



**DARK
SOVEREIGN**

NICCOLI

international bestselling author

BELLA J.

Nicoli

DARK SOVEREIGN 4

BELLA J

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Nicoli is a dark mafia romance, and contain scenes that might offend sensitive readers.

If you have any triggers at all, please proceed with caution.

XOXO

Nicoli (Dark Sovereign)

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Prologue

I lean against my bedroom window, the cold pane of glass chilling my forehead as I stare into the still-dark morning. It's four a.m., and I've been waiting for my dad to come home. Last night, he left in a rush with a harried look on his face, an air of panic following him out the door. Alexius and I both knew something was wrong and decided to stay up until our dad came home, eager to find out what was happening.

I glance at Alexius, sprawled out on my bed, my twin snoring and drooling over my new navy-blue pillow. If this were his room and his bed, I'd pee in his face.

A thick beam of light slices through the darkness in my room, moving along the wall and painting shadows. It's my father's car pulling up the driveway with two SUVs following. There's an instant prickle of warning along the back of my neck as I watch multiple men exit the cars, holding guns in their hands. I'm no stranger to firearms. Not a day goes by that we don't see at least one weapon in this house. Alexius and I turned thirteen two months ago, and that's the day our dad allowed us to fire our first shot. A necessary evil, he called it. But the rush I felt when I pulled that trigger was indescribable.

My father gets out of his Lexus, his black coat blending against the night, and he's saying something to the men. Judging by his stern expression, he's barking orders at them, and I watch as they all act in one swift motion, holstering their guns and hiding them beneath their jackets.

The hair on my arms rises as chills flow over my skin, and my heart is beating so fast, I'm sure it's about to ricochet out

of my chest. Something's wrong. I can feel it. I can see it on my dad's face, and it's making me anxious.

I jolt when Alexius lets out this loud, hacking snore, and I curse under my breath, trying to swallow my heart back down my throat. *Stupid asshole.*

A car door slams, and when I look back out the window, there's this little girl wearing a bright yellow coat standing next to my dad. Her cape is covering her head, and she's holding it tight around her neck as the winter air whips around her. A boy gets out of the car on the other side, and it takes me a moment before I recognize him. I've seen him a few times with his older brother and dad, who is one of my father's friends. But my dad has never introduced us, as their visits would be brief and behind closed doors. Alexius and I often asked my father why they were allowed to join the meetings and not us.

"I will determine when you're ready, just as it is their father's right to determine when they are. And right now, you are not ready."

It pissed us off to see them enter and leave our dad's office, knowing that they knew more about what goes on around here than we do.

My shoulders square as I watch the boy round the car, and the little girl rushes over to him, wrapping her short arms around his leg and clinging to him like the wind is about to sweep her away. He pulls her close, and it's obvious she trusts him. She's so tiny compared to him.

The boy places an arm around her shoulders as if shielding her from the world. I wonder if that could be his sister. And where is his older brother?

I'm about to wake Alexius when the girl looks up straight at me. It's too dark to see the color of her eyes, but I can see she's sad. Really, really sad. And she's scared too. I have no idea how I know this. I just do. Everything about the scene in our driveway screams with melancholy.

The front door opens, and my mother steps outside. She's wearing a red coat over her white nightgown, her slippers leaving footprints in the snow as she walks up to my dad. She usually hugs him when he returns after leaving so abruptly and without any explanation. But not tonight. There's no hugging. No kissing. No loving gesture. They're simply staring at one another, a silent conversation where words don't need to be said because it's already written on my mother's slumped shoulders and Dad's dismayed expression.

Something isn't right.

I sit up straight as my dad leans closer to my mother, whispering something in her ear. I have no idea what he's saying to her, but when my mom glances up at my bedroom window, the porch lights illuminating her face, I can see the weariness on her drawn expression.

I don't hide, not caring that my mother knows I'm watching them. She doesn't call me out either and turns her attention to the boy and girl. She holds out her arms and picks up the little girl, cradling her against her chest as she carries her inside the house, out of the winter cold.

When my dad turns to the boy, placing his hand on his shoulder, the boy starts to cry—and it's not a gentle sob. It's a violent, painful, soul-piercing cry I can hear all the way up to the second floor. It's like his screams are being torn from his bones. The pain, the anguish, it has my chest tightening in response. His body trembles as my father pulls him close, comforting him while snow clings to his black coat. I have no idea what's happening, but I can feel the weight of it. It's crushing and brutal.

I have to know what's going on.

I rush out of my bedroom, my feet pounding across the lacquered floors as I run down the hall toward the stairs. My heart is racing, and the sinking feeling in my gut is getting worse with every step.

I grab the staircase banister and lift myself onto it, sliding all the way to the bottom, and lunge forward, almost losing my

balance as I land on the marble floor in the foyer. Mom would kill me if she saw that.

“Nicoli.”

Crap.

I turn to face my mother, standing by the archway leading to the living room. In front of her is this tiny human with big green eyes and soft-looking honey-blonde hair framing her red, tear-stained cheeks. Her chin wobbles as she tries to be brave, staring up at me as if I’m a giant towering over her. It’s as clear as daylight that this little girl’s heart is broken. She’s hurting.

My focus drops to a smear of red on the hem of her jacket, and my limbs go ice cold. “Is that...” I look up at my mom. “Is that bl—”

She silences me with a sharp, warning glare and lightly shakes her head. I’m not supposed to finish my question, but I already know the answer.

A sudden strong and deep sympathy claws its way into my chest as I look at the little girl’s face, and I’m soaking in every last drop of her sadness. This odd sense of protectiveness wells up inside me, and I have no idea why. I can’t explain it. It’s just...there.

My mother kneels beside her, placing a loving arm around the little girl’s waist as she looks at her. “This is my son, Nicoli,” she says softly, wiping a lingering tear from the girl’s cheek. “And he’s going to help take care of you.”

I arch a brow, and the little girl practically sinks into my mother as she leans in and whispers something in her ear.

My mom snickers as she straightens. “He does have pretty eyes, yes.” It’s when my mother’s gaze locks with mine that I know my life is about to change.

“Nicoli, I’d like you to meet...Mirabella.”

Chapter One

“H mm, you taste so good.”

I growl my disapproval and grab Vera’s sleek, blonde ponytail, jerking her head up. “Did I say you could talk?”

She licks her lips and shakes her head.

“Then shut the fuck up and make me come down that pretty little throat of yours,” I hiss, forcing her head down and shoving my dick back in her mouth. Vera sucks like a fucking champ. If the girls here at Myth each had a resume, Vera’s would list ‘Masters in cock sucking, Bachelors in making men come in thirty-two seconds, and expert semen swallower.’ This woman can swallow a mouth full of cum without leaving so much as a sheen on her lips.

While she works my cock with her hand, sliding her tongue along my length, I lean back and stare at the naked woman in a cage suspended high, close to the ceiling. She’s new, but I recognize her because Caelian, Isaia, and I welcomed her here at Myth a little less than a week ago—and we welcomed her in the way we welcome all the new faces around here...stuffing every hole with Del Rossa cock. Alexius used to be part of our little welcoming party, but the wedding ring on my twin brother’s finger tamed his dick into wanting no other pussy than the one between his wife’s legs.

Now it’s up to the rest of the Del Rossa brothers to welcome all the new faces around here. When they walk through these doors, we fuck them first so they know who

owns them. Every girl who works here at Myth knows we're the ones who take care of them, and we demand nothing more than complete and utter loyalty.

Vera's silky tongue, smooth and wet, licks and laps around my shaft, her hands twisting and pumping, her gentle moans vibrating down to the base. It fucking makes my toes curl, pleasure rippling up my spine while I stare up at the naked woman in the cage.

The female body is one of God's most beautiful creations, and admiring it, fucking worshipping it is something I can do all day. Vera has firsthand experience of my obsession with the beauty of a naked woman. She spent five days in a cage just like this one so my eyes could feast on her naked perfection. I fed her. I gave her what she needed to clean herself. I gave her a fucking bucket to piss in, and when I fucked her, I had her push her ass against that cage, her pussy blooming between the steel bars. And she fucking loved every second of it.

I tighten my hold on Vera's hair and push her down farther, bucking my hips and jabbing the tip of my cock against the back of her throat. She gags, her cheeks hollowed and lips curled outward as she takes my cock as deep as her throat will allow. Her hazel-colored eyes tear up, but she keeps them pinned on mine without missing a fucking heartbeat. I'll give her a ten for effort.

My abdomen tenses. My skin heats up. And every nerve ending in my body is vibrating with pleasure. I'm about five seconds away from tasting euphoria when Caelian walks in with this huge, stupid grin on his face as he tucks his hands in his pants pockets.

"I knew I'd find you with your dick in someone's mouth."

"Fucker!" I grab my tumbler glass from the side table, flinging it across the room. It hits the edge of the open door behind him, glass shattering and exploding onto the marble floors.

Caelian glances at the broken glass and then at me. "Did you aim for my face?"

“If I did, your face would be roadkill.” Vera wraps her fingers around the base of my dick and starts working it like her life’s about to end. My eyes roll closed as I hold my breath before saying, “Thinking about it, it might be a slight upgrade from the face you have now.”

“Hilarious. I can’t contain my laughter,” he says, deadpan, before taking a seat across from me. He snaps his fingers. “Vera, why don’t you come over here and experience what it’s like to suck a real man’s cock?”

Vera makes this weird snorting sound like she’s simultaneously choking on a laugh and my dick. My hand almost becomes one with her skull as I jerk her head back, causing her to gasp—her rosy lips gaped open and her eyes wide.

“If you so much as look in my brother’s direction, I will fuck you. My brother will fuck you. Every goddamn thing with a dick in this building will fuck you before the clock strikes midnight, Cinderella. And by the time the sun rises tomorrow, you’ll know what it feels like to be fucked within an inch of your life. Sounds fun to you?”

She shakes her head, her throat bobbing as she swallows hard.

“That’s what I thought.” Personally, I would have preferred it if she said yes.

I force her face down to my lap, sinking my cock into her warm, wet mouth again. I let go of her hair and ease back into the couch, lighting a cigarette as Vera’s tongue works its magic.

I glance at Caelian. The fucker is smirking, and that means he’s feeling ballsy enough to want to piss me off. I narrow my eyes. “I dare you to take her off my cock.”

He scoffs. “Nah. Not tonight. There’s more than enough pussy going around here. So, what’s up your ass?”

I exhale a plume of smoke. “Nothing. Why?”

“Because you seem...tense.”

“I was five seconds away from blowing my load down Vera’s throat when you so rudely burst in. Of course, I’m fucking tense,” I snap, then hiss as Vera drags her teeth up my shaft, the sensation making my balls tighten. “Where have you been?” I ask before taking a long drag from my cigarette.

Caelian lights himself one, too. “What do you mean, where have I been?”

“You’ve been disappearing completely off the radar every few weeks, and then returning with an ugly fucking smile on your face. What are you? Some fucking werewolf with a thing for knotting kink?”

“Yeah. That’s exactly what I do—disappear every full moon to get my dick stuck in some random pussy.”

“Sounds about right. Jesus fucking Christ,” I curse, sucking air through my teeth as Vera takes me all the way back in her throat. The need to come is so intense it almost hurts, but her mouth is no longer good enough. I need the tight walls of a greedy pussy, the heat of a cunt drenched with lust.

“I do have a life outside this family, Nicoli.”

I scoff. “Wishful thinking, brother. None of us has a life outside this family.”

“Yeah, well, I do. We might share everything—” Caelian’s gaze drops to Vera’s naked ass “—but there are a few tiny details about my life that’s not Dark Sovereign business.”

“Keep on telling yourself that.”

Caelian adjusts his pants, his eyes dark and hooded. After years of fucking our way through this club and sharing the women, we’ve learned to embrace our most wicked desires and not shy away from it. It’s the way we’re wired—to fuck.

“Vera,” I say, licking my lips, “I’ve changed my mind. Get up and click those stilettos over to my brother. I think he’d like to feel those magic lips around his cock.”

Vera obeys like the good little girl she is. There’s a seductive glint in her eyes as she gets up off her knees and arches her back as she straightens, her full, round tits passing

inches away from my face. I jerk forward, wanting to take a pebbled nipple in my mouth when she pulls back.

I grab her wrist and yank her close, pulling my Espada pocketknife from the belt clip on my side and nicking her skin with the steel tip. A drop of blood pools on her tanned flesh below her rib cage. The moan that slips from her mouth is of pure euphoria as I lick at the tiny cut. They say a person's soul is in their blood. Well, the taste of Vera's soul on my tongue is fucking divine. The metallic tang still teases my tastebuds when I take a pebbled nipple into my mouth, sucking it so damn hard she lets out a choked moan, throwing her head back. Her hips move like she's already on my dick, and I nip at the skin just above her nipple before letting go, a satisfied smirk spreading across my lips as I see the mark I left.

She straightens, and her eyes are a fiery pit of desire. She's so fucking ready, I can smell it on her. The sex. The lust. The need to fuck. She's just like us. All of them are.

I lean back on the couch, watching her sway her hips in a seductive rhythm while walking over to Caelian. Her naked ass is perfect. It's like God spent a little extra time putting her curves together so fuckers like me can sit back and appreciate His art.

She's about to go on her knees in front of Caelian when he grabs her hips and pulls her so she straddles him. His gaze drops to the tiny nick I made on her side, his thumb tracing the skin below it. "You're one fucked-up individual, you know that?"

"You love it, too. Now, shut up and fuck her, already."

He takes her mouth, hard and possessive, like he's starved for her taste, sliding a hand up her neck and back down her naked spine. I can hear her gasps. Her whimpers. The soft little moans as she moves her hips on Caelian's lap.

"My brother might be happy with your mouth," Caelian says after letting go of her lips, reaching between them, and pulling out his cock. "But I want this wet pussy to make a mess on my dick."

My balls tighten, aching like a motherfucker as I watch her lift herself only to sink back down, Caelian's cock disappearing inside her.

"Fuck," she moans out loud, throwing her head back, the silky strands of her blonde ponytail dangling down her back. Her hands are steady on his shoulders, and his are flush on her waist. I'm so ready to fuck, lust seeps from my pores. But watching her ride Caelian's dick is a different kind of thrill. It's a slow burn of ecstasy that flows through your system compared to the rush that burns through your veins when you're balls deep in pussy.

Caelian starts moving beneath her, and I can hear the wetness of her cunt as he slams into her. I bite the inside of my cheek, growing impatient while I watch them. Every labored breath, every moan, even the slight sheen of sweat on her back invites me to join them.

As if my brother can hear my thoughts, he slips his palms to her ass, spreading those firm cheeks for me. "Come on, brother. You know Vera can handle both of us."

She sends me a seductive glance over her shoulders, invitation beaming within those hooded eyes.

I'm on my feet, and in two strides, I'm behind her, grabbing the back of her neck and forcing her forward, her cheek planted on Caelian's shoulder.

Looking down, I spit and use the head of my cock to spread it down between her ass cheeks. Her moans grow louder, and I keep my grip on the back of her neck, sliding my dick into her tight little hole. A low growl rumbles in the back of my throat as her body offers zero resistance. Vera doesn't need time to adjust. She's one of our favorites here at Myth and knows how to handle all four Del Rossa men. So, two is a piece of fucking cake for her.

"You're the perfect little slut, aren't you?" Caelian whispers, wiping the hair from her face.

She nods, and I tighten my grip on her neck, shoving my dick deeper into her. Caelian and I thrust into a rhythm we've

mastered after years of sharing our women. Each time I withdraw, he sinks in, and I'm overwhelmed with a wave of pleasure that squeezes my goddamn lungs, making it almost impossible to breathe.

"You like that?" I push back into her, gripping her neck tight. "You like getting your ass fucked?"

"Yes, sir," she moans, pushing her hips out more toward me while Caelian jackhammers into her again.

The sensations the three of us create is fucking consuming. Electric. It's euphoria that floods our systems, and both Caelian and I let out wild growls, our rhythm morphing into a frantic fucking.

I close my eyes, my dick slamming in and out of Vera's tight ass. Her thighs ripple with every thrust. I'm so high on sex, so close to fucking coming, I'm pretty sure I'm more animal than human right now as I lick and bite her shoulder.

"She's about to come," Caelian says. "Her cunt is fucking throbbing."

I let go of her neck and twist my hand in her ponytail, pulling her head back so she cranes that pretty throat of hers. "You know the rules, slut. You come when we give you permission to."

"Yes, sir," she replies with a heavy breath, and her hips slow their rhythm as she tries to control her body.

"That's my girl," Caelian murmurs, his hungry eyes raking down her naked throat. "You're so fucking good. If my brother wasn't here, I'd let you run down these halls so I can chase you. Nothing makes a cunt feel so fucking perfect like a little resistance."

The moan that slips from Vera's lips is proof that my brother's words had a straight line down to her soaking pussy. I can hear the wetness between her thighs as Caelian slams into her, feel it lube my cock as it spreads between her ass cheeks. There is no better sound than a woman's arousal while her pussy gets smacked. The sound of sex. The sound of pleasure. The sound of zero fucking control.

The rhythm Caelian and I have starts to falter as we both chase our own pleasure inside her. I lean closer, my chest flush against her back, my lips brushing along the shell of her ear. “Come for us. And make sure everyone in this building can hear you.”

Vera doesn't disappoint, a scream tearing from her throat as she bucks her hips, doing what Caelian wanted her to do... make a fucking mess on his dick.

“I'm about to cream her pussy, man,” Caelian says between labored breaths.

I give a few more thrusts, pushing in deep before pulling out of her and squirting my jizz on her naked back. For one hot, sweet, dirty minute everything goes black. Then, beautiful green irises fill the image inside my head, blood red lips a teasing glimpse bursting through the haze in my mind. It's always like this.

She's always. Fucking. There.

Chapter Two

I park my car in front of the house—my new Maserati GranCabrio’s headlights casting a stark light against the old-world elegance paired with the modern architecture of the Victorian-style mansion. The LaFerrari lost that new-car smell which, to me, is always justification enough to buy a new car.

Leaning my head back against the seat, taking in the view of the house, I remember a time when getting my dick wet had me feeling like I was on top of the fucking world. A time when a trip to Myth would have me smiling all the way back home.

Now...not so much.

Now, I just feel numb, and try as I may, I can’t seem to fuck myself out of this humorless funk. It’s like the older I get, the stronger the battle with my own head.

I step out of the car, and my eyes are immediately drawn up to the second floor. I’m not the least bit surprised when I see Alexius and Leandra fucking against their bedroom window, Leandra’s naked body writhing against the glass, her palms and tits flush against it. The gentle yellow pools of light from the outside lamps illuminate them, accenting their curves. Leandra looks down, and our eyes meet. I don’t look away, and neither does she. This is what they do, what they get off on—having people watch them fuck each other. It’s their guilty pleasure, and sometimes mine, too.

Alexius slips a hand between Leandra and the window, cupping her breast and tugging at her nipple. His other hand

reaches around her waist and dips low, cupping her pussy, and I know he has his fingers on her clit by the way her warm breath leaves a mist against the glass.

I smile, thinking of an old memory. A secret memory. Ours.

I have to give it to my brother; he landed a fucking jewel when he found that woman. But standing out here in the cold watching them also reminds me why I have to get out of this damn house every chance I get. It's Alexius and Leandra's constant, high-pitched gushing over the twins, Isaia's newfound platonic friendship with Leandra, Maximo's talent to somehow be everywhere at the same damn time—it's all working on my last goddamn nerve. And don't even get me started on Mirabella and those plump, blood-red lips and hourglass curves.

I can see it every time our eyes meet, her silent desire and screaming questions. Those are the moments I become the world's biggest asshole by looking away as if the thought of sparing her a single fucking glance is beneath me—like she's nothing but an insignificant piece of furniture in this house. When it comes to her, I've perfected the art of aversion.

Her constant smiling, her incessant babbling, and positive take on life annoy me on a good day. One would think after what she had been through, she'd see the world for what it really is. Fucked-up, unfair, and just a giant black hole that swallows everyone who isn't strong enough to survive it. But no, she goes around smiling as if life has only given her roses, rainbows, and unicorns.

She suffocates me. The air becomes heavy and dense, like smoke, whenever she enters the room, and that's why I can't fuck-off out of there fast enough.

I'm a douchebag around her. Well, technically, I'm always a douchebag, but when she's close, I become a douchebag with a side of asshole.

Raindrops start to fall, the water droplets slipping down the black paint of my Maserati. Even the weather is pissing me off. The sunny days, chilly breeze, and late-night

thundershowers say that the seasons can't make up their goddamn minds. So, is it still summer, or is it time for motherfucking fall already? Jesus.

My heavy footsteps break the silence of the house as I start up the stairs. If my mom were still here, I'd make an effort to be quieter, but she still hasn't returned from the family vineyard in Tuscany. She left last year, shortly after my father died. The plan wasn't for her to stay there permanently, but we knew it would happen. This house is haunted by too many memories—good and bad. But it's the good ones that make it impossible for her to walk through these halls without being reminded of what she lost the day my father took his last breath. It's been a year, and the weight of his influence and power still lingers in every corner. Vincenzo Del Rossa was once the heart of this family—the one that built the Dark Sovereign into the empire it is today. An empire my brothers and I will protect with our lives. Ask my uncle, Roberto, whose body got burned and his ashes flushed down the motherfucking toilet. Fucker wanted to ruin our family so he could rule and forge alliances that would one day put the Dark Sovereign in the hands of people who didn't have Del Rossa blood flowing through their veins. He refused to accept that the Dark Sovereign doesn't forge alliances. We don't bargain, and we don't make deals. We are strong enough to stand on our own. But that fucker had to die to figure it out.

“Hey, man.”

I still and turn to face Alexius, watching him pull a shirt over his head and close his bedroom door as he steps into the dimly lit hall.

“Everything good over at Myth?”

“Yeah.” I square my shoulders. “You'd know that if you were at the club more often.”

“You know I don't go to Myth without Leandra anymore.” He grins. “You missing me over there?”

“Me? No. But Vera misses having her pussy tag-teamed by all four Del Rossa brothers.”

“Seriously?” He stares at me, deadpan.

I shrug. “She still sucks dick like a pro, though. She sends her love, by the way.”

Alexius sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I swear to God, sometimes I forget what an ass you are.”

“Talking about ass, I see you and Leandra are still fucking like rabbits.”

“Jesus.”

“What? You can’t expect to fuck your wife against a window for the whole world to see and not have me crack some wiseass remark about it.” I slip my hands into my pants pockets. “I just hope to God you got her on some real birth control, because the last thing this house needs is more babies. Having the twins and Isaia around is all the whining I can handle.”

Alexius snickers, and he rubs the back of his neck. “What I have my wife on is none of your business, brother.”

“I know you had her on your dick less than ten minutes ago.”

“Good night, Nicoli.”

“It’s not my job. You know that, right?”

“What is not your job?” Alexius sighs.

“Taking care of shit at Myth like I’m the heir who ascended to the throne when our father died.”

“What are you saying?”

“You’re the Boss, Alexius. Not me. You should be at the club doing what the *Boss* is supposed to do. Rule.”

Alexius rests his hands on his sides, glancing down at his bare feet. “I know it’s not your job to stand in for me when I’m not there. That’s why I’m not asking you to do it as a Del Rossa. I’m asking you to do it as my brother.”

“Aw, fuck. Are you serious?” I roll my eyes. “You had to go play the brother card? Now I not only want to kick your

ass, I want to give you a hug while doing it.”

Alexius smirks. “Good night...*brother*.”

“Good night, Boss. Give Leandra my lo—” the door slams shut in my face “—ve.” I grin.

In the last thirty years, I’ve come to the conclusion that God made us twins and gave me the power to ruffle Alexius’ feathers. Fuck knows, that peacock needs some ruffling every now and then. I’ve been consciously rubbing his face in the fact that he has taken on a less active role in managing Myth every chance I get. That doesn’t mean I don’t get it. I do. The man is married with two kids. His responsibilities shifted; his world changed. It is what it is—and it also happens to be why I do what needs to be done to keep my world from changing.

It’s almost three in the morning, and I walk past Mira’s bedroom door, when I stop, exhaling a heavy sigh. I know what I’m about to do even though I’m trying so fucking hard to convince myself not to. It’s something I do every damn time on nights like these—nights when being with other women does nothing to calm my heated blood. If anything, it only makes me more on edge, sharpening the blades of resentment that cut through me every goddamn day.

I bite my bottom lip, swallowing a frustrated growl as I turn and wrap my fingers around the doorknob, hating that I can’t even walk past her bedroom without feeling like an asshole.

I wiggle the knob the tiniest bit, then wait and listen, making sure she’s asleep before quietly opening the door and stepping inside. I close the door behind me, and her scent drowns my senses. A sensuous musk with delicate jasmine. Familiar. Sensual. Utterly toxic to my system. There are so many other women who wear the same brand of perfume Mira does, but somehow, she’s able to make it uniquely hers. A smell that reminds me of a decision I made fifteen years ago, a decision I’m still paying for today. A decision I’m finding hard not to regret when I’m able to look at her like this—without pretense and secret vendettas. When I can stare without worrying someone might notice...that *she* might notice.

“We do what we have to to protect the ones we care for.”

My feet rest on the floor, planted firmly as I watch her sleep from across the room. I’ve stood at this exact spot so many times before, I can navigate this room blindfolded without making a sound.

There’s no moonlight shining through her window or outside lights casting a glow over her features. But I can see her. I can see her as clearly as the fucking sun. Her blonde hair is splayed over her white silk pillowcase, the red straps of her nightgown touching the ivory skin of her shoulders. It’s Mira’s favorite color. Red. After everything, one would think she’d hate the crimson shade. But instead, she’s grown to love it like it’s somehow connected to good memories. But I know it’s not.

I breathe deeply, allowing her scent to infiltrate my soul so I can be reminded of a bond that once was—a bond I severed the day I stood in a river of blood for her.

My chest constricts with an ache I’m all too familiar with. It’s an ache I force myself to feel because it keeps me focused on what needs to be done.

It sucks to be me.

Silently, I step out of her room and close the door, feeling his presence behind me before turning to face him. Our gazes lock, and a knowing look passes between us. He knows the truth, and so do I. We’re the only ones who know, and we’ll do anything we can to keep it that way.

I straighten my shoulders, looking Maximo in the eye. “You need to protect her.”

“From what?”

I turn and stomp in the other direction. “From me.”

Chapter Three

MIRABELLA

I can smell the blood. It's pungent and sharp, like iron mixed with the stench of rotten meat. It's making my stomach turn, leaving the acidic taste of bile in the back of my throat. The hair on the back of my neck is raised, my skin cold and clammy as the talons of death stroke my flesh.

It's everywhere—the sticky liquid that clings to my fingers, my palms. I think it's under my feet too.

I'm trying to breathe, but malevolence thickens the air and congeals my throat. It's hard to get air all the way down so it can fill my lungs. My eyes are closed, but I pinch them even tighter. I don't want to open them. I don't want to look.

I've been here before. This place. This nightmare where nothing good happens. I'm too scared to move. Too afraid to breathe. The more I struggle for air, the sharper the smell of death and carnage.

“Mirabella.”

I suck in a breath as a gentle hand touches my shoulder. “Momma,” I whisper.

“You need to keep quiet, okay?”

I nod without saying a word.

“Promise me you'll be as quiet as a mouse.”

“I promise.” A tear slips down my cheek as I allow her familiar presence to wrap around me. It's welcoming and haunting at the same time.

“Keep your eyes closed. No matter what you hear, you don’t look. Do not open your eyes.”

“I won’t,” I reply with a shaky voice. The dread that bubbles in the pit of my stomach is debilitating, my heart hammering against my rib cage with a frantic rhythm.

“You have to stay hidden.” Her hand cups my cheeks, her thumb swiping at the tears. “You can’t come out. No matter what happens.”

“Hide with me, Momma.” My plea is a desperate prayer. “We can hide together.”

“Not today, *la mia luce*.” My light. It’s what she has always called me, saying my smile is as bright as the sun, my laughter the light that smothers the dark. Always her little light.

My bottom lip quivers. “Momma?”

Her touch is gone, and I instantly mourn it, my gut filled with an emptiness that hurts all the way to my bones.

“Momma!” I cry.

“Please, Mirabella. You have to be a brave little girl. For me. Please, promise me.”

“I don’t—”

“Promise me. Promise me you won’t open your eyes.” Her voice drips with a desperation that sounds painful, as if the words hurt her insides, tearing her apart and making her bleed. I want it to stop. I want the sound to go away. I want to hear her voice echo with the light and love of my momma who tucks me in at night, my momma who sings for me while she brushes my hair.

I hate hearing her like this. It’s like nails scraping along a chalkboard, hurting my ears, a raw tone that spreads an ache through my veins, curdling my blood.

“Please,” she whispers. “Be my brave little girl, just one more time.”

“I will. I promise, Momma,” I say, struggling to keep my eyes closed because everything inside me is begging for me to open them so I can see her face. Her eyes. I want to see her, but I promised I wouldn’t. “I promise.”

Something changes. The air just got colder, and I’m shaking, my teeth clattering. “Momma?”

“Open your eyes, Mirabella.”

“Marco?” How did my brother get here? Where’s Maximo? Why aren’t they together? They’re always together.

“I said open your eyes.” I don’t like the way his voice sounds. It’s hard. Angry. It scares me.

“No.” I shake my head. “Momma said I shouldn’t.”

“You need to know.”

My heart beats impossibly fast. “Know what?”

“Mirabella.” It’s my mom’s voice, the cold instantly gone. “Don’t look. You promised.”

“I know, Momma. I won’t.” I suck in a double breath when I feel her kiss my forehead, her lips warm and comforting. My entire body shudders, and I lose control of my tears.

“My beautiful little girl.” She places her nose tenderly against mine.

“Momma.” I sniff as tears lap down my cheeks.

“I love you, Mirabella.”

“Don’t go, Momma. Please.”

Momma. I jerk up, my palm flush against my chest as I gasp for breath. Sadness crushes me, my insides torn to shreds. Every bone aches, and my lungs screaming for air.

I yank open my bedside drawer, grab the bottle, and pop the cap, swallowing two pills. Whenever I dream of her, my eyes are always closed. She always asks me not to look. Why? I want to see her. It’s been so long, and I’ve already forgotten what her face looks like.

“Shit,” I mutter, wiping beads of sweat from my face with the back of my hand.

I hate waking up like this, feeling like the nightmare has stolen my breath. Whenever I dream of her, the sound of her voice, I wake up feeling like I lost her all over again, as if that night happened yesterday. Every nightmare is a reminder of what I truly am.

An orphan.

“Goddammit.” I slam the drawer shut, pulling my fingers through my tangled hair.

The pain is heavier today. The grief is screaming louder than usual. Of course, it is because today marks the seventeenth year of Maximo and me being orphans. Seventeen years since we lost our family.

God, it sucks.

I swipe the lingering tears from my cheeks and close my eyes, breathing deeply, visualizing the oxygen filling my lungs. Years of therapy, hours of sitting on a couch talking about my feelings, and the one thing I’ve managed to gain from it is how to breathe so I can have the strength to smile and pretend like my head is filled with nothing but unicorns, and my heart pumping little chocolate hearts all day long.

On an exhale, I force myself out of bed, my feet sinking into the plush pearl-white carpet as I move toward the window. The view is beautiful, especially at this time of morning when the sun starts to peek out over the horizon, the early rays sending a warm glow over the maple trees. In the spring and summer, flowers bloom in waves of yellows, whites, and vibrant fuchsia splashed across acres of green. But now, as summer rolls into autumn, the colors slowly lose their luster while the trees’ leaves trade their forest green for shades of ocher. No matter how often I look out my silver-curtained casement window, the view always reminds me of what I have to be thankful for.

I’m thankful Maximo and I are here, blessed with a life only the Del Rossa family can give us. Grateful they took us in

and treated us as their own. I can't imagine what would have become of us had it not been for Vincenzo Del Rossa refusing to let the foster system swallow us.

I catch my reflection in the large, ornate mirror of my platinum French vanity. The dark circles under my eyes are proof of a bad night, of the tears I cried in my sleep.

My fingertips trace along the scar that streaks down the side of my face. It's barely visible to most, but I see it—a reminder of a sick man who blamed me for his perversions.

Micah was Vincenzo's bastard son, a son no one knew about, not even Alexius. Last year, Micah forced his way into our lives by gruesomely murdering women at the Dark Sovereign clubs and slaughtering Isaia's girlfriend. He then turned his attention to me, claiming I was the cause of his sins. That God wanted him to rid the world of beauty that has the power to make men fall from grace. Beauty that elicits sin.

A cold shiver runs down my spine at the memory of that day inside the Del Rossa mausoleum.

"It's beauty like yours that leads so many sheep astray. Even me."

"You need to repent for leading so many men astray."

"God says if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee."

"The scripture says the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her seductive words are smoother than olive oil, but she is bitter as wormwood, a sharp two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, and her steps lead straight to the grave. And that's where I sent them. To their graves just like God told me to."

"You might not be a harlot, but you're the hand that caused me to stumble. I still do every time I look at you. My mind becomes a snake pit of sin, and the serpent infects me with its evil."

"Your beauty infects my soul."

Micah maimed me by dragging his knife down the side of my face, from my temple to my chin, right before Nicoli jumped through the mausoleum window, colored glass shattering as a gunshot echoed between the walls. Nicoli didn't think twice about putting his life in danger to save me. He took a bullet for me, and as blood soaked his white shirt, all I could think about was how I couldn't lose him, thinking that there was no way I'd want to live in a world he wasn't part of. Leandra says I screamed that night, that she could hear me all the way outside where Alexius left her in the car. But I don't remember it. I don't remember screaming...or moving...or breathing. All I remember was the fear.

Cold, paralyzing, debilitating fear.

Nicoli's courage that night almost had me fooled by thinking he might care more than he led on. But the very next day he proved me wrong by acting like 'feelings' had nothing to do with it. After that, he pretended like nothing happened, just like everyone pretends Micah never existed.

Chills run along my skin, and I inhale slow and deep, shaking the memory and turning away from my reflection in the mirror. I can't allow my thoughts to hover around memories that can tear open old wounds. The dead have no place in my life and can only hurt me if I let them.

I turn and lean back against the windowsill, glancing around the three-hundred-square-foot bedroom. I'm not oblivious to the fact that my room is larger than some apartments in this city. I have the best of the best—the finest furnishings, luxury bedding, and an enormous walk-in closet filled with more clothes than one person really needs. But there's this hole inside me, one I hide behind a thousand smiles, one I try to fill with every swipe of a credit card. Then, of course, there's the guilt that comes along with it. How can I feel like there's something missing when I have everything? I'm blessed to live here on the estate, enjoying the finer things in life—a life the Del Rossas have generously given me. I have everything a girl could need.

Everything except him.

“Nicoli,” I whisper to myself simply to hear his name on my lips, then push myself upright, square my shoulders, and pull on the mask of the perfect Del Rossa daughter—even if it’s not by blood.

My walk-in closet is half the size of my bedroom, with different fabrics and textures of every color and style imaginable. But there’s one color that dominates my wardrobe. It’s like a scarlet wave across a sea of white shelves and chrome rails. To some, it’s the color of blood. To me, it’s the color of life—which is kind of odd considering what happened to my real family.

I slip on a short, red, Boho-style, sleeveless, halter-neck dress, finishing off the outfit with a pair of nude heels. Today is probably one of the last warm summer days we’ll have this year, and I intend to make the most of it.

I’m about to walk out of my room and open the door just as Maximo readies to knock.

I smile. “You’re knocking on my door early today.”

“You okay?” he asks as he rakes over me with his concerned gaze. We both know what today is, which is why he feels the need to check on me.

“I’m fine. You?”

He nods. “I’m good.”

There’s this awkward silence, and even though he doesn’t move, I know he’s secretly squirming. My brother is not the touchy-feely type, and anything that has to do with human emotion activates his gag reflex.

“I’m okay, Maximo. Really.”

“Okay, well,” he drags his fingers along his beard, “I’ll be around all day if you, you know...need me for anything.”

I smile, appreciating his effort to show me that he cares even though it’s probably giving him heartburn.

“Thank you,” I say and move in to hug him. We don’t have to talk about the fact that today is the anniversary of our parents’ massacre. We don’t have to say a word about losing

our oldest brother that night either. Maximo doesn't have to tell me that the night we lost Marco, he lost his best friend. I already know because Marco and Maximo were as close as two brothers can be, and even though I don't remember much, I do remember a ten-year-old Maximo screaming at the top of his lungs when Mr. Del Rossa told him that Marco had died along with our parents.

"I know you miss him," I whisper against my brother's chest, and he stiffens before letting go of me.

He steps back, deflecting. "You should go grab some breakfast before Isaia gets there. That guy is a fucking Hoover when it comes to food."

"Yeah, okay. Are you joining us?"

"Ahm, I grabbed a muffin on my way here. I need to check on security, make sure everyone is at their post."

"I'm sure the security around here is ironclad. You can spend half an hour having breakfast with us, Maximo."

"No. Not today." He leans close and places a peck on my cheek. "I'll see you later."

It's like he suddenly grew wings, flying down the hall in record time. I'm used to him pulling away whenever I mention our older brother. But I get it. He misses him, and we all handle grief differently.

The dining room is empty, so we follow the sound of laughter and find Leandra and the kids on the patio. Although it's much more than a patio. It is a luxurious dining experience with an outdoor chef's kitchen, a ten-foot-tall stone fireplace, and a poolside bar.

Leandra looks up and smiles. "Good morning. I hope you don't mind that I've arranged for us to have breakfast out here this morning."

"Of course not." I take a seat next to her. "I told you this a thousand times already. With Alexius' mom gone, you are now the Del Rossa First Lady of this house."

“Pfft. No, I’m not.” She tries to get Aria to eat a slice of papaya but ends up picking it off the floor. “You’re the one who was raised to be the perfect Del Rossa hostess.”

“Oh, please.” I pour myself some orange juice. “The only reason I got raised to be hostess is because, literally, no one in this household thought Alexius would get married, let alone marry a decent woman like yourself.”

“I heard that.” Alexius touches Leandra’s shoulder, leans down, and lays a long kiss on her eager lips. A really long kiss.

I clear my throat. “Ahem—get a room.”

Alexius pulls away half an inch and licks his lips like Leandra’s taste is his drug, and he just got a fix. God, I wish someone would kiss me like that.

He turns in my direction. “Good morning, Mira.” Then he narrows his eyes, and I know he knows what day it is. “How are you doing this morning?”

“I’m great,” I reply with a smile as he takes a seat across from me. “Your wife just agreed that instead of having a party here at the house as we always do for my birthday, we can go out instead.”

“I did?” Leandra frowns.

“Yup. We’re going to paint the town red, as they say.”

“We are?”

“Yes, we are.” I take a few spoonfuls of fruit and place them in a bowl. “It’s my birthday in two weeks, and I feel like doing something different this year to celebrate by going out.”

“Out where?” Caelian reaches over my shoulder and grabs a piece of toast before rounding the table and sitting next to Alexius. It’s easy to spot that they’re brothers, apart from the sharp difference in eye color—Alexius and Nicoli with their piercing blue eyes, Caelian and Isaia with their smoldering dark chocolate irises.

I pop a strawberry into my mouth. “We’re going to that new place in town. After Dark.”

Alexius lifts a brow. “After Dark is a nightclub.”

“Um...thank you for clearing that up.” I lean my head to the side. “Here I thought After Dark is a late-night bingo club.”

Caelian chuckles and Alexius’ expression turns hard. “You’re not going to After Dark.”

“Who’s going to After Dark?” Nicoli sits next to me, and I struggle to swallow my mouthful of fruit, which shouldn’t be this hard since I just chewed it into a puree. Instantly, it feels like all the air got sucked into an invisible vacuum, which says a lot since we’re sitting outside where there’s an abundance of air.

“Mirabella seems to think she and Leandra are going to After Dark for her birthday.”

Nicoli snorts. “What?” He looks at me. “No, you’re not.”

“Ooh. Drama.” Caelian has a huge-ass grin as he leans back in his chair like he’s about to watch a show.

I shift in my seat, steeling myself before I meet Nicoli’s blue-eyed gaze. “Yes. We are.”

“After Dark is a nightclub.”

“My God. Yes, I’m aware of that, thank you. We’re still going.” Without looking her way, I nudge my best friend with my elbow. “Leandra, back me up here.”

“Oh, no. I’m not getting involved. Besides, you’re Aria and Alessio’s babysitter. So, if you go, I can’t.”

“We’ll get Esther to watch them,” I chime back.

“Esther is—”

“An amazing and responsible woman who has worked for this family for years. It’ll work out,” I say without breaking eye contact with Nicoli, even though it feels like my heart is about to explode.

“Alexius,” Nicoli starts, “didn’t you give Esther that weekend off?”

“I sure did.”

I narrow my eyes at Alexius. “No, you didn’t.”

“He’s about to,” Nicoli says, followed by taking a bite of his toast.

“It’s my birthday, and I’m going out. Leandra is my best friend, which means she’s coming with me. So, either you lock me in my room—”

“Which you know the men in this family have no problem doing.”

“Or,” I enunciate at Nicoli, “you can all join us and make sure Leandra and I don’t get into any trouble.”

“Who’s getting into trouble?” Isaia plops down next to Nicoli, his forehead creased with confusion.

“No one,” Nicoli responds curtly. “Because they’re not going.”

“Who’s not going where?” Isaia glances from Nicoli to Alexius. “What the fuck am I missing?”

Caelian rights himself and places his arm on the table as he leans closer to Isaia. “Mirabella wants to go to After Dark for her birthday. Alexius clearly has a problem with it. Nicoli definitely has a problem with it. And do you know what that means, little brother?”

Isaia lifts a brow in question, grabbing a warm, buttery croissant drizzled with melted chocolate. I’m debating whether being bloated for the rest of the day might be worth indulging in one of those.

“It means we’re in for a very entertaining breakfast because what’s about to happen is Mira will be stubborn as hell as she always is. Leandra will not appreciate Alexius’ tone and the fact that he thinks he can control her, and by the time the women leave this table, our twin brothers will sit here wondering what the fuck just happened. And you and I, we’ll enjoy the fuck out of it.”

Isaia bursts out laughing, and Alexius slaps Caelian against the back of his head.

“You’re an idiot. You know that?”

“Says the one whose day is about to get shot to shit.”

Leandra stands, her glare aimed at Alexius, who, by the expression on his face, already knows what’s coming. “It’s Mirabella’s birthday, and if she wants to go celebrate at After Midnight—”

“After Dark,” I correct her.

“After Dark, then I’m going with her. Join us. Don’t join us. But we’re going.”

“Like fuck you are,” Alexius snaps, but then he’s forced to watch his wife walk away without sparing him another glance. Her only response is the determined click of her heels across the patio.

I smile at Alexius, reveling in my victory as I reach for a croissant at the same time Nicoli does. Our hands touch, and it’s as if his skin is an inferno of wildfire, heat spreading up my arm and across my chest. I let out a silent gasp, my pulse racing and my heart thundering with its echo beating between my ears.

It’s always like this. For me, at least. Whenever he’s near me, whenever there’s the slightest sensation of physical touch between us, it’s as if my world comes to a screeching halt, and I’m robbed of gravity. There’s no air. There’s no light or darkness. There’s no past or future. There’s only him. It’s been that way for as long as I can remember. He’s never given me any reason to believe he harbors any kind of feelings for me. In fact, if he does feel something, I’m pretty sure it’s somewhere between apathy and contempt, judging by the way he looks at me ninety-nine percent of the time. But this moment right now is that other one percent where his gaze is white-hot and I feel it caress my skin.

I’m frozen, our pinkies still touching as I look into his eyes. Alexius and Nicoli are almost identical in many ways, even the color of their irises. But where Alexius’ eyes are sapphires that shimmer with mystery, Nicoli’s are dark and

deep blue, like azurite, with a vitreous luster that hypnotizes me with a single glance.

For a few breaths, our eyes remain locked, and I'm lost, heat kissing the back of my neck. I can feel my body and soul wanting to get closer, every nerve ignited with flames that lick my flesh. His lips part, my gaze drops to the movement, and he...looks away.

Ice clamps down around my spine, and it all fades to nothing, like water sinking into desert sand.

"I have a busy day." He stands, slipping on his suit jacket. "I'll grab breakfast on my way to Myth."

My cheeks warm as I place my hands in my lap, looking down. I've been part of this family long enough to know it's not only business that takes place at Myth. I'm painfully aware of Nicoli's sexual prowess and late nights at Myth. It hurts, but it is what it is.

I listen as Nicoli's footsteps disappear, and I swallow the hurt slowly creeping up my throat. "I, um..."

"I'm telling you," Caelian starts, "out of us four douchebags, Nicoli is the cunt."

I get up from my seat. "I have to go inform the chef that plans have changed for my birthday."

"You're not going," Alexius calls after me.

"You and I both know we are."

"And be careful while you're stomping through the house like you're the spawn of Satan. We're having new art delivered."

I give him a dismissive wave over my shoulder and stomp off...like I'm the *spawn of Satan* on a mission.

Chapter Four

If I had a nickel every time that woman pissed me off, I'd be the goddamn Trevi Fountain. The only difference would be I wouldn't have good luck coming out of my ass, but rather a thousand fucks spitting out of my mouth.

It's not even nine in the morning, and already I'm loosening my tie so I can breathe, unbuttoning my collar.

Goddamn, stubborn, infuriating woman, pissing me off first thing in the morning with the reckless notion that she's going to a club on her birthday. I bet she'll be dressed in a short, tight, red skirt that emphasizes her firm, round ass, with a backless blouse showing more skin than a club full of horny fuckers looking to get their dicks wet need to see. I can already imagine men drooling after her lush, red lips with the perfect Cupid's bow, their thoughts filled with fantasies about kissing her. Touching her. Undressing her. Fucking her.

I'm going to kill someone.

And After Dark, of all places! Nope. No. Over my dead fucking body is she going to that place. I'd love to know how she's even aware After Dark exists. It only opened a few weeks ago, and we've never even spoken about or mentioned it because we avoid anything and everything with the name Ferrero attached to it—with good reason. That's also why I'm currently on my way to find Maximo, because when it comes to his sister, having him on my side always backs her into a corner she can't come out of. And that's where I want her right now...in a fucking corner.

The large pocket door that leads to the Dark Sovereign chamber is open, and I'm hoping to find Maximo there, but instead it's my youngest brother sitting at the table, his expression pensive.

"Have you seen Maximo?" I bark.

He shakes his head. "Nope."

"Why do you look more pathetic than usual?"

He snorts. "God, you're an asshole."

I walk in and across the burgundy carpet, highlighting the gold trimmings, then take my seat across from him. There are five black, button-tufted executive chairs at this table that represent the five men of this family. Alexius has the throne, his chair marked with the silver and gold symbol of the Dark Sovereign. Mine is on his right while Caelian flanks his left. Isaia and Maximo sit across from us, our ranks apparent for anyone who walks in here.

It used to be my father, Alexius and me, and our uncles—the Savelli brothers—who sat around this table. But after my father died and Alexius took over as leader of this family, Roberto tried everything to undermine and dethrone him. Roberto wanted to form alliances with others, expand the Dark Sovereign to members with the biggest bank accounts. Unfortunately for him, he underestimated our determination to keep the Dark Sovereign the way it has always been. A family-run empire.

The sun is high, casting rays past the magnolia-colored curtains draped to the sides of the windows.

"Seriously, this isn't a fucking sunroom. Why are you in here?"

"I dunno." He stares at Alexius' seat. "It's just hard some days."

"What's hard?"

"That I'm finally sitting here at this table, and he's not here." He shifts. "I guess it would have been kind of awesome

if Dad was still here to see all his sons sit around the Dark Sovereign table.”

My little brother’s sentiments brush off on me, a pang of grief knocking at my chest. “Yeah. It would have been kind of awesome. He would have been proud.”

“And I think he would have loved that Maximo is a part of it now.”

“Father always saw Maximo as his son. There’s no doubt that Maximo was always meant to have a seat.”

“True. I have shit to do.” I stand. “If you see Maximo, tell him I need to speak to him.”

“About?”

“About his sister being a giant-sized pain in my ass.”

I hear Isaia chuckle as I stomp out of the Dark Sovereign chamber. After twenty minutes of searching the entire estate, dropping f-bombs like it’s a goddamn trend, I finally find Maximo in the driveway talking with the guards. Instantly, warning prickles the back of my scalp because why the fuck is he speaking with security? Do we have a problem? Because God knows, that’s the last thing I need right now...another fucking problem.

“Something I need to know about?” I don’t give a shit about cutting Maximo’s sentence short.

He places his hands on his hips, squaring his shoulders. “Nope. Just a regular morning briefing.”

“Awesome. Now, fuck off,” I bark at the guards, then look at Maximo. “I have something I want to discuss with you.”

Maximo rubs his forehead. “What did my sister do now?”

“How do you know it’s about Mira?”

“Because you look like you’re about to cut something, and usually that means my sister did something.”

“It’s not something she did. It’s something she thinks she’s going to do, but hell will freeze over before I allow her to do

that something because that something she wants to do is reckless and stupid, and she's not fucking doing it."

Maximo lifts a brow, blinking once, twice... "Can you say that again? I didn't get the first part."

"Your little sister wants to go to After Dark for her birthday."

And there it is—the instant disappearance of sarcasm and the immediate onset of a giant 'fuck-no' expression on his face. "That's not happening."

"That's what I told her."

"Did she stab you after you told her that?"

"I saw the glint of a knife in her eyes, yes."

Maximo rubs the back of his neck, looking down as he kicks at the asphalt. "She won't go."

"How can you be so sure?"

"She won't go alone, and where will she find someone to go with her?"

"Oh, see, this is where your little sister is really fucking smart." I narrow my eyes, pushing my finger into my temple. "She convinced Leandra to go with her."

Maximo shrugs. "Problem solved, then. There's no way Alexius will let Leandra go."

I press my lips into a thin line, staring at him, deadpan, and realization punches him right in the face.

"Fuck. Goddammit!"

"Yup. My twin brother seems to love having his balls tied up."

"He knows After Dark is run by the Ferrero family."

"He does. Mirabella and Leandra don't. And even if they do, they won't know what it means. Not like us."

Maximo curses, then turns and stares at the sky like the answer to our problem is about to drop out of the sky. "We can't make an issue about this." He faces me again. "My sister

is like a fucking bloodhound. If we blow this shit up and refuse to let them go, Mira will be up our asses and push every goddamn button for answers.”

I scoff. “Yeah. Your sister has a real talent for pushing all the wrong buttons.”

“She’ll ask questions and demand answers. Answers we can’t give her.”

I kick at the ground and swing to the side, clutching my forehead, nostrils flaring and veins searing. “Fuck.”

“You know what this means, right?”

I glance at him. “We’re going to After Dark?”

“Looks like it, yeah.”

“Christ.” I take a deep breath, rolling my shoulders. “We still have eyes on the Ferreros?”

“You know it.”

“There’s nothing we need to be concerned about?”

Maximo shakes his head. “Nothing. You know, maybe—”

“Maybe, what?”

He shrugs. “It’s been seventeen years. Maybe it’s time to accept that there’s no longer a threat.”

I smirk, not because he’s funny, but because he’s an idiot. “I will never accept that there is no threat. As long as I fucking breathe, as long as the Ferreros breathe, I will live like those fuckers have a nuclear weapon with your and your sister’s names on it. Those assholes won’t ever catch me off-guard because I underestimated them, whether it’s seventeen years or fifty.” I step up close to him. “You know how they say to rather live like there is a God and find out there isn’t one than live like there isn’t one only to find out that there is a God? Well, I would rather live like there is a threat and die a happy man after years of peace than not expect a threat and end up losing everything I care about because I made a stupid mistake by thinking the Ferreros’ business with your family ended the night they slaughtered your parents.”

Maximo takes a sharp inhale, cranking his neck from side to side. “You’re right.”

“You bet your fucking ass I am.”

“Fine. I’ll, uh...I’ll make sure we have backup at the club, have eyes in the surrounding buildings.”

“Good.” I roll my shoulders. “In the meantime, I have two weeks to find a way to piss her off and have her lock herself in her room so we can just avoid this entire situation altogether.”

Maximo snorts as he pulls out his phone, pacing while barking orders at whoever is on the receiving end, putting security in place for this weekend.

I light a cigarette, take a long, hard drag, and close my eyes as it fills my lungs, holding it for as long as possible before letting it out, the puff of smoke dissipating in the air. That woman has a rare talent of getting under my skin without even trying, and it’s infuriating as fuck.

“We’ll have eyes and ears all over that club,” Maximo confirms before slipping his phone back into his jacket pocket. I see the lines on his forehead, the twitch along his left eyebrow. He’s worried. Of course, he is. Maybe I didn’t have to be such an asshole by laying it on thick when all he did was suggest that perhaps the Ferreros are no longer a threat to him and his sister. They killed Maximo’s parents because they wanted complete control of the drug trade on these streets. It was a good, old-fashioned turf war, an assassination to gain power. And with the Tirelli family out of the way, they grow their empire one drug shipment at a time. And since the day the Dark Sovereign withdrew from the trade, they have the monopoly when it comes to drugs. Because of Maximo and Mirabella’s parents, my father cut all ties with that market. It was out of respect for their loss. Even though Maximo and Mirabella were no threat to their business, and still aren’t, we’ve always kept a close eye on the Ferreros, ensuring they don’t come after the Tirelli siblings. Families like ours don’t like leaving loose ends. But it’s been seventeen years. So maybe Maximo is right to think that threat might never come.

I take another drag from my cigarette. “You okay...you know, with today—”

“Yeah, man. I’m fine.”

“And Mira? Is she okay?”

“I think so,” he replies, dragging his fingers through his dark hair. “She, um...she mentioned Marco this morning.” He gives me a knowing look, and I stiffen. “I hate it when she tries to talk about him.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, keeping myself from saying something because God knows I’ll end up saying the wrong fucking thing right now.

“You know,” he starts, “if you want to know how she’s doing, you can ask her yourself.”

I glare at him. “You and I both know it’s best if I don’t.”

“You’re simply asking her how she’s doing, man. You’re not asking her to have your fucking baby.” His expression says he’s getting kind of sick of my bullshit. I get sick of my own bullshit sometimes, too.

“Asking her how she’s doing today of all days is a potential opening for emotions and feelings to surface, and that’s not exactly the kind of conversation I want to get caught up in with her.”

“I get it. I do—”

“No. I don’t think you do.”

“You don’t have to be a dick to her every single day, Nicoli. Especially not today. If she ends up crying, just comfort her. It won’t mean anything.”

“It will to me,” I say, tossing my cigarette to the ground and stomping it into the asphalt, annoyed at him because I know he knows better. I’ve spent years perfecting this fucking charade. I can’t risk breaking it all down simply because I want to know whether she’s okay.

“Anyway. I have shit to do.” I pull my tie back in place and smooth it down my chest. “Looking forward to our night

out. Make sure you get your nails done and buy yourself a new dress.”

Maximo gives me the finger, and I smirk. “And here I thought you were more of a two-finger kind of girl.”

Chapter Five

MIRABELLA

My fists clench as I stalk toward the kitchen. “I’m so sick of his shit,” I grumble. Who the hell does he think he is? A condescending asshole, that’s who.

Half the time, he doesn’t even notice me. But when he does, he acts like he has the inherent right to tell me what I can and cannot do. His arrogance is astounding. Maddening. Always speaking to me as if I’m incapable of making my own damn decisions. God, Nicoli infuriates me. I’m ready to jump out of my skin and tear through his smug sense of superiority.

“Fuck!” I stop and place a palm on my forehead, certain my chest is about to explode. Nicoli has the natural talent to piss me off, and it’s exhausting trying to constantly brush it off.

Closing my eyes in a moment of peaceful respite, I take a deep breath and lean back against the wall. “Ouch!” I wince, something sharp pressing against my back. I try to jerk away and find my dress caught on whatever is protruding from the wall and trying to drill through my spine.

Alexius. New art. Hooks. My designer dress getting torn to shreds.

“Fuck. Really?” I glance up at the roof, directing my sarcasm to a higher power. “Are you serious?”

I try to reach behind my back and untangle the fabric stuck on what feels like a nail, but I can’t lean away from the wall far enough to get my arm in there without risking tearing my

dress. “Oh, come on,” I exclaim, stomping my foot as frustration boils in my bones.

Footsteps with an unrelenting pace echo from around the corner, and relief floods me. “Thank God. I need some help over here,” I call just as Nicoli appears and comes to a screeching halt, his blue eyes wide with confusion.

This is where I’m confident the universe has a hard-on for me.

Nicoli lifts a brow. “What are you doing?”

“I’m testing these hooks to see if they’ll carry the weight of Alexius’ priceless yet heavy paintings.” Sarcasm is oozing out of my pores, and I blow a strand of blonde hair out of my face.

Nicoli shrugs and starts walking past. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“Nicoli, I need help.” The words taste bitter as it burns my dignity to ash. “I’m stuck and can’t move without tearing a hole in my dress.”

“You’re stuck?” he asks in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Do I want to ask?”

“No. Now, can you reach behind me and unhook me?”

Nicoli hesitates, glancing up and down the hall as if he’s waiting for help to come from either direction.

“Nicoli,” I snap.

“Tear a hole in your damn dress, then.”

“No,” I moan. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“Then buy yourself a new one.”

“Nicoli, for God’s sake. Just reach between my back and the wall and unhook me. It’s not rocket science.”

He’s pulling his palm down his face, his expression that of someone who was just asked to shove cocaine up his ass and smuggle it into North Korea.

“Nicoli!”

“Okay. God. Relax, woman.”

Woman. He called me *woman*. And why do I find it hot as fuck?

My skin warms, and I know I’m flushed all the way from my neck to my cheeks as he moves up close, trying to see what kind of mess I managed to hang myself up on.

I try not to look at him, and while I’m desperate to control my eye movement, which is very fucking involuntary right now, I’m also hyperaware of him robbing every ounce of oxygen in a six-foot radius around us. And I’m pretty sure he grew taller in the last five seconds because he’s towering over me, heat emanating from him in waves.

My mouth goes dry, my flesh covered in goosebumps all because he’s so. Damn. Close.

Time has been paused. I’m sure of it. And sound is muted. Everything around us fades away the longer we stay within a few breaths’ distance from one another.

If this were a movie, this would be the part where the girl makes a complete ass of herself in front of a boy she’s had a crush on for years, because her brain just turned to mush.

I shift from one leg to the other.

“You need to stand still.”

“I’m trying.”

“Try harder.”

I roll my eyes. “Do you have to be a dick?”

“Do you have to be a damsel in distress daily?”

“Excuse me?” I gape. “Daily? And I’m not a damsel in distress.”

He snorts. “Yet you’re the one hanging from the wall.”

“It was an ac-ci-dent,” I enunciate, spitting out every syllable.

“Next time you feel like becoming a permanent fixture in this house, don’t wear your favorite dress.”

I narrow my eyes with a glare. “Just unhook me.”

Nicoli inches closer and places a palm on my shoulder. It’s a simple touch, but it moves through me like flames through grass on the hottest day of the year. The annoyance I felt one second ago...gone.

My stomach twists into a thousand fiery knots, and my mind is incapable of telling my lungs to breathe. If a single touch from him has this effect on me, what would it feel like to be in his arms? To be kissed by him? To have his naked body against mine?

His hand is warm, his fingers gently brushing my skin—a sensation that somehow moves down my spine and pools between my thighs. And his scent makes everything worse because I love it. I love the earthy smell that always clings to him. Warm notes of amber-wood and pepper are amplified with hints of smoke and leather—a heady combination that’s addictive.

Nicoli’s hand is at my back, moving gently along the fabric of my dress, demonstrating expert finesse with a simple hook that I clearly cannot maneuver my dress away from without massive amounts of help.

His breath ghosts across the side of my neck, sending a subtle shudder through me, and I can’t help turning my face toward him, leaning closer. I’m lost. Transfixed in a moment that’s alive with anticipation.

I’m overwhelmed with a desire I have no right feeling, powerless as I look up, letting out a gentle gasp as our eyes meet. He’s so close, his face inches from mine, lips parted slightly, and I’m aching for him to close the gap. His gaze is so intense, conveying an unspoken need that completely consumes me, and I can’t help but feel like he’s looking right into my soul.

His hand stills behind my back, and I’m aware of every rise and fall of his chest, this magnetic pull between us making

it impossible for me to move. The way he looks at me with such heated intensity sends my mind into an incoherent whirl, making any sensible thought impossible. This beautiful tension between us feels unbearable yet so deeply desired all at once.

“Mirabella,” he whispers, and the sound of my name on his lips is a powerful spell that wraps me up and keeps me captive.

I don’t want him to talk. I don’t want him to breathe. I just want him to kiss me.

He licks his lips, and my gaze drops to the movement, stirring a hunger that threatens to expose every fantasy I’ve ever had of him. Oxygen no longer reaches my lungs. Gravity no longer keeps me grounded. My mind has my body convinced he’s going to kiss me, and I’m helpless to resist.

As he lowers his face, dark strands of his hair brush along my temples. “I can’t...” There’s a tug at my back, and I close my eyes. “Got it,” he says, his voice low and dark.

I can’t move while he lingers for a few more breaths before taking a step back. “Be more careful next time, okay?”

Just like that, the spell is broken, and he’s walking away from me, leaving me a mess against the wall, wondering what the fuck just happened.

“Oh, my God,” I breathe, my body numb as if every drop of blood has been drained from my veins.

Did we...did something just...I’m not sure.

Did I imagine the last thirty seconds? Conjure it up with the part of my brain that seems to thrive on my attraction for Nicoli? Or...was it real? The connection that just blew up the Richter scale?

“You okay?”

I yelp at Leandra, who appears out of fucking nowhere. “Goddammit. If you woke up this morning intending to give me a heart attack today, you almost succeeded.”

Her amber-brown eyes narrow as she studies me. “Why are you so...flustered?”

“I, um...” I look and point at the hook in the wall, frown, and glance down at the floor. “I just...” Nope. No. I can’t do it. I can’t form a coherent thought, meaning I have zero chance of responding.

“Mira? Are you okay?” She touches my forehead with the back of her hand. “You need to sit down for a bit?”

“No,” I finally manage to say. “But I do need a drink.”

Chapter Six

NICOLI

My bedroom door slams shut behind me, the windows shuddering in their frames. What the fuck did I almost do?

“Jesus, Nicoli. You fucking asshole!” I jerk off my coat and toss it on the black tufted couch, yanking the tie from my collar while stomping across the carpet.

The crystal bourbon decanter is cold against my heated palm as I pour myself a drink at—I glance at my bedside clock—ten in the morning. I hesitate for a split second. *Fuck it.* Ten in the morning is as good a time as any.

The amber liquid glistens in the glass as I bring it up to my mouth, smelling the oak and spice before the velvety texture slips down my throat, the sting of alcohol settling in my stomach. One mouthful isn’t enough, so I drain every last drop, loving how it numbs my insides. That’s what I need right now. To be numbed.

Numb from feeling anything. Especially when it comes to her.

She came to us an orphan, a little girl with the yellow jacket and curly white hair. A girl with big green eyes that bewitched me into becoming fiercely protective over her. A girl who had me wrapped around her tiny finger since the first time she stared up at me from my mother’s side. I would read her bedtime stories and chase her through the garden while her laughter bounced off the red peonies. She would draw butterflies and rainbows on my arms, and cat whiskers on my

cheeks. There were countless days I willingly walked through this house with scribbles on my face, looking like an idiot, all because it made her happy. It made her smile. And to me, it was worth the insults my brothers threw at me.

In this house, I was her ward until one moment in time changed the entire trajectory of our lives. The day I lost her.

My nostrils flare as I slam down the glass, immediately pouring myself another one. If I ever needed to get drunk off my ass this early in the morning, now would be that time.

Just like the first glass, the second one doesn't erase the image of her plump, inviting, red lips inches from mine. I could smell the richness of the chocolate croissant she had for breakfast, fused with her perfume—the scent that lingers in her bedroom at night while I watch her sleep.

“So close,” I mutter.

It almost snapped, the tether that keeps me from losing control around her. All these years of keeping my distance, building that wall between us one reluctant brick at a time, came seconds away from crumbling. For what? A simple kiss? I nearly broke a promise I made years ago because my fucking mouth salivated to taste her. And now what she tastes like is all I can think about. Sweet cherries? Ripe raspberries? No. Her blood-red lips probably taste like something more exciting. Seductive.

Pomegranate. I bet it's pomegranates. A scarlet fruit that tastes like cranberries but doesn't. Tart like blueberries, but not. It's a unique taste. Exotic and sharp-edged, like her. One of a kind.

Unique.

“Fuck!” I fling my empty glass across the room, glass shattering against the wall. My dick throbs like a motherfucker, and there isn't a pussy in this goddamn universe that'll relieve the ache. Except hers. And that thought alone makes me want to break every glass in this entire fucking house because it's terrifying knowing that no matter how hard I try to fuck my way through life, try to fuck her out of my

system, it'll never work. The debilitating desire will never go away. Not unless I have her, and that's something I'll never allow myself.

Not her. Ever.

I pull my hands through my hair, tugging at the strands as I sit on the couch. I have no idea how this happened. It was one minute. Sixty fucking seconds. And in that time, I kissed her, tore her clothes off, slammed her back against that wall, and fucked her until she screamed while her cunt creamed my cock. I wonder if her pussy's bare. Hollywood style. Brazilian, maybe. Or that cute little landing strip—a GPS location pin for pussy.

My eyes drift closed, trying to imagine her naked body. But I can't. I never could. It's like my mind cockblocks me when it comes to Mira. I can't imagine her naked because there is nothing, no other woman I can use as a comparison because this is Mirabella. She's perfection personified. If I had to put her in a cage, I'd never let her out. I would stare at her all day, all night, every day until the world comes to an end.

Landing strip. It has to be a landing strip.

God, why am I even thinking about this? She probably keeps it all neat and tidy with nothing more than a bikini wax since she's never been with a man. She's never even had a boyfriend—we made sure of that. Guys at school didn't dare look her way, or they'd end up with their eyeballs shoved up their assholes. And the men in this town know if they want to keep their testicles inside their ballsacks, they better not even send as much as a smile in her direction.

Mirabella is this family's most priceless gem, and we protect her as such. But to me, she's my soul and has been ever since the night I experienced genuine pain through a little girl's eyes.

I ROLL ONTO MY SIDE, the bedside clock saying it's three minutes past midnight. I've been tossing and turning for two hours, but I can't sleep. It's been a month since Maximo and

Mirabella arrived here, two orphans who lost their parents. They hardly spoke at first, but after Mirabella's fifth birthday, spoiling her with a ginormous fairy tale castle cake and what seemed like fifty princess dresses, Mira started warming up to us, and soon after, so did Maximo.

They don't talk about what happened that night. My dad told us how their family was gruesomely murdered and how they, too, would be dead if it weren't for my dad's men arriving just in time. He only told us about it because he wants Alexius and me to know the risks and dangers of being a part of a family such as ours. Everything has a price. Our family's wealth, our power, the special treatment we get wherever we go, it has a cost. The grass might be greener on our side of the world, but that only means we have to work extra hard to keep it that way. The hard part isn't getting to the top; it's staying there. As the saying goes, 'With great power comes great responsibility.' It's our family's blessing and its curse.

I turn onto my other side, my legs tangled up in the sheets. "Dammit." I grab the fabric and yank it free, jerking it up and over my shoulders, fluffing up my pillow and trying to get comfortable.

Another half hour passes before I finally feel my body get heavier, weighing into the mattress. I'm drifting off when the sheets move, and a tiny human slips in behind me.

My eyes widen when I realize it's her. Mirabella, snuggling with her back against mine. I'm about to say something when I hear her sniff and feel her tiny body shaking.

Is she...crying?

"I miss Mommy," she says, sniffing again, short and quick. "I miss Daddy."

There's a voice whispering to me to keep quiet and let her speak, so I don't make a sound. I don't even move.

"Mommy cried. I think it hurt."

My stomach turns inside out.

"The men hurt her."

I tighten the sheet around my shoulders.

“I...um...Mommy told me to hide under the bed. Said I have to keep quiet. She made me promise.” Her soft voice quivers more, and more with every word, and it’s like glass splintering inside my heart.

“I didn’t make a noise.” Sniff. “When she fell, I didn’t make a noise.” Sniff. “When she looked at me, I didn’t make a noise.”

It physically hurts to imagine a little girl hiding underneath the bed while her mother is being slaughtered.

“She told me to close my eyes. But I didn’t. I wonder if she’d be angry with me if she knew I didn’t.” Mira moves, tugging on the sheets. “I wish I was older. Eight. I’d be strong enough to help her if I was eight. Do you like the color red?”

I don’t answer.

“I like it. Mommy’s blood was red. It’s a pretty color. Did you know that when a person dies, their eyes change? Mommy’s eyes changed. Not the color. Just the way they look.”

The lump in my throat grows thicker.

“When she fell, she looked at me. Her lips moved. I think she said she loves me. Then she didn’t look at me anymore. Her eyes were open, but she didn’t see me. I think that’s when she died.”

Soft little sobs jab knives into my chest, and I can tell she’s trying not to cry. It sounds like she’s smothering them into the pillow. I don’t know what to do. I should probably comfort her, but I have no idea how. Do I turn around and hug her? Do I go to the kitchen and get her some milk and cookies? Do I call my mom? Yeah, I should probably do that. She’ll know what to do.

“You remember the day I knocked the cake pan off the kitchen table before Mommy could put it in the oven? How the thick chocolate batter spread on the floor?” Sniff. “That’s what it looked like.”

How what looked like?

“The blood that came out of her neck. It was thick. It spread slowly, too. But I wasn’t allowed to move. I promised her I’d keep still. So, I watched it come closer. I wanted to scream then. I really did. But Mommy says you should never break a promise. A promise is...a promise is expensiver than the biggest pot of gold. She says every time you make a promise, God writes it down in His book. And if...if you break it, He has to tear out the page, and we don’t want Him to do that, no.”

My eyes start to sting, and I clench my jaw, and it’s like my chest has been hacked wide open.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

I move my head in a gentle nod even though she can’t see it.

“God had to tear a page from his book the night Mommy and Daddy died because...” her gentle sob penetrates my bones, “because I did make a noise. I broke my promise. Mommy’s blood touched my sleeve, and I screamed. I think I made God angry because loud sounds exploded and hurt my ears.”

Gunshots.

“Do you think God is still angry...” she chokes on a sob “...still angry with me.”

God, no.

“I hope not. I don’t want Him to be angry with me because then I won’t go to Heaven and see Mommy again.” More cries, more heart-wrenching tears that sound like they’re cutting through her heart. “I’m sorry I screamed,” she whispers through sobs. “I’m sorry I screamed.”

My own tears start to lap off my cheeks, the pillow soaking it up as I lie there in the dark, listening to a little girl cry, hearing her pain in every single sob. It’s too much. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything sound as broken as her. God, I wish I could snap my fingers and take away her pain. Take away the memory. I wish I were older so I could help my dad find whoever is responsible for Mirabella’s heartache. Just like

she saw her mother's blood seeping through the floors, I want to see those bastards' blood coat my hands. But I'm not older. I'm thirteen, and there's nothing I can do to help her. So, I do the only thing I can do in the middle of the night with a girl crying in my bed...

I reach behind me and take her small hand in mine, squeezing it tightly. I have no idea how much time passes, but her sobs slowly start to wane, and I'm silently thanking God for it because I'm not sure how much more of it I can take before my heart explodes.

"I don't think I want to talk about this again," she whispers, clasping my hand tight. "I don't want to cry again."

I wipe my cheeks across the pillowcase and take a deep breath as Mira snuggles deeper into me. "I think I like Mr. and Mrs. Del Rossa. I hope we can stay here forever."

Oh, I'll make sure of it.

"I'm going to sleep now. I love you, Max."

THAT NIGHT MIRA thought she had wandered into her brother's room. She opened her tiny little heart and spoke her pain, put her nightmare into words and told her big brother what she saw the night her mother was murdered in front of her. Only, it wasn't Maximo she told.

It's been seventeen years since that night, and she still doesn't know...that it was me.

Chapter Seven

NICOLI

After my impromptu trip down memory lane's graveyard and sitting on my couch wondering if I had a good enough excuse to drink an entire bottle of bourbon before midday, I decide thrusting my frustration into sex and drowning my feelings in a climax that turns my spine inside out might be a better option.

It's something I tell myself every damn time, that maybe today I'll be able to fuck her out of my system. Perhaps this time the past would tear right out of me while I come down a Myth girl's throat.

Wishful thinking, motherfucker.

I'm about to get into my car when Alexius comes rushing out the front door, wearing his Ray-Ban sunglasses, slipping on his suit jacket, looking like God dunked his ass in ice-cold confidence, moving like he's featuring in a goddamn men's cologne commercial.

"Nicoli, we have a problem," he says, adjusting the collar of his jacket.

"Of course we do," I scoff, pulling my hair back with my fingers.

"Caelian just called. There's an issue over at Myth."

"Myth?"

"Yeah. Some fucker tried to recruit one of our girls."

I slam my car door closed and face him. "Say what?"

“Some motherfucker got caught trying to smooth-talk one of our girls into leaving Myth and going to work for him.”

“Who the fuck would be that dumb?”

Alexius rounds his car. “Don’t know. Caelian just said to get our asses over there asap.”

“Wait,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “You’re going to Myth?”

“Yup.”

“So, your wife is actually letting you go to Myth without her?”

He opens the door to his car. “Not the time, Nicoli.” Then he gets in, starts the engine, and spins out of the driveway. Dammit, if I had two more seconds, I could have ripped into him with my award-winning sarcasm. But, instead, I’m short on his ass, soon tearing onto the asphalt as I speed off the estate grounds. The idea that someone had the balls to walk into our club and try to recruit one of our girls is fucking unbelievable. Who would have a nutsack that big? Who would want to die so badly he’d scratch the lion’s balls by taking a shit on our porch? I already know it’s not some scumbag, backstreet pimp. This person is high enough on the food chain to be able to set foot in Myth in the first place, let alone get a one-on-one with our girl and think there’s half a chance she won’t be loyal to people who fucking feed her.

Club Myth isn’t just some sleazy strip club. It’s not a cheap brothel where filthy fuckers come to get their dicks wet. It’s the Dark Sovereign’s most elite club. A place where the world’s most expensive champagne flows like water, a place where beautiful women bring the Chicago night sky to life. It’s the playground of the upper echelon of this city’s high-flying society, and you don’t get through those doors with a minimal entry fee and a stamp on your goddamn wrist. Those who frequent Myth have an exclusive VIP membership with a six-figure monthly price tag. With it comes a vow of secrecy and loyalty toward our family’s business.

The only way you're exempt from that fee is if you make a highly confidential contribution toward our club—the kind of contribution that has a pretty face, firm tits, and a tight ass.

There are so many rumors flying around town about Myth. But my favorite rumor is the one about the women we keep captive to bear children for us, how we raise the girls and teach them to be slaves and whores while we bury the boys below the maple trees.

I snort at the thought.

People can gossip and whisper about us all they want, but if you're not on our VIP list, you don't have shit for proof that this club even exists.

The tires of my car screech as I come to a stop outside Myth. Alexius is standing next to his car, buttoning up his suit jacket, his lips pulled in that weird way they always do when he's annoyed by waiting for someone.

I get out and roll my eyes at him. “Don't pretend like you've been waiting for me for an hour.”

“I have.”

“I was right behind you. Look.” I point at the asphalt. “Those stones are still settling back into place after you assaulted them with your Audi's cheap fucking tires.”

“Shut the fuck up. My tires are worth more than your car.”

“In your dreams. Oh, my God, Vera will be so excited to see you here without your wife.”

“The only reason Vera is excited to see me is because my brothers don't fuck half as good as I do.”

I narrow my eyes. “You're a motherfucker. You know that?”

“Hello, ladies.” Caelian is standing at the top of the stairs, his arms held wide like he's an entire goddamn welcoming party. “I was hoping you'd get here before I'm fifty.”

Alexius heads up the stairs, straight past Caelian and through the back entrance.

I shrug at Caelian as I walk past. “Our brother is pissed because of his cheap-ass tires.”

“Good God. Are you two ever going to grow up?”

“Nope.”

We enter the club, the lights on the high, coffered ceilings reflecting on the pristinely polished marble floors. The highly expensive and significantly over-the-top double-story crystal chandelier is underwhelming and unimpressive with the window shutters open, the natural sunlight suffocating the golden glow that’s supposed to scatter off the rows of crystals hanging at different levels.

The halls are usually quiet this time of day, but today it feels eerily quiet. It’s as if the walls know our little paradise here has been violated by some dumb schmuck trying to lure our angels out of here and straight into the hell he crawled out of. Unfortunately for him, our girls are loyal, trustworthy, and dedicated to this club and us. We take care of them. We protect them. We give them the luxurious life they couldn’t even dream of before they came here.

Our girls aren’t back-alley whores—not unless we want them to be.

“Who’s the girl?” I ask Caelian as he falls into step next to me.

“Yulie.”

“Yulie?” I frown. “The Russian girl who came in two weeks ago?”

“Yup. Makes you wonder if this asshole knew she was new. Hoping her loyalty wasn’t solidified here.”

“Oh, I don’t wonder. I know. That’s exactly what this fucker was hoping. The question squeezing my balls right now, though, is how would he know she’s new?”

Caelian shrugs. “Maybe he’s a regular and saw she’s a new face around here.”

“There’s not a chance it’s that simple.”

“Of course, there’s a chance it’s that simple.”

I stop and turn to face him. “Tell me you’re not as stupid as your face makes you look? Nothing in our world is ever that simple, Caelian. Nothing. If we get the wrong mail delivered to our house, it’s not simply a human error on the postal service’s part. No. It’s a clue.”

“A clue to what?”

“A clue to whoever is about to fuck us in the ass next.”

Caelian snickers. “And if the chef serves us the wrong meal?”

“That’s a sign.”

“Of what?”

“That someone is trying to poison us.”

He slips his hands into his pants pockets. “And if you wake up finding a new scratch on your car?”

“That’s an omen.” I straighten my suit jacket. “One that says I’m about to tear your throat out your ass.”

“Can you two idiots—” Alexius levels us with a glare straight out of Lucifer’s asshole “—focus on the problem at hand?”

“Focusing,” I say, shooting him a fake smile before sauntering past him. “Where’s Yulie?”

“Maximo has her in the bar by the poker tables,” Caelian replies, and all three of us make our way down the staircase, my hand gliding across the gold banister framing the steel rails.

There are two arches on either side of the foyer—one leading you to the lavish dwelling of sinners, AKA fuckers like me, and the other taking you to the deluxe gambling area where we find Maximo standing guard next to Yulie.

“Hey, Max,” I start, approaching him. “Have you ever had an American pitbull?”

He frowns. “No. Why?”

“Just asking.” I circle my finger in front of his face. “You have that fighter dog expression nailed to a T. Makes me wonder if you grew up with a pack of wild animals.”

“I did. I grew up with you and your brothers.”

“That does explain why you’re always walking around with your asshole puckered, just like my twin brother over here.” I slap my palm on Alexius’ shoulder, then almost get obliterated with a glower that can tear the flesh off Satan.

“Okay, then.” I step back and pull a chair closer, taking a seat across from Yulie. Her rosy nipples tease through white lace, her slender body filling the button-front, split-hem sleep dress perfectly.

Yeah, our girls sure only get the best.

Alexius crosses his arms and puffs up his chest like he’s about to fight this woman. “Tell us everything. And make it quick.”

“Hey, hey. Easy, Casanova.” I hold out a hand, gesturing for him to step the fuck back. “Being with one woman has done absolutely nothing for your charisma.”

“Unlike you, I don’t have time to piss around, Nicoli.”

“Just let me handle this.”

Alexius lets out a low snarl behind me, but I ignore his impatient ass and focus all my attention on the beautiful, dark-haired Russian girl in front of me.

“Poor girl,” I coo. “You’re as pale as a ghost. Maximo, get Yulie a cosmo or something. We need to calm her nerves before her brain short-circuits.” I reach out and brush a gentle finger down her cheek. “You scared, little one?”

She nods, strands of dark hair slipping down her face.

“Don’t be.” I place my fingers below her chin and lift her blue-eyed gaze to meet mine. “You’re not in trouble here. We just need to know what happened.”

I don’t break eye contact with her, trailing my fingers along her jaw. I’ve been around these girls long enough to

know what they need. And what Yulie needs right now is to feel protected. Cherished. Special. Nothing earns a woman's loyalty faster than appreciation.

“Let's start at the beginning. Did you get a name?”

“We have him as Aldo Costa,” Maximo responds, and I simply narrow my eyes at him.

“Thanks. I'd like to continue this conversation with Yulie, if you don't mind.”

The creak of leather is audible as Maximo tightens his arms in front of his chest. He's on edge. Angry. Annoyed. I'd bet the entire Dark Sovereign money pot that Maximo is about to cut through glass with his tight, sharp jawline. Whenever we have a problem that seems to have slipped through a crack in security, Maximo takes it as a personal failure and will not rest until he fixes it...and spends an entire six months sulking while riding the backs of his men with a whip and chainsaw.

I shift in my seat and drop my hand to Yulie's knee, easing my thumb along the inside of her leg. “What, exactly, did he offer you?”

She licks her blush-pink lips. “He said I would be his number one,” she replies, her Russian accent thick and hot as fuck. “That I would be treated like royalty.”

“Do we not treat you like royalty, Yulie?” I tilt my head, keeping eye contact.

“Yes,” she replies, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“What else?”

“He said that his club will be three times the size of this one.”

I raise a brow. “Oh, would it, now?”

“And if I can get more girls to go with me, he will reward me.”

“Reward you how?”

“I do not know. He made me uncomfortable, so I told him to wait while I got another girl to join us, pretending I was

interested in what he was offering.” Her breath hitches as I inch my hand slowly up her inner thigh. “I went and called security, but when we got back, he was already gone.”

My fingers reach the soft fabric of her panties, and I trace my fingertips up and down her slit. She welcomes my touch by parting her legs, giving me better access.

“And you didn’t once think to take him up on his offer?”

“No, sir. Never.”

“And why not?” I slip her panties to the side, brushing a finger along her smooth pussy lips.

“You have...” She sucks in a breath. “You have shown me more kindness since I got here than I’ve been shown throughout my life. This is my home now.”

Abruptly, I sink a finger deep into her wet cunt. “Good girl.”

Yulie throws her head back, Russian words slipping from her tongue. I have no idea what she’s saying, but whatever it is, it’s making my dick hard.

Isaia finally decides to join us and curses when he sees Yulie’s legs spread while her pussy sucks my finger deeper into her. “So, this is what you’re up to when I’m not around. Do you fuckers ever work?”

I stand, leaning down and wrapping my other hand around the back of Yulie’s neck, whispering into her ear, “My little brother is going to fuck you now.”

“I am?”

“Be a good girl and do exactly as Isaia says. Understood?”

She’s biting her bottom lip while nodding. Her irises are pools of desire, her pussy ready to be ravaged. I’d be up for the challenge, but it seems this morning’s events have screwed with my head, and even though it’s Yulie sitting in front of me now, it’s not her I’m seeing. It’s not her eyes staring back at me. It’s not her lips glistening with temptation. And it’s not her body rocking against my palm.

I pull my finger out of her and straighten. “Isaia, give Yulie a good fucking. She deserves it.”

Isaia steps up. “Sure will.”

Caelian slips in behind Yulie, placing his hands on her shoulders. “I’ll stay and watch, make sure he rewards her really well.”

Maximo joins Alexius and me as we walk out, leaving Yulie in the capable hands of my two brothers.

“Find a clear picture of this asshole’s face and run it through all the video footage,” Alexius says to Maximo. “I want to know everything there is about this fucker. Where he lives, where he eats, where he shits. Even his goddamn blood type. And we need to know how the fuck this guy got through our security.”

“That’s easy,” I start. “We have someone with questionable loyalty and a need to feel me rip their spleen out their ass.”

Maximo’s phone vibrates, and I watch as he reads whatever’s on the screen. “I know who it is.”

“Who?”

“Ruben Willard. He was on gate security but transferred to bodyguard duty at the last minute.”

“Let me guess.” I roll my eyes. “He walked around our club playing guard dog to this Aldo Costa.”

Maximo nods. “And disappeared right after the last video footage we have of Costa.”

“Find this Ruben cunt,” Alexius orders. “Get as much information about Costa out of him as you can before you kill him.”

“Yes, sir.” Maximo stomps in the other direction when I call out after him.

“Actually, I’d like to join in on this one.”

Maximo turns to face me.

“Let me know when you have him, and I’ll make sure he sings like a fucking bird.” I won’t be trying to fuck her out of my system today, but maybe a man’s screams, tears, and blood will make me forget for just a little while. “Oh, and give Yulie the night off. She’ll be thoroughly fucked after they’re done with her and rendered completely useless for the next twenty-four hours.”

Maximo simply waves a hand at me before disappearing around the corner.

I scoff. “That man will live like he has Satan on his heels until we figure all this out.”

“Which is why I’m confident we’ll have this Aldo Costa’s tongue real fucking soon.”

Alexius stops as we reach the bottom of the stairs, the oversized chandelier hanging above us. “I will not allow anyone the honor of thinking they’re competition for us, Nicoli. We need to find whoever is behind this and cut them down before they get a chance to set up camp on our streets.”

“We will,” I say, grabbing a napkin from one of the waiter’s trays and wiping Yulie’s pussy juices off my fingers and palm. “If this person has big enough balls to come to our club and try to recruit our girls, they probably have an ego the size of Japan, which means he won’t be able to stay hidden for long. Arrogance likes attention, and that’s what they got now. Our fucking attention.”

It’s not even two hours later when I walk into a luxury apartment with Ruben Willard tied to a chair in the middle of his own living room. Maximo has already beaten him to a pulp, one eye swollen shut, his lip busted and bleeding.

I slide off my suit jacket and drop it on the black granite kitchen counter. “Wow,” I remark, glancing around the lush apartment with floor-to-ceiling windows, expensive leather furniture, and a richly polished wine cabinet that features expensive wines from around the world. “We sure pay our employees fucking well. So, that makes me wonder why our friend here felt compelled to fuck us in the ass, because clearly, it’s not about money.”

I look over at Maximo. “Got everything you need from him?”

He nods. “It’s the Ferrero family. Paid him to get one of their guys in the club for some recruiting.”

“Of course, it’s the Ferrero family. I’d be surprised if it wasn’t. They move in and take the drug trade, and now they want to get their filthy hands on the sex trade as well. Greedy cunts.”

Maximo’s knuckles are bruised and bleeding, but the look on his face says he’s barely begun. Pity for him, because I’ve been downright itching to unleash some pent-up aggression. It’s been a while since I could allow myself the freedom to be a cruel fucker.

I walk over to the wine display and run my fingers along the rows of expensive bottles. “I must admit, Ruben, your choice in business associates is questionable, but your taste in wine is exceptional.” I take one with a dusty label, an imported red all the way from South Africa, and smash it against the wall, relishing the sound of glass shattering into a million pieces.

Ruben startles, his one good eye widening in fear. I turn to face him, holding his gaze as I take another bottle and smash it against the opposite wall. Fragments of glass rain down, the light turning it into a webwork of prisms that crash onto the pristine white floor tiles, turning them into a sea of crimson and shores of shards.

I pick up another bottle with an elegant white and gold label, then start to pace. “I have a pretty good idea why you were so fucking stupid, Ruben. Let’s see if I’m right.” I settle in front of him, widening my stance, still holding on to the wine bottle. “You make enough money working for us. Live a good life. Fuck a different woman every weekend.” I shrug. “You have enough money to buy mommy-dearest one of those expensive espresso machines for Mother’s Day, but that too has a selfish connotation because your mom doesn’t drink coffee. You do, and you don’t want the cheap shit she keeps in

her kitchen cabinets for when you visit. And you don't have the balls to tell her that you think her coffee tastes like piss."

His bloodied nostrils flare, and I know I'm hitting it on point.

"You have enough money to book a flight to the Maldives for a nice tropical vacation. You drive a flashy car. It's no Maserati or Aston Martin, but it gets you from point A to point B and manages to turn some heads." I glance down at his wristwatch. "You have enough zeroes in your bank account to spoil yourself with expensive shit like a Rolex every second year." I smack my lips together, dragging my gaze around the apartment. "I'd say you have enough to live an extremely comfortable life. But what you don't have, I'm afraid, is common fucking sense."

I fling the bottle of wine across the living room, sending it flying into the wine cabinet, and more than half of his collection tumbles out, shattering on the floor, decorating his white walls with splatters of red.

"See, it's fuckers like you who simply can't be content with their lives. You're overindulgent leeches who want more, and more is never enough. This is where common sense comes in." I place my hands on his wrists tied to the chair and lean in, bringing my face inches from him. "Greed makes you desperate. Desperate makes you sloppy. And sloppiness gets you killed."

He sucks air through his teeth, and by the fear that swirls in his mouse-colored eyes, I know that he knows he's a dead man. I take his jaw between my fingers, studying this asshole's piss-poor attempt at growing a mustache. "What is this? A teenager's version of a fanny tickler?"

Maximo snorts, and Ruben snarls...right before he spits in my face. "Fuck you."

I wipe the saliva off my face and release his jaw, stepping back. Ruben smirks in defiance as if he's won some kind of victory by spitting on me. I shake my head, disappointed by how predictable human beings truly are.

“You have a death wish, don’t you?”

“You’re gonna kill me anyway.”

“True. But now I plan on making it as painful as possible.” My voice is low but firm as I walk toward the broken wine bottles scattered across the tiled floor. “So, not only do you have zero common sense, you’re dumb as fuck too.”

Glass breaks and cracks under my Italian leather shoes, the crunching sound similar to shattered bone. Ruben tries to glance over his shoulder to see what I’m doing, but since he only has one good eye, he can’t see shit. I grab a handful of crushed glass, not caring that the tiny, jagged edges slice into my palm. When I’m high on bloodlust, I don’t feel pain. Like the bullet that landed in my chest the night shit went down with our dearly dead uncle, Roberto. I felt nothing. One minute, I was standing in the Dark Sovereign room, and the next, I woke up in my bedroom with those annoying as fuck beeping machines.

“Maximo, you’re sure you got all the information you need out of this one?”

Maximo lifts a brow. “Yeah. We have everything we need.”

“Good. Because after this, he won’t be able to say shit.”

Maximo lifts a brow as he watches me move to stand in front of our royally fucked friend, whose eyes went from defiance to terror in record time. “What...what are you doing?” He’s shaking, and I can practically smell the fear.

“Open wide.”

“No! No!” He shakes his head violently, horror lacing his expression like he’s living in his own goddamn *Saw* movie. Maximo slaps his palms against Ruben’s ears, keeping him still so I can shove the shards of glass in his mouth.

“Eat up, fucker,” I sneer. Ruben tries to scream, but it’s all muffled by my palm flush against his mouth, and the more he tries to fight it, the deeper the glass goes. Blood trickles down the sides of his lips and chin as he tries to sputter around the pieces of glass in his throat. His eyes are so fucking wide I’m

sure they're going to tear out of his skull. "That's what you get when you fuck with us," I say as he chokes on the shards and his own blood, tears streaming down his cheeks. God, the power pulsing through my veins right now is fucking exquisite. There's nothing like holding a man's life in the palm of your hand, knowing you're in control, that you decide whether he lives or dies. Unfortunately for this fucker, his fate was decided the moment he let Aldo Costa through our club doors.

I step back, and a thrill shudders up my spine as I witness the scene in front of me. Ruben's mouth falls open as he tries to scream, but it's more choked gags and tortured cries, blood-stained pieces of glass expelled from his mouth with desperate breaths.

His lips, his tongue, it's all pierced and gashed by what looks like thousands of tiny fragments of glass. Pain is laced through every line on his face, but it's not enough. I pick up a large piece of glass, the sharp tip glinting, my own palm bleeding. I can feel the tiny shards digging deeper into my flesh, but there's no pain. No burn. No sting.

"You should have settled for the way your life was, Ruben. Because compared to others, it's a pretty good fucking life." I swing my arm, slicing the sharp edge through his cheek, his head jerking to the side.

He doesn't scream. He's not making a goddamn sound, his cheek now a large, gaping hole, and I can see parts of his teeth through the grotesque wound. His one good eye is still wide but starts to flutter, his shoulders slumped as he seems to teeter on the edge of unconsciousness.

"Oh, no. You get to look in my eyes while you die." With a snarl, I grab his hair and pull his head up so he faces me, and when he looks at me, I jab the broken glass into his jugular, severing the vein. "See you in hell, motherfucker."

His last gasp is garbled and wet, his body rigid and shaking. The sight of his blood pouring out over my hands is pure ecstasy. There's no better scene than watching a traitorous fucker like Ruben Willard die at my hand.

Adrenaline courses through me, Ruben's body going lax as his life drains out of him. Power engulfs me, and I'm lost in a blood haze. Hypnotized. Entranced. Until beautiful green irises push through the cruel vapor, reminding me why I'll never have the one thing my heart and soul desire most. Because it's as clear as the blood coating my hands.

She's a queen...and I'm a fucking monster.

Chapter Eight

“I want to do my own thing.”

“And what, exactly, is your thing?” Caelian asks, taking a sip of his whiskey.

“I want to help a blushing bride plan the perfect wedding just as she had always dreamed of. I want to plan an old couple’s fiftieth anniversary and help make it even more unforgettable than their wedding day.”

“You want to be a party planner?”

“Not a party planner. A dream maker.” I smile and settle back in the tufted chair, already seeing the perfect setting of a dream wedding in my mind’s eye. “And since Mrs. Del Rossa is no longer here, and there’s a new first lady in the house, I have more free time to do what I want.”

“Like going to nightclubs?” Nicoli leans against the arched wall, his sleeves rolled up and tie loosened. His muscles are so defined you can see it through his shirt. He’s fucking beautiful. Tall. Attractive. Exasperating.

I arch a brow. “That topic is closed for conversation, Nicoli. Move on.”

“So, you’ve accepted that you’re not going?”

“No. You’ve accepted that I *am* going.”

He scoffs. “Like fuck I have.”

I narrow my eyes as I notice his bandaged hand. “What happened to you?”

“It’s just a scratch.”

“Of course it is.” These men never give you straight, true answers. Everything is either a bullshit response or a fucking riddle.

“If you don’t mind? Caelian and I were in the middle of a conversation until your rude ass interrupted.”

Caelian smirks, his brown eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Yeah, I heard. So, you want to be a party planner.”

“Dream maker,” I correct him while framing my glare with batting eyelashes.

Nicoli crosses his arms. “Alexius won’t fall for it.”

“It’s not up to him.”

“Of course, it is. Everything revolving around this family is up to him.”

I stand, cross my arms, and mimic his stance, shooting out a hip for good measure. “And why won’t he fall for it?”

“Because the last thing he wants is a member of this family being out there planning other people’s parties and weddings and shit—”

“And shit?”

“—unprotected and vulnerable. An easy fucking target.”

“An easy target?” I seethe. “You think I can’t protect myself? That I’m this vulnerable little princess whose only place is in a goddamn tower brushing her hair and looking pretty all day?”

Nicoli shrugs. “Sounds about right.”

“Screw you, Nicoli. I can take care of myself. And the last time I checked, this is a free country, which means I can do whatever I want.”

“Haven’t you heard? This country’s laws don’t apply to us. We make our own. And one of our rules is that every member of this family will remain protected twenty-four-fucking-seven. You going out there and planning parties and shit—”

“And shit?”

“—and going to nightclubs and bars is not protection. On the contrary, it’s asking for trouble.”

Caelian chuckles, clearly enjoying watching the back-and-forth between Nicoli and me.

I shift my weight and square my shoulders. “I’m not asking for your permission, Nicoli. And neither do I need your approval. This is my life, and I choose what to do with it. Not Mrs. Del Rossa. Not Alexius. And sure as hell, not you.”

Nicoli lets out a humorous laugh. “We’ll see.” He turns on his heel and walks away.

“What the hell does that mean? *We’ll see*. We’ll see what?” I turn to face Caelian with a giant question mark on my face.

“Don’t ask me. What do I know about this continued drama between you and my brother? I’m just here for the sheer entertainment of it.”

“Ugh.” Frustrated and pissed off, I stomp out of the living room, fuming while rushing to my room. I don’t care if anyone hears me slamming my bedroom door. It’s the only place in this goddamn house where I feel I can breathe without running the risk of being reprimanded and told what to do. I’m not a child. I’m not a Del Rossa wife. I’m not even a Del Rossa. God, I wish I was in Tuscany with Nicoli’s mom right now, living my life far away from these controlling freaks who suffocate me with their oppressive expectations.

I kick off my shoes and step out of my dress, dropping it on the floor. My room. My dress. My floor.

I yank open the cabinet and snatch a cotton pad, wiping away the makeup on my face. The scar stretching down the side is more visible and enhanced without foundation masking its presence.

I grab the orange and bergamot candle, strike a match, and light the wick, desperate for some peace. It’s been a day, and all I want to do is take a long bubble bath and feel all the negative energy drain from my body. And by negative energy, I mean Nicoli. And Alexius. And pretty much all the Del

Rossa men. I just need some me time without being bombarded with orders and everyone else telling me what I can and cannot do. At least I have some control over choosing which bubble bath I want to soak in. Magnolia blossom... which is not where it's supposed to be because Leandra used it last night. Seriously?

I have other options, other bubble baths I can use, like rhubarb and rose or jasmine. But I'm so determined to do what I want and not what other people's actions force me to do—*like borrow my goddamn bubble bath*—that I choose to wrap a towel around myself and stalk down the hall to get my magnolia blossom bubble bath.

I peek out of my bedroom, scanning the hallway for signs of life. Once I'm sure the coast is clear, I tiptoe across the lacquered floors, rushing toward Leandra and Alexius' room. I clutch the towel tightly in front of my chest, peering behind me every few steps. As I turn the corner, I walk straight into a brick wall with a pulse.

“What the f—”

“Oh, God,” I gasp, and three things happen at once.

The towel drops.

Nicoli's eyes widen.

And I die.

A wash of heat rushes to my face, and a fire is lit inside my chest. The scarlet towel is pooled around my feet, refusing to obscure the overwhelming embarrassment that floods my system as I stare into sapphire eyes. Humiliation grabs hold of every muscle in my body, and I'm frozen because, apparently, I have now forgotten how to move. All I can do is stand like a statue and feel the shame chew me up in big chunks of awkwardness.

I stare up at Nicoli, regarding me with an expression that seems both unreadable and unfamiliar all at once. Is it because I've never seen him look at me the way he's doing right now? The silence hurts my ears, seconds turning into decades until Nicoli's blue gaze slowly starts to wander, raking down my

body. Too overwhelmed to bear witness to this disaster, I shut my eyes and do nothing but just stand absolutely fucking still. Every trace of our earlier dispute is gone. It's as if the argument in the living room never happened.

Nicoli clears his throat, and I open my eyes just in time to see him crouch in front of me, his eyes downcast as he reaches for the towel. My heart is beating so fast, and I'm convinced he can hear the thump.

A single wisp of his hair tickles my leg as his fingers grip the towel still draped around my feet. An electric current shoots up my thigh, sparks of anticipation prickling my skin.

“Nicoli, I—”

“Shut up.”

“You don't even—”

“Just for once, Mira.” He touches my calf, and I suck in a breath. “Keep quiet.” His voice is low. Demanding. And I'm biting my bottom lip nervously, trying to keep myself from saying something incredibly fucking stupid.

His fingertips trail gently up the side of my leg, his deft touch seeping into my skin, leaving me weak-kneed and hardly able to keep myself upright. There's just too much heat. Too much desire. Too much electricity that I can practically taste.

What is he thinking? Does he like what he sees? Is desire alive in his veins as it is in mine? Is this really happening?

A hankering need coils low in my belly, desire radiating outward from my core, spreading between my legs. I can't control it. I can't make my body stop reacting to him. He's so close I can feel his breath on my skin, his midnight hair framing his face, which bears the mask of barely contained hunger. His gaze is steady on his hand that continues to touch me, slowly tracing up my outer thigh and all along the curve of my hip. I'm nothing but liquid being this close to him, under his touch and at his mercy.

He stops abruptly, his hand hovering over my hip bone, his fiery blue eyes hooded and alive as he stares at my pussy. My

pulse quickens, and my breathing grows ragged. Time is frozen, the intensity a taut thread that would sever at any moment. My heart is on the cusp of bursting, the blood in my veins saturated with silent longing.

“You have no idea,” he murmurs, his eyes riveted to my sex, licking his lips and leaving a tempting sheen. “You have no idea how hard this is.”

“How hard what is?”

Nicoli brings his face so close to my aroused flesh I can feel the slightest brush of his nose. It sends my body into a spiral, aching for him to put his mouth there. To kiss my sex, eat me out, and make me come.

“To stay away from you.”

“Then don’t,” I whisper and close my eyes, my skin electrified with sweet anticipation.

He takes a slow, savoring, deeply erotic inhale as if he’s relishing the scent of my lust that clings to my folds. A surge of heat weakens me, forcing me to reach out to the wall so I can keep my balance.

He doesn’t move, and neither do I. I don’t even dare to breathe with the amplified silence between us. Every particle of my being is focused on him, drunk on the anticipation that could so easily drown me. My mind is already racing with thoughts of what’s about to happen. My body is primed and pussy slick. I want him so badly it hurts. It’s an ache I can’t describe, deeply rooted and heavily weighted. As angry as he makes me, he dizzies me too.

I want him to kiss me there. I need him to use his tongue and taste my clit. I want it slow. Fast. Gentle. Hard. I want it any way he’s willing to give it to me, just as long as he touches me and gets rid of the hunger that’s taken over my soul.

I swallow hard, my throat narrow and lungs desperate, my heart racing as I pray for him to finally give me what I’ve desired for so long. Him. I want him.

Trying to catch my breath, Nicoli suddenly straightens, and a gasp slips across my lips. With a subtle touch on my chin, he

forces me to look up at him. There's a softness in his eyes that I haven't seen in years. A gentle hue of affection. I have no idea what he's thinking, and I wish I could read his mind. I want to know if he wants me as much as I want him. I want to know if he thinks I'm pretty because, to me, he's the most beautiful creature on this Earth. His dark hair. His crystal eyes. His full lips. The way his mouth curves at only one end when he smirks. Nothing in this world sets me alight with life the way Nicoli Del Rossa does.

He leans his head to the side, his thumb raised to trace the course of my scar. I'm not wearing any makeup, and I know the mark Micah gave me is more noticeable now than any other day when covered. He's never seen the permanent seam of marred flesh because I always hide it so well. But now...he can see it. He sees me at my most vulnerable, the purest form of me he'll ever get.

There's a sudden shift, his eyes no longer liquid but hardened ice as he regards the prominent flaw on my face. His gaze cuts to mine, and the electricity between us vanishes as if it was never there.

He drapes the towel over my shoulders, covering me, breaking every shard of the connection that soared between us half a heartbeat ago, and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. "Hummingbird," he rasps, and my chest tightens. He hasn't called me that in years, and hearing it again has now turned my blistering desire for him into an aching longing.

Nicoli cups my cheek, his touch gentle and soft. "You are the bane of my existence." The words leave his mouth like a curse, one that shatters my heart and breaks my world. I'm nothing but pain as he turns his back on me and walks away, every step putting a thousand miles between us.

"And you are mine," I whisper, clutching the towel as my soul drowns.

Chapter Nine

Mira appears by my bedroom door, her hand on her hip and delicate eyebrows raised. The pout on her lips perfectly complements the impatient tapping of her foot. “Did you remember to buy me a present?”

I smirk and shove my books in my backpack. “Why would I buy you a present?”

“Because it’s my birthday.”

“No, it’s not.” I snicker. “Your birthday is still two days away.”

She walks in with her arms crossed, the pink bow in her hair bouncing against her cheeks while her white baby doll shoes glide across the carpet. “Doesn’t mean you can’t give me a present today.”

“That’s exactly what it means.” I slip on my jacket and glance in the mirror, trying to straighten my tie. As I turn, I find Mira standing right in front of me, glaring up with narrowed eyes. “What?” I shrug.

“You’re supposed to get me a birthday present.”

“Two more days.” I clasp my big hands around her tiny arms, pick her up, and place her on the bed. She doesn’t move, keeping her arms crossed, still glowering at me.

“I want a pony,” she says, and I roll my eyes.

“You and two million other six-year-old girls.”

“Seven.”

“Not for another two more days. Now, as much as I’d like to stay here and remind you a thousand times that it’s not your birthday today, I’m late for school.” Grabbing my backpack, I rush toward the door, stopping and turning toward her. “Are you coming?”

“No,” she says, raising her eyes to the roof. “I’m going to stay. Right. Here.” She huffs, blowing a rogue curl from her face. “I’ll wait for you until you get back.”

“Oh, no. Not a chance. You want to go through my stuff again, don’t you?”

“No.” Her cheeks blush a light shade of pink, and the way she bites her bottom lip has a guilty conscience written all over it.

“Mira,” I say, giving her a warning look. “You’re not going to stay in my room and wait for me. Go stay in your own room.”

“I’m going to call him Hummingbird.”

I cock a brow. “Who are you calling Hummingbird?”

“The pony you’re going to get me.”

I drop my bag, unamused. “I’m not getting you a pony.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m still in high school and don’t have a job. And even if I could buy you a pony, I wouldn’t.” I cross my arms and lean against the doorframe.

Mirabella frowns. “Why not?”

“Because you want to call your pony Hummingbird.”

“What’s wrong with Hummingbird? I like hummingbirds. And I like ponies. So, I’m calling my pony Hummingbird.”

“It’s dumb.” I pick up my backpack again and fling it over my shoulders.

“No, it’s not.”

“I have to go now, or I’ll be late.”

“I’ll wait here.”

My jaw clenches, and I pinch my eyes closed, hold my breath, then let out a sigh. "Mira, please. I'm on my last life with the stupid principal. I can't be late for school again. Do you want me to get detention?"

Her lips are still pouted, her cheeks sucked in as she ignores me, staring up at the ceiling.

"If I get detention, I won't be here for your birthday party Friday afternoon. Is that what you want?"

"No," she snaps.

Ah-hah. That caught her attention.

"I don't want you to get detention on my birthday," she says and slips off my bed, prancing toward me with the hem of her pink and white polka dot dress touching just below her knees. "I'll wait until you get back from school."

"Wait for what?" I pull the door closed behind me and watch as she walks down the hall, her baby doll shoes tapping lightly across the lacquered floors.

"To remind you that I want a pony for my birthday."

"You really don't have to remind me."

She abruptly stops and glances up at me over her shoulder. "So, you are buying me a pony?"

"No."

"Then I'll wait until you get back from school to remind you."

I shake my head, glance at my wristwatch, and hurry on my way, quickly ruffling my fingers through her hair as I pass her.

"Li, stop that. You know I hate it when you do that."

I snicker at the way she groans with annoyance. "See ya later, Hummingbird."

"Hey, that's my pony's name."

"You don't have a pony."

"Li," she calls out after me. "Li, stop!"

A loud groan vibrates up my throat as I reluctantly turn to face her. “I know you can say my name, Mira.”

“But I like calling you Li.”

“Okay, whatever. I have to go.”

Her green eyes glimmer with mischief as she glances from me to the stair railing, and I already know what she’s saying without actually saying it.

The word “no” teeters at the edge of my lips because I’m so late and don’t have time for this right now. But saying no to Mira—especially when it involves breaking some rules—is something I don’t like to do. Never have. My dad says she has me wrapped around her little finger, and I can’t deny it because...well, it’s true.

“Fine,” I concede. “But you can’t tell anyone.”

Her sunshine smile reaches her eyes as she places a finger on her lips. “Shh.”

“Yeah, you better shh.” With a quick glance around, I hop onto the banister, steadying myself with my hands on the cold iron, and slide all the way down to the end of the stairs, leaping from the edge and landing on my feet.

“And that’s how it’s done.” I grin, bowing in her direction.

Mira’s laughter fills the air—light and melodic, and it has the power to make even me smile.

I right my backpack on my shoulder. “Now, go play with your dolls or something. I’ll see you later.”

“Remember, you’re buying me a pony,” she calls after me as I shut the door, stepping out on the porch.

I grin and shake my head. “Hummingbird.”



I'VE NEVER BEEN MORE convinced that the universe has a hard-on for me. I just happened to walk down the hall at the same time Mira just happened to stroll around with nothing but a towel. And that towel just happened to drop to the floor, my jaw following suit. You can't make this shit up.

Whacking my own dick isn't something I like to do. I prefer to feel a pussy clench my cock rather than my fist. But the second my bedroom door slams closed behind me, I unzip my pants and pull out my dick. It's impossibly hard. I don't think it's ever been this hard. Give me a concrete wall, and I'll fuck a hole in it with this jackhammer throbbing in my palm.

Her perfect-sized tits—just a little more than a handful—begging to be touched, rosy nipples pleading to get sucked, and that temptingly tight cleft inviting me to slide my shaft between her breasts. *Fuck*. Her smooth skin wakes every nerve ending in me. I'm convinced she bathes in silk every night and showers in honey every morning. How else can one explain how goddamn perfect she is?

Mira's hourglass curves and rounded hips with an ass worth starting an apocalypse over had precum pearling on my dick the instant that towel dropped. I had to lock my jaw and clench my fists just to keep myself from pouncing on her like a wild, rabid animal. I would've settled for humping her leg like a dog if given half a chance. *Jesus*.

I grip my dick tight, feeling the thick vein throbbing, pumping it up and down, imagining it's her pussy. Landing strip. I knew it. I knew her pussy would have a plush little streak of neatly groomed hair. The perfect fucking rectangle for just enough tickle to let me open my mouth wider and eat her cunt like she's a five-course meal for a man who has been starved his entire life. That's how I feel right now. Starved. Famished. Ravenous.

I grab hold of the bedpost, gripping it tight, and moan softly as my balls start to draw up close to my body. With every stroke, I see her more clearly, how she spreads her legs wider, her pussy lips glistening with arousal. I can smell it. I *did* smell it. I couldn't stop myself from drawing in a deep, slow inhale with her sex so damn close, all I had to do was

stick out my tongue, and I would have tasted her. Sweet mother of God. If she tastes as sweet as she smells, I would never come up for air. It was agony not to lick up her crease and sink a finger into her hole, to make her come and swallow her pleasure.

My hips rock as I pump my cock, harder, faster, imaging my palm as her velvet-softness gripping me tight. I slide my thumb over the head, running circles around it, then slip my hand back down, pulling back all the way to the base. In my head, Mira and I are on the bed, her ivory skin a deep contrast against my navy-blue sheets. I'm sliding in and out of her, her heels digging into my ass. The deeper she takes me, the faster I thrust into her with only one goal...to wreck her cunt.

My breathing gets heavier, weaved with short, raspy moans. And as I imagine kissing her for the first time, feeling her lips against mine, having her exquisite tongue brushing mine, I give myself one final stroke as pleasure rips through my balls and up my spine. My cum jets onto the sheets as I continue to pump, milking my own cock for every last drop.

But it's still there. The fire. The need. The hunger. It's still buried deep in the pit of my stomach, and other than the ribbons of cum staining my sheets, there's no proof that I just jerked off and came. There's zero relief. No trace of satisfaction. And I'm still one hundred percent fucked.

I tuck my dick back in pants then stomp to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. It's like hell just opened its asshole and my veins are on fire. But as the water runs from the faucet, and I look at my reflection in the mirror, my mind comes to a screeching halt.

Landing strip.

A beautifully groomed pussy.

Ready to be taken whenever.

By whom?

Jesus. Fuck. I grab hold of the basin's edge, my knuckles pure white. She's a virgin. I know she is because there's not a man alive who has the balls to touch her. It's one of those very

simple 'I can't have her, so no one can' scenarios. It's selfish, but I don't give a rat's ass.

I let go of the basin and breathe in deep. Yeah... Mirabella's definitely still a virgin.

Chapter Ten

“I ’m not a virgin.”

Leandra gasps, her mouth gaped open as I just nonchalantly drop this information bomb on her. “You’re not a virgin?”

“Shhh.” I quickly glance around the restaurant, hoping no one else heard Leandra blurt out my confession—especially the muscle Alexius placed on protection duty. Luckily, the two of them are sitting across the restaurant at the bar, pretending they don’t even know we exist. But they know. They’ve been trained to have eyes in the back of their head when it comes to Leandra and me.

Leaning in closer, I respond quietly, “No, I’m not.”

“Why haven’t you told me?”

I shrug. “It never came up.”

“Bullshit. We’ve spoken about my sex life with Alexius numerous times, and in detail, I might add. So you had plenty of opportunity to share this little tidbit of information.”

“Your sex life, yes. Not mine.”

“Seriously, though. Who? When? Where? How many times?”

I give her a wicked grin. “It’s a long story.”

“We have time,” she urges. Then, as if on cue, the waiter arrives at our table with the bottle of champagne. We sit in silence as we wait for him to pour our glasses, and I can

practically hear Leandra's thoughts racing, her gaze unwavering and filled with questions.

Once the waiter walks away, Leandra's eyes widen with a muted demand for me to spill every last detail.

"It happened the summer after high school. Mrs. Del Rossa and I went to Tuscany for a few weeks just to get away from it all." The golden bubbly tingles on my tongue as I recall the vivid memories of good food, great wine, and sensual nights spent under the Tuscan sky.

I smile shyly. "I met this couple—"

"A couple?"

"Yes. A couple. Imelda and Tommaso."

"Oh, I love that name. Tommaso."

"You have to shut up if you want to hear the story."

She mimics zipping up her lips, then eases back in her chair.

"So, Imelda and I became friends. Good friends. She went sightseeing with me, and we laughed so much my stomach would hurt. It was just so freeing to be able to do things without the Del Rossa name hanging over my head." I peer at Leandra from under my lashes. "Anyway, Imelda invited me to their villa for dinner one night. It was quaint and beautiful, safely tucked away within a vineyard." My gaze drifts off into space as memories come flooding back, and my skin erupts in goosebumps as if it remembers, too. "We were drinking expensive wine, chatting, and laughing. The three of us just got along effortlessly. You know?"

"No. I don't know, which is why I want you to talk faster."

I laugh, my insides awake with butterflies born from memories. "After dinner, the three of us took a stroll outside in the vineyard. The night air was warm and scented with grape blossoms."

"The perfect setting for romance," Leandra says dreamily.

“To this day, I’m not sure if it was the Tuscan wine or the romantic atmosphere drawn from the summer night heat, the pink and orange sunset, and the enchanting grapevines. Maybe it was a little bit of it all rolled into one.” I close my eyes for a second, trying to bring back the feeling of warm air caressing my skin. “But I was high on whatever it was. All three of us were.” I take a sip of champagne to calm the flurry of emotions within me. “I remember laughing at something Imelda had said when suddenly Tommaso grabbed my hand, swirling me as if we were dancing. A cloud of dirt rose around our feet when he pulled me against him, his dark brown eyes boring into me with so much intensity it took my breath away.”

Leandra gasps. “Where was Imelda when this happened?”

“She stepped up behind me and rested her hands on my hips. There was no need to read the room—or in this case, the vineyard—to know what they were proposing.”

“God, I need more details.” Leandra empties her glass of champagne and doesn’t wait for the waiter to refill her glass, pouring herself another one. “Every last detail.”

I snicker and look down at the pristine white tablecloth. The memory feels so real, as if the ghost of Tommaso’s fingertips still lingers on my skin. Shivers travel down my body as I think of how he gently smoothed his hand down my side, my hip, lifting my leg as he leaned into me, letting me feel his hard cock against my wet sex. I uncross and cross my legs under the table. “Let’s just say that her words set off a chain of events that made that the best night of my life.”

“What words? What did she say?”

Sensual flashbacks have me clenching my thighs and shifting in my seat. “She said, ‘Let us make love to you, *bella*.’ And Tommaso, his lips were inches from mine when he whispered, ‘Just for tonight.’”

“Sweet Lord.” Leandra’s cheeks flush, and judging by the heat in my veins, I’m pretty sure mine do, too. The waiter walks up to us, ready to take our order, when she dismisses him with a single wave. “Not now.”

I burst out laughing, loving how entranced she is and how good it feels to finally share this with someone.

“The next thing I knew, all three of us were standing naked in the vineyard, and we were all wrapped up in each other. I was so high on adrenaline, now that I’m thinking back, it all seems like a vivid dream.”

“You lost your virginity in a vineyard?”

“Not technically in a vineyard on the dirt ground. Somehow, we managed to make our way back to the villa, and I remember how nervous I became when Tommaso backed me up against the edge of the bed. Imelda noticed and asked me what was wrong, and when I told them that I’d never had sex before, I swear the desire in their eyes intensified threefold.”

Leandra leans forward, placing her elbows on the table, and practically begs for more details. “What happened next?” Her voice is lower now, huskier.

“They spoke to each other in Italian, and Imelda suggested I watch them first. I was transfixed while watching Tommaso caress and kiss her, how their bodies moved in the same rhythm, like a perfectly choreographed dance. Imelda’s back would arch off the bed, Tommaso’s toned ass flexing, the lean muscles in his back curving and rippling as he made love to her on lavender sheets.”

“Ah-huh.” Leandra empties her second glass, flustered, and I suppress my laughter.

“He made her come, and the moans that left her mouth were pure ecstasy. I wanted that. I wanted to experience what she just felt.” I shrug. “So, I said yes.”

“Of course you did. If you said no, I’d tell you right now that we can no longer be friends.”

I laugh so loud that people sitting two tables from us glare at us, but give me one more glass of champagne, and I won’t care. “Imelda guided me onto the bed,” I continue. “She made me lean back against her, settled between her legs with my back against her chest. She told him what to do, and he did exactly what she said. He kissed me the way she told him to.

Touched me as she directed. And when it came to...you know...taking my virginity, Imelda kissed me. She kissed me so hard, with so much passion and vigor, the next thing I felt was this deep pressure between my legs followed by a sharp pain that turned into this exquisite ache that I've never experienced before." I suck in a breath, the memories becoming too real, my cheeks heated with embarrassment and arousal.

Leandra gapes at me, her expression both shocked and captivated.

I clear my throat and try to douse the heat in my system with a full glass of champagne. "And that's how I lost my virginity. In a villa surrounded by vineyards in Tuscany."

"Well," Leandra presses her lips together, "it sure as hell beats losing your virginity in a boutique."

Our hysterical laughter fills the restaurant, and I can't believe I was finally able to tell someone. It feels good to share my secret, and it somehow makes it more real. More insanely erotic and beautiful.

"I spent every night with them after that, until one day I got there, and their villa was empty."

"They left?" she blurts out. "Without saying goodbye?"

"Yeah. But it's okay. Well, I mean, it sucked, of course. But somehow, it felt like it was time. You know? As if it ended while it was still beautiful, and that time would just have ruined it." I weave my fingers through my hair, pulling the blonde tresses over my shoulder. "I spent two more summers in Tuscany after that, but I never went back to that villa in case I might find them there."

"You didn't want to see them again?"

"Of course I did. But I was afraid the three of us might get entangled again and that it wouldn't be as beautiful as it was the first time. The memories I have are worth more than a second-rate experience."

"It's like I'm listening to a romance novel on audio," she remarks, then grabs her handbag and stands. "Now, if you'll

excuse me. I urgently need to go fuck my husband.”

I burst out with laughter, the moment filled with lightness. “We haven’t eaten lunch yet.”

“And I’m famished. But not for food.”

“That’s so unfair. At least you have someone to satiate your hunger. All I have is a bullet and a wand.”

“Oh, we have that, too. But Alexius gets jealous when it’s not his cock I’m riding.”

“Oh, my God. I’m getting visuals. Please stop.”

“It’s only going to get worse if you don’t take me home to my husband soon.”

“Jesus, yes. We’re leaving.” I grab my bag and take a quick last sip of my champagne while Leandra is already out the door.

I sigh, past reminders instilling a wistfulness in my soul. I’ve always had peace with what happened all those summers ago in that Tuscan villa. Never once did I regret a single moment I spent with them. It was the most liberated I’ve ever felt in my entire life. No tragic past or possessive Del Rossas breathing down my neck. I was free to just...be.

The only thing that remained a constant during my time with them was Nicoli. Not a single minute spent in that villa could douse the fire that burned in my soul for him—that *still* burns in my soul for him.

For as long as I can remember, he’s been the single most important person in my life—even if it seems like he hardly notices me. Yet I’m pretty sure he noticed me last night. Naked. Embarrassed. And a goddamn trainwreck.

My heels click across the polished floors as I weave through the tables and chairs, aiming for the exit, when a man steps in front of me.

“Excuse me.” He smiles, his eyes an intense brown.

I stop, bewildered. “Hi.”

“My name is Felix.” He clears his throat, his crisp white shirt stretching across broad shoulders. “I hope you don’t think I’m too forward, but I was sitting at the bar with a few friends, and I really tried not to stare at you like a stalker.”

My cheeks flush. “Well, um...firstly, thank you. I guess. Secondly, my name is Mirabella Tirelli.” I hold out my hand, and he takes it with gentle fingers, squeezing lightly.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mirabella.”

This man has melted chocolate irises and a jawline that could cut through glass, but there’s something sticky about the look in his eyes. They’re too eager, and I feel like I’m suffocating under the weight of his attention. Don’t get me wrong. He’s painfully attractive—the kind of guy you’d see on the cover of a magazine because, holy shit, is this guy good-looking—but he’s totally giving me predator vibes.

A gold chain peeks from underneath his open-collared shirt, the scent of his expensive aftershave confirming that this man has no shortage of money. Well, that and the dollar sign tattoo on the side of his neck. He slips his hands into his pants pockets, inching closer, looking at me like I’m the only woman in the room. “I was hoping you’d let me buy you a drink sometime.”

Apparently, he’s attractive but stupid. Or he just has no idea who I am and who my name connects to in this town.

“Listen, I’m flattered. I really am, but—”

He holds up his hand in defeat. “It’s okay. I understand.” He pulls a card from his pocket. “Here’s my number in case you change your mind.”

Not to be rude, I accept the card and slip it into my purse. “It’s nice to meet you, Felix.”

Brushing past him, I smile because it’s been a hot minute since a guy approached me in this town. And it kind of feels... good. Too bad I only have eyes for one man.

Chapter Eleven

“No.” Alexius’ expression is as plain as day—he doesn’t feel the need to explain his one-word answer at all. It’s as final as yesterday’s weather. Unchangeable.

I grit my teeth, fighting the urge to beat a yes out of his ass. “Why not?”

“Because I need you here.”

“I know no one has ever told you this before, and it might come as a shock, so brace yourself...but you have two other brothers. I know.” I shrug dismissively. “It’s unbelievable that our parents had two more sons and never told you about it, given that you’re the heir and all.”

“Stop.”

“Their names are Caelian and Isaia. Now Caelian, he’s not too bad. He’s easily manipulated, like a puppet on strings. Isaia, however, his attitude sucks. If you ask me, he’s still stuck in puberty because tell him not to do something, and he will do it with so much passion it would set the rain on fucking fire. Sure, he has some redeeming qualities, but it’s not worth fighting through all that shitty attitude to get them. So, I’d suggest you steer clear of giving him any kind of responsibility around here.”

“Are you done?”

“Nope.” I light a cigarette, plumes of smoke coming out the sides of my mouth. “In fact, I haven’t even started yet. Wait until I get to Rome, our long-lost cousin, who I’ve recently discovered has a thing for bondage.”

Alexius' eyes widen, and I smirk. "Oh no, brother. I know exactly what you're imagining right now, and you can't have it more wrong."

"I'd ask you to draw me a picture, but I'm afraid you'll see it as a challenge and use my Montblanc fountain pen to draw Rome's dick on my mahogany desk."

"There's no need to draw you a picture. Just swap the positions of the participants."

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"Like, take the girl in the picture inside your head, and put her in Rome's position. Then take Rome and put him in the woman's position." I twirl my fingers around. "You know, Shibari his ass."

Alexius' frown goes from questioning to sheer horror in zero-point-two seconds. "Are you serious?"

"Very."

"Jesus. Now I can't get that image out of my head."

"I know." I chuckle darkly, remembering how horrified I was after I walked in on a scene where the woman was holding the whip, and Rome's the one ball-gagged. "I was unable to get that picture out of my head for weeks."

My brother shakes his head. "I could have gone my entire life without knowing that. Fuck you very much."

I lift my glass in a mocking cheers. "You're welcome."

"Bullshit aside, you can't leave. I need you here handling the Myth side of things. Shipments. Deals. Memberships. It's all you."

"I'm no body language expert, brother, but your flat expression tells me this issue is not up for debate or discussion."

"Damn right." He sits back in his seat, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "There's not a chance in hell you're leaving, especially not because of her."

My spine goes rigid, and there's no more sarcasm teetering on the tip of my tongue. "Why do you think it's about her?"

"What else can it be?"

I cock a brow. "I hate the weather this time of year."

Alexius snorts.

"I like that whole daylight saving time bullshit. It mindfucks me into thinking I'm getting older faster."

"Why do you want to die faster?"

"Reincarnation," I say slowly. "It means I get to do shit differently next time around."

"Differently when it comes to her?"

"Differently when it comes to letting you go through the birth canal first. Next time I'll wrestle your baby-ass and be the firstborn, so I don't need your permission when I want to fuck-off to Tuscany." I slam back a mouthful of whiskey, get up, and pour myself another one.

I want to leave this house. Leave this city. Leave this goddamn continent. I want to get a million miles of distance between her and me. It's the only way I know how to fight this.

I sigh. "Alexius, I don't need twin telepathy to know you're staring a hole in the back of my skull right now."

"I get why you would want to go, but this goes beyond your pride or heartbreak."

I turn to face him, and he sits up a little straighter in his chair.

"You leaving is not going to fix anything."

"I beg to differ."

"It's not going to make you love her less, brother."

My nostrils flare, my insides turning at the mention of love. "I don't love her."

"Then what would you call it?"

Obsession. “Nothing,” I reply flatly. “That’s exactly what it is. Nothing.”

“Then why leave?”

“I’m bored.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“And you’re a dick.”

Alexius stands, leaning with his palms on his desk. “You’re not leaving, Nicoli. I need you here to help me protect this family.”

“Asking you was a mere courtesy, brother. I’ve made up my mind, and I’m leaving, with or without your permission.”

“No, you’re not. You are staying right here, and you are going to do what you’ve always done.”

“And what’s that?”

His expression is stern, yet his eyes show the gentle hue of compassion. “Protect her.”

Reality slams into my chest with all its fury, like a tidal wave dragging me under the surface, its ice-cold claws digging into my flesh as it drowns me. There’s no use denying it. No use trying to run away from it. I’m destined to suffer bound to the one person I can never have.

“Your first, most profound instinct has always been to protect her, Nicoli. And it’s been like that since the moment that little girl walked into our lives. It’s always been you and her. I dunno.” Alexius throws his hands in his air, exasperated. “Since day one, you two just gravitated toward one another. Like,” he places his hands on his hips, shrugging, “you’re two people with one soul.”

It’s as if someone is tearing my spine out of my body, reaching through my rib cage to grab my heart and squeeze every last drop of blood from it. The lump in my throat makes it impossible to swallow, so I grit my teeth and clench my jaw, forcing it down because that seems easier to do than acknowledge that Alexius is right. We are connected by an invisible force that seems unchangeable. Unbreakable. The

little girl with the yellow jacket has always been the innocence I've been compelled to protect.

"Fine," I say with a sigh, resigning myself to his authoritative decline of my request. "I'll stay. But you should know that every second I spend here in this house makes me fucking miserable."

"I know you're hiding something from me." Alexius pins me with his pointed stare. "You and Maximo...and Dad. The three of you have been hiding something from me for years, and I don't know what it is. But I'm willing to bet it has something to do with why you're not allowing yourself to love ___"

"Stop using that word," I warn.

"What is it? What are you hiding, Nicoli?"

My stomach coils, barbed wire tearing at my insides. "I'm not hiding anything."

"Bullshit. I've always known you and Maximo share a secret. And I know it's deep because there's no other explanation why you'd keep it from me other than you're protecting her. That's why I've never asked, never tried to figure it out." Alexius walks around his desk to stand in front of me, his blue eyes no longer soft shades of sympathy but rather hard lines of resolve. "Do not put me in a position where I have to force that secret out in the open...because I will do it. I will not hesitate to dig up whatever it is you've been so desperate to hide that you're willing to sacrifice your own happiness for it. You're staying here, Nicoli. And that's the end of it."

The finality in his tone nails the end of our conversation. He won't let me leave. And the truth is, I don't want to leave. The only reason running off to Tuscany seems like one of the best bad ideas I've had is to stop the selfish prick in me from taking what I don't deserve. After what almost happened in the hallway last night, I don't trust myself around her. I don't trust myself to put her needs before mine, and she needs to stay the fuck away from me. And if getting the hell away from here is

not an option, then I'll just have to try harder and do better to keep a promise I made years ago.

I put down my glass and grab the whiskey bottle. "You're right. There's always been this connection between Mira and me, and no matter how far away I try to run or how much time passes, it's like an invisible bond that will always be there... whether by love or hate...it doesn't matter which one." I take a large swig from the bottle, turning my back on my brother as I walk out. "But I choose hate."

Chapter Twelve

My phone rings. It's security, and I already know why they're calling.

I swipe across the screen, my cigar locked between my lips, and the smoke caked around my fingers. The ice in my glass clinks as I swirl the bourbon around its crystal confinement. "Yes? She's with me. You can let her in." I pause, inhaling deeply for courage. "Tell Mira I must talk to her when she gets home." I hang up, throwing my head back and praying the end of the world will happen within the next sixty seconds. But, of course, I'm not that lucky.

With a heavy sigh, I put out my cigar and empty my glass. The sting of the alcohol tingles my lips and burns as it slides down my throat. I'm painfully aware that the spike in courage and the slight reprieve the alcohol offers is only temporary. But tonight, I'll settle for temporary. The bourbon numbs me, and that's what I need right now. To be numb. Emotions brought me to this point where I have to take such drastic measures. It's feelings that had me thinking leaving this house and skipping town is my only option. But since Alexius declined my request, and the mere fact that I won't be able to protect her when I'm halfway across the world, I'm left with no other choice. There is no other option.

I open my bedside drawer and reach all the way to the back for the tiny red box I know is there. It's been a long time since I opened it. I don't like wandering around in the past because it always results in a fuckton of what-ifs.

What if that night never happened?

What if I had been more careful?

What if she never overheard that conversation?

What if I didn't attend her eighteenth birthday party only to notice that the little girl in the yellow dress had become a woman?

The list goes on. There are too many what-ifs, and allowing my mind to wander too deep will surely drive me mad.

I lift the red lid from the box that's hardly big enough to hold a bracelet. There's a sharp pang in my chest as I remove the white ribbon with a cherished memory attached to it. Its shape and feel of silk are still familiar to me. It was such a long time ago, but I remember it so clearly.

"Hello, Nicoli."

I fold my fingers around the ribbon and slip it into my pants pocket. I let out a breath, closing my eyes for a second, draining my glass and steeling my balls to do what needs to be fucking done.

"Hello, Paula," I say, turning to face her. Her sleek black hair is pulled back in a high ponytail that highlights her sharp jawline and perfect cheekbones. Her legs seem to go on for days underneath her short navy-blue dress that clings to her body's curves like a second skin.

'I don't like girls who wear short dresses. And her dress was way too short.'

"It's been a while." She leans against the doorframe, her cherry lip gloss glistening under the light of my bedroom. "I must admit, I was quite surprised when you called me last night."

"One could say I've been feeling a little...nostalgic."

Her leering gaze slithers down my body, and she bites her lip when she stares right at my crotch. "It's been too long."

"No strings, Paula," I warn, and she shoots me a coy smile.

"As always."

“Good. Just as long as we’re on the same page.”

“Tell me.” She saunters in, swaying her curvy hips. “Why me when you have practically every woman in this city pining over you?”

I slip my hands into my pockets and square my gaze on her. “As I said, I was feeling nostalgic. Thought a trip down memory lane would be exciting.”

“Hmm-mm.” She stills in front of me, and lust is practically seeping from her pores. I can see the hunger swirl in her willow-green eyes, and I know she’s willing to do whatever I ask. She’s always been this insatiable goddamn bunny who would fuck all day long. But the real appeal? She’s not clingy. There’s no need for post-sex spooning or syrupy-sweet texts first thing in the morning. All she needs is to get her pussy wrecked.

“Why now?” Her voice is low, husky, and her tongue darts out to lick her lips.

I reach out, touch her chin, and she lifts her face to mine. “I’m in the mood to indulge with someone who already knows how I like it.”

“You mean someone who doesn’t linger for pillow talk.”

“Exactly.”

She eases her fingers around my wrist, guiding my hand to her throat. “Then let’s not waste any more time.”

I tighten my fingers around her delicate neck, squeezing just enough to cut off her air supply. Her glistening lips part, her eyes already hooded, and we’ve barely begun.

With a snarl, I let go of her throat, and she gasps for breath while smiling wickedly. Biting her lip, she cups my cock in her palm. I’m nowhere near hard, and she notices, and excitement flashes in her irises as she accepts the challenge. “Close the door, champ. I don’t want to waste a single second.”

I glance at the door, and Paula pulls her lips together.

“Expecting someone? Which brother will be joining us this time?”

“No. It’s just us.” I grab her waist and pull her close. “But the door stays open.”

“Oh.” Her face lights up. “Going for some exhibitionism, are we? As far as I recall, that’s never been on the top of your kink list.” She reaches for the hem of her dress, winding the fabric up between her fingers. “But leaving a mark is.”

There’s a dark pull inside me as I peer down at the whitened scar on the outside of her thigh. I remember that night, how the blade of my Espada pocketknife seamlessly slit her skin, tears of scarlet leisurely trailing down her leg. That was the night I realized I had a brutal taste for the dark. The sight of blood mixed with primitive pleasure.

I slant my head to the side, studying the scar I left all those years ago. “I can still hear you whisper my name as the blade left its mark. You loved it.”

“We ruined your mother’s flowerbeds that night. Hydrangeas, was it?”

“To this day, she still thinks it was Caelian and Isaia.”

Paula snickers, then instead of pulling the skirt of the dress back down, she eases it up and over her head, letting it dangle off two fingers before she drops it to the floor with dramatic effect.

I raise a brow. “I see someone had some work done.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I distinctly remember your tits being less than a handful.” I reach out, cupping her breast, its round weight solid in my palm and larger in size. “Now it’s almost two hands.”

“A girl’s gotta keep up with the times. Now, are we doing this, or are you going to talk me to death?”

There’s this nagging voice in the back of my head screaming at me to stop. But Alexius was right. The connection between Mira and me is strong, and I have no choice but to sever it. It’s the only way I know how to protect

her from me. Her hate would be the wall between us, a division that would keep her safe.

This needs to happen.

I slide my hand from Paula's tit, up her shoulders, and behind her neck, winding her long, sleek ponytail around my fist. I yank hard, and her lips part as she cranes her throat. Leaning in, I brush my lips against her earlobe. "Be a good slut and get on your knees. I need my cock wet before I fuck you."

She shudders, a soft gasp escaping her. "Yes, sir."

I'm sick to my stomach as I watch Paula go on her knees. Reluctance smears a film of bitterness in my mouth. Regret is already gnawing at my spine, and the worst part isn't even over yet. My soul is sickened, and my heart grows heavy as she unzips my pants, pulling out my cock. My insides are coiled tight, and I close my eyes when she takes me in her mouth, starting gently. A moan vibrates behind my pressed lips as my cock hardens slowly the farther she sucks me to the back of her throat. But it's not a delighted moan. It's more of a tormented whimper.

I hate this. I hate myself. But it is what it is.

Tonight...everything changes.



Mira

MY HEART IS BEATING IMPOSSIBLY FAST. I've had too much champagne, spent too long walking down memory lane, and am way too optimistic after getting Nicoli's message. He wants to speak to me, requesting that I meet him in his bedroom.

There are tiny flutters of nerves in my stomach, and then there's my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth because I'm fucking parched. That might be from the lingering effects

of drinking too much champagne. Or that might be because I have no idea what Nicoli could possibly want to speak to me about.

Nicoli spends ninety-nine percent of his day ignoring me, so hearing he wants to see me in his bedroom is both shocking and nerve-wracking.

After our encounter in the hallway, when my towel decided to betray me, letting me drop into an ice-cold bucket of embarrassment, I have no idea what to expect from him. I'm not blind. I'm not naive. I'm not dense. I felt the connection between us crackle with electricity, how the air around us became palpable and laden with sexually charged energy. And when he crouched in front of me, the sound of him inhaling deep, the tip of his nose brushing against my sex...*God*. I reach the top of the stairs and grab hold of the rail, steadying myself, forcing oxygen into my lungs. Just thinking about it is enough to make me drench my panties.

I glance down the corridor, knowing Nicoli's bedroom is just around the far-end corner. What if...what if he's finally ready to talk about...us?

The question hangs in the air as I take a tentative step forward, but my nerves are jangling, and I find it hard to get myself to move quicker. My palms are clammy, and the air seems to thicken the closer I get to his room. Am I even ready for this? Whatever this is?

Good God, Mira. Pull your shit together.

I reach the corner and inhale deeply as I close my eyes, imagining the air filling my lungs in elegantly flowing circles. It's all I need to grab hold of the calm demeanor I've mastered so well, even though my insides are utter mayhem.

"You can do this," I mutter to myself, then lift my chin and square my shoulders, taking those few steps around the corner and up to his bedroom door.

I come to an abrupt stop, the ground beneath my feet suddenly falling to pieces. For a moment, everything is hazy, surreal, until the scene in front of me comes into focus.

A strained gasp moves past my lips, and he looks up, his ocean-blue eyes staring straight into mine...right before my gaze falls to her.

Chapter Thirteen

“Li? Where are you? Li?”

“I’m here.” I toss a stone out in front of me as I lean against the tree, watching it disappear into the thick grass.

“Where is here?”

“Try to find me,” I call, breathing in deeply, the breeze carrying the subtle smell of wildflowers and earth.

Mira’s little blonde head pops out from around the tree trunk. “Found you.” Her smile is infectious. “You should really try harder if you want to play hide and seek.”

I cock a brow as she plops down beside me, the fabric of her soft yellow dress brushing along the green grass. “Who says I’m playing hide and seek?”

“Why else would you sit here behind a tree so far from the house?”

“Maybe I just want to get away from you,” I tease, pulling the white ribbon from her hair and ruffling my hand through her wild curls.

“Stop.” She tries to grab the ribbon, but I yank it away. “And I know that’s not true,” she says, scrunching up her dainty nose.

“And how do you know that?” I put an arm around her shoulders and pull her back, ensuring her feet are covered with the shade of the oak tree. The last thing she needs is to get her fair skin sunburned.

“Because you’re the only one who doesn’t complain when I’m around.”

“That’s not true.”

“Is too. Have you heard Alexius scream at me to get out of his room?”

“That’s because you walk in without knocking.”

“So?”

“So, you need to learn how to knock.”

“Ugh,” she groans.

I snicker, winding the ribbon around my finger before picking up another stone and throwing it out in front of us, watching as it lands with a soft thud.

“And Saia always tells me to keep quiet when I want to tell him a story while he’s watching basketball on TV.”

“You should never talk when a guy is watching sports.”

“I talk when you watch sports.”

“I have this superpower where I can switch my ears off when you talk.”

She slaps my elbow and smiles. “No, you don’t.”

“Sometimes I wish I did. Specifically on lazy summer afternoons when I’m enjoying the solitude of sitting under a tree, and an eight-year-old girl decides it’s a good time to bug me. And that’s another thing,” I add. “Why are you still calling me Li? And it’s Isaia, not Saia.”

“I know that. I’m just used to calling him Saia. And you, I’ll always call Li.”

“I hate it.”

She chuckles. “No, you don’t.”

“By your ninth birthday, I might.”

“I saw you with that girl the other night.”

“What girl?”

“Paula.” She rolls her eyes. “More like Awful-a.”

I snicker and unwind the ribbon from my finger, wrapping it around my thumb this time. “Yeah, so? What about Paula?”

She lifts her chin, putting her nose in the air. “I don’t like her.”

“You don’t know her.”

“I don’t want to know her.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like girls who wear short dresses. And her dress was way too short.”

I scoff. “Not the worst problem a guy can have.”

“And her laugh is terrible.” Mira rolls her r’s with a tenor of disgust.

“It’s not that bad.” I smile.

“Is that why you’re sitting here? Are you thinking of her? Do you love her?”

“No.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“Definitely not.”

“Are you going to marry her, Li?”

“Whoa.” I lift my hands. “Slow down, grasshopper. What’s with all the questions?”

“If you marry her, you’re going to forget about me.” Her bottom lip quivers.

“What? No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will. When a man gets married, he moves away from home. And they don’t visit often because his wife never likes his family.”

I stare at her with what I’m sure is a giant question mark on my face. “Where did you hear that?”

“I watch television, Li.”

“You should watch less television, then.”

“If you get married, you’ll leave your family. You’ll leave me.”

“Why would I leave you?”

She blinks moisture from her eyes. “Because you said I’m family.”

There’s a sharp tug in my heart, and I reach over, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You are family, Mira, and you will always be family no matter what.”

“Promise?” She sniffs, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

“I promise.”

She narrows her eyes and points a dainty finger at me. “You can’t break a promise. My mom always said a promise is expensiver than the biggest pot of gold.”

Expensiver. The night she snuck into my room.

“I promise,” I repeat.

“Every time you break a promise, God writes it down in His book. And if you break it—”

“I won’t break it, Mira.”

“—he has to tear out the page, and you don’t want Him to do that.”

“I won’t break my promise. I swear.”

“You won’t leave me?”

Jesus, this kid doesn’t let up. “I won’t leave you. Promise.”

“Okay.” She purses her lips. “I believe you.” But then she gets that pensive look on her face, her eyes narrowed, a finger on her chin as she glances up at the tree branches. “Ooor, we could just get married.”

I scoff. “What?”

She turns and looks at me, the sun catching the side of her face, one of her striking green irises shimmering in the

afternoon. "If we get married, you won't leave me." She rolls her eyes. "Obviously. I'm your wife. Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two what?"

"We can get married when I'm twenty-two."

I slant a brow and can't help but grin. "I'll be old then. An ogre. You don't want to marry an old man."

"Old? You'll be..." She starts counting on her fingers, her nose scrunched up as she fries her brain. "Thirty-one. You'll be thirty-one. You're right. That is old."

"See? Told you."

"But it's okay." She shrugs. "I'll still marry you. I don't want you to get old alone. That would suck."

I laugh. "You'll do me that favor, huh?"

"I would."

"How about we focus on getting you through school first."

"I'm serious, Li."

"So am I. Besides, maybe I'll be married by the time you're twenty-two, then you don't have to do me that favor."

"But—"

"Or you might have found some handsome prince you'd much rather marry than an old ogre."

"Let's do this." Mira catches me off guard and snatches the white ribbon from my hands, yanking my left hand closer and slowly winding it around my ring finger. "I promise that if I haven't found my prince by my twenty-second birthday," she ties the ribbon in a crooked bow, "I'll be your princess." Her smile makes the sunny afternoon pale in comparison. "And you know I always keep my promises." She holds out her pinky. "Deal?"

I can continue this conversation by stating that I might have a wife by then, but that would just delay the inevitable, which is me saying yes. Mira has the talent to go on and on

and nag until she gets you to say what she wants you to. Well, with me, anyway.

I loop my pinky finger around hers and give it a solid shake. "Deal."

"Yay." She giggles and leans into me, her curls tickling my chin. "I can't wait to be a Del Rossa."

"It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"I think I'll make a great Del Rossa."

I chuckle, unable to argue that. She has the qualities a true Del Rossa needs to survive in this world. Feisty, independent, and unafraid.

My little hummingbird.

Chapter Fourteen

MIRABELLA

I'm unsure whether my heart stopped or if it dropped to the soles of my feet. All I know is that it's not beating anymore. I can't feel it. I can't hear it pulsing between my ears. Not while I'm staring at him, naked, standing by the side of the bed. And her? She's on her back, on the bed in front of him, her thighs spread, one leg hooked around his waist while the other is pressed against his chest. Her dark hair is fanned out on his sheets, her nipples hard, the look of ecstasy clinging to her flushed cheeks. There's a sheen of sweat on her forehead, both their bodies glistening with exertion. Judging by their position, he's buried deep inside her.

I drop my bag to the floor. There's a strange tug in my chest, one that burns and aches simultaneously. I've always known Nicoli is no saint. I watched his car pull out of the driveway after midnight numerous times, knowing he was going to Myth for only one reason. To fuck. But at least it didn't happen here where I had to see it, bear witness to it as I'm doing now. Knowing about it is different than seeing it. Seeing it makes it real, and being unable to unsee it worsens it.

I can't move as my mind races. It takes me no more than ten seconds to realize what's happening.

His message about wanting to see me in his bedroom—something I knew was odd—and his bedroom door wide open, which it never is. It's all planned. Staged. He wanted me to walk in on him fucking another woman. Paula, no less. The one woman I've never liked simply because her skirts are

always too short, and she was the closest thing Nicoli's ever had to a girlfriend.

Nicoli planned this. He wanted to hurt me. He wants me to hate him. That's been his MO for the last nine years, and I haven't figured out why. And now here I am, hardly able to feel the ground beneath my feet while I stare in front of me at the man who owns my heart fucking another woman. My head is spinning from the champagne, thoughts racing as anger grows inside me. I'm so sick of him and his endless mind games, how he so easily fucks with my head. But that ends now. I'm calling his bluff tonight. I'm not going to run away and cry or scream and curse, I'm going to beat him at his own twisted little game.

I step inside the bedroom and slam the door shut. It's then that Paula finally notices me and sends me a wicked grin before looking at Nicoli. "I knew keeping the door open meant someone was joining us. I just figured it would be Caelian." Her hooded eyes glance in my direction. "Who is she?"

"Shut the fuck up, Paula," he demands, his voice low and gruff.

I pin my eyes on him, slowly unbuttoning the front of my dress. He's not moving even though Paula is squirming on the sheets. I don't say a word, letting my actions do all the talking. Maybe my confidence is mixed with shock and the copious amount of champagne bubbling in my veins, but I don't really care. I'm determined to have Nicoli's plan blow up in his beautiful fucking face.

My dress pools around my feet, and my breasts sway as I hook my fingers in the sides of my white lace panties, shimmying as I let them slide down my legs. Just like the night before, I'm standing naked in front of Nicoli, and he has the same look in his eyes. Fiery blue irises burning with something fierce, a hunger that slides onto every line in his face. Only this time, I'm not spineless or speechless. I'm not frozen or barely breathing because Nicoli Del Rossa made a big show of smelling my pussy. I'm ready to play him at his own game.

“What are you doing, Mira?” he asks, his voice thick with lust.

I don't respond. Instead, I move to stand beside him, my sensitive nipples lightly brushing against his arm. He sucks air through his teeth, and heat spreads through my core. Paula doesn't move, and neither does Nicoli, even though his cock is still buried inside her. I bet it's taking all of his self-control to not move his hips and fuck her.

I reach out and run a finger up the soft skin of her thigh. I might not like this woman, but she is beautiful with enough sex appeal to light a tiny village on fire. My fingers leave a trail of goosebumps on her flesh as I drag a fingertip over her hip, her stomach, drawing lazy circles around the swell of her breasts. She's looking at me warily, but her eyes give her away. She's turned the fuck on by this, by me, and as I take her pert nipple between my fingers, squeezing it lightly, she starts to pant for more.

“Oh, I want to play with this little one,” Paula murmurs, reaching out and trying to touch my thigh. I swat her hand away from me, shooting her a silent warning with a single glare. “What the fuck, bitch?”

Nicoli's hand is around her throat in an instant, and he squeezes, growling. “Call her that again and I'll make you choke on her panties, understood?”

She nods her submission, and I can't stop the slight smile curling at the edges of my mouth. Nicoli lets go of Paula's throat as I get onto the bed, now facing him. “I'm joining the party,” I say, settling on my knees.

“Mira, stop,” he warns, and I notice the slight movement of his hips as he inches deeper into Paula. “You need to leave. Get out of my room right now.”

“But you invited me.” On my knees, I inch closer, Paula's face inches from my thighs. But I refuse to look down at her. “That's why you wanted to see me, isn't it? Why you left the door open so I can see you fuck your little slut.” I lean my head to the side, studying him. “Or did you want me to run away crying?”

“Leave, Mira. For fuck’s sake.” He pushes forward again, and Paula moans. My gaze drops to where their bodies connect, Paula’s shaved pussy spread open, and Nicoli’s cock buried deep. I ache to run my hands over his sculpted chest, swirl my fingers around the bullet wound scar, then down his tight abs, to feel its ripples beneath my fingertips as I touch him lower. Lower. Until I feel where his body connects to hers. Jealousy strikes my chest like a beaded whip to my flesh. So many nights I’ve lain awake fantasizing about what it would feel like to have him inside me, my pussy stretched and filled while he rocks on top of me. Would he be gentle? Rough? I’ve always seemed to gravitate toward the latter, thinking about his strong hands wrapped around my throat. His hard body pinning me down, lips sucking and teeth biting. I want him to pull my hair and bend my body to his will, hurt me until it feels so fucking good. I want to see the evidence of his passion for me bloom on my skin in shades of purple and blue. To me it would be proof of his ownership over me.

Paula moves her hips, and Nicoli groans. “In the name of God, stop moving.”

She doesn’t obey and thrusts against him, sporting a sly grin. He curses, and I grab her hair, yanking her head to the side. “Did you not hear him? He said...stop. Moving.”

He looks from me to Paula before his gaze lands back on me. I can feel the intensity of it, and as much as my pride wants me to walk away, there’s something compelling about all this that makes me stay.

My heart pounds in my chest, adrenaline flooding my system, and I can feel sweat bead on my back. Nicoli doesn’t move. It’s as if he knows that if he does, something wicked will unfold. Paula is no longer writhing against him. I think she’s finally realized that there’s more to this than a mere threesome. It’s something primal, something that goes back years. Something that doesn’t include her. She’s merely a pawn in Nicoli’s game...just like me.

We remain motionless, seconds stretching into moments that have no end.

Nicoli's eyes are pinned on mine, and the heat of his gaze seeps into my skin. It arouses a forbidden longing that sets fire to my insides with a fierce, uncontrollable desire that slicks my pussy and sizzles every nerve in my body. And I can see in the way he studies me that he knows as well as I do that this game has changed irrevocably.

"You shouldn't be here. Get up and walk out of here, Mira."

"I'd say make me, but that would mean you have to take your dick out of Paula's cunt. And I'm kind of turned on by it." I trail my fingers up my sides, circling a finger around my nipple, his eyes turning dark as he watches me. "So, why don't we just finish this? Let's play this little game of yours, Nicoli."

"What game?"

"This game where you pretend like you don't give a shit about me, but you and I both know that's not true."

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, and I imagine it's the bullshit he wanted to spit out but then thought better of it.

"There's something between us, and you going to such lengths to make me think otherwise is proof that you know it, too." I pinch my nipple between my fingers, and he bites his bottom lip. The flames dance in his eyes and make them glow with primal need. He's a being of the night, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Sometimes a monster. He is good at keeping his emotions hidden, an expert in painting an illusion that he doesn't give a shit. But the tension in his shoulders and his jaw says otherwise.

Every trace of restraint leaves hard lines of lust on his expression, dark strands of hair fanning those beautiful eyes that are trained on me.

I inch closer, palming both my breasts now. Paula starts to move her hips in a slow circular motion, and Nicoli remains dead still.

"Fuck her," I say, my voice low and sultry. He hesitates, letting her leg fall from his shoulder, so he's trapped between

her thighs. “You fuck her pussy.” I shift and rock back on Paula’s face. “While I fuck her mouth.”

“Jesus,” he moans, lowering his head and groaning as if he’s in pain—*good*—then gives a single hard thrust into her, causing her lips to brush against my pussy.

A shock of electricity slams up my spine. I throw my head back, craning my neck as Paula licks her velvet tongue through my slit, the tip dancing against my clit.

Nicoli thrusts into her again, harder this time, and our eyes meet. He’s leaning over her, his arms stretched out and hands by her sides. It’s as if he wants to get closer to me, as close as he can, and I can’t stop myself from wanting to close the distance as well. His low groans mirror the pleasure I feel from Paula’s mouth on my sex, French-kissing my cunt like she’s starved for it. She hooks her hands around my upper thighs, pulling me down harder, her tongue dipping into my entrance.

I moan out loud with them both. The world spins around us, creating a surge of electric pleasure until our moans fill the air like a symphony, each person’s body growing more excited with every second.

Nicoli reaches out, fisting his hand in my hair and pulling me closer, his forehead against mine as he continues to pound into her. His warm breath smells like bourbon and cigars. It’s intoxicating as it wafts against my lips. “Fuck, Mira,” he rasps, and I move my hips, riding Paula’s face faster, deeper. Her thighs are spread wide, her knees bent, heels digging into the edge of the mattress. I can smell her, her sweet arousal that pools between her body and Nicoli’s—the wetness of her cunt that allows him to go deeper into her. We’re hot breaths mixed with desperate moans intertwined with a desire that we can’t escape from. Not now. It’s already gone too far.

The sound of Nicoli slamming into her—skin on skin—resounds around us, and I know I should be repulsed and sickened by it, but I’m not. I got onto this bed trying to beat him at his own game, but now I’m coiled deep within its webs, a willing prey to his depravities.

“What are you doing to me?” he whispers, out of breath, our bodies moving in the same rhythm as if it’s me he’s fucking. It’s no longer her. She’s no longer here. It’s just us. Just the two of us lost in our wicked desires and sensual sin.

“The same thing you’re doing to me.” I place my palms on his cheeks. “I’m ruining you.”

His lips slam into mine with a brutal force that knocks the breath from my lungs. My world shatters into a million pieces of euphoria, a moment I’ve been waiting for so long. He’s kissing me, and I can taste the hunger on his lips, feel the desire with every stroke of his tongue. It mirrors my own, our pent-up passions unleashing in an explosion of chaos.

Nicoli cups my cheeks while his body moves at a grueling pace, but he doesn’t miss a beat as he continues to kiss me. It’s as painfully beautiful as I had always imagined. It doesn’t matter that Paula is here because, right now, she’s a bystander and not a participant. It’s *our* bodies moving, *our* lips craving, *our* desires taking control.

I moan as Nicoli tears his lips from mine, one hand sliding down to my jaw and pressing his fingers deep into my skin, gripping tight.

“Why can’t you just hate me?” he asks between labored breaths.

“I don’t know. I don’t fucking know.”

The tension in my belly fuels me to move faster, to rock harder, Paula’s tongue sliding and licking, her lips sucking on my clit, causing my legs to shake as pleasure forces prickles of delight through every muscle until my insides detonate with a rapture that tears through me like a hurricane.

“Jesus, fuck,” Nicoli curses, and I reach out, forcing him to look at me.

“Don’t come inside her. You can show me that courtesy.”

“I wish it was you. I wish it were you I’m fucking right now. God.” He bites his bottom lip, his body pistoning as his cock slams into her over and over again. Paula starts to cry

out, and I press down harder on her face, muffling her sounds of ecstasy with my wet pussy.

“You look at me when you come, Nicoli Del Rossa.” My demand sends him spilling over the edge, his hooded gaze planted firmly on mine. He jerks back, reaches down and grabs his cock, pumping it hard, that first shot of cum landing hot on my stomach, the rest squirting onto Paula’s sweaty body beneath us. A deep groan echoes from his chest, and it’s the most magnificent sight I’ve ever seen. Every muscle, every tendon in his chest and shoulders is pulled taut, his jaw and neck set in tight lines as he comes, pleasure ripping through him.

Nicoli pushes himself back and away from Paula, who remains still and spent on the bed. I slide off the bed, my body nothing but waves of aftershocks, electrified with rapture. But my heart...my heart is fucking destroyed. There’s no trace of bliss on his face. His expression is pained, as if he knows it, too.

I can’t control the pain that now rushes to the surface, drowning out the adrenaline. I’m too exhausted to stop the tears from falling, so I let them as I walk up to him. My walls have already crumbled. There’s no need for me to stay strong anymore, and I no longer have to hide what I’m feeling. I’ve done it long enough, loved him from afar for too long. Staring up at him, I pray to God he can see in the depths of my eyes how my soul is bleeding out. I need him to know that this is the moment he lost me. Whether he loves me in this all-consuming way I love him or not, if fate ever had a happy ending in store for us, Nicoli just single-handedly destroyed it.

He destroyed me.

I slap him. Right across his beautiful fucking face, his neck jerking to the side. “You wanted me to hate you. Well, now I do. Congratulations, Nicoli.”

With that, I grab my dress and walk out of his room, leaving a piece of me behind. My dream. My heart. Him.

That was the moment I died...and I never want to take a goddamn breath again.

Chapter Fifteen

MIRABELLA

My bedroom door slams shut with a reverberating crash. I stand still for a moment, my hands shaking and knees trembling as the realization of what I just did hits me like a freight train. I can't believe I did that. It was stupid and reckless...*and stupid*. And now my heart is nothing but fragments of agony.

The assault of emotion is instantaneous. An invisible weight crushes me, and I sink to the floor in an agonizing heap. I cover my face with my hands as if that could stop the raging waterfall of tears from falling. But it flows freely, rivers of tears mixed with searing pain that seems to seep deep into bone. My chest is being hacked with jagged-edged knives, claws digging their way deeper and deeper until it consumes me entirely. My mind is a jumbled mess as I try to make sense of everything that's happening, but it all seems hopeless. Nothing makes sense anymore.

God, *I* don't even make sense to me anymore.

I don't know how long I sit with my back against the door. It could be minutes or hours; time loses meaning when you're drowning. I should blame myself, but I don't. Instead, I blame him, which is probably a selfish fucking thing because Nicoli never gave me any reason to think there's more between us than family ties. I just always had a glimmer of hope in my heart that one day he'd wake up and realize he loves me. Now it's nothing more than a young girl's innocent dream that became a woman's fantasy, and now turned into a nightmare.

I've always loved him. It was a love that grew from a little girl's adoration to a young woman's infatuation. I remember a time when we were inseparable, but that all changed abruptly. It was like we were close one day, and the next, he couldn't get away from me fast enough. I could never figure out why, but I always hung on to hope that a day would come when the universe would somehow bring us together.

Now that hope is gone.

I wipe my face with the back of my hand, trying to compose myself. It's no use, though. The pain gets worse with every beat of my heart, and I can hardly swallow a breath.

Stumbling to my feet, I strip down, dropping my clothes on the carpeted floor. I'm still crying as I walk to the bathroom and step into the shower. The burst of water is ice-cold, but I don't even flinch. It slowly warms the longer I stand underneath it, water cascading down my face, my shoulders, my body. But I feel nothing. I can't feel anything apart from this bone-crushing pain that seems to radiate from everywhere all at once. It's raw and intense, thrumming like a live wire. I can taste the sorrow that crawls around me like a thousand flesh-eating insects. It's bitter and heavy in my mouth, weighing down my tongue.

As the warmth finally reaches me, I start rubbing soap onto my skin, wanting nothing more than to be clean again. Clean from the nasty crud that clings to me. Clean of her. Clean of him. Not once did I feel this filthy after the sultry nights in Tuscany. My nights shared with Tommaso and Imelda were passionate and exquisite. Our hands and lips, bodies and breaths were intertwined with the mutual adoration and affection that fueled our every touch and kiss. I left them feeling like a goddess, desired and worshiped. Satiated and fulfilled. But this...this is different. I feel different. I feel dead. Broken. I've never felt this lost in my entire life. I've loved him for so long, and I don't know who I am if I can't love him.

"How could he do this to me?" I whimper, wiping water from my face, and my fingers hover over my lips. His kiss. Oh, God, his kiss. It was our first kiss, something I've wanted for so long. It was supposed to be beautiful, powerful, enraged

with a passion that would explode on my tongue. That was the dream. But reality gave us a first kiss that lingers with echoes of cruelty, burning like acid, and now all I want is to wash it off my lips. I want it gone. I want him gone. But even as the suds slip down my body and swirl around the drain, they fail to cleanse away the stains of betrayal that cling to my skin like a curse. And no matter how hard I scrub, I can't get him off me because he's everywhere. His handprints are on my flesh. His eyes are in my head. His face is engraved into my heart. I can't get rid of him because he owns my fucking soul.

"God, make it stop," I plead, fresh tears pouring from my heart and down my cheeks. "Please make it stop!"

The water turns scalding hot, and the drops blast against me in violent bursts of a thousand needles. I don't move even though it feels like my organs are melting away. It's like someone has drained me of life and left behind a hollow shell. The vibrant world that existed outside now seems dull and meaningless. Everything that was once beautiful to me now only appears ugly and unforgiving.

"Please!" I scream, folding my shoulders into me as I clutch my chest as if I could keep my heart from breaking further. "Why do I have to love him? Make it stop!" It's too much. The pain is overwhelming. I can't bear it, and my knees go weak, the gravity of hell pulling me down.

Strong arms wrap around me from behind, and I immediately know it's him by the way my soul comes alive under his touch.

"Fuck you!" I cry out in anguish, his touch like a branding iron against my skin. I buck and thrash against him in a desperate attempt to pull away. "I hate you! I fucking hate you!" My screams slam against the walls, my tears coming down hot and angry, but he doesn't let go. The more I struggle, the tighter he holds me, trapping my naked body against him until I have no more strength left to fight him. Sobs tear from my chest, and all I can do is lean back and melt into his embrace, sink into his hold while my soul is ripped apart.

He pulls me deeper into him, burying his face in the crook of my neck, his lips soft and tender against my skin. But it hurts. It hurts so damn much I can hardly get enough air in my lungs to survive another minute.

“I’m sorry, Hummingbird,” he murmurs into my wet hair. “All I’ve ever wanted was to protect you. I swear to God.”

More sobs erupt, and I’m bleeding out in his arms. “I hate you,” I whimper. It’s a whispered lie and a desperate cry.

“I know.”

“I’ll never forgive you.”

His gentle kisses continue over my shoulder. “I know.”

I close my eyes and let myself feel for a moment, ignoring the familiar tingling sensation spreading through my body as his lips delicately caress my neck. Despite the hurt he’s caused me, despite the pain he’s made me feel, I will always crave him in ways no other man could ever match. My soul needs him; my heart loves him. And that’s what makes this so fucked-up, because I know that I will never love another man the way I love him. I would rather die alone than settle for second-best love.

My body shudders as I inhale deeply, leaning my head back against his shoulder. “I don’t remember a time when I didn’t love you,” I say, my mind a haze of crippling emotions that compel me to finally speak the truth. “It’s always been you...Nicoli.”

“Mirabella,” he whispers, and it’s barely audible with the sound of splashing water raining down on porcelain tiles.

I’m staring up at the water jetting from the chrome showerhead. “I’ve never tried not to love you. Even when you couldn’t give me the time of day, I still loved you.”

The sound of him breathing against my neck sends shivers down my spine, and without thinking, I turn to face him, his hands resting on my hips. I place my fingertips gently against the bullet wound scar on his chest, and he makes this hissing sound as if my touch burns him. “That night when Maximo came to my room, saying your uncle had shot you...I don’t

remember a time that I've ever been so scared in my life. I kept on saying, 'he can't die, he can't die.' I was at the brink of hysteria just thinking about waking up in a world where you don't exist." My gaze lifts to his. "That night, I told my brother that I was in love with you. You know what he said to me?"

Nicoli remains still. Silent. Pensive.

"He told me that he knew. That everyone knew. I wanted to ask him if *you* knew, but Alexius came storming in saying you were in the clear. And I was so relieved...so incredibly thankful, I vowed to tell you my truth the moment you woke up." I scoff, removing my hand from his chest. "But when you opened your eyes, you looked right at me, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't say it." I lift my shoulders in defeat. "So, I'm saying it now."

"Mira, don't."

"I love you, Nicoli Del Rossa."

"Goddammit," he bites out, and I can hear the pain in his voice, because I feel it. I feel it everywhere.

With his palm, he wipes his dark, wet hair from his face, blue eyes gleaming like broken crystal, the water streaming down every curve of his naked chest, his pants hanging loose around his hips. He looks a mess. A perfect mess.

"I fucking love you," I repeat, this time with more conviction. "A world where I don't love you will never exist. And as long as I fucking breathe, I will continue to love you. Always."

I reach out, cup his cheek, and my heart constricts as he leans into my touch, placing his palm over my hand. I can't control it. It's a compulsion, almost as natural as breathing, an invisible force that has me leaning into him. I close my eyes, lifting my weight on the balls of my feet, pressing my lips against his. He inhales sharply through his nose as if my tender kiss knocked the air from his lungs. His whole body goes rigid against mine, his shoulders shaking as if my lips are poison to his system. I let my tongue touch his, and a spark

ignites, his lips parting as he gasps loudly, echoing his need that's so profound it vibrates off him in waves. It's so strong it physically aches to feel it seep through to the marrow of my bones.

My heart thumps wildly as my fingers tangle in his hair, desperate to deepen the kiss, my tongue touching his, the final act that makes him come undone. His hands snake around my waist, crushing me against his hard body, and he moans into my mouth, a sound that echoes his thirst to drink me in. I'm entranced, swept up by the moment, clinging to him as I feel his arousal against my hip. But this is so much more than just desire. It surpasses lust. It's a journey to pure, raw emotion, our lips conveying a deep, sensual understanding that words can't. And I can hear it loud and clear, the truth echoing in my heart like the howling wind through a storm.

He loves me. It's written in how his lips move against mine. It's in the taste of desperation that burns on our dancing tongues.

Nicoli loves me.

Then why did he have to ruin me?

I stand there, lost in a kiss that should have been our first, and agony bleeds into me. It's debilitating, so strong that something inside me snaps. A small ember kindles and grows into a fiery rage—an anger so intense it melts away the pain, replacing it with an icy coldness that spreads through my bones. I breathe out as the hardness consumes me, and I sever our kiss, tearing my lips from his.

“Mira, don't,” he pleads, his voice a low thrum of anguish. He tries to keep me against him, tightening his arms as if he's desperate to hold on to the moment...to me. But it fucking hurts. I'm already in pieces. I have to save myself from him—at least what's left of me, if there is any...

With all my strength, I dig my fingers into his arms, unlocking the hold he has around my waist.

“I'm so fucking sorry.”

“I love you,” I whisper, finally able to pull away. “But I will *never* let you love me back.”

“Mira, please—” He tries to reach for me, but I step away.

Our eyes lock, and it’s just pain. It’s all there is between us. “I would say it’s over, but it never started,” I say as I grab a towel and walk backward. “And it never will.”

With that, I turn my back on him, the final curtain drawn on something that never was. Walking away from him tears me apart, my broken heart leaving trails of blood behind my footsteps.

It’ll always hurt loving him, whether we’re together or apart. But, at least apart, he can’t add more hurt to an already paralyzing pain I’ll never get over.

Ever.



Nicoli

I SPENT my life trying to protect her. But nothing could protect her from me. I’ve ruined her, stained everything pure in her soul. She’s jaded and broken because of me—because I couldn’t stop myself... from falling in love with her.

Chapter Sixteen

That night continues to burn in my mind. It's on constant repeat, never fading. The heat of her desire still lingers and intensifies every time I think about it.

When I close my eyes, I see her. Her beautiful face, blood-red lips that tasted better than I ever could have imagined, and her naked body with downright killer curves. My fucking poison. In the memories, she's right there, ripe for the taking. All I have to do is reach out. My cock is buried in someone else's pussy, yet all I can think about is that I want it to be her. I want her on her goddamn back, her thighs spread and cunt weeping for me, moaning and arching her back as I pump into her. I want it to be her that begs for more of me, and I would willingly oblige by giving her everything I have.

One wouldn't say it was one of the worst fucking nights of my life, not when I relished the sight of her moving her hips, rocking her body as another woman eats her pussy. Mira was painfully beautiful and radiant in her desire. I've jerked off numerous times imagining my palm was her, but I could never have conjured up a fantasy as exquisitely dirty and crazy as the one that played out the other night.

It wasn't part of the plan. Mira was supposed to walk in and see me fuck Paula, cry and run away, and never speak to me again. That's what needed to happen, but I underestimated my little hummingbird. She saw right through me and called my bluff; she showed me a side of her I never knew existed. The way she touched herself and fucked Paula's mouth, Mira was seduction and ecstasy rolled into the most erotic thing I've

ever seen—and that says a lot since I spend most nights at Myth.

I was entranced. Beguiled by her. My eyes followed her every move, mesmerized by how she moved, confidence oozing from her pores. I drank her in, savoring every moan that left her lips, hating that it was Paula's tongue getting her off and not mine. I wanted to be the one who tasted her, lapped her up and made her wild with cries of pleasure as she rode my face, her arousal gushing past my lips. Just the thought is enough to drive me crazy. Imagine how fucked I'd be if I did what I wanted to do—yank her off Paula's face, bend her over, and slide so deep inside her pussy she'd see goddamn stars. But I didn't. Instead, I watched her with awe and admiration while the reality of it all crushed me. I knew that every second I allowed it to continue, our silent bond was breaking, crumbling, fucking rupturing, but I couldn't stop. The cold bastard in me was too selfish. I knew it would be the closest I'd ever get to her, and I took it. I used every moment to fill the longing I've been living with for so long. Mira's presence consumed my entire being, and nothing else mattered at that moment. Only the two of us existed. Sure, my cock was still inside Paula's greedy body, but it could have been anyone as far as I was concerned. She became invisible to me. All she succeeded in doing was fading into the background while I watched Mira transcend from innocence to sensuality right before my fucking eyes.

It took everything in me not to unleash my most torrid desires on Mira's body, which seemed so damn willing. Her green eyes were swimming with lust—hungry and consumed. But there was something else too. Something she tried to hide, but to me, it was clear as fucking day. It was pain. Hurt. Betrayal. It sliced into my soul every time she let out a breath. That was the only thing stopping me from taking her, forgetting the promise I made and making her mine in every way known to man.

But the real doozy, the most profound mind-fuck, was when I decided to go after her because I wanted to make it right. I wanted to kiss away every trace of heartache I caused her. My goddamn soul screamed for me to take her in my arms

and never let go. I can't explain it. It's like something switched inside me, and I went from wanting her to hate me to needing her to love me in zero fucking seconds. It was a complete one-eighty shift I had no control over, as if it all clicked into place, and I was ready to throw all my inhibitions to the wind so I could just love her. Just fucking love her without caring what the repercussions might be because all that mattered was showing her that my heart had always been hers. I was ready to take the leap, to try to make shit right. But when I found her in the shower swathed in a cloud of sorrow, her body shaking and her agonized sobs painting the walls with her pain, the universe reminded me why I did the most fucked-up thing a man could ever do to a woman.

Excruciating guilt crashed over me and sobered me from the haze of wishful thinking. My mind flooded with regret and shame for what I had done to her. It was then I realized my apology would never be enough because how can you expect someone to love you if all you know how to do is hurt them?

So, I let her go, even after her declaration of love pulverized me...I let her go. And now here I am, days later and still fucking miserable.

Alexius walks into the Dark Sovereign room, fixing me with a hard stare, then looks at the bottle of bourbon in my hands. He raises an eyebrow. "She still not speaking to you?"

I take a swig straight from the bottle. "Nope."

"Are you going to tell me what the fuck it is you did?"

"Nope."

"Is the bourbon helping?"

I smack my tongue, staring at the liquid that makes it all suck less, yet provides zero comfort. "Nope."

"Then why are you drunk?"

"I'm not drunk. I'm contemplating."

"Contemplating what?"

I frown at the bottle as if it's a living thing taking part in this useless conversation. "The scale of how I fucked up."

“And what’s the verdict?”

I scoff. “I tipped the scales, brother. I tipped the motherfucking scales.”

Alexius snatches the bottle from me and chugs a mouthful, grimacing as he passes it back to me. “It’s her birthday tomorrow.”

I meet his gaze with a flat stare. “I’m well aware.”

“And we’re all going out.”

“After Dark?”

Alexius shrugs, and I already know Leandra got his balls in a twist. She probably sucked his dick until he caved and gave permission.

“If you’re thinking Leandra got my balls in a twist and sucked my dick until I caved and gave permission...you’re wrong.”

I lift a brow.

“She sucked my dick and then proceeded to fuck my brains out. Only then did I cave.”

“Well,” I bring the bottle to my lips, “if you put it that way, then I guess it makes sense that you’re sending both her and Mira into the lion’s den. A good fucking is always worth putting the ones you love in danger.”

“Maximo will have eyes and ears everywhere. The fucking president can go to that club tomorrow night, and he’d be safer than in his oval office. So don’t start your shit with me,” Alexius warns, taking his seat at the polished table, his chair embroidered with the gold and silver crest. What a fucking joke—gold and silver. We’re not gold. We’re not silver. We’re pitch fucking black. The whole lot of us. We think we protect the people we love when all we do is fuck shit up. It’s a family curse that stems from that damn creepy-as-hell mausoleum. Everything started there on the night that changed everything.

I shift in my seat, dragging my palm down my loosened tie. “I’m not starting anything. Just saying it the way I see it.”

“Are you going to make it right?”

I look up from the half-empty bottle of bourbon in my hand, unamused by his subject change. “Did you miss the memo? She hates me now. There’s nothing to make right.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“I didn’t want any of this,” I snap.

“Then why are you so hellbent on pushing her away?”

“Because it’s fucking necessary.” I swallow another mouthful of bourbon that burns as it travels down my insides. “But turns out that a bullet to the brain would suck less than this.”

“Are you ever going to tell me what you’re hiding?”

I press my lips in a thin line, a silent answer that he picks up on immediately.

Alexius leans back in his seat. “Let’s play the game we used to play when we were kids. I guess, and if I guess correctly, you have to tell me.”

I snort. “You’ll never be able to guess this one, brother. I guarantee it.”

“I can guess that it has to do with Mirabella’s parents’ murder. About the Ferrero family being responsible.”

“Oh, dear brother.” I scoff. “You’re barely scratching the surface.”

“I also know that you’re hiding something that has to do with Marco.”

I stiffen. “What makes you say that?”

“I was going through Dad’s things after he died. I found a file on Marco, and what I found particularly interesting was his date of death.”

Chills wrack up my spine, heat tingling the back of my neck.

“Do you know why Dad would have Marco’s date of death almost ten years after the night of the Tirelli massacre?”

There's a second that my demeanor falters, and Alexius immediately picks up on it. My brother can smell my bullshit a mile away. God, I hate him. I don't really. But I do.

I swirl the bottle between my fingers, putting on the most ironclad poker face known to man. "Why, if you found this file after Dad died, are you only asking me about it now?"

He crosses his legs, leaning back, acting like a cool and confident dick. "One of the most important things Dad taught me was patience."

"And one of the most important things he taught me was how to kick my twin brother in the balls."

"Sarcasm has always been your defense mechanism."

"And being a dickhead, yours."

"I know you're protecting her," he says evenly. "And I know that sooner or later you're going to have to tell me exactly what it is that you're protecting her from."

"I should have protected her from me. But I couldn't even do that."

Maximo clears his throat, standing by the entrance and locking eyes with Alexius. "Leandra is looking for you. She's out on the patio."

In my head, I'm kissing Maximo's ass right now and cuddling him under a willow tree for saving me from what has the potential of being a very unpleasant conversation. I smirk at my brother. "You've been summoned."

He simply glowers at me, standing. "This conversation isn't over."

"Oh, but it is." I pour two gulps down my throat, watching my brother walk out. But he pauses when he reaches the door, giving Maximo and me a knowing look—his silent way of saying he knows we're two pricks with a secret.

When he's gone, I open my mouth and feel the air rush back in. My chest is hollow, a big fucking black hole that swallows my goddamn life. I sink back in my seat. "He's

going to keep pushing until he squeezes every last drop of the truth out of me.”

Maximo strolls over and places his hands on the back of his chair, his leather jacket crinkling around the width of his arms. A cigarette dangles between his lips, the smoke suffocating the scent of honeyed beeswax that always lingers in this room.

“Maybe we should tell him.”

I almost choke on my own spit. “Excuse me? Have you lost your fucking mind?”

He takes the last drag from his cigarette before snuffing it in the crystal ashtray shaped like a dollar sign. “Maybe it’s time, Nicoli.”

My heart halts instantly and then starts beating again, but too fast. “No fucking way. No. We agreed that Mira can never know the truth.”

“I’m not saying she needs to know everything, just the part that matters.”

“And what part is that, huh? Which part do you think matters the most? The part about your older brother being responsible for your parents’ deaths? Or—”

“Yes!” he snaps. “That part. I hate that she mourns him, too, when she thinks about what we lost. He doesn’t deserve her grief.”

“It’s too risky, Maximo. If we tell her the truth about Marco, she could figure out all the rest. And that can’t happen.”

“Who’s to say knowing the truth about him will let her remember everything else?”

“Stop! We agreed that we would keep it between us. You and me and my father.”

“And I’ve always trusted your father to know what’s best for everyone,” he says, his brow creased with hard lines. “Which is why I agreed to keep this secret from everyone else. And I never questioned him. Not once. But a lot has changed

since your father died, Nicoli. And that makes me wonder if he'd feel the same if he was still here." He gives me a knowing look. "I don't think he would if he knew how you felt about my sister. What you're sacrificing for her."

"What I'm sacrificing doesn't matter. What I feel doesn't matter. All that matters is protecting her from the truth." I nail him with a pointed glare. "*All* of it."

"Alexius won't tell her."

"Leandra has my brother's balls wrapped around her goddamn pinky, and all it'll take is a sixty-nine, a swallow, and a fucking hand job in the church pew for him to sing like a motherfucking bird. And if she knows, so will Mira."

Maximo sighs and rolls his shoulders as if they weigh too much. "Goddammit," he mutters under his breath. "Fuck you, Marco." Venom laces his words. "Every time she mentions his name, my fucking skin crawls. I swear to God, there will come a day that I lose my shit and let everything slip."

I fly out of my chair, knocking it over in the process, and slamming my fists on the table. "She will never know the truth, Maximo. Not about Marco. Not about the mausoleum. And sure as fuck not about what happened that night. Is that understood?"

"She's my sister."

"Is. That. Understood?" My hands are balled into fists, and I squeeze them tight, my knuckles burning white.

"What if she wakes up one morning and remembers everything?"

"She won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just know."

"She'll never forgive us, Nicoli. If she puts it all together and finds out we kept this from her, she will never forgive us."

"I'm doing everything I can to keep her from ever putting it together, and that includes me staying the fuck away from

her so I don't somehow trigger her memory. She's been through enough shit to last her two lifetimes. The last thing she needs is more emotional damage. More fucking hurt."

"You fucking hypocrite." His chest rises as he breathes deeply through his nose, bunching up his lips like he tastes something vile. "You want to protect her from more pain, yet you go and break her fucking heart."

"It's different."

"No, it's not. There's always a risk that the truth will come out, that she'll wake up one morning and remember. At least if you'd stop being an asshole and admit you love her, she would have someone to help her deal with it should that ever happen. Now...now she has no one."

"I will only hurt her, Maximo."

"You already hurt her, you fucking asshole. You already hurt her." Maximo's words hang heavily in the air between us like a tightrope. His anger is palpable and justified; he knows what I did to Mira and how I hurt her. He's the only one who knows about my setup with Paula. He kept nagging and pushing me for answers after Mira seemed to have flipped a switch overnight, going from being the sun and life in this house, to a closed-off, hardened version of herself. So, I finally spat out the truth. But my confession didn't include the part where his sister was riding Paula's mouth. I spared him that detail.

"You're right," I concede while clenching my jaw, looking him square in the eye, not shying away from the shame that sticks to my flesh. "I did hurt her, and I'll never forgive myself for it. But I did what was necessary. I put my own shit aside for her, and that, I won't regret," I say, my voice hoarse with emotion that surprises even me. "And even if I did, the damage is done, and I can't undo it. I can't change the past. It is what it is, and I'm sure she'll get over it soon enough."

He scoffs. "If you think that, you don't know my sister. You have no idea how much she loves you."

"*Loved* me." I sit back down. "She hates me now."

“There’s this stupid saying about a thin line between love and hate.”

“Spare me the romantic bullshit.”

Maximo straightens his shoulders, tapping his fingers on the headrest of his high-backed leather chair. “She’s hurting, and I should probably beat your fucking ass over it. But I know that when it comes to her, every decision you make is based on your instinct to protect her.” He lets go of the chair and steps back. “I respect that. And that’s the only reason I’ll keep this secret...at least until you say otherwise.”

“Which I never will. And why the fuck are we even talking about this? For years, you remained silent, yet today you’re all up in my ass about it.”

He sucks his bottom lip into his mouth, and I can practically smell his need to punch me in the face. “As I said,” he grits out, “some days, it’s hard to let her mourn the brother responsible for fucking up her life. Our lives.”

“Gentlemen.” Alexius appears in the doorway, and I know by the scowl on his face that he just heard everything. “I think we need to talk.”

Chapter Seventeen

MIRABELLA

I t's dark. Cold. My legs are restless. They want me to run, but I can't run because I can't see anything. Where do I run to? In which direction do I go when everything is pitch black around me?

Momma made me promise not to open my eyes, and I can't break that promise. I won't. Where is she? "Momma? Momma, where are you?" I turn my face to the left, then to the right. "Momma?"

"I'm here, Mirabella." The sound of her voice drapes like a blanket over me, the cold instantly gone.

"Momma!" I scream with a desperate hitch, my arms flailing around in the dark as I search for her.

"You didn't open your eyes, did you?"

I shake my head, pinching my eyes closed even harder. "No, Momma."

"Good girl. Now, remember, if the bad man tells you to open your eyes, you tell him no. Understood?"

I nod.

"No matter what he says, or how angry he sounds, you do not look. Okay?"

"Yes, Momma."

There's a sudden cold breeze that wraps around my ankles with icy tentacles. "It's the bad man," I say. "He's here."

“Remember, he can’t hurt you. He can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. If you stay strong and keep your promise, he will go away.”

My tears are warm as they trickle down my cheek, and I swat them away with a quick sweep of my hand.

“Open your eyes, Mirabella.” His tone is dark, his voice thick and sticky...like blood. “If you want to remember, you have to open your eyes.”

“Remember what?”

“Everything. Just open your eyes.”

“No.” I shake my head almost manically, my warm tears turning into coals. “I won’t.”

“You have to. It’s the only way you’ll remember.”

“No.”

“Look at me!” he roars, the world around me shaking with waves of anger.

“No. No. No,” I keep repeating, pressing my palms over my ears. “I won’t look.”

I won’t look.



“GREAT. YOU’RE NOT DRESSED YET.” I shut the bedroom door behind me, sauntering toward Leandra.

“What do you mean?” She arches an eyebrow and glances down at her front. **“I *am* dressed.”**

I balk. **“You’re kidding, right?”**

“No. What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s one button and three inches of fabric away from a habit.”

She rolls her eyes and turns her attention back to her reflection in the mirror. “I like it. Alexius loves it, too.”

This time it’s my turn to roll my eyes, making a dramatic show of it. “Of course, he loves it. It’s a black frock that accentuates absolutely nothing. What’s not to like? Here, try this one.” I give her the dress I picked out specially for her, knowing she’d want to go out in a dress more suited for Sunday mass than a Saturday night birthday party.

Leandra glances over the low-cut cowl neckline mini dress then scowls at me. “Are you serious?”

“That color will complement your skin tone. Plus, the reflective sequins and beads will make you stand out in the crowd.”

“Why do I want to stand out?”

“Because you’re a Del Rossa wife, and everyone in this city needs to know that every time you walk into a room.” We lock eyes for a moment, and I know she knows I won’t let her leave this room without trying the dress on first.

“Fine,” she concedes and slips in behind the wooden dressing screen. “But if Alexius decides to lock me in a room again, it’s on you.”

“Don’t act like you won’t enjoy being held hostage by your husband...again.”

She huffs out a chuckle, then peeks from around the white handcrafted wood, gazing at the hem of my mini dress. “Did Maximo approve the dress his little sister is wearing tonight?”

“Maximo doesn’t have to approve anything when it comes to his little sister, thank you very much.”

“That dress is provocative and sexy. I’d be surprised if the brothers let you out on the front porch.”

I turn from front to back and back to front as I look at my reflection. “I figured since we have five babysitters tonight, I have to wear something noticeable through a wall of muscle.”

“Now I know why Maximo is so serious all the time. He has you to worry about.” She glances around the framework

again. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” I pretend not to know why she’d ask me that. But I do. I’ve been in my room most of the time because I’m trying to avoid running into Nicoli. I’m still licking my wounds, and the last thing I need is to look into the eyes of the predator who tore my heart out. On the days I do decide to step out of my room, I hardly speak to anyone, mainly because I really don’t want to. It’s like there are clinking ice cubes in my chest, freezing my desire to smile and be friendly to others while I’m dead inside. But since today is my birthday, I’ve decided the best gift I could give myself is to go out into the world and do whatever the fuck I want. Hence the reason I’m wearing the very revealing dress that leaves little to the imagination.

“I’m not going to push you to tell me exactly what happened that had you huddled up in your bedroom, but I’m here...you know. If you need to talk.”

I fluff up my hair, trying to get more volume into my freshly styled curls. “The last thing I want to do tonight is talk. I just want to forget about everything, just for tonight.”

Leandra shoots me a tight smile before disappearing again. “Just for tonight. I’ll bug your ass about talking again tomorrow.”

“Please don’t.”

“I’ve always wanted to ask,” she says from behind the screen. “You really love the color red. Is there a specific reason for that?”

“I dunno. There’s just something about the rich, deep shade of red that makes me feel...empowered, I guess.” I run a hand down the front of my one-shoulder ruched dress with cut-out detail around my middle. It’s skintight, the fabric smooth and cool, feeling like water on my skin. This one has been sitting in my closet for months, waiting for the perfect opportunity to be worn. And tonight is that perfect opportunity—a birthday celebration and a night on the town.

“It’s not a color a lot of people can pull off. But it’s like God invented red with you in mind,” Leandra says as she steps

out from behind the dressing screen.

I smile. “Talk about pulling off a color. Those rose-gold sequins look stunning on you, and I’m pretty sure Alexius will burst a vein in his forehead when he sees you.”

“As I said,” she shimmies me out of the way and steps in front of the mirror, “I’ll blame it all on you.”

I reach for the clip in her hair and remove it, letting her dark hair cascade down her shoulders. “If I’m to blame for you looking this hot, my work here is done.”

Turning on my heel, Leandra takes my hand and lets me face her, her eyes gentle and caring. “Happy birthday, Mirabella. I hope this year is all you dream it would be.”

If there’s one word to describe her, it’s ‘genuine.’ There is nothing false or fake about her. What you see is what you get, and what you see is a kind, courageous, loving, and strong woman. There’s no need to guess how she managed to crack through Alexius’ hard exterior, how she has him wrapped around her finger. He knows what he found in her, what a diamond she truly is...which is also why she’s become my best friend.

“Thank you,” I say, squeezing her hand. “But judging by how it started, I’m not holding my breath.” I don’t allow myself to get caught up in the moment that would surely catapult me back into that dark hell of despair. If I do, I’ll lose my resolve to forget about him, and tonight is all about forgetting and focusing on nothing but having fun—something I haven’t allowed myself to do since my impromptu vacation to Tuscany after senior year. I’m determined to take back my life and refuse to be locked up in this cage any longer.

“Is Nicoli joining us?”

My stomach flips. “No. Maximo said Nicoli had somewhere to be. Which is great because all he’d be able to do is suck the oxygen out of that entire damn club.” A piece of me is thankful, while another sulks because I wanted him to see me in this red dress while I shove what exactly he’s missing out on in his face. I’m done sulking. Done being

miserable. And that's why I started this party early with a few glasses of champagne, and rummaging through my bags in search of Felix's card so I could send him a personalized invitation. It's petty, I know. Also, I don't care.

There's a crackle of excitement as Leandra and I walk through the hall and down the stairs. It's in the air, it's on my skin, it's alive in my veins. Tonight, I want to celebrate my birthday my way. Not the Del Rossa way. I don't want to smile and greet guests. I don't want to worry about being on my best behavior while acting like the perfect hostess to a birthday party planned with the Dark Sovereign in mind. I don't want to be a courteous, prim and proper princess while worrying more about the guests having more fun than me on my own goddamn birthday. I want to be the woman I was back in Tuscany. I want to feel that confidence again, forget about rules and restrictions, and throw caution to the wind. For too long, I've been kept locked up. Suppressed and smothered. I'm not an innocent little schoolgirl with ponytails and cotton underwear. I'm silk and lace, seduction and sensuality, with a hint of rebellion lurking beneath the surface. And tonight, I plan on letting it all out to play. This night will be about me, what I want and how I want it. I will dance until my feet hurt. Laugh until my stomach aches. And I plan on drinking more champagne than what's considered proper in our world.

Tonight, I'm not in their world. I'm in mine.

As we walk out the front door, I'm reminded that Leandra and I will be hidden behind a giant brick wall of Del Rossa muscle. The brothers are fierce, and they protect what's theirs with a ferocity that can't be matched. Ask Oliver Jaycox from my freshman year, a boy who pulled together the courage to ask me on a date only to show up at school the next day with a broken nose and busted lip. Then there's Sam Rathborne, the senior who asked me to prom then ended up needing emergency eye surgery the night before. The list goes on, boys trying to get close to me only to avoid me like the plague shortly after. Maximo, paired with the most powerful brothers in the city, equaled me not having a social life.

But I'll always have Tuscany. And I plan on having this night too.

They're all standing by the black limousine, smoking cigars while looking like they own the goddamn world in their ironclad confidence and expensive suits. Except for Maximo. My brother despises suits and would rather walk around naked than wear anything other than his leather jackets and jeans. But I am surprised to see Isaia in a suit—well, half a suit. He might not be wearing a suit jacket, but pants that aren't denim, and a dress shirt with sleeves rolled up mid-arm is entirely out of the ordinary for him. The only time he'll wear Armani is on wedding days or funerals. High days and low days. I guess he sees my birthday as a high day. I'll take it.

Caelian is the first one to notice us. His eyes widen, and he clenches his fist in front of his mouth to hide his smirk. "Someone is getting killed tonight."

Maximo and Alexius both look up at us, and their expressions change from bored to pissed in half a heartbeat.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath as both Maximo and Alexius march toward us like war generals. But Caelian intercepts by sliding in front of them and pushing his fingers into their chests.

"Come on, guys," he starts. "We're all adults here. Let the women be."

"Get the fuck out of my way," Alexius barks.

"Listen, it's Mira's birthday. Let the girls have a good time. God knows they deserve it for being able to live under the same roof as the lot of us."

"If you weren't my brother, I'd shoot you." Alexius flattens Caelian with a stare that could inflict immense pain and suffering. Isaia snickers in the background, drawing my attention, only to see Nicoli standing next to him. My heart hiccups, then it comes back to full-steam mode, my thoughts and resolve hijacked by the sight of him. His hair fades into the black of night, his crystal blue eyes glittering like beacons in the dark. There aren't enough adjectives in the English

language that can describe the perfection that is Nicoli Del Rossa. He used to be my prince. Now...he's my villain.

Our eyes meet, and for a moment, I let it seep through. The pain. The heartache. The longing. But I hold his gaze, and he slowly looks down my body to the top of my Jimmy Choo heels and back up again. His stare turns to ice, and I feel it spread across my skin, its chill settling in my bones. And then he starts toward me like a bulldozer ready to demolish my dreams of a fun night.

I'm going to throw up.

Maximo rushes over, and I glare at my brother. "You said he wasn't joining us."

"He's not, so relax."

"Then what is he doing here?"

Nicoli practically shoves Maximo out of the way, standing so fucking close I can smell the coffee he had at breakfast. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Get out of my face, Nicoli."

"You can't seriously think what you're wearing is appropriate. It doesn't even qualify as a shirt, not to mention a fucking dress."

I level him with a glare, lifting my chin in defiance. "You are the last person to lecture me about what's appropriate."

"I insist that you find something else to wear."

"And I insist you find someone else's life to ruin."

His nostrils flare, his lips drawn back. "Don't play this game with me, Mira."

"You started this game, so I will fucking play it."

"You're making a mistake."

"And for the first time in my life, I don't give a fuck about mistakes anymore." I inch even closer, and I'm sure he can taste my confidence on the tip of his tongue. "And I have you to thank for that. So, get the hell out of my way."

The breath of distance between us pulses with electricity. It's palpable and intense, like a looming thunderstorm thickening the air. He doesn't move, and neither do I. We're two solid lines on a drawing board. Bold. Hard. And impossible to go around.

Nicoli's expression is nothing but hard lines and fiery grooves. "On second thought," he says, taking a step back without tearing his gaze from mine, "I think I'll join you."

My insides coil tight, but I refuse to show any emotion other than sheer contempt. "Great. You can keep an eye on the drinks, make sure I don't get roofied." I shoulder past him, heels clicking loudly on the asphalt. "Last thing I want is to be taken advantage of."

I hear him growl like a fucking animal behind me, and I'm all kinds of satisfied by the knife I just lodged in his chest.

Caelian waves Nicoli over to the limousine. "Don't worry. I'll sit in the middle of you two and prevent pre-party carnage."

Nicoli stomps in the direction of his car. "I'll meet you there."

"Oh, come on. This limousine can fit half of Japan in the back seat."

Nicoli ignores him and slides into his sleek, black Maserati.

Relief drapes over me. I don't think I'll be able to handle the proximity of sitting in the same car as him.

Nicoli starts his engine, pumping the gas and revving it hard before he speeds off, his tires kicking up gravel.

I'm trying to gather my resolve that Nicoli just shattered, forcing ice through my veins and steel up my spine. As I walk to the limousine, I force myself to pretend tonight will be a good night. But I can't shake the ominous feeling in my gut that's saying everything is about to change.

Chapter Eighteen

NICOLI

I'm leaning against my Maserati when the limousine pulls up to the curb. I grind my cigarette into the pavement and march toward the long-ass black car.

Maximo emerges first, his dark eyes carefully scanning the area before opening the door for my twin brother. As if I haven't already taken inventory of everything and everyone around us.

"I was hoping you'd come to your senses and take the girls home."

Alexius slaps a palm on my shoulder. "No such luck, brother."

"Tell me you stopped at the boutique to get Mira a different dress."

"That woman is determined to make your life hell, and not even I have the power to stop her."

"Pussy," I bite out, and Alexius smirks as he holds out his hand, helping Leandra step out of the limo. At least she's wearing a dress. Mira, on the other hand, is wearing a...I don't know what it is, but it sure as fuck ain't a dress.

Mira's long, slender leg appears as she puts her heel on the asphalt, the curve of her calf smooth and hypnotic. It's like a goddamn movie or a shampoo commercial, and I'm waiting for her to step out and wave her blonde locks from side to side in slow motion. And apparently, shampoo commercials now turn me on because my cock is fucking furious.

As she slides out of the back seat, I catch a glimpse of her black lace panties peeking from between her legs. The sight wrecks my motherfucking balls.

I snap my gaze all around us, ready to cut out the eyes of any asshole who caught a peek of what I just saw. Possession knocks hard against my skull, my pulse racing and heart thumping, ready to kill and slaughter.

Mira's forest green eyes fall on mine, and I can barely breathe as she shimmies the tight fabric of her red dress down her thighs, her movements powerful and sensual while keeping her stare fixed on mine. My muscles twitch in anticipation, my dick swollen and hard for this woman. She knows what she's doing to me. She's playing a game, but she doesn't know the rules. But I'm confident she'll know the number one rule before the night ends, and that's to never fuck with the lion's balls. That's me. I'm the lion.

I remove my suit jacket and wrap it around her shoulders as she passes me.

She stiffens. "What are you doing?"

"Doing the gentlemanly thing by adding a layer to your outfit."

She shrugs out from under the jacket, swatting my hands away. "You wouldn't know chivalry if it hit you in the face."

"Believe me, Hummingbird. You'd rather want me to cover you up than cut out a man's spleen."

"Don't call me that." The silent warning in her eyes is fiery hot. "And I'd appreciate it if you could keep your distance tonight."

"Look at my lips, sweetheart," I say, pointing at my mouth, leveling her with a stare. "Not a...fucking...chance."

"Ugh." She whirls around, walking so fast her heels sound like firecrackers hitting the pavement.

I stay no more than a few paces behind her, my eyes taking in every face around us. Everyone knows who we are, because

the moment they see us, they stand to the side and avert their eyes. Smart.

Maximo leads us to a private entrance on the side of the club, and it's an explosion of sound the moment we walk into After Dark. Bass vibrates through the floor, pumping a rhythmic beat in the dark and smoky hall. The music is a narcotic for the warm, writhing bodies on the dance floor, consumed by the electric atmosphere. Neon laser lights streak across the checkered dance floor, reflecting in the mirrored walls to create a kaleidoscope of colors throughout the double-story club. In the center of it is the bar with luminous blue lights around it, the bartenders flinging bottles, mixing drinks, and sporting glow-in-dark body paint on their bare chests. It's like a goddamn unicorn pissed all over this place.

I spot a few familiar faces of men on our security team. They're blending in, pretending to be partygoers, sipping their virgin drinks while keeping their eyes peeled for potential threats. It sets me at ease knowing there's backup, but it doesn't stop me from being glue on Mira's ass.

I glance up at the Ferrero brothers sitting in a booth on the top level, floor-to-ceiling glass allowing them to look down at their flock whenever their God complex strikes. And as if right on cue, Nunzio Ferrero steps up to the window, dressed in black, thick gold chains hanging around his neck, hair slicked back, and chest puffed up like a fucking peacock. Fucker can be glad it was his father who ordered the hit on Mira's parents and not him, which is the only reason he's still breathing now that he's taken over the family empire. One of his sheep leans in and says something in his ear. Nunzio looks down at us, a dead giveaway that his bodyguard just informed him of our arrival.

“Nicoli Del Rossa?”

I turn to face this bald asshole with an earpiece plugged into his cauliflower ear. *And that right there is why I quit the wrestling team in high school.*

“Who's asking?” I widen my stance, ready to break bones if this guy so much as smells like trouble.

“Mr. Ferrero would like to offer you one of the private lounges.”

“No, thank you,” Mira chips in, waving him off dismissively.

“Excuse me.” I grab her wrist, tugging her close. “He wasn’t talking to you.”

“Look at my lips, sweetheart.” She lifts her chin, and my gaze immediately falls to her blood-red mouth, that perfect Cupid’s bow tempting the fuck out of me. “I...don’t...care.”

I pull her close, slamming her body into mine, her breath swooshing across those pretty fucking lips of hers. “I would caution you against fucking with me, woman.”

“I won’t. You have Paula for that, remember?”

“What I do remember is you fucking her mouth like her tongue was my dick.”

“Yours?” she smirks. “It wasn’t your dick I was picturing.”

Jealousy thickens my gut, and I’m two seconds away from hauling her ass out of here and taking her to the Antarctic, where she’ll be forced to wear layer upon layer upon layer of clothing. It’s a crazy plan, but it doesn’t make it any less appealing.

Mira takes a step back, and her gaze darts over me with a sassy upturned curve of her lips. Little minx is testing me, trying to fuck with my head. Only she doesn’t have to try this hard because she’s been fucking with my head since she came on Paula’s face.

With one last haughty look, she blows me a mocking kiss, her eyes swimming with a cattiness I’ve never seen in her before. I almost laugh at her audacity. Yet secretly I’m enjoying it far more than I should. Her little game is like heroin to my monster.

Luckily, my twin brother picked up what I was putting down mentally and accepted the wrestler’s offer for a private lounge. Mira doesn’t look at me as we weave through the

crowd. She'd hate for me to see her sulk after her short-lived victory.

I straighten my suit jacket sleeves, stepping next to Alexius as we walk through the club. Our presence demands attention, and a sea of heads turn to stare at us. Those who aren't gawking are dancing in tight spaces. The scent of sweat, cologne, and sex cling to the smoke that drifts from the floor up to the air.

Mira is behind me. I know this because I can feel her eyes stabbing the back of my skull. Finally, we reach the stairs, and I stand to the side, letting her go first because there is no chance in hell anyone else is walking behind her only to gawk at her ass while she sways her hips up these steps.

Bad idea. Terrible idea. Because now *I'm* the motherfucker gawking at her ass. I'm biting my bottom lip the entire way up as she sways her hips hypnotically. The red fabric accentuates her curves, the smooth skin of her thighs glowing under the pulsing lights. And those calves—*Jesus*, I want them wrapped around my waist while I make her sing for me with slow, deep thrusts, feeling her virginity tear around my thick girth.

The things I'd do to her—*my God*.

We walk into the private lounge decked with black leather couches and gold-framed glass tables. The walls are a deep shade of sultry mulberry, the club music tearing through the glass barriers. Waitresses in black mini-dresses slink around, their hair tied in sleeked-back ponytails. Caelian is on them like a cat on a rat the second he walks through the entrance. I would probably be, too, if I weren't so damn invested in Mirabella.

"Thanks," I say to Alexius as the women grab some champagne.

"For what?"

"Don't be coy."

He snickers. "Did you really think I'd let them come to this club and not have them safely tucked away?"

I frown at him questioningly. "You arranged this?"

“Of course. I sent word to Nunzio, saying it’s a special occasion. And then I also suggested that tonight might be a good time to discuss a few things. You know—” he shrugs “—possible future endeavors.”

“What? You want to do business with the Ferreros? Are you insane?”

“Relax. Just because we’re discussing possible business benefits doesn’t mean any sort of commitment from us. Besides, staying close to your enemies is always a good idea.”

“I don’t like it.” I grab a glass of whiskey from a waitress’s tray as she strolls by. “Any kind of conversation with these fuckers has the potential to turn into a dildo right up our asses.”

“Let me worry about the Ferreros. You worry about keeping greedy hands off Mirabella.”

“Fuck me,” I mutter, slamming the whiskey back. At this rate, I’ll need a tank full of alcohol to get through this night without murdering someone...or slipping my dick inside her.

Mira is leaning against the private bar, the yellow lights creating a halo around her hourglass shape. I’ve never seen her this drenched in seduction, her eyes sparkling with mischief and excitement—a lethal combination for a man like me. I’d be a stupid fuck if I tried to convince myself that my desire for her isn’t growing to new heights. I’ve wanted her for the longest time, but it’s never been this debilitating. It’s like I’m an animal, and Mira is in fucking heat—a primal lust stronger than any other instinct. How do I fight this? How do I stay away from her when images of her naked body are on replay in my head? When I’ve had a taste of what it would be like to claim her?

I’m entranced as she empties her champagne flute and links her pinky with Leandra’s. “Let’s go dance.”

Alexius wraps his fingers possessively around Leandra’s elbow. “I don’t think so.”

“We’re just dancing,” Mira says. “It’s not like we’re stripping.”

“My wife is staying right here with me.”

“I just want to have a good time with my best friend on my birthday. Is that too much to ask?”

Alexius’ dark brows curve inward, and Leandra and I notice he’s about to lose his shit.

Leandra lets go of Mira’s pinky and slips in next to her husband. “Maybe later, Mira.”

“Oh, my God,” she exclaims. “How is it that I spent eighteen years in this family and only realize now that you’re all assholes?”

She’s stomping toward the door when I slide in behind her, wrapping my fingers around the back of her neck, squeezing just enough to make my intentions known. “You’re pissed at me. You’re hurting, and I get that.” I step up, pressing my chest against her back, and I feel her shudder. “But this new spoiled brat attitude of yours will only get you into trouble. So, just. Stop.”

She stands completely still, and I can see her chest rise and fall as I glance down over her shoulder.

“This isn’t me being a spoiled brat, Nicoli. This is me being a woman scorned.”

She leaves toxic energy behind as she walks off, out the door and down the stairs. Everything is spinning out of control—her, me, us, my resolve to stay away from her.

My heart races as I watch her step onto the dance floor, slipping past swaying bodies. The thought of any part of another man touching her—whether it’s his back, his shoulder, or his goddamn foot—is forcing venom through my system. It’s poisoning me from the inside, its toxicity cutting through the thin tether of my control.

I don’t know when it happened, but somehow, somewhere, my instinct to protect her morphed into a possession that’s stronger than my need to keep her from figuring out the truth.

I’m standing at the top of the stairs watching Mira like a hawk when Nunzio Ferrero decides to grace us with his

presence. “Nicoli Del Rossa.”

I’m not amused. “Nunzio.”

His gold chain glints as the colored lasers swirl around us. “I never thought I’d see the day the Del Rossa brothers would set foot in one of my clubs.”

“That makes two of us.”

A sly grin appears on his face. He gives me that Sicilian mob boss vibe—the kind women drop their panties for, and the kind men like me just want to plant lead in his chest for.

I gesture toward Alexius, standing inside the lounge with his arm snaked around his wife’s waist. “You should probably go speak to my brother. He’s the diplomat.”

“And you?”

I smirk. “I’m the one he sends when talking is no longer an option.”

“So, you’re the dog on a leash.” Nunzio’s eyes gleam with arrogance.

“And I’d love to show you why.” It’s a challenge, and he knows it.

My eyes fall on Mira dancing, and Nunzio follows my gaze.

“Ah. I can see why you’re so tense. Your wife is stunning. Sure to catch the eye of every man here.” His voice drips with innuendo, and it makes it impossible to react. I don’t even care about telling him she’s not my wife. All I care about is slitting his fucking throat.

I’m about to reach for the knife tucked away at my side when Alexius intervenes. “Nicoli, why don’t you go to the dance floor and check on Mira.”

He tramples me with a warning glare, and I clench my fists before turning away, knowing I’m about to start a war in this club if I don’t leave now.

Mira is dancing, her eyes closed and back arched, her head tipped back, showering in sensuality, moving in a trance-like

state. Her hips swing in the rhythm of the music, her breasts bounce with every move, and her body responds seductively to the beat, all provoking my urge to touch her. But instead of throwing myself at her, I watch her from a distance, entranced by her. The war inside me has never raged as it's doing now—a war between me wanting to protect her and to claim her.

Some fucker wearing a white shirt and a death warrant around his neck slips in behind her. A tornado of flames blasts through me, and I stop breathing. He better not fucking touch—*motherfucker! He touched her.* His hands settle on her hips, and my primal need to keep her from predators looking to touch what's mine...

Fuck! She's not mine. She's not mine. She's not. Mine.

Fuck this shit.

I'm shoving sweaty bodies out of my way until I reach her and grab her arms, dragging her off the dance floor.

"Nicoli, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

We reach the far end of the club, and I spin her around to face me as I pin her shoulders against the mirrored wall, my chest heaving. "Do you want to start a goddamn massacre?"

She sneers, trying to wrench out my grasp, her glare so angered it almost makes me flinch. "Who do you think you are? You don't own me."

"Says who?"

"Me! You had your chance, Nicoli, and you fucking blew it. So let go of me."

"No."

My fingers grip her harder, and I lean closer. Our lips are mere inches apart as my eyes bore into hers. "You're punishing me."

"You deserve it."

"Why? Because I fucked her instead of you?"

"Fuck you!" Her eyes are wild, and her red lips are pulled tight. But I don't move. Instead, I slide my fingers along her

chest and encircle the base of her neck. Her chest rises. She's trembling beneath my touch, her breaths coming out in shallow, uneven pants. Desire is seeping from her pores. I can feel it. Smell it. Fucking taste it.

Forcing my thigh between her legs, her lips part as I lean my forehead against hers, looking down at her delectable mouth. "Tell me, Hummingbird," I rasp. "How much will you hate me if I fuck you right here, right now?"

"You won't dare."

I jerk my knee deeper against her sex, her shoes barely touching the ground. "Try me."

"Why now? After all these years, why now?"

"Because it turns out, your hate turns me the fuck on."

My hands have her pinned in place as I take full advantage and press my lips forcefully against hers. As she groans, my heart thunders, and desire courses through me in angry waves. The faint smell of smoke mingles with her sweet scent, feeding my hunger into a frenzy. Holding her gaze, I pull back slightly before crashing our mouths together again with a ferocity that speaks of years of restraint finally being broken down.

Drawing away once more, we're both gasping for air while the heat radiates between us like an inferno ready to consume everything in its path. The primal craving burning inside me is undeniable, and I can no longer control it. I don't want to control it. Not anymore.

"Don't you dare kiss me again," she whimpers, out of breath.

"If I do, what are you going to do about it?"

"Scream."

"Promise?" I roll my hips, pressing my hard cock against her hip, and she bites her bottom lip. "I would kill to hear you scream for me, Hummingbird."

"I'm afraid you don't have what it takes to make me scream."

“Challenge accepted.”

Our lips crash together again as if nothing will ever keep them apart. The energy that hums around us is too potent to deny, our kiss a flurry of frenzied passion, tongues lapping, and teeth nipping. The music fuses with the powerful lust that sings between us, wrapping us up in a rhythm that’s no longer controlled but crazed. Our kiss isn’t anything like the one shared in her shower. That kiss was pain. This one...it’s lust. It’s desire. It’s unstoppable.

I lose myself in her, unable to control my need. And by the way she weaves her fingers in my hair, pulling me deeper into her, I know she’s lost in me, too. Nothing else matters as I taste her, feel her, and let the heat between us ignite.

I tear my lips from hers, then grip her cheeks with my fingers, her pretty mouth puckered and swollen. “Say it,” I demand hoarsely. “Tell me you hate me.”

“I hate you.”

Chapter Nineteen

MIRABELLA

I hate him. But I don't.

We shouldn't be doing this, and I shouldn't want this, but I'm so tired of fighting. Just once I want my thoughts to be silent and my heart to be still. All I want to hear is the swoosh of adrenaline and the heavy breaths Nicoli exhales against my throat.

I want him to touch me and never stop. I need him to kiss me and never let go. But I'm supposed to hate him. I'm supposed not to want him. He hurt me, but my body seems to have forgotten that. This is insanity. It's madness. But I've never been more alive than I am right now. His touch, the way he looks at me, his lips burning mine—it's fiery chaos and consuming me too fast.

I move rhythmically against him, grinding myself against his thick thigh lodged between my legs, panting heavily with desire.

“You're making a mess on my thigh, Hummingbird.”

“Just like I made a mess on Paula's face.”

He moans something harsh against my ear that makes me shudder, and I can't control the whimpers that escape me.

“I need to feel you, Hummingbird.” His voice is strained, as if he's holding back and it's causing him physical pain. “Fuck.”

I clutch his hair tighter between my fingers. “Fucking do it, Nicoli. Here. Now.”

“God, you’re killing me right now.” He flexes hard, his cock pressing against my hip, and I move my body from side to side, giving him just enough friction to drive him insane.

“You’re going to make me lose my mind,” he rasps, his lips tense as he tries to control himself.

“Then walk away.”

“I don’t see that happening.”

I pull his hair, yanking his hair back, and he hisses with a wicked grin. “Walking away has always been easy for you.”

His hand encloses my throat, and he squeezes hard, his mouth open as he brushes his lips up and down my cheek, breathing heavily. “You think staying away from you was easy?”

“It sure looked that way.”

“You only saw what I wanted you to see.”

“I know. That’s why you left your bedroom door open while you fucked Paula, remember?”

“I remember wanting to lick your pussy in the goddamn hallway.”

Desire drenches my panties, and he slides his other hand between us, palming my sex underneath my dress, causing me to lean my head back as the sensation rushes over me. “I remember wanting to slip a finger into you, feel your heat from the inside.”

“Nicoli,” I breathe, lifting my arms and settling them against the mirrored wall, his fingers teasing me through my panties.

“I remember going back to my room and making myself come all over my goddamn sheets.”

“God,” I moan as he finds my clit.

“And it wasn’t the first time, either.” He kisses my chin, then drags his tongue along my jaw, his finger increasing the rhythm between my legs, the exquisite pressure building inside me. “Every time I jerked off, it was you I imagined touching.

And every time I fucked another woman—” he pulls my panties to the side, sliding a finger into me, causing me to moan out loud “—it was your face I saw, Hummingbird. It was your body writhing against mine, your tits I sucked.” He palms my breast, his finger slipping and out of my pussy while his thumb presses harder on my clit. “It was your cunt I was buried in. It’s always been you, Mirabella. Always.”

The tether snaps, and control explodes into fragments of nothing as I come around his finger, his name escaping my lips with a long, shuddering gasp. My mind, my body, my thoughts are all consumed with a rapture I’ve never experienced before. It’s so intense I can’t stop shaking.

My hips move in desperate circles, wanting to feel every last drop of pleasure that gushes into his palm.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he rasps. “So fucking beautiful.”

Remnants of my orgasm linger, but I’m still hungry. I’m far from sated because I want him inside me. I want to feel his cock stretch me as he drives into me with hard, relentless thrusts, filling me until I can’t stop myself from screaming.

It’s insane, but I want him to hurt me. I want him to be rough and lose control with me.

“I want to fuck you, Hummingbird.”

“Then fuck me.”

His lips slam onto mine, kissing me so hard it hurts. His hands are all over me all at once, his hips thrusting and body moving—the beat of the music amplifying every touch, every kiss, every drunk thought as we writhe against each other.

“You deserve more than a quick fuck against a nightclub’s wall,” he murmurs between kisses. “Your first time can’t be like this.”

“Um, yeah, it’s not my first time.”

His body turns to stone, and he stops abruptly. “What did you say?”

My breathing is a rapid mess. “It’s not my first time.” I add an eyeroll for effect.

“It’s not...your first time?” His eyes are bright and furious as he levels me with a glare. “You’re not a virgin?”

I almost laugh at how taken aback he is. “No, Nicoli. I’m not. Why do you look so surprised?”

His jaw tics, his expression hard. “Who?”

“You don’t know him.”

With a growl and a hiss, he grabs my arm and starts dragging me toward the exit, shoving people out of the way, spilling their drinks, and almost knocking them over.

“Nicoli, stop.”

He doesn’t. He’s a raging hurricane ready to destroy anything in his path. And as we reach the side entrance, he yanks open the door, pulling me behind him, my heels barely touching the sidewalk as he storms toward his car. The air is cold, and a shiver ripples through my bones, faint drops of rain falling on my naked shoulders, my skin soaking it up.

“Nicoli, what are you—”

He pulls me close and presses my front against the side of his Maserati, the steel cold against my stomach. His hands claw at the hem of my dress, bunching it around my waist just as he forces my legs farther apart with his knee. He’s rough, out of control, his breaths fiery exhales of lust that singe my skin. Rain starts pouring down harder, the droplets cool against my heated skin, seeping through the fabric of my dress.

I raise my hips, inviting him to take me right here, right now, in the street where anyone can walk by and see us. But I don’t care. I don’t give a shit if a tour bus full of foreign old people stops across the road to watch. I’m too drunk on him, too invested, and too damn hungry for him.

He hooks a finger into my thong, tearing it off with such force the lace cuts my skin. But I don’t feel pain. All I feel is the throbbing ache of my empty sex, drenched and begging to be fucked and used by a man I’ve desired for so long. It feels like a dream, a vivid fantasy I’ve conjured up in the middle of the night. God, I hope I don’t wake up.

He reaches inside his pants, and I can't stop myself from moving my hips, pushing it outward when he drags the tip of his cock down the slit of my ass. "Nicoli, please fuck me." I'm desperate and don't care if my dignity lies in tatters next to my broken body once he's done. All I care about is the here and now.

His dick nudges at my entrance, my insides electrified with anticipation. "At least this won't hurt," he murmurs. "Much."

He plunges into me hard, and I cry out, raindrops lapping down my lips. Nicoli buries his face in the back of my neck, his hot breath coating my skin in fiery bursts. I reach for him over my shoulder, bracing myself for his onslaught, my hair clinging to my wet cheeks. He doesn't give my body time to adjust around him, rears back, and plunges back in deep, the pleasure so intense I can't take a breath. But it's exquisite, the feel of his thick girth and hard length inside me, and I'm already addicted. I want more. So much more.

His body pins me against the car as he thrusts faster and harder, each plunge more ferocious than the last. My moans reach a higher pitch every time he sinks into me, hitting against my core. His grunts are messy cries laced with pleasure, both of us possessed and consumed by a haze of lust and a desperation for release. It's as if years of pent-up desire finally exploded, and there's no stopping it. No controlling it. We're lost, and I don't want to be found. I want to stay here forever while Nicoli fucks me in the rain, claiming me and losing control.

"Faster," I demand, and he snakes an arm around my waist, pulling me hard against his body so he sinks in deeper.

"Come on my cock, baby girl," he demands with breathless gasps. "I want you all over me."

My whimpers and moans shoot up to the fucking stars, and now I'm moving, too, meeting his erratic thrusts as the pressure climbs, building until everything inside me erupts.

"Oh, God, Nicoli."

His hand grips my hair and pulls my head back. “I’m going to pump my cum so deep inside you, it’ll be like there’s been no one before me.”

“I’m...I’m going to come.”

He reaches around my neck and plants his palm over my mouth. My lips are agape and eyes closed as I throw my head back, coming so hard my legs tremble and body shakes. A rush of euphoria grips every muscle tight, my blood singing with pleasure.

His groans fill my ears, his hips moving in strong, tight jerks, his cock pulsing against my inner walls as he comes inside me. Time is frozen, and the world no longer turns. We’re both soaked, the rain pelting down, our hot breaths forming mist that disappears into the night.

“Fuck. What are you doing to me, Hummingbird?”

My heart constricts. “I love it when you call me that.”

“You’ll always be my hummingbird.” There’s a promise that rings in his words, and I soak it up, let it penetrate my chest so it engraves in my heart. “I need to know.”

“Know what?”

He pulls out of me, and I wince, instantly mourning the loss. But he slips his hand between my legs, dragging his fingers through my slit, then forces it into my mouth, spreading the taste of his cum mixed with mine on my tongue. I enclose my lips around his fingers, lapping and sucking every last drop of it. The two of us mixed together tastes like sin.

“A name,” he orders with a heavy breath along my ear.

“What?” I blurt while my body still shakes with tremors of pleasure.

“Who is it?” he bites out with a low tenor. “Who touched you?”

“Oh, my God. Are you serious?”

“Give me a fucking name, Mira.”

“Just one?” I didn’t know his eyebrows could go that high, and it was a dick move on my part, but anger has been the most emotion I’ve ever been able to get out of him. So, I’ll take it.

Angry fingers wrap around my throat. “Don’t fuck with me, Mirabella. Who is it?”

“You just fucked me against your car out in the damn street, and that’s the first thing you say to me? What the hell is wrong with you?” I try to push myself away, but Nicoli is a brick wall that makes it impossible.

“Rather, ask me what’s not wrong with me. The list is shorter.”

“Get your hands off me, Nicoli.”

“I need his fucking name.” He punches his fist into the roof of his car, and I no longer find his shock amusing. He’s angry. He’s furious, and he’s scaring me.

“Get off me!” I push him away and quickly yank my dress over my thighs. I’m flustered and out of breath when I turn to face him, his mouth a taunting sneer and the veins in his neck bulging with the strain of restraint he’s trying to hold on to.

My heart thumps violently. “I told you, you don’t know him.”

“I need a name.”

“Why?”

“So I can slit his throat.” Nothing in his expression says he’s not serious, a murderous rage flashing in his eyes.

“You’re an asshole.”

“That’s not a name, Mirabella.”

“No!” I slap my palm hard against his chest. “No! You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to be jealous.”

He steps back, wiping the back of his hand across his nose, fuming. “Who in this motherfucking city had the balls to touch you?”

“No one! And you made sure of that, didn’t you?”

“Because no one has the right to touch what’s—”

“Yours?” I snap. “Newsflash, I’m not yours. I’m not fucking yours. You don’t own me.”

“Believe me. I know that.”

“Then why are you acting this way?”

“Because if I can’t have you, no one can!” His voice slams against the asphalt, his words like metal with sharp edges.

“What did you expect? That I’d spend my life alone, waiting for the day you’d hopefully love me back while you fucked every woman in this entire goddamn city? You selfish asshole.”

He launches at me, towering over me with a threatening stance, eyes burning into mine. “You have no idea how fucking hard it is to stay away from you when all I want—all I’ve ever wanted was you.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I was protecting you.”

“From what?”

“Me!”

I search his face in confusion. “What are you saying?”

“That I love you, goddammit, Mira!”

My entire world comes to a screeching halt, and my heart explodes inside my chest. Neither of us moves. We don’t even breathe under the weight of his confession. That’s when I see it, a fleeting glimpse of vulnerability hidden behind the anger that burns in his gaze. It’s a sight I’ve never seen before. A softness I never knew he had.

“I fucking love you. I always have. But I can’t be with you Mira, and it is fucking eating me alive.”

I lean back against his car, afraid I might fall. “Why...why can’t you be with me?”

The mask he always wears so well slips back on, and I know the moment it does. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Mira—”

“You tell me you love me and always have, but you can’t be with me. And that it *doesn’t matter*?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Of course, it’s complicated. You’re a Del Rossa. Everything with you is complicated. I’ve been in this family long enough to know that there will always be secrets, and I’m okay with that. I’m okay with not knowing everything, Nicoli. But what I’m not okay with is you saying you love me but can’t be with me without giving me a reason. That’s bullshit.”

He pulls a tense hand through his hair, letting out an agonized groan, his dark hair clinging to his face, rivulets of water running down his cheeks. “This is all fucked up. I knew if I lost control with you, I’d fuck it all up. I always do.”

“You always do what?”

“Hurt you. No matter how hard I try to protect you, I always end up hurting you in the process.”

My throat tightens, and my heart knows it’s about to get plundered. “What are you saying?”

He looks away, unable to look me in the eye, when he softly speaks. “Maybe I’m not supposed to love you.”

“But you do.” I blink hard, trying to stop the onslaught of emotion threatening to pour out.

Suddenly, he’s in front of me again, his features etched with pain and despair. He grabs my face between his hands and presses his forehead against mine. His breathing is labored, his body shaking. “Please believe me when I say that everything I do, I do because I love you with every fucking fiber of my being.” He kisses me so tenderly it almost feels unreal. “But I can’t love you and protect you, Hummingbird. Believe me. I would if I could.”

Tears slip freely down my cheek as I try to nestle deeper into him, inhaling his scent and needing his warmth. None of this makes sense. I refuse to believe love would exist between two people if it's not written in the stars. But I promised myself that Nicoli Del Rossa will never hurt me again, and I refuse to let what happened between us tonight change that.

I lift my arm and place my hand against the skin of his neck, his forehead still resting on mine, and whisper, "Leave."

"Hummingbird, I'm sorry."

"Just...leave, Nicoli. Get the fuck away from me and leave me alone."

The weight in the air suffocates me, and neither one of us moves. The air is thick and heavy, crushing me inch by inch while we stand there in silence.

But finally, he nods solemnly, his touch against my skin fleeting as he steps back. He stares into my eyes for a few more seconds as if hesitating or trying to convince himself that walking away is him doing the right thing.

He turns away without another word and walks off toward the club. I'm left standing there with a million unanswered questions burning inside me like fire, watching him walk away from me like I'm some whore he just fucked. Like he does with all the others.

The adrenaline that's flooded my system almost the entire night is dissipating, churning and spinning into regret and sadness. If it weren't for the ache between my legs that reminded me of what Nicoli and I just did, I would surely think it was all a dream. A nightmare.

I turn toward his car and swipe at the tears, hating myself for crying over him again. It seems it's all I've been doing. Hurting and crying over a man who says he loves me yet can't be with me. I don't know what's worse...to love a man I know will never be mine because he doesn't love me back? Or to not be able to be with the man I love even though he loves me, too?

"Mirabella?"

I look up at a man walking toward me. I recognize him when he steps out of the shadows and into the dim light of the streetlamp, his white shirt soaking wet and clinging to his chest.

“Felix?” Oh, Jesus. I completely forgot I had called him earlier, asking him to join us. It was a stupid move. Stupid, stupid move. Too bad I only realize that now.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you inside the club, but it seems the real party is out here.” Felix grins wickedly as he settles in front of me, wiping his wet hair from his face.

“I was just on my way inside,” I say, licking rain from my lips.

“We can just stay out here,” he says, stepping closer, his brown eyes glinting under the light until he walks out of the yellow sphere and into the dark.

I glance around, seeing no one else. “Um...no. I...um, I think I’d like to go home now. So, I need to go find my friends. I’m sorry,” I say, squinting through the rain. “I know I invited you, but I...I really just want to go home.”

“I just got here.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m really sorry.” I clutch my arms tight and try to walk past him when he steps in and blocks my way.

“You know. Some would consider it rude to invite a guy who has made it clear he’s interested in you to your birthday party, and then you fuck another guy in the parking lot.”

My face flushes, warning prickling the back of my skull. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, come, now. You wouldn’t have let him fuck you out here in the open if you didn’t want to be watched.”

“Screw you,” I exclaim and attempt to walk away from him again. But this time he reaches out, straightening his arm in front of me.

“Felix, please. My friends are waiting for me,” I say in the calmest way I can muster.

“Word on the street is the Del Rossa brothers like to share.” With a sideways glance, his dark eyes show me that he has nothing but wicked intentions. “I’m sure he won’t mind, you know—” he sucks his bottom lip between his teeth “—if I blow my load in your cunt as well. I’m sure there’s more than enough space in that womb of yours for two men’s cum.”

A sickening surge of bile floods my stomach, my instincts screaming at me to run. So, I do. I try to run past him, but his hand snakes around my waist, forcing me against him as he picks me up.

“Let me go!” I shriek and start to thrash, scream, and kick, my heart a flurry of panic. I manage to loosen his hold, but as my feet hit the ground and I try to take the gap, he grips the back of my neck, and a searing pain shoots down my spine as he pulls me hard, forcing me down face-first onto the hood of Nicoli’s car.

“You can’t run from this.”

“No! Don’t fucking touch me!” I’m squirming violently, trying to reach back and scratch his arms, his hands, any piece of him I can find. But he grabs my hands and squeezes them so hard I cringe from the ache that spreads up my arms as he pins them behind my back.

“You see,” he snarls in a menacing voice, pressing his body hard against mine, leaving me gasping for air as he pins me against the car. “No one says no to me.” I can practically hear the cruel smile in his voice. “Unless you want it this way? You can scream if you like. Otherwise, you can just stand here and enjoy getting fucked again.”

“Please don’t.” My fear multiplies, and it’s choking me as a heavy panic crushes me, forcing air from my lungs.

“Don’t worry. I’ll fuck you so much better than he did.” He’s reaching into his pants, and I’m thrashing hysterically, my tears burning like acid and thoughts racing, yet I can’t seem to comprehend what the hell is happening. *This can’t be happening. Please, God.* I’m trying to fight and push him away, but he’s too strong, forcing my legs apart with a jerk, and I start to heave when his cock touches my thigh.

God, no. This isn't happening. It's not fucking happening!

“Felix, stop! Please stop.”

There's a sudden loud crack that slices through the air, deafening me. A gush of warm liquid splashes onto my back and neck, and something hard and heavy almost knocks my legs from under me as it drops with a thud by my feet.

I'm crying, sobbing, paralyzed by fear. My arms and legs are shaking, my spine trembling and skin ice cold as I slowly turn to the side, glancing down to see Felix on the ground. Blood oozes from his temple, seeping into the asphalt and pooling around my heels, and I don't know what the fuck it is I'm looking at.

I glance up and find Nicoli standing to my right, rage twisting his features, his body rigid as if his muscles had turned to steel. His fingers move with precision as he works the action on his gun and slides it back, ejecting the empty bullet casing. My stomach lurches upward. A sickening rush of nausea forces its way up my throat, and I jerk to the side, vomiting all over Felix's dead body.

My mind is a complete blank, every sound muffled by the ringing in my ears. It's like my mind short-circuits, and all I see are flashes of dark and light. It's all an incoherent mess, hazy and unfocused.

Strong arms wrap around me, and I'm too weak to fight. Too weak to scream. There's pain everywhere, but I don't know where it's coming from.

A familiar warmth penetrates the fog, slowly spreading all over my skin.

“I got you, Hummingbird. I got you.”

Chapter Twenty

NICOLI

Two black SUVs crush rock into the gravel as they speed up the driveway behind me. They tailed me from the club in case I got in trouble along the way. I had Maximo on speaker telling me which route to take home, detailing where he had security in place.

I've never driven this car so fast. The smell of burnt rubber fills my nose as I help Mira out of the back seat.

"I'm fine, Nicoli," she whispers as I pick her up and start carrying her inside.

"No, you're not."

"You don't have to carry me. I can walk."

"I don't care if you can run a fucking marathon."

I hear our fleet of bulletproof Hummers pull up outside, tires screeching as they stop short of ramming up the front entrance steps. The moment shit hit the fan at the club, Maximo had the Hummers there in a fucking flash, ditching the limousine and getting everyone out of there.

Maximo comes charging in, his face drawn. "Is she okay?" His worried gaze lands on her. "You okay, Mirabella?"

"I'm okay."

I don't stick around to enjoy a precious family reunion with everyone shooting up prayers of thanks. My only concern is this woman I'm carrying, and I need to take care of her.

I rush up the stairs, clutching Mira's shivering body tight, storming straight to my bedroom, slamming the door closed with my foot and darting to the bathroom. Carefully, I set her down, and I'm finally able to look at her, going over every inch of her to make sure she's okay. After I picked her up from the sidewalk outside the club, my only concern was getting her the hell away from there.

Her wet hair is stained with blood, splatters sticking to her shoulders, and I have no idea if it's hers or the fucker I left dead on the sidewalk. Her cheeks are soaked in tears, and she's shivering, her teeth clattering and waxy skin covered with goosebumps.

"We need to get you out of these wet clothes," I say and quickly turn on the shower so it can warm up.

She's sniffing as I ease the dress off her shoulders, careful not to hurt her. My heart drops to my stomach when I see scratch marks around her neck, and it's like her pain is mine. Her agony is mine. Everything she's feeling, I'm feeling, too.

I pull off my shoes and yank the fabric of my shirt, buttons flying and bouncing off the tiled floor like little spiders scurrying around our feet, and I guide Mira into the shower. She gasps as the warm water hits her cold skin but makes no move to pull away. I'm right behind her, watching the blood that sticks to her shoulders slowly run down her back in tears of red. The water turns a sickly pink, swirling around our feet and disappearing down the drain.

I place my hand on her back, and she flinches. It fucking breaks me to see her react that way to my touch. I don't ever want her to be afraid of me or cower from me in any way. I'd rather eat glass like our friend Ruben.

I start to lather soap into her hair, gently massaging her scalp as I get rid of the sticky blood. Soap scented with sandalwood fills the steam that envelops us, and a large part of me relishes knowing she'll smell like me now—another way of letting the world know she's mine.

I let her turn to face me, easing her under the pelting water and gliding my hands all over her body, getting rid of the suds.

Mira closes her eyes as fresh tears run down her face, and I tip her chin upward. “Look at me, Hummingbird.”

Forest green eyes glimmer under the warm light, the whites of her eyes red from crying. What I’m about to ask her is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to ask anyone, but I have to. I can’t take care of her if I don’t know.

“Did he...” The words are like barbed wire slicing up my chest. “Was I too late?”

She shakes her head, pressing her lips tight as more tears fall. “No.”

“Jesus. Thank God.” I pull her close, circling my arms around her naked shoulders and pressing her against me so tight I’m probably hurting her. But I can’t stop myself. I need her closer than close.

When she leans her head against my chest, wrapping her arms around my middle, I suck in a breath. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m sorry for letting you think I don’t love you. Sorry I pushed you away, that I made you feel less than what you’re worth to me.” Her quiet sobs pierce my heart like a thousand daggers, and I swallow hard. “I’m sorry for what happened with Paula. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I love you back in the shower.” I close my eyes, allowing every emotion to finally pour out of me. “And I’m so fucking sorry I left you alone outside that club, Hummingbird. I shouldn’t have walked away from you. I shouldn’t have ever walked away from you.”

Soft sobs turn into pained whimpers, and all I can do is hold her. There are no words that can right the wrongs I’ve done. There aren’t enough apologies in the world that can justify her ever forgiving me. I won’t dare to ask it of her.

“You killed him,” she murmurs against my chest.

“Baby, I’ll kill a thousand men and tear out their hearts for you.”

“If you didn’t show up when you did...”

“Shh.” I cup the back of her head, pressing her harder against me. “Don’t go there, okay?”

“I felt him, Nicoli. He was seconds away from raping me.”

I grind my teeth, and the flames of hell light up in my gut as I take her face between my palms, forcing her to look at me. “It’ll be a cold day in hell if I ever let another man touch you again, you understand? No one will come near you, not while I’m around.”

A knock on the bathroom door makes me pause. “Nicoli?” Leandra’s voice echoes through the foggy air. “Alexius wants to talk to you.”

“Of course he does.”

“Is she...is she okay?”

“I’m fine,” Mira replies and slips past me as she steps out, grabbing a towel.

“Oh, thank God.” Leandra exhales a sigh of relief and wraps her arms around Mira in an embrace. “Thank God you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.”

Leandra’s still hugging her when she looks up at me, silently conveying that this shit is far from over. “Your brother needs to see you.”

“He can wait.”

“No,” she replies sternly. “Go see your brother. I’ll stay and take care of her.”

I don’t want to leave her. I don’t want to leave her ever again. If I can have my way, she’d be fused to me for eternity. But, unfortunately, that’s not possible, and neither is avoiding Alexius.

I grab a towel and roughly dry my face and hair. Then, without thinking, I pull Mira close and press my lips against her temple, wishing there was a way I could make her see into my heart. Give her a glimpse of what she’s worth to me. “I’ll be back soon,” I promise her before heading out.

I throw on the first pair of sweatpants I can find and pull a t-shirt over my head, slip on some shoes and hastily rush out

of the room, down the stairs. Maximo is waiting for me outside the Dark Sovereign chamber, and he looks fucking miserable.

“Everyone here?” I ask, and he nods.

“Good,” I mutter. “Let’s get this over with.”

Maximo steps in front of me and puts his hand on my chest. His jaw is anchored in a clench, and his brows furrow. For a moment, I’m sure he’s about to kick my ass.

“Thank you,” is all he says. It’s all he needs to say. And I know that whatever is about to go down, whatever the repercussions, he has my back because we both care about her. She’s all he has left in this world, and to me, she *is* the fucking world.

Alexius is pacing like a caged animal when I walk in, the stifling air thick with a smoky haze from Caelian’s cigar.

Isaia is pouring three glasses of bourbon, but when he catches sight of me, he grabs another glass. The room is so tense you can almost hear a pin drop as Alexius turns to face me. “How is she?”

“She’s okay.”

“He didn’t—”

“No. No, he didn’t.” I don’t give him a chance to finish that sentence because I don’t want to hear the goddamn words come out of anyone’s mouth.

I slam back my glass of bourbon in one gulp and let the burning liquid scorch my throat. “How bad is it?”

Alexius scoffs. “It’s bad. Real fucking bad.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Sarcasm is webbed around my words. I don’t give a damn about how bad it is because if I hadn’t gotten to her in time, it would have been far worse.

“The guy you killed was Felix Salvatore.”

“That name means nothing to me.”

“It’s Nunzio’s cousin, Nicoli.”

“That’s funny,” I sneer contemptuously, shaking my head. “You say that as if I’m supposed to care.”

“You *killed* Nunzio Ferrero’s cousin.”

“I don’t give a shit if it’s the president’s motherfucking grandson.”

Alexius rubs the back of his neck, then places his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “You started a war tonight, Nicoli.”

“That motherfucker started a war the moment he laid a hand on her.”

“I know,” he mutters. “Believe me. I would have done the same if it was my wife.”

“Then why does this feel like I’m standing in front of a goddamn jury right now?”

“You’re not,” Caelian says, snuffing out his cigar in the dollar sign ashtray. “We all would have done the same. I want to crack his skull open so badly that I’d let him come back to life just to do it. And I’m pretty sure Maximo here would do far worse if—” He stands and rounds the table. “But we all know the shit’s already hit the fan. The Ferreros want our business. They want in on our trade, and the perfect way for them to accomplish that is by declaring war against us and garnering support from other families. All they needed was a reason, and now they have it.”

“They don’t have shit.” I ball my hands in fists. “This fucker had his filthy goddamn hands all over her. What was I supposed to do? Ask him nicely not to fucking rape her? And then buy him a motherfucking beer afterward? Jesus.”

“Caelian is right,” Alexius starts as he sits at the table. “They’ve been waiting for a reason to challenge us, and now they have it. They won’t give a shit how justified your actions were. They will not let this go.”

“And what about them killing Maximo and Mira’s parents? We let that go.”

“That was Dad’s decision, not ours. He had his reasons.”

“Bullshit!” I slam my fist into the table with such force it shakes beneath my rage. “What reason could he possibly have had?”

“He was protecting them,” Alexius exclaims. “Dad was protecting Maximo and Mira. He knew starting a war would only endanger their lives even more, and keeping them safe was more important than vengeance. You, of all people, should understand the need to keep loved ones safe, Nicoli.”

“Yeah, well, maybe if he did us all a favor and killed those fuckers, we wouldn’t be in this mess right now.”

“Nothing can be done about that now,” Alexius snaps. “What matters now is how we move forward. We need a plan, and we need to work fast before Nunzio even thinks about challenging our power.”

“That’s easy. We kill them,” I say coldly. “One by one, we slit their fucking throats and make the world a better place without those motherfuckers.”

Alexius’ phone rings, and silence drops in the room like a bomb. He takes his phone out of his pocket and gives Maximo and me a knowing glance before slipping out of the room.

My jaw hits the fucking floor. “Is he serious?” I look at Maximo with disbelief. “Is he seriously taking that call in private?”

“Relax.” Isaia shoves another glass of bourbon in my hands. “Take a goddamn breath, and let’s wait until he returns. Alexius knows what he’s doing.”

“Of course,” I snort. “Just like he knew what he was doing when he agreed to go to that fucking club in the first place. If he had just listened to me, none of this would have happened.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it now,” Caelian growls through gritted teeth, shooting me an icy warning glance. “It is what it is, and it can’t be undone. Now we need to deal with it.” He whips around to face Maximo. “I’m assuming you’ve tightened security around here?”

“You know it.”

“Good. No one sets foot off this estate without a motherfucking army truck. Especially not the women.”

“That’s one thing we can agree on,” I say, gulping down more bourbon. “And what is taking Alexius so fucking long?” I swing around and see my twin brother standing by the door, phone in hand. I lift my brow and spread my arms. “And?”

“That was Nunzio.”

“No shit.”

“He, uh...” He seems confused. “He called to, um... apologize.”

“What?”

“Yeah.” Alexius walks in and drops his phone on the table. “He expressed his deep regret over his cousin’s actions.”

“Oh.” I frown. “Is it weird that I find that confusing? And how does he know what exactly his cousin did?”

“They got it all on security video footage.”

“Okay, well,” I say slowly, “that’s great, then. Crisis averted.”

“There’s one little hiccup.”

I roll my eyes. “I knew it wouldn’t be that fucking easy.”

“No man shall ever lay a hand on or bring harm to the wife of another.” Alexius starts reciting one of the cardinal laws. “Such an act warrants irreversible consequences, including death, without the risk of retaliation from any other members of the organization.”

I clap my hands. “You know your laws well, brother. Congratu-fucking-lations. But I fail to see how that has anything to do with Nunzio’s apology.”

Alexius’ eyes find mine, and my twin telepathy instantly goes apeshit, warning me that whatever comes out of his mouth next will fucking floor me.

“Nunzio thinks Mirabella is your wife.”

I’m frozen to the spot and confused as fuck. “What?”

“Yeah. That’s why he just spent five minutes assuring me that no member of his family will retaliate over Felix’s death.”

“Why would he think...Oh shit,” I mutter, remembering the conversation Nunzio and I had. “He referred to her as my wife earlier at the club, but I didn’t correct him because I was too busy mentally stopping myself from pulling his liver out of his ass.”

“Well, that just proves that you keeping your mouth shut sometimes has its uses.”

“Okay.” Caelian holds up his hand, staring pensively in front of him. “I’d hate to state the obvious here, but Mirabella is, in fact, *not* his wife.”

“We’re all aware,” Alexius says, deadpan.

“And you didn’t correct him during your phone conversation with him?”

“I did not.”

“So, you just handed him a nuclear fucking weapon because by this time tomorrow, Nunzio will know you lied to him.” He falls back in his chair, throwing his arms in the air. “That’s great. If we weren’t fucked ten minutes ago, we sure as shit are fucked now.”

“No, we’re not,” Alexius says, then turns to face me. “Because Nicoli is going to marry Mirabella. Tonight.”

Chapter Twenty-One

MIRABELLA

Every girl wants a fairy tale wedding. A white dress, beautiful flowers, hundreds of guests, champagne towers, and a four-tier cake. Everything will be perfect, from the red carpet rolled down the aisle between the church pews to the delicate sunlight shining through the colored glass of a cathedral rich with history. The day would be filled with moments that become memories that would last a lifetime.

It's a day I've dreamt about my entire life.

And now here I am, living the exact opposite. I'm not wearing a white wedding gown. In fact, I'm not wearing a dress at all. There are no flowers except the pink potted orchid on the coffee table. There are no champagne towers, just half an empty bottle of bourbon and dirty glasses. The living room is not a church, and there's no sunlight shining through the clear windows because it's twenty minutes to midnight.

It's all wrong and distorted. There's only one thing about this that comes close to the dream, and that's Nicoli standing next to me. The only difference is he looks indignant and not at all like a man in love. Same goes for me. I'm not the blushing bride I always thought I'd be. I'm scared. Uncertain. Insecure. And I'm still reeling from almost getting raped in a parking lot. Yet here I am...about to marry the man I've loved virtually my entire life, and we're both fucking miserable.

Tears burn the back of my eyes while I listen to the priest recite scripture about how sacred marriage is. The Dark Sovereign might have this priest on their payroll, but he insisted that the marriage ceremony take place, or he won't put

his signature on the backdated wedding certificate. It's like getting God's stamp of approval on committing a felony. I guess that makes it better, then. *Not.*

"Nicoli Del Rossa, do you take Mirabella Tirelli to be your wife? Do you promise to be faithful to her in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love her and to honor her all the days of your life?"

My insides coil tight.

"I do." There wasn't a single second's hesitation, and one would find it comforting if it didn't sound like he was accepting a business proposal.

The priest turns to me, and my stomach turns.

"Mirabella Tirelli, do you take Nicoli Del Rossa to be your husband? Do you promise to be faithful to him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love him and to honor him all the days of your life?"

A giant lump in my throat comes out of nowhere, and I try to swallow it. I glance down at my ankle-high boots and black tights, the sight making this moment even more depressing.

I wipe away a tear and clench my jaw, trying to keep my shit together so we can just get this over with.

Straightening my shoulders, I lift my chin and look the priest in the eye. "I do."

The priest nods. "What God joins together, let no one put asunder."

I almost scoff at his choice of a blessing.

"Do we have the rings?"

An awkward silence settles, and I can practically hear everyone cringing around us.

Nicoli clears his throat. "I don't have a ring, exactly." He reaches into his pocket and reveals the white ribbon.

"Is that—" I place my hand on my chest "—what I think it is?"

He nods, the slightest hint of a smile curling at the edges of his lips.

My heart leaps inside my chest at one of the few things I do remember of my childhood. The sunny Sunday afternoon. The shade of the maple tree. Nicoli tossing stones into the grass. And the promise I tied with that ribbon around his finger.

His eyes find mine, and for a second, all of this doesn't feel like a disaster. Not while he looks at me as if I'm the only person in the room while holding such a big part of our bond.

"I, um..." I glance around. "I don't have anything we can use for you. Oh, wait." I reach back and slide the black hairband from my ponytail. "Will this work?"

Nicoli smiles. "It's perfect."

"Well, this is definitely unique," the priest says, and Nicoli smirks with a devilish grin.

"Father, everything about this is unique."

As the priest finishes his blessing, Nicoli carefully takes the ribbon and loops it around my ring finger, securing it with a crooked bow. "With this ring, I seal my promise to be your faithful and loving husband, as God is my witness."

His hand lingers on mine as he stares at the white silk—a piece of my childhood that has now become a token of our bond. I feel a warmth spreading through me at his touch.

"It's perfect," he murmurs. "Just like you." How he looks at me leaves my knees weak and my heart pounding in my chest. I have no idea how he did it, but somehow Nicoli has managed to make a tiny part of this charade okay, especially when the feel of his hand on mine is electric.

I look up at Nicoli, my heart beating a little faster. His dark eyes are full of intensity, and for a moment, I feel like we're the only two people in the world. The priest clears his throat, and I remember that I'm supposed to do my part now, too.

My hand shakes as I take the thin and flimsy hairband, knitting it around his finger twice. "With this ring, I seal my

promise to be your faithful and loving wife, as God is my witness.” A single tear drips down my cheek. Every word I just said feels real. True. As if poured out of my heart and into the open space between us. And I can’t look at him because I don’t want to see the lie.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Heat rushes up my neck, and I awkwardly glance at the priest. “There’s no need for us—”

Nicoli grabs my cheeks in his palms, pulls me close, and kisses me without warning. I’m frozen, only to be warmed by his lips a second later. It’s not just any kiss, this sizzling connection of his mouth on mine. It’s passionate, fierce, and dizzying—every cell in my body alive with electricity. It’s words, declarations, and promises all rolled up into a single kiss that takes my breath away. My heart swells. There’s something about this moment that’s so real, and I allow myself to get carried away by it. My blood sings, and my soul hums to a tune that feels a lot like love, and I force myself not to forget what this truly is—a show and a sham—but I fail miserably. I fail because deep down there’s a flickering light of truth, the bright beam of the possibility that this kiss means so much more than just a solution to a threatening war.

Our lips part, but Nicoli doesn’t move away. He slides one hand to the back of my neck, cradling it gently, bowing his head to brush his lips against my ear. “You kept your promise, Hummingbird,” he whispers, and for a moment, I’m confused, my thumb toying with the ribbon around my finger. But then I remember the words I spoke that one sunny afternoon.

“I promise that if I haven’t found my prince by my twenty-second birthday, I will be your princess. And you know I always keep my promises.”

Overwhelmed by emotion, I suck in a breath, feeling the warmth of my tears soak through my cheeks. It’s five minutes to midnight. It’s still my birthday—my *twenty-second* birthday, just like I had promised.

Nicoli places a kiss just below my earlobe. “Serendipity... or fate?”

A shiver travels down my spine, my chest open and bleeding with so many emotions it’s flooding my system and consuming my soul.

It’s only when Caelian starts whistling that we’re both pulled back to the living room filled with the weight of a threat that looms over us all as a family.

Alexius walks up and slips a thick roll of money into the priest’s hands, thanking him and showing him out. My mind is hazy, my thoughts a jumbled mess as reality comes to destroy the moment that had me wrapped up in a fantasy I wish with all my heart were true.

“Everything’s been arranged,” Alexius says as he walks back in. “The marriage certificate will be backdated. Your marriage status will be updated on all systems within the next hour, and a new identity document showing Mira’s name change will be delivered in forty-eight hours.”

I stiffen, and I think Nicoli senses it.

“We should discuss these matters in private,” he says to Alexius, and they walk to the side of the room.

A name change didn’t even cross my mind when this bomb got dropped on me. Mirabella Del Rossa. It was a game I often played as a teenager, where I would use a curtain or a towel as a veil, stare at myself in the mirror and introduce myself to make-belief guests at my wedding as Mirabella Del Rossa.

Maximo steps in beside me. “Are you okay?”

“That’s a stupid question.”

“I know, but I’m asking it anyway.”

I look up at him. “Are you sure this will work?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Because the only reason I agreed to do this is because you said this is the best solution. And I trust you.”

He shifts from one leg to the other. “I don’t like this any more than you do, Mira. But this is the only way to prevent a war between us and the Ferreros.”

“I just don’t understand how being married to Nicoli would make it all okay. Almost getting raped isn’t okay, whether I’m married or not.”

“It’s not that simple, Mira.”

“It should be.”

“Things work differently in our world.”

“Then I don’t want to be a part of this world.”

Maximo sighs. “You already are. And after tonight, you always will be.”

“What? Oh, no. There’s no forever here, Maximo. As soon as all this is over, Nicoli and I will get a divorce and pretend like none of this ever happened.”

“Like fuck we will.”

I swirl around and find Nicoli standing two feet away, his eyes so intense I can feel the smoldering heat melt my flesh and penetrate my bones.

“None of this is real, Nicoli,” I say, my voice sounding far less confident than it should.

Nicoli grabs my hand, and I’m forced to follow him out of the living room, where he pins me between the wall and his body. “We’re not getting a divorce,” he says simply as if another option just doesn’t exist.

“This isn’t real,” I bite out under my breath. “This is nothing but a sham, and the only reason we got married is because we have no other choice.”

He sucks his bottom lip into his mouth. “I’m going to repeat what I just said. We’re not getting a divorce.”

“For as long as there’s a threat, yes.”

“You’re not hearing me,” he grits out. “We just got married and said our vows before God.”

“By a priest who got paid a roll of cash not even thirty seconds after he announced us as husband and wife.”

“Has tonight taught you nothing?”

“Yeah, it did. It taught me that you do a really fucking good job at walking away from me, leaving me alone outside of that goddamn club where I almost got raped.” I regret saying it the moment the words leave my mouth.

He winces as if I had just lodged a dagger in his back. “You think I don’t know that?”

“Nicoli, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“You think I don’t hate myself for leaving you out there alone? That I’m not aware of how I failed you...*again?*” He spits out the last word as if it’s acid on his tongue. “I was angry. I walked away. And you got hurt. I’ll never forgive myself for that. It’s fucking ironic, really, how I always fail at the one thing God has placed me on this fucking Earth to do, and that’s to protect you. I stayed away from you, fought my feelings for you every goddamn day, suffered in silence because I couldn’t be with the only woman I’ve ever loved, the woman who carried my motherfucking heart in the palm of her hand without knowing it. And I still failed.” He brings his face inches from mine, the blue depths of his irises threatening to drown me. “So tonight, I’ve come to the conclusion that if protecting you is *this* impossible to do apart, then I’ll make sure to do it right with us...together.”

“What are you saying?”

He leans closer, his breath like a ghost’s whisper against the shell of my ear. “You are my wife now, Hummingbird. ‘Til death do us part.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

MIRABELLA

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Moving your stuff into my bedroom.” Nicoli’s staring at my dresser, frowning. “I never understood why you have so much shit on this thing.”

“How do you know how much shit I have on my dresser? Have you been in my room?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

He snatches my hairbrush and the little see-through holder with all my hairbands, dropping them into a box. “It would be great if you could grab a few things and help.”

“I’m not helping you because I’m not moving into your bedroom.”

“We’re married.”

“Make-believe. Why can’t an intelligent man like yourself grasp that concept?”

“Why is it that a beautiful woman like yourself needs all this shit?” He waves his arm over all the perfume bottles and makeup.

I cross my arms and stare at him. “Get out of my room.”

“This isn’t your room.” He stalks toward my walk-in closet and swings open the doors. “Jesus Christ. What the fuck is this?” He steps inside, his head moving from side to side as

he looks around. “How is your wardrobe bigger than an H&M store?”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m serious. Are you hiding a fucking Kardashian in here?”

“Okay, that’s it.” I grab his elbow. “Get out. Now.”

“You have an entire wall of shoes. Shoes, Hummingbird.” He glances down at me without budging. “It’s a goddamn shoe shrine.”

“Get. Out.”

I snake an arm around his waist and push him toward my bedroom door, and he quickly grabs the box from my dresser before I give him a final shove out the door. “Now, please leave me alone.”

I’m about to slam the door in his face when I notice him studying the frame hinges.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to see what size screwdriver I need to take this fucking door down.”

“Nicoli!”

“I’m serious, Mira.” Intense eyes gleam into mine as he drops the box and slams his palm against the door. “It’s been a week. We’re not living in two separate bedrooms. We won’t be *that* couple.”

“We aren’t even a fucking couple.”

“I have a document that says otherwise.”

“An illegal document, you mean?”

His lips pull down at the edges. “It has a priest’s signature on it.”

“The priest you paid?”

“He’s still a man of God. Speaking of, I’m still waiting for a name.”

“What name?”

He slants his head to the side, staring straight at me as if I just asked the world’s dumbest question.

And then I remember. “Are you serious right now?”

“Dead.”

“I’ll give you his name if you can tell me the name of every girl you’ve slept with.”

“That’s easy. None.”

“Oh, I highly doubt that.”

“It’s true. I haven’t slept with anyone. I usually fuck them and leave. There’s no sleeping involved.”

I blink. “You’re an asshole.”

“Naaaaaame.” His lips vibrate as he presses them together.

“Fine.” I cross my arms and slant my hip. “Tommaso.”

“Tommaso?” He recoils. “What kind of pussy name is that?”

“The kind with a real big, thick, loooong—”

“Finish that sentence, and I swear to God—”

“Dick.”

Abruptly, he grabs my waist, spins me around so fast I’m not sure which way is up, and slams the door shut, pinning me against it. Heat emanates from him, the size of his body creating an invisible wall as he towers over me, caging me with his muscular arms. “You still need to learn not to fuck with me.”

“And you need to accept that I’m not just going to roll over and play the part of a submissive wife.”

“That’s too bad.” He strokes his finger along my jaw. “You would look exquisite on your knees.” A sultry tenor in his voice wakes my insides with a flutter. “And where, exactly, is our friend Tommaso from?” he continues.

“I told you he’s not from around here.”

“Then where?”

“I don’t know.”

Lines of confusion form on his forehead. “How do you not know?”

“Because it happened the summer after high school when I was in Tuscany.”

“Tuscany?”

“Yes. And I think they were on vacation, too, so I don’t know—”

“They? They!” He brings his fist to his mouth, biting hard, and I have to admit I’m suddenly finding his jealousy and lack of restraint real amusing. I should roll with this.

“Yes. They. Him *and* his girlfriend.” I smirk wickedly. “You didn’t think Paula was the first girl whose face I sat on, did you?”

A low growl echoes from his throat as he leans his head down, the muscles in his shoulders straining against the white fabric of his shirt. “Woman, I swear to God my death certificate will have your name listed as cause of death.”

“There are worse ways to go.”

He snorts, and our gazes fuse together, electricity sizzling and crackling, our connection growing stronger with every second. Everything fades to the background, even the bickering, replaced with a flammable longing that licks my skin with fiery strokes.

Nicoli inches closer, his lips less than a breath from mine, and I’m overwhelmed with a need for him to kiss me. *Please kiss me.*

“You know what we have is more than just an arrangement,” he rasps.

“It’s definitely not enough to warrant marital bliss.”

“Yet,” he growls in a low, gravelly voice that sends a sudden wave of desire between my thighs. His scent is

intoxicating as it fills the air, and I breathe it in, warm notes of amber and pepper with a hint of leather.

I gasp when his hands grip my waist like shackles, jerking my lower body closer to him while my shoulders remain planted on the door. He's planting peppered kisses on my collarbone, slowly driving me to madness. Shivers ripple through my insides when he slides a hand up under the hem of my shirt, his fingers teasing along my stomach in a straight trail up to my breast, but stops just below the swell.

"This has been years in the making, Hummingbird. I was just dumb enough to think I could fight it."

He drags a single finger up my breast, touching my nipple with nothing more than his fingertip. I try to stifle a groan but fail miserably.

"One bedroom," he says, his voice husky with desire. "We've wasted enough time apart."

"You mean *you've* wasted enough time," I challenge with a shaky voice.

"I'll take responsibility, but only this once," he teases, brushing his lips up my jaw, breathing hard and spreading goosebumps across my skin. He grazes my earlobe with a featherlight kiss, his finger drawing lazy, barely-touching circles against the very tip of my nipple. "So," he drawls, "let's make it official and be a fucking couple."

"Nicoli..."

My protest dies when he grinds his hard cock against me, lighting my body with a thousand sensations. "Say yes," he demands.

"I don't—"

He cups my breast, squeezing hard, and the sound of his heavy inhale causes me to lean my head back, shivering with anticipation.

"Say yes," he repeats, the volume of his voice climbing with urgency.

I shudder against him and can't stop myself from rolling my hips against him. I'm dizzy with desire, breathless with a need much stronger than my resistance.

“We can't—”

Nicoli jerks up my shirt, and warm lips are on my breast, sucking my nipple into his mouth, inhaling sharply through his nose as if he's tasting euphoria for the first time. A loud moan escapes me, and I arch my back off the wall, pressing my body harder against his. Every touch, every flick of his tongue, the warmth of his mouth, is like a slow stroke between my legs without him even touching me there. My core is hot and drenched, and I don't have to touch my clit to know it's swollen.

Cold air prickles my wet nipple when Nicoli inches back, the tip of his tongue flicking the pebbled nub before swirling around it. He's slowly driving me insane, soaking my panties with nothing more than his mouth on my breast.

His tongue is gone, and I'm panting with a throbbing need that has my body all twisted up. “Say. It.”

“Yes,” I whisper, barely audible.

He lifts his head and peers up at me with a mischievous grin on his face. His blue eyes sparkle with satisfaction. He knows exactly what he's doing to me. “Say it again,” he says between heavy breaths that fan the space around us in heated need.

“Yes.” My voice crescendos this time, an acceptance of a fate I can no longer control. But one thing I've learned since everything around us started to unravel is that Nicoli loves the game. He thrives on the excitement of it. And so do I.

I crash my lips on his, and our tongues collide. My fingers are weaved through his hair, and I wrap a leg around him to bring him even closer. He hooks his arm around my knee, and I'm shamelessly grinding against his hard length pressed against me.

Our breaths are hot gasps of passionate moans, and I wait for him to slip his fingers into the waistband of my tights

before I inch back and break the kiss, and he leans his forehead down against mine. "I'll move into your bedroom," I say with panting breaths. "On one condition."

"Whose heart do I need to cut out and place by your feet?" There's a smirk on his face, but something tells me he's not kidding.

I reach down between us, slip my hand inside his pants, and wrap my palm around his hard length, squeezing with just enough pressure.

"Jesus, fuck," he curses under his breath. "Name it, Hummingbird, and it's yours."

Pre-cum beads on his cock, and I ease my thumb over it, spreading it around the velvet tip. Letting out a wild growl, he flexes deeper into my palm, slamming his fist into the wall next to me. "What the fuck do you want?"

I lean my head to the side. "I want you to take me to Myth."

Nicoli goes rigid, and I'm pretty sure he just stopped breathing. "Abso-fucking-lutely not."

I tear my hand from his cock and out of his pants, lowering my leg from around his waist and pushing my palm against his chest, forcing him back. "Then I'm staying right here in my own bedroom."

Nicoli stares at me for a moment, looking like I just dropped a bucket of ice all over him. "You're kidding."

"Try me."

He places his hands on his waist. His sleeves are rolled up mid-arm, his veins bulging beneath his tanned skin. "Why would you want to go Myth?"

"Because I've been watching you speed out the driveway at midnight going to Myth for years. I've heard the rumors and the hushed conversations between you and your brothers, and I want to see it for myself."

"It's a sex club," he says.

“I know that.” I tug my shirt down, covering myself up.
“And that’s why I want to go.”

“To a sex club?”

“Yes.”

“A sex club?”

I slant a brow. “Are you having a seizure?”

He licks his lips, and a slow smile creeps up his face.
“You’re fucking with me, aren’t you?”

I cross my arms, leveling him with a stare that tells him I’m, in fact, not fucking with him.

He swipes at his nose with his thumb, scoffing as he turns away from me, only to face me again a second later. “You’re serious.”

I let my arms fall to my sides. “Do I not look serious?”

He comes in close and cups the back of my neck, locking eyes with me for a long moment before he speaks. “What do you want from Myth? And don’t say sex because I’ll burn that fucking place to the ground if you do.”

I purse my lips, squaring my gaze into his. “I want sex.”

His eyes narrow into slits, his fingers tightening on the back of my neck, and I can practically feel his stare dissecting my brain. He licks his lips then lets go of me, taking two long strides back with what looks like a mask of new resolve on his gorgeous face.

I study him, not looking away for a second as the silence pulses with thick heat between us.

Nicoli lifts a hand and points a finger at me as if he’s on the verge of saying something, but then lowers his arm and slowly walks toward the door, picking up the box with some of my things he had dropped earlier.

He turns with the box in hand and walks back into my room, abruptly dropping the box on my bed before turning to face him. “Enjoy your room.”

“Where are you going?”

“Tuscany.”

“What?”

“Tommaso is in desperate need of disembowelment.”

I roll my eyes at him. “You’re being overdramatic and irrational.”

He stops at the door and turns to face me, his expression hard lines and sharp edges. “The last guy brought the wrong man into our club, and I made him eat glass before I severed his jugular. Now imagine what I’d do to a man who had his dick all up in your cunt?”

“You’re insane.”

“Oh, you have no idea, Hummingbird. No fucking idea.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“So, it turns out that Felix was also the guy who tried to recruit our girls.” Maximo takes his seat by the table.

“Aldo Costa?” I ask.

“Yup. We managed to identify him by the dollar sign tattoo on his neck.”

I smirk. “So, I killed two birds with one bullet. A thief and a rapist. Look at me go.”

Alexius glowers at me, unamused and clearly wearing his no-time-for-bullshit suit today. “You and Mira need to start making appearances.”

“I know.” I place my fists on the table, turning my attention to Maximo. “Are you sure you’re the one with the balls between the two of you? Because your sister has a nut sack of steel.”

Maximo laughs. “Can I just say that it thrills the shit out of me to see her make your life so damn uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable, my friend, is the understatement of the century.”

Alexius snorts. “Welcome to married life, brother.”

I scoff. “At least you’re having sex, multiple times a day, even. Me? All I’m getting is a good daily case of blue balls.”

Maximo clears his throat, and I glance at him, his face red and jaw set.

“Sorry,” I say, internally cringing. “It’s gonna take some time getting used to being married to your sister, wanting to fuck her brains out, and *not* saying it out loud when you’re in the room.”

“Moving on.” Alexius shifts in his seat, placing his hands on the table. “Nunzio is searching high and low to find something that will help him out of this hole his cousin has put him in. The last thing that man wants is to be in our debt over what Felix tried to do to Nicoli’s wife.”

“And how do we know this?” Isaia asks, and both Alexius and I shoot him a look as if he has just turned into the dumbest fuck alive.

“You know,” I start, “sometimes, it’s easy to forget you’ve only been sitting here at this table for a year. But then you go and say stupid shit like that.”

“I’m serious.” He shrugs. “Why wouldn’t he simply accept that his cousin fucked up by trying to rape Nicoli’s wife and just move on?”

“Because it’s not that simple. I know I wouldn’t,” Alexius says in an even tone. “If I wanted to get my dick wet in a trade that I know will make me millions and then some, plus guarantee me friends in high places, I would do whatever it takes to make that happen. I would not let a dead cousin with a hard-on screw that up by shaming me in front of the family I’m trying to fuck up the ass.”

“There you go.” I lean back in my seat. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Which brings me back to my point.” Alexius slithers his gaze to me. “Leandra and I are going to take a break from representing the Dark Sovereign at socials and formal events. You and Mirabella will be going instead.”

“Not a chance.” I shake my head. “I am not the Boss of the Dark Sovereign, nor am I the face of this family. You are. Born and bred for it.”

“I don’t care. You and Mirabella need to be seen together more. You need to make connections with others to solidify

your presence as a couple in this society, Nicoli. We cannot, under any circumstances, let Nunzio think we are even a little less than a strong, united front. We can't give him the slightest reason to think he could take us on."

I'm grinding my teeth, tapping my finger angrily on the table. "I'm not a social fucking butterfly like you. And I'm not parading my wife around like a goddamn trophy at horse races and fucking birthday parties."

"You think that's what I'm fucking doing? Parading my wife around like a goddamn trophy?" He stands, leaning with his palm flat on the table, his eyes burning through my skull. "Let me tell you what our father told me when I refused to marry. Listen good, Nicoli. A pretty wife is not just a fuck toy—sorry, Maximo."

Maximo waves it off, but I'm pretty sure he just vomited a little in his mouth.

"A man's power is communicated and reflected off his wife's image. They are the ones who strengthen our presence simply by standing at our sides. Having a wife who looks at us with love and adoration is how we demand true respect from others like us. Not our money. Not our guns. Not our fucking surnames. Our wives, *Nicoli*." He presses down hard on the table, bending his elbows as he leans closer to me. "So you do whatever the fuck it is that you need to do to make your wife happy. Sacrifice your motherfucking pride if you have to because that woman will be the one thing that makes you want to get up in the morning when the rest of the world has gone to shit." He's heaving, and there's an intensity radiating from him that I've never seen before. His words are coming from somewhere far deeper, far more profound than just the wisdom of a mafia Boss. It's pouring from his goddamn soul.

A deafening silence follows Alexius' outburst. If I didn't know that every word he said was the truth, I'd be pissed at how he just spoke to me—especially in front of the others. But he's right. I've seen first-hand how my mother supported my father in ways that exhausted her. I've seen her crying secretly in her beloved garden when she thought she was alone. I sat under the maple trees and listened to her cry until she couldn't

cry anymore. Yet, when I'd see her later that same day, she would have a smile on her face that could light up the devil's heart, and she'd be holding my father's hand as if she'd never let go. She was his strength.

Alexius straightens, still staring me straight in the eye. "There will come a time when that woman will bleed herself dry for you, when she will love you even though it fucking breaks her. And when you fuck up so badly you tear her soul apart, your wife won't hate you. Instead, she'll hate herself for still loving you. In the end, she will forgive you even though you don't deserve it. You will spend the rest of your motherfucking life doing everything you can to try to deserve her love even though you know you never will."

That's the deepest shit I've ever heard come out of my twin brother's mouth. It cuts right to the bone, and by the way he's looking at me now, we both know he's talking about his own past with Leandra. About the time he deceived her, took her for granted, and broke her heart. It's his way of warning me not to do the same. A little brotherly advice.

I could say a dickhead thing, but I'd say that takes asshole to a whole new level that not even I would go to.

"Okay," I concede without saying anything else. I'm too afraid to open my mouth in case I end up saying the wrong thing like I usually do.

Alexius sits back down and lights a cigarette, a plume of smoke caking around his fingers. "Good. Besides, I need a goddamn vacation."

"Tuscany?" The word causes last night's Mexican food up my throat.

"No. I bought Leandra a private island off the coast of Belize as a gift for our anniversary next month."

"Whoa. You're putting me to shame, brother. I still need to buy my wife a wedding ring. But first," I hold up a finger, "I have to find a way to get her in my goddamn bedroom."

Caelian chuckles. It's the first sound he's made since this entire conversation started.

I peer at him. “Why have you been so quiet?”

“I’ve been silently hoping it wouldn’t take you an hour to say what we all knew you’d say from the very beginning of this conversation.”

“And what’s that?”

He smirks. “Yes, sir.”

Everyone bursts out laughing except for me. “That’s great,” I mutter. “Remember this moment when I piss all over your face next time your drunk ass passes out on the front porch.”

Isaia gets up and pats me on the shoulder on his way out. “Good luck with Mirabella. I’ll see you assholes later.”

“Where you off to?”

“Myth. I got some energy I need to get rid of.”

“Oh, wait for me.” Caelian rushes out after him, and we’re all aware we won’t be seeing them again today.

They shut the door, and Alexius stares at me pointedly. “I have to say it.”

“Say what?”

“That I’m glad I found out about this secret you two have been keeping from me *before* this shit went down because now I know what’s on the line.” He gives me a knowing look. “Her sanity.”

I’m mildly annoyed that my brother is repeating shit I already know. “Is there a point?”

“Yes. There is.”

“And what’s that?”

“Protect her.”

“Is that not what I’ve been doing?”

“It is. This is just my way of saying that whatever decision you make when it comes to protecting your wife, you have my support.” He looks at Maximo and then back at me. “But I have to agree with Maximo.”

“About what?” Have these two fuckers been talking behind my back?

“We both agree that this is good,” Alexius says simply.

“What is?”

“That you finally decided to stop fighting it and love her. Yes, I understand your reasons for keeping your distance, but trust me when I say that being with her and loving her the way you want to love her will only strengthen your bond. And that bond is what will save her should the truth ever come out.”

I’m still getting used to the fact that Alexius knows everything, which means I’m super uncomfortable whenever he talks about it. Fuck, I’m always uncomfortable talking about it because it forces me to think of a day I hope to God never comes.

Alexius rolls his shoulders, rubbing the back of his neck. Tired lines form grooves on his forehead, and from this angle, I can see some dark circles under his eyes. He really does need a break.

“Are you getting enough sleep, man?” I ask, studying him.

“Both the twins are sick with the flu and haven’t been sleeping at all. Leandra refuses to have the nannies help when the twins are sick, so we’re up all fucking night.”

“What good are nannies when you can’t use their services?”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Where’s Leandra now?”

He looks down at his wristwatch. “My guess is she’s trying to get them down for a nap. She agreed to accept help while I’m stuck here with you assholes.”

“Here’s an idea. You stay here, close the door and get some sleep—even if it’s just an hour.” I get up and gesture to Maximo to do the same. “If we run into Leandra, we’ll just say you’re on some super private call with some president or something.”

Alexius leans his head back, closing his eyes. “It’s a stupid fucking idea, but I’m too tired to give a shit.”

“Then it’s settled.” Maximo and I walk toward the door. “Enjoy your beauty sleep, brother.”

We walk out the front door and stand by my car parked in the driveway. I want to fucking burn it. All I see when I look at my Maserati is Mirabella’s cheek planted on the hood, her back bent, and that fucker’s hands all over her. I don’t see the image of Mira and me fucking in the rain against the side of the car. I don’t think of how good it felt to finally be inside her, after all this time of wanting nothing else. That motherfucker erased it all, tainted it, ruined it, and managed to change a whole lot around here even though he’s no longer breathing.

I light a cigarette and take a long drag, savoring how it fills my lungs. “Get rid of it.”

Maximo lifts a brow. “The car?”

“Yes. Get rid of it. Strip it. Burn it. I don’t care. Just get rid of it.”

“Will do. Listen,” he crosses his arms and settles in front of me, his black leather jacket all shiny and shit in the sun, “we haven’t had a chance to talk about...you know, the fact that you are now my brother-in-law.”

“Ew, God. How is it that you make everything sound gross?”

He smirks. “All jokes aside. This might all be staged and planned, or whatever. But I’m glad it’s you.”

I let out some smoke, watching it disappear into the air.

“I know you’ll protect her, Nicoli. You’ve been doing it since the day Mirabella and I arrived here, and I know you will until the day you die.”

I look him dead in the eye and nod. I’ll fucking die for her, and we both know it. I live for that woman. Always have, always will.

He shifts from one leg to the other, rubbing his fingers along his neatly trimmed beard. “And if the day comes that she remembers what happened that night, I’m glad she’ll have you to get her through it.”

I flick my cigarette, the orange ember sparking on the gravel before I smother it under my shoe. “She won’t remember.”

“I’m saying if. Anyway, as Mirabella’s brother, I feel like it’s my duty to say this.”

“Say what?”

Maximo steps up, leveling me with what I’m assuming is his I-will-fuck-you-up glare. “If you break her heart, I will fuck you up.” There it is. “And next time you decide to take my sister for a dance in the rain, make sure there’s no fucking cameras around.”

“What the fuck? Dance in the... Oh.”

“Yeah.” He slaps his palm on my shoulder. “For the love of God, never forget that I have access to all the security footage here and all over town.” He starts in the other direction.

“But you have eyes everywhere. Where are we supposed to—”

“Don’t you fucking say it.” As he walks away, he gives me the finger, and I whistle to get his attention. When he turns, I throw him my car keys.

“Get me a new one.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t care. Just make it red.”



Mirabella

“EVERYTHING OKAY HERE?” Leandra asks as she flutters inside my room and frowns when she sees me unpacking a box.

“Peachy,” I answer as I place one of my perfume bottles back on the silver tray. “Nicoli has taken it upon himself to move my stuff to his room without my permission. Then we ended up bickering about it, and when I finally said that I’d move into his bedroom on one condition, he cursed, he overreacted, and left the box on my bed.”

Her eyes twinkle with mirth as she closes the door behind her. “What was your condition?”

“That he take me to Myth.”

Leandra clears her throat as if she almost choked on a breath. “Take you to Myth?”

“Yes.” I swirl around to face her. “Why does your face almost look identical to Nicoli’s when I said that?”

“Do you know what all happens there at the club, Mira?” She sits down on the end of the bed.

“It’s a sex club, Leandra. I have a pretty good idea what goes on there.”

“Yeah, but do you really?” She narrows her eyes. “Because I can tell you now that I was not prepared when Alexius took me there the first time. You think you are, but trust me, you aren’t. It’s like another world, and I am not sure anyone’s imagination is as wild as the reality of it. There are no limits. As in no. Limits.”

“And that’s what I want.” I take a seat on the couch, pulling my legs underneath me. “No limits. I’m not this innocent little girl everyone thinks I am.”

“Oh, I’m very much aware after you told me about Tuscany.” She widens her eyes, and we both snicker. “But maybe Nicoli isn’t.”

“He is,” I state simply.

Her eyebrows almost touch her hairline, and she leans with her elbows on her knees. “He is?”

I draw invisible lines with my finger on the couch's armrest, tracing patterns on the fabric. "At the club, we kind of..."

"You kind of what?"

"We had sex."

"At the club?"

"In the parking lot, to be exact."

"The parking lot?"

"Against his car. In the rain. Out on the street." My mind wanders back to that night as I speak these words, steamy bodies pressed against each other while raindrops pelted down around us like tiny missiles.

Her expression goes blank, and her eyes glaze over as she tries to process all that information laid out over a few short sentences. But then she looks at me, and I see the momentary pity that flickers across her face like a shadow. "This was before...Felix?"

I flit my gaze down and flick my nails with purpose. "Yes."

"Maybe that's one of the reasons he doesn't want you going to the club," she says slowly, squinting an eye at me from behind a curtain of dark hair.

"Why? Because of what happened with Felix?"

"Because he thinks you're not ready."

"I'm not broken, Leandra. I'm not a piece of glass that shatters under the slightest pressure."

"To him, you are."

"But I'm not. And I'm sick and tired of him treating me that way."

"You're right. You're not. You're a force to be reckoned with—smart, tough, and beautiful in every way possible. But that won't stop him from being protective of you."

"Are you defending him?"

“No. Yes.” She shakes her head lightly. “Maybe. I don’t know. All I know is that a lot has happened in a very, very short time. You and Nicoli went from having this fragile relationship, at best, for years to fighting and not talking for days to having sex at a club and getting married within hours. I don’t think either of you has taken a minute to process all of this.”

I nervously bite down hard on my bottom lip, feeling the tension tighten in my chest.

“Both of you need time to breathe first. Digest all that has happened,” she says, her tone soft.

“Believe me, Leandra. I’m digesting.”

“Are you really?” She slants her head and watches me like she’s waiting for that first sign of weakness. “You haven’t spoken about what happened with Felix. You’re acting like it never happened.”

“He didn’t rape me, Leandra.”

“That doesn’t make it any less traumatizing.”

“I feel like everyone underestimates me. I’ve been sheltered by this family all my life and never had a chance to show anyone my true strength. And now that I’m thrown in the middle of all this, everyone seems to think I’m not strong enough to handle it.” I stand. “You, of all people, should know it is possible for a woman to survive something traumatic without breaking into pieces.” The silence is thick and heavy, and it pains me that I had to hint at her troubled past. But I’m sick of everyone thinking I’m a fucking porcelain doll. I’m stronger than this. I might not be a Del Rossa by blood, but I’ve been raised like one, and that’s one thing this family has in spades. Strength. The power to survive whatever life throws at you. “Yes, I was scared,” I continue. “It was the most frightening experience of my life. But now, when I think about that moment when I saw Felix’s body on the ground, his blood staining my shoes, I don’t feel fear, panic, or hurt.” I take in a breath. “I feel empowered...by the justice of it. I can’t explain it. To me, Nicoli took care of it by shooting and killing him, and it makes me feel...okay.” I shrug. “If Nicoli didn’t kill

him, maybe then I'd be the mess everyone thinks I'm supposed to be. But I'm not, and I dunno what kind of person that makes me for finding comfort in blood and death."

Leandra places a gentle hand on my shoulder, her expression showing understanding and compassion. "It makes you the kind of woman who refuses to let another's actions determine your worth," she says softly. "And you're right. You're stronger than people give you credit for."

I nod, feeling the weight of her words settle over me like a warm blanket.

"But don't let that strength become your weakness," she continues thoughtfully. "Don't be so determined to prove yourself that you forget to take care of yourself."

Her words strike something deep within me, and I realize how hard I've been pushing myself lately, how desperately I've been trying to keep up with everyone else, especially playing this game with Nicoli. Maybe it's time to stop. Perhaps it is time for me to stop and breathe.

"I won't," I promise fiercely, meeting Leandra's gaze head-on. "But what about Nicoli? He needs to accept that I'm not as innocent and fragile as he thinks I am. My God, you should have seen him when I told him I'm not a virgin. He was talking about bullets and glass and disembowelment."

"Oh, shit," Leandra utters as if she knows exactly the kind of reaction I got from Nicoli. "Has growing up with the Del Rossa brothers taught you nothing?" she teases. "They are nothing if not possessive when it comes to their women."

"I wasn't his woman back then."

"But you are now. And that changes everything."

I frown, unsure if I like the sound of that. "What do you mean?"

"I mean Nicoli sees you as his," Leandra says bluntly. "And try as you might, you will never get him to see it otherwise. He will fight you. He will infuriate you. He will try to manipulate you by kissing and making love to you. And he

might even go as far as getting you pregnant and locking you in a bedroom to get that point across.”

We chuckle, and I say, “Making light of a situation that was actually really fucked up probably makes us as morally gray as the guys.”

“It’s in the past.” She smiles. “It can’t be changed.”

I take her hand and squeeze. “Just like the whole ordeal with Felix is in my past and can’t be changed. I won’t let it steal precious time from me by wallowing in it.”

“Good for you,” she says. “I’m proud of you. And I know Nicoli is, too. Can I give you some friendly advice from one Del Rossa wife to the other?”

“Please. I think I’m going to need it.”

She leans closer, mischief swirling in your eyes. “During the day, they want us to be queens at their side. But at night...” she grins, “they need us to be slaves at their feet. And at night, we have the power to make them give us what we want.”

I can feel my cheeks flush at her words. My heart races as what she’s suggesting sinks in. The thought of being at Nicoli’s mercy, of submitting to him completely, sets my body ablaze with a desire I can’t ignore. And if I can use that to my advantage...why not?

Chapter Twenty-Four

NICOLI

I walk into my bedroom and breathe in, unclasping the Rolex from my wrist. I look up and come to a screeching halt when I find Mira lounging on the couch, wearing nothing but one of my black ties and her sexy as fuck red stiletto heels. Her long legs are bent at the knee, and the silk tie draws attention to her firm breasts, which quickly rise and fall with excitement.

I slam the door shut with such force that the walls shake and the windows shudder in their frames.

Mira's blood-red lips part slightly, her eyes darkening with desire as I approach her.

"Anyone could have walked in here," I warn.

"Good thing it was you, then."

I don't take my eyes off her as I pull off my shirt in one swift motion, already hard at the sight of Mira's luscious body. "What are you doing?"

"I moved my stuff into your bedroom just like you asked me to."

"You did?" I don't take my eyes off her to look around.

She nods. "I did take the liberty of changing your sheets." Only then do I notice my old sheets are gone, replaced with red silk. "I don't know about you, but I find sleeping on a pillow that smells like skank unappealing."

I snicker, knowing she's referring to Paula. I go to stand in front of her and run a finger along her naked shoulder, down

her arm, and over the curve of her hip. “What changed your mind?”

Swinging her legs off the couch, she settles in front of me, her beautiful face staring upward. “As you said, we won’t be that couple who sleep in separate bedrooms. I decided to agree.”

I grab her chin between my fingers, the intensity in her eyes sending a shiver right through me. “What changed your mind? The truth this time.”

She licks her lips, and I’m clenching my jaw because I want to lick off the sheen her tongue left behind. “I’m done,” she says quietly. “I don’t want to play this game anymore.”

I ease her face to the side, studying every contour of it, then lift it more so I can see the exquisite curve of her throat. “You were a terrible player, anyway.”

Her full, sultry lips curl up in a grin. “You weren’t at the top of your game yourself.”

“I was distracted.”

Mira sucks on her bottom lip, staring at me through thick black lashes as she loosens my belt. The snap of the leather as she rips it from around my waist has me snarling as I peer down at her.

“Anything distracting you now?” she asks, reaching inside my pants.

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s good to hear.”

She lifts a dark brow before her gaze flits down to my cock, easing her rounded palm down its length. I’m barely breathing as I savor the silky feel of her hand as she starts to stroke me slowly. Even though one simple touch from her drives me fucking wild, I manage to grab her hand that’s around my dick and stop her from moving. “I know we should probably discuss hard limits and all that shit. But I really don’t want to.”

“Why’s that?” She slips her tongue out of her mouth and swirls the tip around the head of my cock, and the sight alone makes me want to come all over her fucking face. I suck air through my teeth, and my balls pull tight.

“Because I know for a fact that the things I want to do to you are far beyond any hard limit you can have. And I really don’t want to fuck this up.” I breathe heavily, watching her tease her tongue around the tip as I keep her hand from moving around my shaft.

Mira looks up from where she’s sitting in front of me. Her eyes grow darker and bolder as her fingers find the root of my cock, and I start to push down against it. “You won’t fuck this up. I won’t let you,” she murmurs in a breathy voice that has all the air whooshing out of me as one long exhale. Then, with a groan, I release her grip on my shaft, sending shock waves deep into my lower body, making me shudder with anticipation.

“How can you be so sure?”

I watch as she seductively drags her tongue around her lips, her eyes fixed on mine. “Because there is nothing, and I mean nothing, I don’t want you to do to me.” She takes my cock inside her mouth with one swift motion, and all I can do is grab her hair as my eyes roll into the back of my fucking skull. “Holy fuck.”

The way her tongue moves, how she opens her throat to take every inch of me proves that this definitely is *not* her first rodeo. But fuck me if I’m going to be a prick and get all aggressive about that now.

I let out a deep sigh and move my fingers closer to her face, gently caressing the sides of it, allowing her to take as much control as she wants. Her hand moves lower to cup my balls and roll them in her palm. I think I’m about to have my first out of body experience...or I might just pass out.

“Mira,” I moan, my heart pounding against my chest. She answers with a purr that vibrates around me, her red lips leaving a ring at the base of my cock that’s one of the sexiest fucking things I’ve ever seen. My hips angle up to her in an

attempt to get even closer as she moves up and down the length of me until, finally, I can take no more.

I grab her shoulders and pull her up to her feet, crashing my lips against hers, kissing her feverishly with enough fire to light this bedroom on fire. I palm her breast and tug at her nipple, and the sounds that roll from her tongue are like music to my fucking ears.

“I’m not a gentle lover, Mira,” I whisper.

“I don’t want you to be.”

I bend my knees and reach down between her legs, sliding a finger through her slit. Her pussy is so slick I drag her arousal all the way up to her navel.

“I’ll hurt you.”

“I want you to.”

I lift my head and study her face for a second, her eyes glazed and hooded, her cheeks already stained with the tint of desire. “You’re mine now, Hummingbird.”

“In every way.”

I sweep her up, and she wraps her legs around my waist, that little strip of hair on her pussy teasing my stomach. I turn and drop her on the bed. Her soft curls wave around her shoulders as she starts worming her way upward, but I grab around her knees and jerk her back to the edge. “You don’t do a fucking thing unless I tell you to.”

“Yes, sir,” she says with a smile, and my cock jerks as I slip off my pants, dropping them to the floor right before I glide my hands up her smooth legs, over her knees, and down the inside of her thigh.

“I can be fucking hard and demanding, Hummingbird. And one of my demands is that you scream for me every time you come unless I say otherwise. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” I’m barely touching her, and she’s already writhing uncontrollably.

“Now lay still,” I order as I crouch, my eyes level with her pussy, and I jerk her knees open wide. “I’ve waited fucking years for this.” With my thumbs, I spread her pussy lips open, exposing her slick pink flesh. “To see what your cunt looks like.”

Her hips buck, and I bite at her ankle, causing her to moan. “I said stay still.”

She stills immediately, and I admire the sight of my teeth marks on her flesh.

The swollen skin of her pussy is so sensitive, her legs shake every time I slick my thumbs up and down her engorged inner lips, touching her clit now and then. Her pussy’s so wet she’s already made a mess on the sheets.

“You’re driving me crazy, Nicoli,” she whimpers.

“And I’ve only just begun, baby girl.” My cock aches to drive into her, to push into the hot, wet depths of her pussy, but I’ve waited so fucking long to do this right that I don’t plan on letting it be over soon.

I put my nose right against her clit and deeply inhale the smell of her arousal. It’s potent, sweet, strong, so fucking earthy and natural, and it’s making me drunk with primal need.

I slowly sink a finger into her, and her back arches off the mattress just as I taste the tang of blood from biting down too hard on my bottom lip. Abruptly, I remove my finger and swat her pussy hard with my palm. Her whole body jerks as if a shockwave exploded through her.

“God, Nicoli.”

“I said keep still.”

“I’m trying.”

I slap her sex again, relishing the sound of her cries. “Try harder.”

“Can you just fuck me already?” She’s practically humping the air.

“Not a chance. I want to taste you first.” Launching forward, I slam my mouth against her wet pussy, sucking hard without warning, pressing my tongue into her wet hole, licking upward, greedily devouring every drop of her honey that catapults me into a state of euphoria. I feel like a fucking animal. I’m growling at the taste of her, and I know I will never get enough.

She’s screaming out my name, her body rigid and shaking, her thighs clenched tight against the side of my face, her hips lifting off the bed, her fingers twisted into my hair.

“Oh, God, Nicoli. I’m coming.”

I bask in feeling it all—the taste of her and the sound of her desperate cries echoing throughout the room. This is what I’ve waited so long for, to have my Hummingbird’s screams fill the empty spaces in my bedroom.

I hardly give her time to come down from the high when I grab her waist and flip her onto her stomach, forcing her down flat on the bed by pressing the length of my body on hers, and holding her arms out to the side with mine.

“Oh, God,” she moans as I slide up and down her, letting her feel every inch of me, my cock sliding through the slit of her ass as I kiss and nip at her back and neck. It’s all about sensation, drawing each second out until it’s almost unbearable.

“I’ve waited so long. I want to taste you everywhere,” I say, slipping off her, grabbing her hips and pulling her up on her knees. Her wetness is now dripping down her inner thighs, and I can’t stop myself from licking it up, dragging my tongue all the way up her leg before pushing it inside her pussy.

“You’re going to make me come again,” she moans, and I smile against her cunt.

“That’s the plan.”

I get up and walk to my dresser, and in the bottom drawer, I pull out the thigh restraint device I’ve had safely tucked away in there. I’ve never used it before, and now is the perfect time.

“What are you doing?” she asks, out of breath, glancing to the side, her eyes widening when she sees the leather restraints.

“Do you trust me?”

“I do.”

“Then shut up and do as I say.”

Carefully, I tie the restraint around the upper thigh of her left leg, purposely fucking her exposed pussy with my knuckles along the way, loving how she moans. Securing the other end around the bedpost, I start with the other leg until she’s restrained and unable to close her legs even an inch.

I take a few steps back, admiring the view while stroking my cock once, twice, before cupping my balls and squeezing, needing just a drop of relief. “If only you could see yourself now.”

She throws her head back, a curtain of blonde hair sliding from her back and down her shoulders.

“So fucking beautiful,” I murmur, finally stepping up to her, her hips just an inch lower than mine, and I drag my fingers across her back, loving the sight of her skin erupting in goosebumps under my touch.

I watch my dick as I guide it into her soaked pussy, and it’s the proudest fucking moment of my life. “You look like mine—” I push into her, just the tip “—because you are fucking mine.”

With a powerful thrust, I push into her, filling her up all at once, her heat swathing my cock as I sink in, stretching her walls. I thrust deeper, harder this time, pulling her closer as I reach the depths of her core.

“Jesus,” she moans. “You’re so deep.”

“That’s what these are for.” I tug at the restraints, the leather biting into her skin. “To let me get inside you as deep as fucking possible.”

I slam into her, my pelvis hitting against her ass, the sound of skin slapping skin along with our grunts and moans filling

the room like a beautifully filthy melody. She's fucking screaming now, her fingers scratching at the sheets. She's on the brink of madness, and the most beautiful thing I've ever witnessed. She's unable to contain it, unable to close her thighs even the slightest inch.

"You're mine, Hummingbird. Don't you ever fucking forget it." My balls slap against her ass cheeks as I relentlessly piston in and out of her. I'm not going to last much longer. "You better come before I do, or I'll keep you in this position for the rest of the night."

"Fuck!"

The pleasure and tension builds in her body; I can feel it in how her walls tighten around me. "Hold on," I warn, and I let go of her hips, stretch out my arms, and get a tight hold on the bedposts, gripping it tight as I continue to drive in her harder, faster, every muscle in my body tense and contracting.

"Yes!" she cries. "Fuck, yes!"

Her body convulses in front of me, the warmth of her cum gushing over my cock. The sound of me slamming into her wetness is exquisite, and I roar as I come with a ferocious burst of pleasure that grips so fucking tight my legs start shaking and my vision blurs. I can't move. My orgasm keeps intensifying, even after I collapse onto her back, my cock jerking as I cream her cunt with every last drop.

It takes several minutes to get our breathing somewhat under control.

"God, I love you, Mira," I murmur, then pepper gentle kisses along her spine, slowly gathering the strength to push myself up and loosen the restraints around her thighs one by one.

She collapses onto her stomach, sighing with the relief of no longer being restrained. I take in this vision before me, this fucking amazing, beautiful mess of a woman, my wife, lying completely spent on my bed. My wife is a beautiful mess, and all for me—because of me. And as I lie down beside her, I realize something that takes my breath away.

For the first time in my life, I know what it feels like to be satisfied by a woman.

My woman.

Chapter Twenty-Five

MIRABELLA

“**O**pen your eyes, Mirabella.”

I can hear Marco. He's here. Close.

“Open them. You know you want to.”

My heart races as I feel his breath on my face. Something is off about him. I'm scared, but he's my brother. I'm not supposed to be scared.

“Open your eyes.”

“No. Momma said I shouldn't.”

“Open your eyes.”

“I promised.”

“Open your eyes, Hummingbird.”

“Nicoli,” I breathe out his name.

I feel his lips pressing firmly but gently on my back. I whisper his name again, his hand sliding down the arch of my side, settling on the curve of my hips. His touch sends a shiver through me that makes me tingle all over.

He shifts closer, his chest against my back and cock against my ass, easing my hair away from my shoulders, showering me with featherlight kisses. “Please tell me you're not sore, because I really...” he licks up the side of my neck, “really...” he sucks my earlobe gently “...really want to be inside you again.”

I roll my hips, arousal already pooling between my thighs. “Then what are you waiting for? Get inside me, Mr. Del Rossa.”

With a snarl, he grabs my leg and loops his arm underneath my knee. My breath catches as he enters slowly, inch by inch, unrushed, all the way inside me. He stays that way and doesn't move, just letting my walls stretch around him while he licks up my side as if he can taste me. I arch into him, the sensation leaving me breathless as sparks crackle through my body.

I moan while biting my lip, nestling my face deeper into the pillow as he eases out of me, then sinks back, keeping that same slow and gentle rhythm. The sensations are more powerful this way. It's like he's inside me, but I can feel him everywhere.

“How does it feel?” he asks, rolling his hips. “To have me inside you?”

“It feels... amazing,” I whisper, the words spilling from my lips with a gasp. “It's like a pressure building in me, and I can feel you everywhere but nowhere at the same time.”

I tilt my head up and moan when he kisses me with a kind of tenderness that matches his movements, his tongue sliding against mine. I can taste his peppermint toothpaste, and I don't even care that I haven't brushed my teeth yet. If he doesn't care, why should I?

I grab the silk between my fingers, clenching my fist as he pulls out and sinks back in, silently willing him to go faster, to take me higher. He rests my knee on his elbow and reaches between my legs, touching my clit and sending me into a tailspin of pleasure. My orgasm builds rapidly even though his movements remain slow and controlled. All he does is increase the pressure on the sensitive nub, creating intense shockwaves up my core.

With his lips on the side of my neck, he rasps, “Come for me, Hummingbird. And remember my rule.”

I moan as the pressure starts to rise to a peak.

“Louder,” he demands, and I cry out his name as I come, pleasure radiating from my core and making every one of my nerve endings come alive. He continues to stroke me through it, and my every muscle snaps with a blissful release.

“Good girl. I want to wake up every morning and make you come before you even think about getting out of bed. Now, is that enough lovemaking for you, Hummingbird?”

“Definitely.”

“Good. Because now, I’m going to fuck you.”

I feel his muscles ripple, his body tight as he slips out and then slams back into me with such force I have to plant my palm on the velvet headboard to keep myself steady.

His labored grunts match my gasping whimpers as his hips move faster and harder, his balls slapping against my pussy. He continues this way, in, out, continuously increasing the intensity, and all too soon, I feel that familiar tug at my core again.

With one final push, reaching so fucking deep inside me, we crest together, our bodies coming apart as we climax.

“Jesus,” he murmurs, out of breath, and I feel the sweat clinging to his upper lip as he kisses my shoulder again. There is so much cum around the top of my thighs that Nicoli easily slides a finger through my ass cheeks, then gently presses against my tight hole.

“Is your ass still intact, baby girl?”

“I, um...I’ve had some...experience down there.”

“Toys?” His tone is rough and sharp as if he’s restraining himself.

“Yeah.”

He pushes part of his finger inside me, and I moan. “So this is mine, and only mine?”

“Only yours.”

“Good. I’ll take it...soon.” He swats my ass and gets out of bed.

I stretch out on my back, admiring him in all his naked glory. His body is lean and robust, with deep grooves and valleys of tight muscles. Tanned skin and sculpted chest, rounded shoulders that are broad and striking. And that ass... dear God, that tight, round ass is enough to drive me crazy. I'm not even sure if this is real or just a dream. It's like I've waited to be with him for so long, and now it all seems surreal.

I sit up against the headboard and watch him slip on a black buttoned shirt. "You're not going to take a shower?"

"Nope. I want you on my cock all day."

Jesus, I swear my womb just did a somersault, and my ovaries exploded.

After pulling on his pants, he sits on the couch, roughing a hand through his hair. "Alexius wants us to start making appearances together. Show a united front and make connections to strengthen our presence as a couple."

"It makes sense." Even I can do that math.

"He and Leandra plan on taking a step back, so the spotlight is on us for a while, just until things settle."

"Will it, though?" I bring my knees up and wrap my arms around them. "Settle?"

He sighs heavily. "I don't know. But I don't think Nunzio will stop scratching and digging until he finds something to use against us."

"Then we need to ensure there's nothing for him to find."

"I hate attending soul-sucking social shit parties where rich men have nothing better to do than flaunt their money while their wives play dress-up. I won't spend every night for the next six months pretending to love getting my ass kissed by people who would offer their firstborns just to have the Dark Sovereign in their corner."

"Take me to Myth, then," I blurt, and his expression turns to stone.

"Jesus. I think I just fucked you out of your mind."

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Come sit on my dick so I can fuck you back into your mind this time.”

“Hear me out.”

“Mira—”

“Just listen. All your associates and so-called friends in high places are members of Myth, right?”

“I don’t like where you’re going with this.”

“If we go there as a couple, everyone who is important enough to know about us will know.”

He leans back, his gaze pinned on mine. “This isn’t what I want for you, Hummingbird. I don’t want to parade you around like some prize.”

“Why not?” I challenge and slip out of bed. “Are you ashamed of me?”

“Of course not.”

“Then parade me around,” I say, sauntering toward him. I’m naked but confident, and he needs to see that. He needs to let the image he has of me in his head shed that innocent skin that keeps him from seeing the real me.

His eyes are rimmed with hunger as they drift down my body and back up again. I love how he looks at me like I’m a five-course meal he’ll devour and never get tired of.

I straddle him, placing my hands on his shoulders and flipping my hair to the side. “Show the whole damn world who I belong to.”

His hands cup my ass, and he sucks air through his teeth as he forces me to grind against his cock. “There’s a risk involved if I show you off to the world.”

“And what’s that?”

He cups my breast, rolling the round flesh in his palm, then tugs at my nipple before enclosing his fingers around my

throat. “Men will want you.” He squeezes. “They will want to fuck you, and then I’ll become a motherfucking serial killer.”

A thrill ripples down my spine. The idea of him killing for me is intoxicating, and it stirs a rush of adrenaline through my veins.

“No one will ever get close enough to touch you again,” he snarls as he constricts my air supply even more.

“Because you won’t let them?”

“Damn fucking straight, I won’t.”

“Myth is the perfect platform, Nicoli. Establishing a strong presence there is all we need for the royals of this kingdom to know that you and I are the king and queen of this world.”

He licks his lips, his hand dropping from my throat back to my breast, cupping it perfectly in his palm. “Why do you want to go to Myth so badly?”

I lock eyes with him, no longer rocking my body on top of his. “Because you’ve spent countless nights there fucking other women, acting out every single one of your fantasies with them. Now you’re my husband, and I want every girl in that club who had the honor of being fucked by you to know that.”

“Mrs. Del Rossa. Is this your way of pissing on me and marking your territory?”

“You’re not the only one who can be possessive.”

“Fuck, you’re hot when you’re jealous.”

I rake my fingers through his hair and tug back sharply, licking up his neck with one fiery stroke of my tongue. “You have no idea, Mr. Del Rossa. So you better fucking take me to that club so I can show those girls on your payroll that none of them will ever touch you again.” I brush my lips along the shell of his ear. “Not unless I tell them to.”

He curses under his breath, his eyes rolling closed as he shudders beneath me.

“Just like you, I have fantasies, too,” I whisper, sucking on his earlobe. “And I want to explore them with you.”

Without warning, he grabs my hair and pulls my head to the side, his eyes wild as he growls, “If—and that’s a very big fucking if—I take you there, you will follow my rules.”

“Of course.”

“I’m serious.” He tightens his fist, and I hiss as my scalp burns. “I can’t go slaughtering people in my own damn club. So you do. Exactly. As I say. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” I whimper.

“Okay. I’ll think about.”

“You’ll think about it? No, I want an answer—” He crashes his lips against mine, snuffing out my words. The heat of his mouth, the pressure, the roughness of his tongue is fiery passion and unbridled desire that melts away every thought. I’m no longer interested in bickering or begging. All I want is to be owned and restrained with this kind of blissful agony that has the power to bring me to my knees for this man. My husband.

He leans back and licks his lips, his eyes hooded and beautiful. “Don’t push me on this.”

I could go on and on, push him until he gives me what I want. But I’ve been in this family long enough to know to pick my battles wisely. I’m not picking this one today.

“Okay.” I slide off his lap, and his expression falls as he gapes at me. “Where are you going?”

“I need to take a shower.”

“When you were in Tuscany,” he starts, and I screech to halt, unsure I like where this is going, “was it just you and the two of them?”

“Imelda and Tommaso, yes. Why do you ask?”

He gets on his feet and fixes his gaze on mine. “There wasn’t another man involved?”

I place a hand on my hip. “No, Nicoli. There wasn’t. So you can relax, you only have to kill one guy.” I can’t hide the sarcasm. “Now, I really need to take a shower.”

Nicoli grabs my wrist and pulls me back, his eyes downcast as he rubs his chin with his other hand. “Two girls and a guy?”

“Yes,” I retort. “Well done. You got it figured out.”

He yanks me close, my shoulder now touching his arm as he looks at me. “Have you ever thought about it?”

“About what?” My voice is barely audible. When Nicoli is this intense, I seem to be unable to breathe right around him.

“Two guys and a girl.” The words roll from his lips, and the air is suddenly laden with tension that laces around my core.

My lips part as I stare up into his eyes. “Hasn’t every girl thought about it?”

“It’s a yes or no question, Mirabella.”

“Yes.” I suck on my bottom lip. My time in Tuscany was erotic, sensual, and beyond my wildest dreams. But I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I’ve thought about being with two men. “Why do you want to know?” I ask wearily, and his reply is a hard, heavy, heated kiss on the mouth, his tongue breaking past my lips to sweep at every corner. I’m liquid against him, melting into his side.

As he pulls back, he licks his lips, and I scrutinize his expression, trying to figure out where his head is, but he gives me nothing. Not a single clue.

“Now, go take that shower.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Where are we?” My gaze flits from one corner to the other of the underground parking area.

Nicoli closes the passenger side door. “A friend’s place.”

“What friend?”

“A friend that’s sort of... family.”

“I’m confused.”

Nicoli grabs my hand. “Just keep quiet and walk with me.”

“Is it a party or something? Because you told me to wear something casual.” I try to free my hand, but he only clutches it tighter as we enter the elevator. “Nicoli Del Rossa, if you let me wear denim jeans and boots, knowing you’re taking me to a party, I swear to God I will twist your nipples in your sleep.”

The elevator doors close, and Nicoli pushes me against the cold steel. “What you’re wearing doesn’t matter at all. At. All.”

“What? Why? Nicoli, you underestimate the power of first impressions, and I—”

“You’re not going to be wearing anything within the next fucking twenty minutes,” he snaps. “In fact, you’ll be wearing nothing for the rest of the night. Now, will you shut up?”

I study him, biting my lip. “Okay, now I’m nervous.”

“For Christ’s sake, woman.” He pushes himself off me and straightens, pulling a hand through his hair.

“Why are you so tense?”

“I’m tense because I’m not sure I can do this.”

“Do what?”

He presses his lips in a thin line, casting his gaze up to the elevator’s roof. It stops and pings, the doors sliding open, revealing a professional and sleek foyer, almost like an attorney’s office or the doctor’s reception area. I freeze, staring out in front of me without blinking. “Nicoli Del Rossa, where the fuck are we?”

“Just walk.”

I grab the iron handlebar, forcing my heels down. “Is this where husbands bring their wives to off them or something?”

“What? *Off* them?” He sends me a skeptical look. “You need to stop watching movies.”

“I don’t watch movies.”

“Then where the fuck does your wild imagination come from?”

I blink. “Books.”

“Books? I’ve never seen you read a book.”

“What do you think I’m doing on my phone at night?”

“I don’t know. Playing Candy Crush or something?”

“Who still plays Candy Crush?”

“What kind of books do you read?”

“Real dark and dirty books.”

Nicoli plants his hand on the elevator door as it starts to close again. “Dark and...dirty?”

“Where do you think I learned that thing I did last night?”

“I assumed Tuscany.”

“Why do you always assume it’s Tuscany?”

“Because apparently everything happens in Tuscany.”

I frown at him, unamused. “Not everything.” I glance past him. “*Almost* everything.”

“For fuck’s sake, woman.” He grabs my hand and drags me out of the elevator.

He’s so wound up he doesn’t even give me a minute to admire the paintings against the wall.

Nicoli slides a security card through the door lock, and a beep sounds before the door clicks open.

His large frame towers in front of me, and I try to peek past him. “Are there people here?”

“Just one.”

He turns to face me, and I can feel the intensity ripple off him. He’s nervous, every muscle tight.

“Nicoli, what’s wrong?”

His brows are furrowed, his lips pulled tight like he’s biting the inside of his cheek. “Give me your hand.”

“What? Why?”

“Will you shut up and just give me your hand? Please.”

Nicoli hardly ever says please, and when he does, it usually scares the crap out of me because that means we’re about to cross over to deep and emotional territory.

I swallow and give him my hand, his palm warm against my skin.

I watch intently as he reaches into his pants pocket, pulling out the white ribbon. *Our* white ribbon.

We’re both silent as he wraps it around my wedding finger, tying the bow on the top. “I need you to wear this tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to see it on your finger, or I might lose my fucking mind.”

“What is happening right now?”

His gaze cuts to mine, and his blue eyes floor me, crystal swirls that always manage to take my breath away.

His shoulders rise as he takes a breath. “I love you, Hummingbird. I always have. But I have hurt you so many times, too many times, and it kills me.”

“Nicoli—”

“Shhh. Let me finish.”

“I don’t like—”

“Woman, I will duct tape your mouth shut. Don’t test me.”

I zip my lip.

He shifts from one leg to the other, his thumb delicately brushing along the ribbon around my finger. “I was a dick to you, Mira. I robbed you of so many things because I was all fucked up over you. I couldn’t stand the thought of you being with anyone else even though I didn’t have the balls to take you for myself.”

“Are you referring to the guys who somehow magically ended up in the ER before my dates with them?”

He grimaces. “Among other things.”

“Nicoli!”

“My point is, I played God when it came to you, and you had to go all the way to Tuscany to have a taste of life because I didn’t allow you to have it here.”

My gut clenches.

“And tonight is me trying to make up for it.” Something dark gleams in his gaze.

“What’s happening tonight?” Now I’m nervous, and my palm is getting all sweaty.

“Do you trust me?”

I narrow my eyes, and he clutches my hand tighter.

“Do you trust me, Mira?”

“Yes,” I reply slowly. “Nicoli, what’s going on?”

“Before we go into this room, I have three rules.”

“You can’t tell me the rules when I don’t even know what they’re for.”

“Just—” he holds up his hand “—three rules. And listen very fucking carefully because one minor slip-up will mean death and carnage.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“First rule.” He widens his stance, his eyes pinned on mine. “You do exactly as I say when I say it.”

“This conversation would go so much better if I knew what we’re talking about.”

“Second rule. You do not do anything unless I tell you to.”

I cock a brow. “That’s the same rule with different wording.”

“That’s how fucking important the first rule is.”

I place my hand on my hip. “And the third?”

“Third?”

“You said there were three rules.”

“Oh. Yes. Keep all sharp objects away from me.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Hurt who? Nicoli, tell me, what the hell is going on?”

He reaches out, grabs my waist, and pulls me close, slamming his lips on mine and kissing me stupid within less than a second. There’s no tongue. No demand. Just one fiery hot kiss that somehow manages to fill me with so much emotion that the back of my eyes start to sting with unshed tears.

Touching my chin, he leans his head against mine. “I love you, Hummingbird.”

“I love you, too,” I murmur, and I hear him take a sharp inhale through his nose.

“Take off your clothes.”

“Excuse me?”

He slips his hands underneath my jacket and over my shoulders, letting it slide down my arms. “Take off...your clothes.”

The low thrum in his voice drips with authority, and it speaks to every molecule in my body as if I’m under his spell and there are no other options than to obey.

Nicoli crouches in front of me, helping me get rid of my boots while I slowly pull my shirt over my head. Heat sparks up my thigh with every brush of his knuckles and fingers against my ankles.

I unzip my jeans, and he hooks his fingers into the sides. Then as he starts to ease them over my hips, he kisses me just below my navel, causing me to shudder. His tongue glides along my lower abdomen, goosebumps erupting all over my skin.

“Nicoli,” I breathe as he pulls my jeans and panties down together. “What’s happening right now?”

“I’m giving you what you want.” He gently kisses my sex, and I grab his shoulders to steady myself. His warm breath wafts against my inner thighs as he spreads them apart, his hands roaming to my knee and easing it over his shoulder.

“Nicoli,” I pant, moaning out loud when he slips his tongue through my folds, giving one long, leisurely stroke that sends a thousand volts of electricity up and down my spine. He continues to entice me with his tongue, expertly licking and teasing every inch of aroused flesh until I’m a shuddering mess and can no longer keep myself up.

He sucks my clit between his luscious lips, and I’m sure I’m one stroke away from an orgasm when he lets go of my knee and straightens in front of me.

“You’re not serious?” I whimper.

He wipes the glisten from his mouth, his expression dark and wicked. “You’re not allowed to come...yet.” He takes my

hand and leads me inside the room, my skin hyperaware of the cool air.

The room is perfumed with a sultry fragrance. Vanilla overwhelms my senses and caresses my hypersensitive skin, with a hint of ginger that tickles my nose and sends shivers down my spine. The room is dimly lit with a weak yellow-orange glow that mimics candlelight. Shadows cling to the dark plum walls, the air thick with seduction that drips over me like warm honey.

My body is lit. My insides are molten lava. My pulse thrums in my temples, and my arousal is spread thick between my thighs.

The floor is covered with a plush black carpet, intricately woven with fine velvet threads. The furniture is elegant and ornate, with gold and silver accents. It's as if I had been transported to a world of luxury and pleasure, the warmth and comfort of the room inviting me to stay between these walls forever.

In the center is a large four-poster bed turned to face the other end of the room. I can see the black sheets drape around the edges, the tufted headboard the same plum purple as the walls.

I take a few steps forward, my bare feet sinking into the plush carpet. My hand reaches out to stroke the soft velvet of an armchair beside me, smoothing my palm down along the top edge. A shiver runs down my spine as I feel his eyes on me. Nicoli is behind me, watching my every move, studying me with the intent to drag me out of here at the faintest sign of unease.

I turn to face him, his blue eyes gazing intensely at me. His jet-black hair is slicked back, making him look even more dangerous and alluring. "We can stop this at any time. Just say the word."

"I don't even know what this is yet."

He removes his jacket, slowly popping the buttons of his shirt one by one, and I stare at his fingers, knowing exactly

what they feel like against me.

“This is me trying to give you a taste of a life I had robbed from you until now.”

“Nicoli, you’re not making any sense.”

“Close your eyes.”

“What are you going—”

“Close your eyes, Mirabella.” His gravelly tone sends ripples along the back of my neck, and as I close my eyes, I feel his hands on my elbows, slowly easing me forward. With every step I take in the darkness, my heart thrums with a sensual thrill filling my blood.

My knees brush what feels like the edge of the bed, and we stop, his fingertips softly tracing my shoulder blades. My breath hitches in anticipation, and I feel his lips touch my ear. “Open your eyes.”

As my eyes flutter open, a gasp leaves my lips as I take in the sight, my mind momentarily stunned into utter silence.

“Is that...”

“Hello, Mirabella.”

“Rome?” I glance up at Nicoli in silent question, and he simply nods. My hands are trembling as I take it all in. Rome is on the bed naked with his back against the tufted headboard, and he’s wearing a black silk mask.

Nicoli’s lips brush along my shoulder. “Play with us tonight, Hummingbird,” he murmurs against my neck, his breath tickling my skin.

“What are you saying?”

Nicoli rolls his hips, pressing his hard-on against my ass, his lips kissing up the side of my neck until he reaches my earlobe. “I want to share you tonight.”

“With Rome?”

“Yes. I want to give you one night of sexual pleasure without any limitations. One night of feeding all your desires.”

My heart races as images and fantasies of wicked pleasures fill my mind, and I take a deep breath, my gaze roaming over Rome's body. His muscles bulge as he shifts his weight, his cock already hard and ready.

"Say yes, Hummingbird," he rasps against my neck, his hands moving between us as he loosens his pants. "One night without any consequences. One. Night."

Desire washes through me as I take in the sight of Rome, blindfolded, black silk sheets framing his hard physique.

I glance up and over my shoulder at Nicoli. His dark eyes glitter in the light from the fire, and a faint smile lifts his lips as he awaits an answer.

My breathing hitches as all inhibitions slip away. "Yes," I finally whisper breathlessly with a nod of agreement, and Nicoli locks his lips with mine as if his kiss seals our fate for just. One. Night.

His arms snake around my body, and he cups my breasts softly. "I had to put a few things in place to make sure I'm able to get through this."

"We don't have—"

"Yes," he says with conviction. "We have to. I have to." With expert fingers, he tugs gently on my nipples. "Rome is blindfolded because I don't want him seeing you. No one will have the honor of seeing your face when you come. Just me."

I let out a breath, trying to calm my wildly beating heart as Nicoli steps away, naked now and stalking toward the headboard. Only then do I notice the handcuffs dangling from the two bedposts.

For a second, I feel insecure, standing naked in front of Rome, but the fact that he can't see me sets me at ease, and I'm secretly thankful for my husband's rule.

Rome extends his arm, and Nicoli locks the cuff around his left wrist. "And he won't be touching you. At all." He moves in behind the headboard and to the other side, slipping the cuffs tight around Rome's right hand. "Only I touch you. Only I kiss you. Understood?"

My pulse quickens at the mention of the rules, and I nod.

“Say it. I need to hear you say it.”

“Only you touch me,” I breathe out. “Only you kiss me.”

“Good girl.”

A violent shudder wracks through me, my core tightening, and I close my eyes when he moves in behind me, gliding his fingers down my spine.

“My cousin is not allowed to speak to you directly. He understands the rules and the importance of discretion. He knows you’re mine and only mine. After tonight we won’t speak of it again. The moment we walk out that door, it’ll be as if it never happened.”

I nod in agreement, flicking my nails nervously when he takes my hand, stilling me. “I’m in control here, Mirabella. Not you. Not him. I say what happens, and I determine your every move.”

I’m already panting. Nicoli’s words are a spell woven around us—moving through all of our senses. We’re tethered together, our connection amplified in the authority that clings to him, and I love that he’s in control. The idea of him dictating everything thrills me, covering me with confidence.

“Get on the bed,” he demands with a low voice, and I obey, the silk sheets soft against my knees, my eyes fixed on Rome. There’s an eagle tattoo that spreads across the top of his chest, its wings spread wide with feathers of red and black. The tiger’s face inked on his stomach is beautifully vicious—a predator with a taste for the blood of its prey. Ripples of muscle stretch down his body, his thighs thick and legs sculpted. I don’t remember much of him as a kid and only saw him around the estate once or twice right before shit hit the fan with Rome’s dad, Nicoli’s uncle.

God, the thought of that day is strong enough to steal my breath, so I shake it off and out of my head.

I glance over my shoulder at Nicoli. He’s standing by the foot of the bed, his arms stretched out above him as he grips the pole stretched between the bedposts.

“What do I do now?” I ask, the anticipation making my stomach tighten in delight, my skin prickling everywhere as I wait for his next demand.

“Crawl over to him, and take his cock in your mouth.”

I lick my lips. Nicoli’s features are painted in dark, heavy lines of desire.

I move forward, my nipples brushing along Rome’s legs, my body hyperaware of the slight touch. Rome’s cock is impossibly hard, stretching long up his abdomen. I stare at his face as he bites into his lower lip. He’s anticipating my next move, waiting for me to do as Nicoli demanded. The thrill is erotic and intoxicating, knowing that Rome can’t do a thing. He can’t see anything, either. He’s entirely at the mercy of Nicoli and myself.

Without taking my eyes off his face, I reach out, take his length in my hand, and give it a single stroke. Rome exhales sharply, his abs tightening as I ease the head of his cock past my lips. His taste is sweet, his girth thick as I roll my tongue around it.

“All the way to the back of your throat, Hummingbird, just like I know you can.” I quiver when I feel his hand on my back, his fingertips drawing lazy circles across my skin.

A moan escapes me as I open my throat, taking Rome’s cock, relishing the sound of him sucking air through his teeth.

“That’s my girl,” Nicoli coos, his finger slipping down my ass, dragging through my pussy, stroking and teasing me while Rome’s length fills my mouth. Every twitch of his cock on my tongue makes me aware of Nicoli’s fingers inside me. The sensation overwhelms me, and I place a palm on Rome’s thigh, digging my nails into his flesh.

“Swallow every inch of him, Hummingbird.” Nicoli’s gravelly voice coats his command with a seduction I easily surrender to, heat pearling on the back of my neck.

Rome gasps, his hips rising as my tongue circles the base of him. I suck hard and fast, my mouth taking the rhythm of

Nicoli's fingers. I'm so close to coming, I can already feel the trickles of pleasure starting at my toes.

Rome's cock slips from my mouth as I lose focus, and Nicoli abruptly slaps my pussy, causing me to cry out.

"Did I say you can stop sucking him?"

I shake my head, and this time his palm hits my ass. My lips wrap around Rome's cock, and I'm rewarded with a deep groan, his hips flexing sharply, slamming the head of his length into the back of my throat.

I gag and choke, tears burning my eyes, but I don't stop, continuing to swallow him.

"Nicoli," Rome says, out of breath, "make her stop, or I'll come down her throat. Then I'll be no use to you the rest of the night."

The mattress dips behind me, and Nicoli's hand is in my hair, pulling my head back, forcing me to crane my neck. He lets go and places his fingers between my shoulder blades. "Move closer, hands on the headboard and let Rome taste that beautiful tits of yours."

I sink my nails into the velvet while straddling Rome, his skin hot against my inner thighs. A shudder ripples down my spine as he takes my nipple in his mouth, rolling his tongue before sucking it hard, and I arch my back while moaning out loud.

"You like that, Hummingbird?" Nicoli's not touching me, but I love that he's close.

"I do." I rock my hips. "But I prefer your mouth."

"You know just what to say. Now turn the fuck around," he demands, his hand on my waist as he guides me to face him. The sheer lust that reflects in his eyes takes my breath away, my insides liquid, and my core aching. He touches my cheek with his knuckles before brushing wisps of hair from my face. "You're fucking beautiful." He leans in and kisses me fiercely, possessively, his tongue demanding entrance, and I willingly open for him. My heart races faster when he slides his hands

down my sides, settling on my hips. “Take his cock,” he murmurs, licking his lips. “Guide him into you.”

I’m still for a moment, staring into his eyes, my heart hammering so hard I’m sure it would break out of my chest. “Nicoli, are you sure?”

“Fucking do it, baby girl.” This time his voice holds more conviction, and he applies pressure to my hips. I reach for Rome and position him at my entrance as Nicoli starts to push me down, our gaze locked, neither of us looking away.

My lips part as Rome slides easily into me, filling me up one delicious inch after another. My husband kisses me again, forcing me down quick and hard, my body taking all of Rome’s cock.

“Aaah,” I moan against his lips, my body trembling as he guides me up and down. My limbs are heavy, every muscle coiled tight as I keep moving to Nicoli’s motion, the momentum increasing. Rome’s length swells inside me, and he curses as he goes deeper into me every time.

“I need you to come, Hummingbird,” Nicoli growls, dropping his hand between my legs, finding my clit and working it with fast strokes. The pressure builds up until the wave crashes over me, possessing me with a pleasure that explodes through my veins with an inferno of wildfire. I cry out as the orgasm rips up my spine and back down to my core, my inner walls clenching around Rome’s cock.

“Jesus, she sounds fucking beautiful when she comes, Nicoli.”

“If you think her cries are beautiful, you should see her face.”

Nicoli is no longer controlling my hips. Instead, I’m rocking to my own accord, riding my climax rough and hard.

Sweat clings to my upper lip, and I’m all panting breaths and electric currents as ecstasy consumes me.

Nicoli smiles as I open my eyes, staring right at him. “Now for the fun part,” he teases, and I’m not sure I can handle any

more. But he leaves me no choice, guiding me to turn and face Rome again. I'm weak, my limbs numb, and mind shattered.

"Remember how I told you your ass is mine?" He slides his hand between my legs, his fingers stroking through my slit, spreading my cum upward and around my tight hole.

"Yes," I whisper. I'm all lubed up with my own arousal, and his finger slides into my back entrance. It's so intense, and I'm unsure if I'm about to climax again or if it just hasn't stopped rippling through me since the first time.

"You ready for this?"

"Hmm-mm." I suck my lower lip into my mouth.

"Good. Now, take his cock inside you again." Simpering, Nicoli sweeps my hair over my shoulder, kissing along the back of my neck. I've fantasized about this moment many times, wondering what it would feel like to be taken by two men at once. But I never could have imagined this. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced.

I arch my back, Rome's cock buried inside me to the hilt. I'm drunk on sensation, dizzy with desire. And then I feel him there—Nicoli's cock squeezing into me, and I stiffen. "Relax, baby girl," he rasps, snaking an arm around my waist and up my front, cupping my breast. "You have to let me in."

Rome flexes his hips so light and slow, he's barely moving inside me, giving me time to adjust.

Nicoli's hand is on the small of my back. "Lean forward."

I place my palms flat on Rome's chest, his skin hot and clammy, a faint dusting of chest hair glimmering with perspiration.

Nicoli pushes inside me, and I gasp, whimpering at the intrusion as he sinks in little by little. "Fuck, your ass is tight," he growls, and I feel cold liquid run down my ass, followed by the gentle strokes of his fingers as he spreads out the lube.

He tries again, and this time it's smoother, easy as he gently pushes inside me. It's not as painful as I thought it

would be, and I'm thankful for experimenting in Tuscany and how Nicoli prepared my body for this moment.

"Oh, yeah, baby girl," he murmurs. "Take all of us."

This time I sink back down, taking Nicoli into me, and he curses heavily against my back. I'm filled with both their cocks now, my body stretched around them, hot and heavy. I try to suppress a moan by biting my bottom lip, feeling both of them pushing in and out. Rome picks up the pace, thrusting ever deeper into me while Nicoli follows with slow and steady rocking. I don't think I've ever been this full, filled to capacity, my body trembling from the exquisite pressure that's both pleasure and pain rolled up into a whirlpool of sensations.

"Your ass will always only be mine."

"Only yours," I simper. Both men increase their thrusts in an alternating rhythm that shows their experience with sharing women. They're moving with my pleasure in mind and not their own until all three of us find a cadence that's a seductive dance that builds and builds, until my body starts to tremble, unable to take any more.

"Nicoli. I can't...it's too much."

Abruptly, I'm pulled away from Rome's body, both men sliding out of me, relief flooding my system. I'm a fucking mess when Nicoli forces me down to take Rome's cock back in my mouth while he slams into my pussy.

Nicoli grunts, and I moan loudly as he pounds relentlessly into my cunt. The orgasm takes me, rippling and crashing against every bone. My body trembles from head to toe, and my breaths are heavily panting exhales.

"Nicoli." Rome tugs at the cuffs around his wrists. "I'm gonna come."

"Swallow every last drop, Hummingbird."

Rome comes in my mouth, squirting in the back of my throat, and Nicoli roars, his cock jerking inside me as he climaxes. Both men orgasm, cum dripping from my mouth as I struggle to swallow it all.

Nicoli's fingers dig into my hips, his groans reaching peaks with every thrust.

"Nicoli," I exhale, overcome with exhaustion that crashes over me. "I can't."

"I got you, baby girl."

I collapse, and Nicoli pulls me into him, moving so he's cradling me against his chest. My mind is in hazy chaos, my body aching all over. Reaching up, I cup his cheek, staring up and into the blue depths of his irises. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Hummingbird. Now, close your eyes. I'll take care of you." He takes my hand and kisses my palm. "I'll always take care of you."



THE WATER IS warm and soothing against my skin, the floaty bubbles popping with the scent of light flowers and coconut. Candlelight flickers in every corner of the modern, sleek bathroom, reflecting in the large mirror above the wall-mounted vanity. It's all white marble and silver finishings, strikingly different from the dark and sultry bedroom.

My bones are numb, and there's a dull ache between my legs. My body is exhausted, but on the inside, I feel exhilarated. My mind is calm without racing thoughts, only... bliss.

I'm basking in the afterglow of what happened between the three of us. I've always imagined what it would be like with two men, but I never thought I'd ever have the chance to experience it. And it surpassed every dream, every fantasy, but only because Nicoli was there. He guided me and took control. It wouldn't have been this mindblowing if I didn't have him right there with me.

The door opens, and Nicoli stands silhouetted in the doorway. "He's gone."

“He left?”

“Yeah.” Nicoli strolls in, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. “Part of the deal. No hovering and no sticking around for pillow-talk.” He pulls a hand through his hair. “Frankly, I think Rome’s just happy he’s still alive.”

I chuckle. “Why would he agree to it if he thought his life was in danger?”

“Apparently, he’s a masochist.”

Nicoli kneels beside the tub, cupping his palm and running water down my shoulders. “You okay?”

“Sore.”

He smirks as if my being sore is a massive pat on the back for him.

“Stop smiling, Casanova. You had help.”

Silence settles, but it’s not uncomfortable. It’s pensive and calm as if we’re both caught in deep thought.

I move my legs from side to side and watch the water ripple. “Where do we go from here?”

“Home.”

I splash him with water. “I’m serious. What happens now?”

The flickering candlelight dances across his sapphire eyes. “Get out of the bath.”

“What? Why? I’m really comfortable, and the water is so nice and—”

“Mirabella Del Rossa, get out of the tub.”

My heart skips a beat at him using my name—my new name. Whenever someone calls me Mrs. Del Rossa, I have the overwhelming urge to pinch myself just to make sure it’s real.

Nicoli helps to steady me as I climb out, water and soap suds sliding down my body. I try to grab a towel, but he stops me by pulling me to the center of the bathroom.

“Can I at least cover up a bit?”

“Nope.” He grabs his jacket off the ottoman and reaches into the pocket. “I want you naked for this.”

“Nicoli. You know, tonight was great. In fact, it was so great, I think I’m going to need a timeout for the next two days.”

“That’s adorable,” he says with a frown and a half-smile. “The fact that you think I’m a gentleman who will give his wife’s cunt a timeout.”

I try to reach for a towel again, but he gets there first and tosses it aside. “I said I want you naked for this.”

“For what?”

Nicoli pulls a royal blue velvet box from his jacket and drops the jacket to the floor.

My heart beats a staccato rhythm inside my chest when Nicoli approaches me. I’ll never get used to the way his presence penetrates the air, filling every corner of a room with a dominant energy. He manages to make me forget that I need air because I always find myself breathless when he’s this close.

“I wanted to give you this experience tonight because the truth is, I’m a selfish prick, and when it comes to you, I’m a possessive prick, too.”

I smile. “Is it bad for me to get turned on when you get all possessive?”

“Fuck no. At least now, when I get possessive and do something stupid, I’ll just give you my dick instead of an apology.”

I swat his arm. “Asshole.”

“As I was saying.” He takes my left hand in his, staring at the wet ribbon still tied around my finger. “I had to give you this one night because when we walk out of this apartment tonight, things will be different.”

“Different?”

He opens the velvet box, and I hold my breath as he reveals an emerald shaped diamond in a four-cross-claw setting, the white gold band adorned with pavé petite diamonds.

“Oh my God, Nicoli.”

He takes the ring out of its cushioned confinement and holds it between his fingers. “A wedding in our living room in front of a priest my brother paid, with a ribbon as a wedding ring, was just all kinds of wrong for someone as special and beautiful as you, Hummingbird.” He goes on one knee, and I place my hand on my chest. “And I want to at least try to make this one thing real and as it should be.”

“What are you doing?”

On bended knee, he takes my hand in his, but he doesn’t look up. “About a month after you and Maximo came to live with us, you came into my room one night, and you got into my bed.”

I don’t say a word as I watch him, my heart about to explode out of my chest.

“You thought you were in Maximo’s room and started telling me things you remembered of the night you lost your parents.”

I swallow hard, emotion thickening in my throat.

“You said a promise is *expensiver*—”

“*Expensiver*?” I chuckle.

He smiles. “Yeah. You said a promise is *expensiver* than a pot of gold. And that every time you make a promise, God writes it down in His book. And if you break it, He has to tear out that page.” Nicoli finally looks up at me, and the emotion in his eyes steals my breath. “Tonight I promise that I will love you with all that I am, every day for the rest of my fucking life. I promise that I will protect you, keep you safe, and make sure you are loved the way you deserve to be loved. And I swear, Mira, I fucking swear—” he bites out “—I won’t make God tear out this page in His book. Ever.”

Tears roll down my cheeks, and I gasp, placing my hand in front of my mouth.

“Mirabella Tirell, will you marry me?”

I stare at him through the tears in my eyes, unable to speak. I’m unable to move because I’m afraid I might fall apart in this most beautiful, powerful, and magical moment of my entire life.

“Yes,” I whisper. “A thousand times, yes.”

Nicoli slips the ring on my finger, and something inside me unlocks; the world changes and suddenly, everything is just...right. It’s as if every breath I’ve taken my entire life now makes sense.

Nicoli is still on one knee as he reaches around my waist, pulling me close and pressing his lips against my belly, his eyes squeezed shut. “I’m sorry it took me this long, Hummingbird.”

I weave my fingers through his dark hair, his naked arms and chest warm against my skin. “Better late than never.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I'm nervous.

Of course, I am. I never imagined Nicoli would agree to bring me here. I've spent hours, maybe even days, of my life wondering what it looked like. Leandra often goes there with Alexius, but she never talks about it. What happens at Myth stays at Myth, it seems. It's like their nights spent there are part of a world that's only theirs and no one else's. The only thing she has shared with me is that they always go masked because Alexius is determined to hide her from the rest of the guests. No one gets a glimpse of her because she is only his. And she's okay with it. She's more of a background kind of woman, the silent type who observes, yet her presence is always known. She's the perfect woman for Alexius. She's strong enough to keep him grounded, and she doesn't need to use her own voice to feel validated simply because she has all the confidence she needs to be Alexius Del Rossa's wife. I'm not like that. I've never been like that. The spotlight is where I shine the brightest. My personality is too large to be contained in the background. I grew up in this world. I've lived it, and I've become just like it.

I was born to be a Del Rossa wife.

Nicoli parks his car by the back entrance, and I'm nervously flicking my nails. "Everyone's here?"

"Yeah. Alexius made sure everyone and their fucking mother got invited tonight."

"Nunzio?"

Nicoli swallows hard. “I’m afraid so. I got outvoted. Seems like my brothers, including yours, think that having Nunzio here with a personal invitation from the Dark Sovereign would make it less likely for him to follow through with his plans to step into our line of business.”

“How so?”

“If he’s seen among our VIP guests enjoying the services we provide and tomorrow decides to open his own club, he’ll be branded a snake who can’t be trusted. And that would make his odds of finding allies zero to none.”

“It makes sense.”

“I know,” he sneers. “But that doesn’t mean I like it. And then my brother doesn’t even have the balls to be here himself.”

“You know how he is with Myth and showing Leandra’s face around here,” I say. “And she doesn’t want him here without her, which reminds me.” I reach out and touch his cheek. “That rule applies now to you as well, Nicoli Del Rossa. No more midnight rendezvous around this place without me. Understood?”

He places a palm on my knee. I’m wearing an A-line, high-neck, floor-length dress that’s tight around my waist and entirely made of red lace. Two slits on either side spread all the way up to my hip—no panties required, which is convenient when your husband decides to finger you in his car.

His hand eases the lace off the side of my leg. “Trust me when I say there is nothing here that I want.”

“Says the man who came here almost every night.”

“Because he tried to fuck the one thing he couldn’t have out of his system. And now—” he forces a finger inside me, causing me to squirm on the leather seats of his Audi “—I no longer have to.”

I let out a sigh as he pulls his hand away from me, trying to catch my breath. “You are the devil. You know that?”

“In an Armani suit.” He winks and shoots me a wicked grin before getting out of the car, moving around it and opening my door to help me out.

The air is soft and warm, the breeze gentle and slow. The moon and stars are on full display in all their splendor, like it’s casting their magic down on us. Maybe it’s the thrill, the excitement, the hint of nerves, but I’m entirely electrified. Just the idea of it all makes my heart quicken, and my skin burns with anticipation.

Nicoli pulls me closer and presses his lips to mine tenderly, caressing my neck with soft kisses before looking deep into my eyes. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you look in red?”

“Does this dress carry your stamp of approval?”

“Oh, it does. I just hope you’re not attached to it, because I love the sight of torn lace all over the fucking floor.” He places his thumb on my bottom lip, applying pressure. “Remember. You do exactly as I say. Exactly.”

“I will.”

“Good. Now let’s go show the world my new queen.”



Nicoli

I’M a fool for doing this. Every instinct inside me is screaming for me to take her home—especially with Nunzio Ferrero being here tonight. I hate this tactical game we need to play—a battle of wits. I’d much rather charge into this fucker’s house and slaughter each and every person who merely knows his goddamn name. I’m not patient. I don’t play games with fuckers. You piss me off, I drive a knife through your heart. You fuck me over, I plant lead in your skull. Threaten those I hold dear, and I will make you suffer in a way that’ll have you praying for an eternity in Hell.

Alexius expects too much of me, even though I'd probably demand the same if I were in his shoes. And Mira is way too accepting and understanding. I wish she'd show more hesitance and have difficulty understanding how all this works because then I'd have a pretty fucking solid excuse not to go through with this. But my wife is showing more backbone than I ever expected. Looking beautiful in her red dress that clings perfectly to her curves, the lace enclosed around her neck with her hair tied up high, she exudes elegance and poise. It's like she's finally stepped into the role she's been born to play. Her confidence is that of a queen and ruler of man, a woman whose smile can seduce and lips that poison—an enchantress capable of anything. But that still doesn't put me at ease. Just because she's stronger than anyone has given her credit for doesn't mean I can throw her to the wolves and hope they won't bite.

Just then, I spot Nunzio Ferrero getting out of his limousine, buttoning up his suit jacket. The man's a fucking snake, and he looks the part too.

He catches me glaring at him and struts toward me like we're old friends from high school who were co-captains of the fucking lacrosse team. He has four men flanking him—a giant wall to protect the serpent wannabe-king.

“Nicoli,” he greets.

“Nunzio.” I pull Mira closer and slip an arm around her waist.

Nunzio's slimy gaze drips down her body, and I want to tear his damn eyes out. “I was surprised when I received your brother's invitation. I've been trying for years to get into this place.”

My nostrils flare. “Any specific reason?” We both know the answer, but I challenge him anyway.

“When one hears about paradise on Earth, it's only natural to want to witness it for yourself.”

“Or create your own,” I say, and by the way he looks at me, I know he's reading between the lines.

He huffs. “I don’t see the harm in two different versions of paradise coexisting.” He straightens his shoulders underneath his suit jacket. “Anyway. So, tell me, what I can expect from my first visit here? Any forbidden fruit for men with...darker tastes? You know what I mean?”

I’m picking up what he’s putting down, and I sure as fuck ain’t playing. “Like rape?” I bite out between clenched teeth and feel Mira stiffen beside me.

“No one said anything about rape.” His eyes flicker to Mira and then back at me again. “There’s nothing wrong with heavy petting or a little rough play between adults. You know what I mean?”

“I’m afraid we don’t,” Mira chimes in. Where is a roll of duct tape when you need it? “Please explain what it is you mean...exactly.” She spits out her last word, and I can practically taste her venom.

Nunzio is taken aback by Mirabella, not used to women speaking their minds, I bet. And he simply stares at her in a way that makes my fucking skin crawl.

Mira smiles. “Mr. Ferrero, if you are referring to dubious acts that entail hurting or harming any of the girls under our employment, I’m afraid this is not the place for you. But I do know of one that is far better suited for someone with your tastes.”

Nunzio rolls his tongue in his mouth.

“I think they call it Hell.” Mira speaks the words so fucking smoothly, it’s like an open palm slap to the cheek—and the look on Nunzio’s face confirms it.

His nostrils flare, and his eyes are dark orbs of rage. “It seems your wife isn’t familiar with her place, Mr. Del Rossa. Perhaps you need to teach her.”

Maximo steps in on Mira’s other side, and I gently ease her back as I take a step forward, boxing her in between Maximo and myself.

“Friendly warning, Nunzio. Keep your filthy mouth off my wife.”

“Then you better keep her on a fucking leash, or someone else will be forced to teach her tricks,” he spits out. “Like to go on her fucking knees.”

It’s instinct. There’s no thought process involved. There’s no assessing the pros and cons of what I’m about to do. It’s just the natural thing to do, like taking one breath after the other.

I reach for my gun tucked into my back when Mira’s hand wraps around my elbow, stilling me, whispering in my ear, “Don’t.” I freeze, not taking my eyes off Nunzio. “It’s what he wants.”

“Maximo, get my wife back into the car.”

Mira tightens her hold on my arm, her nails sinking into my flesh, a silent way of telling me she’s not going anywhere.

“I think it’s best you leave, Nunzio,” I say, still keeping my hand on my gun.

“I’m here on invitation by your brother.”

“And I’m revoking it.”

We stay rooted in our spots, and Nunzio’s jaw clenches. He’s hungry. I can smell it on him. He craves it just as much as I do. The blood. The violence. The mayhem. And he won’t stop until he gets it. All those fake apologies over what Felix did, pretending the Ferreros are in our debt, that there will be no retaliation—it’s all bullshit. If anything, it only made him more determined to take what’s ours and destroy us.

Nunzio presses his lips together, a silent challenge in his eyes which I accept with a simple nod.

A half grin spreads on his ugly motherfucking face as he turns to walk away but stops and glances over his shoulder. “By the way, Mrs. Del Rossa. My condolences for your loss. No child should lose her parents in such a cruel way.”

“Motherfucker!” I lash out, ready to tear his goddamn head off, when Maximo jumps in front of me, pushing me back.

“Not with her here,” Maximo warns, reminding me through the red haze that Mira is standing behind me. “Take

her home. Now.”

Nunzio smirks. “I’d listen to your bodyguard here. This is no place for a beauty like her.

I’m clenching my jaw and biting my tongue, my veins burning with adrenaline, the monster in me ready to destroy and annihilate as I watch him walk away. Alexius was wrong. There is no avoiding a war between the Ferreros and us. The war already began that fateful night seventeen years ago. And my father might have chosen peace, but I don’t. I won’t.

I choose vengeance.



The Ferrero family is determined to ruin the Dark Sovereign from the inside out, starting with the new Del Rossa wife.

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Reckless

To Touch You

To Hate You



All the way from Cape Town, South Africa, Bella J lives for the days when she's able to retreat to her writer's cave where she can get lost in her little pretend world of romance, love, and insanely hot bad boys.

Bella J is a Hybrid Author with both Self-Published and Traditional Published work. Even though her novels range from drama, to comedy, to suspense, it's the dark, twisted side of romance she loves the most.

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