

A muscular man with a beard and extensive tattoos is shown from the chest up, looking to the left. He is holding four babies in front of his chest. The babies are looking towards the camera. The background is a dark, textured grey.

AN AGE GAP  
ROMANCE


# QUADRUPLE DADDY

KAILESY

Copyright © 2023 by Kai Lesy

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

# QUADRUPLE DADDY

A BEST FRIEND'S OLDER BROTHER ROMANCE

KAI LESY

## CONTENTS

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

34. [Bella](#)

35. [Gabe](#)

36. [Bella](#)

37. [Gabe](#)

38. [Bella](#)

39. [Gabe](#)

40. [Bella](#)

41. [Gabe](#)

42. [Bella](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Savage Protector \(Preview\)](#)

DESCRIPTION

**“FOUR heartbeats. Are you kidding me?!?”**

My babies’ father is much older.

My best friend’s older brother.

And a former Mafia man.

So how the heck did I agree to having his babies??? Four babies!!!!

Well... it’s complicated.

Our Arrangement came with 3 core rules:

**NO** emotions. **NO** attachment. Absolutely **NO** turning back.

And I just discovered he’s been keeping a secret...

The kind that could easily put us ALL in mortal danger.

**Did I make the biggest mistake of my life?!?!**

## BELLA

“**W**ait a second, did you say *four* heartbeats?” My heart pounded heavily in my chest as I stared at the ultrasound tech.

“Yes, four heartbeats and four little babies. Here, let me show you,” she said, turning the monitor around so I could get an even better view. “Baby A is right here, Baby B is here, Baby C is trying to hide but you can make him or her out here... and Baby D is easy to miss but is right there.”

I stared at the screen in disbelief. Was this the reason I have been putting on more weight than usual? I thought it was all the extra carbs I had allowed myself to eat since I was pregnant, and all the milkshakes I’d been craving. My doctor had been concerned at how fast I was gaining, and well, now it suddenly made sense.

Gabe, the father of the babies I was carrying, hadn’t said a word yet. I looked over at him. His jaw was tight, his eyes staring at the screen, but there was no emotion, nothing that would give away how he was feeling. His hands gripped the side of the bed I was laying in, his knuckles white.

“You conceived through IVF, correct?” the tech asked.

“Yes, I’m a gestational carrier,” I said. Otherwise known as a surrogate, but most medical professions seemed to prefer the other term these days.

“Do you know how many embryos they implanted?”

“Two,” I said, my head spinning as I remembered what the doctors had told me. “Because of my young age, they said



implanting more would lead to a higher chance of multiples, we were already prepared for the possibility of twins, but... how? With only two embryos?"

"It looks like they both split," she said. "Do you have a family history of multiples?"

"No, I'm an only child. My mom is also an only child, while my dad had a brother, but they weren't twins. I don't understand how this could have happened?"

"The fertility drugs you had to take to help increase your chances of successful implantation can also cause multiples," she answered.

I looked up at Gabe who was still staring at the screen. His brown eyes turned to me and we shared a look. He had wanted one baby but said he would be more than happy with twins. How did he feel about quadruplets? These were his babies, and I knew that there were options but I wasn't sure I wanted to consider those options.

"Gabe?" I managed to choke out.

"Yes?" His voice came out lower than usual.

"Are you okay?"

He took a second before he responded, and when he did, it was a curt nod.

We would have to talk about all of this later, of course. Gabe wasn't one to talk about his feelings anyway, but in the presence of a stranger, it was even harder to get a response from him.

He turned to the tech, finally taking a deep breath. "What's next? What do we need to do to make sure all of the babies and Bella are safe and healthy?"

"Well, first thing we need to do is find you an obstetrician that is experienced with multiples and high-risk pregnancies."

"High-risk?" Both Gabe and I said at the same time.

I wasn't an idiot, I knew that having more than one baby at a time posed a risk to not only the babies but also me. Still,

hearing those words spoken out loud caused me some anxiety. I knew that carrying a baby for Gabe for nine months wouldn't be easy money, but it was about to get exponentially more difficult.

“Yes, high-risk. With multiples, most women aren't able to carry to term, yet we want to make sure that the babies aren't born too soon, either. It also poses higher risk for the mother.”

I had originally thought I'd take a few weeks off from my job toward the end of the pregnancy, but now it was looking like I'd need more time than that. Considering I was a barista, I was on my feet all day, every day.

Gabe spoke up. “It's fine, we will make sure Bella gets plenty of rest and she will be in good hands.”

I stared at him. I was his surrogate, not his girlfriend or wife, living together was not something we'd ever discussed. Maybe he meant hiring some help for me or paying me enough so that I could quit my crappy job. Both would be acceptable to me.

A little while later in the car, however, he threw me for a loop.

“You're going to move in with me until the babies are born.”

“Excuse me?” I stammered. “Don't I have a say in this?”

He turned to look at me, a smile pulling at his lips. “Are you really going to turn down a chance to stay at my place, with my staff waiting on you hand and foot?”

“What about my job?” I asked.

“Your new job is making sure those babies, and you, stay as safe and healthy as possible. I'm sure Starbucks will understand the situation you're in.”

I settled back into the seat, my hand resting on my belly. I didn't care about the barista job; I knew there would be others. It was just to get me by until I could pay for grad school and finish my degree, so I could finally follow my dreams. Which

was why I had approached Gabe about being his surrogate in the first place.

He did have a point about his house. His place was obscenely large, with an entire staff to clean and to cook; I wouldn't have to lift a finger for the rest of the pregnancy. I could rest. Living with Gabe might be weird due to my long-standing crush on him, but I could put those feelings aside for the safety of the babies. And because, well, after the last few years of working until I collapsed day after day, some rest sounded nice.

There was also the bonus that Ava was staying with him too. Living with my best friend for the next few months would be fun. She was busy with law school, so we didn't get to see each other as much as I would have liked. Now we'd have more opportunities to spend time together, sharing a roof.

"So... is that a yes?" Gabe asked, a glance in my direction.

"It's a yes, but I do have to go back to Chicago and let my roommate know and get my stuff from the apartment."

"Absolutely, and I'm happy to help with all of that."

"Thanks, Gabe," I said.

He was focused on driving, but I couldn't stop myself from staring at him. I'd crushed over this man for as long as I could remember, likely from the first moment I met him when I was six or so. Ava and I had been friends since kindergarten, and the first time I went over to her house and met her older brothers, I was smitten with Gabe. Of course, I was a child back then, and one would think childhood crushes eventually die out but there I was, twenty-four years old admiring every curve of Gabe's jawline.

He was going to make gorgeous babies. I pictured them with his dark brown hair and chocolate eyes.

Gabe caught me staring, so I quickly turned my head away, looking out the windshield.

"You live in a very nice neighborhood," I said. I had always loved St. Louis, and Gabe lived near Forest Park—one

of the largest urban parks in the United States. It would be an amazing place to grow up, and I expected his kids were going to live a very nice life.

A tinge of sadness seared my heart.

His kids.

Yet they were growing inside of me.

I had known what I was getting myself into when we agreed to the arrangement, but at times, the love I felt for the babies was almost too much to bear, and I worried how I was going to feel when the time came for me to give them up and not have a hand in raising them. I knew I might still see them because I was close to his family, but they wouldn't call me mom. My heart ached at the thought.

But I knew it was something I'd have to get over.

I signed the agreement and besides, I had to get my life together before I could ever think of raising children of my own. I had time.

Those words didn't quell the pain in my heart, but I did my best to not think about it as Gabe pulled into his driveway. The large metal gates opened for us, and he drove toward the circular drive in front of his gorgeous estate.

Before I could get out of the car, Gabe rushed over to my side and opened the door, lending me a hand.

"I'm not helpless just yet," I told him with a laugh, even though the extra weight in my midsection did make some things harder already. I took his hand and thanked him for his help.

Ava must have been watching for us because as soon as I was on my feet, my best friend was running down the stairs, an eager look on her face. She looked a lot like Gabe with the same dark hair and big brown eyes.

"Sooo,.... Did we find out if I'm having a niece or nephew?"

"You know, that's one thing we didn't find out today," I said with a laugh. "But I'm guessing there's going to be at

least one of each, the odds are good for that, right, Gabe?”

“I’d imagine so,” he said.

Ava looked at me, then at her brother, with a confused expression. “What do you mean?”

“Apparently there’s four little De Lucas’ in there, nice and cozy.”

“Four?” Ava’s eyes grew even wider.

“Yep, four of them,” I said, digging out the ultrasound photo the tech had printed for us. I showed Ava each baby as they had done for us earlier.

“Four babies?” Ava said again, her voice cracking. “But how, I don’t understand.”

“That’s the risk with fertility drugs and multiple implantations,” I replied.

Ava still looked stunned, taking the photo from my hand and bringing it closer to her face as if to get a better view. She stared at it for a long time as I chuckled to myself.

“I couldn’t believe it either. Hell, I still can’t believe it,” I said.

Gabe cleared his throat. “This means the pregnancy is going to be high-risk, so to make sure Bella is as safe and comfortable as possible, I’ve asked her to move in with us.”

Ava looked up from the photo and remained stoic. Perhaps it was shock. Perhaps it was something more. Ava had struggled with me being her brother’s surrogate initially, and she had just started coming around to the idea. She said it was a little strange that her best friend was having her brother’s baby, especially knowing that I’d had a lifelong crush on him.

She turned toward me, unblinking. “Wow, this is all just—wow.”

“Can you give us a minute?” I asked Gabe.

“Of course, I’ll be inside. I can show you where you’ll be staying as soon as you’re ready,” he said.

Gabe headed up the stairs, leaving Ava and I alone in the front yard. She handed the photo back to me, and at first, she wouldn't even look me in the eye.

“Ava, if this is too weird for you, I'm sure we can come up with something else.”

“Too weird? No, I love the idea of you staying here under the same roof as me. I've always thought of you as a sister, it's just...” she trailed off.

“What?”

“It's just, I'm still struggling with the idea that you're having my brother's baby, well, babies, and while I know it's just a professional arrangement, I worry that with your hormones and your feelings for Gabe, that things could get... messy.”

“They won't get messy, Ava. I'm grown enough to know that Gabe and I will never happen outside of my dreams. Even pregnancy hormones won't convince me otherwise.”

“I just don't want you hurt, Bella. I love you both more than life itself.”

“I appreciate that, Ava. I wouldn't have signed up for this if I thought I would end up hurt.”

“I sometimes feel bad that I mentioned my brother's plans to you in the first place, knowing that you were already looking into egg donation and what not to pay for school. I knew you were desperate to find a way and it was like I dangled a carrot right in front of your face.”

I placed a hand on Ava's arm and smiled at her. “You presented me with the opportunity of a lifetime, one that I'm grateful for, and I know Gabe is too. You've helped both of our dreams come true by telling me about Gabe's decision to hire a surrogate.”

Ava bit her lip and stared up at me. “I hope so.”

“I know so,” I said. “And now, think of the fun we're going to have living under the same roof for the next few months.”

“It will be nice having you here; I’ve missed you so much since you moved to Chicago.”

I pulled her into a hug. “I missed you too.”

“I have to leave for class soon but let me show you around a bit first.” She looped her arm through mine and together we walked up the stairs and into her brother’s home.

\* \* \*

AVA SHOWED ME HER ROOM, which was on the second floor and overlooking the expansive garden and pool in the backyard. She had to rush off soon, so she handed me off to Gabe, whom we found in his office.

“Always working,” Ava muttered as we stepped inside the large room decorated in dark wood and leather. “You know, Gabe, with four kids on the way, you’re going to have to learn to step away from the desk now and then.”

“I already have plans in place to take more time off,” he said softly. “I’ve hired enough staff that I could retire right now and let them do all the work if I wanted to.”

“If you wanted to, that’s the key phrase,” Ava teased. She looked over at me. “I’ve always told him he’s never going to find a woman if he can’t pull himself away from work sometimes.”

Gabe sighed but didn’t say anything.

“Anyway, I’m off, she’s in your hands now,” Ava said. “Treat her well.”

“I’ll probably have to head out before you get back,” I told her.

“But soon we’ll be roomies and get to spend all the time in the world together,” she said with a smile.

Ava gave me a quick hug before rushing from the office, leaving me alone with Gabe.

“I just need to send a quick email, then I can show you to your room. I have a meeting in about an hour, but I can reschedule,” he said.

“Sounds good, and no need to reschedule, I have a long drive ahead of me this evening,” I replied, perusing the books on the massive shelves around the room. Gabe owned his own security company, offering private security to some of the most influential people in the world.

“Done,” he said, standing up from the desk. “These books are likely pretty boring for you, unless you work in security, but there’s a library on the main floor that might interest you.”

I followed him out of the office and down the hallway, past the stairs that led up to both Ava’s and his room.

“I am giving you a room on the main floor, since stairs will likely become difficult for you as the pregnancy progresses,” he said. “And there’s a room nearby that I plan to stay in, just in case you need me.”

“You don’t have to switch bedrooms because of me,” I said.

“I’d rather be nearby.”

We turned the corner and he opened a door that lead into a large guest suite. There was a king-sized bed in the center of the room and large windows overlooking the same garden that Ava’s did upstairs. Thick, velvet curtains were pulled open, but they could be closed to block out the sun.

“Here you go. If there’s anything you need, we can get it for you,” he said.

There was a walk-in closet that had plenty of drawers and space for my clothing.

An attached private bathroom with a shower and a large tub that was bigger than my apartment in Chicago capped off the suite. I stood there, just staring at the space when Gabe said, “We’ll get you a chair for the shower, and we can hire a nurse to help you with anything you need.”



“I’m sure I’ll still be able to bathe myself,” I said with a chuckle. “Women have babies all the time and manage just fine.”

“I know, but I just want you to be assured that I will get you anything you need. All you have to do is ask.”

“I appreciate that Gabe, truly.” Ugh. Why did he have to be so damn kind on top of so damn good-looking?

“Well, you’re giving me a pretty amazing gift, Bella. It’s the least I can do.”

I had to turn away from him or I was going to launch myself at him.

“Good thing your place is so big,” I said, mostly to myself.

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing much. I’m just grateful for the large room and bed, considering I’m going to get pretty huge, and probably won’t be able to leave this room for the last few weeks of the pregnancy.”

I walked over to the window, grateful that I would have a beautiful view at least.

“Oh, we can get a TV for this room too,” Gabe said. “And anything else you might want to entertain yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“Harriett is head of housekeeping, and I will introduce the two of you before you leave. Christina is our chef, and she’s absolutely amazing. If you have any dietary preferences or concerns, I can let her know, and if you give me a list of your favorite foods, any snacks you want to have, anything at all, I’ll make sure we can stock it for you.”

Outside the window was a hummingbird feeder and I watched as the tiny birds fluttered around. A smile stretched across my face knowing that I would be able to watch the birds come and go from my bed while on bed rest.

“I can’t thank you enough, Gabe,” I said.

He took a few steps closer to me, standing beside me at the window. “I should be the one thanking you.”

“Well, this is a mutually beneficial arrangement. I’m going to graduate with my master’s debt-free thanks to you.”

“But you’re giving me a family, Bella,” he said.

I turned and caught him looking at me. His dark eyes softened, his chiseled features relaxed. “You’re going to make an amazing father, Gabe.”

I would have never agreed to it if I’d had any doubt about that. Gabe used to be a bit wild, and I knew about his checkered past, but the man he became was protective and loved with a fierceness that I admired. I wished someone had loved me the way he loved his baby sister, the way he cared for her and would do anything for her. I knew he would do the same for his children.

Gabe’s lips pulled back into a smile, but he averted his gaze quickly. “Come on, let me show you the library before I head into my meeting,” he said.

I followed him out of the room, and he pointed to a door one away from mine. “I’ll be staying there,” he said.

“Good to know.”

He meant it when he said he would be close. There was only a bathroom separating his room from mine.

“And I’ll make sure you always have a way to alert the staff, and me, if you need anything, night or day.”

Seeing Gabe’s protective side only intensified the crush I had on him. God, how I hoped to find a man like him one day, a man who would do anything for his family.

As we walked back toward the stairwell, Gabe stopped and pointed out the library. We stepped inside and I was blown away by just how many books he had. Floor to ceiling shelves, in a room that was almost two stories tall, all stocked with books. My eyes went wide. “I think this is bigger than the public library near my home,” I said.

“If you need anything from the upper shelves, please either get me or one of the staff members to help you.”

“I will, thank you.”

Cozy couches and chairs with ottomans, and a chaise lounge situated in a bay window meant that it would be easy to get comfortable and lose hours reading. There was no way I’d get bored while staying there, that was for certain.

Just a quick glance at some of the shelves and I saw everything from Charles Dickens to Stephen King, Russian literature to Shakespeare.

“And if we don’t have a book you want, just let me know and I can order it for you,” he said.

“I have a feeling you already have every book I could ever want, but thank you,” I replied.

He smiled, shoving his hands in his pockets as I looked around.

I would have plenty of time to get acquainted with the library, and I still had the drive back to Chicago, so I reluctantly pulled myself away. I didn’t want to keep Gabe from his meeting, either.

“Well, I better get going.”

“Are you sure you want to drive? I can get you a chauffeur, or even see about getting the jet—”

I held up a hand to stop him. “It’s only about four hours, I’ll be fine,” I said with a laugh. “But did you say jet?”

He shrugged. “I don’t own it outright, but I have access to a private jet to use as needed.”

I blinked, staring up at him. “I think that’s overkill just to go from St. Louis to Chicago but thank you for the offer. I need my car to pack up everything anyway.”

“Oh, about that, I’m going to hire a moving company,” he said. “Don’t lift a thing, please, it’s not worth the risk.”

“Wow, okay then, thank you, Gabe,” I said.

We stared awkwardly at each other. Ava and I would have hugged, but Gabe and I had never been that close. I reached out my hand and Gabe looked down at it for a moment before shaking it. Probably not the smoothest move I could make, but we had made sure to stress that it was strictly a business arrangement, and handshakes were common in business.

“Alright then... I will see you in a week or two,” I said as I headed for the door. Gabe followed me and walked me to my car. Always a gentleman, I thought to myself. Whatever woman he ended up with one day, if he could pull himself from his work long enough to date, would be very lucky.

## G A B E

**B**ella's stuff had arrived, and she would follow shortly. I knew she couldn't be too far behind the movers. She'd denied my offer of a driver, saying that she was still fine to drive. I knew she was right, but I couldn't help but worry about her.

"I don't know how I'm going to do this," I muttered to myself as I stared at the empty nursery. The walls were bare and white, I had no idea what color to paint the room. We still weren't sure of the babies' gender yet. Like Bella had said though, there was a chance we'd have both. The odds were pretty good for that.

"How you're going to do what?" Ava's voice surprised me.

I turned to find my sister in the doorway to the nursery, leaning against the doorframe.

"Four babies... I had planned to have one, maybe two, total. But now I'm going to be a single dad to four babies."

Ava walked into the room and stood beside me, staring at me while I continued looking at the blank wall.

"Well, Dad managed to raise the four of us after Mom died."

"Dad? You're really going to bring up Dad as an example of stellar fatherhood?" I side-eyed my sister.

She shrugged. "I mean, he did what he could."

I scoffed at the very idea that he'd done the best he could.

“He could have done without getting involved with the Mob, that would have made our lives so much less complicated.”

“Yeah... I really can't argue with you there, but you know you're not going to do this alone, right? You have me.”

“Thanks, sis,” I said. It was hard to believe my little sister was all grown up sometimes. I was ten years older than her, so I remembered her being a baby. I remembered her first day of kindergarten. I practically helped raise her at times after our mom died, since Dad struggled with grief and threw himself into his work. Another reason I wasn't too keen to think of our father as doing his best to raise all four of us; he hardly had anything to do with Ava's upbringing. It was my brothers and me that raised her.

My heart sank at the thought of Dante and Roman.

How long had it been since we'd talked? I couldn't even remember.

Ava, however, was always by my side. We'd always had each other. The two black sheep of a family of criminals because we both decided to live a straight and narrow life. Well, not always in my case, but I came around. Ava, however, was always good, and she had inspired me to be good too.

She seemed to sense my train of thought. “Have you even told Dad or our brothers about the babies?”

I shook my head.

“Do you plan to?”

I didn't know how to answer that. My first instinct was to say no, I didn't want anything to do with them, and since we'd gone this long without talking, I figured it would be easy. But part of me yearned to share the news with my family.

Thankfully, I didn't have to answer. Ava's phone alerted and she said, “Bella's here!”

She took off out of the room, and I was right behind her, down the stairs and out the front door where Ava was already

embracing Bella. I noticed a few boxes in Bella's car, so I walked over and grabbed them from the backseat.

"Don't worry, I didn't carry those," Bella said. "My roomie did all the work; I didn't carry anything."

"Good," I said. I had offered to drive up to Chicago and personally help with the moving, but Bella declined. I almost went anyway, but Ava told me that I needed to respect her boundaries and trust Bella, which I did, 100% or else I wouldn't have asked her to carry my children. But I wanted to help her too.

I lifted the two boxes and headed back toward the house. "Your things are already placed in your room," I told her.

She was following behind me, she and Ava chatting away excitedly as we walked toward Bella's room. Ava opened the door and I stepped inside, placing the boxes next to the ones the movers had brought earlier. She didn't really have a lot of stuff; I could have handled it all on my own had she let me.

"Thanks, Gabe," Bella said, beaming back at me.

Her strawberry blonde hair fell in ringlets over her shoulders, and it made me wonder if one of our kids might inherit the red hair gene. I knew it was unlikely, but I smiled at the thought of it. Unlikely, but not impossible, considering that neither of Bella's parents were redheads.

Her eyes were blueish green and reminded me of the sea. Again, unlikely that the babies would inherit her light-colored eyes over my dark brown ones, but a guy could hope. I didn't tell Bella that one of the reasons I was happy to have her as a surrogate was because she was gorgeous and I hoped my babies might have some of her features, but it was true.

"Ooh, you totally need to see the nursery," Ava said as she checked the time, her smile turning upside down. "But I have to head to class. Gabe, you need to show her what you're working on, it's going to be amazing."

"I haven't done much yet," I replied.

Ava said goodbye to Bella and hurried out the door.

“Is she always running around like a chicken with her head cut off?” Bella asked.

“Yeah, pretty much. These days she’s always coming and going, she works so damned hard.”

“I know she does,” Bella said. “She’s going to make an amazing lawyer one day.”

“That’s true.” And Bella was going to make an amazing journalist one day. Another reason I chose her was because of her ambition and her brains—more traits I hoped she would pass down to my kids. “So, um, would you like to see the nursery? Like I said, I really haven’t done much with it yet.”

“I’d love to,” Bella answered.

She followed me down the hallway and up the stairs. I made sure she took it slow and walked behind her; I wanted to be able to catch her in case she slipped.

We made it to the top and walked past my bedroom first.

“There’s a door connecting my room and the nursery. I wanted them to be close by.”

Her smile could light up any room. Standing there in the hallway, just the two of us, with her looking up at me, I found myself wanting to inch closer to her, to see if her lips were as soft as they looked.

Though as soon as the thought crossed my mind, I scolded myself mentally.

*She’s your sister’s best friend. She’s your surrogate. She’s not your girlfriend, Gabe.*

I cleared my throat and opened the door to the nursery, making sure not to stare too long at Bella.

“Oh, good thing there’s plenty of room for four cribs,” she said.

“Yeah, I feared the room would be too big when we thought there was only one of them,” I said. “But now I’m grateful for the space.”



“What are you planning on doing in here?” she asked, glancing over at me.

“I honestly don’t know. I had planned to paint the walls a soft green, it’s gender neutral and my favorite color.”

“Green would be very nice, and it’s a calming color,” she said.

“You think so? Is there anything you’d like to see in here?”

She turned and looked at me, her smile wavering. “Why are you asking me?”

“Well, you’re the one carrying them and birthing them, your input is welcomed.”

Her face suddenly turned very serious. “Gabe, I’m really trying not to get too attached or to think of these babies as my own. It’s hard enough as it is. I already feel so much love for them. Seeing them on the ultrasound just made everything that much more real... I fear that by helping to design the nursery or giving insight into your life with them, the lines may start to blur even more for me.”

I felt like an idiot for even asking. Tears welled in her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away and turned toward the blank wall. I gave her some space, all the while trying to find the right words. Had I made a mistake asking her to do this for me? It was her idea, and she was a grown woman, but at the same time, neither of us had any idea what pregnancy and childbirth would look like when we’d agreed to it. She was close to my sister; she would be in my life and the babies’ lives. So what would that even look like? We had agreed that it would stay professional, but what did that even mean?

I stepped up beside her. “Bella, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked, I—”

Before I could finish, she stopped me. “I think some animals would be cute.”

“Animals?”

She nodded. “Yes, like giraffes and monkeys, a border of them, perhaps? It would look really good with the green walls.”

A lump formed in my throat as I pictured what she was saying. “I agree, that would be adorable.”

“I think so too, and I already call them my little monkeys,” she said softly. “Though I know they aren’t mine.”

Without thinking, I took Bella’s hand in mine and turned her toward me. I lifted her chin up to meet my gaze. “Bella, did I ever tell you why I was happy you offered to be my surrogate?”

She shook her head.

“It’s because I admire you. Your brains, your ambition, everything you’ve become despite your shitty upbringing,” I said. “And I understand that those traits aren’t just magically inherited.”

I wasn’t even sure what I was trying to say. My heart was pounding, and she just stared up at me, almost as if in shock that I had my hands on her. Shit. I let go of her and stepped back, remembering what Ava had told me about respecting Bella’s boundaries. I shouldn’t have touched her, not like that.

“Anyway, what I am trying to say is... I know you’re going to be in our lives, you and Ava have been best friends since kindergarten, and I don’t see you going anywhere once the babies are born. I don’t expect you to just disappear, you know? I’m not sure what the relationship will look like between you and them, but I do hope that you will be in their lives.”

My words seemed to relax Bella. She took a deep breath and seemed to ponder what I was saying.

“Thank you, Gabe. I know that I won’t be able to be their mother, not in a traditional sense, but it means a lot to me that I will still get to be in their lives.”

“Absolutely. Everything I’ve read has said that it’s actually a good idea for the babies to know where they came from, and I want what’s best for them, and for you.”

She smiled again, and it was like someone was doing somersaults in my belly.

Shit. When did she grow into such a gorgeous young woman? I had always known she was pretty, but looking at her now... I could hardly believe this was the same freckle-faced kid who used to sleep over with my sister and giggle every time I walked into the room.

She was beautiful, and so grown-up. So mature. So smart. Everything I could have wanted in a mother for my future children.

And she'd been in front of me all along.

## BELLA

I stared at my phone for a long time, working up the nerve to hit the call button. Finally, after a deep breath and some pacing in my room, I went for it. It rang three times, and I half expected it to go to voicemail when my mom's voice finally came through on the other end of the phone.

"Bella?"

"Yes, Mom," I said. "How are you? I haven't heard from you in a bit."

"Just busy with work," she said, not even bothering to ask how I was doing.

"Yeah, I know things have been hard since Dad, well—"

"Since he got locked up? Yeah, it's been really fucking hard." Her tone was harsh, not that I was surprised. She had every right to be angry at my dad, considering he was going to be in prison for a long time.

"I know, and I'm sorry."

"Have you spoken with him?" Mom asked me.

"Not since the trial, no," I said. That was over a year ago. Considering we didn't really talk much before that, not speaking to him for so long wasn't hard.

"I can't believe that shithead got caught," my mom muttered. "I was always telling him to stop making fake IDs for those high school kids, they don't need to be drinking at sixteen, but he said they paid well and that's why he did it. Not well enough if you ask me, look where it got him."

I knew that my dad was in prison for forging IDs and other legal documents. It's how he'd made a living, apparently. I'd had no idea; my parents had kept it hidden from me growing up. Or they tried to at least. Dad had been selling IDs to my classmates for years and they all told me about it in high school. It finally caught up to him.

I cleared my throat. "Anyway, Mom, I was calling because I have some exciting news to share."

I waited for some response from her, but I was met with silence, so I continued. "I'm a surrogate for Gabe De Luca, you know Ava's older brother?"

"You're what?" she asked.

"A surrogate. I'm carrying his babies."

"Babies? As in more than one?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm actually having quadruplets."

Silence, at first. Then a laugh. "You're fucking with me, right, Isabella?"

"No, I'm not fucking with you, Mom. I mean it. I'm about twelve weeks along, and I'm getting huge already."

"How much is he paying you to do this?"

"He's paying me well, don't you worry about that. Enough so that I can go to grad school and not take on any debt. Considering the journalism field isn't known for paying a ton, I thought it would be a smart—"

"How much?" she interrupted.

"Mom, that's personal."

"I'm your mother," she said. "I just want to be sure you're not being stiffed. I never did care for the De Lucas.... Their father was into some shady shit."

My jaw tightened as I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. "So was Dad, and you, for that matter, and I still turned out okay, didn't I?"

Mom didn't answer. "So you're not going to tell me how much he's paying to carry his kids?"

"No! I can take care of myself, Mom, and Gabe is paying me very generously. We've had lawyers look everything over and never mind, this isn't why I called."

As per usual when it came to my mom, my nerves were already shot. Why did I even bother?

My mom was muttering something I couldn't make out, likely cursing my very existence under her breath. After calming myself down, I decided to try again.

"Mom, I was hoping you might give me some advice or something. Talk me through your pregnancy with me, let me know what to expect, that sort of thing."

She let out a groan. "I told you before, I don't remember anything about my pregnancy with you."

"Nothing? You remember nothing?"

"No," she said. "I imagine that means it was pretty boring and uneventful."

Well, that was good, I guess.

"How about childbirth? You've never talked to me about that, did you have a c-section?"

"No."

"So vaginal birth?"

"I didn't give birth to you out of my ass, now did I, Bella?"

"Jesus Christ," I muttered to myself. My head was aching, and I knew it was from the stress of dealing with my mother. After a momentary pause, I decided it wasn't worth it to continue. I was supposed to be avoiding stress, after all. "Sorry for bothering you, Mom. I have to go."

She didn't even try to stop me from hanging up. No apology, nothing. Not that I should have been surprised. I thought my mom would at least be concerned, not about the money but my well-being.

I fell backward on the bed with a loud groan of disgust. I'm not sure how long I stayed like that, staring at the ceiling and cursing the fact that I didn't have a normal, loving family like most of the people I knew.

A knock on the door pulled me back to reality.

"Yes?" I called out.

"It's me," Ava's voice responded.

"Come in," I said.

She stepped inside and joined me on the bed.

"My brother has a beautiful home, but I don't find the ceilings to be that interesting," she teased.

"I just got off the phone with my mom."

"Oh, crap." Ava knew what that meant. "How'd it go?"

"As badly as you'd expect. I told her about the pregnancy and being a surrogate for Gabe, tried asking her questions about her pregnancy with me."

"And?"

"And she basically told me she doesn't remember anything. Nothing at all. She carried me for nine months, birthed me and it's like I'm asking her what she had for dinner on January 15th, 1985. No recollection whatsoever."

"I'm sorry, babe," Ava said, rolling over to face me.

"It's okay. I don't know what I expected. She's always been weird about this sort of thing. It's like she never wants to talk about me as a baby. Hell, I've never even seen photos of me as a baby. It's like she couldn't have been bothered to take any."

"I don't understand it at all," Ava said. "Maybe we were right as kids and you were adopted or something."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Knowing my parents, do you think the state would have let them adopt a child?"

"Good point," Ava muttered.

“No, the reality is my mom couldn’t care less about me. Which is so weird considering all the times I overheard my parents arguing about my mom’s infertility. It always sounded like she wanted more kids, but she couldn’t even love the one she had.”

I rested a hand on my belly. These babies weren’t even going to be raised by me, and yet, I couldn’t imagine turning my back on them. I would remember every detail of their birth story, and I would cherish every second I had with them. It didn’t make sense that my mom could be so callous toward me.

“People are complicated,” I said. “I guess my mom got what she wanted, then realized she didn’t really want me after all.”

“Don’t say that” Ava chided softly.

“It’s true,” I said. “But you know what, it’s fine. I’ve got you, and Gabe is taking care of me. I don’t need her.”

Ava smiled and gave my arm a squeeze. “So would this a bad time to tell you I have a date tonight or—”

“You have a date?” I asked, propping myself up on my side a bit.

“Just some rando I met on Tinder, but he seems nice. But if you want me to cancel, I totally will.”

“No, absolutely not. You need to have some fun with all the studying you’ve done lately.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely, and besides, Gabe is here. It’s not like you’re leaving me alone.”

The idea of just Gabe and I at dinner wasn’t exactly a bad thought either. I would never grow tired of looking at him or watching him get all protective over me and the babies.

“Alright, I promise I won’t be long,” Ava said.

“No, please, stay out as late as you want,” I replied. “Because after dinner, I am likely to go straight to bed, or at



least lay around in bed like a potato since I'm exhausted."

There was a knock on the door and Gabe called out, "Dinner is ready."

"Go, shoo," I said, playfully nudging my friend. "Good luck, you deserve to find someone who makes you happy."

"So do you, Bella."

"Pssh, one day. Once I'm settled in my career," I said. "Or at least once I'm not pregnant with your brother's babies."

We shared a laugh as Ava opened the door. As I started to peel myself up from the bed, Gabe rushed to my side and offered me a hand. I thanked him as I stared up into his gorgeous eyes.

Gabe and I, alone for dinner. There were definitely worse ways to spend an evening.

## G A B E

“Do you like the steak?”

“Oh yes, something has to seriously be wrong with a person to not like filet mignon,” she said with a laugh. “And this has to be one of the best steaks I’ve had in my life.”

“Good,” I said with a smile, taking a bite of my own steak. “You never got around to telling me what you like, and don’t like, so I could have Christine adjust the menu.”

“I’m not a picky eater,” she said. “Especially now—I’m just hungry all the time.”

“You are eating for five, so it makes sense,” I said, taking a bite of potatoes.

We both ate in silence for a few moments. I poured myself another glass of wine. Bella was drinking Sprite as she said that it helped with some of the nausea she was dealing with.

I wasn’t really sure what to talk about, or what was okay to talk about. I’d known Bella for years, but our relationship had changed when she had agreed to carry my children.

“So, um, I ordered the wallpaper for the nursery today. It has little monkeys, just like you suggested,” I said.

She smiled. “Oh really? I can’t wait to see it.”

“Me too. I want you to be involved.”

Her smile fell a bit and she stared down at the mashed potatoes, moving them around on the plate.

“I know you’re worried about letting the babies go, Bella. But we talked about this, I want you in their lives.”

“I know, but I’m not their mother, Gabe. I mean, I am, but I’m not. It’s just a weird situation, and I’m trying to figure out where I fit in.”

Suddenly, I made a snap decision.

“I want them to know that you’re their mother, Bella. We can tell them as soon as they are old enough to understand. Even if we aren’t together romantically, it doesn’t mean that they can’t know about you and about where they came from.”

Bella’s eyes filled with tears, and I rushed over to her side, fearing I had hurt her feelings.

“It’s fine, I’m fine, I’m not sad. I’m just emotional. Damn hormones,” she said. “I love that you want them to know about me, Gabe. Hearing those words means so much to me, you have no idea.”

“I know it’s complicated, but I think we can find a way where we can all live in harmony,” I said.

She stared back at me with hope in her eyes. I would do anything to stop those tears from falling.

Knowing that this beautiful, ambitious, amazing woman was carrying my children also blurred some lines in my own head, and I realized I was starting to see Bella differently than I had before.

I cared for her, and not just because she was giving me an incredible gift and not even because she was my sister’s best friend. I cared about her as a person aside from those things. Hell, I wasn’t sure I was thinking clearly anymore, the wine certainly didn’t help matters.

Knowing that she was fine, and with her tears drying up, I went back to my seat at the table.

“Ugh, these hormones are driving me crazy,” she said with a little laugh, wiping away the rest of the tears from her eyes. “My emotions are all over the place. I’m either crying over an ad I saw on Facebook, or so horny I can’t even see straight.”

Her words began to trail off and she stared at me with a panicked look in her eyes.

“Horny, huh?” I said, trying to turn it into a joke, but Bella’s eyes only got larger.

“I’m so sorry, I’m not sure why that slipped out of my mouth,” she said.

“It’s fine, you have nothing to be sorry about,” I said, though there was a tightness in my jeans. She wasn’t the only horny one. I adjusted myself and tried to go back to my meal, focusing on the mashed potatoes and gravy instead of the beautiful woman sitting across from me.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, taking me by surprise. I dug it out and checked who was calling. I frowned as I read the name to myself.

“Everything okay?” Bella asked.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s just, Roman is calling me. I don’t think he’s called me in years,” I said before ending the call. I was about to put the phone away when it rang again.

“I hope everything is okay,” Bella said.

“I’m sure it is,” I muttered as I canceled the call again. “And if it’s not, he can send a text or leave a voicemail.”

When my phone rang a third time, I went to end the call again but noticed it wasn’t Roman.

It was my dad.

I stared at the phone for a long time, debating with myself. Did I really want to speak to my father after all these years? Not really. But with Roman calling and then Dad, it made me think perhaps something was wrong.

“I’ll be back,” I told Bella, slipping from my seat as I answered the call.

“Dad, is everything okay?” I stopped in the hall outside the dining area.

“Gabriel!” Dad exclaimed. “I wasn’t sure you’d pick up.”

“I almost didn’t, but Roman tried to call me too. I thought maybe something was wrong.”

“Oh no, nothing is wrong, son,” my dad said. “I’m just calling to talk business—”

“I’m not in business with you anymore, Dad.”

I was about to hang up the phone when my dad spoke again. “It’s about the property in Riverview.”

“Mom’s property?” My voice caught in my throat.

“Yes, and I know it means a lot to you, but we have an opportunity to make a lot of money—”

“I don’t need money, Dad.”

“Son, I don’t think you realize what kind of money we’re talking about here. Tony’s company wants to turn it into a casino. You know there’s limited riverfront property and with the laws regarding casinos in Missouri—”

“I don’t give two shits about casino laws in Missouri,” I cut him off. “The property is to stay in the family, just like Mom always wanted.”

I had thought my brothers agreed with me about that, but maybe not seeing as Roman had tried to call me. Didn’t really matter though, since I had the largest share of the property being the oldest and Mom left it mostly to me. And I knew Ava wasn’t interested in working with Tony, either.

“But Gabriel—”

“Not happening, Dad, find another piece of land.” I hung up before he could continue arguing with me. My blood was already boiling. Having my father try to talk me into selling that property was enough to piss me off, but my brothers too? Shit, I thought they were at least slightly better than him. Showed how well I knew the men they grew into.

## B E L L A

I could hear Gabe's voice as I stepped out into the hallway. I paused, not wanting him to think I was eavesdropping, but it was too late to head back into the dining room. He turned and saw me standing there.

His face was twisted in a look of rage.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, walking toward him, concerned that something could have happened.

"Just family drama," he replied.

I knew about his family. Ava had told me that their dad wasn't the upstanding citizen that he tried to pretend to be. I knew that Gabe had a checkered past, running away from his dad's influence and falling into a lot of trouble of his own before cleaning his act up. His brothers weren't supportive of the new Gabe, or of Ava's choice to go to law school.

But I also knew that Ava, and likely Gabe too, still cared for their family. It wasn't easy to just walk away, I knew that firsthand.

I placed my hand on Gabe's arm. "I'm sorry. I'm here if you want to talk about it."

Gabe looked down at where my fingers stroked his skin. He was quiet for a long time before meeting my gaze again.

I hadn't lied earlier when I said I was horny all the time due to hormones, and that one stare was enough to make my panties nearly melt right off of me. There was still rage burning underneath the surface of Gabe's gaze, but there was

something more too, a heat in his eyes that made me move even closer to him.

“I need to relieve some tension,” he said.

I bit my lip, and the way he stared at me gave me the confidence to make my next move. “Well, I’m happy to help you with that if you’d like.”

His eyes widened as he took me in, looking me over as if considering my offer. Maybe he wasn’t sure if I meant what I said or he was having second thoughts considering who I was.

“I was thinking of just going to the gym, but,” b

BEFORE HE COULD FINISH the sentence, he took my face in his hands and smashed his lips into mine.

His hands were both rough and gentle at the same time, and his five o’clock shadow tickled my face, but those lips... they tasted even more divine than I imagined them to be.

My heart pounded in my chest as his tongue pushed into my mouth.

Gabe De Luca was kissing me.

He lifted me up off the floor and into his arms. He carried me down the hallway and into his temporary bedroom, laying me gently on the bed before joining me.

He kissed me long and hard, his hands moving over my body. I could hardly believe I was in bed with him, that I could touch him and feel him against me. My hands pulled at his shirt, eager to see more of him.

His chest was chiseled and covered with tattoos. I ran a hand down over his abs and unzipped his jeans before slipping beneath the waistband of his pants. I couldn’t see him fully, I could only feel him. His cock was hard and thick in my hand.

My body ached with need and I let out a low groan.

“Are you sure?” Gabe whispered against my lips.

“Yes, yes, Gabe.” I whimpered. “I want you.”

“Good, because I need to be inside of you,” he growled.

I felt the juices soaking my panties at those words. Gabe took no time at all removing my clothing, his hands moving along every curve of my body. His mouth explored my neck, my cleavage, my breasts before he began dotting soft, gentle kisses on my belly. I shuddered as he moved even lower, parting my thighs and burying his face between them. His tongue found my clit in a matter of nanoseconds. He circled it gently, his fingers teasing my opening as I quivered beneath him.

My mouth could barely find the words, but I managed to cry out, “Yes, Gabe, yes!” over and over again as he explored my most sensitive parts. He slid a finger inside of me, then two, then three, curving them upward and moving them in and out as he continued teasing my clit.

It didn’t take long at all for the first orgasm to hit. Pleasure rolled through me as my back arched upward. Gabe used his free hand to try and hold me down as he continued to go down on me. Wave after wave of bliss moved through my body until I couldn’t take it anymore, and I fell limp against the bed. My breathing was heavy and ragged, and my body was tired.

But when Gabe looked up at me from between my legs, my juices soaking his face, I knew I needed him inside of me.

I reached for him, but he surprised me by saying, “No.”

“No?”

Had he changed his mind?

“You’re going to get on top of me,” he said, his voice calm. “I don’t want to risk anything.”

He laid down on the bed, and I climbed on top of him, straddling his body and staring down at him.

Gabe pushed my long hair back over my shoulder and away from my face. “So I can see you better,” he said. I pressed against him, rubbing his member between my thighs. So much warmth, so much wetness—he was going to slide in easily, I had no doubt about that. I took his cock in my hand



and guided it toward my opening, and as expected, he slipped inside of me like a hand in a glove.

I gasped from the sensation of feeling him stretch me.

Gabe placed his hands on my hips, and for a moment, I just stayed like that, getting used to the sensation of being stretched ever so slightly from his thickness. Slowly, I began rocking my hips back and forth, grinding against him. His fingers dug into my flesh a bit as he helped me move, slowly rising up and down on his cock.

I fell forward, and his lips found mine, my groans of pleasure getting lost in the sweetness of his mouth as I felt another orgasm building inside of me.

“Yes, yes,” I whimpered. “I’m going to come again, Gabe —”

“Come for me, Bella,” he demanded. “Come *with* me.”

He pulled me down against his body, and I felt his cock throbbing inside of me. The sound of his groans and feeling him coming deep within me was all that was needed to push me over the edge. We came together, our bodies as one.

As the last waves of pleasure washed over me, I fully collapsed against Gabe. Neither of us spoke for a long time, but he stroked my face and held me against his hard body.

I was still struggling to believe what had just happened, even as my body was still recovering from the act. He was still sheathed inside of me.

Slowly, he helped roll me over to my side, then he turned to face me.

For a brief moment, I feared he might have regretted what we’d done but the look on his face told me otherwise. He smiled at me, dotting a kiss on my forehead. He was about to say something, but a knock at his bedroom door stopped him cold.

“Gabe?” Ava called out from the hallway.

Gabe’s eyes went wide, and I jumped from the bed. I searched the floor for my clothes as Gabe responded to his

sister.

“Yes, Ava?”

“Hey, I wanted to talk to you about something. Has Roman been trying to reach you all night?”

“Yes, he has, and I spoke with Dad. Everything is fine,” Gabe said through the door.

“Do you mind if I come in?” Ava asked.

“Uh, well, I’m not really decent at the moment, but I can meet you in the living room in a few minutes.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ava responded.

As I stared at Gabe, I knew that what we had just done was a one-time thing. We couldn’t do it again. “I’m sorry—”

“For what?” he asked.

“For letting my pregnancy hormones get in the way.”

“Don’t be,” Gabe said as he zipped up his pants. “We both wanted it. We’re both adults, we did nothing wrong.”

That was a relief.

“That being said,” he continued. “I don’t want to complicate things. We need to tread carefully. I don’t want anyone hurt after all of this is said and done.”

“Me either. That’s the last thing I want.”

Gabe came over to me and took my face in his hands again, tilting my head to look at him. He kissed me softly before pulling away. “I don’t regret a thing.”

“Me either.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way.”

Now fully dressed, I tried to slip out of Gabe’s room and down toward mine, figuring I’d leave the conversation with Ava for another time.

But as I stepped out of the room, I found Ava waiting at the end of the hall. She turned when the door opened and stared at me.

“Bella? Were you in Gabe’s room?”

Shit. I guess there wouldn’t be any waiting to have the conversation.

“Uh, yeah, Ava. I should explain—”

“Did you two, you know.”

I nodded.

“Please don’t be upset with me, I know you’re worried about things getting messy.”

“I think we’re beyond the messy part already.”

“No, no we’re not. Pregnancy hormones got the best of me, but Gabe and I both agree, this was a one-time thing, and we’re handling it like adults. There’s no drama, no hurt feelings, nothing you have to worry about.”

Ava looked at me with uncertainty, but she nodded. “I hope so because the last thing I need is to lose either you or Gabe. You two are my whole world.”

“I know, and you’re ours, we would never abandon you, Ava.”

I knew she dealt with her own issues from feeling like her family pretty much forgot she existed most of the time.

“Thanks, Bella,” she said, and there was a hint of a smile.

Gabe stepped out a moment later. “Oh wow, um...”

“She knows,” I told him.

“I know,” she said with a playful roll of the eyes.

“And we’re all good?” Gabe asked.

I looked at Ava who only hesitated for a second before nodding. “We’re all good.”

## GABE

**M**y phone buzzed. I checked it and saw Roman's name on the screen again. Shaking my head, I hit cancel. "He just can't take a hint, can he?" I muttered.

Before I could put my phone away, a text message popped up from him.

*Hey Gabe, we need to talk.*

The fuck we do, I thought to myself before shoving my phone in my pants pocket.

Bella excused herself, leaving Ava and I alone in the hallway. It was awkward looking at my sister, knowing I had just hooked up with her best friend. I felt like a bit of an ass, to be honest.

Ava had a serious expression on her face, and I expected her to launch into an argument about Bella, but instead she led me to a little sitting area down the hall and took a deep breath. "Promise me there's not going to be drama between you and Bella, ever?"

"Of course not, the last thing I want is drama considering the arrangement that we have."

Ava cocked her eyebrow at me. "Well knowing your past with women—"

"That was years ago, Ava. I was in my twenties and pretty fucked up all around. I'm not that guy anymore. In fact, before now I haven't been with a woman in almost three years. I've

laid off dating entirely, including sleeping around. I have no interest in that life anymore.”

“I hope so, because I can’t lose you, Gabe. I’ve already lost Mom, Dad, Roman and Dante—you’re all I have left,” she said.

Draping an arm over my little sister’s shoulders, I pulled her closer to me into a side hug.

“You listen here, Avapocalypse,” using one of the nicknames I had given her when she was a toddler and used throughout her entire childhood, “You literally can’t get rid of me. Even if you tried. I’m your big brother, and you’re stuck with me, no matter what happens.”

A smile stretched across my sister’s face. “Thanks, Gabe.” She punched me playfully as she pulled away from the hug. “But whatever you do, don’t hurt my best friend because then I might have to beat the shit out of you.”

She was a tiny thing yet it was always a joke that she could take me in a fight. Hell, maybe she could, I knew Ava was fierce.

“You got it,” I said. “I have no intention of hurting Bella. I care about her, Ava. I’ve known her since she was in kindergarten, I’m not going to be careless with her heart.”

Ava nodded. “I know you’re a good guy, deep down. I just worry.”

“No need to worry.”

Ava frowned as she dug her phone from her pocket. “It’s Roman.”

“He’s calling you nonstop too, huh?”

“I guess since he can’t reach you,” she said. “Do you have any idea what this is about?”

“Dad wants to sell the Riverview property.”

Ava’s eyes grew wide. “You can’t be serious. That property is to stay in our family, he knows how important it is to us.”

“I know.”

“And Roman and Dante? They agree with him?” she asked.

“I assume so,” I said.

“I can’t believe it. They care about that property as much as you and I do,” she said. “Hell, they have more memories of being there than me, since I was still pretty young when we stopped visiting the place.”

“Right, but you know Dad got his claws into them, they only care about money now.”

“Un-fucking-believable,” Ava said, leaning back into the couch. “Well, I know my share isn’t that large, but I absolutely refuse to sell.”

I patted her on the hand. I knew my sister would be on my side. She always was. The only one I could count on to do the right thing in our whole goddamn family.

“I’m not going to sell either. They can’t do a thing without me signing over my portion, so I guess they’re going to have to find another piece of property to build their casino.”

“They want to tear down that gorgeous house, with the views of the river and the woods all around, to build a fucking casino?”

“Yep.”

Ava shook her head, still in disbelief.

“You know, one of the few memories I have of Mom is at that place,” she said, her voice low. “We were playing in the garden; she gave me a little shovel to dig holes and she dropped in tulip bulbs. She made it seem like I was such a good little gardener, but really, I know she was doing most of the work.”

“Grandma loved her tulips,” I said. “I remember getting in so much trouble once when Roman and I were playing and I fell into the tulip beds, but Mom was there to tell me it was okay, that she understood that accidents happened.”

“She was a good mom,” Ava said, her voice cracking.

“That she was.” I looked over at Ava and saw tears in her eyes.

Although I felt robbed of my time with our mother, Ava, her only daughter, got even less than I did. It was such a sad shame—I knew Mom would have loved raising her.

“I also remember playing hide and seek in the house with Dante,” she said with a low chuckle. “It was so easy to get lost in there, and I was hiding in a cabinet in the upstairs hall. I think he gave up on trying to find me. Mom eventually found me after I started crying.”

“I remember playing hide and seek there too. Dante never had the patience to finish the game, if he didn’t find you in three minutes, he found something else to do instead.”

“So it wasn’t just me?” she asked.

I laughed. “Oh no, it wasn’t. Roman and I learned pretty quickly to never play with Dante, unless he was the one doing the hiding.”

Ava snickered. “That makes a lot of sense now. At the time, I thought he just hated me.”

“Nah, they never hated you,” I said.

She was quiet for a long time. “Yeah, I remember when I got older, Dante was really protective of me, so I guess you’re right. It just always felt like the three of you were super close and I was set apart as the baby, or maybe because I was the girl.”

“I think the age difference definitely affected things,” I said. She was right though, my brothers and I used to be super close. I always adored Ava and we were all protective of her, but it was hard to bring an eight-year-old into some of the activities we were involved in as teens.

“You miss them, don’t you?”

I looked over at Ava. “Of course. Don’t you?”

“All the freaking time,” she said. “Every time Roman calls, I’m tempted to pick up. Speak of the devil...”

She pulled out her phone and stared down at it.

“You know you can answer it if you’d like to,” I told her. “I never said you couldn’t have a relationship with them just because I chose not to.”

“I know it’s my choice but considering the field I’m going into and all that, I can’t be associated with their activities, but \_\_\_”

“But they’re still your brothers.”

She nodded and sighed as the ringing stopped.

“I’m going to head to bed, it’s been a wild night.”

It suddenly hit me; she’d been out on a date. She got home pretty quickly, which wasn’t a good sign.

“Bad date?” I asked.

She groaned and rolled her head back against the couch. “I don’t get how these grown ass men can be so fragile. Once he found out I was going to be a lawyer, he clearly became uncomfortable because he said, and I quote, he was ‘looking to be the breadwinner in the family’. Like dude, we aren’t even talking about marriage yet, but what a red flag.”

“None of that will matter once you find the right guy, I promise.”

“If he even exists,” she said with a sigh. “Oh well, I think I’m going to lay off dating for a bit and get back to focusing on my degree.” She stood up and headed toward the stairs.

“I’m proud of you, Ava.”

Those words stopped her in her tracks. I knew that Dad had never uttered that phrase to her, not even once. He never did to any of us.

But I wasn’t my dad. I was working on being better than my father, which meant being a better person to everyone, especially to my sister who’d been through plenty of shit alongside me.



She smiled. “Thanks, Gabe. I’m proud of you too.”

Ava knew my past, knew there was a lot for me to be ashamed of, but what was important was I knew I had come out ahead. I knew I had a lot to be proud of, even if our dad could never see it or say the words.

“Thanks, sis,” I said. “Sleep well.”

She headed upstairs.

Deciding to check on Bella before heading to bed myself, I walked down to the end of the hallway. I knocked gently on her door, which wasn’t closed all the way, and it opened enough for me to see that the room was empty.

She had free rein of the house, was free to go wherever she wanted, so I didn’t think too much of it. But I knew I wasn’t ready to fall asleep. There was too much going on in my head. Truth was, I knew that I was seeking her out not simply to check in on her, but because I enjoyed her company.

I walked back down the hallway and wondered where she could be. A smile stretched across my face as it became obvious.

The library.

As soon as I entered, I saw her on one of the large, overstuffed couches, a book laid open on her chest. Her eyes were closed and every once in a while, a quiet snore escaped from her.

She looked so peaceful, I almost just grabbed a blanket and left her there, but I knew that pregnancy made your body ache and I didn’t want her to wake up sore and uncomfortable. Without a second thought, I walked over and removed the book, placing it on the table. I slipped my arms underneath her, and she stirred, her eyes fluttering but not fully opening. She muttered incoherently.

“Shh, I’m just going to take you to bed,” I whispered.

“Gabe?”

“Yes, it’s me,” I said. I lifted her into my arms, cradling her against my chest. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she said, resting her head against me.

I carried her into her bedroom and placed her on the bed, careful to pull the blankets aside before laying her down. I covered her up and smiled as she nestled into the bed with a satisfying sigh.

I hoped I'd be able to sleep as soundly.

## BELLA

**I**t was a good thing the bed at Gabe's place was so comfortable because the further I got into the pregnancy, the harder it was for me to sleep. And I was about to be spending a lot more time in bed as the days went on.

I wasn't fully on bed rest yet, but I knew to expect it at some point, and I was told to take it easy. To Gabe, that meant I was not to lift a finger or stand too long or do anything that might cause stress on my body or for the babies.

There was a knock at the door, and a smile stretched across my face.

"Come in," I said, knowing full well that it was Gabe coming with breakfast in bed for me. That had become a thing in the last couple of weeks, something I thoroughly enjoyed and could get used to.

But it wasn't just Gabe. Ava was with him, and she carried a balloon that said, "You're halfway there!"

"Congrats on making it twenty weeks, girly," she said, practically skipping over to the bed.

"Thank you," I replied. It had gone by so fast, it was almost hard to believe that I was nearing the finish line.

Gabe helped me to sit up in bed and positioned the tray in front of me.

Biscuits and gravy with a side of scrambled eggs. I never had to worry about going hungry and the food was better than anything you could get in a restaurant.

Gabe had some staff bring in a tray for Ava as well. He never ate, though he always sat with me and drank his coffee.

No coffee for me, I had requested a big glass of apple juice, which was weird. I had never really drank it before but found myself obsessed with it during the pregnancy. Gabe made sure I always had some on hand, any time of the day or night, when a craving struck.

“So, you have the anatomy scan today?” Ava asked.

“Yes, just to make sure the babies are doing alright,” I said, placing a hand on my now very ample belly. It was hard to believe that it would still grow even bigger.

“And are you going to ask about whether they are boys or girls?” Ava was hopeful, she was very interested in knowing what we were having.

“That’s not up to me, I told Gabe he could decide,” I said, looking over at him.

“I don’t care if they’re boys or girls, I just want—”

Ava finished his sentence for him. “Healthy babies, yes, so do I. I’m just curious, aren’t you?”

She looked at the two of us. Truthfully, I was a little curious, but I was fine waiting as well. It wasn’t as if I was picking out names, of course that was all up to Gabe, and he hadn’t mentioned anything about that.

When neither of us answered, Ava expressed a similar sentiment. “And what about names? Do you just have a ton picked out, both girl and boy names, and you’ll decide when they get here or what?”

Gabe looked perplexed. “I hadn’t really thought about that.”

“See, which is why you should know.” Ava took a bite from her biscuits and gravy with a smug look on her face.

“Maybe,” Gabe said. “We’ll talk about it.”

He looked over at me.

“We? I thought this was your decision.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” he said.

Gabe had been amazing about making sure I felt included in the pregnancy but sometimes I wasn’t sure where the lines were drawn—not just because of our agreement, but because of my own attachment to the babies.

“We can talk about it on the ride over to the clinic,” I said, finishing off my breakfast. “Speaking of which, I may need some help getting out of this bed.”

Both Gabe and Ava were on their feet in an instant.

I chuckled at how quickly they rushed to my aid. I just had to say the word, and they were there.

“Thanks, but I don’t think I’m heavy enough to need both of you to get me out. Not yet at least.”

But at the rate I was growing, it probably wouldn’t be long until that was a possibility.

\* \* \*

DURING THE SCAN, the tech muttered the word “Oh, ” and my heart dropped. She went silent as she slid the wand over my belly.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Once we finish with the scan, the doctor will come in and talk to you about the results.”

Those words sent a chill down my spine. I shared a look with Gabe, and he clearly picked up on it as well. He took my hand in his and gave it a firm squeeze, as if to let me know that we were in this together.

The tech finished up what she was doing and told me I could get cleaned up and dressed. My hands were shaking as I put my clothes back on.

“What is it? Do you think something is wrong with them?” I asked Gabe.

“I’m sure everything is fine, they may just need more testing or something since you’re carrying four babies.”

“Maybe,” I said. The tech’s “Oh” stuck with me though and I kept replaying that moment in my head over and over as we waited for the doctor to arrive.

When he stepped into the room, the look on his face didn’t make me feel much better.

“First of all, I want to ease your concerns. Your babies are fine. Three of them are perfectly healthy, no problems as far as we could tell,” he said. “But Baby B has what appears to be a small hole in his heart. Now before you panic, I will let you know that this is an issue we see fairly often, and most babies end up recovering. Some even close up on their own after birth, others may need surgery, but it’s a condition I feel confident that we can manage.”

It took a minute for the doctor’s words to click. Gabe once again took my hand in his, and his strength was enough to get us all through it. When I couldn’t find the words, he did.

“So you think our son will be fine?”

Our son. His words surprised me, but I didn’t have a chance to really think too long about them. One of the babies, a little boy, had a hole in his tiny heart. Might as well have been my own heart because it ached in my chest just thinking those words in my head. The doctor’s voice brought me back into the moment.

“I do, yes. Do either of you have a family history of heart problems?” the doctor asked.

I looked at Gabe. “None on my side,” he replied. “Thankfully, my family is actually really healthy, we don’t have any medical issues as far as I’m aware. Neither of my parents have any heart problems, not even high blood pressure or anything like that.”

“How about at birth?” the doctor asked.

“No,” Gabe answered. “My brothers and sister and I were all born healthy.”

When the doctor looked over at me I opened my mouth to answer, but quickly realized I had no answer. Nothing concrete at least. I knew nothing about my own birth. While I was sure most parents would inform their children of any major health concerns, I couldn't be too sure with my mom, especially after our earlier conversation. I stared blankly at the doctor.

"I don't know," I said. "My parents have never talked to me about my own birth, and they've never told me if there's anything genetic in my family."

"That's fine, we can do more testing. I think this is something we can tackle," he said with a reassuring smile.

After we finished up at the appointment, and as soon as we stepped outside, the tears began to fall. Gabe pulled me into a hug and said, "It's going to be okay."

"I hope so," I said. "I need answers."

I pulled out my phone and dialed the number before even reaching Gabe's car. I found a bench and sat down. Gabe stepped away to give me some privacy.

My mom answered just before it went to voicemail.

"Yes?" she answered.

We hadn't talked since I broke the news of the pregnancy to her, but I still expected some concern to come from my own mother.

"Mom, this is important. I need some answers and I need them now," I said. Before she could protest, I added, "Was I born with any heart defects or other health issues?"

"Bella, I told you I don't remember any of that."

"You don't remember if I was born with a hole in my heart? That seems like something important that a mother would remember."

She just sighed.

"Come on, Mom. This is serious. One of my babies appears to have a heart defect and we are trying to determine if

it's genetic. Do you remember if I had any health problems at birth, anything at all?"

"Bella, I don't know," she said.

"How can you not know anything about your own daughter's birth?" My voice was raised, I couldn't help it. "How come any time I ask about my birth or anything about when I was a baby, you don't remember? How come you always avoid answering questions about my genetics?"

I couldn't stop myself, I let it all out. Years of pent-up frustration. It didn't matter too much before if I knew little about my birth story. But carrying Gabe's babies, it mattered a lot and I wanted answers.

I didn't expect a response. I thought she might even hang up on me. But once I finished, she burst out with, "Because I didn't give birth to you."

"What?" I stammered.

"I told you, I didn't give birth to you. Are you happy now? I'm not your mother, and your father isn't your father. You finally know the truth so you can stop fucking badgering me with questions I don't have answers to."

"You're not my... wait, am I adopted?" It was hard to imagine my parents being approved to adopt a child, but it was the only thing that made sense.

At first, I wasn't sure what I was hearing on the other end of the line. Was my mom sobbing?

"I always wanted to be a mother, it's all I ever wanted," she spoke between sobs, at times making incoherent sounds, "But my fucking body couldn't even get that right. So I did something stupid, and it fucked everything up."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't—"

"You can't what? Tell me what you did!"

I heard some sniffing, and then the sound of her blowing her nose. She took a few deep breaths before continuing,



seemingly calmer. “I can’t talk about it, Bella. But just know, it’s why I always resented you. Because you never bonded with me, deep down I suspect you knew you weren’t mine. You ruined everything, my marriage, everything.”

Her words were like a dagger through my heart, even though I always suspected it to be true. My mother hated me. She blamed me for things that couldn’t possibly be my fault. How could I, a child, break up their marriage when I didn’t even ask to be part of their lives in the first place?

“I never asked to be your daughter, you know,” I said.

The line went dead.

I sat there in shock, the phone to my ear as if I expected my mom to come back on the line, to tell me what she had done and how I came to be her daughter.

But I knew, in my heart, that just like the love I had craved from her my entire life, she was incapable of giving me what I needed.

## G A B E

“We’ll get to the bottom of it,” I told Bella on the drive home. “Gather everything you have—birth certificate, childhood photos, anything from the time you grew up.”

With my background and history, I could find almost anyone. Bella was a journalist, so I knew she had the tools to dig up info as well. Together, there was no way we wouldn’t get to the bottom of things.

“My head is spinning,” she said. “I always suspected something was off, but I thought it was typical teenage angst of hoping I had different parents all along, you know?”

I nodded. “I think that’s normal.”

“But I have flashes of memories in my head, of people I never saw again. Maybe they were distant relatives or maybe I dreamed them up. Who knows, but now I wonder if maybe —”

She trailed off, but I knew what she was thinking. Those people she had memory flashes of, maybe they were her real family.

Her mother didn’t give her much to work with, but she had mentioned that she’d done something bad which led us both to believe that the method they used for Bella joining the family was most likely illegal.

Bella was definitely right about her parents not likely being parental candidates to adopt. Criminal history. Alcohol and drug abuse. Domestic violence charges. I’d heard about it

over the years, and I knew what kind of people her parents were. Her dad was in prison and likely would be for a long time for multiple charges.

Normally I wouldn't jump to kidnapping as the first viable option, but in her case, it seemed the most likely.

When we got home, Bella and I went to her room, and we grabbed everything she had from her birth and childhood. With those documents and photos in hand, we went into the library.

I brought my laptop so she could relax on the comfortable couch while I worked on doing do everything in my power to get her the answers she desperately needed.

First, she handed me her birth certificate.

Isabella Marie Stone born to James and Mary Stone of St. Louis, Missouri, on October 15, Barnes Hospital. Nothing unusual there, at least at first glance, but her dad had gone to prison for forging legal documents, so I knew that I would have to dig deeper if I wanted to prove it was a fake.

Bella had no baby photos, none whatsoever. The earliest photo she had of herself was at the age of about three or four. She told me that her parents claimed they had none, and when pressed, she said they talked about a fire and losing everything in it when she was young, but she couldn't remember anything about a fire happening. They insisted she was too young and had forgotten.

"You were a cute kid," I said, staring down at the photo of a toddler Bella in pigtails. Her hair was just as strawberry blonde then as it was as an adult, but curlier. She had a big, bright smile and was wearing a pink dress with little white bows all over it, and pink bows in her hair. I wondered, if one of the babies was a girl, would they look like her? Because if so, that would be so damned adorable.

"Thanks, I only wish I knew what I looked like as a baby," she muttered.

"I promise you, I will find out what happened."

She smiled at me, and my insides turned to mush. Over the last few weeks, I had spent a lot of time with Bella. We had kept our promise to Ava and had not been intimate again. It would have been hard with how pregnant she was anyway, though I couldn't deny being tempted. I found myself looking for excuses just to be in the same room as her but told myself it wasn't because I had feelings for her, it was wanting to protect my babies. But even I knew that was a bunch of bullshit.

First thing I did was scan the photo and do an image search to see if anything popped up. I wasn't expecting much, but it was a logical first step. As the results populated my screen, however, my chest grew tight.

My face must have given away my thoughts because Bella was looking over at the screen. "What is it?"

I clicked the result that caught my eye.

It was a missing child poster that had been circulated in Chicago and online.

"That looks like me! That's even the same dress from the photo!" she exclaimed.

She was right. The photo was almost exactly the same. Subtle differences in posing, but I was still looking at an adorable redheaded toddler in a pink dress with little white bows who was three years old when she went missing from her family's home. She was never found.

"Her name is Anabel," I said. "Anabel O'Connell."

"Anabel..." Bella whispered to herself. "Is my name really Anabel?"

I shrugged, because truthfully, I didn't have the answers. Could it just be a similar looking little girl? Or was it Bella?

"Does it say who to contact?" She leaned closer to read the information on the poster.

"It says to contact Chicago PD with any information."

"We should do that, right now, in fact—" Bella was digging out her phone, but I stopped her by placing my hands

on hers. She stared deep into my eyes.

“I know you want answers, but I do not want you stressing about this. At all. It’s not good for you or the babies. Do you trust me?”

She nodded. “Absolutely, Gabe. I trust you and Ava more than I trust anyone in my life.”

“Then let me handle it, okay? I can dig around, find out everything I can, and I will pass it along to you. Before we bring in the police though, we really need to be 100% sure, for your sake as well as the parents of this child.”

“You’re right. Thanks Gabe,” she said, her voice soft.

A strand of hair fell in front of her face. Without even thinking, I reached over and tucked it behind her ear. She smiled at me, and in that moment, it was hard not to press my lips to hers. I leaned closer, but instead of meeting her lips, I kissed her forehead.

“I think I’m going to rest a bit, it’s been a long, distressing day,” she said.

“I think that’s a very good idea,” I agreed.

“You’ll tell me if you find anything?”

“Promise.”

She smiled again, and I helped her from the couch. Walking her down the hallway to her room, I so badly wanted to kiss her, but knew that we had agreed to keep things friendly. I stopped outside of her door.

“Do you need any help getting into bed?”

“I think I can manage that on my own, but thank you for everything, Gabe.”

She hesitated there for a moment or two, her eyes twinkling behind thick, black lashes. I could have stayed there and counted the freckles on her cheeks all day, but I knew she needed to rest.

She slipped into the room and closed the door behind her. I waited in the hallway, listening for any sounds coming from

inside in case she called out for me.

After a few minutes of silence, I walked back down to the library and stared at the pile of stuff she had left for me. Her birth certificate was on top. Picking it up, I read over it again and pulled out a magnifying glass to get a closer look.

There, on her name, was a change in font from the rest of it. Barely noticeable, but once I picked up on it, I noticed it in a few other places. Maybe it was a coincidence but knowing her family, I had a feeling I had just found my second clue.

## BELLA

Gabe had found a highly-rated heart specialist, and we had sent the babies' ultrasound pictures along with other medical documents ahead of meeting with him. Dr. Montgomery had looked over the ultrasound images and had ordered further testing as well. He came into the room with a smile on his face, which instantly relieved some of the anxiety coursing through my body.

“Well the good news is, I agree with your obstetrician that this is something we can manage,” he said. “I’ve seen this sort of problem many times before, and it usually closes up on its own after birth. If we need to do surgery, we can wait a few months for it, at least until the baby puts on some weight. Considering you’re having quadruplets, we expect all of the babies to be pretty small at birth. Obviously the longer you can go before giving birth, the better. I would encourage almost complete bedrest, if at all possible.”

“I’m already doing that, for the most part,” I replied.

“Good, keep it up,” the doctor said. “Since you’re having multiples, delivery will most likely be scheduled and there will be a lot of specialists on hand. I’ll be there as well, and I really think that with your care team, everything is going to be okay.”

I suddenly realized I’d been squeezing Gabe’s hand a little too tightly—when I released my grip I left white marks in his flesh. Hearing those words, however, helped me to relax. I felt like I could breathe for the first time in days, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, at least somewhat.

Until the babies were born healthy and were out of the woods, there was no way I could fully relax. I loved those little monkeys already. I loved them more than life itself and knowing that they were at risk simply because there were four of them, and with the heart issue, I knew the third trimester was going to seem excruciatingly long.

Gabe asked a few questions, having done some research on his own. I couldn't help but smile over at him, feeling blessed to have him at my side throughout all of this. He was a caring, doting father to the babies already. He did everything for us, and I had no doubt he would continue to do whatever was needed to make sure our children were healthy and happy.

Gabe gave my hand a squeeze, and when we walked out of the office and into the parking lot, he pulled me into a hug.

“Well that’s mostly a relief,” I said. “Not that I’m not still worried—”

“I know you are. We both are. But it is nice to hear from a specialist that our baby boy is likely to be fine.”

Our baby boy.

I didn't call out his choice of words. After all, I felt the same, though I kept it to myself. I thought of them as our children, something that I knew could complicate things once they arrived, but it was too late for that.

“Thirty weeks,” I said. “My goal is to get us to at least thirty weeks.”

Most quadruplets were delivered around thirty weeks. While in a perfect world, I'd hold out for forty, I knew it wasn't possible and my doctors told me to be prepared for a scheduled C-section. So in ten more weeks, maybe less, they would be out of the safety of my womb and in the world with us.

As much as I loved the idea of holding them in my arms, as long as they were inside of me, they were my constant companions. I knew once they were born, it was unlikely that I would get to be with them twenty-four seven and that pained



my heart to even think about. But until then, they were with me, always, and I liked that.

Gabe looked down at me, still holding me close. I so badly wanted to ask him what he was thinking. His face was relaxed and soft, his lips pulled back into a smile.

*His soft, sweet lips*, I thought to myself, remembering the way they had felt pressed against mine. My insides quivered at the memory. What I wouldn't give to be able to have my way with him again, but I knew that wasn't a good idea.

It didn't help that every little thing he did was hot as hell. Being a strong, loving father was easily one of the sexiest things a man could be.

I pulled away from his embrace, knowing that there was no way to act on my desires. I was too pregnant. The doctors told me to take it easy, and no amount of drenched panties would change that.

"I have some things to show you when we get home," he said.

"Oh yeah? With the nursery?" I asked.

"Well... yes, some things there too, but that's not what I'm talking about."

He took my hand in his and together, we walked to his car which was thankfully parked nearby.

"Are you going to tell me?" I asked. "Or keep me guessing?"

"Keep you guessing, at least until we get home." His face had turned serious all of a sudden, and I instantly knew what it was about.

"Oh, so you found something about my real family?" I asked.

He nodded as he opened the car door for me. "I'll show you when we get home, but please promise me that you won't let it stress you out or upset you?"

“I’ll do my best.” And I would. I wanted to do my very best for these babies, but Gabe’s tone worried me a bit.



## G A B E

**B**ella was propped up on the couch in the library when I came in with my laptop. She put her book away instantly.

“You said you had some stuff to show me?”

“I do,” I said, taking the seat next to her. “But please, whatever you do, we need to be calm about this, and proceed slowly. Because we still don’t know for sure that these are your parents.”

“You found my parents?” She sat up straighter.

“Maybe.” I had to temper her expectations because I meant what I said—I didn’t know for sure. Only a DNA test could prove that she was their daughter, and we had enough going on already, I didn’t want to add any additional stress to her life.

“Tell me, Gabe.”

“Their names are Charles and Brenda O’Connell. They live just outside Chicago, in Lake Forest.”

“Wow, that’s a beautiful area, ritzy,” she said.

I nodded. “They had a daughter named Anabel, you saw her picture. She was kidnapped from their home when she was three years old and never found. The family suspected a member of their staff, a housekeeper that disappeared around the same time Anabel did.”

“My mom talked about working as a housekeeper for affluent families before. Do you know the name of the housekeeper?”

“Yes, Maria Smith.”

“That seems like a pretty basic name. Almost fake.”

“Exactly.”

Bella seemed to be thinking things over for a moment, and I wanted to give her plenty of time to soak in all the information.

“Is there a way to look them up online? Or can I contact them?”

I knew she would want to talk to them, and I didn’t blame her one little bit.

“Yes, I have an email address for Charles, I believe. I found him on LinkedIn, otherwise they don’t seem to have much social media activity. They seem to keep a low profile.”

“That’s fine, an email is perfect.”

“What do you plan to say to him?” I asked.

She seemed to think over the question for a long time before saying, “I honestly don’t know. It feels a bit cruel to be like, ‘hey, I suspect I might be your daughter,’ just in case I’m not. They’ve probably gotten a lot of scams like that unfortunately, people pretending to be their daughter since they have money.”

“Yes, that’s my thought too.”

“What if I don’t come right out and say it, not at first? I could pose as a journalist researching missing children cold cases. It’s not a complete lie—I would be interested in writing a story about Anabel’s disappearance even if I’m not their daughter. I’m sure I could sell it to a magazine, somewhere.”

“I think that sounds like a good plan.”

Bella was now sitting fully upright beside me, her eyes wide as she seemed to be mulling over all the possibilities. Excitement was etched across her face.

“Gabe, I can’t tell you enough how much I appreciate you doing this. This means the world to me.”

“I can’t promise they are your parents.”

She stared deep into my eyes. “I know, but the fact that you did all this for me, it still means a lot.”

“I will do anything to help you find answers, Bella. If this isn’t your family, I will keep searching until we figure out where you came from.”

She leaned closer to me, close enough that I could feel her breath against my face. It wouldn’t take much to close the distance between us, to plant my lips onto hers.

We’d been fighting it for weeks and weeks. For what? I often asked myself.

*No, I argued with myself internally, she’s vulnerable and emotional, you can’t do this.*

The temptation was too much though. I yearned to feel her lips, to touch her soft skin, to claim her and make her mine.

I couldn’t stop myself from inching closer.

A door opened and closed, causing both of us to pull back. Bella’s cheeks flushed as she stared toward the doorway.

Ava walked in, and because of the upset look on her face, I feared that she was about to go off on us for nearly kissing.

But she didn’t even mention it. “Did you talk to Roman yet?”

“No. I wasn’t planning on it, why?”

“I think you should call him,” Ava said, surprising the hell out of me.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes, I just got off the phone with him and—”

“I have no intention of selling the property, Ava.” I sighed, fearing that my brothers had gotten to her.

“He doesn’t want to talk about that. He didn’t even mention it to me, in fact. He just misses us, Gabe, and wants to reconnect.”

I leaned back against the couch and crossed my arms in front of my chest. Ava was a smart girl, but she also didn't know Roman the way I did.

"He's changed," she continued. "Or so he says, and I think I believe him."

"I don't."

Ava's face fell even more. "Gabe, please, give him a call. I think you might be surprised."

I wasn't convinced, not at all. Roman never surprised me. He took after our father in almost every way, following in his footsteps. He seemed to enjoy walking the line between the legitimate and the criminal world.

Ava's face almost convinced me, at the very least, to consider it.

"I'll call him when I get a chance." I worded it that way on purpose, knowing I could find a way to put it off indefinitely. There was a lot going on, and while I would always love my brothers, they would never come first. Ava, Bella, and my children were the only family I needed.





## BELLA

I stared at the blinking cursor. Charles O’Connell’s email address was typed in. That was as far as I had gotten. I wanted to send him a message but couldn’t find the words. I didn’t know for sure that I was their missing daughter, and it wouldn’t be fair to them to get their hopes up, so I planned to come at it from a different angle. Still, trying to find the words to type out to the man who very well could be my biological father was more difficult than I imagined.

My mom was not answering my calls, so it wasn’t like I could ask her more questions. I couldn’t go over to see her either, not in my delicate condition. It wouldn’t have been wise anyway considering the conversation would likely turn ugly and stressful, and we were trying to limit my stress levels, not increase them.

*Dear Charles,* I typed. That was easy enough. But then I doubted myself. Perhaps I should call him Mr. O’Connell? Yes, definitely. I changed that and just stared at the screen, trying to figure out the best way to open up the conversation.

Nothing came to me.

I’m not sure how long I sat there like that, staring at the blank email.

A knock came at my door.

“Come in,” I said.

Gabe stepped into my room, and right away, I felt myself smiling, simply by being in his presence.

“Christine asked for the night off, so Ava and I are thinking of ordering takeout and maybe watching a movie.”

“That sounds great,” I said, closing the laptop and putting it on the table beside the bed.

“Are you craving anything in particular?” he asked.

“Hmm I would do almost anything for some good pad Thai.” I knew Ava was a big Thai food fan, and I assumed Gabe would be as well, since... who didn't like Thai food?

He smiled. “I think I know just the place.”

I slipped from the bed and followed him into the living area, where Ava was waiting for us. “Thai food?” Gabe asked her.

“Uh, have I ever been known to turn down Thai food?” She laughed.

“Perfect,” he said. “I think I already know what Ava wants, and Bella, you said you wanted pad Thai.”

He pulled out his phone and began placing the order, while Ava and I looked at the menu to see if there was anything else we wanted. Considering I was eating for five, it was a no brainer that I would want something more.

When the food arrived, we went into the tv room, which to be honest, was more like an in-home movie theater. A large projector screen and several rows of the comfiest couches and chairs imaginable filled the space. There was plenty of room to spread out, and I got an entire couch to myself, with a little table in front of me for my food.

“So what are you ladies in the mood to watch?” Gabe asked.

“Can we pick anything?” Ava asked, eyes wide as if she already knew what she wanted to ask for.

“Anything at all. As long as I own it or can find it on a streaming service,” he said.

Ava and I shared a look, smiling at each other since we knew what movie we both wanted to watch without uttering a

word.

Gabe chuckled and said, “Alright, *The Princess Bride* it is.”

“Yay!” Ava exclaimed. “I feel like a kid all over again. Thanks, Gabe.”

“Yes, thank you, Gabe,” I said, opening the top of the container to my pad Thai. “This smells amazing.”

Gabe took the chair next to me, with Ava on the other side. We chowed down as we watched the movie that Ava and I had seen at least a thousand times over the years.

“What do you think about naming one of your kids Wesley?” Ava asked Gabe.

“Wesley is nice,” Gabe responded. “What do you think, Bella?”

I nearly choked on my food. “I, um, well, I haven’t given it any thought since I didn’t think it was my place to help name them.”

“Of course it is,” Gabe said with a sweet smile. “I’d love to hear your thoughts on names.”

“Okay, so what were you thinking?”

I was curious to hear what Gabe had in mind.

“Well, after you asked about names a while back I realized I needed to start thinking about that so I came up with two; one for a boy and one for a girl.”

“What names did you pick out?” Ava asked eagerly.

“Lucia, after our mom, obviously,” he said, averting his gaze and staring down at his food. I knew that Gabe had been very close to his mother and losing her was difficult for him.

“I love that. It’s such a beautiful name and holds so much meaning.”

“I agree,” Ava said. “And what about the boy’s name?”

“Vincent, after Mom’s dad,” he said.

“Ahh, yes, you two were very close,” Ava replied, her tone softer and gentler. I didn’t know the entire history of Gabe and his relationship with his grandparents, but it was clear that they had meant a lot to him.

“Vincent is a nice name,” I said.

“Thank you. Now I was thinking you could help name the other two?”

“We don’t know if they’re boys or girls yet.”

“We can find out, if you’d like,” Gabe said.

I looked over at him, and he was staring right at me. The look in his eyes nearly took my breath away. Sometimes, it felt like maybe we could raise the babies together, maybe it was possible to co-parent, or even better, be together as a family. I found myself wanting that, yearning for it more and more by the day. The more time I spent with Gabe, seeing the way he took care of the people he loved, the more I wanted to be the true mother of his children.

My childhood crush was gone, replaced by something more real, more grown-up, but I couldn’t put it into words.

“I am leaving that up to you,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

“They’re your babies too,” he reminded me.

“Only because I’m carrying them,” I said. “I can’t forget that.”

“I still want your opinions, and your involvement,” he said.

“Ariana,” I spoke after a moment of thinking it over. “If we have more than one girl, that is. I’ve always loved the name and it just feels right.”

“Ariana is lovely,” Gabe replied, sitting back in his seat with a satisfied smile.

“Yeah, I love Ariana with Vincent and Lucia,” Ava added.

It was nice, sitting there, feeling part of the family, and thinking about the future. I placed a hand on my belly and felt

the babies wiggling around inside of me. I loved them so much already, and I knew that Gabe and Ava did too.



## G A B E

**B**ella yawned just as the credits appeared on the screen.

“I feel ya there,” Ava said. “And I have to be up super early tomorrow for a seminar.”

My sister got up from the couch and stretched, matching Bella’s yawn with one of her own.

“When did we get this old, where bedtime at ten p.m. is normal?” Bella asked with a laugh.

“Well, I’m a law student and you’re literally growing four humans inside of you right now, I think we both have valid excuses,” Ava said. “Do you need any help?”

“I got it,” I told her. “You can just head up to bed.”

I rushed to Bella’s side as she attempted to get up off the couch, helping her to her feet.

“Who knew it would ever get this hard to get off the couch,” she said.

“Four humans, remember?” Ava piped up.

“Trust me, it would be hard for me to forget,” Bella said with a laugh. She placed a hand on her lower back, so I did the same, offering her support.

“I’m going to help her to bed, then I’ll be back to clean up the mess.” I looked over at Ava.

“Don’t even worry about it, Gabe. I got it under control,” Ava said. “I think I can handle a few takeout boxes.”

“Thanks, sis,” I said.

Bella and I walked slowly from the room and down the hallway. I knew that the time was coming soon when she might need to be in bed all the time, and I knew that would be hard for her, but getting around was becoming more difficult by the day, too.

We made it to her room, and I helped her into bed. She was already wearing pajamas—she practically lived in them because they were more comfortable and easier to get in and out of.

I tucked her in then sat down on the side of the bed.

“You know, I mean it when I say I want you to be involved. I went with a known surrogate, rather than a random one, for a reason,” I said.

“And here I thought I had to convince you all along,” she said.

“Do you remember how quickly I jumped on your offer?”

“You told me you needed to think about it,” she reminded me.

“Only because you’re my sister’s best friend, I didn’t want to complicate your life or Ava’s. But the moment you came to me, I knew in my heart that you were the woman I wanted. You’re beautiful, intelligent, ambitious... everything I could ever want in the mother of my children.”

Bella let out a gasp that hung in the air. I couldn’t help myself, I placed a hand on her belly. I loved nothing more than touching her, feeling my babies kicking from inside of her. But it wasn’t just that.

In the dim light of the room, I could see the way she was looking at me, her eyes wide, taking me in. Another reason I hesitated with making the decision to have her as my surrogate was because I knew that at one time, she’d had a crush on me. I figured that had died down over the years, but the way she looked at me in that moment, I knew that the crush had turned into genuine feelings that had only grown stronger.



And it was mutual.

I leaned forward, intending to kiss her forehead, but found my mouth pressed against hers.

Bella's fingers stroked my face as she returned the kiss but then...

"Gabe, I—"

I was afraid of what she might say. I knew what I had done was wrong. I pulled back from her, stumbling away from the bed. "I'm sorry, Bella."

"Don't be sorry, Gabe," she said.

"I'm just afraid this will complicate things for us. I want you to always be involved with the kids, and to always be a part of this family. What if—"

"What if, what?" she asked, sitting up a bit in the bed. "What are you afraid of, Gabe?"

I knew all too well what I was afraid of.

I was afraid of falling in love with her.

"Everyone I love, well, eventually they disappear."

"Ava hasn't disappeared," she said, her voice calm and soothing. "And I am not going anywhere. These babies, they bind us for the rest of our lives. I will be in their lives as long as you'll let me."

"Of course I want you in their lives. It's important they know who gave them birth and I—"

Again, I stopped short of admitting that I was falling for her. Scratch that, I had fallen head over heels for her already. The last few months with her under my roof, spending nearly every day together, showed me that I had been right about her. She was everything I wanted in the mother of my children, but not just genetically, I wanted her as my partner too.

"Gabe, I promise you, I'm not going to disappear."

"What if one day I do something terrible? What if you decide that you really hate me?"

“That’s not going to happen.”

“I just want us to always get along, to always be like family, and if we, well, if we get any closer, there’s a risk one of us could get hurt.”

Bella’s face softened, and she smiled at me gently. “Gabe, I think it’s already too late for that.”

I remained frozen in place, allowing her words to sink in.

Could we really do this? Could we be together, raise our kids together, and be a real family?

What about Ava?

My head was spinning with thoughts.

“Give it some time,” she said, yawning again. “We don’t have to decide anything tonight.”

I went back to the bed, helped her get situated again and stared into her beautiful eyes. This time, when I leaned in for a kiss, I wasn’t kidding myself. I knew what I wanted.

But it was a soft, quick brush of my lips against hers, nothing more.

“Sleep well, beautiful.”

I turned the light off and slipped from her room, my heart still racing from the conversation we’d had. I walked down the hall back to the tv room and found that Ava had cleaned up everything, as promised. As I came back out and headed to my room, I ran into Ava coming from the kitchen.

“You really should call Roman,” she said.

“That came out of thin air.”

“He messaged me again, he really misses you,” she said.

“I’ll call—”

“You have time now, Gabe,” she said before heading up the stairs. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

She was right. I had time. I wasn't tired. Roman was clearly still up if he had just texted her.

Perhaps I should call him and see what he had to say.

If anything, I could officially tell him to fuck off about the property and be done with it, proving to Ava that that's all he wanted from me. I stepped into the living area and closed the large doors behind me.

I hesitated for a moment or two before I called him.

He answered on the first ring.

"Gabe?" He sounded shocked.

"Yeah, Ava has been bugging me to call you," I muttered. "What's up?"

"Hell, I thought maybe you were too good for us now." Roman let out a dry laugh. "Now that you've got your act cleaned up and shit."

"No, I just haven't felt like putting up with your bullshit, and no, I don't want any involvement in any of your business dealings, especially regarding selling Mom's property."

"Slow down, Gabe. I just want to talk. Ava told me you were going to be a father. Congrats, man."

I switched the phone to my other ear as I paced the room. "Thank you."

"I hope to meet my little nieces or nephews one day, if you'll give me that chance."

Those words surprised the hell out of me. Roman had never seemed interested in kids before. It sent up a few red flags. I knew that Dad often liked to remind me of our familial connections anytime he wanted to propose an idea he knew I wouldn't like. Was that what Roman wanted to talk about?

"Sure, maybe one day," I said. "I'd love for my kids to meet my family, you and Dante especially, but only if you stop working for Dad and clean up your act."

"That should be pretty easy," Roman said, his voice suddenly turning serious.

“What do you mean?”

“I hate to be the one to break it to you, Gabe, but Dad’s dying.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “Dad tried to pull me back in by claiming he was dying from cancer. That was what, five years ago? So maybe find a new tactic if you want me to feel guilty.”

“It’s true though, Gabe. I’m not messing with you. He has end stage liver and kidney failure. All the drinking is finally catching up to him.”

My heart stopped momentarily. I didn’t want to believe it, and not just because my family had a history of lying. The idea that my dad, a man who had seemed to be immortal and managed to survive shit that would have killed most other people, was dying, didn’t feel real to me.

“I just spoke to him a few weeks ago. He sounded fine and didn’t mention anything about that.”

Roman scoffed. “Because it’s Dad. He’s not going to tell you he’s dying or show any signs of weakness. But he’s been placed on hospice as of last week, and we’re not sure how much longer he has left. So if there was ever a time to talk to him, if you have anything left to say to the old man, you might want to do it soon.”

I paused by the big picture window and looked out into the darkness. I searched for something to say but found myself coming up with nothing. I felt numb.

“Gabe?”

“I’m still here,” I said.

“Like I told you, I’m sorry to be the one to break this to you.”

“I appreciate it, Roman.” And I did. I still wasn’t sure if I believed it, but something in his tone told me he was being truthful. Either that or he’d become one hell of an actor over the last few years.

“He’d like to see you,” Roman said.

I ran a hand over my face.

“Why the fuck does he want to see me?”

“Because you’re his son, man.”

I shook my head.

“And that means something to him now?”

“He’s always done his best.”

I didn’t want to argue with Roman, but no the fuck he did not. He’d made it pretty clear that he valued money and success over the lives of his own kids. He never loved us, he only cared about leaving a legacy behind when he died.

A legacy that would not live on with me.



## BELLA

**M**y heart stopped as I stared at my inbox. I had finally sent my potential father an email the day before, not really expecting a response. Yet there I was looking at an email from Charles O'Connell.

I was grateful to be sitting down in bed when I opened up my laptop. I clicked the message and took a deep breath before reading his reply.

After talking it over with Gabe, I had decided to tell him that I was looking into the case concerning the disappearance of his daughter, Anabel, and that depending on what I found, I might be interested in writing an article about it and other cold cases. And I did intend to do that, it wasn't a total lie. Now that I had gone down that rabbit hole, I felt compelled to help the O'Connell's whether I was their daughter or not.

THE MESSAGE FROM CHARLES READ:

*Hi BELLA,*

*Thank you for reaching out to me. I would love to talk about Anabel's case, it has been so long since anyone has asked about her. Even if you don't put together an article, that's fine, but I am willing to do whatever I can to help you.*

*You had asked about our family. Besides Anabel, we have two other kids; an older son named Liam and a younger daughter named Harper. My wife, Brenda, was pregnant with*

*Harper at the time of the abduction. We found out a few weeks later. It was a difficult time, and Harper has grown up hearing stories about her sister. Ironically enough, we called our daughter Bella, so it was very nice to get your message and see your name in my inbox. Maybe it's a sign.*

*You had asked about the housekeeper that we suspected. We don't have much information about her. Her name was Maria Smith, which we found out was a fake identity. Nothing that we knew about her was real and there's been no trace of her since. She had worked for us for three months prior to the incident.*

*You had also asked if Anabel had any health issues. She did not. Her brother Liam, however, was born with a heart defect.*

*Thank you again for looking into this. I'd love to chat more if you have the time, and you can call me at the number posted below if you have any more questions.*

*CHARLES O'CONNELL*

I READ and re-read the message over and over again. My mom's name was Mary, it was so close to Maria, and she was a housekeeper for a time. My dad forged documents. We were both named Bella, for god's sake. Yes, I was Isabella and his daughter was Anabel, but that was an easy fix for my mom and dad. It all lined up in my head, and I was convinced that Charles had to be my father. I pressed the buzzer to ask Gabe to come to me. I tried to stay in bed as much as possible, and he told me to buzz him if I needed anything. I tried not to bother him often, but I really wanted to speak to him about what I'd found out.

Gabe was in my room at a moment's notice.

"Bella? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine. I just wanted to share with you this email I received from Charles O'Connell," I said, unable to



stop myself from grinning like a fool.

He pulled over the armchair from the corner and put it beside the bed. I handed him the laptop.

His facial expressions as he read it told me everything I needed to know. He cocked an eyebrow and said, “Interesting,” once he finished.

“It seems very likely he’s my dad, right? His son was even born with a heart defect, Gabe. Just like our son.”

“I agree it seems very likely,” he said, passing the laptop over to me. “Still, I want you to be careful.”

“Careful of what?”

“To not cause yourself too much stress right now.”

“Oh yes, of course,” I said. “I’m not stressed in the slightest.”

“Right now, no, but this opens up a whole can of worms, Bella.”

“I’m thinking of calling and talking to him, not telling him my theory just yet, but to ask more questions,” I said. “Do you think that would be okay?”

Gabe pondered my question for a second or two. “I can’t really tell you what you can and can’t do, Bella. You’re an adult.”

“I know, but until these babies are born, I need to be careful, and want to make sure we’re on the same page about these sorts of things.”

“I appreciate that,” he said softly. “But I also don’t want to keep you from finding out the truth.”

“I plan on taking things slowly.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that. And I trust you, Bella. I know you love these babies and would never do anything to harm them. So, if you’d like to call Charles and talk to him, pretending you’re still doing an interview, then I can support you on that.”

“Thank you, Gabe,” I said. My stomach twisted and turned, and it wasn’t just the babies growing in my belly. I was excited, truly excited. My mind was spinning from everything going on.

It was legitimately spinning. I felt lightheaded and grabbed a hold of Gabe’s arm. “How can the world spin when I’m not even moving?” I asked him.

Gabe jumped up. “Should we call the doctor? An ambulance? Have you had anything to eat yet today?” I normally ate around nine in the morning, but I had woken up earlier and with all the excitement, it had slipped my mind to request my breakfast that morning. Christine usually waited to hear from me.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet, actually.” I let out a sheepish laugh as the dizziness faded. “I probably need to eat.”

Gabe studied me closely, as if unsure.

“I promise you, my stomach is grumbling and I’m starving, I’m pretty sure that’s it.”

“Alright, I’ll get you some breakfast,” he said.

Gabe called the kitchen staff and didn’t leave my side. He kept a close eye on me until the food arrived. I’d gotten rather used to breakfast in bed every day. They always brought in a nice tray and gave me plenty of options to choose from. It was like staying in a fancy hotel.

As I bit into a croissant, I looked over at Gabe, sipping his black coffee as usual.

“Did you have a chance to think about the conversation we had the other night?”

He looked down at his coffee, swirling the cup around. I knew he knew what conversation I was referring to, but he took a long drink from the mug and remained quiet.

Not wanting to push the issue, I let the subject drop. However, as I tried to finish my breakfast, the silence began to get to me, along with the hormones, and tears began falling from my eyes.

“Bella,” he said, his voice as gentle as always. He stood from the chair and joined me on the bed, stroking my arm as he stared into my eyes. “What’s wrong? Have I hurt you? The last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

“No, you haven’t hurt me,” I said, doing my best to wipe away the tears. “It’s just hormones, I think.”

His face softened. The way he looked at me, the way his eyes seemed to sparkle when he caught sight of me coming into a room... all of it made me feel so cared for and loved. I knew Gabe felt the same way I did, even if he struggled to find the words to express it.

He leaned forward and kissed my forehead, his lips soft against my skin. I closed my eyes and cherished the sensation, unsure of how many more sweet moments we would have like that. Once the babies were born and I went to school, he would not need to take care of me anymore. He might even find himself a wife. Thinking about that caused a lump to form in my throat and the tears started falling again.

“Sheesh, I’m pathetic,” I said with a dry laugh, trying to make fun of myself.

“You’re not pathetic, far from it. You’re pregnant and emotional, and you’re going through a lot right now—I don’t want to add to that. You never have to feel ashamed of crying in front of me, Bella.”

God, I wanted him to be mine so freaking badly.

Why couldn’t we just stop pretending and be together already? Why did everything have to be so damn complicated?



## GABE

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket as I stared down at Bella, her tears finally dry. She stared back at me with big, beautiful eyes and lips that were just begging to be kissed.

I pulled the phone from my pocket and checked who was calling.

It was my dad.

My heart ached.

I knew we had to have a difficult conversation that I wasn't looking forward to.

"I'm sorry, I have to take this," I said to Bella, excusing myself from the room.

Once I was in the hallway, I answered the call.

"Yes, Dad?" My voice cracked.

"Gabriel, I'm so happy you answered the phone, I thought I might have to call you a hundred times to get an answer." Dad paused to cough. His voice sounded weaker than usual. Or maybe I was imagining things. He continued. "Anyway, about the land deal, Tony told me that—"

"I don't give a fuck about Tony, Dad."

"Well Tony sure as hell gives a fuck about the property, and I don't see any way around this." More coughing, that turned into a fit that seemed to take all of his breath away and leave him wheezing in its aftermath.

Leaning against the wall, I used my free hand to rub at my eyes and temples. A pain surged through my head.

There was a beeping in the background. Dad wheezed, as if still trying to catch his breath.

“Are you in a hospital?” I asked.

“No, not a hospital, a care home of sorts,” my dad said, brushing off my comment. “Just until I get better.”

“Roman told me you were dying, Dad.”

“Roman is full of shit.” His voice wavered. Every breath he took sounded more difficult than the last. He sighed and continued. “My kidneys aren’t doing so hot, I’m on dialysis, but it’s my liver they are most worried about. Who knew a liver was so goddamn important? But I’ll be fine, Gabriel. I expect to go home in the next day or two.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I knew that it was unlikely Dad was going home anytime soon, if he went home at all. Roman was right. Dad wasn’t going to talk about it though. He may have faked dying before for attention or to manipulate us, but I knew when it came right down to it, he’d never actually tell us that he was sick.

He continued. “Anyway, Tony would like to meet with you.”

“I’m not meeting with Tony,” I said sternly. “Why are you so concerned about this deal, when you’re in the hospital with liver and kidney failure?”

The line went almost silent, except for the beeping of machines in the background.

“Dad?”

He took a deep breath, loud enough that I could hear it over the line. “Gabriel, I made this deal with Tony and his guys, and we have to honor it. I don’t give a fuck about what happens to me, I’m looking out for you. These are guys you don’t want to mess around with and they have told me they will come after our family to get what they want.”

I knew that story. I knew it all too well. But the fact that my father had proposed a deal with land he had no right offering up filled me with rage. My fists balled up at my sides and it took everything in me not to slam them into the wall.

“You put my family in danger? Over a casino?” I growled.

“It’s not just a casino, it was an entire package deal, the casino was the final part of it.” He began coughing again, and it lasted for a good two minutes. I could hear voices in the background, and I realized someone was talking to him.

“I can’t do this right now,” I muttered. I hung up the phone and used every tactic in the book to calm myself down. Those might have been my last words to my father, but at that moment, I couldn’t have cared less.

My father put his kids and my family in danger. If only he cared half as much about us as we did him, we wouldn’t be in this fucking mess.

After a few minutes, I knew that I needed to handle the situation. I had done everything in my power to get away from my dad’s bullshit, but as usual, he plopped me right back into the fucking middle of it.

I called Roman. I started speaking as soon as he answered.

“What is this bullshit about Tony getting Mom’s property or he will come after my family?”

“Whoa, hello to you too, bro,” Roman said dryly. “Let me guess, you talked to Dad?”

“Yes. So what the hell are we going to do?”

“You don’t have to worry about a thing, Gabe. I’ve got it covered.”

“With Tony?”

“Yes,” Roman said.

“Then how come Dad doesn’t seem to know this?”

“Because Dad is no longer involved in the deal. He’s too sick for it. I’ve taken over negotiating with Tony and we are

looking at other properties, so you can relax, you don't need to worry about anything."

My fists unclenched, as did my jaw. My brother seemed in control and confident, and if there was one thing to be said about Roman it was that he could handle some messy shit if needed.

"You sure about that?" I asked.

"Absolutely, I have it covered," he promised.

"Good, because if anyone even thinks about coming after my family, there will be fucking hell to pay."

Roman let out a low laugh. "There's the Gabe I know and love. Welcome back, brother."

"I'm not back," I reminded him.

"No, of course not, not in that way. This is my deal, you're not involved," he said.

As much as I hated that my brother was tangled in the same illegal bullshit as our dad, I was grateful that it was Roman on the job. We might have had a falling out years ago, but I knew that Roman knew what he was doing.

"Do you trust me?" my brother asked me.

Normally, the answer would be "Hell, no," because I knew not to trust him, Dante, or anyone else working under my father's thumb. But instead of answering, I hung up the phone and left the question hanging in the air. As much as I wanted to trust my family again, I knew there was no way we would ever be close. Which made my heart ache. I wanted my kids to know my brothers, at least the guys I had grown up with. Not the men they had grown up to be.





## BELLA

I had told Charles I would call him that afternoon. Although I knew he was expecting me, the idea of calling my potential father and hearing his voice was more nerve wracking than I expected.

Finally, I just did it.

He answered pretty quickly.

“Hi, Mr. O’Connell, it’s Bella.”

“Yes, Bella, thank you for calling,” he said. His voice sounded so gentle and kind. I knew you couldn’t tell much about a person just from their voice, but right away, I liked him. “I think I told you already that we called my daughter Bella, so it’s a bit strange to be calling you that.”

“You can call me Isabella, if you prefer.” It made me wonder if my mom had kept my name as Bella since that’s what I’d have known but changed it just enough to try to hide my identity.

“Oh no, it’s fine. It’s actually nice,” he said. “So how are you doing today, Bella?”

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I managed to push them back. “I’m doing well, how about you, Mr. O’Connell?”

“Please, call me Charles,” he said. “And I’m doing well. My wife and I celebrated our anniversary last weekend. Liam pulled himself away from his job long enough to visit, so it was nice to have the family together. Well, most of the family, at least.”

A sadness clung to his words. My heart ached for this family who had lost one of their children, and likely always noticed her absence at any major event.

“Congratulations on the anniversary,” I said, trying to focus on the positive. “And your son, what does he do for a living?”

“He’s an architect,” Charles said. “He works in Chicago, so not too far away.”

“And Harper?” I found myself so curious about these people. I wanted to know everything I could about them.

“Harper is still in school; she’s finishing up a degree in journalism.”

My heart stopped.

“Journalism, really?”

“Yes, I told her I was talking to a journalist, and she got excited. She might want to speak with you at some point if you don’t mind. She never met Anabel of course, but she could talk to you about what it was like growing up knowing she had lost a sister. It clearly affected her life.”

“I don’t mind at all; I would like that.” My voice caught in my throat. The idea that I could have a brother and a sister, and that I might be able to speak with them, made me emotional.

Tears fell down my cheeks, and I tried to keep my voice even and calm as I spoke. “So, tell me about Anabel.”

“Are you okay, Bella?” Charles asked, clearly sensing that I was crying.

“Yes, I’m just a bit emotional. I’m pregnant,” I said.

“Congratulations,” he offered.

“Thank you. It’s just hard for me to imagine losing a child, the pain your family endured. It’s so heartbreaking,” I said. More tears. I was full-blown sobbing at that point. While I was partially telling the truth about why I was so emotional, it wasn’t just that. I found myself hoping that the O’Connell’s

were my family. Not just for my sake, I so badly wanted this family to get their daughter back. I could already tell that Charles was much kinder and more caring than the man who had raised me.

“It was very hard,” Charles said. “Even though it’s been over twenty years now, the pain never fully goes away. Both Brenda and I constantly think we see her on the streets, any time we see a woman who resembles her even slightly, but we know that we are just chasing ghosts at this point.”

“I’m so, so sorry,” I said. I wanted to tell him my suspicions, that I might be his missing daughter, that perhaps she wasn’t a ghost at all. But I knew that if I wasn’t their Bella, it would utterly crush them, so I had to be 100% sure before I could even consider bringing it up.

I could hear him take a few ragged breaths on the other end of the line, I assumed to regain his composure. “So, may I ask, what made you interested in our case? With all the high-profile missing children’s cases in the world, why ours?”

I struggled with coming up with an answer that he would believe. “Uh, well, I don’t know, really. I guess because it’s close to home, and she would be around my age now. The fact that no one has even talked about the case in almost two decades got to me as well. I was hoping to highlight the case again, along with others that have gone cold, and see if maybe new information might come forward.”

“I really appreciate it,” he said. “I haven’t told Brenda yet, just in case the article doesn’t get picked up or go anywhere, but I know she’d appreciate it too. If there’s anything you want to know about how it happened, I’m ready to tell our story. You know, earlier, I said we were chasing ghosts, but I don’t think that’s true at all. I only say that to try and force myself to come to terms with our loss. But I believe our daughter is still out there, somewhere, and I dream of finding her almost every single night.”

The tears had momentarily stopped falling, but they returned with his words. I wiped them away with my hand and focused on my breathing to remain calm.

“I hope she is, for your family’s sake, and I hope you find her one day.”

“Thank you, Bella,” he said. “So do you have any questions for me?”

“Well, I do have one request. Do you happen to have any photos of the housekeeper you suspect kidnapped your daughter?”

“I have a copy of her fake ID, which did include a photo, yes.”

“Could you send that over to me, please?”

“Of course, I’m happy to.”

Everything about Charles just oozed kindness. He was the complete opposite of the man I had known as my father, who often cursed and spouted cruel words, who never had a caring thought for anyone.

We talked a few moments longer, but then his wife got home from her errands. I let him go, since he wasn’t telling her anything yet, not wanting to get her hopes up. I respected him for that, it was clear he cared deeply for his wife whom he’d been married to for almost thirty years. It gave me hope that real love could exist and that maybe one day, I’d have a family like that too.

A few minutes after getting off the phone, I checked my email and saw that Charles had sent me something. I opened it up and gasped.

Staring back at me, on an ID labeled Maria Smith, was the face of the woman I called Mom.



## G A B E

I tapped lightly on the door and called out to her, “Bella? You called for me?”

“Yes, come in, please,” she called through the door.

As soon as I entered the room, Bella blurted out, “My mom most definitely kidnapped me. I have proof now, and I think we should go to the police and—”

Her eyes were big and bright and she was speaking at a mile a minute, her hands flying everywhere as she spoke. Her laptop was sitting in front of her. It was hard to make out everything she was saying. Stepping closer to her, I held a hand up. “Slow down, please. I only caught half of that.”

She took a deep breath, then another, as I sat down beside her on the bed.

“Okay, so I talked to Charles O’Connell, and I asked him to send a photo of the housekeeper he suspected kidnapped his daughter,” she said, speaking a bit slower now. She turned the laptop toward me and there was a photo of a driver’s license. The name matched the housekeeper that Charles suspected had kidnapped Anabel.

I stared at it for a long time, trying to make sense of it. I had seen Bella’s mother a few times over the years, not that often, but I definitely recognized her.

“It’s clearly my mom. I would recognize her anywhere, even with a bad dye job or wig or whatever she’s wearing,” Bella said.

“I believe you.”

Bella’s entire demeanor seemed to relax. She had previously been in defense mode, thinking she’d have to convince me, but I believed her. I could see it too.

“We need to go to the police, Gabe.” Her voice cracked.

“I agree, I think we have enough information to go to the police, but—”

She opened her mouth to argue with me, but again, I held up a hand. “You only have a few more weeks of the pregnancy, Bella. This is a critical time, we need to keep your stress level as minimal as possible, and I worry that a police investigation and drama with your mom could make things very difficult for you.”

She closed her mouth and appeared to be thinking.

I continued. “I’m not saying we never go to the police, I’m just asking you to wait until the babies are here,” I said. “For both your safety and theirs.”

Bella took a second but nodded in agreement. “You’re right. It’s already been twenty-something years, what harm will a few more weeks do? I want to make sure that we get as close to full-term as possible. I’m just so anxious to get the ball rolling. I might have a family that actually loves me out there, Gabe. Thank you so much for everything, I don’t know what I did to deserve all your kindness.”

I rested a hand on her stomach and she laced her fingers through mine. A small smile pulled at her lips, and in that moment, I was the one struggling to breathe. My heart raced and there was a fluttering in my belly. I had never felt that way about anyone before, just being in the same room with Bella was becoming more and more difficult, because my feelings for her were taking over my body.

I knew it was time.

“It’s because I care about you, Bella. I think I might even be falling in love with you.” She inhaled sharply and stared at me, her mouth open in a small O and her eyes wide. “Gabe, I—I mean, you already know I feel the same about you.”



I nodded. She didn't have to say the words, I knew how she felt.

“The feeling is definitely mutual, I'm just, I'm scared.”

“You have nothing to be scared of with me, Gabe.”

“I know that I do. I just worry I'll fuck things up like I always do, and then what? I'll have both you and Ava hating my guts.”

She leaned forward and put the laptop on the table beside the bed, adjusting her position with my help. Once she was closer to me, she took my face in her hands and held it there, staring deep into my eyes.

“Gabriel De Luca, I've known you for most of my life. I know you're not perfect, I know you've fucked up in the past, I've heard all about it from Ava. But I know that isn't the man you are today. I also know that there's nothing you can do to ever push Ava away. Your sister adores you and even if you and I have a falling out one day, I can assure you that she's not going anywhere. And I have no intention of going anywhere either. You two are the closest thing to a family I've ever had, and I'm not going to give that up easily.”

Her fingers stroked my cheek, down to my jawline. Bella licked her lips and stared up at me and I knew what she wanted me to do.

Pressing my lips against hers, I let my fingers get lost in her soft curls, holding her face against mine. All the blood in my body moved south, causing an erection to form in my jeans. Mentally, I reminded myself that she was very pregnant, and nothing was going to happen that day, but in the back of my mind, I heard the voice, “*Not today, but definitely again someday.*”

I wanted her in my life. I didn't want her to disappear once the babies were born, for us to go back to being acquaintances, mostly connected through my sister.

I wanted her in my life, and in the lives of our children. She most definitely was no longer an acquaintance.

She pulled back from the kiss and there was an expression on her face that gave me pause.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Ava,” she said. “We have to talk to Ava if we want to pursue anything further.”

“I agree.”

“I can do it,” she said.

“No, we’ll do it together. I think it’s best if we both talk to her, let her know that we’re not going anywhere. She had a lot of fears of abandonment thanks to our childhood. I think she’s going to need some reassurance from both of us.”

Bella nodded, but there was something else.

“What does this mean for, well, you know,” she let out a low laugh as she placed a hand on her giant belly.

“Well... what do you want?”

Her eyes sparkled as she mulled over the question. “Honestly? I would love for us to be a family, a true family.”

A tendril of hair fell across her face, and I tucked it behind her ear, stroking her soft skin as I admired her beauty once more.

“I want that too, Bella. More than anything.”

\* \* \*

AVA STARED at us from across the table. She looked at me, then at Bella, then back at me. “Alright, is someone going to tell me what’s going on here?”

We had asked her to meet us for dinner that evening. With the end of her semester coming up, it was harder to run into her around the house, so we specifically asked her to meet up with us, which seemed to arouse suspicions in my sister.

“Is it the babies? Is everything okay with them?” she asked.

“The babies are fine,” Bella replied.

“Okay,” Ava turned to me, her voice lowering. “Is it Dad?”

“No, no news about Dad yet,” I said.

“Okay... so the whole thing with your family, Bella. Is it about that?”

“I do have some news about that, but it’s not why we asked to talk to you tonight,” Bella said, making eye contact with my sister briefly before glancing over at me, as if for reassurance that I was still on board.

I nodded and cleared my throat. “Bella and I have developed feelings for each other, Ava.”

Ava’s face went through a series of emotions before she managed to speak. “Excuse me? What does that even mean? Are you saying you two want to be together?”

Both Bella and I nodded and said, “Yes,” at the same time.

I reached over and gave her hand a squeeze under the table.

“Wow,” Ava said, leaning back against the chair. “Just wow. I thought we had talked about this, and that everything would remain professional.”

“That was the goal,” I said. “But life had other plans.”

“This was never intentional, Ava,” Bella said, her voice soft and gentle. “It just happened.”

“And you’re sure it’s not pregnancy hormones fucking with both of you?”

“We’re sure,” we both said at the same time.

“Well, I mean, you don’t need my permission to date, so I’m not sure what this meeting is all about.” There was a dryness to her tone. Ava stared down at her plate as she pushed the food around on it. It reminded me of when she was young and I told her I was moving out to pursue my other interests, back when I had moved to California for a short while. She later told me that she felt abandoned, like the only person in

the family who cared about her was leaving her behind. It had broken something inside of me to know that she had felt that way.

I didn't want her to feel that way again.

I tried to find the words to reassure her. "Ava, we're not here to ask permission. We're telling you because we both love you, and we don't want you to feel like your feelings were never considered in any of this. They have been, and we want to reassure you that we will both always love you and be there for you, no matter what."

"And what happens if you split up? Am I just supposed to choose between my best friend and the only family I really have?" Tears welled up in Ava's eyes, but she wiped them away and held her head up high. "I'm trying not to be selfish here, I want you both to be happy. I do. I'm just—"

"You're scared. I know that feeling all too well. You're scared of losing yet more people you love, but I can assure you, Ava, as your big brother, I'm not going anywhere, ever. No matter what happens between Bella and me, we will never make you choose between us."

Bella added, "We're all adults here, Ava. And no matter what happens between Gabe and me, we have four little lives depending on us being civil and at the very least, co-parenting amicably. We will make it work, and like Gabe said, we will never make you choose or desert you."

Ava looked across the table at the two of us. Both Bella and I seemed to wait with bated breath for her to say something, anything. She took a few moments to gather her thoughts. "I appreciate the two of you coming to me and talking to me. I'm happy for you both, I really am. I would love nothing more than for the two of you to have your babies and raise them together, happily ever after. I'm just nervous," she said. "But I know you're both good people, and I trust you to not tear our family apart."

I felt my lips peel back in the biggest smile ever. Jumping up from the table, I rushed over to my sister, pulling her up into a hug.

Once our embrace ended, Ava went over to where Bella was sitting and hugged her best friend. There were some tears shared between them but from what I could make out, they were happy tears. I heard Ava tell Bella, “I’m so happy for you, I know how much you’ve wanted this.”

My heart swelled inside of my chest, knowing that my family—the family I had carved out for myself—was strong. Nothing could tear us apart.



## BELLA

**T**hirty-one weeks. With quads, it was normal to deliver at the thirty week mark, and while it scared me that we weren't going to make it to forty, or at least a bit closer, my doctors all assured me that it was best for the babies to be delivered then. We had a scheduled C-section where there would be a lot of medical staff on hand. Not just the obstetrician for myself, but a doctor for each one of the babies too, including the heart specialist for our little boy with the defect.

The night before the procedure, I was anxious as hell. I was excited to meet our children but scared too. They were safe inside of me, still growing, and soon they would be pulled out into the world and placed in incubators until they were big enough and strong enough to come home. It could take months.

I couldn't walk upstairs to see the nursery for myself, but Gabe wanted me to know it was ready and waiting for our little ones. He video called me from the room.

“Aww the little monkey lamp is so adorable!” I said. “You didn't tell me about that.”

“It was a surprise,” Gabe said, grinning from ear-to-ear.

He moved the camera around the room. It was painted light green with trees and little monkeys swinging from the branches. The cribs were lined up against the far wall, matching the color of the trees so they blended in very nicely. There were two changing tables and a nice, large sofa along

with a rocking chair for when we were taking care of the babies, or in case we wanted to sleep in there with them.

“It’s perfect,” I said, tears filling my eyes as I pictured our children in the cribs or playing on the floor when they got older. Our children. I would be there with them, to raise them. I hadn’t planned on being a mom when I originally agreed to be Gabe’s surrogate, but I couldn’t be happier.

Gabe had gone all out on the nursery and every gadget you could think of was there. From diaper systems to bottle warmers to top-notch cameras and baby monitors, he really did try to think of everything we might need. I couldn’t ask for a better father for my children.

I yawned and checked the time. We had to be up super early to get to the hospital, to get checked in and everything settled before the procedure. Gabe saw my yawn and said, “I’ll be right there.”

Since we’d had the talk with Ava and had decided to take our relationship to the next level, Gabe had been sleeping beside me. He also helped me to shower, to get dressed, and other daily tasks that were no longer easy for me to do. He could have had staff help me but no, he was always there by my side helping me with whatever I needed.

Within a few minutes, there was a knock on the door.

“Gabe, you really don’t need to knock anymore,” I said with a laugh.

He came inside the room with a sheepish look on his face. “Probably not, but I just want to get your permission before entering your private space.”

“Such a gentleman, but seriously, come here.”

He stepped over to the side of the bed and kissed me. Thankfully I had done everything I needed to do before the tour of the nursery, so we could just go to sleep now. He climbed into bed beside me and wrapped his big, strong arms around me. I would never grow tired of being held by him.

“Tomorrow is a big day, huh?” I said, tired but unable to sleep.



“Yeah, I can hardly believe it’s finally here.”

“I’m excited to meet them, but so nervous.”

He stroked my hair. “I’m nervous too. I worry about you.”

“No need to worry about me,” I said.

“I can’t help it, Bella. I love you.” That was the first time he’d ever said those words to me, at least in verbal form. I turned my head to look at him. Even in the darkness, I could see the smile on his face.

“I love you too, Gabe. I’m going to be fine. I worry about the babies though, especially little Vincent.”

Since we knew that the baby with the heart defect was a boy, we had started calling him Vincent, the name Gabe had picked out. He always seemed to light up every time we talked about little Vincent; the name was perfect and I knew it was right for our little fighter.

“I worry about them too, but we have some of the best doctors around. They’re going to be okay.”

“I hope so,” I said. “I already have so much love for them.”

He stroked my cheek and face, dotting kisses on my forehead and the tip of my nose.

“And I love that you do,” he said. “You’re going to be an amazing mother.”

“And you’re going to be an amazing father.”

“Thank you. Have you thought about what you might want to name another little boy, if we have more than one?”

He’d told me since he named Vincent, if we had another boy, the name was up to me.

“I have actually. I was thinking... Vincent and Lucia are both Italian, and we talked about Ariana for another little girl, which also seems to fit the theme. What if we went with Elio? Eli, for short.”

“I love it,” Gabe said.

“Really? Because I do too. I’ve always thought the name Eli was adorable, but it felt more like a nickname to me.”

“I agree, and I think Elio is perfect. It fits in well with the others, and yes, it has Italian roots.”

“What if we have all boys?” I said with a laugh. “I mean, it’s not likely, but maybe we need more names picked out, just in case.”

“I think we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

As I relaxed back into the bed, I felt my eyes growing heavier. I had to be up in a matter of a few hours, and I knew that the day would be long and tiring, even though I would spend a lot of it laying down. It was going to be emotional too.

“You need sleep,” Gabe said softly, as if reading my mind.

“I know, I just can’t shut off my brain. Do we have everything packed and ready to go? What will tomorrow look like? What if something goes wrong? What if—”

“Shh,” Gabe said. “Worrying about all of that won’t change a thing, will it? Can you do anything about any of it right now? We will deal with whatever happens, when it happens, and you won’t be going through it alone, Bella. You have me. I’ve made sure we have everything packed, I’ve checked five times already, and if we do forget something, I can have Ava grab it. Or Roman and Dante.”

I opened my eyes. “Your brothers?”

“Yeah, I got a text that they’re in town apparently, and they wanted to be here to meet the babies, if we were okay with that. I told them I’d talk to you, but with everything going on, it just wasn’t a priority.”

“I’m fine with them being here if you are, Gabe. I’ve never had a problem with your brothers, but I respect whatever you decide.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he said, kissing my forehead. “I’m just saying, we aren’t alone. If we need anything, I know there are people we can call. We’ve got this.”

His words soothed me. With him at my side, as well as Ava, I knew he was right. We could do this.



## G A B E

Seeing Bella on the table, draped in sheets and prepped for surgery made it all so real. This was it; I was going to be a dad.

It felt like time was racing by but also standing still. The moment I heard them say, “It’s a boy!” my heart raced. A moment later, we heard cries and Bella’s eyes filled with tears as our first child, a son was shown to us.

He was so unbelievably tiny, it was scary to see him. How could he survive being that small out in the world? I suddenly understood Bella’s desire to keep them safely inside of her, at least until they were larger and healthier.

We only got a few seconds with our little boy, but we were told his heart sounded healthy and fine. He was not the one with the defect. Our little Elio, a name we’d only picked the night before, but it already felt so right for him. He was rushed away, out of sight, and it broke my heart to see Bella’s face as they whisked our son away. We didn’t get to hold him like many parents get to do because he needed to be in the NICU.

I squeezed Bella’s hand, trying to bring comfort to her, knowing that she wanted nothing more than to hold the baby that had been growing inside of her for months.

I kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry, honey, we will get to hold them soon,” I said.

“It’s a girl,” one of the nurses called out, peeking behind the curtain with a smile. “And she looks healthy.”

“Good, our little Lucy,” Bella said with a smile, already having a nickname for Lucia picked out.

We could hear her crying, and we got to see her for a brief moment. Slightly bigger than her brother, but still so very tiny. So fragile and delicate. She was whisked away just like Elio.

“Soon, Bella,” I said, squeezing her hand and taking a few deep breaths. My own cheeks were wet with tears. I knew it would be an emotional experience, but I had no idea it would affect me the way it did. I couldn’t even remember the last time I cried, but being there as my babies were born was one of the best, most emotional experiences of my life.

“Another girl,” the nurse said with a smile. “She looks to be doing good too.”

They showed us our second little girl, who was around the same size as her sister.

“Our little Ariana,” I whispered, even more tears streaming down my face.

“Sweet Ari,” Bella whispered.

She disappeared from our sight.

“Almost there,” I said. “One more to go.”

Vincent. Our little fighter. The one who would need the most help after birth, who might even need heart surgery. Neither Bella nor I said anything as we waited for confirmation that he was born.

It took longer than the other three. We heard voices, frantic voices.

“Is everything okay?” I called out.

No response. Just more frantic voices.

“Is he okay? Is our baby okay?” Bella’s eyes grew wide.

The nurse popped her head back over to us. “A little boy,” she said.

No crying. No sound from him whatsoever.

“Is he okay?” I repeated louder.

As she opened her mouth to answer, we heard the most beautiful sound in the world—Vincent’s first cries. The nurse smiled widely and showed us Vincent, the smallest of the babies. He was so tiny.

Then just like that, he was taken away from us too.

“Congratulations, Mama,” the nurse said. “Two boys, two girls, and they look to be doing fine.”

“Even Vincent?” Bella asked.

“All of them,” the nurse replied, likely unsure of which one was Vincent. “The last baby, as you know, has a hole in his heart. He is being looked after by the heart specialist now, but he’s crying and appears as healthy as can be expected.”

Bella still needed to be stitched up, and I stayed there, right by her side. The nurse came back and asked if I’d like to see the babies.

I looked at Bella. It didn’t seem fair that I would get to meet them before she did, she was their mother. But she was still being stitched up and recovering from surgery.

“Go,” she said. “I want our babies to meet one of us right away.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to leave you.”

“Yes, absolutely,” she said. “I’ll be fine, but I want our children to know we’re here for them, and if I can’t be there, I want you to be.”

The nurse led me toward where the incubators were. As soon as I stepped into the room, it all became very real to me. These were my sons and daughters.

The emotion that poured over me was unreal. My knees felt like jelly, and I had to hold myself up against the wall as I stared down at their tiny little bodies. For some reason, I couldn’t stop looking at their itty, bitty hands. I wanted to let them wrap those tiny fingers around one of my own, but I wasn’t able to touch them yet.

I spoke to each of the babies, telling them that I loved them already, more than life itself, and I knew their mom did, too.

“It’s going to be okay. We’ll all be home together soon, as a family, just you wait and see.”

My heart was full. It was in that moment that I felt it happen, the shift from being a regular man to being a father.





## BELLA

**A**fter several days in the hospital, I was released to go home. I was relieved but that meant leaving my babies behind. Being at Gabe's place felt weird without them. They had been a part of me for several months, and now we were separated.

Gabe's brothers had come to town to visit and we were all enjoying some drinks in the living room. I stuck with tea, mostly out of habit.

Ava looked to be enjoying having her brothers back together, and she couldn't seem to stop smiling. Gabe appeared more reserved, cautious, and I couldn't blame him. We'd talked about his feelings a lot, about how he wasn't sure he could trust Roman and Dante, not fully, but he was open to trying. I knew he missed them.

"Do you remember the time that Dad took us all fishing?" Dante, the youngest of the brothers, asked.

"Ugh, yes, he got so fucking wasted he passed out in the boat, and we had to swim to shore to get something to eat." Roman chuckled at the memory, Gabe did not.

"I don't find that memory as amusing as the two of you. Ava almost drowned," he said.

"I was fine," Ava mumbled, brushing it off.

"You were caught up in the currents, and I had to swim out to get you. I almost couldn't grab you," Gabe said. "All because of Dad's incompetence as a father."

Ava didn't say anything else. I knew she wanted her brothers to all just get along.

"Yeah, true," Dante said. "I forgot about that part. Dad was pretty shitty at typical dad stuff, wasn't he?"

"You can say that again," Gabe muttered.

"I got the feeling he never really wanted to have kids, that Mom was the one who wanted us," Dante continued.

Of the three of them, Gabe was the most serious, most grown-up. Dante, while mischievous and always enjoying a little trouble, was pretty harmless. Roman, on the other hand... well, based on what Gabe had told me, he had gotten himself into some major Mafia business. I understood why Gabe wanted to keep his distance from him.

Gabe seemed to relax a bit with his brother backing him up. "I think Dad wanted us because he wanted a legacy to leave behind, to not be forgotten once he died."

"I agree," Dante said.

Roman didn't argue, he just looked at his brothers with an odd smile on his face. Of the four kids, Roman was closest to their father, and often defensive about him. But he didn't say anything, and I was grateful for that.

Before long, the four of them were laughing about fonder childhood memories and inside jokes, it put a smile on my face.

It was nice being surrounded by family, even if it wasn't my own.

I thought about my mom, or the woman who claimed to be my mom, at least. I hadn't heard from her in weeks. She didn't even know that I'd had the babies yet, even though I tried to call her to tell her. I shouldn't have bothered, but there was something in me that desired to connect with her after the birth of my children.

Gabe's family was nice to have around but it just reminded me of everything I lacked.

I sipped my tea as they talked amongst themselves. My phone lit up on the table, and since I couldn't bend easily yet, I was grateful for Gabe handing it to me.

He watched my face as I checked who was calling.

"It's Charles," I told him.

"Do you want to take it?"

I nodded and started to move from the couch, but he stopped me. "We can give you some privacy," he said. "No need to get up."

I answered the call as the others left the room.

"Hi, Charles," I said. "What a surprise."

"Sorry to call unexpectedly. I hope I'm not crossing a boundary here, but I remember your kiddos were due any day now, and I hadn't heard from you, so I wanted to check in and make sure everything was okay."

"Thank you, Charles, everything is fine. I had the little ones five days ago," I said, a smile spreading across my face. He cared enough to call, even though he hardly even knew me. "They're doing well, though in the NICU, which is normal with quads. We're still waiting to see if Vincent needs surgery for his heart."

"That's right, you said one of the babies had a hole in his heart? Just like my son, Liam," Charles said. "But looking at him today, you wouldn't even know. My brother had the same defect, in fact, and he's still going strong too. It does seem to be genetic."

The way he said that last bit was rather strange. Maybe I was imagining it because of my suspicions.

Charles quickly added, "Not that I think Vincent is related to us or anything. I mean, well, I wanted to ask you..."

He trailed off, his voice cracking at the end.

"Yes?" My own voice barely came out as a whisper.

"It's silly, like I said, I'm always seeing ghosts of Anabel everywhere. It's just, well, when you emailed me, I googled

you to see what I could find out. We get a lot of people trying to scam us—psychics offering to help find our daughter, private investigators who swear they saw her and will tell me where for the low price of a million dollars, that sort of thing. Well, when I searched your name, I came across your Instagram account and I couldn't help but think that you look a lot like my Bella, just all grown up. Like I said, it's ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous at all," I replied. "In fact, I contacted you because I believe I might be your missing daughter. I didn't say anything at first because I needed to be sure, and I wanted to wait until after the babies were born to tell you."

"Oh gosh," Charles said. "Wow, I can't believe it."

"I'm sorry I didn't mention anything sooner."

"No, don't be sorry, Bella. I understand, your sweet babies come first," he said.

So comforting. So understanding. The complete opposite of the people who raised me. *Is this what it feels like to be loved?* I thought to myself. A lump formed in my throat.

"Thank you for understanding. But now that the babies are here, I would love to find out the truth once and for all. I suspect my mom was your housekeeper and that she kidnapped me from your home. It only cemented my belief when I saw the photo you sent over because it looks just like her."

"I'm not sure what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, we have time, Charles. We will find out the truth. We can take the next steps as soon as you want to go to the police."

"You're still healing, and the babies are in the NICU. I think I need some time to let it all sink in before we go to the police. Because in my head, I already believe you to be my daughter, and if we find out you're not—"

"I know, but I believe it too. There are just too many things that align and make sense."

“I’ve had my hopes up a lot over the years, Bella, so please forgive me if I don’t want to get too ahead of ourselves here.”

“I understand, and we can take all the time you need,” I said.

“I just really like thinking of you as my daughter,” he admitted.

I smiled so wide it hurt my face. “And I really like the idea of you being my dad. The people who raised me... they aren’t good people.”

“That breaks my heart for you, regardless of what we find out. You’re a good person, Bella.”

Tears welled in my eyes.

“You too, Charles.”

“We’ll talk soon,” he said. “I just need to wrap my head around everything and talk to my wife and the kids, and then we’ll be back in touch to see what the next moves will be.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We ended the call, and it took me a few moments to compose myself. A knock came at the door and Gabe peeked inside.

“He knows,” I said as the tears flowed down my cheeks. “He figured it out.”

Gabe was at my side in a heartbeat, kneeling beside the couch. “And how did it go? Are you okay?”

“I’m great, these are happy tears, I promise,” I said with a laugh. “It’s been an emotional few days, but yes, it went well. He seems very happy to think of me as his daughter, very hopeful, so we’re going to try to find answers.”

Gabe brought my hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Whatever happens, I have your back, you know that, right? You will always have Ava and me.”

“I know, thank you” I said, running a hand through his hair. “I truly believe the O’Connell’s are my family, there’s just too many coincidences.”

“I agree,” he said. “And they seem like good people, but we still want to be careful. You don’t know them that well and I worry about you.”

His face was soft and sweet, his eyes genuine. The way he looked at me made me feel so loved.

“Thank you, and I agree we should be careful,” I said. “We’re not rushing into anything. Charles wants to take some time to think about it and talk to his family.”

“Good,” Gabe replied. “He sounds like a good man based on everything you’ve told me.”

“He is,” I said with a smile.

And he wasn’t just any man. In my heart I already knew that he was my father.





## G A B E

“**A**riana and Lucia may be able to go home within the next week or so.”

It was like music to my ears. My daughters would soon be home, where they belonged, after a month in the NICU.

“And what about Elio and Vincent?” Bella asked before I could find the words.

“Elio still needs to put on some weight,” the doctor said. “But I suspect in a couple of weeks, he will also be able to come home. Vincent will likely be here a bit longer as we watch his heart and see if the hole continues to close on its own.”

Our babies wouldn't be coming home together, and I knew it was tough on Bella. Taking her hand in mind, I squeezed it. Soon we'd have our family together all under one roof.

“Can we see them?”

“Yes, of course,” the doctor said.

“They are doing well enough to be out of the incubator and will be moved out of the NICU tomorrow.”

That was amazing news. Our girls were getting stronger by the day.

Bella was out of her chair within a second and I was beside her, ready to see our babies.

The doctor took us down to where the babies were being kept. They were all in the same room near each other, but soon

they would be separated and that made me sad, even though I was happy our girls were doing well and able to come home soon.

A nurse was there to help us and picked up little Ariana first. Bella was already reaching out, ready to take her, and as soon as the baby was in her arms, Bella's entire body relaxed and her face lit up.

Once Ariana was settled with Bella, the nurse handed Lucia to me.

“I still can't get over how tiny they are,” Bella said, cooing at our little girl.

“I know,” I agreed, looking down at Lucy.

We took seats next to each other and sat in silence for a long time, just admiring the beauty of our babies.

“Her hands are so small,” Bella said.

“I know,” I showed her where Lucy's fingers were trying to wrap around one of my own.

“I love them so much.”

“Me too.”

I glanced over at the other two babies, my sons. They were still in the incubators. We had been able to hold them, but for shorter periods than with the girls. I hoped they never felt neglected. We talked to them as much as possible.

Bella was also looking over at them. “I hope Vincent's heart continues to heal on its own, I really don't want him to go through such a major surgery. He's just too tiny.”

“Me too.” I whispered.

Lucy let out a small whimper in my arms, her delicate face twisted into the cutest little expression as she fussed a bit. Bella cooed at her, “Oh sweet girl, what's the matter?” she said, speaking to Lucy in my arms.

“Maybe she's hungry?”

And just then, my phone rang in my pocket. I wasn't about to go digging it out, so I let it ring through, preferring to talk to my baby in my arms.

But then it rang again.

And again after that.

I briefly handed Lucy to the nurse so I could shut my phone off, pissed that someone was daring to ruin my special moment with my baby girls, even though the caller likely had no idea what we were doing.

I canceled the call. "It's just Roman. I wish he would get a hint and leave us the fuck, err, leave us alone." I looked at the nurse and the babies. I would have to rein in my swearing. They were obviously too young to pick up on it, but as they got older, I didn't want them taking on my bad habits.

The nurse handed Lucy back to me once my phone was off.

"Do you think it was about your dad?" Bella asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe. Probably. Who the heck knows."

I knew that my dad was dying, and at any time I could get the call telling me that he was gone. Maybe that's why Roman was being so persistent. I didn't want to think about it though, not during such a special moment with my daughters.

"You know, if you want to visit him you can."

I looked over at Bella. I had never mentioned wanting to visit my dad. We'd been estranged for years, and it had never even crossed my mind.

"I haven't seen my dad in over five years, and before that, only briefly. It's been like ten years since we spent any real time together. I don't think running to his side during his last moments on earth is necessary."

Bella's brow furrowed. I knew that look.

"Don't worry about me, I'm fine. Like I said, I don't have a relationship with my dad, and right now, I just want to focus on my children."

Bella didn't argue with me, and I was grateful for that.

I quickly changed the subject. "I think Ariana totally fits her," I said.

"And Lucia is perfect for her," Bella agreed.

"How did we get it so right?"

"Because it's us, of course we got it right." I knew she was teasing, but at the same time, there was a hint of truth there. She was right. Ever since we had decided to embark on things together, everything just seemed to fall into place. Having her by my side, it felt like we could do no wrong.

After a while, we had to leave, as the nursery was closing its doors to visitors. We placed Lucy and Ari back in the care of the hospital staff and made sure to spend a few moments talking to our boys.

"I love you," I told each one of them. "And we will be together soon."

As we left the hospital, I decided to turn my phone back on and listen to my messages. I had several from Roman.

"Gabe, man, please call me as soon as you can. Dad isn't doing so well and the doctors think he has only a couple weeks left, a month tops. He's awake less and less, and if you want to spend any real time with him, I wouldn't hesitate—"

I hung up before listening to the rest of the message. I'd heard everything I needed to know. Even so, after all the abuse and neglect at the hands of our father, a lump formed in my throat and I had to stop walking to compose myself before getting behind the wheel of my car.

Bella was right by my side. "What is it?"

"It's Dad, as suspected. He doesn't have long, and Roman said if I wanted to speak to him, I had very little time left."

A coldness ran through my veins. I felt numb, like I wasn't even in my own body anymore.

"Roman is right, you should go to him, Gabe."

I took her hand in mine and tried to keep it together as much as possible.

My dad was dying.

But my beautiful baby girls would be coming home any day, and that took priority. I threw myself into thinking about them and what life would be like in a few days when they would be home with us.

“Gabe—”

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” I said. “I was thinking, we might want to pick up some larger diapers. I think the girls might grow out of the size we bought very quickly.”

“Whatever you think is best.”

I knew Bella wasn’t talking about diapers.



## BELLA

**M**y babies were already six weeks old, and finally, our two girls were home. Elio and Vincent still had some time in the NICU, but we had little Lucy and Ari with us and that was a reason to celebrate.

Roman and Dante were over a few days after the girls came home; they wanted to meet their nieces. Gabe was slowly letting them back into the fold, but also keeping walls and boundaries up just to be safe. He said that he wasn't sure how big of a role his brothers were going to play in our kid's lives, but that we'd take it day by day.

None of the De Luca men had ever held a newborn before, and at first, they were hesitant.

"I'm afraid I'll drop her," Dante said as I tried to hand him Lucy.

"You? With your big, strong arms, you don't think you can hold a baby without dropping her?" Ava teased her brother.

Ava seemed really happy to have her brothers back in her life. She and Dante were a little closer than she and Roman, but Roman tended to keep his distance from everyone—whether intentionally or not, I wasn't sure.

"You're sitting down," I told Dante. "I think you'll be just fine."

Still, it was always hard handing over one of my babies. I wanted to keep them both in my arms at all times, since I'd already missed out on so much with them. I wanted to keep

them all to myself, but I knew that it was good to have family involved.

I hadn't talked to my "mother" in months but I had sent her a text letting her know the babies were born. Not surprisingly I hadn't heard a single peep from her. I was starting to realize she wasn't worth my energy or my emotions and that it was probably best to let sleeping dogs lie. I didn't want that kind of toxicity around my children anyway.

Thankfully, I still had Charles, who I was starting to really think of as my dad. Even if it turned out that we weren't genetically related—which we almost certainly were—he had stepped up and filled a void that I hadn't even known existed until we started talking.

Dante took Lucy into his arms after some encouragement and looked down at her with awe.

"See? You're a natural," I said. "Just like Gabe."

"Yeah, well, unlike Gabe, kids have never really liked me much."

"I doubt that's true," I said with a friendly smile.

Roman sat in a chair nearby, quietly observing and making it easy to forget that he was there at all. He and Gabe had spoken a bit earlier and things had gotten heated. Since then, Roman had been keeping his mouth shut and staying closer to Dante, Ava and me. Gabe had been holding Ari, who was sleeping peacefully in his arms, for about an hour, sitting in tranquil silence and staring at his daughter with such love in his eyes.

"Hold on, Charles is calling," I said, not moving too far away from my babies. I answered. "Hi there!"

"Hi Bella," he said. "I know you mentioned two of the babies were coming home and told me to call a few days later. I hope now isn't a bad time?"

"Not at all," I said. "Would you like to see them?"

His voice cracked. "I—I would love that."



We switched to a video call and I turned the camera toward the little ones.

“Ariana is sleeping in her daddy’s arms at the moment,” I said, showing her off on the camera.

“Oh wow, she is precious,” Charles said. “She looks... never mind.”

I knew what he was about to say. He was going to say that she looked like his little Bella.

“And this is Lucia, but we call her Lucy for short,” I said, trying to regain my composure.

“They are so sweet. Ariana and Lucia look so much alike, I imagine it’s hard to tell them apart. Are they identical?”

“No, but they might as well be, right? I make sure to dress them in different colors, but there are subtle differences.”

“Both beautiful little girls,” Charles said, his voice catching. We turned off video calling as he started to get emotional.

“Anyway, I wanted to tell you that I’m ready to talk to my wife and children about what we suspect, and to get the ball rolling,” he said. “As long as you’re ready, that is.”

“I’m ready, yes,” I quickly replied. My life was chaotic with the babies, but I knew that things weren’t likely to calm down anytime soon, and we needed to get an investigation going into what happened. I needed answers, and so did the O’Connell’s.

“Good. I want to talk to my family first, make sure they’re prepared for what is to come, but I think they will be very eager to get answers, and to meet you one day, if you’d like that.”

“I would love that. No matter what happens, Charles, I would love to meet your family. I feel like I already know them based on our conversations.”

“They’re going to love you,” Charles said. “I’ll let you go; it looks like you have guests and I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re never intruding, I love hearing from you.”

I could hear the smile in Charles’s voice. “Good, because I love talking to you. It brings me comfort, even if we aren’t sure yet.”

I was sure in my heart, but I knew that gut feelings weren’t scientific proof. We’d find out soon enough. Eventually, it might mean that my mom, or the woman who had raised me, would be arrested. I had come to terms with that. I wasn’t sure how she would react when she found out that we had discovered that I was likely kidnapped. Maybe she would try to run, but it was anyone’s guess. I really didn’t care; It wasn’t like she was an active participant in my life anyway.

I got off the phone and turned back to the others. Ava was the only one left in the room, and she was holding Lucy. Ari was asleep in the bassinet next to the couch. “Where did everyone go?” I asked.

“They stepped out to ‘talk,’” Ava grumbled. “Which means they are going to argue.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. Lucy was sleeping peacefully in Ava’s arms, and it brought a smile to my face. “Do you want me to go check on them?”

I knew that Ava got a little stressed being around her brothers when they argued, she just wanted everyone to get along. Considering she came from a family that seemed to fight all the time, I couldn’t blame her for being a bit sensitive to raised voices.

“That’s up to you,” she said. “I’m just trying to focus all my attention on these little angels and forget about the family drama.”

I stepped out into the hall momentarily, and I could hear their voices in the library nearby. Frowning, I thought twice about wanting to get into the middle of things. I trusted Gabe, but his brothers, especially Roman, were pretty intense. I closed the large French doors to the living area, not wanting their voices to wake up the girls.

I sat down on the couch beside Ava. “You have the right idea—focus on the babies, not their drama,” I said.

“I’m sorry, Roman brings drama wherever he goes.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“He’s my brother,” she muttered.

“Yeah, but so is Gabe and he turned out alright.”

“Dante isn’t too bad either, most of the time,” she said.

“True, and I remember pieces of Roman a bit growing up. He’s intense, but he’s a good guy deep down, or at least I think so.”

Ava nodded. “He is, he’s got a good heart. I just think that Dad kind of beat the goodness out of him, literally and figuratively. I hope that once Dad is gone, he finds his way back.”

I talked to Gabe often about their dad dying, but Ava barely mentioned it. I had tried to bring it up a few times, but she always shrugged it off.

“Are you going to see him?” I asked.

Ava shrugged. “I don’t know. I told my brothers I would try to drive up there tomorrow, but I am not looking forward to it,” she said. “Of all of us, Dad hated me the most.”

“He didn’t hate you.”

“No, he just had no use for a daughter,” she said.

“Well good thing that his opinion means nothing.”

She smiled at me. “I see the way Gabe looks at these girls, and it makes me so happy. I would have loved to have had a father that loved me the way he loves Lucy and Ari.”

“I know the feeling.”

“I hope that Charles is your dad and that you are able to experience that,” she said softly.

“Me too,” I agreed.

I also hoped that Ava would one day find peace with her own father.



## G A B E

“I told you not to fucking talk about business with me, and especially not today, of all days.”

“Then when?” Roman asked.

“Never, if I have my way. I told you; I want no part in any of it.”

“You’re a De Luca, Gabe, there’s no getting out of the family business. Tony wants to talk to you.”

“I don’t do business with the Mafia,” I said, walking over to my brother and standing face-to-face with him. My hands were balled at my sides, my cheeks were heated and likely red from anger. “Do not bring this bullshit into my house, under my roof, and into my family, you hear me? My daughters just came home a couple days ago. Today is a happy day, and you have no right to bring that shit here.”

Roman backed off, holding his hands up as Dante stepped between us. He was always the one to break us up when things got too heated, even when we were kids.

“Listen, Roman, Gabe is right. Now is not the time for this.”

“He can’t escape his family or who he is. Even when Dad dies, he’s still a De Luca.”

“Yeah, well, that means something different to me. Mom was a De Luca as well.”

Roman scoffed, just as he always did whenever one of us brought Mom up. “You hold Mom up on a fucking pedestal,

but she married into this, she knew what she was getting into when she had kids, she chose our father. Do you really think she was the fucking saint you make her out to be?”

Good thing Dante was between us because I lunged toward Roman. I couldn't hold back my emotions when he talked about Mom like that.

“Fuck you, man,” I said.

“Yeah, well, fuck you too. You can't even visit your old man on his deathbed, after all that he did for us.”

“All that he did for us? You mean make deals with the Mob, train us to do the same, throwing us to the wolves and putting our lives in fucking danger to make a dime?” I spat the words at Roman. It had been a long time since I'd felt so much anger.

“He did the best he could with what he had. He had nothing, Gabe. He came from poverty and worked his way up in the only way he knew how. You think you'd have this huge house if it wasn't for Dad? Do you think you would have been able to start a business without the money he made?”

“I earned all of this myself.”

“That's bullshit, and you know it. There's no self-made man here, you benefited from the legacy our father built for us and now you won't even go say goodbye to him before he dies.”

“I have other priorities right now, Roman. I have my children to look after. Maybe if Dad had put us first just once all those years ago, you wouldn't be dealing with the fucking wolves at your throat now.”

Roman started to say something but Dante stopped him and pulled him aside. We were getting nowhere. Any reconciliatory feelings I had toward Roman were now gone.

“Just leave,” I said. “Both of you, can you just leave and let me spend time with my family? That's all I want.”

“We're your family too,” Dante said, sounding a little wounded.

“Well you certainly don’t know how to fucking act like it, bringing this bullshit into my house, today of all days,” I said. “So I’ll ask you again, please leave, or I will make sure you’re escorted out. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

Roman pushed past Dante and headed for the door. “Not like you ever thought of us as family anyway, you always thought you were better than everyone.”

“No, Roman, I didn’t. I just didn’t want to be caught up in Dad’s bullshit. You know what, never mind, why do I even bother?”

“Yeah, exactly, why bother with your family,” Roman said as he stepped out of the library.

I looked at Dante, unsure if he would stay or follow Roman. He shook his head. “You know, he might be an asshole sometimes, but you can be too. He made some good points.”

Dante walked toward the door, just as I expected him to.

I followed them both, making sure they found their way out of my house without any more trouble. Roman slammed the front door behind him, cursing me out under his breath before leaving.

I stood there in the entryway for a long time. I knew Ava had wanted to repair things with them, but I wasn’t sure it was possible. Our family was too broken.

I heard movement behind me and turned to find Bella standing there.

My body instantly relaxed when I laid eyes on her.

“Is everything okay?” she asked me.

“Everything is fine, the guys were just mad that I wasn’t making plans to visit Dad.”

I noticed Ava peeking her head out of the living room, listening to everything. She cleared her voice before saying, “Maybe they’re right, Gabe. Maybe we should visit him one last time.”



I stared at my baby sister. She had grown into an intelligent, mature, self-sufficient young woman, despite all the ways our father had tried to fuck her up.

Not answering her, I walked past her into the living room, where my daughters were fast asleep in the bassinets we had brought down for them. Bella stepped up beside me, and I put an arm around her waist, kissing the top of her head.

Ava sat nearby.

These were my people.

This was my family.

They came first.

Bella whispered softly to me. “It’s okay if you want to go to your dad.”

“I can’t leave you and the girls. What if something happens to Vincent while I’m gone?”

“Chicago is only four hours away, and we have it covered here. I have plenty of help. This could be your last chance, Gabe.”

As much as I hated to admit it, a knot formed in my stomach upon hearing those words. I might never see my father again.

Years ago, after he moved to Chicago to get closer to his business, and I decided to step away, I thought I was okay with never seeing his face again.

“I’m going tomorrow,” Ava said. “If you want to join me.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think we should both leave Bella here alone. You go first, I can always go later.”

“There may not be a later.”

I knew she was right.

But how could I leave them, the people I loved most in the world, even for a day, for a man who didn’t even seem to love me?



## BELLA

**W**e had carefully moved the girls to their cribs in the nursery and made sure that the monitors were up and running. Exhausted, I fell into our bed. I had moved upstairs to Gabe's master suite as soon as I was able to make it up the stairs.

"What a day," I said.

Gabe laid down beside me. "Tell me about it."

I glanced over at him with a smile. "One good thing I forgot to mention is that when I saw my doctor yesterday, he told me that everything is healing up nicely and even approved of us having some fun."

"It's been long enough?" Gabe asked.

"Yes, it'll be six weeks tomorrow," I said. "Hard to believe, I know, but—"

Before I could finish what I was saying, Gabe's mouth pressed against mine. His hands were lost in the tangled mess of my curls as he pulled me into him.

"I promise I'll be gentle," he said, whispering the words against my mouth.

"I've never known you to be anything but gentle with me," I responded.

"Trust me, it's hard not to pounce on you right now. You have no idea how long I have been wanting to be with you again."

“The feeling is mutual,” I said, pressing my lips to his and hooking my leg over his hip.

We were on the bed, lying on our sides, facing each other. He was right about being gentle. I was approved for sex, but I was still healing from the C-section. I trusted Gabe, I knew he would be careful with me. It had been a long few months of being open with our feelings for each other and not being able to express them physically in the way we wanted to.

Gabe reached between my thighs. I had worn just a simple nightgown to bed for easy access. His fingers found my opening and slipped between my lips, gently playing with my clit as we kissed. He lowered his mouth to my neck, sucking at my flesh and grazing it with his teeth. His warm breath brushed against my ear.

“Yes, yes,” I whimpered. I needed more.

With his free hand, he slipped the nightgown up higher, exposing my chest. His lips dropped to my nipple as he slowly slid a finger inside of me.

His tongue swirled around my nipple as he fingered me, adding in a second digit and then a third once it was clear I was ready for it. I could feel how wet I was, how easily he could slide in and out of me. I had wanted to be with him again for so long, and finally, I was given the okay to have him.

My first orgasm built up slowly, each gentle suck or touch inching me closer and closer. But once it hit me, my entire body shook and my legs clenched shut around Gabe’s hand, as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me.

“Yes, Gabe, yes,” I moaned, trying to keep fairly quiet so as to not wake the babies in the next room.

Once the last wave hit me, I relaxed against him, breathing heavily and unable to speak for a few moments.

While I was catching my breath, Gabe undressed and I got to admire his hard, chiseled body, before removing my nightgown and tossing it aside.

He laid back down, this time behind me, spooning me.

His cock rubbed against my ass before I parted my thighs. He slipped between them, my wetness allowing him to easily move back and forth, against my clit. It felt good, but I wanted more. I needed to feel him inside of me.

He took his cock and guided it toward my opening. The tip of him pressed into me and I pushed my ass backward, helping to ease him in.

Gabe thrust ever so gently until he was fully sheathed inside of me, my body stretching to accommodate him. He held me close like that for a few moments before he started moving, thrusting in and out of me.

His fingers played with my breasts, gently kneading them and circling the nipples. Every nerve on my body felt like it was tingling with excitement, like electricity coursing through my limbs as we made love.

It didn't take long at all before a warmth grew inside of me. Each thrust brought me closer and closer to the finish line. Clenching my pussy around him, I cried out, "Come with me, Gabe... please..." before my voice turned into a garble of whimpers and moans.

Gabe's cock throbbed inside of me, as he buried himself into me one last time, filling me with his seed. His groans meshed with mine until finally, we both relaxed onto the bed in each other's arms.

He held me, stroking my hair and running his fingers along my skin. I felt closer to him than I'd ever felt to anyone in my entire life. I felt safe, content, and never wanted the moment to end.

He removed his cock and turned me over to face him.

"I want to be able to see your beautiful face," he whispered, cupping my chin in his hand and bringing my lips to his.

He lay there beside me, holding me in his arms. I thought he might have fallen asleep because he was so quiet, but then he spoke.

“This is the first time in my life I have felt this happy, this complete,” he said. “Having you and our children, I finally feel like I have everything I’ve ever wanted in my life.”

“I feel the exact same way.”

He kissed the top of my head. We both had grown up in difficult households, with families that never really loved us. I wasn’t sure what I was feeling in that moment was even possible until I had met Gabe and had our children.

“I have hope for the future again,” I said softly. “I mean, I always hoped to make something of myself, to make my life mean something, which is why I’m so focused on my career and making it in journalism. But now I realize that there is more to life than just that.”

He kissed me again.

“Family is all that matters to me,” he said. “And you’re my family now, Bella.”

His words made me think about his father. I knew there was tension there, even though I didn’t know the whole story. But I also knew Gabe. He meant what he’d said about family being everything to him, and I feared that if his dad died without Gabe saying a proper goodbye, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

I also didn’t want to nag him, so I remained quiet. I had told him already, countless times, that we would be fine for a day or two so he could say his peace with his dad. Each time, he’d gone quiet on me, so I let it go.



## G A B E

**M**y phone rang the next morning, waking me up far too early considering we were up and down with the babies all night. I'd hired some help, but we still wanted to do most of the care regarding our children, so I was up every single time they cried.

I answered it without even checking who it was; I just wanted the ringing to stop before it woke Bella.

"Yes?" I muttered under my breath, as I climbed from the bed.

"Gabe, it's me, Dante."

I stepped out into the hallway, hoping not to disturb Bella.

He continued before I could ask him what he was calling about.

"It's Dad. The doctors just left his room and told me that he's got days left, at most. If you want to see him, and I'm not saying you have to, but if you do, now is the time."

I let out a deep breath and closed my eyes, rubbing my temples. It was too early to deal with the drama surrounding my father.

"Ava is coming up today, you could always ride with her."

"I think she might've left already, she said she had to be back by this evening for a lecture or something," I said. "And I don't want to leave if she's not here. One of us at least should be here to help Bella."



“Don’t you have staff on hand?”

“I do, but I’m not going to leave her without family, not right now.”

“Alright, I understand,” Dante said. “It’s your call, man. I’m not going to guilt trip you or anything, but I know even with how bad things were for us, there’s likely something you want to say to him or ask of him, and if so, now is your last chance.”

He was right. There was a lot I wanted to ask of my dad, but I knew he would never give me a straight answer, even on his deathbed.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I said.

“Of course, Gabe. No matter what happens, we’re still brothers.”

I hung up the phone and stood there in the hallway, mulling over what Dante had said.

“Everything alright?” Bella asked from behind me.

I hadn’t even heard the bedroom door open. She was wearing a soft, pink robe and tying it around herself as she stepped out of the room.

“Yeah, it was just Dante,” I said. “Dad’s only got a few days left, according to the doctors. I’m sorry, I didn’t want to wake you.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about me,” she said. “I’m worried about you, Gabe. Are you sure you don’t want to go see him?”

“I can’t, Bella. I need to be here for you, Ari and Lucy, and for the boys, too.”

“We have it covered, Gabe,” she said. “Ava will be back this evening, and with the staff you’ve hired, we have plenty of help for you to be able to leave for a day. Chicago is only a few hours away, you can leave early and come back in the evening, like Ava is doing.”

“I don’t want to leave you like that.”

“We’ll be fine,” she said, placing a hand on my arm. “This really could be your last chance to say goodbye to him.”

It wasn’t even just about saying goodbye. It was those damned, nagging questions I felt I needed to ask. Even if he fed me a line of bullshit, I still wanted to ask them.

“I don’t know...”

“I think you’re going to regret it if you don’t go,” Bella said softly.

She was right. I pulled her into me and kissed the top of her head, which was soft and fluffy from her bedhead of curls.

“How in the hell do you know me so well already?”

She turned her head to look up at me. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

I didn’t answer, not with my words, but with a sigh of resignation. She was right. They were all right.

“I have plenty of help and it’s only one day, Gabe,” she said again. “We will be fine.”

\* \* \*

THAT AFTERNOON, we met with the doctors to discuss our little boys. Bella had Ari and I had Lucy strapped to my chest as we waited for the doctor to update us on their brothers.

“So Vincent is still not well enough to go home,” the doctor said.

Even though I was expecting those words, they still stung. The boys had been in the hospital in what felt like forever. I couldn’t wait to have our entire family home under one roof.

“But Elio is doing very well, he’s finally put on enough weight that I think he could be released next week.”

Now that was music to my ears.

“Really? You think he’s strong enough?”

“I do,” the doctor said. “We still want him to put on a few more ounces, but at this rate, I don’t think it will be an issue.”

“Wow, that’s amazing news,” Bella said, smiling at me. “Do we have any idea about when Vincent could be allowed to come home or if he’s going to need surgery?”

“I talked to the heart specialist this morning before our appointment, and he told me that his heart is healing on its own. Right now, he doesn’t think he will need surgery, but it’s still too early to tell. As far as a timeline for when he could come home... it really isn’t clear, I’m afraid. I think he will need at least another few weeks in the NICU.”

Bella’s smile wavered a bit. Ari made a noise and she turned her attention to the baby. I knew it killed her, as much as it did me, not to have all four of our children home with us.

I reached out and squeezed her hand. “Soon, sweetie.”

“I know,” she said. “And then we will have our hands full.”

“Yes, most certainly,” the doctor said with a chuckle.

We thanked him and left the medical center. All morning and afternoon, I had been thinking about what Bella and Dante had said about my dad. As soon as we were in the car and the girls were buckled in, I turned to Bella and said, “Since things are going so well, and the boys seem to be stable, I was thinking of heading to Chicago tomorrow, if that’s okay with you?”

Bella nodded. “Of course it is, Gabe. Like I told you, we have plenty of hands on deck, we will be fine for a day or two.”

“Just a day,” I clarified. “I will leave early in the morning and be back by dinner time.”

She smiled gently at me. “You know you can take all the time you need.”

“That is all the time I need. I’m needed more back here, with my family.”

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it before starting the car and heading for home. Once there, I messaged both Ava and Dante to let them know the plan.



## BELLA

**I**t had been a long day already with the doctor, Gabe's dad, and Ava returning from seeing him for the last time. I was thinking of rescheduling the call with Charles, but Gabe encouraged me to keep the appointment since I was finally getting to meet his wife, and potentially my birth mother, for the first time.

When the phone rang, I nearly jumped out of my skin. With shaking hands, I answered the call and it went straight to video.

Staring back at me was Charles and his wife, Brenda. As soon as I laid eyes on her, I let out an audible gasp.

*That's where I got my curly, red hair from,* I thought to myself. She looked just like an older version of me, hair and all.

She must have thought the same thing because tears welled up in her eyes and she covered her mouth in surprise.

"See, honey, I told you," Charles whispered to his wife. "I told you that she was our Bella."

I didn't want to get any of our hopes up but seeing her was yet another piece of the puzzle that seemed to fit. It all added up to mean one thing and one thing only—that they were my parents.

When she uncovered her mouth and stared back at the camera, I noticed we both had the same birthmark near our lip. Jesus, could it be more obvious?

“Hi Bella, sorry if I got a little emotional,” Brenda said, wiping away the tears. “I’ve just gotten my hopes up so many times over the years, and every time, they get dashed with reality.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “And I understand, it’s emotional for me too. I can’t believe all the signs pointing towards me being your daughter. I want to believe it so badly.”

“Well, we will find out soon enough,” Charles said. “That is, if you’re still okay with us moving forward with the investigation.”

“I am, yes.”

“Good. I’m sure they will do a DNA test, but we can also do our own. Not that I have any doubt, I am fully convinced of it now,” Charles said. He comforted his wife as she cried into his shoulder. Seeing her so emotional, and seeing the love between the two of them, brought tears to my eyes too.

“Would you like to see the babies? Well, two of them at least, just the girls are home right now,” I said.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Charles said. “I told her all about them, and how we might be grandparents.”

“I didn’t believe him, I thought he was just chasing another unicorn.” Brenda said.

“But now you believe me?” Charles asked with a small chuckle.

“I want to, and yes, she does look so much like me, just like you said and—” She seemed to be struggling with speaking. It was likely a huge shock to see the daughter she thought she’d lost decades ago staring back at her.

“There’s just too many coincidences,” I added, getting up off the bed and walking toward the nursery where the girls were sleeping.

I stepped inside and turned the camera toward Ariana first.

“What a sweet baby,” Brenda cooed. “She looks so much like—”

“Our Bella when she was a baby?” Charles finished for her.

“Yes,” Brenda said in a choked voice.

I then showed them Lucy, and Brenda had the same reaction. Since I’d never seen a photo of myself as a baby, it was hard to know if what they were saying was true or not, but it made me happy to know my daughters looked like me.

As we were talking about the girls, another call flashed across my screen. It was the woman who’d raised me. I canceled the call and went back to talking to Brenda and Charles, heading back into the bedroom so as not to wake the girls.

As I was getting comfortable on the bed, a call popped up on my screen again. I let out a groan as I canceled it, and not even a second later, it popped up again. After months of not talking to me, suddenly whatever she had to say was urgent? I was so annoyed, and it showed on my face.

“Do you need to take the other call?” Charles asked.

“No, it’s just my mom, err, Mary. Maria, as you knew her, I suspect.”

“Oh,” Charles said, as if he wasn’t sure how to respond to that. “Does she know that we’re pursuing an investigation?”

“No, I haven’t told her anything. In fact, we haven’t talked in months. But I’m not about to give her a heads up, I want her caught and brought to justice if she did indeed, kidnap me.”

“Are you okay with that, Bella? I know Brenda and I hold negative feelings toward this woman, but she did raise you, and you had a father too, from what you’ve told me. Are you okay with them being put in jail?”

I had thought about it long and hard, and the question didn’t affect me as it did when we first started talking about it. “The man who raised me is already in prison for a very long time, and I haven’t talked to him in years. And as far as Maria, we hardly talk at all anymore and I don’t think she ever loved me anyway. What I’m trying to say is, I’m okay with it. If she did kidnap me, then I am prepared for justice to be served.”



We were quiet for a second, and the number popped up on my screen again.

Dammit, why now?

“You know that we have all the time in the world to get to know each other,” Charles said softly. “We hope to meet you in person soon, and your babies too. Maybe you should take the call and see what she wants?”

“Maybe, since she’s so damned persistent,” I muttered.

Her number popped up again.

“It was nice seeing you,” Brenda said, her voice weaker than before. “I hope we can talk again soon.”

“We will,” I said, tears welling in my eyes as we said goodbye.

As soon as I disconnected the call, my phone rang again.

“Yes?” I nearly yelled into the phone. “What is so damned important that you keep calling when I haven’t heard from you in months?”

“Why didn’t you tell me the babies were home from the hospital?”

I was taken aback by her words. “What? You never responded to my messages about them being born, how did you know they were home? And for your information, only two of them are home, the other two are still in the NICU, not that I expected you to care.”

“Janice told me. She said she saw it on your Instagram that the girls were home, and I hadn’t heard. I looked like such an idiot not even knowing my grandbabies were home from the hospital.”

“Janice?”

“Your dad’s sister. You only met her once when you were little. She has always tried to act like she’s better than me, that she knows more than I do, and that’s exactly what happened when she asked if I’d seen the babies yet. Janice shouldn’t know more about you than I do.”

That's why she was blowing up my phone? Unbelievable.

"You could have called and checked in on me at any time, the phone goes both ways."

"God, Bella, I swear I tried my best with you, and yet you're still so fucking disrespectful."

"I'm not going to listen to this—"

"No, I'm not finished yet," she interrupted. "I know that I made a mistake with you because we never fully bonded. You never really loved me."

"Because you never showed me any love first," I said. "I was the child; I owed you nothing."

"You know what? I'm done with you, Bella. I'm going to start over—"

I didn't let her finish the call before hanging up the phone. Hot tears streamed down my face.

I was done with her long before she was done with me. And thankfully, she would be arrested soon if I had my way, so she couldn't tear another child away from their loving family like she had done to me.



## G A B E

I'd always hated hospitals. Every time I stepped into one, the sound of the beeping sent me back to when my mom died. I could still see her in the hospital bed, unconscious and unable to speak. I liked to believe that she had heard me when I said goodbye to her and told her that I loved her, but it was hard to know for sure.

According to Dante, Dad was still lucid enough to understand what was being said around him, and he even managed to talk.

I ran into Dante as I was walking toward his room.

“Hey man, I was just coming out to find you,” he said. “Good news, Dad woke up feeling a bit better today. He even ate breakfast for the first time in days...”

He trailed off as he saw the look on my face.

“What is it?” he asked.

I didn't want to ruin Dante's positive mood by pointing out that often, right before folks died, they had one last, strong day where they were hungry and talkative. Terminal lucidity, as they called it. It was a surge of energy before someone passed away, usually within hours or days.

Maybe I was wrong, but I had a feeling based on what the doctors had been saying, that I wasn't.

I patted Dante on the back. “Good, glad to hear he's talking, at least.”

“Oh yeah, Roman was just in there and playing cards with him, but he stepped out when I got your text that you were here.”

Still not talking to me. Not surprised in the slightest.

Dante led me to the room and motioned for me to enter.

“Go on, I figure I’ll let you have some time alone with the old man.”

Part of me wanted to turn around and get the hell out of there. The beeping from inside the room caused my head to spin, and for a second, I felt like I couldn’t move my legs forward to actually enter the room.

But somehow, I managed.

The TV was on, but turned down low enough that it might as well have been off. I saw Dad before he saw me, he was staring at the TV, an old episode of Law and Order played out on the screen. I wasn’t sure if he was actually watching or just staring off in the distance.

Then he turned his head ever so slightly and saw me.

“Gabe.” His voice was weak, and he started coughing as soon as he said my name. He tried to sit up taller in the bed, but I stepped to his side and urged him to not move too much.

“Yes, it’s me,” I said, unsure of what else to say. “Just relax, Dad.”

He stopped moving and just looked at me.

The once large, strong man had whittled down to a mere shell of the person he once was. He’d lost at least a hundred pounds and was nothing but skin and bones. His eyes were sunken in and surrounded by dark circles. He wasn’t a young man when I last saw him, but he looked closer to ninety than his actual age of fifty-eight.

After my father caught his breath, he just looked at me for a long time. I wasn’t sure what to say, so we sat in silence for several minutes.

He surprised me with his words once he spoke. “Gabriel, my son, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” I couldn’t recall ever hearing those words pass his lips. “For what?”

“For everything,” he said. “For being a shitty dad, for not letting you boys and Ava know how much you meant to me.”

It felt like there was a vice grip on my heart. For a second, I thought I might be having a heart attack, but no, it was just an intense rush of feelings from hearing my father apologize.

I didn’t want to tell him it was okay, it wasn’t. I settled for the truth, “I appreciate that, Dad.”

He continued. “I know you can’t possibly forgive me, and I don’t expect that. But I hope that whatever you do, you always put your family first. Don’t make the same mistakes I did.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” I said, and it was the truth. Being raised by him had made me feel fiercely protective and loyal to my own family. I would never imagine putting my children through the same bullshit he put us through. “My children, Bella and Ava, they are my world. Nothing, not work, money, success, or anything else, will ever come before them.”

“Good, son, I’m glad to hear that,” he said. He began coughing, but once it settled down, he surprised me once again. “I love you, Gabriel. I may not have always shown it, but I love you, son.”

Hearing those words from my father’s mouth made the grip on my heart even stronger. I couldn’t breathe for a second or two. Finally, once I could speak, I managed to choke out, “I love you too, Dad.”

And I meant it. I knew that I did. Even through everything, I loved that old bastard. I may not have forgiven him, but I loved him.

“Because I love you, Gabriel, I think you need to listen to my next words very carefully...” He trailed off as he coughed, his body shaking violently with each hack, his face twisted

into a painful look. I so badly wanted to do something, anything, to help him, but knew I couldn't.

Before he could finish what he was trying to say, a nurse popped into the room with a cheerful smile. "Morning, Mr. De Luca. Ooh, I see you have company. Is this another one of your boys you keep talking about?"

Dad nodded between coughing, and managed to choke out the words, "My oldest."

I introduced myself, "I'm Gabe."

"Oh right, he has talked about you a lot. Said he missed you," the nurse said as she injected something into Dad's IV. "I'm glad you could make it in to see him."

"What are you giving him?" I asked.

"Just something to ease his pain, though it may make him sleepy, I'm afraid."

"It's fine, his comfort is key," I said.

"Fuck being comfortable," my father said. "I want to stay awake."

"I'll be here all day, Dad," I told him.

He mumbled something, but he was able to relax into the bed more comfortably within a few minutes. He also managed to stay awake, which wasn't too surprising—my dad was stubborn as shit.

When the nurse left, he turned back to me. "As I was saying, Gabriel, please listen to me because this is serious."

"I'm listening."

"The deal with Tony? You need to give him the land, son. You need to give it to him," he said, his words becoming more and more garbled as he spoke.

"Really? At a time like this, you want to talk business?" My blood felt like hot acid in my veins. Counting to ten, I did my best to calm down before I said anything else. After all, these could be some of the last words I ever spoke to my

father, and I didn't want them to be angry, hateful ones, even if that's how he was making me feel.

"I'm not just saying this to get rich, though you know me, I always loved money." He chuckled, even as his eyes drifted close.

"Dad, listen, I don't want to talk about that. I just want to let you know that I love you, and I promise to take care of the family."

"If you want to care for them, do... as... I... say..." his words trailed off into silence, and he let out a small snore after a second.

He was asleep.

That was it.

The last words he spoke to me were about some damned deal.

I was still that little boy, hoping and praying that my dad cared more about me than his damned business, and yet again, I was worried that I was being naive.

After some time at his side, I heard voices in the hallway. Roman was back from wherever he'd gone. I knew I couldn't avoid my brother forever.

I stepped away from Dad's side and into the hallway. Roman's jaw tightened the moment he laid eyes on me. Before he could open his mouth, I stopped him.

"Now isn't the time, Roman," I said. "Besides, we fought about me seeing Dad before he dies, and I'm here, aren't I?"

Roman visibly relaxed. "I'm glad you came; he's been asking about you all day."

"I'm glad I came too," I said, still pondering over the words my dad had said to me. "Can I ask you something, Roman?"

"Sure."

"The deal with Tony, you're still handling it, right? You're finding him another property?"



“I’m doing my best, yeah,” Roman said. “Why?”

“Just something Dad had mentioned, he insisted on talking about it.”

“Dad hasn’t been in on the deal since he got sick, he doesn’t know what’s going on with it.”

“Yeah, it’s been me and Roman,” Dante added.

I hated that Roman was bringing our younger brother into the bullshit, but he was a grown man, nothing I could do about it.

“Good, thanks. I appreciate that because I still want nothing to do with it.”

“Understood,” Roman said dryly.

Dante, always the mediator, piped in to change the subject. “How long are you going to be here?”

“Just a few hours,” I said. “I promised Bella I would be back before too late.”

“Is he sleeping?” Dante motioned toward the room.

“Yeah, the nurse came in and gave him something that knocked him the hell out.”

“Ah, he’ll be out for a while then, I hope you got to speak with him for a bit at least.”

“I did.”

“Did you say everything you wanted to say to him?” Dante asked.

I thought about his question. The answer was no, there was so much left unsaid, so many questions left without answers. But I had a feeling it would just have to remain that way.

“Is that even possible?” I asked Dante.



## BELLA

“**Y**ou look exhausted,” Ava said as she plopped down beside me on the couch.

I laughed. “Gee, thanks, do I look that bad?” I teased.

“No, you know what I meant,” Ava replied with a playful nudge on my arm. “I know you’ve been dealing with a lot lately, and if you’d like to rest for a bit, I have time to listen for the girls.”

We had staff on hand, including a nanny, but I usually liked to care for the girls myself. But Ava was right, my eyes were growing heavy, and I desperately could use a nap. She was one of the few people I trusted with my kids.

“Thank you, Ava. I just might take you up on that.”

“Yes, please do, go get some rest.” She took the baby monitor from my hand.

“I should check on Gabe too while I’m at it.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Take care of each other, Auntie Ava is on babysitting duty.”

I slipped from the couch, and as much as my bed was calling to me, I decided to call Gabe quickly and check on him first, slipping into the library nearby to make the call.

I dialed Gabe’s number and he answered quicker than I expected.

“Hey, I was just going to leave a message, I don’t want to pull you away from your dad.”

“It’s fine, he’s sleeping and I had to make a coffee run,” he replied, his voice sounding more tired than usual. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine, don’t worry about us. The girls are napping, Ava is on duty to let me have some rest. I just wanted to check in on you. How are you holding up?”

“Well, I suspect he doesn’t have long. I wouldn’t be surprised if he passed within the next day or so.”

“I’m so sorry, Gabe. Is there anything I can do? I hate not being there with you, but if you need to stay the night, please don’t feel like you have to rush back to us.”

“I don’t want to stay the night; I have a feeling he may not wake up again.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m doing about as well as can be expected. I think I’m fine, better than fine, actually.” I knew Gabe, he would always try to downplay his struggles.

I heard a sound from the hallway outside the library.

“Hold on, I think Ava is calling for me,” I said.

As I opened the door, a chill ran through my entire body. Ava wasn’t just calling for me, she was screaming my name from the top of the stairs. A blood-curdling scream.

I forgot all about the phone call and rushed up the stairs as quickly as I could, finding Ava at the top, tears streaming down her face. She kept screaming, “Oh my God, Ava! They’re gone, they’re gone.”

“Who’s gone?” I asked, unable to comprehend what was happening.

Ava pointed down the hallway, to the open nursery door.

Gabe was now calling my name on the phone. “Bella, Bella, is everything okay? What’s going on there?”

“I– I don’t know,” I said as I moved toward the nursery.

Ava managed to pull herself together enough to say, “I’m calling 9-1-1, now.”

I still wasn’t sure what had happened. As I stepped into the nursery doorway, my heart stopped. What was I going to find when I looked into the cribs?

They were empty.

All of them. I looked through the entire room as if infants might have found a way to hide in the closet, as the tears streamed down my face.

“No, no, this can’t be happening, it must be a mistake. The nanny must have them.”

“Bella, what’s going on?” Gabe yelled from the phone in my hand.

“The girls, they’re gone, they aren’t in their cribs.”

“Could Lana have them?” Gabe asked.

I tried to pull myself together as I went back into the hallway to search for Lana. She was there talking to Ava who was still in tears.

No babies in hand.

“Lana, where are they?” I asked.

“The police are on the way,” Ava said.

“Where are they?” I demanded.

My knees gave out on me as she responded, “I don’t know.”

“My mom,” I muttered. “She stole them. She stole my babies!”

Tears streamed down my cheeks and I fell entirely to the floor, my head hitting as I went down, but I didn’t care. Nothing mattered in that moment except for my beautiful, perfect little girls.

I heard Gabe on the phone next to me on the floor.

“I’m on my way home.”



## G A B E

I had raced home. The four hours between Chicago and St. Louis felt like an eternity as I sped down the highway toward my house. My heart was pounding, and I cursed at myself for ever leaving Bella and the babies alone.

My brothers had offered to come with me. Even Roman seemed concerned as I raced from the hospital, barely taking time to mutter what was happening.

I parked alongside several police cars.

Rushing inside, an officer blocked my path.

“I need to get inside!” My voice was raised more than I meant for it to be.

“Sorry, sir, this is a crime scene, we can’t just let anyone go in.”

“This is my house. I’m the father,” I said.

The officer didn’t look entirely convinced. Looking past him my eyes fell on Bella through the open front door pacing the living room. I called out to her.

Bella looked at me, her eyes large and wet, her cheeks soaked with tears as she rushed toward me. She pushed past the officer and ran into my arms.

“Gabe,” she sobbed into my shoulder.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m here now,” I said.

The officer reluctantly stepped out of our path and let me enter my house.

Bella walked me back into the living area, the rest of the house was blocked off. Ava was sitting on a couch alongside Lana, the nanny, and the rest of the staff was there too.

“What happened?” I asked no one in particular. I didn’t want Bella to relive the nightmare again. I held her close to me, her face buried in my chest as I stroked her hair.

It was Ava who answered and explained what had happened. How the babies were in their cribs asleep one minute, and without making a peep on the monitor, somehow disappeared from the house without anyone noticing.

“The police have questioned all of us,” Ava said, her eyes wet with tears. “But they aren’t telling us anything either.”

“The cameras, did anyone check the cameras I have set up?”

“The cops have those,” Bella reassured me, lifting her head up to look me in the eyes. “They’ve taken everything and have made them unavailable for us to view now too. They say it’s part of the investigation.”

“They haven’t told you anything?” I asked the room.

Everyone shook their heads.

“They say they will talk to us once they have something to share. They assured us they’re on the case.”

“They’re moving too slow,” Bella said, staring me in the eye. “They refuse to listen to me. Gabe, I know it’s my mom, she’s the one that kidnapped our girls, I know it. Our last phone call, she said she was going to start all over. This is what she meant.”

“You told them this?” I asked.

“I did, and they said they’ll look into it, but I don’t think they’ve sent anyone out to look for her. I know my mom, Gabe, she can just disappear and be a whole other person with a new identity, and we will never be able to find her.”

Her eyes bore into mine.



“You’re right,” I said. “And they haven’t sent anyone to investigate her?”

“Not that I know of, they just keep telling me that they’re handling it, but they don’t think she’s a suspect.”

“They don’t think a woman who kidnapped her first child was a suspect for kidnapping more children?”

“They don’t seem to believe me that I was kidnapped, since there’s no investigation or anything. I tried to explain, but they kept cutting me off.” Bella’s voice raised in anger and her normally pale skin was turning pink. She motioned toward the police officers standing in the hallway. “They seem more concerned with keeping us locked away here than actually finding our children.”

“I’ll take care of it.” I kissed Bella before stepping into the hallway and heading for the door.

The officer that hadn’t wanted to let me in was there, ready to stop me again. His nameplate read “Beekman.”

“You tried to stop me from entering and now you’re going to stop me from leaving?”

“We need to ask you some questions.”

“I wasn’t even in the state when my children were taken,” I said. I pushed past the officer and headed for my car. I expected other officers to follow me, and Beekman tried to stop me, but he wasn’t fast enough. I made it to my car and pulled out of the driveway with him shouting for me to come back.

If they weren’t going to check out Bella’s mom, I would do it myself.

Bella’s mother lived just south of the city. It had saddened me that even though she lived so close, she had never once visited Bella, not throughout the entire pregnancy or even afterward. I can’t imagine being a parent, living so close to your children, and not even coming over to visit when they had a baby, or in our case, four. But I reminded myself, she was likely not Bella’s real mother.

I pulled up outside of her house. It was dark inside and out, not a single light on. No car in the driveway either, but it could be in the garage. No sign of a police presence. I hopped from my car and went straight for the front door. I tried knocking, but it was quiet inside. There was a window on the side of the house and I walked over to it to see if I could make out anything inside. It was pitch black, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see some sort of mess in the living room, as if someone had thrown a bunch of shit around. Books were all over the floor instead of in the bookcase, papers littered the coffee table and floor. It looked like someone had been looking for something.

I walked around the house to the back and found a window that was left partially open. Looking inside, it was a bedroom and I could see most of the house I couldn't see before from that angle. Still no movement.

Clothes were all over the bed, thrown around like the books and papers in the other room. To me, it looked like someone had quickly packed up and left. My heart raced as I thought about the reasons for that.

With the help of a pocketknife, I managed to rip out the screen and push the window the rest of the way open. Thankfully it was large enough for me to fit through. Climbing inside the bedroom, I worried that if there were someone in the house they would hear me, but to my relief no one came running into the room.

The place was clearly empty.

I glanced in the closet as I walked past, noticing it had been cleared out. Another suitcase sat nearby. After checking it out, I noticed the zipper was broken, which was probably why it had been left behind. More reason to believe she fled. But where would she go? Bella was right, she could quickly form a new identity and literally be anywhere. I needed some sort of a clue, anything.

I made my way into the living room and glanced around. I dug through the papers, which consisted of birth certificates,

social security cards, and passports with various names on all of them. None of it was helpful to me in that moment though.

I walked into another room and found a little office. An older model computer sat on a desk against the wall. When I moved the mouse, the screen lit up; it appeared to have only been asleep and not fully shut down.

Sitting down at the desk, I got to work. I checked her history, thinking any pro would clear that out, but Mary Stone was no pro—I found that the last site visited was for Southwest Airlines. When I clicked on the link, it logged me in automatically.

She had bought only one ticket, which surprised me, to Los Angeles. The flight was scheduled to depart in two and a half hours, out of St. Louis Lambert International Airport.

I was up from the chair and out the door as fast as possible.

I had to get to Lambert before she boarded that plane.



## BELLA

“We’re all done here, miss,” one of the officers said to me. “Everyone can leave and go home, but please be prepared for more questioning, and don’t leave the state.”

“Wait!” I grabbed her arm before she could leave. “What did you find out? Do you know where my babies are?”

“We don’t—”

“Have you talked to my mom, like I asked you to?”

The woman, Officer Michaelson according to her nametag, pursed her lips and looked uncomfortable.

“Please, tell me something, these are my children.”

“Your mother isn’t a suspect at this time. That’s all I can tell you, I’m sorry.”

“Why isn’t she a suspect? Did you even talk to her?” I wasn’t going to let go of the officer’s arm before she answered me.

“She is not considered a suspect, as we believe this was a job clearly done by professionals.”

“My mom is a professional. She kidnapped me when I was very little.”

The woman pulled her arm free from me with an exasperated sigh. “I promise you that we are doing everything in our power to find your daughters.”

“Everything? Really? Besides talking to a woman who is a known kidnapper who threatened to steal a baby only twenty-four hours before my babies went missing?” Tears welled up in my eyes; tears of anger, of frustration, of not being taken seriously.

“Again, I am very sorry, but we’re doing everything we can.”

She turned on her heels to leave, and if it wasn’t for Ava who took my arm and forced me to stay put, I might have followed the officer out, demanding answers that I knew she wouldn’t give me.

I let out a scream of frustration, and then I remembered Gabe was still out there looking for my mother. We were free to go now, I could help. I reached for my phone and dialed his number.

He answered. “Sorry, I’m driving, you’re on speakerphone.”

“Did you go to her house?” I asked.

“I did, and she clearly left very quickly. I saw that she bought a ticket for a flight to Los Angeles, scheduled to depart shortly, so I’m headed to the airport to try and stop her.”

“I’ll be right there,” I said.

“No, Bella, I can handle this.”

“No, I’m going to meet you at the airport.”

I hung up the phone before he could continue to try and talk me out of it. Ava looked at me with a concerned expression on her face.

“My mom bought a ticket to Los Angeles,” I said. “Gabe and I are going to try to stop her at the airport.”

“I’m coming with you,” Ava said.

“No, please stay here, just in case.” I wasn’t sure what I was hoping for, it wasn’t as if the babies were going to magically appear out of thin air. “Just in case the cops come

back, or you notice anything else that might help us. I'll feel better with someone staying here. I'll have Gabe, Ava."

I appreciated that she wanted to come with me for moral support but I knew I would feel better if she stayed at the house.

I grabbed my purse and keys and headed for my car.

If the cops weren't going to seriously consider my mom as a suspect, then we'd just have to take matters into our hands.

\* \* \*

GABE ARRIVED at the airport before me and had bought us tickets on the same flight that my mom was on just to get us through security—as well as on that plane—if absolutely necessary. She wasn't going to leave without us getting answers.

He met me at the security entrance. Thankfully, Lambert was fairly easy to get around, all things considered, and Southwest had its own terminal. We got through security in record time, keeping an eye out for my mom every chance we could. We planned to meet her at the gate, but I scanned every face, looking for her and my girls.

When we got to the gate, I noticed that they had already started boarding. Shit. She could be on the plane already. *We might be on our way to LA*, I thought to myself.

I expected her to be wearing a wig or some kind of disguise, so when I spotted someone with brown hair similar to her style, I didn't think it could be her at first. But then she glanced to the side and I saw her face.

"There!" I exclaimed, taking off before the word had fully left my mouth.

As I approached, the first thing I noticed was that she was alone. She didn't have my babies with her. But that didn't deter me. I slammed into her, taking her to the ground. She stared up at me with a look of shock.

“Bella?”

“Where are my girls?” I demanded from her.

A crowd had gathered around us, but I couldn’t care less.

“Tell me!” I shouted at her. Did you send them with someone else so it was less suspicious?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked me.

“My girls! You took them,” I accused.

She tried to push me off, but I wasn’t going away that easily. I held her hands down beside her, pinning her to the ground. “Tell me! Where are they? You are not going to get away with kidnapping them, not like you did with me!”

She stared at me with a look of utter confusion.

“Bella!” Gabe called out, but I ignored him and continued questioning my mom. “Bella, look!”

He grabbed my shoulder and I turned to see what he was referring to, thinking he had spotted our girls somewhere in the airport. Instead, he just said, “Your mom doesn’t have them.”

“How do you know?”

He turned his phone toward me so I could see the message on the screen. It was a photo of our girls, still in the pajamas I had put them in before they went down for a nap. The words above the photo made my blood run cold.

*If you want them back alive, you’ll meet with me.*

I kept reading the message over and over again. It was signed ‘Tony.’

“Who’s Tony?” I muttered as security arrived.

“I’ll handle it,” Gabe promised me.

“Who’s Tony?” I asked again as the TSA agents lifted me from the ground and restrained me.

“Someone that works with my dad,” he said.



I was being led away from Gabe, and I knew that there was nothing that I could do without making things more serious and ending up in jail. I looked back at him and called out, "Please find our girls, Gabe. Don't worry about me, just find them and bring them home."

My entire body was shaking and tears streamed down my face as they led me away.



## G A B E

Watching Bella get taken away by the TSA broke my heart. It took everything in me to not run after her, but she was right—I needed to find our girls.

Bella's mother was also taken back for questioning.

The crowd around them started to disperse, and I pushed my way through it, heading for the exit. I was worried about Bella but knew she could take care of herself. She didn't need me rescuing her, and nothing I could do would help her get released from the TSA any sooner.

My hands were shaking as I replied to the text.

*I'm listening. What do you want?*

I stared at the screen as I walked out the way I had come only moments before. With every step, I prayed for a response, something, anything from Tony. I knew now that I would do anything he asked. I knew what he wanted, my mom's property, and he could have it. I'd sign it over to him for free if it meant getting my girls back home safely.

I was outside and walking toward the parking garage when my phone rang.

"Are you alone?" the voice on the other end asked me.

"I will be in a second, just need to get to my car," I said.

"I'll wait."

I quickened my pace, not wanting to hesitate a second longer than necessary. I was pretty much running at that point

and as soon as I climbed inside I said, “I’m alone. What do you want, Tony?”

“First of all, my condolences on the death of your father.”

“What?” I realized at that point I had several missed calls from both Roman and Dante, but I’d been too focused on trying to find my girls, I hadn’t been paying attention.

“Yes, he died earlier this evening,” Tony said. “Am I the one breaking the news to you? I’m sorry, Gabriel, I forgot you weren’t in touch.”

My jaw clenched tightly.

“It’s fine,” I said, a knot forming in my throat. “I’ll ask you again, what do you want? I thought you were doing business with Roman.”

“I’m not happy with Roman. He can’t give me what I want.”

“The property, my mom’s property, right?”

“Yes, exactly. It’s the perfect location for what I need. Unfortunately, nothing on the market right now offers that much land on the riverfront, with those views, for the kind of money you’re going to sell it to me for.”

*Calm down, Gabe,* I told myself as I closed my eyes and steadied my breathing. I was dealing with a hostage negotiation where the hostages were my baby girls, and I didn’t want to say the wrong thing. Tony was unstable and deranged, and he had my infant daughters.

I didn’t say anything because nothing I could say at that moment would help get them back.

Tony continued. “You’re going to sell the property to me, and at a decent savings, because you’ve made me wait and cost my business a lot of money in the process.”

“I’m not the only one that has to sign off,” I said.

“Yes, but you’re the main one. You hold the biggest claim.”

“The property can’t be sold unless we all sign off on it though, and what happens if Roman or Dante don’t value my daughters’ lives as much as I do?”

“You’re going to make them, Gabriel. I know you well, son—”

“Don’t call me son,” I growled. My dad called me son, and Tony had sometimes tried to use the nickname on me, creating a false sense of closeness that simply wasn’t there.

“Fine, Gabriel,” he said, though it sounded like it came through clenched teeth. “I know you well, I know what you’re capable of when you want something. You’re not afraid to get your hands dirty and I know you’ll do whatever it takes to get your daughters back, I assume that ambition applies to your brothers and sister as well. So do whatever it takes. Because your daughter’s lives literally depend on it.”

The line went dead before I could say another word.

Slamming my hands down against the steering wheel, I let out a string of curse words. One of the most dangerous men I knew had my sweet baby girls.

I picked the phone up from where I dropped it on the seat next to me and quickly called Roman. He answered and started to say, “I have news about Dad—”

But I cut him off.

“You fucked up, man. You really fucked up and now you’re going to fix it before I kill you myself.”



## BELLA

I paced the small holding room, staring at the walls for what felt like hours. I needed to get out of there.

Finally, a door opened and I rushed toward it.

“We’ve verified with the local police that your story of the kidnapping checks out,” the TSA agent said softly. “I’m really sorry to hear about that, Ms. Stone.”

“Does this mean I can go?”

The woman nodded. “We’ve decided to release you. Your mother isn’t going to press charges, and the police are currently talking to her now.”

My ears perked up. *Are they actually going to take that seriously?*

“Can I speak to her before I leave?”

“Sure, if she agrees to talk to you. They should be done in a few minutes,” the agent said.

A few minutes. I needed to get out of there and get to my girls. I was contemplating my next move when I looked up and saw my mom being led away in handcuffs. The woman stepped aside and I walked into the hallway.

“Can I have a minute?” I asked.

The cops shrugged, though they didn’t walk away.

“What are you being charged with?” I looked at the woman I had thought was my mom.

“Kidnapping,” she muttered.

“My kidnapping?” I asked, my voice cracking.

She merely nodded.

“Did you admit to it?” I asked.

She didn’t answer. She just stared at me.

“How could you?” Tears streamed down my cheeks. “How could you take me from a family that loved me, when you didn’t even want me?”

“I wanted you, Bella. You just always rejected me. You never loved me.”

“That’s bullshit,” I said. “I loved you so much growing up, and I did everything to get you to love me in return, but it never seemed to work. You never loved me.”

“I did, Bella,” her voice stronger than before. “I loved you so, so much, but—”

“But what?” I stammered.

“But it was never enough.”

“Never enough? For what? To get over your guilt for ripping me away from my real family?”

She averted her gaze and looked down at the ground. She said something under her breath that I could hardly make out, but it sounded like, “Can we go now?”

She was leaving me with more questions than answers, as always. I didn’t know why I expected anything more from her.

“Never enough for what?” I asked again, pleading with her to just finish her sentence.

As she was being led away, she looked back at me, but no words came from her mouth. She just stared at me and for the briefest of moments, I thought I saw tears in her eyes. I had never once seen my mother cry. At least not real tears. She knew how to turn on the crocodile tears when she wanted to manipulate someone into giving her what she wanted. But this



was different. I thought for a second that maybe she really did love me, and it pained me to see her cry. After all, she might not be my birth mother, but she had raised me, she was the mother I had known all my life.

Finally, she spoke up. “It was never enough to keep our family together. Your dad still cheated on me, still went to prison. I thought you might heal our marriage, but instead, you managed to tear it apart even more.”

Her words ripped my heart right out of my chest. I had been foolish to think those tears had been because she actually loved me, and not because she was sad for herself and her life falling apart.

My knees felt weak, but I managed to stand tall. There was nothing else left to say to her as the police led her away, and I stayed there in the hallway for a moment catching my breath.

I didn’t know what to do or where to go.

I knew I needed to get a hold of Gabe, to find out what we were doing to get our girls back. My heartache because of my mom’s cruel words were not going to distract me from what really mattered. I stared down at my phone, ready to call Gabe. He had sent a message to me earlier, all in caps “*DO NOT TELL THE POLICE ANYTHING.*” A cold chill ran over my body.

I turned to find an officer standing there that I recognized from earlier at our place. He was headed for the door.

“Do you have news about my girls?” I asked.

“We’re doing everything we can.”

“. So you have nothing.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I know what you said. And it means nothing if you don’t know where my girls are.”

I was starting to think the police were useless.

I turned back around and headed for the door, not wanting to be anywhere near any of them when I called Gabe. He had

told me he would handle it, and I trusted him, but I wouldn't be able to rest until our girls were safe and back home where they belonged.

As I was leaving the airport, my phone rang.

“Hi, Charles,” I said as I answered. Part of me had wanted to call him dad, but it was too soon for any of that.

“Hi Bella. I hope now isn't a bad time to talk?”

“I'm afraid it is. Ari and Lucy were kidnapped earlier today.”

“What? Was it—”

“No, it wasn't Mary. Though she has been arrested and charged with my kidnapping .”

“I'm going to talk to Brenda and we will head to St. Louis right away, to be by your side.”

I was almost to my car and needed to call Gabe. “I don't want you two coming here, not until we figure this out. It could be dangerous, and the less people I care about at risk, the better.”

“Are you in danger?” he asked.

“I don't think so. Please don't worry about me. I'm going to meet with Gabe now and we're going to figure everything out. I promise to keep you updated.”

“Please do, Bella. We will be there in a heartbeat if you need us, but we don't want to cause you more stress.”

“Thanks, Charles. I have to go, but I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything.”

We got off the phone and just knowing that I had people who cared enough to rush down to St. Louis to be at my side, to support me, brought tears to my eyes. The woman who had raised me couldn't even be bothered to check on me after I had given birth to quads, even though she lived in the same city.

I climbed behind the wheel of the car and took a few deep breaths before calling Gabe.

He answered on the first ring.

“Any news?”

“I’m at home. I know what Tony wants and we’re going to give it to him,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m, well, I’m holding it together, but just barely. I’m headed home now.”

“Please drive safely.”

“I will.”

We exchanged “I love you’s,” before I started the car and headed toward home.

I trusted Gabe and knew he would get our girls back.



## G A B E

**B**ella fell into my arms and I never wanted to let her go. She turned her head to look up at me. “Anything yet?”

“Nothing yet. I just know that he wants us to sign over my mom’s property, and we’re going to do that.”

“Have you talked to your brothers? Ava?”

Ava poked her head out from the living room. “He’s talked to me, and yes, I’m on board with selling it. Anything for my nieces.”

“Thank you, Ava,” Bella said, releasing me to hug her best friend.

“I’m so sorry,” Ava replied.

“It’s not your fault. If anything, it’s mine,” Bella said.

“It’s not your fault either, Bella. The girls were in their cribs, with monitors on. There’s no way anyone should have been able to sneak in under our noses and grab them,” I said.

Bella looked back at me. “Do we know how they got into the house?”

“I think so. It’s only a guess since the cops took all the CCTV recordings.”

“So what happened? Or what do you think happened?”

“I suspect that someone left the service entry door unlocked. I talked to the staff, and I guess sometimes they leave it unlocked during the day because they come in and out

for smoke breaks. They thought it was safe to do during daylight hours, it was just carelessness.”

“And you don’t suspect any of the staff of being involved?” Bella asked.

After what had happened with her and her mother, I completely understood her concerns about the staff.

“I don’t, but the police are interviewing all of them just in case.”

I had fired the ones that admitted to leaving the door open. Even if it was just an act of carelessness, I couldn’t have that in my house, not when it came to my family.

“Alright, so what do we do now? Just sit on our hands until we hear something?”

“Well—” Before I could finish speaking, the bell rang signaling someone was at the gate to the property. The three of us shared a look as I walked over to the intercom and camera.

Staring back at me was Dante from the driver’s seat.

“Hey, Gabe, care to let us inside?”

I pushed the button for the gate to open.

A few minutes later, they rang the doorbell and I let them in.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Once Roman told me the news about your little girls, I knew we had to get our asses up here to help find them,” Dante said. He looked over at Roman who had his hands shoved in his pockets. “We want to help, don’t we, Roman?”

“We do,” Roman said. He cleared his throat and finally looked at me. “Man, I’m so fucking sorry. This is all my fault. I really thought Tony was fine with looking at other properties.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him. It would have been a waste of time and energy to get into that right now. I could see the look in my brother’s eyes, I knew he felt like shit.

“I blame Tony, not you, Roman.”

“Let’s get your babies back.” Roman said.

“Do you have a plan?” Dante asked.

“I’m waiting to hear from Tony. I sent him a message telling him we’ll sign. He just has to give us a time and a place.”

“You think it’s going to be that easy?” Ava asked.

The three of us looked at our sister. She had never been involved in the crime side of our family, but she knew enough to know that no one was trustworthy.

“Here’s hoping he’s reasonable. If he’s not, well, I know we can figure it out.” I looked at my brothers when I said that. There was no one else I’d rather have on my side if we were going to war with Tony than those two standing beside me.

“How about the boys in the hospital?” Dante asked.

“They have security on them. The hospital is aware of what happened, and they’re keeping their units locked down. A few uniformed officers are there as well. They should be fine,” I said.

Bella walked back over to me and snuggled against my chest and I held her close. I couldn’t have imagined doing this alone or with anyone else. Seeing her take her mom down at the airport reminded me of just how fierce she was. She was a mama bear in every sense of the word, and I knew she was going to fight alongside me to get our girls back.

I kissed the top of her head gently as we waited.

After some time, my phone rang.

“It’s him,” I said, answering the call.

“So you got all your family to rally together and sign off on the sale that quickly, eh? They must really love you,” Tony said.

“Just get to the point, Tony. Where do we meet and when?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll text you the address of my lawyer. He has the paperwork ready at his office in Chicago, and he’ll be ready to see you first thing in the morning.”

“We’ll be there,” I said. “But you know I’m going to need some reassurance from you that our girls are okay.”

“Of course,” he said.

He turned the camera on and I watched as he walked into a room. He flipped the camera toward two cribs along a wall, where a woman was tending to one of them. He spoke to her in Italian and she stepped out of view so he could step closer.

Bella was beside me again, watching. Roman, Dante and Ava were on the other side of me.

Ari was fast asleep, peacefully it would seem. Seeing her curled up in a stranger’s house, in a crib that wasn’t hers, pained my heart.

Lucy was awake and fussing a bit, the woman had been tending to her. She looked fine otherwise. Still, it killed me that they were right there, yet so far away at the same time. Bella let out a muffled sound and covered her mouth.

He pulled the camera back, and I got a glimpse of the room, including a window along the wall with the cribs.

“She’s fine, just a little grumpy,” Tony said before flipping the camera back to himself. “We have nannies to feed and care for them, they are safe. Just keep your end of the bargain tomorrow so that it stays that way.”

The call ended abruptly and the room was quiet, it seemed no one knew what to say. I pulled Bella closer to me and just held her.

A second later, an address came through for a law office in Chicago. An appointment was scheduled for eight a.m.

I checked the time. It was just after midnight but I knew none of us were going to be getting any sleep that night.

“I think we should head into Chicago tonight.”

“I agree,” Bella said.



I looked at her. “You don’t have to go.”

“Yes, I do,” she said and stared at me with a look of fierce determination. I knew there was no way I was talking her out of it. I kissed her forehead.

Glancing at my siblings, I could tell by the looks on their faces that they were all in. I felt a warmth spread across my middle.

“I’ll ride with Dante and Roman,” Ava said.

Dante nodded.

“Sounds like a plan. Bella and I can follow in my car, it’s useful to have multiple vehicles, just in case.”

“In case of what?” Bella asked.

I shared a look with my brothers. They knew that things could go south very quickly, and if so, I needed to be sure Bella and Ava got out of there. The boys needed her.

“Just in case we want to go our separate ways later,” I said.

Bella looked at me as if she didn’t believe that was the real reason, but I couldn’t bear to tell her the truth. Because if shit went south, it could mean the worst for our baby girls, and my heart couldn’t take even imagining that. I knew hers couldn’t either.

“It’ll be fine—we sign the paperwork, get the girls, and everything will be alright,” I said, wrapping an arm over Bella’s shoulders.

It had to be fine.

I had to get my family back together.

There was no other option.



## G A B E

**B**ella fell into my arms and I never wanted to let her go. She turned her head to look up at me. “Anything yet?”

“Nothing yet. I just know that he wants us to sign over my mom’s property, and we’re going to do that.”

“Have you talked to your brothers? Ava?”

Ava poked her head out from the living room. “He’s talked to me, and yes, I’m on board with selling it. Anything for my nieces.”

“Thank you, Ava,” Bella said, releasing me to hug her best friend.

“I’m so sorry,” Ava replied.

“It’s not your fault. If anything, it’s mine,” Bella said.

“It’s not your fault either, Bella. The girls were in their cribs, with monitors on. There’s no way anyone should have been able to sneak in under our noses and grab them,” I said.

Bella looked back at me. “Do we know how they got into the house?”

“I think so. It’s only a guess since the cops took all the CCTV recordings.”

“So what happened? Or what do you think happened?”

“I suspect that someone left the service entry door unlocked. I talked to the staff, and I guess sometimes they leave it unlocked during the day because they come in and out

for smoke breaks. They thought it was safe to do during daylight hours, it was just carelessness.”

“And you don’t suspect any of the staff of being involved?” Bella asked.

After what had happened with her and her mother, I completely understood her concerns about the staff.

“I don’t, but the police are interviewing all of them just in case.”

I had fired the ones that admitted to leaving the door open. Even if it was just an act of carelessness, I couldn’t have that in my house, not when it came to my family.

“Alright, so what do we do now? Just sit on our hands until we hear something?”

“Well—” Before I could finish speaking, the bell rang signaling someone was at the gate to the property. The three of us shared a look as I walked over to the intercom and camera.

Staring back at me was Dante from the driver’s seat.

“Hey, Gabe, care to let us inside?”

I pushed the button for the gate to open.

A few minutes later, they rang the doorbell and I let them in.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Once Roman told me the news about your little girls, I knew we had to get our asses up here to help find them,” Dante said. He looked over at Roman who had his hands shoved in his pockets. “We want to help, don’t we, Roman?”

“We do,” Roman said. He cleared his throat and finally looked at me. “Man, I’m so fucking sorry. This is all my fault. I really thought Tony was fine with looking at other properties.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him. It would have been a waste of time and energy to get into that right now. I could see the look in my brother’s eyes, I knew he felt like shit.

“I blame Tony, not you, Roman.”

“Let’s get your babies back.” Roman said.

“Do you have a plan?” Dante asked.

“I’m waiting to hear from Tony. I sent him a message telling him we’ll sign. He just has to give us a time and a place.”

“You think it’s going to be that easy?” Ava asked.

The three of us looked at our sister. She had never been involved in the crime side of our family, but she knew enough to know that no one was trustworthy.

“Here’s hoping he’s reasonable. If he’s not, well, I know we can figure it out.” I looked at my brothers when I said that. There was no one else I’d rather have on my side if we were going to war with Tony than those two standing beside me.

“How about the boys in the hospital?” Dante asked.

“They have security on them. The hospital is aware of what happened, and they’re keeping their units locked down. A few uniformed officers are there as well. They should be fine,” I said.

Bella walked back over to me and snuggled against my chest and I held her close. I couldn’t have imagined doing this alone or with anyone else. Seeing her take her mom down at the airport reminded me of just how fierce she was. She was a mama bear in every sense of the word, and I knew she was going to fight alongside me to get our girls back.

I kissed the top of her head gently as we waited.

After some time, my phone rang.

“It’s him,” I said, answering the call.

“So you got all your family to rally together and sign off on the sale that quickly, eh? They must really love you,” Tony said.

“Just get to the point, Tony. Where do we meet and when?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll text you the address of my lawyer. He has the paperwork ready at his office in Chicago, and he’ll be ready to see you first thing in the morning.”

“We’ll be there,” I said. “But you know I’m going to need some reassurance from you that our girls are okay.”

“Of course,” he said.

He turned the camera on and I watched as he walked into a room. He flipped the camera toward two cribs along a wall, where a woman was tending to one of them. He spoke to her in Italian and she stepped out of view so he could step closer.

Bella was beside me again, watching. Roman, Dante and Ava were on the other side of me.

Ari was fast asleep, peacefully it would seem. Seeing her curled up in a stranger’s house, in a crib that wasn’t hers, pained my heart.

Lucy was awake and fussing a bit, the woman had been tending to her. She looked fine otherwise. Still, it killed me that they were right there, yet so far away at the same time. Bella let out a muffled sound and covered her mouth.

He pulled the camera back, and I got a glimpse of the room, including a window along the wall with the cribs.

“She’s fine, just a little grumpy,” Tony said before flipping the camera back to himself. “We have nannies to feed and care for them, they are safe. Just keep your end of the bargain tomorrow so that it stays that way.”

The call ended abruptly and the room was quiet, it seemed no one knew what to say. I pulled Bella closer to me and just held her.

A second later, an address came through for a law office in Chicago. An appointment was scheduled for eight a.m.

I checked the time. It was just after midnight but I knew none of us were going to be getting any sleep that night.

“I think we should head into Chicago tonight.”

“I agree,” Bella said.

I looked at her. “You don’t have to go.”

“Yes, I do,” she said and stared at me with a look of fierce determination. I knew there was no way I was talking her out of it. I kissed her forehead.

Glancing at my siblings, I could tell by the looks on their faces that they were all in. I felt a warmth spread across my middle.

“I’ll ride with Dante and Roman,” Ava said.

Dante nodded.

“Sounds like a plan. Bella and I can follow in my car, it’s useful to have multiple vehicles, just in case.”

“In case of what?” Bella asked.

I shared a look with my brothers. They knew that things could go south very quickly, and if so, I needed to be sure Bella and Ava got out of there. The boys needed her.

“Just in case we want to go our separate ways later,” I said.

Bella looked at me as if she didn’t believe that was the real reason, but I couldn’t bear to tell her the truth. Because if shit went south, it could mean the worst for our baby girls, and my heart couldn’t take even imagining that. I knew hers couldn’t either.

“It’ll be fine—we sign the paperwork, get the girls, and everything will be alright,” I said, wrapping an arm over Bella’s shoulders.

It had to be fine.

I had to get my family back together.

There was no other option.





## BELLA

Nobody had slept. We had arrived in Chicago with plenty of time to spare and waited in the parking lot of the Law Offices of Herman and Schmidt until they opened their doors.

“Is Tony going to be there?” I asked Gabe, who was sitting beside me in the car, eyes closed but very much awake.

“Doubtful.”

“How do we get the babies?”

Gabe opened his eyes and stared straight ahead. “Once the contract is signed, we will call Tony and arrange for a pickup.”

“And what if he doesn’t come through with his end of the deal?”

Gabe looked over at me, his eyes softening. “Then my brothers and I will handle it. But I don’t see that happening. Tony doesn’t want the girls, and he wants to continue doing business with Roman, I’m sure, so he won’t want to burn bridges with him entirely.”

“Roman will still do business with him after this?” My voice rose. The very idea of someone wanting to do business with a man who kidnapped his infant nieces caused my blood to boil.

Gabe reached out and took my hand. “I don’t know. Hopefully not. But at least until we have the girls, he has to go along with whatever Tony says. Don’t take it personally, we are just trying to make this go as smoothly as possible. Once

we have the girls, Roman can do whatever he wants. But if he continues doing business with Tony after this, he won't be welcome back in our home, that's for sure."

I relaxed into the seat. I knew that Gabe would never want to be associated with the likes of Tony; he had left that life behind years ago. If Dante and Roman wanted to be in our lives, they would have to make a choice. I knew Gabe would hold them to that choice too.

Gabe sat up straighter and reached for the door handle. "Looks like Michael Herman has arrived."

There was a man entering the law office dressed in a tailored navy blue suit and tie. He didn't look much older than me, maybe early thirties at most. He looked so clean-cut and professional, who would have guessed he was working with some of the shadiest people in Chicago?

I opened the car door and Gabe looked over at me.

"I'm coming," I said before he could argue with me.

He shrugged and took my hand in his as we walked toward the office. Ava, Dante and Roman were right behind us. None of us said a word.

Gabe held the door for all of us to step inside. Roman was the one to step ahead and greet the receptionist, who seemed to know him already.

"Mr. Herman will see you now," the receptionist said as she led us past her desk and into a conference room. She closed the door behind her, leaving the five of us alone in the room. No one sat down.

The door opened, and the man we saw earlier in the navy suit entered and greeted us with a smile. "Hi everyone, I'm Michael Herman and I will be handling the contract with Mr. Bianco for the property sale."

He was closest to me and reached a hand out to shake. I stared at it for a long time, wondering if I wanted to shake this man's hand. Eventually, I did it just to get the ball rolling.

“Bella Stone,” I said, staring Michael right in the eye. I hoped that he could sense my disgust from just that one look.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Stone.” Then he made his way around the room.

“Please, have a seat everyone,” he said after shaking hands with Gabe, Roman, Dante and Ava.

I waited until Gabe sat down and took the seat beside him, with Ava on my other side. Roman and Dante sat across from us and Michael sat down at the head of the table. He took out a folder and opened it, slipping out several copies of the contract before passing it to us. “I only expected the four of you, so I didn’t print a copy for everyone, but if you’d like me to get my secretary to print another one, it wouldn’t be a problem,” he said, winking at me. I shot him a look of death in return.

“That’s fine, she can look at mine,” Gabe said, his eyes on the paper. His brow was furrowed as he flipped through the pages.

The room went quiet again as the guys and Ava looked everything over. I was able to see the contract, but I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. I had no idea what the property was worth or what it even entailed, but from the looks on everyone else’s faces, they were getting a shit deal.

“The price is a lot lower than we discussed,” Roman said.

Michael looked over at him, still grinning. I wanted to smack that look right off his smug little face. “Oh? Tony didn’t negotiate the price with you? He told me the lower price wouldn’t be an issue, that circumstances had changed.”

“Circumstances,” I scoffed under my breath. “I guess you could call it that.”

Michael looked at me and I wondered if he knew. Did he know that his client was holding my babies hostage while he passed around contracts for the others to sign? If he did know, he was a damned good actor. A look of bewilderment passed over his face.

“I thought this was a negotiation that I wasn’t privy to, a change in the property value?”

“You can say that” Gabe muttered. “Do you have a pen?”

“So are you all okay with the change in price then?” Michael asked.

They all shared a look with each other, and for a second, my heart sank into my stomach. What if Roman and Dante wanted to argue?

But to my relief, they all nodded in agreement.

“We are,” Roman said.

Pens were passed around, and all four of them signed away the property that had been held by their mother’s side of the family for generations. I knew that it hurt them, especially Gabe, but we were given no other choice.

Once it was signed, I was the one to ask, “Now what?”

“Well, closing could take a couple of months, but the funds are being held in escrow until then. They will be released upon closing.”

Everyone started to get up from their chairs, but I wasn’t satisfied with that answer. As we were saying goodbye, I stopped before Michael and asked him, “How do you sleep at night knowing who you do business with?”

He stared down at me, and for a second, something dark flashed in his eyes. It made me think he knew exactly what I was asking. His frown was quickly replaced by the same smug expression from earlier. “What do you mean, Ms. Stone?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. My clients are real estate developers, mostly. Some might argue that they can be greedy, but no more so than anyone else, in my experience. They’re just capitalists doing what capitalists do.”

I stared at him, hoping for a hint of what I saw earlier to reinforce that he did, indeed, know what type of people he was doing business with, but there was nothing. His smirk just pissed me off even more. He was being deliberately obtuse.

“Let’s go, sweetheart,” Gabe said, taking my arm gently.

I shook my head and resisted the urge to slap the smirk off Michael's face. What good would it do anyway, it wouldn't get us any closer to getting our babies back. But the deal was done, and if what Gabe said was true, we should be getting a pickup point from Tony soon.

We left the office building and found ourselves back in the parking lot. The entire exchange took less than half an hour. It was hard to believe that a property worth millions could be sold in such a short amount of time. Then again, usually there would be negotiations involved in a land deal but with our girl's lives on the line, there was no room for arbitration.

"So what now?" I found myself asking that a lot these days.

I looked at the three brothers who had dealt with Tony most of their lives.

"We wait. We should be hearing from him very quickly—" Before Roman could finish the sentence, Gabe's phone went off.

"Speak of the devil."

Gabe answered the call.

"Yes?"

I couldn't hear what Tony was saying, no matter how close I got to Gabe's ear.

"We did what you asked, now tell us how we get the girls back," Gabe said.

There was some talking on the other end, then Gabe's face immediately turned red. He began yelling into his phone. "No, that wasn't the deal, Tony. You said we sign the contract, we get the girls—nothing about waiting until the deal closes."

"No way," I said. "Give me the damned phone."

"We are not fucking waiting until the contract closes. The lawyer said it could take months." Gabe tried to keep the phone out of my reach, but I managed to fight him for it, ripping it from his hands.

“Listen to me, you fucking piece of shit,” I seethed. “Those babies need their mother, and we are not going to wait until the property closes. You’re going to give them to us now.”

I don’t know what I expected to hear, but laughing wasn’t it. Tony let out a dry chuckle, as if what I had said was entertaining or even adorable.

“Then you better hope the contract closes quickly, and without a single hiccup.”

Before I could say another word, the line went dead.



## G A B E

“They can’t keep our babies, we can’t let them keep them,” Bella said, her hand still holding tight to my phone. “Those assholes are going to give them back to us.”

“I know where they’re keeping the girls,” I said.

“You do?” Bella asked.

I nodded. “When Tony showed them to us earlier, I noticed a window that looked outside as he scanned the room. I know that it’s Tony’s estate, we’ve been there before as children and played in that very same backyard more times than I can count.”

“Then we go there and demand they give us our babies back,” Bella said, already turning to head for the car. I gripped her shoulder and stopped her.

“It’s not that easy,” Roman said before I had a chance to. “Tony’s place is as secure as Fort-fucking-Knox.”

“Yeah, and he’s not going to listen to our demands,” I added.

“So what? We just sit on our hands for the next few months and hope that he’ll give them back to us?” Bella asked. Her face was red with frustration, and I knew that she would fight like hell to bring our girls home.

I would too.

“No, I’m going to break in and get them back.”

Roman sighed.



“I’m in,” Dante said without a moment’s hesitation.

“You sure? You know this is dangerous,” I told him.

“Fuck, I’ve done worse, and I’ll do anything for family,” he said. He patted me on the back. “Ari and Lucy are my nieces.”

We both looked over at Roman.

“I’m not expecting anything,” I told him.

“You think I’m sitting this out?” he asked me.

“Well, I know you probably don’t want to ruin your business with Tony.”

“Fuck Tony. He took my nieces. As soon as he did that, he was dead to me. I don’t intend to work with him ever again.”

“Ok,” I said.

“Besides, I was already planning on going legit after Dad died. I’m tired of dealing with people like Tony.”

I took Roman’s hand in mine and shook it, patting him on the shoulder at the same time. “Thanks, man. I always knew you had it in you to do the right thing.”

“So we’re going to break into Tony’s mansion, kidnap the girls, and get the hell out of there?” Dante asked.

“That’s the plan.”

Bella looked at me, and I already knew from the expression on her face that she thought she was going with us. I just looked her in the eye and shook my head.

“I’m going, Gabe. They are my daughters too.”

“Can you guys give me a sec?” I looked at my brothers and Ava.

“Of course,” Roman said, as he motioned for the others to get in his car, leaving just Bella and me alone in the parking lot.

“Gabe, you’re not going to talk me out of this. I need to do this,” she said.

“And I need you to go home and make sure our boys are also taken care of,” I replied.

She opened her mouth to argue, but then closed it as if she had to think about what I said. So I continued. “What my brothers and I are about to do, we’re trained for that sort of shit. We’ve been doing this kind of thing since we were old enough to walk. We know what we’re doing.”

“I can be quiet too,” she said, crossing her arms in front of herself defiantly. “I know how to be sneaky.”

“It’s not just that, Bella. These guys are dangerous, and they will exploit any weaknesses we have. And you, Bella, you’re my weakness... if something were to happen to you, or if your life was at stake, I would throw myself in front of a bullet to save you, and that’s not what our girls need. Our girls need me to be on my toes, my only focus on them.”

Her arms relaxed and fell to her side, so I took both of her hands in mine.

“And if, God forbid, things go to shit, I need you on the outside to still fight for our babies, Bella. Our boys and our girls. They need you.”

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“They need you too,” she said.

“And that’s why I’m going to do everything in my power to not get killed. Which will be easier if I only have to worry about myself until I get to the girls. I know Roman and Dante can take care of themselves, and they know what they’re getting into—if something were to happen to them, that’s just what they signed up for. But you, Bella... fuck, if I lost you, I don’t know how I could ever live with myself. And as strong and fearless as you are, you just had four babies less than two months ago. You’re still healing and you need to let your body recuperate fully.”

Bella’s face fell with resignation. She let out a ragged breath. “I know you’re right, but I can’t lose you, Gabe. I can’t lose you or our girls.”

“Let me do this. I promise you, I will do my best to make sure that all of us come back unharmed, so we can be a family.”

Bella stared up at me with pleading eyes.

“I trust no one else with our kids. No one else.”

Bella nodded her head. “For the boys,” she said, her voice filled with resignation.

“For the boys. I will go fight for our girls.”

I lifted her face toward mine and kissed her, not wanting to ever break the bond between our lips. I didn’t want to leave her, I wanted us all to be together. But for that to happen, I had a job to do.

I walked Bella over to the car where my brothers and Ava were waiting.

Roman was already down to business. “Ava is going to take my car, we’re going to take yours, Gabe. That way Ava and Bella can head back to St. Louis.

“Sounds good,” I said, looking over at Bella, expecting she might argue. But she nodded. Tears were still fresh on her cheeks, and I knew that she desperately wanted to go with us.

I gave her hand a squeeze and we kissed one more time before we parted ways.

“Get our girls back,” Bella said to me. “You’re the only person I trust to do that.”

“Take care of our boys, no matter what,” I told her.

“You know I will.” She wiped away the tears and stood tall.



## BELLA

I watched as Gabe drove away with Roman and Dante. Adrenaline coursed through my body, and my legs ached to run after the car and insist that I was going with them after all. But he was right. I'd had major surgery only two months before and I was in no shape to deal with such a dangerous situation. I would only be a liability and put my girls at greater risk.

I got in the car with Ava and she started driving.

I pulled out my phone and dialed the number of the hospital. After getting connected to the nurses station on our sons' floor, I asked how they were doing.

"They're doing great," the nurse told me. "The doctor thinks Elio could still come home this weekend, and Vincent is as strong as ever. He's a fighter, that one."

"And security-wise?" I asked.

"Oh yes, the security team has their room surrounded. No one but nurses or doctors can come in or out, and no one can remove the babies without thorough checks. Your boys are in good hands, Ms. Stone."

Hearing that was such a relief. "Thank you."

When I got off the phone, I noticed that Ava wasn't driving toward St. Louis.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The boys are doing well, right?"

“Yes...”

“And they’re surrounded by security, I imagine?”

“Yes...”

“Well, I was thinking, your biological family, or who you suspect to be your biological family, is located here in Chicago, right?”

“They are, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, I was thinking you might want to meet them.” She looked over at me with a sheepish grin.

“Now? I really don’t think now is the right time, Ava.”

“And why not? I imagine if anyone has any idea what you’re going through, it would be them.”

“But look at me. I haven’t slept in days, I’m a mess.”

“And I’m sure they will still love you regardless,” Ava said with a knowing smile.

I thought about it for a moment or two, still not convinced. My stomach twisted and turned at the thought. I was nervous about meeting them and had wanted our first meeting to be special; a happy moment when we reunited and they got to see me at my best, not my lowest.

As if Ava could read my mind, however, she said, “Isn’t that what family is for?”

“What do you mean?”

“To love you regardless, to pick you back up when you’re down, to have your back?”

“Yes, but I hardly know these people. And we’re not one hundred percent sure yet they’re my family.”

“Based on what you’ve told me, I don’t think it’s going to matter too much. They already love and adore you.”

“But what if they don’t?” And that right there was the crux of it. My fear of rejection. This was my last chance at having a family that adored me, that cared about me the way parents should. And what if they didn’t?

“Well, you still have us,” Ava said matter-of-factly. “Gabe and I are your family now.”

Hearing her say those words warmed something inside of me. I studied my best friend for a long time before saying anything.

“So you really are okay with Gabe and me being together?” I asked.

Ava looked over at me with a raised brow. “You really have to ask me that?”

“Well, yeah, you and I haven’t really talked much about it since our initial conversation months ago. You haven’t said much since.”

“Because there wasn’t much to say. I think it works beautifully. Seeing the two of you together has made me realize how perfect you are for each other. My brother clearly adores you, and you two make an awesome pair. Watching you guys parent and deal with all of this together, it’s serious relationship goals for me.”

It felt like my eyes were constantly watering, mostly sad tears over the last couple of days, but that time, they were tears of happiness. I looked over at Ava and managed to choke out the words, “Thank you. I really needed to hear that.”

“We’re family, Bella, and there’s nothing that’s ever going to change that. Nothing you can do or say will change that for me. I love you, bestie.”

“I love you too,” I said.

We shared a smile and drove in silence for a minute or two.

“So we’re in agreement then? We’re going to see your family? Because I’m almost to their town.”

I took a few deep breaths and thought about it. What was the worst that could happen? They rejected me, and I went back no worse than I was before? I still had Ava and Gabe; we had created a family together. And best-case scenario? I could

confide in people who truly understood what I was going through and get to meet my probable birth family.

“Let’s do this,” I said, taking out my phone and calling Charles.





## G A B E

**W**e had to strategize so we went over to Roman's penthouse apartment.

"Roman and I worked security for Tony about six months ago, for his sixtieth birthday celebration," Dante said.

"Not much has changed," Roman added. "Tony remodeled the kitchen, and added a sauna, but nothing that changes the fundamental layout of the property."

Roman doodled a little map on a piece of paper with Dante pointing out possible entry locations for us. Getting inside was only half the battle. Knowing Tony, that place was crawling with security. He lived a dangerous life and a lot of folks wanted him dead. One of the many reasons I left that life behind was because I didn't want to live in a house with constant security detail, feeling like every friend might one day turn on me and try to kill me.

"Does his team have any significant uniforms or anything?" I asked.

"Nothing in particular. Just all black, typically."

I looked down at what I was wearing, all black. My usual attire. I must have picked it up from somewhere.

"So we're good as is?" I asked.

"Perfect," Dante answered.

"The question is, how are we going to get inside without being noticed?" Roman looked over his drawing.

Thinking back to how Tony's associates must have gotten into my place, it gave me an idea.

"Service entrance." I pointed to it on the map.

"Like where they take out the trash and shit?" Dante asked.

"Exactly. Plus the staff usually go in and out from the service entrances, take smoke breaks, etc."

"Meaning people are constantly coming and going," Dante finished my thought.

I nodded as Roman continued looking over the map. Even if they didn't leave the door propped open like my staff did, there was a chance we could find someone coming and going and just enter along with them.

"And from the service entrance, which is here at the back near the kitchen, we could enter through the back corridors—it's less likely that Tony will be walking around near there. It's usually just maids and staff," Roman said.

"Eventually, to get upstairs, we will have to enter a main corridor, and there will be security, guaranteed," I said slowly, looking at my brothers.

"And we'll do what we have to do," Roman answered gravely.

I sighed. I hated knowing that we might have a fight on our hands, and not with Tony. Taking that asshole down was one thing, but the hired men who likely weren't involved in kidnapping the girls could become collateral damage.

"I don't like killing innocent people."

"The guys standing outside the door where your daughters are being kept are not innocent, Gabe." Roman stated. "They are likely pretty high in Tony's network if they're assigned to guarding the hostages."

When he put it that way, I knew he was right.

"Still, let's try to keep the kill count down, if at all possible," I said.

“Of course,” Dante agreed.

Roman shrugged. “Yeah, of course.”

We went back to planning. I looked down at the map. “Based on the video he sent me, I think I recognize the room, it’s definitely one of the bedrooms upstairs. It was used as a kid’s playroom back when we were young, I remember that big tree out back.”

“I think you’re right,” Dante said.

I had a good feeling I was right. Then again, we hadn’t been in every room of that house, and it had been decades since I stepped foot in the room I was picturing in my head. We often stayed there as kids when Dad got too fucking drunk at their weekly poker games. The wallpaper was different, as was the furniture. But the tree out back that you could see from the window, had not changed.

Roman shot up from the table. “Alright, sounds like we know what we’re doing, where we’re going once inside.”

I looked down again at the paper. Once inside, we could get to the back stairwell, go up that way and enter the main corridor to the room we suspected the girls were in. If we were wrong about any of it, or if we ran into someone who figured us out, we were in trouble.

Were we ready? Would we ever be ready? Probably not. But I trusted my brothers and myself—we knew what we were doing and were quick to react as necessary. We’d been doing this kind of stuff our entire lives for our dad.

I stood up from the table, and Dante followed.

“We got this,” Dante said, patting me on the back. “This is the kind of shit we’re good at, Gabe. We’re going to get your girls back.”

\* \* \*

I THOUGHT we might be waiting a bit in the side yard at the service entrance. I was worried we might look suspicious just

standing there since Tony more than likely had cameras all over the place. Thankfully, we weren't there long when a female staff member stepped outside with a bag of garbage in hand. My brothers and I walked toward the door as if we were supposed to be there. She held the door open for us, but as I started to step inside, she spoke up.

“Hey, wait a second.”

I stopped, frozen in place. She was thirty-something and dressed in a maid uniform. I wouldn't hurt an innocent woman; I couldn't do that. I prayed internally that she didn't question us.

“Yes?” Roman asked.

“Do you have a cigarette by chance?” the woman asked.

“Sorry, all out,” Roman said. Roman didn't smoke. None of us did.

Dante said, “I don't smoke, I just come out here for the fresh air.”

“Same. I quit a few years ago,” I said, lying and trying to act natural.

She looked at us and sighed. “Probably should quit myself. Maybe one day, but this job, it's the pits I tell ya,” she said. “Anyway, have a good evening.”

She walked past us and toward the garbage can as we stepped inside Tony's house. It almost felt too easy, except I knew we were good at being stealth. We blended in. We looked the part because at one time, we were in the lifestyle ourselves.

We stepped into a kitchen which was mostly empty. It was past lunch but too early for dinner. Some kid who looked to be no older than eighteen was washing dishes in the sink. He didn't even turn to look at us. He had headphones on and music so loud we could hear it from where we were standing.

I motioned for the guys to follow me. We walked down the long service hallway, passing by a couple of women dressed as maids chatting and laughing about something.

I was starting to wonder where Tony's security guards were when we got to the end of the hall. There was a room off to the left, which appeared to be a break room, and several guys dressed all in black were sitting around a table playing cards. None of them even looked up as we passed by.

"Looks like Tony needs to hire some new security detail," Roman muttered.

At the end of the hallway, there was a stairwell that I knew led to the main part of the house. I took a few deep breaths before stepping onto the bottom step and heading up.

The hardest part was yet to come.



## BELLA

“I can’t do this,” I said, sitting in the car outside of a beautiful, two-story home. Kids were playing in a yard nearby, and the sound of birds chirping added to the peaceful nature of the neighborhood.

“We don’t have to go inside if you don’t want to,” Ava said.

“It’s not that. It’s just, the rest of the world is moving along like everything is normal, while I’m sitting here waiting for news about my babies.”

“They’re going to be fine,” Ava said, patting the back of my hand. “My brothers are amazing at this sort of thing. They are complete bad asses. I have no doubt that Gabe is going to get your girls and come back to you safely.”

I looked over at the house. According to Charles and Brenda, they had stayed in this house even after their daughter was kidnapped, because they always hoped she would find her way back to them. That would mean that it was the house I had once lived in.

I tried to remember something, anything, but there was nothing there.

The home had a light blue facade with white shutters and a welcoming front porch with a swing. The complete opposite of the types of homes I lived in as a child. Homes plural because we moved around the city a lot, from dirty apartment to dirty apartment.



Ava was right though, if anyone knew what I was going through, it would be the O'Connell's.

"Alright," I said, trying to pump myself up. Part of me still regretted not pushing to go with Gabe, but I knew he'd been right. I would have only held them back.

I opened the car door and stepped out into the sunshine. A cool breeze fluttered past, and the scent of lilacs filled the air. Charles had mentioned that Brenda loved flowers and gardening, I wondered if they might be hers.

We walked up toward the front entrance and before we could even ring the doorbell, the large, French door swung open. Charles and Brenda stood in front of me, and behind them, two others who I imagined were their children—potentially, my siblings.

Tears were already running down Brenda's cheeks as she reached out to hug me. I fell into her arms, amazed at how natural it felt to be there.

"Your hair is just like mine," she laughed.

"I always wondered where I got the curly, red hair from."

It was like staring at an older version of myself in the mirror.

I hugged Charles as well, before turning to the others.

"This is Liam, and this is Harper," Charles said, motioning toward his adult children.

Harper had the same red curls, only she kept hers cut shorter. Anyone who looked at us would immediately ask if we were sisters, the resemblance was uncanny.

Liam took more after Charles, but his hair was the same red hue as the rest of us.

"I—I don't know what to say," I managed to get out, feeling the tears sting at my eyes. "It's been a long day."

"Oh sweetie, I heard," Brenda said. "Come inside and have a seat. I can get you both something to drink."

We walked inside the home and into a grand living room with a large brick fireplace. As soon as my eyes fell on the fireplace, a memory flooded my brain.

“I fell and hit my chin on the corner of the grate, didn’t I?”

I reached up to touch the scar on my face, the scar that was mostly invisible now, but I’d had it when I was younger and it could be seen in some of my childhood photos.

“You did,” Charles said, his voice cracking. “You gave us both a fright and required a couple stitches. I can’t believe you remember that.”

“Just barely. It’s images in my brain, more than anything else,” I said, still staring at the fireplace. “I always thought I’d dreamt it or something, because I never saw the fireplace again.”

“Have a seat, please. I know you must be exhausted,” Brenda said. Her voice was so soft and gentle, her smile genuine and filled with concern.

“Thank you,” I replied, sitting down on the sofa. Ava sat in a chair across from me so that Brenda and Charles could join me on the couch. “I’m sorry if I’m a little off, or if I start crying. I’m just so afraid that I may never see my girls again.”

Brenda took my hand in hers. “I never thought I’d see you again, but here you are.”

She was right. I knew Gabe was going to get them back. I trusted him to follow through and bring them home. Still, anxiety coursed through my veins and it was the only thing I could think about, even with my new family crowded around me.

I tried to find some distraction, anything that would keep me from having another panic attack. I suddenly noticed the photos on the fireplace mantle and it felt like all the air left my lungs.

“You still kept a picture all these years,” I said.

“Of course, we never took the pictures down,” Charles replied. “We might have added and changed out photos of Harper and Liam over the years, but Bella forever stayed three, until now that is.”

I couldn't even imagine their pain. All the years lost. Hell, I had lost years with them too. What would my life have been like if I had been raised with them in this home, where I had belonged?

Liam and Harper had taken the love seat beside us, not saying much. I imagine it had to be difficult to meet me, not really having known me except in stories. Well, except for Liam.

“Do you remember me?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Barely, I was four, but I do remember you. You liked to steal my Hot Wheels and run off with them.”

We both chuckled at the thought.

“Sorry,” I said, biting my lip through the laughter.

“No, don't be. After you were gone, I stopped playing with the Hot Wheels, because I missed you stealing them,” he said.

“That's true,” Brenda added softly. “He would cry anytime I brought them out for him, we eventually packed them away.”

Harper hadn't been born yet; she had never met me. I wondered how her life was impacted, I hoped it wasn't too hard for her.

She was grinning, clearly happy to meet me, albeit a little shy.

“So you want to be a journalist?” I asked her.

“I do,” she said. “Apparently just like you.”

“A love of writing does run in the family,” Charles said, patting his wife's hand.

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

Brenda shot her husband a sheepish grin. “I haven’t written in years, but yes. I was writing a book about the kidnapping, but never finished it. Before that, I mostly wrote fiction for fun, though never having one picked up by a publisher I wouldn’t call myself a writer.”

“I’d love to read your work sometime.”

“And I’d love to read some of yours.”

Having a mother that actually cared about my interests and hobbies... I had never experienced that. It was surreal to me and filled my heart with such warmth.

I looked over at Ava, who was staying quiet. She smiled at me, a knowing smile because she had been right to take me there. While I was still anxious, being around them, my family, brought me more comfort than just sitting at home alone would have.

“Thank you,” I mouthed to her.

Being there amongst people who already loved me, felt so safe and calming. Something I had never once experienced in my own home growing up.

I checked my phone, but there was nothing.

“No news?” Brenda asked.

“Not yet,” I said.

Ava spoke up at last. “They’ve got this. They will take their time, but I believe in them.”

“I do too,” I said. And I did. I just wanted our family to be back together again.



## GABE

**W**e were still on the main floor. There were two ways to get to the top level, and we were taking the staff's way—the back stairwell. It was not worth the risk of walking out in the open, through the living and common areas. Of course, anyone could still be walking around in that part of the house, it wasn't closed off, so our risk of running into a familiar face was still high. Our risk only got higher the more levels we went, the closer we got to the nursery.

A short hallway led to the stairwell. There were footsteps coming down, and the three of us paused. My hand rested on the gun at my side.

A man came down, dressed all in black, clearly security. He gave us the once over. My fingers twisted around the gun, ready to move at a moment if necessary.

“Haven't seen you three around before. Are you new here?” He asked casually.

I nodded. “Tony brought us on, said that there was a situation requiring extra security.”

The man nodded. “Yeah, I figured. A lot of new faces around here right now.”

He walked past us and my grip on the gun relaxed.

“Close one,” Roman mumbled with a low chuckle.

“It's a good thing he's new at this,” I said. Someone higher up in the ranks may have questioned us more, asked for some

ID, or even recognized our faces. We had gotten lucky, but I knew our luck wouldn't hold out forever.

I motioned for my brothers to follow me up the stairs. They opened into a long hallway, and I hoped my memory served me right, that I would know exactly what room to go to.

At the far end of the hall, I saw a woman dressed in the same attire as the nanny from the video. It may have even been the same woman. She turned right, exactly where I thought we were supposed to go.

I moved forward, walking with confidence, as if we were supposed to be there. I turned the corner and as expected, there were guards at the door. Three of them. One for each of us. I looked at Roman and Dante as we continued toward the room.

The men looked at us suspiciously. "We're here to take over," I said.

One of them, the shortest of the three, snorted. "Says who?"

"Says Tony," I replied. "He told us to relieve the three of you."

"Yeah, no, I'm not leaving unless I hear it from Tony himself," the shorter man said, crossing his arms in front of his chest and looking me straight in the eye. He was an entire foot shorter than me but had the balls to make up for it.

I looked at Roman off to my right, but before I could stop him, he lunged forward and grabbed the man closest to him. Dante grabbed the other guy, leaving me with Shorty.

"Fuck," I muttered, knowing the gig was up as I lunged for the man. He had a knife in hand already, which I had to grab. We fought for a moment as I covered his mouth, to prevent him from screaming. The knife fell to the floor with a clatter and I kicked it away, out of reach, as I wrapped my arm around the man's neck.

Roman had stabbed his guy, who was now slumped over on the floor and bleeding out. Ruthless, I thought, but I knew that about him. He came over, picking up the knife from the

floor I had kicked aside and forced it into Shorty's gut while I kept a grip on his mouth, to prevent him from making any sounds.

"I know you didn't want any casualties," Roman said. "But we have to act fast. There are cameras all over this hallway."

I knew he was right. The man went limp in my arms. Dante had put his man down as well.

I went for the door and found it locked, the knob refusing to turn. Roman said, "Here!" and tossed me some keys from one of the guards. I slipped the key into the lock and opened the door, quickly stepping inside, not wanting the nanny to see the mayhem waiting outside in the hallway.

My brothers did the same.

The nanny turned and looked at us with a curious expression, but my eyes were on the cribs. My girls. They were there, sleeping peacefully. I hurried toward them.

"Is everything okay?" the nanny asked.

I looked back at Roman and shook my head, reminding him that we didn't hurt innocents. This woman was likely unarmed, maybe she didn't even know why she was there or whose children they were.

"Yes, Tony just wants us to move the girls," I said. "He fears it's no longer safe here."

"No longer safe? From whom?" she asked.

I couldn't even be bothered to answer. I stood over one of the girl's cribs and stared down at her. Lucy. My sweet Lucy. I reached for her just as I felt something poking into my back.

"Step away from her," the nanny's voice said.

I glanced behind me as she said, "I have a gun pointed to your lower back," her voice calm, but serious. "And I'm not afraid to pull the trigger."

"Shit," I muttered to myself. Not because I feared that this woman would kill me, but I knew what my brothers would do to her. "Go easy on her, will you, Roman?"



There was some fumbling behind me, a muffled scream, then silence as I picked Lucy up into my arms and held her against my chest. She opened her eyes and fussed, but quieted when she saw me. I liked to think that she knew she was with her father.

Dante handed me one of the bulletproof vests we had brought to wrap them in. She fussed again as I covered her. “I know, I know, baby girl, but it’s only to get you out of here.”

I looked over and Dante was with Ari, doing the same with her. Soon, we’d all be together again.

I turned around to find the nanny on the ground. I raised an eyebrow at Roman. “She’s just unconscious, I didn’t kill her,” he said.

I had to believe him, there was no time to check. We moved toward the door, knowing that the hard part was likely still ahead of us. As soon as we stepped into the hallway, Tony turned the corner and was staring right at us. He wasn’t alone. There were about five other guards directly behind him, all armed to the teeth.

“Didn’t think you would get away that easily, did you?” he asked.

“Nothing about this has been easy, Tony,” I said. “We gave you what you wanted, we signed over the property, we held up our end of the deal. You didn’t, so we came to fulfill your end of the bargain.”

Tony stepped forward, the men with him followed.

“We do not want trouble,” I said.

“You brought trouble when you entered my house,” he said.

The girls were protected from bullets with the vests, but I wasn’t sure how we were going to be able to fully defend them, seeing as there were five guards plus Tony, and three of us.

“I’ll surrender my weapons if they surrender theirs,” I said. “You can even take me, just let my brothers leave with the

girls. I'm who you really want anyway, am I right?"

Tony's smirk grew. Old feuds, nothing that I had deemed important enough to remember, seemed to flash in his head as he stared at me.

"I have to admit, you leaving the organization without fulfilling your obligations has irked me for years, but your father and I were still doing business together, so I didn't want to ruin that but I never did forgive you for leaving."

"Well, you have me now, do whatever the fuck you want with me, but leave my daughters out of it, they're innocent."

I grabbed my gun from the holster and lowered it to the ground, careful not to drop Lucy who was now fussing in my arms. It broke my heart that she was so upset. All I wanted was to get her out of there.

"Take me instead, and if the deal falls through, if I've fucked it up somehow, then you have me," I said.

"As tempting as it is—"

A sudden commotion downstairs stopped Tony in his tracks.

"What's going on down there?" he asked, looking at one of the guards. He instructed him to go check it out as my heart raced. As soon as the guard disappeared around the corner, the sound of gunshots could be heard off in the distance. Then, shouts of, "Police, on the ground! Surrender your weapons!" filled the air.

I looked to Dante and the two of us dropped to the ground, covering the girls with our bodies as shots rang out down the hallway, getting closer to us. I called out, "There are children, there are babies here!" as loudly as I could, hoping that someone would hear us. Roman was in front of us, shooting at the guards.

"Put your gun down, Roman," I demanded, fearful that if the police rounded the corner and saw him with his weapon out, they might shoot first and ask questions later.

Roman, stubborn as ever, refused to listen.

“ROMAN!” I demanded, grabbing his ankle and yanking, forcing him to look down at me. “We need you.”

The sound of footsteps and disorder was getting closer. Roman held the gun up and my heart continued to race—I feared I might have to watch my brother get gunned down in front of me. Even with all of our differences, I couldn’t bear the thought of it.

Slowly, Roman lowered his weapon and just as the police rounded the corner, he got down on the ground beside me.

“Babies, we have babies here,” I yelled again.

A couple officers rushed to our side as silence finally settled in the house.

I lifted my head and saw Tony, on the ground, bloody and staring at the ceiling with blank eyes.

I looked over at Roman who was also staring at Tony. He had a satisfied smile on his face. A cocky grin. He was proud of that kill.

I know at one time, I was just like him, but taking a life didn’t bring me that sort of pleasure. I loved my brother dearly, but I had to admit, he still scared the living shit out of me at times. It was a good thing he was on our side.



## BELLA

**M**y phone buzzed. An unrecognized number. My heart stopped as I stared at it, knowing that this call could seal the fate of my family.

“It’s going to be okay,” Brenda said to me softly.

My hands shook as I answered the call, placing the phone to my ear. My voice came out barely a whisper. “Yes?”

“Bella, it’s me.” Hearing Gabe’s voice caused relief to flood my body.

“Oh, thank God,” I said, relaxing back on the sofa. If he was alive, I knew that whatever had happened, he and our girls were safe. I knew that Gabe would never leave our daughters behind.

“I’m currently in police custody, and our girls are being held by social services until you arrive. But they’re safe, Bella. Our girls are safe.”

“They’re safe,” I said, repeating his words for everyone in the room, but also myself. “The girls and Gabe are safe, they’re at the police station now.”

“I can’t talk long, I’m still being questioned, but you can come get the girls.”

“Yes, of course, I’ll be there right away. Just give me an address.”

He gave me the address to the police station, and I repeated it out loud so Ava could type it into her phone.

“I have to go,” he said.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn’t want to let him go, but I knew I’d be reunited with him soon. “I love you,” I said.

“I love you too.”

I hung up, my hands still shaking and I couldn’t find the words to say everything I wanted to say, but they got the gist of it.

“I’ll drive,” Charles said, standing up.

“You don’t have to, it’s getting late—”

“Yes, I do have to. I want to be there for my daughter and granddaughters,” he said.

“I’m coming too,” Brenda replied.

Liam and Harper were already standing as well.

“We might have to take two cars,” Ava chuckled.

“I have a van, but if you’d like to drive separately—”

“I can drive Harper and myself,” Liam said. “So that you can all be together.”

“Thank you,” Brenda said, smiling at her oldest son. If I’d had any concern about my siblings despising me for coming back into their life it disappeared in that moment. It was clear that they were welcoming me with open arms.

“Thank you,” I said to Liam.

We piled into the van, and my head was spinning. Charles texted Liam and asked him to pick up a couple of car seats on his way to the police station, which he was happy to do.

So now I knew what it felt like to have a family that actually cared about you. Ava took my hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. “You okay?”

“I think so. I’ll be happier when we’re all together again, but I’m relieved knowing that they’re all safe.”

The drive to the police station seemed to take an eternity, especially since we were out in the suburbs and needed to go

into the city. As soon as we pulled into the parking lot, and before Charles had a chance to park, I was already reaching for the door handle. Ava was right behind me as I nearly jogged to the entrance. I pulled open the door and stepped inside, scanning the area, unsure of where to go.

“Can I help you?” A woman at the counter asked me.

“I’m with Gabe De Luca. My girls, I was told my daughters were here, with social services.”

“Oh yes, take a seat,” the woman said casually, as if the situation was a normal occurrence for her. Perhaps it was just another day at her job, but to me, it was my entire life.

I wanted to argue, but Ava took my arm and led me to a chair nearby. Brenda and Charles joined us within a couple of minutes, and before we were called back, Liam and Harper also showed up.

“What’s taking so long?” I groaned.

“Bureaucracy,” Charles said. “I’ve dealt with the police enough to know this feeling well. There’s much waiting.”

A few minutes later, a woman came out and called my name. My family stood to join me, but she stopped them. “Ms. Stone only, please.”

“But I’m his sister, the girls’ aunt,” Ava pleaded.

“And we’re the grandparents.” Hearing those words out of Charles’ mouth was so nice. I smiled at him. It meant the world to me.

“Sorry, only the mother at this time,” the woman said in a deadpan voice.

“Fine, sorry everyone, but I’ll try to keep you updated.”

I followed the woman back, who hardly said anything to me at all. She held a door open for me and we walked down a long hallway.

She used a key to unlock a door to my left, and I stepped into a room that was cold and sterile with a metal table in the middle of it.

“Am I being interrogated?” I asked.

“No, but we do have some questions for you. Just wait here.”

I had no idea what was going on or what to expect. My head was spinning as I paced the tiny room. So much waiting without any answers. I had been there for what felt like hours and still no sign of Gabe or my daughters.

There was a knock on the door and then it opened. I expected a police officer coming to ask me questions or to hold things up even longer.

I was surprised to see Gabe.

I nearly fell over the chair trying to get to him, and I was in his arms as quickly as humanly possible. He kissed the top of my head, then my lips, as tears streamed down my face.

“What’s going on, where are the girls?”

“They’re bringing them now, they just wanted to make sure they had all the facts before releasing us.”

“What happened?” I asked, staring up into his eyes.

“Apparently the cops back in St. Louis did have a lead this entire time, they recognized one of Tony’s men in the video. They couldn’t let us know—they had to go through proper channels first to get warrants and make sure everything was done by the book. They burst in and saved the day.”

“No, you saved the day,” I said. “You’re the one who saved our girls.”

“Well...” he smiled down at me. “If you want to consider me a hero, I’m not going to argue with that.”

“What about your brothers? Tony?”

“My brothers are fine; Dante is being released and Roman will be pending investigation of the shooting—Tony will not be a problem for us ever again.”

His jaw clenched and his eyes darkened, telling me all I needed to know.



Another knock on the door, and then a friendly-looking woman stepped inside with a man right behind her. And in their arms, our girls.

They made their displeasure well known, fussing and crying as the social workers handed our babies over to us.

Seeing tiny Lucy in her giant dad's arms made me tear up all over again, but they were happy tears. I held Ari close, calming her, knowing she had clearly been through so much more than I could ever imagine.

"Mommy is so, so sorry," I whispered as I kissed her forehead.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," Gabe reminded me. "It's not your fault."

The guilt was heavy on my shoulders though. I had been in the house, if I hadn't left them in their nursery, alone, no one could have snuck in to steal them.

As if Gabe could read my mind, he replied to my thoughts. "Had you been in the room, I'm afraid of what might have happened to you. This very easily could have gone another way and not ended happy for our family," he said.

"Do you think they would have..." I trailed off, unable to finish my question.

Gabe nodded. "They would have tried to take you too, or worse. I know my girl, you wouldn't have gone down without a fight, which I appreciate, trust me. But these guys, they're ruthless, Bella. And I don't even want to imagine what could have happened. I couldn't bear losing you."

He leaned down and kissed me.

Another knock came, this time an officer telling us we were free to go.

"There was enough video evidence to show that you were acting in self-defense," the cop said. "And we know you were only trying to protect your girls."

Gabe didn't look so certain, leaving me with questions. I whispered, "Were you only acting in self-defense?"

“Mostly,” he whispered back.

I gave him a small smile. I was just so thankful and relieved that we were safely reunited.

Together, we walked back down the hall to the waiting room where Dante had joined the crowd waiting for us.

Right away, Charles and Brenda rushed us and the babies. I tried to introduce Gabe to everyone, but my head was still spinning and I was simply exhausted from the last few days.

“You look tired, sweetie,” Brenda said to me, sounding like the loving mother I had always dreamt of having.

“I’m exhausted.”

“You guys can stay at our place tonight. We have plenty of space.”

I was eager to get home, even though I knew my boys were still at the hospital, safe and sound, and it would be very late by the time we got back. I looked at Gabe.

“It might be nice staying with family,” he said. “I think after the last few days, you need it.”

Family.

I had a family.

And to think, only months before, I feared that I was all on my own.

“Sure, but we might leave early tomorrow morning, I’m eager to see my boys as well,” I said.

“Of course,” Brenda said. “And I can’t wait to meet my grandsons too.”

Grandsons. Hearing her say those words filled me with such joy.

“Soon,” I said. “Very soon, I hope.”

We still had to deal with a police investigation and DNA testing to be sure they were my parents, but we knew.

We all knew.

It was now just a matter of having proof.



## G A B E

I don't know what woke me up first—the sunlight streaming through the windows or the feeling of Bella's fingers caressing my bare chest. Opening my eyes, I found her smiling at me.

It had been a few days since we got our girls back home, and Elio was expected to be released from the hospital later that day. Vincent was still in the NICU, but it was confirmed he likely wouldn't need surgery and should be able to follow his brother home within the coming weeks. Soon, our family would finally all be together, all under one roof.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“It's just after seven,” she said.

“You're up early.” I dotted kisses along her forehead as she nestled her body closer to mine.

“I couldn't sleep, I'm just so excited for today.”

“How are the girls?”

“They've been fed. Ava and I took care of them and they're back asleep, but I couldn't fall back asleep myself.”

She pressed her body against mine under the blanket. Her skin was bare and her fingers circled the tattoos on my chest. She stared up at me through thick, black lashes with bedroom eyes.

She didn't even have to say a word or touch me anywhere intimately, I was hard as a rock for her already. Cupping her face in my hands, I brought her lips to mine and kissed her

deeply, my tongue exploring her mouth as her hands moved lower on my body, slipping underneath my boxer shorts.

“Well good morning to me then,” I whispered against Bella’s lips.

She slipped my boxers down with my help and removed them. With my hands on her waist, I rolled her over until she was on top of me, naked and beautiful, staring down at me between a curtain of her red curls.

My fingers traced along her curves as she ground her body into mine. Considering everything we’d been through, we hadn’t had much time for intimacy. My body craved her, I was dying to be inside of her once again.

She reached down and guided my cock between her thighs. Her wetness and warmth caused a groan to escape from my throat. “Yes, Bella... I need you.”

The head of my cock pressed against her, and she teased it, rubbing it over her warm pussy until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I need to be inside of you,” I growled.

She slipped just the head inside of her, teasing me for a moment longer before sliding down my cock, finally connecting our bodies . A small gasp escaped her throat as I filled her up.

“Good girl.”

Slowly, she rocked her hips back and forth, up and down, her breasts bouncing with each movement. I took them into my hands and raised my head up, sucking on her nipples. I pumped my body upward, guided by her movements, meeting her rhythm, to get even deeper inside of her. Bella moaned, “Yes, Gabe...”

I’d never get sick of hearing my name from her mouth. I continued sucking and playing with her breasts as she rode me, her movements becoming faster and more determined, her breath more ragged. Her moans became more urgent and her pussy tightened around my cock as she let out a cry of pleasure, her entire body shuddering with release.

“I’m coming,” she squeaked out. “Oh God, Gabe...”

I looked up at her gorgeous face twisted into a look of pure bliss, and it took everything in me not to finish right then and there. But I didn’t want it to end yet.

As her orgasm subsided, her body relaxed against mine. I pushed back her thick hair so I could see her face before pressing my lips to hers. I was still sheathed inside of her, and after a few moments, she began rocking her hips back and forth again, telling me that she wasn’t finished yet.

“You’re a little vixen aren’t you?” I teased.

“I am, especially when it comes to you,” she said with a playful grin.

With her help, I rolled her over onto her back, never removing my cock from her wetness. Towering over her, with her legs wrapped around me, I began thrusting into her. Lowering myself so I could kiss her as we made love, our bodies began working in perfect harmony. Her back arched upward to meet my every thrust, taking me deeper and deeper inside of her. Her tongue danced with mine as her nails raked down my back.

Her sweet whimpers were music to my ears. I wanted to make her feel so fucking good, to show her just how much I loved her.

Her lower body arched upward, her heels digging into my back as her nails sunk into my flesh. I could tell she was on the verge of climaxing again; good thing, because I was on the edge of exploding.

“Come for me, Gabe,” she pleaded. “Please, come with me.”

Hearing those words from her mouth pushed me over the edge. I thrust into her one last time, my cock throbbing inside of her as she moaned my name over and over again.

“God, I love you,” I said as my orgasm subsided.

No one had ever made me feel the way she did. She stared back at me with the sweetest of smiles.

“I love you too.”

Those words were music to my ears.

I slipped my now deflated cock out of her and rolled over to the side of her, laying on my back. She rested her head on my chest as I stroked her hair.

“Our family will finally all be together soon,” she said.

“I know, I can’t wait.”

She turned her head upward to look at me. “Did you ever expect things to turn out like this?”

“Never in my wildest dreams. I thought I was destined to be a single dad forever, and I had come to terms with that. I was okay with the possibility of being a one-parent show. I never imagined you coming into my life, but God, I’m so grateful that you did. I cannot picture my life without you now.”

She leaned up and kissed me softly on the lips.

“How about you?” I asked. “When you offered to be my surrogate, did you ever imagine that we’d end up like this, that you’d be my partner, my lover, helping to raise our four babies?”

Bella let out a short little laugh. “No, I had no idea. I’m not going to lie, I’ve always had a crush on you and part of me dreamt of us ending up together, but I never thought it was possible. I was planning to earn the money and go to school, I wasn’t even thinking of dating and babies yet. I was so focused on my career and now—”

“What?” I asked.

“Well, now, I’m rethinking what I want from life.”

That raised an eyebrow. “Really? You don’t want to study journalism?”

“I still want to be a writer, that much is true, but I have some other ideas in the works. I’ve been considering taking some time, and not going back to school until the babies are a little older. It gives me a chance to think through my options.”



“Well whatever you decide to do, just know that I am going to support you, one hundred percent.”

She kissed me again before relaxing against my chest. “Thanks, Gabe,” she said. “I just can’t wait until our family is together, all of us, Vincent included.”

“Soon, sweetheart. Very, very soon.”

\* \* \*

“ELIO, MEET YOUR SISTERS,” Bella cooed as she held the baby close. Ava was holding Lucy and I had Ari in my arms. We had our hands full, but we were a happy bunch and that’s all that mattered.

Roman and Dante were also there for Elio’s homecoming. After a brief investigation into the shooting at Tony’s house, Roman was released from custody, all pending charges dropped. Dante would hold the babies, but Roman was still too afraid, saying he feared he might break them. He liked watching them from a slight distance, and I caught him smiling at them a lot. He seemed to want to be in their lives, and as long as he walked the straight and narrow path, I was happy to have him.

“So now that things have calmed down a bit, maybe we should discuss Dad’s funeral,” Roman said. “Whenever you’re ready, of course.”

Being busy with the babies, along with everything else, made it easy at times to forget that my dad had died. Sometimes I wanted to forget everything and tried extremely hard to do so, but I knew that it wasn’t only about me. My brothers wanted closure, and Dad had other family that had been asking about a service.

“Sure, I think we can plan something. You two set it up and I’ll be there,” I said. “As long as you have it here in St. Louis. I’m not going out of town again anytime soon.”

“Understood,” Roman said. “Are you doing okay about all that?”

I was surprised Roman was checking in on me. We were never a family that really talked about our feelings.

“I am. There’s still a lot of resentment and anger, questions I wish I had answers to, but I think I’m finally at peace with everything. How about you?”

Roman shrugged. That was his answer. He was going to leave it at that.

“What are your plans now that you’re out of the family business?”

“Hell if I know,” Roman laughed. “But I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

“My security company could always use guys as good as the two of you,” I said, looking over at Dante. “I have my hands full these days, I could use some help running it.”

“I’ll give that a thought, thanks, man.”

“Me too,” Dante added.

There was something else I wanted to talk to my brothers about but wasn’t sure how to go about it. I’d already discussed things with Ava and she was fine with it, but she also didn’t feel the same way about mom’s property as my brothers and I did, she had less attachment to it.

“Since the deal fell through and we have mom’s property again, I was wondering...” I looked over at Bella. We had already discussed it very briefly, and I knew where she stood, but I wanted to be sure we were all in on this, “...well, I was thinking Bella and I might live there, raise our kids out there, if you two didn’t mind.”

“Yeah, I don’t mind,” Dante said. “It’s a bit too rural for my liking, I prefer staying in the city.”

We both looked over at Roman. I knew he had some attachment to the place.

“Sure, go for it,” Roman said. “As long as Ava is fine with it.”

“I’m good, I’m hoping to stay in St. Louis after I graduate, I need to be in a city to land a good job,” she said.

“Then it sounds good to me,” Roman said. “Like Dante, it’s a bit too rural for me. Are you guys sure you want to live that far away from civilization?”

He looked between Bella and me.

“Well, there’s a lot of space for the kids to run around. We have beautiful views of the river. It’s even bigger than this place, by quite a bit—”

“I’m already sold on the idea, Gabe, you really don’t have to say anything more to convince me,” Bella said with a chuckle. “I think after everything we’ve been through, getting away and just focusing on our family sounds amazing to me. And I’ll love being out of the city and raising our kids surrounded by nature.”

“Well then, sounds like a plan,” Roman said.

It had always been a dream of mine to raise my family there and knowing that it would soon become a reality filled me with so much joy. I glanced back over at Bella who was smiling at me. *How did I ever get so lucky*, I thought to myself, as I brought her hand up to my lips.

How did I ever get so damned lucky?



## BELLA

“Baby Vincent is home!” I exclaimed to Charles over the phone. “And I also got a little something in my email today, though I haven’t opened it yet.”

The email was regarding a DNA test that we’d all done. It held the results that would tell me whether or not we were biologically a family. Although I already knew in my heart, the results would be the verification we needed to correct all of legal my documents so I could officially be an O’Connell instead of a Stone. Since I was used to the name Isabelle, we had agreed I would keep my first name, but everyone called me Bella anyway.

“That’s great news, on both accounts,” Charles said.

“Are you driving? I can call back later if you are?” I had heard some road noise in the background.

“It’s fine, I have you on speaker,” Brenda said. “Harper and Liam are with us as well.”

“Oh hi!” I said to everyone. “I hope you’re all doing well, but if you’re on your way somewhere, I can let you go after I show you the baby.”

I walked over to where Vincent was sleeping in his father’s arms. Ari, Lucy, and Eli were also there, spread between Ava, Dante and Roman who finally gave in and decided to hold one of the babies. He was doing remarkably well for how worried he was about it.

I smiled as I stared at my family. In front of me was everything I had ever wanted.

“So would you like to see Vincent?”

“We would, but you don’t have to do it by video call,” Charles said.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re outside your door,” he laughed.

My heart skipped several beats as the doorbell rang. I heard it both in real life and over the phone.

“You’re here? But how?”

“Gabe gave us the address, we wanted to surprise you,” Charles answered.

“Are you going to answer the door or leave them standing outside?” Gabe teased.

I rushed to the front door and opened it up. Standing on our front porch were Charles, Brenda, Liam, and Harper, all with the biggest smiles on their faces and their arms open for a hug. I made the rounds, hugging each of them and greeting them.

“Wow, I can’t believe you guys came all this way,” I said.

“We wanted to be here to celebrate Vincent coming home and his clean bill of health,” Charles replied.

“We wanted the family to all be together for this special day,” Brenda added.

Family. I would never grow sick of hearing them say that word. Which reminded me...

“The results!”

Charles and Brenda beamed at me, their faces glowing.

“You already looked at them, didn’t you?” I asked.

“On the way over, I couldn’t wait any longer,” Brenda admitted. “As soon as I got the notification, I just had to.”

Seeing their faces, I knew that the results were what we had hoped for, but I had to read them for myself. Since my phone was still in my hand, I quickly opened my email and found the message. My hands were shaking as I clicked on it.

My DNA was a match with both Charles and Brenda.

I was their daughter.

My knees felt weak and I had to grab ahold of the doorframe to steady myself as the news sunk in. The woman who I had thought was my mother, the woman who acted as if she never once cared for me, was not my mom.

Brenda was.

My dad wasn't in prison for forging documents and stealing identities.

He was standing in front of me in a pair of khaki golf shorts and a baby blue linen polo shirt.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as my family enveloped me.

I could now stop calling them Charles and Brenda, they were Mom and Dad.

We were all crying as we hugged, and my parents told me that they loved me, that they never stopped loving me.

"I love you guys too," I said, wiping my eyes and trying to pull myself together. "Are you ready to meet your grandsons?"

"Absolutely," my mom quickly replied.

They walked alongside me further into the house, and when we stepped into the living room, my parents immediately greeted their grandchildren. They oohed and aahed at them. My mom was holding a baby within seconds, managing to take Eli from Roman who seemed ready for a break. Ava handed Lucy over to Charles, and Harper got her hands on Ari.

I took my baby boy, Vincent, the one we were worried about all these months, and held him in my arms, sitting down between my mom and dad.

"So I have some more news to share with everyone too, while we're all gathered here," I announced.

My mom raised an eyebrow. “You’re not pregnant again, are you?”

“Oh no,” I said with a laugh. “No, that’s not it. One day maybe but not right now, we have our hands full. It’s that I accepted a job writing articles for *People* magazine!”

“Oh wow,” my mom’s eyes grew wide. “I’m so proud of you, sweetheart. How did that come about? I want all the details.”

“Thank you! Well, as you know, our story has reached the national news, with me being kidnapped, then having my own children kidnapped, so I decided to tell our story and submitted an article to *People* magazine about it. It was accepted, and they asked if I would be interested in writing about other missing children cases that had gone cold. They thought it would make for an important series, and that I was just the person to do it.”

“That is amazing, honey,” Charles said.

Vincent’s fingers wrapped around one of mine, and the tears welled in my eyes again. Everything was so perfect, it felt surreal to me. My babies were home. My family was with me. I was writing professionally and had a career that I’d always dreamt of having, and I was able to write about something that truly mattered to not only me, but other victims as well.

“Also, I was approached about writing a book about my experience,” I said. “And, I was wondering, Mom, if you would like to work on that together? I know you started a book about it already, and your side of the story is so important in all of this.”

“Oh, I don’t know, sweetie. Would they even be interested in that?” she asked.

“They already are. I proposed it to them and they love the idea. I just need to know if this is something you want to do together.”

My mom looked into my eyes and I saw she was tearing up, even as her smile grew wider. She wiped at her eyes and



then pulled the baby closer to her, hugging Eli.

“Well, with your help, maybe the book will actually be worth publishing, so yes, of course I want to do this with you,” she said.

My heart was bursting with joy in that moment. Knowing that my mom and I would be working on the project together, a project that I was certain would be very emotional and would allow us to get to know each other better.

“Harper could help as well,” I said. “In fact, I would love to get insights from the whole family, if possible.”

“We’d love to help,” Charles said.

Harper looked even more ecstatic at the idea. I intended to help my little sister out any way I could. All my life, I had wanted a sibling, and now I had one of each. I was going to have to make up for lost time.

Which reminded me... I pulled out a Hot Wheels car from my pocket and tossed it over to Liam. “To make up for all the ones I used to steal from you,” I said with a playful wink.

He grinned as he stared down at the toy car. “Who knew that a Hot Wheels car would nearly bring me to tears, but here we are.”

There were lots of tears, past and present, and likely more to come in the future. Hopefully mostly happy ones. Looking around at the room filled with so much love and joy, I had a good feeling that they would be.

## EPILOGUE

One Year Later

“**L**et me just scooch you over an inch, yes, just like that, Eli,” I said as I got the baby into position. I stood back and looked at my handiwork with a smile.

I realized something was missing. Oh yes, the question mark. I’d printed it out and had it sitting off to the side. I placed it next to the last baby in line. Little Vincent, whose face twisted into a look of annoyance. “Shhh, sweet boy,” I said, picking up the baby and cradling him in my arms. I was worried we might have a meltdown before Bella came in and saw the babies lined up, and if that happened, well, then it would be perfectly imperfect, like most things in our lives. But with some comforting, Vincent settled down and I put him back in place.

Perfect.

I propped open the door and called out, “Sweetie? The kids want to show you something.”

“Is everything okay?” Bella called back. She had been in the office doing some edits to the book she was working on with her family.

“Everything is fine, they just want to show you something.” I couldn’t contain the smile on my face as I glanced back at the babies. Ari fell asleep, her head resting on her sister next to her, but that was okay.

Bella's footsteps came from down the hall. I popped my head back into the room and took my place next to the babies holding the question mark sign.

The door opened and Bella stepped inside. "What are you guys doing in the library—"

Before she could finish, her gaze fell on the babies' onesies. I watched as her mind read off each word in order.

Will. You. Marry. Me.

She read it off a couple of times before her hands went to her mouth. A small squeal escaped her lips, frightening Lucy and waking Ari, who started fussing. Upon hearing their sisters crying, Vincent and Eli joined in.

I dropped the question mark as we both went over to the kids. Comforting all four of them meant we each took two at a time, a task that wasn't easy, but we had become pros at it.

"Shhh, it's fine, Mommy's fine," Bella whispered to a still fuzzy Ari and Lucy.

I took the boys since they were closest to me. As usual, Eli settled pretty quickly, he was the quieter one out of the boys. Vincent seemed startled, but also calmed once there was no more excitement.

"Did you mean it?" Bella asked, holding Ari in her arms, rocking her back to sleep.

"Of course I meant it," I said. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't mean it."

I nodded to the baby blue box on the desk that was propped open, showing off the diamond that I had selected for her, with help from Ava, of course.

Bella's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Are you... Is this... "

We had discussed getting married, but it was always a "one day" thing, and not something we had talked about doing anytime soon. But as the days went on, and as we built a life for ourselves in our new home, on the property that had

belonged to my mother's family, I wanted nothing more than to make our relationship official.

"Bella, after everything we've been through, I can't imagine anyone else by my side. We make a killer team, and we're rocking it raising these munchkins. I know we've talked about waiting until the kids are a little older and you finished school, but—"

"Yes," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"What did you say?" I asked, unsure if I heard her correctly.

"I said yes, Gabe. Yes!" She shouted the last word a little too loudly, arousing Ari in her arms and causing her to cry out grumpily. We both chuckled as it set off a cacophony of babies. This was our life now, and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the entire world.

I went back to soothing the boys, and she rocked Ari to sleep while distracting Lucy with a stuffed toy.

"So you're okay with getting married before going back to school?" I asked her.

"Well... as you know, I've been wondering if a master's is even necessary, considering my career is going so well without it. I only wanted to get the degree to further my career, but now I'm not so sure. Besides, there's something I need to show you."

Ari had fallen asleep in her arms again as I stared at her, waiting for whatever she wanted to show me. Was it a job offer? Something else? I put both boys back down on the couch.

She slipped something from her pocket and handed it to me.

"I just took this an hour ago."

It was a pregnancy test.

"I know we had talked about having another baby once these ones were older, but—"

“You’re pregnant?” I muttered.

“I am,” she said, biting her lip. “So how do you feel about five under two?”

My heart raced at the mere thought of having another baby. I looked over at the four we already had, and I knew that no matter what, we would find a way to fit this new baby into our life and make it work.

Bella and I could handle it.

I wrapped my arms around her and lifted her off the ground, planting a kiss to her lips.

“So I’m assuming you’re happy about the news?”

“How could I not be happy? I just found out that our family is growing by at least one more.”

“Hopefully only one more,” she laughed.

“Well, okay, hopefully one more, but we can handle whatever comes. I feel like the happiest man on earth right now.”

She kissed me again and I just held her there, our bodies pressed together. I stared deep into her eyes.

This life was nothing like I had pictured for myself when I was younger, but there I was. In the house where I had my happiest memories growing up, with the woman I loved, and our children surrounding us.

“We should probably hold off on the wedding until after the baby is here,” she said. “But I am thinking... I would love to have the ceremony overlooking the river, right here on this property.”

“That sounds like an amazing idea to me. What better way to celebrate our life together than to get married at our home.”

“Surrounded by everyone that loves us,” Bella added.

“And that’s a lot of people these days.”

“Thankfully so,” she added.

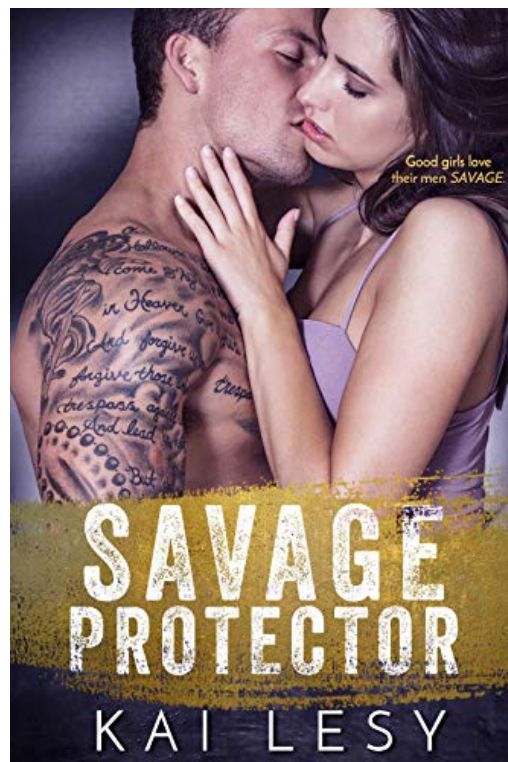
I released her and we found all four babies napping on the couch where I'd placed them to surprise Bella. They slept peacefully, snuggled together. It was too perfect for words. We stayed like that, hand-in-hand, admiring our children and relishing in the knowledge that even through everything, we had somehow managed to still find our happy ending.

**The end**

**Get a sneak peek a three years into the future of Bella and Gabes' happily ever after [HERE](#).**

*Check out more steamy single dad bestsellers [HERE](#).*

# SAVAGE PROTECTOR (PREVIEW)



**My sweet and gifted student...**

**Has a cocky bastard dad.**

Hugh's my intense bodyguard.

Truth is - *he's a total prick.*

It drives me nuts how the ex-SEAL's presence gets me bothered.



And the sick pleasure I get when he orders me around.

It doesn't help that Hugh's tall. Ripped. And pure testosterone.

Maybe danger makes me weak.

Or maybe I'm intrigued by his mysterious and broken past.

**I just hope the dangerous men after me get the worst of  
Hugh's bite.**

## PROLOGUE

“You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?” I pulled her close, being a little rough. Ten days of having my cock ache over her were more than enough. “You should realize that there is only so much playful teasing a man can take.”

“If you start this and stop in the middle again, I’ll throw you down the stairs.” She cupped her hands over mine and stepped closer.

Every cell in my body screamed for release.

“You’re not big enough to do that, and I’ll give you one chance to walk away from me. Go if you even doubt that I’m going to take it easy on you. I haven’t been with a woman in too long. I can’t be gentle, not with how bad I need you right now.”

The resolution in her eyes was all I needed. She wanted this more than I did, which seemed impossible.

“Good,” I whispered and kissed her hard as I slid my hands down her soapy back. I cupped her perfect ass and pressed on the back of her thighs as I lifted. She wrapped her legs around me like a good girl and clung to me as I jogged us down the stairs to my bedroom.

I sucked my way down her neck and kissed the top of her tits before my legs bumped into the bed. “I want to taste you. Get on your knees for me.”

She whispered but rolled onto her stomach and lifted to her hands and knees like a kitten in heat. “Please don’t stop.”

“That’s not something you’re going to have to worry about.” I pulled my shirt over my head and let my inhibitions go as I sunk to my knees. Wrapping her in a tight hug, my arms around her thighs, I leaned in and pressed my tongue to her pink flower.

The sound of her crying out in pleasure drove me to suck, lick, and probe faster. The taste of her coming almost had me losing my own load.

Good thing we had to meet her father for brunch. Otherwise, she’d have a long eight to ten hours of me fucking every opening she’d let me have access to.

I was starving, and she was my buffet.

## LAYLA

**N***o place I'd rather be than right here.*  
“Alright. Now listen up.”

I glanced around the classroom, my hand raised as I prepared to lead my mini-musicians in one more piece for the day.

“This one is not easy. I see the stress on some of your faces, but remember, this is what sight reading is all about. You get a new piece of music, and you have to play it right away. Deep breath.”

Their collective chests lifted. The sound of someone letting out a toot resounded in the back, and everyone cracked up.

I'd lost them.

It was a regular occurrence, but I loved every second of it.

“Really?” I lifted on my toes and gave the back row of rowdy boys a look. “Hold your hot air in for your instruments, okay?” More laughter. I offered a smile and nodded.

“On my count. Ready?” I glanced down at Hannah, a petite flutist, who lifted her head, her eyes filled with hero worship. Certainly, it wasn't directed at me, but I was the only one up front. Maybe her mind was in a different place.

The bottom third of her flute started to slide toward the floor as the class began to play the piece of music. I dropped my hand and let out a yelp as I jumped off the conductor podium and leaned over her stand, grabbing the shiny silver tube as it dropped.

“Whew. That was close.” I handed it back to her. “Don’t put so much grease on the tubing, okay?”

Her eyes began to water in unison and my heart almost stopped. “I’m so sorry, Miss Sommers.” Before I could respond, she pressed her little chin to her chest, her face downcast as if I’d yelled at her in front of everyone.

I reached over and placed my fingers under her chin, gently forcing her to look up at me. “Hey. It’s all good, okay? Nothing to worry about. No one was hurt, no instruments dented, and no animals were harmed in the making of this music.”

The class broke into laughter as Hannah smiled at me, her tears a sign of her sweet, angelic little heart.

“Okay. Thanks, Miss Sommers.” She wiped her tears away as I moved back. She lifted her flute to her lips, nodding at me with a determination in her eyes. Kids were resilient and breathtakingly beautiful in their willingness to try again.

I wished my resolve was that firm, but life had handed me lemon after lemon. I wasn’t sure I had a yearning for lemonade anymore.

Perhaps a Diet Coke or a glass of whiskey?

A smirk tugged at my lips. My father would have been proud to hear me contemplating hanging out with Jack and Jim. They were a man’s drink and a woman’s release. I’d roll my eyes at him, much like my mother had when she was alive and giving us both hell day in and day out.

“Miss Sommers? You still here?” Bart, a portly kid in the front row, waved his flute back and forth.

I laughed and lifted my hands. “Of course. Lift your instruments on three. One. Two. And Lift.” I lifted my hand and started the cadence as they bobbed their heads. A moment later, music filled the room, and my soul expanded with it.

It was, after all, my release.

My father, the DA of Chicago, didn’t approve of my career path, but it wasn’t his choice to make. He’d been squawking in

my ear for six years over the fact that I was “wasting my life,” but he had no idea how much I *actually lived* standing on the small make-shift podium beneath me, watching a group of future leaders make something out of nothing.

Music was the essence of my life, the evidence of the spirit. It filled the air with its haunting melody and wrapped around me so tightly that at times, I could never part my ways with it even if I wanted to.

A life shadowing my father’s ambitions would have resulted in me becoming a very different woman, one who had no concept of hope in the center of tragedy. Tragedy was something I knew about, rather intimately. Losing my mother had almost crippled me, then the second worst day of my life came when I was stood up at the altar, but my passion for children and music dragged me through the longest of nights.

“Beautiful!” I smiled and clapped my hands, bouncing on my feet.

The class smiled back at me, and a soft voice whispered from the front row.

Sweet little Hannah.

“You’re so pretty when you smile. I hope I’m pretty like you one day.” The girl’s eyes widened as she clasped her hand over her mouth, her cheeks reddening. The sweet thing hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but I was beyond appreciative that she did.

After two years of being single, feeling pretty was rare.

“Thank you! You’re already way ahead of me.” I winked at her and lifted my hands. “You guys sounded like angels and frogs. But I’m not telling you which of you sounded like a frog.”

The boys in the back row lifted their hands and laughed loudly. I joined them, and soon the whole room was filled with the sound of delight.

“It’s time to go, Miss Sommers.” Charlie, a brilliant boy in the saxophone section spoke up. There was a sadness around his eyes, and it made me want to hug him every time I saw

him. Getting involved in the kids' lives, especially in an afterschool program, wasn't really appropriate, but something about Charlie made me want to break the rules.

Was he abused?

Bullied?

A foster kid, maybe?

"And so it is." I offered him a warm smile before turning back to the rest of the class. "Alright! Pack up. See you guys next time, and do not forget to practice your scales. Especially you toads in the back."

More laughter filled the room as I worked to put my music back together and get my things ready to vacate the premises. Several other instructors used the facilities I rented for my classes. Even though the building wasn't in the best part of town, it would do until I could afford something better.

Sooner rather than lately, if I played my cards right.

Anger swirled in my stomach at the thought of my father's response the last time I mentioned that I could use a seed investor in building a new arts center for the kids to come to, for the community to enjoy.

*"Layla! Don't be ignorant. Music doesn't make the world go 'round. You're not a child anymore. Doctors, accountants, oil men, chefs, entrepreneurs, and lawyers make a real difference. And if you're not adding to the motion, you're detracting from it."*

I shook my head, pissed at myself for thinking my father might have been willing to have a conversation about my dreams without slaughtering them across the altar of his hopes for me.

*Asshole.*

I hated how he acted, but I could never hate him for being him. He was a product of his upbringing, his own father the most decorated district attorney in Chicago back in his day. It was a family legacy, and because I was an only child and my mother was gone, I was all he had.

And his dream would die with me.

His dream.

Not mine.

*“People like us are here to bring progress into the world.” He reached out and cupped my face, forcing me to look up at him. “Get that snarl off your beautiful face. You remind me too much of your mother when you do that.”*

*“Why can’t you be okay with the fact that I have a passion that I get paid for? You love prosecuting criminals. I love seeing the light go on in a kid’s face when they realize they’ve done something few people do.”*

*He laughed, the tone of it almost sardonic. “What, honey? They blew into the end of a piece of metal, and it made a noise?”*

*“I love you, Dad, but I don’t really like you much.”*

“Miss Sommers? I, um, I didn’t mean to call you out on the time. I’m sorry if—” Charlie stood before me, his skin pale as if he were going to be sick.

I lifted my watch toward him, turning my wrist at an awkward angle. “See anything off here?”

He glanced down at my watch and let out a soft breath. The vein in the side of his throat was ticking like he was in the middle of a marathon. “Um. It’s not working. The little hand isn’t moving.”

I pulled it back toward my face and glanced down before looking at up at him with a smile. “Exactly. It stopped last week. It was supposed to be waterproof, so being brave and all, I put it in a tub of dishwater, and guess what?”

He relaxed, his shoulders rolling back and a smile appearing on his freckled face. “It wasn’t waterproof.” His smile grew wider. “My dad did that too, the other day. You should have heard him in the kitchen. You would have thought someone blew the garage off the house.”

I laughed loudly and pulled him into a side hug. “I like the sound of your dad already.”



*He has a dad. Foster child officially marked off the list.*

“He’s a great guy.” He moved away from me and picked up his case. “I like the song today. It’s my favorite so far.”

“Me too.” I beamed. “It’s actually my very favorite song of all time.”

“Really? I’ve never heard it before.”

“Well, after you’re done practicing tonight, go look it up on YouTube. The Muppets played it in one of their movies. Tell me which one it was when I see you next time, and I’ll give you the saxophone solo in the second section.”

His eyes widened. “What? Really?”

“Oh yeah. You’re brilliant with your instrument.” I glanced up as someone at the door cleared their throat. “Okay. Let’s get out of here. It looks like the next instructor is ready to take the room from us.”

“I’ll practice nonstop. I’m not going to let you down, Miss Sommers. I promise.” Charlie turned and walked out the door beside me.

“Layla.” The older woman that used the room for an adult concert band practice snarled at me.

“Sounds good, Charlie. See you later.” I patted his back and waited until he was gone to turn my attention on Della. “Hi Della. How are you?”

“Skip the pleasantries. Make sure you turn the air down to sixty-four degrees before you leave here in the future. We were sweating our asses off last time we used this room. I know the pipes are all old and crusty, but do your part, young lady, or I’ll call the owner again.”

“No problem. Enjoy your day, okay?” I gave her a go-fuck-yourself look and walked out of the building.

Sometimes it was just better to kill them with kindness.

The sun had just begun to set over the edge of the parking lot. The wind was blowing like crazy. Pausing, I glanced around to make sure everyone was gone. With my duties done

for the day, I walked languidly to my car and let my mind wander to the possibility of Charlie growing up to be a professional musician. He was incredibly talented, and from what I understood, the little boy was two years ahead of his peers in school.

I'd dared to reason he was child protégé.

I got in my dumpy Honda and tried to crank it. Three exertions later, it finally purred to life. The looks I got as people passed me in their tuxes and nice, black dresses were almost comical. Why a fancy group would use a co-op building as their rehearsal location was beyond me.

I didn't fit in with my family, my father's friends, or even the adults that shared my love of music. My place was with a bunch of gangly fifth graders who marched to the beat of their own drums.

"No place I'd rather be." I pulled out of the parking lot with a smile on my face. I belonged right where I was.

To hell with anyone who thought differently.

## HUGH

“Just doing my job, sir.” I extended my hand and shook his firmly.

“Maybe, but some people go above and beyond what they’re called to do for a paycheck.” He released my hand and turned, walking toward the open door in his office at the state capitol. “Walk with me.”

“Sir.” I moved in behind him, grateful I’d worn my black suit to the wrap-up interview on the job. Everyone was in black. I’d have looked like a jackass wearing something colorful, though dark blue was the extent of my “rainbow.”

“I could use a man like you around here, you know? Someone with a special forces background and an eye for detail.” He clasped his hands behind his back, his gaze forward as we walked down the hall.

“I appreciate that, Senator, but working a freelance job has been vital to my family life.”

“Family? Oh.” He paused and turned to face me. “I didn’t realize you had a family.”

“Not sure if that’s a compliment or not.”

He let out a short, curt laugh. “I’m not sure if it is, either. You got kids, Hugh?”

“Yes, sir.” I held back the hint of a smile that wanted to respond for me. “A son. Charlie. He’s a brilliant boy like his mother was. He’s only nine, but already in fifth grade.” I

shook my head in disbelief that the little guy was *already* nine, not *only* nine.

“Like his mother *was*?” The inquisitive look on the senator’s face faded as the words came out of his mouth. He lifted his hand and waved it in front of me. “No. Never mind. Forgive me, son. That’s none of my damned business.”

“Nina passed two and a half years ago.” I clasped my hands in front of my waist, trying to keep from fidgeting. It would never get easier talking about her. Her name on my lips brought up a level of pain I once didn’t think possible off the battlefield, but I was wrong.

*So fucking wrong.*

“Well, forgive me. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.” He reached out and clasped my shoulder, offering me that rare smile again. “Anytime I need someone guarding me on a conference or in a hostile environment, I’ll be calling you.”

“I hope you do.” I nodded and turned, walking out of the pristine white building where the state’s politicians sat in their ivory castle and made decisions for the common folk, like me.

Breathing in deeply, I glanced up toward the sky and worked on unbuttoning my jacket. “I need to get my ass back in the gym, Nina. Cheetos and frozen pizzas don’t work well for me.”

I could almost heard her laugh.

The contract with the senator had been a good one, money wise, but I was grateful to be back home on solid ground. Charlie had stayed with Jordan, Nina’s older brother, and my closest pal from my military days. He was my better half at the security firm as well. Not having a brother myself, he was the closest thing to family to my boy and me.

I ran my hand down the frame of my motorcycle as I stopped beside it in the parking lot.

“Wow. You ride that thing in a suit?” A nerdy looking guy stopped beside me, his glasses crooked on his face from the

Kleenex he held up to his nose. His voice was pinched and nasally.

“Sure do, man.” I tilted my head to study him closer. “Your nose bleeding?”

“Yeah.”

I chuckled and got on the bike. “Go to the bathroom and lean your head forward. Then get some ice. It’ll help tighten those veins in your nose.”

He smiled or tried to. “Um. Thanks? You a nurse?”

“Do I look like a nurse?” I let out a good laugh. I was no nurse, but I’d been helping people all my life. It was all I knew. It was my way of life.

“Not a very pretty one.” The guy backed up. “Great bike. My dad used to have one just like this. Maybe I should get one.”

“Maybe.” I nodded before putting on my helmet and riding out of the parking lot. The thought of Charlie having a bike made me feel like I needed to vomit or shit myself. Maybe it was time I retired my bike, as painful it was to think about.

No way my boy was going to do anything that might put him in danger, at least until he was too old to wrestle to the ground.

*Or too big.*

I smiled at the thought. The little tike was spot on for his age, but being an Einstein, his mother had him running with kids two to three years older, so he *appeared* smaller.

He’d come into his own, but until then, I’d worry about him. Nina would have given me hell about being sensitive where our son was concerned, but I’d just shrug. I’d wanted a boy all my adult life, and he would have my heart — the parts of me that were shut off from most of the world — anything he needed from me.

With Nina gone, it was even worse.

He was all I had left.

The wind picked up around me as I pulled up to the nondescript gray building where we did our paperwork. My thoughts dispersed as I caught a glimpse of Jordan rising from a squat near the door. I parked the bike and pulled off my helmet as my boy walked toward me.

“You really took the bike to the capitol building?” He snorted. “What a fucking showoff, man.”

“Language,” I said with a solemn look on my face.

We both busted in laughter at my attempt to be serious. Usually, we liked to break each other’s balls. Charlie had a good head on his shoulders and always knew how to behave. When I really needed him to pay attention, the boy knew damn well to do so.

“Are you seriously standing out here on the front porch waiting for me to come in? What are you, my damn babysitter?”

He reached out and clasped my hand, pulling me into a tight hug. “I’m glad you’re home, dad. I hate it when they send you overseas for a job. Shit scares me.”

“Pussy.” I patted his back before stepping around him. “Doc here?”

“Yeah. Jordan’s throat deep in paperwork.” He sidled up next to me. “So? How was it? Charlie did great, by the way. He’s so much like Nina it’s ridiculous.”

“I know, right?” I reached up and ran my fingers through my hair. Charlie reminded me of Nina more and more every day. It was a doubled edged sword: a blessing and a curse. “The trip was fine. Senator Boyd isn’t nearly the hard-ass everyone thinks he is.” I shrugged. “I guess everyone wears a mask in public.”

Jordan opened the door for us. “You Mr. Buddha now? Gone off to China and all the sudden bubbling over with deep insights. I need to get you a white robe and some string sandals.”

I laughed, unable to help myself. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Not a chance, buddy. Go talk to the boss, then let’s catch up and see who’s drawing the short straw for the next assignment.”

“You owe me one for taking this one.” I turned and pointed at my best friend as I walked backward toward Doc’s office. “It’s your turn to take the next armpit assignment.”

As I stepped into the small, informal reception area, Doc’s administrative assistant, Lizzy, was hanging up her phone with a frustrated sigh. She tossed her long, wavy red hair over a slender shoulder and closed her emerald green eyes.

“What’s up, Lizzy?” I asked, propping my hip on her desk. I had to give the girl kudos for being able to put with us macho assholes all day. She was a petite and curvy girl with all the sass her red hair dictated she have, and she managed to stay afloat in the testosterone sea that was our office.

“Ugh, my best friend is getting married next year on an island someplace and I’m almost certain I’ll need a date,” she huffed.

I laughed. “Uh, if it’s a year away, why are you so stressed about it now?”

She looked at me and crinkled her nose, simultaneously pinching the bridge. “Well my friend’s brother is my horrible ex. Let’s just say he’s never getting on my good graces again. Anyway, what’s this I hear about armpit assignments?”

Doc called out from his open door. “There are no armpit assignments here. I hate it when you jackasses refer to jobs like that.”

I winked at Lizzy, stood, and pressed my hands to the door frame of Doc’s office. “Then I shall refrain from doing that again.”

He smiled. “Glad you’re back, Hugh. Come on in and sit down.” He shuffled through some paperwork as I sat in the seat across from him.

There was no reason to fill the silence with mindless chatter. Doc and I went way back, too. He was a good man, a

retired special forces captain — no bullshit or games kind of guy.

“Here.” He handed me an envelope. “The senator had that sent over yesterday for you. The letter I got made it sound like the two of you fell in love.”

I gave him a knowing look before glancing down the front of my body. “Well, you see what I’m working with here, right?”

He chuckled. “He said you were by far the best bodyguard he’s had in years. You were present but invisible, intelligent but silent.”

“Now who’s Buddha?” I lifted my chin and yelled, praying like hell that Jordan heard Doc.

“Fuck you, man.” Jordan walked into the room and sat down in the chair next to me, nodding at the envelope. “Bonus?”

“Probably.” I folded it up without opening it and put it in my front suit pocket. “He offered me a permanent position at the capitol building.”

“You tell him to suck it?” Jordan leaned back in his chair and almost fell. I reached over and pushed him the rest of the way back, causing him to bust his ugly ass and yelp.

“Good grief.” Doc leaned back and focused on me. “Thank you for going out of town. I know that’s not easy with you having Charlie by yourself. I told you I wouldn’t do that too often to you, and I won’t. But for this round, thank you. You were the best man for the job.”

“I resent that.” Jordan climbed up off the floor and sat back down, giving me a look that would have gotten his ass whooped if he were anyone else. “I’d have done the senator right, too.”

Doc ignored him. “You didn’t take the job, right Hugh? You’re not in here to tell me you’re leaving to work with a bunch of stiffs in suits, ‘cause I ain’t hearing it.”



“No.” I shook my head. “I want a job that keeps me here in Chicago for a little while if possible. Charlie is stressed with school and the advanced classes. Seeing that the new semester just started, he needs me home.”

“Then I’ll find you something here.” Doc glanced over to Jordan. “We’ll send nugget head over here to Saudi next week to guard the Prince of Akbar.”

“What? Fuck no.” Jordan stood up, his playful demeanor all but gone. “No, no, and no. Got it? No.”

“Is Akbar a place?” I laughed heartily and stood up.

“Sounds like something out of a Disney movie.” Jordan crossed his arms over his chest and lifted his eyebrow at Doc. “You pulling my dick?”

“I’d have to find it first. Get the fuck out of here. Jordan, wrap up your paperwork, and Hugh, go see your kid, man. Great job on this last one. You did me proud.”

“That’s what I’m after.” I turned and wrapped my arm around the back of Jordan’s neck, pulling him out of Doc’s office with me. “I’ll be charging extra for taking out the trash.”

“Fuck you, too.” Jordan elbowed me in the side and walked me to the door after I released him. “Hey.” He reached out and grabbed my arm. “I know this is seriously none of my business, but are you at all worried about Charlie being in music instead of sports? It just feels weird to me.”

I folded my hands across my chest and pulled my shoulders back a little. “We’ve had this conversation before. First off, you’re right, it’s not your business, but seeing that you’re family, I’ll say it again — Charlie can do whatever he loves doing. Life is short, Jordan. We lost Nina way before her time, and if she had known she was leaving us so fucking soon, what would she have done differently?”

He nodded and bit his bottom lip, the subject obviously hitting a little too close to his heart.

I patted his chest. “Let the kid live in a world he loves instead of forcing him into one *we* understand.”

“Okay. Sorry. Tell him I miss him already.”

I winked and walked to the door, excited about picking him up. “I will. Thanks again for watching him this last week.”

“It’s like hanging out with my little sister again. I’d never say no to that.”

I understood all too well.

I’d never say no to that either.

Not for anything in this cruel world.

**[Click here for full story.](#)**