



DARK
SOVEREIGN

UNVEILED

international bestselling author

BELLA J.

Unveiled

DARK SOVEREIGN BOOK 6

BELLA J.

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Unveiled (Dark Sovereign)

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Editors:

Virginia Tesi Carey

Lori Whitwam

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Author's Note:

Unveiled is the third and last book in Nicoli and Mira's story.

The following books need to be read prior to Unveiled:

[Nicoli](#)

[His Queen](#)

Possible triggers:

- Graphic violence and gore
- Explicit sexual scenes
- PTSD

Chapter One

I killed him.

My brother.

His blood paints my hands, thick crimson liquid seeping into my fingernails. I feel nothing. Or maybe I do, but it's not regret, remorse, or even guilt. It's anger, madness, a hot branding iron pressed against my chest, the searing metal burning away every trace of my humanity.

It's his fault, after all. He had it coming. He had it coming for years, years that I thought he was dead. Years I spent mourning him.

I stare at his lifeless body lying on his side while blood pools around his corpse. There's this tingling at the back of my neck that sends shivers down my spine. One would think it's shock, or panic, or fear. But it's none of those things. Not even close. It's a stir of adrenaline, a charge of exhilaration, a high I've never experienced before.

I kick at his feet.

I kick again.

Harder. Angrier. Until my scream tears from my throat, slamming against the cold walls of the mausoleum. He didn't deserve to die here in this sacred place. He should have bled out on the pavement where the dogs can piss on his decaying corpse.

"You fool."

I jerk around, the eery voice slithering around my bones. “Who are you?” My voice echoes around the chamber of death. “Who’s there?”

“Did you really think it would be this easy?” A shadow creeps up the wall, moving across the colored glass of the window, a sudden chill causing me to shiver.

“Who are you?” My mind races, the adrenaline now laced with a deep-seated fear. “What do you want?” I step back toward the door, but my feet feel heavy, and I can’t move as I watch the shadow get closer. Like a flame, it grows as it consumes all the oxygen in the building, my lungs straining for air.

“Look,” the voice says with a low tenor of malice. “Look at him.”

I glance at my brother’s body on the floor. His blood flow has slowed, the red now staining the grout between the tiles.

“Look at him,” he demands, and the evil vibrates from his tongue all the way to the marrow of my bones.

“I know what I did,” I say, staring at my brother.

“No, you don’t.”

“I do. I killed him.” I try to steady myself, but it’s like I’ve lost control over my body. “He deserved it,” I say boldly, even though every fiber of my being is screaming at me to run away.

The voice tsks, and the sound crawls across my skin like a thousand spiders. “That’s where you’re wrong...birdie.”

Ice slams into my gut, and my soul leaves my body in a rush of fear. “N...no.” I shake my head in disbelief.

“You think you survived me, but your survival only makes me want you so. Much. More.”

The air is instantly weighted, my chest tightening as I try to breathe. My limbs tremble, and my vision tunnels. From the corner of my eye, there’s movement on the ground, and I gasp when I see my brother’s legs start to move.

“No, no, no, no!” I shut my eyes. “This isn’t happening.”

“Open your eyes, Mirabella.”

“No! No, I won’t.” I ball my fists, and I can feel the dried blood that clings to my palms crack.

“Open your eyes.”

“This isn’t real,” I chant. “This isn’t real.”

My entire body is shaking, my legs weak, and shoulders trembling.

“I said open your eyes!” Cold hands grab my arms, pain searing through my flesh, and I open my eyes.

“Hey. You okay?”

I blink, my heart beating impossibly fast, every limb heavy and numb.

“Hummingbird.” Nicoli touches my chin, forcing me to look up at his worried expression. “You okay?”

I let out a breath. “Yeah. Just a bad dream.” I roll onto my back and stare up through the dark, the moonlight shining in and casting stripes of light across the ceiling.

Nicoli is silent for a moment before sliding closer to me, and I turn my head to look at him. His dark hair is wild from sleep, and his eyes shine even in the dim light. He cups my cheek gently, his touch warm against my skin. “I got you, Hummingbird.”

My heart melts like always when he says things like that. But it’s not so much the words he speaks but the way he says it. The way his eyes show the intensity he wishes his words could convey. The way his voice cracks slightly when he calls me Hummingbird.

I take a deep breath, trying to shake off the chill that had settled over me from my nightmare. Nicoli brushes his thumb along my jawline, and I lean into his touch until our lips meet in a slow kiss.

As he pulls away, he rests his forehead against mine. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” I say finally.

Nicoli nods and leans back on the bed next to me. We’re quiet for a while before he breaks the silence again. “I will find him, Mira. I swear.”

I slip my hand into his, seeking an anchor in all this uncertainty. “I know.”

“And when I do,” his gaze cuts to mine, “I’ll make sure he begs for death...by your hand.”

A shudder flows through me, the darkness in Nicoli’s promise settling in my chest. It was never something that appealed to me, the thought of ending someone’s life. But with the nightmare I’ve lived and Nicoli by my side, the thought now thrills me to a point where it’s all I think about. My husband’s desire for vengeance and justice mixed with mine are now indistinguishable. The same. Even though I’m the one who got hurt, who got abused and misused, Nicoli is the one living with that guilt. I see it in his eyes every damn time he looks at me.

Guilt for not being there.

Guilt for not saving me in time.

Guilt for not protecting me.

I reach out and place my finger on his chin, his stubble rough beneath my fingertips. “You owe me nothing, Nicoli.”

“I owe you everything.”

“It’s not your fault. Your guilt is unwarranted.”

“Is it?” He wraps his fingers around my wrists, blue eyes penetrating mine. “Should a husband not feel guilt when he could not protect his wife?”

“Nicoli—”

“Should a man not experience rage and regret for not keeping the woman he loves safe and unharmed?”

“It is not your fault,” I say firmly, then slide my leg over and position myself to straddle him, my palms firmly on his chest. “I love you, Nicoli. What happened doesn’t change the

way I feel about you. Nothing ever will.” I rock my body on top of his, his cock swelling against my sex. “What he did to me,” I move my hips, sliding my slit along his shaft, “doesn’t affect how I still desire my husband.”

My lips crash against his, our tongues melding as he groans into my mouth. His hands thread around my hips, and the sensation causes a wave of pleasure to ripple through me. “I love you,” I whisper, nipping at his bottom lip before pulling back and trapping him with an intense stare. “No matter what happened or happens in the future. This is still us—you and me. Not even the devil himself can ruin it.”

Nicoli launches upward, grabbing the back of my head and forcing me close so he can capture my mouth, his fiery tongue sweeping to every corner. His fingers fist my hair so tight my scalp starts to burn, but it’s a beautiful type of agony that ignites a desire for him and only him. It’s stronger than any memory. More potent than any pain endured. And for me, that’s enough proof that Nicoli and I can survive hell as long as we have each other.

I lift my hips and reach down, wrapping my fingers around his length and guiding it to my entrance. Nicoli’s lips part against mine, his breath warm and desperate as I inch down, slowly taking him little by little.

“You feel so good,” he whispers, groaning as I take him fully.

I wrap my arms tightly around his neck, his cock impossibly hard and buried to the hilt inside me. The muscles in his shoulders tense when I start to move, and he hisses his pleasure against my cheek. “Work that pussy,” he rasps before tightening his hold on my hair, jerking my head back, causing me to gasp. “Ride my dick like you’ve earned it.” He breathes against the column of my throat so that a shiver of sheer need runs down my spine and pools in the pit of my stomach.

I grind my hips, shifting at an angle to provide the most pleasure. His cock hits the top of my channel, electricity exploding in my core, setting my body alight and almost making me come.

My eyes fall closed, and I rake my fingernails up and down the ridges of his bare back until he growls and grabs my wrists to hold them still. I can feel his body tremble against mine, and his breath comes out in shuddering gasps against my neck as I move up and down on him with increasing intensity.

“Don’t stop,” he growls, and I throw my head back just in time for his mouth to claim the delicate contour of my throat, his velvet tongue lapping against my flesh. His hand is still enclosed around my wrists behind his neck, and I use his strength as leverage to raise myself before letting gravity pull me back down again, harder this time.

“Do that again, and you’ll make me come,” he grunts with warning.

“That’s the point, isn’t it?”

“I want your cum around my dick before I cream your cunt with mine.”

“Oh, God,” I moan, his words washing over me like liquid sex and fiery sparks.

He palms my breast, the fire in my belly turning to an inferno as he rubs my nipple between his deft fingertips. His arm around my waist pulls me closer and harder against him, his hand trapped between our writhing bodies as we continue to move.

A moan leaks from my lips when he takes my nipple in his mouth, sucking hard before letting go, then tracing the tip of his tongue around the hardened pebble. The sensation is indescribable. I can feel it all the way to my clit, throbbing and demanding more while his dick smoothes along my pussy walls.

The heat radiating from our writhing bodies is almost too much, every nerve ending running along my skin, prickling with electricity.

“Fuck me, Mira,” he bites out, letting go of my wrists and grabbing my waist, his fingers biting into my flesh. He’s quivering against me, fighting his urge to move and thrust.

He's keeping still for me, letting me take from him what I need my way. My rhythm. My pleasure.

I rock my hips, my clit finding friction against him, and it makes me push harder against his pelvis, needing more, the desperation for release forcing me to fall back, my hands enclosing around his thighs to steady myself.

"That's my baby girl," he hisses, reaching out to cup both my breasts, squeezing them together as I ride him.

Up and down, back and forth, I'm mindless with the need to come, my every move fueled with the ironclad grip of desire. Nothing exists except for this. Us. Our bodies consumed with one another, wrapped in pure ecstasy.

"Touch me," I beg, needing just a little more to leap over the edge.

"Tell me where to touch you."

"You know where."

"I need you to tell me."

"God, Nicoli," I moan, out of breath, grab his hand, tearing it from my waist and smacking it down between us, pressing his thumb against my clit. "There."

He applies the slightest pressure, drawing circles, sending shockwaves of pleasure rippling through me.

"Yes," I cry out, throwing my head back, rocking faster, taking him deeper. My entire body tightens around him, and my orgasm ruptures inside my core as Nicoli latches on to one of my nipples, groaning as he sucks. I feel him jerk inside me while I continue to ride him, both of us coming, lost in our pleasure.

I'm trembling, and we're both shaking as Nicoli winds his arms tightly around me, pulling me close, peppering tender kisses along my collarbone.

I lick my lips, trying to catch my breath when he pulls us down so we collapse on the mattress, my one leg still wrapped around his waist. As the ecstasy fizzles, I'm weak against the truth—and the truth is even though our desire for each other is

still strong, something's changed. He changed. Before Nunzio, our passion was brazen, our desire limitless and untamed. But now it seems...locked and chained.

"You need to stop," I whisper against his chest.

"Stop what?" His hand glides down my arm.

"Thinking I'll break."

"I don't think that."

"Yes, you do." I place my chin on his chest as I look up at him. "That's why it's different."

He cocks a brow. "What's different?"

"The way you fuck me."

His blue eyes flash as if my words offended him. "You know that's not true."

"That's why you let me take the lead. Why you insist I tell you what I want while we're fucking."

"Stop," he says before letting go of me and sliding his legs off the bed, placing his elbow on his knee and rubbing his fingers along his forehead.

I sit up, pulling the white silk sheet up to cover myself. "You're afraid to fuck me the way you want to fuck me, Nicoli. Just admit it."

"Jesus, Mira." He shoots up and grabs his sweatpants, pulling them on with frustrated jerks.

I scoot to the edge, not taking my eyes off him. "Honesty. That's what makes this work. That's what makes us work. So I need you to be honest with me."

He pulls a hand through his disheveled hair before his gaze meets mine.

I swallow hard, the words bitter on my tongue even before I speak them. "When was the last time you fucked me without..." I suck in a breath, "without thinking...of him—"

"Jesus Christ."

"—and what he did to me."

“Mira, that’s bullshit.”

“Is it?” I narrow my eyes at him, studying him, already seeing the truth in his iced irises. “You used to fuck me like I was your heroin, Nicoli. Like I wasn’t just your wife, but your own personal fuck toy, and I loved that. I loved that you wanted me that way, like your desires started and ended with me.”

“It still does.”

“But now—” I launch up “—you touch me like I’m glass. You ask me what I need because you feel it gives you permission to pleasure me. And when I say what it is I need, that’s all you deliver.”

He scoffs, turning away from me and pacing the length of our bedroom floor before stopping. “We can talk about this in the morning.”

“No. I want to talk about it now.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“I don’t fucking care, Nicoli. We need to sort this shit out. It’s been two months. Two goddamn months—”

“Mira—”

“No, Nicoli!” I snap. “Just admit it. Just admit that you think if you let yourself go with me the way you used to, you’ll hurt me.”

“Stop.”

“Or maybe it’s because you see his face every time you’re with me, see his hands all over me, his cock inside me.”

“I said stop!” His voice slams against the ceiling, the sharp warning slicing through my lungs and causing me to suck in a breath. “You’re right. Okay? You’re fucking right. I do think of him touching you, hurting you.”

My heart constricts.

“I’m constantly thinking of what he did to you, what he took from you.”

Tears prickle my eyes as he storms toward me, grabbing my shoulders, his eyes wild and intense. “Not a fucking day goes by that I don’t think about him and how I would die if it means giving you the justice you deserve. But when I’m with you...” he continues, his jaw ticking. “When I’m inside you, that’s the only fucking time I don’t think of him, Mira. It’s the only time I’m not consumed with bloodlust and this overwhelming need for vengeance.” He steps closer, causing me to crane my neck as I look into his eyes. “When we’re in that bed, writhing beneath the sheets, all I think about...is you. About what you want, how you’re feeling, and how badly I fucking failed you.”

“You know it’s not your fault.”

“You know why I ask you ‘permission,’ as you put it. It’s because I want to make sure it’s me inside your head, not him. That it’s me you’re seeing and feeling because I swear to God, if it’s his face you’re seeing while you’re with me, I will die a thousand fucking deaths, Mira. I would slit my own goddamn throat if memories of him haunt you while I’m touching you, kissing you, making love to you.”

I’m not sure if it’s tears I see in his eyes or if it’s just my own welling up in mine, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this way. This vulnerable. This...fragile.

He touches my chin with his thumb, lifting my face toward his. “I can’t stomach it, Hummingbird. I can’t handle the thought of you reliving that hell simply because I can’t control myself with you.” He presses his forehead against mine as I breathe in. “I would rather die than have you see him even once while you’re with me.”

I swallow hard and whisper, “Not once have I mistaken your touch for his. There hasn’t been a single moment that my reality with you has been replaced with the past of him.” My voice hitches as I continue, “You make me forget all of it when we’re together, Nicoli. And that’s why I need all of you. I need to know he’s not there when you’re with me. It’s only us...just like it was before.”

“I don’t know if I can,” he murmurs as he snakes his arms around my waist, pulling me closer. “I’ve never been this scared in my entire life, Mirabella. I’m so afraid I’ll hurt you.”

“You won’t.” A tear laps down my cheek. “You will never hurt me, Nicoli.”

“I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

“The only thing I’m afraid of is losing you. Losing us.”

“You’ll never lose me, Hummingbird.”

“Swear it.”

His lips find mine, his kiss tender and light yet filled with the heaviness of a moment that has us both vulnerable in the same way. “I swear.”

Chapter Two

“O h, my God.”

Leandra’s reaction is exactly as I expected.

“Just,” she narrows her eyes, “tell me again.”

I walk over to the dining room window, sliding it open with a gentle tug. The sun is high, the spring heat seeping through my pores. The garden is alive with colors, bright yellows and pinks splashed across the lush greens that are expertly painted across the yard. I’ve always loved this season most, and the scent of freshly mowed grass, pine, and the rich, earthy smell carried by the breeze reminds me of when I was a little girl and how I would run through the garden while Nicoli chased me, laughing and so damn happy. I remember the day I gave him my ribbon, tied it around his finger, and promised to marry him if he couldn’t find a wife by the time I turned twenty-two. And somehow, the universe twisted our fates so that promise could be kept.

A light wind suddenly sweeps through the open window, ruffling my hair and lightly grazing my cheeks.

I turn to face Leandra, rubbing my palms together. “My oldest brother was a sick, perverted human being, and when my parents found out about how he chose to show his love for his baby sister, they wanted to send him away.” I scoff. “But he had them killed by the Ferreros before they had the chance,” I whisper in a cracked voice.

“And years later, you found him tied to a chair in the mausoleum?”

“Yeah. That’s after I thought he had been murdered, too.”

“Jesus. This is insane,” she breathes out, widening her eyes as she tries to wrap her head around everything I’m telling her.

“It’s weird that after years of not remembering, I now suddenly remember everything clearly.” I stare out to the side but focus on nothing. “I remember his voice. He tried so hard to sound mournful, yet there was a bitterness in his tone that left this foul taste in my mouth.”

“He admitted to being behind the murders?”

“Eventually.” I shrug. “And when he did, I lost it. This red fog blinded me, and I remember being unable to control it. It was like this...this poison just pumped through my veins, and I couldn’t stop it.”

Leandra leans her head to the side as she stares at me. “You freaked out.”

“Yeah.” I scoff. “I freaked out and then...killed him.” My eyes meet hers, and I half-expect her to look at me in horror, but she doesn’t.

“And you lost your memory after that?”

“Yeah. I guess I hit my head too hard when I fell after trying to attack Nicoli.”

“And he never told you the truth about what happened that night?”

I shake my head, then cross my arms. “And now, in hindsight, I wonder why I never found it suspicious that no one ever wanted to talk about Marco. Not even Maximo.”

“My only guess is they were trying to protect you.”

“Oh, I know they were. I don’t blame them. I probably would have done the same thing if this happened to someone I cared about.”

Leandra shifts from one leg to another, the champagne-colored pencil skirt hugging her curves. “And now you remember everything.”

I nod as I brush my fingertips against my forehead to flick the blonde wisps of hair from my face.

“Everything came rushing back when you were out there that night?”

“The night Nunzio had me hunted like some fucking animal, yes.”

“And you haven’t told Nicoli that you remember?”

I shake my head lightly, and Leandra gets up from the sofa and walks over, her dark hair loosely bouncing over her shoulders, the strands beautifully stark against her white blouse. It’s easy to see how happy she is. Even while there’s sympathy painted all over her face, there’s this glow of contentment in her eyes.

“You have to tell him.”

“I know. It’s just that everyone is already treating me differently. And this...it will make it worse.”

She draws in a deep breath and hugs me. “I’m so sorry you have to go through all this,” she whispers.

My skin crawls with every word of pity and understanding. I hate this part of it all. Everyone’s sympathy. Their commiseration. The cautionary way everyone approaches me like I’m some broken porcelain doll who has been patched up and glued back together. Now, everyone fears that the slightest pressure will cause me to break apart again.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk to anyone?” she says softly as she leans back, studying me.

“I’m not going to see a therapist, Leandra. I’m fine.”

“It might help you process everything that’s happened.”

“I’m processing it just fine.” I shake my head, feeling a sudden surge of anger. “I don’t need some stranger asking me how I feel about killing someone. It’s done. It’s over.”

“But is it really?” Leandra presses. “What happens when you have nightmares? Or when the guilt overwhelms you?”

“Guilt?” I raise a brow. “You think I feel guilt for killing my brother after finding out he was responsible for our parents’ murder? You think I feel guilt for killing men who tried to hurt me, killing to survive?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I feel many things, but I sure as hell don’t feel guilt.”

I inhale sharply as the events of that night out in the woods flash in my head, the vivid images cracked and slashed by visions of Marco’s bashed in head. Two different nights, ten years apart, but there’s one thing they have in common—my bloodied hands.

I glance down at my palms, and it’s like mirror fragments, my mind showing me the reflection of the aftermath—after I slit that hunter’s throat. My hands are coated with his blood, the crimson liquid seeping into the sides of my nails. I can still feel the adrenaline pumping in my veins, forcing my heart to beat impossibly fast.

“Mira?”

I sniff and look up at Leandra’s worried expression.

“Are you okay? I lost you there for a second.”

“I’m fine.” I blink away the memories and brush past her, catching my breath. “I just wish that everyone would stop treating me differently. I’m not broken.”

“No one said you were.”

“Yet everyone is treating me like I am. Maximo can’t even look at me for longer than five fucking seconds.”

“He’s killing himself for not being able to save you.”

“And so is Nicoli. Everyone is walking around like I’m dead. Nunzio might as well have killed me.”

Leandra’s expression flashes with warning. “Don’t say stuff like that.”

“Well, it’s true. Instead of being happy that I got out of that nightmare alive, they’re all fucking miserable around me, treating me like I’m a ghost of someone they’re mourning.”

Leandra looks at me, her eyes softening. “I get it. But you have to give them time. Especially Nicoli. That man dedicated most of his life to protecting you, and you got hurt, Mirabella. Really...really hurt.”

“I know,” I say with a sigh, feeling the weight of my exhaustion settle into my bones. “I just wish they would talk to me like I’m still the same person.”

“You are still the same person. You’re just carrying a burden that no one else can understand.”

I press my lips together, hating the heaviness settling in my stomach. “I need my husband to touch me and make love to me the way he used to. Like I’m the only woman in the world who makes him lose control.”

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but expecting everything to go back to how it was before...” Her voice trails off, and she closes her eyes for a moment. “It’s going to take time, Mira.”

I take a deep breath, feeling the tears form at the corners of my eyes. “How much time?”

“I don’t have the answer to that.”

“How is that for irony? I’m the one who went through hell, yet it’s everyone around me who seems to struggle with PTSD.”

“Everyone handles trauma differently. Right now, Maximo is throwing himself at his work so he doesn’t have to sit around and think too much. Nicoli is driven by his need for revenge and is out there turning the world around in search of Nunzio. And you...” She sends me a half-smile. “You want to go on with your life by picking up where it left off before the worst possible thing that could happen to a woman happened to you. You want everything to be exactly the same as it was because you’re desperate to pretend like nothing happened.”

I shift from one leg to the other as the truth in her words resonates with me in a way that almost knocks me on my ass. “Is it so wrong to want to pretend like it never happened?”

She shakes her head lightly, her eyes sheer pools of empathy. “No. It’s not. But you can’t expect everyone else to do the same.”

I glance down as I nervously weave my fingers together. Leandra steps closer and puts a hand on my shoulder, offering me silent comfort.

“I’m not trying to pretend like it never happened because he raped and hurt me,” I say, looking at her. “I’m trying to pretend because I wasn’t a monster before it happened. I wasn’t a murderer.” I shrug. “At least, I didn’t know I was.”

“You’re not a monster, Mira.” She cups my cheek briefly before sliding her palm down my arm. “You’re a survivor.”

“I don’t want to be a victim or a survivor. I want to be Mirabella Del Rossa, whole and unscarred. I want my husband to be proud of the woman walking next to him. Not try to hide her from the world because he’s afraid she’ll break even further.”

Leandra’s gaze flickers with sympathy, and I can tell she’s struggling to find the right words.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“For what?”

“For putting you in this position where you feel like you have to be my friend, my shrink, my mother, my cheerleader, and everything else in between.”

She lets out a soft laugh. “I don’t feel like I have to be anything I don’t want to be. You’re my best friend, Mira. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you. I just wish I could snap my fingers and make all this pain disappear.”

“Yeah. You and me both.” I drag a palm down my face in an attempt to pull myself together. “I guess I have to tell my husband that I remember killing my own brother...don’t I?”

She presses her pink lips in a thin line. “I think that would be wise.”

“Thank you,” I murmur. “For everything. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Her warm smile reaches her eyes. “Luckily, you’ll never have to find out.” She leans in and gives me a peck on the cheek. “I have to put the twins down for their nap. How about some cocktails on the porch later?”

“God, now you’re talking my language.”

She snickers, squeezes my arm, then strolls out of the dining room. I watch her go, feeling the knot in my chest slowly unraveling with each step she takes away from me. Leandra has always known how to soothe me and make me feel like everything will be okay, even when it feels like my world is crumbling around me.

Alone in the room, I take a deep breath and sit at the large oak dining table. The weight of everything that’s happened over the past few months hits me like a ton of bricks. It tends to do that occasionally, pushing back the memories of my brother, my parents, and the men I’ve killed, all churning together in my mind like a tornado.

I close my eyes and see Marco’s face, twisted in anger as he admits to killing our parents. I can feel the anger boiling inside me right before I killed him. But with the rage and the sight of his blood comes a different feeling altogether.

Power.

Chapter Three

I don't feel the pain, just the rage. The anger. The uncontrollable need for violence. My knuckles ache. My fist fucking throbs, and I can practically taste the blood in the air. But I don't stop. I can't stop. The sound of bones cracking under the force of my punches is like music to my ears. His face is a swollen mass of purple and blue, blood and snot pooling over his top lip dripping down his chin. His nose is awkwardly bent to the side and bleeding, his lips are cut, and a trickle of blood is leaking out of his ear. But not a single part of me feels bad for beating him to a pulp. All I want to do is hurt him some more. I want to hear and feel every bone in his body break. I want to watch every last drop of blood drain from his veins and witness his marrow get ripped straight out of his spine. It's the price this world pays for letting her get hurt. It's the universe's penance for allowing her to suffer like no woman ever should. And I don't care how long it takes or how far I have to go. I won't stop torturing, hurting, killing until I'm satisfied that the debt to my wife has been paid.

I pull my Espada knife from my pants pocket, flicking the blade with every intention of slicing open his hand. But then I remember that night in the kitchen, the night Mira tried to cook for me—emphasis on *tried*. We ended up fucking on the kitchen table, and she begged me to cut her, to unleash my most twisted desires onto her body. So I did. Maybe that's why all this shit happened; because I maimed my wife's body and made her bleed, only to find pleasure in it. Maybe what happened to her is supposed to be my punishment, yet she's the one paying for it.

It was her blood this blade tasted last, and I intend to keep it that way, so I slide it back into my jacket pocket, then hold out my hand to Caelian. “Knife.”

“You’re not gonna get anything out of him if he’s dead,” Caelian remarks as he hands me his knife before casually leaning against the dirty wall, smoking a cigarette. The smell of burning tobacco is overshadowed by the more familiar stink of urine, feces, and sweat that lingers between these four walls.

“Please. Please,” the man begs, but not even a goddamn puppy can make me stop.

I lick my lips, and with a snarl, I jab the knife through the fucker’s hand, feeling the blade slice through bone, crunching it, and hitting the wooden armrest.

He screams. The sharp, ear-shattering wails of a grown man practically lick my motherfucking balls.

Caelian starts to circle him while glancing around the room. “When do you think is the last time he cleaned this place? Jesus, is that...” He looks closer at the stains on the torn sheets bundled up on the broken bed. “Is that cum?” Caelian looks at me. “Is that cum?”

“It probably is. And yes, this place is a dump. Now, can we focus here?”

“Oh. Of course.” Caelian stills and retakes his place against the wall. “Please continue killing the only lead you have right now since you slaughtered the others.”

“Fuck you very much,” I grit out before balling my hand into a fist once more, sweeping my arm back and launching it forward, hitting the fucker square in the jaw. Blood explodes from his mouth, a tooth clattering across the tiled floor.

Caelian snorts. “Souvenir?”

“No, thanks,” I spit out, grabbing the fucker’s face. “What I really want is his jaw on my bedside table holding my fucking beer.”

The coward begins to whimper, so I grab a fistful of hair and yank his head back. “Where is he?” I growl. “You better start talking...” Fucker’s name slipped my mind, so I glance at Caelian.

“Ben,” Caelian answers, and I frown.

“His name is not Ben.”

“It is now.”

“Fine. Ben,” I mutter, turning my attention back to him and pulling his head back even farther. “Start talking, *Ben*.”

“I don’t...I don’t know,” he sputters, the sound of gargling blood coming from his throat. “I don’t know where Nunzio is.”

“Liar!”

“I’m not lying. No one knows where he is. No one’s seen him for weeks.”

“Are you telling me your boss just vanished into thin fucking air?”

The son of a bitch spits more blood, and my top lip curls in a snarl as the need to beat him to a pulp knocks against my chest, breathing heavily. “All I know is he has safehouses all across the city.”

“Safehouses?”

He nods. “When he stays in a safehouse, it’s just him and the lady of the house. No one else.”

I shoot Caelian a questioning look before scowling at the bleeding fucker whose piss I’m currently standing in. “Lady of the house? You mean his whore?”

“I dunno what these women are to him. All I know is they live in the safehouses, take care of them, make sure they’re always ready for him.”

I grind my molars together, fighting the need to fuck this guy up for a moment before my eyes flick to Caelian, silently asking if he believes the shit this loser is feeding us.

Caelian shrugs. “Makes sense. We all know Nunzio is a fucking coward. Of course, he’ll have hiding places with pussy ready.”

My attention is back to our bleeding friend as I lean forward, wrapping my fingers around the knife’s handle, causing it to shift slightly and earning a beautiful moan of pain from Ben’s bloody mouth. “Give me specific locations.”

“I told you. I don’t know where.”

“Why are you protecting this asshole? Look at where you’re living. It’s a fucking hole in hell’s back yard. One would think Nunzio could at least take care of his loyal, albeit stupid, worker bee motherfuckers.”

“Like I said,” he bites out, sucking in a deep breath, “I don’t. Know.”

I pull out my gun, placing the barrel under his chin. “How about now?”

“Jesus,” he cries. “I don’t know. I don’t fucking know!”

“Do you know how badly I want to squeeze this trigger, Ben? I *really* want you to keep lying so I can blow your tongue out of the top of your head.”

His bloodied bottom lip trembles, more piss running down his legs, wetting the floor. “Louis,” he whispers, and I cock a brow. “My...my name...it’s...Louis.”

Anger ruptures, the flames licking my skin while heat melts every last ounce of control I have left. “See you in hell, motherfucker.”

I pull the trigger. The gunshot reverberates through the room, blood spattering on my face, and I slowly straighten, gun still in hand, as I stare at the bloody mess that *was* Ben’s face. It looks like he’s been mauled by a pack of starved dogs.

“Jesus Christ, Nicoli,” Caelian whines as he wipes drops of blood from his cheek. “How about a little warning next time.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Was my gun on his face not warning enough for you?”

“I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to actually kill the fucker.”

“What?” I snap in disbelief. “Please tell me, brother, what about this entire scenario had you thinking that I won’t *actually* kill Ben here?”

“Louis,” Caelian corrects, grabbing the knife lodged in Ben’s hand and yanking it out. “His name...is Louis.”

I press my lips together and lift my gun, aiming it at my younger brother. “I dare you to say that again.”

Caelian is unfazed. He doesn’t even fucking blink as he locks his glare onto mine. “Louis. Say it with me. Loo-ee.”

“Fuckers.” Maximo stomps in. “I leave you alone for two goddamn minutes, and there’s a dead body tied to a chair, and Caelian has loaded ammunition dangling in front of his face again.”

“What do you mean again?” I ask.

“Last week, there was an old fart at the club who thought Caelian and the new girl were a duo.”

“Maximo,” Caelian barks. “We made a pact to never talk about it again, man.”

“And now I’m breaking that pact.”

“Is nothing sacred anymore in this family? Look, my brother has a gun aimed at my head. A fucking gun.”

Maximo starts untying Ben’s hands. “He won’t shoot you.”

“I might.” I keep my gun trained on Caelian’s head as Maximo instructs the clean-up crew to remove what’s left of Ben.

“You see?” Caelian points at me. “He’s one temper tantrum away from shooting me.” He turns to face me. “Are you done jerking off?”

I lower my gun and smile. “Yeah, I’m done.”

“Great,” Maximo says, pulling out a packet of cigarettes from his leather jacket pocket. “Caelian, I need to speak to

Nicoli in private.”

“If you’re thinking of sucking his dick, he already creamed his pants when he killed Ben.”

“Loo-ee,” I enunciate as Caelian walks out, flipping me off over his shoulder. The door slams shut, and I’m pretty sure I heard the wood crack around the hinges.

Maximo grabs a sheet off the bed and holds it out to me. “Clean your face.”

“With the dead man’s cum-rag? No, thank you.”

“Ew. Goddammit!” Maximo drops the sheet and curses. “That’s just nasty.”

I pull off my jacket and wipe the blood off my hands and face, tossing the two-thousand-dollar Armani suit jacket in the dead man’s piss. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Mira,” he responds simply, leaning back against the wall and finally lighting his cigarette. “I, uh...I overheard a conversation between her and Leandra this morning.”

“In other words, you were eavesdropping?”

“Exactly.”

“Good man.”

His expression hardens, and my spine tingles with warning.

“What’s going on?”

Maximo glances around the room. “Maybe we should have this conversation somewhere else.”

“Maximo,” I warn. “Spit it out, man.”

“She remembers.”

I freeze on the spot, my mind completely blank. “She remembers...what?”

When his eyes finally meet mine, reality seeps in.

A beat passes, and I press my hand against the wall, rubbing my eyes with my fingers. “Marco.”

“Yeah.”

“And you overheard her tell Leandra this? That she remembers...killing Marco?”

Maximo simply nods, then takes a long drag of his cigarette, the amber bud glowing angrily before it fades again. “She got her memory back the night...” His voice cracks. “The night of the hunting.”

“Jesus Christ,” I exhale, pulling my hand through my hair and grabbing a fistful at the back of my neck. “I can’t fucking believe this is happening. And why...why wouldn’t she tell me?” I glance at him. “What else did you hear?”

Maximo shakes his head lightly. “You’re gonna have to speak to her.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Maximo. What else did she say?”

He drops the cigarette to the ground, stomping his heel into it before straightening. “That she’s tired of us treating her like we’re scared she’ll break. And that’s why she didn’t tell you that she remembers everything. She thinks it will only make it worse.”

“Oh, my God,” I mutter, leaning my head back against the wall, staring up at a giant crack through the yellowed ceiling. “She should have told me.”

“We need to get our shit together,” Maximo counters.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s right, Nicoli. I’m avoiding her as much as possible because when I see her, all I think about is how it’s my fault. That if I never took her to that motherfucking hotel, never left her side while she sorted through fucking flowers, it would never have happened. And you—” he points at me “—you’re different with her.”

“I’m not—”

“Yes, you are. You talk to her like you think your voice will shatter her skull. And when you’re around her, you’re like a little fucking puppy wagging your tail at her all day long because God forbid you piss her off.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Maximo scoffs. “What’s wrong with that? I’ll tell you what’s wrong with that. You used to be the motherfucking dragon who breathed fire around her, protecting her like she’s your queen. And now...now you’re shielding her like she’s that little girl in the yellow coat who is too small, too weak to defend herself.”

I’m biting the inside of my cheek, trying to stop myself from tearing his head off with my teeth. But deep down, really fucking deep down, I know what he’s saying is the truth.

Maximo steps up, placing a hand on my shoulder. “It seems like, once again, we’ve underestimated my sister. It’s not her who needs to deal with this shit, Nicoli. It’s us. We need to deal with it and move the fuck on. Otherwise, we’re both going to lose her.” He leans his head to the side, eyebrows arched. “For real this time.”

Chapter Four

The door slams behind me, and I stand there, bloodied and frustrated. My hands are cold and coated in the remnants of a man's life, my clothes soaked in his agony. Mayhem echoes through my thoughts, the violent craze pounding in my head and thumping through my heart. And while my knuckles ache and the cuts bleed, I'm painfully aware that it's all for nothing. Nunzio remains hidden, like a ghost haunting every inch of my mind.

"Nicoli?" Mira's voice is hesitant as she slowly walks down the stairs, her green eyes widening at the sight of me. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I snarl, frustration boiling within me.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." I glance at the blood on my hands, how it started to crust in the corners of my fingernails. "It's not mine."

"Oh, thank God."

"Well, some of it might be," I say, opening and closing my fist, the flesh burning as the movement irritates the cuts. Mira's heels click across the lacquered floor as she closes the distance between us, and she reaches out cautiously, her fingers skimming the edge of my blood-stained sleeve. "Did he survive?"

"No." My answer is as final as Ben's last fucking breath.

She flinches, but I see the understanding that flickers across her face. She knows what I've done, what I'm willing

to do for her. For us. And yet, I can't help but feel like I'm failing her because no matter how many men I kill, it's not him.

"I will find him, Mira. I swear to God."

"I know."

"But every time I think I'm close, he slips through my fingers," I confess, my voice raw with frustration. "It's like he's a fucking ghost."

"Nicoli, you will find him," Mira insists, her grip on my hand tightening. "I believe in you."

I want to believe her, but with each passing day, the weight of our vendetta grows heavier. As much as I crave retribution for Mira, I can't help but wonder if I'm strong enough to see it through.

"Come on," she murmurs, taking my hand and leading me up the stairs to our room. "Let's get you cleaned up."

As we move through the darkened halls, I can't shake the weight of my failures. The image of the man's lifeless body and his screams echoing in my ears—my efforts have yielded nothing. No closer to our vengeance, no closer to making Nunzio pay for what he did to Mira.

Mira closes the bedroom door behind us, circles me, and unbuttons my bloodstained shirt in silence.

I just look at her for a few moments, wishing I had a direct line to her thoughts. Maybe then I'd have a clearer picture of what she needs from me, her husband. Perhaps I'll understand why she hasn't shared her secret with me.

"You remember."

Mira freezes, her fingers still clutching the white button, and she stares at it instead of looking up at me.

"You remember that night in the mausoleum," I press, but it's not a question.

Without saying a word, she continues to unbutton my shirt, only faster now, like she's trying to distract herself from the

conversation. I let her for a moment, taking in the sight of her. Mira's always been beautiful, but in this moment, with her hair falling around her face and the light on her skin casting her in a warm glow, I'm struck by how much I love her.

Finally, when she's done, she meets my gaze. "I do remember," she says softly. "I remember everything."

My heart constricts as I witness the pain of her memories settle on her brow. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She takes a step back, and I instantly hate the distance she's putting between us. "I can ask you the same question." The way her green eyes study me is almost unnerving. "Is that why you kept your distance from me all those years?"

"I was trying to protect you."

"From what? From realizing that I'm a monster? A murderer?" Her voice is soft, yet bitterness vibrates from her words.

"See, that's exactly why I chose not to tell you. I knew the guilt would be too much for you to handle."

A dark chuckle rolls from her lips. "Why does everyone think I'm drowning in guilt? Because I'm not. I have the blood of two men and my own brother on my hands, but guilt is not what's suffocating me. It's the fact that I don't feel guilt that scares me. The fact that I might be a psychopath. A monster."

"You're not a monster," I say, reaching for her and tilting her head back with my fingers below her chin. "You demanded justice, Mira. You didn't kill because you wanted to. You killed because you had to."

She presses her cherry-red lips into a thin line. "I didn't have to kill Marco."

"Yes, you did," I reply, brushing the back of my hand across her jaw. "He cost you your life. He took everything away from the four-year-old you. If you didn't kill him that night, I would have."

"Your intentions don't justify my actions. Just like our need for revenge doesn't justify you going around killing

people.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No.” She slides her hands underneath my unbuttoned shirt, gently easing it over and off my shoulders. “If I were a good wife, a good woman, I would tell you to stop. If my soul was light,” she continues, her nails brushing down my naked arms, “I would fear the darkness that’s consuming you, demanding blood. But I don’t.” Her eyes meet mine. “I don’t fear it, Nicoli.”

“Why?”

“Because that same darkness consumes me, too.” She takes my hand and places my palm on her chest, the silk of her blouse soft beneath my fingers. “I feel it in here, the same need, the same justice to see Nunzio pay for what he did to us.”

“To you.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Us. What he did, he did to us. You’re hurting just like me, Nicoli.”

“What I’m feeling is nothing compared to what he did to you.”

“Stop,” she urges, letting go of my hand to cup my cheek as her green irises stare straight into my soul. “Yes, I have the memories. The nightmares. But you have the uncertainty, trying to figure out what I had been through and how deep my scars go, and sometimes not knowing is worse than knowing.”

I take a deep breath, feeling her words slice through me like a hot knife. “I just want to protect you, Mira.”

“I know,” she murmurs, leaning up to kiss me gently on the lips. “I love you so much, Nicoli. Please, love me the way you used to.”

I swallow her words, kissing her softly but with purpose, hoping she’ll be able to feel that which I can’t put into words. That she can feel what she is to me, how she’s not just my heart and my air, she’s the life in my soul, and without her I’ll be...nothing.

I watch as Mira's eyes scan my bloodied body, her gaze flickering with a mix of concern and something else, something darker. Her lips part slightly as she takes in the sight of me, the man who'd do anything for her.

She eases back, and I groan in protest, not nearly done kissing her.

Taking my hand, she looks down at the cuts. "You did this for me."

"For us."

"Good," she whispers, once again meeting my gaze. "Because what I want right now is for you to take this anger and rage and channel it into something... primal."

My heart races at the implication of her words, the hunger in her eyes reflecting my own insatiable appetite for destruction. Then, I realize how deeply we're entwined in this twisted dance of vengeance and desire. We've become monsters forged in the fires of our shared pain.

"Are you sure, Mira?" I ask, even though I know the answer before she speaks.

"More than anything," she replies, her voice thick with need. "Let me feel your power, Nicoli. Show me how far you're willing to go for us."

"Anything," I promise, my resolve solidifying as I pull her close, the lines between love and revenge blurring together in one intoxicating moment. "Everything."

"Good. But first, let me take care of you," she says softly, her voice barely audible over the pounding of my own heartbeat. She reaches out, her fingers brushing against the dried blood clinging to my skin.

With her fingers weaved through mine, we walk into the ensuite bathroom, the scent of my wife's perfume lingering in the air—sweet and sensual, a smell I could easily drown in.

My dick is already hard when she starts to unbuckle my belt, her soft hands brushing against my stomach, sending jolts of electricity through me. Her deft fingers touch the sensitive

tip, and I close my eyes as I snarl through the surge of lust that grips my balls so fucking tight.

“Eyes on mine,” she orders softly before unzipping my trousers and pushing them down over my hips, freeing my cock. Her eyes darken and dilate as she looks down at my hard length, and like a fucking tease, she traces her fingertips down my V, exploring my body as though it’s something she has to commit to memory, all while avoiding the one place I’m aching for her to touch.

As if every inch of me is some sacred territory she needs to conquer, her gaze transfixed as she continues to stroke her fingertips across my abs. I’m suddenly taken back to a time when desire fueled us, not vengeance. When our passion for each other consumed us wholly. A time when we demanded pleasure unapologetically.

She turns on the shower, steam filling the room as the water heats up. “Step in,” she orders, and I obey, the scalding water cascading over my tense muscles. Mira follows me, the droplets clinging to her golden hair like diamonds.

“Does it make me a monster if this turns me on?” she asks softly. “Knowing you’ve killed for me. Committed unthinkable violence, spilled blood—” her green eyes dart up to mine “—all because you love me?”

Abruptly, I grab her jaw, gripping it tight as I force her to lean back while her eyes remain on mine. “It doesn’t make you a monster, Hummingbird,” I murmur. “It makes you my queen.”

“Promise me, Nicoli,” Mira murmurs, her breath hot against my ear. “Promise me that we’ll face it together no matter what happens. Whether we lose this battle or rise in victory, we do it...together.”

“I promise,” I vow, my voice shaking with the weight of my words. As Mira continues to wash away the remnants of my violent past, I feel a strange sense of hope stir within me. Together, bound by love and vengeance, we will survive the darkness that lies ahead.

“Isn’t it ironic,” she says as she starts to lather soap on my body. “I had to go through hell to realize that you’re not my Prince Charming, but rather my Dark Prince.”

The intensity of her words, coupled with the gentle pressure of her hands as they work to cleanse my skin, sends a shudder through my body. It’s a potent mix of fear, desire, and determination that leaves me reeling. In this moment, surrounded by steam and shadows, our connection feels stronger than ever.

The steady stream of water cascades over our entwined bodies, droplets clinging to Mira’s golden hair like stars in the night sky. Her hands move with a purpose, washing me, cleaning me, the lather of soap slippery between our naked bodies.

She reaches for my hand. “Does it hurt?” she asks softly.

“Only when I think about what Nunzio did to you,” I confess, the raw honesty in my voice echoing through the steamy confines of the shower.

“Nicoli,” Mira murmurs, wrapping herself around me even tighter, “you’re doing everything possible to find him and make him pay. I see that. I know that.”

Her words sting with the unspoken truth, that despite my efforts, Nunzio remains elusive, a ghost haunting our lives. I grit my teeth, fighting back the frustration building inside me.

“Every day that bastard breathes is another day that justice goes unserved,” I say, unable to keep the bitterness from seeping into my tone.

Mira’s hand moves to cup my face, fingertips tracing the contours of my cheekbone. Her touch is like fire against my skin, igniting a desire that threatens to consume me whole. “You’ll find him. I don’t doubt it for a second. And when you do, you and I’ll bathe in his blood together.”

Our mouths collide, passion and rage mingling as we come together in a moment of desperate intensity.

For a fraction of a second, time stands still. The world around us fades away until all that matters is the two of us,

united by love, intent on revenge...stronger than ever.

With tongues tangling in a desperate attempt to convey the love and rage coursing through our veins, Mira holds me tight against her, her fingers dancing across my back as she whispers against my lips, "Promise me no matter what happens...we'll face it together."

I gather her closer, crushing our bodies together until I feel like nothing can separate us ever again. Our hearts beat as one, two halves of an unbreakable force. "I promise, Hummingbird."

The water shuts off with a sudden finality, leaving only the sound of our ragged breathing to fill the bathroom. I gaze at Mira, her eyelashes heavy with droplets and her skin flushed from the heat. The sight of sheer desire flashing in her eyes sets a flame burning deep in my soul, one only she can quench.

She licks her lips, those beautiful cherry-reds I could kiss for eternity.

"Nicoli." She breathes my name like a prayer, and I do the only thing I can. I gather her in my arms, lifting her feet off the ground as I clutch her naked body against my chest, carrying her into the bedroom, leaving wet footprints on the carpet.

For the first time in what feels like an eternity, I can let go of the guilt, anger, and unyielding need for revenge. In this moment, it is just Mira and me, our connection transcending the ugliness of the world outside.

I place her down on her feet, and the atmosphere shifts and thickens with a hunger that can no longer be ignored. Mira's green eyes, usually so bright and lively, are now darkened by desire as they roam over my body. My breathing is heavy, raw need pulsing through my veins as I pull her close, our lips crashing together in a heated kiss.

"Nicoli," she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders as our tongues tangle. "I need you."

"Fuck, Mira... You have no idea how much I want you right now." My voice is hoarse, barely audible over the

pounding of my heart. As our bodies press closer, the slickness of our wet skin only heightens our touch's intensity.

Mira's fingers trace the contours of my chest, sliding lower to grip my throbbing cock. A guttural moan escapes me, and I can't help but grind into the warmth of her hand. She knows exactly how to touch me, every stroke, every caress, driving me closer to the edge of insanity.

"Please, Nicoli..." Her plea is desperate, her breath hot against my ear. "I need you to love me like you used to. Without limits. Without reservations."

The power of her words pushes me past the point of no return. I lift her up in one swift motion, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the bed. The soft fabric of the sheets does little to cushion the force with which I lay her down, grabbing her knees and yanking them open, exposing that beautiful, swollen, pink cunt of hers. And with a growl, I slam my mouth over her wet pussy, my tongue sliding hungrily through her slit, her taste driving me fucking insane. She gasps, weaving her fingers through my hair, writhing beneath me. I thrust my tongue deep inside her, swirling around her clit as she moans and cries out for more.

Using my thumbs, I part her pussy lips even farther, using the tip of my tongue to trace greedy circles around her sensitive flesh before flicking it against her clit, over and fucking over, driving her insane. For the first time in so long, it's just us without the ghost of that fucker driving a wedge between us, keeping us from loving each other the only way we know how—the way we want to.

Her sex is so wet I easily slip a finger inside her, causing her to arch her back off the sheets. I add another, gently curling them and pushing them farther in as she tightens around my fingers. With each movement comes a louder, more desperate moan from her beautiful lips.

When her thighs start to quiver, I know she's close, but I'm not done with her yet.

I launch up, planting my feet back down on the carpet. "Get on your knees," I command, and she obeys without

hesitation. As she inches forward, I take my cock by the base, guiding it into her mouth, hissing as she takes my length, her tongue lapping along my shaft. I let her take me in for a few moments just to enjoy that heady sensation of being between her lips before I start thrusting faster and harder. With each deep inhale, she takes me deeper still, eliciting moans from both our mouths as the pleasure builds.

“Do you...” I stop myself from continuing, staring down at her, her eyes teary from my cock hitting the back of her throat. I wanted to ask her if she wanted more or could handle more, but that’s not how it works between us. That’s not how our dynamic soars. I take. She takes. I give. She gives. That’s how we do it. That’s how we used to do it and how we’ll do it from today onward.

“Suck my dick like it’s the last thing you’ll ever do,” I growl, then grab a fistful of her hair, pulling her head to the side so I can get a better view of her crying tears of desire while swallowing my cock.

“You like that, don’t you, Hummingbird?” I say, knowing fully well she can’t answer me with my dick stuffed in her mouth. “You like tasting me on your tongue, sucking me, hoping I’ll come down your throat.”

Her head bobs up and down with each thrust while sucking me even deeper into her mouth, and it feels so damn good. I’m seconds away from coming when I pull out, grabbing her shoulders, lifting her onto her knees and slamming my mouth against hers, kissing her so fucking hard, letting my tongue duel with hers, wanting to steal her taste and make it mine.

I palm her tit, squeezing, rolling the perfect swell of soft flesh in my palm before pinching her nipple hard, causing her to yelp.

I pull away slightly, my breaths heavy and thick with want. “You know what I’m gonna do now?” I whisper against her lips. She makes a sound of anticipation as she eyes me, waiting for me to continue but wanting more all at the same time. The look on her face tells me this is where our story

continues. No more hesitation. No more guilt. Just raw, undiluted passion.

“Turn around,” I order, grabbing her waist and forcing her to do as I say.

“I need you, Nicoli,” she begs as she steadies herself on all fours, swaying her ass in front of me, her blonde locks spread over her back and shoulders.

I’m trying to ease the ache in my cock when I wrap my fingers around it, giving it a few good strokes as I set my eyes on Mira’s blooming pussy. Swollen. Wet. Ready. Her arousal is already coating her inner thighs. So I drag a single digit up her thigh, coating it in her wetness, sliding it through her parted slit to her puckered hole. She instantly starts to shake as I tease and massage her tight ring, spreading her arousal.

“Ahh, Nicoli.” Her legs tremble as I stroke her there, playing with the delicate entrance before sliding my thumb into it ever so slowly.

I get on my knees, inching closer, placing a palm on her back and guiding her down so her shoulders meet the mattress, and her ass lifts higher up, giving me more of her pussy to look at.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I remark, sucking on my bottom lip as I take her in. “There is no better sight than your pussy when it’s dripping for me.”

The way her moans intensify, how her hips sway, and her breathing accelerates tells me she’s consumed with lust, just like I am.

I start to stroke my dick again as I push my thumb into her ass, and at the same time, I slide my middle finger into her warm cunt.

“Oh, my God, yes,” she breathes heavily as I finger fuck both her holes. She’s so fucking wet, there’s zero resistance, my palm coated in her juices.

Her pussy walls clamp down around my finger. She wants to come, but I tear my fingers out of her body, leaving her empty and desperate.

“No way we’re wasting a perfect orgasm on my finger, Hummingbird.” I shift closer and drag the head of my cock up and down her drenched slit, leaving her gasping as my tip enters her tense body. “Not when my dick is ready to give you a much better one.” With a single, hard thrust, I push into her, hitting her as deep as fucking possible, then keep it there, our hips touching lightly, and my balls are pressed against the soft skin of her ass cheeks. “Tell me how it feels,” I say, rubbing my palm around her waist.

“Good,” she whimpers, and her inner muscles contract tightly around me as she moans in pleasure and throws her head back. “So...fucking...good.”

“If you come before I tell you to, there will be hell to pay,” I warn, slipping my thumb back into her hole as I drive my cock into her, our bodies slapping together, the sound of our moans fuelling me to fuck her harder, faster.

“God, I missed this, Hummingbird.” I’m breathless, sweat clinging to my brows as perspiration pools behind my neck. But I don’t want to stop. I don’t ever want to stop. Being inside her is the best fucking high of my life. There is no drug that compares to the ecstasy I find deep inside her perfect cunt.

Mira starts to pant wildly as I continue to thrust, and her inner walls quiver and clench around me. “Please,” she breathes between moans, pushing her hips out even farther, her body taking my cock deeper as her fingers grasp the silk sheets, bunching it in her palms. “I have to come.”

“Not yet, baby girl.” My voice is gruff, and I feel my cock swell even more as it continues to push inside of her. “I want you to fight it until you can’t anymore, until it breaks your goddamn mind trying to stop the pleasure I’m fucking into you.”

“My mind is already fucking breaking. Nicoli, if I don’t come now—”

I can feel her tight walls gripping my dick so hard that it takes everything in me not to come right then and there. “Jesus,” I groan, pulling my thumb out of her asshole so I can sink my fingers into her waist as I start to fuck her with

savaged thrusts, my balls tightening, every muscle in my body pulled taut as I bite into my lower lip, desperate growls tearing up my throat.

I snake an arm around her hip. “Come for me, baby girl,” I demand, and I barely touch her sensitive clit when she cries out.

“Oh, God!” Her screams reverberate around the room, crashing against my spine as her orgasm grips her, her pussy pulsing around my throbbing shaft.

Mira’s inner walls clench and release, milking me as I feel myself explode inside her. My cock tightens, and my hips buck uncontrollably against hers as wave after wave of pleasure rocks through me.

We both collapse onto the bed in a tangled heap of sated limbs, our heavy panting echoing off the walls around us until it fades away into blissful silence.

It feels like forever since I felt this satiated, and judging by the sound of her labored breaths and the pink tint on her cheeks, she feels the same.

As I look at her next to me, her blonde hair fanned out across the pillow, her full lips parted in pleasure, I am struck by the overwhelming love I feel for this woman. She is my everything – my strength, my solace, my reason for being. And I will do whatever it takes to protect her, to ensure her happiness and safety, even if it means embracing the darkest parts of myself.

Lying here, our bodies pressed together, the softness of Mira’s skin against mine, I realize that at this moment, we have found solace in each other’s arms. The weight of our desire for revenge is momentarily lifted, replaced by a deep sense of connection and belonging.

“Nicoli,” Mira whispers, her breath warm on my neck, “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Hummingbird.” I stroke her hair. “More than you know.”

Chapter Five

The door creaks open, and I step into the dimly lit room. Alexius is waiting for me, seated behind his desk, leaning back in his chair as he takes a sip from his glass of bourbon. The desk lamp places his silhouette on the wall like a dark mass cut out of black paper. His heavy frame leans to one side as he sips his drink.

“Who died?”

“Apparently, some guy named Louis. But here’s the real kicker,” he says as he places his glass down. “My twin brother shot him in the head.”

“Correction.” I hold up my hand. “I shot him through the face. Vertically upward and strategically moved his tongue to his brain. And that, dear brother, takes an immense amount of skill.”

“And stupidity,” he remarks.

I move closer to him, the floorboards groaning beneath my feet. He watches me, his eyes icy blue and unreadable. It’s a quality I’ve always envied – the ability to remain calm and collected no matter what storm brews inside. To stay in control while a hurricane unleashes carnage in my head is something I will never master—mainly because I don’t fucking want to.

The leather chair creaks as I take a seat across from him. “Let me guess. You’re going to give me some speech about how I can’t go around killing people and putting our family at risk of some form of retaliation. That what I’m doing is not how we do things in our world, that there are rules and

stipulations and goddamn fine print that tells us how to take a fucking piss.”

Alexius cocks a dark brow.

“But let me tell you, brother,” I continue. “I am the one retaliating. This family is retaliating against a wrong done unto us. Every drop of blood I spill, every life I take is warranted, and you fucking know it.”

His expression remains impassive, and I grow increasingly restless and annoyed.

“Nicoli,” Alexius prompts, his voice firm but not unkind, “I get it. I really do. And believe me when I say I want Nunzio dead and buried yesterday.”

“Then, for the love of God, spare me the lecture today.”

“Revenge is a dangerous game, Nicoli,” he says softly, his gaze never leaving mine. “But I understand your need for it. Just remember, balance and strategy are key, and right now, you’re too emotionally invested in this to find a balance.”

I lean forward. “Tell me if you see anything on my goddamn face that says I give a shit about balance.”

A heartbeat passes, and Alexius sits back. “We’ll make him pay.”

“But in order to do that, we have to find the fucker first.” I launch up and stomp across the room, pouring myself some bourbon, and my hand ain’t light either. I’m filling this baby up to the fucking brim. “It’s been months, and we’re no closer to finding this asshole than we were the night I carried my beaten and battered wife out of that goddamn forest.”

“Nunzio is an arrogant fuck. It’s only a matter of time before he screws up and leads us to whatever hole he’s hiding in.” His tone is a careful mix of understanding and authority. “But until then, we have to be smart about it. Plan our moves and consider the risks. If we want to end this war once and for all, there is no room for error. We can’t jeopardize our position in all of this.”

“And what position is that?” I snap as I pivot to face him, clutching the crystal tumbler in my palm. “What position are we in when nothing is fucking happening?”

Alexius pulls a hand through his hair, sighing. “I get it, Nicoli. I really do.”

“No. You fucking don’t. None of you get it.”

“Fine,” he shoots back. “I might not know exactly what you’re going through, but I do know that protecting your wife is far more important than you going out there playing God and raining down the fury of hell onto everyone and their goddamn mother.”

“You want me to stop?”

“I want you to stop slaughtering half the city.”

“Fine.” I shrug. “But first, you have to do something for me.”

“This is not a democracy, Nicoli.”

“Close your eyes and picture Leandra naked, scared, being hurt and humiliated. Think about your wife getting raped by that motherfucker, over and over again, while she begs for him to stop, and his only response to her pleas is to shove his dick inside her even deeper.”

He licks his lips, and the muscles around his jaw tighten. “Don’t.”

“Think about the pain she had to go through, the utter, complete, violent, brutal,” I spit out, “violation of your wife’s body.” I am still right in front of him, our eyes level. “Tell me, brother, what would you do if a man desecrated that which is so fucking sacred to you, you would die for it?”

I can see the veins in his neck bulging, flexing as he clenches his teeth, trying to rein in his anger. “I would burn cities to the ground for it,” he grits out.

“Then do not expect me to do anything else...brother.”

Alexius narrows his eyes, his mouth flattening into a hard line. When he speaks, his voice is cold and distant. “You

cannot put this family at risk by..."

"Motherfucker!" I bellow. "Are you listening to yourself?"

"...by being reckless. I can't allow that, Nicoli."

"Allow that? Jesus Christ, Alexius!"

"I have to act and do what I think is right for this family, and with you going around like a goddamn vigilante leaving bodies on every street corner for Maximo to clean up is risky and selfish."

"Fuck you, Alexius," I spit out, pointing my finger right at his goddamn face. "Fuck. You."

"Nicoli—"

"Listen to me, and listen to me good, brother. If I have to kill every motherfucker in this city, slaughter every kitten and offer every goddamn puppy to the devil himself, I will fucking do it if it means I get to hand that bastard's bleeding heart to my wife on a motherfucking silver platter!" My voice slams against the ceiling, my anger ricocheting off the walls and landing right against my brother's goddamn forehead.

Alexius shakes his head. "You're not making this easy."

"Good. Because guess what, it wasn't fucking easy for her either when she was kept in that goddamn room being raped by a sadistic fuck!"

A single bead of sweat trickles down my temple, and I'm just waiting for my heart to break through my ribs. The room is thick with tension, a palpable force that presses against my chest like a vise. "You are looking at this all wrong, Alexius."

"Then how should I look at this?"

"Look at this for what it is! That I've been hunting Nunzio's men, one by one. Taking them out. Weakening his ranks. And the weaker this motherfucker gets, the faster we'll smoke him out of the ground."

A moment passes, then another, until I find my breath again, and the world around us settles into place.

His voice is softer now, the hard lines on his face relaxing. “All I ask is that you promise me you will be careful.”

“And all I’m asking is that you stop being the Dark Sovereign leader and start being my goddamn brother.”

“I am your brother.”

“You sure?” Caelian smirks as he strolls in. “I find it hard to believe you’re brothers because you look nothing alike.”

Both Alexius and I glare in his direction. “What are you doing here?”

“I needed some suffocating tension, so I decided to look for my twin brothers.” He shrugs and takes a seat. “And look, here you are with a fuckton of tension, and I can just soak it all in.”

My expression hardens. “Get the fuck out.”

“Wait.” He holds up a finger, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath. “Yep, my pores are high right now. You know, you two can bottle this shit and sell it to politicians. They’ll kill each other within an hour.”

“We were getting there,” I say, deadpan, glaring at Alexius.

“Let me guess. You—” Caelian points at me “—are incredibly pissed because Alexius is giving you a lecture on proper Dark Sovereign etiquette when you, in fact, do not give a shit about anything that does not end with Nunzio’s head on a spike.”

“Exactly.”

“And you—” this time his finger points at Alexius “—are incredibly annoyed that Nicoli is being unapologetically himself without considering the consequences of his actions.”

“Exactly,” Alexius huffs.

“So, in actual fact—” Caelian gets up, pointing at both of us with his arms stretched out “—you are both assholes.”

Alexius and I frown at each other before turning to face Caelian.

“Yes. You are,” he says like he’s nailing our balls to the wall. “Alexius,” he starts. “I love you, man, but you need to stop worrying about your twin brother and fucking let him shoot things, disembowel people, and blow shit up until he’s satisfied.”

“Until I find Nunzio.”

“You,” Caelian cuts me short. “You need to grow the fuck up, man.”

“Fuck you!”

“You think Alexius likes being the grown-up all the time? The one who has to ignore his emotions and always think with his head because you can’t? Yes, he can be a dick half the time, but this fucker right here is responsible for the rest of us. We fuck up, he has to fix it. You go out there burning the goddamn streets, and he’s the one who has to put the fires out.”

“Thank you,” Alexius presses before Caelian cuts his glare toward him.

“But sometimes, just fucking sometimes, instead of being a dick, be a cunt like the rest of us and just let your emotions back up your decisions every once in a while. Mira has been a part of this family since she was four. Hell, I can’t even remember a time that she wasn’t here. And she got hurt. Really fucking hurt.” Caelian approaches Alexius, every trace of sarcasm evaporating from his words. “I know you have big shoes to fill and that you’re trying to do right by Dad. But what do you think our father would do if he were still here? If he knew what that son of a bitch did to the only daughter he’s ever had?” Caelian dares him to respond, and Alexius pulls his palm down his face and then starts to pace before looking in my direction.

“He would want us to burn this goddamn city to the ground to find Nunzio,” he says, and there’s a dark ring in his tone that tells me he means every goddamn word.

“Yes!” Caelian exclaims. “Finally.” He strolls to the door, opens it, but turns back to look at us. “Now, can you two

please shake hands or jerk each other off, or whatever the fuck it is you do when you make up? Everyone in this house is getting sick of your bickering, and we need a break.”

The door slams shut behind him, and Alexius and I stare at each other. “What the fuck just happened?” I ask.

“I have no idea.”

“Did he just...did he just lecture us?”

“I think so.”

“Caelian?” I stress. “The one who would pluck his own eyeball out before taking anything seriously?”

“Yup.”

“Fuck me.”

Alexius’ eyebrows almost touch his hairline. “I feel like I need a shower.”

“Yeah. That just didn’t feel right. Usually, we’re the ones telling Caelian to grow up.”

Alexius empties his glass, and it’s so fucking quiet I can hear him swallow the bourbon while we’re stuck together in the world’s most awkward moment ever.

I clear my throat. “We good?”

“Yes. I think we are.”

I’m nodding absentmindedly as I walk to the door.

“Nicoli,” he calls, and I turn to look at him. “You do what you gotta do.”

A silent understanding stretches between us, and I’m once again aware of the unbreakable bond between us. We might be two completely different people with nothing more in common than the same eyes and face, but we’re brothers. And in the end, nothing can change that.

Chapter Six

The second Nicoli enters our bedroom, slamming the door behind him, I realize I might have bitten off more than I can chew. But still, I don't regret my decision to wait for him. Naked and legs spread with my battery-operated friend in my hand.

"Mira, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I press the button, the sound of vibrations rippling through the room.

Nicoli smirks yet shakes his head as if both entertained and exasperated at the same time.

"Sit," I order, gesturing toward the couch. "Get comfortable. You have a show to watch."

There's a flash of something primal in his eyes as he jerks his tie loose, starting on the buttons of his shirt. "I'd prefer to be in the show rather than watch it."

"Of course you would. But right now, I need you to sit your ass down and your eyes glued on me."

My heart is already pounding, and just by the sight of him slipping off his shirt, every inch of him roped and defined, I know I'll be the one who ends up begging before he does.

"You sure you don't want me to come over there and help?" There's a sly grin on his beautiful face, one I love and hate equally.

"Stop being an arrogant ass and sit. Watch. Or you might end up not playing any part in this show."

Nicoli sits, leans back, and rubs his fingers along his jaw as he stretches out, blue irises gleaming with an intense desire to play this game just as much as I do. This is what I love most about us—*what I missed most about us until last night*—the fact that there are no inhibitions, limitations, or hesitations when it comes to us. We're both sexual beings, and I thank God that what happened with Nunzio didn't ruin that part of me. It could have, though. Easily. But I refused to give the devil more than he had taken.

"No touching yourself," I warn.

"That's not fair. You get to fuck a toy, and I don't get to pump my palm?"

"Who said I'm playing fair?" The truth is, I'd come way too goddamn fast if I had to watch him make himself come right now.

Electricity sparks across my skin as I trail my hand down my body, never breaking eye contact with him. The vibrator hums as I glide it up my inner thigh, and I ease my palm over my breast, inhaling deep as desire flares.

Nicoli leans forward slightly, licking his lips in anticipation as he watches me, his gaze darting between my face and pussy.

"Don't tease me, Hummingbird. Put that toy where you want it most," he dares, his irises turning dark, his expression shadowed with hard lines of lust.

"Are you going to sit there and bark out orders, Mr. Del Rossa?"

"You know I am." He brings his hands to the waistband of his pants and slips them off before kicking them aside, revealing hard muscle flexing with every movement.

"I said no touching yourself."

"I'm just getting comfortable." He shifts, giving me a better view of his impossibly hard cock, the shaft thick and long with promises of pleasure.

A sudden burst of courage hits me like a freight train, and I press the toy against my clit, the vibrations instantly sending me into a frenzy, moans escaping from between parted lips.

“That’s it, Hummingbird,” he murmurs, leaning his head to the side as he stares at my pussy. “You’ve barely begun, and look how wet you are.”

Goddammit. He knows what a sucker I am for dirty talk. He’s doing this on purpose to prove that he can beat me at my own game.

“Put it inside you,” he demands, his voice dripping with sex. I don’t even know why I try. Not a single part of me is ever in control when it comes to this man, which is why I obey instantly. As soon as the toy sinks into my tightness, I moan out loud and arch up off the bed. Nicoli just smiles knowingly because he knows exactly what kind of effect his words have on me.

Holding his gaze, I groan as the vibrations continue to ripple through me, my hips instinctively grinding against it.

“So responsive. So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs darkly. “I can watch you all night.”

Every nerve ending in my body is aflame, and as I watch him wrap his hand around his length, I almost come. “You just can’t obey an order, can you, husband?”

“Not when my wife’s pussy is spread wide open, inviting me in.”

I squeeze my breast, my nipples hardening as my climax starts to trickle from my toes all the way up my legs, and my eyes roll closed.

“Look at me, Hummingbird.”

“Are you not the one who’s supposed to look at me?” I counter, working the toy between my legs.

He watches and responds with soft grunts of approval, his hand working up and down his shaft with long, slow strokes. Unhurried and controlled.

I'm two seconds away from coming when he growls, "Stop."

"Nicoli," I whimper, his name a plea on my lips as he gets up from the couch, stalking toward me with his dick in his palm. "Drop the toy, baby girl," he hums as he stretches out one arm, grabbing the top railing of our four-post bed, every shredded muscle in his side and chest pulled taut as he leans forward. "Keep still, and let me really watch you."

I do as he says, my body in agony as I pull the vibrator out of me. I can feel the arousal seep from my sex as I hunger for more. For release.

This really backfired, didn't it?

I'm breathless as I watch him grip the base of his cock, squeezing hard like he's trying to temper the need to plunge into me. I'm not even touching myself, yet seeing him pleasuring himself has me arching my back because I can't keep still.

"Spread your legs wider."

I'm biting my bottom lip as I ease my legs open all the way until my knees hit the sheets. Blue eyes flash with desire as he showers me with fervent looks that devour every inch of my aroused body.

The second he moves his palm all the way to the base of his dick, his hips flexing, a sensation I can't control washes over me, and it feels like all the heat, sparks, and lightning inside my veins gathers up into one point between my legs—ready to implode.

"Is your clit aching, Hummingbird?"

"You have no idea," I breathe. I'm fighting the urge to touch myself, grabbing the sheets in my palms to stop that from happening.

Nicoli's strokes keep a steady rhythm, his movements measured as if he's savoring each bit of pleasure that comes from having his eyes on my naked body, spread and aching for him. Every contour of his body is shaped and shredded to perfection. How did I get this lucky to call Nicoli Del Rossa

mine? It's like God has granted me the one thing my heart desires most. Him. My husband. Perfection.

"I can't decide whether I want to come on you or in you."

"I'm hoping for the latter."

"Hmmm," he groans, and it's a sound I wish I could fuck, because something that sexy, that hot, needs to be in me, I swear to God. My fists tighten around the silk sheets some more, and I'm sure I'm about to combust.

Nicoli notices, and his top lip curls in a smirk. "How does it feel to know you're one touch away from coming, yet you're not allowed to?"

"I hate it," I bite out, arching my back, not taking my eyes off his cock being pumped in his palm.

"Good. Because that's what you wanted to do to me when I walked in here, right? You wanted to torture me by having me watch but not participate."

I scowl at him. "I don't think I like this game anymore."

That sexy as fuck smirk of his grows wider, and he increases the speed at which he's jerking his cock.

Abruptly, he stops, reaches out, and slides his arms underneath my thighs, curling his hands around my hips, and pulls me closer to the edge with a hard jerk, slamming his cock into me at the same time. My breath explodes from my lips, and I cry out as he starts to rub circles around my hooded clit.

"Now I'm the one in control," he says, grinning down at me.

I can only nod as waves of pleasure engulf me, making it impossible to respond with words. He knows what I want—to be taken hard and fast until neither of us can take any more pleasure.

I'm trembling, aching, desperate for release. I'm delirious with need, unable to form a coherent thought beyond craving this release threatening to burn through me.

“Not yet, Hummingbird.” He is gazing down at me, his crystal irises hooded and consumed with lust. “You’ll come when I allow it, not a moment before.”

“Please,” I rasp, looking up at him through half-lidded eyes, watching him thrust into him, sweat beading across his forehead. “Nicoli, please. I need...”

“I know what you need.” He moves his touch away from my clit, and I moan from the torment of being right at the edge, only to get pulled back. His thrusts grow stronger, harder, faster, and to go deep, he places his palms on my bent knees, pushing them forward and down so my pussy and ass lift more for him.

“Jesus,” he rasps. “I’m so fucking deep inside you right now.”

“More,” I plead as the sound of his thighs slapping against my ass fills the room with its sensual melody.

The pleasure builds and builds, my entire body taut as a bowstring.

“You ready to come for me, baby girl?”

“God, yes!”

“Look at me.”

I pin my eyes on him while he’s slamming so hard, so deep into me, I’m fucking breathless.

“Come for me, Mira.”

The command sends me over the edge. My back arches as I come with a scream, Nicoli’s name on my lips. The world whites out, fracturing around me as rapture consumes every inch of my being, my body erupting into sensation. Wave after wave after wave of pleasure wash over me as he continues to pound my pussy, hitting my core with every thrust.

When I come back to myself, Nicoli is holding me close, murmuring soft praise and endearments, his elbows positioned above my shoulders.

He kisses the top of my head, his cock still hard and buried inside me. “You are exquisite when you come for me,” he rasps. “The way you surrender so beautifully. The sounds you make. The way you clench around me, greedy for more.”

A flush of heat courses through my body. My heart beats like a drum, pounding in my chest as warmth pools low in my belly once more. I tilt my head up to gaze into Nicoli’s eyes, seeking the promise of his mouth. He lowers his lips onto mine without hesitation, and I’m lost in sensation - how he tastes, smells, and feels pressed against me. The kiss is deep and claiming, full of passion that ignites my soul with need. As we finally part, I’m left panting for breath, but hunger lingers.

“Again,” he murmurs against my lips, and my veins ignite when he starts to move. I cup his face with my hands, memorizing each angle of his features and the rugged stubble on his jaw. He takes my bottom lip between his teeth and teases it back and forth before soothing it with a sweep of his tongue. Nicoli begins to move, his thrusts measured but powerful. I meet him eagerly, clutching at his shoulders. The rhythm builds, and our pace becomes more urgent and needy, like a storm brewing in the distance, then explodes into something that is both destructive and beautiful.

“That’s it, baby girl,” Nicoli whispers, increasing his pace. “Take everything I have to give you.”

I do, and it’s so perfect I could cry.

Our bodies move as one, slick with sweat and desire. Nicoli braces himself on his forearms, gazing down at me with eyes full of love and possession—eyes that would tell me how much he loved me if the world stole his words.

All I can do is cling to him, nails scoring paths down his back as the tension inside me mounts once more.

“You’re mine,” Nicoli growls, snapping his hips forward. “Say it.”

“Yours,” I gasp out. “Always yours.”

Satisfaction flickers across his face. He dips his head, biting at my neck and shoulders, marking me as thoroughly as any brand. The slight pain only heightens my pleasure, shoving me closer to the edge.

Nicoli straightens, adjusting his angle, and when he thrusts forward again, he hits that sweet spot inside me. Stars burst behind my eyes, and a cry tears from my throat.

“That’s it, Hummingbird,” Nicoli encourages. He keeps the same angle, a perfect rhythm, as he rocks into me. “Come for me. Now.”

At his command, my body gives in. I fall apart around him and tremble as every muscle tightens. Nicoli follows, pushing inside me until he finds his climax. It’s beautiful. Sensual. And so uniquely ours. Something no one can ever take away from us.

We lie together, our bodies intertwined and our hearts racing. Nicoli gently kisses my forehead and lips, conveying his love and dedication in that gesture. I can feel the affection emanating from him.

When he moves to pull out, I wrap my legs around his waist, holding him in place. “Not yet,” I murmur. “Stay with me.”

Nicoli smiles, eyes softening. “Always.”

Chapter Seven

My eyes flutter open as nausea crashes into my chest. A cold sweat breaks out across my face, the back of my neck, and down my back, my heart racing like it's been set on fire. Burying my head in the crook of my arm, I sit up slowly and clutch my mouth. What feels like the world's worst episode of vertigo slams into my head, but I force myself to throw back the covers and leap out of bed. I stumble to the bathroom, flipping on the harsh overhead light as I stagger across the floor toward the toilet. My hands shake as I crash to my knees just in time for a bolt of heat to shoot through me before I retch, my back arching as I heave, every muscle in my stomach contracting painfully.

When the spasms finally subside, I slump against the cool tiled wall, my chest heaving as a rancid taste burns the back of my throat. God, I feel like shit. It's like someone poured a gallon of bile down my throat and now it's poisoning me from the inside.

Pushing myself up on my feet, I grab my toothbrush, smothering it in mint toothpaste, and scrub my mouth and tongue until it feels raw. I try to reach the back of my mouth, but the risk of making myself gag is too big, and the last thing I want is to throw up again.

I rinse and spit, then throw the toothbrush into the trash before pawing with trembling fingers through the cabinet, grabbing a new one. That's when I notice the box of tampons tucked away in the back, and an ice-cold wave of panic crashes over me.

“Shit.” I grab the box, trying to remember when my last period was, but I can’t recall. I count up the days, the weeks, but it’s like my memory won’t go back that far. Did I skip a period?

Oh, my God.

No. No. No.

I stumble back, the box slipping from my hand, and tampons roll across the bathroom floor. I haven’t had my period since...since...

“Jesus Christ, no,” I gasp as dread floods my system. My back hits the wall, and I sink to the cold floor, unable to breathe. How did I miss this? It’s been almost two months. How the fuck did I miss this? It didn’t cross my mind once. Not once did I think about my period or the possibility that I might...*oh, God...be pregnant.*

Nausea rises again, and I launch forward just in time to not vomit on the tiled floor. My thoughts scatter into chaos as I heave and retch, my stomach gripped with painful spasms as it forces more bile up my throat and out my mouth. Everything hurts. Every muscle is pulled taut, my bones aching as if they’re being crushed. My head throbs, threatening to explode, and I just want it to stop. I want everything to stop. I want this nightmare to end and just have my goddamn life back.

The violent projectile vomit turns into dry heaving. There’s nothing left to get rid of, and I finally sit back, sweat beading around my face as I struggle to catch my breath.

Dear God, this can’t be happening. Please tell me this isn’t happening right now.

My gaze falls on a tampon on the floor in the middle of the bathroom like it’s the universe’s version of a goddamn middle finger.

Am I...can I be...surely I can’t be pregnant?

Nicoli.

Nunzio.

Oh, God...

Revulsion rushes over me as memories threaten to engulf me. Memories of *him*. His evil face. His vile touch. His slimy, arrogant fucking voice. My whole body starts to shiver, and the scar he left on my inner thigh burns as if he just sliced it two seconds ago. My mind is bombarded with flashes of his malicious grin as he wipes at the blood, using it as lubricant to fuck me while I'm lying there refusing to fight because I know that's what he wants. He wants me to fight. He gets off on my cries and my screams, and I would rather die than give him what he wants. Even my thoughts run through the memories in present tense, like it's happening right now. Like I'm still trapped in that room and never got saved.

But it's not happening. He's not here. Nicoli did save me.

Breathe, Mirabella. In. Out. In. Out.

"You are mine now, birdie. I will fucking touch you when I want to."

"No one is here to stop me. No one is here to save you from me."

"That's it, birdie. Scream for me."

Tears well up in the corners of my eyes as I desperately try to force the memories away, to lock them in a box in the farthest corner of my mind. With a broken sob, I wrap my arms around my body and tremble until all that's left of me are tears and fear so crippling I can't move from the bathroom floor. If there were ever a moment when giving up was an option for me, it would be now. The thought of him...of his baby...growing inside me, it's too much. I won't be able to live with that. How could I?

I close my eyes, lean my head back, and try to breathe through the panic, trying to focus my mind on Nicoli—his face, his voice, his warmth, our connection that's always managed to pull us together.

Slowly, I stand and make my way to the sink, the hard ceramic edges pressing into my forearms as I splash cold water onto my face in an attempt to ground myself and get control. As the cold filters through my pores, I'm suddenly

frozen, unable to move. It's like the world slowly encircles me, fading in from shadows to darkness as I watch tiny droplets of water drip down the side of the faucet, leaving crooked trails behind them. I'm scared to move. I can't think straight. I can't breathe. Every thought in my head mixes together, and it feels like the walls are closing in on me, so close I can smell the familiar stench of death and despair clinging to the suffocating air.

"You will not lose your shit now," I say to myself, straightening so I can look at my reflection, but it's a stranger staring back at me. Eyes red-rimmed and glassy, hair sticking up in all directions, and skin pale as death. I hardly recognize myself. At that moment, I realize I'm not just scared of being pregnant or having Nunzio's child inside me. I'm scared of what it all means. Of how it will change everything. Of never being free from him.

Forcing my eyes shut, I try to calm the fear pumping through my veins and to stop a scream from ripping out of my throat.

If I'm pregnant, there's a chance that it might be Nicoli's. Of course, there's a chance, and that allows a sliver of hope to seep through the panic like a gentle wave of calm that floods the chaos.

I have to fight. I have to pick myself off this bathroom floor. I have to face this. It's the only way.

"You will not lose your shit now," I repeat. "Not now. You have to face the truth, even if it's fucking terrifying." I wipe at the tears under my eyes, inhaling sharply through my nose, desperately clawing at every last drop of strength. I need answers. And fast. But I have to be smart about this. No one can know, not until I know for sure. I can't let the doctor do a house call; that's the quickest way for alarm bells to sound all around this goddamn place. And if I leave the estate, Nicoli will know by the time I'm out the gates. I can tell Leandra, ask her for help, but there's nothing she can do that Alexius won't find out about.

Fuck. I have to try something. I have to know.

I rush back into the bedroom and grab my phone, hoping like hell I can pull this off. I call the pharmacy and order a delivery of nausea medication and a pregnancy test, instructing them to send it immediately.

I quickly pull on a pair of jeans, slipping on a white blouse and shoes before heading out of the room. Security will search any packages before allowing them through the front gate, and the only way I can stop that from happening is if I'm at the gate in time for the delivery so I can accept the package in person. It'll be less than two minutes before Nicoli finds out about the pregnancy test should security search the contents.

With every step I take, I hope like hell I don't run into anyone on my way out. Luckily, there's not a Del Rossa in sight when I walk through the halls, down the stairs, and out the front door. It's an overcast spring morning with a slight chill in the air, and I'm praying to God that this isn't the universe dishing out some ominous sign that things are about to get much worse.

The cold breeze hits my cheeks, and I wrap my arms tighter around myself as I walk down the driveway toward the gates. It's a long walk, but my mind is too much of a mess to notice. I'm putting one foot in front of the other on autopilot, focused on nothing but the chaos inside my head. There are so many what-ifs it's terrifying. It's like a wave threatening to crash down over me, and I'm not sure I'll be able to survive it.

As I approach the gates, my heart starts racing. The security team is strict and thorough. Any packages coming in or out of this estate must go through them first, but if they see what's inside the package, every Del Rossa in this goddamn city will know.

I try to act casual as I wave at our security guard who looks up from his post with a bored expression before he recognizes me and quickly stands at attention like a soldier. "Mrs. Del Rossa," he greets. "I have strict instructions that you're not allowed to leave the estate."

I muster a smile. "Believe me, no one is more aware that I'm a prisoner here than I am." It's meant to come across as

mild sarcasm, but by the stern look on this guy's face, it failed.

I clear my throat. "I have a package arriving, so I'm just here to sign for it."

"I can sign for it, ma'am. I'll make sure it gets to you safely."

"It's, um..." I search around us, trying my best to hide how nervous I am. "It's kind of private, so I'd prefer to sign for it myself."

A look of discomfort settles on his brow. "Ma'am, we have strict orders to search through every package that gets delivered."

Shit. "I know. But this is really private."

"Those are our instructions, Mrs. Del Rossa."

Seriously? I shift from one leg to the other. "Fine," I huff. "But I'd still prefer to sign for it myself."

"Are you sure? I don't mind bringing it up to the house for you."

"I'm sure," I say, shooting him a half-smile.

"Okay, then." He tips his hat at me, and I hold my breath as I watch him return to his post. The last thing I need is a nosy guard to make this situation worse than it already is.

The minutes crawl by as I pace in front of the gate, biting my thumbnail, my pulse racing and stomach churning. What will I do if the test is positive? I'll have to tell Nicoli, but how would I even start that conversation? *'I'm pregnant. It might be yours, or it can be the man who raped me who's the father, the one you're hunting like he's game.'* No version of that conversation will turn out remotely close to okay.

How would Nicoli react? Would he want me to keep the child? Get rid of it? Would I want to keep it or get rid of it? But what if it's Nicoli's baby, and we end up terminating the pregnancy?

Oh, God. There are so many variables, and the best outcome I could hope for right now is that I'm not pregnant

and my nausea is just some nasty bug going around.

A car turns onto the private driveway, pharmacy logo on its side, and I sag in relief, but it's short-lived when I notice the guard walking up to the gate.

The delivery man steps out of the car clutching a small white bag. "Delivery for Mira Del Rossa."

I snatch the bag from him, muttering a hasty thanks as I dig through its contents. Tampons, check. Nausea meds, check. Pregnancy—

"Ma'am."

My heart leaps to my throat as I pull out the box of tampons, showing it to him. "I told you it was private."

Embarrassment flares across his cheeks, his throat bobbing as he swallows. "Just following orders, ma'am."

"Mira?"

I glance up and see Maximo striding toward me, brows furrowed. "What are you doing out here?"

Panic rises in my chest, and I crumple the bag in my fist, hiding its contents from view. "Oh, I had some nausea meds delivered," I say, aiming for a casual tone and failing miserably. "I haven't been feeling well."

Maximo's gaze sharpens. "You look like hell. Is everything okay?"

"Gee, thanks, brother. That's exactly what a woman likes to hear when she's not feeling great."

"I didn't mean." He sighs. "I'm just concerned."

I inhale deeply. "I'm fine. Just a little nausea. Something I ate. I should, um...I should head back in, take a nap or something."

Before I can move, Maximo steps forward and wraps me in his arms. "I know," he says softly, and I tense for a moment. "I know that you remember."

Marco.

I swallow hard as he places his chin on my head, clutching me tight to his chest. “And I’m sorry we kept it from you.”

Emotion clogs my throat, and I cling to him, allowing my brother’s familiar presence to envelop me. “It’s okay,” I say. “I get it.”

He leans back, his eyes searching my face. “You’re not pissed at me?”

“How can I be pissed at you when I know you were only trying to protect me?”

“I know, but still.”

“How did you...deal with it? You know, the truth about Marco being behind everything?”

Maximo lets go of me and steps back. “I was pissed that I didn’t get to kill him first,” he replies with raw honesty. “I knew our brother wasn’t right in the head, but I never once suspected that he was behind it all.”

“How could you have known? We all thought he was dead.”

“I just—” he places his hands on his hips, staring down at the asphalt “—I knew something was wrong with him. I knew he was sick when I caught him with you that day.” Revulsion snakes around his words. “You were so small, and what he tried to do to you. Jesus.”

“Maximo, don’t.” I step closer and place a hand on his elbow, the leather of his jacket smooth against my palm. “There’s no use torturing yourself over it. It’s in the past and not worth thinking about.” I smile warmly. “I’m not.”

“How do you do it? You’ve been to hell and back. How are you so...strong?”

“Being strong is the only way I know how to be.” I shrug. “I grew up with five boys who didn’t allow me a moment of weakness.” I smile warmly, rubbing my hand up and down his arm. “I have you to thank for my survival skills.” With a wink, I step back, and my brother gives me a half-smile.

“I love you, Mirabella. You know that, right?”

“I love you, too.” The breeze picks up, and I swipe strands of hair behind my ear. “I’m going to go medicate and take a nap. I’ll see you tonight at dinner?”

“Yup. You’ll let me know if you need anything?”

“I will.” On my way past him, I lift on my toes and place a peck on his cheek before continuing up the long driveway. A part of me wanted to tell him, let him know what kind of hell is storming through my insides. But telling someone means I’ll have to say the words out loud, and right now, I’m not sure that’s something I can do.

As I walk back to the mansion, my mind is still reeling with everything that has happened. The closer I get to the house, the heavier the bag becomes in my hands. I know that it’s not just the contents but the burden of having to keep this secret that is weighing me down. I have trouble keeping my feet moving, but there is a dread that keeps me from stopping, so I try to focus on the breeze caressing my face and the sound of leaves rustling in the wind, but my thoughts won’t leave me alone.

I make it to my bedroom and slump onto the edge of the bed, staring at the paper bag on my nightstand. It seems like hours of me just sitting there before finally mustering the courage to open it.

With shaking hands, I spill the contents out on the bed, panic rolling over me in a sickening wave when the pregnancy test falls on the silk sheets. A piece of paper falls out of the bag, and I grab it expecting it to be the receipt. Only, it’s not. It’s a handwritten note, and it sends a sheet of ice slicing through my bones.

“Is it mine?”

Nunzio.

“Jesus,” I gasp, the paper slipping through my fingers as if it can burn my flesh. I’m breathing, but the air doesn’t reach my lungs as I stare at the note in horror. It’s like he’s right here breathing against my neck, his presence squeezing my throat shut, suffocating me.

“No.” A tear slips free, and I’m back with Nunzio again—the smell of his sweat and cologne mixed with liquor. The feel of his hands all over me, his teeth biting at my flesh, his cock spearing into me with a brutal thrust. God, he’s everywhere.

I squeeze my eyes shut and press my palms into them until tears leak from the corners, leaving a stinging in their path down my face. I draw deep breaths, holding them as long as possible so the nausea can pass, but nothing works. Nothing makes the savage thoughts easier to bear.

Realization slams into me like a freight train. Nunzio is watching. Even in hiding, he’s watching. How?

I launch up and pull my phone from my jeans pocket. Jesus Christ, is he...my phone?

“This is not happening,” I mutter to myself as I start to pace, glancing at the devil’s note lying on the bed—the bed I share with my husband. The fear and the panic that tiny piece of paper stirs is like having a ticking time bomb lodged in my gut, about to explode at any moment.

A clammy chill spreads across my skin, my mind spinning with a million thoughts. To think I was worried about Nicoli finding out before I got a chance to do the test, yet Nunzio knew the moment I hung up my phone. It’s like my life has become a sinking bridge of irony, and the more I try to keep it from collapsing, the heavier it gets—the more cracks threaten to bring the entire foundation down in one heap of destruction. Just when things finally seem to return to normal between Nicoli and me, Nunzio manages to fuck it up from the cave he’s hiding in.

Anger replaces fear, white-hot and violent. He’s not close, yet he finds a way to screw with my head. It’s like he’s everywhere, like he’s in my blood and there’s no way I can escape him.

With a snarl, I grab the paper and crumple the note in my fist. The urge to destroy something, anything, is overwhelming, and every emotion slams together in one giant explosion of chaos. I’m panting, my heart pounding when I weave my fingers through my hair, trying to fight the mayhem

threatening to possess me. Not once did it cross my mind that Nunzio would make contact, that he'd be stupid enough.

I let out a bitter laugh that's replaced with a cry of rage as I grab a vase of roses from the side table and hurl it at the wall. It shatters on impact, water and porcelain shards exploding across the room, red roses smashing into chaos around it. A sharp pain slices through the anger and I glance down to find a jagged piece of porcelain embedded in my forearm, blood welling around it.

I just stare at the wound for a second, mesmerized by the crimson droplets sliding down my arm, triggering flashes of my hands covered in blood. Then the sting registers and I grit my teeth against it.

I sink down on the edge of my bed, yanking the porcelain from my arm with a hiss. Blood drips onto the floor, the bright red tears escaping my flesh oddly satisfying. The pain seems to help ground me in the present, chasing away the ghosts that haunt my mind.

The bedroom door is flung open, and Leandra appears with a worried frown. "Are you okay? I heard a commotion—" She sees the bleeding wound on my arm. "Oh, my God, Mira. What happened?"

That's the moment I can no longer keep myself from breaking as I let go of all my strength and allow the fear to consume me.

Leandra's expression softens as she rushes over, kneeling beside me and grabbing a handful of tissues from the side table. She presses it gently against my arm, careful not to hurt me further.

"It's okay," she whispers soothingly. "I'll get the first-aid kit, and we'll get this cleaned up. Okay?"

"It's not okay," I choke out as I shake my head. "Nothing is going to be okay."

"Mira, no," she murmurs. "It'll be okay. I swear."

"No." I let out a shaky breath as the tears flow freely down my face. It's as if a dam has broken inside me, and all the

emotions I've been holding back come crashing out.

I look up and into her eyes, seeing the sadness and worry reflect from her eyes, and I say the only thing I can say.

“I think I'm pregnant.”

Chapter Eight

The dank, dimly lit room reeks of blood and fear. It took me all but five minutes to decide that the first guy Maximo dragged in here didn't know shit, which meant I had no use for him. Hence, his corpse is propped up against the wall, his head hanging eerily to the side with a bullet wound through his chin, up his ugly goddamn face, and out the top of his skull.

Caelian repeatedly flicks the top of his Zippo as he stares at the dead body. "I can officially say that the wall has more brains than this motherfucker." He snickers at his own wise-ass joke.

I turn to face Alexius. "Is he for real?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Hey," Caelian snaps. "One of us has to have a sense of humor around here. Imagine if all of us were pitch-black-hearted assholes like you two."

"Says the one who hunts women for a sport," I bite back.

"Con-sen-sual," he enunciates. "Not that you'll know what it means."

"Can we just get back to killing?" All three of us turn to face Isaia, who's been spectating in the back corner of the room.

Alexius takes a long drag of his cigarette, not caring that some strands of his black hair fall over his eyes. It's been a hot fucking minute since my twin joined one of these torture shows in our pursuit to extract information. But after our

minor altercation that Caelian intercepted to point out that we're both being dicks, I've been including Alexius in my plans, and he's been kind enough *not* to be up my ass about every fucking thing I do.

Maximo hauls my next target and perhaps victim through the doorway by their shirt collar, a snarl of revulsion lacing his features. The man's eyes bulge out of his skull when he sees his friend's corpse, an animalistic rage coursing through him as he unleashes a flurry of kicks and curses. "You bastards! Let me go!"

"Your name is Joel, right? Like the Bible's Joel?"

"Screw you," he seethes, the veins at his temples pulsing with rage.

"That's not a very biblical thing to say," I taunt.

"Let me go."

"Tell me what I want to know, Joel, and I just might."

"Bullshit. You and I both know I'm about to end up like him," he spits out, nodding toward the corpse.

"Then why the fuck are you demanding we let you go if you already know there's no chance in hell we'll do that?"

"Fuckers!"

Maximo slams a fist into his side, and Joel hunches forward as Maximo yanks his hands up above his head and fastens his wrists to the chain dangling from the ceiling.

"Okay," I sigh, pulling a hand through my hair. "Let's see if you'll sing. Tell me where Nunzio is," I growl, my voice gravelly and low, as I walk up close to him. His eyes dart between me and the array of tools laid out on the table behind me, his fate lying among the cold steel instruments.

"Fuck you," he grits out, defiance flickering in his eyes even as his body trembles.

"Wrong answer." My fist connects with his jaw in a swift, brutal motion, pain shooting up my arm as the satisfying crunch echoes through the room. "Let's try that again. Where

is Nunzio?" I snarl, watching blood dribble down his chin from the fresh wound, the chains complaining as he sways back and forth from the blow.

He spits a mouthful of blood before latching his dark brown gaze onto mine. "How many of us have you killed?"

"If by us, you mean Nunzio's bitches, I've lost count."

"Then you can't be very bright, can you?" He smirks, blood staining his teeth. "Because if you were, you'd realize by now that none of us fucking know where he is."

I narrow my eyes, studying him as I would a predator sizing up its prey. "I'm struggling to decide if I should just kill you quickly like I did your friend here or if I should make it last until you beg me to tear out your heart."

"No one knows where he is, man. Do you really think Nunzio is that stupid, telling us all where he's hiding when he knows the goddamn Dark Sovereign is searching for him?"

"It won't be the first time he's done something stupid, the first time being kidnapping my wife," I hiss, grabbing a pair of pliers from the table, the steel cold and weighted in my palm.

He swallows hard, his throat bobbing as his gaze drops from mine to the floor. "I swear, man. I don't know fucking anything."

"Let's see if your fingers have a better memory than your tongue," I taunt, reaching up and grabbing his pinky finger firmly, clamping the pliers around it. The metal bites into his flesh as I twist, and his piercing scream follows the sickening snap of bone. Am I the devil for loving the sound of his choked sobs, finding pleasure in the way his face contorts in agony? Perhaps.

I glance at his severed pinky rolling across the floor and leaving a trail of blood behind it while my darkened soul relishes the broken cries that tear from Joel's throat. A sheen of sweat instantly erupts across his face, covered in lines of pain.

"Talk," I demand when his cries subside, replaced with ragged breaths and gargled noise.

“Fuck...you.” His voice is nothing but whispered agony as tears and snot drip down his chin.

I lean in close, smelling the pain and desperation in his breath. “We both know you’re either going to talk or die, perhaps even both.”

He grits his teeth before reluctantly speaking up again, sweat dripping down his forehead as he does so. “All we know is...it’s just some rumors about his whereabouts, most likely fake because this whole town is abuzz with this shit.”

“What’s the rumors?”

He stares at me, breaths coming out labored.

“I don’t have time for this shit,” I mutter. Without a single goddamn thought, I grab the knife off the table, and with a sweep of my arm, I slice the blade across his cheek, and he hisses as blood gushes from the open wound.

I don’t wait for him to talk, and I barely contain the rage as I grab a handful of salt from a nearby container before slapping it on the open wound on his cheek, reveling in the way he screams out in so much agony, I’m sure his fucking soul just left his body.

“Please! Stop!” he begs, tears streaming down his face as he struggles against his binds.

“Then give me what I want,” I insist, my heart pounding with anticipation. “Tell me where Nunzio is hiding.”

Caelian chuckles. “I told you that salt would come in handy.”

I glare at him with warning before rubbing my palm harder against Joel’s cheek, getting each grain of salt into his open flesh.

Through groans and cries, Joel stutters, “Bria...Briana.”

“Where is Briana?” Caelian asks with a giant question mark on his forehead.

“Not where. Who,” he says as he cringes, pressing his eyes tightly closed as he struggles through the pain. “Rumor is she’s

the one he's staying with. I don't know where. I swear to God."

My gaze shoots to Maximo with a silent demand, and he nods before storming out.

"Good," I say, my voice cold and devoid of emotion. "You can die now." I thrust the knife savagely into his neck, feeling fire race through my veins as a shudder courses through his body. His eyes pop wide open in shock before the life evaporates from him, the chains rattling one last time like a funeral bell before falling silent.

I turn away, my chest heaving as I take a few deep breaths to calm myself. My body aches from the exertion, but there's no time to rest. With each interrogation more brutal than the last, my soul grows darker, but it's a price I'm willing to pay for Mira.

"Finally, we're one step closer," I mutter. "We find Briana, we find him."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Alexius says behind me. "Like Joel said, it's only a rumor."

"It's all we got, brother. How about some positive attitude, hey? If this Briana exists, Maximo will have her before the sun sets tonight, guaranteed." I have all the faith in the world in my brother-in-law's ability to find this woman. Like me, Maximo is fueled by his need to get his hands on Nunzio.

Alexius crosses his arms. "And how are you going to make her talk?"

I light myself a cigarette, inhaling deep, letting the poison reach the farthest corner of my lungs before exhaling and glancing at the dangling corpse. "The same way I made him talk."

As I leave the room, the echoes of their screams linger in the air, a chilling reminder of what I've done and the monster I've become in the name of revenge. But the end is near, and soon Nunzio will know the depths of my wrath.



MIRA

MY HEART IS POUNDING LIKE A WILD ANIMAL IN MY CHEST, and I feel sweat beading on my forehead. I'm pacing the room, agitatedly rubbing my palms together until they burn with friction. Suddenly, the putter of a car engine rumbles through the silence. I look out the window, petrified, as a vehicle turns into the driveway. "He's here," I whisper, feeling bile rising up my throat.

"You need to relax," Leandra says, and I glance at her sitting on the velvet chaise across the room. She offers me a faint smile. "This will be over before you know it."

My eyes dart around the small room, stopping at the various monitors and machines lining every surface. I'm overwhelmed by the sheer amount of medical equipment piled up in every corner.

With a trembling voice, I ask her, "Doesn't it disturb you that your husband has an entire hospital within this one tiny room?"

Leandra smirks before replying, "He was determined to be prepared for everything while I was pregnant. And after the twins were born, he thought it would be wise to keep all of this here."

"Alexius likes to be prepared for any and every scenario, it seems."

"He's...ah." She smiles. "He's cautious."

"You know your husband is going to freak the fuck out if he finds out the doctor is here to see you. Well, me. But the doctor thinks he's coming to see you, which means it won't be long before it reaches Alexius, and he comes charging in here like a—"

“Mira,” Leandra interrupts. “Take a breath. Everything is going to be okay.”

“I just...I need to make sure.”

“Of course you do. And we’ll deal with it no matter what happens or whatever the outcome. Okay?”

My fists clench together with white knuckles, and my fingernails dig sharply into my palms. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve gone over the whole pregnancy thing in my head, driving myself crazy with possibilities of what might happen once the doctor walks in here. “Okay.”

I press my lips together, feeling the nerves and fear claw at my chest. “There’s something else I didn’t tell you.”

“What is it?” Her eyes glimmer with concern.

“Nunzio knows.”

“Knows what?”

I swallow, and it’s like razor blades going down my throat. “Yesterday. There was a note inside the bag with the pregnancy test.”

“A note?”

“Is it mine?” I breathe softly, as if not saying the words too loud would make it less terrifying. “That’s what the note said. ‘Is it mine?’”

“Oh, dear God.” She places a hand in front of her mouth, shock weaved across her expression.

“He knows, Leandra. He knows I ordered the pregnancy test, and the only thing I can think of is that he has my phone tapped or something.”

“Mira, you have to tell Nicoli. You have to tell him now.”

“I know. And I will. I just...I need to do this first.”

“This is dangerous, Mira.”

“I know that. And I swear I will tell Nicoli as soon as we’re done here.”

The door opens, and the doctor walks in, both Leandra and I snapping our attention toward him. It's not the same doctor who treated me after Nicoli found me in the forest, and I wonder if he knows about it all, if all the Dark Sovereign doctors get briefed on whatever happens to whoever in this family.

Knowing the ranks in this house, he greets Leandra first. "Mrs. Del Rossa."

"Hello, Doctor."

He pushes his glasses higher up his nose as he sets down his briefcase. "You think you might be pregnant again?"

Leandra's gaze cuts from him to me and back to him. "Not me, Doctor," she says, and immediately, his attention shifts to me, staring at me, unblinking.

"Oh. The other Mrs. Del Rossa."

Leandra stares at the doctor, her expression tight and unyielding. "Doctor," she begins slowly, emphasizing each word with a measured tone, "this is a delicate matter, and I must insist on your discretion."

A palpable sense of dread settles over his dark brows. "Mrs. Del Rossa, you are well aware of my position regarding your husband and this family."

"I know that you are obliged to tell Alexius everything. All I'm asking is that whatever happens here today, you'll guarantee your silence for at least a few hours. Just while we figure everything out."

"Leandra," I say, but keep my eyes pinned on the doctor. "I've got it from here."

Leandra frowns, but she doesn't question me. That's one of the many things I appreciate about her; she's not pushy like the rest of this family. She respects boundaries and privacy.

She nods lightly before opening the door. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

The doctor's gaze is fixed on me as Leandra shuts the door behind her, the creases on his forehead deepening with worry.

“Nicoli doesn’t know, does he?”

My throat convulses, and my stomach lurches as I take a step forward, fingers twitching and tightening into gnarled knots. “I’m afraid not.”

“May I ask why?”

“Because if I’m pregnant...there’s a chance the baby might not be his.”

Chapter Nine

The door clicks shut behind us, and Alexius whips around to face me. “You good?”

“Yeah.” I glance at my wristwatch. “It’s almost midnight, and we still haven’t heard anything from Maximo.”

“If this Briana woman is out there, no matter what it takes, Maximo will find her.”

“I know. But it’ll be really fucking nice if he can find her faster.”

“Hey. Listen,” he starts, shrugging off his black trench coat. “At the risk of sounding like a cinnamon roll—”

“For the love of God, rather not say it.”

“Go to your wife, man. Get into bed with her and just be with her? Clear your head of everything but her.”

I lean my head back before cranking it from side to side as tension pulls tautly at my muscles. “It’s kind of hard when your wife is the center of everything, you know?”

“I can’t imagine what it’s like for you.” He places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “What I do know is that everything has to come to an end sometime. And so will this. Get some sleep. You need it.”

I nod. “Yeah. Thanks.”

I navigate the darkened hallways, my footsteps echoing off the polished floors, feeling an oppressive silence all around me. We haven’t been home much lately, and it’s like these

halls have lost their familiarity. Like ghosts haunt them now—ghosts of a life we lost decades ago even though it's only been months. Weeks. Days. Minutes. Seconds.

I would give anything to go back in time and appreciate the moments of sheer happiness more—moments that weren't overshadowed by darkness.

Pushing the bedroom door open, I see her there, my wife, lying on her side, the sheets draped over her hourglass curves, her soft breathing evident in the quiet room. The sight of her like this makes my heart ache as if my love for her is poison. She looks so innocent, so vulnerable, and for a moment, everything else fades away. The bodies we left behind tonight and the blood on my hands are inconsequential compared to her. When I'm with her, it's so easy to pretend like I'm a good man, that there isn't a vengeful beast wreaking havoc in my blood.

I close the door behind me and pad softly across the carpeted floor to take a shower and attempt to wash all my sins away before wrapping a towel around my waist and softly walking back into the room.

Mira stirs but doesn't wake as I go to stand at the side of the bed, her breathing even and deep. The moonlight filtering through the curtains cast a soft glow on her golden hair, fanned out on the pillow beneath her, and the sight of her takes my goddamn breath away.

I reach out to brush the hair from her face gently, my fingertips trailing along her cheekbone. God, she's beautiful. She's exquisite. Not even the scar Micah left on her face can take away from her stunning features. I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear, my heart pounding against my ribs. There will never come a day that I feel deserving of her. Every morning when I wake up with her next to me, I have to reach out and touch her to make sure she's real—that she's really there. That she's mine.

Will she ever know how much I love her? Will she ever truly understand the depths of my adoration, my desire, my need for her?

She moves, slipping her arm from beneath the sheets, and I frown when I see the bandage on her arm.

As if sensing my presence, she slowly opens her eyes, blinking sleepily up at me. “Nicoli?” she mumbles, her eyelids fluttering open to reveal those bright green eyes that always seem to pierce right through me. “You’re home. I tried to wait up for you.”

“I know, baby. It’s late.”

“Everything okay?”

“What happened to your arm?”

“Oh. I had an unfortunate run in with a flower vase.”

“You what?”

“It’s late, Nicoli. Come to bed.”

“In a minute.”

She props herself up on her elbow. “Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry, Hummingbird.”

“For what?”

“For underestimating you.” I cup her cheek, lightly brushing it with my thumb. “All I wanted to do was protect you, keep you safe, and I failed.”

“Nicoli—”

“Listen to me, Mira,” I press, leaning over her. “I failed in protecting you, and you survived. On your own, you fucking survived. You didn’t need me.”

She sits up, her eyes fiery with resolve. “I will always need you, Li.”

God, my heart constricts when she calls me that.

“I will always need you. There will never be a time in my life that I don’t.”

“You’re not hearing me, Hummingbird.” I slide my hand to the back of her neck, squeezing lightly. “I’m saying I’ve been wrong all this time. You were a four-year-old girl, and

you survived your family's slaughter. You didn't need me to protect you by lying about Marco. You don't need me to protect you by keeping you away from Myth. And Nunzio, you fucking survived him on your own, Mira. You killed those men because you're strong—my fucking God, you are so strong.” I grab her face with both my palms, leaning my forehead against hers. “And I'm sorry it took me all these years to realize that the only fucking thing you need from me is to love you. Nothing more. Nothing less. I love you, Mirabella Del Rossa. I love you so fucking much it hurts.” I take her hand and place it over my heart. “In here. It hurts in here, but it's an ache I never want to be without.”

A light moan comes from her throat as I capture her lips with mine, kissing her deeply and passionately, our tongues exploring each other's mouths with a hunger that grows stronger. The sound of her delicate whimpers makes me want to ravage her body, taste every inch of it, and explore its contours as if I had never touched anything so beautiful. Her lips are warm satin against mine, and I savor their taste before taking them deeper.

She moves up, making space so I can slide in next to her, and I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her close. The warmth of her body against mine is soothing, and I let out a deep breath, burying my face in the crook of her neck, inhaling her sweet scent that calms the turmoil within me. It's moments like these that make everything else in my life seem worth it. The bloodshed, the violence, the darkness, and the loss of my soul are all worth it as long as I can come home to her in my bed and in my arms. I would spend an eternity in hell if it means I get a single lifetime with her.

My hands travel down Mira's body, tracing the curves of her hips and thighs. The silk of her nightgown glides over my palms like warm water against my skin, and she gasps as I grip her waist, pulling her close to me so that our bodies press together with a perfect fit. Her heat emanates through the fabric, coaxing a primal desire within me that I can't contain—that I don't want to contain. I feel her heart pounding against my chest in time with mine, like two drums beating in unison,

our breaths mingling in the space between us while our lips meet with an urgency that takes over all thought.

“I want to make love to you,” I murmur, and her lips pull into a smile against mine.

“Are you asking?”

“Fuck, no.” I smirk and slide a hand over her hip, taking her panties as I pull them down her legs. My need for her intensifies, and I guide her leg over my waist, spreading her thighs to make room for my body as I move her on her back and slip between her legs. I kiss her lips like it would mean death if I don’t, and I groan softly as she wraps herself around me, and we both hiss at the contact of our warm bodies. Our breaths come out in ragged pants, my cock nudging at her wet entrance.

I break the kiss to look down at her, brushing a fingertip along the scar on her face. “You’re beautiful,” I murmur, and she licks her lips, those beautiful irises staring straight through my dark soul. My body, my heart, my mind, everything is in awe of her—this gorgeous fucking creature I get to call mine.

I push forward, shifting the angle until just the head of my cock is inside her. Her heat feels exquisite, like magma pouring through my veins, and while I stare down at her, drinking in her perfect features, watching her mouth form the perfect O as I sink into her deeper, I know that my life flows through her veins. My heart beats in her chest. And my soul is no longer mine. It’s hers.

“I love you, Mira,” I rasp as I slowly push inside her until I fill her completely. “You are my life,” I say as I ease out of her. “I would give up my last goddamn breath for you, Hummingbird.” With a single thrust, I’m buried deeply in her again, her fingernails digging into my shoulders, the sharp ache spurring me on.

“God, you feel incredible,” she moans, her voice strained with desire, and I’m overwhelmed by the thought of owning her ecstasy—knowing her body longs for me and me alone.

Her eyes flutter shut as I ease out before sinking my slickened cock back into her, repeatedly, taking my time, feeling her pussy walls clamp down on my cock. Each slow stroke brings a rush of sensation, driving me wild with want. The gentle rocking of the bed, the grunts I make while fighting for control, and her little noises that say she's enjoying this as much as I am all make up a symphony of ecstasy. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, leaving a sting laced across my flesh while the heat builds between us until I'm sure we'll both burn to ash.

"Please," Mira begs, her voice rough with pleasure even as I continue to rock into her leisurely.

"Not yet," I whisper. My gaze is etched on her face as I gently sweep a strand of blonde hair to the side—her pussy getting slicker with every stroke of my cock. "I don't want this to be over yet."

I claim her mouth, committing her sweet taste to memory, her lips burning mine with a perfect heat. This woman is like cocaine to my addiction, and I want to spend the rest of my life high on her. There is nothing else I need more than her. She's my fucking religion.

The room sings with the sounds of our breathless whispers and the rhythmic cadence of our bodies moving together. It's a symphony of passion, a testament to the raw, primal connection that exists between us—something I will cherish for the rest of my life.

Her pussy starts to throb around me, and I know she's close when she shuts her eyes, arching her back, pressing her breasts into my chest. I lean down and capture a nipple in my mouth, gently sucking, licking, teasing the hard bud with the tip of my tongue, pressing a palm against her hip as I continue to move in and out of her. I shift my leg upward, my thigh pressing against her ass, needing to be deeper inside her, wanting her to feel all of me.

"Nicoli," she pants. "Please."

My momentum increases, as does her breathing, and her body quivers beneath mine.

“Come with me,” I whisper. “Come with me, baby girl.” With each stroke, we spiral higher, and she holds on tight to my shoulders while she throws back her head and lets out a loud moan of pleasure.

“Look at me, Mira,” I command, my gaze never leaving hers. “Let me see those beautiful eyes when you come.”

At my words, her eyes snap open, locking on to mine, her body quivering, her cheeks flushed and fucking beautiful. A cry escapes her lips as she succumbs to the wave of ecstasy crashing over her, and it’s enough to push me over the edge with her.

We both gasp and moan as our climax washes over us, and I’m lost in her, my rhythmic thrusts growing erratic as nothing else matters but the pleasure that explodes between us. If magic existed, this would be it. This moment. Us.

I collapse onto her, my heart thundering against hers as we drown in rapture. We’re both breathless while my cock still twitches deep inside her, and I shudder as the last aftershocks continue to ripple. She quivers beneath me as I slowly slip out, our cum warm and wet between our slippery bodies.

As our breathing gradually returns to normal, I pull Mira close, enfolding her in my arms. The intensity of what we’ve shared lingers between us, a reminder of the undeniable connection that binds us together. She looks up at me, her irises pools of emotion, and I kiss her tenderly, wishing I could bottle this moment and keep it forever. I don’t want it to end.

My arms wrap around her protectively as I press a gentle kiss to the top of her head. “I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you, too, Li.”

A single tear breaks free from her lashes and slides down the side of her face, breaking against her cheek. I watch it fall as if in slow motion and then catch it with my thumb. Her expression changes from rapture to sadness.

“Mira, what’s wrong?”

She pauses for a moment, her eyes clouded with emotion, the sight of it clawing a hole inside my gut. She looks past me,

up at the ceiling, her bottom lip trembling.

“Mira, baby.” I take her chin and force her to look at me.
“What’s wrong?”

Her rosy lips pull in a thin line before she murmurs,
“There’s something we need to talk about.”

Chapter Ten

The air in this room is like a wall of solidified oppression. Alexius' scowl can crack through titanium while Isaia's and Caelian's stares are so intense it's practically burrowed inside my skull. I know this meeting isn't going to end well. How could it? I haven't even said what I needed to say, and already the tension is so thick, I'm choking on it.

Maximo leans against the wall with his arms crossed firmly, the crease on his forehead clearly indicating just how pissed off he is to be here. He was on this Briana woman's heels when I called this meeting, insisting he be present. And the mere fact that I expected him to put his manhunt on pause for this should be enough for him to know that I'm about to pull the rug right from under them all. Everyone knows that for me to call a meeting means either the world is about to end or the devil's about to move in.

Caelian's eyes narrow, his fingers drumming an impatient beat against the arm of his chair. "Well?"

I clench my jaw, my heart chipping away at my ribs like a jackhammer. For the first time in my entire goddamn life, I don't have words. I have no idea how I'm supposed to say this out loud and not kill something. But I have no choice. This has to be done.

"Mira's pregnant." My gaze darts all around the room except at their faces. Usually I'm a fan of 'oh-fuck' expressions, but today? Not so much.

Silence lingers in the room as my words sink in, and it's as excruciating as a kick to the balls.

"Are you shitting me right now?" Isaia glares at me. "That's it? You called all of us here, insisted on us being in this goddamn room within the hour just to share the news that your wife is pregnant?"

Alexius leans back in his chair, and I'm sure I hear him let out a sigh of relief. "I think what our youngest brother here is trying to say is that, I mean...congratu-fucking-lations, but we all sat here thinking you were about to tell us that hell's asshole just opened up in our goddamn living room."

"Believe me," I mutter. "I wish that were the case." I shoot Maximo a look, and his eyebrows slant inward.

Caelian places his arms on the table, squaring his shoulders. "What the fuck is going on, man?"

I walk over to the minibar and pour myself a shot of bourbon, throwing it back, appreciating the sting, even if only for a second. I'm starting to think a little kick to the nuts might be less painful. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'll fucking volunteer if it means avoiding this altogether. This isn't something I ever dreamed I'd have to do, words I never thought would come out of my mouth. It's possibly one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, telling my brothers of how this nightmare just turned into a goddamn horror show.

When I turn around to face them, my gaze finds Alexius'. "There's a..." I swallow hard, shutting my eyes for a moment as the words burn my tongue.

"Jesus, Nicoli." Caelian smirks. "You look like you're about to tell your grandparents you just smoked pot in their bathroom and fucked the sink."

"Seriously, Caelian," Alexius scolds. "I swear to God, sometimes I struggle to believe we're blood-related."

"Hey, it's not my fault all you got blessed with are blue eyes, plump lips, a sharp jawline, and high cheekbones with zero fucking personality."

Isaia rolls his eyes. "Can you take nothing seriously?"

“Not when we get summoned like Armageddon’s about to go down, only to be told that our brother here knows how to fuck a baby into a goddamn womb.” Caelian glowers at me. “Well done, brother. It seems like you can aim after all.”

“There’s a chance Nunzio might be the father.”

And just like that, I drop the motherfucking bomb on all of them, and I pin Caelian with a pointed stare. “Nunzio might just be the one with the perfect aim, brother. Now if you can add sarcasm to that and make it even remotely funny, I’ll kiss your fucking ass right here, right now.”

The room falls silent, and I continue to stare at Caelian’s stunned expression, shock rippling through the air. It’s toxic, suffocating, and I have to clench my jaw as I gather the strength to say it again.

“My wife is pregnant, and there’s a chance that Nunzio might be the father.”

As the words leave my mouth, my control breaks, and I launch my glass across the room. Shards of glass explode, shattering on impact, mirroring the chaos that’s been warring inside me ever since the conversation Mira and I had in the middle of the goddam night.

All levity is drained from my brothers’ faces and the room is silent for several moments as they struggle to process this information.

“Please say that again,” Alexius says in disbelief.

I bite my bottom lip, snarling as my insides crawl with rage. “My wife might be carrying Nunzio Ferrero’s baby, and not mine.”

“How the fuck is that possible?” Caelian mutters.

“He raped her, Caelian,” I sneer. “Repeatedly. And now she’s pregnant, and we have no idea whether it’s his or mine.”

Isaia’s confusion is evident in his furrowed brow and how he awkwardly rubs the back of his neck. “But isn’t there some way to figure it out? Like if she counts her...umm...cycles or something?”

“The doctor says she’s almost eight weeks along, which matches the timeline.” My throat burns as if laced with acid, burning its way through my insides.

“Jesus Christ,” Alexius curses. “There really might be a chance this baby is his?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Motherfucker!” He slams his fist into the table, but no one flinches. Everyone is too wrapped up in the magnitude of this ginormous fuck-up to notice if a goddamn bomb went off in the goddamn hallway.

Maximo remains silent on the other side of the room. He hasn’t moved an inch since I shared the news, and I can only imagine the chaos raging through his thoughts.

“Just when we think all this can’t get more fucked up.” Isaia falls back in his seat. “How is she?”

“That’s a stupid fucking question, you asshole. How the fuck do you think she is?” I pull out a cigarette, light it, and inhale as deep as my lungs allow me, reminding myself that my brothers aren’t the enemies here. I release the lungful of smoke across the room, watching as the bitter-tasting cloud dissipates. “She’s a fucking mess.”

“Understandably so.” Alexius gets up and goes to pour himself a glass of bourbon.

“Pour me one of those, would you?” Caelian says before he, too, lights himself a cigarette. “Jesus Christ. This is insane.”

“But there’s still a chance it could be yours?” Alexius retakes his seat. “You can still be the father?”

I nod as I stub out the cigarette in the large glass ashtray on the table. “There is a fifty-fifty chance, yes.”

“There’s tests that can be done to determine this?”

“There’s a non-invasive prenatal paternity test they can do.”

“Great,” Caelian exclaims. “Then let’s do that. Get that shit done asap because God knows there is no way any of us will survive the fuckton of pressure and tension that will descend on this house for nine fucking months.”

“Seven.”

“Seven fucking months.”

“I know you probably know this,” Alexius starts. “But this has the potential to change everything, you know? Between our family and the Ferreros.”

I lift a brow. “Believe me. I’m well aware.”

“Pardon my motherfucking ignorance, but explain to me how this will change anything with those assholes.” Caelian seethes.

“If this baby is...*not* Nicoli’s,” Alexius says, meeting my gaze, “some will see it as a union of our families.”

“You’re fucking kidding me, right?” Caelian’s eyes go wide. “Tell me you’re shitting me. That fucker raped our sister-in-law, and if she’s pregnant with his kid some will see it as a what? An alliance?”

“Some, yes.” Alexius rolls his shoulders. “Especially those who will stand to gain from it.”

“Only the Ferreros stand to gain anything from this shit-show.”

“Exactly,” I say, leaning back against the wall. “They will influence their allies, put the pressure on us to declare a ceasefire if a child is involved.”

Caelian leaps from his seat, his forehead creased with confusion. “So, you’re telling me, if this baby is Nunzio’s, we’ll be forced into a corner, not allowed to retaliate?”

“Yeah.” I rough a palm through my hair, pressing my fingers into my neck, squeezing. “It’ll come down to two choices. Call a ceasefire, lay down our guns like a bunch of pussies, or we see this through, bury that motherfucker, but risk losing the respect of others and making new enemies.”

“In other words, we’re fucked?”

The look Alexius gives him confirms it.

Caelian throws his hands in the air. “Well, in that case, I say we kill this cocksucker and every other stupid cunt who thinks they have a horse’s ass of a chance to take us on and live.”

“Unless there’s zero chance Nunzio is the father.” Everyone’s gaze snaps to Isaia. “No one has to know that there’s a chance Nunzio might be the father. If we don’t say anything, how would they know?”

Caelian snaps his fingers. “That’s right. If this baby is Nunzio’s, no one has to fucking know, and we still get to kill his ass.”

Concrete fills my gut, ice stacking up my spine. Alexius notices.

“What are you not telling us, Nicoli?”

I suck air through my teeth, pulling my lips in a thin line. “He already knows.”

“What? Who?”

“Nunzio.”

Caelian frowns. “Please explain that like I’m a two-year old.”

“Nunzio,” I repeat. “He already knows that there’s a chance she might be pregnant.”

“How?”

“Mira had a pregnancy test delivered to the house, and there was a note in the bag.”

Caelian shrugs. “What note? Jesus, Nicoli, talk faster.”

“A note!” I snap. “A fucking note, okay. It said ‘is it mine.’” I’m two breaths away from slamming my fist into the wall, every drop of blood in my veins charged with rage.

Alexius curses while Caelian sits back down, a faraway look on his face. “How does this fucker continue to be one

step ahead of us?”

“I’ve been asking myself that for the last two months,” I mutter.

“I hate to be the one to ask this.” Isaia rubs his temples. “But if the worst happens here and it is his, are you keeping it? You know...the baby?”

Bile pushes up my throat. “That, um...” I hold my breath. “That will be for Mira to decide.”

Maximo’s eyes almost pop out of their sockets. “You’ll let her keep it if it’s not yours?”

“I don’t *let* her do anything,” I grit out. “As much as I wish I could control my wife, I don’t. And that *it* you’re referring to is my wife’s baby, irrespective of who the goddamn father is.”

Maximo takes a threatening step toward me, his expression hard. “Nicoli, I love you like a brother. But think about this.”

“I’ve done nothing but think about this since she told me.”

“Then you know, if this baby is his, and Mira chooses to keep it, she would be reminded every day of what that son of a bitch did to her. *You* will be reminded of it every goddamn day.”

My pulse starts to go apeshit, the ice in my spine splintering and shattering, piercing my insides like poisoned arrows.

“What if that child grows up to look just like its psychopath dad, huh?”

“Maximo,” Alexius warns, but he doesn’t even flinch or attempt to back down.

I pull my palm down my face. “Trust me when I say I’ve gone through every fucking scenario a thousand times over.”

“Then you fucking know as well as I do that if this baby isn’t yours, Mirabella can’t keep it.”

“It’s not up to me.”

“Like fuck it isn’t!” His voice thunders through the room, his anger slamming into the walls with a force that vibrates against every bone in my body. His eyes are two dark storms hungry to wreak havoc on everything they can rip apart. “She can’t keep this baby!”

“Nicoli is right,” Alexius says coldly, sternly. “It’s not up to him, or any of us, for that matter. Whatever the outcome, the decision is hers.”

“Bullshit!” Maximo seethes. “Bull-fucking-shit. Are you going to sit there and tell me that if this baby is Nunzio’s you’d want that kid around this house? That you won’t once look at that boy and think of the blood that runs through his veins or listen to that girl laugh and hear her dad’s evil laughter?”

Alexius shakes his head. “It’s not up to us.”

“And what about the two families?” Maximo snarls. “Think about that for a second. Like you said, this baby will mean a forced alliance between the Del Rossa and Ferrero families. It will mean that that fucker gets to walk around freely knowing he can’t be touched for doing what he did to my sister. What, are we going to play house with those fuckers, drink a beer and have a barbecue every second Sunday? Over my dead goddamn body.”

All I can do is stand there and watch, witness Maximo lose his shit. It’s warranted. Everything this man has said makes sense. I have had a thousand similar thoughts, thinking of the consequences—thinking of how it would affect each and every one of us if it were true. But no matter how angry the thought makes me, nothing would be able to change it. Nothing.

“Maximo,” I say, trying to remain calm, “it is what it is, man.”

Maximo storms toward me, and I stand my ground, not blinking when he shoves his face so close to mine that I can feel the fire in his breath. “If this baby is his, you will man the fuck up and you will take control of the situation.”

“And what situation is that?” Mira’s voice is like a punch to the gut, and I close my eyes, exhaling as I prepare myself for the mother of all fuck-ups to go down.

Maximo’s nostrils flare as he turns to look at his sister while she stands in the door. No one noticed her come in; everyone too wrapped up in the chaos.

Maximo squares his shoulders, anger seeping from his pores. “If this baby isn’t your husband’s, you can’t keep it.”

“If this baby isn’t Nicoli’s, it’s a decision we’ll make together. Just the two of us.”

“You’ll seriously consider keeping it even if it’s the child of the man who raped you?”

Mira walks up to stand next to me and laces her fingers with mine, pressing herself tight against my side. “It’ll be up to Nicoli and me to decide. It has nothing to do with you, Maximo.” She glances at my brothers. “It has nothing to do with any of you.”

“Mira,” I warn softly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why not? Since you’re all here discussing me and this pregnancy, I think this is exactly where I have to be.”

I turn my back on my brothers, leaning close to her, my lips almost touching her ear. “I told you I’ll take care of this.”

“And I told you I want to be involved in this.”

“That’s not an option.”

“When it comes to me and this baby, it’s the only option, Nicoli.”

“Mira. I’m asking you to leave this to me. To let me handle it. Please.”

She purses her cherry-red lips, her eyes conveying the depth of her determination. “I told you, I want to be a part of this.”

“Goddammit, woman,” I grit out softly.

“A part of what?” Maximo demands, his presence a force that takes up all the oxygen in the room.

Mira lets go of my hand and moves to stand in front of her brother, and I’m trying my best not to pick her up and throw her over my shoulder while hauling her sexy as fuck ass out of here. “I want to be a part of your plan to find Nunzio.”

Maximo scoffs. “That’s not happening, Mira.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is Dark Sovereign business,” Alexius chimes in, and she practically decapitates him when she cuts her glare in his direction.

“Dark Sovereign business? Tell me, Alexius, how finding the man who tortured and raped me—not you, me—is Dark Sovereign’s business and not mine?”

He sighs. “Mirabella—”

“Tell me how catching the man who used me as bait for some sick fuckers to hunt is more Dark Sovereign business than it is mine?”

“Okay.” Caelian rises to his feet. “Everyone just calm the fuck down.”

Isaia leans his head back. “Caelian, shut the fuck up, man.”

“You shut the hell up.”

“I swear to God, I will kick your ass so hard you’ll think it’s fucking Tuesday.”

“It is Tuesday, you dumb fuck!”

Glass shatters in an ear-piercing explosion that silences everyone instantly, and Mira stands at the edge of the table, her chest rising and falling as she stares at the broken ashtray she just threw across the room.

“You can all bicker and fight and threaten all you want, but it won’t change the fact that this baby is mine. No matter who the father is, the baby is still mine. And in the end, I will be the one who makes any and all decisions when it comes to this matter. Not you.”

Alexius gets to his feet, his authority reaching every corner of the room. “We have a way of doing things.”

“I know the rules of this world, Alexius. Better than you think. I know that if he’s the father it will force us into some twisted, fucked-up alliance with that family. That he’ll be untouchable and never pay for what he’s done.”

Alexius shoots me a warning look, a silent way of telling me to get a grip on my wife, but clearly, my brother has forgotten that there is no getting control over Mirabella.

“I also know the Dark Sovereign isn’t what it is today without breaking a few rules,” she continues. “This family does what needs to be done even if it means bending the rules to our benefit.”

Alexius narrow his eyes. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that a paternity test will be done...*after* Nunzio is dead.”

Alexius stares at her for a moment, then slowly moves his gaze toward me as realization dawns on him. “If we find out he’s the father after we’ve killed him, there’s no alliance.”

I nod.

“There’s no risk of losing the respect of others,” he continues. “And zero risk of potential new enemies because of it.”

“Brilliant!” Caelian exclaims with a huge smile on his face. “That’s fucking brilliant.”

“It’s risky,” Isaia chimes in. “Especially since he knows she’s pregnant.”

I shake my head. “It only means we have to find him faster.”

“Fuck, yeah,” Caelian exclaims. “And plant some lead in his skull right after we pull his spine out his ass.”

“You’re not killing him.” Mira’s voice rings through the room, stunning everyone speechless.

Alexius leans with his hands on the table. “Excuse me? You just said—”

“I know what I said.” She stalks closer to him, her jaw firmly set, her eyes haunting, cold and fucking beautiful. “You’re not killing him.”

“Mirabella.” I stomp closer, placing a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugs me off while keeping her gaze etched on Alexius’.

“Up until now, all of you have controlled this entire situation. Refused to include me. Kept me hostage in this house. But that stops today.”

My twin brother sighs, and I know he’s at the end of his rope with her. “We have rules. We have a code. We can’t let him live, especially if this baby turns out to be his.”

“And I’m pretty sure that somewhere in your goddamn rule book, it says that you will not harm the father or mother of a family member’s child. Not without that family member’s permission. And while we can’t be sure whose baby I’m carrying, I’m that person.” She leans closer, her green eyes gleaming. “And I’m telling you now...you will not hurt him, Alexius.” She looks at all of us. “None of you will.”

As she speaks, I silently marvel at the strength my wife possesses. How, after everything she’s been through, she can still confront the darkness of her past head-on and use it to challenge others. Her confidence is fucking exquisite, and my heart swells with pride.

“That fucker needs to die, Mirabella,” Isaia says as if Nunzio’s death is some biblical prophecy.

“And he will,” she responds with a venomous tenor in her voice.

Caelian rubs his eyes with his palms. “I’m so confused.”

“Nunzio will die,” Mira continues. “But none of you assholes will get to kill him.”

A deafening silence drapes over the room, and the moment serves to highlight the exquisite resilience and strength my

wife wears like a motherfucking crown.

Her gaze settles on mine. “You won’t kill him...because I will.”

Chapter Eleven

The garden is starkly beautiful but in an unsettling way. The sun's golden rays penetrate the flower beds with a sinister yellow hue, and the chirping birds sound like mocking laughter as if they know what monsters hell is about to unleash. Even the rustling of leaves carries ominous whispers in the breeze, an eerie sense of dread as if something dark lurks beneath the beauty.

I couldn't sleep last night, and neither could Nicoli, although he pretended to. But I knew he wasn't. There was no steady rhythm to his breathing, stilted and erratic, tension rolling off his body like a wave of heat. It was the longest goddamn night, and I was secretly thankful when dawn started to creep up on the horizon. The night felt like it would never end. And this morning at the breakfast table, the atmosphere was suffocating. Every breath felt like a struggle with an uncomfortable silence that thickened the air. There was no banter between the brothers, no jokes or cussing. It was just... silence. I was the cause of it. I could see it in the way everyone would sneak glances my way, their expressions relaying their discomfort. Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore, so I just got up and walked out. And now here I am, outside on the porch, trying desperately to catch my breath and find some solace in this abyss of darkness that has become my life.

"Here you are." Nicoli walks out on the deck. "The pharmacy just delivered this."

I glance at the paper bag. "Pre-natals?"

He nods, and I arch a brow at him in silent question, and he lightly shakes his head.

My throat tightens as I force out the word, “Thanks,” my eyes glued to him. His face is a battlefield of emotions, courage and despair waging an epic war. I can’t imagine how hard this has to be for him, and I wish so much that this wasn’t something I had to expect of him.

I wrap my fingers firmly around his, silently pleading for some kind of hope. His azure gaze pierces me to the core, and for a moment, his face softens. It’s a small consolation, but it’s something.

“Promise me this won’t take away everything we have,” I say softly.

He grips my hand tightly, a promise sealed within the warmth of his skin. His thumb brushes soothingly on the back of my hand. “We’ll make it through this, I swear.”

Tears well up in my eyes, and I can hardly breathe as I stand there, our fingers intertwined. The emotions that course through me are like a hurricane, pushing me over the edge until I think I can’t take it anymore.

As if he could feel the storm in me, he pulls me close and wraps his arms tightly around me, and all I can do is bury my face against his chest, clenching my jaw to stop myself from sobbing. His cologne lingers in my nose as I cling to him, desperately willing myself to find a shred of hope that all this will be worth it in the end.

“It’s gonna be okay, Hummingbird,” he whispers, breathing lightly against my hair, rubbing circles on my back. “All this is going to end soon.”

“It has to,” I murmur. “I can’t take it that they look at me differently now.”

“Who?”

“Your brothers. My brother.”

Nicoli leans back, brushing strands of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. “They’re concerned.”

“I know they are.”

“Hey.” He catches my chin between his fingers, lifting my face to his. “You and I, we’re in this together. We are going to see this through, and we’re going to come out stronger.” He presses his lips gently against mine, and I close my eyes, letting myself be consumed by the love between us. At that moment, nothing else exists except for Nicoli’s touch and the overwhelming emotions he brings out in me. It’s all I have—*he’s* all I have and all I’ll ever want. If my need for blood ruins this and takes him from me, I will never forgive myself.

I wrap my arms around him tightly, deepening our kiss and pouring all my fears and hopes into it. I want to believe we can make it through this together, but a part of me is terrified. What if everything falls apart? What if I’m not as strong as I think I am? What if ending this war with Nunzio costs me everything?

Nicoli pulls away slightly, resting his forehead against mine as he breathes heavily. “I promise you that no matter what happens, no one will ever come between us.”

“I hope so.”

“Trust me,” he murmurs against the corner of my lips before kissing them again briefly. “I let you down once. I won’t do it again.”

“You have never let me down.” My heart flutters with renewed hope. “And I trust you,” I say, and he kisses me once more, his lips warm and familiar, anchoring me in the present and making the fear and doubts recede. Slowly, we pull away from each other, and Nicoli takes my hand again, leading me back into the house.

As we pass the foyer, one of the staff members is placing a glass vase with white gardenias on the side table. “Mrs. Del Rossa, these just came for you.”

“Thank you,” I say, then glance at Nicoli. “Is this you?”

“No.” It’s the tone of his voice that spurs a violent shiver down my spine. I lift the card attached to the vase, and when I

see the name written on the front, my stomach drops to the soles of my feet.

'Birdie...'

The card slips through my fingers, a sheet of ice running through my veins. I take an instinctive step back from the flowers like they might ignite into a violent explosion at any moment. Nicoli swipes the envelope off the floor with a vicious snarl, cursing as he rips open the card. His face contorts with rage as he reads it, and my whole body trembles with a sickening anticipation that echoes off my bones.

“Motherfucker!” Nicoli drops the card on the table, and I force myself to glance at the note, each word written in elegant script, the letters piercing me like shards of glass.

'What a beautiful mother you'll be.'

Dark waves of dread crash over me as if an unseen hand ripped away my courage and replaced it with a fear so intense it twists its way into my chest, clawing at my lungs.

Nicoli snatches his phone with a trembling hand, and his voice is sharp and desperate as he yells out orders to the security team. At the same time, an invisible force wraps itself around me, squeezing my throat until I can barely draw a single breath. The rest of the world disappears around me, fading away like smoke in the air until all that remains are the flowers in front of me and Nunzio's voice ringing clear in my ear as he calls me Birdie over and over again. It's like a mantra, each syllable a vise tightening its grip around my spine.

But then Nicoli is in front of me, his hands cupping my face and forcing me to look into his eyes. “Mira,” he says firmly. “Are you okay?”

Inhaling a deep breath, I can feel the air slowly filling my lungs, Nicoli's touch grounding me and his voice breaking through every other sound around us. I bite down hard on my lip as I nod, barely managing to keep tears from spilling down my face.

He leans in closer, brushing his thumb along my cheek. “We got this, Hummingbird. Okay? We got this.”

His eyes pierce mine like daggers, seeking out any shred of weakness or fear, and I steel myself against his probing gaze. My heart pounds furiously in my chest, but I force myself to take a deep breath and look him in the eye, unwilling to let him see that I’m afraid. The last thing I want is for my husband to think I’m not strong enough to see this through.

I refuse to be weak.

“Really. I’m fine,” I reassure him, stepping back and glancing around him at the flowers. “White gardenias,” I murmur. “A symbol of secret love.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nicoli murmurs. “This fucker and his goddamn mindfucks.”

Maximo bursts through the front door, gripping the security guard by his collar with a rage-fueled strength. His eyes blaze with anger as he snarls through gritted teeth, “He didn’t check the note!” Maximo shoves the guard with such force that he stumbles forward and falls face-first onto the floor. He bellows in fury, “You were supposed to check everything that gets delivered here! Every-motherfucking-thing!”

“I thought it was Mr. Del Rossa.” The guard gets back up on his feet. “I thought it was him who sent her the flowers.”

“What the fuck made you think it was Nicoli?”

“The name on the card. Birdie.” He shrugs. “That’s what he calls her.”

Nicoli rakes his fingers across his face in frustration. “Not Birdie, you dumb fuck. Hummingbird. I call my wife Hummingbird.”

Maximo is furious, his face twisted into a scowl of rage. The palpable anger radiates off him in waves, his muscles rippled with tension. I know what’s coming next; my brother’s going to make an example out of this guard so no one will ever forget the consequences of neglecting their duties. And it’s going to be a hundred times worse because of the rage he’s

been silently carrying around since I made it clear that this war with Nunzio will be handled my way.

Before Maximo can take a step forward, I place myself between him and the guard. “Beating the shit out of him won’t change anything.”

“It’ll make me feel better.”

“Will it?” I challenge. “I know we’re all on edge around here, and these flowers are like a goddamn bomb right now. But this is exactly what Nunzio wants. He’s fucking with our heads. He wants me to be scared. He wants you and Nicoli to get angry and lose your shit, why? Because people make mistakes when they’re not in control.”

Maximo cocks his head, considering my words as he glares at the guard. His fists are still clenched tightly at his sides when Nicoli grabs the guard behind his neck and drags him to the front door. “You’re fired. And consider me not having him kill you to be your severance pay.”

He slams the door shut and pulls out his cigarettes before lighting one and angrily pacing with it stuck between his lips. I can only imagine how close he is to exploding, wanting to go on a goddamn rampage through the city right now.

Leandra appears at the top of stairs. “You know your mom doesn’t like it when you smoke in the house.”

Nicoli glances up at her, taking the cigarette from his mouth and exhaling a plume of smoke. “Yeah, well...she’s not here.”

“But your wife is,” she says as she starts to descend the stairs. “And she happens to be pregnant, too. So, I’d appreciate it if all you could stop smoking around her.”

Nicoli glances at me, and I can see it’s only dawned on him. “Fuck,” he mutters, opens the door, and stomps to the driveway, stubbing the cigarette with his heel into the asphalt before coming back inside. “Happy?”

Leandra smiles. “Very.”

“Get a trail on whoever got these flowers delivered,” he orders Maximo.

“Already on it.”

“Good.”

“He’s going to slip up,” I say simply. “It’s only a matter of time.”

Maximo straightens in front of me. “How can you be so sure?”

“That psychopath thinks I might be pregnant with his baby. I can assure you, even with a fifty-fifty chance, that son of a bitch will risk coming up for air just to find out I’m carrying the next Ferrero heir.”

Chapter Twelve

The night is darker than usual. Or maybe it's just my psyche reflecting some pitch-black ominous shit into the world. Even the stars seem like evil motherfuckers sitting against the darkness, waiting to spit fire and watch us burn.

I think about Mirabella and what went down when she interrupted an official Dark Sovereign meeting by clicking her heels across the floor, sashaying that hourglass figure of hers in there like it was her playground, and the rest of us had to ask her permission to play.

Did it piss me off? Yes.

Did I want to haul her ass out of there? Yes.

Did it turn me the fuck on seeing my wife act like she owned the world, taking on five grown-ass men? Fuck, yes.

A hard cock is probably not the most ideal reaction I should have had toward that entire scenario, but what can I say? My wife's strength and fearlessness is a potent aphrodisiac for me that shoots straight to my cock.

But then I saw the way she froze this morning after Nunzio's flowers arrived, and I wanted to set the world on fire for her, slay her demons and eliminate all her fears. I want to be strong for her so she doesn't have to be, but that's not what she needs. It took me so long to realize she doesn't need a knight in shining armor to fight her battles for her. She needs a man to love her, and a beast to fuck her. Even after what she went through, she still trusts me to be that man, to be that beast for her. God, she's so much mine, it's ridiculous.

I'm leaning against a tree, smoking a cigarette, watching the embers flicker in the darkness when Maximo's truck pulls up. I suspect he's still mad at me—probably at the entire fucking world. I went into that meeting expecting everyone's worst reactions, but I didn't expect Maximo to lose his shit the way he did. I knew he'd be upset. I just didn't anticipate to what degree. We're both strong-willed men passionate about protecting those we love, and we've kicked each other's asses numerous times. The last time being me using his face as a punching bag after my wife got kidnapped.

I was two hundred percent sure it would end with him punching me in the face. And I would have let him. I wouldn't have fought back because I understand. I get it. If Mira had to have Nunzio's child and we had to raise a Ferrero kid in this house, it would be the worst test life could ever put any of us through. He's angry and confused, but unfortunately, I can do nothing to change that. Not now. It has to be this way.

From a distance, I can see the tension in Maximo's shoulders as he jumps out of the truck. He moves to the back door and pulls it open. A woman jumps from inside the car, hands balled at her sides, and butts into his chest with an angry shout. I watch her struggle against him for a few seconds, swearing and flailing at him like she doesn't realize she's only wasting energy. She's jerking and cursing, trying to kick her way out of his grip. Her defiance would be admirable if it weren't for her loyalty to Nunzio.

"Keep moving," Maximo growls at her, his grip on her arm unyielding. I can't help but feel a twisted satisfaction seeing her squirm under his control.

They disappear through the heavy doors of the mausoleum, and I flick the cigarette butt into a pile of leaves and kick at a patch of thistles. I pull up my collar against the chilly breeze and follow closely behind them. The air inside is cold and damp, the scent of decay and death clinging to every surface. This place has always made my skin crawl, but it serves its purpose well tonight—the perfect prison for our prisoner.

"Here should be good enough," Maximo says, pushing Briana against one of the cold stone walls. She stumbles but

quickly regains her footing, her eyes blazing with a mixture of fear and defiance.

“Is this where you’re going to kill me?” she spits, her voice echoing off the walls. “Bury me alongside the great Vincenzo Del Rossa?”

“Watch your tongue,” Maximo warns, his fingers digging into her arm. “You’re only here because we need information. But don’t think for a second that means we won’t make you suffer.”

“Go ahead,” Briana sneers. “It won’t change anything. You’ll never find Nunzio.”

“Never say never,” I interject, stepping out of the shadows. I can’t help but smile at the fleeting look of surprise that flickers across her face as she realizes my presence. “Now, let’s see how long that defiance lasts.”

My heart pounds in my chest as I approach Briana, her eyes locked on mine. She’s a cornered animal, but rebellion shimmers in her dark eyes, which only fuels my determination.

“Where is he?” I demand, my voice cold and uncompromising.

“Go to hell,” she spits back, and the venom in her voice sends a shudder down my spine. I have no doubt she’s been well trained by Nunzio himself, taught what to say in situations like these.

“Wrong answer.” I grab her jaw, forcing her to look me in the eye. “You’re going to tell me what I want to know, one way or another. And trust me, the more you resist, the more painful this will be for you.”

“Fuck you,” she snarls, but I can see the flicker of fear in her eyes. Good. She should be afraid.

“Let’s try this again.” I release her jaw and step back, adopting a calm demeanor that belies the storm raging inside me. “Tell me where Nunzio is. Now.”

“Or what?” she challenges, crossing her arms over her chest. “You’ll kill me? Torture me? Don’t bother. I’ve already

accepted my fate. There's nothing you can do to break me."

Goddamn it, why does she have to be so stubborn? My patience is wearing thin, and I can feel my anger bubbling beneath the surface, ready to explode. But I need her to reveal Nunzio's whereabouts, and losing control won't help me achieve that goal.

"Fine," I say through gritted teeth, taking a deep breath to steady myself. "If you don't talk willingly, we'll do this the hard way."

"Bring it on," she taunts, her eyes glittering with defiance. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Maybe you should be," I warn, my voice low and dangerous. "Because I won't stop until I find Nunzio."

Her lips curl into a cruel smile, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "You can try, but you'll fail. Nunzio is always one step ahead of you. Ask your pretty little wife." An arrogant grin appears on her face. "Nunzio knows your wife is pregnant."

"I have no doubt he does."

"He's waiting," she taunts.

"For what?"

"For you to do a paternity test."

"He won't be included in those tests."

She shrugs. "If it's not yours, it's his."

"Maybe my wife and I are in an open relationship, and there are ten other candidates."

She tsks, shaking her head slowly. "If that baby is his—"

My tether snaps. I launch at her, my hand enclosing her throat, squeezing hard while forcing her back against the wall. She hisses, her lips parting as she struggles for breath.

"If that baby is his, he'll what?" I challenge.

"Nunzio will..." She chokes as I tighten my grip. "He'll... he will take... what is rightfully... his. His child... and her."

Her choked-out words slam against my spine like a goddamn wrecking ball, and I'm trembling with fury as I grab my gun and press it against her temple so fucking hard I could squeeze the metal into her skull. "No one will take her from me again," I spit out, anger raging through me, spurred by the muted sounds of her whimpers and gasps for air. My finger is on the trigger, heavy and cruel, my fingers around her neck on the verge of crushing her throat. The thought of him taking Mira from me again makes me see nothing but red. I would rather kill this woman in the most brutal way imaginable, go on a massacre through this entire goddamn city before I let that happen.

With a snarl, I squeeze down on the trigger, and Briana closes her eyes, waiting for her execution, when someone places a gentle hand on my back.

"Nicoli," Mira murmurs behind me, and her voice is like salve on an open wound. "Breathe, my love."

My hand holding the gun starts to shake, and I'm clenching my jaw, biting down so hard I'm sure my teeth will crack.

"Let me speak with her," Mira says calmly, her gentle fingers easing around my arm. "Please...Li."

My eyes close, and her voice, the name she called me, it's like morphine running through my veins, taming the chaos. I choke on a ragged breath as I let go of Briana's throat, stepping back. Mira cups my cheek, lifts herself on her toes, and kisses me, her lips like feathers brushing along mine. "I love you," she whispers, then turns to face the woman now hunched over, trying to get air into her lungs.

My heart is still pounding wildly, but I stare at my wife with new fascination. I'm in awe of her, so confident and in command. The air around her shimmers with authority, and I know Mira is finally becoming the woman she's meant to be. A queen.

Chapter Thirteen

“Mira, get out of here,” Maximo demands, stomping toward me, but Nicoli forces himself in front of my brother, blocking his path.

“Don’t,” Nicoli warns him.

“What the fuck, man?”

“This is how it needs to be.”

“She shouldn’t be here,” Maximo sneers before turning his angered glare toward me. “You need to leave.”

“Let it go, Maximo,” Nicoli says, once again blocking Maximo’s view in my direction. “Back the fuck up, and let your sister be. I won’t say this again.”

Nicoli’s authority is unquestionable, and I can see the moment Maximo submits and reluctantly takes a step back. When Nicoli turns to face me, there’s a silent bond that charges between us. His eyes are intense, and I have never seen his gaze so fierce yet so tender at the same time. We’re no longer two different elements but rather one force, and I know together we’ll end this...one way or the other.

“Who the hell are you?” Briana asks, and I face her, cold arrogance dancing in her eyes.

“Her,” I say simply, my voice cold as ice. “I’m the woman who survived that fucker.”

“Ah.” Briana’s expression hardens once more, but there’s a flicker of uncertainty in her expression that wasn’t there before. “You’re the knocked-up one, then.”

I'm not the least bit surprised. If Nunzio's been hiding with this woman until now, I'm sure she knows everything he does.

"Let me tell you something," I say, my voice steady. "You think you know what kind of man Nunzio is? What kind of man you're protecting? You don't have a clue."

"Oh, believe me, sweetheart. I know exactly what kind of man he is."

"And what's that?" I ask, my heels clicking against the stone floor of the mausoleum. "A good man?"

"I've seen worse."

"I haven't. He's the worst kind, Briana."

"That kid you're carrying might be his, so my guess is you didn't always think of him as the worst kind."

My heart thumps faster. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"The truth of what he did to me."

"I don't give a shit what he's done to you. He takes care of me. He loves me."

"Loves you?" I almost gag as I say the words. "You think that psychopath is capable of loving anyone?"

Briana places her hand around her throat where Nicoli choked her, rolling her shoulders while keeping her eyes pinned on mine.

I cross my arms as I settle in front of her. "How about I tell you what he's capable of?"

"No, thank you."

"He took my clothes. Stripped me bare. Touched me in a way he didn't have permission to." My eyes are locked on Briana's. "He raped me over and over. The harder I fought, the more he hurt me. It was a goddamn sport for him, Briana."

I hear Nicoli curse behind me, and my heart constricts, but this has to be done.

“He raped me until my mind broke, until I was no longer in my own body because he was busy tearing it apart.”

“Stop it,” Briana snaps, her bravado wavering. “Stop lying.”

“You think he loves you, that his love earned your loyalty to him, but you’re just another pawn in his sick game. Do you really want to sacrifice yourself for a man like that?”

Briana’s eyes flicker between me and Nicoli, her thoughts clearly racing. Her defiance might be wavering, but she’s still clinging to it like a lifeline.

“I don’t believe you,” she spits.

“Show her,” Nicoli says behind me, and I look at him. “Show her what he did to you.”

Our gazes lock, and Nicoli silently urges me to do what needs to be done, to unearth all the ugliness to further our cause in ending this.

I step closer to Briana who watches me warily, and I slowly lifts the hem of my skirt. She slants a brow, pulling her lips in a cocky grin. “Are you flirting with me, Mrs. Del Rossa?”

“Hardly.” My fingers brush against my leg as I bunch up the fabric, revealing the ugly scar that snakes its way up my thigh. “That’s him,” I say softly. “That’s all him.”

Her grin falters. “Nunzio likes to play rough.”

“He also likes to rape women. And when their pussies aren’t wet enough for him, he does this.” I point at the scar. “He cut me, smeared his cock with my blood and raped me while I vomited from all the screaming and the crying.” It takes everything in me to get the words out, to not let my voice crack as I say out loud what that monster did to me. I refuse to show weakness. I refuse to crumble beneath the weight of my trauma. I’m not just a survivor, I’m a fighter, and I’ll fight the memories for the rest of my life, and never give up.

Briana diverts her eyes, licking her lips as she presses her back against the wall as if she's trying to get away from the proof that Nunzio isn't close to being the man she thinks he is.

"Look at it," I command, my words dripping with steel. "This is what your precious Nunzio does to innocent women. How long before he starts doing this to you, before he hurts you? Or even worse, kills you?"

Briana's gaze shifts from the floor to my scar, and I can see a hint of uncertainty creep into her eyes.

"Is that enough proof for you?" I ask. "Or do you need more evidence of the monster you're protecting?"

Briana glances back and forth between us, her defiance wavering. "You don't understand," she murmurs, her voice barely audible. "He saved me once. I owe him."

"Saved you?" I snarl, my patience running thin. "By dragging you into a life of crime and violence? By asking you to put your life in danger for him? Tell us where he is, Briana, and I'll make sure you never see the side to him that I have."

"He'll kill me if I talk."

"We'll protect you. Tell us what we need to know, and you'll have the Dark Sovereign protection. No one in this fucking city will touch you, I swear."

She purses her lips, her brows furrowed as she contemplates my offer. My heart is beating wildly, my pulse racing. We're so close to finding Nunzio, I can fucking taste it, and all I want is for this to be over.

Briana licks her lips and lifts her chin. "It is what it is," she sneers. "I will not betray him."

My heart sinks into my stomach, and my anger spikes. "Fine," I hiss, struggling to keep control. "But know this. If you continue to protect him, you're no better than he is. And if you don't tell us what we need to know, I will kill you myself."



NICOLI

I YANK BRIANA BY HER ARM AND FORCE HER TO SIT IN THE wooden chair. She offers zero resistance, like she's not the same woman Maximo pulled out of his truck. Briana's eyes flicker between Mira and me as I tie her arms, fastening her feet to the chair. I can sense the growing unease in her posture as she takes in what Mira said. It's clear that Mira's strength is something she hadn't anticipated, and I can't help but feel a swell of pride for my wife. Through all this, I've seen a side to Mira I never knew existed. Or maybe it was just my male ego that made me blind toward it, not wanting to see that my wife doesn't need my twenty-four-hour protection. She doesn't need me to be her avenging angel because she's her own. But no matter how obvious it is to me that she can handle this, there's still a stubborn-ass man in me who would do evil, brutal, and savage shit for the woman he loves. I've been protecting her since she was four years old, and it's not something I'll ever be able to switch off. Maybe just...tame it. A little.

As I finish restraining Briana, I lean a little closer, breathing down the side of her neck. "We *will* kill you," I growl, keeping my voice low and menacing. "So the way I see it, you only have one chance of getting out of this alive, and that's by taking your chances with us by telling us what we need to know. My wife offered you protection, and we will give it. But no matter what decision you make, you're Dark Sovereign property now...whether we bury you or protect you."

Briana's breath hitches, and I notice her knuckles whiten as she grips the armrests of the chair she's tied to. She seems unsure of herself, and that's exactly what I want. The doubt gnawing at her is an opportunity we can use to our advantage

—a chance to break her resolve and get the information we need.

“I’m not beyond torturing a woman when it comes to my wife, Briana. I will throw my one last goddamn moral out the window and I will fuck you up for her. I swear to God.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” she grits out.

“And that will be your last mistake.” I straighten, towering over her, determined to do anything for my wife—and I mean anything, even if it means killing my soul in the process.

Mira slips in next to me, taking my hand as we stand in front of Briana as this powerful, unified force ready to fuck up the world for each other.

“You have a choice,” Mira says softly, her voice resolute despite the tremor running through it. “Pick wisely.”

The air in the mausoleum grows heavy with tension. The atmosphere is nearly suffocating—emotions running high as we confront Briana. Our shared desire for justice and revenge is palpable, electrifying the space between us like a live wire.

I glare at Briana, my jaw set and eyes flaring with determination. Mira stands beside me, her beautiful green eyes filled with courage that leaves no doubt about the strength of our united front.

“Tell us where Nunzio is,” I demand, my voice low and threatening. “Or I swear, you’ll regret it.”

“Fuck you,” she hisses, but I can see the fear in her eyes, the growing realization that her loyalty to Nunzio may cost her more than she’s willing to pay.

“Is he worth this?” Mira asks softly, her words cutting through the tension like a knife. “Is he worth your life?”

I can see Briana’s resolve crumbling, the power dynamics shifting in our favor.

“If I tell you, do you swear to protect me?” she whispers.

Mira straightens and steps closer. “Yes. You have my word.”

My heart races, adrenaline surging through my veins as I wait silently for her to say the fucking words, to tell us where the motherfucker is. This is it—our chance to bring Nunzio to justice and end this nightmare once and for all.

“Fine,” she breathes out. “I’ll tell you where he is.”

Chapter Fourteen

My hands tremble uncontrollably as I frantically stuff clothes and necessities into a suitcase. My heart thumps in my chest, pounding wildly with fear-driven adrenaline coursing through me like molten lava. I know where Nunzio is hiding, and while the brothers arm themselves for an attack, Leandra and I have to be rushed off to two separate safehouses. I knew this day was coming. I couldn't wait for it. But now that it's here, I'd be lying if I said I'm not scared—that I don't fear the outcome.

Strong arms coil around my waist from behind me, and I suck in a breath, closing my eyes as I lean back into him.

“It'll be okay, Hummingbird. We got this.”

“I just want it all to be over.”

“Soon. I promise.”

I turn to face him, craning my head to look him in the eye, desperate for assurance. “Promise me you won't do anything stupid.”

“That's something I can't promise,” he teases with a grin.

“Nicoli, I'm serious.”

“I know, babe. I know.”

I study his features, his sapphire eyes. Everyone says they look identical, but to me, Nicoli doesn't look at all like his twin brother. They might have the same eyes, equally sharp and hypnotic, but there's a warmth to Nicoli's irises that Alexius' do not possess. Maybe it's because I've spent

countless hours gazing into these pools of mystery, at first always finding comfort in them until, one day, I realized I wanted to drown in their blue depths and be lost in their magic forever.

I cup his cheek, his warmth soaking through my palm. “I love you, Nicoli Del Rossa. I’ve loved you my entire life.”

He takes a deep breath and places his hand over mine, sending a wave of electricity up my arm. “You are my everything, Hummingbird.”

My throat tightens with emotion, and I’m unable to speak.

“What I feel for you isn’t just love. It’s something more. Something stronger. It’s like I literally can’t fucking breathe without you.” He reaches out and cups my cheeks with both his hands. “The day you got out of that car wearing that ugly as fuck yellow jacket, I knew you were going to change my life forever. I knew protecting you would be my purpose.” He licks his lips, his eyes searching mine. “Until the day you turned sixteen, and my purpose changed. I was no longer just meant to protect you. I was meant to love you, too.”

He kisses me, and I suck in a breath against his lips, unable to stop the wave of emotion that crashes through me so hard I’m sure I’ll break into a million pieces because of it. It’s like our love, our bond is this living, breathing thing that I can feel expanding within me, filling up the empty spaces that I didn’t even know existed. The way he kisses me is desperate, urgent, filled with a passion that burns like the sun. Nicoli’s lips are so familiar, yet every time he kisses me it feels like the first time again. His hands slide down from my cheeks to my neck, his fingers twining into my hair as he deepens the kiss, our mouths madly pressing together as we both try to pour our souls into each other.

When he breaks the kiss for air, both of us gasping against each other’s lips, there’s a sudden ache inside my chest I just can’t endure.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I whisper. “I can’t do this, Nicoli.”

“Mira.”

“No. No. I can’t. There’s still time to stop this,” I beg, and he presses his forehead against mine. “Please, Nicoli.”

“You know as well as I do that this has to be done.”

“No.” A tear slips down my cheek. “I was wrong. I never should have suggested—”

“Baby.” His fingers bite into my arms as he pulls me closer. “We can do this.”

“We don’t—”

“Yes, Mira. We have to. It’s the only way we’ll be able to put this behind us.” He presses his lips hard against mine, and a sob fills my breath. “It’s the only way you’ll find peace.”

I nod, swallowing hard as I push away the fear that threatens to consume me. The thought of being separated from Nicoli, even for a short time, is almost unbearable.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” I whisper.

“Only if you promise me the same.”

“We promise each other. No matter what happens, we won’t be reckless.”

He nods. “We got this, baby girl.”

“Yo, Nicoli.” Caelian appears by the door. “The cars are ready. We gotta go.”

Nicoli brushes his lips softly against mine, and I’m sure my heart will tear out of my chest at any moment. “Tonight, we end this. Okay? You and me.”

I nod quickly, and he gives me one last reassuring smile and says, “I’ll meet you downstairs,” before turning to follow Caelian out the door.

For a moment, I stand there in the silence, listening to the sound of my own heartbeat thudding like a bass drum. I know Nicoli’s words are true. We must see this through to the end, no matter what, but the panic and fear are so raw I’m struggling to control it. I wipe away the tears that stream down my face and take a deep breath, trying to collect myself. There’s no turning back now.

When I get to the foyer, everyone is already there. Alexius is helping Leandra with the twins, pulling on their coats. Every time I see him with them, I'm struck by how different he is around them. It's like a mask slips off his face, showing a side of him only his family gets to see. He's still intense and brooding, but there's a gentleness to him that no one ever thought existed.

It's amazing how much Aria looks like her dad—black locks and those intense blue irises. Alessio also has Alexius' sapphire eyes and the same midnight hair. But there's a softness in him that's identical to his mother—a kindness that can melt the most hardened of hearts.

Caelian and Isaia step outside while Nicoli and Maximo are deep in quiet conversation. I can only imagine the storm that beats inside them, both fiercely protective of me.

“Are you okay?” Leandra asks, and I turn toward her.

“I'm fine. I'm sorry you and the twins are caught up in this, too.”

“Don't,” she says, touching my elbow. “We'll all be okay. And hopefully, this all ends soon.”

I give her a small smile in return, grateful for her presence and the friendship that has become invaluable to me and my sanity.

As we head out to the cars that will take us to separate safehouses, Nicoli's hand slips into mine briefly, sending a shiver up my arm.

“I got you, Hummingbird,” he rasps into my ear. “I won't let anything happen to you.”

“I know.” I squeeze his hand in return, feeling a sense of security wash over me, but it doesn't settle the deep, looming fear of uncertainty—not knowing how this night will end.

He opens the passenger side door of the black SUV, standing to the side as I slide into the back seat. Nausea starts to creep up again, so I clutch my stomach, breathing through the sickening feel in my gut.

Nicoli leans in, kissing my cheek tenderly, then whispers words of reassurance into my ear. As he pulls away, all I want to do is grab him and never let go. Glue myself to his side and refuse to let him leave. I've never wished for a different life. I grew up in a world with wealth and luxuries some can only dream of, but just like everything else, it comes with a price—this moment right now being it.

“I love you,” I murmur, and he silently mouths the exact words back at me before shutting the door. I clutch my stomach tighter, feeling the bile rise in my throat. It's a familiar sensation, one that I've experienced before when faced with danger. But this time, it feels more potent, like the poison flowing through me is stronger than ever. The fear is crippling, harshened by a single thought. Maybe this was the last time I'd ever see him.

My husband.

The love of my life.



NICOLI

THIS FEELS DIFFERENT. THIS ISN'T JUST FEAR OR PANIC. IT'S worse. Far worse. I'm watching her being taken away from me, knowing this war is about to reach its peak, and I'm sending her into the belly of the beast. I'm going against every goddamn instinct I have to protect her, choosing to cling to hope that this plan works. Why do I suddenly feel like the dumbest fuck in the world?

The atmosphere is charged with tension, the night trained on us like a heat-seeking missile ready to strike. One wrong move and I lose everything. One second of hesitation, one wrong decision will cost me more than I can bear to pay, so all I can do is pray to God that He gives me the strength to see this through.

I swallow back my feelings of fear and desperation and put on a steely mask of determination. This is no game; the stakes are too high. One misstep could cost me everything I love and cherish, so there is zero room for error tonight. Each breath is measured and focused as if my life depends on it—because it does. Mira is my life, and I'll rain down hell on the entire goddamn world if it means I finally get to end this for her.

The engine of Mira's SUV starts, and I kick at the gravel as my boots stomp across the asphalt toward one of the other unmarked cars.

"You ready?" Maximo says as he opens the passenger side door.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

We get into the car, adrenaline pumping through my veins, and I start the engine, keeping my eyes glued to the SUV Mira is in.

"Tonight is the first time in my life that I envy Rome, thinking that if I had done the same, none of this ever would have happened."

"This life is in your blood, Nicoli. Our blood. And something tells me it's in hers, too."

"I always thought your sister is too good for this world. I still do. But somehow—" I grip the steering wheel "—somehow I think she has a better chance at surviving this life than any of us do."

"My sister's a fighter, I'll give her that."

Alexius knocks on the window, and I roll it down.

"We good?"

"Yeah. You make sure your wife and kids get where they're going safely."

Alexius gives me a knowing look. "Are you sure about this?"

"No. But it's—"

The back passenger door gets flung open and Caelian slides into the back seat. I whip around to face him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m coming with you.”

“We agreed you’d go with Alexius and Isaia.”

He shrugs. “Well, I changed my mind and I no longer agree with that plan. So, I’m coming with you two assholes.”

“No, you’re—”

“Just take him with you.” Alexius straightens. “He might come in handy. Besides, if you don’t get to kill anyone tonight, you can kill him.”

“Fuck you very much, brother,” Caelian calls after him as he walks away, then sits back in his seat, adjusting his collar. “I’m buying all of you assholes unicorn dildos for Christmas you can all go fuck yourselves with. Just saying.”

I put the car in drive, revving the engine as Alexius and Isaia get into the car behind us.

Maximo glances at me. “Once we’re sure Mira is secure at the safehouse, we’re ending this shit with Nunzio once and for all. Tonight.”

“Tonight,” I repeat, trying to ignore the warning prickling the back of my neck.

Alexius and Isaia take the lead, the SUV with Leandra and the kids falling behind him, and another boxing her vehicle in from behind.

The fourth car falls in line, and my stomach knots when Mira’s vehicle starts to move. I gently put my foot on the gas to follow, and I can practically feel Maximo’s tension colliding with mine. My heart is pounding like a sledgehammer as we approach the gates, my vision blurred with a rush of rage, anger, fear, every fucking emotion known to man, my eyes glued to the car in front of me. Alexius turns to the right, Leandra’s car, and the one behind them following. It’s a convoy of black SUVs, driving in line then splitting in two different directions. Just as Mira’s SUV turns to the left and

out of the estate, I abruptly come to a stop just outside the gate.

“Fuck.” I slam my palm against the steering wheel.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Maximo stares at me wide-eyed.

“Shit, give me a sec,” I curse, quickly leaping from the car, popping the trunk, and grabbing my gun from the duffel bag, tucking it into my side.

“What the fuck was that?” Maximo demands as I get back in behind the wheel.

“I forgot my gun in the bag.”

“You forgot. Your gun. In the fucking bag?” The disbelief on Maximo’s face would be comical if not for the current circumstances.

“Let it be known,” Caelian starts, “that you are the biggest asshole out of the lot of you, so you’ll be getting the monster-sized dildo for Christmas.”

“Whatever, man.” I step hard on the gas this time and speed down the road, the streetlights zipping past in an orange line, casting shadows over our faces.

As I catch up to Mira’s car, I have an overwhelming urge to stop all of this, grab Mira, and take her with me far away where no one can find us. It’s a mad scheme, but surely it’s better than what we’re doing now. It would be easier and safer than a plan that’s foolproof on paper, but executing it could have dire consequences. There are so many things that could go wrong tonight, and I’m two seconds away from pulling the plug on all of this.

“Please, Nicoli. You need to trust me. It’s the only way.”

“You okay over there?” Maximo clutches his gun, and my nostrils flare as I nod, adrenaline pumping through my veins as we tail Mira’s SUV.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” I order.

“Hey, man, you sure you can handle it if shit hits the fan tonight?” Caelian looks at me in the rearview mirror, concern laced across his eyebrows.

“Of course, I can fucking handle it,” I snap back at him, tightening my fingers around the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white. “I have to.”

Chapter Fifteen

The night is a shroud, an inky blackness that clings to every corner of the city. It's heavy and suffocating, the thick air and shadows seeming to close in around us as we drive through the streets. I can feel it, a presence that lingers just beyond the reach of my senses. It's a sense of foreboding like everything is about to change.

We're steadily following the car in front of us, and I glance out the back window, Nicoli's headlights shining directly on us. My hands tremble on my lap, fingers twitching to reach out and touch him one last time before it's too late. God, please just keep him safe. I can't bear the thought of something happening to him. I would rather die than lose him.

Streetlights flicker like beacons in the distance, smearing luminous patches of yellow light over cracked pavement and graffiti-covered walls. It's like an invisible menace that lurks all around me, invisible yet tangible. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as we turn down a dark alleyway, a knot forming in the pit of my stomach.

"Almost there," the driver says, his voice barely penetrating the oppressive silence that fills the car. I nod. My throat is too tight to speak.

My eyes dart nervously around the alleyway, searching for any sign of danger. I can barely make out the silhouette of buildings in the distance and a flicker of movement just beyond them.

I glance at the clock on the car's dashboard. We've been driving for almost twenty minutes, taking so many turns I don't even know where we are anymore. It's supposed to make it harder for anyone to follow us, but the three cars driving closely together know the route. Nicoli and Maximo have been working on finding the safest way—and the longest—all morning and afternoon, planning every turn with a secret location in mind.

The light shining through the back window disappears, and I whip around in my seat. There's no one behind us. Nicoli is supposed to be behind us, but he's not.

"Where is Nicoli?" I ask the driver, and he speaks into his earpiece. But my heart is pounding too fast, the erratic beat the only thing I hear.

The car screeches to a sudden, unexpected halt, thrusting me forward with a jolt that sparks a wildfire of fear in my chest. My heart pounds frantically against my ribs as a bolt of adrenaline shoots through my veins like icy fire, shaking me with its intensity.

"Shit," I gasp, gripping the door handle as if it's the only thing keeping me grounded. "What's happening?"

"Fuck!" the driver grits out. He lets go of the wheel, reaches for the holster at his side, and pulls out a gun. The next sound is a deafening boom that pierces through the silence as the door flies open, leaving a trail of spattered blood across the windshield.

A scream rips from my throat as my driver's lifeless body sags into the seat, my ears ringing from the gunshot. I'm frozen in terror, my mind racing as I try to understand what's happening.

I twist around in my seat, trying to look out the back window again, sucking in a breath when I see a figure standing in the dark—like a shadow with a blackness that rivals the night.

It's him. I know it is.

I scramble to the far end of the car, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it's going to burst out of my chest.

It takes me a moment to realize that someone has opened the door on my side and is now yanking at my arm. Without thinking, I grab the other door handle, kicking at whoever is trying to pull me out of the car.

"Let go of me!" I scream, giving another wild kick, hitting them square in the face. There's a crunch as their nose breaks, and I hear him cursing and yelling, his hands no longer clawing at my legs.

I try to open the other passenger side door, but it won't budge, leaving me with only one option. I launch back toward the door when the man clutches his nose, blood spilling through the creases of his fingers. Grabbing the door handle, I try to pull it closed when he hunches down, trying to stop me from closing it. But I grab the handle with both hands, grimacing as I use every ounce of strength to yank it, slamming the guy's head between the car and the door. I do it again, harder this time, blood gushing from his ears and nose. I swing one leg to the side, kicking him back, and I can barely see through the blur in my eyes as I manage to slam the door shut before reaching over the driver's dead body, yanking the driver's-side door closed, too, and locking the car.

My breaths are coming out in ragged gasps as I prop myself up between the two front seats, frantically looking out the front and back window.

I glance at the ignition, but the keys are gone. Shit. The man whose skull I fractured must have taken them when he shot the driver.

"Fuck!" I'm trying to figure out what to do when the sound of footsteps trudging through gravel has me frozen. I tense up, struggling to swallow, and it feels like every footstep pounds in time with my heartbeat.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the back window, and I jump with a yelp, my pulse throbbing in the side of my neck.

"Open up, birdie."

Oh, God. I suck in a breath, planting my palm over my mouth to keep myself from screaming.

A loud bang shakes the car, the back window shattering, but it doesn't break. I yelp with fright, my heart leaping up my throat, making it hard to breathe as I stare at the shattered window.

"Open up the car, birdie," Nunzio commands, his voice deep and gravelly, sending chills down my spine.

"Fuck you!" I scream at him, and his malicious laughter echoes like a demon whisper in the darkness.

"I'm afraid we don't have a lot of time, so I'm going to have to skip playing games," he says with amusement. "For now, that is."

I frantically search for a way out, my eyes darting around the car until they land on the driver's gun, lying by his feet just next to the brakes. I twist myself around, stretching over the dead driver as far as I can, tears welling in my eyes as I desperately try to maneuver myself over the body. Half his face is covered in blood, his chest, too, and it's starting to stick to me like hot tar. The metallic stench of death fills my nostrils, seeping into my lungs with every breath. I force myself over him, squeezing through the seats, the edges pressing painfully into my sides as I try to reach the gun.

There's another loud crack, a gunshot, and the passenger side window cracks and flexes as the bulletproof glass absorbs the bullet's force.

"You can't stay in there forever, birdie."

"Watch me," I grit out softly, inching forward just a little more, my fingertips barely touching the gun.

"You want me to blow up this car with you in it?"

"You won't." My fingertips brush over the gun.

"I won't?"

There's a rhythmic tap on the front window, a sheet of ice slicing through my spine. I freeze and slowly glance up, and it's like a bolt of fear zaps straight through me when I see him

leaning from the side, tapping his gun against the window. I always knew seeing him again would take me back to that room—naked and unable to stop him from hurting me. I knew looking into his eyes would open the floodgates to memories I've worked so hard to lock away. But I never expected the fear and debilitating tremors to claw into me, gripping me so tight, making it impossible for me to move.

“Get out,” he says, tilting his head to the side. “Or I’ll blow up this goddamn car.”

“You won’t kill me.” The words just blurt out of my mouth before I can stop them, and a vindictive smile creeps onto his lips.

“I won’t?”

I straighten between the two front seats. “If you kill me, you kill your baby.”

His expression falters with a second—a goddamn second before his face hardens. “We don’t know if it’s my baby yet.”

“Does it matter? Isn’t that why you’re here? To take me and find out for yourself?”

He narrows his eyes, his gaze flickering over my face before sliding down to my stomach.

“You want to know if I’m carrying the future Ferrero heir.” I try to infuse as much confidence in my voice as I can muster, thinking I might buy some time for Nicoli or Maximo to get here if I stall. “And if I am, what then?”

He moves away from the front window, leaning down to look at me through the driver’s side. “Then that child belongs to me. And so do you, birdie.” The smirk that curls at the edges of his mouth is enough to make me sick to my stomach. He considers me for a moment, our eyes locked. I refuse to look away, to cower. His presence might invoke fear in me, but my will to remain strong is far greater.

Hard lines of anger start to take over his expression, his dark brows creasing inward. “Get out of the fucking car!” he screams. He screams so loud I can feel every syllable rip through my eardrums, and my stomach drops so violently my

bladder contracts as if it wants to empty itself. But I will not be intimidated. Not by him. Not again. And even though every instinct in me is shouting that I look away, I don't. I won't.

Screeching tires startle us both, and Nunzio jerks his head to the side, my gaze following out the back window, sharp headlights heading straight toward us.

Nicoli.

Relief swooshes through me, but it's short-lived as I realize that hell is about to break loose, and Nicoli is going to get himself caught in the middle of it.

Nunzio barks out orders, running in the other direction. But it's so fucking dark, I can't see farther than a few feet away from the car.

The SUV comes to a stop, smoke bleeding from the tires and in the path of the headlights. Gunshots start going off like thunder, and I clap my palms over my ears, trying to push out the noise. My heart can't take it. I'm paralyzed by the fear that Nicoli might get hurt. How could he not? It's raining bullets, and it's happening so fast, in such a blur, I have no idea what the hell is going on.

My breath compresses in my throat as my chest rises and falls rapidly, panic clawing so deep into my lungs that I'm sure I'll suffocate.

More gunshots and more screams.

My eyes dart around frantically as I hold my palms tight over my ears. Where is he? Where is Nicoli?

"Nicoli!" My voice is shrill and fills the air, but no one can hear me. "Nicoli!"

Abruptly, the shooting stops, and Nicoli's voice shatters the eerie silence as he screams my name. "Mira!"

"Nicoli," I say, panicked. "I'm here." I move to the back seat, leaning closer to the rear window to try and see through the dark, to see if he's okay. That's when I hear it again...the *tap tap tap* against the passenger window. Cold dread slithers down my spine, knotting in my stomach as I slowly turn. Tears

break free, sliding down my cheeks when I see him...Nicoli, standing by the window...with Nunzio's gun against his head.

"No." The word leaves my fucking soul, and I realize I've never felt fear before now. All those times I've been scared before don't compare to what I'm feeling right now.

"Don't hurt him," I whimper, my voice breaking as dread fills my lungs. "Please don't hurt him."

"Then get out of the fucking car," Nunzio spits out, pressing the barrel of his gun deeper into Nicoli's temple, two of his men taking position behind him.

There's no hesitation on my part. There is nothing to think about. Nothing to assess or analyze. I'll do whatever the hell he says to stop the worst from happening.

"Fine," I say, sliding closer to the door and wrapping my fingers around the handle. "I'll get out." I unlock the door, the sound almost as threatening as a gunshot.

Nicoli shakes his head at me, his top lip curled in a snarl. "Mira, run. Don't listen to him." But I don't have a choice. I've never had a choice when it comes to him. I didn't choose to love him. I just do. I didn't choose to have this bond with him. It just happened. And just like now, I don't choose to save him. I have to.

A gust of icy air claws through me as I open the door, sinking deep into my marrow like icicles, but it's not the cold that sends shivers up my spine. It's him. The man whose face represents the most bottomless pits of Hell. The man who my hate gravitates to like a magnet. It courses through me like poison, burning hotter than his blade parting my skin.

"Mira, no," Nicoli bites out, but Nunzio tightens his grip on Nicoli's arms behind his back, pressing the gun harder against his face.

Nunzio sucks air through his teeth as I straighten out of the car. "Jesus, birdie. You're even hotter than I remember."

"You motherfucker!" Nicoli thrashes.

“Nah-ah,” Nunzio warns. “I won’t just kill you, Del Rossa.” He looks at one of his men standing a few feet away, his gun aimed at me. “Picture this scenario,” Nunzio starts. “Let’s say you can overpower me here, fight me and get your hands on my gun, your little wife here will be dead by then. You think you can manage to get control over this situation faster than a bullet can blow your wife’s goddamn brains out?”

“You won’t kill her.” Nicoli’s nostrils flare, his chest rising and falling rapidly. His anger, the rage, it’s palpable. “She’s pregnant, and you won’t hurt her until you know who the father is.”

“If you, by some miracle, happen to put a bullet in my head tonight, it won’t fucking matter whether she’s carrying my child or not. So I dare you, Nicoli. Try me. See if I’m fucking bluffing.”

My eyes lock with Nicoli’s, and a knowing look passes between us. As bitter as it is to swallow, neither of us has a choice. Nicoli won’t let anything happen to me, and I will do anything and everything to make sure he doesn’t get hurt.

Nunzio’s slimy gaze rakes down my body and his tongue darts out like a serpent’s, licking his lips. “Between you and me,” he murmurs close to Nicoli’s ear, “I’m going to love getting reacquainted with your wife’s body.”

“Motherfucker!” Nicoli’s barely breathes as rage consumes him.

A sinister grin spreads across Nunzio’s face, and I can see the physical pain his words cause Nicoli, his face contorted with so much rage, it’s almost too much to witness.

“Go to hell,” I spit at Nunzio, struggling to keep my voice steady. My hands curl into fists at my sides, the nails digging into my palms as I fight the urge to lash out at him.

“Feisty,” he chuckles. “I’ve missed that fire in your eyes.”

Nicoli growls. “Nunzio, I swear to God, I’m going to—”

“What? You’re going to what? Kill me? I think that will be hard to do since I’m the one holding a gun to your head.”

“Let him go, Nunzio. You want me, so let Nicoli go.”

“Mira,” Nicoli warns through clenched teeth. “Don’t do this. Do not get in that fucking car.” The desperation in his voice is heartbreaking, and I hate it.

I pin my gaze on him, and I hope he can see how much I love him, how this isn’t even a decision. For me, there is no other option than to obey Nunzio’s every command if it means saving Nicoli.

“Birdie, how about you let Manuel here escort you to the car.” One of the guards steps out from behind him, his savage glare pinned on me and his gun raised. “As much as I love playing with all of you, I really want to go home. It’s way past my bedtime.”

“What about my husband?”

“I’ll let him go as soon as I see the taillight of Manuel’s car with you in it. Not a second earlier.”

“No.” I pull my lips in a straight line. “I don’t trust you.”

“Good. You shouldn’t.”

“Let Nicoli go.”

“Or what?” he taunts, raising an eyebrow. “You’ll stomp your heels and throw a hissy fit, princess?”

“Fuck you,” I snarl, my blood boiling with rage.

“Such a dirty mouth,” Nunzio muses, his eyes raking over me like he’s deciding which part of me to break first. “Imagine how dirty it will be with my cock down your throat.”

Nicoli thrashes, cursing. “If you touch her I swear to God I will fucking rip your spleen out of your goddamn throat.”

“You have a big fucking mouth for someone who has a gun to his head.”

“You think I give a shit about my life? You think I’m afraid of you pulling that trigger and shooting me?” Nicoli lets out a malicious cackle. “You really are a dumb fuck, aren’t you?”

“Nicoli, stop,” I urge, fear surging with a violent spike in my chest.

“The only reason I’m not shoving this gun up your ass right now, Nunzio, is because of her.”

“Aw, that’s admirable. Really.” Nunzio taps the gun tauntingly on Nicoli’s forehead. “But between you and me, I think that makes you the dumb fuck, and not me.” Nunzio’s expression hardens. “To the car, birdie, or I’m pulling this goddamn trigger.”

“Fine. I’ll go to the car, and he can put that gun against my head, but I am not getting in that car until you let Nicoli go.”

“You are not in a position to bargain with me, birdie. You are going to get your ass in that car, and Manuel will drive you away, and only then will I let hubby go.”

“Surely you can see how that’s not a fair trade.”

“Do I look like someone who trades fairly?”

I place my palm firmly on my stomach. “Do you want to know if this baby is yours? Because if you hurt my husband in any way, I swear to God I will drive a knife inside my belly the second I get the chance.”

Nunzio’s eyes widen, forming grooves on his forehead. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

He studies me for a moment, eyes roving over me, contemplating. Nicoli is staring at me, silently screaming at me to walk away, but there’s no chance of that happening. If we go down today, we’re going down together.

“Fine,” Nunzio snaps. “You’ll walk over to Manuel, and you—” He jerks Nicoli against him. “You will fucking behave because if you don’t, Manuel will shoot her in the fucking face. And I’d really hate to see that happen because your wife has a really, really pretty face.”

Nicoli snarls, the vein in his neck throbbing, his chest rising and falling heavily. “Don’t do this, Mira. Don’t get in

that damn car,” he urges, struggling against Nunzio’s hold. “Get the fuck out of here!”

Tears sting my eyes, my soul silently weeping as I witness the desperation in his eyes. I know the thought of me going with Nunzio is worse than facing death for my husband. But losing him, existing in a world where he isn’t, it’s a reality I can’t comprehend. One I refuse to accept. I would rather live a lifetime as Nunzio’s captive than know I exist in a world where Nicoli doesn’t.

“On second thought, Manuel, get your ass over here.”

I pause as I narrow my eyes at Nunzio.

“Keep your gun aimed at the back of his head,” Nunzio orders, Manuel’s gun is now pressing against Nicoli’s skull as Nunzio steps away. The smile he gives me sends shivers of revulsion down my spine. “I’ll be escorting you out of here.”

The second his hand wraps around my arm, a violent surge of nausea explodes in my gut. His touch burns, like acid on my flesh, and I’m trying hard to swallow the bile threatening to push up my throat.

“Walk,” he orders, and for a second I freeze, glaring at him, feeling the hate rise to new heights. The need to see him suffer is pressing hot against my skull. I want to see every drop of blood drain from his body. I want to see the holes in his face after I cut his eyes out, and I want to smell the rancid stench of him pissing himself with fear—fear of me.

Movement in the distance catches my attention, and under an old, flickering light, I glimpse Maximo’s features and he’s pointing to the top of the building behind me before he disappears into the darkness again.

I suck in a breath, trying so damn hard not to look in Maximo’s direction for longer than a second, not wanting to draw any attention his way. Manuel and the other guard have their backs turned toward where Maximo is hiding, and Nunzio has his gaze pinned on me. I have no idea what he’s planning, but no matter what it is, I have to do what needs to

be done, right here, right now—and that's giving myself up so
I can save my husband.

Chapter Sixteen

“**M**ove, birdie,” Nunzio grits out.

My teeth bite into my lip until I can taste the blood on my tongue, searing with rage from the sight of him touching her.

The rugged metal of Manuel’s gun presses against my temple like a branding iron. His hot breath, reeking of stale cigarettes and alcohol, prickles the back of my neck, and I’ve already decided that Manuel will be the first to get his head smashed against the pavement.

My jaw tics with anger, and my rage builds to a crescendo. My teeth grind together like stones as I think about all the things this bastard has done to Mira, every second of pain he caused her. A thousand screams echo in my head, pushing me over the edge as I envision a myriad of gruesome ways to take away his life so slowly he’ll pray that the devil takes him quickly.

“Mira, please,” I start, and she stares at me with so much pain I can feel it seep into my soul. “Don’t do this.” My voice is almost unrecognizable from the rawness of emotion. “Let him do whatever he wants with me, but don’t you dare give up. Do not get in that car. Run. Run as fast as you can. Please, Hummingbird.”

Mira’s gaze burns as teardrops glisten in her eyes, her jaw set firmly in a mask of resolve.

“I won’t let him hurt you.”

“Mira, please!” I shout, desperation choking my voice, and I let out a scream that tears my soul apart, ripping from the deepest part of me, a cry that bounces off the walls and echoes into the darkness.

Nunzio chuckles, a sickening sound. “I think your husband is having a hard time with this,” he says to Mira, and I wish I were still the reckless Nicoli who would take his chances, even if there’s just a five percent chance I’ll be able to fuck him up. But I can’t be reckless. Not when it comes to her. Never with her.

She glances over her shoulder in my direction, her eyes glimmering with tears, her feet barely keeping up with Nunzio’s relentless pace as he drags her toward a car. I’m struck by the horror of it all, my heart pounding like thunder in my chest until every breath is like shards of glass tearing through my lungs. Every muscle in my body and every instinct in my blood screams at me to act, to intervene and stop this, but I’m fucking powerless. Nothing I do now will prevent this from happening, and it’s the worst kind of agony I’ve ever felt.

Nunzio cackles in triumph as he forcefully drags Mira to the car, her eyes wide and pleading as she frantically looks back at me, our gazes interlocked as he steals her away from me. It’s fucking excruciating, like venom poisoning my blood and slowly killing my heart.

Jesus, where is he? Where fucking is he?

I glance up at the building in front of me, my thoughts frantic with every possible thing that could go wrong. If he doesn’t pull through, all of this gets shot to shit, and I lose my wife to this psychopath once again.

There’s a quick flash on the top of the building, like light bouncing off a metal surface, and my stomach lurches up my chest.

“Motherfucker,” I mutter under my breath.

“What did you say?” Manuel growls behind me.

The air around me suddenly turns cold, and my blood pumps faster in my veins as I let out a feral growl. “I said, get

ready to die, motherfucker.” Without warning, I drop into a defensive crouch and whip to the side just as a bullet pierces the air with an explosive roar. The deadly projectile finds its mark directly in the center of Manuel’s forehead, blasting a hole in his skull. His body drops heavily to the ground, blood oozing out of the wound. It’s a perfect kill shot.

“Now, you’re just showing off,” I mutter as I look up at the building where our sniper is positioned.

A second bullet comes zapping through the air, instantly killing the second guy, and as he drops to the ground, his gun lands right in front of my feet, so I grab it and start running toward Mira.

Nunzio whips around, momentarily distracted. I seize the opportunity and lunge, slamming my shoulder into his midsection. We crash to the pavement in a tangle of limbs. I grapple for the gun, fingers clawing desperately until I wrench it from his grasp, slamming his hand into the asphalt with such force, trying to get him to let go.

His fingers snap open, the weapon falls out of his hand, landing a few feet away, and I slam my elbow straight into his ugly motherfucking face.

I’m clambering to my feet when a large frame steps in beside me, Maximo towering over Nunzio. “Today you die, motherfucker.”

“Maximo, no!” Mira launches forward, putting herself between us and Nunzio like she’s protecting him.

“Mira, what are you doing?” Maximo narrows his eyes at her.

“You’re not going to kill him.”

He stares at her in disbelief, and I know this man’s mind is about to break with confusion. “This fucker needs to die, Mirabella. Why are you protecting him?”

“I told you that his life is mine to take,” she says sternly. “Not yours or anyone else’s. Mine.”

Nunzio scurries up to his feet, readying to run in the other direction, but I can't aim with Mira blocking my view.

I swipe around and yell into the night, "Davian! Shoot him!"

"No!" Mira gasps, darting to the side, trying to get into the sniper's line of sight.

"Mira!" A scream tears from my soul, and I don't know how the fuck it's possible, but I swear I can hear that one bullet explodes from the sniper's chamber, and the world freezes around me. Dread slams into me, a sheet of ice cutting my bones, and I'm paralyzed, terror coating my skin like a thousand nails. Fear twists and turns within me as I desperately try to make sense of what is happening. And all I can think about is how this bullet is going to my wife's chest and will break through and sink deep into her beating heart. It's a split second, but I've already seen my life without her flash before my eyes—the agony, the despair, the emptiness. At that moment, my mind's made up. I will end my life. I will end my life here and now rather than take a single breath without her.

Her honey-blonde hair. Cherry-red lips. Her laughter. God, no. Don't let me lose her.

The single gunshot pierces the air like a jagged blade, slicing through every other sound and leaving nothing but an eerie silence. Then I hear it, a shrill scream of agony that is muffled by my raging thoughts, and in a surreal moment, Nunzio crumples to the ground with a guttural gasp.

The world around us speeds up to a frantic pace, and I lunge toward Mira with a wild urgency, grasping her around the waist and yanking her body close. I'm clutching her so damn tight, weaving my fingers through her hair so desperately that they tangle in the strands. "Jesus, Mira," I murmur, pressing her hard against my chest.

Her body shakes with sobs, and I breathe out heavily, closing my eyes, thanking God that my worst nightmare didn't just come true.

“You’re okay,” I murmur, pressing my lips hard on the top of her head, breathing in deep so I can smell her familiar scent to make sure this is real, that I’m not dreaming. “You’re okay? You’re not hurt?”

She shakes her head and tries to lean back, but I only pull her back harder, refusing to let her go.

“I’m okay,” she whispers through the tears. “You? Are you hurt?”

“No. I’m fine, Hummingbird. We’re both fine.”

“Thank God.”

I lean back, sliding my hands to her cheeks as I study her face, ensuring there’s not a goddamn scratch on her. “I need to get you home.”

“What about Nunzio?”

“Mira,” I try to protest because I already know what she’s going to say.

“You promised, Nicoli. You gave me your word.”

“I know.”

I press my lips against hers, sucking in a breath, completely disarmed by this woman. I don’t ever want to stop kissing her. Never.

Nunzio curses behind us, and I reluctantly break our kiss to look in his direction, the fucker squirming on the ground in pain, his leg bleeding profusely.

Maximo looks at me, silently urging me to give him the order to end this—to finally kill Nunzio so we can all move on. But as much as I want to kill Nunzio myself, Mira’s right. I made her a promise, and no matter how much it goes against every instinct I have, I’ll keep that promise.

Maximo curses when I lightly shake my head at him, and I know he’s tearing me apart limb by limb inside his head right now.

“How’s everyone doing down here?”

I turn and cock a brow. “Davian fucking Stark.”

He grins, clutching a cigarette between his lips.

“You cut it real fucking close, man.”

“What can I say? I have impeccable timing.”

“I don’t know if I want to kiss or kill you right now.”

“Hey.” He points to Manuel’s dead body. “Do you see that? This man’s skull is cut right through the middle, exactly. Do you know the amount of skill it takes to pull that off?”

“Well, I—”

“Exactly. You don’t. You can’t rush perfection, man.”

“You call that perfection?” I gesture toward Nunzio, still clutching his leg.

Davian shrugs. “Hey, I could have placed a bullet through his eye socket, but you clearly instructed not to kill this fucker.”

“That, I did,” I mutter, regretting my decision to pass that little instruction along. “Baby,” I say as I pull her close. “Meet Davian Stark. The best fucking sniper in the US.”

“Fuck you,” Davian spits out. “I’m the best goddamn sniper in the world.”

I snort and watch as he takes Mira’s hand.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Mrs. Del Rossa.” He cocks a sly brow. “You are even prettier than I imagined.”

“Okay, Casanova,” I warn, pushing him away. “Keep your dick on a leash.”

“If he breaks your heart, you call me up, okay?” He winks at Mira, and I simply press my lips in a thin line.

“If you didn’t just save our asses, I would kick yours right about now.”

“Love you, too, man. Good luck.”

And like a fucking phantom, Davian just disappears into the darkness. There’s a reason he’s the best in what he does,

and that's also why he's high up on the Dark Sovereign payroll.

“Yo, Nicoli,” Maximo calls, and I quickly glance his way. “What are we doing with this fucker?”

Mira places her fingers around my elbow, and I close my eyes, my head and my heart at war with each other. My head is telling me to gut Nunzio from nose to navel, feel my knife tear through his insides. But my heart—damn my heart—it's telling me to keep my word because as much as I want to kill Nunzio myself, Mirabella is the one who needs this to move on.

I walk up to Maximo, who has his gun trained on Nunzio. “You know as well as I do that his life is owed to your sister. No matter how much you and I want to do this, it's not up to us.”

“Jesus Christ, you are all a bunch of pussies,” Nunzio spits out, sweat streaming down his face, forehead creased from pain. “You gonna have a woman do a man's job, Nicoli?”

My jaw clenches, and I ball my fists.

“It makes sense for you to have her do the dirty work since Del Rossa men are known to lack goddamn spines.”

Fury lights up every inch of my body, and before I can even think, my fist connects with Nunzio's jaw. He falls back, this time clutching his nose. So I lean over him, bringing my face so close to his so he can smell the hatred on my breath. “The only reason I'm not cutting out your tongue right now is because my wife wants to hear you scream while you beg for death.”

A car comes to a screeching stop, the headlights casting looming shadows across the streets.

Caelian leaps out of the car, the ignition still on, and rushes toward us. “If you two fuckers leave me behind again, I will personally shove spark plugs up your pee-holes. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Maximo keeps his gun aimed at Nunzio. “Someone had to stay behind and call for backup.”

“That’s me. I’m the fucking backup.” Caelian stops abruptly by the corpse of the man who got sniped right between the eyes. “I see Davian made it in time.”

“Barely.”

Another SUV pulls up, both Alexius and Isaia getting out of the car. “Is everyone okay?” Alexius stomps closer, his gaze sweeping across the scene.

“Everyone’s fine.” I glance at the two dead bodies and an injured Nunzio. “Well, those who matter.”

“Mira, you okay?” He walks up to her and pulls her in for a hug.

“I’m okay,” she says against his chest.

Alexius leans back, scanning her for injuries. “The baby okay?”

That’s when Mira’s eyes meet mine. I give a light nod, and she smiles. “There is no baby.”

Chapter Seventeen

The night she told him...

“Mira, baby.” He takes my chin between his fingers, forcing me to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s something we need to talk about.”

“I’m listening,” he says softly, cupping my face in his hands and searching my eyes for a hint.

I swallow hard, my heart pounding inside my throat. I know my husband. I’m painfully aware of what my husband’s reaction will be. But I have to say it. I have to tell him and make him understand.

“Mira, what’s going on?”

I shift beneath him, and he rolls to the side as I step out of bed, pulling my red silk robe around my shoulders. “I need you to promise me you won’t freak out.”

His brows slant inward. “When have I ever freaked out?”

I scowl at him. “Do you need me to make a list?”

“Name one time I freaked out,” he challenges as he props himself up against the tufted headboard.

“Let’s see, there’s the day you found out I’m not a virgin.”

“I’m still going to do that, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Kill Tomniso.”

“You mean Tomasso.”

“Tomhasto.”

“Repeat after me. To-ma-so,” I enunciate, and I swear Nicoli’s eye twitches as he stares at me.

“You’re not helping save that man’s life.”

“Okay, Nicoli,” I say as I close my eyes and exhale. “Can we try to focus here for a moment?”

“Of course, babe.” He pulls a cigar from his bedside drawer.

“You know I hate it when you smoke in the bedroom.”

“Do you want me to freak out or smoke?”

I pause for a moment. “Smoke.”

“Smart choice.”

“Okay, but seriously. I really need to tell you something, and I need you to have an open mind.”

He slams shut his Zippo and takes a long drag on the cigar. His eyes narrow as he tilts his head back and releases a thick stream of smoke that coils through the air with a deep snarl. “Okay,” he growls. “My mind is open.”

I cross my arms. “Can you take nothing seriously?”

“I’m dead serious. You told me to have an open mind, and now I’m telling you that my mind is open.”

“You’re being an ass again.”

“Baby, are you sure you don’t want to talk about whatever it is tomorrow when the sun is up? We both know how you get when you’re tired.”

“And how exactly do I get when I’m tired?”

He frowns, blue eyes studying me for a moment. “I feel like that’s a trick question.”

“Nicoli,” I warn.

“Baby girl, just get into bed. We can cuddle and spoon, get some rest. And in the morning, we can fuck against the bedroom window, and then we can talk about whatever it is you want to talk about.”

“It can’t wait.”

“Surely it’s nothing *that* bad that it can’t wait until morning.”

“I’m pregnant.”

The cigar slips from his lips, landing on his lap, leaving a trail of embers burning through the silk sheets. “Motherfucker!” He leaps out of bed, snatches it quickly, and grinds it into the ashtray before staring me straight on. “What did you just say?”

“Could you just pull on some pants? I can’t talk to you when you’re naked.”

“Mirabella Del Rossa. Talk.”

“Fine.” I try to steel myself as I speak, but my arms wrap around my body in a self-protective gesture. “I was having these nausea spells and realized I haven’t had my period since...” My voice trails off, and I can’t bring myself to say the words. Nicoli’s eyes study me, and it’s like it all suddenly clicks for him, his face drained of color. I’ve known Nicoli my entire life, and I can confidently say I have never seen this expression on his beautiful face.

Nicoli grabs a pair of sweatpants, slips them on, and sits on the couch, staring into nothingness, his eyes void of emotion.

I clear my throat. “Leandra—”

“Leandra knows?” he interrupts.

“I had to tell her, Nicoli. I had to make sure and needed her help to get the doctor here without the rest of you finding out.”

“Fuck me.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, his eyes shut and jaw clenched tight, grinding his teeth. He pulls his palm down his face, his fingers curling like talons around his chin. The veins in his neck bulge as a tsunami of emotion

crashes over him. “You should have told me. I could have...I could have been there with you.”

“I didn’t want to put you through that. I wanted to be absolutely sure first.”

“When was the doctor here?”

“Today.” I start gnawing on my thumbnail, my stomach turning into a thousand tiny knots that are chafing against my spine.

Nicoli gets up and starts to pace, roughing his hand through his hair, shoulders pulled taut with tension. Abruptly, he whips around to face me, his eyes the color of a perfect storm as he stares at me from across the room. “And there’s a chance... “He sucks in a breath. “Jesus. There’s a chance it could be his?”

“That’s what I thought, yes.”

“You...thought?”

“I’m not pregnant.”

He balks. “But you just said—”

“I needed you to take me seriously.”

“Jesus Christ, Mira,” he blurts. “Are you trying to fucking kill me? Motherfucker.” Both hands are in his hair as he stomps up and down, his chest heaving as he breathes heavily.

“Nicoli—”

“You know, sometimes I think we take the whole marriage banter just a little too far. We need to set some boundaries. We need to tone that shit right the fuck down.” He crouches over and straightens again, throwing his head back as relief floods him.

“There’s more,” I murmur, grimacing as I anticipate his reaction.

“Oh, baby,” he sighs. “Lay it on me because nothing, and I mean nothing, can shock me after that.” Abruptly, he stills, staring at me with suspicion weighing on his brows. “I see what you’re doing here.”

“What am I doing?”

“You dropped that giant-sized dick on my forehead so that whatever you’re about to tell me next doesn’t sound half as bad.”

“That’s not what I’m doing, I swear.” I take a few steps over to him. “Listen, I’m all kinds of serious right now. And I need you to promise you won’t barge out of here until this conversation is over.”

“What?”

“Promise me, Nicoli.”

“Jesus, Mirabella. What the fuck is going on?”

“Promise,” I demand.

“Fine, I promise.” He crosses his arms over his chest, and I want to hug him, to kiss away the tense expression tugging on his face, the one that tells me he’s ready to growl at me. “Now talk.”

I press my lips thinly while his eyes search my face for answers. This entire conversation so far has not been going the way I thought it would, and now I’m wondering if I should continue it at all.

“Mira,” he demands. “Baby, talk to me.”

I walk over to my dresser table, slowly open the drawer, and reach all the way back, pulling out the crumpled piece of paper.

“What’s that?” he asks, eyes narrowed.

“It’s, um—” I hold it out to him. “It’s a note.”

When he takes it from me, I stop breathing, watching as he scans over it. It’s like watching a storm form in the distance, his features clouding over until he finally looks up at me with a thunderous expression.

“He called you birdie.”

I lick my lips as I nod, my throat dry.

Nicoli swipes with his finger across his nose, his jaw tense. “Nunzio wrote this letter?”

Again, I just nod, unable to think of anything I can say that would diffuse the bomb currently threatening to explode in Nicoli’s chest.

He crumples the paper in his fist, eyes burning with a ferocity I’ve only ever seen when it comes to Nunzio. “How? When did you get this note?”

“It was in the bag that got delivered with the pregnancy test.”

“How did he know?”

“I, um...I suspect he has my phone tapped somehow. I might be wrong. But I phoned the store when I ordered the pregnancy test, so that’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Jesus!” Nicoli roars. “I have to get Maximo.”

“Nicoli, no.” I rush toward the door, blocking his path. “You promised me you wouldn’t leave until this conversation is over.”

“Fine,” he snarls. “This conversation is over.”

“Nicoli, please. Calm down.”

“Calm down? This psychopath has fucking eyes on you, Mirabella. Do not tell me to calm down.”

“Please.” I hold up my hands. “I need you to listen to me.”

Nicoli’s chest heaves with exertion as he stares down at me, his eyes flashing dangerously.

“Can you just...please sit.” I point toward the couch. “Please.”

Nicoli hesitates for a moment before he goes to sit down, his body tense and rigid like coiled wire, ready to snap at any moment.

I step in front of him, arms crossed. “I have an idea.”

He raises a brow. “An idea?”

“To lure Nunzio out.”

“I’m listening,” Nicoli says, though the skepticism is etched deep into his features.

“We use me as bait.”

“Okay.” He stands. “Now this conversation is *really* over.”

“Nicoli,” I warn, keeping my voice steady and firm. “Just hear me out, please.”

He glares at me for a moment before reluctantly sitting back down, leaning his arms on his knees, rubbing his hands together.

“Clearly, he’s watching us, so let’s give him something, something that will draw him out.”

“Like what?”

I lick my lips, my heart thundering in my chest. “We pretend I’m pregnant.”

“No.” His tone rings with finality.

“If Nunzio thinks I’m pregnant and there’s a chance the baby might be his, he’ll come for me.”

“And that right there is exactly why my response to your plan is giant fuck no.”

“He’s playing with us, Nicoli,” I say sternly. “That psychopath is playing with us, and if we do this, if we pretend I’m pregnant, we will take control of this game. Think of it like chess.”

“Chess?”

“What determines black’s move?”

He widens his eyes in question.

“White’s move. White moves first. Thus, white determines the move black will make next. If we make the first move, control the game, we’ll be able to determine his next move before he’s even made it. Right now, we’re all just sitting ducks. We’re waiting for him to make a move, yet we have no idea what it could be, which means we don’t have a chance to

anticipate or prepare. This way we'll be proactively acting instead of waiting to react.”

Nicoli stares at me for a long moment, like he's analyzing my words, before he finally leans back. “Let's say, for argument's sake, I agree—which I'm fucking not—how can you be so sure that you being pregnant will make him come to us?”

“I know him, Nicoli,” I say softly as if I'm ashamed of the fact. “I know Nunzio in ways you don't.”

Nicoli's expression grows pained, and I go to take a seat next to him, staring down at the carpet beneath my bare feet, memories slowly trickling in. “I know every line on that man's face. I can recognize every emotion just by looking at him. Anger. Disgust. Pride.” I swallow. “Lust.”

“Fuck,” Nicoli curses under his breath, and he reaches out, placing his hand on mine.

“I know the way his lips curl at the edges when he smirks, how the one side lifts slightly more than the other. How fine lines appear at the corners of his eyes only when he laughs. God, his laugh, it's the most vile thing I've ever heard. And he does this—” I touch my ear “—this thing with his ear where it, I dunno, moves when he's deep in thought.” I inhale deeply, pushing the memories back before they get the chance to fester. “Anyway. My point is, he's an arrogant bastard, and his mind is this twisted, fucked-up place. And he hates you.” I turn to face Nicoli. “He hates the Dark Sovereign more than anything, and he will never stop trying to destroy you.”

“Yeah, that part we're very much aware of.”

“Then what better way to destroy us than forcing his blood, the man we hate more than anything in the world, to flow and mix with the Dark Sovereign's legacy?”

Nicoli rubs his chin in thought, looking lost in contemplation.

“It's the perfect way to destroy us from the inside,” I say. “Create a crack in the middle, then sit back and watch the Dark Sovereign shatter and break—”

“Until there’s nothing left,” he mutters, looking my way. I can see in his eyes that he gets it. He bites his bottom lip, hissing before he asks, “So, what’s the plan? We send him a postcard to share the news? Put a goddamn announcement in the newspaper?”

“I can make phone calls from my phone, doctor’s appointments. I can have supplies delivered to the house. Prenatal vitamins or something. If he found out about the pregnancy test, he’ll find out about that, too.”

Nicoli scoffs. “You really thought this through.”

“I have.”

“And what? The entire household pretends you’re pregnant and—”

“No. Just us.”

He raises a brow in question.

“Only us. We’re the only two people who can know the truth, Nicoli. We can’t tell the others. The more people who know, the more chances of the truth coming out and everything blowing up in our faces.”

“You’re telling me you want to lie to Alexius? Maximo?”

“Everyone. Yes.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I.”

“It’s a twisted plan.”

“I don’t disagree.”

“There are so many things that could go wrong, Mira.”

“I know. But we have to try. I want to move on with my life, Nicoli. I want to live again without Nunzio’s shadow hanging over us.” I push myself up, pulling my robe tighter around me. “I want to be free of him. I know everyone thinks I’m strong, that I’ve managed to survive him without breaking, but I don’t know how much longer I can do that. I’m scared I’m going to wake up one morning and not have the strength

to get up, to fight.” A tear slips free, and I swipe at it with my palm. “I’m afraid if this war doesn’t come to an end, you and I are going to wake up one morning and realize we’ve lost each other to our need for revenge. That we lost sight of what’s really important.” The thought alone invokes an array of emotions in me. “The fear of one day losing you, losing us because of him, it’s paralyzing me, Nicoli. It’s too much. And I don’t want to live with that fear constantly clawing at my throat.”

Nicoli shoots to his feet, grabbing my arms and piercing me with his gaze. “You won’t lose me, and we won’t lose each other. I’ll make sure that never happens.”

“But what if it does? Are you willing to take that risk by letting this all drag on, never ending? It can be years, Nicoli. Years before we find him.”

He shakes his head. “We’ll find him, I promise.”

“Then let’s do this.”

“No.” He takes a step back. “I’m sorry, Hummingbird. It’s too risky. If anything were to happen to you—”

“It already has!” I exclaim. “Something has already happened to me. I already got hurt in the worst possible way. Don’t you get it? What can he do to me that’s worse than he already has?”

“Kill you!”

“And you think dying is worse than what I went through?” More tears heat my cheeks as I step up to him, craning my neck to look him in the eye as I grit out, “I would rather die than go through the hell that psychopath put me through.”

Nicoli’s jaw works, his eyes hard as he takes in my words. I can see the war inside him as he struggles with what to do.

“Please,” I beg. “Help me finish this once and for all so we can move on with our lives. Together.”

We stare at each other for what feels like an eternity, so many unspoken words lingering in the air, heavy and tense.

“I love you so damn much, Hummingbird.” His voice is soft and strained like it physically hurts him to say it. “If I lose you—”

“You won’t.” I rush up to him, reaching out and cupping his face. “You won’t lose me, I swear it.”

Nicoli’s eyes flicker with pain and fear but also a fierce determination. “Okay,” he murmurs. “Okay, we’ll do it your way.”

A rush of relief washes over me, and I push myself on my toes to kiss him. Our lips meet in a desperate, hungry embrace fueled by our shared desire to end this once and for all. This plan is risky, but it’s also our best chance at taking down Nunzio and living without the constant threat looming over us. As Nicoli’s tongue flicks against my lips, I deepen the kiss, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. His hands roam down my back, tracing the curves of my spine before gripping my hips and pulling me flush against him. My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging at the strands as I try to deepen the kiss, wanting him closer than close. For a moment, all the fear and the pain melt away as we’re lost in each other. I break the kiss with a sharp intake of breath, and I lean back, gasping for air. “Nicoli.”

“Yes?”

“I need you to fuck me.”

Nicoli’s sapphire eyes lock on to mine, a predatory glint gleaming within their depths. I’m paralyzed by the power of his stare, unable to break away from its magnetic draw. My pulse races as he looms over me, his commanding presence threatening to devour me whole.

He slams his lips back onto mine, the taste of desire coating our tongues as we devour one another with this kiss. I’m already gasping for air as his fingers curl around the fabric of my robe, tugging it off my shoulders and exposing my naked body to his hungry eyes. He takes me in with unabashed lust, exploring and caressing every bare inch of me with his hot gaze alone. It ignites something wild inside me, the possession he displays over me simply by looking at me.

He snakes his arm around my waist and yanks me close, and the moment our bodies touch, I feel the electricity between us. It crackles with raw intensity, igniting my senses as my skin tingles where we connect. I can't help but shudder at the sensation, and when he kisses me again, I moan into his mouth, melting against him as he cups my breasts in his large palms, teasing and pinching at the nipples until they're hard and standing at attention for him. He breaks our kiss just long enough to press rough kisses down the column of my neck. "You do things to me, Hummingbird."

"Good things, I hope."

He grabs my hand and forces me to cup his cock, pressing his palm hard over mine. "I'd say it's a lot of good things."

The feel of his length, his engorged girth, makes my mouth water to taste him, so I drop to my knees in front of him, craning my neck, keeping my eyes locked on his. His size is overwhelming, and his sheer power constricts my lungs in longing.

He hisses his appreciation, sliding a hand behind my head. "You're the only queen who looks fucking ravishing on her knees."

"Only for you," I rasp, hooking my fingers into the sides of his pants, slowly pulling them down. The second his cock springs free, I flick my tongue against his glistening head.

Nicoli sucks air through his teeth, throwing his head back while tightening his grip on my hair, forcing me to take him all the way in my mouth. He flexes and hits the back of my throat with the first thrust.

"Fuck," he curses, and my eyes water as he keeps it there. Still. Not moving. Like he wants to savor it, and as he rolls his head to the side, his eyes closed, euphoria painted along every contour of his face, he pulls my head back, giving me a moment's reprieve to catch my breath.

Once he opens his eyes staring down at me, he reaches to touch my cheek with his other hand, wiping at the spit that clings to the corner of my mouth. "You want to be my slut?"

My heart beats faster. “Yes.”

He drags his thumb across my lips, gazing down at me like I’m a dream to him. “I’m done trying to hide you from the world. When all this is over with Nunzio, I’m taking you to Club Myth. I’m going to show the world how exquisite you are. Everyone will see what—*feel* what a fucking force we are together, and no one will be able to stand against us.”

My stomach swirls with anticipation as I dart out my tongue, and he slides his finger into my mouth, then easing it out with a pop from my lips.

“And you and I, we’re going to make it our playground.” He wraps his fingers around his length, guiding it to my mouth, dragging the tip around my lips. “You want that, baby girl? Spend our days in love and our nights in sin?”

“Yes, sir.”

He inhales sharply, grabs my hair tightly, wrenches my head back, and thrusts his cock into my mouth. A guttural moan slips from his throat as I struggle to take him in, his taste bursting in my mouth, the salty-sweet flavor of his pre-cum making me desperate for more. He digs his fingers into my scalp, holding me still as he pistons into my throat while I fight against the tears stinging my eyes. With every movement, an animalistic pleasure crawls across his face, and it’s the most beautiful fucking thing I’ve ever seen.

“Fuck,” he breathes out, and I revel in his pleasure, swirling my tongue around his length, sucking so hard my cheeks hollow out, and there’s barely enough air reaching my lungs. But I don’t care. I choose his pleasure over oxygen.

He buries his hands deeper in my hair and pumps into my mouth, harder with each thrust. He grunts out his pleasure, and I fight not to gag, his cock hitting the back of my throat every time. But after a few more strokes, he pulls out of me with one last moan before letting go of me completely.

Grabbing my shoulders, he yanks me up into his arms, my legs wrapping around his thick waist, his cock brushing against my slit, sending a bolt of lust shooting up my core.

His eyes darken with lust and something more primal, something I recognize as the inherent need to possess me. The same need I share for him.

He carries me across the room and slams me down on the bed, sliding his hands underneath my thighs and yanking me to the edge, prying my legs open with a strength that leaves me breathless. His eyes are wild with desire, his gaze sweeping down my body, stilling at the apex of my thighs.

I anticipate feeling his mouth on my sex, my body already primed for the pleasure of it, but instead, I feel his hands between my thighs, his fingers spreading my pussy lips open for him. I lean my head to the side so I can look down, and he's on his knees between my legs, staring at my pussy in front of him, licking his lips. My breath hitches as I feel his gaze burn through me like fire.

“You know what I love most about your wet cunt?” He slants his head, his voice a low rumble of desire and heat. “The fact that it's all wet and swollen just for me,” he rasps before bending his head and pressing a kiss to my clit, firm but gentle, then slowly licking down to my entrance and back up.

My back bows off the bed, my legs shaking as waves of pleasure wash over me with each flick of his tongue.

He inhales deeply. “God, I love smelling sex between your legs.”

“Nicoli,” I moan, my body craving to be filled.

“I want to make you come like this,” he rasps, his warm breath tingling against my wet flesh. “I want to taste your cum on my tongue, worship your cunt.” He slides a finger inside me, wrapping his lips around my clit, sucking it only once, causing me to quiver. “Then I'm going to desecrate it.”

“Oh, God.” I love it when he says such wicked things. Words like that are like a one-way ticket to sin between my legs.

He slides a second finger into me, his face pressed into my folds as he hungrily sucks and licks, causing my back to arch. Each stroke is like a lightning strike between my legs, his

mouth devouring me with relentless fervor. I grip the bedsheets tightly, shaking uncontrollably on the brink of an explosion. It's impossible to contain all the sensations he's forcing into me, and it's threatening to tear me apart. But then he slows his rhythm, purposely not allowing me over the edge.

"Your body is so fucking perfect," he growls, wrapping his arms underneath my waist, gripping my ass firmly in his strong hands, lifting my hips off the bed, shoulders pinned on the mattress. A breath escapes my lungs when he kisses the inside of my thigh where my scar is—tracing his tongue along the marred flesh, licking like he's trying to make it his, trying to remove the mark of pain by replacing it with his branding of pleasure.

"Tell me how much you need me, Mira," Nicoli demands, rubbing his thumb against my clit in slow, deliberate circles.

"You know I do. I've always needed only you." My voice is barely above a whisper.

"Say it again," he orders, his touch becoming more insistent, pushing me closer to the edge of ecstasy.

"Please. I need you inside me."

"God, you're so fucking beautiful like this," Nicoli murmurs, his breath hot against my skin.

"Nicoli, you better make me come, or I swear I'll—"

Three fingers are forced into me, the sensation cutting off every thought. "Or you'll what?"

"Please, Nicoli."

I slip my hands into his hair, tugging him closer as I press myself to him. He eats me ravenously, tongue-fucking me like he's starved, his lips kissing and mouth sucking like he'd die of hunger if he didn't.

As his tongue continues to fuck me, I can't help but let out a moan. The sensation is electric, sending sparks of pleasure dancing across my body. He licks and teases me, his skillful mouth working its magic on my sensitive flesh. All thoughts

of control and restraint vanish from my mind, replaced by a need so powerful that every nerve-ending screams for release.

“Nicoli,” I whimper, gripping his hair tighter, and I lift my knees, clenching my thighs from the pressure of a looming orgasm that will erupt at any moment. “Don’t stop, please.”

“Such a greedy little slut, aren’t you?” he growls, flicking his tongue against my clit with a precision that sends shivers down my spine. “You want it so bad, you’re shaking.”

“Oh, fuck, don’t stop.” I’m helpless under his control, and it’s exhilarating. “Make me come.”

“So fucking gorgeous when you beg like that. You’re about to lose your mind, aren’t you?”

I nod, unable to form words as the pressure inside me reaches a fever pitch.

“Then come for me, baby girl.”

It’s like my body has been waiting for his permission, unleashing a pleasure that crashes over me like a tidal wave of ecstasy.

“Fuck, Nicoli!” I cry, my nails digging into his shoulders as my orgasm rips through me, leaving me shattered and whole all at once.

“Such a good girl,” he praises, his voice low and dangerous. “Now, let’s see how much more you can take.”

Before I can catch my breath, he’s lifting me off the bed, my thighs wet from the orgasm that’s still lingering in my bones.

Guiding me to stand in front of the floor-length mirror, he slips in behind me, his chest pressing against my back and cock hard against my ass. I’m still panting, my insides desperate for air, but when I see our reflection in the mirror, a new desire flares inside me. With disheveled hair and flushed cheeks, Nicoli and I are the epitome of passion at this moment. My nipples are hard, my pussy glistening, and my body is covered in a sheen of sweat.

“Look at you,” he commands, his voice thick with lust. “You’re an exquisite little whore, aren’t you? My beautiful, filthy wife.”

“I’m your whore.”

“Hmm,” he growls. “Say that again.”

My eyes are etched on his in our reflection. “I’m your whore, Nicoli Del Rossa.”

He groans, pressing his lips to my shoulder, easing a palm against my spine, gently urging me to bend forward at the waist, my hands bracing against the cold glass of the mirror.

“Keep your eyes on us,” he demands. “You’re going to watch me fuck you.”

My breathing is ragged and uneven, anticipation coursing through my veins with every beat of my heart. The reflection in the mirror shows my parted lips and his wild eyes, his gaze dark and predatory, and his body taut with restrained power.

He grips my hip with one hand, fingers biting into my flesh. Without warning, he slams into me, his cock filling me so completely that I almost lose my balance. I cry out, the sudden mixture of pain and pleasure sending shockwaves through my body.

“Fuck!” I gasp, gripping the mirror’s edges as I struggle to keep my footing.

“Look at yourself,” Nicoli orders, his voice dripping with authority. “See how perfect you are for me, how well you take me.”

As he thrusts into me again, I watch my own face contort with ecstasy, our bodies moving together in perfect harmony. I can’t tear my eyes away from the sight, the overwhelming sensations threatening to consume me entirely.

“Tell me how it feels,” he demands, his hips slamming against mine with brutal force.

“God, Nicoli,” I moan, my mind reeling from the sheer intensity of the moment. “It...it feels so fucking good.”

“It’s because you were made for me, Hummingbird. Your mind, your body, your pussy,” he grunts, his control slipping ever so slightly as passion overtakes him. “Every single part of you is irrevocably mine.”

The words echo through my head, each syllable resonating deep within my soul.

“Yours,” I manage to gasp out between ragged breaths.

His grip on my hips tightens, his fingers digging into my flesh as he fucks me like a savage. Each powerful thrust sends spasms of pleasure throughout my body, with the rhythmic impact of his thighs slapping against my ass resounding through the room. The primal force of his thrusts has my heels lifting off the plush carpet, my legs unstable, trembling beneath me. The way he takes control, asserting his dominance over me, it all makes my heart race in this perfect chaos we make together.

“Ah, Nicoli,” I whimper, barely able to form words as my mind swims with ecstasy. “Please...harder.”

“Fuck,” he growls, snaking his arm across my back, his palm gripping my shoulder, pushing me down whenever he slams into me. I cry out as pleasure overwhelms me, and the sensations become too intense to bear. My body begins to quiver with delight as a wave of bliss crashes through my veins—it’s almost too much for me, and I’m struggling to contain it, struggling to keep my legs from giving way beneath me.

“Nicoli!” My vision blurs as my body quivers uncontrollably. “I’m... oh, God, I’m gonna come!”

“Then come for me, baby,” he snarls, his eyes locked on to mine in the mirror. “Show me how fucking good my cock makes you feel.”

That’s all it takes. His words are the catalyst that sends me spiraling over the edge. My climax crashes over me, my entire being consumed by the sheer intensity of it. As I scream his name, my nails dig into the mirror’s frame, gripping on to anything I can find for support.

“So beautiful when you come for me,” he murmurs, his voice laced with pride and ownership.

“Only for you,” I pant, my breaths coming in ragged gasps. And even as the aftershocks of my orgasm continue to ripple through me, I know that no matter what darkness lies ahead, we’ll face it together—bound by our love and the undeniable power we hold over one another.

My body still trembles from my release, and I watch our reflection in the mirror—Nicoli’s imposing figure pressing into me from behind, every muscle roped, skin glistening from exertion. His eyes are filled with lustful desire as he drives his cock deeper inside me, the intensity of his thrusts echoing through the room.

He’s consumed. Possessed. Completely powerless against his primal need for release.

“Fuck, Mira,” he growls, his voice strained with need. “You feel so goddamn good.”

“I need you to come for me,” I murmur. “I need to feel your release inside me.”

His hands grip my hips tighter, seemingly driven wild by my words, and I fucking love it. I love how his face darkens as lust consumes him.

“Jesus, baby. Say that again,” he demands, his breath hot on my neck.

“I need it,” I moan. “Give me your cum, Nicoli.”

“Fuck,” he hisses, his thrusts becoming more powerful and deliberate. “I’m gonna give you every last drop.” He roars, and as he slams into me one final time, I feel him stiffen, the force of his release filling me in a way that leaves no doubt of his possession. His guttural cry of pleasure fills the room, and I can’t help but smile, knowing I’ve given him what he craves just as much as I do.

“Mine,” he pants, his chest heaving against my back as we both struggle to catch our breath. “My vengeful queen. I’ll make sure you get the blood you deserve,” he murmurs with a

darkness laced through his words. “He will bleed out at your feet.”

The prospect of finally getting revenge, it’s exhilarating, and by God, it turns me the fuck on, sending a wave of power through my veins. I reach up, weaving my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer against my back. “Promise me something.”

“Anything,” he breathes against the nape of my neck.

“Promise that it will be me.” I turn in his embrace to face him, slipping my arms around his shoulders. “Promise me that I’ll be the one to kill him.”

His face takes on a hard edge, the sharp corners of his jawline illuminated by moonlight. He looks down at me with intense eyes and nods slowly.

“I swear it,” he says firmly before capturing my lips in an urgent kiss. It’s filled with passion and promise of vengeance that will soon be ours for the taking.

Chapter Eighteen

Present

As I step into the abandoned warehouse, the air clings to me, heavy with the stench of decay and neglect. Working lights are strung up all around the edges of the structure in neat rows. The illumination cuts deep into the room's darkness, casting shadowed lines on everything it touches. My gaze sweeps across the vast, empty space, my heart pounding with anticipation. We've all waited for this moment, but only Mira and I feed ravenously on the promise of revenge.

I find him hanging from a heavy chain bolted to the ceiling. Nunzio's face is ashen white, his naked chest drenched in sweat, his pants stained with blood from the wound in his leg. For a moment, I remain still, watching him, taking in the scene of a man I have hunted for months. A man who took the one thing I love most—the one person God has put on this Earth for me and me alone. He hurt her. He tortured her. He violated her in ways only a monster could. He stole our peace from us, and he broke my hummingbird. But little did he know that, like a phoenix, she would rise from the ashes and come out stronger, more beautiful...and more deadly.

Everyone's here. Alexius. Caelian. Isaia. Maximo. We stand together, a wall of power. We are the Dark Sovereign, a society of men, a family, who the Ferreros have been targeting for years, trying to be what and who we are. But they will never be us because we don't find our strength in bloodshed,

tyranny, and cruelty. We find strength in each other. In our family.

Mira clears her throat behind me, making me aware of her presence. I glance at her as she steps in next to me, her blonde hair falling over her shoulders. The red of her dress is a striking contrast to her ivory skin, glowing, radiant, dazzling.

She looks up at me, her green irises filled with so much strength and power that it takes my breath away.

“You ready for this, Hummingbird?”

She nods. “Tonight, this ends,” she says, and I take her hand, bring it to my lips, and kiss it softly.

“Tonight, this ends.”

Together, we walk toward the others, Mira’s eyes trained on Nunzio. There is no sign of fear or panic or hesitation in her. She’s gleaming with confidence, draped in a dangerous mystique that makes her all the more captivating.

“You follow my lead until you’re ready,” I whisper as we approach him, and she simply nods before taking a seat on a chair Maximo has placed next to him, especially for her.

“Looks like you’ve seen better days, Nunzio,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm as I approach him.

His mouth curves into a defiant smile, but it lacks conviction as pain washes over him. “It’s a minor setback.”

“Didn’t think you’d end up like this, did you?” I sneer, staring into his eyes filled with fear and pain.

“Fuck you, Del Rossa,” he spits back, defiance still present in his tone despite his weakened state.

I scoff. “Arrogant till the end.”

“Who says this is the end?”

“You think you have a chance of walking out of here alive?”

“No,” he responds, then takes a heavy breath. “But I know my ghost will haunt you and your pretty wife long after you’ve

buried me.”

“You think we’re going to bury you? No.” I go to stand in front of him, placing my hands in my pants pockets. “We’re going to cut you up in nice bite-sized chunks and feed you to the pigs.”

Nunzio remains silent, his head hanging down, spit and snot dripping from his nose and mouth. He looks pathetic and weak, and I have to say that humiliation suits him perfectly.

My eyes narrow as I focus on the blood pooling beneath him, originating from the gunshot wound in his leg. I lean down and yank the rope Maximo had so carefully tied around his upper thigh until it cut into his skin, stopping the blood flow and preventing him from slipping away too soon. There is no way we are going to let him die this easily.

When I straighten, I glimpse a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. “That’s the thing about revenge,” he starts. “It doesn’t last. You can try to prolong my death and make me suffer, but eventually, I will die. You’ll feed me to the pigs, and this will all be over.” He manages to lift his head to look me in the eye. “Revenge doesn’t last, but memories do. And I’ve given your pretty wife enough memories to last her a lifetime.”

I barely think before I fly into action, my fist a blur of motion as it crashes into his gut with all the force I can muster. A deep groan escapes his lips, and saliva explodes out from between them while I’m filled to bursting with an uncontrollable rage that begs for release. My hands ball into iron-hard fists, trembling with anger and the urge to do more. But I remind myself that I won’t be the one to make him pay for what he’s done—not entirely. That honor belongs to Mira. But goddamn, do I want to break him.

I glance at her sitting on the chair, watching us. Her toned leg is showcased through the daring slit of her red dress, tantalizing me with each graceful crossing and uncrossing of her legs. Her expression is that of beautiful calm, rich with control, but I recognize the wicked glint in her irises.

“Is that all you got?” he taunts, coughing some more.

“No. But as much as I want to gut you, carve out your spine, and hack out your lungs, your blood isn’t mine to spill.” My voice is low and menacing. “And the thought of my wife extracting her revenge from your veins fills me with so much satisfaction, it’s giving me a fucking hardon.”

“Your precious wife,” Nunzio spits, venom in his words. “You really think she has it in her to hurt me?”

“Hurt you? No, motherfucker. She’s going to fucking kill you.”

“Can’t wait to see how she humiliates herself trying,” Nunzio taunts, his sneer making his paled face look even sicklier.

I take hold of his cheeks with my fingers like iron vise grips, determined to bruise and break his fucking face. My voice is low and menacing as I speak. “You are nothing but a wasted piece of shit. You think raping and beating women makes you powerful? It makes you nothing more than a goddamn psychopath who has a special fucking corner in hell.”

I let go of him with a jerk, the chains complaining above him. And as I look at him hanging there, his breaths ragged and shallow, I know that Mira will be the one to break him. The thought of her hands on him, punishing him for his sins, both terrifies and excites me. It’s a delicate, dark dance I can’t wait to witness.

“Enjoy your final moments, Nunzio,” I whisper, stepping away from him, my eyes never leaving his. “You don’t have many left.”

And as I watch him struggle against his bounds, I feel a sense of morbid satisfaction, knowing that soon, he’ll be at the mercy of the woman he tried to destroy. And she won’t show him any.



MIRA

THIS MOMENT IS ALMOST SURREAL.

I've dreamt of it so many times, lain awake at night wondering how it would feel to see him weak, vulnerable, defenseless—just like I was. Just like all the other women he's ever hurt, and I bet there's a lot. Psychopaths and monsters like him thrive on fear and pain. It's what makes them feel strong. It gives them the illusion of power when, in fact, they're nothing but a flawed version of God's creation.

I sit on a wooden chair, my gaze unwavering as I watch Nunzio's sickening form dangle from the ceiling, his pants soaked in blood. There's no sign of the shirt he had on earlier, and a grotesque bruise spreads across his ribs. I'm sure he has my brother to thank for that. Even though they were told not to touch him, I know the Del Rossa brothers and Maximo gave him a good fucking beating. He deserves their wrath. He deserves mine more.

A coldness settles deep within me, hardening my heart and fueling my thirst for revenge. My body trembles with a violent rage as I clench my fists and feel the icy chill of hatred plunge into my core. This man came close to taking everything from me. Revenge may not right all wrongs, but it'll make me feel better knowing that this bastard has suffered something, too.

"He's all yours, baby." Nicoli's voice is low and dangerous and sends a thrill across my skin. He hands me a wickedly sharp knife, its handle cool and heavy in my grasp.

I remain seated, tapping the blade of the knife on the armrest. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* I'm making sure I commit every little detail of the scene before me to memory. I don't want to forget a single second of it.

He doesn't look at me. He keeps his head hanging down, snot dripping from his nose.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Eventually, he looks up. “You gonna annoy me to death with that tapping, birdie?”

“I hope not,” I say, leaning my head to the side as I watch him. “I’m just thinking, there’s something wrong with this picture, but I just can’t put my finger on it.”

“You’re not on your knees sucking my dick, that’s what’s wrong with this picture.”

Nicoli growls beside me, about to launch forward when I shoot to my feet, stopping him. Rage is rippling from every inch of his body; his mouth pulls in a snarl as he glares at Nunzio, ready to tear his heart out. I can’t imagine the kind of hell his emotions are wreaking inside him as he tries to control his anger. It has to be the hardest thing he’s ever had to do, and he’s doing it for me.

“It’s okay, Nicoli,” I say, giving him a reassuring look. I know this is hard for him not to be able to kill Nunzio himself. Nicoli is a man of pride, of violence, a man who bathes in authority just like his twin. It’s in his blood to demand penitence from those who have wronged him, and even though I’m the victim of Nunzio’s sickness, Nicoli was wronged, too. This world is about power, and everything is bent here in a way that constraint is seen as weakness. But I know better. To me, my husband’s control is the epitome of power, love, and our unbreakable bond.

My heels click across the concrete floor, the sound ricocheting through the empty, abandoned building. Nunzio smells like sweat and humiliation, the stench of shame reeking from his pores. “I think I know what’s wrong with this picture.” I untie the rope around his leg, letting it fall to the floor, fresh blood leaking from the wound. And without taking my eyes off his, I place the blade between my teeth and start to unbutton his pants.

“You gonna play with my dick before you send me to hell, birdie?”

I yank his pants down, remove the knife from my mouth, and step back.

“You’re a feisty one,” I start, allowing the memory to seep through. “And I need your cooperation, which means I need to weaken your confidence, hence why you’re naked.”

It takes him a moment to realize I just quoted him, word for fucking word. A grin starts creeping up on his ugly face, and he lets out a laugh before looking at Nicoli. “You see, Del Rossa? I told you I gave her a fuckton of memories. She remembers it like it was yesterday.”

Nicoli’s jaw clenches. His nostrils flare. And the vein in his neck bulges with rage.

“Maybe if you fuck her better, she’ll forget about how good I made her feel.”

I slice the knife across his chest in one swift, precise motion, blood instantly spilling tears of red down his stomach. He doesn’t scream, which is disappointing, but his face contorts in pain as he hisses, and my soul eats it up like it’s mana from Heaven.

With another single violent swish, the knife draws its path across his exposed skin—this time slicing into muscle lower on his stomach. I angle the blade so that I don’t dig too deep, knowing if I do, he might bleed out before I’m done.

There are blood splatters on my hand—only a few specks, but Lord help me, the sight soothes something in me, like it’s slowly healing an open sore that’s been infected for months. Revenge courses through my veins like liquid fire, and I can’t suppress the sadistic smile that creeps across my lips.

My gaze rakes across the fresh cuts on his stomach and chest, blood oozing from them, dripping on his ugly, limp dick as he hangs naked. Ugly. Revolting.

“Is that the worst you can do, birdie?” He challenges me, but his breaths are labored, sweat beading across his skin. Every inch of him is marred with suffering, and it’s the most beautiful sight.

I let the flat side of the blade dance across his battered skin two more times, watching him flinch at its touch. “You thought breaking me would make me weak. You were wrong.”

“You sure look like a broken doll to me,” he hisses, his eyes narrowing as he tries to maintain control over the pain. “It’s only the bold and the broken who crave blood. You, birdie, are not bold.”

“I’m not the one about to die...am I?”

“That says nothing,” he hisses. “You’re gonna kill me, but I’ll still haunt your dreams. My face will still be what you see when your husband fucks you, and you’re going to think of him, wishing it was my bloodstained cock fucking your ass.”

Nicoli roars behind me—guttural and brutal, a violent tenor of rage rippling from his throat. He launches forward, a knife in hand, and jabs the blade into Nunzio’s thigh, hacking it up...and up...Nunzio’s screams ringing through the warehouse, mingling with the thrumming of my own heartbeat in my ears. Nicoli tears the knife from his thigh only to stab it back into the already gaping flesh, blood gushing from the wound.

It’s everywhere. On Nicoli’s hands, the floor, my dress. And as I witness the anger on my husband’s face, I realize it’s unfair of me to expect him not to get his pound of flesh simply because I want it all for myself. I’ve been obsessed with getting my revenge. I lost sight of Nicoli’s hunger for it, too. So I step back, watching as Nicoli unleashes his worst.

Nunzio’s screams reach a fever pitch, and I glance at Maximo, recognizing the ruthless desire for blood on his face. Our eyes lock, and I nod, giving him the permission he needs from me. He charges toward Nicoli, who is still savagely shredding Nunzio’s flesh, and my brother roars as his blade penetrates Nunzio’s other thigh, slicing it open.

Alexius, Caelian, and Isaia all circle around our enemy, every one of them cutting and stabbing him, his monster screams filling the open space around us. Like avenging angels, the Dark Sovereign takes back the control this man has stolen from all of us. This isn’t just my battle, my war. It’s theirs, too. It’s ours. We’ve all been fighting it. And now we’re all claiming victory over it.

I have no idea how Nunzio is surviving this gruesome onslaught, but I'm thankful he does. His agonized screams penetrate my soul, and that open sore inside me continues to heal. It's a beautiful relief. An exquisite peace that fills me to the brim. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before.

Blood pools around Nunzio's feet, its sickly sweet aroma seeping into the air.

Nunzio's cries start to fade, and I yell, "Stop!"

Like a machine, the five men stop abruptly, all at once, Nunzio going limp as he hangs from the chains. His body is a plowed land, his legs and shoulders mauled, carved and hacked, his flesh gaped open, but none of them stabbed him in the chest or abdomen, somehow avoiding major organs and arteries. All these years of blood and violence have molded them into skilled killers. And now, they've left me the death blow.

I walk up to Nunzio, his head hanging down, lifeless and brutalized. My heart is beating impossibly fast, but this unexplainable calm stems from within me.

Nicoli moves in behind Nunzio, grabbing his hair and yanking it back. "Look at her!" he demands. "Look. At. Her."

With a labored breath, Nunzio opens his eyes, but the life in them is already half gone.

My pulse quickens, adrenaline flooding my system as I stare into the eyes of the monster. I lean closer, pressing my blade against his throat as I whisper, quoting him one final time, "We had some fun times, Nunzio. But I'm afraid it has now come to an end."

Slow, precise, controlled, I drag the blade across his throat, blood starting to spurt more and more as the cut grows. Searing crimson spills out of him, the blood warm, wet, and slick on my hands as I continue to carve the life from his veins.

The sensation sends a shiver down my spine, each droplet of crimson reminding me of how I survived a monster like Nunzio Ferrero, how I refused to break. And now...it's over.

It's finally...over.

His eyes widen in horror, his body convulsing as gargled sounds choke in his throat, his final moments of life gripped with pain, torture, and the horror of dying by a woman's hand.

I stand back, seeing Nunzio's lifeless body hanging limply from the chain, a pool of crimson forming beneath him. A strange sense of satisfaction washes over me, and I finally feel like I've reclaimed control over my own life.

Nicoli is watching me, his gaze piercing me to the core, those blue irises the only beacon of hope in the darkness that's slowly fading away.

"Nicoli," I say breathlessly, my voice heavy with emotion as exhaustion floods me. "It's over. He's gone."

"It's over, Hummingbird."

My legs give way, and I collapse, Nicoli catching me just in time. "I got you, baby girl," he murmurs, holding me tight. "I got you."

Epilogue

Nicoli helps me out of the limo, his hands tracing down my bare arms, sending feather-light shivers across my skin. He leans his head to the side as his gaze drops to my plunging neckline, gently brushing his thumb along the exposed curve of my breast.

“You look stunning, Hummingbird.” His voice is warm and deep, his hooded gaze sweeping over me. “I have a feeling I’ll be walking out of here with blood on my hands.” A shiver runs down my spine at the possessive gleam in his eyes.

I can’t help but smile, feeling my cheeks flush under his heated gaze. I’ve been in love with Nicoli for as long as I can remember. How could I not? He’s a force of nature, all sharp edges and dangerous charisma. By simply looking at me the way he does now, he makes me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

The outside lights scattered around the building bathe his features in alluring shadows, his blue irises glittering with sensual mischief under the yellow glow.

I take a deep breath, and the distinctive aroma of his cologne mixed with his own unique scent fills my lungs. A wave of desire rushes over me, excitement bubbling inside me, thinking of the night ahead.

He leans closer, his breath warm against my neck. “Are you wearing panties?”

I bite my bottom lip and nod, feeling the heat flush to my cheeks.

He drops to his knees and carefully slides the skirt of my dress up with his fingers, allowing the fabric to float over my legs before resting on my waist, exposing my red lace thong.

“What if someone sees us?”

He peppers kisses along my thigh. “Let them see. As long as every person here knows you’re mine.”

His fingers tease me through the thin material, making me moan with pleasure. “If you keep on like this, you’ll make me come before we’ve even set foot inside.”

“Oh, baby girl, it’ll be the first of many.” As he hooks his fingers into the sides of my panties, he eases the lace down, and I gasp when he gently kisses my bare sex, sending shockwaves of desire through my core.

“Now you’re not playing fair.”

“I don’t remember fair being part of our plans for tonight.” He reaches around my waist, both palms cupping my ass, squeezing as he presses his nose against the slit of my pussy, inhaling deep before growling his delight. Without saying a word, he slides the skirt of my dress back down and straightens while I’m two seconds away from demanding he fuck me against the goddamn limo.

His lips part in a knowing smirk, and he looks at me with those blue eyes shining brighter than ever. “You ready to enter the castle of sin?”

“You know I am.”

We step into Myth, and my heart is racing with excitement. I never thought this day would come when Nicoli would finally bring me here. I’ve wondered and dreamed about this place ever since I learned of its existence. A place where desires are embraced and pleasure is the ultimate goal.

The scent of exotic vanilla and jasmine fills my senses as we enter through the large double doors. And the erotic energy in the air immediately wraps around me like a blanket of pleasure, smothering me in hot anticipation.

A large chandelier drips with crystals, casting a seductive glow over the entire area, my eyes adjusting to the low lighting as I take in the scene before me. People of all shapes and sizes mingle, laughing and chatting while sipping their drinks. The air is thick with expectation, and I feel my body responding to the charged atmosphere.

It's elegant pristine, with an underlying edge of decadence. It's like an entirely different world we're stepping into, a world of freedom and indulgence without the chains of society's limitations.

I can feel myself getting more and more aroused as I take it all in. The scent of sex is thick in the air, and I can't help but wonder what kind of pleasure awaits me.

I hook my hand into the crook of Nicoli's elbow. Everyone's eyes are on us as we descend the staircase. I can feel their gazes like a physical touch, sending a thrill up my spine. But rather than feel shy or self-conscious, I feel empowered by their attention, knowing that Nicoli is one of the Dark Sovereign Kings and I'm the woman he chooses to have at his side. His wife. His queen.

"You see all the men looking at you?" Nicoli tightens his elbow as if to lock my hand between his arm and body. "They're wondering what's beneath your dress."

"Thanks to you, nothing," I reply, hyperaware that I'm naked underneath and how my thighs brush together.

As we walk, the palpable desire in the room spins around me like a web. I'm caught in it, and I'm not sure I want to escape. My heart is pounding so hard that I can hear it in my ears. The people around us part like the Red Sea, giving way as we pass. It's as if there's a force field around us, like we're two bodies orbiting each other, completely separate from the rest of the room.

Nicoli leads me through the throng of people, his touch reassuring in a way I can't quite explain. The excitement and thrill of what's to come wash over me in waves.

As Nicoli guides me down a dimly lit hallway to one of the private rooms, my pulse thrums with eager anticipation. He pushes the heavy wooden door open, allowing me to enter first.

No one is in the room except for a naked woman kneeling in the center, her wrists bound behind her back and a black blindfold covering her eyes.

Anticipation slides into arousal, heat pooling between my thighs as I take in the room. A queen bed with red silk sheets is on the opposite wall, and a large, ornate mirror stands in the corner next to a table with an array of whips, paddles, crops, and chains. The shelves are bursting with a variety of different toys—whatever your imagination can conjure, you'll find it here. This room lays out all the possibilities to make your dreams a reality.

Nicoli shuts the door behind us, the sound of the lock clicking into place, sealing us in our own little world.

“First, the rules,” he starts, sliding his suit jacket off his shoulders and tossing it over the black velvet chaise. “Rule number one. Your pussy is mine. The only cock fucking you is mine or those unattached to a male body.”

I snicker. “I’m more than okay with that.”

Nicoli removes his tie and unbuttons his collar. “Rule number two. My cock is yours and no one else’s. I’m not fucking pussy unless it’s yours.”

I lick my lips, my heart swelling in my chest, loving the fact that he’s mine and mine alone. I glance at our friend sitting as quietly as a mouse on her knees. “She knows the rules?”

Nicoli nods. “She knows not to say a word and to do exactly as she’s told. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I circle the woman, trailing a fingertip along her shoulder. She shivers but remains silent and unmoving, the perfect submissive waiting to be used for our pleasure. As I still in front of her, I lift her face upward with a single finger under

her chin. She's beautiful. A redhead, her skin flawless and pale. I wonder what color eyes she has. Blue? Green? Amber?

“What is her name?”

Nicoli goes to stand behind her. “Celia.”

“She can nod when answering a question?”

“Yes.”

I drag my thumb along her bottom lip. “Are you eager to play with us, Celia?”

A red curl slides down her shoulder as she nods.

“Good.”

Nicoli stalks toward me, forcing me away from her and backing me up against the wall. He cages me in, one hand on either side of my head, and claims my mouth, his lips devouring mine in a passionate kiss that blazes through me like a volcanic eruption, branding my mouth with its heat. Nicoli nips at my bottom lip before whispering against my mouth, “You are my wife, and I love you more than anything in this world. Nothing will ever change that. What happens here tonight is for our enjoyment together.” He slips a hand between my thighs, brushing his fingertips upward until he touches my bare pussy, causing me to gasp. “In our bedroom, I control you. I control your body, your moans when you come. I control everything. But in here, tonight, nothing happens unless you demand it. Understood?”

A thrill shoots through me at the command in his tone.

“Yes,” I whisper, and he slips a finger inside me, the sensation taking me by surprise.

“Your cunt is drenched,” he rasps, his thumb finding my clit. “Does the idea of controlling Celia turn you on, Hummingbird?”

There's no use in denying it. “Yes.”

Nicoli studies me for a moment before stepping back, and I drop my dress to pool around my red heels. Desire darkens

Nicoli's gaze as he takes me in, admiring every curve of my body as if it's the first time he's laid eyes on me.

"How about you take a seat over there," I murmur, pointing to the black chaise. "But take your pants off first."

Tonight, we'll remind each other of who we belong to, Nicoli and I. And this woman, she'll be our conduit, the instrument of our pleasure.

I saunter over to the woman, acutely aware of Nicoli's gaze on my naked body. His desire for me is a heady aphrodisiac, fueling my own need to dominate and control.

I trail my fingers down the woman's cheek, enjoying the way she leans into my touch. "Do you want me?" I purr, circling one taut nipple.

She nods, and I pinch the nipple and twist sharply. Her back arches, hips jerking. I smirk, glancing at Nicoli. His eyes are hooded, hand wrapped around his cock as he strokes himself lazily.

The thought of this turning him on sends another rush of heat between my thighs.

"Get on the bed, Celia."

She's on her feet, and I place my hands on her shoulders, guiding her to sit on the edge of the bed. She truly is beautiful, her skin flawless, her breasts just the right size, her hourglass curves enough to entice any man...or woman.

I lean closer to her ear, purposely showing my ass in Nicoli's direction. "You're a beautiful woman, Celia," I whisper, gliding a finger along her collarbone and down to her tits. "Are you wet for us?"

She nods, and I smirk, glancing at Nicoli as I allow my fingers to dip down and delve between her legs, parting them so he can have a good look. He bites his bottom lip as he watches, and desire flares inside me when I touch her pussy lips, sliding a finger through her wet sex. She's soaked, her inner thighs coated with her arousal.

I thrust two fingers into her dripping cunt, reveling in the way she clenches around them. I can't resist the urge to look at Nicoli, his lips parted slightly in appreciation for what he's seeing.

Curling my fingers, I stroke that sweet spot deep inside until she's writhing on the edge of the bed, leaning her head to the side, her cheeks a seductive pink.

Only when she's teetering on the edge do I withdraw and place my glistening fingers to my lips. I straighten and face Nicoli, sucking one finger clean of Celia as he watches me, moaning at her taste.

Nicoli's hand is moving faster now, grip tight around his cock as I saunter to him. "Taste," I say, dragging my finger, still wet with Celia's juices, across Nicoli's lips, then slipping it in his mouth. He sucks on my finger hungrily, eyes bright with desire, and then releases it slowly before he grabs my arm and yanks me forward, slamming his lips onto mine in a fiery kiss. His tongue delves into me like he's searching for something deep inside while he continues to stroke his cock, moaning into my mouth.

We break apart, breathless and panting, my thighs wet and body humming.

"You're going to drive me insane tonight, aren't you, Hummingbird?"

"Madness is the goal, my love," I murmur, smiling as I walk back to Celia, anticipation thrumming through my veins.

"On your back, legs spread," I order, voice husky with desire.

She scrambles to obey, movements jerky in her haste. I follow leisurely, hips swaying, and climb onto the mattress to kneel between her thighs.

"You're going to be a good girl tonight, aren't you, Celia?" I trail a single fingertip down her torso, circling her navel before sliding lower. She arches into my touch with a strangled moan.

I dip my head and blow a stream of cool air over her swollen clit. Her hips jerk off the bed, a muffled shriek escaping her lips. I do it again. And again. Each burst of air ratchets the tension in her body higher until she's writhing uncontrollably, desperate for release.

"Baby girl," Nicoli starts as he stands from the chaise, walking toward the bed, his hard cock still in his palm. "You're going to drive the poor woman crazy."

I flick my hair over my shoulder and look at him. "You want me to lick her cunt?"

He reaches for the bar above the bed, grasping it, his arms outstretched, every muscle defined on his torso while his cock remains stiff and throbbing. "I want you to eat it."

Leaning down, my ass in the air, giving Nicoli the perfect view of my wet cunt, I lap at Celia's clit, slow and languid, savoring each jerk of her hips and every whimper that slips free. My tongue traces circles around her swollen bud, tasting her arousal as she shivers. Nicoli's deep groans of pleasure only make me hungrier for her, my breath hot on her delicate skin. I thrust two fingers into her dripping cunt, curling them and sealing my lips around her clit. Her hips writhe beneath me as I drive her closer to the brink of ecstasy with each stroke, my tongue exploring every inch of her.

The sounds of Nicoli's moans as he strokes himself fade into the background, my entire focus on the woman spread out before me.

Sucking hard, I drive her over the edge. Her back arches off the bed, thighs clamping around my head, as she comes with a muffled scream. I work her through the aftershocks, only withdrawing when she collapses limply against the mattress.

I raise my head and lick Celia's taste off my lips. Nicoli's gaze is hard, his pupils blown wide with lust, fist pumping furiously over his cock.

"My turn," I pant, relishing the sweet taste of this woman on my tongue. "On your knees, Celia," I order as I get off the

bed. She obeys, and with her hands tied behind her back, her cheek and shoulders are pressed against the mattress, her ass high in the air with her pussy blooming for us.

I walk over to the table with an array of toys on display. Choosing a pretty pink dildo, I lube it up and hand it to Nicoli. “This is how you’ll fuck her tonight.”

“You’re going to make me lose control.”

“I like the sound of that.”

He reaches out abruptly, gripping his fist in my hair and yanking my head back as he pulls me close. “If I come before you do, there will be hell to pay,” he warns darkly, and my pussy instantly throbs.

He lets go, positioning the toy at Celia’s entrance.

I wrap my hand around his wrist. “Not there.”

He pauses, gaze flickering to mine in question. I shake my head slightly and tap the dildo against her ass instead. Understanding dawns, followed quickly by heat.

Nicoli presses the toy into her hole in one smooth thrust, burying it to the hilt. A strangled cry escapes her, muscles clenching around the intrusion.

I release his wrist to trail my nails down his back. “Slowly. Let her feel every inch.”

He draws the dildo out in increments, watching avidly as her ass stretches to accommodate it. When only the tip remains inside, he pushes back in just as slowly. The woman whimpers, trembling under the onslaught of sensation.

“Again,” I order. Nicoli obeys, establishing a brutal pace of deep, penetrating strokes. The wet sounds of her ass being fucked fill the air together with her muffled cries.

I wrap my hand around Nicoli’s cock, stroking him in time with each thrust. Pre-cum slicks my movements, his entire body trembling with the effort to hold back. With Celia’s next moan, I slide in front of Nicoli, sitting on the edge of the bed as I take his cock in my mouth, causing him to groan.

“Jesus, fuck. Mira.” He stops moving the dildo in and out of Celia as he struggles to keep control, shutting his eyes, his cheeks flushed and body taut. I swallow him down to the hilt, my tongue playing over his hard length while I suck him with deep pulls. I’m high on power and lust, relishing the control I have over Nicoli. Celia is just an added bonus. I’m more focused on Nicoli and the bond we’ve shared for as long as I can remember.

A vise grip tightens in my hair, and he yanks me off his cock, slamming his hot mouth onto mine, kissing me like he’s starved. Our teeth clash, our tongues duel, our kiss so out of control and wild, it feels like the world is ending.

I break away and lean back, giving him a sultry smile. “Keep fucking her ass,” I murmur, giving him a vibrator to play with next before I slide onto the bed, perched up on the headboard, moving to sit with my legs spread in front of Celia. A part of me wishes I could remove her blindfold. I want to see her eyes when she sees me like this. I want to see desire swirl in their depths when she tongue fucks me. But this is one rule Nicoli has implemented that will be in place during every one of our visits here at Myth. No one sees. No one watches. Just us.

Nicoli shifts up, wrapping his hand in Celia’s red curls, lifting her head off the mattress and guiding her down until her face is buried in my pussy. A bolt of electricity slams against every bone in my body.

“Make my wife come,” he demands, his command clear. Her tongue delves between my folds, lapping at my clit with urgency. A bolt of electricity slams against every bone in my body, and I gasp at the sensation, watching her red curls brush against my thighs, her head bobbing as she licks me. I’m lost in the feeling of Celia’s tongue racing across my opening, plunging inside, causing me to tremble with the need for release.

Nicoli leans in to capture my nipple between his teeth, biting down just hard enough to make me moan. His hand grips my hip, controlling me as I rock against Celia’s mouth, pleasure coursing through my veins as I edge closer to the

climax. I'm overwhelmed with the sensations of dual pleasure, my muscles gripped tight. God, and the sounds we're making—it's fucking beautiful.

Nicoli releases my nipple, his tongue licking up my chest, along my throat until he reaches my ear. "Come for us, Hummingbird," he rasps. "Give Celia a taste of your sweet cum."

"Oh, God," I cry as I start to come, my body shuddering beneath their combined attention, heat and electricity bubbling off them both as they continue to wreak havoc all over my body. Nicoli slams his mouth on mine again, swallowing my moans. The dual sensations of her tongue and his kiss heighten the ecstasy, and I'm sure it will never stop as it grips tight around my every limb, my mind flooded with an all-consuming pleasure.

Nicoli holds me steady through the tremors, and by the time he releases me, Celia has slowed her rhythm on my pussy, clearly waiting for further instruction.

Breathless, I meet Nicoli's gaze, and a smug satisfaction lingers in his eyes, a reminder that my control here is nothing but a smokescreen. He's in control when it comes to me. He always has been and always will be, and I don't want it any other way.

"On your knees, baby girl," Nicoli demands, and I'm shivering with anticipation, new desire simmering in my veins.

Nicoli guides Celia on her back again and hands me the vibrator. "You're going to make her come with that while I fuck your cunt from behind."

Oh, my God. "I don't know if I can take much more."

"Baby." He touches my chin, a malicious, dark glint in his eyes. "You just have to." His hands are on my waist. "Move over her, baby girl."

I do as he says, my knees now next to hers as I loom over her. "Put that toy in her pussy," he demands, and I balance myself on my knees and one arm, using the other to slide the

vibrator into her, and I'm holding my breath as I watch her eager pussy take every inch.

Nicoli gets in behind me, and I cry out when I feel his tongue glide through my wet slit, from my entrance to my ass and back down.

Abruptly, his tongue is gone, replaced by the head of his cock, and I curse when he slams into me. "Fuck!"

"That's it, baby girl. Take all of me."

I gasp at the sudden impact, and he moves inside me with ease, making my eyes roll back in pleasure. With both his hands on my waist, Nicoli drives me back against him each time he rocks forward. I'm so swept away by his cock moving inside me with relentless thrusts.

"Don't stop fucking her," Nicoli commands behind me, and only then do I realize I'm so swept up by feeling him inside me I find it hard to focus on Celia.

With my elbow, I force Celia's legs wider, working the toy in and out of her pussy to the rhythm of Nicoli fucking me. Our moans and cries mix in the air, Nicoli's cock feeling exquisite as it slides against my swollen walls. I'm panting now, trying to match his pace and controlling Celia's pleasure at the same time.

I watch as the pink toy disappears into her greedy cunt, then slide it back out, and I position myself over her, leaning on my elbow to play with her clit. The three of us are all heavy pants, and sweaty bodies, writhing and shaking, fucking and indulging in some of the most intense fuckery I've ever experienced.

Nicoli is pounding into me.

Celia is writhing as I fuck her with the vibrator.

The three of us...we're fucking madness. We're chaos, about to set the world on fire around us.

Celia's moans turn into euphoric cries, her body writhing, arching her back.

“She’s waiting for permission,” Nicoli pants behind me. “Tell her to come.”

“Not yet,” I grit out, working her pussy hard and fast, her juices coating my fingers and palm, the toy soaked. The sound of our bodies slapping, Celia’s wet pussy being worked, and our heavy breaths and moans—it’s a filthy symphony, and I don’t want it to end.

“Baby girl,” Nicoli growls behind me, slamming into me deeper each time. “You better come before I do, or I swear to God I won’t make you come tonight. You’ll walk out of here with a throbbing pussy.”

He snakes his arm around my waist, his fingers finding my clit, and my legs start to quiver uncontrollably. “Come, woman. Make a mess on my cock.”

“Ah,” I moan. “Celia, come.”

As Nicoli plunges hard into me, Celia moves her hips faster to the vibrations of her toy—and then she’s screaming out, my cries following suit, and Nicoli’s growls thunder through our moans as we reach our climax together in a moment of sheer fucking ecstasy. The intensity is overwhelming, and the second my pleasure wanes, exhaustion crashes into me.

Nicoli grunts, his thrusts erratic, hitting so fucking deep it hurts as his cock jerks inside me, creaming me with his cum.

I collapse onto the bed, and Nicoli presses his front against my back. He yanks the blindfold off Celia’s eyes. “Out,” he orders, and without looking at us, she hurries off the bed and out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

“That was...in-fucking-sane,” I say breathlessly as Nicoli slips in behind me, snaking an arm around me tightly.

“Don’t get used to it,” he murmurs against the shell of my ear. “Sharing you isn’t my favorite thing in the world.” He presses a tender kiss to the back of my neck.

“You didn’t enjoy it?”

“Like fuck, I didn’t. It was amazing.” His lips are on my shoulder. “But if someone held a gun to my head, asking me to pick, I’d much rather have you all to myself.”

“Ooh. That’s an idea. A gun to your head. I should remember that for next time.”

“Okay, babe. As much as I love you and all this kinky fuckery, that’s where I’ll draw the line.”

“Ugh,” I groan out teasingly. “You’re no fun.”

“Mira?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re scaring me.”

I snicker, sliding my arm over his as he holds me. “Promise me it will always be this way.”

“Why would it ever change?”

“I dunno. We’ll have kids. Get old.”

“Kids?”

I turn to face him. “You want kids, don’t you?”

“You know I do. But the last time we had this conversation, you said you weren’t ready.”

“Not now. But maybe one day.”

Nicoli’s eyes sparkle with emotion, and he pulls me closer. “Well, kids or no kids. We will always engage in some epic, kinky fuckery. Guaranteed.”

I laugh, and he smiles as he stares down at me. “Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you’ll always love me and never get tired of my bullshit.”

I smile and kiss him gently as forever sings in my blood, tasting our happy ending on his lips. “I have always loved you, Li. And I always will.”

“Me too, Hummingbird. Me too.”

The end



This concludes Nicoli and Mira's story, but the Dark Sovereign world is far from over.

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Reckless

To Touch You

To Hate You

Standalones

Cruel God



All the way from Cape Town, South Africa, Bella J lives for the days when she's able to retreat to her writer's cave where she can get lost in her little pretend world of romance, love, and insanely hot bad boys.

Bella J is a Hybrid Author with both Self-Published and Traditional Published work. Even though her novels range from drama, to comedy, to suspense, it's the dark, twisted side of romance she loves the most.

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