

“I’m gonna die.”

My new husband, the archangel Michael, cocked an eyebrow up at me. I brandished the two-inch white satin stiletto that had been holding my right foot hostage.

“Seriously, not even Dr. Schols could make this abomination more comfortable.”

He chuckled and knelt, tuxedo and all, in front of me. “Sorry, babe. If it helps, you look incredible.”

He slipped the other shoe off. I resisted a small shudder as his long, strong fingers stroked my ankle and the barest edge of my calf. Judging by the sly look in those sea-green eyes, he’d done it on purpose.

I smirked, keeping my voice low, so as not to tip off the guests currently filing into the reception hall that we were both being a little naughty. “Save it for fight night, handsome.”

Michael winked. “Yes, ma’am.”

He rose and sat next to me at our exclusive little newlyweds table as I slipped on my post-wedding flats. The hall could comfortably fit an army, and in some ways, it was. The people from my side of the family didn’t number that high—my best friend Lauren Yi and her daughter Lily, my surrogate mother Selina LeBeau, my father Lewis Jackson, Dr. David Faust and his ex-wife Madison Withers, the former angel Avriel, and my fellow Seer slash former roommate Myra Bennett and her son Chris. Michael’s guests were his brothers (and mine, if I was being honest) Gabriel and Raphael, his former band mates, and various other angels whom I didn’t know personally but had met over the years.

Lauren was running the show, and the last time I checked, we had just under forty guests total. That wasn’t counting the bodyguards lurking around to make sure no one crashed the party—either unruly demons bent on revenge or a representative from the US government. After all, I was a wrongfully accused wanted fugitive, wedding dress or not.

Our round table had lacy white cloth draped over it and sat in front of a square dance floor around thirty or so feet from end to end. The surrounding tables matched in décor and there were small pots with white roses and lavender at the center of each one. Behind us was a stage with a microphone, a band equipment—drums, guitars, a bass guitar, a piano, and speakers—for when we got in the full swing of things.

Gabriel had adopted the John Hammond “spare no expense” approach for the food; we had not one but two gigantic tables running the length of the far walls, packed to burst with every kind of delicious food one could get their hands on in Vatican City. I had all but starved myself in the last two months to make sure my dress fit, so the fresh bruschetta, *spaghetti alla carbonara*, *saltimbocca alla Romana*, and assorted baked breads were causing a river to spontaneously flow in my mouth. I rubbed my stomach and muttered, “Soon...soon.”

Once everyone was comfortably seated, Lauren went on stage and picked up the mic. “*Buon pomeriggio*, everyone. It’s about time we got started.”

She smiled warmly down at my husband and me. “We’re here, of course, to celebrate the union of Jordan Amador and Michael O’Brien. Anyone who knows them knows that this is more a formality than anything else. These two knuckleheads were pretty much meant for each other, and while it’s been a winding path to find their way, I’m glad they made the journey together. I couldn’t be prouder of either of you.”

A round of affectionate applause broke out, heating my cheeks a bit. Even amongst friends, I still felt humbled that so many people cared about me, and my relationship with Michael. I was beyond lucky; I was blessed, to say the least.

Michael leaned over and kissed my temple, spreading the blush further across my face. I glanced furtively at him. “What was that for?”

He grinned, settling his hand over mine on my knee. “You’re cute when you’re embarrassed.”

I scowled at him. “You’re gonna pay for that later.”

He wagged his eyebrows. “I certainly hope so.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I’ve made a terrible mistake here today.”

The applause died down and Lauren continued. “Our lovebirds are going to make rounds and then dinner will be served. In the meantime, please enjoy some of the music from the Throwaway Angels.”

Another short bout of clapping, and then Michael’s band mates got up on stage, tuning up their instruments. I gathered up my skirt and stood, heading towards the first table to my right, where my side of the family sat.

Selina Lebeau was a slight thing these days, but that was not a surprise; she was pushing sixty-five. She wore a cute white pants suit with a lavender blouse beneath it. Her white-and-grey hair had been freshly cut in a neat short afro. She had always held a regal beauty and style to her, one that I hoped to emulate if I ever reached her age.

“Jordan,” she said, pulling me into a hug. “You look beautiful, *cher*.”

“It’s so good to see you,” I said, closing my eyes as the scent of her perfume flooded my nostrils. It was jasmine, and every time I smelled that scent, it reminded me of home above her candy shop. The room I’d rented from her was tiny and a little depressing, so she always brought me a little bouquet of jasmine to give it some life. “I missed you.”

She drew back and waved a hand dismissively, her smile turning wicked. “How could you possibly miss me with a strapping gentleman like this on your arm?”

Michael laughed a bit, and I rolled my eyes. “Don’t encourage him.”

He held out his hand and then kissed the back of hers when she offered it. “A pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs. Lebeau.”

“Call me Selina, dear. No need for formalities now that you’re marrying into the family.”

“Yes ma’am. I just wanted to say thank you for taking such good care of her.”

She wrapped her hands around his. “Believe me, it was my pleasure. All I ask is that you do the same.”

He nodded. “I will.”

She grinned, pinched his cheek, and returned to her seat. Lewis helped pushed her up to the table and then cast a cool glance over the two of us. My stomach twisted into a fishermen’s knot. Considering all the trouble he’d caused when we first met—namely, almost getting me kidnapped and murdered by a Detroit loan shark—I almost hadn’t invited him, but my conscience (and Gabriel) wouldn’t let me leave him off the list. His unusual fashion sense had shown up yet again; he wore a black, white, and red checkered suit jacket, a blood-red tie, and black slacks.

“Michael,” he said, holding out one hand.

“Mr. Jackson,” my husband replied, clasping it. Hard.

“You once told me that you weren’t gonna let me shit all over Jordan’s life and leave you to clean up the mess. I hold you to that same standard, boy. Do anything else to make her upset and they’ll never find your body.”

I buried my face in my hand. To his credit, Michael didn’t seem at all surprised. “Yes, sir.”

I shook my head, lifting my head to glare at my father. “So I guess that whole ‘you marry a man like your father’ thing is true, huh?”

Lewis arched a thick eyebrow at me. “How so?”

“You’re both hyper-masculine jackasses.”

Both of them frowned in unison. It was so uncanny that I shuddered.

Lauren patted Lewis’ shoulder sympathetically. “She means that in the nicest way.”

“Yeah-huh,” he said. “You got a mouth on you, girl. Just like your mother. She had better taste in men, of course—” I rolled my eyes. “—but you’re a dead ringer for Catalina. I know we’ve had our differences, but I’m glad that you seem happy now. Stay that way. No matter what.”

I nodded, clearing my throat a little and blinking quickly as my eyes threatened rainfall. “I will.”

He smiled faintly, tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, and sat, quickly engaging in conversation with Selina.

Lily hugged me around the middle and I kissed the top of her head, grinning. “Hey, munchkin. Good job with the flowers.”

“Thanks. I love your dress! Can I wear it when I get married?”

Michael chuckled as she hugged him next, scooping her up in his arms. It was slightly harder to do now that she was twice the size of when he’d first met her and still growing. “A little early for that question, don’t you think?”

Lily pouted. “Aw, Uncle Mike, I’m nine! I’m a grownup now.”

“Right. My mistake. I’ll make sure Auntie Jordan keeps the dress in perfect condition for you, then.”

She beamed and kissed his cheek. “Thanks.”

Lauren shook her head as he put her down. “When were you going consult me about this, short stuff?”

Lily spread out her dress, her smile shy, staring down at her feet. “I like weddings. Everybody’s happy.”

“Yeah, except the organizer,” she replied with a long-suffering sigh. “I don’t know why I agreed to this.”

I crossed my arms. “You demanded that I let you do it.”

She shrugged. “Demanded, suggested...it’s all semantics.”

“Well, either way,” Michael said, hiding a grin. “Thank you. This couldn’t have turned out better.”

He pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheek. She hugged him back fiercely. “I always knew I liked you. You’re good people.”

She let go and winked at him. “...for an underwear model.”

Michael groaned. “*Please* don’t call me that.”

She cackled. “I had to for old time’s sake. I’ll swing back by after I check on things.”

She squeezed my hand affectionately and then headed towards the stage. Myra swept me into a hug next. She’d gotten her hair cut short this time around, but it was a little longer in the front, giving her that stylish Halle Berry look. It worked exceptionally well with her navy suit and baby blue blouse. “Don’t you clean up nice. Can’t remember if I’ve seen you in a dress before.”

“I try not to make it a habit,” I replied after we parted.

She glanced over Michael and her smile turned a smidgeon evil. “And I’ve always loved a man in a suit.”

Michael let out a dramatic sigh. “*Now* she tells me. Geez, Myra. If you’d said that six months ago, you’d be the one standing next to me in the aisle.”

She snapped her fingers. “Damn. Missed my chance.”

Her russet eyes snuck over towards Gabriel, who was having a word with the wait staff over by one of the buffet tables. “Guess I’ll have to find someone else...”

Her teenaged son, Chris, heaved a sigh and glanced at me helplessly. “Jor, why’d you have to introduce them? This cat’s gonna be my stepdad at this rate.”

I laughed, rubbing his shoulder. “Sorry. I didn’t think it’d be love at first sight.”

He crossed his arms and scowled. “If they get married, I’m moving in with you.”

“I’ll get the guest room ready.”

Myra nudged his shoulder with hers. “Oh, hush. You’ll thank me when your new rich stepdad sends you to Yale on a full ride.”

He paused. “Well, maybe he’s not so bad.”

We headed over to the next table, greeting the perpetually nervous Avriel—who gave me such an enthusiastic hug that Michael got suspicious—as well as Dr. Faust and Madison, Raphael, and other angels I’d come to know in Michael’s social circles. We made rounds to all the guests in just under half an hour, taking pictures and making small talk, before returning to our table up front for dinner.

As expected, the food was outrageous. Last night during the bachelorette party, we’d hit the hottest attractions in the city and I’d already tasted some of Vatican City’s finest food, but whomever did the catering felt the need to leave an impression. Lauren had kindly given me a

light jacket to wear over my wedding dress to avoid staining it, and she was right to do so, because I couldn't stop stuffing my face to save my life.

Finally, Michael's band mates played their final song, indicating that we were about to start the first dance. The DJ manned his station and took over to start playing the wedding soundtrack we'd organized. I wiped my mouth, reapplied a bit of makeup, and doffed the jacket. Michael and I walked to the center of the dance floor, and to my surprise, he bowed at the waist, a smile curling across those full lips.

"May I have this dance, Mrs. O'Brien?"

I responded with a neat little curtsy that made him laugh. "Why, yes, you may, Mr. O'Brien."

He held out his hand. I took it. He drew me close and wrapped me in those sinewy arms of his, lacing his fingers over the small of my back while I looped mine around his neck. The speakers spilled out sweet notes from violins and violas, and then the silky-smooth crooning of Billie Holiday's "Crazy He Calls Me" filled the air.

We swayed together among the occasional flashes from the photographer, nothing fancy, just slow, graceful, almost lazy dancing, enjoying the closeness and intimacy since we'd been separated for most of the previous day. Too soon, the song drew to a close, and Michael dipped me, which made me giggle, as the crowd burst into applause.

He pulled me up and kissed me, and for a moment, I completely forgot about the wedding party, the reception, and basically the entire planet Earth. At some point, Michael had learned that sliding his hand across the space between my shoulder blades and up over the nape of my neck while he kissed me made me melt into a puddle. I could hear myself purring into his open mouth and couldn't fathom the thought of ever stopping. His other hand glided down my spine and I could pinpoint the exact second he remembered we were in public because it stopped a half-inch above my backside.

Michael broke the kiss and tilted his face towards my ear, his voice painfully low and breathy. "How much longer is this shindig again?"

I choked on a laugh. "Another hour, maybe."

"Mm. That's about an hour too long." I shivered as he kissed the shell of my ear and then let me go, a very non-angelic smirk hovering around his lips when he noticed my reaction. Thank God for Maybelline; I had a feeling if I hadn't shelled out for the long-wear lipstick, it would've been all over his mouth after that kiss. Stupid sexy angel.

Lauren cleared her throat a little at the mic, mirth evident in her voice when she spoke. "And now we'll have the father-daughter dance, assuming he doesn't murder Michael right now."

"Give me a minute," Lewis grumbled, standing and glaring daggers at my husband. "There's got to be a sharp knife around here somewhere."

The guests laughed and Michael adopted a facetious “what did I do” look before returning to his seat at our table. My face could have lit a candle, it was so hot. Thankfully, the DJ cranked up “Isn’t She Lovely” by Stevie Wonder and the two of us moved in close to start dancing.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “Kind of got caught up in the moment.”

“Hmph,” Lewis said. “Just don’t let it happen again.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, give it a rest. He put a ring on it and everything. Cut him some slack.”

“He’s still a punk,” he said darkly. Then, his expression softened somewhat. “But I guess you really do love this guy, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I do. More than anything.”

“Then do me a favor. Don’t let the bullshit get between you, like me and your mother did. I didn’t do right by her, leavin’ the way I did. You either. Nothing I can do about it now but say that I’m sorry and that you have a chance to be happy that we never did. I know she’s here, in her own way, and she’d be proud of you. You’re a hell of a woman, Jordan.”

My life’s motto seemed to be much like Chandler Bing’s, “I make jokes when I’m uncomfortable,” but for once, I didn’t have a wisecrack. I realized I’d never expected him to say such words, not after our sordid past. He was a selfish, difficult man, but his tone told me he meant what he said.

I leaned my forehead against his chest to hide the hot tears streaking down my cheeks. “Thank you.”

He gave me a little squeeze, his deep voice hoarse. “You’re welcome.”

The song ended and we separated, both doing the “manly cough and brisk face-wipe” to dispel the tension.

Lauren smiled fondly at us as Lewis took his seat. “And now we’re going to have a little break from tradition with this next dance. Our lovely bride has asked to dance with the groom’s brother, Gabriel.”

Gabriel glanced up from where he stood by one of the server’s, blinking his blue eyes rapidly in shock. He’d been our official translator, as he spoke perfect fluent Italian, and so the first thing he said was, “*Scusami?*”

I smiled at him and crooked a finger. “Care to join me, big guy?”

“Oh. Yes.” He muttered something else to the waiter and then made a beeline for the dance floor. He bowed deeply at the waist, almost exactly like Michael had.

“May I have the honor of this dance?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

The soft piano notes of Cat Power’s “I Found a Reason” began and we started to dance. He was a little stiff in my arms, and his cheeks were a bit pink. Our coupling probably looked a little odd since he was an entire foot taller than me at 6’6”, but we made it work.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

“Because you’re cute when you’re surprised.”

He flushed even darker and I giggled. “Relax. You’ve been so busy in the background and I just wanted to have a little time with you to say thank you for everything. It’s been wonderful.”

Gabriel smiled, cupping my cheek. “No need to thank me, my dear. It was my pleasure. You are so precious to me. I would do anything to see you smile.”

I shook my head, touching the back of his hand. “Oh, don’t you start. I’ve already cried three times in the last hour. Any more and my makeup is pretty much toast.”

He laughed softly. “Fair enough.”

The song was short, but it gave me enough time to lean my head against his chest and listen to his breath, relieved at the sound. I’d almost lost him. But he was here now, and safe. I committed this feeling to memory, every second of it. I’d longed for family for so much of my life, and it was so comforting to know that I had a brother, even if it wasn’t by blood.

The music faded away and Gabriel laid a kiss above my right brow like he always did. “I love you, my dear.”

I smiled up at him. “Love you more.”

I returned to my seat beside Michael and the wait staff made their rounds, filling everyone’s glasses with champagne as Lauren began her toast.

“Some of you probably already know this story, but I met Jordan a few years ago at the restaurant. She was this scrappy little thing drinking coffee and sorting through the employment section of the newspaper. In the booth next to her, there was this creep who was hitting on one of the waitresses, Stephanie, and he wasn’t taking the hint that she wasn’t interested. We had tried different things to try and get him to leave her alone, but we weren’t making much progress until Jordan apparently got tired of him. She got up, walked over, smiled at Stephanie, and said, ‘Excuse me, sweetie, but do you want to have sex with this man?’ Steph, of course, is completely thrown off and says, ‘Uh, no thank you.’ Jordan looks the guy dead in the eye, smiles, and says, ‘There. Now that we’ve solved that mystery, will you please pay for your meal and stop drooling



over this poor woman so she can get back to work?’ The guy cops an attitude, like he’s going to do something, and mind you, he’s about the size of Payton Manning. He goes, ‘And what are you going to do if I don’t?’ Jordan goes, ‘Well, I am at crotch level, so I was thinking about twisting your nuts off, but clearly you don’t have any since you like to pick on girls. Please hit me. I’d love press charges and then you can go to jail and truly understand the meaning of unwanted attention.’ The guy storms off and we’re all just stunned, and then she just goes back to reading the paper like it was nothing. I called my boss Colton and told him what happened, and the first thing he said to me was, ‘How do you think she’d look in a smock?’”

A healthy round of laughter spread through the room. “From there, I pretty much knew I was in for it with this friendship. Jordan, you are an intense sort of woman, but your heart has always been in the right place, especially when the chips are down. I know you’ve had it rough. I’m constantly impressed with how you bounce back, how you won’t let the world douse that fire inside you. I’m so glad to have known you. I know I wouldn’t have made it through some of these last few years without you there.”

She turned towards my husband. “And you, Michael. God bless you. You took her off my hands.”

We laughed again. “I don’t think either of us was ready for you, Mr. O’Brien. I knew the moment that I saw you two together that this was the genuine article. I mean, the way her face used to light up when she talked about how much she wanted to strangle you...”

She shook her head and pretended to wipe away a tear. “It was very moving. All kidding aside, I’ve never seen anyone make her so passionate and comfortable with who she is. She’s opened up so much as a result of loving you, and I can’t thank you enough for bringing her out of that prickly little shell she used to be in. There’s a reason my baby girl calls you ‘Uncle Mike.’ You are a wonderful addition to this family of ours, and I can’t wait to see what’s in store for your future together.”

Lauren raised her glass. “To Jordan and Michael.”

The guests did the same. “To Jordan and Michael.”

We all drank. Lauren stepped off the stage and I hugged her with all my might, whispering, “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, sweetie.”

She let go, hugged Michael as well, and then handed the mic to Raphael as he came forward. Of the three archangels, he was the shortest at 5’10”, and had medium-brown skin only a couple shades lighter than mine. His black hair was slicked back from his face except for a cute little curl that had escaped. Like Gabriel, he was fluent in every language, but he had spent so many years in Mexico healing the sick that his accent never went away.

*“Buon pomeriggio, friends and family. Most of you know me, but to the few new faces gathered here, my name is Raphael. I’ve had the pleasure of knowing Michael for many years. I’m honored to hold the responsibility of best man.”*

He tipped his glass a little in Michael’s direction, his brown eyes warm and twinkling slightly with mischief. “I’m sure most of you know how maddeningly charming he is, but he wasn’t always like this. When we were young, Michael was a direct sort of person. Yes or no answers, very brief and sometimes a little impersonal. As we grew up together, it was clear to me that while I loved him like a brother, there was something he needed, something that wasn’t easy to find in just anyone. He has always been fiercely protective of the people he cares about and no matter what, he is driven to do the right thing. I’ve always admired that about him. I’ve learned so much from him over the years. Often, I struggled with seeing other people in pain and I could only do so much to ease it, or seeing how pervasive corruption can be in certain places. He told me once that everyone in the world is made up of what he liked to call ‘the holy dark.’ We all come into this world born with darkness and light inside of us. As we grow older, the light and dark fight to dominate us. We win and lose small battles all the time without even noticing it. If we’re lucky, there is a balance between them and we’re able to accomplish just as many great things as awful things in our lifetime.”

Raphael glanced at me, and his smile widened. “And I know without a doubt that Jordan is the guiding source of light in Michael’s life.”

Again, my cheeks did their impression of a broiling slab of meat in an oven. “The first time I met Jordan was not long after an unfortunate event that caused her grievous harm. It was the first time I almost didn’t recognize Michael. He was so different after meeting her. She unlocked some part of his personality and he was able to open up not only to her, but to the other people in his life. Suddenly he could laugh more easily, he could be warm and compassionate, he could admit that he felt more vulnerable than ever before. I knew the moment that I saw how he smiled at her that it was love. It was something pure and precious that will continue to make both of them exceptional people.”

He raised his glass. “For that, I thank God, and I wish the both of you an endless lifetime of happiness and peace. You both deserve that. I’m honored to be a part of your lives. To Jordan and Michael.”

Again, the reception hall resounded with the words, “To Jordan and Michael.”

We drank and Raphael came down from the stage, immediately swallowed up in a hug from his brother. He laughed a little and patted Michael’s back, calling him “a big softie.” He hugged me next and kissed my cheek, giving me a playful squeeze before letting me go.

“And now,” Lauren said. “We get to the fun part: cake cutting. If you would, Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien?”

She guided my gaze towards the rear of the room where the enormous white 5-tiered cake sat, looking pristine and absolutely delicious. After months of dieting to fit into this dress, I was about to go to town on it.

Michael led me to the table and our family gathered around with their cameras ready as we sliced into the decadent vanilla-and-chocolate layers (“ hilariously symbolic,” Lauren had told me) and heavenly vanilla frosting. I threatened Michael under penalty of death not to smear it all across my face, and he agreed, choosing a slice that was enough for just one bite. Everyone cheered as we fed them to each other, and I got a little distracted when Michael caught my hand and licked the frosting off of my fingers one by one, his eyes glittering with that same wicked light from before.

From there, the DJ kicked into action with up-tempo songs, ranging from “Calabria” to “You Never Can Tell” to “Twist and Shout” to “Golden Years” to “Come and Get Your Love.” For the better part of half an hour, we let the music wash over us and had a deliriously good time until it was time for the bouquet and garter-belt toss. Lauren and Gabriel were the lucky winners, and he surprised her with a (rather convincing) smooch for the photographer. Lauren’s cheeks were redder than the wine we had with lunch.

Afterward, the DJ queued the last songs of the evening, which included many of the slow tracks (the “getting busy” mix, as Lauren called it) like “In My Veins” by Andrew Belle, “Baby” by Warpaint, and “Iris” by Goo Goo Dolls. I had enjoyed the entire event, but spending that time out on the dance floor with Michael so warm and close and staring down at me like the entire universe existed behind my eyes was beyond beautiful.

The reception drew to a close and we made our rounds once more, thanking every single guest and hugging the crap out of our family members who would be heading back to the States tomorrow. Security guards opened the doors and Michael and I spilled out into the warm night air, heading for the limousine that had pulled around out front. He opened the door for me and I swept up my skirt, climbing in. He followed and told the driver to head out whenever he was ready.

“So,” I said. “I have a surprise for you.”

Michael arched an eyebrow. I reached into the compartment next to the mini-fridge and pulled out a light blue box with a navy bow and held it out to my husband.

He shook his head. “Jor, I told you not to get me anything.”

I smiled and handed it to him. “Shut up and open it.”

He sighed and untied the bow, slipping the top aside. He pushed apart the tissue paper and lifted up a white ceramic coffee mug, reading what was inscribed along the side in red.

“World’s Greatest Dad?”

Michael's green eyes widened and then darted down to my stomach. "J-Jordan, are you—"

I took his hand, chuckling. "Whoa, relax, babe. No, I'm not pregnant."

I bit my bottom lip and took a deep breath to steady myself. "But... Belial did give me my wedding present last night. It was the phone number to his personal attorney. It's a fresh start for me, for us, and that got me thinking about the future. I know that you're perfectly happy being with me."

I squeezed his fingers, softening my voice. "And I also know that you miss Allison. You haven't been able to see her for so long and I'm sure she misses you too."

Michael swallowed. "Baby, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that it might take us a while to get back on our feet, to get settled somewhere and keep safe, but once we've taken root... I'd like Allison to become part of our family. I'm saying that I'm game, Michael. Me and you helping a girl who could use a good home, who could use somewhere safe where she can just be a kid."

He took both of my hands in his. "Jor, this is... a *huge* step. Are you sure this is what you want? You're not just doing this for me?"

I shook my head. "I know what it's like growing up an orphan. If I can make it even a little bit better for someone in that situation, then you're damn right I'm gonna do it."

He kissed the back of my hands, one by one, and then my lips, slowly. "I love you so much. Thank you."

I leaned my forehead against his. "My pleasure."

He flicked his gaze up to meet mine, and there was more heat in it than all the suns in the universe. "Not yet."

He reached past my shoulder and locked the car door, his smirk turning devilish.

"But soon."

FIN