



MARRIAGE BY

*trial*

*legally bound duet book two*

CRISTINA  
LOLLABRIGIDA

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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## Blurb

Tired of being used as a pawn in everyone's plan, Alessandra decides it's time to take her future in her own hands, even if it means burning down the world around her.

Pawn.

That's all sheltered mafia princess Alessandra Russo will ever be.

She learned early on that all she was good for was pleasing men; both in and out of the bedroom.

That's how she was raised.

That's how she was trained.

After her arranged marriage to disgraced prosecutor Drake Walker, she had a taste of what a marriage with love could be like. Not just because she knows how to appeal to his darkest desires, but because, for once, she found someone who truly loves her for who she is.

With her happiness and marriage at risk, she must navigate being caught between rival mafia families to save the lives of everyone she has ever known.

The clock is ticking. She needs to decide if she can sacrifice her family for her one shot at love.

## Content Warning

Content Warning:

The Legally Bound duet is an erotic, dark mafia romance with elements of BDSM and is intended for readers 18+

Possible triggers/includes:

Strong language, explicit sexual content (including bondage, spanking/impact play, exhibitionism, somnophilia, toys, & more), power dynamics, rough Dom/sub play that may not align with safe real-life BDSM, dubious sexual consent, gun/knife violence, sexual assault, domestic abuse (not between hero/heroine) discussions of contemplating suicide, mental health, and abortion.

*For all the smut lovers out there—you aren't so vanilla, after  
all.*



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## Chapter One

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*BEEP... BEEP... BEEP...*

*The monitor registered an even heart rate, but the patient remained unconscious.*



UNKNOWN NUMBER: ATTACHED VIDEO

Though dark, the parking lot behind Drake's building was distinguishable. And though she wasn't in the frame, Drake would know Alessandra's voice anywhere. She was crying and begging before the clip ended. Regardless of the circumstances, he knew he needed to move quickly.

Drake was at his safe in seconds, cursing as he jabbed in the four-digit code—the one he'd recently changed to his wedding date. He pulled out the black Beretta and a loaded magazine. Instead of waiting for his private elevator, he took the emergency stairs two at a time.

His thumb remained on the safety the entire way, poised and ready if needed. Once he reached the entryway, he raised the gun and peeked around the corner. Training and experience taught him the importance of keeping his guard up even

though it seemed like he was wasting precious time because every second mattered.

Nothing could've prepared him for the sight that greeted him. He shook as he approached Noah's bloodied body, lying prone on the asphalt. His swollen face looked like a grotesque creature wearing his skin as a mask. Drake's fingers came away bloody after searching for a pulse, and he thanked God it was there. Noah took pride in styling his hair, which was now matted with blood, and the visible skin beneath his shredded designer clothes was bloody and bruised.

After his quick assessment of Noah, Drake turned his attention to his wife and felt the blood drain from his face. He'd never experienced fear like seeing Alessandra naked and crumpled on the ground beside Noah. As he turned her over, he nearly cried with relief when she softly whimpered. He gathered her in his arms and again thanked a higher power.

"Hang on, Alessandra."

Drake could hardly breathe as he examined her body, finding her bruised and battered. He had his suspicions about who was involved. As soon as it was confirmed, he had a bullet with their name on it and would deliver it right between the eyes.

Her wrists had been slashed, and she was bleeding out. Drake tore fabric from her discarded clothes and wrapped it above the wounds to create a tourniquet and slow the bleeding.

"Don't leave me, bella. I love you!" he cried.

He held her until the paramedics arrived. At that point, Alessandra was no longer conscious, and Noah wasn't breathing.

Distraught, Drake called Jerry. How would he tell his friend and mentor that his husband had been beaten to the point that they weren't sure if he'd survive?

Drake used his status as a prosecutor to persuade an officer on the scene to take him to the hospital. He was in no condition to drive himself or remain home alone.

Each member of the private task force had a secret code memorized and would text an unknown burner if their

positions were compromised or an emergency such as this arrived. Drake sent his code to his handler, Grant Ellis. It immediately sent a GPS signal of his last known location and opened access to mirror the phone in case evidence such as photos or recordings were taken.

This would lead them to the anonymous sender of the video. Drake couldn't waste time worrying about it now, but that video had likely saved his wife's life.

Once he arrived at the medical facility, he was escorted to a private waiting room. Both his wife and friend were rushed into emergency surgery. And all Drake could do was wait.

"Drago?" A man approached Drake cautiously.

Drake looked up to find his team leader approaching. Grant Ellis cocked his eyebrow, which was marred by a heavy scar. He'd confided one night over drinks that it was a shrapnel wound from a roadside bombing overseas. His sandy-blond hair was perfectly coiffed as always. The smell of smoke lingered around him, making Drake feel sick.

"Don't call me that!" Drake growled. He wasn't in the mood to exchange pleasantries or be polite.

Grant ignored Drake and took the seat next to him. He leaned back and crossed a foot over his knee.

"I was briefed on the way up by police and medical personnel. We've already identified the sender of the message you received. Your instincts were right. Sometimes CIs and those undercover get too deep."

"I don't give a shit about that right now. I only care about my wife and friend."

"Jerry is on his way. I sent an agent to pick him up when we received his distress signal."

Drake only nodded.

"I'm glad you've been getting some good pussy, but you've lost sight of your priorities in this marriage."

Drake wanted to put his fist in Grant's face but restrained himself. He needed to save his anger for those who truly

deserved it.

“Alessandra was always supposed to be *mine*. She’s my wife. I love her. I will do what it takes to make this right,” he said, meaning every word.

The other man sighed and put a hand on Drake’s shoulder. “You made a choice, Drago. Don’t blame yourself for the unknown.”

“You were the ones who were supposed to be watching her! You kept me in the dark for five goddamn years.”

“Would you have been ready for this level of responsibility? Would you have been capable of taking care of an eighteen-year-old dropped in your lap?”

“You make it sound dirty.”

“Do you think she would’ve rushed into your arms after being ra—”

“Don’t you fucking say the word,” Drake warned.

Grant lifted his hands in defeat. “I knew you five years ago. She wouldn’t have stood a chance against you then.”

While Grant might’ve been right about his past, Alessandra had suffered needlessly at the hands of many. He could never forgive that.

Just then, Jerry arrived, visibly shaken and pale. He appeared aged with worry. Drake grabbed his attention, and the man hurried over.

“Where’s Noah? Has there been any update?”

Drake shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“What about Alessandra?”

Drake shook his head again.

“I see. Well then—” Jerry took the open seat beside Drake.

Drake leaned into his hands, ruminating over his role in the situation. He’d promised to keep Alessandra safe but continued to hurt her and fail at every turn.

A woman in scrubs approached them. She was tall and slender, with short dark hair and piercing blue eyes. Her face was devoid of a smile, but her voice was soft as she spoke.

“I’m Dr. Smith. Is one of you Mr. Walker?”

“That’s me. How’s Alessandra? How’s my wife?” he asked as he sprang out of his chair.

He waited with bated breath for her response, his heart pounding in his chest. Her poker face was almost too much to bear as he tried to read her expression for any sign of what she was thinking. He knew that his future could very well depend on her answer, and he was desperate to know what she would say.

“Mr. Walker, your wife came in with multiple injuries. She lost a significant amount of blood due to a severed artery. Our efforts to repair it were successful. She received a blood transfusion and is now resting.

“We don’t know if she will experience nerve damage due to severed tendons. We will evaluate her as she begins healing and refer her to physical therapy if necessary.”

Drake’s shoulders sagged in relief. They would get through this. He would do everything to ensure she was taken care of.

“When can I see her?”

“She’s in recovery right now. She’ll be moved to a room shortly, and you may see her then.”

“Thank you.”

He turned and looked at Jerry, still waiting for news. That feeling of helplessness Drake felt moments ago was still his mentor’s hell.

“Is there any way you can find someone to update my friend on his husband? He was brought in with my wife. His name is Noah Matthews.”

A sympathetic look crossed the doctor’s face.

“I hope you understand that unless you are family, I can’t share any pertinent medical information.”

“Noah is my brother,” he said without hesitation. “Though I understand that you should update *his* husband.”

The doctor approached Jerry, who still sat and stared into space. She leaned forward with her hands crossed in her lap as she began speaking. Though she had said she couldn't share information with them, Drake and Grant were close enough to hear everything she said.

“Mr. Matthews, what I say will be hard to hear. Please let me know if you have any questions or need to take a break.”

Jerry looked wordlessly at Drake, who made his way to his friend's side. Grant came closer as well, offering his support.

“Your husband, Noah, is in critical condition. He was unresponsive when EMS arrived. It was touch-and-go during surgery. The next forty-eight hours are the most critical. I assure you that your husband will receive our best standard of care.

“He suffered severe head trauma, and we've placed him in a medically induced coma to allow his body time to recover and the swelling in his brain to dissipate. We're unsure if he'll have permanent brain damage. In cases this severe, diminished capacity is expected. Our neurologist, Dr. Wilson, will speak with you as soon as he's had a chance to make his initial evaluation.

“Though he suffered several broken bones and stab wounds, minor injuries will heal with time. There was no damage to vital organs such as his heart or lungs. The internal bleeding resulted from a lacerated liver, which we repaired. His spleen had to be removed—”

“When will he wake up?” Jerry interrupted her.

“Unfortunately, we can't answer that, Mr. Matthews. As I stated before, the next forty-eight hours will tell us more. It's best to focus on the positives right now. He survived the surgery. While critical, he's currently stable.

“He's been moved to the intensive care unit, and you'll be allowed to visit him shortly. He is currently intubated. I have



to ask: does your husband have any directives? Does he have a DNR order? Is there anything we should be aware of?”

“My husband isn’t even thirty! Why would he have any of that?”

Drake put his hand on Jerry’s shoulder to offer comfort.

“In cases like this, it’s best to be prepared.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Grant dismissed her and turned to his colleagues. “I directed EMS to bring your spouses here because this facility is best. Noah will continue to receive nothing short of the best.”

Drake snorted but withheld his retort. Nothing short of the best was bullshit. They were collateral damage in a dangerous game. Nothing could make that right besides putting bodies in the ground.

## Chapter Two

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THE THREE MEN SILENTLY WALKED THE STERILE CORRIDORS OF the hospital and exited onto a private terrace. Their conversation needed to be out of earshot of staff and patients.

“It’s safe to speak here,” Grant said after a quick sweep.

Jerry took a moment before lifting his reddened eyes to those by his side. “You have to do something, Drake. This is getting out of hand. You knew Luca was dangerous when he made threats, but you did nothing to stop him.”

“And what would you have me do? I married Alessandra like I was told. I played my role. A mistrial was forced as predicted, and then what? I did my best to protect Alessandra.

“The only threat Luca made was to my life. He wanted to claim Alessandra when Tony named him his successor. Marrying into the family legitimizes his status as heir. I’m confident the task force hasn’t been compromised.”

“I can’t take your confidence to the higher-ups, Drake. It’s time to produce results,” Grant pressed. “The court clerk was bribed to destroy transcripts. There was a break-in at your firm to steal discovery, and a virus cleared out digital records. The Russo influence extends further than we anticipated.”

“You know whom you need to call, Drake,” Jerry said.

“I already told you that isn’t an option, Jerry.”

Jerry grabbed Drake by the collar. “For all the shit you spew of keeping Alessandra safe, you’ve done a piss-poor job of it. As

a result, my husband's life is hanging in the balance. Hesitating puts them in further danger. You have a chance to make a real change. I can't believe you're such a selfish bastard!"

"Let him go, Jerry." Grant put his hand on Jerry's forearm. "We understand you're upset, but we can't turn on each other now. This is a critical point in our investigation."

"Grant's informant failed to anticipate Luca's attack." Drake pulled Jerry's hands off his collar. "You don't understand what you're asking of me. Don't you think it kills me to see Alessandra lying there? Don't you think I'd do anything for Noah, who's like a brother to me?"

"You can help Noah! You're just refusing to. How long can you keep hiding who you are from your wife, Drake? Hasn't enough happened to open your eyes yet?"

"Sometimes you need to choose the lesser of two evils, Drago," Grant said.

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!" Drake roared before breaking down. "I promised to protect Alessandra, and I failed. I failed Noah, too. Can't you see how sorry I am? I never wanted any part of *this* life."

Drake couldn't remember the last time he'd cried, but holding in his emotions caused immense pressure behind his eyes. His eyes stung at the foreign feeling that overwhelmed him. Alessandra was the only one who soothed his beast; he was a wreck without her.

Alessandra thought she knew everything about him, yet the secrets he hid would destroy them.

Jerry turned to comfort his friend now. "You're a good man, Drake. I don't doubt that about you. But now is the time for decisive action. I'm begging you, please."

"And I'm telling you, you don't understand what you're asking of me. I could lose everything. I'm not willing to take any more gambles regarding my wife's safety."

"At least consider it, Drake," Grant cajoled.

“No,” he was steadfast in his answer. “Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I’d like to try and be there for Alessandra when she wakes up.”

Drake realized how insensitive he sounded, given the condition Noah was in.

“I’m sorry, Jerry. I didn’t mean that.”

“Give her my love. We can continue this conversation another time.”

Drake ruminated on their conversation long into the night. What they asked him to do would bring Satan himself into their lives. He would throw the investigation before putting Alessandra in further danger.

Drake sat dutifully at Alessandra’s side, waiting for her to wake up. His stomach churned as the image of her lying on the concrete replayed in his head. He was scared shitless and wasn’t afraid to admit it. He was still afraid even though the medical staff assured him she would recover. Their situation was critical, and it was up to him to ensure her safety moving forward. He fought under the crushing weight of self-doubt and guilt.

Letting his guard down would never happen again. He almost lost Alessandra to his own thoughtlessness. When she returned, he promised to keep her safe and failed.

*Beep... beep... beep...*

The heart rate monitor registered an even heart rate. Her chest rose and fell steadily. She appeared almost peaceful, as though simply sleeping. Drake reminded himself that this was a gift. Whatever Luca’s goal was, she had survived. The beast within was plotting vengeance, but he needed to focus on his wife.

A knock sounded at the door. Drake assumed it was a nurse doing another vital check and didn’t bother saying anything. He moved from the bed to the tiny window that offered nothing more than a parking garage view.

“How is she?” Grant Ellis’ voice interrupted Drake’s reverie.

“Still unconscious, but they assured me she will be fine.”

The man nodded thoughtfully. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for this. I’m sorry she was caught in the crossfire.”

“She was always a target. She would’ve been married to some other patsy if there wasn’t an advantage for Tony to marry her to me.” He sighed. “It should’ve been me. They didn’t deserve this. Anthony Russo needs to be stopped at any cost.”

“This was a message. Are you sure you haven’t been compromised, Drago?”

“How many fucking times do I need to tell you not to call me that?” Drake snapped.

His name was Drake. Drake Walker. Grant knew he hated being called Drago. The man took advantage of Drake’s anger to remind him of what was at stake.

Drake took a deep breath and truly considered the facts. What would Luca gain from attacking Alessandra? She was the one woman he claimed to want. What message was he trying to send?

“Luca attacked her because he’s a sick, jealous fuck. He better pray, because his days are numbered,” Drake growled, in response to his own musings.

“You can’t act outside the law,” Grant cautioned.

“Why the fuck not? My career is over. Look where bidding our time and playing by the fucking book has gotten us. I’m done playing an honest game. Did you know that Drago means dragon in Italian? This *Dragon* is going to burn the city to the ground. I’m going to dance on the ashes of my enemies and reclaim what is *mine*.”

## Chapter Three

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ALESSANDRA SLOWLY BLINKED AWAKE AND WAS IMMEDIATELY startled by her surroundings without understanding how she got there. It took a moment to realize she was in a hospital. She groaned as awareness made her body ache all over.

Drake snapped to attention, realizing she was awake, and quickly hopped out of the uncomfortable chair by her bedside. He grasped her hand and leaned over to stroke her hair.

“Thank God, Alessandra! You’re finally awake. Try not to move too much.”

Not letting go of her hand, he reached over her body to press the call button.

“How can I help you?” a garbled voice crackled over the tiny speaker.

“Alessandra is awake.”

“We’ll send the doctor in.”

“How do you feel, bella?” Drake asked.

“Can I get some water?”

Drake hesitated and looked at their joined hands. He had just gotten her back and didn’t want to leave her.

“Please?” she asked.

“I’ll be right back, dolcezza.” He kissed her forehead and turned to fulfill her request, but a knock on the door stopped him.

A doctor in green hospital scrubs with a white lab coat entered the room, followed by a nurse. Underneath the scrub cap, his brown curls brushed his collar. His skin was tanned as though he just returned from a beach vacation, but his hospital ID, reading Dr. Craig, confirmed he was a doctor.

“Good morning, Alessandra. How are you feeling?” the doctor asked with a smile.

She smiled apprehensively at him and tracked his every movement. She hissed in pain as she struggled to sit up. Drake jumped to her bedside. Tears sprung to her eyes as she looked down at the white bandages wrapped around her wrists.

“Slow down, Mrs. Walker! It’s important for you to take it easy and rest so your wounds don’t reopen. We can give you something for the pain if you need it.”

The nurse came to Alessandra’s aid and looped her elbow around hers, allowing her to use the counterweight to scooch up. She then turned to the bed controls, and the mechanics whirred as the bed slowly elevated.

“Thank you,” Alessandra said as the nurse readjusted the pillow behind her.

So many emotions flooded through her, mixed with the physical pain that brought tears to her eyes. Alessandra closed her eyes and wished she could return to the sandy beach of her honeymoon. Anywhere was better than the hospital.

“Can I check your bandages while I’m here?” the nurse asked.

Alessandra nodded her consent, and the woman carefully grabbed her outstretched arm and unwrapped the bandages. Alessandra held her breath, not knowing what lay beneath.

Nausea rolled through her, remembering how Luca’s knife had sliced across her wrists. The coarse scars that marred her skin were inflamed with new marks. She could no longer hold back tears, and they burned her cheeks. Luca was right about one thing; she’d have a new memory to associate with those scars. Drake squeezed her shoulder in silent support.

“I’m sorry, hon,” the nurse said. “As soon as I’m done, I’ll bring you something for the pain.”

Alessandra's body flushed as they examined her countless wounds. By the time the nurse completed her examination, Alessandra's pain had manifested into anger. She was down, but she wasn't broken. She'd survived so much at the hands of her father. What was a little more?

She experienced weakness in her left hand. The doctor demonstrated exercises for Alessandra to stretch and flex her arms and hands during healing.

"I know it's daunting to experience weakness due to tendon damage, but everything appears to be healing well. We'll keep you a little longer for observation, but you should be released in a couple of days.

"Continue those exercises to rebuild strength and mobility in your hands. We'll have you follow up with an orthopedic surgeon in about six weeks to see if you require another surgery."

"Where's Noah? Is he all right? I'd like to see him."

"You need your rest to regain your strength and heal, Mrs. Walker. I'll check in on you before the end of my shift. If you need anything, please reach out to the nursing staff."

When they were alone again, Alessandra's bravado slipped. She buried her face in her husband's chest and cried. Drake stroked her hair and kissed her forehead.

The nurse quickly returned with pain medication, and she drifted back to a dreamless sleep.



"SHIT," ALESSANDRA HISSED AS SHE ATTEMPTED TO SIT UP upon waking again.

"Did you have a good nap, bella?" Drake asked.



He moved from his chair beside her to raise the bed and help her sit up as the nurse had earlier. Alessandra hated feeling weak and not being able to do it herself.

“How long was I sleeping?” she asked groggily.

“A few hours. But you need it. Would you like some water?” He gestured to the cup on the little table.

She licked her dry, cracked lips and nodded. Drake brought the cup to her and held it while she sipped from the straw. While no longer cold, it was enough to soothe her parched throat.

“How’s Noah? Have there been any updates?”

Drake sighed. “He was severely injured and required surgery. It was touch and go for a while, and he remains unconscious.”

Alessandra frowned at Drake’s clinically cold response. She wondered if he did it for her benefit so she wouldn’t worry. But that wasn’t enough to put her mind at ease. She loved Noah as a friend, and it was her fault any of this had happened. Befriending a Russo put him at risk. No one was safe around her.

Dark thoughts accompanied her long into the night and provided no comfort. She kept her eyes closed and pretended to be asleep whenever someone came into the room to check on her.

The following day, Alessandra awoke alone. Light filtered through the small window of her hospital room. The clock on the wall and the position of the sun through the tiny window confirmed she’d slept well past noon. Though she remained sore, the pain was more tolerable. However, she didn’t say no to offered pain relief.

She picked up her phone, but the device shook violently in her hands after holding it for a minute, and she dropped it in frustration. App games were out of the question, so she used the bedside remote to turn on the tiny wall-mounted television and flipped through the few channels, only to find nothing on. She settled on a local station without paying attention to the program.

Drake walked into the room about an hour later.

“Where were you?” she asked.

He kissed her forehead. “Noah regained consciousness this morning, so I went to visit him. They’re confident he will make a decent recovery.”

“Decent?” She frowned.

“The most important thing is that he is awake and cognizant. The rest of it is about patience and rehabilitation. Like your hand.”

“Please tell him how sorry I am, and Jerry too. We were returning from spending the day together, and Luca and his goons jumped us. There was nothing we could do. I was so scared,” she sobbed.

Drake pulled Alessandra into his arms and ran his hands down the back of her gown. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

She couldn’t blame her husband. Not when everything was her fault. She slipped her mask into place and smiled for his benefit.

“Do you think I can go visit Noah?”

“How about we let him rest a little longer? The doctor said you need yours too.”

Alessandra asked Drake to climb into the bed beside her so she could snuggle into his comforting warmth.

“I love you, bella,” he whispered as her eyes became too heavy to remain open. “*Dormi ora.* Sleep now.”

## Chapter Four

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ALESSANDRA WAS SOON READY FOR DISCHARGE. SHE WAS willing to comply with every instruction but was insistent on seeing Noah before leaving the hospital. She refused to take “no” for an answer. Her friend was more important.

“I’m warning you, bella; he’s in rough shape.” Drake frowned.

“I’ve seen more than you think, Drake. This life isn’t for the faint of heart. I have my fair share of scars, remember? Men have been beaten before my very eyes. Seeing death isn’t a memory you ever forget. Trust me. I can handle this.

“When you’re in Noah’s situation for the first time, it changes you. He needs all the love and support he can get. If I upset him, I’ll turn and walk right out the door. But he needs this.”

The desolation in his wife’s eyes said it all. She was the one who needed this, and all he could do was support her through it. For a woman as young as she was to be so desensitized and talk about her experiences so flippantly as though it were normal ruined him. He had his own burdens to carry from the ruthlessness he’d seen, but he was blessed to have experienced many years of a normal life.

It was as though Drake saw her anew. Being exposed to depravity and vileness was normal for her. He was intent on making up for every moment she’d lived in hell and every scar on her beautiful soul and naked body. One day this would be behind them, and he would help her grasp the life of her dreams.

Alessandra was determined to stand strong when facing Noah and refused the chair the staff wheeled in. His sympathy was the last thing she wanted. Drake offered his arm in a chivalrous gesture. He glowed with pride when she accepted with little convincing.

Drake wanted to be the man Alessandra could rely on—the man she could trust with her deep-seated pain. She had learned to hide her shame deep down but showed him glimpses of vulnerability. Maybe one day, Drake would finally be worthy of his wife’s faith and love.

The strong smell of disinfectant assaulted Drake’s nostrils, stronger than ever as they took the arduous journey down the hospital corridors. An occasional wince of pain crossed Alessandra’s face. She was determined not to show weakness but couldn’t hide the beads of sweat that dotted her forehead from exertion.

“You can lean on me if you need to, Alessandra,” he suggested.

“I’m fine, Drake,” she said through gritted teeth.

But she leaned further into him. Drake took his wife’s weight upon himself as though she were lighter than a feather. She sagged against the wall with relief when they reached the elevator, taking several deep breaths.

“You don’t have to pretend to be strong, bella,” he said softly.

Her eyes blazed with fearlessness. “If not me, then who?”

Drake was taken aback by her dogmatism and fell in love all over again with the defiant way she raised her chin. Her subtle movements and facial expressions communicated so much that if he blinked, they’d be missed. It was time to back off. The more he pushed, the further she’d go to prove him wrong. He’d be damned to do anything that impeded her recovery and held the elevator door for her.

Noah had been moved out of the ICU that morning. The man was lying in bed when they entered the room. His torso was bare except for the white bandages covering his wounds.

Because he was bedridden, ugly white stockings were placed on his feet to assist in circulation.

Alessandra gasped and her eyes shimmered as she took in the seriousness of Noah's condition. The swelling in his face had diminished considerably. Noah suffered a broken orbital socket and would most likely have scarring and possibly require another surgery if it didn't heal on its own.

Drake shook his head as Alessandra pushed away from him and hurriedly made her way to the bedside. Noah weakly held his hand out to her and she clasped it, kissing it gently.

"Oh, Noah! I'm so sorry this happened to you. It's all my fault," she sobbed.

"Shhh. I'll be okay, I promise," Noah said feebly. His voice was dry and scratchy as he spoke, still hoarse from days of ventilation.

He winced in pain but attempted to smile for Alessandra's benefit. She returned his smile through watery eyes and stroked his hair. They didn't need words to communicate the love and respect between them.

Witnessing the touching moment between his wife and friend, Drake twitched with jealousy. Two kindred spirits who understood each other without wanting to tear each other down. Their connection was effortless and carefree, forcing him to stand on the outside, looking in.

At first, Drake wasn't worried about Noah's attraction to his wife. He knew the man's orientation and that he was in an open marriage to pursue sexual gratification with women as long as his husband approved. But now, seeing how they looked at each other, they had something Drake never experienced—unconditional love.

Drake chastised himself for letting those petty feelings consume him while his friend lay in a hospital bed. But if anyone could evoke such a strong response, it was Alessandra.

"Are you hurting? Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked.

"I'll live, gorgeous. Please don't cry."

“I swear Luca will pay. My father will pay for this. I won’t stand idly by and let them continue to hurt the ones I love!” she vowed.

Drake cleared his throat and addressed Noah. “We’re leaving for a while. Jerry knows where we’ll be if you need us.”

Alessandra leaned in and pecked Noah on the cheek opposite his swollen eye. He smiled softly at her.

“Get better soon. We have many more dates ahead of us. I’ll visit as soon as I can,” she promised.

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily.” He turned to look at Drake. “Take care of each other. Stay safe.”

Drake approached the bed and clasped Noah’s hand. “I’ll do everything I can. You have my word.”

Once in the hall, Alessandra could no longer hold back her sobs. She almost collapsed, but Drake was there to support her in an instant.

“It’s okay, Alessandra.”

“I can’t believe he’s suffering because of me. This is all my fault.”

Drake carefully lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. He couldn’t stand listening to her blame herself.

“None of this is your fault. No one blames you.”

He enveloped her in his strong arms. One day she’d realize it was his fault and lay the blame at his feet where it belonged. A hospital corridor wasn’t the proper setting for the conversation they needed to have. It was getting harder and harder to keep the truth from Alessandra. No matter what he did, Alessandra’s continued suffering was unacceptable. Decisive action was all he had left.

Drake supported Alessandra with an arm around her waist as he helped her into the waiting Genesis. It was important to leave the flashy car at home this time. Alessandra slid into the passenger seat with a soft groan.

She didn't question where they were going when he pulled onto the highway, and soon fell asleep next to him. They drove several hours out of the city into the state capital.

They drove past the Governor's mansion and Lincoln's home. Drake remembered taking an overnight school field trip when he was younger. Being stuck for hours on a bus full of stupid prepubescent teens before cell phones were mainstream was a rite of passage. He glanced at his still-dozing wife and again realized how deprived of experiences she was.

He pulled up to the modest two-bedroom home they would occupy for an indeterminate amount of time. He was determined to take her to see all the tourist attractions and make up for the things she missed.

"Wake up, bella. We're here," he said gently.

"Where are we?" she asked, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"We're at a safe house."

"A safe house? Why?"

She shifted suddenly in the leather seat, causing it to squeak. Her emerald eyes widened with panic. Drake took her hand and spoke in a soothing tone.

"Luca made good on his threats by hurting you and Noah. Your brother is a free man now, and with Luca becoming underboss to replace your brother, we don't know what will happen. But you are safe here Alessandra. We're taking a chance to regroup and allow you time to recover. The only way to do that is by getting away from the city for a while."

"How do you have access to a safe house? You're just a lawyer."

Drake ignored her question. Grant had access to numerous safe houses ready to go at a moment's notice across the country for those in witness protection. While Drake and Alessandra weren't entering the program, he had discussed his immediate needs with his boss. The man was fairly understanding, though he stressed to Drake it wouldn't come free. Drake was expected to deliver results.

He helped his wife out of the car and pulled their luggage and several bags of groceries from the trunk. He left the unpacking for later but put the groceries away before grabbing a water bottle and a pill bottle and bringing them to Alessandra.

“Care for a drink?”

Drake twisted the top off the water before handing it to Alessandra and shook two pills from their orange container into her palm.

“You don’t have to take care of me, Drake.”

“Maybe not, bella. But I’d like to. Will you let me?”

She was silent for a moment and begrudgingly nodded her head.

“I know how strong you are, Alessandra. I admire the hell out of you for it. But when it’s just the two of us, you can let your guard down. You’re safe with me. I want to be here for you.”

Tears streamed down Alessandra’s face. He quickly sat on the cushion beside her and pulled her into his arms.

“Let me take care of you,” he whispered.

Drake kissed Alessandra’s tear-soaked cheeks, tasting the saltiness of her tears. His hands reached her tense shoulders and began gentle movements to ease the burden she carried. He continued down her back until he reached the hemline of her shirt and pushed his hands beneath it.

Her bare skin was warm and soft as he kneaded and massaged. He worked his hands around her hips and legs. A soft moan escaped Alessandra’s lips.

“Let me make you feel good.” Drake’s words ghosted against Alessandra’s lips.

“Mhm,” came her reply before they kissed.

Drake lifted Alessandra from the couch and helped her shimmy out of her leggings. He sat her astride his lap, and his fingers languidly skated over the silky skin of her upper thighs while he peppered kisses against her neck and collar.

“Please, Drake. I need you to make me come.”



Desiring to do just that, Drake slipped his hand into her panties and ran a finger along her seam. She wiggled her hips in an attempt to get him to slip the digit inside.

“Please don’t tease me,” she begged.

“As you wish.”

Drake moved Alessandra to the empty cushion beside him and slipped to the floor. He pulled her to the edge of the couch and pushed her panties aside. Her glistening slit greeted him.

“I’ve missed the taste of this pretty pussy. I love how your greedy cunt is always so wet and eager. Is this all for me?”

“Only for you, Drake,” she whimpered.

Drake licked between her folds. His tongue teased her with every long, slow pass. She squirmed against his face, and he pulled away enough to add his finger. He probed gently and retreated just as quickly. His fingers drew light circles around her clit.

“You’re dripping, bella. You taste delicious. I could feast on you every day. Would you spread your legs for me whenever I need a quick snack?”

“Please...”

Drake chuckled when she attempted to gyrate against him. He grabbed her hips to still her movements and blew across her heated skin. She was always so eager, and he loved to prolong the moments of her pleasure. She could beg all she wanted but would wait until he was ready for her to come.

Wanting to taste every inch of her, Drake pushed her knees further apart. He buried his tongue deep inside Alessandra, expertly orchestrating her pleasure. It wasn’t long before her walls trembled and squeezed him. He stimulated her rear passage with his pinky finger while sucking her nub and flicking it with his tongue.

“Drake! Drake!” she cried as she gushed, drenching his chin with her juices.

His hand and mouth continued moving as she rode the final waves of orgasm. Drake pulled Alessandra against him and

kissed her long and deep, allowing her to taste herself on his tongue.

## Chapter Five

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DRAKE HELPLESSLY WATCHED HIS WIFE TOSS AND TURN ALL night. She whimpered and cried in her sleep despite his attempts to comfort her. She would settle into him only to repeat the cycle, and he gave up sleeping to stew over his guilt and anger beside her.

Love made Drake feel anything but light. He wasn't soaring through the clouds. Instead, the beast he kept chained in the darkest recesses of his soul roared and attempted to break free. Alessandra called to every dark impulse he suppressed. He could no longer sit idly by while the woman he loved was in pain.

Drake vowed to make every person connected to her suffering pay. He wanted to give Alessandra everything, whatever it took, to make her smile again. If she asked for his heart, he was willing to cut it out and present it to her on a silver platter.

The urge to claim her repeatedly was strong. He would convince her and those around them that she was *his*—his for the loving, the fucking, and the protecting. The virile male within needed to bury his cock deep inside her and allow the beast to roar his release and spill his seed deep into her womb.

It was time to make her swell with his child. He wanted to walk down the street with his hand on her belly, grinning proudly because everyone would know it was his baby growing within her.

Alessandra whimpered, rolling onto her stomach and snuggling against her pillow. Drake slipped out of bed with a

plan. He dug through his wife's girly crap in the bathroom until he found a bottle of lavender lotion.

Drake returned to the bed and whispered comforting words to gently rouse her awake as he pulled her chemise over her head and helped her settle back onto the cushions. He squirted lotion into his hands and warmed it between his palms.

Alessandra moaned as his hands glided along the roughened skin of her back. He couldn't take away the scars she bore from years of abuse, but he would ensure those men paid with their lives. He had to let the anger go; this moment was about soothing his wife and seeing to her needs.

He slid his hands to her shoulders and began kneading, feeling the tense bricks soften. He rubbed along her ribs and the soft skin of her breasts before pulling back and moving from her upper back to her lower back, paying attention to her knotted muscles. She groaned appreciatively as his thumbs worked out her soreness.

Drake couldn't resist stopping to play with the magnificent globes of her ass. He grabbed her foot and gently kneaded and rolled his knuckles against her arches.

"Drake," she moaned.

It was surprisingly satisfying to focus on his wife's needs. It wasn't that long ago that he had told her the only thing between them would be sex. He was such a fool. Yes, they thrived on their physical connection, but he hoped he could show her the same level of devotion in other aspects of their relationship.

Once he finished Alessandra's massage, he leaned back against the pillows feeling content despite the erection pressing against the seam of his boxers. Alessandra molded herself against him, and he kissed the top of her head.

Her hand stroked the hard planes of his abs, tickling his happy trail with her fingers. She reached below his waistband and took his warm flesh in hand, but he grabbed her hand and halted her movements.

"I didn't do this so you'd service me in return."

“But—” He cut her off with a kiss.

“I might be an asshole, but tonight was about you. I don’t plan on taking advantage of your vulnerability. If you want me to make love to you or fuck you because that’s what you need, then ask me.

“You were tossing and turning, crying out in your sleep. I don’t know how bad your pain is or what you dream about, but I can see you struggling. You’re my wife, Alessandra. I’d do anything for you, and I hope I brought you some relief. But we’re not going to have sex.”

“I need you, Drake. Please.”

“Then all you need to do is lean back and relax.”

Drake separated her legs and lowered his head. She played with her breasts as he held her hips in place. She grew loud as she came the first time. His cock twitched as her head fell back, and her auburn waves splayed across the pillows. His boxers remained in place as he lowered his head again.

An hour later, she begged him to stop. He wiped his mouth and kissed her thigh.

“I don’t think I can feel my legs,” she giggled.

“Does that mean you’re loved up enough, or is there something else I can do for you?”

She giggled again. “Can you make me cannoli?”

His wife was fucking adorable. “Cannoli?”

“Mmhmm.” She smiled widely.

Drake was determined to keep that smile on her face. He vaulted over her and kissed her neck and chest. She giggled and squirmed beneath him.

“I’ll hire a pastry chef first thing in the morning to bake you enough cannoli to last you a lifetime.”

She laughed. “Maybe we can visit a bakery tomorrow and buy half a dozen.”

“It’s a date, bella.”

She settled into his arms once more and soon fell asleep. Drake's beast that had been climbing the walls was satiated in a way that surprised him. Apparently, they both wanted her happy.

Alessandra was still sleeping soundly when Drake woke up the following morning. Before slipping out of bed, he did a quick web search for the closest bakery that sold cannoli.

Drake kissed Alessandra's forehead before driving to the bakery, where he stood in line for thirty minutes through the morning rush. Returning home, he dropped them on the kitchen island for her before heading to work in a secured private office.

## Chapter Six

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ALESSANDRA AWOKE ALONE IN BED. THE ONCE-UNFAMILIAR two-bedroom house began to feel like home. The strong scent of coffee wafted from the kitchen. She smiled to herself as she pulled on her robe. Their only morning rule was whoever was up first made the coffee.

Springfield was several miles from the city, even further from where she grew up. But they were still close enough that laying low was the best option. However, Drake didn't force her to be a complete shut-in.

A physician was scheduled to make a house call that morning and evaluate Alessandra's wounds. They were thankful for everything Grant Ellis had done for them. After the doctor assured her everything was healing nicely, he gave her additional exercises for her hands. Drake assisted Alessandra with her daily physical therapy. She watched him perform his workout routine and was fascinated by the sweat rolling down his muscular chest and how his abs flexed and stretched. His sinewy back and arms worked in tandem to achieve peak physical fitness.

Drake ran five miles a day, which sounded great to her in theory. But her curves weren't made for running, even if she was cleared for such strenuous physical activity. Drake laughed when she told him her breasts weren't made for running. She punched him when he made a jiggling Baywatch reference. He immediately pulled her to him and tweaked her nipple through her chemise. The claws of winter had

descended, and she preferred to stay bundled up in the warmth of their home versus freezing to walk around the block.

Though Drake pleased her the first night they arrived, there was no further sexual intimacy between them. Once she was cleared for sex, she thought Drake would be on her immediately. Unfortunately, every time she initiated, he shut her down.

Alessandra recalled the details preceding her attack. The conversation they never had following her confrontation with Riley and the lipstick on her husband's collar. She could see the writing on the wall. He was pulling away from her. There was no more pretending the issues between them didn't exist.

Drake's angry voice carried in from the next room. He was arguing with someone. Alessandra stealthily made her way to the door and cracked it open so she could hear the one-sided conversation. Though he spoke mostly in Italian, she understood key phrases.

"It's time to call the *Cosa Nostra*..."

Alessandra's hand flew to her mouth to hide a gasp. Could Drake be connected to a family? She wondered if there was any clue she'd missed. She knew all her father's associates; again, the Walkers weren't a part of that. Riley's last name was Watson. If Anthony could get to her, it was unlikely she had connections with a different family.

"*Lei non lo sa*... she doesn't know. I could lose her."

Apparently, there was a lot she didn't know about her husband, and she was determined to find out.

"*La amo*... I love her. How could I tell her I've been lying this whole time?"

That admission was a huge punch to the gut. He loved her! She should be flying on cloud nine, but instead, her heart was hurt by his admission of lies.

"*Merda!* I don't know."

*Achoo*—Alessandra sneezed and quickly shuffled from the door.



“I’ve got to go; she’s awake. Ciao.”

Alessandra slipped back into the cool sheets and stretched as though she’d just woken up when Drake opened the door. He greeted her with a tense smile.

“Good morning, bella. How’d you sleep? Are you in pain?” He crossed to the dresser where her bottle of painkillers sat.

“I’m fine, Drake. Thank you. Have you been up long?”

“I’ve been on the phone with the office this morning. Work’s beginning to pile up. I’m making arrangements to head back next week.”

“Next week?”

“Yes. I’ve been assigned a new case. Unfortunately, there’s work I can’t do remotely.”

Alessandra waited for Drake to elaborate, but he didn’t. She wondered how her husband could remain so calm and collected. Clearly, he was seasoned at keeping secrets, and they were tearing her apart. Riley’s revelation, Drake’s odd behavior, and the conversation she had just overheard made her head ache.

“I know you slept with Riley, Drake! You’ve been lying to me for so long. I will walk out that door right now if you don’t tell me the truth.”

Drake froze, and his spine stiffened. They sized each other up. After a tense silence, he turned on his heel and left the room. Alessandra stumbled out of bed and quickly pulled on leggings and a faded hoodie. She found Drake in the living room.

Her breath hitched at her husband’s rugged appearance. His wavy hair, which was normally smoothed back, lay on his forehead. The dark line of facial hair growing in made his jaw appear sharper. He wore a dark-gray v-neck shirt with rings and straps. Her eyes followed the line down to his exposed collar, wanting to bury her nose in his skin and run her nails through the tuft of curls that were barely visible. His ankles were crossed, hidden beneath black denim jeans.

“Sit down,” Drake commanded. Instead of obeying, she cocked her hip and stared defiantly. “Don’t get too excited, dolcezza. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“Don’t distract me,” Alessandra snapped back. “I know you’ve been lying, and I want the truth. Now!”

Drake rose from the couch and slowly approached her, but she refused to cower before him. He grabbed her arm, not tight, but firm enough to remind her who was in charge. She yanked her arm from his grasp.

“Don’t you dare touch me!”

“Sit down!” he spat.

With a defiant look, Alessandra plopped on the couch. Drake’s eyes blazed as he sat next to her. She wanted to scooch away but wasn’t willing to give him the satisfaction of seeing how he affected her. She crossed her arms and lifted her chin instead.

“I don’t know what you possibly think I’ve been lying about.”

Alessandra wanted to smack him at his faux nonchalance. She’d been a ball of anxiety and variable knots for too long. He knew damn well what lies he’d been keeping. Or maybe there were just so many he didn’t know what they were anymore.

“I know that you’ve been sleeping with Riley. She told Noah and me about the baby. Don’t try and deny it, Drake. She showed me an ultrasound picture.”

“What?” Drake’s hands clenched, and his face turned red.

“She confronted me, Drake. I don’t understand why you’d keep such a thing from me. Riley told me you were planning on leaving me and getting back together.”

“That. Fucking. *Cagna*.” Drake punctuated each word.

“I saw the proof, Drake. When I came to your office, there was lipstick on your collar. You’ve been cheating on me.”

The fire in Drake’s eyes scared Alessandra. She braced herself for his rough treatment, but he surprised her by lightly

caressing her cheek with his fingertips and turning her to face him.

“I swear it’s not what you think, Alessandra.”

“Luca knows about the pregnancy too. He was taunting me. He was also at Jerry’s club in the crowd that watched us.”

“That mook’s been stalking you? Why would you keep that from me? I’ve been worried sick trying to keep you safe. I’ve told you before I can’t do that if you keep things from me.” Drake became irate.

Drake’s demeanor constantly flipped on a dime, leaving her unable to tell heads or tails at times. She realized that their location didn’t matter. The same argument and their problems would continue following them.

“I hadn’t seen Luca between the last time in court and the night he attacked Noah and me. The last time I spoke with him was the morning he called to gloat about the missing evidence. I wasn’t hiding anything.”

“I’m going to kill that *bastardo!*”

“And what about Riley? You’re having a baby with her. How could you keep that from me?”

Drake cupped her face in his hands. He rested his forehead against hers and looked into her eyes. Alessandra tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let her.

“She lied to you, bella. When Noah told me she’d approached you, I immediately hired an investigator to look into it. Our department works with several, and one owed me a favor. It’s one thing to say Riley lied, but I wanted to make sure I had irrefutable proof to offer you. You’ve been through so much. I wanted to put your mind completely at ease. I don’t know why, but she made it all up.”

“That bitch! Why would she lie about something like that? How could she fake a pregnancy?”

“Why else? She’s trying to come between us. Don’t you see that? You said yourself that Luca knew. Tony’s men approached her in Paris, and she accepted a large sum of

money from them. Is it a stretch to assume she's working with the enemy? I'm sorry she tried to hurt you."

Alessandra wanted his words to be a soothing balm on her aching heart. He had an explanation for everything, but there was still so much he didn't say.

"But you didn't come home that night. You ignored my calls and texts. I saw lipstick on your collar."

"I'm sorry, bella. I should've come home to you. I was waiting for my investigator that night. Riley turned up at my office. She made a move on me, but I swear on my life that nothing happened with her.

"I'm going to make them all pay for hurting you. Your father, Luca, and Riley. *Lo guiro*... I swear it! You're the most important person in my life. *Ti amo*, bella. I love you, Alessandra."

Alessandra's heart thundered in her chest. Drake's confession had her reeling. He might not have given her every answer, but she certainly had more than she needed. The truth shone in his eyes. Everything had changed between them. All his efforts to put her first were proof of that.

The girl who never knew real love before had found it in the most unlikely place. She'd undoubtedly been in love with Drake for a long time. It frightened her to admit it.

This angry, beautiful man, who never should've been hers had put a ring on her finger. He loved her...

His admission made them... what? Soulmates? Partners? Regardless, she saw their way forward, together. They could be a formidable team.

"I was afraid of my feelings. Love has only been ugly and painful. Love left me open and vulnerable to being hurt again. You hated me at first, and I had no idea you'd ever feel the same way."

"Alessandra?"

"I love you," she said as tears escaped her eyes.

“You knocked me off my feet, bella. I’m used to being in control and you challenged that the moment we met. The truth is, you’re everything I could ever want in a woman. You’re vivacious and smart and sexy as fuck. I don’t want to live another moment pretending anything different.”

“I love you, Drake Walker.”

## Chapter Seven

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WITH HIS EARS STILL RINGING FROM HIS WIFE'S CONFESSION, Drake grabbed Alessandra firmly and pressed his lips against hers. As always, she immediately opened up to him. Their tongues danced and rolled in a familiar way.

His body became inflamed as he sought solace in the arms of his wife. Sounds of panting and tearing fabric filled the air around them. Blind need couldn't have them close enough. Drake was a moment away from plunging deep into Alessandra but forced himself to pull away.

"Wait, Alessandra," he panted. "We shouldn't do this. I don't want to hurt you."

Resolve and desire burned in his wife's eyes. She trailed kisses against his stubbled jaw and grasped his cock tightly. He hissed as she squeezed the head and stroked the shaft.

"Stop!" he commanded.

"Please, Drake." She loosened her grip but continued stroking. "I need you. We can be careful."

She met his eyes in challenge, but the beast within remained tame. At that moment, he was not the Master in the bedroom. Hearing the breathy way she said his name had him ready to thrust into her hand.

"We should stop," he softened.

"Make love to me, Drake."

Drake froze, looking into Alessandra's emerald eyes. His resistance crumbled immediately, and he captured her whimper with his lips. She was a cool drink to a man dying of thirst in the desert.

He was scared shitless at the connection he felt to this woman. Peeling back the steel armor around his heart and allowing her to spear and claim it made him burn.

As a teenager, losing his virginity was a rite of passage. It wasn't with someone he had feelings for, not even a girlfriend. His first time was with a woman of a certain persuasion. She taught him everything he needed to know while riding him. Sex was purely a physical act. Gratification came from domination.

When Drake became a man, his father's associates no longer held back. They brought him to strip clubs and exposed him to the darker side of sex. Lust suited him just fine. Even after he put his ring on Alessandra's finger and recited the requisite vows, he thought that would be enough.

But Alessandra wasn't just some woman. Their rocky beginning had led to more than he ever imagined. He'd found love when he expected to find contempt. He wanted to prove that her love wasn't misplaced and hoped she'd give him the chance to make her happy. The very thought of losing her scared the shit out of him.

"Please." The gentle plea from Alessandra's lips enraptured him.

Powerless to her charms, Drake scooped her up and carried her bridal style to their bedroom. He deposited her gently on the bed and gazed over her voluptuous body. He could get lost in her peaks and valleys for days and find himself at home. She was his home.

Everything had shifted between them. For the first time, he looked through the love lens. Once, he thought he was in love. He'd wanted to propose to a woman he dated in college named Daisy. Years later, he still recalled her laugh and floral perfume. But she had disappeared without a word.

Sometimes he questioned whether Bitsy and Richard truly loved each other. Sure, they seemed content, but was it love? Only with Alessandra did he realize that every conception he'd had previously was wrong. Love was knowing he couldn't live without her. Love was knowing he wanted to give her everything to put a smile on her face.

She was glowing in the soft light from the bedside lamp. She was a goddess worthy of worship and devotion, and her auburn waves were her halo. He would make sure his queen was never a pawn again. She had been sacrificed enough. He was willing to sacrifice it all now and lay their enemies at her feet.

Soft sounds brought his attention back to her. Her curves enticed him to kiss and lick every inch of her bare skin. All he needed to do was decide where to start.

He began with her lips, kissing her as though he meant forever—as though he genuinely loved her—which he truly did. Drake's hands gently caressed her body.

He kissed along the graceful slope of her neck. Her collar had been left behind in his penthouse, and he realized they didn't need it, not tonight. Tonight was about the love between them; power dynamics didn't belong here. She deserved his adoration. He wanted to prove that he was her partner, not a Master or an owner.

Alessandra arched her back, allowing him better access to her chest when his lips ghosted over her nipple. He pulled it into his mouth and rolled it with his tongue, sucking until it became a hardened pearl. The other glorious breast received the same treatment.

“Keep treating me to those sexy noises of yours and this will be over too quickly,” Drake murmured against her skin.

“I can't help it. You make me feel so good.”

“It's only going to get better,” he promised.

Drake's kisses burned down her stomach, kissing and nuzzling her navel. Taking Alessandra's foot in hand, he looked her in



the eyes before pulling her big toe into his mouth and swirling it with his tongue.

Her head fell back with a moan.

“I’m here to worship you tonight—every inch of you. I will devote myself to your pleasure. Command me, Alessandra. Tell me how to please you.”

He kissed up her leg as it trembled in his hands. Stopping once he reached her inner thigh, he let it fall to the mattress.

“Drake—” she whined.

“Tell me what you want, bella.”

“Please...”

“Use your words, darling. Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

“I want your mouth, Drake.”

Alessandra huffed in frustration when his lips brushed against her forehead. He chuckled as she writhed with need below him.

“You didn’t say where you wanted my mouth. I want to hear the filthy words fall from your pouty lips,” he said as he traced her lower lip with his thumb.

“Please, Drake. I want you to taste me.”

Drake sucked hard enough at the pulse point of Alessandra’s throat to leave a mark, then soothed it with his tongue. He switched between open-mouthed kisses and love bites across her shoulders and chest.

“I love the way you taste.”

Alessandra panted with raw need, “Drake. Please fuck me! I need you, now.”

“I thought you wanted my mouth, bella.”

She shook her head and lifted her hips to prove she was ready. But Drake wasn’t ready to give her what she wanted yet. He knew it would end when he sank into her tight, soaked channel.

Drake dropped between Alessandra's knees and spread her lips with his fingers. She screamed when his hot breath blew across her engorged clit. He pumped two fingers into her, meeting no resistance, and she fell apart when he sucked her nub into his mouth.

He kissed up her belly and swirled his tongue around her hardened nipple. Her back arched as she ran her hand through his hair. He interlocked their fingers and lifted her arms over her head as he slowly entered her. He wasn't rough or hurried—quite the opposite. His strokes were languid and deep.

Tears sprung from the corners of Alessandra's eyes, and Drake kissed them away. He let her hand go and gently cupped her cheek.

“Look at me, Alessandra, please.”

Her eyes shone as they looked up at him. Her bottom lip trembled.

“*Ti amo, bella,*” he said as he rocked against her.

The sob that escaped her broke his heart.

“Should I stop?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I want this. But if you don't mean it...”

She trailed off, too afraid to voice her fears. He kissed her long and passionately as his hips kept moving.

“I can't live without you, Alessandra. You live right here.” He took her hand and placed it on his heart.

She whimpered against his lips and trembled beneath him. Would there ever come a point where their relationship was on even footing?

“Tell me what I can do to show my love for you, Alessandra.”

“Just don't stop.”

He had no intention of stopping.

Later that night, with Alessandra in his arms, Drake received a text.

Jerry: Good news, Noah was discharged. I didn't say anything earlier because getting everything together and home took a while.

Drake looked at his wife, sleeping soundly curled against his bare chest.

Drake: Take care of Noah. If you need anything, let me know.

A few minutes later, his phone pinged with another text.

Grant: All clear. We need you to return to the city and resume operations.

Drake's domestic bubble burst. This interlude had proved necessary to strengthen their relationship, and he wasn't sure they'd be able to find this peace again. It was a hopeless dream to expect it to last long.

Maybe it was time for a change. Maybe Chicago wasn't meant to be their forever home. Washington, D.C. was no longer an option, but they still had a vast world to explore.

## Chapter Eight

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HIDING SCARS WASN'T NEW TO ALESSANDRA. SHE'D HAD years of practice with the ones she bore inside and out. What were a few more?

Alessandra searched through hangers in her closet and emptied the drawers of her wardrobe. She stuffed half of it in trash bags and wrote a giant D on it, indicating it was for donation. Purging her clothes gave her a sense of control, like a snake shedding its skin.

Once she finished, she pulled on a pair of black leggings. The tight pants drew attention to the curve of her hips and ass. She paired it with a camisole and an oversized knit cardigan.

The most important accessory was black fingerless gloves. She flexed and extended her fingers, happy with the flexibility the worn, familiar leather offered. She'd missed the familiar scent and feel against her skin.

She arrived at the Matthews' residence and rang the bell, hearing it chime within. The love between the men made their home welcoming. The high wood-stained ceiling and artful decor were warm and alluring. Her favorite decoration was a canvas print of Noah and Jerry. They looked blissful on a beach.

Noah ushered Alessandra into the living room, moving slower than he used to. Alessandra could only offer a watery smile as her eyes settled on the angry, red scar that sliced Noah's eyebrow in two. His eye socket remained swollen and painful-

looking. She instinctively reached to brush his hair from his forehead but quickly withdrew as Noah recoiled.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

Noah gently grabbed her hand. His thumb rolled over her gloved knuckles. The comforting gesture made her want to weep. Alessandra swallowed the bitterness that rose within her.

She cleared her throat and asked, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m surviving. How about you?” Noah’s voice sounded weak and hollow to Alessandra’s ears.

“Same.” She sighed.

“You look so cozy. I just want to snuggle up with you.” Noah’s lip raised in a half smile.

“You shameless flirt.” She chuckled.

“I prefer incorrigible.” He laughed.

“I’m glad you’re doing better. I was really scared for you.”

“I was too, Alessandra. But we’re both still here.” Alessandra pulled him into a brief but strong hug to offer support before moving off the topic of their shared trauma.

“There’s something I need to ask you.”

“I knew there was a reason for your visit. I’m sorry to disappoint you, lovely. You should know I’m a happily married man.” Noah flashed a crooked grin and waved his hand that bore the solid gold wedding band.

Alessandra rolled her eyes and thumped Noah’s bicep with the back of her hand. “I’m serious, Noah.”

“Okay, okay. What is it?”

“Drake’s hiding something.”

“Really?” He didn’t look surprised.

“Yes, there are things he’s said and done that don’t add up.”

“Okay—”

“Drake said he hired a private investigator to prove Riley was faking a pregnancy. But why would he need to do that if they hadn’t slept together in a year? And what would motivate her to lie in the first place?”

“She probably wanted to play on your insecurities. It was a desperate ploy to come between you and Drake.”

“That’s what I thought at first, but what if it’s not? My father paid Riley half a million to leave Drake at the altar. I was the replacement bride. But Drake had to know I wasn’t Riley. Veil or not, one look at my body should’ve been enough to realize I wasn’t his fiancée.

“Why would she accept money from my father, only to return and play these games? Why did he marry me?”

“What are you getting at, Alessandra?”

“Please, just tell me the truth. I know Drake lied to me about the wedding. But I don’t know his motives behind it. I think his anger was a way of deflecting his own guilt.” Her foot bounced in agitation.

“Alessandra.” Noah sighed. “Are you sure about this? Riley’s a nuisance, but I don’t think she’s dangerous. She played her hand and lost.”

“You’re right. Our biggest threat is Luca.”

“Why did he come after us like that? He’s your ex, isn’t he?”

“There are things you don’t know about Luca. It’s painful to talk about my past.”

Alessandra fell quiet, and Noah took her hand again, seeing the sudden shift in her.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Alessandra?” Noah asked softly, but she was already gone, transported into her feelings.

“Luca wasn’t always like this. We grew up together: Marcello, Luca, and me.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t you dare make excuses for him, Alessandra! He doesn’t deserve your sympathy. You shouldn’t heroicize a monster like him.”

Alessandra wiped a tear from her eye. “I’m not. I’m trying to explain so you’ll realize what happened wasn’t your fault,” she said, opening the emotional wounds that had only begun to heal with Drake’s love. It was important that Noah understood her. She hoped it would help bring him some comfort. The only way for them to move forward was by divulging her past.

“It wasn’t your fault either, Alessandra,” he said softly.

Alessandra took a deep breath.

*Growing up, Alessandra was sheltered. She had no friends, no one to play with except the guards, who occasionally indulged the young girl in hide-and-seek because she was cute. Alessandra used to follow Marcello and Luca everywhere because she was bored and she admired them. They hardly acknowledged her, and when they did, they teased her mercilessly. They referred to her as la peste, but it didn’t stop her.*

*The lonesome Alessandra took the attention they offered, even though it was negative. As they grew older, Marcello was always at Papà’s side, learning to be his successor. This left Luca time to notice Alessandra.*

*As the woman in the family, Alessandra was taught to cook and clean. She began serving meals before the age of 10. The woman’s role was to entertain the men. She was enrolled in dance classes and had a vocal coach so she could sing as she played the piano. She would close her eyes as her graceful fingers moved along the ivory keys, and she could swear she heard her mother singing along.*

*Alessandra was at her father’s beck and call when he had guests. Sometimes they would applaud her, and she basked in their adoration. All she wanted to do was prove she was a good daughter and worthy of her father’s love.*

*As a teen, the comments from her father’s men changed. They often commented about Alessandra’s blossoming beauty and new curves. They said her talents were wasted in front of the piano and should be found lying on her back. She was stubborn and didn’t want to be used for her father’s gain. She had her own dreams and goals for her future.*

*She wanted unconditional love. She cried herself to sleep many nights wishing someone would comfort her. All she wanted was a touch that was gentle, not a hand that left bruises. She was so desperate for love that she clung to Luca the moment he smiled at her and stopped calling her a pest.*

*Luca was already in his 20s, and she was just 16 years old. Alessandra loved his maturity and willingness to teach her about intimacy.*

*The first time he kissed her, he didn't even ask. They sat on a bench beneath a large oak tree in the park. Alessandra couldn't remember what they were talking about, but she was laughing. The next thing she knew, his hot lips were on hers.*

*Alessandra fell in love with him at that moment. Luca wanted her just as badly; they didn't care if it was appropriate. They began dating behind Tony's back.*

*She convinced Russell to accompany her on dates. He would turn his back to give them privacy. Alessandra knew the best hiding spots and would meet Luca for secret make-out sessions.*

*If only she knew the heartbreak that it would lead to. Reflecting on it, she knew now that it wasn't really love. She was desperate and confused his attention as flattery. She was excited to have a secret and act rebellious.*

Alessandra hung her head in shame as she finished recounting her tale.

Noah touched her shoulder gently, and she jerked away. "Then what happened, Alessandra?" he cajoled.

"You already know," she whispered. "When I turned 18, my father decided to make a proper submissive woman out of me. My lessons were long, and my trainer was cruel when I acted out. Luca didn't have a choice..."

"No!" Noah pulled Alessandra against him.

"It changed us both."

He pushed Alessandra away but held onto her shoulders. "You are not responsible for Luca, Alessandra. His actions were his



own, then and now. You romanticized him, but he was a predator. He was a 20-something-year-old man, preying on a lonely teenager.”

Alessandra broke down in Noah’s arms. His comfort was good for her soul.

“I’m so sorry. Thank you for not hating me.”

Noah brushed the tears from her cheek and kissed her gently on the lips. He pulled her back against him, and she buried her face in his chest.

“I couldn’t, even if I tried.”

## Chapter Nine

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ALESSANDRA ORDERED AN AMERICANO FROM THE SMILING barista and made her way to the other end of the counter, joining the throng of those waiting for their orders. Every few minutes, she scanned the crowd for her company, expecting her to arrive soon. A lanky brunette pushed through the door and smiled widely at her sister-in-law. Alessandra greeted her with a slight wave.

Beth rushed over and hugged Alessandra. “Hey, sister! I’ve missed you. I hope you’re doing all right.”

“I ordered your swamp water.” Alessandra handed Beth the matcha latte.

Beth pulled the lid off her cup and inhaled the steam from the hot liquid. “What are you talking about? It smells heavenly.” Alessandra crinkled her nose. “Oh my god, are you pregnant?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

“Are you and my brother being safe?”

The question made Alessandra squirm and blush. She couldn’t possibly divulge such intimate details to her sister-in-law. “Eww. I’m not going to answer that.”

“Well, if you’re not preventing—”

“We’re officially finished discussing my sex life,” she said firmly.

“Don’t be such a prude, Alessandra. I know where babies come from.” Beth laughed.

“But that’s your brother!”

Beth waved her off as though it was no big deal. The women headed outside with their order and sat at a free wrought iron table. The chair scraped against the concrete patio as Alessandra pulled out her seat.

“So, what’s on your mind? We haven’t seen you in a while. We’ve missed you.”

“Drake and I decided to get out of town for a while.”

“Now that you’re back. Bitsy wanted me to extend an invitation to join us for dinner next week.”

“I’ll let Drake know.”

Beth nodded again with a toothy smile and flicked her hair over her shoulder in the easy-breezy way she did everything. Her demeanor drastically differed from her brother’s, and Alessandra was ready to learn more about their dynamic.

Alessandra mulled over her thoughts carefully, trying to figure out the best way to approach her sister-in-law without raising too much suspicion. Beth was the last person she wanted to alienate.

“I missed you, too. I’m glad we’re having some sister time. I was hoping you could give me some advice.”

“Uh-oh, is my brother being an idiot? I know he can be rough around the edges sometimes, but he’s a good guy.”

“Where’d he learn to speak Italian? I noticed the rest of your family doesn’t seem to be fluent.”

“Oh, that’s easy. You know he lived in Italy, right? He studied abroad for a while and became fluent in Italian and Latin.”

Though Alessandra knew Drake lived in Italy for an extended period of time, he never talked about it. This was her opportunity to learn more.

“Do you have family in Italy or anything?”

Beth shook her head. “Not to my knowledge. You know we have a bit of an age difference between us, so I don’t remember all the details. Bitsy said Drake received a

scholarship to study abroad. He lived in dorms, and during summers, he stayed with an exchange family.”

“How long was he in Italy?”

“Six years. I missed him a lot. He never came to visit.”

“And you never went to see him?”

“I wanted to. I begged my parents to go see Drake. However, they said he was too busy. Bitsy looked sad every time I asked. Eventually, I stopped, and Drake came home. But he didn’t want to be my big brother anymore.”

“That must’ve been hard.” Alessandra frowned sympathetically.

“Yeah. When he returned, he bought an apartment in the city and enrolled in law school at the University of Chicago. He rarely visited. I tried to visit once, and he bit my head off.”

“But you seem to get along now. What changed?”

“Dustin began acting out during his teen years. He could’ve ended up with a record, but Drake set him straight. He started coming home more often for family dinners, and it was almost like I got my big brother back.”

“Almost?” Alessandra raised her brows.

“Yeah, something happened in Italy. Drake doesn’t like to talk about it.” She shrugged. “I hope to have an adventure like that someday,” she sighed wistfully.

Alessandra was shocked that Drake didn’t tell her this himself. The more she discovered about her husband, the less she realized she knew him.

“What about Riley? She was almost your sister-in-law.”

Beth snorted. “Riley’s mother grew up with ours, upper crust and all that. Even when they lost their money, we tried to include Riley. Mom and I would invite her to get our hair and nails done, go to eat, and even shopping. Sometimes she’d take us up on our offer, but she remained distant.”

“I’m sorry Riley was like that.”

“After Drake proposed, I thought we would become closer. Mom hired a wedding planner, but Riley never returned a call or text.” She smiled and exclaimed, “I like you so much more! You actually talk to me when we hang out.”

“I like hanging out with you too, B.”

Beth beamed at the genuine comment. Alessandra recognized that she'd found a kindred spirit without realizing it. Alessandra had friends for the first time. It was strange in many ways, but Noah and Beth made her feel less alone.

From Alessandra's observations, Richard and Bitsy seemed to be polar opposites. Bitsy was the pearl-clutching type of woman while her husband was kind and smart with a quirky sense of humor. Somewhere along the way, they must've found love to be together for forty years. Alessandra wondered if she and Drake had the right stuff to make a marriage work like that. Their levels of familial expectations were not the same, but the weight they felt as a result likely was.

“You know you can talk to me anytime you want, Beth.”

“Same here.” Beth smiled softly.

“Were you surprised when Drake married me?”

Beth's demeanor changed in an instant. She appeared nervous, wringing her hands and bouncing her leg.

“I promise this is just between us girls.”

“Did you know Riley's having Drake's baby? Mom and Dad are really upset about it. She sent them the ultrasound.” Beth frowned.

“That bitch is faking it!” Alessandra growled.

“What? Are you sure?”

“Your brother hired a private investigator and found proof.”

“Why would she lie about that? I have to tell Mom and Dad.”

Beth picked up the latest model phone, but Alessandra gently put her hand on her wrist.

“Wait, please. There’s something else I need to ask. Did you know Riley took money to leave Drake at the altar?”

Beth shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“What’s wrong, B?”

“Drake was drunk one night and told me a secret.”

She sucked in a breath. “What secret?”

“I’m not sure I should say. I’m sorry, Alessandra.”

“Please, Elizabeth. We’re sisters now. Sisters have a special bond, meaning we will always be there for each other, no matter what. I want us to share our joys and sorrows. We’ll always have each other’s backs. Let me share your burdens. I promise to keep your secret safe. It will remain locked away in my mind, and we won’t ever speak of it again.”

Alessandra looked at the woman sitting across from her. She employed charm and manipulation, and Beth was ready to crack.

“Drake is going to be so mad at me.” Beth worried her lip.

Alessandra lifted her hands in an easy gesture. “This is just a little girl talk between sisters. Drake will never know. Sisters keep each other’s confidence,” she cajoled.

“Swear to me you won’t tell Drake I told you.”

“How does that saying go?” Alessandra tapped her chin with her manicured finger and smiled conspiratorially. “Sisters before misters.”

It took a little more wheedling and a pinky swear, but Beth eventually spilled the secret that burdened her.

“Drake and Riley broke up before the wedding.” The moment the words were out of her mouth, Beth clapped a hand over her face.

“Excuse me?”

“Drake was pretty upset when she broke things off.”

“Why didn’t he cancel the wedding?”

“I don’t know. He planned to, but then he said there was still going to be a wedding. I’d assumed he and Riley worked things out until you walked down the aisle. Just promise you won’t tell him that I told you.”

“I promise. Your secret is safe with me.”

The women turned their attention to chit-chat for a while, just getting to know each other. Alessandra hung on Beth’s every word hoping for more information, but she received nothing useful.

Alessandra left more determined to uncover her husband’s deceptions.

## Chapter Ten

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“YOU FUCKED UP BIG TIME,” NOAH CHASTISED DRAKE.

Drake turned the cool beer bottle over in his hand and began peeling the label. “I don’t have the faintest idea what you mean.”

“Don’t do this to Alessandra. She’s a great girl with a giant heart despite all the shit she’s experienced.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Drake was irritated at being needled yet again.

“Yet you keep her at arm’s length,” Jerry added.

“I love her. I’m doing what I must to protect her.” *Why didn’t they understand that?*

It was a busy Wednesday evening at Hoolihan’s pub, where the three men met regularly for a kink-free drink night. They occupied one of the wooden-backed booths against the wall. Numerous high tables and stools dotted the floor between their seats and the walnut bar.

Wednesday was dart league night, chosen purposefully for the noise pollution. It allowed them to converse with a low risk of being overheard by the buzzy crowd.

“Protection is great. Smart, even,” Jerry began. “But I share things with my spouse to protect him. Hiding things or lying drives a wedge in your relationship that is hard to come back from.”



“You’re on the other side of things. In *this* world, we protect what’s ours. I failed her once, and that shit won’t ever happen again.” Drake slammed his bottle on the table with enough force that it began foaming.

“Are you willing to risk losing your wife in the process? Because that’s what’s going to happen.” Jerry stared daggers at Drake. “You forget I come from a less-than-stellar background. You don’t own the cornerstone on witnessing shit and changing your life.”

“She heard you at the safe house,” Noah said. “She knows you’re connected. What if she thinks you’re actually an associate of her father? Do you really want her to think you’re one of the bad guys?”

“She’s done being kept in the dark, Drake. You know as well as we do how determined she is to sniff out the truth. What if she turns to Luca? She’s immersing herself in a dangerous game. Your pride is clouding your judgment, and she could get hurt.”

Drake growled, “Don’t you bring up his fucking name. Not after the shit he did to you and her.”

“Are you threatened by him? Do you think she still has feelings for him, Drake?”

In the far recesses of his mind, he was terrified that Alessandra still had feelings for the man. It was Drake’s fault Alessandra had endured years of abuse at her father’s hand. Instead of making his claim and guarding her, he was fuck-knows-where, likely at the bottom of a bottle with a nameless mouth wrapped around his cock.

Confession was allegedly good for the soul. Drake hated kneeling before a priest and begging to be absolved for sins he was never sorry for committing in the first place. But what if confessing something he couldn’t tell his wife eased some of the guilt in his gut? What if he figured out a way to move forward?

“Grant’s source in the Russo family informed him of the wedding day bait and switch. Riley and I ended our

engagement before the wedding, but knowing Alessandra would be the bride, I decided not to cancel the wedding.”

“Why the fuck would you do that to her?” Noah asked, shocked.

“Alessandra Russo was always supposed to be mine. There are some things you can fight, and then fate likes to fuck you in the ass.”

Drake took a swig of his beer, eager to climb off the hot seat, but Noah’s anger didn’t dissipate.

“You’re an egocentric fucking bastard, Drake! You can’t justify your selfishness with some bullshit line about protection. You tortured the poor girl and made her miserable for months.”

“I know,” Drake said, admonished.

“You better figure out how you’re going to make things right. Because at this point, we’re done safeguarding your secrets. Alessandra deserves real love. Not some impudent fool who will only end up hurting her again.”

“And who’s going to take care of her? You?” Drake snorted.

“Yes!” Noah retorted angrily.

Drake was taken aback by Noah’s brazen outburst. It was so out of character for the even-tempered man. He sat like a white knight with his glass of lemon water. Drake studied him for a moment and wondered if it was possible his feelings for Alessandra ran deeper than he admitted. Or if he was lashing out because of the trauma he suffered at Luca’s hands.

Jerry put his hand on his husband’s arm. “It’s okay, Noah. We all love Alessandra and want what’s best for her.”

An awkward silence fell upon the table like a heavy shroud. The men focused on their drinks in an attempt to gather their thoughts and find a more productive route of conversation.

“I have a plan,” Drake admitted. “Alessandra will be free from Tony and Luca if everything works out. Our mission will be complete, and we can all move forward with our lives.”

“Do me a favor. Keep me out of your fucking plan.”

“Noah...” Drake began. “I’m truly sorry for what Luca did to you. Thank you for being the friend you are to Alessandra.”

“I’m not doing it for you, Drake,” he admitted.

“Trust me, I know. But I’m thanking you anyway because you are one of the most genuine people I know. Alessandra deserves better than me, but I plan to earn it. I love her.”

Noah winced. “In the wrong hands, love is toxic.”

Before Drake could retort, Noah rose and excused himself. Jerry, who had remained silent most of the conversation, turned to Drake.

“You know Noah’s trying to process everything. I’m not going to apologize for him, because he has some valid points.”

“I really love her, Jerry.”

“I know you do. But actions speak louder than words.”

“I never asked for this shit.” Drake rubbed his eyes. “It feels like I’m never going to dig myself out of this hole.”

“Noah’s going to be pretty upset when he learns the truth about you, Drago.”

“I appreciate you not telling him.”

“I didn’t do it for you. But believe me, if it puts my husband in harm’s way again, I won’t hesitate to tell him everything. I’ll put pressure on Grant, and then you won’t have a choice.”

“I understand.”

“Sort your house, Drake. I suggest you do it soon before you lose everything you’ve worked so hard to achieve.”

## Chapter Eleven

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STILL REELING FROM EVERYTHING NOAH AND BETH HAD dropped on her, Alessandra waited anxiously for Drake. It was time to learn the truth about the man she married. Though it frightened her, there was power to gain from it.

She Googled “Drake Walker” and impatiently waited for the search engine to perform its job. There were too many hits—the first and most popular being a Wiki fan page for some kind of story game. She wanted to delve further into the enticing fandom but was a woman on a mission. Alessandra downloaded the app for later and refined the search: “Drake Walker, Chicago prosecutor.”

The refined search brought up the desired person. A black and white engagement photo from the society pages caught her eye. Drake stood stiffly, looking like he was about to face a firing squad next to Riley with her million-watt smile. A pang of jealousy shot through Alessandra because no photos depicted her and Drake as a couple. They didn’t even have one in their home, she realized, and it was suddenly the most depressing thing and something she would rectify immediately.

Alessandra scrolled through her phone to find pictures of her and Drake. They had taken a few selfies at Alessandra’s insistence. One was a day trip they took to the Milwaukee County Zoo to see the three elephants—Brittany, Ruth, and Belle. Elephants were her favorite animal; Chicago hadn’t had one since she was a little girl. Their backs were to the

enclosure and one of the three magnificent beauties was visible behind them.

The quote “Love will draw an elephant through a key-hole” popped into her head. She realized how true that was, looking at the selfie of her and her husband. Despite the crap they’d waded through, the moment she captured showed nothing more than a couple in love.

Underneath Drake’s aviators, his smile was just as genuine as hers. She loved the tousled look of his chocolate, wavy hair and unshaven face. He looked as good in jeans and a gray T-shirt as he did in a thousand-dollar suit in a courtroom. Relaxed Drake was her favorite; he was like a different person letting go of his burdens, however briefly.

She sent that photo to be express-printed and continued scrolling. A video she found took her breath away.

*“I want you to see yourself the way I see you. I made this video for your eyes only, Alessandra.”*

*Alessandra was asleep, likely after she and Drake had been intimate. She rolled over, kicking the sheet away, exposing her naked body. Her auburn hair splayed across the pillow. Her brows were knitted together, and her lips pursed. Clearly lost in a dream, she visibly calmed when Drake stroked her cheek.*

*“You’re so beautiful, it hurts to see you in pain. Even when you’re sleeping, there are nights you can’t escape it. But I’m here, amore mio.”*

*Drake’s strokes moved from her cheek down to his collar, still around her neck.*

*“I think you know by now how arousing it is to see you in my collar. I’ve discovered a new kink because I’m hard as a fucking rock watching the way your bare breasts rise and fall in your sleep as you simper.”*

*Drake propped the phone at an angle where they were both visible and climbed onto the bed, straddling her hips.*

Alessandra was mesmerized, watching him languidly stroke his long thick cock.

*“What would you do if you woke up tomorrow with my cum on your tits?”*

*His free hand circled Alessandra’s breast, and he brushed his thumb over her nipple. Her lips parted with a sigh as her nipple pebbled in reaction to his touch.*

*“You’re always so fucking responsive, bella. If I pulled your legs apart and ran my finger through your pussy lips, would you already be warm and wet?”*

Alessandra should be outraged, watching Drake master her sleeping form. She had never consented to be touched or recorded while she slept. But it would be a lie to say she wasn’t turned on as wetness slicked her core. She fought the urge to rub her throbbing clit with her fingers. Drake’s voice pulled her attention back to the video.

*“Your body is the most spectacular piece of art I’ve had the pleasure of viewing.”*

*Drake continued stroking his cock as he played with Alessandra. He leaned over and blew across her chest. Her moan came through the phone speaker as loud and clear as the slight arch of her back. He momentarily removed his hand to step away, and she whimpered, clearly missing his touch.*

*Drake chuckled. “Sei mozzafiato.”*

*His fingertips ghosted up her inner thigh, and her legs relaxed, allowing him better access.*

*“Do you crave my touch, bella? Does this mean you feel safe with me? Because I would never hurt you. I need you to understand that. How many times have we discussed trust and commitment? If nothing else, know that my feelings for you are real. We communicate best here, don’t we? My cock’s never lied to you. Your pussy weeps for me.” He frowned as he continued. “No matter what happens in the future, you have all of me. You may wear my collar, but I’m irrevocably yours.”*

*Alessandra moaned again when Drake brushed his fingers through her dripping slit. He made a tight peace sign with his fingers and rubbed around her clit. Her breathing changed, and she squirmed when he probed her with his finger.*

Alessandra spread her legs and brushed her hands along her thighs, shuddering.

*“Your pussy is contracting around my finger already. Are you dreaming it’s my cock your tight cunt is milking?”*

*He withdrew his finger and brushed the head of his cock through her folds.*

Alessandra rubbed her clit through her panties, unable to hold back anymore.

*“Drake...” she mumbled, sleepily.*

*“Shhh, bella, Daddy’s going to take care of you.”*

*He leaned back and pulled Alessandra’s legs over his shoulders and buried his face in her warm cunt. Her breath hitched as Drake flicked his tongue over her clit, and she screamed when he sucked it into his mouth.*

*“Drake!”*

Alessandra bucked against her palm as she came, drowning out the remainder of the video. She remembered the steamy morning sex they’d had after she woke up.

*Drake loomed over her with a wolfish grin. He ground his hips against her pelvis.*

*“Morning, bella.”*

*“Hello to you, too.” She smiled groggily.*

*His lips captured hers and he fucked her mouth with his tongue while his hands squeezed her breasts. He growled like a beast as he flipped her over and positioned her on all fours. Alessandra cried out as he rammed himself to the hilt and pistoned his hips almost faster and harder than she could bear.*

*His hand fisted her hair and pulled hard, causing her back to bow. His other hand, which had a bruising grip on her hip, moved to her throat and squeezed, choking off her cry. He continued like a frenzied animal, his hips snapping against hers, pushing her up the mattress and making the headboard slam against the wall. He roared as he released inside of her.*

*“Take my cum, bella. I’m going to leave my cock buried inside your greedy cunt until your womb absorbs it all. If any of it drips out, I’m going to scoop it up with my fingers and push it back in. I want you pregnant with my baby.”*

*His dick continued pulsing inside her as he moved deep within her sensitive channel. When she didn’t answer, he slapped her ass hard. “Did you hear what I said?”*

*“I have the implant in my arm.”*

*“Make an appointment and have that shit removed immediately.”*

*He wasn’t asking, he was telling. Drake pulled her up by the elbows so her back was against his chest. The new position opened her body and her vulnerability. It was thrilling and terrifying at the same time.*

*Tears ran down her cheeks as Drake swelled and throbbed with his second release. She hissed when he pulled out. Drake left the bed, returned a moment later with a warm cloth, and set to wiping between her legs.*

*“Did I hurt you?” he asked, concerned.*

*“No. I’m fine.”*

*“I can see that you aren’t. Talk to me.”*

*“Is that an order, Master?” she sassed.*

*Drake’s face immediately changed at her provocation. He was being sincere, and she threw that aside. He grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him.*

*“I’m asking you to let me in. Is it because I said I wanted you to remove your implant? It might not have been the best timing, but it wasn’t just in the heat of the moment. I love you. I want to take the next step with you.”*

*Floodgates threatened to open inside Alessandra. He didn’t know her greatest shame. “I had an abortion.”*

*Drake stiffened immediately. “When?”*

*“Luca got me pregnant the night he took my virginity. My father called me a whore and beat me. When I recovered, he*



*forced Marcello to take me to the clinic. I got the implant in my arm so my father wouldn't find out I was on birth control. I couldn't take the risk of getting pregnant again."*

*"How many men?"*

*"Wha—"*

*"How many men did your father force you to sleep with? I need you to tell me so I know how many bullets to unload into his body. I'm going to kill Anthony Russo. He'll never hurt you again. Do you hear me?"*

*She blinked a few times. He told her before he would make her father pay, but that was the first time he'd said it with such conviction.*

*"He doesn't deserve your sympathy, dolcezza. I'm sorry for everything you endured at his hand and the hands of others. But you are stronger than they gave you credit for. My regina. You are no pawn. I will do whatever it takes to make you see yourself as you truly are."*

*"Drake," she said quietly, looking up into his sincere dark pools.*

*"Forget about everyone's expectations. Do you want to have kids?" he asked.*

*"Yes," she answered honestly.*

*"Then tomorrow, I want you to see the doctor and get that shit removed from your body. I don't want you on birth control ever again. I'm going to wine and dine you tomorrow and return home to put my baby inside you." He was hard again.*

*"Drake, I'm sore."*

*She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Drake unwrapped her and laughed.*

*"My greedy, insatiable wife. Isn't my cum dripping down your thighs enough to satisfy you? No, bella. I have other plans for this," he said, stroking his shaft. "I'm going to finish what I started earlier and paint my initials on your chest."*

## Chapter Twelve

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IT WAS TIME. ALESSANDRA COULDN'T PUT IT OFF ANY LONGER. She took a few deep breaths to steel her resolve and punched the numbers she knew by heart into the keypad. The tone rang three times before a smarmy voice answered.

"How nice of you to call. I've missed you. I can't stop thinking about the last time we saw each other."

Alessandra's teeth grated at the sound. *This was a mistake.*

"Listen to me and listen good, you sick fuck."

Luca tutted. "Watch your tone with me, Alessandra."

"This isn't a social call. I want answers."

Alessandra didn't have to see Luca to know he was smoking when he exhaled. He chuckled. "What makes you think I want to help you?"

"Because you owe me."

"I don't owe you shit, Alessandra. Maybe if you wear something sexy and beg on your knees where you belong—"

"Goodbye, Luca," she snapped.

Alessandra jammed the red button on her phone, terminating the call immediately.

The elevator dinged, signaling Drake's arrival in the private elevator. Her phone rang again, and the caller ID informed her it was Luca calling. She sent the call to voicemail and turned her phone off.

*Stupid girl. I don't know what you expected by calling him,*  
Alessandra chastised herself.

A cloud of negativity preceded Drake's exit from the elevator. Fuming, he stomped down the hall with his briefcase in hand and slammed the door behind him. Several minutes later, he returned with a generous glass of whiskey in hand. He loosened his tie and undid the top few buttons of his dress shirt.

"Whom were you talking to, bella? I've heard you've been quite the busy bee today."

"Yeah, I thought I was married to a good man. Imagine my disappointment at finding out he is a lying scumbag."

Drake stalked up to her, his eyes blazing. Alessandra flinched when he reached for her, but the hit she expected never came. He dropped his hands immediately, and his features twisted.

"When are you going to trust that I won't hurt you like your piece of shit father or your ex?" he spat, but the hurt was clearly noticeable.

Alessandra ducked around him, but Drake wasn't through. He grabbed her arm and spun her around.

"You better watch yourself, Alessandra. You're dangerously close to earning a punishment."

"No, I don't think I am," she challenged.

He pulled her against him and she twisted like a trapped cat, clawing against his chest. Drake's breathing changed, and he lifted Alessandra's chin up with a single finger, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Drake grabbed her wrists and crushed his lips against Alessandra's, silencing her.

He scooped her up, carried her to the bedroom, and threw her on the bed.

"Strip," he commanded.

Alessandra rose from the bed and slapped Drake hard enough to leave a mark, but to his credit, he didn't flinch.

"I said strip." His voice grated on gravel.

"Fuck off!" she yelled.

"Do you remember your safe word?"

"Hullabaloo," she said with a nod.

Drake didn't say another word, just grabbed Alessandra's top and tore it off her body. His eyes darkened at the sound of the tearing fabric. The corners of his mouth lifted like a predator readying to feast on its prey.

"Fuck!" Alessandra crossed her arms, but Drake grabbed her and flipped her face-down on the mattress. He lifted her skirt, pulled off her panties, and spanked her hard. She barely concealed the shriek.

"You do not speak without my permission. I gave you the option to strip, which you refused. Will you be a good girl and remove the rest of these clothes? I'd be more than happy to tear the rest."

He fisted the waistband of her skirt to prove his words. She remained silent.

"Answer me."

"Yes, Master."

Alessandra scooted off the bed and removed the skirt. She stood before Drake in nothing more than a lacy purple rosebud bra.

"That too, Alessandra."

She obeyed and stood naked before him.

"You know what to do."

She crawled back onto the bed and knelt the way he liked.

Drake rummaged through a drawer in his nightstand and removed a pair of red leather handcuffs connected by a small, linked chain.

"I want to restrain you tonight."

A fissure of excitement and fear shot through Alessandra. She was always hesitant about being restrained because of her past experiences. But she trusted her Master in the bedroom, and it seemed this was the only place they had trust right now.

Wetness and fire licked through her loins as he pulled his crop out of the cabinet. *Thwack, thwack*. Drake flicked the crop against his palm. His footsteps fell heavy on the hardwood floor, or maybe that was her heartbeat in her ears.

Drake looked down at Alessandra tied to the bed. He drew the crop across her chest, teasing her nipples with the leather tip. Her back arched and she moaned when he lightly flicked it over her sensitive skin.

“You’re so eager for your punishment, bella. How it goes from here is entirely up to you.”

Drake stripped his clothes, and Alessandra’s eyes trailed her husband’s chest and torso, admiring the sculpted perfection of his body. She followed the dark line of hair that led into his silk black boxers to his magnificent cock, which begged for attention, but he was in no rush to reveal himself.

Drake stroked Alessandra’s face affectionately and kissed her. When she tried to deepen the kiss, he backed away. Alessandra whined pitifully, and Drake chuckled.

“It’s time we discussed things as husband and wife. Have you heard of spousal privilege? The spousal testimonial privilege precludes one spouse from testifying against the other in criminal proceedings. This privilege can be invoked at any time, but it does not survive if a couple divorces.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

The crop came down against Alessandra’s thigh.

“You do not speak unless I give you permission. Is that understood?”

Alessandra nodded and Drake continued. “There are things I have kept from you for your safety.” Alessandra squirmed as Drake rubbed the tip of the crop around her navel. “I love you. The love I have for you is real—it’s the most real thing in my

life. I beg you not to question that. I didn't expect to fall for you, but I did."

"Why did you lie to me about your relationship with Riley?"

*Thwack.* The crop came down on her hip.

"My relationship with Riley has nothing to do with our marriage."

"Please, Master. Tell me the truth. I need to hear it from your lips, not someone else's."

Drake growled, "I promise to tell you when we're not naked in our bed together. No other man or woman deserves to be in these sheets with us."

Drake nuzzled Alessandra's neck and kissed her collar. The tip of the crop came down against her stiff nipple, and she cried out.

## Chapter Thirteen

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“DID YOU KNOW I WAS THE BRIDE BEFORE I WALKED DOWN the aisle?”

“No, bella. I didn’t know you were going to be my bride.” Drake searched Alessandra’s face intently, hoping she bought his lie. Her mouth fell open to retort. He continued, “You have this magnetism about you. When you walked down the aisle, it was obvious to me who you were.”

The day Alessandra slipped in front of the courthouse, Drake held her in his arms longer than necessary because it felt like she was meant to be there. She looked at him with those shining emeralds and licked her lower lip. He would’ve kissed her if that pesky reporter hadn’t been there.

Not long after, he stood in the chapel on his wedding day, expecting this scared little girl to walk down the aisle in a wedding dress, but instead, a vixen captivated him. It seemed a lifetime ago, but they were still technically newlyweds.

Confusion and self-doubt furrowed Alessandra’s gorgeous brow, leaving Drake feeling guilty for letting her feel as though things were her fault. He took her as his bride, not caring about her feelings. But now, her heartbreak became his.

He ran the crop over the silky skin of her inner thigh. He stopped when he reached her apex but didn’t hit her with it this time.

“Who have you been talking to?” she asked.

“Be specific, bella.”

“I know Jerry asked you for help, but you refused him. He accused you of being stubborn. I’ve come to know this is a normal trait of yours.”

“You spoke to my friends about me?” Anger clouded Drake’s vision. He tightened his hand around the handle and swatted Alessandra’s thigh hard enough to cause a yelp.

Drake paused to give her a moment to breathe. She had her safe word, and their game would be over the moment she used it, but not their conversation. This discussion was necessary. However, some things were easier to admit when his wife was naked.

“What else, bella?”

“I overheard you on the phone in the safe house,” she cried out as the crop kissed her other thigh.

His wife shivered as he ran the tip through the desire dripping from her slit. He licked a bead of sweat from her chest, savoring the saltiness on her skin before worrying a nipple between his teeth.

“I know you’re connected.”

Drake froze and pulled away from Alessandra. He raised his gaze to meet hers. His expression became unreadable as he called her bluff.

“If you don’t tell me the truth, Drake, I’m going to find it on my own.”

Drake pressed the tip of the crop against Alessandra’s clit, and she bucked and writhed as the tension broke. His dick twitched in his boxers.

“You’re so beautiful, Alessandra.” He spoke with reverence.

He was at war with himself as his hands glided over her bare skin. Alessandra was about to endure another punishment for her husband’s shortcomings, and he hoped she would forgive him.

“Ten,” he said.

“What?” she jerked out of her post-orgasmic fog.



“Make that eleven. You spoke without permission and failed to address me as Master.”

Drake untied Alessandra from the headboard. Her eyes fell to his thumb rubbing her scarred wrists, enraptured by the single point their bodies met. Though her scabs had healed, the new scars were pink and tender. One day they would fade, and he hoped they would become a distant memory. Until then, he would continue reassuring her that she was seen.

Drake pulled Alessandra to the foot of the bed and turned her over. He forced her chest to the bed and rubbed her ass to prep her for the rough treatment he was about to bestow. She wiggled beneath him in anticipation but stopped when he squeezed.

“Count aloud for me.”

The crop came down across Alessandra’s voluptuous ass. A bright pink blush appeared in the spot his crop slapped her. His mouth watered as her head reared. He longed to take a bite and ravish her, but the thrill of punishment was enough. It was his turn to demand answers.

“One,” Alessandra mewled.

“Why don’t you trust me, bella?” Hurt laced his tone.

Without giving her a chance to answer, he repeatedly brought the crop down. A torrent of feelings tore through Drake’s chest. For once, he was driven by emotion and not logic.

Alessandra sagged against the bedspread and yelped. “Three... four...”

“A Dom/sub relationship can only thrive on trust, like a marriage. Why is the bedroom the only place you see me?” he asked, embittered.

“I want to trust you, Master. But how can I when you continue to lie to me?”

*Whack, whack.*

“Why can’t you trust that I’m trying to protect you? Trust that I will tell you everything when you need to know.”

“Ten... eleven!” she screamed.

“Goddamn it, Alessandra. Don’t you see me? I’m your husband, and I love you! Can’t you see how fucking tied in knots I am? I was scared shitless when you were hurt. I thought I was going to lose you.”

Drake’s dark eyes burned at the memory of finding her lying in a pool of her own blood. He closed them and pinched the bridge of his nose, inhaled deeply.

“Let me in, Drake,” Alessandra said softly.

Alessandra’s body stiffened in anticipation of the crop coming down again as he grabbed her waist. But Drake dropped it to the floor. He knelt behind her and began massaging her sore ass. He kissed along the red marks in reverence.

“Why don’t you love me, bella?” he whispered against her throbbing flesh.

“I love you, Drake! I have for a long time.”

She tried to move from Drake’s grasp, but he grabbed her hips, forcing her to stay in place and bit her cheek. It was more satisfying after her punishment.

“Why did you call Luca Donato?”

Alessandra hadn’t known he tracked her phone. Grant had helped Drake install an app that cloned her cloud. Notifications alerted him when texts and calls were made. In all fairness, he never read what was private. After the operation concluded, he intended to remove the app.

Alessandra sobbed, “You’ve been lying to me our entire marriage. It’s time you tell me the truth.”

Drake turned her over and pulled her against him. He kissed her desperately and sloppily, trying to distract Alessandra. The taste of her salty tears mixed with their saliva, and he couldn’t get enough.

“I’m sorry, dolcezza. You deserve so much better than this life. No matter how hard I try, I will never stop disappointing you, will I? You deserve a better man, the kind that you can be proud to stand beside.”

Touched by his vulnerability, Alessandra cupped Drake's cheeks and forced him to face her. "I want you, Drake. I want you as my Master, my lover, and my husband. Why is it so hard for you to believe that I love you? I need you to let me in. I'm here for you. I'm right here. We're stronger together."

This time she took charge of the kiss. Emotions Drake suppressed long ago resurfaced within. Tears shone in his eyes as he clung to Alessandra like a lifeline, allowing every ounce of her love to envelop him. She was the light to his darkness, and he would perish without her.

Drake led Alessandra into the marble-walled shower. He tested the spray and fiddled with the knobs until a comfortable warmth surrounded them. Drake reached for a soft cloth and the luxury shower gel and worked it into a lather before rubbing down his wife's body.

She hissed when he touched her sore cheeks. He crouched behind her and lightly rubbed the area with his fingertips. He slipped the cloth between her thighs and brushed it against her pussy. She wiggled her hips, enticing him further.

"If you continue doing that, I'm going to get dirty again."

"Maybe that's the point. I love my sexy, dirty wife. You took your punishment so well. Let me take care of you now."

Drake pulled Alessandra against his face and lapped her juices with his tongue. He brought one hand to her belly to help steady her and pushed her forward, encouraging her to use his face as a stool.

After she found release, Drake continued to wash her gently and pulled her from the shower. He towed her dry and walked her naked back to the bed.

"Lay down on your stomach," he said gently.

Alessandra complied with his soft command. Drake went to the cabinet and removed a bottle of lavender massage oil and returned to her. He climbed on top of the bed and straddled her hips.

He flipped the top open and poured a copious amount in his palm and rubbed his hands together to warm the liquid.

Alessandra let out a soft sigh when he slowly massaged her back. He began at her shoulders, kneading to release the tension she carried.

She moaned as his strong hands moved over her scarred back. Listening to her soft sounds brought pleasure to his ears, but he ignored his own needs.

“How does that feel?” he asked.

“Mmm.”

He turned his attention to marks that remained on Alessandra’s ass.

“Oh, that feels so good. Please don’t stop.”

“Anything for you.”

Drake pulled Alessandra into his arms, and her breathing became even. Drake stared at the ceiling, unsatisfied and frustrated. His distraction technique had done its job a little too well. Despite their close proximity, a valley stretched between them.

## Chapter Fourteen

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A FEW DAYS LATER, THE AIR WITHIN THE PENTHOUSE WAS SO rife with tension it could be cut with a knife. Alessandra was at a loss of whom to turn to. Taking a page from her husband's book, she hired a private investigator to dig into his background. The woman called Alessandra and asked her to come to the office for a meeting.

The investigator's office was a small, rented space in the loop. The walls were gray, but instead of being dreary, they offered the perfect backdrop for the minimal decor. A white console table sat against the back wall with a small stack of books and steampunk-inspired knickknacks. An abstract painting of primary color splashes hung above it on the wall. Never having a green thumb, Alessandra was unsure if the enormous potted plants in the opposite corners of the room were real or fake. The large window was shielded by sheer white curtain panels.

A round white rug lay in the center of the marble floor. A rectangular glass-topped desk stood in the middle of the rug on top of white legs, and a stern-looking woman sat in the white chair typing on a laptop.

"Welcome, Mrs. Walker. It's nice to officially meet you. Please call me Tammy." She gestured for Alessandra to take the armchair opposite the desk.

"Hello, Tammy. It's nice to meet you," Alessandra said, though she didn't mean it.

Tammy invited Alessandra to her office because she had news to share. She was apprehensive about the meeting, and the P.I.'s attitude made her feel like she was about to be scolded by a school principal.

“Thanks for coming in. I assure you, I don’t take my responsibilities lightly. Looking into anyone working for the District Attorney’s office can be a terrible business. I hope you appreciate the position this puts me into.”

“I understand. Thank you for taking my case. But I thought I made it clear my expectations were about my husband’s past and personal life, not his professional career.”

The woman leaned forward and rested her elbows on her desk, lacing her fingers together. The smile she had a moment ago slipped off her face. Alessandra realized she was caught in a snare too late.

“I hope you can appreciate that I am required to perform my due diligence and looked into your background as well.”

“You what?” Alessandra stiffened.

“I’m afraid that my fee has tripled at this point. I need payment in full before we proceed.”

“That’s extortion.”

“No, Mrs. Walker. This is purely business. Surely you can understand the predicament you’ve put me in. The question is how much you’re willing to pay for what I have in my files?”

Tammy adopted a Cheshire smile that made Alessandra’s stomach roll. She wondered how much the investigator had uncovered. Surely, she must realize that taking on a Russo signed her death certificate. Maybe that’s why she was so eager for money—to disappear.

Alessandra saw that while Tammy appeared calm, collected, and in control above the desk, she was nervous beneath the glass-topped surface. She was ready to call the woman’s bluff.

*Checkmate in five moves*, thought Alessandra. She crossed her arms and was prepared to show Tammy just who she was attempting to fuck with.

“If you know who I am, then you must know how dangerous things can get for you if you cross me.”

“Is that a threat? From you? You’re a church mouse,” she said, mockingly.

Something inside Alessandra snapped. She wasn’t mean. While she always tried to do the right thing and be a good person, she was tired of being a pawn in the games of others. She was tired of being lied to—being underestimated—and tired of being submissive to everyone else’s desires.

“Don’t cross me, or I will burn this shit to the ground.”

Tammy laughed, “How cute! Are you a little firebug like your big brother?”

“Don’t you dare laugh at me, bitch. I will do it. It’s a promise, not a threat.”

Tammy flattened her palms on the desk. “And I have you on tape threatening me. Always cover your bases, Alessandra Russo.”

Alessandra sat motionless for a moment. She refused to give Tammy the satisfaction of winning.

“You know what, I’m feeling generous. I’m going to raise your fee to quadruple the original amount.” Tammy smiled again.

“My husband will find out about this and have you shut down. He’ll make sure you’re prosecuted.”

“Oh, yes. Tell the husband that you’re investigating that you went behind his back and hired me. I’m sure that will only strengthen your marriage. I think we both know you’re bluffing, *Mrs. Walker*.”

Alessandra pulled her cell phone out of her purse and texted her only available ally. She typed furiously so her opponent wouldn’t see her shaking. Once she was finished she put her phone back in her purse and sat back in her chair.

She remained silent and stared at Tammy until the P.I.’s phone rang five long minutes later.

“Hello?”

Alessandra couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, but she could tell the angry tone of the male coming through. Watching Tammy squirm and sweat, Alessandra sat up straighter.

“Checkmate.” She rested her elbows on the desk and laced her fingers together, mirroring the Cheshire smile the other woman had treated her to earlier.

The call ended and Tammy jabbed a button on her screen. Her face was practically puce as she glared at Alessandra.

“You'll be sorry for that.”

Tammy tossed the dossier on the desk. Alessandra snatched it up, but Tammy interrupted her before she had the chance to open it.

“You tell absolutely no one that I was the one who uncovered this information. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Don't open it in the office. Wait until you're somewhere private. I don't like dealing with the emotional breakdowns of clients.” Alessandra nodded. “Good luck, Alessandra. You're going to need it. Our arrangement is over. Never contact me again.”

Alessandra exited the office, slamming the door behind her.



ALESSANDRA ARRIVED HOME TO FIND A VISITOR IN HER LIVING room.

“You know I believe everyone deserves one favor. You just used yours,” Jerry's Dom voice and stern look sent shivers down her spine. Her knees trembled as she fought the overwhelming urge to drop down and beg for his forgiveness.



Instead, she said, “Thank you, Jerry.”

“What the fuck were you thinking, Alessandra? Why would you hire a private investigator?”

“I know Drake’s keeping secrets from me. And if he won’t tell me, I’ll uncover the truth on my own.”

Jerry held out his hand. “Hand me the file.”

She took a step back and clutched it tighter. “Why?”

“Depending on what the investigator found, it could endanger you and Drake. I want to see if she uncovered something she shouldn’t have.”

“And why should I trust you? Why can’t I just read through the dossier myself?”

Jerry stepped closer to her. His stern expression now conveyed concern.

“I’m on your side, Alessandra. Believe it or not, I’m not the bad guy here. And I know it might not seem like it right now, but neither is Drake.

“I can’t tell you what’s at stake. All I can say is that I see how much you love each other. Drake’s trying to protect you in the way he thinks is best.”

Alessandra retorted petulantly. “I don’t need his protection.”

Jerry’s face changed so quickly that it frightened her. She’d never seen him appear so serious, even in court. “Yes, you do.”

## Chapter Fifteen

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ALESSANDRA HAD NO LIFELINE TO HOLD ON TO. SHE WAS adrift at sea, and it was only a matter of time before the watery depths claimed her. Here was her husband's mentor and friend asking for the one piece of evidence she held in her hands. It would be so easy to say goodbye and take the file to her room.

Clearly, Jerry sensed her train of thought because he sternly called her name—*Alessandra*—sharp as a whip crack. He stepped up to her, put his hand on the manila folder, and pulled it gently from her grasp, which seemed to loosen against her will.

“Trust me,” he said softly.

*Trust...* That dreaded word again. Why was she the one who had to trust others? They were allowed to keep their secrets while never holding her confidence. Alessandra was the one putting herself on the line, emotionally and physically. She needed answers.

Alessandra pouted like a petulant child as Jerry flipped through the papers. She sank into the sofa and closed her eyes. What if there was something incriminating about Drake? She never wanted her husband to face harm.

Marriages went through rough patches; everyone says the first year is the roughest. All they had to do was make it through this one. But she questioned if her love was enough.

Jerry continued to flip through the documents with a studious look. Occasionally he made a sound of acknowledgment.

Finally, he visibly relaxed with a sigh. He placed the folder on the coffee table. Alessandra made a quick grab for the file.

“There’s nothing here that you didn’t already know. I’m sorry, I know you were hoping for something more.”

Alessandra couldn’t hide her disappointment as she leafed through everything. There was nothing about her husband’s time in Italy, their wedding day, or his connections.

“Can you please leave now?”

“Alessandra, let’s talk. I’ll stay with you and wait for Drake to come home.”

Alessandra shook her head. “I’d like to be alone right now.”

“Don’t do this. You aren’t alone.”

“And you’re helping my husband keep secrets from me.”

“Enough, Alessandra.” His Dom voice returned, stunning her. “Don’t do anything rash.”

After a few more minutes of insisting he should stay, Alessandra finally shut the door on Judge Matthews. She stood with her back against the door, listening intently for any noise for a few minutes before heading down the hall.

It was time for her to take matters into her own hands. First, she read the file backward and forward. Jerry hadn’t lied. Everything was a surface biography of the couple. *And to think that bitch tried to extort me for this info.*

Alessandra uncovered her tool kit that was cleverly hidden in her walk-in closet. She studied the lock on Drake’s office door as she’d been taught by Russell. What would Papà say if he could see her now? Would he be proud that his daughter was engaging in such espionage?

Alessandra had ample practice picking locks thanks to years of being locked in her bedroom as a teen. But that bedroom lock was nowhere as sophisticated as Drake’s office. It took her longer than she would’ve liked. The telltale click filled her with satisfaction as she overcame the first hurdle.

Drake's office was messy and cluttered, unlike the rest of the penthouse. Papers were strewn across the desktop and boxes were piled around the room. Alessandra assumed it was discovery for his new case. Since returning to the city, work was something they no longer discussed.

Knowing she didn't have much time, Alessandra approached the wall painting behind the desk of a yacht against a picture-perfect blue sky with white puffy clouds and gentle crested waves. She recognized a hidden wall safe, as her father's office had one—only the paintings varied.

She slid the painting up and was greeted by a standard wall safe with a digital keypad underneath. She tried every conceivable combination, including their dates of birth and wedding date.

It was smart for Drake not to pick something easily guessed, but Alessandra felt a little disappointed at not being able to crack the safe. That little voice within her was hurt by him not choosing a combination associated with her. She shook the thought out of her head and focused on her priorities.

Eventually, she grew frustrated with the red blinking light and chirp alerting her to the wrong combination. Alessandra returned to the desk drawers.

She took a pin hook and a turning tool from her kit and moved to pick the lock. After several attempts, she realized it wouldn't be of any use. The locking mechanism on the desk seemed to be custom-built.

Alessandra wanted to tug her hair in frustration, but determination left her unperturbed. She cursed and turned. That's when her attention settled on the built-in bookcase. A light bulb went off in her head, and she began checking for hollowed books, not stopping until every one was strewn across the floor. She smacked the shelf and discovered a false panel. She carefully ran her fingers along the edges until finding a hidden hook. The door opened to reveal a closet that she assumed doubled as a panic room.

Inside, Alessandra found a lockbox and matched it to the key she had found taped inside one of the book covers. She pulled

out a nine-millimeter, testing the weight and checking the cartridge.

Growing up in a house full of armed men, she was no stranger to weapons or how to handle them. But for some reason, the lengths to which Drake had gone to keep this weapon concealed sent a shiver down her spine.

She immediately searched for any explanation—an excuse that would offer him the benefit of the doubt. He prosecuted criminals like her brother; it only made sense for him to have a weapon for protection. Heaven forbid her father sent goons after him. The panic room made sense, too. The world they lived in was dangerous, and Alessandra couldn't fault Drake for finding a way to protect himself.

She continued looking until she found financial documents for offshore accounts. Drake had never hidden the fact that he came from family money—hell, she'd met Bitsy. He lived in a million-dollar penthouse, but the number of zeros threw her for a loop.

A dossier with the familiar name of *Anthony Russo* caught her eye. In picking it up, Alessandra accidentally knocked a stack of them over. The others were labeled *Marcello Russo*, *Alessandra Russo*, *Riley Watson*, and *Luca Donato*.

Alessandra picked them up, intending to return them to the shelf, but the temptation to find out what those files contained called to her. After all, the purpose of her excursion was to find answers. *Be careful what you wish for.*

## Chapter Sixteen

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### **ANTHONY RUSSO:**

A telephoto lens had captured a picture of her father and was paper-clipped to the front cover. In it, Anthony wore a black pin-striped suit with a black shirt and black tie. His tan face was twisted like a snarling beast, barking orders into the cell phone held up to his ear.

Alessandra had been on the receiving end of his ire more than enough times to know that whatever had made him angry, it was personal. And if it was personal, someone was as good as dead. The fact that his white hair was longer than usual told her this was a recent photo.

*Anthony Russo is the current head of the Russo family. His father, Francisco, emigrated from Italy in the 1940s, post-World War II. He settled in Chicago and quickly built a successful butcher business. Francisco retired at the age of 75, leaving everything to his son.*

*Francisco Russo wasn't known to be a kind man, but he was fair. He helped immigrants in the community find work, housing, or whatever else they needed. This led to him being seen as an integral part of the Italian-American community. As such, it was easy for Anthony to call upon those who owed his father and quickly rise in reputation.*

*Tony's oldest son Marcello's mother, is unknown, as he was born out of wedlock. Marcello was being groomed to take over the family until his arrest.*

*Anthony was only married once, to Marina Toretto, the daughter of Sal Toretto, head of a Sicilian family. Through his marriage, Tony absorbed Toretto's strength, and the couple birthed a daughter, Alessandra.*

*Luca Donato is the adopted son of Anthony. Luca moved from being Tony's top enforcer to being groomed as the new head of the Russo family.*

***Threat level A:*** *Anthony can handle himself in a fight. He is ruthless and has ample resources to serve his means. Anthony is known as a shark. He has ties to racketeering, firearms, and drugs.*



### **MARCELLO RUSSO:**

Marcello's mugshot was paper-clipped to the front cover. Marcello stood before a gray wall. His brown hair was shaggy and dirty, falling around his forehead and ears. Soot was smeared across his round cheeks.

Alessandra had seen her brother's mugshot on several news broadcasts, but she had never studied it like she did when it was in her hands. The hardened expression on his face filled her with dread and sent a shiver down her spine.

Drake was right when he told Alessandra she had blinders when it came to Marcello. She remembered their last confrontation and how there was no remorse in him. She no longer held onto hope that he was innocent, but he would always be her brother.

*Marcello Russo is the only biological son of Anthony Russo and an unnamed mother. He is the Russo family's former heir and is imprisoned for an indeterminate amount of time while his trial is ongoing.*

*Marcello was tasked with burning down a warehouse. Once he realized the targeted structure was occupied, he attempted to rescue the trapped civilian. He was caught by law enforcement on the scene and charged with arson and murder.*

*Updated: Marcello was recently released from Cook County Jail after evidence in the case went missing. A court date has been set to determine the fate of the trial. He is likely to be acquitted, and without evidence, the DA's office is unlikely to refile charges.*

*Marcello moved out of the Russo family home and lives with his girlfriend, Jenny Nguyen. She remains the Russo family attorney. Rumor has it they will be wed soon, though no official date has been set.*

***Threat level C:*** *While he carries the Russo name, he has no power. His current status poses no immediate threat.*



### **LUCA DONATO:**

A photo of Luca with his fists raised and taped to the wrist as he stood in a boxing ring fell out of the folder. Beads of sweat were visible on his brow and bare chest. His tattoos wrapped around rippling muscles like barbed wire. The cobra on his lower abdomen was ready to strike at any moment.

Conflicting emotions tore through Alessandra as she studied Luca's photo. She wished that her only feelings for him were anger and disgust. She mourned the boy she used to know and love as much as she mourned her own innocence.

He, like Alessandra and Marcello, had hope once. They had moments of being carefree children who laughed together, giving the guards hell. They were ensnared in Anthony Russo's grasp, and it was the worst thing that could've happened to them.



She snapped as she looked at the man who had attacked her and Noah so viciously. She tore the picture to shreds and let them fall to the floor. She was tired of making excuses for the Luca she once loved.

*Luca Donato is the current heir of the Russo family, rising from a ruthless and cruel enforcer. A betrothal agreement was made between Luca and Alessandra Russo to cement his seat at the head of the family after attempts to cause a mistrial for Marcello failed. He has repeatedly abused and attacked Alessandra Russo, and his violence toward women is abhorrent.*

*Luca's actual parentage is unknown. It was rumored that he may have been the bastard child of Anthony Russo. Incestuous relationships between cousins of families are not unheard of, but a comparative DNA sample shows no parental match for Donato and Russo. It is likely he was an enforcer's child.*

***Threat level A:*** *Donato is ambitious, ruthless, and quick-witted. He will be more powerful than his predecessor.*



#### **RILEY WATSON:**

Alessandra immediately recognized Riley and Drake's engagement photo. Riley's blonde hair was pulled back in a sleek updo without a single flyaway. Her lashes were incredibly long, accentuating her blue eyes. Not a single blemish was apparent, thanks to her professionally airbrushed makeup. Her pink-lipped broad smile showed perfectly shaped, white teeth. Everything was flawless about her appearance

Though Alessandra had printed out a few pictures of her with Drake, she bristled with jealousy at missing out on the dating and engagement phase. She knew Drake didn't love Riley, but

the woman was still stuck in their relationship like a thorn, one Alessandra hadn't been able to remove.

*Riley grew up in an upper-class household. Her parents circulated in the same social circles as the Walker family until one bad investment bankrupted the family. The patriarch was never able to recover his fortune.*

*Bitsy Walker pushed her son, Drake, to rekindle his romantic involvement with the disgraced heiress, which quickly turned into a reluctant engagement of convenience.*

*With Drake's blessing, Riley moved to Paris to pursue an art career, promising to return home for their wedding. During this time, the couple maintained little contact as there was no love between them.*

*Riley accepted a monetary bribe from Anthony Russo to dissolve her engagement before her wedding to Drake Walker. She has since returned from Paris to harass Drake and his current wife.*

*Her IP address was tracked as part of an investigation that discovered she downloaded ultrasound photos from internet image searches and photoshopped them with her information in an attempt to falsify a pregnancy. No reputable doctor has confirmed pregnancy for Riley Watson. Her motives behind such a ruse remain unclear at this time.*

*The Walker family has severed ties with the Watsons. She retains no allies from her former life. Her current whereabouts are unknown, but it is likely she has returned to Paris.*

**Threat level B:** *She is self-serving, and her motives remain unknown. Her association with the Russo family should not be taken lightly or ignored.*



**ALESSANDRA WALKER (RUSSO):**

A picture of Alessandra gazing over the lake was paper-clipped to the front of the folder. She stared forlornly into the distance; the breeze coming off the lake caused her auburn hair to billow around her shoulders.

For the life of her, Alessandra couldn't place herself at that moment. Was this how others truly saw her?

*Alessandra is the youngest child of the Russo family. She has a heart the rest of her family lacks. After her mother's murder, Tony ignored his daughter for most of her early life. She was raised by a series of nannies. Her personal guard, Russell, views the mafia princess as a daughter more than a charge. He has stepped in to protect her as much as possible.*

*In her teen years, Alessandra hid a romance with Luca Donato. The young lovers made plans to run away together but were caught, at which time Carlo Turelli was brought in to teach her obedience.*

*At 18, Ms. Russo was assaulted by Luca Donato at her father's command. This resulted in a pregnancy that she was forced to abort despite her wishes to keep the child. After this, Alessandra spent years being forced to entertain Anthony's associates until Marcello's criminal trial began.*

*Anthony set up a bride swap and married his daughter to Drake Walker. Though the beginning of their marriage was rocky, the couple has grown close.*

*Updated: Alessandra's auburn hair and green eyes have raised questions about her parentage. A DNA test has proven there is no familial match between Anthony Russo and Alessandra. She is the biological daughter of Marina and Ronan McGraw. At the present time, it is unknown if McGraw is aware he is Alessandra's father. Alessandra is unaware of her true parentage.*

**Threat level E:** *Despite repeated trauma, Alessandra continues to be compassionate. Due to her desperation for acceptance and love, she is easily manipulated. Her tender heart can be exploited and weaponized.*



THE FILE SLIPPED FROM ALESSANDRA'S GRASP. FINDING A dossier on herself in her husband's office was a slap in the face and a stab to the heart. He had manipulated her feelings to gain intel on her family.

She hated her family, but they were hers. Her father was a heartless bastard who had sold her to the enemy. Luca had raped her and attacked Noah, but at one point, he'd loved her. Marcello was the one person she was able to rely on, even if it was at her father's orders.

Learning she was the biological daughter of another man—an ally of her father no less—was mind-boggling. Alessandra wondered if her father forced her mother to be with other men as he'd forced her. Did she have an affair? Was she in love with this other man? The years of abuse Alessandra suffered made sense. She was held prisoner in more ways than one.

At that moment, she realized how fucked up her life truly was. As long as she was married to Drake, he was just another man holding the reins, letting her keep her rose-colored blinders. But no more.

What they didn't realize was Alessandra was more dangerous than she appeared. She had hidden beneath her father's desk or the table as a child, playing quietly while he conducted business. She knew every inch of her family home from playing hide-and-seek with the guards. She could and would burn the Russo empire to the ground and rise from the ashes like a phoenix from the flames.

Beneath her poised demeanor, a she-demon awoke. If this is what they thought of Alessandra, she would prove them to be damn fools. It was always the meek ones you needed to look out for.

Alessandra studied her reflection in the oval mirror on the side wall. Her hair was in disarray, and her cheeks were flushed. The wide-eyed woman staring back at her was unrecognizable.

“Ahhh!” she screamed.

She took a paperweight off Drake’s desk and hurled it at the mirror. The glass didn’t just crack it shattered into a million pieces along with her soul.

“You fucking whore!” she screamed. “I hate you! I hate you!”

She continued screaming, ignoring the pain in her throat because it was no match for the pain in her heart as she blindly swept everything from the desk. Rage blinded her as she picked up a letter opener and turned it over in her hand.

Who would she stab? Would she stab Drake? Her father? Luca? Or herself? *Yes*, she thought. She’d carve out her heart and burn the bitch. Alessandra would never feel a fucking thing again.

## Chapter Seventeen

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AFTER A LONG DAY AT THE OFFICE, DRAKE RECEIVED A CALL from Jerry. He was pissed that Alessandra would hire an investigator behind his back. This was their life, not a game.

It was time to tell her the painful truth if he didn't want to lose his wife. He just hoped that what he revealed didn't jeopardize everything he sought to achieve. It was time to say goodbye to Drake Walker and the fantasy life he'd built for himself.

Drake Walker commanded respect from his peers. His friends knew his darkest desires and didn't judge him for expressing them. He was the big brother that his younger siblings looked up to, and the son his parents were finally proud of. He had the most gorgeous wife wearing his ring. The wife that was meant to be his. The woman he loved more than anything, and the one who had recently agreed to give him a child.

The bastard inside of him was about to shatter all of that. He would no longer be a husband but a jailer. He wouldn't be a son or a brother as part of a family. His tattered career would be gone in a flash. Once the genie was outed from his bottle, no amount of prayer would put it back.

Drake made a few stops on his way home. The first was to a florist for a bouquet of flowers. He chose a colorful array of wildflowers but couldn't name a single one. Regardless, his wife deserved them. It was a pity she didn't expect gifts like flowers from him on a regular basis, and that shit was about to change.

His next stop was to purchase a nice bottle of Bordeaux to accompany their dinner. He owned a free-standing wine cooler with a capacity of over 40 bottles, but this occasion called for something different. Drake was far from a sommelier but knew a good bottle when he saw it.

The final stop was a restaurant to pick up dinner. Another travesty was the lack of dates he took his wife on. Most nights she cooked, or he picked up something on his way home from work. Alessandra spent her days at home waiting for him to walk in the door. It was a shame he only now realized how isolated she was. If it weren't for Noah or Beth, she wouldn't have any friends.

Drake vowed to do better and treat his wife to the marriage she always wanted. He would start taking her out on a weekly date night. He'd even let her pick the activities from time to time and do them without complaint. They could start entertaining once a month or drive to Lake Forest to visit his family.

He would also encourage her to pick up a hobby or do something that helped her make friends. Alessandra had so much to offer; it would be unfortunate if she felt unable to express herself.

Drake wanted to treat Alessandra to a relaxing day at the spa. He purchased a certificate to give her the works: facial, mani/pedi, massage, and body wax.

It was too much to work in hypotheticals and hopefulness. Things wouldn't change unless he made the first step. He couldn't love someone the way they deserved if he continued holding back.

In their building, deliveries were screened and visitors were signed in. The 24-hour building concierge was supposed to check all IDs of visitors against the approved list and call for others. The craggy man behind the desk tipped his hat and greeted Drake as he passed.

Drake swiped the key to his private elevator, which opened directly into the penthouse. Jerry and Alessandra were the only others who had a key to access it. He also technically owned that space and had a decorator turn it into a mudroom.

Any optimism Drake felt disappeared the moment he stepped off the elevator. Alessandra's strangled cry from down the hall caused his heart to stop. The wine bottle shattered as he dropped everything when he heard a crash from within.

His immediate thought was that someone had managed to slip in and attack her. Drake quickly opened the hidden wall safe behind the false panel in the pantry. He pulled out his Glock and loaded a full magazine. With his thumb on the safety, he made his way down the hall.

Drake's blood ran cold as he saw the door to his office standing wide open. Alessandra cried from within as another thumping crash sounded in the room.

A quick sweep of the trashed room revealed there was no imminent threat. He quickly tucked the gun into his waistband.

"Alessandra! *Che cazzo stai facendo*—what the fuck are you doing? Why did you break into my office?"

Broken glass crunched beneath Drake's shoes as he stepped into the mess. Papers were strewn everywhere as though a cyclone had blown through. One of the legs was broken off his sitting chair. His laptop, which was full of classified information, was smashed and broken in two. Drake would have a hell of a time explaining that to Grant.

Alessandra's hoarse screams turned into strangled sobs as her rage cooled. She still seemed unaware of his presence, and he gently laid his hand on her.

"Bella? What happened here?"

"How could you? How could you?"

Reinvigorated by rage, she beat against his broad chest. Drake closed his palms around her fists to halt her movements.

"What are you talking about?"

"The files, Drake! I read them all. How could you keep a file on me? You lied to me! You used me." Her voice cracked. "I hate you! I fucking hate you!"

"Stop, Alessandra."



But she didn't hear a word he said. "All you've done is lie to me. All you've done is use me!"

Tears flooded her flushed cheeks as she sagged against him. She whined pitifully. Her state was distressing. His fury at seeing the destroyed room was instantly replaced with concern.

The room could be rebuilt with a better fucking lock. The broken furniture could be replaced. Alessandra was his only concern.

"Calm down, dolcezza. You're talking in circles."

She pushed away from him. "Don't you dare tell me to calm down."

She picked a book from the mess and chucked it at Drake. He barely managed to dodge it as the pages fluttered near his ear. It crashed against the wall behind him, falling to the floor with a thud.

"Why? Why did you do this to me?" she sobbed. "You don't love me. You never did. I'm such an idiot."

Drake watched her wearily. His heart tore wide open at her sorrow. At one point, he had hated her and wanted to break her. But seeing her devastation was something he couldn't live with—something he would never forgive himself for.

"You said our relationship would never go beyond physical gratification. I thought if I were a good wife, you'd see me as more. I was a damn fool for believing you when you said you loved me."

"Bella, stop. Please let me explain."

"No one loves me. Not Luca, not my father, nor my brother. I see it all now. Who am I? I'm not Alessandra Russo or Mrs. Drake Walker. It hurts so bad, Drake. Make the pain stop."

Alessandra's emeralds were shiny with tears but dulled with heartbreak as she babbled self-degrading nonsense. Drake approached her slowly like a wounded animal. slowly She teetered on the edge, and it was up to him to pull her back.

"Alessandra, stop! You're scaring me."

Drake lunged to grab Alessandra as she crumpled to the floor.

## Chapter Eighteen

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GRANT ELLIS STOOD IN HIS DOWNTOWN LOFT SMOKING A stogie while his other hand was fisted in the hair of the raven-haired beauty on her knees with his cock in her mouth.

“That’s it, be a good little slut and suck me deeper.” His gravelly voice urged her on. She obeyed enthusiastically like the sweet treat she was.

Grant’s phone trilled from its place on his nightstand. He pulled his cigar from his lips when his date hesitated and looked up at him from her place of submission.

“No one told you to stop.”

As soon as the phone went silent, it rang again, making it harder to ignore. She let him go with a wet pop.

“Do you need to answer that?” she asked, hoarsely.

He wanted to grab her by the hair and command her to return to servicing him. When the phone rang a third time, he swore.

“You should go,” Grant said. “Leave your number if you’d like, and we can go out again.”

His date wiped her puffy lips with the back of her hand while he tucked his still-erect penis into his pants. No way was he going to answer the phone with his cock hanging out, but then it would serve whoever called right for interrupting him.

Grant couldn’t continue to ignore his work phone. His call log showed Drago’s name. It came to life again in his hand. A

distraught voice greeted him on the other end when he brought it to his ear.

“What happened?” Grant asked, his irritation replaced by concern in an instant.

“Alessandra had a panic attack. She needs medical attention.”

“I’ll call it in and call you right back.”

Grant ended the call without another word. He dropped the cigar into an ashtray since it had already extinguished in his hand.

He reported the incident, and EMS was dispatched to bring Alessandra to the same facility as before. It was important that she be treated at their clinic where associates of her father couldn’t find her.

Once the arrangements were made, he called Drago back. The man answered on the first ring.

“They’re en route. Tell me what happened.”

“Alessandra broke into my office and found the dossiers we compiled on her and her family.”

“Did she find the classified files?” Grant asked impatiently.

“I don’t think so. She trashed the office and destroyed my laptop.”

“Fuck! If we’re compromised—”

“I know.” Drake cut him off.

“I’ll meet you at the hospital.”



DRAKE SAT IN THE NOW-FAMILIAR WAITING ROOM AT THE private hospital where Alessandra was being treated.

Jerry and his husband, Noah, sat in seats opposite him. Though they had come to support him, Noah's scathing expression was laced with judgment. Drake didn't need it; he was already beating himself up.

"You could've avoided this by being honest with her. If something happens to her, Drake—"

"Noah," Jerry warned.

"No, he needs to hear this. Someone needs to kick his ass!" Noah exclaimed, exasperated, crossing his arms and staring daggers at Drake.

"Control your husband," Drake told Jerry.

"Control is for the bedroom, not in situations like this."

"Noah has overstepped his boundaries with *my* wife."

Noah snorted angrily. "Alessandra *needs* someone in her corner. You're driving her away. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not," Drake sighed. "Things are more complicated than even you know."

"What I know is what I see. You're a damn coward. This excuse of yours is becoming tiresome. Your wife is desperate for the truth, and it *needs* to come out. I'm done covering for you."

Even though the word *coward* hit Drake right in the gut, Noah was right. He hadn't told Alessandra the truth because he was afraid of how she would react and how it would color the way she saw him.

The scene he'd observed that evening told him he was out of time. They were on the precipice of a mafia war. The only way to protect Alessandra was with the truth. She had suffered so much that Drake didn't want to hurt her anymore. That shit needed to stop because he wasn't able to walk away.

Grant's permanent scowl was deeper than usual. He didn't appear to be his normal polished self. His coiffed sandy hair fell flat, he remained unshaven, and the scar that obscured his brow looked angry.

“I need to speak with the two of you alone.” Grant gestured to Drake and Jerry.

Noah rose from his chair and kissed his husband. “I’ll sit with Alessandra for a bit.”

They watched as a staff member led him back to the ward. Grant sat in the chair Noah had occupied moments earlier.

“Assuming Alessandra didn’t stumble across any classified documents, she compromised your position.”

“Things were always tricky. We barely made it through the wedding. Alessandra doesn’t know there’s a mole in her father’s organization that’s been feeding us information.”

“But now your wife is a wildcard. When you swore to keep her on a leash, it wasn’t meant to be in the bedroom,” Grant scoffed.

“I’m aware. Our sex life is none of your business,” Drake growled.

“If your dick is the only head doing the thinking, then we have a problem.”

“What do you expect me to do at this point? We’re married.”

“Jerry can grant you a divorce,” Grant said without hesitation.

“That’s not an option.”

“Think about it, Drake. You might not have a choice at this point. If you truly care about her, you need to prioritize her safety. This is not safe,” Jerry said.



DRAKE TOOK THEIR WORDS TO HEART. THE PROBLEM WAS, HE WASN’T USED TO ASKING FOR HELP. THAT SHIP HAD SAILED WHEN HE WAS FORCED TO GROW UP AT 16 AND PUT ON A PLANE TO ITALY. IT HAD KILLED HIS MOTHER TO WATCH HIM LEAVE, BUT DRAKE NEEDED

answers then. He wished he could forget about those years in his life that twisted and warped the teen from Lake Forest and turned him into a hardened man.

“Yes, Drake?” Bitsy Walker’s cool voice greeted him.

“Hey, Mom.” He cleared his throat, but the lump.

Bitsy knew something was wrong immediately. Her persona shifted from ice-queen to mother in a nanosecond. “What’s wrong, Drake?”

“It’s Alessandra. I fucked up. She’s hurt. I’m afraid I’ve pushed her too far.”

“You need to figure out how to make things right with that girl, Drake. She deserves a partner. There are no secrets between Richard and me. We carried each other down the toughest roads we couldn’t walk alone.”

“Can you come over? They’re letting Alessandra return home, but the next few days may be rough.”

“First, promise me you won’t lie to that poor girl anymore.”

“I promise.” If Drake were still a teen, he would’ve crossed his fingers behind his back.

Bitsy sniffed. “All right. What do you need from me?”

Drake knew this would be painful for his mother as well. She had carried the burden of being his mother for over 30 years when it was never her cross to bear. Every family had its secrets, and Alessandra stood by with her shovel to unbury them all.

## Chapter Nineteen

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SLIPPING OUT OF BED, DRAKE KISSED HIS SLEEPING WIFE ON the forehead and smoothed her hair with his hand. Her contented sigh brought a smile to his face. Even though he didn't deserve these precious moments when she was at her most open and vulnerable, they were the closest they would ever be.

Drake loved his wife's buxom body. He knew every dip and alluring curve that was just for him. The way her pussy clenched tightly around his thick cock gave him pleasure that he'd never felt before her. He even loved her scars, the ones she hid from the world but allowed him to see.

Drake had won Alessandra's heart. She never fully had him because he kept parts of himself locked up tight. No one should shoulder the burdens he carried. But tonight, he was taking the first step to make it right.

He grasped her arm gently and stroked her wrist. When they'd first met, Alessandra would subconsciously rub the scarred flesh whenever she felt overwhelmed. He ran his thumb delicately along the fresh pink line. Reminding her that she was seen had become a habit for him now. He wasn't blind to her pains or sorrows.

For so long, Drake stood in his own way. He'd never felt so free once he gave himself to his wife. Nothing he could do would ever be enough for her, because, from this moment on, she would have all of him for the rest of their lives.



The beast that his wife and years as a law-abiding citizen had tamed was awake and roaring to go. Drake tensed and flexed his fingers inside the black leather gloves that fit like familiar skin and rolled his shoulders before cracking his neck. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel in anxious anticipation. He still had two hours to wait.

Drake was a moving shadow, dressed from head to toe in black disposable clothing. Though he was no trained hitman, as a soldier, there was already blood on his hands at someone else's command. This time, he would feel no guilt.

*Work* had become an obsession; days turned into weeks as he stalked his target, watching every move. Carlo Turelli was a fucking scumbag. The man picked up young girls off street corners and was never gentle. Those that were unlucky enough to enter his home exited shaking and crying with torn clothing and marks all over their bodies—if they exited at all.

While the authorities should've been contacted, all the neighbors seemed too afraid to report him. Instead of apprehending a criminal, the coroner would soon be picking up a mutilated corpse. He smiled at the thought of dispensing justice.

The masked man had broken the knob on the back door and changed the locks two days prior. He removed the still-shiny key from his pocket and simply unlocked the door. It was too easy as the door had no other deadbolt or chain. Such a thing invited trouble living in a rough city neighborhood.

There was no reason to stage the house to make it appear as a robbery. He wanted the police to take one look at the slovenly Turelli and know it was a hit.

Pulling a length of cord from his pocket, the masked man wound it around one hand, making a fist, and then wrapped it around the other. He'd chosen leather gloves solely for the grip and dexterity the natural fibers offered while not leaving fingerprints behind.

Turelli was in his den watching a homemade video. A barely legal girl was crying and begging for mercy. Drake froze in his

tracks, as he knew that voice. He crept behind his target and had a view of the television.

A grainy homemade movie showed Alessandra on the bed, hogtied and fighting against her restraints. Turelli's baritone voice was loud as he spoke close to the microphone.

*"How many times have I warned you about behaving? I will gag and punish you if you continue to fight and scream, little cagna."*

The man spat in her face from beneath a blackened hood. He was menacing, rippling with muscles like a professional wrestler. His body now was quite different, leaving Drake to wonder why he'd let himself go.

Alessandra's bare back was bloody. She continued to struggle against her bonds. Knowing this had happened to her was one thing. Seeing it was another.

"Little slut," Turelli growled, unaware that Drake was right behind him.

Drake's fist tightened around the cord and shook with fury like nothing he'd experienced. A minute later, Drake heard a pleading male voice off-camera and saw the big man press a gun against the young woman's temple. She trembled and paled with fear. Prayers that went unanswered fell off her lips.

Turelli's hand moved faster on his cock as he grunted and made sounds of pleasure. That was when the masked man made his move. He quickly lowered the cord over the seated man's beefy neck, twisted it, and pulled with all his might.

The big man was caught off guard. His body jerked in the chair, and his cock twitched, spewing jets waywardly. His hands raised in protection too late. He clawed at Drake's gloved hands. The leather was too slick for the other man to grab hold of, and Drake didn't feel a thing.

He had one mission—*execution*.

There would be no failure tonight. Drake tightened his grip and used the other man's seated position as leverage to pull tighter. It wasn't long before the big man stopped struggling.

He was unconscious, not dead, but he wouldn't survive the night.

The masked man grew impatient for his target to regain consciousness, so he snapped a packet and waved it underneath the big man's nose. He watched as his beady eyes opened groggily. They were reddened from ligature strangulation, and the man's neck was bruised. That would be the least of his suffering that evening.

While far from an experienced rigger, Drake could still tie efficient knots. Turelli's arms and legs were tied to the chair, and his wrists and ankles were in restraint devices. The man wasn't gagged because Drake wanted answers and to hear the man's anguish. But he planned to gag the man if he spewed filth.

Drake brandished a knife in front of Turelli's face. "*Svegliati, Carlo.*"

"Who the fuck are you?" he croaked.

"I am here to dispatch justice for the women you've brutalized."

"I did nothing to those whores. They begged for it."

Drake plunged the knife into Turelli's thigh, making sure to avoid the artery. He didn't want the stuffed pig to bleed out too early. He squealed as Drake twisted it. The blood spread down the man's hairy leg as he pulled the knife out.

He gestured to the TV. "That girl wasn't asking for it!"

"She was a fucking slut that needed to be taught her place. I enjoyed breaking her," he huffed and spat at Drake's feet.

Drake repeated the same treatment to the other thigh and enjoyed listening to the distressed sounds of his victim. Sweat beaded on Carlo's brow as he gripped the armrests.

Drake removed shears from a duffle bag. "Call her a slut one more fucking time, and I'll cut your micro penis off, *brutto porco.*"

"Why would you care about a little whore like that? It was a job. Her father hired me." He spat.

The masked man opened the shears and followed through with his threat. The tied man howled in pain and jerked against his restraints. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

“Well, this is personal, not business.” Drake sneered beneath the mask. “Say another word about her, and you’ll lose another appendage.”

“What the fuck?” he cried. “I won’t.”

“That’s right. You won’t hurt another woman again. Taking a violent predator like you off the streets is a service to the city. Now tell me, how many girls have you hurt?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“How many?” Drake broke the fingers of the man’s right hand one by one. “Don’t make me ask again.”

“Hundreds?”

Drake picked the fallen phallus from the floor and grabbed Carlo’s chin. The large man clamped his paled, trembling lips as tight as he could and thrashed around, but Drake pried the struggling man’s mouth open and shoved the shriveled cock in. He forced it down his throat, making the man choke on it.

“Are you guessing or confessing? This is for the hundreds.”

Drake didn’t need to hear anything else. He pulled his 9mm from his holster and pressed it against Turelli’s temple.

“Now it’s your turn to beg.”

He pulled the penis from the man’s mouth. A string of saliva connected the man to his own appendage as he sputtered and spat. Drake pressed the muzzle harder against the man’s head.

“Beg, *pezzo di merda*.”

Carlo’s voice was hoarse as he begged. “Please. Please... Don’t do this. I’m sorry, okay. I’m sorry.”

“You aren’t sorry. Even without a dick, you’re still a predator. Your sins are unforgivable.” Drake gestured to the TV again. “She lives in the aftermath of what you’ve done. I will avenge her and every other girl you’ve hurt.”

“Who are you?”

“I. Am. Drago.”

A single gunshot rang out in the den. Blood and brain matter splattered the wall behind the armchair. Drake shoved the phallus back into the corpse’s mouth. Turelli had gotten off light, as far as he was concerned.

## Chapter Twenty

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ALESSANDRA'S HEAD WAS SPLITTING, AND SHE GROANED AS she stirred. Her vision was foggy, and her mouth was full of cotton as she ran her dry tongue over cracked lips. Her mother-in-law's face moved a millimeter as she gasped in surprise.

"Thank God! I'll get Drake." Bitsy Walker patted her hand and was out of the room in a flash before Alessandra was fully coherent.

The room came into focus, and Alessandra found herself in bed at home. Her little heart-shaped jewelry dish was on the nightstand next to the silver-framed picture she loved of her and Drake at the zoo. The closed armoire across from the bed housed the television that they watched while curled up in bed together.

Alessandra was tangled in white sheets with a white duvet across her lap. She had teased Drake about the sterile hotel-type linens and shopped for new sheets for the California king-size bed to add color and personality to the room.

A disheveled Drake rushed into the room and straight to the bedside. "Alessandra? Thank Christ! Are you all right? How are you feeling?" He moved to take her hand, but she yanked it away.

"Don't touch me," she spat.

"Take it easy, dolcezza. The doctor said disorientation would be normal. You've been asleep for almost two days."

Drake's brown eyes were bloodshot as though he hadn't slept in days. His wavy hair was greasy and fell into his unshaven face, and his crumpled clothes made him look as though he hadn't showered either.

"What happened?"

"You don't remember?" Drake frowned. "You had a panic attack and fainted. I took you to the hospital after you hit your head. They treated you and sent you home. However, between the meds they prescribed and the concussion you suffered, you've been sleeping for almost two days. We were so worried about you."

When he moved to touch her cheek, she snapped, "Leave me alone! I never want to see you again!"

A wave of vertigo hit Alessandra as she tried to push herself up from the bed. Mrs. Walker gasped from the doorway as Drake helped steady his wife.

Bitsy needed to feel useful. She shooed her son out of the way to shake out the duvet and helped Alessandra settle back into the bed. She fluffed the down pillows and stacked them behind Alessandra so her daughter-in-law could sit up.

"Take things slowly, sweetheart. We don't want you to hurt yourself again," Bitsy said in a motherly tone.

Noah rapped on the door and walked in with a smile after he noticed Alessandra was awake. He kicked off his shoes and crawled into bed next to her. He wrapped his arm around her and she cuddled into his side.

"How's my girl?" he asked.

"Oh, Noah! I'm so glad you're here."

Drake stood beside the bed with his arms crossed. Alessandra looked at her husband from beneath her lashes, gauging his reaction.



DRAKE WATCHED THE NATURAL RAPPORT BETWEEN HIS WIFE and friend. There was no stopping Alessandra's allure. He tried to tamp down his jealousy, reminding himself they had a natural connection.

They were both subs to two overbearing, dominant men. More than that, shared trauma at Luca's hands bound them together. Drake's fists balled at his sides, and he took deep breaths to calm himself. Alessandra didn't need a hotheaded husband; she needed him to catch her when she fell.

Noah whispered something to Alessandra that Drake couldn't hear, but it made her giggle. The sound of her husky laugh shot straight into his heart and his dick.

Why was it so easy for people like Noah, but not for him? He loved that his wife had someone who made her laugh and put a smile on her face. She was too beautiful to wither away under his tutelage.

"Too many serious faces in the room," Noah said, looking at each of them in turn. He settled on Drake last. "I think Mr. Walker should start us off."

Drake watched Alessandra from his place towering at the foot of the bed. Noah pulled her tighter against his side to offer her comfort. She didn't shake him off, but the tension in the room settled upon her graceful shoulders. Drake should be the one in that bed holding her.

He sat on the bed and placed a hand on her extended leg. She recoiled quickly and pulled her knees up to her chest, closing herself off from him completely. Drake's eyes darkened dangerously at her reaction. He became rigid, and his mother stepped closer.

"I never wanted to hurt you, Alessandra. I never wanted to hurt any of you."



Mrs. Walker laid her hand on her son's shoulder. "It's okay, son. We know."

"Will someone please tell me what is going on? I feel like you planned some sort of intervention while I'm confined to this bed."

"Alessandra," Drake began. "I love you. Please remember that. I'm so sorry for hurting you. I only did what I thought was best to protect you. I see now how wrong I've been."

His words clearly touched a nerve. Alessandra's eyes shone as she looked up at him. She might be angry and hurt, but they were still connected beneath it. They loved each other in their own twisted and beautifully painful way.

Drake's hand unwittingly reached for his wife again, but he retracted it immediately. It wasn't his physical comfort she sought, but he needed hers. Sometimes the only place they communicated in total honesty was when they were connected physically.

"Please, just tell me," Alessandra whispered.

It was Drake's turn to look from her beautiful, pained face to Noah's righteous indignation beside her, to his mother's medically enhanced features. Though Bitsy's face failed to reflect her feelings, her eyes were full of the pain her son's story forced her to relive. Her hand twitched on his shoulder as a tear rolled down her cheek.

Drake patted her hand and squeezed it. *It's all right, mom*, he mouthed.

*I love you*, she mouthed back.

Drake looked Alessandra in the eye.

"My name isn't Drake Walker."

Alessandra's mouth dropped open. It was so quiet a pin drop could be heard.

"I am Drago Prazza."

## Chapter Twenty-One

---

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. –Shakespeare*

*I'M NO GODDAMN JULIET!* THE LINE STUCK INSIDE Alessandra's heart like a barb. She was frozen as blood whooshed through her ears, leaving her deafened to everything as she tried to process Drake's admission.

"I'm not Drake Walker," he said. "I'm Drago Prazza."

Alessandra closed her eyes and willed the tears to stop streaming down her cheeks. She'd stood on the precipice of truth, and Drake had pushed her off the fucking cliff, upending her whole world with a fucking name.

*Damn it!*

"Bella?" Drake's voice finally cut through the buzz in her head, forcing her to face his words.

"No! No!" A strangled cry caught in her throat.

Her body's fight-or-flight response told her it was time to get the fuck out of dodge. She blindly pushed against Noah, who grabbed her around the waist as she fought against him.

"Let me go," Alessandra sobbed.

"No, sweetheart," Noah whispered. "I've got you."

Alessandra had thirsted for the truth—she'd begged, pleaded, cried, and threatened to get it. Now, she'd give anything to

pretend those words had never left her husband's lips. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't wish that genie back in the bottle.

*Her husband*—Alessandra's skin crawled as she looked at the man whose ring scalded her finger. The collar around her neck was no mere albatross but a noose. Her skin broke out in a cold sweat as his eyes traced over her body. Every moment together was built on a lie, and she hated that he knew her so intimately.

Alessandra had forgiven him when he treated her like shit for weeks after they wed. She forgave him when she thought he'd fucked Riley behind her back. Considering the circumstances surrounding their relationship, she forgave him for more than she'd thought possible.

But here she was in the bed of a stranger. No, not a stranger. How didn't she see it before? He had the same cold, dark eyes as the bogeyman that had killed her mother. She hadn't married a good man; she'd married a fucking monster.

Waves of nausea rolled through Alessandra, and she was going to be sick. She fought harder against Noah. Her nails dug into the flesh of his wrists until he swore and let her go. She vaulted off the bed, only to collapse in Drake's arms.

"I've got you, bella."

"Let me go!" she cried.

Strength failed her when she needed it most. She sagged against him, relishing in the comfort of his arms. This man *was* Drake Walker, her husband and lover.

Drake helped her settle back against the bed pillows, and she pulled the white duvet over her lap. The treacherous organ in her chest continued to beat despite it having shattered to pieces.

"It can't be true," she began. "You're Drake Walker."

"It's true, Alessandra. I was in a car accident at sixteen and needed a blood transfusion. They don't just randomly give you blood; they test you to properly type and cross you for a match." Drake's eyes darkened. "My blood type didn't match

my parents or siblings. My whole world changed when I learned Enzo Prazza *is* my father.”

Alessandra looked from Drake’s broody expression to Mrs. Walker’s tear-soaked face. “This is crazy. How did this happen?”

“I can tell you everything, dear,” Mrs. Walker offered, clutching the pearls around her neck and pulling the beads back and forth. “My sister, Juliana, was a waitress in a high-end restaurant during college. Our family came from money, and she didn’t *need* to work. But she said working was an opportunity to flex her independence. Juliana had a zest for life and enjoyed meeting people.

“We only wanted to protect Drake and honor Juliana’s dying wish. She kept a journal during her pregnancy. I gave it to Drake the night we told him the truth about his parentage.”

Drake picked up a worn, brown leather diary and handed it to Alessandra. She opened it gingerly, leafing through the weathered pages. Juliana’s delicate script on the page brought the story of her past to life.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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*Dear Diary,*

*Today began just like any other boring Thursday night at Luigi's.*

*"Juliana, can you take table three? That guy gives me the creeps."*

*I rolled my eyes. Annette had a tendency to behave dramatically, especially when she didn't want to do the work. I brushed my loose blonde hair over my shoulder and followed the motion with my head to gaze at the solo diner at table three.*

*My heart stopped as I laid eyes on the man with his head buried between the pages of a book. I was too far away to see the title from where I stood, but I couldn't help but wonder if the words contained within were the reason for the scowl he wore. An impulse to smooth that line furrowing his brow overcame me.*

*The buttons of his black shirt strained with the effort of containing his muscular form. Would one flex cause it to tear at the seams like the Hulk? His hair was just beginning to gray at the temples, adding to his distinguished looks.*

*I sauntered over and stood near his shoulder, letting him finish his page before speaking. "Good*

*evening. I'm Juliana, and I'll be your server this evening."*

*He paid me no attention as I rattled off the specials. "I'll give you more time," I murmured once reaching the end.*

*I rushed through my other tables to return to him as quickly as possible. The gentleman remained engrossed in his book, ignoring me once again. "Can I interest you in a glass of wine? If you need more time with the menu, I'd be happy to recommend something."*

*This time he licked the pad of his finger before flipping the page. My body flushed at the sensual flick of his tongue, and I couldn't help but watch him for a minute longer. Was it for my benefit? Did he realize my heart was stuttering? Disappointed to receive nothing more, I turned away again.*

*"Any luck with table three? He's been here for half an hour and hasn't placed an order yet," my manager asked.*

*"I'll get it this time. Don't worry," I said.*

*I approached Mr. Table Three with determined steps. A bold plan built itself in my mind. I took the seat opposite him and pulled the book from his hands. Fury clouded his dark eyes until they met my challenge.*

*"Can I tempt you away from this fascinating read with dinner?" I purred.*

*"Only if you join me, dolcezza." His heavily accented speech had me swooning.*

*"I'd love to, but I have other tables tonight."*

*"Sei tanto bella, ma sei una delusione."*

*"What does that mean?" I was so enraptured by his words that I could only whisper.*

*"You must be new." He chuckled at my flustered response. "The kitchen is aware of my usual order,*

*principessa.”*

*“Who may I say the order is for?”*

*“Enzo.” The corner of his lip twitched in amusement.*

*“It’s nice to meet you, Enzo. I’m Juliana.”*

*I almost tripped on my way to the kitchen, aware of his eyes on my back.*

*Once his meal was ready, I returned to Enzo’s table, where he was buried in the book again. This time, however, he lowered it to the table and studied me with the same intensity.*

*“Grazie.” He held up the glass of cabernet.  
“Salute.”*

*“Enjoy,” I replied.*

*I was shocked to find a hundred-dollar bill on the table once his meal ended.*



*Dear Diary,*

*Tonight, Enzo returned, sitting again at table three. Though it wasn’t in my section, the manager said he had requested me. A frisson of excitement jolted through me. The smile that broke across my face was so genuine that he returned it.*

*It was a busy night at the restaurant, so I again declined his request to join him for dinner. However, he left me another large tip.*



*Dear Diary,*

*Tonight, Enzo looked exceptionally handsome in a single-breasted suit. When I inquired as to the occasion, he replied, "Do I need a reason, Amore mio?"*

*He pulled a long, thin velvet box from the inner breast pocket of his jacket. Instead of placing it in my hand, he placed it on the table between us and held my eyes as I reached for it. As my hand closed around the box, he grabbed my wrist. I inhaled sharply at the electric spark his touch elicited.*

*Enzo's thumb brushed against the soft skin of my inner wrist. His other hand pulled the box from my hand. I gasped as he revealed the gorgeous diamond tennis bracelet contained within. I've worn diamonds before, but none given to me by a man of Enzo's caliber.*

*His fingers lingered on my skin as he closed the clasp around my wrist.*

*"Bellissima," he murmured against the back of my hand.*

*I rubbed my thighs together at the feel of his soft lips against my skin. No other man has affected me this way. The blush on my cheeks put a small smile on his face.*

*"Thank you," I said.*

*"Will you join me for dinner?" He lifted his hand to the empty chair opposite his.*



*The hostess gained my attention and gestured to the ten-top that was seated in my section.*

*“I’m sorry, I can’t tonight,” I said as I fiddled with the diamond bracelet on my wrist. “Hopefully, next time.”*

*“Next time,” he agreed.*

*I couldn’t stop staring at the gorgeous bracelet on my wrist all night long. I admired how it sparkled even in the restaurant’s low lighting. The other women on staff were jealous to see how generous my benefactor was. On top of the diamond bracelet, another large tip was left on the table.*



*Dear Diary,*

*Tonight, Enzo failed to come in for dinner. I have never experienced such disappointment. Several tables commented on the look I couldn’t hide. Is this what falling for someone feels like? Perhaps he failed to come in as a power move to show me what I’m missing. Either way, I hope nothing happened to him.*



*Dear Diary,*

*Enzo worked out a deal with my manager for me to only serve him tonight. There was no excuse I could offer not to join him for dinner, not that I wanted to.*

*A man I hadn't noticed before approached with a dress box in his hand.*

*"Mr. Prazza requests you dress for dinner tonight."*

*My hands shook as I made my way into the employee lounge. I locked the door so no one could walk in on my Cinderella moment. I pulled the lid off the box and tore through the crinkling tissue paper until my fingers brushed over the green velvet cocktail dress.*

*Wearing a cocktail dress wasn't new to me, as galas and charity events were something I was forced to attend since I was old enough to walk in a pair of heels. My parents were waiting for me to outgrow my childish working-class rebellion and allow some rich, boring banker to court me. But seeing this gift from Enzo made me feel cherished, like I was his. I'd never been so excited to step into a gown before, and never into something this sexy.*

*Beneath the gown was black lace lingerie. How did the man know my size? The lingerie fit like a glove. I turned in the mirror, running my hands over my body, imagining those hands belonged to Enzo. I couldn't indulge in fantasy long, as the real thing awaited me.*

*I stepped into the gown and immediately felt transformed. I was no longer Juliana but the date of a powerful, mysterious man. My breasts threatened to spill from the low-cut neckline, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was the point. A seductive amount of skin from my upper thigh peeked through the high slit. I walked over to the mirror and quickly touched up my makeup and finger-combed my blonde waves.*

*I was over-dressed for Luigi's. But if this is what Enzo wanted me to wear and this is the place he wanted to dine with me, I was happy to do it.*

*“Sei una visione.” Enzo stood and kissed my cheek.*

*“Grazie,” I blushed and replied in the little Italian I’d learned for him.*

*Enzo ordered my meal for the night and a bottle of champagne. I felt like a queen at his side. Annette stared at me, envy burning in her eyes. She was jealous the Cinderella moment was mine when it could’ve been hers. It was as though no other women existed in Enzo’s orbit when we were together. I doubt that he ever would’ve been hers.*

*My breath hitched as he pulled out a small, black velvet jewelry box and placed it on the table, just as he had with the diamond bracelet. When he opened it this time, the reveal of a diamond infinity pendant was even more resplendent.*

*Enzo rose from the table and walked around to my side. I turned my head, but he lightly guided my chin back in the other direction. His strong hands treated me delicately, as though I was more precious than the jewelry he was hanging around my neck. I fingered the pendant as he lowered to drop kisses along my neck, causing me to shiver.*

*After dinner, he escorted me to the black stretch limo waiting out front. The driver removed his cap and bowed to me before opening the door. Enzo exchanged some hushed words with the man that I couldn’t make out.*

*As soon as the driver climbed in, he raised the partition, and Enzo and I were completely alone. In the blink of an eye, he pulled me onto his lap and hiked my skirt around my waist. He had the top pulled down in one move, and my breasts spilled out.*

*Though we had just finished dinner, he was hungry for me. Between kisses and heavy pants, I told him I was a virgin, but that didn’t quell his determination. If anything, he became more ardent.*

*His hands fumbled for his belt buckle, and he exposed his large cock. It was as magnificent as the rest of him. Strong and warm, he was steel encased in velvet. Enzo quickly flipped me onto my back and plunged into me. He moved in long, deep strokes before picking up a pace that made it hard for me to breathe. A mixture of pleasure and pain sent my nerves into sensual overload. Eventually, he reached a glorious climax. My body eagerly accepted his seed as he pulsed warmly inside me.*

*Enzo marked me as his in every way. He named me his Goomah that evening. I fell head over heels for Enzo.*

*The only problem? Enzo is married.*



*Dear Diary,*

*Today, I received shocking news. I'm pregnant! I don't know when it happened exactly, but I'd like to think it happened the first night we were together. However, every night after that first time, Enzo picked me up, and we made love in the back of the limo.*

*When I told Enzo about the baby, he promised to set me up in a lovely apartment. He told me I could quit my job because he wanted nothing more than to care for our unborn child and me.*

*Enzo's wife was barren, and he longed to have a child. I'm happy to make his—our—dreams come true.*



*Dear Diary,*

*I don't know what I'm going to do. I always knew Enzo was rich and powerful, but I didn't know about the man he really was. Not until his wife, Aneska, a tall, gorgeous European woman, arrived at my apartment. She told me their marriage represented an alliance between the Bratva and Cosa Nostra; my child threatened that.*

*She threatened my baby. "Svoloch," she called him. A red imprint of her palm on my cheek lingered longer than the nauseating smell of her perfume.*

*I called Bitsy because I have no one else. I can't handle a jealous wife at the expense of my unborn child's life.*



*Dear Diary,*

*Today was such a hard day. I said goodbye to Enzo and watched his heart break. I lied and told him that I had chosen to terminate my pregnancy after his wife threatened to kill me. Needless to say, Aneska will be swimming with the fish, and I'm terrified he will come after me next.*

*My brother-in-law's family has property in Montauk. He promised to take Bitsy and me up there for the remainder of my pregnancy.*



*Dear Diary,*

*It's chilly on the beach, but listening to the waves crash against the shore is so calming. Drago is kicking up a storm today, and all I can do is rub my hand over my belly and hope he feels my love and hears my voice as I sing him a lullaby.*

*Enzo wanted to give our son a strong name. What's stronger than a name meaning dragon? That's who my son was meant to be, even though I won't be able to be his mother. I want Drago to know he's strong and loved.*



*Drago Prazza, my dragon. I love you. I hope we'll meet again.*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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BITSY WAS OVERWHELMED BY THE PAINFUL MEMORY AND placed her hand affectionately on Drake's cheek. The light and love of a mother shone through her eyes. Regardless of paternity, Drake would always be her son. It was painful for her and her husband to lose their loving boy only to have the hardened shell of a man return in his place.

"What happened to Juliana?" Alessandra asked.

"Juliana used my name on her paperwork from the very beginning. There was no record of her pregnancy. I kept a picture of Juliana on the beach. Maybe I can show you one day?" Bitsy floated away back to those days as she recounted the tale.

Alessandra nodded. "I'd like that."

"I was present at the birth. Juliana suffered from severe pre-eclampsia and developed a postpartum hemorrhage. She begged me to take Drago and protect him. What choice did I have but to honor my sister's final wishes?"

"Richard and I adopted Drake. We are legally his parents on his birth certificate. I wouldn't have made any other choice. Julianna was my sister; Drake is *my* son. It isn't uncommon, but the stakes were high in our case. Blood doesn't make a family—love does. We're family, no matter what."

"But Drake eventually discovered the truth?"

"We planned on telling him when he was a man. Sixteen was too young to take our son away," Mrs. Walker sniffed.

“What do you mean?” It was time to give Alessandra the missing puzzle piece.

*The adoption secret shocked Drake to his core. Discovering Bitsy and Richard weren't really his parents blew his whole fucking world apart. While they had given him the best life they could, it would take years for him to find it in his heart to reconcile with them.*

*His mom and dad were with Beth at her recital and planned to bring dinner to the hospital for a family meal if Drake wasn't discharged by the evening. Instead of his parents, two gorillas in black suits showed up in his hospital room. They said his father had sent them, but Drake knew that was a lie.*

*One goon knocked him out before he realized what was happening. When he came to, he was on a plane to Italy. Drake was scared shitless but determined not to show it. He put on a brave face and threatened the greasy-haired guido with everything in his arsenal.*

*“Do you know who my parents are? You're going to be sorry, shit brain!”*

*But the goons just laughed. “Little baby with his milk teeth thinks he can threaten us.”*

*“Wait until he gets in front of the boss. He'll soil his underpants.”*

*Drake jumped up and raised his fist, but the guido stood and sneered at him. His opponent was far from weak, and Drake's anger wasn't strength. Guido, whom Drake heard the ape call Lorenzo, stalked up to him unhurriedly, making the teen squirm. He lorded over Drake menacingly.*

*“Sit your pansy ass down before I knock you out,” Lorenzo said.*

*“Enzo wanted you delivered to Italy. He never said anything about your condition upon arrival.” The larger of the two goons cracked his knuckles menacingly.*

*“We have five hours of flight time left. I'm going to head to the room and jerk off. Watch this fucker and make sure he stays*



*out of trouble.” Guido disappeared down the corridor, and the door slam echoed around the cabin.*

*With hours of flight time and nothing better to do, Drake finally took in his surroundings. The white interior of the private jet was trimmed with polished wood. He followed the swirls in the plush carpet with his eyes until he felt dizzy. Two seats faced each other over a stationary round table, providing an intimate eating nook.*

*He was begrudged to admit the leather seats were surprisingly comfortable. Even the large, dumb ape sitting across from him had room to spread his legs. Drake didn't want to keep looking at the big, dumb ox, so he laid on the sofa. Soon he succeeded in falling asleep.*

*They touched down in an airfield and were immediately ushered into a waiting car. He was forced into the backseat between Guido and the ape while they man-spread, making it uncomfortable as a muscular and fat thigh pressed against him. The driver spoke to Guido in Italian with a grim expression and paid Drake no attention, which suited him well during the hours-long drive.*

*They pulled through tall wrought-iron gates with two armed guards stationed in a gatehouse. The secluded villa sat atop a steep hill with a rolling vineyard as far as the eye could see. For a moment, Drake pretended he was on vacation and not kidnapped.*

*Armed guards approached the car as it stopped at the top of the circular drive. They carried holstered pistols on their belts and submachine guns slung over their shoulders. They clearly meant business, and Drake realized he wouldn't be leaving on his own accord.*

*The large doors opened outward in a show of pageantry. A tall, rugged, middle-aged man wearing a linen button-down shirt, white chinos, and loafers barked orders at those around him. His tan skin cracked around his narrowed eyes, and his jaw tightened as he looked Drake over.*

*Drake felt like a piece of meat at the man's appraisal. Was he looking for himself or Juliana in the boy? Drake was disgusted*

*as the man descended the stone steps to greet him.*

*“Welcome home, Drago.” He swept his arms in a baseless gesture.*

*“This isn’t my home—” Drake began.*

*Guido cracked him immediately.*

*Enzo’s eyes grew dark. “Non! Do not touch my son without my permission, Lorenzo.” He pulled a pistol from his waistband and swung the butt against Guido’s temple. The big man staggered, but to his credit, didn’t fall.*

*“Mi dispiace, capo,” guido bowed to his boss.*

*“Drago, come.” Enzo gestured for Drake to follow.*

*Drake complied so as not to end up like Guido with blood dripping down his face. Once the boss’s back was turned, Guido took a handkerchief from his back pocket and dabbed at the wound. He locked eyes with the boy and lifted his hand in a finger gun and lowered his thumb in gesture of pulling the trigger. Guido had set his sights on Drake, and as a typical teenage asshole, he flipped him the bird in response.*

*Enzo gave Drake a tour of the impressive villa. A metal and wood chandelier hung from the high-ceilinged foyer illuminating the space in a warm, welcoming light. Their footsteps echoed as they walked across the polished marble flooring.*

*Even though he’d grown up in a million-dollar home in Lake Forest, it had nothing on the Tuscan villa. The living room, dining room, and kitchen were on the ground floor. Drake’s room was quite spacious, with a private bath on the first floor. Enzo’s suite and other guest rooms were on the first floor. He made it clear his room and office were off-limits. The upper floor was similar to a dormitory or barracks for the house guards.*

*A few days later, a reception was held for Enzo to introduce his son to his associates. Drake was angry and resentful of his forced trip to Italy and made sure everyone knew it. He wanted nothing to do with Enzo or his associates and refused to be shown off like a fucking broodmare.*

*Enzo pulled a picture of Drake's family out of his back pocket. His parents were sitting on the back patio, while his brother and sister played in the yard. He made Drake an offer he couldn't refuse. He threatened to kill the entire Walker family if the teen refused his role in the family. He had no choice but to become the son Enzo always wanted.*

*It hurt to see his family acting like he never existed. Whether Drake was there or not, they were a family. He was the unwanted bastardo they were forced to care for. Even though he was hurt and confused, he couldn't let Enzo or anyone else hurt them. Resentment bloomed inside his chest, and it was the first step in shutting down his emotions.*

*For Drake's 17th birthday, they sent him to his room with a prostituta. There was no gun pointed at the horny teen's head. He didn't require much persuasion. She took the lead and dropped to her knees when the door closed behind them. The woman was a pro with her mouth and tongue. Drake didn't last long, and she swallowed every bit of him down.*

*A little coaxing had him hard and ready again. She led him to the bed, threw him down, and mounted him. Drake lay there as she rode his dick like a pogo stick until he came again. Outside of physical gratification, there was no satisfaction for him in the experience.*

*The next morning, his father's men congratulated him on the right of passage. They invited him to run his first train with them. As the capo's son, he got first pick at which hole he wanted before the other men took their turns. These women were readily available in the villa and seen as a job perk.*

*Drake's moral compass and desires grew darker the longer he spent at Enzo's side. He joined the men on missions and worked as an associate. He moved up to soldato on his 18th birthday.*

*Drake would never forget the kickback from the gun. His ears rang for hours. The men clapped for him and cheered him on like a conquering hero.*

*"Next time, don't forget the earplugs," Lorenzo said. "Otherwise your ears will ring for days."*

*The blood splatter on Drake's face made him look crazed, and the smell made him want to vomit. Enzo clapped him on the back, beaming with fatherly pride. He sent Drake to clean up and planned a party to celebrate his son officially becoming a man.*

*A woman waited for him as he emerged from his shower. Drake looked at her naked body before him and felt no desire; he was completely numb as the last part of his heart that was still soft hardened.*

*He began having night terrors, hearing the man beg for his life. Drake drowned his sorrows in drugs, alcohol, and pussy. But there were nights so dark that they couldn't keep his guilt at bay.*

*Drake asked Enzo about his late wife, Aneska. Her body was never found, and he had played the grieving widower well enough that the Bratva didn't suspect him. He claimed that a rival family was responsible for Aneska's death. The Bratva would only accept an eye for an eye, and Enzo could only achieve that by killing the wife of the rival Don.*

*Once the deed was completed, Enzo left Chicago and recuperated in Italy. He hoped that by biding his time, the Bratva and his rival would weaken themselves. He planned to return and assert his power and influence over Chicago again.*

*With the blood between the Bratva and Enzo settled, the Bratva no longer endorsed Enzo. They refused to back his return from Italy. Therefore, he sought other means to grasp power. Enzo made arrangements with Don Russo to join their families. Enzo signed over properties and assisted in providing manpower to beat down the Bratva in exchange for his daughter's betrothal to his son, Drago.*

*At 22, Drago returned to America with Enzo's blessing and reunited with his family. He refused to go by Drago and changed his name to Drake. He enrolled in law school not only because Enzo wanted someone on the inside, but because Drake needed to do some good in the world. It was why he became a prosecutor.*

*He dreamed of leaving that world behind and becoming a paragon of good. But no amount of good would ever wash his hands clean.*

*That was where Grant Ellis found him...*

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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ALESSANDRA COULDN'T BELIEVE THE STORY SHE'D BEEN TOLD. Her husband was the heir to the Prazza family. She looked again into the eyes of the bogeyman, trying to reconcile them with the man standing before her. Despite everything, she loved him.

Drake aged before her eyes. He looked pained. Dark circles rimmed his bloodshot eyes, and she wished she could smooth his frown lines. He ran his hand through his unkempt hair, as he had a tendency to do when stressed.

His confession devastated her, but her husband had lost so much.

“Do your siblings know the truth about who you really are?”

“No. And it's going to stay that way. We're a family. They don't need to go through the pain of learning the truth. It's also safer for them if they don't know.”

“What does Enzo think happened to you?”

“I can't bring you in on the nuances of this operation, bella. Enzo knows where I am and what I do, but we don't speak. I haven't seen him since I left Italy, fourteen years ago.”

Noah cleared his throat. “Jerry begged Drake to call Enzo while I was in the hospital. Jerry is acquainted with both the Prazza and Russo families from his days as a pimp. He provided girls for all levels of their organizations.”

“On our wedding day, you married me knowing I was once promised to you? Does my father know who you really are? Does Luca?”

“Don’t you see, Alessandra? We were always meant to be together.” Drake reached for her hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I was—”

“If you say you were trying to protect me one more fucking time, I swear to all that is holy, I will scream. Our entire marriage, our love, was built on lies. Who am I in all of this? Why didn’t you just tell me the truth from the beginning? You made me feel like I lost my fucking mind.”

“I was afraid that if I told you the truth, you’d return to your father or Luca.”

“You manipulated me. You lied to me, every time we kissed and every time we fucked.”

“Alessandra!” Mrs. Walker gasped and clutched her pearls.

Everything Alessandra held inside burst from her. The years of neglect and abuse she’d suffered at the hands of men who swore to protect her and lied about loving her were going to end today, even if her marriage failed to survive.

“What was the end goal, Drake? When would I have finally earned the truth from your lips? After I stood up for you? After I denounced my family and chose you? After I suffered mind games from your ex? After I ransacked your office?” Her voice was tinged with hysteria. “From the very beginning, I tried to prove I could be a good wife to you and meet your demands.”

“You’re the woman I love. I love you for you, Alessandra. You’re a *Walker* now, not a Russo or a Prazza. Together we can achieve anything. I’m so sorry for failing to realize that sooner.”

Alessandra wanted to soften at the genuine remorse she saw in his eyes, but now they would play by her rules. Her heart filled with resolve. She needed to confront the bogeyman who had murdered her mother. She needed to discover who she was and

where she fit into this world. Luckily, she knew secrets she could trade Enzo and cripple Anthony Russo.

“I want to meet Enzo.”

“Out of the fucking question!” Drake barked.

“You owe me, Mr. Walker. I want to meet Enzo as soon as you can set it up.”

It was time Drake Walker moved heaven and earth for her needs.

“Why?” Drake crossed his arms.

“It’s time I get to meet my father-in-law. We have unfinished business.”

“That’s a bad idea. You’re inviting trouble to our doorstep.”

“What do you have to lose at this point? We’re already facing a fight we can’t win.” Alessandra held out her upturned arms. “Look at what Luca did to me. Noah almost died. This won’t stop just because Marcello is free. There will always be someone or something else threatening our marriage. It’s time we take control.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking, bella. We can’t become indebted to him.”

“You’ve tried to protect me, and look at where we’ve ended up. We’re only going to continue hurting each other.” Alessandra sighed. “I know what I’m asking. I’m choosing the lesser of two evils. I’m going to offer Enzo something he won’t be able to refuse.”

Alessandra looked at Mrs. Walker and Noah, who had witnessed their entire exchange. She cupped Drake’s cheek. He closed his eyes and covered her hand with his and turned into her palm, kissing it. Her heart quickened as she took his other hand and placed it over her heart.

“Look at me, Drake,” she whispered. When he met her eyes, she continued. “I can’t let anyone else we care about be hurt. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I love you, Alessandra. Please don’t do this.”



“Don’t do this, Alessandra,” Noah echoed.

“I’ll be all right. Don’t underestimate me. I grew up in that life.”

Drake intertwined his fingers with hers. Fresh tears pricked her eyes, only this time the overwhelming emotion made her whole body crave Drake’s touch.

“I’d like to be alone with my wife now.” Innuendo laced Drake’s tone.

“If you need anything, Alessandra, don’t hesitate to call Dick or me.”

“Thanks, Bitsy. And don’t worry, I promise not to say anything to Beth or Dustin.”

Mrs. Walker gave Alessandra a big squeeze and Drake a peck on the cheek before heading out of the room.

Noah crushed Alessandra against his chest and kissed her forehead. “I feel like I’ve known you forever. You know Drake doesn’t deserve you, but I couldn’t imagine anyone better suited for him.”

“Oh, I know.” She laughed. “Maybe one day, he’ll earn it.”

Noah clapped Drake on the shoulder on his way out.

Once alone, the tension in the room rose to a point that made Alessandra feel itchy. Drake—Drago—whoever the hell he really was, sat down next to her and leaned close. Heat burned Alessandra through his hooded gaze.

“Alessandra—”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you look at me and say my name like that.” She crossed her arms, but that didn’t stop her core from flooding.

“Bella.” Drake stroked her cheek. “You know the *real* me. That’s why I work so hard at my job and why I’m passionate about certain projects. My family and friends adore you. Why should my biological parents change anything?”

“It’s more than that. Glossing over it doesn’t change that fact.”

“You know I love you.”

“If you loved me, you should’ve told me the truth from the beginning.” Alessandra threw her hands up in exasperation. “I can’t keep having this conversation. We keep spinning our wheels and get nowhere.”

“I wanted you like fucking crazy from the moment I laid eyes on you the first time in that courtroom. Why can’t you believe me when I say I was doing this to protect you?”

“I read your files, Drake. They said I was desperate for love and easy to manipulate. How do I know you didn’t use that information against me?”

Drake pulled her hand and placed it over his heart. “Damn it, woman! Feel this? It beats for you. Only you! My only regret is that I didn’t save you from that hell the moment you turned eighteen.”

“Shut up!”

She slapped him across the face and struggled against him. Drake only tightened his grip.

“Carlo Turelli is dead. You’ll have one fewer monster haunting your dreams.”

Alessandra’s eyes widened, and her jaw fell. It had come from so far out of left field, she failed to comprehend what Drake was saying.

“You?”

“I did it for you, Alessandra. I once promised you that I would make everyone who ever hurt you pay.”

Alessandra looked up into her husband’s chocolate-colored eyes. He wasn’t crazed or feverish. Instead, she saw the depth of his devotion. No one had killed for her before.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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ALESSANDRA SHOVED DRAKE AND TRIED TO PULL AWAY, BUT he tightened his grip. He captured her mouth and began pouring every ounce of truth into it. Where he approached with desperation for her understanding, Alessandra fought with equal fervor conveying her anger. He groaned with longing, and she moaned in a passionate response.

They tore at each other's clothes, desperate to allow their bodies to work out their feelings. Drake pulled off Alessandra's robe, leaving her in her bra and panties. His thumbs rubbed her nipples through the lace and pinched them once they stiffened, sending a pleasurable pain through her.

Alessandra shuddered beneath his touch. They broke the kiss to take in some much-needed oxygen, and Drake yanked his shirt over his head. They clashed again. She raked her nails down his chest, leaving red marks behind, stopping just before breaking skin. He growled as she bit and tugged at his lower lip.

Drake lifted Alessandra into his lap and palmed her ass roughly before spanking her hard enough to make her jump. Their bodies moved to an invisible beat. They pulled apart and stared into each other's eyes, panting and challenging. Alessandra's hands lowered to Drake's waistband, and she paused out of habit.

Alessandra rocked her hips against Drake's thigh, seeking friction. She bit the shell of his ear and whispered, "If you want to come tonight, you can go fuck yourself."

Drake grabbed her chin and forced her to face him. “Your panties are so wet they’re clinging to you. Your pussy is dripping on my fucking thigh. It’s all right if you want to be angry with me, but this is happening.”

Alessandra rubbed Drake’s hard-on through his sweatpants.

“Do it, Alessandra. Pull my cock out. Feel how hard and hot I burn for you. Fuck yourself with it, take your pleasure from me, and make it hurt, baby. When you come, I’m going to bury myself so deep inside you and fuck you hard and fast until you’re so raw you won’t be able to walk for a week without feeling like my dick is still buried in your greedy cunt. Each stroke will remind you that you’re mine. And when I come, your tight little pussy is going to pull me in deeper, milking every last drop from my body. Isn’t it, bella?”

Drake fisted her hair and pulled her head back, exposing her throat. He sucked her pulse point hard, leaving his mark. He soothed it with his tongue before raking his teeth down her throat. He kept hold of her hair as she moved to pull his sweats and boxers down. She licked her lips hungrily as her eyes rested upon his twitching cock.

Drake begged Alessandra for her mouth with his eyes. He took his hands off her body and lay on the bed naked before her. Alessandra slowly pulled her bra and panties off and threw them across the room. She straddled Drake’s thighs and leaned back, opening up her body for his perusal.

Alessandra rounded her hips and ran her hands up her belly until she cupped her breasts. She circled her nipples with her fingertips and dropped her head back, shaking her auburn hair over her shoulders. She pinched and rolled her nipples until a moan escaped her lips.

Drake watched her left hand, which still bore his ring, skate across her body. She reached the apex between her thighs and cupped her mound. His cock jerked beneath her, but Alessandra ignored his needs.

She slipped her fingers through her lips, gathering wetness before circling her clit with her fingertips. Alessandra’s cries of pleasure had Drake raring to go. He grabbed her hand

before she reached her climax to halt her movements. Alessandra's head snapped up, and her kiss-swollen lips pouted as much as her dusty rose nipples.

Drake lifted her hand and sucked her fingers into his mouth while making intense eye contact. Her lips formed a small O and he rolled her beneath him. He spread her legs and plunged himself to the hilt. He ground his hips against hers and pulled back for a moment, gazing down at the unadulterated pleasure on her face.

His movements became rougher as his body slapped against hers. Drake swore as Alessandra tore into his shoulders and back. He couldn't tell if it was a bead of sweat or blood that trickled down his back, and he didn't give a damn. The pain was cathartic.

After a minute of merciless pounding, Alessandra pushed against Drake. He relented and allowed her to roll them over.

"I want you beneath me," she said.

"Yes," Drake hissed as she grabbed his cock and pumped it in her hand. "Ride my fucking dick like a good little slut."

Alessandra slapped him, and he snarled. He grabbed her hips and looked her in the eye.

"You like being my good little whore, don't you?"

"Mhm," she whimpered.

"Then wrap your lips around my cock before riding me into oblivion. It's been so long since I've felt your velvety throat."

Drake caught her as she tried to scoot down.

"I want you to sit on my face. I'm going to pleasure you while you suck me off."

An unintelligible sound escaped her lips as he helped her position herself over him. He tugged back on her.

"All the way, bella."

She obliged. He found her wetness dripping down her thighs and licked eagerly. She made soft sounds around his spongy

flesh, and his eyes rolled back. She swirled her tongue around his tip, and he repeated the movement around her clit.

They pleased each other, giving over to the sensation of something new and intense. Drake's hips jerked as she nipped at the sensitive underside of his shaft. She kissed and sucked until she found his sensitive nuggets. She stroked his cock and pulled his sack into her mouth.

"Gesù Cristo," he cried.

Her finger found his sensitive spot, and he doubled his efforts to satisfy her before he came. He bucked her off and took matters into his own hand as she knelt beside him.

"Fuck... fuck... fuck..."

He aimed his cock, and the first spurt hit her cheek. The next shot landed on her chest. She took him back in her mouth and suckled until he was spent.

"Was that good, Master?" She smirked and made a show of licking her lips.

"There's nothing hotter than seeing my wanton slut marked with my cum." He stroked his still-rigid cock. "Be a good girl and climb on top. Daddy's waiting."

Drake held himself steady while Alessandra sank down. Her welcoming core covered every inch of him. Their moans intermingled at their connection. Alessandra's tits bounced enticingly as she moved on top of Drake. Each time she drove down, she ground her clit on the base of his cock, chasing her own pleasure.

"That's right, dolcezza, use me like I'm your personal fuck toy. Who gets you this hot, little slut? Our bodies were made to pleasure each other. You can be as mad as you want, but we'll fuck it out."

"Shut up!" she spat.

He spanked her, and it only spurred her on. Her hands moved to his muscular thighs, changing the angle of penetration. His hand glided up her chest to her throat, forcing her to bow back. He squeezed with one hand and held her hip with the other.

When she tightened around him, he thrust from beneath her, and she shattered.

“Drake! Drake!” She chanted his name as she reached her peak.

“Did that feel good? You soaked my cock, bella. But I’m far from finished.”

Coming the first time had taken the edge off Drake, leaving him rock hard. He rolled Alessandra beneath him and threw her ankles over his shoulders. He leaned over her until her knees were near her ears. Grabbing her hips, he lifted her ass off the bed. She cried out at Drake’s thrust, and he pumped relentlessly, pushing her into the mattress.

“Drake,” she sobbed.

“Take my cock like a good little slut. I let you use me for your own pleasure—now it’s my turn.”

Drake grunted and growled like an animal as he moved furiously. Slapping flesh echoed around them. Alessandra dug her fingers into Drake’s biceps as his hand tightened around her throat once more.

“Tell. Me. You. Love. Me.” Each word was punctuated with a sharp thrust.

“I love you,” Alessandra sobbed.

Her words did nothing to slow Drake’s frenzied pace. Beads of sweat broke out across his forehead, and he felt feverish. Drake withdrew and turned Alessandra face down onto the mattress. He grabbed a pillow and shoved it under her hips before mounting her and thrusting deep once more.

His forearms dropped to the bed, and his body covered Alessandra’s. His hips drove her up the mattress. Drake grabbed her hair to force her to turn her head to the side. He pulled out and growled in her ear.

“Beg for my cock. Beg me to bury myself deep inside and fuck you until you can’t see straight.”

Alessandra’s voice was little more than a hoarse whine. “Please fuck me, Drake.”

“Better than that.” Drake’s hand came down hard on her ass.

“Please fuck my slutty little pussy, Master. Please fuck me until I can’t see straight.”

Drake wrapped a hand around her throat, grabbed her other hip, and plunged back inside her. The headboard banged against the wall at the force of their rigorous lovemaking.

“Your pussy is magical. When I’m buried inside of it, I can’t remember being inside anyone else. Tell me you need me.”

Drake withdrew slowly and snapped his hips, thrusting to the hilt again.

“I need you,” she whined.

“I will do whatever it takes to make you happy and keep you safe. Do you understand?” He gnashed his teeth.

“Yes! Yes!” she cried.

“If you have any doubts, you come to me. Do you understand? I’ll bring you to the one place we communicate in total honesty. Right here. There are no lies when my cock is buried inside you. Your pussy knows its Master.”

“Yes, Master,” she whimpered.

“Fuck—” He shuddered and pulled out, his cock throbbed painfully at the lack of release, but they weren’t finished yet.

Drake rolled Alessandra onto her back and buried his face in her pussy. He nipped and then sucked her clit into his mouth. Alessandra attempted to pull away from him, but he grabbed her thighs and held her steady.

“I’m not done with you yet, Alessandra. Not even close.” Drake spread Alessandra’s lips and wiggled his tongue inside her, slurping up her juices. “Your pretty pink pussy is the most delicious meal. I want it every day. Would you like that? Do you want me to lick it for an hour straight? How many times do you think I can have you come with my tongue? Consider it a gift for how hard I’m going to fuck it again once I’m done.”

Alessandra moaned in response as he mashed her clit with his thumb.



“Ask me nicely, bella.”

“Please lick my pussy and let me come on your tongue, Master.”

Drake forced three fingers inside of her while his tongue went to work on her clit again. He didn't know if it was minutes or hours by the time she begged him to stop. He lost track after her fifth orgasm and kicked himself for not demanding she count.

When he was done, he kissed her long and deep. All his filthy promises went out the window as she winced when he entered her again.

“I'm going to make you feel every inch of my love. Look into my eyes, Alessandra.”

She obeyed, looking up at him with shimmering emeralds. He loved her with slow, long, and deep strokes. The familiar tingle began at the base of his spine, telling him his release was imminent.

“Ask me for my cum, wife. Ask me to put my baby in your belly,” he whispered.

“Please give me your cum, Master.”

Drake lowered his fingers to her clit, circling it to get her there with him one last time. He kissed her jaw and watched as tears rolled from the corners of her eyes. He kissed each of her eyelids, and they fluttered open to look up at him. His whole world was pulled into one moment.

He hoped this was the time she would accept him, body and soul. This was the time when his seed would cause her belly to grow. This was the time that he branded her forever as his. They would be tied together in every way possible.

“I want to make a baby with you, Drake,” Alessandra whispered.

Drake pressed his lips against hers, swallowing her moans as she came. He shuddered and spilled his own release deep inside her.

Drake pulled out gently and took his weeping wife into his arms. He grabbed a wipe from the bedside table and cleaned her face, chest, and between her legs. He kissed her forehead, cheeks, and finally, lips.

“I love you so much it hurts,” he whispered.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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THOUGH THEY CLUNG TO EACH OTHER, THE SPELL THAT brought husband and wife together tore them apart just as quickly. Alessandra sat up and pulled the sheet over her naked breasts. Sensing the sudden shift, Drake rose and rested against the headboard.

He reached out to her, but she rolled her shoulder to dodge his touch. With a sigh, Drake dropped his hand and patiently waited for Alessandra to open up. She trained her eyes on her lap and set about smoothing wrinkles.

“Alessandra?”

Reluctantly, she looked at Drake. Her eyes carried the pain of a child and remained unfocused.

“I know I’ve done wrong by you. But I’m here now. Lay your burdens on me. You don’t have to be the strong one all the time.”

“Enzo murdered my mother, Drake,” she sobbed.

“*Mi dispiace*,” he said softly.

Alessandra wiped her tears away with the back of her hand in a childlike gesture. Drake placed his hand gently on her knee, stroking through the silk.

“I was just a little girl when it happened.”

“Will you tell me what you remember?”

*The thing Alessandra remembered most about her mother was her smile. She lit up a room and made you feel like you were the most special person in it. There were no bad days around her. Her laugh had its own melody, and she laughed so much.*

*Papà smiled when she sang. He'd grab her waist and pull her in for a kiss before giving her a tap on the ass.*

*"Sei il mio tesoro," he said.*

*Marina balanced him out. When she died, Anthony lost the best part of himself. The home became cold and lonely without their angel offering her light.*

*It had rained for a week straight, and being cooped up in the house was no fun for a young girl. It was a gorgeous, sunny June day when the sky finally cleared. Alessandra begged her mother to take her to the park. Her father had said no and his word was law. But Alessandra cried and threw a tantrum.*

*Anthony hollered at his daughter, but Marina assured him they'd be safe. He reluctantly agreed and ordered bodyguards to escort them.*

*Alessandra skipped down the block as the playground was within walking distance from their home. She paid no mind to the black car that followed them with her father's men inside.*

*Her mother pushed her on the swings. The scent of Marina's floral perfume mixed with the warm summer sun enveloped her in their comfort. She was smiling and giggling as though the moment was magical. She was happy and carefree, like any child at the park should feel.*

*Marina's dark curls streamed behind her as she chased her daughter in a game of tag. Alessandra was about to take off when her mother grabbed her and pulled her close.*

*A black sedan pulled up, and people began shouting. The young girl saw Enzo Prazza's angry face through the open window. Things happened so fast, she didn't understand much about what happened next, but she experienced terror for the first time.*

*Loud pops sounded like fireworks around them, and she screamed. She didn't realize they were gunshots, but she'd*

*never forget the sound. Marina tightened her arms around her frightened daughter and sang her an Italian lullaby.*

*“Don’t be afraid, mia figlia. It’s going to be all right.” Tears rolled down her face, as she smiled at Alessandra. “Ti amo.”*

*“Ti amo, Mamma.”*

*Marina had been shot several times. And though she had been in agonizing pain she spent her remaining moments loving and protecting her daughter. The guards were too slow to stop Enzo, and he escaped.*

Drake pulled the sobbing Alessandra into his arms. “It’s all right, bella. You’re safe now. I’ve got you.”

“Papà blames me for my mother’s death. He sent me away for years, and the abuse began when I returned. But now I wonder if he was punishing me because I belong to someone else.”

“That *bastardo* had no right to blame you for what happened to Marina.”

“Don’t you get it, Drake? It’s my fault. She would still be alive if I hadn’t begged her to take me to the park.”

Fresh tears sprang to her eyes. Drake cupped her cheeks and touched his forehead to hers. He wiped the wetness from her cheeks with his thumb.

“You listen to me and listen well. You were a *child*. You had no control over what happened that day in the park.” Drake kissed her forehead, cheeks, and nose. “You need to stop blaming yourself.”

Absolution blossomed in Alessandra’s heart. The pain she’d felt for so long eased at Drake’s words. She sighed against him, and he continued stroking her arm.

“Are you absolutely sure you saw Enzo at the park that day?”

“I’m sure, Drake. Enzo was the bogeyman that killed my mother and haunted my dreams for years.” She looked into his eyes and lifted her hand to smooth his brow. “I never realized before that your eyes are the same as his.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You aren’t the bogeyman, Drake Walker. You’re the man I love,” Alessandra assured her husband. “I need to look Enzo in the eye. I want to know why he killed my mother. Women are supposed to be safe in feuds.”

“You’re asking too much of me. This time, I beg you. Please let me protect you.”

“I know what I’m asking. Juliana sacrificed everything to keep you away from that world. My mother held me until her last breath. Their sacrifices brought us together, Drake. Tell me those women aren’t worth avenging.”

Drake closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I will set up a meeting with Enzo for you.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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“WHAT’S GOING ON, DRAGO?”

Grant Ellis blew out a plume of smoke. Though smoking in public buildings was illegal, he never seemed to care. He didn’t have to deal with the lingering stench for days.

“Have the decency to crack a fucking window, Grant,” Drake grumbled irritably.

Grant crossed the office and propped open the window. He made a show of blowing the smoke out.

They met in Drake’s office, as it was swept for bugs on a weekly basis and was more inconspicuous than meeting in Jerry’s chambers. The clock on the wall signaled the end of a normal business day. As a lawyer, it wasn’t atypical for Drake to put in 12 hours a day—or more, depending on his caseload. No one would question a closed-door meeting in the evening.

Drake sat behind his wooden desk while Grant and Jerry sat opposite him in the armchairs. Months ago, Alessandra knelt beneath that very desk and gave him a blowjob so satisfying he couldn’t see straight. It felt like a lifetime ago. He preferred her company to the men before him.

“I’ve told Alessandra the truth about my parentage,” he said.

“It’s about fucking time!” Jerry exclaimed. “For the record, Noah told me.”

“Of course he did. That bitch of yours can’t keep a secret,” Grant said pointedly.

“There’s no reason to insult my husband. Secrets make him itch.” Jerry turned to Drake, “Communication between spouses is privileged, don’t forget.”

In some ways, it brought them closer immediately, but Drake knew the only way to move forward was to honor Alessandra’s request. She wouldn’t feel safe unless she confronted the demons of her past.

“It’s honestly a relief. The last barrier between us is gone. But now it opens her up to Enzo.”

“Surely you didn’t bring us here to offer the play-by-play.”

“She’s requested a meeting with Enzo.”

“Out of the fucking question,” Grant said matter-of-factly.

“Enzo is in Chicago but has been lying low. I didn’t plan to make contact, but my wife asked me to set up a meeting. She needs it for closure. I promised to find a way to make it happen. It will be a huge leap forward for our operation as well.”

“What do you propose?”

“I have an insider within Enzo’s organization. He tipped me off when Enzo returned to the States. It’s through him that I will make contact with Enzo to set up a meeting. Alessandra and I will present a united front. I’ll relay anything of importance.”

“I don’t like this proposition, Drago.” Grant’s scarred brow twitched in irritation. “This is a delicate operation. I’ve put up with you toeing the line for a while now. My patience is not limitless.”

Drake held firm. “Don’t you see the opportunity at hand? If we play Enzo right, we’ll be able to take down the Russo and Prazza families.

“Alessandra doesn’t know of our plans or my role in the organization. The only thing I’ve divulged was the truth about my background.”

“We don’t need your wife’s emotional whims fucking up our operation. We’ve worked too hard to get here, and finally, the



end is in sight.”

“Alessandra is a good girl, Grant. Noah and I have spent time getting to know her.”

Drake looked at Jerry gratefully. He was glad they were able to overcome their disagreements.

“I’ll leave first.” Grant stood but paused at the door. “Make sure you send me the details of your meeting with Enzo as soon as you make contact. I’ll coach you through everything.”

“This needs to be a natural interaction between father and son. I won’t let you feed me lines. Don’t forget that I’ve lived that life. This is *my* call.”

“The body of Carlo Turelli, a known associate of Anthony Russo, was found mutilated in his apartment. Would you happen to know anything about that, Drago?”

Drake shrugged. “From my understanding, he was the one responsible for torturing Alessandra. I can’t say I’m sorry to hear he met his maker. Who knows how many girls will be saved from similar fates?”

“What is to become of our Romeo and Juliet? Are we going to have to worry about our mafia prince and princess?”

“Don’t you dare threaten my wife.”

The room filled with tension as the two men stared each other down. Jerry looked from one face to the other, readying to jump in if necessary. Grant lit a fresh cigarette.

“You went too far, Drago.”

“I lived under Enzo’s roof for six fucking years, Grant. You don’t scare me. I’ve done nothing illegal in the States. You forget my deal with the NCB granted me immunity for the foreign crimes I was forced to commit.”

“You are not judge, jury, nor executioner. Don’t make me clean up another one of your fucking messes again. Your immunity will be off the table, and I’ll come for you.” Grant scowled and gnashed his teeth on the way out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Drake crossed to the closet and pulled out an air freshener spray.

“You really know how to yank his chain, Drake,” Jerry admonished him.

“Well, the son of a bitch asked for it.” Drake gestured toward the crystal decanter on the console. “Want a drink?”

“Two fingers.”

Drake poured the deep amber liquor into two crystal tumblers and returned to the vacated armchair.

“Did you really kill Carlo?”

“You know the answer to that.”

The two men locked eyes. Drake’s mentor sighed but didn’t push the issue further.

“How is Alessandra doing?” Jerry asked after taking a thoughtful sip.

“About as good as expected. Her meds make her tired. The doctor said it could take months for her body to fully adjust as they work on dosing.”

“And what if she becomes pregnant?”

“She’ll be able to maintain a treatment course while pregnant. She may have to reduce or switch meds, but it’s safe for pregnant women to take anti-anxiety meds. We’ve discussed that with her doctor.”

“I’m glad to hear that you’re prioritizing her mental health. That poor girl has been through a lot. It’s no wonder she’s been struggling. Especially with you acting like an asshole.”

Drake gulped his whiskey, letting it burn down his throat. “I’m committed to changing for her.”

“I know you are. I’ve seen it. Love does wonders to tame assholes like us. Love also causes us to do crazy things. But premeditated murder isn’t something I can save you from.”

“The remaining bullets are reserved. After that, I’d happily surrender my firearms.”

They were quiet for a moment, each studying their glass in hand. Once Tony and Luca were out of the picture, Drake's future with Alessandra looked much brighter. He moved to pour more and changed the subject.

"How's Noah doing?" he asked.

"He's still pissed at you. But you know he'll come around eventually. It's been hard for him since the attack. He's trying to find a new purpose." Jerry sighed wearily. "He wants us to have a baby."

Drake almost spat the mouthful of alcohol out. "No shit!"

"I'm too fucking old to be waking up in the middle of the night changing diapers. But if it makes Noah happy, I'm willing to consider it."

"How's that going to work exactly?"

"First, we have to undergo fertility testing and ensure one or both of us has decent sperm. My husband wants an interracial baby. So that means finding egg donors for us to cross-fertilize and implant into a surrogate. Do you know how much fucking money that's going to cost me?"

"I'm sure you're good for it." Drake clapped him on the back.

"Fuck yeah, I am. Noah said after the birth, he doesn't want to know who the biological father of the baby is, as long as we're committed to raising it together. But fuck, I'll be like the child's grandfather."

Drake laughed. "You're not that old. Enzo was around your age when he impregnated my biological mother."

"But that bastard didn't change your diapers or wake up in the middle of the night for feedings. You do realize I'm going to be puked on and pissed on. Those aren't my kinks."

"You've been a great mentor and friend. You have a solid marriage. I think you have what it takes to be a family man. You can always get a manny."

"I fucking hate you for making sense and taking Noah's side."

“Someone needs to. Can you imagine if our kids are born around the same time? We’ll be fucked together.” Drake lifted his tumbler to Jerry.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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A MEETING WITH ENZO HAD BEEN SECURED. THOUGH NERVES kept her up all night, Alessandra was as jittery as a live wire. She attempted to meditate to tamp down the apprehension, but her stomach threatened to revolt. Butterflies had nothing on how she felt. Dons were hardened men, and she would need every ounce of strength to confront her mother's killer.

But she wasn't just going to be meeting a murderer—she was meeting her father-in-law for the first time. Reconciling the fact that her husband was a mafia prince blew her damn mind. She was still dumbfounded at how he had managed to keep it hidden for so long.

“I don't understand why we can't just meet at his house or office.” Alessandra fidgeted with the diamond-encrusted heart ring on her collar.

“We are going to his office; don't tell me you've had a change of heart.” Drake met her eyes in the mirror.

Alessandra took a deep breath and dropped her hands to her sides. Drake stepped forward and massaged her shoulders. She groaned as her tense muscles melted at his touch. She leaned her head against his chest.

“It's not that, Drake.” She found it difficult to vocalize her feelings.

“It's time to get ready, amore mio.” He kissed her cheek. “Would you care to join me in the shower?”

Alessandra shook her head. “I’m too nervous to play in the shower.”

“We don’t have to play, bella. Although if you want, an orgasm releases oxytocin into the bloodstream, which can reduce your stress. I can pleasure you any way you want.”

Alessandra shook her head again, causing her auburn waves to fall over her shoulder. She met Drake’s gaze through the mirror, and tingles spread through her at the thought of him on his knees, spreading her open. Her husband had many skills. His tongue was good for more than just spouting filthy words.

“How about I start the water so it warms up for you? If you’d like to join me, you’re welcome to it.”

A few minutes later, Alessandra found Drake standing beneath the warm spray. Steam billowed around him, fogging the mirrors. She opened the glass door and stepped behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She peppered kisses along his shoulder and nuzzled her cheek against his back.

“Thank you for taking care of me.”

Drake didn’t respond with words. He turned around and kissed her sensually before turning them so she was the one standing beneath the water’s spray. He grabbed her nutty-smelling shampoo in his hands and massaged it through her hair, following up with the conditioner on the ends. He grabbed the loofah and squeezed luxurious shower gel onto it before rubbing it across her back.

“Mmm.”

“Do you like that?” he asked against the shell of her ear.

Alessandra nodded. There was nothing about Drake she didn’t like. His care left her burning with desire as much as his dominating commands did. Drake slowly lowered behind her, kissing her shoulders and spine as he went.

He stayed away from the tingling areas that begged for his attention, keeping his word about pleasuring her the way she wanted. She was tempted to widen her stance and ask for his mouth or fingers. But just as quickly, he stood up and pulled her into his arms.

Their early relationship had been defined through sex. Now they connected on a deeper, emotional level. Sex was still a big part of their relationship, but not the most important.

They traded caresses and kisses, fulfilling their need for intimacy until Drake shut off the water. He grabbed a plush towel and wrapped it around Alessandra before scooping her up and bringing her to the bed.

“We’re going to be late, Drake,” she protested.

“We’ll be fine.”

Drake set her on the foot of the bed and held his hand out to her.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Dance with me,” he said as he took her hand.

Drake pulled her against him and began humming. Alessandra closed her eyes as they swayed slowly. She rested her head on her husband’s chest, listening to his heartbeat. The gentle motions and the scent of his leathery aftershave made her feel safe.

“I think I feel better now.”

“I’m glad.” He kissed the top of her head. “But we do need to get ready.”

Alessandra’s anxiety returned. She worried something might go wrong and that she couldn’t handle it. Drake’s care helped to reassure her. They would make it through the evening together with trust and communication.

Alessandra pulled on a long, one-shouldered purple velvet evening gown. Drake walked into the room in black slacks and a black button-down shirt. He rolled up the sleeves, showing off his strong, corded forearms, which she found ridiculously sexy.

“You look so stunning, bella.” Drake wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her collar. “I can’t wait to see what’s underneath.”

His hand slid down to cup her ass through the fabric as his kisses trailed down her neck to her cleavage. Alessandra stilled his progression even though her nipples tingled with excitement beneath the fabric.

“We don’t have time,” she said firmly, pushing him away.

Drake sighed and let her go. “I know, dolcezza. Into the mouth of hell we go. Let’s get this over with.”

Drake offered Alessandra his arm as they walked out of the elevator. The driver greeted them and opened the door of the sleek town car Drake had ordered for the evening. The driver raised the partition to give them privacy.

“Are you okay, Drake?” Alessandra asked at the storm brewing in her husband’s dark eyes.

“I haven’t seen Enzo in fourteen years. I’ve done so much with my life despite him. He might be my biological father, but he’s not my dad. However, he’s shaped me in a lot of ways.” Drake looked down at their joined hands. “I had everything as a popular, preppy rich boy from Lake Forest. A car accident after a football game introduced me to a dark world. Six years changed everything about who I was. You’re a miracle for having survived twenty-three years.”

She cupped her husband’s cheek. “You are a good man, Drake Walker.”

Drake pressed his lips against hers. His tight jaw betrayed his confident exterior, and his eyes reflected his inner turmoil.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right meeting with Enzo again?”

Drake chuckled wryly. “As if you gave me any choice in the matter. We’re meeting with Enzo at your insistence. Jerry asked me to contact him when Noah was in the hospital, and I refused him outright. But for you, I’m willing to make an exception. I just hope you won’t regret it.”

“Drake.” Alessandra stroked Drake’s arm, but he pulled away. “I’m sorry.”

“We both have our scars to bear, bella. I know you went through hell and back. You’ve heard my story, and I hope you



understand why I kept it from you.”

They fell silent for the remainder of the ride. Drake’s leg bounced as he looked out the window. Alessandra occasionally glanced at him, but he didn’t look at her. The car stopped outside a loft apartment building between the Fulton Market and River districts.

“When would you like me to return, Mr. Walker?” the driver asked.

Drake looked at him with a vacant expression.

“We’ll text you in a few hours and let you know,” Alessandra offered.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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“PASSWORD?”

“*Il mio re,*” Drake ground out and placed his hand against Alessandra’s lower back to convey she was his.

The doorman held up his hand. “Before you go in, I must pat down the lady to ensure she isn’t carrying any weapons.”

Alessandra crossed her arms as the burly doorman gave her a heated once-over. He stuck his tongue against his cheek salaciously.

“Absolutely the fuck not!” Drake pulled Alessandra firmly against his side. “No one lays a hand on my wife.”

“Rules are rules, *putana.*”

Drake reacted in a flash, pulling a knife Alessandra had no idea was hidden on his person. He held it against the portly man’s throat. She gasped and put her hand on Drake’s arm—the one not holding the weapon.

“You apologize to my wife and choose your next words very carefully, or they’ll be your last. I’ll make sure Enzo knows you insulted his daughter-in-law.”

The doorman flinched and gaped like a fish. “*Le mie scuse*—my apologies. I meant no offense to the lady or you, sir.”

Drake retracted the knife just as quickly as he pulled it out. He was well-trained and efficient with many weapons, though he was far from an expert guardsman. Inside, the beast purred

with satisfaction as a bead of blood appeared on the man's neck.

"If you need anything, please don't hesitate to find me. It would be an honor to assist you." The doorman pulled a tissue from his pocket and held it to the tiny spot, and practically tripped over himself to open the door for them.

"How proficient are you with a knife?" Alessandra asked, pausing just inside the door.

"I can handle my own, bella. It will become dangerous inside if I don't flex my muscles and show them who I am. I promise to protect you. Anyone who dares to lay their hands on you better be prepared to die."

His words hung in the air between them. They hadn't discussed Carlo's death, but Alessandra had seen the news reports. He was thankful she didn't judge him or shrink away from him anymore. In fact, their marriage seemed stronger than ever.

"Why a knife and not a gun? I saw one in your office?"

"A gun is too obvious, too bulky, and the first thing everyone reaches for. A knife is more subtle and easier to hide during a frisk. I'm proficient with both. I learned a lot in Italy."

Before they could speak further, an attendant came to greet them. She was dressed in a green velvet cocktail gown and smiled as a perfect hostess. She was the glamor before setting eyes on the depravity within. Inside, the loft apartment building was transformed into a club.

"You brought me to another BDSM club?" Alessandra hissed.

Drake's eyes darkened. "Enzo owns this club. His office is located here. It was the only place he was willing to meet."

Drake led her to the bar. He signaled to the bartender and slipped the man a bill. The bartender stuck it in his pocket and returned to making drinks.

"What was that about?"

"You'll see."



ALESSANDRA TURNED ON HER BARSTOOL TO SURVEY THE CLUB. The ceiling was painted red with a rosebud texture. Multicolored strip lighting outlined the floor, ceiling, bar, and stages. It lacked the intimacy and sensual atmosphere of Jerry's club.

A raised dais was erected across from the bar. A suspension ring hung from a ceiling hook. Jacks, big bois, batons, dragon tongues, and studded whips lined the back wall. Alessandra shuddered as she imagined the damage any one of those could do in the wrong hands. Maybe that was the point?

She already bore scars from her sadistic father's belt. Her husband enjoyed impact play using assorted crops or spanking with his hand. That was enough for her; whips were a hard limit.

High tables with barstools were arranged around the stage on its other two sides for an audience. A few small stages with stripper poles peppered the wall.

Randomly placed stand-up cages held captive subs. One male was dressed in a black latex bodysuit. The only bit of flesh exposed was through the zipper for his cock to hang out. He stroked it for a couple watching him with rapt attention. Another cage held a captive sub with a ball gag in her mouth and her hands cuffed to the bars. She was rigged with a vaginal and anal hook that appeared rather uncomfortable. Alessandra didn't see a Dom or Domme near her and assumed it was a severe punishment straight from her nightmares.

Alessandra was not a fan of cage play. She had spent enough of her life being caged. She'd even felt caged with Drake when they first married. Now that there were no more secrets between them, Alessandra felt secure and protected in Drake's collar. She was finally sprouting wings and preparing to thrive.

She overheard something that made her gasp in shock. A sub was humiliated and flogged while thanking the Dom delivering his punishment. Alessandra thought of the self-deprecating words she had called herself weeks ago in the mirror while she spiraled out of control. The words that were branded on her soul by her father. She was thankful her husband wouldn't subject her to that unless she asked for it. They both knew that he would never degrade her in such a way, because that wasn't love.

Alessandra didn't feel comfortable as a sub in Enzo's club. She wondered if Drake had been introduced to the lifestyle through him and what darker secrets he could still be hiding.

"Time for you to go," a man said over her shoulder, grabbing her elbow.

"Remove your fucking hand from my wife's arm now, Lorenzo. I'm not in the fucking mood. We're here as Enzo's guests."

"Fucking Drago. When will you learn?" The man spoke with a heavy accent.

The guard that Drake had identified as Guido from his past wasn't how she'd imagined him to look. He was a staunch, middle-aged man with a hooked nose, beady eyes, and a gold tooth.

"You brought the *Russo putana* in here?"

His breath stank of alcohol and stale cigarettes as he practically yelled in her face. She covered her mouth with her hand as her stomach rolled.

Lorenzo yanked hard on Alessandra's arm, wrenching her shoulder. She shrieked as he jerked her off the bar stool. Upon seeing her distress, Drake punched the man as hard as he could in the blink of an eye. Blood seeped from the man's nose, though he seemed oblivious to it.

"Take your filthy fucking hand off her. Do not make me tell you again, Guido. The next person who touches my wife or calls her a whore won't be walking on two legs anymore."

Blood spread across his upper lip as he sneered before pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and using it to staunch the bleeding. He dropped his hand from Alessandra's arm, and she immediately squeezed against Drake's side. He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her arm to comfort her.

"You're going to regret that, *bastardo*."

Their interaction garnered attention from the bartender and those in earshot. A harsh voice spoke up behind them, raising the hair on the back of Alessandra's neck.

"Who is making this racket in my club?"

"*Scusi, Capo*. I was attempting to put the trash on the curb," Lorenzo said, indicating Alessandra.

Alessandra shrank further into Drake at Enzo's cloying smile. She felt violated as his eyes undressed her. He was just like the men her father had forced her to entertain. Drake pushed Alessandra behind him and balled his fists.

"That's my wife *your* people keep insulting, Enzo. I will pluck out your eyes and grind them under my boot if you don't stop leering at her. She deserves to be treated with respect as your guest."

Enzo leaned close to Lorenzo, whispering something Alessandra couldn't make out over the music. The guard visibly paled, and it wasn't a result of the blood continuing to ooze from his nostrils.

"*Scusi*, Mrs. Prazza. I meant no offense," he said before scurrying away.

"It's Mrs. Walker," she corrected him, but he didn't turn around to acknowledge her.

"Forgive Lorenzo's poor manners. We don't usually consort with the enemy here. But you are most welcome, my dear. Your beauty clearly transforms civilized men such as us into beasts thinking with our dicks versus our heads."

Drake's teeth ground so hard, Alessandra feared they would burst out of his skull.

“I’m not here as an agent of my father. I wanted to speak with you on my own accord,” she said.

“Look around, my dear. I run a pleasurable establishment here. The night is still young, and our introductions left a bitter taste in my mouth. Enjoy the facilities. I reserved my best suite for you. Drink and play for now. I’ll send for you when I’m ready.”

Enzo motioned for the bartender to pour drinks. Three Negronis were placed on the counter. Drake handed Alessandra her glass, and Enzo raised his.

“*Salute*. Welcome to the family, Mrs. Prazza.”

As Alessandra took a sip of the bittersweet cocktail, a wave of nausea overwhelmed her. If she puked, she hoped it would be right on Enzo’s polished black wingtips.

## Chapter Thirty

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A HOSTESS WEARING NOTHING BUT A THONG APPEARED AS though magically summoned. Her heavily made-up face made her appear grotesque in the hellish hues of the track lights. Drake suspected very few people looked at her face. They were too busy looking at her milk-worthy, oversized breasts with nothing concealing them.

The hostess led them up the back stairs to the second floor, which was heavily carpeted and muffled their steps. *Bodily fluids must be a bitch to clean out of that*, Drake thought wryly. They passed several doors with different symbols on them. The symbols corresponded to the scene set within. She opened a heavy black ornate door with fangs carved into the wood.

Inside was a gothic dungeon for those interested in biting, blood play, or other vampiric fantasies. In the center of the room was a large four-poster bed with a sculpted, arched, red velvet-upholstered headboard. The bed itself was made up with black silk sheets and an assortment of pillows. The bedposts were carved wood, which wouldn't allow shackling, but an under-the-mattress restraint system nullified that issue.

The honeycomb ceiling glowed with a purple light that reflected on the marble floor. A lush rug lay between the bed and a lit faux fireplace for those wishing to make love on the floor. Silver candelabras with red taper candles were lit on the mantle and side table. Red drapes opened to reveal a large



walled mirror. A straight-back ornate chair was positioned next to the bed, and its match sat in the far corner for voyeurs.

A large hand-carved wooden chest held an assortment of handheld sex toys. Various restraints hung from the wall, including a heavy link chain. In the bureau was a drawer of scarves ranging from sheer to opaque. The closet contained heavier equipment along with crops and floggers.

“Climb on the bed, Alessandra,” Drake instructed.

Alessandra followed his command, slipping off her stilettos before climbing up and kneeling in her dress. Drake looked her over for a moment, appreciating how far she’d come from their first encounter with her tear-soaked face as her father forced her to kneel in her wedding dress.

Once she was in position, Alessandra could do nothing more than wait. Drake opened all the drawers and cabinets, looking through the toys and props they could use that evening.

Drake flicked his palm with a few crops before choosing a black leather heart-tipped one. He chose a rigid spreader bar with leather wrist and ankle cuffs. Alessandra could squirm and squeal all she wanted, but there’d be no escape. She didn’t have experience with this particular restraint, and he couldn’t wait to put her body in the perfect position for spanking and fucking.

He found an array of different-sized, colored vibrators, from an egg to a rabbit, choosing a moderately sized purple vibrator. Lastly, on impulse, he picked a gem-tipped stainless steel anal plug. It was time to push her boundaries.

Drake brought his selection to the foot of the bed in Alessandra’s eyesight. Her face flushed deeper with each new item he laid before her. He caressed her collarbone and down her arm with the back of his knuckles. Goosebumps erupted on her skin in their wake.

“Do you see something you like, bella? I handpicked each one with care, just for you. I know some of these items are new to you.”

His hands roamed over her breasts, massaging and stimulating her nipples through the light fabric. He grabbed her under her arms and pulled her up from her kneeling position.

“Do you feel how hard I am for you, bella?” he asked while grinding his crotch against her stomach.

Drake kissed the slope of her neck, and her head fell back with a sigh.

“I’m not sure this is the best place for this, Master.”

He halted. “Explain.”

“Your father owns this club. He’ll know what we’re doing in here.”

Drake laughed. “I don’t give a fuck that Enzo owns this club. I’m hard as steel thinking about slipping into your wet, tight pussy. You’re my sexy-as-fuck wife, and no one else belongs in here with your libido but me. I love how you can be my timid little lamb at times, and a wanton sex kitten others.

“You are mine, bella. When you wear my collar, I don’t want you thinking about anyone else but me. If I have to remind you with my cock buried in your mouth, your pussy, or your ass, I’m happy to oblige.”

Alessandra gasped as Drake pulled the bodice of her dress down, exposing her breasts. He gathered her wrists behind her back and forced her back to arch as he latched onto her nipple. Her breasts seemed fuller as of late. He’d noticed subtle changes that could be early pregnancy or medication.

He hoped like hell it was pregnancy, and until he had proof to the contrary, he was determined to continue pumping her full of cum at every opportunity.

“Your breasts fit perfectly in the palm of my hand.” He demonstrated with his free hand. He pinched and pulled her nipple, causing her to moan. “Milking isn’t a kink that interests me. But I can’t wait to taste the sweetness you produce once you give birth to my baby.”

He lowered his head again and suckled her nipple, flicking it with his tongue.

“Mmm.”

“Do you like that, bella. Do you want Daddy to drink your milk?”

“Drake!”

“I’m not Drake,” he said before sucking the other nipple into his mouth.

“Yes, Daddy! Please suck my tits.”

Drake pulled away and let her go. “That’s my good little slut. We’re in a private room. There’s no audience or playmates here. We can have fun and relieve stress together.”

Drake’s hand snuck its way up her thigh, stopping dangerously close to her wet heat. “I can feel how much you need me, bella. Show Daddy what a good girl you are by picking a toy for me. Earlier, I took care of a different set of your needs. Now let me take care of the throbbing between your legs. Or give me your safe word.”

She moaned as he cupped her mound. Drake’s hand stalled, and he pulled away immediately when she tried to grind against it.

The begging from her pouty lips whipped his lust into a frenzy. He grabbed the ring of her collar and pulled her closer. His lips sought the heat from her skin and left their own scorching trail over her shoulders and neck.

“I’m waiting,” he said.

“Please, Master,” she pouted.

His fingers tore her panties from her body and found her dripping core. A wanton whine spilled from her mouth as her legs fell further apart. He brushed his finger between her lips.

“What makes you this wet, Alessandra? Is it my dirty words? Because I’ll whisper into your ear all night long. Do you crave my touch? I’ll satisfy your needs every time. If you have any fantasies you need to be fulfilled, all you have to do is tell me.”

Drake probed her with his middle finger as he spoke against the shell of her ear. Her chest heaved as her breathing shallowed. She scrambled for her zipper, but Drake beat her to it.

“What kind of husband would I be if I didn’t help you out of your dress?”

Alessandra’s body trembled as he blew across her spine. She mewled like a kitten and rubbed her ass against his crotch. All the signs pointed to her being on edge already, and Drake stepped away. Her lip trembled as she whimpered with need.

“Please, Master. I need to come.”

“I know you do, gorgeous. It’s so fucking sexy when you beg. But you still haven’t told me what you want to play with. It’s a shame I already have you naked because I would love it if you stripped for me.” He sat on a bench against the wall, putting distance between them. Drake’s hooded gaze swept over her naked body.

“Do you like what you see, Master?” She turned slowly, allowing him time to appreciate her body before lowering herself to the floor. She crawled toward Drake, resuming a position on her knees before him.

“You know I do, bella.”

Alessandra raised herself until she was eye-level with the generous bulge in his pants and licked her lips suggestively. She nuzzled his inner thigh and grazed his erection through his pants. Her palms slowly slid up his pant legs, but once she reached his zipper, Drake slapped her hand.

“Alessandra!” he barked.

She immediately backed down and placed her hands on her lap.

“Good girl. I want you to take my pants off.”

She eagerly ran her hands up Drake’s thighs and unbuckled his belt. She leaned closer and pulled down the zipper with her teeth. Drake’s hips jerked in response. His heavy breaths drowned out the sounds of rustling fabric.

“Enough.” He brushed her hands off.

Dejected, she rocked back. Drake put his finger beneath her chin and forced their eyes to meet.

“Since you failed to pick a toy, I’m going to tell you what I want you to do. Pick up that purple vibrator, squat over the rug, and fuck yourself on the highest setting while facing me. If you come, I will punish you.”

She scrambled to grab the vibrator, and the toy buzzed to life as she turned it on. Drake slowly unbuttoned his shirt as he admired how the subtle expressions changed on her face. Each flex and stretch of his muscles screamed with need, but he forced himself to take his time.

His eyes feasted hungrily on the point where Alessandra’s body took the purple vibrating phallus inside her body. Soon she was lost in a world of her own.

“What do you think about when you masturbate, Alessandra? Do you imagine something more vanilla?”

She shook her head.

“Do you conjure a fantasy world where you’re the queen and your subjects wait in line to pleasure you from sunrise to midnight?” She whimpered. “I love how my naughty little slut is turned on by the thought of multiple dicks, but the only one that satisfies her is mine.”

Her eyes glazed over, and she started to shake. Drake removed his pants and boxers and stood gloriously naked before her.

“Don’t you dare remove that vibrator. I want you to bury it as deep as it will go and leave it there. If you come, you will receive ten lashes from my crop.”

He approached her crouched body, grabbed her head, and tapped his dick head against her lips. She opened and flicked her tongue against the tip. He shoved his cock into her throat without prepping her first and held it there until she gagged and sputtered.

“Remove the vibrator from your pussy. I want you facing the wall,” he said as he withdrew.

She obeyed wordlessly, dropping the vibrator in Drake's open hand. He turned it off and placed it on the used toy shelf.

Alessandra stood facing the wall with her arms raised above her head, bearing her weight and stuck her ass out. Drake came up behind her and ran his hand down her spine. She whined and wiggled her ass, hoping he would take the hint and give her what she needed.

"All in good time, darling. You know Daddy always takes care of you. You just need to be patient like the good girl I know you are," he whispered against her spine.

Alessandra's shoulders sagged as Drake walked toward the bed to pick up the riding crop. He returned to her, positioned her exactly as he wanted her, then placed one palm against the wall next to her head and stroked her inner thighs with the heart tip of the crop.

Alessandra's breath stuttered as Drake flicked against her dripping pussy. "You've made a mess. Lick it clean."

He pushed the crop in her face to show her the wet sheen left behind. Alessandra did as she was told, making soft noises that caused Drake's dick to twitch. He pulled the crop away from her lips and ran it down her spine, clapping here and there before running it through the cleft of her ass.

"I haven't taken you here yet, Alessandra. I think tonight is the night. Would you let me?"

Drake shoved his finger into Alessandra's mouth before she could retort, and she sucked on it until he withdrew. She shook her head as Drake ran his finger between her cheeks and probed her bud. He withdrew and ground his erection against her ass.

"You have your safe word. Say it, and we stop. Don't say it, and open your mouth."

Alessandra opened her mouth, and Drake stuck the bulb of the anal plug between her open lips. He continued rubbing her ass crack while she worked. "Get it good and wet, bella. It's going into your gorgeous ass while I fuck your pussy."

He grabbed a tube of lube and coated his finger before sliding it into her virgin hole. Her rear passage offered resistance, but he wiggled his finger to help loosen it up before withdrawing. The tip of the cold jeweled plug quickly replaced it.

“Don’t tense up. Take a deep breath and play with your clit.” Alessandra did as he said. As she exhaled, Drake pushed past her tight ring, watching as it slipped inside her body.

*“Bellissima.”*

## Chapter Thirty-One

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ALESSANDRA WIGGLED HER HIPS, TRYING TO ADJUST TO HAVING a cold foreign object inside her body. A sheen of sweat covered her body. She couldn't think straight.

“Drake... Please, Master... I—”

“Shh, dolcezza. It's all right. I'm here to give you what you need,” he said soothingly as he entered her from behind.

He groaned as his hips met hers, putting pressure on the jeweled plug. She felt as if she were about to burst. Drake's pace was slow initially, but his thrusts quickened. The pressure stimulated a foreign set of nerves inside Alessandra, making her dizzy as she approached climax. Drake forced her legs wider and plunged deeper still. Unintelligible words spilled from her lips.

“Come for me, Alessandra.”

Alessandra's vision blurred when Drake pinched her clit. She came harder than she ever had before and collapsed against the wall. Aftershocks caused her to shutter as Drake played with the bulb.

“I knew you'd enjoy it if you gave it a chance. I will have a mental picture of this moment forever.”

Drake held Alessandra's hand, escorted her to the bed, and placed her feet into the spreader bar. He helped her lay back in a comfortable position before pulling her hands down near her ankles to restrain her wrists.



“Are you comfortable?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Breathe, Alessandra. I’m going to remove the plug and fuck your ass. Are you ready?” She nodded. “I would like your verbal consent.”

Alessandra appreciated the time and care Drake took when pushing her limits. It only felt right that her husband be the one to take the last intimate part of her that remained untouched.

He reminded her of her safe word, and the word bounced around her brain repeatedly each time he did. It was her anchor to the present. But the word would weigh heavily on her tongue if she tried to speak it.

Drake spanked her ass and pulled her from the fog. She groaned as the plug withdrew and left her feeling empty until the bulbous head of her husband’s thick cock replaced it. He tweaked her clit while surging forward. She clenched her hands into fists and whined until Drake pushed through the ring of fire.

He continued forward slowly until his hips met her ass and sat for a moment. Alessandra was so full, she felt the sensation in her throat. She wanted to cry and, at the same time, beg for it to hurt. The bar restricted her movements, but the tension soon broke. Drake took the cue from her body and moved.

Alessandra felt every inch of him as he withdrew slowly until only the head remained inside of her.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes, Master,” she said.

Drake thrust, not stopping until their bodies connected again. He withdrew, increasing in speed and intensity with every stroke.

“You are the most incredible woman. Every inch of you is perfection. Your ass has a vise grip on my cock. I’m not going to last.” He played with her nub. “I want you to come with me.”

Twin tendrils of pleasure and pain swirled within her as Drake's hips slammed against her repeatedly. His heavy breath hit her shoulder, and she knew he was close to release. Drake grabbed the bar to pull Alessandra closer and pushed as deep as he could.

"Fuck—" Drake pulled out quickly.

Alessandra exploded with a wordless scream as she splintered apart. Drake's hot seed seared her skin.

Drake collapsed onto the bed. Several moments passed while he caught his breath and regained his strength before he uncuffed Alessandra. He kissed her as he rubbed feeling back into her sore muscles.

"That was intense."

Drake looked into her eyes and stroked her wrist. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No, Master." She shook her head.

"We're done playing, bella. Call me Drake."

"I love you, Drake," Alessandra said in affirmation.

With a final sigh of contentment, they lay limp on the sweat-dampened silk sheets, holding each other until they fell asleep.



THE SLAMMING OF THE DOOR STARTLED THEM AWAKE. Alessandra scrambled to cover herself but was too late, as both men entering had already glimpsed her nakedness.

Lorenzo leered at her, "Nice tits, *dolcezza*."

"I warned you about disrespecting my wife, Guido."

"You are a beautiful specimen, my dear, like the Venus de Milo. Women are meant to serve at the club and should dress appropriately. Lorenzo brought you some suitable options."

Enzo gestured to his associate to bring forward the selected attire.

“Enzo—” Drake began.

“She’s a Russo, a *putana*, and a submissive. She has not proven worthy of my respect.” Enzo leered at Alessandra. “Love makes men do stupid things, Drago. I thought I taught you better than that. Never let your guard down.

“Did you forget, as head of the family, I get the first pick of any woman?”

“Fuck you, old man,” Drake spat.

Enzo nodded at Guido, who pulled a still-naked Alessandra from the bed. She screamed and attempted to fight him but was no match for his strength.

“Let go of me!” she cried.

He pulled a gun out and pointed it at her head. “She’s freshly fucked and still ripe, boss.”

“Let go of my wife, Guido. I’m going to fucking kill you with my bare hands. No one lays a hand on my wife.”

At Drake’s provocation, Lorenzo trailed the muzzle of the weapon between Alessandra’s bare breasts and down her belly. He circled her navel and made a show of his movements. Alessandra tensed, knowing that at any moment he could pull the trigger.

“Have you been fucked by a gun, *principessa*?”

He forced the firearm between Alessandra’s thighs. She jerked and squeaked in fright. Her emerald eyes went wide and she stared at Drake, silently pleading for him to save her.

Lorenzo pressed the cold metal against her most intimate area. He stroked it back and forth, violating her with the firearm. Alessandra refused to give these men the satisfaction of seeing her break. She clamped her lips tightly and bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood.

Drake sprang from the bed roaring with a murderous rage, but Enzo stopped him with a raised hand. He pointed his own

firearm at Alessandra.

“Enough, Lorenzo. Return to the task at hand,” Enzo ordered his guard.

Lorenzo dragged Alessandra into the bathroom and threw her to the floor. “Do as Mr. Prazza says and change. If you disobey, he will punish you. My gun is still hungry.”

Alessandra almost threw up when he sniffed the muzzle of the weapon and licked the shiny wetness off it. She willed her body to stop trembling. She’d experienced worse, and she’d survived. These men wanted her to cower before them, and she refused. She would cry about it in Drake’s arms later. The only place she felt safe was with him.

He winked at her and tossed a black leather thong at her. She expected him to leave, but he stood and watched as she put on the underwear and thigh-high stockings with a black garter belt. It felt strange against her freshly used hole. There was no bra, so she pulled her hair down and arranged it in a way to offer modest coverage. The black wrist cuffs covered her scars. It was the only piece of the insulting lingerie that made her feel comfortable.

Once she exited the bathroom, Guido grabbed her again. She tried to fight him but was quickly subdued. He took silver chains and connected each wrist to the collar around her neck. She felt humiliated and degraded in a way that Drake never made her feel.

Drake was also dressed and quickly moved to grab her, but Enzo beat him to it. “It’s time to show off my daughter-in-law to the club. Let them see what happens when we collar the enemy.” Enzo yanked on her chain.

“Drake!” she cried.

“Let her go, Enzo!”

“The man with the largest cock and gun in the room makes the rules. How quickly you forget your lessons, Drago. If you keep protesting, we can always put her on stage. She’d look amazing down on her knees sucking my dick before servicing the remainder of the club.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Alessandra and Drake were escorted to a private lounge where a topless woman danced on a small stage. Her hands were cuffed to a rigid bar across her shoulders as she undulated to the music.

Enzo sat to watch the performer. Guido motioned to Drake to sit beside Enzo. Alessandra moved to sit next to Drake, but Enzo clicked his tongue. Drake’s eyes went dark as Guido pushed Alessandra to her knees on the cold floor.

“Now that Mrs. Prazza has learned some manners, we can discuss business.”

“She’s Mrs. Walker and worthy of respect. She doesn’t belong at your feet.”

Drake reached for Alessandra and pulled her onto his lap, wrapping a protective arm around her. Enzo’s eyes blazed, and there was no doubt in Alessandra’s mind that this man would be more ruthless than her father if they crossed him the wrong way. Her husband was right all along; she had invited the devil into her life.

Drake motioned to her to speak. Alessandra opened her mouth, but her tongue felt dry and thick. She tried to swallow, but her throat was tight. A wave of panic washed over her, and she snapped her mouth shut. She wanted to run away, but it was time to be brave. It was time to prove she was a mafia princess.

“I’m right here if you need me, bella. I’m sorry they scared you, but Enzo was only flexing his muscles. I won’t let them hurt you.”

Drake kissed Alessandra’s cheek. His words of support meant everything to her. He had no idea how much she needed him.

Alessandra rolled her shoulders back and took a deep breath.

“Why did you do it?”

“Do what, dear? Be specific,” Enzo teased.

“Why did you kill my mother?”

“The Bratva required retribution for my late wife.”

“My mother was innocent,” she cried.

“No one in this life is innocent. It’s about time you realize that, or you won’t last long.”

“You’re the one who pushed Riley to win Drake back, not my father. Why?”

His false grin turned into a sneer, looking at Alessandra like she was dirt beneath his nails. “My son shouldn’t be tied to the Russo family. Tony lost his edge with Marcello’s cock-up. Your name means nothing now that Donato will assume power.

“It’s time for your ‘star-crossed lovers’ act to come to an end. This isn’t Romeo and Juliet. Your love won’t solve anything. I allowed my son enough dalliances. Now it’s time for him to assume his role in *this* family.”

“We came to ask for your help. If you continue to mock my wife, you will lose me permanently.” Drake laced his fingers with Alessandra’s as he spoke.

“What exactly is it that you want?” Enzo asked.

“We need your support to stand against my father and Luca.”

“I’ll help you on one condition. You may choose—either I kill your entire family, including your brother Marcello, or you divorce my son.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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ENZO'S WORDS RATTLED AROUND DRAKE'S SKULL. THE bastard had given Alessandra an impossible choice, making sure there was no winning for them no matter her answer. He'd warned her, and now he was about to lose everything.

In reality, they had never stood a chance. At one point or another, Enzo was going to reach out and destroy everything Drake had built, including the woman he loved. The man couldn't approach earlier when Drake had nothing to lose.

In the years Drake spent in Italy, he learned Enzo didn't have a drop of goodwill or love in his cold, dead heart. Juliana's diary was full of pages gushing about a debonair man who swept her off her feet. It had taken years to reconcile that she romanticized a monster as most young women without life experience do. Just like his wife had done with him. He was his father's son, after all, and it killed him.

The comparison to Romeo and Juliet made him sick. Everything Drake swore to protect Alessandra from had blown up in his face. He should've said no at that fucking altar and let her walk away. But he couldn't let her marry someone else and lie on her back and spread her legs for him.

The knife in the fold of Drake's shirt weighed against him. He knew how to wield it effectively and make a killing blow. He wouldn't drag it across Enzo's neck; he'd plunge it into the bastard's heart and twist it. But armed guards would ensure neither he nor Alessandra made it out alive.

“A woman like Riley is more suited to Drake,” Enzo said. “She has the pedigree.”

“Let me make this fucking clear. Riley returned to Paris and is in the past where she belongs. She’s not a connected woman. I fail to see what you would have gained from that. Alessandra is *my* wife. If you don’t help us, you will lose your son permanently.”

Alessandra had remained silent in his lap after Enzo’s ultimatum. Enzo looked at their joined hands in disgust.

“Love makes us weak, Drago. I learned that with Juliana. I loved her with everything inside me. But she lied to me and stole you away. You take after her in your dramatics.

“Which will it be? I will kill Anthony Russo, his underboss Luca Donato, and his disgraced son Marcello Russo. Or you divorce.”

“Neither. I refuse to let you kill my wife’s family. Divorce is not an option. Alessandra may be pregnant, and I refuse to abandon her and our child.”

“I understand she aborted once. She could do it again.”

An inhuman whine escaped Alessandra’s lips. Drake was ready to detonate, but Guido flexed behind Enzo, ready to jump in at the slightest provocation. Drake’s only concern was getting Alessandra out of the club safely. The rest could be sorted out later.

“I’ll be generous and give you thirty-six hours to consider my request. There is no third option available. Indecision will not save you. If you fail to respond, I will be forced to act in my best interests. Gino will escort you out.”

“*Bastardo*,” Drake muttered.

“No, son. You are the only bastard here. One day you will realize this was only business. Miss Russo provided us with a means to an end. Thank you for bringing her.

“It was a delight to watch you fuck her in my private room. Do you think your homemade sex tape will go viral? I heard that’s how that one lawyer’s daughter gained her fame.”



Alessandra wilted against Drake's side. He spun so fast with the knife in his hand that he didn't have time to think about what he would do. His heart pounded as the beast in him roared.

"I'm proud of you, *mio figlio*," Enzo said. "There's the boy I raised. It took years to beat out the values and morals that white suburbia instilled in you. It wasn't until you were taken under the wing of my guys that you turned into a man.

"I was afraid you'd changed after becoming a prosecutor. I worried you'd forgotten that I've had eyes on you for years. But now I see the steely look in your eyes, Drago. You can lie to yourself all you want, but it doesn't change who you are."

"Don't even think about it." Guido grabbed Alessandra's arm for leverage.

"I'm sorry, Alessandra," Drake said, raising his arm.

His brave, beautiful wife didn't make a peep. She looked at him, her emeralds shining with tears. He didn't take his eyes off her and threw the knife with precision. It sank into Lorenzo's shoulder, and he stumbled, letting go of Alessandra.

Drake pounced on the wounded man. Lorenzo attempted to fight back, but Drake pressed the advantage of the man's injured shoulder. He punched him in the nose, which began bleeding freely. He knocked the man to the floor and lifted Lorenzo by the collar.

"I will kill you," he growled and bashed the man's head against the concrete floor.

"Drake, stop. Please," Alessandra begged.

"I warned you about putting your filthy fucking hands on her."

Drake wrestled the firearm from the semi-conscious man. He put the muzzle against the man's temple with his finger on the trigger.

His body shook with rage as he spoke. "You don't treat *my* woman this way, Lorenzo. She's my fucking world."

Alessandra rushed to her husband and wrapped herself around him. She mumbled into his back until he heard her. Drake

shook his head.

“Don’t stoop to their level, Drake,” she whispered. “I’m here.”

Drake lowered his arm in defeat.

“Weak,” Enzo said, disappointed.

Enzo nodded to his ape. The man threw Alessandra over his shoulder and dumped her unceremoniously on the concrete outside the club. She shivered in the cool night air. Drake’s demands that they return her dress or cloak went unheard. It was another tactic to humiliate her further, leaving her cold and naked on the sidewalk. Drake didn’t have a jacket, but pulled his shirt off and forced it over her head.

The moment they got into the car, Drake put up the privacy screen and turned to his wife. Alessandra broke down. She looked so little, swallowed by his dress shirt, and her hair in disarray. Her swollen lips wobbled as she choked back sobs.

“I’m sorry, bella. I’m so fucking sorry.” He cupped her face in his hands and stroked her tear-soaked cheeks. “I knew he was a fucking prick. I swear I didn’t know he was going to treat you that way. You shouldn’t have been subjected to it.” She didn’t speak or meet his eyes, so he continued, “He was bluffing about the sex tape. It was only said to try and humiliate us into giving him what he wants.”

Still, she remained silent and refused to look at him. Drake’s heart dropped to his stomach, and he felt sick. He had 36 hours to plan his move against Enzo and ensure Alessandra’s safety. He needed more time; once again, it was their greatest enemy.

Alessandra had called to the beast in the early days of their marriage. It remained close to the surface until she tamed it. But now, the beast demanded retribution. He was willing to commit patricide without blinking. Those who hurt his wife would pay with blood.

Drake took several breaths to calm himself; he didn’t want to scare Alessandra further by detonating in the car. He couldn’t get the scene of his wife’s assault out of his head. But were his actions to make her feel better or himself?

The moment they stepped into the penthouse, Alessandra disappeared into her closet and locked herself inside. Drake gave her a few minutes while he texted 9-1-1 to Grant and Jerry.

He poured himself a generous glass of smooth whiskey and swallowed it without tasting the vanilla and tobacco notes. It failed to give him the burn he craved, and he threw the crystal tumbler against the wall. It shattered into tiny pieces like his soul, but it still wasn't enough. Drake now saw the cathartics of destroying his office from Alessandra's side.

A desire stronger than destroying shit overcame Drake. He needed Alessandra as much as she needed him. He shouldn't have left her alone. He quickly made his way to the closet.

Thudding and crashing sounds could be heard inside. Drake tried the handle, but it was locked. He pounded on the door and called Alessandra's name. When she failed to answer, he rushed to the kitchen and grabbed a metal skewer. The simple lock popped open.

Alessandra had torn through the closet like a tornado. Several delicate items were in tatters. Her vanity was knocked over. She'd scrawled self-deprecating words in lipstick on the mirror. Drake had to shut this shit down.

"Does it make you feel good to destroy shit, Alessandra? Let me know so I can open another credit card to pay for your temper tantrums." He steeled himself to face her ire.

When she flew into his arms sobbing, his heart broke. There were too many tears. His proud peacock needed light to shine. No matter what, he would find a place for her to do that.

"My life is ruined. Don't you understand that? It's either I lose you, or I lose my brother."

"You lost him anyway, Alessandra. Marcello made his choices. I told you one day he would show his true colors. And I told you going to Enzo was a mistake you'd regret."

She pushed away from Drake and slapped him, screaming, "Go to fucking hell!"

“Bella, the devil is already raking my soul over the deepest pits of brimstone. Nothing you can say or do will hurt me,” he replied honestly.

“So this is my fault now?” she screeched.

Drake tried to grab her, but she evaded him. “I’m not blaming you, Alessandra. We had no idea what would happen by going into that meeting.”

“You’re damn right it’s not my fault. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s yours. You lived with and worked for him for six years, right? You should’ve had an inkling he’d pull something like that.”

“Wow, and here I thought you loved me. What a fucking fool I was. Go ahead, *cagna*. Anything else you’ve been holding back?” he asked, provoking her further.

“Don’t you dare twist this on me, *Drago Prazza*.”

“You better watch your fucking mouth, Alessandra, before I make you swallow my cum and then clean it out with soap.”

But she didn’t respond to his last barb. She continued tearing through the closet. Needling her hadn’t worked, so he switched tactics.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“My meds. Did you take them?”

“Of course not. Would you like help looking?” he offered. There was no way she’d find anything in the wreckage she caused.

“Please help me, Drake.” Her lip wobbled as she spoke.

Drake sighed as he surveyed the mess again, wondering where the most likely place to start would be. Her bureau drawers were upended, and their contents were strewn all over. Drake decided to start there. He picked up, sorted, and folded clothes before placing them back in their respective drawers.

Most of Alessandra’s compact makeup was shattered and needed to be thrown away, along with most of the silk and lacy underwear.

“When was the last time you took your pills? Do you remember where you were?”

Alessandra shook her head. “I usually keep them on the vanity. I only take them before bed because they make me drowsy.”

Drake lifted her vanity off the floor and set it upright. He searched the floor around it, including the little wastebasket. He picked up her hamper and shook it. When he heard a rattling sound, he dumped the contents.

“I found them, bella. They must’ve fallen into the hamper.”

“Thank you, Drake,” she said softly.

She took the pill and placed the bottle on the vanity as if nothing happened.

“Do you feel like they’re helping?”

“Yeah, I really do.”

Drake kissed Alessandra’s forehead and told her to lie down while he cleaned the closet. He made a mental note of the items that weren’t salvageable so he could order their replacements from his stylist.

By the time he was finished, his hand throbbed. He looked at the broken skin on his knuckles for the first time. The pain was welcome. It reminded him of what he had to fight for.

Drake had to get his shit together. The time for games was over. It was time to finish this.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

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THE CLOCK TICKED PAINFULLY, MOCKING THEM WITH EVERY passing second. With every passing hour, Drake's mood darkened considerably.

"I know you don't want to hear this, Drake, but I think divorce is your only option," Grant said.

"And what would Alessandra do then? I can't let her fend for herself. Not right now. It's too dangerous, and she's the most vulnerable she's ever been."

Grant gestured to Drake's raw knuckles. "And you're spiraling out of control, Drago. I warned you before you're too close to this. I won't cover for you if you've taken another life."

"Don't worry, the fucker is still alive."

Jerry cleared his throat. "She can stay with Noah and me. We'll take care of her, Drake. You won't have to worry about it. I can push your divorce through quickly," he offered.

"I don't want to get a divorce." Drake ran his hand through his disheveled hair. "Damn Anthony and Enzo for putting us into this position."

"We'll devise a plan, Drake. This will be over soon, and then you and Alessandra can move on with your lives," Grant promised.



DRAKE AND ALESSANDRA CONTINUED TIPTOEING AROUND EACH other like strangers, creating a frosty atmosphere in their home. There'd been no intimacy between them since the night in Enzo's club, as though they feared being lovers. It was self-preservation to ease the hurt they'd feel in the end.

"I picked up dinner on the way home." Drake lifted the take-out bag of Italian food.

"Thank you, Drake." Alessandra smiled though it didn't reach her eyes. "I'll set the table."

Over dinner, they made small talk discussing their respective days. Drake didn't tell her about Grant's plan. It was too early, and he didn't want to get her hopes up if it failed.

"I'm here if you need to talk, Alessandra. I don't mean to add to your stress. Just know how sorry I am for all of this. I'm sorry I kept secrets from you. I just wanted to keep you safe from this part of my past because you'd been hurt so many times. Once again, I fucked up."

"Marriage is a partnership. I should've listened to you, too. But I wish you would've put your trust in me. You shouldn't have said the vows if you didn't intend to keep them."

Here he was trying to be honest, and she acted as though his words and their love meant nothing. While the jibe may have been deserved, her words were a strike to his festering, wounded pride. Drake refused to take the provocation. The dread seeping into his pores couldn't be ignored anymore as he watched her walk away. He stood from the table to follow her into the guest bedroom.

"Are you seriously planning to sleep in here?"

He stopped at the threshold of the guest room. Though Alessandra hadn't slept in it for months, her touches remained.

They had been planning to turn the room into a nursery, but the dream felt unobtainable now.

“Don’t you think I should?” Alessandra whispered.

“Absolutely the fuck not. If there’s a chance this is our last night, we’re spending it together. I’ll let you decide if we sleep in here or the master, but regardless, we’re in one room. If you don’t want to sleep with me, too fucking bad. I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“I didn’t really want to sleep alone.”

“Thank Christ.”

Drake swept her up and carried her to their room. He laid her on the bed and crawled in after. Alessandra rested her head on his chest and wrapped her arm around his waist. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the weight of her warm body against him. The sensual smell of her amber and jasmine perfume lingered on the sheets.

“Why did you think I’d let you sleep alone?” Drake asked as he stroked her hair in a way he’d come to learn calmed her.

“Some part of me thought sleeping alone would be easier.” Her tears moistened the sparse hair on his muscular chest. “Drake, I don’t want this to be our last night together. But I can’t let Enzo kill Marcello. He’s my brother.”

He didn’t begrudge her.

Drake squeezed her. “I love you, bella.”

They knew the morning was their nemesis and would come too soon. Clinging to each other, they traded kisses and caresses.

At some point, they fell asleep, only for Alessandra to bolt upright, jostling Drake awake. She was shaking and sweating. Drake pushed himself up and wrapped his arms around her.

“I’ve got you, bella. It’s all right.”

“I had a bad dream.”

“Want to tell me about it?”



“I dreamt Enzo had a gun to your head and Marcello’s. I begged him to save you. I can’t lose you, Drake.” Her voice wavered.

“Shhh... Let’s not worry about that tonight.”

They settled back into bed, but neither of them fell back to sleep.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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IN A TWIST OF FATE, MARCELLO HAD WHAT WAS HOPEFULLY HIS final court date, where the charges against him would be officially dismissed.

Alessandra didn't have the energy to put much thought into her outfit. She pulled on a jean skirt and an off-the-shoulder blouse. She studied herself in the mirror and saw the dark circles beneath her sleep-deprived eyes. Her hair had lost its luster, and her skin was blotchy. The ache in her heart was permanently etched on her face.

Alessandra met Marcello as he exited the courthouse. His girlfriend and lawyer, Jenny, was with him, and they were flanked by two Russo guards.

Marcello rushed forward and captured his little sister in a big bear hug. "I've been waiting so long to do that. I've missed you, sis. It means so much that you came after the way things ended last time."

"I've missed you too, Marcello. But I needed some time. I hope you understand that."

Alessandra's joy at seeing her brother was cut short by the weight of her looming decision. In a few hours, she needed to decide whether to sentence her brother to death or lose her husband. She couldn't make such a decision.

In a way, the whole situation had begun with Marcello. If he hadn't messed up the job he was sent to do, she wouldn't have

married Drake. While her marriage left things to be desired, she couldn't imagine being married to anyone else.

"You need to leave the city as soon as possible."

"What? Why?" Jenny asked.

"Marcello's in danger." Alessandra explained everything that had occurred recently, including Enzo's threat.

"No way in hell am I leaving my little sister unprotected." Marcello's fists shook with rage as though prepping for a street battle on the courthouse steps.

"Why the hell didn't you warn us sooner?" Jenny fumed.

"You don't understand what life has been like lately. It's been one thing after another. I never planned on keeping it secret. This kind of delicate information is better said in person."

"The timing is a bit fishy," Jenny sniffed.

Marcello's face became unusually stern, resembling their father perfectly. Alessandra took a step back.

"The solution is easy, Alessandra. You're divorcing that asshole. You need to put yourself first."

"I have copies of the original papers you signed months ago. Get Drake to sign, and I'll file them immediately," Jenny said.

Alessandra's palms became clammy, and her heart threatened to beat out of her chest. They misunderstood the entire point. But then again, when did anyone take her seriously? When wasn't Alessandra a pawn, someone for everyone to use and abuse for their own gain? That shit was about to end. She was in charge of her own destiny for a change.

"I don't want to divorce Drake. I'm sorry, Marcello, but I'm choosing my husband. That's why I came to warn you."

Her words exasperated Marcello. "You're choosing the mook over your family?"

"You are not innocent here. I wouldn't have been in this marriage if it weren't for you getting caught. I may not have had a say in whether or not I wanted to get married, but I love my husband. So don't you dare judge my choice."

“Besides, didn’t you admit to being the one who told Papá about my plans to run away with Luca? You took me to the clinic for an abortion even though you knew I wanted to keep my baby. You never stood up for me when men grabbed me at the table. Did you know if I said no to having sex with them, our father allowed them to rape me? Do you know how long it took me to be able to say that word out loud, Marcello?”

He winced and raised his hands in surrender. “I’m sorry for all the hurt and pain I caused you. I’ve had a lot of time to reflect since the last time we spoke, and you were right.”

“I’m still torn up inside, Marce. You never came to save me. But Drake did. He sees me; he loves me. Our happily-ever-after is a work in progress, but I know we’ll get there one day.”

“You should know better than anyone that love isn’t always enough. Don’t lose sight of yourself, Alessandra. You deserve good things. Hopefully, you’ll let me back into your life as your brother someday. Stay safe, little sister. I hope you’re happy.”

“I’m working on it,” she admitted.

“I love you. Stay safe.”

“I love you too, Marcello.”

He opened his arms, and Alessandra stepped into his familiar embrace, reconciling the pain he had caused her with the love she felt. Once this was resolved, they’d be free from familial obligations. They could work toward forgiveness and redefine their relationship on their own terms. Until then, she was determined to hold this moment in her heart, not knowing if she’d ever see him again.



ALESSANDRA WAS READY TO CLIMB OUT OF HER SKIN BY THE time she arrived at her destination. Staring at her childhood home, she couldn't force herself to exit the car. The expressionless guards made no effort to approach her.

She was about to back out of the driveway when the passenger side door opened, causing her to jump. A broad-chested man slipped in the seat next to her. He was still as handsome as ever, except for his crooked nose that had failed to be reset after it was broken by her father.

“You’ve been sitting out here for twenty minutes. I knew you’d return to me.”

His words grated on her raw nerves. Alessandra knew she’d made a mistake. Like her visit with Marcello, this was necessary for no one else but her.

“Will you shut the fuck up? This is about Enzo Prazza.”

Luca’s eyes darkened, and his expression hardened. “What about him?”

Alessandra told Luca the truth. “Despite everything, you were my first love. Though I didn’t know what love was back then. We were children trapped in a world of hate and pain that clung to one another. I was sixteen when we began dating, and you were already a man. You should’ve known better.”

Luca laughed. “We’re way beyond childish fantasies, Alessandra.”

Alessandra’s grip tightened around the steering wheel. “I’m not doing it for the sake of nostalgia. You’d be a better man if it weren’t for my father. I want to give you a chance to redeem yourself.”

“You keep looking at me as though I’m a boy, Alessandra. There is no redemption for me.”

But she had to hope redemption was within their grasp, or they’d all be lost. Maybe it was already too late.

Luca pulled her hand off the steering wheel and unwrapped her wrist cuff. He shook her arm and held it up to her face.

“Look at this. This is what our love did. Don’t you ever fucking forget what I can do to you.”

They both stared at the fading scar. Alessandra yanked her hand from his grasp.

“What do you want, Luca? Isn’t there something outside of this life for you?”

Luca pulled Alessandra’s face to him and pressed his lips against hers. Alessandra slapped him and tried to push him away, but his grip tightened. His kiss was rough and hungry. He was coming to life for the first time in years.

“I wanted someone once and lost her,” he said grimly.

Alessandra looked into Luca’s deep eyes. It was time to let him go. And the only way to do that was through the truth.

“I don’t want Enzo to kill you or Marcello,” Alessandra admitted.

“Let him come for me. I’m not afraid to die. I’ve already lost everything. There’s nothing else for me to lose.”

Alessandra sniffed but refused to cry in front of Luca.

“I’m sorry about everything.” The hardness slipped from Luca’s eyes, and the boy Alessandra once knew shone through. “You deserve so much better than the life you’ve been dealt. If I could go back to that day, I would have let Carlo kill me instead of hurting you. I sold my soul and have been walking around ever since without the only light I ever had.

“Did you know I wasn’t at your wedding because I couldn’t stand to see you walk down the aisle to someone else? I knew I wasn’t right for you, but damn if I was going to stand aside and watch you marry someone else.”

“So demanding I divorce him was purely for your selfish benefit? Do you know how much stress that put on me? On my marriage?”

Luca sighed. “He doesn’t deserve you either. The heir to the Prazza family in hypocrite clothing.”

“But he’s who I want. I *choose* Drake. I’m sorry, Luca. I love my husband. ”

“Don’t ever return here.” Luca’s face twisted.

Alessandra had hurt him, but he needed to hear those words as much as she needed to say them.

“Goodbye, Luca,” she whispered.

Luca slammed the car door behind him. The wound in Alessandra’s heart tore wide, becoming a cavern as she watched him walk away. But she could reconcile parts of herself and fill that empty void of pain with the good.

Alessandra picked up the wrap and looked at the scars on her wrist before wrapping it up again. In doing so, she cauterized her heart. Eventually, those scars would fade into something she could live with.



ALESSANDRA PARKED IN HER PARKING SPOT AND TOOK THE private elevator up. When the penthouse doors opened, she slipped into the smiling, unfeeling mask that was second nature to her. The pieces of her heart scattered across the elevator floor as she stepped off. Inside, she was screaming, and no one could hear her.

Jerry and Noah joined them for dinner.

“I’ve seen many couples in my courtroom during divorce proceedings. Usually, there’s some relief once all is said and done. They don’t look like they’re about to face a firing squad like you two.” Jerry pulled out papers. “With no marital assets or children, and with both of your signatures, there is no reason to prolong it in the system.”

Drake spat his drink back into the glass before slamming it on the table. “*Fanculo!*”

“I’m really sorry that this is the end for the two of you. We were hoping you could manage to work things out.” Noah frowned.

Drake stared daggers at Alessandra. “Apparently not.”

“Drake—”

“Not a fucking word, Alessandra.”

He rose from the table, knocking his chair back. It clattered against the wooden floor. Alessandra rose to chase after him.

“This wasn’t me, Drake. I swear to you. Earlier when I saw Marcello at the courthouse—”

“You went to the courthouse and filed the divorce papers?”

“No! I went to warn Marcello so he could go into hiding. That bitch Jenny must’ve filed the papers even though I told her I don’t want a divorce. I love you. I choose you, Drake.”

“Alessandra?” He stopped and looked at her.

She pushed closer and put her hand on Drake’s chest while cupping his cheek with the other. Drake closed his eyes and leaned into her touch, placing his palm over her hand.

“I *choose* you, Drake Walker. I *love* you.”

“Enzo will know about the divorce. It’s a matter of public record now,” Jerry interjected.

“You can’t stay here anymore, Alessandra. Divorce won’t keep you out of Enzo’s crosshairs.”

“Alessandra can come home with us,” Noah offered. “We have a spare room.”

Tears stung Alessandra’s eyes. “I don’t want to leave Drake.” But she knew she didn’t have a choice.

“I’ll figure this out, bella. Trust me,” Drake said.

They all fell silent to their own thoughts. The silence was broken by Drake’s ringing cell. His brows furrowed when he looked at the caller ID. He punched the green button to answer and put it on speaker.

“Enzo,” he spoke through gritted teeth.



“Hello, son. I’m glad you and Miss Russo didn’t waste time on your decision.”

“She’s Mrs. Walker,” Drake ground out. “We’re staying together despite your demands.”

“Not anymore. A source of mine informed me that you filed divorce papers. It was smart you saw to that of your own accord. Since I couldn’t trust your judge friend to grant your marriage’s disillusionment, I took care of it. You are legally divorced.

“I have found a suitable bride for you, and you will marry her next week. Irish is the best bet, with the Russo name in disgrace and the Bratva a non-option due to my previous affiliation with them.

“You will enjoy Fiona. I know you have a thing for redheads. Your wife might have olive skin, Drago. But did you ever stop to wonder where her red hair and green eyes came from? It seems Russo women are *puttanas* after all. Like mother, like daughter.” Enzo’s sick laugh crackled.

“Watch your mouth, Ezno.”

“Yes, yes. Save that fire to consummate your wedding night. Fiona just turned nineteen and is untouched.”

“That’s not happening. I *choose* Alessandra.” Drake took Alessandra’s hand and held it tight.

“As if you have a choice, Drago. The Russo family’s days are numbered. Your ex-wife will become collateral damage if you put her in harm’s way.”

## Chapter Thirty-Five

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DRAKE STARED AT HIS PHONE IN SHOCK. NOW HE KNEW HOW Alessandra felt when her father demanded she walk down the aisle to marry a stranger. He wasn't planning on divorcing Alessandra, but it bought them time now that it was done.

He was in the middle of texting Grant but dropped his phone the moment a sob escaped Alessandra. She needed him more.

"We'll keep Alessandra safe," Jerry reassured him.

"So this is goodbye?" Alessandra asked through her tears as she threw herself into Drake's arms.

She buried her head in his chest and squeezed as tightly as she could. Drake wrapped his arms around Alessandra and held her tight. It couldn't be goodbye.

"It doesn't have to be," he promised.

His heart broke with mirrored pain. He wouldn't survive without her. All the things he should've said and all the things he should've done differently circled in his head. He looked into her shimmering emeralds.

"What are you saying?" Her chest rose and fell against his.

"I need one more night with you, bella. Please say you'll stay with me."

"I want that too, Drake."

Jerry and Noah bid them farewell, with Noah's reassurance to Alessandra that he was there if she needed him.

Drake lifted Alessandra and carried her into their bedroom, and shook the finality of it out of his head and heart. He placed her on the bed and made quick work of her clothes.

“Thank you for agreeing to spend the night with me,” he said.

“I need you,” she said.

They smiled at each other, but there was no joy in it. Drake fused his lips to Alessandra’s. He needed her more than words could convey. A million clichés about love ran through his head, but nothing felt appropriate to say.

“*Ti amo*,” he said, promising it wouldn’t be their last night together.

“I love you, too.” Her tone promised she’d wait forever.

“Kneel,” he commanded.

Drake didn’t plan on there being Dom/sub play, but Alessandra obeyed, knowing they both needed it. This was how they found control and connection when everything else in their lives had imploded.

Drake fingered Alessandra’s collar and sighed. The disillusionment of their marriage had taken away his wife, and removing her collar would take away his sub. The thought of her walking away threatened to overwhelm him. He cleared his throat, swallowing the lump.

He slapped her ass as hard as he could. She cried out and fell forward. Drake spanked her a few more times.

“Roll over,” he said.

Drake avoided making eye contact. He knew the pain in her eyes would have him begging her to stay. He was willing to put her in his car and take her anywhere in the world.

Drake’s fingertips danced across her skin. She shivered beneath him with arousal. He pinched and rolled her nipples until they puffed appreciatively. His hands moved deliberately and slowly as if trying to commit every inch of her to memory.

But there was no trying. He already knew every spot that made her shudder. Alessandra whimpered as he bit and sucked the

sensitive junction of her neck and shoulder. The need to mark her was strong.

He knew every sigh and moan of pleasure. He wanted to hear those sounds every time he closed his eyes for the lonely years to come.

“Can I make love to you?” he asked.

Without letting her answer, he wrapped his hand around her throat and squeezed gently. Drake captured Alessandra’s lips in a passionate kiss, her velvety tongue tangled with his.

He grabbed her hips and rubbed his thumbs over her sensitive skin. Every dip and curve of her voluptuous body was imprinted on his brain. Her sensual curves fit perfectly against him as if they were made to be together.

“You take my breath away. Your skin is so smooth. I want to taste every inch of you tonight.”

His lips trailed down her neck to her collarbones and slowed to suckle the stiff peaks of her dusty rose nipples. Emotional pain mixed with his arousal spurred him on. He continued his southern trek and nipped her hipbone. His kisses slowed to tease and prolong the moment, wanting her taste on his tongue forever.

Her hips rose. “Please, Master. I need you.”

“Always so eager, bella.”

Drake blew across her folds and separated her lips with his fingers before flicking her clit. He probed her wetness with two fingers from his free hand.

“Yes,” she hissed in relief.

Drake took her to the edge and pulled away as soon as her body shook. He climbed over her and fit his hips to hers. He groaned at the contact and immediately found a frantic rhythm. Sweat slicked their skin, and he hooked his arm under her leg to change the angle of penetration when she clawed at his back.

His head buzzed, barely registering that he was chanting her name like a prayer. She responded immediately. They came

unglued in each other's arms.

Alessandra turned away from Drake but couldn't hide her back shaking against his side. He pulled her tighter and stroked her ribs.

"Don't cry, *amore mio*."

She sniffed, "I never thought we'd be spending our last night together this way."

"I vow to you that I will make this right. Please trust me."

She didn't answer but rolled into him and pressed her lips against his.

"Alessandra," he said softly.

"Don't stop loving me, Drake. Not tonight."

"Not ever," he promised. "This won't be our last night together."

The frenzy that overtook them before gave way to the most gentle touches and rocking. They made love for hours, not stopping until fatigue set in. Even then, they fought to keep their eyes open because they knew tomorrow was the end.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

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ALESSANDRA WOKE UP AS THE FIRST RAYS OF SUNLIGHT filtered through the curtains. Steeling her resolve, she rolled out of bed because if Drake woke up, she could never leave. Thankfully, he remained sound asleep as she dressed.

She penned a letter, telling Drake everything in her heart.

*Drake,*

*The unlikeliest of circumstances brought us together. Though we had a rocky start, I'm thankful you were my husband. You showed me that even with submission, I could find love.*

*You've helped me become stronger. You gave me wings, but I don't want to fly away. I will carry you in my heart forever.*

*If there is a way to find our way back to one another, I promise to wait for you. Keep my collar safe until you can put it around my neck again.*

*Love always,*

*Alessandra*

She removed the collar he'd gifted her from her slender neck. She felt naked and exposed without it. A clean break would be the best for both of them, but the loss of Drake would be with her always. She kissed the heart ring and laid it on the envelope.

She walked into her closet and grabbed the suitcase she'd packed the previous day. Bidding a final farewell to her home of the last few months, she made her way to the Matthews residence.



ALESSANDRA'S ROUTINE SINCE MOVING OUT OF HER HOME with Drake was simple. She cried herself to sleep and woke up every morning feeling groggy and nauseous.

The first thing she did was reach for her phone, hoping this morning would be different, but there was no denying reality. Drake had blocked her number. Her prayers went unanswered. As far as she knew, Drake was still getting married. And the result of the tests she took remained the same.

A knock roused her from her rumination.

"Your coffee is getting cold," Noah called.

*Bless him for trying so hard.* "I'll be out in a moment."

Noah making coffee for her every morning fostered a sense of home. She suspected he needed it just as much as she did. Being near Noah made it easier for Alessandra to breathe.

"Morning, gorgeous." He smiled and handed her a cup.

The hair that fell over his scarred brow and his impish grin made him look like a mischievous teen. The final threads Alessandra held on to threatened to unravel.

"None of that today, miss!" He took her hand. "We drank our sorrows away last night. Today we have a wedding to stop."

"I don't want to go. I'm done playing games."

"Don't you want your husband back? Jerry is officiating, and I've got an invitation. You can be my plus one."

"All right," she sighed. "I'll be your wedding date."

Alessandra's skin prickled, and she itched all over. The thought of Drake standing at the altar about to marry someone else made her sick. This couldn't be real. It couldn't be the end.

The ceremony was being held at the Rockefeller Chapel on the University of Chicago campus. She was in awe as she stepped into the medieval-inspired stone cathedral. It was breathtaking from the lavishly decorated exterior to the flowers that decorated the aisle.

The ceremony had already begun by the time they took their seats at the back of the chapel. Jerry's voice echoed off the high ceiling allowing Alessandra to hear every word, though she wished she couldn't. The ceremony was impersonal, as Jerry didn't use flowery language or talk about love and devotion.

Standing at the altar, Drake looked absolutely miserable, reflecting her soul's cry. He was unshaven, and his hair was messy. Even his suit was rumpled.

"If anyone has a reason why these two should not be wed, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Noah nudged her. "It's now or never."

The guests held a collective breath. But no one truly expected an objection. So when Alessandra stood, gasps went up around her.

"Stop!" she screamed.

"Alessandra? What are you doing here?" Drake asked, shocked.

She ran down the aisle in tears, ignoring the anger on the young bride's face. "Don't do this, Drake. Please," she begged.

"Alessandra, I have to."

Alessandra shook her head. If they were in a movie, she'd give an impassioned speech, and every person in the chapel would root for them. Drake would give Fiona a sympathetic look, and she'd nod in understanding. The two of them would fly into



each other's arms and kiss as the camera panned around them, showing their embrace from every angle to insinuate that the world around them disappeared. Jerry would offer to remarry them, and they would cry *yes* in unison.

But Alessandra had just made a dangerous move while not one, but two, mafia families were in attendance. It didn't matter that Romeo and Juliet ended in tragedy. If this were the end for her, she would go down fighting for Drake.

Alessandra was a mafia princess, not a little girl. She had reconciled her past with Marcello and Luca. Now it was time for her to bring down her father. The first step was reclaiming her husband, and they would work together.

Enzo rose from a seat in the front row. "That's enough! Guards, escort Miss Russo outside. She hasn't learned her place and requires a lesson."

An ape-sized man approached her. As he reached for her, she ducked beneath his arm and almost ran into the arms of a freckled ginger man.

"Don't touch her," Drake shouted.

The doors to the chapel burst open, and a group of men entered with their weapons raised. Screams and shouts reverberated around the chapel.

Enzo pulled a weapon from his waistband and fired a single warning shot. The *pop* had every civilian cowering in fear. "How dare you interrupt my son's wedding. Have you no shame, Tony?"

"Papà?" Alessandra gasped. "What are you doing here?"

Her father didn't look at her and kept his gun trained on Enzo. "I've waited twenty years to avenge Marina."

"Get the fuck outta here," an angry-looking bearded man said.

Alessandra hadn't noticed the father of the bride before. Was he the leader of the McGraw family? Was Alessandra looking at her father? She couldn't think about that, not when ruthless armed men threatened a chapel full of innocent people.

She couldn't hold back anymore and vomited on the floor. Drake took a step off the altar, and the first shot rang out. Alessandra covered her ears and ducked. Civilians ran to the exit, creating a calamity around them

Alessandra peeked out from her hiding spot and saw Drake fall to his knees.

"Drake! NO!" she screamed and ran to his side.

By the time she reached him, he was on his back. Blood soaked the front of his rumpled dress shirt. Her body shook as she pulled his head into her lap. He reached out a weak hand and stroked her cheek.

"Don't cry, bella. I'll be all right, *credimi*." His voice was weak.

"Don't leave me, Drake. Please. Stay with me. I love you."

"*Ti amo—*"

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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DRAKE'S WORLD COLLAPSED WHEN HE WOKE UP TO FIND Alessandra already gone. He squeezed the diamond ring tight in his fist. Instead of reading Alessandra's letter, he put it away in his nightstand drawer with the collar. His grief would need to wait. There was business to handle first.

Drake's phone illuminated with notifications. The temptation was too great, and he blocked Alessandra's number. She was well cared for by his friends, and they would tell him if she needed him. He couldn't plan to do what was necessary when she was crying on the phone.

As he walked into the office, his co-workers looked at him sympathetically. Divorce was a matter of public record. By now, everyone would've heard through the grapevine.

A surprise visitor caused him to rear up. He'd been ready to fight all morning.

"Good morning, Mr. Walker." The unusually formal greeting made him angrier. As if the bitch wasn't the reason he was officially divorced.

In a courtroom, Jenny Nguyen had been a formidable opponent. She would win on aesthetics alone if they faced off that morning. Her navy blazer and skirt were devoid of wrinkles, and her jet-black hair was smoothed without a single flyaway. She uncrossed her arms and looked at her perfectly polished nails.

"Get the fuck out of my office, you self-serving shrew."

“Is that any way to talk to family?” Marcello’s large frame darkened his doorway.

“Get. Out!” Drake roared.

“I have one simple question. Do you love my sister?”

“What kind of fucking question is that?”

The large man shrugged. “Humor me.”

“Marriage wasn’t easy. I fucked up a lot. But your sister was patient and stood by me even though I didn’t deserve it. I thought I was protecting her, but she’s much stronger than I gave her credit for.

“She’s a phoenix that rose from the ashes of hell. She’s beautiful and strong with unparalleled grace. She has compassion for assholes that haven’t earned it.”

“A simple ‘yes’ would have sufficed,” Jenny said.

“After everything she’s been through, I want her to be safe and happy,” Marcello said. “I’ve been a shitty brother, but she forgave me. She married you to save me from life in prison. It’s time I step up for her now.”

“Then why did you let your lawyer forge my signature and file divorce papers?” Drake asked, scowling at Jenny.

“Alessandra was faced with a decision that could’ve gotten her killed. We did the only thing to save her. To save all of us,” Jenny said unapologetically.

Jenny turned toward Marcello, indicating she understood the pain of loving a Russo.

“I’ve been thinking. It’s time we started working together,” Marcello said.

“No chance in hell.”

“Hear us out.”



DRAKE WAS SURE HIS OFFICE AND PENTHOUSE WERE UNDER surveillance. They couldn't meet at Jerry's home because Alessandra was his guest. Too many people in Jerry's chambers or office would rouse suspicion.

Everyone gathered at the Walker family Lake Forest family home. Drake stared at the framed family portrait that greeted them in the foyer. He loved his parents, but his situation stirred up resentment, and the sting of past betrayal renewed. The Walkers had accepted Drake and raised him as their own. So his pictures and achievements hung alongside his siblings' at different ages and stages along the hallway wall.

Alessandra had printed out pictures and added touches that transformed his bachelor pad into their home. Without her, he might as well cease to exist. Drake wondered if he would ever have a home like the one he grew up in. Even without his family, it felt familiar. He had spilled juice on the couch and blamed it on Beth, who was too cute to get in trouble. The growth chart marked him as the tallest until his brother had a final growth spurt and passed him by half an inch, and the smell of his mother's perfume was so strong he was sure she walked around spraying on every permeable surface.

"Do you know how risky this operation is, Drago? So much hinders on Alessandra's movements," Grant said.

"If I readily agree with Enzo's demands, I can demand a few concessions. One of which will be choosing the officiant—Jerry. He can't deny Jerry a plus-one invitation for his husband."

"I don't like the idea of putting Noah in harm's way again. He was lucky to survive the attack by Luca." Jerry voiced his concerns knowing they wouldn't change the outcome.

“Noah is strong, and we all know he will want to do this for Alessandra,” Grant assured him.

“Miss Russo needs protecting,” Russell, the Russo guard, said.

Russell was the only guard Alessandra ever spoke of fondly. He was the one who protected her when every other male in her life had failed. With Grant’s help, Drake had tracked the unknown sender to him. He’d sent Drake that video clip when Alessandra was in danger to ensure she was found in time.

“You’ve been taking care of Alessandra for years. If she trusts you, so will we. I need you to keep your eyes on her in the chapel. We’ll need you to extract and keep her safe if anything goes wrong,” Drake directed.

“Miss Russo is worth the risk. But you need to be aware of the shitstorm you’re bringing to your front steps. I can give you Tony’s whereabouts, but he won’t miss the chance to come after Enzo. Plus, I can’t give you much intel on the Irish.”

“Marcello is handling Luca by playing on his jealousy and possessiveness. As soon-to-be head of the Russo family, Luca needs to make strategic moves to prove his worth. With the Prazza family hoping to connect its heir to the McGraw family, their strength will be enough to wipe the Russo family out. We have no doubt Tony will make a move here. It’s within his best interests to stop this union,” Grant said.

“This plan must be executed with precision. We have no room for error. Alessandra must be freed from this life. The only way to do it is by making sure Tony and Enzo don’t leave the chapel alive. I need to be armed to protect Alessandra. So God help anyone who tries to harm a single hair on her head.

“She was betrothed to be mine; fate had other plans for us, and it’s time to end this once and for all,” Drake vowed.

The thought of removing his father and father-in-law from play was one thing. But the fantasy of being Alessandra’s hero made him purr inside. Giving his wife her hard-won freedom was the most important thing.

“We have a wedding to plan,” Jerry agreed.



DRAKE MET HIS FAMILY FOR DINNER AND WARNED THEM OF HIS risky plan without giving them the dangerous details.

“Are you sure she’s worth it, bro?” Dustin asked. “She can upgrade to a different Walker.”

Drake punched his younger brother in the arm. “Shut up, Dustin! That is my wife you’re talking about. Don’t make me pull out your man bun.”

“I jest—bro code and all that. You need a fucking chill pill or a Midol,” the young Walker said flippantly.

“That’s enough, Dustin. Don’t provoke your brother,” Bitsy admonished her youngest son.

“That is so romantic. I love Alessandra. Just make sure you don’t let her go again, Drake.” Beth sighed. “I hope I can find someone who loves me that much one day.”

“I’m proud of you, son.” Dick put his hand on Drake’s shoulder. “It takes a real man to admit he made a mistake. It takes an even better one to commit to making it right.”

“Promise us you’ll be safe. I don’t want something to happen to you.” Bitsy wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes. Clearly, she was thinking of her sister—his mother, Juliana.

“I love her, Ma. I will do everything in my power to protect Alessandra. This is the only way I know how to do it.”

Bitsy embraced Drake and kissed his cheek. “I’m so proud of the man you’ve become. You deserve a happy life. That’s all we’ve ever wanted for you.”



WEDNESDAY NIGHT DRINKS WEREN'T THE SAME WITHOUT Alessandra waiting for him to return home. He had no desire to rush back to an empty penthouse.

"I miss her so damn much." Drake took a swig of his beer and placed the bottle on the table with a sigh.

Words fell hollow on his ears because they failed to convey the truth. He rubbed his eyes with his thumbs.

"I know you do. It won't be much longer." Noah comforted him.

"So much can go wrong. Just promise that if anything happens to me—"

"Don't focus on that right now," Jerry said.

"I've done so much wrong by her. I don't deserve her. There's nothing that could ever make this right."

Alessandra had confided in Noah more than Drake realized, and a flicker of jealousy ignited again.

"Survive this."

"I will, for her," Drake vowed.



DRAKE STOOD IN THE GROOM'S SUITE OF THE SIDE CHAPEL.

"This feels excessive," he lamented.

Enzo's eyes flashed in annoyance. "It's a fucking wedding."

"Not one that I want."



“If I remember correctly, your first one suited you well. This marriage will raise your status, Drago. Don’t lose sight of your future. Now that you’ve failed to become a U.S. attorney, there’s nothing more in the civilian world for you.

“As my heir, the Prazza name will bring you strength and glory. You barely cut your milk teeth in Italy. But I feel the power within you. Once you become the head of the family in Chicago, I will return to Italy. Together, we will build a global empire.”

“I don’t want to be your heir. I don’t want to marry an Irish bride. I love Alessandra.”

“Don’t be so narrow-minded, Drago. Once the Russo family crumbles, if you choose to make Alessandra your Goomah, the Irish won’t stop you.”

“Like you did with my mother?” Drake asked.

“Your mother was special. I wanted to marry her, but my ties to the Bratva forbade it.”

“Would you have given up the life for Juliana if she asked you?”

“That’s a moot point. You shouldn’t dwell on hypotheticals. Love was never the point. Juliana served her purpose and birthed an heir, something my own wife wasn’t capable of.

“I was a regular at the restaurant she worked at. She was young, beautiful, and naïve. It only took a few generous gifts before she spread her legs in the back of a car. I fucked her until she became pregnant.

“I do miss her tight, warm pussy. She was one of the best lays I ever had. Whenever a virgin was brought before me, I made sure she was mine for the taking before letting the men have her.”

“I hope you die, you fucking piece of shit,” Drake spat.

Enzo flew into a rage and grabbed Drake by the throat, slamming his back into the wall. “After all this time, you still haven’t learned your place. You’re a fucking disappointment, Drago. I could’ve made you great.

“After the wedding, I will grab the Russo whore, tie her to a post, and force you to watch as every man in my command fucks her. When she thinks they’re done and cries in relief, I will brand her with my initials so she knows whom she belongs to.”

Drake punched Enzo in the jaw, and the men grappled.

“Don’t you talk about my wife that way. If you so much as look at her the wrong way again, I’ll poke your eyes out. If you touch her, I will kill you with pride.

“When Satan himself bends you over and fucks you in the ass with a flaming spear of anguish and lets all his demons take turns, it still won’t be what you deserve.”

Enzo laughed, wiping the blood from his lip. “I was worried the night in the club was a fluke. But now I see—you are my son. You’ve tipped your hand, Drago. Don’t forget that.”

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

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ALESSANDRA CRADLED AN UNCONSCIOUS DRAKE'S HEAD IN her lap. She stroked his cheek as her tears fell.

"Help! Someone help me!" she screamed.

"Miss Russo?" Russell approached. "I need you to come with me."

He grabbed her arm, but she yanked it from his grasp. She put her hands back on Drake. She couldn't leave him vulnerable in the open.

"No! I can't leave Drake!"

"Miss Russo, please. Mr. Walker tasked me with keeping you safe."

"Drake asked you?" She looked at her father's guard in confusion.

"I don't have time to explain. Drake will be all right; it's not safe for you to be here."

But she shook her head. "I won't leave him behind."

"Alessandra?"

"You!"

"Aren't you happy to see your Papá?"

"You shot Drake!" she cried, flying at him in rage. "You shot my husband."

“He was expendable, just a means to an end. You performed your role beautifully. You married the Prazza heir.”

“You knew?” she gasped.

“Of course, I knew. Enzo killed your whore of a mother because I promised you to his son. We blamed it on the Bratva and crippled them. It was no accident that Marcello got caught and Mr. Walker was the assigned prosecutor.”

“You had my mother killed? I thought you loved her.”

Tony’s laugh made her stomach churn. She almost threw up again. She’d been lied to her entire life.

“Political marriages strengthen families. Your mother lied about being a virgin. There was no blood on the sheets our wedding night. She slept with a fucking *mick* before our wedding and got knocked up. I knew that you weren’t mine when I saw the red hair and green eyes. Yet you became my burden. Marina paid for her betrayal. Now you’ll pay for yours.”

Anthony raised his gun and pointed it at her chest. She stood tall before him. Never again would she be afraid of this man who wasn’t even her father. Alessandra had her own family to protect. She drew strength from that.

He didn’t know Alessandra was armed beneath her dress. She had purposefully chosen a strapless dress with gathered fabric to conceal the handgun she had strapped around her waist. Her hand wrapped around the grip while he was speaking.

“Goodbye, Anthony. I hope you rot in hell.”

She ducked and spun so he wouldn’t get a shot on her, while simultaneously pulling her weapon. She squeezed the trigger without a second thought and watched his body twitch as her shot landed in his shoulder. She aimed lower and struck his abdomen. And lower still to the leg, which caused him to fall backward.

Tears freely flowed from Alessandra’s eyes as she was scooped up by a staunch man. She felt like a small child as Russell carried her from the chapel.

He quickly made his way through the rectory and didn't stop until they came upon the president's house across campus. She vomited again the moment her feet touched the ground.

She broke down the moment she saw Jerry and Noah and ran into Noah's arms.

"Someone shot Drake," she sobbed. "Please help him."

"We'll get him to the hospital," Jerry promised.

"It will be all right, beautiful. I promise," Noah assured her.

Alessandra lost sight of Drake at some point. EMTs arrived and began to treat his wounds before loading him into the ambulance. She tried to climb on board but was stopped by Grant Ellis, a man whose role in everything she still didn't understand. He kept talking about an operation with men and women wearing identifying vests and IDs around their necks.

She learned the Irish bride, Fiona, had escaped unscathed. Though Alessandra hated and cursed the woman who was meant to be Drake's new bride, she felt sorry for the poor girl being forced down the aisle. No one should suffer a forced wedding, but she was thankful Drake became her husband.

CPD attempted to control the scene, keeping university students and reporters at bay. A never-ending stream of news vehicles seemed to arrive. Even helicopters zoomed overhead for an aerial view of the commotion. Several body bags were removed from the chapel, and Alessandra turned her head.

After answering a million questions, she was finally dismissed. Grant drove her to the hospital in his SUV. His vehicle had a specially rigged siren, so the Saturday, mid-afternoon traffic yielded to their whims.

Alessandra was frantic by the time she was led to the ICU. The person she first saw was Bitsy, and she ran up to her mother-in-law, crying on her shoulder.

"Alessandra? Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"Drake was shot! They wouldn't let me ride to the hospital with him. Is he okay?"

Drake's mother pulled her in for a tight squeeze. They remained wordless until a middle-aged man in a white coat approached them.

"Walker family?"

"Yes. Is Drake all right?" Alessandra asked.

"He's resting."

"Can we see him?" Bitsy asked.

"Only family may visit," the doctor said firmly.

"Alessandra is my son's wife. She should see him first." Bitsy turned to Alessandra. "Give him my love, dear. And tell him if he pulls anything like that again, I will disown him. My heart can't handle this kind of stress."

The women hugged briefly before the doctor led Alessandra down the empty corridor. Her heels clicked against the tiled flooring, filling the space with noise. Looking down at her dress covered with Drake's dried blood made her ill. She would've stripped, except walking around in nothing more than a thong and heels would be frowned upon.

Alessandra had spent more time in the hospital over the last six months than she had in her entire life. If this level of pain was all they had to look forward to, getting divorced was for the best.

Drake was sitting up in the bed with his chest wrapped in bandages. Alessandra flew to his side and grabbed his hand.

"Drake! Thank god you're okay," she sobbed.

"Alessandra?" he croaked.

"You were shot. I was so worried about you."

"I was wearing a vest. I'm all right, I promise. We planned it all, bella. We're free now."

"What?"

Alessandra looked at him, confused. Jerry, Russell, and Grant joined them.

“We staged the shooting. It was the only way to stop Enzo and Tony. We also crippled the Irish mob,” Grant said, pleased.

“We did this for you, bella,” Drake said.

“For me?” she screeched.

“Miss Russo,” Russell began. “I’m sorry, but your father didn’t survive the chapel fight.”

“My father’s dead?” Alessandra went numb.

“Enzo Prazza was also killed in the raid,” Grant announced. “It will take time for the ballistics to return. Luca Donato’s whereabouts are currently unknown.”

Her brain was overstimulated, and her nerves were shot. She couldn’t register Russell’s words. Her father had been killed by her own hand. She stifled a hysterical giggle that bubbled in her throat. She was free. Her eyes met Drake’s. What was the cost?

“What about Marcello?” Alessandra worried her lip.

“I personally saw to arrangements with your brother, Miss Russo. Marcello will be in touch once he is settled.”

“Marcello left the city a few days ago. He helped us set up the sting and lead your father to the chapel,” Jerry reassured her.

“But Papà is dead?” she asked, trying to wrap her head around everything.

“I assure you our intentions were to incapacitate the Russo and Prazza operations. Our primary objective was to capture, not kill. Excessive force is authorized in extreme cases like these only when the safety of our agents or civilians is jeopardized. I’m sorry for your loss,” Grant said.

He was sorry for her loss. But was she? Again that same bubble of hysteria threatened to burst. Russell had taught her how to use a firearm. He’d saved her life over and over again.

“I should leave you now,” Russell said.

Alessandra embraced her guard. “Thank you, Russell.”

“Be well, Miss Russo.” He embraced her back with the care he reserved solely for the daughter he never had.

The men left the room, allowing Alessandra and Drake a moment’s peace. Drake opened his arms in invitation. Without hesitation, she climbed into bed with Drake and curled up against his side. It had only been a week, but it felt like an eternity. Drake’s touch was the soothing balm her wounded heart needed.

“I missed this.” Drake sighed.

“I missed this too.” She sniffled. “I thought I’d lost you, Drake.”

“We’re free now. We can be together again if that’s what you want.”

Alessandra couldn’t give her answer. She wanted to say yes, but there was a lot more behind it they hadn’t addressed.

“I’m sorry about your father,” she whispered.

“Don’t be. He might’ve been my biological father, but I hated the fucking bastard. He got nothing short of what he deserved. I’m sorry about Tony.”

Alessandra wanted to echo Drake’s angry sentiment. But she found herself unable to do so.

“I killed him, Drake.”



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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## Six Months Later

IN THE WAKE OF ANTHONY AND ENZO'S DEATHS, INTERNAL power struggles ensued among the families. More witnesses came forward to tell their stories, leading to numerous arrests. More deaths arose as underbosses fought against consiglieres and lieutenants.

Everyone wanted a piece of Tony Russo's estate, but Tony had willed everything to Alessandra, which distressed and devastated her. She couldn't return to that home and immediately put it on the market. She ensured the guard who had protected her for years and his family were cared for. Russell hugged her as she cried and promised he was only ever a phone call away.

She donated half the money to the Legal Action League that Drake was passionate about helping. She requested the donation be made anonymously so he wouldn't find out.

She purchased a two-bedroom condo and had plenty to comfortably live off. She invested a bit and put money aside into a trust.

Marcello didn't fight for a single penny, even though he was Anthony Russo's only biological child. He said Alessandra deserved it after everything Tony had done to her. It didn't sit well with Alessandra, so she set up an account for him, gave him the information, and never looked at the balance again.

Marcello was studying to become a mechanic. He was given a second chance and wouldn't waste a single moment. Working with his hands was his true calling, he'd told her. He took an apprenticeship in a garage and was happy.

Some days it hurt too much to be a good sister, and Marcello tried to understand. The siblings were working to define their relationship on their own terms now that they didn't have the weight of familial obligation weighing them down.

Marcello and Jenny broke up shortly after leaving the city. It was no love lost for Alessandra after her friend's betrayal. And Marcello was dating someone new. Alessandra had yet to meet her in person but had gotten to video chat with her a few times.

"Hey, sis. What's good?" Marcello asked.

Marcello's hair was pulled up in a man bun, and he was growing a beard. He looked more like a lumberjack than a mafia prince sitting on a faded sofa in a white V-neck. He was finally comfortable in his own skin.

"Nothing new to report."

He picked up a pipe and a lighter and lit it up, taking a long drag.

"Marcello!" Alessandra exclaimed.

"Don't look so scandalized. Shit's legal here, and it's my day off." He laughed.

They chatted a while longer.

"How's my niece?" he asked.

"She's kicking up a storm on my bladder. I wake up at least twice a night to pee. I swear she's going to be a soccer player or tap dancer."

"And where's the baby daddy?"

"You know I don't want to talk about that, Marce."

"That prick better start giving you more than a once-a-month phone call. He fucking owes you."

"Please, stop!" Tears sprang to her eyes.

She'd already been emotional, and pregnancy hormones exacerbated her feelings. She didn't need Marcello to go into his overprotective big brother tirade again.

"Shit. I'm sorry, sis. You know I just want you to be happy. My offer still stands. There are nice homes in the area up for sale. You can stay with me if you want to build something. You can get a piece of land and have a big backyard for her to

run around. Schools here have really good ratings. Amy said she'd be happy to help with the baby. You don't have to do it alone. Fresh air and a change of scenery will be good for you."

His offer made her heart swell. He hadn't forgiven Drake for everything that happened. As much as she would love to join him in Wisconsin, that wouldn't be possible. Not when the man she loved and the father of her child lived in the city.

"I know, Marce. I appreciate it. If things change, you'll be the first person I call," she promised.

"Do you have plans for the weekend?" he asked. "I could come to visit. Or if you want to take the Metra, I can pick you up in Waukegan. We can stop in Gurnee for dinner before heading back to my place."

Alessandra gazed at the clock. If she said goodbye, she'd still be able to nap for about an hour before needing to get ready.

"I'm meeting up with Beth and Noah this afternoon for coffee. Don't worry about us," she said, touching her belly. "We'll be all right."

"Okay. I love you. Be good."

"Love you, too."



AFTER A QUICK NAP, ALESSANDRA PULLED ON A COLORFUL patterned romper, which had quickly become her favorite maternity wear because it didn't restrict her belly or have a band that continued slipping down as most of the pants did. Though she was almost in her third trimester, her belly seemed smaller than the other pregnant mothers at her doctor's office or Lamaze class.

The moment she stepped into the cafe, her ex-sister-in-law, Beth, pulled her into a big hug before bombarding her with questions.

“Can we order first, Beth?”

“I’ve just missed you!” She put her hands on Alessandra’s bump. “I can’t believe how big you’re getting.”

Alessandra rolled her eyes but smiled. “I just saw you last week.”

“But last week wasn’t today.” Beth pouted.

Though they were no longer family, the women remained friends. There was just something carefree and sweet about Beth.

“Drake was asking about the baby yesterday.” She dug through her tote bag and pulled out a piece of paper. “He gave me a voluntary acknowledgment of paternity form for you.”

Tears that Alessandra had promised herself she wouldn’t cry sprang to her eyes. Once a month, Alessandra messaged Drake to update him on the progression of her pregnancy. He never pushed or asked for more. And sending her legal papers regarding custody today of all days seemed to solidify that things were truly over between them. The stupid betrayer in her chest had hoped they’d find their way back together again.

Noah nudged Beth. “Now you’ve gone and done it.”

“I’m sorry—” Beth began, but Alessandra waved her off.

“It’s just hormones. I’m okay, really.” Alessandra dabbed her eyes with a napkin. “I bawled listening to a Taylor Swift song on the way here already.”

“I know what would cheer you up,” Noah said. “You should join Jerry and me at the club tonight. I’ll help you Dom-shop. You need to dip your toes back into the dating pool and get your kicks before single parenthood leaves you with a mommy tummy and a flat ass.”

“I’ve told you many times, I don’t want a new Dom.”

“There are plenty of men who have a pregnancy fetish. You’re one hot MILF in training. I guarantee we’ll find you someone,” Noah continued.

“What happened to getting kicked in the ass by single parenthood with a mommy tummy and flat ass?”

“You know I didn’t mean it.”

A lump formed in Alessandra’s throat. She grabbed her purse and slung it over her shoulder. “I need to go.”

“No, don’t leave. We’re sorry.” Beth frowned, reaching for Alessandra. “All men talk is off the table immediately.”

Alessandra stood and slung her purse over her shoulder before giving each of them a quick hug goodbye.

“I’ll pick you up at seven! Make sure you wear something sexy,” Noah called after her.

Alessandra decided to walk back to her apartment and clear her head. Thoughts of the last time she had seen Drake pulled her back to the hospital.

*“You planned all of this behind my back?” she screeched.*

*“We did it to protect you, bella.”*

*She pushed out from Drake’s arms. “How many fucking times have we had this discussion? I’m sick of you lying to me. I’m sick of you saying you did shit to protect me. I’m your wife, your partner. When does my opinion matter? When do I have a voice? You need to treat me as your equal, or we can’t be together.”*

*“Don’t you see, bella? I did this for you. I did this to give you choices and freedom.” Tears pricked his eyes as he pulled her back against him*

*His minty breath burned her skin as he whispered, “Just because I’m angry and I seem to be against everyone doesn’t mean I’m against you, Alessandra. I’ve worked so hard to bury my painful past and be a better man. I want to be the man you deserve. Tell me it’s not too late. Tell me we can come back from this. Tell me you love me, even if it’s just one more time.”*

*“Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye for good this time?” she asked.*

*He stroked her cheek, wiping away her tears. "I think we need some time apart to heal."*

*"I don't want that, Drake," she sobbed.*

*"But you need it. I want to give you the space you need to decide. No more cages, Alessandra. Your wings are beautiful. Vola uccellino—fly, little bird. Your future is in your hands."*

*She wept against his bruised chest. Though he winced in pain, he squeezed her as tightly as he could. They were again saying goodbye and holding one another like they meant forever.*

*"Thank you for showing me what real love is." He kissed the top of her head.*

*This time Alessandra kissed away his tears. "Don't give up on us, Drake. We'll find our way back together."*

*"I'll wait for you," he promised.*

*"Kiss me one more time, please," she begged.*

*He was only too happy to oblige. They couldn't strip naked and connect in the way they communicated best. Drake ignored his physical needs to see to her emotional ones. The kiss was one she'd remember her entire life.*

*"Ti amo, bellezza."*

*"Ti amo, Drake," she sobbed.*

Months later, the tingle of that kiss survived on her lips. She brushed them with her fingertips. Kissing another man was the farthest thing from her mind. Noah had suggested Dom-shopping, but dating while pregnant with her husband's baby felt wrong. He didn't feel like an ex. In her heart, she would always be his.

Walking away from Drake was the hardest thing she'd ever done. Her hard-won freedom came at the cost of the one she loved the most. They spent six months together and six months apart. Today would have been their one-year wedding anniversary.

Alessandra was thankful to her brother and friends for making her feel less alone. *They say the first year of marriage is the*

*hardest. I wish things could've been different.*

A couple of days after Drake's failed nuptials, Alessandra moved out of the Matthews' residence and into her own apartment. Living on her own for the first time was quite lonely. She was used to having her despondent thoughts keep her company, but she refused to give in to melancholy.

For the first time ever, she discovered herself. She was Alessandra without catering to her father's whims or cowering from his hatred. She had no commanding husband keeping secrets from her. The trauma of her past no longer overshadowed every step she took.

Her kitten, Lila, rubbed against her leg in greeting the moment she walked in the door.

*"Meow."*

"Hello there, little lovely."

Alessandra pulled the tiny Persian into her arms. The kitten stretched and curled up in Alessandra's lap and began to purr. Lila filled her days with companionship and love. She hoped to provide her baby with the same contentment soon.

Alessandra had never had a pet before, but it was her therapist's idea to consider getting one. Studies showed pets could reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Lila surely did that for her. Pets also eased loneliness and encouraged physical activity and playfulness.

The Russo family home had several guard dogs that lived in a kennel. They growled and barked when she approached. She developed a fear of dogs at an early age. A cat seemed to fit her life and condo perfectly. Noah had been the one to take Alessandra to the shelter and help her find the perfect companion.

"Do you think I should go to the club with your uncle Noah tonight?" Lila meowed in response. "You're a bad influence."



## Chapter Forty

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THE GOSSAMER SILVER DRESS ALESSANDRA CHOSE SHIMMERED in the light. Beneath it, her tattoos and thong were visible. She hoped the baby bump was enough to deter unwanted suitors. Lastly, she fastened silver wrist cuffs to hide her scars.

She finger-combed her auburn waves and let them fall loosely over one shoulder. A familiar pang crept into her chest as she fingered her bare neck. She missed her collar, but it wasn't right to keep it, since he was no longer her husband or Dom.

A knock sounded through the apartment. Alessandra glanced at the time. Noah was early.

"It's open," she called. "I'm still getting ready, but come in."

Noah followed her into her bathroom and hopped on the tiny bathroom counter. Alessandra sat down in front of her makeup mirror and started with smokey colors to make her green eyes pop.

"Why so glum, chum?" he asked.

"I think we should cancel," she said as she applied a matte lipstick.

"You're all dressed up, and I have the perfect date for you tonight. Trust me."

Noah tried to engage in small talk as they drove to the club. But Alessandra remained quiet, absentmindedly rubbing her belly.

Sensual deep music played through the speakers as they entered the main floor. Alessandra donned the same black lace mask she wore the first night at the club.

A Domme played with her sub on the stage. The petite woman was tied to a spanking horse and being flogged with a cat-o'-nine-tails. She squealed like a piglet with every lash but thanked her mistress. The red stripes on her skin were visible from their table.

“This was a bad idea.” Alessandra rose from her seat.

“Sit down,” Jerry commanded.

Alessandra looked wide-eyed at Noah, who subtly shook his head.

“I may not be your Dom, but you are here as my guest. You will conduct yourself accordingly. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

“Good girl. You will not speak unless spoken to. Is that understood?”

She nodded.

“I have a Dom coming for you this evening. He will arrive shortly. Noah will take you backstage to prep for your performance tonight.”

Performing wasn't the plan. She opened her mouth to argue, but his stern look silenced her. He waved as though swatting a gnat, signaling it was time for them to move.

Noah led Alessandra down the nondescript corridor to the staging area. The dressing room contained a bank of lockers, racks of lingerie, and accessories. A long vanity counter ran across the far wall, topped with mirrored stations lit with halogen bulbs.

Noah removed a key from his pocket and opened a locker. He pulled out familiar sets of lingerie. The first was a strappy black number that made Alessandra flinch. She'd worn it for Drake when he debuted her in the club. Given her current state, Alessandra wasn't sure either set would fit.

“There must be something appropriate for my fat ass.”

“Stop being so self-deprecating. You are beautiful and glowing. I wish we could experience parenthood.” Noah’s face fell.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I know you guys are struggling to find a surrogate.”

“And Jerry’s low sperm count means he can’t provide a sample. It was one thing to mix our sperm into embryos to make gorgeous interracial babies and both be the daddy. The knowledge that biologically I’m the father threw a wet blanket on the process. Jerry has more love to give than he thinks, but the tests offered him the perfect excuse. There are mixed feelings involved, and we’re trying to figure things out.”

Alessandra hugged him. He sighed and rested his chin on her shoulder.

“I’d be your surrogate if I wasn’t already expecting.”

“Don’t you even worry about that. If it’s meant to be, we’ll manifest it. Until then, I will spoil the hell out of your little girl.”

They returned their attention to the racks, pulling hanger after hanger until Noah gasped. He pulled a red lace babydoll that flared from the underbust down and a pair of matching cheeky underwear.

“What do you think of this? It will show off your adorable belly while looking sexy as sin.”

Alessandra pulled it from his hands. “I’m all up for comfort these days. To be honest, I haven’t felt sexy for a while. So it might be nice.”

“Yes. Embrace the life-bearing goddess you are tonight.”

Noah handed Alessandra a card once she finished changing. Butterflies flapped in her stomach as she read the two lines:

*Dance for me. Put on a good show.*

“Good luck.” Noah kissed her on the cheek and pushed her toward the curtain.

“Welcome, a special guest, to the stage,” the MC announced.

Alessandra’s heart pounded in time with the music. It wasn’t anything cliché like a Def Leppard song—that was overused in the movies when a guy or girl was raunchily dancing, and water dumped on top of them, showing hardened nipples through a white T-shirt.

No, the song was one that made her ache for Drake. Alessandra closed her eyes and let herself get lost in the rhythm for a moment before sauntering to the pole. She grabbed it with her right hand and twirled around it—once, twice. She put her other hand on the pole and let the audience see her ass as she gyrated her hips to the beat, dropping low. She popped up, spun around, and ground against the pole with her arms raised over her head. Appreciative cheers sounded from the audience, but this was for her—not them.

She grabbed the pole again, crossed her front leg over, and jumped, doing a fireman spin, which was more difficult with a baby bump than expected. She completed her pole moves with a fan kick and dropped to the stage in the splits.

Alessandra pushed herself on all fours and crawled like a cat toward the audience. The crowd cheered with approval, and several bills were thrown on the stage, completing the scene. The reception she received was empowering.

She made the mistake of looking up, and her heart leapt into her throat. Mask or not, she knew those intense brown eyes staring at her. Drake’s rapt attention made her twitch. His jaw was so tight, as though he were barely holding back from grabbing her off the stage.

When she reached the edge, she pushed up on her knees and ran her hands up her thighs and hips. She ran her knuckles over her ribs and stopped to squeeze her breasts and tweak her nipples through the lace.

She threw her head back and rolled it, so her hair whipped around her shoulders. Drake mouthed *good girl*, and warmth

bloomed in her chest. His was the only approval she needed.

She reached to stroke his cheek, and that was when Drake grabbed her, much to the audience's disappointment. Boos and catcalls followed them as he carried her down the hall to his private room.

"I couldn't stand others watching my sexy wife on the stage. I want a private dance."

"I'm not—"

## Chapter Forty-One

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SHE WAS ABOUT TO SAY *NOT HIS WIFE*. HE WOULD'VE PUNISHED her for it, except for the very obvious change in her physique. Of course, he knew she was pregnant. Noah had told him after she moved out of their apartment. And she messaged him updates after her checkups to keep him updated on the progress of her pregnancy. But this was the first time they'd seen each other in six months. Six long months that stretched for centuries.

Drake was a shell of a man every fucking minute she was gone, and damn, did he miss her. He'd missed out on six months of her pregnancy that they would never get back.

Drake promised to wait for her until she was ready. But now that they were face-to-face for the first time again, that shit stopped immediately. She no longer had a choice. He wasn't going to cage her but cherish her.

Alessandra became tearful.

“Those better be happy tears, bella.”

She nodded and fanned her face with her hands. “I'm happy it was you.”

Drake grabbed her wrists and leaned in to claim her with a kiss. Their lips met, becoming reacquainted after months apart. Though at the same time, they'd never forgotten how it felt to move against each other.

Drake couldn't hide his obvious arousal. Alessandra brushed her hand against the bulge in his pants, and he groaned at the

contact. “I swear there’s been no one else, Alessandra. There will never be anyone else.”

She peppered kisses across his neck. “I missed you.”

“I love you, Alessandra. I’m so sorry about everything. I’ve been miserable without you. Please come back to me.”

“I love you too, Drake! I never stopped being yours.”

Their lips met again, hungry and passionate. Their tongues traded caresses that had them making pleasurable sounds. All their hurt, longing, trust, and love poured into it with the promise that it would be different this time. It was a new beginning.

“I was devastated when you left your collar and wedding ring at the apartment. It wasn’t my idea to bring you to the chapel. But when I saw your true anguish, I had to let you go. When I discovered you were pregnant and didn’t come home, I thought we were over for good,” he said when they broke apart.

His chocolate eyes darkened with hurt. Alessandra smoothed his furrowed brow with her hand.

“I’m sorry, Drake. I’m so sorry for hurting you.”

He helped her sit on the bed and wrapped his arms around her waist. It had taken him so long to find the right path with Alessandra. She was pregnant with his child. He wouldn’t lose them again.

Drake gingerly kissed her exposed belly before rising and capturing her lips again.

“Wait here,” he whispered against her lips.

Drake crossed to the wardrobe and pulled out a large white box with a pink ribbon. Alessandra’s eyes grew wide as she tore off the ribbon and removed the lid. The multi-colored confetti tissue paper crinkled as she pulled it out. She raised a hand to her heart and gasped at a pink teddy bear.

She pulled it out and hugged it to her chest. “Oh, Drake.”

“Even if you decide you don’t want me in your life, I hope you’ll let me be there for our daughter. Our fathers were fucked up and did horrible things.” He took her hand and interlaced their fingers. “Together, we can break that cycle. Bitsy and Dick aren’t perfect, but they’re waiting to love their grandchild and you.”

Alessandra wiped tears from her eyes but didn’t say anything. She closed her eyes and rested her chin on the head of the teddy bear. Drake’s imagination swapped the teddy bear for a tiny baby. He had wanted her pregnant, but somehow had never had a clear vision of the family he saw before him now.

“I think we have what it takes to make a great family.” He paused to let her absorb and process what he said. Drake knew when to push and when to let her process.

In one comment, he’d touched on her greatest fears that she would be a bad mother because she had grown up with so much pain and sorrow. He also ignited the part that yearned for love, acceptance, and a happy family. Whatever that looked like, they’d figure it out together.

She finally cleared her throat and shook her hair over her shoulders. She dug back into the box, and her cheeks colored as she pulled out a sheer, white-trimmed robe similar to the one she found in Riley’s closet on their wedding night. A matching white lacy chemise and thong were included in the set.

She pulled out a Pucci abstract-pattern diaper bag. “I don’t need designer labels. This is too much—” She gasped when her hand closed around a pink Lovestruck Tiffany key ring with her penthouse key and elevator pass. Drake was asking her to move back in.

Her lip trembled when she pulled out a gray ring box. Inside was a five-carat emerald cut Versailles diamond three-stone ring with alternating round and marquise accent diamonds. The former ring on her finger was one not meant for her. This ring was priceless because he had chosen it just for her.

The last item in the box was a rose-gold moon and star discreet, permanent day collar. After their hurt, Drake couldn’t



place the same collar on her neck. This was a symbol of their new commitment. Forever. Everything within the box showed Drake's intentions. She only needed to say *yes*.

He was already down on one knee when she turned around. Drake reached up for her hand. His voice wobbled as he asked, "Bella, will you be mine? My love, my wife, my sub, and the mother of my children?"

"Yes, Master!" she cried.

He removed the ring from its soft cushion and slipped it on her left ring finger. "I chose this ring to symbolize our journey in life together. The past was painful for both of us, but we've moved forward to our present today. The future is ours to write—ours for the taking. I want you as my partner, now and forever."

Alessandra held her hair out of the way so Drake could slide the collar around her neck. She fingered the charms while Drake used a small wrench to lock the collar. His fingers stroked the nape of her neck, causing her to shiver at his touch.

"Will you play with me, bella?" he asked.

"Yes, Drake."

He swiftly swatted her ass. "Don't forget you're wearing my collar now."

"I'm sorry, Master," she whispered.

"Be a good little girl for me and strip. I want a show like you gave that audience out there."

She took a couple of steps from the bed and swayed her hips to an invisible beat. She started with her hands resting on her hips and slowly lifted them, caressing her bare belly before cupping her breasts. She moaned lightly as she touched herself, brushing her collar and lifting her loose hair. She turned around, giving Drake her backside and letting her hair cascade down her back like a waterfall.

Drake stood behind Alessandra and wrapped an arm around her waist. He pulled her against him and followed her rhythm, moving his hips in time with hers.

“Did it turn you on to have men lusting after you? Did you like them paying for your attention? Would you have shown them your gorgeous tits? If I threw money at your feet—” He pulled his wallet and dropped it before her. “Would you bend over and let me see your pretty pink pussy? Does it turn you on to act like a little slut? Did teasing me from that stage make you wet?”

Her legs became weak, and her core burned with need. His harsh words always had an effect on her. The more crass he was, the hotter he fanned her flames. She did her best to cover her missteps and continued moving. Soon she was down to nothing but her panties, which were too tight on her skin. Only complete nakedness would soothe her fever.

“*Bellissima,*” he said.

Drake pulled Alessandra onto his lap and encouraged her to rub against his thigh. He nuzzled the valley between her breasts before sucking on her puffy dusty nipple. She moaned as her back bowed, and her hips cantered faster.

Based on her whimpers, he knew she was getting close, but he wouldn't let her come yet. He picked her off his lap and peeled her sopping panties down her legs.

He guided her over to the wall, where an assortment of hanging restraints was displayed. He chose a set of chains, attached them to her wrist cuffs, and lightly tugged, guiding her to the hanging ring. He fastened her chains to the ring and adjusted it so her arms rose above her head, but her feet remained firmly planted on the floor.

Drake caressed Alessandra's body with his fingertips. He pinched and rolled her nipples before licking and sucking on the hard pebbles. His hand probed between her thighs but withdrew the moment she tried to grind against him.

“The last time we were here, we had an audience. How do you feel about outside participation this time?”

“Who?” Her brow wrinkled, and her mouth made a little “o.” Drake stuck his finger in her mouth, and she eagerly sucked on it.

“Someone who was hoping to play with you.”

Drake groaned and motioned to the couple hidden in the corner to reveal themselves.

“It’s your choice, bella. You can have a threesome with Noah and me, or we continue playing solo. Do you remember your safe word?”

“Hullabaloo.”

“What is your choice?”

Drake nuzzled her neck and placed a blindfold over her eyes. Her breath hitched as he blew across her collar. She shivered as he caressed her body with teasing touches. She spread wider as he tapped her thigh in a silent command.

She whimpered as he brushed his finger along her slit. She was so hot that his middle finger slipped right in knuckle deep. He rotated his hand and curled his finger, hitting the perfect spot within her.

“Do you want to play with Noah and me?”

Alessandra nodded her head. Drake withdrew his finger and spanked her pussy with his palm.

“Say it.”

“I want you and Noah to fuck me, Master. Please.”

Drake’s hand lazily snaked up and down her body, teasing her and building tension as Noah removed his clothing. Noah was a head shorter than Drake, and though his build was leaner, he was no less beautiful or powerful.

Noah nuzzled Alessandra’s neck. “I’ve been dying to taste you, Alessandra. I bet you’re sweet.”

“Don’t forget to ask permission, pet,” Jerry cautioned.

Jerry sat in an armchair against the wall. When he and Noah invited a playmate, he watched before joining in the action. He allowed Noah to have penetrative sex with others but did not engage himself.

Noah paused and asked Drake for permission to play with Alessandra. She squirmed against her bonds as he dropped to his knees. Noah lifted one of her shapely legs over his shoulder and stroked the back of her thigh to ease her tension. He kissed and licked spirals from her knee to her inner thigh, stopping when Drake's hand touched his shoulder.

Drake parted his wife's pussy lips with his fingers and held her open to Noah's hungry gaze. Drake guided Noah, telling him where to set his tongue to make her body sing and how to prolong her pleasure.

Alessandra cried out at the dual sensation. Noah's tongue and Drake's fingers worked in tandem, seeking her release. She jerked involuntarily but had nowhere to go. They ignored her pleas for more and spoke about her as though she wasn't there.

"Doesn't my wife have the most delicious pussy, Noah? I could get lost in it for hours. Fuck, some days I do."

Noah pulled away to answer, "Yes, Sir. Thank you for letting me have this pleasure."

Drake whispered in Alessandra's ear, "See what a good submissive Noah is? You could learn something about gratitude from him, bella."

"Thank you, Master," Alessandra cried.

Drake lifted Alessandra's other leg over Noah's shoulder. Her weight was redistributed as she hung over Noah's body.

Drake dropped to his knees behind Alessandra and kissed her cheeks. He buried a finger into her wetness, stroking her spot before withdrawing it and used the lubrication to probe her rear passage.

"Oh, please... Please... It's too much. I need to come."

Drake withdrew his finger and stood behind Alessandra, pulling her back into his chest. She whimpered as he played with her breasts.

Drake whispered gruffly in her ear, "Is he a good pussy-licker, dolcezza? Do you want to gush on his chin and reward him for his efforts? Come for us, little slut."

And come she did, wave after wave of ecstasy rolling through her until her body sagged against the chains. Noah lowered her shaky legs but supported her until she could bear weight. Drake unchained her and held her until she stopped trembling.

“I knew you were sweet, but that was incredible. Thank you.” Noah kissed Alessandra briefly on the lips before returning to Jerry’s lap.

## Chapter Forty-Two

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THE FIRST THING ALESSANDRA SAW AFTER DRAKE REMOVED the blindfold was Noah's muscular ass. Jerry had his stiff cock in hand and directed Noah to suck on it. She quivered at the sight, having never seen two men be intimate before. He made many pleasurable sounds.

Noah let his husband's cock fall from his lips at a stern command. He lubed Jerry's cock before climbing onto his lap, reverse cowboy style, sinking onto the bulbous black cock. She rubbed her thighs together as heat built within her.

"Go help them out, bella," Drake whispered harshly.

Alessandra crawled toward the amorous couple on her hands and knees. She pushed herself up between their open thighs. Noah's undulations caused his dick to twitch and rub against Alessandra's sensitive chest, smearing it with sticky warmth. He groaned and moved so fast it almost smacked her chin.

"Suck Noah's cock like a good girl," Jerry ordered.

He grasped the base of his husband's penis and held it steady for Alessandra as she parted her lips for Noah's spongy flesh. Warmth bloomed in her belly when he moaned as she ran her tongue around the head, savoring his salty-sweet taste.

"I never thought watching my wife suck a cock would have me so hard. I have to fuck you to prove you're mine."

Drake adjusted Alessandra's body and slipped his cock between her folds. He entered her slowly, pumping in and out. His movements caused her to lose her concentration on Noah.

Judging by his grunts and moans, he seemed too close to the edge to care.

Eventually, the two men found a rhythm that worked to give and receive pleasure. Drake held Alessandra's head down on Noah while he exploded in her mouth. She swallowed his cum and released him, only to throw her head back to express her orgasmic joy.

Drake dropped to the floor and pulled Alessandra with him. He adjusted their angle and spread her wide so Noah and Jerry could watch them continue to connect.

"Touch yourself," Drake commanded. "I want to feel you come around me one last time."

She closed her eyes and dropped her hand to her clit. She rubbed circles, luxuriating in the dual sensation. Atoms soon exploded behind her eyes. She was vaguely aware of Drake finding his own release inside her.

When she came out of her stupor, she and Drake were alone. He pulled Alessandra protectively against his side as they caught their breath.

"How did you enjoy sharing?" Drake asked.

"Honestly?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I appreciated the experience but decided it's a limit for me. I love you and don't want to share you or be shared with anyone. I want monogamy and fidelity."

"Thank you for your honesty," he said, running his hand through her hair. "I enjoyed watching you, and I would never implicitly give you to someone I didn't trust. But I don't want to share you, either. And remember, I may push your boundaries, but we will never do something you're uncomfortable with."

They shared a kiss and a few more lazy moments relaxing before getting cleaned up and returning to the main floor. Drake pulled Alessandra up on the platform and dropped to his knees.

“I love you, bella. I need you in my life. This time, I want to build a relationship based on honesty and trust. You are a force to be reckoned with and proved your strength in every obstacle you’ve overcome. You’ve consumed my every thought since you walked into the courtroom a year and a half ago.

“We were always more than just sex, even though I tried to delude myself into thinking the alternative was true. You helped me grow and become a better man. It would be my honor to give you the world. Will you let me take care of you and our daughter? Will you marry me again?”

Alessandra looked at the ring he had placed on her finger. He was asking her again in public because he wanted to claim her in front of everyone. But he was the man on his knees, giving her the power. She held the fate of their future in her hands.

This was the moment they had worked so hard to achieve—the freedom of choice. There were no doubts about her answer.

“Yes, Master,” she replied.

“Look at me, Alessandra. I’m not your Master right now. I’m Drake. I’m down on my knees asking you to marry me.”

“Oh, Drake! Yes,” she cried. “I want to be your wife again, forever.”

“If I may offer my congratulations and remind you I’m a judge. We can make this official today. It is your anniversary, after all.”

“But we don’t have a marriage license.” Alessandra pouted.

“You forget who your friends are,” Noah said with a smile. “I work in the clerk’s office. It’s already been filled out and stamped. It only needs your signature, and I can file it first thing tomorrow.”

“I can’t believe you planned this!” she laughed and hugged Noah. “Thank you.”

Noah hugged back and added, “I can bring you backstage and find you something amazing to wear. We’ll make you the most beautiful bride to get married in this BDSM club.”



Alessandra looked from their friends to her fiancé. She raised her eyebrows in question, to which Drake shrugged in response.

“We can get married tonight and have a big wedding later. Whatever your heart desires will be my pleasure, bella,” he said.

“As long as we can have the ceremony later. I’m not sure I’m comfortable telling our daughter we got remarried in a BDSM club.”

Jerry cleared his throat, causing her to laugh.

“The nicest BDSM club in Chicago,” she corrected, and they all laughed.

“So you’re saying...?”

“Yes.” She giggled. “I’m saying it’s our anniversary. I want to spend the night being your wife again. I can’t wait another second!”

Drake wrapped his arms around her. “I couldn’t possibly agree more.”

Alessandra followed Noah backstage but couldn’t find anything on the racks.

“You know, Drake gifted me with a package earlier. I think I’d like to wear the set he chose for me.”

She looked at Noah, her husband’s conspirator, who winked. She owed him so much for bringing her and Drake back together. Her heart felt light, and her smile was genuine for the first time in months.

Sure, she and Drake still had their shit to sort out. But the evening was full of promise. She was to be Drake’s again, though she had never truly stopped belonging to him.

By saying yes, she was forgiving the past and agreeing to forge a new path with the man she loved at her side. Alessandra pushed Drake’s boundaries just as much as he pushed hers.

Inside the box, Alessandra's fingers brushed a delicate white lace mask. It was a far cry from the heavy veil that had obstructed her face to hide her identity. It offered anonymity, transforming her from a duckling into a swan.

She pulled on the white lace and felt a kick from her belly. "You approve of this, don't you?" she asked and rubbed. As if in response, she felt another kick.

Alessandra tied her robe and fingered her permanent collar. She didn't feel caged anymore. She felt cherished, and most importantly—free.

On the center stage, Alessandra and Drake exchanged vows with everyone in the club watching them. Jerry didn't use their names to protect their identity.

While it was the first official wedding Jerry had performed in the club, he'd been part of collaring ceremonies in the past. Noah said they often compared them to a wedding in a way that typically involved the exchange of jewelry, but instead of a ring placed on a bride or groom's finger, it was a collar placed around the submissive's neck. Each collaring was unique to the people taking part, and most ceremonies included vows.

After the ceremony concluded, the atmosphere in the club changed to one of celebration. Drake and Alessandra watched several scenes on the main stage as they cuddled on the sofa.

"I love you, bella."

"I love you too, Master."

That night Alessandra left with her Master's collar around her neck and her husband's ring on her finger. It felt right like she was stepping back into someone she was meant to be.

## Epilogue

TUCKED AWAY IN A CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOOD WAS A nondescript building where Goose Island Barrel House paid tribute to the city's storied industrial past. The warm hospitality and craft beer was just a bonus for their wedding reception.

Drake and Alessandra didn't have the best track record with chapel weddings and had opted for a unique experience. The 10-foot walnut tables were covered with burlap runners and mason jar centerpieces. Twinkling lights wrapped around the barrel-lined walls. "Part Kentucky rickhouse and part Napa winery" was how the event coordinator had explained the venue space.

Alessandra looked around in satisfaction. It was far from her dream wedding, but she couldn't be happier. She realized that marrying the man she loved was more important than the details. It was their third wedding. But really, who was counting? If Drake continued to ask, Alessandra would say yes every time.

Alessandra was dying for a drink, as the early days of motherhood were now behind her. As if summoned by magic, a fruity cider appeared before her.

"It'd be a shame if the bride didn't have some liquid courage." Marcello offered a one-armed hug as she took the drink. "You look gorgeous, by the way, sis."

Alessandra glanced at herself in the mirror. She had chosen a simple white shift gown to accommodate her softer curves. As

much as she swore she would start exercising, baby snuggles seemed more important. She'd received surprising news from the doctor the day before, and it seemed they would be expanding their family sooner than anticipated. She put the glass down, and her brother raised his eyebrows questioningly, but didn't say anything.

"Thank you for walking me down the aisle, Marcello."

Marcello offered his arm to Alessandra and pecked her cheek. No mask or veil covered her face. She never had to hide who she was again; for that, she was eternally grateful.

"Are you serious? I wouldn't miss my little sister's wedding for the world. Does he make you happy? Is he treating you well?"

"He saved us both." She sighed.

"That doesn't mean you owe him," Marcello said.

"I don't owe him. I love him," she said truthfully.

Drake had transformed into a different man after they married the second time. He was romantic and patient without holding back his affection. Fatherhood came naturally to him. Their daughter, whose hand was so tiny she couldn't grasp his smallest finger, had him wrapped around hers.

"We've both changed so much."

The rocky beginning of their marriage had been riddled with secrets and lies. Alessandra felt like a bird whose wings had been clipped before being stuffed into a cage. And while she had traded one cage for another, she remained stifled. It wasn't until she almost lost Drake for good that she realized she might have been the one collared, but it was her husband who had made the greatest sacrifice.

Drake was the man of Alessandra's dreams. He had helped her break free from her cage and gave her a beautiful set of wings to soar.



FOLLOWING THE NIGHT AT THE CLUB, ALESSANDRA AND LILA moved into Drake's penthouse. Alessandra breathed life into his gray world again. However, Lila wasn't as happy to have Drake kick her off the pillow she'd claimed as hers.

Alessandra put her condo on the market the same week Drake listed his penthouse. They bought a large parcel of land and built a home just over the border in Wisconsin. It was close enough for them to commute to the city when they needed or wanted to. Marcello was right about the fresh air doing them some good.

Drake supported his wife's desire to help people as she became a volunteer for a crisis helpline. She had shed the pain of her past and blossomed into a more confident, empowered woman, leaving him in awe.

Drake's wedding gift was an ongoing project and would be unveiled in the summer. The park where Alessandra's mother was murdered had been torn down. He hired a crew to clean the empty lot, secured all the necessary permits, and found a company to build a memorial park bearing their mothers' names. He couldn't wait to take their daughter, Ariella.

Drake's eyes were full of hunger and love as Alessandra walked down the aisle toward him. When she stopped beside him, he wrapped his arm around her and whispered, "I can't wait to marry you so I can pull you into the bathroom, tear your dress off, and fuck you dirty."

His parody of the words he said on their first wedding day felt like a lifetime ago. In many ways, it was. There was no denying the dark impulses that lurked beneath the surface, but he'd reconciled that part of himself. Drago Prazza was dead, and his family brought out the best in him.

"It's your turn, Drake," Alessandra whispered.

“I do!”

Laughter erupted around them.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride!” Jerry exclaimed with a smile.

“*Baciami*, Mrs. Walker.”

“Yes, hubby.”

## PSA

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at <https://998lifeling.org/> or dial 988.

If you or someone you know has been the victim of sexual assault, please contact RAINN, The National Sexual Assault Online Hotline <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

For the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline, call 800.656.HOPE (4673) to be connected with a trained staff member from a sexual assault service provider in your area.

## Legally Bound Playlist

The Sound of Silence - Disturbed

Just Pretend - Bad Omens

Bring Me To Life - Evanescence

One Last Breath - Creed

Better Than Me - Hinder

Waking Lions - Pop Evil

Always - Killswitch Engage

Unstoppable - Sia

What If I Was Nothing - All That Remains

Under Your Scars - Godsmack

A Little Bit Off - Five Finger Death Punch

Ti Amo - Umberto Tozzi ft Anastacia

Right Here Waiting - Richard Marx

Broken - Seether ft. Amy Lee

Scars - Papa Roach

Hear Me Now - Bad Wolves ft. Diamante

Not Strong Enough - Apocalyptica ft. Brent Smith

I Don't Care - Apocalyptica ft. Adam Gontier

Monsters - Shinedown

Angel - Theory of a Deadman



I'll Follow You - Shinedown

Battleships - Daughtry

It's Not Over - Daughtry

Rise - State of Mine

Survivor - Pop Evil

Survivor - State of Mine ft. Eva Under Fire



## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, thank you to Crazy Maple Studios for creating the platform and inviting me to become a visual story writer in 2021. *Accidental Bride* has over 100k reads on the Chapters-Interactive Stories app.

Thank you to my early readers for both their love and criticisms. You helped shape this story, and I hope I have done justice to Alessandra and Drake's journey.

Without authors like Sophie Lark and the team of Caroline Peckham and Susanne Valenti, the *Legally Bound* duet wouldn't be here. Their mafia romances introduced me to this genre.

My hometown Chicago inspired many of the locations in this story.

Thank you to K.B. Barrett Designs for the beautiful cover designs and graphics. Also, for leading me down the inspiration path to continue this series.

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Thank you to my bomb proofreader, Sarah EA Hart. I loved your reaction to *Accidental Bride* and can only hope that *Marriage by Trial* lived up to your expectations.

## About the Author

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Cristina Lollabrigida is a romance lover who was inspired to become an author. Several of her works are available on the Chapters-Interactive Stories app where she's been writing serialized works since 2021.

As of summer 2023, she is no longer a baby author!

Her podcast, Romance Obsessed with Lollagirl is currently on hiatus. Season 1 episodes are still available for your listening pleasure. She hopes it will return soon.

She is originally from Chicago and lived for many years in rural Wisconsin. She currently lives with her husband and their three children in South Carolina.



## Also by Cristina Lollabrigida

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### Accidental Bride

Upholding the law was all Drake Walker ever wanted to do. Until he found himself married to the one person that could ruin him...

Alessandra Russo.

Daughter of the notorious mafia Don.

Sheltered member of Chicago's elite.

Pawn.

She knows her life was never her own.

Hidden.

Abused.

Unloved.

The day her father announced she was to be wed to a stranger, she only hoped her unknown husband would save her from her dark and deprived life.

Now married to the city's top prosecutor, and the lead lawyer on the case against her brother, Alessandra finds herself in the balance of saving herself and saving her family. Relying on her training to meet her husband's deepest desires, she vows to do what she can to keep her unwilling husband happy, and both of them alive.

### Lake Heart

When Jackson Lake's pro football career comes to an abrupt end, he realizes his true dream was Aubry Chase, the girl he left behind.

Aubry Chase's biggest mistake was falling in love with her brother's best friend.

Jackson Lake is the only man Aubry Chase ever loved. He broke her heart when he left to pursue his dreams. When a career-ending injury has Jackson returning to his hometown, sparks fly as the two lock eyes at the county fair.

After years apart, Jackson and Aubry fight the fear of getting burned again. They relive moments of their past as they rekindle their romance, trying to avoid the pitfalls of self-doubt and blame so they can build their dream future together.

### Running After You

**She suffered.**

**She persevered.**

**She provided.**

**Isabelle Marietta was used to running, and nothing was more satisfying than feeling the pavement beneath her feet. When tragedy struck her family, she fell back on the one thing she was good at: running, this time with her ten-year-old brother in tow.**

**Five years later, Isabelle's brother decided he was done running from invisible threats. When the high school's guidance counselor, Nate Marshall, discovers the truth and the past threatens to catch up to them, Isabelle is prepared to run again. But Nate is determined to show Izzy that she can stop running once and for all.**

### Princess for a Day

Seeing her boyfriend in the arms of another woman on her birthday was pretty bad. Having a picture of the night go viral was even worse! Now all 21-year-old Talia wants to do is drown her sorrows in ice cream and reality TV.

Prince Grayson is betrothed to a princess he never met. When his father pushes for an official proposal, tensions rise as secrets come to light. Will Grayson follow his heart, or will he sacrifice everything to fulfill his duty to the crown?

Talia's royal adventure begins when a mysterious woman arrives on her doorstep, inviting her to the kingdom of Serlavina. Princess lessons, balls, and first kisses.

Oh, my! Pretending to be a princess seemed like a good idea until she met the prince. Will she break his heart or find her true love?

One life-changing kiss would never be enough. Call it fate, kismet, mistaken identity, or a devious plot that brought them together. **True love, royal intrigue, and the adventure of a lifetime await!**

### You're My Always

To have, to hold, and to protect... Always.

Officer Michael Miller took an oath to serve and protect, but his wife's disappearance on their first anniversary continues to haunt him.

Angela is the captive of a motorcycle gang leader. Recurring dreams of love with a handsome stranger ignite hope and her fighting spirit. She feels a soul-deep connection even though she doesn't know his name.

When Michael receives a plea for help he can't ignore, he seizes the opportunity to be the hero he failed to be. He finds backup in the most unlikely sources as he walks a fine line between revenge and justice.