

## Chapter One

Ciro Augusto Dominguez laid his palms on the desk and rose stiffly from his chair. His body tensed in defiance. He did little to hide his anger from his parents, facing him.

“I am supposed to marry this woman, who you have adopted, and make her pregnant?” he said bitterly, directing his annoyance at his mother.

Francisca stood—her arms crossed, her chin lifted—in that dominant posture she took whenever she was heading for a clash with her only child.

“You always knew, Cy,” she said pointedly, arching an eyebrow, as if she didn’t expect his outburst.

Cy turned his gaze to his father. Mauricio stood two steps behind Francisca. His lips were sealed in a firm line, his arms crossed too. There was no point in looking at his father for support. Of course Mauricio would back his wife. He always did. Francisca was the dominant one. The alpha female. She stood there, cold and calculating, dressed in her tight-fitting Italian suit and high heels, looking at least twenty years younger than she should, thanks to cosmetic surgery. Cy sneered. His mother was artificial in every way. The designation didn’t fit her. She had never been a mother to him. They stood watching him, contemplating his next move.

His knuckles turned white as he clenched the edge of the expensive cherry wood desk, trying to control the rage that swept through him. He was tired of being a pawn in their struggle for power, for wealth. It was true that he had always known. He had been told since childhood, like other children would be told a bedtime story. He just never thought about it. Up to now, it had been some kind of distant knowledge pushed to the back of his mind. Now the time had come, and though he should have expected it, it was dropped on him like hot oil.

“You talk as if we are animals, chosen for breeding,” Cy said, his eyes accusingly on his mother. Even her French perfume made him sick.

Francisca took a step closer to his desk, her voice turning cold. “You know that our empire depends on it. On you producing an heir. Your father and I did our duty. Now it is your turn.”

Cy straightened and gave her an icy smile. Francisca had never made him

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feel like more than a duty. “A high price to pay for power,” he snarled. “Is it worth it, Mother?”

Francisca didn't flinch at his sarcastic inclination on “Mother”. Leaning toward her son, she put her hands on the desk in front of him, challenging him to defy her superiority, piercing his gray eyes with her cold, black ones. “Nothing is more important. All the luxury you live in, you owe to us, to our enterprise. The people, our employees, the towns we support with our money, are looking at us for the answers. Fertility is being wiped from the face of the earth. It is up to us to give them hope, to ensure human survival.” She narrowed her eyes. “Your father and I have invested more money than what most royal families can afford to create you a fertile wife. Most sons would die for an opportunity like this. You should show us the gratitude we deserve,” she hissed, “even if you are not capable of showing the respect.”

Cy held his mother's gaze, unblinking. “This is not exactly what I want for my life, or what suits my lifestyle, Mother dear. You didn't bother to ask me what I wanted.”

Francisca straightened. Their eyes were level. In her heels she was as tall as her son, a head taller than her husband. “What we want is beside the point. I never suggested that you change your way of life. All you have to do is make her pregnant. For as long as she is fertile, she will serve us. It has been decided. The two of you will...” she searched for a word, waving a manicured hand in the air, “... breed, as you so delicately put it. Don't worry,” she added smugly, “she has good DNA. We have been thorough. Our scientists have done an outstanding job. You will make very clever, if not pretty, babies.” Her lips twitched into a smile. “We ran all the tests. She is definitely fertile.” Her eyes glittered at her own brilliance.

When Francisca saw Cy's frown deepen in further disapproval, she said, rolling her eyes, “And it doesn't mean that she has to be involved in your life, or in anything for that matter, not even in raising the children, as long as you keep up the show. The children, pray that there will be,” she said dramatically, “will be well taken care of. When she has no more purpose, you can simply let her retire to wherever you wish. She will not inhibit your lifestyle.

“But as far as the media is concerned, you will be the perfect, happy couple. You will keep up appearances. Here, you can do with her as you wish. See her, or not see her. Have your lovers, or not have them. But you will fertilize her when she ovulates.” She added hastily, “Of course you cannot maltreat her, because the Bureau of Female Rights is stricter than ever. The world is hungry for fertile females. One wrong move from your side, and she will be taken from us.” Her voice turned softer, masking manipulation. “Besides, I met her twice. It shouldn't be that difficult. She is not unappealing.”

Cy listened in silence, all the while feeling the injustice of his mother's