

A Dark
Mafia
Romance

CORRUPTED

Angel

BELLUCI MAFIA BOOK ONE

NICOLE FOX

CORRUPTED ANGEL

BOOK ONE OF THE BELLUCI MAFIA
TRILOGY

NICOLE FOX

CONTENTS

Mailing List

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Corrupted Angel: A Dark Mafia Romance

1. Alexis
2. Gabriel
3. Alexis
4. Gabriel
5. Alexis
6. Gabriel
7. Gabriel
8. Alexis
9. Gabriel
10. Alexis
11. Alexis
12. Gabriel
13. Alexis
14. Alexis
15. Gabriel
16. Alexis
17. Gabriel
18. Alexis
19. Gabriel
20. Alexis
21. Alexis
22. Gabriel
23. Alexis
24. Gabriel
25. Alexis
26. Gabriel
27. Alexis
28. Gabriel
29. Gabriel
30. Alexis

31. Gabriel

32. Gabriel

33. Alexis

34. Gabriel

35. Alexis

36. Alexis

37. Gabriel

38. Gabriel

39. Alexis

Also by Nicole Fox

Mailing List

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**CORRUPTED ANGEL: A DARK MAFIA
ROMANCE**

**I found my angel.
Then I broke her wings.**

Alexis should've never set foot in my world.

Men like me stain girls like her. We take their innocence and tear it to shreds.

She thinks she's tough. She thinks she can handle me.

But she doesn't know just how deep my darkness goes.

It was for the best that I claimed her for a night and left her behind.

Anything more than that would have been cruel.

I thought I'd seen the last of Alexis Wright.

So imagine my surprise two years later when the door to my office opens...

And *she* walks in.

The girl I ravaged. The girl I devoured.

Now that's she's in front of me again, I have just two questions for her:

First—what is she doing here?

And second...

What does she mean, "our baby"?

ALEXIS

It is getting dark outside.

I flick on the lamp at my desk and stretch up in my chair, trying to avoid the inevitable end-of-the-day hunch. My stomach grumbles and I slide open the bottom drawer of my desk, eyeing the goodies inside. Ah, yes, the good ol' secret snack drawer. It's a secret not because I'm ashamed of how much I snack, but because Vicky Oberman in the cubicle across from me will pop over the divider like a meerkat if she hears the tell-tale crinkle of a bag of chips.

I pull out a packet of Twizzlers and slide the drawer shut. I stare at the blinking cursor on my computer screen while I gnaw on the end of a stick of strawberry licorice. I told my fiancé, Grant, that I would be home late tonight because I wanted to finish up this story, but I'm not sure I can be bothered.

It's just a fluff piece—the unlikely story of how a community center caretaker found the exact skates he used to wear when he visited the center as a child. Mr. Finkel spent half of the interview reminiscing about how much everything used to cost in those days (a can of soda—a nickel; a hot dog—a quarter; two scoops of ice cream—ten cents), and the rest of the time talking about how kids these days have no appreciation for the luxury of having a community center to go to.

Now, it is my job as the dedicated local news journalist to turn that pile of boring jelly into a thought-provoking article

examining the role of community centers in empowering the youth of tomorrow.

Or at least, that's how I've decided to spin it. My editor, Debbie Harris, just wants me to write the story. In fact, her exact words were, "Nobody's going to read it but that caretaker, so just make sure you don't misspell the guy's name."

Debbie makes no bones about how she doesn't expend time or energy on the puff pieces when there are bigger stories to tell. I just wish she would give me one of those bigger stories. My work at the *New York Union* so far has involved precious little in the way of substance.

"Wright!" comes a clipped voice from the entrance to my cubicle.

Oh, boy. Speak of the devil.

I spin to face Debbie, a Twizzler still hanging out of my mouth. She is a stern-looking Scottish woman with perfectly coiffed blonde hair, black-lined eyes, and lipstick that is never out of place. She has a commendably infinite selection of bold-colored pantsuits. Today's number is a fuchsia blazer and slacks with a bright white top underneath. She looks about forty-five, but in my two years of working for the paper, I have never heard her discuss her age. I heard a rumor that someone in the office tried to throw her a birthday party once and the person was never heard from again.

"How's the story going?" she asks in her thick Glaswegian accent.

"Good." I bite off the end of the Twizzler. "I was just—"

She waves a hand. "Nope, all I need to know. I'm just here to give you your assignment for tomorrow." She grins. "You'll like this one."

My heart picks up. Debbie's finally going to give me something meaty to sink my teeth into.

"It's a dog show!" she announces.

"Oh."

“Don’t look so disappointed.” She leans against my cubicle wall. “You haven’t heard the best part.”

I cock a brow, waiting.

Debbie leans in a little. “All the dogs are celebrity impersonators.”

“Debbie!” I groan, letting my head fall back in frustration. “That’s just more of the same crap I always get. Why would you get me all excited?”

She kicks the bottom of my chair, startling me upright, then folds her arms and glowers at me.

“You and your lack of patience again,” she scolds. “Do you know how lucky you are to even have this job? I’ve got a dozen résumés in the drawer who would love to write a story about a parade of dogs in wee outfits.”

“Yes,” I sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Thank you.”

She smiles and leaves.

I know Debbie’s right, but I can’t help my frustration. As cute as the dog show does actually sound, I want to write stories that make a difference.

The clock hits five-thirty and I start to pack up. I don’t feel like staying late today. I just want to curl up on the sofa with Grant and a big glass of red wine and watch some mindless TV. In fact, that sounds exactly like what the doctor ordered.

It takes nearly forty minutes to get from the newspaper offices in Manhattan to our loft in Brooklyn. Grant is lucky—he was just made junior partner at a commercial law firm in downtown Brooklyn and his walk to work is less than ten minutes.

It’s an unseasonably warm evening for November, but there’s still a bite in the air that makes me draw my coat closer around myself as I walk from the subway to our apartment building. I walk up the front steps and into the waiting elevator, dreaming of a full-bodied pinot noir.

The apartment door is unlocked, which is surprising. As close as his office is, Manhattan law is no joke, and Grant

works tough hours. He'd said he wouldn't be too late tonight, though, so I wonder where he's gotten off to. I drop my keys in the bowl and walk into the living room, expecting to find him there, but he is nowhere to be seen.

"Grant?" I call. The aged floorboards whine under my feet as I walk toward the bedroom, dropping my bag on the sofa on the way.

Squeak. Squeak.

I've been arguing with Grant since we first moved in together about the mattress in our bedroom. He loves it, but I can't stand the creaky springs. The thing is, though, that the springs only make noise whenever he and I get down to some adult business. Seeing as how I'm standing out in the hallway, I start to realize with growing horror that that means...

Oh, Jesus.

When I push open the bedroom door with fingers that suddenly feel pale and trembly, I'm greeted with something I never, ever wanted to see.

The first thing I see is Grant's pale ass, clenching as he thrusts.

The second thing I see is the horrified face of the woman beneath him, who has just locked eyes with me and realized—way, way too late—that she's made a big mistake.

My jaw hits the floor.

The woman tries to push Grant off of her and cover up with the comforter, but it takes the big oaf a second to realize what's happening. When he finally does and looks up to see me standing in the doorway, his face falls.

"It's not what it looks like!" he yells. He's leaping out of bed, pulling on a pair of boxers—the ones I got him for his birthday last year, I notice—and gesticulating wildly.

Looking at him makes me feel nauseous, so I look at the girl instead. She's huddled beneath the comforter. Her bottle-blond hair is in wild disarray and her eyes are wide with shock.

“It’s not what it looks like!” Grant repeats, like I hadn’t heard him the first time.

For a second, I want to believe him. It would be so much easier to drink down his lies than to accept that my fiancé, the man I’ve spent every Sunday cuddled on the couch with for the past two years, has betrayed me in the worst way.

But there’s no denying that it is exactly what it looks like.

Anger fills my veins like kerosene. All I need now is a match.

“Then what is it?” I demand, eyes widening. “Were you inspecting each other for lice? Did she lose an earring down your pants?”

Grant rushes over. His sandy hair is standing up in wild tufts and there is lipstick smudged around his mouth. “Baby, let me explain!”

The sight of those lips—the lips that I thought were mine alone to kiss—sets fire to my blood, singing my skin from the inside.

He’s got big, soulful eyes. I remember falling for them, for him. They looked good in the candlelight at the Italian place he took me for our first serious date. Even now, part of me wants to soak up the emotion there and forgive him.

I put that part of me in a box, lock it, and throw away the key.

“Get out,” I demand coldly, jabbing a finger toward the front door. “Both of you need to get out right now.”

My heart is trying to climb up my throat. I feel like I’m going to throw up. How could he do this to me? I am two seconds from completely breaking down, and like hell am I going to let Grant be here to witness that.

Grant frowns. “But it’s my apartment.”

“I said get the fuck out before I throw you out!” My raised voice does the trick. With a yelp, the woman runs past me toward the front door.

Grant turns and reaches for a pair of pants. I must not've been clear; maybe he needs me to repeat myself one last time.

“Did I stutter? I said, *Get. The. Fuck. Out!*”

Hearing the venom in my voice, Grant abandons the pants and bolts out the door. Two seconds later, I hear the front door slam closed.

I collapse in the hallway, like a puppet whose strings have been mercilessly snipped.

The room seems to ring with the echo of my pounding heart. I am still and silent for a long time, my mind blissfully blank. I just stare at the wall, listening to my ragged pulse.

I remember picking out the paint for the hallway. The color is called Gray Steel. After I moved in, I wanted to make it feel more like our home, rather than just his, but Grant liked everything the way it was. He wouldn't let me move furniture around, or redecorate the living room, or reorganize the closet. He eventually relented and allowed me to paint this one hallway, where the walls had been scuffed in a few places already. I was given a few square feet to make my own. At the time, I was grateful for it.

How could I not see back then that Grant wasn't willing to make room in his life for me?

My eyes sting with tears. I throw my head back against the wall. We were supposed to get *married*. After all the sacrifices I made for him, all the times I put him first, and now I find out that our life together meant fuck-all to him?

I break out into wretched sobs. Fat tears roll down my cheeks, shoulders shaking, chest heaving as I struggle to breathe. I'm not sure whether I'm mourning the loss of my fiancé or the loss of the life I'd planned with him—marriage, babies, a family of my own.

Whatever it is, I lost something today. And goddamn it, it hurts.



I have not the faintest desire to get out of bed in the morning, but I know that work is the only thing that will remove the image of Grant's lipstick-stained grimace from my mind. So I slog my way to the office and finish up the community center piece. Then it's time to check out the dog show.

It feels good to do nothing. For a change, I'm actually grateful that Debbie loves handing me the nonsense assignments. I don't have the brain capacity for legal drama or deep investigative reporting. A dog show of celebrity impersonators is about the most I can process right now.

As predicted, it is very twee. My favorite is a greyhound dressed like Ziggy Stardust, who howls into a microphone on command. He doesn't end up winning anything, which is disappointing. The winner of the best costume category is a poodle with a laconic grin who goes by "Pawl Newman." Second place goes to a weiner dog in a sparkly jumpsuit and a ginger wig who the owner would have us believe is Elton John. I leave thinking that Ziggy was robbed.

I head back to the office to start writing up the piece, wondering if this is it for me. Am I doomed to spend the rest of my days writing articles that nobody will read until I eventually retire to become a childless, angry cat lady? There has to be more than this.

During the day, I text my best friend, Clara Fitzgerald, to update her on the latest in my love life. She tries to call me several times during the day, but I don't answer. When I finish work at five-thirty on the dot, I call her back.

"Finally!" she groans. "I was beginning to worry about you."

"Sorry. It's just been a busy day." I fish a chocolate bar out of my purse and start munching on it on my way to the subway.

"I can't believe Grant. What an absolute pig."

"I know." I sigh. "Look, I'm going to lose you in the subway soon. Can I call you later?"

“No need!” Clara says brightly. “I’m on my way over to your place now.”

“Clara ...”

I really don’t feel like company tonight. It’s Friday, which means there will be a movie on TV and I can be as hungover as I want in the morning. There’s a bottle of wine on the rack that Grant’s boss got us for our engagement that we were supposed to wait until the wedding to drink. That bad boy’s getting cracked. I’ve also got a pint of Ben and Jerry’s in the freezer. My evening is set.

“Oh—I’m losing you,” Clara hisses into the phone. “Can’t—cutting out.”

“Clara!”

“See—soon!”

She hangs up and I curse under my breath. Clara is very kind, and wise, and unbelievably forgiving, but she’s also the pushiest person I’ve ever met. She seeks to control everything in her environment, which I know is something that has come out of two hard years of sobriety but still frustrates me sometimes.

Still, I guess it will be nice to spend some quality time with my best friend. I’ll need to move out of Grant’s apartment soon, so it could be fun to do a little damage to it.

Clara is waiting in front of my building when I get home. She is holding two big shopping bags and bounds up to me, throwing her arms around my shoulders. One of the bags smacks against my spine.

“Ouch,” I complain. “What is that? A bag of bricks?”

Clara chuckles. “Just you wait.”

We head up to the apartment and Clara sets the bags on the kitchen island, then throws herself across the sofa. Her mass of golden curls spills over the armrest and she tilts her head back to look at me.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

I sigh and slump into the armchair opposite. “Weird.”

“Maybe a little free?”

“Nope. Just weird.” My head lolls to the side and I meet her gaze. “We had a plan, Clara. Grant and I had a plan. After we got married, we were going to travel, and then we were going to start our family. Grant wanted a girl first, but I wanted a boy, a little fella I could dress up as a sailor and teach to always be polite. He’d be the kind of kid that would call adults ‘ma’am’ and ‘mister,’ and everyone would fawn over how cute he was.”

“Were you planning to have a child in the 1950s?” she asks skeptically.

I frown. “Well, it doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

“You can still have all that,” Clara says. “You’re only twenty-six. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you, and it’s better to start fresh now than spend the rest of your life tied to a man who was never going to put you first.”

“You’re right.” I look back to the ceiling. “I’m just scared to start over.”

“If life didn’t scare you, it wouldn’t be worth living.”

“I’m sure that will be comforting in a couple of weeks, but at the moment, I just ...” I look over at her. “I don’t know. I’m hurt.”

Clara sits up, green eyes twinkling with something I can only describe as mischief. “You know what I hear when you say that?”

“What?”

“That you need a distraction,” she says. “Let’s go out tonight.”

My eyebrow raises skeptically. “Out?”

“Yeah. Like to a club.” She folds her legs under her, looking every bit the yoga instructor she is. “Yes, let’s go dancing! I’ll tell you the same thing I told my students today:

if all else fails, feed your soul with deep stretches and heavy bass.”

“You did not say that to your class.”

“I did, too.”

I chuckle. “Okay, sensei. All the same, I think I’ll nama-stay home.”

“Please come out with me?” She pouts her pink lips. “It’ll be good for you. Now that you’ve kicked Grant to the curb, you can actually have a little excitement in your life.”

Clara always thought of Grant as boring, with his long monologues and predictable patterns. He was the sort who adhered to a weekly schedule like his life depended on it—CrossFit three times a week, his favorite cop drama on Tuesday nights, fish for dinner every Friday. It’s ironic that after years of being able to tell the time based on his movements, he would throw me a curveball so unexpected that it would knock me on my ass.

“Grant was boring, wasn’t he?” I realize out loud.

Clara nods. “An absolute snoozefest. A pretty face, but very little going on upstairs.”

“Very little going on downstairs either,” I remark. “I can’t imagine that floozy was with him because of his commendable ability to fall asleep almost immediately after ejaculating.”

She snickers. “That’s the spirit!”

“Ugh. Why was I even with him?” I scrub a hand over my face. “I think on some level I always knew I was settling. I’m just annoyed that it took this happening for me to realize it.”

Admittedly, I was always curious about the concept of having a spark in a relationship. It was something I never felt that Grant and I had. I presumed that what we did have—comfort and security—was better. Stronger. More stable.

Clearly, Grant didn’t think so. With my blinders off, I realize I shouldn’t have thought so, either.

“Your dad likes him,” Clara points out. “I think you’ve always been a little blind where your dad is concerned.”

“Dad only likes him because he’s also a lawyer,” I reply. “He just likes having someone around he can talk torts to.”

I haven’t even told my dad the news yet. In fact, I’ve hardly spoken to him lately. He’s been busy defending the innocent, and I’ve been busy looking for new ways to describe canine outfits. I always worry that my dad judges me for not living up to my potential. I hate the thought of disappointing him.

Clara shoots to her feet and goes to the island, grabbing the bags she brought before setting them down on the coffee table. “Let’s do something fun. You remember fun, right?”

“I just don’t know if I’m in the mood, Clara ...” I eye the bags suspiciously. “Plus, don’t you think a club will just be a den of temptation to you?”

She waves dismissively. “Please. I am so Zen these days that the thought of alcohol doesn’t even faze me. I just want to dance with my best friend and help dig her out of the misery spiral she’s about to sink into.”

“Who said anything about a misery spiral?”

“I see you glancing over at the freezer.” She flattens her lips. “If I don’t get you out of here, you’ll end up watching terrible romcoms until you pass out in a puddle of melted ice cream.”

I am annoyed that she has anticipated my evening plans so astutely.

“Fine,” I sigh. “Let’s go dance.”

She squeals and perches on the coffee table, pulling items out of the bags. She has brought her entire makeup kit, as well as enough hair-styling tools to supply a pageant.

“What’s all this?” I ask suspiciously.

“This is your future.” She pulls a sparkly dress out of one of the bags with a flourish. “Gaze upon it with glee, for I am going to give you a makeover.”

I eye the dress. “That’s not going to fit me.”

Clara is petite, with toned everything and an ass that defies gravity. I run on the curvier side, with a flat stomach but flaring hips, thick thighs, and generous cleavage. I have the kind of body that looks great in pencil skirts and form-hugging jeans, but I’m dubious about the slinky number that Clara has picked out for me.

“It absolutely will fit,” she replies. “You can trust me. I’m enlightened.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously wise.” She fans out a selection of makeup brushes. “Now... Where to begin?”

Clara pokes and prods at me for the next hour. By the end of it, my face is so caked with makeup and my hair so full of spray that I question whether I will be able to keep my head upright. Clara announces in a singsong voice that she is finished and somehow goads me into the sparkly dress. Then she guides me to the mirror, and the first thing I see is her hopeful expression.

And then... Wow.

Clara has coaxed my normally curly hair into silky waves that cascade over the tops of my breasts. My blue eyes pop under thick black false lashes, with gold and purple eyeshadow and thick black liner on the upper lids. My lips are light pink and shiny, and my skin is flawless, like creamy marble.

And the dress... Damn, the dress. It clings to me in all the right places, with a deep V accentuating my cleavage and a fringe at the bottom that tickles the tops of my thighs when I move.

“I don’t even look like me,” I comment, turning my face from side to side, entranced by my own reflection.

“That’s not so bad, is it?” Clara brings the makeup to the mirror and bumps me out of the way while she starts on her own face. “Tonight you can be anyone you want to be.”

She's right, I realize. I am transformed.

Maybe going out is a good idea after all.



Clara and I hit up a few bars on the Lower East Side before making our way to what she claims is the best club in all of New York City—Fiamma. Once we get inside, it is a veritable buffet of sights and sounds. Loud dance music pulses through the speakers and ultra-glam revelers pack the dance floor and wave their arms above them as neon lights slash through the crowd.

I had a couple drinks in the earlier bars, but I never drink to excess when I'm around Clara. She says it doesn't bother her, but it doesn't seem fair. I'm working with a bit of a buzz, so Clara and I skip the bar and head straight for the dance floor.

I don't know the song playing but let the beat flow through me as I start to dance, winding my hands toward the ceiling and rolling my hips. It feels good to dance. I lose myself in it, swaying and twisting and tossing my hair. Clara and I make eye contact and break into giggles. It is the first time all day that I have felt truly alive.

I look over my shoulder to see how crowded the bar is, and my eye lands on a man cutting through the crowd a few feet behind me. My breath catches.

I'm just drunk enough to have one crystal-clear thought amidst the chaos: *That is one fine specimen.*

He must be around 6'5" as he towers above the crowd of high-heeled glamazons. His dark hair feathers around his face and the nape of his neck. It's the kind of hair that looks silky to the touch, and my fingers twitch at the thought of running my hands through it. His full lips are set in a hard line, as though annoyed at having to swim through the sea of bodies. He glances over, and for a second, our eyes meet.

My heart skips a beat and I go still, like a deer in the headlights. His eyes are dark pools that draw me in until I feel as though I'm drowning. He looks away, and I snap back into the present, realizing that for the past few seconds, I've forgotten to breathe.

The man disappears without so much as a backward glance. Maybe he wasn't looking at me at all.

Clara pokes my shoulder. "You okay?"

I nod and go back to dancing. "Sorry. Got distracted."

"By that hunk of man meat?" She licks her lips. "I don't blame you."

I dance until my feet ache, and sweat shimmers on my chest. I even indulge in a little bump-and-grind with a few guys who come my way, but the second any of them start asking too many questions, I grab Clara and we scoot into another part of the crowd. I just want to have fun, and at the moment, the idea of chatting up any guy is the opposite of that.

Clara and I hit the bar and I order drinks. She starts to drift off in the direction of a sexy guy with a very impressive afro and I have to wrangle her back to my side as she has my wallet and phone in her purse.

We hit the dance floor again and the guy comes over, performing silly dance moves like some sort of mating ritual for Clara's approval. It works. One second I'm shimmying with my best friend, the next I'm sipping a drink next to her while she and the hot rando paw at each other like teenagers.

I scan the club, my vodka cran tasting increasingly bitter with every sip. I don't even realize what I'm looking for until I see him—the hot guy I maybe made eye contact with earlier. He's leaning against the wall near the VIP area, scrolling through his phone.

I don't get him. He doesn't seem to belong here. He's too serious, and he looks too bored. He's wearing a slim-fitting black suit, with a black shirt and a red tie. It's bold, but he's not peacocking. He's just... being.

As though he can feel my gaze, the man looks up from his phone. His gaze skewers through me from across the room. A blue light splashes across my face, and I have no doubt that this time he is looking at me. Everything seems to slow down around me and my pulse races. His mouth lifts ever-so-slightly in a smirk. My mouth is dry, and I down the rest of my drink in one gulp. When I look back up, he is already walking up the stairs into the VIP area.

I turn back to Clara and grimace. She and her new friend look as though they're trying to eat each other, but at least she's having fun, I suppose.

Clara breaks away and whispers something in the guy's ear, then comes to talk to me.

"Hunter and I are going to get out of here," she says. "You'll be okay to get home, right?"

I nod, forcing a smile. "Sure."

She smooches my cheek and grabs Hunter's hand. The two of them disappear within seconds. It's almost impressive, or rather, it would be if it weren't so annoying.

I heft a sigh and glance down at my empty drink. I'll grab one more for the road. There's a bottle of wine waiting for me at home, and if I'm remembering correctly, I've got a big bag of Doritos in one of the cupboards.

I squeeze my way to the bar and order another drink, swaying to the music. The bartender, a gorgeous redhead covered in tattoos, hands me my drink, and I take a sip absently as she keys it into the till.

Only then do I realize that my wallet disappeared from the club at the same time that Clara did.

GABRIEL

The bass vibrates through the floor, but it's a lot quieter up here than it is in the club below. I am sitting in my usual booth at Fiamma, my favorite club out of all the bars my family owns in the city. It's a good place to conduct business. There's little chance of being overheard, and my father would never set foot here, preferring to keep to the old drinking holes he and his friends spent their youths in, shrouded in a cloud of cigar smoke.

To my left sits Vito Gambaro, my best friend since grade school. He will be my consigliere, my right-hand man, once I take control of the syndicate. For now, he's my most trusted confidant, and the only person in the organization who I know without a doubt expresses loyalty to me and me alone.

Across from us sit Dom Rozzi and Diego Berdini. Dom is a good capo but takes his pleasures in the simple things in life, not caring much for politics or strategy. He thinks with his muscles and his dick, and doesn't like any problem he can't fix with his fists. True to form, Dom is staring lecherously at a pair of long legs that saunter past. Diego chuckles.

I lean toward Vito. "Is the meeting set?"

Vito glances at Diego, but the older man is too distracted by Dom's drooling to notice our sidebar. "Yeah. They'll meet with us at the docks tomorrow."

I sip my whiskey. "Good."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Vito asks.

I send him a dark look.

Vito is immune to the power of my glares and leans closer, lowering his voice. “Your father will be livid if he finds out.”

My father is the don of the Belluci crime family and Vito is right—he will be downright furious if he learns that I am making plays behind his back. Unfortunately, it is a necessary evil. If my father has his way, he will bring ruin to the family and end a generations-long dynasty of power. He has always been a greedy man, but as of late, his greed has begun to consume him. I intend to prevent that from destroying us all.

“He will come around to see that it is the best move for the business,” I state. “He may act like one, but my father is not a fool.”

I hope that is the truth. Lately, his actions have shown otherwise.

We Bellucis command the majority of the docks, a vital piece of real estate for any criminal organization. The Irish mafia, run by the Walsh family, controls a small chunk for themselves. My father has been gearing up to wrest control of the docks from them entirely but cannot see why that is a bad idea. The Walshes are strong, and I suspect that they have another power backing them as they have had a recent surge in resources and capabilities. The don is blind to this. He refuses to think of the Walshes as anything other than the tick on our back that they have been for the past couple of decades.

“What are you two whispering about?” Diego interjects.

I look over at the older man. His dyed black hair is slicked back from his forehead, and fine lines furrow his face. Beneath his suit, his arms and chest are covered in faded tattoos, a map of the tumultuous life he has led for so many years.

Diego is like an uncle to me, and I wish I could trust him as he’d be a valuable ally to have. Unfortunately, he has been a close friend of my father’s since they were teenagers.

“Vito was just reminding me of the time that he and I snuck in here when we were kids,” I reply.

Diego laughs, exposing teeth yellowed by decades of smoking. “I remember that. I had to come down and throw you both out on your asses because the bouncers were too afraid to deal with you.”

“Everyone was,” Vito chimes in. “Nobody wanted to be the one to give the twelve-year-olds beer, but Gabe knew how to throw his weight around, even then.”

“You two were always getting into trouble.” Diego leans back, grinning. He nods to me. “You were the king of the castle before anyone even handed you the keys.”

I chuckle. I guess nothing has changed.

The waitress comes by with our next round of drinks, and the conversation soon moves onto the upcoming boxing match. This divides the table as Vito backs the more experienced Russian powerhouse, whereas Diego and Dom maintain that the Bronx-bred newcomer will easily unseat Vito’s champion.

I don’t care much for boxing or sports in general. They are just distractions. A distracted man is an easy one to fool.

I glance over the balcony at the throbbing dance floor below. My gaze catches on a brunette in a sparkly silver dress that splinters the flashing strobe lights. I saw her face in the crowd earlier as I cut through the dance floor, and I remember thinking she was stunning.

I watch as she dances with wild abandon, occasionally swishing her long wavy hair into the faces of the other clubgoers, but she doesn’t seem to notice or care. Even from this distance, I can see that her body is built for sin, and my cock stirs as I watch her hands glide over her cleavage and hips.

Diego’s voice cuts through my leer. “Gabriel, did you hear me?”

I look back to him, blinking. Who is the distracted one now?

“No,” I answer. “What did you say?”

He leans closer, glancing out of the booth to make sure nobody is close enough to overhear. “Your father wanted me to check that you know your role in the upcoming merger.”

We always speak in veiled terms when in public, and I understand his meaning.

I nod. “It is not complicated.”

My father’s plans never are. He lacks the elegance of strategy that my grandfather employed while consolidating our power decades prior. The don’s plan to harness control of the docks involves mostly muscle and firepower, the only strategy being to kill the Irish before they can kill us. I am meant to conduct this strategy from the north, while our other forces push in from the east and west.

“I know you have your misgivings, but this acquisition will weaken our competitors enough to push them out of business,” he says. “You’ll see.”

The only thing I will see if this plan goes ahead is a long and costly mob war. One is already brewing due to my father’s machinations, and attacking the docks will pour gasoline on the smoldering embers.

Luckily, before that can happen, I intend to meet with the Irish leader’s youngest son, Damien Walsh. We will strike a tentative peace while the Bellucis still have the upper hand that will hopefully bring a little order back to our streets. My father has wasted enough men and money on this already, and when I bring news of the arrangement to him, I am hoping he will have enough sense to see it is the best solution.

The trick will be in arranging this truce without drawing Damien’s suspicion. If he thinks an attack is imminent, it could spook him and make him unpredictable. I need him to be calm and malleable.

Before I can answer Diego, my phone begins to ring. I check the screen and my jaw tightens. It’s the big man himself.

“Excuse me,” I say, exiting the booth.

I make my way to the back alley, where it is quieter. I lean against the bricks and look at my phone, considering whether

it would be worth it not to answer. No, I decide, I need to be on his good side.

“Hello, Father,” I answer.

“Where the fuck are you?” he growls.

“Fiamma.”

“Of course. Where else would you be? It’s not as if we have a war to plan, is it?”

I grit my teeth. “Do you need me?”

“I need you to remove your head from your ass and start acting like the leader you’re going to be one day,” he bites out. I can just picture his face turning purple, as it always does when he gets wound up. “I’m beginning to think that maybe Felicity is right. Maybe you’re not going to be ready to take over when the time comes.”

Felicity Harrow, that scheming witch. My father has been absolutely obsessed with the woman for the past two years, and you can pinpoint the decline in his senses from the second she walked through the door. My father has always let his dick do more of his thinking than any man should—Felicity was just the first woman to capitalize on it. She quickly moved from mistress to advisor, spreading her influence like a virus.

“I’m with Diego,” I reply, trying to keep my voice calm when all I want to do is scream at him. “We are going over the plans for the merger.”

That takes some of the wind from his sails. “Why didn’t you say that?” he grumbles. “I swear to God you take pleasure in pissing me off.”

I ignore his question. “Do you need me to come to your office?”

“No. Just wanted to check to make sure you weren’t fucking around.”

In other words, he was hoping I would be so he could flex his authority a little. We play this game often.

“Great. Tell Felicity I say hi.”

I hang up the phone and head back into the club, consciously trying to relax my jaw. How I am even related to that man is beyond me. He is shameless in his arrogance.

It will be his downfall.

Back inside, I stop next to the wall before heading back to the VIP section to quickly check my emails. With everything happening, it can be easy to forget that I have a lot of responsibilities besides keeping my father in check. He largely leaves the running of our legitimate businesses to me, claiming that he finds the work tedious and beneath him. In truth, he just doesn't have the head for it. If he can't shoot it or fuck it, he's not interested.

My spine tingles and I glance up from my phone. My gaze connects with the girl I watched dance earlier, and her eyes widen as she realizes she has been caught staring.

I hold her gaze, heat flooding my bones. Her lips are a bold, juicy red. She is heavily made up, like all of the women in here, but she seems less comfortable in it somehow. Other women would smile at me, flutter their lashes, and try to lure me in to dance with them. She is just still, as though she hopes by not moving, I will not be able to see her.

Any other time, I would love to stalk that prey, to melt away her hesitance until she was putty in my hands. But not now. Now, there is business to attend to. She will have to remain a fantasy and nothing more.

I turn and climb the stairs for the VIP area, returning to my booth. I will ask Diego to reiterate the details of my father's plan even though I know them already. That way, when the don asks Diego about our meeting later, he will corroborate my story.

The men and I talk for a little longer, but even Diego's attention begins to stray towards the delights of the club. I have achieved my objective, however, so I dismiss them for the evening, and I decide that the best thing to do would be to go home and do some work. I could do work every hour of every day and still not get enough done.

Then I look down from the balcony and see *her* again. It's the girl in the glimmering dress, but she's not dancing anymore. She is at the bar, and it looks as though she is arguing with the bartender.

Interesting. I didn't peg her as the fiery type, but from her irritated gestures it looks as though I was mistaken.

Perhaps what I need tonight is not more work, but a little distraction. And I know exactly how I am going to get it.

ALEXIS

I place the drink back on the counter, sliding it away from me.

The bartender looks up from the till. “That’ll be twelve dollars.”

I clear my throat. “Here’s the thing.” I wince. “I just remembered that my friend has my wallet, and she left. I’m so sorry for being a pain, but would it be okay if I just, you know, gave the drink back to you?”

Her kohl-lined eyes flick from the drink, which is now about three quarters full, to me. She narrows her eyes. “That’ll be twelve dollars.”

“Like I said—again, so sorry—but I can’t pay for this drink.”

“So you just expect me to give it to you?” she scoffs.

“Well, no. I’m giving it back.”

“You drank some,” she says in a flat voice. “It’s not like I can just give it to someone else now.”

I want to cry. Why didn’t I think to grab my wallet before Clara left? Better yet, why didn’t I just decide to leave when she did?

I already know the answer to that. There is a bag of Doritos and a bottle of wine waiting for me at home, sure, but nothing else. Just a big, empty apartment that I don’t even belong in anymore, if I ever did in the first place. The longer I

stay here, packed by people on all sides, the less time I have to spend listening to echoes in the vacant space where my life used to be.

“Look, I totally get where you’re coming from,” I tell her. “I wish I didn’t have to be this person, but I can’t pay for this drink. It’s an unfortunate mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.”

The bartender sticks a hand on her hip and taps the bar top. “That might work in other clubs, but not here. And frankly, it’s a little pathetic.”

Irritation unfurls in my belly. I take a deep breath and try to remember that she is just doing her job. She could be a little less mean about it, but I shouldn’t take it personally.

“This isn’t a trick,” I say, throwing my hands up in exasperation. “Please believe me.”

“Sure.” She rolls her eyes, then sticks out her lip and flutters her eyelashes. “*Please, Ms. Bartender,*” she continues in a baby voice. “*My friend took my wallet and now I can’t pay for my drink. Whatever will I do?*”

I glower at her, hands clenching. For some reason, I now imagine I’m seeing Grant’s blonde skank standing across the bar from me. Sneering at me. Mocking me.

“You’re getting awfully pissy about a drink that probably cost less than a dollar to make,” I snap.

I am no longer thinking straight. Grant betrayed me, Clara abandoned me, and now this bartender is refusing to give me a break even though I desperately need one. The world is trying to punch down on me. I’m sick of just turning the other cheek. Time to punch back.

“Pissy?” she snarls. “Bitch, have you looked in a mirror recently?”

Okay, now it’s definitely getting personal.

“Just take the drink back,” I groan. “Why do you have to be so difficult?”

“I am so sick of dealing with bitches like you. Just dig a few crumpled dollars from between those fake tits and get the

fuck out of my bar.”

“They are not fake!” I shout. “So I’m actually going to take that as a compliment, ha!”

A hand glides over my lower back and I freeze as the tall man I saw earlier appears at my side. He shoves a twenty in front of my nose.

“Stop yelling at the bartender,” he orders. He is so close that his earthy scent invades my senses, much like he is invading my space.

I slap the bill away. “Mind your own business.”

The bartender has gone silent, all traces of aggression washed away by the man’s arrival. Typical. I bet he is the kind of asshole who hangs around places like this so he can throw his weight and money around at every opportunity. Not today.

The man ignores me and slides the money over the bar top. The bartender snatches it up before I have a chance to say a word.

“Keep the change,” he tells her.

She nods and moves on to serve the next customer, bringing our interaction to an anticlimactic end.

I turn and look up at him. Even in my heels, he is significantly taller than me, so I straighten my back to achieve maximum height.

“I had it covered,” I assert.

His lip tics at the corner, the barest hint of a smile. “Did you?”

I did not, not at all, but since I didn’t get to finish what I started with the bartender, my leftover annoyance has to go somewhere. This rich asshole fits the bill perfectly. I bet he has had everything in life handed to him, and he expects women to fall at his feet just by opening his wallet.

“Yes.” I fold my arms. “It was a simple misunderstanding, and I was close to making her see that.”

“What kind of misunderstanding?”

I run a hand through my hair, sighing. “My friend left with some guy and took my wallet. I didn’t realize until I’d already ordered the drink.”

“Your friend left you?” he inquires.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He begins to lead me away from the bar. “Then you have no excuse not to have a drink with me.”

“Except for the fact that maybe I don’t want to.”

He glances down. “That’s too bad, because the way I see it, you owe me.”

My heart thuds against my ribs. How does he make that sound so delicious? My head fills with visions of him undressing me, laying me out on a bed of black silk. I blink to flush the thoughts out.

“One drink,” I clarify.

He nods. “One drink.”

Guys this hot are bad news, and after the week I’ve had, I know that I should be making smarter choices than this. But here I am, walking with him. Doing exactly as I am told. I glance up at him as we move through the crowd, tracing the long line of his jaw and his full, stern lips. The only imperfection is a little crook in his otherwise straight nose, as though it was broken in the past. It makes me curious.

Maybe, considering the night I’ve had, this is the smart choice. I don’t have to do anything. I can just have a drink with this smoking-hot stranger and go home. Would that be so bad? He intrigues me, and if I’m being honest, I’m flattered by his attention. He is a god, and as a mere mortal, don’t I have a duty to oblige?

The man leads me up to a booth in the VIP area. There is a long padded bench on either side of the table, with a balcony at the far end overlooking the club below. Deep aquamarine lights line the booth’s roof, giving the interior an otherworldly glow. The walls on either side help block out some of the noise, though as I sit, the bass thrums up my thighs.

The man slides in close next to me. Electricity sizzles up the side of my body where his side just brushes mine.

“What’s your name?” he asks. Now that I can hear him better, I note that his voice is deep and throaty, almost like a lion’s purr.

“Alexis.” I sip my drink. “And yours?”

“Gabe.”

Gabe. It’s such a plain, pedestrian name. It doesn’t really suit him. I can’t help but smirk.

“Something funny?” he asks, tilting one brow.

Somehow, I don’t think he will like it if he finds out I’m laughing at his name. I look past him and point down to the dance floor, where a heavily muscled guy in a white tank top and matching white track pants is trying to grind on a girl who clearly has zero interest. His frosted tips glow in the black lights.

“I didn’t realize that Backstreet was back,” I comment.

Gabe doesn’t laugh, but his amused smile is reward enough. His left cheek dimples when he smiles. Just the left, like a little secret.

“You’re funny,” he says.

It doesn’t come across as a compliment, more an observation.

“Sometimes,” I reply.

He waves at a passing waitress. He doesn’t say anything to her, but she nods and dashes off, as if he has delivered a command with his mind.

Gabe leans in a little closer, resting his hand on the table and turning his body, caging me in. He is not smiling now, and the intensity of his expression makes my heart jump up my throat.

“People are funny when they’re covering up pain,” he says. “Are you in pain, Alexis?”

I clear my throat as a vision of my mother's sallow face swims into my mind. I shove it down, keeping my expression neutral. I get the feeling that Gabe likes his cruel games. He fancies himself a cat and me the injured bird.

"Dr. Phil has nothing on you," I state blithely. "Do you get paid to make comments like that or is the shock on people's faces compensation enough?"

His mouth curves wickedly. My heart flutters.

"I look forward to stripping away that armor," he says.

His words evoke that image of black silk again and I take another sip of my drink. At that moment, the waitress arrives back at our booth with a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice and two glasses. She sets them down in front of us.

"Thank you," Gabe says, sliding her a crisp one hundred dollar bill.

She nods in a way that looks a little like a bow and leaves. She clearly knows Gabe but doesn't talk to him. I can't figure out if that's weird or not.

"You said one drink." I hold my half-finished vodka cranberry up.

Gabe takes the bottle from the bucket and begins to pull away the foil from the cork. I can't help but notice his hands are nimble for how massive they are.

"I did say one drink," he replies, popping the cork. "But I never said what of."

"That's cheating."

"You must live a charmed life if you think that's cheating." He pours out a glass of champagne and sets it in front of me.

"You're one to talk about charmed lives," I remark. "Everything about you screams money. I bet you've never known what it is to struggle."

He chuckles. "If only you knew."

"Cryptic."

“Unapologetically so.” He clinks his glass against mine and takes a drink.

I narrow my eyes and sip my drink. It is, without a doubt, the best champagne I’ve ever had. It’s like nectar. I shudder to think how much this bottle must have cost.

I tilt my glass up again and drain it back. This earns me an amused tilt of the lips from Gabe, but not quite a smile. I get the feeling he dispatches those sparingly.

“Looks like my drink is done,” I say. “Whoops.”

Gabe refills the glass and raises his eyebrow, as if to say, *Your move.*

I push the glass away. “Listen, I think you’re barking up the wrong tree here.” I gesture out to the crowd. “There are any number of brainless bimbos waiting for you to pluck them out of obscurity so they can massage your ego and bend to your will. Why don’t we go find you one of those?”

“I don’t want a brainless bimbo,” he replies huskily, leaning closer. His eyes skewer mine. “I want you. You needn’t massage my ego, but I think you’ll find you will bend to my will.”

My mouth goes dry. That’s a checkmate if I’ve ever heard one. I take a breath, scouring my brain for a witty retort but finding nothing.

This man, this beast of a man, has turned my brain to goo.

I don’t want to give him what he wants, but the problem is that what he wants is what I suddenly, desperately need. The hot promise of those words is enough to drive every thought from my brain except fervent desire. An ache grows between my thighs. I squeeze them together.

His lip curls. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Just planning an escape route.”

He shakes his head slowly, smirking. “No, you’re not.”

I take a breath. “No, I’m not,” I murmur.

I have never wanted someone as much as I want Gabe. His eyes carve a fiery path down my body, and when they return to my face, I am blushing. My better sense warns that this is a bad idea, but I can't figure out why. I'm not looking for another man who will break my heart, so isn't this perfect? I've had a shitty couple of days, and now it would seem fate has thrown me a bone by offering up a gorgeous man to take my mind off everything, if only for a little while.

Hell, I've earned this.

Gabe leans closer and my breath catches in my throat. He reaches out, and I gasp as he yanks a thick black curtain across the opening of the booth, blocking out the rest of the VIP section. He leans back and draws the curtain over the balcony as well.

Just like that, we're completely alone in a building packed with people.

Gabe guides me to my feet, and I don't understand why until he walks me to the side of the table and lifts me up by my hips, setting me on top. He runs his fingers down my cheek, over my neck, between my breasts, and that barest of touches is enough to set me on fire. His hands come to my thighs, spreading them just enough for him to wedge his hips between.

He hasn't even kissed me yet and this is already the most erotic thing I've ever experienced. His thumb brushes over my bottom lip. His expression is serious, almost contemplative, like he is taking me in. I quiver in anticipation.

Without warning, he presses me down to the table and his mouth latches onto my neck. I moan in surprise. I can feel his stiff cock through his pants and it rubs against the bundle of nerves between my legs; the sudden contact after so much anticipation is like fireworks. My hands cling to his jacket in desperation.

He hikes up my dress and cups my ass with one hand while the other squeezes my breast. His lips carve a fiery path down my neck, over my collarbone, and between my breasts, where he shoves the fabric of the dress and my bra aside and

frees my nipples. His mouth ravages me. I can do nothing but moan as he sucks and nips on my sensitive buds. Stars shoot behind my eyelids. He continues to grind his erection against me, and I swear I'm going to come right there and then.

Gabe straightens, shrugging out of his jacket. I watch, gasping for breath, as he calmly rolls the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows.

No, I need him. I need more—and I need it now.

I sit up and grasp the front of his shirt, trying to pull him down to kiss me

His hand comes around my throat and he pushes me back down, holding me in place. Gabe tsks, smirking. "Not so fast." He squeezes just enough for me to know who is in charge, but not enough to hurt. "I want to hear you say it."

I glare at him, core quaking with need. "Say what?"

He smiles darkly, leaning in, and it is the sexiest thing I have ever seen in my life. "Say that you'll bend to my will."

There is no doubt in my mind that this is a man who takes what he wants, who feeds on the power he holds over others. I shiver as I watch him, and I'm shocked by how turned on I am by him dominating me like this.

I am powerless.

And fuck if I'm not getting off on it.

The words seem to fly from my lips of their own accord. "I will bend to your will."

His eyes darken and he leans down, slamming his mouth against mine. I moan against his mouth, core aching for him. Gabe grinds his hips into mine and I cry out from the sheer pleasure of it. My legs squeeze around his waist.

Gabe nibbles my lip and his hand goes between us to release himself. I quiver with anticipation, my heart fluttering against my ribs. I need him so bad. I can't think of anything else I've ever needed this much—not even oxygen.

He pushes my panties to the side and his eyes bore down on mine. He presses inside of me, and I feel myself stretch to accommodate him. He is big. So big that I groan, and my hands claw at his shirt.

His mouth tics once more at the corner. Cocky bastard.

I kiss him hard, urging him deeper. Somewhere in the back of my mind, an alarm bell goes off—I'm having sex with a stranger and we're not even using a condom. I took my pill today, right? And definitely yesterday, too?

Gabe bottoms out, and all those thoughts go out the window.

He starts to pump in and out, his mouth kissing and sucking the exposed skin of my throat. Pressure builds in my core. I scrabble to hang onto him, as though I'm going to float away into the club if I can't keep a solid hold, and Gabe rips my hands away and slams them against the table above my head.

This is so beyond anything I've ever experienced before. This man owns my body. And I'm letting him. I will do anything he asks of me right now as long as, for the love of God, he doesn't stop.

His hips crash into mine in a frenzy. I squeeze my eyes shut and curse, sensation flooding my skin as an orgasm builds deep in my belly. Gabe kisses me again, smothering my cries. His breaths come hard and fast.

“Are you going to come, kitten?” he hisses against my mouth.

“Yeeeessss!”

“Good. Come on my cock, show me how much you love it.”

It starts from the top of my scalp, like icy fingers scraping down my skull. Then it crests like a wave and slams over me. I come so hard that I cry out without meaning to, and my whole body seizes. Still pinned to the table, I am powerless to do anything other than let my orgasm rip through me.

Gabe growls approvingly and slams into me even harder. His breathing is labored, movements erratic. His biceps bulge as he presses me even harder into the table. It is a glorious sight.

“Fuck!” he cries, burying himself in me one last time. I feel him pulse hard before he collapses against my chest, releasing my hands as he catches his breath.

My forehead is sticky with sweat. My legs are shaking. I don’t know whether I should say something or not, and the awkward realization of “What now?” hits me like a ton of bricks.

Gabe rights himself and turns away from me as he does up his pants and runs a hand through his hair. I scoot off the table and stick my boobs back in my dress.

He draws back the curtain to the rest of the VIP section and looks at me. “You can leave.”

His words hit me like a slap in the face, but I don’t show it. “Oh, can I?” I ask, cocking a brow. “Is this you dismissing me?”

Gabe grabs his jacket from the bench and starts dusting it off. “Yes.”

I don’t know what I expected. Did I think I was special? That someone who’d proven himself to be a controlling jerk all evening was going to suddenly start being nice just because we banged?

“Fine with me,” I mutter, snatching the champagne bottle from the ice bucket. “Sayonara, douchebag.”

I take a swig from the bottle and strut out of the VIP area with my head held high. He probably expects me to thank him, maybe kiss his feet on my way, but I’m not about to spend my time kowtowing to some rich asshole.

This is for the best, anyway. The last thing I need in my life is another man. If Grant and my new friend Gabe have taught me anything, it’s that I’m better off alone.

I ditch the champagne bottle on my way out of the club and sail out into the night. The street outside is pulsing with life, and I dodge laughing girls in party dresses and entwined lovers as I pound up the sidewalk. The night air feels like heaven on my flushed skin, but the reprieve is lessened by the pure agony emanating from my feet and the knowledge that it's going to be a long walk home.

With every step, the sass I wore like armor in the club slips away from me, like someone tugging back a silk sheet. Maybe I am better off alone, but why do I have to be? What is it about me that is so easily rejectable? On any other day, Gabe's cold dismissal might not have hurt so much, but the further I walk, the more it digs into me.

I know men like him. I know he's just an asshole. I know he probably treats everyone in his life like they're disposable. But for a second I felt seen, felt wanted. I wasn't expecting him to fall in love with me, but I also didn't expect him just to toss me away.

Just like Grant did.

I hug my arms to my chest. Pain splinters through my toes and up my calves and I grit my teeth, shivering as my earlier warmth abandons me.

It's going to be a long walk home indeed.

GABRIEL

Two years later ...

I glance up from the papers in my lap and look out the car window, tracing the outline of the distant skyscrapers. I take a breath. The drive from one place to another is the only time I have any peace these days. The leather back seat of my Mercedes S-Class has become my haven. It is the only place I do not have to put on a persona, where I can just sit for a minute without somebody needing something from me.

I am on my way to a meeting with Vito and my advisors at my home, where I prefer to conduct all mafia business. Lately, we have had a lot of business.

I look back down at the papers just as a boom rips through the air. The car shakes. My head shoots up and I look over my shoulder to find a plume of smoke rising from the direction of the docks.

Shit.

“David,” I say.

My driver’s eyes meet mine in the rear-view mirror. “Yes, sir?”

“Take me to the docks. Quickly.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a squeal of the brakes, the car careens across the road, and I am thrown against the door by the force of the

hairpin turn. Other cars honk at us, but David blatantly ignores them and slams on the gas in the other direction.

Whatever that explosion was, it might have nothing to do with me, but I have a bad feeling about it.

I pull my Glock 19 from my shoulder holster and call my lieutenant, Antonio Linetti. He and his team are guarding our territory on the docks—what little there is left of it. Antonio doesn't answer, which doesn't bode well.

David slides to a stop in front of our main warehouse on the docks. Thick black smoke belches up from the roof, and men are running this way and that. I do not hear gunshots. One good sign, at least.

I leap from the car, holding the gun at my side, and jog into the fray. I round the front of the warehouse and grit my teeth. There are wounded men groaning on the ground outside while others are still being dragged from the burning building. Inside, red flames crackle and roar as they devour tens of thousands of dollars' worth of product.

I spy Antonio emerging from the smoke with a man slung over his shoulder. Antonio is massive. He isn't quite as tall as me, but he's built like a brick house, and he removes the body from his shoulders and places it on the ground as though it weighs nothing.

"Antonio!" I call.

His bald head turns in my direction and he jogs over.

"What happened?" I ask.

Antonio's face and head are smeared with soot and sweat. His skin is red from the heat. "Someone rigged a bomb on one of the pallets," he explains. "It has completely fucked the warehouse. I don't know if we can save it."

"Any hostiles?" I ask, looking around.

He shakes his head. "Not that we've seen so far. Just the bomb, probably on a timer rather than a remote detonator."

"How many casualties?"

His gaze flicks to the bloody mess at the front of the warehouse. Men are crying out in pain, faces caked in blood. I spot a couple who are missing limbs. Some are not moving at all.

“Hard to say at this point,” he admits. “There were a lot of men in there. We had just taken in a delivery.”

I notice the light catching on something stuck to Antonio’s neck. Leaning closer, I see it is a piece of silver confetti in the shape of a four-leaf clover.

“What the fuck is that?” I growl.

Antonio peels it off and flicks it to the ground. “It’s everywhere. They must have packed it with the bomb.”

I look around, and for the first time, notice glints of silver all over the place. It peppers the ground around the warehouse, sticks to the clothes and skin of the men laid on the ground, and I even see a couple pieces floating down from the ash cloud.

“Those fucking Walshes,” I bite out.

I am livid. Absolutely shaking with rage. I want to slaughter every last one of them, to stuff their mouths with so much of their whimsical fucking confetti that they choke on it.

“Sir, with all due respect, you need to leave,” Antonio says. “The cops are going to be down here at any minute, and you have a public image to protect.”

I grit my teeth. The vein in my forehead pulses as rage floods my system. I know he is right, and that there is nothing I can do here, but I want to help. This attack has made me feel powerless. Weak. I am a don who cannot protect his men.

I shake my head and swear. The best I can do is to make plans to retaliate. For now I need to walk away, to leave this matter in Antonio’s capable hands. I might not like it, but I have to live with it.

“Good luck,” I tell Antonio, clapping him on the back. “Call me to report later.”

He nods and jogs back toward the building. I head to my car, and David speeds off. The smell of smoke still burns in my nostrils, and I know that no matter what happens, I must make Andrew Walsh pay.



I storm through the double doors of the conference room, sending them slamming back on their hinges. A couple of the men around the long, rectangular table jump in their seats, then clear their throats and shuffle papers in embarrassment.

I take my seat, straight-backed, at the head of the table and scan the expectant faces looking back at me. This council is composed of my five capos, Diego, and my trusted consigliere. Usually, Antonio would be present as well, but he is obviously busy.

The only person who doesn't have a trace of uneasiness on his features is Vito. He looks almost bored, though he is hard to read behind his beard at the best of times. I wish he'd never grown the damn thing. He looks ridiculous. His light eyes meet mine.

"We heard about what happened on the docks," Vito says. "Have they taken more territory?"

"No. Not yet," I reply. "The attack was designed to weaken us. I expect that another will follow soon, so we need to be prepared for it."

"We can't lose what little we have left of the docks," Dom Rozzi pipes up. "We need to fight back."

Since taking control of the organization two years ago, Dom has been a constant. His main contribution was securing the loyalty of the other capos, a couple of whom were dubious when I assumed leadership. They soon fell into line, but I am always conscious of the fragility of my fledgling regime. One slip up and I could fuck everything.

"Agreed," I say. "Dom, I'm assigning you to protect the docks with Antonio and his crew. Make sure your men are

patrolling twenty-four-seven. I want it locked down.”

I point to Piero Bianchi. “You and your crew are on standby. If Dom or Antonio call, I want you at the docks in less than ten minutes. Do you understand?”

He nods. “Yes, sir.”

I hate that I am having to concentrate so much force on such a small area, but we cannot lose the last of the grip we have left on the docks. Two years ago, we nearly held a monopoly on them, and now we are clinging to the knife’s edge.

Things could have been different. If my father had listened to me, none of this would have happened.

But he didn’t listen.

He incited a war with the Irish and they fought back harder than we could have ever anticipated. Within months, they had wrested majority control of the docks and had shrunk our territory considerably. Since then, they have been trying to drive us out of the city altogether, and I have been struggling just to keep them at bay. I know they have help but have never been able to figure out who from.

It’s no fucking wonder I can’t sleep at night.

“What about the attacks on the businesses?” Diego asks. He adjusts the reading glasses on his nose and looks down at the paper in his hands. “Three restaurants, one bar, and a retail store, all vandalized to varying degrees in the past week.” He slides a paper across, showing a smashed storefront. Inside, four-leaf clovers have been spray-painted all over the walls.

“These businesses are under our protection,” I state. “Ensure that they receive money to cover the repairs and compensate their losses immediately.” My gaze snaps to Mirko Bernardino and his ever-present scowl. “Send a couple of your most personable men down to check in on them and reinforce our presence. Make sure they know that the Bellucis are still in charge and that these Irish attacks will not be tolerated.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We still have one strong advantage over the Walshes,” I state. “They are cash-poor, which is part of the reason they’re lashing out at us like this. They’re trying to hit us where it hurts and steal a little for themselves while they’re at it. To beat them, we will need to drain their resources, and I have plans to do so.”

The conversation moves onto other business from there, and by the time I notice the hour, the meeting has gone over schedule, and Vito is tapping his watch discreetly at me. I’m going to be late for my next appointment if I don’t leave now.

“I need to go,” I state, rising to my feet. “Dom, go over everyone’s assignments one last time. When you’re finished, check in with Antonio and take his report.”

Dom nods and I leave the room, Vito trailing behind me.

“What’s that?” he asks.

I stop and look at him. “What?”

He reaches out and plucks something from my shoulder—a piece of silver confetti. Conducting business always calms me down. But seeing this disgusting reminder of today’s attack ramps my nerves right back up again.

I don’t answer Vito, and he knows better than to ask a question twice. I head up to my room to change into my tuxedo, angrily adjusting my cufflinks and combing my hair in the mirror. It is ridiculous that I should have to attend something as dull as a museum opening when I have a kingdom to control. Unfortunately, part of being a billionaire is maintaining a public persona. It is the part of the job I hate the most.

Sometimes, I feel like I don’t even get a second to breathe between running the business and leading the Family. On days like today, the transition is abrupt enough to give me whiplash. The only way I have been able to manage both sides of my life is to keep them as separate as possible. So, even though the Walsh problem has dug its claws into my brain, I wrestle it into a box for now and slam the lid closed.

David takes the Rolls Royce to drive me to the gala, and he pulls up to the curb amidst a sea of flashing lights and shouting press. I unfold my long legs from the back seat of the car and stride up the red carpet, ignoring the questions the reporters yell at me.

“Gabriel, attending another event solo?”

“Hey, Gabe, why no arm candy?”

“Gabriel! Gabriel! How does it feel walking in your father’s footsteps?”

The last question nearly makes me pause but I keep walking, painting on a smile as I step through the museum’s front door. I feel dozens of pairs of eyes snap to me, and a few people leaning close to whisper in each other’s ears. If these gaping socialites and self-important yuppies knew half of what I do on a day-to-day basis, they would cower in fear when I enter a room.

I grab a glass of champagne from a passing server and stroll over to the museum director, Helen Tonks. It was she who invited me, and who I have to thank for ruining my evening.

“Helen,” I say with a congenial smile as I approach.

Helen is in her early forties and wears it well. She has high cheekbones and wispy features. Her red hair is coaxed into a chignon and her freckled cheeks pull back in a grin when she sees me. She and her female friend stop talking and both face me.

“I was wondering when you would show up,” Helen says. “For a moment there I thought you were going to stand me up.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” I tell her. “You know how much of a fan of yours I am.”

Helen grins, and I notice her friend subtly elbow her in the side.

“Oh, how rude of me,” she chuckles. “Gabriel, please meet my sister, Fiona. Fiona, this is Gabriel Belluci, whom you’ve

heard so much about.”

The younger woman smiles at me hopefully, and I notice the resemblance for the first time. I take her hand and clasp it.

“Lovely to meet you,” I say.

Fiona’s eyes widen. “Helen says you’re an avid supporter of the arts.”

“I’m happy to attach my name to anything with the power to save humanity,” I reply. “And art is a universal language by which people from all walks of life can communicate.”

The image of a spray-painted clover flashes through my mind. I grit my teeth unconsciously.

“Please excuse me,” I say. “I should mingle for now, but I will speak more to you ladies later.”

Both of them deflate a little, but smile and send me on my way. I make a circuit of the room, dropping in and out of conversations, laughing at boring jokes, dredging up details from memory so I can ask so-and-so about his wife’s knitting obsession and so-and-so about his new yacht. It is exhausting.

I catch a shimmer of silver in the crowd, but before it can evoke my rage, I realize it is a dress and I am transported. Instead of smoke and ash, I see a girl with long brown hair, twirling in a crowd of people. I see a pair of pink lips turned into a disapproving scowl.

I don’t know why I still think about the sassy girl from Fiamma sometimes. I only knew her for a few hours, and she disappeared from my life as quickly as she sashayed into it.

What was her name? I have struggled to remember it in the years since. A-something. Annabelle? Allison?

I look around the room. Hungry eyes meet mine from every corner, and I consider taking someone home to distract me from today’s losses. There are plenty of options to choose from; I should not still be thinking about a girl I fucked from two years ago whose name I can’t even remember.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, dragging me back to the present. It is an email from my assistant, Jenny, reminding me

that I have an interview in the morning. I'd completely forgotten.

Fuck, can I not have a moment of peace? I hate interviews. I hate the tedious questions, always the same but in different words. But that's the life of a billionaire—responsibilities stacked on top of responsibilities.

I sigh and shove my phone back in my pocket. I don't have the time for women.

I dial a smile up and dive back into the fray.

ALEXIS

I check my hair for the fifth time in the elevator mirror. I'm still not sure about it. I cut my long locks to just above my shoulders a couple of weeks ago and I haven't been able to get used to the way it looks or feels. I look more mature, and I know that's a good thing, especially when it comes to interviews like the one I have today, but I miss my long hair.

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. I whip around and march out, hoping that the receptionist across from me didn't see me staring at myself in the mirror.

"I'm here to see Mr. Belluci," I inform her.

She nods and taps on her keyboard. "Please take a seat."

I sit, clutching my notebook to my chest. I am a warrior. I am here to ask questions and get answers. Reclusive billionaire Gabriel Belluci is known for being polite but closed off, and many journalists have tried and failed to obtain details of his personal life. He rarely gives interviews, but because he recently donated a large sum to the newspaper's charity, I have a unique opportunity to dig into him.

I just hope I don't screw it up.

A moment later, the receptionist strides around the desk. "Please follow me."

I stand and adjust my pencil skirt, ensuring my blouse is tucked in properly, and follow her down a hall to a large set of oak double doors. She opens the door and gestures for me to enter, then closes the door behind me.

Gabriel Belluci is typing on his laptop when I enter. He looks up and a shard of ice stabs through my rib cage.

Oh no.

Oh. *No*.

You've gotta be fucking kidding me.

I can't believe my eyes. It's Gabe, the sexy stranger who fucked me senseless in Fiamma two years ago. The one who gave me...

Focus, girl. This isn't Gabe. Well, not exactly. It's Gabriel Belluci. He might be the same man, but we aren't tangled in each other at Fiamma. I'm here to do my job, just like he's here to do his. If I'm going to get through this debacle without actually imploding in my seat, I need to focus on the task at hand. Save the theatrics for later, when I can properly process just what the fuck is happening to me.

He blinks, and for a second, I think he is about to smirk and make some sort of lewd comment, but he doesn't. He closes the lid of his laptop and stands, extending his hand, without a single drop of recognition in his features, even though he must be experiencing the same flashback I am.

"Alexis Wright, I presume," Gabriel says.

I stride forward, adrenaline spiking through me, and shake his hand. Heat flashes from my palm all the way up my arm. "Yes. Thank you for meeting with me."

He drops my hand and gestures to the seat in front of him. "No problem at all. Challenging illiteracy in youth is a cause close to my heart. I think the Finn Striker Foundation is doing great work."

Curiously, his answer feels disingenuous. His body language is stiff, and his face barely moves when he speaks. I don't get the feeling I'm welcome here at all.

Finn Striker was the editor-in-chief of the *New York Union* decades ago and he set up the charity as a way to give back to the community. The charity has struggled in recent years, so Belluci's generous donation has caused quite the stir.

Gabriel looks at me expectantly and I feel my cheeks heat. He is just as hot as I remember—powerful jaw, thick black hair, stern brown eyes that are deep pools just waiting to swallow me up. And, just in case there was any doubt, his nose is a little crooked. This is definitely the man who dominated me in the VIP booth two years ago. I am quiet just a little too long and he frowns.

“Is everything okay, Ms. Wright?”

His voice is like chocolate—rich and dark. I remember the way he commanded me in the booth and my heart flutters.

Get your head together, Alexis. You have a job to do.

I sit upright. “Yes.” I pull out my tape recorder and set it on the desk. “Do you mind if I record this?”

“Yes.”

I pause. Nobody has ever said they minded before. “It’s just for me to review while I write the interview out later.”

He doesn’t flinch. “Take better notes.”

I don’t understand. Is he being like this because he recognizes me and is playing with me, or is he just always this icy?

I want to snap back at him, but I hear Debbie’s Scottish drawl in my head.

This is it, Alexis. This is the big times. You get a juicy scoop on this elusive billionaire and I’ll know you’re ready.

I take a breath. “Okay,” I say, scribbling on my pad while dictating out loud. “Take better notes.”

When I look back up, Gabriel is nearly smiling. Just nearly. Not enough to dimple his left cheek, but hopefully it’s a sign that he’s warming up to me.

I scan my list of questions. “Let’s start with something simple,” I say. “You have a reputation as a bit of a lone wolf. You and your family have always been very private, which is a hard feat to accomplish when you hold such an elevated position in society.”

I pause, trying to formulate my thoughts, but they are all scrambled by the memory of his searing lips on my skin.

“Is that a question?” Gabriel asks in a clipped tone.

I look up, blinking at him. “I was getting there.”

“You know what? I’ve got a better idea.” Gabriel leans forward with a condescending smirk. “I have a very busy day ahead and I’m sure you’ve got lots of meandering questions to ask other people. I’m going to make this easy on you. I’ll have my assistant send you some copy and a couple of quotes for your paper and we can both get on with our day.” He leans back. “I deal with pushy journalists like you all the time and it always goes the same way in the end, so let’s not waste any more time.”

I am appalled. The sheer arrogance. The lack of respect!

That’s when it clicks. The asshole really doesn’t recognize me. I don’t know what I expected. It makes sense that the arrogant, domineering lady killer who I met that night at Fiamma would discard the memory of one of his conquests the second she left the room. I probably only recognized him so easily because I haven’t been with anyone since him. I’m sure he’s had a revolving door of ladies to give fake names to and charm onto their backs.

It’s just like my dad always taught me—rich men are assholes. Full stop.

The thought of my dad sends fire through my veins. He wouldn’t put up with this crap, and neither will I. Since his murder two years ago—not long after I first met Gabriel, actually—I have channeled my father a lot. They never found his killer, which has left me with a lot of anger and nowhere to put it. I tap into that well of rage now.

“You promised the *Union* an hour-long interview,” I say, donning a cold smile. “Whether you like it or not, I’m here so you can make good on your word.” I glance down at my list of questions. “First question: how do you blend your business life with your personal life?”

He cocks a brow. For a second I think he will refuse to answer, maybe even call in security to kick me out, but finally he drops his brow and sighs.

“That’s easy. I don’t have a personal life.”

I frown. “Everyone has a personal life.”

“Next question.”

“What do you mean when you say you don’t have a personal life? What do you do in your free time?”

“Next question.” His tone makes it clear we will not be continuing down that avenue.

I’m feeling feisty, and I figure with this guy I’m not going to get anywhere by being polite.

“Tell me about your father,” I say. “What was your relationship with him like before he died?”

Gabriel’s father died two years ago under infamously suspicious circumstances.

His voice is cold. “Next question.”

“You can’t keep avoiding my questions,” I say. “I have you for an hour. Why make that an unpleasant hour?”

Gabriel stands and walks around the desk. He leans against the edge in front of me, knees nearly touching mine, and folds his arms. The way he looks at me, his mouth ticking at the corner, his eyes dark and challenging, it looks like he wants to eat me alive.

Well, I’ve gotten his attention.

“I’ve never been threatened by a journalist before,” he drawls. “Go on, ink slinger. Tell me what you’re going to do to me.”

Heat flashes between my thighs and I swallow hard. I remember what it felt like to have him pumping inside of me, his hands like shackles keeping me still for his use, and my stomach does a flip.

I force down my lust and stand up, glaring. “I’ll annoy the crap out of you until you give me a response,” I say. “And if you don’t, I’ll write the truth—that you’re just another entitled rich prick who doesn’t give a shit about anything except where your next dollar is coming from and what you will buy with it.”

I want to slap my hand to my mouth. Where did that come from? I expect my outburst to make him angry, but he only seems more amused. It’s infuriating. He’s baiting me into a trap and I am falling for it.

“Given the amount of money I’ve donated to your charity, I don’t expect your editor would like that,” Gabriel points out.

“She also won’t like it if I come out of here without any answers.”

“Like I said, I’ll have a packet sent to you with everything you need.” He straightens and steps forward, and his body is so close to mine that I smell him—earthy and male. Sandalwood, maybe. I resist the urge to gulp his scent in.

“So I can use the same dull script as everyone else?” I ask. “I don’t think so.”

He leans in. “Tough.”

“What is your problem?” I snarl.

“Presently, you.”

“Just give me what I need and I’ll be out of your hair.”

His lip curls into a predatory smile, and I am suddenly aware of how close our bodies are. My heart races.

“Be careful what you wish for, ink slinger. I can think of a few ways to give you what you need.” His eyes dip to my parted lips and I feel frozen to the spot.

Is Gabriel going to kiss me? And if he does, are we going to reenact our first meeting on top of his desk? The thought both thrills and terrifies me.

“Stop calling me that,” I manage to rasp.

“Fine.” He cocks his head. “How about kitten?”

Heat floods my face. I remember him calling me that in the booth. For a second I think that maybe he does recognize me, but I bet that's what he calls all the girls he screws. It's easier than calling them by their names.

Gabriel is toying with me. I know I shouldn't take the bait, but I can't help but scowl. "Don't you dare."

"You're right. Tiger is much more fitting."

He growls, baring some of his teeth, and I know he is mocking me but the action is so sexy that I can't help but squeeze my thighs together. My core aches.

Challenging him was a mistake. My mouth has written checks that my body can't cash and he has won. Again. Only this time, submitting to him doesn't feel good in the slightest. I bet he does this with every woman who walks into his path, which just makes me feel used. And angry.

"You're an asshole," I spit out, snatching my bag and notebook from the floor.

Gabriel walks back to his chair and sits down while I storm toward the door. "It was lovely speaking with you, Ms. Wright. I look forward to reading your article."

I try to slam the door, but it's got whisper-quiet hinges and slides closed with a pleasant *snick*. I resist the urge to punch the heavy wood and march to the elevator.



I am just stepping through the rotating front doors of the *New York Union* building when my phone dings. I have a new email from Gabriel's assistant, Jenny. Sure enough, she has sent me the document Gabriel mentioned, with a couple of boring quotes and some suggested copy. At this point, it hits me that I have fucked up.

For the past couple of years, life has been a struggle. Between my mom losing her battle with cancer, my dad's unsolved murder, and everything else, I have had to work harder than usual to keep my world from spinning out of

control. One thing I could always rely on was being good at my job, and now I've screwed that up to the high heavens.

I take the elevator to my floor and try to slink back to my desk unseen. I can hear the can of barbecue Pringles in my snack drawer calling my name. *Alexis* ...

"Alexis."

I freeze. I know that voice, and it's not coming from a tube of potato chips.

I turn on my heel and Debbie is standing behind me, arms folded. "You're back early."

"Got everything I need," I say, voice wavering slightly.

She cocks a slim brow and purses her cherry-red lips. Today, she is wearing a blue tweed blazer over a pastel pink shirt with matching blue tweed capris.

"Did you talk about his relationship with his father?" she inquires.

"Uh, no."

"And what about his personal entanglements?"

"He said he doesn't have any."

Her mouth flattens. "Tell me at least that you asked him about why he wanted to donate to the charity."

"He said it's a cause close to his heart."

She pauses, waiting for me to elaborate. When I don't, Debbie sighs. "And why is that?"

"He didn't say," I reply, grimacing.

Debbie scowls at me. "So you got nothing."

"I'll get another interview," I promise, clasping my hands together. "He's a tough nut to crack, but if you give me a little more time I will smash him into the dirt."

Debbie's eyes widen and she blinks. "Smash him into the dirt? What the hell happened over there?" She shakes her head. "Don't answer that. Just get some answers and write me the best article this city has seen on Gabriel Belluci. Yes?"

“Yes.”

“Good.” She smiles tartly. “Off ye go. Toodle pip.”

GABRIEL

Another day, another media circus.

I am standing on a podium outside the main doors of a shiny new elementary school, squinting against the sun beating down on me. Beside me, the principal of the new school—Evan Webber—addresses the crowd of students, parents, and press. The school will welcome hundreds of young minds come September, and thanks to my business, they will have access to thousands of books and dozens of computers in the Belluci Library.

The principal blabbers on, thanking me and the other donors, trying to make jokes that don't quite land. Not even the kids are laughing. One of them has his finger up his nose and is staring, deadpan, at the principal like he is the most boring man in the world. I am beginning to wonder if he is.

I understand the purpose of these events, and of ingratiating myself and my business with the public like this, but it frustrates me that I am stuck here playing the friendly billionaire when I should be dealing with the Irish threat.

“And now, to cut the ribbon!” Webber announces.

He passes me a pair of comically oversized safety scissors and I force a smile for the cameras. I walk to the ribbon and pose with it between the scissor's blades for a second, and then snap them closed.

The crowd cheers.

“Shall we go inside, everyone?” Webber asks.

The kids cheer, and we begin the next portion of the ceremony. I only have to make it through a brief tour and the drinks reception and then I can leave. I take a calming breath and wait beside the doors as the small crowd hustles in behind the principal. I take a spot at the rear, checking emails on my phone as we walk around, Webber droning on about how the children will have access to the classrooms of tomorrow, today. Vito is with me and he follows a few yards behind, keeping an eye out for threats.

“How did you get so big?” a small voice asks from below me.

I look down to find a boy walking at my side. He looks no more than nine years old and wears a Yankees jersey and backwards baseball cap.

Without prompting, he continues. “I only ask because my mom says that I need to eat my broccoli to grow big and strong, and I’m just wondering if that’s true or if there’s a shortcut.”

I chuckle. “Where is your mom?”

“Up there.” He points to a woman in a tight white dress chatting to one of the cameramen near the front of the group. “She wants to be on TV.”

I find his honesty refreshing. Most people speak to me through some sort of filter—be it deference or greed. An image of the fiery woman from *Fiamma* flashes through my mind. Then comes a vision of the sassy reporter Alexis, mouthing off to me like I couldn’t crush her in my palm if I wanted to.

Most people.

“I’m afraid your mom’s right,” I say. “When I was your age, I was half your size. The more vegetables I ate, the bigger I got.”

He eyes me skeptically. “Are you two in cahoots?”

We arrive in the gymnasium and Webber directs the pack to the refreshment table. “In cahoots?” I laugh. “You’ve been watching too many spy movies.”

I look up to find Webber making a beeline for me. “I need to talk to Mr. Belluci,” he says to the kid. “Why don’t you go grab some juice?”

The boy disappears, along with the temporary respite he provided.

“I wanted to thank you again for your donation,” Webber says, peeling me off to the side. “I’m sure you well know that education is a sector that could never be overfunded, but of course, we are often underfunded. I know this school looks as though it has everything the students will need, but there are a lot of angles we still need to approach.”

“The classrooms have interactive whiteboards,” I say in a low voice.

Webber should know to back off, but his head is so far up his ass he doesn’t flag the warning.

“They do indeed. The classrooms of tomorrow, today!” He grins. “And the library, oh the library is fabulous. Really remarkable. We’re so grateful for your donation and for your presence today. I wonder if you and I would be able to put our heads together and think what else this school needs and if we have the means to achieve it?”

“You’re asking for more money,” I state.

“I’m merely suggesting that if there was more money available, we would be able to put it to good use.”

A squat reporter and video camera bustle into view. The reporter tacks to my side and shoves her microphone in my face. The light from the camera blares into my eyes.

“Mr. Belluci, what do you think of the school?” she asks.

I narrow my eyes against the camera’s glare. “Can you turn that light off?”

Webber sidles up beside me. “Mr. Belluci and I were just discussing how much he has helped the school so far, and what kinds of things we can achieve together in the future.”

The cameraman ignores me, and the light stays on.

“That’s interesting. Are you saying Mr. Belluci will continue to sponsor the school?”

“Anything is possible!”

“The light,” I growl, blinking.

The reporter continues to ignore me. “Speaking of possibilities, Mr. Belluci, do you see children in your future —?”

“Will you turn that fucking light off?!” I roar.

Every single head in the gym turns, and it is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. The cameraman, stunned by my outburst, freezes. He does not turn off the light.

The vein in my forehead throbs.

“Get out of my face!” I demand, pushing past them. I snap in Vito’s direction, “We’re leaving.”

I try to ignore the shocked faces of the parents and kids as I storm toward the gymnasium doors, but I can’t help but notice the woman in the white dress shielding her son as I walk past. He gapes at me from behind her. I doubt he’s going to eat his vegetables now.

What’s wrong with me? I’m always in control of my emotions. *Always*. I might be seething on the inside, but I never show it, especially not around a bunch of cameras and kids. Lately, I can’t seem to escape my temper. What’s changed?

I trace back to when I started to feel like this—jittery and irritable, a little unstable—and realize that I’ve felt this way since the interview with that infuriating Alexis woman. Something niggled me about her and I don’t know what it was. Was it her blatant lack of respect? Her odd familiarity? Or simply the hot desire she aroused in me?

Vito does not say anything until we are in the car and it begins to move. His gray eyes meet mine and his forehead wrinkles. “You okay, boss?”

“Fine.” I scrub a hand over my face and sink into the seat. I am not in the mood to talk.

Vito scratches his beard. “Look, I know you’re beating yourself up over what happened back there, but you shouldn’t.” He waves dismissively. “None of this matters. We both know you have bigger things on your mind.”

I nod.

A long silence passes between us.

“That principal looked like a rat, huh?” Vito comments. He peels his lips back and scrunches his nose in a rodent-like fashion.

I look away, but my mouth tilts a little. I appreciate his attempts to cheer me up, but it’s no good. I fucked up today, and I’m going to continue fucking up like this until I get my head on straight.

“How’s Corie?” I ask, changing the subject.

Vito’s voice turns dreamy when he talks about his wife. He is hopelessly in love with her and never pretends to be anything otherwise, even if the guys razz him about it.

“Glowing, man,” he says. “She complains constantly about her swollen feet and how big her belly is, but pregnancy suits her. I can barely keep my hands off her.”

“So we should expect a little brother or sister for Nuri sooner rather than later?”

He chuckles. “I want as many kids as Corie will let me have.”

“Are you not worried about whether you’ll make a good father?” I ask.

I don’t know why, but the question from the reporter about whether I would have kids in the future bothered me. I’d never thought about it before. It had just never seemed important.

“I worry constantly,” he says. “But it’s because I worry that I know I’m going to be fine.”

I frown, watching the city slide past the window. His answer doesn’t make any goddamn sense.



I am at my desk in my home office, staring at the screen of my laptop. My fingers rest on the keys but do not move. I have been stuck in this position for several long minutes, but every time I try to focus on business, my mind wanders elsewhere. I think back to the horrified looks on the faces of the people from the school. I think back to the way Alexis' lips pillowed as she spat venom at me.

You're an asshole.

Yes. Yes, I am.

This is all her fault. I don't know how she did it, but she got inside my head and I can't shake the thought of her insolence. Her blatant disrespect. And the way her sinful body filled out that pencil skirt.

I groan in frustration and push my chair back from the desk. I can't focus. I need to clear my head.

I go to my bedroom and change, then head to my home gym. Pumping weights always helps me get my head together. I load up a barbell and start lifting, but after a few reps I can still see her face.

I add more weight and my teeth grit as I press the bar away from my chest. My muscles burn and quiver. I picture her standing in the corner of the room, that murderous expression on her face as she watches me. Her face blends in with that of the girl from Fiamma years ago. Until I met Alexis, I hadn't met another woman who challenged and intrigued me like her. Only the girl from the bar was fair game, a tasty snack to devour while on a break from consolidating my kingdom.

Alexis, on the other hands, is off-limits. She's a journalist and that always spells bad news. The last thing I need is for her to shove her nose where it doesn't belong and find out the truth about me and my business. Maybe that's why I can't stop thinking about her—she is the closest thing I've found to the girl from Fiamma and yet I can never possess her.

I imagine draping Alexis over my knee and spanking that luscious ass. One smack for every time she looked at me like I was scum. Two for every time she spoke to me with disrespect.

I set the bar back on the stand and sit up, chest burning. This isn't working. My cock is rock-hard and no amount of exercise is going to take care of that for me.

I jog upstairs to the shower and peel out of my clothes while the water heats up. My cock juts out in front of me, swollen with need. Steam begins to billow from the shower door and I step in. The hot water cascades over my skin and I let my head fall forward, eyes closed. My hand grips my rod and I begin to stroke.

I think about the girl from Fiamma first—the way she fought me, resisted me, ultimately succumbed to me. She denied her lust, but I watched it build in her eyes. When I finally took her, she was soaking wet and would have done anything I told her to.

I imagine that fucking Alexis would be the same. She might talk a big game, but I bet given enough time I could have her on her knees in front of me with her mouth open.

I picture her there now. How I would love to punish that little mouth of hers. I imagine her stretching those plump red lips around my cock and sucking me in deep. I would push her down until she gagged, her throat constricting around me like a vise.

I moan. My hand is moving so fast that droplets of water are spraying everywhere.

I can see Alexis looking up at me with those wide blue eyes while I invade her mouth. She knows she's totally at my mercy and the thought of it thrills her in a way she never thought possible. I imagine pumping in and out of her mouth, my hand gripping the back of her head, my body shaking with the need to come. I can almost feel her lips and tongue against my shaft, her hands against my thighs.

I groan and press a hand to the wall to steady myself as my legs begin to shake. I'm so close.

I think of Alexis' plump ass and the image of her bent over my knee sends a spike of pleasure through my balls. I work my shaft harder, gritting my teeth. I picture a red handprint on her creamy skin like a brand. I can hear her yelps and moans as if they are echoing through the room, and my cock tenses.

That girl needs to be put in her place, and the thought of doing just that sends me over the edge. I come hard. My eyes squeeze shut as I pump rope after rope of come to the shower floor, where the water swirls it down the drain.

"Fuck," I mutter, catching my breath.

I should feel relief, but I have only just taken the edge off. The thought of the sassy reporter still causes my gut to clench, and I know that I have to get control of myself before I let this fascination sink into obsession.

GABRIEL

I lean back in my chair, squeezing my eyes shut and gritting my jaw while my publicist, Carmen Book, yammers away in my ear.

“Like I’ve said, as far as public meltdowns go, you could have done much worse, but you’ve done some damage and we need to remedy that. We’ve done some groundwork, but now we need to hammer it home.”

I hate speaking to Carmen. She is an anaconda of a woman, and while she is very good at her job, she drives me insane. After the initial incident at the elementary school, she called my office several times and when I called her back the next morning, she spent a good five minutes haranguing me for not getting on top of the situation sooner. She has called every day since to enact a new stage of her plan to redeem my public image. I am not looking forward to hearing what she has in store for me today.

“I’m going to arrange an interview with the reporter from Channel 5 whose pesky cameraman incited the whole thing,” Carmen says. “You can apologize, maybe make a joke, flash that charming smile, and then once they’re eating out of the palm of your hand, you can offer more money to the school and mic drop out of there.”

My eyes open and I stare at the ceiling. “No.”

“Gabriel ...”

“No,” I repeat, firmer this time. “I am far too busy. I’ll donate the money, but I’m not doing the interview, and I’m

definitely not fucking apologizing.”

Something Carmen and I have never seen eye to eye on is the fact that I rarely give interviews, and I never apologize.

My cell phone buzzes on the desk in front of me and I lean over to check it while Carmen natters at me.

“You have to trust me, Gabriel. If there wasn’t such a mystery around you already, this might not be so bad, but because nobody knows jack shit about you, everyone is now assuming that you’re a low-key psycho.”

My eyes scan the text. I frown.

“Let them assume that,” I growl. “Speak to the principal of school and tell him we’ll write them a blank check if they shut their mouths about it from here on out. And remind Channel 5 who makes a generous donation to their charity every year.”

“I don’t think—”

“Just do your job, Carmen,” I say in a low voice. “I have to go. Update me tomorrow.”

I slam the phone down and lean back, massaging my temples. My cell buzzes again and I read the next message.

It’s Antonio reporting from the docks. The Irish have just done a drive-by shooting, but luckily there were only a couple of injuries and no deaths. He is dealing with it, and I trust him enough to leave it in his hands. Antonio was my father’s lieutenant before I assumed the leadership, but he was one of the first to proclaim his loyalty to me. He said my father’s regime had begun to make him nervous.

I think back to those days before the power shift, when I was just the heir apparent with relatively few responsibilities. I should have enjoyed that time more. I don’t regret the decisions I made that got me where I am now, but it hasn’t been easy.

My assistant, Jenny, buzzes me.

“Yes?”

“Sir, I have Alexis Wright on the phone for you,” Jenny says in a timid voice. “She keeps calling and demanding a follow-up interview. She says you still owe her forty minutes.”

That tempting journalist is the last thing I need right now, especially since she’ll want to talk about what happened at the school. I can’t afford any distractions.

“Get rid of her,” I say.

“I’ve gotten rid of her every day for the past week. She keeps calling.”

“Then keep getting rid of her until she gets the message.”

“Very well.”

I reply to Antonio, thanking him for the update. I am glad that there was little damage, but that also concerns me. It feels as though the Irish are toying with us—but to what end?



Diego drops by later in the afternoon, and I am happy to see him. The older man has become a useful source of guidance over the past couple of years. He is like the father I always deserved but never had. Because he was close with my actual father, I expected more resistance when I took the reins. Diego’s loyalty surprised me.

The first thing he says as he walks through my office door is, “Well, you look like shit.”

“Speak for yourself, old man.”

He laughs, sinking down into the chair opposite. Recently, Diego has begun to dress his age, though he still dyes his hair black. Today, he is wearing a gray tracksuit with a gold chain hanging from his neck.

“Still not sleeping?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Not well.”

“It’s the Belluci curse,” he says with a sigh. “Your father had the same issue when he took over. I used to have to kick

him to wake him up in the morning, but as soon as he became the don, *boom*, up at six every morning.”

It always throws me off when Diego speaks so casually about my father.

I clear my throat. “I have a lot on my mind.”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown.” He plucks a pen from my desk and starts fiddling with it. “So what’s on your mind, kid?”

Diego is the only person in the syndicate who is allowed to call me anything other than my name, “boss,” or, in most cases, “sir.”

“The Irish have attacked the docks again.”

“I heard. Sounds like Antonio’s got it under control though.” He points the pen at me. “A good leader needs to delegate.”

“I am delegating. It still worries me.”

“You should try to let that go for now,” he says. “It’s not a helpful thing to worry about. What else is on your mind?”

“The incident at the school.” I wrinkle my nose. “Carmen wants me to apologize.”

Diego waves a hand dismissively. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. A Belluci doesn’t apologize. Tell her to shove it.” He grins. “Next?”

The next thing that comes to mind isn’t a thing at all but a person—an annoyingly persistent person with a bad attitude.

“I did an interview last week with a journalist from the *Union* and she’s been hounding Jenny for a follow-up interview ever since,” I tell him. “That should be the absolute least of my worries but there’s something about this girl ... Have you ever heard of Alexis Wright? Do you know if she has interviewed me before?”

Since he is mostly retired, Diego reads a lot. He is the type who flicks through the paper every morning over a cup of coffee with a pair of reading glasses perched on his nose. It is

a strange juxtaposition when you consider that twenty years prior, he was famous in organized crime circles for savagely slashing the throats of his enemies.

Diego still wants to be useful to me whenever he can, so even though his throat-slashing days are over, he consumes everything that gets written about me in the same way that Carmen does, except she is looking at it through a business lens and he looks at it through a Mafia lens.

“Alexis Wright ...” Diego pauses to think, brow furrowed, but ultimately shakes his head. “No, never heard of her, and I don’t think she’s interviewed you before.”

This irritates me more. Why does it feel like I know her? And why can’t I get her off my mind?

“Doing an interview might not be a bad idea,” Diego continues. “I’m surprised Carmen hasn’t suggested that already.”

“She has. I just don’t want to.”

“It would do you good to seem a little more relatable after that mess at the school,” he argues. “And it would get this reporter off your back. Two birds, one stone.”

I know on some level that he’s right, but I can’t shake the feeling that I need to stay away from Alexis. My gut senses a threat with her; I just can’t figure out why.

“Thanks for the advice, Diego.”

“No problem at all, kid.” He salutes me and grins. “That’s what I’m here for.”



I work late, still wrestling with my worries and doubts. I am just about to sign off for the night when my cell phone rings. Dom’s name flashes on the screen.

I answer, expecting bad news. “Yes?”

Dom clears his throat and gets straight to the point. “Victor Holt is dead.”

Victor Holt was one of my account managers—he worked mainly for Belluci, Inc. but was an associate on the mob side as well. He was a minor player, and I would be surprised to learn of his death if he wasn’t the third lower-level associate of mine to die in the past few months.

“How?” I ask, even though I already know what he’s going to say.

“A tragic accident, it would seem,” Dom replies, just as I expected. “A gas pipe burst and set fire to his house.”

I run a hand through my hair, cursing. “I need you to get in touch with his family and make sure they know we will take care of them. Just don’t insinuate that this is anything other than an accident. I don’t want to cause any alarm.”

Dom’s breath crackles through the receiver. “His family were in the house,” he replies. “Wife, two kids. They didn’t make it.”

A lump forms at the back of my throat and I swallow it down. In my head, I can hear the distant whoosh and crackling of flames. I didn’t know Victor or his family, but they didn’t deserve this.

I think about the terror they must have experienced in their last minutes, the agony of realizing that there was no hope. These were people I am supposed to protect.

I am quiet a beat too long. “Boss?” Dom asks.

“Thank you, Dom.”

I hang up and take a deep breath as I slide the phone back onto the desk.

Inside, I am seething. I want to break things. I want to scream. The Irish are playing with me, trying to make a goddamn fool out of me, and so far I have not been able to do anything about it. People are suffering, and I can’t make it stop.

I run a hand through my hair and relax my jaw. I am good at what I do because I don't react like my father did. I think. I strategize. I don't let my emotions win.

But for fuck's sake, it is hard sometimes.

ALEXIS

It is a beautiful day. Long beams of sun slash across the path in front of me as I push my son, Harry, in his stroller, listening to the birds chatter in the leafy sycamore branches above. The morning air is warm on my exposed shoulders and I can tell it's going to be a hot day. We keep to the side of the path to let joggers and cyclists pass, then pull over next to the duck pond. It's Harry's favorite.

I go to the front of the stroller and lift him out. I set him on his feet and bend over, holding both of his hands as we approach the pond. I can't believe he's over a year old already. It feels like yesterday he was a tiny newborn potato, and now he's walking.

Well, nearly. He mostly just waddles and he needs help doing that, but I know that I'll blink one day and suddenly he'll be forty.

A goose floating on the pond honks aggressively at a duck who has swum too close. Harry giggles, and his little left cheek dimples.

I used to think it was cute. Okay, it's still incredibly cute—but it also reminds me of how much Harry is starting to look like his father. It's bad enough he's got Gabriel's dimple, but to add insult to injury, he has his dark eyes as well. It's hard to tell at this stage, but I wonder if he has inherited Gabriel's long face and even longer legs as well. How the hell am I supposed to wrangle a teenager who is a foot taller than me?

I take a breath and return to the moment, to the feel of his soft little hands in mine. I'm getting ahead of myself. The sudden reappearance of Harry's father has shaken me. After we shared that wild night at Fiamma together, I never expected to see him again. I never wanted to, truth be told. Being a single parent has been no cakewalk, but if I was going to choose someone to co-parent with me it wouldn't be "Gabe," and it *definitely* wouldn't be Gabriel Belluci.

Harry plops his butt down on the grass and I check the time on my phone. We have a little time before I need to drop him off, so I sit behind him and cuddle his back against my stomach. We wave to the ducks together. They don't notice or care.

If Gabriel knew about Harry, he would either try to micromanage every detail of our lives or he'd be like these ducks—totally apathetic. Either way, we're better off without him and always have been.

Seeing Gabriel again has made me question a lot of things, but ultimately, if I could go back, I wouldn't do anything differently. I have the most beautiful, perfect son—even if he is genetically predisposed toward megalomania—and I have him all to myself.

Surely, that's a silver lining that makes it all worth it.

We rest by the pond for a few more minutes, but then we're out of time. I strap Harry back into the stroller and take off at a brisk pace. I wish I didn't have to take him to day care. I wish we could spend the day together, far away from my work and Debbie's wrath. She has been increasingly frustrated with my inability to secure a follow-up interview with Gabriel. I'm frustrated, too, especially since I want to do the interview probably even less than he does. It would be easier for everyone if we just got it out of the way and never had to face each other again.

I drop Harry off with a kiss and a smile, then head to work. I get off the elevator on the floor before mine and take the stairs the rest of the way, as it's a more direct path from the stairs to my desk than it is from the elevator. The plan is to

avoid Debbie until I hopefully have some sort of update. It has worked for three days so far.

I don't make it anywhere close to my cubicle. Debbie spies me through her open office door as I'm attempting to sneak past the water cooler and hollers my name across the room.

"Wright!"

I sigh and whisper a silent prayer as I approach her office. When I arrive at her doorway, I don a fake smile. Maybe she isn't calling me over to give me shit. Maybe she just wants to chat.

"Debbie," I say cheerfully. "You look like a ray of sunshine."

This is on account of her cheery yellow pantsuit, which does not match her expression in the slightest.

She scowls. "Close the door."

I close the door and approach her desk, clasping my hands behind my back.

"Do you see this desk, Wright?" Debbie asks, running her hands over the wooden surface.

"Yes ..."

"Look at how clean it is," she continues. "No coffee cups, no stray paper clips, and no papers mussing it up."

I narrow my eyes uncertainly. "Yes, it's a very clean desk."

"Well, it shouldn't be!" she snaps. "I should be able to look down and see your interview with Gabriel Belluci." She jabs her finger on the empty space in front of her. "Where the hell is it?"

"Debbie, I've been calling them for weeks," I explain. "He won't grant me an interview. His assistant won't even pass me through to him."

"I don't care!" Debbie flings her hands up dramatically. "You wanted the big stories, Alexis. You wanted the challenge. I thought you were going to impress me, but so far all you've done is piss me off, ye wee diddy."

My heart thuds. I swallow.

“I’m trying!” I defend. “I don’t know what more I can do. If he won’t see me, he won’t see me.”

“What kind of attitude is that?” she demands. “Did Nellie Bly give up writing the truth just because the men of the world told her no? Did she feck!”

Nellie Bly is Debbie’s hero. She was an investigative reporter in the nineteenth century who yearned to write about more than fashion, theater, and the other topics that were deemed suitable for women at the time. After being railroaded by the male titans of the industry over and over again, she moved to New York City and famously went undercover in a women’s asylum to expose the horrific treatment of patients.

“I hear what you’re saying, Debbie, but I’m not sure that situation is comparable.”

“Of course it is! You need to be aggressive, Alexis.”

How much more aggressive can I get? I’ve already been harassing Gabriel’s assistant several times a day.

It’s not worth arguing with Debbie though, so I give her a curt nod. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll get the interview.”

“You better!” She points a finger at me. “This is your chance, Wright. Don’t screw it up.”

My face is hot when I leave Debbie’s office. I’m not sure whether it’s from embarrassment or rage—a bit of both, I suppose.

I’m mad at Debbie for not understanding how difficult this is. I’m mad at Gabriel for making it difficult. Most of all, I’m mad at myself for ducking out of his office with my tail between my legs the first time around. If I’d had more of a backbone, none of this would be happening.

I suppose it’s never too late to develop a backbone, and as a plan forms in my head, I realize I’m going to need it.



The glass door of Belluci, Inc. slides open and I saunter inside confidently.

I am supposed to be here, my casual gait broadcasts. No reason to be alarmed.

I smile at the young security guard sitting behind the front desk and continue floating past.

“Excuse me, miss?”

Shit.

I turn on my heel, grinning broadly at the security guard. He looks a few years younger than me, with dark slicked-back hair and a round face. I approach the desk, swaying my hips.

“You need to check in,” he says, reaching for the phone. “Who are you here to see?”

I bat my eyelashes. “I’m hoping you can help me,” I say. “I’m here to surprise my friend. Her boyfriend just dumped her and I wanted to swing by to cheer her up.”

“What’s your friend’s name?” He raises his eyebrows expectantly, hand hovering over the number pad.

I lean against the side of the desk, putting him at direct eye level with my boobs. This is shameless, but Debbie would argue that Nellie Bly would do the same thing in my position. At least, that’s what I’m telling myself.

“Like I said, I want to surprise her.” I giggle. “If you tell her I’m coming, it won’t be much of a surprise.”

“I’m sure she’ll be surprised enough to learn you’re in the building.” He shrugs. “Sorry, miss. I don’t make the rules.”

I flick my gaze up and down his torso. “I like a man who takes control,” I purr. “But surely you can make an exception to the rules for me, just this one little time?”

If my flirting is having any effect on the security guard, he doesn’t show it. He isn’t even looking at my boobs. He’s all direct eye contact and a blank expression.

“What’s your friend’s name?” he repeats.

I switch tactics. “Please just let me go up. I’ll be in and out and I won’t cause any trouble.”

Not true. I am probably going to cause a load of trouble.

“I can’t do that.”

“But I know that you can.” I can’t help the bite of irritation that enters my tone. This shouldn’t be this difficult.

“Look, this isn’t going to work.” He rises from the chair and folds his arms. He’s massive. “If you don’t tell me who you are and who you’re going to see, I’ll have to remove you from the building.”

I believe that he will do it. Time for a Hail Mary.

I purse my lips and cross my arms to mirror his posture, looking up at him with as much venom as I can muster.

“Do you know who I am?” I ask.

“No.” He smiles condescendingly. “That’s part of the problem.”

“I’m Alexis Wright,” I say. “If you don’t let me up there, I’ll make sure you’re begging for food stamps by the end of the week.”

I bunch my lips and narrow my eyes, trying to seem as intimidating as possible.

The guard laughs and plops back into his chair. “Listen, lady. My boss is a hell of a lot scarier than you could ever be. Run along now.” He waves me off.

I am humiliated but not deterred. I stomp out of the building and head down the alley beside it, hunting for a way in. There is a service door, but it is locked.

Fine. I’ll wait it out. Somebody will have to come out of there eventually.

I take up a spot behind a dumpster where I can keep an eye on the door and crouch down and wait.

And I wait.

And then I wait some more.

My legs are shaking, and my feet complain bitterly. I should have worn a more sensible heel to work today, or at least grabbed a pair of tennis shoes from my apartment on my way over here. I'm going to end the day with no interview and ten broken toes.

I am considering going inside to try the security guard again when the door squeaks open. A man in chef's whites steps out and props the door open with a crate, then lights the cigarette between his lips.

Bingo.

I wait for the man to finish and go back inside, then race forward to catch the door before it closes fully behind him.

Success!

I enter a service hallway with bright fluorescent lights and creep down it, looking for a staircase or elevator.

Zilch.

At the end of the hall, there is a door with a small window looking out to the lobby. To the right, I can see the elevator doors. To the left, the security guard is sitting at his desk.

"Shit."

Well, there's nothing for it. I'll have to make a run for it. I slip out of my shoes and hold them in my hand, bracing my hand against the door and readying myself. Then I push the door open and sprint across the tile as quickly as my feet will carry me and jam my finger against the call button.

"Hey!" the guard yells.

He races around the side of the desk toward me, muttering something into his radio. My heart crashes against my ribs and I realize that the elevator has too far to come down. It's still on the fifth floor.

I look around in desperation and spot a door to the stairs, but the security guard is closing in fast. I dodge his hulking form just before he reaches me and race in the other direction, slamming through the door to the stairs and bolting up them as quickly as I can.

“Stop!” he screams behind me.

I keep running, rounding the landing to the first floor and continuing up. What floor is Gabriel’s office on again? Probably the top one. I look up at the seemingly endless spiral of stairs and swear under my breath.

The security guard’s steps pound on the steps below, urging me to move faster. I make it to the fourth floor when the fourth-floor door bursts open and another security guard snatches my arm, hauling me toward him.

“Let me go!” I yell, trying to wriggle out of his grip.

“I’ve got her,” he says into his radio.

He pauses to listen to the response in his earpiece, and the first security guard catches up with us. He is puffing angrily and grabs my other arm.

“I’ll take her,” he says.

The second security guard shakes his head. “New orders,” he says. Then, turning to address me, he adds, “You’re coming with me.”

I don’t like the sound of that. I try desperately to free myself from his grip but he’s too strong. His hand is like a vise on my arm. He hauls me through the door into a large open-plan office, where dozens of faces turn to gawk at me as I am dragged toward the elevator.

I feel like a snapping beast, a wild thing subjugated against its will.

Like a tiger.

GABRIEL

When Mauricio yanks a struggling, cursing Alexis into my office and deposits her into the chair opposite me, I am two things—annoyed, because despite my best efforts she has somehow wound up in front of me again, and impressed, because despite my best efforts she has somehow wound up in front of me again.

As my gaze drifts over her, I note that I am also aroused. Her curly, shoulder-length hair is in disarray. Those glittering blue eyes narrow on me below thick black lashes, and her lips curl into a snarl. Her chest heaves, and the buttons of her blouse seem to barely contain her sizable breasts. She looks fierce and sexy and positively venomous.

“Thank you, Mauricio,” I say. “You can go.”

He nods and leaves, closing the door behind him. And then we are alone.

“I don’t know why you look so angry,” I comment. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? You’re in my office. Calm down, Tiger.”

Her eyes widen. “What I wanted was for you to be a decent, respectful human being and give me the forty minutes you owed me,” she spits. “I didn’t want to be dragged through this building like a prisoner. You can’t just order your muscle to tote me around like a rag doll. If Mauricio had invited me up with his words, I wouldn’t look so pissed right now.”

“It’s my building,” I reply. “I can do whatever I want.”

She frowns. “You are a grade-A asshole.”

My cock stirs as I imagine disciplining her for talking to me like that. I push those thoughts away. I’ll give her the interview. The sooner this is over, the better. Then she can be out of my life for good. No distractions.

“The clock is ticking, Ms. Wright.” I tap my watch. “If I were you, I wouldn’t waste any more time insulting me.”

Alexis blinks, as though she’d forgotten why she was here in the first place. She is gripping her shoes in one hand and drops them, scrambling through her purse for her notepad. She retrieves it and looks up at me.

“I presume I can’t record this?” she grumbles.

“You catch on quick.”

Her jaw tightens, but she doesn’t retort. Clearing her throat, she says, “Since we last spoke, you had an uncharacteristic public meltdown. Could you comment on what happened at the school?”

“I could comment, but I won’t. You can ask the school or Channel 5 if you want to know more.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve bought their silence?”

“I’m afraid I’m not the right person to ask when it comes to understanding your feelings.”

She purses her lips. They are pink and juicy, and I want to bite them.

“Okay, fine.” She shuffles the papers in her lap and slides one across to me. “Because you initially refused my follow-up interview, I’ve had a lot of time on my hands to dig up more information about you and Belluci, Inc. Three years ago, the IRS was investigating your company for potential tax evasion. A year later, the case was dropped. Did you buy them off, too?”

“Yes,” I reply coolly. “There was a misunderstanding and we paid our taxes. That’s how it tends to work with the IRS.”

In truth, my father had been siphoning funds from the business to an offshore account behind my back to avoid taxes, hoping to maximize our budget for war against the Irish. I remember being livid when I found out. Alexis must have done a lot of digging to find that nugget, as I had to spend a lot of money to sweep it under the rug. Once more, I am both irritated and impressed.

“That’s not the only suspicious thing I uncovered,” she continues. “Over the past couple of years, several of Belluci, Inc.’s employees have died in what look to be tragic accidents.” She glances down at her pad. “The most recent of which involved a Mr. Victor Holt. He and his whole family were killed in a gas explosion.”

“As you say, tragic accidents.”

“But who is to blame for the accidents?” she asks. “I wonder if these employees found out something they shouldn’t have.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. “Would you paint me as some sort of Bond villain, Ms. Wright?” I ask. “Do you think Victor Holt stumbled across the secret underground lair where I keep my plans for world domination?”

Her jaw tics in annoyance. “I don’t know what to believe. That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

“And you hope to expose me in your little article?” I sit forward, skewering her with my gaze. “Is this still even about your article?”

Alexis blinks, and I can tell I’ve hit a nerve. Interesting.

“What else would it be about?” she asks.

“You tell me.” I sit back. “Somehow, I don’t think your editor is looking for a scandalous expose on your charity’s new donor.”

“I’m looking out for the paper’s interests,” she replies. “If there’s something fishy going on with you or your business, somehow I *do* think my editor would rather expose it than be implicated in it.”

“I admire your colorful imagination, Ms. Wright, but I’m just a businessman. You won’t find any skeletons here.”

If she knew where to look, this pesky journalist could find more skeletons than she would know what to do with. I am wary of her determination. It seems very personal and that unsettles me.

“Correction,” she says, eyes meeting mine fiercely. “There is at least one skeleton. Two years ago, your father, a well-respected businessman, disappeared. His body was found eight months later outside your family’s hunting cabin in the Poconos, despite there being no trace of him there in the initial search. Initially, investigators suspected foul play, but due to the degradation of the evidence, your statement about your father’s mental health prior to his disappearance, and the positioning of the body, the case was ruled a suicide.”

I go cold.

Alexis continues. “Cause of death was a bullet to the head.”

My fists clench under the desk but I keep a calm façade.

“Do you believe it was a suicide?” she asks. “Or do you think your father was murdered?”

“I believe the police.”

“Was there anyone who might have wanted your father dead?”

The sheer fucking *audacity* of this woman.

I shake my head. “I have entertained this nonsense long enough,” I say, picking up the receiver on my phone. I dial security and hang up.

“What are you doing?” Alexis asks.

Before I can answer, a guard steps into the office.

Alexis’ eyes flare open. “What? Now you’re just going to have me dragged out like you had me dragged in?” she growls.

“That is the most astute observation you’ve made this entire time.” I flip open my laptop screen, heart hammering in

my chest. I can't show that she has gotten to me.

The guard—Vinny, I think his name is—grabs her by the arm and hauls her from the chair.

“I should have known from the second I first laid eyes on you that you weren't someone worth knowing,” Alexis snarls suddenly, fighting against Vinny's grip. “I wondered so many times after that night what you would say if you knew that I'd had your baby, but now I know that you wouldn't give a single shit.”

My eyes snap to hers. Baby?

“For the record, next time you use a fake name to pick up chicks, I would recommend something a little sexier than ‘Gabe.’”

Suddenly, it clicks. Alexis. The girl from Fiamma's name was Alexis. She had longer hair then, and was wearing a lot more makeup, but it's her. How did I not see it sooner?

Vinny is looking at me with wide eyes, unsure how to react to the scene. If there's one thing I've learned about this woman, it's that she doesn't like to lose, and this bombshell is probably just a fabricated manipulation to get a reaction from me. It won't work.

“Get her out of here,” I order.

Vinny continues to drag Alexis to the door.

“Good, I want to leave!” she spits. “After what happened at that school, I don't want you anywhere near my son!”

Her eyes burn into mine. We stare at one another for what feels like hours, and though I feel the venom from her gaze as though it lashes through my blood, I find something else there, too, that I can't quite decipher. Is it desperation? Hope?

Then she is gone from my office, and the door whispers closed.

A son.

My heart thuds and I sit perfectly still, as though her last words held the power to turn me to stone. Could it be true?

Could I have a son? We only had sex one time, but one time is all it takes.

I consider having Vinny bring her back in, but I can't show any sign of weakness. She's playing with my emotions. There probably is no son. No baby. After what happened with my father and Felicity, I know better than to trust a woman's word when she is only trying to get her way.

Still.

With legs as heavy as lead, I rise from my desk and walk to the window. Outside, cars the size of ants weave between each other. Lights in the building across begin to flick on as the afternoon sun falls behind the crest of the buildings and long shadows creep through the city. It is a rare moment of quiet for me. For the first time in years, I think neither of my business nor the Family. I am thinking of myself, of what I feel and what I want to do, and I am so out of practice that I don't know where to start.

If Alexis is telling the truth, this could change everything. A variable has emerged that I have no control over. The prospect of that is terrifying but also, somehow ... not.

The sounds of the city below come back into focus. I shake my head to dislodge the cobwebs. I am getting ahead of myself.

I walk back to my desk and call Vito. If it turns out I do have a child, he is the only one I can trust with this information until I know what to do with it.

"Boss?" he answers.

"I have a job for you," I say. "I need you to investigate a reporter for the *New York Union* called Alexis Wright. Specifically, I want to know if she has a son, and if so, how old he is."

Vito doesn't ask any questions. He is good like that. "Will do. When do you need to know by?"

"As soon as possible."

We end the call and I try to get back to work, but the revelation that Alexis is the woman I have been fantasizing about for the past two years hits hard.

And a child. Jesus Christ, a fucking child. I don't yet know what to make of that possibility.

I find myself staring at the phone, waiting for Vito to call. The minutes tick by, and I soon realize I am being ridiculous. This is exactly what she wanted. I am not going to let this damned woman get in the way of my work.

I push thoughts of Alexis out of my mind and focus.



The call comes in on my cell just as I am about to leave the office that evening. My hand is on the door, but when my cell flashes with Vito's name, I pause.

I answer, jaw tight. "So?"

"I did some digging, and Alexis Wright has a son," Vito confirms. "He's just over a year old."

Shit. The timeline adds up—there is a chance that Alexis was telling the truth.

"Thank you, Vito."

"Uh, yeah," he says. "And, uh, that's not all I found."

"That's quite enough for now," I interrupt. My mind is whirring at a million miles a minute, fighting the rising tide of nausea in my stomach. "Thank you."

I hang up and walk back to my desk, sinking into the chair and sliding my phone across the desk.

I might have a son.

The realization hits me like a bag of bricks and knocks all other thoughts from my brain. I have spent the past few hours convincing myself that Alexis was just trying to get under my skin and that, when Vito called, it would be to tell me that the child didn't exist. Then I would get back to my work with a

clear head and I would never let myself entertain thoughts of that temptress again.

As it stands, I don't know what to do with this information. I stare blankly at the desk as I struggle to gather my thoughts, but they spin faster and faster with every second.

I never thought about having children before. My relationship with my own father was so screwed up that it never occurred to me to continue that legacy. Who's to say I wouldn't fuck things up with my own kid just as bad as he fucked things up with me?

I never prepared for this. Never planned for it. Each step of my life until this point has been meticulously drafted with intention, and this bombshell could throw everything into chaos. I need to get on top of the situation and reclaim control.

I'm getting ahead of myself again. I still don't know for certain that this child is mine. I reach for my phone to make one more call.

ALEXIS

It is hard to concentrate on work after the morning I had, especially since I still didn't get anything usable from Gabriel, so the only thing I actually have to work on is a puff piece about a charity music festival.

How am I supposed to focus on anything while the image of Gabriel cruelly ordering me out of his office constantly replays in my brain? For all of a half second, he looked like he might do the human thing and sit me down, ask me about Harry. Then he dismissed me with a wave of his hand. It was humiliating.

I somehow get through the day and head to my apartment in Queens. Clara is waiting for me there with Harry. A couple days a week, she picks him up from day care after lunch and babysits him for the afternoon in exchange for using my apartment to film the yoga videos she posts online. She claims my apartment has a better aesthetic, but I suspect Clara just knows that I find it hard to accept help. In any case, the arrangement saves me a little money, which is always welcome as a single parent. I also like that Harry gets to spend time with his Aunty Clara.

“There's Mommy!” Clara coos as I walk in.

She and Harry are sitting amongst a pile of blocks in the living room. She waves his little hand at me.

“Here's Mommy,” I echo with a sigh. “And she has had one hell of a day.”

Clara wrinkles her button nose. “Did Debbie chew you out again?”

“Yes, she did,” I reply. “She basically bullied me into breaking into Gabriel’s office. And that went so well that I ended up dramatically revealing to him that he’s Harry’s father as I was being dragged out the door.”

The color drains from Clara’s face. “Alexis!”

“I know, I know.” I slouch onto the sofa.

“First of all, you don’t even know that he’s definitely Harry’s dad,” she points out. “It’s just as likely that Grant’s the father.”

I have kept Clara apprised of the situation since I stumbled out of Gabriel’s office in a daze after our first interview. She is of the firm opinion that I should stay as far away from Gabriel as possible, which I would have loved to do if Debbie hadn’t needed me so much.

“I couldn’t help myself.” I lean over and stroke Harry’s silky hair. He giggles and reaches for me, and I lift him gently into my arms, cradling him against my chest. “I wish I could put into words how arrogant Gabriel is. I wanted to shock him. I didn’t want him to win again.”

Clara opens her mouth to respond, but there is a knock on the door.

“Did you order food?” I ask Clara.

She shakes her head and I hand her Harry, walking over to the door. I gaze through the peephole and see a tall, slender man in a black suit. He wears a sour expression.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“Ms. Wright, my name is Daniel Greer. I am here on behalf of Gabriel Belluci.”

I glance at Clara and she shakes her head. I turn back to the door.

“Why?” I ask.

“I have a proposal for you,” he says. “Please let me in.”

I stand back and undo the latch, opening the door to admit the dark-haired stranger. He steps into the apartment, clutching a black leather briefcase, and looks around distastefully. Spotting Clara, he stiffens.

“Can we talk in private?” Daniel asks.

I shake my head. “Anything you can say in front of me, you can say in front of my friend.”

“Very well.” He smiles tightly. “Mr. Belluci is willing to offer you one hundred thousand dollars in cash, as well as an exclusive interview in his home, if you will consent to conducting a paternity test on your son.”

One hundred thousand dollars? That’s an outrageous amount of money. I wonder if that’s what’s in the briefcase. I look to Clara, whose eyes are bugging out of her head.

“Can you give us a minute?” I ask Daniel.

He works his jaw from one side to the other, and I suspect he has been told not to leave without getting my approval. Typical Gabriel move.

“Just go!” I snap.

“I will be right outside the door,” he says, ducking out of the apartment.

Clara rushes over to me. “You’re not seriously thinking about doing it, are you?”

I’m still in shock. But one thought keeps running through my head over and over again like a broken record: *I need to know*.

As the months went by and my pregnancy progressed, I’d given up hope of ever seeing “Gabe” again. But something—fate, bad luck, or God’s cruel sense of humor—brought him back into my world and me back into his.

And so the question I buried a long time ago, the question I gave up on? It’s back with a burning vengeance.

“I need to know, Clara,” I tell her in a hoarse whisper. “I need certainty.”

I believe what I'm saying. But there's something I'm not admitting, either—that part of me is also just curious about Gabriel. I wonder if there's more to him than the cold veneer he wears. Something about him called to me on that first night we met. I thought he'd dismissed me for good today, but with the arrival of the beanpole waiting outside my apartment, it would seem that maybe Gabriel's not a robot after all.

“But what about everything that you've said about him?” she asks, wrinkling her nose. “I mean, just think about the way he's made this offer to you. He's trying to buy you.”

“And he can try as much as he wants,” I reply. “I won't take his money, but I need the answer.”

I can tell Clara disagrees, but she doesn't argue with me anymore. She just gnaws at her lower lip nervously.

I open the door to Daniel. “Okay. I consent to the test, but you can tell Mr. Belluci that I don't want his money.” I fold my arms. “I'll take the interview, though.”

“Very well.” He walks to my kitchen table and sets the briefcase on it, snapping open the clasps. From inside, he pulls out a pair of rubber gloves and a plastic bag with a swab kit. “I just need to take a cheek swab from the child and I will deliver the test to a testing facility for immediate processing.”

Everything about his manner is cold and impersonal. This is hardly how I pictured this moment going. I mean, I didn't think Gabe would come knock on my door and ferry me away to a castle in a pumpkin carriage, but maybe a little bit of romance? Guess not, though. The man has yet to even hint at a smile.

I take Harry from Clara and stroke his head while Daniel collects the swab. He returns the swab to its container and slides it into the bag, then packs everything neatly into the suitcase and snaps it closed.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” he says, already heading for the door.

“When will we know the results?” I call after him.

He answers without turning around. “Very soon.”

And then he's gone. The whole thing feels a little like a dream, and I am left standing in my kitchen, heart pattering, knowing that my life is about to change but unable to predict how.



Less than two hours after Daniel left my apartment, there is a knock on the door.

Though he'd told me the test would be processed immediately, I did not expect the results back that fast. But who else could it be? I'm not expecting anyone, and Clara would have texted me if she was coming back to my apartment for some reason.

I go to the door and look through the peephole. My heart drops into my stomach like a stone.

It's not Daniel waiting at my door.

It's Gabriel.

He checks his watch impatiently, though his handsome face doesn't betray an ounce of emotion. I take a second to admire him. His suit is tailored close to his broad shoulders, and I remember feeling the hardness of his muscles against my fingers as we embraced. My heart races.

"What are you doing here?" I call through the closed door.

He looks into the peephole, cocking a brow. "I think you know. Let me in."

I take a breath and undo the latch, stepping back as Gabriel breezes through the door. His large form seems to take up the whole kitchen. He surveys my apartment—the small kitchen that opens to an equally small living room, bare furnishings, plain walls—and I can tell he is not impressed.

I rock onto my heels. "So you being here ... I guess that means—?"

Gabriel's eyes meet mine. "Yes."

Just like that, our fates are forever intertwined. Whatever happens after this point, Harry officially has a father.

“And you’re here because...?” I ask.

“Part of the deal was that I would oblige you with an interview in my home,” he explains. “I am here to collect you for it.”

I thought maybe he was going to say that he came to meet Harry. I am disappointed.

“It’s a little late for an interview,” I say. “Could we do it tomorrow instead?”

Gabriel gives a short shake of his head. “If you want your interview, you’ll come with me now.”

“I can’t leave my son.”

“I know,” he says. “Bring him.”

Part of me wants to object—it’s ludicrous that he thinks that, just by showing up here, I’m supposed to fall into line—but part of me is intrigued. Gabriel has just found out he has a son. This could be the most vulnerable I ever see him, and it’s my duty as a journalist to exploit that.

Hmm. Maybe I am the pesky reporter he thinks me to be.

“Okay,” I say. “Just give me a few minutes to get a diaper bag together.”

“Not necessary. I have everything you might need at my home, and there will be a nanny there to look after the child.”

I find the cold way he’s speaking and his indifferent expression interesting. This must be how he copes. I study him, looking for a flicker of emotion, and only realize I have been staring for too long when he raises an eyebrow expectantly.

“Well?” Gabriel says.

“Yeah, okay.” I go into my room and grab Harry from his crib. He fusses in my arms and I bounce him as I walk back to the kitchen. I study Gabriel’s face as I approach him, but his expression is indecipherable.

Very interesting.

“Let’s go,” I say, sliding my purse onto my shoulder.

He leads the way out of the building. There is a sleek black town car waiting in front. Gabriel opens the door and gestures for me to get in. I pop my head inside and frown.

“Gabriel, there’s no car seat,” I complain.

“Just hold him on your lap.”

I straighten and glare at him. “I don’t know why I expected that you might know even the first thing about having a baby, but clearly I was wrong. What happens if we crash or someone hits us? He could be seriously hurt.”

Gabriel’s lip curls into a bitter smile. “If someone so much as taps this car while he is in it, I will have them killed.”

Alarmingly, I can’t tell if he’s joking or not. Can Gabriel joke?

“Besides,” he adds, pointing at two other big tinted SUVs I hadn’t noticed, “we will have an escort on all sides.”

Even with how little I know about him, I know it would be useless to continue fighting him on the issue. I swallow my retort about that being hardly reassuring and get into the car, clutching Harry to my chest. Gabriel follows, closing the door behind him.

Now it’s just the three of us.

Here goes nothing.

ALEXIS

The car ride is painfully silent. The only sounds are Harry's curious gurgles as he stares out the window, reaching with his chubby little hands as though he could snare the passing buildings in his fingers. He is in a grabbing phase.

Gabriel stares at his phone screen, tapping out a message.

Was this a bad idea? The thought of Harry growing up without a father has always bothered me, but will it be any better for him to grow up with a father who doesn't care about him? Sure, Gabriel is here and that has to count for something, but what are his motives? It doesn't feel like fatherly affection drove him here.

"Are you even going to look at our son?" I bite out.

Gabriel's fingers still on the screen. For a second, I think he's going to say *no*. If he does, I might claw his eyes out.

After a beat, Gabriel tucks the phone into his inside jacket pocket and turns to look at us. Though I am glaring daggers, Harry giggles.

I study Gabriel's face. His mouth purses slightly and he clears his throat.

"What's his name?" he asks.

"Harry," I tell him. "He's named after my late father. A good man."

"Harry ..." Gabriel's brow furrows. "Harry Wright?"

A strange look passes over his face like a dark cloud. More than anything in the world right now, I wish to be inside Gabriel's head, to understand what that look means. Is he happy with the name? Does he hate it? Should I even care one way or the other?

I frown. "Yes."

"Ah."

The look passes and Gabriel reaches out tentatively, running his thumb over Harry's cheek. I did not know he was capable of such tenderness and for some reason, this small motion hits me like a punch to the gut.

True to form, Harry reaches up and clasps Gabriel's thumb in his meaty fist. Gabriel blinks, as though startled, and the idea of a tiny baby spooking this buffalo of a man makes me chuckle. Gabriel's eyes meet mine. I expect irritation, but there is warmth swirling in those amber depths instead. His mouth tics ever-so-slightly. My belly flutters.

Though awkward, there is a gentleness to this moment that chips away at my apprehension.

The car turns and I hear the crackle of gravel beneath the tires. Looking out, I see we have started up a long driveway bordered by manicured lawns on either side.

"We're here," Gabriel says, extricating his thumb from Harry's grip.

I am sad the car ride is over. A sense of foreboding settles in my gut and I worry I will not see this gentle side of Gabriel again.

The car halts at the top of the drive and the driver opens the door on my side. I step out, bouncing Harry. My jaw drops.

Gabriel lives in a mansion.

A massive, *fuck-off* mansion with marble columns on either side of the front door. I have never seen a building stand so proudly. The shutters on its Georgian windows are flung open to the warm night air and sconces lining the front wall bathe the red brick in golden light.

What did I expect? That the egotistical billionaire would reside in a modest hut at the edge of the woods?

Gabriel arrives next to me. "I'll show you the nursery."

I nod, trying to regain control of my faculties, and follow him inside. Two men stand at the front of the door. Neither looks at us or says a word. Gabriel has guards. I'm not sure how I feel about that.

Inside, there is a balcony overlooking both sides of the vaulted foyer, and my shoes slap against the marble tiles. I follow Gabriel as he leads me up the wide fantail staircase to the second floor. There is a maid polishing a golden wall lamp and she slinks close to the wall as we pass, even though the hallway is more than wide enough to accommodate all three of us.

This is too much. The extravagant mansion, the deferential staff ... No wonder Gabriel acts like he owns everything. He does.

Gabriel stops at a door and opens it, gesturing for me to step inside. I peer in and swear under my breath.

"It's a nursery," I remark.

Gabriel stands behind me, and I can practically feel his heat at my back. "Yes."

Not only is it a nursery, but it's the most beautiful nursery I've ever seen. A luxury wooden crib sits on one side of the room, with a sweet mobile hanging above it. There is a chest of toys and games open on the other side of the room, next to a plush sofa. Sitting on the sofa is a woman I presume to be the nanny. She stands up as we enter, smiling pleasantly.

"Did you have all this set up already?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder at Gabriel. "Christ, you only found out you had a kid a couple hours ago."

"Money is power." He nudges me toward the nanny. "This is Jessica. She will look after Harry while we talk."

Right, the interview. I'd forgotten all about it.

I am reluctant to hand off my baby to a stranger, but I know that Gabriel will have hired the best of the best. And she does look very nice. I pass Harry over and Jessica grins down at him, her blonde hair falling in a curtain over her face. He curls his fist around a few loose strands but doesn't tug. He is always very gentle.

"Come on," Gabriel says, leaving the room.

I walk to the doorway but linger there, watching Jessica rock Harry back and forth. My fingertips itch to reach out and take him back. Maybe I'm in the grabbing phase, too. I feel vulnerable here, and that baby is my everything. The thought of leaving him even for a second tugs at my heart. Harry seems content enough, but my feet are cemented to the ground.

Footsteps approach and Gabriel is at my back. "Are you coming?"

I glance up and am surprised to find that he's staring at the scene in the nursery as well. Some of the hard edges of his expression have softened, but when he sees me looking, he turns away.

"If you want your interview, I suggest you follow me," he says, striding off down the hall.

I steal one more peek at my baby and follow him.

Gabriel leads me to a sitting room on the ground floor. Long windows line the far wall and there are tall bookshelves on either side of the room. I angle toward one of the shelves as I enter the room, admiring the variety of titles and how neatly they are arranged.

Gabriel clears his throat. I turn and he is sitting on a red leather love seat in the middle of the room. I walk over and perch on the matching sofa opposite. Between us sits a long, cherrywood coffee table. It looks like an antique, and I bet it's only one of many in this house.

"Thank you for agreeing to continue the interview," I say, somewhat awkwardly. "I've just realized I don't have a pen or paper. Can I record this instead?"

Gabriel leans over and opens a drawer in the side of the coffee table, then wordlessly hands me a pad of paper and a pen from inside. He slides it closed and sits back, watching me. I pick them up, not bothering to hide my amused smile.

“Is something funny?” he asks.

“Nope.”

“Good.”

I lick my lip, watching him, trying to arrange my thoughts. Everything has changed since the last time we sat like this, and I am conscious of the fact that this is my third try. I need to get answers from him this time. Debbie will kill me if we end up having to publish that pile of fluff his assistant sent over, and beyond that, I need a win. This man has tested me every second that I’ve known him. It’s time for me to test him back.

“I’d like it if you could walk me back to your childhood,” I tell Gabriel. “What was it like growing up under a man like Fabrizio Belluci?”

A shadow passes over his face at the mention of his father, but he quickly smiles. “He was a good man. Growing up, he could be very hard on me, but his influence is what shaped me into the man I am today.”

His answer doesn’t feel genuine. I push further.

“Did he prime you from a young age to take over the business?” I ask. “I understand that you assumed a leadership role in the company quite early on, at which point Fabrizio seemed to melt into the background.”

“It was always understood that I would take over the business.”

“Did you want to? Or was it more of an obligation than an ambition?”

He chuckles. “How will you paint me in this article, I wonder?”

“That all depends on you.” I raise a brow in challenge.

Gabriel leans in, resting his forearms on the tops of his thighs. The pose is more casual than I am accustomed to from him, and that unsettles me somehow.

“What about your childhood?” he asks. “You said your father was a good man, and now you style yourself as an auditor of the truth. But is that obligation or ambition?”

That hits a nerve, but I don’t let it show.

“I’m not the one being interviewed,” I point out.

“I propose a little tit for tat.” His eyes bore into mine. “After all, I think I have the right to know more about you, considering we share a child.”

He’s not wrong, and it would be easier to get answers out of him if we made some sort of arrangement. Plus, I’ve got nothing to hide.

“Okay, Dr. Lecter,” I agree. “*Quid pro quo* then. Ambition or obligation?”

Gabriel smirks at my reference and the sight of it makes my blood burn. Does he have to look so sexy all the time?

“Ambition or obligation,” he repeats thoughtfully, rising from the sofa. He walks to the liquor cabinet at the side of the room and grabs a crystal decanter of amber liquid and two glasses. When he sits back on the love seat, he pours out a measure into each glass as he ruminates. “In my family, those concepts are one and the same. I have had expectations placed upon me since I was a child, and I have always striven to meet and exceed them.”

He slides a glass toward me.

“What about you, Tiger?”

My heart flutters. I wish he would stop calling me that because it does things to me and I’m trying to hang on to what little semblance of professionalism I have left.

“Ambition,” I say, lifting the glass. “My father was a state prosecutor. Every case was personal to him, and often he would work so hard that he’d end up sleeping in his office. He taught me that caring about other people wasn’t about what

you could say to them, but what you could do for them. That's why, when I write, I want the words to mean something. I want them to make an impact."

I take a sip of the drink and try not to make a face. It's whiskey. Very potent whiskey.

"*Was* a state prosecutor?" Gabriel inquires. "Is he retired now?"

I click my tongue. "That's not how this works. I get another question first."

Gabriel sits back and takes a sip of his whiskey, gesturing for me to continue.

"What was your relationship with your father after you took over the business?" I ask.

"Tense, at first," he admits. "He had a hard time letting go. But once he realized that the business was in good hands, and he was free to explore other interests, he more or less left me to it. Is your father retired or dead?"

I do not expect him to be so blunt and I blink. "Uh, dead." With a little more confidence, I add, "Murdered, actually. He was shot, like your dad. So I guess that's something else we have in common."

"My father killed himself."

I level my gaze at him. "Right, of course. And your mother?"

"Died in childbirth. Yours?"

"Died of cancer. We're like two peas in a pod."

The tension between us is palpable, and Gabriel gives me an indecipherable look. It burns deep into my skin and I look down at my notes.

"Look at me, Tiger."

I follow his command, heart racing.

"What do you want from me?" I ask.

“I don’t want anything from you,” he says. “You’re the one who has been chasing me for an interview, remember?”

I shake my head. “You’ve been toying with me from the first second we met in Fiamma. You might kick me to the curb when you feel like it, but you’re getting something out of this and I don’t quite understand what.”

“Toying with you?” He cocks a brow. “Is that how you see it?”

I nod. “You take pleasure in unsettling me.”

Gabriel sits forward and I scoot back, even though there’s a coffee table between us. He marks my gesture with a smirk.

“I think you like me toying with you,” he drawls. “In fact, I think you’ve been waiting for me to take our game even further. Like I did that night at Fiamma.”

My mouth goes dry. The heat of his gaze zaps straight to my core and I clench my thighs, trying to get my thoughts back on track.

Interview, interview ... I’m supposed to be interviewing.

I take a breath and clear my throat, trying to pretend like his words haven’t gotten to me. “Let’s talk about your plans for the future,” I propose.

But it’s too late. He has picked up on my arousal. I can see it in the hungry way he looks at me.

“The only plan I’m willing to discuss with you right now is my plan to bend you over that sofa and fuck you senseless.”

His words hit me like a bolt of lightning. Every one of my nerves sizzles to life and cries out for him. My mind is flooded with visions of our naked, entangled bodies and it takes significant effort to clear them away.

I narrow my eyes at him. “You really will do anything to get out of this interview, won’t you?”

He smiles wickedly. “We can finish it after if you’re that concerned.”

“There will be no after. I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“We both know that’s not true,” Gabriel says, rising to his feet.

I am rooted to the spot as he walks around the sofa, taking slow, predatory steps. He disappears from my line of view and I am just about to turn around when I feel his hand slither around the side of my neck, cupping my cheek. He lowers his face next to mine, breath tickling my ear. My heart hammers against my ribs. Liquid heat settles between my legs.

Gabriel’s lips feather over my throat. I can’t help but moan.

“That’s what I thought,” he murmurs, kissing his way from my chin to my shoulder. His hand skims down over my breast, and my nipple tightens beneath his wandering fingers.

All the thoughts in my head flutter away, leaving behind a hazy cloud of lust. It feels sensational to be touched after my long abstinence, especially when the person touching me knows exactly how to set my body alight.

Gabriel’s lips move away. He stops touching me entirely. I whimper without meaning to, an addict denied her fix.

“Come here,” he commands.

As if they have a will of their own, my legs straighten and I’m up.

I find submitting to Gabriel freeing. Between my career and Harry, there is not a second in my day when I don’t have to be responsible. With Gabriel, somebody else has the reins. I hate to admit it, but it feels good to dance to the beat of someone else’s drum. It doesn’t hurt that the person setting said beat is a tall, dark sex god.

I walk around the sofa, heart beating so loud I am sure Gabriel can hear it. He watches me with dark eyes, drinking me in. I arrive in front of him and lick my lips.

“Good girl,” he croons.

And then he slams his lips against mine. The sudden ferocity of his kiss startles me and sends my adrenaline into overdrive. I cling to the front of his shirt. My legs threaten to

buckle beneath me. Gabriel's arms snake around my body, pulling me tightly against his chest as his lips ravage mine.

My core throbs. Gabriel presses me back against the sofa and drops a hand between us, rubbing it against the front of my pants while his mouth carves a hot path down my neck. I arch toward him, eyes rolling to the back of my head.

"You don't know how many times I've imagined doing this," he growls into my skin. "Every time you open that pretty little mouth to insult me, all I can think about is fucking you until you can't string a sentence together."

"Is your ego that delicate?" I mock.

He laughs, nipping the crook of my neck. "There you go with that mouth again."

"So do something about it."

Gabriel spins me around and pushes my shoulders, bending me over. His fingers dig into the meat of my ass, his mouth at my ear. "Oh I will."

His hand slides around the front of my jeans and undoes them, and in the next second, he has torn them and my panties down to my ankles. I feel so exposed. There's something sexy about being in such a compromising position, and I wait with bated breath to see what comes next.

Gabriel's palm rubs over my bare ass, and he smacks it hard. I yelp in surprise, but the pain mixes with pleasure and it feels as though sparks are skittering across my skin. His hand slides over my butt and then down. My breath catches as his fingers probe my sex, and Gabriel emits a low moan of approval when he finds me soaking wet.

This discovery lends an urgency to his movements. He slides a finger in and out of me, then adds another, fucking me with his hand. I eagerly grind back against him.

Gabriel's fingers move away and I look back to find him sheathing his length in a condom. Nice of him to bother this time.

His eyes meet mine and he pushes my head down, driving my ass into the air for his pleasure. I feel him at my entrance and then he plunges into me in one smooth thrust.

I arch back with a loud moan.

“You feel so good, Tiger,” Gabriel purrs. His hands come to my hips and he pushes me forward with another powerful thrust. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

I cling to the top of the sofa, eyes rolling to the back of my head. Gabriel fucks me quickly, greedily, like a starving man devouring a feast. The room fills with the sound of our slapping skin and my harsh breaths. His cock fills me entirely, stretches me, dominates me. Pleasure swirls in my belly and I find myself pushing back on him, needing more and more.

Gabriel grabs my shoulder and uses this grip to ram into me even harder. The hand on my shoulder soon slides over the front of my throat, and he drags me back against his chest, holding me in place as he continues to drive up into me.

I feel like a rag doll for Gabriel to use as he sees fit and I’ve never been more turned on. I am at this hulking man’s mercy—and I love it. But Gabriel is not a selfish lover, and his free hand slides across my belly and over my mound, fingers circling my clit. I cry out in sheer ecstasy.

It’s too much, all of it:

His cock buried inside of me...

His fingers playing with me...

The feel of his hard chest against my back...

Tendrils of heat glide up my legs and into my core, and I quiver all over as a delicious orgasm builds deep in my belly.

Gabriel’s breathing becomes more ragged, more urgent. The hand on my throat eases and I find myself being bent down again, though he continues to flutter his fingers against my sensitive nub. My hair creates a curtain around my face as Gabriel continues to slam his hips into mine.

I screw my eyes shut as the warmth glows from my core, the sensation growing and growing until ...

“Oh my God!” I cry, muscles clenching with the force of my release. I am jettisoned into space, where I float in a dreamy nebula as pleasure floods every cell of my being. I have not come like this since ... well, since the last time Gabriel and I had sex.

My body clenches down on Gabriel and sends him over the edge. His hands come to my hips and his fingers dig into me as he slams home one final time.

GABRIEL

My forehead prickles with sweat, and even though my legs are still shaking a little, I right myself and take a step back from Alexis. She looks so perfect bent over the couch, with her pink ass in the air, that I'm tempted to go for a second round right now. But I want to leave her craving more, and we will have plenty of time to do all the things I've fantasized about doing to her.

I deal with the condom and pull my slacks back on.

"Right." Alexis straightens and pulls up her jeans, then turns to me. "Let's finish the interview."

"Most women would usually want to cuddle for a bit first," I point out with a wry smile.

Alexis combs her fingers through her hair. "And I'm sure that, cuddle monster that you are, you're always more than happy to oblige to such a request."

I chuckle.

Alexis intrigues me; she has since that first night we met. The more I learn about her, the more I realize she is different than anyone I've ever known. And I like that. She can pretend that she despises me as much as she wants, but I know she is just as fascinated as I am.

She gestures to the love seat where I was sitting before. "If you'd please take a seat."

I find her formality amusing after what we just did. Alexis is clearly fighting something, and I am going to enjoy

exploiting her indecision.

I sit, and Alexis is about to do the same when there is a loud crash from the second floor. Thudding footsteps slam into the floorboards above our heads, growing quieter as they head toward ...

A woman's scream rips through the house.

"Harry!" Alexis shoots out of the room.

"Alexis, stop!" I bark, dashing to the coffee table and snatching the gun from the drawer. "It could be dangerous!"

But she is already gone. Nothing will stand between her and her baby. My baby too, I realize. I shove the gun in the back of my pants and chase after her.

My heart quickens as I think about what I would do if something had happened to him. But who would be after him? I have only known about him myself for a few hours, and I have told very few of my men. He should be safe.

I pound through the house and up the stairs, skidding to a halt at the door to the nursery just as Alexis crosses the threshold toward Jessica. The nanny is in the corner. She is pale as a sheet, and quivers as she holds a wailing Harry to her chest. The shrill sound of his cries digs into me like a rusty knife.

"What happened?" I ask.

Alexis scoops Harry from Jessica's arms and the other woman collapses against the wall. "I think they were going to take him," she says quietly. "I wouldn't have let them, I promise."

"It's okay," I say. "You didn't let them. Where did they go?"

"The guards came and they ran. I—I don't know what happened after that."

Alexis walks around the room, gently bouncing Harry. She murmurs to him quietly, though her expression is anything but calm.

I approach Jessica and offer her my hand.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly.

She nods.

“Good. You can go home now, Jessica.”

Jessica takes my hand and shakily rises to her feet, leaving the room just as Diego appears at the doorway holding a walkie-talkie. His flamboyant Hawaiian shirt clashes with the grimace etched onto his features. The guards on standby often play poker in the guardhouse, and Diego has been a regular participant in these games since he was a guard for my grandfather forty years ago.

He gestures for me to join him in the hallway.

“What happened?” I ask in a hushed voice.

“Looks like an attempted kidnapping,” he informs me. “I was in the guardhouse when I heard the commotion. Somehow, two men got into the house, and Angelo caught up with them just as they were heading into nursery. They took off and we lost them at the north end of the property.”

I frown. “Tell the men to keep looking. I want to question them.”

“Already done,” he says with a nod. He continues in a whisper, “Do you think it was the Walshes? Who else knows about this baby?”

“The news shouldn’t have made it back to them yet,” I reply. “Unless we’ve got a leak.”

Diego glances into the room. “It’s possible, but if we’re looking for potential leaks, I’d start with her.”

I follow his gaze and see Alexis still trying to soothe a crying Harry. I know she would never do anything to purposefully endanger her child, but she has no idea what kind of world I live in. Who knows who she could have told about this.

“Thanks, Diego. I appreciate you stepping in tonight.”

“Of course,” he replies.

“One more thing,” I say. “Make sure Jessica is well compensated for tonight.”

He nods and leaves me, and I take a deep breath before reentering the nursery. Alexis is still gliding around the room, patting Harry on the back and whispering to him. He is still crying.

Why is he still crying?

“Is he hurt?” I ask, striding toward them. “I’ll call a doctor to check him over.”

The thought of anyone hurting Harry makes my veins buzz with rage, but I need to keep a calm head for the baby’s sake. Once I figure out who this was, I will make them pay. I pull my phone out of my pocket and start to dial.

“He’s fine,” Alexis says, meeting my eye. “I checked him over and he’s not hurt. He’s just scared.”

Harry’s wails ease somewhat, and I slip my phone back into my pocket and approach the pair. Alexis eyes me warily. “Gabriel, what the hell happened?” she asks in a quiet voice.

I reach out gingerly and stroke Harry’s tearstained face. “Let’s talk about it in a minute,” I tell her. “I want to see him calm down first.”

When she looks at me, I can tell she understands, though I’m not sure I understand the compulsion myself.

I need Harry to be okay.

I need him to stop crying, need him to be calm. I tend not to waste time stewing over other people’s emotions, but with Harry, I don’t have a choice.

The child looks at me and, for the first time, I notice he has my brown eyes. He hiccups. His crying eases into rasping breaths.

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell him.

Providing comfort doesn’t come naturally to me and I feel a little awkward, but I’m determined not to let that stop me. My father was never there for me. What I told Alexis wasn’t

wrong—he was hard on me, and that toughness helped shape me into the man I am. But when he wasn't being tough, he was cold and uncaring. I will not be that to Harry.

He turns his head and buries it in his mother's shoulder, and the rejection stings, though I know it shouldn't. I will become a familiar figure to him soon enough. One day, he will take over the business and keep the Belluci name going long after I'm gone. Today, he just wants his mother.

Alexis walks to the sofa and sinks down. She starts to rock Harry back and forth, humming softly. I am entranced. The scene is so peaceful that it's hard to believe all the chaos that occurred only minutes before. I know right then that I cannot and will not let my son go. He needs to stay right here, where I can protect him.

“Alexis,” I say.

She looks up, still rocking Harry. His eyelids flutter closed and he curls into her chest.

“I need you and Harry to stay here from now on,” I tell her. “I think it would be best for you to remain under my protection until I find those men.”

Her eyebrows converge on her forehead. “Um, no,” she scoffs.

“I wasn't asking.” I fold my arms. “It's not safe for you to return to your apartment.”

“It's not safe for us to be here,” she argues quietly. “I don't know if you remember this, but around fifteen minutes ago, someone broke into your house.”

I walk to the couch and take a seat beside her. “They were heading for the nursery. My security team think it was an attempted kidnapping.”

“Even more reason for us not to stay here.”

I sigh, tousling my hair. “Alexis—”

“He's nearly asleep,” she interrupts. “Can we talk about this when he's asleep?”

I nod and Alexis goes back to humming as she rocks Harry. His breaths even out and his fists relax. He yawns, settling close against his mother.

Watching Harry go still in Alexis' arms is utterly captivating.

ALEXIS

Harry snuffles softly and I know he's finally asleep. I look up, expecting Gabriel to be on his phone or something, and am surprised to find him staring intently at Harry.

"He's asleep," I say.

"Okay. Put him to bed and we can go talk in my office."

I instinctively hug Harry closer to my chest. "Absolutely not," I reply, affronted. "You're crazy if you think I'm going to leave him unprotected after what just happened."

Gabriel's expression flickers, as though my comment stung. "He was protected before. They didn't get to him."

"Where were the guards when I showed up in his room?" I volley back. "As I remember it, the only people in there were a screaming baby and a terrified nanny."

He sighs and scrubs a hand over his face. "Will you just come to my office? You can bring Harry if it makes you feel better."

"Thank you for the permission," I say tartly, rising to my feet.

My legs are wobbly, but I manage to put one foot in front of the other to follow him as he leads me out of the nursery and through the house. The halls are lit with warm crystal chandeliers and the air smells like fresh pine. There is not a speck of dust in sight. I think about his request for Harry and me to stay here and wonder if it might not be so bad. The

house is gorgeous, and the more I see Gabriel interact with Harry, the more I warm up to him.

That being said, I will never forget the terror that blasted through me when I heard Jessica's scream. I don't know if I could ever feel safe here after that.

Gabriel enters a large office with rich mahogany accents and an imposing desk set in front of a towering arch window. Impressive. I follow him inside and take a seat in front of the desk, careful not to jostle Harry too much.

On the wall to my left, above a squat bookshelf, there is a framed black-and-white photo of a dignified-looking older man. I recognize him from my research as Gabriel's father. Gabriel shares many of his features, including the harsh set of his mouth where a smile should be. I didn't get the impression during the interview that he idolized his father—the feeling was more one of grudging respect. I wonder why he put his picture on the wall.

Gabriel sits across from me in the executive chair and clasps his hands in front of him.

"I feel like I should be telling you about the latest figures," I joke. "We're down ten points in the DOW and up ten points for Gryffindor."

Gabriel frowns. "This isn't a time for joking around."

"Tough crowd."

"I need you to take this seriously," he growls.

"I am taking this seriously, and I am seriously not going to move in with you."

His eyes bore into mine, all business. There is no nonsense in his handsome features, and I feel the weight of his stare like a pile of bricks on my chest. This must be what it's like to face him down in a boardroom. No wonder he's so rich. He's terrifying.

"I don't just need you to move in with me," he replies. "I want you and Harry to stay here and not leave the property until I have neutralized the danger."

My eyes pop out of my head. “Stay here?” I hiss, trying to keep my voice low for Harry’s sake even though his suggestion is so preposterous I want to scream. “I have a life, Gabriel. I have a job, and friends, and most importantly, free will. So no, I will not stay with you.”

Gabriel’s right eye twitches and he erupts out of his chair, striding to a tall cabinet at the side of the room. “The kidnappers caught us by surprise.” He opens one of the doors and I crane my neck, trying to look around him. “That is the only reason they got anywhere near Harry.”

I catch sight of a dial and realize he’s standing in front of a safe. Gabriel twists the dial with an angry flick of his wrist.

“Now that I know somebody wants to hurt him, I will double security and ensure they don’t stand a chance,” he continues. “I can lock down this mansion, but I cannot lock down the outside world. The only place he will be truly safe is here.”

“Why is someone after him anyway?” I ask.

Gabriel hefts open the safe door and removes some of the contents. “I don’t know,” he admits. “But I have some powerful enemies.”

He comes back to the desk and I realize he is carrying stacks upon stacks of money. He sets it front of me and splays his palms on the desktop, leaning over.

“If you agree to stay with me, you can have all of this,” he says.

“You expect me to sell my freedom?” My features twist with disgust. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s not for sale and neither am I.”

He smiles cruelly. “In my experience, every woman has a price.”

I am furious with him for thinking so little of me, but his comment also makes me a little sad. “Jesus, Gabriel. Who hurt you?” I ask.

Gabriel's mouth flattens. Wordlessly, he goes to the safe and returns to the desk with more bundles of cash. "Take the money, Alexis. Think about the safety of our son."

"If you're so concerned with Harry's safety, then use this ridiculous amount of money to hire security for my apartment," I suggest. "But I'm not going to agree to be your kept woman."

Gabriel adds more cash to the pile. "Like I said, there are too many variables in the outside world. I can protect you both better here."

I kiss Harry's forehead, refusing to even look at the newest addition to the money pile.

Is the money a little enticing? Of course it is. But my integrity means more to me than tidy bundles of cash, and I don't want Gabriel to think for a second that he can buy me.

I do wonder about Harry's safety, though, as well as my own. Gabriel is adamant that it is not safe in the outside world, but how much can I trust him? And how much of this whole show is just Gabriel wanting to control me and his access to Harry?

"Okay, fine," Gabriel says when I continue to ignore the growing stack of cash. "So you won't take any money. But what if it went to someone who needed it?"

I look up and meet his gaze, curious.

"I've looked into it and after your father's death, his firm started a scholarship fund in his name to help underprivileged students pursue a career in law." He sits across from me and swipes the money to the floor, clearly agitated with my continued resistance.

Harry shifts in my arms and I glare at Gabriel with a raised eyebrow.

He carries on speaking, clearly unrepentant. "I will donate one million dollars to that fund if you agree that you and Harry will stay here."

The prospect is tempting. One million dollars would do a lot of good, and it would be honoring my father's memory in a huge way. There's the added benefit, of course, of getting essentially unlimited access to a reclusive billionaire, which will be great for my story. Especially since it's just gotten a load more interesting—what does he mean he has powerful enemies?

I'll ask Debbie for a little more time to gather information and work on it. My agreeing to stay would be altruistic, really.

Beyond all that, there is something like desperation shining in Gabriel's eyes and I do want to trust him. Though I can think of at least five nasty things I could call him off the top of my head, so far, "bad father" doesn't make the list. I can tell that he's trying, and that he cares.

"You can work from home," he continues. "If the paper is resistant, I will pull some strings to ensure they allow it. Your friends can visit. And as long as I'm with you, you can make trips off the property." His eyes search mine. "I won't let my son leave when I know that he is in danger."

Something about his demanding tone sends butterflies careening around my rib cage. His insistence on dominating me every step of the way both infuriates me and arouses me, which in turn confuses me. I could fight him on this a little more, but I know it won't do any good, and if I refuse and something does happen to Harry, I will never forgive myself.

"Okay," I relent. "We will stay, but only temporarily."

Gabriel shows no signs of relief. He was expecting this answer.

"Good." He picks up the phone on his desk.

"But I have one more condition," I tell him, sticking my chin out.

He cocks a brow.

"All this excitement has made me hungry," I continue. "I want a snack. Something salty and crunchy. Like corn nuts. Or Funyuns."

Gabriel punches a number on the phone, mouth curving slightly. “Michael, come to my office and escort Ms. Wright to her room. And have someone bring her some salty, crunchy snacks.” He looks me in the eye. “Like corn nuts. Or Funyuns.”

When he gets off the phone, I frown. “Also, I’ll obviously need to go home and get my stuff.”

Gabriel shakes his head. “No, you don’t.”

I roll my eyes. “Christ, are you going to buy me a whole new wardrobe too? Is it French maid outfits and lingerie from here on out?”

Gabriel’s lip curves sinfully. “Don’t give me any ideas.”

Heat flashes in my core, but before I have the chance to retort, a tall, beefy man dressed in all black and absolutely covered with tattoos enters the room. The new arrival either doesn’t notice the bundles of cash all over the floor or does a good job of pretending not to.

Gabriel dismisses me with a wave of his hand, as though he wasn’t just flirting with me the second before. I hate how he does that—switches between hot and cold so easily.

Anyway, it’s late, and I’m tired. I stand from the chair, rubbing Harry’s back, and get up to follow the man, who introduces himself in a monotone as “Michael.” If only my little guy knew that his life was about to change. I think about all the other lives that Gabriel’s donation will change, too, and I wonder if maybe he’s right when he says that everyone has a price. What will he try to buy from me next? My son’s affection?

No, that’s definitely one thing that is not for sale. If Gabriel so much as moves a finger to try to get in the way of my relationship with my son, Harry and I are out of here and that’s that.

Michael is silent as we move through the house. We stop in front of the door next to the nursery and he twists the handle and pushes it open. He takes up a post next to the door and I realize he must be my security for the night. I give him a once-

over and decide he could probably stop a train in its tracks, never mind a kidnapper. It helps ease some of my uneasiness.

I enter the room, and I am pleased to see there is a door connecting this room with the nursery beside it, but that is the only thing I am pleased to see.

All of my things are here. My laptop is sitting on a long white desk in the corner of the room, as well as the notepads and pens that are usually littered around my apartment. My favorite furry throw is draped across the luxurious four-poster bed. I go to the closet and slide back the door and sure enough, my clothes are neatly hung up on the rail and my shoes are lined up on the floor beneath them.

My heart sinks into my stomach. Gabriel must have had my apartment cleared out after he came to collect me for the interview, which means even before the kidnapping attempt and his offer, he never intended to let me go. His bargaining gave me some semblance of control when in reality I had none.

There is a gentle knock on my door. I open to find a new burly man in a suit holding a big bag of Funyuns. He hands them to me wordlessly.

I open the bag as I meander around the room, checking out my new space and trying not to feel too played. This is still for the best, right? I'm helping out disadvantaged students, honoring my dad's memory, getting an exclusive scoop on Gabriel, and keeping my son safe. Plus, snacks delivered anytime I want. It could be worse. I flick on the light of the ensuite bathroom and marvel at the gigantic rain shower, chewing thoughtfully.

It could be *much* worse.

After completing another lap of the room, I stretch out on the bed with Harry. It feels like heaven compared to the mattress at my apartment, and I groan.

It could be *so much* worse.

ALEXIS

The baby monitor crackles to life, waking me up. “Guuggh guhh.”

I take a deep breath, knowing that if I don’t get up and soothe Harry now, he will start bawling within minutes.

“Guuggh guhh!”

I’m about to crack open my eyes and go attend to him when I hear something else on the monitor—a man’s voice saying, “Shh, shh,” in a soft, comforting rasp.

Pulling a baggy t-shirt on over my head, I pad to the open nursery door and lean against the doorframe, watching as Gabriel cradles Harry and rocks him back and forth. He whispers to him. I wish I could hear what he is saying.

It’s been a weird week. I’ve spent most days playing with Harry, doing work on my laptop, and exploring the mansion and all of its delights. There are a couple of locked doors in the house, including the one to Gabriel’s office, but otherwise, I’m free to roam at will. I can’t help but feel like a bird in a cage, but it’s a nice cage at least—with a theater room, a library, and a gym.

Work-wise, I explained my absence to Debbie by saying that I was pursuing a lead. That’s not abnormal for reporters at the paper, and since she was placing such a premium on the Gabriel story, she didn’t seem to care if I didn’t show up to the office for a little while.

Gabriel looks up at me and I smile. He smiles back, and warmth spreads through my belly. His black hair is messy, with a stray lock falling over his forehead, and the way his powerful arms cradle our son so tenderly makes my heart do a flip.

“Go back to bed,” he says. “He’ll be asleep again soon.”

I shake my head. “I’m awake now. May as well be awake.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

And then he turns to the window with Harry, and the familiar feeling of dismissal replaces the warmth in my gut.

This is how it is with Gabriel. I catch a small snippet of tenderness—a kind gesture here, a smile and a joke there—and then just as quickly as it came, he slams down the blast doors and returns to his cold, reptilian persona.

Last night, I was watching a movie with Harry before bed, and Gabriel came into the theater room and plunked down onto the sofa next to us. He didn’t say a word but pulled Harry onto his lap and filched some of my popcorn. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, curious what he was going to do. Harry tugged on his tie. Gabriel tickled him. Minutes passed, and Harry started to drift off, which is when Gabriel slid him back over to me, grabbed another handful of popcorn, and sauntered out of the room. I didn’t see him again until he stole into my room in the middle of the night and woke me with fiery kisses on my neck. He has been doing that a lot.

Admittedly, I live for his witching hour visits. When I wake to Gabriel sliding into my bed, squeezing me with urgency as he grinds his hard cock against my ass, I melt. We exchange few words, but Gabriel doesn’t need to speak for me to know who is in charge. I think of last night, when he pressed my face against the pillows, ass high in the air, and spanked me until I was sure he would leave a handprint as he drove in and out of my eager body.

Liquid heat floods my core and I whimper without meaning to. Gabriel looks up questioningly as he lowers Harry into the crib.

I bite my lower lip. “Why don’t we both go back to bed for a bit?” I suggest.

Gabriel stands up, folding his arms over his muscled chest. The dim light casts shadows across his rippling abs. I want to lick them.

He stares at me for a minute, drinking in the sight of the T-shirt skimming over the tops of my bare thighs, and my heart flutters in anticipation.

But Gabriel gives a slow shake of his head and walks toward the door. “I have to work.”

And just like that, he’s gone.

I sigh, deflated. I still haven’t figured out exactly what it is I want from Gabriel, but being rebuffed like that sucks no matter how you cut it. I mostly just don’t get where we stand. The best I can figure at this stage is we’re co-parents with benefits, except the benefits seem to hinge entirely on Gabriel’s mood. Not sure how I feel about that.

Gabriel loves sex—that’s not the problem. The problem is that he seems to put sex—as well as everything else he might take pleasure in—on the backburner while he pours all his time and focus into his business. It’s like he’s afraid that by letting himself enjoy something too much, all his power and success will slip away. Gabriel may act controlling toward me, but he’s infinitely more controlling of himself.

I decide to take advantage of the fact that I’ve got at least another half an hour before Harry wakes up again and hop into the shower, hoping to wash away some of my impure thoughts. The hot water cascades over my body and I tip my head back, smiling. I have not gotten used to how luxurious this shower is yet, and I’m not sure I will. There is a bathroom on the other side of the house with a clawfoot tub. Maybe after I put Harry down to bed tonight, I’ll indulge in a long soak.

After my shower, I towel off and get dressed, grab the baby monitor, then make my way down to the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee. Victoria, Gabriel’s personal chef, is hard at work kneading dough on the counter.

Victoria is the person in the house I have the most interaction with besides Gabriel. She makes all my meals, prepares Harry's food, and keeps a fresh pot of coffee brewing all day long. She's a saint, really.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning." She smiles and wipes her floury hands on her apron. "Can I make you some breakfast?"

Victoria is a tall woman, with kind brown eyes and graying hair that is always pulled back into a neat bun. She reminds me a little of my mother in looks, but not in personality. Mom was never the type to whip up a batch of bread first thing in the morning, with bacon and eggs on standby for whoever might wander into her lair. She was more the type to show up unannounced with a bag of reubens from the deli down the road, eager to share the latest gossip she'd heard down at her early-morning spin class.

I think the hardest part of her illness was watching her spark slowly fizzle out. She grew tired easily, and her zest for life slowly diminished until it was obvious to everyone around her that she had given up. That the pain had become too much for her. It was like watching her slowly turn transparent, until one day there was nothing left.

Victoria snaps in front of my face. "...Earth to Alexis. Do you copy?"

I shake my head, blinking. "Sorry. Uh, no. I think I'm just going to have some cereal." I go to the cupboard and start rifling around, pushing thoughts of my mom out of my head.

Victoria shrugs and goes back to kneading, humming a tune to herself as she works the dough. I leave her to it and take my breakfast to the living room that has become my makeshift office. There's a desk in my bedroom, but it's comfier here. Plus there's something naughty about working from the couch.

I sink onto the sofa and eat. Scrolling through my phone, I notice that Clara still hasn't responded to the message I sent her yesterday morning. That's odd for her. Since I have a little

time before I need to start working, I decide to give her a call. She's usually up in the mornings.

The line rings a few times, and just as I think it's going to go to voice mail, she answers.

"Hello?" comes her hushed voice.

"Good morning," I chirp. "I hope I didn't wake you."

I hear rustling and then the sound of a door closing. "I was already awake." Clara giggles. "My, uh, *guest* on the other hand ..."

"Ooh la la, who is the lucky man?"

"You remember that Killian guy I told you about last week?"

Just after I moved into Gabriel's, Clara slept with a guy from one of her yoga classes who she described as "hopeless on the mat, but a rocket in bed." I figured that would be the last I'd hear about him though, since Clara goes through lovers like tissues.

"You're still seeing him?" I ask incredulously.

"Yes. He's so ... ugh, I don't know. So *bad*. I tried to give him the usual 'thanks but no thanks' when he asked for my number after we banged, and he literally wrestled my phone off me to call himself from it."

I frown. I don't like the way that sounds. I'm a bit protective of Clara because of her past and almost negligently carefree attitude. But then again, who am I to judge? I'm literally locked up in my baby daddy's mansion. Not exactly a role model for domestic stability.

"That sounds ... interesting," I say. "What does he do?"

"Something to do with security, I think. I don't know, he doesn't really like to talk about it."

I take a sip of coffee. "So have you guys been going on dates or is it just sex?"

"Mostly sex, but we've hung out at the bar with his friends a few times." She pauses. "I'm not sure how I feel about them."

They seem a little rough around the edges.”

I remember Clara being surprised that this bearded, tattooed guy showed up in her yoga class, which was what drew her to him in the first place. A little alarm goes off in my head, but I figure that’s just the protectiveness again. Clara goes to bars with me sometimes and it doesn’t seem to bother her, so surely it’s fine for her to hang out there with her new squeeze.

Before I can ask more questions, Clara changes topics. “How is work going? Is Debbie still on your case?”

“Debbie and I have come to an understanding,” I say. “She’s given me more time to work on the Belluci story now that I’ve bunkered down in the belly of the beast, but she’s not giving me anything of substance to work on until I submit it.”

“Do you think you’ll finish it soon?”

I sigh. “Doubtful. I still don’t know what I want to say, and so far, Gabriel has given me very little to work with. Anyway, Debbie’s out of town at the moment, so I’ve got a little reprieve to figure it out.”

“Chin up, babe.”

“Thanks.” I take another sip of coffee. “Will I get to see you soon? I’m lonely without you.”

“Uh, maybe. I’m pretty busy with work, and Killian has been taking up a lot of my time.”

“Is that why I didn’t hear from you yesterday?”

“Yeah, sorry. Killian gets annoyed if I’m on my phone a lot when I’m around him,” she chuckles. “I think he’s a bit of a Luddite.”

My brow wrinkles. “That sounds a little controlling, don’t you think?”

“Says the woman locked up in an ivory tower,” Clara snaps.

Her cutting tone catches me off guard—Clara is never usually anything but bright and cheerful.

“That’s different,” I argue. “Someone was going to hurt Harry.”

“Rather convenient, don’t you think?”

I sit back, stomach churning. “Are you suggesting that Gabriel fabricated a kidnapping attempt just so he could get me to stay in his house?”

“I’m saying that ever since he found out about Harry, he’s wedged himself in your life and you’ve bent over backward to let him without questioning anything.”

“That’s not true.”

It is a little true. Gabriel’s dominance has been a theme of our relationship, but I question him plenty. He might be a control freak, but he wouldn’t stoop to such a low, manipulative level to get me here...

Would he?

“I have to go,” Clara huffs.

“Wait—Clara.”

But she has already hung up. I groan and toss my phone to the other side of the couch. Why was she so defensive? It’s not like her. Is she angry with me for letting Gabriel into my life? She advised against it initially, but I thought she would come around and see that it’s best for everyone that Harry has a father. I wish she would come and see for herself how good Gabriel is with him.

I drain the rest of my coffee and grab my laptop. I try to focus, but my mind keeps slipping back to Clara’s implication regarding the kidnapping attempt. I don’t believe she’s right, but it does fuel my curiosity about Gabriel. How does a person become a billionaire in the first place? Belluci, Inc. owns a lot of property and businesses, including a few casinos, so I doubt all of it is squeaky clean. There must be some corruption somewhere—otherwise, why would anyone want to hurt his child?

I think hard on that, staring at the blinking cursor on my screen. If I dug into his business, what would I find? And

could I turn that into a story?

One thing I have learned is Gabriel's an absolute workaholic. My mind goes to his locked office, where he spends most evenings. I've crept past a couple of times and performed a little sneaky eavesdropping, but didn't hear anything useful. Once I heard him mention "the Irish" while he was on the phone. I presume they're business contacts of some sort.

I feel bad for snooping, but I think Gabriel does know who tried to kidnap our son and is keeping me in the dark. Every time I have brought it up, he shuts me down, so isn't it my right to try to find answers for myself?

The baby monitor comes to life with the sound of cries and snaps me out of my thoughts. I haul myself up from the sofa and head to the nursery.

GABRIEL

I stare out the car window, digesting my thoughts from this morning's board meeting. Things have been hectic at the office with the end of the quarter coming up, and they have been equally hectic with mob business as the Walshes continue to drive into Italian territory. The only time I have been able to relax recently has been with Alexis and Harry.

Funny. I thought that introducing my baby and his mother into my life would make things more stressful, but I find that, when I am around them, I am more at ease. For the past three weeks, they have been worming their way deeper and deeper into my thoughts. I don't know how to feel about it.

We stop at a red light, and I spy a jewelry store across the street. Does Alexis like jewelry? I never see her wearing any, but I wonder how she would react if I bought her some as a gift. Nothing too fancy of course—some diamond earrings, or a silver tennis bracelet. Just a small token of my appreciation.

But appreciation for what? Appreciation is not a currency I trade in. I make business transactions. Alexis agreed to stay in my home in return for me donating to her late father's scholarship fund. And snacks. I shouldn't need to feel appreciative for anything, yet I do.

I think about last night, when I sat with her and Harry while they watched some ridiculous teen drama that Alexis pegged as her guilty pleasure. The show was vapid and ridiculous, and I had more important things I should have been doing, but I found myself lingering there. Alexis explained the

more complicated twists in the plot to me and shot me wary side eyes when I took a few of her gummy worms. Harry climbed into my lap and shook his plastic set of keys in my face. We both laughed when he threw them on the floor and then babbled at me until I picked them up.

It was comfortable. Nice, even. But is that something I should be commemorating with gifts? Or should I be more careful?

I still don't know what to make of Alexis. For a woman who shouts her unsolicited opinions from the rooftops, I never know what she's thinking. There are times when I catch her watching me like a biologist studying a newly discovered animal in the wild. When she sees me looking, she always turns away.

Harry is much simpler. Hungry, happy, upset—you can always tell what's going through his mind. Maybe I should get him a gift. A new toy to toss on the floor.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. The pair of them are becoming a distraction to me. I have bigger things to reflect on than picking out gifts. If he were alive, I can think of a few derisive comments my father would make upon seeing me like this.

Thank the fucking Lord he's not.

My phone rings and I pick it up, trying to pull my focus back together.

“Yes?”

“I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Belluci. I know you're on your way home.” It's Jenny, my assistant.

“What is it?”

“Mr. Forrester from the Gaming Commission can no longer make your meeting on Friday. He wants to know if we can reschedule to tomorrow evening? He apologizes for the last-minute change.”

Bill Forrester is a slimy pig of a man who loves nothing more than growing fat on bribes. But, since much of the mafia

money is laundered through the Belluci casinos, he's a necessary evil.

I had been planning on having dinner at the house tomorrow. Alexis has been dropping hints for the past week or two that it would be nice for the three of us to have dinner together, like a proper family, and I do find the prospect quite intriguing.

"Mr. Belluci?"

I snap back to focus. How could I let my thoughts get away with me like that?

"Tell Mr. Forrester I'd be delighted to meet him for dinner tomorrow," I say. "Make a reservation for us at Vertigo for seven."

"I will do."

"Thank you." I hang up.

I squeeze my eyes shut and groan. Can I not have one second where I don't think about Alexis and Harry? I need to get my head together.



My plan when I get back to the house is to go straight to my office and get some work done. I am taking a break from Alexis and Harry, I decide. I need to dive back into business matters and relegate that troublesome pair to the back of my mind while I focus on things that are more important.

And then I walk past the living room, and Alexis is sitting on the sofa with her legs crossed, wearing nothing but a tiny pair of pajama pants and a white cotton tank top. Her hair is tied in a tight bun, though a few strands have escaped and frame her heart-shaped face. Harry is nowhere in sight, so he must be with Jessica in the nursery. My gaze tracks down to Alexis' collarbone, then the top of her delicious cleavage, but the laptop screen hides the rest of her figure from my view.

My cock stirs, and I storm straight into the living room and pluck the laptop out of her lap, tossing it to the end of the couch.

“Hey!” Alexis complains.

I bend down and scoop her into my arms, tossing her over my shoulder like a bag of flour.

“Gabriel!” She smacks my back as I walk out of the room. “I was in the middle of something!”

My hand cracks down over her ass. “Quiet.”

Alexis lets out a low moan. My cock strains against the zipper of my pants when I think about what I’m going to do with her. I was supposed to be going straight to my office—I suppose there’s no reason I can’t still carry out that plan.

I keep a firm grip on Alexis’ legs as I walk and her hands dangle freely down my back. We pass a maid in the hallway who does a very good job of pretending she can’t see us. When we get to my office, I hurriedly unlock the door, practically breaking it down in my rush to get inside.

I kick the door closed and walk to the desk, sweeping the various pens and notepads onto the floor before depositing Alexis onto its surface.

“Can I talk now?” Alexis asks.

“No.” I take her chin in my hand. “The only thing I want to hear out of your mouth are moans. Understand?”

There is fire in her eyes. She nods eagerly, licking her lips. I love when she looks at me like that—hungry for my cock, ready to cede to my every desire so that she can get what she wants.

I kiss her hard, wedging myself between her legs. Her lips are soft and pliant, and I snake my tongue between them to probe her mouth. She sighs against my lips. Her hands dig into my hair, and I yank them free and press them, palms down, onto the desk.

“I don’t want you to move these hands unless I say you can,” I hiss into her neck, nipping at her sensitive flesh.

Alexis moans, tipping her head back to give me better access. I kiss and suck as my hands maul her tits, massaging and squeezing. I love her curves. Her ample tits, her wide, fleshy hips, her round ass. She looks sinful in clothes, but when she's naked, Alexis is exquisite.

I begin to peel away her clothes, letting her hands up long enough for me to remove her shirt and bra. I shimmy down the little shorts and her panties and then she is completely bare to me. I spin her so she lies across the length of the desk, running a finger from her neck to the inside of her thigh.

“You're beautiful,” I say.

Alexis looks at me with fire in her eyes. Her pillowy lips are begging for my kiss.

I undress while she watches, chest rising and falling with her ragged breaths. Her palms stay tight to the wood. When I finally step out of my pants, my rod bobs in front of me, hard as a rock. This is what she does to me. I will be sitting at work in the middle of the day and get hard just thinking about her. I try not to, but it's like the more I try, the harder it gets.

I lean over Alexis. I am dying to sheathe my length inside of her, but I will tease her a little more first. I kiss down her neck, between the swell of her breasts, and over her belly. Her fingers dig into the top of the desk and I can tell she is dying to touch me, but she doesn't. Her submission thrills me.

I kiss to the tops of her thighs, skimming over her pussy. She whimpers with need, and I see her fingers trembling. She is being a good girl. I decide to reward her.

I lift her legs over my shoulders and lick up her slit. She is soaking wet and tastes divine, and my cock grows harder. If that's even possible. I work my tongue inside and swirl it around her clit. Alexis gasps and moans.

“Gabriel!”

She says my name like a prayer. A cry for help. I move my tongue faster, rewarding her supplication. Alexis' thighs quiver. I work a finger inside of her and continue licking, sucking, making her mine with each naughty kiss.

She says my name again and I slide another finger inside. Her fingers are pressed so tightly to the desk that they are white. For a woman who regularly tells me to fuck off, I am pleased at how well she handles my instructions.

Then again, she loves this. She craves it. When I dominate her, she gives in completely and it is intoxicating for both of us.

Alexis arches back, pushing into my face. She is close. I double my efforts and she comes apart with a delicious moan, her pussy squeezing my fingers. By this point, my cock is ready to burst and I cover her body with mine, driving into her heat.

God, she feels good. Her pussy walls squeeze around me like a vise.

“You can move your hands,” I tell her.

Alexis doesn't need telling twice. Her hands come around my back, nails digging into my skin. I press a bruising kiss to her lips. She groans and scratches my back, and I slam my hips harder into hers in response.

Liquid pleasure builds in my balls and I thrust harder, squeezing her legs back toward her chest to get even deeper. I grit my teeth.

I come hard, collapsing over Alexis. My head feels like it's spinning, dizzy pleasure chasing every thought from my mind except the feel of her skin against mine, and the pleasant emptiness inside of me.

ALEXIS

My body tingles with the afterglow of my orgasm, and I run my hands over Gabriel's sinewy back as both of us catch our breath. He lifts onto his forearms, and as always, I remember how much I love the feel of his muscles bunching under his skin. He looks down at me, black hair falling over his forehead, and his lips tilt in the barest of smiles.

I get lost in his eyes and in the intimacy of this moment. This is rare for us. So often, it feels like, as soon as the lust fades and Gabriel's thoughts return, he slips away from me, back behind his mental shields.

I reach out and trace my fingers down the side of his jaw.

A loud trill interrupts us and Gabriel stiffens. He pushes off the desk and I sit up as he rifles through the clothes on the floor and pulls out his phone, turning his back to me as he brings it to his ear.

Well, that was nice while it lasted.

“Yes?” he answers.

He is still while the person on the other end of the phone speaks. I strain to hear what they are saying but the volume is too low.

“I'm on my way.” He puts the phone on the desk and starts to pull on his clothes.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

Gabriel looks over his shoulder at me. “Yes. I need you to stay here while I go deal with something.”

Here? In his sacred, secret kingdom? Gabriel must be starting to trust me if he’s willing to leave me behind the locked door of his office.

I hurry to my feet and get dressed, watching as Gabriel runs a hand through his hair and prepares to leave.

“Can I sit in the big chair?” I ask.

Gabriel looks at me with something that could be amusement, but he shakes his head. “No.”

I frown and sink into the guest chair. Well, I know the first thing I’m going to do the second he leaves.

“I won’t be long,” Gabriel says. “Don’t leave.”

“Sure.”

He strides out of the office without so much as a kiss goodbye. When the door closes behind him, the silence that follows is almost overwhelming. The office is in disarray, all his pens and papers scattered all over the floor. I consider picking them up but decide against it. I don’t know how long he will be gone and I have a rare opportunity here.

Gabriel has left me alone in his office.

Me. The journalist. Alone. His office. His private sphere.

I shoot up from the chair and begin wandering around, trying to keep my footfalls as quiet as possible just in case. I’m like a kid in a candy shop: I don’t know where to start.

I feel guilty that my immediate reaction to Gabriel imbuing me with the smallest amount of trust is to snoop through his things, but Debbie would kill me if she knew I had the chance and didn’t, and besides that, I need the truth. I have so many unanswered questions about Gabriel and if he were more forthcoming, I wouldn’t need to go searching for answers myself. This isn’t just about the article anymore, either. The enigma in the thousand-dollar suit is my son’s father, and it’s my duty to find out everything I can.

This is what I tell myself to push the guilt back down my throat as I start poking around, pulling at his desk drawers and thumbing through the papers on the floor. I wish now that I'd learned to pick locks, as many of the desk drawers and cabinet doors are locked.

The portrait of Fabrizio Belluci glowers down at me from the wall as I conduct my search. I try not to feel his gaze on me—he's only a photograph, and a photograph of a dead guy to boot—but it makes my skin crawl.

I shouldn't be doing this. It's wrong. Gabriel could finally be opening up to me and if he finds out that I took advantage of his trust without so much as a second thought, he may never trust me again.

I lower myself into the executive chair and run my hands over my face. Thoughts ping around my brain like popcorn.

Yes, it is, on one level, wrong, but would I be doing this if our relationship was on more even footing? Gabriel has engineered every interaction and variable since he first slapped that money on the bar at Fiamma two years ago. He has made some vague assurances for my safety and well-being, but other than that, his presence in my life has thus far been merely transactional. Why should I owe him anything? I doubt he would lose any sleep over invading my privacy.

With new resolve, I get up and continue my search. I root through every unlocked panel in the cabinet, careful to put things back exactly as I found them.

And what do I find? A whole load of nothing. A printer, stacks of paper, boxes of pens, empty notebooks. In short, all the kinds of things one would expect to find in an office.

I am about to admit defeat when I spy the bookshelf beneath Fabrizio. Gabriel wouldn't be as theatrical as to hide something in a cutout book, would he? I walk over and thumb the titles. There are a couple of leather-bound historical tomes on topics like Mussolini and the Punic Wars (I discern an Italian theme), but most of the books are modern business tomes. I start pulling them out one by one, flipping through the pages before returning them.

I feel ridiculous, but at least, once I am finished, I will know that there is nothing worth finding in this office that isn't locked away.

I reach a book with no title on the spine, and when I pull it out I'm surprised to find it's not a book at all. It's a photo album.

I start thumbing through the pages. I figure the album must have belonged to Fabrizio because the photos are mostly of him and various suited men, smiling as they clink glasses or smoke cigars. There is one of him with a tall, blonde woman with piercing blue eyes. Fabrizio has his hand on the hip of her slinky black dress and he gazes at her adoringly.

I glance up at the Fabrizio over my head. Why did Gabriel choose this image to commemorate his father when there are dozens in here where he looks happy?

I keep flipping through and pause when I come across a photo of Gabriel.

I am stunned.

Gabriel looks about ten years younger in this picture. I'd say he's no older than twenty or so. His cheeks are a little rounder, his frame a little lankier. He is leaning against a brick wall with a splash of sunlight over his grinning face. His hair is shorter and combed, but the same reckless strand he fights off now is hanging over his forehead. He looks utterly carefree.

With considerable effort, I keep flipping through the album, but although there are a couple more photos of Gabriel, most of the pictures are of his dad. I approach the last page, and am thinking about flipping back to that first photo of Gabriel, when my heart thuds to a halt.

I bring the album closer to my face, sure that my eyes are deceiving me. Fabrizio Belluci is standing with his arm around a middle-aged man with a graying beard and twinkling blue eyes. They are laughing.

But... it can't be.

I continue to stare at the photo.

And my father continues to stare back at me.

That doesn't make any sense. Dad despised the filthy rich—he cared for the downtrodden and neglected in society. He would never have been friends with someone like Fabrizio Belluci, and if he was for some bizarre reason, I'm sure I would have known about it.

So what the hell does this mean?

GABRIEL

After leaving Alexis behind me in the office, I unlock the door to the cellar and make my way down the dingy stairs. I do not like that my men brought an Irish prisoner here, and I can't figure out why. This has always been our way. If we need answers, we obtain them by whatever means necessary in this cellar, where we are safe from prying eyes. But it feels different somehow with my baby upstairs, and with Alexis waiting in my office. I know I probably shouldn't have left her there alone, but I didn't have much choice. I didn't want to risk her following me here or the questions that my dashing away to the locked cellar would elicit.

At the bottom of the steps, I turn to find Diego, Dom, and a few of Dom's men standing around a chair in the center of the room. Our guest is tied to the chair, his arms strained behind his back. Blood runs down his face from a cut on his forehead, and his lip is split in two places. I don't recognize him, so he must be one of Walsh's lower grunts.

"Who is this?" I ask.

All Diego had told me on the phone is that we had a guest in the basement. This better be good.

Diego kicks the bottom of the chair and the man groans. "This is Phil. We found him sneaking around the docks," he says.

I step closer to the prisoner, glaring down at him. "And what was he doing there?"

“Initially, he said ‘reconnaissance,’” Dom replies. “But after a little gentle coercion, our friend admitted that he’d planted another bomb.”

My jaw tightens. Visions of the destruction from the last bomb crowd my mind and an icy dart of panic buries into my ribs.

“Phil was just about to tell us where he put the bomb,” Dom says, patting the prisoner’s head affectionately. “Weren’t you, Phil?”

Phil glares up at Dom. One of his eyes is nearly swollen shut. “I’m not telling you shit.”

“I think you are,” Dom says. “Because the big boss is here now, and he isn’t as nice as we are.”

“No, I am not,” I say, sliding out of my suit jacket. I hand it to Diego, who folds it over his arm, and start rolling up the sleeves of my shirt. “I would start talking, Phil. You were laying explosives in my territory with the intention of killing my men and destroying my product. You’re a dead man whether you talk or not, but it’s up to you how much you want to suffer before you die.”

Phil’s lower lip quivers and he looks away. “I won’t tell you.”

I lean down and grip his face in my hand, forcing him to look me in the eye. He groans as I squeeze his bruised jaw. His skin is sticky with blood and sweat.

“Your life means nothing to me,” I growl. “Your pain means nothing to me. But my men? My territory? Believe me when I tell you that you don’t want to see the lengths I will go to to protect what is mine.”

I cannot waste any time getting the answers I need. If Phil is telling the truth, a bomb could go off at any second. If he is lying, and there is no bomb, I could evacuate my men only for the Irish to swoop in and claim the last chunk of the docks for themselves.

I release Phil’s jaw and stick my hand out. Diego slides the hilt of a knife against my palm.

“Here’s what I’m going to do, Phil.” I press the flat edge of the blade to his face. “I’m in a bit of a hurry, so I’ll tell you the whole plan now, and then I don’t need to waste any more of my breath on threats. First, I’m going to stab this knife through your knee. You won’t believe how much that will hurt. Then I’ll ask you where the bomb is.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll slice off an ear next. That used to be a favorite technique of my father’s, and it’s usually pretty fucking effective. Then I’ll ask you where the bomb is. If you don’t tell me, then I’m just going to start filleting chunks of your skin. There’s about twenty pounds of skin on a human body, so I should be able to ask that question another dozen times or so before you pass out from blood loss.

Phil begins to shake and sob. Tears spill down over his cheeks, mixing with the red of his blood.

I hover the point of the blade over his kneecap and meet Phil’s gaze. “Are you ready to start, Phil?”

“Wait, wait!” he croaks. “I’ll tell you.”

I straighten. “Thought you might.”

“It’s in the southernmost warehouse, hidden inside a FedEx box by the office door,” he blubbers.

I hand the knife back to Diego and address Dom. “Call our contact in the FBI and have them send over a bomb disposal unit. I don’t care how much it costs, we need them there immediately.” I point at Phil. “Once the bomb has been found and neutralized, kill him. Make it quick and painless. As a thank you for his cooperation.”

I grab my jacket from Diego and make my way to the stairs, glancing down at the blood smeared on my palm. I’ll need to stop in the bathroom on my way back to my office.

I hear footsteps behind me and look back to see Diego following me up the stairs. “Where are you going?” he whispers.

I stop to address him. “I need to get back to Alexis.”

“Right. Alexis.” He glances back into the basement, but none of the other men are looking at us. “You’ve been spending a lot of time with her recently.”

“And?” I snap, grinding my jaw.

Diego backs down. “And nothing. I’ll let you know when everything is done.”

I turn and continue up the stairs. I head straight into the first bathroom I see to wash the blood off my hands, scrubbing aggressively as I think about what a disaster it would have been if we hadn’t caught Phil.

But we did catch him. The Irish lost this battle, but I know there are plenty more to come.

I dry my hands and unroll the sleeves of my shirt, then slide my suit jacket on overtop. I hope Alexis is still waiting like a good girl.

Diego’s comment repeats in my mind.

You’ve been spending a lot of time with her recently.

I wonder what he meant by it. Do my men think I’m weak because of my growing connection to Alexis and my son? They might. Those same men watched my father turn into a chew toy for the demoness Felicity. Maybe they think it runs in the family.

They would be wrong. I enjoy spending time with Alexis and Harry, but I would never let it go too far. Alexis will not control me.

I head up the stairs, passing Harry’s nursery on my way back to my office. The door is ajar and I peek inside to see Jessica and Harry building blocks together. Harry giggles, plucking a block from the pile and bringing it to his mouth. Warmth blossoms in my chest as I watch him.

I feel calmer when I am around Harry and Alexis, and it’s nice to have something to worry about other than power and money. It’s also scary. I wonder if we could ever be a family. If there is a way for me to maintain the necessary distance while also integrating them into my life.

Only, I don't want to watch my son grow up from a distance.

I leave the doorway and walk back to my office. I open the door and Alexis jumps. I expected to walk back to find her lounged on my chair, feet propped up on the desk, but she is sitting exactly where I left her. She turns to look at me, and her face seems oddly strained.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

Alexis shoots to her feet and faces me, nodding. "Yeah, of course. Everything okay with you?"

"Yes."

"Good."

I lick my lip. "I'm going to take you out for dinner tomorrow."

Alexis blinks in surprise. I'm a little surprised too; the compulsion came out of nowhere, but now I can think of nothing else I'd rather do tomorrow night.

"Sure," she says. She is perfectly still and her face is pale.

"Alexis, what's the matter?"

"I just ..." She presses her lips together. "I was just alone in here and I started thinking about my parents. My mom's death, then my dad's murder not long afterward." She glances down. "I'm sorry to be such a bum." "

I cross the room, surprised by my own tenderness as I pull her against my chest and wrap my arms around her shoulders. Alexis nuzzles into me. I rest my chin on her head.

"Don't be sorry," I murmur, running my hands over her back. "I'm here to take care of you."

She stiffens, as though surprised by my gentle words. I hunt for the resolve to push her away and go to work, but I can't find it. I want to be here with her, and seeing her in pain tugs at something deep inside of me.

"Come." I release her, sliding my hand down her arm to interlace with hers.

I lead her out of the office and to my bedroom at the end of the hall. I have never brought her here, and she gazes around curiously at the simple furnishings, the clothes hanging neatly in the closet, and the perfectly made bed.

I stop at the foot of the bed and tug at the bottom of her shirt, lifting it over her head. “Get on the bed.”

Alexis crawls onto the bed slowly and I follow, guiding her onto her belly.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

I straddle her lower back and brush the hair away from her shoulders. “The first time I came to you in the middle of the night, after we both collapsed from exhaustion, you climbed onto my back and rubbed my shoulders as I fell asleep.” I glide a finger down her spine. She shivers.

“You were tense,” she replies, voice muffled by the sheets. “I could feel it while we were ... you know.”

I chuckle at her delicate phrasing. She’s not usually the type to beat around the bush.

“It was nice,” I reply, beginning to squeeze the muscles of her shoulders. “I never thanked you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

My thumbs dig into the meat of her shoulder blades and she sighs with pleasure. “Well, I guess if you insist ...”

Alexis begins to relax. I glide my hands over her smooth skin, rubbing out her muscles. Time slows, and I hear only her soft breaths as I work her body. The muscles in her shoulders are tight, and I pay extra attention there. Occasionally, she sighs contentedly. It is a delicious sound, one I hear so little from her. I am used to her moans and whimpers as I pillage her body, but I rarely experience Alexis in a state of deep relaxation.

I rub down her back and over her sides. Her body is pleasantly warm. It feels surprisingly good to touch her like this, with no thought of my own pleasure, no agenda. And

watching her sink deeper into the pillows, eyes fluttering behind her closed lids, is its own reward.

“I don’t get you,” she murmurs drowsily.

I do not respond, just continue my languid exploration of her body.

I don’t know how long the massage lasts. After a while, her breaths deepen further and she emits a soft snore, and I realize she has fallen asleep. I trace my fingers over her shoulders and down her spine. She is beautiful. Her soft, cupid’s bow mouth, her long black lashes, her round cheeks. I find myself staring.

I don’t get you.

I’m not sure I get me either. I understand our sexual chemistry, and it adds up that I would want to rip her clothes off at every given opportunity.

It’s primal. It makes sense.

But this? The hard edges of our relationship are beginning to soften and it unsettles me how good that feels. I have never been this way with anyone before. I would not say we are close—we still do not trust each other—but I can feel a fondness developing between us.

What I need to decide is whether I will allow these feelings to continue growing or snap them off like overreaching vines.

ALEXIS

I stand in front of my closet in a towel, arms folded across my chest, and stare. I can't remember the last time I got dressed for a date, never mind one under such strange circumstances. What does one wear to dinner with their billionaire baby daddy slash prison warden? I need an outfit that says "I like the softer side of you I've seen recently and I'm developing a bit of a crush" but that also says "Who me? I'm not investigating you for possible signs of corruption."

My feelings toward Gabriel are complicated to say the least.

I settle on a little black dress—a versatile piece for any occasion. I pull the dress out and toss it on the bed while I go over to the floor-length mirror and start on my makeup. Through the nursery door I can hear faint laughter—deep and melodic—and I realize Gabriel must be in there with Harry. I pad over to the connecting door and open it softly, popping my head through the gap.

Gabriel and Harry are sitting on the floor, and Gabriel is flying an airplane above Harry's head. The scene looks a little silly as Gabriel is sitting cross-legged in a full suit and Harry is wearing a giraffe onesie. Harry reaches up for the airplane with chubby arms, giggling, and Gabriel brings the plane down toward him, until Harry nearly manages to grab it, and then swiftly out of his reach.

"Plane! Plane!" Harry cackles, delighted with the game.

Gabriel grins.

My heart glows.

For all the question marks hanging over Gabriel, I know at least one thing for certain—he cares about his son. Their relationship has been steadily building over the past few weeks, and watching it blossom has made it difficult to keep an emotional distance from Gabriel.

Sometimes I feel like a giddy teenager around him, yearning for any scant show of affection. With every passing day, I feel closer to him. He has this magnetic energy that draws me in, making me long for him when I'm doing something as simple as making a cup of coffee or washing my hair.

But then the questions fly in like darts and pop those happy balloon thoughts. How much can I trust him? Is this family man persona true to his nature or is he one false step from snapping back into the cold businessman who discarded me in Fiamma like week-old leftovers and then promptly forgot all about me?

It would be one thing if I only had my own heart to guard, but I need to protect my son, too.

Gabriel looks up and catches me staring. His smile drops and the hand holding the plane lowers. Harry seizes the opportunity to grab the plane by its wing and tug it out of Gabriel's hand. He brings the nose to his mouth and starts to chew on it.

“You know that we have a reservation, right?” Gabriel comments, eyes narrowing in irritation. “I am watching Harry so you have time to get ready, not so you have time to spy on us.”

I clear my throat, stepping fully into the room. I've managed to piss Gabriel off before our date has even properly begun. Go me. Gabriel's gaze travels over the towel wrapped around my body, the bottom of it just grazing the tops of my thighs, and I think I might be off the hook. My face heats as I approach.

“I heard laughter and felt left out,” I say, bending over Harry. I run my hand over his silky hair.

Gabriel rises to his full height and grabs the top of my arm, jerking me upright. He starts walking me backward, and I stare at him nervously until my back presses into the wall.

“That’s funny,” he says with a cruel smile, bending over me. “Because I heard you taking a shower earlier and I felt left out, but because you chose to start getting ready so late in the day I knew I didn’t have time to hop in and fuck you senseless before dinner.”

Warmth trickles down into my belly and I lick my lip. Seeing Gabriel angry shouldn’t turn me on, but God help me it does. His black eyes drill into mine and for a second I think he might say “fuck the reservation” and rip my towel off right there.

Then he releases me and takes a step back.

“Go finish getting ready,” he commands. “We’ll put Harry to bed before we go.”

I rise and go back into my room to finish applying my makeup, pulse throbbing. I tease my hair into gentle waves that brush my shoulders, and when I am satisfied, I zip myself into the black dress and slide on a pair of emerald pumps. I spin in front of the mirror, pleased with my appearance, and step back into the nursery.

Gabriel’s eyes snap to me and he whistles appreciatively. “You look good.”

It seems my earlier sins have been forgiven now that I’ve produced a finished product on time. I run my hands over the dress. “Thank you.”

Gabriel lifts Harry and walks over to me, holding Harry near my face. I pinch his little cheeks and kiss his forehead. Harry yawns, slumping into his father’s arms.

“Somebody is ready for bed,” I comment.

Gabriel takes Harry to the crib and I trail behind. After he sets him down inside, I bend into the crib and bring the blanket

up over his chest, running my fingers over his head as he settles.

Gabriel's hand slides over my back. The tender gesture surprises me. I think about the massage he gave me last night, and how good his hands felt caressing me. I smile and lean into him.

We both take a minute just to stare down at Harry. His eyes are closed, tiny hands clenched into fists, lips pursed. He looks perfect.

Gabriel's lips come to the top of my head. "Time to go," he whispers.

I nod, and the two of us sneak from the room like thieves in the night.



I bite into the braised lamb shank ravioli and my eyes roll to the back of my head. "Oh my *God*," I groan. "I want to marry this pasta."

Gabriel takes a sip of his Malbec, eyes glimmering with laughter. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

"I'm not just enjoying it; I'm composing love ballads to it." The succulent flavors melt in my mouth and it's everything I can do not to scoff the whole bowl down in one bite.

I have never been to a restaurant this fancy, and at first I was skeptical that it would be any better than a good old-fashioned diner, but I was wrong. The salami and fig crostini appetizer made me see God, and the sommelier's suggested pairing of Tuscan chianti for my entree has made every sip and nibble a spiritual experience.

"If you could go to any country in the world just for dinner, where would you go?" I ask. "Rome for pizza? Japan for sushi? Nepal for Momos?"

Gabriel's mouth tilts. "Jetting off to another country for a meal is not out of the realm of possibility for me."

“I get it—you’re very rich and important.” I narrow my eyes at him.

Gabriel laughs, then chews a bite of his food thoughtfully while he considers his answer. “I would probably say Thailand,” he answers finally. “The street food there is like nothing you’ve ever had before.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to say street food,” I admit. “You seem more like the foie gras and caviar type.”

“I’m not. I like some of the finer things in life, but I’m not needlessly indulgent.” He takes a sip of his wine and sets it back on the table. “Foie gras tastes like shit.”

I think back to the plain décor in his bedroom and realize he’s right. He has the flashy car, the expensive clothes, the big mansion, but when it comes to his private sphere, Gabriel has the capacity to be quite plain. I suspect that his desire for wealth has more to do with the power that comes with it than the extravagance it allows.

“And what about you?” Gabriel asks.

“Oh, that’s easy,” I say, pointing my fork at my food. “I would come here.”

His lips tug at the corners and he lifts his glass toward me. “To being exactly where you want to be,” he says.

I clink my glass to his. “Hear, hear.”

We drink, and I wonder if Gabriel is suggesting this is exactly where he wants to be, too.

“I used to come here with my father on special occasions,” Gabriel tells me. “He was friends with the former owner. I’m pleased to see the quality hasn’t diminished since the restaurant changed hands.”

The mention of Gabriel’s father makes the ravioli stick in my throat. I think about the photo of Fabrizio with his arm around my father and realize that I haven’t thought about it all evening. I swallow hard.

“Did your dad have a lot of friends around the city?” I ask.

Gabriel pauses with his fork halfway to his mouth. “He had a lot of friends all over,” he says. “Why?”

“Just curious.”

He bites down and chews thoughtfully. “You’re always *just curious* about something.”

“It’s in my nature.”

“So it would seem.” His lips curve playfully. “Curiosity killed the cat, you know.”

“But satisfaction brought it back.” I take a sip of my wine. “Everyone always forgets the second line of that adage.”

Gabriel watches me, candlelight playing across his features. I don’t know how, but he is somehow more handsome tonight than ever. His warm amber pools pull me in and I get lost in them. The memory of the photograph slides away into oblivion.

“You amuse me,” Gabriel says finally.

My heart pitter-patters and I look down, smiling. Those three words are the closest he has ever come to declaring his feelings. I know it’s not much, but it’s something.

This whole evening has been perfect—from spying on Harry and Gabriel in the nursery, to the amazing food, to joking and laughing with Gabriel like we are just a normal couple on a normal date instead of ... Well, whatever we are.

Plus, I know that there is great sex on the horizon. What more could I want from tonight?

I look up and am about to ask Gabriel to tell me about Thailand when I notice his demeanor has changed. His shoulders are stiff, mouth pressed in a firm line, gaze extending behind me.

I look over my shoulder and see a short, gray-haired man approaching. His hair is shaved at the sides, with a long mop on top, and there are tattoos snaking from the collar of his shirt and the sleeves of his suit jacket. His pale face is lined with wrinkles, and when he arrives to stand at the side of our table, I see that his eyes are a sparkling, forest green. There is

something off about him, but I can't put my finger on what it is. He looks like the kind of person who enjoys lukewarm baths.

"Gabriel Belluci," the man says in a thin, rasping voice. "How lovely to see you."

He speaks with a faint accent. Irish, maybe? That would make sense, as I've heard Gabriel cursing the Irish before and the stranger's arrival certainly doesn't seem welcome.

"I'm sorry; do I know you?" Gabriel's words are polite, but his eyes spit fire.

He obviously knows this guy but is pretending he doesn't. Why?

"Forgive me," the man says, dropping into a ridiculous bow. "Andrew Walsh. I was a close friend of your father's."

Gabriel's jaw tightens. "Nice to meet you."

"And you." Andrew's eyes flick to me. "Who is this lovely creature?"

The way his words drip from his mouth makes my stomach churn with revulsion. I don't know if it's just Gabriel's reaction or if I'm genuinely picking up bad vibes, but something about this man is *wrong*.

"My date," Gabriel bites out, abandoning all pretense of civility. "If you wouldn't mind, we'd like to get back to our dinner."

Hostility rolls off Gabriel in waves, but this only seems to delight Andrew. I have never seen Gabriel like this. I've seen him pissed off before, and he's displayed aggression in the bedroom, sure, but this is entirely different. His expression is positively murderous, like he's a second away from reaching up to snap Andrew's neck.

"Of course." Andrew's lips curl into a feline grin. "If I had a lovely little dish like this, I'd be keen to devour it too."

I suspect he is not talking about the food. Bile rises in my throat and I set my fork down.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Andrew simpers. “Oh, Gabriel, one more thing. I owe you my condolences. I heard you’ve lost several of your staff recently in tragic accidents.” His eyes glitter. “A word of professional advice—if you want to avoid any more accidents, I would loosen your grip on the docks.”

With that, Andrew slinks away. Gabriel’s eyes follow him.

I struggle to digest what I just witnessed. That was a clear threat, and Gabriel’s lack of reaction leads me to believe it is not the first time Andrew has delivered one.

“Gabriel,” I whisper, leaning over the table. “What the hell was that?”

His gaze shifts to mine and the anger rolling in their depths makes my chest clench. “Not here.”

He picks up his fork and continues eating his meal in silence. I let mine grow cold in front of me.

GABRIEL

On the car ride back to the mansion, Walsh's threat circles my mind and I want to throttle him for revealing so much in front of Alexis. Her innate curiosity will not allow her to let this go. Andrew Walsh all but admitted to arranging the deaths of my staff, deaths that she had asked about during one of our interviews, and beyond telling her that he is mentally unhinged—not untrue—I can't think of how to explain his words away.

Alexis stares out the window. I can tell she is dying to ask what happened in the restaurant, and who Andrew Walsh is, but she remains silent.

I'm tempted to tell her. I'm tired of the secrets and the games. My persona was already split between the businessman and the Mafia boss, and adding a third to the mix—the harmless family man—has been exhausting. I feel like I can trust her, but I worry that my regard for her has eroded my judgment. After all, she is a journalist. One with an aggravating sense of morality.

Even if I could trust her, would it be wise to bring her into this world or would it just endanger her and Harry more?

The car continues to bump along, and I feel Alexis growing more restless. She turns to face me, eyes searching mine. She licks her lips in thought.

“Can I trust you, Gabriel?” she asks.

This catches me off guard. I wasn't expecting her to be going through the same thought process.

“What do you mean?” I reply.

Alexis tucks a stray curl behind her ear. She is sitting as far away from me as possible, wedged against the door. By her posture, it seems she has answered her own question.

“I mean exactly that—can I trust you?” She purses her lips. “I’ve seen how you are with Harry, and I want to believe that your son isn’t just a passing fancy for you, but I’ve realized that I have no idea who you are.”

“I’m a lot of things.”

“Yeah, I’ve gathered that,” she remarks. “We’re reaching a stage now where I need some sort of guarantee from you. Some permanence. Because I’ve seen you wear a lot of different faces, and I want to be sure that the one you wear when you look at our son, and at me, is genuine.” She sighs. “Look, I’m not crazy. I don’t expect us to become the Brady Bunch overnight, but before I continue down this path with you, I want to be sure that Harry and I won’t find ourselves tossed to the curb in six months because the novelty of having a child has worn off on you.”

She is asking a lot of me, especially given that I still need to decide how to explain Andrew Walsh.

“I will always make sure you and Harry are taken care of,” I reply.

“What does that even mean?” She tosses her hands up in frustration. “I want a straight answer. What do Harry and I mean to you?”

“This isn’t the time, Alexis.”

“Oh, right, because of what happened back there?” She juts her thumb behind her. “You don’t think that now might be the perfect time for us to have this discussion? That maybe I deserve a little clarity considering a scary leprechaun just threatened you over dinner?” She lowers her hand and narrows her eyes. “I already know that there’s something criminal going on behind the scenes with your business, that some dirt would come out in the wash. I’m not an idiot.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I growl.

She does. That's the problem. It unnerves me how close she has gotten to the truth considering how little I have let her see.

"Then tell me."

I don't. Not here, not now. If she wants the truth, she will need to wait until we are back at the mansion where I can show her properly. I only wonder if she can handle it.



We arrive back at the house and walk up the front steps in silence. Alexis is childishly ignoring me, and begins to head straight for her bedroom. I follow behind, admiring the curve of her ass in her dress as we walk up the stairs.

This woman infuriates me, arouses me, challenges me, and all I want to do is protect her. But I can't commit to her, not like she wants, especially not when she doesn't know the full truth. But what will she think when I tell her? Will she reject me?

We reach the top of the stairs and Alexis turns for her bedroom, but I grab her wrist. "Come with me."

She yanks her wrist away but follows as I lead her to the room next to my office. The door is locked, and as I pull the keys from my pocket, I gesture to the hall table opposite.

"Leave your phone, shoes, and purse there," I instruct.

Alexis bites her lip uncertainly, but does as she is told.

I push the door open. "Go inside."

Alexis enters hesitantly, and I follow, closing and locking the door behind us. She watches me warily, then her eyes trail over the soundproofing on the walls, the steel bench on one side of the room, and the long row of lockers on the other. There are no chairs, no decorations. This room is for utility and nothing else.

"What is this?" Alexis asks.

“This is the safest room in the house.” I spin her to face the bench and she stumbles a little, falling forward and landing with her palms against the cold metal. “It’s soundproof, and the only person who can get in or out is me, so I know it has never been bugged.” I tug down the zipper of her dress. “Now I just have to make sure you haven’t brought any bugs in with you.”

“Paranoid, much?”

I don’t answer.

Her dress hits the floor and I undo her bra, pulling it from her shoulders, and then push her panties down. I take a step back to admire her, fully naked, her panties around her ankles. My cock stirs, but I have business to deal with first.

I grab Alexis’ shoulder and turn her to face me. She glares at me, but her nipples poke up from her round breasts, betraying her arousal. I know that if I slipped a hand between her puffy lips right now, I would find her wet and wanting.

“Are you satisfied?” she asks through gritted teeth.

“Yes.”

“Can I put my clothes back on now?”

“No. I like you like this.”

“You are such an asshole sometimes,” Alexis groans.

I grab her chin, squeezing her cheeks. “You were the one who wanted the truth, Alexis. Let’s see if you can handle it.”

In a frenzy, I go to the row of gray lockers and start unlocking the doors, swinging them open to reveal their contents to her: MK 48 machine guns, semiautomatic pistols, Kel-Tec rifles, 12-gauge shotguns, dozens of grenades. One locker is full to the brim with ammunition, boxes and boxes of everything from buckshot to hollow points. There is enough ammo here to take down an army.

I move to the next locker, which houses the Belluci pride and joy—a collection of knives first started when my great-great grandfather moved to America. Some of these blades are over a hundred years old. Bowie knives, switchblades,

machetes, even a French colonial knife with an ivory hilt—all wickedly sharp.

The end locker has a safe in it, and I twist the dial while Alexis gapes at the store of weaponry. When the safe clicks open, I grab several bundles of cash from inside and throw them at her feet.

I don't stop there. I pull out stacks of paperwork and drop them onto the metal bench. Alexis fans out the pages, glancing through the records of offshore bank accounts, business contracts, and deeds to dozens of properties like casinos, restaurants, and clubs—including Fiamma.

“Gabriel, what is all of this?” she whispers.

“This is who I am,” I say, spreading my arms wide. “I’m the leader of a powerful Italian crime syndicate.”

“You’re a Mafia don,” she clarifies.

Her expression is frustratingly hard to read. I can't tell if she's horrified or just surprised, but the way she crosses her arms self-consciously over her chest tells me she's at the very least uncomfortable.

“Yes.”

She purses her lips. “Are you serious?”

What is she thinking? My pulse pounds in my throat and I hate the way this feels. It's as though I'm nervous.

“Why would I lie?” I ask.

Alexis answers in a small voice, as though it's all sinking in. “I don't know.” She licks her lips. “Why are you telling me this? Why now?”

“I've been thinking about my legacy,” I tell her. “Blood is important to me. Harry is my son and one day, this will all be his. Whether you like it or not, you're a part of it now, too.”

She pales. “You think I'm going to let my son grow up to be a Mafia don?”

“*Our* son,” I remind her. “And I think he will grow up to make his own decisions.”

She narrows her eyes, but doesn't argue back. She knows I'm right—it's up to Harry whether he wants to follow in my footsteps.

"You're taking a big risk by telling me your secret," she points out.

I shake my head slowly. "Not at all. If you ever try to expose me, I'll deny it. You have no proof, and who would believe you over me?"

This takes the wind from her sails some. Alexis frowns and I can see the gears working in her head. I am now desperate to know what she is thinking.

"What you said in the car ..." I ask, leaning against the far wall. "Is that still what you want, now that you know the truth?"

Alexis takes a shaky breath. "I don't know. I need to think about it."

"That's fine. Take all the time you need to think." My eyes land heavily on hers. "Just be sure that while you are thinking, you do not entertain any thoughts of betraying me. I am already very lenient with you. But betrayal is one thing I cannot accept."

"Duly noted." She shivers. "Can I put my clothes back on now?"

I stalk toward her and pry her hands from her chest, flattening them against the steel bench, arching her toward me. My chest pushes into hers and I can feel her heart racing. She looks up at me with wide blue eyes.

"Are you scared?" I ask.

"No."

"Liar."

"I'm not scared!" she asserts. "I'm just ... confused. And worried."

I release her hands and run my fingers down her cheek. "What are you worried about?"

“I’m worried about what this means for Harry,” she says. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to him.”

I wrap my fingers around her chin, angling her face toward me. With a small shake of my head, I say, “I will never let anything happen to Harry. Or to you. You’re both under my protection.” I smooth my thumb over her jaw. “That’s why you’re here, so I can keep you safe.”

She doesn’t look entirely convinced, but it doesn’t matter. She knows who I am now but still doesn’t grasp the extent of what I am capable of. It’s probably better that way. I don’t know if she would feel any safer if she saw my dark side.

“Can I go back to my room now?” Alexis asks.

“No.” I release her chin and glide my fingers down her arms, leaving gooseflesh in my wake. “I’m not done with you yet.”

My hands come to her plump ass and I lift her onto the table. She squeaks in surprise, hands coming to my shoulders to steady herself. Heat burns through my belly but I will take my pleasure later. For now I want to focus on Alexis, want to drive a spike of pleasure so deep inside of her that when she remembers this conversation, her toes curl with pleasure. I want her to remember who owns her.

I press between Alexis’ legs and capture her mouth with mine. Her kiss is hesitant—reluctant, almost—and I respond by gripping her face in my hands and kissing her harder. She moans against my lips. Her fingers claw into my chest. I wrench them free and push her back, flattening her against the table.

Her legs instinctively wrap around my hips. It would be so easy for me to release my cock and drive into her and for a second, I consider doing just that—but there’s one thing I want to do more.

“It’s cold,” Alexis complains.

I press a finger to her lips. “Quiet.”

I trail that finger over her chin, down her neck, then between her breasts. Her pink nipples point up, begging for

attention, and I lean down to pull one into my mouth. Alexis gasps, arching up to meet me as I suck and nibble on the delicate bud. I move to the other, squeezing her tits in my palms, backing away from the table as I continue my journey down.

I hike her legs over my shoulders as I drop to my knees, which puts me at the perfect height to hover my mouth over her pussy. Her scent makes my cock throb. She quivers with anticipation, watching me with half-lidded eyes as her tits rise and fall with ragged breaths. I meet her gaze as my tongue glides between her lips.

Alexis throws her head back and moans, thighs tightening against me. I begin to devour her greedily, relishing her sweet and musky taste. I alternate between circling her clit with my tongue and sucking gently.

Her responding moans are a symphony of the finest music to my ears. I glide a finger inside of her and stroke her inner walls, which makes her quake with pleasure. She tenses up and I know she is close. I press on, moaning as my cock threatens to burst from my pants.

I love this. I love seeing her lose control, feeling her body shake and flex as I deliver her to paradise. Alexis' body tightens around me and she lets out a long, keening moan, but I don't stop. I keep licking and slide another finger inside of her.

"Gabriel," she gasps. Her hands bury in my hair and tug. I can't tell if she's trying to pull me closer or push me away, but it doesn't matter. I won't relent. Not yet.

Alexis throws her head back and cries out as another orgasm rips through her. I growl and nip at her clit and she convulses once again. I could watch her come all day, every day. The sight of it, the sound of it, the feel of her body gripping my fingers ... I will need to dig deep into my willpower to leave without burying my cock in her, but I've already spent too much time here. Andrew Walsh made his threat plain, and I need to gather my capos to decide what to do about him.

I begin to stand, kissing the insides of her thighs as they slip away from my shoulders. Alexis' panting breaths fill the room. She slumps against the table, and one eye flutters open to watch me as I move around the room closing and locking the open doors.

Alexis shuffles to the edge of the bench and hops off. She gathers her clothes silently and begins to dress, not bothering to ask my permission this time.

"I'll give you time to process everything I've told you," I say, "but if you can't handle living in this new reality, I might need to take drastic action."

"Is that a threat?" she asks, eyes glinting as she zips up her dress.

"Merely a word of caution."

"Fine." She stands tall, folding her arms. "A word of caution to you, too, then. If anything does happen to Harry, I know who I will be holding responsible. And I will not hesitate to burn that person down."

I have to hide my smile.

There's my tiger.

ALEXIS

I awake to a knock on my bedroom door and I roll over, checking the time on my phone. 8:00 a.m. Right on schedule. I hop out of bed and pull on a baggy T-shirt on my way to the door, stretching my arms over my head and yawning.

I crack the door open and Angelo, one the mansion's guards, is holding a vase of flowers. The arrangement of cerise germini, red and yellow roses, and lush green foliage bursts with color. Angelo's expression does not.

"Thanks, Angelo," I say, taking the bundle off him.

He hands me a bag of peanut M&Ms. "This came with them."

I grab the bag and turn into the room, rolling my eyes as I kick the door closed. The peanut M&Ms are very welcome, but the flowers—where the hell am I going to put them? Similar bouquets sit on every available surface, the snacks that came with them long since consumed. Every morning since Gabriel revealed his secret to me, I have woken to a delivery of flowers and snacks. Peonies and Pringles. Gerbera daisies and Funyuns. Lilies and cheese puffs. It has now been a week. I thought he would have stopped by this point.

I can hear from the baby monitor that Harry is awake and I take the flowers with me into the nursery. He is standing in his crib, and giggles happily when he sees me.

"Flower!" he babbles.

His vocabulary is still small, but over the past week “flower” has been a necessary addition.

I bring the bouquet over to the crib and lean down, burying my nose in the petals and sniffing. Harry copies me.

“They smell good, huh?” I say.

Harry claps excitedly. I wonder if Gabriel knows that Harry gets more excited about the morning flower delivery than he does about the afternoon toy drop. I glance around the room at the shiny new trucks, robots, and stuffed animals. Harry hasn’t had the attention span to play with all of them, which is fine because half of them are age inappropriate, which at least indicates that Gabriel picked them out himself since he can be a bit clueless at times. It’s sweet, though. I appreciate that he’s trying.

“Breakfast?” I suggest, placing the vase on top of a chest of drawers.

“Flower!”

“You can’t have flowers for breakfast.” I return to the crib and lift Harry into my arms. “They wouldn’t taste very nice.”

He nuzzles against me.

“I suppose some flowers are edible,” I add thoughtfully, heading out of the room. “They put them on fancy salads and stuff like that. Though, to be honest, I don’t think even if someone told me a flower was edible that I’d be all that inclined to eat it.”

Harry mumbles a string of nonsense and I realize I have been spending too much time with my toddler. Besides brief interactions with the house staff, my only adult conversations are with Gabriel.

I try to remedy this by calling Clara on my way to the kitchen, but she doesn’t pick up. Odd. I haven’t spoken to her in ages and she never answers when I call.

Victoria is chopping vegetables in the kitchen when I arrive. She grins when she sees me and sets down her knife, wiping her hands on her colorful apron.

“Good morning!” she says. “Some breakfast for you and the little one?”

“Yes, please.”

I set Harry up in the highchair next to the island as Victoria sets a pan on the stove and starts pulling ingredients from the fridge. She comes to the high chair when Harry’s all settled and leans over, grinning at him.

“How about some scrambled eggs and fruit, hmm?”

“Mingo!”

Victoria purses her lips, puzzled. “I’m not sure I’ve got any mingo in the fridge.”

“Mingo!”

I chuckle. “It’s your apron,” I say, pointing to the pink birds scattered across the fabric. “We went to the zoo last week and Harry lost his mind over the flamingos.”

Victoria laughs. “I see! Well then, we have a love of flamingos in common, Harry.” She goes back to the stove and starts cracking eggs, humming to herself.

My mind wanders to the zoo. Gabriel took Harry and me there the day after his big reveal. The day after he stripped me naked and made me come several times in his anti-bug room, as a matter of fact. I wouldn’t have expected him to be able to transition so easily between Gabriel the mob boss and Gabriel the father, but he was all gentle smiles and jokes at the zoo.

At the elephant enclosure, he pretended his arm was a trunk, to Harry’s delight. At the tiger pen, he pinched my butt and then wrapped his arm around my waist and drew me close. And I forgot all about the day before. Forgot my doubts, my worries, my fears. For one afternoon, Gabriel and Harry and I were just a normal family at the zoo, and when I came back to earth at the mansion’s gates, I felt a stab of sorrow that it was over.

We are far from a normal family, but I so badly wish we could be.

Harry and I eat and I load him into his stroller for a wander around the gardens. It's a beautiful day, with sunlight spilling over the manicured hedges, gravel walkways, and cheerful flower beds. The air buzzes with the sounds of bees whirring between the blooms, and overhead swifts dip and weave against a backdrop of cloudless, sapphire blue. I breathe in the heady scent of lavender and fresh-cut grass.

It's hard to reconcile this scene with the savagery I know goes on just underneath. It's the same with Gabriel. The journalist in me longs to pry back the daydream to expose the twisted roots of corruption threading beneath my feet.

But how can I achieve that now? I know too much. I'm in too deep. Before I knew the extent of what I might uncover, it was easy to want to look. Now I know, or at least can imagine, the murky depths continuing to chase this story would bring me to, and it's not safe for me to go there. Beyond that, I'm not sure I want to. It would destroy the family that the three of us are building. Harry will always be a priority for me, and if what's best for him is for me to take a step back, then maybe I should—even if it goes against my values.

Debbie would be furious. She's been suspiciously quiet recently, which lends me to believe she's given up on me already. She sends through new assignments but doesn't harass me about the Belluci article, and it could be a long time before she offers me another opportunity to prove myself. It hurts to know that I've let her down, but that's not the worst bit. If I let this go, I will have let my father down, too.

Besides that, what if destroying this family, removing it as an option, is actually the right thing to do for Harry? I don't know what to think anymore. I don't know what to feel.

I'm completely, totally stuck.



A half-dozen new toys in the nursery, yet Harry and Gabriel are playing the airplane game again.

Harry reaches high into the air above him, stretching meaty fingers as he tries to snatch the plane from the sky. Gabriel swoops it low, just within Harry's reach, and then zips it out of the way again, lifting it over his head. The room echoes with Harry's laughter and Gabriel's ridiculous airplane noises.

"Neeeeeeeeow!" The plane makes a nosedive, pulling up at the last second before it collides with the plush cream carpet. "Zooooom."

Harry's eyes follow the plane around the room, but mine are fixed to Gabriel's face. He is grinning, cheek dimpled, utterly carefree. He leans forward and a lock of black hair falls in front of his sparkling brown eyes but he doesn't bother to brush it back, and it gives him an almost boyish look.

My heart warms as I watch them from the sofa between typing out sentences on my latest article. Gabriel looks the most casual I ever get to see him—no tie, white shirt unbuttoned at the collar, sleeves rolled to his elbows. His eyes wrinkle a little at the corners as he laughs. He radiates pure joy.

How can this man be a criminal? Not just a criminal, but the leader of an entire criminal *empire*.

I try to imagine what that means, what kinds of horrible things he has done, and I just can't. I can't see anything other than a doting father when I look at him. I think of my own father, and a lump forms in my throat.

What would Dad think of me? He hated criminals and fought tooth and nail to defend those who had been wronged by them. Then his life was ended by a criminal. If he saw me now, would he understand my conflict or just condemn me for my lapse in morality?

The picture of Dad and Fabrizio flashes through my mind and I wonder if maybe Dad had some moral lapses of his own. That image has haunted me every day. I'm still not sure about what I am going to write about Gabriel, but I know that I need to do more digging in order to know what to think about him.

For now, it's hard to see Gabriel and feel anything other than affection. Harry has already fallen in love with him. Despite my misgivings, I feel myself falling for him too. Every scene like this, every gentle caress in the dark, chips away at my defenses. I know I shouldn't love him, but a person lost in the woods doesn't get to choose which creature comes along to devour them.

Gabriel brings the plane level with Harry's face and approaches slowly, making sputtering noises as though the plane is running out of gas. Harry watches, going adorably cross-eyed as Gabriel boops the plane against his nose and then lets it fall to the floor.

Harry claps. "Dada!"

Gabriel's smile drips away and he stares at Harry, stunned. My chest tightens. Harry doesn't notice the change in Gabriel's demeanor and reaches for him, smiling hopefully, but Gabriel doesn't pick him up. He rises to his feet, smoothing out the creases in his trousers without so much as looking at his son's outstretched arms. I swear the temperature in the room drops by at least three degrees.

I try to catch Gabriel's eye as he turns for the door but fail. And then, Gabriel is gone, leaving both Harry and me to wonder what the hell just happened.



I sigh, closing my laptop and staggering to my feet. I thought leaving Harry with Jessica would help me concentrate, but I can't stop replaying this morning's awkward scene in my head.

Harry calling Gabriel "Dada."

Gabriel walking out.

The instant change in the atmosphere from one of happiness to awkwardness.

I don't get it. I thought Gabriel liked being a father? I thought he cared about Harry? He has been so warm and

affectionate with Harry right from the beginning—why was hearing Harry call him Dada suddenly too much for him?

I tried to leave it alone, tried to give Gabriel some space, but now I need to know.

I don't even know if Gabriel is home, but if he is, it's a good bet that he's in his office. I leave the living room and wind through the house, hopping up the steps and heading down to the end of the hallway. I pass the door to the soundproof room and my heart quickens. I pull myself together—this is no time to get distracted—and pause outside of Gabriel's office. I take a deep breath and knock.

“Come in,” Gabriel calls in the deep, authoritative voice he reserves for his staff. And for me, when I've been naughty. My core tingles, but I ignore it. Not the time.

I enter the room and Gabriel looks up from his computer. The slight widening of his eyes is the only indication that he is surprised to see me. He closes the lid of his laptop and folds his hands in front of him while I glide the door closed behind me.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hi.”

I lick my lip, approaching his desk. “What happened downstairs earlier?”

Gabriel's jaw tightens. He looks like he's about to dismiss me, but then he sighs and his shoulders sink away from his ears.

“I'm sorry,” he says.

I blink. “I'm not sure I heard you correctly because that sounded an awful lot like an apology.”

Gabriel's mouth twitches at the corner, but he doesn't smile.

“It was an apology,” he replies. “I know this goes against your nature but try not to milk it.”

I sink into the seat across from him and lift my hands in a gesture of concession. “Okay. This is me not milking it. Can I ask you to elaborate a little, though?”

Gabriel leans back, scrubbing a hand over his face. I read distress in his furrowed brow and tight shoulders and my heart aches with the desire to comfort him.

“I don’t know how to do this,” he says finally.

He doesn’t need to tell me what he means by *this*. His raw honesty tugs at my own similar set of insecurities. I have been questioning my ability to do *this* since I first learned I was pregnant, and those worries have only gotten more pronounced with every new challenge.

“I don’t know how to do *this* either,” I reply, leaning forward. I snake hand over the desk, palm upturned. “But to be honest, I think we’ve already been doing *this*, and I think that it’s working so far. I can see us continuing.”

The words spill out of me without any thought to my internal conflict. In this moment, I don’t feel any. I just see Harry’s dad, who has become a source of comfort for me and our son, and I know that I need him in my life.

Gabriel rests his palm against my own and I close my fingers around his hand. His eyes search mine, and for the briefest second I catch a glimpse of vulnerability in his amber depths.

“Do you really think that’s possible?” he asks. “Given what you now know about me?”

“Yes.”

My lack of hesitation surprises Gabriel, but it surprises me too. I’ve spent hours agonizing over the morality of my current situation, trying to figure out if it’s okay for me to feel the way I feel. But given a split second to decide, the answer is that yes—I want our family to continue.

Gabriel’s mouth curves and he squeezes my hand. “Thank you.”

“An apology and a word of gratitude all in the same conversation?” I joke. “I must be dreaming.”

His mouth flattens. “That’s what I would consider milking it.”

I chuckle and blow him a kiss, then pull my hand back and rise to my feet. “I should get back to work.”

“How is that going?” Gabriel asks.

I pause. I’m not used to him making small talk, and I’m not sure whether he actually wants to know or if he’s just being polite to transition out of our brief emotional interlude.

“Fine,” I respond, deciding it’s probably a case of the latter.

“I would love to read some of your work.”

“If you go to the *Union* website and type my name into the search bar, it’ll pop up with things I’ve written,” I tell him. “Be warned though, it’s pretty boring stuff for the most part.”

He nods, smiling. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

I leave his office, entirely sure that Gabriel has no interest in reading my work and this will be the last time we speak of it.



The next time I see Gabriel is a couple of hours later. I turn around and find him leaning against the frame of the bathroom door while I am bathing Harry. I don’t know how long he has been watching us.

“You’re a good writer,” Gabriel says.

I blink, surprised. He actually read my work.

“Thank you,” I reply.

“You could write better stories if given the opportunity.”

His comment stings for a couple of reasons. One, because I have been given the chance, and two, because I’m still not sure

that I'm going to let that chance slip away, even though the resulting guilt gnaws at my insides.

"I know," I say.

Gabriel nods and leaves without another word. He doesn't even acknowledge the bubble hat and beard I have given his son.

ALEXIS

It's a gorgeous, sunny day. Gabriel's hand is warm on my back as I push Harry's stroller through the park.

Harry spots ducks in the distance and points at them. "Ducks!"

"You want to see the ducks, Harry?"

Of course he does. He always wants to see the ducks.

I turn the stroller toward the duck pond. Sunlight filters through the trees, dappling the winding path in front of us. I hear the quacking of the ducks in the distance, and the twittering of the birds hopping through the branches above.

"Nearly there," I tell Harry.

But the path seems to extend before us. The further we walk, the longer it grows. A cloud passes over the sun, and long shadows stretch across the path. The chittering in the leaves above dies down. An eerie silence slips over us like a shroud.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Nobody answers. I look up at Gabriel, but my father stares down at me instead.

"Dad?"

At first, I feel relief—he's here; he's with me—but the expression on his face is far from loving. His mouth is twisted cruelly, eyes that always laughed before now narrowed in disgust.

“What are you doing, Alexis?” he asks in a croaky voice.

I turn around, looking for Gabriel. Where did he go? My heart races in my chest and I stagger away from my dad, whose expression grows more menacing by the second.

“How could you give yourself to a criminal?” Dad demands. “You disappoint me.”

“You don’t understand!”

He approaches the stroller, and I try to pull it away but the handle slips through my grip.

“Harry would be better off without you.” Dad reaches into the stroller and pulls Harry out. Harry cries, writhing in my dad’s arms. Dad turns and begins to walk away.

“No!” I scream, bolting toward him.

But the path stretches out like taffy, and no matter how fast I run or how much I scream, my father doesn’t turn around, and I can’t reach him.

“No! Please!” I beg. “Please!”



I gasp and bolt upright, panting. My heart is pounding. I pat my hand over the top of the bed beside me, hoping to find Gabriel’s familiar form, but I’m alone.

I wish he was here. That nightmare was so vivid, so painful. I swallow and stagger out of bed, wiping the tears from my eyes as I make my way to the nursery door.

I need to see Harry. Need to know he’s okay.

I peek my head into the room and sure enough, Harry is snoozing happily in his crib. I breathe a sigh of relief and lean against the frame for a moment while my body relaxes. Harry is okay. I’m okay. I shouldn’t let something like a stupid dream get to me so much.

I go back into my room and crawl under the sheets. Despite telling myself everything is okay, I still wish that

Gabriel was here.



I don't know how long I sleep for, but when I awake again, it is still pitch-black in my room. At first, I don't understand what has woken me up. I hear something moving in the room and blink into the darkness. A tall shadow stands at the end of the bed.

“Gabriel?”

No answer.

I try to sit up and realize with horror that I can't move. My hands and legs are tied down at the corners of the bed. I tug on the restraints but they don't give. Liquid fear threatens to choke me and I open my mouth to scream.

“Calm down,” Gabriel says, moving around the side of the bed.

Relief floods my system.

“I thought you were an intruder!” I snap. “You scared me.”

Gabriel's face is veiled in shadow, but moonlight slashes across his bare torso through the blinds, highlighting his drool-worthy muscles. His fingers glide up my bare leg, stopping when they reach the fabric of my pajama shorts. A shiver of anticipation rolls through me. I whimper without meaning to.

“You know who I am now,” Gabriel says. “I've given you a secret, one that I do not dispense lightly.”

I hear a metallic snick and the dim light reflects off something flat and pointed in Gabriel's hand. A knife, I realize. My pulse picks up again. The side of the bed sinks with his weight. He skims the flat of the blade up my thigh and the cold metal leaves gooseflesh in its wake.

“Gabriel ...”

“I need something from you in return,” he continues.

My mouth is dry and I can't tell if it's from fear or arousal. I swallow hard.

“What?” I ask.

“I need you.”

He tugs the blade through the fabric of my bottoms, ripping them up through the waist. My breath catches in my throat.

“I need you to submit to me fully. You are mine now.”

He tears the knife through the other leg of my shorts as well, then tugs the fabric away until I am completely bare. The air feels cold against my wetness. I want him to linger there, to touch me, but the flat of the blade glides over my belly, bunching my shirt over the tops of my breasts. Tendrils of fire snake through my core and I arch up, daring him to cut my shirt the way he did my bottoms.

Riiiiip.

Cool air hits my nipples and they pucker. Gabriel flicks the switchblade closed and tosses it to the side, and the next time he touches me, it is with warm, rough fingers. He captures one of my nipples between his fingers and pinches it. A zap of pleasure shoots straight between my thighs and I groan.

“Tell me,” Gabriel orders in a deep, powerful voice.

My thoughts are battling through a thick fog of lust. “Tell you what?” I gasp.

“Tell me that you're mine. Tell me that you submit.”

There is a dark edge to his tone I have never heard before. I can tell that if I speak those words, things will be different from now on. He has revealed his darker side to me and this is part of it.

A faint, distant voice wonders if I should be afraid, but I'm not. I'm excited.

“I'm yours,” I say, voice thick with need. “I submit to you completely.”

Gabriel growls deep in his throat. He leans over, kissing me hard on the mouth. I strain to be closer to him, to deepen the kiss, but he pulls away far too soon. I whimper.

“Don’t worry,” he says, backing off the bed and onto his feet. “I’ve got plenty of plans for that mouth.”

My core flutters at the dark promise of his words. I hear the zip of his pants and the shuffle of the fabric as he pulls them down. My clit throbs with the need to be touched. I find myself tugging against the restraints, as if it will do any good.

Gabriel’s weight sinks into the bed again and he crawls over me, peppering fiery kisses across my belly, over my breasts, and up my neck. He reaches behind me and props my head up on the pillows, but before I have time to wonder why, he kneels by my face and gathers my hair in his fist.

His cock sticks out before me, hard and thick. My mouth waters and I open before he even tells me to.

Gabriel groans appreciatively. “You really are a good girl, aren’t you?”

He shifts forward, and I stretch wide open to accommodate his girth as he pushes his length to the back of my throat. His taste is slightly salty and all man. I close my lips around him and start to suck, licking the underside of his shaft as he guides my head back and forth.

I love the taste of him. Love the feel of him in my mouth. Love the way he quivers all over as I devour him. Gabriel is a beast, and I am completely at his mercy, but somehow I still have this last sliver of power—the power to make his head explode with pleasure.

Gabriel begins to rock his hips against my face, pushing his cock further down my throat. I gag a little but manage to take him in. I look up. I can just make out his eyes in the darkness, and I stare into them deeply as he plunders my mouth.

I’m yours, my eyes say.

Gabriel begins to fuck my face in earnest. His breaths come ragged, frantic. My heart is crashing against my ribs, and

I take breaths when I can.

My jaw is beginning to ache but I don't care—there is something so wildly erotic about him taking my mouth like this that I might come without him even touching me. I feel like I'm on fire, and the flames are licking at my clit and bringing me closer and closer to release.

On his next thrust, I shove my head closer to Gabriel's pelvis, nose pressing into the meat of his groin, and Gabriel throws his head back and moans. He holds me there, but leans back and presses his fingers against my sex, rubbing slowly. The pleasure is explosive. My muffled cries vibrate down the length of Gabriel's shaft and he lets out a litany of curses, pulling out just as I think I will pass out from lack of oxygen.

He shifts down my body, and I am still gasping for breath when his mouth descends on mine in a powerful kiss. His tongue snakes into my mouth and I kiss him back eagerly.

Gabriel lines up at my entrance and thrusts inside. He smothers my moan with his kiss, setting a punishing pace with his hips.

I see stars.

My body is so on edge that the first orgasm crashes over me within seconds, and my whole body shakes as waves of pleasure roll beneath my skin.

Gabriel lifts my hips and continues to drive into me. My hands tighten around the restraints and I grit my teeth as the pressure of another climax builds in my belly. I can do nothing to help it along. My muscles quiver.

From Gabriel's grunts and groans, I can tell that he is close, and the thought of him spilling inside of me while I am tied up and helpless is so hot it pushes me over the edge again.

"That's right," Gabriel rasps. "You're mine."

"I'm... oh, fuck, I'm yours!"

He hammers into me one last time and stills, fingers digging into the flesh of my hips.

My brow prickles with sweat and I suck in breaths, heart slamming into my rib cage like a jackhammer. Gabriel relaxes over me, and bestows gentle kisses over my forehead as he leans forward to release my hands.

My arms fall limp to my sides and Gabriel moves to undo my feet. When I am completely free, he lies back on the bed and bundles me into his arms. His body is warm, his touch soothing. I relax and feel a smile creep up my face.

“You’re mine,” he murmurs.

I snuggle into him and listen as his breaths deepen.

He’s right. For better or for worse, I’m his. My mind flashes to the photo in his office and I realize that I need to ask him about it.

And that means things are going to get far worse before they get any better.

GABRIEL

I walk up the front steps of the house, nodding at Angelo and Matteo as I pass through the door. It was a long day at the office, and I have a long night of work in my home office to look forward to.

Before chaining myself to my desk for the evening, I must make one crucial detour.

I need to see Alexis and Harry.

They have become an addiction to me. Sometimes my life feels like a revolving door of boardrooms and blood, meetings and mayhem. But when I am with them, everything else slides away, if only for a little while. I have never experienced anything like it. I find myself seeking them out at odd times of the day just because I need to satisfy the urge to hold Alexis in my arms or hear Harry's laugh.

Alexis isn't in the living room where she does most of her work, but the sound of giggling filters through the halls and I follow it to the French doors leading into the sunny back garden. I step outside and see Alexis and Harry sitting on a blanket on the lawn. Harry is wearing a floppy tan hat that makes him look like a jungle explorer, and Alexis is wearing a deliciously short pair of jean shorts and a pink tank top. Her skin glows in the sun's golden rays, hair reflecting glints of copper. I admire her for a moment, following the line of her collarbone down to her cleavage.

My world narrows. My pulse softens.

Alexis points when she spots me. "There's Daddy."

Harry grins. His mouth is smeared with something red. “Dada.”

I still have not gotten used to hearing him say that, but I like it.

I lower myself onto the blanket and lean over to press a kiss to Alexis’ forehead. “What are we up to?” I ask.

Alexis lifts a bowl containing cut-up strawberries. “We were just having a snack.”

“To eat or to wear?” I inquire, licking my thumb and rubbing it over Harry’s red grimace.

He giggles and squirms away, crawling to the edge of the blanket to his stuffed flamingo.

“If it were up to the little man, he would wear all of his food and eat none of it.”

“If it were up to me, *you* would never wear anything.” I smirk. “But unfortunately we can’t all get what we want.”

Alexis cocks a brow. “Mr. Belluci, I have it on good authority that you get what you want quite regularly.” She curves her lips into a feline grin. “In fact, last night, I believe you got what you wanted no less than three times.”

“Perhaps,” I remark, “but I think you’ll find I’m a very greedy man. Quite hard to satisfy.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I have half a mind to toss her over my shoulder and take her into the house, but if I succumb to that impulse we won’t come up for air for hours and I do have a lot of work to do. For now, I will just enjoy the sensation of the sun on my back and the delectable smell of strawberries and Alexis’ coconut sunscreen.

Harry toddles to his feet at the side of the blanket and takes shaky steps toward me, arms outstretched. I hold my hands out to catch him if he falls, but he makes it all the way to me without faltering.

“Dada!”

I wrap him in my arms, feeling my heart swell. Who knew that such a tiny package could bring so much joy?

Alexis clears her throat. “Gabriel, can I ask you something?”

I meet her gaze and her expression flickers with uneasiness. I stroke Harry’s head, nodding.

“When I was alone in your office last week, I found a photo album on your bookshelf,” she says.

My jaw tightens.

Alexis continues. “There was a photo in there of my dad and your dad and they looked really friendly. Especially given what I now know about your family, it doesn’t make sense to me. Did our dads know each other?”

“You snooped around my office?” I ask in a low, biting tone.

Alexis’ eyes widen and she answers in a wavering voice, “Just the bookshelf.”

“You’re lying.”

She doesn’t deny it. “Please, Gabriel. I just want to know the truth.”

“You want to know the truth?” I lift Harry and set him on the blanket in front of her, rising to my feet. “The truth is that all women are the same and you can’t trust a single one of them.”

I storm into the house, ignoring Alexis’ pleas for me to come back.

I have bent over backward to protect her, to make sure she and Harry have everything they need, and this is how she repays me? I left her alone in my private space for five minutes and she used that time to sneak around behind my back?

I jog up the stairs and head straight for my office, locking the door behind me before sitting at my desk. I’m furious, but I can’t tell how much of it is from Alexis invading my privacy

and how much is from her asking questions that I know I can't answer.

I try to push Alexis out of my mind and focus on work. I power up my laptop and there are several emails that need my attention, so I start working through them.

Despite my best efforts, my thoughts keep wandering. After spending a good several minutes reading and rereading the same email, I slam my laptop closed in frustration and lean back in my chair, groaning.

I go to the bookshelf and scan over the spines until I come across a familiar plain, black leather binding. I pull out the photo album and bring it to the desk. I haven't looked at it in years. Not since I tucked it away, where nobody should have been able to find it. Especially not Alexis.

I flick through the pages. Most of these photos were taken at my father's parties. Say what you will about the old man, but he knew how to throw a soirée—brass bands, champagne towers, French pastries, the whole works.

I flip to a photo of my father with his arm around a smiling blonde. Felicity Huffman. Her crystal blue eyes sparkle with mirth, but then again, they always did. She possessed a singular talent for spitting scathing insults through a Cheshire cat grin, delivering one from ease to indignation within the length of a second.

Felicity came from nothing and climbed her way up through New York society, using the deep pockets of powerful men as her handholds. By the time she dug her claws into my father, she was so good at the game that he didn't stand a chance.

Her desires became his desires. Her schemes became his schemes. It was Felicity who inspired my father's ill-fated and ill-advised power grab two years ago, and if it weren't for her, he would still be alive.

Not only that, but we would still control most of the docks, and there might be something close to peace between the currently warring territories.

I flip the pages again and find the image that provoked so many questions from Alexis. Her father and mine do look rather chummy, clasping opposite shoulders, leaning against each other to support their wine-heavy limbs.

I don't know how I will explain this away. I am angry at Alexis for betraying my privacy, but I am more angry that, because of her actions, I am having to pull a page from Felicity's book of manipulations just to cover my tracks.

I can't tell Alexis the truth. She isn't ready for it.

At least that's what I tell myself. In actuality, I think it's me who isn't ready. I'm not ready to pop this bubble of companionship we have formed.

But most of all, I'm not ready for her to go back to looking at me with hatred in her eyes.



Later that evening, I find Alexis in the bathroom adjoining the nursery just as she is drying Harry off after his bath. I lean against the doorway and she looks up as she wraps the fluffy white towel around Harry's shoulders. She doesn't speak.

"Can we talk in my office?" I ask.

Alexis hoists Harry into her arms and walks past me, heading for the changing table. "Yeah. I just need to put Harry to bed."

She starts fastening him into a diaper with unhurried movements, taking the time to poke him playfully on the nose and tickle his round little belly. He giggles but lazily, sleepily, his movements soft and slow. Watching her prepare our son for bed is almost hypnotizing. She eases his arms and legs into a pale yellow onesie and then cradles him to her chest, bouncing lightly as she walks around the room.

The scene is so sweet, so tender, that the anger that has been bunching in my shoulders all afternoon drains away. By the time Alexis sets Harry in the crib and pulls the blanket over his chest, I feel as though I'm ready for bed, too.

I cross the room and gaze down into the crib as Alexis turns on the sun and moon mobile above. Harry moves his lips, eyelashes fanning his cheeks. He makes a soft gurgling noise and lets his head fall to the side, chest rising and falling with tapered breaths.

“Okay, let’s go,” Alexis whispers, shoving the baby monitor in her back pocket.

We take soft steps out of the room and float the door closed. We walk in silence to my office, but the second we step inside, Alexis turns to me and presses the flats of her palms against my chest.

“Gabriel,” she says. “I’m sorry for snooping through your office when you asked me not to. If there’s one thing I know about you, it’s that you’re very particular about your privacy, so I understand why you got upset. That being said, I don’t think how you freaked out on me earlier was fair. All I did was find a photo album on the bookshelf. Bookshelves are meant to be browsed, that’s part of their whole thing. And I think it’s fair to have questions about what I found.”

My lip tilts. “Why do I get the feeling you rehearsed that?”

“Because I did.” She brings her hands to her hips. “Several times. With Harry playing the part of grumpy Gabriel.”

I run my finger down her cheek. Her skin is like cashmere. Her eyes flutter closed and she leans in to my touch.

“It’s just a photo,” I tell her. “My father styled himself as a philanthropist when it suited him and he often attended charity functions where he mingled with people like your dad. I didn’t even know it was your father in the photo until you told me.”

Alexis looks up, pursing her lips in thought. I can tell she’s not convinced.

“Do you promise?” she asks. “I’m not sure I can handle any more secrets, so if there was something going on between our families I want to know now. I don’t want to wind up more hurt later down the line.”

A small voice urges me to tell her, but I block it out. She will hate me if I do. I cannot lose her.

“I promise that the picture means nothing.” I draw her close. My fingers trace a lazy pattern over her back and she relaxes against my chest. I wonder if she can hear the deception in my flickering heartbeat.

“I will never hurt you, Alexis,” I whisper, my lips brushing the crown of her head. “I will always protect our family.”

Her fingers dig into the front of my shirt and we stand in silence until a low whine emits from the baby monitor. Alexis steps back and digs it from her pocket just as Harry begins to wail in earnest.

“I should go check on him,” Alexis says, somewhat awkwardly.

“Go.” I cup her cheek, forcing her to meet my gaze. “I have some more work to do, but I’ll come to you after.”

She nods, and rises on her tiptoes to press a chaste kiss to my lips before turning and leaving my office.

I sigh and claw my fingers through my hair. Her words seem to echo around the room.

All I did was find a photo album on the bookshelf. Bookshelves are meant to be browsed.

She isn’t wrong, and normally, I wouldn’t care if she had a flip through *The Rise and Fall of Il Duce* or *Macroeconomics: A History* while she waited for me to come back to the office.

The thing I find troubling is that the album was not meant to be browsed...

Which is why I never placed it on the bookshelf in the first place.

Someone else did.

I walk behind my desk and remove a small silver key from the top drawer, then loosen the floorboard where my feet normally rest. I pull the lockbox from the hole and unlock it, going through the contents with meticulous attention, but nothing else is missing or otherwise disturbed. I don’t know whether whoever placed the album on the bookshelf intended

for Alexis to discover it or whether they thought I would, but either way they were playing with me.

I put the lockbox back and am about to put the key back in my desk, but think better of it. It will be safer if I keep it on me.

I slip it into my pocket, along with the key to my office door. I'll grab a chain from my bedroom on my way to Alexis' room and start wearing both keys around my neck.

Until I figure out who was in my office, I will need to keep them close.

A couple of my men have keys to my office, but none of them should know about the lockbox under the floorboards. The prospect of a stranger entering my office without my knowledge is troubling, but the idea that this intrusion was likely one of my men is even more so.

I need to keep this quiet.

ALEXIS

My muscles burn. I grit my teeth, sweat trickling down my forehead, as I move my legs faster, digging deep inside of myself to push, push, *push!*

The timer beeps, and I sink into the saddle of the stationary bike. I yank the headphones from my ears. My panting breaths are nearly as loud as the blaring EDM music I was listening to before. I check my stats on the screen while I rest and give myself a little pat on the back.

Lance Armstrong ain't got nothin' on me.

Though this mansion does sometimes feel a little like a cage, it has excellent facilities. I've never been so fit in my life. I've definitely earned myself a big glass of chardonnay and a dip into the chip pantry.

I swing my leg over the bike and hop down to the floor, staggering to the water fountain to refill my water bottle. My muscles ache. It's a good ache, like the kind one achieves from having lots of vigorous sex. I am aching in that way, too.

I chug down some more water and lean against the wall, smiling at myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror across the room. I turn to the side and check out my butt.

Looking good, feeling good.

My stress levels have been near zero over the past few days. Gabriel explained the photo, and since then, every day has been a fervent tango. Yesterday afternoon, I walked past

him in the hallway and he slammed me against the wall for a passionate kiss, but then left me there wanting more.

I rewarded him in kind by spending the evening teasing him with flashes of cleavage and leg while we ate dinner and put Harry to bed, and by the time we made it into my room, we ended up tearing each other's clothes off. I found one of his shirt buttons stuck to my foot when I went to put my socks on this morning.

I'm still not sure I trust Gabriel completely, but is it wrong of me to bank my concerns for a little while and just enjoy spending time with him? Worrying about whether he's telling me the whole truth or not isn't going to help me uncover it.

I grab my towel and water bottle and head out of the gym but pause before I take another step. A trail of red rose petals leads from the gym door down the tiled hall. My heart rate, which had begun to calm, picks right back up again as I follow the trail around the corner, through to the foyer, and up the stairs.

It ends in front of my closed bedroom door.

I stop there, hovering my hand over the handle as I imagine what kind of delicious scene might be waiting for me on the other side. I hope I will find Gabriel sprawled on the bed, naked, with the stem of a rose between his teeth.

I turn the handle and push the door inward, then frown. The room is empty, my bed still perfectly made from this morning. What the hell?

Before I can go in to explore further, a hand glides around my waist and soft lips press into the back of my neck.

"You tricked me," I remark, leaning back into Gabriel's embrace.

He chuckles and the tickling vibration makes my hair stand on end. "God forbid I become predictable," he murmurs, running his hands up over my breasts. "You might get tired of me."

"Somehow I don't see that happening."

Gabriel nudges me into the room and kicks the door closed behind us. I try to turn around, but he holds me in place.

“I’m all sweaty,” I complain, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

“So?”

“So I probably stink.”

“You smell like sex,” he purrs.

I tip my head back and he plants a kiss on my cheek.

“All the same, how about we take this to the shower?” I suggest.

Gabriel nibbles my earlobe thoughtfully and heat gathers between my thighs. I arch my back, grinding my ass against him, and he growls low in his throat.

“Okay.” He releases me. “Take your clothes off.”

I spin on my heel and strut backwards as I peel away my gym clothes, and Gabriel watches me with dark eyes. I leave a trail of clothes to the bathroom, and when I reach the doorway Gabriel walks toward me, loosening his tie. My heart gallops.

I love that no matter how many fiery encounters we share, I am always hungry for another. It seems crazy to me that once I was engaged to a man with whom I found sex to be a chore, something to check off a list once every couple of weeks just so I could feel like our relationship was secure.

Sex with Gabriel isn’t something I want to do—it’s something I need to do. It’s an eternal inferno raging inside of me.

Gabriel meets me in the bathroom and turns on the shower, letting the room fill with steam as he removes his clothes. He doesn’t touch me. I drink in the view of his tanned skin and taut muscles, carving a path with my eyes from his strong shoulders, to his rippling abs, to the sexy V that disappears into the top of his pants.

There is a chain around his neck with two keys on it that I haven’t seen before. I wonder what they open. I know better

than to ask.

Once he's naked, he lifts one finger and crooks it, enticing me forward.

I float toward him. His hands come to my face and he leans down to kiss me, long and slow. He makes a languid exploration of my mouth, teasing me with his tongue and teeth. His fingers glide down my neck, over the tops of my breasts, and down past my navel.

I whimper as he skims over my sex but he pulls away.

“Get into the shower,” he commands.

I hop to it like an eager soldier. The hot water feels like heaven on my sore muscles, and I let my eyes fall closed in bliss. Does life get any better than this? A hot shower and an even hotter man to share it with?

Gabriel enters the shower and guides me to the wall. The tile is cold on my naked back and I squirm, but the second his mouth glides over my neck, I can no longer feel anything except Gabriel's touch. I sigh and let my head fall back. I suck in the thick, steamy air.

Gabriel's hand dips between my legs as he bites and sucks my neck. His light touch is still enough to make my legs quiver. He teases me, fluttering fingers over my clit without applying the pressure I so desperately need. I try to arch into him but his other hand presses against my belly and holds me to the tile.

“You're so beautiful, Tiger,” Gabriel murmurs. “And you're all mine.”

“Yes,” I hiss. “All yours.”

He rumbles his approval deep in his throat and finally gives me what I need. His fingers press against my clit and he begins to rub. Pleasure bleeds through me. My hands come to his chest, gripping his burly muscles, and I hold on for dear life.

I have never met a man as good with his hands as Gabriel. Before him, I always thought fingering was something

inexperienced teenagers did in the backs of their parents' cars before curfew on a school night.

Not so with Gabriel. He makes an art of it. He applies varying amounts of pressure, circling my clit and then gliding between my folds, and just when I think I am about to melt, he presses a finger into me to stroke my inner walls.

I curse and my legs nearly give out. Gabriel chuckles and doubles his assault, moving his fingers faster and faster while I struggle to stay on my feet. Sparks radiate from my core as the pressure builds. I squeeze my eyes shut.

My skin burns. My toes curl.

Gabriel kisses me hard on the mouth and I moan against his lips. His hand comes up to squeeze my breasts and he rolls one nipple between his fingers, sending darts of pleasure to my core. I am shaking now.

Gabriel pulls back and our eyes meet. His hand comes to rest on my neck, but the touch is more gentle than usual. His thumb caresses over my jugular.

“Come for me, Tiger,” he says.

And oh—I do.

My body seizes. I let out a strangled cry as molten pleasure erupts from my core and washes through every single inch of my body. The sensation is so intense it obliterates everything else from my mind for several glorious seconds, and I float back to earth in a dreamy, steamy haze.

I am still catching my breath when Gabriel's hands dig into my hips and he lifts me from the ground. My legs come around his hips and he impales me on his cock. I let out a low moan. I love the feeling of him inside of me, stretching me, owning me. I love knowing that he has been rock-hard this entire time but wanted to make sure I got my pleasure first.

I love him.

Wait, what?

I don't have time to process that thought as Gabriel begins grinding up into me, using the shower wall as leverage. His

thrusts are like his kiss—slow and unhurried, as if savoring every glide of skin against skin. He cups my ass and I hang onto his shoulders, though I suspect he doesn't need any help holding me up.

Gabriel grunts with pleasure as we make slow, almost lazy love while the shower steam billows around us. I run my fingers over his tight biceps, up his neck, and into the wet mop of his hair, where I grip tightly and pull his lips harder against mine.

I lose myself in the moment. In him.

After a while, Gabriel's thrusts get harder. He bounces me on his cock, breaths coming shorter and faster, and I cling on for dear life as the pressure of another orgasm builds deep in my belly. Gabriel squeezes me to him and I kiss the crook of his neck feverishly. His cock buries into me over and over, pushing me closer to ecstasy with every stroke until ...

"Oh my God!" I wail. My teeth grit as the tension in my belly snaps and I climax hard.

Gabriel roars and slams into me one last time as my gripping muscles push him over the edge. His legs shake but he continues to hold me, forehead resting against my neck as he catches his breath.

I hear only our panting breaths and the splash of water hitting the tile. I feel only Gabriel's heat. I nestle closer, pressing soft kisses to his neck. I wish we could stay like this forever.

Gabriel eventually lowers me and, with a small smile, grabs the body wash and squirts some into his hand. I forgot all about the actual showering part of getting into the shower and I laugh.

We take our time cleaning each other, and Gabriel pampers me with a lovely scalp massage while he washes my hair. By the time we leave the shower, I am so relaxed that I feel more liquid than solid. We towel each other down and then Gabriel takes me by the hand, leading me over to the bed, where he pulls me down into his arms, chest pressing into my back.

We lie in silence for a while. Our breaths even out, and my skin begins to cool. I snuggle in closer to Gabriel's warmth.

"I should probably get back to work," Gabriel says, though he makes no move to leave the bed.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

His laugh rumbles against my back. "All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy," he says. "Now who is forgetting the second part of the adage?"

"Touché," I concede. "But you do work very hard. I know that you have two businesses to take care of, but is there nobody who can take some of it off your hands?"

"I prefer to keep as much of the work as I can."

I rub my fingers over his. "Why? That seems like a hard way to live."

"Searching for an easy way out is what made my father weak and easy to manipulate," he replies. "I've been in charge for two years and I'm still cleaning up his mess."

This is the first time that Gabriel has opened up to me about his father and I try not to sound too eager as I continue to question him.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

Gabriel sighs, pressing a soft kiss to my neck. "In the few years before his death, he met a woman named Felicity Huffman. He was completely enamored with her from the start, and she soon picked up on the fact that he loathed making decisions."

His fingers drift over the top of my shoulder.

"She started first just whispering in his ear, pulling a string behind the scenes here and there. That wasn't enough for Felicity though, and it wasn't long before her private machinations became much more public. She installed herself at his side and from that point on, every order my father gave may as well have come from her lips. Some of his men tried to question his judgment, but Felicity was very good. She made my father feel like her ideas were his ideas. So when his men

brought up their concerns, he deemed them traitors and had them killed. He would never have done something so rash before Felicity. To give her credit, though, nobody questioned him again.”

“Until he was killed,” I point out.

Gabriel stiffens a little. “Yes. Until then.”

I sense an opportunity to find out what Gabriel knows about his father’s death and am just arranging the question in my head when he speaks again.

“I need you to promise me that you won’t do that.”

His words come out dark, harsh.

I swallow. “What do you mean?”

“Do not try to manipulate me. Do not take advantage of our bond for your own devices.”

Our bond. What an odd way of putting it. Then again, how would I put it? I wouldn’t say we’re in a relationship, but we’re also not just screwing. There are feelings involved.

Perhaps too many feelings, I think, remembering the realization I had in the shower. I don’t really love him, right? That was just the serotonin speaking. How can I love someone who on some deep level terrifies me? Someone who my mind wants to trust but my instincts beg me not to?

“I won’t manipulate you,” I reply, realizing that I have been silent too long.

“Promise me,” he orders.

That should be an easy promise, right? I’m not manipulating him and have no intention of doing so. Yes, I’m looking into him for a story, but that doesn’t make what we have any less genuine. I’m not using him. I just take opportunities where I can.

“I promise.”

GABRIEL

I look at the faces of the men gathered across from me. My trusted friend Diego, my advisor Vito, my lieutenant Antonio, and my most reliable capo Dom.

Twenty minutes ago, Antonio brought news that the Walshes had struck one of our armored trucks, stripping it of all its valuables and killing the two men inside.

I should have killed Andrew Walsh at the restaurant when I had the chance. He has since gone into hiding, which has evidently made him bold. I picture his slimy smile and my blood boils.

I lean against the back wall of my office, gritting my teeth. “We need to retaliate for today’s Irish attack, and when we do, we need to make it count. I have a plan.”

“What is it?” Diego asks. He wears another of his colorful shirts, this one with little red crabs on it. He looks out of place between Vito and Antonio, who are both fitted out in black suits.

“We’re going to burn down one of their warehouses,” I tell my men. “The one on the perimeter of their docks’ territory.”

“We can’t do that,” Antonio says, running his palm over his bald head. “Their presence on the docks is too strong, and they’re probably beefing up their defenses as we speak.”

“Which is why we’re going to hit them hard and fast,” I snap. “Andrew Walsh will be expecting us to take some time to lick our wounds. We don’t stand a chance of penetrating

deep enough into the docks to attack one of the other warehouses, but if we send out soldiers now we should be able to catch them by surprise. They need to know that any attacks on us will be met with swift and scathing vengeance. Burning down that warehouse should send that message.”

Antonio nods. “It could work.”

“It will work,” I say. “Do you and Dom have enough men standing by to complete the job?”

“Yes,” Dom says.

Antonio nods again.

“Keep it quick, and keep it quiet,” I tell them. “As soon as it starts to burn, get out of there before backup arrives. You’re not there to fight; you’re there to destroy.”

“Yes, sir,” Antonio and Dom chorus.

“Go,” I say. “Come back to report to me when it’s done. I will be watching from the dash cam of your car, Antonio, so make sure you park somewhere I can watch it burn.”

Andrew Walsh has fucked with me for too long. I see his laughing face when I close my eyes and I am tired of him making a fool out of me. I lost money and good men today and I want him to know how that feels.

Antonio and Dom leave, but Diego and Vito linger in my office.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Diego asks.

Vito answers for me. “We need to do something. If we don’t strike back then Walsh will only keep pressing our buttons and testing our limits. I agree with Gabriel—we need to make a show of strength.”

Vito’s confidence in my plan fortifies my resolve.

“Diego, I should have done this when Walsh sent men to try to kidnap my child,” I tell him. “I will not live in fear of him just because—for the moment—they have the upper hand. This war cannot drag on forever. Perhaps it is time to toss a match to the whole stinking mess.”

Between the bombing, attempted bombing, and this attack, Walsh has made it clear that he will stop at nothing to level us. I won't let him. My family has worked too hard over the generations to allow failure now, especially not when I am at the helm.

"Very good," Diego says. "I'll be in the guardhouse if you need me."

Diego leaves.

Vito steps closer, scratching his beard. "Do you want me to stay?"

"I don't see what good that would do."

His features flicker. "It could be nice to have a friend. I've noticed you've been a little withdrawn recently. Do you need to talk?"

"I don't want to talk," I snarl. "I have spent too much time talking. I need action, Vito."

Vito's metallic eyes survey me with something that could be sadness. He gives a slow nod. "Just know that I am here for you if you need me. I understand the pressure you're under."

"Go, Vito."

He leaves without another word. Vito is like a brother to me, and I appreciate that he is trying to help, but he seems to think the solution to my worries will be found in a conversation. They won't. I will know peace when I see the Walshes' warehouse devoured by flames.

I sit at my desk and flip open my laptop, pulling up the feed from Antonio's car. It begins to move as he pulls away from my house, past the gates at the bottom of the drive, and onto the street.

The footage is grainy and lags a little here and there. The camera has no audio so I can't hear him, but I know that Antonio will be barking orders down the phone while he drives. Usually, an attack would necessitate a little more organization, but I trust my men to be able to rally enough bodies by the time they reach the warehouse.

I watch as Antonio gets closer to the target, barely blinking. Barely breathing. My heart thuds against my ribs and my fingers curl against my palms. When I finally see the warehouse come into view and the car stops, I force myself to relax and take several deep breaths.

This will be over in a matter of minutes. And then Andrew Walsh will know that he can't fuck with me any longer, that I will be responding to his violence with violence of my own. If he doesn't know how cutthroat I can be, he is about to find out.

I watch my men approach the building, wondering why they have not met with any guards yet. Surely Andrew Walsh has men patrolling his properties? He would be a fool not to.

Something doesn't feel right. I reach for my phone to call Antonio and the feed lags again, freezing on an image of my men just about to breach the front door. I dial Antonio's number and wait, heart crawling up my throat in anticipation.

The line rings. And rings. And rings.

The screen unfreezes and suddenly there is chaos. Dozens of Walsh's men have appeared in front of the warehouse, guns blazing. My men scatter to take cover, returning fire where they can. What the fuck? How could this happen?

Antonio finally picks up, and I can barely hear his voice over the crack of gunfire. "Sir, we're outnumbered."

"Order a retreat. Now."

"Yes, sir."

He hangs up, and I watch as, one by one, my men disappear behind the view of the camera. All except a few of them, that is, who remain unmoving on the ground.

I swallow the urge to throw my laptop across the room. How could this happen? Even if they had a garrison stationed in the warehouse just in case, there is no way the situation should have devolved so quickly.

They were ready for us somehow.

As if they knew we were coming.

I wait for Antonio's car to begin moving, but it doesn't. All I see are Walsh's men, shooting and advancing toward the parked car. Has Antonio been shot? The thought of losing my lieutenant in such a needless slaughter makes my blood boil. I am going to find whoever betrayed me and I am going to make them regret it.

Finally, Antonio's car begins to move. I don't breathe a sigh of relief yet—I still don't know who is driving—but once the car is clear of the docks, I call Antonio again. He picks up right away.

"It was an ambush," Antonio pants. "I've got at least three dead, several wounded."

"Someone sold you out," I tell him.

"I know. I think I know who it was."

"Who?"

"Gino Ricci," Antonio replies. "He's one of the newer recruits. He spent the entire firefight hiding behind a car. Dom has him now."

My lips pull back into a snarl. "Bring him to me."

"We're on our way."

I end the call and set my phone on my desk. I take a long, deep breath, sucking down oxygen like it's Valium. It doesn't help. My blood sears like poison through my veins and I want nothing more than to crucify the man responsible for this needless slaughter.

At least three dead. Several wounded. And I just know that Andrew Walsh is sitting pretty somewhere, laughing at my failure. All because some new recruit with even less loyalty than brains betrayed us. Betrayed his own men.

I have not calmed down by the time Antonio and Dom return. I get word from the guardhouse that they are on their way to the house and I go to meet them at the front door, unwilling to hold my rage in any longer.

Antonio and Dom arrive alone, dragging the man I presume to be Gino between them. He's a scrawny kid,

probably no older than twenty. His brown hair is slicked back with too much hair gel, like he thinks he's a proper gangster, and he is wearing half a dozen rings on his lanky fingers. He thinks he's flashy. I wonder what his price was for selling us out.

Dom and Antonio toss Gino to his knees in front of me. His lip is split and he has a black eye.

"I questioned him in the car," Dom says. "He admitted to giving the Irish a heads-up that we were on our way."

"Did he say anything about my office?" I ask.

Dom frowns. "No. Should he have?"

I shake my head. Gino has never worked security at the mansion, so it would be nearly impossible for him to have moved the photo album in my office. That only makes me angrier, though. It means there is another rat.

"Why did you do it?" I demand.

The pathetic fool on the marble doesn't answer.

"Why?"

Gino shudders and looks down at the floor. He still doesn't answer.

My fist flings out before I even know what's happening. The rage seizes control of my body in an instant and I am more than happy to let it. Each time my fist connects with Gino's face, it is a sweet release, and I picture Andrew Walsh sputtering before me instead of this treacherous rat.

Gino falls back and I haul him up by the collar. I go into a frenzy, punching his nose, his jaw, slamming his head against the floor.

"Fucking traitor!" I roar.

Blood pours from his nose and mouth, but I don't stop. His eyes roll the back of his head and distantly I know that he won't make it much longer but I don't care. I want him dead, and I'll do it right here in the middle of my Carrara marble and leave the stains for the maid to deal with.

Faintly, I hear a high-pitched wail, and at first I wonder if it is Gino. No, it's too far away. I pause, listening, and realize that the sound is coming from the nursery. My madness splinters and falls away from me. I pause, panting, and drop Gino to the ground, where he lies groaning.

I wipe the blood from my knuckles on my jacket and turn, heading for the stairs.

“Boss,” Antonio calls after me. “What do you want us to do with him?”

I look back. “Kill him.”

“Don't you want to interrogate him more first?” Dom suggests.

“Just do it!” I roar.

Nobody asks me any further questions.

ALEXIS

I hold Harry to my chest, desperately rubbing a hand over his back, my head bowed against his.

“Shhhh,” I plead. “Please stop crying.”

Harry does not stop crying. He hasn’t stopped crying since the yelling first started downstairs. I don’t blame him. The awful sounds make me want to cry, too.

Gabriel is down there and he is angry. I have no idea what’s going on but what started with yelling has turned to the unmistakable sounds of violence, including horrible-sounding groans.

My stomach roils. I bounce Harry and pace the room, singing his favorite nursery rhyme as a last-ditch effort to calm him down.

Why did I think I could do this? Why did I think I could live a normal life while I loved a monster? My thoughts spin as I wonder what the man downstairs did, and what it would take for me to find myself on the receiving end of a similar treatment.

What if Gabriel found the folder of notes on my laptop and realized I was still considering writing an article on him? What if I decide I can’t stay here anymore—would he consider that a betrayal, too?

I know my frantic heartbeat is not helping to calm Harry and I try to level my breathing. My eyes prickle with panicked tears. What was I thinking, letting myself get involved in all of

this? I should have left the second I found out who Gabriel was. Why the fuck did I stay?

Because you care about him, a small voice says. And because he's good to you, and to Harry.

I hardly find that comforting now.

My gut clenches with nausea and I have to force myself to breathe normally.

It's okay, it's okay, everything is totally okay ...

“Just do it!” I hear Gabriel roar.

I clutch Harry closer and squeeze my eyes shut. His wails meet my ears like nails scratching down a chalkboard. I am desperate for him to stop but what can I do? *What can I do?*

Heavy footsteps approach the room. Is Gabriel coming to yell at me and Harry for being so loud? I don't think I can deal with seeing him in the grip of such violence. If he yells at our son for crying then whatever this thing is between us, it's over forever.

The door opens and Gabriel enters, sliding the door closed behind him with surprising gentleness. His hair is in disarray. His white shirt rolled to the elbows and unbuttoned at the collar, and there are flecks of ruddy crimson peppered over the front of it. His eyes are black.

My gaze traces over his proud mouth, high cheekbones, and straight nose and for a moment I see him as his namesake—Gabriel, the beautiful, deadly avenging angel.

Then he steps toward me, shattering the spell, and I take a step back.

He stops. Hurt flickers over his features. I feel a sudden stab of guilt but don't say anything. He wouldn't be able to hear me even if I did, with Harry still screaming at the top of his lungs. I don't know how the kid hasn't cried himself out yet.

Gabriel continues toward me and I resist the urge to scamper away. He reaches out for Harry and my arms tighten around him instinctively. Gabriel sighs, furrowing his brow.

“Let me help,” he says softly.

I swallow and, for reasons I still don't fully understand, allow Gabriel to lift Harry from my arms. He begins rocking him back and forth, bending in to whisper into Harry's ear. I watch, stunned, as Harry begins to calm down. His cries fade into hiccups and ragged breaths, soon quieting altogether.

Guilt drops into my belly like a brick as I watch the tender scene. How could I fear this man? How could I worry about him hurting our son? He has been nothing but loving and affectionate since the first day with Harry, and yet I worried that he was coming upstairs with cruel intentions. I think of the pain that glazed Gabriel's expression when I took a step back from him and feel awful.

Gabriel turns and I catch sight of the knuckles on the hand cradling Harry's head. They are raw and bloody, and the memory of those appalling sounds catches up with me. I don't know what to think. It feels like the man standing in front of me is a different one to the person I heard downstairs, but the physical proof of his skinned knuckles proves they're one and the same.

Yet for some reason I suddenly don't mind. The fact that Gabriel is that person doesn't bother me as much when I know that he can be this person, too—the sweet, loving father.

Now that Harry has stopped crying and the world feels calm again, the horror I felt only moments before begins to slowly seep away. My muscles begin to relax. I go to the couch and sit down, falling back against the cushions with a heavy sigh.

Gabriel looks at me but doesn't say anything. He keeps rocking Harry, and after a couple more minutes he deposits him gently into the crib.

Gabriel stands over the crib and watches Harry as he drifts off to sleep. Not long ago this room was a den of noise and chaos; now the silence is almost overwhelming.

I don't know what to think.

When he finally turns from the crib and walks toward me, his expression is unreadable. He extends a hand and I take it, rising to my feet. He keeps a firm hold of my hand as we tiptoe through to my bedroom and shut the dividing door.

Once we are alone, Gabriel pulls me to his chest and wraps his arms around me. I melt against him. His hands rub over my back, chin resting on my head, chest rising and falling against my cheek.

He kisses the crown of my head, whispering, “I’m sorry.”

His voice is so soft that I wonder if I imagined it. Gabriel is not the type to apologize.

But I feel it in the way he holds me, the way his fingers skim over my back and his lips melt against my head. I bury my face in his chest, inhaling the scent of sweat and male musk and sandalwood, and we both know without me saying it that I have already forgiven him.

I shouldn’t. But I can’t help myself.

Maybe I’m broken inside.

Gabriel pulls away after a moment and lifts my chin with his thumb. “I want to show you something,” he says.

“Okay.”

“I need to get changed. Meet me downstairs in ten minutes?”

I nod, and Gabriel leans down to press a chaste kiss to my lips. I yearn to pull him closer but the kiss is over as quickly as it came. And then he leaves my room.



When I meet Gabriel in the foyer, he is neither the angel of death nor the repentant lover. He has returned to his normal self—crisp suit, tidy hair, something like boredom coloring his expression. He brightens a little when he sees me, offering me his hand as I come down the last of the stairs.

The air is thick with the cloying scent of bleach. I try not to think about it, and am grateful when we step outside into the fresh air.

The sun is just beginning its descent to the horizon, and the dying light gilds everything it touches. Birds chatter in the bushes. Everything is peaceful.

A car is waiting for us and Gabriel opens the door for me. I slide inside, and when Gabriel follows and closes the door, I turn to him.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

Gabriel smirks. “It’s a surprise.”

I nearly blurt that I think I’ve had enough surprises for one day but think better of it. Gabriel is trying to make amends. I shouldn’t keep punishing him.

Neither of us speaks on the drive. My head is spinning with conflicting thoughts. Of course, I knew that Gabriel’s “job” would involve some brutality, but it never seemed real to me until today. It frightens me.

What frightens me more was how quick I was to forgive and forget. Being with Gabriel is changing me. The old Alexis would have taken Harry and stormed out of there at the first sign of violence. The new Alexis is willing to accept a little violence and corruption when it comes packaged with Gabriel’s fatherly affection and the bond between us that grows stronger with every day.

It’s not too late. I can still flip back to the old Alexis if I want to. I just need to decide if I want to or not.

And if I’m willing to pay the price of that betrayal.

The car heads into the city and we pull up beside a glass skyscraper in lower Manhattan. Gabriel helps me out of the car and leads me into the building just as another car stops behind us and three guards get out. They follow us inside.

The receptionist nods at Gabriel as we pass, and at the elevator I read through the names of businesses listed on the

directory next to the elevator as we wait, but none of them are familiar. What are we doing here?

Our security detail piles into the elevator behind us, and it is a long, quiet ascent. The elevator doors open to darkness. What the hell?

The guards step out first and flick on the lights. Plastic sheeting hangs from the walls, and tools and building materials are scattered throughout the airy space.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Right now, it’s a construction zone,” Gabriel says, leading me past sawhorses and through sheeting. We stop in front of a window at the far end of the room, which overlooks the skyline glittering in the last embers of sunlight.

“For some time now, I’ve been considering starting a news publication,” he continues. “As it is not my wheelhouse, however, I would require someone to spearhead the project.”

My heart skips and I look up at him in disbelief. “You mean me?”

“Of course I mean you.” Gabriel chuckles, fixing me with an amused smile. “You’re a good writer, and beyond that you’re clever and fierce. I trust you’d make a fine leader.”

I look back out the window, imagining what it would be like for this to be the view from my office every day. I wouldn’t need to hold out for whatever scraps Debbie felt like throwing my way that week. I could pursue any story I wanted, building our audience and purpose from the ground up.

I could have it all—a family, a fulfilling career, a voice.

Gabriel’s arm tightens on my waist, pulling me closer to him. His warmth is comforting.

“What do you think?” he asks. Something like insecurity laces his tone, and I realize that he needs me, perhaps even more than I need him. He is trying to make me happy, to give me everything I need so that I will never feel compelled to seek it outside of him. After what happened earlier he is scared

that he has pushed me away and now he is trying to reel me back in.

And it's working.

I want this. I want him. I drive all the thoughts from earlier out of my head and focus on this moment and the man I am sharing it with. I want this to work.

A tiny voice warns me it never will, but I smother it with visions of a bright, happy future for me, Harry, and Gabriel. As a family.

GABRIEL

I untangle myself from Alexis' arms, gently tucking her under the covers as I slide out of the bed. She stirs, turning onto her back, her dark hair fanning over the pillow. I smile at her soft snores.

I have already stayed here too long, listening to her heartbeat as she fell asleep, but my feet remain glued to the ground. I watch her chest rise and fall with her breath. I stare at her cupid's bow lips, turned at a mischievous angle even in sleep, and peace washes over me even though I know what I am about to do.

Alexis has that effect on me. I think back to last night, when I awoke from a horrible nightmare full of blood and pain. These dreams are not uncommon for me, and they make it hard to get back to sleep so I usually get out of bed and start my day at this point, even if that means surviving the rest of the day on only a couple hours of sleep.

I woke in a cold sweat with Alexis calling my name.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You were thrashing around."

I could barely think, never mind answer her. My mind was so scrambled by the visions of horror that had been burning me only moments before. She pulled me into her arms and rubbed gentle circles into the muscles of my back. She hummed a song to me, one I couldn't name but recognized as one she sometimes sang to help get Harry to sleep.

"Do you want to tell me about your dream?" Alexis murmured against my forehead.

I still didn't answer.

"That's okay," she said after a moment. "Just don't go back there. Stay here with me."

I felt warm from the inside out. As my breaths evened out and my thoughts came back into focus, I remember thinking that I should get out of bed, do some work. But Alexis's caress and the feel of her soft breath on my forehead held me there like invisible ropes, pulling me down, down, down ...

Until the next thing I knew, it was the morning.

Now, as I watch her, I resist the temptation to crawl back into bed and pull her to my chest. I have business to attend to.

I go to my room and dress, grabbing my gun and then heading down through the house to the cellar. Diego called me earlier and said that he had overheard one of the guards in the guardhouse bragging about breaking into my office. He thought I would want to know, having remembered me asking Antonio about it the other night.

He and Vito are waiting for me in the cellar with the guard. Matteo, I think his name is. He's new. He came to me via Diego's recommendation, so I'm a little surprised Diego was so quick to turn him in, but I have more respect for the man because of it. In uncertain times like this, it's nice to know I still have people I can rely on.

Matteo is tied to a metal chair with a bag over his head. Vito and Dom are sitting behind him playing cards, but they quickly abandon their game and walk over to meet me when I descend the stairs. I feel a little guilty for asking Vito to be here after his wife gave birth only yesterday, but this is a delicate matter and I need people I can trust. He is at the top of that list.

Matteo's head shoots up at the sound of footsteps, though he can't see anything through the thick burlap.

"Has he said anything?" I ask Diego.

"No," Diego responds. "We were waiting for you."

I roll up my sleeves. “Then I suppose we should get started.”

Vito pulls the sack from Matteo’s head, and the guard’s wild eyes shoot around the room like a startled horse. He seems surprised that there are only three of us, and his eyes fill with fear when they land on the gun in my hand.

“What’s going on?” Matteo asks.

He’s young, like Gino was, which makes me wonder about the integrity of my other young recruits. His curly mop of dark hair is slicked with sweat and more is beading on his clean-shaven chin.

“Diego tells me that you were bragging about breaking into my office,” I say, leaning against the wall opposite him.

“I wasn’t bragging,” Matteo sputters, glancing at Diego with desperation in his eyes. “I didn’t say anything to anyone.”

“But you did break into my office?”

His eyes return to mine. “Yes, I did. But I didn’t take anything, I swear.”

“Why were you in there?” I ask.

He swallows, chest heaving. “I just moved something. That’s all I did. I moved a book, a-a-a photo album, and I left. I promise I’ll never do it again. Please just let me leave.”

So far this is going a lot smoother than I expected. I don’t know why Matteo is being so forthcoming, but at this rate, I will be back in bed with Alexis before the hour is up.

“A photo album?” Diego asks. “This is a waste of time. He’s obviously lying. He’s been stealing from you.”

“I didn’t steal!” Matteo yelps. “I promise!”

“Why should we believe anything you say?” Diego sneers, bending over the prisoner.

“Easy,” I snap.

He straightens, taking a step back with his hands in the air. “Sorry, boss. The kid’s been pissing me off all night. I should

have never vouched for him. He's a lying snake."

My eyes meet Diego's. "I understand, but let me deal with it."

He nods and backs away from Matteo.

"Why did you move the photo album?" I ask coolly.

Matteo's nostrils flare, but his lips stay firmly pressed together. A bead of sweat rolls down from his forehead. He stays perfectly still.

"You were so chatty earlier," I remark. "Why go quiet now?"

Still, no answer.

"He's not answering because he's hiding something!" Diego interjects. "He stole something. Why would he go in there just to move a book?"

I ignore Diego's outburst, but my brow ticks with irritation. I walk toward Matteo and crouch down until our faces are level.

"Matteo, why did you move the album?" I repeat.

"I don't know! I, uh, I thought it would be funny!" he replies in a strained voice. His eyes flick over to where Diego is standing. "Please let me go."

"Did someone tell you to move it?"

His lips zip closed again and pull into a grimace.

"Matteo, answer the question!" I demand.

His face falls forward and he shakes his head, and I can't tell whether this is an answer or an objection. I drag his head back up by his hair and snarl, "Why did you move the album? Who told you to do it?"

"I don't know. I don't know!" he moans.

I release an angry sigh and drop him, stomping to the other side of the room. This kid is obviously no criminal mastermind. If he moved that album, it was because somebody told him to do it, but he's scared of whoever that was. I don't

want to torture him but I may have to, even though he would just be confirming what I already know—that Andrew Walsh has somehow infiltrated my house.

“Please let me go!” Matteo cries.

“I can’t let you go until you tell me who put you up to this,” I shout back.

“He’s a dirty sneak!” Diego yells. “You’re wasting your time, Gabriel.”

Vito remains quiet at the sidelines, observing from afar. I wish Diego would be quiet, too. Unfortunately, because he has worked for the Family for years and because of his age, he often forgets his place. And because he’s like an uncle to me, I often let him.

“I’m not a thief!” Matteo yells. “Please, I didn’t take anything!”

“Yes, you did!” Diego growls.

“No, I swear!”

“I’m tired of this shit,” Diego mutters. I hear the click of a gun but turn around a second too later. Diego already has the barrel at Matteo’s temple, and as I open my mouth to tell him to stop, he pulls the trigger.

Blood spatters everywhere and Matteo falls limp. Diego shoves the gun back into his pants and wipes the blood from his face with the back of his hand.

“That’s enough of that,” he remarks, seemingly pleased with himself.

“Diego!” I charge over to him. “What the fuck did you do?”

“I did you a favor,” he says, squaring up with me. The deep lines of his brow furrow. “This is how your father and I dealt with things in the old days. There’s no point torturing a thief. Better to just get it over with and get on with your business.”

“That wasn’t your call to make,” I remind him.

Diego cocks his head. “Were you going to let him live?” he asks. “Did the thought of killing him make you squirmy?”

My jaw tightens and I force myself to relax it. The last thing I need is for Diego to perceive me as weak. He doesn’t understand what Matteo did and why it worries me so much; he just thought the kid was a thief.

“Just take care to obey my orders,” I tell him, then point to the corpse. “Have someone come and clean up your mess.”

It’s a slap in the face, but Diego doesn’t so much as flinch. He knows he was in the wrong.

“Vito, with me,” I command, heading up the stairs.

Vito follows, and neither of us speak until we reach my office. I collapse into my chair and scrub a hand over my face.

“You okay?” Vito asks.

“Yes. I’m just tired. That’s the second traitor I’ve had to deal with this week and I suspect he won’t be the last.”

“We will find them,” Vito assures me.

“Yes, we will. For now ...” I pull a wrapped package from behind the desk and pass it to him. “A little something for the new father.”

Vito grins and pulls the package toward him. “It’s big. There must be a lot of cigars inside.”

I chuckle as he rips open the package to reveal a baby carrier. Vito lets out a bark of laughter and points at the picture on the box: a jovial-looking man in a beige sweater with a baby strapped to his chest.

“This will be great for work,” he jokes. “I can look after Nuri and still hold a gun in each hand. Two birds, one stone.”

I laugh. “And who said having a baby would hold you back?”

“Thank you for this, boss.” Vito sets the box down at his side. “And thank you for the flowers you sent to the delivery room. Corie loved them.”

“My pleasure.” I grin and open the top drawer of my desk, fishing out another wrapped package. “But do you want your real present now?”

“Real present?” He cocks a brow.

I slide the box over to Vito and he picks it up, unfolding the wrapping.

“You shouldn’t have done this,” he says. “You’ve already done so much for me and Corie.”

“Vito, you’re family.”

He draws back the paper and opens the box, gazing at the gold Rolex inside with awe.

“You can pass it down to little Nuri one day,” I tell him.

Vito’s eyes flick to mine and the gratitude in his silvery depths is almost overwhelming. “Thank you, Gabriel. I can’t tell you how much this means.”

“Don’t mention it.” I lean back, smiling. “Now get out of here. You’ve got a wife and newborn baby at home.”

He smiles and takes his gifts, saluting at the door before sliding it closed behind him.

I think about Diego’s rash killing tonight and wonder if my problem is solved now. Matteo confessed to moving the photo album, and now he’s dead. I suppose it doesn’t matter that he never told me who was pulling the strings since I already know it was Andrew Walsh. I wonder if Gino and Matteo were the only traitors or if there are more in my midst. It is safer to assume the worst, but at least I can prepare for that now.

I tie up a couple of things on my computer and then head back to Alexis’ room, undressing in the dark to the sound of her soft breaths. I slide into bed next to her and she turns, wrapping around me. I close my eyes and hold her close, inhaling the delicate fragrance of her shampoo, absorbing the heat of her skin. I relish this moment of peace.

For better or worse, Alexis has become my refuge. Just the feel of her body pressing into mine imbues me with a sense of calm. She provides a much-needed escape from my violent

world, and it scares me to need someone so much, but I have stopped trying to deny it. Life's struggles are easier with her around.

When Alexis looks at me, the world turns a little slower.

ALEXIS

Gabriel holds me close. The cool metal keys around his neck press against my cheek, a visceral reminder of his secrets.

I try to go back to sleep, try to let his deepening breaths soothe me, but I can't help but wonder where he went. Did he hurt someone else? Did he kill someone?

Time ticks by, but my eyes don't grow any heavier. If anything, the more Gabriel slides into unconsciousness, the more alert I become.

Did Gabriel not realize that by starting to wear keys around his neck it would only increase my curiosity more? I wonder if it's a test. Maybe after my last foray into Gabriel's other life, he doesn't trust me and wants to make sure that my investigative days are over.

They're not, of course. They never will be. Not when I still have questions—and I have oh-so-many questions.

I imagine what the keys might open. One of them will undoubtedly be for his office. Either that or the soundproof room. But it's the other one that draws my interest most. Is it for one of his desk drawers? Or one of the cabinets?

What is he hiding?

If Gabriel is testing me by dangling these keys literally in front of my face, then I know I should leave it alone. But I don't want to.

I've been going back and forth for days on whether I can stomach Gabriel's criminal enterprise—and I don't think I'll ever be able to side with him completely if I'm still wondering what kinds of skeletons he has locked away in his many closets. It's probably not nearly as bad as my imagination would have me believe. If I look into it now, I can settle my curiosity forever.

I glide my hands over Gabriel's warm chest. I dip under the chain and begin to carefully lift it away from his skin, barely breathing as I slowly pull the chain up over his head.

I begin to work the chain out from under him and the keys clink together softly. To my ears, it's like a gunshot. Gabriel shuffles, letting his head fall to the side, and I freeze. His face is mere inches away from mine. My heart hammers violently against the back of my rib cage. If Gabriel opens his eyes right now, I'm done for.

I listen for his breathing. When there is no change, pull the last bit of the chain over his head until the keys dangle from my fist. I move with excruciating slowness off of the bed, then pad over the carpet and slip out the door.

I head toward Gabriel's office, expecting him to come pounding down the hallway at any second. He is going to be furious with me if he finds out. For a second, I consider abandoning the venture, but I've already got the keys. May as well commit.

I try both keys in the lock of the soundproof room but neither fits. I move to the next door down—Gabriel's office—and try again.

Bingo.

I let myself into the office and close the door behind me, flicking on the light to survey the room.

Everything is exactly as I remembered it. Fabrizio glares down at me from the portrait above the bookcase, and something about it being the middle of the night makes him creepier. A shiver rolls down my spine.

I go to the bookcase first, looking for the photo album, but it's not there. Hmm. I suppose I've already seen it, but I wanted to have another peek at young Gabriel while I was here. I wonder what he did with it.

Next, I go to Gabriel's desk and sit in the leather chair, trying the key in each of the drawers. It doesn't turn in any of them. I go to the cabinets next and move down the rows, trying the key in every lock, but no dice.

Deflated, I go back to Gabriel's chair while I think of a plan. If this key doesn't open anything in this room, what does it open? Do I need to sneak around the whole house trying it out in different locks? That could take all night. I'm conscious of the fact that the longer I am out of bed trying locks, the more likely it is Gabriel will wake up to find me and his keys missing.

Maybe I should just go back to bed. Give up.

I roll the chair back and stand, and the floorboard below gives way a little and squeaks under my foot. I look down, curious, and press again. Another squeak.

That's odd. I doubt Gabriel would be the type to abide a squeaky floorboard, especially not right under his desk.

I push the chair out of the way and settle onto my hands and knees, tracing the outline of the plank with my fingers. It's loose. I dig my nails into one side and pull back, and sure enough, the entire board comes out.

My pulse pounds. With all these locked doors, what kinds of things would Gabriel hide under his floorboards?

I reach into the dark hole and my fingers brush over something metal. I find the edges of it and pull it out using both hands, rising to my feet and setting it onto the desk. It looks like a safety deposit box from a bank. The lid is locked, and I produce the second key and hold my breath as I try it in the lock.

Click.

It works.

I release my breath and lift the lid.

The photo album is sitting in the center of the box. I remove it and set it to the side to check out what's underneath.

It takes a second for me to understand what I'm looking at. There is a manila folder lying in the bottom of the box stamped with the NYPD crest. I don't know what I was expecting to find, but a police report didn't make the top of the list.

I pull the report out and start to flip through. It opens to the middle pages, where photos of a crime scene are paper clipped together, and I stare at them in horror. I recognize the man sprawled out on the tiled floor, blood pooling beneath him, looking up at the camera with dead eyes.

It's my father.

I snap the report shut, skin flashing cold. I don't understand. This is the police report for my father's murder.

But why would Gabriel have this?

With shaky hands, I reopen the folder and start reading through in a frenzy, digesting as much information as I can. When I get to the potential suspects, the officer in charge wrote that the type of weapon used and the modus operandi of the kill indicated a potential connection to the Belluci crime family, but they were unable to locate Fabrizio Belluci for questioning. I already know from my research that Fabrizio was not seen again until they found his body eight months later in the Poconos.

I don't understand. Why would Gabriel keep this? And why would he lie to me about the connection between our fathers? Obviously, there was more to it than he initially told me, and the fact that he had this hidden away under his floorboards the whole time makes me wonder if Fabrizio really was responsible for the murder of my father. It would make sense if my father discovered Fabrizio's clandestine dealings and was going to expose him.

Sickness swirls in my belly. I set the report to the side, searching the lockbox for anything else, like there will be

some magic document at the very bottom that explains everything. But there's nothing. Just an old photo album and the police report for my father's murder.

I have seen enough. I lock the box and set it back into the floor, then slide the floorboard back on top. I let myself out of the office and lock it behind me, thoughts slashing through my brain like a hurricane on my way back to my bedroom.

Has Gabriel known about my father from the beginning? Does he know what happened between my dad and Fabrizio? He must, if he's hiding the police report. Was he ever planning on telling me?

I stop outside my bedroom door and try to rein in my runaway heartbeat. There's no way I'm getting back into bed with Gabriel. Not tonight. Maybe not ever.

It makes me sick to think that this whole time he has been hiding this from me. My father has never had justice for what happened to him. Thanks to Gabriel, he never will.

I sneak into the room and place the chain around Gabriel's head, tugging slightly until it settles back around his neck. I grab a hoodie from the back of the chair and swipe my phone from the top of the desk. And then I head straight for the nursery, needing to hold Harry in my arms.

Harry wakes when I pick him up, gurgling sleepily as I pace around the room. Thanks to one of his grandfathers, he will never know his other grandfather. What kind of legacy is that to bring a child into?

I head out of the nursery and down the curved staircase to the foyer. I don't realize where I'm heading until I'm standing at the front door.

I could do it. I could leave.

I would have to make it past security, of course, but I imagine if I started freaking out and saying that Harry was sick and we needed to go to the hospital, I'd be packed into a car before anyone had a chance to find Gabriel in my room and wake him up. Once I got to the hospital, it would be easy to lose my escort.

It would be *so* easy.

I sigh and turn from the door. Problem is, I don't really want to leave. This mansion has become my home. Gabriel has become my family. He's Harry's family. Much as I hate him for keeping this from me, I have so many other feelings for him that it's hard to focus on the bad.

I pace through the empty mansion, trying to decide what to do. I can't pretend like I didn't see what I saw. I don't think I can go back to normal with Gabriel knowing what I know.

It's very early in the morning but I need to hear a friendly voice. I hop onto one of the kitchen stools and call Clara, hoping that this time, when I need her the most, she will pick up. The line rings a few times and I am about to give up when I hear her crackly voice.

"Alexis?" she whispers in a voice thick with sleep. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, fine. I'm sorry to wake you."

"One second." Clara is quiet for a moment and I hear her shuffling around. When she returns to the call, she isn't whispering anymore. She must be with Killian again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I wish I could tell her. I wish I could tell her everything. If I did, though, I would only be dragging her into this sorry mess and that's the last thing she needs.

"Yeah, I just couldn't sleep and I wanted to hear your voice," I say. "I haven't heard from you in a while and I was starting to get worried. Are you okay?"

She sighs. "I'm sorry. I've been a crap friend."

"No, you haven't. I just miss you. And I worry about you."

"I miss you, too," she says. "I've been so busy with work and Killian. I keep meaning to come by and see you; it's just not quite as easy as it was when you had an apartment in the city."

I suspect that's not the whole truth. I think Clara's avoiding me, but I don't know if it's because she's in a love bubble with

her new man, or if she's mad at me for letting Gabriel take over my life. As long as she's not drinking again.

"That's fine. I've been pretty busy, too."

"Are you still writing that article?" Clara asks.

Am I?

I think about the secrets under Gabriel's floorboards and realize that I have almost everything I need to write the kind of article that could set up my entire career. Mob boss kills influential state prosecutor and then disappears, never to be seen alive again? All I'm missing is the link between the two men and more information about Fabrizio's death.

"I don't know," I admit. "Things between Gabriel and me have gotten very personal. I don't think it's worth jeopardizing that for an article."

If I write the article I'm thinking about, it wouldn't just jeopardize our relationship—it would obliterate it completely.

"Why? Have you found something?"

I clear my throat. "No, nothing like that. He's just very private."

"Are you afraid of Gabriel?" Clara asks. "It just seems like ever since he came back into your life, you've acted less and less like the precocious journalist I know you to be and more like his docile housewife."

"That's not nice, Clara. It's complicated."

"So everything is fine then?" she hums. "Nothing to worry about?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you calling me at four o'clock in the morning?"

My brow furrows. "Obviously, it was a mistake," I spit. "It won't happen again."

I hang up the phone before she has a chance to say anything else, groaning with frustration. If Clara knew what

was going on, she wouldn't be so judgmental. Or maybe she'd be more judgmental. That seems to be a color she's wearing a lot frequently.

Harry has fallen asleep in my arms. I hold him close as I wonder what to do.

GABRIEL

I awake to the sound of my phone ringing on the bedside table. I sit up, rubbing my eyes, and realize that Alexis is nowhere to be seen. What time is it? I always wake up before her. The sky outside the window is a deep blue, indicating early morning.

So where is she?

I don't have time to consider this further as the phone rings again. I pick it up and check the screen. Antonio. This can't be good.

I clear my throat and answer. "Yes?"

"Boss, I'm sorry to call so early but we've got a situation," Antonio says.

"What is it?"

He delivers the news in a low, monotone voice. "Three of Mirko's men were on a routine collection last night when we lost contact with them. I sent out a crew to retrace their route and they just found them. Their van was raided, and all three of them were lined up inside of it and executed."

"This has gone too far," I say through gritted teeth. "We need to find Andrew Walsh and put an end to this once and for all."

"That could be difficult," Antonio says. "He hasn't shown his face in weeks."

Antonio's right. All we know is that Andrew Walsh is bunkered down somewhere outside of the city. We will either need to draw him out or determine his whereabouts. Considering I also want to retaliate for these latest attacks, I decide to do both.

"Meet me at the house in an hour," I tell Antonio. "Bring a dozen of your best men. We're going hunting."

"Yes, sir."

I hang up, sinking back onto the mattress. The Italian-Irish war is close to reaching its climax. I know it. Andrew Walsh knows it too—that is why he is in hiding.

I wonder if it would be wise to send Alexis and Harry away but ultimately decide against it. My mansion may not be a secret but it is a fortress, and considering the incidents with Matteo and Gino recently, I would not trust that if I sent them away somewhere secret, they would not be found. I don't think I have seen the last of that problem yet.

I call down to the guardhouse and order them to bring in more security. Then I go to the shower and prepare myself for war.



We arrive at the front of O'Neill's in the midmorning. The Irish pub looks empty, but this is where a few Walsh capos meet each day to discuss business.

I briefed the men before we left. All that remains is to get in, get what we came for, and get out.

This is a risky move. Not only will the building be defended, but so far the Irish have been attacking our property and soldiers, not our capos. In doing this, I will be pushing the conflict a step further and I will not be able to take this move back. Now is the time for risks, though. If I don't take this step first, then I know Andrew Walsh will do it himself, soon enough.

I give the signal. Antonio leads the first wave of men inside. They crash through the door and there is muted shouting and gunshots, then silence. I wait a beat before I follow, gun drawn, along with the second wave of men who are there for my protection.

It stinks of stale beer inside the bar. I wrinkle my nose as I look around, noting with approval that Antonio and his men have lined up the meeting's security against the wall with their hands behind their heads. There is a pile of guns in the center of the room, and three capos are sitting at a round table with their hands raised and a gun pointed at each of their heads. Their cups of coffee are still steaming on the table.

I walk around the table and address Walsh's men. "Three of my men were murdered this morning. That means I'm owed three lives." I stop behind the oldest of the three and press the barrel of my gun into the back of his head. "I'm sure you can do the math from there."

I walk to the next in the circle and press the gun to his head. "I'm feeling generous, however, and I'm willing to take only two lives if one of you will tell me where I can find Andrew Walsh."

Silence. I expected that. These are made men, after all, and there's a large audience. They won't spill secrets here. What I was looking for wasn't an answer, but a reaction. Two of the capos stiffened at my question. The third didn't react at all—he doesn't know anything.

I walk around the table to the third capo and put a bullet in the back of his skull. He falls forward, slamming into the table and spilling coffee everywhere.

I point the gun between the two who remain. One looks to be in his fifties, with a thick red scar across his cheek and more gold chains and rings than a rapper. He glares at me. I know that I will never get any information from him. I shoot him next.

The remaining capo is around my age, with a thick ginger beard and a shaved head. I press the gun to his temple. Even seated, I can tell he's a big guy.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer.

“That’s Daniel Cairns,” Antonio says from the side of the room. “He’s Andrew Walsh’s second cousin.”

My lips curve. “Perfect.” I lift the gun away and then swing the butt of it down across his face.

Daniel groans from the force of the hit, and drops his hands to shield his face against another.

“Take him,” I instruct my men. “Tie up the rest but leave them alive.”

I consider ordering them all dead, but I came here for retribution, not a massacre.

Energy buzzes through me on the drive back to the house. I can feel the end of this war in my bones.

Once back at the house, I instruct Antonio and his men to take the side entrance to the cellar while I go through the front to look for Alexis and Harry.

Because Daniel is a capo, there is a possibility that Walsh will send men to free him, and I can’t take any chances. I also don’t want Alexis to see anything she will not be able to unsee. She and Harry will need to stay in the nursery until I am finished.

I find Alexis and Harry sitting on a blanket in the back garden. Harry is playing with his favorite airplane while Alexis flips through a magazine. She looks delicious in her jean shorts and blue tank top, but I don’t have time for such thoughts now. I look forward to coming to her later.

“Dada!” Harry exclaims when he sees me, lips breaking into a toothless grin.

Alexis’ head shoots up. She doesn’t smile, just stares at me as I approach them.

I arrive at the edge of their blanket and extend my hand for Alexis. “I need you to take Harry up to the nursery or your room and stay there for the day,” I instruct.

Alexis frowns. She does not take my hand.

“Why?”

“Because I am telling you to.”

Alexis sticks her chin out and leans back on her elbows, evaluating me with an irritated expression. She opens her mouth to speak but lets it fall closed again, as if unsure of herself.

I squat down in front of Alexis, frowning. “This isn’t the time for your attitude.”

Her lips draw into a thin line, blue eyes staring deep into my own, something imperceptible swirling in their depths. She glances at Harry, who is now sucking on the nose of his airplane, and takes a deep breath.

“I know about the police report in your office,” Alexis says. “I know our fathers knew each other and yours is suspected of having killed mine.”

The thrill of my impending interrogation slips away and dread thuds into the bottom of my stomach. I feel for the key around my neck, but it’s still there. She must have taken it off while I was sleeping and returned it before I woke up.

My jaw tightens. I stare at Alexis, long and hard, watching as the color drains from her face and she draws back across the blanket.

Anger is not quite how I would describe what I am feeling. It’s not simply betrayal either. Hearing her say these words, knowing that she betrayed my trust, it rips and twists at my insides.

It fucking hurts.

I must look positively murderous as Alexis staggers to her feet and grabs Harry, angling him away from me. That hurts even more. Does she think I’ll hurt him, or is she just trying to stop him from absorbing my brand of poison?

“It’s true, isn’t it?” she spits. “You’re not denying it.”

“I can see that I made a mistake in trusting you.” I draw to my feet. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Did he do it personally?” Alexis presses. “Or was it a hit? And why did he disappear right afterward?”

I gesture for the two guards at the back door to come forward. “Take Miss Wright up to her room,” I instruct, glaring into Alexis’ eyes. “She is to stay in her room or the nursery. Keep her there by force if you have to.”

They each grab one of her shoulders. Alexis doesn’t struggle, probably aware that if she does, there is a chance Harry could get hurt. I step forward, glaring down at her as I yank her phone from her back pocket.

“I’ll be taking this,” I tell her, tucking it into my inside pocket. “You would do well to remember that I can take whatever I want from you, including my son.” I lean down, leveling my gaze with hers. “Betray me again and that is exactly what I will do.”

“You’re a psychopath,” Alexis snarls. Her eyes are bright and fierce. She would look beautiful if I wasn’t so disgusted with her. How long has she been lulling me into a false sense of security? How many lies has she fed me like chocolate-dipped strawberries?

“And you’re exactly the manipulative witch I always thought you were.” I wave to the guards. “Take her away.”

GABRIEL

Once Alexis and Harry have been removed from my sight, and I am alone in the backyard, I roar and kick through the remains of their picnic. The airplane smashes down the middle. Cut grapes go flying everywhere. Grape juice soaks into the gingham blanket, spreading like blood.

Why? *Why?*

All I needed was for her to trust me. All I asked was for her submission. She seemed to give it so willingly for so long, but the entire time, she was scheming behind my back. What other buried secrets has she been trying to unearth?

I take a breath and scrub my hand through my hair and realize I am letting her distract me again. I have business to attend to in the basement. I will deal with Alexis's betrayal later.

I head back into the house and down to the cellar, where Antonio and a few of his men have strapped Daniel to a chair in the middle of the dark room. Vito has arrived too and nods from his position in the corner.

I slip out of my suit jacket and hand it to Antonio, striding over to the prisoner as I roll up my sleeves. His muddy brown eyes dart between me and the rest of the men in the room, fingers clawing around the arms of the chair.

"Daniel," I say, stopping in front of him and folding my arms across my chest. "I need one piece of information from you today, and one piece only. Provide it and I will set you free."

“Oh, why didn’t you just say so?” he says jovially. “Yes, I do think that suit makes you look fat.” He jiggles his restraints. “Can I go now?”

I ignore the wisecrack. “Where is Andrew Walsh?” I ask calmly.

He meets my gaze. “I don’t know.”

“You do know,” I say. “I saw how you reacted when I asked that question in O’Neill’s.”

His lips pull back into something between a smirk and a grimace. “Well, if I did know, I wouldn’t be very good at my job if I told you.”

“You won’t be very good at anything ever again if you don’t tell me.”

He leans back in his chair, as though it’s the most comfortable recliner in the world. “The way I see it, either I keep my mouth shut and die here with honor or I spill the beans and Andrew Walsh removes my eyes with a melon baller. Either way, I’m not going to have a nice day.”

“I can guarantee you you’ll have a much worse day if you don’t give me what I want,” I tell him. “Your boss is a morally bankrupt psychopath. Why protect him? You could be on your way to the Bahamas within the hour if you give me what I need.”

Daniel shakes his head. “See, I don’t think that’s the case. I’m not making it out of this basement. If I tell you where he is, you can’t take the risk of letting me go in case I warn him. You’re going to kill me no matter what, and I know that because it’s exactly what I would do.”

He’s right, of course. I find myself holding a grudging respect for this man, and his churlishness reminds me a little of Alexis’ smart mouth. Part of me wants to provide him with a little mercy. Does he have to die?

I dismiss those thoughts. Yes, of course he does. I have a job to do, and a responsibility to my men. The killings will not stop until I cut off the head of the snake. The only reason I’m even considering letting Daniel live is because of Alexis—

because of the weakness she has cultivated in me. Am I just going to fall for the charms of any old whore now, like my father?

Pathetic.

I return to the interrogation, disgusted with myself for my weak mental sidebar. I reel back and slam my fist into Daniel's face. I feel his nose crack and he groans as blood begins to gush from his nostrils.

"Whether I kill you or not at the end of it, the question is: how much pain are you willing to endure to protect your boss?" I ask.

I punch him again, this time splitting his lip.

"I will find Andrew Walsh. One way or another I will find him, so your silence, while admirable, is pointless."

Daniel's head falls forward and blood drips from his open mouth.

"A man like me knows there is suffering coming his way sooner or later," he pants. "I'd have been a fool to think fate would spare me."

My fist reels back. For a second, Alexis flashes through my mind. I see her sitting in the chair opposite my desk, at my office in the city. She wore the same tart expression as she threatened to make our hour-long interview uncomfortable.

I pause. Daniel flinches and looks up, wondering why the hit never came, and my skin burns with humiliation.

It's like he can see it: that Alexis is in my head. She has been in my head since the second we first met. And now look at me—hesitating to interrogate an enemy for information because he reminds me a little of her. How many other ways has she wormed her way into my skull, damaging my ability to be the leader my men need?

Not anymore. Not at this most crucial time, the culmination of years of bloodshed. I need to be strong now more than ever.

“We’re going to try something else,” I say, lowering my fist. I turn to Antonio. “Bring me a knife.”



I wash the blood from my hands in the sink, staring at my reflection in the mirror. Pink water swirls down the drain. I wash until it turns clear and splash water onto my face, then dry my face on the towel and exit the bathroom.

Vito is leaning against the wall outside. He straightens when I come out.

“Hey,” he says. “You okay?”

I frown at him. “Yes.”

“You left the cellar pretty quickly,” he continues.

I start walking in the direction of my office and Vito tags along beside me, his stubby legs working overtime to keep up with my striding steps.

“There was no reason to stay,” I reply. “Antonio and his men are dealing with the body and I don’t have any information to act on.”

Daniel held out right to the end, and I rewarded his efforts with a bullet to his skull. I’m frustrated both because I clearly picked the wrong capo and because Andrew Walsh doesn’t deserve that kind of loyalty.

We arrive at my office door and Vito catches my eye. “You just don’t seem like yourself.”

“Vito, how many times do I need to tell you that I don’t need you to be my fucking therapist?” I snap. “Go home. I’ve got lots to do and standing around and talking about my feelings isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

His thin lips press together, but he doesn’t argue. He gives a small nod and leaves me, and I fish the key from around my neck and enter the room. The very act of doing so reminds me of Alexis’ betrayal and a wave of anger crashes over me.

We had something good. Now we can never go back to that, all because of her insufferable curiosity.

Then again, maybe her betrayal was a gift. I have clearly been leaning too far into my emotions because of her, and look where it has gotten me. She made me trust her, let my defenses down, all so she could sneak behind them like the pesky reporter she always was.

Alexis made me weak.

I go straight behind my desk, tugging at the loose floorboard and pulling out the lockbox from underneath. I tuck it under my arm and grab matches from the top drawer of my desk, then leave my office, heading down the stairs and out to the backyard.

When I set the box onto the grass and unlock it, nothing looks out of place. Alexis was clearly careful to put everything back exactly as she found it. Of course, she wouldn't want me discovering her transgressions until she deemed the moment appropriate.

I pull out the photo album, then light a match and toss it into the box, stepping away as the report catches fire. I watch the pages curl inward, watch the flames devour my secrets.

One by one, I remove the photos from the photo album and toss them into the fire too. The burning ink crackles and pops as the flames make short work of years of memories.

I should have done this years ago. The album was a memento of the golden years, and the police report dog-eared the page where all that ended. Hanging onto them was sentimental and idiotic.

I toss more pictures onto the flames. Felicity Huffman grimaces back at me as I incinerate her once and for all. She will not be reborn in Alexis, and I will not make my father's mistakes. Not again.

I will close myself off and operate my businesses with ice-cold, impartial judgment, and I will not let my emotions get the best of me ever again.

I watch until every scrap of paper is gone and only black ash remains. Then I don't know what to do.

My head aches with stress but I have cut myself off from my main sources of stress release, namely fucking Alexis or playing with Harry. Still, I am desperate to discharge the tension in my muscles somehow, and I suppose the next best thing is exercise.

I change and head to the gym, jumping right into a punishing workout. I sprint as fast as I can for as long as I can on the treadmill, and after that, I lift weights until my muscles scream. Then I jump back on the treadmill and do it all again.

No matter how hard I push, how much sweat drips from my forehead, it doesn't help. I can still feel Alexis' presence in the house like a grain of sand under my skin.

ALEXIS

I wake up slowly, stretching my arms over my head, and for a second I feel at peace. Sunlight splays over my fluffy comforter, and as my muscles sing with delicious heat, I prepare to get up and start my day.

And then I remember.

I jump out of bed, practically jogging to the nursery to make sure Harry is still there. Ever since Gabriel warned me a few days ago that he could take Harry whenever he wanted, I have half-expected to wake up one morning and find my son gone, spirited away in the middle of the night.

Harry is still there, though, sleeping soundly. I stare at his round little cheeks and silky brown hair and try to let calm wash over me. Usually, looking at him is enough, but for the past few days, panic has been my constant companion.

I go back to my room and collapse onto the bed, curling into a ball. I haven't seen Gabriel since he ordered me locked in my room. I haven't wanted to—not since he didn't deny my accusations and thus confirmed my worst fears.

Gabriel's father killed mine.

As horrifying as that knowledge is, what hurts more is that Gabriel knew about it and didn't tell me. This whole time, he's been whispering sweet nothings in my ear and playing father of the year for Harry. But he failed to confide this crucial information.

It has always hurt knowing that Harry will never get to meet his grandfather. My dad would have absolutely doted on him, and I always imagined him looking down on us, proudly watching me raise Harry on my own.

Now I know that, if Dad is watching, he is ashamed of me. It makes me sick.

How long is Gabriel going to keep me locked up here? I roll onto my side and draw my knees to my chest, trying to calm the anxious flutter of my heart with deep breaths. It feels like the walls are closing in, and there is nothing I can do to stop it. I am powerless. I trusted the wrong person and now I'm the prisoner of a dangerous mobster.

I rise unsteadily and go to the window, desperate for fresh air. I open it and stick my head out, gulping in the sweet smell of freshly cut grass and hydrangea blossoms from the bushes below. I look down, wondering how much it would hurt to land on the bushes from this height. Would I break anything? I don't think I would. It wouldn't be a pleasant landing, but I would survive it.

I glance around. There isn't a security guard in sight. The lawn stretches about a hundred feet ahead before it meets with a copse of trees, which would be a good place to hide.

Before I even know what I'm doing, my feet carry me back to the nursery and I scoop Harry into my arms. I walk back to the window and hoist one leg over the ledge. I look down. I breathe.

I imagine crashing into the top of the bush, twigs clawing through my clothes. What if I land funny and Harry gets hurt? What if I squeeze him the wrong way? What if the impact knocks me unconscious and he falls out of my arms?

Harry wakes, squirming. As if he knows the dark thoughts threading through my mind, he begins to cry, and his tiny wails cut through me like a jagged blade.

I pull myself back through the window and slide down against the wall, openly sobbing. If I didn't have to worry about Harry, I could escape.

But I can't leave him. I won't. If I leave Harry now, I will never see him again, even if I come back for him with the police. Gabriel will make sure of that.

Hot tears flood my cheeks. I don't try to comfort Harry. I don't have it in me. We both cry and cry and cry, filling the room with the echoing sounds of anguish and defeat. We are completely trapped, helpless.

Hopeless.

There is a gentle knock on the door. I sniff, bouncing Harry in my lap. As if curious why I have stopped crying, he quiets down, too, unscrunching his face and studying me suspiciously.

"What is it?" I call.

My heart pounds. There have been several knocks on my door over the past few days, and none of them have been Gabriel, but this could be the one that is. I don't want him to see me like this, utterly desolate.

"Breakfast," comes a soft male voice. Not Gabriel.

"Come in."

The door opens and Diego bustles in. I saw him around the house and grounds sometimes before without ever knowing his name, and the fact that, since my incarceration, he has been the one to bring me meals only makes me more curious how the old man fits into this operation.

His gray hair is greased back from his forehead, and he is almost always wearing some kind of colorful Hawaiian shirt. Today, it is a powder-blue number dotted with large pineapples. He is heavily tattooed, but I can't tell what most of them are as the ink has faded and bled over time.

"Victoria whipped up your favorite," Diego announces, walking over to set a tray with two metal lids down in front of me. He doesn't comment on my awkward positioning or on the fact that my eyes are puffy and red from crying.

Diego sits opposite me with crossed legs and lifts the larger lid from the tray to reveal fluffy scrambled eggs, topped

with diced chives and a little bit of cheese. On the side are three crispy strips of bacon.

“And for the little guy ...” Diego lifts the smaller lid and there is a small portion of scrambled eggs, as well as a cup of yogurt and a bowl of fruit.

I hug Harry close to my chest and lean my head back. “I’m not hungry.”

“Maybe not, but you should eat,” Diego says. “And Harry needs to eat too.”

I sigh. He’s right.

Opening my eyes, I turn Harry and sit him between my legs. I pull the plate of scrambled eggs in front of him and start lifting bites to his mouth. I don’t care that we’re on the floor, or that he’s probably going to get food everywhere.

Diego watches me with kind eyes. His gaze flicks to the curtains, which flutter in the breeze from the open window, then back to me.

“Were you going to escape out the window?” he asks.

I don’t answer. Harry slurps down some scrambled eggs and smacks his lips happily.

“You wouldn’t make it far,” Diego continues. “There are cameras everywhere.”

“Well it’s a good thing I changed my mind,” I snap.

Diego lifts his palms in surrender. “Relax, Mama, I want to help you.”

“Help me?” I frown, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. “As in, help me escape? Why would you do that?”

Diego reaches forward, stroking Harry’s head with a gentle smile. “Gabriel is not acting like himself. Locking you up here was cruel, and I worry about what he is going to do next.”

My heart seizes. “You don’t think he would hurt us, do you?”

“I don’t know.”

Diego scratches his head, then reaches into his back pocket and digs something out. He lifts my hand and presses a black flip phone into my palm.

“Let’s not find out,” he says.

I close my fingers around the plastic. I don’t want to believe that Gabriel would hurt us, but whatever role Diego plays in this organization, doesn’t he have a better insight into his boss than I do?

Then again, what if this is Gabriel testing me? Trying to set me up? His warning flashes in neon red lights in my mind.

You would do well to remember that I can take whatever I want from you, including my son. Betray me again and that is exactly what I will do.

Colluding with one of his men to escape, and taking his son with me ... I can’t imagine Gabriel taking that as anything other than a betrayal.

“I’ll think about it,” I say.

Diego’s mouth flattens. “I wouldn’t think for too long. I’ve loaded my number into the phone, but once you call, I will still need a week to get everything ready.”

He slowly gets to his feet, groaning a little. When he catches me watching, he grins. “These old bones aren’t what they used to be.” He points to my food. “You should eat that before it gets cold.”

With that, Diego clears out, leaving me to digest his offer as well as breakfast. I finish feeding Harry and then chew on a slice of bacon while Harry crawls around the room.

Can I trust Diego? Is he the wise old man fearing for my safety, or is he a faithful soldier laying a trap so that Gabriel can feel justified in separating me from my son?

I try to remember a simpler time, before Gabriel and the mob and this whole god-awful mess. What I wouldn’t give to go back to fluff pieces now.



Later that afternoon, as I am playing cars with Harry in the nursery, there is a knock on the door. It's a stronger knock than Diego usually does, and considering he dropped our lunch off an hour ago, I doubt he would be back so soon. He didn't mention anything about his offer and neither did I. I still haven't decided.

The mystery knocker doesn't wait for me to call out, and before his face even appears in the doorway, I know it's Gabriel.

I clutch Harry against my chest and lift my knees as a shield, watching Gabriel warily as he strides into the room.

"What do you want?" I bite out.

His dark eyes flick from mine to Harry, lips tightening at the sight of my protective posture. "I came to see how you were doing."

"Oh, like you care now?" I grit my teeth, nose wrinkling with rage. "And here I was thinking you came to be a man and admit the truth about what I found. I've already put two and two together. I know your father killed mine, or at least had a hand in it somehow. Why can't you just admit it?"

Gabriel stalks across the room and squats in front of me. His amber eyes bore into mine. He always looks sexiest when he's angry—sharp cheekbones, tight full lips, fierce expression—but when I look at him now, I just feel sick.

"I don't have to tell you anything," he says in a low, monotone voice. "I gave you and Harry everything and you repaid me by sneaking around my back. You don't deserve the truth."

"I hate you," I spit.

And in that moment, I truly feel it. I want to rake my fingernails over his perfect face. I want to claw his eyes out and leave him in this room to languish alone, like I have been.

Gabriel delivers his next words with a cold cruelty that drives shivers down my spine. “You can hate me all you want, but you need me. Stop pulling at old threads and start treating me with the respect I deserve or I will take Harry and exile you forever.”

A lump forms in my throat and I swallow it.

“You’re a monster,” I whisper.

“You have no idea.”

Gabriel gets up and leaves me there, shaking with the promise of his lingering threat. Harry fusses in my arms and my eyes burn, but I refuse to let a single tear drop until Gabriel has left the room. Once he closes the door behind him, I sob quietly against Harry’s soft forehead.

I give myself two minutes to mourn the life Gabriel and I could have had, and to fear for what kind of life I have ahead of me, before I pull myself together and dig out the burner phone Diego gave me from under my mattress.

There is only one number saved in the address book and I ring it, watching Harry play with his stuffed flamingo. Sadness tugs on my heart, but I have to do what’s right for my son, and that means getting as far away from Gabriel as possible.

“Hello?” Diego answers.

“Please help me.”

“One week. Be ready when I call.”

The line clicks dead, and I tuck the phone back under the mattress.

And now, I guess, we wait.

GABRIEL

My cell phone rings. I look up from the screen of my laptop, gut twisting when I see Antonio's name on the screen. My lieutenant has become the star of my nightmares. Each time he calls it is with more bad news, and he has been calling a lot recently.

I answer gruffly, "Yes?"

"The Irish have burned down Il Paradiso," Antonio reports. "I'm on the scene now. There are bodies."

I squeeze my eyes closed and try to loosen my jaw. This is the third business Walsh has burned this week. The war escalated exponentially in the days following my murder of Walsh's three capos, and it feels as though I am swimming in a sea of blood with no land in sight. I used to have my family to keep me afloat, but even though they are in the same house, I have lost them. Maybe forever.

"Thank you, Antonio. I know we're spreading men thin as it is, but send extra guards to the other businesses under our protection."

"I will do."

"And add extra guards at the docks," I continue. "I have a bad feeling that the Irish are gearing up for something bigger."

"Yes, sir."

I end the call and slam the lid of my laptop closed. How many more will die before Andrew Walsh comes out of hiding so I can deal with this once and for all? He's a coward.

My temple throbs. I have had a headache since the second I opened my eyes this morning, and it doesn't feel like it's going to abate anytime soon. I dig my fingers into my forehead but it doesn't help. I know something that might, though.

I leave my office and walk to the nursery, nodding at the guards flanking the doors as I enter. The room is dimly lit by a smattering of stars projected onto the ceiling. Harry is in his crib at the far end of the room, and as I walk toward him, I notice Alexis watching me through the open door to her bedroom. I ignore her and continue approaching the crib, gripping the wooden edge and staring down at the peaceful baby within.

Harry's eyes are closed, head tipped to the side. His tiny lips are parted slightly. He is fast asleep, hopefully dreaming of happy flamingos and high-flying airplanes, completely unaware of the nightmares his father battles in the real world.

Spikes continue driving into my brain but it's somehow easier to bear in his presence. I reach into the crib and run my fingers over his velvety cheek.

Alexis clears her throat behind me. I straighten and turn. She is standing with her arms folded, and her features are stacked in a ferocious expression. I guess she's still mad at me, then.

Time for me to leave.

I go to walk past Alexis, but she steps into my path.

"What the fuck is going on out there?" she hisses. "I hear people come in and out at all hours of the day and night. My guards keep suggesting that I should be grateful because I'm the safest person in the house. And you won't tell me jack shit."

I lean down, leveling my face with hers. "I might tell you if you hadn't already proved that you can't be trusted."

"I deserve to know."

I shake my head, snarling, "I can think of a few things you deserve, and none of them include my confidence."

I sidestep her and continue heading for the door, but she darts into my path again just before I reach it.

“You are such a child!” she snaps. “Of course I’m going to pry if I think you’re keeping secrets from me. How about not keeping secrets from me in the first place? We wouldn’t be in this mess if you’d just told me what you knew about my father.”

“No. We wouldn’t be in this mess if you had displayed a modicum of respect toward me. That changes now.” I point to the side. “Get out of my way.”

Alexis crosses her arms with a bitter smile. “No. Not until you give me some answers.”

“Alexis,” I growl. “Do not push me.”

She narrows her eyes. “Or what?”

My arm flings up before I even fully know what I’m doing. I close my fingers around her throat and shove until her back collides with the wall next to the door. Alexis’s hands come up to my arm, trying to pry me away, but I’m too strong.

“You fucking Neanderthal!” she screams. “Let me go!”

I step closer, my body pressing against hers. Even though I am so angry that I want to wring the life out of her, I can’t deny the effect she has on my body. My skin heats at the thought of taking her, right here, my fingers squeezing her neck.

“Apparently, you still think you can talk to me like you did before,” I bark. “Let me correct that for you. You were lucky. I should have snapped your fingers for half of the things you said to me, but I was lenient because you amused me and because I wanted to fuck you. Clearly, I should have been more strict with you, and going forward that’s exactly what I’m going to be. Don’t count on me for mercy anymore. It’s time for you to learn your place.”

“My place?”

Alexis goes to slap me and I catch her hand, slamming it to the wall beside her head.

“God, you are so broken!” she cries, struggling against my grip. “I don’t know why I ever cared about you when clearly the only person you care about is yourself. You’re a big, fat walking ego and I wish I’d never introduced my son to you. I can’t wait until he is old enough to see all your jagged edges where a heart should be. I can’t wait to watch him grow to hate you.”

She punctuates her last sentence by spitting on my cheek. I grit my teeth, fingers tightening on her neck. I hope it bruises, so that every time she looks in the mirror, she remembers the price for this kind of defiance.

My lips curl into a snarl. “Keep talking and you won’t get to see my son grow up.”

“Do you feel like a big man when you threaten me?” Alexis taunts, wheezing.

My veins tighten with rage and I am about to snap back at her when a keening wail starts up behind me. I look back, and Harry is standing at the edge of his crib, bawling his eyes out. My hands loosen and Alexis shoves me back, running over to him.

I wipe the spit from my face and leave without sparing Alexis another glance.

I am disgusted—with Alexis, for her cruel words and inability to back down, but most of all with myself. I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to hurt her like she hurt me, to give her physical scars to match the ones she slashed into my heart.

I go back to my office and sit at my desk, head pounding. Guilt twists my insides. Why does she have to do this to me? Why can’t she just fall in line and defer to my authority so I won’t need to punish her? If she did, maybe one day we could even return to a level of normalcy between us. We could be a family again.

If she keeps acting out like this, I will have to produce harsh consequences. And when I do, it will be Alexis’ fault that our family is forever broken.



I walk out of the cellar. The drying blood on my hands makes my skin feel tight. I flex my fingers on my way up the stairs, passing the first bathroom I see, unbothered about washing the blood away. There is a hollow ache in my chest and I want only one thing—to see Alexis.

It's late and I am exhausted. My head still throbs, my muscles complain with each step, and emotionally I feel like a squeezed-out toothpaste tube. It's all her fault. I can't stop going over our fight in my head, and I can still feel her pulse fluttering under my thumb.

I enter her bedroom silently and close the door behind me, walking to the foot of the bed, footsteps muffled by the carpet. Alexis is sprawled diagonally across the mattress, snoring lightly. She is totally relaxed. I remember a time when she could be this relaxed around me while conscious, and realize that time is gone now forever. I will never see her like this unless she is asleep.

My fingers itch to touch her, or to go to the nursery and hold Harry. I know I can't—not with blood on my hands. But will it ever fully wash off? I think of what Alexis said, how Harry will grow up and learn to hate me, and I wonder if it's true.

I am a beast. Perhaps I was kidding myself when I thought I could be a better father than my own. Is there room in this life for that kind of sentiment? Or am I doomed to repeat my father's mistakes because that is the only path a man in my position can take?

I take one last look and head for the door. I still have work to do tonight before I can sleep.

My phone rings as soon as I close the door and I curse myself for not setting it to silent. The last thing I needed would have been Alexis waking up to find me watching over her.

I pull out my phone and check the screen. It's the guardhouse.

I answer, heading back for my office. “Yes?”

The man’s voice is frantic. “Sir, it’s Damien. You need to lock down the mansion. Four men have breached the perimeter. They killed everyone in the guardhouse and disabled the cameras. I don’t know where they are now.”

His words are like a spike through my skull.

GABRIEL

I sprint back to Alexis' room as I dial Antonio's number, heart slamming into my ribs.

"Antonio, there are hostiles on the property," I shout as soon as the call connects. "Damien reported four. I'm locking down the mansion, but I need you to mobilize your men and get over here as soon as you can."

"Yes, sir."

I hang up and arrive in front of Alexis's guards, who heard the orders I gave Antonio and have drawn their guns. I draw mine too.

"Radio for backup," I instruct. "Triple the guard on these rooms. When backup arrives, I want both of you to take Alexis and Harry into the bathroom and barricade yourselves in. Tell all the other guards to meet me in the foyer immediately."

I hear Angelo barking into the radio as I bolt down the stairs. If the intruders left the guardhouse just before Damien's call, I only have about a minute before they make it to the house. My mind whirs with strategy. There are three entrances into the house—through the cellar, the back patio door, and the front door. If I fortify the back and front doors that should draw them into the cellar, where it will be easier to pick them off.

There are already a couple of guards waiting for me in the foyer, with more filing in. With no time to lose, I start delivering orders.

“I want three guards on the back door and three on the front. Everyone else wait at the top of the cellar stairs. Whatever you do, do not let them make it to the second floor.”

I hope that three men will be enough to drive them away. I don't have more to spare, especially since nearly half of my available forces are protecting Alexis and Harry.

“Yes, sir,” the men chorus, jogging off in separate directions.

The lights cut out. I swear under my breath as my eyes adjust to the sudden darkness. Blinking, I look around as though it will help. They're here.

I hear the crack of gunshots from the south end of the house, near the back door, and start to run in that direction, feeling my way along the walls.

By the time I make it to the back door, my eyes have more or less adjusted. I find one of my guards lying prone amidst smashed glass from the French doors. The other two—Bruno and Leo—flank the doors with their backs to the wall, and one of the gunmen is lying dead outside.

“Two attacked us,” says Bruno, the eldest of the two guards. “I think the other one ran off.”

I step through the broken door, vigilantly checking my surroundings. Finding no threat, I kick the body on the patio.

“He's dead.” I pluck the rifle out of his grip just in case, noticing a canvas bag slung over his shoulder. I tug the strap off his arm and lift the bag as more wicked cracks echo through the black sky like thunder. The shots are coming from the other side of the house—near the cellar, it sounds like.

Returning to the cover of the house, Bruno hands me a flashlight to inspect the contents of the bag.

“Fuck.” My throat tightens and I look to Bruno. “Radio the others and warn them that the intruders have brought explosives.”

Bruno does as instructed and I jog back through the house toward the gunshots. Walsh has taken it too far this time. I

think of the men lying dead in the guardhouse, and I hope to God that Diego wasn't with them tonight.

This attack has gone too smoothly for a blind assault. There is no way that four men could take down the guardhouse, the cameras, and the lights so swiftly without inside help. I have already killed two men for treachery—how many more are going to turn out to be turncoats before this is all through? And how is Walsh recruiting them?

The sound of gunshots becomes deafening as I reach the door to the top of the cellar stairs. My men shoot down the stairs, but whoever is down there is returning fire. I pull Max aside to report.

“How many are down there?” I ask.

“Two.”

“Fuck.” I scrub a hand through my hair. “They split up. One is dead at the back entrance. I don't know where the other is.”

A roaring crash slams into my eardrums and the house shakes. Dust plumes from the direction of the front door.

“Max, with me!” I yell, racing to the foyer.

Thick black smoke invades the hole where the front door used to be, and the three guards lie sputtering on the tile.

“Check on them,” I instruct Max, heading through the gap with my gun drawn while he crouches next to the first of the downed men.

I sidestep the crater in the stone porch and peer through the darkness, listening for the sound of footsteps. What I hear instead is a popping, grinding noise. I listen closer, trying to figure out what the hell I'm hearing. Recognition dawns on me and I leap back into the house just as one of the stone columns tumbles over and a slab from the portico roof dislodges and slams to the ground.

Bruno and Leo are in the foyer when I turn around.

“What are you doing here?” I yell.

“We heard the explosion and thought you would need help over here,” Bruno replies. “They said on the radio the ones in the cellar are dead.”

“You left the back door undefended!”

Suddenly, a black shadow dashes past us. I whip my gun up, trying to aim at the figure, but it is hard to distinguish him from the shadows. I track the man’s movement as he begins to dart up the stairs and I shoot, but my bullet misses.

I sprint after the intruder. Adrenaline pours gasoline on my burning limbs and I grit my teeth. I have to stop him. At the back of my mind, I know there are plenty of guards outside of Alexis’ room, but panic has taken over at just the thought of this gunman and his explosives getting anywhere near my family.

I round the top of the stairs and shoot just as the gunman is about to turn down the hall leading to the nursery. The man yelps and collapses, and I race toward where he has fallen, kicking the gun from his grip and then delivering another kick to his face.

Two guards race around the corner and drag the man up, radioing to the others that all of the intruders have been neutralized. The other guard radios back that Antonio and his crew of backup have arrived. I breathe a little easier knowing that the situation is in hand.

“Get the lights on and take him to the cellar,” I huff. “We’re going to have a little chat.”



The surviving intruder’s name is Finn. In the first ten minutes of questioning, this is all I learn from him. It is clear that I am going to have to apply more pressure. I wonder if one of his dead compatriots, now stacked in the corner of the room, purposefully within his view, would have been a better subject for interrogation.

Antonio is with me, as well as one of his men, but the rest of the men are upstairs tending to the wounded and dead. I should hear soon if Diego was in the guardhouse. If he is dead, I am not sure I will be able to hold back from beating this man to death with my bare fists.

“Finn,” I say, approaching his chair and squatting in front of him. “It’s late. I’m tired. Answer my questions and we can all get some sleep.”

Finn is a tall, sinewy man with dark circles under his green eyes. His stringy brown hair is tied back in a bun, but several pieces have come undone in the melee. He is jittery and flinches when I get too close, but despite his obvious fear, he is doing a good job of keeping his mouth shut.

“I’m not going to talk,” he repeats, blood spilling from the corner of his mouth.

I have grown tired of hearing him say it.

Frustrated, I press my finger into the bullet wound on his leg. He flails against his restraints and howls. I press harder.

“Who hired you?” I yell.

Finn doesn’t answer. I remove my finger and his head falls forward, shoulders heaving with the force of his panting breaths.

I hover my bloody finger over the wound again. “Who hired you?”

He sobs quietly but doesn’t respond. I sigh and jab my finger into his flesh, and Finn’s sobs turn to wails.

“I can do this all night,” I tell him, twisting my finger. “Believe me when I say neither of us will get any rest until I get some answers.”

“Please!” Finn screams. “Okay! Okay!”

I remove my finger then yank his head by the bun and force him to look at me. His eyes are red with tears. He is dripping bloody snot all down his face. He’s pathetic.

“Andrew Walsh sent us to blow up your mansion,” he sputters. “That’s all I know.”

It’s hardly news, but I needed confirmation. I don’t know who else would have coordinated an attack on us like that and after seeing the contents of their bags, I surmised the plan hinged on using them.

Behind me, Antonio’s phone rings and he answers it in a hushed voice.

“I know you had help from the inside,” I continue. “Tell me how you knew to disable the cameras and the power so quickly.”

Finn swallows. “We just did as Andrew Walsh instructed. I don’t know how he knew about all that.”

I release his bun and his head falls forward. I stand and walk to Antonio, pulling him to the side. He ends his call and shoves his phone in his pocket.

“Six dead in the guardhouse, but none of them Diego,” he reports.

At least that’s a little good news. I let out a sigh and scratch my head.

“This slimeball says he doesn’t know who the traitor was,” I mutter. “And I believe him, unfortunately. What do you think?”

Antonio glances at the shivering wreck tied to the chair. “I believe him, too. I don’t think we’re going to find that traitor until we find Andrew Walsh. He’s too smart to tell any of his thugs where he got the information.”

I grind my teeth and pull my gun from my shoulder holster. “Walsh’s attacks are getting more and more flagrant. We need to find him soon.”

Antonio nods.

I walk back to Finn and put a bullet in his skull, then leave the cellar without another word. My limbs feel heavy. My head still fucking hurts. The fact that there’s a massive hole

where my front door used to be doesn't help my headache, and to top it off, I no longer feel safe in my own home.

I walk past men running this way and that, heading up the stairs and straight past the murky brown bloodstain in the hallway where I shot Finn. There are still four guards outside of Alexis' room and the nursery. I'm not taking any chances.

I enter Alexis's bedroom and find her pacing at the foot of her bed, Harry tucked under her chin. When I enter, she whips around with wide blue eyes. Her hair is a mess. She is visibly shaking.

"Gabriel, what the fuck is going on?" Alexis hisses. "I heard gunshots, an explosion, people yelling ... Then it stopped, but nobody would tell me anything. They just said the threat had passed."

I'm relieved that she and Harry are safe, and the knowledge that I could have lost them tonight makes me want to cross the room and pull her into my arms. Then the last words she sneered at me slice through my brain.

Do you feel like a big man when you threaten me?

Anger grips me like a vise. She has no idea what I went through today to keep her safe, what I sacrificed, and she doesn't care.

"Gabriel?" Alexis' voice comes softer this time. "Is everything going to be okay?"

I don't have an answer for her. The desire to comfort her bubbles back up inside of me.

But I turn away, leaving her room without having spoken a single word.

ALEXIS

I barely sleep, and when I do, my dreams are dark and violent. I dream of men storming into my room and tearing a crying Harry from my arms. I scream but nobody can hear me, nobody is coming to save me. This repeats over and over again. Sometimes the man who takes Harry looks back before he leaves, and he's wearing Gabriel's face.

I wake just as dawn's early fingers stretch toward the opposite wall. It has been seven days since I told Diego that I would accept his help to escape, and yesterday's attack has only solidified my resolve.

I have never been as terrified as I was hunkered down in that bathroom. Harry cried the whole time, and the two guards locked in with us kept telling me to get him to shut up.

Each time I calmed him down a little, the gunfire would start again, or the house would shake with the force of an explosion, and he'd start right back up.

All I wanted to do was cover my ears and scream, but I had to try to stay calm, to think of how I would get Harry out of here alive if someone were to break down that door and kill the guards.

It was horrifying. And I won't do it again, not ever.

Almost worse than that was when Gabriel finally came to check on us later that night. He was covered in blood and dust and just stared, ignoring my questions. His face was like a blank sheet. Despite how furious I was with him, I was

desperate for him to hold me and rub my back and tell me everything was going to be okay.

Instead, he walked away, like he didn't care.

I fling back the covers and walk over to the nursery, grabbing a diaper bag from the closet and starting to stuff it with anything we might need. I don't know what Diego's plan is or if I will even need any of this, but better safe than sorry.

Harry stirs in his crib. I take him out, changing him and feeding him the container of applesauce I set aside yesterday. Diego didn't say what time he would come but warned that I needed to be ready whenever he did.

After Harry eats, I get changed and throw a few of my own things into the diaper bag. I try not to get sentimental about everything I'm leaving behind. I can buy new things when I start my new life—far, far away from here.

And then I wait.

The minutes tick by. I play with Harry, and over time the house begins to fill with noise. I press my ear against the door and listen. There is banging, people calling to each other, something that sounds like a drill. I suppose there must have been a lot of damage yesterday.

Oh no. What if Diego decides to call off the plan because there are too many people around? Or worse, what if the plan goes ahead but someone sees us and reports us to Gabriel?

I am tempted to call Diego and tell him I've changed my mind. The stakes are too high. If I get caught, I lose Harry forever. Even if I don't get caught, Gabriel will come after me. He will never stop coming after me.

Just as I start to dig the phone from my pocket, I think about my father. What would he tell me to do?

He would tell me to get the hell out of Dodge and to make Gabriel pay for ever trying to keep me here. Our relationship is already ruined, so why not write the article I was thinking about? It would bring some closure to my father's murder and provide much-needed justice against the man who has been covering his father's tracks ever since.

Before I can shove the phone back in my pocket, it starts to ring, startling me. I answer it with shaky hands.

“Hello?”

“You need to go now,” Diego says. “The guards have left, but it won’t be long before someone notices they’re gone. I’m in a black car at the back of the estate, parked on a service road just through the rose garden.”

“There are a lot of people in the house,” I say nervously. “I think they’re fixing the damage from yesterday.”

“The contractors don’t know you and they certainly don’t know that you’re a prisoner. Nobody will notice you, I promise, but you need to leave now.”

I take a bracing breath. “Okay.”

Hanging up, I get to my feet and sling the bag over my shoulder.

Here goes nothing.

I collect Harry in my arms and tiptoe out of the room, looking up and down the hall for security but finding none. I wonder how Diego got them to abandon their posts. He must have a lot of sway around here, which makes me even more curious why he is helping me. Surely, once Gabriel finds out I’m gone, he will look into it and discover Diego’s betrayal?

I creep down the hallway and pause at the top of the stairs. The foyer is a hive of activity. Two men are hammering wooden framing into a hole that yawns like a gaping wound at the front of the house, while another man and a woman are sanding a new door near the bottom of the stairs.

The damage is shocking. I heard the noises and felt the vibrations, but I had no idea the extent of the attack. No wonder Gabriel looked so pissed last night.

I take a deep breath and stride down the stairs with confidence, just like I did when I tried to sneak into Gabriel’s office, except this time I’m sneaking out. So much has changed since then.

A couple of the contractors eye me warily as I walk through the foyer, and one of them flicks the saw off, but I think their unease has more to do with the fact that I'm carrying a baby through a construction zone than anything else. I smile and nod at them, making my steps as brisk as possible, and soon I'm through to the back hall.

Only a little further and I'll be at the back door. I just have to pass the kitchen and living room.

I creep along the empty hallway, passing the blessedly empty living room first. I keep my ears pricked, expecting to hear Gabriel's heavy footsteps gaining on me at any second.

If he catches me, I'm done for. The diaper bag was a bad idea—at least if I hadn't packed anything, I could say that I was just going for some fresh air. I consider ditching it behind a plant or shelf but I don't have the time.

I continue slowly, keeping my footsteps as quiet as possible. When I pass the kitchen, I look inside to make sure it's clear and my eyes land on Victoria at the island, mixing something in a bowl. She stares right back, and her gaze moves from my face, to Harry, to the bag slung over my shoulder.

My chest tightens with panic, and I wonder if I should make a run for it and hope to reach Diego's car before someone catches up with me. I could try pleading with her. She's a mother. Maybe she'll understand.

Victoria looks back down at the mixing bowl and starts to whistle.

Cool relief washes down my spine and I whisper a thank you even though she can't hear it, then continue past. The back doors come into view and I prepare myself for the hardest part—crossing the open lawn.

I plunge forward, leaving the house and walking across the patio, trying to ignore the rusty brown stain just outside the door. I look around and can't see any security, but that just makes me wonder if Gabriel has seen me on the cameras and

is coming to get me himself. Any second, I will hear him roar at me to stop and then it will all be over.

I cross over the lawn, gritting my teeth as adrenaline sears through my veins. I cross under a wrought iron archway and into the cover of the rose garden, which blooms in decadent reds, yellows, and pinks. A gardener trims one of the bushes where the path splits to my right but she doesn't even look up as I pass.

Harry giggles and reaches out for the roses as we pass by. "Flower!"

I am too busy focusing on the path ahead to notice him snatch one of the stems, and by the time I do it's too late—he releases the stem, crying. He has cut himself on a thorn.

"Harry, shh," I murmur, bouncing him. "It's just a little booboo."

I look back and the gardener's head has popped above the bush, and she is watching me curiously.

"Is he okay?" she asks.

"Fine!" I answer, waving. "Thank you!"

Harry continues wailing the rest of the way to Diego's car, and I'm sure it is the loudest sound in the history of the universe. When I see the black sedan on the side of the service road, I start to jog, desperate to make it those last few feet. My fingers close on the handle. I made it!

I open the back door and peer into the car, half expecting to see Gabriel sitting there with a furious scowl, but the back seat is empty. Diego is sitting behind the wheel and he cranes his neck to look back at me.

"What's his problem?" he asks, frowning.

I slide into the car and close the door. "He cut his hand on a rose," I say, looking around for a car seat. There isn't one. What is it with gangsters and not knowing the first thing about looking after babies?

I guess beggars can't be choosers.

“Can you get him to stop?” Diego asks as I strap in. He looks oddly formal today in a crisp white shirt and black tie. It makes him seem at least 50 percent less friendly, and the sour expression on his face doesn’t help.

Diego starts to drive off and I shoot him an irritated look in the rear-view mirror. “Give me a minute.”

I am so distracted by comforting Harry that I hardly notice the familiar scenery of Gabriel’s property slipping away. By the time Harry has stopped crying, we have left the mansion and all of its frights and delights behind.

I can’t believe I did it. I got out.

I look back, as though I’ll be able to steal one last look at Gabriel, but there is only road. Tears gather in my eyes and I don’t understand why.

This is good, right? Gabriel is a killer. A criminal. Both Harry and I are better off leaving him in the rear-view forever. I am absolutely making the right choice for both of us.

Then why does it feel like I left a chunk of my heart in that mansion?

GABRIEL

I survey the scene—the burnt timbers, melted plastic, and hanging wires—and try to keep from flying into a rage in front of Vito and Dom. While I was busy defending my home last night, Walsh had a second agenda. He burned down one of our inner-city storehouses, destroying all of the product inside. The men assigned to guard it last night were called into action at the house, leaving it completely undefended.

Despite my fury at having been outmaneuvered, I'm just relieved that Alexis and Harry are okay. That knowledge calms me a little.

“There must be tens of thousands of dollars of damage here,” Vito comments, looking up at the gaping hole in the roof. “At least they didn't choose to attack the docks.”

Dom kicks the remains of a nearby crate and it tumbles in on itself, sending a plume of ash into the air. He looks back to the entrance, where a few of his men are standing guard, and speaks in a low voice so as not to be overheard. “Gabriel, we can't afford to fight this war much longer.”

“I know,” I mutter.

“We've been giving as good as we've gotten,” Vito points out.

“True, but Walsh has more territory and more men.” Dom kicks another crate. “The further he pushes us back, the harder it will be for us to push forward.”

I scrub a hand through my hair, breathing in the acrid smell of smoke still lingering in the air. “We need to end this.”

“How?” Dom asks.

How indeed?

The first thing I need to do, I realize, is stop thinking about Alexis. How much time have I wasted over the past week worrying about her and agonizing over the pain of her betrayal? I can barely sleep at night.

That all needs to end. I will lock her down completely and push thoughts of her out of my mind. This war has reached its peak and until I end it once and for all I need to be ice-cold and focused. Alexis is a distraction at this point and nothing more.

“The rat,” I say finally. “I think it’s time we find it and crush it underfoot.”

“We’ve tried,” Vito replies.

“We’ve tried interrogating,” Dom corrects. “Brutal force isn’t working. We could take a more covert approach. If the rat doesn’t know we’re watching them, they could lead us straight to Walsh.”

I crook a brow. “Your suggestion is for us to spy on my men?”

“Not spy,” he says. “Investigate. Unless the traitor is being very careful about covering their tracks, we should be able to find something suspicious, even if it’s just an unusually large purchase.”

I don’t like it. Loyalty is everything in my world and it goes both ways—I expect loyalty from my men and in return, I don’t question that loyalty. My relationship with them is one of mutual respect, and digging through their lives to find if they are a rat spits in the face of that.

“He could be right,” Vito says, noting my frown. “I know it’s an uncomfortable prospect, but look around.” He gestures to the remnants of the storehouse. “There are only two ways Walsh could have known we would pull the guards from this

storehouse last night. Either he had eyes on all of our properties—unlikely—or someone gave him a heads-up. Even if the rat doesn't lead us to Walsh, cutting off his source of intel will at least give us more of a fight in this war."

I sigh. "Okay. Let's do it."

I turn and leave the wreckage, both men following behind me. I don't even know where to begin, but I know that I must be ruthless in my hunt for the truth. I wonder what I will do if it turns out that Alexis is the rat. Is that possible? I don't want to think so, but this all started around the time I found out that Harry was my son. She might not even be doing it knowingly.

I choose not to contemplate that possibility. Not yet.

My hand is reaching for my car door when my phone rings. I check the screen and my heart drops. It's the guardhouse.

"Yes?" I answer, gesturing for Vito and Dom to stop and wait for my command.

"Sir, it's Damien."

Not him again. I very much doubt this will be good news.

"And?"

Damien clears his throat and continues. "There's been a bit of a situation," he says. "Alexis is gone."

I freeze. My face flashes cold. "What do you mean she's gone? That's not possible."

"She had help," he says. "Security footage shows her getting into a car. It looks like Diego is driving it. About ten minutes before that, both of the guards outside her room became violently ill and reported that Diego offered to relieve them of duty while they, uh, took care of it."

"Diego?" I ask incredulously. "It can't be. Send the footage to me."

I hang up and turn to Vito and Dom, who are watching me expectantly. I lead them back into the storehouse, still digesting the implication of what Damien has just told me.

“That was Damien,” I tell them. “He says Diego just helped Alexis escape.”

“Impossible,” Dom replies.

Vito shakes his head. “Entirely possible.” His eyes light up. “And I think we’ve found our rat. Gabriel, do you remember how quick Diego was to execute Matteo? I thought that was strange at the time, especially since Diego almost never loses his cool, but it would make sense if he was protecting himself.”

My phone vibrates with a new email and I open it, clicking play on the security footage Damien has just forwarded me. Vito and Dom crowd around and we watch the video together. The footage is of the service road that cuts behind the rose garden. There is a black car parked on it, and when I zoom it, the driver does look an awful lot like Diego. But it’s hard to see from the camera’s positioning.

Alexis jogs into view with Harry in her arms and a bag over her shoulder. She jumps into the car and it pulls away, bringing it closer to the camera. I pause, squinting at the screen.

“It’s Diego,” I say.

Vito and Dom mutter their agreement. An icy dart sticks between my ribs as the pieces come together in my head. Diego is always floating around, and nobody ever questions him because he is highly respected. I kept him in my confidence, so he often knew sensitive information. He was always in the guardhouse, which would have made it easy for him to help let in the men who tried to kidnap Harry, and to pass on intel to the intruders from last night. He probably still had a key to my office from when it was my father’s, and could easily have found the photo album under my desk.

When I locked Alexis away, Diego was quick to suggest that he should bring up her meals. He made what I thought was a good point at the time—that he was a friendlier face than the rest of the guards, and his presence might put her at ease.

In reality, he was plotting ways to break her out for his own purposes.

But why? Why would Diego do all of this?

There is only one logical answer and even thinking it makes me feel sick. Diego—my friend, my mentor—is working for the Irish.

“Are you okay?” Vito asks.

I shove my phone back in my pocket and storm back to the cars. “We need to go now. Alexis and Harry are in danger.”

Diego’s betrayal stabs me with every step. I trusted him, looked to him for guidance, and this whole time he has been laughing at me. Playing me for a fool.

Suddenly, it’s not so easy to keep my emotions at bay. My family is in danger, and I grieve the loss of a man who I once thought of as a brother. It would be better if Diego was dead.

By the time I am through with him, he will wish that he was.

ALEXIS

Once Harry has settled, and it hits me that I have escaped Gabriel's grip, I realize that I have no idea what comes next. Diego hasn't mentioned a destination and I wonder if he's waiting for me to name one.

"Can you take me to my friend Clara's place?" I ask him. "She lives in Queens."

He looks back at me. "Sure."

I settle back in the seat, pulling Harry close and letting my eyes fall closed. It's all going to be okay. I'm out. I'm safe. Clara will help me get some money together and disappear, and then I can put all of this behind me.

My heart stings at the thought of never seeing Gabriel again, but this is the only way. I will never be free when I am with him. Part of me wonders if maybe that would be so bad, because even in that scenario I would still have him, but I need to respect myself more than that.

The car rocks gently, soothingly, bumping over little dips in the road. My sleepless night soon catches up with me and my eyelids turn into bags of sand, pulling heavily toward the earth. Diego will wake me when we get to Queens, I figure. And I'll need all the energy I can get once I'm there.

I slip into unconsciousness, batting away errant speculations on whether Gabriel has noticed me missing yet, and supposing he has, whether even the slightest crack has split the surface of his cold, stony heart.



I wake slowly, eyelids fluttering open. It feels like I've been asleep forever, but it can't have been very long because we're still driving. I peer out the window to determine our bearings and am surprised to see towering pine trees on either side of the road. We're nowhere near the city.

"Diego?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything.

"Where are we? I thought you were taking me to Clara's."

"It's going to be fine," he says, eyes flicking to mine in the rear-view mirror. "Just a small detour."

Small? There's nothing small about this detour. We're in the middle of nowhere.

Panic lances through me but I try to breathe through it. If I freak out, Harry will freak out. I need to think. Why would Diego be taking me out here? Is this some elaborate ploy of Gabriel's to punish me for trying to escape? Are we going to pull down some deserted street just to find Gabriel standing there, waiting for me? No, it can't be. Gabriel is not the theatrical type.

Then what is this? What is Diego's endgame?

I remember the burner phone in my back pocket. I could call for help—but who would I call? I don't want to involve the police unless it's a last resort because that goes against my plan to quietly disappear. I certainly can't call Gabriel. I don't know Clara's number off by heart, so I can't call her either.

I rack my brain in desperation but realize that 911 is my only option. Whatever Diego's plan is, it can't be good, and calling the police is going to land me in a lot of trouble and a big mess, but I can't risk anything happening to Harry.

I shift my weight to the side and try to pull the phone out as discreetly as possible, keeping a cautious eye on Diego in the rear-view mirror. This is a difficult task with Harry on my

lap, and I struggle for what feels like forever until I finally dislodge the thing.

I flip the phone open in my lap and look down at the screen, dialing in the number. I hear Diego shift in the front seat and when I glance up, I am staring down the barrel of a gun. I let out a squeak of fear, tightening my grip of Harry.

Diego looks back at me. “Toss the phone up here or I’ll put a bullet in your baby.”

Bile rises up my throat. My hands shake as I awkwardly throw the phone into the seat in front of me, blinking back tears. Diego turns back around and sets the gun in his lap without another word.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask hoarsely.

“You’ll see.”

Oh God. What have I done? I’ve jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. I rack my brain for ways to get out of this, but short of ducking and rolling out of the car, there’s nothing I can do, and I certainly can’t do perform that maneuver holding a baby.

I’m fucked.



We drive for about another half an hour before Diego pulls into some sort of industrial park. He crawls between rusty, abandoned-looking warehouses, and my stomach reels as I realize this would be the perfect place to kill us. I don’t see a single car until we approach a warehouse at the end of the lane with several black SUVs parked out front. Diego parks between them and points the gun at me again.

“Get out.”

I do, hoping that if I cooperate, he won’t hurt Harry. My legs quiver beneath me and I swallow down a panicked sob. I need to be strong, to keep a calm head, if I want any chance of

getting out of here alive. I don't know what Diego's plan is, but I know that I'm in grave danger.

Diego grabs my arm and drags me toward the front of the warehouse. The metal door groans and slides open, and out walks the man I recognize as Andrew Walsh, flanked by an assortment of goons.

Shit, shit, shit.

I didn't even consider this as a possibility. Diego is a traitor. I should have known something wasn't right, that Diego wasn't breaking me out of the mansion out of the good of his heart.

I was so desperate to get out, especially after Diego implied that he was worried about Gabriel hurting me, that I didn't even think about Gabriel's war and how much the other side might want to get their hands on Harry and me.

"Finally," Andrew says with a cancerous smile. "My prize is here."

He looks exactly as I remember him. Deep wrinkles line his tanned face, and his gray hair is buzzed cleanly at the sides but tossed carelessly back from his forehead. He is wearing a cobalt-blue suit and stands out amongst his thugs, who are dressed in all black. Just looking at him still fills my gut with revulsion, now more than ever.

If Diego passes me over to these men, Harry and I are as good as dead. I take quick stock of my surroundings and note that in a few paces I can be behind their SUVs, and from there, I might be able to get into one of the warehouses to hide.

I don't have time to think about whether this is a good idea or not—I have to act. I muster all my strength and shove Diego against the side of his car. He loses his balance and falls into it, and I use this leverage to rip my arm from his grip.

And then I run.

"Oh, no," I hear Andrew call sarcastically. "She has escaped."

I sprint behind the SUVs and then back the way we drove in. Harry squirms in my arms and I realize with horror that if he starts to cry, Walsh's men won't have any trouble finding me.

"Please don't cry," I whisper, scampering around a corner. "Shhh. Everything's okay."

Harry gurgles but stays blessedly silent. Just as I am thanking my stars for this development, I turn another corner and find two men in my path. I skid to a stop and turn around, only to find the exit blocked by another two men.

I'm trapped.

I catch my breath, sending panicked glances in every direction, but I can't see a way out.

A second later, Andrew strides around the corner, laughing. "That was fun," he says in his rumbling Irish accent. "We must do it again sometime."

His men advance, and I make one last-ditch attempt to dart out of their clutches but it's no good. One of the men grabs me by the hair and drags me back. Agony splits through my skull and I cry out, tears clouding my vision.

"Let go!" I scream.

Harry starts to cry, and the man holding my hair ignores both of us as he tugs me back to Walsh's warehouse. The closer we get, the more dread fills my stomach like lead weights.

"Help me!" I shriek. "Someone please help me!"

Neither Walsh nor his guards tell me to shut up, and I realize that there is nobody around to hear me. I'm completely, hopelessly trapped.

The man holding my hair lets go once we're inside the warehouse. I barely have a second to look around before two other men grab me by the shoulders and drag me past rows of crates toward the back of the space, where one of them opens a door to a dingy, bare room. The only furniture is a metal chair

in the center of the room. A naked light bulb hangs directly above it.

The men shove me into the chair, and one of them stands behind it and grabs my arms while the other pulls at Harry.

“No!” I bellow. “Don’t take him!”

“Let go, you dumb bitch,” the one in front hisses.

The man behind me wrenches painfully on my arms, trying to pull them behind my back. I struggle desperately, even as it feels like the tendons in my shoulders are going to pop and snap. It’s no use. There are two of them and only one pathetic me.

I watch in horror as the man in front pulls Harry away.

“No!” I scream, still struggling. “Please, no!”

I am not ashamed of how much I beg and plead as the man takes Harry away. I will do anything if only they will let me keep him. Anything.

My screams echo back at me, filling the room with noise and torment. Harry’s confused wails underscore all of this.

“Stop moving!” shouts the man behind me, who is tying my arms to the chair.

I keep struggling and he smacks me hard across the side of my head. My ear rings and my vision scatters like sparks. He ties each of my feet to the chair legs, delivering further blows when I refuse to sit still, and then he leaves, too, slamming the door and leaving me alone in the room.

I keep wriggling against the rope, which rubs against the bare skin of my wrists, but it’s too strong. I try to rock the chair, but it’s bolted to the floor. I am hit with the sickening realization that this room was built for a particular purpose, and I am not the first person to languish within these four walls.

I slump down, hanging my head, as my desperate cries turn to gurgling sobs.

Harry is gone.

The day he was born, when I first held him in my arms, he looked so impossibly small and fragile that my first emotion was a potent mix of love and panic. How was this little wrinkled sock puppet ever supposed to make it in the world? He needed me to protect him. I made a vow right then to always keep him safe.

I have failed.

Sickness blooms in my stomach like a horrible, misshapen fungus as I think about what they are going to do with him.

This is all my fault. I fell for a criminal, let myself believe that I was safe in his arms.

My heart beats a panicked SOS against my rib cage, but there is nobody coming for me.

Stupid, foolish girl.

ALEXIS

The door screeches open and slams closed, jolting me out of the thin veil of unconsciousness I had begun to slip under. I pry my eyelids open one at a time. They are heavy from exhaustion, and sticky with dried tears.

I don't know how long I have been here. The minutes feel like hours and the hours feel like days. Twice now, the guards have brought me water and bread and released me long enough to relieve myself in a bucket in the corner of the room, a humiliating display made more humiliating by the fact that it feels like a luxury. The bread is never enough to satisfy my hunger, the water far too little to sate my thirst. I think they do it once a day, but I don't know. I don't even think it's enough to keep me alive.

There is no window in the room and the light bulb above casts an eternal pale glow over the bare concrete floor and bone-white walls. They do not turn it off to allow me to sleep.

My whole body aches, and hunger gnaws at my stomach. At this point if they removed my ropes, I don't think I would have the strength to run away. I have never felt so hopeless and trapped.

Andrew Walsh's smug face swims into view. I blink at him and try to sit up straight.

"I'm sorry that I didn't come to visit earlier," he drawls, standing over me with folded arms. "I wanted to give you time to get comfortable."

I pry apart my dry lips. “Is there a comment card I can fill out?” I croak. “I’d like to rate your hospitality five stars.”

His thin mouth pulls into a toxic sneer. “Oh, Alexis. What fun you and I can have together.”

“Where’s Harry?” I ask. “Is he okay?”

Walsh squats in front of me, humming. “I’d be more worried about yourself, whore. Your little rug rat is a golden bargaining chip. You on the other hand?” He shrugs dismissively. “You’re dispensable.”

“Please let me see him.”

He shakes his head, wicked serpentine eyes gleaming with malice. “Not yet. I think you and I should have a chat first.”

“I don’t know anything,” I say.

He reels back, slapping me hard across the face. My head flings to the side, cheek stinging. Oddly, it is the most alive I’ve felt since they first dragged me in here, and the electric pain invigorates me.

“Stupid girl,” he snarls close to my ear. “What do you think I could possibly have to learn from you when I already have a man on the inside? You’re just the dumb bitch who delivered my bait to me.”

I swallow, which is made difficult by the Sahara dryness of my throat. Walsh stands up and begins to pace the room in front of me.

“I actually have a few things I’d like to share with you,” he says, his voice losing its angry edge. “It is so satisfying to watch a plan come together, isn’t it? Even more satisfying when you finally get to reveal that plan.”

“I was dumb enough to let you kidnap me,” I bite out. “Whoop dee doo. I wouldn’t gloat about it like you’ve pulled off some *Ocean’s Eleven*-style heist.”

Walsh stops and spins on his heel, grin widening. His words drip from his mouth like molasses, sickly sweet.

“Much like your little boyfriend, you vastly underestimate me.” His lips curl back. “You’re looking at the man responsible for ruining your life.”

I frown in confusion.

Walsh continues. “I have a lot of influence in the city, including a stranglehold on one prickly news editor. It didn’t take much for Diego to persuade Gabriel to donate to the *New York Union*, and from there, I had the perfect opportunity to send Debbie digging after him. All I expected was to expose a little dirt about him, unsteady him in the public eye to damage his legitimate business—which would have had a knock-on effect to his less legitimate business.” His eyes twinkle. “I told Debbie to send someone alluring after him, someone who might be able to get under his skin. I didn’t realize that she’d had a gem like you in her palm the entire time. The only child of Harry Wright.”

“You knew my father?” I ask, unable to mask the desperation in my tone.

He cocks his head. “I knew his sort, clinging to the underbelly of Fabrizio Belluci to feast on whatever scraps fell from his overstuffed jowls. More importantly, Gabriel knew him. That made you the perfect candidate for the assignment. And then, when Diego told me about the child ...” Walsh shakes his head, laughing. “I couldn’t believe my luck. After learning that, there was no way I could fail. Either my initial plan would succeed or I would gain invaluable leverage against Gabriel. Or both.”

He leans over me, so close that I can smell the minty sweetness of his breath. I press back into the chair.

“And then you fell in love with him. Stupid, careless girl.” He grabs my chin, squeezing my jaw painfully. “When Diego told me about your little relationship, we laughed and laughed and laughed. I hope you don’t really think he gives two shits about you. All Gabriel Belluci cares about is money and power.”

“Why don’t you leave that up to me to worry about?” I mutter angrily.

“Do you think your prince is going to save you?” Andrew taunts.

He lifts my chin up and down in a nodding motion. I grit my teeth, glaring at him with all the strength I can muster.

“Wrong.” He releases my chin, laughing to himself. “You’re going to die here.”

“Just let me see my baby!” I snap in irritation. “If I’m so worthless, what does it matter to you? Why bother keeping him from me in the first place?”

Walsh takes a breath, smoothing his hair back. “Because it’s fun,” he says simply. “Because, now that I have Gabriel’s toy in my grasp, like any schoolyard bully, I want to break it.”

I sink into my restraints. I am so fucking tired.

“If you have any humanity, you would bring my son to me,” I say. “I know even criminals like you understand honor, and I can’t imagine anything more dishonorable than keeping a mother from her baby for the sake of fun.”

I spit out the last word like it’s a curse, like it burns my lips as it passes between them.

Andrew looks at me strangely, and for a second, I think I might have gotten to him. Then he laughs and walks away, leaving me alone to fester in my misery.

I struggle to process everything he has told me—Debbie working for the Irish mob, being set up to interview Gabriel, how apparently every lowlife in the country knew my father. So many questions and feelings bubble up inside of me that I don’t know where to begin.

Is Debbie okay? Have they hurt her? Over the past few weeks, I haven’t been able to reach her on the phone, and the few emails I’ve gotten have been suspiciously short.

Could Walsh have killed my father? I don’t know why Gabriel would have kept that from me when the alternative was letting me believe that his own father was accountable for the crime, but Andrew’s description of my father leads me to question an alternate history of events.

Maybe my father didn't try to expose Fabrizio. I hate to think this, but maybe he was close with the Italian mob, as Walsh said, and because of that, he was taken out by the Irish.

My thoughts also spin around what Andrew said about Gabriel and his lack of feelings toward me. Was that true? If you'd asked me a couple of weeks ago, I would say it was a bald-faced lie. I would say that we had an inscrutable bond, and even if it wasn't love for him, it still meant something.

Now, after being locked up in my room for a week and all but forgotten about, I'm not so sure. Maybe Gabriel doesn't care. Maybe his affection for me only extended to the point of me becoming a burden to him.

In the end, it doesn't matter if Walsh is right about Gabriel's feelings for me. It doesn't matter if he's right about Gabriel not coming to save me. Gabriel will come for Harry, and the thought of Harry's rescue is the only brightness left in my world.

Thinking of Harry brings tears to my eyes. I'm surprised, because I didn't think I would have enough moisture left in me to cry. I feel like dust inside.

Where have they taken him? Are they hurting him? I hope that even vile creatures like Andrew Walsh would not stoop so low as to harm a toddler. I exhaust myself under the heavy weight of my worry, chasing my thoughts in circles.



It feels like hours later when the door next squeals open. I look up, throat constricting as Andrew Walsh waltzes into the room with Harry in his arms.

Harry is crying, fists swinging back and forth. I pull against the ropes, trying to get a better look at him, to make sure he hasn't been hurt, but Andrew dips and weaves around the room too fast for me to keep up.

"Shhh," I murmur, trying to keep the waver out of my voice. "Harry, it's okay. Everything's going to be okay."

“Everything’s not going to be okay, little Belluci,” Andrew says mockingly. “Everything is going to be utter shite, and there’s nothing you or your whore mother can do about it.”

“Please be gentle with him,” I beg. “He’s only a baby. He’s innocent.”

Andrew stops and dangles Harry in front of me. I take the opportunity to do a quick inventory. No cuts, no bruises, that’s good. He’s wearing the same clothes I brought him in and he’s a little dirty, but he doesn’t look harmed otherwise. God, I hope they’re feeding him more than they’re feeding me.

“Say goodbye to Mama,” Andrew says.

Harry sniffs, looking at me with red-rimmed, hazel-brown eyes. Gabriel’s eyes.

“I love you,” I whisper, horrified by the realization that these might be the last words I ever get to say to him. “I love you so much.”

“What a touching scene.” Andrew spits on the ground by my feet, and in an instant, he and Harry have disappeared back behind the door.

“No!” I scream, jerking violently in my seat.

The chair doesn’t budge and I know it won’t do any good but I keep struggling, keep screaming my head off. It is the only thing I can do now—the last bit of power I have. I cry and I scream until my voice is hoarse, but nobody comes.

I should have never left the mansion. I feared the darkness lurking inside Gabriel, but little did I know that there were much more twisted creatures roaming the night. Besides, I would be lying if I said his darkness didn’t intrigue me. Didn’t call to me.

I miss him. Despite everything he has done, he made me feel safe. When I was with him I felt untouchable, and part of me blames myself for screwing all that up, even if my snooping was justified.

Oh, to go back to those trivial problems now.

GABRIEL

I stare at the photos scattered across my desk. It feels like a leaden weight is crushing my ribs.

Alexis and Harry disappeared without a trace three days ago. I have picked through every inch of the city looking for them, consulting every contact I've ever had, even sending men on dangerous reconnaissance missions into Irish territory.

Nothing.

And then this morning, Vito turned up at my door with a grim look on his face and a manila envelope filled with photos. Walsh sent a messenger but no message—just images. Horrible, gut-wrenching images.

Alexis's are grainy, and all taken from the same height and angle. A security camera. She is tied to a chair in the center of an otherwise empty room, her arms cruelly twisted behind her. In some of the photos she's screaming. In others, she sags against the ropes, head lolling forward, as though sapped of her will to live. All of the pictures are time-stamped.

Walsh is presenting a narrative—the captured princess, bound and held with no remorse or reprieve. She has been in the same position for three days.

Harry's photos are clear and disturbingly domestic. In some of the photos he wears a green leprechaun hat. In others, he is cradled by a faceless man and sucks on a pacifier in the shape of a gun, while a real gun is in view on the man's hip.

Harry is crying in all of them. He doesn't look hurt, at least. Not from what I can see. But it is what these photos don't show that bothers me most.

I check the backs of all of the photos and recheck the envelope they came in, just in case I have missed something.

"You're sure the messenger didn't say anything?" I ask Vito for the third time.

He is standing on the other side of my desk, his hands clasped behind his back. Disgust weaves through his features, and I know when he looks at the photos, his mind goes to little Nuri and his wife.

"I'm sure. He just gave them to me and said to make sure you got them," Vito answers.

I slump into my chair and sigh angrily. Exhaustion has made my bones heavy. I have barely slept for the past three days, instead spending almost every single hour of every day coordinating the search for my family. When I close my eyes, I can see them, crying out for me.

"Part of me hoped that she had defected to Walsh knowingly," I admit, scraping my fingers through my hair. "At least if she'd gone with the intention of spilling all my secrets and destroying me, she wouldn't be in pain."

"She won't be in pain for much longer," Vito reassures. "We are going to find them."

His words don't help. I sweep the photos off my desk, unable to stomach the sight of them anymore.

"He has killed dozens of my men, some of them brutally, but this is undoubtedly the worst thing he has ever done," I say quietly. "I don't even feel guilty for saying that."

"Of course you don't." Vito sits, watching me a controlled expression. "There isn't anything in the world I wouldn't destroy to save Nuri and Corie if they were in danger. That's what it means to have a family."

His words resonate with me. *Destroy*. That's what I'm going to do to Walsh. I am going to obliterate him from

existence, and I will shred every person who gets in my path. Including Diego, if it comes to it.

“Family is a funny thing,” I rasp. “I thought Diego and I were as close as family once.”

“Diego fooled all of us.” Vito picks up a pen from my desk and begins to fiddle with it. Bags the color of cement hang from his eyes—he has not gotten much sleep lately, either. “The only thing I can’t figure out is if he did this out of loyalty to your father or if he fooled your father, too.”

“I don’t know which would be worse.”

My eyes slip down the scattered photos of Alexis and Harry on the floor. Oily fear glides through my insides and I want to vomit. I squeeze my eyes shut, gritting my teeth.

“I shouldn’t have been so harsh with her,” I say.

When I open my eyes, Vito is looking at me with something like surprise on his features. To be honest, I’m surprised, too. I was so angry with Alexis, so adamant that the punishment I administered was lenient compared to what she deserved.

“You did what you thought was just,” Vito says, though I get the feeling he doesn’t disagree with my statement.

“And pushed her straight into Andrew Walsh’s greedy little fingers.” I lick my lips, sinking back into my chair. “I’m still angry with her, angrier still knowing that she intended to take Harry away from me, but can I say I would have done any different in her position? If someone backs me into a corner, I strike. If someone lies to me, I uncover the truth.”

Vito rubs the back of his hand over his tired eyes. “I think that’s a balanced way of looking at it.”

“I need to get my family back, Vito.” I let my shoulders slump, indulging in a long, weary sigh.

The only other person I could be this vulnerable with is tied to a chair in an empty room somewhere, and it kills me that I am no closer to finding her than I was three days ago.

My phone rings and I whip it out of my pocket, checking the screen. It's the guardhouse.

"Hello?"

"Sir, this is Damien. There is a man at the gates claiming to be a messenger from Andrew Walsh."

My heart stumbles over a beat and I sit up straight. "Bring him to my office immediately."

I hang up, relaying the news to Vito. "I need you to call Dom and Antonio," I add. "I want to meet with the three of you after I speak to this messenger."

Vito nods and leaves the room, and I hastily gather up the photos from the floor and slide them back in the folder. I check the bullets in my gun and stuff it back in its holster.

Each second ticks past agonizingly slowly, but finally, there is a knock at my door and Damien and two other guards lead in a smug-looking, beanpole of a man with beady black eyes. He walks in lazily, as though he has all the time in the world, eyes trailing over seemingly everything in the room except me.

"Leave us," I tell Damien and the others.

Damien opens his mouth to protest, but I level a heavy glare at him until he backs out of the room.

"Deliver your message," I tell the wiry stranger.

He doesn't answer, but reaches into his jacket pocket. My hand goes to my gun and he pauses, peeling back the fabric to show me that he was only reaching for a piece of paper from the inside pocket. I nod and he retracts the paper, handing it to me.

I unfold the paper, taking in the messy scrawl.

I hope you liked my photos, it begins. I thought they were quite artistic. I'm tempted to hang them in my office, or maybe I could sell them to a museum. I would call the photo series "Gabriel's Humiliation."

My hands clench with rage, wrinkling the paper. I force myself to keep reading.

No good kidnapping would be complete without a list of demands. I won't bore you with the details of what I will do if you fail to meet them, but I will be so kind as to send you the photos afterward.

What I want is very simple, Gabriel. Meet with me at the below address, where you will relinquish the last of your docks territory. I will also require an administrative fee of fifty million dollars in cash (a mix of big and small bills, if you wouldn't mind).

Come alone. Otherwise, I'll kill them both before you make it even a step onto the property. You have twenty-four hours before I do it anyway.

Much obliged,

Andrew Walsh



“Walsh has made his demands,” I say, handing Vito the note. “I need to act immediately if I am going to produce that much money in cash.”

Dom and Antonio crowd on either side of him, reading over his shoulder.

“You can't really be considering this,” Antonio says, looking up at me. “It's obviously a trap. There is no way you will make it out alive.”

“And if I don't go, Alexis and Harry will be killed.”

Vito tugs his lip between his teeth. Out of the three of them, he is the only one with a wife and child, and I can tell he is torn between emotion and pragmatism.

“Antonio's right,” Dom chips in.

Antonio slides the paper across my desk, tapping on the address at the bottom. I searched the address while I waited for

Dom and Antonio to arrive, finding that it is for an industrial estate in upstate New York, near the Vermont border. I imagine that Walsh has chosen it for its seclusion and defensibility.

“We’ve been looking for Walsh for weeks and now we have him,” he says. “Let’s storm the base. He wouldn’t have revealed himself if he wasn’t expecting you to cede to his demands. We can catch him off guard and take care of our Irish problem once and for all.”

“They’ll kill Harry and Alexis,” I repeat through gritted teeth.

Antonio’s bald temple wrinkles. “I would be surprised if they aren’t already dead.”

Dom nods along in agreement.

“You’re suggesting I sacrifice my family,” I say in a low tone.

Antonio shakes his head. “*This* is your family, Gabriel. Fifty million is a lot of money. Losing that and the docks will cripple us, even if you do make it out of there alive. Which, to be clear, you won’t.”

I catch Vito’s eye. “What about you, old friend? What do you have to say?”

Vito scratches his beard in obvious discomfort, gaze flicking between us. He gives a solemn shake of his head.

“What Dom and Antonio are saying is true but ...” He sighs. “You know I would do anything for my wife and child, and I would not condemn you for doing the same.”

“That settles it,” I say, rising to my feet. “I’m going.”

“It’s suicide, Gabriel,” Antonio says firmly.

“Leave that to me to worry about,” I tell him. “As for you three, I have other jobs for you.”

GABRIEL

My eyes flick to the GPS on the dashboard, which advises that I will arrive at my destination in five minutes. On the seat beside me sits a black duffel bag, stuffed to the brim with fifty million in cash (big bills only; Andrew Walsh can go fuck himself), the deeds to the docks businesses, and all my hopes and dreams.

I am conscious that every second it takes me to get there is another second that Harry and Alexis are suffering, so I jam my foot on the gas.

The industrial estate appears ahead of me. I turn through the gates, counting no less than half a dozen sentries just at the entrance, and I glimpse a few prowling along the rooftops. I crawl between warehouses and a guard with an M16 rifle waves me forward, directing me to a rusted monstrosity at the very back of the lot.

Several of Walsh's men are waiting for me out front, and they surround the car as I kill the engine. One of them yanks the door open and grabs me by the shoulder, hauling me to my feet. I let him check me for weapons while another of Walsh's men grabs the duffel bag from the passenger seat.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming," comes Andrew Walsh's lilted, honey-sweet voice. The soldiers clear out of his path as he walks toward me, wearing that same simpering smile he always does.

"Where are they?" I demand.

“*Hello, Andrew, how are you?*” he mocks. “Why, thank you for asking! I’m very well, Gabriel. I hope you are too.”

“I figured under the circumstances we could skip the pleasantries.” I level a bone-melting glare at him. “Where are Alexis and Harry?”

The man with the duffel bag brings it to Walsh for his inspection. He paws through the contents and nods, then gestures toward the building. The man disappears inside with the bag.

Walsh finally returns his attention to me. “So impatient.” He rolls his eyes, as if I am the most tedious person in the world. “I suppose you agreed to my terms, however, so it’s only fair I deliver the goods.”

He snaps and the men on either side of me grab my arms. I consider fighting their grip but it’s not worth it. I am completely surrounded, at Andrew Walsh’s mercy, just as he intended. I only hope he also intends to keep his side of the bargain.

We head through the warehouse and to a door at the back that screeches on its hinges as Walsh goes through, my two shadows and I following close behind. I recognize the room immediately as the one from the photos of Alexis, and it’s even more drab in person.

Alexis is still tied to a chair in the center. Her head is tipped forward, hair forming a curtain over her face. She doesn’t look up.

“Alexis,” Walsh coos. “I brought you a visitor.”

She lifts her head slowly, as if it is the heaviest thing in the world, and her weary eyes lock onto mine.

Searing rage slices through me at the sight of her. She looks wretched. Her skin is pale and stone-gray, with purple and green bruises patterning her face and arms like a sickly patchwork. Her lips are cracked, dried blood caked on the skin above them, and her hair hangs in limp strands around her face.

There is no doubt in my mind that I will kill Andrew Walsh for this. First, I need to get Alexis and Harry to safety.

“Where’s Harry?” I ask.

“He’ll join us in a second.” Then, leaning down to Alexis’ face he says, “What do you make of this, Alexis? The Bellucis kill your father and then rescue you. Seems like an odd twist of fate, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t come here to chat,” I snap, drawing his attention back to me.

Walsh stands slowly, cocking his head to the side.

“I know you’re going to execute me,” I say. “You’ve gotten everything you wanted. So let Alexis and Harry go and let’s get on with it.”

Walsh taps a thoughtful finger against his chin. “I could do that, or I could keep all three of you. You’d be a happy little family again.”

“If my men don’t get a call from me in the next twenty minutes to say that Alexis and Harry are safe, they’re going to start waging an all-out war against you. They are waiting at key locations all over the city and will destroy dozens of your businesses and storage facilities before your men even have a chance to retaliate.”

Walsh’s lips twist to the side in thought and then he shrugs. “I suppose I can enact my designs for the Belluci baby another day. I do enjoy a good hunt.”

My gut clenches and I have to restrain myself from attacking. Walsh walks to the door and knocks on it, and one of the men holding my arm releases me from his grip and walks behind Alexis to start removing her bonds.

She slumps forward, nearly falling out of the chair, and my heart twists. I abhor seeing her like this—weak, dim. She flickers like a light bulb with a faulty element, and it looks like any second she will go out completely.

The door screeches open and a man walks in holding Harry. Alexis tries to rush over but stumbles and goes

tumbling down. I wrench out of my guard's grip and dive forward, catching her just before she collides with the cement floor.

"Easy, Tiger," I murmur, drawing her to her feet.

Alexis looks up at me, a mixture of emotions swirling in her crystalline eyes. Do I see accusation? Regret? Relief? More than ever, I wish I could tell what she is thinking.

Walsh claps his hands together. "What a touching scene."

Alexis wobbles out of my grasp and makes her second attempt to cross the room, movements stiff. She walks over to the guard carrying Harry and draws him to her chest, burying her face against his shoulder.

Harry looks at me over Alexis's shoulder. Dirt streaks his face, and his fine hair is a messy bush on top of his head, but he doesn't look hurt at least. His intelligent brown eyes shine with recognition.

"Dada," he says.

My rib cage feels suddenly a size too tight. "My car is parked out front," I tell Alexis. "The keys are in the ignition."

"Let her go," Walsh says, nodding to his men. "Tell the guards at the gate to let her pass."

His words are a balm on my aching soul. Whatever happens next, Alexis and Harry are safe.

Alexis and Harry leave the room, escorted by one of the guards. Now only I and two of Walsh's men remain.

"I believe you have a phone call to make," Walsh comments.

He reaches under his jacket and pulls out his gun, idly checking the bullets in the chamber while I dial Vito's number. When he answers, I tell him that Alexis and Harry are on their way out of the compound, and instruct him to tell my men to stand down. I hang up the phone and one of the guards snatches it out of my hand.

Walsh points his gun at the chair. “Why don’t you take a seat?”

I know as soon as I do, I’ll be bound like Alexis was. Walsh will make my death slow and painful, a dishonorable way to treat a man of my standing, but that will be the point. He wants to dishonor me, to humiliate me.

I’m not going to give him the chance.

Just as the guards move to seize me and drag me to the chair by force, I kick the heel of my shoe and the knife hidden in the sole snaps out. I kick out at the guard on my left and the blade sinks into the side of his leg. He curses and staggers back.

My other assailant leaps toward me just as Walsh raises his gun to shoot, and I grab the guard by the shoulders and spin him in front of me. Walsh fires, the resounding bang splitting my eardrums, and searing pain follows. Walsh’s shot ripped straight through his guard’s heart but missed mine, clipping me through the shoulder instead.

I push past the pain, dropping the man’s body and diving toward Walsh. He pulls the trigger again just as I wrench his arm down, and the agony explodes through my thigh. I grit my teeth and slam my fist into his face, twisting the gun from his grip. Walsh may be devious, conniving, and ruthless, but he’s not strong.

Gunshots crack in the distance. My backup has arrived. I instructed Antonio and Dom to advance when I gave word that Alexis and Harry were free, but the compound is well-defended. If I want to avoid massive losses, I will need to cut off the head of the snake.

Another shot rings in my ears, this time slicing through my other leg. I fall to my knees, dragging Walsh down with me, body throbbing with pain. I look back to see the guard I stabbed advancing, gun drawn. My hold on Walsh’s gun is hidden by the positioning of our bodies and I snap my hand out and shoot the guard before he has a chance to shoot again.

Walsh takes advantage of my momentary distraction by trying to wrestle out of my grip, but I wheel around and pistol whip him across the face. Blood splatters across the ground and he groans.

I press the barrel of the gun to his forehead. “Tell your men to surrender.”

A woozy fog slips between my thoughts and I shake my head to clear it. I am losing a lot of blood.

“Do it!” I roar.

Walsh fumbles in his pocket for his phone, and within moments, he has given the order and the gunfire ceases. I keep my hold on the gun, finger hovering over the trigger. Cold sweat prickles my forehead, and my stomach turns. My eyelids are like leaden weights and I struggle to keep them open. If I pass out now, I will be dead before my men can reach me.

But at least Alexis and Harry will be safe.

Several long seconds tick by, and I feel my mind sliding toward unconsciousness. Walsh watches me with bright eyes. He knows what is about to happen, and he is waiting patiently for the second the gun falls from my hand. I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

Footsteps pound toward the door and it flies open with enough force to batter the wall behind it.

Antonio rushes into the room, gun drawn, but shoves it in the back of his pants when he sees me kneeling over Walsh. “You look like you’ve seen better days,” he comments, hauling me to my feet. He supports my weight so I don’t have to put too much pressure on my legs.

“Is this not the Ritz?” I joke through gritted teeth. Pain carves down from my shoulder and up through my legs, but I am grateful for it. It is keeping me awake.

More footsteps clatter through the door and Dom drags in a bound, wriggling body. My vision swims, and it takes a second before I realize who I am seeing. Dom drags Diego to the chair and sits him down, and my new prisoner looks back at me with horror in his eyes.

Walsh is on his knees in front of me and I deal with him first, delivering a bullet between his eyes. He doesn't deserve this mercy, but I can't risk keeping him alive a second longer. His body slumps to the floor.

Such an easy end for such a sinister man. It makes me wonder if I have underestimated fate. If there is more darkness lurking just ahead of me, waiting to leap on my back when I least expect it.

But I cannot worry about that now. My vision is darkening, and I turn to Diego with Antonio's assistance.

"Why'd you do it?" I ask.

I feel a lot of things toward Diego—anger, disgust, betrayal—but forefront at this very moment is knife-edged disappointment.

I thought that when I confronted Diego, he would finally reveal his hidden side to me. I thought he would spit in my face and gloat about all the ways he twisted my regime over the years, perhaps even call me a few choice names.

But he doesn't. He sits there, shoulders heavy, looking older than I've ever seen him.

"I was friends with your father for the better part of three decades," Diego explains. "But it wasn't easy for me. I clawed tooth and nail through the ranks, proving myself to him. He planned to give me my own territory to manage after the expansion, an opportunity that I had been chasing for years."

He shakes his head, a bitter grimace twisting his wrinkled cheeks.

"When you took over, it all vanished in a puff of smoke. You eliminated my chance to gain power, and then, on top of that, you didn't give me any responsibilities. At first, I thought it was because I was close to your father, but I soon realized it was because you thought of me only as an old man. You didn't respect me, so I sought power outside of the family."

I raise the gun to his temple. My hand is shaking from the blood loss and I struggle to hold it steady while Diego stares me dead in the eye.

“You were family to me, Diego. If you would have asked, I would have given you anything.” My finger hovers over the trigger. “I hate that you’ve put me in this position. I wish it didn’t have to be this way.”

My tongue grows thick in my mouth and my senses dim one by one, and I know I have only seconds before I pass out. With the last strength I can muster, I pull the trigger, and Diego’s lifeless body slides to the ground.

The gun drops from my fingers and clatters to the floor.

“Antonio,” I slur.

“Yes, boss?”

“You’re in charge for now. Keep everything running smoothly.”

The edges of the chair in front of me blur, disappearing into the gray background.

“And Alexis ...” I manage to whisper. “Keep her safe.”

I spiral down, down, down...

My last thought as the darkness closes over my head is that if I die before I get a chance to hold Alexis again, I will be really pissed off.

ALEXIS

I look out the window, watching as the trees begin to give way to buildings and roads, while smooth classic rock floats through the car speakers. It's a surreal feeling after so much pain and violence. All of a sudden, I am relaxing against a buttery leather back seat while two of Gabriel's men sit in the front, speaking to each other in hushed voices.

I reach over to Harry, who is strapped into his car seat and snoozing happily. When I left Andrew's warehouse and hopped into Gabriel's car, the sight of the car seat brought tears to my eyes. It reminded me of the first time I got into a car with Gabriel and Harry, and his dismissive attitude toward his oversight. That feels like lifetimes ago.

The car keys were in the ignition, as Gabriel promised, and I hightailed it out of the compound like a bat out of hell. I tried not to think about how I was leaving Gabriel behind to die. There was nothing I could do to save him. I'd barely made it out of there with my own life, and my priority at that moment was to protect Harry at all costs. So I drove, even as the tears spilled over my cheeks. Even as my heart splintered and broke.

I left the compound without a problem but didn't make it far before I came across two cars blocking my path. A short-bearded man came to my window, introducing himself as Vito, Gabriel's right-hand man. He explained that Gabriel's forces were descending on the compound and it was his job to keep me safe until it was all over.

I was herded into the back seat of the car while the two beefy men took the front, and Vito gave me a sandwich and some water, plus food for Harry, and warned me to eat slowly. He also gave me my phone back, which I found strange. Was this Gabriel trying to make amends for going totally psycho on me?

So I sat in the back seat of Gabriel's car and had a picnic lunch while gunfire boomed in the distance, and once the fighting stopped, Vito gave the driver, Gio, instructions to take me to the hospital to meet Gabriel. I was relieved to hear he was alive but nervous to be stuck in a car with two mafioso strangers.

This is the most comfortable Harry and I have been for days and sleep keeps tugging at my eyelids, trying to pull me down into its soft embrace. I refuse to let it. I don't know if I will ever be able to relax around Gabriel's men again after what happened with Diego.

Gio looks back at me, as if sensing my discomfort. "We're nearly there," he says.

The other man looks back too. "Do you want the rest of your sandwich?"

My stomach was so painfully empty that I could only stomach a few bites before. I shake my head, and both sets of eyes return to the road.

I must doze off at some point because the next thing I know someone is opening the door for me. I blink, looking around. The front seats are empty.

I see Gio hovering over Harry through the other open door, as if about to pick him up, but he seems to think better of it and leaves me to unbuckle Harry and lift him from the car seat.

I step out of the car and realize we are in the parking lot of the hospital. The sky above is a deep sapphire blue, and the last shreds of sunlight warm my bare arms. I forgot how good the sun feels. I vow never to take it for granted again.

"Are you okay to walk?" Gio asks.

I nod, though my legs complain bitterly with every step. I still don't know how long Andrew Walsh had me tied up in that room, but the stiffness in my muscles indicate that it was a long time. Being able to rest in the car has helped, though, and by the time we reach the entrance, I start to loosen up.

We pass few people walking through the hospital, though we attract funny stares from the ones we do. I suppose we must be quite the sight—one bloodied, limping woman, one dirty baby, and two hulking men in black suits.

“Gabriel wants to see you first, but then there is a room set up for you two,” Gio explains, guiding me to the elevator.

Even a hospital room sounds like luxurious accommodations compared to the hellhole where I spent the past God knows how many days. I imagine the relief my dehydrated cells will feel after being hooked up to an IV. Perhaps someone will even give me a sponge bath and some Jell-O. It sounds like heaven.

“Is he okay?” I ask.

My lips crack around the words, voice hoarse. I have not spoken much in the past few days and the sound of my voice sounds foreign to me. It has been mostly screams.

“He was shot three times,” Gio explains. “He has lost a lot of blood, but he will survive.”

It should mean a lot that Gabriel nearly died rescuing me, but I can't help but wonder if Gabriel would have taken three bullets if Harry was safe and sound at the mansion and it was only I who needed saving. I hate to admit it, but Andrew Walsh got inside my head.

The elevator door opens and the second guard hangs back. “I'm going to go watch the entrance,” he says to Gio. “You can take her from here?”

Gio nods, and we proceed down the hall together. “He's in the room at the end,” he says.

At the end of the hall, there is a door to the staircase. My gaze snags on it like a loose thread. If there is anything this

whole ordeal has taught me, it's to always have an exit strategy.

I won't need one though, I tell myself. Gabriel is going to say something very sweet and I'm going to forgive him, and then I'm going to let the nurses pump me full of enough drugs to forget the name Andrew Walsh.

We proceed toward the door and I begin to hear faint voices from inside Gabriel's room.

I recognize Vito's voice. "It's the meds, boss."

"No," Gabriel protests. "I need to tell her."

My ears prick and I walk a little faster, Gio shooting me an uncertain glance.

"You've been through a lot," Vito says. "You'll feel better after some rest."

Gabriel's voice is thick. "I killed her father, Vito. She needs to know."

I stop dead, arms tightening around Harry. Gabriel's words rattle around my brain, sharp points banging against the inside of my skull.

All this time, I assumed Fabrizio had killed my father. I didn't even consider that Gabriel might have had a hand in it, but it makes a lot more sense now why he was so keen to hide the truth from me.

I try to swallow, but my throat is too dry. I have sought answers in my father's death for years, wishing that I had the means to confront the killer, always picturing them as some low-life degenerate with dirty fingernails and greasy hair. I never thought that my father's killer would come packaged in a thousand-dollar suit, stamped with a charming smile, never mind that I would then fall in love with that person.

Panic grips me. I have to get out of here.

Without warning, I dart for the stairs, crashing through the door and leaping down the steps two at a time. The sudden movement is agony, but if I want any chance of escaping I need to get as far away from this hospital as quickly as I can.

I hear the driver hot on my heels, yelling after me. “Stop!”

I ignore him, sprinting through the door when I reach the ground floor, heart hammering. I frighten two nurses as I careen past, and when they see that I—bruised, beaten, and wretched-looking—am being pursued by a big, scary-looking man, they start shouting for someone to stop him. I look back and see the hospital security staff struggling to take him down. Even if they are not successful, they have given me the opportunity I need to disappear.

I leave the hospital and don’t stop running until I am several blocks away, where I slip into an alley and lean against the brick wall to catch my breath. Harry squirms in my arms, obviously uncomfortable with my sudden dash.

“We’re safe now,” I tell him.

We are penniless and alone down an alley, with nowhere to go and night coming quickly. We are far from safe. Nonetheless, we are out of Gabriel’s reach and that feels like the safest place to be in the world.

First things first: Harry and I need food and a bed. I free my phone from my pocket, getting a whiff of my underarms in the process. A shower would be called for, too.

I try Clara, tapping my foot against the ground in a nervous jitter as I wait for her to pick up. The phone rings and rings and rings—no answer. I try her again, then a third time, so she knows it’s an emergency. But I get nothing.

She could be in class, I reason. She usually does days, but sometimes she teaches the evening classes. I try the yoga studio, and a woman with a gentle, flowery voice picks up right away.

“Blossom Yoga,” she says. “How can I help you?”

“Hi, I’m looking for Clara Fitzgerald, is she in the studio?”
I say.

“Uh, I’m afraid not,” the woman replies, and her voice wavers a little. Odd.

“Do you know when her next class is?” I continue. “This is her friend Alexis. It’s an emergency and I haven’t been able to reach her.”

There is a pregnant pause. Something doesn’t feel right. My eyes brim with tears as the panic snakes through my limbs, threatening to take over. I can’t lose my shit, not here, not until I get Harry and I somewhere safe.

“I’m sorry,” the woman says, quieter now. “I can’t help you. We haven’t been able to reach Clara for days.”

Her words are like a brick to my chest.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“She stopped showing up for classes. No phone call, no email. If you do find her, can you let her know we’re worried about her?”

I know what they probably think at the studio—that Clara has relapsed and is lying at the bottom of a bottle somewhere. After everything I’ve experienced, I worry that it is so much worse.

“Thank you. I’ll let her know.”

I hang up, squeezing my eyes to force back tears. Harry hiccups and squirms. He wants to get down. He probably hasn’t had a chance to walk around in days and I hate to deny him of it, but God knows what kind of inner-city flotsam he might stumble over in this alley.

I need to think. Who else could I possibly call?

The only person I can think of is Debbie. She set me up in all this, yes, but only because Andrew Walsh had her in his clutches. He’s dead now, and she owes me.

I hit Debbie’s contact, practicing the circular belly breathing Clara taught me ages ago in an effort to stay calm. I have been kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured, but somehow being out on my own for the first time in months with nowhere to go is more traumatic to my nerves. The stress sits heavy on my shoulders. I feel like I am sinking through the pavement,

inch by inch, and unless I formulate a plan soon, I will find myself too wedged in to move.

Debbie's phone doesn't even ring. It goes straight to voice mail. I try calling again, even though I know it will achieve the same results, and then once more because I don't know what else to do.

Radio silence.

I shove my phone back in my pocket and readjust my grip on Harry, who is about to throw a full-on tantrum.

"Down, down!" he demands.

"You sound just like your father," I mutter.

A hollow ache spreads in my chest. Once I had everything—a career, a best friend, a purpose. And then I had a family.

And now, for the first time, Harry and I are completely on our own.

TO BE CONTINUED



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I made her my queen.

Then she smashed her crown.

Alexis was nothing... until I made her my everything.

My queen. My world. My sun and my stars.

But just when I thought I could trust her, my tiger showed her true stripes.

She ran from me.

And took our infant son with her.

Some sins are unforgivable—and nobody takes what's mine.

I will find her. Reclaim her.

And then I will ensure that she can never leave me again.

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