



EUGENE & ELLIOT PART 1

THE BASE

The Beginning

By the Bestselling Author of the
Full Circle series and The Librarian series

H.M. WOLFE

THE BASE: THE BEGINNING

Eugene & Elliot Part 1

H.M. WOLFE

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DEDICATIONS

To Audrey (A.M. Snead), Becca, and Beau, my three musketeers, to Brei-Ayn and Nicole, my fierce alphas, to my small, but dedicated ARC team and to my loyal readers, thank you from the bottom of my heart. You keep me going.

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CHAPTER 1

“Elliott Spellmann, where do you think you are going? Get inside right now!” the girl shouted.

“For goodness sake, that woman!” the blond, curly-haired young man groaned mentally, rolling his eyes. “What is it, Christine?” he answered in a bored voice, going back into the house.

“What’s happening to you, sweet boy? Here, you forgot it again, third times this week, and it’s only Thursday!” This time, the girl spoke in a gentle, concern-filled voice. Examining Elliott’s face, she handed him the coat she was holding. “You don’t look very well, dear!”

“Why thank you, Christine, you are a sweetheart, as always,” the young man tried to sound ironic, but the wide grin on his face gave him up.

“Listen, don’t play cool with me, OK? I may be a bitch, but it’s for your own good. Since you aren’t recovered after that pneumonia, and you leave without your coat?! If you don’t take care of yourself, at least let me do it.”

“Thanks, Christine, bye Christine, I am going to be late for work. Love you, too!” Elliott shouted, waving to the girl while he was walking backward.

“Don’t fool around like that, be... Too late!” She watched in horror when the blond bumped into a random pedestrian, tripping and falling on his back.

The impact with the ground wasn't very hard, and luckily Elliott was in one piece, except for a scratch on his left elbow. The blond let out a sigh of relief and was about to get back on his feet when he froze on the spot. Two pretty large hands were starting to touch him all over, making his skin crawl.

Elliott knew what was coming. He'd experienced it too many times to forget it. Closing his eyes, the blond prepared his body and waited for the blows to land on it again and again. To his great shock, the man didn't raise his hand to him. He didn't even start to yell or curse. However, that didn't stop Elliott from reacting in the only way he knew: by staying still, holding his breath, hoping the man would not notice him. But the blond ran out of luck that day.

“Hey, kid, are you all right? Look, I am very sorry, I should have paid more attention, but...” the well-built man started to talk, only to be abruptly interrupted by Christine. She was heading to the two of them at light speed, getting ready to defend Elliott tooth and claw.

“Go on your way, big guy, you've caused too many problems already. Get lost before I go mad!” Judging by the look on her face, the young woman didn't joke about the get mad part, but the man in front of her didn't look intimidated at all.

“Look, missy, I didn’t do anything wrong, I was just asking the kid if he was all right.” The man had a mix of authority and gentleness in his voice.

“Stop touching Elliott, moron, can’t you see he is terrified of you?” Christine fumed, her patience running thinner by the second.

The man looked at her, a pained expression in his light blue eyes. Running a hand through his thick, light-brown hair, the stranger stepped back, his attitude changed. The girl ran to help the blond get back on his feet, but couldn’t stop to feel sorry for the man who stood on the sidewalk, staring ahead of him.

“I’m all right, Christine, see? He didn’t harm me, didn’t even try to” Elliott’s voice calmed down his friend.

“Yes, honey, I am sorry for overreacting, but I thought... Did you get hurt?” The girl’s voice was filled with concern, and so was her expression.

“No, I am not hurt at all, not even a scratch” the blond lifted his head, offering his friend an assuring smile. The next moment, however, he lost stability and, if it weren’t for the man who ran and caught him, Elliott would have fallen again.

“Thank you, big guy” Christine sighed in relief, giving the stranger a much friendlier look. “And you,” she turned to her friend, “get back into the house. No work today, not when you are so dizzy...again.”

“But...” the blond raised his head, trying to protest, with no success whatsoever, as the girl managed to snatch his phone and speed dialed the number from the law firm where the young man worked.

“Hello, Christine Malone speaking, I’m calling on behalf of Elliott Spellmann. He can’t make it today because he is not well. Yes, a terrible headache and dizziness. Yes, I see, he will go to the hospital this time, I will take care of it personally. OK, thank you very much, I will let him know. Thank you for understanding and have a good day!”

All the time Christine talked on the phone, the stranger couldn’t take his eyes off of Elliott. He examined every inch of the blond’s face, making him lower his head. “*It’s impossible, yet the resemblance is remarkable,*” he said to himself. Careful not to scare the young man away, he got closer and closer.

“Your friend Christine is a lady you can’t mess with, and she is also hell-bent on protecting you. So I suggest doing as she said and get in the house. Judging by how pale you are, you’re most likely to get dizzy again. You could use me as support to get safely into the house. How about that?”

Elliott looked at the man talking to him, seriously considering rejecting his proposition, but his body decided otherwise. A new wave of dizziness made the blond lean on the light-brown haired guy, who protectively wrapped an arm

over his shoulders. After only a few steps, the stranger noticed that Elliott's legs were ready to give out again, so he took the blond in his arms bridal style, carrying him into the house.

“What do you think you are doing? Put him down this very second!” Christine yelled, her face red from anger.

“And let him fall to the ground? I don't think so,” the man replied in a calm voice. “Look, missy, you may say this is not my business, and you would probably be right, but your friend here has a serious health issue. I could recommend some very good neurologists and brain surgeons who could...”

“You are right, it is not your business,” Elliott suddenly said, plopping down on a chair in the kitchen. “Thank you for being so nice to me, but we'll take it from here. Now, if you don't mind, I would like you to leave.”

The man nodded. “I know the way, so no need to show me out. Have a nice day, both of you” he said, slightly bowing his head.

Later that day, after coming home from classes, Christine checked on Elliott, who was sound asleep. The girl sighed relieved, because it wouldn't have been a surprise for her to find the bed empty. It was not the first time the blond went to work behind her back, after initially calling in sick at her insistence.

While she got busy cooking a light dinner, the girl couldn't stop wondering what was wrong with her friend and

why he stubbornly refused to go to a hospital, although it was clear that he was sicker by the day. Even if he couldn't work, Christine thought, he could afford the costs of medical treatment, surgery included.

The girl had lived under the same roof with Elliott for about two years, but the blond was very much a mystery to her. All she knew about his past was that, when he was twelve, his entire family fell victim to a gang that had invaded their home, Elliott being the only survivor. That was possible only because the perpetrators took the kid and sold him into slavery. He had spent two harrowing years in a forced labor colony.

When the two of them met, Christine was at the end of her rope, unemployed and virtually homeless, as she preferred to live in run-down motels or on the streets rather than with her crazy, dysfunctional mess of a family.

All those morons of half-siblings and step-siblings who weren't capable of graduating high school ridiculed and mocked Christine for wanting to become a law student. Then she met Elliott, who had graduated Harvard with flying colors at the incredible age of eighteen and came to New York City, where he worked for one of the most important law firms in the entire country.

Ever since the beginning, the young man had generously shared everything he owned with the less fortunate

girl. His house, money, books and everything else became Christine's, too, all Elliott asked in return being to be left alone, not be bugged with questions about his past. Although the girl was dying of curiosity to find out more about her mysterious roommate, she respected his wishes.

Gradually, Christine started to notice that Elliott was very uncomfortable around large men and sometimes their presence even terrified him. The blond also spent countless hours working and studying, so he barely managed to sleep two or three hours a night.

The first time he got dizzy, about six months after Christine moved in with him, the girl strictly limited his working at home and studying program. Surprisingly enough, he accepted all her conditions. After a while, the situation repeated, and she found out that the blond had lied to her. To gain extra time for study and work, he left home one or two hours earlier.

When Christine asked him to explain his behavior, Elliott reminded her about the agreement they had. The young woman didn't insist anymore, but she became even more protective of him. Although she didn't doubt the negative impact the traumatic events of his childhood had on the blond's capacity to express his feelings, the young woman suspected that it was much more than that.

The beep of her phone made Christine flinch because she wasn't expecting any calls. As she checked her phone, a broad smile suddenly brightened her face because she recognized the caller's ID. It was Mallory Ashburn, Elliott's co-worker at Weldon, Somerset & Associates, and the only friend the blond had beside her.

"Hello, boyfriend!" Christine smirked, entirely convinced that the man on the other end of the line would sense it.

"Hello, girlfriend" the reply came in a slightly tense voice. "You are smirking again, am I right?"

"As always, my precious boyfriend. Did you call to ask about Elliott? Because I turned his phone off, so he wouldn't be disturbed.

"I thought you would, that is why I called you" the man's voice became tense again. "How is he?"

"For now, he is sleeping, and I don't intend to wake him up any time soon. Fortunately, everything else is normal. I mean no high fever or anything like the last time."

"That's great!" Mallory sighed, a heavy weight lifting from his chest. "That kid works too much, he needs to get a lot more sleep," he said worriedly.

"Look who's talking, the king of sleepless nights! You too need much more sleep, if you ask me" Christine replied, her voice also worried. "At this pace, the two of you will kick the bucket in less than a year" she added.

After a brief moment of silence, Mallory spoke, his voice resigned. “We are not in the same situation, girlfriend. Elliott is just a kid, while I am anything but a kid. He inherited a lot of money, while I am the sole breadwinner in my family. Speaking of, I have to go. My mother wants to speak to me. Take care of yourself, my sweet Christine!”

Putting the phone back on the counter, the girl felt her chest constricting in pain for the man she had just finished talking to. Mallory was gay, a deep in the closet one. The only people who knew about his sexual preferences were her and Elliott, the blond being in pretty much the same situation.

The big difference between the two young men was the family situation. The Ashburns, Mallory’s parents, were a couple of bigoted parasites who lived exclusively out of their elder son’s pocket. The poor guy worked day and night to pay the mortgage for the mansion-sized house they lived in, for his siblings’ fancy private schools, for their expensive cars and designer clothes.

Meanwhile, Mallory only had about a dozen shirts and three suits. With all the bonuses he got, the man couldn’t afford to get a nicer-looking car to impress his clients, so it was his lazier, but luckier co-workers who enjoyed the fruits of his hard work. A prisoner in the house he paid for every month, Mallory lived neglected and deprived of affection.

To make things even worse, his good-for-nothing parents suspected that something was not right with their son, so they had started pressuring him into dating wealthy heiresses. In their greed, the Ashburns didn't care about their own son's feelings. Their master plan was to force him into a loveless marriage.

That was when Elliott came up with the idea of Christine passing as Mallory's girlfriend, which she had gladly accepted. It was easy for the girl to pretend, especially since she cared very much about her roommate's co-worker. Deep down inside her soul, Christine wished she was together with Mallory, but she knew better than to make a move on him.

For a while, she hoped the two co-workers would form a couple but, although they got along exceptionally well, there was no spark, no sexual chemistry between the two of them. Both men planned to quit working at the law firm and open their own office instead, with Christine as their assistant, but before that, they had to work harder than ever to gain the money that would allow them to fulfill their dream.

The opportunity appeared sooner than any of them was expecting. Stark, Inc. and Bloom Enterprises, two of the greatest conglomerates of companies in the world, were looking for a law firm that could ensure exclusive legal representation for their U.S. subsidiaries. As usual, Elliott and Mallory didn't spare time or effort, and in the end, they

convinced the senior partners that they were the best for the job.

Christine sighed again. Winning the contract would land a bonus of around a quarter million dollars in each of the young men's accounts. For Mallory, it would be the ticket to freedom, as he intended to give sixty percent of it to his parents before leaving the house where he was so poorly treated and regarded as nothing more than a checkbook.

"Who was that, Christine?" Elliott's sleepy voice put a stop to the girl's wandering thoughts.

"What do you mean?" the young woman asked, carefully examining the young man's face. "He looks so much better," she thought.

"I heard you, speaking with someone, but maybe I was dreaming," the blond stretched his hands above his head, yawning.

"Oh, that!" Christine smiled, as she finally understood. "Mallory called and asked how you were doing."

But the blond wasn't listening to her anymore. Frowning, he picked up a rectangular piece of paper off of the floor, inspecting it on both sides. "Where did this come from?" Elliott gestured to the object, giving it to his roommate.

"I don't know, it's a business card, or at least it looks like one." Christine read the name on it, Eugene Brentano-Fenelli, but it didn't ring any bells to her. Turning the card

over to the back, she and Elliott stared at the few words written there: *Call whenever you need me.*

CHAPTER 2

Alastair Stark pushed aside the pile of documents, frustrated beyond limits. Reading through merge or sale contracts and other companies-related legal documents weren't exactly his favorite Saturday morning activities. The man let out a long sigh, thinking that, finally, in a few days, this responsibility would be taken off of his shoulders.

Helping Daniel with his corporation was Alastair's idea in the first place so he couldn't complain about it, but this kind of work tested his patience to no end, not to mention how it messed with his morning workout routine. However, Alastair was beyond grateful that Sylvester had insisted he should take those business law classes all those years ago.

Every time the former CIA director thought of his late husband, it was to remember the happy times they spent together. The first few years after Sylvester's death, the pain was too great, so the widower preferred to drown himself in work, pushing the memories of the two of them to the back of his mind.

About two years after his husband died, Alastair made a desperate attempt to put the past behind him, so he went head first into a relationship with a woman two decades his

junior. The man always knew he was bisexual and thought, by getting involved with a woman, he could get over the pain of losing Sylvester faster. But, instead of mending his heart, the new relationship had torn it into a million tiny pieces.

There wasn't anyone in his life after that, and somehow Alastair had started to get used to the idea. He even thought that it was better this way, as his work at the CIA and the position of Supreme Dragon left him with little to no time for anything else. He religiously followed a strict routine and considered himself too old to change his ways for someone else.

Then, when Alastair himself had almost given up any hope of finding his deceased nephew's lost son, he appeared out of the blue, turning the former Supreme Dragon's life upside down. The rebellious, short-tempered young man had taught him, the calm, composed adult some valuable lessons about loyalty, friendship, dedication, and love.

A small smile played on Alastair's lips, just like they did every time his thoughts wandered in that direction. Getting Daniel and Tarquin together was his idea, but not even he expected things to turn out as they did. According to the initial plan, the young Ballard should have got close enough to Fenelli's adoptive son so he could collect the DNA samples Alastair needed so he could prove the man's real identity.

Instead, Tarquin had hopelessly fallen in love with the target of his mission, his feelings being reciprocated from the start. Amazed, Alastair assisted to the incredible transformation of the two broken souls into two indestructible men, united by a love so strong that it could surpass even the most difficult obstacles.

One year had passed since the two of them were married, a few days after Tarquin's twenty-first birthday, a year after they'd met for the first time. The former CIA director couldn't think about that day without feeling a taste of bitterness on the tip of his tongue. It was, of course, because of Antonia Ballard, who had chosen to reject, again, her son's choices and decisions.

Alastair shook his head, suddenly saddened about the whole situation, as he couldn't understand how the woman could persist in her stubbornness and not see how happy Tarquin was with Daniel by his side. The former Supreme Dragon thought that the discussion he had with Antonia two years earlier would have made the woman understand her son better, to support and see him.

Tarquin's mother only agreed with Alastair so she could get him out of her hair, but she showed her true colors by declining the invitation to her son's wedding. Fortunately, her absence hadn't stolen anything from the beauty of the ceremony, on the contrary. The two men who had united their

destinies forever radiated love and happiness, everyone who had attended their wedding could see that.

For Alastair, the day his great-nephew got married was the first time in almost two decades that he felt the emptiness surrounding his existence. During the day, his busy schedule barely allowed him to catch his breath, but as soon as the work ended, he was alone in his enormous, luxurious penthouse, with no one to keep him company.

A few days earlier, however, something had happened, making the head of the Stark family question his sanity. While visiting one of the law offices he was considering for the exclusive representation of the numerous companies the Starks and Blooms owed, Alastair had crossed paths with someone who stirred in him all kind of feelings.

The former Dragons' House leader thought all the emotions he was experiencing had died when his beloved Sylvester passed away, and that he'd buried them deeply. It turned out he was wrong, because they resurfaced, mercilessly tormenting Alastair, who desperately tried to get that chance encounter out of his mind, with no success.

Instead, he was haunted by a pair of big, chocolate-brown, incredibly beautiful eyes and the sadness he saw in them. The possessor of those beautiful eyes had a well-proportioned body that begged him, with every fiber of his

being, to be held, hugged, explored, caressed and kissed all over.

Everything was perfect about the guy, except his age. By the way he looked, Alastair estimated him to be no more than thirty years old. He rolled his eyes at the thoughts invading his mind. What the hell could an old man like him, have to do with a guy young enough to be his son?

For goodness sake, Alastair, you fucking pervert, get a grip! You don't even know his name or what his sexual preferences are! Even if he was gay, he is most likely in a relationship, maybe even happily married. Stop thinking about him. You don't have anything to offer to anyone.

A noise coming from his laptop interrupted Alastair's mental self-scolding. He went back to the desk, taking a look at his mailbox. Indeed, he had received a new email from one of the law offices on his list, Weldon, Somerset & Associates. The former Supreme Dragon's heart started to pound faster in his chest, as he recognized the name. It was the firm where the man who had stolen the peace of his heart and mind worked.

Because of the great number of big and small law offices interested in offering their services, Alastair came up with an effective method of selecting the most competent. He had required them to develop a complete representation plan.

So far, all the projects he had received were good, but none of them succeeded in impressing him.

However, as soon as he started to read the email, Alastair knew he had a winner. The plan included all the problems the described situation could develop and presented multiple solutions in each case. Everything was detailed, no aspect was neglected, treated superficially or pushed aside.

Looking at the email, Alastair couldn't stop from asking himself how many sleepless nights the guys in that team spent developing a project of such complexity. The man wanted to know the names of those in charge of it. So he took a look at the bottom of the document. M. Ashburn and E. Spellmann were the only names that appeared there.

The former CIA director found it hard to believe that the simulated situation was the work of two minds alone. However, if that was the case, the guys were brilliant, with vast experience and numerous exclusive clients. Alastair groaned in frustration, wishing it was already Monday so he could meet M. Ashburn and E. Spellmann.

The man felt he couldn't wait any longer, so he picked up the phone, dialing the number of Weldon, Somerset & Associates. He wasn't the impulsive type, but lately, his reactions were surprising, even for him.

“Weldon, Somerset & Associates, good morning, how may we help you?” the pleasant voice of a woman greeted from the other end of the line.

“Good morning, Alastair Stark speaking, I would like to meet with Mister Weldon, Mister Somerset or any other available senior partner from your office as soon as possible.

After some moments of silence, the woman spoke again. “Mister Weldon is out of the city, but Mister Somerset will be available in two hours. Shall I make you an appointment then?”

“Yes, thank you very much,” Alastair said, relief obvious in his voice. “I would like to make it three hours from now. I would appreciate very much if you could do that” he changed his mind.

“Anything else I could help you with, sir?”

“Yes, there is one more thing. Could you give me please some contact info for M. Ashburn and E. Spellmann?” Alastair said in a slightly tense voice.

“Of course, sir, I will give you the business and personal cell phone numbers for each of them. Although...” the woman abruptly stopped.

“Is something wrong?” The former Supreme Dragon’s voice filled with concern.

The woman sighed audibly. “I am afraid there is,” she said sympathetically. “Elliott is currently hospitalized, and Mallory is most likely by his side. The poor kid has no one except him and Christine.”

There was something almost maternal in the woman's voice, something that made Alastair suspect that she knew much more about the two lawyers than she told him. The assistant, or whatever she was, had a professional attitude until Spellmann and Ashburn, or Elliott and Mallory, came into discussion. From then on, she had shown Alastair her protective side, and he knew, in an instant, the woman was a valuable ally and source of information.

"Mister Stark, are you still there?" the woman asked, worriedly

"Yes, I am still with you, ma'am. Sorry, I was carried away for a moment." Alastair apologized. "By any chance, do you know the name of the hospital where they took Elliott for treatment? I want to be of help," he continued.

"Of course I know. It's New York General Hospital because it's the closest from Elliott's house," the answer came promptly.

"Thank you very much. I appreciate your help, ma'am. I have something more to ask you if it isn't too much trouble." Alastair asked hesitantly.

"Something is telling me that I am going to like whatever you're going to ask me to do, so no, it's no trouble at all, Mister Stark. The name's Gloria, by the way."

"Miss Gloria, I would like you to reschedule my appointment with your bosses. The boys are my top priority right now."

“I had a feeling about you, Mister Stark, so I didn’t schedule an appointment. You are a nice guy, you know?” Alastair could sense the smile in the woman’s voice. “Promise me something, please,” she continued.

“Anything for such a nice lady, Miss Gloria,” the man also smiled while saying the words.

“After you sign the contract, please don’t make the boys work themselves to death. But if you must, at least give them credit for their work. Trust them, believe in them, support them, don’t break their wings.” The woman suddenly stopped talking.

“I will do exactly what you told me to do, Miss Gloria. I give you my word,” Alastair said solemnly.

And he intended to keep that promise, whatever it would involve, because, from what the assistant from the law firm told him, there was something very wrong with the way the two young lawyers, Mallory and Elliott, were treated.

The woman mentioned that Spellmann, the one with health problems, checked in to the New York General Hospital for tests, so the former Supreme Dragon decided to start from there. Picking up the phone, he speeds dialed Victoria Stuyvesant’s number, waiting for the doctor to answer. As expected, she did almost instantly.

“Hello, Victoria, Alastair Stark speaking. I would like to ask a favor. I know it’s Saturday and you are probably

home, relaxing in the company of Max and the boys, but it's kind of an emergency and..."

"Come on, Mister Stark, no trouble at all! Actually, Max took the kids out, so I am all by myself. How can I be of help?"

Alastair smiled to himself. He didn't have any doubt that Victoria would help him, that girl had a heart of gold. "Could you find out the current status of one of the patients at the hospital? I only know his name, Elliott Spellmann, I couldn't get more information to narrow down the search." the man said in a guilty voice.

"That's not much trouble at all. I think I can manage to find out the information you are interested in. Call me back in about ten minutes, please."

"I'll do that, thank you, dear," Alastair replied gratefully.

He made himself busy straightening things around the apartment, not that everything wasn't already neat and tidy. His military education and the almost two decades he spent in Sylvester's company had a substantial impact on the man, almost turning him into a neat freak. Finally, Alastair checked his watch and, seeing that nearly fifteen minutes had passed since he called Victoria, so he redialed her number.

"It's me again, dear, sorry for being so insistent, but did you manage to find out anything?"

“Perfect timing, Mister Stark, because I was about to call you. There is something very wrong with this whole story” Doctor Stuyvesant said in a concerned voice.

“What do you mean by *wrong*? How serious are Elliott’s health problems?” Alastair was starting to get worried. He couldn’t explain why, but he felt as if his nephews, and not some stranger, were in that situation.

Victoria inhaled sharply. “No one knows. The patient was brought into the hospital Thursday night, experiencing severe dizziness and headaches. He was accompanied by two people, a young woman in her early twenties and a man who appeared to be in his late twenties. They talked him into staying overnight, but that was it.”

“That was it...how? What do you want to say?” Confusion added to the intense worry Alastair experienced, the mixed feelings noticeable in his voice.

“On Friday morning, the patient asked to be discharged, insisting that he was fine. According to Mister Spellmann, the dizziness was a consequence of him not sleeping enough this week. He also refused to undergo any tests, in spite of his lady friend’s insistence.” Victoria sighed, frustrated about the whole situation.

“There is a thing I still don’t get,” Alastair said in a thoughtful voice, after some moments of silence. “If Elliott was in such bad shape, how could they discharge him just like that?”

“He twisted their arm into it, threatening to sue the hospital. The goddamn kid turned out to be a lawyer, a very seasoned one even. He called our legal counselors and spent

almost an hour talking to them. According to the members of the staff who assisted at the scene, your protege was a force of nature.”

As she spoke, Victoria became less and less frustrated, the feeling replaced with admiration for the young man’s actions. The criminal psychologist Alastair was, felt the change and that made him smile brightly. He was about to ask the doctor some more questions, hoping to find out more relevant details that could bring some light into the mysterious story, when the sound of the intercom put a stop to his intentions.

“Sorry, dear, I would like to talk to you more, but I have to go. The boys remembered their old uncle Alastair and decided to visit me,” he said, joy pouring from his voice.

“Go on and answer the door, Mister Stark, no need to apologize. Have fun with the little ones and don’t forget to tell Daniel and Tarquin I love them,” Victoria giggled into the phone.

“I will, darling. Goodbye, and thank you.”

After hanging up on Doctor Stuyvesant, Alastair pushed the intercom button. “Who is it?” he asked, knowing the answer in advance.

“Excuse me, Mister Stark, but one Vincent Grant is here, asking to see you. The man is quite persistent.” the concierge answered apologetically.

A wave of shock hit the former CIA director, sending chills along his spine. Vincent Grant. The man he was least expecting to see. “Send him up” the man spoke in an ice-cold voice.

CHAPTER 3

Although the sun had started to rise, pouring light and warmth from its shining rays, it was pitch black in the room. The thick curtains completely covered the windows, the only source of discreet light being the aromatic candles placed on the floor and on the two nightstands.

Daniel lay on the bed, wearing nothing but the oval agate Tarquin gave him eighteen months earlier, when the blond proposed, and the two rings he got from Alastair the same day. The raven-haired man's breath hitched slightly as he stared in awe at his husband.

Moving tortuously slow, undulating his hips and flexing the perfectly sculptured muscles of his torso, Daniel's wonderful husband removed the t-shirt and boxers he had worn the previous night. Then, completely naked, Tarquin climbed onto the bed, seductively crawling, until he was only inches away from Daniel.

"How do you want it this time, husband?" the blond whispered into the raven-haired man's ear in a husky voice.

"Like last time," he answered, making considerable effort to form the words. "I want you to take me while I lay on my back so that I can lose myself in your beautiful eyes."

Then, Daniel fell silent and, extending a hand, he delicately caressed Tarquin's eyes and the thick, long, silky lashes shadowing them.

"You know I will take care of you, don't you?" the blond whispered gently, following the contour of his husband's face with the pad of his index finger.

The raven-haired man nodded. "You always take care of me, I trust you with my life."

"Good." A smirk played on Tarquin's lips, spreading all over his face. Lowering his head, the blond started to kiss Daniel's chest, neck, and face, until he reached his husband's lips. With the skillful tip of his tongue, he parted them, demanding entrance, then he captured them in a heated, passionate kiss, while his tongue won the battle for dominance, tasting, exploring and conquering Daniel's mouth.

Breaking the kiss for one moment, Tarquin reached for the nightstand, taking the bottle of lube he'd placed there earlier. Then the blond resumed the kissing session even more passionately until both he and his husband ran out of air again. The feel of Tarquin's lips on his skin and mouth made Daniel whimper in need, already wanting to be taken by his beautiful, passionate husband.

Boring his sky blue eyes into the raven-haired man's dark blue, almost black ones, the blond gave him an assuring smile. Gently spreading Daniel's legs, Tarquin properly and

carefully prepared him, then coated his cock with lube, pushing inside his husband's hot, pulsating, welcoming hole. Knowing precisely what and how Daniel liked it, the blond started to tease the man, moving slowly inside him.

As soon as the raven-haired man started to moan, Tarquin sped up the pace, putting more force in his thrusts, heatedly caressing every inch of his husband's body. Meanwhile, the said husband returned the favor, delicately touching the blond's flawless skin until he reached his firm, hardened nipples, the most sensitive points on his wonderfully shaped body. Smirking, Daniel squeezed the two buds, making Tarquin jolt and tilt his head backward, eyes half closed.

In response, the young Ballard intensified the force of his thrusts, almost driving his husband over the edge. On the brink of orgasm himself, the blond took Daniel's cock in his hand, stroking it slowly at first, then, as the raven-haired man bucked, pushing his dick into Tarquin's fist, he increased the frequency of the strokes, understanding the message.

"Please, my love, bear with me a few more seconds," the blond asked his husband in a rough, pleading voice. "Let's come together."

Breathing erratically, Daniel didn't offer an answer, he just nodded. A few hard thrusts later, Tarquin came with a

loud, passion-filled moan. His husband followed him, releasing with a savage, victorious cry.

For a while, the two men just laid on their backs, in silence, lost in each other's eyes, basking in the post-orgasm euphoria. As usual, Daniel was the one who made the first move. Turning on one side, he propped up on an elbow, looking at his husband with adoration. The young Bloom lightly touched the blond's chest with the tips of his fingers, when Tarquin playfully slapped his hand, gently shoving it away.

“What was that for?” Daniel feigned surprise, although, judging by the wide grin on his face, the raven-haired man already knew the answer.

“Consider it a warning,” his husband answered, sporting an equally wide grin. “You cheated again, Bloom.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Ballard,” Daniel defended himself.

“The nipple thing. You did it again, taking me by surprise, although I told you not to” Tarquin explained, waiting for the other man to react. “And it's Ballard-*Bloom*, in case you forgot.”

“So, that's it, you didn't like me playing with these sweet, deliciously tasty pebbles?” the raven-haired man grinned again, giving a light squeeze to one of the blond's nipples. “That is why you moaned so loud,” he laughingly added.

Tarquin gave his husband a stern look. “You are in deep trouble, Mister Bloom,” he said huskily.

“Define deep trouble, Mister What’s-your-name” Daniel answered in the same manner.

“Payback, punishment, round two. No touching, no teasing.”

The expression on the blond’s face was one of fiery passion and the raven-haired man’s heart swelled with love at the sight of his lover. Without a word, he laid on his stomach, waiting for his husband to take the lead. Tarquin didn’t waste any time, and he prepared him and Daniel again, then pushed inside the bigger, older man in one go.

Tarquin gave Daniel some time to adjust, starting to pound his beloved husband’s ass mercilessly when he sensed the man was ready to take what he was giving to him. Gripping Daniel’s shoulder with one hand, Tarquin reached for the man’s dick with the other, stroking it with urgency. Encouraged by Daniel’s loud moans, the blond increased the rhythm and intensity of the thrusts, in an all-consuming act of lust, passion, and love.

Tarquin brought Daniel to the edge two times before finally allowing his release. When he came, the raven-haired man did it more intensely than the first time, soiling the sheets beneath him. The orgasm still washed over him, sending pleasurable shocks throughout his body, when, turning his

head to the other side, Daniel smiled widely at the image of Tarquin sprawled all over the bed.

“What are you looking at?” the blond mumbled, eyes half closed, feeling his husband’s gaze on him.

“At the beautiful man laying next to me,” the answer came in a love-filled voice. “Even now, after a year, I still can’t believe how lucky I am.”

The blond frowned a little. “What do you mean by that?”

Daniel caressed his husband’s soft, silky curls. “I am lucky to be married to the bravest, most intelligent, caring and beautiful man on the face of the Earth. I am the proud father of three sons, the greatest a father could wish for. I am the luckiest bastard in the whole world.”

Tears glistened in Tarquin’s eyes as he spoke. “You know, my love, not even a day passes without me thanking all the gods out there for sending you into my life. I couldn’t imagine how it would be without you. Don’t ever think about leaving my side, Daniel Bloom.”

“Don’t worry, you are stuck with me forever,” the raven-haired man smirked. Pulling his husband close, he wrapped his strong arms around him, enjoying the peace and comfort he felt in the blond’s presence.

The two men stayed like that for more than an hour, dozing off from time to time. The house was peaceful, the kids spending the night at Eugene’s, under the watchful eyes of

Aristarh and Mickey. The young Detroit Mafia boss adored his little adoptive nephews, showering them with affection, attention and all kind of presents.

The young boys loved their Uncle Eugene from the bottom of their little hearts and listened to him as if he was one of their fathers. Avid to learn new things as they were, the children listened, fascinated, to the stories the two bodyguards told them about their faraway native countries.

As for Eugene, he encouraged the boys' inclinations towards studying by turning one of the extra rooms in his house into a children's library. The hundreds of books on different subjects, interactive maps, and audio materials quenched the thirst of knowledge Emery Lochlin, and Gabriel possessed.

Surrounded by love and understanding, protected, cared for and listened to, the three young boys' minds developed spectacularly, making them act more mature and responsible than their age of six and twelve, respectively.

As for their fathers, the two of them had evolved spectacularly in the eighteen months that passed since they had proposed to each other. During that time, two events marked Tarquin and Daniel's lives, making them realize how much they'd changed themselves. One was Swinton's trial, set

between the marriage proposal and the wedding. The other one was the honeymoon they spent in Sabahaddin.

To spare his father the suffering and guilt, Tarquin avoided telling his parents about the horrible things he had experienced at the hands of the disgraced media tycoon. Using Alastair's influence and taking advantage of the fact that Eugene owned the most prestigious news channels in the country, Daniel managed to get his fiancé's name out of public attention.

However, for justice to be served, Tarquin still had to testify before the grand jury. It was then when his transformation became visible, making his friends and lover proud of him like never before. The blond did a great job in court, resisting the vicious attacks Swinton's lawyers unleashed on him.

He didn't crumble, didn't break down in tears, didn't show any sign of fear. Instead, the young man sat there, looking the monster straight in the eyes while telling his story in simple words, without leaving anything out or adding something to it. Tarquin's testimony was decisive to the course of the trial; it was what made the jury vote unanimously for Swinton's conviction.

From that experience, young Ballard emerged stronger, wiser and much more confident. Even if, because of the choice

he made, his father wasn't at his side, the blond felt the support and encouragement emanating from Liam, Elizabeth, Martin Cornelius and Eugene, the most loyal friends someone could wish for.

The day they got married was the most beautiful day of Daniel and Tarquin's life as a couple. Having Eugene and Liam at their sides as best men, the two lovers exchanged vows and rings, tightening the bond between them even more. That day, the two husbands looked in their beloved's eyes and saw their soul reflected there. But, instead of reserving the bright future both of them deserved so much, the Fates decided to put them to the test one more time.

While planning their wedding, the two lovers decided on Sabahaddin, the little, but rich and powerful emirate Tarquin's uncle ruled over as their honeymoon destination. After spending the first few days lost in each other's embrace, abandoning themselves to the delightful pleasures of the flesh, things went downhill at warp speed.

Daniel started pretending not to understand his husband's discreet signals when he was in the mood for some hot sex, so Tarquin became more evident in expressing his wishes. In the end, the young Bloom avoided the blond altogether. However, instead of being hurt by the constant rejection, Daniel's husband went directly to the root of the problem.

Tarquin's patience soon was rewarded, as the raven-haired man confessed that he felt unworthy of touching the blond, afraid that he would stain his flawless body. The young man was shocked by his husband's revelation, but he didn't show it. Gradually, after days and nights of discussions, Daniel finally decided to let it all out.

Eyes vacant, he told Tarquin about the memories of his horrible past that invaded his mind, torturing him night and day. Daniel recounted the abuse, the torture, the humiliation he suffered at the hands of Leonard and all the other beasts with human faces from that lab of horrors.

Daniel's confession shook his life partner to the core. He knew about the experiments, of course, but he hadn't any idea of the other terrifying things his beloved was put through by those savages. In the beginning, Tarquin felt lost, because, far away from home as they were, he had no one to turn to for advice. Then, the realization hit the young Ballard, so he took the first step on the long path of healing his husband's shattered soul and broken mind.

The two of them secretly traveled outside the walls of the royal palace, unaccompanied, to the holy dervish's small house. The wise old man welcomed them as if he knew about their visit and he started, without asking the young men anything, to tattoo the magic word on Daniel's chest.

As soon as the pair returned to New York City, taking advantage of his husband's absence, who was in Detroit, inspecting the House's branch there, Tarquin gathered his trusted friends and told them the whole story, asking for their help and support.

Elizabeth, who then worked as a profiler for the special team, was the first one who suggested they should switch their roles in the bedroom. She was sanctioned by Eugene, who seemed quite informed on the subject, much to the others' surprise.

When Daniel returned, Tarquin brought the subject up for discussion and was relieved when his husband agreed with the idea, without raising any objection. And so, the raven-haired man surrendered entirely to his blond guardian angel, who kept showing him how worthy of love he was.

Benefiting from Eugene's expert advice, Tarquin alternated sweet, passionate lovemaking sessions with intense, rough sex, Daniel responding wonderfully to the stimulation. From time to time, the blond let his husband take the lead, increasing his confidence and making their bond tighter and stronger.

And there they were, almost a year later, wrapped in each other's arms, the blankets pooling around their waists, as

the two men enjoyed the calmness around them. Daniel opened his eyes, smiling widely at the sight of Tarquin's head on his chest, the golden, rebellious curls covering almost all his torso.

The raven-haired man started to run his fingers through that silky hair when the beep of his phone stopped him. Careful not to wake up his husband, Daniel grabbed the phone, stepping out of the room and closing the door behind him. To the young Bloom's surprise, it was Alastair who was calling, quite unusual for the former Supreme Dragon, especially on a Saturday morning.

"Hi, great-uncle, how are you?" Daniel started the conversation, as relaxed as he could.

"Hello, my dear boy," the older man returned the greeting, his voice sounding strained. "I am sorry to interrupt your lazy Saturday" Alastair continued, apologetically.

"Don't worry. We were going to get up anyway. In fact, I spoke with Tarquin last night, and we intended to visit you today."

"Really?! I am glad to hear that, my boy," the former Supreme Dragon said in a more relaxed voice. "How are the kids?"

At the mentioning of his sons, Daniel's face brightened. "The three musketeers are at Eugene's. Later on, the gang will come here and then go out for the entire day.

God, great-uncle, those cousins of mine would spoil our kids rotten if we let them” the raven-haired man playfully groaned.

“Good. This way, you and Tarquin will be free all day. Could the two of you come to my place earlier than planned, please?” The tension in Alastair’s voice returned even more noticeable than before.

“Of course we can. What’s wrong, great-uncle?” Daniel started to worry.

“Thank you very much, son. See you soon,” the head of the Stark family ignored his great-nephew’s question, hanging up.

Daniel stared at the phone in his hand, not knowing what to think of the call that had just ended. Alastair was by his side for the last two years, supporting him through thick and thin, being his rock, a continuous source of wisdom and good advice. But now, the usually calm, collected man was an emotional mess. Daniel sighed heavily, wondering what could have happened this time.

CHAPTER 4

“I don’t know what to do with Elliott anymore, Mallory! Lately, he behaves so irrationally that he drives me to despair! You saw it yourself. Every time I want to know what’s wrong with him, he brings that damn agreement into the discussion. I can’t help him, but I can’t watch how my best friend is destroying himself, either! What do I do, boyfriend?”

Christine was desperate, exhausted and helpless. For the first time in her life, the girl was afraid, not for herself, but for the health, safety, and sanity of the one who was like an older brother to her. Elliott had locked himself behind a heavy door and thrown away the key. Up until two days earlier, he had managed to keep up the appearance of a normal life, but everything went downhill on Thursday.

That evening, his dizziness was so severe, that Christine and Mallory decided, over Elliott’s head, to take him to the hospital for an extensive, detailed examination. Overnight, thanks to the vitamin infusions he got, the young man’s state had improved spectacularly, so in the morning he insisted on being discharged. When the doctors refused, Elliott had shown everyone how good and convincing of a lawyer he could be.

“Relax, girlfriend, he will come around eventually. I know he will. Our friend is a hell of a fighter. He won’t give up that easy,” Mallory’s voice sounded convincing, as he took Christine’s hands in his.

“I would like to believe that, boyfriend, because otherwise...” The girl stared blankly ahead, her voice broken.

“Elliott is just extremely exhausted, he spent a lot of time researching the Stark-Bloom project, plus he was also behind many of the practical results.” Mallory sighed heavily. “Now, that I can think better, there is only one person responsible for the bad situation our friend landed in,” the young man added in a guilt-ridden voice.

“And that person would be...” Christine left the sentence unfinished, waiting for her fake boyfriend to complete it.

“Me. Elliott worked himself to the bone so I could get rewarded, he spent only God knows how many nights depriving himself of sleep to lift some of the financial burdens off my shoulders. It’s me. I’m the one pulling him down, the one who is not capable of doing more. My father is right, you know? All I do is complain while letting others do the hard work for me.” Mallory’s voice was bitter and full of self-loathing.

“No. Don’t do that to yourself, don’t let them win!” Christine almost yelled, flames of anger in her eyes. “That lazy ass father of yours, Benard the dick, and all the other bastards from the office, they just try to bring you down because they envy you.”

The young man didn't say anything, he just lightly squeezed the girl's hands, smiling sadly. She and the blond who locked himself in his room were Mallory's only friends, and he couldn't bear the thought of losing either of them. He had been a loner for as long as he could remember, but it was only then when the young man realized how empty his life was. As if she could have guessed his thoughts, Christine started to talk again.

"I know what the two of you need," the girl smirked. "Elizabeth told me a while ago, but I called her a twisted-minded freak. However, the more I think about it, the more I am convinced she was right."

"Elizabeth, like the mysterious girl you befriended out of the blue a while ago? The one you talk about all the time?" Mallory widely grinned, his mood suddenly brightened.

"Exactly. There isn't any mystery about Elizabeth, as she works as a profiler for the New York division of the FBI. She is extremely good at what she does, you know."

"I believe you, girlfriend. You are an extraordinary, brilliant, feisty young lady and you wouldn't befriend someone who is anything less. So, what do Elliott and I need, according to your good friend Elizabeth?" Mallory was interested in finding out.

"A man in your life," Christine's answer came almost instantly. "You need someone who will listen to you, a man you could come to whenever you feel tired, whom you could tell everything. Someone older, Elizabeth said."

Mallory shook his head, saddened. “With all due respect for your friend, she is wrong on that one. Older men prefer an experienced partner, one who could offer them pleasure. Not...a guy like me.” The young man slightly blushed when he said the last words.

Christine offered him a warm, sincere smile. “If you think that being a virgin is an obstacle in the way of your relationship with an older man, you are very wrong, boyfriend. It’s quite the opposite. In most cases, Elizabeth said, experienced men prefer the company of the less experienced lover.”

Mallory paid attention to what Christine was saying, a small smile playing on his sensual, rosy lips. The young lawyer remembered the sexy rusty-haired man he had crossed paths with a couple of weeks earlier in the main hall of the office. He was the embodiment of sophistication and elegance, every move of the man emanating confidence and power.

During the eight years he had worked for Weldon, Somerset & Associates, Mallory had met all kind of people, but never someone like that red-head. The young man suspected the older man came from a wealthy and influential family, had the best education, and gave orders as if he was born to do it, which he was.

The second their eyes met, Mallory knew he was lost. The older, rusty-haired man captured the young lawyer’s soul

in his beautiful dark-green eyes and took it with him when he left. Since then, the junior partner at Weldon, Somerset & Associates had his head invaded with thoughts of the man who had stolen his heart. However, he didn't expect his feelings would be reciprocated, because, most likely, the rusty-haired was happily married.

“Hey, boyfriend, your phone's ringing again!”

Lost in his thoughts, Mallory startled at the sound of Christine's voice. “See who it is and what they want,” he answered. The young man didn't have any energy to engage in a sterile discussion with his parents, who insisted he should marry some rich, older woman instead of wasting his time with Christine.

“You guys are the best! Congratulations!” The girl burst into the room, barely containing her enthusiasm. Running to Mallory, she planted a kiss on his cheek.

“What happened, girlfriend? Why are you so happy?” The young man smiled warmly, loving to see Christine coming back to her usual, bouncy self.

“Miss Gloria just called. Guess what?”

“What?” Mallory echoed the last part of the girl's question.

“A Mister Alastair Stark called. Initially, the guy wanted to schedule an appointment with the big bad bosses,

then he changed his mind. According to Miss Gloria, Mister Stark postponed the meeting until Monday, because he wanted you and Elliott to be present.”

“I am glad the firm got the contract, I am,” Mallory said, although his voice and the look in his eyes told an entirely different story.

“Boyfriend, you could be more enthusiastic. Isn’t it what you and Elliott worked your asses so hard for?” Christine was disappointed by the young man’s reaction.

“And we will get paid twenty-five thousand dollars each, while Richard Benard will have the money to buy that three hundred-thousand-dollar car he salivates so much for. He is Mrs. Weldon’s favorite nephew, Christine. No one could compete against that.” Sadness, bitterness, and resignation were mixed in Mallory’s voice, the young man suddenly looking and feeling very tired.

“Well, not this time,” Christine said in a flat tone.

“What do you mean?” her friend asked confused.

“Miss Gloria said this Alastair Stark guy seemed hell-bent on having the two of you in his boat. She also said he promised to give you credit for the entire project so Benard the dick can kiss the huge bonus goodbye.” The girl sported a huge grin of satisfaction on her pretty face.

In his room, with the curtains close, Elliott lay on the bed, hands folded under his head, staring blankly at the ceiling. He was exhausted, physically and mentally, tired of everything. Tired of hiding, of running away, of lying to his

friends, of pretending to be something he wasn't. Instead, he wanted to shout, to cry, to destroy everything. He felt like driving Christine and Mallory away for good.

No matter how hard he tried, Elliott couldn't find a reason to cling to the life he had, to keep his friends close. To do this, the young man would have to open up to them, but he couldn't take risks, not again. Last time he did that, he lost everything: sanity, self-esteem, the little bit of innocence he still had, dignity, control over his body.

Once the memories he fought so hard to suppress invaded his head, Elliott couldn't stop from remembering how he trusted that man so much, that he had told him his deepest buried secrets. And the man used those secrets to destroy Elliott bit by bit until almost nothing was left.

Drowning himself in his studies was the only way the then boy could cope with all the twisted mind games his therapist played, with the immense pain he inflicted on the fragile, already scarred body of his. The long hours he spent in the libraries and study halls, working on complicated individual or team projects were the breaths of fresh air Elliott needed before being pulled into the hell Carter had created just for him.

Two years earlier, when he escaped, the newly Harvard law school graduate was foolish enough to think it was for

good, but life proved to him again how stupid he was because the past came back to torment him once again. Elliott suspected that it was going to be even worse than before, and this time he had no will to fight back.

“Buddy, are you in there? Are you all right?” Mallory’s worried voice pulled the young man back from the swamp of his thoughts. “There is something we need to tell you, something that will make you happy,” his friend insisted.

Elliott couldn’t bring himself to drive Mallory and Christine away. Not yet, anyway. “Wait a moment,” he said, unlocking the door. “Now you may come in.”

At the sight of his friend, the other man felt a heart-wrenching pain, but somehow he managed to control his emotions. “The firm was chosen to represent Stark, Inc. and Bloom Enterprises exclusively. Christine just found out, Miss Gloria told her.

Suddenly, Elliott’s face brightened. He was happy for Mallory, who finally could be free from his parents. As for Christine, she would be a wealthy woman in her own right. “This calls for a celebration,” he said. “How about stuffing our faces with ice cream?”

“I just heard someone say the magic words ice cream, tell me I heard it right,” an unfamiliar girl’s voice said from somewhere in the house.

Elliott frowned, casting Mallory a questioning look, but the older man’s only response was a shrug. Both of them

headed to the living room, from where they suspected the voice had come from. To the young men's great surprise, Christine was in the company of a girl about her age, with fiery red hair and strikingly beautiful, dark green eyes.

At the sight of the unknown woman, Elliott took a step back. Mallory guessed his intention and, with a pleading look in his eyes, gently put a hand on the younger man's shoulder, stopping him. All this time, the girl carefully studied the two, without saying anything.

"Elliott, do you know who this young lady is?" Mallory asked with a knowing smirk, winking in Christine's direction.

"No. I take it you know, so be kind and tell me," the younger man answered in a slightly irritated voice.

"She is Elizabeth, Christine's friend. *That* Elizabeth," his friend informed him, whispering the last part into his ear.

"Really?" Elliott pretended to be enthusiastic, although he had no idea what or who Mallory was talking about. "Nice to finally meet you," he continued, reluctantly extending his hand.

"Likewise," the girl replied, shaking hands with the blond. "I never met a Harvard graduate as young as you," she continued. "I only graduated last year, to my eternal shame."

"You know what they say. It's never too late." Strangely enough, Elliott warmed up quickly to Christine's friend. There was something about Elizabeth that made him

feel safe and sheltered. “What are you specializing in, if I am not too nosy?”

“Not at all,” the answer came right away. “I am a criminal psychologist,” the girl smiled. “Add badass in front of it, and you have my cousin Liam’s description of my job.”

Elliott smiled at Elizabeth, a bright, genuine smile. Suddenly, an entire world of perspectives opened before him. Maybe, just maybe, he wasn’t alone after all. What if he could open up to Christine’s friend? She could help him overcome all his paralyzing fears, could help him defeat the demons of his troubled past.

A girl would have no interest in playing wicked mind games with him, Elliott thought. She wouldn’t feel any sick pleasure in physically and mentally crippling him, leaving him to almost bleed to death on the cold floor. Maybe he wouldn’t have to make the ultimate gesture to silence the voices in his head once and for all.

“I was about to take Christine and Mallory out for ice cream,” Elliott broke the comfortable silence in the room. “What about you, joining us, Elizabeth?” he offered sincerely.

“There is nothing I would like more,” the girl replied, regret obvious in her voice, “but I have already an appointment with the gang.”

“Oh, I understand,” Elliott sighed, trying hard to hide his disappointment. “The invitation stays open,” he offered.

“Wait a moment! What about you joining us?” Elizabeth asked, her beautiful green eyes shining brightly. “That way, you could meet the whole gang,” she continued, grinning knowingly.

“I don’t think that is a good idea. Elliott feels very uncomfortable among strangers, and he wasn’t in the best of places lately. Sorry to disappoint you, but...” Mallory fell silent, examining the younger man’s face

“On the contrary, I think it’s an excellent idea,” the one in question replied. “Thank you for being such a good friend,” he turned to his co-worker, “but I need a change. I could make an effort and be more relaxed around Elizabeth’s gang. They couldn’t be that bad, after all.”

“Not at all,” the red-haired girl assured him. “Well, except Liam, but he behaves when the little ones are around, so...”

After about half an hour, the four of them arrived at their destination, a cozy place with a homey feeling. The gang, as Elizabeth called her cousins, was already there, because someone waved in their direction.

“Oh, look, there they are! I can’t wait for you to meet each other,” the red-haired girl said in an excitement-filled voice.

“Finally, you convinced the famous Christine to come and meet us. Not to mention she brought her friends, too!” a

young man around Elizabeth's age exclaimed. He also had red hair and dark green eyes.

"This is my infamous cousin Liam," the girl said, amused. "Liam, this is Mallory and Elliott, Christine's best friends.

The group shook hands with the red-haired young man, then Elizabeth indicated another man, who waited patiently to introduce the three people accompanying her. "This one here is the most reliable cousin I could wish for, Martin Cornelius," the young woman dramatically gestured to him.

"Auntie Lilibeth! Auntie Lilibeth!" two high pitched voices called in sync.

"Emery! Lochlin!" the third worried voice warned to no avail, as two curly-haired, blond little boys of around six came running into Elizabeth's opened arms. A third boy, most likely a preteen, followed shortly after.

"Gentlemen and lady, I give you the three musketeers; Gabriel Bloom-Ballard, Emery Bloom-Ballard, and Lochlin Bloom-Ballard."

But Elliott wasn't paying attention to the kids, as in that very moment, a man stepped inside, heading straight to the little group. Eugene Brentano-Fenelli was there, and this time the blond couldn't chase him away.

CHAPTER 5

“Hello Alastair, long time no see,” the man said, stepping inside the apartment. “Or would you prefer Supreme Dragon? Director Stark? Which one should it be?”

“Whatever, Vincent, I don’t care what you call me. I’m not going to lie by saying that it’s a pleasure to meet you,” the red-haired man replied, closing the door behind his unexpected, unwelcomed guest.

“Keeping it short and sweet, as always,” Vincent replied. There was no trace of irony in his voice, only an immense sadness. “Don’t worry, I’m not here for pleasantries, either. If it was up to me, I could have easily spared you from my undesirable presence.”

As he sat in the comfortable, huge armchair next to the large window, Alastair examined his guest, with a curiosity he didn’t make any efforts to mask. Once very handsome, Vincent Grant looked much older than his forty-nine years, a mere shadow of the man who gave the Starks and the Blooms so hard a time nearly three decades earlier.

Suddenly, Alastair realized that he hadn’t offered the man a seat and he just stood there, in the middle of the room, with his head lowered, waiting for his host to permit him to speak. The former head of the CIA felt guilty, especially since Vincent didn’t seem to be in the best of shape.

“Do sit down,” Alastair gestured to one of the chairs on the other side of the desk. “You don’t look very well,” he continued after a short pause, trying to make his voice sound as sympathetic as he could.

“Thank you very much,” Vincent answered, sitting with a sigh of relief. “You shouldn’t worry about me. It will pass...eventually. I’ve been through much worse, but I am not here to remind you of it or to question your decisions.”

Alastair didn’t reply, lowering his head in shame. The pitiful condition of the man in front of him came as a result of his actions. It was the first and only time the then Supreme Dragon lost control over his emotions, letting anger and fury take control, and Vincent paid a high price for it.

Enraged by Daniel’s disappearance, he blamed the one obsessed with his nephew Sebastian, hunted him down like he was a rabid animal and ordered some CIA agents to torture him. For days, Vincent proclaimed his innocence, asking to be released, desperately pleading and begging for it, until Alastair finally let him go.

The two men had crossed paths one other time, at Vincent’s express request. He was hospitalized then, treating the wounds the overzealous agents had inflicted on him. When Alastair came into the hospital room, the other man gave him a piece of paper.

Looking at it, the red-haired man realized that it was Vincent's will and, without saying a single word, he tore it in small pieces, throwing them into the other man's face. Then, the Dragons' House leader turned his back and left, ignoring the voice that desperately called his name.

"I am very sorry," Vincent broke the heavy silence. "I know how uncomfortable this must be for you, but there isn't another way, I'm afraid."

"Well, since you came all the way here, I'll see what I can do for you." Guilt overwhelmed Alastair, and he could barely stand to look at the man in front of him.

"I need your permission to speak to Sebastian one last time. In your and Joraan's presence, no tricks, no nothing. I have nothing to hide. Ten minutes, no more. Please!" Vincent's voice sounded desperate, in spite of his efforts to hide it.

Saddened, Alastair shook his head. "I'm afraid this is not possible. Sebastian and Joraan died eleven years ago, in a plane crash."

"You hate me that much, Stark? Even now, after all these years?! I should have expected it, you are not the forgiving type, are you? But to tell me something like that only to keep me away from Sebastian..." Vincent hadn't raised his voice. There was no bitterness in it, only disappointment and disbelief.

“Listen, Grant. I am sorry for what I’ve put you through, for what you’ve had to endure all these years. I wish I could turn back the time, I wish everything could have been different, but it doesn’t work that way.”

“I see. There is a lot more for me to pay for, isn’t there? Are you not done with me yet? What do I have to do? Kneel at your feet, kiss your shoes, crawl in front of you? Because I am ready to do all of this and more.” The man’s voice was more and more desperate, Alastair almost feeling his pain himself.

“Listen, Vincent. I am not lying to you. Sebastian and Joraan are dead. It took a long time for me to accept the harsh reality, but I have finally come to terms with it. As hard as it is, I think you should do the same.”

Alastair left his seat and, getting in front of the other man, put his hands on both of Vincent’s shoulders, then waited patiently for the realization to hit him. The younger man flinched a little under his host’s touch, but he did nothing to remove his hands. After a while, lifting his head, Vincent met Alastair’s gaze.

“You know, Stark, if you would have read my will instead of tearing it up, all those years ago, you could have spared both of us of all this, but you couldn’t help it. You had to show me once more how much you despised me.”

“Vincent, don’t do this to yourself, please! I am immensely sorry for everything. I came to understand a lot of

things after the boys passed away. All the mistakes I've made, all the bad decisions I've made... the past still haunts me, in spite of my efforts to straighten things up."

"When you tore up my will...there was also a confession there. I confessed the only crime I committed. It's not about loving Sebastian, although that was an unforgivable crime, at least in your eyes. No. I killed that Edward MacAllister bastard."

"What?! Why would you do such a horrible thing?" Alastair was utterly shocked. So, he was right all the time. Vincent Grant was a twisted, sick bastard after all.

"Horrible thing?! Should I have stayed with my arms crossed, watching how Sebastian was dying a little more each day because of the cruel treatment that soulless bastard subjected him to? Should I have ignored his cries for help like you did countless times?"

Vincent's voice was passionate, he had sparks in his eyes, but an incredibly pained expression on his face. For the first time in a very long time, Alastair was questioning his beliefs and actions. What if the man in front of him had really loved Sebastian, and he wasn't just irrationally obsessed with the younger man?

For once, the former head of the Dragons' House, decided to let Vincent speak. Alastair wouldn't interrupt him or even assume the worst as he'd done so many times, in the past. He owed him that much.

“Why did Sebastian need help? What problems did he have and what did Edward have to do with all of that?”

“That fucked up bastard was the problem! Your nephew was terrified of him, but he had no one to turn to! The poor kid put on a happy face every time he was around you because the union between him and that monster was everything you dreamed about! He was sixteen when you threw him into MacAllister’s arms. Sixteen, Alastair!”

“But Sebastian loved Edward, he was madly in love with him, I saw it in his eyes, they shone so brightly, so... I don’t understand!”

“Because you were too busy playing the savior of the world, you chose to turn a blind eye to everything that didn’t serve your purpose. Indeed, Sebastian loved the fucker with everything he had. The kid couldn’t believe how lucky he was to be the sophisticated aristocrat’s center of attention. He continued to love MacAllister long after that bastard started to become verbally and physically abusive”. Vincent’s voice broke, his eyes went dull.

“What happened then? What made you kill Edward?” Deep down inside, Alastair suspected the answer, but he wanted it confirmed by the other man.

“One day, almost four weeks before the wedding, Sebastian came to my place, looking very distressed. I waited for him to calm down, then asked him what had happened.” Vincent closed his eyes, inhaling sharply. “The bastard broke his promise. He didn’t wait for the kid to turn eighteen, as he

promised you. The night before, he'd ripped from Sebastian what was his to give away.”

“Are you saying that Edward...raped my nephew?” Alastair asked, brokenhearted.

But Vincent didn't answer. He just sat there, eyes closed, head tilted back, tears running down his pale cheeks. For the man, that day, when he held the love of his life, trying to comfort him, was very much alive. Even then, after more than three decades, Vincent recalled every detail of it and he felt no remorse for taking that bastard's life. The man gathered his strength because the hardest part was yet to follow.

“No, he didn't. Not in the strictest sense of the word, anyway. The fucker barged into Sebastian's room, drunk and carrying a knife. He ordered his fiancée to get naked and, when the kid refused, he brought the knife into the discussion. Sebastian had no choice but to submit, MacAllister taking him brutally and repeatedly.”

“Goddamn son of a bitch! How dared he to do something like that to an innocent kid with no sexual experience whatsoever? Why didn't Sebastian come to me, why didn't he tell me? I would have...” Alastair sensed the anger rising inside him, but Vincent cut him short in his flat voice.

“You dismissed him, like you did so many times before. Don't lie to yourself, Stark, you didn't care about that boy, none of you did. For all the Starks and Blooms with an

unstained reputation, Sebastian was a disgrace, the kid who got arrested and served a year in a juvenile detention center for drug possession. Never mind that the boy was framed, in your eyes he was a criminal.” Tired all of a sudden, Vincent fell silent.

“I am sorry for all the times I screwed up so goddamn badly,” Alastair started, repentantly. “I regret immensely that I let the prejudices blind me, that I destroyed what you and Sebastian had, making my nephew fear you. Some two years ago, I finally realized what an asshole I’ve been all this time. Someone put me in my place.”

Vincent looked at Alastair, a small smile playing on his pale lips. “I am happy you found someone who could love you as you deserve. For me, Sebastian was the one and only, I put his happiness above all my needs.”

The redhead studied his guest, a thought crossing his mind, making him imperceptibly flinch. Alastair started recalling how Sebastian had started dating Joraan only two months after Edward’s death and how, soon after the two of them officially became a couple, Vincent completely disappeared from the picture. The Supreme Dragon gasped at the realization.

“Tell me, Grant, Sebastian, and Joraan... you brought them together, didn’t you?” Alastair asked, curiosity dripping from his voice with every word he spoke.

“I’ll tell you, but I also want to know something. What is the name of the man who put you in your place?” Vincent smirked.

“Of course, I have nothing to hide, and his name is Daniel, the current Supreme Dragon and one of the best hostage negotiators in the country. He is a force of nature, nothing and nobody could stay between him and the things he wants to achieve.”

“He seems to be a remarkable man, indeed,” Vincent gave Alastair a melancholic smile. “Don’t let him go, Stark, don’t drive him away. As for Sebastian and Joraan...they were two lonely souls who needed each other and they found one another at the perfect moment.”

“Thanks for the advice, Grant, I will take care of Daniel, at least as much as he allows me to. You know, in some aspects, he is just like his father, while in others, the two of them are very different. Anyway, the resemblance is remarkable,” Alastair said affectionately.

“I don’t think I had the pleasure of knowing Daniel’s father,” Vincent replied, then he realized. “Sebastian’s son? The one who disappeared without a trace fourteen years ago... you are talking about him, aren’t you?”

Alastair smiled so brightly that the entire room seemed to lighten. “Yes, the Daniel I am talking about is none other than the long-lost son of my nephew Sebastian.”

“How... how did you find him? When did he come back? Was it before or after...”

Vincent stopped the questions flowing like a torrent from his lips, unable to continue. He wasn't ready to admit the harsh reality of his beloved's death. Knowing him safe and happy in another man's arms was one thing. Vincent could live and had lived with that for more than twenty-eight years.

But finding out that the one he loved so hard was no longer among the living was more than the man could endure. And yet, he had to be strong, at least for a while, to make sure everything would be all right for the one he cared for and protected over the last sixteen years.

"Alastair, what is Daniel like? Please tell me about him. I want to know everything about him. Don't ask me anything right now; everything will make sense at the end, I promise." Vincent looked pleadingly into the other man dark green eyes, waiting for his reaction.

"Well, there are so many things I could tell you about Daniel, that the rest of our lives wouldn't be enough for me to finish, I'm afraid," Alastair answered in a slightly amused tone. "He is wise, loyal, a trusted friend, a loving husband, a dutiful son and nephew, brilliant, a caring, affectionate father, a supportive teammate..."

"Perfection, just like his father," Vincent said in a melancholic voice. "Sebastian and Joraan would have been very proud of him, I bet my life on it," he added convincingly.

Alastair sighed heavily. "You are right on that one, Grant. During the time he was missing, the poor kid endured

hell at the hands of some cruel, twisted-minded monsters. Late at night, when I have trouble sleeping, I often wonder how he managed to survive.”

Vincent was enraged at the idea that someone could mistreat his beloved’s only child. “What did the bastards do to him? Stark, tell me that they suffered thousand times more!”

The cold, twisted, cruel smile forming on Alastair’s lips calmed down the other man, letting him know that justice was served. “Those responsible for Daniel’s sufferings paid dearly for their crimes, he made sure of that himself. You killed Edward for abusing poor Sebastian. His son wasn’t as generous. He let his tormentors live.”

The look on Vincent Grant’s face was completely relaxed and serene. In the beginning, the man dreaded coming to Alastair, but now he could see how much of an inspired decision that was. He needed to find out some more things before revealing to his host the real reason for him being there.

“Does Daniel like kids? You mentioned earlier that he is a father of three. Are they adopted or did he use a surrogate mother, as his dads did?” Vincent fell silent, patiently waiting for the explanations.

“Gabriel, the oldest, is his biological son and the twins are Tarquin, Daniel’s husband’s, biological children. Anyway, they don’t show any difference between the kids, loving all three of them from the bottom of their hearts.” Alastair’s voice was soft and gentle when he spoke about the young boys.

“So, coming here wasn’t a bad thing, after all. Daniel is, according to you, a protective, loving man. I think he would welcome Hayden with open arms.”

“He sure would.” The same gentle smile played on Alastair’s lips when he asked. “Who is Hayden? Is he your son?”

“No, he isn’t, although I wish he could have been,” Vincent replied, saddened. “He is Daniel’s younger brother. Sebastian’s son.”

CHAPTER 6

“What?!” Alastair couldn’t believe what Vincent had just said. There was no way his nephew would have cheated on his husband, the two of them loved each other too much. “No,” he said, “you must be mistaken, Daniel was the only child of his fathers.”

Vincent raised his head, looking his host straight in the eyes. “The only one you and everyone else knew about, yes. Not a living soul, except his mother and me, was aware of Hayden’s existence.”

“How did you managed to get your hands on...” For some reason, Alastair was embarrassed, so he left the sentence unfinished.

“As usual, by stealing it. Back then, I hadn’t given up my ways completely. I promised Sebastian I would, but since the two of us didn’t end up together, I saw no reason to change my lifestyle. So, I planted someone inside the sperm bank and, at the right moment, the guy did the job for me.”

“What about the mother? How did you get in touch with her? What was she like? What did she do for a living? Where is she now?” This time, Alastair didn’t stop in the middle of the sentence. If Vincent was telling the truth, and the former head of CIA had every reason to believe he was, then the redhead wanted to know everything.

“Shannon was a sweet, doe-eyed girl, who loved children and desperately wanted to have one of her own. The bastard she was with beat her once so severely, that she

miscarried. However, she was still able to carry a pregnancy to full term, so I made all the necessary arrangements. When Shannon was six weeks pregnant, I took care of that scumbag; he became another dead body in an alley no one gave a flying fuck about.” Vincent had a cruel expression on his face while saying the last words.

“What happened next?” In light of all the things he found out from and about his guest, Alastair didn’t judge the man anymore, he understood the reasons behind his actions. He was waiting impatiently for the rest of the story.

But Vincent wasn’t in a hurry anymore. Now, that Hayden’s future was secure, he could stall a few more minutes. It was his way of making Stark want to know more about this great-nephew of his. Also, he intended to find out more about Daniel before deciding who of the two men he would appoint as his beloved godson’s guardian. And there was, of course, Arnett.

Finally, Vincent broke the silence, smiling brightly. “The day Hayden came into the world was the happiest of my entire life, the day that marked a turning point in my life. The three of us were happy, we had each other, and it was enough. Shannon had a good job, and I’d started a small business, life was good. But then, Daniel was kidnapped, and everything went downhill again.”

“When the agents brought you to me, why didn’t you mentioned anything about Hayden’s existence? You could

have spared yourself from a lot of trouble and pain...” Alastair’s voice filled with guilt and regret.

“Don’t do this, Stark! It was nothing, just a couple of broken bones that healed quite nicely in the end. Anyway, a thousand times better than losing the last little piece of Sebastian I had, because, as soon as I’d have mentioned anything, you would have taken him from me.”

“If you lost everything you had, how did Hayden and his mother make it?” As soon as he asked the question, Alastair deeply regretted, because he knew it offended Vincent.

“Who said I lost everything? Who said Shannon and Hayden lacked financial support? I did everything in my power for them to have what they needed and more. I worked myself to the bones, spent my days and nights calculating risk margins and other stock market shit to make sure Hayden had the best of everything.”

“You were a stockbroker? Is that how you made money?” Alastair never saw Vincent as more than a stupid, disrespectful, uneducated troublemaker, someone who was obsessed with his nephew to the point of kidnapping him. To think that he had studied hard enough to get a degree in finances or business was inconceivable at the time. But yet again, the man was a never-ending source of surprises.

Vincent nodded. “At the time I kidnapped Sebastian, I was already enrolled in a study program specially developed to help former juvenile convicts. Before I could realize, I was sucked up in the world of stock market transactions, and I’d decided to make a name in the field. By the way, here is my

business card.” The man mysteriously smiled as he offered Alastair the rectangular piece of paper.

“Thank you, but I am afraid I don’t need the kind of services you provide. I don’t trust the stock market anymore. It’s too unpredictable, too volatile. Some years ago, we were at the point of losing almost everything we had invested. Fortunately, someone stepped in, helping us to recover all our investments. He was the best in the country, a man with a solid reputation. Who backed us up and fought for us.” Recalling how close to a financial ruin the Stark and Bloom families were, Alastair felt cold shivers down his spine.

“You never know,” Vincent smiled, as mysteriously as earlier. “Anyway, back to the point. A week ago, Shannon died. Someone killed her. Shot her to death.” The next second, the man’s look went dull, his lips tightly sealed.

“Who would do such a terrible thing? Was it one of your former associates, someone from your past?” Alastair was shocked by the revelation. He couldn’t imagine why someone would want an inoffensive woman dead.

“Blaming me, as always. I guess some things never change, huh?” Vincent’s voice was defeated and sad. “No, it wasn’t someone from my previous life, that was the first thing I’d checked. Whoever wanted Shannon dead made sure she couldn’t escape her fate. They sent ten hitmen after her.”

“Ten assassins against one defenseless, unarmed woman? Who could have hated her that much?” Alastair tried desperately to overcome the shock he still experienced after finding out about the tragedy his great-nephew’s mother had fallen victim to.

“I don’t know, but I am going to find out. That is why I thought of placing Hayden in your care. You should stay out of this, Stark, it’s my business and mine alone. Instead, make sure the kid is safe and well cared for.” Vincent’s voice had an edge of cold warning, and so did the look in his eyes.

“Don’t worry about it, Grant, Daniel and Tarquin will welcome Hayden and love him unconditionally. Besides, he will also have the three musketeers to keep him company. Alastair smiled brightly. “They would be thrilled at the idea of having an older brother.”

Vincent checked his watch, surprised to see how fast time had gone by. Since the initial plan had suffered considerable changes, he was ready for the next move. Grant didn’t have any doubts about Alastair agreeing with his request, but he was nervous about the impending meeting with Hayden’s older brother and his husband.

“Alastair, I would like you to arrange a meeting between me, Daniel and the young man he is married to, as soon as possible. Preferably today, in the next hour or so.” the tone Vincent used showed how determined the man was to get what he wanted.

“I’ll see what I can do about that,” the former leader of the Dragons’ House nodded in approval. “You see, Grant, Daniel knows me as a man who sticks to his routine, and I can’t anticipate his reaction to this sudden change. He might panic and suspect the worse, so consider yourself warned.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I don’t care what happens to me? On the other hand, if you deceive me only to get your hands on Hayden and then break his spirit, as

you almost did to his poor father...So help me, I will come for you, hunt you down one by one and destroy you, so consider yourself warned.”

“Calm down, Vincent, none of that will happen, because I’ve learned my lesson the hard way. Let me call Daniel, and then we will speak some more. There are still a few things I would like to know.”

“Okay. I will continue to trust you. It’s the best option I have. Go, call your nephew, I won’t listen to your conversation; privacy is a word I know the meaning of. In the meantime, I am going to get in touch with the friend in whose care I temporarily placed Hayden.”

Alastair gestured to one of the two guest bedrooms. “Perfect. You can use this room to talk over the phone with your friend, while I’ll call Daniel.”

Two minutes were more than enough for Vincent to exchange a few sentences with his most loyal, trusted friend. When the call ended, the man wiped his face with one of his hands, letting out a heavy sigh. There was, of course, the other thing, but he couldn’t ask Alastair to take care of it for him. That was his responsibility.

“I just finished talking to Daniel, he and Tarquin will be here in no more than half an hour. Did you managed to sort things out or do you need some more time?” Alastair spoke from somewhere in the house.

“No, thank you, I ended the call some minutes ago, but I waited for you to finish as well. You said something about wanting to know things about Hayden, can you be more specific?” Vincent was ready to offer an honest answer to anything Alastair might ask him, and the other man sensed that.

“What does the kid know about his fathers? How did you justify their absence from his life?” Even from the beginning of Vincent’s story, the former head of the CIA was curious to find out the answer to this question.

“Once Shannon got through the early stages of the pregnancy without any complications, we started working on a background story for when the child would want to know more. He grew up knowing that his daddies were two very well trained, brave soldiers, who took part in long, dangerous missions far away from home. When Daniel was kidnapped, we added this detail to the story.”

“What is the kid like? What are his hobbies? What does he plan to do once he grows up?” Sensing that Vincent was becoming a little tense, Alastair cut himself short. After a brief moment of silence, he decided to make things clear. “I’m not asking all these questions to manipulate Hayden later, forcing him to be something he doesn’t want to be. I want to know everything there is to know about him.”

Vincent let out a sigh of relief, visibly relaxing.” Just like his father, the kid is a loner, with no close friends, except one person, who...but that is not important. He oscillates between becoming a doctor and making a name as a psychologist. Some reputable universities, including NYU,

sent him letters of acceptance, but I think he would like to take a break, for now at least.”

Alastair was delighted, his eyes shining with pride at the thought that Sebastian’s younger son was to become a college student at only seventeen. He also couldn’t stop from admiring the dedication of the man who, together with the kid’s mother, raised him so well. Stark was about to ask another set of questions, when the door almost flew open, Daniel and Tarquin stepping inside hurriedly.

“Great-uncle, what is wrong, what made you change plans, calling us earlier?” The raven-haired man made no efforts to hide his concern.

Heading to him, Alastair pulled the said man into a tight hug, kissing his forehead. “Don’t worry, dear boy, nothing is wrong, on the contrary, I...”

“Sorry for abruptly interrupting you, sir, but I don’t buy it, and neither does Tarquin. Something’s wrong, I sense it, you never... Wait, who is this?” Daniel asked suddenly, his eyes landing on Vincent.

The man blinked a few times then, when no one noticed, pinched his palm as hard as he could, to convince himself he wasn’t dreaming. The older son of his beloved Sebastian stood there, in front of him, the spitting image of his father. “Hello, Daniel, ‘I’m happy to finally meet you.”

“My boy, do you remember when I told you about your dad, I mentioned the name Vincent Grant?”

“Yes, you told me it was that guy who kept dad safe in the juvenile detention center, the one who took care of him.” Daniel inhaled sharply, realization hitting him. “Sir, are you Mister Grant?” he spoke to Vincent, tears in his eyes.

But the other man wasn't able to speak. Instead, he wrapped his arms around the young Bloom, squeezing him to his chest, inhaling his scent. “Sebastian would be proud of you,” he whispered.

Daniel was overwhelmed with emotions. Ever since Alastair told him about Vincent, he wanted to know the man, to thank him for everything he had done. However, his great-uncle explained to him that Grant had cut all ties with Sebastian, no one hearing anything from him, ever since. And yet, he was back.

“Mister Grant, let me proudly introduce you to my husband and better half, Tarquin Ballard, a man like no other and the best, most loving father.” Daniel's eyes shone with love and pride as he spoke.

“I am thrilled to meet you, Tarquin, I've heard great things about you. Alastair told me you have three kids of your own. I hope you don't mind taking in another one,” Vincent offered the pair a shy smile.

The blond smiled back. “Of course not, Mister Grant! Children are blessings in disguise, Daniel and I won't turn down an offer to enlarge our family.”

“I am delighted that I decided to come here, Alastair,” Vincent turned to the older man, “Tarquin here just convinced me he and his husband could offer Hayden the love he so much needs.”

“Whoever he is, the kid would be well taken care of and showered with love, my cousins excel at this job. They make great nannies, too,” Daniel smirked. “By the way, is he also part of the family, great-uncle?”

“Yes, dear boy, he is. You, Tarquin and your children are the closest relatives Hayden has. He is your brother, Sebastian’s younger son.”

“What?! It can’t be, they were never unfaithful to one another, you said it yourself, sir.” All the light in Daniel’s eyes was gone, replaced with sadness, pain, and disbelief. He was about to continue when the sound of the intercom put an end to his intention.

“Send him in,” Alastair said, pushing the button.

After a short while, the door opened again, discreetly this time, and the kid shyly entered the apartment. Visibly intimidated by the three unknown men in the living room, he stopped in his tracks, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. The boy just stood there, unsure of what they expected of him. With his mother dead and his only real friend laying on a hospital bed, he felt abandoned and forsaken.

One of the younger men, black-haired, just like him, headed to the boy, engulfing him in a warm hug. “Nice to meet

you, little brother, welcome home. I am Daniel and meeting you makes me incredibly happy and sad at the same time. I'm very sorry for everything," the man said, looking the kid in the eyes.

"Nice to meet you, too," the boy whispered, extending his hand. "My name is Hayden." Then, looking around the room, he asked, visibly disappointed and confused. "Are our fathers not here yet? Did they miss the plane?"

"Our fathers are no longer with us, I'm afraid," the blond man spoke. "They passed away nine years ago."

Hayden's expression was vacant, his eyes dull. Without saying a single word, he headed to the door. Hand on the doorknob, the kid faced the room, speaking to no one in particular. "I don't belong here, then. My place is next to Arnett."

"Good." Daniel's voice stopped Hayden in his track. "Because I don't care who this guy is. He could be the greatest criminal of all times. As long as he is your friend, this Arnett fellow will live with us, too."

CHAPTER 7

Elliott watched helplessly as Eugene Brentano-Fenelli got closer and closer to the table their small group gathered around. The blond wanted to get up and leave, but he knew that his hastened action would have worried Christine and Mallory very much. Besides, he couldn't risk making a scene in front of the girl's friend and her cousins.

So Elliott did what he learned to do so well six years earlier. He froze on the spot, held his breath and prayed not to be noticed by the man. *“Just a little more, he wouldn't stay so long, is here to say hello. You don't have to speak to him. He doesn't have anything to do with you.”* The young man inhaled sharply, closing his eyes and pressing his shoulder into Christine's.

“Hello everyone, sorry I'm late, some last minute business to take care of,” Eugene spoke in a pleasant, warm voice. “Of course, those three adorable nephews of mine took advantage of it and twisted poor Mickey's arm in bringing them here without me.”

“I pity him from the bottom of my heart,” the young man Elizabeth introduced as Liam said, rolling his eyes. “With all his seven feet and three hundred pounds, he is putty in the little ones' hands.”

“We are not that bad, Uncle Liam! And we are not little, either!” a child's voice protested energetically. “Tell him, please!”

Elliott flinched violently, as he realized one of the blond young boys was lightly pulling at the sleeve of his shirt, making him the center of everyone's attention. "You are not bad at all," the blond mechanically said the words, speaking to no one in particular. Then he started to caress the child's golden locks absently.

"Lochlin, that wasn't nice of you at all! What did I tell you about not disturbing people with your antics? Prove that you are a good boy by apologizing to auntie Lilibeth's friend," the older boy, a black-haired, said in an affectionate, yet somehow stern voice.

The younger boy nodded. "I am sincerely apologizing, sir, it won't happen again." He looked at the blond young man with his big, beautiful, bright blue eyes.

"It's Lochlin, right? No harm done, little one, it was my fault, I guess I became lost in my thoughts. And I should also apologize for calling you little when you aren't." Elliott took the child in his arms, placing him in his lap. "Here you go."

"Sir, can I... um... would you like to take me in your lap, too?" a small voice whispered from somewhere behind the blond young man.

"Sure, here you go," he said, gently smiling to the shy little boy appearing in front of him. "Take a seat, handsome young man. You and your brother make an adorable pair."

"I am Emery," the child whispered into the blond lawyer's ear.

"I am Elliott," the answer came in a soft, low voice.

All this time, Eugene cast discrete glances in the blond's direction, trying hard to remember where he'd see the delicate, vulnerable man who was so good with children and so shy around grown-ups. The pain in those beautiful blue eyes was overwhelming and, strangely enough, Eugene could relate to it, he could almost feel it.

“Look at the two, how quiet they are all of a sudden! You would be a hell of a good father, Elliott. I'd bet all my money on it,” Liam exclaimed, letting out a low whistle.

“My cousin is right,” Martin Cornelius also joined the discussion. “I can picture you surrounded by kids, once you find the other half of you. I don't have any doubt that you will meet them, sooner or later.”

“Thank you very much, both of you, but I don't think I will ever...” Elliott abruptly stopped, then, after a short while, he continued. “I am too busy with my work and everything in between. Dating is not a priority for me. Besides, the law office where I work is known as having zero tolerance for... sexual minorities, so...”

“Screw them, then, quit and get a job elsewhere! No one should tell you who to love and who not!” Liam's green eyes darkened even more, his face red with anger. “I just can't stand those kinds of bloody hypocrites!”

Elliott smiled sadly. “I am in a very complicated situation. I was recommended for the job here by my family's

lawyer back in Boston. Since my parents passed away, he was like a father to me. I can't disappoint him like that."

The blond lowered his head, afraid that the others would see what he was hiding, the lies he had told so many times, that he came to believe them himself. No one should know the truth, not even Mallory and Christine. Still, Elliott felt inexplicably safe around Elizabeth and her cousins, especially Martin Cornelius, whose presence calmed him. If it weren't for Eugene Brentano-Fenelli, he would enjoy his time.

As if the man had read the thoughts of the young lawyer, he raised his head, looking at the man who had invaded his daydreams for the last half an hour or so. Suddenly, the Detroit Mafia boss remembered who the delicate blond was and the rather unfortunate circumstance their meeting was the result of.

"Elliott, I am sorry for not recognizing you from the start. Are you better now? You seemed in pretty bad shape on Thursday, when I was invited to leave your house." Eugene had a concerned look on his face as he spoke in a gentle voice.

"So you are the Brentano-something guy! Your face seemed extremely familiar, but I couldn't remember when I'd met you." Christine quickly reacted to the man's obvious interest in Elliott. "As my friend told you then, he is none of your business."

“The little, fierce defender strikes again!” There was no irony in Eugene’s voice, only a tinge of sadness. “If I were you, I wouldn’t drive away those who are concerned about your friend’s wellbeing.”

“Stay away from Elliott. You don’t know anything about him. You are one of those bastards who only pretend to care, and then...” The girl fought hard to control the anger rising inside her.

“You are wrong on that one, Christine. I do care a lot. Right now, I can see how uncomfortable the two of us fighting over him makes Elliott feel. I am going to take him home and cook him a warm meal. He needs good, tasty food, plenty of sleep and a lot of love and support. I am going to offer him all of that and more. But before that, I need your blessing.”

Christine looked at the guy like he had lost his mind, but all she could see in those ice-blue eyes was a sincere concern, affection and a strong will to help. The girl knew she needed all the help she could get to save Elliott from the desperate situation he had landed into. The man seemed a valuable ally Christine couldn’t afford to lose, so she nodded in approval.

“Elliott?” Eugene gave him a questioning look. “Do you want to stay a little more or would you rather go home and get some rest? Meantime, I could watch over you while cooking dinner. What do you say?”

“I think I’d rather go home. How about the kids?” The blond’s voice was filled with regret, as he looked down to the little boys who were leaning on his chest, relaxed and comfortable.

“We could take them with us if you don’t mind them keeping you company, or we could leave them here, and Liam or Martin Cornelius could drop by and bring them later. Whatever works best for you.”

“I would prefer to take them with us if the others agree as well.” As he spoke, Elliott cast a pretty please, look in the three cousins’ direction.

“Of course you can take them with you, I’ll pick them up later, when I accompany Christine and Mallory back to your place,” Elizabeth offered, smiling warmly. “Have fun, boys,” she added.

“Mickey will pick us up!” the little warrior Lochlin suddenly declared, a wide grin starting to spread on his cute, little face.

“So you could manipulate him into doing whatever your plotting minds are set on doing? I don’t think so, young man! Besides, it’s only Saturday, so you are still in my custody until tomorrow afternoon,” Eugene replied amused, winking at the young boy.

The older, raven-haired child left his seat, joining his uncle, while Elliott picked up the blond twins, holding them safely in his arms. The little group sitting around the table swooned at the sight, making both men smile gently. The

young Brentano waved once again to the others, then he hurried to catch up with Elliott, who was already patiently waiting near the large car.

“Here we are!” Eugene opened the vehicle’s doors, helping the younger man with the twins, while Gabriel took his usual spot between his brothers’ car seats. The blond made sure their safety belts were properly secured, before stepping into the car.

“Are the children all right there in the back, all by themselves?” Elliott asked Eugene, casting a worried glance over his shoulder.

“Yes, they are,” the man smirked. “Those three are as independent as can be and they also value their privacy a lot. Especially the twins, who are constantly plotting, finding new ways of wrapping us adults around their little fingers.”

The blond smiled weakly. “You love them very much, don’t you?”

“Is it that obvious?” Eugene feigned innocence and surprise. Then, his look became hard as steel as he spoke in an ice-cold voice. “If anyone ever thinks about harming those kids... I will put the bastard into a grave with my bare hands.”

Hearing the man’s words, Elliott felt chills down his spine, but not in a wrong way, not like Carter had made him feel. Eugene’s voice might sound threatening, but the blond also felt the protectiveness radiating from the man behind the

wheel, the fierce determination in his eyes and voice. Elliott was sure of one thing; someone, someday, will be fortunate to have Eugene by his side.

“I realized one thing,” the Detroit mobster broke the silence. “I forgot to ask where your house is,” he smiled apologetically. I guess Tarquin’s right, slowly but surely I’m starting to become senile.”

“Don’t blame yourself, it’s entirely my fault, I should have provided it sooner. It’s because I’m stupid. I try hard to make it better, but apparently, I’m limited like that.” Elliott lowered his head in shame, anticipating the vicious verbal attack he was sure Eugene would unleash on him.

“What kind of twisted-minded, sick bastard put these ideas into your head?” The older man’s voice was calm, but the blond could see how furious he was by the way his knuckles turned white as he squeezed the steering wheel.

“No...no one,” Elliott stuttered, “it’s just the way things are. Everybody around me knows that working is all I am good for, doing the boring part of the job. I am a less than average lawyer. I graduated only because my family’s lawyer pulled some strings.” The blond automatically repeated the phrases he assimilated as reality, the harsh sentences Carter forcefully made him memorize.

“If you say so...” Eugene’s voice and expression were neutral. “You mentioned that you graduated law school. When was that?”

“Four years ago,” the answer came in a shaky voice.

“And how old were you at that time?” Again, the question was asked in a calm voice, as if the man was engaged in a casual conversation.

“Eighteen, why?” Elliott started to feel a little uneasy, mainly because he couldn’t figure out the reason behind Eugene’s sudden curiosity.

“Oh, nothing. You are right, eighteen-year-old Harvard law school graduates roam all around New York City. On the other hand, I must have lived in a cave, because you are the first one I have come across in almost two years.”

Eugene’s phone beeped, signaling an incoming message. The man slowed down the vehicle, checking the text, then smiled. Next to him, in the passenger seat, Elliott was confused, torn in half between his need for protection and the urge to get as far away as he could from the car’s driver. He was in the middle of an internal debate when Eugene pulled the vehicle into his house’s driveway.

“Okay, everyone, we’ve safely reached our destination, it’s time to get out,” the young Brentano smiled, turning to the three children, who were surprisingly quiet during the ride.

“Here you are, Sir Chat-a-lot,” Elliott smiled to Lochlin, freeing him from the seat belt. Then, he took the boy in his arms, making him giggle.

“Why did you call my brother that?” Emery whispered when the blond helped him out of the car seat.

“Because he chats a lot, obviously. How about Silent Knight being your warrior name? Do you like it?”

“It’s cool!” the little boy raised his fist in the air, in a gesture of enthusiasm and victory.

Gabriel got out the last, quickly catching up with his younger brothers. “Wait for me, you fearless warriors!” he called, smiling widely and brightly.

But the two young boys didn’t listen, following Elliott into the house. The young man lured them into the kitchen, asking for their help. The three of them started to gather all the ingredients and utensils Eugene may need, arranging them on the counter. When the other man and the black-haired boy finally got inside, everything was ready.

Young Brentano examined with a critical eye the items on the counter, a satisfying look appearing on his face. From the corner of his eye, he noticed how relaxed Elliott was in the presence of Emery and Lochlin, how well he interacted with the children. Most likely, Eugene thought, feeling a pang in his chest, the blond had been deprived, one way or another, of the most beautiful stage of life, childhood.

“Do you need help here, uncle? I could wash the vegetables, peel them or do anything else except cutting meat or cooking it,” Gabriel offered with a shy smile.

“Well, this old man could use a helping hand once in a while,” Eugene smiled back, “especially from a fine young

gentleman like you. On the other hand, if I were to think better, you could supervise your brothers so Elliott could lay down until the meal is ready.”

“Are you okay in there, everything under control?” Christine asked, peeking into the kitchen. “We are back too, so tell me what do you need us to do.”

“For starters, stay away from the kitchen. You and Mallory could check on the little ones so Elliott could rest a little,” Eugene suggested.

“Aye-aye, captain,” Christine mocked a military salute, disappearing into the living room. “Get your nice self to bed, darling, I’ll take it from here,” she ushered the blond upstairs.

The young man didn’t protest, exhausted as he was. Once in his room, he didn’t lock the door behind him, as usual. Instead, he climbed into the bed, pulling the covers over him. The pleasant conversation and happy laughter reached Elliott’s ears, but the noise, instead of bothering the blond, made him relax even more.

For the first time since his parents’ death, the young man was safe, the feeling wrapping around him like a warm, comfortable blanket. The buzz from downstairs lulled him into what he desperately wanted to be a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 8

The doctor caressed the blond, curly-haired boy on his belly. He was stroking the small bump that had started to become more and more noticeable. The child, no more than thirteen years old, began to shiver from the coldness of the metallic table he laid on, naked like the day he was born.

The doctor's hand started to go up on the fragile, exposed body, his moves becoming slightly rougher, making the boy let out a small whimper of discomfort. However, he didn't move a single inch, looking straight into the man's eyes with his sky blue orbs. Encouraged by the child's passive attitude and the trust the child showed him, the doctor continued to touch him on the chest, neck, and face.

"My little genius, you make me so very proud," the repulsive creature spoke, taking one of the boy's golden locks between his fingers. "You are so intelligent, so compliant, so perfect, exactly what I wanted, how I wished you to be."

"Doctor, what's wrong with me? What's that thing growing inside of me? Am I going to be all right or am I going to die?" The boy's voice was shaky, barely above a whisper, fear and despair written all over his face.

"Hush, little one," the wretched man replied, pressing a finger on the child's pink lips so hard, that he flinched for the

first time in over an hour since he was laid out naked on the cold table. "I will rid you of the tumors in due time. Until then, be the good boy you always are."

"I'll be a very good boy, just get them out of me, they make me feel sick and tired all the time," the child started to whine.

"Don't cry. You don't have to get upset over all kind of petty, unnecessary things." The doctor lifted the boy from the table, pulling him into a hug. "You are very special to me, my brilliant, curly-haired scientist! Am I not good to you?"

"Oh, yes, you are very kind to me, doctor. You're the one who keeps me safe. You always let me study, to read whatever I am interested in." As he spoke, the child raised his head, looking into the man's evil, beady eyes with his innocent, sky-blue ones.

"Of course I let you read, to enrich your knowledge. I will be good for you, my boy, so good that you won't let anyone else into your life. And because one day, my revenge will strike them down...through you."

Elliott woke up, heart thumping frantically in his chest. Not aware of his surroundings, he cast a panicked look around the room, letting out a sigh of relief when realizing where he was. The blond tried to remember what the dream that woke him up was about, but his brain was foggy. One thing he was sure of, though, it featured the doctor at the lab.

Gradually, the blond's muscles started to relax, his breath became less labored, and the rhythm of the heart beats slowed down. Laying on his back, Elliott began to wonder, why did he have these extreme reactions every time the lab and the doctor running it appeared in his dreams?

The man treated the then-boy with kindness, he was sweet to him, encouraged him to expand his horizon by reading, studying and expressing his opinions on what he found out from the books he read. The blond furrowed his brows, trying hard to figure out why, in spite of all the good memories, evoking the time he spent in the doctor's care was always an emotional-draining experience for him.

Maybe he associated the lab with the tumors that grew inside him for nine months before the doctor could finally remove them. During that period, Elliott felt permanently sick to his stomach, some days barely eating, while other days, stuffing himself with food like there was no tomorrow.

Checking the watch on the nightstand, the blond could see that only an hour had passed since he got into bed. Instead of going downstairs and joining his friends and their guests, Elliott decided to lay in bed for several more minutes. He knew that they would have been worried if he had appeared before them looking lost and agitated.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Christine and Eugene started a conversation with the blond as the central subject. Christine was intrigued, by the sudden, unexplainable interest the man showed for her friend, so she decided to play along. Eugene wished to know so many things about her best friend that she wanted to discover the real reason.

“So, how long have you and Elliott been friends? How did you end up living with him?” Eugene asked, hoping for an honest answer.

“It was two years ago, the dean called me in his office, telling me that it was about an ad I had posted earlier on the university’s site.”

“What ad?” Eugene frowned imperceptibly.

“I was looking for a room to share. My family situation was, and still is, pretty shitty. Living in the dorms, with the parties that seemed to never end, was the same thing, so... Anyway, the dean told me that someone had answered my ad, but they wanted to interview me first, so I went to the address.”

“What was your first impression of Elliott? Did you sensed something was wrong with him, did he act strange or anything?” Eugene hardly contained the curiosity in his voice.

“Nothing like that, I liked him instantly. During the interview, I found out he was only recently living in New York, was working for a well-known law office, graduated Harvard law school two years earlier and was an orphan.”

“And he told you all those things in one go?” Eugene had a thoughtful look. “That’s strange, especially for someone like him.”

“Yes, he did, but then he added that what he had told me is all I needed to know about his past. Not bugging him with questions about his past was the only condition Elliott had. He offered me everything; a roof over my head, food in my belly, brotherly affection and support.” Christine fell silent, tears of gratitude brimming in her eyes.

Eugene nodded in understanding, and he could find nothing wrong with her story. Her answers seemed truthful. On one hand, the man felt terrible about twisting her arm into giving up information about her best friend, scarce as they were. On the other hand, however, he had to know more so he could give Elliott the help he desperately needed.

“Wait a minute!” Christine suddenly said in a somehow excited voice, getting Eugene’s attention instantly. “I just remembered, there were a lot of other things he said during the interview. I don’t know how relevant they are, though...”

“Every bit of information you could share is of great importance,” the man gave her an encouraging smile.

“Elliott was adopted, his parents told him when he was ten. He started to wonder why all the Spellmanns and the

Brauns he knew had brown eyes and black hair, while he was blond with blue eyes.”

“Where did they take him from? Orphanage? Foster care?”

“Nothing like that. Mrs. Spellmann was working as a nurse in a high profile private clinic. One of the patients suffered complications during childbirth, and she didn’t make it. No one claimed the newborn, so the Spellmanns, who were childless, took him home, raising him as their own.”

Eugene frowned again. “Something is off here. Why didn’t his mother’s family take Elliott as well, when they came after her body? His adoptive parents must have hidden something from him. Unless...”

“Why would he lie to me? Isn’t that what you were about to say?” Christine cut the man short, her voice defensive.

“Look, I am trying to understand here, and I won’t exclude any possibility, at least for now,” Eugene explained.

He started to stir the pot, adding ingredients and tasting once in a while. The delicious smell of soup reached Christine’s nostrils, making them flare. Seeing how the man focused on the cooking, with Elliott’s well-being in mind, warmed her heart. Without realizing it, she started daydreaming about a pair of intense, dark blue eyes and the calm voice of their possessor.

“Liam or Martin Cornelius?” Eugene asked her, apparently amused.

“Excuse me, what?” Christine asked, still under the impression of her daydreaming moment.

“Who’s captured your heart? I was asking you something two minutes ago, but you were busy daydreaming of one of the two. Or maybe it was another man? Sorry for assuming things,” Eugene sincerely apologized.

“I was thinking about your family, indeed,” the young woman replied, “but not in the way you thought.”

“Oh,” was everything the man said.

“You are quite an interesting bunch because there are little to no similarities between you and the others. I mean, the only one who seems to be related are Elizabeth and the redhead. What’s his name, again?”

“Liam,” came the answer. “You are right, I am not their relative by blood, but I see all of them like that. Nine years ago, another of their cousins, Daniel, saved my uncle’s life and he adopted him. But the bond he and I share is tighter than that.” Eugene had a melancholic look in his eyes as he finished the sentence.

Christine looked at the man who was leaning against the counter, seeing him from an entirely different perspective. He was not a threat to her friend, as she initially thought, based on Elliott’s reaction. Instead, Eugene Brentano was all about helping the blond, freeing him from his fears and insecurities, though his reasons remained unclear.

“Why are you so set on helping my friend?” Christine curiously asked, hoping to hear the real reason.

“I have nothing to hide,” the answer came. Eugene faced her, eyes vacant. “Have you ever watched someone dying, only three feet away from you? Have you ever felt helpless, because, in spite of knowing what to do to save their life, all you could do was hear their agonizing screams and see how monsters inflicted wound after wound on their body?”

Christine was utterly shocked. “When did... when did that happen?” she managed to ask in a shaky voice.

Eugene inhaled sharply, trying to control the emotions roiling inside him. “Sixteen years ago. I was fourteen at the time, and he was fifteen. We were in love, and they made us both pay dearly for that crime.” The man’s look was troubled, his voice broken.

The girl felt her chest constricting. Eugene’s pain was almost tangible, so intense she almost felt it herself. “Your boyfriend’s killers... were they convicted? I hope they are rotting in prison for the rest of their wretched lives!” Christine spat.

“Oh, no. They are not in prison. The bastards are rotting six feet under.” The man kept himself busy with the pot of soup and the pan with stew so the girl couldn’t see the look in his eyes. However, something in his voice gave her cold chills.

“So, you only want to help Elliott as a way to make up for not being able to save your boyfriend’s life? Or do you have another reason?” Curiosity sparked in Christine’s eyes as she waited for Eugene’s answer.

“I want him to be happy. He reminds me a lot of someone I admire and care about very much,” the man smiled warmly. His sadness was suddenly gone.

“Do you also happen to love this special someone?” the girl winked knowingly.

“Yes, I love him, he is the younger brother I never had.”

In the living room, the children were busy watching a documentary about the life of pelicans. After more than an hour of playing hide-and-seek in the yard with Mallory, the young boys were tired and a little hungry, so they waited for their uncle to finish cooking. The twins had started to miss Elliott, to whom they felt instantly connected so they couldn’t wait for him to get up and join them at the table.

Seeing how relaxed and quiet the children were, Mallory left his comfortable spot on the couch, heading to the kitchen. There, he was welcomed by the subtle aromas of soup, vegetable stew, and roasted meat.

“Girlfriend, if I knew you could cook so well, I would have proposed to you ages ago,” he said while helping Christine set the table.

“Sorry to disappoint you, boyfriend,” the girl smirked, “but all this is Eugene’s doing, not mine. I wish I could cook half as good.”

“Well, someone will be fortunate someday,” Mallory grinned, “our friend here makes perfect husband material.”

“You better tell that to Elliott, I bet he would be thrilled to find out,” Christine replied. “The guy has my blessing, not that he would need it.”

“What guy? Who are you talking about?” Mallory asked.

“This one here. He’s expressed his interest in Elliott, and I agreed.”

“Oh, really? And how is he going to do that? What does he know about our friend’s needs? Christine, I thought you cared about Elliott.” Disappointed, Mallory turned around, intending to leave the kitchen.

“Wait! If you are so desperate for answers, why don’t you ask the right person?” There was nothing provocative in Eugene’s voice, so the younger man plopped down on a chair.

“Speak, then. I’m all ears,” he said.

“I intend to be in control of everything regarding Elliott; his emotions, fears, state of health, needs. Of course, first I’ll have to...”

“Do you hear yourself talking, man? Controlling the most intelligent, caring human being I know? Over my dead body!”

“Mallory, listen to me, please! Taking control of his life is not the same as controlling him. Elliott would be able to manage his finances by himself, to buy the things he would consider necessary. I also won't interfere in his professional life. He could make whatever decisions he would see fit. I was just about to say that, first and foremost, I would have to gain his trust.”

Meanwhile, in his room, Elliott finally managed to calm down, and he was back to his usual self. Not exactly typical, because he didn't dread going downstairs and facing his friends and their worried looks. On the contrary, it was like the blond was drawn there, he couldn't wait to join the others.

Or maybe it was only one person he was fascinated by, the man with the crystalline blue eyes whose presence was assuring and threatening at the same time. Elliott couldn't see himself with another man, he knew what dreadful consequences his reckless behavior would have. The blond didn't doubt that one day, Carter would come to claim his possession, dragging him back into the ocean of despair and helplessness.

Elliott went downstairs and was about to head into the kitchen when he heard Mallory speaking. His best friend must

have been angry or troubled because he raised his voice at whoever his partner of conversation was.

“And how exactly are you going to do that? Or is it classified information?”

“No, it isn't. I have the feeling someone mistreated poor Elliott, to the point he can no longer tell the truth from lies, illusion from reality. I need your help to build a support network around him.” The voice, authoritative and gentle at the same time, belonged to Eugene.

“A support network?” Christine said, somehow confused.

“Yes. People Elliott could rely on when he felt threatened. People he could trust and open up to. Elizabeth is a psychologist and a woman. Liam is the best sniper in the city. Mickey and Aristarco would be honored to guard him. I could arrange for a professional chef to come and cook for him. And of course, there would be me.”

“What's your role in all this?” Mallory wanted to know, his defensive attitude gone.

“I would be the one Elliott would leave all his worries and fears to, the one who would calm his mind, heal his broken spirit and keep him safe. I would kill and bury with my own two hands anyone who even thinks about harming him.”

Slowly, Elliott slid to the floor, back against the wall. Safe! The word echoed in the blond's head, giving him a state of euphoria he didn't want to end. A man, a stranger, was

willing to fight with all he had to make him feel safe. For years, Elliott only thought of Carter as being the predator who tore him into little pieces, devouring them one by one. This time, instead of destroying the blond, the predator would bring him into the light, ripping Carter apart.

CHAPTER 9

“Do you...do you mean it? About letting Arnett live with you? At your house?” Hayden said in a shaky voice.

“Of course he will live with us if the two of you are the good friends I think you are. Where else should the guy go, if he doesn’t have anyone?” Daniel was surprised by his younger brother’s words.

“But... are you going to hit him? Beat him with the belt? Make him sleep on the cold floor? Because if you do, I’m not coming either.”

Daniel’s eyes darkened. “Okay, we are going to have a little talk, right here and now. Tell me everything I need to know about the poor soul. Where is he now? Who mistreats him? How old is he?”

Vincent cleared his throat. “Look, Daniel, you shouldn’t worry about Arnett, focus on Hayden. I will take care of everything. I have enough money to bail him out and get him the best lawyer in the city.”

“Wait a minute, is this Arnett guy in prison? What is he accused of? Excuse me, Mister Grant, but since the fellow is so important to my brother, anything related to him is very much my business,” Daniel replied, his voice laced with determination.

“He wanted to keep mom alive. To protect her.” Hayden raised his voice, looking straight into his brother’s eyes.

“So he attacked the one who killed her?” Sebastian’s older son nodded. “I see. Don’t worry, little brother. We will get your friend out of prison. We will make sure he never gets there in the first place.”

From where he sat, Vincent studied Daniel, making no effort to hide his interest. The young man, in spite of the remarkable physical resemblance with his father, had a completely different psychological structure. Determined, strong-willed, confident, independent, everything Sebastian would have wanted his son to become. However, he couldn’t put Arnett’s fate in the young man’s hands, not when Alastair still influenced him, one way or another.

“I appreciate your good intentions, Daniel, but you better not make promises you can’t keep,” Vincent shook his head, saddened. “Arnett will be charged as an adult, in spite of being only seventeen. Most likely, he will be sentenced for life, maybe more than one term.”

“Come on, Mister Grant, what could that kid do so bad to deserve something like that? Whose side are you on?” Daniel passionately spoke, his eyes darkening.

“We will put together the best defensive team. No expense is to be spared. You don’t have to worry about anything, Hayden,” Tarquin suddenly spoke, smiling gently to his young brother-in-law.

“I appreciate your good intentions, boys, I do, but I’m afraid you won’t be very willing to get Arnett out of prison

once I tell you that they are accusing him of killing seven men.”

“What?!” Daniel was the embodiment of disbelief. “A kid took down seven armed men? Is that what you are trying to say, Mister Grant?”

“Yes,” Vincent nodded. “He is now at the hospital, out of surgery, but the prognosis is not good at all. Arnett may not survive,” the man said, turning to Hayden. “I am sorry, champ.”

“Nobody dies, Mister Grant, not on my watch, and certainly not on Daniel’s,” Tarquin spoke in the same voice as earlier. “What hospital is the boy in?”

“Angels of Mercy,” the answer came right away. “It’s a little clinic on...”

“Thank you, sir, I know the place,” the blond replied, quickly tapping on his phone.

Alastair stared in awe at Tarquin, his heart swelling with pride as he watched how collected the young man was, how promptly he acted. Then, the former Supreme Dragon turned his attention to Hayden, studying him. The kid looked very tired and sad, but that was understandable, given the loss he had experienced. But there was something else in his eyes, something Alastair couldn’t put his finger on.

“What did you do?” the kid asked Tarquin, as the blond turned off his phone with a long sigh of relief.

“I activated a code,” the young man smiled, caressing his brother-in-law’s hair. “From now on, Arnett is one of us, and we will do everything in our power to protect him.”

“What about you?” Hayden turned to Daniel, locking eyes with him.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you hate us, me and Arnett, for barging into your life and complicating it?” The kid’s eyes brimmed with tears, threatening to spill any moment.

“You are my brother and that kid laying on a hospital bed is your best friend. End of story.” Daniel’s words were flat, but Hayden could feel all the love and gentleness in his voice.

“Hey, big boys, how about moving your asses and getting in the car? We are going to pay our hero a little visit.”

“What hero?” Hayden asked, a little bit confused.

“Arnett, who else?” Daniel protectively wrapped an arm around his younger brother’s shoulders, pulling him closer.

“But you need to notify the police hours in advance, and even then...”

“Tarquin took care of everything, he is a brilliant guy,” Daniel cut his younger brother short, patting his shoulder.

“The three of you go ahead, I will stay a little longer to keep Alastair company unless he wants to kick me out,” Vincent smiled to the small group.

“Yes, my boys, go your way, my friend and me here still have a lot to catch up with,” the former head of the CIA also spoke.

The two older men spent some time in silence, lost in their thoughts, casting short glances to one another once in a while. Alastair wanted to ask Grant about Arnett, as everything about the kid’s story intrigued him. Who was the one who had oppressed him? Why didn’t he ask for help? How was it possible for a seventeen-year-old to kill seven armed men and so on.

Vincent, on the other side, was still under the impression of Daniel’s and his husband’s presence. There were so many things the man wanted to ask about the two of them, but he doubted Alastair would answer them. In the end, Hayden’s wellbeing was the most important thing, and Vincent could rest assured from now on because the kid’s future was secured. There was, of course, the other matter.

“So, what do you think of the boys? Daniel and the delicate blond he is married to?” Alastair wanted to know.

“Delicate blond?” Vincent raised his brow. “I don’t remember seeing a delicate blond in this room. There was only Tarquin. Unless, of course, Sebastian’s son is married to another man.”

“So you liked him, and I don’t speak about Daniel,” Alastair replied, a smile of satisfaction starting to form on his lips.

“Yes, I liked him a lot, those two are perfect together. I bet both of them are loving, protective fathers,” Vincent also smiled.

“They will extend the love and protectiveness over Hayden and Arnett. Not to mention the kids, who will be thrilled at the perspective of having another uncle. Two, actually.”

“Look, Alastair, I don’t expect them to treat the kid as one of their own. All I want is to give him warm food, a bed and some clothes on his back.”

“Vincent, be honest with me. What’s wrong with Arnett?”

The other man didn’t answer. He just stared blankly into space. After a while, he started to speak. “I don’t know, Stark, I wish I knew. That bastard Sydney treated him worse than an animal, but the kid never complained. Shannon pitied him, but he didn’t seem to care, didn’t seem to feel the pain.”

“Who was this Sydney guy? I don’t remember you mentioning his name before,” Alastair asked, frowning.

“He is Shannon’s brother-in-law and the owner of the neighboring farm, where Arnett lived. Sydney was a total bastard, I wanted to kill him a couple of times,” Vincent grimaced as he spat the last words.

“Brother-in-law? Hayden’s mother was married after she gave birth to him?”

“No, her sister was the lowlife’s wife. Arnett appeared at their farm about five years ago, scared and almost naked. Sydney abused the poor kid from day one, never sent him to school, worked his bones off.”

“Why didn’t you reported the bastard to the police and social services?” At the mentioning of the abuse, Alastair felt anger rising inside him, threatening to take over.

“Shannon wanted to, once. Sydney beat Arnett badly, and the wounds got infected. However, Arnett cried his heart out, asking her to change her mind. From then on, she took the boy to her farm, where he befriended Hayden.”

“How close are the two of them?”

Vincent had so much pain in his eyes that Alastair felt it like a punch in his stomach. He hated himself for asking that question, but the need to know was so strong, that he couldn’t help it. However, the former Supreme Dragon also wanted to let the other man know that he was no longer the blind, insensitive bastard from three decades earlier.

“Relax, Grant, I just want to know everything that is to know about the boys, that’s all,” Alastair warmly assured the other man.

“Good, because if you try to break their hearts, to separate them as you did with me and Sebastian... so help me, Stark, I won’t be merciful like I was a couple of years earlier. I will bury you so deep, you will never recover, especially now, that my poor lover is gone forever.”

“I give you my word. I will not try to interfere in their relationship if they have one. It’s only that...” Alastair abruptly stopped speaking, a gentle smile playing on his lips.

“What is it? Why did you stop?” Vincent asked curiously.

“Hayden is hell-bent on protecting Arnett, to make sure he has a good life. That is why I suspected the two of them are in a relationship. So, are they?”

“I guess so. Even from the beginning, the two of them were close. They’ve done everything together, cuddled, slept in the same bed...Arnett even used to bring Hayden small gifts and flowers.” It was Vincent’s turn to smile. “Speaking of,” he said, “I have to go to the hospital, too. The boy may freak out if he doesn’t see me there.”

Alastair nodded in understanding. “Sure, go ahead. One more thing, though. We’ve transferred Arnett from Angels of Mercy to New York General Hospital. Oh, and I think the charges against him will be dropped, too.”

Without a word, Vincent shook Alastair’s hand, hugging him, then headed to the apartment’s door. Hand on the knob, he turned once more to the other man, intending to say something, but changed his mind, walking out and closing the door behind him.

The retired CIA director was alone with his memories again, but this time it wasn’t only about his past. Meeting

Vincent after almost three decades brought to the surface a part of Alastair's history he preferred not to remember, not to think about. The images invading his mind were of a manipulative, selfish young man who, in the name of family reputation, unleashed hell on two innocent souls.

It all started when Alastair discovered that the youngest of the Bloom heirs he put so much time and resources in gathering together was serving time in a juvenile detention center for drug possession. Sebastian was almost fourteen at that time, a shy boy with big, dark-blue eyes and jet-black hair. Vincent, three years older, took the kid under his wing, protecting him in every way.

Because of his juvenile criminal record, Alastair treated Sebastian harsher than his brothers, although Benjamin, the second-born, was more of a troublemaker who rebelled constantly. When he discovered his younger Bloom nephew and the boy from juvie had exchanged letters, Alastair was furious. He accused Sebastian of persisting in his criminal ways and drastically limited the boy's contact with the outside world, homeschooling him.

But yet, on the younger Bloom heir's sixteenth birthday, Vincent found a way to break into the Connecticut mansion, where the party was being held, and kidnapped the boy. Fabian, the older of the three brothers, was devastated,

blaming himself for not taking enough care of his brother. Alastair started to worry about Sebastian, for the first time since he became the boys' ward.

Then, two weeks after disappearing, the kid came back unharmed, accompanied by Vincent. The young man wanted to talk with Alastair, but the newly-appointed Supreme Dragon, instead of listening to what he had to say, dragged him into the stables, beating him and making Sebastian watch. He only stopped when his nephew broke down, promising never to see Vincent again if he would spare the young man's life.

Thinking about those moments, Alastair loathed his three decades younger version so much, even wishing, for a brief moment, someone would have killed him back then, to spare the two poor souls of all the pain he put them through. Sebastian kept his promise, had stellar results in the military academy and made everyone proud of him.

More than that, he was engaged to be married to the descendant of a wealthy, powerful and prestigious aristocratic family. Thinking about the hell his nephew endured at the hands of the bastard who pretended to cherish him, Alastair wanted to punch himself in the face. What Vincent did, no

matter how wrong it was, saved Sebastian from the nightmarish life he would have lived as MacAllister's husband.

Without realizing what he was doing, the former Supreme Dragon put his hand into the pocket of his trousers, pulling out the business card Grant gave him. With everything that had happened over the last couple of hours, he didn't have the time to examine it closer, intending to do it once all the excitement had ended.

Alastair's hands started to shake as he looked at the name written on the rectangular piece of paper; Jeremy V. Grant. The best stock market broker in the whole country, the very one who helped him to recover the money he lost in those uninspired stock tradings. At the time, one of the broker's many assistants had gotten in touch with Alastair, saying that Mister Grant was interested in helping him.

For the then Supreme Dragon, that phone call was heaven-sent, so he gladly agreed with the only condition Jeremy V. Grant stipulated in the contract they signed. According to it, Alastair wasn't allowed, under any circumstance, to get in touch with the broker in any way other than through his assistants.

The former head of CIA despised his nephew's friend so much that he didn't bother to run a check on him. Because of this, the man wasn't aware of Vincent's middle name, so he didn't associate the prestigious stock market broker with the former juvenile convict who had caused him so much trouble.

Instead of ruining them, Grant helped the Starks and Blooms to avoid financial ruin and social disgrace, rising above all the hate and resentment he must have felt for those who took Sebastian away from him. But, instead of rubbing it in Alastair's face, the man came to him prepared for more personal sacrifices, as long as Hayden was safe.

Alastair didn't see himself worthy to look Vincent in the eyes or shake his hand, not after everything he did to him and put him through. But he knew what to do to atone for his many sins. First, it was with Daniel and Tarquin. Then he had Hayden and Arnett to take care of, to watch them grow into two strong, caring, protective young men, who could battle their demons and win the fights.

And there were, of course, the other two young men, Elliott Spellmann and Mallory Ashburn. No, Alastair's mission didn't end with bringing Daniel and Tarquin together. That was only the beginning of it.

CHAPTER 10

Daniel had been driving for about ten minutes, focused on the road, but thinking about all the things he had found out that morning, at the same time. How did his father and Hayden's mother end up together? Why did he choose to reveal the existence of the child to his best friend, but not to his husband?

From time to time, he cast short glances to his younger brother through the rear-view mirror. The poor boy looked exhausted, but he made great efforts not to show it, not to give up his internal turmoil. Daniel felt the urge to stop the vehicle, get in the backseat and wrap Hayden in a warm, assuring hug. On the other hand, he was aware of his little brother's need to be at that Arnett boy's side, so, instead of slowing down, he sped up.

"You are driving too fast, the police are going to pull us over and give you a speeding ticket," Hayden warned. "Besides, I think you are driving in the wrong direction, at least according to this," the younger Bloom indicated the GPS on his phone.

"The direction is right, little brother, don't worry about that. Soon, you will meet your friend, and you wouldn't want him to see you like that, would you?" Daniel's voice was calm but somehow amused.

Hayden rolled his eyes. “Listen, I lived at a horse farm, not in a cave. I may not be a hotshot computer expert, but I know how to use one, or a phone. But maybe you are smarter than the GPS,” the kid pouted, then fell silent.

From the passenger’s seat, Tarquin shot daggers in Daniel’s direction. “Your older brother is trying to say Arnett was transferred from Angels of Mercy to New York General Hospital. They are better equipped and the doctors working there are some of the best in the country. Your friend will have all their attention and the best possible care.”

Hayden’s eyes widened in surprise. “When... Who did it?”

“I did, earlier at great-uncle Alastair’s apartment. I took care of everything. You don’t have to worry about any of those things. Daniel is right, seeing you like that would upset Arnett, and that won’t do any good to his physical or mental health.”

Tarquin’s voice had a soothing effect on the boy’s tense muscles and nerves, making him relax. From the very second he saw the blond, Hayden took an instant liking of him. While the boy perceived his older brother as the most protective of the two, he found him somehow intimidating. This made the younger Bloom feel attracted more to his brother-in-law’s calm, affectionate, nurturing nature.

Exchanging glances with Daniel, Tarquin started to tap on his phone, then looked over his shoulder at Hayden who

had seemed to doze off. The kid was awake though, studying with great attention the buildings the car passed by on the way to the hospital. Judging by the expression on his face, he couldn't wait to meet Arnett, to see for himself how the hospital was treating Arnett.

Finally, the three of them arrived in front of an impressive, modern building, that didn't look at all like Angels of Mercy, where the homeless and other less fortunate people were treated. Daniel knew about the desperate financial situation of the clinic, and he planned to invest, a considerable amount of money from the Dragons' House's funds in it.

“Wow, this place looks impressive!” Hayden exclaimed, staring in awe at the sleek, tall structure. “Are you sure this is a hospital?” he asked Tarquin, while his older brother pulled the car into one of the numerous spots in the parking lot.

“Take a look yourself,” the blond smiled, gesturing to the silver, shiny letters composing the name of the medical facility.

“When they came and took Arnett into custody, my godfather offered to pay for his medical care,” Hayden barely whispered, his eyes shadowed with sadness. “But they pushed him aside and laughed in his face, saying that Angels of Mercy is more than a criminal deserves. They also said my godfather should be grateful they didn't let Arnett die on the streets.”

Tarquin's eyes narrowed, becoming two blue slits, and his face reddened in anger. "Don't worry, little brother, no one will bother him here," the blond assured the black-haired boy.

"Oh, no! They are here!" Hayden's eyes widened again, only this time the reaction was one of fear. With a shaky hand, the boy pointed to the police car stationed near the hospital's entrance.

Tarquin rubbed soothing circles on his brother-in-law's back, calming him down. "Leave everything to me. Daniel is inside, taking care of the paperwork, but we have more backup nearby, in case it's necessary.

"Okay," Hayden managed to say, inhaling sharply.

Wrapping an arm around the boy's shoulders, Tarquin cast fugitive glances around them, then headed straight to the three cops who were leaning against the car. As soon as they saw Hayden, the policemen's attitude changed from relaxed to defying, patronizing, threatening even. They got closer to the boy, ignoring the blond young man by his side.

"What are you doing here, son?" the older of the three spoke. "You should be at home, mourning the loss of your mother, instead of coddling her killer. Give the poor woman the justice she deserves, boy!" he concluded in a threat-laced voice.

"Good day, officers!" Tarquin stepped in, smiling sweetly. "Now, what did he do?" he continued, feigning ignorance.

“This is none of your business, young man. Go your way, or else you risk an accusation of obstruction of justice,” another cop growled the warning.

Hayden clung to his brother-in-law’s jacket, trying to make himself as small as he could. But the blond didn’t show any sign of being intimidated. “Obstruction of justice,” he said, with a thoughtful expression. “That’s right, that is what the three of you would be accused of if you don’t mind your own business.”

“Oh, really? Says who?” the older policeman smiled ironically.

The blond shrugged, taking out a badge from the back pocket of his jeans. “Special Agent Tarquin Ballard, FBI,” he stated his official identity. “The kid you are talking about is not the criminal, he is a witness. I hope you understand all the implications, standing in the way of a federal investigation could have. Have a good day, officers!”

An arm wrapped around Hayden’s shoulder, the blond nonchalantly passed the three policemen, entering the hospital’s main lobby. Instead of heading to the reception desk, they took the elevator to the fifth floor. The young Bloom wanted to point it out, but he was still under the impression of the scene from earlier.

To Hayden’s surprise and confusion, the entire corridor of the fifth floor was full of heavily armed men, who were either sitting or standing. At the sight of Tarquin, all of them

bowed their heads with respect. The blond answered with a curt nod, the little Bloom imitating him.

“Who are they?” Hayden whispered, as soon as the two of them passed the guards.

“Our men,” Tarquin answered, smiling gently. “We dispatched them here to protect Arnett,” he added.

“We, like the FBI?” The young Bloom still couldn’t believe it that the cute, friendly, sweet guy next to him was a badass federal agent.”

“No, we, like the Dragons’ House. Anyway, I have to report the incident to my superior,” the blond grinned. “I just messaged great-uncle Alastair, and he confirmed my suspicions. We have an investigation on our hands.”

“What’s the Dragons’ House? What has great-uncle to do with mom’s shooting? Are you even an FBI agent? A real one?” Hayden wanted to know.

“You have plenty of time to find out what Dragons’ House is. Great-uncle Alastair has everything to do with anything. And yes, I am a special agent working in the IT department of the FBI. I am in charge of protecting the databases and servers from cyber attacks. That’s it for now. I’ll tell you more after you see Arnett. Tell him I said hi and I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

“Is he... Is he all right? Is he awake? Can he speak?” Tears pooled in Hayden’s eyes, threatening to spill.

“Yes, yes, and yes,” Tarquin smiled, lightly shoving his young brother-in-law to one of the room’s door. “Come on,

don't make him wait.”

The curtains of the room were closed, so it was pretty dark inside. Once Hayden's eyes got used to the lack of light, he could see a form shifting on the bed. He got closer and closer until he could see Arnett's face. The other boy blinked a few times. Then he ran a hand over his face. Clearing his throat, he was finally able to speak.

“Hayden, is that you? How did you manage to visit me? Didn't they give you a hard time? Are you all right?” Concern was etched into the boy's beautiful face as he looked young Bloom in the eyes.

“I missed you very much, Arnett, and I was worried sick, afraid of what those brutes might do to you.” As he spoke, Hayden took the other boy's hand between his own, caressing it with the pad of his thumb.

“How did I end up here? It was your godfather. He managed to pull some strings to save my sorry ass, didn't he? How can I repay his kindness?”

“It wasn't him, although he tried very hard to transfer you to another hospital, where you could be taken better care of. It was my brother's husband's doing,” Hayden widely grinned. “You should have seen how he put Detective Lytton and his minions in their place!”

“Your brother-in-law did what? How reckless could he be to mess with them?! Those three brainless gorillas are

police officers, after all! Your brother-in-law is insane!” Arnett slowly shook his head in disbelief.

Hayden grinned again. “No, he’s not. Tarquin is an FBI agent. You should tell him everything you know, he and my brother will keep you safe. They are nice guys, you know.”

The other boy didn’t say anything, but the little wheels inside his brain started to spin at warp speed. Arnett was illiterate, he barely knew how to write his name, but that didn’t mean he was stupid. An FBI agent whom Hayden trusted, who was willing to protect him at all costs was the perfect solution to everything. Maybe the guy would listen to him. Perhaps he would know what to do with the information Arnett would entrust him with.

“Is something wrong?” Hayden’s worried voice brought the other boy back to reality.

“No, everything is all right,” he said, smiling weakly. “I was thinking about what you told me about your brother’s husband. How high is he ranked in the FBI’s hierarchy?” Arnett was waiting for the answer holding his breath, as their future depended on it.

“Special agent or something along that line,” Hayden answered, frowning a bit. “He said he works in the IT department, protecting the agency’s servers against attacks.”

The other boy felt like he just won the state's lottery jackpot. A hacker, his best friend's brother-in-law was a fucking governmental hacker! But special agent...the guy must have been at least thirty years old. How could a man of that age take someone like Arnett seriously? He would dismiss everything the boy would tell him as the product of his imagination. But then again, he had to try.

"Your brother's husband... is he here, at the hospital? I want to talk to him," the boy said, looking into his friend's deep blue eyes.

Hayden shook his head. "No. It's not that Tarquin wouldn't listen to you or anything. We have to make sure you're healed completely, Arnett. You could speak to him as soon as you get back on your feet and regain your strength."

"Please, do this for me! It's the perfect time to talk to him, the more the discussion is postponed, the worse it'll be," the boy spoke, giving his friend a pleading look.

Meanwhile, Daniel finished talking with Doctor Stuyvesant about his kid brother's friend's condition, and now he was sitting next to Tarquin, outside the room, patiently waiting for Hayden to come out, so the two of them could speak with the boy. He couldn't get out of his head what Doctor Victoria told him, the new found information shocking the young Bloom and making him wonder how anything like that was possible.

Hayden came out of the room, abruptly stopping Daniel's train of thought. The boy looked much better than he had when he went inside, he thought, examining his kid brother's face. Relief, relaxation and a tinge of sadness were the emotions Sebastian's older son could notice in Hayden's expression.

"How's your friend? Any signs of improvement? Is he still in pain?" Tarquin asked, his voice worried.

"Yes, he is much better now," the answer came. "He wants to talk to you," the boy added, looking at the blond.

"Are you sure your friend wants to talk to me, and not to Daniel? Maybe this is what he meant when he..."

"I am, positively sure," Hayden cut Tarquin short. "You see, he doesn't like or trust strangers, but when I told him how you put Lytton and his minions in their place, and when I mentioned you being an FBI agent, he insisted on talking to you."

"Okay, then, let's go inside," Daniel said, leaving the chair.

Just when the two husbands were about to enter the hospital room, two young men walked down the corridor, between the two lines of guards, heading straight to them. Both of them hugged the two husbands tightly, then they went next to Hayden, giving him warm, welcoming looks.

“Thanks for joining us, guys, and sorry for ruining your Saturday plans,” Daniel turned to the two newly arrived men. “Say hello to my little brother. Hayden, these are our cousins, Martin Cornelius and Liam.”

“Hi, kiddo, nice to meet you, I’m Liam, and I have the feeling you and me are going to be good friends. In spite of what your grumpy older brother may tell you, there’s a lot of cool stuff you could learn from me.”

“Don’t you ever, ever listen to him. Otherwise, you could end up in big trouble,” the other young man, who looked so much like Daniel, playfully warned him.

“Okay, little brother, now, that you know the crazy side of the family, it’s time for me and Tarquin to talk to your friend if he didn’t change his mind,” Sebastian’s older son said, lightly touching his younger brother’s cheek.

When Daniel turned the light on, Arnett blinked a few times rapidly, trying to adjust to the new situation, but he didn’t dare ask the man to turn it off. He started to shift uncomfortably, pulling the blankets up to his chin. Then, the boy took a look at the blond young man, deciding he could trust him.

The other one, though, with his soul-piercing, dark-blue eyes, gave the boy chills down his spine, until he realized the man was Hayden’s older brother. Letting out a heavy sigh, Arnett drew his legs to his chest, hugging them tightly. Then,

he closed his eyes, waiting for the two men to ask him anything they would want to know. The boy was as ready as he could be for that moment, probably the most important of his life.

CHAPTER 11

Daniel pulled one of the two chairs in the room over, bringing it as close to the bed as he could. The young man sat, then started to examine the kid on the hospital bed. Judging by his exposed arms, he was pretty well-built, maybe a little on the lean side. His light-brown hair hung in long strands over the shoulders, in dire need of a cut, as Daniel noticed, smiling.

There was not much else to see of Arnett, tightened into a ball, legs hugged to his chest as he was. The boy's chin rested on his knees, eyes tightly shut. Most likely, the young man thought, the kid was making great efforts to stay calm, to not show the two of them how scared he was. Tentatively, Daniel lightly touched Arnett's back, causing him to flinch.

"Relax, we are here to help you. I am Hayden's brother, and this is my husband, FBI special agent Tarquin Bloom-Ballard," he gently spoke, continuing to massage the boy's back.

At the mentioning of Tarquin's name and rank, the kid raised his head. "I'm Arnett," he said in a flat voice. "Ask me anything, I will answer honestly."

"Are you all right, Arnett? Do you think you could handle this, in your state?" Daniel asked, worriedly. "Doctor Stuyvesant, the doctor who examined you, said that the

wounds healed remarkably well. I was relieved to hear that, especially since your chances of survival were so slim.” Saying that, the young man mysteriously smiled.

“I ain’t stupid,” the boy spoke in a hostile voice. “I didn’t go to school, but I recognize a trap when I see one. I’ll answer any question related to Hayden or Miss Shannon, and that’s all.”

Daniel lowered his head, realizing how intrusive his question might seem, and probably it was so. “I am sorry, Arnett, I am. You can keep your secrets. I’m never going to bother you again. Promise.”

From where he stood, Tarquin could see the boy’s expression and, judging by it, he wasn’t entirely comfortable in his husband’s presence. After exchanging glances with the young Bloom, he took the lead.

“Tell us everything you remember, it doesn’t have to be in a specific order,” the blond gave Arnett an assuring smile. “We will protect you against anyone who would want to harm you.”

“After we left our great-uncle Alastair’s apartment, he messaged me, saying that Mister Grant mentioned a certain Sydney as being the one who tortured you. Is there anything we should know about him?” Daniel asked in the gentle, but firm voice Alastair used when he talked with him or his cousins.

Arnett huffed. “Sydney was a mean bastard, but in the grand scheme of things, he was just a pawn, maybe even less. They only used him to get to Miss Shannon and Hayden. From what I’ve heard, that guy Carter was the big bad boss. And there were also the Italian fellows.” The boy stopped as if he would have waited to see the effect his words produced on the two men.

Indeed, the mentioning of Italians made Daniel flinch a little. “What about the Italian fellows? Do you know who they were?”

After thinking intensely for a moment, Arnett nodded. “Once, when Sydney was wasted, he told Martha not to worry, he wouldn’t stain his hands with her sister’s blood, he would let his Detroit Mafia friends do it.” The boy balled his hands into fists, his beautiful green-brown eyes full of resentment.

“Why did the boss, that Carter guy, wanted Hayden’s mother dead?” Daniel’s curiosity increased, and his anger got stronger, with each new revelation of the boy.

“I already told you, it’s a bigger, more complicated scheme. Once, I sneaked under Sydney’s office window, peeking inside. There was no one inside, so I jumped into the room. There was a briefcase on the floor. I opened it and took a look inside.” The boy stopped talking, hanging his head low in shame.

Tarquin sensed Arnett’s internal turmoil, so he discreetly signaled to his husband to give the kid a break. Daniel nodded in understanding and started to rub soothing circles on the boy’s back. Gradually, he relaxed, leaning into the touch and

raising his head. The kid stared into the young Bloom's dark-blue eyes, still undecided if he should trust him or not.

However, the hesitation only took one moment, until Arnett noticed the remarkable resemblance between the man who tried to make him feel comfortable, and his beloved. Hayden's brother would never reject or misjudge him. He would be supportive and understanding, the boy thought.

"There were a lot of papers in the briefcase," the kid continued his story. "Official documents, as far as I could tell, like birth records, contracts or something, and a lot of photos. Young guys' photos, attached to files that probably contained personal information of sorts. And there also was some kind of list, I think, with names." After blurting out everything in one go, the boy stopped.

Daniel lightly ran his fingertips through the teenager's long, light-brown strands. "We could take another break if you like. Just let me know if you feel tired or anything. I'll go out for a sec, to check on Hayden, okay?"

"Sure, go ahead," Arnett nodded. Tell your brother that...never mind." A tinge of sadness shadowed his face.

"I'll tell Hayden that you care about him, although I think he already knows. He will spend the night at our cousins' house," Daniel said gently.

While the older of the Bloom brothers went outside, the boy on the hospital bed debated if he should tell the young men that the list was in his possession. Also, he was thinking about whether he should reveal the other information. After a short, but intense internal struggle, Arnett finally made up his mind.

“The list I saw in the briefcase,” he started to talk as soon as Daniel came back into the room, closing the door behind him, “it’s now in a safe place. I took it and hid it. Thought it was important.”

The black-haired young man was startled by the revelation. “Where is it?” he asked in a low voice.

“Someone’s keeping it for me,” Arnett answered. “His name is Colin Rafferty, you can ask for him in the Irish section of the Bronx, he owns a pub named The Gambit there.” The boy fell silent, studying Daniel’s reaction.

“This Colin Rafferty fellow seems to be an interesting man,” Tarquin remarked. “At least, his pub has quite an unusual name,” the blond continued, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“I think he is the highest in their ranks, higher even than Carter. And I also think he is as good as he is dangerous,” Arnett said. “Once, before Miss Shannon took me in, Colin caught Sydney hitting me and beat the bastard so bad that he stayed in the hospital for three straight weeks,” the kid added with satisfaction.

“He seems a great guy, if you ask me,” Daniel grinned, “someone I would be honored to shake hands with. Get some rest, kiddo, I will send one of my men to pick up the list from your friend first thing in the morning.”

“I will do that,” Arnett nodded. “You two do the same. Thank you both for everything you are doing for Hayden,” the boy added in a grateful voice.

“As I said, both of you are very important to us all. I promise that you won’t spend a single hour in jail, you are a good kid who deserves the best.”

With those words, the two husbands left the hospital room, after giving Arnett a last warm hug for the day. During the almost one hour-long drive to the mansion, neither of them said anything, thinking about what they had just heard from Arnett.

First, Tarquin and Daniel would have to figure out what relevance the list had, and then, together with the guys from the team, they would have to find a way to alert Carter’s potential targets before arresting him.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m drained,” Daniel suddenly broke the silence. “All I want is a hot, quick shower and a few hours of sleep.”

“Same here,” Tarquin approved. “However, I still have some energy left, so I’m up for other...activities if you are interested,” he grinned.

“I am sorry, not this time. But I’m sure that there would be plenty of other opportunities,” his husband regretfully turned down the offer.

“Of course, you know better,” the blond smirked.

Tarquin went straight into the master bedroom, while Daniel stayed downstairs for a little while, calling Eugene and checking on Hayden. After spending about an hour in Arnett’s company, the kid was now at the apartment building, where his Stark cousins and the other guys from the team were holding a welcome party for him.

A small smile playing on his lips, Daniel headed to his and Tarquin’s room, when the blond crossed his way. Wrapped in a long, black, silk robe, he was swaying his slim hips right under the black-haired man’s nose, pretending not to see him.

It was too much for Daniel who extended a hand, wrapping it around his loved one’s waist and stopping him in his track. Without giving Tarquin time to react, his husband pushed him against the wall, capturing his mouth in a hot, passionate kiss. No matter how hard the blond tried, it was Daniel who won the battle for dominance, greedily sucking his lover’s lower lip and tongue.

Then, in a swift motion, the raven-haired man shoved his husband against the wall, peeled the robe off of him and pinned him with his hands above his head. For a moment, the

two lovers got lost in each other's eyes, Daniel admiring the flawless perfection of Tarquin's body. Without a single word, the blond wrapped his legs and arms around his husband's waist and neck, needy whimpers escaping from his slightly parted lips.

Eyes darkening, Daniel closed the space between him and the man he loved so much. Spitting into his hand, he coated his cock and thrust two of his wet fingers into his husband's hole after scissoring his fingers, and quickly stretching him, Daniel started to thrust into his hot cavern. With each new movement of his husband's hips, Tarquin was getting closer and closer to his personal heaven.

Smiling evilly, the raven-haired man pounded into the blond's tight ass even harder and deeper than before, nipping at his tender skin and leaving hickeys behind, all over his sensitive neck and chest. In response, his husband dug his heels deeper into his muscular back, starting to let out quiet moans of pleasure.

Sensing that Tarquin was already on the brink of orgasm, Daniel gave him the attention he deserved, grabbing and stroking his cock with one of his hands. Then, gently disentangling the blond's legs from around his waist, the young Bloom changed the angle, putting one of his husband's legs on his shoulder. Tarquin started to moan louder, tilting his head backward and rolling his eyes.

After a series of long, intense, rough thrusts, Daniel shot his load deep inside his husband, while the blond came hard between them, splattering their bellies and chests with cum. Entirely spent, Tarquin laid limp in his beloved's arms, who then carried him into the bathroom, gently putting him in the tub.

About half an hour later, the two men lay in bed, arms wrapped around each other, a warm smile spreading across their faces.

"Listen, Mister Ballard, if you ever pull a stunt like that again..." Daniel started, only to be interrupted by Tarquin, who placed a gentle kiss on his lips.

"You will do what?" the blond cast a knowing glance in his husband's direction, darting his tongue over his sinful, plump pink lips.

"I will punish you so badly, you won't be able to leave the house for an entire month," the young Bloom said in a low, husky voice.

"You could never hurt me, Daniel, and that is why I love you so damn much," Tarquin replied, losing himself into the dark pools of blue his lover's eyes were.

"I love you more than life, my angel," Daniel answered, hugging the blond closer to him.

“It’s not good, Carter, not good at all! Our associates are very unhappy with your activity, or the lack of it, to be more specific,” the man spoke, discontent noticeable in his voice. “They are about to lose what little patience they still have, and I can’t blame them.”

“Come on, father, when have I ever disappointed you? I need some more time, that’s all,” a man in his early to mid-thirties replied nonchalantly. “As for those arrogant bastards, they better be patient and trust us like before. After all, it is you and me who do the hard work and put money into their pockets, not the other way around,” the man named Carter concluded, irritated.

“I must admit you are right, at least on this one. However, you are starting to get too sloppy, son, and that won’t do us any good,” the older man said, in a considerably softer voice.

“Sloppy? What do you mean by that? Everything is going according to plan, father, and I have things under control.” The younger man smiled. “You always said that I get my intelligence from you.”

“Flattering me won’t get you anywhere, son, you should know that by now,” Carter’s father warned him. “Why isn’t Jeremy V. Grant dead by now? Why is his heir still out there, somewhere, instead of being in your custody? And, above all, why isn’t the list containing the names of our targets back in your possession?”

When he heard his father mentioning the list, Carter became tense. The old man was right, leaving the briefcase in Sydney's office, even if for a short while, was an act of inexcusable negligence on his part. After he realized the list was no longer with the other documents, Carter interrogated the lowlife, who vehemently denied the accusations.

Sydney suggested asking Arnett, the half-brained kid living with Hayden, their target, and his mother, one of the obstacles in the way of his plans. He didn't know to read or write and, if the list were in his possession, the retard would turn it over to them. But the waste of space denied it, in spite of Sydney roughing him up.

Carter sighed in frustration. Getting back the list was his number one priority; otherwise, the entire operation would be compromised. On top of that, the fucking retard at the racehorse farm took down seven of the ten armed men their Mafia friends sent to kill the bitch and the old stockbroker. Seven seasoned assassins eliminated by a kid with a gun. How the hell was that even possible?

No matter how good of a psychiatrist he was, Carter couldn't hide from his father, the man knew him better than he knew himself. At the age of sixty-one, Isaac Williamson was one of the most respectable estate planning lawyers from

Boston. His dark-brown hair was cut short, the white strands appearing here and there giving him an air of distinction.

Well fit for his age, Isaac Williamson didn't spare any expense when it came to clothes. The most famous designers created his suits, the impressive number of shirts he had were all hand-made, the accessories were of the most exceptional quality. But the luxurious lifestyle the Boston lawyer was accustomed to drained his considerable resources in no time. So, instead of giving it up, he made his wealthy clients pay for it.

The scheme was pretty simple. With the help of his son Carter, Isaac Williamson picked his victims from the rich folks who only had one, troubled, under-aged child. He convinced the client to sign guardianship of their only heir to him. Within a year, the client died, and the orphan became Carter's patient.

The psychiatrist messed with the kid's mind, making them sign a will in his or his father's favor, then he got rid of them one way or another. Everything was going smoothly until Elliott Spellmann happened.

CHAPTER 12

“There’s no point in crying over spilled milk,” Isaac Williamson said, patting the spot next to him, inviting his son to take a seat on the comfortable leather couch. “Now, relax and tell me how things are going with the Spellmann brat. That has already taken too long.”

“Don’t worry, father, he will be dead sooner than you think,” Carter’s answer came in an assuring voice. “The little whiner won’t see it coming. His mind is already so messed up that, when he finally decides to end his miserable life, no one will be surprised.”

The Boston lawyer smiled ferociously. “That is exactly what I needed to hear, after all the bad news. Would you be so kind and share with your old father?”

“Of course, it would be my pleasure, as always. You see, when you sent Spellmann here to New York Coty, to work at your law school friend’s firm, I was confused and disappointed by your decision. I have to confess I thought you had developed a soft spot for that pathetic form of life. Pretty soon, I realized how wrong I was,” Carter sounded genuinely repentant.

“When was that?” Williamson asked, satisfied that someone as brilliant as his son recognized the superiority of his intellect.

“Well, Spellmann came out to you when he was fifteen, and Mister Weldon’s law office shows zero tolerance to the employees having a deviant sexual orientation. A little

too conservative for my tastes, but this exaggeration serves our purpose excellently.” It was Carter’s turn to harbor a satisfied smile.

Williamson rubbed his hands together, in a gesture of evil satisfaction. “Working in an intolerant environment would put extra pressure on Spellmann’s shoulders, and he will eventually give up. Brilliant!”

“Thank you, father, I don’t deserve your praise,” Carter said, slightly dipping his head. “Things will happen just as you described. More than that, the whiner’s only friend is another gay guy in a similar situation. Of course, there’s also the stupid bitch he took in, but how could the stray help him?”

The Boston lawyer had a thoughtful look. “There is something you didn’t take into consideration, son. You didn’t manage to completely break him then, what makes you think you will succeed now?”

Carter cleared his throat, visibly embarrassed, knowing his father was right. No matter how much he played with the kid’s mind, how harsh the punishments implemented on him were or how hard and far the brat was pushed, he didn’t give up. At some point, his personality split, and, instead of leading to his destruction, this helped Elliott to survive.

By day, he was a brilliant student who had graduated Harvard Law School at the incredible age of eighteen, the one who was admired by his fellow students and professors alike.

When the sun set, however, Elliott was the helpless victim of his therapist, suffering unspeakable horrors at Carter's hands.

Somehow, no matter how badly they beat him, the teen managed to pick up the pieces, stick them together and continued to play the charade, deceiving everyone. He kept quiet about the psychological and physical abuse to the point that he didn't even inform his lawyer. In his naivety, Elliott saw him as a father figure, and he didn't want to upset the attorney by telling him about Carter and his cruel ways.

"Maybe I didn't succeed in breaking Spellmann back then, but that was because I was stubborn and didn't take a partner to help me."

Suddenly, Isaac Williamson wasn't so sure his son was as intelligent as he thought he was. "Why the hell would you need help with breaking that pathetic excuse of a human being down? Involving an outsider in our business would..."

"With all due respect, father," Carter abruptly interrupted the older man's furious tirade, "you sent Spellmann to New York because the police were starting to get nosy. We wouldn't want that to happen again, would we? Involving someone else means getting ourselves the perfect scapegoat," a sly smile formed on Carter's lips as he spoke.

"You know what, son? Now I regret that I didn't twist your arm into studying law, instead of leaving you to choose your future career. You would have been a hell of a good

lawyer. Now, tell me, please, I want to know everything,” the Boston lawyer rubbed his hands together once more.

“Well, there is this guy, Richard Benard, the nephew of Mister Weldon’s wife. As a lawyer, he has zero competence or inclinations, but because he likes the finest things in life, the dude is considered perfect as the office’s image. Being the privileged asshole he is, Benard hasn’t any enemies, but he can’t stand Spellmann and the other closeted gay lawyer.”

“And? How exactly did you use that to our advantage? What did you make him do?” Williamson asked, curiosity filling his voice.

“In exchange for a considerable amount of money, I gave him some notes in my handwriting, to sneak them under our client’s door. It will make him lose what little sanity he still has.” Carter’s eyes sparked of evilness as he pictured a terrified, devastated Elliott.

“So long, Spellmann,” the Boston lawyer gleefully exclaimed. “It is about time we get rid of him. It’s taken too long already. Plus, everything went wrong from the beginning, because of that madman’s interference in our plan.”

Initially, Williamson recalled, letting out a long, frustrated sigh, Jacob Spellmann and his wife were supposed to die in a car accident, when Elliott would have been around fourteen years old. But the twisted-minded scientist decided he wanted the boy as a lab rat for his crazy experiments, and everything went down the drain.

It took two years for the lawyer and his not-so-respectable friends to track down the facility and get the kid out of there. His state of mind was very fragile, but he proved to be tougher than Williamson and Carter estimated. The lawyer dismissed any thoughts of Elliott, turning once again to his son.

“Enough of this! Tell me about the new case. I want to know every little detail.”

“My current project’s name is Ezra; he’s almost nineteen, the only son of a respectable, wealthy woman named Selma Redmayne. No matter how hard I tried, I managed to find only a little bit about the father. All I have is that he left his wife when she was pregnant, but made Ezra the only beneficiary of his will.”

“Did you meet the target yet? What is he like?” Williamson already could smell the blood to be shed, so he could get his hands on even more money.

“Well, he is a little different than the other ones, that’s for sure,” Carter replied, a thoughtful look in his eyes. “Of course, little Ezra is as sweet as can be and head over heels in love with me, but there’s something about him that bothers me a lot.”

“What do you mean by that?” Williamson frowned.

“I don’t know, sometimes the kid has a strange spark in his eyes as if he’s warning me not to mess with him. Speaking of those eyes... sometimes, they give me chills down my spine.” After staying silent for a few seconds, Carter spoke

again. “I just had an idea. I think I know how to break little Ezra’s mind and body.” A cruel, twisted rictus formed on the psychiatrist’s lips as he spoke.

“There’s my son, that’s how I like to see you,” the Boston estate planning lawyer said, lightly clapping his hands. “Go, bring them down, show them what you’re made of,” he continued, clapping Carter on his back.

“I will do that, and even more, father. Soon, that brat will be dead, and the Spellmann fortune will be finally ours to enjoy.”

Elliott lay in bed, completely relaxed, smiling weakly. For the first time in months, he didn’t dread going to work on Monday. It wasn’t anything wrong with the job itself. It was the way everyone looked at him that bothered the young lawyer. Although he stayed as deep in the closet as he could, Elliott was almost sure that at least four people suspected he was gay.

One of them was Mister Somerset’s primary assistant, Gloria, who he was sure would never betray his secret. The other two were his co-workers, but, besides some innuendos here and there, they didn’t express a particular interest in Elliott’s private life. But there was also Richard Benard, the man who hated his and Mallory’s guts.

Because he was related to one of the senior partners, the man had a nasty attitude, treating everybody, except the big bad bosses, like dirt. Every Monday morning, Benard asked Elliott who took him to bed over the weekend, what gay club he frequented and so on. It was like a ritual for the man, who enjoyed seeing the desperate expression of his victim, the pleading look in the young man's eyes.

Well, not anymore. This morning, Benard would be in for a big surprise, because he would meet an entirely different Elliott. One who would not try to hide away, hoping in vain that he could avoid his tormentor. Of course, he will try to figure out why the target of his bullying would be so unresponsive to the teasing and taunting, but he would never find the answer to that.

Because it was not a what, but a who. Eugene Brentano, the man Elliott attempted to kick out of his life four days earlier, had come back and taken his heart away with his soft voice, gentlemanly manners and the concerned expression he harbored every time he looked at the blond lawyer.

But the thing that swept Elliott off of his feet, making him fall into Eugene's open arms was the ferocious determination in the man's voice when he spoke to Christine and Mallory in the kitchen. "*I would kill and bury with my own two hands anyone who even thinks about harming him,*" Eugene said then, his words freeing Elliott from the chains holding him prisoner.

Later, after dinner, the two of them had an in-depth, long talk about what each of them wanted from an eventual relationship and how they pictured the future as a couple. What they could have, if Elliott would agree to it, was not something for everyone, Eugene warned him.

First, they would have to trust each other, to be completely honest with one another. At this point, the blond instinctively started to shiver, memories of his past with Carter, resurfacing brutally and pulling him under, assaulting his mind, suffocating him. Eugene didn't yell at Elliott to stop faking it, didn't hit or punish him in any other way.

Instead, the man took the young lawyer in his strong arms, carrying him upstairs to his room, where he gently placed the blond on the bed, in a sitting position, and started to massage his shoulders. Under Eugene's skillful hands, the muscles in his back and shoulders began to de-stress, Elliott gradually relaxing.

Then there was the note. The white piece of paper on the corner of the dresser, same shape and size as ever. So insignificant, so easy to ignore. As simple as it looked, it was the source of the blond's nightmares for over six months. More specific, the words it contained were the ones that kept him awake almost every night and brought back memories of a horrible past.

Elliott closed his eyes, praying for the note to be ignored by Eugene, but that didn't happen. The older man noticed the square piece of paper that hadn't been there moments earlier and went straight to it, picking it up. When he read the words written there, Brentano took a seat next to the blond, without saying anything.

Elliott froze on the spot, seeing the redness creeping up the man's face, and his eyes narrowing, the tell-tale signs of an incoming wave of rage. He started to shake uncontrollably, scurrying away from Eugene's touch.

"Amore, don't do this to me, don't push me away, please!" the older male implored, his eyes filled with pain and concern. "The last thing I want is to hurt you," he continued, tentatively touching Elliott's cheek with the tips of his fingers.

"I am so sorry you had to see this, it's not going to happen again. You won't see something like that again, I swear, I..."

"Who wrote this? Who plays these dirty mind games with you? I want the name of the motherfucker who messes with someone so precious to me," Eugene spoke, gently but firmly.

"It's Carter. Carter Williamson, my...former therapist and..." Elliott was unable to continue, hanging his head low in shame. "He never loved me, I... I can't talk about this."

“This Carter bastard... is he here, in New York City? Is he from the city?” the older man continued to ask questions in the same soft voice from earlier.

Inhaling sharply, Elliott raised his head, looking straight into Eugene’s eyes. “He lives in Boston, is one of the most reputable psychiatrists there. His father...Carter is the son of my lawyer, Isaac Williamson, who doesn’t know anything about what his son did to me.”

“Do you believe you are ugly, worthless and a filthy, stupid, little whore? Because I don’t believe that. I will show you right here and now how much I value you.”

With those words, Eugene started to slowly, carefully undress Elliott, leaving him in only his briefs. Then, he began to kiss the blond all over his face, descending to his neck, chest, hands, and finally to his legs. Lowering his head, the Detroit Mafia boss slightly parted the young lawyer’s legs, kissing his inner thighs.

Feeling Eugene’s warm breath fanning against his skin, Elliott started to let out moans of pleasure, arching his back, begging for more attention. When the young Brentano raised his head, casting the blond a questioning look, he answered with a whimper, wrapping his arms around the other man’s neck and offering his mouth for Eugene to take in a passionate, heated, savage, sweet, never-ending kiss.

Eugene's heart hammered in his chest, so hard that, for a moment, he was afraid it would break his ribcage, bursting out of it. He broke from the kiss, then drew a much-needed breath of air as he admired the young man spread on the bed for only him. Elliot was his to worship and possess. Without realizing it, Elliott took the first step in surrendering control to Eugene.

“My beautiful one, you don't know how hard it is for me right now to control myself, to hold back my lust, to put a stop to the urge of taking you. I want to mark you as mine. But I have to do it, for your good... and mine,” Eugene spoke, lightly touching the blond's chest with the tips of his fingers.

“I...I understand, I do,” Elliott whispered, his chest constricting in pain. “Thank you for your honesty and... for all the rest. It was good, I only wished it... never mind.”

“No, amore, you don't understand, what you think is not true at all. I'm only trying to tell you this is not the right time for us to be together, not while you're still haunted by a past I can't do anything to shelter you from.” Eugene's voice was sincere, his eyes filled with adoration.

Elliott jolted awake suddenly, then smiled at the fresh memories of him and the man who, in such a short time, had become so important to him. Stretching lazily under the warm blankets, he stalled a few more minutes in bed. He then went to the bathroom and started to perform his morning ritual. Half an hour later, the blond was dressed entirely, suit, tie, and everything. He then headed downstairs to eat breakfast.

Halfway through his plate, Elliott was interrupted by the beeping of his phone. He smiled, seeing that was Mallory calling, most likely to check if there was still something left for him to eat.

“Hello, early bird!” the blond was the first to speak. “Christine set a plate aside. You better come before it gets cold.”

“Good morning, Spellmann, I never say no to a breakfast cooked by my lovely girlfriend. Anyway, I wanted to thank you for the car. It’s all I wanted and more.”

“What car?” Elliott frowned, although he was aware Mallory couldn’t see him.

“The one you... wait a minute, are you saying that it wasn’t from you?”

“No, I didn’t buy you a car, new or otherwise.”

“Okay, then, I’m on my way to your place.”

Twenty minutes and several whistles of admiration later, the two young men were on their way to Weldon, Somerset & Associates, trying to solve the mystery of Mallory’s new car. After parking in the spot reserved for the junior partner of the firm, both lawyers headed to the reception area, noticing the discreet signs Miss Gloria was making in their direction.

“Good morning, Miss, you look gorgeous as ever,” Elliott gave her a bright, sincere smile.

“Look who’s talking, Mr. Handsome! You look better than ever, my boy. They must be exceptional”, the woman smiled back.

“Yes, he is,” the blond blurted out, not realizing what he was saying.

“You look good too, Mallory, baby,” the receptionist-assistant said, after checking the other young man. “Now, move your pretty little asses into Mr. Somerset’s office. Alastair Stark arrived two minutes ago. They are waiting for you two,” she added in a conspiring voice.

After knocking on the door two times in a row, Elliott and Mallory heard Somerset’s voice telling them to come in and take a seat. The young men entered and sat, but, instead of relaxing, Mallory froze on the spot. In front of him, staring into his eyes, was the charming, much older redhead who’d stolen his heart a few weeks earlier.

CHAPTER 13

“Mister Stark, it’s a real pleasure to meet you,” James Weldon, the older of the two senior associates in the firm said, shaking Alastair’s hand. With his three-piece suit, silk tie and antique watch attached to the vest, the man was the embodiment of the successful lawyer concept.

“I am glad to meet you, too, Mister Weldon,” the former CIA director smiled coldly, “I heard a lot of interesting things about this law office in general and you in particular.”

“Well, I only hope those interesting things you heard of were also good things,” Weldon replied. As he found out from different, more or less official sources, Alastair Stark had the reputation, among other things, of making good use of words and their meanings.

“They sure are, Mister Weldon, they sure are. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here, would I?” the redhead said, smiling mysteriously. “I’ve come in peace to bring you good news, but let’s wait for Mister Somerset first, he deserves to hear them too. You are partners after all.”

“Sure, it’s the right thing to do,” the lawyer approved, mainly because the other man didn’t leave him any other choice. That farmer’s son who was his associate made it clear in the discussion they’d had over the weekend that he, the great James Weldon, had to pack his things and leave the firm, first thing in the morning. Before that, he was going to impress Stark, show him what a real boss was made of.

When Somerset gave him the news that all the firm's shares were in his possession, Weldon had yelled at the man, accused him of betrayal, then ended up begging to be spared public humiliation, and his partner agreed. He was going to retire discreetly, packing his personal belongings after the meeting. With the generosity of the winner, Somerset also allowed to his soon to be former associate to be the one who'd meet Alastair first.

Like all the other well-reputed law firms and independent professionals from New York City, James Weldon also heard of Alastair Stark's search for an office able to provide top quality, prompt and exclusive services. Together with his associate, Matthew Somerset, he decided to try the waters, although the competition was fierce.

While the two men waited for the other senior partner, Weldon thought that Stark's presence in his office could mean only one thing. They had been selected to represent Bloom Enterprises and Stark, Inc. His thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock on the door, most likely one of the experienced employees, or even Ricky Benard, his wife's nephew, a young man with a great future ahead.

To Weldon's disappointment, it was only that old, black woman who was playing receptionist, when in fact she was Somerset's eyes and ears in the lobby and reception area. He would have kicked her big, fat ass out of the office a long time ago, but his associate had decided to keep her around.

“Yes, Gloria, what is it?” Weldon asked in a bored voice, showing the woman she was not welcome there.

“Mister Somerset said he’s been waiting for you and Mister Stark for twenty minutes already, wondering if you read the memo I put on your desk.” The woman shook her head, rolling her eyes. Then suddenly, she saw Alastair. “Well hello there, Mister Stark, nice to meet you in person.”

“Nice to meet you too, Miss Gloria,” the man smiled charmingly, shaking her hand. Then, casting her a worried look, he continued. “I hope everything is well with the boys. Did you see them already this morning?”

“Not yet, but they will appear soon, those blessed souls are never late like others are most of the time,” Gloria replied, shooting daggers in Weldon’s direction.

As an exasperated Weldon showed Alastair the way to his partner’s office, he turned to the woman, winking at her and grinning widely. She chose to ignore the man’s coded messages, but her heart jumped joyously for her favorite boys. This Mister Stark was indeed a man of his word. A good man, she could sense it.

“Come in. I’ve been waiting for you,” Matthew Somerset, the main senior partner in the firm, spoke, inviting the two men in his office. I can’t tell you how honored I am having someone like you here, Mister Stark”, the man continued, shaking Alastair’s hand.

“The pleasure is mine,” the answer came, accompanied by a smile directed to Somerset. “I heard a lot of good things about you and some of your younger employees,” the former head of CIA continued.

“Do sit down, Mister Stark, and tell us more, please, about the reason you’re here. You can take a seat, too, James,” Somerset ended the sentence on a less pleasant voice than the one he used when speaking to Alastair.

“Well, after going through a ton of emails, a particular one got my full attention. It was a complex business law case study, that, according to my humble opinion, demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the federal and state legal stipulations regarding different conflicts that can affect a contract or impending transaction. I was so impressed that I decided to search no more, and go with your office instead.”

“It’s a very inspired decision, Mister Stark, I and my associate will do everything in our power to make you happy by providing you with the most competent legal advice, helping your companies develop and prosper,” Weldon couldn’t contain his excitement at the news.

“I may be an old-school gentleman, but this doesn’t mean I am not open to everything that’s new. There’s something heartwarming about young people’s enthusiasm. Especially when they want to prove they’re worthy of the boss’, or bosses,’ trust. That is why I want to know the younger lawyers working in this office,” Alastair smiled mysteriously.

Neither of the two associates offered him a reply, each of them having his ideas about what younger lawyers meant. Weldon, who came from an old money family, was always frustrated that it wasn't him who'd turned a small law office into a successful firm, but his associate, the son of a mere farmer. That was why he was hell-bent on smoothing the way for his nephew, Richard Benard so that the young man could take over the firm, his associate's share included.

Somerset, on the other hand, worked hard for a full scholarship and even harder to pay for the books he needed that he couldn't borrow from a library or another student. Because of this, he valued those employees who put extra time and effort to keep the standards at the high level he had set them decades earlier. That was why he became attached to Mallory Ashburn and that pale, quiet blond who always hung out with him, Elliott Spellmann.

"Sure, Mister Stark, in fact, I was about to talk to you about the most promising young lawyer working here, an outstanding talent when it comes to negotiation, the future of this company," Weldon started, as always, to exaggerate his wife's nephew's qualities.

"You are talking about either Mister Ashburn or Mister Spellmann, I suppose," Alastair relaxed in the giant armchair.

"No, not at all, those two are mediocre at best, the name of the young man in question is Richard Benard."

“Well, it isn’t his lucky day, because I came here determined to meet Ashburn and Spellmann and talk to them,” the Stark family’s patriarch smiled ironically. “However, Mister Weldon, you can bring that Benard guy in here, too, if you insist.”

And there they were, Mallory and Elliott under the scrutiny of the potential client who could make the firm they worked for even more famous than it already was. Mostly because he spent almost the entire Sunday with Eugene and the kids, enjoying their company, Elliott looked better, more confident than usual, the bags under his eyes less dark and heavy.

Mallory, on the other hand, had another sleepless night, trying to figure out how to make the most of his already stretched to the limit budget. The debutantes’ ball was less than three weeks away, and his younger sister needed a dress for the occasion, the payment for his brother’s car was due in a week, and he hadn’t managed to buy anything for himself, not even a shirt.

Suddenly, Mallory lowered his head, too ashamed of his old suit and shirt, out-of-fashion shoes and lack of jewelry to look into the redhead’s eyes. The man was the epitome of sophistication, why would he want to have anything to do with someone like himself?

“Are you all right? Sorry, I don’t know who is who here. I am Alastair Stark, by the way,” the man spoke, extending his hand.

“Mallory Ashburn, meeting you is an honor, sir,” he replied, shaking the hand the redhead offered.

“Elliott Spellmann,” the blond introduced himself, giving the older man a vigorous handshake.

“I am thrilled to meet both of you,” Alastair gave them a warm, fatherly smile. “Let me congratulate you on the project you submitted on behalf of your firm. It was quite impressive. I am happy to inform both of you that, from now on, you, under Mister Somerset’s supervision, will be in charge of everything regarding the companies’ part of the Stark and Bloom estate.”

Eyes widened in shock, the three lawyers stayed silent for a few seconds. Then, summoning the little courage he had, Mallory decided to speak. “With all due respect, sir, this cannot be. Elliott nor I would disrupt the hierarchy, bringing chaos to this office.”

Looking into the young man’s beautiful, chocolate-brown eyes, Alastair could see he didn’t lie. That he was determined to leave the things as they were, most likely because he wasn’t born to the right family. “What if I told you that having you and Elliott in charge is a mandatory condition for sealing the deal?”

Mallory shook his head slowly, taking a deep breath. “Don’t do this to your companies, don’t blow the work of your parents and ancestors into the wind. All those people worked so hard to bring them to where they are now. And you, instead

of passing on their legacy, are ready to destroy everything for a whim?”

As he looked into Mallory’s eyes, Alastair could see the mix of disappointment and despair in them. The former head of the Dragons’ House knew, deep inside, that the young lawyer was right. None of his more experienced, arrogant co-workers would listen to him, so all the pressure, the hard work, would weigh down on Mallory’s and Elliott’s fragile shoulders.

“There is a way for everything, including this,” Somerset broke the uncomfortable silence in the room. “Anyway, Mister Stark, first I would like to make sure that this is what you want.” The lawyer looked straight into his potential client’s piercing, dark-green eyes.

Alastair nodded. “Yes, I want Mallory Ashburn and Elliott Spellmann to be in charge of everything related to Stark, Inc and Bloom Enterprises. I won’t change my mind. You have my word.”

“Good. Look, this is how I am going to solve the problem. You appoint me as the associate in charge of everything, and I am going to need two assistants to keep up with the huge volume of work. Then, I am going to delegate my work regarding your companies to my new assistants.”

“And the names of the two new assistants happen to be Mallory Ashburn and Elliott Spellmann?” Alastair smiled amused.

“Exactly,” Somerset answered, returning the smile. “You see, Mister Stark, Mallory is right, no one will listen to him or Elliott, if they go there by themselves, no matter how hard working and intelligent they are. On the other hand, invested with my authority...”

“They would carry the orders of the big bad boss, and no one would dare to oppose them,” Alastair finished the sentence, smiling maliciously. “You know, Mister Somerset, I am starting to like you very much. We have a deal, then.”

Right then, a knock on the door signaled the return of Weldon, accompanied by a young man about Mallory’s age, maybe a year or two younger. He was dressed in a designer suit, wore classy shoes and expensive accessories, his nails manicured and hair perfectly styled. The brown-green eyes of the young man had a self-sufficient expression that made Alastair dislike him instantly.

“Good morning, Matthew, sorry I’m late, the traffic was hellish this morning,” he said, taking a seat without being invited to. Then, noticing Alastair, he stood up again, extending his hand. “I am glad to meet you, Mister Stark. It will be a pleasure to work for you. My name is Richard Benard, but I think James already mentioned it.”

Alastair took the extended hand, but he only held it for a few seconds before letting it go. “The traffic is hellish, indeed, but, if you leave from home earlier... Anyway, what

does an old man like me know? Mister Somerset here and I belong to another era. We still cling to politeness and other values that are considered outdated by the younger generation.”

Benard looked at the man, not knowing what to say. Suddenly, he saw Elliott, his favorite bullying target. “Hey, Matthew, what is this loser doing here? Who let him in? That Gloria woman should do her job better and not let just anyone into your office.”

“Elliott and I are here as per Mister Stark and Mister Somerset’s express request,” Mallory spoke coldly. “You better show him some respect. I am saying this for your good, Benard.”

“Oh, really, Ashburn? How sweet of you to defend your little lover! Well, it looks like the two of you did end up in bed together, after all.” Richard fell silent, waiting for the bomb he dropped to produce its effect.

To his great disappointment, none of the four men made any comments to what he said. Both Elliott and Mallory had neutral expressions. They didn’t even flinch when Benard called them names. The one who reacted was Somerset, who smiled slyly and pressed the intercom.

“Gloria, would you be so kind as to bring me the contracts I gave you this morning? Please, girl, make it ASAP!” Then, he turned to his associate’s wife’s nephew, ready to put the bastard in his place. “Yes, it’s an official thing,

there's no point in denying it any longer. Mallory and Elliott ended up together, in the same bed, and it's entirely my doing."

"What do you mean by that, Matthew? You knew it all along and chose not to inform my uncle? That is..." He was cut short by Gloria, who came in bringing two manila folders.

"Anything else, sir?" the woman asked Somerset, putting the folders on the desk, in front of him.

"No, thank you, young lady," the lawyer smiled. "Oh, you should stay here a little longer, I think you are going to like this."

"As you wish, Mister Somerset," Gloria answered, a confused expression on her face.

"Okay, boys, these are the documents I was telling you about earlier. Once you sign them, everything becomes official."

The two lawyers nodded, signing the papers in front of them. As they did, Alastair studied Somerset's expression. Something was off there, he could sense it, but it wasn't something wrong, at least not for the boys. There was more about the old lawyer than met the eye, the former CIA director thought.

"Good job, fellows," Somerset smiled, shaking Mallory's and Elliott's hands. "Now, about your uncle,

Benard, and the role he plays in this firm. Starting from today, James Weldon is no more a partner in this law office, not when his share is only ten percent.”

“But ...but he owned forty percent of it, what happened to the rest? You stripped him of his share, didn't you, Matthew? Nothing more than a greedy, manipulative farmer's son that is all you are!” Benard lashed out, without giving a fuck about who was listening to him.

“Over the years, your uncle James borrowed huge amounts of money from different people, using portions of his share as collateral. I couldn't sit and watch how he destroyed what I've spent the best years of my life creating, so, every time James did this, I paid his loans in exchange for the shares he guaranteed it with. This morning, I informed your uncle about the new situation and asked him to leave, which he agreed.”

Richard Benard was shocked by Somerset's revelations, but he also suspected something even more terrible. “So, you intend to run the office by yourself now, huh?”

“Not at all. I am going to retire, leaving some younger, more qualified lawyers to run the firm from now on. Gentlemen and lady, it's my pleasure to introduce you to the new bosses of the office, Mister Mallory Ashburn and Mister Elliott Spellmann.”

CHAPTER 14

“What?!” Richard Benard couldn’t believe what his uncle’s partner just said. “Are you out of your mind, Matthew? How could you leave the office in the hands of these... these...” He was unable to continue, anger and frustration suffocating him.

“I would be more careful with your words, if I were you, Dick,” Mallory intervened in an ice-cold voice. “He may no longer be an associate here, but you still owe him respect as a senior employee. That is, of course, if you still want to keep your job here,” the young lawyer smiled coldly.

“Well, as I see it, congratulations are in order,” Alastair left his seat, shaking hands with Elliott, then turning to Mallory. The former Supreme Dragon took the lawyer’s hand and smiled, lightly massaging it. “Congratulation, Mister Ashburn, you deserve this and more.”

“So, it looks like I am going to have new bosses to work my ass off for,” Gloria smiled brightly, pulling both young men into a warm, motherly hug. “I am very happy for you, my boys,” she added.

“I worked in and for this office, since I was twenty-five — a fresh law graduate with nothing more than a diploma, the will to succeed and hard work. I worked for almost thirty-five years in a row, not allowing myself to rest. No wife or kids by my side, because I had no time for distractions. Here I am, at sixty-two, with no one I could leave the firm to until

you. Then you came into my life, dear boys. I've put you to the test enough; now I can rest assured, knowing that the fruit of my hard work is in good hands." Somerset stated, emotionally.

"I better go, gather everyone and tell them you will be making an important announcement, Mister Somerset. With your permission, Mister Ashburn, Mister Spellmann," Gloria smiled through tears.

Alastair couldn't take his eyes from Mallory, who looked the same, but yet completely different. He had more of everything. More authority, noticeable especially in his posture, more charisma, more confidence. The lawyer seemed surrounded by an aura of power; his eyes shone with passion and determination.

Arranging his tie and smoothing the fine wrinkles on his coat by running his palm over them, Mallory was getting ready to be introduced as one of the new senior associates of the law office he had slaved in for the last seven years.

Outside, in the lobby, most of the employees received the news with a mixture of relief, concern, and curiosity. Relief for Weldon's departure, as only very few of them liked him. Concern for Somerset's retirement, because almost all perceived him as the captain of the ship, and curiosity because almost nobody knew anything about the new associates.

Alastair waited patiently in the office that, most likely, would be Mallory's once Somerset retired and moved his personal belongings out. Through the glass wall, he could hear how the young man talked with his former co-workers, assuring them that no one would lose their job, on the contrary, each of them would get a substantial raise.

The patriarch of the Stark family smiled, happy to see finally see good deeds being awarded. He didn't doubt that neither Mallory nor Elliott would fire Benard. On the contrary, they would keep him, at least for the moment, making him either give up his ways and work hard or resign.

"Excuse me for the delay, Mister Stark," Mallory started to speak, closing the door behind him. "Elliott will join us in a minute, and then we can discuss all the details of our business agreement."

"Take your time, Mister Ashburn. I am not in a hurry, especially now, that I know my family's companies are in yours and Mister Spellmann's competent hands," Alastair gave the young lawyer a warm smile.

"Over the next few hours, Elliott and I will reorganize everything, leaving other cases and clients to our experienced co-workers. This way, we can dedicate all our time to Bloom Enterprises and Stark, Inc."

Alastair smiled again, letting out a small, barely audible sigh. "Your parents must be very proud of you, Mister Ashburn. I know I would be if I'd had a son like you."

“Well, I guess they are, although they’ve never told me, and I never asked.” Mallory’s tone was as professional as minutes before. His look didn’t betray any emotion, but Alastair knew he hit a sensitive spot.

“Excuse me, I had some things to care of,” Elliott entered the office. “However, I managed to reschedule some of our prior engagements, and I called the respective clients to explain the newly created situation. Surprisingly, they were very understanding. I also...”

“Elliott, calm down, you have plenty of time to take care of everything and a lot of people willing to help you with whatever you may need. Miss Gloria, for instance...” Mallory was abruptly interrupted when the very woman he mentioned came into the office, after softly knocking two times.

“Today is not a good day for me. I seem to barge in at the worst moments, interrupting something important every time. However, a Mister Eugene Boormann asks to speak with one of the associates and, since both of you are here...”

“Eugene Boormann? Doesn’t he have an entire army of lawyers representing him and the media corporations he owns?” Elliott asked, a little surprised.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Mallory replied. “Send him in, Gloria.”

When Eugene Boormann stepped inside the office, the only man who didn’t react to his presence was Alastair. Mallory’s eyes widened in surprise, and Elliott was petrified,

because, only a few feet away from him, stood the man who'd promised to protect him and chase away his demons and fears.

He was the man who'd treated him with so much care and tenderness; the one who Elliott wanted so desperately to trust was nothing but a huge lie. Eugene Brentano never existed, he was just a figment of his screwed up mind. Just another myth he invented to escape the pain of a tormented past.

The black sports car pulled up across the street from The Gambit, Colin Rafferty's bar. The two men inside it carefully inspected their surroundings. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, at least at first look. It was the traditionally Irish neighborhood, with solid-built brick houses, with white picket fences and flower beds in the front yards. After making sure no danger was present, the two got out of the car.

Through the bar's window, Rafferty saw the men getting closer and suspected they were there to see him. Judging by the clothes they wore and the expensive car parked across the street, they didn't belong to his usual clientele. That was composed mainly of working-class men, who came to enjoy a drink or two once they finished for the day.

When the two stepped inside, Colin took a better look at them — wondering what someone like they were doing in a

place like this. The raven-haired man, with his solid built and stern look, had most likely a military or law enforcement-related job. It was the blond kid the one who got Rafferty's attention, with his pale skin, sky-blue, and tired eyes marked by dark, heavy bags.

“What can I get you to drink?” Colin asked, motioning with his head to the dark-haired man. “Only water or juice for him, since he is not twenty-one yet,” he continued, making the same movement toward the blond, who smiled and blushed, lowering his head.

“Two orange juices, please! I don't drink alcohol either. Sorry for disappointing you on that one, Mister Rafferty. Oh, by the way, my name is Daniel Bloom,” the black-haired said extending his hand.

“Tarquin Bloom-Ballard,” the blond spoke in a soft voice, then smiled. “I am his husband,” he pointed to the man next to him.

“Nice to meet you, gentlemen,” Colin shook their hands. While shaking the blond's hand, he noticed them: dark, big bruises all around the kid's wrists, most likely caused by the brute standing next to him. Sebastian's wrists had been bruised almost all the time, too, and, like this poor blond kid, he had no one to turn to.

“Is something wrong, Mister Rafferty?” the blond asked worriedly, a troubled look in his beautiful, blue eyes. He made a sudden move, exposing his bruised neck.

“Do you need help, son?” Colin asked him as gently as he could, wanting to hug the fragile boy, taking all his pain away.

“Yes, I do. In fact, we both need help. You see, we are friends with Arnett, and he said you have something of his, a list he gave you.”

Rafferty gave Tarquin a look full of regret. “Look, son, it’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s the abusive bastard standing next to you.” The man gritted his teeth, barely managing to control his anger.

All the time his husband spoke with the bar owner, Daniel studied the man. In his middle to late forties, he had gray hair and heavy stubble, also gray. Rafferty’s dark blue eyes had a somehow tired and resigned expression, but Daniel guessed that it was just a facade. Underneath it, he suspected, it was passion and the will to fight to the bitter end for something he believed in.

But what intrigued the young Bloom the most was the way Rafferty spoke. Unlike most of the Irish residents from Windsor Terrace, he didn’t have the harsh, specific accent and singsong voice. Instead, the man spoke like a highly educated person, reminding Daniel very much of his uncles Fabian and Alastair.

There was a way to solve the mystery that surrounded Colin Rafferty, so Tarquin’s husband discreetly took the phone

out of his pocket and speed-dialed Darien. Their expert linguist would establish the man's origin based on his conversation with the blond that they broadcasted live.

Sipping from his orange juice, Tarquin chose to ignore Colin's remark about his husband being abusive. "The Gambit. Quite an interesting name for a bar, Mister Rafferty. You must be very fond of playing chess," he smiled shyly.

"Yes, I am. What about you, son? Who named you after that cruel, depraved Roman king?" Rafferty instinctively knew that there was something special about the blond kid. He knew much more than he let others see. Sebastian was the same, but they almost crushed his spirit. Almost.

"My revered grandmother named my father that, and being the only child, I was named after him," the blond whispered, saddened. "Well, since you can't help us, Mister Rafferty, it's time for us to go. Sorry for wasting your time, and don't worry about Arnett. Sure, he will be disappointed, but Daniel will explain everything to him. My husband is very good with kids, Mister Rafferty."

"Come, my angel, I am sure we can find our way out," the raven-haired men said, taking one of the blond's hands and kissing it. "Have a good day, mister, and thanks for nothing," he turned to the bar owner.

Just when the two were about to step out, a sleek black car appeared from around the corner, heading to The Gambit. Colin sensed the danger, and bent down under the counter,

taking his gun from its secret hiding place, ready to defend his own life and those of his unexpected clients.

Meantime, the two visitors were on the ground, the black-haired man aiming at the occupants of the car, who started to shoot round after round through the bar's large windows, which turned into a million shards in a matter of seconds. The blond typed on his phone, probably messaging someone for help, although Rafferty didn't understand why the kid didn't call 911.

Suddenly, the car started to lose control, doing flip-flops in the air. Somehow, two of the men inside managed to escape unharmed, before the vehicle turned into a mass of contorted metal surrounded by flames. The two gunmen followed a third, younger, armed, redhead man, who intended to use the bar as a shelter. Just when he got inside, one of the hit-men fired, but the bullet grazed the black-haired man's shoulder instead.

“Shit, Daniel, why the hell did you do that?! I had the situation under control, the guys were already dead!” the redhead started to yell, but Rafferty could see how terrified he was.

The blond let out a long sigh. “You just can't stay out of trouble, Daniel Bloom, can you?” Then, tearing his shirt, he used it as gauze to wrap around his husband's shoulder, not

before inspecting it thoroughly. “It is superficial, you are lucky,” he said in a shaky voice.

Daniel looked at his husband, wrapped his uninjured hand around his waist, pulling him into a tight, passionate embrace. “Did you already forget what I promised you when we got married? I will always be there to protect you and our children.” Then, he pressed a heated kiss on the man’s lips.

“Thank you, cousin, for saving my sorry ass again,” Liam said, giving Daniel a warm, but not so tight hug, afraid to hurt his shoulder even more.

Meanwhile, Rafferty was busying chasing and catching the surviving gunman. It was pretty easy, as the redhead had shot him in the right leg, and the man was bleeding pretty badly. Using the rope he collected from under the counter, the bar owner tied the gunman’s hands behind his back, dragging him inside the bar. There, he threw him in a corner, waiting for the three men to decide his fate.

All the time when the bar was under fire, Daniel, as the other two had called the black-haired man, didn’t lose control for a single second — always anticipating their adversaries next move, always focused on protecting the others, Colin included. Still, this didn’t qualify him as trustworthy in Rafferty’s eyes.

On the other hand, the way he spoke to the blond, kissing his hand, embracing and holding him close...

Sebastian's abuser never did those things, but Vincent did. He was the one in whose arms the scared, lonely, brokenhearted kid always found consolation.

Colin closed his eyes, in a desperate attempt to block the images of a past that wasn't his. As always, he would do the right thing, and get Arnett out of the way of danger. His dreams of Sebastian must have been a warning that something would go wrong and someone would have to suffer.

"So, Mister Rafferty, I take it there's nothing I could do to make you change your mind and hand us Arnett's list?" Daniel asked respectfully.

"No, young man, you're right, I am not going to change my mind. More than that, I don't think you are fit to take care of Arnett, so I'm going to bring him here, to live with me."

"This is a matter you'll have to settle with Mister Grant, the boy's ward. But moving out from my home won't do him any good, because..."

"So, you are saying I should let you put bruises on him as you do with your husband, who hides behind a smile? Not in a million years, boy!" Rafferty said, spitting the last word.

Daniel managed to keep his simmering anger under control. He took his wallet and, extracting one of Vincent's business cards, put it on the counter. "Have a good day, sir," he said, collecting the prisoner from where they'd dropped him.

Later that evening, after replacing the window and cleaning the mess, Colin was getting ready to welcome his guests, when he saw the silhouette of a man trying to sneak unnoticed, sliding along the wall. The predator Rafferty was stepped into the light, pinning the man, hands above his head.

The big, green-brown, soulful eyes stared into Colin's dark blue-ones, making him lose his composure and judgment. He cupped the man's face, capturing his lips in a sensual, heated but slow kiss. Strangely enough, the captive responded with the same passion, Soon, both of them were sucked into a whirlwind of delightful, intense pleasure.

Breaking the kiss for a much-needed breath of air, Rafferty took a better look at the man, and he liked what he saw. "I'm Colin," he said simply.

"I'm Vincent," the other answered.

CHAPTER 15

Daniel stepped inside The Gambit, looking for the owner, who was not in sight. Two weeks had passed since his visit there — two weeks since his life went downhill, since he lost Tarquin. Of course, physically, the blond was still there. Although with every day that passed he got weaker and skinnier. Daniel dreaded the day when he would come home from work to find a dead body instead of his dear, so full of life husband.

The raven-haired man balled his hands into fists, plopping down on a stool at the bar, head down, shoulders slumped. He recalled memories from when he and Tarquin were a happy couple — raising their kids together, doing things together, having tons of fun. That was until Antonia Ballard happened.

“Isn’t it a little early to have a drink? Why are you not at home, or in the park, with your wife and kids? What could go so wrong in your life to make you want to find consolation at the bottom of a bottle?” Colin gently spoke, feeling sympathy for the seemingly young customer who sat there, at the bar, looking so defeated.

“Everything goes wrong, Mister Rafferty, every fucking thing. I would love to be at home with my three boys and... It’s just that...” Daniel stopped, unable to continue.

“Wait a minute, aren’t you the one who came with the blond boy, some time ago? Arnett’s little friend’s brother? As you see, I fixed the windows, so everything is like before,” Colin started talking, hoping that he could cheer up the young man, even if only for a bit.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Daniel sighed. “I’m glad that, at least, the bar is like before, because my life isn’t the same. Tell me, Mister Rafferty, have you ever wished you could turn back time? Undo what you’d done, make the wrong right again?”

“What’s wrong, my boy? You can talk to me if you want to. It would be better than keeping everything inside.” Suddenly, the bar owner realized. “It’s the blond kid, your husband, isn’t it? What’s wrong with him?” Colin’s heart wrenched in pain, expecting the worst.

“I’ve lost him, sir. The love of my life is no more with me. He let it go without a fight. I shouldn’t have left him alone with that bitch. I should have been there, by his side, but...” Daniel stopped, staring blankly into space.

Colin looked at the man in front of him, finding it hard to believe he was the same man from two weeks before. He could relate to the pain in those dark blue, almost black eyes with the emptiness in the man’s soul. There was a feeling so painfully familiar, so intense, just like three decades earlier, when Sebastian had to give up on his only love, to save the man’s life.

“Listen to me carefully, Daniel. I know you probably won’t believe me right now, but things will get better, eventually as long as your loved one is still alive, in body at least. You’ll have to fight for him. Do everything you can to bring him back, do you hear me? It’s not over until it’s over.”

“Maybe, just maybe, there’s still some hope left. There’s still a way to get Tarquin out of his actual state of mind. However, I would need your help, and I don’t know if you would be so willing to give it to me, once...”

“What do you need me to do?” Colin interrupted Daniel. “Just name it, whatever it is.” He looked into the young man’s dark blue eyes, a reflection of his own.

“I need the list Arnett gave you,” the answer came right away. “Before everything went wrong, Tarquin thought that list was significant to someone. So important, they wouldn’t hesitate to do whatever it takes to get their hands on it.”

“Let me go get it, although I don’t know why the kid thought it’s so important. I’ve seen a lot of weird things in my life, but this one... Honestly, I can’t imagine why someone would want to kill for it,” Colin said, shrugging. “Just wait a minute.”

While he was in the back, most likely to bring the list, Daniel looked around the room, searching every inch of it with evident curiosity. The Gambit was nothing special, just another pub where folks in the neighborhood gathered and enjoyed a glass or two of their favorite drinks.

However, judging by how spotless clean, neatly arranged and strictly organized everything was, Daniel doubted it very much. With Tarquin's depression and everything, he had forgotten to ask Darien about the conversation he had recorded two weeks earlier. The kid also hadn't mentioned anything about it.

One of the items, displayed on a small, cushioned panel, drew Daniel's attention. It was a piece of ribbon with a gold medal attached to it. Getting closer, he started to examine the object up close. He noted its every detail. The badge featured an eagle, wings spread, holding a sword in its claws, laying on a pedestal of some sorts. Encompassing, the eagle, there were three words. EFFICIENCY. HONOR. FIDELITY.

The medal seemed vaguely familiar to Daniel. Although he couldn't remember precisely where he'd seen it, as quickly as he could, the black-haired man took a photo of the medal. He then sent it via a message, praying that the receiver would answer. To his immense surprise, the response came after less than a minute. The information in the message, making Daniel gasp.

“Here it is, son, sorry it took so long, but I couldn't remember where I'd put the damn thing. Take a look, but I doubt you will understand any of it.”

The young Bloom smiled weakly. “No problem, I took advantage of the time alone to sort some things out at work. Let me see it,” he gestured to the piece of paper in Colin’s hand.

With an enigmatic smile, the bar owner put the folded list in Daniel’s hand, waiting for his reaction. Indeed, the raven-haired man thought frustrated, as he stared at the paper in his hand. The God damn thing didn’t make sense. Short or long lines of letters and numbers, in combinations or separated, covered an entire page.

Daniel’s face suddenly lit up with a smile that reached his eyes. “You’re right, Mister Rafferty. I don’t know what all this means, but someone else does, and he will solve this mystery.”

“I am glad to hear that, son. Anyone who could find some sense in that has all my respect and admiration,” Colin returned the smile.

“Well, sir, I guess I should be on my way, it’s time to bring my husband back,” Daniel said, heading to the door. “Have a nice day and thank you for everything.”

Left alone, Rafferty started to polish the already clean counter. His mind was wandering to random places. Thoughts of the young, raven-haired man invaded his mind. They made him question his judgment of two weeks earlier. Then, he had

labeled Daniel as an abusive husband. One who didn't hesitate to raise a heavy hand to the blond, bruising his body and soul.

But an abuser couldn't look so devastated as the young man did less than an hour earlier. A psycho couldn't relate to his victim's pain and fear, Colin thought. He knew what it was like to be one of those targeted, he experienced it through Sebastian's eyes. No, Daniel wasn't like that, he was like Vincent.

When his thoughts reached that point, Colin's breath started to hitch. He recalled the meeting with the other Vincent, the heated kiss the two of them had shared. No, it wasn't just a kiss. It was something truly magical, as their souls got so close, merging, becoming one.

For Colin, it was like he found his long-lost soulmate after being brutally separated from him. But the man never returned, leaving the void in the bar owner's soul unfilled, and his heart aching for a love he knew was not possible. Vincent was the man of Colin's dreams because that was the only place the two of them could meet.

Daniel entered the house, already dreading the silence surrounding it over the past two weeks. The kids, Hayden and

Arnett included, were rarely around. Eugene had offered to take them to his place, so he and Tarquin could have privacy and time alone. Sure, Daniel went there several times a day, spent quality time with all the boys, but it wasn't the same.

The twins kept asking about their daddy, if he had gotten better yet. When could they go back, why he never visited them and so on. For Gabriel, who had a special relationship with Tarquin and was also older and more mature, the whole situation was twice as hard as it was for the twins.

From the grand foyer, Daniel intended to head directly upstairs, take a shower, then cuddle with his husband, trying to comfort him, as he did over the past two weeks. All this time, Tarquin wasn't there. He didn't respond to Daniel's caresses and whispers of love, his eyes empty of any feeling but an immense pain.

Passing by the kitchen, the raven-haired man heard the discreet clatter of dishes and the noise of water running into the sink. He stopped in his tracks, thinking it was unusual for that time of the day. Unless...Heart pounding in his chest, Daniel stepped into the kitchen. There, to his great surprise and joy, he saw a half-naked Tarquin bent over the sink, washing a plate and a glass.

The raven-haired man examined each shape of the body he worshiped, seeing that, in spite of eating very little

over the past few weeks, the blond was still in great shape. From where he stood, Daniel couldn't see his husband's expression, but he suspected it wasn't one of sadness. At least, not as overwhelming as the one he was used to.

“Hello, husband,” the sound of Tarquin's voice, so lighthearted, startled the young Bloom. “Do you want something to eat? I could fix you some eggs if you want me to,” he smiled, wrapping his arms around Daniel and kissing him on the cheek.

“Hello, husband,” Daniel replied, hugging the blond tightly and inhaling his sweet scent. “Thank you, but I'm not hungry. Not now, at least”, he winked. “I have something for you.”

“I wonder what it is,” Tarquin seductively spoke, casting his husband a languid look.

“I went to Windsor Terrace. I met with Mister Rafferty again,” Daniel cautiously spoke, studying the blond's expression. “He gave me the list.”

“Finally! Where is it? Let me see it,” Tarquin's tone grew more and more impatient as he spoke.

“Here it is,” Daniel extended the paper to him, “but I'm afraid...”

But the blond didn't wait for his husband to finish. Snatching the list out of the dark-haired man's hand, he started

to study it. He frowned and mumbled random words. When Tarquin got to the bottom of the list, he went into the small office, grabbed his laptop and started typing.

“Can you get to the bottom of this?” Daniel asked although he knew the answer in advance.

“I solved the mystery from the start. It was meant to be an encoded list, but whoever coded it either did a superficial job or didn’t imagine someone could decipher it.”

“And what are you doing now?” As always, Daniel was in awe when it came to his husband’s computer skills. He wanted to know more about what he was doing.

“This is a list of bank accounts, and now I can link them to the owners. Done!” Tarquin exclaimed, in a satisfaction-filled voice.

Then, the blond started to run every name on the list through different databases, to see what information he could get on each of them. As the operation progressed, he became more and more frustrated. The answers he hoped to find weren’t there, on the contrary, everything became blurred — the leads proving to be nothing more than dead ends.

“That’s it. I’m done! We need help here, qualified help,” Tarquin huffed frustrated, staring at the laptop’s screen.

“By qualified help, you mean...” Daniel tried.

“Someone who knows those people, or at least has another means to find out things about them. For instance, we could use the help of an investigative journalist. Someone very good at this job, like...Charles Swinton!”

“That bastard didn’t know anything about what being a real, good journalist means, not to mention he’s in prison for raping you. No way in hell, angel!” Daniel said in an angry voice.

“Yes way, mister!” Tarquin replied, fire in his eyes. I’m going to talk to Swinton, and you are coming with me. End of story!”

“My angel, there are a ton of good investigative journalists out there, why would you need the help of that... that...” Daniel stopped, hugging his husband. “Please, don’t put yourself through that, not again.”

“A rapist. That’s what Swinton is. He brutally attacked me, used my body, discarded and blackmailed me. I will not forgive him for what he did to me. Not now! Not ever! But I couldn’t sleep well at night knowing that someone else suffered a horrible fate because I was too cowardly or too proud to ask for Swinton’s help.”

Daniel looked into Tarquin’s eyes and listened to his passionate, convincing voice. He knew there was no other way but to agree with him. As usual, everything the blond said made sense. He was logical even when he was carried away by emotions. Without a word, the raven-haired man nodded, starting to climb the stairs, his husband in tow.

One hour and a few phone calls later, Tarquin parked the car in a somewhat solitary spot near the prison, to Daniel's confusion. Staring intensely into his husband's eyes, the blond straddled his lap, kissing him on the face and neck while feverishly exploring his body with eager hands.

"In the back, undressed," Tarquin commanded huskily, sending little waves of pleasure through Daniel's body. The raven-haired man obeyed without hesitation, waiting for the blond's next move. Getting rid of his clothes, except for his boxer briefs, Tarquin moved into the back seat.

Locking eyes with his husband, he seductively lowered his briefs, releasing his hardness. He then covered his cock with lube from the travel-size tube he always carried, just in case. Positioning them both as comfortable as the confined space of the car allowed, he slowly entered his husband. The two men then started to move in sync, Tarquin pounded mercilessly into Daniel, kissing, caressing, nipping and licking everywhere on his torso and neck, marking him as his own.

Looking gently at his beloved, the blond took his erect cock that begged for attention, stroking him while whispering sweet words of love and praise into his ear. Some hard, long thrusts later, Tarquin spilled his seed inside his husband, letting out a loud, passion-filled moan. Feeling the delicious

warmth, Daniel shot his load between them, with a strangled, savage cry.

Panting hard, the blond laid sprawled on the backseat, while his husband tried to catch his breath after the passionate, short, intense lovemaking session. Turning to Tarquin, a sated smile on his face, Daniel planted a shy kiss on his blond angel's pink, sinfully delightful lips.

“What was that?” he asked a spark of amusement in his eyes.

“That was me showing you how much I've missed us making love over these last two weeks,” Tarquin answered, a tinge of guilt in his voice. “It won't happen again, I promise.”

Daniel hugged him tightly, kissing his forehead. “I love you no matter what. You know that don't you?”

“Yes, I know,” the answer came in a whispered voice. “And now, it's time to clean ourselves up, straighten our clothes and pay a visit to Mister Charles Swinton,” the blond said with a mischievous smile.

CHAPTER 16

Elliott took another manila folder from the pile in front of him, putting the one he'd just finished going through aside, on top of all the others he was studying. Soon, Mallory would come to take him to lunch, like he always did over the past two weeks, since they'd become associates at the law firm. At least, there was a reason for him to remember that day as a good one.

However, two weeks earlier, the same day Elliott's dream came true, his world crashed down once again. He'd discovered the huge, ugly lie behind what he so naively thought to be a fresh start for him. The man who had told the blond he would protect him at any cost, that he would love and take care of him didn't exist.

Strangely enough, Elliott wasn't affected by the revelation as he thought he would be. The blond behaved most professionally, smiling charmingly and explaining to Mister Boormann why he, or Mallory, couldn't take him as their client. Of course, Elliott recommended Eugene one of the top lawyers working for the office, but it was up to him if he would take the advice or not.

Going home, later that day, the blond still waited for the man who claimed to love him, to appear on the doorstep. He

waited for Eugene to explain the entire Brentano-Boormann thing, but that didn't happen. Elliott was torn in two. One half was relieved that he had avoided an unpleasant situation, while the other half was devastated that he was a mere plaything for the man — a distraction, nothing more.

At some point, the blond wanted to talk to Mallory. He wanted to ask for advice, but gave up that idea. His friend was somehow off, so very different from his calm, focused self. Of course, at work, Mallory was as efficient as always, but once he left the office to go home, the young lawyer didn't pay attention to the conversations around him. Because of that, Elliott didn't burden him with his problems.

The blond blamed the stressful environment of his associate's home for the change in Mallory's attitude. Those greedy assholes, his parents and siblings, not knowing he was now one of the two associates in the law firm, were making his life miserable. In spite of this, he still hesitated to take the decisive step and move out of that serpents' nest.

Of course, Elliott still had Christine's shoulder to cry on as he had over the past two years. However, he had started to notice some subtle changes in the young woman and decided not to bother her unnecessarily. Up until then, she hadn't given much attention to things like makeup or hairstyle, considering them frivolous and time-consuming.

Also, Christine had started going out more often, so she wasn't around every time Elliott needed to talk like she was before. The blond suspected the girl had a boyfriend of some sorts because an elegant, silver car pulled off quite often near their home, waiting until Christine left the house.

Strangely enough, Elliott didn't feel neglected by his friends. Somehow he liked not being the center of their attention. The blond was glad they could live their lives and meet new people instead of worrying over him all the time. This way, he could also carry on with his usual routine, without feeling the need to assure them all the time that he was fine.

"Hello, gorgeous, what are you dreaming of? Or who, to be more specific?" Gloria's voice broke the trail of Elliott's thoughts, bringing him back to reality.

"Excuse me, Miss Gloria," the blond lawyer weakly smiled. "I wasn't dreaming about anyone. I was thinking about how much my life has changed over the past fourteen days."

"Whatever you say, boss," the woman grinned knowingly. "Speaking of, Mister Mallory sent me to tell you he won't be able to accompany you to lunch."

"Oh?" Elliott knitted his brows in confusion. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all," the woman assured him, a note of amusement in her voice. "He was asked out to lunch, or so he

said,” she shrugged, the same knowing grin on her face.

“Who invited Mallory to lunch? I imagine you are in possession of this information, Miss Gloria, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am, boss. It’s the most important client of the firm, Mister Alastair Stark. A fine, distinguished gentleman, if you ask me.”

“You’re right, Miss Gloria, Mister Stark is an outstanding person. I’m happy he’s befriended Mallory. Unlike other men his age, this gentleman doesn’t use a superior, condescending tone when speaking to us, young folks.”

“I noticed it too,” Gloria said, tempted to mention to Elliott all the other things she noticed, but she changed her mind. After all, knowing Mallory as she did, the woman was sure he would put a stop to any inappropriate action.

“Well, it looks like I’ll be eating by myself today. See you in an hour, Miss Gloria”, Elliott smiled, taking his coat and stepping out of the office.

When he started working at the law firm, the blond had discovered a small bistro just across the street and went for lunch there ever since. The food was good, the place had a cozy, homey feel and it wasn’t too peopley, either.

When he was getting ready to cross the street, Elliott felt someone grab his arm with claw-like fingers, squeezing it so hard, that the young lawyer was sure the spot would bruise almost instantly. Wincing, the blond tried freeing himself from the predatory grasp that held him so tight.

“Not so fast, dumb-head!” the aggressor hissed in Elliott’s ear. “Long time no see, whore! Didn’t you miss me at all?”

The blond froze on the spot. The voice, the words...No matter how hard he tried to escape his past, it kept coming after him. It kept hunting him down, pulling him under. “Carter,” Elliott whispered, barely audible.

The man elbowed him in the side. “So, you do remember me. You aren’t so stupid after all. Move, bitch!”

“Where are you taking me?” The blond didn’t feel fear, horror or anything like that. Somewhere deep inside, he’d known one day he would run out of luck, it was just a question of time.

“Take you?! I was wrong. You are the same stupid bitch as ever. I’m not going to take you anywhere. I’m going to kill you, like the worthless, pathetic worm you are, by pushing you in front of that truck!”

Elliott didn’t flinch, beg or attempt in any other way to change the psycho’s decision. He knew better than that. Instead, the blond closed his eyes and started to pray. Not for him to be saved, but for his friends to have a good life. His last thought went to Eugene, and there was no bitterness in it, only gratitude and that something more he couldn’t name.

“Hey, dude, if you care about your life, let the young gentleman go. Now!” a cold, commanding voice spoke from behind them.

“Who the hell are you? Mind your own business, loser!” Carter replied in an arrogant voice. He then shoved Elliott off the sidewalk in front of a huge garbage truck, as he ran away.

“It’s okay, boss, I got you,” the other man said in an assuring, gentle tone, snatching the blond in his arms. “Can you walk?”

“I... I don’t know, but I can try,” the blond answered in a shaky voice. He managed to take a few steps before his legs gave out. Fortunately, the mysterious man’s firm grip prevented him from falling to the ground.

“Here, boss, let’s go,” the voice spoke again.

With Elliott in his arms, the man headed to a car parked nearby. He unlocked it and put the blond in the backseat, securing him with the seat belt. The man did everything with the utmost care as if he was afraid his touch would hurt the blond. For the first time since he’d been saved Elliott dared to take a look at the man who had rescued him and froze.

The man was huge, about six foot seven, maybe more, and very solidly built. Under his leather jacket and shirt, the

blond could picture the bulky muscles flexing, but, unlike in the case of Carter's guards, the image didn't terrify him.

"Where are we going?" Elliott asked the man, who was wrapping a thin, but warm blanket around his shaking form.

"I'll take you home, boss. You need to rest, to overcome the shock. No more work today, just cuddles," the man gently smiled, touching the blond's cheek.

Soon, the warmth from the blanket seeped into Elliott's body, making him relax a little and doze off. When he woke up, two strong arms were holding him, carrying him up the stairs of a luxurious house. All the time, the gentle giant checked on him, the same assuring smile on his lips.

Finally, Elliott's guardian angel stopped in front of a door, knocking softly on it, twice. After waiting a few more seconds, he opened it, stepping into what appeared to be a bedroom, the blond still in his arms.

"Aristarco, why on earth aren't you at work? What could be so important you...Oh, Santa Madonna!" the man who spoke, none other than Eugene, exclaimed, covering his mouth with his left hand.

"Sorry about not informing you earlier, Padrino, but the situation required a quick reaction, so..." the giant said in an almost whispered voice, carefully placing Elliott on the bed.

“What’s happened? Is he hurt?” worry poured from Eugene’s voice, as he frantically examined the blond.

“I don’t think so, maybe his arm is bruised, but other than that... A bastard tried to push him in front of a garbage truck.”

“*Maledetto bastardo!*” Eugene cursed, balling his hands into fists. “*Grazie mille, Aristarco*, you can leave us for now. I’ll call you if we need anything.”

“Very well, Padrino,” Aristarh answered, leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

Eyes filled with concern and that something else Elliott couldn’t or wouldn’t dare name. Eugene knelt in front of the blond, removing his shoes and socks. Then, with deft fingers, he started to undo the buttons on his shirt, one by one. Under the older man’s touch, Elliott began to shiver, but not in a bad way.

“I want to take a look at the bruise and rub some oil into it, nothing more. If you are uncomfortable, I can, and will, stop whenever you say so.” Eugene’s voice was soothing, in spite of its firmness, a balm on the blond’s aching heart.

“I don’t want you to stop. On the contrary, I want you to...go all the way,” Elliott whispered, trying to push down the lump in his throat.

“Are you sure about that? I need your consent to everything. I won’t go further without it,” Eugene locked eyes with the blond.

“You said you would take care of me and you kept that promise. I trust you won’t hurt me.”

With a small smile on his lips, the older man continued to undress the blond, slowly. As if he performed a sacred ritual. Leaving Elliott in nothing than his underwear, Eugene laid him on the bed. Then, he left the room, only to return a few minutes later, carrying some items he placed on the nightstand.

“No, my love, don’t look over there,” the older man said, a strange accent in his voice. “You are not allowed to look at anything but me. No noise should distract you, except for the sound of my voice. *Capisci, amore mio?*”

Eugene’s husky, sexy voice gave Elliot goosebumps. He couldn’t speak, so he just nodded in understanding.

“Spread your arms and legs. I am going to tie you up. Are you comfortable with that?” the Detroit Mafia boss cast the blond lawyer a worried look.

“As long as it’s not very tight, yes,” Elliott barely whispered.

“Don’t worry, I am not going to hurt you, precious,” Eugene assured him with a smile. “But first, I am going to take care of your eyes.”

Saying that he took one of the five black, long, thick silk scarfs from the nightstand, covering Elliott’s eyes and

tying it behind his head. Then, he used the other four to tie the blond's arms and legs to the bedposts. Once finished, Eugene started to undress, carefully following the reactions of the young man lying sprawled on the bed.

Indeed, Elliott was focusing on every swish, every slide, every little sound the other man's clothes were making while falling on the floor. When he heard the zipper of Eugene's pants, the lawyer started to shiver. Only the shivers were provoked by anticipation, not by fear. It was an entirely new feeling for the blond, who began to breathe erratically.

For several moments, there was only silence in the room — nothing to suggest the presence of another person. Then, just when Elliott was about to start worrying, he heard the noise Eugene's footsteps made on the hardwood floor. Then he heard another sound made by an object placed on the nightstand.

The next thing Elliott felt was coldness as if he was packed in ice. After being confused for a few moments, he finally understood. The other man was placing ice cubes on his heated chest, neck, and abdomen. Then, Eugene started to talk in that thick, deep voice that gave Elliott chills, telling the blond how perfect he was, how wonderful, how sweet.

Focused as he was on the words of praise that poured like honey from his lover's mouth, the blond didn't pay

attention to the bed dipping next to him or the other things signaling another presence. So, when he felt Eugene's mouth on his cock, Elliott jolted in shock, tugging at his restraints.

But this time, the man who was paying close attention to his reactions chose to ignore him. Instead, he started to tease the slit of the blond's cock, swirling the tip of his tongue around it and sucking on it until small, pearly drops of precum started to form. By then, Elliott was moaning loudly, lost in the pleasure Eugene's actions provoked in him.

After a while, the teasing and sucking stopped, leaving the blond somehow disappointed. However, he jolted again, feeling that sinful mouth on his hardness, but this time the hot breath was replaced by a much cooler one. It didn't take long for Elliott to realize the other man had his mouth filled with ice cubes.

But, instead of being uncomfortable, the cold was a blessing, as it calmed the ache in his groin. However, under the action of Eugene's mouth, taking the blond's whole length in, things started to get hot again. Elliott couldn't take anymore and, bucking up, forced his cock to the back of Eugene's throat. Feeling that the blond was at the edge, the Detroit mobster grabbed his hips, preventing him from retreating.

With no choice left, Elliott released his load in the older man's mouth. A million fireworks exploded before his hooded eyes. Smiling affectionately, Eugene grabbed the bottle of lube from the nightstand and started to work Elliott open with care and gentleness. All this time, he showered his young lover with sweet words of praise, making him feel important and cherished.

When he considered him ready, Eugene lined his cock up with Elliot's hole and started to push himself slowly into the blond. Elliot, letting out small gasps and whimpers, tried to stay as still and quiet as he could. Once fully inside, the older man started to move slowly, retreating and thrusting.

Eugene was aware of how traumatized Elliott must have been, so he put everything into making their first time together a pleasurable experience for the blond. He gently caressed the young man, running his hands lightly over his body and beautiful face, as he whispered words of love in his ear.

Elliott started to writhe underneath the older man, begging for more. Eugene gladly complied, taking the young man's cock in his hand, while using the other to support his weight. Calling Elliot's name, he was the first to come, with Elliott close behind.

Freeing his lover from the restraints and the scarf blocking his vision, Eugene washed the proof of their lovemaking off of him. Then, after cleaning himself, he crawled under the covers, hugging Elliott close to him.

“Makhtoub,” Eugene said, with a smile on his face, breaking the silence in the room.

CHAPTER 17

“What was that?” Elliott asked, his voice laced with curiosity.

“What was what?” Eugene replied worryingly, propping his head on one elbow. “Did you hear something or...”

“No, what you said a while ago. That strange word, mak...”

“Oh, *makhtoub*,” the older man sighed, relieved. “It’s an Arab expression, the equivalent of *what it was written*. It’s about accepting one’s faith and honoring the Almighty’s will.”

“You didn’t mention about being from Arab origins, but it doesn’t matter, I realized that today. I had no right to be disappointed about you not saying who you are. I didn’t reveal my past, why should you do it?” Elliott’s voice was flat, but a right kind of flat.

“It won’t happen again. I promise,” Eugene spoke in his firm, but soothing voice, as he traced his finger along the blond’s face. “In fact, I will tell you everything right here and now.”

“You don’t have to,” Elliott delicately put his finger on the other man’s lips. You have your secrets, as I have mine. Your name, be it Brentano, Boormann or otherwise, it’s not relevant. The man who takes care of me, who protects me every step of the way can’t be a monster.”

Elliott's words were music to Eugene's ears, medicine for his aching heart. He cupped the blond's face, capturing his pink, full, tempting lips in one heated kiss. Tasting his sweet mouth, he explored it and let their tongues dance together. Elliott could feel all the emotions of the other man, from searing passion and never-ending love to fierce possession and the fear of losing him.

“My love, you have the right to know it all. I would have told you everything that fateful day. I swear I was about to show up at your doorstep and explain everything to you, clear up the misunderstanding. Unfortunately, I had to change my plans, because of circumstances I had no control over.”

“What happened?” All of a sudden, Elliott felt the urge to know everything about his protector's life. Not out of curiosity, but to know how to console him in times of need.

Eugene let out a long sigh. “My cousin got shot, his husband fell into a depression he wasn't recovering from, and I found out my family is the target of an unseen enemy. That is the abridged version,” he smiled weakly.

“Your cousin... is he all right now? How bad was he hurt?” Elliott asked in a shaky voice, moving closer to Eugene.

“Fortunately, it was only a very superficial wound, nothing to worry about. The not-so-good part is that we don't know who's after us or why. All I could manage to get from one of the gunmen is that my cousin and his family are the targets, and the enemies belong to Italian Mafia.” While

saying the last part, Eugene's eyes darkened and his muscles tensed.

Italian Mafia. Elliott was beyond shocked. The man who indirectly saved him from Carter was a target himself, hunted by the most ruthless criminal organization in the country. What could he do, with only one bodyguard by his side, against an army of highly trained assassins? Elliott closed his eyes, afraid for his protector's life, praying for his safety.

"Don't worry, *dolce amore mio*. I will deal with it like a true man of honor. I will search them out and bring them down, one by one. Whoever the bastards are, they will curse the day they messed with Cesare Brentano-Fenelli," Eugene cruelly smiled.

"Who's this Cesare guy?" Elliott asked, hope and curiosity mixed in his voice. The situation couldn't be that desperate, after all, if the man next to him had an ally inside the Mafia.

"That would be me," Eugene spoke gently. My full name is Cesare-Eugenio Brentano-Fenelli, and I am the Don of the most powerful family in Detroit. However, you don't have to be afraid. We are different. We have solid principles and rules and..."

"You are right," Elliott cut him short, "I want to know everything. I won't run away, whatever it is, but I want to know." The blond fell silent, waiting for the story to unfold.

“I am the fruit of a forbidden passion,” Eugene started. “My mother was the only daughter of the richest Italian businessman and Mafia boss from Detroit, Giacomo Fenelli. My father, Claudio Brentano, was poor, working to support his widowed mother and two younger siblings. Because he was intelligent and hard-working, Giuseppe, the boss’ second son, befriended him, and that’s how he knew Rosa, my mother.”

“Why weren’t your parents allow to marry? Was it because of your dad’s financial situation?”

“There were many aspects, money included. However, the obstacles didn’t stop them. A couple of years later, my grandfather appointed his firstborn, Cesare, as the new Don, dying shortly after. Then, my mother’s family fell victim to an ugly betrayal, only she and zio Giuseppe surviving. It was then when my parents conceived me. To save the life of his sister and that of the unborn child, he married her off to a don of minor importance.” Eugene’s eyes darkened as he remembered the bastard his mother’s husband was.

“What about your dad? Why didn’t he marry your mom? I mean, he was free to do it, once your grandfather was dead, and your uncle was his friend.” As Elliott spoke, Eugene could hear the confusion in his voice, he could see it in the beautiful, sky-blue eyes.

Instead of answering right then, young Brentano hugged the blond, lightly cradling him. With a love-filled gaze, he ran his fingers through the soft, golden curls, then nuzzled into the neck of the man in his arms, inhaling his scent. That took over his senses, like a drug giving a quick high.

Once again, Eugene promised to himself to never let another lover go, to never watch them suffer and die before his eyes. Never again would he be so helpless. Never again would he let his enemies win, allowing them to take the one he loved.

“Sorry, my love, I was carried away,” Eugene smiled to Elliott, seeing the interest and worry mixed in his eyes. “To answer your question from earlier, no, my parents still couldn’t marry. In a world governed by strict laws, like the Mafia, their love was doomed from the start. Anyway, mamma, with zio Giuseppe’s blessing, kept her unwanted husband away from her bed and her life. The bastard didn’t complain, but, when the opportunity presented itself, he struck her straight in the heart.” Eugene’s eyes darkened, his lips pressed tight.

“Wha... what did he do? Did he kill her?” Elliott’s voice shook, his eyes filled with tears that threatened to spill.

“Oh, no, he did worse than that. The scum took her reason to live away, tearing her heart into a million tiny pieces. He is dead now, because otherwise...” Eugene abruptly stopped, not wanting to show Elliott the dark, hatred-filled side of his soul. “Enough of this, my love, you should be sleeping,” Claudio’s son painfully smiled. “This is a story of blood and hate, and I don’t...”

This time, it was the knock on the door what made Eugene stop speaking. Listening carefully, he identified the sound as being the secret code he and Aristarh used in case of

emergency. It was for the second time in one day, and the young Mafia boss wondered what else could be wrong.

“What’s wrong, Aristarco?” Eugene said, popping his head through the cracked door. “I thought I instructed you not to disturb me unless it’s urgent.”

“Well, it’s an emergency of sorts. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have barged in like this, Padrino,” Aristarh whispered, sensing his boss’ irritation.

“Come in and speak, then,” the Fenelli family’s head said, opening the door and letting the Russian in. “Elliott knows everything. There are no secrets between us.”

“It’s about Mister Daniel. He sent me a message saying that he and Mister Tarquin are going to the state prison.”

“State prison?! Why on earth are they going there? Or is it something job-related?” Eugene asked and, judging by the look on Aristarh’s face, he knew he was not going to like the answer.

“They are paying a visit to Charles Swinton. Mister Tarquin intends to get him out, to help them with an investigation.”

“What?! That man is really out of his mind, and Daniel is even crazier for agreeing with this! I can’t imagine why Tarquin, of all people, needs the help of that goddamn monster!”

All the time Eugene and Aristarh spoke, Elliott watched the two men, trying to catch something from their conversation, but all he could hear was prison, monster and two names, Daniel and Tarquin. The blond could sense how worried Eugene was about the two men, which made him wonder what they were to him.

“What about the kids? Where are they now? Who is with them?” The Detroit Mafia boss’ voice became increasingly worried when he mentioned the kids, whoever they were.

“It’s all right, Padrino, Mickey is with them. He took the little ones from school and dropped them off at Mister Martin Cornelius’ girlfriend’s home. I also called Mister Liam, and told him to go there.” Aristarh spoke in an assuring voice, making Eugene relax.

“Thank you very much, Aristarco, you are the most loyal, effective, intelligent man I’ve ever known, I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“And I would be dead without you, Padrino, I can’t repay what you did for me,” the giant said, hugging Eugene. “Oh, there is one more thing, I almost forgot.”

“What is it?” Although he couldn’t see his lover’s face, Elliott sensed his voice was less tense than at the beginning of the discussion.

“Consigliere Brentano and Donna Rosa are going to pay you a visit,” Aristarh smiled. “As of... an hour, more or less.”

“What?! And why didn’t you tell me this earlier?!” Eugene’s face shone with joy, Elliott sensing the change in his voice.

“Relax, Padrino, everything was taken care of, Sergey took the limo and went to the private airport to pick them up. How’s the young boss?” Aristarh said, seeing the blond peeking from under the blankets.

“He is fine, thanks to you,” Eugene smiled with gratitude. “And thank you for being such a good friend.”

Elliott waited for Aristarh to leave, then, taking advantage of young Brentano’s absence, he got out of the bed. He started to collect his clothes from where he’d neatly folded them. The blond was about to put his socks on when the gentle voice of Eugene made him stop.

“What do you think you are doing, *amore mio*? Dressing in the same clothes from earlier, and, on top of that, without showering first?” The man’s expression was a mixture of sadness, confusion, and pain. “Are you not going to stay and meet my parents?”

“I thought...I think you’d want to be left alone, to enjoy each other’s presence. I don’t want to intrude, to...” Elliott lowered his head, unable to continue.

“Listen to me, *amore*,” Eugene said, gently lifting the blond’s chin, “meeting you would bring a lot of joy to my parents. Mamma will adore you, and papa will welcome you

with wide open arms and a big heart. Why are you afraid of them?”

“I’m not. It’s just that...” Elliott cut himself short, as he realized Eugene wanted him there, together with the most important people in his life.

“You better hurry up and hop into the shower,” the young Mafia don smirked. And don’t worry about clothes, Aristarco took care of everything.”

Elliott nodded, without bothering to ask what he meant, since it was related to the man who had saved his life. After a short, refreshing shower, he returned to the room, one towel wrapped around his slim waist and another in his hand. There, the blond gasped in surprise, as he saw a complete outfit waiting for him on the bed.

Everything, from the shirt to the pants and coat, all of them white, fitted perfectly to his body as if they were tailored especially for him. Next to the shirt and suit, there were briefs, also white, and a pair of shoes and socks which completed Elliott’s outfit. With a confident smile on his face, completely dressed, he went downstairs, ready to meet Eugene’s parents.

“Hey, Swinton, you have visitors,” the rough voice of Chomsky, one of the guards in charge with that sector, broke

the silence down the corridor, making some of the inmates curious.

“Lucky motherfucker,” someone commented, in a somewhat lighthearted voice.

“Yeah, ole Charlie here must’ve been a very good boy, I tell you. Santa’s already landed, bringing some special presents to our buddy”, Chomsky said, unlocking Swinton’s cell. “Well, come on, ole boy, don’t let the guests wait, it’s rude.”

The disgraced media tycoon appeared in the doorway. He waited for the guard to handcuff him and chain his ankles. “Good day to you too, Officer Chomsky,” he spoke politely. “The visitors’ thing, is it for real? Or have your bosses decided to move me to another block?”

“Nope. Why should they? You haven’t created any problems. You’ve shown repentance for your criminal activities. All of the other inmates kinda like you...I wish we had more inmates like you in here, Charlie, old fellow,” the Polish guard patted him on the shoulder.

Swinton sighed in relief. Once he came to terms with his fate, the former billionaire stayed out of trouble. He was getting involved in all the programs dedicated to helping the inmates who wanted to continue their education.

In a very short time, he became very popular among the inmates and guards alike. With Chomsky, one of the oldest, most respected guards, Swinton had a tight bond. It was

comparable only with what he and Harrison had. That was why the man's behavior seemed somehow strange to him like he would have said goodbye.

“Officer Chomsky, what's wrong? And don't tell me nothing, because the journalist in me feels like something is bothering you a lot.”

“I am not going to lie to you, Charlie. This will probably be the last time we see each other like this. Guard and inmate, I mean. You did some terrible things, but, unlike others, you did everything in your power to straighten things up. If not for those you've hurt, at least for others. I...”

“I don't understand what you are trying to say, Officer Chomsky,” Swinton said, confused. “Who are these visitors and what do they want from me?”

“A young fellow in his late twenties and a kid in his teenage years. As for what they want from you, I don't know,” the guard shook his head. However, it must be very precious, to get you free in exchange.”

“Free?! As free to get out from here, to step outside the main gate? No offense, but you most likely misunderstood or misinterpreted a random discussion, and...”

“Charlie, old fella, listen to me! There is no doubt. The warden called me in his office and showed me the papers. The governor had signed them and everything. Here we are, go and convince yourself.”

With those words, the guard hugged Swinton once again, wishing him a good life. Heart thumping in his chest, the man stepped inside the room, heading to the table where the two men sat. Looking at their faces, he let out a loud gasp, as before him, were none others than Daniel Bloom and Tarquin Ballard.

CHAPTER 18

“Good afternoon, gentlemen! I was told I have visitors, but I didn’t expect it to...” Swinton started, only to be cut short by Tarquin.

“To be us? Is that what you are trying to say? Don’t worry, we come in peace,” the blond smiled, somehow sarcastically. “We are here to offer you the chance of a fresh start,” he continued.

“A fresh start? You have a weird sense of humor! You came all the way here and used your influence to get me out of here to do what? There’s nothing for me out there, and you know it.” Swinton’s voice was resigned, his attitude was showing defeat.

“There are a lot of things out there waiting for you. Things you ignored, took for granted or threw away,” Daniel said, leaning over the table. “If you are truly repenting for what you’ve done, you would agree to help us. If not, you can go back to your cell. Simple as that.”

“What could I possibly help you with? It’s not that I refuse to do it, but I can’t imagine what...”

At that point, Tarquin took the list from his jacket pocket, putting it in front of Swinton. “Take a look at this. I couldn’t find anything on them, except their names. I suspect they all are rich people, but, as you know, I’m my father’s son in many ways, including when it comes to frequenting high society gatherings, so...”

Swinton nodded, a pang of pain squeezing his chest when he remembered the circumstances of his first meeting with the fragile, lonely boy. The ambitious woman Antonia Ballard was, had dragged her son to every party she attended, showing him off like he was a trophy.

But that was then. Now, sitting in front of Swinton, was a completely different Tarquin, the lost kid evolving spectacularly into the confident young man who sat across the table. Rumors were he had an outstanding career in the FBI, being appointed a special agent at the early age of twenty-one.

While the blond occupied his thoughts, Swinton also examined the list. In the beginning, it didn't make a lot of sense, just a series of random names. But, as he continued to read, the journalist in him realized the strange connection between some of the names, and this made him gasp in shock.

“What is it, Swinton? Do you see something? Tarquin leaned over the table, excitement noticeable in his eyes and voice.

“Actually, yes, and it is quite disturbing,” the man replied, feeling how his investigation journalist self came back to life. If you would give me a pen, I could show you better what it's all about,” he continued.

“Here you are,” Daniel said, offering him a pen over the table. “I trust you are not going to use it as a weapon

against us,” he continued in a dry voice, “although one never knows.”

But Swinton chose to ignore him, focusing on the list instead. Using Daniel’s pen, he drew little crosses, lines, and circles in front of every name. After all of them were marked, the man pushed the list to the center of the table.

“Here,” he said, putting the finger in front of a name. “This one and that one and that one and the six others that I marked with a cross, they are all dead. None of them were older than twenty-one, all of them had inherited colossal fortunes.”

“Are you suggesting that someone killed them for money?” Tarquin frowned. “If so, why didn’t I find the police reports? Why wasn’t anyone interested in finding out how these young people died?”

Swinton shook his head. “As you said earlier, you are your father’s son in many ways. When someone from high society dies suddenly and violently, persons of interest make huge efforts to hush up the scandal. Trust me, I’ve witnessed many such cases. Some of them I covered myself.”

“What about the other ones, marked by you with the lines and circles?” Daniel asked. Suddenly, the raven-haired man froze, as he spotted Hayden’s name among the ones having a circle in front of them. Tarquin noticed it, too, but didn’t say anything, waiting for Swinton’s answer.

“The lines represent missing persons, only three of them. These two and the famous Elliott Spellmann.”

To Daniel, the name sounded familiar, he'd heard it recently, but couldn't remember where or when. “What is this guy so famous for?” the raven-haired man asked, frustrated.

“Elliott is, or was, the adopted son of a wealthy banker, Jacob Spellmann. When he was twelve, a gang broke into their home, killed the parents and took the child. He appeared two years later. The family's lawyer, Isaac Williamson, took him into his care. Elliott graduated Harvard law school at eighteen, and rumors were he would become a senior partner in Williamson's firm, but, two years later, he disappeared again.”

“And no one reported him missing? Not even the lawyer? Something's not right with this story,” Tarquin said, knitting his brows.

“What about the circles, Swinton? What are they for?” Daniel asked, uneasiness in his voice.

“Supposing that someone killed or kidnapped all those I marked with crosses or lines, the circles would be their next targets. Do you recognize any of the names? I'm asking out of professional curiosity,” Swinton cautiously smiled.

Daniel looked at the man in front of him, examining his body language, facial expression, carefully listening to his voice. On the way to prison, while Tarquin was driving, he had read the email containing the full report on Swinton's conduct

in prison and was pleasantly impressed to discover the man changed a lot for the better.

“If Tarquin, who suffered immensely at his hands, could trust him, why can’t I do the same?” Daniel thought to himself. “Yes, I did,” he said, inhaling sharply, “my brother’s name has a circle next to it. However, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense? If he is your brother, then... But there is no Bloom here, what brother are you talking about?” Swinton said, a little confused.

“It’s a very long, extremely complicated story. Anyway, Hayden’s name doesn’t appear as Bloom, but as Owens, his mother’s name. She never met my father. Like I said, long and complicated.”

“Here it is, Hayden Owens.” Swinton sighed. “You’re right. It doesn’t make sense. Especially if whoever made this list is after money. Maybe they have another reason. Maybe everything is just a series of unfortunate coincidences... However, no matter what this is, I will get to the bottom of it.”

“I am sure you will,” Tarquin smiled confidently. “Especially since you are going to team up with your former right hand, John Harris. We’ve made all the arrangements, the two of you will be sharing an apartment and...”

But Swinton didn’t listen anymore. Tears fell freely down his wrinkled, pale cheeks. The man raised his head, looking up

and thanked whatever god or goddess who was merciful enough to give him a second chance.

The elegant limo pulled out in front of the stairs leading to the mansion's impressive entrance, where Eugene and Elliott were waiting. At the thought of meeting his protector's parents, the blond had a lump in his throat he desperately tried to push back, with little success.

The driver got out first, opening one of the back doors and bowing, respectfully while he waited for the passengers to leave the vehicle. Claudio Brentano was the first to step out, graciously extending his hand to Donna Rosa. Once his wife descended from the car, the former consigliere offered his arm, smiling affectionately.

Just about the same time, a sleek, black car parked next to the limo, two young men, a blond and a black-haired one, getting out of it. However, their arrival was entirely ignored by Eugene, who ran down the stairs to welcome his parents, while Elliott chose to stay near the door.

A part of him wanted to know these people who, in spite of the many obstacles they faced, kept the love for each other alive and were now enjoying their happily ever after. The

other part of Elliott was afraid Eugene's parents would reject him and, deep down inside, he knew that would be the end of his relationship with the man.

“*Il bello della mamma!* Look at you, how handsome my son is!” After hugging him tightly, Donna Rosa inspected her son from all angles, shaking her head and pursing her lips. “The same old story, *figlio mio*. You work too hard and eat too little.”

“*Mamma, non e vero*, you know it,” Eugene protested, amused. “I eat like a pig and sleep like a log, I swear. Would I ever lie to you?” he gave her the sweetest puppy eyes ever.

“And work like an ox and a dog combined,” Donna Rosa replied, unimpressed by her son's attempts to direct her attention to another subject. “I know you Brentano men. Your papa does the same things.”

“*Cesare, figlio, che piacere vederti!* I missed you so much!” the former consigliere exclaimed, pulling his son in a tight hug.

“I missed you, too, papa, both of you. But with business and other...things, keeping me in New York, I didn't realize how fast time had passed and...”

“We understand you, *figlio mio*, we really do. That is why, with the blessing of your Uncle Giuseppe, we came here to stay for as long as we are welcome,” Brentano smiled.

“You don't know how happy I am to hear that,” Eugene said, his face shining with joy. “Come, please, I want

you both to meet someone,” he continued in an excited voice.

He went ahead of his parents to the spot where Elliott had stood while the Detroit Mafia don greeted his parents. No matter how much Eugene assured him that the consigliere and his wife would welcome him with open arms, the blond felt uncomfortable and out of place.

Suddenly, his eyes widened in fear, as he detected the two men who were climbing the steps. Elliott’s heart started to beat erratically, as both the driver and the giant Russian seemed unaware of the danger the two strangers, now right behind Brentano, represented. He decided to warn the man. It was all he could do.

“Sir, behind you,” the blond said, making efforts to speak as if the words didn’t want to leave his lips. Then, in a desperate gesture, he grabbed Donna Rosa by the shoulders and turned her around, using his body to shield her from the attack.

“What’s this?” the former consigliere spoke in an angry voice. “*Giovanotto*, are you out of your mind?! Take your hands off my wife. Now!” he barked.

“What’s wrong, papa? Why are you yelling at Elliott? What has he done?” Eugene asked, stepping back with Elliot and his parents.

Flinching away from young Brentano’s touch, the blond gently let Donna Rosa go. “I deeply apologize to you, ma’am,

for causing you discomfort.” Then, turning to Claudio, he spoke in an ice-cold voice. “I don’t kill or harm people, consigliere. They, on the other hand...”

Claudio’s eyes widened in surprise as he looked in the direction Elliott indicated. “Daniel! Tarquin! *Cari nipoti miei!* Come here, let me hug you!” Without waiting any longer, he squeezed the two young men to his chest.

Meanwhile, Elliott left the happy family reunion unnoticed. He went down the steps, wanting to be as far away as he could from that place, where he knew happiness for such a short time. The blond didn’t intend to see Eugene ever again. Continuing their relationship would have created a rift between the son and his parents, and that was the last thing Elliott wanted.

“I owe you apologies,” the blond heard a voice from behind him, but he didn’t turn back, knowing to whom the voice belonged. It was Consigliere Brentano, who probably wanted to unleash more hell on him. “Please, listen to me, *figliolo*,” the voice insisted, pleadingly.

“You don’t owe me anything, Consigliere Brentano,” Elliott said, continuing to walk. “I will go away, and I will never see your son again, I promise. Just spare me from further humiliation and pain, I’ve had enough of this for one day.”

“No! You can’t do this, Cesare would never forgive me if you leave him because of me. I was the one who overreacted

and then accused you of things you didn't do. Can you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, consigliere, I'm glad everything is okay now, and your wife is safe. My mother didn't get that chance. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Elliott wanted to leave, but two strong arms stopped him. Then the next second he was pulled to Brentano's chest and engulfed in a warm hug. He was caressed on his head by a loving hand, while words were whispered into his ear, in a language he didn't understand.

Suddenly, emotions and memories Elliott thought of as lost forever invaded his soul. For the first time in ten years, he felt the safety of a fatherly embrace, the warmth of a caring heart. No one, not even the good doctor, had offered him the affection Brentano gave him right there and then.

"Come, son, everyone is waiting to meet you. I'm afraid that, if I don't bring you back to the house quickly, I will have to face the wrath of my beloved wife, Rosa," the consigliere smiled. "Plus, all the others are waiting impatiently to meet you."

Elliott nodded, smiling weakly. "Very well, then, let's go."

As they came closer to the house, the blond could see that a rather large group had formed. They were waiting for him and Brentano. His face was suddenly lit by a smile, as he recognized the cute little blond twins from two weeks earlier. As soon as they spotted Elliott, the children ran into his arms.

“Whoa, are you Uncle Eugene’s special guest?! I am happy to see you again. I thought you forgot about us,” one of them spoke.

“How could I ever forget about you, Sir Chatalot?” Elliott took the child in his arms, kissing him lightly on his rosy cheek.

“Daddy is well now. We can go to the mansion with him and papa. You and Uncle Eugene can have the house all to yourself,” the little boy winked.

“These kids, always in the center of attention,” Elliott heard a voice from behind him. Turning, he saw a raven-haired, solidly built man, looking at him with an amused smile on his face. “Daniel Bloom-Fenelli, Eugene’s cousin,” he said, extending his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Elliott smiled at him, shaking his hand. He looked fascinated into the man’s dark blue eyes.

“Here you are, *figliolo*,” Donna Rosa spoke as she headed over to where Daniel and Elliott were. Examining the blond, she shook her head and sighed. “If you and that other one think the two of you can get away with not eating enough, you are so very wrong, *ragazzi*.”

Daniel huffed, amused. “You and Tarquin have landed in big trouble, my friend. Zia Rosa will stuff you with her delicious, tasty food, then she will bust your asses if you blonds don’t empty your plates.”

“Who’s Tarquin? I thought the kids’ names were Emery and Lochlin,” Elliott asked, confused.

“That would be me,” a blond man spoke, circling Daniel’s waist and pulling him in a possessive hug. “I am the little ones’ daddy and the husband of the big guy here,” he continued.

“As usual, we missed all the fun,” a redhead who was exiting a car, followed by two boys in their teens, protested. Looking better at him, Elliott recognized Liam, Elizabeth’s cousin.

To the blond’s big surprise, Christine, accompanied by another raven-haired man who looked familiar, got out of the same car. She went straight to her roommate, hugging him. “Eugene called and told us what happened. Everything will be all right now. No one will harm you anymore,” she whispered, rubbing his back.

Elliott closed his eyes and let out a small, happy sigh. Christine was right. He was among friends now.

CHAPTER 19

“Hello, Colin! Busy evening, huh?” Vincent said, plopping down on his favorite stool, right in front of the bar owner.

“Uh-hu. It’s payday somewhere, and the guys reward themselves with something more than the usual after-work beer. There are good guys, though, family men who don’t drink away all their earnings.”

Vincent nodded, smiling. “Yeah, I know the type. So, what are you planning to do after closing time?” he winked.

“Do you think I will give in to your wicked way without a fight? Do you really think you will have me on my knees before you, begging for mercy?” Colin whispered-yelled in a rough voice, bending over the counter. “Well, think again, old fellow!”

“Old fellow?! Last time the two of us met, I was so rough on your ass, that you must’ve cried for a week,” Vincent grinned, “and now you dare to call me an old fellow?!”

“I will have your ass tonight! It’s going to hurt you so bad, you won’t dare show your face here again. I will make you my bitch, and I won’t stop until you beg me,” Colin replied, a bright shade of pink coloring his cheeks.

“Aw, you are blushing, isn’t it just sweet?” Vincent continued to tease the bar owner. “Anyway, this isn’t going to save you from the fate I’ve reserved you.”

The patrons looked with obvious amusement at the two men, enjoying their banter. Those straightforward, working-class men had come to like the fancy-dressed guy who was, for almost two months, a regular at The Gambit. Vincent's friendly nature and easy way with people drew everyone close to him. The folks in the neighborhood considered him one of their own.

"Hey, Vince, how are the kids?" one of the men sitting at the bar asked, raising his hand as a sign of salute.

"They are doing very well, thank you for asking, George," the answer came. "Hayden bonded very well with his older brother, and Arnett finally decided to take Tarquin's offer, so now he's learning to read and write. How are your grandsons?"

"Driving my poor daughter-in-law insane, as always. Of course, my wife blames me for everything, even if she was the one who gave birth to our son," the man grinned.

"Speaking of," Vincent turned to Colin, "are the little ones still up? I want to kiss them good night if they are not asleep."

"No, they are still wide awake, waiting for their favorite uncle to tuck them in and read them a bedtime story."

"I better hurry, then, the little curly-heads may fall asleep any minute. Good night, guys, enjoy your drinks," Vincent waved his hand as he went upstairs.

He walked down the narrow corridor, listening intently, then stopped in front of a room, cracking the door and casting a glance inside. On a queen size bed, two young boys, of about seven-eight years old were playing with a set of building blocks, trying to make a spaceship out of them.

Vincent looked at the little kids, his expression pained and saddened. The smallest one, Aidan, was very shy and quiet, always hiding in the shadows. He desperately wanted to pass unnoticed, always shaking when someone accidentally touched him — the favorite target of bullies.

And then there was Evan, with his little hands permanently balled into fists, hissing through gritted teeth at whoever approached his twin brother with aggressive intentions. He was almost always sporting bruises, the results of the fights the little boy got into, in his attempts to protect Aidan.

Only that sometimes, the bruises were not put there by his classmates, but by the larger, heavier hand of Lottie Jones, his mother, who punished Evan for disrupting the atmosphere of their home. That happened at least once a week, sometimes the beatings being so severe, that the kid couldn't leave the house for days.

During these periods, Aidan used to disappear from home, hiding in some dark corner, scared, hungry, disoriented.

That was until Colin spotted him and Evan, who came to take his little brother home, promising that he would defend him. Without a word, he took the kids under his wing and offered them the warmth, shelter, food, and love they needed so much.

When, after some more passionate, heated, all-consuming kisses and make-out sessions, Vincent decided to give his feelings for Colin a chance, he became a part of the twins' life, too. Evan at first and then Aidan warmed up to the man, allowed him to touch and hold them, a privilege reserved until then only for the kind bar owner.

Careful not to scare the little boys, who were so absorbed in their game that they didn't notice him, Vincent stepped close to the bed's edge, taking a seat. Then, he put his hands on both boys' back, starting to rubbing them gently.

"Uncle Vincent," the twins exclaimed at the same time, "When did you get here? We didn't hear you," Evan asked, while Aidan circled the man's neck with his pale, skinny arms.

"I stayed in the doorway, looking at how nice the two of you were playing," he smiled. "How was school today?"

"It was great," Aidan spoke, a small smile forming on his pale lips and lightening his eyes. "Our science project was voted the most interesting of the entire class. We were the only ones who got an A+", the child continued to brag. "Mom will like it."

“No, she won’t. She never does, Aidan, all she wants is...” the child stopped abruptly, casting Vincent a suspicious glance.

“Since you did so good at school, what about two bedtime stories instead of one?” the man spoke in a cheerful voice, pretending the scene hadn’t happened.

“Yay, two bedtime stories,” Evan wiggled his little fist in a victorious gesture, hugging his brother.

Vincent took one of the colorful children’s books from the nightstand, starting to read the boys’ favorite story in a gentle, enchanting voice. Five minutes later, their even breath signaled that the children were sound asleep. Putting the book back on the nightstand. Vincent tucked the twins in, kissing each of them on the cheek and forehead.

The man was about to go downstairs when he heard someone’s footsteps. A dark silhouette appeared at the end of the corridor. He became tense but decided not to change direction, so he continued to walk. A huge sigh of relief escaped from Vincent’s lips when he realized the silhouette belonged to Colin.

“Oh, it’s you!” he said. “The little ones are fast asleep. I wrapped the blankets around them, turned off the light and left the door slightly opened. I thought you were busier tonight.” The last sentence was spoken in a questioning tone.

“The guys just left, and now El is taking care of everything downstairs. He figured out the two of us would want to talk, so...”

“That helper of yours gives me chills every time I see him. By the way, does he have a name, like normal people? Because you can’t consider El as such,” Vincent raised his eyebrows while he spoke.

“Eli. That’s his name, and there’s nothing scary about him. And no, he is not my helper. The boy likes to hang around here. Nowhere to go, I guess. He is the owner of a guns and ammunition store, does fairly well. The kids and I are the only family he has.” As Colin spoke, his deep blue eyes darkened, giving up a little of his internal turmoil.

“Sounds like this Eli fellow is a good guy after all,” Vincent said, in an attempt to brighten the other man’s mood.

He couldn’t stand to see Colin unhappy; his heart ached every time it happened. In spite of his muscular body and outgoing personality, there was something about the man that reminded Vincent very much of Sebastian. Just like that poor Bloom kid, Colin was extremely vulnerable on the inside, but he hid that from the others.

“There’s something important I want to talk to you about,” the blue-eyed man said, bringing the other man back to the present. “Let’s go to my office,” he gestured to the door in front of them.

The room was pretty small, but it didn't look like a bar owner's office at all. At least not how Vincent imagined it. Everything, from the light beige tone the walls were painted in, to the furniture and the little decorative objects spread here and there spoke of elegance, comfort, and an impeccable taste.

“Lately, I've thought a lot, about many things,” Colin started to speak, uneasiness in his voice. “The recent events in my life have made me reconsider some of my priorities and make some decisions I had kept postponing until now.”

“What kind of decisions are you talking about?” Although he made efforts to stay calm, worry poured from Vincent's voice.

“I filed for the twins' adoption, and I intend to get full custody. I want that bitch out of their lives forever,” Colin answered, his eyes darkening.

“But... how are you going to do that? You aren't related to the boys in any way...or are you?” Vincent didn't try to hide his interest and curiosity.

“No, I'm not, but neither is that soulless creature who calls herself their mother. You see, owning a bar comes with all kind of advantages. You are nice to people, make conversation, find out stuff, without giving the impression you are after specific information.” Colin slyly smiled when saying the last part.

“I see... So, what did you find out from your patrons?” Vincent's curiosity increased, as he sensed there was more about the twins' story than met the eye.

“Lottie never wanted children, which doesn’t surprise me at all. Anyway, the boys were given to that woman by someone, who, in exchange for a substantial monthly payment, told her to raise them without giving up her routine.”

“What routine?” Vincent was curious but also surprised at how sarcastic the other man’s voice sounded when saying that word.

“Well, Lottie is the neighborhood’s whore, everyone knows that. The person who entrusted the children to her said they had to stay alive until they reached twelve years of age.” Colin’s eyes darkened again, anger and frustration written all over his face.

As for Vincent, the other man’s revelations troubled him a lot. As he suspected, something was incredibly wrong with the arrangement between Lottie and that mystery person. He also wondered how Colin came into possession of that secret information.

“Anyway, I am determined to get the bitch to sign a document stipulating that she would completely give up her parental rights. And I also want to write my will.”

“Your will? Aren’t you too young for this kind of stuff?” Worry poured out of Vincent’s voice, as he examined Colin’s face.

“Not at all,” the man replied, smiling weakly. “I’ll be fifty in a few years, so thinking about my will is not premature at all. I didn’t think of it, until Eli brought the subject up for

discussion, suggesting that I should consider securing the children's future."

"He seems like a caring, intelligent young man, but still creeps me out," Vincent smiled. "And what did he say, more specific?"

"Eli hired a lawyer who helped him with the papers. When he dies, everything he owns will go to Evan and Aidan." Colin shook his head in disbelief. "I knew the kid was doing well financially, but I didn't expect him to be that rich: over two hundred thousand dollars in liquid assets, plus several real estate properties."

Vincent whistled appreciatively. "That's quite an impressive fortune for someone so young if you ask me." Suddenly, the image he had of Colin's helper changed radically, making him feel guilty for misjudging the young man.

"The bar, a house and fifty thousand dollars in a bank account is everything I own, and it will go to the twins when I no longer walk this earth. I want to appoint you and El as their legal guardians, to watch over them in case I... you understand."

"That is not going to happen, but you are right. You need a good lawyer who can help you with everything, adoption, and custody included. I also intend to find a lawyer who could represent Hayden's interests in the eventuality of my death. I have a strange feeling about the current one. There's something about him that screams trouble."

"What about we both join forces and look for the best lawyer in the city for our boys?" Colin suggested, smiling.

Seeing Vincent was still tense, he added, “Now, that we’ve agreed on this matter, I can bust your sorry ass at chess.”

“So, you found the list, after all. Congratulations, my dear Sydney,” Carter sarcastically said to the beefy guy in front of him. “Where was it?” he continued in the same voice, carefully examining the man’s expression.

“In the retard’s room, where else?! I’ve told you countless times that goddamn kid was a troublemaker, but you didn’t bother to listen. If you had let me take care of him a year or two ago, everything else would have gone smoothly, but no.” Sydney clenched his jaw, anger boiling inside him.

“What about the other list? Why don’t you have that? It should have been in the retard’s room, too,” Carter spoke coldly, irritated that a nobody, like the man standing in front of him, dared to point out the mistakes he’d made and throw them in his face.

“No, it isn’t, the pest must’ve given it to that guy. If so, getting it back will be mission impossible,” Sydney shook his head, frustrated.

“What guy?” Carter asked, his patience wearing thinner with each minute he spent in the other man’s company.

“A wise guy from Windsor Terrace, the owner of a bar with a fancy name. He runs the family business, using the bar as a cover. Colin Rafferty is the guy’s name.”

“I don’t care how big of a gangster this man is, if he’s an obstacle, I will get him my way. Now if you’ll excuse me, Sydney, I have some other pressing matters to attend. See you next time.”

After parting ways with his associate, Carter headed to the house he had rented for three months. Although he had hoped his stay in New York would be a short one. The man took a deep breath, thinking about the difficult situation he had landed in.

Ezra ran again before Carter could break him, Elliott Spellmann seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth, and now he would have to deal with a hot-shot Irish gangster who had the other half of his precious list.

Lost in his thoughts, Carter didn’t notice the kid coming from the opposite direction until it was too late. The two of them bumped into each other. The young man fell to the ground but, instead of getting up, he started to pat the asphalt around him desperately.

“What’s wrong, kiddo, what are you looking for?”, Carter said, grabbing his arm and tried to help him get to his feet. “You should pay more attention, otherwise, you could hurt someone. What’s wrong with you, are you blind?”

“Yes, actually he is, and you are an insensitive bastard,” a redheaded young man spoke, shooting daggers in

Carter's direction. "Are you all right, Dar-Dar?" he said gently, picking up a white walking stick from the sidewalk and wrapping an arm around the other young man's shoulders.

A cruel smile formed on Carter's lips, as he looked at how the two became lost in the crowd. The blind young man was fascinating. Extremely beautiful, with a fragile physique and vulnerable. Exactly how he liked them. Hunting him was going to be fun, Carter thought, rubbing his hands together in a gesture of satisfaction

CHAPTER 20

Eugene laid in bed, propped on one elbow, looking at Elliott's sleeping form with a bright smile on his face. The blond was facing him, one hand under his head and the other resting relaxed between the two of them. It was Monday morning, the start of another busy week at the law firm, and Elliott needed all the sleep he could get, especially after the previous night's heated, intense sex.

A rebel curl fell on the blond's face, making him scrunch his nose. Eugene removed it with a delicate gesture, tucking it behind the young man's ear. There was still half an hour left until Elliott had to wake up, and young Brentano decided to use it the same way he had over the past month, contemplating the sleeping beauty and letting his thoughts run freely.

His mother must have woken up by then. She was most likely in the kitchen, doing breakfast for her two sons, as she proudly proclaimed. After the unfortunate incident on the day she and Claudio had arrived in New York, Donna Rosa had taken Elliott under her wing and into her warm, loving heart. As for the consigliere, he did everything in his power to win the blond's forgiveness for treating him so cruelly that day.

Brentano senior showered Elliott with fatherly affection, ready to do whatever he might ask. When the blond expressed his interest in Mafia politics, hierarchy and history, the former consigliere became the most dedicated and patient professor ever. His efforts paid off quickly, as Elliott was a very fast learner.

Eugene sighed, as his thoughts took another, not so pleasant, turn. According to his father, Don Antonio Moretti's health had deteriorated significantly over the past few months, so he had appointed his grandson Luca as successor. The kid was only in his early twenties and didn't seem very thrilled at the idea, but since being the only living male relative of the old don, he didn't have much of a choice.

"Good morning, stranger danger," a sleepy Elliott said, looking at Eugene with his beautiful, sky-blue eyes. "What were you thinking about?" he continued, stretching under the blankets with feline grace.

"You, what else do you think?" young Brentano continued, pecking the blond's lips. "Will you join me for a quick shower?"

"Mmmhhmmmm, sounds very tempting," Elliott purred, eyes half closed. "No hanky-panky, though, or else we'll be late for breakfast, and Mamma Rosa will unleash hell on our sorry asses," he felt the need to add, feigning horror.

"Okay, I promise to keep my hands away from your round, sweet, sexy, tempting ass," Eugene grinned.

Half an hour, a hot shower and several passionate kisses later, the two men went down to the kitchen, where donna Rosa greeted them as usual, her face lightened by a broad smile.

“Good morning, *ragazzi!* Hurry up, the food is getting cold.” After carefully examining Elliott’s face, she shook her head. “You don’t look so well, *caro mio*. Are you sick?”

“No, mamma, he is not, trust me, I take good care of him,” Eugene answered, while the blond dug into the food, enjoying every bit of it.

“So, boys, what are you going to do today?” Brentano senior asked, putting aside the paper he’d just finished reading.

“Well, nothing interesting for me,” Eugene said, “just the usual, a board meeting at noon and the presentation of the monthly report. After that, I am going to call Vittorio about this whole Moretti situation.”

Claudio nodded. “Yes, it’s the right thing to do. If young Luca doesn’t want to be the next Moretti don, no one can make him. What about you, Elliott? What’s your plans for today, *figliolo?*” he said in a warm, affectionate voice.

“Well, Mallory and I thought about it, and we decided to hire a second assistant since poor Miss Gloria is overwhelmed with tasks. The new assistant will be working for me, while Mallory, as the senior partner, will have Miss Gloria just for him. I’ll be interviewing a candidate for the position this very morning, so I have to go.” Elliott smiled, kissing Donna Rosa

on the cheek. “*Grazie, mamma*, the food was delicious, as always.”

Taking his briefcase, the blond waved goodbye to the three Brentanos, got in the car, and started driving to the office. All the way to there, a small smile played on his lips, while thinking about how lucky he was, surrounded by the love of the family and friends he had longed so much for.

Elliott also thought about Mallory and how much his best friend had changed over the last few weeks since he’d become a senior partner at Ashburn & Spellmann, the new name of the law firm. His self-esteem and confidence had increased considerably, and he no longer accepted his parents’ and siblings’ tyranny and poor treatment.

After a heated argument with all of them, he’d moved into Elliott’s house, to Christine’s delight, because she wasn’t alone anymore. However, this wasn’t the only change that occurred in Mallory. The blond often surprised him smiling, with a dreamy look in his beautiful brown eyes. Elliott suspected his friend had someone, but when asked, the said friend vehemently denied it.

After parking and locking his car, the blond entered the building, with the small smile still playing on his lips. On the way to his office, he ran into Richard Benard, almost knocking

him down. The other lawyer had a confused expression on his face.

“Morning, boss, are you all right? You don’t look very well this morning.”

“Richie Benard, the right man at the right time and place,” Elliott smirked. “Would you please accompany me to my office? I want to talk to you about something.”

“Sure, boss,” the other man said, not knowing what to expect, as the blond was the most unpredictable of the two associates.

Over the weeks since he and Mallory took over the office, Benard came to admire Elliott, his sharp instincts, sound judgment and the smart way he outwitted his opponents in and out of the court.

“Well, Richie, I must confess I am pleasantly impressed with how you put that bitchy attitude of yours to use,” Elliott said, satisfaction noticeable in his voice. “That is why Mallory and I have decided to give you more cases. Divorce cases, I mean, because you do wonders with them.”

“I... I don’t know what to say. I mean, thank you, Mister Spellmann,” Benard stuttered, overjoyed. Ever since he graduated law school, he knew family law was his field, but his uncle insisted otherwise. “I won’t disappoint you. I will work harder than ever, I...”

“I get the idea, Richie, move your sexy behind and get to work,” Elliott said, amused. “One more thing. Would you be

so kind and tell the gentleman who applied for the position of assistant to step inside?”

“Of course, boss,” Benard replied. “Mister Spellmann is waiting for you, sir,” he said to the man waiting outside the office. After studying him for a moment, the young lawyer continued. “You and he will get along just fine, trust me.”

When the man stepped into the office, slightly limping, he couldn't suppress a gasp of surprise at the sight of the young man in front of him. On one hand, he didn't expect the principal associate in a law firm that big to be a boy in his late teens, like the one in front of him.

On the other hand, there was a shocking resemblance between the said boy and his dearly departed husband's best friend. He was a quiet, shy young man with big blue eyes and a passion for mathematics. Tarquin Ballard, that was his name.

“Please, take a seat, Mister... Van Sloot? Did I pronounce it correctly?” Elliott said, examining the man head to toe.

“Yes, you did, Mister Spellmann,” he replied, sitting in the chair the blond indicated. “Joraan Van Sloot,” the man added, extending his hand.

“Nice to meet you. So, let's see...” Elliott started to look over his resume, a little disappointed. The man didn't

have any references and no experience as a lawyer's assistant. However, as he read, the blond became more and more convinced that he needed to search no longer, Joraan Van Sloot was perfect for the job.

“You know, when I started to read your resume, I was sure that I'd have to take one more interview, but I was very wrong. You're exactly what I'm looking for. Congratulations, Mister Van Sloot, welcome to the team.” Elliott smiled brightly, shaking Joraan's hand.

“Thank you, Mister Spellmann, I will do my best, and I promise you won't regret your decision. Tell me please, sir, what was it that made you decide to hire me?” There was a tinge of curiosity in the older man's voice he didn't make any effort to hide.

“Well, you were the underdog here, the one who was seemingly not qualified for the job. But I believe in underdogs, as I was one too, until not long ago. Besides, someone who worked for the US Embassy in Pretoria is more than suitable as my assistant,” Elliott said, slightly bowing his head as a sign of respect.

“I should get ready to take over my new job, then. One more thing before I go. Do you happen to know a certain Tarquin Ballard?”

“Of course I do, he's a great guy — a happily married father of three. We are about the same age. Why do you ask?”

“He's already gotten married? At this young age? Oh, sorry, Mister Spellmann, I didn't intend to...”

“Don’t worry, Mister Van Slood, no offense taken! Yes, Tarquin is married to one of the most loving, understanding, caring guys on the face of the earth. He and Daniel were made for each other,” Elliott answered.

“Daniel? Nice name,” Joraan said, in a somewhat melancholic tone. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

When he left the office, the new personal assistant had tears in his eyes. As they ran down his cheeks, he prayed for his long-lost adoptive son. He hoped that he was happy somewhere in the arms of someone who loved and was loved by him.

“Okay, folks, lunch break, see you in about an hour. As always, I don’t go anywhere until I examine every one of you, so there’s no point in jumping on each other’s throat in my absence. Those of you who have jobs to go to are the first to be examined. And there are, of course, the emergencies.” Rayne sighed, as he looked to the multitude of people waiting in front of his small office.

All the patients nodded in understanding, but the doctor still felt like he was letting them down. There were so many of them, the health issues so serious in most of the cases, and he was just one person. He fought against the odds, sometimes to

save a life from death's clutches, sometimes only to postpone the inevitable.

Feeling helpless and powerless was one of the things Rayne hated the most. Sometimes the things he witnessed on an everyday basis made him want to run and never look back, but he couldn't. It was not the kind of inheritance Rayne would have left to Gerrard; it was not how he wanted to be remembered by his son.

At thirty-three, with his stunningly beautiful emerald eyes and red hair, Rayne Calhoun was a very handsome man, one a lot of women and men dreamed about having as a life partner. But he didn't believe in marriage. Not anymore. Not since his husband, the reputable professor and medical researcher Conroy Winters, had kicked him out of the house they had shared for the past seven years.

It was his house, too, Rayne thought with bitterness, remembering how he'd slaved in the lab day and night — conducting experiments, writing conclusions, double- and triple- checking every result, doing everything all over again when something went wrong. All that time, his dear husband was holding press conferences, going to prestigious medical congresses or doing interviews, taking all the credits for Rayne's work.

But he didn't care, not as long as he had Gerrard, not as long as he could spend some quality time in the company of his son. Conroy insisted on sending the boy to a boarding school, implying that Rayne was too busy with his career to take care of him properly. He proved his husband wrong though, visiting Gerrard as often as he could.

Alastair Stark was a name that inspired admiration, respect, and sometimes envy. But for Rayne, it was the name of a man who rejected the woman he had a one night stand with. The woman whose virginity he took, leaving her pregnant. The same man whose courage was praised by everyone, acting like a coward and turning his back on his unborn child out of fear of losing his wealthy, aristocratic husband.

No, Gerrard would not remember his father as a coward who walked away, turning his back when the boy needed him the most, Rayne said to himself, as he crossed the street, heading to the food truck from where he bought a frugal, but tasty lunch. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the two teenagers waiting for the ice cream vendor to hand them the cones they'd ordered, then the car heading straight in their direction.

To his great horror, Rayne saw how one of the men in the car pulled a gun, aiming at one of the teens and started to shoot. In just a few seconds, the kid fell to the ground. It all happened so fast that none of the people present at the scene

had time to react, except for Rayne. He ran to the fallen kid as hard as he could, dispersing the people gathered around.

“I’m a doctor, please, let me look at him,” he said, pushing through the mob. “Make more room. He needs to breathe! Come on people, let me do my job!”

“Is he badly hurt?” a shaky voice asked. Rayne looked at the possessor of the voice, a kid slightly younger than the one who was wounded. “Is he going to... die?”

“No, if you can keep yourself together and help me to carry your friend here to my clinic. Also, please put that expensive phone of yours to good use and call an ambulance like you should’ve done in the first place.”

“I’ll call my brother, he’ll know what to do,” the kid answered, squeezing his eyes shut and hissing between his teeth. “Don’t worry about me, doc, just take care of Arnett,” he continued.

Rayne nodded, taking the wounded teenager in his arms and carrying him to the clinic. Suddenly, he realized the other boy was also injured, but for some reason, he preferred to hide it. When they finally arrived at the clinic, the blue-eyed boy collapsed on the bed, near his friend, and Rayne could see he was hit in the thigh, but fortunately, the wound was superficial.

The other one, however, was badly hurt and had lost a lot of blood. In spite of this, however, he breathed evenly and

hadn't lost consciousness. After properly cleaning the wound, Rayne took a better look at it, and what he saw gave him chills up his spine.

“Hey, kid,” he spoke to the other boy, “how well you know him?” he gestured in Arnett's direction.

But the boy didn't seem to hear him, busy as he was tapping on his phone. After a while, he finally spoke. “Arnett is my best friend. We ‘kinda grew up together. Sorry, I didn't answer, I was busy texting my brother and great-uncle.

“Very good,” Rayne spoke, giving the teenager a bright smile. “Can you tell me, now that your friend is all taken care of, what is your name? And why didn't you tell me about your wound?”

“I didn't want to worry Arnett, that's why. And sorry about not introducing myself earlier. My name is Hayden Bloom, my brother's name is Daniel, and my great-uncle is Alastair Stark”, the kid said, looking at Rayne with his intense blue eyes.

Alastair Stark, the man thought bitterly. It seems that he was making a habit of abandoning the relatives who needed him the most. A habit he'd passed on to the teen's brother, Daniel Bloom, another soulless bastard.

CHAPTER 21

“So,” Rayne said, after the first wave of shock the mentioning of Alastair’s name and relation he had with Hayden provoked dissipated a bit, “I take it you are one of the poor rich boys placed in nannies’, chauffeurs’ and housekeepers’ care, because your parents, who are supposed to watch over and love you are too busy for that?”

“No, not at all,” Hayden replied, sensing the irony from the man’s voice. “You see, great-uncle Alastair is...”

“I know who he is, or rather was, because he retired not long ago, which gives him plenty of time to spend in the company of his young nephews,” Rayne spat. “But he is how he is, and I bet your brother learned to act the same. After all, with a teacher like that...”

“My brother is on his way here, most likely worried sick about us. With all due respect, doctor, you don’t know them. I am very grateful for you saving Arnett’s life, and mine, but that doesn’t give you the right to think and speak ill of my family.” As he spoke, Hayden’s deep blue eyes darkened, becoming almost black.

In the meantime, Arnett woke up after being sedated by Rayne and was looking around him confused, not realizing what had happened to him. After a while, the kid extended his hand, calling his friend’s name. Hayden noticed, and took the hand between his own, rubbing and kissing it.

All of a sudden, the main door of the little clinic burst open, letting an agitated Daniel inside. He pushed through the crowd of people waiting to be examined, ignoring their protests, and went straight to Rayne's office. Without knocking, he barged inside, as the doctor was examining a pregnant Brazilian woman.

Instead of waiting, he helped the patient down from the examination table and into her clothes. All the time, he spoke with her in Portuguese, asking questions about the pregnancy and giving a lot of useful advice about how to take care of her and the unborn baby on a tight budget.

Then, as the woman was leaving, Daniel turned to Rayne, who was half-amused, half-startled by the whole episode. "I take you don't leave until they are all properly examined and diagnosed," he said, gesturing outside. "And also, you are kind of short of medical supplies."

"Short of medical supplies?! Dude, that is the understatement of the century! That is all I have," Rayne said, opening a heavy, rusty metallic closet and showing its content to Daniel, "and it will all be gone by tomorrow."

"Wait a bit, I am going to check on someone, and then I'll be back with you," the unexpected visitor said, pulling up his phone.

Rayne nodded, continuing to examine his patients and to prescribe medication. After a while, another guy, a brunette

this time, stepped into the office. “Hello, I’m Eugene, Daniel told me that you need help, so here I am.”

“Who told you I need help?” For a second, Rayne looked confused, then realized. “Oh, the weirdo from earlier! Although, if I thought about it better, he wasn’t a weirdo after all, if you would be as good as him...”

“There’s only one way to find out how good or not I am,” Eugene smirked, “put me to work.”

Rayne took the advice and didn’t regret it, especially since, after a few minutes, the other guy, Daniel, also appeared. The newly arrived men, in spite of their city boy appearance, didn’t seem disgusted by the sometimes purulent wounds that needed to be cleaned, bandaged, stitched or disinfected or by the unkempt appearance of some of the patients.

Both men seemed younger than Rayne, Eugene by only one or two years, while Daniel seemed to be in his middle to late twenties. Occasionally, they took a few minutes break, saying that they had to check on something.

With all the excitement, Rayne forgot, almost totally, about the two teenagers in the emergency room. He scolded himself mentally and left the office, saying that he had to take care of something, much to the two guys’ amusement. Entering the room, Rayne let out a sigh of relief, as the boys were cuddled together, safe and sound, asleep.

Neither of them showed signs of fever or other complications, so the doctor took the chart to note it down. As he was getting ready to do that, Rayne gasped in surprise, because the medical chart had been filled in with two different handwriting. Three, in fact, his included. It didn't take him long to realize that it was the doing of his unexpected helpers, Eugene and Daniel.

Then, he remembered. Hayden, Alastair Stark's nephew, said his older brother's name was Daniel. So that was it, Rayne thought bitterly, the entire good Samaritan masquerade was that soulless bastard's doing, and that fellow like the good nephew he was, carried on the plan. The doctor felt the anger slowly raising inside, but he decided to keep it under control, at least for the time being.

He stepped out of the room, heading back to the main office when a giant man about seven feet tall bumped into him. Rayne was getting ready to admonish the guy, but instead, he just stared at the multitude of packages, all of them containing different medical supplies, the giant was carrying.

"Hey, doc, where should I put these?" the man whispered-yelled, gesturing with his head to the load he was carrying.

"In the main office, there's a closet in there where I store them," Rayne finally answered, after staring some more

at the mountain in front of him.

“There’s no more room in there, doc, not even if these were all of them, but the other lads are bringing more, so...” the mountain replied in a thick accent voice.

“What other lads?” Rayne was the embodiment of confusion, unable to understand what was going on.

“The Russians, Aristarh and Sergey. Boss’ orders”, the fellow said, following the doctor to the back of the building, where the storage room was. Of course, with the scarce funds he had, Rayne couldn’t afford to buy so many supplies at a time, so it was empty.

“Okay, put them there, and tell the others to do the same,” Rayne said, determined to get to the bottom of the whole charade.

He went into the office and started to examine another patient, spying on the other two men from the corner of his eye. To his surprise, neither of them showed any sign of tiredness or boredom. On the contrary, they both seemed to possess vast reserves of energy and stamina, much to Rayne’s admiration and pleasant surprise.

However, the sensation that everything was a carefully staged act designed to fool him persisted in the corner of the doctor’s mind, nagging him. Why didn’t Daniel tell him who he was from the beginning? Why didn’t he ask, instead of searching for the boys’ room by himself?

Who was Eugene and what role did he play in all this? But above all, where and when had the two of them assimilated the amazing medical knowledge they made use of in examining the patients? With these questions running through his mind, Rayne didn't notice the lobby had emptied.

"Finally," Eugene groaned, stretching his hands over the head. "My friend, you have all my admiration. I don't know how you keep up with this on a daily basis. I would have called quits by now."

"Because you are old and rusty, that's why," Daniel playfully retorted, "and because Elliott, who's a decade younger, drains you of all your energy."

"Well," Rayne answered, watching amused the banter between the two friends, "someone has to take care of them, too, you know. Unfortunately, my patients can't afford expensive treatments and visits to well-known specialists, so I don't have a choice."

"Yes, you are right," Daniel admitted, his voice laced with sadness. "but still...God! My neck and shoulders are stiff, they are in great need, of a massage," he groaned. "What about you, doc? What do you need right now?" he winked.

"Superficial bastard, like his great-uncle," Rayne thought bitterly. But, instead of the acid reply on the tip of his tongue, the doctor heard himself voicing his deepest buried wishes. "A completely equipped clinic and a good divorce lawyer who could reunite me with my son."

Daniel looked straight into his eyes, nodding. “It can be done everything can be taken care of, can’t it, Eugene?” he said, turning to the brunette. “Oh, sorry about not introducing myself earlier,” he continued, extending his hand. “Daniel Bloom-Van Sloot.”

Rayne Calhoun.” His name was all the doctor said, taking the other man’s hand and shaking it only for a second or two.

Bloom-Van Sloot. The missing kid. He remembered the case very well. It happened some thirteen years earlier, by the time he started working with Conroy and his collaborator, that scary-looking Italian scientist, whose name he forgot all the time. It was around the time he had Gerrard, the only light in his bleak existence.

Alastair Stark, the man with countless friends in high places and endless resources, must have found the kid, turning him into a cold-hearted, manipulative bastard. A younger version of himself. And now, most likely, Daniel was doing the same with his kid brother. At this thought, Rayne felt a pang in his chest.

“I’ll go and check on Arnett and Hayden,” he said. “Thank you, guys, you must go and have a well-deserved rest.” The doctor smiled weakly in Eugene’s direction, avoiding Daniel.

“Um, doc, excuse me, but Aristarh and Mickey already took the boys home,” the raven-haired man spoke. “I am sorry about not informing you earlier, I was going to, but...” he lowered his head in shame.

“Of course you didn’t inform me, Mister Bloom,” Rayne lashed out, “you didn’t feel like it. Of course, your brother will be treated by the best doctors in the city, while Arnett...Well, his fate depends very much on how much he means to you. Of how you could use him in the future.”

“Look, Doctor Calhoun, I don’t know what you think of me. Someone who has their agenda has filled your head with all these false images of my family and me. Anyway, you will have the chance to see how wrong those persons were if you accept my offer.” Daniel’s voice seemed sincere, but, without realizing it, he’d made a big mistake.

Rayne’s eyes darkened menacingly, as he fought to keep control over his temper. But the doctor made a decision, and it was too late to back down. “What offer?” he said in a raspy voice.

“To come and take care of the kids at my house, as their doctor, until they are back on their feet. What do you think?”

Rayne’s jaw dropped on the floor, his eyes wide with surprise, as that offer was what he least expected from someone related to the cold-hearted man who chose a comfortable life over his flesh and blood. A crazy idea went

through Rayne's head, making him laugh hysterically on the inside.

What if this Daniel fellow dared to stand up for himself and Hayden, saying no to his old great-uncle's manipulations and twisted little games? What if he was his own man? Rayne wouldn't want to miss the opportunity to witness the clashes between the two, so he decided to accept the offer.

"All right, I'm in, but on one condition," he said, giving Daniel a piercing look. "It's either take it or leave it," he felt the need to add.

"Good," the other man replied, a mysterious smile on his face. "I agree from the start, but I would like to know what I've agreed to. What is your condition, I mean."

Rayne nodded. "It seems fair to me. I want honest answers to any question I may ask you. And don't worry, I am not interested in what you and your girlfriend are doing after it gets dark," he said ironically.

"Husband," Daniel said, his eyes brightening. "I'm a married man, Rayne, and I'm the luckiest guy on earth to have him by my side."

"Yes, he's a lucky bastard," Eugene also confirmed, then shook his head. "Man, those two are unstoppable in so many ways! Together, they are invincible."

Hearing the two of them speaking like that, Rayne felt a pang in his chest, wondering if Conroy ever spoke of him in the same way. But, instead of letting his mind wander on that path, he decided to continue the question and answer session. As soon as the three of them got inside the car, he resumed it.

“There is something I am confused about,” Rayne said, with a thoughtful look on his face. “Why didn’t Hayden call an ambulance, to take Arnett to a hospital? Or, supposing that he was scared, why didn’t you?”

“To protect the kid,” Daniel answered without hesitation. “Calling an ambulance would have landed Arnett in deep trouble, and that is the last thing I want. My kid brother has feelings for him, so...”

“I don’t understand. What kind of trouble would have the boy gotten into if you checked him into a hospital?” Rayne had his theories but also needed to hear Daniel’s version.

“All clinics and hospitals, at least the big ones, have an obligation to report the gunshot wounds to the police so that they could investigate the incident. Last time, Tarquin managed to get Arnett out of that mess, but...”

“Wait a minute, are you saying, this is not the first time the kid had been shot? When did that happen?” Rayne’s mind was in the gutter.

“About two months earlier. At the time, he lived with Hayden and his mother. Ten armed men attacked the house, killing the poor woman. However, before that, Arnett managed

to take seven of them down, suffering multiple severe wounds.”

“That kid killed seven armed men?” Rayne was shocked by the implications of Daniel’s revelations.

When he saw how fast the teenager’s wounds were healing, he suspected something was not quite right. The doctor had seen this before, many times, as he was the one who discovered the serum by accident. More than that, Rayne had volunteered to test it, and that was why he didn’t have any scar left from his C section.

He couldn’t stop wondering how Arnett had become in possession of the serum. Did he ingest it by accident, did someone else administrate it to him? If yes, who and why? However, the thing that troubled Rayne the most was Daniel saying Arnett killed seven armed men. If that was true, the boy was a deadly machine, programmed to fight to his last breath.

Closing his eyes, the doctor remembered with great clarity how Conroy hid in some corner with that Italian scientist, whispering and casting him sidelong glances. At that time, Rayne didn’t give much importance to that, but now everything clicked into place, making him freeze at the realization.

His professor, the man whose intelligence and desire to serve the science he so naively admired, was a monster, who

had subjected his fellow humans to horrific experiments, using his gullible student's discoveries. All along, Rayne suspected, deep down in his soul, that something wasn't right, but he didn't say anything, because he loved Conroy and believed the man loved him back.

And now, when the ugly truth was right there, there was no one he could turn to, no one he could trust. Even if there was, Rayne couldn't have told anything to anyone. He had to stay quiet, to push everything to the furthest, darkest corner of his mind.

Doing otherwise would equal turning his back on the only thing that mattered — abandoning his son to a fate worse than death. Knowing Conroy, he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice Gerrard to save his skin. Rayne couldn't do that, and he wouldn't allow it.

CHAPTER 22

“Now that’s strange,” Eugene said, frowning while he stared at the screen of his phone. “He’s never done that before.”

“Who never did what?” Daniel asked absently, focusing on the road while trying to find answers to some of the questions that nagged him since Hayden messaged him about the incident he and Arnett were involved in.

“Elliott. He hasn’t answered any of my calls or messages. It’s not like him to ignore me, not for so long.” Eugene was worried and didn’t make efforts to hide it.

Daniel shrugged. “He may be caught up in some work, turned the phone off and didn’t check it. You know how forgetful he can sometimes be, especially when work is involved. He’s so much like Tarquin that sometimes I think these two were related, in another lifetime.”

“Who’s Tarquin?” Rayne, who had been silent most of the ride, asked. Daniel had mentioned the name once, like the one behind Arnett’s release, when he was accused of killing those assassins.

“My husband,” Daniel answered, glad to divert Eugene’s attention from Elliott not answering his calls or messages. He was also worried about the whole thing, suspecting something terrible might have happened. “He works for the FBI,” he added proudly.

“Oh, so he’s older than you. I mean, he has to be, if he has a rank high enough so he could pull strings and have the accusations against Arnett dropped,” Rayne said, visibly impressed.

“No, Tarquin is four years younger than me,” Daniel smiled weakly, “but he is way smarter. And yes, he’s a special agent, a hell of a good one.”

An FBI special agent. Rayne gasped in shock, wondering if the man realized that something was not quite right with Arnett. If he ever found out, the kid could land in the government’s custody, and it wouldn’t be long before everything was exposed.

Rayne had to admit that Conroy was a genius, after all, because he took the credit for inventing those miracle painkillers and other treatments, all the financially profitable part of their research. There were, of course, the studies on the human genome they had worked together on, that had brought him the much-coveted recognition of the academic world.

So, when everything was exposed, Rayne would be the only one who would take the fall. Conroy could, and he surely would, claim that his former student and ex-husband was the only one in charge of the experiments, that Rayne had thwarted them without his knowledge. He could even invoke this as a reason for divorce, gaining everyone’s sympathy and approval.

This way, Rayne would land behind bars, where he would spend the rest of his life. All the while Conroy would gain full custody of Gerrard, raising him to hate the one who gave him life and loved him. The doctor balled his hands into fists, cursing himself for being so helpless. But maybe, just maybe, he could find a way out of this mess.

“Home, at last!” Eugene let out a sigh of relief, then jumped out of the car, heading to the imposing edifice he called home.

“Thank God you arrived!” a young woman came running to the car, breathing heavily. “I was about to call you, but then I thought I’d let you get home safe,” she said, still panting.

“Christine, in the name of all the gods, what’s wrong?” Daniel asked, worry and concern pouring out of his voice with every word. “What’s happened?”

“Who’s that?” the girl pointed in Rayne’s direction, looking suspiciously at the doctor.

“It’s all right, Christine, you can speak, he’s the one who saved Arnett and Hayden’s lives today. He’s a doctor, a great one even,” Daniel said in an assuring voice.

“Elliott was attacked,” the girl blurted out, without realizing the impact her words had on Eugene, who felt his knees giving out.

The next second, he straightened up, remembering who he was and what was expected from him. “Who dared to

do this? Who's the bastard? I want him now, alive, to torture and kill with my own two hands!"

Rayne was looking at the man in front of him roaring his rage as a wild beast unleashed, and he couldn't help but admire him. Whoever he was, that Elliott fellow was lucky to have Eugene as a protector, he thought. But, the guy probably needed some medical attention and, since he was there, Rayne decided to make himself useful.

"Where is the patient?" he asked. "I mean, Elliott. Where is he? I'm going to examine him. If it's okay with you, of course," he turned to Eugene.

"Yes, sure, thank you very much, Rayne, you are a true friend," young Brentano said. "Christine will show you the way to my house."

"No, she won't," the girl replied in a determined voice. "She will stay here to have a nice little chat with you boys, while Liam will accompany doc here to your place."

"I'll show him the way, Liam is not available right now," a raven-haired man spoke from behind Christine. "Martin Cornelius Bloom, nice to meet you. I'm beyond grateful for saving the boys' lives," he said, shaking Rayne's hand.

"Okay, young lady, could you tell us both what is with all this mystery? Why didn't you want to accompany Doctor Calhoun?" Daniel finally spoke, when the two men were far enough away.

“Look, Eugene,” Christine said, turning to the man in question, “I like you a lot, and I admire the patience you showed to Elliott, the gentleness and understanding you treat him with, but it’s time to take a stand.”

“Take a stand? For what? Against what or who? I don’t understand you, I’m afraid,” the Detroit Mafia don said, confused.

“You have to find a way to make him tell you everything about his past. I mean, this is the second time he was attacked in broad daylight, with almost fatal consequences. Eugene, he knows the guy, I saw it today on his face.” Christine started to shiver when she recalled Elliott’s expression when he denied knowing the attacker.

All the time he listened to the dialogue between the girl and his best friend, something bugged Daniel. Who saved the blond lawyer this time? Where were they? Why didn’t they stay and wait for Eugene, who would have rewarded them generously for saving his boyfriend? Unless the rescuer had their own agenda, the man thought, slightly worried at the possibility.

“Listen, Christine,” Daniel turned to the young woman as they stepped into the mansion’s dining room, “who brought Elliott home?”

“A taxi. The driver said he was paid very generously for the ride by the person who entrusted our friend to him,” she answered, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“Could the taxi driver offer a description of that person, their name or anything like that?” Daniel became increasingly frustrated by the lack of information. That made tracking down Elliott’s rescuer to be as impossible as catching his attacker.

“He offered a pretty detailed description of the guy. Tarquin introduced the data into his computer, and now he is working on a sketch.” Christine smiled widely. “Your husband is amazing, Daniel. You are so good for each other; I only wish my poor Elliott could be as happy with Eugene as Tarquin is with you,” she added.

“Hey, girl, chin up, those two will be as happy as my blond angel and I are, you’ll see. When someone has a dark, horrific past, it’s hard to put it behind just like that. Fortunately, my adoptive cousin is well aware of this, and he’s willing to wait as long as it takes for Elliott to open up to him.”

“Speaking of cousins,” Christine said, looking around as if she was afraid someone would hear her, “there’s no secret me and Martin Cornelius have been dating for about two months now. For me, what we have is more than just a thing, but I can’t speak for your cousin. I mean, he is sweet, well-mannered, always giving me attention, but...”

“The problem with us, the Bloom boys, is that we are not very good with words. Don’t know what or how to say it. Instead, we prefer to show how much we love the angels guarding us. One day, you...” Daniel cut himself short, staring at Christine’s wrist.

There, attached to a thin golden bracelet, was a tiny blue gem, known as The Moonstone. It had been in the Bloom branch of the family for generations, Cornelius “the Governor” Bloom had given it to Tessa Stark when he proposed to her, instead of an engagement ring. Ever since, it was passed among the firstborn males of the family.

Since Daniel’s uncle, Fabian, was the oldest of his brothers, he’d given it to his only son, Martin Cornelius, when the young man turned twenty-three, a couple of months earlier. However, it was the legend behind it that made Daniel stare, seeing it on Christine’s wrist.

Legend had it, The Moonstone had magical powers when given to the one the bearer had feelings for, and that person didn’t remove it from their wrist. According to the legend, the man who had the bracelet in his possession gave it only when he was sure about his feelings for the lady in question, when he knew she was his soulmate.

Daniel opened his mouth to say something, but right then, Martin Cornelius came back inside, Rayne in tow. Judging by the expression on the doctor’s face, Elliott’s state wasn’t good at all. He plopped down on a chair, wiping his forehead clear of sweat. After about a minute of silence, he finally spoke.

“I want all of you who are not particularly connected with Elliott to leave this room. What I am going to say is strictly confidential.” Rayne’s voice sounded defeated and tired.

“Look, doc, you are scaring me,” Eugene said in a shaky voice. Fear, worry and concern invading his beautiful, blue eyes. “What’s wrong with Elliott? How...how bad is he?”

Rayne sighed, looking straight into the other man’s eyes. “He is in pretty good shape, for now, but it won’t be long before the first symptoms kick in, wreaking havoc on his body. Nausea, headaches, dizziness, sleepiness or, to the contrary, hyperactivity...and this will be only the beginning.

As he was listening to Rayne enumerating all those symptoms, Eugene felt the world crashing down on him. What did his Elliott do to deserve that? What condition could cause that multitude of symptoms?

“How... what can I do to ease his pain? Is there any way I could be of use?” he asked, feeling his mouth dry.

Rayne’s heart broke as he looked at the man. He saw the pain in his eyes, hearing it in his voice. But he was still hesitating because all this could be just an act. He couldn’t risk Elliott being thrown away as soon as he turned his back and left the house. So, instead of offering him a straight answer, Rayne decided to test Eugene.

“I prescribed him some vitamins and mineral supplements because his body will desperately need them,

after being quickly depleted. You could help Elliott by massaging his neck and shoulders because they will stiffen a lot. Also, you have to be extra careful not to let him perform a lot of physical effort, like running long distances or moving heavy objects.”

“Yes, I will do all these things and more, much more, I promise, but please tell me, what does Elliott suffer from?” Eugene pleaded in an almost broken voice, but Rayne decided to ignore him.

“Now for the psychological impact,” he continued on a professional tone. “There will be days when he will be fine, optimistic, confident, cheerful, and there will be days when Elliott will be depressed, not wanting to get out of bed, complaining about anything and everything. Are you sure you can deal with this and more, Eugene?” Rayne asked, giving him a piercing look.

But the man didn’t hear the last part, staring blankly into space, with Daniel having the same shocked expression on his face what the doctor said sounded extremely, painfully familiar to both of them. Eugene had witnessed tens of times the heartbreaking scenes of teenage boys who couldn’t handle the brutal changes their fragile bodies went through.

He watched helplessly how they cried themselves to sleep, how the brutes deprived them of affection, of comfort, hurting the poor souls even when they should treat them with a little more care. Some of the unfortunate kids found the means

and opportunity to take their own lives, others carried on, but didn't survive.

And now, there was his sweet, beloved Elliott, experiencing the same ordeal. Eugene couldn't understand how that was possible. Unless...the man's blood turned to ice at the possibility. His mind refused to accept the unthinkable. Still, that was the only answer, acceptable or not.

"Tell me, doc," Eugene turned to Rayne, making efforts to keep his emotions under control," is Elliott pregnant?"

"And what if he was? What if he *is*?" the doctor stared at him in a way that reminded him of Alastair.

Daniel started to rub circles on Eugene's back, then hugged him. "He is a fighter. Everything will be fine, you'll see. Come on, talk to Elliott. Show him how much you care about him," the raven-haired man said, casting a glance in the small office's direction, where Tarquin was still working at the sketch of the man who had brought Elliott home.

"I don't *care* about that beautiful blond," Eugene said, heading to the mansion's main entrance, "I *love* him," he added.

The man ran all the way to his house, burst the door open and then stormed up to the stairs. He stopped in front of

the bedroom door, listening intently. Then, careful not to make any noise, opened it, sneaking inside the room almost noiselessly. On the bed, knees hugged tightly to his chest, Elliott stared blankly ahead.

Eugene lay behind the blond, gently rubbing his back the same way Daniel did with him earlier. The other man didn't react in any way, a weak sigh escaping from his pale lips. Gradually, however, his tense muscles started to relax under the action of Eugene's skillful fingers.

"Did the doctor tell you?" Elliott was the first to break the silence, becoming tense again.

"Did he tell you?" Eugene answered in a gentle voice, continuing to rub circles on his lover's back.

"Yes, the two of us discussed it for quite a while. He's a great guy, you know?" Then, for a few moments, Elliott fell silent, shifting on the bed. "What now?" he asked all of a sudden, raising his head.

"Now," Eugene said, facing the blond, "I will take care of you two, excellent care, so you can be healthy and fit when the time comes. Then, we are going to be daddies and raise a family together, just like I intended. Nothing has changed, amore."

"What about your parents? They will be horrified to..." Elliott stopped, unable to continue.

"To find out they are going to be grandparents?! I don't think so, especially in papa's case. He can't wait to hold his

grandchildren in his arms, to show them off, to teach them things...As for *mamma*...

“Yeah, you are right on that one,” Elliott smiled, his face brightening, “if we are not careful, those two will spoil the little one rotten.”

Eugene wrapped his arms around the blond’s small form, hugging and cradling him to his chest. Sometime, he will tell him about how he and Daniel became friends and what the two of them had to endure in that lab of horrors.

Eyes closed, wrapped in the warmth radiating from Eugene’s body, Elliott finally decided to turn his back to the past. To start anew, without secrets and lies that would ruin his happiness. As for the evil creature who stripped Elliott of everything, he better finds a deep hole to hide in because Eugene Brentano would have no mercy for him.

TO BE CONTINUED...