



ACCIDENTAL *bride*

legally bound duet book one

CRISTINA
LOLLABRIGIDA

ACCIDENTAL BRIDE

Legally Bound Duet

OceanofPDF.com

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Blurb

Upholding the law was all Drake Walker ever wanted to do. Until he found himself married to the one person that could ruin him...

Alessandra Russo.

Daughter of the notorious mafia don.

Sheltered member of Chicago's elite.

Pawn.

She knows her life was never her own.

Hidden.

Abused.

Unloved.

The day her father announced she was to be wed to a stranger, she only hoped her unknown husband would save her from her dark and deprived life.

Now married to the city's top prosecutor, and the lead lawyer on the case against her brother, Alessandra finds herself in the balance of saving herself and saving her family. Relying on her submissive training to meet her

husband's deepest desires, she vows to do what she can to keep her unwilling Master happy, and both of them alive.

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Praise for Accidental Bride

I love this book! It's different from other BDSM. I like how the author combined BDSM and mafia together and put a twist on it. This is a good story. Nobody wants a cookie-cutter story, that's just boring...

J Jaxon

Oh wow!! This was an absolutely incredible story!!!! I couldn't put it down and read it in less than 12 hours. This had so many twists and turns that it kept me on edge at times. It was hot, sexy, and spicy! It was so so so good! Thanks so much for sharing this amazing story! The author has amazing talent! Also, it was nice to see the MC have curves. Loved this book!

Shaebaby

I enjoyed this story more because I read it out loud to my husband and we both enjoyed it. I've read over 30-some books in the last couple of months and afterward, I'll summarize to my hubby. This time I read it to him. Love it, love it, love it.

Ben Love Studstill

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Content Warning

Content warning:

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

Possible triggers/includes:

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

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To the User Story Authors

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Prologue

A TALL, BLEACH-BLONDE WOMAN WEARING A CRISP BLUE SKIRT SUIT cleared her throat and ran her tongue along her perfectly-straight teeth, ensuring no food debris was left behind from her quick lunch. The weather could be unpredictable in the Windy City, but she'd received a tip that couldn't be ignored.

With an umbrella in one hand and a handheld microphone in the other, she beamed a dazzling smile and waited for her cue. Her cameraman stood a few feet opposite her in a poncho with a boxy camera hoisted on his shoulder. He pointed at the red light to indicate they were rolling. Her earpiece crackled to life, relaying from the studio that her feed was live.

"Hi, I'm Megan Gordon. We're live from outside the Daley Center, where the evidentiary hearing in the trial of Marcello Russo, the son of crime boss Anthony Russo, has concluded. Jury selection begins next week, and the trial is set to begin next month."

She quickly brushed her wind-whipped locks behind her ear. The cameraman gestured behind her, indicating her intended subject had left the building. Megan greeted the tall, brown-haired man dressed in a finely-crafted Italian suit.

"Here comes lead prosecutor, Drake Walker." He was lost in thought, and she waved at him to grab his attention and quickly shuffled over. "Mr. Walker, can you update us on the Russo case?"

“No comment,” he bristled.

“Can’t you give us anything?” she pouted, but he didn’t seem interested. “Is it true that your position at the U.S. Attorney’s office depends on a favorable outcome? Are you worried about going up against a man with extensive influential connections? After all, Anthony Russo is a pillar of Chicago’s Italian community.”

Drake sighed and turned toward the eager reporter. “This is a case just like any other, Miss Gordon. I am confident in my abilities as a prosecutor. The evidence will speak for itself as it’s presented to the jury. I have no doubt that justice will be served in this matter.”

“We appreciate you taking the time to share with us.” She smiled into the camera, listening to a voice in her earpiece. “We were surprised to hear that Drake Walker, one of the most eligible bachelors in the city, is finally settling down. Many people are curious about who has captured your heart. Can you share any details about your lucky bride? Rumors say you’re marrying a family friend to appease the district attorney.”

A look of annoyance crossed his face. “I don’t think my fiancée would appreciate it if I divulged the details of our relationship on live TV.”

A voluptuous redhead, dressed in black from her ruched top and mini skirt to her heels with their trademark red sole, sauntered out of the building behind the reporter and Drake. The cameraman gained the reporter’s attention by signaling once again. She almost squealed in delight at the possibility of getting the young woman to join them.

“Miss Russo! Miss Russo! A moment of your time, please,” the reporter shouted as she walked up to Alessandra.

The redhead tried to hurry away and slipped as she stepped into a puddle. A pair of strong arms grabbed her around the waist and pulled her out of the path of a ride-share. Alessandra shyly bit her lip and looked up at her rescuer from beneath long lashes. Megan’s eyes sparkled with delight, as she couldn’t have planned a better setup if she tried.

“Are you okay?” Drake asked, wrapping his arms tighter around her as though afraid to let her go.

Unable to respond, Alessandra just nodded. She clung to his muscular biceps and stared into his eyes. Megan asked the same question twice before Drake and Alessandra sprang apart.

“Miss Russo, are you okay?”

“It’s Alessandra,” she mumbled.

“Of course.” Megan smiled. “Are you okay? Thankfully Drake was here to pull you to safety.”

“It was nothing,” Drake said humbly and let Alessandra go.

“Alessandra, can you tell us how your brother is holding up? How do you feel about the outcome of today’s hearing?”

“My brother means everything to me. It hurts that he has been denied bail, but I will remain strong for him.”

Megan observed the fiery gaze in Drake’s eyes as he became entranced by Alessandra’s words.

“Is it true that Marcello was acting on orders from your father, Anthony Russo?” the reporter asked.

“I can’t discuss family business.” Alessandra froze like a deer caught in headlights.

“So you’re not denying it?” The reporter smiled, ready for the kill.

“Miss Gordon,” Drake began, shifting the focus away from Alessandra. “Miss Russo has no comment.”

Alessandra looked up at Drake and flushed. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, Miss Russo.” Drake stiffened.

The segment ended as Megan’s earpiece crackled to life, and she was pleased with how well it went. The cameraman cut the feed and left the three in front of the courthouse.

Drake cleared his throat. “If you ladies will excuse me. Have a good day.”

“Is your fiancée aware of your relationship with Miss Russo?” Megan asked.

Drake rounded on her. “Excuse me?”

Megan held her hands up to ensure she meant no harm. “Off the record, Mr. Walker. I’d have to be blind not to see the attraction between you.”

In heels, Alessandra only stood as tall as Drake’s shoulder. Her face turned red once more as he gazed down at her. Megan studied their body language intently. She could sell the hell out of this story without trying.

“No comment,” he said without taking his eyes off Alessandra.

“Thank you, Drake,” she croaked and broke eye contact.

Although Drake seemed like he had more to say, he nodded and quickly departed. Alessandra immediately walked toward a sleek black town car that pulled up to the curb. An imposing figure stepped out to open the door for her.

She was unaware that Megan Gordon was not the sole witness to their conversation.

Chapter One

ANTICIPATION MADE ALESSANDRA GIDDY AS SHE REACHED FOR THE HEAVY veil. Turning the fabric over in her hands, she tried to picture the face of her husband-to-be. She hoped for a charming and adventurous man with tousled dark locks and captivating eyes who could sweep her off her feet.

Growing up, Alessandra fantasized about this day many times. She visualized the moments with her bridal party, sipping mimosas while getting their hair and makeup done. Family and friends would watch in reverence as she attempted to stifle happy tears while floating down the aisle to her groom—glowing with pride—shedding a tear of his own, waiting to pledge himself to her. She would vow to happily obey him as a loving and devoted wife as long as they both shall live before riding off into the sunset of wedded bliss.

But this was far from that circumstance. The only company she had was a hair-and-makeup artist who tried to make conversation, but Alessandra found it hard to muster a smile. She stepped into her dress, transforming into the most beautiful bride, and wished her mother was there to see her. Her groom would most likely be an associate of her father—some greasy-haired, middle-aged man who smelled of cigar smoke with meat sweats. Her skin crawled at the thought.

Once, a teenaged Alessandra thought she'd found true love. The kind of fairytale that romance novels made young women believe in. They made plans to run away together the day she turned eighteen, leaving Lake Forest

a distant memory. She didn't need the pomp and circumstance of a white wedding, only the groom and a Vegas wedding chapel. He promised to love her forever, and everything was perfect until her father discovered their secret romance, twisted it, and made it lethal.

As the only daughter of Anthony Russo, Alessandra's hopes of choosing anything in her own life never came easy—if at all. Bitter tears stung her eyes as she fought them back. Reminiscing about Luca Donato only hurt; she had the scars to prove it. Alessandra chastised herself for being foolish and instead focused on not ruining her makeup.

Today would be a day just like any other, and she would be strong enough to get through it. The only problem was she just didn't want to. The only thing she knew of her new husband was that he was influential in Chicago, which would benefit her father. Women had no power in this life and helped the family through strategic arrangements.

Tony took care of all the planning, allowing Alessandra to choose only her dress. Two weeks prior, her brother's girlfriend, Jenny, had taken her to a dress shop on Randolph Street.

A bell could be heard from the rear of the shop as they entered. Shortly after, a slender woman with pink colored streaks and a hoop in her nose and brow, welcomed them with a flawless smile that didn't quite reach her icy stare. "Welcome to 606 Bridal, ladies. Is one of you the lucky bride?"

"I am," Alessandra admitted.

The woman's smile grew wider as if she was anticipating a sale. "You'll make a stunning bride. When is the wedding?"

"It's in two weeks."

"I'm afraid that doesn't give us much time." Annoyance flashed across the woman's face.

Alessandra pulled her father's black card from her Hermès handbag and handed it to the saleswoman whose tag read Alicia. Her eyes widened as her manicured fingers grasped the card. "What is your name, Miss?"

The name Russo was on the black card. "Call me Alessandra."

“Please follow me this way, Alessandra. I’d be happy to fetch you a glass of champagne as we discuss your needs.”

Alessandra and Jenny took seats on the plush purple loveseat while a team of women surrounded them. Rack after rack of dresses was brought for Alessandra to peruse. Noting that nothing seemed appealing to the bride-to-be’s tastes, the saleswoman asked, “What would your fiancé like?”

Alessandra laughed wryly. “It’s an arranged marriage to a stranger. I don’t care what he would like.”

“Alessandra,” Jenny said, scandalized.

Alessandra rolled her eyes at the petite woman sitting beside her. The bridal shop attendant appeared sympathetic and excused herself.

“Your father won’t like you discussing your affairs with everyone.” Jenny scolded her like a child.

“And who is going to tell him? You?”

“You’re being completely selfish, Alessandra. Why can’t you think of Marcello?” Jenny sniffed.

“I’m sorry, Jenny.” Alessandra frowned.

They were interrupted as Alicia re-entered, cradling a transparent plastic dress bag. She hung it on a rack and unzipped the bag with reverence. “This gown was custom-tailored for a bride whose wedding was canceled. If you’re interested, we can rush alterations.”

Alessandra tried on the show-stopping, cream-colored trumpet gown without batting an eye at the ten-thousand-dollar price tag. If she was forced to marry, her father would damn well pay for it. It was soft and sweet-meets-elegant and chic. Delicate floral lace, pearl beading, and textured tulle added a touch of luxe that an elite Chicago bride must have. The sheer back led to a lovely, ladylike train and didn’t hide the roundness of her ass or softness of her hips.

She couldn’t help the swirl of emotions as she ran her hand across the sweetheart neckline and down the side of the corset-style bodice. Her

husband-to-be would surely appreciate the ample cleavage and her highlighted feminine curves.

“You look beautiful, Alessandra,” Jenny said.

“Does it matter?” Alessandra sighed. She turned back to the mirror and told herself not to get her hopes up. Looking the part didn’t mean anything.

Alessandra’s hands trembled as she fingered the four-carat diamond necklace and earring set she’d inherited from her mother. She said a silent prayer, asking her mother to bless her union. What wisdom would she impart to her daughter on her wedding day?

Everything about the exquisite dress, flawless hair, and runway-worthy makeup was perfect, leaving Alessandra feeling like an actual bride. But that damn veil—she sighed, turning it over in her hands again. The gorgeous smokey eye and luscious lashes accentuated her green eyes, and merlot lipstick was the perfect topper to bring classic elegance to her pouty lips. It was a shame the long, thick veil would obscure her face and the hard work of the woman who went to great lengths to achieve such results.

“I don’t understand, Papà. I don’t want to marry a stranger. Please don’t make me do this.”

Tony’s backhand connected with his daughter’s face so quickly she didn’t have time to brace herself. A loud crack resounded within the confines of the cozy bridal chamber. The sudden sting caused Alessandra to cry out and grasp her cheek.

“You will put that fucking veil on and walk down the aisle like you were told. You know better than to question me, Alessandra. It’s time you perform your duty to this family. Your brother, Marcello, wouldn’t question me. He’s the reason you are doing this. Don’t you want him back?”

Anthony Russo’s word was law. Alessandra’s dress would stain red if she argued further. She dropped her gaze from his stern face to avoid another blow from her heavy-handed father and spoke to his lapel.

“Yes, Papà. Of course.”

If Marcello was present at her wedding, she wouldn't feel so adrift. He would walk her down the aisle or offer an escape route. But it was on her to brave the long walk alone, as he was currently incarcerated at the Cook County Jail that had housed numerous celebrity criminals, from gangsters such as Al Capone and Frank Nitti to serial killer John Wayne Gacy, over the years. If Tony's plan worked, the first Russo behind bars would be released soon.

Alessandra rooted through the makeup bag the stylist left in case she needed a touch-up throughout the day. Luckily, it included concealer that she blended over the already-blooming bruise on her cheek. If there was one thing she knew how to do, it was hide marks beneath makeup and plaster a smile on her face, because men were so busy leering at her body that they never saw the pain in her eyes.

Tony glowered at her as she picked the veil off the dull, crushed carpet where it had fallen from her grasp and shook it out with a sob. She was thankful for that ugly thing now; at least the groom would no longer see her tears.

An attendant knocked on the door, signaling it was time to exit the bridal suite. She sighed heavily, rolled her shoulders back, and picked up her modest bouquet. Beneath the veil, her mask slipped back into place. Resolve filled Alessandra's heart. She was prepared to dive headfirst and would prove to her father that she wasn't weak.

Alessandra would be the perfect coiffed, waxed, and dressed mafia wife in public. She would stand aside while her new husband took as many goomahs to warm his bed as he pleased. When he wanted her, she would perform her marital duties as the perfect submissive sex doll and bear a son to continue the vicious cycle.

"Make me proud, Alessandra," Tony said before slipping away.

She was a socialite in her own right, regardless of being hidden from the world. Marcello might be the one in jail, but Alessandra was the one who never experienced freedom. The scars on her back prevented her wings from sprouting. She wondered if her husband would continue clipping them or if he would set her free and let her fly.

The wedding march began, bringing her inner turmoil to the surface. Becoming a stranger's wife was less than ideal, but there was no turning back now. With her fulfillment to her family complete, Alessandra Russo would be no more. Her new identity would be molded to suit her husband's needs.

Those in attendance rose from the pews to watch the bride walk down the aisle. Many odd stares were cast in her direction due to her veil-obstructed face. She ignored them, putting one foot in front of the other and focused on the man at the end of the aisle.

Alessandra gasped in shock and lost her footing. A man shot up from the pew beside her and offered his hand, but she ignored it. She took a deep breath and resumed her walk with as much grace and dignity as she could muster.

The man of every lust-filled fantasy she'd ever had stood at the altar, waiting for her. The devastatingly-handsome Drake Walker was her husband-to-be. Standing in a black tuxedo with his hands behind his back, Drake commanded the room just like he did in court as Chicago's top prosecutor.

Alessandra was captivated by his wavy brown hair and the dark stubble that adorned his chiseled jaw. Her nipples tightened as his hungry gaze peeled every stitch of clothing off her body, leaving her to walk bare. Depraved images flashed through her mind about what he would demand on their wedding night.

Why would her father choose the prosecutor on her brother's case as her groom? With the evidence mounted against Marcello, it was only a matter of time before Drake won his case. She should lift her heavy skirt, turn around, and run away as fast as she could, but Drake smiled and reached out his hand. Like a moth to a flame, she fluttered closer.

His warmth radiated through her as he pulled her close. She looked at her small hand in his and thought for the first time that maybe marriage wouldn't be as bad as she thought. Maybe he was sent to save her again and give her wings.

Drake leaned toward her and whispered, “What’s with the veil, principessa? That dress is *perfezione*. I can’t wait for the ceremony to end, so I can take you back to the bridal suite, tear your clothes off, and fuck you dirty.”

It was shocking that he’d say such a thing in front of a priest inside a church. Drake’s dirty promise licked fire through Alessandra’s veins. She bit her lip to keep from begging to hear more.

The priest raised his hands for the congregation’s attention. The ceremony stretched around them, but everything became a blur until Drake leaned in and lightly chuckled in Alessandra’s ear.

“It’s your turn, bella,” he whispered as he gestured at the priest.

Alessandra was suddenly aware of everyone silently waiting on her. “I do!” she spluttered.

The priest pronounced them husband and wife moments later. Permission was granted for Drake to kiss his bride. Alessandra’s breath hitched in anticipation as her husband reached for her veil. She licked her lips and puckered up, only for her fairytale bubble to burst when Drake barked.

“What the fuck!”

Gasps and uncertain words rang through the church. Even the priest recoiled at Drake’s outburst.

Drake grabbed Alessandra’s arm, but not hard enough to hurt her, and dragged her down the aisle. She struggled to keep pace with his long strides in her Jimmy Choos. The church erupted in noise the moment they were out of sight.

Drake didn’t stop until they entered the bridal suite, and he slammed the door behind them. Alessandra gulped when his finger flicked the lock. Fire flashed in his chocolatey gaze as he angrily undid his tie and pulled his collar open. She watched breathlessly as he discarded his jacket on the settee and removed his cufflinks in a seamless move. She practically swooned when he rolled up the sleeves of his starched white dress shirt to reveal muscular, corded forearms.

“Che cazzo, what the fuck is going on here?” he growled. Alessandra flinched at Drake’s furious outburst.

His handsome face twisted in anger so intensely that he resembled the men who plagued her nightmares. She backed away from him, bumping into the vanity, and grabbed it with her hands to steady herself.

“What do you mean?” she stammered. “We just got married. Why are you so upset?”

Drake scoffed. “Why the fuck wouldn’t I be? What kind of sick joke is this? Where is Riley?”

“Who’s Riley?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Drake didn’t hear her, or if he did, he didn’t care. He paced, running his hands through his wavy hair before suddenly halting. He darted to grab Alessandra, and she cowered before him.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she pleaded.

Drake immediately dropped his hands and stepped back from Alessandra, studying her intently as if seeing her for the first time.

“I’m not going to hurt you, bella. I’m just trying to make sense of what the fuck is going on.”

“Please calm down. I think I deserve answers too, Drake.”

Alessandra couldn’t wrap her mind around everything. She waved the emerald-cut diamond ring Drake had placed on her so gingerly just minutes before. It fit her manicured finger perfectly as though it was meant to be hers. Drake tenderly took her hand and played with the ring on her finger.

“First, tell me how the hell this happened,” Drake cajoled.

“My father brought me here to get married. He told me it was time for me to do my part for the family.”

“So you set me up?” he snapped.

“What? No! Of course not! My father arranged the marriage. I didn’t know who the groom was until I saw you standing at the altar. I thought you were

expecting me,” she said, gazing timidly from beneath her lashes.

Drake deflated slightly. “Alessandra, what happened to your cheek?” He gently grazed her cheek with his fingertips, causing her to wince in pain. His eyes darkened.

“When I told Papà I didn’t wish to marry, he struck me.”

“*Bastardo!*” Drake dropped Alessandra’s hand and began pacing once more. “Tell me just one thing, and be honest, please. What happened to Riley?”

“Who’s Riley?”

“My fiancée!”

“You have a fiancée?” Alessandra was genuinely shocked. After all, he had just married her.

“I can’t tell if you’re playing with me or just this fucking stupid! I was supposed to marry her today, not you.”

Alessandra’s heart sank. It was one thing to marry a stranger and call him her husband, but it was another when that man hated her. An angry retort rose in her throat, but Drake cut her off before she had the chance to speak.

“What the fuck happened to Riley Watson? What did you do to her?”

Chapter Two

THANKS TO DRAKE WALKER'S HARD WORK, HIS CAREER WAS AT ITS PEAK. He achieved more by thirty-six than most men in his profession. He was prosecuting Marcello, the son of notorious mafia boss Anthony Russo, for arson and murder. Winning the trial—heralded as the case of his career—would make his dreams of becoming an assistant U.S. attorney come true.

Marcello was looking at a thirty-five to eighty-year prison sentence if convicted. Drake thrived on law and order and was determined to see a Russo pay for his crimes. His drive left little time for hobbies or planning a wedding. His only contribution was paying the invoices as they rolled in for the two-hundred-thousand-dollar wedding day.

Drake began dating Riley in middle school, and they'd dated through most of high school. It was never love for him. He broke things off when he left to study abroad and never once regretted the decision.

Riley came from old money. And like Drake, she was no stranger to the status and obligations that came along with it. However, her parents fell victim to embezzlement and lost their fortune. Marriage to Drake would've elevated her family status once again.

Socialites thrive in the same circles, and the two reconnected at a charity gala. They rekindled their romance at Bitsy Walker's strong urging. Always the dutiful son, he thought maybe this time would be different between him and Riley and proposed a couple of months later.

His fiancée was a free spirit and moved abroad for a work opportunity a few weeks later. They hadn't seen each other in the year since she'd left. She had changed in the twenty years they'd been apart, and there was no love lost when she contacted him two weeks ago to call off the wedding.

Drake and Riley had never experienced intimacy as teens and, though engaged, hadn't consummated their relationship. They were settling for a marriage of convenience, not love or kink. Being aware of Drake's sexual proclivities, Riley had suggested he could develop a relationship with a submissive outside their marriage as long as he was discreet with his interactions and avoided scandal.

It should've been a perfect arrangement until a stunning redhead entered the courtroom and sat dutifully on the defense's side. Drake intentionally turned his back on the stand to watch her, eyes rapt with attention. On more than one occasion, he sank into those doe-like emerald eyes, indulging in a private fantasy.

Drake wasn't a cheater. The ring he'd placed on Riley's finger meant commitment—which included fidelity, regardless of if he remained unfulfilled. With her calling off their engagement and someone else wearing his ring, Drake was riddled with emotions he couldn't name.

Alessandra Russo was the one woman he craved but could never have. She plagued his dreams and left him so enraged with need that his cock was almost chafed. Now that they were married, would her green eyes shimmer beneath those dark lashes as her ruby lips wrapped around it?

His body shook with fury standing before his unwitting wife. He'd never forgotten how her luscious curves felt pressed against his body, and he'd never mistake her for Riley. Still, he'd convinced himself that the fiancée he hadn't seen for a year was beneath the veil.

Drake got caught up in the moment at the altar when Alessandra was so close he could smell her amber and jasmine perfume. A fantasy slipped off his tongue before he could stop himself, and he swore he could see her blush.

He said yes. He claimed her as his. In the cold depths of his soul, his beast roared with rapture. So why was he so pissed?

She should've never been his bride. They were a match made in hell. Looking but not touching was all he was allowed. Alessandra stood before him as his wife, a conflict of interest, as he was now prosecuting his brother-in-law.

He needed to fuck her brains out and leave her screaming, shaking, and begging for more, but he couldn't consummate this marriage. They would have it annulled immediately if he wanted to salvage his career.

Until then, he would play the only card he could and pray Alessandra never discovered the truth.

"Where is my fiancée?" he asked again. "I was supposed to marry Riley today."

"It's a funny story, actually." Anthony Russo, a man in his mid-fifties with a full head of gray hair and goatee, walked into the bridal suite. His dark beady eyes were cold and calculating even as he smiled.

Anthony was dressed more appropriately for a funeral in his black three-piece suit and tie. Dons never wore color when conducting business. Dressing in black was seen as a symbol of power and a way to blend into this lifestyle.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Russo?"

Drake knew he'd locked the door behind them and wondered if Anthony had the key. He kicked himself for letting his guard down. Of course, a woman of Alessandra's status wouldn't be married without the protection of her father. Armed guards likely sat in the pews to ensure Tony's plan went off without a hitch.

"Hello to you too, son. *Congratulazioni* on your nuptials. I came to deliver my wedding gift to the blushing bride and groom."

Anthony pulled an envelope from his breast pocket. Drake snatched it from the man's hand, pulled out a letter, and read it aloud.

Drake,

I'm sorry to do this on our wedding day. I've made an important decision and hope you'll understand and forgive me in time. We aren't meant for each other, and we both know this marriage is a mistake. I know that I don't satisfy your needs.

I am not under duress and am safe. Please don't try to track me down. Mr. Russo helped me realize that I deserve to live on my terms. He has generously offered to finance my dreams. It's a gift that I can never repay. His only request was I step away from you for good.

You will easily find another bride since a marriage of convenience is all you want. But you'll have to do that without me. We deserve better than to settle and hold one another back. We need to find our own bliss—best of luck in your career.

Be happy for me, please.

Sincerely, Riley.

Drake crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it on the ground. His ire turned from Alessandra to Anthony.

“What the fuck is this? A Dear John letter? You made her do this? It doesn't make sense. It doesn't even sound like her. What did you do to her, Russo?”

“I gave her a gift. Something she wanted more than marriage. It was the chance to finance her dreams, as she eloquently stated. You should be thanking me. I gave you a faithful woman. She'll make a good wife. She was trained for this.” He turned toward his daughter. “On your knees, Alessandra. Show your husband what a good submissive woman you are.”

“Papà, please! He doesn't want to be married to me. Don't make me do this,” she begged.

Anthony's mocking grin slipped in a second as he grabbed his daughter by the shoulders and roughly shoved her to the floor. “I said on your knees, Alessandra. Do not make me repeat it.”

Shocked to see that Tony had the audacity to treat a woman in such a way caused Drake's protective instincts to kick in. Recalling the bruise on her cheek, he shifted in front of Alessandra with his fists clenched. He'd be

damned if anyone lay a hand on *his* wife. “Don’t you dare touch her!” he hissed.

Alessandra sobbed behind him. “Yes, sir.”

Drake turned toward Alessandra. His eyes darkened with arousal at the sight of the gorgeous redhead on her knees. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but she remained still, on display in her dress. His gaze lingered on her full breasts that threatened to spill from the corset. If only they were alone, Drake would've pulled down her dress and tasted her supple olive skin.

There was a purity to Alessandra that Drake wanted to sully. He wanted her mouth wrapped around his cock while her tears mixed with her saliva, providing extra lubrication. Drake bit back a groan as he clenched and unclenched his fists. He ached to spank her and let the sounds of flesh against flesh and her cries fill the room. He wanted to feel her silky, naked skin beneath his palm and watch her turn a lovely shade of pink. But this was neither the time nor the place.

Dark desire slipped into his voice as he issued his first order. “Alessandra, humble.”

Though she sobbed in humiliation, Alessandra did as instructed. She prostrated herself in her wedding gown and lowered her forehead to the dingy beige carpet. Her fingertips graced the tip of Drake’s four-hundred-dollar cap-toe Oxfords as she stretched her arms before her.

“She will serve you well. From my understanding, your ex-fiancée didn’t share your tastes. Your wife responds well to a firm master. Now that you’ve received your gift, why don’t we discuss business.”

Alessandra moved to rise, but Drake barked at her, “Alessandra, stay.”

“Yes, sir,” she mumbled.

Drake followed Anthony into the hallway, where things immediately became heated. Though a head shorter than Drake, Anthony exuded a menacing air. Unfortunately for the mob boss, Drake wasn’t easily intimidated.

“What the fuck is going on here, Russo? What did you do with Riley?”

Anthony laughed, “You already read Riley’s letter. You know better than anyone the answer to that question. You should be focused on starting your marriage on the proper foot. I assure you it cannot be annulled. A marriage scandal and quick divorce won’t reflect well on the future assistant U.S. attorney’s record. Now that you’ve married into the Russo family, I believe they refer to it as a conflict of interest.

“As my son-in-law, it’s time to discuss a quid pro quo arrangement. Jenny Nguyen is our in-house attorney. You need to stay abreast of the District Attorney’s movements.”

Drake grabbed Anthony’s collar. “You son of a bitch! Your son is guilty. I know he acted on your orders. He deserves to do time, and you deserve to rot in hell.”

Anthony pushed Drake off and adjusted the lapels of his jacket. “Is that any way to speak to your father-in-law? When can I expect my son’s release and the charges dropped?”

“That won’t be happening!” Drake said with conviction.

“No? A copy of your marriage certificate has already been sent to my son’s attorney. She’ll be contacting the clerk for the first possible hearing date,” the older man sneered.

“How could you use your own daughter as a pawn in your twisted scheme? It seems she and Riley are the only victims here.”

Anthony laughed, “Riley accepted half a million dollars to leave you. It only took a single offer. She didn’t bother to negotiate for more. I guess your relationship wasn’t worth much.”

“I don’t care how it looks. I’ll file for divorce tomorrow. I know a judge willing to push through the paperwork and finalize it immediately. He’s here as my guest. Perhaps you’d like an introduction? Surely you can appreciate my working relationships with Cook County judges.”

“I’ll kill her.” The stone-cold face of a killer made Drake’s heart stop.

“She’s your daughter!” Drake might be a merciless bastard, but he was looking into the soulless eyes of the devil himself.

“Alessandra served her purpose to save my heir. After today, I have no further use for her. If you divorce her, she becomes a loose end. In my business, loose ends are dangerous.

“It’s not a good idea to keep your bride waiting. I’m sure you want to celebrate. She’s worth the price, and I’ve never had a complaint about her services. Alessandra’s trainer prepared her for such an occasion. While he was heavy-handed, there was no permanent damage.” Anthony pulled a folded document from his jacket pocket. “I had her tested to ensure she was in pristine condition and ready to consummate the wedding night. I’ve been assured her pussy is still tight.”

“You’re disgusting,” Drake spat.

Considering himself victorious, Anthony walked down the paneled hall, whistling a tune that Drake vaguely recognized. Drake clenched his fist as he watched the other man disappear around the corner. Things between them were far from over.

Alessandra had clearly been eavesdropping and jumped away from the door as Drake re-entered the bridal. He flicked the lock again and turned to his wife.

“I’m sorry for all of this, Drake. I know you hate me,” she said as her lower lip trembled. “If you let me go, I’ll leave. You’ll never have to see me again.”

White-hot panic clawed at Drake’s throat at the finality of Alessandra’s words. He was used to being in control, and this situation was slipping through his fingers quicker than sand. He needed to know Alessandra was tangible—*his*—and not some beautiful mirage. He removed a handkerchief from his back pocket and cautiously raised his hand to her face. Even though he dabbed lightly at her tears, she still flinched beneath his gentle hand.

He silently cursed her father for doing this to her, to them. For better or worse, Drake and Alessandra were married. A single piece of paper had

fucked up his whole life. If his life was going to shit, he would relish the ride.

Drake leaned in and kissed Alessandra on the forehead. A whimper escaped her at the contact. Their eyes met, and Drake knew their inexplicable connection was undeniable.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, Alessandra, but I promise I’ll protect you,” he vowed, and he intended to keep that vow forever.

Alessandra shook her head and stepped back to distance herself from him. Drake yearned to hold her in his arms and have her soft feminine curves yield to his hardened planes. He tugged her close, not allowing her to pull away. He ran his nose against the delicate skin of her neck, nuzzling at a sensitive spot behind her ear while inhaling the warm amber and jasmine scent of her perfume.

His lips brushed against the shell of her ear as he spoke, causing her to tremble in his arms. She latched onto his muscular biceps for support. He couldn't deny how good it felt to be her anchor.

“I thought I told you to stay. You’ve been a naughty girl. Disobedient little girls earn punishments.” His seductive promise sent a shiver down her spine.

Alessandra regained her wits and pushed out of Drake’s arms, wheeling on him. “This isn’t the time or the place for your games, Drake Walker!”

“You’re right, bella. It’s time to head home and enjoy our wedding night.”

There was a reception waiting at The Drake Hotel. Four hundred guests had RSVP’d and expected to celebrate his nuptials in the grand ballroom. The luxurious Goldcoast suite with a view of Lake Michigan was reserved for Mr. and Mrs. Drake Walker. As tempted as he was to take his wife, their marriage was a farce, and he couldn’t face everyone tonight.

He’d apologize to his parents tomorrow, unsure how to explain everything. But tonight, he couldn’t wait to get Alessandra naked. He planned to use a crop on her ass until it was bright pink. Once her pussy glistened, he would taste her sweet nectar, licking the juices that ran down her thigh. Then he’d punish her mouth before making her ride his cock into oblivion.

“Home?” she gulped.

Alessandra sat in the limo with her hands politely folded in her lap. Her posture was ramrod straight, and her eyes stared ahead, seeming to take nothing in, or maybe she was taking in everything. Either way, she didn’t speak a single word, throwing a wet blanket on his mood.

Drake’s professionally-decorated penthouse offered a sophisticated vibe. The vaulted concrete ceilings added to the loft appeal. An open floor plan was a modern classic, and he loved the all-hardwood flooring. An architectural staircase led to his king loft with a large balcony that included access to a large private roof deck. In the congested city, having space to breathe was a necessity.

He often ate at the breakfast bar, which separated the kitchen from the living room. The dining room table was reserved for entertaining guests, which wasn’t often with his work schedule. Drake used the wood-burning fireplace often during the cold winters. The stone hearth added a welcoming touch, making it the room’s focal point. If it ever became too cold, the loft had heated floors.

Growing up in the suburbs, Drake often took the Metra downtown. He fell in love with the city during his many excursions. When he returned from Italy, the first thing he did was rent an apartment. He bought his penthouse a few years later. The West Loop penthouse was far from the Lake Forest home he grew up in, and he was proud to call it his.

Alessandra’s head swiveled in awe. “I didn’t expect a bachelor pad to be so welcoming,” she said. “Did your fiancée live here with you?”

Drake became livid when Alessandra mentioned Riley. The two women weren’t synonymous, though his wife’s tone implied otherwise. He wondered how much to disclose. There was a lot Alessandra didn’t need to know, but there was no hiding the walk-in closet full of Riley’s things. He had allowed her to move her belongings in before she left for Europe, so she didn’t need to rent storage space.

“What the fuck do you think?” he barked.

“I’m sorry, Drake.” Alessandra gently touched his arm. Drake looked at the point of contact, which made his heart pound. “I swear I had no idea what my father’s plans were. But—”

“But what?”

“Maybe we can make this work. If you want to try,” she said shyly.

Drake moved suddenly, pressing flush against Alessandra. The move caught her off guard, and she took a cautious step back. He advanced, continuing to close the distance until her knees hit the couch. He smirked as Alessandra’s skirt pooled around her as she toppled backward. Drake leaned over her, caging her with his hard body.

“You think we can make this work? Enlighten me, what would that entail?”

“I... I don’t know,” she stammered.

She squirmed beneath his intense stare and heat. When she attempted to look away, Drake grabbed her chin forcefully. Desire knotted Drake’s stomach as he leaned closer to the siren. Their lips were so close he could almost taste her. Every fiber in his being warned him this was a bad idea until Alessandra’s tongue timidly licked her lips. Couldn’t she see the beast she tempted by simply existing in his space?

Drake pounced. His kiss was commanding, punishing, dominating, a promise of things to come—things that would destroy her. His cock twitched, and he pushed his hips against her, making her feel it. Would she be wet if he lifted her skirt and tore her panties from her body? She sagged against him, allowing him control. She was perfect.

There was no denying the spark between them. But there was also pain, betrayal, and humiliation. Drake needed to punish Alessandra. It was the only way to lance the festering wound. He bit Alessandra’s lip and tugged, adding pain to her pleasure.

“Drake...” she moaned.

The breathy way she said his name broke the spell. He pulled away, needing a moment to compose himself.

“Fuck!” He ran his hand through his hair. His eyes were magnetically drawn to her heaving chest. It was painful to pry them away. “You can stay in the spare bedroom. I’m sure you’ll find something suitable to wear. Tomorrow we can move your shit in. I suppose you can stay here until I figure out how to get us out of this mess. To clarify, I never want to see you again once this is resolved.”

Alessandra’s face fell as his words cut her. She didn’t deserve to be tied to a craven like him. If only Alessandra knew how broken and twisted Drake was inside, lost in the bleakness of his own soul. Pushing her away was the only way to save them both.

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Chapter Three

DRAKE WAS A POOR HOST INDEED, LEAVING ALESSANDRA STUNNED ON THE couch. She had dreamt of a marriage filled with love, unlike any she had experienced before, and realized now how naïve that was. It was foolish to hope Drake Walker would be that man. She chastised herself while attempting to catch her breath.

The slamming of a door made her jump. She sighed and adjusted her slipped bodice before wandering down the hall, searching for the spare room. The room was surprisingly warm and feminine compared to the rest of the modern, bachelor loft. The bed was made up with white sheets and a turned-down pink bedspread. She opened the closet door only to find it was a generous walk-in with rows of clothes, shoes, and accessories.

A white lace garment caught Alessandra's eye. She was sure it was meant to be worn by Riley on her wedding night. She fingered the delicate sheer tulle robe with a satin belt trimmed with white feathers.

"So much for our wedding night beauty. Who would've thought I'd have something in common with a discarded garment? We're both unwanted." She sighed and pulled the set off the hanger.

The day's events weighed heavily upon her. She couldn't well begin a marriage built on lies and deception. Wedding night expectations left her disappointed and wondering what she had done wrong. The fire and anger in Drake's eyes confused her, while his rough treatment left her painfully aroused.

Drake had kissed her with such unbridled passion it left her dizzy. She caressed her kiss-swollen lips with the cold diamond, hoping it would help cool her fevered skin. His power radiated sex and danger, making her core throb. She peeled off her soaked thong, thankful Drake remained oblivious to the effect he had on her.

Soft morning light shone through the window, and a gentle breeze billowed the curtains to wake Alessandra the following day. She stretched her arms overhead and arched her back like a cat gazing around the room. Outside of the bed, there was a nightstand and a wall-mounted TV. There were no personal items in sight. Everything had been arranged in the closet.

They were overwrought on their wedding day, and many things were said and done in the heat of the moment. Still, Alessandra was disappointed to wake up alone. It was time to start her first day as a married woman, and she was determined to make a better first impression.

Alessandra studied herself in the mirror. The beautiful eye makeup now appeared heavy and smeared, and she didn't have the proper cleansers for the waterproof eyeliner and mascara. Her skin was blotchy due to rubbing against the pillowcase and crying. A quick shower in the guest bathroom helped to invigorate her senses. After failing to find a toothbrush, Alessandra swished some mouthwash to freshen her breath.

The scent of coffee wafted into the room, perking her up. She quickly grabbed the sheer robe and pulled it over the white lacy undergarments. She was pleased they fit so well. Her torso appeared leaner, her breasts lifted, and her pert ass was displayed in the thong.

Before seeing her husband, she shook some of the burdens from her shoulders and slipped her mask back into place. Unfortunately, Alessandra ran smack into a wall of hard muscle as she walked into the kitchen.

He grabbed her shoulders to steady her. "Watch where the fuck you're going!" he barked.

"I'm sorry, Drake." She refused to let Drake see her tremble.

Drake's eyes slowly perused her body. Alessandra couldn't resist doing the same. Her eyes drifted down the hard planes of his herculean chest covered

with a tuft of hair darker than the hair on his head. His well-defined abs were closer to an eight-pack than six. The vee and dusky happy trail made a perfect arrow to draw her attention to the sizable bulk in his red silk boxers.

Drake released her and turned away. Her eyes dropped from the sinewy muscles of his back down to his titanium ass as he moved. His raw masculine energy radiated around them, and she wanted to run her fingers through his hair and drag her tongue against his hot skin, tasting every inch.

Tony had ensured Alessandra knew how to properly please men. No partner had ever sought *her* pleasure, leaving the act unenjoyable, but she performed as instructed. Drake was the first man she wanted to serve voluntarily.

She was willing to fall on her knees if he would stroke her hair and call her a good girl. More than anything, she wanted to prove her worth outside of the bedroom. She wanted to change Drake's heavy scowl into a smile. The way to a man's heart was through his stomach, after all.

"Would you like me to make some breakfast?" She crossed over to the stainless-steel fridge and pulled it open, only to find it empty, and quickly turned back to Drake. "Why is the fridge empty?"

"After the wedding, we planned to stay in a hotel for two days. My cock should've been buried in my wife's pussy until we left for our honeymoon. Hence the reason the fridge is empty."

Alessandra was trying to make peace, and it hurt when Drake snapped at her. The green-eyed monster of jealousy erupted in her gut when he said his wife—meaning Riley, not her. He didn't have to keep browbeating her because she wasn't his intended bride. She sighed and began digging through the kitchen drawers, searching for a pen and paper to start a grocery list.

"I can go shopping if you'd like while I'm out and about today," she offered.

"I truly don't give a fuck what you do!" Drake's words stung as much as a slap to the face.

“Are you always such a miserable bastard? Why don’t you just go on your damn honeymoon and leave me alone! I’m not your punching bag.” The words escaped Alessandra’s lips unintentionally.

“What did you call me, Alessandra?” Drake’s tone was cold as ice, and his eyes burned as they locked on hers.

“You heard me! I called you a miserable fucking bastard,” Alessandra challenged.

In a flash, Drake pinned her against the countertop. Her squeak was barely audible over her own thundering heart. Drake pressed against her, and her nipples hardened beneath the lace cups of her lingerie. Her clit throbbed with unfulfilled need at his sudden proximity.

“I won’t tolerate back-talk or disrespect,” Drake firmly responded against her neck.

“Respect is earned. Right now, you haven’t done a damn thing to deserve it.” She shoved Drake hard, but she might as well have hit the granite countertop. Drake captured her wrists and pinned her body with his hips.

“You’re in my house now, little girl. We’re going to set some ground rules.”

Drake ground his hardness against Alessandra’s hip. His hot breath against her skin sent shivers down her spine. The fight ran out of her when his hands tightened on her wrists as he waited for her response.

“Yes, sir,” she answered meekly.

“Good girl.”

Drake bit her neck, causing her to gasp. He grasped her hips and spun her so she faced the counter. He trapped her by thrusting his hips against hers, pressing his arousal against her scantily-clad ass.

“Drake!” she cried out. “What are you doing?”

“Do not speak until given permission. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Drake grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her head back, causing her back to arch. He growled in her ear, “I didn’t give you permission, naughty girl.”

Drake lifted one hand and spanked her ass so hard she whimpered. His hand connected several more times, alternating cheeks. Each time she bit her lip to keep from sobbing wantonly. She was on her toes by the time he finished, sticking her ass back into his crotch. There was no hiding the effect he had on her.

“Now be a good girl and pull your panties off, Alessandra. I want to see my mark on your beautiful ass.”

His command confused her as she was wearing a thong. Clearly, he’d be able to see her already. She fought the instincts to submit blindly and decided to test his dominance by replying sassily.

Alessandra lowered her hands to the waistband of her panties while Drake’s eyes narrowed, watching with bated breath. She toyed with them just a moment before hesitantly biting her lip.

“I gave you an order, Alessandra. Lower your panties and let me see my handprints on your ass.” His words burned her skin.

Alessandra rubbed her thighs together, hoping for some friction to soothe her achy, wet core. She wanted to give in and obey the silver-tongued devil, but she shook her head.

“Bratty subs get punished. Do you enjoy being spanked like a naughty little girl? Does the idea of being disciplined turn you on?” Drake spanked her again and squeezed her sore globes.

“You could remove them for me, sir,” Alessandra mewled.

Drake growled before fisting the lace and tearing it from her body. She flushed at his scrutiny. He admired his handiwork while caressing and rubbing her tender flesh. He followed up with slight taps that elicited a feral response from her. Her body sent mixed signals to her brain until she could no longer think straight.

She wanted to beg for mercy but didn't know what she would say, only that she needed more. Drake's touch became lighter as he massaged her to soothe the sting. Such tenderness caused Alessandra to break into a sweat.

"You're simply beautiful."

Drake freed his cock from the confines of his boxers and slid dryly between her cheeks. His scorching velvet branded her as he rocked against her. A piteous wail escaped Alessandra's throat. She was dripping with desire in the most intense sexual encounter of her life.

His strong hand wrapped around her throat, squeezing gently, testing her limits. It was too much stimulation, but at the same time, not enough. Drake was setting his expectations, and she was along for the ride.

"Do you like that, bella?" he whispered against the shell of her ear.

"Yes, sir."

They became lost in the sensations, two writhing bodies against the counter. Pain and pleasure signals pushed Alessandra closer to the edge. But the angle Drake pinned her kept her from using the ledge to achieve the orgasm she was desperate to reach.

"Please, Drake... please... I need...." she begged, needing more.

Drake suddenly recoiled. "*Merda!* What am I doing?"

He quickly shifted his boxers back into place and left the kitchen, slamming the bathroom door behind him. Breathless and needy, Alessandra collapsed against the countertop. Her ass stung from his treatment, and her hips were bruised from the lip of the counter.

Alessandra attempted to compose herself and swallow the shame of being abandoned half-naked in the kitchen. She grabbed the shredded panties and bid them farewell before throwing them in the garbage. Her self-worth fluttered to the bottom of the empty bag along with the lace.

Alessandra showered again in a vain attempt to scrub Drake's woodsy scent from her skin. The warm spray trickled down her chest and over her

painfully pebbled nipples. Her fingers slipped between her legs and circled her swollen clit that had been left neglected.

Drake's dirty and commanding words echoed in her ears. His rough treatment and control over her pleasure brought her dangerously close to the edge and made her itchy. The hunger in his eyes mirrored her own desire. She still felt the heat where Drake's thick, long, hot cock exuded pre-cum against her ass crack.

She pushed past her disappointment and fantasized about what might've happened if Drake hadn't pulled away. Alessandra's breath quickened as her fingers moved faster and pressed harder. It wasn't long before the wave of orgasm had her bracing herself on the cold tile wall to remain standing, biting her lip to muffle her ecstasy.

Imposter syndrome hit her hard. She had taken someone else's fiancé and wedding. Now she stood in another woman's closet searching through her clothes because she only had a wedding dress. Finally, she found a simple blouse and wrap skirt that fit.

Alessandra was thrown by the sight of Drake drinking a cup of coffee in frayed dark-wash jeans and a gray T-shirt. The shirt fit him like a second skin, allowing every muscular bulge to remain on display. He always looked handsome in his expensive tailored suits in court, but relaxed Drake took her breath away.

"Glad you found something," he said, barely looking at her.

Alessandra smoothed down the skirt. "Thank you."

Alessandra reached for the coffee pot, but the click of Drake's tongue made her pause. The disapproving gaze in his eye was all too familiar, as she had seen it in all the other important men in her life. Her heart shriveled as the air became rife with tension. They sized each other up like feral cats, ready to pounce if the other suddenly moved.

There was nothing else to do but accept defeat. Alessandra knew where she wasn't wanted, whether it be in her childhood home or her husband's penthouse. Determined to catch a cab and not return, she moved toward the

door. Drake must've sensed her flight response and halted her by raising his hand.

"I'm off today, so I thought I could help you move your stuff in."

"Excuse me?" His offer threw Alessandra.

"Since we're stuck together, we can use the time productively and figure a way out of this mess." Drake dumped the remainder of his coffee down the drain and rinsed the mug before setting it in the dishwasher.

"Oh." She was crestfallen.

Every time Drake offered a kernel, she foolishly got her hopes up. When he immediately snatched it away, she was left with egg on her face. He saw her as the enemy, and she was ready to settle for an amicable relationship.

"Just let me get my keys. I'll drive."

They rode the private elevator down to the basement garage, and Drake hit the unlock button from his keys. The lights of a red Corvette Stingray Z51 flashed with a subtle lock pop. Alessandra would've thought he was compensating for something with a flashy car, but having felt the strength of his erection an hour before, she knew that wasn't the case.

It was easy to dismiss the designer labels as Drake dressed well for court. Even Jenny, the Russo family attorney—acting as her brother's criminal defense lawyer—spent thousands on a single outfit for court. But now, having been to his penthouse and sliding into the leather interior of the brand-new car that cost somewhere from sixty to eighty thousand dollars, it was clear Drake came from money. Alessandra wondered if she would ever truly know who Drake Walker was.

Alessandra put her home address into the car's navigation system. She had to remind herself it wasn't home anymore. It was her father's house now. It was always his, just like everything inside of it. Just like her, until he'd decided it was time to sell her off.

"You're practically right around the corner," Drake mentioned.

"Lucky me," she mumbled as he pulled onto the city street.

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Chapter Four

THE HOMESCHOOLED AND SHELTERED ALESSANDRA HAD GROWN UP IN A gated mansion in Lake Forest and was only a show pony for her father's associates. She was not allowed to wear pants when her father was entertaining, so her wardrobe consisted mainly of babydoll dresses as a child. The skirts grew shorter, and the tops bared more cleavage, as she grew. It provided men the opportunities to grope and leer as they pleased.

As a mafia princess, she should've been revered. Her father should've protected her. Instead, he was the one who handed her to the wolves stalking her. He sent her into many bedrooms after sunset, forcing her to stay until dawn. There were parts of her that would never be clean. Thankfully, she couldn't remember a Walker being part of that circle.

Anthony Russo had many legal businesses, including multiple real estate holdings, from apartments to warehouses. *Don't neglect the real estate market. Besides, you never know when you'll need a safe house*, he'd told her. She lived in a safe house for years after her mother was murdered. She had a new nanny every six months and returned home once a week to be paraded before her father. Though she grieved her mother, those years were still the happiest, because things changed once she returned to the Russo estate.

Alessandra stared forlornly out the window as the congestion of the city gave way to suburban streets. As they drove closer, the scenery grew

increasingly familiar and her breathing shifted in response. She tore her eyes from the window and focused on her folded hands in her lap instead.

“Alessandra, listen. I—” Drake began.

“Don’t, Drake!” she snapped, cutting him off completely.

Although Drake did not initiate any further conversation, she noticed his occasional glances in her direction. She felt bad and wanted to say something but wasn’t in the mood to engage in small talk. There were many things that they needed to discuss, but the car was not the appropriate time or place to do so.

They pulled up to the wrought iron gates that surrounded the Russo family estate. Drake had barely hit the brakes before Alessandra jumped out and forcefully shut the door behind her. Drake quickly thrust the car into park and rushed after her.

He grabbed her elbow and forced her to look at him. “This is ridiculous, Alessandra. Let me come in with you.”

With a sigh, she realized that having Drake by her side could be advantageous for her. She couldn’t anticipate the mood her father would be in, and Drake was her husband, after all. She reluctantly agreed and climbed back into the car. The gates opened automatically, beckoning them to enter. A craggy-faced guard greeted them and told Drake to park at the top of the drive.

Alessandra stood calmly, taking a few deep breaths as she waited for the arch-topped iron door to open. Her father had the bulletproof and fireproof security door custom-made. In the event of a perimeter breach and guard incapacitation, the home’s exterior was designed to serve as the final defense line. Being there no longer felt like being at home; it felt more like an imposition. Despite the warmth of the sun, she remained encased in an icy cocoon.

A burly man in a black suit and receding hair opened the door. His face brightened with a crooked, snaggle-toothed smile.

“Welcome home, Miss Russo.” He opened his arms to her.

“Hello, Russell.” Alessandra hugged the beefy man.

Russell was the only soul in the barren mansion outside her brother to show a modicum of kindness. She wished he could have been her father. While he was still part of the family, his *modus operandi* was never to hurt women or children. In fact, he took many lashes to save Alessandra from her father’s wrath.

“Don Russo and Mr. Donato are waiting in the office for you, Miss Russo. Don’t tarry,” her father’s personal guard, Angelo, said.

A sudden stiffness overcame Alessandra as she gazed at the lieutenant, trying to gauge the situation. She hoped to steer clear of her father, and Luca was the last person she expected to run into. He had been away on business for the past month. Alessandra had a suspicion that her father had intentionally sent him away to avoid any interference with her wedding.

As she breathed faster, Drake sensed her discomfort and offered support by placing a reassuring hand on the small of her back. Though a small gesture, Alessandra appreciated it more than words could express. She drew strength from her husband’s stoicism.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded, concealing her emotions deep within. Though she could have found her way blindfolded, she let Angelo lead them to her father’s office. The presence of the escort was meant to intimidate and display dominance; however, she was aware of more information than her father had realized.

Alessandra frequently listened in on private conversations conducted behind closed doors. She even hid beneath tables or desks, “playing” with her nannies. *Nanny* was a loose term for the women who spent equal time entertaining her father’s men.

The times she was caught, she received a lashing and was locked in her room for indeterminate amounts of time. If Russell was the one to find her, he answered her questions as patiently and honestly as possible. She learned the value of knowledge and how to leverage secrets to protect herself while wielding her feminine charm as a powerful weapon.

Angelo knocked on the office door, and Luca's deep voice commanded them to enter. The fact that Luca, not her father, gave the order didn't bode well. Alessandra stepped in before Drake.

Luca gestured for her to come closer and pulled her into a one-armed embrace. His chilly touch sent shivers down her spine. Luca's whiskey breath made Alessandra feel faint as he leaned in to kiss her. Alessandra instinctively reached out for Drake, who swiftly rescued her from the other man's hold. Drake cleared his throat, causing Luca to back away, and Alessandra relaxed into Drake's protective embrace.

"Hello, sweetheart," Luca said while taking measure of Drake.

Luca Donato had aspirations of becoming Consigliere for Marcello, and he had already risen to the position of capo at a young age. His success was attributed to nepotism and the fact that he had become a soldier at only sixteen years old.

Luca's dark hair was slicked back as usual, but his facial hair was outgrown. His classically-handsome features were marred by the broken nose that had failed to be reset after Tony discovered they were dating without his permission. They both bore scars from their relationship.

Luca wore black slacks and a navy button-down shirt, signaling this was no formal meeting. However, his gun holster hung from his belt in warning.

Alessandra couldn't help but compare the men before her. Her first love was Luca, a dangerous rebel from her past whom she had fallen for. Back then, he had longer hair that would fall on his forehead, tempting her to reach out and brush it away. Every time he smiled, her heart would flutter, captivated by the beautiful words he would say.

On the other hand, Drake exuded a masculine aura. He wasn't the dashing rogue she fantasized about, but stood tall with a rugged appearance. Based on Alessandra's experience that morning, he appeared to be more well-endowed than Luca. Although Luca wasn't lacking in that department, Alessandra had never experienced such pleasure with him. Alessandra blushed momentarily at the thought but promptly dismissed it from her mind. She recognized the gravity of the situation at hand.

“Marital bliss, I see!” Anthony laughed. “Tell me, did you consummate the marriage bed last night?”

“That’s none of your fucking business, Russo,” Drake snapped.

“Do you need a real man to show you how it’s done?” Luca made a lewd gesture. “Come here, Alessandra.”

Drake’s grip tightened around Alessandra, who trained her gaze on the floor. Being the object of their ridicule was nothing new, but shame spiraled through her at Drake witnessing it. She wanted him to see her as his sassy wife, swaying her hips and enticing him in the kitchen, not a meek girl fearful of her father’s anger.

“I said come here now!” his voice dropped to a menacing tone.

“N... no...” she stammered. “I don’t have to obey you or Papà anymore. I’m married now.”

Luca made a grab for Alessandra, but Drake sucker-punched him. Alessandra’s hands flew to her mouth as she gasped. “Do not lay your filthy fucking hands on my wife again.”

The guards in the room quickly stepped between Luca and Drake, preventing further escalation. Angelo pushed his blazer aside, flashing a glint of his gun. He wouldn’t hesitate to draw it. Alessandra placed her hand on Drake’s bicep to pull him back.

“Don’t, Drake. It’s not worth it.”

Luca rubbed his jaw before he started laughing. “Do you really think this *puttana* needs your protection? She’s pledged to me. You’re just a means to an end.”

“Enough of this!” Anthony roared, banging his fist on the mahogany desk.

“I’m just here to pack my belongings, Papà. I’m moving in with my husband.”

“So be it. You will return immediately upon Marcello’s release. At that time, you will divorce and belong to Luca. It will be up to him what happens to you next.”

“No!” she cried.

Her father pushed back his chair and rose from his seat. His face twisted into a look that meant his hand would follow shortly. “Don’t argue with me, child. This *will* happen.”

“Let me make something perfectly clear, Russo,” Drake began. “You don’t scare me. I will not allow you to treat my wife this way. She is no longer yours to use and abuse. She is *mine*.”

“Don’t forget, I’m the one who popped that delicious cherry. Just because she spreads her legs eagerly, doesn’t mean you’re special. A woman’s place is on her back with a cock in the hole of his choosing. Enjoy playing house while it lasts,” Luca mocked.

If it weren’t for Drake supporting her, Alessandra was sure she’d end up on the floor as every nerve ending went numb. Once upon a time, she had loved Luca with everything she had to give, and his crass words made her feel like a fool. Five years ago, he’d betrayed their love and her trust to gain her father’s approval. She’d never forget that day as long as she lived.

Tony dismissed them after a few more barbs were exchanged. Angelo escorted them to Alessandra’s bedroom, where she filled a small suitcase. Drake offered to help her pack more.

She shook her head. “What difference will that make, Drake? It won’t matter in the end.”

I was never meant to be free. I know that now, she thought and blinked back bitter tears. Alessandra bid a silent farewell to the home she grew up in, wishing it would burn to the ground and take its seeds of evil along with it.

Russell found them before they left. “Take care of yourself, Miss Russo.”

Too many eyes were on them for him to give her the hug she desperately needed. Her bottom lip wobbled as she nodded. “You too, Russell.”

They drove back to Drake’s penthouse in silence. Alessandra crossed her arms and stared out the window, watching the suburbs become traffic-bogged city streets.

Riley's belongings overwhelmed Alessandra as she attempted to find room in the closet. There was no room in the closet or Drake's life. She was painfully aware that she had no place to call home, no place where she belonged. Drake wanted to divorce her anyway, and now her father demanded it. It was best to accept the future that waited to shackle her.

A soft knock sounded from the door. The knock came again, but she continued ignoring it. A minute later, Drake let himself in. Alessandra quickly turned away and wiped the tears from her face. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her true devastation.

"Are you all right, bella?" Drake asked softly. "There's still time to make it to the airport. Why don't we go on a honeymoon? I think some time away from this craziness will offer us a chance to get to know each other better. We can figure out how to make this work." He cupped Alessandra's face in his hand and swiped his thumb to catch tears that fell.

"Drake—"

"I will protect you," he promised.

After a tense encounter with her father and Luca, Alessandra was taken aback by Drake's gentleness. She lashed out in hurt and anger, smacking his hand away.

"Don't pretend you suddenly give a shit about me. We'll be divorced by the end of the week. You'll never have to think of me again once the trial ends."

Drake stepped back and sighed. "Pack your bags, Alessandra. We're going somewhere tropical. Make sure you pack a sexy swimsuit."

He turned on his heel and left her standing dumbfounded in the middle of the closet.

Chapter Five

THE BRITISH AIRWAYS STAFF WAS ATTENTIVE TO THE HONEYMOONING couple in the first-class luxury suites. British heritage met contemporary design, giving Drake the space to comfortably stretch out his body and sleep most of the nineteen-hour flight.

Before falling asleep, he overheard the flight attendant pestering Alessandra, asking for details of their wedding. His wife took liberties to avoid admitting it was a shit show. She didn't realize Drake was silently cataloging her description of her dream wedding—everything from the music and flowers to the reception's color scheme.

Her recount made him feel awful. They had avoided the reception so he wouldn't look like a fool in front of his friends and family. In doing so, he'd robbed Alessandra of the experience. She deserved better than that.

For his honeymoon, Drake rented a bungalow on a private island. The smell of salty sea air and sunshine eased some of his tension. Unfortunately, he was honeymooning with the wrong woman. He subtly played with the still-foreign, 24-karat gold wedding band—with inlays from a Buffalo Trace whiskey barrel and meteorite dust—on his finger.

A complimentary bottle of champagne on ice with a letter expressing the resort's felicitations to Mr. and Mrs. Walker awaited them upon arrival. A tray of plump juicy strawberries with whipped cream and chocolate dip was arranged on a platter, ready for their enjoyment next to a crystal vase of fresh-cut, long-stemmed roses. Twinkling tea lights were spread across

every surface, adding a touch of romance to the atmosphere along with strewn red flower petals.

Towels were arranged in origami swans surrounded by a flower-petal heart and more petals that spelled out Mr. & Mrs. on the king-size bed. A large gift basket containing matching robes, slippers, flavored lubes, and other sensual goodies included a note wishing them a bountiful life together.

“It’s beautiful!” Alessandra exclaimed.

Drake grunted in response.

“There’s only one bed.”

He cocked his head in response to her furrowed brow. “Are you afraid of me, bella?”

“N... no...” she said hesitantly.

“Maybe you should be.” He lifted her chin with his fingers and searched her wide green eyes. “Kneel on the bed, Alessandra.”

Alessandra’s breath hitched at his command. *That’s right, dolcezza. I’m your daddy now.* Despite their thirteen-year age difference, she seemed just as taken with him as he was with her. As they began exploring their intense sexual chemistry, her desire would cement their bond, not his.

She took off her shoes and quickly crawled onto the bed to obey. Drake watched her settle in position, spreading her knees and resting with her palms facing up, presenting herself to him. She belonged among the rose petals, naked, with her hair splayed across the white pillows.

“*Bellissima.* You’re a work of art.”

Drake brushed his hand across her cheek and twirled an auburn lock around his finger. He wanted to bury his nose in her hair and inhale deeply, welcoming her sensual scent among the roses and salty air.

“I paid you a compliment, Alessandra. What do you say?” Her breath hitched when he pinched a nipple through her top.

“Thank you, sir.”

“One day, I will put a collar on your graceful neck. Would you like that, Alessandra? Would you like me to become your Master?” He caressed her neck with featherlight teasing touches.

“Yes, sir.” She glanced up at Drake. “What about your fiancée? Did you collar her as well?”

“Ex-fiancée, and no, she wasn’t submissive to me.”

“But you loved her. And you’ll never love me,” Alessandra whispered.

Drake wasn’t sure if she meant for him to hear, but he responded anyway. “No, there won’t ever be love between us. But there can be hot, dirty, mind-blowing sex.”

His eyes tracked the tear that rolled down her cheek. “Maybe the next man I marry will love me.”

She sounded so heartbroken and wilted before his eyes. Drake wasn’t sure how to respond. He took the coward’s way out and pretended he hadn’t heard her. What did he know of love anyway? He’d proposed to a woman he didn’t love for his public image. There was no competition for his heart.

Marrying Alessandra was a mistake. Being seen as a jilted groom would’ve been better than the situation he created. A candidate to become an assistant U.S. attorney caught up in a marriage scandal would cost him everything. His lust entangled with his better sense, and he willingly fell for the bait and switch. He didn’t even hesitate to say, ‘I do’, and he planned to punish her for it.

Unfortunately for Drake, Alessandra sat eager and willing to please him. None of this was her fault, yet he hated her for his weakness. He’d meant it when he’d promised to protect her from Tony and Luca. But who would protect her from him?

“Put on your suit, Alessandra. We’re going to the beach.” Her head snapped up. She studied him, attempting to gauge his sincerity.

Drake hoped a change of location and activity would improve the somber atmosphere between them. He helped her off the bed, and she retreated to the bathroom. After changing into board shorts, Drake opened the suite’s

French doors and stepped onto the private deck. He leaned against the railing and watched the waves crash against the sandy beach while waiting for his wife to appear.

Drake's eyes practically bugged out of his head when Alessandra sauntered out of the bathroom in a strappy rose-gold bikini. Her breasts threatened to spill from the cups, and her ass begged for his hand again. His shorts felt too tight as he watched her pull on a black embroidered mesh Kimono, saying a silent goodbye to her curves as she rendered him speechless without even trying. Her beauty enchanted him as she piled her loose hair over her head and banded it.

Alessandra appeared younger once she was devoid of makeup. Her freckled skin, along with the red hair and green eyes, made him wonder what her mother looked like because she looked nothing like Tony. He forced himself to blink a few times and smile when she began squirming under his scrutiny.

"I'll race you to the water," Drake said playfully.

Alessandra accepted the challenge and took off like a shot. Not to be outdone, Drake followed close behind. Despite the hindrance of the sun-baked, soft sand, he managed to catch her and lifted her over his shoulder. He slapped her ass, and she shrieked with laughter. His heart flipped at the sound he heard for the first time. Her breasts bounced off him, and she continued laughing as he waded calf-deep into the ocean.

"Put me down, you animal," she giggled.

"As you wish, principessa." Drake dropped her unceremoniously into the chilly, shallow water.

"Ahh!" she shrieked, rounding to splash him in retaliation. "You're going to be sorry!"

They played in the water, chasing each other, splashing, and laughing together. It was the freest Drake had felt in a very long time. When Alessandra turned all moon-eyed at him, he almost fell for her. His eyes dropped to her full lips and he wondered what it would be like to kiss her without pretense. Would she lean into him and submit freely?

“Let’s head back. I made dinner reservations for us, and we should change.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dinner for two was served on a private balcony overlooking the ocean. The tide rolling in was the perfect accompaniment to the sounds of chatter and clinking silverware from the busy bistro. The chef had prepared a special five-course meal for the newlyweds.

“It’s beautiful here! I know I’m not the one you originally planned to share this with, but I’m thankful to be here with you.”

Drake couldn’t begrudge Alessandra for enjoying herself. Escaping their reality for a few days was exactly what they needed. He should keep her at arm’s length to lessen the sting of divorce, but he leaned closer as she spoke.

“Raise a glass with me, bella. To hating each other a little less today and the eventual disillusionment of our marriage.”

“Cheers,” she said nonchalantly. She smiled softly as she took a sip of the robust red.

They enjoyed a nice dinner together as the sun sank low on the horizon and a cool breeze came off the water. Alessandra was unsuccessful in suppressing a shiver.

“Are you cold?” he asked, noting the goosebumps that spread across her skin.

“I’m fine.” Her chin lifted in defiance.

Drake continued watching her as she finished her wine. Her eyes seemed sad, though the rest of her face was unreadable. He wondered if she was fighting the same attraction he was.

“Come on, wife. It’s time to head to bed.”

Drake wrapped his arm around Alessandra’s waist. She leaned against him as they walked back to the bungalow. It felt too right, which only confused him more. Her proximity made it hard for him to clear his mind. He shouldn’t want her, but could he let her go?

Drake needed to uphold the law, first and foremost. If he let her too close, he would end up begging her to ruin everything.

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Chapter Six

DRAKE RAN ALONG THE BEACH, UNSURE HOW LONG HE'D BEEN RUNNING. The past few days, his routine had been the same: roll out of bed while it was still dark, while his wife slept, and slip out of the bungalow. He found something to distract himself and didn't return until late evening. Drake was exhausted when he returned and erected a pillow barrier between them before crawling into his side of the bed. He rolled to face the wall and fell asleep.

On the first night of their honeymoon, Drake watched Alessandra perform her bedtime routine and wanted to wrap her in his arms. The desire to consume her was so strong it scared him. He put a pillow between them to stop from rolling her beneath him.

She frowned when she looked at the bed but didn't say anything. She rolled to face the other wall and curled up into herself. Alessandra whispered goodnight in the darkness, and like a pussy, he didn't respond.

Alessandra called to Drake's depraved urges, which scared his ex-fiancée. Alessandra's body oozed sensuality and begged for sex. He couldn't stop dreaming about shoving his cock down her velvety throat while her lips curled around him. He pushed his body past the limit in punishment for the twitching of his nether region. As if running from his thoughts made a difference.

Once again, he returned to the room that evening and placed the barrier between them. But the breeze off the open patio caused Alessandra's scent

to waft around him. It made resisting almost unbearable. Again, Alessandra whispered goodnight, but he didn't respond. He told himself he was doing this for her benefit, even if it made them both miserable.

It was the middle of the night when muffled sobs woke him. Drake froze and listened to Alessandra weep. The ice around his heart slowly thawed when he forced himself to acknowledge her pain.

God help them. He was done resisting. Drake removed the pillow between them and pulled Alessandra into his arms. She rolled over and cried into his chest.

"I'm sorry, bella," he whispered as he stroked her hair.

It had been his suggestion they take the trip, and he hadn't done right by his wife. Reality settled over him like a cruel mistress. He was just another asshole for hurting her; she deserved better than him.

His cock didn't care that she was crying and begged for attention. Drake wanted to kiss every tear away and worship her body until she cried tears of pleasure. But he couldn't. It wasn't the right time. Seeing to her emotional needs was more important than his physical ones.

He held her long after her tears dried up and her breathing evened. Intimacy wasn't Drake's strong suit. The idea that he could care for Alessandra bode poorly for them both. But he couldn't deny how warm her body felt pressed against him, like an extension of his being.

The following day, he ran along the beach, meeting little resistance from the wet sand near the surf. Drake's mind continually wandered back to Alessandra and what she was doing without him. Long after she'd fallen asleep in his arms, he had stared at the ceiling, wondering where they would go from there. She'd plagued his thoughts for months and seemed determined to continue to do so.

Drake entered the room and stripped off his sweat-soaked athletic wear. The bathroom door was unlocked, and the shower was running. He silently slipped into the steamy bathroom—glimpsing Alessandra's wet, soap-slicked body—and shut the door quietly behind him.

"You should lock the door if you don't want company."

Alessandra yelped, caught off guard. His cock sprang to life as she spun to face him, offering a full-frontal view of her voluptuous body. He watched the water running in rivulets over her full breasts and down her belly. She was soaked from head to toe, and Drake's eyes zeroed in on her bare pussy, wondering if it was as wet and warm as the spray.

"Are you crazy, Drake?" she hissed.

"I just want a shower. Are you going to make room for me?"

He smirked at her bewildered expression of his own naked display. Drake wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked the shaft for her benefit until pre-cum beaded on the tip. He groaned as his thick length pulsed, proud and needy. Unfulfilled desire hung in the heat between them.

"Invite me in, bella," he spoke languidly.

"Come in, Drake." Her breathy response made him chuckle.

He stepped beneath the warm spray and ran his hands through his hair. Alessandra blinked up at him. He caressed her cheek and delighted in how she leaned into his touch.

"Drake—" she mewled.

That was enough to break his restraint, and he pushed her against the cool marble wall. He descended like a vampire, biting ferociously, leaving marks before soothing them with his tongue. A primitive virile need to claim Alessandra overwhelmed him—the beast within purred as her body responded immediately, becoming soft and pliant to his demands.

Needy, desperate moans assailed Drake's ears as he pinched and rolled Alessandra's nipples, not caring to be gentle. His eyes lifted to her face, watching with fascination as her head fell back while he flicked his tongue over the stiffened peaks.

He grabbed her wet hair in his fist and pulled her into him, claiming her lips. Their tongues joined in a fevered kiss. He couldn't deny how delicious she was, and nothing would stop him from tasting her other lips.

Drake roughly parted Alessandra's legs with his knee and inserted two fingers into her wet pussy, pushing past the resistance of her tight heat. He moved his hand hard and fast, not giving her time to adjust. Her body trembled, and she grabbed his forearm for stability.

"You're so fucking tight, Alessandra. Your greedy cunt's trying to pull my fingers in deep. Were you fantasizing about me, hoping that I'd join you?"

"Drake!" she cried.

He continued pumping his fingers and circled her clit with his thumb. Her walls gripped tighter, and her legs shook as her climax was imminent.

"You're not allowed to come unless I give you permission, do you understand?"

"Y... yes... sir," she panted.

Drake continued his assault, curling his fingers and bringing her right to the edge. He withdrew when she attempted to grind herself against his palm. He swatted her ass and held onto her cheek.

"Please, Drake. I need to come," she whimpered.

He brushed the thumb of his other hand across her lower lip and stared into her eyes. He smiled as her tongue chased his thumb. He slipped it into her mouth, and she responded immediately, sucking gently.

"You haven't earned it yet. Get on your knees, bella. Do a good job, and you will be rewarded."

Alessandra obeyed him wordlessly. He enjoyed the feel of her hands caressing his abs as they involuntarily flexed. He groaned as she scratched her nails down his thighs so close to where he needed her. When she reached for his throbbing dick, he halted her movements.

"Grab your ankles. I don't want your hands to be tempted." Alessandra reached behind her back and grabbed her ankles, opening her body up to him completely. Drake stilled with his hands on his hips, appreciating the vision of his wife on her knees, waiting for him. Wet and unbridled, she was

a beautiful, natural submissive. “Good girl. Now open wide because I plan on using your pretty little mouth.”

Drake stroked himself and squeezed another bead of pre-cum from the tip. He groaned at how soft and pillowy her kiss-swollen lips felt as he traced them with his wet head.

“Stick your tongue out,” he said. He tapped his cock against her waiting tongue and fought the urge to thrust uninhibited into her waiting mouth.

“Every time with me will be your first again. Forget any man who has been here before. I’m going to punish you for every hard-on you left me with for the past six months.” He grabbed a fistful of her hair and guided himself into her wet channel.

She tried to move against him shallowly, but he forced himself deep into her mouth. His eyes rolled as he hit the back of her throat. He held her there until she gagged. He relaxed his grip on her hair, allowing her to control the speed and depth. She bobbed on his shaft, running her tongue along the underside.

“That feels amazing, Alessandra. Now relax your velvety throat. I’m going to fuck it.”

His grip tightened, holding her still while he pumped voraciously. He forced his cock deeper than before and didn’t stop his forward movement until her nose pressed against his pelvis. He held her while she looked at him from beneath her long, wet lashes. Drake squeezed her throat with his other hand until she squirmed. He withdrew immediately, taking the cue from her body, allowing her to inhale and splutter before pushing back in.

“You did good, dolcezza. Daddy’s proud of you.” Her emerald eyes were his undoing. A familiar tingle began at the base of his spine, and his balls became tight. “I’m almost there.”

Drake adjusted the angle of Alessandra’s head, one hand in her hair and the other around her neck. He thrust wildly, disappearing entirely within her mouth. She hummed around him, and the subtle vibrations pushed him over the edge.

With a final push, his ass clenched, and he erupted with a roar. Every bit of himself spilled down her welcoming throat. He held her head in place, not letting go until she swallowed every drop of his salty seed.

He withdrew and helped her back to her feet. She swayed slightly, and he pushed her wet locks back.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she replied, hoarsely.

“You were incredible, bella.” He pulled her against him and kissed her long and fervently. “You earned your reward. But you cannot come until I give you permission.”

Alessandra nodded under hooded eyes. Her chest heaved as she attempted to catch her breath. Drake backed her against the cool marble again and knelt before her. She ran her fingers through his curls as he looked up at her.

“Are you ready, principessa?” he asked.

She looked down at him and worried her lip in a way that was effortlessly sexy. His wife was so timid and sensual at the same time, and he found himself in awe of her. Drake caressed the back of her right calf and kissed her from her ankle to knee. He pulled her leg over his shoulder, baring her beautiful pink pussy.

He ran his tongue along her folds in long slow licks, taking his time to tease and taste her sweet nectar. “I knew you would taste good, but fuck, bella. You taste so goddamn sweet.”

“Drake, please...” she begged.

“Please, what?”

“I need—” She wailed as he flicked her clit.

Drake pushed two fingers into her, curling them against her perfect spot. He relished in her deliciousness, in no rush to end the sweet torture.

He pulled away completely. “Tell me what you need, Alessandra.”

“Can I please come, sir?” She squealed as he nipped her hip bone.

Drake ignored her pleas. He threw her other leg over his shoulder and lifted her, leveraging her body against the tiled wall at his mercy. He wrapped his hands around her thighs and spread her open further, driving his tongue deep inside her as she writhed against his face.

“Come for me. Now,” he commanded.

Alessandra begged a higher power to have mercy on her as Drake sucked her swollen clit into his mouth and bit down. She screamed as she came apart, drenching his chin with her juices. He growled at the delicious pain her fingernails digging into the skin of his shoulders caused.

Drake continued stimulating her with his tongue and fingers as she bucked against him, riding out the wave. He lifted his fingers to her lips, and she opened for him. He stroked her tongue, and she took the cue to suck and lick them clean as she had done to his cock minutes earlier.

“You are so beautiful when you come, bella.” Drake placed Alessandra back on her feet and kissed her forehead.

The water continued raining down on them as Drake held Alessandra in his arms. Drops of water clung to her long lashes as she looked at him with her shining emeralds. He was driven to throw her over his shoulder and spend the day in bed unlocking the mysteries of her body and soul. But something snapped inside his chest. He couldn't offer her the same. Drake exited the shower and slung a towel around his hips before Alessandra could catch her breath.

Chapter Seven

ALESSANDRA RESTED HER HEAD AGAINST THE COOL TILE WALL AND CLOSED her eyes, waiting for her legs to solidify. She purposefully took her time to allow Drake the opportunity to slip out now that their marital duties were performed. He'd delivered on his promise of a hot and dirty experience. There was no shame in the act, but she was determined to avoid the awkward what-comes-next conversation.

When she exited the bathroom an hour later, her eyes widened with shock. Drake stood on the patio and turned to smile as she joined him. There was no mistaking his woodsy scent mingling with the salty sea air. She wanted to wrap herself in a blanket of its comfort. His wavy hair gently brushed against his forehead—the same hair she had held onto when he was on his knees. She wanted to brush it from his forehead and smiled at her deviously-handsome husband.

She took a moment to appreciate the view beyond their bungalow. The patio gave way to a stretch of white sand that was their own private beachfront. The water was so blue and stretched to meet the horizon. Gentle waves rolled against the shore. Alessandra decided to capture a bit of sand in a vial to bring back a tangible memory from their honeymoon.

“How was your shower, bella?” Drake asked softly.

“It was good, thank you.”

“What are you all dressed up for?” He gestured to her outfit, a pair of short-shorts and a tank top.

“I’m going out,” she said, pouting and crossing her arms.

“Where are you going?”

Her smile wavered, and she spoke through gritted teeth. “Why do you suddenly give a damn? You’ve ignored me for days.”

He sighed and pushed his hair off his forehead. “You’re right. I’ve been an asshole. But I hoped we could spend the day together and get to know each other.”

“That’s what you said you wanted to do before coming on this trip.” Alessandra looked at him momentarily before making her way toward the door.

“Please, stop.” She hesitated with her hand on the knob. “This whole situation has me fucked up in knots. I took it out on you, and it’s not fair. Can you please forgive me?”

“I’ll forgive you under one condition.” She punctuated with her finger.

He perked up. “Name it, Alessandra. If it’s within my power to grant, it’s yours.”

“Stop taking your shit out on me. We’re in this marriage together. I’m not your enemy, but I can be your friend. We should try and make the best of our time together.”

Drake moved toward her, holding out his hand. She softened at his gesture. He took her hand and intertwined his fingers with hers.

“You’re right. This is your father’s fault. It’s been hard to separate you from him, but I promise to try. I’ll work to earn your forgiveness if you allow me the chance to prove my sincerity.” He looked at their joined hands and stroked her knuckles with his thumb. “Can you tell me where you’re going? I want to join you.”

She smiled brightly and opened the door, dragging Drake out of the room. “Come with me. I promise it’ll be fun.”

They walked down to the docks, where a longshoreman showed them a speedboat she had rented. Drake's mouth hung open when Alessandra effortlessly climbed onboard.

"What are you doing, bella?"

"Don't tell me you're afraid of being on the water," she teased, looking over her shoulder.

"Quite the opposite. I'll be the captain."

"How chivalrous of you! Or is it sexist?"

"Tell me something, honestly. Do you think it's sexy watching your man take charge?"

Alessandra's eyes traced the muscles of his chest that strained beneath his polo and the biceps that bulged out of his sleeves as he moved around the boat with practiced ease. Her belly clenched as she imagined the boat rocking them as he moved on top of her.

Drake laughed and turned back to untie the boat. "That's what I thought."

Despite the odds, Alessandra grew to care about her husband. The man he portrayed himself thus far in their marriage and the courtroom wasn't the real Drake. She silently vowed to allow him time to let his guard down and earn his trust.

The boat cut through the ocean, spraying water around them. Alessandra occasionally watched Drake steer the boat with ease through her Tiffany sunglasses. About half an hour from the resort, Drake cut the engine and dropped anchor. He settled close to Alessandra and stretched out his legs. The warm sun baked their skin, and the only sound around them was the gentle lulling of water against the boat.

Alessandra couldn't stand the tension or silence any longer. "Want to go for a swim?" she asked.

She stood and seductively peeled off her clothes, giving her husband an impromptu show. Drake's eyes burned hotter than the midday sun as they caressed every inch of her bare skin.

Alessandra swayed her hips as she stepped toward the railing. Taking a deep breath, she swung her legs over the metal bar and jumped into the crisp cool blue water. When she crested the surface, Drake was looking down from the railing.

“Come on in, hubby! The water’s refreshing!” she called up to him.

Drake quickly stripped and jumped in the water. The splash his body caused drenched her, but she laughed at his lack of grace. He grabbed her waist when he resurfaced so she couldn’t swim away. That suited her just fine, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Happy now? Was this all a ploy to get me naked?” He asked, laughing.

“I didn’t plan on taking a boat out today. But since you decided to spend the day with me, I quickly called the marina and asked if they had any rentals left. I wanted to see if my husband knew how to drive a boat.”

“There are several harbors in the state. I learned how to sail through the Lake Forest Sailing program. My family owns a yacht, and learning how to navigate a beast like that makes a simple speedboat easy. I also own a jet ski, ATV, and a snowmobile.”

“And a sports car.”

“Oh, bella, you think I only own one?” He laughed and whispered in her ear. “You haven’t seen me drive a stick yet.”

Their conversation turned into heated territory she wasn’t expecting. “You were a preppy boy growing up, weren’t you? I’m impressed.”

He shrugged noncommittally. “If I was a preppy boy, you must’ve been a goth chick.”

“I was homeschooled. My father said it was too dangerous for me, though Marcello was allowed to attend high school and college,” Alessandra said morosely.

Drake cleared his throat. “It was a great idea to take a boat out today. Thank you,” he said sincerely.

“Since you wanted to do something together, why not make it fun? It beats sitting in the bungalow alone, wondering where you’ve been for the past few days.”

Drake gazed at her meaningfully but didn’t reply. He let her go, slipping back into her broody husband. She dropped her arms from his neck, and he swam a few arm lengths away.

They returned to the boat and sunned themselves naked on the deck.

Alessandra pulled her knees to her chest. “I wanted to say how genuinely sorry I am for everything, Drake. I honestly didn’t know my father planned this.”

“You know I could lose my case due to this, Alessandra, and receive a sanction. I interviewed to become an assistant U.S. attorney. That dream won’t come true because of this scandal. Your father fucked up my life and my career.”

“I’ve already said I’m sorry. But I refuse to feel guilty that my brother may be released. He’s a good man and my best friend. I miss him.”

“He’s a criminal, Alessandra!” Drake exclaimed. “He broke the law. He may have acted on Anthony’s orders, but ultimately, it was *his* decision. Your father and brother deserve to go to prison. Forgive me, but you will never change my mind about that. It’s my job to ensure the bad guys remain in jail.”

Alessandra hugged her legs tighter. Of course, she knew who her father and brother truly were, but they were still family. Her heart twisted over the consequences Drake faced. Pulling back layers and being vulnerable wasn’t easy for Alessandra. But she was willing to bear the pain for the sake of her partner.

“I have happy memories from early childhood, but everything changed after my mother died. I used to wish I had been born into a different family. Maybe things could’ve been different for Marcello and me.”

“Wishes are for children.” She winced and absentmindedly rubbed the scar on her wrist. “I’m sorry you were hurt, Alessandra. You didn’t deserve to be used like this.”

“Thank you, Drake. That means a lot to me.”

Drake took Alessandra’s hand and ran his thumb across the scar on her wrist. It had healed years ago, but the emotional scars left behind remained raw. Drake lowered his forehead to hers. The move was so gentle she couldn’t hold the tears back.

“Drake... don’t—”

“Shhh.”

Drake gently placed his hand on her cheek and wiped away her tears with his thumb. She’d learned to stuff everything deep down and lock it away in the dark recesses of her soul. Despite going years without shedding a tear, she suddenly found herself struggling to contain her emotions.

Alessandra froze beneath Drake’s intense gaze. Her breath caught as he leaned in slowly, like a hunter approaching a deer in the forest. Any sudden movements and reality would come crashing down to sever the fragile emotional tether they had built.

Drake pressed his lips against Alessandra’s. The kiss lacked intensity and conflict, devoid of lust or anger, like every kiss that had preceded it. It was filled with intense emotion that threatened to overwhelm them both. If left unchecked, it would burn the world around them.

Drake pulled away quickly and grabbed his clothes. Turning away to dress, his sinewy muscles stretched across his broad shoulders, erecting walls again. Alessandra reluctantly pulled her clothes on while Drake lifted anchor and started the engine.

“Would you like to have dinner with me?” Drake asked once they docked.

Alessandra hid her shock and replied, “Let me take a quick shower.”

After finishing her shower, she settled at the vanity to blow-dry her hair and apply makeup, allowing Drake to have his turn in the bathroom. Her phone chimed with a text.

Luca: I hope you aren’t banging that imbecile, Alessandra. It’s a fake marriage. You belong to me.

Alessandra: What do you want, Luca?

Luca: Is that the proper tone to strike with me? Don't make me wash your mouth with soap or stick something else in it.

Alessandra: You're a pig! I'm on my honeymoon. What do you want?

Luca: Marcello's court date was changed, and your father expects you to attend. Need I remind you of what's at stake?

Alessandra: I'll be there. He's my brother, after all.

Luca: Good girl. Don't forget to behave yourself.

Alessandra quickly deleted the messages so Drake wouldn't see them and shut the phone off.

She was about to knock on the door to see if he was ready when she overheard him.

"She doesn't need to know.... Things are complicated.... You're right.... I'll be home tomorrow...."

She quickly moved away from the door and sat on the bed. A plume of steam escaped the bathroom as Drake opened the door.

"Is everything all right, Drake?" she asked nonchalantly.

"Of course. Are you ready for dinner?"

After a pleasant dinner, the couple returned to their room. Alessandra prepared for the last night of their honeymoon to the left of a pillow barrier. Drake frowned as she erected the barrier but climbed in anyway.

"Goodnight, Drake," Alessandra said softly.

"Goodnight."

Though she didn't cry herself to sleep, she stared at the ceiling long into the night, knowing he did the same. The honeymoon left more questions than answers, leaving her to wonder where they went from there.

Chapter Eight

A FEW NIGHTS LATER, ALESSANDRA AND DRAKE LOUNGED IN THE LIVING room, talking and laughing over a glass of wine while waiting for their late dinner to be delivered. She sat with her legs tucked beneath her, and Drake's arm was thrown over the back of the sofa.

She gazed longingly at her husband, wanting to push an errant brown strand off his forehead. He was so handsome when he was relaxed and smiling. She found men who showed their teeth while smiling quite appealing. However, she knew that deception could lurk behind a brilliant set of teeth.

She felt like she could let her guard down in the relaxed atmosphere. Since returning home, Drake had remained attentive. And while there was no further physical intimacy between them, they seemed to be on the right path.

They drifted closer on the sofa to the point their knees almost touched. All the cues were there, and Alessandra thought Drake would kiss her at any moment. She shifted to open her body up, signaling that she was willing to follow his lead. He moved his hand from the back of the sofa to caress her bare shoulder where her robe had slipped. His lips drew so close that his breath tickled her lips. She shivered with anticipation and puckered her lips.

The doorbell rang, interrupting the moment. Assuming it was the takeout they'd ordered, Alessandra offered to answer the door. It wasn't a delivery but a striking, well-dressed woman with sleek blonde hair.

“I’d like to see my husband.”

The air escaped Alessandra’s lungs. She’d forgotten how to breathe. *Husband?*

She was staring into the cold ice-blue eyes of Riley, Drake’s ex-fiancée. It pained Alessandra to admit the other woman was stunning in a black plaid tweed jacket and skirt.

Riley was everything Alessandra wasn’t. She was tall and sophisticated, carrying herself like a true socialite. Of course, a handsome, rich man like Drake wouldn’t date anyone less than supermodel worthy.

Alessandra felt self-conscious around the woman who moved with such a dignified presence. Standing at 5’4”, she carried a few extra pounds on her hourglass frame that concentrated in her breasts and hips, while Riley towered half a foot over Alessandra in her stilettos.

“Who’s at the door?” Drake called from the living room.

Upon hearing Drake’s voice, Riley tilted her head and walked past Alessandra while giving her a disapproving glance. Her heels clicked against the hardwood, and Alessandra trudged behind her in bare feet.

“Well, if this isn’t a cozy picture,” Riley quipped. “Who the hell is this tramp, and why is she wearing my underwear, Drake?”

Alessandra had replaced the lacy panties Drake ruined the morning after their wedding. Tonight, she wore a pink lacy baby doll with matching panties. The only part of her lingerie that belonged to Riley was the robe.

Drake jumped off the couch and quickly closed and tied the red silk robe, concealing the matching boxers. He crossed his arms as his eyes darkened.

“Riley? What are you doing here?” He clenched his jaw.

“Hello to you too, darling.” She finger-waved. “Now, are you ready to answer my question? How about you dismiss the maid so we can have a private conversation.”

Alessandra stepped next to Drake and flashed her diamond ring in Riley’s face. “I’m not a maid. I’m his wife.”

She remembered what her father had said about Riley leaving Drake for money. Riley certainly wasn't dressed like a woman who was hurting for money. Alessandra assumed clothing was the same as emotion.

In high society, there is an unwritten expectation to maintain appearances at all times. Show off your designer labels so no one knows you're hurting for money. Keep a smile on your face so no one knows how painful the welts on your back are.

Alessandra looked from Riley to her husband. This was their marital home, and she'd be damned if Riley took another stab at Drake or ran her out of the house.

"If you wouldn't mind giving the adults some privacy," Riley said patronizingly.

"This is my house now. You don't get to come in here and make demands," Alessandra said, wanting nothing more than to wipe the saccharine smile from Riley's face.

"Alessandra, please. Give me a moment alone with Riley." Drake's stern voice stunned Alessandra.

She turned sharply towards him to engage in an argument. "I'm your wife, Drake. I'm staying right here."

A shiver ran down her spine as his eyes flashed with a dangerous threat of punishment. She backed down but didn't leave.

"Why is she here, Drake? Isn't she a bit young for you? You've been calling me all week, begging me to come home. And you've let this bimbo help herself to clothes from my closet and lounge in my underwear."

"What does she mean, Drake?" Alessandra was dismayed.

"I'm sorry, Alessandra," he said.

Alessandra searched Drake's eyes for answers she desperately needed, but his silence spoke volumes. She recollected the phone call she had unintentionally overheard on their honeymoon, now knowing he was speaking to his ex. Despite feeling dizzy and eyes stinging from unshed

tears, Alessandra remained strong. She refused to let anyone see her shed a tear.

“Riley took money to stand you up at the altar, and you’ve been begging her to return this whole time? All I’ve done is try to show you I’m in this. Yet you continue to hurt me. You’re a fucking asshole, Drake Walker! I never should’ve trusted you.”

Drake grabbed Alessandra’s arms roughly. “That’s enough, Alessandra.”

She wrenched free from his grip, rounding on Riley. “Did Drake tell you how he moaned my name while I sucked his cock? How he ate my pussy like he was starving after?”

“Oh honey, that doesn’t make you a wife. It makes you a whore.”

Another blow akin to a slap, and she was done. She could no longer ignore the writing on the wall. Their marriage was doomed from the start. Alessandra just hadn’t expected it to end like this. Unable to stomach any more, she walked to the guest room closet and threw items into her suitcase.

Alessandra couldn’t leave in her underwear and decided to stick it to Drake and Riley by wearing something of hers. She took scissors to a pair of white jeans, turning them into cut-off shorts, showing off the lotus mandala tattoo on her thigh. She pulled on a black zip-up hoodie, zippering it to her navel—exposing the black lace bra and sheer black top underneath—and a black belt with a chunky silver buckle to accentuate her waistline.

Alessandra turned in the mirror, satisfied with her look and not caring how petty the move was. She grabbed her belongings and made her way to the elevator. Jamming the button was a vain hope because Riley caught up to her.

“Are you homeless? Can’t you afford clothes of your own?” Riley laughed in derision.

“Do you think my perky tits, curvaceous body, and ass that Drake loves do this outfit justice? I’m sure it looks better on me than a prune-faced bitch like you.” Alessandra knew she was acting immaturely but didn’t care. She was heartbroken, and lashing out was the only way to keep herself in one piece.

Riley's face turned puce, and she pursed her lips as though sucking on a sour lemon. Alessandra turned to the door next to the elevator. She'd take the stairs if needed.

Drake reached out to stop her. "Please give me a chance to explain. It's late, don't leave."

The desperation in Drake's voice had Alessandra hesitating. She looked into his eyes and saw pain that mirrored her own. But Riley grabbed his arm and stroked the exposed part of his chest.

Alessandra shook her head. There was an intimacy between the two that she couldn't compete with. "It's clear we've made our choices, Mr. Walker. You'll be hearing from my lawyer."

"Alessandra—"

"Let her go, Drake," Riley said.

Alessandra passed the young delivery man on her way out. She'd be damned if Riley ate her dinner, so she snatched the food from his hand and dumped it in the garbage.

Blazing street lamps greeted her as she stumbled onto the sidewalk. Jenny's blue sedan sat in the loading zone with the hazards flashing. Jenny reached for Alessandra's bag and placed it in the trunk.

As soon as Alessandra settled into the seat, she couldn't hold back anymore and burst into tears. Jenny placed a comforting hand on Alessandra's shoulder.

"It's going to be okay, Alessandra."

Though Jenny worked for the Russo family, she was the closest thing Alessandra had to a friend. She was the only one Alessandra could turn to for help.

Alessandra couldn't stop speaking until she had purged all her emotions. "He was engaged to someone else before we got married. How could I be so stupid? Of course, he'd call and beg her to return. You don't fall out of

love with someone just because you marry someone else. I can't compete with her, Jenny. I need you to draw up divorce papers for me."

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" Jenny asked.

"My marriage is a sham. Marcello doesn't need my help anymore. Luca already told me the judge gave him a new court date."

"What about your father and Luca?"

"Father said I'll belong to Luca—the monster-you-know kind of thing. I'm done being used for their gain. Just because I'm a woman doesn't make me a pawn. I'm leaving the city."

Alessandra rubbed the scar on her wrist. Jenny expressed sympathy through her dark eyes as the two women silently communicated. "If you're sure this is what you want to do, I'll help you however I can."

They arrived at Jenny's Bucktown loft. Alessandra was surprised at how modest the interior was. A simple white sofa and matching loveseat took up most of the living room. There was an ottoman instead of a coffee table and two distressed wooden side tables. As Alessandra looked around, she was nonplussed to find it lacking any of her brother's personal effects.

Jenny offered to make Alessandra something to eat, but she had no appetite. She then attempted to entice her guest with ice cream and a movie.

"I'm sorry. If it's all right with you, I'll just head to bed." Alessandra wasn't in the mood for company.

Jenny showed Alessandra to the guest room to help her settle in comfortably and brought her fresh linens. "I'm just down the hall if you need anything."

"Thanks, Jenny."

Alessandra showered and pulled on a cami and stretchy pajama pants. As she got comfortable in bed, her phone illuminated on the nightstand. There were several missed calls and a single text from Drake.

Drake: Please talk to me, Alessandra. I'm sorry about Riley. I'm sorry for everything.

Alessandra: Leave me alone, Drake. If you have anything to say, contact my lawyer.

Alessandra shared Jenny's contact details before shutting off her phone. Burying her face in a pillow and forgetting how her marriage had fallen apart in the last few hours was all she wanted to do, but instead, she stared at the ceiling for hours, trying to figure out how to break free of her cage and move on with her life.

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Chapter Nine

DRAKE BROKE INTO A COLD SWEAT AS HE WATCHED HIS WIFE WALK OUT THE door. Despite Riley's protests, he quickly threw on jeans and a T-shirt. By the time he reached the lobby and ran out to the street, Alessandra was nowhere to be seen.

He pulled out his cell and called her immediately, but it went straight to voicemail. He tried again before cursing and kicking at a pebble on the sidewalk. He thrust his hands through his hair as he had a tendency to do when frustrated.

He gave up and returned to the building. The concierge shook his head when Drake asked which way Alessandra had gone. He'd royally fucked up, but it wasn't what Alessandra thought. If only she had given him a chance to explain.

When Alessandra returned, he would place a tracker on her phone so he would always know where she was if she left again. He hoped she was somewhere safe. A night to cool down might be what she needed.

He dreaded riding the elevator alone, knowing his night was far from over. When the doors opened and he stepped off the elevator, he saw Riley stripped down to white lingerie and posed seductively on the couch. The set was similar to what Alessandra wore on their wedding night. His cock twitched at the memory of tearing the sexy lace from his wife's body.

“Come to me, lover,” Riley beckoned. Her voice was an ice bath on his fantasy.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Drake roared. “That’s my wife you chased away.”

Riley rose from the couch and slowly approached Drake, swinging her hips. She stroked his arm and said, “No darling, she’s not your wife. I understand your need for toys but don’t forget we had an agreement. This is far from discreet.”

Drake shook her off his arm and stepped back. “You broke our arrangement when you called off the wedding last month. I told you I would cancel the wedding, but you begged me to reconsider. You left me standing at the altar like a fool. I thought we had an understanding. If you didn’t want to marry me, you shouldn’t have accepted my proposal in the first place.”

Riley sighed and approached Drake again. She crossed her arms and tapped her manicured nails against her elbow. “I care about you, Drake, but I had cold feet. You, of all people, should respect that. All I needed was a moment to sort my feelings.

“I was packing for my flight when Anthony Russo’s men showed up at my Paris flat. They forced me to write that letter rejecting you. I told them it wouldn’t stop me, and they took my passport for good measure.

“It took me time to get an expedited replacement. Imagine my dismay when I found out you married someone else! I’m the one who should feel betrayed here. Look, why don’t we have a drink and talk about this....”

“Fine,” Drake snapped.

He poured himself a generous whiskey and a glass of rosé for Riley. When he came back with their drinks, she was still in her underwear.

“Put your clothes on, Riley. Let me assure you that nothing will ever happen between us. We’ll have a drink, and then you need to pack your shit and get out.”

“I don’t even have a car, Drake. I only just arrived back yesterday. I’m staying in a hotel.”

“Then I’ll hire movers, and you can rent a storage facility. From what I heard, you’ve come into some money recently.”

“Now, don’t be like that, darling. Surely we can work out some other arrangement.” She rubbed his bicep. “I’m a bit strapped for cash at the moment.”

Riley began listing the things she had spent her money on, hoping to elicit sympathy from Drake. But he didn’t give a shit. He would never care about Riley again. After Alessandra left, he realized how much he’d come to care for her. And what a fool he was for letting her walk away.

“We can work this out, Drake. Why don’t I just move into the guest room for a while? That was always the plan, and I had to give up my flat in Paris.” She grinned like a Cheshire Cat.

“There’s no way in hell that’s going to happen. My wife shouldn’t feel like you’re a ghost in our relationship. What you’re doing isn’t fair to her, Riley.”

Riley narrowed her eyes and replied mockingly, “Don’t tell me the infallible Drake Walker caught feelings for a little girl. Who is she? Surely you knew it wasn’t me walking down the aisle. I didn’t change that much in a year. Be honest and tell me why you married her. We agreed to have an open marriage. You could’ve fucked her.”

Drake shook his head. “You know I would’ve been faithful in our marriage.”

“If there was anyone else underneath that veil besides Alessandra Russo, would you have said ‘I do’?”

Drake’s heart beat wildly. He never intended for Alessandra to learn the truth about their wedding day. And here, his perceptive ex had his feet to the fire.

“I wanted Alessandra Russo. She was always supposed to be *mine*!” He was riled up and almost divulged everything. He sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. “You need to leave now, Riley. The doorman will call you a cab and ensure you have enough money to return to your hotel safely. You’re not welcome here anymore. This is *my* home.

“I’m going to pack up your belongings and send them to storage. I’ll let you know where they end up and pay for the first three months. After that, it’s on you.”

“This isn’t over, Drake,” she hissed.

Before going to bed that night, Drake received a text from Alessandra that confirmed she was safe, with a pin containing Jenny Nguyen’s contact information.

Drake: Thank you for taking care of my wife.

Jenny: I didn’t do it for you, Mr. Walker.

Drake: Despite what people think, I care about her. I’m not a monster.

Jenny: I’m billing you for this conversation.

Drake: I don’t give a shit about your billable hours. Just keep Alessandra safe. Let me know if she needs anything.

Jenny: I’ll see you in court.



THE FIRST THING DRAKE DID THE FOLLOWING DAY WAS HIRE A PACKING AND moving service. He paid an exorbitant amount of money to have them there that afternoon. It was a pittance to him, and he should’ve done it sooner.

The next thing he did was call his stylist. He placed an order for a new wardrobe, including shoes and accessories. This was Alessandra’s home now, and he hoped to create a more hospitable atmosphere for her homecoming. Her appreciation of his efforts wasn’t necessary.

Unsure of Alessandra’s favorite foods, Drake hired a chef to assemble a menu for the week and a shopper to purchase the ingredients. Assorted fresh fruits filled the bowl on the counter. He grabbed a banana, chocolate

protein powder, peanut butter, and almond milk, threw all the ingredients into a blender, and made himself a protein shake.

Lastly, he called his housekeeper and asked her to spend the day organizing the loft. He planned to tip her a month's salary on her next check for her trouble.

He readied himself to meet his parents for lunch to try to explain the clusterfuck that was his wedding day. He arrived at The Lake Forest Club, where his family had been members for as long as he could remember. The large club had a pool and diving well, twelve tennis courts, and four paddle courts. The dining options changed several times through the seasons and featured new weekly specials.

His parents were already seated when the hostess showed him to the table. Bitsy Walker, the family matriarch, gracefully rose to greet her eldest son. She was impeccably dressed from head to toe. Not a single hair was out of place nor a wrinkle on her filler-injected face. She could only muster a tight smile in greeting as he kissed her cheek.

"Hello, Drake." Bitsy smoothed her tailored Chanel suit before sitting back down.

"Hello, Mother. Hello, Father."

"Hello, son." Dick Walker greeted his son with a clap on the shoulder.

They sat down, and Drake ordered a filet and beer. They exchanged pleasantries while waiting for their food to arrive. Bitsy shared gossip regarding her friends from the country club and briefed him on the upcoming charity event that she was organizing. Dick told him about his latest golf game.

Once the food arrived, Bitsy shook the linen napkin out and placed it delicately in her lap. Drake and Dick followed suit. Bitsy sighed in discontent over her salad. It was time for them to discuss the matter at hand.

"The Watsons weren't happy about the wedding," Bitsy sniffed.

"I paid for the damn thing. They didn't bother coming to the church."

“Regardless of whether or not Riley called off your engagement, you should’ve canceled the wedding. You made us look like fools in front of our friends.”

“I’m sorry, Mother. Rest assured, I am not concerned with the opinions of your friends.”

“Watch your tone with your mother, Drake,” Dick cautioned.

Bitsy didn’t cry, nor did she suffer fools. Drake had committed the greatest sin in her book by creating a public scene with his outburst in church. But he didn’t give a fuck about their affluent friends anymore. His priority was his wife. Drake adopted a stoic expression and checked his emotions.

“Who is this girl?” his father asked.

“Her name is Alessandra Russo.”

“As in—” Bitsy gasped.

“Yes.”

Drake continued to explain the complexity of his situation to the best of his abilities. There were some things he couldn’t tell them for their own safety. He hoped they would understand one day.

Dick clapped his hands. “That settles it. You’ll bring this young lady home for dinner next week. We want to meet her.”

To Drake’s disappointment, Alessandra wasn’t home when he returned that evening. But everything else was taken care of. He called her, but again his call went straight to voicemail.

He yearned for his wife, and sitting in the darkness without her angered the beast within him. The longer she stayed away, the worse her punishment would be.

They would see each other in court a few days later. He resolved to drag her home, kicking and screaming if he had to. He helped himself to the rest of the whiskey before bed.

Chapter Ten

TRUE TO HER WORD, JENNY DREW UP A DIVORCE PETITION. ALESSANDRA SAT on the bed with the papers in her lap for hours. She trusted Jenny's legal skills and didn't read them. She couldn't read them. She felt lightheaded just by having them in hand.

Jenny knocked on the door, finding Alessandra in the same position she'd left her in. "You need to sign them."

"I don't know if I can," Alessandra pouted.

"Sign them, Alessandra." Jenny thrust a pen at her and pointed at the papers.

Alessandra felt an immense amount of pressure coming from every direction, which weighed her down. It seemed like nobody cared about her wishes. "I don't know if this is a good idea."

"Think of it as insurance. If you sign them now, you can serve Drake in court and avoid a process server."

She had no intention of celebrating the disillusionment of her marriage. Was it necessary? If she were being truthful with herself, she would confess that she desired to stay married.

Alessandra was determined to show Drake what he was missing. She wore an off-the-shoulder gray knit sweater top and a high-waisted black mini

skirt adorned with bold buttons, thigh-high stockings, and black fuck-me pumps.

She pulled her long auburn hair over one shoulder to expose the gentle slope of her neck. Outside she was sexy, confident, and put together. Inside she was falling apart. She longed to be the wife of Drake Walker, not just a woman with a random husband.

Once they arrived at the Richard J. Daley Center, the women parted ways. There were separate security lines for officers of the court and the general public. The security guards knew Alessandra by name at this point and were quite cordial. Her heart quickened with every echoing step down the corridor of the fourteenth floor as she approached Judge Matthew's courtroom.

Although Jenny had not explicitly stated the day's expectations, Alessandra was aware that they were related to her marriage. If things went "according to plan," Marcello would be a free man soon.

Drake was already sitting at the prosecutor's table when she walked in. He seemed to sense her presence and turned to face her. When their eyes met, he licked his lips like he wanted to devour her, stripping her naked with wolfish eyes.

Alessandra found it impossible to ignore the intense physical response she experienced in Drake's presence. She walked up to him with a determined mindset, reminding herself of her purpose for being there. She gathered courage while adopting a forced smile to ease the tension before delivering the papers to him.

"Hello, Alessandra. How's my wife doing?"

"I have a gift for you." She handed him the envelope and removed the wedding ring from her finger.

As soon as Drake laid eyes on the papers, his expression visibly changed to one of disappointment. His brow furrowed and his eyes blazed with intensity as he asked, "Is this what you really want?"

No, she thought. Alessandra was unable to meet his gaze with a lie on her tongue. Instead, her eyes fell on the Windsor knot of his plum-colored tie.

“Just sign the papers, and Jenny can file them today. We’re already in the courthouse. You’ll never have to see me again.”

Drake didn’t have a chance to respond because Marcello was escorted into the room. The guard removed his cuffs once he took his place at the defendant’s table.

Marcello smiled and waved briefly at Alessandra. Anthony and Luca arrived at the courtroom and sat down right behind Marcello a moment later. Their father scowled as he saw Alessandra next to Drake. He tensed at her side as Luca smirked and winked.

Multiple Russo guards entered the courtroom, raising the hair on the back of Alessandra’s neck. Drake was the intended recipient of a message conveyed by her father’s display of strength. She looked at her husband and was interrupted before she could warn him.

The bailiff told them to rise as an attractive black man in his late forties with a touch of gray at his temples took his seat on the bench. Judge Matthews exuded an aura of dignity, calling for order in the court. An immediate silence settled over the room, allowing the defense team to present their motion to dismiss.

Jenny stood in her pinstripe skirt and blouse. She patted her jet-black hair, which was styled in a chignon for court. Her voice rang out confidently. “Your Honor, we move for a dismissal of the charges against Marcello Russo based on the prosecution’s clear conflict of interest. Drake Walker is Mr. Russo’s brother-in-law. Given this familial role, my client can’t receive the fair trial he deserves.”

“I attended the wedding, Miss Nguyen. Congratulations, Mr. & Mrs. Walker. It was quite eventful, to say the least. I don’t see how a marriage impedes the prosecutor’s duty to try this case fairly. As I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Excuse me?” her eyebrows shot up in astonishment.

“I have it on authority that you are in a relationship with the defendant. Is that not a conflict for you, Miss Nguyen?”

“N... no... of course not, Your Honor,” she stammered as she sat back down. “My relationship status does not impact my ability to do my job.”

“Motion denied,” Judge Matthews ruled.

“Thank you, Your Honor. I want to make a motion if the defense is finished.” Drake stood.

“Go ahead, Mr. Walker.”

“The defense coerced Alessandra into becoming my bride to force a mistrial. That’s witness tampering.”

The judge angrily addressed the defense. “This is a serious accusation. Is this true, Miss Nguyen?”

“Your Honor, with all due respect, it’s a moot point. I am not aware of any malicious scheme or collaboration. As a court officer, it would have been my responsibility to report such an occurrence. I received the marriage certificate that proves a legal wedding took place. The couple is filing for divorce. I drafted the papers myself as Miss Russo’s attorney.”

“Really?” Judge Matthews addressed Alessandra.

Luca snickered and made a lewd gesture. Drake’s hands clenched by his side; Alessandra beat him to answer.

“It’s not true, Your Honor! Drake and I are not divorcing.”

“Alessandra, be quiet,” Drake hissed.

“Now, counselor, I’d like to hear from Mrs. Walker. Allow her to continue so we may put this situation to rest. Step forward, please.”

Alessandra stepped next to Drake. She grabbed his hand, and they interlaced fingers. She took her ring back from him and placed it on her finger, flashing it at the judge and Jenny.

“Your Honor, what Mr. Walker said is true. Our love story wasn’t a whirlwind romance, to say the least. Despite our circumstances, Drake and I have fallen for each other. It may have begun as an arranged marriage, but I care for him. Please don’t hold this against my husband.” She turned to her

brother. “I was forced to marry Mr. Walker due to my father, Anthony Russo. I’m sorry, Marcello. I have no reason to suspect my brother’s involvement in this scheme. ”

“What the hell is going on, Alessandra?” Drake spoke through gritted teeth.

Alessandra whispered in Drake’s ear. “Kiss me. Please, sir. We need to make this look real. My father is here for me. You promised to keep me safe.”

As Drake scanned the courtroom, he met Anthony’s scowl with steely determination before enveloping Alessandra in a comforting embrace. Drake leaned closer to Alessandra, stopping just a hair’s breadth away from her lips.

“Drake!” she squeaked.

“For you, Alessandra. Damn the consequences.” He closed the distance. Their kiss was supposed to be brief and innocent, but Alessandra couldn’t help but wrap her arms around Drake’s neck. He reciprocated by gripping her hips and pulling her flush against him.

Drake’s tongue demanded entry to her mouth, groaning when she opened to him. His hand lowered to squeeze her ass. She moaned as he pressed his growing erection against her belly. Drake’s hand made its way from her ass to the hem of her short skirt.

A loud bang startled them apart. Another bang of the gavel had them staring wide-eyed at one another breathlessly. They quickly attempted to compose themselves.

“Perhaps we should take a short recess to allow Mr. Walker and his new bride time to compose themselves. We’ll reconvene in fifteen minutes.” Judge Matthews didn’t seem amused by their display.

Chapter Eleven

WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ME? I'M ACTING LIKE A HORNY TEENAGER. Drake was angry when Alessandra left him and stopped responding to his calls. However, upon seeing her before him, his anger dissipated. He was more relieved to see her safe.

Getting those signed divorce papers from her was like a punch in the gut. He was going to make her understand. Riley had used Drake's invitation to pack up her belongings as an opportunity to size Alessandra up. There was no way he'd reconcile with his ex. He was determined not to let this incident negatively impact their future.

He had hoped she would come back and notice the efforts he made. Would she want to remain in this life with him? Alessandra was never an anonymous, faceless girl. She was a contradiction of her environment. One moment, she was timid and shy. The next, she was a wanton sex kitten who was hard to control. Alessandra needed someone who saw her and allowed her spirit to shine.

If Jerry hadn't banged the gavel, Drake wasn't sure he could've stopped himself from stripping Alessandra and claiming her in the courtroom. He wanted to prove to Tony, Luca Donato, *and* Alessandra that she belonged to him. The longer he spent in her orbit, the more his self-control slipped away.

As soon as recess was called, Drake grabbed Alessandra by the hand and dragged her into a private staff bathroom, locking the door behind them.

“What the fuck was that, Alessandra?” he seethed.

“I’m sorry, Drake. Jenny betrayed my confidence. I thought she was my friend. We had to show a united front because my father was publicly humiliated. They’ll come after you too now.” Apprehension laced her voice as she subconsciously stroked the scar on her wrist. “You don’t know what they’ve done to me. I can’t return home with them. I already signed the papers. Give me a day’s head start. We’ll both be free, and no one will ever see me again.”

Panic bubbled inside Drake at the thought of losing Alessandra forever. He took her hand in his and cupped her cheek with the other. He forced her to meet his gaze.

He sighed and pressed his forehead against hers in the most intimate gesture he could muster. “Please don’t leave me, Alessandra. Give me a chance to explain.”

“I can’t, Drake. If the situation were different, we wouldn’t be together.”

His stubborn wife attempted to push him away, but he wrapped his arm around her and pinned her to the counter with his body.

“You already have a punishment waiting for you. Don’t make it worse for yourself. Listen to me!”

She immediately stopped struggling when he forcibly grabbed her chin. Drake stroked her cheek, and she leaned into his touch.

“Drake—”

“When I called Riley, it wasn’t to beg her to return. I told her to clear her shit out before we returned from our honeymoon or I would discard everything because it bothered you that I still had her things. Please trust me when I tell you that relationship is over. I don’t love her, I never did.”

“How can we have a marriage if you aren’t honest with me?” she asked.

“There are things you don’t need to know, Alessandra. Things in my past would only hurt you. Can’t you just believe that I have your best interests at heart?”

“I’m a selfish bastard for asking you to stay with me, bella. You’re my shining light, and I’m desperate for you to return to me. We’re a contradiction of each other. I want you so badly that I can only push you away for self-preservation. It won’t end well.

“I regret not being honest with you earlier. I don’t want to hurt you, but I fear my darkness will only cause you pain. I’m sorry. I promised to keep you safe, and I will if you let me. Just don’t leave me again. Don’t take your light away from me.”

It was evident that Drake was struggling with conflicting emotions, as he both asked Alessandra to leave and pleaded with her to stay in the same breath. He felt raw after exposing his vulnerability. He realized how much he needed her only after the words left his mouth. Her mouth fell open, and she instinctively placed a hand over her heart.

He pressed his lips against Alessandra’s, kissing her long and passionately. He was desperate to assure her of his dedication and the honesty behind his words. She moaned when his tongue invaded her mouth. He was done holding back.

“If I lift up your skirt, will I find you wet already? Are you going to show me how much you missed me? Can’t you see how I’ve ached for you?”

Drake took her hand and placed it against his clothed cock. He pulled away with a hiss as soon as she grasped it. This wasn’t his moment. The first time he fucked his wife wouldn’t be in a public bathroom.

“Drake!” she cried when he lifted her onto the counter. “Punish me....”

He kissed her again, this time hungrily. His tongue tangled with hers as she pulled his hair. When he broke the kiss to trail down her slender neck, she wrapped her arms around his neck, clawing at his suit jacket.

Her mewls and her soft body yielding to him spurred him on. His eyes darkened as he fantasized about the many ways he’d enjoy punishing her if they had the time. He bit her lip before sucking it into his mouth. Dark promises would have to wait, but he wouldn’t leave her completely unsatisfied.

“This is only the beginning, do you understand?” He nibbled on her ear lobe. “I don’t have time to paint you with my cum or leave my handprint on your ass. That will happen tonight when we get home. Right now, I want you to scream for me, Alessandra. Scream my name while I finger this needy cunt.”

Drake pushed her panties aside, exposing her naked mound. He grabbed the backs of her knees and spread her open for his visual pleasure. Her glistening pink center beckoned him closer. And while he wanted to bury his face between her folds, she hadn’t earned it this time.

Drake wrapped her legs around his waist and thrust against her hard. She moaned as he brushed against her clit.

“Drake,” she whined.

“You’re a naughty girl, Alessandra, leaving me without a chance to defend myself. I will tie you to my bed and fuck you for days. I’m going to bury myself so deep in your pussy you won’t be able to walk out on me again.”

He leaned back and thrust two fingers deep within her. Her walls squeezed tight around him, and her breath quickened, signaling her orgasm was quickly approaching.

Drake pulled her hair unceremoniously, causing her back to arch. He curled his fingers and bit her neck hard enough to leave a mark.

“Do my words spur you on, dolcezza? Or is it the idea of returning to court looking freshly serviced? Your ex will take one look at your mused hair and wrinkled clothes and know I gave you this pleasure. They will see that you are mine.”

Alessandra wrapped her arms around Drake’s neck and pulled them closer. He increased his pace, and she bucked against him.

“Good girl, Alessandra. I don’t want a dead fish in the bedroom. Daddy wants his girl to be enthusiastic. You’re eager to please me, aren’t you?”

“Yes—” she hissed as his thumb circled her clit, causing her to shudder.

“Yes, what?” He bit the shell of her ear.

“Yes, Daddy!” she squealed as he worked his fingers in and out of her.

“Come for me, bella.” He grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him as he pinched her clit.

“Drake! Drake!” she cried. Her screams echoed off the tiles as she broke apart.

“So beautiful. So delicious.” Drake sucked her juices from his fingers.

Mirrored desire promised more to come. Alessandra’s gaze dropped to Drake’s crotch as he adjusted himself in his pants. She reached for him, but the alarm on his phone sounded.

“This isn’t over. I’m going to punish and fuck you tonight.” Drake promised as he pulled her panties off and slipped them into his pocket with a grin. “Let your wet, bare pussy remind you who just had you screaming in the bathroom. Will you rub your thighs together at the sound of my voice in the courtroom? Imagine if I bent you over the witness stand and spanked my naughty girl before sinking my cock into you before everyone.”

Alessandra shivered at his words. He pulled her in for a hungry, wet kiss before they walked back to the courtroom hand in hand. His need for every part of her raged out of control.

“Let me take you out, Alessandra.”

“Where will we go?”

“Anywhere you’d like. I want to leave our problems at home and treat you to our first official date. I want to put a real smile on your face and know that you’re happy.” He stroked her cheek.

“I’d like that.” She rewarded him with a beautiful smile.

Drake pulled her in for another searing kiss and smacked her ass before parting. He winked at her when she sat in a seat right behind him. Soon the courtroom was packed again.

Chapter Twelve

WITH DRAKE'S KISS LINGERING ON HER LIPS AND HER PANTY-LESS CORE still drenched and clenching from his dirty words, Alessandra watched her husband command the courtroom again. Her fantasy about him treating her as a hostile witness and bending her over the witness stand to fuck her was a favorite. She was shocked when Drake revealed he had the same fantasy, and it made her tingle all over again. Alessandra would've encouraged Drake to continue if his alarm hadn't forced them to stop. Granted, a courthouse bathroom wasn't the appropriate setting for them to consummate their marriage.

Luca slipped into the seat beside her and gripped her hand tightly. Being in a courtroom didn't guarantee safety, but she'd be damned if he frazzled her.

"You've been a bad girl, Alessandra. Your father is not pleased by your little display in court, nor am I. Although, I must say you do look ravishing. We can play a little if you'd like. No one will notice if I slip my hand up your skirt." He put his hand on her bare thigh.

"Leave me the hell alone," she hissed and attempted to pull her hand away, but Luca gripped tighter. She bit back a yelp.

"Listen here, little bitch, you belong to me! Tony promised you to me before he married you to that fucking suit, and I plan to collect."

"We've been here before, Luca. You know Papà will never let us be together. He's the one who tore us apart. Don't believe him now."

“He named me heir to the family. It changes everything now. I want you, Alessandra. I’ve always wanted you.” His hand moved higher, and Alessandra slapped it.

“But Marcello—”

“—Is a Mamaluke.” Luca chuckled. “Tony is demoting him after his cockup.”

“How can a man be so cruel to his own children? Marcello wouldn’t be in this courtroom if he weren’t forced to burn that warehouse down.”

“Make Drake sign the divorce papers,” Luca said.

Alessandra shook her head stubbornly. “No. I’m not divorcing my husband.”

Luca leaned in and whispered in her ear, “If you don’t get him to sign, I’ll make you a widow. And when I reclaim you, I won’t be gentle. You’ll be pregnant with my son before the year is done.”

Alessandra trembled at his words, feeling just as helpless as she had at eighteen. He turned her hand over, drawing attention to the scar on her wrist. The pain was unbearable, leaving a permanent reminder of how evil men could be.

She blinked back tears. “Don’t you dare threaten him, Luca! Drake’s a good man. I’ll make sure he signs the papers. We were only putting on a show for court.”

“Tell that to the fucking hickey on your neck. You let him mark you. Did you let him fuck you, too?” Luca spat venomously when Alessandra covered her neck. “You accused your father in open court, Alessandra. Do you realize how poorly this reflects on him? That went on the record. We’ll have to bribe the court clerk to make the transcript disappear.”

“That sounds like your problem. I’m not a Russo anymore. I’m Mrs. Drake Walker now. My father saw to that.” She yanked her hand roughly from Luca’s grip, bracing herself for what he would say next.

Luca delivered the blow with a smirk. “Why do you defend him, Alessandra? You know he can’t stand you. He’s just using you as a revenge fuck against his ex. You’re dumb enough to think you’re special. You’re just a desperate, sad, little girl looking for love. News flash, sweetheart, he’ll never see you as more than a pair of tits and ass while it lasts.

“At least with me, you’ll know where you stand. I’m capo bastone now, don’t forget. Being my wife won’t be so bad as long as you mind yourself. With you by my side, the Russo legacy will be stronger than ever.”

Believing in the possibility that Drake could love her might be a childish flight of fancy, but Alessandra had clung to it. Luca said everything she knew deep down was true. The excitement she felt for the date Drake promised was now long gone.

She’d never be free as long as demands were made of her. Loyalty was expected from her, but no one reciprocated in kind. Drake was still her best chance at self-discovery. It felt wrong giving him the papers, but now it was the safest thing for him.

“There, there. There’s no need to get upset, poppet. It’s how this game’s played. You’ve seen it firsthand. Make sure Drake signs the papers. You’ve got one week.”

As though sensing Alessandra’s distress, Drake glanced over his shoulder and immediately glared daggers at Luca. Luca locked eyes with Alessandra and shot a finger gun in Drake’s direction with a wink. The gesture drove the seriousness of his threat home.

The remainder of court went by unremarkably, not that Alessandra was emotionally inclined to pay attention. The judge ordered a continuation, and another court date was set. Marcello was led away in handcuffs, waving gently at her. She stood ramrod straight, not looking at her father, waiting for him to exit first.

Drake tried to take Alessandra’s hand, whether as a small comfort or part of the show, she didn’t know. She shrank into herself. They returned to the penthouse in tense silence after multiple attempts of engagement by Drake had failed.

What had once felt inviting now felt like a prison sentence of its own volition. Alessandra longed to be anywhere else. Drake stepped closer to her, and it was all she could do not to fall apart.

“Talk to me, Alessandra. Tell me what’s wrong. What did that *stronzo* say to you?”

“Like you care. I’m done with these games, Drake. You have the papers. Please just sign them.” It was easier to be angry than face the truth.

Drake grabbed Alessandra’s forearms and pulled her close. “What the fuck are you talking about? I thought we decided to make this work. You’re the one sending mixed signals now. I was there in court when you begged me to kiss you. You certainly allowed me to make you come in that bathroom. I promised to protect you, but you need to be honest with me so I can.”

She laughed shrilly and thrust her arms out of his grasp to put distance between them. “You think you can lecture me on honesty? Pot meet kettle.”

Drake stepped closer to Alessandra, causing her to jump back. He stalked closer, licking his lips. He was the predator, and she was the prey. She searched wide-eyed for an escape route and failed. It was already too late. He had her back against the wall.

“That’s right, bella. There’s nowhere left to go. Now, look at me.”

Alessandra wanted to defy him, but he was too close. His woodsy scent threatened to choke her, and she longed to bathe in it. Drake roughly grabbed her chin and forced her to look up at him.

“Tell me what’s changed. Is a divorce what you really want?”

But she didn’t get the chance to respond because he traced her lower lip with the pad of his thumb. Her knees trembled at his sensual touch. All Alessandra wanted was for him to end this conversation and punish her. She sucked the tip into her mouth, eliciting a groan from Drake. He fucked her mouth with his finger before withdrawing it with a pop.

“Answer me, Alessandra.”

Of course, she didn't want to divorce. But she couldn't ignore the truth in Luca's words or Drake's own admission. She would only be a sexual toy to be used and discarded by Drake until Luca claimed her for much worse.

Men like them would never change. But she would try desperately to twist herself into the mold they desired just for a single kernel of love. Hell, she'd take a microscopic crumb. The life she was raised in didn't allow her higher value but to spread her legs for those her father deemed worthy.

She almost broke under Drake's studious gaze, but her eyes shone with resolve. They were two people who barely tolerated each other and had no business being married. So why was she so inexplicably drawn to him? If staying married meant he was a target, that his life was in danger, didn't he deserve better than that? She cursed her warped feelings and said the only thing she could.

"Yes, I'm done with this farce," she hissed. "Sign the damn papers, Drake, and let's move on. You can return to your life since it was much better before I came along."

She attempted to duck under Drake's arm, but he caught her and twisted her arm behind her back. Her breath caught in her throat as he forcibly pulled her flush against his hard chest.

She practically melted, feeling his warm breath on her neck. Alessandra's thoughts scrambled around Drake. He knew which buttons to push to set her on edge. Shivers ran down her spine as Drake's lips brushed the shell of her ear.

"I'm a possessive man, bella. If you wanted out, you shouldn't have said 'I do'. You're *my* wife. We belong to each other. Stop fighting this. I know how much you want me." He ground his erection against her ass. "Don't you feel how much I want you?"

She whimpered at his words. It was wrong, so wrong, but it felt absolutely right.

"Drake...." she mewled.

Drake lowered her hand over his pants. She grasped the stiff bulge, and he groaned as she squeezed. He wound his hand in her hair and pulled. She

closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of his lips on her neck.

“What do you want, Alessandra?” he whispered. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not in the mood to be gentle. I expect you to be obedient, not a brat.”

“I want to be yours, sir,” she replied.

Drake growled and tore her clothes off, not stopping until she was completely naked except for her Louboutins. He backed up, taking his warmth with him. Standing still was challenging since Drake always left her disoriented. Desperate to prove she was a good girl, Alessandra took a deep breath in an effort to calm her quaking hands and pushed her heels together.

Drake adjusted her hands behind her head, pushing her breasts up and out for his inspection. His foot tapped hers, and she widened her stance. A wolfish grin stretched across his face as he appraised her like a piece of meat. She had no doubt he could scent her arousal. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than for him to take her. Her need was so desperate it verged on painful.

He continued his slow perusal, torturing her with an occasional brush of his finger across her burning skin. She was feverish and dripping by the time he stopped. It was impossible to hold back a yelp when he pinched one of her nipples, sending the pain to her throbbing core. He rolled it between his thumb and forefinger.

“Drake!” she sobbed.

“I didn’t give you permission to speak. Walk toward the window and assume a punishment position.” Drake’s hand settled on her ass.

“But, sir, what if someone sees us?”

“You’re a beautiful woman, Alessandra. Let them see you.” He licked the shell of her ear. “I want people to watch you fall apart on my cock.”

Alessandra’s mouth went dry, but she obeyed. Her heels thudded on the wood floor as she walked to the panoramic window overlooking the Chicago skyline. She could even see the lake between gaps in the high-

rises. She stood with her legs spread wide, back arched to present her bare ass to Drake, and crossed her arms on the cool glass.

Though she couldn't see Drake, she heard the rustle of his clothes. He unfurled his tie before her face, letting her wonder what he had planned for only a moment.

“Open your mouth, gorgeous. You spoke without permission, so I will fill it for you.”

Alessandra obeyed, hoping the kiss-proof lipstick would fail and smudge his tie as he slid the smooth silk between her full lips. The idea of leaving him a reminder of their play turned her on. Drake's fingers brushed her hair back to tie a tight knot.

He smacked her ass hard, and only a muffled cry escaped. His hand came down on the other cheek just as hard before he roughly palmed her ass.

“It's an incredible view, isn't it?” Alessandra was unsure if he meant her naked body in front of the window or the skyline itself. She secretly hoped he referred to her. “I've never fucked in front of this window before. It's time we change that.”

If Alessandra could beg, she would. Her core clenched and her nipples tightened at the thought of him taking her. The wetness running down her inner thighs proved her readiness. She craved his crudeness, wondering if he intended to keep his promises. Drake reached around and palmed her breasts while biting her neck, sending more painful signals to her core.

He was teaching her everything about the kind of man he was. It was too much, and she brought her legs together to find some friction for herself.

“Naughty girl. Did I give you permission to pleasure yourself? Did you forget about the punishment you earned?”

He thrust his thigh between her legs, and she ground against it, leaving a streak of wetness on the cloth. She jolted as Drake spanked her multiple times. Then he reached around her body and flicked her clit before pinching hard. The stimulation was too much, and she came immediately. The tie in her mouth muffled her cries.

“Mmm.”

Drake’s arms were the only thing that kept her liquified body upright. He gave her a moment to catch her breath before disengaging himself. She was vaguely aware of him removing his clothes.

The hot length of Drake’s cock pushed against the crack of her ass. “You came so beautifully for me. Are you ready for your reward? I can’t stand another moment without my cock buried deep inside you.”

Still gagged, all she could do was nod her assent. Alessandra slowly swayed her hips to grind against Drake, but he yanked her head back quickly, causing her to arch, reminding her who was in charge. Nothing turned her on more than giving him the reins and having him set the pace.

He ran his large cock through her swollen folds, grinding himself against her. “You’re so wet, bella. I’m going to be able to slide right in.”

Drake withdrew, and the crinkle of a condom wrapper was barely audible over Drake’s heavy breath against her skin. “Are you ready, Alessandra?”

She moaned and nodded her head enthusiastically. Drake pulled her hands off the glass and trapped them behind her back. He forced her to spread wider with his thigh. He aimed at her center with one hand and thrust so deep with a single stroke their hips met.

Drake stilled only a moment before withdrawing and entering again with increasing force. He repeated multiple times until Alessandra’s head dropped back. She was entirely at her husband’s mercy with nothing to steady herself. He controlled her every move, and she was floating.

“You feel incredible, Alessandra. Your body was made for my cock. I can’t believe it took this long to be inside you.”

She couldn’t believe it had taken so long, either. Now that the moment had arrived, it didn’t disappoint. He was so big and fit perfectly inside her. Her body eagerly accepted him, recognizing this man was made for her.

His hips continued slamming against her ass, and she wanted to thank him for it. Her breasts swung like a pendulum as he rocked her back and forth.

Occasionally he thrust her into the cool glass, and the lights beyond the window blurred.

“Are you thinking of how many people are watching you take my cock, bella? How many women wish they were in your place? How many men have their cocks in their hands imagining your tight wet body?” he growled as he rolled his hips. “This pussy is *mine*. *Mine* to fuck, *mine* to please. If I want to lick it for hours, you’ll be a good girl and lie on your back. If you feel needy, climb on my cock and ride it because it’s *yours*.”

His hips continued to snap, flesh against flesh. Alessandra sobbed through the gag as she edged closer to another orgasm.

“I want to hear you scream my name when you come.” Drake quickly yanked the tie from her mouth.

His pace became frenzied as he pushed so deep it was almost painful. Drake’s breaths became labored against her shoulder. Her core clenched around him.

“Drake! Drake! Drake!” she screamed as white-hot bliss tore through her. The city lights dulled as she collapsed against the window.

“Alessandra!” Drake’s head fell onto her shoulder as his cock twitched deep inside her.

Their heavy breathing fogged up the glass around their bodies. Drake kissed the side of Alessandra’s neck as he pulled out. He left Alessandra confused and naked, staring out the window. It was the best sex of her life, and she wondered if he felt the same.

Chapter Thirteen

DRAKE FELT GUILTY LEAVING ALESSANDRA. A GOOD DOM KNOWS HIS SUB requires aftercare after such rough play. But he was craven and ran away from his own feelings. He took a long, hot shower, letting the thoughts of court, expectation, and marriage swirl down the drain.

It was too late to ask her to forgive him, but he hoped the gift he left Alessandra would be the first step toward peace. Several dress boxes had been dropped off by courier earlier that day. His housekeeper checked the sizes in Alessandra's closet and called his stylist to purchase cocktail dress options for the evening.

He took a blank card and scrawled:

Wear something sexy for me. I'm showing you off as my wife tonight. The black dress is my favorite.

—Drake

He'd only seen a picture of the dress but could imagine it on Alessandra. The sheer black lace top was embroidered to offer modest coverage of her breasts while plunging to the navel. The thigh-high slit would offer him an advantage in playing with her. A thick satin ribbon belt would accentuate her waist. The stylist also picked out a black jeweled necklace and matching earrings that would glitter against her hair.

Drake buttoned up his new black single-breasted Armani suit and reached for a maroon silk tie. He hadn't wanted to impress a date this much in a long time, and his wife deserved him at his best.

Drake remembered the day his father taught him how to tie a tie.

"Now, son, every young man must learn to tie a tie. You want to look sharp, don't you?" Richard Walker turned his son toward the mirror.

Young Drake enjoyed open collars because he always found ties too constricting. Fashion didn't exist in his vocabulary. But Drake loved his father and wanted to make him proud. He smiled at his father's reflection when he saw a purple-damask-on-navy tie. It made him feel special since it was his father's favorite.

"I'm going to teach you how to tie a Windsor knot."

Dick instructed his son to raise his shirt collar, draped the silky tie around his neck, and pulled the wide end down his right side. The older man's fingers crossed the wide part of the tie over the narrow part and looped it through the opening at the neck.

"Now, this is the tricky part, son. But you'll see it's not as hard as it looks. Pass the wide end underneath and to the right of the narrow part with the wrong side facing out and cross the wide part over to the left of the narrow part with the right side facing out."

Drake's father demonstrated this move in the mirror. He pulled the wide end through the opening at the neck and passed it through the loop at the front. Then he held the ends in one hand and carefully slid the knot toward the collar with the other hand until it was snug and fixed Drake's collar.

Drake felt like he was being choked and immediately yanked the knot down again. His father frowned. Their moment of bonding was severed.

"I don't like ties, Dad," he whined.

"Sometimes we have to do and wear things we don't like. It's your grandmother's funeral today. Your mother would appreciate seeing you dressed for the occasion."

It was a losing battle for Drake. Bitsy's family came from old money and privilege. His grandmother had always been more critical of appearances than his mother. And if wearing a suit jacket and tie made his mother happy on such a sad day, he'd do it. Drake turned to his father and hugged him.

"Thanks for the tie, Dad."

Dick patted his son on the back before walking out of the room. Drake turned to the mirror and undid the knot to practice the steps his father had just taught him. It took a few tries, but the tenacious, young man was determined to get it right.

Once dressed, Drake chose a pair of diamond cufflinks and pulled on his Rolex. He poured himself a whiskey and waited for Alessandra to finish readying herself. The *click, click* sound of her heels on the hardwood floors alerted him to her presence.

She softly cleared her throat to gain his attention, which was unnecessary as his heart quickened in anticipation. He turned to greet her and almost choked on his drink. She had chosen the black dress after all. His imagination didn't do her beauty justice.

"You are absolutely stunning, Alessandra."

He knew she would look sexy, but the breathtaking vision before him awakened other feelings. Drake held his arm out to encourage her to come closer.

She froze for a moment before taking a cautious step. "Thank you for the dress, Drake. You have good taste."

He frowned. Didn't she realize how beautiful she was? His compliment was genuine, without any connotation. He hated that merciless bastards had conditioned her, and decided he would do whatever it took to make her see herself as worthy of the life of her dreams.

She hooked her arm in his, and they made their way to the street where a town car waited. Catching the capped driver staring at his wife's ass, Drake fought the urge to pluck out the man's eyes. He shooed the driver away and offered his hand to assist Alessandra in climbing in. She smiled as she grabbed his hand.

She scooted across the black leather seat to make room for Drake. He popped open a bottle of champagne and poured her a glass. As the drink bubbled in the flute, her eyes brightened with excitement.

“Here’s to my beautiful wife.” He raised his glass.

“You’re pulling out all the stops this evening, Mr. Walker. What’s the occasion?”

Alessandra and Drake raised their glasses and clinked them together. She took a satisfying sip and watched Drake’s Adam’s apple move as he swallowed.

“First, I’m treating my wife because she deserves it.” He kissed her beneath the ear. “We’re headed to a charity gala tonight. They’re raising money for a non-profit Legal Action League.”

“What do they do?” she asked.

“Not everyone can afford legal services. Even if a lawyer agrees to take on a case pro bono, there are still court costs and filing fees. Sometimes a case requires outside resources like private labs or investigators.

“The Legal Action League assists in funding those costs as well. It lessens the burden on all parties that cannot fund or work for free. Most of those who partner with the league can do so for a pittance. This allows them to offer their services at low or no cost to those in need.”

“Like public defenders? I thought the court appoints them when someone can’t afford a lawyer.”

“Yes and no. Unlike the public system, some lawyers work directly with the league and can take clients at their discretion. The league offers resources to make referrals within a network of lawyers, not just in criminal cases.

“The judicial system isn’t perfect, and neither is the Legal Action League. Everyone deserves legal help when necessary. I do what I can, even if it’s only a donation.”

Even as a prosecutor, he knew innocent people faced trial daily and were wrongfully convicted due to bias or lack of a proper defense. Apart from

criminal law, there were various legal matters such as property disputes, civil cases, divorces, child custody cases, and contracts that he was interested in handling but had to refer elsewhere.

From a young age, his mother had taught him the importance of charitable giving, and he took pride in supporting a cause he was passionate about. Those with privilege had a responsibility to assist those without.

Alessandra became quiet, and a frown marred her pretty brow. Drake knew she was thinking of Marcello and squeezed her hand to comfort her.

“He’s all right, Alessandra. I’m sorry for the pain you’re experiencing. Please understand I have a job to do. A man died, and it’s my job to get him justice. Someone deserves to pay the punishment for his loss.”

“I know that, Drake. I just wish it wasn’t my brother.”

Drake nodded and cleared his throat. He felt her pain deeply and wished he could take it away. He understood that it was hard to separate her feelings and aspired to be the man she could depend on.

“Have I told you how gorgeous you are tonight? You’ll be turning heads at the gala. We should turn this car around so I can take you home and keep you to myself.”

“How very caveman of you,” Alessandra teased.

“Bella, I’ll hoist you over my shoulder and beat my chest to claim you before laying you out on the buffet table and feasting on you.”

Drake wrapped his arm around Alessandra’s waist and pulled her closer. He fused his mouth to her neck, sucking and biting hard enough to leave a mark. His hand trailed up her thigh, slipping inside the slit. His fingertips brushed her sensitive region through her thin, wet panties.

“Drake,” Alessandra breathed.

Drake leaned in and whispered, “You’re soaked, bella. What naughty thoughts are you thinking? We could get a room at the hotel and sneak out of the gala for a quick fuck. Then again, I know hooking up in public turns you on. We can find a quiet corner of the room and be discreet.” He kissed

her bare shoulder. “If you keep biting your lip like that, I’ll take you here in the car.”

Drake moved her panties aside and stroked her bare lips, brushing against her sensitive nub. Before he could slip a digit inside her wet channel, the car stopped outside the Water Tower Place. Tuning out downtown traffic was easy with Alessandra at his side. They arrived at their destination in the blink of an eye.

Drake laughed as Alessandra slapped his hand away and quickly adjusted her skirt before the driver opened her door. She pulled the visor down and looked at her reflection. Her skin was flushed, and he quickly pushed the visor up.

“What—”

“It’s adorable when you get flustered. A young newlywed should always look like that around her husband. And if she doesn’t, he’s clearly not doing a good job.”

Placing his palm on the small of her back, he escorted her through the doors of The Ritz Carlton. They walked into the awe-inspiring ballroom with many circular tables covered in crisp white linens and Chiavari chairs. The panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows provided a dramatic evening view of the city.

Drake wondered if Alessandra felt as heated as he did, remembering their tryst in front of the windows of his penthouse. After their meal, he planned to ask his wife to dance beneath the 400,000-crystal chandelier illuminating the room with glamor and elegance.

They made their way to the head table for their seating assignment, and Drake removed an envelope from his breast pocket and placed it in the prominently-displayed donation box. A raised platform stood on one end of the room for speeches and the band to play on later.

Before dinner, there was an open bar, and the five hundred guests had time to mingle and socialize. Drake and Alessandra made their way to the bar to order a drink.

“We’ll take a glass of champagne,” Drake ordered before Alessandra had the opportunity to make a request.

He handed her a flute and held his in a toast. “To my beautiful wife and our first date.”

Alessandra’s face colored briefly before a dazzling smile stretched across her face. Drake watched with rapt attention as she sipped champagne. He swooped in for a quick kiss as she lowered the glass, tasting the effervescent liquid on her ruby-red lips.

They moved around the room arm in arm, making small talk with Chicago’s elite—including various judges, partners of law firms, the police commissioner, and many other high-society men and socialites that were in attendance.

Drake caught the glances Alessandra gave him before voicing an opinion that varied from his. She was a socialite in her own right—the daughter of Anthony Russo. And he wanted her to own her voice.

Across the room, Drake’s eyes met Jenny Nguyen’s. She used to be respectable until becoming entangled with the Russos. Her searing gaze fell to his arm wrapped around Alessandra.

Jenny made her way through the crowd. “Isn’t this quite a development? Here I was under the impression that you were filing for divorce.” Alessandra flinched when Jenny touched her.

“I didn’t sign the papers,” Drake growled. “We’re giving our marriage a real shot.”

“Is that so?” The woman’s eyes narrowed, and a cat-like grin spread over her face.

“Drake’s mistaken. We’ll be moving forward with the divorce. We’ll file as soon as he’s ready. You know how lawyers are. He needs to ensure all the t’s are crossed and i’s are dotted.”

Drake’s jaw clenched painfully, and his grip around Alessandra tightened. There was no way in hell he was letting her go. She was always his, and she would come to understand that soon.

“We’ve discussed this already, Alessandra. We are not filing for divorce. That’s the end of it!” he snapped.

“Well, I should let you lovebirds continue to make the rounds. Do say hello to Jerry for me!” Jenny smirked and flicked her hair over her shoulder as she turned.

Drake jerked Alessandra away from Jenny. He took several deep breaths to calm himself and pull back the palpable waves of anger. Alessandra remained quiet as they moved to find their seats.

“There’s my favorite married couple. My husband and I are at the same table.” Drake’s mentor and friend, Judge Jerry Matthews, greeted the couple. “Mrs. Walker, I’d like to introduce you to my husband, Noah. Noah, this is Alessandra.”

There was a seventeen-year age difference between the interracial couple. Jerry was a virile black man in his late forties whose hair had started to gray, while Noah was tall and lanky with dark blond hair and a trimmed beard. He was younger than Drake—just shy of thirty but looked barely older than Alessandra.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alessandra.” Noah hugged her and turned to Drake. “How’s it going, Drake? You two had quite the wedding.”

Alessandra giggled at Noah’s boyish charm. “It’s nice to meet you, too. Judge Matthews clearly has good taste.”

“He really doesn’t,” Noah laughed. “I’m the one who pursued him relentlessly.”

Drake couldn’t help but chuckle. “They were interested in each other. But as a clerk for the judge, they couldn’t pursue a relationship.”

“That’s so sad. So what happened between then and now? I mean, you’re married, aren’t you?”

“Proudly, for three years now.” Jerry kissed his husband’s cheek.

“I was doodling Mr. Noah Matthews on paper one day.”

“Like a teenager with a crush does?” Alessandra asked, remembering doing the same thing herself.

“I’m not ashamed of it. It paid off. Sometimes wishes do come true. I am Mr. Noah Matthews, after all.”

“At that point, I decided to stop denying my feelings. I immediately transferred Noah to another judge and asked him out on our first date the next day.”

“That’s the sweetest story I’ve ever heard.” Alessandra was awed.

“Well, our story isn’t as exciting as yours. But it’s love nonetheless.” Noah shrugged.

“Love...” Alessandra echoed softly as Jerry grabbed Noah’s hand and pulled him in for a sweet kiss.

For the first time, Drake kicked himself for not recognizing the woman beside him. He blamed her shamefully for something that wasn’t her choice, but his.

Alessandra burst into laughter as Noah recounted a story; the two quickly bonded. He was surprised to see how well she fit in with his friends and how she opened up in ways he had never seen before. As he witnessed the sincere smile on her face, his heart raced with delight, and he felt honored to stand by her side as her companion. She was charming and witty, and blossomed before his eyes. Drake’s desire reignited with intensity and longing. He had to convince her to stay and give him the opportunity to win her over.

Drake wrapped his arm around Alessandra’s shoulders and kissed her cheek once they sat down for dinner. She rewarded him with a sweet smile.

“I like your friends. Thank you for bringing me here.”

Chapter Fourteen

THE POLICE COMMISSIONER DISCUSSED CHICAGO'S CURRENT CRIME RATES. Alessandra struggled to pay attention to his words because she was painfully aware of the fire trailing across her upper arm caused by Drake's fingers. The change in his demeanor was enough to give her whiplash, but when their eyes met, his smile gave her hope.

He was upset earlier when she told Jenny they were still moving forward with the divorce. Alessandra hoped they could leave this marriage with their dignity intact. But he didn't know about Luca's threat. She planned to tell him the truth after the gala.

The final speaker of the evening was the mayor herself, whose platform for election was a champion for women's and children's rights. She shared her experiences from her time in the public defender's office due to underfunding and overwhelming caseloads.

"Thank you for your contributions this evening. It's you that makes this gala a success every year. Please enjoy the remainder of your evening. The bar and dance floor are now open."

Drake stood and extended his hand to Alessandra. "May I have this dance, bella?"

She let him pull her to the dance floor. The chandelier cast a warm romantic glow over them. The night was shaping up to be something special. The walls between them were crumbling, and it felt good to not be so defensive.

Drake wound an arm around her waist and pulled her close. They swayed to the music. Alessandra would forever remember the soft instrumental strains of *Right Here Waiting* as their song.

“I’m sorry it took this long for our first dance,” Drake said.

“It wasn’t an ideal wedding day for either of us,” she said softly.

“Would you like to renew our vows one day? We can have a ceremony that means something to us and a grand reception like this with our friends and family celebrating us.” The sincerity in Drake’s voice shocked her. She never expected him to ask such a question.

“Is that something you’d want, Drake?”

His muscular shoulder shrugged beneath her hand. Their eyes met, and Drake’s eyes shone with an emotion Alessandra couldn’t name. Her eyes fluttered as he brushed a gentle hand across her cheek.

“Why did you marry me if you knew I wasn’t your fiancée?” Alessandra asked.

Drake’s jaw clenched as he gazed into a far corner of the room. She placed her hand on his stubbly cheek and carefully turned his head to face her. The truthfulness of his answer could change the course of their short-lived marriage.

“Riley and I were a *smart match*, as they say. Both of our families come from old money. My application for the U.S. attorney’s office put me under massive scrutiny. A billionaire playboy or someone with devious sexual proclivities would tarnish the position. They wanted a hometown hero, someone relatable to the people. Riley and I dated in high school, and our mothers hoped we would one day get married. But marriage wasn’t in my plans.

“Breaking up was the right thing for us. Last year I ran into Riley at a gala, and we were both single. Our mothers saw it as the perfect opportunity to set us up again. After a few dates, I proposed.

“Riley received a job offer in Paris and couldn’t pass it up. I said she could move her belongings into my apartment so she didn’t have to rent a storage

unit. We hired a wedding planner to handle all the details, and you know the rest.”

Alessandra knew there was more, but Drake sighed and became quiet. He stepped back and twirled her before pulling her even closer. This time Alessandra didn't resist laying her head against Drake's chest. She inhaled his woodsy cologne and allowed herself to get lost in the moment.

As the song ended, Drake leaned down and kissed her softly. They clung together, prolonging the moment. Her heart broke because she knew their marriage had an expiration date.

“I had a nice time tonight. Thank you for bringing me here.”



THE EARLY MORNING SUN PEEKED THROUGH THE CURTAINS, AND Alessandra stretched with a groan. She wasn't ready for her pleasant dreams to end. Lying against Drake's silk sheets, she recounted their night.

After coming home from the gala, they'd torn each other's clothes off in the foyer, and Drake had taken her against the door, making it shudder with each rough thrust. They'd stumbled into the living room, where he had bent Alessandra over the back of the sofa. She'd ridden him in the hallway before they'd finally made it to his bedroom, where Drake had made love to her, leaving kisses instead of bites along her neck and chest.

Tears spilled from her eyes when they peaked together, and Drake had kissed them away. He held her as she cried, unable to articulate her feelings. Drake was like a wild beast, rough and passionate, but it was in those peaceful moments where they shared true intimacy that Alessandra knew he held the power to break her heart.

They fell asleep, tangled in the sheets and each other's arms. Alessandra watched the sinewy back of the naked man still sleeping beside her rise and

fall. She attempted to quietly crawl out of bed, needing a shower before visiting her brother later in the day.

“Where do you think you’re going, wife?” Drake’s groggy voice greeted her.

“I have to start getting ready. I’m sorry if I woke you.”

Drake’s eyes roamed Alessandra’s naked body, and his desire grew beneath the sheets, offering her a promise of morning fun. Her body felt tingly all over, even though she was already sore.

She quirked her brow and purred, “Are you pitching a tent, or are you happy to see me?”

“Watch your tone, bella, or I’ll shove my cock in your pretty little mouth and teach it a lesson.”

“Make me, husband,” she challenged.

Drake growled and leapt off the bed. Alessandra squealed and ran for the doorway. He caught her by the hips just as she entered the hall. He pulled a hand back and gave her ass a sharp slap. She cried out as it added to her excitement.

“Your ass is perfect, Alessandra. It colors beautifully beneath my palm. Do you enjoy being spanked? Is that why you act like a brat?”

He squeezed and rubbed her cheek as he spoke. She quivered against him, wanting more. Afraid to trust her own voice, she nodded.

His hand made contact again with a thwack. “Use your words.”

“Yes, sir.”

She moaned as his fingers moved to the apex between her thighs. Teasing touches brushed through her wetness slowly but didn’t dip inside. Her hips moved in an attempt to draw friction, but he pulled away.

“Thank you for being honest with me. You should shower now; you don’t want to be late. Do you want me to tell you what I’ll do as I shower alone?”

She gulped and nodded.

“I’m going to jerk my cock thinking about your luscious ass. When I come, I’m going to imagine painting your body with it. Do you want me to use my finger and draw a big D on your chest? Do you want to be branded with my hot sticky cum?”

Alessandra’s core clenched at Drake’s depraved words. She whimpered, wanting to beg him to take her right there. His hands massaged her breasts, rolling her nipples between his thumb and finger.

“Drake... please...”

“It’s okay, bella. You have my permission to make yourself come in the shower. Do you feel how hard I am just thinking about you? I want you to caress your soapy breasts and reach your other hand between your legs, parting your pussy lips as you play with yourself.” Drake demonstrated, stroking her with his hands as he sucked her ear lobe into his mouth. “Will you do it for me, Alessandra? Will you be rough, pretending it’s my fingers buried deep inside you? How many will you use?”

Drake’s words scrambled Alessandra’s brain, and she trembled with need. Wetness dripped down her thigh as she teetered on the edge and would splinter any moment. Drake’s hand came down again, and she screamed.

“Please, Drake. I need to come,” she sobbed.

“Time for your shower. Don’t forget to thank me when you come.”

Alessandra did just that, relishing in the ownership Drake took of her body as she replayed the scene in the hallway. She touched herself, pretending it was her husband’s fingers bringing her pleasure. His hard cock pressed against her ass as she leaned into his muscular chest. Her eyes fluttered shut when his breath ghosted across her skin, gliding along her neck and collarbone.

When Alessandra entered the kitchen, Drake approached her with a steaming cup of coffee. Their eyes locked as their fingers brushed.

“Thank you. This is just what I need after my hot shower.”

“You look nice. How are you feeling?”

Alessandra's dressed-down appearance was nothing compared to Drake's navy suit.

"I'm not going to lie. Considering what happened in court, I'm a little nervous about seeing my brother."

"It's not your fault, Alessandra. He'll forgive you because he loves you. I'm in the office today, so I'll have my phone if you need anything. I'll see you later."

Drake's support meant a lot to her. They'd made progress in their relationship, but Alessandra knew once she dropped Luca's threat, things would spiral again.

"Drake, there's something we need to discuss. Can we talk tonight?"

"Of course. Let's have dinner together. I really have to run now, dolcezza," Drake said, glancing at his watch.

He leaned across the counter and kissed Alessandra's forehead quickly before heading out the door.

Alessandra sighed as she finished her cup of coffee, alone with her thoughts.

Chapter Fifteen

THE BARBED WIRE-TOPPED FENCE SURROUNDING THE COOK COUNTY JAIL where Marcello was incarcerated always depressed Alessandra. She hated that the brother she loved more than anyone else was behind these brick walls. He was denied bail during trial due to his affiliation. If he was convicted, he would move to the state penitentiary.

She placed her keys and phone in a tray before walking through the metal detector into a cold waiting room. She approached the counter and handed her ID to the unenthusiastic guard. Alessandra was still determining if she should sign in as Walker or Russo. As proud as she was to be Mrs. Drake Walker, it still felt like an act of rebellion.

As she waited to be called, she sat in an uncomfortable plastic chair and avoided making eye contact with the tattooed individual who leered at her a few seats away. During her Tuesday visits, she usually had a chat with the guard. However, she missed last week's visit due to her honeymoon. And while she'd seen Marcello in court a few days prior, she couldn't wait another week to visit her brother.

Finally, her name was called, and she followed the guard into a small conference room. Their father had pulled strings that allowed for private visits instead of sitting at the video monitors where conversations were recorded.

Marcello was led in through the door, dressed in a black turtleneck and trousers, with handcuffs as an accessory. The guard removed them and

informed them they had fifteen minutes before leaving. Alessandra noticed her brother rubbing his wrists once the cuffs came off. She knew how painful restraints could be, and her own wrists throbbed in sympathy.

“It’s good to see you, baby sister. How are you?”

Marcello looked tired and worn down, with loosely-fitting clothes suggesting he had lost some weight. They put on fake smiles to appease each other before sitting down.

“Hey, big brother. I can’t believe they let you dress up for little ol’ me,” she said with a giggle, adopting a sweet Southern twang.

“I told them I had a very important visitor today. No prison jumpsuit for my guest, only the best.” He laughed. “I wish I could give you a big hug. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too. How are you doing? Do you need anything? I’m really sorry about what happened in court.”

“Don’t be sorry. The important thing is your happiness. Is he treating you well?”

Alessandra’s face flushed as she thought about her intimate night with Drake and their fun that morning. She brushed her hair behind her ear—a tell her brother knew well.

“Things have been interesting....”

“Some things are clearly going well!” Marcello teased.

“Shut up!”

They laughed, breaking the tension.

“I’m sorry that you got caught up in all of this. What Tony did to you wasn’t right. You shouldn’t be married to a suit.”

“You’re not angry with me? I feel like I screwed everything up for you. I failed you and Papà.”

“The mistakes made were mine. It was easier when we were kids, wasn’t it? There wasn’t this insane amount of pressure. I chose to follow orders in an

attempt to prove my worth and place in the hierarchy and got caught.

“You’re a good person, baby sister. You’re strong in ways that I never could be. Go live your life and be free.”

“I can’t just leave you. Remember how we used to dream of running away together? When you’re released—we can start over.”

“No, Alessandra. Even if I am released, I’ll never be a free man. Running away was a childish fantasy. We know better now.”

Marcello was right. Neither of them would ever be free. Tears rolled down her cheeks at his words. They felt final, as though he were genuinely saying goodbye.

“Without you, Luca’s in charge. They’re trying to force me to be with him again, and I don’t want that.” Alessandra looked at her hands in her lap.

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk to Papà. It’s the least I can do for you. A man like him doesn’t deserve you.” Marcello crossed his arms.

“What if I talk to Drake? Maybe I can convince him to offer you a deal. Would you take it?”

“You know that I can’t take a plea, Alessandra. If I plead, it shines guilt on our father.”

“So you’d rather run the risk of spending the rest of your life in jail?” She was dumbfounded.

Marcello shook his head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Just promise me you won’t say any of this to Jenny. She’s not the same woman, Marcello. She’s in Papà’s pocket now.”

Hurt flashed in her brother’s eyes. Alessandra gained no satisfaction from breaking his heart, but he deserved to know the truth about the woman he was dating. She had betrayed them both.

“Please don’t give up, Marce. Promise me I’ll be able to hug you again.”

“I promise, baby sister. Go be happy for me. That’s enough for me right now.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too. Be good, find love, and live a good life. Don’t let anyone force you into bad choices.”

Alessandra played with the wedding ring on her finger. “You say that like it’s so easy. Now who’s the one being naïve?”

Alessandra defied the rules and threw herself into her brother’s arms. He embraced her just as tightly and kissed her head as she sobbed into his shoulder.

“Don’t be sad. This is a drop in the bucket for me. I promise I’ll take you to that little gelato shop you love when I get out.”

Alessandra nodded silently, hoping to take a bit of the warmth and safety she felt with her.

A sharp knock startled them. The guard returned with cuffs in hand.

“Visiting time’s over. It’s time to return to your cell, Russo.”

“It’s never enough time, is it?” Marcello smiled ruefully.

Marcello squeezed Alessandra tight one final time before stepping back with his hands extended. Alessandra hated this part, watching her brother being cuffed and escorted from the room. She wiped the tears from her eyes, determined to be strong for him.

Alessandra morosely gathered her belongings and left the jail. She sat in the car with her eyes closed and leaned back against the headrest. Each time she left, she wanted to bang her hands against the steering wheel and scream. She cursed her father for doing this to his children.

Once she collected herself, she turned her phone on. **Ding, ding** Several messages rolled in. She received a genuine invitation that made her smile.

Chapter Sixteen

DRAKE SHUFFLED PAPERWORK ON HIS MAHOGANY DESK, PAUSING TO THINK of Alessandra for the umpteenth time that morning. He leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his wavy hair, turning to gaze out the window of his spacious twenty-fifth-floor office. It was his private retreat where he found solace when he lost grip on a case and needed to revisit discovery.

Self-preservation should have him hating Alessandra and forcibly keeping her at arm's length, but he was a sadist. All he wanted to do was command her to hop on his desk and spread her legs open so he could feast on her. The more time they spent together, he realized she was the whole buffet, not just a snack.

Damn Alessandra for proving to be the perfect wife—thoughtful, eager to please, and so sexy his cock ached to be in her. They connected on a deeper level than he thought possible. He planned on asking her to take their relationship to another level, starting with introducing her to his family.

A thirst to prove himself had always driven him. The son who was never good enough and constantly pushed to achieve perfection—anything less was for plebeians.

When the district attorney wrote a letter of recommendation for the U.S. attorney's office, Drake felt validated. While his case record spoke for itself, it felt good to have recognition. But his mother got into his head when she implied marriage would strengthen his personal image. If only

she knew of his proclivities. She'd clench her pearls in shock and likely disown him.

Bitsy Walker was a hard woman to please, but if anyone were up for the challenge, it would be Alessandra. He hoped to gain his parents' approval once they saw the genuine connection he had developed with his wife.

A sharp knock startled him from his reverie. He reshuffled his papers, pretending to be busy.

"At ease, Drake," Jerry joked.

"To what do I owe the honor, Judge?"

Judge Matthews tapped the crystal face of his Bulgari watch. Drake turned his wrist and realized it was half past noon. He was late for their weekly lunch at The Dearborn.

"Shit, I got caught up."

"I come bearing gifts." Jerry held up the takeout bag. "I brought you a Chicago Cheesesteak."

Feeling suddenly ravenous, Drake dug into his sandwich with gusto. He wiped a dribble of au jus from his stubbled chin. After a few delicious bites, he placed the remains back onto the foil wrapper.

"Thanks for the meal."

"Lost in discovery, or is something else on your mind? A certain fiery redhead Mrs., perhaps?"

"Discovery, actually. But you know we can't discuss that."

"So let's talk about the real issue. How's your lovely wife?" he asked with a gentle smile.

Drake groaned and ran his hand through his hair again. It might be good to gain advice from the only person he knew who was happily married.

"How do you do it?" Drake asked.

"Be more specific," Jerry said patiently.

Drake looked at his wedding band. “Marriage! She drives me fucking crazy. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

Jerry listened as Drake spoke in circles, attempting to articulate his feelings properly. He walked over to the credenza, poured two fingers of whiskey into crystal glasses, and handed one to Drake.

“Let’s call it an early day,” Jerry suggested taking a sip of his drink. “Are you planning on debuting her at the club?”

Jerry owned a successful member’s-only BDSM club. It catered to Chicago’s elite and networked with high-profile clientele in every major city. Drake retained a private suite.

“I’m not sure if we’re ready for that yet.” However, he thought of it often.

“What are you waiting for?”

If he were to bring her to the club, she would have to commit to being his submissive. Drake imagined what it would be like to play in the club together. He was very selective regarding playmates, but Alessandra wouldn’t just be for fun and games. He wanted her forever.

“It’s all right to let your guard down, Drake. Sometimes people may surprise you.”

“Like you?”

“I remember clearly when a rich college kid with a chip on his shoulder was lost and desperate. He needed someone to guide him and help him understand the urges he could no longer keep in check. He was angry at the world and worried about hurting someone. What he needed was someone to understand what he’d been through.”

“You taught me there was nothing wrong with me.”

“That’s right.” Jerry sipped his drink. “There’s still nothing wrong with you. But you still make mistakes. That’s the beauty of being human. What are you so afraid of?”

Drake looked intently into his glass, stewing over Jerry’s words.

“How do you think she’ll react when she learns the truth, Drago?”

“Don’t call me that!” Drake growled.

“Let me impart a little wisdom to you. If you can’t reconcile yourself, you won’t ever find love. You’re married now. She deserves more than being held prisoner by secrets and lies.”

Drake felt hot under the collar and glared at his friend. The man’s hands immediately shot up in surrender.

“I planned on asking Alessandra to meet my parents. I’d like her to meet my family.”

“That’s a huge step, Drake. I’m happy for you. You two should also have dinner with Noah and me. He had a lot to say about her after the gala.”

“No,” Drake said firmly.

“You get to decide, Drake. She’s your wife. But I won’t stand in the way of them becoming friends, and you shouldn’t either. Getting her out of the life is going to be hard. The first step is showing her what normal life and friendship are.”

“I won’t allow her to be hurt again,” Drake promised.

“I know, Drake. Sometimes life happens.”

Drake told Jerry about Alessandra's abuse and how much she still held back.

“From the time she was five years old until the day we wed was too damn long. You should see the scars on her wrists and back. Alessandra told me some of the shit they did to her. I’ll kill the motherfuckers who hurt her and put a bullet between every one of their eyes.”

“You’re an agent of the law, not an executioner. Ellis won’t like hearing you talk like that.”

Drake seethed. “Fuck Ellis.”

“Don’t blame Grant. And don’t blame yourself for shit that’s not your fault. You are not guilty by association. And you can’t take it out on that poor girl

anymore.”

They sat in silence, ruminating on the heavy words hanging between them. Drake gulped the remaining drink in his glass and refilled it.

“And what about Jenny Nguyen? Her wedding will cause trouble for us.”

“Let me worry about her.”

Drake shook his head. “I can’t imagine how hard you’ve worked all these years to get to where you are now. I admire that.”

“Remember, you’re not that angry young man I met anymore, Drake. We grow and evolve as a part of life. I’m happy in my marriage because my husband and I have no secrets. Of course, there are things I can’t share with him. But he knows the important things, the hard things to admit in the light of day, and accepts me. Just don’t wait too long.”

They finished their drink together in peaceful silence.

Once Jerry left, Drake returned his attention to his laptop and opened a private browsing window. The computers at work were monitored through keystroke software, so he carried his laptop and used his mobile hotspot. But if anyone were to look over his shoulder, they would see he was jewelry shopping.

Chapter Seventeen

“TWIRL FOR ME, SWEETHEART. I’D DIE FOR CURVES LIKE YOURS.”

Alessandra twirled at Noah’s catcall with a laugh. She popped her hip and posed to model the red cocktail dress he had pre-selected at the upscale boutique.

“Yes, queen! Who is this gorgeous model?”

After a stressful day, retail therapy was the perfect thing to take her mind off her worries.

“You have great taste, Noah. I appreciate your help.” She smiled thankfully.

When Noah had called asking her to shop, she’d suggested coffee instead. Naturally, they compromised on both, and she had no regrets. Alessandra couldn’t remember a time when she had so much fun shopping. The last time she had gone shopping with someone was with Jenny to pick a wedding dress. It felt like a lifetime ago, though it was mere weeks.

“Oh, hush you. When we met, I knew you needed a friend, and I’m up for the challenge.” He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for a quick side hug. “How are you doing, darling? I can’t imagine things have been easy with Drake. He can be a bit difficult at times.”

“How much time do you have? My marriage to Drake is a farce. I lied in court when I said we fell for each other.”

“Maybe that was true in the beginning, but it’s not true anymore. You can deny it all you like, but I know you care for each other.”

“It’s about the release for Drake. He doesn’t care for me. He told me the only thing that would ever be between us would be sex.”

“Alessandra, if you can’t see Drake’s into you, then you’re blind. I saw the subtle touches and glances at dinner. Believe it or not, you looked at him with the same moon-eyed expression.” Noah looked at her knowingly. “Jerry told me about how steamy you got in court the other day and how he had to call a recess so you wouldn’t tear your clothes off.”

Alessandra flushed at the memory of Drake pleasuring her in the bathroom during the recess. She shook her head quickly.

“That just proves my point. Our sexual chemistry is off the charts, but there’s nothing more between us. Drake doesn’t even like me. If anything, he only tolerates me.”

“He was never that way with Riley. That girl was such a bore. But you get under his skin.”

“Yeah, like a pest....”

Noah shrugged his shoulders in a way that said *take it as you will*. But her traitorous heart leapt with hope.

They spent the remainder of the afternoon together. Noah regaled Alessandra with stories of his relationship with Judge Matthews. She was happy to feel a genuine connection with someone without hidden agendas. There was no backstabbing in Noah’s spirit. He allowed her to be herself.

“Thanks for this, Noah. I really needed it.”

“We should make this a regular thing.”

“I’d like that.”



ALESSANDRA STEPPED OFF THE ELEVATOR INTO THE DIMLY-LIT FOYER.

“Drake, I’m home!” she called.

“I’m in the kitchen. Dinner should arrive shortly.”

Drake handed her a glass of red wine. The top buttons of his dress shirt were undone, inviting Alessandra’s eyes to fall to his collar. She wanted to lick and taste every inch of his delicious bare skin.

“Thank you. That’s sweet of you.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised because I did something nice. You’re *my wife*, after all.”

Alessandra flinched at the possessive way he stressed *his wife*. Was he jealous she’d spent the day with Noah? She decided to let it go.

She was elated by the romantic ambiance he’d created. Soft jazz played through the speakers, and a candelabra was placed on the table already set for two.

“I’m going to change into something a little more comfortable.”

Alessandra slipped off to her bedroom and changed into the cocktail dress she’d purchased that afternoon. She turned in the mirror, loving how the fabric shimmered under the lights and hugged her curves, which was bound to pull appreciation from Drake.

When she stepped into the dining room, the aromatic smell of garlic greeted her. A bountiful plate of seafood linguine was in her spot, along with a side salad and a breadstick. Drake pulled out her chair as a chivalrous gesture. He whispered in her ear as he pushed her in.

“You are breathtaking. I feel like a fool for not taking you out tonight.”

She shook her head. "It's the thought that counts, Drake. This is more than enough."

They discussed their respective days over entrées.

"No matter the verdict, Marcello will be all right, Alessandra. He's a grown man. I feel like talking about him always upsets you. I'm sorry, but I must uphold the law. If you let me, I can be here for you in the private moments."

Alessandra almost choked on her wine. Drake's sincerity stirred her anxiety, and she blurted, "You need to divorce me!"

Drake appeared like he'd been slapped. She braced herself for the fight that would ensue.

"Ma che cazzo, bella! What the fuck? We can't have one pleasant conversation without you bringing up a fucking divorce. I don't know what else to do to prove that I'm in this marriage."

Alessandra's chin wobbled, "I'm sorry, Drake. You need to sign the papers. Please, we can't live this charade any longer."

"Give me one damn honest reason."

When she opened her mouth, she gaped like a fish. Words failed her when waves of hurt and anger rolled off Drake. She'd already prolonged this conversation, and there was no time left for delay. The plates rattled as Drake pounded on the table, demanding her attention.

"Answer me, damn it!" he roared.

"My father named Luca the heir to the Russo family even if Marcello is acquitted. They want me to marry Luca to strengthen his claim as head of the family. He said he'll kill you if you don't sign the papers. I don't want you to get hurt, Drake. I'm sorry, there is no other choice."

"When?"

"The other day in court. He said you had one week to sign the papers, or he'd make me a widow."

“What the fuck is the matter with you? Why would you wait so long to tell me? How can I protect you if you won’t let me, Alessandra?”

“I’m sorry, Drake. I really am. I asked you multiple times to sign the papers.”

“That excuse doesn’t hold water, Alessandra. You should’ve told me! Fuck —”

“Please forgive me.” Tears flooded her face.

Drake pushed back from the table and left her sitting there flabbergasted. She knew all their progress didn’t matter anymore in that moment of broken trust.

Not being able to sit still and wait any longer, Alessandra began to clear the table. Tendrils of smoke swirled from the extinguished candles when Drake stalked toward her and threw the papers at her feet.

“There... signed... Get the fuck out of my home!”

“What?” she gasped.

“You wanted them signed so badly. It’s the last thing I’ll ever do for you.”

Alessandra bent to the floor, humiliated, and picked them up. She quickly leafed through and saw every line initialed and his scrawled signature on the last page. Even though it was an impossible situation, some of her hoped Drake would fight for her. It was a fool’s dream, and she was heartbroken.

“Please, Drake, you must know that this isn’t what I really want. If there was another way, I’d want to stay married. You must know by now that I care for you, and I’m fairly certain you feel the same.”

“I don’t believe a single damn lie from your mouth anymore.”

Realization knocked the wind out of her. Drake wasn’t angry. He was lashing out because he was hurt. Their eyes met for a moment, and she saw their genuine longing. But the moment she attempted to approach, he turned away.

Damn his pride. Alessandra knew she had to do something to convey her true feelings. Words weren't enough when she had the papers in her hand. She dropped them as if burned and rushed to Drake.

"Please stop. Don't say anything we can't come back from."

Drake deflated and turned back to her. Searching his eyes, she tried to figure out who had hurt him. Cautiously, she grabbed one of his hands and intertwined their fingers and cupped his stubbled cheek in the other.

"What are you doing, Alessandra?" he whispered.

"I care about you, Drake. I'll prove it—"

Without waiting for a response, she pressed her lips to his. She started off slowly to convey compassion and firm to show conviction. Drake dropped her hand and wound his arms around her. She sighed into him, becoming pliant in his strong arms, answering his questions, and soothing his doubts with her body.

Drake responded with passion. Alessandra opened to his demands, and his tongue assaulted her mouth, showing her who was indeed in charge. He wrapped her hair in his fist and pulled gently, changing the angle.

Their bodies slid together, spilling secrets, giving a name to words neither of them could admit to in the cold light of day. When they finally broke apart, breathing heavily, Drake rested his forehead against Alessandra's.

"Damn it, bella. I don't want you to leave."

"Then don't make me. I don't know any other way around this. I don't want you to get hurt."

Drake gently stroked her cheek. "I never wanted to care about you, Alessandra. But you rooted yourself in my heart."

"I'm choosing you, Drake. I want to be here with you. Please let me protect you, too."

Drake stepped away, severing their connection.

"I have a gift for you."

“Really? Even though we’re getting divorced?”

Drake picked the papers up and tore them to shreds before her eyes.

“All I wanted was for you to be honest with me. You wouldn’t push for divorce if it weren’t for Luca’s threat. We’re in this together.”

“Oh, Drake, thank you.” She jumped into his arms.

He held her for a minute letting the hug comfort them both. He stepped back and said, “I must warn you that if you accept my gift, it means you’re mine forever.”

Drake disappeared into his room and returned with a blue velvet gift box wrapped with a ribbon.

“I have special plans for us.”

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Chapter Eighteen

DRAKE HAD BEEN TO HELL AND BACK IN THE SPAN OF TEN MINUTES. HE WAS raked across the fires that burned his soul and had ice water poured through his veins. But they finally resolved the divorce nonsense and would put it behind them. Luca Donato didn't scare him. Alessandra was *his*. She belonged to him; he wouldn't let some bastardo take her away.

Drake's heart kicked up in anticipation as he handed Alessandra the box. He had personally chosen everything inside for his wife.

"What is this, Drake?"

"Open it, bella," he encouraged.

A smile spread across her face as her manicured fingers tugged the ribbon and opened the box.

"I want you to meet my family," he blurted.

"Really?" she gasped.

"I want you to get to know each other. It would mean a lot to me."

"I'd love to. I didn't think you wanted me in that part of your life."

Drake took her hand and stroked her knuckles with his thumb to reassure her. "Things change, bella. My friends love you. I think we're ready to take the next step in our relationship."

A few days later, the couple drove to Lake Forest, where Drake grew up. Though the two had grown up in the same city, with their age difference and varying social circles, their paths never crossed.

“You weren’t kidding when you said my father is practically right around the corner.”

Alessandra squirmed in the seat next to him, looking sexy in a floral-patterned blouse and short black leather miniskirt. His hand rested on her bare knee. The sheer black stockings didn’t make it out of the house because he couldn’t resist tearing them from her body, throwing her on the dining room table, and eating her out until she begged him to stop. As a result, they were running late.

“What if your family doesn’t like me?” Alessandra asked for the hundredth time.

“They’re going to love you, trust me,” Drake reassured her.

“Maybe we should stop and pick up flowers for your mother. Maybe even a bottle of wine or some chocolates for after dinner.”

Alessandra’s leg trembled beneath Drake’s steady palm. A glance at his wife’s face conveyed her nerves. He couldn’t deny her the chance to make a good first impression, and a stunning bouquet would be a nice gesture.

Simple drugstore flowers wouldn’t do for this occasion, so Drake typed ‘flower shop’ into his GPS. Luckily, one was within minutes of his parents’ home, so they didn’t need to drive out of the way.

From behind a swinging door, a florist appeared carrying a large vase filled with a lively mix of vibrant carnations, roses, and gerbera daisies. The sound of a motion sensor chimed in the background.

He greeted them as he placed his vase on the counter. “Welcome to Bodi’s Flowers. How can I help you today?”

“I’m meeting my in-laws for the first time and wanted to make a good impression.”

The florist's eyebrows raised briefly, but he quickly smiled before turning to Drake.

"What is your mother's favorite flower or color? Would you like something simple or elaborate?"

"My mother loves daisies. She always said they were the perfect flower to enjoy all summer long. Her favorite color is purple."

"Alright, let me whip something up for you."

The florist returned with a gathering of white roses, lavender daisy poms, Peruvian lilies, and lavender carnations. The bouquet was carefully wrapped in tissue paper, with delicate shades of purple and white. After securing it with a white ribbon, he ran the scissors' blade across the length to make the ends curl.

Alessandra buried her nose in the bouquet and smiled. "I hope your mother likes these. They are gorgeous."

Drake picked a single dark pink carnation for Alessandra, and her face lit up. She rewarded him with a peck on the cheek.

"We're not here for me, but thank you." She buried her nose in the bloom.

Drake sent Alessandra to the display to pick out a dozen strawberries dipped in chocolate confections with chocolatey drizzles. While she was occupied, he ordered two dozen long-stemmed roses to be delivered to his wife the following day.

Once they returned to the car, Alessandra held the flowers and confections in her lap, appearing calmer than before. Drake returned his hand to her knee.

"They're going to see how smart and thoughtful you are and fall in love with you." He almost added *like me*, but caught himself.

It was too soon to say the words, but Drake knew it was the truth. He was falling for his wife, which unfortunately put them both in more danger than she realized.

Upon arrival, they were greeted by a charming English country-style home that exuded a relaxed elegance. The property spanned over half an acre and was buffered by trees and a motor court. Hired landscapers kept the courtyard and garden picture-perfect year-round. The Westminster Chime could be heard within when Drake rang the bell.

Bitsy opened the door, dressed and ready to play the perfect hostess. She wore the cream silk blouse Drake bought her for her birthday, paired with white linen pants and tan loafers. She greeted Drake with a smile and narrowed her eyes as she gave Alessandra a once-over.

Drake intertwined his fingers with Alessandra's, giving her hand a comforting squeeze. This was their chance to start fresh. It wasn't Alessandra's fault the wedding was ruined. He was glad he had the chance to meet his parents and smooth things over ahead of time.

"You've got this, dolcessa," Drake whispered in her ear. "I think you should give her the flowers."

Alessandra smiled briefly and revealed the bouquet they had bought. "It's nice to officially meet you, Mrs. Walker. I hope you don't mind we brought these for you."

Bitsy's face reflected as much surprise as her frozen brow allowed at the gesture, and she took the flowers from her daughter-in-law's hand. Her lips turned up a fraction in a curt smile.

"How thoughtful of you, dear, and please call me Bitsy. Why don't you come in."

Drake placed his hand on the small of Alessandra's back and beamed at her. They stepped into the foyer, which opened into a formal living room with large windows that provided plenty of natural lighting off the front garden and bluestone patio. The room's focal points were a beautiful wood-burning fireplace and a wall of bookcases.

Drake's father sat in an armchair near the hearth, reading a book. He was a scholar by profession and an avid reader. The older gentleman put his book on a side table and removed his reading spectacles before greeting his son with open arms.

“This is my father, Richard. Be careful with him, bella. He’s a bit of a rascal.”

Richard took Alessandra’s hand and kissed the back of it. “It’s a pleasure to meet such a peach. You’ll have to ignore my son. I haven’t the faintest clue what he’s referring to.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Walker.”

“Please, my dear, call me Dick. Mr. Walker makes me sound old.”

Everyone in the room started laughing. A woman a few years older than Alessandra with mousy brown hair in a ponytail and a sweater got everyone’s attention with an “eww.”

“Dad, please don’t hit on your son’s girlfriend.”

“Alessandra is my wife, Beth, not my girlfriend.”

Beth gave her brother a quick hug, and he lifted her off her feet. She squealed and swatted his arm. “Put me down, you big lug!”

“This know-it-all is my sister, Elizabeth. We call her Beth.”

She threw her arms around Alessandra and gave her a big squeeze. Drake frowned as she only patted Beth’s back in response.

“Just so you know, I’ve always wanted a sister! My parents only gave me annoying brothers instead.”

“I don’t have any sisters either.”

“Who’s the hottie?” All heads snapped as a wolf whistle sounded from the direction of the dining room. A frat boy around Alessandra’s age sauntered in, shaking his long hair out of his face.

He stood shoulder to shoulder with Drake. At first glance, the two men seemed dissimilar. Upon closer look, it became clear that they were indeed brothers, despite their contrasting appearances of a suited professional and a casual hoodie-wearing slacker.

“Don’t be an asshole, Dustin. You will treat my wife with the respect she deserves,” Drake growled and drew Alessandra tightly to his side, kissing

her cheek.

“I like my women curvy and gorgeous. If you want to ditch the suit—I’ll show you a real man.” Dustin flashed a dimple.

Drake clenched his fist and glared at his brother. The beast in him reared its ugly head, and he almost pounced.

“Dustin Joshua Walker!” Bitsy snapped. “You mind your tongue. That is not how you were raised to treat a woman.”

“Jesus, Ma! Chill out. She knows I was just kidding. Don’t you, Alessandra?”

Tension rolled off Drake and continued to fill the room until Alessandra stepped in to diffuse the situation. She placed her hand on his stomach, claiming him in front of his family. He calmed at her touch.

“Excuse me, Dustin, but this is *my* suit. Trust me, what’s underneath is *all* man. I’m not looking to trade him in any time soon. But thank you for the compliment.”

She quickly kissed the junction where Drake’s jaw and neck met before turning back to the family.

“See, Drake, I told you. I can tell we’re going to get along fine, sis. But for real—these guns are at your service.” Dustin flexed and waggled his eyebrows.

Everyone laughed, and even Drake chuckled. Bitsy shook her head, but the corners of her mouth turned up. “My apologies, Alessandra. You’d think wolves raised my children, not socialites from Lake Forest.”

All three siblings threw their heads back and howled. Drake’s heart felt lighter being around his siblings. Home was a place where he could let down his guard. Allowing himself to be vulnerable and letting his wife see this side of him felt right.

“I didn’t know your family was so much fun, Drake.”

“You don’t know the half of it, bella.”

Affection and desire filled Alessandra's eyes as she looked at him. Maybe there was hope for them after all.

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Chapter Nineteen

THE DINING ROOM TABLE WAS CENTERED BENEATH A SOFTLY LIT CRYSTAL chandelier. Decorative plaster molding framed the high ceiling adding character to the room.

Alessandra couldn't remember the last time she had a comforting home-cooked meal. She'd heard stories about her mother's amazing cooking. After her passing, a private chef was hired to cook all their meals. At nine, Alessandra began cooking lessons, but she couldn't cook a meal of this caliber. Alessandra complimented Mrs. Walker on the delicious meal they indulged in.

"I'll pass your compliments to our chef. We always hire for guests, dear."

The remainder of dinner passed smoothly. Alessandra joked and laughed with Drake's family as they charmed her with tales of his misspent youth. She enjoyed seeing this lighter side of her husband.

After dinner, they retreated to the backyard. The comfortable outdoor seating was expertly arranged on the blue stone patio underneath a fairy light-wrapped pergola. Richard lit an enclosed fire pit, and they chatted beneath the twilight sky.

"We were shocked Riley left our poor Drake at the altar. Don't you think it's funny you sauntered down the aisle out of nowhere as a replacement bride?" Mrs. Walker began.

“Mother,” Drake warned.

Bitsy waved him off. “But seeing you together, I’m thankful our son has you. He seems happy.”

“We should have a girl’s day soon, Mom! Alessandra, you, and me. We can get mani/pedis, grab lunch, and do some shopping,” Beth suggested.

“I’d like that. It would give us a chance to get to know each other better now that we’re family,” Alessandra agreed.

“I’d like that too, my dear. How about we plan a day next week?” Bitsy pulled up the calendar on her phone.

“Your wife is smoking hot, Drake, and she’s cool as shit. Riley was always such a buzzkill,” Dustin said.

“Regardless of the circumstances that brought you together—we only care about your happiness.” Mr. Walker raised his glass with a smile.

Alessandra’s heart swelled at the blessing from the Walkers. Drake squeezed her hand and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you for inviting me, Mr. and Mrs. Walker. Is there anything I can help you with?” Alessandra gestured to the plates in Bitsy’s hands.

“That would be wonderful, dear, and please call me Bitsy.”

Alessandra helped Mrs. Walker and Elizabeth with the dishes while the men indulged in a nightcap. She smiled, enjoying the warmth Drake’s laughter drifting in from the patio evoked in her heart.

As night fell, it was time to return to the city. Everyone escorted them to the porch.

Dustin pulled her in tight and joked, “Are you sure my brother didn’t find you at Hooters?”

“Do I really seem like a Hooters girl?” she asked.

“You have the rack of one, but you’re too nice.”

Drake knocked Dustin upside the head. “You better watch it, Dustin.”

Dustin threw his hands up. “I yield, Mr. Walker.”

The family waved them off.

In the car, Drake turned to Alessandra. “Thank you, bella. I’m so glad you got along with my family.”

He leaned over the console to give her a sweet kiss. His tongue gave hers a gentle caress before retreating. He pulled back, resting his forehead against hers. His eyes shone joyfully as he smiled at her in the dim light.

“Thank you for introducing me to your family, Drake. I had a good time tonight.”

Drake rested his hand on Alessandra’s knee again. She laced their fingers and held his hand as they returned to the city.



AT HOME, ALESSANDRA PICKED UP THE GIFT BOX DRAKE GAVE HER AND took it to her room. She wanted to show Drake her appreciation and slipped into a sexy pink and white lace lingerie set with thigh-high white stockings attached to a pink ribbon garter belt.

Seeking to capture her husband’s attention, Alessandra swung her hips seductively. Her heels click-clacked across the wooden floor as she approached. Drake focused on the beer in his hand as he rested on the couch. She stood at attention and waited for him, drawing satisfaction at the lusty gaze in his eyes.

He placed the beer on the coffee table and stood. She stepped away from the couch, and he followed. His hands lightly brushed her body during the inspection. “I wasn’t expecting this tonight. You are so fucking sexy.”

“Tell me, Drake... was this really a gift for me or you?” she said breathlessly.

Drake grabbed her chin with one hand and a handful of her pert ass with the other. He turned her face to the side and whispered, “Oh, bella, this is a gift we’ll both enjoy.”

Liquid heat pooled in Alessandra’s core, causing it to throb painfully. Drake let her go and took a step back. She whimpered at the loss of contact.

“On your knees, gorgeous. There are some things we need to discuss.”

Alessandra followed Drake’s command, resting with her knees spread and her palms face up on her thighs, presenting herself to him. She purred as he caressed her cheek affectionately.

“How many masters have you served before me?”

Drake’s question caught her off guard. She raised her eyes to his. “What?”

“If our relationship is to progress, it’s time we discussed these things. I expect complete honesty, or there will be punishments. *Capito?*”

“Yes, sir.” She nodded in understanding.

“Good girl. Now... How many masters have you served before me?”

“None.”

Drake produced a black crop seemingly from nowhere. He placed the tip of the crop below Alessandra’s chin and forced her head up to look him in the eyes. A quick flick of his wrist and the crop stung her lap. She glared at Drake.

“*Completa onestà.*”

“You want complete honesty, Drake? All right, then—”

Another flick of Drake’s wrist brought the crop down on her, but she didn’t care. If he wanted complete honesty, the truth wasn’t pretty. Alessandra swallowed the sting and sighed. Her shoulders sagged with the weight of the scars she carried.

“I’ve never had a master, only a trainer.”

“Who was your trainer?”

Alessandra and Luca planned to elope on her eighteenth birthday. Marcello was supposed to join them as they left Chicago for good. Their first stop was a wedding chapel in Vegas, and they would figure out where to go from there.

Alessandra beamed as she arrived at the airport, hand in hand with Luca. They were growing impatient waiting for Marcello, who was on assignment. They worried when he didn't show, but Luca didn't want to miss their flight.

After rebooking Marcello, they headed toward the gate, where airport security caught up with them and detained them without explanation. Shortly after, Tony's guards arrived. They grabbed Alessandra and dragged her out of O'Hare kicking and screaming. Many people stared, but no one dared intervene.

When they returned to the house, Tony was livid. He ordered the guards to strip Alessandra naked. Russell tried to intervene and was knocked unconscious. Tears rolled down her face as every stitch of cloth was torn from her body, and two guards forced her to her knees and held her there.

Pain blinded her as Tony's belt buckle connected with her bare skin. He lashed her ten times, and by the last one, she couldn't hold herself upright anymore. She collapsed, naked and bleeding, the moment the guards released her. The scars on her back still ached years later.

The lashing wasn't her punishment. It was Luca's. Her punishment was being forced to watch as they beat him to the point of losing consciousness. She was afraid they would kill him. He suffered multiple fractures and lost a tooth.

The next day, Tony hired a man to train his daughter to obey and serve. He beat Alessandra and called her a whore. She had no value anymore unless she learned how to properly please men. She cried and told them she was still a virgin. But that didn't stop their cruelty and the pain they inflicted.

Drake dropped the crop and stared at Alessandra. His fists were clenched so tight his knuckles turned white.

"Porca puttana! Who was he? What did he do to you?"

Alessandra never saw his face, only the black leather hood he wore during their training sessions. But she saw him shirtless several times. A tattoo of Vlad the Impaler stared at her from his back as the silhouettes of impaled victims stood around him. His voice was deep and his eyes were ice cold.

Some men enjoy their women tied up and completely at their mercy. Ropes were crossed between her breasts, wrapped around her upper arms, and tied in a knot around her wrists. She was rendered immobile from the waist up. Luca was brought in for the intimate session.

She screamed and pleaded for him to untie her. Luca turned green when she started crying. He resisted at first, and Alessandra's heart fluttered. She thought he still loved her and would save her. But the trainer pulled a gun from his belt and whipped Luca over the head.

Luca still refused, and the man in the leather hood pressed the muzzle against Alessandra's temple. She struggled and screamed, begging them to let her go. Cold sweat broke out across her forehead as she began praying. She implored her mother and any god who could hear her to save her.

The trainer gagged Alessandra to keep her quiet and kept his finger poised on the trigger until Luca was naked. Blood dripped from his forehead onto her back as he climbed over her. She struggled until the coarse rope tore through her tender flesh. Luca left her aching and bleeding in multiple places.

"Luca... he—" She sobbed and held her wrists out to Drake.

The beast within Drake roared and threatened to tear Tony apart with his bare hands. Seeing his wife broken and shaking before him, he sank to the floor and pulled Alessandra into his lap as she continued recounting her story. He soothed her by stroking her hair.

Alessandra fell into a deep depression and couldn't stand the ugly scars any longer. She fingered the jeweled hilt of the dagger she was allowed to keep for protection. Slowly drawing it from its sheath, she watched as the balanced blade reflected the soft candlelight of her room. Alessandra placed the sharp edge against her still-tender skin and prayed for relief from her pain.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't muster the courage to drag the blade across her skin. She wept and threw the dagger across the room, and it sank into the wall with a thunk. Blinded by her tears, Alessandra curled into a ball and cried herself to sleep. She wished for death more nights than she could remember in the confines of her father's mansion.

Luca had sworn to love and protect her, but he'd broken his promise. He could no longer look her in the eye. He often stumbled drunkenly down the halls, sometimes alone, sometimes with a woman under his arm. He had stolen Alessandra's innocence, and in the years that followed, Luca had warped into a man she didn't recognize.

“Those fucking cocksucking motherfuckers! I'm so sorry for everything they put you through. I'll never let Anthony, Luca, or anyone hurt you ever again.” Resolve burned in Drake's eyes.

Alessandra's heart burst at his promise. She wanted so much to believe him, but life had served her one bitter disappointment after another. Baring her soul to Drake was genuinely cathartic. He knew her deepest, darkest secret now.

Drake lifted her off the floor, carried her to his room, and gently laid her in the bed. He stripped down to his boxers and climbed into bed beside her, pulling her against his side.

“I'd like you to sleep in bed with me from now on.”

It wasn't a command but a request. Alessandra didn't have to see his face in the dark bedroom to know vulnerability would shine through.

“Yes, Drake,” she agreed.

They traded caresses and sweet kisses. A new level of intimacy opened for them through Drake's ability to put his wife's needs above his own.

Chapter Twenty

AS LUCA'S DEADLINE APPROACHED, DRAKE COULDN'T GET HIS THREAT OUT of his head. He wasn't afraid of Luca Donato—he needed to formulate his own plans. The first thing was a sidebar with his mentor, Jerry. Upon entering Drake's office, the man frowned and shook his head at the apparent disorganization.

“You've been combing through these documents for days.”

The stack of twenty white cardboard file boxes to the right of Drake's desk were still waiting for his attention. The half dozen to his left were complete. He read through the digital copies while at home, and it still wasn't enough.

“This case needs to be foolproof. The associate I'm bringing in isn't caught up to speed yet. I need your help,” Drake said in desperation.

“When people make friends with judges, they usually ask favors to vacate a conviction or forgive a couple of parking tickets. Not wade through boxes of discovery.”

Drake looked at his mentor intently. “I'm serious, Jerry. This case is not easily won due to the Russo influence. You know we only have one shot at this.”

“You think I don't know that? I would appreciate it if you didn't question my integrity,” Jerry said, aggravated.

Drake sighed and set the folder he'd been looking through back on his desk. "Says the pimp that rose to become a judge. You wouldn't be a successful club owner or judge if certain quid pro quo arrangements weren't made. You'd be serving time yourself."

"Watch your tone, Mr. Walker. Your actions and associations could potentially jeopardize your professional reputation and standing, especially given your background and current connection with the defendant's sister," Jerry warned.

Drake began flipping through another file. "I'm just saying that it's getting harder to work this case ethically, and that's why I'm combing through discovery. It's worth noting that Marcello Russo wasn't the only person involved in the crime. He unfortunately became the scapegoat who was apprehended. Taking a crime boss's son off the streets will open the city up to major feuds and plays for power."

"What about you?" Jerry asked.

"Alessandra's *mine*. I'll protect her until the day I die. If Luca Donato has any say, it will be soon, which is why I'm bringing an associate onto this case. If anything happens to me, someone needs to step in right away. This case can't afford missteps."

"Luca Donato threatened you?" Jerry leaned forward.

"I'm not afraid of him. I can handle myself." Drake handed Jerry a manilla folder. "Luca's not a lieutenant anymore. He's been promoted to Underboss. Tony named Luca the heir of the Russo family."

"Shit, Drake. You can't take a threat from him lightly."

"Promise that if anything happens to me, you and Noah will look after Alessandra. Although she is the daughter of a crime boss, she was not brought up as a mafia princess."

As Drake continued recounting Alessandra's words, his emotions began to surface.

"Do you love her?" Jerry asked.

“She’s a shining light in the shit we’re wading through.”

“Don’t dodge my question, Mr. Walker,” Jerry said sternly.

“Promise me you’ll do everything in your power to ensure her safety if something happens to me. She deserves stability and happiness.”

Drake opened his wall safe and showed the gun he kept to Jerry. He knew how to handle a firearm, though he was far from an expert marksman. He had taken courses in self-defense and carried a concealed weapon because a prosecutor couldn’t be too careful regarding high-profile cases. If Luca wanted a fight, Drake would go down swinging.

“Do you think they discovered the truth about you, Drago?”

“I’ve told you before not to call me that,” Drake growled, shaking his head.

“You need to tell her the truth.”

Alessandra confided her innermost struggles and secrets, while Drake kept her at arm’s length. There were some dark secrets he hid so deep below the surface, Alessandra faced a world of hurt if she discovered the truth. It would destroy everything they were building.

“You know I can’t do that. More than my marriage is at stake.”

“Has there been news on Enzo’s moves?”

Enzo Prazza was another notorious crime boss. His last known whereabouts were in Italy. He’d fled Chicago in disgrace decades ago but planned to encroach on American territory. With the floundering Russo empire, it was only a matter of time before he was stateside.

“Are you sure you can handle this, Drago?”

“I escorted Alessandra home to pack her belongings and was able to gauge the strength of their defense. All guards are armed; even Luca wore a firearm in the home. Striking the heart is a widowmaker.”

“What do you suggest then?”

“We buy our time,” Drake stated. “A guard named Russell has a soft spot for Alessandra. He’s been caring for her since she was a child, even putting

himself on the line to protect her. He is the only person in that god-forsaken place that may be our in.”

Drake owed the man a debt of gratitude. If it wasn't for Russell's care, who knows what would've happened to Alessandra. With the thirteen-year age difference between them, his wife was only a child when he returned from Italy. He felt responsible for leaving her in hell since she turned eighteen. He should've flexed his muscles and laid claim to her that morning months ago outside the courthouse when she fell into his arms. If he had been more careful, he could've avoided a sham wedding and things would be different.

Besides his work as a prosecutor, Drake worked alongside Jerry in a covert task force aimed at dismantling the Chicago mob. Jerry avoided prison time after being collared years ago by agreeing to become a confidential informant. In the days when he was still a pimp, girls occasionally brought information without realizing he was a rat.

A high-ranking government official grew suspicious and stopped hiring Jerry's girls. It placed a target on his back, and he was pulled out. He adopted a new identity and was given seed money for a new life. But Jerry wasn't ready to stop bringing criminals to justice.

He attended law school and used the seed money to open an elite club. Instead of using girls for information, he had the place wired. Although the evidence collected within his club was not admissible in court, the task force had alternative methods to utilize the information.

Every member underwent a thorough background check, and their files were encrypted for security. He'd met Drake when he was caught sneaking in. Though he was behind a mask, the unidentified young man immediately raised a flag.

When security apprehended Drake, they escorted him directly to the boss. Jerry quickly recognized the angry young man was a kindred spirit. He took him under his wing without hesitation. Drake didn't like to think where he could've ended up if he had fallen into the wrong hands and detonated.

Jerry felt a sense of pride toward the gentleman standing in front of him. He was aware that the current scenario was causing distress for Drake, and his friend was on the brink of losing control once more.

“Don’t you think Alessandra deserves to know her place in all of this?”

Drake shook his head, “It’s too soon. She still sees her brother as innocent. I meant what I said about protecting her, Jerry. I’ll protect her from everyone, especially myself.”

It was only a matter of time before Drake lulled Alessandra into a sense of security. She would be the key to bringing down her entire family. Once that happened, she would hate him forever, and he made every effort to make peace with that.

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Chapter Twenty-One

WITH LUCA'S DEADLINE LOOMING EVER CLOSER, ALESSANDRA PLANNED TO make the most of her last night with Drake. She made minestrone soup as an appetizer and baked ziti with sausage as their main course. For dessert, she picked up cannolis from her favorite bakery.

She set the table for two, just as Drake had once done for her. Italian jazz played in the background, and she opened a bottle of red wine.

She glanced at the clock. Drake would be home in half an hour, giving her time to slip into something more comfortable.

Alessandra pulled out a seductive silver lingerie set she had purchased with Noah's input. It was the first time she'd bought something so sexy with the intent of enjoying it with a partner. The silver body chains around her waist glittered in the light, as did the rhinestone butterfly appliqué on the panties. Silver wrist cuffs covered the scars on her wrists. Lastly, she pulled on a silver necklace Drake had gifted her.

When Drake saw her, he grabbed her by the hips and kissed her along her jaw.

"Dinner's on the table. Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving," he replied.

He scooped Alessandra up and carried her to the table. He impatiently pushed everything aside and sat her on the edge.

“The food will get cold.”

“I have a more important feast in front of me, one that’s guaranteed to be hot and wet for me.” He sat in a chair and placed Alessandra’s feet on the armrest. He easily moved her panties aside and blew over her lips. She whimpered as he teased her clit with his fingertips.

“Drake... Dinner—” She moaned as he ran his finger between her folds, probing the entrance of her wet tunnel before withdrawing and sucking it into his mouth.

“Mmm. Delicious,” Drake said.

He pulled her panties down and pushed her thighs wider apart, spreading her open for him.

“This is the nicest spread that’s been laid before me. Do you know how often I’ve fantasized about this moment? Tell me, bella, which do you enjoy more, my fingers or my tongue?”

Her reply was a breathy whisper. “Both.”

Drake obliged and began feasting. After treating Alessandra to two screaming orgasms, he helped her off the table once her legs stopped shaking. She excused herself to get cleaned up. Drake had reset the table by the time she returned.

“This smells amazing, Alessandra.”

“It’s going to be cold now,” she pouted.

“It was worth it. I hope you enjoyed it too.”

“Of course I did.”

Alessandra offered to warm the food, but Drake shook his head. He smiled and ate the cold food, appreciating her efforts.

After dinner, they retreated to the couch. Alessandra curled up beside Drake, and he absentmindedly stroked her arm.

“There’s something I’d like to talk to you about. You know I enjoy control and dominance in the bedroom.” She nodded in acknowledgment. Drake

swallowed, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel devalued. What we do—what I enjoy—I don’t want you to feel forced into anything.”

“Where is this coming from, Drake?” she asked, taking his hand in hers.

He removed her cuff and rubbed his thumb over her scars. “You’ve opened up so much to me. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Drake wasn’t a man who opened up easily. She showed him her vulnerabilities and now sat attentively, waiting for him to share his.

“I want to explore kink with you in a way that’s unique to us. I want to be your Master and you to be my submissive. It’s important that you want this too, Alessandra. Your enjoyment and fulfillment matter to me.”

Past trauma threatened to overwhelm Alessandra, but Drake’s grip remained firm. He was her anchor, and her eyes dropped to the point of their connection.

“If this will make you happy, it makes me happy too. There’s nothing we’ve done that I haven’t enjoyed,” she admitted honestly.

Drake lifted her chin with his free hand and pushed her hair behind her ear. “Don’t hide from me, bella.”

She lifted her gaze to meet Drake’s. His eyes conveyed so much in that connection. He wasn’t angry or broody. They weren’t darkened with desire or lust. They were the most beautiful brown eyes she’d ever seen, with flecks of gold catching the soft light. Drake studied her with equal intensity.

“There may be times I push your limits, but I promise to take care of you after.”

“Yes, sir.”

Drake’s posture changed as his voice took on a strict dominant tone. “On your knees, Alessandra. I expect complete honesty from you. You will be punished if you lie to me.”

“Yes, sir!”

They dove into a lengthy conversation regarding limits and past experiences. Drake discussed his expectations and let Alessandra voice her concerns when appropriate. Her head spun by the time they finished their negotiations.

“I have a gift for you.” He pulled a slender blue box from his pocket and handed it to Alessandra. Her face lit up as she excitedly opened the box. “I want to make this official. In public, you wear your wedding band to symbolize our marriage. I expect you to wear my collar during play to symbolize our commitment.”

Her breath caught in her throat as she fingered the gorgeous sapphire and diamond halo heart D-ring collar. It was the single most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Though tomorrow’s future was unknown, this symbolized their new commitment. She would always be Drake’s—heart, body, and soul.

“May I put it on you?” Drake asked.

Alessandra nodded, finding herself at a loss for words. Drake caressed her neck and squeezed with enough force to make her gasp. He leaned down to kiss and suck her neck, leaving his marks on her, claiming her.

She was soon panting, desperate for more. She reached her arms behind her head, lifting her hair up to allow him to fasten the collar around her neck.

“When you are in my collar, you will call me Master. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.” She was ready to be Drake’s permanently.

His fingers grazed her soft skin as the clasp closed. Tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of Drake’s time and attention in choosing such a piece for her. Wearing his collar made her feel safe and cherished. It was a far cry from the training collar she was forced to wear as a teen.

Drake nuzzled the skin around the collar. The sensual move left her needy for more. She grabbed Drake’s shoulders to steady herself and swallowed three words that rose in her throat.

He whispered his request in her ear. “I want to fuck you while you’re wearing my collar.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Undress me slowly,” he commanded.

“Yes, Master.”

She slowly ran her hands up his muscular biceps and down his broad chest, enjoying the power exchange. She grabbed the hem of his shirt and slowly pulled it over his head, watching his muscles flex as she bared his torso.

Drake looked down at her through hooded eyes. She dropped back to her knees and flicked her tongue around his navel as she unbuckled his belt. His massive erection sprang free as she pulled off his pants and boxers.

Pre-cum glistened along the tip, and she wanted to lick it off him, but she waited for her master’s permission.

“Good girl, you will be rewarded for that.”

Drake helped her back to her feet and hooked his finger in the collar’s ring. He led her down the hallway to their bedroom, not using any more force than necessary. He laid on the bed first, pulling her on top of him.

“I want you to ride me, Alessandra. Take your pleasure from me.”

She reached into his nightstand and grabbed a condom. Maintaining eye contact, she tore it open and rolled it down his length. Drake groaned as she pumped his cock, enjoying the warmth and how it pulsed in her hand.

Drake’s affections had her core so slick that when she climbed over his lap, she immediately sank down. Once fully seated, she waited a moment before moving, luxuriating in the fullness she felt with him

“Drake—”

A quick, firm smack on her ass brought her back to awareness. Drake circled one hand around her collar, squeezing gently.

“You will be punished if you break the rules, Alessandra. Do not forget how to address me.”

“I’m sorry, Master.”

Alessandra rocked back and forth, finding her rhythm. Drake's hands fondled her breasts, twisting and pinching her nipples.

"Yes...yes..."

"The sight of you in my collar is so fucking sexy. You're riding me and taking pleasure, but your beautiful body is mine. Do you like being owned? Do you like being my pet?"

Her pace quickened as she bounced up and down on Drake's dick. She ground her clit against his base every time their hips met. Drake gripped her hips to help guide her movements and thrust beneath her, increasing their pleasure.

"I'm close, bella. I want you to come with my hand around your throat."

"Please make me come, Master."

Drake's hand moved up her belly and over a full breast, squeezing and kneading before moving upward. Alessandra moaned as he applied firm, steady pressure to her throat. It wasn't hard enough to hurt, but enough for her to feel it.

"So fucking hot. Squeeze my cock as hard as I'm squeezing your neck, bella. I want you to steal the cum from my body."

His other hand remained on her hip to keep her steady. He bent his legs to allow her to lean back against his knees. Her breathing became uneven, and her inner walls began to squeeze Drake.

"Good girl. Now come for your Master."

Drake squeezed tighter and bucked against her at a frenzied pace. Her head fell back as her vision blurred.

"M... Ma... Master... Drake!" she cried.

Her body shuddered in the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced as Drake twitched within her. As aftershocks coursed through her, she fell against his chest, a sweaty, hot mess.

They lay in bed together, Alessandra curled up into Drake's side, and he held her close.

"Sex with you was amazing before, Alessandra. But I never imagined it being this hot with you in my collar."

"I loved it, Drake. Your dominant side is very sexy."

"Would you like me to remove your collar before we fall asleep?"

Alessandra shook her head. It felt right to keep it on. Tonight she was Drake's; maybe tomorrow would never come for them. They fell asleep in each other's arms, naked save for her collar.

The following day, Alessandra woke to the vibration of her phone. She groggily reached for it and groaned as Luca's name flashed on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Time's up, bitch."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

“LUCA?”

A panicked Alessandra shook Drake awake and put her phone on speaker so he could hear what Luca said. Drake quickly grabbed his phone from the nightstand and began recording the conversation.

“I’m very disappointed in you. You were warned that you only had one week. Did you think you’d actually get away with this?”

“I’m not signing the goddamn papers. As a matter of fact, the copy was destroyed. I won’t allow you to threaten my wife like that,” Drake said.

Luca laughed down the line. “That’s so sweet. I’m afraid you don’t have a choice in this matter, Mr. Walker. Alessandra knows the consequences of her actions.”

Alessandra looked at Drake, and he nodded. “Please, Luca. I... I care about Drake. I don’t want him to get hurt. There must be some other compromise or arrangement we can make.”

Drake laced his fingers through Alessandra’s and squeezed them. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“You’re weak, Alessandra. How can you care for that Neanderthal? I told you before, he’s just playing with you. Same little bird, different gilded cage. I’m sick and tired of you disrespecting me. You have always been mine.”

“I’m not weak, Luca.” Alessandra’s lip trembled. Drake moved closer and gathered her in his arms.

“A ring on your finger doesn’t change things. Marcello’s only option is to plead if you refuse to divorce Drake. Mr. Walker will be offering him a very generous deal.”

“No way in hell! That’s not happening. You don’t get to hold me over a barrel. Alessandra is my wife, not a pawn,” Drake spoke resolutely.

“Ah, clearly, you’re just waking up and haven’t heard the news yet.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Drake asked.

“You know how it is, Walker. Sometimes things just get misplaced. There is no evidence against Marcello Russo. You can’t possibly prosecute an innocent man without evidence to back it up.”

Drake and Alessandra looked wide-eyed at each other, trying to determine the validity of Luca’s words.

“Well, aren’t you happy, Alessandra? Your brother will be home much sooner than expected. You should be grateful. Remember where your loyalty lies.”

“Fuck you, Luca! I’ll never be yours.”

“We’ll see, darling. *Ciao*, bella.”

Luca ended the call, and Alessandra resisted the urge to chuck her phone across the room. She turned to Drake, who was already scrolling through emails on his phone.

“Fuck! Jerry is calling us into his chambers this morning.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Of course it’s not okay. Damn it! This is all your fault. I can’t believe you’re this naïve.”

He hopped out of bed.

“How is this my fault? You can’t keep blaming me for this. We should be past this by now. We’re a team, Drake!”

“If you had told me the truth about Luca’s threats initially, I could’ve prevented this from happening. I would’ve warned Jerry. How did discovery disappear when I’ve been combing through it all week? My case has gone to shit because of you. Fuck! I should’ve known better.”

Alessandra felt as though she’d been slapped. “How dare you pin this on me? I had nothing to do with this. I was trying to protect you.”

“I don’t need your fucking protection. Don’t bother anymore.”

Drake walked into the attached bath and slammed the door behind him. Alessandra attempted to follow, but the door was locked.

“Fuck you, Drake Walker! You’re a fucking bastard!” Alessandra yelled through the door.

They were constantly taking one step forward and two steps back. Alessandra was stuck between two men and two worlds, and their words cut deep.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was mussed from sex and sleep. She had several love bites from Drake and their animalistic lovemaking. She began choking, suffocating with an albatross around her neck. She clawed at the collar’s clasp with her manicured nails.

Drake promised to keep me safe and protected by giving me this collar. I thought he cared about me...

The collar was a heavy, stinging weight in her palm, and she dropped it. She stared at it, unsure of what to do next. Eventually, she picked it up and placed it in a drawer.

Alessandra chose a romper with a low-cut lacy top, showing off ample cleavage and her graceful neck. She wanted Drake to see she’d removed the collar without his permission.

She made a pot of coffee and a bagel for breakfast. Drake gave her a once-over.

“Are you dressing to show off your curves so men will drool over you?”

“Maybe I want them to look at me, Drake. Maybe I’ll find someone who thinks I’m worthy of their time.”

She stroked her neck and drew her hand between her breasts to settle on her hip. Drake followed the movement with his eyes.

“Where is your collar?”

“What collar?”

“God damn it, Alessandra, this isn’t a fucking game!” He stepped closer to her, anger radiated from him, threatening to burn her. “You wearing that collar means something to me.”

“You’re damn right. This isn’t a game, but you keep playing with my emotions anyway. You gave me that collar as a symbol of your commitment. You should take care of me, cherish me. Instead, you instantly jump down my throat the moment something happens.

“How is that fair? I’ve been patient and understanding. I’m your wife, not your emotional punching bag. We’re supposed to be partners. I thought things were changing. I can’t do this anymore.”

Her voice cracked, but she was determined to hold back tears. She turned her back needing a moment to breathe. Drake enveloped her in his strong arms. His warm, firm chest pressed against Alessandra’s back. Despite their fight, she leaned into his comfort.

“I’m sorry, Alessandra. You’re right. This is ridiculous, and I should be past it. But as you can see, I’m still a fucking mess. Please forgive me.”

Alessandra spun in Drake’s arms and looked up at him. She couldn’t hold back the tears at his heartfelt words.

“This is the last fucking time, Drake Walker.”

Though he seemed sincere, she couldn’t help the anger that flashed through her. Their whole relationship, she had been catering to his emotional whims. It was time to put the issue to bed. If he couldn’t trust her now, he never would.

“You need to decide once and for all whether we’re staying together or getting a divorce. I mean it this time, Drake. The next time you treat me like this, we’re done. I will walk out that door and not return. You need to trust me. I’ll forgive you, but this is the last damn time.”

Drake hung his head and sighed, pulling Alessandra closer to him. She rested her head on his chest, soaking up his woodsy scent, and listened to his heartbeat.

“You’re right, Alessandra. *You are right.* You deserve better than me. I swear from now on, you will receive my all. Please stay with me. Give me one more chance to prove I’m all in this with you.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

OVERWHELMING GUILT CHURNED IN DRAKE'S GUT. HE WOULDN'T BLOW THE last chance Alessandra offered him. She asked for his confidence and trust. But he was the untrustworthy one. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep his secrets.

"Come with me," Drake said. "I want you to hear what Jerry has to say."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"It's the least I can do. I don't just want you there. I need you there. Please come with me."

"Okay," she agreed.

They left for the courthouse. Drake had a special parking permit that allowed them to park on the lower level of the closest garage. Court officers' security lines moved much faster than the general public's. Drake waited several minutes for Alessandra to rejoin him.

He took her hand and led her to the twelfth floor, which held Judge Matthew's chambers. Once inside, Alessandra gazed around.

"Wow! This isn't what I expected a judge's chambers to look like. Somehow, I thought it would be fancier."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, my dear. I am but a humble public servant," he mock-bowed to her.

“I’m sorry.” Her hand flew to cover her mouth. “I didn’t mean it as an insult.”

“Jerry knows, bella. He’s joking”

“Please sit. We’re waiting on Miss Nguyen to join us. She should be here any moment.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in, Miss Nguyen. Let’s get down to business. I have a tee time to get to.”

“Sorry I’m late, Your Honor,” Jenny said breathlessly as though she’d run through the courthouse.

“Nonsense, Miss Nguyen, you’re right on time.”

Which was a nice way of saying she was late. Jerry cleared his throat and looked at them.

“I suppose by now you know why you’re here.” It wasn’t a question.

“It has come to the defense’s understanding there is no evidence incriminating my client. I can assure you that neither he nor I had any involvement in this matter. Since my client is innocent and the state has failed to meet its burden of proof, I am filing to have all charges dismissed,” Jenny proclaimed.

“Evidence doesn’t just walk away, Jerry. You know I’ve been combing through discovery. How did known associates of Mr. Russo know this occurred before our meeting in chambers?” Drake said, exasperated.

“If the Russo family had anything to do with the disappearance of evidence, I affirm my client is not complicit,” Jenny assured them.

Jenny and Drake were hostile adversaries ready to poke each other’s eyes out. They stared daggers at each other, so full of animosity that they forgot they were career professionals.

“May I speak, Your Honor?” Alessandra jumped in to try and settle their dispute.

“I object, Your Honor!” Jenny interjected. “Mrs. Walker has nothing to do with this. She shouldn’t even be here. This is inappropriate.”

“I would argue that she has every right to be here. She is a witness in this matter as Mr. Donato contacted her this morning,” Drake said.

“Is this true, Mrs. Walker? Did Mr. Donato admit to you that he knew evidence went missing?”

Drake turned to Alessandra with a steady, hopeful gaze.

She appeared heartbroken at being thrust into an impossible situation. He could see she was struggling with whom to support. He squeezed her knee to encourage her to speak up. She was right. It was high time he stopped placing blame on her for the direction the case had taken.

Drake was distracted by Alessandra while they enacted the real plan. He was never meant to win this case, and he’d allowed his stubborn pride to come between him and his wife. She shouldn’t have to choose between her husband and her brother.

Drake squeezed her knee again and leaned in to whisper, “It’s going to be all right, Alessandra. I’m here for you. No one will hurt you.”

“Mrs. Walker, this is a private sidebar in chambers. Nothing is on the record, and communication is privileged. No one will know you’re involved. I want to remind the defense of this,” Judge Matthews assured her.

Alessandra closed her eyes and took a deep breath before recounting their morning. “Ever since our marriage began, Drake and I have been pressured to ensure that we satisfactorily resolve this case for the Russos. After the last motion failed, Luca made death threats against Drake.

“This morning, Luca called to antagonize us. He knew evidence had gone missing and was gloating about it. Drake’s quick thinking led him to record the conversation.”

“How would Mr. Donato have prior knowledge of missing evidence, Miss Nguyen?” Jerry asked. “The official communication sent through the clerk didn’t offer specifics.”

Jenny snorted angrily, “I have an obligation to defend my client, and therefore, cannot reveal my source. It falls under attorney-client privilege, Your Honor.”

Drake pulled out his phone and set it on Judge Matthew’s desk. He made sure the volume was turned up and hit play. Everyone was silent as they listened. When it ended, Jerry didn’t look pleased.

“I need time to think about this. You’re dismissed for now. I expect you to remain close. I’ll render my verdict soon.”



OUTSIDE ON THE STEPS OF THE COURTHOUSE, DRAKE ATTEMPTED TO DRAW in air. His career was ruined despite his efforts to uphold the law. His friendship with Jerry wouldn’t change the outcome. Things ended the moment lust outweighed his better judgment at the altar.

Drake had won the real prize. It was time to put her first and respect her no matter what. Alessandra wasn’t his to use. Home with him should be her safe space. Their marriage shouldn’t feel like a life sentence.

Alessandra’s soft voice broke through his reverie. “I’m sorry about your case. I can’t believe my father would stoop so low.”

“Your brother was facing felony arson and murder. With the evidence disappearing, the case is circumstantial at best,” he replied steadily without looking at her.

“Marcello didn’t know anyone was going to be in that warehouse. You need to understand that he never intended to hurt anyone.”

Drake rounded on her, “You think that fucking matters? Someone died! The man was a father with two young children and a pregnant wife. Where is the justice for them?”

“I know that, Drake!” She threw her hands up. “My brother was facing the possibility of life in prison for his mistake. He’s not a killer. You don’t know him.”

“And you’re blinded by your love for him. You’re giving him too much credit. He had a choice!”

“You’ve met my father, you’ve met Luca—you know he never had a choice.” Alessandra wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “I never had a choice....”

The words were barely audible, but Drake heard her. For the first time, he finally heard her, and it gutted him. Everything she ever told him fell into place. She gave him glimpses into her life through stories of abuse and torment. But now he finally saw her. His beautiful queen was a manipulated pawn, and *his* strings kept her that way. She clearly had regrets when it came to their relationship, and he had no one to blame but himself.

“What the fuck does that mean, Alessandra?”

Unmistakable hurt shone in her eyes. He reached out to touch her, but she flinched.

“It wasn’t my choice to marry you. My father did this to us. Just like he put my brother in his situation. Don’t you see that, Drake? Do you understand now? Given the option, I never thought I’d choose to stay with you. I never thought we’d fall for each other.”

“I’ll offer him a deal for you. But I’m warning you, bella, you will regret this one day. Marcello will eventually show you his true colors and only disappoint you.”

Alessandra threw herself into his arms, and he caught her. He would always catch her. They clung to each other in a moment of desperation, finally breaking through the most painful barrier.

Maybe this was indeed for the best. With this case behind them, they could put one foot in front of the other and move forward with their lives. The expectations of the case and the deceit that brought them together would be in their past.

Drake ran his fingers through his wife's soft auburn hair. Despite everything, he wanted his marriage to work. With the world burning down around them, as long as the day ended with his wife in his arms, he would survive.

"Why don't you head home without me? You don't need to wait for the judge's decision. I have work to finish up here. Maybe some time alone will do us good."

"Drake, please don't do this. Come home with me."

Drake cupped her cheek, and her eyes fluttered shut. Humiliation washed over him, and he couldn't stand his wife witnessing it. He kissed her forehead and turned back to the courthouse.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DRAKE KNEW THE VERDICT BEFORE JERRY CALLED THEM BACK TO THE office. With disappearing evidence, they would now need to prove tampering. Unfortunately, that would never happen.

“We are agents of justice, and this situation is abhorrent. Mr. Rommer’s family deserved justice for his death, but with the dishonest way the defense comported themselves, it’s no longer possible. Due to lack of evidence, justice may not be served,” Jerry said in disgust.

“I will file a motion to dismiss the case immediately,” Jenny said.

“You do that, Miss Nguyen. My clerk will set a date for the hearing.”

“I’d also like you to reconsider your decision to deny bail.”

“Mr. Russo will be released on his own recognizance.”

With a Cheshire smile, Jenny bid the men farewell. She was on the phone conveying the good news to someone before the door closed behind her.

“*Che cazzo!* You can’t do this, Jerry.”

“I’m bound by the law, Drake. They played a good game. I’m dismissing without prejudice.”

“That’s not good enough. My career is over because of this bullshit. This was all I had,” Drake fumed.

“Had, not have. Go home to your wife, Drake. Lick your wounds. We all lose sometimes.”

“No!” Drake pounded his fist on his mentor’s desk.

Jerry stood and glared at Drake, putting the petulant child in his place.

“Pull yourself together. This career may have been all you had at one point, but that’s not the case anymore. You’re married now. Grow up and take responsibility for your damn life.

“You act like this was done to you. But don’t forget. I stood beside you at that altar. I don’t care what excuses you want to use, but you’re deluding yourself. *You* made a choice. *You* said those vows.”

“She was always supposed to be mine, Jerry. I couldn’t say no when I saw her coming down that aisle. I didn’t come to my senses until I lifted the veil,” Drake admitted in defeat.

“I support you in a lot of things. I went to bat for you when the higher-ups wanted your immediate removal from this case. Results were promised to buy you time, and now it’s time to pay the fucking piper. Sometimes you have to use bait to catch the bigger fish. I was once a criminal who was given a second chance. Look where I am now.” Jerry gestured to the framed degrees hanging behind him.

“I will find another way to bring the Russos to justice. Alessandra will provide that for us. You’ll see.”

“Mark my words. The longer you jerk that poor girl around, the more she will hate you when she finally discovers the secrets you’re hiding,” Jerry said.

“I need a fucking drink,” Drake sighed.

He looked at his mentor. Drake appreciated the no-nonsense attitude and blunt honesty Jerry offered. But he didn’t want tough love.

Drake left his car in the garage, and Jerry drove them to his member’s-only club. Instead of wearing masks and mingling with members on the main floor, they headed to Jerry’s private office.

Drake took a swig of the generously-poured whiskey Jerry offered. One wall was a mirrored panel that allowed them to scan the floor and watch the entertainment privately. On stage was a burlesque dancer. She swiveled her hips to entice the audience as she slowly removed her glove, biting and pulling each fingertip.

It was his first time in the club since his bachelor party. He hadn't played with anyone since he proposed to Riley last year. Alessandra was the first woman he was with in a long time, and he had no desire for anyone else.

"Have you thought more about bringing Alessandra here? You should introduce her to this side of you in a safe environment."

It had been a month since their wedding, but it already felt like a lifetime with every argument and problem they had faced thus far. There were many times it seemed they wouldn't arrive at this date.

"Since she committed herself to submission, then debut her here. I'll help you set the scene. If you give me a shopping list, I can ensure your room is stocked for you."

"Collaring her was incredible. You should have seen how unbridled and sexy she was. The way she moves and the way she fucks is unlike anything I've experienced before." Drake shook his head, and the spark in his eyes dulled. "But she removed it the first chance she had because I screwed up."

"You need to reconcile your head and your heart. You wouldn't continue to have the same conflict if you were honest. A good Dom treats his sub with respect and comports themselves with dignity. I've taught you better than to be an alpha-hole."

"Alpha-hole?" Drake snorted.

Jerry nodded. "Imagine if your sister told you a man was treating her like you're treating your wife. Would you stand for it?"

Drake sagged. His friend was right. If he found out some guy was mistreating his little sister, he'd punch his fucking lights out. After all, he was ready to rain hellfire on Anthony Russo.

“Show Alessandra how much you value her. Spend your monthiversary with us.”

“Monthiversary?” Drake raised his brows.

“Urban Dictionary, my friend. It means you’ve been a total fuck-up, and you owe your wife something special because she’s put up with your ass for a month. If you want to keep her, treat her right.” Jerry laughed. “Besides, Noah’s sweet on her and will help show her the ropes. We’ll make sure she has a great time. The rest of the marriage is up to you.”

They finished their drink, and Drake indulged in a couple more. While Jerry took him home, Noah picked up his car so it wouldn’t be left in the court garage overnight.

It was late when Drake entered the apartment, only to find his wife asleep on the couch. She slept peacefully with her auburn hair splayed around her like a halo and cherub pout. Her left breast strained against the thin pink cami, offering a glimpse of her areola. All he had to do was hook his finger around the fabric to coax out the nipple and help himself to a taste.

Drake’s groin tightened at the fantasy of taking his sleeping beauty. He scooped her up and shushed her when she stirred. She seemed so small and vulnerable in his arms.

Sweet, squeaky sounds escaped her in this intimate moment, and she snuggled closer. Drake’s heart revved in his chest, and her eyelids fluttered as he kissed her forehead.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Drake gently laid her in their bed. She rolled over and hugged her pillow immediately. Drake said goodnight to each delicious curve as he pulled the comforter over her. She sighed contentedly as he gathered her in his arms and pulled her against his chest.

“I’m sorry, bella. Loving me is poison, but I’m too selfish to let you go. I can’t live without you and will only break your heart,” he confessed to the dark.

His secrets continued to haunt him. He hoped she could forgive him for the continued deceit when she finally learned the truth.

Arrangements through marriage were often made to strengthen the standing and legitimacy of the families. Once he ensured Alessandra was safe, he'd cut her strings and offer her the chance to be free. It would kill him if she chose to walk away, but he loved her enough to let her go.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

ALESSANDRA WOKE UP WARM IN BED ON HER MONTHIVERSARY. SHE ROLLED over only to find her husband's side empty.

"Drake?" she called.

The door opened, and Drake walked in carrying a tray of pancakes and a cup of coffee. He set it down on the nightstand next to her.

Alessandra stretched and propped herself against the pillows with a smile.

"What's this?"

"I thought I'd do something nice for you this morning. It's been one hell of a month. We deserve to celebrate."

"Breakfast in bed? This is so sweet of you, Drake. Thank you."

Drake leaned over and kissed her cheek as he handed her a plate. Alessandra picked up her fork and turned to Drake.

"Open up, husband. I have a syrupy bite just for you."

He licked his lips as he leaned in and opened to Alessandra. Their eyes met as he closed his mouth with a groan.

"I'd like to enjoy a more delicious syrupy bite."

Drake swiped his finger through the syrup and rubbed it on Alessandra's bare shoulder. It was cool on her hot skin.

Drake's tongue flicked along the trail he left behind. Many open-mouthed kisses followed before he pulled back.

"Now, that is what I call a sweet breakfast."

"What if I want a syrupy bite of you?" she asked coyly.

Drake popped his cheek with his tongue, and Alessandra got an idea. She pulled her husband's boxers down and swiped her finger in the syrup. He groaned as she played with the bulbous head of his stiffening erection.

"Relax, hubby. Let me take care of you."

She flicked her tongue against his tip, tasting the sweet maple mixed with his natural saltiness. She took the head in her mouth and swirled her tongue.

"Fuck, bella. That's so good."

After a moment, he pulled her off him.

"I'm still hungry," he said when she pouted.

He swiped more syrup and circled her nipples. He leaned down to take one in his mouth, flicking it with his tongue and suckling. She ran her hand through his hair and cradled the back of his head as he moved to the other one.

They took turns pleasuring each other until Drake's alarm went off.

"That was amazing." He grinned. "We need to have breakfast in bed more often."

After their meal, Alessandra cleaned the dishes while Drake showered. He emerged from his room in a button-down shirt and slacks.

"What's on your agenda today?"

She had hoped they could spend more time in bed together, but he was dressed to leave.

“I have to go into the office for a while. You’re welcome to come with me if you’d like. Maybe we can have lunch together.”

“And this evening?”

“We have a party to attend.”

“Is it another gala?”

Drake’s eyes turned dark. “Sure, bella. Another gala. Are you coming to work with me? We should get going.”

Alessandra grabbed a wrap dress and quickly fixed her hair and makeup. She was excited to spend the day together.

Alessandra was surprised when they arrived at Drake’s office. It was almost a carbon copy of the Walkers’ den. Clearly, Dick’s scholarly interests had rubbed off on his son. Law books and true crime novels lined the bookshelves.

She turned to appreciate the breathtaking view. “This is incredible, Drake. It’s so open and airy, the natural lighting is perfect, and this view is to die for.”

Drake stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her neck.

“I’m glad it meets your expectations, Mrs. Walker. Are you getting wet looking out the window? You screamed so loud when you climaxed, imagining an audience on our first night together. If you’re patient, we can fuck in front of my office window as soon as I’m done working. It will be your reward for being a good girl.”

She whipped around and saw the desire in his eyes. A frisson of excitement bloomed in her belly as Drake beckoned her to follow with the crook of his finger. Alessandra squealed when he picked her up and sat her on his desk, pulling her thighs apart and stepping between them.

Wrapping a fist in her hair, Drake pulled until she moaned. Her back arched, pushing her breasts into his chest.

“I’ve wanted to invite you into my office for a while now.”

“And what is it we do in your office?”

Drake kissed her long and deep. He brushed kisses along her jaw toward her ear before whispering, “I’d like you down on your knees between my legs. I have work to do, after all.”



DRAKE HELPED ALESSANDRA OFF THE DESK AND WATCHED AS SHE SANK TO her knees and crawled into the space beneath. He was so turned on by the sight that his dick twitched painfully behind his zipper. He’d had this fantasy of role-playing the boss with Alessandra in his office for a while. It wouldn’t take long for her skilled tongue to detonate him.

Teasing fingertips ran the length of his thighs, and he groaned as Alessandra squeezed him through his pants.

“Are you sure you can handle me and focus on your work? I can be fairly persuasive.”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to take it.”

Drake’s hands went to his zipper, but Alessandra slapped them away.

“Tsk, ts. Keep your hands to yourself. This is my job, boss. And I take it very seriously.” Her eyes lit up at their turn of play.

“By all means, then, Mrs. Walker. If you do a good job, I’ll recommend you for a promotion,” Drake said, sinking into his role.

Alessandra slowly pulled down Drake’s zipper and reached into his boxers to grasp his cock. It glistened and beckoned her forward. Drake jerked when she kissed the tip. He clenched his fists to avoid grabbing the back of her head and taking matters into his own hands.

“Are you sure you want me handling this package, sir? It appears quite dangerous, and I can’t be held responsible if you lose your concentration.”

Her lips brushed against his throbbing shaft as she spoke.

“Don’t worry about me, bella. I’ll be fine.”

He turned his attention to his computer and opened his e-mail folder. Alessandra proved she was up for the challenge. Pixels blurred when hot air blew across his tip. Feminine hands balanced on his thighs as a wet tongue caressed the vein on the underside of his shaft.

Unable to see below the desk, each sensation was heightened. Alessandra kept changing her rhythm and method. By the time he got used to her sucking the head like a lollipop, she nibbled on the sensitive underside causing him to jump. He moaned as she gripped his base and flicked his slit with her tongue.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Her mouth felt amazing, and he was determined to enjoy every second of the teasing pleasure she gifted him. “Goddamn... That’s incredible. But you’re going to have to work harder than that to earn your promotion, dolcezza.”

Finally, the wet channel of her mouth welcomed him into its warm depth. She bobbed shallowly at first before pulling him deep. She reached into his boxers, squeezed his sack with one hand, and wrapped the other tightly around his shaft, focusing her tongue and mouth on his head.

The words on the computer became foreign. His concentration became lost as he read the same line multiple times. His head fell back in ecstasy.

“Oh fuck... That feels so good!”

Drake pushed back from the desk, and Alessandra crawled out. She gazed up at Drake from under dark lashes, taking him deep in her throat. A guttural sound conveyed his approval as she hummed around him. Drake lost control seeing Alessandra’s hand up her skirt, pleasuring herself.

A familiar tightening began at the base of his spine. His breathing became more shallow. He wanted to prolong the moment, but lost it when she tapped the sensitive spot behind his balls.

“*Merda!* Get ready. You’re about to receive your raise.”

Drake erupted in her mouth, and she swallowed every drop with a wicked grin.

“You win that one, Alessandra. I’m not going to complain about the results.”

Drake tucked himself back into his pants, and the couple grinned at each other. It was time to return the favor. He captured Alessandra’s lips in a deep kiss, grasping her hips.

He lifted her up on the desktop and pushed the hem of her skirt up.

“Now it’s my turn, Mrs. Walker. I’m going to show you my appreciation for your hard work.” A knock on the door interrupted Drake’s plans. Alessandra quickly hopped down and adjusted her skirt.

“Come in,” he grunted.

Noah sauntered into the room, looking down at the stack of papers in his hand. “Hey, Drake, I’ve got papers for you.”

“Put them on my desk and get the hell out.” While upset at the interruption, he still had all evening to make it up to his wife.

At Drake’s sharp tone, Noah looked up and noticed Alessandra. “Hey, Alessandra. I wasn’t expecting to see you until tonight.”

“What’s tonight?” Alessandra asked.

A wide grin lit up Noah’s face. “Nothing.”

“You’ll see, bella.”

Noah couldn’t stay long, as he had other errands to run. He hugged Alessandra and clapped Drake on the back before leaving.

“I have a few more emails to send, and then we can head home.”

This time, Drake concentrated on his work and was ready to leave for the day an hour later.

Chapter Twenty-Six

AFTER RETURNING FROM THE OFFICE, DRAKE AND ALESSANDRA SEPARATED to get ready for dinner. Several hints were dropped about a party, but she could only imagine what that would be like. Tingles of excitement ran through her body as her mind conjured different scenarios.

A black town car picked them up from the penthouse and brought them to the River North area. They stopped at The Godfrey Hotel, and Drake checked them into a one-bedroom king suite.

At dinner, the staff was quite attentive. The I|O GODFREY Roofscape was reserved just for them. A large bucket with two bottles of champagne sat on a side table next to a patio daybed. They took turns feeding each other an assortment of appetizers, including black truffle fries and a charcuterie board.

“This is delicious. I wish we had time for dessert.”

“Don’t fret, bella. There will be plenty of time for dessert later.”

The seductive purr in Drake’s voice let her know that the only thing they’d be consuming that evening would be each other. They returned to the suite, and large dress boxes were set on the bed.

“Who’s hosting the party tonight?”

“The host chose to remain unnamed.”

“I don’t understand. Where’s the party?”

“We’re going to an exclusive club this evening.”

“Which club is it?”

“You’ll see soon enough. First, we need to get dressed.”

Drake gestured to the dress boxes waiting for her. Grinning like a kid on Christmas morning, she opened them. Both dresses were sexy in their own way, but Alessandra chose a sheer silver one. The bodice offered coverage, but the rest was thin enough that she worried someone might see her panties in specific lighting, so she decided to forgo them. The slit was high enough to expose her tattoo, and the cuffs hid the scars on her wrists.

Alessandra noticed a black lace mask in the box. Silver threads were woven around the openings to accentuate the eyes. She fingered it gently and turned to Drake.

“What’s the mask for?”

“We’re going to be incognito tonight. It’s a private members-only club, and anonymity is prized.”

Drake looked like a prince in his new black tailored suit. The floral jacquard jacket was embroidered with silver to match Alessandra’s dress. His own mask was a solid black piece accented with silver filigree.

“You’re breathtaking, Alessandra. I can’t wait to show off my wife this evening.”

They took the town car to a nondescript building near the Midtown Athletic Club. When the man at the door asked Drake for the password, he confidently said, “Tiddlywink.”

The doorman radioed to someone who immediately greeted them and escorted them to the VIP lounge.

Red velvet curtains and metal hooks hung from the walls. A curved sofa and chaise allowed an open view of the room regardless of where they sat. A round platform stood in the center. Soft lighting cast multicolored hues throughout the room, and sultry music played from hidden speakers.

“Did you bring me to a BDSM club?”

“Yes, Bella. Do you like it? I hoped we could take our relationship to the next level this evening.”

Everyone around them wore masks, staff and guests alike. The male staff members were reminiscent of Chippendale dancers, with their muscular physiques on full display. Their bulges were hidden beneath black boy shorts that accentuated their buns of steel. Chains were clipped to the white cuffs circling their wrists and the black collars around their necks.

Female staff members wore red, black, or white lace thongs and garter belts that were connected to matching colored sheer thigh-high stockings. They were braless and wore either colored pasties with thin silver chains connecting them or nipple clamps.

Alessandra’s visual senses were overloaded as her head swiveled side to side, attempting to take everything in. A woman stood chained to a spreader bar against the wall. Her breasts were exposed, and several hands groped and caressed her body. She couldn’t hear the woman, but the rapture on her face, as her head fell back in ecstasy, spoke volumes.

A dominatrix walked a human pet clad in black latex from head to toe. His zipper was open, and the leash was attached to a ring at the tip of his penis. She occasionally lashed his backside with a riding crop like the one Drake had wielded. At one point, the pet sat on his hind legs and buried his face in his mistress’s cunt.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Alessandra? Just so you know, I’m going to fuck you in front of an audience before the night is over.”

“Drake—”

He stroked Alessandra’s exposed shoulder, causing goosebumps to rise. He leaned in to ghost his lips against the sensitive skin behind her ear.

“Does it turn you on? If I touched your pretty pussy would you be wet? Are you enjoying watching the scenes around you? Can you see yourself as the center of attention?”

It was embarrassing to admit that, yes, she was turned on. Drake chuckled darkly as she squirmed in her seat. He pulled her astride his lap, facing her out so she could see everything. His fingers danced up the inside of her thigh.

There was no way to hide the dampness between her thighs. Drake's fingers met no resistance when he reached her apex. He inserted a finger and slowly pumped it in and out. Alessandra bit her lip to stay quiet.

Drake upped the ante by adding a second finger to the first and squeezing her neck to heighten her pleasure. His lips ghosted her ear as he spoke. "Do you enjoy being on display, bella? How many eyes do you think are trained on your pretty face as I finger you? Or do you think they're more interested in watching your pussy try to pull me in?"

Her pussy clenched at his words, and she let out a soft moan. Drake shoved three fingers in her mouth to muffle her sounds and added an extra digit to her core. His hands fucked her in tandem, adding to his own excitement.

"Every man here wishes his cock was as deep as my fingers. If only they knew how tight and greedy your needy cunt is."

She came apart at his words, writhing in Drake's lap against his stiff cock, causing him to groan. He removed his fingers and sucked them clean.

Once they composed themselves, he turned her back toward him.

"I need to apologize to you, Alessandra. I haven't earned the title of being your master. I should be worshiping the earth at your feet, my goddess. My hope for this evening is for us to cement our bond as Dominant and submissive. But only if that is something you want."

Drake pulled her collar from his breast pocket. The light reflected off the diamonds like a mirrored ball, beckoning to her. Alessandra reached out and fingered the open heart. She longed to feel it against her skin again, but the pain remained. She'd felt discarded and unloved the last time it was on her neck.

As though he could read her thoughts, Drake said, "I collared you before we were ready. *Colpa mia*. Bringing you here is a chance to show you a different side of me. Collaring you in public is not just for show.

“I vow from here on out with you as my submissive that I will care for your needs. I will cherish you daily, even if we don’t play. Please wear my collar again. Let me show everyone here how much I care about you, Alessandra. Will you accept me as your Master?”

“Oh, Drake. Yes, I want to wear your collar again.”

“You mean—Yes, Master.”

“Yes, Master.”

Drake fastened the collar around her delicate neck and pressed a kiss to the clasp. Alessandra fingered the beautiful diamond ring. The vows he’d made felt significant. The collar was as precious as the ring on her finger, if not more so because it had been chosen specifically for her.

When they got married, he placed the ring on a stranger’s finger. But this piece of jewelry was chosen with time and attention. They’d made a commitment to one another with it. And she would cherish this moment forever.

“That was the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen. I feel like a pervert for witnessing it.”

Noah approached them in black slacks and an unbuttoned blazer over his bare chest. His mask was bold and gold, drawing attention to his head, instead of his athletic physique.

“I wholeheartedly approve of this development. You’ve got a good woman in your corner, Drake. Don’t fuck it up again.”

Judge Matthews stood next to Noah, dressed in white. Jerry appeared quite regal with his authoritative stance and the gold and blue mask on his brow.

“Your Honor! What are you doing here?” She was surprised when the men joined their table.

“Please, call me Jerry. There’s no need for formalities outside the courtroom. I happen to be the proprietor of this establishment.”

Jerry gave his husband a non-verbal command. Noah bowed gallantly and held his hand to Alessandra, pulling her away from the table.

“Come with me, sweetheart. It’s time we don our proper apparel for tonight’s entertainment.”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

NOAH LED ALESSANDRA TO A DOOR BEHIND A CURTAIN SHE HAD NO IDEA was there. They entered a dressing room with a bank of lockers, racks of lingerie, and other clothing items. Shelves of shoes and accessories lined the wall next to the bathroom. A long vanity counter ran across one of the long walls topped with mirrored stations lit up with halogen bulbs.

Noah pulled a strappy number off the rack and pointed Alessandra toward a changing room. She tried on the black leather lingerie. The harness bra could barely hold that title. A black band circled under her breasts. Another band circled the fullest part of her chest, barely covering her puffy nipples. The G-string was smooth and soft against her skin. The adjustable garter belt circled her belly button with a metal ring. She pulled on the solid black thigh-high stockings and clipped them to the belt.

Stepping out of the room, Noah whistled. “You look fierce, like a rockstar. You’re going to rock Drake’s world.”

Noah bit his lip, and his eyes trailed Alessandra’s body, making her feel tingly. He helped her fasten the leather wrist cuffs and attached chains from the cuffs to the D-ring on her collar.

He’d also changed into black leather pants and an open white button-down shirt. A black braided leather choker was clasped around his neck.

“Are you a submissive too?”

Noah nodded. “Welcome to the sub club. From my understanding, you and Drake are the main event this evening. Don’t worry, though. You’ll do great.

“Now, follow me. Drake has a private room, and it’s almost time for the show. I personally can’t wait to see you.”

Noah took Alessandra’s hand and led her through several back hallways and up a flight of stairs. They walked down a nondescript corridor to a room with a heavy wooden door. It was marked with a heart-tipped riding crop.

“Drake wants you to kneel on the bed with your arms behind you.”

Noah helped her pose on the extra-large four-poster bed. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and made his way to a settee along the far wall. He rested on one knee with his palms flat on the floor similar to the starting position runners assume for a race. He didn’t speak and trained his eyes on the floor.

Alessandra gazed around the romantic and sensual room while waiting. Torch-light sconces flickered softly, casting moving shadows. Low-lit track lighting ran the perimeter of the high honeycomb ceiling. A red damask carpet covered the floor.

There was no comforter on the bed, only a fitted red silk sheet against her skin. She had a feeling the black upholstered ottoman at the base of the bed was for spanking. A suspension hook hung from the ceiling. How many fantasies would she fulfill here with her husband?

Lengths of rope and cord hung from the dark wood-paneled wood walls, along with whips of various lengths and styles. Alessandra wondered if there were other toys hidden in the sizable wardrobe.

She was unsure how long they waited before the door finally opened. Hearing footsteps, Alessandra chanced a glance and raised her head.

“Eyes front and down. Do not speak unless I give you permission,” Drake barked.

She quickly cast her eyes down again as more soft footsteps thudded around the room. She found the anticipation and environment titillating, and

moisture gathered in her core as Drake approached.

“Before we get started, I’d like to discuss limits for tonight’s scene.”

Drake stroked Alessandra’s collar and caressed her bare skin. She leaned into his touch and purred like a kitten.

“Tell me, bella, what is your safe word? Do you have any hard limits I should know about?”

“I don’t have a safe word.”

Drake walked to the wall and took his time feeling the weight and flexibility of several crops before settling on one of braided leather with a black diamond-shaped tip. He slowly approached the bed again. Alessandra shivered, and goosebumps rose on her skin as Drake traced her spine with the tip of the crop. He smirked as she yelped when he swatted her ass.

“You will address me as Master. The trick to picking a safe word is choosing something that wouldn’t come up naturally during our playtime. We can always go with a light system if you prefer. Green means go or keep going. Yellow means caution or slow down, you’re close to your limit, and I’ll check in with you. Red means it’s a hard limit, and I’ll stop immediately.” He paused, giving her time to think it over. “If you want to be a brat, you will be punished. Believe me, I’ll get off either way.”

“Hullabaloo is my safe word. I’m sorry, I’ll be a good girl. I want to please you, Master.”

Alessandra gulped as Drake approached her again. There were limits, but she was afraid to name them in front of an audience and embarrass him. He sensed her hesitation and spoke instead.

“How about I tell you what I want to do tonight? You can object to anything that would make you feel uncomfortable. How does that sound?”

She nodded gratefully. Drake’s eyes flashed dangerously, and she realized her mistake. “Thank you, Master.”

“I plan to fuck you in front of an audience this evening. Exhibitionism seems to turn you on. Would you agree?”

“Yes, Master.”

Having sex for the first time in front of the large panoramic window, knowing there could be an audience, was hot. But it wasn't the possibility of being seen as much as Drake's dirty depictions that set her body to flame.

However, seeing the scenes on the club's main floor, not caring who the audience was, seemed freeing. Drake wanted to assert his dominance by taking her in front of the audience tonight, and she'd be remiss not to admit the thought of being claimed by him was everything she wanted.

Their relationship had shifted into uncharted territory recently, and Alessandra was ready to turn herself over to trust. He would keep his promises to keep her safe and protect her.

There was no doubt in her heart that she was utterly in love with her husband. She would stand up and say it under oath if anyone asked. Tonight would only strengthen that for her and prove there was no turning back. She would go to the ends of the earth and face any fire for him.

“Did you hear me, bella? I said that I will not go easy on punishment tonight if you defy me.” He grabbed her hands. “I want to bind your wrists.”

Her heart froze at Drake's talk of binding. She instinctively reached for her scarred wrist, but Drake beat her to it. The gentle touch of his massaging fingers on her scarred flesh grounded her.

Compassion shone in his eyes as he held her steady. Tears flooded her eyes when he turned her hand over and pulled her cuff away to kiss her scars. That moment meant he heard her and understood her fears. He was saying that she could trust him, and he planned to bring only pleasure, not inflict pain.

“We don't have to, Alessandra. I want to turn that painful memory into a pleasurable one. It's your choice. Your voice and consent matter here,” he said so only she could hear.

“I want to try with you, Drake.”

“Remember your colors or your safe word.”

Their brief interlude as husband and wife ended as Drake's posture hardened.

"You will be brought to the edge of orgasm many times, but you will only be allowed to come when I say."

The tip of Drake's crop caressed her fevered skin. He dipped the tip into her bra, if it could even be called that, and brushed her hardened nipple. Alessandra groaned at the teasing and was rewarded with a spank.

Drake gently flicked from her behind to the front of her panties. The diamond tip disappeared into the soft leather and massaged her clit. Hard pressure was replaced with light touches over and over as the pace quickened, causing her eyes to roll.

She was close to toppling over the ledge into pure ecstasy, but Drake kept his promise and pulled the crop away. She screamed as he flicked between her legs, delivering the blow to her sensitive nub. Alessandra needed more of the pleasurable sting.

"Please, Master—"

Drake swatted her ass again. She squirmed as he ran the tip along the line of her thong, but another flick brought her back to attention.

"How do you feel about audience participation? Do you want others to touch you?"

Noah's handsome, boyish face flashed through her mind. His charming smile and their instant connection were unlike anything she had ever experienced. As she changed in the dressing room, the hungry look in his eyes made her feel desired. She blushed at the thought of how hot it made her, but she shook her head. He was happily married, and her crush on him was silly. She *loved* her husband.

Having anyone but Drake felt wrong. Her heart stopped, and panic clawed at her throat.

"Yellow," she cried.

Drake stopped immediately. He crawled onto the bed in front of Alessandra and cupped her face.

“What is the yellow?” he asked, his face concerned beneath the mask.

During her father’s parties, she was groped and objectified. At the end of the evening, she was locked in a room with whichever of his associates won the highest bid. In her shame, Alessandra couldn’t lift her eyes. But Drake forced her to look at him.

Drake already knew that Alessandra had been abused, unloved, and sold. While her husband would never treat her that way, she couldn't help the moments when unwanted emotions bubbled to the surface. She often had flashbacks to her past and felt scared, angry, and alone. She tried to push these emotions away, but they would always return. Drake didn’t judge her. He did his best to be patient and help her through it.

“I planned to push your boundaries tonight, Alessandra. But at no point will you be in danger. At no point will I ignore your consent. Just say the word, and everyone leaves us. If you want me to take you home, I’ll wrap you in my jacket and carry you out of here.” He kissed her briefly. “Please trust me. I’ll never let anyone hurt you.”

Trust. “I trust you, Drake.”

“That’s my good girl. I will always protect what’s mine. You are mine.” Drake picked up her hand and held it to his heart. “This is yours.”

Threads of trust sewed together her broken heart. Each time Drake asked for her trust, a part of her became whole. He was her Master, but he proved she was his partner tonight. No one had ever given her that choice before. Just as trust was the only thing she could offer him, his heart was the only thing he could offer her.

“Are you okay?” Drake whispered.

Alessandra nodded, “I’m ready, Master.”

Drake moved off the bed to resume their scene. He picked up the crop again and faced the bed.

“Are you going to touch someone else?” Alessandra asked.

The crop came down again with enough force to make her yelp. Drake roughly grabbed her chin and crushed her lips with his. His tongue immediately demanded entry to her mouth, and he used it to dominate hers. When he pulled away, he tugged at her lower lip with his teeth, and the crop came down again.

“Are you jealous? Do you enjoy being punished? Having a bratty sub has its place, but don’t forget who’s in charge tonight.” He leaned in to whisper, “Don’t worry about other women, bella. I don’t see anyone else when I’m with you. There will never be another woman for me,” he promised.

Drake held out his hand, and Alessandra took it. Drake’s closeness and dominant position made her blissfully tense inside. Feelings of euphoria built with their every touch. He helped her off the bed, his strong grip supporting her weight, and she quickly looked away.

“I want you to strip slowly. Give everyone a show.”

Alessandra’s eyes went directly to the settee where she’d last seen Noah. He was still kneeling on the ground with Jerry sitting behind him. They stared at her with rapt attention while Jerry stroked his husband’s bare chest. Her entire body flushed as she scanned the room full of strangers, knowing they would soon see her most intimate parts.

Painful arousal flooded her core, but her mind screamed yellow. Given her traumatic experiences with sex, she hadn’t consented to anything like this before. The first orgasm she’d experienced from a man was with Drake. Once he told her to imagine all her firsts were with him, and that’s exactly what she would do.

Drake’s hand settled on her lower back to ground her again. She was grateful that he offered to send everyone out of the room. She knew he would do it too if she asked, but she kept her lips clamped. This experience was theirs to own. Moving forward was a positive first step in her journey to break free from her past.

Drake removed the chains that she had almost forgotten were there. She smiled thankfully, and he motioned for her to continue. Her body moved to

a sensual beat as she peeled off her top. Drake squeezed and tugged on a hardened nipple, and Alessandra felt a jolt in her center.

“Turn around. Let them see your voluptuous ass and the pretty marks we made when you remove your panties.”

She turned as Drake commanded, closing her eyes and losing herself in the moment. Slowly peeling off her panties made her feel liberated. Appreciative clapping sounded in the room as she kicked them off.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

SMACK, SMACK, SMACK—THE ONLY SOUNDS IN THE ROOM WERE THAT OF THE crop connecting with Alessandra's ass. She lost count of the lashes, and Drake chuckled darkly.

"You were supposed to count each one out loud, bella."

"Ten, Master," she cried.

"Good girl. Keep your eyes on me and place your hands behind your back."

Drake swallowed the lump in his throat. He needed to show Alessandra trust and remain calm, but the sudden fear in her doe eyes made him want to kick everyone out of the room. The possessive beast rose within him, threatening to pluck the eyes of every man and woman in the room staring at her naked form.

The evening pushed every boundary of hers and was their biggest exercise in trust. He was a lucky bastard that she was willing to participate. He'd barely earned the trust she gave him, and he wouldn't take it for granted. Trust was something that was earned over time and could be easily lost. He was determined to show Alessandra that he was worthy of her trust, even though he didn't deserve it.

Some men called themselves Doms, but their primary objective was to break women. They were abusers in kinky disguise, like the man who'd

“trained” his wife. Now that his case had gone to shit, the least he could do was get justice for her.

There were three men on Drake’s list: Anthony Russo, the man who abused his daughter and allowed others to abuse her. Drake hadn’t forgotten the bruise on Alessandra’s face on their wedding day. Luca Donato, the asshole who promised Alessandra the world and betrayed her in every way. And the masked trainer. Drake sought after his identity and wouldn’t rest until he uncovered it.

There was no owning Alessandra. His fierce and feisty wife was too beautiful to break. He learned her tells when she felt overwhelmed. She self-consciously rubbed the scars on her wrist; even the cuffs he chose weren’t enough to distract her.

Binding Alessandra wasn’t for his pleasure. It was for her. He meant it when he said he wanted to turn her traumatic experience into a positive one. The wrist cuffs would protect her from the bindings rubbing against her skin, but he still carefully chose silken cords off the wall.

Drake would never let someone he didn’t trust implicitly near his wife in such an intimate manner. He captured Alessandra’s attention while Jerry carefully took hold of her wrists and tied them behind her. Jerry was an experienced rigger and could restrain her without harm.

“Master!” Alessandra’s voice tinged with panic.

“It’s alright, dolcezza. It’s only Jerry. He is just making sure that you are safe while we play. No one else will touch you this evening. It will only be me.”

Jerry whispered in her ear, “You’ll be safe tonight, I promise. I’ll be watching and making sure of it.”

Once the bindings were in place, Jerry rounded Alessandra so she could see him before he returned to his husband.

“Now, I’d like to blindfold you. Removing your sight will heighten every other sense as we play tonight. Not having your hands or eyes will allow you to divulge in other sensual pleasures.”

Alessandra nodded, and he turned her away from the audience once more. They were offered an unobstructed view of her ass and bound hands. But the move was intended to give her privacy while he removed the black lace mask and replaced it with a silky blindfold. The club offered complete anonymity unless there was consent during private play to reveal one's identity.

Most members chose even then to remain masked. And though some knew one another's identity, discretion was the name of the game. Drake and Jerry knew every person currently in the room, as they were a carefully chosen audience. He'd never allow someone he didn't know into his private sanctuary or such an intimate view of his wife.

Drake brushed his lips against Alessandra's in a light kiss before holding the blindfold in front of her face.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

She nodded. Whenever he asked her to trust him, he wanted to tell her he loved her. But the words stuck in his throat. Instead, he intended to reward with pleasure tonight.

Alessandra's lips trembled slightly as the blindfold plunged her into darkness. She shivered as he ran his fingertips along the collar around her neck.

She gasped when he scooped her up and gingerly placed her on the bed. He took a moment to feast on her beautiful curves. Drake was still fully dressed, a symbol of his dominance, while Alessandra lay naked on the red silk sheets. He hooked her under the shoulders and pulled her to the edge so her head hung down, her auburn hair fell like a curtain.

She crossed her long slender legs as though that would keep the audience from viewing her glistening bare pussy. He wished he had left her panties on for the satisfaction of tearing them from her body. Alas, next time. Her perky breasts were more prominent due to the arch her arms behind her back caused. Drake debated grabbing the set of silver clamps but decided against them so he could taste her sweet buds.

Alessandra groaned in appreciation as Drake massaged her shoulders. He leaned over her so only she would hear him. “How does that feel, wife?”

“More—” she gasped as he squeezed and fondled her breasts.

He chuckled. “Don’t worry. You’ll have your wish soon because I’m going to fuck your face in a minute.”

Drake tweaked her nipple, eliciting a squeal before pulling back. He lowered his zipper and fisted his throbbing cock. There was no such thing as a soft cock or semi-hard around Alessandra. He was raring to go at any time.

“Open your mouth, bella,” he commanded.

Her pouty-painted lips eagerly parted before him. He held himself at the base and traced the outline of her soft lips with his velvety tip. Alessandra’s tongue darted out to caress him.

Drake fed her slowly at first so as not to overwhelm her, but she proved willing and able. Her lips closed around him, and her tongue joined in the fun as he moved in and out. After a few shallow thrusts to allow her time to adjust, he couldn’t hold back anymore.

“It’s time to turn up the heat,” he said as he grabbed her hair to hold her steady and pushed deep until he met the back of her throat. He withdrew and thrust forward again, repeating until her nose hit the pull of his zipper. He snapped his hips repeatedly. Every few thrusts, he held himself deep for several seconds.

She hummed around him, increasing his pleasure. “Mmm. You’re a wonderful little cocksucker, darling. But I need to bury myself in you now. I need to prove to everyone here that you’re mine. And I’ll do it by filling you with my come.”

Alessandra gurgled in response, vibrating his cock in her throat. A string of saliva connected their bodies when he pulled out. It took everything in him not to shoot his load on her heaving chest as he gazed at her pink, freshly fucked face.

Drake picked her up and adjusted her body so her legs hung off the bed this time. He wrenched her thighs apart and left her open and on display to those in the room. Her exposed pussy glistened in the low light a moment before her legs snapped shut.

Still clothed, Drake reached for the crop, his preferred flogging method. A quick flick of his wrist and it came down across her thighs. Alessandra yelped before her legs fell open naturally.

“Remember, you can use your safe word if you need to.”

Though Drake owned the room, he’d never played in it before. Quick connections were made on the main floor if he was ever in the mood. He walked to the closed wardrobe, which was full of new varieties of dildos, vibrators, butt plugs, and more toys.

Dancing his fingers across several options, Drake settled on a little pink egg. While small, the vibration on the toy was mighty. It buzzed to life with the click of a button.

Leaving it on, he approached the bed once again. Gazing at Alessandra’s gorgeous body, he lowered his hand to her nipple. Her body jerked, clearly not expecting the vibrator to kiss her there.

Drake worried her other nipple between his teeth. Murmurs sounded from the crowd around them. A slap of flesh came from somewhere behind him. While the audience wouldn’t join them on the bed, it didn’t stop them from having their own fun.

“You’re so incredibly responsive. Just a little more, and then I’ll fuck you like you deserve,” Drake whispered in her ear as he moved the vibrator down her belly and nudged her clit with it. Alessandra’s hips jerked, and she struggled against her restraints.

“Easy, dolcezza. I’ve got you. *Fidati di me.*”

“Please... please, Master,” she begged.

She continued to buck and whimper as the intense vibrations brought her close. Drake held her hips to steady her. He counted ten seconds out loud,

pulling away before she detonated. She cried at the sweet torture, a layer of sheen settled across her skin.

Drake let her calm down for a moment, stroking her inner thighs with his fingertips. He licked a bead of sweat that rolled down the valley between her magnificent breasts.

He dropped the still-buzzing toy and picked up a single feather. Her back arched as he caressed her nipples and tickled her belly with it.

Alessandra's breath hitched, and a sob tore from her throat as he brushed the tops of her thighs. He grinned and bit his lip, watching her every move. *Just a little more*, he told himself. She held up remarkably well, but she was still new to this.

He wouldn't deny her orgasm much longer. But oh god, every sigh, whimper, and cry made him hotter and harder than he'd ever been before. Alessandra was the most responsive playmate he'd ever had. His weeping cock refused to be ignored much longer. He'd be coming inside her soon enough.

He drew the feather through Alessandra's wetness and flicked it against her clit before dropping it and picking up the egg again. He feasted on her sweet nectar and probed her entrance with his tongue as the toy pressed against her clit. Alessandra trembled, teetering close to the edge again.

Drake moved to explore her rear passage with his fingertip. She cried out at the contact. "No! Don't!"

At her shout, Drake stopped abruptly. He hesitated briefly, giving her the chance to give him a color or her safe word. But when neither came, he proceeded to roll her over so her cheek and chest were down to the mattress.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her so she rested on her knees with her ass in the air. "It's time for your punishment, principessa. The audience is going to enjoy watching me discipline my naughty girl."

Drake dropped the crop on the bed and admired the lashes that colored Alessandra's gorgeous rear. He stroked her back and kissed the marks he left on her ass.

“You forget the rules. Number one, I am *your* Master, and you will address me as such. Number two, no speaking without permission. Number three, you have a safe word. If you need me to stop at any time, use it.”

“I’m sorry, Master,” she blubbered.

He needed to anchor them both and squeezed Alessandra’s hands. He exhaled, relieved when she squeezed back. Caring for the comfort of his sub during a session and needing her reassurance was new to him.

Drake ran his hand over Alessandra’s round ass, giving it a squeeze and slap before thrusting three fingers into her dripping pussy. She surged forward at the intrusion, but he put his other hand on her shoulder to hold her still.

He fucked her with his fingers for mere seconds before she cried out again. “Please fuck me.”

Drake shook his head and chuckled at his needy brat. He withdrew his fingers and left Alessandra in position as he backed off the bed to remove his clothes.

Drake was tested before the wedding and knew he was clear. He had always practiced safe sex before. But tonight, in this environment, the excitement of taking his wife bare set his nerve endings tingling with anticipation.

Filling her with his cum and claiming her for everyone to see fulfilled a need he never knew existed. Right now, a child was the last thing they needed, but one day, he’d fuck a baby inside her and watch her belly swell with pride. Until then, practice made perfect.

Drake returned to the bed and climbed behind Alessandra. He grabbed her hips without hesitation and entered her in a single hard thrust.

“Yes!” she screamed.

Drake pistoned in and out without mercy, lost in an animalistic frenzy. Pumping his hips, he gave into the pure sensation of flesh against flesh. Sex, sweat, and sounds of pleasure permeated the air around them.

“I’ve reached nirvana fucking your tight, warm pussy bare. I’m never wearing a condom again,” he said as slapped her ass with his palm.

Alessandra whimpered in response. His hips continued pounding against hers as he took and took. “Fuck me, dolcezza. We can’t end this before we’ve truly begun.”

Drake pulled out and gripped the base of his cock. He took a few deep breaths to take the edge off and thrust his fingers inside Alessandra. She wailed as he tweaked her clit. He withdrew and used her wetness to probe her tight rosebud again. Though she squirmed and whined, she didn’t use her safe word.

“Do you like me playing with your ass, bella? I’m proud that you didn’t use your safe word. Don’t worry. I won’t fuck your ass tonight. I don’t want an audience when I take you there.”

He worked her rear passage with his finger until the tight ring gave way for him to slip in up to the first knuckle, and he thrust his cock into her again.

“Fuck, bella. Your pussy is superb. Do you like my bare cock in your naughty cunt? Milk me and coax every drop of cum from my body.”

He synced his movements, thrusting his cock in time with his finger, overwhelming Alessandra’s senses. She moaned, sweaty and shaky beneath him.

“Please—”

“It’s time, Alessandra. Don’t forget to show your gratitude when you come.” Drake grunted as his own limit was reached.

Their moans were lost in the sounds of pleasure around them. His eyes crossed as Alessandra’s body spasmed around his cock.

He spanked her ass one final time as hard as he could while driving his cock deep. “You. Are. Mine. Come for me!” He pinched her clit.

“Master! Yes! Master! Thank you!” she screamed her release.

Drake spasmed inside her, spurting hot liquid while howling like a beast gone blind before collapsing against her backside.

“Good girl. You were incredible.”

Drake held her body while he removed his finger and gently pulled out. The audience clapped around them. In the moment of climax, he’d forgotten others were still in the room.

Drake removed Alessandra’s blindfold, replaced her mask, and then untied the rope around her wrists. He massaged them for a moment before turning her to their audience.

“Take your bow, dolcezza.”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

SOMEHOW, SHE MANAGED TO DO AS DRAKE SAID. IT WAS ALL TOO MUCH. Alessandra's head and body buzzed. Every nerve ending was scraped raw.

Feeling lightheaded in her post-orgasmic haze, she felt faint. Luckily Drake was there to catch her so that she wouldn't fall. She'd come to learn that he would always catch her if she fell. He commanded everyone to leave then and scooped her into his arms.

"Careful now, bella. They're all gone, and it's my turn to take care of you."

Drake carried her bridal style into the en-suite and ran hot water into the tub. He gingerly removed the wrist cuffs and massaged her tender skin. He kissed each wrist with appreciation before reaching to remove her collar.

Alessandra held up her hand to still him. "Leave it," she said.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She smiled gently and nodded. "For a little while."

Drake helped her into the tub, and she hissed as the water scalded her sensitive skin. He immediately adjusted the tap before joining her. The water soothed aches she didn't realize she had from their rigorous lovemaking.

He grabbed a sponge, squirted some luxurious bath gel onto it, and soaped Alessandra's body. She leaned against his chest and groaned when he

reached her intimate areas.

“You were incredible tonight, dolcezza. I’m so proud of you. I hope you enjoyed it too.”

“Thank you, Master,” she said, still in a haze.

“We’re done playing, Alessandra. I’m Drake now. I only want to take care of my wife.”

She swallowed and nodded. Drake noticed the shift and wrapped his arms around her.

“Are you alright? Did I hurt you?” His face reflected the concern in his voice.

Alessandra reached up to touch his cheek to reassure him.

“Bella, you’re crying. Talk to me.”

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed.

He turned her around and pulled her against his chest. “Fuck, amore mio. Did I hurt you?” he asked.

She shook her head. She couldn’t articulate the swirl of emotions she felt. Alessandra’s heart flipped. Tonight didn’t just cement their bond as Dominant and submissive. It made her inexplicably *his*.

With Alessandra still in his lap, Drake applied a generous amount of shampoo to her auburn waves. She groaned as he massaged her scalp, running his fingers through her long hair. He peppered her face and neck with light kisses. He turned on the spray nozzle and pulled the shower head down to rinse her.

He helped her climb out of the tub, wrapped her in a plush robe, and carried her back to bed. While they were bathing, someone had been in the room to clean the toys and room. The sheets had been changed, and a comforter had been laid on top, along with several pillows.

Drake laid Alessandra against the pillows and poured her a glass of water. He watched as she drank the whole thing. Pride swelled in his chest as he

cared for her.

“Are you hungry? I can get you some cheese or chocolates, or I can order something heavier if you’d like.”

She shook her head. “I’m good, Drake. Thank you. I just want you to hold me.”

Drake was happy to comply and climbed in beside her, pulling her close. “Tell me you’re mine, Alessandra.”

“I’m yours, Drake. All yours.”

He was quiet a moment before saying, “Happy monthiversary. I never imagined I’d feel this way before. I want you to know how much this means to me.”

Drake stroked her hair, and Alessandra didn’t even know when she fell asleep.



A FEW DAYS LATER, ALESSANDRA MET WITH NOAH FOR LUNCH.

“I’m still tingling from the other night. You were so hot!” he said.

“Shhh! Not in public,” Alessandra chastised him.

Her face flamed as she recounted Drake’s dirty words and ungentlemanly treatment. She couldn’t deny how sex between them grew hotter. Parts of her body were still deliciously sore.

Drake had not pressured her for anything since, but he had continued to look after her. He massaged her body and drew her baths, adding salts and oils. There was no penetration, but he’d brought her to climax several times with his tongue. When she’d attempted to return the favor, he had refused, saying it was for her benefit, and that taking care of her needs was enough.

“Honey, you have nothing to be shy about. Don’t forget, I saw and heard every bit of you. We can still be friends.”

She playfully pushed him. “You’re the worst!”

“And you fucking love me!” He waggled his brows.

She squealed as Noah returned her shove with a playful hip bump and pulled her into a shoulder hug. Their laughter garnered disapproving looks from those nearby.

“Well, well, well...”

Just when Alessandra was having a good day, a poshly-dressed woman whose voice dripped with venom glared at them. Alessandra almost didn’t recognize her. But she could never forget Drake’s ex-fiancée.

“Hello, Riley,” Noah greeted her coolly.

“Hello, Noah, dear.” She air-kissed him in greeting before turning to Alessandra. “Hello, tramp.”

Alessandra glowered. “You don’t get to talk to me like that. I don’t know who you think you are. This bitter-ex routine is just pathetic.” Alessandra gestured, indicating Riley’s face.

Anger flashed in Riley’s eyes before turning to mock concern. “Oh, dear. You don’t know, do you? I shouldn’t be surprised that Drake kept it to himself. He’s always been one to hide secrets when it suits him.”

Alessandra kept her mouth shut, refusing to rise again to Riley’s bait. Riley studied her nails, adopting an air of nonchalance before continuing. “Now, why do you think that is?”

“Just spit it out, Riley. What don’t I know?”

Riley’s eyes narrowed on the healing marks Drake left on her neck. “You’re just a plaything, sweetheart. Drake will tire of you soon. Girls are always more attractive in the bedroom. But a man like him needs a real woman who can carry herself in public.”

“That’s enough, Riley. Leave her alone,” Noah warned.

“I didn’t even know you’d be here, Noah. It was a coincidence. I actually just came from seeing Drake at the office.”

A twisted smirk appeared on her face, making Alessandra’s stomach drop. She flexed her perfectly-manicured fingers, insinuating their use.

“Let’s just say we had a long reconciliation. He still says I’m the best he’s ever had.” She laughed, haughtily.

“You’re lying,” Alessandra snapped.

“Now that Drake knows the truth, we’re getting back together.” Riley smiled viciously.

“The truth about what?”

Rummaging in her purse, Riley hummed to herself. She pulled out something small and handed it to Alessandra. She looked at the blurry black-and-white photo in her hand. It was an unmistakable ultrasound photo.

“It’s not true!” Alessandra cried.

“Oh, dear. This is embarrassing. Did Drake not tell you? He’s known about it for a while now.” Riley tilted her head.

Tears pricked her eyes. Noah’s hands quickly wound around her waist as she swayed.

“It can’t be true. It just can’t be. Drake wouldn’t,” she whispered.

“Just know that Drake will demand a paternity test, Riley. If you are really pregnant, there’s no way that baby is his,” Noah said.

Riley snatched the photo from Alessandra’s grasp and shoved it back into her purse.

“Aren’t you even going to ask when?” She clicked her tongue in disapproval.

Alessandra squeezed her eyes tight, hoping the wave of nausea she felt would pass. Emotional overload threatened to crush her in public, and she refused to give Riley the satisfaction.

“It’s going to be all right, Alessandra.” Noah squeezed her arm to comfort her before turning to Riley. “You need to leave.”

“Ta-ta, for now.” Riley laughed.

Turning on her heels, Riley sauntered away. It was all Alessandra could do to keep it together.

“It will be alright, hun,” Noah consoled her. “Let’s take a breather.”

Noah took Alessandra’s hand, and they headed toward Grant Park. They walked around for a while before settling on a bench overlooking Buckingham Fountain. They sat waiting to view the water show. Alessandra sighed, and Noah wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asked, breaking the silence.

She quickly wiped the tears from her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Drake and I never talked about having kids. I don’t even know if he wants them. We’re just starting to get along, so I thought maybe someday. But now he’s having a baby with *her*!”

Noah sighed and rubbed his hand down Alessandra’s back to comfort her.

“Riley and Drake were never going to work out in the long run. For what it’s worth, I’m glad that he has you. I’m glad to have you too,” Noah reassured her.

“How long have you known Drake?” Alessandra asked.

“I’ve known him my whole life. Our families are close. I went to school with Beth. Drake’s the one who helped me get the job as Jerry’s clerk.” Noah lifted Alessandra’s chin with his knuckles. “That’s how I knew Riley wasn’t right for him. They dated in high school, and she played him for a fool. I warned him proposing was a mistake, but he thought he could handle it. Things changed immediately.”

“What do you mean things changed? Drake told me Riley was never submissive to him. Why did he propose if she wasn’t what he wanted?”

“Growing up, Riley was part of the same elite social circle. People tend to put their wants and needs aside when money and expectations are on the line.

“Drake had one serious girlfriend back in college. He really loved her and wanted to propose. She swore she would wait for him to finish law school, but there was pressure and disapproval from his family. It was hard on their relationship. One day she disappeared. Drake held up hope for a year before his heart hardened.

“He remained single for a long time. Even at the club, he would play for a night and not pursue anything long enough to even learn the name of his playmates.

“Last year, he went to a gala and reconnected with Riley. Less than two months later, they were engaged. He looked like he’d received a prison sentence, not found true love. Riley received a job offer at a European gallery. She couldn’t wait to start her new job and left immediately.

“Drake let her move her belongings into his apartment so they wouldn’t end up in storage. He financed her trip, paid the rent on her Paris flat, and she demanded more.”

Alessandra couldn’t believe what she was hearing. How did a dominant man like Drake allow a woman to run roughshod over him? It didn’t make sense.

“How did Drake handle all that? He doesn’t seem to be the kind of man who would allow a woman to push him around.”

“Drake closed himself off and became miserable. He gave Riley the benefit of the doubt and wanted to make it work. With his career on the line, everything came down to image.

“Marriage had the potential to work for them. Riley would have access to the Walker family fortune, and Drake would have a wife at home, showing how stable and reliable he was to the district attorney.”

“How could this happen? Why didn’t you tell me this sooner? I thought we were friends.” Alessandra’s voice was shriller than she meant it to be, and Noah winced.

“I’m trying to be your friend, Alessandra. I think I should leave.”

Alessandra shook her head. “No! Please, don’t go. I’m sorry, Noah. You’re right. It’s a lot to take in, and I shouldn’t take it out on you. It’s just so hard to wrap my head around everything.

“Things only became more complicated when he married me. He was so cold at first. Sometimes it still feels like he harbors resentment towards me.”

Noah pulled her in again. “I’m sorry you’re going through all of this. I think Drake projected his struggles onto you because you awakened something he’d buried so long ago. It doesn’t excuse his behavior, but Drake loves you.”

That evening when Alessandra returned home, Drake wasn’t there. She tried calling multiple times, and every call went straight to voicemail. Every message was left unread. Finally, she fell asleep on the couch at three in the morning.

Dreams of Drake and Riley swirled through her head, causing her to toss and turn. Asleep or dreaming, her husband’s actions continually hurt her.

Chapter Thirty

DRAKE WAS STILL FLYING HIGH DAYS AFTER THEIR FANTASTIC NIGHT AT THE club. Now that they were cemented as Dominant and submissive, it was time their marriage received the same treatment. He went to the same jeweler who made Alessandra's custom collar and ordered an eternity wrist cuff to wear over her scars. It was diamond-studded to look similar to a diamond tennis bracelet.

For the first time, he envisioned forever with someone. He was busy ring-shopping to propose to Alessandra. At times he couldn't fathom how messy their marriage began. She was a bride without a proposal, and it was time to rectify that. He planned to take her on a second honeymoon to a private island where they could be naked the entire time. They could make love on the beach under the stars, in the bed, or on any other surface in the private bungalow where the mood struck.

Drake worked up the courage to tell Alessandra he loved her for the first time. He'd wanted to say it in the bath at the club, but he hadn't wanted her to feel as though he was only saying it because she was naked in his collar.

Alessandra deserved the best in life. He had overheard her talking about her dream wedding when she thought he wasn't listening, and he was determined to make it happen for her. His stomach churned at the thought of her running away. But if she ran, he would follow her to the ends of the earth.



THE RUSSO CASE WAS OFFICIALLY RESOLVED. MARCELLO WAS SET TO BE released within the next twenty-four hours. In the end, Jerry had no choice but to dismiss the charges. The whole trial was a shit show.

The district attorney requested a meeting with him.

“Thank you for meeting me, Mr. Walker. Please have a seat.” Alan Foxx, a stately-looking man with silver hair and a strong jaw that matched his steely gaze, held out his hand, indicating it wasn’t a suggestion. Drake looked at the man he once respected, who now held the future of his career in his hands.

“I’ve been following your career for some time, Mr. Walker, and your track record has been impressive.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Alan leaned forward and laced his fingers, resting his hands on the desk in front of him.

“The Russo case was always a long shot. Putting the son of a crime boss behind bars would’ve been a huge win for the city. Saying I’m disappointed with the outcome is an understatement.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you—”

The man lifted a hand to stop Drake.

“The deck was stacked against you. I read the transcripts and followed the case. I have no issue with the way you handled yourself. That being said, the U.S. Attorney’s office has denied your application. I’m afraid I cannot promote you to Assistant District Attorney either.”

“May I ask why?”

“Your affiliation with the Russo family is cause for concern. I can’t allow their power and influence to infiltrate this office.”

“With all due respect, my marriage has no effect on my ability to perform my job.”

“I appreciate your commitment to your position. Unfortunately, my decision has been made. I appreciate your dedication to the law and hope you continue to have a successful career.”

A dumbfounded Drake didn’t know how to respond. The first thing to pop into his mind was the word divorce. If he and Alessandra were no longer together, that would show how committed he was to his job.

Since Alessandra entered his life, the law wasn’t as black and white as it seemed. If you had asked him a month ago what he would choose at the crossroad, the answer would’ve been obvious. But now things had changed.

“It was an honor to be considered,” he said.

Drake couldn’t allow his composure to slip, but inside he was seething. Anthony Russo had succeeded in ruining his career while simultaneously giving him the greatest gift in his life.

Needing to lick his wounds, Drake returned to the office instead of home. Opening the door, he was immediately confronted with another problem.

“What do you want, Riley?”

His ex sat in his office chair wearing a trench coat, stockings, and fuck-me pumps. Her blonde hair fell below her shoulders. Clearly, she’d had work done while in Europe. Her nose was slightly narrowed, her lips fuller, and her breasts enhanced.

She slipped off the coat and hopped on his desk in a black corset and panties. Her hand extended out, beckoning him closer.

“Come to me, lover.”

“I haven’t been your lover since high school, remember? Even then, the term is used loosely.”

“That’s not true. We’re having a baby, Drake.”

“I don’t know if you’re making shit up or just delusional. In case you’ve forgotten, I never fucked you.” He spoke crassly.

“Poor Alessandra was hurt to find out you’d been unfaithful.”

Drake grabbed Riley by the shoulders, his strong fingers tightened as he said, “You stay away from her, *puttana*!”

“Oh, I’m so scared,” she shivered dramatically. “I’m not afraid of your empty threats.”

“If you don’t stay away from my wife, you’ll regret it.”

“What are you going to do, Drago?”

Drake dropped his hands and immediately stepped back as though punched in the gut. Only a handful of people knew his true identity, and Riley was never one of them. His past was buried so deep that not even Tony Russo had uncovered the truth. The fact that she knew meant only one thing...

“What did you call me?” he hissed.

Riley grinned like the cat that ate the canary. She approached him slowly and looked at his crotch as she ran her hand over his torso. She raised on her tiptoes and whispered in his ear, “That’s right, love. I know the truth. And if you want your secret to stay with me, I suggest you fall in line.”

She sucked his earlobe into her mouth and tugged. Drake grabbed her hand as it moved to his belt buckle. And squeezed in warning.

“Back the fuck off, immediately. I mean it, Riley. I’m not in the mood for games.”

“We can work this out very easily.... If you want me to disappear, I want ten million dollars. A monthly stipend for all my living expenses, too.”

“I won’t allow you to blackmail me,” he said gruffly.

Riley dug into her purse and pulled a sonogram out. She thrust it against his chest. He snatched it and crumpled it in his fist.

“You wouldn’t leave the woman carrying your child destitute, would you?” She pouted while fluttering her eyelashes.

“You’re insane! If you’re even pregnant, we both know that child isn’t mine.”

“And we both know that there is someone who can ensure I have the *proof* that says you are the father.”

Drake’s eyes clouded like a thunderstorm and the beast rose to the surface. His posture changed instantly, adding a menacing air to him.

“Do not fuck with me, Riley. I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation you’re stepping into.”

“Did you forget our families wanted us to get married?”

“You can’t play both sides, Riley. If you threaten me, it will only end badly for you. I’m done playing by the rules. I *am* my father’s son. *I will do whatever it takes to protect my wife.*”

Riley began to tremble before Drake as he loomed over her, emphasizing every last word. Love made him lose his mind. It was getting harder to control his impulses despite everything he’d been through.

The threat Riley posed was the one that would hurt his wife the most. He couldn’t have that—something needed to be done. The question was if he could live with himself after.

“Come near my wife again, and I will bury you.”

Chapter Thirty-One

ALESSANDRA AWOKE WITH A START. SHE CALLED OUT FOR DRAKE, BUT received no response. He wasn't in the kitchen when she helped herself to a glass of water. The bed hadn't been slept in, and she started to worry.

Quickly slipping into a wrap knit sweater dress, she pulled on a pair of knee-high boots and headed into the brisk Chicago morning. Luckily, it was early enough that the doorman could quickly hail her a cab.

She knew of only three places to look for Drake. His parent's home was in Lake Forest, but that didn't seem likely. Jerry's club, where he had a private room that included a bed. Or his office.

His office seemed the most logical place to start, and she gave the address to the driver. The short commute stretched forever in early rush hour traffic. Eventually, the driver pulled up in front of the high-rise. She swiped her card without looking at the total fare.

The elevator moved at a snail's pace dinging as it passed every floor. Twenty-five floors later, the doors opened to the firm where Drake was a partner.

The door hit the wall with a bang, and a sleeping Drake jerked awake with a start. His hair was disheveled, his tie was askew, and a mostly-empty bottle of whiskey was on the desk within arm's length.

"Che cazzo!"

Multiple emotions slammed into Alessandra at once. A fear she couldn't bring herself to acknowledge as she waited for him to walk through the door that Luca or her father may have hurt him. Anger at him for not even bothering to call or text that he wouldn't be home. Abandoned and hurt that he ignored her all night.

But the emotion that flooded her at his blurry-eyed expression was relief that he was safe. She wanted to slap, kiss, hug, and scream at him all at once.

Alessandra stepped closer to throw her arms around him but stopped short when she saw smeared red lipstick on his collar. Riley's mocking smile popped into her mind as proof of their affair knocked the wind out of her.

Knowing she couldn't break down in front of her husband or confront the end of her marriage in that state, she turned on her heel and walked out the door.



WITH HER ACHING HEART AND NO OTHER PLACE TO GO, ALESSANDRA MADE her way to the jail where Marcello was set for release that morning. He was the anchor she needed. This was a chance for them to start over and have a more honest and open relationship.

Marcello stepped into the sunlight as a free man a few hours later. He was dressed in all black, and though he appeared thinner than the last time she'd seen him, the clothes were appropriately sized. His dark hair was shaggy, down around his ears instead of slicked back, and he appeared as though he hadn't shaved since his last court date.

Alessandra rushed to meet him, and he greeted her with wide-open arms. He lifted her up and spun her around before stepping back with a huge grin.

"It's great to see you, little sister. How are you?"

Alessandra's smile slipped.

“Who do I have to kill to make you feel better?”

At that, she burst into tears. “That’s not funny, Marce! Don’t let them hear you say things like that.”

Marcello pulled his sister back in for a comforting hug. “I’m sorry. Are you all right?”

Alessandra shook her head and stepped back from him. “Did you know, Marcello? Be honest with me, please.”

“Did I know what?”

“What Papà and Luca had planned for me? Did you have any hand in their plans? I’ve felt so used and manipulated. I need one man in my life to finally be honest with me.”

Marcello’s face hardened. “Can you handle the honesty?”

She could face the consequences of the truth later, but for now, she needed honesty. The jovial brother she used to know melted away into an imposing man.

“Did you know what Papà and Luca planned to do with me? Did you help them set it up?” she asked again.

“It’s more complicated than that. I was facing possible life in prison for murder. It was supposed to be a simple job. Set fire to a warehouse owned by a family corporation that refused to continue paying protection. The insurance collection would’ve lined our pockets, and the protection fee would’ve doubled after rebuilding.”

Alessandra’s jaw dropped at Marcello’s cold recount.

“Don’t act so scandalized, Alessandra. You know this life! We all have our part to play. I know my place, but you refuse to learn yours. Why do you keep fighting when there’s nothing left to fight for?”

“You can’t mean that! You’re my brother. How could you say such a thing? We’ve always supported each other.”

“No, I’m a *Russo*. It’s about fucking time you start acting like you’re one too. You should’ve learned your lesson years ago but had to be taught the hard way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He didn’t have to say anything else, but she needed to hear the truth.

“I was the one who told Papà of your plans to elope.”

Alessandra flew at her brother in a blind rage. She slapped him and beat at his chest with her fists. “You let our father sell me like a whore! How could you?”

He grabbed her wrists and attempted to shake sense into her.

“If it wasn’t Drake Walker, it would’ve been some other man. You should consider yourself lucky. A woman’s place is to serve her family through marriage.”

She yanked free of his grasp and slapped him as hard as she could. “You son of a bitch! I hate you!”

“I’m sorry.”

Sorry? Sorry didn’t make up for her fragile illusions crumbling down around her. Alessandra’s world spiraled as she ran away, blinded by her tears. Somehow she managed to make her way back to the penthouse because she had nowhere else to go and crawled into bed.

She was trapped with nowhere to run, no place to call home, and no one to trust. She’d suffered years of abuse and neglect because her father blamed her for her mother’s death. His hatred caused the scars on her back that now throbbed painfully with every heartbeat.

Finding love with Luca in the bleakness of her home was a gift. But now she knew it wasn’t just her father who’d torn them apart, but her brother, someone she and Luca had relied on and confided in.

When Alessandra was forced to abort the baby Luca left her with, Marcello was the one who offered to escort her to the clinic. What a fool she was,

thinking he was supporting her. He was likely there to make sure she went through with the procedure.

Drake was her second chance at love and a future that could finally be her own. But he proved to be just another man who made empty promises, fed her just enough to keep her in line, used her, and broke her heart into a million pieces.

Alessandra pulled the blanket over her head. The crushing emotional weight of the past few days left her with a migraine. She welcomed the physical pain to bury her heartache.

But it wasn't just a headache. Her stomach flipped, threatening to force her to spill its contents. Alessandra's heart began pounding furiously in her throat. She clawed at her clothes, which were suddenly so constricting, making it hard to breathe. The walls of her cage were ever-shrinking, locking her in.

Her whole body began shaking as sweat beads broke across her forehead. Only one thought crept into her mind—she needed Drake. She cried out as her vision blurred, on the verge of losing consciousness.

The door burst open, and Drake scooped her up like a white knight. She shook and cried in his arms.

"I... can't... breathe..."

"Shh! You're having a panic attack, amore mio. Try to take some deep breaths and calm down. I'm here now. I'm sorry for everything. Let me take care of you."

She wanted to push him away but didn't have the strength. Physical and emotional exhaustion left her aching all over. He crawled into bed behind her, pulled her body against his, and spooned her.

The problems between her and Drake couldn't be ignored. But for tonight, his arms were the comfort she needed.

Chapter Thirty-Two

THE FOLLOWING DAY, ALESSANDRA WOKE UP IN DRAKE'S BED WITH A pounding headache. She was hungover without the party. She blinked a few times, trying to clear the fog from her vision, and groaned as she stretched her aching body.

Drake entered with a cup of coffee and painkillers. He handed her the cup first and held his palm flat with the round white pills.

"You're going to need the caffeine and these for the headache. After that, we can take a warm shower."

"Leave me alone, Drake." Her voice was hoarse.

She rolled away from him and pulled the blanket over her head again. They needed to talk, but she didn't have the energy. Wallowing in self-pity was far more appealing than confronting her cheating husband.

"Fine, Alessandra. I'll leave these on the nightstand for you when you're ready."

He left the room, and she sighed in relief. That was until he re-entered with a glass of orange juice a few minutes later.

"Make sure you keep your fluids up. Beth will be here soon. She and Noah are taking you out for the day. We'll talk when you get home tonight."

“We have nothing to talk about, Drake!” She spoke with false bravado. There was so much they needed to discuss, but she couldn’t let him gain the upper hand again.

Drake leaned down and tried to kiss the top of her head, but she pushed him away before he could make contact. He stepped back with a frown.

“Clearly, you’re upset about yesterday. I had a shitty night and drank too much. I was too drunk to drive home and passed out in my office. It was thoughtless not to call, and I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care what you do anymore, Drake. Just leave me alone.”

“Bella.” His tone was a warning.

“Please, just go away.”

Drake sighed and left her to cry alone in bed.

At some point, she was all cried out and grabbed the cup of coffee. It was ice cold by the time she finally took a sip. She shook her head and put down the mug. She turned her attention to the glass of juice to wash down the painkillers before heading to take a long shower.

She did feel better once she was clean. A caffeine serum helped remove some of the puffiness from her eyes. Makeup did wonders to cover her blotchy skin, and a classy new outfit from her closet boosted her confidence. She paired a low-cut navy-blue blouse with high-waisted cream linen pants.

The bell rang just as she finished getting ready. Beth greeted her with a big smile and a warm hug when she answered the door.

“This is going to be so much fun! I’ve always dreamed of spending the day with my sister!” Beth exclaimed, practically bouncing.

“I’m looking forward to it too.” And she actually meant it as she returned Beth’s hug with a smile. The other woman’s energy was infectious.

“Noah’s meeting us at the café. I figured we could grab a quick bite and put a small dent in my brother’s wallet.”

“That sounds great.”

Alessandra grabbed her purse, and they headed out the door. It was one of those warm fall days that every Chicagoan lived for, where the sun shines, and the weather warms up, making it feel like summer for one more day.

Noah greeted them with a smile as they arrived at the outdoor café. He hugged Alessandra, and she felt a warmth she hadn't felt in days. Though their last outing had ended on a tense note, all was forgiven between the friends.

Noah turned toward Beth and hugged her as well, spinning her around as she laughed. He kissed her on the cheek, then draped an arm around Beth's shoulders and wrapped the other around Alessandra's waist.

“How'd I get so lucky with you two sexy ladies on my arm?”

“You're always such a rascal! Did you know Noah was my first kiss, Alessandra?”

“No!” she gasped.

“It's true! We're the same age, and we grew up together. One day we decided to practice kissing, and who better than your best friend?” Beth's ponytail swished as she threw her head back with a laugh.

“I was experimenting, and we were like six!” Noah said.

“Ten,” Beth corrected him. They laughed.

“But I thought—”

“For the record, I'm a proud bi-sexual man. I just don't broadcast it. I prefer dominant men in the bedroom, and I'm happily married. However, there are occasions when I enjoy the company of the female persuasion.”

The way Noah had looked at her body with more than a cursory glance, comments he'd made that she'd dismissed, and the lingering touches that warmed her, all made sense now. She wondered if there was more than friendship on his mind or if she was projecting her own confusion on him.

“So, last week, when we were...?”

Noah's eyes blazed with fire when he looked at Alessandra. He leaned in and brushed his lips to the sensitive skin just behind her ear. She shivered in her seat.

He whispered so only she could hear, "Watching you was incredible. I haven't been that turned on by a woman in a long time. I was quite disappointed you didn't want to play. But there's always next time."

"What about Jerry? How does that work?"

"He's supportive as long as he picks my partner and gets to watch. It's called cuckolding."

Alessandra's core clenched at the thought. Did Drake want her to be with his friend? But the next moment, it was her heart that clenched. Did he cheat because she wasn't enough to satisfy him? Maybe Alessandra was too inexperienced with kink. Maybe Drake found her too vanilla. Though they hadn't discussed fidelity, marriage and commitment meant something to her.

"Hey, Noah," Beth interrupted. "Do you remember the frogs you put in my room on my eighth birthday?"

"Your favorite story was The Princess and the Frog. You kept hoping to kiss a frog that'd turn into a prince. I was only trying to make your birthday wish come true."

"My parents were so mad! Noah wasn't allowed over for a month. When they finally let him come to play again, he had to turn out his pockets to prove he didn't have any live amphibians hidden in them."

Alessandra listened attentively as Noah and Beth shared numerous stories about their wild adventures during their youth. At one point, she laughed so hard, she almost spit out a mouthful of coffee.

Alessandra faced difficulties in her marriage and lacked familial support, but she found solace in these small moments. At twenty-three, Alessandra found hope and acceptance in her friends' unconditional love.

Chapter Thirty-Three

RETURNING TO THE PENTHOUSE, ALESSANDRA FELT LIGHTER. MAYBE THINGS weren't as bleak as they seemed yesterday. Perhaps she could even forgive Drake for his transgressions. Regardless, they needed to talk about the state of their relationship. She would demand complete monogamy from this point forward.

Noah pulled Alessandra in for a comforting hug. She sagged against him, thankful for his much-needed support.

"Thank you for today, Noah. I needed to get out of my head for a while. I have a lot to think about. Riley is an unwelcome pest in our marriage."

"Look at me, Alessandra. Despite your rocky beginning, Drake is a faithful man. He wouldn't take her back."

Words didn't negate the lipstick she'd seen on Drake's collar or explain why he hadn't returned home the other night. But then, last night, he'd held her and comforted her when she'd needed him most.

Worrying made her head ache once more. She shook it with a bittersweet grin. Spinning her wheels would only make things worse. She needed to talk to her husband.

"No matter what happens, Jerry and I are in your corner now. We'll never turn our backs on you."

She turned to Noah again, wrapping her arms around him in thanks. Noah leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

A slow clap could be heard from the shadows. Several men in black suits approached, grabbing Alessandra and Noah. A meaty hand covered her mouth before she could scream. The panicked expression on Noah's face mirrored her own.

Luca sneered as he approached. The man holding Alessandra warned her not to scream before he lowered his hand from her mouth. There was no trace of the boy she once loved in the man standing before her. His hand cracked across Alessandra's face.

"Isn't this sweet? I knew you were a whore. Is this another lover of yours? It's bad enough I have to share you with that asshole, Walker."

"How many times have we been through this? I'm not yours! Drake is my husband. I love him!"

Luca scoffed. "You love him even though he knocked up someone else?"

"What are you talking about? Are you stalking me?"

"I saw you offer yourself up in a room full of people. Did you enjoy having people watch you be fucked like an animal? You should be ashamed of yourself. That's not how you were taught to act."

"And you would know all about that, wouldn't you?"

Alessandra had made peace with allowing Drake to dominate her and use her body in front of a room full of strangers. Knowing Luca had been stalking and watching her with Drake made her blood run cold.

Luca pulled a knife from his belt and brandished it in Alessandra's face. She screamed, and a hand quickly clamped over her mouth.

"Quiet now, Alessandra," Luca said. "If you enjoy getting fucked in front of others, I'll make that happen in a moment."

She bit Russell's hand and yelled at Luca, "What do you think you're doing? Noah's my friend."

Luca turned toward Noah and studied his face intently. Grabbing Noah's chin, he turned it left and then right. "He's pretty, isn't he? I think we can offer him some character."

Alessandra screamed as Luca stabbed a struggling Noah in the gut.

"Leave him alone! Noah!"

She renewed her efforts to fight the burly man holding her.

"You need to calm down, Miss Russo," Russell said. "Don't make things worse."

"Please, Russell. Don't do this. Let me go," she begged. "Don't let him hurt Noah. He's just my friend. He's done nothing wrong."

"I'm sorry, Miss Russo. I have my orders."

Thuds of flesh pounding against flesh and the sickening crunch of bone followed by a piteous cry from Noah brought tears to her eyes. She tried harder to get to her friend. The stench of blood permeated the air, making her sick. Eventually, Noah's body went completely limp.

The men turned their attention back to Alessandra. Luca wrapped his hand around her neck and squeezed with such force it was hard to breathe.

"If that message wasn't clear enough, Alessandra, you belong to me. I'm going to show you."

Alessandra thrashed like an animal caught in a snare. She knew it was pointless but wasn't going down without a fight. She needed to keep breathing. She had to help Noah. Then Drake's face and their promised future flashed before her eyes.

"Drake and I love each other. He'll make you pay for this."

Luca's eyes sparked in anger, and he slapped her so hard her vision went white. The knife in Luca's hand was still dripping with Noah's blood as he slashed at her clothes, not caring if her body became marked in the process.

Once she was naked before him, he stood back, and she saw the feverish look in his eyes. Rivulets of blood ran down her body, mixed with sweat

and dirt. Luca threw her to the ground and climbed on top.

He bit and sucked at her skin hard enough to leave marks. His tongue trailed across the bloody trails while his rough hands kneaded her breasts, pinching and rolling her nipples until she cried out in pain. He wrapped a strong hand around her throat and squeezed until she was at the point of unconsciousness while his other hand worked at the fly of his pants.

As though through a tunnel, she heard someone telling him to stop.

“Someone’s coming, boss. We need to leave.”

“Until our next dance, darling,” Luca whispered in her ear. “You hate these scars on your wrists, so I’ll fix them for you.”

He crushed his lips against hers and tore at her lower lip. The metallic taste of blood trickled down her throat. Luca took the knife and slashed her wrists, leaving her bleeding out on the ground.

Finding strength, Alessandra dragged herself to where Noah lay motionless.

“Noah... Noah.... Wake up! Please wake up!” She was unsuccessful in her attempts to rouse him.

“Help! Someone, please help!” She screamed for help, but in reality, it was barely a whine.

Darkness infringed on her vision, threatening to overtake her. She was fading fast, but continued to fight.

Warmth enveloped her freezing body as she started floating away.

“Alessandra! Alessandra! Stay with me....”

She reached her hand to brush Drake’s cheek. Why was he crying?

“Help is on the way, bella.”

Sirens wailed in the distance.

“Stay awake, Alessandra.”

She was just so tired.

“I love you.... Please, don’t leave me....”

I love you too...

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Sneak Peek at Marriage by Trial

BEEP... BEEP... BEEP...

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



Unknown number: attached video

EVEN WITH THE GRAINY, SHAKY VIDEO FILE, DRAKE INSTANTLY RECOGNIZED the building's private lot. And though she wasn't in the frame, Drake would know Alessandra's voice anywhere. She was crying and begging before the five-second clip ended. Regardless of the circumstances, he knew he needed to move quickly.

Drake was at his safe in seconds, cursing as he jabbed in the four-digit code—the one he'd recently changed to his wedding date. Every time the safe opened, it required a code change, and he didn't have time to waste creating a new combination. He pulled out the black Beretta and a loaded magazine. Instead of waiting for his private elevator, he took the emergency stairs two at a time.

His thumb remained on the safety the entire way, poised and ready if needed. Once he reached the entryway, he raised the gun and peeked around the corner. Training and experience had taught him the importance of keeping his guard up, even though it seemed like he was wasting precious time because every second mattered.

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

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

"Hang on, Alessandra."

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

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

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

PSA

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at <https://988lifeline.org/> or dial 988.

If you or someone you know has been the victim of sexual assault, please contact RAINN, The National Sexual Assault Online Hotline <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

For The National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline call 800.656.HOPE (4673) to be connected with a trained staff member from a sexual assault service provider in your area.

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About the Author

Cristina Lollabrigida is a romance lover who was inspired to become an author. Several of her works are available on the Chapters-Interactive Stories app where she's been writing serialized works since 2021.

As of summer 2023, she is no longer a baby author!

Her podcast, Romance Obsessed with Lollagirl is currently on hiatus. Season 1 episodes are still available for your listening pleasure. She hopes it will return soon.

She is originally from Chicago and lived for many years in rural Wisconsin. Now she lives with her husband and their three children in South Carolina.



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Also by Cristina Lollabrigida

[Marriage by Trial, Legally Bound Duet Book 2](#)

Coming October 2023

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

Pawn.

That's all sheltered mafia princess Alessandra Russo will ever be. She learned early on that all she was good for was pleasing men; both in and out of the bedroom.

That's how she was raised.

That's how she was trained.

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

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

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

Lake Heart Twin Lakes Book 1

Sometimes your true dream is the one you leave behind.

When Jackson Lake's pro football career comes to an abrupt end, he realizes his true dream was Aubry Chase, the girl he left behind.

Aubry Chase's biggest mistake was falling in love with her brother's best friend.

Jackson Lake is the only man Aubry Chase ever loved. He broke her heart when he left to pursue his dreams. When a career-ending injury has Jackson returning to his hometown, sparks fly as the two lock eyes at the county fair.

After years apart, Jackson and Aubry fight the fear of getting burned again. They relive moments of their past as they rekindle their romance, trying to avoid the pitfalls of self-doubt and blame so they can build their dream future together.

Princess for a Day

Princess For a Day is a steamy contemporary, royal romance retelling of the Princess and the Pauper, featuring a virgin plus-sized heroine, an LGBTQ+ snarky fairy godmother or bestie, and a prince betrothed to another woman.

Seeing her boyfriend in the arms of another woman on her birthday was pretty bad. Having a picture of the night go viral was even worse! Now all 21-year-old Talia wants to do is drown her sorrows in ice cream and reality TV.

Prince Grayson is betrothed to a princess he never met. When his father pushes for an official proposal, tensions rise as secrets come to light. Will Grayson follow his heart, or will he sacrifice everything to fulfill his duty to the crown?

Talia's royal adventure begins when a mysterious woman arrives on her doorstep, inviting her to the kingdom of Serlavina. Princess lessons, balls, and first kisses. Oh, my! Pretending to be a princess seemed like a good idea until she met the prince. Will she break his heart or find her true love?

One life-changing kiss would never be enough. Call it fate, kismet, mistaken identity, or a devious plot that brought them together. **True love, royal intrigue, and the adventure of a lifetime await!**

[Running After You](#)

Cinnamon Roll Hero Series

Coming 8/23/23

She suffered. She persevered. She provided.

Isabelle Marietta was used to running, and nothing was more satisfying than feeling the pavement beneath her feet. When tragedy struck her family, she fell back on the one thing she was good at: running, this time with her ten-year-old brother in tow.

Five years later, Isabelle's brother decided he was done running from invisible threats. When the high school's guidance counselor, Nate Marshall, discovers the truth and the past threatens to catch up to them, Isabelle is prepared to run again. But Nate is determined to show Izzy that she can stop running once and for all.

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