



DARK
SOVEREIGN

HIS WIFE

international bestselling author

BELLA J.

His Wife

DARK SOVEREIGN, BOOK 2

BELLA J.

Contents

[Author's Note:](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[OTHER NOVELS by BELLA J](#)

[About the Author](#)

Copyright ©2022 by Bella J

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual living or dead person, businesses, events, or locales is purely coincidental.

Author's Note:

His Wife is book 2 in the Dark Sovereign series and should be read after Alexius, Book 1. If you haven't read Alexius, you can grab your copy [here](#).

What to expect:

Graphic violence

Sexual situations that might make some readers feel uncomfortable

Everything you would expect from a mafia romance

A hero (or villain) with questionable morals

XOXO

Chapter One

LEANDRA

Each time he touches me, I feel it deeper, its effect more profound. It digs deep into my soul, penetrating every wall I have ever built. I'm weak against it, unable to fight the descent into oblivion with him, lost forever, and God knows I never want to be found. Not as long as I'm with him.

In bed at night, just the feel of his breath against my skin has my blood instantly rushing to the surface, heat accelerating through my body, causing my head to spin with the promise of pleasure he delivers every single time.

It's in the dark that his blue eyes gleam the most, their brilliance keeping my gaze captive. We're connected. So in tune with each other. It's easy to convince myself that we're meant to be. There are so many lies my mind can tell whenever I'm under his spell, so many fables weaved within his touch. He makes me reckless, not caring about the consequences I might face when all this is over.

I've never been one to play with fire, yet with him, I crave to burn. I pray for my destruction if it means I can find my ruin in his palms, his fingers, his mouth, his body. I never imagined I'd one day find myself in the arms of a man whose name once sent shivers down my spine. Now, his name ignites a spark—a raging inferno that makes my body ache for him.

Alexius.

Alexius Del Rossa.

My husband.

The man I vowed to hate, only to fall into the snake pit where my heart now beats for him. I am his. I want only him. Every second spent with him is one moment closer to my undoing. He will steal my breath and corrupt my soul. I know that. I can feel it when my heart starts racing whenever he's near

me. Warning knocks against my chest when I struggle to breathe every time his sapphire gaze takes me captive. And those moments when his silent presence sends a flush to my cheeks and crazed butterflies to my stomach, that's when I know the lines have blurred and nothing is as black and white as it was when it all started. That I'm no longer the scared girl he propositioned with an envelope that held the power of a different life for me. And whenever he touches my cheek, his eyes glazed and beautiful with him lost in thought, I can see a glimpse of a man who no longer seems to hate what I represent and loathe who I am to him.

His wife.

Maybe it's a twisted fantasy of a girl who once had nothing, and now lies at the feet of a king. Or maybe it's the dream of a woman who longs to find love in this dark world.

Either way, Alexius Del Rossa will be the end of me.

I hear the clink of ice cubes, imagining him taking a sip of his whiskey, savoring the rich taste on his tongue while he watches me with blue eyes threatening to ignite. But there's something different tonight. He's different. The air is heavy, loaded, and thick. Like time is ticking by, closing in on the inevitable.

The end of our arrangement, perhaps.

"Your thighs burning yet?" I shiver from the sound of his voice. "You've been in that position for a long time. Your stiletto heels are starting to sink into my carpet."

I shake my head. "There's a different part of me aching right now."

"I can see that. Your pussy is blushing for me, all pink and swollen."

"Please," I beg. "How long are you going to leave me like this?"

"For as long as I fucking like."

On the floor and crouched, knees bent and pulled wide, I steady myself. My hands are tied behind my back, the silk constraints wrapped around my wrists. The blindfold is soft against my skin, my lack of sight causing me to focus on nothing other than the rich timbre of his voice that could carry me to orgasm with words alone.

I can feel his eyes on me. The heat of how he watches me spread open and naked. Vulnerable.

"Submission suits you, stray." I hear the ice cubes again. "How can you be this perfect angel at my side, yet you're this tempting siren at my feet? You're my perfect contradiction."

The sound of his heavy footsteps coming closer has me shivering with anticipation. I let out a breath hearing him unzip his pants, the fabric brushing across my knee as it falls to the floor. My heart beats a staccato rhythm against my ribs, my blood singing for the next fix of the euphoria only he can give.

Slipping in behind me, his naked thighs press against my shoulders, I settle back between his legs as he sits down on the mattress. I'm trembling at the first feel of his fingertips against my spine as he draws lazy circles along my skin. Blindfolded, I'm forced to endure the heightened pleasure and torture of his touch. It's gentle, tender yet poisonous, as it infects me inch by slow inch, and the sound of his steady breathing, the feel of it dancing along my naked shoulder, has me leaning my neck to the side, hoping he'll place his red-hot lips on my flesh.

"Who knew the stray I picked up off the streets would end up at my feet, eager for my cock? An insatiable little slut who thrives on the knowledge of her husband's dick throbbing for her."

Fuck. My insides are a mess when his choice of words meant to insult only feeds my need. It's the dark shadows of my soul that relishes it, seeking ecstasy within the depths of our depravities. With a quick sweep of his hand, he slips my hair over my left shoulder, finally touching his lips to my skin.

He shifts, and I moan at the brush of the tip of his cock along my back. I can smell him—the spicy smell of sandalwood and the sweet scent of sex that emanates from our pores whenever we're together like this.

He reaches over my shoulder to palm my breast, twisting my nipple between his fingers, and I jolt from the sting, sucking air through my teeth. While his lips explore my naked shoulder, I can feel that something is off. It's him. He seems...troubled.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing but the fact that my cock wants into you."

As if I can see him, I turn my head halfway, only to have him grab my jaw and force my face toward him, pressing his mouth to mine and spearing his tongue past my lips, feeding me his taste, his need, his intentions.

A whimper forces out of my lungs when his hand reaches down my stomach, cupping my sex, and I rock on my feet, almost losing my balance.

Breaking our kiss, his lips brush along the shell of my ear. "There is something about you that makes me forget about a life outside these walls." He inserts a finger in my pussy, and my lips part. "I can walk through my

bedroom door feeling like the whole world is closing in on me, lay a single fucking glance on you, and everything disappears, fading to nothing compared to the ache of wanting to bury my cock deep into this wet cunt of yours. Why is that? Why do I continue to want to lose myself in you?” His voice dips low, a tinge of resentment resounding off every syllable. “I only wanted a wife in you, Leandra. Not a goddamn distraction.”

“I guess we both got more than we bargained for, didn’t we?”

I feel his lips curve against my neck. “I suppose we did.”

A second finger slips inside me, his arm snaking around my shoulder rigid as he reaches down farther. “Let’s see if you can keep your balance while I make you come like this.”

His thumb finds my clit, and I loll my head to the side. My legs shiver, and my body coils tight around his fingers, every stroke bringing me closer to pleasure.

“Alexius,” I moan.

“I’ll make it easy for you this time.” The second he bites down on my shoulder, my orgasm crests, every muscle shuddering from the pleasure he so expertly forces into me.

“Get up,” he orders, pulling his hand from my sex without giving me a moment to come down from the high, grabbing my shoulders and hoisting me to my feet. I can barely stand, my heart beating wildly with every heavy breath.

The blindfold is yanked off, and light hits my eyes. I blink rapidly, my sight adjusting to the light in the room while Alexius unties my hands. Lust ripples from him in torrid waves that infect the air, making it hard to breathe. Alexius isn’t a gentle lover; his touch and claiming of my body are always possessive and dominant. Sometimes cruel, yet always exactly the way I want it.

But it feels different now. He’s different. Angry. A brutal man with a savage touch that both hurts and ignites.

With irate steps and brutal fingers, he forces me toward the draped curtains before jerking them to the side, the hues of early sunset slicing through the window.

“Alexius, what are you doing?”

“That’s a stupid fucking question.”

With a palm against my back, he pushes me up against the glass, my nipples hardening from the cold, a stark contradiction from the heat that

scalds my flesh as he presses his hard chest against my back. “I’m going to fuck you against this window.”

“Someone might see us.”

“We can hope. I don’t care who sees me fucking you, Leandra. In fact, I want the whole goddamn world to see so everyone can know who you belong to.”

I glance down from the second floor at the garden and its clear cobbled pathway. Someone can walk across at any moment, look up and see us. See me, my naked body pressed against the glass while Alexius fucks me from behind.

The thought thrills me, excitement tearing at my insides as I imagine one of his brothers standing there, watching us. I still wonder which one he shared me with, whose tongue lapped at my pussy, whose cock I gagged on.

Alexius lines up his cock and pushes it inside me. A warm breath leaves my lips and mists the window just as he fists my hair, flexing his hips before pounding back into me, causing me to moan out loud.

“That’s my stray,” he murmurs into my hair. “Let me hear you.”

His hands fall to my hips, and he grinds into me, his cock hitting me deep. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t close my eyes. I’m staring at the path that leads through the rows of roses—some still blooming even though it’s late autumn, and most greens have turned to the rustic shades of fall. There’s this sordid part of me that wants someone to appear there—to have eyes on me, on us.

Alexius buries himself to the hilt inside my aching pussy, thrusting so hard my feet lift off the ground. I’m helpless against the onslaught—against the pleasure he fucks into me, his cock hitting that perfect spot that sends shivers to every corner of my body, making my toes curl and my breath catch in my throat.

Every thrust is hard and unyielding, his hips slamming against my ass. He’d probably tear me apart if my body weren’t accustomed to him.

There’s a flash of a dark figure that appears across the garden, and my heart hiccups inside my chest as I narrow my eyes. My breasts slip up and down the glass as Alexius continues to fuck me.

I can’t see who it is walking in the distance, and my pulse races with anticipation just as he looks up. There’s no telling whether it’s Nicoli or Caelian. I know it’s not Isaia because this person is wearing a suit.

Alexius looks over my shoulder and nudges me with his chin. “Show him

what you look like when you come.”

“Who is that?”

“What does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He reaches around my waist, sliding his fingers between my legs, finding my clit, causing me to gasp and arch my back. “You don’t give a fuck who it is, as long they watch us fuck. That’s all that matters to you, isn’t it?”

I glance to the side at Alexius’ parted lips before meeting his fiery blue gaze, instantly lost in their depths, willingly drowning. My hunger for him doubles, and I’m an aching, starving mess for him. Just him. Always him. He’s right. It doesn’t matter who watches us, who witnesses us come undone, our bodies twisted together. All that matters is us. This. The way we feed each other’s most wicked desires.

Pressing harder against my clit, Alexius pulls me tighter against him, driving into me with one relentless thrust after the other, and each time his cock reaches the deepest part of me, a moan tears from my body.

He grabs my jaw with his other hand, forcing my head back, our parted lips touching. We don’t have the strength or the control to kiss. All we’re capable of is fueling our bodies forward toward a rapture that’s become our addiction.

I’m cocooned between him and the window, his fingers biting painfully into my jaw. But I like it. I relish the sting of pain as it feeds the darkness that would detonate at any moment.

“You better come,” he demands. “If I come before you do, I’ll pull my cock out of you and leave you aching until morning.”

His poison-laced threat is the last push I need, and my body convulses as my climax rips from my pussy to my spine. I’m still caught in the electric current of euphoria when I feel him come, his cock jerking as he fills me.

“Jesus. Fuck,” he curses, burying his face in the crook of my neck, and I go limp against him, wincing as his cock slips out of me, followed by his cum dripping down my inner thighs.

I can’t move, utterly spent and thoroughly fucked, when he presses his lips against my spine before draping his shirt over my naked shoulders. “I won’t be back in time for dinner,” he says before walking away.

Chapter Two

ALEXIUS

I glance up at her bedroom window, and there she is, staring down at me from the second floor. A vision of mystery and beauty trapped inside the walls of my world. Even from a distance, I can see the confusion painted on her beautiful face as she watches me leave. I've been around less than usual, distracted with this fucking mess some sadistic church fucker has been leaving on our goddamn front porch. Knowing Leandra, her mind is probably working overtime, the wheels turning in the direction of my absence being because of her, because of what's happening between us. She might think I'm trying to get away from her, but that idea is crushed every time I come home and fuck her until sunrise. All I want to do is lose myself in her. Forget about the war raging on the outside of these walls. With her, the weight of being the firstborn Del Rossa seems lighter—like it's no longer crushing me. I hate it. I hate that I look forward to the next time I'm able to touch her, kiss her, to just *be* with her. I'm constantly distracted thinking about her, wanting nothing more than to let everything I've worked for all these years go up in smoke around me so I can do nothing else but be with her. To just be a man who wants to make his wife come, scream his name, and witness her drown in pleasure while his heart is consumed by her.

She's a distraction, one I don't need nor want. But one I refuse to get rid of.

One giant clusterfuck of a contradiction—that's what my life feels like ever since I fucked her in that damn boutique. I should burn that fucking place to the ground. *Or turn it into a goddamn shrine.*

The engine of my Maserati roars to life as I turn the ignition. I glance up at her through my windshield one more time, and she drops the curtain. I feel

a pang of...something, aware of the divide between us that's always been there, but lately, I forced myself to ignore it because my need to own every last drop of her essence is much stronger.

It's been weeks since our wedding, and we still live in separate bedrooms even though we only fuck in mine. Countless times I've told her to move her things into my room, but she's been reluctant. Hesitant. Guarded. And I fucking hate it. I want her in my bed where I can touch her whenever I want and lose myself inside her when the clock strikes midnight. But she's not ready, I know that. But I'm too selfish to give a fuck, yet I care enough to not force her.

My wife. My contradiction.

Fog hovers over the city, early morning sunrays tearing through the mist. The streets are starting to come alive with traffic and crowds of people clutching their coats, everyone rushing to go make a buck only to hurry straight back home after because they're exhausted from chasing wealth. Tomorrow morning, rinse and repeat.

Luckily, I'm early enough to miss the peak, and it doesn't take me long before I park at the back entrance of Myth. Caelian is standing outside smoking, the collar of his black coat lifted to ward off the cold.

Nicoli pulls up next to me with his red Ferrari and straightens his tie as he gets out, eyeing me as I close my door. "You're late."

"So are you."

"I was distracted." He slips his hands in his pants pockets, a hint of a smirk settling in the corners of his mouth. "By something that demanded my attention in our mother's garden, where she takes her morning walks...every day."

I grin. "And I was distracted by my wife's needy pussy, not giving a fuck about who walks where."

His blue eyes flash suggestively. "Something tells me you still have your dick up the ass of the horny honeymoon phase."

"You jealous?"

"Have you seen your wife? Of course, I'm fucking jealous. Everyone with a dick is jealous."

"Yeah, well, they should keep their dicks in their pants unless they want to choke on it." A subtle reminder that I won't be sharing my wife with anyone. Not again.

Nicoli grabs my arm as I start toward the entrance, pulling me back.

“Don’t fuck it up.”

“Don’t fuck what up?”

“You and her. Do not fuck it up. That woman’s got you by the balls, and any fool can see she’s been fucking breathing just for you lately. Don’t do something stupid to derail it or self-sabotage your shot at being happy.”

There’s a flash of something raw in his eyes. Envy. Longing. A yearning for something he thinks he’ll never have.

I step closer, fixing my gaze on his. “How long has it been?”

“How long has what been?”

“Since the day you decided to deny yourself the one thing you want above all others.”

A knowing look passes between us, and for no more than a quarter of a second does Nicoli let his guard down, allowing me a glimpse of the man plagued by his only weakness for too damn long. It’s all there, clinging to his demeanor, the tightness around his eyes and the tic of his jaw. But as quickly as it came, it vanishes too, and he roughs a hand through his midnight hair. “I have my reasons, and you know it.”

“I do. And I understand it. But that doesn’t mean I like watching my twin brother torture himself while doing everything in his power to make sure he ruins and destroys every path that could possibly lead to the source his heart has been beating for since he was nine years old.”

“Are we talking about Mira again?” Caelian interrupts, cigarette dangling between his lips. “Nicoli, do the world a favor and just fuck her already.”

Nicoli plucks Caelian’s cigarette from his lips before flicking it away. “Why don’t you do me a favor and die?”

“And what, leave my share of inheritance to all you ugly fuckers?”

“Can you assholes stop fucking around?” I’m at the top of the stairs glowering at the two children in front of me. “Isaia and Maximo are waiting for us.”

Nicoli shoulders past Caelian and shoves him to the side, and all three of us enter the club. It’s eerily quiet, not a sound other than our heavy footsteps across the white marbled floor as we descend the stairs. The low-hanging chandelier has been switched off, the walls devoid of dancing lights reflecting from the crystal teardrops to give our guests the feel of elegance. Royalty. Wealth.

The halls are empty, our determined footsteps the only sound that fills the open space. There’s not a soul in sight, which only adds to the eerie echo of

silence. Apart from Sundays, Myth is never closed. People's sins and depravities don't have a timestamp or a designated timeframe. It's always there, gnawing and scratching, tainting souls no matter the time of day. Myth is the garden of Eden where demons come to play from dusk 'til dawn, from sunrise until the moon drops behind the horizon. But on Sundays, the Lord's day, this little paradise rests, taking a break from injecting sin into the veins of its addicts.

Occasionally, we close the doors for shit like maintenance and renovations. It doesn't happen often, but it wouldn't seem out of the ordinary or suspicious if we closed the doors for a few days—which has been the case since we found Tarina's body. But to make it seem more authentic and less random, I've arranged for the entire gambling area to be repainted and have new blackjack and poker tables put in. The last thing we need is to ring any warning bells with our loyal clientele.

Our girls stay on the other side of the estate, and I've made sure they're too busy getting pampered with an entire team of beauty therapists and masseuses to ask questions. A well-deserved break and some renovations are the messages that got relayed to them regarding the impromptu closure of the club.

The faint scents of lemongrass and champagne trail behind us, carried by the heavy reality of what we're all doing here. As we pass, my gaze lingers on the double high-walled doors with brass hinges, our symbol carved on the polished oak. Today we're meeting up in the room where Tarina's lifeless body was found a few days ago. Isaia and his talent for code and electronics chose to go through the video footage of the last few weeks in that room. Twisted fucker says being in that room motivates him to find this sick son of a bitch. But if you ask me, Isaia is just a glutton for punishment and refuses to do anything the easy way. He thrives on torturing himself.

The metallic stench of blood and rotting flesh envelops me the second I put a foot inside. The room has been cleaned, and every trace of the gruesome scene erased as if it had never happened. But there's no way to get rid of the memories or dispel the bloody images plaguing these walls. I'm no stranger to blood or seeing brain matter splattered across a room or pieces of cracked bone protruding from knees and elbows. I've killed my fair share of men, including that waste of space, Jimmy, who was seen as family even though we didn't share the same blood. But it hits differently when it's someone you have sworn to protect. And that's what my brothers and I have

promised to do—to keep each and every girl on our payroll safe and taken care of.

Tarina’s ankles were strapped to a spreader bar, her wrists slit and tied behind her back. Her eyes had been removed, her ear cleanly torn off, and lips sewn shut—exactly the same as the first victim. The only difference was the note that had been hidden inside her mouth. I can still remember the sound of the scissors cutting through the black thread and the feel of the bloodied paper between my fingertips when I pulled it from her mouth.

*The mouth of an adulterous woman is a deep pit;
a man who is under the LORD’s wrath falls into it.
Proverbs 22:14*

But it was the last part of the note that forced ice through my veins.

*The Lord will deliver you all from evil,
And I will be His Instrument.
I am, after all...your brother.*

Your brother.

Did the word ‘brother’ have a religious connotation, referring to us all as brothers as children of God? Or was it meant literally? Literal brother.

I glance at all four of my brothers, Maximo included. Whoever this guy is, he sure as hell knows how to create a vortex of epic mindfucks that can swallow you whole and spit you out in goddamn pieces.

I swallow hard when the silver pole comes into view—the same pole her bloodied body was tied to. “What is that still doing here?”

Isaia looks up from the monitor and follows my gaze. “It’s getting taken down today.”

“Good,” I snarl and take a seat across from him. “Find anything?”

Nicoli and Caelian flank me, and Maximo slips in behind Isaia, staring at whatever is on the monitor.

“I can’t find the location, man. I’ve been trying to trace it and see where

the motherfucker disabled our cameras from. But I can't find shit!" He throws the mouse across the room, the little computer accessory exploding into pieces along with Isaia's frustration.

"Dude, relax," Nicoli says. "When was the last time you slept?"

"I don't need sleep. I just need to figure out how this fucker got past all our security, fucked with our cameras, and killed one of our girls."

"I still think we should close the club," Maximo says, rubbing his fingers along his beard, which seems longer than usual, his hair unkempt. It seems this entire situation is fucking with all of us, our lives coming to a complete standstill.

"No." I stretch my legs out in front of me. "The last thing we want is for word of this to get out and discredit the business we run here. We were lucky the security who found Tarina had half a brain not to rush down the hall screaming murder. We need to contain this at all costs."

"The girls are asking questions, man. They want to know where Tarina is." Maximo crosses his arms.

"My God." I leap up from my seat. "Tell them Tarina took a goddamn holiday, or she ran away and decided to become a waitress in fucking Jamaica. I don't care," I spit out. "We are not closing this club. We are not giving anyone any reason to question our reign in this motherfucking kingdom." My voice slams against the walls, my anger ricocheting off every word. "I am not going to let one sick fucker destroy our reputation, our legacy, and everything our family has built over the last goddamn fifty years, is that understood?"

Everyone's eyes remain on mine, no one making a move or sound except for Nicoli as he gets up. "I agree. Alexius is right. Whoever this sick fuck is, he's trying to rattle our cage, hoping we'd crack, and that isn't happening. We triple the security if we have to. Quadruple it. But we are not cowering away by shutting everything down."

"What if this asshole strikes again?" Caelian asks before lighting a cigarette. "Clearly, this son of a bitch knows how to get past our security and into our clubs undetected. He could just walk in here tomorrow and butcher another—"

"Wait. That's it." I stiffen, a giant motherfucking lightbulb going on inside my brain. "That has to be how he got in."

Maximo lowers a brow. "How?"

"He's a member. A regular. Someone who has been inside our clubs and

knows how we do things, the level of security we have.” I glance at Caelian playing with the cap of his Zippo lighter. “That’s how this fucker is fingering us, because he knows us.”

Chapter Three

LEANDRA

“I can’t decide. You pick one.” Mira carefully lays two pieces of fabric side-by-side out on Alexius’s desk, her brow furrowed as she studies them. “I mean, the ivory satin is so classic and romantic. But the champagne silk is exquisite. So elegant. My God, this is so hard.” She uses her palm to fan out the fabric, her indecisiveness evident in the way she tilts her head and purses her red lips. “What do you think?”

We’ve been going through tablecloth fabric samples since we locked ourselves in here hours ago. The anniversary party is tomorrow night and Mira woke up this morning doubting every choice she’s made, from the table setting to flowers. Everything. This is the closest I’ve seen her come to a mental breakdown.

I pick up two different sets of beige napkins. “I guess it depends on which napkin you choose. Timeless beige or Jasmine white?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Timeless beige. Not only is the name romantic, but the shade is also perfect to go with the peach roses.” She takes the napkin from me, and her entire face lights up. “Oh, my God, yes. The champagne silk with these napkins will scream elegant romance without looking boring. Leandra, you are a genius.”

I smile. “When you’re unsure about anything, start with the things you’re absolutely sure about and let your decisions flow from there.”

Mira places the napkin and tablecloth together, taking a step back to get a better look. “The aesthetics are perfect. Now,” she turns to look at the array of crystal vases set out on the table across the room when I place a simple, long-stemmed crystal vase above the flowing tablecloth and napkin set we’d chosen, setting it down gently. Mira’s plump lips curve into a warm smile,

and she claps her hands in approval. “I love it. Oh, it’s going to be so romantic. I’m already crying.”

I place an arm around her shoulder and squeeze. “It’s going to be perfect.”

“I hope so. I want this night to be everything and more for them. They’ve been so generous and kind, taking Maximo and me in and raising us as their own. I can’t imagine what would have happened to my us if it hadn’t been for them.” A rogue tear slides down her cheek, and she quickly swipes it away with her finger. “I still get nightmares of that night.”

“The night your parents were murdered?”

She nods. “And my oldest brother, Marco. Sometimes I know I’m dreaming, know I’m caught up in the nightmare. Other nights I wake up in cold sweats crying, the dream so vivid, I’m still stuck in that room with my parents’ bloodied bodies even after I wake up. She still checks on me some nights, Alexius’ mother.” Mira tightens her arms in front of her. “She’ll quietly walk into my room and place a kiss at my temple. Most of the time, I pretend to be asleep because I know it’s comforting for her, too, in a way.”

“I’m so happy you had them to take care of you.”

Mira glances at me. “You had no one.” Her voice sounds pained, and it reflects in her eyes. “You had no one to take care of you.”

I ease back and clutch my hands in front of me as I walk toward the office window. The morning started with clear skies, but clouds have since been carried by the howling wind, now casting shadows across the garden. “I survived, and that’s all that matters, right?”

A gentle sigh echoes from behind me. “Right. And hey, now you’re part of this family, too. Married to a millionaire with a bad attitude and an unhealthy relationship with crime and brothels.”

Mira snickers, but I merely smile, the thought of them running whore houses slowly carving a hole in my chest.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry,” she apologizes and slips in next to me. “It took me years to digest that last part so it no longer bothers me. And here I get my foot in my own ass by assuming you did the same over the span of a few weeks.”

I lick my lips and absentmindedly reach for the scar behind my ear, brushing the marred flesh. “I’ve heard the rumors of the Del Rossa brothers long before Alexius shoved that envelope down the front of my waitress uniform.”

“He did what?”

This time it’s my turn to chuckle as I glance at her sideways, feeling my cheeks warm. “He came into the diner where I worked and walked right up to me, practically pinning me against the wall while breathing down my neck.”

“Sounds like him,” she says dryly, rolling her eyes.

“He pulled out the black envelope and slipped it down my front, saying I had twenty-four hours.” The memory is so vivid, so detailed. I can remember the chills that erupted across my skin as his warm breath kissed my cheek. “I knew the moment I looked into his eyes he’d destroy me.”

Mira nudges me with her shoulder. “Destroy, as in a good or a bad way?”

“Verdict is still out on that.” I pull myself together and refuse to let the memory linger any longer. “I guess I don’t have to wonder whether the brothers frequent their own clubs.” I try hard not to let it sound like a question, yet I’m sure I fail, but secretly want her to tell me that Alexius has never gone to one of his own clubs, which is absurd. Of course, he has.

Mira unties her hair, shaking out the knots. “As a woman in this house, I’m not privy to any information regarding their business. They are incredibly secretive about everything, and it’s crossed my mind more than once that these hard-asses rule the Illuminati or have the Antichrist himself under their employment.” She sweeps her blonde hair into her fist and reties it in a messy bun, placing her arms on her hips. “But instead of making peace with the fact that I know nothing that goes on in this house, I make sure I have a pair of eyes and ears around here.”

I gape. “Are you serious?”

“Of course.” She shrugs, scowling as if I just asked the world’s most stupid question. “I live with these guys, Leandra. If shit goes down, I want to make sure I know what it is.”

“And what do you know about Myth?”

“Oh, Myth is the cream of the crop of all sex clubs. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors.”

“I have. But being from the other side of town, the gossip that littered the streets was more about the lower-class clubs.”

Mira takes my hand and leads me to the leather couch, sitting down at the edge of the seat and pouring us both a glass of whiskey from the crystal decanter. She hands me mine before settling back. “What I know about Myth is that you have to be richer than Elon Musk and more powerful than the president to get access. Gambling is a big part of this family’s business—at

least, that's what I gathered over the years. Even though Myth is a sex club, I believe the poker and blackjack tables are the main attraction. It's where the men roll out their dicks to see who has the bigger one." She takes a sip of her whiskey and winces as she swallows. "I will say, I overheard Alexius and Nicoli talking once, and it sounds like they take good care of the girls who work for them."

"What did you hear?" I ask, clutching my glass tighter.

She bites her lip and looks thoughtfully across the room. "One of them had suddenly gotten sick, and her gallbladder needed to be removed. Alexius paid for one of Chicago's top surgeons to operate on her, and she received the best recovery care. From what I could hear, Alexius spared nothing to ensure she was well taken care of."

A sliver of light breaks through below the dwelling surface of jealousy that starts to suck all the oxygen from my lungs. "He takes care of them," I murmur, looking down at my glass and the swirling amber liquid.

"As his employees, yes."

I scoff. "You might have eyes and ears around here, Mira, but your reach doesn't go past the estate security gates. We don't know what goes on behind the walls of Myth. I don't think we ever will."

God. The thought makes me sick to my stomach, my cruel imagination showing me torturous images of Alexius wrapped up in beautiful women and their perfect bodies. It makes sense that a man like him would prowl the proverbial terrain in search of those who can feed his hunger. Alexius is larger than life, and I'd be stupid, naive if I think for even a moment that I'm enough for him. I will never be enough, no matter how expansive my wardrobe is or how far I'm willing to go with my body to please him. There's just not enough of me to keep a predator like Alexius sated for a lifetime.

Mira senses the shift, eyeing me with concern. "Don't go there, Leandra. Nothing good can ever come from allowing your mind to go there. It's dark and lonely, and no one will come for you there. If you want to thrive here, not just survive but thrive, you need to forget everything you've ever read or heard about love and romance. Forget about the kind of love you dreamt of when you were supposed to learn algebra in class. That whole American dream with the white picket fence, two kids, and a Yorkshire terrier running around doesn't exist here. It will never exist here. Not when your heart belongs to one of them."

I meet her sympathetic gaze, something familiar flashing within her light

green irises. It's like she can feel everything I am, relate to it somehow.

She slams back the last of her whiskey, cringes, and lets her eyes settle on the empty glass in her hands. "These brothers can't be tamed, Leandra. Their hearts might be attainable, but that does not mean you can control the blood in their veins. And Del Rossa blood runs deep. It's wild, thick, and vicious with a history that will always define who. They. Are."

Her words scratch against the glass surrounding my heart, walls that can shatter from the slightest pressure. A protection layer unable to withstand the power of Del Rossa blood. The blood that runs through my husband's veins—the blood that warms the flesh of the man I'm falling in love with.

"I've never been to Myth," Mira continues, pulling me out of my thoughts. "And I'm sure Maximo would rather have his lungs pulled from his ass than have his little sister ever walk through those doors."

I snicker. "Do you blame him? It's a sex club."

"And I'm a grown woman who can make her own decisions. It's time my brother and everyone else around here realizes that."

"By everyone else, you mean...?" I narrow my eyes at her, but she ignores my knowing stare.

"I mean every asshole who lives under this roof thinking I need my decisions made for me." She pours herself another glass. "I've been meaning to ask, has Alexius been acting strangely to you the last few days? Well, stranger than normal."

Guess I'm not the only one who noticed. Alexius is stoic and controlling on his best day. But lately, he's been different. Distracted. Withdrawn. The only time I know I have his full attention—have all of him—is when he reminds me how tightly I'm chained to him by proving how easily we can drown in each other. Like this morning when he fucked me against his bedroom window while one of his brothers watched from the garden. I can still feel the pressure of his hand on my jaw, the cold glass against my naked breasts while his hard body keeps me locked against the window, his cock stretching my pussy and filling me until it hurts. His possession of me is absolute and exhilarating, something I'm not sure I'll be able to let go of once our time together comes to an end. Every time our lips collide, our tongues duel, and our bodies rock to a rhythm our lust determines, it becomes more and more evident that our souls were either created as one in Heaven or burned and crafted in Hell. The way he knows me, what I want and how I want it, and how he's more than capable of meeting all my expectations

blows my mind every damn time.

A flush of heated skin spreads across my chest, thinking of the brother who saw us this morning. I loved it. The thrill of being watched, thinking of someone else being turned on by us and how we fuck, fantasizing about being one of us or taking part.

Does Mira know about the brothers and their love of sharing? If she has eyes and ears around here as she says she does, then it only makes sense that she does know. And if she does, is it safe to assume she has no issue with it?

I clear my throat. “He has been...distracted, I guess.”

“I wonder what’s going on?” Mira brushes a finger along her chin. “All of them seem on edge, like they’re waiting for a bomb to drop.”

“The other night, Alexius left quite abruptly just before midnight. He didn’t come home—well, not that I know of. I only saw him at lunch the next day, and he seemed...out of sorts ever since.”

“Something is going on, I’m telling you.”

“Maybe it’s his dad. He knows time is running out. All of them do. That can’t be easy.”

“Nope.” Mira straightens and starts pacing. “It’s not that. Maximo came to me last night and made me swear I wouldn’t leave the estate alone or without security. I dunno.” She swings around and scratches her temple. “See if you can get something out of Alexius.”

I laugh as I stand. “Are you serious? You know as well as I do Alexius never cracks. He won’t tell me a damn thing.”

“At least try,” she presses, her eyes wide and lips pouting suggestively. “Use your post-coital superpowers.”

I burst out laughing, and so does she. “Post-coital superpowers?”

“Come on, I’m desperate,” she whines through her laughter. “We need to figure out what’s going on.”

“Fine, I’ll try. But I can tell you now, Alexius is a giant wall when it comes to anything other—”

“Than fucking?” Her eyes beam with mischief, and my cheeks burn. “Oh, come on. Everyone living on the second floor can hear you two tearing each other apart every night. Savages.” She winks at me and puts down her glass. “Okay, I have to let the event planner know we’ve made our selections for the table settings. See you at dinner?”

“Definitely.”

Mira strolls out of Alexius’ office, and I can’t help but envy her and how

she so easily navigates through the secrets and the darkness that comes with the unknown of this world the Del Rossas rule so effortlessly. It's expected, though. This is something she's known her entire life.

One thing she's right about—even if I, by some miracle, own even a fraction of Alexius' heart, it wouldn't change him. It wouldn't change the man he's always been and always will be. If I want to at least try to be enough for him, I would have to up my game and shed the last bit of skin of the woman I was the day I walked out of that shitty apartment I grew up in.

Chapter Four

ALEXIUS

I t's almost eleven p.m. when I get out of my car and look up at her bedroom window. She's probably already asleep after eating yet another dinner without me.

A pang of regret—*or is it guilt?*—swirls in my chest. Something shifted between us the night I shared her with my brother, giving her the fantasy she desired, and in turn realized she might be the wife I didn't want, but is now the woman I don't plan on letting go. We might not have had dinner together tonight—or the last few nights, for that matter—but the thought of her being here under this roof waiting for me forces that sliver of light through the thick blackness that's been suffocating my soul almost my entire life. I've been searching for this light for so long, and now that I've found it, I have no intention of losing it.

Then you need to pull your shit together.

I still have a business to run.

And a woman to keep.

I have a responsibility to this family.

You have a responsibility to her.

She knew who and what I am the day she agreed. She understands.

Does she? Does she really?

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath, slamming the car door. Two girls were butchered and murdered like it was some sacrificial act. Whoever this fucker is, he's making sure we understand that all this is happening because of our sins. Our lifestyle. But the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced it's far more personal than that.

I am, after all, your brother.

There are so many ways that one sentence could be interpreted, and it's been mindfucking me for days.

Closing the front door behind me, I slip off my coat and stomp up the stairs. Tension claws at my tight shoulders, and I'm fucking exhausted, but my thoughts are wide awake.

The dim lights of the hall guide me to my bedroom, and I pause when I pass her door. I can't stop myself from imagining her in bed, soft raven curls splayed over the pillows, her smooth skin like velvet. My fingertips ache from the memory of what it feels like to touch her, feel her flesh and soak up her warmth. God, she's on the other side of that door, a brick wall separating us, and still, I'm so fucking drawn to her it hurts. It's almost supernatural, like God took pity over the man born from the bowels of Hell and created this perfect being just for him so he can have a little taste of Heaven. Paradise. But there's a chance that once all is done I would have corrupted her, ruined her, leaving her no chance of being another man's Heaven.

Good.

I pull my hair back, weaving my fingers through the strands while staring at her bedroom door.

My mind pulls me in two different directions for no longer than a moment. Let her be and give her some reprieve from me. Let her have peace without me filling every crevice of her being by possessing her mind and body. Or be the selfish bastard everyone knows me to be and give in to the temptation that ignites my blood.

No doubt. The latter wins, and I ease open her bedroom door and step inside. My quiet entrance and the click of the lock don't wake her, and my footsteps don't disturb the silence. Instantly, I'm wrapped in the soothing relief I feel whenever we're alone, locked away from the world outside. It's her and me alone between four walls where nothing can touch us, where nothing can sever the madness we so eagerly bathe in. Like magnets, we're drawn to each other—whether it means rapture or destruction, it doesn't seem like we care.

Leandra sleeps peacefully under the sheets hugging the outline of her body and draping effortlessly down her accentuated curves—curves I've memorized, her body a map I could trail my fingers over blindfolded.

It doesn't take long for my eyes to adjust to the dark, the outside lights' faint glow enough to alleviate the heavy black of night.

I remove my suit jacket and place it over the sofa's armrest before taking

a seat, leaning back and just...watching her. She's wearing one of my shirts, and I find it sexier than any provocative lingerie set I've bought her. The crisp white shirt and creamy skin are a stark contrast to the darkness.

The room smells like her—vanilla and the enticing scent that's uniquely her. An aroma that slowly turns me rabid for her. To kiss her. Taste her. Fuck her deep so I can touch her soul. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined the girl I found in that disgusting apartment eating dry instant noodles would end up being this magical being who has bewitched me, making me question what it is I truly want out of life.

I rub my chin with my forefinger, wondering exactly when this fucking happened. When I got so swept up in this woman, drugged on the ecstasy she's selling every goddamn time she spreads her legs for me. I'm not a morally gray kind of guy. I'm a pitch-black motherfucker who realized I could not stomach the thought of her walking out my goddamn front door—even though it's part of our agreement. But it all got shot to shit the moment I sank balls deep into her the very first time.

The girl in the photograph, standing by a grave like a lost little lamb, was the ideal candidate. The perfect prey for me to sink my teeth into while I fulfilled what I thought was a ridiculous request by my father. But there was a slight uptick in my pulse while I stared at that image of her, a gentle hum in my veins. Now I know exactly what it meant. I was drawn to her from that very first moment, the beautiful girl in a picture that depicted my future.

A grave. Grief. Regret.

That slight uptick in pulse, and delicate hum is now a pounding heartbeat and a symphony singing to my blood. If I had only turned past her picture, moved on to the next, I wouldn't be here mindfucked by this delicate angel raining down hell on my plans to use her while I need her before throwing her aside like the dispensable pawn she was meant to be from the start.

No. It's not that simple anymore. Reality is setting in, and soon it will be cast in stone. Leandra is not the pawn I intended for her to be. She's a fucking queen. My queen.

Our bodies are the perfect fucking fit when we're together. The sexual attraction is liquid fire and potent passion that has the power to bring us both to our knees.

Leandra stirs. A gentle moan rolls from her lips as she turns on her back, slipping a leg from under the covers and hooking it over, bending her knee. The sight of her bare thigh has me biting my bottom lip, my cock stirring to

life, and I get up, stalking closer.

I remove my shirt and pants and crawl into bed next to her—her sweet scent enveloping me. She nestles deeper into the mattress, her heart-shaped lips slightly parted, her cheeks painted with a delicate pink. Reaching my hand beneath the sheets, her heat wraps around my naked body as I ease my fingers down her side, slipping them under the hem of her shirt and between her thighs. My eyes are etched on her beautiful face, and I have to suppress a groan when I find her pussy bare. God, this woman. This fucking woman is everything—it's like she was born to feed my hunger and poison my veins.

I tease her cunt with nothing more than a gentle touch, tracing the outline of her lips. Gentle circles. Around and around. Slowly coaxing her body into an aroused state while my cock is ready to have her walls close around me. But I love watching her. I love studying her face, the delicate furrow of her brows as her body slowly goes from a dreamlike state to fire. I wonder how long it'll be before she wakes up, how far I'd be able to push this before she opens her eyes and realizes her husband has the power to claim her body even while she fucking sleeps.

Writhing under the sheets, she brings her arm up, slipping it under the pillow, and I still my touch, waiting for her to settle before dragging a finger down her slit, wetness starting to pool there. Is she dreaming of me touching her? Dreaming of me fucking her?

What I wouldn't give for a glimpse inside her dreams, her fantasies, her wicked desires.

My cock is impossibly hard, and I palm it, squeeze and pump a few times, precum already coating the tip. It's the knowledge that I have this kind of power over her, over her body, knowing I can do whatever the fuck I want with her right now, and she won't be able to stop me—and I doubt she'd want to. She's my little stray, the woman who can transform from my elegant wife to my filthy slut with a mere shut of a door.

Getting on my knees, the mattress dips and her eyes flutter, the sweetest moans escaping her lips and slamming against my motherfucking balls.

"Alexius," she murmurs, her eyes still closed.

"Shh." I move in between her legs, still fisting my dick while staring down at her beautiful features touched by the dark shadows. "I got you, stray."

She doesn't push me away, nor does she deny me. Not even while half asleep. It intensifies this twisted ownership I feel over her, knowing she

craves my touch, my cock, my cum with every breath—even in her sleep. She's bound to me as I'm addicted to her, and I know we'll both fall to our ruin. But I just don't give a fuck.

She stretches, lifting the shirt higher up her body, arching her back and shimmying her ass, allowing me to see her bare cunt spread. Wet. Welcoming.

Lowering her right arm, she eases her palm to her sex and starts to rub her pussy with delicate circles—eyes still closed, and cheeks turning a deeper shade of pink. It's so fucking erotic. I'm transfixed by the sight of her teasing her clit, lifting her hips slightly, working her body into a frenzy just for me.

Her moans, parted lips, the way she caresses and touches herself drives me crazy. I'm not sure whether she's half-awake or not, and I don't care. The sick fuck in me says this isn't taking advantage of my wife in a dreamlike state because she's mine. She belongs to me. When I want her, when I need her, I'll take her, and I won't ever be denied. Not when it comes to her—the woman I want to chain to my bed and fuck into oblivion.

My balls tighten, my palm working my hard length as I watch her sex glistening, wet and ready to take me, her gorgeous clit swollen and begging for my tongue.

The lust is so intense, and its control is wrapped like a leash around my throat. It has every muscle in my body pulled taut, and I inhale deeply, the musky scent of her arousal teasing me into a frenzy—my shoulders rigid, and my biceps tight.

“Mine,” I groan. With a swift motion, I'm at her entrance and spear inside her—deep, her wet pussy lips firmly pressed against the base of my cock.

Her eyes snap open, revealing amber irises, a loud moan tearing from her lips, filling the silence. Bewildered and fucking beautiful, she looks up at me, and I flex my hips more, making sure she realizes just how damn deep I'm inside her right now.

“Alexius,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “What are you—”

“Are you going to tell me to stop, stray?” I challenge, rearing back, pulling out so just the tip of my dick nudges at her entrance before slowly sinking back in. “Go on. Tell me to stop. Tell me you don't fucking love waking up in the middle of the night with my cock stretching your cunt,” I bite out, the heat of her slick walls tightening around my length. “Tell me you're not aching to come right now.”

Something flashes within the brown swirls of her eyes as she stares up at

me, her hair falling in perfect disarray around her beautiful face. And I see it. The raw need. The madness that plagues us both, the delirium and utter chaos that will never subside. It will never unchain and set us free, not as long as we're willing to burn together.

"Tell me," I press, my voice low with demand. "Fucking tell me you don't love this." Another thrust and the tip of my dick hits her center. Her hips buck, and fingers dig into the pillow.

"I can't tell you that," she murmurs, settling her gaze on mine. "Because I fucking love it."

"Jesus Christ, woman." I groan and slam my lips against her, kissing her as if it's possible to devour her. In response to our feverish kiss and heated embrace, she wraps her legs around my waist, squeezing her calves against my ass, urging me deeper. The softness of her thighs is exquisite, and I can feel her everywhere, her presence caressing every inch of my skin.

I break our kiss and yank her shirt, ripping it down the middle like a fucking savage ready to tear her the fuck apart. I suck air between my teeth, hissing, grabbing her legs and removing them from around me, lifting her ass as I press the back of her thighs against my chest, hooking her knees over my shoulders. With every thrust and every spear of my cock, she moans out loud, and it's the most exquisite sound I've ever heard in my life.

Her legs are a cage around my neck, and her pussy a vise around my dick, fueling me to fuck harder, slamming my hips into her ass—our rhythm perfect chaos.

Sweat beads at my temples, her nails clawing at the sheets, her delicate throat curved, an offering from the prey to its predator.

"You can question the world, Leandra. But there's one thing you'll never question, never doubt." Forcing her hips up even farther, I push forward, her knees close to her chest, and I reach out, clasping my fingers around her throat, digging my fingertips into the fragile skin. "You are mine. And if you think the end of our agreement will change that," I snarl, inhaling through my teeth, "you're fucking wrong. You hear me?"

Thrust.

"Do you."

Thrust.

"Fucking."

Thrust.

"Hear."

Thrust.

“Me?”

“Yes,” she cries out. “Harder, Alexius. Fuck me harder.”

Who the hell am I to deny my wife what she wants?

My hips move faster, shoving my cock deeper into her, feeling a rush of blood and adrenaline surge through my veins, and I groan when her hands clasp around my neck, forcing me closer, her body bent and welded beneath me, heels digging into my shoulders. We’re a fucking mess at the edge of insanity, losing our grip on reality while we’re prisoners of our depravities.

There’s a mix of torture and pleasure that paints her every feature. Her whimpers, her moans of pleasure and grunts of pain only make me lose my mind faster. Grasping me tight, her body shudders as she cries out, coming around my cock, and by God, my entire world is now constricted and narrowed down to only the slick heat of her pussy, and I’d rather bleed out than stop.

A long groan rips from my throat, and I come, squeezing my ass tight while flexing hard, compelled to fill her pussy with every last drop of my jizz, needing it deep inside her.

Deep. Inside. Her.

Because...I’m keeping this stray...and I’d cross a thousand lines to do it.

Chapter Five

LEANDRA

My eyes open, and I'm drenched, the torn shirt clinging to my sweaty skin. I glance over my shoulder to find Alexius sleeping behind me, clutching me tight. His warm breath weaves through my hair and caresses the back of my neck, his presence wrapped around me like a shield, and I don't think I've ever felt this safe before.

Taking a deep breath, I let his familiar scent fill my lungs and soothe my bones. I allow it to infect my reality so I can linger longer in this dream. A dream where it's just us. No deal or arrangement. No Dark Sovereign. Just us.

I run my hand down his arm that's snaked around my middle, my fingertips brushing along solid muscle, sending an electric current through my chest that inflames and licks the back of my neck. I close my eyes and savor the moment, the silence, and I relive every second of last night.

Waking up in the middle of the night with his fingers between my legs and his stiff cock in his hand would be disturbing to some. But not to me. It instantly drove me wild, like a magnetic pulse passing between us, charging my body and leaving me aching for release. The attraction, chemistry, and tension are always there, burning, throbbing, yearning. I want him all the time. Every time. If only we could lock ourselves in this room forever and only exist within each other.

But that's wishful thinking on the largest scale. Whatever this is between us has so many variables it's hard to figure out if this is real or just a distraction while we wait for our time to run out. And it will run out. Time is our enemy, and it won't stop. It will never stop. My heart is a throbbing mess just thinking about the day I walk out of here with my insides torn to pieces

because I know I'll never feel his touch again. Never experience the high of being with him. Why did I let it go this far? Why did I allow myself to fall so deep when I knew the terms of our bargain? *Oh, that's right.* I didn't let it go that far. I didn't allow anything. It just. Fucking. Happened. Now, there's no stopping it. I'm addicted. An addict who will keep on being my own worst enemy for as long as I'm able to get my fix of him. It's too late to save myself from heartbreak and a river of tears I know will soon come.

It's the first time he spent the night in my room, our naked bodies entwined together, holding each other. We fell asleep soon after, sated and exhausted. We didn't speak. We didn't need words, not while our bodies communicated so effortlessly in a rhythm that is uniquely ours.

I look up at the bedside clock. Usually, Alexius would be in his study or out on business at this time of the morning. And it fills my heart with something warm and fuzzy, affection fluttering in my belly, that he's still here...with me. But it scares me too. I'm scared of the feelings dwelling beneath all the lust and desire that so easily consume us. I'm afraid of how my heart beats faster when I'm with him, how my pulse races, my blood drowning in adrenaline when he makes his wicked intentions known. I'm terrified of breaking the moment he lets me go.

His hold around my waist tightens, and he nuzzles into my nape, inhaling deeply. "I love smelling you when I wake up."

My heart stammers. "We overslept."

"Does waking up early and thinking the world can go fuck itself before I let you out of my arms count as overslept?"

I stop breathing, his voice, his words turning my insides to liquid. "You shouldn't do that."

"Do what?" He inhales my scent again.

"Say things like that."

"Why not?"

"I like it too much." My heart hurts like it's suddenly too big for my chest. "I might expect you to say things like that to me every day."

"And that would be bad?"

"Very. For me, at least."

Alexius places his hand on my hip and guides me to my back. His black strands are messy, and his irises have swallowed the brilliance of every sapphire in the world—his chiseled jaw capable of cutting glass. "What if I want to say it to you every day?"

I grab the sheet and pull it over my mouth. “Then I’m screwed.”

“What are you doing?” He frowns, lifting himself slightly.

“Morning breath.”

“Morning breath, my ass.” He grips the sheet and pulls it away from my face, and I reach to grab it again.

“Exactly. Morning breath smells like ass.”

He snickers and rolls on his back. “Mine doesn’t.”

“You might be one wealthy son of a bitch with a huge gold family heirloom around your finger, Mr. Del Rossa, but your morning breath smells just like the rest of ours.”

He tosses a pillow at me as I get up, and I chuckle, catching it and throwing it back at him. “I need to freshen up.”

After brushing my teeth, pinching my cheeks to get some blood running to the surface and, roughing my fingers through my hair, I lean against the bathroom’s doorframe, crossing my arms.

Alexius is propped up against the headboard, the sheet low around his waist, teasing me with the toned ridges of his defined abs, and I get a glimpse of the prominent V I’ve traced with my tongue so many times. Staring at his DS ring, he absentmindedly twirls it around his finger, seemingly deep in thought.

“Are you thinking about the party tonight?” I ask, strolling back to bed.

“Among other things.”

“Mira’s done a great job organizing everything.”

He looks up and grabs my waist, pulling me down on the bed next to him. “So have you. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you helping Mira plan this party.” He touches my chin with a gentle finger. “Thank you for that.”

“Don’t thank me. I want to help.” I shrug. “The days drag in this place when I’m alone with nothing to do.”

A sly grin tugs at the ends of his full lips. “You can always find something to do.” He inches closer, his gaze fixed on my lips. “I can show you.”

My whole body shivers, nervous anticipation rushing through me as he leans in. I’m frozen, breathless, his lips so close to mine. The way my insides ignite and quiver, one would think I’m two seconds away from experiencing my first kiss.

I squeeze my thighs together with desire, too scared to breathe because I don’t want to wreck this perfect moment.

His warm breath caresses my skin, his scent chaining me down further. I don't even realize I'm holding my breath until I exhale softly as he moves closer, his lips grazing mine, the tip of his tongue flicking out. Blue eyes keep my gaze captive as he closes the gap between us. They're watching me burn and yearn for him, desire seeping from my pores.

I'm silent. Still. Meanwhile, on the inside, I'm raging, screaming at him to kiss me. And when he does, I'm nothing but liquid desire, his lips soft, smooth, and supple, and his kiss gentle. The fire in my belly, the heat between my legs, the tingle of desire, it's all there in one giant sphere of excitement that's lodged in my throat, making it impossible to breathe right. The way he grips my waist, his body melding to mine as he pulls me closer—I'm enthralled and possessed, time wholly forgotten.

It's when he winds another arm around my waist, wanting to pull me on top of him, that I press my hands against his hard chest. "We can't."

"Like fuck we can't." He grabs my wrist and places my hand on his naked, hard cock, wrapping his fingers around mine so I close my palm around his length.

A desire-choked moan slips from my mouth, and I exhale with a waft of air. "I really can't. Mira is—"

"I really don't give a fuck." His hand slithers up my thigh, fingers sliding through my pussy. "My dick is hard, and your cunt is wet. Let's not waste it."

"Alexius," I groan. "I have to—"

"Spread your legs. That's what you have to do." He pushes a finger into me, his thumb brushing against my clit, and I inhale sharply. It's torture, like I'm in my own corner of Hell as I reluctantly pull away. "I promised Mira I'd be up early to help her, and I'm already late."

"Mira is more than capable of doing this shit on her own."

"I know." I shoot up to my feet, pushing my curls out of my flustered face. "But I'm trying to show everyone—"

"Show everyone what?" he demands.

I take a deep breath. "That I'm more than just the woman my husband picked up off the streets to meet his father's demands. I want to prove to them and myself that I'm not just a pound of flesh stuck in a room or aimlessly wandering around for whenever my husband decides it's time for me to get some attention again."

My words come out with a bite of resentment, and I didn't mean for it to. I'm aware he picked up on it just by the scowl on his face as he looks at me.

“It’s not like that,” he murmurs.

“That’s what it’s starting to feel like to me.”

“Well, you’re wrong.”

“Am I? Mira is the only person who gives me more than the polite ‘good morning’ and ‘good night’ around here. I’m a stranger in this house, Alexius. A guest whose stay is limited.”

Alexius rubs the back of his neck. “You’re more than that.”

“I don’t think so. If I had to analyze every little thing in my life right now, I’d say I’m nothing more than a woman who willingly spreads her legs for you. Your stray. And to others, I’m Alexius’s wife, the woman he was forced to marry.”

Alexius narrows his eyes, searching the room. “Where the fuck did this just come from? I swear you were right here sitting next to me, kissing me, and now you’re over there going on about shit I’m not even sure I understand.”

Talk about a one-eighty. “I didn’t mean to go there.” I place my palm on my forehead. “Maybe I’m just a little confused about what the hell is happening between us and you being hot and cold all the time.”

“Hot and cold,” he scoffs.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“Noticed what?”

“That you’re distracted lately. You’re here, but you’re not. It’s hard not to get mindfucked by everything.”

The sheet swooshes as he tears out of bed, naked with his cock hard and bobbing as he steps up to me, claiming my cheeks between his palms. “You should work on not getting so easily mindfucked, stray. I need you at the top of your game whenever I choose to fuck you, wherever I choose to fuck you.”

“See. A booty call,” I huff.

“Not a booty call. It’s just the way it is. We’re unraveling, remember?” He kisses me once more, leaning his strength into it. “I’m going to call Vicky and let her know you’ll be needing a dress for tonight.” He leans back, gaze dragging up and down my body. “Something silver. Shiny.”

Resting a hand on my waist, I pop my hip to the side and raise an eyebrow at him. “Are you in charge of what I wear now?”

Lacing his fingers around the back of my neck, he pulls me in and presses his lips on my forehead. “Don’t kid yourself, baby girl. I’m in charge of

everything when it comes to you.”



ALEXIUS

Mira comes sprinting down the stairs, and I can already see us picking her bones off the foyer floor from falling over those heels she’s wearing. “They’re here.”

“Who?” Nicoli frowns.

“Your mom and dad. They’re back from their trip.”

“Isn’t that sort of the idea? You know, Dad convincing her to pack up all his medical equipment, a private nurse, and for them to go away for a few days so you can put this extravagant, over-the-top shindig together?” Nicoli glances at me, then back at Mira, who is in the middle of stabbing him with her eyeballs.

“Thank you, Mr. Del Rossa, for pointing that out. Now, if you could please take your sarcasm and shove it up your ass, I’ll take it as a personal favor.”

“Just stating the obvious.”

I smirk at them, knowing their banter is owed to something more profound, stronger, something Nicoli is hellbent on ignoring, acting like it doesn’t exist.

Straightening my tuxedo sleeves, I feel her presence stroke the skin of my neck, igniting a fire in my stomach. But it’s when I turn to face her that she truly takes my breath away. In a silver sequin-encrusted evening dress, my wife is a fucking vision. I can’t take my eyes off her as I move toward the end of the stairs, looking up at her, my heart squeezing with pride. This woman who once wore a coffee-stained waitress uniform with holes in her shoes now shines like a thousand diamonds put together—a kaleidoscope of beauty, elegance, confidence...and mine.

Our gazes meet, her red lips curved in a gorgeous smile, her raven hair pulled to the side and over her right shoulder. As I watch her walk down the stairs, my heart beats to a different rhythm, a cadence created by the sway of

her hips. I'm lost. Lost in the universe with no idea where I'm supposed to be—like a dying star endlessly wandering, yet drawn to the sun. To her. My wife.

The sparkling fabric hugs her every curve and flows like water down her hips, the deep V neckline blessing me with a glimpse of the swell of her breasts. She's beautiful—her brown eyes with rays of honey are a hypnotizing mix of Heaven and Hell, and I don't care if looking into them means the end of me. All I care about is her. About how I feel when I look at her. Kiss her. Touch her.

I hold out my hand, and she places her palm in mine. "You look—" I struggle to find the right words. "You *are*...exquisite."

"Thank you." Her cheeks flush with a subtle glow. "You clean up nicely, too." The sweet smile on her beautiful face is deadly to my self-control, her perfume subtle yet strong enough to envelop my every bone.

I bite my lip and lean into her ear, whispering, "You look stunning in this dress, and I can't wait to tear it off you."

"Alexius." This time her cheeks turn bright pink, and I slip an arm around her waist, but not before I palm her ass, feeling the swell in my palm and am reminded of what she looks like on all fours, pushing her hips out to me. *Fuck.*

"What is going on?" My mom walks through the front door, placing her handbag on the side table. "Why are there so many cars parked in the driveway?" She eyes all of us. "Why are you all dressed up?"

Mira flits to the front, her coral satin dress flowing around her feet. "There's no time for questions. We need to get you ready."

"Ready for what?"

"It's a surprise." Mira smiles warmly.

My mother glances from me to Nicoli, then at my father being wheeled into the foyer by his nurse. "Vincenzo, what is going on?"

There's a flash of warmth in his eyes, affection, as he stares at her as if she's the oxygen he had been breathing his entire life. "*Amore mio*, as Mira said, it's a surprise."

Worry fills the lines on her forehead as she frowns at my father. "You need to get some rest. Let me help you get settled."

"There's no need. Nicoli and Alexius are here to take care of me. Go with Mira."

"Vincenzo—"

“*Amore mio*, please,” my father pleads with an edge of command, and my mother squares her shoulders, knowing there will be no arguing with Vincenzo Del Rossa tonight.

There’s a hint of a smile on her pink lips as she turns to face us, but I can see it hardly reaches her eyes. “Where do you want me, Mira child?”

Mira claps her hands with excitement. “Come on. We have lots in store tonight. Leandra,” Mira calls, and I notice how my wife’s eyes light up when she realizes Mira has just asked her to go with her and my mother—like she’s a part of it. A part of this family.

I kiss her cheek and squeeze her hip. “I’ll see you at the marquees.”

Leandra nods and follows Mira up the stairs. For those few seconds, I keep my eyes on her, not giving a fuck if the world comes to an end during the time I admire her, allowing myself to be swept away by the warmth that fills my chest and thaws my heart.

Nicoli slaps a hand on my shoulder, squeezing. “Make sure your fly is closed, man.”

“What? Why?” I look down.

“Your dick is about to dart up these stairs. Keep that thing leashed.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“She is a beautiful woman, Alexius.” Both Nicoli and I turn to face my father. I’m taken aback by how weak and frail he looks. They’ve only been gone a few days, and he seems to have aged ten years.

“Yes, she is.”

“I bet she’d be a great mother to your children someday.”

“Dad,” I groan.

“What? Surely you would like to have an heir? A son to carry your legacy?”

I roll my eyes. “Not tonight, Dad.”

“Micah,” he says absentmindedly. “I’ve always wanted a son with the name Micah.”

“Well, Dad,” Nicoli chimes in with a drawl of sarcasm, “you literally had four sons, four chances to name one of us Micah, but thank God you didn’t because that name is terrible.”

“And Nicoli is any better?” I challenge.

“Fuck, yeah, it is.”

“Micah would make a fine name for an heir,” my dad continues, his eyes heavy and sad, a reflection of the life that’s slowly draining out of him.

“What do you know, Alexius.” Nicoli grins at me. “You were almost a Micah. I don’t know which name is worse, and if you should be thankful or not.”

“Fuck you.”

Nicoli’s rumbling laugh fills the foyer, but it’s the look in my dad’s eyes that keeps my attention—their soft gleam, as if, for a moment, he’s not here but somewhere else entirely.

“Dad, you okay?”

He shakes his head lightly as if stealing himself from a dream or memory, then looks at me with a soft gleam in his eyes. “Yes...yes, I’m fine. Just... treat your wife well, Alexius. There will come a time when you need her more than anything. A time when you realize your life courses through her veins.”

How do I respond to that when I’m convinced that time will come sooner rather than later?

“How are you feeling?” I ask, giving the nurse a silent nod to move to the side, and I slip behind his wheelchair.

“It was a good few days with your mother. We needed that.”

“No, I mean, how are you feeling?”

Nicoli walks beside us.

“Oh, you mean whether I feel any less than death after our mini getaway? No. No, I don’t.”

Nicoli and I look at each other, our mutual worry evident.

“Are you sure you’re up for this party?” Nicoli asks, and my father holds up his hand to bring us to a stop. Without glancing at us, he sits straight in the wheelchair.

“Thirty-five years. I’ve been married to your mother for thirty-five years. Some people don’t even live that long. So, if you’re asking whether I’m up to celebrating that with your mother, I’d say it’s the stupidest fucking question I’ve ever heard.” He sucks in a breath as if a thought had torn through his chest. “This will be the last celebration I spend with her, and I intend to make the most of it.”

His exhaustion whirls through the air like a blight, and with the chandelier’s light glowing down on him, he appears like a war-torn soldier—a man who has fought his last war and is now an ailing man who wants nothing more than to love his wife during the last few moments of his life.

An intense sadness burns my eyes, and I look down at the black blanket

covering his legs. Memories of him standing in this exact same spot—healthy and regal—tug at the heartstrings of the little boy I once was. A boy who, no matter the differences we had, looked up to his father. A boy whose chest would swell with pride every time Vincenzo Del Rossa introduced him as his son. I am still that boy. I am still that boy who would do anything to make his father proud.

“Now, how about you help me look as dapper as the two of you.”

My father smirks, and Nicoli pulls his fingers through his hair. “Although Alexius and I are miracle workers, we do not possess the power of God.”

I cock a brow. “Speak for yourself.”

Chapter Six

LEANDRA

I enter the large, high-ceiling tent. It's like stepping into a different world. A fairy tale. Thousands of fairy lights are draped across the roof, their muted glow casting an enchanted spell into the night—like fireflies that came together to celebrate the eternal love of two people.

Round tables decorated with the champagne tablecloths and crystal vase centerpieces Mira and I selected have been perfectly arranged all around the dance floor in the middle of the tent. A soft coral carpet leads from the entryway to the wooden-deck dance floor, where an elegant arch adorned with white roses and sparkling champagne chiffon waits for Mr. and Mrs. Del Rossa to renew their wedding vows.

Gentle music plays in the background, keeping guests' chatter calm as everyone seems to bask in the romance drifting in the air.

I greet some guests as I make my way to our table. Maximo is already seated, but like a hawk, his gaze hovers, watching over the crowd, always alert and searching for a threat. During my weeks here, Maximo and I have hardly spoken. It's easy to see where his loyalty lies, how he dedicates every minute of his life to the Del Rossa family. The man is like a brick wall, steadfast and impenetrable, except when it comes to his sister. He's protective of her, kind to her. I've never seen a man's expression go from brutal and cruel to affectionate and kind so fast whenever Mira is around. I envy that. The bond they share. I often wonder what it would have been like if I had a sister or brother, if we'd share the same connection. But then I thank God my parents weren't blessed with another life they could ruin. I managed to survive my dad's depravities and my mother's addiction, but I'm not so sure I would have if I had another person to keep out of their twisted grasps.

Caelian and Isaia walk up to the arch. It's always weird seeing Isaia in a suit, his discomfort noticeable from a mile away. He's been keeping his distance from me lately, which is probably a good thing considering the line he crossed when he kissed me that night after Alexius decided his brother could watch while he made me come. I suppose that's what happens when you play with fire; someone always gets burnt. And that's one of the reasons Alexius chose to keep the third participant in our one night of sharing a secret—a precautionary measure so no fuses could be lit between any of us.

A soft melody starts to play, and all the guests get up on their feet as Mr. Del Rossa walks down the aisle with Mira by his side. My heart aches when I see how slow his steps are, Mira's arm hooked into his elbow, a way for her to guide him and support him as he makes his way to the arch. Every second is beautiful and emotional, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop the tears from falling.

Mr. Del Rossa joins his two sons, and Mira walks off, joining us at the table.

We glance down the aisle to where Alexius stands at his mother's right side while Nicoli takes his place on her left. Her hands are gently slipped in the crooks of her two oldest sons' elbows, their tall frames towering at either side of her.

Alexius finds me, our eyes pinned as they start down the aisle. The instrumental melody of "Perfect" by Ed Sheeran starts playing, and there's no more stopping my tears. Mrs. Del Rossa looks beautiful in the beige satin dress Mira had chosen, a soft champagne shawl placed around her shoulders. But it's the sight of Alexius looking down at his mother. The care and devotion in his sapphire eyes are more powerful than any magic, and it takes my breath away. Alexius and Nicoli carefully guide her, holding on to her as if she might drift away if they didn't. It's beautiful and disarming to see such strong, powerful men unashamed to put their love for their mother on full display for the whole world to see. For the first time, I realize they aren't just the Dark Sovereign. They are a family. They are blood, their bond stronger than all the wealth and power in the world.

I wipe at my tears as they pass, and I'm taken aback when Alexius pauses for just a moment, reaching out, cupping my cheek and placing the most tender and loving kiss on my forehead—a kiss that rippled all the way to the marrow of my bones. A kiss that held more affection than any act I've ever experienced. In front of all these people, during a moment laced with

romance and filled with magic, Alexius stops time for a second to give me a glimpse of his heart.

There's a tap on my shoulder, and Maximo holds out a navy blue handkerchief, which I take, carefully dabbing at my eyes and cheeks.

Both Alexius and Nicoli kiss their mother on the cheek and slip in place at her side. It's a picture-perfect moment, two parents surrounded by their sons.

The surprise mixed with every emotion is solid on Mrs. Del Rossa's face as she gazes at her husband, mouthing the words, 'I love you.'

The same priest who married Alexius and me starts speaking—a whole different sermon than the one he gave at our wedding. This one isn't about finding love; it's about love standing the test of time. About a bond stronger than any hurdle life can throw at you. Like a plant, love needs to be fed and watered, taken care of and cherished. Only then will it bloom into something so beautiful that it outshines the darkness determined to tear it apart.

With every word the priest speaks, I keep my gaze on Alexius, wondering if what we share could be nourished and watered into something equally as beautiful as the love shared between their parents. Can whatever this is between us bloom into a flower we'd both dedicate our lives to protect?

Alexius meets my eyes, and like a giant wrecking ball, reality slams into me with a truth I've been trying to deny for weeks.

I'm falling.

I'm falling in love with Alexius Del Rossa.



ALEXIUS

My father's using all his strength to keep steady on his feet, holding my mother's hand in his as if it's his most prized possession. The way he looks at her is like he's never seen anything more beautiful.

He touches his lips to the top of her hand, and a tear slips down my mother's face. "I have never loved you more than I do right now," he starts, soft whimpers flowing from the guests surrounding us. "My love for you

echoes from the emptiness I feel just thinking about what my life would have been without you. For thirty-five years, you have been more than just my strength. You have been the rhythm to which my heart beats every minute of every day.”

I look at Leandra and watch her dab the tears from her cheeks. While I listen to my father’s words, my mind is filled with images of us standing in front of a priest thirty-five years from now, renewing our vows like my parents just did. And I wonder what our life would be like up until that moment. Would the words pour from our hearts while our children stand beside us? Would we look back at our life and not regret a single moment? Somehow, the thought of it licks at the edges of my heart. I want that. I want that moment with her, far in the future, after a life lived together. But what trials would lead us there? How many regrets would we have after years filled with chances to make the wrong decisions? Would we love each other? Hate each other?

Would she be happy?

My parents kiss, and even though the crowd cheers, my world goes quiet. In that second, our family is frozen, all six of us standing together beneath the lights and in front of God. Many might think we’re a family with questionable morals and corrupted intentions. But when it comes to family, we have heart. We protect what is ours, and this family is ours.

Every emotion clings heavily to the air and drifts below the strings of lights. But it’s when my father takes her in his arms, hugging her and looking right at me, that I see the struggle. He’s hurting. His heart is aching because he knows his time with her has run out and that each second might be his last. My father is mourning, knowing that his path with her is about to end.

Nicoli presses his lips together as he glances at me, and I know we’re both thinking the same thing. We’re feeling the loss to come, the grief already nipping at our chests. This wasn’t just a renewal of their vows. This was goodbye.

Music starts to play, and Caelian and Isaia carry the arch from the dance floor while Nicoli and I walk to join Leandra and Mira at our table.

I take Leandra’s hand without thinking, without doing it intentionally, and pull her closer to my side. Her familiar presence and the scent of her perfume are comforting, calming. It pacifies the fear of knowing my father could be snatched away from us at any given moment, and it makes me want to clutch her tighter, to never let her go. With every squeeze of her hand, I

draw strength from her, and my heart expands, filling my chest to the brim. Just looking into the depths of her eyes makes me want to forget about everything else. My father's illness. How I'd support my mother when he's gone. The murders. The clubs. Everything. I want to forget everything and just...be with her.

The next song starts to play, "Yours" by Russel Dickerson, and my mom waves for us to join them. With a smile, Leandra agrees, and I lead her onto the dance floor, catching a glimpse of Nicoli walking out while Mira stares after him with longing in her eyes. He's such a fucking jackass.

Leandra's palm touches my cheek, and I look at her, only her, and I realize I want it to be her always. Forever.

She places her arm around my neck as I settle mine on her waist, pulling her close, needing to feel her against me, our bodies slowly moving in the rhythm of the music. "Your parents found something that most people search a lifetime for," she says, her lips touched with a tempting glisten.

"Maybe some people find it without knowing and end up letting it go."

Long, beautiful lashes bat, brushing the top of her cheeks. "Because they don't open their hearts, thinking love is nothing but a weakness."

"And yours?" I ask, slowly drifting within the romance that's bewitched everyone around us.

She bites her bottom lip. "My heart is open."

"Even if the chance of you getting hurt is high?"

"Even then. There are so many reasons love could pass me by, but fear won't be one of them."

Her words penetrate deep into my soul, and the shiver that travels through my veins has me feeling like I'm only waking up now, alive for the first time. As if my life is progressing to something more than just money, power, and meaningless sex. It's so much more with her this close to me, and it's clear as fucking daylight. I want her. I want Leandra to be more than just the wife at my side with a pretty face and a willing body. I want her to be mine in every sense of the word. Mine, and only mine.

My hands slowly slide down her back, feeling the curve of every vertebra beneath my hungry fingertips. The subtle rush of air from her lips as I press her hips to mine makes me want to hear her moan and whimper, coming undone beneath my touch. I can feel the heat of her skin, see the delicate vein in her neck pulse to the rhythm of her racing heartbeat. She's trembling against me, her eyes hungry and pleading.

I lean down, tracing my lips along the outline of her beautiful face until I feel her warm breath on my cheek. Finally, our lips meet, and I kiss her as if she could break, as if our kiss is fragile. Gentle. Slow. Easy. Powerful. My tongue begs for entrance, which she grants with a slight parting of her lips. She tastes like expensive champagne and sin, her body fitting mine perfectly as if she's the angel made especially for the devil.

The song stops, and I inch back, our lips barely touching. "You're moving into my bedroom. Tonight."

Chapter Seven

LEANDRA

By the time the last guests left, Mr. and Mrs. Del Rossa had called it a night, and my things had already been moved to Alexius' room—even my entire closet. It never ceases to amaze me how quickly Alexius can get things done. How, with a simple snap of his fingers and a single order, he could change the color of the moon if he really wanted to.

I've walked into his bedroom so many times before, but tonight stepping into his room feels different. It feels...permanent. Like there's been a shift in the air. A good shift. But the pressure's mounted, too, as if a commitment has been made—especially now that he's let me into his space, sharing our privacy with one another. But what does this mean for us? For me? There are so many alarm bells ringing around my heart, cautioning me not to read too much into this. What will a lifetime's worth of money and security mean to me if I walk out of here with a broken heart?

"I instructed your staff to move your things."

"I can see that." I turn to face Alexius leaning against the doorframe, the bow of his tuxedo and top button undone.

"You can rearrange your things as you like. There's more than enough space."

"Are you sure?" I twirl my thumbs in front of me.

"Yes, I'm sure there's enough space for you."

"No. I mean...are you sure about this? About me moving in here?"

Alexius starts toward me, moving with the grace of a lion—powerful and predatory. His eyes are full of purpose, his jaw set in a determined line, and my heart races when he stands in front of me, so close I can feel the vibration of his presence ripple through me.

“Last night when I came home, sneaking into your bedroom and waking you with my hand between your legs,” he steps up to me, looking down, eyes dark and smoldering, “I realized that I don’t want to fucking sneak around. I need you in my bed every goddamn night so I can fuck you whenever I want, however I want. And I want you to wake up every morning next to me so I can hear every little moan you make because you’re sore, your body aching from the way I fucked you.” Another step and our bodies touch, my husband stealing all the air around me. “I want to see the fatigue on your beautiful face, knowing I drained you of every last drop of energy by making you come over, and over, and over again.”

My thighs clench, heat spreading across my skin and up my neck. The heat of a flush trickles along the back of my neck, and my lips part at the feel of his fingertips on my collarbone.

“I want to smell you on my sheets every day, have your scent linger in this room whenever I walk in, and have your torn panties on my motherfucking couch.”

The words burn my tongue, and I already know how stupid I am for saying it out loud. But I do it anyway. “Is that the only reason you want me here? Sex?”

The half-grin on his face is sexy as hell, his thick lips enticing me for a taste. His fingers travel up the side of my neck, his thumb resting on my chin. “No. That’s not the only reason.”

“What is—”

“Alexius!” Mira’s voice tears through the night, a painful shriek echoing from outside the door, instantly sending ice down my spine.

“Jesus.” Alexius darts to the door and yanks it open only to be met by Mira’s tearstained face.

“It’s your dad.”

He turns to me, and I see it. The grief is already slithering in because he knows. It’s time.

“Go,” I urge. “I’m right behind you.”

Alexius and Mira disappear from the doorway, and I’m frozen. I can’t move. I’m scared. Scared for him, for his mother, his brothers, for everyone.

Death isn’t ugly. It’s brutal. There are no walls strong enough to fight its vicious claws from tearing you apart.

Flashes of my mother’s lifeless body on the filthy couch, the needle on the carpet by her feet—I can still see it like it happened yesterday. I can still

feel it. The pain of losing a parent. The relief of being freed from a tormentor. And the guilt for being unable to cry or mourn.

Alexius will mourn. He will grieve. And I need to be there for him.

Rushing out of the room and down the hall, I find Isaia sitting on the floor around the corner from his parents' bedroom, roughing his hand across his cropped hair.

"Isaia." I still in front of him, my heart already splintering. "You should be in there."

"No." He presses his lips together, leaning his head back against the wall. "I can't."

I crouch in front of him. "You have to say goodbye. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't."

He scoffs. "You don't get it." His dark brown eyes meet mine. "I've said goodbye every night for the last year because I never knew if it would be the last time I see him. I've said goodbye hundreds of times. I don't need to do it again." He sniffs, and his jaw tics, biting back tears. "Tonight, after my parents renewed their vows, I hugged him, and he told me he loved me. And for the first time in so long, I said it back. I told him I loved him, too, and it was this powerful fucking moment, you know?" He wipes his nose with the back of his hand, before inhaling deeply, eyes shimmering with unshed tears as he looks at me. "I want that to be the last memory I have of him. I don't want to go in there and have the image of my father taking his last breath steal that moment from me."

I brush my tears away with my thumb and lean on his knees, reaching out to cup his cheek. "I get that," I murmur, and Isaia leans deeper into my touch, placing his palm over mine and closing his eyes as a single tear escapes. "You do whatever you need to, to hold on to that memory, you understand? Don't ever let it slip away."

A torturous whimper floods from his lips, and he clutches my hand, pressing a kiss in the center of my palm, letting it linger for a desperate moment, and I swear I can feel his pain travel through my veins.

"Isaia—"

"I need to leave," he mutters and gets on his feet, helping me up, too. There are no more words I can say, and all I can do is watch as he stomps off in the other direction, hands tucked in his jacket pockets.

Shivers wrack through me, and I rub my hands up and down my arms, feeling utterly helpless, knowing nothing I say or do will help take the pain

away.

Wiping my own tears from my cheeks, I make my way to the master bedroom. Maximo and Mirabella are both standing by the door, Mira tucked deep under her brother's arm, her arms wrapped around his waist. All I can do is offer them my unspoken sympathy with a half-smile that's nothing more than a mere press of my lips.

Mira takes my hand as I settle next to her. "You should go in. He needs you."

"No. I can't. It's not my place."

"Your place is next to your husband."

"I'm not sure I can be what he needs me to be right now."

"Leandra." Mira pulls away from her brother and grabs my shoulders, determination burning through her tears. "Do you love him?"

I narrow my eyes. "What?"

"Do you love Alexius?"

"It's not that—"

"Stop. Stop the bullshit for once, and just answer the damn question. Do you. Love him?"

Every wall left standing around my heart crumbles, and I'm naked, exposed, left with nothing but the truth I've been trying to ignore for so long. There's no use in denying it any longer; it's not something I can change, no matter what the consequences might be. This is my truth.

"Yes," I whisper, tasting my tears on my lips, my heart raw and bleeding. "I do. I love him."

"Then you go be with him. You stand by him. And you be whatever the hell he needs you to be for him to get through this." Mira sniffs, and I nod through my own tears. "Go."

I'm not sure how I manage to put one foot in front of the other. I'm too busy focusing on taking one breath at a time, trying to get my racing heart under control as I slowly walk into the bedroom. The soft whispers and silent whimpers whisk along my skin. Sadness thickens the air, and I swallow hard, the heavy heartbreak of saying goodbye weighing down my chest.

As I round the corner of the entryway, I see Caelian standing close to his mother, who lies on the bed next to her husband, resting her head on his shoulder, her tears seeping through the fabric of his blue nightwear as he whispers something against her hair. Loving words. Final words. Words that carry the last crackling of a dying fire. A light that will soon be no more.

But it's not until I see Alexius kneeling next to his father's bed, clutching his father's hand between his palms, that my soul fractures. My heart is cut open as I witness my husband on his knees, more vulnerable than I have ever seen him.

Nicoli stands behind him with a gentle hand on Alexius' shoulder, then looks at me and takes a step back, a silent gesture for me to take his place. The pain, the anguish in the room is almost too much to bear, and I can hardly keep my legs from giving way beneath me as I walk closer. I can feel Alexius' agony wrap around me, stealing my breath and breaking my heart even more. My tears are my own, but they fall for him. They mourn...for him.

The moment his father's eyes close, his chest rising and falling for the final time, Alexius presses his lips on his father's knuckles, whispering something I can't hear through the deathly silence. It's too much, even for the angels. The silence of insurmountable sorrow.

Alexius stands, easing his father's hand down before leaning over and touching his weeping mother's cheek. God, I can taste it. I can taste death and its bitter aftermath as I stare at Alexius, his expression pained, but hard. It's the expression of a powerful man fighting, struggling against the grief of a son who just lost his father.

He turns to face me, and the second our eyes meet, I see it. I see his need to break down. I see his strength dissipating as he desperately tries to hold on...just a little longer.

Just a little longer.

Without saying a word, I take his hand, clutching it tight, leading him out of the room. Even the halls don't feel the same anymore. There's an emptiness that drifts around us as if the air is grieving, too, the lights no longer shining as bright.

Silently, I enter our bedroom, easing the door closed behind him. He's standing in the middle of the room, back turned toward me, not saying a single word. And all I can do is wrap my arms around him from behind, leaning my head against his broad shoulders. "It's okay," I whisper. "You don't have to be afraid of breaking. Not with me."

His muscles strain as he inhales deeply with a shaky breath, right before the veil breaks. A sob tears from his throat, and we both collapse to the ground. I have my arms around his shoulders, holding him as tight as I can while hearing that broken sound come from his tears. Through all my years, I

have never felt as powerless as I do now, holding him, rocking back and forth, wishing I can take away his pain, ease his suffering. More than anything, I want to make him whole again, but losing someone you love leaves a hollow in your soul that nothing can fill. It's always there. Always open. Over time, we just make space for it.

Chapter Eight

ALEXIUS

The wood of the casket is polished to a dark sheen. The gold latches and carry handles on the sides glint under the brightness of the sun. I expected it to rain today, to be overcast and gloomy, the way it's been around here ever since my father took his last breath. But it's unusually sunny for a winter's day, another way the universe showcases its love of irony. The only chill in the air is that of the subtle breeze that brings with it the scent of freshly cut grass, the air sweet and clean.

Our family mausoleum is built in the farthest corner of our estate, a modern designed construction of thick gray granite slabs. The large walk-in, multi-crypt structure has four columns at the front, the DS symbol carved into the wooden doors with a gold plate above it that reads 'One family. One life.' It's the words my grandfather used to say. He would remind me and my brothers of it every time we had a fight among each other. That's the reason he wanted this mausoleum built; he wanted to keep the family together in life and death. I remember the day I came to this part of the estate with my father when it was still just an open piece of land. He showed me the plans of the building, telling me how civilization has made use of mausoleums for thousands of years. How the pyramids hold the remains of pharaohs and leaders, people of great prestige, and to this day those ancient structures carry with them the legacies of those buried there. And this place, this piece of land will always keep our legacy alive.

I glance at the groundskeeper standing by the back entrance gates—gates that are only ever used for access to the mausoleum and burial site. He's wearing a suit today. It's an old suit about two sizes too big for him, the sleeves of the jacket touching his knuckles. But it's the thought that counts,

the fact that he's here, dressed accordingly so he can pay his respects. I don't even know his name, one of many of our estate staff. In fact, as I glance around at the other guests who are here now, I don't know half of these people by name.

Leandra places a white lily on my father's casket, the hem of her dress flowing around her ankles. Black. I hate it. I hate the color, especially on her. She's too fucking perfect to wear a color that represents death and mourning.

A tear slips down her cheek, and as she settles next to me, I reach out and wipe it away, leaning closer. "You do not have to mourn him. He was nothing to you."

She takes my hand, and her eyes meet mine. "I might not have known him well, but I know to you he was everything. I mourn for you, Alexius. For the loss your family is enduring."

"I don't want you to feel my pain."

She gives me a weak smile. "But I do, and nothing can change that."

If there ever were a time I was acutely aware of how she's slowly claiming my heart, little by little, piece by piece, it would be now. This moment.

My mother softly sobs next to me, and I let go of Leandra's hand to watch my father being lowered to the ground, the casket covered with white lilies every family member had placed there.

An ache cracks through my chest, listening to the priest reminding us that we were made from dust, and to dust we shall return. It's a path we all have to wander down. One day.

My eyes burn, and I clench my jaw to keep my emotions under control. Nicoli, Caelian, and Isaia stand close to my mother, their expressions hard, like mine, but we all mourn. We all feel it so damn deep in our souls, the agonizing ache that reminds us of what we lost. But we choose to keep our grief to ourselves, to show strength in our unity as family rather than sorrow.

The night my father died was the one time I allowed my emotions to control me, to free my tears. And Leandra has been the only person to witness me at my weakest—broken and in her arms. I never wanted her to see me like that, but I couldn't stop it. Her words, her touch, it was warm, soothing, a solace that tore down every brick wall I hid my grief behind. There's no denying it. She's changing me. Making me feel things I never thought I would. And now, while I stay strong to support my grieving mother, Leandra is my only comfort. The one who keeps me from drowning

in bottomless grief.

After the last "amen," people start to scatter off in different directions after saying their final goodbye. I take my mother's hand, and she dabs away tears beneath her black veil. "I would like to stay here for a while," she says, her voice shaking. "Until he's safely resting in his crypt."

"Then I'll stay with you."

"No. I'd like to be alone with him." She looks up at me. "Please."

I hate how frail she seems, like she has aged twenty years in only a few days. Everyone can see how lost she is without him, like she's off-balance, missing her other half.

Squeezing her hand, I lean in to kiss her cheek, the smell of her sorrow drowning out the familiar scent of her perfume.

Maximo is standing a few steps behind my mother, and with a simple nod of my chin, he knows exactly what's expected of him—to stay close and watch over her. For the last couple of days, we have put the investigation of our sadistic killer on hold, my father's death giving us the perfect excuse to keep Myth and all the other clubs closed during our time of mourning. It's given us all some space to breathe and time to prepare for all the changes to come.

Uncle Roberto steps up and leans in to kiss my mother's cheek. "I'm so sorry for your loss, dear sister."

She simply nods in reply, her bottom lip trembling as she tries to keep her tears at bay. The hate I feel for my uncle is palpable, and having him here, standing beside my father's grave, pretending to mourn the loss of his brother-in-law, makes my blood curdle. And when our eyes meet, I silently remind him of my promise—to remove him from this fucking family as soon as I take my father's place. Soon, he'll be nothing, his name wiped from the Dark Sovereign dynasty. He plotted to kill my father and erase the entire Del Rossa bloodline but has never been able to. Something tells me my father might have known about my uncle's vendetta and always managed to keep one step ahead of him, waiting for him to hang himself. But I'm not my father, and I won't sit around while he schemes his betrayal.

Leandra slips her hand into mine, and I squeeze it, drawing strength from her touch to control myself. No matter how much I want to feel his skull crack under my blade, today is not the day. Soon.

Our footsteps are quiet as we amble down the cobbled path. We don't speak. The silence is comfortable, and I'm grateful she doesn't hover or

smother me with words of comfort and press me to talk about my feelings. It's like she knows what I need, and I seem to have become attuned to her in the same way.

"You cried today," I say simply, staring out in front of us.

"That's what people do at funerals, isn't it?"

"You didn't cry at your mother's funeral."

Her grip on my hand tightens, and she takes a few moments before answering, "It's different."

"How so?"

She lets go of my hand and lifts her arm, but I grab her wrist before she can scratch behind her ear.

"Why was your mom's funeral different?"

Her lips pull in a thin line. "Because...you can't mourn someone when you're happy they're gone."

"Funny."

"What's funny?"

I give her a sideways glance. "You don't sound happy when you say that."

"The guilt kills it."

"Guilt?"

Leandra stops and turns to me, brushing strands of hair from her face. "What kind of daughter doesn't mourn her mother?"

"The kind who's been abused all her life."

"Still, she was my mom. I loved her despite everything, yet I'm incapable of mourning her death." Her voice breaks on the last word, and she sucks in a breath.

I touch her cheek with the back of my hand, my knuckles caressing her smooth skin. "Your guilt is unwarranted. She didn't deserve your love when she was alive, and she sure as hell doesn't deserve your tears now that she's gone."

"Maybe." She takes my hand. "I didn't know your father very well, but I do know that if he deserves your tears, he deserves mine, too."

It's instinct, natural, how I so easily lean down and capture her lips with mine, soft and hesitant at first, then deepening the kiss, my hands cupping the frame of her face. It's like it has become an intricate part of my existence, something I've been doing for years. Her taste is familiar and bittersweet, reality trickling in through the haze I've been under since realizing I'm not

willing to let her walk away from me. I'm acutely aware that our deal has reached the beginning of its end. My father is dead, his death the final tear through our agreement. But I'm not ready. I'll never be ready, which is why I did what I needed to do.

I pull back, tracing my thumb along her bottom lip. "The first time I saw you, you were standing at a grave. Lost. Lonely. Insecure. Little did I know you'd stand at a grave beside me, a queen."

"I'm no queen, Alexius. I'm just playing my part, remember?"

"Are you sure you're still playing? Or have you become the person you were meant to be all along?"

Her eyes search mine, her lips slightly parted. "I think that's a conversation for a different day."

A subtle way for her to say she plans on sticking around a little longer. At least, out of her own free will, that is.



LEANDRA

I've been at Alexius' side the entire day. Not because it's my duty as his wife, but because I want to. I want to support him, be everything he needs me to be to make it all easier for him.

His brothers have been glued to their mother, constantly surrounding her, supportive and protective—like a brick wall that can't crumble. It's another reminder that the Del Rossa family is so much more than just a crime mafia who gets their hands dirty with underhanded dealings and sex clubs.

Sex clubs. My stomach coils at the mere thought of it, of Alexius going there and doing God knows what with other women. The jealousy tastes bitter, but I have no right. Simply because the signs are there that this might be more than just an agreement doesn't mean the rules have changed. But the idea of other women having their hands all over him, his cock hard and ready to fuck them, makes my skin crawl. I don't want him kissing anyone else, touching another woman, or even thinking about having sex with anyone but me.

But again...I have no right. And now that our deal is rushing to its end, I'm more confused than ever.

Mira closes the front door after the last guests leave. Mrs. Del Rossa is exhausted, her cheeks pale and eyes red, but it didn't stop her from being the perfect hostess, playing her role. It seems in this world there's always a role to play.

"Are you okay, Mother?" Alexius places his hands on her shoulders, studying her with a worried frown.

"If you'll all excuse me, I'd like to rest now," she murmurs with a shaky voice.

Alexius looks at Mirabella, and she steps in next to his mom. "I'll walk with you."

Once they're up the stairs, Nicoli sighs, roughing his hand through his hair. "I don't know about you guys, but I need a drink."

"Pour yourself a glass," Caelian replies. "I'll take the bottle."

Isaia lights a cigarette, and Alexius glowers at him. "You know Mom hates it when we smoke in the house."

"Yeah, well," a cloud of smoke blows past his lips, "I think me smoking in the house is the last thing Mom gives a shit about right now."

I sense Alexius' frustration toward his brother and slip myself between them, facing Isaia. "I'm sure you're right," I say to him calmly. "But since she has a million other things to worry about, let's help her by keeping the little things like smoking in the house to a minimum."

Isaia scoffs, his dark brows arched. "You act like you care."

"I do care."

"Bullshit. The only reason you're here is because our dad forced Alexius to take a wife, and—"

"Isaia," Alexius snaps. "Stop your bull—"

"No! You stop." Isaia points right at him, then lowers his glare to me. "Both of you can stop. It's over, Leandra. You no longer have to be here. Now that our dad is dead and buried, Alexius doesn't need a wife anymore." He takes a step back, his expression hard. "Your deal with my brother is done. So, do us all a favor and leave."

"What the fuck is your problem?" Alexius rushes past me, but he's out of reach when I try to grab his arm to pull him back. He plucks the cigarette from Isaia's mouth, tosses it to the floor and grabs him by the collar, jerking him closer. "I get that you're angry, brother. But I will not let you take it out

on her.”

“Why? Because you care?” Isaia challenges. “You didn’t want a wife in the first place, remember? You made it very clear that you do not need a wife, nor do you want a wife, and the only reason she’s here is because you wanted to grant a dying man’s wish.” Isaia clenches his jaw, bringing his face closer to his brother’s. “Well, you granted it. And he’s dead now. So, you can send her on her way.” He smirks. “Unless you like fucking her too much, which is my guess. Can’t say I blame you. She’s a nice piece of ass.”

Alexius rears back and swings, slamming his fist into Isaia’s face. I’m frozen as I watch Isaia fall back, blood gushing from his nose. I scream. At least I think I do. It’s hard to hear anything other than my panicked heartbeat echoing in my ears.

Isaia strikes back, and I watch as Alexius stumbles back, but it only takes a second for him to retaliate, pounding a fist into his brother’s gut, forcing him to double over.

“Stop!” I yell. “Please stop this!”

But Alexius is relentless, landing another punch, sending Isaia stumbling backward before Alexius pushes him back against the wall. Alexius’ expression is cold, and it scares me, not knowing what he’ll do next—what he’s capable of.

From out of nowhere, Nicoli grabs Alexius’ arm and shoves him to the side, putting himself between them. “You two fuckers can kill each other tomorrow. But not today. You hear me? Not today!”

The tension between them is thick and already wrapped around my throat as I swallow hard. Their eyes flash with anger, their red-hot glares powerful enough to tear each other apart. I take a step back, and another, until I feel the cold wall behind my back.

“I’m so sick of your fucking bullshit!” Alexius seethes at Isaia. “I’ve put up with your asshole attitude because I know this is what you do when you’re in a bad place, but you’ve gone too far. Pull your shit together, man. Or I swear to God...”

Nicoli stomps up to Alexius and leans his head to the side, nostrils flaring as he forces his twin brother to look him in the eye. “Let it go. This is not the place or the time.”

Alexius’ chest rises and falls with each rapid breath, but I can see the moment he realizes Nicoli is right, the rage slowly withering.

Isaia wipes at his busted lip, his nose covered in blood. “You know what?

Fuck you,” he says to Alexius and Nicoli, then looks over at me, his expression completely blank. “Fuck all of you.”

An eerie silence settles, followed by his heavy, angered footsteps as he storms out the front door, slamming it hard behind him.

Nicoli sighs, leaning his head back with his hands buried in his hair. “Fucking hell. I knew this was a goddamn ticking time bomb between the two of you. I just didn’t think it’d explode today of all days.”

Alexius wipes at his lip with his sleeve. “What ticking time bomb?”

Nicoli’s blue gaze cuts in my direction. “That ticking time bomb.”

Now both of them are looking at me, and heat flushes up my neck to my cheeks. “Me?”

“Yeah,” Alexius breathes out, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What about me?”

Nicoli cocks a brow, staring at me from under thick, black lashes. “The fact that our little brother is in love with you.”

Chapter Nine

ALEXIUS

“He’s not in love with me.”

Both Nicoli and I stare at her.

“What?” Her eyes find mine. “He’s not in love with me, Alexius.”

I’ve suspected it, and it’s crossed my mind a thousand times. But I hoped to be wrong because Isaia is my blood, and Leandra has become the one thing strong enough to make me break that brotherly bond without thinking twice.

“Nicoli is right.” I loosen my tie and unbutton my collar. “Isaia is—”

“—not in love with me. That’s absurd.”

Nicoli picks up Isaia’s dead cigarette off the ground and tosses it out a window. “All of us can see it. The way he looks at you.”

“We’re friends. That’s it.” Leandra reaches behind her ear, and I know I should stop her from scratching the scar, but I don’t. Jealousy is an ugly motherfucker that has the power to make you feel nothing else, and as I touch the tender flesh of my cheek, all I want to do is bash Isaia’s face in. I can practically see the jealousy and anger swell inside me, making me want to hurt my little brother in ways that would have my father turning in his grave.

Leandra wipes her palms down the front of her black dress, her cheeks pale and eyes worried. “Excuse me,” she mutters and starts up the stairs and disappears around the corner.

I rub my temple, feeling a headache coming on. “Any other day,” I mumble. “This could have happened any other fucking day, but no, it had to be today.”

“You know that’s how we roll, man. This family’s timing has always gone for shit.” Nicoli slips his hands into his pockets. “Never a dull fucking moment. You’ll have to ice that.” He gestures to my face.

“It’s not that bad. I need a drink.”

“I’m right behind you.”

Instead of going to the dining room or my office, I pull the gold key from my pocket, deciding today is a good day to open the bottle of Glenlivet whiskey my father kept in the Dark Sovereign meeting room.

Nicoli follows and closes the pocket door behind him, and I take the bottle from the glass cabinet.

“That’s the bottle our grandfather gave Dad. Are we finally opening it today?” Nicoli asks.

I brush my thumb across the label. “Dad always said he was waiting for the perfect day to open this. My guess is, today is that day.”

The seal cracks under my hand as I twist the cap, and I instantly smell its rich aroma of dark chocolate and sultanas. I inhale deeply, savoring it, thinking of all the times my dad held this bottle in his hand, saying he couldn’t wait to taste one of the most expensive whiskeys in the world. It crushes me thinking that he never got the chance to.

“Cheers,” Nicoli says as we clink glasses. “To Dad.”

“To Dad.” As the crystal rim touches my lips, I hesitate for a second before taking the first sip. The smooth liquid bursts onto my tongue with the taste. It’s a symphony of flavor, varied notes of spiced fruit and toasted nuts. It’s impossible not to savor it before swallowing its silky sweetness.

“Fuck me, that’s good.” Nicoli moans in appreciation.

“Our grandfather had taste. I’ll give him that.” I close my eyes, taking a second sip, loving the burn as it settles in my stomach, the alcohol easing tension from my muscles.

“So,” Nicoli starts. “Are you ready for this?”

“For what?”

He places his hand on the back of our father’s chair, tapping his finger on the black button-tufted fabric.

“I am. Dad made sure of it.”

“You think Caelian is ready?”

I shrug. “I think so. Dad used to think Caelian doesn’t give a fuck, but I disagree. It’s time for him to be a part of this. He’s changed a lot, grown more trustworthy, reliable...unlike Isaia.”

“Isaia has always been different,” Nicoli remarks, staring at the silver and gold DS symbol on our father’s chair. My chair. “I sometimes wonder if he’s made for this world.”

“He is,” I answer, moving toward the magnolia-colored curtains, staring out the window. “I think he resents the fact that he’s the youngest of four sons, and there are only three seats available at this table. You’ll take mine, and Caelian will take yours. God knows how long it will be before he gets his chance.”

“We could change that.” Nicoli’s tone dips lower. “You can change that.”

A sparrow lands on the outside windowsill, its feather shining under the sun, and I think back to the day my father told me I needed to take a wife. God, I was so fucking angry, unable even to fathom why he made such a ridiculous demand.

Now, in hindsight, knowing how much Leandra’s presence in my life and her support has kept me from drowning the last few days, I realize my father was right.

‘A man’s power is communicated and reflected off his wife’s image.’

Like a fool, I misunderstood. A man’s power does reflect off his wife’s image, but only because he draws his strength from their bond like I’ve drawn my strength from her.

I close my eyes and smile, whispering, “You old bastard. You always knew better.”

I pour myself another drink, and out of habit, I move to sit on my chair when Nicoli stops me, smirking. “This one’s mine. You sit in your own fucking chair.”

It’s surreal as I look at the black chair, the silver and gold DS symbol embroidered on the top. This might be my place now, but it will always be my father’s chair.

We both sit at the table, and it takes me a second to settle.

Nicoli leans back in his seat. “I know we fuck around and take a piss at each other half the time, but now I’m serious. We can change it. You and I both know what a snake Roberto is. And you’ve made it abundantly clear the fucker will be dealt with once Father has passed.”

“Oh, believe me, he’ll be taken care of.” I trace my fingertip along the rim of my glass. “But we have another factor to consider.”

“What?”

I glance at Ricardo’s seat, my other uncle, who has been sitting at Roberto’s side for a while. He’s always been the one with the smallest dick around here, keeping his mouth shut most of the time, never contributing, and always following his older brother’s orders like a little bitch.

“Uncle Ricardo is a problem?” Nicoli’s eyebrows lift, a slight smirk on his face. “The man can hardly take a piss without Roberto holding his fucking hand.”

“Exactly. Which means if we take out Roberto, Ricardo has to go too.”

“That’s fine by me. When both of those bastards are gone, there isn’t a Savelli left to take their place. Then the Dark Sovereign will finally be ours, and we no longer have to worry about Roberto’s greedy ass pushing to form other alliances.”

I nod. “That was our father and grandfather’s wish for this family. To keep it strictly family. And that’s what we’ll do. Keep it strictly family. Del Rossa family.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Nicoli slams back the rest of his whiskey just as Caelian strolls in.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he blurts. “You opened Dad’s whiskey, and you fuckers are drinking it without me.”

“Can’t help it if you keep disappearing every five minutes to jerk off, brother.” Nicoli smirks, and I snicker.

“What happened to your face?” Caelian asks as he grabs the bottle and pours himself a glass.

“Isaia happened,” Nicoli answers on my behalf, every word coated with amusement.

“Oh, shit.” Caelian places the bottle back on the table. “He finally figured it out?”

“What? That my little brother is in love with my wife?”

“Yeah. That.”

I sit back. “Leandra thinks it’s bullshit.”

“I kinda do, too.” Caelian shrugs, then points at what used to be Nicoli’s chair, silently asking permission with a cocked brow, and I nod. “See,” he starts as he sits down, “I don’t think he’s in love with her. He cares for her, that’s for sure, but it’s not love. It’s a friendship, and our brother’s dumb little ass is confusing the two because all he knows how to do is think with his dick. So now he thinks he’s in love with her, but he’s not, and now everyone is ready to start World War Three in this house because everything’s just been blown out of proportion.”

Nicoli’s lips curl downward. “Or it’s that.”

“Oh, my God,” I exclaim. “You were the one who brought it up, and now you’re saying you might be wrong?”

“Hey, I only said what you were already thinking, okay?” He taps his finger against his temple. “Twin telepathy.”

“I should have punched you instead of Isaia,” I say dryly.

“Then you’d be going to Italy with more than a busted lip since I can kick your ass with my eyes closed. And what kind of message would that give our good friends in Rome when they see the new leader of the Dark Sovereign managed to get his ass handed to him?”

Both Caelian and Nicoli laughed, and I groaned at the reminder of my trip ahead. We might not have allies in the sense of sharing the Dark Sovereign’s business and making it a fucking democracy, but we do have friends, ones we would go to war with if need be.

“Are you taking her with you?” Nicoli asks, and my migraine starts getting worse.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, if I may give my ten cents here—”

“You may not—”

“—I’d suggest taking her with you. Showcasing your perfect marriage would only amplify the security your leadership will bring to the Dark Sovereign.”

I know he’s right, and it fucking irks me even to think it.

Nicoli gets up and places his hand on my shoulder. “I have no idea what the fine print of your deal is and when she’s supposed to leave, but do what you must so she goes with you next week. I’m ninety-nine percent sure it’s what Dad would have wanted.”

Sighing, I empty my glass, cringing from the sting. “She’s not.”

Nicoli stills. “She’s not what?”

“She’s not leaving.”

He narrows his eyes. “Does she know that?”

I get up on my feet and button my suit jacket. “Not yet.”

Chapter Ten

LEANDRA

Alexius sits on the side of the bed, holding an ice pack against his cheek, when I walk out of the bathroom, tightening the towel around me. From a distance, I can see the tension in his shoulders as he slams back the last mouthful of whiskey.

I couldn't stand seeing them fight, watching two brothers wanting to hurt each other. But, more than anything, I hated being the reason for the conflict between them.

"You're wrong," I say, and Alexius looks in my direction. "Isaia is not in love with me. I won't deny that there is a connection between us, but it's nothing more than friendship."

"According to you, maybe."

"I'm serious." I walk up to him as he reaches for a cigar in his bedside drawer, lighting it. "Other than Mirabella, Isaia was the first one to show me any sort of kindness when he walked me down the aisle. He was the only one who didn't make me feel like an outsider, not because he's in love with me, but because he's an outsider himself. Can't you see that?"

A plume of smoke slowly wafts from his lips, and I step up, my knee touching his. "You and Nicoli are twins, and you share a bond, a kinship like none other. Caelian and Nicoli are together most of the time because you're always working." I lean my head to the side. "But Isaia, he's always alone, drifting down these halls like a ghost, and hardly anyone notices."

"You do. You notice." The way he looks at me with those azure irises makes my heart skip a beat. It's like he's trying to figure me out. Trying to decide for himself whether what he thinks is true about Isaia's feelings for me, and that it might be mutual. It's not. Not even close.

“Only because for half my life I did everything I could to be invisible, to not be seen. In my world, being noticed is dangerous, and it comes with a price no woman wants to pay. But in yours, not being noticed means you’re not good enough.”

He reaches out and yanks the towel from around me, and my lips part as his eyes turn dark. “In my world, when another man desires your woman,” his warm breath against my naked hip makes me shiver, “touches her,” he slides a finger up my thigh, “or simply looks at her the wrong way,” his hand brushes against my sex, and I suppress a moan, “he dies. Whether he’s blood or not.”

“He’s your brother, Alexius.”

“And you’re my wife.”

“A wife you didn’t want. Something Isaia is very much aware of.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to want what is mine.”

“Is that what I am?” I challenge, shifting from one leg to the other, the slight movement luring his gaze down to where he’s touching me. “Yours?”

“Have you ever doubted that for a second?” He continues to stroke his finger along the crease of my sex, and I’m struggling just to keep my breathing even. “Because if you have, I clearly haven’t fucked you hard enough.”

My heart tightens, and I scrape my courage together so I can take a step back, needing to break the spell his touch has over me. “Am I your wife?” I ask, keeping my eyes pinned on his. “Or am I just like the other women at your club? A woman you can fuck whenever you want? A woman whose only purpose is to spread her legs for you when your dick is hard?”

His eyes flare, and he’s on his feet, towering over me, a magnificent force that has me fearing and desiring him at the same time. “If you were one of the women at my clubs, you’d be locked in a cage, legs spread and tied to the bars so I can look at your pussy while another sucks my cock.” He takes a threatening step closer, and I’m incapable of moving back. “If you were one of the girls at Myth, all my brothers would be there to watch me fuck and cream your pussy while they come on this pretty little face of yours.” He touches my cheek, and I inhale sharply as he drags his thumb down my lips. “If you were anything like the girls in my employment, I wouldn’t feel the need to slit my brother’s throat simply because I think he’s in love with you.”

My body is shaking, my legs trembling. His touch on my chin might be gentle, but his eyes are wild and expression savage, like he’s about to rip me

apart and enjoy every second of it.

Abruptly, he grips my jaw, fingers biting painfully into my flesh, hard blue eyes letting fear tear through me. “You know what I do, our line of business. I am surrounded by naked women almost daily, women who fucking live to please us. So, I would caution you against jealousy, stray, because it’ll drive you crazy and only piss me off.”

I lift my chin underneath his grasp, anger swelling in my chest. “How can you expect something of me when you’re not even capable of doing it yourself?”

His brows furrow, and I wrap my hand around his wrist as his fingers tighten into my cheeks.

“Less than an hour ago you wanted to beat your brother to a pulp because you think he’s in love with me. You just told me you want to slit his throat,” I spit out with puckered lips. “You expect me to not be jealous when naked women surround you every day, yet when a man just looks at me in a way you don’t like, you want to spill blood.”

“Because you are mine.”

“Something no one will ever respect while everyone around here thinks I’m just a stray you picked up off the streets because your dad forced you to take a wife,” I snap. “A wife everyone knows you didn’t want in the first place. No wonder Isaia thinks it’s okay to be in love with me.” It’s a backhanded remark, but I’m too furious to care, too wrapped up in the clusterfuck of emotions wreaking havoc inside me.

His angered gaze studies me, his face so close I can feel his breath on my cheek. “I thought you said he’s not in love with you.”

“According to you and Nicoli, he is.”

“Which is why he needs to get his ass handed to him on a silver fucking platter,” he hisses between his teeth, his top lip curled in a snarl.

“Because I’m your wife?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Am I your wife, Alexius? Or just a way to get your rocks off? A way for you to scratch an itch?” As adrenaline floods my system, I jerk my head free from his grasp and take a step back. “Because if so, you have no right to want to hurt Isaia for wanting what’s yours. If I’m nothing more than your fuck toy, a woman whose jealousy pisses you off, then I swear to God I am not yours and never will be.”

“Oh, but you are,” he grits out. “Whether you want to admit it or not.”

“I’m not naive or stupid. I know how it works here. Women aren’t just wives, they’re possessions. They’re owned. You might think sharing a bed with me, fucking me, having me scream your name between these walls makes me yours, but you’re wrong. Because the only way you’ll ever own me is if I allow it.”

A low groan vibrates from his throat, his gaze pure chaos, and I swear his frame grows taller, his shoulders broader. “If you allow it?” There’s a cruel tenor in his voice that latches on to my spine, keeping me in place. “If you… allow it?”

I swallow hard, trying my best to keep my wits about me. “That’s what I said, and I mean it.”

“No, you don’t.” He stalks closer, forcing me back until I hit the wall and he has me trapped. “Every time you welcome me between your legs,” he cups my sex hard, “it’s proof that you’re mine. Every orgasm I give you, every time you scream my name, and every ounce of cum I pump inside you,” he slips a finger into me, and I moan, “it echoes my ownership over this tight little pussy of yours, and this perfect body that sings like a fucking mockingbird every time I touch you.”

“That doesn’t mean shit,” I counter breathlessly, my rage withering as he finger fucks my defiance out of me.

“Oh, it means everything, stray.” His finger goes deeper. “See, I don’t give a fuck what my brothers or anyone else think when it comes to you and me.”

“Maybe if you did, Isaia wouldn’t have been so quick to remind us that we’ve reached the end of our agreement.”

For a second, he hesitates, stilling his finger inside me, his expression unreadable. His eyes moving along my features as if he’s seeing me for the first time has me holding my breath.

His tongue darts from his mouth, licking his lips, coating them with a tempting sheen, but he doesn’t say a word. All he does is breathe, the tension, our connection pulsing, and I can feel the lie wrap around my throat. My lie. His ownership over me isn’t something I allow. I can’t control it. But neither can he. It just is, and it’s stronger than both of us.

The tension snaps, resounding like a gunshot as our lips collide in a desperate, feverish kiss—our teeth clashing and tongues dueling.

We’re all hands, lips, tongues, and nails, scratching and clawing at each other like savages caught up in a haze of lust.

I moan in protest when he slides a finger out of me and cry out when his cock replaces the emptiness seconds later. His thrusts are deep and fast, our bodies a slapping, sweaty, blissful mess, and I forget everything. Everything but his name, which I say breathlessly as he moves his hips, slamming deeper into me every time. He grabs my ass and pulls me up, forcing me to wrap my legs around his waist, my arms steady on his shoulders. We're caught in a fucking frenzy as he relentlessly pounds his cock into me so hard it hurts. But the pain only makes me want it more. I'm addicted to it. To him.

"You are mine," he growls. "You." Thrust. "Are." Thrust. "Mine."

I come, and my cries hit the ceiling. "Yours." That's what I'm screaming out loud over and over again as my body shakes and quivers around him. "I'm yours."

A low growl comes from his throat, and I feel his cock jerk inside me, his hot cum filling me. I whimper when he pulls out of me and sets my feet back on the ground, and I'm ready to collapse, my muscles weak and aching, but my body ignites once more when he drags his fingers through my slit, covering it with slick wetness and placing it on my lips. The scent of it turns the newly ignited flicker into a flame, and I'm moaning around his fingers when he slips it into my mouth, letting me taste his cum mixed with mine.

"Every time you challenge me, thinking you can question my claim over you, I will fuck you so hard it hurts, and I will make you taste my cum as a reminder that you *allowing* me to do anything is complete. Bullshit."

He's right. I know he is. His dominion over me is absolute, and it pisses me off...because I like it. I shouldn't. But I do, and that's what makes our dynamic so fucked-up and beautiful—his hunger to dominate and my need to submit even though I know my heart is on the line.

"You and I," I start, pushing him away so I can step to the side, "we're the kind of mindfuck that's going to drive one of us, or both of us, crazy."

A wicked grin tugs at his lips as he takes off his clothes, standing in front of me naked, and a goddamn king. "We're unraveling, remember? We might as well drown in the madness while we're at it."

"Yeah, well, before we drown, I just want to say one thing." I clench my jaw to keep the threatening tears at bay. "You're a selfish asshole, Alexius Del Rossa. Because every time you remind me that I'm yours and I belong to you, you don't stop to think for one second what you are to me. *Who* you are to me."

"Then tell me. Tell me who I am to you."

A rogue tear escapes, but I swipe at it before it can leave a bitter trail down my cheek. If I don't say this now and acknowledge the truth, I'm afraid I'll lose who I truly am. It'll eat me alive, and I'll be nothing but an empty shell.

I square my shoulders, willing my wildly beating heart to not smother the words I've finally found the courage to say. It's been a long time coming, and I tried to push it all away, to ignore and hopefully smother it. But I can't do it any longer. The lies I tell myself, they're toxic.

"You are my husband, Alexius," I start, my voice shaking. "And the man I've fallen in love with. I don't know when it happened, or how, or why. But it happened." Another tear trickles down my face. "I'm in love with you, and I know it'll come at a price. I know loving you will destroy me in the end, but I can't change it, and I'm done fighting it." I roughly wipe at my tears with my palms and drag my hands through my hair, feeling more exposed than ever before—not because I'm naked, but because my heart is now open, lying bleeding at his feet.

Time suddenly feels wrong. Seconds are hours, and minutes seconds. Alexius doesn't say a word. He just stares at me like he feels sorry for me. His eyes that burned with fiery fury mere minutes ago are now blue pools of...pity. Is it...pity? Sympathy?

My stomach coils as the bones in my chest break one by one. "Don't," I bite out while tears lap down my lips. "Don't feel sorry for me for loving you. I did it to myself. I knew what we were from the start, and I allowed myself to fall for you anyway." My mocking laugh ripples through the heartbreak. "See, *that*, I allowed. I unraveled and fucked up along the way. It's my own fault for ending up wanting more than what's included in our agreement. So, don't feel sorry for me."

Still, he just stands there. Unmoved and silent while he watches my heart bleed dry like the cold-hearted bastard I've always known him to be. A man who thrives on power—and I've just given him more of it by showing him how truly vulnerable I am.

"You know what?" I walk backward. "Isaia was right. Our marriage has served its purpose, and there's no reason to continue the charade. It's over, and it's time for me to leave." I grab a sheet off the bed, turning my back on him. But before I'm able to wrap it around myself, his hands are on my hips and he's pulling me flush against him, stealing my breath away.

"Alexius, don't."

“I changed my mind,” he whispers behind me.

“Changed your mind about what?”

He places a gentle kiss just below the nape of my neck, and I shudder.
“Our agreement.”



ALEXIUS

She smells like vanilla, sex, and heartbreak—the truth bleeding from her veins. And God forgive me, but I love it. I revel in her truth that’s a mere echo of my own.

I snake my arms around her waist, pulling her close and nestling my nose in her hair, wanting to breathe in her very essence. “Fuck our agreement,” I whisper.

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

“You made it perfectly clear from the start you didn’t want a wife.”

“I didn’t,” I confess, brushing her hair over her shoulder so I can pepper more kisses on her warm skin. “But our agreement burned to ash the moment I tore through your virginity that day in the boutique, and everything changed.” I let my hand dip down low, easing between her legs because I’m hard. I’m hard as fuck from her confession, and knowing without a doubt that she feels the way I do, I want to be inside her like it’s the very first time.

“Alexius,” she whispers my name like a prayer. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying what you’re feeling,” I roll my hips and let her feel how hard I am, “I feel it, too. I’ve felt it for so long, convinced I had gone mad.”

Her body leans back into me, my fingertip gently massaging her clit. “You have no idea how many times I wanted to tell you that our agreement no longer meant shit to me, that the thought of you leaving turned me inside out. But since we’re all about confessions today,” I bring my lips to her ear,

keeping a steady rhythm on the bundle of nerves throbbing beneath my fingertip, “I wasn’t planning on letting you leave.” She sucks air through her teeth, rolling her head back. “You walking out of this house wasn’t an option for a very, very long time.”

“Jesus, Alexius.” She’s breathless and fucking beautiful.

“It’s the truth.” Another roll of my hips has my length slipping between her ass cheeks, and I groan into the nape of her neck.

“Then say it,” she whimpers with challenge, and I know exactly what it is she needs to hear.

I take her waist, turn her, and shove her on the bed, get on my knees, and settle between her legs. Raven curls flare in a beautiful mess on the silk sheets, and I watch her eyes turn to fire when she looks at my cock in my palm, hard, thick, and head swollen. Just. For. Her.

“Before I say it, you need to know.”

“Know what?”

“The consequences of us.” I let go of my cock, reach for her hips, and pull her closer so her pussy’s only inches away from me. “I’ve been raised to be a reasonable man,” I start, teasing a fingertip around her pussy lips, her breathing quickening. “I’ve been taught to think before I act. To assess and weigh every possible outcome of every single choice I make. To not let my emotions dictate my actions.” Drawing more lazy circles around her sex, she bucks, trying to get me to touch her where she needs me to. “But you have to know, Leandra, that I will never be a reasonable man when it comes to you. I won’t ever think twice to kill for you, to burn this fucking city to the ground for you.” One sleek move, and my thumb’s inside her, causing her to writhe, searching for it when I pull my finger out of her. “When it comes to you, I don’t give a fuck about the repercussions of my actions. I don’t care if I die with the blood of a thousand men on my hands, men I killed for you. Men who merely looked at you in a way that pisses me off.” Lifting slightly, I slap the head of my cock on her clit a few times, causing her to moan before tracing it down her slit, her slick heat making it hard not to penetrate. “Do not expect me to be a fair or rational man when it comes to you because you will be sorely disappointed. I will kill. I will maim. And I will destroy for you... whether you want me to or not.”

“I wish I could say I find your words disturbing,” she says, her back arching off the mattress when I nudge at her entrance. “But I can’t. If anything, it only makes me want you more, knowing what extremes you’ll go

to for me.” She lifts herself on her elbows, dark hair framing her flustered cheeks. “It gives me this twisted sense of power, and I love it. Now, say it,” she demands, and there’s a sudden shift between us, her gaze feral and hunger intense.

Leaning down close, I look into her burning irises. “I’m in love with you, Leandra Del Rossa. And you are my wife in every fucking way.”

Chapter Eleven

LEANDRA

I didn't think I'd ever hear him say those words. And now that he has, my heart is full and my soul complete. It's surreal, this life-changing moment of confessions that we'd never be able to turn around from. Everything's changed, and there's no going back now. I thought hearing him say he feels the same way would have me weak at the knees while my heart melts in my chest. But instead, I'm filled with vigor, confidence, thrilled by this new sense of...ownership. Not only do I belong to him, but he belongs to me, too. Alexius Del Rossa is mine as much as I am his.

As if he senses my newfound confidence, he eases back, dark brows curved with challenge. "Get on all fours," he orders, and my spine tingles with excitement while I eagerly obey. He's biting his bottom lip when he reaches out and fists my hair, easing me down while he has his other hand around the base of his cock—firm and inviting—guiding it to my mouth. "Now, suck my dick while you imagine my hands covered in every last drop of blood I've yet to spill for you. My beautiful. Fucking. Wife."

I part my lips and take his cock in my mouth, sucking eagerly as I run my tongue along his shaft, feeling the veins pulse. His scent is a fusion of sex, his spicy cologne, and a hint of leather. It's enough to heighten my senses and make my body burn.

I moan around him, my desire climbing as I taste the lust on his cock and feel his girth grow even harder against my tongue.

His grip on my hair tightens, and he controls the depth I take him in by forcing my head back and forth, hissing every time the tip of his cock reaches the back of my throat. He starts to fuck my face, his hips moving fast, rushing toward his release and tilting my head back so he can go even deeper.

With a guttural groan, he pulls out of my mouth, squeezing his throbbing length and cursing before yanking my head up by my hair. “As much as I love coming down your throat, I need your pussy tonight. I need to come inside you.” His eyes are dark pools of blue, lust burning through the hues. But before he can pin me beneath him, I press my hands to his chest and push him back against the headboard before straddling him, my thighs pinned around his waist.

An amused grin spreads across his handsome face. “Do you want to ride me, stray?”

“Only if you promise not to move.”

His eyes narrow as he sees the challenge in mine, and he lifts his hands in mocking surrender.

“Do your worst, Mrs. Del Rossa.”

Fuck. That devilish smirk and dangerous sex appeal could make every woman want to drop her panties and bend over. It still feels surreal that a man like him can find pleasure with a woman like me. Alexius is perfection personified, his eyes liquid lust, and those lips are as sinful as his body is flawless.

I shift and turn on top of him, feeling his warm breath along my naked back. His hand grazes up and down my spine, easing down every vertebra and sending shivers through me as I push his pants farther down his legs.

“I said no moving.”

“It’s a ridiculous request,” he murmurs, and I slide my wet folds along his stiff shaft, earning me a low groan that vibrates from his lips.

“Let me do this. Please,” I beg, and there’s a moment where he hesitates, his fingers lingering against the arch of my back, but then it’s gone, and I feel him relax beneath me.

Lifting myself to my knees, I reach for his cock, guiding him to my entrance before sinking onto him with a moan. He’s so big, so thick, but my body has grown accustomed to him, my walls wrapping around him as if we were made to fit. I hear his subtle groan as a cloud of smoke wafts past, and I gently rock my hips, just enough to make him want more. The sensation is indescribable. Being in control of how deep and how fast, determining where his cock hits and moves inside me, leading the pace as we work toward our release, intensifying everything I feel, hear, taste.

With my hands on his thighs, I lean forward, dragging my palms down over his knees and legs. My nipples brush against his thighs, his length

slowly slipping out of me as my legs widen.

“I swear to God, woman. If you let my cock slip out of you, I will take your ass and make it hurt.”

A thrill slithers down my spine, and I ease back, propping myself up with my hands on his muscled thighs. I take him deep, pushing down hard to ensure every inch of him is inside me. The pleasure is intense as I move, riding him with slow and controlled circles of my hips.

He thrusts beneath me, and I stop. “You’re breaking the rules, Alexius.”

“What gives you the idea I give a fuck about your rules?”

I’m slowly driving myself insane with the leisurely circles of my hips and rocking my body on top of him the way I want to. Taking his cock the way I want to.

My eyes close, and my body picks up the pace. My hips are no longer rolling, they’re moving up and slamming down, my fingers digging into the flesh of his thighs. Every time the head of his cock reaches the deepest part of my core, it takes me closer to my release.

Dark strands of my hair bounce around my shoulders as I ride him, his groans and curses fueling me to go faster, to fuck him harder. I’m about to crest when Alexius grabs my hips, thrusting up hard before wrapping his arms around my waist and cupping my breasts, his chest flush against my back.

His warm breath skims my sensitive flesh, our bodies squeezed together so tight, it’s hard to know where he begins and I end. I throw my head back, reaching behind me and weaving my fingers through his hair as our moans form a symphony of lust headed toward a crescendo that would rip through us at any moment.

We’re both moving. I’m pushing down hard while he rolls his hips upward, both needing it deeper. So much deeper.

“Do not think for one second simply because I allow you to ride me that you’re in control.”

His hand slips down my front, his expert fingers finding my throbbing clit. I can no longer control my breathing, my moans. But the desire is too powerful, too intense, and we’re both past the point where control is even a fucking option.

“No man will ever have this privilege of knowing what your pussy feels like. Only me. It will always be me.” The sound of his rapid breaths fills my ear, and I cry out just as his hand wraps around my throat, fingers squeezing

to a point where I can no longer inhale. His cock throbs inside me, our movements desperate and uncontrolled. The pleasure is intense. It's too much as tears prickle the corners of my eyes.

"Come on my cock, stray. I won't cream this pussy of yours until you break around me."

My lips part, my pussy clenches, and my body comes apart, an orgasm crashing against every bone, a storm raging through my blood. My climax crests, and I feel him jerk inside me, growling against the skin of my shoulder, pressing our bodies harder together.

It's impossible to think that there are moments as powerful as this, moments strong enough to define us. Define who we are. And it's in this moment that I see it as clearly as the sun breaking through the clouds while rain still laps onto the Earth. No matter how daunting it is, how profound the consequences might be...I am his. And I want to be. I want to be his. I want this with him. Not for a day, a week, or six months. I want this until the day I take my last breath.

I've been denying this truth, hoping it would disappear, but instead, it only intensified threefold.

My chest rises and falls with every breath, but I don't feel the air reach my lungs.

"I love you, Leandra," he whispers. "I just hope you can carry the burden that comes with it."

Chapter Twelve

LEANDRA

The second I step off the plane, Italy's chilly weather has me grabbing the collar of my coat, bringing it closer to my cheeks.

"You feeling better?" Alexius' hand touches the small of my back.

"A little."

During three of the nine hours spent on his private plane, I was stuck in the bathroom, wiping vomit from my mouth and dabbing sweat from my forehead. The moment we took off in Chicago, my stomach started turning, and it didn't stop until one of the flight attendants started giving me one ginger tea after the other. Apart from nausea and dizziness, the disappointment of not being able to enjoy every second of it made me feel even worse. I was so excited. Maybe too excited. It was the first time I'd ever been on a plane, my first time leaving the States. And when I stepped onto the private jet, taking it all in, I was stunned. The girl who lived in that shitty apartment could never have imagined the kind of luxury some people basked in.

White leather seats, large oval-shaped portholes, and the dark oak woodwork all reminded me that I have no idea how far the Del Rossa wealth stretches. I've been with this family for months, and it still blows my mind sometimes.

"It's your first time on a plane. I should have anticipated that you might get sick," Alexius says as he guides me toward the SUV, Maximo keeping the door open for us.

I groan. "I think it was more excitement than anything else."

With the twist of his wrist, he pulls me close, my chest flush with his. The cold breeze weaves through my hair, and he gently tucks the strands behind

my ear. “Until now, you’ve merely experienced a morsel of what my world has to offer. There is so much more, Leandra. An abundance of luxuries and wealth you can’t begin to imagine.”

I smile as I search his eyes. “Since the day I walked into your home for the first time, I haven’t gone hungry or spent a single night shivering through the cold because I slept under a broken window. To me, that’s all the luxury I need.”

Something flashes in his eyes. I can’t tell what it is, but his gaze softens and his lips part as if to say something, but he kisses me instead. It’s soft at first, then deepens with a desperate sweep of his tongue, his hands holding me close. The strength of his body, the ripped muscles beneath his suit, I can feel it. Feel the beat of his heart. And the way I melt into him as our first kiss under the Italian sky turns to fire, my chest aches to hope. Since we confessed how we truly felt about each other, I’ve been walking around with much hope and excitement for the future. We bared our souls to one another, and finally, knowing I’m not the only one who wants us to be more than just two individuals who entered a temporary agreement made my heart sing. But there’s still doubt. Isn’t there always? No matter how often you hear someone say they love you, there is always that sliver of doubt that creeps in through the tiniest cracks.

For now, I choose to ignore the subtle warning. There is no place for uncertainty and insecurities under the Italian sun.

Maximo clears his throat behind us, and my cheeks burn as I break our kiss and lower my face into Alexius’ chest. “You had to bring him along?”

“Maximo goes where I go.” He lifts my chin with a gentle hand. “Especially when I have something with me worth protecting.”

“Alexius,” Maximo calls. “Standing here on the open strip makes my eye twitch, man. We need to go.”

Alexius takes my hand, leading me to the car. I glance back at the plane one last time before slipping into the back seat, still unable to comprehend that this is reality. I’m in Rome, wearing a beige designer wool coat, with knee-boots and jeans worth more money than I made in a year as a waitress. And not to mention the man sitting beside me, a gorgeous, attractive, powerful king with eyes that can steal my soul and a toxic touch that chains me up and leaves me breathless.

I have no idea how long we spend in the car. I’m too enthralled by the streets of Rome to keep up with time. There are so many people not even the

overcast weather can keep them from experiencing the rich scenery.

“*Dolce far niente*,” Alexius says, and I glance at him with confusion. He smirks. “Pleasant idleness. The sweetness of doing nothing. That’s the main thing that draws people here.” He looks out his passenger side window. “It’s the only place in the world where you can find entertainment, peace, romance, and freedom by simply doing...nothing.”

“My imagination could never have done it justice,” I say. “It’s like we’ve left one world and entered another.”

“Maximo, have you informed the hotel that we’re on our way?”

“They have the back entrance secured for our arrival.”

“Are they there yet?” Alexius asks.

“Silvestro and his wife arrived yesterday afternoon.”

“Saint?”

“They’re scheduled to arrive later tonight.”

Alexius scoffs. “Bastard loves making people wait.”

I lean closer and whisper, “Are they the business associates we’re here to meet?”

“Yes. We’re all staying at the same hotel, so meeting up is easier and safer.” He glances my way again. “Hotel Hassler is one of the most prestigious hotels in the heart of the city. I suspect you’re going to love it.”

“It can be a trailer park, and I’ll love it,” I reply with an excited grin, and Alexius seems amused as he watches me.

We arrive at the hotel, but we’re escorted through the back so fast it’s impossible to take anything in and appreciate our surroundings. All I get are glimpses of pristine marble floors, dark wood, and shades of umber, timeless elegance gleaming from every corner.

“Penthouse,” Maximo says to the elevator attendant as the steel doors close. The man is as subtle as a heart attack with his hand on the gun at his side, glaring at the attendant as if he was daring him to make one wrong move.

“Is he always like this?” I ask Alexius.

“He takes a piss one-handed, so he has a hand on his gun at all times.”

I inch closer to Alexius, staring at Maximo as if he’s about to go savage in this tiny, enclosed space.

Alexius snickers, finding my apprehension amusing, but takes the opening to snake an arm around my waist, pulling me against him. It’s impossible not to soak in his heat, loving how it feels to have his arm around

me—an age-old act of showing ownership and affection with one simple move. I’ve come to appreciate these seemingly insignificant moments with him, moments that aren’t meant to be bricks on a path to happiness but merely junctures to enjoy on your way.

The elevator chimes, and the doors open, revealing the exquisite Botticino marble floors, polished to shiny perfection. As we step into the suite, bouquets of peonies welcome us with their sweet, rosy scent. The flowers aren’t white, but rather a pale blush—delicate and romantic.

Every inch, every corner is pristine, elegant, and open, the air fresh and clean. The walnut wood-paneled walls give the living space a refined look—a fusion of earthy tones and warmth with shades of fawn. Two large traditional columns separate the sitting room from the dining room, the mirrored walls creating the illusion of endless space around the black dining table. There are no words to describe it. It’s like our own little paradise in the most romantic city in the world.

“Better than a trailer park?” Alexius smirks, and I can’t stop myself from smiling.

“This is beautiful.” I twirl in the middle of the foyer, looking up at the high ceilings and then at the ample living space in front of me. “And all this space.”

“It’s a three-thousand five-hundred and fifty-two-square-foot suite.”

I gape at him. “Just for the two of us?”

He nods.

“That’s insane.”

“Come on. I want to show you something.” He slips off his coat and places it over the beige sofa as we pass, walking out the large double glass doors and onto the terrace. I don’t even notice the late afternoon chill caressing my cheeks as I stare out at the outdoor space that’s like something out of a dream. Potted plants are placed on the border walls that surround the terrace, and green vines weave along black steel trellises. It’s a lush vegetation utopia with a beauty not even the overcast skies can touch. I’m mesmerized and can almost feel the magic in the air, like everything is alive and charged with energy.

I’m pulled out of my reverie by Alexius’ voice. “It still amazes me, no matter how often I stare at this view.”

He’s standing at the farthest end of the terrace, hands in his pants pockets, and for me, he completes the breathtaking image of the Rome skyline.

Majestic. Marvelous. Magnificent.

“Come on.” He turns and holds out his hand, beckoning me closer, but I’m frozen with slight apprehension.

“I...um. I don’t...”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of heights.”

“Well,” I drag out the word, and my cheeks warm.

“You were just on a plane for nine hours.”

“I know. I’m not afraid of heights.” I pull my lips in a straight line, the heat in my cheeks burning hotter. “It’s, um...”

“Leandra, out with it.”

“It’s an edge thing,” I blurt. “Whenever I stand close to a ledge, I have this bone-numbing fear of falling over.”

He turns toward me, hands tucked back into his suit pants pockets. “Come here,” he orders. The collar of his white dress shirt is unbuttoned, a pair of Ray-Bans hiding those burning sapphire eyes, and like a stupid moth, I’m bewitched by the flame—a flame luring me to the literal ledge.

I step forward, but still again. “You standing there looking like a man who sinks his teeth into women like me daily might not be enough for me to walk all the way over there.”

“What if I tell you I’ll reward your courage?”

“With what?” I ask, the energy around us starting to crackle.

His lips spread into a sexy as fuck grin, and he starts unbuckling his belt just as Maximo walks out on the terrace, stopping in his tracks when he spots us. Alexius doesn’t even look his way when he says, “Get the fuck off the terrace, Maximo. Or better yet. Get the fuck out of the penthouse. Now.”

Without saying a word, Maximo backtracks and slides the glass doors closed.

I purse my lips at Alexius. “That was rude, don’t you think?”

“It was either that or letting him watch.” He pulls the belt from around his waist, the sound sending electricity up my spine.

“Letting him watch what?” I murmur, my breath already becoming labored.

“How I’m going to help you overcome your fear of standing on the edge.” Every word is laced with seduction, and I already know what he plans on doing. There’s no way I’ll be able to stop him. I don’t want to.

He starts walking toward me, the belt in his hand, and I can feel my pussy starting to throb in anticipation. I back up a few steps, and he notices, lifting a

brow. “Don’t,” he warns. “Do not walk away from me.”

I freeze and watch him while holding my breath, and when he reaches me, I exhale gently, his closeness wrapping around me like it always does. He reaches out, slips the coat down my arms so it pools around my heeled boots on the ground, and I shudder as he runs the belt along my cheek.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, do you know that?” he murmurs before lowering his head to capture my lips in a searing kiss. My body responds to his touch like it’s been starving for it, my lips burning with the inferno he ignites with a simple sweep of his tongue. I offer no resistance while he captures my hands in his palms, easing them behind my back, looping his belt around my wrists, binding them together, cinching it tight. I arch my back, pressing my breasts into his chest just as he breaks the kiss, trailing his lips down my neck. “You are the only woman I want to fuck for the rest of my goddamn life.” My nipples harden in response, straining against the fabric of my blouse. My moan drifts from a breath, and I close my eyes as he reaches up and cups my breasts, gently squeezing and rolling them, slowly teasing me with waves of pleasure moving through my body. When he cups my sex, his hand brushing against the denim, I know I’m lost.

Slipping his hand out from between my legs, he slides it up my waist and around my middle, his chest now flush against my back. “Open your eyes, stray.”

I open them and gasp, staring out over the Rome skyline, my heart beating in my throat. I didn’t even realize we were moving, that he was slowly guiding me to the half-wall barrier surrounding the terrace. The air smells like looming rain, a storm headed toward us far in the distance. I can hear the bustle of people, the noise of engines, the city of Rome alive below us.

Through the heat in my core and the ache between my legs, fear starts to curl inside my gut. “Alexius—”

He yanks the belt tied around my wrists. “You are a Del Rossa, Leandra. You have the entire world at your feet, and there is nothing you need to fear. Not while I’m the twisted son of a bitch who will cut out the hearts of those who hurt you and lay them at your feet.”

The promise that echoes from his words makes me shiver. It gives me a sense of power, confidence, knowing he’d be a brutal savage if I needed him to.

My pulse races, a cold breeze whips through my hair, and while I stare

out in front of me, the view clear and far, I know he's the cause of my rapidly beating heart. Not fear. Him.

“There are three things I’d like to address right now.” He presses closer to me, his hard chest rippling against my back as his hand slithers up under my blouse, sparks dancing from my skin to his palms, fingers teasing along the waistband of my jeans. I shiver, electric currents surging through my nerves, down my arms, and up my legs to ignite a spark in my stomach where it grows into a flicker...a flame...until I feel like I’m going to explode. That’s what a simple touch from this man can do to me, my sex throbbing with a need to be stroked and teased.

“First. You need to trust me. You need to know that I won’t let any harm come to you no matter what I ask you to do. Understand?”

He pops the top button of my jeans, and I whimper.

“Say you understand, Leandra.”

“I understand.”

“Good.” He exhales into the nape of my neck, and the warmth of his body and the spicy scent of his cologne ward off the Italian cold.

“Second.” His fingers are deft and sure as he undoes every button. “This one goes hand-in-hand with the first.” I lean my head back against his shoulder. “You will do everything I ask, without question. You hesitating just now, not coming to me after I asked, simply because you’re afraid of falling, is un-fucking-acceptable. Do you understand me?”

Authority is locked around every word, his voice low and commanding. It’s the voice of a man used to getting his way, demanding nothing but obedience. No matter how intense my fear of falling is, my instinct to obey him is much stronger.

“Understand,” I whisper, wishing he would slip his hand between my legs. But he doesn’t, leaving me aching for his touch.

“Now, this brings me to the third—and it’s a big one, Leandra. It’s not up for negotiation, and if you disobey this rule, I will leave your pussy empty of me for a long time.”

He has both hands on my waist now, clutching the waistband of my jeans. “This is the last time you ever wear fucking pants. Understand?” With a sharp yank, he tugs my jeans down, taking my panties with it. The fabric is bunched around my knees, and I know he’s staring down at my naked ass. I can feel his gaze burning my flesh. Every inch of my body is electrified and alive under his spell.

My hips move as he works to unzip his own pants, and my pussy clenches as he drags the wet tip of his cock through the slit of my ass. “Dresses, skirts, that’s all you’re allowed to wear.” A hand slips around my waist and dips between my legs, an expert finger finding my clit and making me moan. My nipples harden even more, the silk blouse feeling rough and rugged against them. “I don’t want something as insignificant as goddamn pants in my way when I want to fuck my wife. Understand?”

I’m breathless. So wet. The circles he draws around my clit have every muscle tied to the pleasure pulsing from that one sensitive nub to every bone in my body.

“Do you understand?” Abruptly, his hand is gone, a moan echoing from my throat followed by a gasp as he bends me forward, my chest against the ledge.

“Yes, I understand.” I whimper, and he tugs at the belt wrapped around my wrists before slapping both palms on my ass, spreading me open so he can sink into me with one hard thrust. My cries echo over the city in front of me, reverberating off the buildings around us.

He fills me, every inch of him sinking into my aching pussy. The sensation of him moving inside me is overwhelming like it’s the first time. I can’t move with him; the jeans around my knees and belt tied around my hands make it impossible. I’m completely at his mercy, having to trust him to give my body what it needs. Leather bites into my wrists, and denim chafes against my skin. But the pain only intensifies to anticipation for pleasure.

“Do you think someone is watching us right now, stray?” He stills for a moment, his dick still hard and deep inside me.

“I sure hope so,” I murmur, utterly possessed with a lust that only he can evoke.

A shudder moves up my spine as his palms ease along the flesh of my ass. “You know what I think?”

“That you’d like to make me come?”

He snickers. “In due time. I think...” With his palms, he spreads me wider, and I imagine him watching as he slowly rears back. “I think if I were a religious man, I would have prayed for you my entire life.” He spears back into me, the hard edge of the half-wall scraping against my stomach. “I think God created you just for me even though He knew I’d corrupt you.”

“You’re wrong,” I mutter, trying to move my hips. “I’ve been corrupted all along. You just turned the ugliness of it into something...beautiful.”

Alexius pounds into me with such force my heels lift off the ground, and my heart hiccups as my gaze falls, realizing how high up we are. The ground seems so far away, and if he wanted to, he could easily throw me over. Just one simple nudge, and I'd fall to my end.

As if he could read my mind, he grips the belt with one hand. "I won't let you fall, stray. Never."

The smack of his palm against my ass reverberates around us in the open air, and I moan as he sinks into me completely, hitting my core with his swollen cock. Holding me in place, he slams into me so hard that my hip bones hit against the edge of the wall, my breasts now past the edge as I'm halfway over the barrier. It's both terrifying and thrilling, but the trust is there. It's keeping the panic at bay, allowing the anticipation to build. With one relentless thrust after the other, each movement harder and faster than the last. My pussy throbs and clenches, my orgasm building, my body tied with the chains of a climax I know will tear through me at any moment.

"You want to come?"

"God, yes."

All it takes is another single thrust—hard, deep, fucking divine—and my orgasm explodes through me, waves of ecstasy crashing over me as I cry out.

Alexius doesn't stop, his grunts of pleasure licking against the back of my neck, his cock pulsing inside me as he comes.

He slows, our breathing rapid, chasing for air. Still glancing down at the streets below us, people indulging in the sweetness of doing nothing. "*Dolce far niente.*"

"You're going to be the death of me, Alexius," I whisper as he pulls my pants back up and over my hips.

He brushes my hair over my shoulder, leaving a trail of kisses across my naked neck before his lips touch my ear. "I know."

Chapter Thirteen

ALEXIUS

“Gentlemen.” I walk into the private lounge. Gian and Saint together with their wives are already there, lounging on the leather couches. “It’s good to see you all.”

“Alexius.” Saint stands and buttons his suit jacket, holding out his hand. I take it for a good handshake before turning to Gian, greeting him in the same manner. Both these men have been friends of the Dark Sovereign for a long time, and they are about the only people, apart from my brothers, I trust in this world.

“Let me introduce to you my wife, Leandra.” I touch the small of her back, the lace of her silver column sheath dress soft against my fingertips. “Leandra, meet Marcello Saint Russo and his wife, Milana.”

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Mila says with a warm smile, her striking red dress about as bold as her husband’s presence.

I turn to the others. “And this is Gian Silvestro and his wife, Daniela.”

“Nice to meet you,” Leandra greets, her voice reflecting the confidence she carries in her shoulders.

Daniela smiles when she notices Leandra’s confused expression. “It’s called partial heterochromia iridis,” she says. “It’s when one half of an eye is a different color. In my case, half hazel, half green—same green as my other eye.”

“I’m sorry.” Leandra’s cheeks flush with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” Daniela assures her. “It makes most people look twice. But you, Mrs. Del Rossa,” she teases with a smirk, “we’ve all patiently been waiting to meet the woman who tamed the firstborn Del Rossa.” She tucks a

red curl behind her ear.

“It’s good to finally get together,” Gian chimes in. “It’s been too long.”

“Too long indeed,” I agree.

“I’m surprised Nicoli hasn’t joined you.” Saint steps in next to me, his pin-striped tie as perfect as his black, pressed suit.

“Nicoli has some family business to take care of in my absence.” Meaning he has a killer to catch. It was against my own better judgment that I took this trip while we had a church fucker popping eyeballs, cutting off ears, and shoving crosses between the legs of the girls who work for us. But there was no getting out of this trip to meet up with the Russo and Silvestro families as head of the Dark Sovereign.

“We’re so sorry for your loss,” Milana says. “I wish we were able to attend your father’s funeral.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

“I had the utmost respect for your father, Alexius.” Saint swallows the last sip of his bourbon. “I came really close to breaking our rule of not being seen together.”

Gian hands his wife a glass of champagne. “Sometimes, I wonder if it’s not time to let that one rule go. Things have changed. Maybe we should reconsider. We are, after all, the second generation of this friendship between our families. Times have changed.”

I shake my head. “I might not have agreed with my father on everything,” I give Leandra a sideways glance, “but I agree that the decision to keep our circle a secret is in our best interest. Unfortunately, some might mistake this for an alliance, and the strength of this so-called alliance will be felt all around the world, right to their bones, and it will put us all at risk of being seen as a threat.”

“As much as I’d like not to, I agree.” Saint takes a seat on the leather couch, Milana sitting down next to him. “The last thing we all need is a bunch of fuckers coming at us. Besides, not having the world know about our business ventures makes everything run smoother.”

“Well, I know the three of you have a lot to discuss,” Milana says. “But let’s have dinner first, and then we’ll give you three some privacy.”

I nod and take Leandra’s hand, leaning closer, taking a moment to appreciate the delicate scent of her perfume. “Have I told you that you look absolutely stunning tonight?”

Her cheeks turn the prettiest pink. “You mentioned something along those

lines before you decided to bunch the skirt of this dress around my waist. It's still creased."

"Hmm-mmm," I hum, thinking about how I took her bent over the couch, muffling her cries with a beige scatter cushion. "You wanted me to fuck you."

"Says who?"

"Says the pair of panties you didn't wear underneath that dress." I still and turn to face her. "Be glad I told you to put on a pair before we came here, or I'd be in that restroom over there," I nod in the direction, "fucking you against the goddamn vanity."

She sucks her cherry-red bottom lip into her mouth, the sight making my cock twitch. "Now I kind of wished I didn't listen to you."

"Jesus, woman." I lean closer. "My cum is still coating your cunt, and yet you feel the need to play with me right now."

With a seductive grin and amber irises of liquid gold, she reaches out and pretends to straighten my tie. "There will never be a time I don't want to play, Alexius." She leans in to kiss my cheek and whispers, "You should remember that."

I grab her waist inconspicuously as I turn us away from our guests, squeezing my fingers into her hips, and excitement travels down my spine when I hear her gasp. "I will have no problem shoving my cock deep inside your pussy while the entire world watches. And if I see one hard dick on any man while they watch you come, I'll put a bullet in their skull." This time it's my turn to kiss her flushed cheek. "You should remember that." The slight shiver down her body doesn't go unnoticed. I love these fucking games we play and how thrilling she makes it by being a willing participant.

I drop my hand to her ass, cupping the firm flesh in my palm. "Let's eat."

Caprese bruschetta, pancetta and veal rolls, eggplant parmesan poppers, and more were served as appetizers. *Bistecca alla Fiorentina* steak was served as the main course, while Milana and Daniela opted for the *risotto ai funghi porcini* due to them not eating meat. Good conversation paired with exquisite Tuscan wine made for a pleasant evening of laughter and entertainment.

I'm not the least bit surprised, yet amazed at how Leandra fits in perfectly. Her presence flows within the heart of our group, weaving among the rest of us as if she belonged here. As if she had always been a part of the friendship ties that stretched for years. Milana and Daniela took to her

immediately, and not once did I feel like I had to include her or do something to make her feel at ease with the night's company. Every now and then, she would glance my way, and the sparkle in her eyes would put the diamond necklace I gifted her tonight to shame under the crystal chandelier. Once again, I'm reminded that she was born for my world. Born to be a queen. Born to be mine.

For most of the evening, my attention was focused mainly on her, how she managed to become the light in the room, her smile and laugh filling the space and making my heart swell inside my chest. If there was any doubt about how I truly felt about her, tonight solidified it.

She owns my heart, mind, and soul.

Saint leans in close to Milana, whispering something in her ear. I've known this man for years, and I never thought I'd see the day Marcello Saint Russo would be so pussy-whipped and on his knees for a woman. But Milana brings out the best of him; everyone can see it.

Leandra finishes the last of her champagne, and I place a hand on her knee below the table, giving it a firm squeeze before easing it up between her thighs. She stiffens and gives me a sideways glance as if she can stop me with a mere look. But she knows I won't stop. She doesn't want me to.

I slide my hand up...up...a slow race of seduction, a secret affair between my touch and her smooth, hot thighs. A thrill enters my veins as I catch her shiver, and she looks away, refusing to let me see the rapture in her eyes, the pure bliss she experiences every goddamn time I touch her.

Saint and Gian are discussing their latest splurges on multi-million-dollar yachts while my fingertips continue their journey up toward the heaven tucked between my wife's legs. She clenches her thighs, restricting me from further access, and my cock twitches in protest. If we were alone, I'd grab her by the hair and shove my dick down her throat so deep that tears would stain her beautifully flushed cheeks. But I make my disapproval known by letting my fingers bite into the soft flesh of her thighs, applying enough pressure that leaves her with no choice but to open her legs. When she does, she gives me a disapproving glare, and I simply smirk, straightening my tie with the hand that's not currently on its way to her pussy.

"Alexius," she says just loud enough for everyone to hear, "would you mind pouring me another glass of champagne?"

"Of course." The stare-off between us is a battle, and she thinks she's won, only to see that I just need one hand to pour a goddamn glass. I lift a

cocky brow, and she narrows her eyes at me—beautiful amber eyes begging me to do what I want even though she’s pretending to fight it. She knows as well as I do that she’s already wet for me, and knowing I wouldn’t stop if someone held a gun to my head makes her even more so.

She inches her thighs apart, knowing the battle has been won, her pussy mine to do with as I please. I watch her plump, sensual lips touch the rim of the crystal glass, and I imagine her lipstick stains at the base of my cock as she takes a sip of her newly poured champagne. The delicate contour of her throat bobs as she swallows, and I picture her eagerly gulping down my cum, ribbons of it bursting from the corners of her mouth.

Jesus. My cock is rock hard and ready to fuck, and I know her cunt is wet enough to let it easily slide in.

My fingers brush along her soft lace panties. It’s inaudible, but I see her lips part with a silent gasp as I trace the outline of her pussy. Her panties are soaked, and I smirk, watching her trying not to squirm, fighting her body’s urge to move deeper and closer to my touch.

“When will you be joining the fleet, Alexius? I know a guy who can give you a great deal on a yacht much bigger than Saint’s.” Gian shoots Saint a cocky grin, and Milana snickers.

I take a sip of my whiskey, my fingers still tucked between my wife’s legs. “I already have something bigger than Saint’s. I wouldn’t want to embarrass the man even further.”

Everyone bursts out laughing, including Saint. “Alexius, my friend, yours might be bigger, but mine is built for pleasure and used way more than yours.”

“I’ll have to get some extra mileage on mine, then,” I say, sliding Leandra’s panties to the side, touching her swollen pussy lips beneath the table, and her laughter gets stuck in her throat. “Or I’ll just buy another plane, and then no one will give a fuck about mileage.”

“Oh, we’re talking about planes?” Saint feigns ignorance, and more laughter erupts, a great distraction as I slip a finger inside Leandra’s welcoming cunt, forcing a soft moan that only I can hear from her lips.

While Gian and Saint continue taking a piss at each other, their wives chiming in now and then, I wonder if I’m the only husband at this table currently fingering his wife. Not going to lie, the thought turns me the fuck on, and by the way Leandra looks in my direction, a flash of lust in her eyes, I know she’s thinking the exact same thing.

I lean closer to Leandra, letting my finger slip out, dragging it up to touch her clit. “You’re going to make a mess on your seat,” I whisper in her ear, feeling her shiver as I gently massage that tiny bud that’s swelling more and more beneath my fingertip. “Do you think they know?”

“Alexius, stop,” she scolds with a whisper, but I feel her opening her legs wider for me.

“Should I make you come in front of my guests?”

She grabs her glass and pleads, “Please stop,” before taking a sip, but her voice holds no conviction. There is not a fucking bone in her body that wants me to stop. She knows I know she’d let me fuck her in front of everyone here because that’s what she likes. What we like.

“Why would I stop when you’re clearly enjoying it so damn much?”

“Your guests.”

“I don’t give a fuck if they see you come. Do you?” I apply more pressure on her clit, and she responds by pressing her hips down, pretending to shift in her seat when she’s actually grinding her pussy against my palm. “My little stray wants to come...doesn’t she?”

By placing her glass against her lips, she hides the deep breath she takes before smiling at something Milana said, which neither of us heard. They are all oblivious to what’s happening beneath the table—or at least, I think they are. Even if they knew, I wouldn’t stop. I love teasing Leandra like this, watching her skin turn the most beautiful blush pink, her eyes filled with excitement.

I lean back in my seat, pretending to participate in the conversation while feeling her arousal increase, coating my fingers. Her thighs clench, her lips part, and sweat beads at her temples. She’s close. I can feel it as I slip inside her wet little hole, how her body sucks my finger into her. I’m one stroke away from making her come when she darts up from her seat, leaving my hand cold and void of her drenched cunt.

“Ladies, I haven’t had a chance to visit the hotel boutique yet. Who wants to join me while the men smoke cigars and measure their dicks?”

There’s dead silence before Daniela bursts out laughing. “Oh, my God. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to say those words.” She, too, stands from her seat. “At every dinner party, right before the women get excused, those exact words always burn the tip of my tongue. So I’m glad one of us has finally had the balls to say it.”

“I like her, Alexius,” Milana says between laughs. “The three of us are

going to have a lot of fun tonight.”

“Speaking of,” I stand and face the three women, “instead of going to the boutique, I’ve arranged for a private viewing up in our suite where they’ll showcase their collection.”

Leandra lifts a brow at me. Did she really think I’d let her go to the first floor alone? Sure, I could send Maximo and some of his security down with them, but the last thing I want is unnecessary attention surrounding my wife. And judging by the way Saint and Gian look at me, they’re thinking the same thing, approval etched on their faces.

“That’s so considerate of you, Alexius,” Daniela says as she picks up her glass of champagne.

I reach out and gently take Leandra’s elbow in my hand before pulling her close, bringing my lips to her ear. “That’s twice you’ve denied me tonight,” I whisper, my tone firm. “Now I’ll have to return the favor.”

Chapter Fourteen

LEANDRA

I'm looking at dresses and blouses, skirts and coats. It's a bombardment of colors as my fingers trace over fabrics while I pretend to be interested in buying more clothes when I already have a wardrobe bigger than Japan back home. I've told Alexius a thousand times that I don't need more clothes, only to have Mirabella add more items the following day. And now, while laughing and chatting with Milana and Daniela, all I can think of is Alexius and what he said to me before we left the lounge.

"That's twice you've denied me tonight. Now I'll have to return the favor."

It's a threat, a promise, a vow to make me pay for denying him twice. First, when I clenched my thighs together, refusing him access when he had his strong, rough hand travel up the inside of my thigh—yet I eventually welcomed his touch only to squirm in my seat. And second, when I wouldn't let him make me come while he fingered me at the dinner table with his friends around. It's not like I didn't want him to. With every bone in my body, I wanted him to push me over the edge, but I couldn't guarantee I'd be able to keep a straight face while an orgasm tore through me.

"So," Daniela started, flipping her red curls over her shoulder as she takes a seat, pouring herself another glass of champagne. "For how long after the wedding did you hate him?"

I balk, not entirely sure what's happening right now, nervous energy flapping its wings in my stomach.

Milana smiles, slanting a brow as she looks my way. "It's okay. You can trust us. Both Daniela and I hated our husbands at first, for different reasons—a discussion for a different day. But somehow, these damn men just found

a way to rip our hearts open and imprint themselves in every single cell.”

“And drove us crazy with their hot and cold bullshit,” Daniela adds. “Until they finally came to their senses and stopped playing dirty.” She scoffs, and her eyes glaze over as she stares into the distance. “At the beginning, I was convinced our hate for each other would end up destroying us both. It almost did.”

Milana nods in agreement. “I was sure I’d never be able to fall in love with a man like Saint, not after what he did to me. But love works in mysterious ways, I guess. We can’t choose who we love.”

I shrug. “The heart wants what it wants, I guess.”

“Exactly.” She licks her lips after taking a sip of her champagne, placing the flute on the glass table next to her. “So, what’s your story? How did you and Alexius meet? But more importantly, how much did you hate him on your wedding day?” Milana and Daniela snicker, and I know I could become friends with these two women. We seem to have so much in common, and I guess if I choose to have a life with a man like Alexius, I’ll need friends like them.

“Well,” I start, sitting on the sofa across from them, “Alexius and I didn’t meet in what would be seen as a conventional way.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Milana smirks. “I met Saint in a hotel room after he shot and killed who I thought was my friend. Daniela, she met Gian on their wedding day. Nothing about our husbands is conventional, I can promise you that.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. “You ladies make my story of a man shoving a black envelope down the front of my waitress uniform seem like a dream come true.” All three of us burst out laughing, the bubbles of the champagne popping on my tongue and making me loopy. “And I hated him a lot on our wedding day. A lot.”

“Ahem.” Alexius clears his throat, and I jump to my feet. Milana and Daniela leisurely look over at him standing in the foyer with Gian and Saint flanking him. All three men have an aura of power around them, their pristine Armani suits emblazoned with fluorescent lighting while sex appeal ripples off them in waves that can tip the fucking Richter scale. The other girls hardly seem bothered by the fact that our husbands might have overheard our conversation—and judging by Alexius’ look, he definitely heard.

“Ladies, I think it’s time to call it a night,” Alexius says, tightening his cuffs. Gian merely lifts a brow at Daniela, and she’s on her feet, while Saint

simply nods in Milana's direction and she's at his side in record time. Talk about a complete one-eighty.

"Alexius," Saint says, straightening his suit jacket, "we'll talk soon."

Our four guests step into the elevator, and Alexius loosens his tie, unbuttoning his collar. "You, too, Maximo," he orders, and I see Maximo standing to the far right, then swiftly moving to get in the elevator with the others.

The steel doors close, the chime resounding like a gunshot through the room, ripping through the tension thickening with every second that passes. Alexius stares at me in silence, anger and lust warring inside him, as if he can't decide if he wants to sink his teeth into my flesh or tear my goddamn dress off.

"Alexius, I—"

He places his finger on his lips, a simple act that demands my silence.

His irises drown in blue, gaze fixed on me with a ferocity that could cut glass. With dark brows drawn, and full lips set in a thin line, his demeanor instills equal parts fear and excitement in me, and I gulp, trying to keep my throat from closing. I debate whether I should take a breath or not, hesitant to make a move while his expression remains unreadable.

I should say something again, cut through the tension, but I have no idea what. It's hard to find the words while he stalks toward me, his every stride purposeful. His presence sucks all the air out of the room. It's powerful and unmistakable as it wraps around me, instantly going for my throat. My breath. My essence.

I'm incapable of moving when his Italian leather shoes kiss the toes of my stiletto heels. I can hear his steady breathing, the pounding of his heart. Or is it mine? I'm not sure. I'm too entranced, bewitched by this man's mere presence, how he keeps me captive with a gaze so fucking intense it could crack through concrete.

There's an uptick in my pulse as he towers over me, his silhouette outlined with the yellow light of the chandelier. I have to crane my neck to look him in the eye, his broad shoulders casting a shadow over my shivering frame. He smells like whiskey and cigars, sex and sin, and judging by the electricity pulsing between us, I'm about to become the devil's offering.

"Take off your panties." His voice is low, rough. Sexy.

"Why don't you take them off for me?"

His hand is around my throat before I have a chance to take another

breath. “Do not challenge me, stray. Not now. Just do as I fucking say. Can you do that?” He bites out every word, authority clinging to his cold tone. Nothing has ever sounded sexier.

My throat bobs underneath his palm as I swallow hard. “Yes.”

“Good.” He lets go of my throat, and with a snarl, he grabs the fabric of my dress, yanking the skirt up, bunching it around my waist, causing me to gasp. “Now, let’s try that again. Take off. Your panties.”

My breaths are nothing but air of submission as I obey by hooking my fingers in the sides, shimmying the thin layer of lace down my legs, letting it pool around my feet.

His gaze drops, fiery irises flicking over my exposed sex, and I watch him lick his lips, hunger burning behind ripples of blue. His dominion over me, his ownership is palpable, and all I want is for him to grab me and do his worst, fuck me until my body breaks.

Riveted and frozen in front of him, I see his chest rise as he takes a deep inhale as if he’s grasping at his last ounce of self-control.

Cutting his gaze to the open bottle of champagne in the ice bucket, there’s a second for me to breathe, my lungs burning and body aching.

“Is the champagne to your liking?” he asks, but I know he doesn’t give a shit about my answer.

“It...it is.” I can’t even get two simple words out without stuttering.

“On your knees.” It’s not a request. It’s a command, an order, one I feel in every bone.

I kick off my shoes, not taking my eyes off him as tension mounts. It’s palpable, and I’m already wet thinking about the wicked game he’s about to play. That’s what makes it us. That’s how we ignite, by playing games to see who yields the power. And he wins every single time.

As he reaches for the champagne, the ice clinking in the bucket, rivulets of water dripping from the bottle, I lower to my knees. The marble floors are cold and hard, just like his gaze, but there’s a hunger I’ve come to recognize, a need for dominance. He’s angry at me for denying him, but he’s hard for me, too. His dick is pressing against his pants, the hard bulge demanding attention. Does he hate that? Does he hate being angered and turned on by me simultaneously, thirsting for power and dominance over a woman who challenges him?

“Go on,” he urges. “Take out my cock.”

I lick my lips, the light from the chandelier coloring him in every shade of

gold. Regal. Majestic. *Mine*. Alexius is all mine. And right here, on my knees in front of him, I realize he's not the only one willing to spill blood for us. I'd kill for him. I'd go to hell for him. I know that now.

Lowering my gaze to his crotch, I unbuckle his belt with deft fingers, knowing exactly what I want, ready to take it.

The sound of him sucking in a breath when I reach for his cock, wrapping my fingers around its girth, makes my pussy want to be filled and used. It's hard, thick, and throbbing in my palm, the swollen head glistening with precum.

"You want to taste it?" He leans his head to the side, studying me.

"Yes."

"Give it a few good strokes first." I watch him lick his lips before taking a swig of champagne from the bottle as I pump his cock.

"Now?" I ask, desperate to taste him.

"Not yet. Tease the tip with your fingers first. Gently."

I swallow hard, doing as he says, smearing the clear liquid all along the head of his dick, watching his cock grow even larger, thicker, engorged to fuck. Ready to fill me to the brim.

Brushing my fingertips around the tip of his cock, I clench my thighs, needing some relief from the ache, and I'm salivating to taste him, to have his cock reach the back of my throat, but he's determined to make me suffer for it.

Another drop of precum beads. "Lick it off," he says, and I'm about to lap at it with the base of my tongue when he grabs me by the hair, pulling me back hard, making me wince. "Lick it off using just the tip of your tongue."

My skull burns. "Alexius—"

"Do as I say." His words are final, his tone leaving no space for negotiation, and I do as he says, touching the tip of my tongue on the wet droplet, its taste exploding in my mouth, only making me want more. My entire body is set alight, my insides fire, my core throbbing with violent delight.

Pulling my head back even more, he slants his head to the side, studying me, his lips pulled in a snarl. "You're dying to suck my cock, aren't you?"

"Yes," I murmur breathlessly. "Please."

"Touch yourself. Play with your pussy while on your knees, and I'll think about letting you swallow my cum."

Bastard. He's hellbent on punishing me for denying him earlier, dragging

it out, making me suffer with the need for him.

“Is your pussy wet?” he asks as I reach down and slide a finger between my folds.

“Yes.”

“Good. Move your hips while you play with yourself. Get those fingers of yours soaked.”

“God,” I moan, closing my eyes, teasing a finger along my clit, his grip on my hair tightening. I’m so fucking horny, it only takes a few strokes for me to teeter at the edge, ready to come. But I know him. I know this game we’re playing—one we’ve played so many times before. I know the rules.

“I have to come,” I whisper.

“Stop,” he demands, and it takes everything I have to stop touching myself. “You don’t get to come yet.”

“Alexius—”

Tipping the bottle in his hand, he pours champagne all over his cock, the gold liquid spilling down the front of my dress and seeping into the fabric of his pants. The scent of alcohol and sex explodes around us, and I moan loudly as he rubs his champagne-coated cock along my lips, teasing me into a fucking frenzy. “You want this, don’t you?”

I nod. “Please,” I beg, my entire body trembling with need.

“Where do you want it? In this pretty little mouth of yours, or inside your greedy, wet cunt?”

God. I want it everywhere. I want to taste it on my tongue and feel it inside my pussy at the same damn time.

“You have two seconds to answer me before I step away and deny you my cock.”

No. God, no. “Mouth,” I answer hastily, desperately. “In my mouth.”

Alexius growls as he pushes past my lips, plunging into my mouth, reaching the back of my throat with the first thrust. I’m not prepared to take him this deep and gag around his length, tears pooling at the corners of my eyes.

“Don’t waste my fucking time,” he orders. “Open that throat of yours and swallow my cock, you little slut.”

I moan at the way that word rolls from his tongue. He knows I love it when he calls me that, when he degrades me, makes me feel dirty and wicked. A moan vibrates up my throat and around his cock, and his groan fuels me to suck him harder, faster, deeper. He tastes sweet and intoxicating

as I lick the champagne off his shaft, lapping the bubbly liquid from his length.

“Look at me when you have my cock in your mouth.”

I flick my gaze up to his, my eyes tearing up every time he hits the back of my throat.

“Do you like my taste?”

I hum around his thick girth, and he bites into his bottom lip.

“You want to suck me dry while I fuck this perfect little mouth of yours? Get me ready to blow my load down your throat?”

“Hmm-mm.”

“That’s my girl.” He moans when I take him all the way to the back of my throat. With his grip still tight behind my head, he moves me in rhythm with his thrusts, picking up pace, his movements becoming quick and erratic. The taste of him, the feel of his cock sliding in and out of my mouth, it’s divine, and I can’t get enough, wanting all of him. Every single fucking drop. I feel him tense up, and I know he’s close. I can taste it. All he needs is my palm around his length, pumping while I suck him hard.

“Don’t swallow,” he commands before a growl tears from his throat, his cum bursting onto my tongue. It’s too hard not to swallow, too much, but I try anyway, jizz spilling out the corners of my mouth.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he curses while I continue to work his cock with my palm.

I’m a hot mess on the floor, clenching my thighs to relieve the ache when he reaches for my shoulders and pulls me to my feet. His fingers are in my mouth, swirling and getting coated with his cum as he forces me back until my naked ass is against the edge of the couch.

I cry out when he slides his cum soaked fingers inside me, my pussy so slick and wet. “Open these fucking legs wider,” he orders, jerking my thighs farther apart, adding a third finger to fuck me with. The wetness between my legs slaps and swishes against his palm, my pussy a wreck for pleasure. It’s complete chaos. Madness. A flurry of lust and lack of control, both of us spiraling, grunts and groans slamming against the ceiling.

“Alexius, I’m going to come,” I say with desperate breaths, my hips moving in rhythm with his hand between my legs. But just when pleasure is about to explode, he pulls back, his fingers leaving my cunt cold and empty, my body trembling as it teeters at the brink of release.

“What are you doing?” I’m breathless. Aching. And I want to rage. I want

to fucking scream, my body buzzing in agony. My hips are still fucking moving, for Christ's sake.

A wicked grin settles on his face, and he brushes his cum-coated finger along my bottom lip. "You denied me twice tonight," he murmurs, dragging his finger up the side of my face. "This is strike one."

Chapter Fifteen

ALEXIUS

The fire in her eyes is fucking beautiful. Their amber hues have turned red, almost black with a fury that could leave hell in ruins. Her body is still shaking, her skin flushed all the way from her chest, up her neck, touching her cheeks. I had her right there on the brink of coming mere moments ago, her pussy so wet it's gushing down her thighs. But I warned her. I told her there would be a price for denying me what's mine. And now she's paying it—or rather, her body is.

With a cum-soaked finger, I tuck a curl behind her ear, purposefully touching the scar I know is there. “Every action has a reaction,” I murmur, brushing my lips against her cheeks. “Your actions by denying me at the goddamn dinner table have determined my reaction by having to show you the consequences.”

“The consequences being you acting like an asshole?”

I chuckle lightly, leaning my forehead against hers. “God, I love it when you challenge me, woman. It makes my dick hard every time.”

Leandra grabs my hand and places it against her wet cunt. “I know a way to get rid of it.”

I smile, teasing a fingertip by her entrance. “As much as I'd like to fuck you right now, you need to be taught a lesson.”

“And what lesson is that?” she snarls, her breath hot and heady. “That you're in control? That you alone decide when I come?” She yanks my hand from between her legs, sliding her own finger inside her pussy. “I don't need you to do it for me. I can do it myself. I can make myself come whenever the fuck I want.”

I look down between her legs, her eager fingers slipping through her pink,

swollen slit, touching her clit.

“You want to watch, husband? Watch your wife make herself come because you teaching me a lesson seems to be more important than giving your wife pleasure?”

Anger snaps across my spine, and I grab her wrist with a cruel hand, jerking it away from her throbbing sex, holding it tight. “Be careful, Leandra. There’s a fine line between challenging me and simply pissing me off.”

“Yeah.” She shoves me back, and I smirk at her blatant anger. “There’s also a fine line between playing a game and knowing when you’re taking it too far.”

Anger kisses her cheeks with radiant fire, her eyes wild, aggressive like she has war in her veins. Her hair is a tousled mess, her chest rising and falling with every fiery breath. My wife, she’s a motherfucking vision, a goddess of beauty and rage all rolled into one, and it’s making my dick rock fucking hard.

“You do not get to be an asshole simply because I wouldn’t let you make me come at the goddamn dinner table with four other guests to witness it go down.”

“You like it when people watch,” I challenge with a sly grin.

“That’s different.”

“How is that different?”

She balks for a second, and I’m still fucking smiling, amused and turned the fuck on. “It just is. You had no right—”

I launch at her, grabbing her jaw between my fingers and lifting her face to mine. “When it comes to you, I have every right.”

“You forfeit that right the moment you deny me your cock.” Her words are a low growl, like a lioness standing her ground, knowing her place and ready to defend it. The way her eyes gleam with victory, she knows she has me cornered. I should be pissed off. I should want to teach her a lesson she’ll never forget. But I’m too goddamn proud—my stray now a queen with a spine stronger than most men when in my presence.

I squeeze my fingers into her jaw, forcing her chin up more. “You want my cock?”

“Yes,” she hisses without pause, and like a beast unleashed, I grip the fabric of her dress and rip it down the front, exposing one of her perfectly round tits, her nipple lush and pebbled, deserving of my attention. But not now, not while her body is wildfire and my cock is craving to burn.

I jerk her around, and I don't do it gently, grabbing the back of her neck and forcing her to bend over the back of the couch, pressing her face into the sofa seat, her ass propped up beautifully, like a fucking offering.

I guide my cock to her entrance, and she presses her hips toward me, wanting to take me inside her before I'm good and ready to give it. "You want my cock?" I repeat the question because I love hearing her say it. Crave it. Need it. Fucking taking it.

"Yes. I do," she bites out, her lips all puckered against the seat pillow.

"Then you better scream for me, stray, because I ain't giving you my cock because I think you deserve it. I'm going to fuck you because I know this little body of yours is nothing without it."

I plunge into her hard, deep, and fucking brutal, her cries slamming against the ceiling. My cock hits so deep that I can feel a slight resistance, her pussy walls unprepared to take all of me with one relentless thrust. My fingers squeeze tighter around her neck, and I take her roughly, my cock diving into her soaked pussy while her screams of ecstasy cling to my goddamn skin.

"Is this what you want?" I bite out between breaths.

"Harder," she demands.

"You sure about that?"

"Just shut up and fuck me."

"Jesus Christ," I curse and let go of her neck, grabbing a fistful of hair and yanking her head back while pinning her hips down on the edge of the couch with my other hand. Her back is a perfect curve, and I cut my gaze from the delicate contour of her shoulder blades down to her ass, watching my cock fill her greedy cunt. I'm not gentle. My touch isn't kind. But she likes it this way. We're both animals driven by a need to fuck, reveling in it.

"I'm going to come." She's breathless. Mindless. Utterly consumed, and I can feel her pussy clamp down around me.

"You better fucking scream. Let the entire city of Rome hear you come, stray."

She doesn't disappoint.

She screams for me, a throaty, desperate, agonizingly beautiful scream that tears from her insides as I fuck her into a climax that shreds through her body. The cadence of her pleasure travels down my spine, slamming against my balls, and I spill myself inside her, grunting and growling, coming so goddamn hard, my mind shatters.

There's cum leaking from her cunt as I pull out of her, so I palm her pussy, scooping it up with my fingers and forcing it back inside her. She moans, her throbbing pussy now sensitive to the touch, but I don't care because I want her body to take every last drop.

I pull her head back more. She's spent. A boneless mess underneath me as I lean over her back, rasping into her ear, "Don't ever deny me again. Understand? If I want to fuck you in the middle of Town Square, you'll let me. If I want to finger you while having dinner with the motherfucking queen, you. Will. Let me. Understand?"

"Yes," she breathes out. "I understand."



Rome has been good to us the past couple of days. We've had nothing but sunny days, the golden light casting amber hues across ancient stones and cobbled walkways. The icy tentacles of winter only came out once the sun set, the chill preferring to drift in the dark.

We've been out exploring, walking hand in hand through the bustling crowds, taking in the sights, pretending like we didn't have a life to get back to.

Out on the streets, the air is alive with the smell of food and champagne, people chatting in different languages from all around the world, all wanting a taste of Italy's best. Witnessing Leandra experience the wonders and beauty Rome has to offer for the first time makes me feel like it's my first as well. With her, the colors seem brighter, the architecture more magnificent, and the food tastier and sweet. It's different with her, as if the world has opened its heart and I can now see the true wealth of life it has to offer. The city's energy is amplified with her at my side.

From braving the crowds at one of the oldest markets in Rome for a taste of the world's best coffee to buttery pastry desserts, dinner at the best restaurants, and fucking underneath the midday sun on the terrace, Leandra and I—dare I say it—spent our time enjoying Italy like it's the honeymoon we never had.

Raven curls curtain down the sides of her face, her palms flush against

my naked chest while her thighs press against my waist as she straddles me. I lift my hips, pushing in deeper, and she whimpers, lifting her head and falling back, her hands grabbing the tops of my thighs. Perfect, palm-sized tits bounce with hardened nipples as she rides me, the winter sun of Rome beating down on our naked bodies while we fuck on the round rattan sun lounger. It's been our favorite place to fuck, outside in the open, thinking of all the people standing by their windows watching us, wishing they were us while the sun and the stars witness the multiple ways we could give each other pleasure.

Her hips move with a purposeful rhythm, our bodies connected as one with my dick inside her. I know she's coming when she leans her head back, her delicate throat craned and exposed as her lips part with a cry of ecstasy. I follow, grunting, and arch my back, spilling my load inside her.

She collapses on top of me, and we both breathe rapidly, sweat beading at my temples.

"You think anyone's complained about us making noise out here?"

I snicker. "If they have, management knows better than to bring it to my attention."

She props herself up on her elbows, staring down at me. "How does it feel to know you have so much power over everyone and everything around you?"

I tuck her hair behind her ears. "I'm not going to lie. It feels great," I answer truthfully. "It's my definition of freedom."

"How so?"

"Because I can do whatever the fuck I want, and no one can say shit about it."

"But can you, though?" She traces a fingertip along my chest. "Can you do whatever you want while you're head of the Dark Sovereign?"

"I can do whatever I want, *especially* now that I'm leading the family business. Before, I was bound to my father's rules and his laws. Now, I can make my own." I lean back, tucking my arm beneath my head, staring up at the sky, different shades of blue weaving behind white clouds. "But my father's rules work. His laws keep everything standing, so I have no desire to change anything...except one. The one thing my father and I never could agree on."

She lays her head against my chest, her cheek warm against my skin. "And what's that?"

“For the Dark Sovereign to be ruled solely by the Del Rossa family.” Determination floods my veins at the mere thought. “There are five seats at the core of this family business. Right now, it’s me, Nicoli, and Caelian who represent the Del Rossa name. My uncles Roberto and Riccardo take up the other seats.”

“So, Isaia is the only brother who doesn’t have a place in the family business right now?”

“My little brother is a part of the Dark Sovereign whether he has a seat or not.”

Leandra lifts her head off my chest, staring at me. “But he doesn’t have any say? No right to have his opinion heard?”

“Not at the moment, no. But he will have his place once I’m done getting rid of my uncles.”

“But until then, he’s basically an outsider looking in when it comes to his own family.”

I frown as I study her. “What is it about my little brother that always has you defending him?”

She pushes herself up, her perfect hourglass-shaped body naked and fucking beautiful. “I’m not defending him. I’m just trying to see things from his perspective.”

“Why?”

“I already told you why.” She grabs her robe and slips it on, and I prop myself on my elbows.

“Because he walked you down the aisle.”

“Because he showed me kindness.”

“You care for him.” The words burn the tip of my tongue.

“I do,” she admits, her gaze drifting before meeting mine. “I care for him like a brother, Alexius. Nothing more. You know that.”

I scoff. “I do. But it doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

A gentle smile appears on her face, the sun touching the lines of her delicate features. “Would you rather have me not care about your family at all?”

“I have three brothers, and you had to pick Isaia to form this friendship with.”

“What makes him different than Nicoli or Caelian?”

“You didn’t watch Nicoli or Caelian fuck,” I snarl. “Nicoli and Caelian didn’t watch me finger you on our goddamn porch.”

“You did that,” she shoots back. “You decided to play that game with Isaia that night. Not me.”

“I didn’t force you to watch him fuck Melanie, did I?”

She crosses her arms. “I don’t remember you complaining that night in the bathroom.”

“Oh, you mean the night I caught you with your hand between your legs?” I get up, not caring that I’m buck naked, and reach out to touch her cheek. “The night I realized we had more in common than I thought, witnessing the ecstasy in your eyes as I came on your beautiful face.”

“Good times,” she murmurs, and I stifle a laugh.

“Good times.”

My body welcomes her warmth as she reaches up, placing her arms around my neck. “Please tell me Isaia isn’t going to be an issue between us forever?”

I snake my arms around her waist, pulling her tighter against me. “As long as my brother has a dick and balls, I’ll probably feel the way I do now.”

“Oh, my God,” she sighs, pushing her arms against my chest to get away. But I grab her jaw and pull her closer, claiming her lips with mine. She doesn’t resist, melting into our kiss, allowing me to swallow her breath as her lush lips part so our tongues can touch. Truth is, I would probably always be jealous of her bond with Isaia. I’m too possessive not to be. But deep down, I know she’s mine. I know her truth. I can taste it on her lips every time we kiss like this.

My hands wander down her back, cupping her ass and lifting her on her toes, kissing her hard with a groan before letting go of her lips. I lean my forehead against hers, her familiar scent of vanilla fused with the romance that always lingers in the Italian air. “I’ve been to Rome more than a dozen times in my life, but I’ve never had the desire to stay. Not until now.” I brush her hair back, her hair soft and sleek between my fingers. “I guess I was wrong thinking power is freedom.”

“How so?” she murmurs, her amber eyes searching mine.

“If I were truly free, I would have us stay here forever, not caring about anything or anyone else. It would just be us. This moment. Forever.”

“I don’t.”

I frown with question, and she gives me a smile that warms every last drop of blood in my veins.

“If our life together were like this forever, we’d never learn to appreciate

these moments.”

I take her chin between my fingertips, placing my thumb on her lower lip. “I love how you can say such beautiful things with the same mouth that sucks my cock so ardently.”

“You’re a lucky man, Mr. Del Rossa. Men would kill for a mouth like mine.”

“You’re right, I would.”

“Well, hopefully, you’d never have to.”

I tilt her chin up, squeezing my fingers gently into her jaw. “I give you my word, stray. The day will come when I spill blood for you. I swear it.”

Her cheeks glow with the perfect shade of pink. “I swear, every time you say things like that, all I want to do is spread my legs for you. What kind of woman does that make me?”

A smirk tugs at my lips. “My woman.”

“I guess it does. You’re quite the mindfuck, you know that?”

I frown. “How so?”

“You’re jealous as fuck, yet you don’t mind it when people watch us?”

I slip my hand down the front of her robe and cup her breast in my palm, feeling how her nipple hardens. “I am the world’s worst contradiction when it comes to you, Mrs. Del Rossa. While I want to slit the throat of every man that desires you, nothing thrills me more than fucking you while others watch.”

“Why?” Her lips part with a subtle breath.

“Because you’re mine. No one else will ever have you, taste you, fuck you, and I love shoving that fact in the world’s face.”

And that’s the motherfucking truth. We’re both bathed in sin with our mutual depravities. It amazes me that she can be this soft, caring person, flip a switch, and be a wickedly filthy temptress. My temptress.

“Speaking of,” I say, easing the other side of her robe to the side, exposing both her tits, my gaze firmly focused on the rosy pebbles begging to be sucked. “Since it’s our last night here, there’s somewhere I want to take you.”

“Where are we going?”

I lean down, dragging my tongue around her nipple, then teasing it with my teeth before sucking it deeply into my mouth, letting it go with a pop. “A place you and I will fit right in.”

Chapter Sixteen

LEANDRA

The curved driveway is lined with symmetrical half-walls, the top stone arches mirroring one another on either side of the asphalt path. Our car headlights catch the rows of well-manicured shrubs decorated with tiny white lights that make it seem like a thousand fireflies got caught in their leaves. The fairy lights' glow creates a magical scene as the gravel pathway leads us to what looks like a castle, with a tall tower framed with the Italian night sky and scattered stars.

I lean to the side while glancing out the window, trying to take it all in against the midnight sky. "What is this place?"

"It's a very elite club."

I turn to look at him. "Elite, meaning...?"

"Private," he answers simply. "A private club."

"And by private club, you mean..." I press for an answer, but he continues to stare at me without saying a word. "Yours? This club is—"

"It belongs to the Dark Sovereign, yes."

A flutter starts up in my chest. "So, this is an...adult club?"

His face is a portrait of amusement, mischief and devilry hiding behind blue eyes touched by the white lights surrounding us. "Look at the building, and then you tell me if it's an adult club or not."

I turn my attention to the breathtaking property, a moonlit castle complete with its parapet. Golden spotlights splash against the stone walls, highlighting the blue-gray shuttered windows and tall tower. "It looks like a castle."

"It is a castle. Well, it was once. But it's no longer formally acknowledged as one."

"I can't imagine something this beautiful being an adult club."

Alexius shifts next to me. “What kind of clubs do you think we run, Leandra? Sleazy strip joints and filthy whorehouses?”

“No, of course not.”

He narrows his eyes at me, and I can feel warmth spreading to my cheeks.

“I don’t know what to think.”

“That’s the problem with the world today. Everything gets stereotyped to the worst version of what something can be.” He straightens his jacket sleeves. “People think about an adult club and imagine a filthy dungeon with dirty whores and drugged-up slaves.”

“That’s not—”

“I know.” His gaze cuts to mine. “But you can’t deny that the thought has crossed your mind.”

I reach to weave fingers through my hair, forgetting that it’s swept together in an elegant up-do, a special request from my husband.

Alexius touches my cheeks, and my skin instantly ignites. “There are two reasons I wanted to bring you here tonight. One, so you can see for yourself that we’re not juvenile criminals selling cheap sex to back-alley sleazeballs who can’t afford a bowl to piss in.” The car stops, but Alexius makes no move to get out, his intense stare pinning me in my seat. “This is *Mito*, Italian for Myth. It is one of our most elite private clubs and casinos. Like Myth back in Chicago, only the cream of the crop here in Italy knows about this club. The only way you can get into this club is with a six-figure monthly deposit, and that’s not even our VIP clientele.”

“How do you become a VIP?”

Alexius studies me, biting his bottom lip as if he’s trying to decide if my question is something he’s willing to answer. “Come on.” He taps on his window, and Maximo opens his door. “Let me show you.”

I get out of the car. The sweet scent of European olive trees fill the night air, and I crane my neck as I look up at the tower, counting five rows of windows. Five floors. The castle blends ancient and modern architecture, its centuries-old stone walls still perfectly maintained. The building is a landscape painting with the dark purple and black hues of night and walls in muted creams. It’s stunning.

After straightening my emerald-green dress, the diamond studs along the deep V neckline sparkling under the lights, I catch Alexius staring at the top of my thigh showcased by the slit that runs up from the hem on the skirt cut just below my knee.

“Did you do as I said?” His suggestive tone has me smiling.

“I did.”

“Good. Now, let’s see how many men I can kill in one night.”

I lift a brow. “It was your request.”

“For my pleasure,” he replied. “And my pleasure only.”

I clench my thighs. Wearing a dress with a slit that runs this high makes it impossible to forget that I’m not wearing any panties.

“Here.” He’s holding a black lace masquerade mask, and I frown as I take it from him.

“What is this for?”

“A precaution.”

“For what?”

He slips in behind me, placing the mask on my face, gently tying it behind my head, and clipping it into my hair, explaining his request for an up-do hairstyle. A shiver travels down my spine as he places his warm hands on my shoulders, leaning closer and having his lips brush against the shell of my ear. “There’s no chance in hell I’d let my wife show her face to every man here.” He places a tender kiss on the side of my neck. “Which is why I arranged tonight to be a special masquerade...event.”

I turn my face to bring my lips an inch from his. “No one will know who we are? Who you are?”

“No one.” He circles to my front and slips his solid-black mask over his eyes. The mask is featureless against the bold lines of his face. It has a sheen that brings the mask to life under the lights, and he seems more regal than ever, his broad shoulders and tall frame outlined with the gold hues of the fairy lights casting the grounds in a magical glow.

My heart is beating so loud I can hear it in my ears. Butterflies occupy my stomach, fluttering madly with a mix of uncertainty and excitement. I hook my hand into the crook of his elbow while Alexius instructs Maximo to stay by the car. It’s clear by the lines of his frown that Maximo isn’t happy about it.

The click of my heels resounds off the cobbled stairs, the cold breeze digging its sharp claws into my calves. But the second we walk through the doors, the cold is smothered with a burst of warm air that envelops us. There’s a sweet scent of vanilla and cinnamon, an erotic blend with a lavender undertone. Pristine white marble floors with delicate lines of gold welcome us. Sparkles of diamonds from the chandelier’s delicate web of gold

and tiny crystals scatter across the foyer in a prism of color, drawing eyes to its perfection. Every inch of this place is decorated with wealth and sophistication, priceless art adorning the walls as a golden sheen touches every corner.

This isn't what I imagined it to be like at all. All those times the Dark Sovereign and adult line of business would come up in a conversation, I never once thought of it to look like this. There are no dark corners with hidden places and shadows of depravity clinging to the walls, no looming unease of filthy lechery that thickens the air. Instead, everything is open, light, and people—couples walking about, chatting and laughing, drinking champagne, and nodding toward us in welcome, not acknowledgment. They have no idea who we are, who my husband is, and it excites me—the freedom our anonymity rewards us behind the masks we wear.

Waiters dressed in black and white uniforms move through the crowd with trays of filled glasses. Men sit around poker tables, stacks of chips fanned out in front of them while their partners stand behind them. I'm surprised to see just as many women as there are men, each seemingly having just as much fun as their male counterparts.

Alexius guides me through the crowd to a set of stairs that lead us to the second floor. We don't speak, partly because I have no words, still digesting everything I'm seeing.

The second floor is mainly the bar. Earthy tones and dark wood finishings are accentuated with low lamps and dimmed light, enough to give off a soft glow, while ethereal music creates a relaxed atmosphere. Men are smoking cigars and drinking whiskey, seemingly deep in conversation, while seated in booths with black cushioned seats. Women standing together are leaning close, painted lips moving with the latest gossip, some smoking cigarettes and laughing quietly at the secrets they share. It's when they glance at Alexius that their lips part with silent awe, their eyes raking over him and relaying their lecherous thoughts. Even with a mask hiding part of his face, he's still a force that demands the attention of everyone around him. But instead of jealousy, it's pride that fills my chest and warms my flesh because I'm there, too. I'm the one clutching his elbow, the woman who gets to accompany him now and warm his bed later. He's mine. And by the way their glowering gazes drip like venom down my frame, they know it, too.

Alexius grabs two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and hands me mine.

“This place is...it’s beautiful, Alexius.” I take a sip of the sparkling gold drink, the gentle fizz and delicate taste trickling across my tastebuds.

“Does it look like you imagined?”

“No. Not at all.”

His smile portrays his small victory over proving me wrong, and as we approach the second set of stairs, he turns to face me. “This brings me to the second reason for me bringing you here tonight.”

My pulse quickens. “What is it?”

He steps closer, bowing his head to stare down at me as he snakes an arm around my waist. His hand rests possessively on the small of my back, failing to hide his need to have the world know I belong to him. Tension mounts between us, the swirls of blue in his eyes pulling me into their depths, and I can see it, the desire, flickering like flames while electricity crackles around us. He reaches out to brush a finger along the bottom edge of my mask. “You are so fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, and I can feel every word licking down my back, igniting a flame in my core.

“What is the second reason for bringing me here?”

His gaze follows the trail of his finger as it slips down the side of my neck and over my shoulder. “To unravel.” His voice is dark, a sensual drip of an erotic promise.

I swallow, my senses suddenly heightened, aware of the way he stares at me, the heat of his gaze as powerful as physical touch.

“You and I are best when we unravel together, Leandra. When we allow ourselves to indulge in the most wicked desires that bloom from our mutual need to lose control.”

I’m trembling with anticipation, my legs weightless and pulse racing. “What are you saying?”

His touch is fire when he places a fingertip against my jaw, urging my chin up toward him. “I want you, stray,” he murmurs.

“You have me.”

“No.” He shakes his head lightly, licking his lips as he gazes at mine. “I want. You. Without inhibitions. Without the barrier society creates to ensure we experience guilt and shame just thinking about our most erotic fantasies.”

I hold my breath as his words, his voice, his presence light every inch of my body on fire.

He leans down, his lips hovering close to mine. “Unravel with me, Leandra.”

A moan catches in my throat as he kisses me, his tongue sliding into my mouth. Tasting. Teasing. Igniting. With a palm flat on my back, he pulls me close, and I can feel every hard line of his body against mine. His familiar scent fills me, and his taste leaves little room for thought other than the feel of his tongue dancing with mine. A simple kiss from him has me falling deeper into the moment. Into the salacity this club expertly evokes in its patrons.

He tears his lips from mine, and I'm already panting, arousal pooling between my legs.

"I want you to embrace the freedom tonight. Let your desires guide you without restraints."

"What exactly are you saying?"

He nudges my chin, so I crane my neck, looking up at him in the dim light. "No one touches you, and I am the only man who gets to fuck you. Other than that," he places a gentle kiss on my jaw, "your fantasies are an open field tonight."

Chapter Seventeen

LEANDRA

You get those moments where everything that lights up your senses seems surreal, like a dream where you know you're dreaming, but you don't care. You allow it to be real. You let yourself get swept away by the fantasy, losing yourself in it even though you know reality could snatch you from it at any moment.

This is one of those moments.

I'm vaguely aware of Alexius' hand on my back as my gaze drifts from one corner of the room to the other. The music is sensual and erotic, a coiling cadence that reflects the image in front of me—a cage suspended in the air, the girl locked inside, gagged, tied, naked, and on her spread knees. The champagne bubbling in the glasses of masked guests lounging on luxury sofas feels like it's flowing through my veins, electricity crackling inside me. The lust. The sex. It's seeping through my pores, caressing my skin. It's penetrating my blood.

The guests aren't just men. There are women staring at the caged girl, their eyes glazed and cheeks flushed. Golden hues from the dim light spread a vibrant opulence throughout the room. The combination of elegance and sex is more intoxicating than a single element I see before me.

It's easy to see that the girl in the cage is aware of the eyes on her, the guests drinking her in. It's thrilling her to know the sight of her naked body in submission is igniting a palpable lust among the crowd. She's relishing the sensation of their gazes crawling over her.

In silence, Alexius and I move around the room. I'm speechless, taking it all in, and he's allowing me to without distraction. My body is buzzing, picking up every ounce of sexual tension from everyone around us, and when

he reaches to touch the small of my back, I gasp as sparks ignite in my belly. His touch is electric, a sensation I could easily get lost in.

Alexius nods in the direction of a man standing across the room at the far end, and the cage starts to lower as it slowly turns so everyone can see her from every angle. Her small body is displayed in a way that makes her seem like a tame animal, a dream for those who do not crave the hunt and simply want their loot to fall in their lap.

With his hand still on my back, Alexius applies the smallest amount of pressure, urging me to walk closer to the cage. I'm tense and thrilled simultaneously, my insides knotted with nervous energy.

The woman in the cage is beautiful. Her jet-black hair is tied in a sleek high ponytail, perfectly exposing the flush in her cheeks and the long lashes framing her dark, hooded eyes. Rosy lips are clasped around the red ball-gag, and she radiates with a sexual allure that reaches past the golden bars of the cage. There's no need for her to stand and sway her hips for me to know her thin waist and full ass make for killer curves. She's a goddess. A siren, and she has everyone here under her spell—including me.

A thin gold chain is tied around her neck, the delicate strings hanging down her back. I lick my lips as my gaze lowers to her full breasts. Her luscious pink nipples are erect, practically begging to be sucked and lapped until raw. The lights reflect off the gold bars, and it dances across her breasts, teasing down the trail between them. She's so exposed, her naked body on full display. But it's in her dark brown eyes that I see the enjoyment, that she's indulging in sin just like the rest of us.

Abruptly, Alexius pulls me back against him, and I gasp when I feel how hard he is.

"Do you see how wet she is?" Alexius murmurs against my ear, his hands resting on my waist. "Her cunt is glistening."

I lean my head to the side, staring past her parted knees while Alexius grinds his hips, his erection hard and insistent against my ass.

With her knees spread apart, I take in the lustrous folds of her shaved pussy coated with a sheen of wetness, the delicate pink flesh swollen and inviting.

"She's turned on," Alexius says. "She loves having eyes on her, knowing there are wet cunts and hard cocks in this room because of her."

Staring at her wet cunt makes me hyperaware of my own, bare with no panties and throbbing with an ache to be filled. And the longer I look, the

more turned on I become. This woman's arousal is intoxicating, tingling along every nerve ending down my spine.

"Is your pussy wet, stray? Like hers?" He snakes his palms up to cup my breasts, and I whimper with bated breath. "Is your body primed to get fucked? Or would you prefer to watch her cunt get filled first?"

I moan in response. I can't help it. The thought of watching this woman get fucked, her pussy filled up, it's a mind-trip that has my body bursting at the seams, desire soaking my thighs while it blooms in my core.

I close my eyes when Alexius' lips touch the nape of my neck, chills traveling down my spine at the feel of his tongue lapping against my skin. "This is just a taste of what this place has to offer, the tip of what I want you to experience here tonight." Through the fabric of my dress, he pinches my nipples, and I let out a breath. "The question is, are you ready for it?"

The way my body hums, the way my skin is electrified and sex soaked, there is no denying it. I want more. I want to delve deeper into this world that seems so far away from ours—a world where nothing but depraved desires and sordid seduction matter.

"I am." The words roll from my tongue with the same amount of heat that has my blood simmering.

"Good girl." I can feel him smiling as he kisses my neck once more. "Come on."

He takes my hand. It's warm and comforting, a reminder that he's here with me. We're unraveling together.

My pulse is all over the place, my heart thumping rapidly against my chest, a mess of things I've never felt before. It's exhilarating, but a sense of unease lingers. Alexius is used to sex clubs and erotic acts that could make some cringe with disgust while others drowned in fantasies just like this. But to me, this is all new, uncharted territory, and I'd be lying if I say I'm not intrigued.

We're halfway up the stairs, and I'm not sure if it's my sweaty palm or rapid breathing, but Alexius seems to sense my unease as he presses my back against the stone wall, crystal blue eyes piercing my soul, a dark abyss that swallows me whole. It's like the world stops spinning whenever he looks at me this way—like I'm the one thing that keeps his heart from dying, and he hates me for it. He despises the control his affection toward me has over him.

"Don't be afraid of it."

"Of what?" My voice is nothing but a soft thrum of insecurity.

“This.” A rough hand slips inside the slit of my skirt, cupping my bare pussy in his palm, and I bite down on a moan. “Don’t be afraid of what turns you on. Of what your body is telling you it wants.” A single finger slides through my wet slit, spreading my arousal as he teases my clit with a single torturous touch. “I brought you here because this is my fucking playground, and you and I,” he slides a finger effortlessly into me, extracting a moan from my lips, “we’re the same, Leandra. We’re both predators. You just love to act like prey. But that’s all it is. An act.” His finger slips out, leaving my pussy aching for more.

He leans his head to the side, studying me. “Don’t you see? That’s why we enjoy tearing each other apart, why we fuck like savages, making it hurt while our bodies burn with ecstasy.” Sex drips from his lips, seduction clinging to his every word. “Nothing that happens here tonight can be wrong when it’s something we both find pleasure in. Nothing. Don’t be afraid of what you want. Take it,” he bites out. “This is my kingdom, Leandra, and I brought you here because I know this is where you belong. The fearless queen who walks beside her savage king.” As he leans closer, his cheek touching mine, his intoxicating scent smothers the air I breathe. “The world is unraveling, stray. We might as well unravel with it.”

It’s the way his finger dances across the sensitive bud that almost makes me come, and I realize just how fucking turned on I am. But before pleasure explodes, his hand is gone, and I’m watching him trace that same finger along his bottom lip, a feral look in his gaze—wild and untamed—like a beast about to rip into the bloody flesh of his prey. The spiral staircase is dimly lit, and a window behind Alexius allows a sliver of soft moonlight to trickle in, painting his silhouette with a diamond glow. The contrast of striking light and dark shadows plays across his face. He’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen, a force no one can withstand. I’m lost in how my body responds to him and his touch as if I’ve always been his.

He steps back, but the air is laden with tension that could snap us both in half. “I’ll say it again so it can sink into your pretty little head. Nothing that happens here tonight can be wrong when it’s something we both find pleasure in. Just remember my rules—”

“You want me to act without inhibitions, yet you give me rules,” I challenge.

“Those rules aren’t to spoil your fun. It’s to protect lives, stray. If another man touches you, I will—I repeat, I will give you his heart on a silver

motherfucking platter.” He traces a finger down the side of my face. “So, if you value the life of others, you’ll abide by these rules. Understood?”

There it is again, the thrill, the power that sings my flesh, knowing I control the amount of blood my husband will spill for me. His wife. His queen.

Maybe he’s right. Perhaps I’ve been a predator all along.



ALEXIUS

Since the day I arranged our trip to Italy, I couldn’t stop thinking of what it would be like to bring Leandra here to Mito. To have this experience with her and embrace the sinful art of not giving a fuck. To indulge. I knew I’d never be able to take her to Myth. Not just because of the murders, but because there’s too much history between those walls. My history. I don’t want my wife around the place where I fucked and fornicated my way through life for years. And I’d imagine she wouldn’t want to be around the women I’ve shared with my brothers. So, bringing her to Mito was the answer to my desire to share this with her. We’re the same. We want to push boundaries, tread on the edge, and have the freedom to dance in the dark...with each other.

It was a risk, I knew that, and that’s why I didn’t make the final decision until the night I had her on her knees licking champagne off my cock. That’s when I decided that this night had to happen.

I’ve watched her, studied her every expression since we walked in here, and not once did I see anything but curiosity, thrill, and excitement. I saw the desire in her eyes as she watched the girl in the cage, the way her cheeks flushed and lips parted with subtle breaths, I knew she was turned the fuck on. Her body proved it when I slid a finger through her cunt five seconds ago, her body writhing against the tower wall, her legs unstable on the stone stairs.

When I felt how wet she was, how the simplest touch against her clit almost made her come, I knew I made the right decision to bring her here. I know my wife. I know what she needs, what her body needs, what she craves—even if she doesn't know it yet herself.

But she's about to find out.

Heat emanates from her as I lead her up the stairs to the third floor, through the first door. My cock is throbbing for release, my blood searing with excitement and anticipation. But my own needs will just have to wait. Tonight is about her, about what she wants, and giving her what she craves.

The room is dimly lit, darker than the rest of Mito, the lights barely touching the white carpet with their golden hues. The scent of lavender is stronger here, more potent as the air in the room has no windows to escape through.

I watch Leandra as her gaze sweeps across the room, taking in every corner, every detail. Her hand tightens in mine, and I would have mistaken it for unease if it wasn't for the hunger that beamed from her hooded eyes as she takes in the scene in front of us. Two naked bodies, a man and woman, kissing, their arms around each other in a warm embrace as lechery clings to their glistening skin.

"What is this?" Leandra asks but doesn't take her eyes off the couple.

"Exhibitionism and voyeurism often go hand-in-hand." I pull her close, moving her to stand in front of me, my chest flush against her back. "I figured since we like being watched so much, it's time to turn the tables and be on the other side of our little...sinful delight." I grin as her body stiffens. The delicate vein in her neck pulsing rapidly tells me the idea of watching intrigues her, and I'm willing to bet if I slip a finger between her legs right now, she'd be drenched.

"Do they...do they work here?" Her voice is nothing but a whisper.

"No." I allow my hand to slide gently down her naked arms. "They're like us, stray. They're a married couple who enjoy being watched. Do you see it?" I trace a finger back up her right arm as my left hand rests on her waist. "Their gazes are locked on one another. It's as if we're not even here, and it's just them, lost within their own desires. They want us to watch them fuck."

The erotic sound of my wife's gasp sends a thrill down my spine straight to the tip of my dick. Her arousal is intoxicating, the way her body emanates the lust that fills her veins. Leandra is beautiful on every given day, but when

desire consumes her, she's a fucking vision.

“Alexius, I—”

“Shhh, stray,” I murmur against the skin of her neck. “Watch.”

The man guides the woman onto the padded bench in the middle of the room. She lies down on her back, blonde hair fanning around her partly covered face. The white mask she wears is adorned with tiny silver studs, her dark brown eyes burning with life. As the man's gaze rakes over her naked body, it's like he's laying eyes on her for the first time. There's affection. There's love. There's trust. And I can only assume the name inked on the inside of his bicep, Mia, is the name of his beloved lying on the bench, her body ready for whatever he plans on giving her.

The man wraps his hands around her ankles, easing them up so her knees bend, then gently pushes them to the side to spread her thighs, giving Leandra the perfect view of her glistening pussy. He circles the bench, his slow movement and silent gaze creating the most palpable atmosphere. Mia can barely control her breathing as her chest rises and falls. As he takes his place by her head, glancing down in her eyes, he reaches out and cups her breasts, Leandra sucking in a breath right at that moment.

Her reaction is enough to make my dick throb, and I'm no longer sure if I'll be able to wait for the final event before fucking her.

Chapter Eighteen

LEANDRA

I'm leaning against Alexius, unsure my legs can hold me, trusting him to keep me from falling. It's almost too much how consumed I am with a desire I've never experienced before. It's euphoric, as if watching this couple do what they're doing is already giving me the pleasure I need even though my body is building, rising toward ecstasy with every passing second.

The man rubs her nipples with his fingers, pinching them, tugging them, rolling them against his palm—it's as if I can feel it all the way to my core. There's a headiness to watching them that excites me, their lust igniting my own.

The woman arches her back as he leans over her, slowly dragging his touch down her stomach, stopping just above the bare mound of her pussy. She lifts her hips, wanting his touch lower, but he denies her and retreats upward, back to teasing her tits.

It's easy to see her belly is pulled taut, every muscle tight with anticipation. Her round ass wiggles slightly as she continues to writhe beneath her man's touch.

Her moans are soft with subtle nuances that have her breasts rising and falling, his fingertips never leaving her naked body as he leisurely rounds the bench to stand at her side. I watch with bated breath as his gaze travels along the same route as his touch—from her hard nipples, down...down...down.

God, I want him to give her what she wants, touch her pussy and play with her clit, to give her the pleasure she needs. But just when I think he's about to dip his hand between her legs, he stops and tortures her by leaving her sex untouched.

"Tell me what you're thinking, stray," Alexius rasps in my ear.

“I want him to touch her pussy.” There’s no space for modesty right now, not while my body is dangling by a thread. “I want him to make her come.”

“All in due time.”

The woman leans her head to the side, and he’s cupping the swell of her breast as he takes his cock in his palm, stroking it a few times before wrapping his fingers around the base, guiding it to the woman’s mouth.

I moan, and my nipples harden when he slides his shaft past the barrier of her lips. Alexius’s stiff cock is twitching against my ass, and I can hear his ragged breathing behind me. Watching the man fill her mouth with his dick, pushing all the way to the back of her throat, is erotic and intoxicating, a fantasy I never knew I wanted to witness. Her cheeks hollow as she tries to accommodate his girth, and he gives her the time she needs, slowly easing out only to move back in.

The woman’s head bobs up and down on the man’s cock, her red lips clasping around the bulging head. I can see her throat working as she tries to take him in as deep as possible without gagging, trying to hold her breath without suffocating. He gives her a few minutes to adjust again before increasing the pace, thrusting in and out of her mouth with long, deep strokes.

The sounds of her mouth around his cock and the throaty groans of his pleasure are music to my ears, and I can feel my pussy getting slick with desire. My body is nothing but ripples of electric currents, my sex aching and throbbing. I know that the slightest pressure against my clit would make me come, but I need more. I need to see them touch each other.

“Alexius.”

“What is it that you want, stray?” He palms my tits, and my body trembles against him.

“I want him to touch her. Let him touch her,” I plead to Alexius as the man still denies her pussy the attention it needs.

Alexius doesn’t say anything, but he does reposition me so I have a clear view of her thighs and cunt.

The man leans over her, bracing himself on one arm as he continues to fuck her mouth, his eyes wild, hooded, the muscles in his back roped, and his ass pulled taut as he flexes. His erratic thrusts make me think he’s close to coming, but that’s not what I want. I don’t want him to come already. He needs to make her come first.

I cock my head to the side, staring at her sex—smooth and wet, swollen and ready to be fucked. The musky scent of sex is strong in the room, the

smell of her arousal reaching every corner, pheromones dancing wickedly among us.

Flashes of the night Alexius finger fucked me on the porch while Isaia watched bombard my mind. And I wonder if this is what it looked like, if my cunt was as drenched as hers, heated and throbbing to be filled. What did it look like to see Alexius' strong hand between my legs, his expert fingers disappearing inside me, spreading my arousal and teasing my clit? I want to know what it looked like, what my pussy looked like when I came against Alexius' palm.

"Alexius," I glance over my shoulder, barely able to control myself, "you said you want me to act with no inhibitions, to feel free to act on what I desire most."

He slams his lips against mine, his hand against my jaw forcing my head even more to the side so he can claim my mouth with a searing kiss I can feel all over my body at once. I'm breathless when he stops, letting his lips hover above mine. "That's what I said, yes."

I turn so my chest touches his, craning my neck to look at him. "If I asked you to do something for me, would you do it?"

He cocks his head and smirks. "Baby, you know I'll fuck you wherever, whenever."

"No." I swallow. "It's not something I want you to do to me."

He frowns, his blue eyes rippling with curiosity behind his black mask. "What is it?"

I glance over my shoulder at the couple, the man still fucking her mouth, then return my gaze to Alexius. "I want you to make her come." My insides coil tight as I say the words, and the way his eyebrows almost touch his hairline tells me I just took him by surprise with my request.

"What?"

"Just now, on the staircase, you told me I'm a predator just like you. So this is me being that animal, making my demands known." It's like a shroud of confidence cloaks me; the freedom of knowing what I want and the courage to ask for it is indescribable. It's a high I've never experienced before.

Alexius touches my jaw, studying me with intent, his irises pools of resolve. "I'm not fucking another woman, Leandra."

"No." I shake my head. "I don't want you to fuck her. I just want you to make her come."

His eyes narrow, and I know he's trying to figure me out, trying to read me as if he can see the truth of my soul.

I reach between us and cup his cock in my palm, squeezing his hard length, causing him to suck air between his teeth. "I want to watch your fingers tease and torture her cunt while your touch slowly drives her insane."

He rolls his hips, pressing his cock deeper into my palm. "Are you sure about that?"

"I am." There's no jealousy, no inhibitions. Just desire. Need. A craving to see my husband pleasure this woman.

"Leandra," he shakes his head lightly, lips pressed in a thin line, "I'm not ___"

I reach up and cup his cheeks, pulling him down so our lips can collide in a fiery kiss with a desperate sweep of my tongue against his before pulling away. "This is me unraveling, Alexius. And I need you to unravel with me."

His eyes turn a shade of blue I've never seen before—pools of dark radiance, a deep well in which I can see the battle he's waging within himself. But there's a connection between us. It's electric, alive, and undeniable. I know he's into it, wanting to give in to my request. We're the same, just like he said. It's his loyalty to me that makes him hesitate—and it's something I appreciate even though I'm yearning for him to give me this.

Abruptly, he grabs my arms and pulls me up on my toes, bringing my face inches from his, my breath catching in my throat. "I'm only going to ask you this once, stray, and you better answer truthfully."

I nod.

His eyes move as his gaze cuts up and down my face like he's searching for the answer in my expression. "Do you want me to make her come...for you?"

I lick my lips, his fingers biting painfully into my arms. "Yes."

Without warning, he reaches down, roughs his hand underneath the skirt of my dress, and slips a finger inside me, causing me to moan out loud, my legs trembling as I almost come instantly. I whimper as he curls his finger before sliding it out of me as if he wants it drenched in my arousal. He kisses me deeply, probing my mouth with his tongue, pressing his hard cock against my hip before tearing his lips from mine. "On one condition."

"What?" I'm breathless, ready to give him whatever the fuck he wants.

"You sit on that motherfucking sofa and spread your thighs so I can watch you play with your pussy while you watch me play with hers."

“Done,” I murmur, and hold my breath as he walks up to a table, grabbing a blindfold before stepping up to the bench. He hands the blindfold to the man, their lips moving as they whisper to each other. I have no idea what they’re saying, but as the man slips on the blindfold, I know exactly what Alexius’ demand was. There’s no way he’d allow this stranger to watch me.

Alexius turns his back to the woman’s face, ensuring that apart from his hand between her legs, every type of intimacy with her is severed. He has no interest in this woman other than the fact that it pleases me.

His gaze is pinned on me as I sit down on the sofa. The tension between us is a tangible thread ready to fucking snap at any moment.

He nods, his gaze flitting down to my legs before meeting mine again. I obey his silent command by spreading my legs and reaching down, leisurely dragging a single finger through my wet slit.

Alexius’ fingers immediately go to work between the woman’s legs, teasing and tormenting her most sensitive places. I watch as her body writhes in pleasure, as she arches her back and moans around her man’s cock.

It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen, and it only heightens my own desire, arousal pooling around my finger as I sink it inside me. I’m so wet and slick, my swollen flesh hyper-sensitive to my touch.

I lick my dry lips, my chest heavy with shallow breaths as I watch my husband’s fingers stroke her cunt, tracing the outline of her pussy lips. Alexius and I make eye contact, and he sinks a finger into her entrance, a whimper tearing from my throat at the sight. I suck my bottom lip into my mouth, touch my clit, rolling my fingertip over the swollen bud. He watches me, his eyes smoldering and dark, his hand working the other woman’s pussy the same way I’m working mine.

I bend one knee, lifting my leg and sinking my stiletto heel into the sofa's leather, spreading my pussy lips wide, wanting him to see every fucking inch. The bulge in his pants is unmissable. He’s ready to fuck me, his cock wanting inside me.

God, I’m so wet, so slick, just like the cunt Alexius is touching and teasing right now. I watch two of his fingers disappear inside her, her moans vibrating around her man’s cock. That’s when I lose control, my orgasm building, rising like a tidal wave inside me.

My hips move on the sofa. It’s impossible to stop my body from flexing into my touch.

“Come for me, stray,” Alexius demands, and the sound of his voice sends

me over the edge. His finger is on the woman's clit, and she cries out at the same time I do, both of us writhing, arching our backs in pleasure.

I throw my head back, perspiration trickling down the side of my face as I ride out my climax, my body shaking and every muscle trembling. I come hard, my clit pulses against my fingertip, and I can feel my cum gush out of me. I'm still raptured and euphoric when I hear my husband's curses.

"Jesus Christ, woman!" His hands are on me, grabbing my arms and pulling me off the sofa, jerking me around and bending me forward with a cruel hand against my back. I'm facing the couple, watching the man throw his head back as he comes, white ribbons squirting on the woman's cheek and lips.

Alexius groans, and I hear his belt and zipper before he yanks my skirt up, the cool air touching my naked ass. I'm anticipating him to plunge into me at any second when he grabs both my wrists, pinning them behind my back before he reaches for my hair, pulling back and forcing me to crane my neck while my skull burns and my spine curves. The tip of his cock is at my entrance when he calls out, "Fucker, take off your blindfold and watch me fuck my wife."

"Oh, God," I moan, my body more alive than ever. There's no trace of the orgasm I had five seconds ago by the way my pussy aches for release.

Alexius reaches out with his other hand, grabbing my jaw and forcing his finger into my mouth. "You taste that, stray? That's her and you. Both of your tastes cling to my motherfucking finger. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

I moan.

"Isn't it!" he yells, and I whimper.

"Yes. It's what I fucking wanted."

He's a savage. A beast unleashed. There's nothing gentle or kind about how he pushes his way inside me, thrusting deep and hard. I cry out as he fills me, the pleasure intense and overwhelming. He fucks me mercilessly, his big body slamming against mine as he pounds me. My legs are unstable, and the only thing keeping me from collapsing is Alexius' grip on my wrists behind my back.

The couple watches us, their faces betraying their arousal and excitement. I can see the woman's hand moving between her legs again, like my husband didn't just make her come, her fingers pleasuring herself as she watches Alexius fuck me.

The sensations are overwhelming, Alexius's thick cock filling me completely, and soon I'm coming again, my body shaking and trembling as I'm consumed by pleasure. But my cries of ecstasy only make him fuck me harder, deeper, his groans hitching every time he hits me deep. His own orgasm is building; I can feel it in the way his cock swells and thickens inside me.

Alexius growls behind me, and I'm still feeling the aftershock of my climax when his orgasm rips through him, his dick jerking as he fills me with his cum. I clench around him as our bodies tremble. It's intense. Overwhelming. It's fucking perfect.

The next thing I know, I'm being pulled up, and we're both collapsing on the sofa together, his cock slowly going limp inside me until it eventually slips out of me. I'm breathless, sweaty, my thighs sticky with cum, and my heart is racing at what feels like a million beats per second while I try to process what just happened.

I watched my husband pleasure another woman, and it made me come.

We just had sex in front of other people, and I came again, this time around my husband's cock.

It was wild. Wicked. Sinfully depraved. But Alexius and I...we just fucking unraveled.

Chapter Nineteen

LEANDRA

Mira bursts through the front door just as we get out of the car. “You’re back!” Excitement glows on her cheeks, and it seems like she’s floating as she strides toward us, her blonde hair bouncing around her shoulders. “I’m so happy you’re back.” She throws her arms around my neck, squeezing me hard enough to crack bone. “I never knew how much I love having you around until you boarded that damn airplane.”

“I missed you, too.” I smile, hugging her back. She smells like flowers. Familiar. Home.

“How was it? How was your trip?” She leans back to look at me. “Did Alexius spoil you? Did he take you shopping?” Her eyes brighten, and she clasps her hands together. “Tell me he took you to see the Colosseum. If he didn’t, there’s something wrong with him on a spectacularly high level.”

“Mira,” Alexius blurts. “Take a breath before you pass out.”

“Okay, fine. I missed you, too. No need to be jealous,” she teases before hugging him. Her energy is dizzying and infectious. All I can do is smile as she turns to me, taking my hand.

“Come on.” Mira practically drags me inside, her smile illuminating her whole face. “I’ve arranged for us to have lunch so you can tell me everything.”

“Mira,” Alexius groans from behind us. “Leave her be. We just got home after a nine-hour flight. At least let her get settled first.”

Mira snaps her gaze in his direction, staring at him, deadpan. “You know what women do after their friend spends a week in Rome?”

“What?”

“We gossip. We pry. We ask about the sightseeing when all we really

want to know is how the sex was. Where it happened. How it happened. And how many times.”

“Who says we had sex?” Alexius shoots her a pointed stare, and Mira freezes, narrowing her eyes.

“You are seriously jet-lagged. Aren’t you?”

Alexius looks over Mira’s shoulder at Nicoli as if silently asking for help.

Nicoli shrugs. “Don’t look at me. I told you before, the women in this house are fucking crazy, yet you insist we feed them.”

“Oh. My. God.” Everyone looks at Mira while she’s gaping at my hand. “He gave you a wedding ring?”

“He...uhm—”

She pulls my hand closer, spreading my fingers as she stares at the square-cut diamond with two baguettes on each side. “It’s absolutely stunning. My God, Alexius. You picked it without me?”

He cocks a brow, glowering her way. “I’m capable of buying my wife something without your help, Mira.”

She scoffs. “Be glad this ring has a huge fucking rock, or I would have been in a great position to tell you just how much of an idiot you really are.” Mira hooks her arm in mine. “Now, I need to know everything.” She glances over her shoulder at Alexius. “And I mean everything.”

“I’m not telling you everything,” I say, and she quickly hushes me.

“Shush. Let the man stew a bit. I promise you he won’t be able to do a goddamn thing for the next two hours while he wonders what the hell it is we’re talking about. Alexius is so high-strung all the damn time. I love screwing with his head every now and then. But seriously,” she stops just as we round the corner, out of sight, “was it like a mixing-pleasure-with-business kind of trip? Or was it an I-couldn’t-walk-right-half-the-time kind of trip?”

I wrinkled my nose and purse my lips. “A little of both?”

“Ugh, never mind,” she concedes, grabbing my hand again. “Tell me about this ring. What does this mean?” she asks urgently. “Are you two, like, married, married? Like, is it a permanent thing now?”

Heat prickles across my cheeks, a flutter of excitement starting in my stomach as I remember our time at the club, right before he gave me this ring. If any couple experienced one night that defined them, the night at Mito would be ours. That night raised our level of trust to new heights. Watching him make that woman come while his attention was solely focused on me,

proving that there was no other woman for him but me—it shifted the dynamic between us. I no longer wonder about his time spent as a single man at Myth. I don't feel this overwhelming jealousy tighten around my throat when thinking about the girls at their clubs, how many he's fucked, how many he's shared. It's no longer of any consequence to me, to us, because what we have—what we experienced at Mito—it's ours, and no one can take that away from us. I trust him. He trusts me. We trust each other. It's a bond I know we'll cherish. And he sealed that bond when he gave me a proper wedding ring that night, under the Italian sky at the top of the Spanish Steps. My heart's been full ever since.

I smile, my soul floating with a happiness I've never felt before. "Yes. It's permanent."

"Holy shit!" Mira exclaims, trying to muffle her excitement by holding her hands over her mouth, but her green eyes are practically beaming. "You're my sister-in-law for real now? Well, kind of. God, I don't know what I'm more excited about. You and Alexius finally getting your heads out of your asses, or me finally getting a sister." She wraps me in another tight hug. "I'm so happy for you."

I've missed talking to her the last few days. Her energy. Her optimism. How she brings this entire household to life.

"Thank you. But let's just see how it goes first before we bring on the fireworks."

Mira's lips curl in a sly grin as she taps her finger against her temple. "I'm already planning your first-anniversary party."

"Stop." I snicker. "We still have a few months to go before we get there. So, tell me, how is Mrs. Del Rossa doing?" I ask once Mira finally lets go of me, and we sit on the couch in front of the fireplace.

Mira pulls her feet up under her, leaning back. "Not good. I'm worried about her. She hasn't received any guests since the funeral and hardly leaves her room. Not to mention the fact that she's barely eating." Worry creases her brow as she stares at the crackling fire. "I suppose it's all part of the grieving process."

"I wish there were something we could do," I say, unable to imagine exactly what she's going through after losing her life partner. All I can do is think of how I'd feel if something happened to Alexius, and we've only been together for a short while.

"The only thing that can heal grief is time." She turns her gaze to mine.

“How is Alexius doing? Is he coping...after everything?”

“I think so,” I reply. “He’s been less distracted during our trip than before we left. But I’m pretty sure that’s about to change since we’re back.”

Mira nods. “Things are strange around here for sure.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know. The brothers are all just acting weird, more secretive than usual.”

“Nicoli?” I ask, raising a brow.

She sighs. “He’s been even more distant, if that’s even possible.”

There’s pain in her words masked with a sneer. There’s something between the two of them, something so strong everyone around them can feel it—except for them. For him. Or maybe he does; he just chooses to ignore it. My bet would be on the latter.

“The other day,” Mira starts, “I overheard a conversation between Nicoli and Caelian.”

“Eyes and ears, huh?” I tease.

“Hey, these guys give us nothing. They just expect us to walk around here and look pretty without knowing what the hell is going on behind closed doors. It’s my God-given right to know exactly what’s happening around here.”

I snicker. “What were they talking about?”

“Swear this stays between us.”

“Of course.”

Her blonde hair cascades down the sides of her face as she pulls her fingers through it, her expression somber. “I heard something about a murder at Myth.”

“Murder?” I blurt, and Mira shushes me, glancing over her shoulder to the entryway.

“Keep quiet.”

“Sorry,” I whisper. “But...murder?”

“Yeah.” She shifts closer. “I couldn’t hear everything. All I got was something about a murder at Myth and that they’re using Mr. Del Rossa’s passing as an excuse to keep the club closed for a while.”

My gaze drifts from Mira to the fireplace, sparks of oranges and reds flickering, glinting with golden light as the flames consume the wood. “A murder at Myth. It seems unreal,” I mutter, deep in thought. “Is it one of the girls working there?”

“That's my guess,” she answers, shrugging one shoulder.

“Mirabella,” Maximo calls from the foyer.

“Dammit,” she sighs. “I forgot my brother’s back, too. It was so freeing being able to take a pee without having to explain where I’ve been for a total of five fucking minutes.”

I chuckle. “He’s just protective of you.”

“Yeah, well,” she gets up and straightens her white blouse, “his protection is suffocating. Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

I watch as she walks out, her skinny jeans hugging every curve tightly and ankle boots giving her enough lift to make it seem like her slender legs went on for miles.

If what Mira heard is true, it would explain why Alexius was so distant and distracted before our trip. I’ve never been to Myth. It might as well be a million miles away, but I can’t help feeling this sense of dread. Worry. Like it’s closer to home than we think. Or maybe I’m just tired and need to get some rest. Hopefully, not too much will change now that we’re back home, surrounded by reality. Our time in Rome was perfect. I don’t want anything to ruin it—to ruin this good feeling swirling in my chest.

Whatever it is Alexius and I had found in Rome...I hope to God we’ll be able to keep it.



ALEXIUS

Nicoli closes my office door, and I glance at him while pouring two glasses of whiskey. His jet-black hair is shorter than it was the last time I saw him. “You got a haircut.”

“I did. I do still have my balls, though.”

I snort. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You handed your balls over to your wife in Italy, didn’t you?”

“You’re an asshole, you know that?”

He tips his glass toward me. “I might be an asshole. But at least I’m not

pussy-whipped.”

I lift a brow. “You sure about that?”

“Drink your whiskey and shut the fuck up.”

All I can do is snicker as I take a seat on the leather couch across from him, savoring the sting of the whiskey as it slides down my throat, settling in my stomach.

Nicoli smirks in my direction. “I must say, the diamond ring looks much better than the gold band she’s been wearing.”

“What can I say? I wasn’t feeling inspired when I got her the gold band.”

“And your wife inspired you in Rome?” His suggestive tone has me rolling my eyes. “Just how much did she inspire you?”

“If you’re looking for details about my sex life, you ain’t getting it.”

“Oh, come on.” He leans back and stretches his arm across the back edge. “I remember a time when you were always eager to share.”

“And that’s all in the past now.”

“Is it?” He narrows his eyes at me. “Is it really?”

I smirk. “Pry all you want, Nicoli. I’m not telling you shit about the sex between my wife and me.”

“My wife and me? Jesus.” He grins like an idiot. “Listen to you, speaking the language of a married man. I still remember the night you told us Dad was forcing you to take a wife, something you were extremely pissed off about. You remember that night? The night you had that girl fuck me while she still had your cum in her mouth.” He moans appreciatively. “Good times.”

“Stop.”

“If someone had told me that night you’d be sitting here today with your dick in a twist over some woman, I would have called bullshit.”

Him and me both. I didn’t go into this marriage thinking it would end up being anything other than a major inconvenience. The day I watched Leandra walk down the aisle, I hated the idea of being married to her. I hated what she represented—a life where others made the decisions for me. I resented my dad for forcing my hand, for threatening my position in this family. And now look at me. I went from a billionaire playboy who fucked for selfish pleasure to a husband who loved nothing more than to look at his wife’s face while she comes all over his dick. I went from looking forward to the day Leandra left and I’m finally free of her to reaching new lows on my already questionable moral compass in order to have her stay. She says she loves me,

that she doesn't want to leave, but I'm not a man who leaves anything to chance.

"What is it?" Nicoli eyes me with curiosity. "What are you not telling me?"

"Nothing." I clear my throat. "I'm just thinking about how fast things can change."

"My twin telepathy is going apeshit right now. You're up to something."

I smirk, taking a sip of whiskey. "Maybe your twin telepathy is broken."

"Brother, there are two things of mine that are never, ever broken. My twin telepathy, and my dick."

"Then maybe I'm broken."

He snickers. "No, you're not. You're just in love with a girl. I gotta say, brother," he continues, "out of the four of us, I didn't think you'd be the first to get tamed."

"You and me both. I always thought you'd be the first to cave."

"What? Who? Me?" He acts all surprised.

"I was sure you'd come to your senses sooner rather than later."

He shifts in his seat. "Please tell me you're not referring to—"

"I am." I keep his gaze, challenging him to deny what everyone in this house already knows. "It's only a matter of time—"

"How're Gian and Saint doing?"

I smile at my small victory, getting Nicoli to stop prying and being an ass about my relationship with Leandra. "They're good."

"Is that redhead still—"

"Daniela—"

"Yes, her. Is she still hot as fuck?"

I shake my head in disbelief. "You know Gian will cut out your tongue and shove it up your ass if he hears you say that?"

"Hey, just saying it as it is. That wife of his...goddamn." Nicoli sucks air through his teeth. "Can you imagine her on her knees, staring up at you with those gorgeous, mismatched eyes, your cock stuffed in her mouth?"

"I swear to God, if Gian wants your head on a stick one day, I ain't saving you." I slam back the rest of my whiskey and stand to pour myself another one.

"Talking about wanting other men's wives," Nicoli taunts, "Isaia hasn't been home."

I turn to face my twin. "Where's he been?"

“Staying at Melanie’s.”

“Melanie?” I ask, surprised. “The woman he’s been fucking?”

“Yeah.” Nicoli crosses his legs, settling in his seat. “He has her set up in this nice little apartment across town.”

“Is it serious?” A part of me hopes it is. Maybe if he has a girlfriend to focus on, he’ll be less likely to obsess over my wife.

“Nah. It’s just pussy for him. He’s been fucking Melanie for a while now.” He swirls his drink. “So, is our friendship with Saint and Gian still solid?”

“It is.” I take my seat. “If shit hits the fan, we can count on their support.”

Nicoli leans his head to the side. “And by shit, you mean Roberto?”

“I doubt our problem with our uncle will become that big of an issue to warrant outside intervention. But yes. If we need their help, they will give it.”

“And there are no strings attached to having their support?”

“None,” I reply. “Gian and Saint have no desire for an alliance.”

“Remind me how that works again.” Nicoli narrows his eyes. “We’re not in an alliance with them, yet they’ll lend us their balls and firepower if we need it, and we’ll do the same for them?”

“Why do you always have to refer to everyone’s balls?”

He sits up and leans forward. “Let me ask you this. If someone refers to a man’s balls in a conversation, do you get this weird tingly feeling in your nutsack?”

“What the fuck?” I start laughing.

“Yeah, you do.” Nicoli leans back. “And that tingly feeling, dear brother, immediately has you paying more attention to the conversation.” He shrugs. “Always refer to a man’s balls if you want to be taken seriously.”

“Sometimes, I wonder how I survived sharing the same uterus with you for nine months.”

“We survived because we have gigantic-sized balls.” He winks. “Your balls tingly?”

“Fuck off.”

Nicoli laughs, then slams back the rest of his whiskey. Bastard. I envy his ability to crack a joke to lighten the mood in any situation, no matter how high the pile of shit we find ourselves in.

“To answer your question,” I clear my throat, “Gian and Saint don’t want a hand in any Dark Sovereign business just like we don’t want anything to do with theirs. Our meeting in Rome confirmed as much. We don’t get our

names mentioned in the same conversations, but when the day comes that merging our family names is warranted, it's an avenue all three of us are willing to take."

Nicoli sets down his glass and studies me for a moment, every trace of mischief erased. He doesn't have to say a word because I already know what his silence is saying.

"I want him and Ricardo out, Nicoli." I confirm what he's thinking. "And I don't plan on taking my time to get it done, either. I want them out and on their asses with not a dime of Dark Sovereign money in their pockets."

"We'll get it done," he assures me. "But right now, we need to focus on catching whoever the fuck this psychopath is killing our girls."

I let out a heavy sigh, hating the reminder of the shitstorm we still have to deal with. We're nowhere close to figuring out who this fucker is and why he's been going around killing our girls, slaughtering them like pigs. Cut ears, sewn-shut mouths, and crosses shoved inside the victims—it's like the goddamn Antichrist has been set free at our front door, and he wants to start the apocalypse in our back yard.

I sit back down, leaning my elbows on my knees. "Tell me you got something while I was gone. Anything."

"No, man. Nothing." Nicoli's expression is somber; he's just as frustrated as I am. "Honestly, I don't think we're going to get any closer to catching this fucker while our clubs are closed."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that as long as he has no reason to come out of hiding, he ain't going to leave us any breadcrumbs to follow."

I pull my palm down my face. "Are you suggesting we reopen our clubs and hope he comes back?"

"It's fucked up." Nicoli loosens his tie with a yank, unbuttoning his collar. "But if we want this son of a bitch caught, we're going to have to take the risk. You know that as well as I do."

"Yeah." I let out a breath, leaning my head back against the edge of the couch, staring at the coffered ceiling, my insides heavy. "But I don't like it. I don't want to risk anyone else getting hurt by this fucking psycho."

"You and me both, but what other option do we have? This fucker ain't coming out to play while we keep the playground locked."

"Fuck." I lunge to my feet, frustration and anger bubbling like poison in my veins, and I find myself wanting to go back in time. Wanting to go back

to yesterday when Leandra and I were swept up in the magic of Rome, pretending like the rest of the world didn't exist. Now, we're back here, and it feels like we never left.

I walk up to the window and unlatch it before opening it. Cold air floods inside, and I can smell the rain in the distance. The gray sky will soon be a tapestry of black as the sun sets. Somehow it feels like the darkness will be heavier tonight. Thicker. A mantle that would smother everything it touches. That's what happens when you experience a piece of Heaven only to return to purgatory. The darkness becomes bitter to swallow after you've had a taste of the light.

Everything feels wrong. I should feel pride and confidence upon taking my father's place, but instead, there's this crushing weight that accompanies the flashes and images of the two women whose bodies had been brutally mutilated. Women who were under our protection. Whoever this fucker is, he's somehow managed to drape darkness over this family, over our empire, and now, instead of walking with pride, we're all walking on goddamn eggshells while we scatter to keep him from striking again.

"This is bullshit," I mutter, closing the window.

"Which part?"

"All of it. This is our territory, our world." I turn to face my brother. "We rule here. Not some twisted fuck who needs his spine torn out. I will not let this fucker dictate our every move while he hides in the shadows like a goddamn coward."

His dark brows curve upward, and he places his hands in his pockets. "Business as usual?"

I nod. "Only this time...we catch this fucker."

There's a knock on the door, and Nicoli opens it. "Gabriel King." Nicoli glances at his Rolex. "Painfully punctual as usual."

"Nicoli." Gabriel strolls in as my brother stands to the side. His height is imposing, his stare piercing, and presence forceful. He arches a brow when he sees me and approaches with his hand extended. "Alexius, I didn't expect to see you here today. Aren't you supposed to be in Rome still?"

I shake his hand. "We just came back this morning."

"You're jet-lagged, and already it's back to business as usual with you."

"No rest for the wicked." I grin. "Whiskey?"

"Always." He unbuttons his pristine slate-gray suit jacket before taking a seat. Thick, dark, salt and pepper hair is neatly styled, his jaw cleanly shaven,

his expression one of controlled serenity. As a man of immense wealth, Gabriel King is one of our elite clients and has been for years, using Myth for his private parties fitting for a man of his...*tastes*. Together with a select few, Gabriel hosts indulgent events of the forbidden kind, and discretion is the only currency he's interested in when it comes to attendance.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" I ask, handing him his glass before taking a seat across from him.

His throat bobs as he takes a sip, closing his cobalt-blue eyes as he appreciates the smooth taste of the alcohol. "First, I'd like to offer my condolences on your father's passing."

"Thank you." I lean back. "It hasn't been easy, but knowing he's no longer suffering has given us some comfort." I shrug. "Business-wise, it's been quite the adjustment."

"I can imagine." He places his whiskey glass down on the side table. "Which brings me to the reason I'm here. I know Myth has been closed for business temporarily, and I would like to know when you're planning on reopening your doors again?"

Nicoli sits down next to me. "You getting a little restless, King?"

He smirks. "You could say that. It has been a while, and my associates and I are eager for things to—you know...return to normal."

I nod. "Understandable. As a matter of fact, Nicoli and I were just talking about Myth and that it's time to reopen our doors. Business as usual."

"Well then, that's great news." He takes his glass and savors another taste. "I can go ahead and make the necessary arrangements for our next event to take place in two weeks?"

"You can." I tilt my glass in his direction. "Myth's doors are always open for you and your associates."

"That's good to hear. Thank you, Alexius." He slams back the last of his whiskey, stands and buttons his suit jacket. "Will you be joining us?"

Gabriel's parties are the best of its kind; a night of sin and wicked pleasures most can't even imagine, exceeding the fantasies of those who have the privilege to attend. Under normal circumstances, I would jump at the invitation, but given how my life has changed since finding Leandra, my attendance at these events has now ended.

"Thank you for the offer, Gabriel." I stand and straighten my suit lapels. "But I'll have to decline respectfully."

"Wife?" Gabriel eyes me with curiosity, yet there's a level of

understanding in his gaze.

“Indeed. A lot has changed in my life.”

“Understandably so. Well,” he reaches out, and we shake hands, “let me know if you change your mind. Your wife is more than welcome to join the festivities.”

My cock instantly reacts at the thought of Leandra joining me at one of Gabriel’s lascivious affairs. If our night at Mito indicates how extraordinary it can be between us in an environment where nothing is taboo, a night at Myth with Gabriel as the host would be mind-blowing.

“You know, Gabriel. My wife and I might just take you up on your offer.”

“Fantastic. Just say the word, and I’ll make sure I have some special arrangements in place for the two of you.” He turns to face Nicoli. “You, Caelian, and Isaia are welcome as well.”

Nicoli stands. “I accept. Unlike my brother, I’m not married or pussy-whipped with my dick in a twist, so I’ll definitely be there.”

Gabriel snickers. “Good. Well, thank you for the whiskey, gentlemen. Looking forward to our future endeavors.”

Nicoli opens the door for our guest and I watch as Gabriel saunters out. His life is the embodiment of a rags-to-riches life story, going from a poor boy to one of the wealthiest men in America.

“We better catch this fucker before Gabriel’s party,” Nicoli says, closing the door.

I bring my glass to my lips, appreciating the oaky aroma of the whiskey. “Don’t worry, brother. We will. Soon.”

Chapter Twenty

LEANDRA

My heart is lodged in my throat as I count the weeks on my fingers. I'm trying my best not to panic, taking one deep breath at a time, allowing the oxygen to reach my lungs. I keep telling myself there's a reasonable explanation for this apart from the obvious. There has to be.

I'm never late. Ever.

I stare at my birth control pills, and it only confirms it. I'm late. Really fucking late.

"Jesus," I curse, pulling my fingers through my hair, flipping it over my shoulder. The knots in my stomach keep twisting tighter and tighter, my mind reeling with thoughts, yet not a single one makes any sense.

I've taken my pills every single day. Religiously. Alexius has been making sure I have a replacement pack at the end of each month, being just as cautious. Yet here I am with a gut full of dread, counting weeks, and it's not adding up. At all.

Maybe I'm not pregnant.

Maybe I'm just stressed, or my body is going through some out-of-whack hormonal change. That could explain the on-and-off nausea and tender breasts.

Oh, God. I'm pregnant.

"Shit."

I grab the birth control and shove it back in my bedside drawer like it's a child who didn't do what they were told and now gets to have a time-out. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

I bury my face in my palms as I sit on the edge of the bed. I have to be sure. But how? Alexius has eyes and ears on me twenty-four-seven. Since we

came back from Rome, Alexius has doubled security here at the house. Mira and I aren't even allowed to leave without giving Maximo a day's notice so he can put the necessary protection in place. It's been insane. But after Mira overheard a conversation about murders at the clubs, we've been less inclined to complain about the muscle following us around.

Mira.

I have to tell her. She's the only one who'll know how to get a pregnancy test smuggled in without Alexius knowing. I can't tell him if I'm not one hundred percent sure.

Or ninety-nine percent. Fuck.

There's a knock on the door, and I almost jump out of my skin as I leap to my feet.

"Leandra, are you in there?"

Thank God. It's Mira. "Yeah." I rush to open the door, glancing up and down the hallway before grabbing her hand and pulling her inside.

"Whoa." She rights herself as I shut the door. "I just wanted to ask you if you'd like to have lunch on the porch. It's a beautiful day outside. Wait." She stills, raking her gaze up and down my face like she'll get any answers in my expression. "What's wrong?"

"I, um..." I scratch the scar behind my ear, nerves pressing air from my lungs. "I need to ask you a favor."

"Sure. Anything." Her forehead is creased with concern as she studies me. "What's going on?"

My nervous fingers travel to the back of my neck. "You have to swear to me you won't tell a soul."

"Jesus, Leandra." She inches closer, her eyes narrowed. "What's going on?"

"Promise me, Mira."

"Yes, of course. I promise. What is it?"

I brush past her, crossing my arms as if hugging myself is possible. "I, um..." I turn back but don't look at her as I struggle to form one simple sentence.

"Spit it out," Mira urges, and I finally gather the courage to look her in the eye.

"I need you to get something for me without anyone knowing."

Mira's green eyes widen, her cheeks suddenly pale, contrasting with her blood-red lips. "Are you on drugs?"

“What?”

“Because if you are, I can’t help you there. I once tried to get some ecstasy into the house, and it got hand delivered by my brother. And I mean it literally when I say hand-delivered. The pills were still in the dealer’s hand... the hand my brother cut off.” She shrugs like something just slithered over her grave, and my stomach turns with the visual. “God, it was so disgusting. I threw up all over Maximo and that fucking severed hand. All bloody, and it was this ghastly color, while the fingers were so...so stiff, like they’d been frozen. Not to mention the smell. My God, it was horrid.” She gags...and I run for the bathroom, making it just in time to avoid cleaning vomit off the marble floors.

Mira comes rushing in while I’m hunched over the toilet, heaving out the fruit and granola parfait I had for breakfast.

“Are you okay?” She looks at me with a mixture of worry and pity.

“No,” I answer truthfully, sitting down on my ass, clutching the toilet bowl.

“What’s wro—” She gasps. “Oh, my God, you’re pregnant.”

I frown up at her. “I throw up, and your first guess is I’m pregnant? Maybe the berries in the parfait weren’t fresh. Or maybe I have a bug. Or maybe it’s the visual of the severed hand that has me hanging over the damn toilet.”

“Nope. Nah-ah.” Mira crosses her arms, staring down at the mess I am on the floor. “You’ve been glowing lately.”

I frown. “Glowing? I’m throwing up, for God’s sake.”

“Still, you’ve had this glow,” she waves her hand in front of me, “ever since you came back from Rome. I just thought it was because you’re ridiculously happy and getting the crap fucked out of you every goddamn night. But now.” She pauses like she’s taking a moment for it all to sink in. “You’re pregnant...aren’t you?”

I wipe my mouth with some toilet paper before flushing and pulling myself off the floor, reaching for the mouthwash and gargling like my life depends on it. Once the rancid, gall-bitter taste is out of my mouth, I turn to face Mira, who is still staring at me—eyes wide and red lips parted.

I take a few breaths, leaning back against the bathroom sink. “That’s what I need your help with. I need to get a pregnancy test without anyone knowing.”

“Alexius doesn’t know?”

I shake my head, placing my hand in front of my mouth, still trying to catch my breath. “And I don’t want to tell him unless I’m sure.”

Mira sits on the bathtub's edge, clutching the rim and tapping her French-manicured nails against the porcelain. “I hate to sound like a mother right now, but you two haven’t been...you know, safe?”

“We have. I have.” I start pacing. “I’m on birth control, have been for years.”

Mira scowls. “But Alexius was your first?”

“Yes. He was.” I still in front of her. “You don’t live in a neighborhood I grew up in as a teenager without being on birth control.” I glance over her shoulders, staring into nothing. “The last thing you want is to be pregnant after you—”

“I get it,” Mira interrupts. It’s probably just as hard for her to hear as it is for me to say. “How late are you?”

“Late.” I breathe out. “Really late.”

“Fuck,” she curses, hanging her head with a curtain of blonde hair flowing down the sides of her face before looking back up. “Well, at least you’re married. So, there’s that silver lining.”

“Mira,” I start, panic slowly bubbling to the surface, causing my eyes to tear up. “I can’t be pregnant. This can’t happen right now.”

She gets up, her heeled boots clicking across the floor as she walks up to me. “Okay, before we start freaking out—”

“We?”

“You. Before you freak out, let’s just make sure. Once we see two little pink lines, then we can freak out.”

“Again, we?”

“Yes, we. Of course, we. If you freak out, I freak out. It’s what best friends do.” She places a palm on her forehead, her cheeks flushed, but I’m standing there staring at her and having this huge ‘aaaaaw’ moment because I’ve never had a best friend. And it’s kind of sad, if you think about it, since I’m a grown-ass woman.

“Best friends?” I smile.

She glances at me, her lips curving into a smile when she sees me grinning like an idiot. “No,” she starts, then pulls me in for a hug. “Sisters.”

“This is probably one of those moments when there’s so much stuff happening all at once, and it only takes something really, really small to get the waterworks going.” I sniff, tears slipping down my cheeks. “But hearing

you say that isn't something really, really small—even though it's not quite as big as the possibility of me being pregnant, but—”

“Leandra.” Mira pulls back to look at me. “You’re rambling, but I’m going to chalk it up to nerves and the fact that you’re probably dangling off the cliff of hysteria right now. So, let’s get that pregnancy test.” She grabs my hand and leads me out of the bathroom. “I need to know if I’ll be drinking alone tonight or not.”

Four hours later, we’re sitting on my bed staring at three pregnancy tests, all showing two pink lines. There are no faint or light pink second lines that make you squint in order to see it. No. It’s all very pink. Very bold. Very fucking visible, as if the test itself is screaming at me, ‘You’re fucking pregnant!’

Mira starts drinking her second glass of wine. “Well, shit.”

“Yeah.”

“I did not want to drink alone tonight.”

“And I really need a drink right now.” I pull a palm down my face and mutter, “Fuck,” as I slide off the bed and start pacing. I’m trying to think, but it’s impossible to sort through the maze of thoughts that eventually lead to the same thing. I’m pregnant.

I am. Pregnant.

I’m going to have a baby. Alexius’ baby.

I freeze, staring at the floors but seeing nothing at all. “I’m going to have a baby,” I murmur. “I’m going to have a baby.”

“Yeah.” Mira points at the three tests. “Evidently so.”

“What am I going to do? What am I going to tell Alexius?”

Mira gets on her feet, grabs the bottle of wine, and tops up her glass. “Well, it’s really quite simple. You’re going to tell Alexius that you’re pregnant. He may or may not freak the fuck out, but after the initial shock wears off, we’re all going to be very excited, and by Christmas next year, Santa Claus will be visiting the estate for the first time in, like,” she shrugs, pursing her lips, “ten, eleven years?”

“Oh, my God.” I fall onto the bed, burying my face between the pillows. “Alexius is going to hate me.”

“Wait. What?”

I lift my head and brush the hair out of my face. “He’s going to hate me.”

“Why would he hate you?”

“Because I’m pregnant.”

“Excuse me?” Mira places a hand on her hip, her eyebrows almost touching her hairline. “Did you make this baby alone?”

“No.”

“Were you the only one who enjoyed the sex?”

“No.” I scoot up.

“Were you the only one who got an orgasm while you both enjoyed the sex you were having?”

I frown. “No.”

“Then why the fuck will he hate you? No, let me rephrase.” She waves her hand around, clearly slightly pissed off. “Why the fuck will he even just slightly dislike you because you’re pregnant with a baby he helped make... over and over and over again?”

“I don’t know.” I throw my hands in the air. “He just took over from his father and is probably still finding his feet in this new role he has to play in this family. I just can’t think that he’ll be happy about it. I mean, I’m not happy about it—”

“—right now,” Mira chimes in. “You’re not happy about it *right now*. But,” she puts her glass of wine on the bedside table and plops down on the bed next to me, “I can almost guarantee that once all this sinks in and both you and Alexius have had time to adjust to the idea of having a baby, you’re going to be really happy about it.”

I tuck my hair behind my ear, absentmindedly tracing along the scar. “I don’t know, Mira.”

“Look, I know it’s not ideal. But at least you two got your heads out of your asses in time and realized that you loved each other before, you know,” she glances at my stomach, “this.” Her eyes find mine, her gaze soft and expression caring. “At least you knew your agreement with Alexius was over and that he asked you to stay because he wants you to and not because he feels obligated because you’re pregnant.” She glances at her wristwatch. “Shit. The family doctor is coming around to check on Mrs. Del Rossa.”

“Is she sick?” I ask, worried.

“No. Well, not physically.” Mira clammers off the bed, pulling her fingers through her honey-kissed hair. “It’s just...she’s not been eating much, and it’s like she just retreated into herself since Mr. Del Rossa died. So I’m worried about her.”

“She’s grieving. She needs time.”

Mira flicks her nails, staring down at her hands, black eyeliner

accentuating her long lashes. “I know. I just...” she inhales deeply. “You know those couples who have been together for so long that once one of them passes, the other one dies not long after?”

I nod.

“I’ve been thinking of those couples a lot since Mr. Del Rossa died.”

I shift to the edge of the bed and drop my legs off the side. “You think Mrs. Del Rossa—”

“I dunno.” She looks up at me, and I can see every trace of worry in the swirls of her green irises. “I hope not, but it wouldn’t hurt having the doctor check her out.”

“No. That’s good. I’m glad you’re having him come over.”

“Yeah.” Her gaze cuts to mine. “Hey, here’s a thought. While he’s here, maybe he should take a look at you as well.”

“No.” I wave her off. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Leandra, he’s literally going to be down the hall, so he might as well just pop in here and check you out.”

“No.” I get on my feet and brush past her. “What if he tells Alexius before I’m ready to?”

“I’ll tell him not to say anything.”

My stomach tightens, nervous tension rolling up my shoulders and knotting in my throat. “Mira—”

She rushes up to me and takes my hands. “At least then you’ll be able to tell Alexius without a shadow of a doubt that you are indeed pregnant.”

I lift a brow and glance at the three pregnancy tests. “You have doubts? Really?”

“Well, no. But still.” The scent of her perfume fills the air around us as she leans in to hug me before strolling to the door and glancing back. “Okay, at least let me make an appointment for you to go see him.”

“Okay.” I nod and clutch my arms around my middle.

“Good.” She smiles. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.” The way she looks at me, her eyes two glistening emeralds, somehow manages to ease the panic just a little bit. Kindness always radiates from her as if you could see her heart in her smile.

“Thanks, Mira.”

Chapter Twenty-One

ALEXIUS

I open my office door and stand aside so Mira can walk in. She's been nagging me about the extra security around her and Leandra since we finished breakfast.

"I just want to take your wife out for lunch without four bags of muscle staring over our shoulder at the goddamn food on our plates."

"They're giving you more than enough space. They can wait outside the restaurant." My footsteps are muted as I saunter across the carpet to grab my phone from my desk. "You won't even know they're there."

"No. Alexius, you've had these guys follow us around for weeks. I just want two hours. Two goddamn hours without having them constantly staring at us. People think we're mafia wives with the muscle you're packing around us."

I lift a brow with silent sarcasm, and she scoffs.

"Okay, bad choice of words. But I'm not a wife, so that's only half badly chosen words."

I sigh, again standing to the side so she can walk out of my office. "I don't see how having them standing outside the restaurant would affect the privacy of your lunch."

"Are you kidding me? Knowing they're there is enough to suck the fun out of it."

"I'm not budging, Mirabella," I say, trying to sound stern while stifling a laugh. She always goes into this hyperactive mode whenever she doesn't get her way. "Your protection is more important than a two-hour lunch date."

"Alexius!" Mira stops and stomps her heel against the tiles. "We're cooped up in this house all the damn time, and the days we are allowed to

leave, you have an army of men following us. Do you know how awkward it is when there are men watching you like hawks while you decide whether you'll need tampons for heavy or light flow?"

"Jesus, Mira. TMI. Goddammit."

"Yeah. Exactly." She places her hand on her hips and purses her red lips. "Point proven."

I shake my head. It's not so much the idea of Leandra and tampons as it is having Mira and tampons in the same thought that creeps me the fuck out. But still. "My answer is still no."

"You're smothering her, Alexius." Her voice pitches higher than usual as she stares at me in earnest. "And you need to stop. As much as she's your wife, she's still this normal person who wants normal things, and trust me, being followed around by bodyguards all the damn time is not normal. Not for her."

Unease crawls across my skin. I've sensed that Leandra hasn't been herself lately. She's been distracted. On edge. And quiet. Too quiet. I've been unable to figure it out, figure her out mainly because I'm hoping I'm wrong, that I'm the one on edge with us trying to catch a killer. But maybe Mirabella's insistence on having some privacy is a sign that my instincts might be right. They've grown close, and it only makes sense that Leandra confides in Mira if something bothers her. But still, the idea of them unprotected, even for just two hours, doesn't sit well with me. "Mira, I don't —"

"Do you really want your men around while your wife tries on lingerie that she'll be wearing for you tonight?" She nudges her chin in the air, a simple act of defiance, and I narrow my eyes at the cunning little beast.

"Well played."

"Thank you. Now, can your wife and I please go out to lunch without being guarded like cattle?"

"Fine." I sigh. "But you're taking the Audi so I can track you at all times."

"Oh, my God," she moans, rolling her eyes and making a dramatic show of her disapproval.

I merely shrug, unfazed and hoping she'll continue into a tantrum that would force me to change my mind. "It's either that or being guarded like cattle. Your choice."

"Okay, fine. Good God, you're a pain in the ass. I don't know how she

puts up with your shit. It's those blue eyes, I tell you. Fucking panty-melters." Mira brushes past me, swaying her hips, her shoulders squared with confidence from her little victory.

"Two hours," I call out after her, but she ignores me—something she knows how to do really fucking well. I'll need to keep my eye on her with Leandra and make sure her attitude doesn't rub off on my wife.

My phone vibrates, and I pull it from my jacket pocket, Isaia's name flashing on the screen. "Yeah?" I answer while making my way down the hall.

"Alexius."

It's the sound of his voice, his tone, that has me stopping dead in my tracks. "Isaia, what's wrong?"



The tires screech as Nicoli speeds around the corner, his red LaFerrari demanding the attention of everyone around. He slams on the brakes, skidding to a stop outside the entrance of the apartment building, and we're both out of the car the second he kills the engine.

"This is not fucking happening." Nicoli flicks his cigarette, then nods to the security standing by the double glass doors before rushing inside. I'm right behind him when Maximo pulls up with his Hummer, gets out, slams the door shut, and runs inside the building with us.

"Tell me this is some sick fucking joke."

"Isaia sure as fuck didn't sound like he's kidding." I follow Nicoli across the foyer, people scattering out of our way as we dart for the stairs. "Which floor?"

"Third," Maximo calls out behind me, and the three of us sprint up the stairs, taking two at a time.

I can hear my blood rushing in my ears, my pulse racing and thoughts stumbling around the words Isaia said when he called. All I kept thinking while listening to him speak was that this couldn't be true. That none of what he said was real. Even his voice, so flat, so emotionless, didn't seem right.

We reach the third floor, the pounding of our heavy footsteps resonating

down the hall.

“This one.” Maximo bangs on the door once. “Isaia. Open up, man.”

I’m not in the mood for waiting, so I brush past Maximo, grab the glossy doorknob, and jerk the door open. The sunlight coming through the apartment's floor-to-ceiling windows is blinding, bouncing off the stark white walls. I stomp inside past the kitchen, entering the living room through the large archway. “Isaia! Where the fuck are you, man?”

I turn when I find the living room empty. It’s when I glance up at the second floor that everything inside me chills. “Jesus Christ.”

My heart drops to my feet, and my lungs deflate. I don’t even blink when Nicoli bumps into me and follows my gaze, the scene bringing him to a screeching halt. “Dear God.”

I’m frozen, my every muscle iced. It’s like the world stops, and nothing else exists but this sheer terror that sinks into my chest and steals the breath from my lungs. Black shadows close in around the edges of my vision, zeroing in on the bloody body hanging from the second-story railing.

“Isaia!” Maximo’s voice seems to echo far in the distance even though he’s right in front of me, a flash of leather and panic. When the vile stench of blood fills my nostrils and infects my brain, the world starts moving again. But it’s wrong. It’s all wrong.

“Jesus, Isaia,” Nicoli calls, and my attention snaps to my little brother sitting on the spiral staircase, elbows on his knees, clutching a bottle of bourbon. “You okay, man?” Nicoli rushes up the stairs, Isaia taking a long swig of the bourbon, not saying a damn word.

“Melanie,” I whisper, staring at her almost unrecognizable body, her dirty, blood-soaked hair framing her face as her head dangles eerily to the side with cable tied around her neck. “Jesus.”

Her eyes have been cut out, two gaping holes with congealed blood clinging to her cheeks like runny paint, her lips sewn shut with black thread, tears of crimson dried on her chin. It’s like the devil made her face his canvas—his own sick, vile masterpiece of pain. There’s a pool of blood on the carpet below her, the thick liquid seeped into the white fibers. Cuts all over her body left gaping holes of flesh and jagged wounds crusted in blood. It’s a goddamn horror scene no ordinary mind can imagine.

I tread backward until I feel the leather couch behind my knees and sit down. “This is…” I shake my head before pulling my palms down my face. “Jesus Christ, this isn’t fucking happening.”

“I’ve been telling myself that ever since I walked in here and found her like this.” Isaia pours more alcohol down his throat, thirsting for the escape it can give. The bottle is already half empty, which explains Isaia’s lack of freaking the fuck out.

“All this time,” I start, my voice low. “All this time, we’ve been upping security at the clubs, waiting for him, thinking that’s where he’ll strike. And then he…” I point at Melanie’s lifeless body, my jaw clenched as anger surges up my throat, forcing me to swallow my words.

I scream. I fucking roar, grabbing the vase on the coffee table and throwing it across the room. Crystal shatters, and it’s an explosion of yellow rose petals everywhere. “Motherfucker!” I growl, kicking at the fucking table. It’s like the devil’s serpent crawls all over my last goddamn nerves, destroying every ounce of control I have. “How is this fucker doing this?”

“She was an easy target for him.” Maximo paces, his hands on his sides and his gaze fixed on her lifeless body. “We didn’t have her protected.”

“Because we didn’t think she was a target.” I rough my hand through my hair, fighting the urge to tear it from my skull. “We didn’t once think—”

“No,” Isaia interrupts, his eyes downcast. “I didn’t think. I didn’t protect her. There’s no we in this fucked-up equation.” He chugs down more bourbon before swinging it across the room, amber liquid splattering against the wall and joining the ruined vase and roses on the floor. “It was my responsibility to protect her, and I didn’t. I might as well have invited this fucker in here.” He chokes on his words and straightens, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. “I might as well have sat there on that goddamn couch and watched while he…while he tortured her to death.”

“It’s not your fault,” I say, my chest tightening as I watch my little brother struggle to keep it together.

“Of course, it is.”

“None of us thought she’d be a target. We only thought about the girls at the clubs.”

“And your wife,” he snaps, then turns his attention to Nicoli, who’s pacing up and down the second floor. “Mirabella. We doubled security around them. Not once did I think it necessary to do the same for Melanie.”

“We couldn’t have known.”

Isaia slams his palm down on the staircase barrier. “I should have! I should have known. I should have protected her. But I didn’t.”

“Jesus, Isaia.” Nicoli stands tall at the top of the stairs. “No one could

have predicted this. You were just fucking the girl, for Christ's sake. It's not like you were going steady with her."

"Nicoli," I snap. "Seriously?"

"What? It's the truth. I'm just saying it as it is. Isaia's been fucking her for years. It's never been anything more than that, so how the fuck were we supposed to know this motherfucking son of a bitch would even think about targeting Melanie?"

"You're an asshole."

"No, he's right." Isaia's eyes are glazed as he looks at the body, his leather-clad shoulders slumped, his white shirt stained with bourbon. "Nicoli's right. We were just fucking. We weren't anything more than fuck-buddies, and still, she winds up dead." His dark gaze cuts to mine. "More proof that the Del Rossa name is a fucking curse. We ruin everything we touch...don't we, Alexius?"

There's this moment between us, a silence that's so fucking loud, it's deafening. I know exactly what he's not saying out loud. That's been his problem with me ever since I brought Leandra into our lives, the fact that I used her. Corrupted her. And now he can't fathom the idea that I've fallen in love with her and that she feels the same about me, the man who showed her no compassion while my brother offered her kindness by not letting her walk down the aisle alone on her wedding day. That's the difference between Isaia and me—he has a heart. I don't. But I have her instead, the woman who siphons life through my veins, and that's what has my brother so mindfucked when it comes to my wife. It's a feud between us that's far from over, but now is not the time or the place.

I look at Maximo. "Any sign of a note?"

"Not that I can see, no."

"Found it." Nicoli leans over the black steel barrier, studying the side of Melanie's face. "Fucker left it in her ear...or at least, what's left of it."

Eyes, ears, mouth—it's this fucker's pattern of torture. That, and the... God.

My gaze cuts to the top of her thighs. Her ankles are tied, keeping her legs together, but there's a piece of wood peeking out just below her mutilated sex. The wooden cross.

My stomach coils, and I turn my back to the scene, rubbing my palm across my neck. "We need to get her down from there," I say to Maximo, who inches closer.

“We should get him out of here first.” He gestures to Isaia, who manages to walk down the stairs only to have the bourbon kick his ass and fall on the last step. I’ve seen my little brother drunk countless times, but this is the first time I’ve seen him both drunk and defeated.

“Caelian is on his way. He can take Isaia home while we take care of shit here.”

Maximo nods, but I can see he’s struggling to keep a straight face. This time our killer hit too close to home. He’s no longer taking a shit on our goddamn front porch. Instead, he’s knocking on our fucking door...and he’s on his way in.

An hour later, Maximo drapes a black sheet over Melanie’s body, mumbling, “Sick fuck,” over and over again.

After Caelian got Isaia out of here, we got her down and removed the note from what was left of her ear. I’ve read it five times, yet the words still aren’t sinking in.

Nicoli is trying to wash the blood from his hands in the kitchen sink, groaning every two seconds. One wouldn’t think he’s a man used to getting his fingers dirty with the blood of others. But I get it. The drop of crimson I managed to get on my sleeve is bugging the shit out of me, and it’s probably because it’s just too damn close for comfort.

Whoever this fucker is, the time is drawing near. I can feel it, the sense of foreboding growing darker with each passing second. He’s getting closer. Ultimately, we will come face to face.

I’m sitting on the sofa holding the bloodstained note in my hand. It’s not really a note. It’s more like a slip of paper scribbled with a message written in blood from the goddamn Antichrist. But it’s the choice of verse that has me confused and scowling. It doesn’t fit the pattern compared to the others. Those had Biblical passages about prostitution and sex, and deception. But this one is different. It doesn’t fit the mold. It’s like it’s a message, a warning.

I shake my head. “Something isn’t right,” I mutter.

“No shit, brother.” Nicoli plops down next to me, sighing heavily. “We have a serial killer who just killed our brother’s girlfriend, and you think something isn’t right?”

“I’m serious.”

“I’d be worried if you weren’t. This entire situation is unfathomably fucked.”

Maximo takes the letter from me, reading it silently at first, then out loud

as he paces. “Be sober. Be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, is a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking who he may devour.” He stops and turns to face me. “You’re right. This verse is different. It’s a warning.”

Nicoli scowls. “Everything here is a fucking warning. Melanie’s mutilated corpse is a motherfucking warning, and we are nowhere close to finding this bastard. And the worst part, the part that creeps me out the most, we could cross this bastard in the street and not know it.”

A feeling of dread rises in my chest, and I clench my fists to get rid of the crawling sensation on my skin. Jolts of static run down my spine with warning, so I get up and start walking around the living room. I need to focus, concentrate, and get my head straight so we can start figuring shit out. “We’re missing something.”

“Yeah,” Nicoli replies dryly. “His fucking name so we can find him and cut his heart out.”

“Whoever this guy is, he’s toying with us.”

Maximo leans against the wall, still staring at the note in his hand. “He’s watching us. He’s watching all of us. The fact that he knew where Melanie lived and when Isaia wouldn’t be here.”

“Yeah.” I pull my hand through my hair. “And Isaia has practically been living here the last few weeks, so this fucker had to have had a close eye on him to know when he’ll catch Melanie alone.”

“How did he get in here, though?” Maximo pushes himself off the wall. “How did he get past security?”

“The only way he could get past security without signing in is...” And like a goddamn punch to the face, a thought catapults into my head, and I jerk around to face him. “He lives here. He’s a goddamn tenant in this apartment building.”

“I’m on it.” Maximo is already out the door by the time Nicoli gets on his feet.

“If he stayed here, I can guarantee this fucker ain’t that stupid to use his real name.”

“I know.” I sigh. “But at least it’s something. And all we can hope for is that somehow, somewhere, he left us a goddamn breadcrumb.”

Not having any leads, any idea who he is, that’s what’s been eating at me the most. It’s the fact that this fucker is outsmarting us on our own goddamn turf, our fucking city. Not knowing has me on a razor-sharp edge, and we’re no closer to finding him than we were since the first murder. As Nicoli said,

he could walk past me on the street, and I wouldn't know. He could be the goddamn waiter at the restaurant where Mira and Leandra are having their lunch right now, and no one would fucking know.

Fuck.

I pull out my phone and dial Leandra's number, and I'm holding my breath the entire time the phone rings, finally exhaling when I hear her voice. "Alexius?"

"Are you still at the restaurant?" I ask, rubbing my fingers along my forehead.

"No. Um...Mira and I sort of changed our plans."

I freeze. "You what?"

"Well, technically, we didn't change them. We just took a little detour on our way home from the restaurant."

"Where are you?" I bite out.

"I'll talk to you when you get home tonight."

"Leandra, tell me where you are."

"I have to go. I love you."

"Fuck!" I shout into the receiver, the engaged tone resonating in my ear.

"Where are they?" Nicoli asks.

I swipe my finger across my phone's screen and click on the tracker. "I don't know, but I'm about to find out."

"We have a problem." I glance up, and Maximo is standing by the door with an envelope in his hand. "This was left for you at reception."

"By who?" I stomp up to him and grab the envelope.

"A man who goes by the name Micah."

"Micah?" Nicoli repeats. "Do we know a Micah?"

My breath hitches in my chest, and my heart races as I rip open the envelope. The paper is rough against my fingertips as I pull it from the envelope and open it. It's crinkled like someone had dug it out of a trash can. Somehow, I know it's him even before I read the words written with blue ink in elegant calligraphy.

Brothers,

It is time to gather at our Father's house. To rid your lives of evil for good. As the Word teaches us in Matthew 5, verse 30, 'And if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not thy whole body go into hell.'

I've gone to the house of our Father to cut the member from your lives. But do not dwell; she will repent and be forgiven. Only then will she be gifted eternal life.

“Leandra,” I whisper, adrenaline flooding my system, flashes of her face, her smile bombarding my mind, terror squeezing the air from my lungs. “He’s going after Leandra.”

“Where?” Maximo’s eyes are wild as he waits for me to sort through my thoughts, to get the goddamn words out.

“His father’s house,” I murmur before looking up at him. “Our father’s house.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

LEANDRA

“**Y**ou are definitely pregnant.”

The doctor’s voice disappears into the background, and I no longer notice the smell of alcohol and antiseptic that made my stomach turn when I walked in here earlier. My mind is utterly consumed by the image on the screen. I try to move, leaning my head to the side to look closer, focusing and taking in every detail. The doctor is pointing and explaining what I’m looking at, but all I can see is this black and white foggy image. Somewhere in the middle is a black bubble with a tiny shape inside, a little pulsating blip. The baby’s heartbeat.

It’s a life. A tiny little life whose heart is beating inside me.

“Would you look at that.” The doctor inches closer to the monitor, and I watch him as he pushes his glasses farther up his nose.

“What is it?” I glance back at the screen as he circles an area with his finger.

“It looks like you’ll be having twins.”

“What?”

“That definitely looks like a second amniotic sac. Do you have twins in your family?”

“Um...my husband. He has a twin brother.”

“Let’s see if we can hear that second heartbeat.” He gently moves the ultrasound probe inside me, focusing intently on the screen. The discomfort I felt two minutes ago when he slid the probe into me is long gone, replaced with a fusion of nerves, anxiety, and a dash of ‘what-the-fuck-is-happening.’”

Suddenly the heartbeat we hear through the speaker sounds different. More erratic.

“There it is.” The doctor smiles.

“There’s what?”

“The second heartbeat.”

I swallow hard. “A second one?”

“Yes. A second one.” He smiles at me, then eases the probe from between my legs and discreetly drapes the white sheet over my knees. “Congratulations, Mrs.,” he glances at the name on the top of my file, “Dinali.” That was Mira’s idea, using my maiden surname to avoid the raised eyebrows when you mention the Del Rossa name.

“I’ll need to see you again when you’re at twelve or thirteen weeks. I’ll arrange with my receptionist to schedule a date for you.”

I prop myself up on my elbows. “Twins?”

The doctor chuckles. “It’s a shock, I know. But yes. It looks like you’ll be having twins.” The latex gloves snap as he pulls them off, discarding them in the metal bin, and I’m still choking on a breath when he leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

I lie back down and stare up at the ceiling. “Twins,” I whisper, saying the words like I have no concept of what it means.

There’s a light knock on the door. “Can I come in?”

“Um, yeah, Mira. Come on in.” I sit up and dangle my legs down the side of the bed when she walks in, her eyes beaming with curious excitement.

“I saw the doctor leave. How did it go? Are you pregnant?”

I’m still stunned, brushing my hair out of my face, leaning my head to the side as I stare down at my feet. My mind is struggling to digest what the doctor just said, and Mira is staring like she’s two seconds away from choking the words out of me.

“Leandra, what did the doctor say?”

“I...um...” I look at her but then glance to the side. “I’m...I’m pregnant.” My gaze meets hers. “With twins.”

Mira’s eyes widen in shock, and her palm is on her chest as she sucks in a breath. “Twins?”

I nod.

“Twins?” she reiterates, taking a step closer.

“That’s what the doctor said. Twins.” The words are coming out of my mouth, but I’m not sure what the hell it is I’m saying. It’s as if my mind isn’t able to digest it, to make sense of it. Twenty minutes ago, when I walked in here, I was still struggling with the idea of being pregnant, of having a child.

Now I'm facing the reality that I'm not just pregnant with one, but two lives are growing inside me. Two.

"Two," I repeat my own thoughts. "I'm having two babies."

"Oh, my God." Mira gasps. "There's two?"

My stomach turns, and a wave of nausea crashes in my chest, forcing bile up my throat. I'm off the bed and barely make it to grab the trash can, my back arching as I vomit into it. Mira rushes to my side and grabs my hair, holding it out of my face while I retch and gag. The taste is horrid, the thick stench clinging to my nostrils. It keeps on coming until my stomach is empty, the queasiness torturing me with more dry-heaving.

"Here." Mira hands me a box of tissues, and I grab a handful, wiping my mouth. "You okay?"

"No," I croak out. "I'm not okay." And then this veil of emotion drops over me, tears just pouring out of me. "I'm not ready to be a mother. I can't...I can't be a mom. Not now. How could I be so stupid? How could I let this happen?"

"Leandra, calm down."

"No." I cry, sitting down on the floor, clutching the sheet, and grabbing more tissues while it feels like my entire life is three seconds away from imploding. I'm sobbing so hard I can't catch my breath. "I can't do this, Mira. It's not in me. I...I have no idea what a good mother is supposed to be like. My mom was a drug addict, a selfish, narcissistic bitch who was incapable of loving her own daughter."

"Lee—"

"And my father." I gasp for breath between tears. "He's a monster who wanted to groom his own daughter to become a whore so he could get more money to buy drugs. Don't you see?" I look up through tear-filled eyes at Mira's pained expression. "My mom and dad were both fucked up parents and human beings. It's in my blood."

"What?" Mira wipes a tear slipping down her cheek. "What's in your blood?"

"To be a fucked-up parent. To be a horrible mom."

"Dear God, no. No, Leandra." Mira grabs my shoulders and pulls me close, trying to console me while I sob into her lilac blouse. "Just because you had shitty parents doesn't mean you'll be a shitty mom. Listen to me." She leans back and wipes hair out of my face. "After everything you went through as a child, all the pain and neglect you suffered, that will only make

you stronger. More determined to be the best mother you can be.”

“What if I can’t do it?” Tears lap past my lips, the saltiness of my fear spreading on my tongue. “What if I’m too damaged to raise a child?”

“You, Leandra Del Rossa, are not damaged. Do not give them that much power over you. Do not let your past and your fucked-up parents destroy what can be the most beautiful thing that’s ever happened to you. Do you understand me? They took enough from you and do not get to take this from you, too.”

“I’m scared, Mira.” My voice cracks, and my hand snakes as I wipe tears from my face. “I’m so scared.”

“I know. I’d be worried if you weren’t. This is huge. This is a big deal and a lot to take in. But you’re not alone. You won’t ever be alone in this. You have Alexius who adores you, who will do anything for you and your children.” She shrugs with a half-smile. “And you have me. When you need me, I’ll be there. And I will be the best aunt these babies could ever ask for.”

I smile through the tears.

“Oh, my God. Can you imagine the size of these kids’ wardrobes with an aunt like me?”

A snicker fills the tremor of my whimpers.

Mira gently tucks a curl behind my ear. “You and Alexius are going to hate me because I’m going to spoil these kids rotten during the day so their naughty little asses can keep the two of you up at night and make you miserable. And just so you know, I’m not cleaning poop diapers. Wiping drool is where I draw the line.”

I laugh, and she joins in, only for me to start crying again mid-laugh. “Twins. That means double poop.”

“Ah, sweaty,” she chuckles as she pulls me in for another hug, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “Now, that’s something I’d definitely cry about.”

“Mira!”

Her hearty laughter rings in my ears, weaving a sense of calm through the whirlpool of emotions I’m struggling to keep under control. Mira has become one of the most important people in my life, and I have no idea what I would have done without her.

Leaning back, I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hand. “Thank you,” I whimper.

“Of course. You’re the sister I never had. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do

for you. Alexius, too. He can be an ass at the best of times, but he's my brother. All of them are. Now, come on." She stands and helps me to my feet. "You need to get dressed, and I need to go get you some gum or something for your vomit breath."

"That would be great."

Mira waves in front of her face, grimacing. "Yeah, I'll get the extra minty flavor. I'll wait for you in the foyer by the kiosk."

I nod and watch her walk out, sucking in a breath when I hear the latch of the door click in place. After getting dressed, I glance at my reflection in the small, square mirror placed against the back of the door. My eyes are red and puffy, and my cheeks flushed. I look like shit and not at all like the radiant, expecting mothers who, while we waited, left the doctor's office beaming with excitement, rubbing their growing bellies with eager palms.

My hand shakes as I place it on my stomach. It's hard to wrap my head around it, to think that there's life growing inside me, life Alexius and I created. I'll have to tell him, and the thought alone terrifies me. I have no idea what to expect once I tell him, how he'll react. Will he blame me? Will he see this pregnancy as an inconvenience rather than a blessing? God, I don't know. And I have no idea how or when I'll have the courage to tell him.

I pull on my jacket and flick my hair from under the collar, squaring my shoulders before walking out. I'm trying not to look at all the expectant mothers as I wait at reception to schedule my next appointment. Looking at the joy on their faces only makes me feel guilty for not experiencing the same excitement.

Maybe Alexius will come with me next time I'm here.

I'm pacing up and down in the foyer of the medical center, waiting for Mira. I've already been to the kiosk searching for her, but the cashier confirmed that a woman matching Mira's description was already there earlier. The Audi is still parked outside, so I guess she must have gone to the ladies' room while waiting for me, touching up her make-up and giving her lips a fresh layer of red.

It's twenty minutes later and I've checked the ladies' room, tried her phone six times, only to get her voicemail. I also noticed the missed calls from Alexius, but I just can't bring myself to call him back, knowing I'll have to tell him the truth sooner or later. Right now, I'm choosing later.

Unease starts to creep along the back of my neck. The patter of feet on the smooth floors and the muffled conversations of people eating lunch at the

kiosk's coffee shop all work together to drive this unsettled feeling down my spine. Mira wouldn't wander off somewhere without at least sending me a text, so I walk back to the Audi and try her phone again while keeping an eye out. "Mira, where the hell are you? I'm worried," I say into the receiver when I get her voicemail again. There is no sign of her anywhere, and I'm about to call Alexius when Maximo's Hummer and Nicoli's LaFerrari screech to a stop behind the Audi.

Alexius is out of the car before Nicoli can cut the engine, his eyes alert and face painted with worry. "Jesus. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I glance from his wild eyes to Maximo's worried expression. "What's going on?"

Worry lines form grooves on his forehead, and storm clouds gather in the depths of his irises. The overcast sky traces his outline, and I don't think I've seen Alexius look so anxious before.

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Yes. Really, I'm fine. I just can't find Mira." I scan the area around us, and Alexius grabs my wrist.

"What do you mean, you can't find Mira?"

"I just...I can't find her. She was supposed to wait for me in the foyer, but she's not there."

"She's gone?" Nicoli slams the door of his car. "Where is she?"

"I don't know. I tried calling her, but I'm only getting her voicemail."

"Leandra," he storms toward me, "where the fuck is Mira?" His voice booms through the parking lot, his anger seemingly aimed at me and sending chills up my arms. "Where is she?"

"Hey, lay off." Alexius shoves Nicoli back. "She said she doesn't know."

"Fuck!" Nicoli kicks at the Audi's tires, steaming, his breaths coming out in short pants between curses. I've never seen him this enraged, this unhinged before, and it's stirring up a panic that's slowly starting to squeeze my lungs, robbing me of air.

Maximo is on his phone, pacing and cursing for Mira to pick up, and the more I look at the three of them, the more I can feel that something is very, very wrong.

"Alexius." I inch closer to him, still keeping my eyes on Maximo. "You're all scaring me. What's going on?"

"Voicemail. Fuck!" Maximo curses, and Nicoli drops an entire alphabet of f-bombs as he plucks out his phone and tries calling her as if he might

have better luck. But he doesn't, and his cell phone pays the price by getting catapulted to the sidewalk, scattering in a thousand pieces against the curb. "Where the fuck is she?"

"It's not Leandra." Alexius crouches, and I watch him pick up a stick of gum from the ground, straightening. "It's Mira," he mutters—Nicoli and Maximo turning their attention to him as he glances at them. "He has Mirabella."

Chapter Twenty-Three

ALEXIUS

“What is going on?” Leandra’s knuckles turn white as she clutches the bar on the passenger side door. I take a sharp turn, the tires of the Audi skidding across the asphalt, screaming as I take the corner. “You’re scaring me, Alexius.”

“I just need to get you home. Make sure you’re safe.”

“Safe from what?”

I ram the brakes and take another turn, then floor the gas pedal, speeding down the streets, weaving in and out of traffic. “He’s taken Mirabella.”

“Who? Who’s taken her?”

“This fucking psychopath.”

“What psychopath? Alexius, you’re not making any sense.”

“None of this makes fucking sense!” I slam my hand against the steering wheel, anger liquifying in my veins, poisoning me to want to destroy fucking everything in my path. “I don’t know who he is, how he’s managed to do everything he’s done.”

“What are you talking about?” She grabs my arm, but I jerk free from her grasp.

“I was sure it was you when I read his letter.”

“What letter? Alexius, slow down. You’re scaring me.”

“I need to get you home. Make sure you’re safe.”

“Driving like this won’t get me or you home safely. Please slow down.”

I ignore her plea, fueled by the adrenaline flooding my system and the need to get Leandra to safety. There’s no time to explain, no time to slow down. Mira is gone, and we have no fucking idea where even to start looking.

“What did Mira say, exactly?” I ask without looking at Leandra.

“I don’t...I can’t...”

“Leandra, think!” Jesus fucking Christ, my head is spinning, and I can’t stop it. It’s so loud, the angry rush of blood thumping in my ears. Everything is a mess, and I’m trying to figure a way out of it with little to zero clues. Nothing this fucker wrote in that letter makes sense.

“Mira, what did she say?” I quickly glance at Leandra before focusing my attention back on the road, the street lights blurred with the heavy rain coming down as if the Heavens had been torn open. “Where did she go to? Why weren’t you together?”

“We were at the doctor’s office, and I threw up, so Mira told me she’d go buy me some gum and that she’d wait for me in the—”

“Wait for you where?” My voice ricochets in the tiny space. My anger isn’t helping the situation, but we’re racing against time. “Wait for you where, Leandra?” I try to lower my tone this time.

“The foyer. She told me she’d wait for me in the foyer.” There’s panic in her voice. She’s nervous and breathing erratically. With a glance, I notice her shaking, tears running down her face. Fuck.

“Wait.” I narrow my eyes, my gaze flicking between her and the road. “Why were you at the doctor’s office? Are you sick?”

“No.” She shakes her head and wipes her nose with the back of her hand. “I’m fine.”

“Then why were you throwing up? What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Nothing is going—”

“What are you not telling me?” I take the last turn, and we’re finally on the long-ass road that leads straight to the estate.

“It’s nothing, okay? Let’s just find Mira. Then we can talk.”

“Leandra!” I snap, and she visibly jolts in her seat. “What the fuck is going on? What are you not telling me?”

“I’m pregnant!” she yells, and every thought in my head screeches to a fucking halt.

“You’re pregnant?”

“Yes, Alexius. Yes.” Her brows curve, and tears drip from her lashes. “I’m pregnant. That’s why Mira took me to the doctor, to make one-hundred-percent certain before I tell you.” She turns in her seat to face me, her cheeks flushed and lips curled as she whimpers. “I’m so sorry, Alexius. I didn’t mean for this to happen. I’ve taken my birth control every goddamn day. You know that. And I...I don’t know how this happened. I’m so sorry.”

I stomp on the brakes, the stench of burnt rubber instantly filling the air. The sudden silence between us is heavy enough to make me hold my breath, and the only sound is the pitter-patter of raindrops on the windshield, my secret betrayal ringing in the back of my head as my mind replays the words she just said.

A tear slips onto her cheek, and it's like a goddamn slap in the face, jerking me out of the panicked haze I've been in ever since I read that goddamn letter, going fucking crazy trying to find Leandra while I had the image Melanie's mutilated body fresh in my head.

I reach out and catch the tear as it laps from her cheek, the skin of my finger absorbing the moisture. My heart breaks a little witnessing the guilt she has no right feeling. "Get out of the car."

Her dark brows arch in confusion. "What?"

"Get out of the car," I order and open my door, slipping out into the rain. My expensive suit is being ruined one raindrop at a time, but I don't give a flying fuck because there is only one thing that matters to me—one thing I care about, and that's her. My wife. The woman who made me realize I *do* have a heart capable of loving, a heart that bleeds only for her.

Rain splashes around my feet as I rush around the front of the car, reaching her before she even manages to stand straight.

I cup her face as I step up close. Her beautiful face is a stunning sight as rain rivulets mix with her tears. "You listen to me, and listen good. You don't apologize for this," I say, brushing my thumb across her wet lips. "I told you right at the beginning, a Del Rossa never apologizes. Jesus, Leandra, especially not for this." I lower a hand to her belly, still keeping her gaze captive with mine as I press my lips together to get rid of the rain that lingers there. "You did nothing wrong. Why, in the name of everything holy, would you feel you need to apologize for being pregnant?"

"I don't know," she whimpers, her voice shaking, her expression nothing but delicate lines of uncertainty. "I wasn't sure...I didn't know how you'd react. And I didn't want you to think—"

"Think what? That you being pregnant is the best news I've gotten in a really long time?"

"I didn't want you to—"

I crash my mouth to hers in a fiery kiss, my tongue pushing past the barrier of her wet lips. She tastes of rain and mint and the sweetest fucking honey that soothes my soul in ways I never knew possible. Her lips are

dynamite and silk all at once, and I pour everything I have into that one damn kiss because I have no words. I don't know how to say what I'm feeling, so I kiss her, hoping it will tell her exactly what it is I need her to know.

That I love her.

That she's my world.

That she's not just the air I breathe, but the life that courses through my veins.

She's my everything and all the tiny little pieces in between.

A groan echoes from my throat as I deepen the kiss. I hate that she's crying, but I relish the taste of her tears. Her uncertainty in my devotion to her is venom in my veins, but I savor her vulnerability because it proves that I haven't completely ruined her innocence. That I haven't corrupted her gentle soul, and I now know it's the one thing I need to protect. To cherish.

I reluctantly pull away with a moan, leaning my forehead against hers. "You make me happy," I whisper, rain lapping down the sides of our faces. "Happier than a man like me deserves."

"I wasn't sure how you'd—"

I kiss her again, drowning her words with a hard kiss before inching back. "Erase those doubts, Leandra. They have no merit, no right to occupy your thoughts when it comes to me. Never doubt my feelings for you. Ever."

She nods, sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, shivering, and I brush away the wet hair clinging to her cheeks. "I'm going to take you home, and I need you to go to my parents' room. Make sure you lock yourself and my mother in. Understand?"

Light, earth-brown irises plead under stormy skies. "Alexius, please tell me what is going on."

"I will. I promise. But right now, there's no time. We have to find Mirabella."

"Is she in danger? Does this have to do with the murder at Myth?"

I balk. "How do you know about the murder?"

"Mira told me she overheard your brothers talk about it, but we weren't sure. Is Mira in danger, Alexius?"

"Get in the car." I open her door and scan the area around us, placing a hand on the small of her back as I urge her to get in. The rain is coming down strong, drops exploding in each direction as I slam the car door and run to get in behind the wheel. "Remember," I say when I rev the engine. "When we get to the estate, you go to my parents' room. Lock the door."

“I wish you’ll tell me what’s going on.”

“I will. I promise. We just need to find Mira first.”

The iron gates open as we drive up. It’s raining so hard the wipers struggle to keep up, water splashing from the car’s side fenders as I speed down the driveway. “In my dad’s closet, you’ll find some crates with old newspaper articles. Behind it is a bottle of whiskey with a dark brown wooden case next to it.” I glance at her. “There’s a gun inside. I need you to take it out and keep it, just in case.”

Her eyes widen, fear overshadowing their amber hues. She seems frozen, not even fucking blinking.

“Leandra!” I snap, stopping the car in front of the house. “Did you hear me? The gun. It’s in my father’s...” A wrecking ball slams into my gut, realization slicing through my mind with a sharp-edged blade.

It is time to gather at our Father’s house.

I’ve gone to the house of our Father to cut the member from your lives. But do not dwell; she will repent and be forgiven.

The Lord will deliver you all from evil, and I will be His Instrument. I am, after all...your brother.”

“Jesus Christ.” I hold my breath, my heartbeat echoing between my ears as the words of those letters slowly start to create a picture. “He said our father’s house.”

“What? Who?” Leandra touches my hand. “What are you talking about.”

“He wasn’t talking about God. He was talking about our father. Literally, our father. Our father’s house.” I climb out of the car and stare up at the two-story mansion. “My father’s house. I am your brother,” I mumble, the words repeating over and over in my head, but it doesn’t make sense. We all assumed he meant it in a religious sense, not actual brother. But what if...

Memories of the night my father asked me to arrange their anniversary party play out in my head. I remember how conflicted he was, how he seemed to wallow in the past, saying that his time for making things right had passed. He was sad. Almost hopeless with a regret I didn't understand.

“When you're a dying man like I am, you start to think of all the things you would have done differently. The things you wish you could go back and change.”

“All the money in the world can't cure me or prolong my life. And power? What is power when death can erase you with a mere snap of its fingers? There's only one thing that matters, Alexius, and I regret that it's taken me my whole life to realize...and that's family. Loved ones.”

“There is one decision I regret the most now...now that my life is coming to an end. One wrong decision that pains me more than any amount of morphine or medicine can numb.”

“Alexius.” Leandra's touch jolts me out of my own head, the roar of engines slicing through the noise of rain pissing down onto the Earth. Nicoli and Maximo both leap from their vehicles, but I'm too distracted by the memories, as if my brain's sorting through all the puzzle pieces, trying to make it all fit.

“Micah. I've always wanted a son with the name Micah.”

Instantly the memories all slide together. “Nicoli!” I yell as my brother rushes up the stairs to the front door. “It's Micah.”

Nicoli stops and turns to face me. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Don’t you remember? The night Mom and Dad returned from their trip, the night of the party, Dad said he’s always wanted a son named Micah. That it would make a good name for an heir.”

Nicoli frowns. “That can be a coincidence. Doesn’t mean it’s tied to this.”

“I know. But right now, it’s the only fucking breadcrumbs we have. Go find Mom, make sure she’s safe.” I turn to Maximo. “We need to search the house. Every room, every corner, every goddamn fucking crack in the wall. Now.”

“There is no way he’d be able to get past security. Security is all over. It might as well be the fucking Whitehouse.”

“I don’t care. Just do it.”

Maximo and Nicoli rush into the house, and I grab Leandra’s hand. “Change of plans.”

“What?”

“I’m not taking you in there. Not if there’s a chance he could be in the house.”

“What about Mira? And where’s Caelian? Isaia?”

“Isaia is with Caelian. They’re safe. Right now, I have to get you safe.”

“And Mira? We have to find her, Alexius. If she’s in danger, we have to do something.”

“And we will.” I grip her arms. “I promise I’ll find her, but first, I need to take you to a safe place. Please. Just get back in the car. I know where to take you, where you’ll be safe.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “This is dangerous. I’m not leaving you.”

“Leandra, get in the motherfucking car!” I yank her arm and force her into the car. There’s no time to debate, no time to stand around and argue. If this psychopath has Mirabella, every damn second counts if we want half a chance at finding her alive.

I rev the engine, images of Melanie’s corpse bombarding my mind, praying to God we don’t find Mirabella like that.

I put the car in reverse, swerve to the side, and speed back down the driveway, my heart beating like fucking crazy with a fresh surge of adrenaline every goddamn five seconds.

“Where are you taking me?”

“The mausoleum. It’s the safest place for you right now.”

“You’re taking me to the family graveyard?”

“It’s safe. That place is a fucking fortress. No one will get in there.”

“Okay, but why are you driving off the estate?”

“It’s quicker around the outside and to go through the back gates. I can’t exactly speed down a cobbled path now, can I?”

The faint sound of Leandra sniffing filters through the rush between my ears, and I glance at her staring worriedly out the window before taking her hand, squeezing it tight. “I’ll keep you and the baby safe. I promise.”

“Babies,” she whispers so softly, it’s almost inaudible.

“What did you say?”

Her gaze meets mine, swirls of amber glistening. “Babies. Twins.”

My breath hitches as I snap my gaze to her. “Twins?”

“The doctor seems to…” She stills, distracted, narrowing her eyes as she looks straight ahead. “Should the back gates be open?”

“Definitely not.” I park the car by the open gates, warning prickling the back of my skull. “Stay in the car.”

“Alexius.”

“Stay,” I order. “Call Maximo. Tell him to get his ass here now.”

I get out of the car, every bone in my body crawling with caution with each slow step I take. Blood rushes through my chest when I see the open door past the four gray columns of the mausoleum. Everything about this is wrong. The open gates. The open door. He’s here. I can feel it in the heavy air that thickens the closer I get.

Thunder claps, and there’s an angered echo of rumbling as rain pelts against my face like needles. Shielding my eyes with my hand, I look up, rain coming down in sheets, the wind whisking it into a frenzied storm. I’m drenched when I reach the mausoleum, my clothes sticking to my skin and hair clinging to my face.

I reach for my gun at my side, alert, and my every step is slow and calculated as I enter through the door. My heart stops when I see her, life draining from my chest.

“Mirabella.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

ALEXIUS

The day we learned about my father's diagnosis was the first time in my life that I experienced genuine fear—the kind that not only grips your stomach and floods your system, it takes control of your entire existence. The kind that possesses your body and consumes your mind, wrapping around your past, your present, your future, and squeezes until it's all distorted. Unrecognizable.

Today, right this very moment, is the second time that unbidden fear torrents through my veins like poison aimed at my lungs to steal my breath.

On one of the royal blue benches placed in the middle is Mira, sitting with her legs on either side of the rectangular velvet seat, her ankles tied to the oak eagle-clawed feet. Her green irises are amplified with fear, her rapid blinking a desperate attempt at blocking out the world around her. I can practically smell the panic, the terror. It's thick and viscous, lining my throat as I swallow.

Her red lipstick is smeared far beyond the lines of her heart-shaped lips. Mascara streaks cling to her face below her eyes, every tear spreading the black lines farther down her cheeks. Her fear manifests in desperate whimpers muffled by the cloth stuffed in her mouth, and my first instinct is to run to her. To help her. But the man sitting behind her presses his knife harder against her throat, burying the blade deep enough to bite into her skin, a drop of crimson tainting the steel.

“That's close enough.”

My attention snaps to the man, and I jerk my aim straight in front of me. “Let her go.”

The man snickers, his dark, uneven brows arching as he watches me with

malevolent brown eyes, and I immediately recognize his face. “You’re the groundsman. You were at my father’s funeral.”

“Our father’s funeral.” There’s hostility in his voice, a hate that resonates in the way he glares at me, his unkempt beard moving as his jaw tics. “I’ve been waiting a really long time to be able to introduce myself,” he says, still keeping the blade against Mira’s throat. “My name is Micah Gallo, but—”

“I don’t care if you’re the real baby Jesus. Right now, all I want is for you to let her go and then we can talk about who’s who.”

“My name,” he enunciates his words, “is Micah Vincent Del Rossa.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Let her go, then we talk.”

There’s a surprise in his eyes as he frowns. My guess is it’s because I don’t react to the mention of my last name, and that’s because I don’t fucking care. All I care about is getting Mira safely away from him and cutting his eyes out before I shove a cross up his ass, followed by a bullet to the skull. *Fucker.*

“Let her go.”

“That’s not going to happen, brother.”

“I’m not your brother,” I spit out. “Now let her fucking go.”

His legs are on either side of the bench as well, and he’s pulling Mira back against him, using her as a shield. The stained mosaic window that stretches from floor to ceiling behind them scatters light against the granite crypts. The rain outside is no longer an angry downpour and now falls with a gentle patter against the ornate glass.

“No.” He tightens his grip on the knife, and Mira whimpers. “I think I’d like to keep her here for a while longer.” His voice is eerily calm as he leans his head to the side, studying her face while the knife glints in the light, a sharp and lethal contrast to the skin of Mira’s delicate throat. “It’s beauty like hers that leads so many sheep astray,” he says as if he’s in awe of her, his gaze melting over her features. “Even me.” He inches closer, his cheek against hers, his face painted in ecstasy. It’s fucking creepy, and I can already feel the bones of his skull crack under the pressure and sharp blade of his own damn knife as I drive it through his goddamn face.

“Let her go.” I take a step closer, but he notices and nicks Mira’s skin with the tip of the blade, another drop of red collecting on the sharp steel. Mira pinches her eyes closed, more tears running down her face.

“Take another step, and I’ll make sure it goes deeper this time.” His threat reaches the hairs in the back of my neck, panic gushing down my spine.

“Hurt her again, and I’ll kill you.”

“You think I’m afraid of dying?” He frowns. “When my life on this Earth ends, my eternal life in Heaven begins.”

“You really think your psychotic ass is going to Heaven? There are special places in hell for sick fuckers like you.”

“That’s always been your problem, hasn’t it? Even though I’m the one sitting here with the knife against her throat, one flick of my wrist away from ending her life, you think you control the narrative here.”

“The way I see it, there are two ways this can play out. You let her go, and I’ll decide whether to kill you or have you dumped in some psych jail where you’ll get your ass wrecked within the first three hours. Or you kill her, and I kill you. So, either way, you’re fucked, and that means I am the asshole in control here.”

“No,” he says calmly. “You’re not. You see, this confidence of yours stems from a lie you’ve been told your whole life. A lie you’ve been living.”

“And what lie is that?”

“That you’re the firstborn Del Rossa. The true heir to this empire, when the truth is...you’re not.” A menacing grin curves at the edges of his mouth. “I am.”

“You’re not a Del Rossa,” I snap. “A true Del Rossa doesn’t harm his own, and Mira is one of us.”

His lips curl down as he feigns confusion. “What about Jimmy, then?”

Blood rushes to my chest. “What the fuck do you know about Jimmy?”

“I know that you killed him.”

“You don’t know shit.”

He scoffs. “I know you put a bullet in his head and had Maximo get rid of his body like a slaughtered pig with rotten meat. I’ve also taken it upon myself to inform your uncle of your transgression.” He smiles with vindictive victory. “He should receive the letter any moment now.”

“You motherfucker,” I say between clenched teeth.

“See? I’ve had my eyes on you for a very long time, brother.”

“I’m not your fucking brother!”

“The blood in our veins says otherwise.”

I glance at Mira. Her bottom lip trembles, her chest rising and falling rapidly as her breath comes out in gasps around the dirty cloth. The vein in her slender neck throbs to the erratic beat of her heart, sweat clinging to her brows. She’s so fucking scared, her eyes pleading with me to help her as she

tries to push back against Micah's shoulder, desperate to get away from the edge of the knife.

"Listen, Micah," I start, my finger settled on the gun's trigger, "I'm sure you have a lot of shit you want to talk about, and I'd love to listen to your story about how life fingered you in the ass. But I'd prefer doing it over a bottle of bourbon than having to talk to you over a crying woman's shoulder."

"I don't care what you prefer," he snarls. "Mirabella isn't here for me to use as collateral. She's here because she needs to repent."

"For what?"

"For being the reason men sin. For leading us astray."

Fuck me. His voice just went from calm to creepy as fuck. "God says if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee."

I raise a brow. "What the fuck does she have to do with your right hand?"

"It's her fault!" he snaps, spit exploding from his lips, and my stomach coils when he presses the knife harder against her throat. "For years, all I wanted was to show you the error of your ways. To save your—"

"Is that why you killed Alicia? Tarina?" I scowl. "Melanie? To make us aware of our sins? I got news for you, asshole. We already know. Unlike you, we don't go around pretending to be righteous when we know our paths to hell are already paved."

He cranks his neck from side to side, his face that of rapture as if the reminder of his handiwork just gave him a motherfucking hardon. "The scripture says the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her seductive words are smoother than olive oil—"

"I'd rather not get a scripture lesson from you right now."

"—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." He smiles. "And that's where I sent them. To their graves just like God told me to. But don't worry." The thumb of his other hand caresses Mira's cheek. "I gave them their chance to confess their sins and to ask for forgiveness."

I inch closer, my gaze cutting from him to Mira every few seconds. "Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Did you ask for forgiveness? Because I'm pretty sure murdering people is against whatever the fuck it is your religion teaches you."

He lets out a maniacal cackle. "It's for the greater good."

“Let’s pretend for one minute that I’m buying into this slaughtering women for the greater good bullshit. What the fuck did Mira do? She’s not one of them.”

The way he slides his hand to her jaw, his dirty fingernails dragging across her skin, it’s like a snake slithering up my spine. “She might not be a harlot, but she’s the hand that caused me to stumble,” he murmurs, dragging a finger over her bottom lip. “I still do every time I look at her. My mind becomes a snake pit of sin, and the serpent infects me with its evil.”

An image of him jerking off in our family graveyard while stalking Mira fills my mind, and I shudder at the thought. “You’re a sick man.”

“It’s because of her. She infects my soul with her beauty.”

Mira pinches her eyes closed, the sound of her muffled sobs urging me to hurry this shit up. But I don’t like how he looks at her, how his voice hums with lust every time he talks about her. It’s like she unhinges him, and that’s the last thing we need.

“Micah, brother,” I say with a moderate dash of sarcasm. “Tell me about this theory of yours that you and I are related.”

His attention snaps back to me, and there’s no missing the disdain in his eyes as he studies me. “Our father wasn’t a saint.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Before he married your mother, he got a woman pregnant.”

“Your mother?”

He nods. “But she wasn’t like him. She didn’t come from a wealthy family, so she didn’t stand a chance. Not even when she knocked on his door with a crying baby in her arms.” He hisses through his teeth. “Our father sent her away, and he bought her silence with a check every month for the last thirty-six years. He made no attempt to see me or be a part of my life. No birthday cards. Christmas cards. Nothing.”

“And now you choose to punish others for something he did?”

“At first, yes. I wanted him to suffer for denying me my birthright by destroying his life from the outside in. I could have lived here.” He waves his hand around before pointing the blade’s tip at me. “I could have been you. He robbed me of everything, and when I decided to infiltrate his life, getting this job here, I wanted to ruin his damn life.” A creepy-as-fuck smile settles on his face. “But then God intervened and gave me the justice I deserved, and our father paid for his sins.”

“His illness,” I mutter, unable to wrap my head around the level of

fucked-up this asshole really is.

His smirk reaches his eyes. “A life for a life. He ruined mine and then paid for it with his. He freed me, and I want you all to experience that freedom, which is why I took the lives of those women, women whose bodies you use to build your evil empire on.” He grinds his jaw, glaring at the side of Mira’s face like he’s about to rip into it. “Men are weak when it comes to women. Even Adam fell because he was seduced.” Mira visibly shivers as he drags the tip of the knife up to her temple, his nostrils flaring. “Women like her have the power to ruin a man, to let him fall from grace and rob him of any chance at eternal life.”

He’s shaking, angry, and I know I’m running out of time. Mira’s whimpers grow louder, her shoulders trembling, tears pouring down her pale face.

I straighten my arms, my finger firmly placed on the trigger. But she’s too close. I can’t risk taking a shot and hurting her.

A shadow by the window catches my eye, but I try to keep Micah’s attention on me. “Let her go, and we can sit here all day and talk about whatever the fuck it is you want to talk about.”

He ignores me, staring at Mira as if she’s the holy grail he needs to ruin. “I’ve committed a sin against my flesh by desiring her.” The tip of his knife presses against her temple. “She’s constantly in my head. She’s always there, tempting me, seducing me. She has to repent. She has to pay for her sins.”

“Micah, hurt her, and I swear to God, I will kill you fucking slowly.”

“I don’t fear pain,” he murmurs like he’s in a trance, a dream, the knife glistening against her delicate throat with deadly intent. “I only fear eternal damnation, and I will not let her be my Eve. I will not fall from grace as Adam did. No woman is worth that price, no matter how beautiful.” His jaw tightens, and he bites into his lower lip, crimson seeping from Mira’s skin as he drags the blade down the side of her face, slowly cutting her flesh. Mira’s muffled screams fill the mausoleum, slamming against granite, and I’m teetering on the edge of fucking madness.

“No!” I yell, blood gushing from the grotesque gash of his blade, cutting her from her temple, down the side of her cheek, to her jaw. She’s sobbing, screaming, her whole body shivering, and I want to run to her and kill this motherfucker, but the fear of what he might do next keeps my feet planted on the ground.

I bite my lip, a growl tearing from my throat. “I’m going to kill you, you

son of a bitch!”

Glass shatters. It's an explosion of colored shards as Nicoli breaks through it with a leap, jumping through the window, covering his face and hitting the ground, rolling. I take my chance, rush forward, and grab Mira's shoulder, forcing her down as I aim and pull the trigger without blinking.

The fucker jolts back on impact, falling on the bench and landing awkwardly on the floor. I have no idea how Nicoli got there so fast, but by the time I'm focusing on Mira, she's already untied and cradled in his arms, blood dripping down her face.

I pull off my jacket and hand it to Nicoli to place against her wound. Her sobs are the saddest sound I've ever heard, and it's slicing through my ribs as I watch a river of blood ooze from Micah's skull, seeping into the grout. Adrenaline is swooshing wildly inside my veins, throbbing inside my head as my mind tries to process what the fuck just happened.

Maximo comes running in, and he's at Mira's side, hugging her, studying her, making sure she's okay. I hear his curses as he examines the cut on her face. “Motherfucker! It was him?”

Maximo kicks at Micah's dead body, then spits on his corpse. “Fucker! I can't believe how close he got.”

“Alexius!” I turn to see Leandra rush toward me, but I grab and stop her from coming too close, not wanting her to see the bloody scene.

“Oh, my God.” She gasps. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I'm fine.” Her arms are around my neck, and she's squeezing me so hard I can feel her relief in my bones. “I was so worried about you.”

“I'm okay.” I grip her neck and kiss her head. “I'm good.”

“Mira?” Her hair whips around her face as she searches, a cry leaving her lips when she sees Mirabella crying into Nicoli's chest. “My God. Are you... is she...did he hurt her?”

“She's okay.” I breathe out and watch as she runs to Mira. “She's okay. Everyone is...okay,” I mutter, relief flooding my system with a violent wave. My legs go weak, and I take a seat on the bloodied bench, dragging a hand down my face, everyone's voices drifting farther and farther away as I sink into my mind, my thoughts dragging me into this dark abyss.

Time is frozen as I glance at Micah's dead body. I don't doubt that he told the truth. I believe him because now, in hindsight, the truth was there in my father's sad expression the night he spoke of his regret. It was all there, the pain and torment of making the wrong decisions. Micah's life story was

in my father's eyes, and the demons of his deception and desertion, of his lies, haunted him on his deathbed—stole his peace along with his last breath.

I rub my hands together, watching Micah's blood stain the floor of our family mausoleum. It's like my father's ghost is whispering in my ear, warning me, telling me that there are few lies that escape judgment for their deception by getting buried. Truth uncovers most, exposes and forces them into the light. But every so often there's a lie that rests in the grave only to be exhumed...like Micah. My father's lie. His secret that has now become ours.

"Nicoli," I call, and watch as he reluctantly leaves Mira's side as Leandra tends to her.

"You okay?" he asks, studying me.

"Yeah. I'm good. But that cut on your face will need stitches."

He touches the bleeding wound above his eyebrow. "I'm fine."

"Mira's good?"

"Yeah." I can hear the anger still vibrate in his tone. "I'm glad you saved her, but I wish I was the one to plant the lead in his head."

"It doesn't matter. It's done."

"You believe him?" Nicoli asks, glowering at Micah's body. "You think Dad was his father, too?"

"I do." I sigh heavily. "I do believe him."

Nicoli arches his brows. "I can't wrap my head around it. That Dad would —"

"Stop. We don't have to wrap our heads around it. We don't have to deal with this. It's done. It's over. I don't know why Dad made the decisions he did, but it's not up to us to question it now when he's no longer here to defend himself."

Nicoli narrows his eyes. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," I glance at Micah, "our father's lie stays here." I look back at Nicoli. "His secret will never set foot out of this grave. I believe that's what Dad would want. Otherwise, he would have told us. So, this is our last gift to our father, ensuring his secret will stay buried with him. Always."

"What about the others?"

We glance at Maximo, Leandra, and Mira, and I shrug. "I think we're all in agreement."

Everyone nods, and I hold out my hand to Nicoli. He glances at it, knowing it means a brother's bond will seal it, a force that can never be broken.

His shoulders move as he breathes in deep then shakes my hand. “Always.”

“Take the women home. Get Mira checked out. If Mom asks, you two were in a minor car accident. That’s it.”

Nicoli nods.

“Maximo and I will get this mess cleaned up,” I say, turning to look at Micah one more time. “He never existed until today. And now we’ll continue as if today never fucking happened.”

I find my wife’s gaze, and she gives me a warm smile that makes my heart swell. And as I watch her walk out with her arm around Mira’s waist, I remind myself how I felt during the time I thought Micah had taken her. The fear, the panic, the darkness that consumed me like a black hole that kept on growing, eating away at my insides. During those moments, I caught a glimpse of what my life would be without her, and I now know that I would cross the Devil if it meant keeping that from happening.

My lie? My deception? I pray that it will be buried with me when my time comes. I don’t care if it haunts me in the afterlife, as long as it doesn’t take her from me in this one.

Chapter Twenty-Five

LEANDRA

I'm awake when Alexius slips under the covers beside me. His warmth seeps through the satin of my nightgown, his breath warm on my neck. Strong, deft fingers slide along the curve of my hip, and he pulls my back flush against his chest. It's when he shifts, forcing his knees behind mine, and I wiggle my ass closer, that I feel his hard length.

The silence is calm, tranquil, almost dreamlike as if today never happened. As if my husband didn't kill a man and Mira didn't get hurt. Static currents tease my skin to life as his hand bunches up the fabric of my nightgown, easing the satin up my thigh, causing goosebumps to form on my legs.

The heavy musk of whiskey lingers on his breath as it wafts against the side of my neck. Expert fingers dance along the edge of my panties, drawing them to the side, and he rolls his hips, pressing himself against me, his cock thick and insistent as it slides along my naked ass. My body is fire and flames as I grind against him, arousal pooling between my legs, the tip of his cock spreading a bead of moisture across my skin that provokes the deep ache in my core.

He catches my panties around his thumb, his other fingers biting into my hip. As I move to meet his gentle thrusts, I moan and whimper with soft, panting breaths. His cock dips between my legs, his length brushing against my pussy lips, coating his cock with my lust.

"I need you," he whispers against my ear.

"I'm yours."

With a quick flick of his wrist, he has me on my back and moves on top of me, pulling the white nightgown over my head, tossing it to the ground

before hooking his fingers at the sides of my panties, forcing my thighs together and legs up in front of him as he slides them off.

His hands ease down my legs, my calves resting against his shoulders while the air around us grows thick with the scent of sex. It's when he palms my ass, spreading my slit open for him, that I suck in a breath, his gaze hot on my naked cunt. I can't get enough of watching him, witnessing how he looks at my bare pussy, how his eyes roam my naked body, his lips glistening with a feral hunger.

My knees bend as he forces them to the front, and he leans down, sliding his tongue through my slit, earning a desperate moan from my lips. Instant euphoria surges through my veins, lighting my body on fire as he licks my cunt and sucks my clit into his mouth, driving me insane. His tongue is soft, wet, and eager, tracing my pussy lips with the tip before dipping into my entrance as his fingers spread me wide open for him.

I'm writhing on the sheets, grabbing the pillow and clawing at the ends while his tongue drives me toward a climax. But just as I feel the first lick of an orgasm starting at my toes, he jerks my legs apart and pulls me downward.

His eyes are dark and beautiful, but there's a gentleness in his gaze that makes my heart swell as it rakes down my body, his sapphire irises burning with flames of blue. It's like he's seeing me for the first time, drinking me in, absorbing me with an intensity that strokes against every bone in my body. Shadows from the dim light dance across his chest, every muscle ripped and toned, his shoulders broad and frame majestic. Regal. Dominating.

His gaze takes mine captive, his lips glistening with my arousal, and he eases a fingertip along my bare pussy, sending electric waves up my core. I arch my back, my hands fisting the sheets when he finds my clit, gently stroking the nub, slowly working my body into a frenzy of sensation.

"Alexius," I moan, and he slides a finger inside me, curling it upward, finding the spot that makes my legs quiver. More whimpers roll off my lips, his finger moving in and out of me while his other hand teases my clit, increasing the pressure to set my body alight.

Release teeters at the edge of exploding when his touch is gone, leaving me empty and panting. He grabs my hips, lifting my ass off the bed and pulling me downward, my thighs clenched against his sides, his knees propped under me.

I bite my lip when I feel the velvety tip of his cock against my entrance, my body trembling with need.

“Take it,” he murmurs, his voice low and tone demanding. “If you want my cock, take it.”

I flex my hips, pushing down, and he’s inside me with one slick slide.

“That’s it, stray. Now move and take my cock the way you want it. I want to watch you come.”

I lick my lips with every moan as I roll my hips, taking him deeper, moving my waist downward before pushing back up, his cock slipping in and out. He watches me intently and doesn’t move an inch, allowing me to control how he enters me, his palms flush on my thighs.

The pressure builds, starting with a trickle spreading from my toes, up my knees and thighs, his cock hitting all the right spots. With every stroke, I feel him more, the way his length smooths against my inner walls, the tip of his dick reaching deep. I want to take it slow. I want to make it last as long as possible, to linger in this state of bliss forever. But the need for release is too strong, my body wound up too tight.

“You want to come?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know what to do. You know what I want.”

I nod. He wants me to scream for him. He always wants me to scream for him so he can hear my pleasure erupt.

“Oh, God,” I cry out, and arch my back off the bed, craning my neck as the orgasm washes over me, my body shaking as I clench around him. My mind is a maze of pleasure and ecstasy when he reaches out, wrapping his fingers around my throat, squeezing hard.

“Not God. Me,” he growls. “I control your body. I make you come. My cock. My body. My fucking everything. Not God.”

“You,” I whimper, and he slides on top of me, pushing so damn deep against my core that I shiver beneath him. His body is flush against mine, skin on skin, smooth and hot, gliding over me as he fucks me.

“Say you’re mine,” he rasps against my ear, his heavy breathing weaving through the silent shadows around us. “Say it.”

“I’m yours.”

His palm is on my belly as he continues to thrust. “God, the thought of my seed growing inside you, fuck, it drives me insane.” Harder and faster, he pumps in and out of me. “I’m inside you, a piece of me possessing your body. You’re mine now, in every way possible.”

His lips crash against mine, kissing me hard, his tongue invading my

mouth, lapping against mine, stirring a taste that is uniquely us. It's sweet and addictive, an exquisite tang of sin and pleasure that drives us to the brink of madness, craving more. Our bodies are intertwined as we move to a harmonious rhythm that is ours. It's never been like this. This deep, intense, more than just a physical fuck. It's more than just lust and desire. His groans fused with my moans has an echo of promise, one I feel dancing in my veins, filling my heart to a point where it might burst.

"I'm never letting you go," he growls between panting breaths, our bodies rocking harder, faster. "You're mine. The life growing inside you is mine. Nothing will ever change that. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I'm yours. Always."

"I'm going to fuck you every goddamn day, so you never forget." He pounds into me, slipping his hand from my belly to my hip, pressing down on the inside of my thigh to spread my pussy wider for him as he fucks me.

His pelvis grinds against my pubic bone, his cock stretching me, filling me to the brim, and I feel him grow thicker, harder inside me. We're both close, our bodies at war with the desire that consumes us.

I'm panting, his breaths hot against my collarbone, his shoulders flexing under my touch, his muscles taut and so fucking beautiful.

"Come for me, stray," he murmurs breathlessly. "Come with me."

I cry out as I come for the second time, the pleasure more intense, a mind-blowing crash of euphoria that grips every muscle, every bone, every molecule of my being. He continues to drive into me, hard and heavy, until I feel his cock pulse, pouring his cum inside me. Even at the peak of rapture, we move in sync, like we're made for each other. Own each other. Completely and undeniably consumed.

Sweat clings to our skin, and he stills on top of me, our bodies slick and exhausted, and he leans his forehead against mine, his eyes closed. "Today, for an hour, you were gone. I thought he had you. I thought I was going to lose you."

"You didn't." I weave my fingers through his hair.

"I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think." His words are a pained confession on his lips. "It was like the blood in my veins didn't know how to move. It was the most excruciating experience of my life, Leandra. And when I found you in that parking lot and realized he had taken Mira and not you, the relief was indescribable."

The weight in his voice presses down my chest, breaking my heart one

breath at a time.

He lifts his head, and his gaze settles on mine. “What kind of man does that make me? Being relieved that the fucker had taken the woman who is like a sister to me rather than my wife?”

“No. You can’t think like that.” I cup his cheeks in my palms. “You don’t have to feel guilty about something like that.”

“That’s the thing.” He traces a finger down the side of my face. “I don’t. I don’t feel guilty. Not one little bit. There is nothing I won’t do to make sure you’re safe. No life I wouldn’t trade for yours. And no line I wouldn’t cross to keep you.” His nose touches mine as he leans down. “You’re in my blood, stray. There are not enough hours in this lifetime to make you understand just how deep you run in my veins.”

My heart is bursting at the seams, feeling every word penetrate bone. I’m breathless and consumed by him, my soul overflowing with a kind of love gifted from the heavens with the strength to rule hell.

“I love you, Leandra,” he whispers. “Until death do us part.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

LEANDRA

It's been days, and no one has mentioned Micah or anything about that day. No one ever will. Everyone agreed that Mrs. Del Rossa would never know about Micah. All she had was the loving memories of her husband, and none of us wanted to take that from her. Revealing Alexius' father's secret now won't change anything. It won't correct the wrongs it caused. It will only inflict pain, something she has more than enough of grieving the love of her life.

A pact was made, and a secret was buried. It's ironic how father and son separated in life now joined in death. Micah's ghost will stay in that mausoleum forever, chained to the granite crypts, left to wallow with the dead. It's how it has to be, and everyone feels the same.

I'm on my way to Mira's room when her door opens, and she walks out with the doctor, smiling like she always does. "Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate you coming around."

"Of course. I will be back in a few days to check on you. For now, just keep the bandages dry."

"Is everything healing okay?" I ask, joining them.

"As well as expected," the doctor replies, straightening his sleeve. "It's going to leave a scar, but once the tissue has healed properly, see what the scar looks like, then we can talk about surgery to try to remove most or even all of it."

"That's good news. Right?" I touch Mira's elbow, and she smiles at me.

"It is. But let's see how the scar turns out first." Her voice is soft, but her pain resonates through. My heart breaks for her. Like it wasn't enough to be held hostage by a psychopath, she's now left with a scar as a reminder. Every

time she looks in the mirror, she's reminded of the ordeal she went through. I can't begin to imagine the level of fear she had to have experienced that day. When she told me what he said to her, how he blamed her beauty for his sickness, having her life teeter at the sharp edge of his knife, it sent chills down every bone in my body. My stomach still churns just thinking about it.

The doctor disappears around the corner, and I turn, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay? I know it's a dumb question, but I'm asking it anyway."

"I'm fine." She touches the bandage on her face. "It hardly hurts anymore."

"I'm not referring to that." I give her a half-smile. "I'm asking if *you're* okay. You. Not your scar."

Her chest rises as she takes a deep breath as if something as simple as breathing seems to exhaust her. "I am. It's just the um...the nights when I'm alone that my mind starts to work overtime, you know? But the doctor gave me something to help me sleep."

"That's good. Your mind needs to heal, too."

"Yeah. Have you seen Nicoli?" Her dark brown eyebrows curve. "I haven't seen him in a while."

I purse my lips. "No, I haven't. He hasn't been around much lately, has he?"

"No." The lines on her forehead are furrowed with worry. A little sadness. "I can't help feeling like he's avoiding me." She shrugs. "Well, more than usual. God, he's such an asshole for jumping through that damn window. He could have killed himself."

"Mira, he helped save your life by risking his. He could have hurt himself a lot worse than just a cut down his eye."

"I know he risked his life, and that's why he's an asshole." She glances up and down the hall, fidgeting with her fingers as she looks at me again. "The thought of something happening to him is far worse than the memories of what happened to me. My heart stops every time I think about it."

"Oh, Mira." I move in for a hug, wrapping my arms gently around her shoulders, gliding my hand down her silky blonde hair. "He's fine. Nicoli is fine, and so are you. That's all that matters. And I'm sure Nicoli's just been preoccupied with dealing with the aftermath of everything." I take a step back. "Alexius hasn't been around much either." I place my palms on my stomach. I've been doing it a lot lately, even when my thoughts aren't

occupied with babies and swollen bellies.

“You’re right.” Mira’s red lips curve at the edges. “The brothers do have a lot to take care of, I guess. Listen, I’m going to check on Alexius’ mom. I’ll see you at dinner?”

“Definitely.”

“Great.”

“Mira?” I call after her, and she stops to look my way. “I’m happy you’re okay. I would not survive this place without you.”

This time her smile does reach her eyes. “You would have been fine without me. I’m telling you, a time will come when you rule these ancient halls.” She holds her arms wide and twirls on her feet, chuckling. “It’ll happen. You’ll see. But my guess is you’ll be running after those two down here first.” She points at my belly and winks before strolling in the other direction.

Running after two kids? My God. I can’t even fathom the idea of two babies growing inside me. Thinking about them running down these halls one day is daunting, and I’d be the world’s greatest liar if I said it doesn’t scare the living shit out of me. After my total breakdown at the doctor, thinking I’d be the worst mother ever, and Mira trying to talk some sense into me, the doubt still lingers. At night, while I listen to Alexius’ rhythmic breathing next to me, staring at the moonlight sneaking through the tiny gap between the curtains, the panic would set in. My mind would race with thoughts of crying babies, dirty diapers, and the unbelievable knowledge of being responsible for a life. Two lives. Two babies utterly dependent on me as their mother, relying on me to keep them safe and to give them a life filled with love and joy, to give them the security I never had.

I want to be a good mother. But I’m so damn scared. What if my childhood, my mother, broke that part of me—the part where nature takes over, and motherhood would come naturally? What would I do then?

Panic slowly creeps in from my ribs to my lungs, and I inhale deeply, pushing the thoughts out of my head, reminding myself there’s time to adjust. Time to work through our family’s unplanned expansion and work on myself to ensure I be the best mom these babies could ask for.

I make my way down the stairs, headed to the dining room, when I find people walking in and out of the foyer, a giant Christmas tree placed in the center. There are people hanging ornaments and lights. Men trim the green branches to create the perfect shaped tree. The smell of freshly cut pine and

crisp nature paints a picture of snow, hot chocolate, and a warm fireplace. It makes me think of magic and presents, the gingerbread houses I saw in the windows of bakeries my mom and I would pass on our way to the store. Children would walk out with fancy pink and white striped cake boxes, the sweet, sugary smell of cake and cookie dough wafting from inside the bakery every time the door opened and closed.

At night when my parents were asleep, I'd lie awake and think about families opening presents with laughter and thankful hearts—images I've only ever seen in newspaper ads and movies. My dad didn't believe in holidays. He said it was an underhanded way to extort the human population into buying things they couldn't afford. Now I know it's because he'd rather use the money for drugs and whores than buy his only daughter a gingerbread house with a roof decorated with round candy wafers and square gum pieces.

I've lost out on so many chances to build fond memories, stories I could have told my kids one day. But there's no use wallowing in the past. Nothing can change it. It is what it is, and all I can do now is ensure that my kids have a far better childhood than I could ever dream of.

Alexius comes up behind me, snaking his arms around my waist and leaning his chin on my shoulder. "I swear the trees get bigger every year."

I lean back, closing my eyes as I inhale, appreciating his familiar, comforting scent of earthy sandalwood. "It's going to be beautiful," I say as the decorators walk past us with gold baubles, silver stars, and large white snowflake ornaments. "It's my first Christmas tree."

I feel Alexius stiffen behind me. "You've never had a Christmas tree?"

I shake my head.

"Not even as a child?"

"Nope. My dad didn't believe in holidays."

"Easter?"

"None."

With gentle fingers, he forces me to turn around and face him, then tips my chin up with his finger, our gazes latched. "I'll spend my life righting the wrongs your parents did to you, and I'll make sure our children have nothing but the best." His hand drops to my belly, his fingers scrunching the fabric of my silk blouse, and I place my palm on top.

"I love you."

"And I love you." He places a tender kiss on my lips, a simple act with the power to ignite a blaze. "I have to talk to Maximo, then I'll join you for

dinner.”

“Sure, but when you have time, I want to talk to you about Nicoli.”

“Jesus. What did my twin fucking brother do now?”

“Nothing. That’s the problem.”

Curiosity lingers on his curved brow. “Okay, but can we discuss it after dinner?”

“Sure.” I smile, then watch him walk in the other direction. I turn and knock into a guy carrying the large gold star for the top of the tree. He almost drops it, and I stumble back while trying to help him keep his balance.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” he apologizes, his cheeks flushed and eyes filled with panic. “I didn’t see—”

“No, it’s okay.” I smile. “I’m fine. I should get out of your way.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Honestly, it’s okay.”

“Mr. Del Rossa will—”

“My husband will not know about this,” I assure him, witnessing how my husband’s presence in this house and town intimidates everyone around.

I’m scrambling to get out of the foyer with more people carrying crates of decorations, holly bushes and mistletoe being draped along the staircase. The rotunda ceiling is being curtained with lights, staff scurrying around to transform it into a Christmas wonderland.

There’s a soft flicker in my belly, a twitch of excitement from the girl who never lived in a house with a Christmas tree. My heart feels full with the thought of presents and ribbons and paper hat crowns, a fireplace decorated with red and white stockings and candy canes. It’s my childhood dream coming to life, and by this time next year, I’ll have my own little family to share the festive joy I was denied.

Ten minutes ago, I couldn’t picture myself running down these halls chasing after kids. But somehow, now, I can see our children huddled around the tree, their laughter, their happy faces beaming with excitement as they unwrap their presents, eager to find the gift hidden beneath the snowflake wrapping paper. Somehow...I can see our family. My family.

Suddenly, the future no longer seems so daunting.

As I pass the window overlooking the front courtyard, I catch a glimpse of Nicoli’s flashy red car parked outside and decide to look for him so we can talk about Mira. I’m worried about her, and if he’s purposefully avoiding her, I want to know so I can wrap my fingers around his throat and personally

strangle him.

My flat boots make no sound as I saunter down the hall, the lights casting a warm glow on the lacquered floor. The house already smells like pine and spice, a mix of the holiday aroma that fills our chests and warms our hearts.

“She can’t know about this.” Alexius’ voice filters through the slivered gap of his office door left slightly ajar. It’s his harsh tone that makes me stop, leaning my head to the side, listening.

“Are you sure he can be trusted? Or is he a potential problem we need to eradicate now?”

“He won’t talk.”

“Are you sure, Maximo? Where does he get the placebos from? You know as well as I do there’s always a fucking trail.”

Placebos?

“I’ll run a trace, find the trail,” Maximo says, his voice low yet determined. “I’ll make sure it’s clean.”

“My uncle is out for blood after receiving Micah’s letter about me planting a bullet in Jimmy’s skull. He has no proof, so he can’t do shit about it. But he’s going to keep digging until he figures out a way to ruin me, and if he finds out about this and tells her...*fuck!*”

There’s a loud bash, a thud of a fist being slammed against a table. I jerk and suck in a breath.

“Alexius, relax. I’ll take care of it,” Maximo assures him. “No one will ever know you replaced her birth control. I’ll make sure of it.”

My heart stops. For a second, I’m a goddamn ghost standing in the hall, ice creeping down my spine as blood drains from my body.

“Fuck that. I’m not chancing it. Take care of him. Shut him up before he gets a chance to talk.”

“Alexius, I don’t think it’s necessary—”

“I said—” Alexius’ voice booms through his office walls. “Shut him up. For good. Understood?”

There’s a short, silent pause followed by heavy footsteps. It’s coming closer to the door, but I can’t move. Too much weight is piled on my chest, squeezing all the air from my lungs while my heart pounds with a panicked tempo. It hurts, my bones crushed under the force of a deceit unleashed.

The door is jerked open, and I’m met with the sight of azure irises I’ve fallen hopelessly in love with. But now, I don’t recognize them at all.

“Leandra.” His voice is a mere breath, an echo of awareness, knowing his

lies have reached my shattered heart.

I can't get myself to open my mouth and say something, my mind as silent as my tongue. It's as if the world flipped upside down, and I was sucked into a vortex where everything's a jumbled mess, where the truth can't be distinguished from the lies.

He takes a step, and I instantly retreat, staring at him like I've never seen his face before, searching to find something—*anything* that's familiar. But there's nothing. Not a single fucking thing.

The way he watches me, how the color drains from his eyes, I know he knows I heard enough. His betrayal clings to the air like toxic vapor, its only intention to destroy me. It's too thick, too viscous, and I can't fucking breathe with him this close.

"Leandra." He tries to reach for me, but I turn and run the other way, needing to get the hell away from him before I suffocate. My mind goes from silence to swarming chaos as I race up the stairs, knocking into someone, and there's an explosion of holly bush leaves and bright-red berries. "I'm sorry," I whimper. "I'm so sorry."

"Leandra!" Alexius calls, his voice coming closer, forcing more adrenaline through my veins, urging me to get away. "Leandra, stop!"

My feet race across the floor, my heart beating wildly. I don't even realize I'm crying until I reach the bedroom, turning the doorknob, and a tear slips onto my hand.

"Leandra, wait!"

"No!" I scream as his arms wrap around me from behind, squeezing me so tight he lifts my feet off the ground. "Let me go!"

"Calm down!"

"No! Fuck you!" I kick and thrash against him, desperate to escape.

"Just calm down and listen to me." He kicks the door closed behind him and loosens his grip, allowing me to jerk away from his hold.

I put as much distance between us as possible, inching backward like prey afraid to take her eyes off the predator. "You switched...you..." *Dear God*, I can't say it. I can't get myself to say it; the words are a bitter gall on my tongue. It's disgusting.

"I'm pregnant," I whisper. "I'm pregnant because you...you switched my birth control?" It doesn't make sense. My mind can't comprehend the magnitude of what I just said.

Alexius doesn't answer me. He just stands there and watches with his

confession emanating from the cruel, blue pools of his eyes.

“Please tell me I’m wrong.” A tear laps into my mouth. “I’m begging you to tell me what I heard is all wrong.” Desperation clings to me like dirt, filth seeping through my pores, and it hurts. It stings. It’s fucking slicing my soul with a thousand sharp blades, leaving nothing but gaping wounds of broken promises and hollowing the sweet midnight whispers of the man I love, so it’s now nothing but empty words. “Tell me what I heard isn’t right. Please, Alexius,” I cry. “Please tell me you didn’t...please!”

“I couldn’t risk it,” he blurts. “I couldn’t risk you walking out that door and out of my life.”

My legs give way, and I collapse, my frame a sagging mess on the floor while tears try to escape the fangs of betrayal eating through my goddamn soul.

Alexius takes a step closer. “I had to make sure that you stay. Here. With me.”

“How could you?” My tears taste like salt and fractured trust, and my fingers spread as I clutch my belly. “How could you do this?”

“I told you there was no line I wouldn’t cross to keep you.”

My vision is blurry with tears. All I see is his black Italian leather shoes as he approaches, my cheeks burning and chest aching. I can’t look up. I can’t look at him. It hurts too damn much. And I’m paralyzed, sinking farther and farther down into a sea where there’s nothing. Nothing but pain. Deception. Lies.

Countless nights. A thousand words. A million kisses. Sunsets filled with promises. It’s all gone. In an instant. A split-fucking-second, and it’s just smoke thinning into the air until there’s nothing left of it.

Darkness engulfs me, and I’m weightless, coiled inside a void where nothing makes sense. I’m plunged into a cold emptiness with sharp tentacles piercing my lungs, making it harder for me to take a decent breath.

No matter how many times I go over everything inside my head, it all just comes to this moment, this place in time where I’m on my ass in front of his feet, broken and beaten, exactly where he wanted me when all this started. This was all inevitable.

“Everything is a lie,” I mutter. “You, your promises, your declarations of love.” I look up at him. “It’s all lies.”

“It’s not.” His jaw tics and shoulders square, his demeanor showing no trace of guilt. “I love you more than I ever thought possible, and that’s

exactly why I did what I did...*because* I love you.”

A maniacal laugh spills through my tears and taunts his lies. Every ounce of strength in me surges, and I manage I push myself up on my feet, anger giving me the courage to look him in the eye. “Love? Do you hear yourself, Alexius? Do you hear what you’re saying?”

“I’m saying that I love you and did this so you would fucking stay.”

“You switched my birth control, for fuck’s sake. You tricked me into becoming pregnant. You took that goddamn choice away from me.”

“What choice?”

“The choice of becoming a mother! God damn you, Alexius!” I cry, placing a palm on my forehead, forcing myself to breathe so I won’t pass out. “Getting pregnant and having children is supposed to be this beautiful thing when the time is right for both of us. And now...you ruined it. You corrupted it.”

“I did what I had to do,” he bites out between clenched teeth. “I love you, and I couldn’t stand by and wait for the day you decide to walk out my fucking front door.”

“You wanted me in a corner, in a place where it’s impossible for me to leave you. That’s not love. That’s manipulative bullshit. Evil. A fucking obsession.”

“Call it what you want. It doesn’t change the fact that you are mine. *My* wife. And I was not about to just stand to the side once our agreement was over and watch the woman I love leave.”

“Love. You keep using the word like you know the meaning of it,” I spit out. “But you don’t. To you, love is control. It’s power. To you, love means you’re the puppeteer and everybody else the fucking puppet. Including me. Including these babies.” More tears stream down my face, but it stems more from anger than sadness as a new reality hits me square in the chest. “Because of your selfishness, your twisted need to fucking control everything and everyone, I’m going to be a mom. We’re going to have twins, Alexius. Two lives born from your fucking lies!” I scream. “Do you understand that? Do you realize the magnitude of what you’ve done? These babies aren’t even born yet, and you’ve already infected their existence with something so ugly.” I bite my bottom lip and choke on a sob. “Every time they laugh, I’ll be reminded of your lies. Every time they cry, I’ll feel the cut of your deception, over and fucking over again. Do you see what you’ve done?”

“What I’ve done, I did because I love you.”

“Bullshit!”

His expression hardens, his face stone as he stares at me. “For one goddamn hour, I lost you and went out of my fucking mind thinking Micah had you hanging from a ledge with a cable around your throat. So, in case you’re wondering whether I regret doing what I did,” he inches closer, and there’s nothing but pure resolve in his eyes, “I don’t. I don’t regret switching your birth control with placebos. I don’t regret getting you pregnant. And if I could go back in time and do it all over again, I would. I warned you, Leandra. I told you I can’t be a fair or rational man when it comes to you. I warned you that with my love comes a heavy burden, one you’ll carry for the rest of your life.”

“I didn’t think the burden would be destructive.”

“Neither did I. But what matters is that we love each other, and nothing can change that.”

He reaches out, and I jerk back, his fingers brushing against my arm, his touch nothing but a searing fire that melts my flesh.

“You’re wrong.” I wipe the tears on my cheeks. “Something did change it. *You* changed it.”

“I know you’re hurt and feel betrayed, but I won’t apologize,” he bites out, his jaw clenched.

I scoff. “Because a Del Rossa never apologizes?”

He cranks his head from side to side like he’s saddled with the world’s weight on his shoulders.

“It’s ironic if you think about it.” I cross my arms. “You lied to me. You deceived and tricked me because you were afraid of losing me.” I suck in a breath, a thousand knives piercing my heart every second I continue to look at him. “And you ended up losing me anyway.”

“Don’t—”

“And not just me,” I sneer, his deception slowly infecting my love for him, deforming it into something unrecognizable. “You lost these babies, too.”

A threatening anger hardens the lines on his face. “What the hell are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’m going to walk out that fucking door, and you will never see me again or these children.” I wrap an arm around my belly like a protective mother. “I will not live in this house with your lies, and I sure as hell won’t raise my children here with you so you can poison their lives with

your bullshit, too. I won't do it."

I rush to the chest of drawers, scooping bundles of clothing in my arms and plopping them down on the bed. Everything in me hurts. Every bone is broken. My world is imploding, and it's destroying me from the inside out.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I told you." I sniff. "I'm not staying here. This was an arrangement to begin with, and it's ended." I grab a suitcase from the closet and drop it on the bed, cramming all the clothes I can find into it. There's so much adrenaline flooding my system, I can't even stop to think straight, to think farther than the estate gates. I have nowhere to go. But right now, nowhere is better than here.

I jerk the bedside drawer open, spotting the birth control I haven't touched since finding out I'm pregnant. It's a smack to the face. A punch to the gut. A fucking knife through my heart. "You son of a bitch," I curse, pain and hate forming the venomous words on my tongue. I grab it and throw it at his face, seething with fiery breaths. "I hate you. I fucking hate you!" It's a lie that pours from my screams, but at this moment, it's the truth I need to be able to walk away.

"No, you don't." The deep rumbling of his voice makes me pivot to look at him. "You don't hate me, and you know it."

"Right now, I know nothing other than the fact that you lied to me and that I need to get the hell away from you."

"I'm afraid that's not an option."

"And I'm afraid that's not up to you."

Blue eyes narrow, and it's like a veil of black mantles him, his expression detached, and his entire demeanor changing from man to monster, determination resonating in his every stride toward the bedroom door.

"Look at what I did to ensure you never leave." His eyes flare with cold fury, a flash of complete darkness with a chill that steals my breath. "Now imagine what I'd do to make sure you don't take my children from me, the lengths to which I'd go to keep that from happening." His hand settles on the doorknob, and my heartbeat thumps in my throat.

"Alexius, what are you—"

"If you think I'll allow you to walk out of here with my babies growing inside your belly," he turns the lock, the click of the latch nailing fear into my bones, "you, dear stray, are sorely mistaken."



To be continued and concluded in...

UNRAVELED

You can pre-order your copy [here](#).

Intrigued by the side characters?
Some of them have their own stories.

Gabriel King

[ALONG CAME A THIEF](#)

Saint & Milana

[THE RISE OF SAINT](#)

Gian & Daniela

[THE DEVIL'S VOW](#)

Become a member of my VIP Club by signing up [here](#).

Members get exclusive sneak peeks and freebies, future release updates and more!

Dark Sovereign

[Alexius](#)

[His Wife](#)

[Unraveled](#)

[Nicoli](#)

Vows and Vengeance Duet

[The Devil's Vow \(Book 1\)](#)

[The Devil's Vengeance \(Book 2\)](#)

The Sins of Saint Trilogy

[The Rise of Saint \(Book 1\)](#)

[The Fall of Sin \(Book 2\)](#)

[The Sins of Saint \(Book 3\)](#)

The Twisted Duet

[Blood and Lies \(Twisted Duet, Book 1\)](#)

[Blood and Vows \(Twisted Duet, Book 2\)](#)

The Villain's Duet

[The Villain's Captive](#)

[The Villain's Beloved](#)

Underworld Kings

[Cruel God](#)

American Street Kings

[Depraved \(American Street Kings, Book 1\)](#)

[Defiant \(American Street Kings, Book 2\)](#)

[Deranged \(American Street Kings, Book 3\)](#)

[Destroyed \(American Street Kings, Book 4\)](#)

Reckless

[To Touch You](#)

To Hate You

The Royal Mafia Series

Mafia Princess (Royal Mafia, Book 1)

Mafia Prince (Royal Mafia, Book 2)

Mafia King (Royal Mafia, Book 3)

Mafia Queen (Royal Mafia, Book 4)

The Shattered Secrets Duet

His Regret (Shattered Secrets, Book 1)

Her Torment (Shattered Secrets, Book 2)



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.

Stalker links:

[Website](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Facebook Readers Group](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Amazon](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Email](#)