

JORDAN SILVER

*The Life*  
Sacrifice



THE LIFE

SACRIFICE



JORDAN SILVER

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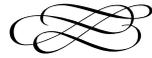
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## GABRIEL



I watched and listened to Fontane's meltdown and couldn't dredge up even an ounce of sympathy for the man still. His wracking sobs of lament were just the beginning as far as I'm concerned and not a reason for me to ease up on him or show compassion. There are just some things in life that shouldn't be so easily excused, forgiven, yes, but swept under the rug, hell no.

His daughter has been living with the repercussions of his actions for more than a decade. She's almost an adult now, almost able to stand on her own two feet, at least that's my hope, so it's too late for him to pull his head out of his ass and get his shit together. I'm going hard on him with no letup because I dread what would happen, could happen if I leave him in her life.

There's no guarantee that he won't mess up again. It's taking him this long, with all the evidence thrown at him, to come to terms with the truth. What could be his reason for not wanting to believe his own daughter and the things he'd seen firsthand? It can only be one of two things, either his ego won't let him accept that he'd been wrong all along, or he's afraid to face the truth.

Both those things are the products of a weak mind. If he can't love her enough to put her first, then there's no need for him in her life. I know part of my reasoning is selfish and self-centered. I want her to become strong, independent, and able to stand on her own two feet. But I also have the need to

eliminate her enemies before I can safely go on with my plans without worrying about her future.

I slipped away to visit the grandparents under the guise of playing a game of chess with gramps before leaving for the trip, but in truth, I had way more important things to discuss once I got there. It had been tricky at first, letting someone else in on what I had planned. I had to because I admit I needed help, and other than Pop, I could only find it here.

No one would suspect, least of all Pop, that I would take such a chance. But herein lies the other reason I have to put space between Gianna and me. I'm not the boy she thinks she met. I'm not nice, not sweet, well I have been, with her. What I am is a calculating bastard who'd do whatever it takes to get the result I want.

I have a code of ethics that I live by, true, but if you cross me, there's no length I won't go to to end you. I dabble in things the world would shudder at, my computer is my weapon of choice for now, and I use it, along with others like me, to find and destroy those who prey on the weak with my mother's past as the driving force that pushes me to go where most would falter.

I've sent men to jail after exposing their dark secrets, brought corporations down for using human beings like chattel; these are the kinds of things I do in my spare time. My heart, the one she's been flitting around these last few weeks, has been dead or just about for a very long time.

But the kicker to all this is that I'm the one who thinks she deserves better. I want more for her, even though it kills me to think of her life with someone else. But I'll be gone right, so... I rubbed my chest where it hurt and walked inside my grandparents' home.

"I see you found a way to get yourself to Paris after all. Are you sure you want to go through with this? If Draco gets wind...."

"Yeah, I'm sure. This is just a preliminary visit, though, nothing to worry about. I think I finally found the one I've been searching for. I'll start there."

I held my breath waiting for the advice to put an end to things now. It always comes the closer I get to my goal, and I know it's just that ingrained filial piety and the belief in protecting the women in the family that had got me this far with my need for help.

It hadn't been easy in the beginning; there'd been a lot of questions. I'd had to share part of Ma's story, which hadn't been the easiest thing, but my calculating mind knew that it was the quickest way to cut through the noes I was sure to get. It had worked too. I might be good with a computer, but knowing people in the know had been more useful at this point in the game, and that's where I'd needed help.

My plan is a long, drawn-out one, only held back by the fact that I still don't know where my grandfather is. I'm not expecting the search to be easy; I'm not even sure if he's alive or dead, but I know I won't put the finishing touches on Ricci until I find out. I think Pop and I are both thinking that Ricci either has him stashed somewhere, or he finished him long ago.

According to Ma's words, her dad had gone after Ricci after sending her away. Since Ricci was still alive and kicking, that meant the old man had failed. But where is he now? Pop had searched the whole of Sicily looking for him, that much I know, with no luck, and my search hadn't produced anything, but I think I may have found someone with some answers.

I've spent most of my planning time trying to find the people who would've been at the party where Ma was violated on that horrible night. By process of elimination, I think I'd found most if not all of them. It had taken meticulous precision to comb through Ricci's life going back decades to find those closest to him.

The fact that most of them were still friends, still did things together all these years later leaves a bad taste in my mouth. The man is scum, and so those he surrounds himself with can't be much better is my thinking. I'd found the ones who'd been there, even got my hands on a picture from that night by hacking into his and others' computers a while back.

But there was this one female that seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth. The others were pretty much still going about their lives as usual, but this one had been silent since around the time of the attack. There are no records of her weeks after that night, which leads me to think she'd either distanced herself from them because of it or had gone into hiding for whatever reason.

There's no death on record, nothing, not even a rumor. She'd just up and disappeared one day. I'd found her family, her siblings, and a few cousins, but there was nothing there either. That's where I'd needed help. I needed men or women on the ground where my computer couldn't reach, and since my family is Italian, I'd shamelessly used their connections in the old country to get me what I was after. "So, I guess the boys came through."

"They did."

"Be careful, don't do anything rash. I gather you'll be going in alone?"

"It's the best way for now." A half-truth since I plan to go it all alone, but that admission would bring me more trouble than I want to deal with.

We went over my plans, some of them anyway, the parts I wanted to share. I know it was only to make sure I had all the bases covered, though we'd been through this a hundred times. I could see the questions starting to form with my every answer and made my excuses in haste. There was no point; I won't turn back.



THE GIRLS WERE STILL PLAYING dress-up when I got back, so I threw myself into something else I'd been neglecting these past few weeks. ANONYMOUS is my safe space. A group of men and women who don't know each other beyond the keyboard but share basically the same drive to eliminate the dregs of society from whichever corner they're hiding out in.

I came across the group by chance a long time ago and had been using it as a staging ground of sorts ever since. I've honed my hacking skills, among other things, through the work I do with the team. Even though we don't know each other personally, there are a few that I've grown close to over the years. I don't know their names, other than their handles, but I don't fool myself, and neither do they I suppose that we couldn't find each other if we wanted to.

Hacking came easy to me. Born of necessity, since my prey was halfway across the world, I'd perfected it in less than a year and was soon caught up in that world. That's how I was approached, word got around in the underground that I was good at what I do, and the next thing I knew, I was part of this thing that was hated by many and not even heard of by most.

I learned a lot from the others, and there were times when we needed help from each other outside of whatever crime we were working to expose, so a bond was forged between some of us that have lasted years. Now it was going on two weeks since I'd interacted with them because I was too busy dealing with her mess.

"You're back, Nemesis. You had a good rest, I hope." I smiled as I typed my response.

"Hey, Memnon, I did, yes. I didn't get a chance to see the result of our last job; any word yet?"

"He's done; it's all over the news, though the world has yet to learn of our part in his downfall." That means a job well done. The world only hears of us when we want them to.

"How did the competition go? You aced it, I bet." It took me a second to recall what he was referring to. I'd spent so much time dealing with Gianna that I'd all but forgotten life before her.

"Level ten grandmaster."

"Whoa, that's awesome. Did you celebrate?" I would've had some girl with entrapping eyes not snared me.

"Sort of!" Becoming one of the world's only martial artists to make it to that level in modern times should be something

noteworthy, especially for someone my age; for me, it was just something I did to pass the time. It's the one thing I did for myself, the one selfish need I had to fulfill.

I changed the subject since talking about myself has never been high on my list of things I like to do. We shot the breeze for a while playing catchup, and it felt good to be talking to someone who knew more about me than most without knowing who the hell I was.

Funny enough, this is the only place I feel free. When I'm behind the screen doing what I do best, destroying the lives of men like Ricci who think they can hide behind their wealth. Men who show the world one face while hiding behind a mask of deceit.

Each time I help bring down one of these assholes, I'm just sharpening my teeth for the final showdown. I could easily have finished Ricci off with the keyboard a long time ago, but that's too easy for the likes of him. This one is personal, so I want to look into his eyes when I administer the final blow.

"Any luck yet on your thing?" I'm always brought up short when he asks me that. Once, a long time ago, in a moment of weakness when I first started, I'd let slip some of my story. Not much, and I was too young at the time for anyone to take me seriously. But Memnon was the one on the other side of the screen that day, and occasionally, he'd bring it up. I guess he'd seen through the bullshit I'd tried to play it off as to the seriousness behind my words. It's been years, and he still remembers. It freaks me out that he does.

"Some yes, it's going slow." No, it's not, but we're ANONYMOUS for a reason. Though we've never crossed the line, never hacked each other, I have no doubt that he, especially, could find me if he so desired. That's why my computers all have special state-of-the-art bells and whistles attached to keep people like myself from getting in. On the other hand, I could probably find him with much effort if I chose, but why bother?

It's enough that he's a friend online, someone who'd helped me hone my skills over the years and has been an ear to

bend when needed. We didn't stay long; we just had a brief discussion about the group's next target before logging off.

I stood and stretched before heading for the door to go in search of her. I miss her! That's been happening a lot lately, another phenomenon that I'm not used to. It's easy to tell myself that I can walk away, but at times like this, when I feel that human connection with this one girl, I can't imagine how.

It's only been a few hours, but already I feel like I'm missing a limb. Maybe I'd gone too far, taken too much, and I find myself in that place of self-doubt again as I opened the door to the girls' room, where they were laughing and chattering away, full of excitement.

"Are you two done with her? Come, Gianna, let's go see your dad before we leave."

"The flight's in two hours; you don't have time."

"He lives ten minutes away, Anna, not Jupiter. We won't be long." I took Gianna's hand in mine and led her from the room.

"I didn't know we were going to see my dad."

"You don't want to?"

"I wasn't planning on it, but I guess since I'm going out of the country, I should tell him." Of course, there's that. I just smiled and let her carry on, believing that that was the reason for our visit.

Felix wasn't the only one in the Fontane residence having a meltdown; Victoria had been breaking shit since she drove off the night before. I'm going to make sure her crazy goes off the charts, and she escalates by the time her mother is let out of jail. I have to time everything perfectly so that by the time we head to Paris in a few weeks, this will all be over.

I'm still not sure what I'm going to do with Fontane if I'll leave him standing or not, but those two I know for certain must go. He's already starting to pay for his mistakes though it will never be enough, but at the end of the day, he's Gianna's blood, so I'll only go so far with his destruction. Victoria and

Becky, on the other hand, can't be left to do more damage than they'd already done.

I made sure she was dressed well enough to cause havoc, changing her out of the jeans and sweater she'd worn shopping into something more upscale. The black velvet palazzo with a cream silk blouse and matching black velvet jacket was perfect though she balked.

"Gabriel, I'm just going around the corner to see dad; why do I need to get all dressed up like this?"

"I see Ma hasn't given you the talk. A lady must always look her best even if she's just going down the driveway to grab the mail." She rolled her eyes and giggled, which caused me to do something stupid, like pulling her in for a kiss. So much for distancing myself.

## GABRIEL



I think my sisters may have rubbed off on me some in the last couple of days because I don't recall being this majorly petty before. But as I walked her towards her family home, hand in hand, her mother's car, now hers parked on the driveway behind us; I was almost bursting with anticipation at the havoc I was about to cause.

I could give less than half a shit whether Felix Fontane knows that she's leaving the country. Pounding the nail deeper into Victoria's coffin, though, is high on my priority list. I guess I've decided to come down to their level to deal with them since not one of the three, Becky, Victoria, or Felix, seems to have a working brain cell to share between them.

Had my opponents been more formidable, I wouldn't go this route, but since they have the underbelly of a half-dead fish that had been caught and thrown back in, this is where it's at. "Hello Fontane, may we come in?" He answered the door looking his usual flustered self with red-rimmed eyes. Bastard, you haven't cried enough yet. Soon!

I realized as I looked at him that he irritates me; that's what this feeling is. This is new for me; I never let anyone or anything irritate me long enough to get under my skin, but because of her, I'm putting up with this mook, and my give a shit meter is running on empty.

"Oh, hi, I didn't know you guys were coming over today. Come on in." He looked at her with something approaching longing in his eyes, longing, and dare I hope, a tinge of regret? I barely held back the sneer that always wants to break out in

his presence from reaching my face as we followed him into the room where the portrait of his late wife dominated.

Now I almost wish I'd let Becky out to enjoy this. But she serves my purpose much better behind bars for now. Out here, with me gone, who knows what the hell she'd talk this fool into doing, so as much as I wanted to get my jollies watching her squirm like a worm at the end of my hook, this will have to suffice.

"We're just here to let you know we'll be leaving the country shortly, Fontane."

"Leaving, what do you mean? Where are you going?" He looked from me to Gianna, but I noticed she wasn't even looking at him. In fact, she hadn't said a word since we left the car.

"Um, it's my sisters' birthday; they're taking her to Turk's and Caicos for a week to celebrate."

"Oh!"

His response sounded weak and laden with something approaching guilt. Was he now realizing that he'd robbed her of her damn life? Going from my own and my siblings, there's so much we've done that she won't get to do. Her mother was damn near royalty from the looks of the family, and this jackass had let her daughter suffer the life of a destitute hermit.

"I see; wait, she doesn't have a passport; how is she going?"

"My father took care of it." My look dared him to say shit; he couldn't possibly know that I had an argument ready for anything he could throw at me. He had the good sense not to even think of objecting, which saved him from my wrath. I wasn't here for him anyway.

I relaxed and took a seat pulling Gianna down beside me when I heard the faint tread of footsteps on the stairs. I'm pretty sure the other two didn't hear them, as Fontane went on to ask about the trip and how she was doing. The kind of crap you'd ask a stranger or an acquaintance you ran into after a long absence,

Does the guy even realize the great divide between him and his kid? On the other hand, what's up with chatty Kathy? She'd been talking my ear off on the way here, hopping from one topic to the next, now she'd clammed up and was barely giving her dad one-word answers, and even those sounded strained.

"Gia's terrified of flying." Come again? How the hell does he know that when she's never been on a plane before we went to New York? She looked at him with interest as well at his words.

"How do you know that?"

"Don't you remember? Once, a long time ago, before your mother... when you were about three or four, we were going to take a trip to Europe, but when we got to the airport, you had a meltdown."

"We would've ignored it if it was just a regular kid thing, but you'd never acted that way before, and when I picked you up, your little heart was beating with fear. Your mother and I decided right then and there to nix our plans. We'd planned to wait until you were older and try again." His wan look almost made me feel sorry for him. Too bad he'd fucked up royally since then.

"I flew to New York and Virginia. I guess I trust Gabriel. He held my hand the whole way both times." Was that a dig? Oh crap, maybe I should've checked her before we left. I was so busy thinking of making Victoria sweat that I didn't stop to think about her feelings and what she might want.

Have I been doing this all along? Making decisions for her without asking? Scratch that; I don't know any other way, and even if I did, I wouldn't be using it. I only have one speed when it comes to her, but I'm getting the feeling more of late that she'd changed since learning about her mom, something I seem to have overlooked.

"Ah yes, I remember; I guess I overlooked it in all the chaos that has been going on around here lately." Why did he look at me when he said that? I'm not the one who screwed the

pooch, and you'll have a fucked-up time trying to blame me for any of this. Not that I care.

"I guess it's a little different flying on a private jet. Your daughter has become quite the pampered princess. By the way, I brought something for you." I reached in my pocket and pulled out the little USB stick I'd kept there, and passed it to him.

"What's this?" He took it a bit warily.

"It's your daughter's dance performance at the party last night."

"Dance? I thought..."

"You thought your wife and stepdaughter took that joy away from her as well, so did I. You should watch it when you have a chance; she's awesome. When those two snatched the only thing she liked away from her, she found another way."

"I don't understand."

"Have you ever seen the old music room at the school? No? well, you should take a look one day. It's a broken-down place not fit for mice, a hazard. Your wife and her spawn terrorized Gianna so much that she had to use that room to keep doing the one thing she liked. Wasn't your wife, her mother, a dancer as well?"

"Yes, but Gia is the one who said she didn't want to do it any longer."

"Did you ask her why, or did Becky tell you?" I've been here five minutes, and I want to kill you.

"I... Gia, is this true?"

"It was a long time ago dad, no point in bringing it up now." She sounded pissed. Her backbone was coming in very nicely.

"You still paid for Victoria to go, though, right, just like everything else. Once again, we have a prime example of you forsaking your own flesh and blood for some other man's leavings." That last statement proved to be too much for Victoria because she came bounding into the room with fury.

“I’m his daughter; why can’t he pay for me? She’s the one who decided to quit; no one forced her.”

“Was this before or after you and your mother took turns pushing her down the stairs?” She didn’t have a lie ready, so her denial came out weak and faint.

“You’ve said that before, and I told you it wasn’t true. Gia was prone to accidents even before her mother died.” Fontane got pissy. If his opinion mattered, I’d give a damn.

“She was a normal kid who fell and scraped her knee from time to time as kids do, but after you married the asp, how many ‘accidents’ did she have?”

“I wasn’t... Gia, tell him, tell him that that never happened.” She didn’t say shit and his face paled. He turned his eyes to Victoria, who looked as if she wished she hadn’t come downstairs after all. “You mean it’s true?” He looked back at Gia.

“Like I said, dad, it was a long time ago. There’s no point.”

“She’s lying, mom, and I never did anything to her. And if mom did do something I was just a child, how can I be held responsible?” So that’s the new game you’re playing.

“Fontane, did you know that the youngest killer in US history was a little five-year-old girl who killed her sister in her bed? She bashed her head in while she slept because she was jealous of her.”

His simple ass became flummoxed, I guess he was suffering from information overload, or his mind was finally starting to work after being brain dead for so long. “Victoria, tell me the truth, what really happened?”

“Dad, I’m telling the truth; none of that happened. I don’t know why she’s making it up. Are you trying to gain points with Gabriel? Is that why you’ve been lying on the family?”

“His name is Gabel!” Even I looked at Gianna in shock; I don’t think I’ve ever heard that voice come out of her before or seen the look on her face that she sent Victoria’s way. “No one calls him Gabriel, but me. Unless you want me to reveal all your dark secrets here and now, you won’t cross me on

this.” She added on the last when Victoria opened her mouth to argue, but those words shut her up right quick.

I think I may be a sexual deviant because her tone and attitude made me, well, not fit for company. She was breathing fire, barely holding onto her temper, and I was here for it. Fontane himself was shocked, and Victoria shut right the hell up, but I knew that wouldn’t last long.

“So, you’re saying your daughter is a liar, and the strangers are telling the truth. That makes sense to me. In the off chance that you no longer wish to be her dad, she has a whole family willing to adopt her, just say the word.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you sitting here taking the word of that instead of your daughter. I’m talking about ten years of mistreatment right under your nose. Do you even know where they came from? Victoria, you want to tell him?”

“Tell him what, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Really! Who’s Jimmy? Where is he? Where did you live with him and your mother before moving here? I know you were young when all that happened, but I also know that you know more than you’re admitting to. You lived with the man for the first five years of your life; there’s no way you could’ve forgotten him. Besides, didn’t you run into him just a few nights ago?”

Gianna looked at me like I had two heads. “What?”

“I forgot to tell you.” No, I didn’t, but you asked me to leave it until after the party. I smiled at her and turned back to the other two. Victoria had lost all the color in her face, and Fontane was damn near epileptic.

“If you have something to say, Russo, then spit it out. You keep making all these unsubstantiated accusations with no proof.” I pretended to unlock my phone, “I can call Jimmy right now and let him tell you. He’d love to see his daughter again.”

“NO!” Victoria forgot herself for a second, I guess, and almost rushed across the room.

“Why not? I thought you didn’t know who he is?”

“I... I don’t know; I’ve heard the name before, but it’s not like you said. Felix, dad, you should wait until mom comes home to get to the bottom of this. Why are you trying to destroy our family?” That last was for me.

“Don’t pay him any mind, dad; I think he has us mixed up with someone else, or she’s putting him up to it.”

“For someone who’s such a damn bully, you’re weak. Come on, Gianna, let’s go; the twins are waiting.” I helped her up from the chair and walked past a fuming Victoria; Felix was still processing.

Becky’s in jail; now, these two can spend the next week in misery. Victoria no doubt will spend the time trying to unravel the lies, while Fontane can go looking for answers, while I show Gianna the time of her life on the island.

I felt a slight pang of sadness at the thought of what will follow but brushed it aside. I won’t let that put a damper on her first real vacation. I hope she looks back on it with fond memories somewhere down the line; in the future, she’s bound to have without me.



BECKY



WHY ISN’T anyone answering the phone? This is nonsense. Our phone can’t be out of service. “Hey, can you check and see what’s going on? I can’t get through to my husband.”

“Lady, this is the jailhouse, not the phone company.” I bit into my already raw nail bed that I’d chewed away in the last few days locked away in here.

Why isn’t the phone working? It can’t be; did Felix up and leave? No, that doesn’t make sense. He has a business here;

everything he knows is here. And besides, he'd never sell the house he'd once shared with Adrienne. And what about Victoria? Why hasn't she come to see about me?

I hope she's not doing anything stupid while I'm gone. I know without me there to rein her in, things could get out of hand. I have a lot of cleaning up to do once I get out of here, but I'm pretty certain I can get out of all of it.

But if Victoria acts up with Felix around, if he should see her true colors, that would do us more harm. I'm worried sick and getting sicker by the day at the thought of what's going on with her. She doesn't do well under pressure, and things can get pretty out of hand if things don't go her way.

My nerves jangled at the thought of what could be going on out there without me there to supervise, and I almost screamed the place down. It doesn't make sense that Felix hadn't come to see me, that there wasn't a lawyer anywhere willing to work with me; I don't buy that for a second.

Could he be planning to leave me? Has he finally bought into that kid's words? Damn brat, why is he poking around in my life anyway? Because of that little twit, no doubt, and the lies she's told. Did he say something to Felix? What could he have said? Calm down, Becky; he doesn't know as much as he thinks he does. He can't.

But he'd learned so much in just a few short weeks. The reminder had my blood running cold. I knocked against the bars and called out to the guard but to no avail. I was lucky enough to get the one phone call and knew there would be no more forthcoming for the rest of the day. All I have to look forward to is the stale slop they'll serve for dinner and staring at the four walls.

I tried pacing to ease my mind, but that only seemed to make me more agitated. My mind, as it had done the last few days in here, kept going back to the past, to the life I'd built. So what I'd put my daughter ahead of someone else's, what mother in the world wouldn't have done the same?

Was it so wrong to want the best for my own kid? To want to give her the life she deserved? It's not my fault that things

went the way they did. That little bitch was too snooty, just like her mother, and too distrusting of me in the beginning. If I hadn't put a wedge between her and her father, there would've been no place for my daughter in his life.

All her sniveling over her mother's death had taken up his time back then, leaving Victoria and me out in the cold. I had to do something, didn't I? Even with Adrienne gone, she still hung over everything like a specter, and with her mourning daughter there, a constant reminder, there wasn't much else I could do.

If I'd been thinking, I would've convinced Felix that she'd been having an affair. That would've soured his great love for sure. He would've believed me too because she and I were friends. Maybe it's not too late...

No, he'd never believe me now, not with everything else that's going on. I must get out of here; I have to get back home where I can work my magic and turn things around. Things had been going so well. Felix barely paid any attention at home, which suited me fine. He trusted me to run the household, which I was perfect at because I'd listened to his wife go on and on for months about their perfect life.

She had no idea that I was taking notes. That it was through her that I learned all his likes and dislikes. That it was because of her, a picture had started to form in my head. A life of parties and shopping trips out of town, rubbing elbows with the rich, and being able to afford anything I wanted, like sending my daughter to the top private school in the nation where she would be in close contact with the offspring of the wealthy, upping her chances of marrying into one of those families, and being set for life.

Why shouldn't we both have a life like that? Why shouldn't my daughter be afforded the same opportunities as hers? No matter what anyone says, I won't accept that I've done anything wrong. It's not my fault. I tried, didn't I? I tried to be her mother, but it was she who rejected me at every turn. I did what I had to, to stake my claim as the woman of the house. If I hadn't, her wimp of a father would've let her rule the nest out of guilt over her dead mother.

It's inconceivable; I think that's the word, to think that it could all come crashing down so easily at the hands of some punk who didn't have anything better to do but meddle in some stranger's life. So, what, I did what I did, anyone else in my situation would've done the same.

Why shouldn't my kid have nicer things than her? She had a hard start in life while little Miss Perfect was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. So when I got the chance, why would I let my daughter suffer for someone else's child's happiness? Victoria's self-esteem was never the best, and Gia, for whatever reason, only made it worse.

Now I have no idea what my poor child is going through out there without me, surrounded by people who hate us. She's my last hope for getting out of this unscathed. Felix isn't the sort to turn his back on the child he'd adopted and raised as his own. Once again, I can use that to my advantage.

I feel the way I did when we first got here, like an unwanted outcast—the one who, no matter how I tried, I could never fit in. I'd used my daughter's connection to their kids to get a foot in, but that hadn't gone as well as I'd hoped either. It's because I wasn't one of them, those bitches.

I learned only too late that their friendships were born not because of close proximity to one another but because they'd genuinely liked Adrienne and saw her as some glittering light who was always the go-to person for whatever ailed these pampered witches with brooms up their ass.

Not even my made-up background was enough for them. They weren't interested in me as a person, not like they'd been with her. It's like they hated me for living while she was gone and never gave me a chance. Some of them had even laughed in my face, some going so far as to accuse me of wanting to fill Adrienne's shoes and not being able to fit.

I grew to hate them then and had encouraged Victoria instead of scolding her when I found out what she was doing to their kids. As far as I was concerned, we were killing two birds with one stone, ostracizing Gia from her support system, and gaining a foothold for my kid.

Do they know? Does everyone know that I'm in here? They must be laughing at me now. I can just imagine their next bitch lunch gathering; they'll be nodding their heads and patting themselves on the back for being right about me all along. Would they approach Felix now that I was out of the way? Before that new horror could set in, the guard was calling out to me.

"You've got a phone call."

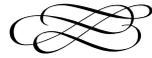
"It's about time. I'm going to give Felix Fontane a piece of my mind." I have to keep up appearances here, so they won't think I've been deserted by my wealthy husband and start treating me wrong.

"It's not the husband."

"Who is it? Is it my daughter?"

"No, some guy named Jimmy."

## GABRIEL



Like a kid in a candy store, that's what watching her reminded me of. She took to the water on sight, and had I not dragged her out each day after giving her swimming lessons in the mornings, she'd have spent the whole vacation in the tropical paradise in the water. That worked out in some ways because she was so tired at night that there was no question of us making love.

She'd be asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow most nights, but tonight she'd worn me down, and I, of course, had given in. I hated the look of uncertainty on her face when I tried to gently turn her away. And since I didn't quite yet have a ready answer as to why we should put the brakes on, I gave in, not that it was a hardship, except for the guilt I knew would follow.

Now she's asleep, cuddled up to my side while I lay awake thinking about our future, both hers and mine. In truth, I was trying to figure out the best way to fix what I now saw as my screw-up. I'd made up my mind not to do this again, not to take any more from her than I already had.

The first time could be explained away; she'd needed me then, and though I should've known better, I can live with that. But still, I had taken things further, knowing that in the end, I'd just be one more person who disappointed her in life. That's not the person I've trained myself to be, but I can't see a way out that won't hurt her, and dammit, she's a weakness I wasn't prepared for.

While she's been having fun, spreading her wings, and enjoying things she never got the chance to before, I've been able to keep my inner thoughts well hidden. But tonight, they haunt me, and no matter how I try, I can't find the answers. There's no easy way to put distance between us without hurting her already bruised heart, and it's killing me.

Funny, in all my studying, I never touched on the subject of love and relationships; I never thought I needed to because it was never supposed to be a part of my life; she was never supposed to be part of my existence.

Now looking down at her sleeping face, I wished for the first time in my life that I could escape the taint and curse of my conception. That I was worthy of her. I could almost imagine a life with her. I almost long to be there for her evolution, for the day she becomes the complete being I know lives inside her.

I'd love to be there when she finally comes into her own; I'd love to see the woman she becomes, strong, independent, and sure of herself in a way she's never been. I was shocked to feel a tear gather in the corner of my eye, which I closed quickly to stave it off. I hugged her a little tighter, kissing her forehead as she sighed in her sleep and got closer. Her life is only just beginning, and once I get rid of all the obstacles in her way...

I can tell her the truth, that I can't offer her anything more than what we have right now. I'm not afraid of her rejection but warier of what it would do to her. No matter how I look at it, I can't avoid bringing her pain because no matter what, in the end, I still took Gianna's innocence. If I continue with this, I might end up being the person who brought her the most pain.

Shit! What am I going to do now? I can't desert her now, not with things being the way they are. But I must find a way to put distance between us while still helping her. I also have to find a way to protect my heart, to keep her from getting in any deeper because all of this is tearing me apart.

This guilt each time we make love isn't going to get better with time; it's never going to go away. I'll only be prolonging the agony for both of us. I feel like a monster each time I touch her now because I know there's only one way for this to end. Part of me wants to continue, to leave things as they are and let them run their course.

I've even played around with the idea of juggling both her and my revenge. It can be done if I change the end I have planned, but that would entail making some changes which I can't see happening. I've known all along what has to be done with Ricci, what must happen between him and I. The final showdown, if you will. I've imagined it a thousand times and have made peace with it. But her presence in my life has made the picture a bit fuzzy.

So now, I concentrate more on her issues with her father and stepfamily as a way to make up for what I'm sure will be a blow to her when I leave. It's the only thing left for me to do, my only saving grace at this point since I can't go back and replace her virginity. Something I am now feeling hella guilt over taking.

I think in the back of my mind, I had selfishly hoped that I could have my cake and eat it too. That I could find a way to have my revenge and keep her by my side, but the conflict in my mind won't allow me to see my way clear to having her or even having a life after I take out Ricci. The selfish part of me keeps hinting at the fact that this thing with Ricci is going to take time so I can keep her with me until the very end, but like I said, it's selfish to think that way. She deserves better.

I rolled away from her once I was sure she was asleep and wouldn't wake without me there to hold her. The doors leading to the balcony were left open, allowing the ocean breeze to cool the room naturally as the moon hung over the water amidst a blanket of stars. I sat out there, gazing out over the water deep in thought, putting my shit aside to focus on hers. No matter what the end might be for us, I won't leave her until everything in her life has been set to rights; that much I know.

Things are coming along well back home. I'd called the jailhouse pretending to be Jimmy to mess with Becky minutes

before we left to come here. When she answered, I just hung up as soon as I heard her voice knowing that that would terrorize her even more. It may seem childish but psychological warfare is just as effective as the physical.

I've mapped out everything in my head to get the best result for Gianna. So far, I have someone working on building a case against Becky for her mother's murder, something I haven't told her as yet in case it doesn't pan out. Greta's words may not be enough to have her arrested, but if we handle it right, we just might luck out there.

There's no statute of limitation on murder, but I don't expect Becky to own up to what she'd done, so it's her word against the housekeeper. So, I'm trying to find a way to get her to confess, which isn't going to be easy unless she's brain dead. That's why I've been trying to push Victoria over the edge because I'm almost certain she knows some if not all of what her mother has done.

Young as she was back then, there's no way that over the years, she hasn't known what her mother is. I'm banking on the fact that she won't want to go down with that ship. Felix had been dumb enough to adopt her, or so he thinks, so she'd use that in her favor, or at least I'm hoping that's the way it goes.

It's the reason why I've ostracized her from her friends and separated her from her mother, this way, she has time to think, to imagine what her life will be like if she loses everything. As far removed as she is now, being kicked out of school, then having to spy on the lavish party from a distance, I know she won't want to be even farther away, which will happen if she gets kicked out with her mother, so she'd want to hang on to what little bit she has, which she can only do by staying in Felix's good graces.

It's diabolical, I know, using the daughter against her mother, but those two are one and the same as far as I'm concerned. I've overheard plenty since bugging the Fontane home, but nothing yet about the murder, only enough to make him see them in a different light when I finally expose them. If all I wanted was for him to be disappointed in them and

himself, I would've outed them already, but that's small potatoes compared to what I'm after—total and complete annihilation.



“HAVE the girls been posting about their vacation online?” I pulled Anna aside after breakfast the next day while the others got ready for a day on the yacht. It was our last day here, and I was ready to get back home and put my plans into action. There were only a few weeks left until Paris, and I wanted this thing with Fontane out of the way long before then.

Gianna seems to think that once she exposes the truth to her dad through Greta that that will be the end of it, but I know it's going to hit her hard, and I am preparing for it.

She'll be busy with all the debutant bullshit, which should help, but I know she's going to break at some point no matter how brave she's pretending to be now. At least once a day, when we're alone, I bring up her mom and the way she feels about what had happened to her as a way to get her to face it and not bury her head in the sand like she's been doing; this way, she too will be ready for the fallout.

She hates it, which is only normal, but the more she talks about her feelings, the easier it's becoming for her to swallow the reality that her mother had been murdered. Now it was almost time to head back home, so there was no more putting it off.

“Of course, with minute detail just like you asked.”

“Cool, thanks. Don't forget, no pictures of Gianna, just talk up how much fun she's having.” She rolled her eyes and grinned.

“I know; you've told us a thousand times already.” Yes, I have, but they have no idea why I'm making them do it, or maybe they do. They're my sisters, so I'm sure they must have some idea of what I'm up to.

I know it's eating away at Victoria that she's not here, and Gianna is. I'm using her irrational jealousy and envy against her to send her into a tailspin. By the time we get back home for the final confrontation, she'd be ready to sell her mother down the river, which is what I'm banking on.

It's petty as hell and something that shouldn't work with someone who has more than two brain cells, but I know it'll work on her because she's weak. The only thing left to do is to show her that if she stays on the same boat as Becky, they will both sink. I have no doubt she'd jump ship, especially if it means she can keep the life she has now. In short, I'm going to use her to destroy her own mother, and I have no qualms about that shit.

I've had Gianna send texts to her dad, letting him know she was okay and having a good time. She'd questioned me at first and didn't want to since she was still a bit salty with him, but I'd convinced her and even got her to call a time or two because I know Victoria would listen in to those calls. She does a whole lot of muttering to herself since there's no one for her to talk to now that her friends have deserted her.

I know from her murmurings that she was escalating; her obsession with Gianna and I was sending her over the edge. I learned too that she and Felix hardly ever spoke to each other; in fact, he spent more time talking to the portrait in his living room than anyone else, and some of his words led me to question his actions towards his daughter in the past decade or so.

He talks to Adrienne as if she were here, asking her for guidance, apologizing for letting things get this far with their daughter. It's as if he really hadn't noticed anything wrong until I came along and tore the blinders off; whatever. I refuse to make any excuses for him, but I think there's some deep-rooted shit going on with him, something I hadn't picked up on until I eavesdropped on his conversations with his dead wife.

"What you up to now, puppet master?" Lance caught up to me on the dock as we began to board the yacht behind the girls who had gone ahead chattering away with excitement.

“Why are you calling me that?” He snorted and looked at me side-eyed.

“Because I know you. You’ve been on that computer the whole time we’ve been here, and I know it’s not for school. Tasha has been broadcasting every little thing you and Gia do online until I want to bury her in the sand, and you haven’t stopped her. I know how much you hate that shit, so I came to the conclusion that you’re up to something.”

He’s another one I have to keep at arm’s length. If he knew what I was up to, he’d stick his nose in my shit and make my life difficult. I hate the thought of leaving him almost as much as I do her, but I’m going to make sure they’re both taken care of no matter what, so hopefully, that will make up for it.

“Lancelot!”

“What’s up, brother?” I slung my arm around his shoulders.

“You know I love you, right?” He stopped walking and stared at the side of my head while I dragged him along beside me.

“What’re you planning?” The worry in his voice almost made me regret giving him those words.

## LANCE



I couldn't wait to get back home. Ever since Gabe made that statement, something dark and ugly has been gnawing away at my gut. I'd spent the last day on the island pretending for the girls' sake, but my mind was in turmoil. As soon as we landed, I hot-footed it to his house in search of Unc. I had to wait for the reunion to end before I could get him alone, and by then, I was a mess of nerves.

"Gabe's up to something. Do you know what he's planning?" Even I could hear the panic in my voice.

"What did you see?"

"Nothing, as usual, he keeps everything hidden, but I get the sense that he's about to make a move. He had his special computer with him on the island." That got a rise out of him.

"So it's not about Gia? It's about the other thing?"

"Looks like it."

"Why are you so stressed all of a sudden? You knew about the secret computer long before this."

"Yes, but... he told me he loved me. Although I know it, Gabe isn't one to say it like that just out of nowhere. It's as if he was saying goodbye." I hated having to tell him this; I hated the look of almost fear that came into his eyes.

"Let's not panic, let's not panic, we have time. Shit, I knew this was going to happen."

"What? What's going to happen?"

“Lance, you’re coming to Paris with us. I’ll talk to your dad. I was going to invite you anyway; somebody has to escort one of the twins since Gabe will be with Gia, and I’ll be with the other.

“I don’t understand. Aren’t they going to Paris for a coming-out ball? What could he be planning for that?” I could see he was struggling to find the right words. I’ve known for some time that there was some well-kept secret between the two of them, something that neither has ever shared; I’ve known it since Unc asked me to all but spy on Gabe, but not knowing why had never bothered me more than it did right now.

Unc paced the room back and forth, scaring the heck out of me the more he kept silent. “Don’t be scared, Lance; nothing’s going to happen to him.” Yeah? So why do you look so worried?

“Pop, you in here? Oh, hi Lance, I thought you left without saying goodbye.” Gabe knocked and opened the door to the home office before stepping inside.

I felt guilty, but that only lasted about a second. I’d much rather have the guilt than the fallout from whatever he’s up to. He should know what saying those words would do to me. Not because there’s anything wrong with an almost adult male saying I love you to another; that’s bullshit. But because of who he is, those words carry more weight than most. Gabe’s not big on showing emotion; he shows his love in other ways.

“What did you need, son? Lance was just telling me about your trip.” I didn’t even blink at the lie, just kept my eyes on Gabe, who looked his usual relaxed self. That’s another thing; the guy never gives anything away, so his declaration is way out of place. Was it a cry for help? Is he somehow asking me to save him from himself and whatever this is? I have no idea.

“It can wait. I’ll leave you two alone.” He walked back out of the room, leaving Unc and me to look at each other.

“I’ll talk to him, don’t sweat it,” Unc assured me, but I wasn’t sure. I hated to leave, but my dad would be waiting for

me since he acts like the prodigal son's returning anytime I go away for longer than a weekend.



## GABRIEL



I THINK I MESSED UP. It was a moment of weakness that led me to tell Lance I love him like that. Not sure where my head was that day; maybe everything was hitting me at once, and I realized that he was one of the people I'd be leaving behind. I'm pretty sure he was talking to Pop about my strange behavior before I walked in because he's been on my ass since yesterday.

I've seen the looks and the way he wouldn't leave my side, but at least Gianna hasn't noticed anything off. I've gone out of my way to make sure she had as good a time as she could, knowing what she'd face once we got back here. I waited for him to leave before going back to Pop, who looked like he was about to blow.

"Pop, it's time."

"Time for what?" Oh yeah, they were talking alright.

"The lawyer. Let Becky out on bail."

"You gonna finally tell me what's going on there?"

"Yeah!" I'd held off telling him until now so that he wouldn't take matters into his own hands. I told him all of it now, about the murder and everything that came after. I could tell from the way he watched me that he was trying to figure out if that was the only thing on my mind.

"No problem, I'll take care of it. Anything else bothering you?" Freaking Lance had sold me out.

"Nope, just this. I want to get it over with before Gianna leaves for Paris."

“I see! Well, okay then, I’ll let you know what happens. It shouldn’t take longer than end of day today. What’re your plans? Do you want me there with you when you confront them?”

“Nah, I’ve got it. I don’t expect any trouble from that end.” I didn’t; I’ve had more than enough time to plan, my only issue being how Gianna will handle things. She says she’s ready to get it over with; in fact, she’d mentioned it as soon as we landed, but she has no idea. I’ve had years to deal with my shit, and it still gets me, so imagine someone as soft as her.

I left Pop to go back upstairs, where she was on my bed playing with the ankle biter. The twins had heard somewhere that pets were susceptible to the virus, something that had been proven false, but they still refused to take theirs on the trip, so this one was acting like she’d been gone for a month.

She looked up when I walked in, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. I wish we had more time that I could shield her a little bit longer, but I’d started the ball rolling, and there was no turning back. I’d already started putting things in place for my trip to Sicily, which was going to be a headache in itself.

The hardest part will be giving Pop the slip once we reach Paris. I’m almost certain he’s going to have me watched every second, but I think I’ve found a way to get around him. I’ll get the twins to cover for me as well, and with the Jetstream at my disposal, it shouldn’t be that hard to do. A quick two and a half hours flight there and back, not counting the drive once I land.

It doesn’t matter what time I arrive at my destination so I can leave in the middle of the night once everyone has gone to bed and be back before they wake in the morning. I’ve played it out a thousand times in my head already, granted everything goes as planned.

“Is something bothering you, Gabriel?”

“Why do you ask?” She shrugged as I plopped down on the bed with the dog between us.

“I don’t know; you seem... distant. Is it the thing with my mom? Do you think something’s going to go wrong?”

“No, nothing like that, sweetheart. I’m just going over everything in my head so that there are no mistakes.”

“I hear you; I’ve been doing the same ever since we landed. Even though I told you to put it away until after the party and then the trip, it’s all I can think about since the day I spoke to Greta.”

“I know, but I’m glad you got to enjoy both; there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“What do you think my dad is going to say? Do you think he’d believe me, or will he brush it aside like he does everything else?” If he does, I just might throw his ass off a cliff.

“If he doesn’t believe you, what will you do?” She seemed stumped by the question, which means she hadn’t given it much thought.

I know in her naivete, she’s expecting things to go smoothly; that just goes to show how innocent she truly is. After all the disappointments from her dad, she still expects him to accept the truth and act accordingly. The truth is, that’s the thing that worries me the most. To me, Felix is already dead. To her, he’s the last remaining parent she has left, and in her heart of hearts, she wants the old Felix back.

I’d love to give him to her, but I’m not holding out much hope. It would be awesome if he stepped up and became the father she needs; that might help ease the pain of my leaving; but I’m pretty sure I’m going to end up going with door number one, which is to destroy him along with the other two and give her a clean break from her past.

I can do that now because she has her grandmother and her aunts and a whole lotta cousins she hasn’t seen since she was a child. I’ve done my homework there, too, digging into her family’s background to make sure she’d be safe with them. I could tell by the way she absently played with the dog’s fur that she was worried, though, and trying to put on a brave face.

It's times like this that get to me when she looks so vulnerable that it hurts. She gave me a questioning look when I reached out and ran my fingers along her soft cheek. "You look tired; why don't you take a nap?"

"Yeah, I am a bit tired. Stay with me." She was out as soon as I lifted her higher on the bed so she could lay her head on the pillow.



## BECKY



"YOU'VE BEEN SPRUNG, LADY." I rolled and sat up on the cot as the latest warden unlocked the door to my cell.

"What? What happened?"

"Your bails been made."

"Don't I have to go to court for that?"

"Listen, you wanna stay here? No skin off my nose."

"Is my husband here to pick me up?" Now that I was getting out of here, my anger came back full force. I'd been lying there feeling sorry for myself, wondering why the hell Felix hadn't come to see about me. A week and a half, that's how long he'd left me in there to rot, and I can't help but feel it has something to do with Gia and her lies of late.

I've run the gauntlet from fear to anger and back a thousand times, going almost crazy since no one was telling me anything. That phone call from Jimmy had only made my time here more stressful, not knowing how he found me, wondering if he'd shown up at the house. No wonder the ugly jumpsuit they'd made me wear was now hanging off me. I've lived on nothing but fear and angst this whole time.

"I don't know who's here to pick you up; I was just told you were free to go. You can collect your things upfront." He

didn't even hang around long enough to listen to my complaints, of which I had plenty, just opened the cell and went about his business as if I didn't matter. It was insulting, to say the least, but that's becoming the norm here of late.

I made sure they returned everything I came in here with before stepping out into the waiting area, expecting to see my husband waiting for me and feeling that pit in my gut when he wasn't. I had to endure the embarrassment of having the desk sergeant call me a cab, which he did with a smirk on his face.

There I stood in designer wear, thousand-dollar shades, and a five-thousand-dollar purse and no way of getting home, no loving husband or daughter waiting for me. The fact that I'd spent most of my time here yelling about what my husband was going to do to them for keeping me here is probably what put the smirk on his face.

I'd cussed Felix out in my head a thousand times by the time the cab pulled into the driveway and was fighting mad by the time I put my key in the door. The house was deathly silent; not even the sound of the television could be heard as I walked in. "Hello, anybody home?"

"In here." I followed Felix's voice into the living room where it came from, ready to blast him, and came up short in the doorway.

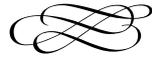
"What the hell is that doing here?" I thought I shouted the words, but they came out as little more than a whisper.

Anything I was about to say died in my lungs as I took in the sight of Felix sitting in a chair that he'd drawn up close to the fireplace where the life-size portrait of Adrienne hung over the mantle. "Hello, Becky, you're finally home. Have a seat." I looked from him to the portrait and back with my mouth hanging open, and my feet stuck to the floor.

There was a strange tingling in my fingers and toes, and I felt as if my head was about to explode. The air grew thick, and I found it hard to breathe as question after question tumbled through my head, but none made it past my lips. A phone rang somewhere in the room, and I vaguely heard the din of his voice as he answered.

“Perfect timing, your stepmother just got home; come on over.”

## FELIX



“Who was that? Is that Gia and that boy? I just got home; I’m in no mood to deal with those two right now....”

“I told you to have a seat. I’m having a drink; why don’t you join me?”

“Felix, I’m serious. Because of them, I spent a week in jail for an honest mistake.”

“Mistake? What kind of mistake was that? Who gave you the right to sell Gia’s car?”

“I admit I was a bit hasty there; I was just upset at what they did to Victoria. Besides, it was that Russo kid who burned her car; it’s only fair.”

“I see. What about the rest of it?”

“The rest of what? It’s all nonsense. You yourself know how hard I’ve tried to be a good mother to Gia. I was her mother’s best friend... Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason, go on.”

“What do you want to hear? I still don’t know what’s going on. Something happened between Victoria and Gia, a silly prank with her hair, and everyone’s blowing it out of proportion.”

“Was that all?”

“Of course, it was. What else could it be?” My skin crawled when she came further into the room to stand beside

me, placing her hand on my shoulder.

“Well, they’re on their way here; I guess we’ll get to the bottom of it once and for all. She sounded pretty serious on the phone just now. Oh, by the way, I seem to recall you spent a lot of time with Adrienne before she passed. Was there anything strange about that day?”

“What? Why are you bringing that up now? How can I remember what happened that day? It was so long ago.”

I almost flinched when she threw herself in my lap but caught myself in time. I have no idea why Gia is coming here now, it could be as simple as letting me know she’s back in the country, but I have some questions of my own. Funnily enough, it’s the dance that snapped me out of whatever fog I’ve been in these past few years.

When I wasn’t sitting here looking at her mother, I’ve been watching the recording of my daughter dancing that the Russo kid had given me and my eyes opened further each time. I’m not sure that was his intention, but who knows. When I think back on all my interactions with him, I’m apt to believe he’s smarter than the average teen.

The more I watched Gia; the more questions arose in my mind. Why would she give up dance, something she once loved and aspired to excel at, because it was one of the things she shared with her mom? Only to use the dusty old room at school to practice away from prying eyes.

That and a whole lot more went through my head in the ensuing days, and I got to looking at things differently and seeing things that I’d overlooked in a new light. I haven’t spent the whole week just gazing off into space either, not after that cryptic message about Adrienne’s death.

But I had to be careful with Victoria still in the house. I took some time off from going to the office and spent my days outside of the house visiting old friends. Those who didn’t close the door in my face were only too willing to talk, to share their thoughts on my now wife and what they knew of her true character.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard some of the things they said, but it was the first time I listened without bias and without Becky's whispers in my ear. Most of them only spoke up now because of recent events, and I'm certain the Russo men had got to them in some way since they were willing to talk freely without fear of repercussion.

They'd opened my eyes to some things, but I still need to hear Gia tell me from her own lips what all had been done to her. I let Becky prattle on and on with that sing-song voice that grated on my nerves when it never had before. The anger that had built up over a week was barely contained as I nodded as if agreeing with her assessment that Adrienne's death had been so long ago, and as her friend, it pained her to even remember it.

"If Gia's coming here, I don't think you should have that picture hanging there. You know how she is; she's not ready to deal with seeing her mother like...."

"You mean to say she's still too young to deal with the loss? I seem to recall that's what you said when you had me remove all traces of Adrienne from the house."

"Why are you saying it like that? We both decided that don't you remember?"

"Of course, I remember. I agreed with you at the time, seeing as you were the one who spent the most time with her; I thought you knew best."

"That's right, and since she's been acting out lately, I don't think she's in any state to deal with this. She seems to be having some kind of mental break. Maybe we should...."

"It was Gia who brought the portrait home." She got up from my lap and walked around behind me, I guess, in a futile attempt to hide her anger. The look on her face reflected in the glass that covered my wife's portrait made my guts turn.

She hadn't realized I guess that I could see her. It's odd, when I had the portrait encased just a few days ago, I didn't give any thought to this added benefit, but in the last couple of

days, I'd seen both mother and daughter's reflection as they stood behind me and what I saw made my blood run cold.



## GABRIEL



“YOU READY?” She nodded her head silently and gazed out the car window with a sigh. She might be, but I'm no longer sure that I am. I'd convinced her to go in there alone because I knew we stood a better chance of Becky slipping up without me there. It's been my plan all along, not only to show Gianna that she had the strength to stand on her own but because I knew Becky wouldn't dare show her ass with me in the room.

But now that we're here, I feel like a dad dropping his kid off at the school gate for the first time and dreading his precious baby being bullied by the other kids. I took her hand and brought her attention back to me. “Tell me, do you really want to do this? If you're not sure, I'll think of another way.”

Nothing could've reassured me more than the giggle she gave me or the way she leaned over to kiss my cheek. “I'm sure; stop worrying.” The lamb is comforting the lion. I grabbed and hugged her like she was going off to war, but that too was twofold. When she's distressed, her heart beats in a certain way, which I could now feel, but at least it wasn't as bad as I'd have expected.

Whereas in the last few days I've been rushing to get her life together so I could move on to my own problems, I was now wishing I could turn back the clock, give her more time to get herself together, more time to deal with all this until she was truly ready. But I don't have the liberty.

This trip to Paris is the chance I've been waiting for. Pop has me under lock and key when it comes to getting that close to Sicily. Even without either of us acknowledging that the other knows what the other is thinking, we've drawn our lines

in the sand. He doesn't want me anywhere near Ma's past, and I can't let him handle what's mine to do.

He doesn't know that I'm aware of the lengths he's gone to to protect me or what I'm willing to do to protect him. But now, she's in the mix, messing with my head as usual. "Okay, go on in there before they realize I'm out here. Remember, I'm right here, and I'll be able to hear you with this." I ran my finger over the diamond stud I'd admitted to her was bugged.

I had to have some way of explaining how I'll know what's going on in there. She doesn't need to know I've had eyes and ears on the place since forever. "Okay, I'm ready." She breathed out hard before opening the door and stepping out, and I had to refrain from calling her back and taking her home. We could just let Greta go in there and do her thing when she gets here in a little bit; that should be more than enough.

But Gianna needs this; I need her to have her moment, to take some of her power back. If it were me, I know I wouldn't be satisfied with anything less. So, I watched her walk inside while I stayed hidden in the car, hoping that everything went as planned. If Felix has been following the crumbs I left him; he should be more than ready to accept the truth.

I'm not so much worried about his dumb ass as I am about her reliving some of the shit that had been done to her. Not to mention having to listen to what had been done to her mother once again in the presence of the ones responsible. Last time she'd been a wreck.



GIANNA



YOU CAN DO THIS; you can do this, you... I repeated that mantra in my head as I walked into my family home. I almost looked back, giving the fact that Gabe was here away. "Hi

Ella, can you do me a favor? Can you make me those brownies I like?" I smiled when she looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

"Sure, sure. The turtle ones, with the caramel?"

"Yes, I've missed them."

Not really, since Gabriel had browbeaten Sheila into making me some when I told him of my fondness for them, and now they're an added staple in the Russo home since everyone else had fallen in love with them as well. It was Gabriel's idea to get her out of the way, something I didn't question, but I think it's his way of protecting me from prying ears. Or maybe he knows I'd be more relaxed knowing that the woman couldn't overhear the darker aspects of my past. Then again, Becky and Victoria don't like witnesses to their bullshit, so he could be thinking of that.

She won't be that careful with dad, not when it comes to making me look bad. It just goes to show how well she believes she's poisoned my father's mind against me, and that's just what I want. I want her to be just the way she's always been behind his back. I want him to fall for her lies like he always does so that when the truth is revealed, his pain will be doubled.

The deeper I walked into the house, the angrier I became, but I hid it well. Gabriel was right; I just have to pretend like this is a play, and I'm about to go onstage. "Where's Victoria?" Only my dad and Becky were in the room when I walked in. I was almost surprised to see my mom's portrait still hanging, having believed Becky would've tried her best to get rid of it as soon as she walked through the door. There's hope for dad, yet I guess.

"She's upstairs; why?" Dad turned to look at me. Did he always look that tired? That beaten? My heart almost hurt for him, for the forlorn look on his face. But I pushed it aside; this is his doing, not mine. It's too late, too much water under the bridge. Forget everything he'd let them do to me; I won't ever forgive him for marrying the woman who murdered my mother.

My mind tells me this, but my silly heart still felt that bond that had been forged between us before my world went to heck. I looked away from his gaze before he made me falter. This is the only time I'll do this, it has taken a lot to shore myself up for the task, and I never want to deal with this mess again.

"I think she should be here for this; it concerns her as well."

"Where's that boy? Your new shadow? Has he caused enough trouble in this house? Do you know what he did to me? What both of you did? I can't believe after everything I've done for you...."

"Not now, Becky, come and sit down, Gianna. You have a tan; it looks good on you. I've watched your dance all week; I didn't know you were that good."

"Dance? What dance?"

"I've been meaning to ask you about that? Didn't you tell me that Gia was no longer interested in dance? You even convinced me that it was her idea to quit. You said she didn't want to do it any longer because it was something her mother did, that she was mad at her mother for leaving. Don't you remember? I do; it was the first time I hit her."

"It's what she said she wanted. Isn't it Gia?" I ignored her, not even looking in her direction. "Felix, why do you keep bringing up things from before? I can hardly remember what I did yesterday. Gia, this is not a good time; I just got home after spending a week in jail, thanks to your boyfriend."

"Dad, can you call Victoria down here, please?"

"Why? What do you plan to do to my daughter now? Haven't you done enough?"

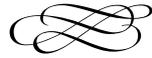
"I'm not talking to you, Becky, dad."

"Excuse me? Who do you think you're talking to?" I just gave her a look and waited for the fallout from dad, but there was none coming. He just got up from his chair and walked to the entryway to call up the stairs to Victoria.

I felt some of my unease leave me. I thought Gabriel was nuts when he told me to take this approach, believing my dad hadn't changed one bit. But he was certain that my father wouldn't react like the norm.

It wasn't much, but just that little show of support stopped my heart racing as sickeningly as it had been since walking in here. I felt the glare of Becky's gaze at the side of my head, and where before I would've cowered or done my best to escape it, this time I turned to look at her directly. Did you flinch, witch? Good, I've only just gotten started.

## GIANNA



I waited for Victoria to flounce into the room once she saw me sitting there. “What’s she doing here? I thought she was away on some fancy vacation? Mom, when did you get home? You look like...heck. So, what are we all doing here?” She flopped down on a chair across from me so she could better glare at me, I guess.

“Gia wanted us all here. Go ahead, what is it you’d like to say?”

“Becky, you wanna sit? This might take a minute.” She looked at me with something approaching malice, but I fought not to look away like a scared little mouse.

“We’re waiting, Becky.” I eyed the glass in dad’s hand when he said that. I don’t know how I missed the amber-colored liquid and the bottle beside him at the foot of his chair. I don’t think I’d ever seen him drink, that’s why.

That makes a lot of sense. I was beginning to think Gabriel was a magician; he’d called dad’s moves almost to a tee. Now I know we just got lucky, and dad had chosen to tie one on, on this particular day. She dropped down beside her daughter after dad crossed his legs to keep her from sitting on his lap. Another one of her power moves deflected. Will wonders never cease.

This little sideshow almost sidetracked me from my reason for coming here. This is the first time I’d seen dad like this and the first I’d seen mother and daughter looking so put out.

“Now that we’re all here, I only have one thing to say. Dad, I met with our old housekeeper, remember her? Greta?”

“Greta? Where on earth did you find her? I’ve been looking all over the place....”

“What? Why have you been looking for her? Felix, exactly what is going on? What’s with all these trips down memory lane and stuff? What lies have you been telling behind my back?” She turned her ire my way, but once again, I ignored her.

“Like I was saying, dad, I spoke to Greta, and she had something very interesting to say.”

Now I looked at Becky with all the hate I felt inside. I’d just signaled Gabriel that I was going with plan number two. I’d so wanted to bring up everything I’d endured at the hands of these two, but now I find myself weakening, or maybe it was just my aversion to spending more time than was necessary with these three.

So instead of rehashing things that no longer mattered like I’d wanted to, I’ll just go right to the most important issue. Out the side of my eye, I saw Becky move to the edge of her seat. No doubt she was trying to come up with some plausible reason why dad shouldn’t want to hear, but again, Gabriel had been right on point when he said just say what I needed to out loud, no beating around the bush.

“Would you like to tell him, Becky, or should I?”

“Tell him what? I don’t know anything about Greta and her time here. She left just after I started living here unless you forgot.”

“But why? Dad, did you ever wonder why she was in such an all-fired hurry to fire Greta? She’d been here since before I was born. You liked her, so did mom. There was nothing wrong with her work, so why did Becky get rid of her in such a hurry? Go ahead, tell him. It’s because she knew something about you, isn’t it? About what you did to my mom.”

“Shut your mouth; when are you gonna stop lying? Felix, I told you, she makes up stuff just to make me look bad. She’s

never liked me being here; you know that. Don't you remember the way she acted when we first got married? She..."

"I told you to sit down and shut up."

"Felix!"

"Go on, Gia, what did Greta say?"

"She said she saw you kill my mother." Becky flew up from her chair and charged at me, but dad got there before her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm not going to sit here and let her lie on me like that." My heart was back to racing, and I felt sick to my stomach. The sound of the door opening came just in time to save me from passing out.

I'd remembered to leave the door unlocked as he said, and Gabriel and Greta walked in. Two things happened at once; Becky fell back against the chair as if her legs had given out, and dad whispered Greta's name as if in shock. "Hello, Mr. Fontane, Miss. Gia, nice to see you again."

"What's she doing here? With him? Is this another setup you two cooked up? Look here you..."

"Come in Greta, Gia was just telling us a story about the day my wife died. Why don't you tell me what you have to say?" I couldn't tell from dad's dry tone if he believed me or not.

Greta faltered, which is understandable, but Gabriel's subtle touch on her back seemed to give her the push she needed. I'd geared myself up to hear this again, told myself I could hold it together, but as she started speaking, I felt the need to put my head between my knees.

Her voice grew stronger as she went on with her story, and each time Becky tried to interrupt, all it took was one look from Gabriel to shut her up. "I don't have to sit here and listen to this..."

"Sit...down." Dad was fuming. It was the first sign of life he'd shown since Greta started speaking. Becky floundered

about a bit, looking green around the gills, and had the situation not been so dire; I might've found joy in her discomfort. "Go on, Greta, I'm listening."

This time Greta didn't look at Becky before carrying on but instead to Gabriel, who nodded his encouragement. Until now, he'd stuck close to the older woman, but once she got to the actual day leading up to what she swore she'd witnessed, he left her side and crossed the room to mine.

"That day, things were a little lighter around the house than it had been in a while. Ms. Adrienne was almost back to her old self. Not quite, but she seemed more upbeat than in days past since she became so gravely ill. I don't know what made me come up here at that time. I'd been in the kitchen where I usually stay when company is visiting."

Here Greta stopped and swallowed hard, her eyes now fixed on the portrait of mom. "I think it might've had something to do with the way Ms. Adrienne had started acting around Becky. In the days leading up to it, they'd seemed like friends, same as always. But that morning, Ms. Adrienne asked me a strange question after Becky left the first time. When I thought of it after, I realized that Becky had been a bit upset when she left, before she came back later looking chipper."

"What did Adrienne ask you?"

"She asked me if I'd noticed anything strange about Becky before. She seemed a bit confused, or so I'd thought at the time. Now, I'm not so sure. I put it off to the medication messing with her head; some days, as you know, were harder than others. I was so caught up in feeling sad about her situation that I missed what was really going on. The guilt has been eating me up inside ever since."

"Go on. What exactly happened that day?"

"After Becky left that first time, I went up to see if Ms. Adrienne needed anything. She was just sitting up in bed with a frown on her face; that's when she asked me that question about Becky. I told her honestly that I hadn't. Truth is, I never really paid much mind to visitors in that way. Only when I

noticed that some of the ladies had stopped coming by as often.”

“Anyhow, Becky was back a few hours later, and I didn’t think anything of it; why would I? She’d been back and forth a lot back then. In and out at all hours until you came home in the evenings. So, I was in the kitchen standing at the sink; I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a few hours yet before I had to go pick up Ms. Gian...I mean Ms. Gia.” She smiled wanly at Gabriel when she corrected herself.

“Anyway, I was standing there washing the dishes when I got the eeriest feeling in the pit of my stomach. I couldn’t explain it; I just... Anyway, I headed up the stairs, being quiet as a mouse, carrying a tray with refreshments. If nothing was out of place, I didn’t want to interrupt whatever the two of them were discussing, but if I was caught, I could just pretend, you know, that I was bringing up something. Even though Ms. Adrienne wasn’t really eating much by that time, and she’d fuss at me if I overworked myself seeing to her guests.”

“You remember Mr. Fontane; she didn’t like anyone else to take care of her, especially the nurses who came. Strangers, she called them. She didn’t like them seeing her that weak and undignified. She’d only let them administer her medicine, but that was it. The rest you and I took care of and were glad to do it. She said that was more than enough work on my shoulders, and if our visitors needed pampering, they could get it at home; I wasn’t here to cater to their needs.” She smiled fondly at the memory.

“You know Ms. Adrienne was a spitfire when she chose to be. Anyway, I came up the stairs, and at first, all I heard was the drone of their voices, couldn’t make out what they were saying to each other. Then I was finally able to hear. What are you doing? That’s what Ms. Adrienne said, then she shouted, get away from there.”

“Something in her voice made me panic, and I rushed to the door just in time to see Becky fiddling with the IV. I wasn’t sure what all she’d done; I just remember the smug look on her face, a look that turned to pure evil when she turned to

look at Ms. Adrienne on the bed before she saw me standing in the doorway.

“I’ve watched enough soap operas to know I had to act fast. I could barely find words, just held up the tray with what I’m sure was a sickly-sweet look on my face. My whole body had gone ice cold. I’m amazed even now that I didn’t stutter when I spoke, that I was able to get words past my lips. I pretended that I’d just arrived and walked in the room chattering away like I always did.”

She took a deep breath here as tears ran down both our faces. It was then I realized that I was digging my nails into Gabriel’s arm, where he held me. I tried easing back, but he put my hand back without looking at me as if to say it was okay, carry on. “I wasn’t sure then if it had worked; I was too busy trying to keep my eyes on Ms. Adrienne, who looked like she was just falling asleep.”

“I even convinced myself that I’d misunderstood the situation. Why would Becky hurt someone who’d been so nice to her all along? Even then, she took the tray from me, all smiles. “She’s a bit tuckered out. Why don’t we leave this here for now?”

“That’s what she said. I wanted to refuse to leave the room, but I had no excuse to stay. She was the guest, someone Ms. Adrienne held in high regard, while I was just the help after all, even though Ms. Adrienne treated me like anything but. And besides, her own child was in the room with her at the time. Who would’ve thought...?”

“If I was wrong, how could I explain my irrational feelings? It’s only after Becky left a little bit later, and I came up here to find her not breathing that I doubted. Even then, I wasn’t sure. But then she moved in here, started taking over, started treating Ms. Gia worse than an unwanted orphan. It made me sick. She must’ve caught on that I’d seen more than I should that day because next thing I know, I was being replaced.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me about this?”

“I wasn’t sure at first. You’ve got to understand. Had I known, I would’ve said something. But it was only after I’d been gone from here that I was able to put things into perspective. Even then, I didn’t dare say anything, just told the new housekeeper to keep an eye on Ms. Gia because I’d seen the way Becky had started treating her.”

“Felix, she’s lying; it wasn’t like that.”

“Really? What was it like? Tell me. Why did you stop the others from coming to see my wife?” Contained anger; that’s what the tone in dad’s voice sounded like. Becky stood there in shock with her mouth hanging open.

“You didn’t think I knew, did you? I’ve learned a lot in the last week while you were gone when you were not here to muddy the issue.”

“Felix, I’m telling you, you’ve got to listen to me; you’ve got it all wrong. It was her; she put her up to this.” Becky turned her venom my way and once again made as if to come after me.

“Bitch...I hope...the fuck...you do.” Gabriel didn’t even raise his voice, but the look he gave her, the tone in his voice, was more than enough. She turned once more to dad, who had murder in his eyes.

“What did you do to my wife, you monstrous bitch?”

“I didn’t; I didn’t; she’s got it all wrong.... It’s what Adrienne wanted. I was just helping her out; she was going to die anyway....”

“You’re lying. The day before Adrienne died, she and I spoke to a specialist in Switzerland about all the ways he could make her better. He’d worked on similar cases with great success, and we were just waiting for the call that he was willing to see her.”

“You don’t understand that day; she was in too much pain.” Becky nodded her head and looked around the room for support.

“No matter what, or how much pain she was in, my wife would never have left Gianna, and I never. What did you do? I

can have her body exhumed; you know. I can have the medical examiner look for whatever poison you fed her.”

“I didn’t; I didn’t....” Why does she look so small now? So pitiful?

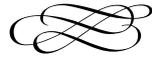
“She did it. I saw you, mom.” My eyes went to Victoria in shock. Until she said those words, there was still a sliver of doubt.

“Victoria, hush....” Becky tried silencing her.

“No, I did, Felix. I saw her. I was too little to understand, but she told me that she was just giving her medicine.”

“When I was a little bit older, and I brought it up again, she threatened to throw me away. She said she’d send me away if I ever said anything about it again. All these years, she’s pushed me to fight with Gia to get rid of her. It was all her doing.” You could hear a pin drop.

## GABRIEL



Well, that was no fun. Just once, I wish humankind would surprise me, but they have yet to. The place turned into pandemonium, with all players screaming at each other. I kept Gianna in place by my side, “Not your monkeys, not your circus baby. Just sit back and watch it unfold.” I’m proud of her even though she didn’t confront them for the hell they’d put her through. I kind of expected it, though. I knew that she was more interested in getting to the bottom of what had been done to her mother than in any restitution from these beasts.

I watched and listened as they went at each other, every word like a script to a play I’d written. So damn predictable, even Felix the hump was getting his lines right. My focus was on the daughter since I’m quite sure the mother was about done, and just as I’d expected, she turned on a dime: no class, no shame, no loyalty. Then again, look at what she came from.

“This is all your doing. I can’t believe you’d stoop so low as to bring your poor innocent mother into this....” Becky looked at Gianna.

“Enough, don’t mention her again, don’t let her name pass your filthy lying lips. I want you out of my sight. Get out!” That vein in his forehead is about to pop. He should get an aneurysm and die the dumb fuck.

“You can’t just kick me out. There are laws. You’re my husband; I’m your wife. This house is as much mine as it is yours.” Ah, the words I’d been waiting to hear.

“Actually, it doesn’t belong to either of you.” All eyes turned in my direction. Fontane because I’m sure he’s wondering how I knew that and the others in genuine surprise.

“What are you talking about? What is he talking about?” Becky looked at her husband, outraged as a wet hen in winter. Maybe I’m as twisted as she is because I’m having way too much fun watching her demise. Now to put the screws to her, finish her off for now.

“Oh, didn’t you tell her, Felix, that this house belongs to Gianna? It was left to her by her mother’s estate. You have no claims to it, and neither does he. Gianna?”

“Get out!” My baby took a lot of pride in saying those two words, and the look on Becky’s face made it that much better.

“You heard her.”

“Felix!”

“Like he said, it’s her house.”

“Even so, we’re her parents; she’s still too young to inherit surely.”

“Don’t ever call yourself my parent again. You’re nothing of the sort and never was. Parents don’t mistreat their wards; not even animals do that.” Well, some do but go, baby, you’re on a roll.

“Didn’t you hear your own daughter just admit out of her own mouth that you forced her to pick on me? So, all those trips down the stairs headfirst were your doing. What about when you sent me to bed hungry? Or all the lies you told my dad about me, to make him hate me, were you my parent then?”

“I never told any lies. You were mean and hateful, wasn’t she, Victoria?” Dumb as a stump, can she really not tell which way the wind blows?

“Mom, it’s over. I’m sorry, but you’ve done too much, and now it’s all coming to light. I can’t save you. I can only ask for dad and Gianna to forgive me for what you made me do to her

all these years.” Cue the crocodile tears that never came: just dry heaves and even drier eyes.

“I think I told you before; her name is Gia. Isn’t that what you made everyone else call her because you were jealous of her name? How beautiful it was? Or was that your mom too? Did your mother lie to all Gianna’s friends and turn them against her?”

“What’s this?”

“Oh, Fontane, you still don’t know? When you made all those visits this week, didn’t you think to ask why they all dropped Gianna in favor of Victoria?”

“Yes, that was mom’s idea, all of it.”

“Why, you little bitch.” Becky cracked Victoria across the face, and she ran to Fontane. I looked at Gianna to see her rolling her eyes; no fucks given.

I squeezed her hand when she opened her mouth to speak, then mouthed the words not yet with a shake of my head. “So, Becky, when are you leaving? This one has homework to get back to; we don’t have all night.” If hate had a look, I just caught it.

“And don’t take anything from here. The clothes on your back, that’s all you deserve. Everything you have was bought with my mother’s money one way or another.”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

“Hell would be a good start. Now get out of my house before I call the police. Don’t look at dad he can’t save you. I’ll just call my grandma if he even tries, then no one will have anywhere to live.”

“Gia...”

“Don’t start, dad; don’t even start.”

“I think you should leave Becky.”

“Yeah, and thank your lucky stars that we don’t have enough evidence to have you charged with murder.” Gianna went in for the kill.

“I didn’t kill anybody. Felix, are you really going to take their word against mine?”

“I don’t see why not. You’ve done nothing but lie to me our entire marriage. I’m tired; you should go.”

“Not to worry, Fontane, there’s no statute of limitations on murder. I have someone working on bringing a case against her. If push comes to shove, we can always go with exhumation, but I’m trying to spare Gianna that. She’s been through enough.” Fontane did the only thing I could respect since we met. He went to the room’s entryway and pointed to the door in a silent order for Becky to get out.

“I’ll let you keep the car for now....”

“Dad!”

“It’s okay Gia, I’m not letting her keep it, but since she can’t stay here, she’ll have to find someplace to go, and there are no hotels within walking distance. I doubt the neighbors would welcome her at this point.”

“I don’t really care. She talked you out of letting me drive the car mom left for me, claiming I was too careless to even get a license while her daughter drove around in a luxury car. If that wasn’t bad enough, she even sold my car, so no, she should walk to wherever she needs to.” Now that’s the Russo twins talking right there. Then again, Anna and Rosa would’ve stripped her naked, down to her bare feet. They’re vicious like that.

Becky left the room screaming obscenities and headed up the stairs, apparently to get her important papers. I glared Victoria out of the room to give Gianna and her dad some space after telling Greta she could leave with the team that was waiting for her outside. Her job here was done, but since she means so much to Gianna, Pop already had a job lined up for her at one of his places back in the city.

“What a mess.” Fontane dropped down in his chair, looking worn. “I’m so sorry Gia, I guess I really let you down.”

“You did more than that. You lost me.” Good girl!

“I know, I’m sorry. I won’t ask you to forgive me, but I hope one day to make it up to you.”

“I don’t understand; why did you change so much? When mom was alive, we were so close. You’d never let anyone hurt me.”

“I admit I was a different person back then. I had my head on straight. Your mother was my guiding light. With her by my side, everything always seemed so much easier. After your mom passed away, I didn’t know what to do. I thought that all the things I did were for you for your benefit.”

“I didn’t know how to be a mother and father to a girl, a young girl who just lost her mom at that.” His voice broke, and he looked like he’d aged ten years. While they talked, I kept my ears pricked for what was going on in the rest of the house. Becky might be thinking she’d got away with this one, but she can have no idea that this was just the beginning.

“I swear I only had your best interest at heart. Things got away from me, I guess. I only wanted to give you the best in life. That’s why I married Becky in the first place. She convinced me that as your mother’s close friend, she’d take care of you. So, I held onto that with the hope that you’d not suffer your loss too much. The more you fought against what I was trying to do, the more I pushed back. I see that now. I admit I wasn’t in the best place back then; I was in no condition to raise you on my own, but I did everything wrong, I know that now.”

“I can’t blame Becky for any of this. It was all my doing. I never saw her for what she was. Now that I look back on it, all the things that you endured while I turned a blind eye, things I should’ve noticed. I’ll never forgive myself for that, but not to worry, I’ll make reparation for my sins.”

“What does he mean by that?” Gianna asked me since Fontane seemed to have gone off somewhere in his head.

I shrugged my shoulders to put her at ease, but I’m hoping he means to jump off a cliff or some fuck.

“We should go; it’s getting late.”

“Yes, you kids should go on ahead; I’ll talk to you later. It’s been a long day.” He got up from his seat and started walking us to the door. Gianna walked out ahead of me because I was still trying to pick up anything from upstairs. I need the next scene in this play to play out before I can get rid of Victoria as well. I can tell that Fontane still has his head buried in his ass.

Just because she came forward and sold out her mother, he seems to think that gives her a pass. Me, not so much. He stopped me at the door and took a step back from the look I gave him.

“Uh, one last question before you go. Your dad came to visit me while you were gone. He mentioned in passing that I should cover the portrait in glass, even told me where to go. Was that your idea?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know?” I just smiled and walked out the door.

“I don’t think we should’ve left Victoria in the house. I don’t care where she goes; she needs to go.” Gianna pounced as soon as I got in the car where she sat waiting, breathing fire like a dragoness.

“Not yet; we’re not done.” I turned up the device in the car so she could hear what I’d caught, what I was hoping to catch.

“Why did you sell me out after everything I’ve done for you?” Becky’s voice came through loud and clear.

“I told you I wanted back in that school. I told you I wanted the designer clothes that you promised when you had all that money. You didn’t give me any of the things I asked for. Besides, I don’t owe you anything. I’m a minor, remember. I’m just a kid. All of this was your doing.”

“You’re lying. You hated Gia; you wanted her life, even as a little girl. To the point that you poisoned everyone against her. Remember that?”

“Yes, just like you wanted her mother’s life, so don’t act all innocent. So what if I mistreated her? What if I took

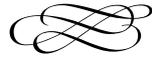
everything she had and loved? Why can't I have nice things too? It's not my fault. It's yours and Jimmy's that my life was worse than hers. At least I didn't kill her."

"I can't believe you. I can't believe that after all the things that I've done, getting blood on my hands to give you a better life, that you'd just throw me away like trash."

"This is not my fault you made those choices. You're the one who lied to get the job at that school. You're the one who set your sights on that idiot Adrienne, and you're the one who killed her so you could screw her husband and take over her life. This is just your just desserts, mom; you should just accept it. I think you should leave before they really do call the cops and have you arrested again. I still have a chance; I'm not going to lose it because of you." The smugness in her voice was palpable. I guess she really is nuts after all. Too bad that shit's not an excuse in my book.

"Hold it!" I had to grab Gianna to stop her from leaving the car and running back inside. "Not yet; soon, I promise. I'll get her out of your house in another day or so." If all goes as planned, that is.

## GABRIEL



“*L*et’s go spar!”

“What?” I grabbed her nape gently and walked her towards the Russo dojo.

“You have way too much pent-up energy to focus on doing homework, so let’s go get rid of some of it.”

“I know of a better way to get rid of it.” She mumbled the words beneath her breath, but I was still able to hear them.

“Bet! But let’s try this first.” She gave me that queer look she’s been throwing my way ever since she caught on to the fact that I’m avoiding taking her to my bed. At least she’s not brave enough yet to come right out and say anything. That’s a conversation I haven’t quite prepared for yet, even though I know it’s coming.

“Go change.” I guided her to one side of the changing room where new outfits in her size had been added to the twins’ while I went to the other side to get ready. She was still spitting mad by the time we met up again, and I hid my grin as we got in position. Her bow was laced with sarcasm which I ignored as we faced off against each other. “Sensei!”

“Cute! Let’s go.”

For someone who was new to this, she’d taken to martial arts pretty easily; her years of dance had made her loose and limber though I’m sure her anger had a lot to do with her performance today. I worked with her for an hour until she had nothing left, then took her upstairs to shower and settle down to do her homework while I played around on my computer.

Every once in a while, I'd look over at her as she lay sprawled across the bed with the dog on her butt while she did her read over her assignment, still with a look of displeasure on her face. I'd expected tears, a tantrum or two, but I guess hearing what Victoria had to say at the end there had erased everything but the anger.

Anger's good. I have the feeling that before this is all over, she's going to run the full gamut of emotions, but I want her to deal with the pain she's been bottling up inside before it becomes too much. She always has an excuse, an escape to get away from facing it, but I know it's there, just beneath the surface. I also know that today was just the beginning of the hell she's about to face.

I don't think it's quite set in yet. There's been so much going on in her life in just these last few weeks—a complete change of pace from where her life was headed. I don't want her to lose traction, don't want any missteps that would send her back into hiding. That's the excuse I'm using today for not having the conversation I know we need to have.

There are only so many ways I can avoid touching her when it's obvious to both of us that I want to. That's another thing that I didn't read in my vast collection of books. How to be this close to her all the time, the person I'm sure was meant to be my soulmate, had I not been cursed with my plight and not touch.

Just looking at her, I want so much to walk over there and lay down beside her to cuddle the way I've learned she likes to. My heart aches for the loss of her, and it hasn't even happened yet, so I know the reality is going to be devastating. Is it fair that I'd have had time to get ready for that occurrence when she didn't?

There's nothing I can do about that now; I'd started the ball rolling with her dad, now is not the time to drop something like that in her lap. I need to have her life as sorted as possible before I move on. I know that what I plan to do for her makes up for some of the heartache I'm bound to cause, though I know that for me, I'd much rather have the person, shortcomings and all.

I looked away just in time when she turned to me as if feeling my stare, closing my eyes when I felt her look away again. Am I hurting her? Does she need me to hold her at this very moment? Part of me was already there, and the other knew that I needed to start building that wall if I was going to avoid doing even more damage than I'd already done.

So, I pretended an interest in my screen when the truth is I couldn't even see it. Lately, the turmoil in my gut has amped itself up into these knots that I'm finding it harder and harder to loosen. The sooner we get her sorted, the closer it will be to our parting. I don't think I've ever felt anything sadder. I wish I could... There're so many things I wish for because of her. But so many years of believing my life will go one way can't be changed that easily.



## GIANNA



THERE'S SOMETHING BOTHERING GABRIEL. I thought I sensed it on the island, but I wasn't sure until just this second. It's as if he's avoiding looking at me. That thought emboldened all my doubts and inner fears that I've kept hidden from the rest of the world. Was he tired of me already? Was I just a phase, a plaything he no longer wanted?

How could I have forgotten who he is? How popular and sought-after he was at school? That he could have any girl, he wanted? Most of them more suitable than me. How had I let myself believe all this time that he could truly be interested in me? I'd never heard of him being a player, and there's no way he could fake the things he makes me feel. Or is it all one-sided?

I felt a cold chill run through me as those doubts came crashing down on me all at once. Maybe this was my way of avoiding thinking about my mom and the way she'd been

betrayed, finding something else to stress over. Or maybe I'm finally seeing something that has been right in front of me all along.

Gabriel Russo, guys like Gabriel Russo, smart, handsome, rich, and just all-around perfect, don't fall for nobodies like me. Why would he? I mean, his family is perfect, while mine is a train wreck of a disaster. Although we live in close proximity, I'm way down on the totem pole when it comes to comparing our wealth. And again, there's the fact that he could have anyone he wants.

I bit my lip to withhold the groan of despair that almost escaped me. I didn't know that he was looking at me, but he must've been. Because before the first tear fell, he was there, moving the dog out of the way and folding me in his arms. His hugs, like sunshine and laughter and all the good that life has to give, wrapped up in one, can make me weak.

I buried my face in his chest and gripped the back of his shirt so hard in my fists I thought it would tear. My body shook with tears though there was a toss-up as to what I was crying about. I got distracted by the fast-paced beating of his heart. His voice when he calmed me was filled with apprehension and a strain of something else I didn't quite catch.

When he started running his hand back and forth along my spine soothingly, it only made me cry harder. My heart felt like a stone one minute and mush the next as my head filled with chaos and fear. I held on tighter, cried harder, and felt sorry for myself even as I enjoyed being close to him.

When he holds me like this, I can tell myself that I'm being silly, that there's nothing wrong with us. No way can he be this kind, this loving with me, if he didn't want me. I tested that theory by lifting my lips to his. There was hesitance at first, but that only lasted a mere few seconds before he melted into me.

Now my tears were ones of joy mixed with a touch of sadness. Joy because we were once again in each other's arms and sadness for my poor mother, who'd been so horribly

robbed of her last chance to live. I was soon consumed by him, no room for thought of anything else but what he made me feel.



## FELIX



I PACED BACK and forth in front of the portrait of my wife while my mind raced to hold onto something, anything. The alcohol I'd consumed was no help, no more powerful than water at this point. I thought for sure it would help ease the pain that has been hounding me for days now, but hearing everything I'd heard this evening had proved to be too much even for liquid courage.

Becky was still moving around upstairs, no doubt working on a way to hoodwink me into letting her stay. I had no idea the kids knew that the house wasn't mine but was, in fact, owned by my daughter. Obviously, they'd learned this on their trip to Virginia. Something I hadn't even thought of in forever.

I hadn't kept the truth from Becky on purpose; it just never crossed my mind to. I didn't see the need since I always expected that we'd all live here together until Gia got married. I imagined we had at least another few years; while the girls went off to college, they'd come home for the holidays and spend their summers home.

When the time came, and Gia decided that this is where she wanted to raise her family, Becky and I would find a place of our own, while Victoria went off with her husband to start a life of her own. So it wasn't subterfuge that held me back from divulging that information.

Now I see that it worked in my favor, keeping that tidbit of information hidden. Who knows what tricks Becky would've pulled to cause trouble? Not that she could've done anything about the ownership of the house, Adrienne's family has made

their dislike of her more than evident over the years, so anything she tried would've gone over even worse than when she tried driving Gia's car or when she wanted the heirloom jewelry Adrienne had left behind.

I lost all my strength as Greta's words played themselves over in my head again and had to drop down on my seat before my legs gave out. There was a sick feeling in my gut, eating away at me and wreaking havoc on my senses. I felt the same mix of emotions I'd been battling all week—shame, despair, anger, and rage.

Most of it was against me, but even more, it was for Becky. I can't bring myself to blame Victoria; she's just a kid and one that I was legally responsible for. Besides, my lawyer had all but warned me that getting out of an adoption is almost as hard if not harder than divorce.

But when I think of the secret she'd kept all these years, my anger at her is just as fierce as what I feel for her mother. Shouldn't it work both ways, this adoption? As her father, shouldn't she have told me the truth before today? How much truth was in her words? Had Becky really been the mastermind behind all that happened, while Victoria had been little more than a victim herself? That would mean that I'd failed not one but two daughters, leaving them both at the mercy of that monster.

I heard her footsteps on the stairs and fought to hide the hate on my face. I'd had the whole week to think about this since receiving that call. There was doubt, of course; how could it be true? I'd never seen that side of Becky, the side of her that could kill a friend in cold blood then go on with her life as if nothing happened.

But after this day's revelations, there's no way I can overlook this, no way she can talk me out of believing the truth. I wanted so much for it to be a lie, some sick joke someone was playing. Even after hearing the less than positive things others had to say about her and her actions behind my back, I'd still held onto a glimmer of hope that she wasn't the evil bitch everyone was making her out to be.

I admit it was for my own selfish reasons that I refused to accept. I needed to do that because if it were true, then everything I'd done since Adrienne's death would be tantamount to the worst betrayal. But there's no way for me to hide from it now; it was out in the open for all to see. And I have the feeling if I don't handle this right, I'll lose my daughter for good this time.

I hadn't foreseen Becky being ousted from the home, but along with my denial in the last few days, I'd been working on the other side of that count. I'd played the what-if game morning, noon, and night and had more or less come up with a plan of action if it proved to be true. Now I'll have to rework some of it in my head since she would no longer be in the house.

"Aren't you even going to look at me?" She spoke from the doorway before making her way into the room when I finally looked in her direction. "Felix, come on, you know this is all lies. That Russo boy hates me for some reason, no doubt because of the lies that little bitch told about me." She recoiled back from the look I gave her.

"Are you talking about my daughter? Is that the little bitch you're referring to? Or is it your own?"

"Felix!" She does put upon umbrage very well; how did I miss that before?

"What all did you two do to my daughter?"

"Nothing, why won't you believe me?"

"A pout on an adult age woman is not as effective as you seem to think." Her face changed immediately, and I saw it just for a second before she schooled her face again. Just for a split second there, I saw the light that entered her eyes, a look I'd never seen before.

Something inside me eased, and I knew what I had to do. "Look, Becky, I don't know what to believe anymore. I need time to think, to get my head around all this."

"I can't believe you'd throw me over this easy. We've been married longer than you and her, you know. I'm the one who

was here to pick up the pieces... why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" I kept my voice void of all emotion, the way she's used to, as I took another sip straight from the bottle this time. "Look, as I was about to say, whatever is going on, Gia has asked you to leave this house. I think you should go until I come up with something. Here, take this, get yourself a room in town for now and I'll talk with Gia, get her to calm down."

"But..."

"There's no other way."

"What do you mean? She's just a kid; she doesn't have that kind of power."

"Actually, she does in this case. Even though she doesn't inherit for another few months on her eighteenth birthday, the estate is under her grandmother's care. It'll only take a word from her to make it happen."

"But you're Gia's father; surely you have the right."

"Not in this. Adrienne's inheritance is passed down through the women in her family; husbands have nothing to do with it. I'm sure I don't know how to undo a couple of centuries-old tradition that has been in good standing for generations."

"So, what am I supposed to do?" She took the wad of money I held out to her.

"Don't worry about it; consider it a mini-vacation. You've been through a lot in the last few weeks; go enjoy room service and unwind. Watch TV, get your hair and nails done." She actually looked like she was buying it. Who is this creature?

"Come with me."

"I can't do that. What will we do with Victoria? She, too, has had a hard couple of weeks."

"I don't care about her after the lies she told either. Little brat."

“Don’t be like that.” I swallowed my bile and touched her hand lovingly. That seemed to work as she relaxed just a little.

“It’ll only be for a few days, I promise. Go on now. I promise to come to see you soon. Just call after you check-in in, let me know you made it okay.” I got up and walked her to the door with a smile on my face that I did not feel. Each moment in her presence was torture, and it was all I could do not to break her neck right there in the foyer.

I played the doting husband, going so far as to walk her out to the car, held my breath and disgust in check when she pressed her reptilian lips against mine, and smiled as I held the door open for her. As she drove off, I looked back towards the house. It had been some time since I actually looked at the place.

A place that once held all the happiness to be found in my world. It had been Adrienne’s dream house and, at the time, way above my pay grade. I could afford it now, but that too was thanks to the start her family had given us as part of our wedding present. My heart ached at the memory of all that my beautiful wife had brought into my life. The love we’d shared was one for the books. So how had it come to this? How did our beautiful dream become this nightmare?

I saw Victoria moving around in her room through the windows upstairs and sighed in almost defeat. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with her now. On the one hand, I feel a sense of responsibility, and on the other, I’m very disappointed that she sat on the truth she’d revealed only tonight for so long.

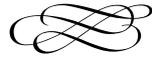
I sighed deeply before making my way back into the house, feeling like the whole world rested on my shoulders. The alcohol, for now, was keeping my disgust with myself somewhat dulled, but I knew once it wore off, once life came back into focus, that I’d have to face the truth of my own actions. How am I going to live with myself in the next few days while I get my affairs in order?

I’ll have to do it, though, no matter what. It’s the least I can do to make up for my failures. It’s the least I can do to

respect the memory of my wife. I felt cold tears on my cheeks and wiped them away. I don't deserve the privilege of tears, but knowing how disappointed my wife would be with me was more than I could bear.

By the time I made it up to my bed, I was little more than a broken man. There was no more use for me to be here. I'd failed the one thing I had left to do. With my own hands, I'd brought hell into my young daughter's life and subjected her to everything her mother would've opposed. No, there's no more need for me to be here.

## VICTORIA



Oh good, she's gone; thank goodness, I thought she'd never leave. Trying to pull me down with her? Fat chance. Like she'd always taught me, it's survival of the fittest. That's what she'd always snicker and say any time she reminisced about Adrienne, so she should understand my actions and hold no grudges, though she seems pretty pissed at me.

None of this is my fault, though, so whatever. If she wasn't so stupid, none of this would be happening. She had one damn job, and she screwed it up royally. If she'd done half of what I told her to, we wouldn't be in this mess. If she'd gotten rid of the daughter the same way she executed the mother, we both could be sitting pretty for the rest of our lives.

But no, she was convinced that we needed to keep that fool around in order to keep Felix on the hook. She may have had a point the first year or so, but once he'd adopted me and they'd been married long enough that an annulment wouldn't be possible, there was no need for Gia to be around.

Of course, I didn't tell her to knock her off right away. I was too young back then to even understand. At five years old, all I knew was that I hated Gia, but I didn't know why. Just that every time we were in the same space together, I couldn't breathe. She was always the center of attention, especially for her mother and the other women who praised her even above their own kids.

It's only a few years later that that hate had grown to such proportions, and by then, I knew a little bit more about life and

understood what it meant for someone to no longer be here. Plus, I have the memory of what mom had done that day, even though I had no clue at the time. With age and time came enlightenment. I think I was about eight when I finally got it.

That's when I first started pushing for her to deal with Gia as well, but she had other ideas. Now that I think about it, she probably couldn't have held onto Felix without his kid in the picture needing a mother. But what about me? Wasn't I his too by then? That's a slap in the face, the fact that she doesn't see my adoption as....

Oh, oh, now I see. I felt sick in my gut when I figured out exactly why it is that she'd have felt that way. Jimmy: Jimmy is still alive, something I knew but had blocked out like she'd taught me to when I was younger. At that age, I knew nothing about parental consent and needing a parent to sign away their rights, etcetera. But now it all makes sense.

It doesn't matter that he's alive; he can't do anything about it now. Becky had most likely forged his signature, but who's to say? Besides, I'm old enough to look out for myself, and I have more than a few tricks up my sleeve to make sure my life is as uninterrupted as possible. All these things that have been going on will pass soon enough.

Gabe and Gia seemed to want blood, but it was Becky's they were after. They'd already got me kicked out of school; hopefully, that's where their fight with me ends. All I have to do is lay low for now until they all but forget I exist. Maybe they'll be satisfied with picking over Becky's old carcass.

All of this is her just desserts anyway, and I won't feel an ounce of pity for her. She'd been sitting pretty once she got rid of Adrienne. The person she envied most was no more, but I still had to deal with my nemesis in my face every day, living under the same roof. It didn't matter how much torment I put her through; the fact that Gia was still breathing has always been a bone of contention for me.

Maybe I knew somewhere deep inside that as long as she lived, my life would never be fulfilled. And so, it has happened; it's finally come to pass. If there was ever a chance

of Gabe Russo and I getting together, it was long gone now, thanks to Gia.

He hates me, of this, I am sure. The looks he gave me downstairs earlier would've made a weaker person shrink into nonexistence. And why else would he go to the lengths of finding out about the things I'd done to separate Gia from her childhood friends? How the hell had he figured it out anyway? Not even Gia knew the reason for her ostracization.

He'd gone to a lot of trouble for her, and after today I know that he feels something for her, something that he'd never feel for me. He looks at me with contempt while all his looks for her are filled with care and compassion. He doesn't give a fig that my own life is coming apart at the seams; in fact, he's the one with the scissors, wielding them like a scalpel to unravel the very fabric of my life while letting her cling to him for support.

I'll get her back, though, if it's the last thing I do. It may take some time, but all I have to do is weather this storm and keep my place here so that one day I can make a comeback. It doesn't matter what happens to Becky as long as I hold onto my place in this family; it's the only way to survive.

I knew that when things started to go left downstairs. Who knew the damn maid was going to show up and burst Becky's bubble? I'd all but forgotten about her, and again I was too young that day when it all went down with Adrienne and the infamous iv situation.

Did Felix believe me? He hadn't said anything, either way, but he must've. He hadn't even looked at me as far as I can recall. But he hadn't come to put me out either, so there's that. I held my breath as I heard his footsteps on the stairs and sighed with relief when he turned into his room instead of barging into mine.

How long am I supposed to live with this tension and fear? I rubbed my stomach where that unsettling feeling had started up again. I won't last a week at this rate, and there isn't a damn thing I can do because my mother is stupid. It had taken Gabe Russo a little more than a month to unravel what she'd

done in a decade. As I replayed the words that were said downstairs, I came to the realization that mom wasn't as smart as she thought she was.

How did she not know that the house she was planning to sell once I went off to college didn't even belong to her husband but his daughter? Or that as things stand, Gia seems to have more power than we both realized. The thought filled me with so much rage that I dug my fingers into my temples to ease the throbbing ache that had started there and was only getting worse with time.

I refuse to give up, to let Gia win. She may have won the battle, but this war is far from over. I jumped up from the bed and walked over to my dresser drawer, where I kept the emergency cash I'd been stashing away since I was about thirteen. Most of it had been taken from Gia because why should I go without? I needed my own money for nights out with my friends on the weekends.

It's only fair that I be able to keep up with them, isn't it? Besides, Gia didn't like being outside that much, and she had no friends, so why would she need the same allowance as me? I felt a shiver when I recalled the look on her face when she was here earlier; when did she grow a spine? Had she been playing along all this time, waiting for a moment like this?

It can't be. How could she know that Gabe would play knight in shining armor? Had I known things would come to this, I would've taken care of her after that first day. Back then, was it only a month or so ago? Felix still believed her to be a clumsy mess. After I don't know how many trips down the stairs on her ass, he never once questioned mom that it was Gia's own clumsiness at fault.

Had I pushed her down the stairs one last time, making it count for more than a sprain or fracture this time, things would've turned out so different. But now, thanks to her and my fool of a mother, my life is going to be uprooted once again. I bought myself some time, but who knows how long it will last? Or when it will all come tumbling down.

I moved back to the bed to count out my money, watching the door and keeping my ears pricked for any sound. Ella has been acting strange these last couple of days, not that she ever liked me before, but lately, she doesn't even try to hide it. Just another fool under Gia's spell. Another traitor who only likes her because of her parentage because she came from some lofty family on her mother's side.

That's the thing about Adrienne that had got my mother's goat, and I hate the daughter for the same reasons. Because no matter how I try, I can never be the same. My parents are little more than projects trash. It's Becky's fault, everything that's happening to me now. If she hadn't brought me here, I would never have known any other life but the one I was born into.

Because of her, my greed for nice things had grown, and I felt suffocated if I didn't get the things I wanted. So, shouldn't she be the one to get me everything my heart desired? I have no guilt for turning on her. She hadn't held up her side of things as a mother, as someone who'd made promises to me that she hadn't kept. I kept her secret all these years; it's enough. Now it's time I looked out for number one. I won't end up like her. No matter what happens, I won't be a loser.

"What do you want?" I looked up to see Ella standing in my doorway. When did she come in here? How long has she been standing there?

"I knocked, but you didn't answer; I thought something might be wrong."

"What the hell do you want?" I had to grit the words out through my teeth because I didn't want Felix to overhear.

"Oh, I was wondering if you were ready for dinner."

"Get out. And don't come into my room unless I tell you to." I got up and slammed the door in her face, too late, remembering that Felix was just down the hall.

"Huh! He has his own problems to tend to, more important than a slamming door." He must be feeling guilty now that all has been revealed. Knowing that he fucked the woman who killed his beloved must be making him feel like shit right

about now. Good, stay focused on that shit and stay out of mine.

Maybe the guilt will eat away at him to the point that he's no use to himself or anyone. The way he's been staring at that portrait all week and watching that stupid dance might be a good thing after all, though at the time, it grated on my nerves something awful.

Maybe he's finally cracked. I can use that to my advantage. I've only got two things going for me. One, I'm a minor, they can't just kick me out on the street, and two, I told the truth about what I saw that day. Hopefully, he won't dwell on the fact that I'd waited this long to speak up.



## GABRIEL



SHE FELL asleep after our shared bath, and I was too tired to beat myself up over the fact that I'd slept with her again. I spared myself the indignity of saying it was the last time again and turned my focus to the computer. I had a new message in my inbox, the one I'd generated for just this purpose.

Because I trust no one at face value, even those who appear helpful, I'd given the Fontane housekeeper this email address instead of a phone number or my correct email. If people only knew what damage could be done in the wrong hands with just that bit of information, they'd never get on the damn things again. Doxing is just the tip of the ice-burg.

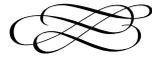
“Hmm, a private stash, huh.” I typed in a command and switched to something else. Starting tomorrow, the girls will be busy with their debutant crap, so I'd have some room to do what needs to be done. I'm waiting for Felix to make a move in the hopes once more that he might redeem himself, at least for his kid's sake. I'm not holding my breath, though.

In the meantime, I won't twiddle my thumbs. I sent off a message to New York. It's time to put Victoria in the hot seat. I'm sure Fontane won't put her out on the street with nowhere to go; he's still under the delusion that she's his adopted daughter, after all. But I'm going to sever those ties with a sharp sword so that even he, as ignorant as he is, won't be able to glue them back together.

"You're up, Jimmy." Time to come claim your little family, or what's left of it once I put Becky behind bars for the rest of her natural life. She's already facing a hefty sentence for the crimes she'd been arrested for. With a murder charge tacked on, she won't be seeing the light of day again. As to Felix, well, let's see how he handles himself, then I'd know which way to take this thing with him.

I have to remember to plant the seeds in Gia's grandmother's ear, that maybe it would be better for her granddaughter to be with her while all of this is going on. She's going to need someplace to stay when this is all over and done. I've decided that the bosom of her mother's family will be that place.

## GABRIEL



For the next week and a half, I played chess with human pawns while she got sucked into etiquette classes and dress shopping with the women. I knew from experience how time-consuming these debutant balls are and used her distraction to line things up for just the right moment.

Just as before, I didn't want her here when shit went down, so I had to be very meticulous. I had men watching Becky, who seemed to be having a crisis with public meltdowns and temper tantrums which only made her look bad. Either Felix had canceled her credit cards or had her on rations because she was staying at a mid-range motel, which I was sure to make known to the right people.

Since she didn't want to be seen in her lowly state, she stayed indoors most of the time, making calls that went mostly unanswered. I couldn't get a bead on Felix, who had kept to himself most of the first week and had only just started showing signs of life. Even when he was at home, all he did was stare at his wife's portrait or watch the video I'd given him of his daughter dancing.

Victoria, on the other hand, was a mess. She's not as sophisticated as her faux father, so she didn't hide her displeasure nearly as well. She could be heard when not seen, throwing things around, screaming out loud out of nowhere, and cursing Gianna with her every breath. It was music to my ears and a delight to the eyes, listening and watching her unravel. It was the perfect setup for my next move.

Gianna was too busy to hound me for anything approaching sex, but she would skin me if I didn't cuddle with her at night. She kept me up to date with all the goings-on, asked for my input on the different dresses and jewelry her grandmother and aunts had chosen for her to wear and filled my ears with her excitement while trying to hide her sadness over what was going on with her dad.

She'd been mad at him this whole time, refusing to even talk about him for the first few days after our visit, but I saw the cracks by the end of the first week. I guess some people are soft enough to forget the harm done to them when they feel an ounce of pity; me, not so much. In her place, I'd have set his ass on fire while he slept and tossed the other two off a cliff in a rotten carpet rollup.

She expressed her grief and disappointment by working my ass out on the mat when she found time, that is. Lancelot has been on my ass, sicced there by Pop, no doubt, watching me like he expected me to disappear in the night. I'd been taking care of my shit while organizing hers as well, and by the middle of the second week, just days before we were set to leave the country for France, I played my last strategic move.

"We should go see your dad before we leave."

"Why? I can see him when we come back."

"Okay." If suspicion had a look, she gave it to me; amateur.

"That's it? You're not going to argue?" Typical, I give her her way; she's not satisfied.

"Why would I? If you don't want to go, you don't want to go." I kept tapping away at my computer keys as if I had no interest one way or another.

I figured, if she's anything like the women in my family, which I'm sure she is, that my easy capitulation would get her to thinking and overthinking, and she'd come up with all the wrong answers, which in this case is fine because it suits my purpose. "Fine, let's go see him."

"Just let me know when you're ready."

“Now’s as good a time as any.”

“Okay, go tell Ma we’ll be back in a bit.” Ma has become very overprotective of her since Ella blabbed to Sheila about what went down the night Greta made her big reveal. At this point, I’m not sure which of my parents wishes to do Fontane the most harm.

She got up to go find Ma, and I picked up my phone and called the team that I had waiting. “Bring the package; you remember what I told you, right?”

“Of course. See you there.” I hung up and went to find her jacket and mine since she always seems to forget to wear one. We took her mom’s car, well hers now, and drove out without calling ahead.

Felix answered the door with a look of surprise followed by pleasure. I’m sure from his ramblings that he expected her to hate him forever. I’d overheard that during one of his self-flagellation sessions. He’d already mourned her without asking her one word about how she felt. I don’t think he called her once since she never mentioned it to me. But I know it was shame and fear that had kept him from doing so.

I learned one thing, though, from all this; she’s a bottler. She keeps her thoughts and feelings bottled up inside until the pressure becomes too much, then she breaks. I’m ready for the fallout I know is coming. I could’ve warned her about my plans, but since it’s my gift to her, I thought I’d make it a surprise.

“Hello Fontane, mind if we come in?” He moved aside without saying much just kept staring at his daughter. I spoke louder than needed because I knew it would get Victoria’s attention which it did. She came down the stairs looking defiant and ready for battle. I guess the last week and a half, she’d had time to think and came away with the idea that she’d been wronged. Sociopathic narcissistic twit that she is.

“I’m sorry, may I use the restroom?”

“Of course, it’s upstairs.” Fontane pointed up the stairs while Gianna looked at me like she was about to freak.

“I remember where it is, I think.” I squeezed her around the middle where I’d had my hand resting on her waist and whispered in her ear.

“I’ll be right back; he won’t let her bully you, not to worry.” I was confident of that much, at least, plus I wasn’t planning to be long.

I made my way upstairs, and instead of the bathroom which I had no intentions of using, headed for Victoria’s room. I knew exactly where to find her stash since Ella had done her job well. She’s another one who’d be starting a new job soon, thanks to the Russos. I walked across the hall and flushed the toilet to avoid suspicion too soon, washed my hands, and headed back down the stairs.

When I got back, Gianna was telling her dad about her shopping sprees in great detail, no doubt to piss off Victoria, who looked on as if she was ready to explode. I sat and listened, enjoying the female mind at work. I guess that’s sexist because some men react the same way, play the same games, but I never knew it was this much fun.

“I don’t understand though, don’t these things take at least a year to prepare for? I think I recall your mom telling me once about all that’s involved.” Gianna looked at me as if embarrassed to brag, so I did it for her.

“She comes from a long line of debutantes; her mother’s family is practically royalty, I guess, so all it took was a word from her grandmother to get her accepted at such late notice.”

“As to preparation, she was born ready for stuff like this. According to her teachers, she’s naturally poised, and her manners, which I suspect she got from her mother before she died, are impeccable.” Out the side of my eye, I saw Victoria dig her nails into the arm of the chair. She was on her best behavior in front of Felix, I guess, in the hopes of keeping him blind to what she really is.

“By the way, Fontane, there was something else I wanted to talk to you about. Gianna, hand.” She gave me her hand after a questioning look, and I opened my little recorder and hit play with the other. Victoria and Becky’s voices filled the

air. Gianna's hand tightened in mine; Victoria became epileptic as Fontane glared at her with murder in his eyes.

The screaming started, and of course, everything was mine and Gianna's fault. "That's not me; that's not what I said. You edited it, didn't you? You put him up to it." No one answered, just let her go on and on, digging her grave deeper.

"She's always been jealous of me, dad, because I was better at everything; that's why she's doing this...."

"Don't call me that. Don't you dare call me that."

"Dad, I... mom was right, can't you see they're doing this to get back at mom and me? Gia never liked us; she's always wanted to get rid of us. Now she has him to help her. How could he have a recording of me saying those things anyway?" I rolled my eyes when Fontane looked like he was giving her words some thought.

Victoria looked pretty pleased with herself, so I guess she was accustomed to that look. Before she moved in for the kill and before my surprise arrived before I was ready for it, I got up from my seat and walked over to the oversized silk flower display where I'd hidden one of many little devices. "These aren't even that good, but they did the job."

I tossed the device to Fontane, who caught it. "That's how I was able to record you. Through one of those."

"That's illegal; you can't do that."

"Gianna, it's your house. What do you think?"

"I knew they were there, and like you said, it's my house; I don't need anyone's permission."

"So, dad, do you believe her? Did we indeed edit that recording?"

"No, I don't think so." He looked at Victoria with loathing and just shook his head.

"It was all mom's doing; I was just a kid, you said so yourself. How could I be held accountable for any of this?"

“What about when you were older? All those times you told me things that Gia had done to you, the times I punished her for hurting you in some way. Was it all lies?”

“No, I promise, it wasn’t she did do all of those things.”

“I guess the fact that she’s a few months younger than you doesn’t make a difference. You’re the only one who gets to use youth as an excuse.” I wound her up until she was ready to spit in my eye.

“She didn’t have anything to complain about. I did. Do you know how I lived before we moved here?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I heard it all from your father.”

“What’re you talking about, Russo? Her father died a long time ago.”

“Did he? That’s odd. Didn’t you tell your ‘dad’ about your father picking you up from the police station in New York a couple of weeks ago?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I removed my phone and scrolled through photos. “Gianna, give this to your dad.” She looked at it first before passing it on with a shake of her head in Victoria’s direction.

“What’s this? Where is this? Who’s that man?” Victoria peeked down at the screen from her standing position in front of Fontane and recoiled as if burned.

“That...is Jimmy. He’s Victoria’s father and Becky’s husband. That’s the night Becky got arrested and there, is a diner in New Jersey. I guess Victoria didn’t want to take the chance of running into anyone she might know and made him take her there before ditching him. Weren’t you told that her father came to pick her up that night?”

“I was, yes, but I thought there was some kind of mix-up. This is crazy. Where has this man been?”

“Prison.”

“Wait, you said Becky’s husband, present tense.”

“Yep! They never got divorced, which means you were never married, and since he never gave his permission, you never adopted this one. You have only one daughter.”

“Don’t smile at me, you bitch; I hate you.” I guess Victoria lost her mind because she charged Gianna. I just raised my leg and tripped her, making her sprawl on her face.

“I want you out of my house, same deal as your witch of a mother, you leave with the clothes on your back. Everything you have is rightfully mine, including your name. We can get that changed, can’t we, Gabriel?”

“Of course, anything for you, love. Fontane, you doing okay?” Not that I care, but if he was going to expire, I didn’t want him doing it in front of her. That’s a whole other kind of hell I don’t want for her.

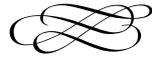
Victoria wailed from her place on the floor. “Bet you never saw this side of her, have you, Fontane?”

“I have no words. It’s just... no matter what she’s done, Gia, we can’t just kick her out on the streets like that. She’s still a minor....”

“How many times must I remind you of the age of majority in this state? Never mind, you won’t have to worry about that. She has someone who’s more than willing to take her in.”

The doorbell rang as if on cue. Ah, my guest has arrived. As planned ahead, Ella was there to answer the door. I didn’t fancy leaving Gianna alone in a room with her at this juncture, not while Victoria was spazzing the hell out and Fontane was looking lost again. The man of the hour stepped into the room, and chaos ensued. “Hello, Jimmy! Welcome to the party.”

## GABRIEL



“Mr. Russo, nice to finally meet you.” If Jimmy had a hat, he’d be turning it round and round between his fingers. He looked totally out of place, but the thief in him couldn’t keep his eyes from roaming around the room with excitement. They finally landed on his long-lost daughter, who was lying on the floor, having a toddler tantrum.

Now here’s the thing about Jimmy. Had he had any redeeming qualities, I would never have sought him out; why? Because I’m a vengeful fuck who thinks people should pay for the shit they do, especially shit done to women and children. I make no apologies for this stance, and anyone who doesn’t agree can pretty much get fucked.

So, when I was doing my little background investigation on Becky and found this specimen, it was like striking oil. I want Victoria gone, but I don’t want her going into something cushy, if you know what I mean. Had Jimmy been a well-off upstanding citizen, I would’ve kept him out of my plans, but seeing as he’s a piece of shit, just like his wife and kid, I opened the door.

Now he stood just inside the doorway to the room, taking it all in, probably already had everything of value fenced in his head. Then he caught sight of his daughter, who I’d promised to find for him. “Vicky? That you? What’re you doing down there? What is this place? Is this where you ran off to that night? I guess I can see why.”

“Who are you?”

Jimmy walked over, hands outstretched to greet Fontane. “This, Felix, is your wife’s husband.” Both men looked at me like I’d yelled fire or told them Kievan Rus was on the rise again.

“I don’t understand.” Fontane, I believe, has been brain dead for the past decade.

“Like I just told you, Becky was never divorced, her husband went to prison, and she reinvented herself to snag a rich clown with more money than sense.”

“Rebecca lived here? Vicky...” Victoria’s tears had automatically dried up as soon as she heard his voice. Now she just sat there staring with the look of someone in front of a firing squad. Her eyes widened, and her breathing changed, and by my count, she moved her lips three times without any sound, as if finding it hard to speak or even form words. “Say hello to your dad again, Victoria. Aren’t you happy to see him? You’re so thirsty for a father to the point of trying to steal someone else’s I’d think you’d be glad to see yours.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know this man.” She actually recoiled away from him, putting some space between them.

“I would’ve said you may have forgotten him since you were so young when he went up. But didn’t you two catch up in that diner just the other day? How faulty is that memory of yours?” She gave me another one of those looks, and just like the complete psychopath that she is, I could see the wheels turning in her head.

Now your typical psycho, they don’t give a shit about anyone or anything. But more than that, they’re master manipulators who can turn shit to gold unless you catch them slipping. Or you can match their psychosis tick for tick; I think I qualify for the latter. I’ll pit my brain against hers any day. I just looked back at her with a smirk I knew would get under her skin.

At this point, I had no real interest in Fontane, seeing her true colors. I wasn’t doing this for him but for Gianna. She was getting a front-row seat, her head going back and forth

between the players as if this were a tennis match. “Vicky, aren’t you happy to see daddy, baby? You know, it wasn’t nice what you did. You didn’t have to run out of the place that way. I thought something bad happened to you that night. You hear stories, ya know.”

“If the waitress didn’t tell me she saw you getting in a cab, I would’ve sat there all night.”

“Get out, get out, get out, get out.” Victoria pounded her fists against the floor, where she still lay sobbing.

“That’s no way to talk to your dad Victoria, didn’t you learn anything from hanging around people who are better than you?” I rubbed salt into her freshly cut wound.

“Who says they’re better than me? Who says?” She wasn’t doing a very good job of hiding the crazy.

“I do. But not to worry, not by much. At least everyone you know is just as big a piece of shit as you are, except for Gianna.” I think she took my smile worst than my smirk.

“He’s lying. I don’t know him.” Cue the rocking back and forth, classic signs that she was under duress.

In perfect timing, Gianna, who seemed to be finally catching on, turned to me and said, “she really is crazy, isn’t she? Poor thing.”

That proved to be the final straw for Victoria. Having the person she hates most looking down on her was apparently too much.

“Don’t you talk about me. Dad, this is all lies, believe me. I don’t know this man. That’s why I ran away from him that night.”

“Oh really! Fontane, there’s one more thing I wanted you to hear. This was recorded the night after Becky got arrested, the day Gianna and I came to visit.” Victoria looked panicked as she tried to figure out what I could probably have on her now. I found the required footage from the night after Gianna, and I left here after I’d been teasing mother and daughter with talk of Jimmy while Gianna spoke to her dad.

The psychotic duo was having a conversation about whether or not I really knew Jimmy, giving the clear indication that she did, in fact, know who he was. Things pretty much went downhill from there before they got worst once Jimmy and Fontane got to talking. “I don’t understand; how did someone like Becky end up married to someone like you? Where did you two even meet?” He scoffed!

“What do you mean someone like me? Becky and I grew up in the same neighborhood in the Bronx all our lives. We even lived there for a bit after we got married straight outta high school.”

“Out of... That doesn’t make sense; Becky went to Vassar.”

“Vassar? What’s that? Is that the place where they do all that space stuff?” Jimmy should be a comic in his spare time.

“No, it’s one of the leading female universities in the country.” Jimmy snorted at Fontane’s recitation and got more comfortable.

“I don’t know what story she’s been telling, but Becky barely got out the tenth grade. She cleaned up good, though if that’s her.” He peered at the portrait of Gianna’s mother.

“No, no, that can’t be her, unless she got cut, no way she got that pretty. Rebecca’s always been a looker but nothing compared to that. That’s pure class right there. I guess she’s your mom, huh, on account of you look so much like her.” He turned his attention to Gianna, who was looking a bit shell-shocked.

“Don’t you talk about my mother. My mother’s more beautiful than that bitch any day.” Well, now, that got Fontane’s attention. Of course, she could crap all over his kid but say anything against his beloved wife, and he’d go apeshit, it seems. But he wasn’t talking. I started looking at old Felix squinty-eyed when I realized that pattern.

I’d almost picked up on it before, but for some reason, it was glaringly obvious today. He was literally swallowing everything, taking it all in, and not responding except to ask

very pointed questions. Why is he harvesting information? Why isn't he reacting as any rational person would? With recriminations and accusations. Instead, he seemed to be inwardly seething while outwardly keeping his cool.

Jimmy went on and on about life with his wife and kid, the hard times they'd faced, and the need for more that had led him to a life of crime. I listened while keeping my eye on Victoria, who was scheming some shit in her head. "So, the woman I thought was my wife was already married, and everything she told me was a lie."

Oh, woe is me, you fuck. Before he could start his pity party and head down the road to butthurt-ville, I decided to step in. Well, it wasn't so much that I decided to step in and more that I'd had enough of the people in the room. The fact that he was sitting there looking like all this was done to him, that he was the one betrayed just rubbed me the wrong way, and weeks of having to hold it in came spewing out in controlled rage.

"None of that excuses the fact that you failed your own kid in the worst possible way. You chose filth and that abomination over there over someone as good as your wife's daughter. Remember her? The daughter she left in your care when she departed this world? Yeah, you don't get to pawn this whole thing off on that vile bitch and the rotted fruit of her corrupted womb. They didn't owe Gianna shit, but you did."

"You owed her a life better than the one she had. Shut up!" I cut him off when he opened his mouth to speak. "If you're going to give me some sob story about not knowing what was going on beneath your nose, then you can go to hell." I got up and walked over to him, barely holding onto my anger because she was in the room. I leaned in close and made sure he saw into my eyes.

"You failed Adrienne Felix in the worst possible way. You brought that into her home." I pointed at Victoria, "and she and her mother terrorized your daughter while living in the lap of luxury. Have you taken a look at your daughter's closet compared to Victoria's? Have you seen the great disparity between the way Becky got you to spoil her daughter while

neglecting yours? The woman who killed your wife tormented your daughter in the house that was left to her by her mother. You weak son of a bitch.”

I’d said too much and not enough. “Jimmy, take your kid outta here before she comes up missing. She gets nothing; she leaves with what she has on. I have men watching the house, if she takes anything from here, I’ll have her and you arrested. I don’t think you’d like the added time for violating parole.” One of the conditions for his early release is if he gets caught breaking the law, he’d be made to spend out the rest of his original sentence plus the penalty for whatever crime he commits behind bars.

“Gianna, come help me, baby.” She got up, and I had to steady her on her feet before leading her over to the fireplace. I dragged a chair over and climbed up, removing the portrait and passing it to her.

“What’re you doing? You can’t take that out of here.” Fontane jumped to his feet, but I ignored him as I started to lead her from the room. His words of protest fell on deaf ears as I took her hand in my free one. “Let’s go.”

“The clock’s ticking Jimmy.”

“She doesn’t wanna come with me. What should I do?”

“Figure it out. The owner of the house wants her gone. Or we could let my people handle it, but then you won’t be keeping up your end of the bargain.”

When we left without saying goodbye to her dad, Jimmy was dragging a screaming Victoria up off the floor. “If they’re not out in five minutes, get them out of there, Tommy.”

“Okay, the boss has been calling. What do you want me to tell him?”

“Tell him we’re on the way.” It was a bitch getting the portrait to fit, but we maneuvered, and I drove slowly until we pulled through the gates of home.

“You’re not talking, you, okay?”

“I’m still processing. Is that really her dad? It seems so weird. I can’t picture Becky the way he described her. How did she get the job here if what he says is true? Becky was always going on about her fancy education, which now that I think of it sounds more like mom’s life than hers.”

“She forged her credentials, paid someone to be her reference, and spent weeks watching YouTube videos on how to scam your way through an interview.”

“You’re lying.”

“Scouts honor.”

“Yeah, but how do you know all this? How did you know about Jimmy?”

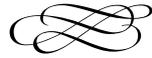
“I just did some digging. Nothing major. All it took was the internet.” Not really, but that’s all she needs to know about my nefarious doings.

“Why does it seem like my life is on some kind of spiral since we met?” That dart hit home hard because she didn’t know the half of it. Part of my anger towards Felix is because of what her future holds as far as she and I go. I’ll soon be just one more in a long line of disappointments for her, but I can’t help it; nothing I can do.

At least I know that her grandmother will take great care of her. But she’d have to leave her home and everything she’s known. My hope is that she moves on without too much heartache. It’s only been a few weeks; after all, I can’t have made that much of an impression that it would last beyond a few months or a year at most.

The thought of how she would move on is still a sore spot, so I veered away from those thoughts in a hurry. I sat for a second or two after turning off the engine with my guts in knots. “Let’s go hang your mother’s portrait.”

## GIANNA



“*W*hy do I have to put these on again?”

“They’re made of sheepskin; they’ll protect your hands, especially your knuckles, from bruising. Just trust us.” I was the one to ask for this, but now that we’re here, I’m getting nervous.

“Okay, let’s go.” It’s best I do it now while I’ve got the nerve anyway.

After hanging my mother’s portrait temporarily in the room, I now occupied at the Russo mansion; I felt like my head would explode with anger after everything that has transpired these last few weeks. Listening to that Jimmy person had opened my eyes to more of the truth of what really happened when I was too young to understand.

From what I gathered, Becky had targeted my mother somehow. Jimmy didn’t know exactly, but I doubt even he knew that I was reading between the lines of all he said and drew my own conclusions. Somehow knowing that made my anger towards Becky burn brighter than before, and it was the last straw for me.

Throughout this whole ordeal, I never gave much thought to anything beyond learning the truth. But now that it was all out, I can’t seem to settle my mind. My poor mother didn’t deserve to fall victim to the greed of someone else. The fact that this viper married my dad, slept in my mother’s bed all these years, and made my life a living hell while my mother’s blood was on her hand seems to have sent me over the edge.

“Remember, don’t get even a scratch, or Gabe will have ten kinds of fits, and we don’t want that.”

“I know, I know, you’ve both told me a hundred times. Stop worrying. With all the stuff you had me wear, I doubt even a sword could get close enough to cut.” I said it jokingly, but it wasn’t that far from the truth. They were acting like I was going off to war.

I pulled the ski mask, which I thought was overkill, down over my face and got out of the car. “We’ll be right outside, leave the door open a crack if you can.” I nodded and walked towards the motel room door on shaking knees. I took a deep breath and calmed my breathing before knocking. I knew I only had a short window of time in which to act, so as soon as the door was flung open, I pounced.

“Who the hell...?” That was as far as Becky got before I hit her with the stun gun. Her body flopped around for a second in such a way that I was stunned at first. Having never seen anyone stunned like that in real life, it looked nothing like I expected. I snapped out of it long enough to move in and tie the cloth I’d brought with me around her mouth to muffle her screams before I started wailing away on her, first with my fists, and when they started to burn, I changed to the sock full of coins.

I think I lost count or track of how many times I swung, and because she was muzzled, her screams came out as little more than squeaks, so there was no real way of telling how much damage was being done. I only stopped when my hands grew tired and looked down at my handiwork. She was a mess. Because the twins had warned me not to speak, so she didn’t recognize my voice, I wanted to yell at her that it was me, that this was just the beginning of what I planned to do to her for what she’d done, but I had to satisfy myself with seeing her bloody and broken. I hope you die!

I left pretty much the way I came, and we headed back to the car. I had an adrenaline rush that ramped up the more I thought of what else I should’ve done to the witch while I had the chance, but I couldn’t be gone too long. Gabriel was under the impression that I’d gone out for ice cream.

He'd insisted on getting it himself the way he has been every night since the first time; even when we were on holiday, he did the same, which is beyond sweet. I'd had to do a lot of fast-talking, and the twins convinced him that we were going to talk about our upcoming trip and would be discussing things he had no interest in.

To further convince him, I'd asked him to look online for new luggage for me. Knowing him and how meticulous he is about stuff like that, especially when it's for me, I was sure it would take him a while. I'd done this for another reason as well. I know from binge-watching cop shows in the past that his time online could be traced. I'm pretty sure that Becky would try to blame him for this, so this was my way of protecting him from suspicion if and when she called the police.

"Where are we going?" I was suddenly nervous when Anna took the turnoff going in the opposite direction to home.

"We have to go to the ice cream parlor, or no one would believe we went there."

"But..."

"You don't know my brother." That's all she said, and I kept my mouth shut.

Of course, the line was long, and I about peed myself waiting to order before we could leave. We pulled through the gates to see flashing lights, and my heart almost dropped to my knees.

"Stay calm; we expected this remember. No doubt she sent them after Gabe." That's what I was worried about. I don't want there to be the slightest chance that he could pay for something I did.

I was out of the car before it came to a full stop. Gabriel and his dad were standing on the steps talking to the two officers, and I could already tell from the look on their faces that it was not going well. When Gabriel saw me, I saw him visibly relax as he ran his eyes all over me from head to toe as

if looking for signs that I was hurt. Damn, there's no way he can know already, is there?

“As I told you before, my son never left the house.”

“We have no way of knowing that, Mr. Russo; we're just doing our jobs.” He sounded nervous. The two cops barely paid attention to the twins and I once they noticed our arrival, but it was obvious they had Gabriel in their sights.

“What's going on?” My voice trembled slightly as I went to Gabriel's side, where he'd beckoned me.

“It's nothing. Did you get your ice cream?” His words were directed at me, but his gaze was on his sisters.

“Come back with a warrant; then we'll talk.” Pop continued talking to the cops.

“That's not necessary; I can show the officers where I've been online for the past hour and a half. I just placed an order; the receipt's in my emails.”

“That would be enough; thank you so much.” I felt sick in my gut when Gabriel reached for his phone. The guilt was overwhelming; here, he was being treated like a criminal when the one responsible didn't even warrant a second glance from the cops. The cops seemed satisfied for now and even apologized for disrupting the evening. My guilt only went up a notch when Pop promised to have a word with the commissioner. I hope I didn't just get these two fired.

We headed inside together, and the only ones who seemed unaffected were the twins. “Rosa, Anna, let me see you for a minute.” It was then Pop seemed to catch on and, with a shake of his head, went off in the opposite direction while the four of us headed upstairs. “Wait for me in my room.” He didn't even look at me. Maybe I shouldn't have got his sisters involved, but it wasn't a well-thought-out attack. The idea just came to me, and before you know it, the twins were planning the whole thing, almost as if they'd been waiting for just this moment.

I looked after them as they headed down the hallway to the girls' room before entering Gabriel's, where Thor was waiting for me, yapping away joyfully as soon as he saw me. I had yet

to come down from my high after beating the heck out of Becky, but now my tummy was tied up in knots worrying about what Gabriel was going to do.



GABRIEL



“HOW DARE YOU?”

“What?”

“Anna, don’t play with me. What the hell were you thinking?”

“So, you know.” I just gave Rosa a look, which seemed to be all that was needed for the two of them to drop the act.

“Are you two crazy? Didn’t I tell you to watch over her? In what universe is taking her there taking care of her?”

“She was fine. We stood outside the door the whole time; nothing happened to her, we promise.”

“That’s not the point. The point is you should never have taken her there. I would’ve taken care of it myself.”

“You’re not the one who lost a mother to that bitch.”

Her words brought me up short. She’s right; how could I have overlooked that one pertinent point? Me, the one who’s lived his whole life plotting revenge, should understand more than anyone how she must feel. But I don’t want her hurt, don’t want her anywhere near this shit. It’s double thinking, I know, but I can’t see it any other way. I have plans for Becky; she’s already on the hook for the counterfeit money and the grand larceny for selling the car. As to the murder, Pop and I have someone working on it as we speak, so there was nothing for Gianna to do.

“I had it under control; there was no reason....”

“No reason? Imagine this was mom; what would you do?”  
Another zinger.

“It doesn’t matter what you say; you should not have taken Gianna into danger.”

“Well, Gianna wasn’t in any danger, and Gianna, wanted to do this, and we supported her because we agreed with what she wanted. You always taught us....”

“I know what I taught you, Anna.” But it wasn’t for you to use against me, brat.

“Fine, I’ll think of a fitting punishment for you two.”

“We accept, don’t we, sis?”

“Yep, bring it on. But whatever you do, don’t tell Lance. Oh, come on, Gabe.” They rushed me when all I did was smile. I hadn’t thought of it, but that’s a great idea. One of his lectures goes a long way to making them feel three years old, which to them is tantamount to destroying their favorite Hermes bag. “I make no promises.”

I walked back to my room feeling less stressed than I had when the cops first showed up at the door. Not for me, but because I knew right away that it was her. I found it strange when she asked me to find her luggage like she hadn’t already shown me what she wanted. She tried playing it off as getting me to pay the thousands of dollars it cost, but I knew even that was a lie.

I didn’t quite put her little game together until the cops showed up, and since she’s not as sneaky as the twins, I put two and two together and figured they were the masterminds. Until she came back safe and whole, I don’t think I breathed once. Even when the cops were trying to pin it on me, I didn’t worry because Pop was in their ass; he has a thing against authority.

All I cared about was where she was and if she’d been hurt. That quick once over I gave her outside is not enough to satisfy, and I found myself racing to get back to her now that I’d dealt with the twins. She was sitting on the bed with the

mutt in her lap. I guess she'd forgotten her prop because it was currently melting on my desk.

"Didn't you say you wanted ice cream?" I picked it up and carried it to her. She watched me as if gauging my mood, which she's not good enough to do that yet; I doubt anyone ever has or could. "Here."

"Th...thank you."

"So, how much damage did you do?"

"They told you?"

"They didn't need to; I'm not stupid. So tell me, are you satisfied?"

"I guess. Are you mad?"

"No!"

"You look mad."

"Do I?"

"Not really, but your voice sounds...off."

"It must be from being lied to."

"I couldn't tell you, but I needed to do this."

"No need to explain." How could I berate her when I, too, knew the feeling of wanting to hurt the one who hurt someone I love?

"Don't be mad at me okay, I can't explain it; it's just something I had to do. If I could've done worse, I would've, but it wasn't well planned out, not enough time." She tried to look forlorn, but it was hard to disguise the pride in her voice. I was actually proud of her myself, surprised but proud nonetheless.

"Eat your ice cream before the mutt beats you to it." From warrior to toddler, she licked the sweet and sensing the danger from me was over; she went on to tell me in great detail how she and her partners in crime had carried out their sneak attack. I tried not to laugh because even though I told her I

wasn't mad, I didn't want her thinking she could get away with this crap again.

Now onto the fact that that wench had the nerve to send the cops to my door. How should I make her pay for that? "I'll be right back."

"Where're you going?"

"I have to see Pop for a minute." I have to expound on Becky's misery since you gave me this opportunity. I think having no place to stay in town while not being able to leave the jurisdiction is a good place to start.

## GABRIEL



“*W*hat kind of big brother are you?”

“Well, hello to you t...wait a minute, big brother. What happened to the twins? Did something happen to them?”

“It’s not what happened to them but what they did.”

“What did they do this time?” He came further into the room and plopped down on the divan in my sitting room.

“They took Gianna to confront Becky, no scratch that, they took her to fight her.”

“Come again.”

“Yep!”

“Was Gia hurt?”

“No, thankfully, she wasn’t.”

“Good, I hope she broke her fucking neck.”

“Lance!” I looked away from my laptop long enough to glare at him. “Not the response I was expecting. She could’ve been hurt.”

“But she wasn’t right.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Let me ask you a question. Were the twins with her?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you think they’d let anything happen to her?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what’s the problem? The way I see it, you and I would’ve done the same thing. She tormented the girl her whole life. You and I both know that if we were in that situation, we’d want to get some of our own back.”

“Still, they shouldn’t have taken her there.”

“Well, it’s done, and she’s fine; stop moping.”

“Why don’t you go harass Pop and leave me alone to finish what I’m doing here?”

“Fine, you’re no fun when you’re being a bear anyway.” I watched him leave, not believing his laid-back happy acceptance one bit. His overprotective ass isn’t that easygoing when it comes to the girls.

I pulled up the gym on my laptop, where the girls were gathered doing who knows what. Just as I expected, he busted into the room. “What’re you two playing at?”

“What? What is it that you think we’ve done now?”

“Did you take Gia to fight someone?”

“He told you? He promised not to.”

“I doubt it. Your brother doesn’t lie, so if he’d promised, there’s no way he would’ve told me.”

“Fine, he didn’t promise, but we told him not to....”

“You told him not to what, Anna? You knew he was going to be upset by this? How did you two know where Becky was anyway?”

“Tommy, of course.”

“Tommy? Why would he tell you that? How’d you get it out of him?”

“Unlike you and our brother dearest, we as females have certain, shall we say, ammunition you don’t.”

“And what’s that, Rosa?”

On the screen, the twins pouted and batted their lashes before breaking into peels of laughter, while Gianna looked

horrified even though she, too, found it funny. “Oh, look at this, Lance, we need your opinion.”

“What is it?” He started backing away with a look of suspicion on his face.

“It’s one of our dress choices for the ball.”

“Oh hell no, I’m outta here. I’ll see it when you wear it.”

“Oh, come on, you know how much we value your input.” Lancelot just rolled his eyes and turned to leave with one last parting shot. “If you two pull another stunt, you know what you’re gonna get. I’m tired of telling you two to behave. Sixteen is not an adult. Remember that.”

He didn’t see them poke their tongues out behind his back as he left, and I switched the screen, not wanting to eavesdrop any further though maybe I should. So that’s what she’s been up to, keeping me occupied with hours of talk about ball gowns and heels while the three of them were plotting mayhem. Slick!

I guess Lancelot thinks that’s why I called him over here. Good, he can keep Pop occupied while I make a quick run. Uncle Garrett had come through for me once again, but with the new restrictions at the hospital, I had a very slim window. I turned off my laptop and headed down to the gym to get her.

“Gianna, let’s go for a ride.” The three of them looked sus as hell, but she got up from the floor where they were having their little meeting and followed me from the room.

“Where’re you going? Can we come?”

“No!” I took Gianna’s hand and led her down the stairs and out the door to the waiting car.

“Are you still mad?”

“About what?” I strapped her in and walked around to the driver’s side. Am I mad? I’m not sure what I am? The knots in my gut were still trying to untie themselves. If I wasn’t preoccupied with trying to find out what was going on with Becky, I’d probably have spent the last few hours worrying.

“I’m guessing since Becky sent the cops to my place that she doesn’t know it was you who beat her up.”

“I’m sorry about that. I didn’t think that far ahead. I should’ve guessed that she’d think it was you. Though how could she? You’re much taller than I am.”

I didn’t bother to answer. I’m sure the twins had thought of it, but because they’re sure Pop would protect me, they didn’t see it as a problem. I wasn’t about to tell her that though, no need to give her any ideas. The more guilt she feels, the better. “Don’t you want her to know it was you?” She looked at me in shock.

“It’s a yes or no question.”

“Sure, I’d love for her to know.”

“Good, I’m going to give you the chance.” I may not be happy with the way she went about things, but it’s already been done, so why stop now? We rode the rest of the way in silence until we pulled into the hospital parking lot.

I’d learned in the last hour that Becky had written my name on a piece of paper for the cops because her jaw had been wired shut. She wasn’t the one to call them either, but other guests at the motel had found her crawling on her hands and knees in the parking lot and called an ambulance. It was the hospital who’d called it in because a crime had been committed, and by law, they had to.

“Let’s go.” I didn’t warn her of the damage she’d done; she’d see soon enough. Hopefully, it will be enough for her bloodthirsty ass. My uncle had left instructions with the front desk, and we were ushered into her room minutes after we arrived and got suited up with goggles and gloves along with masks and gowns.

“Geez, Gianna, what the hell did you hit her with?” Becky was asleep when we walked in but stirred at my voice. She was wrecked. As soon as she recognized us, she started making noises and reached for the buzzer, but I got there first. “Not so fast; Gianna has something to say to you.”

More mumbling, but the hate in her eyes was plain to see when she looked at us.

“Hello Becky, how are you? You don’t look so good.” Becky grunted and tried to move when Gianna got close, but the pain proved to be too much for her. She was bandaged from head to toe; it looked like, almost mummified.

“Are you asking what I’m doing here? I’ll tell you. It was me who put you here. Call it even for all those trips down the stairs. Oh, I also wanted to tell you not to worry about Victoria, her dad came to get her. She should be in New York by now, right Gabriel?”

“I think so, yes.” Becky reached for the pen and paper next to her bed and wrote furiously.

“What did you do to my daughter?”

“Nothing yet. Though I plan to pay her a visit next time we’re in the city. I plan to do worst to her because I’ll have more time. Maybe I’ll poison her the way you did, mom. What do you think? It’s only fair, right. Becky tried sitting up, but Gianna pushed her back down. I’ve never seen her pissed before, not really.

Her face didn’t really give anything away, but the way she gritted her jaw and the look in her eyes told it all. I guess she was wishing she’d done more. “Maybe I should just finish you off now.” Becky’s eyes widened in fear, and she looked at me for help.

“Come here, Gianna.” Like hell, I’d let her walk down that path.

“I’m thirsty; I think I saw a vending machine downstairs; why don’t you get us both something to drink?” She gave me a suspicious look but left to do my bidding after one last vicious look in Becky’s direction. I waited for the door to close behind her before taking one of the visitor’s chairs and dragging it closer to the bed.

“You sent the cops to my home. That was your move; now I’ll make mine. When you leave here, you won’t be allowed back at the motel. All of your cards have been canceled, and

your account is overdrawn. Felix now knows that he's not your husband, so don't expect to get any help from him, and before you forget, you're not allowed to leave the state. There's a homeless city a couple hours away from here, but you'll have to walk. The car is gone. If you fuck with me or mine again, I'll do worse."

I got up and left because her grunts were indecipherable. I met Gianna on her way back and just took her hand and led her away. "Now, let's really go for that ride."



## FELIX



I DON'T KNOW how long I sat there staring at the bare space where my wife's portrait once hung. Victoria had left a while ago, kicking and screaming because the men outside, who I have yet to see, had taken the stuff she'd tried taking with her. She'd begged and pleaded with me to let her stay, and though my heart ached a little for the girl, I thought she was, but knowing what I know now, I couldn't find it in me to care.

My head was a jumble of thoughts and mixed emotions. It's not easy accepting how much of a failure I'd been, not only to my child but to my wife, who I'd promised to take care of her. I tried once again to recall when everything had changed. When had I started neglecting Gia? And why? It has to be more than just Becky's words, surely.

But I couldn't pinpoint a particular time or occurrence; it all seems to have just happened. It feels like one hit after another with no letup. First, learning that my wife had been murdered, and now the fact that I wasn't even married to the monster who'd invaded our lives.

I want so badly to blame Becky for it all, but I'm afraid that would be a lie, and even so, I'd already lost my daughter. I've thrown up so much that there's nothing left. The drink I'd

poured myself sat untouched next to me; I didn't have enough strength to raise the glass to my lips. But I needed to escape, oh how I wish I could. I'm afraid no amount of liquor is going to give me courage.

Beneath the sadness and sorrow laid a burning rage that I knew, once released, would have serious repercussions. I want to hurt someone, but who do I hurt when I'm the one most at fault? And how do I face myself in the mirror after this, let alone look at Gia ever again? She must hate me, didn't she say I'd lost her already? What a mess, what a horrible mess.

I've really made a mess of things this time, and though I knew there was no point in me sitting here feeling sorry for myself, I can't seem to dredge up the energy for anything else. The longer I sat there replaying the last decade in my head, the more the hate grew. It wasn't long before a thought started forming in my head. It won't change what's already been done, but it sure as hell would fix some of what I'd done wrong.

The more I thought of it, the more alive I felt. For the first time in, I don't know how long I had a purpose, something to look forward to. And even though my body cried out for rest and my mind threatened to shut down, I left my seat and headed upstairs to my home office. It's late, but I can get the ball rolling starting now.

Yes, this is the best thing I can do for my daughter, the child I'd failed so abominably. My only purpose now before I leave this world is to make sure that she's okay, that the ones who hurt her and made to pay for what they'd done. So what if the whole world learns that I'd been made a fool of? It doesn't matter. It's the only thing that will satisfy me. I sat down in front of the computer and got to work. "Forgive me, Adrienne!"

## VICTORIA



“*W*hat is this? Turn it off; I don’t want to see it.” This had to be another one of Gabe Russo’s sick twisted jokes.

“I’m sorry, Miss, but I’m afraid that’s not possible. If there is nothing else.” The stewardess bitch walked away like a drone leaving me seated next to this ass who kept going on and on about how he was going to make it up to me for being gone as if I care.

My body still shook with anger and humiliation at the way I’d been treated, but the kernel of fear I feel in my gut stems from the fact that my money was gone. After Gabe and Gia left, I held onto that one thing, knowing that no matter what, at least I had my little nest egg. It was more than a few thousand dollars and more than enough to get me started over somewhere until I got back in the game.

I’d learned from Becky that with money, you can do anything, no matter how bad everything else might be; with money in my pocket, I always stand a chance. I bet it was that bitch Ella who seemed to have just disappeared into thin air. If that wasn’t bad enough, those thugs the Russos had hanging around outside had literally dragged the bags I’d hurriedly packed off my shoulders and kept them. I could’ve sold some of those designer clothes and made good money.

But I wasn’t allowed to keep anything, nothing but the house clothes I was wearing, which was nothing more than an old pair of leggings, an oversized tee-shirt, and a pair of ratty old slippers. To add insult to injury, I couldn’t even enjoy my

first ride on a private plane because the large screen in front of me was playing a repeat of Gia's new life. Gia's dance, Gia having fun on some island, Gia smiling, laughing, playing... the sound was turned up so that even if I went out onto the damn wing, I'd still hear it.

I covered my ears to block out the sound; not only of that, but Jimmy's voice was starting to grate on my nerves. "Shut up, just shut the hell up. As soon as this plane lands, I'm getting as far away from you as possible."

"Why are you acting like this? You used to love your old dad. Did that bitch turn you against me so she could live her fancy life? What all did she tell you?"

He recoiled from my glare and maybe the look of intent on my face. The only thing keeping me from lashing out at him is the fact that I have no idea where this is going, and this piece of shit might be the only thing standing between me and homelessness. Still, I found it almost impossible to keep my feelings bottled up inside a minute longer. It's his job any damn way, seeing as how someone else has been raising his child for the past decade while he rotted in jail. So, I decided to release some of the anger that was about to choke me.

"Stop bringing up the stupid past like it was some great big deal. Do you know what I remember about the past? Living in a dump, eating soup out of those paper cups from the dollar store and rags."

"But, it wasn't all bad; we had some good days. Plenty of people grow up poor and...."

"It doesn't matter what happened in the past; I don't want to be around you. Can you give me the life I want? The one you just destroyed? Why didn't you stay away anyway? Who asked you to come back? I hate you; I hate you, I ha...ouch, you bastard." I covered my cheek where he'd slapped me and stared in disbelief.

"You're not gonna talk to me like that. Now stop acting crazy. I didn't mean to hit you that hard. I remember when you were little, you'd have these fits, and the only way to get you

to stop was a little tap. It always seemed to shake you out of whatever was bothering you at the time.”

“You fucking hit me.” At least he had the decency to look contrite, but still. No one has hit me in a long time—that, more than anything, brought home the fact that my life had changed. I felt sick and wrestled the seatbelt off to rush to the bathroom in the back of the plane. The first thing I saw when I pushed through the door was a picture of Gabe and Gia on this very plane.

I didn’t see anything more as I started throwing up my guts. When there was nothing left, I broke down in tears as the severity of the situation set in. He must’ve known this was going to happen. Why else would his family’s private plane be decked out like this? The huge picture was innocent enough, just Gia with her head on his shoulder as she slept.

From the angle, it was obvious someone had stood over them to take it. It wasn’t even that good, but the fact that she rested on him while he looked down at her with such a look of adoration couldn’t be missed. I didn’t have the strength or energy to tear it off the wall and smash it into a million pieces, so I just sat there on the cold floor of the bathroom, feeling sorry for myself as tears poured from my eyes.

I pounded my fist on the floor, feeling defeated for the first time since mom and I had taken over Gia’s life. Mom had always been there to pick up the pieces, always the one to get us back on track whenever things got derailed. But now I don’t even know where she is. Maybe I should’ve answered when she tried calling me after Felix kicked her out.

But at the time, I thought I should stick close to Felix; I didn’t want to go down on the sinking ship with her, now I’ve been cast out just like she’d been, right back where I’d started, with that deadbeat out there. I can’t believe I’d ever missed him as a kid, had found it hard to let go of the memory of him. It just goes to show how stupid kids are because right now, I’d prefer that he never existed.

It sounded like someone turned a speaker on in the bathroom, and soon the same sounds that had chased me in

here followed. The screams started in my head and made their way past my lips, and before I knew it, the sound was reverberating around the small bathroom. Someone knocked on the door, then it was being forced open, and I kept on screaming. Screaming felt good, like if I screamed long enough, this nightmare would end, and life would go back to normal.

I felt arms lifting me up from the floor, and when I struggled, another pair appeared, and I was being carried, dragged, between two of them.

“What’s wrong with her? Why is she acting like that?” Jimmy asked the stewardess, who strapped me back into my seat with the help of the silent guy who’d been there when we boarded.

“Sir, your daughter seems to be having a mental breakdown. Not to worry, we’ve been instructed to have someone meet us at landing to take care of her.” I heard that little exchange, but it didn’t register right away.

Jimmy kept talking as if he didn’t realize that he was the problem. That him being here was part of the reason my life was falling apart. The stewardess seemed to have a smirk on her face to me; that’s why I refused the juice she offered and knocked it from her hand instead. “Get away from me bitch.” Her passive voice when she replied that it was okay when Jimmy tried to intervene only made me look crazy. But I couldn’t help what was happening right now; I felt so trapped.

It seemed like no time at all had passed before the pilot announced we were landing, and by then, my screams had turned to grunts and groans. I wanted off this plane yesterday. How horrible that my first luxury flight had been plagued with memories of those two, and why am I even thinking about that now? I should be focusing on getting out of this mess.

Gabe had pretty much screwed me out of a dad and home with his little stunt, bringing Jimmy to the house. But even if he hadn’t, the fact that Gia now knew the house was hers I’m almost certain meant my days there were already numbered. I

have no idea where my mother is and no way of contacting her since her phone seems to be turned off.

If they'd let me stay, I'm sure I would've found someone to take me in for a little while, but now I'm hundreds of miles away with no way of getting back. I was dry heaving by the time the plane came to a stop on the tarmac. The stewardess' strange words made sense when the door slid open, and two people got on to escort me.

“Where are they gonna take her.”

“Not to worry, sir, you can follow in the car we have waiting for you.” What? What's going on?

“Who are you? Where are you taking me?” They were more like carrying me than helping, each of them holding an arm as they walked me off the plane and down the steps to what looked like an ambulance.

Jimmy started to follow, but someone else intercepted him and led him to a waiting car. I started to yell at the two who were trying to drag me into the back of the ambulance until I felt a prick in my arm. My limbs grew weak, and my head light as whatever drug they'd injected in my arm took rapid effect.

Gia, this is your fault. I'm going to kill you if it's the last thing I do. I kept repeating that over and over in my head until the drug took over completely, and my thoughts flew away.



DRACO



“Do you know what he did? He's worse than fucking you.” I sat behind my desk as my little brother, the doctor, lectured me on my parenting because his precious nephew had done some inhumane shit to that Becky person.

“No, tell me, what did he do?”

“Okay, when he first asked me about letting him in to see her because she’s Gia’s stepmother, I didn’t think much of it, though I did have a look at her records.”

“Okay, and?”

“And? When I looked at those same records a day later, there was an added notation that hadn’t been there before. Do you wanna know what it said? It said she’s an addict. Do you know what that means?”

“You’re the one who went to med school. Why the hell are you asking me?”

“It means that she won’t be given a viable prescription for pain meds. You know they’ve cracked down on that stuff lately.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“If that’s not bad enough, do you know what else he did?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“He had her released to her supposed personal driver. Guess who her driver was.”

“What did you do? Follow this woman around the hospital? I thought she wasn’t your patient. Didn’t you have anything better to do?” He still gives me that same disappointed look from when we were kids, and it had the same effect now as it had then, none at all. “Okay, tell me who her driver was.”

“Tommy, that’s who.”

“My Tommy?”

“Yes, you know any other?”

“Well, I guess you don’t have to worry about pain meds then....”

“Draco, this is serious.”

“Never said it wasn’t.”

“If you laugh, I swear, I’ll tell Ma about the time you broke her vase and glued it back together.”

“Bitch ass, I was ten.”

“Doesn’t matter; she still doesn’t know.”

“Fine, I won’t laugh, but what do you want me to do?” He started pacing back and forth again, giving me agita.

“Talk to him.”

“Why don’t you talk to him yourself?” Like, I don’t know.

“You know why. Because I’m the fun uncle who lets him slide, and you’re the annoying parent who doles out punishments.”

“He’s fricking eighteen, not ten. You think he’s still falling for that mess? How much did either of us listen to Pop at eighteen?” He dropped down in the chair across from me, “seriously, Draco, the kid is a menace. I think we spoiled him too much. Come to think of it; he’s more like Pop, don’t you think?” I didn’t even bother answering him, just let him work it out on his own like he always does.

After another ten minutes of his rambling and complaining, he got up and left. I guess my finding humor in Gabe terrorizing ‘that poor woman’ was too much for his Hippocratic oath-taking ass.

Once he left, the mask fell back into place. I couldn’t very well let him know that my kid scares the shit out of me; he’d really be spooked then. I already learned from Lancelot what really went down, though I could’ve guessed from the way the girls acted when they showed up to find the cops on our front steps.

He’s busy worrying about Gabe, and his nieces are mini thugs. I haven’t confronted them yet because I have no idea what to say to them. They just got into trouble for fighting in the damn parking lot, but that didn’t seem to do much good since they’re pulling drive-bys now.

I’m amazed at Gia though, I didn’t think she had it in her, but from the sounds of it, my kids had turned her into them in

a matter of weeks. I can't fault the cops for coming to my door, though I can blame Becky for sending them here. But it looks like Gabe had taken care of that. I'm pretty sure that's why he'd gone nuclear on her.

If my brother only knew that the one thing I cared about right now was that once my son was done filleting this woman, he might set his sights on something much bigger and much worse, he'd have had a fit. Garrett tends to act as if he didn't grow up in this family, that he doesn't know the deal, when the truth is, he and I have done worse in our day, but that's another story.

I picked up the phone at my elbow and rang the guesthouse. "Tommy, get over here." I tapped my fingers against the desk as I waited.

"You wanted to see me, boss?"

"Where'd you take her?"

"Take who, boss?" I gave him a look to jog his memory.

"You remember where the car got burned?"

"Geez, Tommy!"

"Hey, it wasn't my idea."

"I'm still here, Tommy; my son hasn't taken over yet. Since when do you do shit like this without telling me about it first?"

"Eighteen boss remember?"

"The old man went through the same with you." He mumbled that part.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"What kinda condition was she in?"

"Bad, she's gonna have to crawl outta there the state she's in."

"Did he give you any other instructions?"

“Just to make sure she didn’t starve, but since her jaw’s been wired shut, she won’t be able to eat any of the food he sent along with her.” Whoa, Gabe, that’s harsh.

“Anything else?”

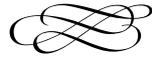
“Yeah, I’m supposed to check back in two days; if she’s still there, I’m supposed to take her to the homeless place downtown.”

“Why didn’t he just send her there in the first place?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, boss. But if you ask me, I think he’s trying to teach her a lesson.” Some lesson. She might deserve it, but the boy has no give in him; that can be a very dangerous thing, depending on how you look at it.

“Okay, Tommy, you may go.” Gabe, Gabe, Gabe, my son. If the boy had a treacherous bone in his body, I’d be looking over my shoulder. It isn’t lost on me, the fact that my people look up to him and trust him the way they do me. He’s smart enough to outmaneuver a hard ass like Tommy while keeping him blind to what he’s really doing. A lesson? Nah, he’s pushing her off a cliff without lifting a finger, and I don’t think she’s his target.

## VICTORIA



“*W*hat’s this place?” I squinted my eyes against the brightness of the room that seemed to reflect the sunlight no matter where I looked. There was a weird taste in my mouth, and my head felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls. I looked over at the two people in the room who didn’t seem to have heard me and realized that I’d said the words internally and not out loud.

When I did try to speak, my lips seemed weirdly stuck together. I was in that strange place between sleep and wake, just before the fog lifts completely, and it took a few tries to clear my head before reality dawned. The last thing I remember was getting off the plane, but I have no idea how long ago that was or what the hell happened between then and now.

The events leading up to the plane ride came back in bits and spurts, and I cleared my throat to speak again. “Where’s Jimmy?” The two people in the room didn’t answer, just kept staring at me without saying or doing anything. I started to think they were mannequins before one of them blinked. What the hell?

“What? Who are you?” I tried moving, and that’s when true panic set in. My arms and legs were chained to the bed beneath me. What the hell? I felt real fear for the first time as I struggled to free myself. Pulling against the chains only made them cut into my flesh but did nothing to help release me, and the chains were done in such a way that I could hardly move at all, which only made the panic and fear intensified.

“Where am I?” Why aren’t they answering me? I know they heard me because their eyes looked in my direction each time I spoke, but they were acting like I wasn’t even in the room. Then they started whispering to each other while looking at me, and the fear made my tummy hurt.

I tried looking around the room to gauge my surroundings, but it was too bright, and I couldn’t make out anything other than the two people whom I’d never seen before. I don’t think I’ve ever felt real fear before that moment. It’s hard to explain. There were no outward signs of danger, just a sense that I was at the mercy of someone else. That’s the thought that kept playing through my mind as seconds ticked by.

There were no sounds in the room or beyond, nothing to tell me what kind of place this was. I gather it’s some kind of hospital because of the medical smocks the room’s two occupants wore, but there was nothing else to go on. No machines that beeped, not even that sick hospital smell you associate with those places. And the brightness of the room made it almost impossible to keep my eyes open for any length of time.

I kept closing and opening them until my vision adjusted somewhat, but it was painful, to say the least. Once my sight cleared up, it was obvious that what I thought was sunlight was actually fluorescent lighting that painted the room in a too bright glow. How the hell did they get the walls so white?

Whatever drug I’d been given was starting to wear off, but my body still felt odd, heavy, and weighed down. I had a feeling I knew where I was, but it was too farfetched to believe. Why would Jimmy let them bring me here, and where the hell is he? I threw out more questions, anything that came to mind, and still, the two of them acted as if they couldn’t hear me.

I felt even more afraid when they just stood up a few minutes later and left the room without a word. I didn’t know what to think, how to feel, other than fear. The only thing keeping me from losing it completely is the fact that Jimmy knows I’m here, so whatever this was, I won’t be left here to rot. But where exactly is here?

I needed to use the bathroom in the worst way and screamed out as much, but no one came. I laid there for what felt like hours, screaming until my throat grew raw, and still no one entered the room. I couldn't hold it any longer and ended up soiling myself, which made the whole experience that much more horrifying. What was even scarier was all the time; I had to think, to second guess, and to worry.

My thoughts kept jumping from one extreme to the next, each one worse than the last. They ran the gamut from anger to fear and back again until I finally felt defeated. A part of me was sure this wasn't real. Things like this only happen in the movies, right. There's no way anyone could get away with locking me away somewhere; it's just not possible.

"Where am I? You can't keep me here." The chains cut into my hands when I struggled until I'm sure they drew blood, but still, no one came. I kept at it until I grew tired to the point of exhaustion then passed out again from sheer frustration and terror. I'm not sure how long I was out this time because when I awoke, the room still looked the same. I looked around as much as my position allowed but saw nothing.

There was nothing but the empty room with that strange light that reflected off the walls. I tried listening for anything, but there was no sound other than the rapid pace of my breathing. A psych ward, I'm pretty sure that's where I was, and the thought filled me with so much fear I almost passed out again.

I fought to stay awake this time and tried to make sense of what was going on around me. I waited for the two strangers to return, but they didn't; no one came. From what little I could see, there were no windows in the room. I was in a box, it felt like. I had to fight to keep the moans that tickled my throat from escaping my lungs, but there was nothing to stop the tears that fell.

I couldn't even hold onto my anger for any length of time because the fear was too real, too prevalent. The not knowing was almost too much to bear, and all I kept wondering was how my life had come to this. I wanted to be angry, to do what

I always do when I feel threatened in some way, but I couldn't even dredge up enough anger to hold onto. The only thing I felt was fear.

I pleaded and begged outwardly and inwardly, but no one came. My yells and screams echoed around the room, but only I seemed to hear. I went in and out of consciousness too many times to count before I grew too tired to continue, and each time I awakened to that same brightness in the room. "Hello. Is anyone there?" Nothing!

I don't know how long I stayed awake this time, but I knew if this went on much longer, I'd really go insane. I didn't hear the door open or any kind of sound, but it seemed I blinked, and the next minute there was someone standing beside the cot I'd been laid out on.

"Who are you, people? What am I doing here?" Nothing! He, she, it, I couldn't tell what it was, just pulled a stool closer and sat with a bowl of what looked like oatmeal. It had a sickly-sweet look on its face when it pressed a button, and the cot raised until I was in an almost seated position. "Do you talk? Say something."

Again, nothing; it just lifted a spoon to my lips which I held closed. I don't like oatmeal; I never did. Just the mere texture of it makes me want to barf. But it kept pushing the spoon past my lips until I gagged. "Are you a robot?" The damn thing kept that stupid look on its face as it raised the spoon again. What the hell? Maybe I'm dreaming. Let me see, what's the last thing that happened?

I was on the plane, there was that stupid video and the picture in the bathroom, what else? Did I really lose my shit? Is that why they brought me here? Was anyone looking for me? Jimmy, Becky, anyone? While I was trying to put the pieces together in my head, this thing was steadily trying to feed me wall paint disguised as food, and the more I resisted, the more it persisted until I really did throw up in my throat.

I've never known real fear, never doubted that I could get out of any situation I found myself in, until now. The not knowing was scarier than anything else. I knew nothing, not

where I was, not how long I'd be here, and not even why I was here. Who was behind this? I had a feeling I knew. This seemed like a bit much, though, as payback for anything I'd done to Gia in the past.

It seemed unfair when coupled with everything else that had happened in the last few days. She'd cost me my home, my friends, even my school, and now this. How does Gabe Russo know this place, and why the hell did he have me sent here? I have no doubt that this was all his sick twisted doing, but I failed to see how I warranted this.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine that I was anywhere else but here, but the stillness of the room wouldn't let me concentrate. When I screamed, the sound echoed around the room until I thought my ears would bleed. I laid there exhausted and miserable, lying in my own waste for what felt like an eternity.

Sometime later, another one of those things entered the room, and I endured the humiliation of having my soiled clothes removed and my body wiped down before I was put in another nondescript hospital gown that had been made to go around the chains on my wrists. When the thing got up to leave, I started yelling again, sure that if I stayed in here a minute longer, I'd really lose my shit.

I felt trapped when I realized that I never saw a door. I know one is there; how else could they come and go? But there were no visible knobs or seams in the whiter than white walls that surrounded the room. I had no way of telling what time it was because my watch was gone. I tried tugging on the chains around my wrists again, but they were too heavy and didn't have any give in them. Fear and trepidation choked me as I fought not to give in.

One minute my mind was filled with all the ways I was going to get back at the ones responsible for putting me here, and the next, it was filled with fear of being stuck here forever.



## BECKY



I WISH I WERE DEAD. Or at the very least that I could go to sleep and wake up when this nightmare is over. I ache all over, especially my heart, which now feels like a block of ice. I thought for sure my life was coming to an end when the monster who brought me here took me out of the car. I would've done anything then to survive, but now, just a few hours later, I'm wishing for death.

What kind of hospital discharges someone in this much pain, and without medication at that? As horrible as it sounds, I'd felt safer there; at least I had a bed to sleep on away from prying eyes. Those first few days at the motel had been hell, with everyone I knew seeming to just happen by the place out of the blue. I'm pretty sure Gia and that boy had something to do with it.

The whispers I could deal with, but the laughter and the snubs were like darts to my chest. So I'd decided to stay hidden, only coming out at night when I was sure no one I knew would be about, not in that part of town anyway. I knew I was on borrowed time, sure that Felix would get around to cutting me off at some point since the boy seemed hellbent on destroying my life, I knew it was only a matter of time, but I thought I had a few more days at least.

I'd had the foresight to pay for a couple of weeks at least, but now it looks like that money would be going to waste because I have no idea where I am right now or how to get back. Each movement sent shooting pain throughout my entire body and the cold; it's so cold here with no way to warm myself in the thin hospital gown, which is all I'd been left with.

I'd been so hopeful when I was told I was being released into someone's care. I thought Felix had come to his senses and was ready to listen to reason as he'd always done before. But by the time I realized that it was a complete stranger

waiting to pick me up, the nurse had already gone back inside, and there was no way for me to escape. I didn't have to think hard to figure out who sent the silent man who never spoke a word. Not that I could've said much with my mouth wired shut the way it is.

I didn't even have paper and pen to communicate, and my phone was missing. Panic set in when we left the city limits, and I didn't recognize my surroundings. I knew we were still in the state, at least, but had no way of knowing where. There were no recognizable landmarks, and it was too dark to make out much of anything beyond the car window.

He, whoever he was, had dumped me here in some sort of wooded area with no sign of life around and just driven off. I don't even know how long I'd been here, and worst of all, I'd left my bag somewhere, either at the motel or the hospital, so I had no way of contacting anyone for help. At the very least, I could've texted Victoria to ask for help if no one else was willing.

Not even at my worst were things this bad; there was always an out, always a way to get back on my feet. Now that it's too late, I wish I'd done things a little different. I have no money, no friends, and no one I could count on. My mind went to Jimmy but only for the briefest of moments. That's the worst thing that could happen now, for him to show up in our lives.

I sifted through the lies in my mind to see if there was a way to salvage things, but I'm afraid there isn't. More than the cat's out of the bag this time. Even if I could make Felix doubt that lying bitch of a maid's words, Victoria had put the final nail in my coffin by repeating what she saw. What else has she been saying now that I was not there to defend myself?

No doubt she was covering her own ass while throwing me to the wolves, my own daughter. Still, as long as one of us hangs in there, there's always a way back. Felix would never dig up his precious Adrienne, of that much, I'm sure, so whatever he thinks or believes will always just be conjecture. I can work with that.

As to the other charges, I can beat those as well. I'm sure that Russo brat had left a trail or something somewhere that could be found, and I could turn this thing around. Right now, though, I needed to get the hell out of here wherever here was. I could barely move because of the pain and the thought of spending the night in this dark, cold place was all I could focus on at the moment.

Something rustled the brush a few feet away from me, and I screamed in my throat as I tried to make myself smaller. I'd dragged myself up against a tree trunk for support, but if something was really out there, I have no way to protect myself. I needed the bathroom in the worst way, but fear held me hostage, as each sound seemed to get closer while the cold wind rushed through the thin fabric of the hospital gown, biting into my bruised flesh.

That bitch had got her piece of flesh, I guess, which I was still finding hard to believe. The Gia I knew would never have had the nerve to lift a hand to me. This was all the Russos doing, and that, more than anything, put fear in me—that and the fact that Felix had changed so much.

How had I not seen it in the last few weeks? I'd been so busy trying to keep myself out of one scrape or another that I didn't pay close enough attention to what was going on with him until it was too late. I couldn't have known that a decade's worth of my hard work would go up in flames in less than a month; has it only been that long?

The small part of me that's fighting to hold out hope is dwindling by the second to the point that even if I had a contingency plan, it would be of no use right now because my mind is too fractured and all over the place to think straight. Just thinking about the fix I'm in makes my head ache something awful, and that's nothing to do with the physical pain I'm in.

Hunger gnawed at my insides, and I felt tears of desperation flood my eyes. I can't even eat, could barely sip on water through a straw, but guess what I have in the bag next to me, food. A sudden thought hit me, and I flung the bag as far away from me as I could with what little strength I had left.

If I could smell the food, then whatever was out there in these woods could too.

A new fear set in, and I dragged myself even closer to the tree as I held my breath and listened for any sound. Is that why he'd done it? Why he'd left me with a bagful of food that I couldn't eat? What a diabolical fiend. I realized at that moment that I feared Gabe Russo more than anything that might be roaming these woods.

How had he brought me to this? He'd set me up in such a way that there was no turning back no matter what I told myself. I might have stood a chance if he were not in the picture, setting traps and snares to catch me at every turn. How had he learned all those things about me? Where had he found that Greta bitch when I couldn't find hide nor hair of her in all these years?

Who else had helped him? The thought that all those snooty women had been waiting like vultures to pick over my carcass, that they were all now laughing at me, filled me with hate and rage. I thought of all the nice things I'd left behind, all that I'd lost in the blink of an eye. How had it come to this?

And where is Victoria while I'm out here suffering like this? I'd done it all for her, only for her to turn around and sell me out. Just wait; as soon as I get back on my feet, which I'm sure I will, I'll take care of her. I'd done most of it for her after all. She's the one who wanted to see Gia suffer; I'd only wanted a better life for us. A life without worry or fear of where our next meal was coming from.

I'm still young; I can always start over somewhere else. I raised my fingers to the bandages that wrapped around my head. I hadn't even had the chance to see what that bitch Gia had done to me. Are my looks gone? I know I'd lost a few teeth, but how much damage had she really done? I couldn't tell; I couldn't feel anything through the bandages but pain.

My eyes started to drift closed, but I kept forcing them open with each sound. There was nowhere to hide if something did come after me, no weapon near to hand to defend myself. Just that thought alone was enough to make me

wet myself, so I didn't need my thoughts to drift to Adrienne, which they did.

I've never allowed myself to think about her before, so why now? It's not like she was healthy with her whole life ahead of her when I helped her on her way to hell. I just put her out of her misery, is all. She would've wasted time and money trying to find a cure, selfish bitch. What's so wrong with what I did? Anyone else would've done the same.

Her sickness had been like a gift. I'd been trying to find a way to get her out of the picture, anything short of murder, when that ripe plum fell into my lap. It was only after weeks of trying that I realized that her husband wasn't the type to leave her for me. At first, I was going to seduce him, then use that as blackmail, but he never once gave me the time of day.

I was running out of options by then. The other women were already wary of me, so there was no way for me to set my sights on one of their men to work my magic, and just like an answer to a prayer, she'd fallen ill. I'd changed tact then and played the bereaved friend to the hilt, working my way closer to her. I'd even got her to distrust her friends, making sure she knew every time one of them said or did something against me.

I played the less privileged single mother who was down on her luck to the hilt because by then, I'd already peeped her game. She was one of those bleeding hearts who thought that giving back would help ease her guilt for being more privileged than most. She's the main type of bitch I hate, those shrinking violet types who bemoan their wealth and the lifestyle it affords them, so they waste time and energy helping the less fortunate.

She didn't know that while I sat by her bedside reading to her, running errands that she could no longer handle, that I was already spending her money and moving into her life. I wouldn't have to get my hands dirty, which is something I'd already reserved myself to doing if it came to that. But it would be cleaner this way, easier.

I watched her dwindle away right before my eyes and knew that it was meant to be. That something or someone was making a way for me and my kid to finally have the life we deserved. Then the stupid bitch went hunting for a cure where there was supposed to be none. I didn't have time to think of a plan. Otherwise, none of this would be happening.

If I'd been given more time, I would've made sure to get that nosy bitch out of the house before I did anything, but she was planning to leave for Europe in less than a day, so excited at the prospect of being cured. All I could see was my new life slipping away. I'd been working on Felix for weeks by that point, having learned that the way to his heart was by being there for his dying wife.

I'd spent countless hours taking care of her, putting in time and effort that I was sure would pay off in the end. The man who'd barely spared me a glance before was now smiling and chatting to me when he came home in the evenings, though it was always about her and what kind of day she'd had.

I didn't mind, though, because I'd had it all planned out. By then, I'd ostracized the others in one way or another, keeping them away from the house. She was too sick to pay much attention to that, and each time they called, I made sure to get to the phone first with an excuse. I was the only one she saw, the only one she had to talk to.

I knew that given time, she would've asked me to take care of her child and husband when she was gone; that's what I was aiming for. But then she hit me with the news that there was a chance she could be cured, and I saw it all drifting away again. I couldn't go back to being the nobody I'd been, not after building those dreams in my head. I'd made a promise to my kid, one that I meant to keep.

It wasn't that hard even, just a few more drops of the prescribed medication, so even if anyone looked, there wouldn't be anything suspicious. No one would've suspected me of anything, but that bitch had to see more than she was supposed to. Now my life is being turned upside down. I know Felix, if there's even a sliver of doubt, he'd never let me back in, not when it comes to his precious Adrienne.

We'd been man and wife longer than they had been, and still, he would never put me before her. I know, somewhere deep inside, I know that it's over, but my mind refuses to give up. The thought of starting over again is tiring, but what can I do? I can't just let it all end like this. I have to find a way; there must be a way to get out of this hole that Russo brat had dug for me.



## GABRIEL



MOVING people around like chess pieces shouldn't be this easy, and yet it is. I almost wish I had more time to play, but Paris lingers on the horizon, and I have even bigger fish to fry. By now, Victoria should be settling into her new home, at least her home for the next little while, as long as is needed to keep her away from Gianna and give her a head start.

I have no doubt she's smart enough to find her way back here somehow, but by the time she's released, Gianna should be long gone from here and out of her reach. As for Becky, I have other plans for her. Ideally, she should be put away for life for the murder of Gianna's mom, but to do that, we'd have to exhume Adrienne's body, something I'm sure would haunt Gianna for the rest of her life. I can't have that.

So, I'd come up with another plan. Something that would make all the players pay for their part in this farce, but I have to tread carefully. One wrong step, and it could all blow up in my face. If I was going to be here for her, I would've done things a little different, but because I'm not and because I don't trust her father, I have to go to the extreme to protect her when I'm gone.

Right now, I'm playing with my food, giving them both a taste of their own medicine. For all the years of rear and isolation she felt, I'm giving them double. I don't expect them

to change; there's no cure for a psychotic sociopath, no medicine they can take to make them better. If I thought there was, maybe then I'd go easy on them, give them a chance to redeem themselves.

But Victoria is a lost cause, and Becky is just too far gone with her greed to turn back to anything resembling human. I'm pretty sure if Gianna knew what I was up to, she'd feel pity for them even after all they've done, but I know they'd use that against her; that's why I have to destroy them completely so that there's no way back in.

Felix, well, his trials haven't even begun. I hold him most responsible for what had been done to her, so it's only fair that he pays a bigger price. I'm just waiting until she's out of here, miles away, before I set the last stage in motion. Two more days, and then I'll give him that final push.

## DRACO



“*W*hat am I paying you four for again?”

“Sir?” Reel it in Draco; you can’t blame them for not being able to do what you yourself can’t. Yeah, but I’m at the end of my rope. I’ve been racing against the clock in the last couple of weeks, trying to get ahead of my son and failing miserably.

It’s not just the Sicily situation that has me on edge these days either, but my son seems to have gone rogue in a way that not even I expected. I’m almost embarrassed to admit that the only reason I know anything about his doings is because he’s allowing me to. What do I mean by that? The boy has straight-up run an Op singlehandedly from his bedroom where he knows I can easily see what he’s up to.

I’m not sure, but I think my guys are having way more fun working with him than they ever did with me. Of course, I’m the mook who’s trying to go legit while these fucks live for the dark side. I guess they were getting bored with my shit, and he’s lit a spark under their asses. It would be funny if it wasn’t true.

A quick rundown of the shit Gabe Russo has pulled in the last week and a half. Sent a teenage girl to some facility that nobody knows about, one I still have no clue how he even learned about its existence. On the same day or just about, had said teenager’s mother dropped off in the middle of nowhere for not one, but two nights, in the dead of winter. Tommy was only too happy to keep me up to date on that one.

I was a bit clueless about his reasons for having the Becky woman picked up and dropped off in the worst part of the city where the homeless have set up shop, all this, while her jaw has been wired shut, and she has no access to medication because he sabotaged that shit as well. Guess what she ended up doing; take a wild guess.

I have no idea if that was part of his plan when he set the whole thing up, but now I'm torn. I hate fucking drugs, but if the boy thinks she deserves this shit, who am I to say different? It's not lost on me, and I'm tempted to ask my brother the doc how it is that she can readily and more easily get her hands on meth than the pain pills she needs. I can't say shit because I have no idea where my son is going with this mess.

What I do know is between him and his sisters, the rest of the world is lucky I'm taking this outfit legit. He's eighteen fucking years old. I shudder to think what he'd become in a few more years if I didn't take the family business in a different direction. What's worst is I can't talk to anyone about this; it would scare the shit out of his mother, my wife; and my own father would probably applaud him and give him pointers on how to be even more of a monster.

I say monster because had it not been for his strict moral code of ethics, that's just what the hell he'd be. The scary thing is, he hasn't broken a sweat. He comes down to the breakfast table every morning, kisses his mom and me on the cheek, teases his sisters, and smiles at Gia like nothing happened. Like he hadn't just given my men orders to do some outlandish shit that even I wouldn't have thought up in a million years.

I find myself sometimes watching him with something approaching awe. I know he knows that Tommy and the crew tell me the shit he's got them doing, but he hasn't mentioned it to me on his own and doesn't seem to mind me knowing that he's basically Al Capone reincarnated.

His poor mother, I think like me, she thought that with the girl in the picture, he'd settle down, my ass. I think he's using her situation to cut his teeth. Don't get me wrong, I've seen

my son at work before, but those things were minor compared to this. It's like he's declared war on Fontane and his family; then again, after what the Becky woman did, I can't say that I blame him.

I'll cut to the chase here; the thing that's bothering me the most is the fact that I can't get a bead on what he's up to pertaining to Sicily. I'm not sure if he wants me to think that he's given up on that, which is a touchy subject because we're both still playing cat and mouse. He doesn't know that I know that he knows; that sort of thing, so how the hell do I broach the subject?

Lancelot hasn't been able to find shit, or he's not telling me if he has, and all of my other efforts have been wasted. Now, as to why this scares the hell out of me, he's not hiding what he's done so far with the Fontane situation, and some of that shit is pretty bad. So, what exactly is he planning for Sicily that he's kept it so well hidden?

He has my team doing his dirty work here while meticulously evading the team I'd hired to keep tabs on him, and he's doing it masterfully. From what Tommy divulged, Fontane is in for a world of hurt if what I suspect Gabe is up to is true. He's had only a little more than a month to put together this diabolical scheme; he's had years to plan for Sicily.

"Didn't I hire you lot to keep an eye on him? How come you've given me nothing so far? He still giving you lot the slip?"

"He doesn't even acknowledge our presence. And half the time he leaves, we don't even know that he's gone." Slippery little shit. I taught him too well, or someone did. I should've put a stop to those weekly chess games between him and the old man. I think maybe I need to have another talk with him about the shit he teaches my kid.

It's no secret that Pop is stuck in his ways and would prefer we keep our feet wet in some aspects of the old business. I can't help him with that. I don't know why the hell he sent me to those fancy schools if he wanted me to continue where he left off. The thing is, Gabe, unlike me, wouldn't be

as easy to control as Pop thinks. Once the boy sinks his teeth into something, it's hard getting him to let go. And I gotta tell ya; his mind scares the shit outta me.

“Well, we kinda knew it would be like this. Damn, I thought we had more time, but I need you to work your way in before we leave for Europe in a couple of days, so at the very least, learn how to keep up with him, will you.”

“You knew it would take time; you said so yourself. But I gotta say, he's tougher than expected, and I think his sisters work with him against us.”

“I have no doubt about that. I forgot to warn you about them. They're almost as devious as their brother, don't trust them either. If they tell you he went left, go right, remember that.”

“They're not that bad really, just very loyal to their brother, is all.” I scoffed and left it at that.

“Whatever, listen, here's what you do, for the time being, stay close to the girl, wherever she is, that's where he'll be. And do your best to get on his good side, will you.”

“We're working on it. At least he hasn't sent us packing.”

“There is that. Okay, back to it then.”

Damn boy. I haven't heard a peep about Sicily, he hasn't made any moves in that direction, but I'm almost certain he's going to do something while we're in Paris. Maybe I've been going about this all wrong. Instead of fighting him or trying to stop him, I should probably just find a way to protect him on his path. That's what a good father does.

But somehow, my gut tells me that if Gabe goes down this path, there'll be no turning back. I'm not even sure why that is, but I never bet against my gut. So, all I can do is keep my eyes on things because the kid can run circles around me with his computer shit, and we both know it.



## GABRIEL



I WATCHED on the home security monitors as the four ninja turtles walked out of Pop's home office. I can just imagine what that little meet was about. Out of respect for Pop, I don't have eyes and ears in his private spaces, but it's not needed. All I have to do is keep track of when he sneaks Lancelot in for a private consult, and I can figure out the rest.

I don't plan on leaving him in the dark forever, but I know I have to beat him to the punch, or he'd try to do what's mine to do. Ma seems completely clueless to the fact of what she'd set in motion; she's so caught up in Balls and debutant crap that she hasn't given a second thought to the fact that I'd be that close to Sicily in a few days.

In fact, since I brought Gianna home, Ma seems to have forgotten all about the seeds she'd planted so long ago. I thought letting Pop know what I've been doing here the last few days would keep him off the scent, but now I think I overplayed my hand. Why else would he be meeting those four all of a sudden if not to put them on high alert?

Too bad for Pop, I've taken what he taught me along with my own knowledge and honed myself into what I am today. He doesn't know it, but I plan to use them to my advantage when the time comes without them even being aware. Tommy and the others had been easy. They've been groomed to see me as their de facto boss, so giving them orders is a piece of cake. And Pop seems to forget that the four that just left his office owe me a debt. After all, I'm the one who brought them into his life, and knowing them, once they're reminded of that fact, they'd see things my way.

It's manipulative as shit, but I never claimed not to be. I only hope that when it's all said and done, he realizes that I did it for him. I don't want my Pop involved in any of this. Pop would kill Ricci. I have no doubt about that. But unlike me, he'd stop there because he wouldn't want to leave Ma and the

girls alone in the world without him, so he'd probably end up in a cell somewhere for life or ten years minimum. I'll never let that happen.

I've spent the last week and a half taking care of things to make sure Gianna's life is okay once I'm gone. It's the least I could do because of what I'm sure my leaving is going to do to her. I keep telling myself that it's only been a few weeks, that she'd get over me with time. As long as I removed all obstacles from her way, she'd bounce back. I have to tell myself that so I can sleep at night because there's no other way.

Hopefully, with time she'd move on and forget this phase in her life, look back on it as just a time when... I've buried myself in vengeance to keep thoughts of what if at bay. I selfishly haven't been able to keep her out of my bed no matter how hard I try. Though I feel like a monster each time, she looks up at me with hope in her eyes.

It sucks; I'm being torn in two because the thing I've worked so hard for is now close at hand, but it means giving her up. Where just a few short months ago, I'd have done anything for this opportunity that just fell into my lap; a part of me wishes I had more time with her, but it can't be helped. This trip to Paris is my first and maybe only chance to get the ball rolling. I have no idea what I'm going to find or even how things are going to play out. I just know I can't let this opportunity slip by. Isn't it strange that in a roundabout way, she's the one who made it possible?

Story of my life! She has no idea that her coming into my life will be the precipice for me disappearing from hers. If not for the Ball in Paris, it would've taken me at least another year before I was able to give Pop the slip and head into Europe.

Pop watches me like a hawk; he won't let me anywhere near Europe if his life depended on it. So, I've been laying low, not showing my hand in any way. I'd hoped that my preoccupation with Fontane would blind him to the fact that I was planning something, but this little meet tells me that hope was in vain.

I looked at the clock on my desk then switched the monitor to the gym where the girls were practicing their curtsies or some shit. I keep sneaking these stolen moments of her and squirreling them away, storing them in some memory bank, and feeling guilty as hell because she doesn't know that in about a week or so, her life will be turned upside down once again; by me.

If I could change it, I would, but no amount of guilt can change what has to be. I've lived with this thing for too long, been set on this course with no interruptions until her. Somehow, I think it's selfish to change that now because nothing has changed, really. Me finding someone doesn't change the facts of my conception; nothing will.

And as much as I feel for her, as much as I wish and hope things were different, there's one thing that still remains. My mother has spent the last almost two decades living with a constant reminder of the worst night of her life; me. I know Ma loves me, she's shown it in a million ways, but somehow that makes it worst in my eyes.

I wasn't something she wanted, but something that had been forced upon her in the most heinous and disgusting way, so even her love for me was thrust upon her. How hard must it have been for her all these years, living with the proof of the darkest hour of her life constantly in her face?

She's never mentioned it, not once. Never made me feel like anything less than her son, and that, too, somehow fills me with guilt. It's a lot, isn't it, to ask of one small woman who'd been left alone in the world because of that travesty. Had it not been for Pop, who knows what hell she'd have endured. So, you see, I can't let that man pay even more of a price for my existence.

Then there's Gianna. Sweet, soft, loveable Gianna. After the hell that has been her life, she too deserves someone better than I. Someone who doesn't come from a place of darkness with the taint that follows me around like a shadow or a second layer of skin that I can't take off at will.

I know some would say that I too am innocent in all this, that I had no part in what had been done to Ma. But they've never had to live with the knowledge that they'd been forged in hell. I snapped out of it and turned the monitor off before I became even more maudlin. There's no time for a pity party, and I wouldn't know how to throw one anyway since I'm not built that way.

I only have a couple of days left before we leave; time to take care of Felix Fontane because I've decided that he too is not worthy of Gianna. I'd had Becky moved to the homeless city downtown after two hellish nights in the woods. Tommy said when he went back to get her that she was damn near catatonic; perfect.

I knew by then the pain from being out in the cold with a broken body for that long would have her climbing the walls, just a little payback for all the years she'd made Gianna feel the same. But there was a more sinister reason behind it. I knew that putting her in the midst of that hell would expose her to something else, something that would help her with the pain she'd been enduring for those two days and nights in the woods. I knew by then she'd gnaw off her own face to get away from the pain.

The man I'd paid to offer to help her with that pain had done a good job since she was now strung out on meth, while her daughter was slowly losing her mind locked away in a room with no way out until I was ready to release her. Messing around with Anonymous had introduced me to some of the darker places that exist in the world.

I'm not sick enough to have her trafficked or put in the hands of someone like Ricci. But there are other more fucked up people out there, people of high intelligence who have to fly beneath the radar to conduct their experiments. Right now, someone is probably peering into Victoria's brain beneath a microscope before putting it back together. I like that the world likes to pretend that people like Mengele no longer exist, keep those blinders on so that people like me can move in the shadows when need be.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds and took a deep breath. This thing I'm about to do is skating pretty close to the line in my head that I dare not cross, but it has to be done. I got up and went towards the gym to get her, putting my game face on as I opened the door. "Gianna, I need you for a minute. She'll be right back." I assured the twins and the matron-like woman who was giving them lessons.

"What's wrong?" She slipped her hand in mine and followed me down the hallway back to my room.

"I've been thinking. Wouldn't you like to move your mom's things out of storage?" She stopped walking with a quizzical look on her face.

"I haven't thought of it, but now that you mention it..."

"I can take care of it for you, but I don't think you should send it back to the house, not right now anyway. How about sending it to your grandmother's?" If she thought the request was odd, she didn't mention it, though I could see she was wondering why we'd do that. This was sticky, the one thing that had stumped me as well.

I can't very well tell her the real reason why. That I plan to make her go there when we get back, or more like I know that it's the only place she could run to. But I need her mother's things gone in order to carry out the next stage of this play I'm writing for Fontane. It's like killing two birds with one stone.

When she didn't answer right away, I opened my mouth and lied to her for the first time. "I don't think you should send them back to the house, not right now with things up in the air with your dad and Becky. At your grandmother's, we'll know that they're safe, that no one would destroy them." She nodded her head in agreement, and I released the breath I held.

"Okay, you can go back to the others. I'll take care of the storage unit." Another lie, I'd already set things in motion there since we were pressed for time. She didn't even think to ask, but her grandmother already knew I was having her daughter's things sent to her. Thankfully the old woman hadn't asked any questions. She was just happy to be receiving all that was left of her child.

I waited for Gianna to leave after a quick peck on my lips, glad to see her this happy and excited about the upcoming trip and her first coming out Ball. At least I can give her this before turning her life upside down. As soon as the coast was clear, I picked up the phone and called Tommy. “It’s a go. Do you have the address?”

“Yes!” He read off the address to her grandmother’s place in Virginia.

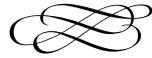
“Cool! You’re expected.”

“Aren’t we playing it a bit close? It’s gonna take at least twelve hours there and twelve hours back. Your Pop wants us to do a final walk-through before the trip....”

“I don’t trust anyone else to take care of this but you. And you’re not driving back. The plane will bring you home. The pilot has the info already. He should be contacting you soon. You just need to time it the way we planned.”

“Oh, okay, that will work.” I hung up the phone and went back to my computer. He’s right, we’re playing it a bit close, but it was the only way to do it. I don’t want Gianna here for the final showdown between Felix and Becky, but if I move her mom’s things out of storage too soon, it might alert Felix, who seems to go there every other day. This way, she’d be long gone by the time he realizes, by the time he reacts to what I have planned.

## GABRIEL



“*H*ey, your guy just moved a shit ton of cash in the last few days. I traced the transfer to an account that has been open in his daughter’s name since she was about three months old.”

“Oh really!”

“Yeah. Not only that, but from his movements, it looks like he’s tying up loose ends almost like he’s preparing to go away or something.”

“Ok, thank you.” I sat back and smiled after hanging up the phone with one of dad’s people who specializes in financial forensics. I’ve been keeping my eye on Felix this whole time, watching his movements listening in on his calls to get a feel for where his mind is at. He had no idea that Becky had been attacked and was in the hospital until I made sure that one of the women she’d tried so hard to befriend knew about her circumstances.

Of course, word had already got back to him that she’d been staying in a motel, and then once she was moved to the homeless city, I made sure those same women were made aware. Just to up her embarrassment and add insult to injury, of course. The fact that he showed no interest, not even to ask how she was doing, was good enough for me.

I’ve been playing him like a puppet on a string, using his mind against him and calling the plays even before he made them. Because I had a pretty good idea where his mind was at, I put things in motion and have been keeping an eye on his

business dealings. I know that if it were for Gianna alone, things might not have changed, but for him, the thought that he'd failed his Adrienne would be too much for him to bear, and I exploited the hell out of that shit.

I made sure in the last two weeks that those women pulled no punches reminding him of the things that Becky and her daughter had done to his kid right under his nose. Their disdain was just more salt added to the bleeding wound I'd opened. A daily dose of reminders, added to the fact that he now knew what she'd done to his wife, is more than his weak mind can handle.

I knew this but did not care. Why? Because he still didn't give a fuck that he'd screwed his daughter over royally, he only cared about what had been done to his wife. At least, that's the way I see it. It's because I was able to see all of this unfolding behind the scenes that I was able to put my final plans into action.

I had to give it a lot of thought because he's the only parent she has left. But when I think about it, he doesn't deserve her after the shit he'd done, so fuck him. My methods are harsh, almost inhumane, I guess, but he doesn't deserve better. Now I'm sitting here thinking about my next move.

I could step in now, stop him from doing what I suspect he's about to before it's too late, but why should I? In life, there should be consequences for your actions, but because of her love for him, I'm not going to bury his dumb ass somewhere; that should be enough. Still, I'll do him one last favor for her sake because maybe, just maybe, somewhere down the road, she might want to have a relationship with him.

I left my room and went in search of Pop. I'm going to need him for this part of my Op, and I know he won't ask me any questions that I don't want to answer. He's too busy worrying about what I have planned once we land in Paris to care about much else. I found him in his office, reaming out someone over the phone. "Just a minute, son." He held up a finger then pointed to the chair across from him.

I sat and listened with a smile as he coolly threatened whoever it was without raising his voice. If I were on the other end of that coldness, I'd give him whatever the hell he was after. "Good, glad we understand each other." He hung up the phone and turned to me in dad mode. "What is it, son? You all packed and ready to go?"

"I need a favor."

"Anything, shoot!"

"Fontaine is getting ready to do something. When he's done, I need you to pull whatever strings you can and make sure he gets a light sentence."

"A light sentence for what?"

"You'll see in the next couple of days."

"We won't be here."

"I know; that's why I'm giving you a heads-up now. Just make sure the lawyer is on standby."

"Boy, what're you doing?"

"Me, nothing, he's the one who's about to break the law."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because I'm the one who's gonna push him to it."

"Geez, Gabe, what now?"

"Nothing, nothing for you to worry about."

"You been talking to your grandfather?"

"Leave gramps out of it; he hasn't done anything."

"Yeah, okay. What should I tell the lawyer when I call?"

"Just tell him to expect a call in the next few days or so."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, make sure he knows to get the best deal he can."

"You're not gonna tell me what this is about?"

"The less you know, Pop."

I left him looking flabbergasted, but it's too complicated to get into, and just in case things don't swing the way I expect, it's best not to say anything more at this juncture. If things do go down the road, I expect, well then, it will become self-explanatory real quick. Next up, Gianna. She's been flitting around here with that ankle-biter like a little fairy with new wings; happy as I've ever seen her.

That's because I've been spoiling the hell out of her, making sure she's not outdone by the Russo twins and their fashionista bullshit. Now I have three divas on my hands. The thing is, the Russo women are fashion icons, no doubt about it, but Eloise Lyon is on a whole other level.

What I didn't know, but came in handy, is that she was going to send back jewelry with Tommy after he made the run to her place, which I ended up using as an excuse when Pop stuck his nose in, wanting to know what his guys were doing in Virginia. He didn't quite believe me; I don't think, maybe because of the look of surprise on my face when they offloaded the trunk at the front door.

Thankfully the girls and Ma went ape shit at the goodies and distracted him, so I'm in the clear there. I wasn't telling him about the storage unit and why I'd had the stuff moved because that would've led to more questions that I'm not ready to answer. Just in case Fontane gets cold feet. Besides, if Pop knows what I'm up to there, he'd have me Shanghaied and kept out of Europe, so no.

Anyway, last night this place was a mess with females running around like headless chickens, and I've never seen the twins or Ma so humbled before. Their shit is nothing to sneeze at; dad has accounts at some of the best jewelers in the world. The shit Gianna's grandmother sent looks like it was made in the sixteen hundreds and was kept in a vault in somebody's castle somewhere. No doubt, those three will be the shining stars.

So, all in all, she hasn't had time to dwell too much on the shit that went down in her family home. It's like out of sight, out of mind, at least I'm hoping that's what it is and that she's not just hiding her true feelings from me. I found her fiddling

with her luggage for the one-hundredth time since we were leaving in the morning.

“What’s with the face?” I walked over for a hug because she likes hugs. She also wears her emotions on her face, and if I walk into a room and don’t hug her, she pouts. That’s been giving me some stress, but I can’t bring myself to put some much-needed space between us. I keep putting it off, not wanting to spoil this for her, but knowing it will all come to an end soon.

I’ve even been playing around with the idea of giving us some more time, but that all depends on what I find in Sicily and how long it’s going to take for me to do what I have to do there. It’s not like I’m expecting to take care of Ricci in one night. Ricci’s a heavy hitter, and he plays in some very dirty waters. I know once I go after him, things will get sticky, so even if I wanted to hang onto her for a while, it might not be the most prudent thing to do.

I guess this is what they call cold feet. I know what I have to do, know that there’s no way around it, but as the time draws near, I find myself looking for ways and excuses to hang onto her just a little bit longer. When she’s like this, soft and clingy, I find it hard to imagine not being there for her. “I’m worried about Thor.”

“What about him?”

“It’s going to be a long flight; what if he’s scared?”

I rolled my eyes over her head. She’s worse than my sisters when it comes to their mutts. “He’ll be fine. You’ve got the calming treats and anti-nausea meds, just in case. The twins take their mutts all over the place no problem.” She moved on to messing with his overpriced carrier, and I had to smile at how much she’d changed in the last couple of weeks.

It’s taken her no time to become the princess she was meant to be. Now that I think about it taking tips from the Russo twins might not have been the best way to introduce her to a life of luxury. Then again, her grandmother and aunts don’t seem to be much better.

I thought for sure she'd have a hard time getting used to all the fuss, but nope, she fits right in. I guess she'd fallen back into the life she'd known when her mom was alive because she hardly bats a lash now at the price of things. I like it; it gives me hope that all will be fine with or without me. She's also got a mouth on her and has been learning how to speak up for herself. Something I knew would happen with enough exposure to the twins. Hopefully, what I was about to do wouldn't put too much of a damper on her mood.

"Do you want to see your dad before we go?"

"Oh Lord, what did you do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Gabriel, the last couple of times you asked me that question, there was something going on at that house. What did he do this time? I don't think I have it in me to deal with anything else right now. The last two weeks have been awesome; I don't want anything to spoil that."

Look at her using her big girl words. "What're you grinning at?"

"Nothing, Miss. Sassy. If you don't want to go, just say so."

"I don't want to go."

"Gianna!"

"Fine, I'll go, but there better not be anything going on."

"Nothing's going on. It's the night before we fly out, is all." I'd left it this late for just the reasons she mentioned. She'd been doing pretty well since the whole Victoria and Becky thing, not stressing too much other than to worry about getting justice for her mother. She seems to have a very innocent view of the situation, thinking that now that everything had come to light that it was as simple as getting the law involved, and that's that.

I knew it wouldn't be that easy, just as I knew that the thought of having her mother's body exhumed wouldn't sit right with her. So, I'd gently broached the subject of Becky

maybe never paying for her sins through legal means. Of course, I didn't tell her that I planned on making the other woman pay, she doesn't need to know that morbid shit, and she's going to hate me as it is, no need to add fuel to the fire and show her just what a monster I am.

The truth is, I'm not getting rid of Becky solely because of what she did to Adrienne, but because I don't want her anywhere near Gianna after I walk out of her life. I did convince her after much effort that Becky will indeed get her just desserts one way or another. She seemed to be okay with that for now, but her dad is still a sticking point.

She runs the gamut from being pissed off at him for letting them mistreat her and feeling sorry for him for the mess he'd made of his life. She keeps remembering the man he used to be before her mom died, which I guess is understandable. Me, I think he's a thoughtless piece of shit who should be nailed to the train tracks ten seconds before the train arrives.

It's been a hell of a ride keeping her blind to what I've been doing, but her preoccupation with the Ball and her first trip to Europe helped me out there. Now I had everything in place, and if all goes as planned, it will be a while before she sees her dad under these circumstances again. The fuck is lucky I'm not just sending him to the hereafter since he serves no damn purpose as far as I can see.

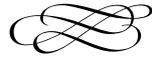
I almost feel sorry for him, but not quite. It's obvious he didn't handle the loss of his wife well, and that led to all this, but he had a kid to protect, and he didn't, end of story. I don't have it in me to forgive him that easily, and I'm bastard enough not to try to force her to either when she goes into one of her moods and starts berating him to me.

I pretty much know where her head is at because I listen to her when she rants, letting her get it all out. Her grandmother has already been warned by me to get her a therapist once the dust settles. I'd had to tell her a little bit about my plans without divulging too much because I need her to take care of Gianna when I'm gone.

It would've been nice if she could stay with my family, but that's not possible, not if I want to make a clean break. "Where did you go in your head again?" How is it possible for her to know me this well when no one else does? She always seems to know when I wander in my mind, something I find enthralling and worrisome at the same time.

That jackass Lance keeps hinting at her being my soulmate, but I know he has an agenda, so I pay him no mind. Speaking of which, he should be here any minute. Pop claims he's coming along as an escort for one of the twins, which I'm sure has some truth to it, but I'm almost certain he's my watcher on this trip. They never learn.

## GABRIEL



I thought it best to give Fontane a call and let him know we were coming. He's been living in the bottom of a bottle the last two weeks. This visit was as much for him as it was her; even though he didn't know I knew it, he should at least get to say goodbye. I may have overshot this one as well because she was visibly shocked by his appearance.

He looked gaunt as if he'd lost weight since the last time we saw him, and there was a sadness in his eyes that I personally thought was too little too late, but that's just me. She's his kid, and as much of an ass as she knows he is, I could understand how his appearance rocked her a little.

I guess I was here for myself as well to some extent. Maybe it was my last shot at giving him a chance to be some type of father to his daughter and not the selfish prick he's always been. I'm still not sure where we landed on that scale. First, he answered the door looking like a lost puppy.

His conversation was disjointed at best, with a little bit of woe is me thrown in for good measure. At some point, he caught my glare and must've realized he was two seconds away from catching my foot in his ass because he snapped out of it. I'm not sure that was much better because he seemed to remember that this might be the last time they see each other under these circumstances, and that seemed to sober him up.

But now, instead of woebegone, he was almost close to sobbing. He kept apologizing to her over and over, but not in an 'I'll do better' kind of way, but more of an 'I can't change it anyway, so you might be better off without me in your life,'

skirting pretty close to letting her know that he was about to do something stupid.

I hadn't forgotten that she asked me what he'd meant the last time when he talked about getting his balls back and doing something about what had been done to her, so I knew where her thoughts went immediately. "Gianna, can you get me some water, please?"

I kept my voice neutral so as not to spook her even smiled. But as soon as she left, I turned my ire on him. "Are you a complete ass?" My tone shook him up, and he looked at me like he was coming out of a daze.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you hinting at some off-colored shit in front of her? Do you want her to feel sorry for you? Do you not yet realize that you're in the wrong here? That nothing was done to you, but everything was done to her on your watch?"

"I'm not trying to do that."

"Yes, you are. I don't give a fuck how sorry you feel for yourself or what you're going through. When she gets back in this room, you're going to act like you're happy for her for once in your worthless ass life. After that, you can do whatever the hell you want. Got me?"

I guess a teenager talking to him like that cut through the alcohol haze, and he took umbrage; like I give a shit. He had the good sense to get his shit together when she came back and spent the next half an hour talking to her about the trip and what fun she was going to have and how happy he was that she was going to get to do something her mom would've wanted.

That's what I came for. I didn't want her worrying about him while away, something I knew was a possibility even though she tries to pretend she won't. I, of course, didn't let on that I knew what he was planning because I didn't want him to change his mind. I'm still one hundred percent positive that she doesn't need him in her life until he gets some help and comes to terms with the fact that he'd failed her as a parent.

I hate people who sweep shit under the rug and never deal with their shit, only moving on as if nothing happened and expecting everyone else to go along with their pedantic bullshit. With that out of the way, it was easy to see that it was the right call because she seemed much lighter and even happier when we finally said our goodbyes.

I'd done all I could as far as her issues go; now it was time to turn all my attention to Sicily, which I'd gone as far as I could with that until I get there personally. There's only so much you can do from behind a computer screen, after all, when you don't know the players on the ground.

One of the biggest hurdles has been finding out where my grandfather disappeared to almost twenty years ago, along with trying to learn the identities of all the people who were there the night my mother was harmed. It was something she'd said in her story telling that had stuck with me, something she only seemed to gloss over and never paid too much mind to, but for me, it was very important.

You see, on the night of her violation, there were other people around, people who knew, people who laughed at the situation. To her, Ricci was the only one at fault; for me, they were all culpable. I never told her that, never mentioned that I held them all to blame, not only for not stopping it from happening but for never coming forward after the fact.

I've spent years trying to find them without knowing so much as a name. It hadn't been easy, but with painstaking patience, I'd pieced together a picture by going back through Ricci's life from the bits and pieces I picked up from the internet over the years. I simply went through his friends, those he was photographed with, and those who were mentioned with him in any capacity.

From there, it was easy to go back as far as his high school and college days until I had a rough idea of who his core group of friends was. I couldn't ask Ma. I never bring that awful shit up to her, no matter how easy it would've made things for me. In my way of thinking, if those words were still etched so clearly in my mind after hearing them only once, I can just imagine how it is for her who'd lived through it.

I still haven't been able to find my grandfather, something that bothers me still, but I think I was able to find the last person that was there that night. She's the only one that seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth not long after, and for some reason, I think there's more to her disappearance.

I'd started to think maybe she was dead, but once I got help on the ground through gramps' connections, I later learned that she was very much alive, just completely removed from the life she once lived. Since she'd pulled this disappearing act so soon after mom's assault, I can't help but think her disappearance had something to do with that night.

Although I'd been able to put together who Ricci's friends were at the time, I still had no idea who'd been in the room that night. So far, all I know about these people are their names and what little has been said about them on social media, which we all know is bupkis. So, my first order of business when I reach Sicily is to find this runaway friend and get the information I need out of her.

Aside from Pop, Ma is the one I've been most worried about. I know she's going to feel some kind of guilt from my actions, even though she's the one that brought this shit to my attention. I've never resented her for it; how can I? But with Gianna in the picture, I sometimes wish she'd never told me about that night, which leads to me thinking I'm a selfish asshole for those thoughts. She'd lost her whole life essentially, even though things had turned around after she met Pop.

Still, that doesn't erase the horrendous shit she'd endured, and I, more than anyone, have no right to resent anything that she'd chosen to do. This is one of the reasons I need to put some space between Gianna and me, no matter what road my trip to Sicily takes. Whether it will be a long-drawn-out ordeal or something I take care of in a week, the end result will be the same.

But if I keep her with me, it'll only cause me to doubt myself, to want things I know I can't and shouldn't have. But since I'm not planning to go to Sicily until the third day, which will be one day after her coming out, I've decided to give her

these last few days. I'll dedicate all my time to her, making sure she has the time of her life so that the blow of my breaking things off won't be as hard. At least, I'm hoping.

For some reason, one of the hardest things I face is telling my sisters about my plans to break things off with Gianna. They've come to love her, I know, and are very protective. And though I know they'd never choose anyone over me, I feel like I'll be putting them in an awkward position without being able to tell them why I'm doing this.

The twins have no idea about what happened to Ma, and I hope to heaven they never do; it'll crush them. I don't even know if they remember that Pop is not my biological father; they never mention it, no one in the family ever does. Come to think of it; I don't think Gianna even knows. I won't tell her, or anyone else, because Pop doesn't like that. He gets very putout if it's ever mentioned, which no one has since I was about five, I think.

But getting back to Gianna and her relationship with the twins, a relationship I fostered before I made the mistake of taking things too far with her. I can only think of the long run when it comes to that, as selfish as it may seem. By that, I mean that one of the things I've decided is that she can't stay in my life for however long or short this process will be.

Not only because I want to cause her as little pain as possible but because I have no idea what kind of blowback may come my way once I go after these people. I'm not worried about the rest of my family. I don't plan on getting them involved in any way. But it would be almost impossible to carry on a relationship while simultaneously keeping her hidden on the off chance that Ricci or any of his cohorts decide to come after me.

You see, I already know what I plan to do once I start this, and none of it's going to be pretty. She's had enough to deal with in her young life. And though she may not see it now, in the long run, she'd realize that this was the best for all involved. Even though I tell myself that, I still feel like a jerk for the simple fact that I should never have touched her in the first place.

I don't regret her coming into my life or any of the things I've done and am still doing to make her future more secure. But I would be lying if I said I don't regret letting things go too far between us. There's no excuse, no way for me to gloss over this shit; I fucked up. So, for the next few days, I'm going to do my best to make it up to her without letting things go any further. In other words, I'm going to try to put distance between us in the nicest way possible in a way that would do the less harm.

"You're doing it again."

"What?" We were now pulling into the gates of home after picking up her nighttime ice cream after leaving her dad's.

"Lately, it seems like you keep going away in your head."

"Why do you say that?" I honestly wanted to know because I'm sure there's nothing I do to give myself away. I have too much training for that.

"I can't really explain it. It's not anything you do per se, just a feeling I get in the pit of my stomach. Does that make sense?" How the hell should I answer that? I'm not about to lie to her about her feelings, not when they're true. I just wish I knew how the hell she out of everyone I know, the person I've known the least out of those I've allowed to get close would know me that well.

"You're right. I do have something on my mind, but we'll talk about it later." Please don't ask me anything more about it. Just let me show you a good time for the next few days, so I don't feel like a complete monster when I leave you. Is there any wonder I hate myself sometimes? I have no idea what the hell lives inside of me, other than the fact that I'm half monster.

What other fucked up shit will I do in life if I carried on? It's one of the things that have plagued me my entire existence, not knowing what all lives inside of me. I could train myself to be a million things. Read all the books in the world, but nothing will ever change my DNA. And my DNA is fucked.

Thankfully she didn't say anything more, just gave me a strange look which I caught out the side of my eye before changing the subject. I felt guilty at the relief I felt after passing her off to my sisters. That was too close and, again, very selfish on my part. There's nothing stopping me from telling her the truth now, other than the fact that I don't want to mess this up for her. I want her to enjoy the ball and her trip and all the things they have planned while in Europe.

I'd feel like even more of a jerk if I messed things up for her now. But how fair is it that I know I'll be crushing her in a few days when she's not even prepared? I've tried okay, tried putting space between us, tried pulling back. But each time I did, she'd get this look on her face, a look of loneliness and betrayal that guts me.

I didn't think anything would ever be this hard, never expected anything to shake the foundation of what I am and what I've known I had to be since the night Ma told me her story. If I let myself, I could just say fuck it, stay here, be with her, build a life together. I can see it. But there's always that thought in the back of my mind that she deserves better. Better than the son of a monster.

## GABRIEL



Paris! What's not to love? I already had my plans mapped out before we even left the states because I knew I would be playing it close. Even though the flights in between the two cities are relatively short, especially by private plane, the drive out to the convent where the runaway was supposed to be would bite into my time.

I hadn't had time to find an airport or landing strip close to where she is because a lot of Sicily is still old school, it seems like, and the place she's at is like stepping back in time, at least that's what it looks like on paper. So, knowing my family and their personalities, I set things in motion through well-placed hints and suggestions.

I knew the girls would hit the ground running, which works out perfectly for me. The whole family had decided to get involved, and Gianna's grandmother, due to her reconnection with my nana and wanting to be there for her granddaughter's first coming out ball, was no exception.

Pop was nervous as hell from the jump, almost as if he expected me to take a connecting flight to Sicily as soon as we landed. I knew his game, so my first order of business was getting his snitches on my side. Lancelot wasn't too hard. He loses his shit in a new city, so it would be easy to keep him preoccupied with touristy bullshit that my sisters were going to drag him off to anyway. As I said, I know all of them and could pretty much write a blueprint for what was going to happen once we got here.

Ma and Stella were already zoning out high-end shopping areas and the best restaurants in the city because that's their thing. Gramps was busy catching up with some old friends, so everyone had their own thing going on, except me. I, of course, had a smokescreen in place to throw Pop off the scent; the catacombs.

I chose this venue, of course, because Ma and the twins wouldn't be caught dead down there, Pop has a touch of claustrophobia, and Lancelot is a snob who wouldn't be caught dead walking through the Parisian underground surrounded by dead bodies, some cop he's going to be.

That wasn't for another couple of days, though, so in the meantime, I had some groundwork to do. No one else seemed as edgy as Pop, and I knew he would be keeping his eye on me the whole time, so to put his mind at ease and not have him put a wrench in my plans, I had come up with a sophisticated plot of sorts.

It was the morning of our first day there, and the girls barely had time for anything other than their last-minute debutant crap, so I chose now to take the first step in my plans for my upcoming solo outing. No, I wasn't jetting off to Sicily right now; I have other plans for that. But this little trip had two purposes.

One, it would give me time to put the finishing touches on my plans, and two, it would show Pop that I wasn't about to go anywhere, which is a lie, but to give him peace of mind, it was worth it to go to the trouble.

I went in search of the twins Marcus and Matthew and their cohorts Robert and Denver. My family, instead of getting hotels or renting a private villa as planned, had ended up accepting an invitation from Gianna's grandmother to stay at her family estate just outside of Paris. The place is crazy, like nobility crazy. There was room for everyone, including the security teams, which Gianna's family didn't even blink at, and who Pop would die before he let us travel without.

I found my so-called team in their quarters, one of the little cottages off the main castle, yes, a literal castle. They were

surprised to see me since I've pretty much been ignoring them since they'd been hired a few weeks ago. "Hey, did something happen?" Marcus stood from his chair while looking around at the others.

"No. Who do you work for? Me or my father?" No point in beating around the bush. That'll only make them suspicious anyway.

"That's a tough one. What are you getting at?" Again, Marcus took the lead.

"OK, let me rephrase that." Who is your loyalty to? Me, or my father?"

"That's another tough one. What is it that you're trying to ask?" It was Robert who answered this time.

"Simply put, there're going to be times when there will be certain things that I want to do that my Pop might not agree with. Whose side are you gonna be on?"

"You're putting us in a tough spot here, Gabe."

I guess Denver picked up on where I was coming from before the others, who soon caught on. Like I said before, I'm the one who saw that each of them was in a not-so-good position at home when we first met years ago, and it was I who brought that and them to Pop's attention, knowing that he'd step in. I'm not one to do shit for people expecting something in return, but I have no qualms about taking that stance this time around.

I knew from the first time I saw them on campus that Pop had brought them in at this point in time because he'd grown suspicious of my activities concerning Sicily. Even though I'd gone to great lengths to keep him from knowing anything about my progress there, he too knows his son, and there're just some things I can't hide from him.

"OK, think about it and get back to me. Just know while you're thinking, we can make this very hard or very easy. If you answer correctly, you have no problem, say the wrong thing, and I'll make it extremely difficult for you. Remember, I

am my father's son; think about why he asked you of all people to shadow me.”

I left after giving them food for thought, knowing that they were smart enough to get where I was coming from. I know that Pop put them on me to keep me out of trouble; I also know that they have no idea what that trouble might be. Pop would never tell anyone outside the family what had been done to Ma, so there's no way he'd come right out and mention Sicily to them. I have that working for me.

Now, to the point that we're all basically teenagers, who do teenage crap, I don't see too much of a problem getting them on my side. Soon they'd know what to report and what to keep to themselves. Basically, with my last parting shot, I'm trying to con them into believing that Pop hadn't hired them so much to keep an eye on me as he did to protect me. Meaning they had no say in what I did and wouldn't try to stop me, not that they ever could. But I don't want Pop knowing my moves before I make them, not until I was ready to share.

I didn't hang around waiting for them to put it together but went back to the main dwelling where the girls were busy with their etiquette coach. One thing I hadn't prepared for was the feeling of loss I carry around with me now. Each time I look at Gianna, it's with the eyes of someone who's saying goodbye.

While she's excited and brimming over with joy, my heart's being torn in two. Each laugh, each gentle touch of her hand when we're close, is like a dagger to my chest. I didn't know it would be like this that I would mourn her. This makes me worry about her own feelings when the time comes. It's only been a few weeks for me, too and I'm arguably more well equipped to deal with what's coming than she is.

The thought of her feeling even a fraction of what I do, makes me hate myself even more. I wish there was a guarantee...I brought myself back from the brink when I caught Lance standing outside the door to the room where the girls were, peeping in. “What's up?” He almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of my voice.

“Shit Gabe, you scared me.” He went back to peeping through the crack in the door where I could see over his head into the room where the girls were practicing deportment. “What exactly are you doing?”

“I’m just keeping my eye on that chick. I think she’s a bit abusive. Did you hear the way she spoke to them?” I barely contained my laughter at the look on his face.

I’d forgotten how overprotective he is but was glad for the reminder. Knowing that they have him in their corner goes a long way to making me feel better about the future. Gianna isn’t the only one I worry about leaving. “They’re almost done here; what say we take them out somewhere.”

“Sounds good; I have a list of places the girls wanna see.” Of course, you do.

We watched for another twenty minutes while the girls breezed through the lessons that they’d already taken months ago, and Gianna caught on easily enough because she had an innate sense of style and grace that the lessons only enhanced.

My suggestion for the outing stemmed from some guilt, not only because of the trip to Sicily and what was bound to follow but because while she was here having a blast and embarking on a new and exciting chapter in her life, her dad’s own life was about to go to shit on the other side of the world.

With the six-hour time difference, I knew it was only a matter of a few hours; if that, before Felix fell into the trap, I’d set for him. If I had any doubts about me being a monster, what I was about to do would put them to rest. Even though I knew the outcome could hurt her in some way, I still couldn’t not go through with it because my sense of justice wouldn’t let me.

Where some would see room for a grey area, I only see in black and white. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. So even though she may come to a point where she’s willing to forgive Felix for his monumental screwups, I can’t and won’t. Doesn’t that make me monstrous? The fact that I’m willing to sacrifice her feelings because I can’t overlook my own.

When I think of it like that, two things happen. One, I accept and am assured that she deserves someone better, and two, my lack of empathy assures me that I have too much of the man who fathered me in me to be any good. I'm not much younger than he was when he did that horrendous shit to my mom, just three or four years, I think. How much longer before I become more like whatever he is?

So, it was with a heavy heart and a wish that things could be different that I waited for Gianna to leave that room then smiled lovingly at her while my heart broke in two as I invited her to go see the sights of Paris with me. As she accepted and put her arm through mine, I knew that at that very moment, her dad was on his way to destruction. A destruction I'd set in motion.

She has no idea who I am. That fact hit me like a ton of bricks when we got into the back of the chauffeur-driven car with half the security team following us and the other half in front. The others chattered away like magpies, well the girls did, while my mind was back home where things were about to go down.

Lance seemed to pick up on the fact that something was up because he kept giving me these worrying looks while trying not to let the girls catch on. I shook my head at him and smiled before taking Gianna's hand in mine to throw him off. Even that made me feel like a jerk. But I can't help it; it's who I am. I'm the guy who can sit here, be part of their moment while wreaking hell halfway around the world, and not bat a lash.



BECKY



THE PAIN IS ALMOST NONEXISTENT, but my life feels like it's gone off the rails in the last few days. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know that this isn't right, that I'm too far gone,

but I can't seem to retrace my steps and get back on the right track. My mind is a blur and has stayed that way ever since I was picked up from the woods, and I think I might be going insane one moment and on top of the world the next.

First off, I wasn't completely myself when I left those woods. I think between the fear and pain I felt, something tore in my mind, and that's why I was so easily duped into taking my first hit of meth. I never in a million years would've thought I'd be into that, but I have to admit that after the first time, it didn't seem so bad.

It helped with the pain and, in all actuality, put me in a better frame of mind than I'd been in since my first arrest. I was no longer doubtful of my actions, and the fear of being exposed no longer felt like the end of the world. In short, I could see more clearly to finding ways of getting out of my new predicament.

I've always been able to get Felix to see my side of things and saw no reason for that to change. Sure, there was more to overcome now with the stupid housekeeper coming forward with her tale of woe, but with the drug coursing through my system, what had begun to seem like a hill too hard to climb, was no longer the ordeal I'd made it out to be in my mind.

The only downside I've seen in the last few days since I started my new favorite pastime is that when the high wears off, those old thoughts crop back up, and I'm back to square one, which is further acerbated by my new circumstances. If anyone should find fault with my willingness to lose myself, if only for a few hours, I'd like to invite them to live with what I have been in the last few days alone and see if they'd do any different.

So, what I've found a new way to escape? I dare anyone, facing the same, not to be tempted, and besides, I can stop whenever I want. It's not like I plan on spending the rest of my life being strung out on drugs, living in this hellhole with the rest of these deadbeats. For one, I'm nothing like the others here who I found repulsive upon first meeting. That all changed immediately after my first hit. Then they seemed like kindred spirits.

But going back to the beginning, I'd been too out of it when I was picked up to say much of anything. Just the fact that I was leaving that place was enough. With my jaw wired shut, I couldn't say much anyway, but I could still think, and what was going through my head only filled me with dread and fear. I seriously thought my life would end there in that dark, dreary place where every sound I heard was thought to be my last.

Hunger, cold, and pain had pretty much overtaken me, and the fact that when morning broke, I had no way of escaping and knowing I had more of the night before to look forward to had made for a miserable time. So, I was more than relieved when I was picked up relatively unscathed from my time in desolation.

Of course, I kicked up a fuss when instead of the motel I'd been taken from, I was brought here. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what kind of place it was, and I was almost certain at this point that the Russo kid had something to do with it. My grunts and groans, which was all I could muster, had fallen on deaf ears, though, and the big burly man who hadn't said a word in the hour it took to bring me here had just tossed me out in an alley.

I'm not sure in my more lucid moments if I should be thankful that Frank, the first one to approach me once it looked like I really was meant to stay here, had befriended me. His assurance that the place wasn't as bad as it seemed fell on deaf ears, and I just wanted to get my bearings and figure out the fastest way out of here.

I couldn't talk, didn't have my phone, and had no way of contacting anyone, which made the whole situation seem worst. I had some idea of where I was, but having never been here before, it was a bit of a shock. I'd only heard of this part of town in passing but never had any need to be anywhere near this place and never wanted to; why would I? But the stress of fighting back pain from my injuries and the horror of the past two nights kind of muddled my brain, and maybe that's why it was so easy to accept his offer of help.

Upon noticing the pain, I was in; Frank had offered to share a hit of his joint with me. I saw nothing wrong with it if it was going to help ease my discomfort because weed never harmed anyone that I know of, and it's not like it would be the first time I'd partaken of a joint or two.

It didn't take me long, even though it had been some time since I'd smoked, to realize that there was something a little more added to the joint, and by the time we'd smoked the second one, I was up for anything. The fact that Frank was the only one with a tent out of this bunch didn't hurt either, so when he offered me shelter from the cold, I saw no reason not to accept.

It did strike me as odd that Frank seemed a bit more sophisticated and well put together than the others who seemed to steer clear of us once we got to talking, and his explanation of having only recently fallen on hard times more than explained the disparity. Now usually, I would've been very distrusting of this whole setup, but after the first couple of joints, I was feeling no pain, and with my own situation being what it was, who am I to distrust his story?

I brought up the fact that the weed seemed a bit more potent than the norm, and that's when he let it be known that he was new to the drug and had only turned to it in the last few days to help ease his own burdens. He'd asked one of the others who in turn divulged that this particular dealer Frank had bought from was known for lacing his weed with other things, namely meth, to keep his clients coming back for more.

Since I still had my faculties about me and was indeed feeling better than I had, I saw no reason to stop, not even when I found myself naked beneath someone, not sure who; it may have been Frank, but I can't be sure. After the hot and cold conditions of my marital bed added to the high, the sex was beyond anything I'd ever known, and so I stopped caring who or when in that first day and a half I was there.

I had a lot of energy and was no longer feeling desperate or like my life was coming to an end. In fact, listening to Frank, I started to build a new life in my head. According to Frank, he didn't expect to be down on his luck for long and was only

waiting for something to come through for him in the next couple of days. The fact that he seemed to like me only added fire to my new thoughts, and I guess you can say Frank and I grew close, forming a bond that it would take others years to build.

For this reason, I found it easy to share some of my past with dear old Frank, who listened and seemed to share my views on the whole situation. He seemed just as enraged as I when I told him about Felix's deceit in keeping Adrienne's things in storage, though I don't quite recall how we got on the subject.

So, for this reason, I didn't think twice when in a drug-induced rage, I let him talk me into going there to take care of the problem once and for all. I had no idea where the storage facility was since Felix never said, but Frank, being as smart as he is, used the process of elimination to narrow it down.

The fact that he had a car helped to reassure me that his story of having just fallen on hard times was true; I mean, how could he own a luxury vehicle had he not been who he said he was. His reasons for not living out of his car made sense too. It was more indeed more comfortable in the tent, which was roomier and warmer, with the little space heater he'd somehow rigged up using a portable battery-operated generator.

Having taken a hit just before leaving, I was feeling no pain once we started out on our little joyride. I was emboldened by Frank's assertions that I was in the right, that Felix had done me dirty by going behind my back and keeping mementos of his ex-wife. Of course, I didn't tell him about my part in Adrienne's death since that was neither here nor there.

By the time we reached the place, Frank had sworn it was it, it was a breeze getting confirmation from the lady in the office who was more than forthcoming with the information, even going so far as to point out which storage unit had been rented by one Felix Fontane, since I had ID proving that I was his wife.

The more I thought of that portrait and what else could be in that unit, the more enraged I became, and even without

Frank spurring me on further, I was ready to carry out my plans of revenge.

I'm sure the drug was responsible in part for my feeling of righteous indignation, but I was still in control of my senses. I grinned conspiratorially at Frank as I grabbed the can of gasoline from the trunk and even waved happily as I snuck around the back of the unit. I might've even hummed a ditty as I poured the gasoline all around the perimeter, giving no thought to the other structures because they had no meaning to me, and I simply didn't care.

The first gush of flames made my heart sing; I'm not going to lie. Seeing what was left of Adrienne going up in flames went a long way to making up for the last few crappy weeks I'd endured because of her daughter. I rushed back around the front to make my escape and rejoin Frank, who we'd decided would be the lookout while I did the deed but came up short when there was no sign of Frank and instead ran smack dab into Felix, who was screaming like a lunatic.



## GABRIEL



AS GIANNA TOOK her first bite of Crème Glacee, I was busy watching the screen of my phone where Nery, aka Frank, one of Tommy's underlings who I'd hired to do the job, was live-streaming the destruction of Felix and Becky Fontane. The volume was down, of course, as I'd convinced the others that I was checking on some mundane school project while they laughed and shared their excitement over being here in Paris.

Even without sound, it was easy enough to read what was happening. Nery had started rolling as soon as Becky took the gas from the trunk, and though I lost sight of her after she disappeared behind the storage unit, it was easy enough to see the flames as they rose.

As we'd planned, Nery changed location and drove out of sight across the way to a place he'd scoped out on his trial run out here, so he wouldn't miss the arrival of Felix, who I'd anonymously sent to the location at just the right time. Coordinating this part had been a bitch, and timing was everything.

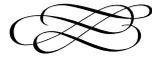
I watched Felix's arrival and the way he jumped out of his car and rushed towards the flames. His look of disbelief was followed by one of pure rage when Becky came skipping around the side of the building. The camera was still rolling when Felix wrapped his hands around Becky's neck and squeezed.

The grotesque look of horror on her face was more than satisfying, and between her struggles and the flames, the staff had been alerted. I watched long enough to see her body go limp before sending a text to Nery to vacate the area.

"All done?" Gianna, who'd been talking to the other three, turned to me with a smile.

"All done; where are we off to next?"

## GABRIEL



I excused myself to the restroom at the first available opportunity so I could make a call to the lawyer to whom I'd asked Pop to give a heads-up. I gave him a rundown of the situation in as concise a manner as I could, to which he didn't ask any questions and acted as though the call was just another of its kind in a long line of many. He's been around since a little before the end of Gramps' reign, so I'm sure that may be true.

"Try to get him off with manslaughter with extenuating circumstances."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, I have some evidence that should help his case." At least I have enough good in me to do this. Without Gianna's involvement, I would've let him rot, but I can't help but worry that she may look back someday and want this piece of trash in her life. Westerners are big on giving forgiveness, especially to those who never get around to asking for it.

The evidence I had consisted of all of Becky's actions in the last couple of days. Unbeknownst to her, 'Frank's' tent and car had been wired for visual and sound, so everything that was said and done there by her was recorded, on top of the fact that she supposedly burnt her husband's dead wife's belongings after gleefully bragging to 'Frank' about doing just that.

With her jaw wired shut and being high as a kite, her demeanor and behavior, from what little I'd seen, makes her

out to be a drug-addicted junkie. Sad as it is, someone of Felix's standing in the community won't be put away for too long for ridding the world of someone like that. Harsh, I know, but it's exactly what I was aiming for.

Especially in that last reel where she removed the gas can from the trunk, that grin, or what I'm sure she believed was a grin, came across more like a sinister sneer. I guess with the drugs in her system, she was feeling no pain, but she didn't give any thought to how she must look. Unbathed, unkempt, her hair a matted mess still with detritus from her stay in the woods. Anyone watching that will no doubt see exactly what I want them to—a burnt-out junkie set on destruction.

Her words, slurred as they were from the little I'd heard from the first recording I'd been sent, were more than enough to seal the deal. Nery had done an excellent job. I have to remember to take care of him and Tommy for doing so well at their task. "Keep me posted. Pop will probably call you after I'm done. You're free to answer all of his questions."

The lawyer promised to take care of it and added that he'd get a counselor onboard for Felix to add some traction to his case. I'd done all I intended to for him at this point, so I turned my phone off and switched my attention to making sure Gianna had the best time of her life so far. There was no way for anyone to get in touch with her about her dad, no one knew the number to the phone I bought her, and no one knew where she was except him. He's not going to call her even if he could.

I'll find a way after her debutante ball to break it to her gently, but since I expect her to be leaving with her grandmother, I think she'd be okay. She'll have people there to comfort her. It was a bit of a tug of war for me going ahead with destroying Felix just days before I broke the news of our split to her, but it couldn't be helped. The timing of all this isn't necessarily my doing after all. I'm just going with the flow.

At the end of the day, the bottom line is that no matter how I feel about her, or anyone else for that matter, I can't turn back the tide. I can't not be who I am. And though I know

she's going to be hurt, I'm hoping the pain wouldn't be as intense, seeing as how we've only known each other for a little more than a month.

I have no doubt that in time, she'll get over it, get over us, and move on. It's the moving on part that bothers me somehow, but so far, I've refused to look too deeply into why that should be. I won't be around anyway, so it shouldn't matter to me. But somehow it does, and just as with love, I have no idea how to deal with these feelings, have no experience with the emotions that thinking of her moving on with someone else when I'm gone evokes in me.

The rest of the day was spent in high anxiety for the girls who, once we returned to the castle, were inundated with preparations for the upcoming party the following night. Their chatter, especially hers, did my heart good because it was getting to the point where I couldn't put off thinking about my own doings much longer. I'd put aside my own plans and thoughts of what was to come to truly devote myself to her all day.

I wanted to give her that much, at least, because she deserved it and more. Now it was time to turn my focus once again to Sicily.

Now, to the reason for my little chat with the boys earlier. I'd decided at some point to allow them to join me on my trip to Sicily, only for the reason that if I disappeared, Pop would freak, and I didn't want that. I played around with the idea of sneaking out during the night, but because I'd never been there before and wasn't sure about the protocol of a young man entering a convent after hours, I didn't want to chance it.

This way, they will see it as just a side trip with no real significance, so not something they needed to report to him until it was all said and done. It may be going a bit overboard, but I like to cross all my T's and dot every I. By the time they realize I'm not really going to the catacombs but headed for the plane, it would be too late, and I'll just use my handy little device to jam their cellphones before takeoff, easy.

As for Pop's other little spy, for some reason, Lancelot decided to stick close to me for the rest of that first night with his distrusting ass, which in retrospect I didn't mind, since he can only run back and tell Pop that there was nothing going on. My calculations seem to be on point because even he had relaxed his stance and enjoyed his day instead of worrying about what I might be up to.

Outwardly I'd been my usual laid-back self, though, in my head, I'd been moving things around, preparing for any bumps in the road, and basically envisioning how I wanted things to play out. I was now very close to taking care of the one thing that had haunted me my entire life.

I was finally about to face my demons and put them to rest for good. If I were truly selfish, I would use the time left to gorge myself on Gianna, taking even more from her than I already have. Instead, I choose to do everything, give her everything, except more of me.

By that, I mean I won't touch her. There won't be any last one for the road. I'm not that callous to take her while knowing that it was over. It wouldn't be fair to her. So, I concentrated all my efforts on showing her the best time sans that. Just being here seems to be doing the trick, and the twins kept her preoccupied with their girly shit, which she was all into, so there is that.

"What are you up to?" I have no idea why he'd be asking me that, seeing as all I was doing at the moment was sitting quietly in a corner watching the girls at play.

"What is it that you think I'm up to?"

"You forget I know you? You've got that look in your eye."

"What look, you clown?"

"Your Pop's worried about you?"

"Why the heck would he be worried about me?"

"How would I know? You two and your double speak make me mental. Just tell me you're not about to do something stupid and put my mind at rest."

“I’m not about to do something stupid.”

He got his answer, but it didn’t seem to be enough since he stayed staring at the side of my head. “Maybe we should go grab Pop, do something with him.” I offered.

“Yeah?” He smiled big. He’s so easy.

“Why not? The women are about to descend any minute, and you know what that means.”

We could hear the sound of voices approaching which meant the women were about to go into another one of their everything ball marathons. I have absolutely no interest in living through that again, and Gianna doesn’t need me since she’d be surrounded, so it was as good a time as any to put Pop’s mind at ease.

I have every intention of sharing some of what I find with him, but not until I’m ready. After that trip, there’d be no point in pretending that I’m not involved, and he’d no longer have to skirt around the fact that he knows that I know the truth. I’ve only kept it up this long because it served my purpose, but that’s now coming to an end.

I said a rather comical goodbye to Gianna, which made her laugh and eased some of the rough edges around my heart, before leaving to go see the other being that I worry about the most.



## DRACO



I WATCHED Lance for any signs when the two of them walked into the room. His dismissive shrug didn’t exactly make me breathe easy, but it was better than I expected. I was beginning to think that I was on the wrong track after receiving the call I just did from my lawyer. Maybe Fontane and his woman were all Gabe was thinking about after all.

I'm dying to ask the kid what exactly he'd done to put that sound of awe in the attorney's voice, but of course, I won't be doing that in front of witnesses and especially not Lance. As close as they are, Gabe has always made it a point not to discuss certain things in front of his chosen brother because of Lance's interest in joining the force at some point.

Even now, he thinks about the impact it would have on his brother's future. Gotta love that kid. If he could just stay in Machiavellian mode and ease off the Sun Tzu, I wouldn't worry so much. If he was going with The Prince, then he wouldn't give a fuck about any damage he's about to do. He'd just do his thing and move on to the next until the day he dies, somewhere in the distant future.

But with the Sun Tzu and Confucius leanings, things might get a bit sticky, which is what I've always been worried about. I'm not sure which code of honor he's going to go with in the end. Too damn smart for his own good sure, but it's his innate sense of justice that has me on my toes. He's like a mix of Bruce Lee and Sonny Corleone; you'd have to see it.

On top of that, I'm worried about the fallout from his mother. If losing him would gut me, it'll kill my Sofia. But I can't get ahead of this thing because I don't have the first clue as to what he's up to. The little shit hasn't given anything away, not even a hint. I'm trying to remember if I was that good at his age, and I don't see it.

This kid, who'd been unwanted by my parents before he was even born, had grown to win them over to the point Pop would take a bullet for him. His grandmother gives him her blessing every morning, whether over the phone or when we're together, with a kiss on his brow. She worries about him, prays for him, everything she did for Garrett and me.

His sisters worship him, and that's no cliché. Even without knowing the circumstances of his conception, they seem to have some sixth sense that he needs more than most. It's funny to watch the dynamic between the three of them. He protects them while they protect him, and the love, that bond, it surpasses anything any parent anywhere could ask for.

And now there's the girl, Gia. She looks at my kid like he hung the moon. They've known each other for a mere few weeks, and already he'd won her over. Not only that, but the lengths he'd gone to, to protect her, to give her back some of what she'd lost, even going so far as to give her family. How can he not see how perfect he is in all our eyes?

Because of this, I've been battling my anger at my darling wife over this shit more in the last few days than ever before. The more I worry that he's about to make a move against Ricci, the more I resent her for telling my kid that shit. Of course, she couldn't have known that he'd study men like Sun Tzu and Niccolò Machiavelli, or that he'd have a code of honor not like our modern counterparts but like someone forged in the damn BC era when people's honor meant something.

Still, she should never have told him, and I'm afraid there's going to be some tension between her and me if anything happens to our son because of it. I'm sure she was still full of vengeance when she told him about her past and had all but forgotten it as time went on.

I'd gone out of my way after all to, if not erase her past, numb her to the effects of that night. I won't ever say she had no right to her need for revenge, and in some ways, I can see why she'd told him, why she'd expected what she did by telling him. Ma would've done the same, no doubt. In theory, it sounds good. In practice, as a man who just wants to protect his son, it's fucked.

And now she's here, laughing, shopping, having a good time, not realizing that there's a good chance this could all come crashing down in a day or two. How the fuck am I supposed to shield her from that shit when I don't even know what type of shit it is? The boy gives me nothing.

I sicced Lance on his ass, but from his noncommittal shrug just now, he didn't learn anything. On the other hand, he was with Gabe all afternoon and didn't know that the kid had basically offed someone using someone else's hands to do it halfway around the world while they enjoyed the sights or whatever it was they were doing at the time.

Look, I have no issue with my son offing people who deserve it. When my Poppy got hit all those years ago, I did what I had to do and will always do to protect me and mine. I get a kick out of the mind fuck games he seems to be so adept at playing with people as well, even though he kinda makes me nervous with how good he is at that shit.

I'm Machiavellian with my shit. You hit me; I hit you back end of story. Gabe is a whole different breed. I know enough to know that it messes with his head that he has part of Ricci in him. If I could, I would cut it out and replace it with the best of me, but I can't, and his young mind and heart doesn't seem able to separate the two, which I know but can't address because we're in that weird space where he's not supposed to know that I know and so on and so on.

I want to go to him and tell him not to do anything without me. But how can I without letting him know that I know what his mother had shared with him? She'd meant that to stay between the two of them, and I dare not breach, but it's tearing me up inside. He's my boy, my son. I want to protect him. But he's a man now, too, isn't he? A man with his own convictions and ethics. How can I stand in the way of that?



GIANNA



THERE'S something going on with Gabriel. I think! I can't quite put my finger on it. It's nothing he's doing outright, just that feeling in my gut. No, it's his eyes; there's something in his eyes, though he's good at keeping them hidden. Maybe I'm overthinking since no one else seems to have noticed anything off.

He's been his usual self all day, nothing lacking in his care and protection of me. I've started checking for these little cues just here lately when I first had that gut feeling. I've been a

little self-conscious, thinking that he was already suffering from burnout from having to deal with my family's issues so early in our relationship. But somehow, I don't see him as the type.

Nothing much seems to faze him, and he's been nothing but considerate, compassionate, even loving towards me. I guess that feeling of distance growing between us could be my own insecurities. Now that the highs and lows of dealing with Becky and Victoria are at an end, I guess I'm feeling a bit adrift. I've never not had to deal with them and the trauma they inflicted.

I'm more aware now than ever that Gabriel only came into my life because of Victoria's bullying, and that too is the only reason he'd moved me into his home. Not that I expected to stay there forever but knowing that it was coming to an end soon leaves me feeling like I'd already lost something special.

So, each time I get that feeling in my gut that I know pertains to him, I start looking for answers. It's easy to forget who he is when he looks at me with such longing in his eyes. I sometimes pinch myself or hug the dog too tight when I remember something amazing he'd done for me.

But here in the last few days, I've been feeling that distance though I can't quite put my finger on why because he hasn't changed towards me, other than the fact that we haven't made love in a bit. You'd think as teenagers who'd taken the lid off that particular jar; we'd be at it all the time.

It had been like that in the beginning, I think, but it's only been a few weeks; surely, the honeymoon phase shouldn't be over. But then I think about all he'd had to do for me in that time, how much he'd achieved on my behalf, and I wonder if maybe he's just had enough and had lost interest because of the burdens I'd brought into his life.

It's hard to know because neither he nor his family has made me feel like a nuisance neither by word nor deed. In fact, the more I notice the distance forming between Gabe and I, the more I realize how much the rest of his family had accepted me. So why do I feel like I'm about to lose it all? What is this

feeling of pending doom that seems to hang over me just here lately?

I fought back those dreary thoughts feeling ungrateful for not enjoying this once-in-a-lifetime experience that I wouldn't have had without Gabriel either. I owe him so much; he'll never know. So, what gives me the right to want more? He's already gone above and beyond and done more than I ever expected from anyone.

So, for now, no matter how my gut gnawed at me, I'm going to put it away and enjoy myself the way everyone else around me is. It wasn't so hard to do. The place, my family's estate, which I still can't wrap my head around, this city, the upcoming ball, all of it, is more than enough to keep my mind from straying.

I looked around the room at the others, my eyes landing on Gabriel just as he stood to leave the room. He came over to tell me he was making his escape when we heard his mother and the other ladies coming, which made me smile at his comical look of horror. He's been a star this whole day, making my first day here in this magical place even more spectacular than it would've been without him.



SOPHIA



YES, yes, yes, this is perfect and all that I'd been wishing for. It didn't bother me that my son had left the room as soon as I walked in. All that I cared about was the fact that he seemed relaxed and at ease. The fear in the pit of my stomach that had appeared ever since I realized that Gabe would be this close to Sicily could be put to rest now.

Over the years, I never questioned why my family had traveled the entire globe without stepping foot in Europe. I'd at first thought it was Draco's way of protecting me, knowing

that Alonzo Ricci had the run of the European Union had made even the thought of coming here break me out in a panic.

I thought that my husband had been reading my mind all these years and avoided Europe for my sake. But funnily enough, in the last week or so, my mind has been filled with thoughts of Gabe and his proximity to the man who'd fathered him. It's not that he's said or done anything to alert me, just a feeling.

In the last month or so, I've not given much thought to Gabe and his thoughts about Ricci, not for a while anyway. He'd been so in love, so caught up in his new relationship that I didn't think he'd have time for anything else. So I have no idea why hearing that we'd be coming here should put me in such a state of panic.

The truth is that Gabe has never mentioned the things I'd told him back then to me, so I've never been sure if he even remembered or gave it much thought. I know well what my purpose was in telling him, what I essentially wanted to get out of sharing such a thing with my only son.

But as time went on, I somehow convinced myself that my sweet boy wouldn't give too much thought to it, that he'd probably decided to move on since our lives were so much better. I, too, had moved on from those days and rarely gave them a thought. Until Gabe turned eighteen, was it only a few weeks ago that I brought it up to my husband? It seems so long ago.

Because now, seeing him with Gia, I can't imagine him getting himself involved in anything that would take him away from her. I've never seen him this happy, this carefree and relaxed. She'd become his entire universe, something any mother worth her salt would reject, seeing her baby being taken by the new beautiful lady in his life. But for me, it was a blessing.

I knew with her in the picture, Gabe would get himself in order and forget what I'd so foolishly shared with him in a moment of weakness and sheer madness if the truth be known. Back then, even after years of living with my husband and his

love for me and my kids, I'd still been harboring that longing for vengeance.

Maybe it was seeing my son become a man. I don't know. Something about him coming of age had unleashed all that I'd kept bottled up inside for so long. It was his right to know as well; I'd thought, and his right as my son to seek justice. But then, as the kids grew and my boy became more and more special with each passing day, I no longer wanted him touched by the ugliness of that night.

I've regretted a million times ever sharing that part of me with him. And in the months leading up to him meeting Gia, had worried that he might do something. Now he has her, and I don't need to worry. I can be here in this place, take trips in the future, I hope, and not worry about him flitting away to go to Sicily.

I have no doubt he could do it if he wanted to. The boy is resilient and very meticulous in his dealings. Listening to the stories that Stella tells about all that he'd done at the Fontane residence is proof of that. He has no idea that I know what all he's been up to there. I pretend to accept his watered-down versions of events, even though I know Stella's version, told to her by the Fontane's housekeeper, would be vastly different.

As I watched the girls in their excitement, a gnawing trill of doubt intruded on my otherwise peaceful thoughts. Gabe had gone to such lengths for a girl he'd only just met. In a matter of weeks, he'd executed a plan, so flawlessly I'd doubted Stella's words until I'd seen the results with my own eyes.

That feeling of dread came back full force, and I swallowed hard around the lump that suddenly formed in my throat. What did I miss? Did I miss something? I better talk to Draco tonight when we're in bed. But Gabe hasn't been anything other than his usual self all day. Maybe I'm overthinking because it's the first time we'd been this close to my old home. Just a plane ride away.

No, nothing's going to happen. I bet Gabe hasn't given any thought to those things in years. Nevertheless, I'd better have a

word with his dad. How often I'd wished we'd never told Gabe the truth about his birth, that he was adopted by his Pop. How different would his life have been had he not known, had that blemish not been there? Why am I thinking such morbid thoughts right now?

One of my twins called out to me, and I made a motherly effort to put all other things aside and concentrate on the girls and making sure this ball, one of the most sought after by the elite, was everything they wanted it to be.

## GABRIEL



The ball, the main event. I did my part well. It was no hardship; I was genuinely and sincerely blown away by Gianna when I got my first look at her in the haute couture ball gown she'd chosen from one of the leading fashion houses in Paris. Unlike other debutante balls, this one was all about introducing high fashion, and the gown she wore along with the jewelry was provided by a very well-known designer.

Words cannot describe what I felt as I took her in; her beauty, so surreal, like a picture, come to life. Not a hair was out of place, her skin flawless, the midnight blue dress that matched her eyes perfectly and hugged her curves in all the right places, she looked like a dream.

"You're beautiful." I kept myself in check, taking only the touch of her hand and a soft kiss to her brow for myself, though it was hard to stop there. I warred viciously, with myself internally fighting hard not to cross the line. I knew it was going to be almost impossible to let go of something so beautiful it hurts.

"Shall we?" I offered her my arm, which she took willingly, and went to meet the others. The last ball my sisters attended, they, along with everyone else, were made to wear white, which they'd bitched about because it made them feel too much like brides, and apparently, for fifteen almost sixteen-year-olds, that's anathema.

Tonight, they sparkled in their favorite color of yellow. These gowns even outshone the ones they'd just recently worn for their sweet sixteen, from Disney princesses to the belles of

the ball. I'm not sure how they pulled it off, getting some highbrow designer to agree to make them the same dress, but I smell Russo money behind it.

I'd done my research enough to know that these things are heavy on charity and gift-giving, which means Pop was probably dropping a mint for his kids to rub elbows with people he wouldn't even sneeze at in passing. Just one of the many lengths the great man would go to to please his progeny.

The three of them needed one last round of commiseration, and Gianna was snatched away from me and taken to the other side of the room. They look too grown, all three of them. But looking at Gianna actually made my chest hurt. My selfish gene was taking over, and for a second there, I gave serious thought to throwing everything else to the side and just basking in her. The thought didn't last long, but it felt good while it lasted.

I didn't have to think too hard to figure out why Lancelot had a sour face on once he joined me. Anytime the girls look too mature, too grown-up for their age, he gets like this. "It's a celebration; fix your mug."

"You know as well as I do that those two are going to be a damn handful. You forget the last catastrophe? Why the hell did they have to grow up so fast?" He tugged at the lapels of his tux and sucked his teeth while glaring across the room at them.

"Miss the pigtails, do you?"

"Yes, if you must know. Look at the two of them. Geez, Gabe, in two years, they'll be eighteen, going away to college. I need a Tums." He rubbed his chest and walked over to where the girls were standing in a huddle with Gianna as we waited for the adults to join us. From the eye rolls and hand gestures, I ascertained that he was lecturing them...again.

We were joined by the others and soon took off for the Shang Ri La Paris, where the party of the century was to be held. The place had once belonged to the Bonaparte family, some prince or the other, and had since been turned into an overpriced hotel for the rich and shameless. Tonight, it was

decked out to accept the daughters of the elite from all across the globe.

I'm not sure how elite it is since they accept the offspring of movie stars et al., but I'm the son of Draco Russo, and I'm here, so who am I to talk? One good thing about the night was that I got to see firsthand how the tables had turned. Just a few weeks ago, I'd taken a small-town girl to New York, done some shopping, and tried my best to turn her life around, at least in the fashion sense.

Tonight, my sisters and I, in fact, my whole family, looked on as that girl's grandmother introduced her around to her friends, and she was treated like damn near royalty. For me, the highlight of the night was all the people who remembered her mother, men, and women who'd known another side to Adrienne when she was younger before she got married.

There were invitations made and accepted, and of course, Gianna didn't leave out my sisters. Each time someone drew her into conversation, she made sure to drag the twins along with her as if they were a package deal. Now don't get me wrong, all of the young girls there tonight shone, but there was no mistaking who won the show.

The three of them drew the eye like no other, and poor Lancelot was having a time of it not letting his caveman DNA take over. Pop and I bonded over shared laughter at his antics, and I think the night went a long way to easing Pop's mind a bit. Surely, I couldn't be plotting mayhem while standing here with a carefree smile on my face, ribbing my best friend and commenting on the differing aspects of the night.

We only had one day left in the city before we returned home, so I'm sure he was breathing a sigh of relief that nothing had gone awry. I'd spent the day today in the catacombs as promised, with my team on my tail, making sure they saw my every move. The fact that I had not fulfilled my tour was not missed by any, so that tomorrow when I disappear under the guise of returning there to finish, no one would bat a lash.

The night was long and fun, including the clubbing that followed. The girls made new friends, but I noticed Gianna stayed close to me. From the looks she gave me every so often, I was almost certain she suspected something. She didn't bring it up, and neither did I and so the rest of the evening went well.

It was coming back to the castle, where things got hairy. She was in the mood to get close, and I, having promised myself not to use her again, didn't know how to ease out of it without hurting her feelings. It was there in her eyes that if I rejected her again, came up with one more excuse; it would break her.

I had another battle with myself as I weighed the pros and cons of giving into her. She didn't know what I did, that after tomorrow she wouldn't be in my life. That I planned to send her away because I was too selfish to let her stay in the only home she's ever known because it was too close, and I can't bear the thought of her being that close and not being able to see her, to have her...

The monster had made all those plans behind her back. The monster had planned out her life without her knowing, claiming that it was all for her while knowing that he was doing it mostly for himself because he's a coward. So, what did this coward do? Take a wild guess.

Because I couldn't stand to see that look on her face, couldn't bear to walk away for the last time, leaving her feeling unwanted rejected, I opened my arms when she turned to me and took her in. Her gown and jewelry had already been returned, and the dress she wore now came apart easily in my hands as I tore in my haste to get to her flesh.

Her skin was warm and soft beneath my hands, and when she pushed my shirt aside and laid her head on my chest over my heart, I almost gave in. I had to close my eyes and concentrate to calm the wild beating of my heart and the racing of my pulse. What is she doing to me?

She touched me as if she knew that this would be the last time. There were tears in her eyes I saw when I finally laid her

across the bed before coming down to rest between her thighs. I looked down at her for much longer than necessary, trying to read her tear-filled eyes before making my way down her body to give her my mouth.

Her taste rushed through me, bringing me close to tears. Her fingers in my hair pulling me closer to her heat, the way her hips moved as I shoved my tongue deeper and deeper still, the way she filled my mouth with her essence, I took it all in, stashing it away for some later date when missing her became too much.

My cock throbbed with anticipation when her small hand wrapped around my heat, the precum freely escaping to coat her palm. I surged into her hand as she massaged me with care, her eyes following the movement as I fucked her hand, gritting my teeth against the need to slam into her and slate the lust she'd awakened in me.

By the time I slipped into her, we were both on the brink. Maybe it was knowing that this would be the last time that made it so potent, but it was the best we'd ever shared. My every sense was heightened; her every move, every sound she made, all of it, was imprinted on my heart.

I covered her mouth to hide her screams of pleasure, stopping them from carrying in the four-hundred-year-old house. Outside, a nightingale sang as we moved together on silk sheets that seemed to enhance our lovemaking as we slipped and slid together. Each move took me deeper into her depths, even before she grabbed my ass and pulled me into her harder.

Our lips stayed fused together, and I took her screams and moans into me, fueling the need that refused to abate inside of me. I went from not wanting to take any more from her to doing my best to leave an impression. I used my cock to mark her where my teeth didn't. Each thrust carried a silent message, or was it a cry for help?

I felt desperate as her sex clung to me with each slide in and out of her. I sucked the tears from the corners of her eyes and whispered words of praise in her ear. Each time I came

close, telling myself to pull out to protect her, but still not wanting to leave her, not yet, just one more stroke.

I fucked, she moaned, and the dance started over from the beginning again and again until I was emptying myself inside her. We stayed there all night. I lost count of how many times I had her, how many times I buried myself deep until I emptied my balls. The last time was just before the sun came up and the house began to stir.

I rolled away from her, leaving her fast asleep to go back to my room. I didn't give myself the luxury of looking back at her, not after the sweet kiss to her sleeping lips and one final touch of my fingertip to her brow. I refuse to beat myself up. What's done is done. I won't pretend it was all just for her. I wanted it maybe more than she did.

There was no time for sleep. I had to get a move on before Pop caught wind. The pilot had been sworn to secrecy with the lie that I was making the trip to my mother's hometown to get her a surprise. The ninja turtles were under the impression we were going to finish up yesterday's tour where we left off, and the others had plans for their last day in the city of love.

A long hot shower helped remove the scent of sex, but nothing could erase the memory from my mind or ease the ache of the scratches her nails had made down my back and on my sides. I got dressed and left to get the others, knowing as I walked out the door and into the car that this would be the last time Gabriel Russo existed.



FELIX



COMPLEX PTSD! The words kept playing over and over again in my head, but they made no sense, just like everything else in the last few days. The therapist seems sure of her diagnosis, but how is it possible? I've never been to war, never really

faced anything harder than Adrienne's death, but according to the therapist the lawyer had hired, that's what had caused it. For the past decade, I've been suffering from something I didn't even know existed.

I looked around my bedroom, still not sure why they'd released me. I'd killed someone with my bare hands. I looked down at those hands now, still not quite believing where things had gone. The last two days were still a blur, intensified no doubt by the alcohol I'd consumed before the incident.

There were still a lot of missing pieces. Like whom had it been who'd called me and told me about the fire? No one had come forward to own up to that. The last thing I remember was being at home losing myself once again in a fifth of scotch or was it bourbon, no cognac, that's right, it was cognac.

Anyway, I was sitting there feeling sorry for myself and bemoaning what had become of my life. It was hard looking back and seeing all of my mistakes, things that I'd overlooked but were so glaringly obvious now, now that the Russos had brought them to light.

I guess I have them to thank for saving my daughter, but what about me? What purpose do I serve in her life after the hell that I'd allowed her to suffer? She was off to Paris with the grandmother I'd kept her from, a woman who'd never been anything but kind to me until Becky.

As I sat there reliving and recalling all that had been, I hated myself even more. I was ashamed to even think about Adrienne, knowing that she would've been disappointed in the mess I'd made of our daughter's life. Just thinking about it had almost driven me insane.

The phone call coming out of nowhere with the dreadful news that the storage unit was on fire and that some woman claiming to be my wife was the culprit had sobered me up enough to get behind the wheel and make it there in half the time it usually took. Thinking of Adrienne's belongings, her legacy to our daughter, going up in flames at the hands of the bitch who'd already done so much was more than I could take.

I don't think I went there with the intent to kill, though. I don't know what I'd planned to do beyond getting there as fast as I could and salvaging anything that had not already been destroyed. But when I saw Becky with that gleeful look on her face, it was the last straw.

I didn't realize what I'd done until the police got there, and by then, it was too late. She was dead, by my hands, literally. For some reason, the alcohol haze kicked back in, and I was no use to myself or the cops who kept repeating the same questions over and over until the lawyer who I'd never met showed up and claimed he was there to represent me.

It was him who'd insisted on a therapist, him who'd put a stop to any and all questions, and him, a complete stranger in whom I now have no choice but to put my trust. But those words, what do they mean? CPTSD! According to the therapist, who I've only seen twice now, my mind had been fractured by the loss of my wife.

Everything I'd done in the last ten years was through the haze and fog. I still can't wrap my mind around it, don't understand. I never felt ill or like anything was off. But the therapist assures me that that is part of my mental illness. I needed a drink in the worst way, but both the lawyer and the therapist had made me swear not to touch the bottle. Besides, alcohol doesn't go well with the pills the therapist had prescribed.

I took them now and waited for the effect to kick in. I'm not sure what they're meant to do, these pills, but all they do is bring to mind all that I had done wrong. I see myself as if looking at someone else, and I hate myself more and more. Within minutes things changed, and I didn't feel so bereft any longer, but I was tired, so tired. I have to make it up to her, to Gia, no wait, Gianna, my daughter's name is Gianna.

## GABRIEL



The look of confusion on my followers' faces when we didn't head in the direction they expected was priceless. I'm surprised it took them this long to question the early morning outing seeing as how nothing was open this early except maybe cafes. But I'd decided to throw them off the scent entirely by waking them myself and inviting them to join me.

Of course, I never told them we were going back to the catacombs; they just assumed since I'd made mention of finishing up my tour—a bit misleading but not an outright lie. But I'm sure they knew the place didn't open this early. They were even more flustered when the driver pulled onto the tarmac where the jet was waiting.

I pretended not to notice their shared looks when the jammer in my pocket blocked them from making any calls. I'm sure they suspected me of sabotage, but what were they going to do? Of the five of us, only one of us is a level ten grandmaster, and besides, I'm the boss's son, they wouldn't dare lay a hand on me or do much of anything else because the same man who hired them would have their ass if they even tried, which begs the question, what exactly was Pop expecting them to do in a situation like this.

"You coming?" I turned on the top step leading into the plane to look back at them as they stood around, probably brainstorming what to do. They were damned if they did and damned if they didn't. This ought to teach them to choose a

side real quick. I might pull my punches with Pop, but I don't owe them the same deal.

They followed behind me, and I hid the smirk I was sure would piss them off. The poor pilot and the rest of the flight staff suffered a glare from Marcus, but the other three just grabbed their seats and buckled in since the pilot had strict orders to leave as soon as my ass hit the seat and had started the engine almost as soon as the door was closed.

I have no idea what they did in the almost two and a half hours it took to get to Catania, but I spent my time finalizing my attack. I have no idea what I'm about to find or how I will be received. And because I don't know why this sister Margarite had joined the convent so soon after that night, I was expecting things to go either way.

I'd called ahead of course and was expected. I gave the abbess some story about wanting to give back in the name of my grandmother in the form of a very hefty contribution, which I do intend on giving them. So, when I inquired about sister Margarite, whose name had been changed from Athena, they were only too happy to facilitate a meeting between us.

Their ready acceptance told me at least one thing, she was not in hiding, or at least it didn't seem so. Why would they be so quick to divulge the fact that she was there if that were the case? On the other hand, I didn't ask for her by the old name, so they could not suspect anything from that angle either.

Whatever the case, once we landed and took the drive out to the almost dilapidated building that had been standing since the seventeenth century or thereabouts, I was ready for any eventuality. "The rest of you stay here. I won't be long." I stepped out of the car and left them to their own devices.

"Shouldn't we check this place out first?" Denver walked up beside me.

"It's a convent; what're you expecting to happen?"

"Oh, a convent." As I expected, that news seemed to put him at ease, and he went back to share with his cohorts after

proclaiming that they would walk around the grounds, all the same, to make sure the place was safe.

The sister who met me was cordial and more than welcoming, her thick accent almost indiscernible as she tried to speak English. I soon put her at ease with my fluent Sicilian, and that, along with the check I'd brought along with me, seemed to reassure her that I had no ill will towards sister Margarite, who I insisted on seeing once our business was over.

"She should be leaving mass right about now. I'll send her out to the back garden and keep the other sisters away to give you some privacy." Her smile was reassuring.

"I appreciate it, thanks." She showed me out to the back garden and pointed out a stone bench where I could sit and wait. I gave her my thanks once again but preferred to stand.

I'm nervous! It's a new experience for me, this uneasy fluttering in the pit of my stomach that felt like dread. Not the sweet little anticipatory butterflies you get when about to face something good.

In all the years I've been putting my plan together, I never once felt anything other than determination, but now, now that I'm here, I almost don't want to know what I came to learn. I'd stopped reliving that night in my head from the story Ma told me a long time ago.

But I was aware that I was about to open that wound again, with not only a stranger but someone who'd been there that night. Someone who I wouldn't have any qualms about asking the tough questions as I did with Ma.

Though the building could do with some TLC, the grounds were another matter altogether. The garden was well-kept, with a myriad of colors and vines clinging to the outside walls and anything else they could find. I didn't worry about the guys finding me here because this part of the grounds was sectioned off and only accessible through the building, which they couldn't freely enter at will.

It wasn't long before I heard footsteps behind me and took a deep breath before gearing up myself to turn around and face her. Her reaction was not what I expected to say the least and almost sidetracked me from my purpose for being here; it was so visceral.

"You! How can this be? Why haven't you aged?" She looked petrified and flustered and actually took a few steps back as if to turn and run away.

"I'm not who you think I am." I kept my voice low and even so as not to spook her any more than she already seemed to be.

"Of course you are. What are you then? Fantasima'?" A ghost! She looked like she almost believed it. "I'm the son of Sofia Antonelli."

I could see the wheels turning, saw almost to the second when she put two and two together. I wasn't surprised that she mistook me for him, Alonzo Ricci; I already knew I had his face. But from the reaction, I'm guessing I look even more like him in person.

My nervousness turned to anger for some reason. Maybe because she was the first one I'd met from my mother's past. Due to her new position as a nun, I'd almost convinced myself that I'd go easy on her. Now that we were standing face to face, that wasn't going to happen.

"Why didn't you do anything that night?"

"What night do you refer to?" She looked away from me, giving away the fact that she knew exactly what I was talking about, not that there was ever any doubt.

"You know what night I'm talking about. Don't play games." I had to remind myself that she was not the main target.

"No, no, I don't...."

"The night she was raped right in front of you." This part I wasn't a hundred percent sure of until now until the look of remembered horror and disgust flitted across her face. I breathed just that much easier now. There was no doubt that

she was there and that she knew and could give me the answers I sought.

My words shook her to the core, and she ended up dropping down onto the bench when her legs gave out beneath her. Her eyes had that faraway look of someone who's lost in thought and memory. "There was nothing I could do. I was little more than a child myself." Something in me relaxed at her willingness to answer.

"And after?"

"After, there was no one I could tell. You don't understand, your father, he...."

"He's not my father." Why did her saying that piss me off so much? Just being associated with him in any way was a sore point of contention. Bad enough, she'd looked at me like a monster. I didn't want her lumping me together with him in any way, not even in her mind.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to offend. What did your mother tell you about that night?"

"She told me everything, but I'm sure there were some things she didn't know. Like why did it happen? Who knew it was going to happen? How did it start? I know she wasn't friends with him, so how did she end up there that night?" I knew most of this already, but I needed to know what went down from the other side.

"That was so long ago; I don't...."

"Don't they teach you not to lie in places like this? You remember everything about that night." Here, I went out on a limb. "In fact, you remember it so well that you ran away to this place to get away from it." Her deflation and look of defeat were all the answer I needed. "Now tell me what you know about that night, don't leave out a thing."

I was betting on her being forthcoming for the mere fact that I'd found her. She may not have told the convent about her past after all and may indeed be in hiding. If I have to threaten her with exposure, guess what I'd do. She took a minute to compose herself, and then it all came tumbling out.

Every sordid detail that Ma would not have known about and therefore could not share.

“That night started out like any other. The Riccis were known for their parties in the neighborhood. Everybody wanted to be invited. It was an every weekend thing when we were younger. There was a group of us, all close friends, all children of old friends that had grown up together and moved in the same circles for generations. Some of us were even distant cousins.”

“I was one of the youngest and had only been to a handful of parties at that point. But I’d heard the stories, seen some of it firsthand.”

“Seen some of what?”

“The games the others played. Their cruelty, especially your...especially Alonzo.” She said his name almost as if it burned her tongue. “Go on!”

“Their games seemed to get more daring as time went on. But nothing was as bad as that night, at least not then. Before they’d go too far, cross the line sometimes, but that night, it’s as if something had taken them all over. I couldn’t believe they were even considering it, but because I was younger and relatively new to the group, my voice was drowned out by the others.”

“I knew he had a thing for Sofia; everyone knew. But when I overheard what they were planning, I felt sick. I told myself it was a joke, as you Americans say, a prank. But when I asked, they just laughed it off as if it were nothing.”

“What did you overhear?” She looked at me as if weighing her words, but my look probably warned her to give it to me straight. But not even I was prepared.

“Sofia never gave Alonzo the time of day. While all the other girls in the village were vying for his attention, she stood out as the one who had no use for him. She wasn’t impressed with his wealth or his family name, none of it. She just wanted nothing to do with him or any of his friends, for that matter. Alonzo, along with some of the others, was very affronted by

this. As he was the leader of the pack, they all looked up to him, and his prowess was theirs, that sort of thing.”

“It was a joke among some of them, and I guess the last time she shot him down in front of them, he took offense more than at any other time and his friends making fun of him for being turned down by a girl from one of the poorest families in the village fueled his anger and depravity.”

I didn’t respond, and she looked at me as if seeking permission to go on. A slight nod of my head gave her the go-ahead, and I looked away from her, turned my back even, to give her space, to make it easier for her to say the words she seemed to be having such a hard time saying.

“The weeks leading up to the party, they hatched a plan. It was the most abhorrent thing I’d ever heard, and I’d heard plenty since joining the ranks of their friends.”

“What plan did they hatch? Who are they?”

“It was all of them, but mainly Felice.” The name sounded familiar. It was the name of Ricci’s wife, whom he’d married just two years after the occurrence.

“What did Felice do?” I didn’t ask if she was the same one. I didn’t want to reveal the fact that I had a dossier on the entire Ricci clan.

“She befriended Sofia. Everyone knew Sofia was a very pleasant girl; she just didn’t mix with the wealthy families in the village. She usually stuck close to home, close to her father.”

I had a feeling where this was going and could already feel my hackles rise, but it was worse, much worse. I listened as she recalled the story of what happened that fateful night. How this Felice had befriended Ma, how she’d tricked her that night into thinking they were going someplace else before luring her into the Ricci mansion where a party was being held.

“Felice was besotted with Alonzo back then; she even went on to marry him after this. Anyway, that night she was the one who brought Sofia to Alonzo. They were all waiting,

Alonzo, Luna, Antonio, Carlo, Bruno, Michele, Teresa', and myself."

"What about the brother? Martin."

"Oh, he was away at university then. He never hung around with us; he wasn't much like his brother. He was more of an academic than the rest of us and spent most of his time away at school or traveling to some out-of-the-way place to do research; he's an anthropologist now."

"As I said, we were all waiting when Felice came back with Sofia. Are you sure you want me to go on?" I was clenching my teeth so hard I could only nod.

"As soon as Sofia entered the room and saw us standing there, she tried to leave, but Felice and Michele dragged her into the room. They were all laughing... she was screaming to be let go. Her eyes... such terror."

She shivered as if reliving it while I cautioned myself not to wrap my hands around her neck and squeeze. She was just a kid herself, maybe the twins' age, I'm guessing from her youthfulness now. She couldn't be much younger than Ma, but she was younger.

I listened through the ringing in my ears as she told the story of my mother's rape, how my mother was held down and violated, how the others cheered, how my poor mother had dragged herself across the room, bleeding after the attack. I wanted to kill her, to lash out, and I did.

"And you just stood there. No cry for help. You unconscionable..."

"There was nothing I could do. Don't you think I've wished a thousand times that I'd done something? There isn't a day that goes by where I don't wish I had done something, anything except covering my ears and eyes and pretending like it never happened."

"There wasn't anything I could do. I was just a young girl myself. That night has traumatized me my whole life since then. I've never been able to sleep without seeing it. I still hear her screams in my head; that's why I'm here, to make penance.

All I could do... in the end, all I could do for her was get her father out of danger when he came back days later looking for revenge. He was so badly hurt....”

Wait, what? “You know where my grandfather is?” My heart raced and knocked against my chest as that ringing slowly began to clear.

“Yes!”

## GABRIEL



“Tell me!” If I were sitting down, I’d be at the edge of my seat. The fact that I’d imagined just this scenario wasn’t lost on me. From the time I found out that she’d disappeared and when I’d tried to triangulate between her disappearance and his, but having nothing to go on, I could only speculate and surmise.

Now I did sit down on the bench as my whole body felt like it was on fire, and I was in danger of passing out any second as the blood rushed from my head. “It was just a few days after the incident. I’m not sure why I kept going around them. I didn’t want to be ostracized, I guess, didn’t want them turning their hatred against me. I’m sorry I wasn’t a better person back then.”

“They all moved on as if nothing happened, even joked about it amongst themselves in the following days. There were whispers around the village, so we knew word had gotten out somehow. Then one night, your grandfather Mr. Antonelli showed up at the place where we were all hanging out. It was bad. He tried confronting Alonzo, but they all ganged up on him.”

“He was taken to a place in the woods where we hung out sometimes, and they beat him unmercifully. I guess he wasn’t expecting it, wasn’t prepared. Had it been Alonzo alone, he would’ve succeeded, but with all the others joining in, he was no match for them. Not even with a pistol.”

“Who was there?”

“The same people that were there the night of the party, they always hung out together and were very rarely apart back then. It was almost impossible to find one without the other.” She seemed to get lost in thought for a second.

“Go on!”

“Once again, I stood around. I didn’t take part, but somehow I was able to convince them that he’d had enough when he was no longer moving.”

“And?” I wonder if that one word sounded as strained with anger to her as it did to my own ears.

“And we left, just left him there to die. I went back once we’d all gone back to our homes, swearing each other to secrecy about the party and the beating since one might lead to the other, and they’d be found out. He was still alive but barely when I got there. I wasn’t sure what to do, but I knew I had to get him out of there and away from the village.”

“My family used to go to a place not far from here, about an hour’s drive. When I was a child, we spent most summers there at what used to be my ancestral home. It was the only place I could think of. It’s far enough away from our village, and no one would think to look for him there, especially since they were all convinced he was dead.”

“Where is he?”

“I can give you the instructions, ah, directions to the place. It’s...” I was on my feet and ready to move.

“Give them to me.”

“Of course.” She hurried back into the convent while I stood there wondering if this was real. I mean, I’d hoped, wished, even prayed, but I don’t think I really expected things to really turn out like this. It was almost too easy.

She came back not ten minutes later with a look of relief on her face as if a burden had been lifted. “What now? Will you be taking him away with you? I know from your accent that you’re from America, is that where your mother went when she disappeared from the village all those years ago?” I took the piece of paper with the directions from her hand and

bit back my first retort. She'd just helped me out tremendously, after all. Fuck that!

“You don't get to ask about her. As to what happens next, say mass every day and hope that this is the last time you ever see my face. Thanks for saving my grandfather.” That was all I had for her, so I just turned and walked away. I turned off the recorder in my pocket just before I came up on the others milling around in the courtyard.

I didn't speak to anyone as I headed back to the car. I gave the driver the instructions, and he nodded as if he knew where we were headed, so that was a relief. I wish I had wings. I would've taken the plane, but who has time for flight plans at a time like this? Besides, I doubt from her description that there's a landing strip nearby.

Everyone was relatively silent, though the others spoke softly amongst themselves every once in a while, while I looked out the window seeing nothing. I think I was holding my breath all the way there, expecting I don't know what. But the biggest obstacle to putting my plans in motion to take Ricci down was about to be removed.

Until I knew where he was and what had happened to him, I couldn't make a move for Ma's sake. I needed to find him for her, make sure at the very least that he was okay and, barring that, that he'd been given a proper burial. You see, in the back of my mind, I always knew Ricci had had a hand in his disappearance.

The drive seemed twice as long, though, by my watch, we'd actually made good time. Another long winding driveway led us to what must've once been a beautiful palazzo. The stone had been weathered by the elements, its once yellow hue now washed out and faded, though the structure still stood tall.

It looked deserted, but it was obvious someone was taking care of the place because the grounds looked well-kept. A man came around from the back of the property alerted by the car engine, and I knew from the rush of excitement in my gut that

it was him. I took him in from head to toe and fought back the tears that started to form.

He had a limp, but other than that, he seemed solid. “Ciao...” He started the greeting in a heavy thick accent as he walked towards me, then stopped, and for the second time that day, I saw a look of horror and distaste on someone else’s face at the sight of me.

“You...” The old man actually made a rush towards me but stopped short in front of me, mere steps from my face. “Who are you? You’re not him.” He seemed confused, and my heart squeezed.

“No, I’m not him. I’m Sofia’s son. I’m Gabriel, your grandson.” He wordlessly mouthed my mother’s name and swayed like an aspen in the wind.

“Sofie...Sofia, you’re...” I had to move forward quickly and hold him up when he started to fall, his hand grabbing at his chest. Why didn’t I think of this? I should’ve given his age. He held onto me, staring into my face with tears streaming down his cheeks, his mouth forming words, but no sound made it past his lips.

He rested his head on my chest right over my heart while patting my back comfortingly, and then I couldn’t let him go. This was my mother’s only family, the one she’d had no choice but to leave behind. In some strange way, he was the connection between our old worlds, hers and mine. Between her past and my beginning.

“I’ve got you, grandpa.” I didn’t rush him when he broke down in tears, just stood there with our arms wrapped around each other for what felt like hours while he sobbed, and I tried hard not to give in to the emotion that was now riding me hard.

“Where is she? Where’s my Sofia? Is she well? How has she been?” He rattled off one question after the other, and I patiently answered as the others held back, watching from a distance.

“A son, a big strapping grandson. Your grandmother, rest her soul, would’ve loved to meet you. But she sees yes!” He pointed a finger up to the sky with a sad smile on his face.

He could have no idea what his words did to me. Because I never let myself feel for too long, never dwell on my feelings, I’d brushed away my thoughts on how this first meeting would go. But now I admit that I half expected him to reject me because of where I’d come from, or rather how I’d come to be.

Instead, it seems after those first few seconds of misunderstanding when he thought I was Ricci, once he learned who I was, he felt genuine joy. My mind was already moving ten steps ahead. Who am I kidding? I knew how this was going to end years ago when I first started trying to find his whereabouts.

“Come in, come in.” He gestured towards the side of the palazzo where there were other dwellings.

“No, grandpa, you’re coming with me.”

“Where?” He actually seemed surprised.

“To Paris, to France, where my mother is, and then home.” He looked stupefied for a second, then turned to look around at the place he’d called home for the past two decades almost.

I don’t care if he’s the caretaker or whatever else he had going on; he wasn’t staying. Not even long enough for someone else to come take his place. “I’ll; I’ll have to get my things.”

“Do you need to call someone, let them know you’re leaving?” No one else had shown up thus far, so I’m guessing he was the only one here.

“No-no, I’m the only one here. The caretaker and his wife come every morning, but we stay out of each other’s way. I will just leave them a note. Eh, how did you find me?” I told him about the nun as we walked back to the little cottage where he stayed. He told me all about how she’d saved him that night, his words matching hers almost perfectly.

He seemed to think he owed her a debt, me I’m not so sure. Granted, she was young back then, but after all these

years to have said nothing, callous. Inside the old cottage that had seen better days, he dragged an old suitcase from beneath the bed, then looked around the room as if lost.

I'm sure he was as flustered as I was, with my sudden appearance, plus the fact that I wasn't giving him a chance to think before uprooting his life. "You don't have to bring anything with you, just anything you value."

"I don't have much of that. I left the village in a hurry, as you know, and never went back, so there was no time to take anything with me when I came here."

His face filled with sorrow adding another wound to Ricci's already lead riddled body. I'm going to kill that fuck torturously slow. But first, I'm going to make him pay. Him and his little band of deviants. Now was not the time; everything in order. His time, though, will come.

I knew I was rushing him, but I wanted out of there as soon as possible. I won't breathe easy until he's on that plane with me, and since he didn't have anything but a few changes of clothes and an old hat, we weren't there long after he wrote his note. It was a whirlwind and, all things considered, went better than I expected.

I told him about my mother's life after he sent her to safety, while he, in a mix of broken English and Sicilian, asked me everything you'd expect. Now, instead of horror, he looked at me with a smile. It was only when he wound down from all the excitement that the rest of what I'd learned hit me like a Mack truck to the chest.

Now that he was safe, my mind went to the gory details the nun had shared. The night she described was much worse than anything I could've imagined, and I'd imagined some awful shit over the years. The others seemed to pick up on my mood and kept grandpa entertained with what little English he understood while I mused.

His reaction to the plane would've made me smile had my thoughts not gone dark, but I had the presence of mind not to show him my displeasure; I didn't want him thinking it was

because of him. But I couldn't help planning my next move in my head.

With the new information, I'll have to change my approach. I always wanted to go after the people who were there that night, but that was when I thought they'd just been bystanders who had no real hand in what had happened to Ma. But now, knowing how active they were in the whole disgusting set-up, I'll have to revisit my plan of action for them.

I realized once we landed after I'd spent the flight getting started on spoiling grandpa with every amenity on the plane, even going so far as to take him back to the bedroom to rest when the excitement became too much, that I hadn't jammed the boys' phones and Pop hadn't been calling me. I guess they'd picked their side.

The drive to the castle took longer because it was much later in the evening with more traffic when we got back. I'd just done all that in twelve hours or less, and the adrenaline rush I'd been feeling all day came to a sudden end. Pop came rushing out the door as soon as we pulled up with a look of such terror on his face; I almost felt guilty.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then his eyes fell on grandpa. "Pop, this is grandpa." His mouth fell open comically, and then Ma was there. No doubt they'd both been worried sick all day, but there was no way to avoid it. At least Pop knew the team was with me and that I'd be okay, and I'm sure he'd convinced Ma of the same.

"Sofia!" Grandpa stumbled towards Ma, who had the look of someone who couldn't believe their eyes. She looked at Pop, then me, then her father in disbelief.

"Papa? PAPA!" I've never heard my mother speak above a whisper; now she screamed and cried as she ran into her father's arms.

"How did you...?" Pop started to ask.

"Later, let's get them inside."



## DRACO



OH, hell, I'd almost yelled at my son for the first time in my life. The boy had put the fear of hell in me, and I'd been on a tear all day. When I couldn't reach him after hours of him being gone, I thought I'd go insane. The fact that his team wasn't answering their phones only added to my angst, and it was all I could do not to lose my shit, which I probably would've done had I not had to take care of my wife and keep her from suspecting anything.

He'd cost a few people their jobs, which I will promptly return to them in the morning when the sun comes up. I'm still coming to terms with the night's happenings. My wife was in a room down the hall with her father, whom she refused to leave for even a second in the hours since he'd arrived.

The house had been pandemonium once all the relatives knew the story of who he was. My girls have no idea what happened to their mother. All they knew about her life in Sicily was that her mother had been dead for a long time, and she was looking for her father, who'd gone missing a long time ago. I never knew what they thought of the story, but it's been years since they even brought it up.

My own parents have been nothing short of wonderful, accepting the old man into the fold like a long-lost friend and making sure he was comfortable. Gianna's grandmother went above and beyond to welcome him as well, as the family fawned over him. He seemed a bit shellshocked, as is to be expected, I guess, and everyone is pretty much on a high.

Me, I'm celebrating something else inside. Not only because my wife has finally been reunited with her father, but because I'd been wrong about my boy. I almost did a little jig in the room by myself. So, this is what he'd been up to all

along, and here I was thinking the worst. I enjoyed that little fantasy for all of ten minutes before Denver, and the others sought me out. “What is it?”

“Ah, there might be a bit of a problem.”

“What sorta problem? What’re you talking about?” They looked at each other, and I got a bad feeling in my gut.

“We don’t know what happened; he seemed fine after going to the convent....” |

“Convent? What convent?”

“Oh, yeah, we went to a convent before we went to pick up your father-in-law.”

“Who did he see there?”

“We’re not sure; it might’ve been a nun. Anyway, after leaving there, we went straight to the place where the old man was staying.”

“Do you remember the place, the convent?”

“Yes, we wrote down all the information. That’s not the problem, though.”

“Spit it out, Marcus.”

“As Denver was saying, Gabe seemed fine on the way there and even heading back, but halfway to the plane, something changed.”

“Like what?” Again, with the looking at each other shit.

“He went...cold.”

“Ice!”

“Arctic!”

“Siberia!”

“Well, shit!”

## GABRIEL



“*H*ey, are you okay? So, this is why you’ve been acting so strange, huh.” I knew she would come; knew she would search me out. I didn’t reply when she rested her head on my shoulder, just kept gazing up at the sky where my attention had been for the last half an hour since I’d made my escape. I’m happy for Ma, grandpa, and even the twins. But his arrival means something totally different to me than it does them.

My big dilemma now is that I’ll have to change up my plan of attack. I should be happy that that’ll mean I get to live longer, much longer, but I’m not, not really. I’ve had my mind made up long ago on what steps needed to be taken. I knew exactly what I was going to do. But now, not only are there more players than expected, but I also have to do more groundwork.

Taking Ricci out would’ve been easy; what my mind has started formatting since talking to the nun is not. Now I also have to think really hard about what I want to do about her and I. It’s not lost on me that my first thought when I accepted the change was that it would give me more time with her, but that’s selfish, and I’ve never been selfish with Gianna, not intentionally anyway.

There was a lot to think about; I just can’t get my head around it all right now, not with everything else that’s going on. I’m itching to get back home so I can get started on the new plan that’s been forming in my head. I wish I was the type

to relax and sit on my laurels for a bit, basking in the pleasure of having found grandpa after all these years, but I'm not.

Instead, I've been standing out here on the stone terrace that overlooked one of the many gardens deep in thought. I was so lost in thought I turned my head just barely and placed my lips against her forehead.

Her sigh of relief made me feel like an ogre; I knew what that meant. No doubt she'd felt me slipping away from her these past few days. That simple gesture may have just undone all my attempts at putting space between us.

Neither of us spoke as we stood in silence. I hadn't planned on making the final break here in Paris; no way would I taint her experience here with heartbreak. But I'd planned on doing so in a few days after we returned home after she'd had some time to deal with the fallout from her dad being arrested. My dilemma now is, should I still carry out those plans now that I have more time? Or should I wait for some distant time in the future?

The unselfish part of me that loves her to my core says to make a clean break now; it's what's best. The selfish part, the part that keeps me up at night, not wanting to let go, says hold on a little bit longer. But then there's what I'm planning on doing and the danger involved, not to mention the time. I have so many other things to rearrange, and just because I've reunited Ma with her dad doesn't mean anything else has changed. Just the timing.

"Are you all packed for tomorrow?" I finally spoke to her, and she lifted her head from my shoulder.

"Yes!"

"What did you do today?"

"We went sightseeing, of course, then did more shopping, and eating, then Lance took us back to see the Eiffel Tower when it got dark outside."

That last sentence had a bit of an accusatory hint to it, which I ignored. I have no doubt I'll be hearing from him too. He'd been quiet since my return, choosing to hang back while

the others talked with grandpa, but I knew from the look he gave me that he was pissed.

There's also Pop to handle, but I already know what needs to be done with him. Believe it or not, he's simple. The fact that I'm about to use his love and trust in me can't be helped. But in the end, he'll realize why I had to do what I did.

"Let's go back inside; it's getting a bit chilly out here." I took her hand in mine and walked her back inside, wishing I could relax enough to enjoy a simple thing like that. I'm more wound up now than I had been before.

When it was just Ricci on my hitlist, or more like before I knew the truth about that night, things were pretty much cut and dry. I knew what I needed to do and made my peace with it.

Now that I know the horror, the degradation my mother had faced at the hands of these people, no way am I going to let any of them live longer than it's going to take for me to hunt them down and slaughter them.

But even that's too easy, too straightforward. I want these people to suffer in the worst ways possible, and I want them to know why before they take their last breath.

I took her inside and up to her room. "I have to go see Pop; I'll be back to tuck you in." Another kiss to her forehead, and I left. I walked down the long hallway in search of the room he and Ma were sharing, putting my game face on as I reached the door. I know Ma was with grandpa down the hall, but I hadn't expected the ninja turtles to come filing out of the suite where Pop was.

I gave them a slight smirk, having already guessed what they'd been up to. "Hi guys, thanks for today. You did me a solid." I pounded fists with each of them, disarming them with a smile. Now, these guys may know martial arts and excel and various fighting techniques, but their minds don't work like mine. I can run circles around them all day, every day, like now. They're looking at me and each other in confusion because I went from cold to hot; amateurs.

Pop was pacing the room deep in thought when I walked in. “Hey Pop, you got a minute?” He seemed surprised to see me but recovered fast enough. “Of course, thanks again for finding your grandfather. Your mother is over the moon.”

“That’s what I’m here to talk about. I wanted to apologize for keeping this from you all this time.”

“It’s noth.... Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m not really sure. I guess it’s because I felt like it was something I needed to do for Ma. I guess by now; you also know that I know what happened to Ma.”

He didn’t answer right away and wasn’t quick enough to hide the flash of pain on his face. I felt that shit in my chest. I’ve always known that he hated the fact that I knew, even though we’ve both been playing the guessing game, pretending that neither knew what the other was doing. Now there was no longer any need to keep it hidden.

“I know. Who’s this nun that you met with?” Now here is one of the things I’d struggled with. Should I tell him about what really went down that night? All of it? I’ve decided not to for multiple reasons.

One, he’d take the plane back to Sicily tonight and fuck his life up by going after Ricci blind, and two, I don’t want to put the things in his head that are now in mine. Which reminds me, I have to do something for Ma.

“She’s the one who helped grandpa get away from Ricci,” I told him about grandpa going after Ricci and what happened then, leaving out the part the others played; he doesn’t need to know that shit. Besides, that’s not why I’m here. I’m here because now that grandpa has been found, Pop has no reason not to go after Ricci. Now I have to find a way to keep him out of it while buying myself some time.

“You know Pop, it’s way off-topic, but we haven’t talked about my early enrollment in a while.” That coming out of left field stumped him.

“What?”

“School, your alma mater, remember, we applied, I got accepted, you were going to take me around to all your old haunts....”

“Yes, yes, we should do that when we get back, as soon as.”

“Awesome, now that this is behind me, I can breathe again. I think we should take the twins with, let them see what their futures are going to look like. And again, I’m sorry about the whole grandpa thing; I didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up, you know, and then things didn’t work out.”

“No, you did good.” Even his voice sounded sus. He was trying to weed me out, but he should know by now that I’m excellent at keeping my true feelings hidden. I don’t like deceiving him, but there’s no other way. I have to keep him out of trouble while plotting against Ricci, nothing new there, but now that game has changed just a little bit.

“I’m tired, Pop. I think I’ll turn in now. You’ll take care of grandpa’s papers and stuff to get him home with us?”

“Already made some calls, but since it’s this late, we have to wait until the morning. Don’t you worry, son, it’ll be taken care of. It might take some doing, but we’ll get him out of Europe in a matter of days. You kids are heading back with your grandparents and Sheila, your mother, and I’ll stay here for another few days....”

“No, why don’t we all just stay a little longer? We can do our classes online for the next week or so, no problem.” Yes, and I can give Gianna another couple of days before she learns about her dad.

“If that’s what you want, that’s what we’ll do.” He hugged me, and I could feel that he’d relaxed. I didn’t feel guilty about deceiving him because it was for his own good. I’ll do it every time.



DRACO



OKAY, what the hell? Is the boy up to something or not? I'm confused as hell. I guess I can put his coldness aside as just being angry at reliving what had happened to his mother; somehow, I'm not so sure that I can let my guard down. Then it hit me. What am I so worried about? Now that my father-in-law has been found, there's nothing stopping me from going after Ricci and putting an end to his pathetic existence. Then there'd be no reason for Gabe to do anything, and I can stop second-guessing my son.

I still have a lot of questions, though, like how the heck had he found the nun? Who is she? I know she was a cohort of Ricci's since she'd been there the night he attacked Mr. Antonelli, shit, I don't even know what to call him yet; Papa maybe like my wife? Anyway, back to the nun and the missing pieces of the story. There's something there, I'm sure.

But the boy asked about university. That's gotta mean he's done, right? I wish I could believe that, but something in my gut is telling me to be cautious, which would mean me not trusting his word, which is a dumb fuck thing to do to my kid. Still, the boy is smart; I also know he wouldn't want me to go after Ricci because of his fear that something would happen to me.

I don't have to have that conversation with my son to know that he thinks that way; we're so much alike that I can figure out that much. But what the hell am I supposed to do now? I can send my guys after Ricci, but that fuck is my mark and mine alone. I don't plan to get caught, so I'm not worried about that shit. I just have to figure out when and where at this point.

The problem is that since Ricci has got it into his head to run for office, he's never alone. Along with the security he's always had because of his family wealth and standing, he now has even more trained men by his side. Sicily is not my battleground, so it would mean rearranging some things about

my former plans. I can do that; I just have to get ahead of my son.



SOFIA



MY PAPA IS HERE; he's really here. I don't think I have any tears left in me; I've cried so much in the last few hours that my eyes are almost swollen. He's tired now, poor thing, and fell asleep just a few minutes ago, but still, I find it hard to leave his side. Part of me can't believe that he's here, and I haven't even had time to wrap my head around the fact that it was Gabe who found him and brought him to me.

I felt like a child sitting there next to his bed, but I was afraid that I'd wake up and he'd be gone if I left. It took Draco coming to the door and knocking to get me to leave. "He doing okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine; it's been a long day for him. My Papa got so old." I missed so much, and my heart aches at the state he's in.

While I'd been living a life of luxury, he's been shut away somewhere away from everything he knows, living as little more than a pauper. I know it's silly to feel guilty about something I had no control over, but I can't help it. "He's going to be fine, sweetheart; you need to get some rest; we have a lot to do tomorrow to get your dad situated."

Yes, he didn't have anything with him, no ID, nothing. I'm sure Draco can handle it, but it might take some time. We'd already discussed staying here longer and sending the kids back home for school, but now I wanted my kids with me; I want family here. Another silly fear, but for whatever reason, I don't want to let anyone out of my sight.

"Can we keep the kids here with us?"

“Your son already suggested it. They’ll take their classes online, and we’ll all enjoy a few more days here while we take care of your dad’s stuff.” I wrapped my arms around him and rested my ear over his heartbeat. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For taking such good care of me, of us.”

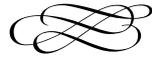
It was only now that the excitement was over that the ramifications of Gabe finding Papa set in. Draco hasn’t said anything, but I’m sure at some point he’d question how Gabe even knew to go looking. It’s not something we’ve discussed with the kids, other than in passing. Oh, dear. Gabe met Athena; what did she say to him?

I felt sick panic rise up inside of me. Not even Draco knows the truth about that night. I’d embellished the story when I told it to him, too ashamed to share the real truth about that night. Even Papa has no idea that I’d dragged myself home that night, hurt and bleeding. The end result was the same after all, but all that had led up to it for me made it even worse in my mind.

Though we never bring it up, I remember well the story I’d told my husband, the same one I’d told Papa that I was alone in the cottage when I was attacked. Somehow, I’d built up that story in my mind; it made it easier to deal with the reality of what had truly happened. I may have felt some guilt for my part in it as well, knowing that I’d been a fool to trust Felice all those years ago. Some might even blame me for being there, though I had been tricked.

“What’s wrong?” I forgot he was holding me and that he knew me so well. My body had tensed up with my thoughts; now, I must evade his question. “Nothing, just tired. Let’s go to bed.” Who would’ve thought that I’d ever have the confidence to distract my husband with sex? I guess it’s a testament to how much I’ve grown because of his love and attention. As if reading my thoughts, Draco broached the subject first. “Who’s this nun who helped your father?”

## GABRIEL



Grandpa fell in love with Sheila; I kid you not. I don't think he's ever seen a person of color before and treated her like some mythological Goddess, and of course, she was putty in his hands. Before we even got on the plane to head home, she was trying to teach him English, which is the family's new favorite thing to witness.

She's been a rock for Ma this whole time, and the bond between the two women was never more evident than now. Even though I doubt she knows why my Ma was going from bouts of joy to having her dad back in her life to moments of anxiety and something approaching fear, she never left her side. It's no wonder that my family loves this woman the way we do.

A lot has happened in the last four days, which is how long it took Pop to get grandpa's papers in order. Almost a miracle, but when you know who you know and all that. Anyway, that night after I left Pop, I'd gravitated to Gianna's room. She was already in bed asleep, tired from the day out, and knowing Lancelot; he'd walked their feet off.

I sat on the bed beside her just to be close, I guess, and listened to her breathe. I played gently in her hair, light enough not to disturb her because my mind was in kill mode, and she didn't need to see that. I'm surprised I've been able to keep my anger so well contained, to the point that not even Pop had noticed. I don't hate; it's too stressful an emotion and would take more out of me than the recipient.

But what I feel for Ricci and now his friends is something much darker. There is no emotion attached, so no chance of mercy or compassion for anyone involved; hate is an emotion, a bad one, but one, nonetheless. What I feel could be best described as inhuman, animalistic, primal. It's crossed all boundaries between the light and the dark.

No way am I going to let anyone else destroy him, and death, a quick death like I'd anticipated, is too good for the likes of him. I already know pretty much everything about the Ricci family, so the groundwork was done there. I know that there's tension in the family, especially between the brothers; the father is a bit disappointed in his chosen heir, and Ricci's only claim to fame is his family name and what it affords him and his lifestyle.

I've already squashed one deal for him as a precursor, just for kicks and because I wanted to see him squirm. But now, that's child's play compared to what I've been contemplating since I boarded the plane to come back. The wife, Felice, I know as well because of her proximity to him, but now with the new information, I'll have to do a deeper search on her as well as the other players.

It's not hard to come to the realization of what type of man Alonzo Ricci is. I've studied him long enough to know how to attack him, break him down, before going in for the kill. Before, I was satisfied with the idea of just taking him out, but now, I won't rest easy until I destroy him first.

As to Pop, I know I couldn't pull the wool over his eyes with just that little game I'd just played, so I'm, as usual, I'm going to have to keep him off my scent. Gianna stirred next to me and rolled over until she was pressed against my side, kind of like the first time she slept in my bed.

I looked down at her and felt sadness reach out to grab ahold of me. I've always, for some reason since the first time I laid eyes on her, associated her with Ma. Something about her soft beauty and innate warmth always reminded me of the woman who gave me life.

Not in an Oedipus sort of way, of course, but something inside of her just pulls me in. The thought of something so horrific happening to her filled me with dread that I had to close my eyes to calm myself. Even though I knew it was futile, something inside me stumbled at the thought of leaving her, but as usual, that was soon followed by thoughts of Ma and what I owed her for not terminating my existence. Now more than ever, I salute her for bringing me into the world.

I left the bed that night and, for the next few days, used the excuse of helping Pop with getting grandpa situated as an excuse to put some much-needed space between Gianna and me. I know now that keeping her with me is entirely out of the question, and the sooner I get her to her grandmother's house, the better.

With Felix going to prison, her maiden family is her next closest relatives, and though she's of age in our state, I don't see them leaving her there on her own. As to the house, it can be left in the hands of a caretaker unless they choose to sell it. I'd thought of it all, of course, while I was putting my plan together and if she knew that, she'd find me calculating, as she should.

By the time we landed back in the states, the air was filled with festive excitement. Between the ball and having grandpa with us, everyone was still on a high. I tried my best to shield her for as long as possible, but it wasn't long before word got back to her, somehow, through the twins and their friends. The rumor mill was already working, news of Becky and Victoria's treatment of Gianna, the fact that Becky might have killed Felix's first wife, and that she'd burned all her earthly possessions to the ground, which led a distraught Felix to flip and strangle her to death.

It's part of my campaign to get him off with a lighter sentence since public opinion tends to trump true justice these days. I did that for her. I could've gone about things in a way that he may have walked away free, especially after learning about his CPTSD diagnosis, but I still wanted him to pay some kind of price for what he'd done to her. Hypocrite! As if what I'm about to do is any different.



## VICTORIA



I THINK I'VE DIED. Have I died? If so, where am I? I tried to lift my head, but nothing happened. There was a strange lethargy that weighed my body down, and I felt adrift, the way you do when you're on a float in the ocean. I couldn't hold my thoughts very well, couldn't seem to remember anything, but I recognized the walls from what little I could see.

I'd seen this sight for so many hours now that it was ingrained in my brain. How long has it been now? I have no idea. It's all I can do not to freak out and lose my mind for real from the minutiae. All I seem to do is drift in and out of consciousness, not knowing where one reality ended and another one began.

My head was still fuzzy from the drugs they'd been feeding me, and I'd lost time. Days or weeks could've gone by, and I wouldn't know since I seem to sleep for hours in this place. Sometimes I'd wake up out of an almost comalike sleep having no recollection of anything. Sometimes I'm too loopy to care.

Today though is the worst. I turned my head to the side where the people usually are. I think they may be doctors from their white lab coats and the fact that they're always peering at me like an insect under a scope. As the drugs started to wear off, I realized that my mouth was unusually parched with a soreness that I can't describe.

My lips were dry, and there was a tinny taste in my mouth that I could not place. Blood, it tasted like blood. I opened my mouth to lick my lips, and something wasn't registering in my mind. Something felt off, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Then I realized I couldn't feel my tongue.

I tried again and again with no luck and thinking it was the effects of the drug, I lifted my arm, which felt like it weighed a ton which was not helped by the shackles around my wrists. I pushed my fingers past my lips as things became clearer and opened my mouth in horror. No sound came as I screamed and screamed. They'd taken my tongue.

I heard a door open somewhere and tried to escape off the cot as I sensed more than saw someone enter the room and head towards me, but of course, I was going nowhere. The sounds I made were sickening, like a mute or some other undesirable thing. I couldn't stop the flow of tears or the mix of anger and fear that filled me. I got even more afraid when the woman came to stand next to the cot with the most unsettling smile on her face.

“Our patron wanted us to tell you that your mother is dead.” What did she say? It can't be. Of course not; she'd said it so nonchalantly it had to be a lie. She started wiping me down, ignoring the grunts and groans of misery as she carried on talking as if relaying some gossip she'd read on the web.

“Are you asking what happened?”

No, you demented bitch. Let me out of here.

“Well, she caught fire to her husband's dead wife's things, and he killed her. Lucky for him, he might get a slap on the wrist due to diminished capacity. Do you know what that means? I'm sure you do; you're such a smart girl.”

“Anyhow, our patron has asked us to also relay the message that Gianna had a marvelous time at her first coming out ball in Paris; she was the belle of the ball.” The bitch laughed like this was a joke.

“Oh, what's that? You want to see?” She moved to the head of the cot and reached into her pocket for a phone. That's when I realized that I didn't recognize her; she wasn't one of the usual doctors that came in and out of here.

She opened her phone, and as much as I hated to, I couldn't keep myself from looking at the screen. Gabe and Gianna looked like a celebrity couple as they danced. Always

with the dancing. Have you ever heard of screaming into the void? I finally knew what that meant as I screamed over and over again, trying to drown out the sound of her voice as she went on and on about Gia and Gabe, but no sound came.

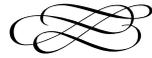
My mouth was just a black gaping hole of nothingness. But something else registered as well. I realized that I felt nothing as she went back to wiping my legs with the wet cloth. My legs, what happened to my legs? I tried raising my head again but still nothing. Fear, horror, disbelief all warred inside me.

“Tomorrow, we’ll work on your arms.” The bitch cackled then started humming. What did she mean about my arms? The door opened again, and a familiar voice was heard. “Okay, Ophelia, time to go back to your place; you’ve had your fun. Did you tell her?”

“Yes, she seemed most pleased.” What the fuck are you talking about, lady? I tried screaming the words, but of course, nothing happened. She shuffled away from the room, and he took her place, pulling the sheet over my body and looking down at me clinically.

“Sorry about that. Ophelia was once one of the leading scientists here, but running the experiments has sent her quite insane, which is odd since she did most of the research. The mind can be like that. Brilliant one moment and shattered the next. How are you feeling?” I’m not sure he was any better than she was. Did everyone in this place have that maniacal look in their eyes?

## GABRIEL



“Lancelot, you’re still pissy, I see. I didn’t go off with them to have fun without you, you know. Pop hired them to watch my back.” He’s such a damn wife sometimes. He’s been pouting for days now, and even now that we’re back, he’s still giving me the cold shoulder. That hasn’t stopped him from sticking close to me, though.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were looking for your grandpa?”

“Is that what this is about? For the simple reason that I didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up only to dash them when things didn’t pan out.” That seemed to unruffle his feathers a bit, and he gave me a softened look.

“You wanna go shoot some hoops?”

“It’s cold as balls.”

“Downstairs, moron.”

“Oh, yeah, in that case.” Anything to keep you from asking me any more questions. I should’ve known, though, that his nosy ass would jump from one topic to the next without fail.

As soon as we suited up and got on the court, he went in. “So, what’s with you and Gia?” Years of practice helped me not to falter under his suspicious gaze. “What do you mean? Gianna’s with her grandmother.” I pretended confusion though I knew what he was referring to.

After news broke of her father’s arrest, I’d done everything I could to keep her calm. She was scared, something I hadn’t

foreseen happening because I'm stupid. I didn't give any thought to how she'd feel having her last remaining parent behind bars. I'd only thought of the end game, to years ahead when he'd gotten his shit together and could be a halfway decent dad to her.

Her grandmother and aunts, who'd flown in with their husbands, have been helping her settle things back at the house where she's been for the past two days. Letting her go home hadn't been as easy as I'd thought, but surprisingly she'd been the one to suggest it, saying that with grandpa here, she didn't want to be in the way. But that was before she'd heard about her father.

I get the sense, too, that she'd been testing me, wanting me to tell her not to go. I wish I could've, but she'd made a very difficult decision very easy for me. I still go see her, though, and we talk on the phone because I don't want her handling this alone, but the distance was the best thing for her in the long run.

I held her when she cried over her dad one minute and listened when she raged against him the next for the way he'd destroyed their lives. She was happy he was being punished one second and scared of what was to become of her the next. That's where her family came in, but I still couldn't just walk away. I'm afraid I'm always going to find an excuse to stay in her life unless I make a clean break soon.

Now that her family has things under control and has taken the reins, I no longer feel as guilty as I did before. I know she'll be taken care of. I still have eyes and ears in parts of the Fontane residence, so I've heard enough to know that she's genuinely loved. I wasn't about to leave that up to chance after all.

She'd taken her mother's portrait back home, and her grandmother had assured her that I'd sent the rest of her mom's stuff to Virginia before we left. When that bit of news seemed to puzzle her, I had a ready excuse. I simply said I didn't trust Becky or her daughter not to do something stupid, and wasn't it great that I'd had that kind of foresight because look what she'd tried to do.

I'd made the lawyer wait a little before sharing that news with Felix. Now he knows that he'd killed the witch for the one thing she hadn't done. Now he can live with the guilt of sitting on his hands all the times he should've acted. Pathetic! Maybe seven years behind bars, which is what the lawyer thinks he might get, will make him face the light.

We threw the ball around for a good hour, neither of us really saying anything, but I knew I needed to put his mind at ease as well. He's not as bad as Pop, but not far from it. "Hey, have you heard back from the force about the program? You haven't said anything about it since we got back. Are you sure you don't want to come with me? You've got the grades."

"I should come with you and keep you out of trouble, but nah, you know I've always wanted to be a cop."

"No reason you can't study criminal justice there and join up later."

"Nah, this way is simpler. I get hands-on training, and it cost way less."

"Don't be an ass. Pop's had your five-two-nine set up for about as long as we've known you."

"I know, but you know how guilty I am about that. I didn't become your friend to mooch."

"Yo, what the fuck? Where's this coming from?" I know Lancelot, and he's off, way off. "Did something happen?"

The fact that he looked deflated and wouldn't look me in the eye told me that I was onto something. What could it be? It wasn't about me, or grandpa or any of it. "Is something wrong with Unc?"

"No, it's nothing like that.

"Then what is it?" He did that thing where you put on a bright fake smile and pretend that all is well like that's gonna work. "Lance!"

"Stop being such a worrier; it's nothing. I'm just decompressing from our trip, I guess. I'll be back to normal by tomorrow; pass the ball." I didn't push because I knew he

wouldn't budge until he was ready to. But I have other ways of getting answers.

He left to go home a little while later, and I headed up to my room. I'd removed Pop's bells and whistles from my home PC and added some extra security. He had no reason to spy on me now since my search for grandpa was out in the open. If he said anything, then he'd have to admit to not trusting me, and the deal has always been no more spying after I reached eighteen. Not that I expect him to stick to that, but it'll buy me some time in the meantime.

I went to my computer to check the progress of the search I'd left running before picking up the phone to call Unc. He answered on the third ring. "Hey, Unc. How are you? Did you like the gifts?"

"Loved them. I plan to come by tomorrow to meet your grandpa; sorry, I've been too busy all week to come by."

"That's okay. Listen, I want to do something special for Lance. Have you heard anything about his placement in the special program on the force?"

"Oh, that, well, funny, you should ask. I don't know what to tell you. He got a call as soon as he came back. He seemed pretty excited about it even went to meet someone; I have the name written down somewhere. Anyway, I don't know how things went, but when he got back home, he didn't seem as excited. In fact, he seemed upset, but he wouldn't say what happened, just that he's not interested in joining the force anymore. Didn't he tell you about it? That's surprising."

"Maybe he forgot to mention it with everything else that's been going on around here. Thanks for telling me. I guess I'll see you soon." We exchanged some more small talk before I rang off. What the hell happened? Did something this mystery person said scare him off? It can't be.

Lance has always known that joining the force was a fool's errand. That he'd put in all the work, put his life on the line, and get nothing for it in return but underpay and complaints. If it was something like that, he would've told me, but instead, he'd lashed out. Why?

Well, hell, I can't very well work on my shit if he's in this type of mood. I picked up the phone again and called him. "Where are you?"

"Just pulling into my driveway. Why?"

"Meet me at the ice cream place; I need to get Gianna her nightly fix."

"Didn't I just leave you?"

"I know where you live, punk, be there in ten."

I hung up and headed for the door.

He was there waiting when I pulled into the parking lot, and we headed inside. I worked my magic until he broke, and ten minutes later, I was peeling into the driveway madder than hell with him speeding to catch up. "Pop, Pop." I walked through the door, yelling for him.

"Gabe, chill, don't... Oh, hi Unc, sorry."

"Lancelot? I thought you left; what's up? What's all the yelling about?"

"Tell him, or I will. Better yet, I'll handle it myself."

"Tell me what? What's going on? Why are you so upset, Gabriel?" I just looked at Lance to start talking.

"I met with one of the recruiters today. He uh, dammit."

"Just spit it out, son; what happened?"

"He said he wanted to use my connection with you.... Ah, crap. He said if I wanted to join the force, I have to give you up."

"Come again!"

"Yeah, he said something about no one being able to get anything on you and some other things that made no sense. I told him to... I told him I wasn't interested. I'll just go to college, I guess."

"What's his name?"

"Dempsey."

“Gabe, take Lance upstairs, call your dad and tell him you’re spending the night. You boys don’t worry about a thing you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” I wanted to punch the wall at his hangdog look. I’m going to leave this hump whoever he is to Pop, for now. “Come on, let’s go watch some crappy shows.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?” He pointed to the ice cream I was still carrying.

“Dammit, I’ll be right back.”



## DRACO



DEMPSEY, Dempsey, that’s a new one. I don’t have a file with his name on it. Guess he’ll be joining the others. When it’s not one thing, it’s another. I’m not really surprised that a grown man was low enough to pull a stunt like this, and I’m in no way bothered by his shit. But the fact that he went after Lancelot is going to cost him. Like I have time to deal with this shit on top of everything else.

My wife has been acting strange since, well since before we left Paris. I still don’t know what the hell my son is up to, and it’s making me nervous, which only got worse when he sent the girl away. Now, this! I don’t know why anyone would want that thankless ass job, but if the boy wants it, he’s going to get it, and no one is going to stand in his way, especially not by using me to hurt him. This fuck!

I could give him to Pop, who would probably love nothing better since my hands are full. But he’s better off on the sidelines. I don’t need a bloodbath in my own backyard, and that old man only knows one way of doing things. I had to make some calls to find out who he was; there was more than

one Dempsey on the force in the state, but only one in charge of the new program. "Gotcha!"

Now to do some work or put my people on it before Gabe puts his foot in his ass. Or maybe I should let him loose on him. At least then, he wouldn't be worrying about Ricci if he still is. He's been very excited about our weekend trip to visit the campus and hasn't even so much as mentioned Sicily. Even his team said he's been laying low, just playing on his computer. That's what I'm afraid of.

## GABRIEL



I was not in the right frame of mind when I arrived at Gianna's place with her ice cream, but she sure did light up when she answered the door and saw me standing there. I studied her face, read her eyes, to see where she was at. There was no longer any redness around her eyes as there was the last time I'd seen her, so she hadn't been crying, at least not lately anyway.

"Gabriel, you're here." Has her voice always been this breathy and light? Or am I just hypersensitive? I held the ice cream out to her, and she reacted the same way she always does, with glee and surprise, like I hadn't been doing it every single night since the first, even when we crossed continents. Well, except for a few that couldn't be helped.

She dug in before turning her body sideways to invite me in. "Come in, grandma and the aunts went to bed early. They're tired."

"What about your uncles?"

"They had to leave a little early, but they promised to be back this weekend." Her face fell, and I imagine she was thinking about where she'd go now that there was no longer an 'adult' in the house.

I'm pretty sure they'd she and her grandmother had had that conversation or some variation, and I'm almost certain that she's holding out hope that I'd come to the rescue. "I'm not coming in right now; I left Lance at the house; I need to get back." She seemed a bit crestfallen but didn't argue as I

turned and left. I walked back to the car and realized it must be the first time that I was in her presence and didn't touch her in some way.

I drove away without looking back once, but it wasn't easy; in fact, it's getting harder to leave her because I know we're almost coming to an end. Lance was somewhere being pampered by the twins by the time I returned, and Pop was behind closed doors, but since I wasn't in the mood to see either of them, I headed upstairs to my room.

I'd almost forgotten about my online search until my special alert kept going off when I walked in. What the frig? That's not supposed to happen unless... I rushed over to the screen to see if there was some kind of malfunction and, barring that, which one of them had set it to blasting. Of course, it's not a high-pitched sound, just something I'd added for just this purpose that only I knew what it meant.

I almost expected to see Ricci's name attached, but no, it was Luna Cavalieri, one of the women who'd been there the night Ma was harmed. "What the hell?" Now, unbeknownst to the public, there are certain words that are used among the world's underbelly that may seem innocent enough to some, but which others recognize for what they are; code words that mean something entirely different than portrayed in the mainstream.

I glanced over what was there so far, as dread and something nasty took root in my gut. Why didn't I expect this? After what the nun had described taking place that night, I should've already suspected that some if not all of them would be into this kind of shit, but my mind never made the jump. Too preoccupied, I guess.

Everything in me balked at the ramifications of what I'd just found. It's like one case overlapping another, and this one is not something to which I can turn a blind eye. I have to think about what to do next. Should I get the others involved, or should I take care of it myself? First, I'd need to dig a little deeper.

It was just one instance, and my search was nowhere near done, and besides, this one isn't something I can just hit and move on to the next. She was one of my targets, not some unknown behind a computer screen. And knowing her track record with Ricci and his crew, I know I have to add this to my plans. My instinct is to get the others involved, but I can't, not yet, not until I know more.

I was at my computer for hours, so engrossed I didn't even hear Lancelot come into my room earlier and crash on the settee in my sitting room. I just happened to glance over and saw him there. A look at my watch told me that three hours had gone by since I sat down, and I still hadn't slogged through all the mud.

It was meticulous work combing through the years and years of files on her computer that I'd hacked into, but it didn't take me long to find the answers. Normally, I would alert the others by now. There was more than enough evidence at my fingertips to warrant that. But if I don't handle this the right way, it could interfere with my plans.

No matter, my conscience won't let me push this aside to exact my own vengeance; I'll just have to work around it, and I know just who to contact. This is his forte, what he excels at. Some ANONYMOUS members gravitate to a particular crime set that they focus mainly on. This is not one of mine, but it's his.

From what he's told me over the last few months, he's been immersed in cases just like this outside of the organization for lack of a better word. I'd listened to the stories, happy each time he finished a case, knowing that an innocent had been saved. Maybe this is a good thing. He can concentrate on this side of things while I work on the other.

I typed out the message fast, not expecting him to answer until morning, but I needed to do it now before my selfishness won out and I put my own needs before what could be hundreds of children in danger. 'Memnon, we need to talk.' I left the computer and went over to Lance to throw a blanket over him.

I stood there as my mind went blank for a second, too much going on at once. I did my compartmentalizing technique and separated everything in my head until a picture began to form. A kind of graph that fits all the different pieces together. I didn't have to change my plans again; I'll just add this new twist to the mix. Friend of Alice, fuck, just when I thought Ricci couldn't get any lower.

But he's smart because I've been in his computer for months and never came across anything like this. So far, this Luna woman seemed to be the one doing most of the legwork, but I have no doubt he's involved. Well, I'll learn more once I enmesh myself, which because of this I might have to do sooner. At least I know how I'm going to bring one of my prey down.

I opened my eyes to see Lancelot looking up at me.

“What're you doing?”

“Nothing, you sleeping here? Go to your bed.”

“I came in here to tell you something, but you were so caught up in whatever you were doing you didn't even hear me come in.”

“What is it? What did you need to tell me?”

“It wasn't important; it can wait. Um, Unc's not going to get himself into anything, is he?”

“Of course not, didn't he tell us not to worry?”



## MEMNON-TRACK



WHAT'S he still doing up? What time is it in New Hampshire anyway? I sat down to answer his SOS while wondering what it could be about. It can't be that he needs my help with a hack; he's one of the best, then again, anything is possible.

And it would at least get me out of dealing with the craziness that's going on around here.

I've been knee-deep in weddings and baby scientists, and who knows what else for the better part of a week I could do with a break. Though I'm pretty sure whatever this is won't be easy. He wouldn't reach out unless it was bad, but I couldn't think of anything he'd need my help with, anything he couldn't do himself.

If it was just a hack, he would've gone about it another way, so what could it be? Was he in some sort of trouble? The thought jarred me for a second. Of all the people I've worked with doing this over the years, Nemesis is right up there with my faves. Had we met in person, I have no doubt we would've been friends; he has that vibe about him.

Maybe it was his story, the one he'd told me long ago in a moment of weakness. Outside of what we do, his story is one of the things that have stuck with me and maybe the reason why I feel an attachment. I'm sure he remembers telling me, but since that day, I'm the only one of the two of us to ever bring it up.

It's almost like he wished he'd never told me, and I guess I can see why. A kid that age, the age we'd been back then, wanting to kill his dad wasn't exactly hair raising. What teen doesn't mouth off at some point or another about wanting to do away with their parents? But I knew then, as I do now, that he'd been serious.

He probably didn't realize that his story had stuck with me and that it was all I could do sometimes not to go digging. But he never brought it up again, except for a slip up here and there when I caught him off guard. But as we grew older, he became more stoic, more careful with what he shared.

Putting all of that aside, Nem is not the type to ask for help, so this must be serious.

"I'm here, brother; talk to me."



## GIANNA



IT'S ALMOST time to get up for school, and I've barely slept a wink all night. There's definitely something going on with Gabriel, and it has nothing to do with him finding his grandfather. Had that been the case, he'd have gone back to being the sweet, attentive boy I fell in love with instead of the moody teenager who left here last night.

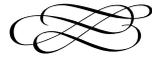
I'm trying to keep a brave face on about things, but the hits just keep on coming, and I don't know which way is up. Dad had killed Becky in a fit of rage and was looking at spending time behind bars. It's looking more and more like I'll be moving out of state for my last year of high school, leaving the few friends I'd made behind.

Once again, I'll be on my own, but at least, if that does happen, I have the option of online classes like that's my biggest worry. The thing that's kept me up all night. If just the thought of moving that far away from Gabriel leaves me cold, imagine how I'd feel if he broke up with me, and that's exactly where I think we're headed.

I can't keep fooling myself any longer, can't keep closing my eyes to the truth. If I'd had any doubts before about him leaving me, his actions last night put them to bed. He barely even looked at me, and for the first time since we met or since we became a thing, rather, he'd walked away without so much as a handshake.

I sat up in bed as nausea struck and panic started to set in. I'm so confused I haven't even been able to deal with the fact that both Becky and Victoria were gone and what that meant. My tormentors were no more, but instead of celebrating, I've been on pins and needles waiting for the other shoe to drop. Now it's looking more and more like it has.

## GABRIEL



After sending him off to bed, I went back to the computer where Memnon's message was waiting for me. I didn't expect him to get back to me this soon, late as it was, but I appreciated it. The sooner I enlist his help, the sooner I can start the process of setting my plans in motion. There was just one thing bothering me now, though, something I hadn't thought of when I messaged him earlier.

Because of what he knows about my past, from that one little slip up so long ago, I have to be careful how much info I share with him so that he doesn't discover my identity. So now I'm faced with the question of how much I should tell him without giving too much away.

He already knew about the martial arts competition, but I'd felt safe sharing that much because, luckily, my participation and placement weren't publicized and won't be ever. Not unless I wanted it to be. I didn't do it for any glory; it was just something I wanted to do for my own satisfaction, so whereas most wanted their name in lights with all the accolades, I didn't, so I chose anonymity.

That's the only reason I'd had no issue telling him about something so personal. As I said, he and I had grown close over the years through our online activities, so some things were just easy to share. To date, he's the only one from the organization that knew more about me than my handle.

Still, I am a bit hesitant to get him even more involved in my life. It wouldn't be hard for someone with his intelligence and wherewithal to start putting the puzzle together if I gave

him too many pieces, even if some were still missing. In other words, I'd better be damn careful going forward with what I share with him, or I'll be exposing myself.

But it can't be helped this time. Not with something like this. I know for a fact that he knows more about this stuff than most, and time is of the essence. If what I suspect is true, then there may be children in danger as we speak. There's no question that helping them trumps my need for vengeance, not that I'm giving it up or that I even could. But now, I need to traverse this minefield even more carefully.

I thought and rethought what I was going to say to him. Had this not crossed the line into my personal shit, there would be no need for subterfuge, but one wrong move.... No, it doesn't matter. I'm not monster enough to have seen this shit and keep silent. There's nothing stopping me from dealing with both situations, ergo the reason I'd reached out to Memnon in the first place.

I started typing, knowing that he was there waiting. Don't ask me how I knew; it's just a sense I have of the person he is. He's always struck me as the type to go above and beyond, especially if he knew he was needed. "Hey brother, thanks for getting back to me so quickly. Quick question, I've never handled this side of things, but you do. How do you go about setting up a sting for a trafficking ring?"

"What?" It's weird, but his one-word answer gave me visions of him sitting up in his chair at full attention.

"You heard me."

"You found one?"

"Yeah. I think I might've stumbled upon something."

"Where?" Now comes the hard part. Does he even remember?

"Sicily!"

"Si... Is this connected to your thing?" Shit, he remembers.

"Sorta, yeah. So, how do I do this?"

“THAT DEPENDS on the size and scope of the operation. What have you got?”

“I think this one might be pretty big. From what little I’ve seen so far, there seems to be a lot of players involved, spanning the globe.”

“OK! Do you feel safe sending me what you got?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have contacted you otherwise. I’ll shoot it to you now.” I sent the file I’d compiled through to him and hoped I was doing the right thing. It’s true that I’ve done good work with the organization and had lots of fun doing it.

I usually stuck to hacking, and that was mostly people in high positions who weren’t living up to their public persona behind closed doors. The truth is, I never really changed course after I was inducted. I’d started hacking as a way to get to Ricci since we were thousands of miles apart. But once they reached out, I had no problem using my skills to help out, but I just never got as involved as some, like Memnon.

My interest never changed from then to now, and quite frankly, I kept my hand in because I get a high from bringing down men like Ricci. Men and women who shit all over the world with their bullshit while pretending to be angels. I want them all exposed and made to pay for their misdeeds. But I’ve never really dealt with trafficking cases beyond the surface level. Now it looks like I might become knee-deep in that hell.

I saw on the screen that he was typing less than ten minutes after I sent him the file, and from the looks of it, he had a lot to say. His words popped up on the screen. “Holy crap, do you know what this is?” If typed words had a tone, his right now would scream tempered excitement.

“I understand some of the lingo but not all. What is it?”

“The motherlode. I’ll try to break it down later, but I have to share this with my team. I’ll try to keep your name out of it because I’m sure you’re afraid of crossover, not to worry, brother, I won’t dox.”

“I never thought you would. So, I can safely leave this in your hands then?”

“Yeah, it may take a while, though. This is not your everyday scumbag trying to make a quick buck. This is the real deal. Catch you later; I’m going to work.”

We signed off from each other, and I sat back to think about his words. It would be perfect if it took a while; that would give me time to make my own moves. I imagine taking down a trafficking ring like the one he described would take time and planning, and while he was taking care of that side of things, I’ll be doing mine.



IN THE MORNING, since I didn’t have to take the twins to school, I asked them to pick up Gia so that I could make a run. I hadn’t taken into consideration that she’d need a ride to school in the mornings once she moved back home. It will be a while before she gets her license, after all, so it would fall to me to take her.

I wasn’t avoiding her purposely, though; I really had somewhere to go. I hadn’t had an opportunity to thank the one who’d helped me get this far and, in essence, had helped bring grandpa home, so I needed to stop my gramps before going to class. I needed some input as well because things had taken a turn.

Before, we both believed that the partygoers were little more than uninterested bystanders. People who’d seen the act and kept their mouths shut. They should be held accountable, sure, but now that I know they were willing participants, their punishment must now fit the crime. For this, and for what I’d already come up with on my own, I’m going to need some guidance.

After the pleasantries were shared, I got to the point of why I was there. I laid it all out, my thoughts, my hopes, and where I wanted things to go. I acknowledged that what I once thought was going to be a quick in and out action may now

take years. Not just because of what I'd stumbled upon, but because of all those involved.

Somehow, I feel even better about this change than I thought I would. The thought of a long slow, drawn-out torture spread out over years made my blood sing, and my vengeful thirst ignite. That's the Sicilian in me. Speaking of which.... Before my mind could go to someone else that I'd subjected to such, my thoughts were interrupted.

"If you do this, they're going to come after you. Is that why you got rid of the girl?" The question jarred me for a sec, but I don't know why I'm so surprised. It's why I'm here, isn't it? Because I'm known so well between these walls.

"Yes." The comforting hand on my shoulder the pat on my hand in commiseration went a long way to easing the hurt I've been keeping at bay.

Before, I was sending Gianna away to protect her from my loss, but now there's an even bigger danger involved, one that I will protect her from no matter what. I don't plan on letting Ricci get near my family. I don't plan on him seeing me coming until it's too late. But I won't risk her not if there's the slightest possibility of me being found out, and there is always that.

Since I've made up my mind to walk into the lion's den alone, I must prepare myself for the fallout when the time comes. That means ensuring both she and Ma are safe. Pop has Ma covered, but Gianna, I have to send far away from me so that there is no connection.

Hearing these same words said in a different manner only reassured me that I was making the right decision. Now that my mind was made up, and I'd gone so far as sending that file to Mem, there's no turning back. Today, I should do it today, I have months of planning ahead, and I can't have any distractions; it's best if she leaves now before I can't let her go. The pain that thought caused was excruciating.



## DRACO



“COMMISSIONER, WE NEED A MEET.” I had to wait until I could speak rationally before making this call. I’m still so beyond pissed I can’t see or think straight, but that’s neither here nor there. Some things in life you can put off for another day, some things you just shouldn’t. I’d already wasted a whole night, but that couldn’t be avoided since I like to have as much available information at my fingertips as possible.

“Draco, hello, how are you? How’s the family? Your father and mother doing, OK?”

“They’re fine for now, but my dad is not about to be, not once I tell him what the hell is going on.”

“What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“One of your subordinates crossed the line.”

“I don’t understand. How? What happened?”

I gave him the scoop on Dempsey. “I spoke to my lawyer; do you know how illegal it is for someone in his position to blackmail a kid like that?” He hemmed and hawed and made up excuses like I knew he would. These people, succubus who would take and take and still want more. Pop’s been paying this hump off long before we moved up here for good.

“The only thing that matters here is that he went after one of mine, so my question to you is, are you going to deal with him, or am I?”

“Let me take a look, see what’s going on.”

“I just told you what’s going on.”

“I know, but I have to... there are things that need to be done. I can’t just get rid of this guy off the force; he’s been with us for....”

“Oh, so you’re saying I’m taking care of it.”

“No-no-no, Draco, come on, this is me.”

“Yes, I’ll let Pop know how helpful you were.” I dropped the call before he could give me any more of his bullshit and waited. I even looked at my watch to check the time. If this hump makes me wait longer than ten minutes, I will indeed handle it myself.

I plan to any damn way, but I want his own to give him the boot first. I want him to feel like a fish out of water. I want him to lose what little power he thinks he has with the force behind him, and then I’ll move in for the kill.

Now, this piece of shit is not the first to come after me. Even heaven doesn’t hold the son culpable for what the father has done, but these fucks stay on my ass with their shit. But the fact that he went after Lance is what’s going to make his pain worst than others. This fuck’s gonna wish he never saw my name come across his desk by the time I’m done with him.

Seven minutes. That’s how long it took before the commissioner called back. “He’ll be gone by end of day today.”

“I want to be there.”

“Draco...”

“I’m there, or the deal’s off.”

“Fine, be here by noon.”

“No can do, the kids get off at two-thirty.”

“The kids?”

“Yeah, see you at three.”

I hung up because what’s he gonna do? Then I called my lawyer, who picked up on the first ring. “How’d it go?”

“He’s getting the boot today at three. I need you there.”

“I will be; now try and keep your nose clean in the meantime, will ya.”

“The fuck did I do?” He chuckled and hung up, prick.

Now, in every Sicilian movie, the consigliere is Sicilian. My boy is a Jew whose great-grandfather didn’t make it out of

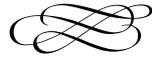
Auschwitz while his grandfather carried a number on his arm for the rest of his life. He's got a score to settle and not just with the Nazi fucks who terrorized his kin. He goes after any and all injustice, and he's good with this shit.

I met Levi my freshman year in college, and we've been thick ever since. He's not my lawyer just because of his intelligence and case record, but because of his personality, because of the man he is. A standup guy with a heart of gold and the instincts of a school of piranha scenting fresh blood in the dirty waters of the Amazon. And he loves fucking with anyone who fucks with me.

He's probably the only one outside of Pop, my brother, and my son, who knows my plans and what I've been doing to take the family legit. In fact, he's played a big part so far in helping me bring that dream to fruition. And though I don't need him this evening, sometimes I take him around for ballast. He's the most expensive weapon in my arsenal.

I sent a text to both boys telling them to come straight home after school. I never give up a chance to show them their own power and the fact that they have me, if no one else, standing in their corner. Lance has been there for my son since the two of them met more than a decade ago. I love him for that, but the truth is, I love him even more because my son loves him like his own soul. Anything I can do to make up for what my boy thinks about himself I'm here for.

## GABRIEL



*M*y phone went off in the middle of biology class, and seconds later, I saw Lance remove his backpack to fetch his. Pop! I looked over at Lance, who was looking back at me quizzically. Poor Lance got caught in the middle of my family's drama a few years ago when the schools first started cracking down on cell phones.

Pop lost his shit! According to him, his kids will always have their phones on them when away from home. When he was reminded that there were no cell phones when he himself was in school and he turned out fine, his answer was that somebody somewhere realized the need, and that's why they exist now.

I wasn't there for the showdown with the headmistress and whoever else sat in on that one, but the end result is we have our phones on vibrate and have the respect not to use them during class and only answer if there's an emergency. Since we're all here except for our parents and grandparents, any incoming call is an emergency as far as I'm concerned because who else would be calling us during school hours?

As for Lance, there's nothing the twins and I are dragged into by Pop that he's left out of. So, I'm guessing he received the same message, to come directly home and no pussy footing around after school, whatever that means. Pop's been in a mood since Lancelot's little reveal the night before.

He'd grunted through breakfast and only had smiles for the females in the house. Ma didn't know what the hell was going on; she's in her own world these days. I know what her deal is,

but neither of us is talking. I'm not one of those braindead assholes who think blaming the victim is the way to go, but I know that she's aware that I now know the truth about that night, and it's probably hard for her to face me.

I understand why she watered that shit down, but how do I tell her that I don't blame her? That this changes nothing about the way I see her and feel about her? If anything, I have more empathy and compassion for the girl she once was, the girl who'd endured that abhorrent shit and was still able to move on with her life, get married and raise relatively decent kids, and on top of that, have a heart like hers.

I also have a lot of respect for Pop. Not many men would've stepped up and taken on the raising of the son of a monster. The way he loves Ma, I'm surprised he could stand to see the reminder of Ricci every single day. Then again, he doesn't know the whole story, and I won't be the one to tell him.

When the bell rang for lunch, Lance jogged over to my side. "What's up with Unc?"

"Beats me! Probably have something to do with what happened last night."

"I figured, but what can it be?"

"Knowing Pop, you have to ask? Most likely, someone's going to get their ass handed to them. Do me a favor, watch the girls for me; I have something to take care of."

"You're still doing that shit? I thought you were done now that you've found grandpa. What gives?"

"Just some last-minute stuff, nothing bad, I promise." Of course, he didn't believe me and the look he gave me said as much, but I ignored him and headed out of the building for my hiding spot.

I was supposed to take care of this yesterday, or was it the day before? But I got sidetracked dealing with Sicily and Gianna. Now that Pop sent out a summons, who knows how long his shit is gonna last, whatever it is, so now might be the

only downtime I have. Besides, this thing is time-sensitive, and I can't expect them to wait on me forever.

I made sure I was alone though I wasn't expecting anyone to infiltrate my personal space and dug out my device, and attached the portable charger. I typed in the necessary information a very sterile-looking room came into view seconds later, where Dr. Naz's face popped up on the screen. Crazy fuck! Genius, but crazy, nonetheless.

"There you are; we were beginning to think you weren't going to call. We've had quite a few days here lately with our test subject. Roz has videoed each development for you as you asked, and we're just about ready for the next stage." He was all but jumping out of his skin with excitement.

No wonder he's been waiting years for someone to work his magic on. The facility he runs had come across the radar in one of the cases I took part in with ANONYMOUS. It was thought that they were into organ harvesting, but as it turns out, they were a group of STEM geniuses whose intelligence had slipped into madness at some point, and their peers found their ideas outlandish and downright primeval.

On further inspection, though their ideas were a bit archaic, there was nothing illegal about their methods, so the organization moved on, but I remained fascinated. Their take on brain function and its importance to the value of life and longevity cannot be argued with.

And, as a team of the world's leading experts on the subject, granted ones who'd been ostracized from their field due to their dogged approach and sometimes forgetting that they were experimenting on living beings, who better to ask?

So, when the time came, I couldn't think of a better place to send Victoria. Short of ending her, this was the next best thing. At least she was making out better than her mother and should be grateful for that much as far as I'm concerned.

By the time this bunch is done with her, she'd either be cured of her narcissistic bullshit, or she'd become more of a monster than she already is. Either way, she's out of Gianna's

life for good, and that's all I care about. All the rest is just icing on the cake as far as I'm concerned.

On the screen, Dr. Naz pulled up a projector screen and started the show, his excitement seeming to grow with each word. I'm guessing he was pleased with the results of whatever jacked-up shit he'd done in the last few days. My only instruction when I sent her to them was to keep her alive. I don't care how they do it. They can leave her brain in a serum hooked up to electrolysis while her body flops around on a gurney for all I care.

“As you know, we've been studying the brain and its functions and overall effects on the rest of the body. Sort of a mind over matter experiment, if you will. As you can see here, the patient is reacting as if restrained, but she hasn't been. She's simply reacting to the subliminal messages that we've programmed into her room.”

“She's now focused on everything else around her and her body, except the thick bandages around her head. She has no idea that anything has been done there, of course. We weren't quite sure what changes would be made to the subject's personality at this stage, but I'm pleased to report that she hasn't seemed to have undergone any great change in characteristics, other than what the programming has done.”

On the screen, Victoria raised her fingers to her mouth and pulled on her tongue hard enough to snap it off at the root. Then she started screaming, but there was no sound. One of the scientists entered the room and started wiping something along Victoria's thigh beneath the sheet that kept her decent.

Because of the subliminal messaging along with whatever they'd done when they opened her up, she couldn't move her legs, and her arms were hardly any better. I knew some of what they were doing; he'd explained it before, but seeing it in action was a bit out there. She looked like a ragdoll being controlled by strings.

Long story short, they were running an experiment where they could basically turn a human being into a robot by controlling their mind. The bandages around her head were

from where they'd actually opened up the top of her head and looked at her brain, among other things that I don't want to know about.

"Now, we will snap her out of it, and you're just in time to see the results." He turned off the video and entered a room where two other doctors were already tending to Victoria. Whatever they injected into her arm seemed to wake her up, and her eyes opened slowly as they adjusted to the light.

"What happened?" She looked confused by the sound of her own voice, and then her hand went back to her mouth where she did that thing with her tongue again; this time, her 'ouch' resounded around the room. "How, I thought you took my tongue." She looked even more afraid now that it was still there.

"Please move your left leg, Ms. Bailey."

She reacted to the use of her given name, something I'd told them to use as part of her torture. The more she's reminded that her past life, the one she'd had in Gianna's home, was over, the more she'd suffer. "I can't move my leg..." She started to protest before one of the doctors poked her leg with something, and she moved it out of the way in haste.

"I don't understand; how is this possible? I thought you took my tongue. It wasn't there before; it was gone; I tasted blood." The other doctor was scribbling away like a machine, and the room got very excited. "Go on, tell us more of what you experienced." Victoria looked around at them before lifting her hand to her head, where the thick bandages protected the incision from being exposed.

"What have you people done to me? Why is my head like this?" As soon as she started becoming aggressive, one of the doctors moved over and injected something into her arm. She was out in seconds.

"What do you think? Tomorrow we'll work on cognitive dissonance since we've had such great success with perception. She did very well, don't you think? A most

interesting case study.” I think you’re a crazy fuck Naz but do you. She doesn’t deserve much better.

I didn’t say that out loud; of course, I just told him to keep up the good work and signed off. I removed the artificial mole and other identifying markers I’d worn during the call. Although my face is never shown, I always make sure my neck, hands, and anything else that might be exposed are camouflaged, just in case.

Victoria wasn’t looking so full of herself these days, for which I’m grateful. To some, having her relive the same torture day after day, where she thinks she’s been paralyzed and lost her tongue, might seem a bit hedonistic. So is having those demented fucks playing around in her brain at will. But I think it’s the least I can do to pay her back for the years of hell she and her mother put Gianna through.

They’d taken her voice and did their best to maim her by pushing her down the stairs. Now, Victoria will get to relive that every day for the next six months or so. After that, she’ll be Jimmy’s problem. She won’t get to live the life she’d become accustomed to, but I doubt she’d even remember once Naz turns her brain to mush.

As to the other player, the only one left now that Becky was gone, he’s going to have his day in court in a few months. But for now, while he’s in the local jail, he’s being made to remember his part in that shit show as well. His cell mate’s family is being taken care of very nicely while he torments Felix with daily reminders of what a shit dad he’d been.

I think the thing that gets to him most is the constant reminder that he’d failed his precious wife, who was probably suffering as she looked down from above at the mess he’d made of her child’s life. I’d put those words into the convict’s mouth, of course, and he’d been coached very well on what to say. The guards were also doing their best to make sure he never forgets.

I never claimed to be a saint. I think I’ve gone above and beyond to acknowledge and admit the fact that I’m a monster, that I have monster DNA in my blood. Asking me to give a

shit about any of them at this point is futile. I'm not one to feel sorry for the wicked just because they seem contrite. These fuckers are only sorry when they're caught. Fuck...them.

I heard movement and was ready to flatten someone when I caught sight of her hair. Dammit! Didn't I ask Lance to keep an eye on her? I'm avoiding you, sweetheart, because I'm not ready to let go. But since you're here....

## GABRIEL



*H*er face didn't look like my Gianna's when she approached me. There was a hard look in her eyes as she came to a stop in front of me. "Are you avoiding me? Have I done something wrong?" That look didn't last; it just disappeared like smoke, which tells me she was trying to be brave. She'd most likely picked up on my change in mood these past few days and was protecting herself.

That made me feel disgusted with myself because I'd been trying so hard not to give anything away so that she could enjoy her time away. On the other hand, she's giving me the perfect opening. I hadn't planned out my words to her in my head like most would've done in my shoes. I just couldn't bring myself to do it, so for the first time in my life, I wasn't prepared.

"There's something...." I stopped and took a deep breath. There isn't much I can tell her to soften the blow that is sure to come, so I decided to go with the truth or as much of it as I was willing to share. "There're some things that I need to do, things you can't be a part of...."

"Are you breaking up with me?" She sounded breathless and hurt and I never in a million years thought this was going to hurt me so bad. But I can't stop now; I just got to rip the Band-Aid off one time. "I want you; I think I'll always want you, but I can't have you. I want better for you." Better than this life of blood and violence. Saying those words were hard, but the next ones out of my mouth were going to be devastating.

“Here’s the thing, if you’re going to have any kind of life, you can’t do it around here; you have to leave. I can’t see you with a husband and kids; I just can’t do it. So, leave with your family, don’t look back. If I ever see you again, I’ll take you plain and simple, and it won’t be like this. I won’t be like this.”

My gut was tying itself in knots, and there was a burning sensation that ran from my navel to my heart like I’d just gutted myself.

“No, Gabriel, please don’t...” The tears, I can’t handle the tears, and for some reason, I got very irate at her for using them now. She won’t understand that there was literally nothing I could do about this situation, nothing that won’t put her in danger. I didn’t want to be harsh with her, didn’t want our last conversation to deteriorate into something awful. But I also knew that sometimes you must be harsh to get your point across.

“You think this is easy for me; it’s tearing my guts the fuck out, but I love you too much to bring you into this. I wish it were different...”

“Into what? What’re you talking about? Does this have something to do with you finding your grandpa?” She’s still not getting it, fuck. I don’t want her even thinking about the mess I’m about to dive into; I don’t want her close to this in any way, shape, or form.

“It doesn’t matter what it’s about; all that matters is that we can’t be together. I’m sorry if you were looking for something more, but now that your life is back on track, you don’t need me. Just leave, like I said. Go to Virginia, live your life.” Be happy; please be happy. I almost buckled in front of her but held it back. Any show of weakness and I’d lose this chance, and after this, I’m one hundred percent sure I won’t be able to do this again. It hurts too damn much.

“So, what was all of this about? Why did you even get involved in my life if you were going to do this?” Fuck, Gianna, just go, please take the words I’ve already said and

go, don't make me have to come up with some harsh shit that I won't even mean just to put space between us.

“Was it just a game to you from beginning to end? I'm not a doll for you to play dress-up with and then discard when you get bored. I'm a whole person.” Where the hell is this coming from?

She thinks I didn't mean any of it, and I have no choice but to let her. This, this is hell. Somehow, I couldn't help reaching out for her, though, almost subconsciously. “I'm sorry, Gianna, I'm so sorry, but there's no way for us to be together.”

Because if the people I'm about to go after know about you, I'm afraid you might be hurt. And if the day ever comes that you learn the truth about my birth... “As I said, you need to leave New Hampshire; you can't be here.” How did I not know that this was one of my fears? That the thought of her knowing where I came from filled me with such angst and dread? If no one else, I want her to never know this, never.

“OK, you've made your point.” She turned in a huff and started heading back the way she came.

“Where are you going?”

“I don't want to be alone, and you don't want to be with me, so I'm going to go find someone who does?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Exactly what I said. You don't need to worry about me anymore. You've made your point extremely clear. Thanks for all that you've done for me. I owe you, or maybe we're even since I gave you the only thing I had worth giving.”

Low blow, but it hit the mark. I had to stand there and grit my teeth with my fists clenched as she walked away from me. Just one more thing I've lost because of Ricci. The pain was unbearable, like being physically hit by an SUV going ninety miles per hour. It was almost too hard to breathe, but I refused to let the tears that threatened fall.

I felt just a hint of pride at her feistiness there at the end, but then her parting words replayed themselves in my head, and I hurried to follow her. Just who is this person she's

running to? Whoever he is, I'll pound him into mush. She can't do that, can't have that in front of me. The hypocrisy and double standards of my thinking weren't lost on me. I don't give a fuck. If anybody's near her, they're going to get it.

I ran back onto campus in time to see her walking away between the twins. Why did that fill me with such relief? It should be none of my business now, right. I'd done what I'd planned to where she's concerned. Things hadn't been as smooth as I'd have hoped, but it hadn't been too bad either. In a few days, I'm sure it'll blow over, and she'll be happy again.

I told myself that as I headed back to class, feeling like the bottom had dropped out. Usually, in situations like these, I can talk myself through it keep my head on straight. But I've never been in a situation quite like this, so the emotions were all new, and they were vicious.

I couldn't use philosophy on this one; I felt pure raw emotion. So much so that by the time school came to an end that day, I could barely put one foot in front of the other without feeling physical pain. Without my years of training, I doubt I would've made it. A lesser man would've fallen, I think. There's no way anyone could hold up under this heavy load of heartache and regret.

I didn't see her that evening, and the twins weren't talking to me, so I had no idea how she got home. Lancelot was pissed when we pulled through the gates to home together like Pop had ordered. "What's eating you?" My words sounded off even to my ears. He gave me a scathing look that I knew only too well. He wanted to hit me, but his brotherly instinct won't let him.

"Gia's grandmother picked her up from school."

"Oh, so that's where she went."

"It was before school was over. What the hell did you say to her at lunch? Why did she have to be walked out of the building like she was doubled over in pain?"

"What?"

"Where're you going? Unc told us to be here."

At his words, I stopped short on my way to the car, feeling torn. The only thing that kept me from going after her, though is the fact that it was for the best. My going there now would change nothing; there's nothing to be done, no turning back. So, I took another deep breath and turned back to the house.

"I can see you're upset, so I'm going to leave it alone, but you've got one day to tell me what the hell you did to her." I hate when he goes into disappointed little brother mode, it really gets under my skin. As if that wasn't bad enough, the twins came peeling down the driveway like bats outta hell and slammed out of their cars in anger.

No need to guess who they were pissed at since they didn't even acknowledge my presence. Poor Lance got caught in the crosshairs because Anna called him a not-so-nice name when she passed by him. I didn't need him looking at me like it was all my fault either, like I wasn't hurting from the breakup as well. I guess because I was the one who initiated it, I get no sympathy. Meanwhile, I felt like someone had scooped out my insides with a rusty spoon.

Pop came down the steps at a jog, calling out a greeting to the two of us. "Let's go, boys...what's wrong with you?" He stopped in front of me and grabbed my shoulders while he studied my face.

"Nothing, Pop, where are we going?" He looked from me to Lance and back before letting it go, which I'm sure means he's going to grill Lance later.

"We're gonna see a guy about a thing." Oh boy! Lance and I just followed him into the back of the Escalade with Tommy at the wheel. I was almost not surprised when we pulled into the police station twenty minutes later, but Lance looked like he was about to shit a brick. "Unc?"

"Don't worry, Lancelot, you're good. Let's go show this asshole why he shouldn't ever mess with the Russos." This ought to be good.



## GIANNA



I DON'T THINK I've ever been this mad or this hurt in my life. Not even when dealing with Becky, Victoria, and my dad in the past. Maybe it's because of all that had transpired in the last month or so that I was feeling such anger where normally I would've kept my head down and accepted my licks. Or maybe it's because I've had days to come to terms with this eventuality.

I knew deep down inside that something like this was coming; I had talked myself through just such a scenario a time or two ever since I noticed him pulling away. But somehow, I'd still convinced myself that it wouldn't happen; there was no reason for it to. Things were going great between us; even his sisters said so.

It was their encouragement, them always telling me how different Gabriel was with me than with anyone else, that had kept my hope alive. Now there was no more hope, no more anything. Just thinking about facing him again left me feeling anxious and afraid. And what about school? How could I ever face anyone there again? Wouldn't they laugh at me? I can just hear them now; the ugly duckling turned swan had been cast aside by the school's heartthrob.

I felt sick like I had to throw up sick. Grandma and the aunts had been trying to talk me into going back home with them now that dad was going to jail, but I'd been holding out, hoping that there was another solution that somehow, I'd be able to stay here. I'm old enough after all, and my inheritance from mom would be coming through in another few months once I turn eighteen; I could be on my own, as long as I had Gabriel.

Dad had even gone ahead and transferred most of his money and half of his business into my name, which his lawyer said is one of the reasons he was having trouble proving that dad hadn't set out to commit premeditated

murder, but that's another story. The more I thought of facing everyone I knew, the more panic set in until I was imagining crazy things in my head.

That night after grandma went to bed, I stayed up thinking, and before I could stop myself, I was on the computer. The first thing I had to take care of was school. At least the one good thing to come out of the pandemic was online classes and the ease with which I could do that today. So, I went ahead and set that up, but I didn't stop there. I was mad, like really incredibly mad, and I may have let that anger lead me to do something no rational person in my situation would've done.

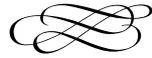
It was spiteful and harsh, especially to the grandmother that I'd just been reunited with, but at that moment, I wanted nothing to do with my life, nothing at all. I didn't take anything, just my birth certificate, social security card, and whatever paperwork I might need.

I was quiet when I walked down the stairs and left the note on the kitchen table. The note was misleading, but it couldn't be helped. I needed to buy myself some time before she started looking for me. I had nothing but the backpack with some of my old clothes, the backpack where I'd found some kind of device that Gabriel had probably put there at some point without me knowing.

I tossed it down the toilet and flushed. I hope he was listening like in the movies, and I'd just deafened him. It took all my strength not to break the phone he'd given me into a million pieces, but I left it along with everything else he'd given me in the closet where I'm sure they'd be found later. The message was loud and clear. I wanted nothing of what he'd given me.

By the time I got into the Uber, which I'd had pick me up down the street away from the house, I was madder than I've ever been in my life. Mad and full of righteous indignation. It was the only way to keep the shakes at bay. The only way I could find to deal with the heartache and pain that threatened to devour me.

## GABRIEL



I admit to blanking out on the way up the steps and into the building since I could pretty much guess where this was going, and my mind was rightfully still back in that little grove where I'd last spoken to her. Lance's words were making me on edge a bit as well. Why did her grandmother have to come get her?

Of course, I expect her to be upset, I'm upset at the situation, but the thought of her hurting so much she had to leave school is making me feel like even more of an asshole than I already do. Whatever this is Pop's about to do, I want over with, so I can get back to the house and have the twins go look after her.

Levi, the snake charmer, met us inside the doors, and that's when my focus shifted. Why the heck is Pop bringing him in? Somebody's feelings are about to get hurt and hurt real bad. "Gabe, Lance, you boys have grown." Since when? He just saw us a few weeks ago at the twins' sweet sixteen. I didn't say a word, though, because he was wearing his yellow tie.

Levi's ties are a harbinger to whatever mood he's in. Yellow means he's not only out for blood, but he pretty much has his prey cornered with no way out, and Pop's gonna owe him big. Pop taught me all this a while ago, and it's stuck because of the pure perfidy of the matter. His smile, along with those frat boy looks of his, like he wouldn't harm a fly, tends to put everyone at ease. At least he's not wearing the pink one. Sheesh!

We made it to the commissioner's office, which looked like a completely different place from the rest of the station, almost like we'd made a wrong turn somewhere. Plush carpet and overstuffed leather chairs compared to the cracked linoleum floors and hard plastic chairs on the floor below.

I recognized the commissioner as he stood to his feet behind his desk to greet Pop but could only guess who the room's other occupant was. From the way Lance tensed up with a sour look on his face, I figured my assumptions were right and shifted my body to put myself between them. That quick, my mind shifted gears.

I've been a horrible friend. My boy is going through something, his life's dream is being threatened, and my selfish ass has only been thinking about myself. Granted, I have all faith that Pop would take care of it, but still. "Commissioner!" Pop's first power play was to ignore the other man's outstretched hand before taking a seat.

He motioned for Lance and I to take a seat in the chairs on either side of him, with me being the one closer to Dempsey. Levi didn't sit. Instead, he opened up his briefcase and withdrew some official-looking documents, which he passed across the desk. "What's this?" The commissioner accepted them.

"This is what we're willing to do unless our demands are met. Your subordinate will make a public apology to the young man he harassed and threatened...."

"Harassed? Threatened?" I guess Dempsey isn't the brightest.

"Shut up, Dempsey!" His boss muzzled him while Levi just gave him a look.

Pop just looked straight ahead, not saying a word, almost as if he wasn't interested. I knew better. That tic right beneath his ear is a dead giveaway to the fact that he was barely leashed, and it wouldn't take much to send him over the edge.

"As I was saying," Levi carried on. "He will make an apology, and then he will be terminated from his post, or we

will sue the department for solicitation of a minor in the facilitation of a crime.” Dempsey flew out of his chair. “Solicitation? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Did you not approach my client and offer him something in return for doing your bidding? Illegal as it was?”

“Did you not use your position of authority to harass and abuse him to get something you wanted? In short, did you not threaten his future livelihood if he didn’t do as you said? Had Lance been Lisa, what would we be looking at here?” Yup, Pop sure knows how to pick ‘em. There are too many holes in his theory to count, but his delivery had even the commissioner falling for his shit.

But then Dempsey made the colossal mistake of trying to save his job and his pension and pretty much ended his own life. “What are you talking about, you smarmy son of a bitch? You’d take the word of this lowlife scum? Who says any of that happened? I met with him, yes, but that was only to talk to him about the program and our plans going forward.”

“Are you saying he’s a liar?” Now you’d think that because this guy was after Pop that he would’ve done his homework, so he would know that those words, said in that tone, meant trouble, but nope, either he was too far gone or too dumb to notice, so he went ahead and planted both feet in his damn mouth.

“Of course, he’s lying.”

“What if I say I believe him?” Even the commissioner was trying to cut Dempsey off at this point, but the guy was literally hot around the collar and missed all the cues. Levi started putting his shit away, and I braced myself for whatever the hell was about to jump off.

“Dempsey, settle down. I told you you should’ve brought your rep, that this was going to happen. My hands are tied this time. You went too far, going after the kid like that. It was a bad move all around.” The commissioner was on diffusion duty.

“I’m saying it never happened, none of it.” He blustered, and the commissioner actually looked at Pop as if begging him to believe his guy over Lance. Something I knew was not possible in any universe and which he quickly learned when Pop gave him his patented ‘you fuck’ glare.

“It’s over, Demps; let’s just get out of this thing as clean and with as much dignity as we can.”

“You’d take the words of this nig....”

Pop reached him seconds before I did, even though I was closer.

The damn room became riotous, with pure pandemonium. Levi pulled Lance back out of the way against the wall, I ended up trying to get Pop’s hands from around this prick’s neck, and the commissioner was ordering his men who heard the ruckus and came running to vacate the room.

“Come on, Pop, let him go. Not here; look at Lance; he’s scared.” Fuck he was, but I knew that would get through to Pop, who looked over at the wall where Levi was busy looking at his phone while holding Lance in place next to him with a hand on his chest. Pop released his hold on Dempsey, which gave me the perfect opportunity to put my fist through his face. The sound of bone and teeth cracking was glorious.

“I’m gonna let you live because my Pop won’t,” I whispered the words over his bleeding stump before walking away. Pop’s always spouting off about the right time and place, but he went after someone in a police station, in the commissioner’s office of all places. Oh well, he did promise to show us our power.

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t just want him fired. I want him brought up on charges. Levi, start a lawsuit. Boys, let’s go home.” We left ignoring the commissioner who called out to Pop, who’d gone ice and almost walked into Uncle Marvin. “Unc? What’re you doing here?”

“Your father asked me not to come, but....”

He was dressed in his collar with that stoic look on his face. “Lance, are you okay?”

“Yeah, Dad, what’re you doing here?”

“Draco? Did you stick to our agreement? You look a bit ruffled.” Pop walked over and whispered something in his ear, which changed his whole demeanor. “Ah, I see. You boys come with me.”

Lance and I followed him, leaving Pop with Levi. We’re either about to get a lecture, which, I don’t know why because we didn’t do anything, or he’s going to take us out for ice cream like we’re ten years old and try to erase the ugliness of the last half hour. At least I hadn’t thought of her in all that time, so there is that.



## DRACO



IT TOOK me a good ten minutes after leaving that place to talk. Levi had already gone back to his dungeon to start carrying out my orders, and I had Tommy drive me around a bit before going home. I’d sent the boys off with Marvin because I’m not equipped to handle this particular situation. I’m not a person of color, so I don’t know the first thing about how that skeezy shit feels, to be called out of your name like that, but I know my Lancelot could not have felt anything but gutted by that ugly ass word.

I had a feeling that things would go there after doing my research on Dempsey and learning that he had that in him. It only pissed me off even more that he’d gone anywhere near my boy with that mentality in him. I’d asked Marvin not to come but to be on standby just in case things did take a turn but held out hope that they wouldn’t.

Of course, sending Gabe with them is self-explanatory. I’m hoping Marvin can diffuse the situation before my son gets it into his head to take matters into his own hands. That’s my job. At least this whole situation had alerted me to the fact that

I had eyes on me, men and women who were trying to bring me down, and even worst, they were planning on going after Pop.

I'm not worried too much about that. I'd spent the last twenty or so years cleaning up the spills from my family's past and plugging up any holes left behind. The fact that ninety-five percent of our businesses were now legit was also in my favor, but it's that last five percent I have to take care of now before this thing gets out of hand.

This means I can't make any drastic moves in the near future, like going after Ricci on my own. Gabe hasn't said or done anything in the last few days since coming back home, but I can't shake the feeling that all is not as it seems.

His team is convinced that he's not up to anything, but what do they know? The boy had dragged them off to Sicily without them being the wiser until they got there. At least I know he's protected with them around if nothing else since they've already lost the fight even if they don't know it yet.

The fact that Gabe got the drop on them the first go-round means he's set the stage for all interactions going forward. I know my son; he's never going to give them the lead, not ever. They're his now. Whatever, I'll figure it out. Right now, I've got this hump Dempsey and his cohorts to deal with.

"Tommy, I need you and the boys to work on something for me."

"What is it, boss? Anything."

"This cazzo, Dempsey, I want you to find everything you can on him, his family, his friends, anyone who's associated with him. I wanna know who he owes, where he gets his dry cleaning done, where his kids go to school, who his wife is fucking while he's out being a racist piece of shit. I want it all; you got me? Go back twenty, thirty years, to when he joined the academy."

"Alright, boss, but uh, ain't they watching you now?"

"I give a fuck who they watch. If their eyes offend me, pluck those shits out."

“Everybody?”

“Everybody.” I’m gonna burn this motherfucker to the ground.

## GABRIEL



It only took five minutes into the car ride back home for me to realize what Pop had said to my Uncle Marvin, or at least for me to get the gist of it. He spent the time switching off between trying to comfort his son and keeping me calm. I don't know why they thought I would do something; I hadn't said a word, and Lance didn't give a shit about some low-wage scumbag with one too many bags of Doritos under his belt using some outdated insult that really just boils down to calling him lazy.

And as if to prove my point, Lancelot said just as much to his dad. "Dad, that word doesn't mean the same thing to me as it does to the people on television and in the news. Gabe and I defanged that word when we were about ten."

"Oh! How did you do that?" Lance looked at me as if to ask if I wanted to explain.

"You do it."

"Okay, remember how Gabe and I met? When those kids used to bully me? Well, when Gabe went back to New York that time, I think we were like seven, he did some research, like a lot. You know how Gabe is. Anyway, like a few years later, he told me what the word actually meant and why people use it incorrectly. Gabe, you explain; you're better at it than I am."

"Fine! Basically, it boils down to this. That word, in a nutshell, means lazy. I simply told Lance that a people who built a whole nation over centuries without pay while their

families were being split up and sold as free labor can't realistically be called lazy. It's a myth, a word used to inflict pain and fear, but it's just a lie."

"So, you see, dad, I've known that since I was ten, so that word says more about the person throwing it around than the recipient."

"And what does it say about them?"

"That they're afraid, of what I don't know. It's like when you're in a fight, and you're losing, so you use dirty tactics to regain the upper hand."

"Like Tyson biting Holyfield's ear in ninety-seven."

"What do you boys know about that? You weren't even born yet." He looked back at us in the backseat while he drove. At least the twinkle was back in his eye.

"Classic boxing on Hulu Unc." He popped a gut laughing, and his voice went back to his happy-go-lucky self once he was sure we were okay. We still went for ice cream, though, and sat like good little boys before we were released back into the wild.

He dropped us off at home so Lance could pick up his car. "I'll see you later; gotta go make sure dad is really okay." We shook on it, and he left. Pop was already back, so I went to see about him as well. Dealing with his anger helped keep my mind off of Gia, but by the time bedtime rolled around and all of my defenses were down, I kept imagining what Lance had described earlier about seeing her leaving school with her grandma.

I threw myself into my plot against Ricci as a way to cope, as a way to not go to her, to make sure she was okay. I thought of just sneaking into her house to watch her sleep, just to reassure myself that she was okay. But in the end, I gave up on the idea because it would serve no purpose other than to prolong the inevitable.

I slept fitfully and woke up still feeling unsettled, but in the shower, I did think of a way to put my mind to rest. I'll just send a member of my team to sit on her house and maybe

follow her to Virginia when they leave for a few days at least. It was an awesome idea, and I thought Denver would be perfect for the job, but before I could hunt him down to tell him what my plans were, the twins came bounding down the stairs.

“Gabe, is she with you?”

“Is who with me?”

“Gia, Gia’s missing.”

“What did you say?”

“Look, she sent this, but it was scheduled for delivery, which means she wrote this a while ago, like hours maybe.” Anna held out her phone for me to see, and at first, I couldn’t make sense of the words or figure out why she was so upset. Then I was flying down the outside steps two at a time.

No-no-no Gianna, what the fuck did you do? Her grandmother was coming out of her house when I peeled into the driveway. “Where is she? Where’s Gianna?”

“I was just about to come to your home; Gianna’s gone, she took off.”

“Took off? Took off where?” Why is nothing making sense?

She held out a handwritten note that basically said she needed some time to herself to deal with everything that happened and not to look for her and not to worry. This one gave the impression that she was coming back, while the one my sister received was an outright goodbye. I felt blood gush from my nose for the first time in about ten years.

“Gabe, Gabriel, young man.” This is my fault, my fault. Even those words made no sense to me; they just sounded like gibberish in my ears. The world was spinning, and I couldn’t get a grip, especially with the boulder on my chest. Eloise’s face kept blitzing in and out of my vision, and my head got so tight I barely registered the sound of wheels squealing over the pounding in my ears.

“Gabe, shit, son, I’m here, I’ve got you.” Pop, good Pop’s here, I can let go. Lights out!



I AWAKENED SOMETIME LATER to whispers in the room. I couldn’t make out what was being said or who was talking, but it was more than one of them. What the hell happened? My body didn’t feel like mine, and only my training kept me from panicking.

I had a bit of trouble pulling out of it, but when my eyes came fully open, my mother, Sheila, and the twins were hovering. “He’s awake, Pop; he’s coming to,” Rosa called out. Why is my little sister crying? I turned my head, and Pop came into view with his phone clamped to his ear and an unsettled look on his face. “I don’t care what the fuck. How far could one little girl get? Find her.”

Little girl, Gianna! It all came rushing back, except for why I was here, in my parent’s room. The last thing I remember is Pop putting his arms around me. I jackknifed up in bed and tried to get out of the bed. “No, son, you stay put; your uncle’s on his way to have a look at you.”

“No, Pop, I’m good. Did you find anything on her yet?”

“No, the boys are still looking. She didn’t drive, so they’re checking out the bus depot and train station; we should get something soon. One of the neighbors saw a strange car pick up someone in the early morning hours, so we’re tracking down the driver, but she wiped the phone clean before leaving it, so we don’t know who it was. We just know it wasn’t a local cab.”

“What do you mean she left her phone?”

Pop looked at the others before answering. “She left everything behind.” That hurt, like a lot. She was basically saying she didn’t want anything from me, a last fuck you to me, I guess.

I didn't bother asking what happened to me even though it was the first time I'd passed out like that. I'll think about that later. Right now, I had to concentrate on not letting it happen again, but Pop's words were making it hard. I felt hot then cold and had to concentrate on breathing to overcome the fear. Where could she have gone? If she were going to Virginia, why go through all this?

"I have to go to my room. I need to get to my computer. I can find her easier that way. Why am I in your room?"

"That's your mother; she freaked out when Tommy walked into the house carrying you." Before I could stand up, Uncle Garrett and Lancelot rushed into the room.

"How do you feel?"

My uncle approached with his trick bag and ignored my reassurances that I was okay. I sat through his examination for Ma's sake because she wasn't talking, just sat there looking scared while my sisters had tears in their eyes. Rosa kept giving Anna looks that tipped me off to the fact that they were hiding something but the fact that they weren't talking meant they didn't want to say in front of the others.

Lancelot brushed by everyone else and came to sit beside me when Uncle Garrett was done. "He's fine; his pressure's just elevated a bit for now, but nothing dangerous. What is it now? The idiot cop?"

"No, Gia's gone." Pop answered while pacing the room.

"What do you mean gone? Like someone took her? Why?"

"No, we don't think that that's what happened."

I need to get out of here and to my room. No one said anything when I left the bed and walked out of the room with Lance and the twins on my heels. "What really happened between you two yesterday?" I couldn't bring myself to answer him, couldn't say the words. "I messed up." Where are you, baby? Don't do this.

I went to my computer and looked at her trackers, but they were all in her house. I sat there like a lump, not knowing what to do next. She had indeed left everything behind. The earrings

I'd added the tracer to, and the one in her backpack. "Where are you going?" Lance called out to me as I left the room again.

"To Gianna's."

"I'll drive." The three of them followed me downstairs and out the door. I felt like I was on autopilot, like all of this was happening elsewhere, and I was just watching it from the sidelines. I didn't see this coming; I didn't expect her to make a move like this. How could she?

"What are you two hiding?" I sat in the front seat of the Hummer with Lance at the wheel while the twins huddled together in the back.

"We didn't know what she was planning."

"Tell me!"

"We introduced her to Diego." I flung around in my seat in surprise.

"Why did you do that?"

"We didn't know why she wanted to talk to him, we thought...."

"We thought she just wanted a fake ID like everyone else, to get into places and stuff." Rosa took over from Anna.

"When did you do this?"

"Yesterday, she called in the evening after school. We'd told her about him before just in passing. We didn't even think she remembered. It was just something to talk about."

"Lance, change of plans, head to the dorms." Diego is an expert at fake IDs but not only that; he has connections to the underground, something not many know about. To the kids at school, he's just the go-to guy for fake IDs so they can get into bars and clubs and other stupid shit. I never had any uses for his services, but that's just the kind of shit these two would get up to.

"If I find out you two bought anything off him, I'll skin you both alive." Lancelot threatened and drove a little faster.

“We didn’t. Monique got one earlier this year, but we didn’t. Pop would kill us if he found out.” I didn’t bother asking why they’d even mention something like that to her, didn’t lash out the way I wanted to, I just sat there and listened to Lancelot tear them a new one for even being involved in something like that.

I didn’t let him come to a full stop before hopping out of the truck. The dorm assistant started to spew some shit, but I wasn’t with it. “Diego Santiago, where?”

“Do you have a pass?”

“Gabriel Russo, that’s my pass. Now, where is he?”

He had the good sense to blanch at the name before typing something into his little device.

“Room three-oh-five, on the third floor, the elevators are right over... Hey, you can’t all go up there at once.” I took the stairs because I’d lose my shit if I had to wait for an elevator, and the others ignored him and followed hot on my heels. I found the room and knocked before bursting in as soon as it was opened.

“Did you make a new ID for Gianna Fontane yesterday?”

“Hey, it’s Gabe Russo, uh, who is that?” I grabbed him up and shook the memory back into his five-foot-four ass. “Okay-okay, chill. The hot little number with the eyes, right?”

“You seeking death?”

“Nope, ah, no, she didn’t want that, said it would take too long, so I hooked her up with someone. It’s messed up what was going on with her, huh.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Her dad, the guys who were after her.” I have no idea what that was about, but obviously, it’s the story she’d told him.

“Who did you hook her up with?”

“Um, I’m not at liberty to tell you...hey, what gives bro?”

“Gabe, let him go.”

“Talk, or I’ll break your fucking neck.”

“Okay, okay, but it won’t do you any good. It’s like this. One of my connections works with this underground outfit that helps women disappear.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s an organization for battered women. Even if I tell you who, it won’t be of any help. Once she passes her off, she won’t know anything more about her; that’s how it works. One hand doesn’t know about the other and so on.”

“What’re you saying?”

“She could be halfway around the country by now, or anywhere for that matter, if she has the money and resources.”

“Give me the name and number of this contact.”

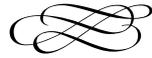
He started to argue, but the death glare in my eyes changed his mind. Halfway around the country or anywhere. Where would she have gone? I took the paper with the name he wrote without looking at it and turned to leave the room. “If anything happens to her, I’ll...” No, not his fault; this was my doing.

I had that choking feeling again as I headed back down the stairs. The idiot assistant looked pissed that we’d overruled his authority but whatever. “Where to? You still wanna go to her house?” Lance sounded pissed, worried, but pissed.

“No, take me back home; I need my computer.”

I’m going to find you and when I do.... I didn’t give you permission to run away, Gianna. What did you do then, asshole? What did you think was going to happen? My conscience can be a bit of a stronzo.

## GABRIEL



Nothing! I spent all night into the morning looking. It's like she never existed. There's no way she could've disappeared that fast on her own, but then again, she had help, didn't she? The contact I got from Diego is lucky she does good work for women in need, or I would've ended her already. She gave me nothing when I called and even refused to meet with me face to face.

I've played around with the idea of holding someone hostage until I get some answers, but that's the monster in me. I have to keep that shit on lock, he's already cost me more than enough, but it's hard not to lose it at every turn. I even paid Felix a visit, but he had no idea where she was and was now spending his days worrying about her instead of the sentence he was facing.

Good, the monster is very pleased that he's not the only one suffering. Her grandmother had returned home with a promise to come back soon. For some reason watching her go was like losing my last connection to Gianna. Now I'm beginning to think maybe she, Gianna has some monster in her as well. How else could she just disappear from my life like this? I have moments when I wonder if she ever cared, but then I remind myself that I'm the one who sent her away, that it was me who'd thrown her away, or at least that's how I think she sees it.

Pop wasn't having any luck finding her trail either, which somehow scares me more than my wasted efforts do. If he couldn't find her with all of his resources, and the two of us

together were coming up empty-handed, I don't know what that says about the lengths she'd gone to to escape me.

Was she really that hurt? Had I been that careless with her when all I was doing was trying to protect? I run the gamut each day from wanting to wring her neck in anger to just wanting her to come back home or at the very least just reach out and let me or someone know that she's okay and not hurt in a ditch somewhere.

I've thrown up more times than I care to remember at the thought of her hurt and alone somewhere, to the point that Pop has me under twenty-four-hour watch. Between him and Lancelot, I don't think I've been alone for more than ten minutes at a time without one or the other checking in.

Now I'm sitting alone in her room at the Fontane residence like a fool, blaming myself because it's my fault, all of it, and wondering why this had to be my penance. I was hoping against hope that she'd at least contact the twins and let them know she was okay, but they themselves have heard nothing.

By the end of the first week, my fear turned to anger and back to fear again. I couldn't eat, was hardly sleeping, and was just going through the motions. I miss her voice, miss her smell, I miss everything about her. Even though I know it was for her own good, I'm now wondering whatever made me think I could live without her in my life.

People stayed away from me; only Pop and Lance dared get near me. At school, there were whispers and stares. I became cold, colder than I've ever been. I didn't look at the blueprints for Ricci's demise, not once because somewhere in the back of my mind, I blamed him for this too. Had he not been the bane of my existence, I wouldn't have sent her away.

Anger and fear turned to hate by month three. Not hate for her, but for everything else. My life truly had no meaning now. I used to think it didn't before, but now I know what that truly means. After I'd exhausted all my options, I used that hate to dive back into vengeance mode. I had no other way to expend all this pent-up energy, but I never stopped looking.

My team had become like my shadow, no doubt thanks to Pop, but they were the ones doing most of the looking. At least once a day, they did a search using their own contacts and connections as well. Pop never stopped using all of his resources, and it was because of him, because of the worry I saw in his face across the breakfast table each morning, that I decided to pull myself together.

There was one thing I knew that she was alive. I told myself that had she departed this world; I would've known. I think she's just hurt for now and that one day she'll come to her senses and return or at the very least get in touch to let me know that she was fine. I had to tell myself that in order to move on, to breathe again.

When the pain got too unbearable, I'd hold the mutt in my lap for comfort. She'd left the damn dog. For some reason, when I think of that, I get so pissed off at her I want to scream. She'd thrown everything back in my face. But then sometimes I'd have these moments where I'm so proud of her because she'd stood up for herself. She could've done that shit in Virginia, where I'd at least know that she was safe.

"I'm gonna light your mama's little ass up as soon as she shows her face again." Can dogs roll their eyes? I'm pretty sure the little shit just did just that. "Where did your mother go? You know, don't you?" She's brought me to this. Now I take care of the dog, waiting for the day she comes back for him.



GIANNA



I LOOKED at the calendar on the wall in the little log cabin on the lake in the middle of nowhere paradise. I still find it hard to believe that not many people have found this place yet, that it's still so uninhabited. There were maybe fifty people spread

out across thousands of acres, everyone keeping to themselves but being neighborly enough to look out for one another if need be.

Winter had been hard as I'd been warned beforehand, but it wasn't that much different from winters back home. No one knew I was here, not even the people who'd helped me escape New Hampshire. I'd used them as far as I needed to, just enough to get new IDs and such. It's amazing what you can achieve with the internet at your fingertips.

All I'd needed to do could be done online, but in those first days, I was so mad, so hurt, I just wanted to disappear. I'd withdrawn a lot of cash from the account dad had set up for me and used the new ID to open an account, leaving most of the money from my inheritance untouched, just taking what I needed to survive.

I knew that Gabriel could track me that way if he wanted to, so I'd done some research and found a forwarding agent that specialized in helping people move money discreetly. It would take a monumental effort for him to go through all the hoops to find me, and even then, I'd put other things in place to safeguard myself from being found. I bet he wishes now that he'd never taught me all that he had,

Maybe he mistook my silence all those nights for disinterest, but little did he know that I was so infatuated with him that I wanted to enmesh myself in his world until we became one—stupid me. My eyes landed on the little red circle, only one more month, and I'd have to move closer to town.

Has it really been that long since I left home? Time really had flown. I'd followed dad's case online, looking for any bits and pieces I could find, but because he was of no importance, there hadn't been much to go on—just a small mention in the police blotter back home. Maybe I'll reach out to him at some point when he gets out; who knows. Some days I just want to leave that whole life behind and never look back.

I went into a deep depression after first leaving the state. I went for days without eating, missing Gabriel so bad with

every mile I put between us that even the thought of food made me ill until I passed out on the street one day in front of a group of strangers who took pity on me and came to my aid even in the middle of a pandemic.

I was taken to the emergency room at the local hospital in the third or fourth town I'd wandered into on the bus. I was still too afraid to get my license at that point, afraid that even with all the steps I took that Gabriel might still find me.

I was out for almost half a day only to wake up to the staff hovering. I had no ID on me, so there was no one to call, my information was locked away in the little out of the way hotel room I'd rented when I got into town a few days ago, and because the town was so small, and no one recognized me, they almost called the cops. Thankfully I woke up just in time.

When they told me what I'd done to myself in the time that I'd gone without eating, that I'd almost taken a life, I made up my mind then and there that I was going to get myself together. I had to live. I had something to live for other than Gabriel Russo. I could almost hear my mother's voice in my ear urging me on. I wanted to make her proud.

Before I left that little town, I did some research and found this place off the beaten path. It was as far removed from civilization as one could get without falling off the edge of the earth. I spent my first days here in a daze, scared and alone but with a new sense of joy that could not be beat.

Slowly, gradually, my mind turned to other things than what I'd left behind, and I found a new purpose. There wasn't much to do here, even after I paid an arm and a leg to get internet set up, which I thought would be impossible so far off the grid, but with the right amount of money, you can do anything. It cost thousands, but in the end, it was done.

There was nothing for me to do here except enjoy nature. The lakes and streams that run through this place are picture-perfect, and I think catalog worthy, and I get to enjoy it every day. Of course, I grew bored with my days, and the fear of being out here alone was almost crippling at first, but the more

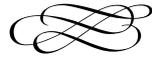
time went by undisturbed, the more at ease I became until it started to feel like home.

Still, I needed to do something with my days instead of just wiling the time away and counting down the minutes. I could've gone into town during the week and signed up for school with my new name and falsified transcripts, but the thought of sitting in a classroom all day didn't appeal.

So, I put school on hold for a while until I decided to sign up for online classes once the internet was up and running. I thought Gabriel every day, and when I didn't think of him, he invaded my dreams to the point that I'd sometimes wake up in such pain it was hard to escape.

I ran my fingertip over the little red circle on the calendar with a melancholy smile. It's been a while since I've hated him, not that I ever really did. But once the anger and hurt wore off, I found it hard to hold on to the anger; besides, he'd given me more than anyone else in this world ever had, even though he may never know it.

## DRACO



“So, where we at now? Still nothing?” All four of them shook their heads at me the same way they’ve been doing every time I asked for the last eight months or so. I’m beginning to think we’re never going to find this kid, and I’m not sure what that means for my son. Watching over him is like babysitting a tiger; you never know when but there’s always the possibility that he’ll strike.

For the first few months, when we all held out so much hope of finding Gia, he was able to keep an almost positive outlook on things. But, somewhere in the last couple of months, he’d switched into some sort of mode that not even I recognized. Of course, life for everyone else has moved on, but my boy, I don’t know what’s true and what’s not.

He tells me daily that he’s fine. He’d thrown himself into his new studies at my old alma mater even though he’d opted into studying from home instead of heading to campus. His mother and sisters spend almost every day worried about him, and since he moved into the guesthouse that’s more than a few feet from the main, it’s gotten worst.

It’s almost like he’s decided to distance himself from life or at least from the rest of us. Nothing scared me more than when he stopped talking. About the only time he’s shown any life in the almost year since the girl left is when Lancelot decided not to join the program at the precinct. Gabe rightfully guessed that his friend was only thinking of dropping the one thing he’d always wanted to do so that he could keep an eye on him, and he’d lost his shit.

I'm still not sure what he meant when he kept saying he won't be responsible for destroying another life or the life of someone else he loved, but I can take a guess. It's no secret that something happened between him and Gia, but he's never said so I can only speculate. Then there was the time I grew afraid that he was going to end up drinking his woes away or dipping into drugs.

He'd become so withdrawn; what else was I supposed to think? But I should've known better. Where most would've buckled under the pressure and done just that, my son had turned to his old passions. He's now honed his body into something approaching perfection, I guess. I caught sight of him one day when I went over to the guesthouse to see him, and the boy has an eight-pack, arms that look like they could bend iron, and a chest that Michelangelo would've wept over as he sculpted.

That was the day I realized my son had become a man. Now, Gabe has always been old for his age, but there was always still a hint of innocence about him, or maybe that's what I wanted to see. The boy I saw that day had shed all pretense at softness; there wasn't a shred of it left. It's not just his body that has changed either; when I look at him these days, there's something in his eyes that had grown hard. If I wasn't his father, he'd scare the shit outta me.

So, as I said, life has been going on. It's taken me this long to compile the information I wanted on Dempsey, but only because the more digging I do, the more assholes I find hiding in plain sight, waiting to take me down. I thought it would be a quick and easy job, but now I have agita dealing with this shit. It's all coming together, though, and Levi's case is about to be wrapped up. Lance is looking at a nice chunk of change though he doesn't need their shit.

My wife has settled down with her father in residence. I think after the whole Gia thing, we'd both believed that Gabe had given up on whatever he'd had planned for Ricci because he was too focused on her to do anything else, but I've kept the boys alert and on the lookout for anything off.

He hasn't left the country to my knowledge, though I'm not sure the idiot pilot wouldn't try pulling the wool over my eyes to please my son. Because you see, while he's been withdrawn and turning his body into more of a machine than it had been before, his relationship with my men has been subtly changing as well.

They no longer just see him as the boss's son but as someone who's come into his own and can order them around in his own right, meaning they no longer have to check with me before carrying out his bidding. Even these four had changed and grown with him to the point that getting anything out of them these days is like pulling teeth.

"Okay, what's he been doing?"

"Nothing, he stays on his computer when he's not hitting the books. At least he's eating again and taking care of himself, but I think he's trying to turn his body into Teflon."

"What do you mean, Marcus?"

"I don't know; he works out like he's training for something. We used to think it was because of the girl, but lately, he won't even let us mention her name, and he seems to have stopped looking for her on his own."

I'm not sure I believe that, but would it be better for him in the long run? I don't just want to find her for Gabe, though; she'd become part of the family, a sweet kid who I thought would be around for a while. Her loss has been hard on everyone, including the twins, and the fact that she'd disappeared so effortlessly with as little experience of the world as she had, makes me shiver to think what my two could pull off.

Instead, they've grown closer clingier, and my girls could cling long before that. Now, it's like they go out of their way to be closer to their mother and I, inviting us into their lives more than before, and that was a lot still. I think it scared them somehow, and though I'm not complaining, I mourn their wild and uninhibited youth that I'd once been dreading.

“Okay, keep me posted!” They filed out of the room, leaving me none the wiser as to what to do next for my kid. Nothing anyone did has worked so far to pull him out of whatever this is. Not either of his uncles, his sisters, his mom, even Sheila has tried. The only time he seems remotely like the boy he used to be is after one of his chess games with Pop.

I don’t know; I’m at a loss for things to do to get him back to the place he was before if it’s even possible. He’d even stopped asking Gia’s grandmother if she’d heard anything from her, and like the guys just said, any mention of her name turns him to ice.



## GABRIEL



“WHAT DID YOU TELL HIM?”

“Jeez, boss!” Matthew scared himself silly at my voice and almost broke his back against the door they’d just walked through. I turned from looking out the window to look at the four of them as they filed in. “I didn’t see you standing there.” I didn’t bother to answer; there was no need. The four of them will run off to their hangout room slash office and discuss whatever they perceive to be going on with me anyway, so why bother.

“Well?”

“We told him that you’re fine. What else could we tell him?”

“Good, that’s good. Get ready to leave in a little bit.”

“Where are we going?” Robert asked, but my only answer was a pointed look. He knows better, which his sheepish look confirmed.

I turned and headed back to my own rooms, leaving them to their own device. I don't think anyone noticed, but I've grown to hate being around others. I'm not sure when it started, but each day that I couldn't find her, I grew more and more withdrawn from the person I used to be. I know why; it's because I no longer have a heart.

Not in the physical sense, of course, it's in there, still beating, but the part of it that feels died about six months ago when I used up all my resources and still couldn't find Gianna. Accepting that had killed something inside of me. Not only because she was gone, but because it was my own doing.

I replay our last conversation in my head over and over again, picking it apart and wondering if I could've done something different. I still get through my days by telling myself that she's just punishing me, which is her right, but I'd made myself stop dwelling on it for the last three months or so.

That's how long it had taken me to stop obsessing over finding her and turn my attention to other things. I'd been torn between finding her and making sure she was okay before turning my focus back to Ricci, but now I can't put it off any longer. After all, wasn't this the whole reason for sending her away in the first place?

It's coming on to a year since she's been gone, and I've run the gamut of emotions time and again until it got to the point where I used my anger and fear to fuel my resolve to bring down Ricci and his cohorts. I'd probably have given it more time had Memnon not been keeping me up to date on his side of things.

It's taken this long for him to even breach the surface of whatever this Luna person was involved in, and according to him, and he should know, this organization that she's a part of is more sophisticated than most, with layers upon layers to peel back.

It's been months, and he still hasn't reached the core of it yet, but that could be because I'd asked, and he'd promised not to involve his team until I gave him the go-ahead, so he was

going it alone for now. I didn't tell him why I asked this of him, and he didn't ask, though from the tone of his words when we communicate online, he's grown suspicious of my intentions.

Though I couldn't let kids be left in whatever hell they were in, I still had my own thing to take care of, so we were working in tangent. While he dug into Luna and the trafficking ring, I put my all into my new scheme. Now I was ready to take the first step. I'd put it off this long in the hopes of finding Gianna, to at least give myself peace of mind, but now I've had to shut it off in order to pull myself out of the limbo I'd gone into when I couldn't find her.

Physical exercise, something I've used in the past to sharpen my mind, hadn't worked too well, and not even working on my plans for Sicily had, nothing has been able to keep me from thinking about her at least a hundred times a day. But I've put my anger and frustration to better use.

The person I was eight months ago is long gone. She was the final insult to my already unwarranted life. The last thing I am willing to lose, the last hurt I'm prepared to suffer. Nothing and no one can get to me now because I have nothing left to give. In short, I've morphed into something approaching subhuman.

I don't even try to pretend anymore. I know it bothers the family, but that can't be helped. It was bound to happen anyway, this distance between us, because they can't be a part of what I'm about to do no more than she could.



GIANNA



“OKAY, okay, we're almost there. I knew we should've headed into town days ago.” I squeezed the hand of the middle-aged woman who sat in the backseat with me while her husband

drove us the long miles into town. She'd said the same thing about three times now.

"I know; I thought I had more time." More like I was afraid the closer I got to my due date. Somehow in my pregnancy brain, I thought that if I put it off, I wouldn't have to face it. Silly, I know, but I guess it's the mind's way of protecting itself.

The last eight months or so have been like a rollercoaster ride. In the beginning, I vacillated daily between joy and fear. Joy that I had a part of Gabriel the jerk as much as I told myself I hated him, with me forever. And fear because I have no idea what I'm doing.

I spent hours, days, weeks, and months on the Internet doing research. One of the first things I did was get my permit and learn to drive before getting my license because the fear of going into labor alone all the way out here away from civilization scared me more than anything else. Not sure how I thought I could drive the hour or more into town while in labor, but again, pregnancy brain.

That's how I met Connie and Ron; there was a sign on the turnoff to the little dirt road that leads back to my cabin with a truck for sale. Now I could easily have walked into any showroom and paid cash for a top-of-the-line luxury vehicle, but I felt nervous making such a big purchase; in fact, I was almost sick to my stomach.

I guess the month and a half of living the good life with the Russos were no match for years of going without, so I easily fell back into past habits. As it turns out, the truck was only a few years old and had only about fifty-thousand miles on it, but they needed to sell because Connie had some medical issues, and they needed the money.

They'd moved out here from a big city in the Pacific Northwest to get away from the hustle and bustle of life where they'd both worked corporate jobs before Connie fell ill. At sixty and fifty-eight, they'd never had kids after thirty-five years of marriage and had no real ties keeping them in their

former lives, so they moved off the grid to live out the rest of their days.

From that first meeting, when I went to look at the truck, it's like they took me under their wing. They never asked any questions beyond the obvious and accepted my explanation that I was escaping a bad breakup. They complained about me going into town on the bicycle I'd bought, especially when they found out about the baby, and short of exclaiming that I didn't know the first thing about taking care of myself, decided to be my new family.

Their place is still a good ways away from mine, about a fifteen-minute drive, so they'd taken to parking their camper on my property, far enough away to give me privacy but close enough to hear me if I needed them. They can have no idea how much I appreciated them, especially when my tummy got too big for me to tie my own shoes.

It all worked out so well in the ensuing months that I felt the fear and uncertainty that had dogged my steps fade away with time, and the three of us kind of settled into a routine. Ron, for all that he was a big-time executive at one time in his life, is very outdoorsy and can fix just about anything he puts his mind to, while Connie was the grandmotherly type who fussed and fawned over me every chance she got.

I didn't want to take advantage, especially when she started cooking my meals, but they both shooed away my concerns. If I'd doubted their sincerity or had any idea that they were out to use or harm me, those were dashed when they refused my offer to move into the cabin when it got bitterly cold out here.

Instead, they helped me turn the extra bedroom into a nursery. Now, I wonder what I would've done without them. I still think about Gabriel at least ten times a day, it still hurts that he'd discarded me, but somehow, I can't stop loving him the way I do. I won't ever talk to him again, that's for sure, but I would be lying if I denied wishing he was here with me.

I'd contacted grandma, letting her know that I was okay and that I'd come to see her at some point in the future, but

that wouldn't be for a while. I had enough sense to call her from a payphone miles away in another state so that nothing could be traced back to me. I wouldn't put it past Gabriel to have some kind of tracking device on her phone.

She wasn't too happy but accepted my decision, and I still have no idea why I protected Gabriel when she asked why I'd run away the way I did. I couldn't exactly blame him, though, because he never told me to make the drastic moves I did, but his actions did facilitate the move. I sometimes even imagine going back or even contacting him about the baby, but I always get cold feet.

He never gave me any explanation for the choice he'd made to send me away other than his cryptic 'there are things I have to do,' so what part would me and the child have in his life? Nothing would change, would it? And how insulting would it be if he changed his mind now that I was carrying his child?

The longer I put off getting in touch, the harder it was to do it in the end, so here I am. Scared out of my mind and filled with anticipation and angst.

## GABRIEL



I stepped off the plane in Palermo and into the car that was waiting there for me. I'd planned ahead because even though I'd never been there before, I knew where I was going and that I needed to be there at a specific time. It had taken weeks of research to pin down the specifics once I came up with a plan.

I couldn't act right away; I had to be sure before making my move. Now that the routine was set, I was almost certain, barring natural disaster, that my prey would be there when I showed up. I'd given myself a few days here just in case things didn't happen the first day because I know Pop won't let me out of his sight no time soon again, so there was no room for failure.

No one back home knew where I was, but I'd brought the ninja turtles with me just to keep Pop off my scent for as long as I could. I could hear the four of them mumbling once we got off the plane, the words 'not again' were said plenty, but I ignored them, only talking to them long enough to send them ahead to the hotel where I'd made reservations.

They'd put up a fuss about not staying with me, but I reminded them of who's the boss, and that put an end to that. It's their choice whether or not they call Pop and snitch, but I wasn't about to make it hard on them. He'd skin them alive if they didn't contact him, and since I was already here, there wasn't much he could do, so I wasn't too worried about his reaction. I'll deal with that when I get back.

The Dempsey situation had worked in my favor after all since Pop was too preoccupied with that mess to stick his nose in my business, and so I've been able to fly under the radar for months now. I leaned my head back against the seat, having no interest in the passing scenery. I wasn't here for anything other than to set in motion a sequence of events that was sure to get my foot in the door. From there, I'll do what needs to be done.

Maybe it's the last few months of anger and frustration that had unlocked the darker side of me, the side that I always knew was there. Whatever, I'm not looking too closely at my motives right now. I'd spent months studying the Ricci family, getting the lay of the land, learning what I needed to about each and every one of them so I could, in turn, use that knowledge to my advantage.

This was a completely different scheme to the one I'd been plotting for years, so it had taken some time, which it probably wouldn't have if she who should not be named hadn't gutted me and sent my life into a tailspin. I know everyone thinks I've given up on finding her, I don't allow her name to be mentioned, and any time it is, I evacuate the scene.

But nothing could be further from the truth. It hurts too damn much, is all. The kind of pain that shouldn't be exposed to prying eyes. I never knew I was this weak, but I went to sleep thinking about her and woke up the same. I have to fight hard to concentrate on anything else, but the ankle biter is a constant reminder; he misses her too.

Sometimes I'd find him curled up in the bed in her old room at my family home even though I moved him into the guesthouse with me. He always finds his way home, though, since we've become codependent on each other.

I had to move out of the house; I couldn't even stand to look at my bed, not once her scent disappeared from the sheets anyway. Everywhere I looked, she was there, and I'd grown tired of seeing the looks of pity and fear in my family's eyes. Especially my sisters. It had taken me a long time to convince them that I don't hold them responsible for hooking her up with Diego, but I know they blame themselves.

Plus, every once in a while, one of them would slip and bring her up, and it got to be too much. I'm sure that's because of a lot of guilt on my part, guilt, and feeling like I'd lost a limb or some other very vital part of who I once was. Gianna!

I pushed back memories of her face and turned my focus to what was up ahead. If things go as I hope, I'll have to have all of my faculties about me. Right now, I was about to walk into the lion's den alone, with no backup and no real way of knowing if it would all blow up in my face.

Half an hour after deplaning, the driver pulled up to a little café that I'd learned old man Ricci likes to visit every morning to have a cup of coffee and a pastry while sitting in the sun with the morning paper. This is it; this is where it all begins. You'd think I'd feel some kind of way, maybe a bit hesitant, even nervous, but instead, I felt a rush of adrenaline that made me step out of the car with confidence and purpose.

Everything depends on what happens here today. Well, as far as this particular scheme is concerned. If this doesn't work, there's always plan B. I was about to use the information I'd learned about this man's family against him and them. Like, the fact that he was not so pleased with his son and was having second thoughts about passing the reins off to him.

I saw his goons as soon as I stepped onto the pavement, but I walked into the place, ignoring them, not acknowledging their presence in any way. Of course, they were on the job, and I'm a new face, so they paid attention. I went up to the counter, ordered my coffee and danish, and walked back outside to a table that was strategically within old man Ricci's line of vision if and when he should look up.

It didn't take long. I knew the minute he looked up from his paper; I felt the moment he did a double-take. "Young man!" It was the first time I heard my supposed grandfather's voice, and it was filled with the surprise and uncertainty I was expecting.

I took my phone out and pretended to make a call, and he got up from his table. The two goons flanked him, and he held

his hand up to hold them back. “Young man, do I know you?” I looked up at him for the first time with disinterest.

“Excuse me?”

“Your face. That’s Ricci, no? Yes, you’re a Ricci. I know your face. It’s mine; it’s my son’s face. How do you have this....”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I got up, walked around him, and left. First phase of the plan done; now it’s up to him to figure out who I am. I made sure to walk slow enough for his people to get to their car before getting into mine. I’m sure if my driver was watching in the rearview mirror, the smile on my face would’ve sent shivers down his spine.



## DRACO



“WHAT THE FUCK are you saying to me, Denver? You’re where?”

“Sicily!” My blood ran cold.

“What? Why? The fuck! Why am I now hearing this?”

“He didn’t tell us where he was going. We went to your parents’ house, and then he just left for the airstrip. We didn’t have time to tell you anything.”

“My parents?”

“Yeah, he’s been going there a lot lately. We thought you knew.” Ah fuck Pop, what did you do? I hung up the phone without saying another word and headed out to the car. “Tommy, Pop’s now.”

“On it, boss.” Dammit, Gabe, just dammit all to hell. He’d clipped my wings, lulled me into a false sense of security

when all along he'd been up to this shit.

I know for a fact that there's no way he went there without extensive planning; that's how he works. I should've known Pop had something to do with him finding the nun, but I just always thought he'd found her through the computer. So much has been going on since we got back from Europe that we never even really got down to discussing the particulars.

Every time I brought it up, he seemed disinterested, but I see now that that was a well-devised scheme to keep me off his scent. I dropped the ball, and now my kid might be in danger; nothing can feel worse than this. If that fuck does anything to hurt him, they'll bury me under the jail because I won't care who's watching.

Of course, he took my plane, so there's no way for me to go after him like I want to unless I book a flight, and that shit would take forever with the restrictions in place. Pop's plane is an option, I guess, but the old man never lets us use it. He has a phobia about one of us buying it with a bomb meant for him. Powerlessness is not something I'm familiar with, and neither is the weakness I felt at the thought of my son being hurt.

I slammed out of the car and took the steps to my parent's front door two at a time, not even stopping to greet the butler who answered the door. I knew just where to find the old reprobate this time of day, cursing out whoever did the Sunday New York Times puzzle that takes him days to finish.

"Pop, what have you done to my son?"

"Oh, you're here. I knew you'd show up. Have a seat."

"Not in the mood, Pop; what were you thinking?" He chewed on his unlit cigar and filled in a word. "Cazzo, there you are." I should light that shit and let Ma have his ass.

"Pop, this is serious. Do you know where your grandson is?"

"It's not me. It's your mother."

"What? What're you talking about?" Just then, she came into the room with a tea tray, all smiles.

“Pauly said you were here. Come, sit down; I’ll explain.”

“Ma? what do you have to do with this?”

“Sit bambino.” Oh damn, her Italian is showing. Once she starts with that, I know I’m in for a wild ride.

“Ma, what did you do?”

“My daughter-in-law told me years ago what happened to her. When your son came to me, he explained that because it was a female issue, he felt more comfortable discussing it with me than with his grandfather, so I did what I had to do.”

“What you had to do?”

“Draco, you know your mother’s grandfather was capomandamento back in the old country. Who better to give the boy advice and turn him onto the right people over there? Me, I’m third generation, my people were made in the streets of Chicago, what do I know?” This...

“So, you just sent him there, let him go on his own. Behind my back.”

“Don’t yell at your mother.”

“I didn’t yell. How could you do this?”

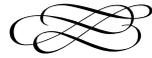
“Boy, I’ve been trying to protect both of you. You want to go legit, and the boy wants to take care of what he needs to take care of. So, this old man has been doing everything he can behind the scenes to make both those things happen. With your mother’s help, of course.”

He smiled at his wife like this shit was just another walk in the park. What am I supposed to do with this, huh? What? At what age are these two going to stop making me crazy? My own mother. “I’m telling Garrett.”

“Ah!”

“And I’m taking your damn plane.” I left because there was no time to lose. Later I’ll get the story of how my mother helped my son hoodwink me.

## GIANNA



Traumatized! What made me think I could do this on my own? Giving birth was the easy part. Connie yelled for them to give me every drug available once the pain started. Well, not exactly easy, but the pain was nowhere near what I expected. But once the ordeal was over and I could breathe again, the real fear set in.

I spent the first few minutes after marveling at the fact that I'd given life, imagining it and living it are two separate animals altogether. But once the adrenaline wore off, all the fears came at me hard. I'm terrified. I'm giving serious thought to going home, or at the very least to grandma's.

One minute I wished Gabriel was here, I wanted to share this with him, and the next, I was mad at him for not being here. I hid my fear well once I was allowed visitors, and Connie and Ron came into the room. I didn't correct the staff who thought they were grandma and grandpa, but it reminded me that my parents weren't here.

That thought only made me break down again, and I let them think that it was because of the pain of giving birth and the fear of realizing I was now responsible for something so helpless. But beneath the fear and uncertainty was this strength of will to be protector, provider, and first love.

If I focused on being the kind of mother mom had been to me before she was taken from me, I know I can do it, so that's what I did. Once visiting hours were over, and Connie and Ron had to leave, I beat back the fear with those thoughts. I reminded myself a thousand times that I wasn't the first

eighteen-year-old to give birth, that many people had done it before and succeeded.

I'd done enough research, watched enough videos, and read all the stories, so I know it can be done well. But none of that kept me from worrying that I'd screw up somehow, and that was my biggest fear. That, and going it alone, especially now while everything is so new. My poor heart is going to be worn out by the time I leave here due to the many up and down emotions running through it.

Each time I felt panic threatening to overcome me, I had to close my eyes and do breathing exercises until I calmed down again. I had to stop myself from dwelling on all the things I had to do in the next few days in order to settle my mind because stressing about it while lying in the hospital bed wasn't helping.

The nurses were all so proud of me; they kept telling me how well I'd done each time one of them came into the room. Their words of encouragement went a long way to making me feel better, but inside I was still a bundle of nerves. The people here were some of the most helpful, just like Connie and Ron.

They didn't just throw problems at me but started off every sentence with a solution. They made sure I had everything I needed once I was discharged, and if I answered in the negative, they were quick to suggest where I could get it. By the time Connie and Ron returned later that afternoon, they had a list of all that we needed, if we didn't already have it.

I felt comfortable telling Connie to go into my bag for my card so she could head into town and get what was needed that I didn't have once the two of them were through fawning. I cried when breastfeeding wasn't as easy as they made it look and laughed with joy when I finally got it to work.

Holding that little body close to mine was the best feeling, and the love, so much love. The realization that there would now be unconditional love in my life is what made all the fears and worries subside. I told myself I could do it, but I wished I had someone here to help. I couldn't not think about Gabriel because it was like looking at a miniature of him. And for

some reason, that gave me peace. Whatever anger I felt towards him was washed away in the pain of bringing his offspring into the world.



## GABRIEL



“YOUNG MAN, please, just a moment of your time.” He’d hunted me down, Salvatore Ricci or more like I’d let him catch me.

“Why are you following me, sir? I told you I don’t... Maybe you can help me.” He came closer, his eyes scanning my face.

“Anything, tell me.”

“Geraci Siculo, have you heard of it?”

“Yes, yes, this is my birthplace; we should sit.” He pointed to a table on the stone patio outside the hotel I’d had the driver bring me to. Of course, it’s not the hotel I’m staying at, just a decoy, I’m not stupid. His voice was beautiful, almost like grandpa’s but more cultured. I knew that was because he’d been educated at some of the best places in Europe, from Bologna to Eton.

“Please, you must tell me, who are you? You speak Sicilian, but you’re not from my country, yes. But how do you come to have my face? No one looks like Ricci, but Ricci.” He waved his finger back and forth to make his point. “Now tell me, what’s going on.”

“You think I look like you?”

“Yes, yes, can’t you see?”

“Well, maybe we’re related. I’m here to find my family, and you say you’re from the village they originated from.”

“Your family, who is your family?”

“Antonelli.”

“Antonelli, si’, si,’ yes, there was such a family, but they do not look like this. This is Ricci.”

Yes, keep following those breadcrumbs until you get to where I’m leading you. “Tell me, who is your father?”

“Well, that’s a long and dark story,” I told him everything I wanted him to know about that night, keeping my eyes on him though they were well hidden behind the shades I’d put on as soon as we sat down.

I saw the tears and compassion in his eyes for the young girl his son had demoralized, though he didn’t know the half of it. I didn’t tell him anything more than I wanted to share because if I did, it would be too easy for him to see through my ploy and guess exactly why I was here. He’s Sicilian; he would understand better than most the need for revenge.

So, I downplayed my interest, pretending only to want to connect with my roots, and I made it seem like I was looking for my mother’s family. I didn’t mention his son by name, but he knew exactly who I was speaking of from my telling of the story. Strike one against him, he obviously knew his son was a monster, but in all fairness, from everything I’d learned about Salvatore, he wouldn’t have condoned such behavior.

He didn’t interrupt, not even to deny that his monster of a son would do such a thing. He didn’t ask any questions, just sat there and took it all in, and once I was done, he shifted his eyes away from me in shame and wiped them with the handkerchief he removed from his pocket.

“I am your grandfather; you’ve found me.”

“No, it can’t be; what are the odds? I just got off the plane; you’re the first person I’ve met here.”

“No-no, this is true, it’s la sorte, we were meant. Tell me, what kind of man are you in America? Who do you live with? What has happened to your life? Your mother?”

I told him the bare minimum about how Ma was sent to America by her father, how she met Pop, but I didn't give him my surname, not yet. He remembered Ma vaguely but only because of her father and because of her beauty that had been talked about in her youth. He'd been too busy running an empire to pay much heed to his sons and their doings, so though he knew family names, he had no real affiliation with the younger generation.

I knew most of this about him from my research as well. He'd tried to do what Pop was doing, bringing his family into the twenty-first century, turning old money into new. But in this climate, that's easier said than done. And now he knows that the son he'd chosen to carry out his wishes was nothing more than a piece of shit who did the things I'd described being done to my mother.

It was like adding gasoline to an already out of control fire. He was already second-guessing his decision to hand everything over to Alonzo when he retired, I knew that before coming here, it plays a big part in my new plans after all, so I couldn't leave any stone unturned.

"You must come home with me." I shook my head before he was through talking, giving a good impression of being upset.

"How do I know you didn't know about this and did nothing?"

"No-no, I've done many things, but this, this is not who I am, please. There's nothing I can do for that poor girl, your mother. But you are my grandson the first. There must be a reason why you were allowed to exist and to become the man that you are. It's not your fault, and it's not her fault, but do you really want to give up your life?"

"What do you mean? Give up my life."

"Do you know who we are? Did your mother not tell you? No matter what life you had in America, it cannot compare to the life you'd have as the grandson of Salvatore Ricci." Yes, I know.

“But how do you know that I’m your grandson?”

“I know, this is my father’s face, my face, my son’s face. Only certain men in the Ricci family have this exact face. If you want, we can do that...scusi,” He snapped his fingers and turned to one of his goons who’d been standing off to the side.

They discussed the word for DNA before he turned back to me. “Yes, we can have this done to put your mind at ease. As for me, I know. You will come to the palazzo. This,” he looked around at the five hundred dollars a night hotel with a sneer, “this is no good.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that.”

“Why? Are you going back to America? No-no, you must not. Listen to me; I am your grandfather, I swear, all will be fine, you leave it to me. We do the DNA now, so you know. I already know.”

“This is crazy.”

“No, la sorte, you came here to find your family no, I am your family.” Yes, I know, and I’m here to destroy you. Well, your son anyway.



## DRACO



I RUSHED BACK to the house to get my passport and a change of clothes, gave my wife some shoddy excuse about last-minute business but didn’t tell her where I was going before having Tommy rush me out to the hangar where Pop kept his plane. I was so rushed I didn’t even think about flight plans or anything else, which didn’t matter as I saw when I got there.

The damn thing looked like it had been taken apart. “What’s going on here?”

“Ah, afternoon Mr. Russo, looks like trouble with the engine.” What are the odds? That deceitful old man did this. Control Draco, stay calm. How am I supposed to do that when it feels like my heart is flying out of my chest?

I’ve tried calling Gabe for the last hour with no answer, and his team hasn’t seen him since he left the plane hours ago now. I tried once more and almost fainted with relief when he answered this time. “Pop, I’m okay, sorry I didn’t tell you what I was doing, but now you know, you don’t need to worry.”

“Son, do you want Sicily to fall?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you have any idea what I’d do to that place if something happens to you there?”

“Nothing’s going to happen, I promise; I’ll be home in a couple of days.”

“A couple... Gabriel Russo.”

“I know what you’re worried about, Pop, but it’s not going to happen, I promise. I’ll be fine. I won’t do anything while I’m here; I’ll explain when I get back. Trust me.”

Ah dammit. He knew what asking me to trust him would do. He was tying my freaking hands here. If I stepped in now, I would be saying I didn’t trust him. I was just about his age when I asked my own father to trust me when I went after the ones who killed my grandfather. We’ve come full circle. “Just hurry home, son. Don’t make your mother worry.”

We hung up, and I stood there for a few seconds more, fighting the will to find another way to get to him, knowing I couldn’t break his trust. The next few days just might be the hardest of my life.

## DRACO



“Sofia, upstairs, now.” Both she and Sheila, who was in the kitchen having one of their gabfests, turned to me in shock. I hadn’t raised my voice, but it was obvious that I was pissed. I turned and walked away, heading up the stairs to our room. Like I said, I’ve never raised my voice to my wife, was never even tempted to, but when she walked into our bedroom, I was barely holding back my anger.

“Draco, what’s the matter? Did something happen?”

“Do you know where our son is?”

“Gabe? Did something happen to Gabe?” She walked towards me, and for the first time since we’d met, I stepped back away from her. I could see the hurt and confusion on her face. But I was way past caring at this point.

Gabe is smart; he’s the smartest person I know, truth be told, and I went to one of the leading Ivy League universities in the world. But he’s a child, my child, and I can’t help but hold her responsible for this. There’s also the guilt of not stepping up and putting an end to this shit when he was still young.

“He’s in Sicily.”

“What? What’s he doing there? I don’t understand.”

“You know why he’s there.” She didn’t understand at first, but I guess my steady glare without uttering another word tipped her off.

“You know.”

“I’ve always known. Now here we are.”

“Draco, I didn’t....”

“You didn’t what? You didn’t mean for him to go after that fuck? You knew exactly what would happen when you told him about this. You wanted him to want revenge to seek justice for you. I can understand that it’s in our blood, but I’m telling you now if anything happens to Gabe, I won’t ever forgive you.”

She dropped to her knees as if the life had been drained out of her and scared the crap out of me. That quick, my anger deflated, and I rushed to her side. Not only because of the broken look she gave me, but because I’ve always understood why she did what she did. It’s just that now, faced with the reality of my son being halfway around the world where I can’t get to him, is making me so angry I can’t see straight.

“Why did you never say anything?”

“Because you should’ve told me yourself. You didn’t trust me to take care of it, and now our son might be in danger.”

“But I thought he’d forgotten all about it, that his only interest was in finding Papa.”

“Whatever made you believe that?”

“Oh no, we have to get him back here.”

For some reason, the look of fear on her face and the panic in her voice seemed disproportionate to the conversation. “What is it?” She looked scared, like really afraid, and then she broke down and told me the truth about what really happened the night she was attacked. I listened in horror as my blood ran cold. If I thought that Gabe would kill this guy before, now I know that the story he’d told me on the phone earlier was bullshit. He’s going to do so much worse.

“That’s why you were so distressed when he mentioned the nun. You think she told him the truth.” She only nodded her head, looking like the lost young girl I’d first met all those years ago. I wanted to shake her, but why? She’s still the victim here, no matter how many mistakes she’d made with our son.

“We have to go get him. You don’t know the Riccis. Alonzo will hurt him if he shows up there and brings this up. His father would not be happy if he learned about this, and there’s nothing Alonzo hates more than disappointing his father. Even though I was never close to them, everyone in the village knew. That’s why he and his friends would threaten the whole village into keeping their actions hidden.”

“He’s a hard man from what I know, Mr. Ricci, a man of honor.”

“So why did you tell Gabe about that night if you were afraid of this?”

“I don’t know. I was angry still; in our culture, as you well know, the son protects his mother. It’s his duty. I wanted him to know what had been done to me. I wanted him to kill Alonzo. I wanted revenge. But the Gabe today is not the same little boy I told my story to.”

Yeah, because you turned him into a machine whose only focus for the past six years has been revenge. I wanted to say this to her, but she was already so fragile. “We failed him; we failed that poor boy.” Everything made sense now. I’d been trying for months to figure out what happened with Gia, why she just up and left all of a sudden when things were finally going well for her.

I think Gabe sent her away because he knew what he was planning, which could only mean that he was getting her out of the way of danger. But just what exactly is he planning to do? If his intent was to off Ricci, I have no doubt he could pull it off without getting caught, which could only mean that he was planning something much more horrible than I’d imagined. “I’ve gotta make a call.”



GABRIEL



SALVATORE WAS TOO EASY, but I half expected it. In fact, it was my one hope in coming here now. I've been steadily screwing with Alonzo's business ventures and gearing up to expose him during his run for office. The only reason I haven't pulled the plug yet is because of the trafficking situation and the fact that Memnon had asked for more time.

Since Ricci was no longer my only target, I'm playing the long game. It's going to take years, though the end result will still be the same. My intent is to make him suffer in the worst ways possible before ending his pathetic life. He took everything from my mother. Now he and the ones who helped him will feel the brunt of my years of planning.

In the meantime, there was nothing stopping me from carrying out the rest of my plans while I was here. After I let the old man 'talk' me into getting a DNA test the next day, I went back to the hotel where the others were waiting. They acted like I'd been gone for days instead of a few hours and started giving me shit. I shut them down by asking which one of them had called Pop.

"Did you eat?" They were sulking and knowing they hadn't, so I called downstairs for room service. "Stay outta my way." I grabbed my bags and headed into the master suite of the penthouse. I'd rented the whole floor because if I'd tried to get this bunch their own rooms, they'd probably have slept outside the door to my room. Draco has them well trained.

Now, the reason why I didn't give Salvatore my name is simple, I don't want anything leading back to my family, especially Ma, not yet anyway. I know if Ricci is dumb enough to go after her, Pop would divide his body between all fifty states, so I'm not worried about that. I'm more worried about the cops and feds who have their eyes on Pop right now.

The only thing I hadn't planned on here was my reaction to the DNA test. That came to me as I was sitting down with Salvatore, just one more way to gain his trust. After all, if I was after something, wouldn't I want that? To prove that I wasn't after anything. The fact that I do have his face is uncanny as hell. I look even more like him than I do his son, down to the damn shade of my eyes.

I can almost feel bad for him, for what I plan to do to his family and his life, but I won't. Now all that's left is to not show my hand too soon. I didn't let on in any way that I was here for revenge. For all he knows, according to what I told him, his son and my mother were the only ones who knew what happened that night. I just told him the story Ma had told me and Pop, which was enough to disgust him.

Now, when I go after the others that were involved, he will be none the wiser. They, too, will be left to wonder how much I know, and I'm sure my presence will send shock waves through their little clique. I already have my introduction planned out, and the DNA test will just be the icing on the cake to get Salvatore completely on my side.

I'm not going in blind, so that will be my advantage, whereas they have no idea that I'm coming. The last thing I said to Salvatore before we parted is that I didn't want his son to know that I'm here, not yet. I gave him the impression that I needed time to process, that I hadn't expected to meet anyone from the Ricci family, and my only interest was in the Antonelli family.

He bought it, of course, why wouldn't he? I used his education against him. I knew that someone like him, someone who straddles both worlds, that of the elite and the dark underbelly of crime, would appreciate someone as refined and educated as me. I plan to work on that some more once we meet again tomorrow.

When he compares me to his rotted seed, there will be no comparison. I also know that there are things he wants to achieve that his son can't. My nana will be of great help there. Though she hasn't been back to the old country in a while, her family still holds a lot of clout here, and I've met my cousins and great uncles over the years when they came to the states to visit. I'm holding them in reserve for just the right time.

The next morning, I went back to the hotel where I'd sat with Sal as if I was staying there. I made sure to get there early and was glad of it when he arrived half an hour earlier than we'd planned. I wish I felt something at the look of pleasure on his face when he saw me.

“Niputi, you’re here; I thought you would’ve left. I got no sleep. Thank you.” He clasped his hands together as if in prayer, and I dredged up a smile.

“I almost didn’t come. This all seems like too much of a coincidence. I’m still getting used to it.”

“No-no, il sorte, il sorte. It’s a blessing that you have come to me at this time. Come, we go get your DNA test to prove to you that we are blood.”

I followed him to the waiting car, where one of his goons held the door open for me. I guess they hadn’t paid close attention the day before because now he made a double-take when I got close. There was no need to guess what he was thinking. If the old man was about fifty years younger, we’d have passed for twins.

As soon as I sat in the backseat with Sal next to me, he grabbed an old fashion album from the seat between us. “I’ll show you.” He opened up the sepia-tinted pages, and it was like taking a step back in history. Not gonna lie; I’m not sure how to feel about looking at the man in the black and white photos that looked even more like me than Sal, if that were possible.

“This is your father!”

“Your great grandfather, yes; good man, hardworking man, who took care of his family and his neighbors. Are you like this, Gabriel?”

“Gabe, and yes, I am.”

“Good, good. I’ll take you to the mausoleum later; you pay your respects.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for the results of the tests?”

“No need, I told you, I know, look, look at this face. You look more like my father than I do. Reincarnazione. It’s like my father has come back to me.” He had tears in his eyes. “We’ll get your test. I tell you everything. What about your family in America? This man your mother has married, is he good to you?”

“My father, yes, very good to me.” He seemed to feel a way about me calling Pop my father. Even though we’d only just met, I know well the Sicilian penchant for possessiveness. I’m banking on it.

“Yes, my son, I haven’t told him that you are here as you asked me. I know you have hate; she is your mother....”

“That was a long time ago. I never really think about it. Hopefully, he’s changed.” The look of hope on his face was another notch in my belt.

“You think this, yes?”

“My mother is a very forgiving woman. She didn’t want me to hate.”

“Would you meet him?”

“I’m not sure. I guess it would be nice to know what he was like if I’m anything like him. I don’t like what he’s done, but maybe he’s changed.”

The look of distaste on his face was all the answer I needed. “We’ll see, we’ll see. And school you say you go to the Harvard, yes, then you must be very smart.” I just smiled shyly, which took a lot of practice since it’s not something I’m familiar with. Having to dumb down who I really am for the old man was worth it, though.

“Ah, we’re here. Let’s do your test. One day, he says, we will know in one day, I paid extra.” He was all but hopping when we walked into the place. I let them do what they needed to, and then it was his turn. Not even fifteen minutes later, we were heading back to the car.

“Today, I show you Sicily. I show you all the places your old grandpa loves. Can you do that? Can you call me grandpa?”

“No!” Shit, Gabe, chill. “I mean, it’s too soon, no?”

“I know-I know, your test. And we have much to discuss before you feel comfortable. Take my word; my son will not go unpunished. You will see.”

I already know! Alonzo has been feeling the heat. Apparently, when Sal went back to the family home the day before, he gave his son the cold shoulder, which he then complained about to one of his cohorts through email. He can't afford to have any strain between them now since he's relying on his father to help with his political campaign. That's the reason I'd chosen to come at this time. I have to stop it before it happens.

I pretended to let him talk me into driving around with him all day. Something a lost child meeting his missing family member for the first time would've enjoyed, but as for me, I was just using it to get closer to him, getting him to let his guard down. He was impressed with my knowledge and pleased that I knew so much of the country's history.

I knew enough about him to pander to him, and since this was nothing more than a script to me, I played my part well. Not once did he try to plead his son's case. In fact, he didn't even bring him up again. At one point, as we stood in front of the mausoleum, I fixed his coat collar and pulled his scarf snugly around his neck, "it's cold." You'd have thought I gave him a pot of gold. Gotcha!

## GABRIEL



I wasn't surprised at the results the next day, but I was by the fact that Sal cried. He never stopped thanking me and was already making plans for me to come to his palazzo and meet the rest of his family. I begged off with the excuse that I had to get back home. "Ah, it's Alonzo; you do not want to meet him yet. Still, this is your home, the home your great-great-great-grandfather built, and where all the eldest sons have continued the line."

"Yes, but I'm not part of that."

"Who says? You are the eldest grandson; of course, you must come."

"Doesn't your sons have any children?" I knew, of course, that Alonzo had a son and a daughter.

"Si' but you are the eldest; this is the way it's done."

"Do you really think that's fair? I'm not here to take anything away from your grandson. My father has more than enough....."

"No-no, this cannot be. I won't have it." I wore a confused expression, but in reality, I already knew this. I knew that his sense of honor, coupled with the horrific actions of his son, would prompt him to want to go above and beyond. I felt no guilt over the way I was playing him. If he'd leashed his mutt, I wouldn't be here. After meeting him, I'm tempted to shield him from the coming fallout as much as possible, but that's as far as I'm willing to go.

“I do have to get back, though; my family will be waiting for me. I still have to think of what to tell my mother about meeting you. And there’s still my grandpa Antonelli; I have to find him.”

“Yes, yes, I forgot, he hasn’t been in the village for many years, almost as long as you have been alive, I think.”

“I hope nothing happened to him. What kind of man was he? Is he the type to go after your son for what he did to my mother?” Think on that and let me know what you come up with.

“I can look for him for you; yes, I can do this.”

“Would you? I would appreciate it, and so would my mother. She hasn’t seen him in years. Not since she had to leave her home.” He frowned and nodded at my subtle reminders of what his snake of a son had caused.

“I understand. You will come back? How will I meet you again? You cannot leave like this. How will I find you?” He was starting to panic.

“Why don’t I give you my number so you can call me whenever you’d like?”

“Are you sure you would not stay for a little bit longer? You’re breaking my heart, niputi.”

“I will try to return once school has recess in a few weeks.”

“Yes, for the holiday, yes, this is perfect. Our family....”

“No, not the holidays but maybe after, for a few days at least.”

“And you will stay with me, yes, at the palazzo.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea; what will your family think?”

“You are Ricci; they will think nothing.” He’s exactly what I expected, straight across the board. I knew that for him, he was scenting fresh blood. One son is a screw-up, the other is off in Egypt digging up Ramses or some shit, and the only

grandson is doing his best to follow in his father's footsteps. He's not quite there yet at seventeen, but close.

His sister, only one year younger, doesn't seem to have much going on except trying to break into the modeling world, but she looks like Felice, so good luck with that. I'm sure I outshine them all, and he will soon know it too. But on my time.

"Well, I guess this is it; here's my number." I gave him one of the business cards I'd had made up with my mother's last name. If he looked for Gabriel Antonelli, he would be led down a rabbit hole into a maze of lies and deception, though the credentials were real.

"This is you? Software engineer, what does that mean?" He looked down at the embossed card with pride.

"It's too much to go into now, but I will tell you later. Here, I bought you a gift." I reached into my breast pocket and brought out the little jewelry box I'd bought for him.

"For me? But I've brought you nothing. I...."

"I don't expect anything nannu." Instant tears filled his eyes, and the hug I gave him sinched it before I turned and walked away.



## DRACO



FOR TWO DAYS, I had no idea where my son was. His team claims he leaves the hotel early every day, long before they arise and return in the late afternoon. None of them could tell me where he goes and what he does there. Something I should've expected but was frustrated by all the same. There was only one way for me to find out, but I was too pissed off at my parents to talk to either of them.

This only enhanced my annoyance with my wife, but I knew that stemmed from fear. Fear of something happening to my son. Now I have her fears to abate as well since she's been freaking out with all the new developments. Usually, I'd be the one to comfort her, but since I lowkey blame her for this taking place, it hasn't been easy.

On top of that, I'm trying to keep all this away from my girls because one run-away kid is enough to deal with. These two would legit get on a plane and go after him, and that won't be good for anybody. Lancelot has been on edge because Gabe hasn't been around, and when they speak, he's very vague. He's another one that will hop a plane, too, if it comes to that.

So here I am in the middle of all this chaos, with my hands tied and snapping at everyone around me because if I can't shoot it or fix it, I'm all outta ideas fuck! I put it off for as long as I could, but by midmorning the third day, I was about to crawl outta my skin, so I bit the bullet and went to see the two old people who'd given me life and now seemed hellbent on taking it through agita.

I haven't told Garrett like I'd threatened because he's a mama's boy who'd somehow end up blaming me out of frustration since there's no way in hell he'd go after her. I wish I knew where Gia was because I might need a break after this mess is over—just kidding! But that too is another thing that's been bothering me; after all this time, there's still no sign of the kid. I don't want to think the worse, but hell, if Gabe can't find her, my guys keep coming up empty; I don't know if she's still alive.

I had Tommy drop me off at my folk's place, and these two were in their conservatory sipping tea like they hadn't a care in the world. Why that should piss me off, I have no idea. "Really, Pop?"

"Oh hi, the boy is here. Come have a seat Pauly, bring him one of those fancy things he likes."

"It's a cappuccino, you Italian reject."

"Don't be rude to your father, Draco. Now come over here and sit down; tell us what you've been up to."

“MA!” Breathe, Draco, breathe; if you yell at this old woman, Pop would probably cap you.

“What? Why are you so high-strung? Have the girls been giving you trouble again?”

“My kids are fine; the only people giving me trouble are in this room.” I walked over and took the chair between them. Pop reached over and ran his hand over my hair like we were pals. I gave him a look and shifted, which made him grin. “I’m not playing with the two of you. Ma, have you heard from my son?”

“Yes!” She had the nerve to stop there.

“And?”

“And what? The boy is fine. He has his great uncles and cousins over there looking after him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you didn’t think I was going to send him there without having someone look after him, did you? They’re keeping their distance, and he doesn’t know they’re there, but he’s fine.”

That actually made me relax a little. Her murdering ass family won’t let anything happen to Gabe, but still. “So, what’s he been doing?”

“He met the pig’s father.” It took me a minute to get what she meant.

“The father, not him himself?”

“Not yet; that comes later.”

“Lady, what the... What’re you talking about?” I changed my words when Pop gave me a look. I’m grown to everyone else in the world but these two.

“I didn’t want this for him.” I sound like a broken record.

“Then you shouldn’t have raised a little tiger.” Thanks, Ma, throw it all back in my face. It’s true I’d been the one to make sure my son had the kind of life that would allow him to pull off something like this. But when I was signing him up for

martial arts classes and getting him the books he wanted when he was a young teenage boy, I had no idea the shits would turn him into what he is.

Pauly came back with the drink and a smile. I gave some thought to getting him alone and getting some information out of him, but I know from experience that won't work. His face is in the dictionary next to blind loyalty. At least they had the foresight to send someone to watch Gabe's back, but I'm still not letting them off the hook.

Just for shits and giggles and the fact that I didn't like the way the two of them were smiling at each other like they'd bested me, I called the doc right then and there. "Gar, you won't believe what Ma and Pop did." Ma started waving her hands around, trying to get me to hang up and Pop looked like he'd sucked on a bag of lemons.

I spilled the beans, leaving out a lot of details but sharing the most pertinent facts. I had to pull the phone away from my ear before he hung up on me. Seconds later, the house phone rang. "I got a thing; see you two later."

"Bastardo."

"You would know I wasn't there, Pop. Ma, did you hear what your husband just said about you?"

"No, Angel, I'm sorry, the boy made me do it." Barf!

"Draco, go home to your family and stop making trouble. You and your brother give me agita."

I was already halfway out of the room, so she didn't need to kick me out.

I was on the phone with my cousin Guy in Sicily before my ass hit the seat in the back of the car. That old lady probably told them not to tell me anything, but I won't know until I try.



JIMMY



“DAD, Dad, look, I made another one.” Victoria came into the kitchen where I was making dinner with another one of her drawings that looked like a five-year-old did it. I made the right noises and pretended an interest even though I was at my wit’s end. I’m not sure what happened to her in that place she’d been taken off to, but she came back like one of those Stepford wives.

She’d been gone so long I almost didn’t expect to ever see her again. So much had happened in the last while that I’m in a constant state of agitation. Rebecca had gone and got herself killed. Can’t say I blame that Fontane guy once everything came out, which was way worse than I’d ever imagined. Then one day, I came home from my job at the garage to find some stranger sitting in my living room with this new creature.

I don’t understand it. She still looks the same, but the rude teenager I’d met only a few months ago seemed to have been replaced by something or someone else. She could wash herself and take care of her personal needs, but that’s about it.

She had to be watched, it seems like all day, every day, so I had to pay someone to come to the apartment to take care of that until I found a place that would take her. It’s like her cheese fell off her cracker or something in that place, and I don’t have the first clue what to do. Nobody gave me any instructions or anything, just dropped her in my lap, and now I’m stuck.

“Come and eat, Victoria. Put that away now.” She pouted but didn’t argue. I looked at her and shook my head as she took her seat at the table. The girl I’d met when I got out was a well-put-together teenager like all the rest, not a hair out of place. Now, she sat there with stains on her shirt, and her hair hadn’t been brushed in days.

I’d learned not to ask the Russo boy any questions about what had happened to her in that place, and there was no point in asking her because each time I did, she just stared off into

space. I couldn't even run away and leave her because the boy had threatened me. Now I'm stuck. I wish those cops had never found me that night she was stranded in that precinct.

## GABRIEL



“*P*op, I’m back.”

“Gabe, are you okay?” He looked me up and down as he came around from behind his desk, where he’d been sitting gazing off into space. His hug was meant more for someone coming back from war than a son who’d only been gone for a few days, less than a week, in fact.

He pulled back and clasped my shoulders while looking into my eyes. “I’m sorry...”

“No, you’re back, you’re okay, that’s all that matters. Are you going to tell me what you did over there?”

“Not yet!” I could tell he had a hard time accepting that answer, but, in the end, he let it go.

I already knew he’d gone to see nana; she’s been keeping me up to date on his activities. “You needn’t have worried Uncle Guy had someone on me the whole time I was there. I was never in any real danger.”

“You knew you were being followed?”

“Of course!”

“Ah, stupid question, sorry. So, you should go see your mother. She’s been worried about you. And call Lancelot before he drives both his dad and I nuts.”

I can imagine how he’s been acting up since I didn’t tell him where I was going or that I was going anywhere, for that matter. His lips have been looser here of late, ever since.... ever since ‘she’ left. I think he’s been slowly fitting the pieces

of the puzzle together and suspects that I'm up to something dangerous. Since I won't lie to him, it's best to avoid him as much as possible some days.

"I will. How was everything here at home?"

"Everything's fine, but as I said, your mother's been worried. I had to tell her where you were, which led to other things coming to light. I guess you heard it all, the whole truth, from the nun." The hint of pain that crossed his face told me all I needed to know about how much Ma had shared. "Yes!"

"Dammit, I was hoping I was wrong. Okay, so you did what you went to do? You're done there?" I know him well enough to read him to easily read between the lines for the words he couldn't bring himself to ask.

"I didn't see him if that's what you're asking. And I'm guessing Uncle Guy didn't tell you anything about what I was doing there."

"Your grandmother warned them off, all of them the whole family. No one would tell me shit. Damn Italians, hardheaded as fuck." I didn't dare smile at his little rant or remind him that he was no different. "I guess I'll go see Ma then, let her know I'm back."

"And call your Uncle Garrett."

"You told him?"

"There was a thing." He looked guilty as hell, so I thought it best to leave that alone.

I found Ma in her room looking at old pictures. She heard me come in and turned with a look of relief on her face when she realized it was me. "Gabe, thank goodness, why did you leave like that? How could you make your father and I worry?" I just looked at her in silence for a hot minute before stepping further into the room.

"Sorry, Ma, I didn't mean to make you worry." I returned the hug, but even I knew it was different. She pulled back and looked up at me questioningly. I'm not sure what or when it happened, but somewhere over the ocean on my way back here, I felt this surge of anger. It's selfish and something I

never let myself think about, but being on the plane with no way to escape the confinement, my mind was brutal in its one-sidedness.

I couldn't get Gianna off my mind. It's been happening more and more of late, but I find myself blaming everyone for me losing her, though deep down, I know it was my own doing and mine alone. I'm not sure what happened, but I'd missed a step somewhere along the way. Too late, I've come to realize that walking away from the best part of your heart isn't exactly sustainable.

I know I had to let her go because it hadn't taken me long to recognize the threat she posed, that she was the one thing that may have taken me off course, but I couldn't do it because of Ma, because I owed it to Ma to right the wrong done to her and repay her for all that she'd done to bring me into the world and give me a life better than most.

But at that moment, alone with my thoughts and missing Gianna like a piece of my soul, I allowed myself to be selfish for just a little while. "Gabriel, what's wrong? You look..."

"Gabe, and it's nothing." I can't stand to hear anyone else call me by that name, not even the woman who'd given it to me. Only Gianna! Damn!

"No, something is wrong, did you.... did you see him?" She held her breath; it was obvious.

"No!"

"Oh, thank heaven."

"I saw his old man."

"No, Gabe, why? Why would you get involved with that family?" She took both my hands in hers as if to compel me.

"If you didn't want me to go there, you should never have told me what was done to you, never told me what I came from. I'm not blaming you; I'm just trying to explain to you why I am who I am and why I have to do what I have to." It's the closest I'd ever come to accusing her, but the look of sorrow in her eyes made me feel guilt.

“I’m sorry, Ma, everything’s okay. I’m home now. Where are the twins?”

“Your grandparents took them off somewhere for the weekend. They should be back tomorrow.” Oh, I guess nana forgot to tell me she was leaving town in our last conversation. I heard someone calling for me from downstairs then Lance was bounding up the stairs.

“Go, he’s been like a bear with his paw caught.” She smiled and patted my cheek before I turned and left the room.

“Hey Lancelot, what brings you here? Shouldn’t you be hunting down criminals?”

“Funny, where the heck have you been?”

“I had to take care of something.”

“Still not gonna tell me, huh.”

“Where did the twins go with nana?”

“Oh, that.” He grinned.

“I’m not sure. Uncle Gar was about to go after the grandparent about something or the other, and they hightailed it out of here with the girls, something about gramps not feeling too good and needing sun, so my guess is the island.”

“Why was Uncle Garrett upset with the grands?”

“Beats me, but he and Unc’s been shut away behind closed doors for the last two days or so.”

“Hmm!” Pop snitched, and Uncle Garrett got pissed, and the grands booked it to escape one of his lectures.

“Gabe Russo! Where the hell are you? Get down here.”

“Oops, you’re up. I’ma be in your room when you’re done.” He jogged down the hallway, and I sighed before going to face the fire. I already knew what I was going to say to everyone. Since Ma, Pop, and Lance were taken care of, all that was left with Uncle Garrett and the twins.

He did the same once over up and down as Pop before pulling me in. “You’re okay? Nobody touched you?”

“I’m fine Unc, I....”

“You don’t have to say anything, your father told me. I understand why you did it, but don’t do it again. Let your dad handle it, you hear me?” I just smiled because I won’t lie to him either. “How’s my aunt doing? Is she here with you?”

“No, your grandma, that wretched old woman took her off somewhere with the twins. Your mother was supposed to go too, but she was too worried about you to leave. Sheila went because they took your grandpa Antonelli under the guise of getting him out of the house, and you know those two are joined at the hip.”

“Oh, reinforcements.”

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing, thanks for checking up on me; Lancelot’ waiting for me. I better go see what he wants.” Yes, and avoid the lecture I know is coming.

“Okay, go ahead, I’m gonna go see your Pop.” Escape!



GIANNA



“OH, poor thing, you look dead on your feet. Why don’t you take a nap? Ron and I got this. You expressed enough milk, and we’ve pureed enough food that we should be fine for a bit.” A nap sounded wonderful, but the guilt would kill me. I hate burdening them even more than I already have. I’ve tried paying them for all the help they’ve given, but they wouldn’t hear of it, which only compounds my guilt.

Secretly though, I know I wouldn’t have made it without them. I’d like to find those women who sit behind computer screens and make childcare seem like a cakewalk. Then again,

none of them has had the pleasure of trying to raise Gabriel Russo's offspring.

I don't see how it is that I did all the work, almost broke my back carrying a tummy that was about half my size, and in the end, I didn't pass on even my eye color. I wish I could be irritated by that fact, but in truth, it warms my heart to look at Gabriel's face. Sometimes in the dead of night, when I'm sitting in the handmade rocker Ron had made, with a child at my breast and my defenses down, I can't help but wish that he was here to see us.

"I think I'll take you up on that nap." I didn't think babies learned to crawl at five months old. All the books say different, but I guess I should've known mine would be different, with Gabriel as a father. I slogged off to bed and dropped down like a lodestone, but sleep didn't come as easy as it should have.

It's going to be Xmas in a few days, the second Xmas without Gabriel. I remember looking forward to this time with him and his family a little more than a year ago. Has it been that long already? The stupid tears that have been plaguing me much of late threatened again, and I turned my face into the pillow to stifle the sound of my sobs.

Some days I just like to have a pity party. Instead of fighting my true thoughts and trying to be the bigger person, I just let all the rage and anger I feel inside take center stage. Of course, that doesn't last long because there's more than just me to think about, but it does feel good when it happens. Worse than those days, though, are the times when I'm tempted to call him, just to hear his voice somewhere other than in my dreams.

Too many nights, I wake up reaching for him only to find myself alone in my cold bed with tears drying on my face. I wish I knew when this agony would end. I thought I'd be at peace with just a little piece of him for myself, but I'm even lonelier now with the constant reminder of him. And as much as I love, there's a gaping hole in my chest where my heart used to be.



## GABRIEL



IT'S THE HOLIDAYS, more than a year since she left. My anger has turned to indifference and back to anger time and again. That hole she blasted into me refuses to be filled, and I wish some days that I'd never started this game with Ricci, that I'd just stuck to my original plan and ended him months ago and be done with this hell. It's too late for regrets now, though. I'd started the ball rolling, and now there was no turning back.

I've been playing cat and mouse with Sal for the last five months, making his need to see me almost unbearable. I keep in touch just enough to satisfy my purpose, but never enough for him. Most humans don't realize that when you starve someone of the love they so desperately want, they'd cling to you and forsake those who are right in front of them. It's always the one who got away.

I lived through Xmas day, put on the face I knew my family wanted to see, and said all the right things in all the right places. They'd let their guards down again, well, except for Pop. He still keeps a close watch but not close enough that I can't get around him. It helps that my team has decided that since they can't stop me, they might as well join me. It took them long enough. Poor guys, they're caught between a rock and a hard place, trying to keep both me and Pop satisfied.

I found no joy in the mountain of gifts I received and was barely cognizant of the festivities, same as last year, only last year we were all still caught up in finding her, so things weren't as jolly as they are this time around. I can't blame my family for moving on with their lives. That's a dick move. But I can't help sitting here in a roomful of people and feeling lonelier than I ever have.

The one good thing about feeling like this is that it fires up my revenge gene. I use all my anger and frustration to keep going and keep coming up with worse ways to bring down my prey. The more I dig into these people, the more disgusting I become. Luna, as I thought, isn't the only one involved in the trafficking scheme. In fact, there are more players at work there than I first thought, according to Memnon.

He's been plugging away on that for me while taking care of whatever else he's into, which I appreciate, but now I'm getting just a little antsy that he might uncover something that would tip him off even more to what I'm doing. I've tried to keep the two things separate, my plots against Ricci and what he was doing to uncover Luna's dark dealings, but I now realize that at some point, the two will intersect.

I waited until the house was dark and everyone was asleep hours later. I was going in alone this time, didn't want any hangers-on sending back news because Pop would for sure lose his mind this time if he knew I was planning to walk into the enemy's midst.

The reason I've been stringing Sal along was to give him a false sense of security. No fast moves; show no interest, so he'd never guess that I was leading him into doing what I want. We were there now because he was dying for his grandson, me, to be close. I've denied him that, keeping him at arm's length until I move in for the kill. It was time to see Ricci face to face, time to start bringing his world down around his ears.



IT WAS STILL EARLY when I landed in Palermo the day after Xmas. St. Stephens day is big with Italians and Sicilians alike. I knew what plans the Ricci family had because Sal had never removed my 'gift' since the day I gave it to him. He has no idea that I can hear everything that goes on in his house within his range.

I know he'd kept his word not to tell Ricci about meeting me. I also know he's been talking to his consigliere about me without giving too much away. I'm supposedly a long-lost relative that he wanted to write into his will. I'm guessing he's not the most trusting soul because he's known this man for over thirty years, and he didn't come right out and tell him who I was or anything else about me, really. I also know he's been doing his best to find me, but so far, all he's got is what I want him to have.

I've even been privy to his conversations with his sons and the rest of his family, which gave me great insight into their relationships. This time I stayed at the hotel where we'd met the last time because I didn't plan to be there for long. He had no idea I was coming because I'd told him last minute that I may not be able to make it after all because of school and my family not wanting me to leave this close to the holiday.

I knew that he would want me here even more so that by the time I call him, he'd move heaven and earth to see me. I spent the whole day putting the finishing touches on my plan for the night before getting dressed to go out. I walked a little ways away from the hotel before pulling the burner phone I'd been using to talk to Sal.

"Nannu, I'm here!"

"Ah, you've come. The family is having a party...."

"Oh, I don't want to intrude. I guess I'll see you next time I'm here."

"No-no, what do you mean? Where do you go?"

"I don't think I should stay here much longer. It seems kinda dangerous; I heard the stories, but...."

"Dangerous? What dangerous?"

"Um, it's not that important; someone just tried to rob me, is all."

"Niputi, are you okay? Where are you?" | gave him the name of the street. "I know this place; I will come to you, you stay, are they gone, the ones who did this?"

“Yes, I got away from them.”

He said something in rapid Sicilian then promised to be here in ten minutes. I hung up the phone and waited. Tonight is the perfect time, is right. It’s one of the only nights I’m sure to find all the players in this farce together. It’s one of the things I’d learned while eavesdropping.

Last night was all about family, but today and tonight are for friends to join in the fun. This works out perfectly because I’d been straining my brain trying to find a way to get them all together. I made up the lie about the attempted robbery to add a sense of urgency. This way, Sal won’t worry about me meeting his son or why I was okay with it, given the circumstances.

True to his word, he was there in less than ten minutes. His goons looked around as if expecting to see my fictitious attackers while Sal ushered me into his chauffeur-driven car. “Ah, you weren’t hurt. This is good. My men will take care of it—no need to worry. We’ll find who, and it will be done. After tonight they will know who you are; no one will bother you, here again, ever. I stake my word on this.”

I just nodded and showed no signs of weakness, not that I have any. But, a man like Sal takes great pride in those around him being strong. Since I know his son and only grandson are not up to par, I go out of my way to show him just how different I am to them, how capable. “It’s no worry. They were just boys. They probably just saw the stupid American and thought I was an easy mark.”

“How did you change their minds?” I just held up my fist with a smirk. He nodded his head with a beaming smile. Are all grandfathers like this?

I didn’t think I would react this way when we pulled through the gates of his palazzo. I didn’t expect the hit to the gut or to feel choked up. It was here, twenty years ago, that I was conceived, though I hate associating such a pure word with the atrocities that took place here.

We drove down the long winding driveway, and it was all I could do to keep the rage contained. I folded my fists out of

his view and gritted my teeth against the cry of rage that lodged itself in my throat. “We’re here. It’s okay, do not be afraid, I’ve decided what should be done. Alonzo will know now, but not to worry. I’m here.”

As if I’m afraid of his spawn. I hope he has a heart attack at the sight of me and dies. No, that’s too easy. It looked like every light was on in the gargantuan palazzo, and through the huge windows in one of the rooms on the first floor, I could see people standing around with flutes of champagne in their hands as they talked and laughed. Was it like this that night? I shook my head to dislodge those thoughts. I can’t walk in hot, or no one would survive the night. I didn’t come here for that, not yet.

No one seemed to notice our entrance at first, but as if pulled by some invisible string, they turned one by one to see the two of us standing there in the doorway flanked by his goons. The whispers started, and exclamations of ‘who is he’ rang across the room as they got a good look at my face. Even the live band seemed to have started playing lower until the music was barely above a soft din.

Alonzo started to come forward, his eyes glued to my face. No doubt he thought I was some long-lost brother, a bastard of Sal’s. “Everyone, this is my grandson, Gabe, from America.”

“Grandson?” They all turned to look at Martin, who held up his hands.

“I’ve never been.” Now the attention turned to Alonzo, who looked like he was trying to recall any dalliance he might’ve had on the other side of the globe.

“No-no, this is Alonzo’s boy. You may all remember his mother; she was a sweet girl from the village. Sofia Antonelli.” His face had gone hard when he said this while looking dead on at his son, who lost all the color from his face. I looked around the room at the others that had been there that night, recognizing them from the dossier I’d compiled on each and every one of them.

“Gabe, say hello to everyone, niputi.” I gave a slight nod to the room at large before fixing my gaze on Ricci. “Hello!”

He reacted as if someone had just walked over his grave. One monster recognizing another, but not yet. I reined myself in. The words 'appear weak when you're strong and strong when you're weak' played through my head. Thanks, Sun Tzu. I dimmed the kill lights in my eyes and made a good impression of trying to hide behind Sal as if unsure of myself.