



A Man of Prestige

Author: S.E. Rose

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Billionaire Doctor Aiden Thomas doesn't give second chances, but Estella Garcia might change his mind, and his heart.

Aiden Thomas and his closest friends have come across a drug that may be responsible for the deaths of young women in the city. When he obtains a sample of the drug, he needs it analyzed, and there's only one person he knows with access to the technology to do it, his ex, Estella Garcia. Estella has worked her way back from a life-shattering event. She's finally moving on after years of heartbreak until the man who destroyed her comes walking back into her life. Estella's discovery leads Aiden to look for an enemy amongst the members of a secret society that he vowed to protect. In a city full of powerful men who will stop at nothing, everyone is a suspect. These two are about to find out that nothing is as it seems, and no one can be trusted.

Total Pages (Source): 55

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Chapter1

Aiden

I see the car coming, and when Conner's car pauses, I know. It's his father. Why are both his father and mine here? There's only one reason that I can think of and it's sitting in my pocket right now.

Fuck. We have to get out of here right now. I keep running until I get to my car. Hopping in, I turn it on and head out the opposite direction of the Sterling property. It's a longer route home, but I don't want to be seen by either my father or his.

My phone rings.

"Are you out of there?" Conner asks.

"Yes, on my way back. I'll see you at the apartment." I hang up and drive back to the city. I borrowed a colleague's car, so I drive to his home first. He's an older doctor who has lived in Bethesda for almost all his life. His wife greets me and tries to get me to come in for coffee, but I let her know I have somewhere to be. I call a car and have it drop me off two blocks from Vivienne's apartment.

By the time I arrive, Sebastian and Alexis are back here as well.

"Well, that was..." Vivienne muses as she makes us all coffee.

I set the vial down on the counter, and everyone freezes to look at it. Alexis slowly

walks over and picks it up, holding it up to the light.

“It’s strange that such an innocent-looking little bit of liquid could cause so much destruction,” she muses as she sets it back down. Sebastian comes up behind her and wraps his arms around her waist, kissing the top of her head.

“We’re going to bring an end to all that destruction, little dove. I promise you that,” he assures her.

“The destruction is from the people that brought that vial here. That’s what we need to end, the people,” I declare as I look from Sebastian to Conner. I can see the agreement in their eyes.

We don’t need words to understand each other. These two know me better than anyone. We’ve been through hell and back again. And it looks like we’ll be visiting hell one last time.

I look over at Vivienne who has resumed pouring coffee into mugs. She sets them on the counter, her hand grazing Conner’s. Only he doesn’t pull away, he places his hand over hers and squeezes it.

I saw them in the car tonight. I didn’t mean to see them fucking, but I wasn’t exactly expecting to find them canoodling in the middle of a spy mission. I have no idea what is going on between those two, but if Conner is showing her affection in front of other humans, then it’s serious.

My heart momentarily turns to ice as I think of Ella. Estella Garcia. Conner and Sebastian used to call her the one that got away until my icy stares stopped them. Ella didn’t get away. She left willingly.

She intentionally signed up for a tour in Afghanistan. Who does that? She could have

stayed here in D.C. Yet, after one explosive fight, she up and fucking left me. I got one note on my dresser as a goodbye. Of course, I tried to contact her, but she went zero dark thirty on my ass. When she finally resurfaced over two years later at a conference I was attending, I was more than a little shocked to see her. She greeted me coolly and let me know what she was doing at the Pentagon and that was it. Well, until a few weeks ago, when I reached out to her.

Ella is a changed woman. And it's not just the top secret laboratory that she runs. It's like the fun-loving woman I fell madly in love with all those years ago, just evaporated in smoke. She's still as sexy and beautiful as she always was, but she's changed.

Our split was so sudden, I think my head might still be spinning from it after all these years. We were fighting about something stupid. I had left a cup on the edge of a table. She made a big deal about it, and I said it didn't matter. So what if a cup breaks? She noted that someone could get hurt. I think my response was a shrug. And she said, "You won't think that if it's your kid doing it someday."

To which I responded, "That won't happen because I'm never having children."

I could see it in her eyes. We hadn't really talked about kids until that moment. We were all lust and passion and fucking. Our eyes had met across a room at a summer clinic we both were attending while in med school, and that was it. I stumbled into her bed that night and we had been inseparable from that day on until that last night.

I was going to marry this woman. I was all ready to propose. I even had a ring. It had been my mother's ring. And then, she up and fucking vanished as if the three years we spent together meant absolutely nothing. I tried to contact her, over and over. I even showed up at her sister's dormitory one time, but she refused to see me or even talk to me. After three months of trying, her sister told me she'd taken a tour abroad and was gone. I later found out she was in Afghanistan. But even my few attempts at

sending letters to her overseas went without a response.

I would never admit to these fuckers that there was a part of me that wanted to contact Ella when we needed her help. I want to finish it between us. I want to say all the words that were never said. I want answers. But the time isn't right. So instead, our communications have been quick and professional.

Conner's phone buzzes, interrupting my thoughts.

"Bryce?" he answers. It's the man who runs the security company that we hired. One of the few without ties to TOD. I'm still a little suspect of the guy, but if Conner trusts him, then I trust him.

"Yes. We're all here. Hold on," he says as he places his phone down and puts it on speaker.

"Your fathers just left the loading dock office. I've rearranged my men and will be upping security measures at all your properties. I don't know what you have planned, but you better be keeping me in the loop. I will debrief you all tomorrow with the latest tech we are adding to your security detail." And just like that, he hangs up.

Sebastian narrows his eyes. "I'm not sure we should let Bryce know that our plan might end in the murder of our own fathers."

Alexis's eyes grow wide. "You're going to kill them?" she whispers.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Vivienne gives her a look of sympathy. “It might be the only way,” she answers in a soft but resolute voice.

Conner brings her hand to his lips. “Alexis, our fathers are...not good men. Hell, we aren’t good men either, but we aren’t killers. None of us takes this lightly. That being said though, if that’s what it takes to bring this web of horrors to an end, then so be it.”

“You know, even if you take out the elite. Hell, even if you take out the council. TOD may just grow another head,” Vivienne muses as she looks to Conner’s Hydra tattoo. I give him a look, and he shrugs. Clearly, Vivienne has learned more about our secret society than Conner has admitted to us. We’ll be talking about that later.

“We know it will,” I answer her as I look at Conner. “But what we hope it will do is stop the current line of...evil from continuing. It will end a dynasty of power that should have ended long ago.”

“We’ll need an exit plan,” Alexis states, her eyes glazing over. Sebastian tightens his hold around her waist and leans into her ear.

“We have one...” He trails off and looks to Conner who said he was working on it. “Or at least, we will when the time comes.”

She nods and wipes a tear away from her cheek. “It’ll be like witness protection, won’t it?”

“It will,” Conner confirms.

“I should probably go visit my family now,” she says as she looks around at all of us.

“That’s a good idea,” Sebastian encourages as he releases her. “We should all head out. If something goes wrong, and we lose communication, we will use this place as our safe house. Agreed?”

Everyone nods. “I’ll leave a key taped under the mat of the apartment next door. It belongs to a little old lady who never goes anywhere,” Vivienne says as she holds it up to show all of us.

“I have to get this sample to Ella,” I say as I pick the vial back up and place it in my pocket, tapping it lightly as if to confirm it’s actually there.

“I have more emails to go through. We’ll need quite a bit of evidence if we’re taking out the most powerful men in this city,” Vivienne says as she turns to head toward what I presume is a bedroom.

“We keep our burner phones on and our private phones off from here out. Only use the private phones when you are at your homes or offices,” I say to them as I head to the door. It’s time to pay a visit to the woman who killed the last warmth existing in my heart.

Chapter2

Ella

I hurry out the door. I’m late. The night air hits me as I make my way to my car. The Lincoln Memorial lights up the horizon and the Washington Monument beyond it.

I’ve been sucked into my work this week. I reflect on how I got here as I turn and look back up at the Pentagon. When I went to medical school, I never thought I’d be

running a lab. I thought I'd be involved in patient trials, but here I am, working at the Pentagon in a medical drug-testing laboratory. Admiral Blake has my lab running a crazy amount of samples. My lab is three stories below ground level in a secret part of the Pentagon that even most people working here don't know about.

When my commander recommended me to Admiral Blake for this position, I was hesitant. There are rumors, but something that Aiden Thomas once said to me yelled louder than any other thought in my head as I accepted the position, keep your friends close and your enemies closer. He had said it was fatherly advice passed on to his group of friends, and he had found it useful.

So, here I am. Everything I do is top security clearance, well, beyond it really. No one knows about it except me and the five lab techs that work for me. We have state-of-the-art equipment, and our current task is to analyze results from an experimental drug trial. Admiral Blake has long been searching for a drug that will essentially mentally sedate soldiers suffering from PTSD while letting them remain physically awake. It's a strange concept that as a doctor with a master's degree in pharmacology, I have serious reservations about, but I do as I'm told because I'm a good soldier.

I roll my eyes at myself as I get in my car and head toward my apartment. It's only a five-minute drive, but working late hours means it's safer to take my car. I park in my complex and head up to my penthouse. There's something to be said about the salary that accompanies my position.

Dropping my bag by the front door, I head into my kitchen. My housekeeper likely left me food in the fridge. I haven't been home in two nights. Pulling all-nighters was never something that ended after college. There were nights abroad where my work took me into the next day, but then when I was assigned here, I was able to keep a fairly normal schedule. That is until my commander recommended me to Admiral Blake and a normal life vanished as fast as the ink dried on my transfer paperwork.

I open my fridge and find my meals neatly stacked in containers. I rummage through them, find the one I want, and toss it in my microwave while I go to shower. I rinse off quickly, not allowing myself to indulge in the ridiculous jets that pulsate water all over my body. I'm tired and hungry, and I just want to curl up and sleep for twelve hours.

I hear the microwave beep as I wrap the towel around me. I grab another towel off my heated drying rack and wrap my hair up in it as I head out to my kitchen. I eat in silence, letting my mind unravel from the last forty-eight hours of work. I close my eyes as I bring the pasta to my lips. I take my time chewing, savoring each bite.

My phone buzzes and I reach over to it.

Aiden: I need to see you.

I sigh. Aiden Thomas. I close my eyes and take a long, deep breath. He has no idea of the heartbreak he caused me with only his words. He has no idea what I endured in the days afterward. He has no idea how much we both lost.

And after several years of no contact, he somehow fell back into my life recently when we saw each other at a medical conference. That was hard enough, but then he asked me for a favor, and I have a gut feeling this favor is going to lead to another favor.

Me: I just got off work. It's late. Can it wait?

The three little dots appear immediately, which gives me my answer before I read his.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Aiden: No. It's urgent. I can come to you.

With a heavy sigh, I type my reply along with my address and set my phone down. I finish my meal and change into something comfortable. I laugh at the fact that I'm changing into comfortable clothes when I spend my days in medical scrubs, the literal epitome of comfort.

The doorbell rings as I pull my hair up into a messy bun. I compose myself before answering the door, checking it's him on my security camera.

I saw him recently at the Tidal Basin where he handed me some samples. That was hard for me. I could smell his familiar cologne, and I felt the warmth of his skin as he handed me the samples. The memories that flooded my mind were almost too much, too painful. I had nearly said no to agreeing to meet with him, but he sounded desperate. And so, I caved. And now, he's here. I should have had him meet me somewhere else, but it's hard to know what places aren't being watched in this city.

I unlock the door and motion for him to enter.

"Could your apartment be bugged?" he asks as he looks around.

"We can talk out on the balcony, if you like," I suggest with a raised eyebrow. After my time dating Aiden, and then being in the position I'm in at work, I take my security protocol seriously, but it appears not as serious as Aiden does.

He leads the way as if he's been here before and opens my sliding door. After looking around again, he walks to the edge of the balcony and pulls something from his

pocket. A vial.

“I need this analyzed,” he states as he hands it to me.

“What...is it?” I ask as I hold it up to examine it. But I already know the answer to this. Less than a month ago, he brought me blood samples from a woman who was drugged. He also had an analysis done on the samples taken from a woman he and his friends had found drugged along a trail back in college. I got a cryptic story about how he felt like a drug company was illegally transporting and distributing this drug that wasn’t even being tested in trials, let alone approved for use. It was his explanation that made me want to help. And perhaps it was my deeply buried need to resolve things with him.

He leans against my balcony wall, crossing his arms. I swallow as I look at his arm muscles which bulge slightly from the movement. My eyes follow the length of his right arm to his hand, and I remember all the things that hand used to do to me. I turn away and look out at the Potomac River, needing to focus on anything but Aiden.

“I think it’s the drug, the one you found in the samples I brought you,” he explains.

My eyes widen. “And I’m guessing this wasn’t procured by legal means.”

“Define legal?” he says with a smirk.

I roll my eyes and shake my head slightly. “Should I assume someone will be looking for this vial?”

His smirk disappears. “Yes.”

I crook my head to one side and swallow. “Do I get more details than that?”

“Do you want to know? Because the more you know...the more I bring you into this...the more you won’t be able to get out of it.” He pauses. “I’m not sure you want to entangle yourself in my...life circumstances.” Is he trying to protect me, or is he trying to keep me out of his life?

I don’t know much about Aiden anymore. I know that once upon a time, he was following in his father’s footsteps, wanting to save lives, but not for the prestige of it. He actually wanted to save lives. He’d lost his mother to cancer. It was quick and over before he even knew she was sick. His father had sent him away for the summer instead of letting him say goodbye to his mom. It gutted him and he was brave enough to share his pain with me. He wanted to work on patient trials for cancer drugs, which it sounds as though he’s accomplished.

I also know that his father is a real piece of work. He’s prestigious but only because he’s cut ethical corners. I did my own investigation into him after Aiden mentioned some things.

But mostly, I’m aware of them being part of a fraternity, that seems to have every who’s who in D.C. The more I’ve been around this city’s powerful, the more I’ve noted the tentacles of the organization in every facet of our nation’s inner workings.

I asked Aiden about it once. He’d mentioned something in passing, but then shut down and said I should stay clear of his fraternity, except for his best friends Conner and Sebastian and his other pledge brothers. Last I heard, they were all living in some sort of weird commune-style, gated community. I guess I can understand that; they were always so close, more than just fraternity brothers.

I look back over at Aiden. He’s studying me carefully. He’s too smart for his own good. I know it must have killed his pride to come to me for help with this. But he knows that my lab has the tech and secrecy needed to do what he wants. He was always the master of manipulation.

I frown.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing. You’re probably right. It’s better if I don’t know. I’ll run some tests on this tomorrow and let you know what I find,” I say as I internally groan at the thought of working on my day off. I haven’t taken a day off in a while. I seem to end back up in the lab even when I don’t have to be there. It’s just been so busy lately.

I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. “Well, I should probably go.”

I nod as he starts toward the sliding glass door. “Aiden?”

He turns to me. I can see so many unspoken words start to form on his lips, but with each twitch, he presses them together, forcing himself to remain silent.

Guilt boils up from the depths where I have locked it away. “It’s good to see you again.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

He gives me a small smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "It's good to see you too, Ells. I'm glad you're doing well," he says as he motions to my penthouse and the balcony with the river view. My heart that's been frozen solid since the argument that ended our relationship, thaws, just a little at the use of one of his nicknames for me.

I follow him back inside to my front door. He turns before he opens it and reaches out, taking my hand that holds the vial. "Be careful with this. The implications could be...life-altering."

"OK. I'll run the samples myself," I reply. I fight the urge to pull my hand away because that part of me is warring with the part that wants him to keep holding my hand. His thumb brushes over my fingers as he pulls away.

"Goodnight, Ells. Call me on this number when you know more. Only use this number. It's a secure line," he says. He pulls another phone out of his pocket and hands it to me. "This is a burner phone. Only use this phone to contact me." He calls the phone on his, and it rings as he hands it to me. He ends the call once he sees that the number has shown up on the burner phone that is now in my other hand.

"Shit. This is more serious than I thought," I mutter as I stare down at the phone in my hand.

"Ells, I'm sorry I brought you into all this. I promise, once I get this information, I'll be out of your hair and your life for good. I do truly appreciate you helping me...it could ultimately save a lot of lives."

"Right. I'll be in touch when I know more," I reply because I don't know what else to

say. He nods and leaves. I stand there staring at my door after he's gone. And then spend another few minutes looking from the vial to the phone. What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter 3

Aiden

The ride home seems long. I turn on an audiobook that I'm listening to, trying to distract myself with a story about dragons and wizards, but it doesn't help. My mind keeps replaying the conversation I just had with Ella. My fucked-up brain keeps showing me her flawless skin, her dark wavy hair, her caramel-colored eyes. Those eyes have so many shades of brown in them, even some streaks of amber. I spent many nights looking at them up close, memorizing each color variation. God, I miss her.

I could smell her shampoo as we stood by each other at her front door. My hands itched to massage it into her scalp while standing under hot water in a shower together. I remember doing that. I remember how it felt to run those silky strands between my fingers.

I've been with women since her, but none come close. I compare every single one of them to her. They are set up for failure before they even say hello to me. It's unfair to them, really. I shouldn't lead them on, I should just make it clear that I only do one-night stands.

Hell, maybe I should thank her. When she left, I tried to find her and talk to her. She seemingly disappeared for weeks, and then I found out she had gone to Afghanistan. I tried to contact her there, but she never replied. So, I threw myself into my work. My promotions and my clinical work successes are all because I spend every hour of every day fixated on making progress. I've worked nights, weekends, and holidays.

My home has a satellite office that I have connected to my work office so that I can keep working after I leave for the day. Sure, I have fun with friends and have had some great nights with ladies I've met, but I never get serious. All my commitment is saved for my career.

Part of me wants to talk about what happened between us, but that ship has sailed. If she wanted to talk about it, she would have come back to me. Instead, years have passed with no word from her at all. She became a ghost in my past until she suddenly came back into my life in the flash of an eye.

That last fight we had, while epic, was stupid and childish. I said some selfish things. I'm not without fault, but disappearing on me like that...I don't know if I can ever forgive her for that.

My burner phone pings with a text from Conner.

Conner: V is working on a chart. I'll call you with more info later.

Conner likes to keep us informed on things. It's odd that he has that role. He's always been the glue that binds us together. Maybe because he has no siblings of his own. I have a stepbrother. My father remarried two years after my mother's death when I was seventeen. Hugh is an alright guy. He's five years younger than me. We don't have much in common. He works in a marketing firm in Boston but has been doing a grad school program online from a D.C. university. I only see him at family gatherings. Lord knows at seventeen, I didn't have much room for a twelve-year-old in my life. Plus, I was still reeling from the loss of my mom when my dad went and landed himself a younger version of my mom. Sadie was ten years younger than my mother. Where my mother had me in her thirties, my stepmom had her son in her twenties. Where my mom was kind, Sadie is a bitch. She clearly married my dad for his name and his money.

I pull into my driveway and make my way inside. My mind continues to race. Memories of Tina, the woman we found in the woods, start to invade my thoughts as I pour myself a drink and sit down in my office. I need to quiet my head.

I need to forget everything and focus on my work, just as I always do. I'm the one who's the most anxious. And right now, my anxiety is in overdrive. I can feel the bad mood coming on. Ella always knew how to make me feel better, even when I was in a mood. There are so many things that only Ella knows. I could fill a book with it all.

My moodiness is a sign of weakness. That's what my father used to say. But I know it's not. It's a sign of the trauma he put me through. It's a sign of the mental anguish I felt when I was called into a camp director's office to hear my father tell me that my mother was dead. It's the sign of the little boy whose heart was beaten to smithereens when he stood over the coffin of the one person who loved him unconditionally.

The guys used to laugh and say I was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Caring and compassionate and logical one moment and then bam, I'd beat the shit out of someone for looking at us the wrong way. Sebastian once said I was a ticking time bomb and needed to get my shit together. He wasn't wrong. When you lose a parent at a pivotal age, everything changes. I remember everything from that time in my life in vivid color. Each memory is engraved in the pathways of my brain. The sympathetic looks at her funeral from people I barely knew. The whispers in the hallways at schools. I started to fall apart, piece by piece. I was checked out because reality wasn't a place where I wanted to live any longer. My father wasn't helpful. I knew he wouldn't be, but a small part of me had hoped that he would care, that he would be a shoulder for me to lean on while I grieved. Instead, I found solace in my solitude, until I found Conner and Sebastian and they showed me what true friendship was. I learned the hard way not to trust others. And it nearly broke me.

I did get it together, eventually, only now, I'm pretty sure I'm about to lose it. If this goes sideways, and it probably will, I may have to give up everything I've worked

for. I'll have to start over. I'm not sure if I'm ready for that. I hit rock bottom and built myself back up, and I'll be damned if I'm going to give it all away.

Conner gives zero fucks. Hell, if he could live in his tiny home on some deserted island, he would happily do so. And Sebastian, while he presents as the happy politician, has spent the last decade miserable with the fact that he was cornered into the family business.

Although, I think Alexis has changed him. I think he'd just as easily throw away his political life for a more quiet and less public one. But whatever he decides, I am nearly one hundred percent sure Alexis will be by his side.

But...I'm not as in the limelight as they are. I've made my fortunes by hiding away and working my ass off. Sure, I get asked to speak at conferences and I've even been on panels testifying on the Hill, but most days, I can wander the city and not be recognized. My father, on the other hand, wants all the fame and glory. He made one groundbreaking procedure happen in his thirties, and now he likes to continue making the rounds on national television as some sort of media medical darling. The fact that my mom died at a tragically young age, only makes him more untouchable. At least Theo Sterling is a known asshole and Senator North is also not known for his sparkling personality, but my father, he's a real piece of work.

I put my noise-canceling headphones on and block out everything but the classical music. I feel my body relax as I turn on my computer and start running data.

There's something therapeutic about numbers. Numbers don't have feelings. Numbers don't lie. Numbers are just what they are. It's comforting. It's probably why math and science were always my favorite subjects.

I get lost in my work for hours. I'm not even sure what time it is when I finally come to a stopping point on crunching some statistics. I look down at the corner of my

computer to see that it's nearly three in the morning.

I place my headphones down and make my way to the bedroom. I shower and crawl into my bed. Conner and Sebastian keep apartments in the city. I don't. I have a shower at work and an old sofa in my office. I've spent countless nights passing out on it and grabbing a shower in the morning, only to start all over again. If I want real sleep, I come here to my sanctuary. My house doesn't even resemble their homes. Their homes look stately. Sebastian's house looks like it could be in the British Lake District. And Conner's house looks like a damn castle. But mine...is modern and sleek. It is full of windows and metal. Everything is clean lines and sterile surfaces. I have a few pieces of art hanging up on the couple of walls that I have. But that's it. No family photos. No trinkets from trips. I keep all my personal items on one shelf in my home office, including a photo of my mother and me at the beach. It's the last we took together. A photo of Sebastian, Conner, and me at our friend's wedding a few years ago sits next to it. A sculpture my mom made when she decided to take an art class one summer fills another void. And a sketch of Ella that I made one lazy Sunday afternoon sits to the far side. It's the only relic of our relationship that I kept. I tell myself that I keep it there because it's the best sketch I ever made, but deep down, I know it's because it's of her. And even after she hurt me, I wanted to keep a piece of her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I crawl into my air-conditioned bed, pulling up the cotton sheets with cooling technology. I hate to be hot. If I had it my way, I'd live upon a snow-capped mountain. Conner and Sebastian prefer tropical islands, which are fine so long as there is cool air inside and I can swim in the water.

I stare up at the skylight in the ceiling. I can see several constellations in the sky. I fall asleep to memories of lying on a blanket on the National Mall next to Ella, pointing out stars and planets. I miss that. I miss us. But I'll be damned if I ever admit that. The day Ella left, she broke me. And if she knows what's good, she'll do as she said tonight and get me this information and then retreat back out of my life forever.

Chapter4

Ella

I feel his hands coming around me. He caresses my hip and slowly glides his fingers down my front. I pretend to be asleep. It's our game. He knows I'm awake. He takes his time tracing the inside of my thigh before sliding his hand between my legs. His finger skirts the edge of my panties, teasing me. I don't move. I want to see what he does next. A single finger pushes beneath the fabric and makes its way down. I'm already wet for him. He glides it back and forth before sinking it inside me. I can't stop the moan that escapes my lips as he strokes me, bringing me to the edge fast.

"That's right, my star, come for me," he whispers in my ear as his thumb strokes my clit. And I come hard, feeling my wetness drip down his finger.

My eyes fly open, and I realize I was dreaming...about Aiden. What the hell? I look

at the clock and see that I've slept for a solid ten hours. I guess I needed that.

I roll out of my bed and head immediately to make coffee. I always need the nectar of adult life before I can function in the mornings. I try to push my dream aside, but as I take off my clothes to shower, I notice that my underwear bears the proof of my arousal. I curse at myself and quickly rinse away the evidence that I was thinking of him.

I want to hate him. I need to hate him. But seeing him last night, confirmed that I don't, and that makes me hate myself. I angrily wash my hair and face and finish my shower.

Stepping out, I swipe my hand over the mirror, clearing it from condensation so I can see myself properly.

I look...sad. I am sad. I wanted to tell him so badly last night. Hell, I've wanted to tell him every night since the night it happened. Guilt pulses through my veins once again. I need to go for a run and clear my head.

I get on my running gear and head out to the trail along the river. I run until I'm winded and out of breath. I run past the grave of the unknown soldier, past the hillsides of graves where soldiers who weren't recovered are memorialized. I turn around and begin making my way back home. I pass families. I pass a mother with a baby in a stroller. I pass a few couples walking dogs. Everyone seems happy, content with life. And then there's me.

How did I end up here? I contemplate it as I slow my pace, starting my cooldown as I approach Crystal City.

My parents wanted a strong son. Instead, they got me, and my little sister. My poor father poured all his dreams for a son into me. Karate. Soccer. Teaching me

everything he thought I should know. He said he wanted to raise strong girls that would know how to protect themselves. And that he did. My younger sister, Elena, is in grad school. She's an athlete and wants to study law after she finishes grad school.

During my last deployment, the guys in my unit would always say that I had a chip on my shoulder. But it wasn't from my family. They had no idea what I'd been through before I deployed.

I reach my apartment building and hurry back upstairs. I make breakfast, skim through some medical journals online, and then rinse off again before heading back to my lab. I stare at the vial and decide to put it inside my water bottle. I sort it out and make my way to my work.

The security guards wave me through, and I head down into the bowels of the Pentagon, past more security. At least I know these guards.

"Hey, guys," I say to them as I flash them my best smile. I hate using the girly card, but sometimes, I find that it's my best weapon.

"Hi, Commander Garcia," says the older man as he looks through my things before handing them back to me. "I thought you had off today?"

I shrug. "Sort of. I just wanted to get a head start on some work so it's ready to go for me tomorrow. I won't be too long today."

"You should be fast. The weather is supposed to be great today," he adds as I head down the long hallway. I smile and nod, pausing as he searches my things. I try to keep my breathing steady as he looks through my bag. I'm still nervous as I walk away from the security checkpoint. I don't even know how I would begin to explain the vial if they found it.

When I go through the lab security doors, I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm alone. Sometimes I find a technician in here on the weekend, trying to catch up on work. I sort out my things and then, careful to keep security cameras away from my view, I take some of the liquid from the vial into a test tube so I can begin to run tests on it.

"What are you?" I ask it as I hold up the test tube and stare at the clear substance.

I admit that I'm a little nerding out over the idea of getting to study a drug that apparently hasn't seen the light of day outside of a Geneva lab, except for some vials of it that have landed here in the nation's capital.

I get everything set up and begin to work. I like the silence of the lab. I like to hear the clink of the glass and metal and nothing else. I find the sterile environment soothing. It's so quiet down here. Only the hum of machines fills the silence. Once my high-tech equipment is doing its job, I walk into my personal office and sit down.

I pull up information on the project I'm currently working on. The labs have come back, and I'm pleasantly surprised by the results. Admiral Blake will be pleased. I go to make my notes and summarize the results, but as I pull up some studies that I was going to read through to possibly add to the summary, I come across a name that I know.

I click on the person's bio and my heart stops. Adam Blake. No, it can't be. Adam Blake, the CEO of Halfagher. I search his bio online and indeed find that he's Admiral Blake's brother. I scan back over to the study. It's old. Twenty years old. It's looking at some compounds that Blake and his team were studying in terms of memory. It found a maximum-dose use of the compound could work on memory but still allow for a physical response while sedated.

I pull up another article, this one is five years later and looking at a drug classification on anesthesia medicines that alter memory. It's an odd area of study considering the

company is more well-known for its microneedle device. It's also an odd background to have for an executive. He apparently has both business and pre-med undergraduate degrees.

My initial reaction is to wonder if Adam Blake might be getting unfair treatment because of his brother's position. Halfagher is one of the top bids to help create the new drug that the admiral has been working toward for over a decade. These studies make me wonder if they haven't been working toward something for a lot longer than that.

What the hell is going on here? My buzzer goes off and I head back into the lab to run the next set of tests. I spend the next six hours poring over articles and studies from Halfagher and Adam Blake. Did Admiral Blake become interested in this sedative idea because of his brother or the other way around? What came first, the chicken or the egg?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I finally pry my tired eyes away from the screen when it continually goes blurry on me. I need to sleep. I look at my sofa but decide I should head back home. I mark the samples under a test name that is exclusively for samples that I'm working on and then number them with a new sequence, so they don't get mixed up.

I look around once more to make sure everything is in order before I head back out to my home. It's not dark out, so instead of taking the metro today, I opt to walk the two miles to my home. I can't help feeling like I'm being watched as I walk, but each time I turn to look, I don't see anyone suspicious. I decide to stick with my car from here out. I curse myself for not clearing out my browser history, although I was only looking at articles through the library search portal, which shouldn't denote any red flags...at least I hope not.

When I get home, I shower again and crawl into my bed. I'm too tired for food. As I lie there wondering what the samples will show, the burner phone Aiden gave me buzzes. I pull open my bedside drawer and look at it. A test message. I shouldn't smile when I see what he's named himself, but I do.

Gräfenberg Wannabe: Anything yet?

Always so impatient. Dr. Ernst Gräfenberg was a famous doctor who is largely credited with discovering the female G-spot. Thus the "G" in its name. During our extremely brief courtship, we had an anatomy class together during our summer clinic. There was an assignment. That assignment led to us discovering this doctor, his work, and our lust for each other. Needless to say, Aiden earned the nickname that night for discoveries of my body.

I quickly straighten my lips. He's not allowed to do that anymore. I go in the phone to change his name, but then another message pops up on my screen.

Gräfenberg Wannabe: Don't put yourself in danger to expedite it. I just need to know as soon as you do.

I roll my eyes and put on my glasses.

Me: I am running the tests now. I should know by the morning.

Gräfenberg Wannabe: Excellent.

There's a pause but I can see the three dots and then they disappear. Then they reappear.

Gräfenberg Wannabe: I really do appreciate this.

I toss the phone back in my nightstand, needing distance from him and our past. I grimace when I see where the phone has landed. I slowly pull out the drawer and push the offending item back farther, tucking it under a letter from my grandmother that I kept when she died a few years ago. I close the drawer, willing myself to forget what I saw. I won't go back there.

As if my sister can read my mind, my personal cell buzzes with an incoming call.

"Hola, chica!" she says cheerfully. Elena is happiness personified. Seriously, she's never been sad a day in her life. She always sees the glass half full.

"Hey, what's up, mi amore," I reply as I walk into my kitchen, deciding I need a glass of water before I pass out.

“Guess what?”

I roll my eyes as I reach for a glass. “What?”

“I got tickets to the concert!” she screams. I pull the phone away from my ear.

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. My friend was supposed to go, but her aunt died.”

“Uh, well, that’s unfortunate.”

“Not for me!” she squeals.

I put my phone on speaker as I get the water. “Lena, that’s really insensitive.”

“Whatever. I mean, yeah, it sucks, but still, it’s awesome. She said I don’t even have to pay her for them. You want to go?”

My sister has been trying to score tickets to this rock concert for three months now. I know it means a lot to her.

“Where’s it at?”

“That’s the best part. It’s in D.C.”

I groan. My sister is in New York City for grad school. If the concert was there, then I’d have a chance to bail, but now I have zero reasons not to go.

“Fine. Text me the deets.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“Yay! We totally have to try that new Italian restaurant beforehand. Oh, and we should hit a club afterward. I hear the band is staying at that hotel by the club we went to last year for my birthday.”

I close my eyes and sip some water, so I can collect myself.

“Oh, and, uh, I can spend the night, right?”

“Of course,” I say with a sigh. “I’ll leave a key at the front desk for you.”

“Thanks, Ella. I can’t wait to see you. I miss you,” she says.

“I miss you too, El-bell. Hasta la pasta,” I say, ending the call with our favorite childhood goodnight saying.

“Hasta la pasta, Elly-belly.”

I grin at her nickname for me as we disconnect. There are a few years between us, but I do love that kid. And now that we’re both adults, I must admit, it’s nice to hang out with her for short periods of time. I can’t take too much Elena at once. She’s a lot.

I put my glass in the dishwasher and head back to my bedroom, crawling beneath my covers and picking up a murder-mystery book that my mom had mailed me a while back. Every few weeks, she asks if I’ve read it yet, and I’m starting to feel guilty about my lack of time to do the simplest tasks and mundane pleasures.

I force myself to stay awake for thirty more minutes as I immerse myself in a story of

assassins and secret societies. My troubled mind keeps comparing the fiction to my real life. As I slide the book onto my nightstand and turn off the light, Aiden's words come back to me. "I'm sorry I brought you into all of this."

Why do I feel like he's sorry about so much more than asking me to illegally process a substance for him? He's not explained very much to me and I'm beginning to wonder what exactly is going on with him. Maybe he's right. Maybe I shouldn't ask questions. I should do him this favor and then never see him again. Only, a part of me, a very buried part of me, wants to see him again. And that scares me.

Chapter5

Aiden

Ella:It's the same drug that was used on Alexis. One hundred percent match. It's also the same drug used on the other girls. It's a seventy percent match to the drug used on Tina. We should talk.

I stare at the text. We found it.

I call Sebastian and Conner first.

"It's a match. Ella confirmed it. We need to lay out our plan," I say after they answer.

"Damn. Vivienne's room looks like one of those detective shows. She's been working on digging up things on everyone on the council. She's narrowing down who the last two elite members are. We should debrief. Give her another seventy-two hours," Conner says.

"How's Alexis?" I ask Sebastian. I've been worried about her since she was found in the woods. Maybe it's the big brother in me. I always wanted a little sister. I used to

love hanging out with Elena. Ella's sister is the coolest. I've kept tabs on her. She's in grad school now.

"She's fine," Sebastian answers, cutting into my thoughts. "The doctor she saw for her follow-up says all her bloodwork is back to normal."

"That's good. Let's plan to meet up on Thursday night at the safe house," I suggest.

"Yep. Hopefully we have more intel by then. I've had Bryce's team doing some research for us, too. He has contacts that may be able to get us intel," Conner says. There's silence on the phone for a heartbeat.

"So...how's Ella?" Sebastian asks. I knew that question was coming. After the breakup, I didn't talk about her. I didn't talk about our fight. I didn't talk anything regarding her. They don't ask, but I know they want to.

"She's fine. I'm going to thank her for helping us and then she's out of this. She has her whole life set up. She doesn't need to be involved any more than she has been," I assure them.

"If you say so," Conner says. I want to reach over the phone line and punch the smirk right off his face. Fuck.

"Oh, and there's one other thing that you'll find interesting about the girls whose bodies have been found in the park recently," Conner adds. "Remember the parties?"

I freeze at the mention of them. Of course, I do. TOD used to have parties. In fact, the night we found Tina we were coming home from one of them. They were typical frat parties, aside from one difference. Some of the alumni would attend. Older alumni. Powerful alumni. They garnered quite a bit of attention from some of the younger women at the parties who were drawn to the power of these men. There were girls

that the alumni would inquire about. It was always the same type of girl. They preyed upon young women who they saw as weak. They preyed upon young women who didn't have life figured out yet or who wanted the husband and the house with the white picket fence and two kids. They took advantage of women with a particular desire for their futures, and it was wrong on so many levels. These powerful men were like rock stars to these young women, and they fucking knew it.

"I remember," I mutter.

"They all had been at a party the night before," Conner says, and I can tell it's through clenched teeth.

My mind does somersaults.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“I thought the same thing. Vivienne had Alexis researching to confirm it. It’s true, which makes me think that maybe one of the first victims was actually...” Sebastian trails off as we all think the same thing.

“Tina,” I whisper.

“Yeah, Tina,” Conner agrees.

“Can we talk to her?” I ask.

“I think we have to,” Sebastian says slowly. “Conner, can you get Bryce to track her down for us? I’m not sure where she lives now.”

“Will do,” he replies. “Have Alexis research the other missing women around that time. I want to know if they had attended a party as well.”

“Already on it,” he says.

“Stay safe, shit is about to get real. Also, I’m having Bryce watch our dads. Apparently, they are quite pissed about the missing vial. My dad tore apart his office that night. And your dad, Aiden, was spotted having a heated discussion with our good friend Jared,” Conner says.

“I want to know what role he’s playing in this,” I state.

“We’ll figure it out; we’ll figure it all out,” Sebastian assures.

We disconnect, and I look back at Ella's message and then hit call.

"I need to know what this all means," she says when she answers.

"Ella..." I trail off because I don't want her to know.

"I'm already involved if that's what you're thinking. And...I might have information that you need," she says quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Just...can we meet?"

I groan. "Meet me at the Falls Church metro stop at six," I say.

"I'll see you then," she adds as she hangs up and I stare at my phone. What am I doing? No matter how badly she hurt me, she doesn't deserve to be dragged into this dangerous situation, yet I can't stop thinking about her. It's as if I'm bringing her down with the ship, just so I can spend one more day with her. It's selfish. I try to tell myself that it's my curiosity about her alleged information, but I'm a lying piece of shit if I believe myself on that one.

My phone pings with a message from Charles Richards. Chuck. We all get assigned a liaison when we take the vow to join the brotherhood. Chuck is mine. He was also our pledge class mentor. He's older now, and I swear at times senile.

Chuck: How are you? I hear a promotion is in the works?

I laugh and call him. He's a much-needed distraction.

"Hello, Aiden," he answers. His voice is the grandfatherly one I always wanted as a

child. I barely remember my own grandparents. My mom's parents died when I was a kid and my dad and his father didn't along. His mother died years before I was born. So having Chuck as a mentor has meant a lot to me.

"Hey. I can't believe I could be running the whole program. I'm the youngest physician to ever get that chance," I admit.

"You deserve it. Running patient trials is your passion, and it shows," he replies, his voice gruff and raspy from years of smoking.

"I'm excited about the opportunity. I really hope this latest drug is going to be a game-changer," I explain because it's the truth.

"I'm sure it will, my boy. I'm sure it will."

"We should have drinks soon. I'll stop by," I say as I flip through a patient chart.

"Absolutely. I'd love that. It's so quiet here since Sally passed away," he says sadly. Chuck's wife had died a few years earlier, which was particularly sad because he had only just retired. He had a long career in both the military and as a pharmaceutical lobbyist and then finally worked as a distinguished professor at my alma mater. Sally had always said the man couldn't retire, instead, he'd just switch careers and begin again.

He was the one who encouraged me to join TOD. He's also the one who tells me the brotherhood is helpful and is doing good. But Chuck is an old-school brother. At his age, I bet he does remember a time when it was all good or at least doing less bad.

"I'll look at my calendar and find some time. You take care of yourself," I say.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“Of course, Gertie is taking good care of me,” he replies, commenting on his housekeeper.

“Good. I’m glad. She came highly recommended.”

“Be good and do great,” he says before hanging up.

I smile and try to remind myself that even if the brotherhood has a faction of people that are doing bad, there has been good to come of it. Chuck, Sebastian, and Conner are all proof of that.

* * *

My day is a cloud of work that I don’t remember. All day, every moment is filled with thoughts of Ella. Memories. Daydreams. What the fuck is wrong with me? By the time I go to pick her up at the metro, my blood is pounding in my brain and my hands tremble as I clutch the steering wheel. She’s standing at the kiss and ride waiting for me in the pouring rain. Her hair is wet, and she’s shivering as she opens the door and slides inside.

“Jesus, Ells,” I whisper as I turn on the heat and her seat warmer.

“I-I’ll be f-fine,” she says as her teeth chatter.

“Why didn’t you wait inside?”

She shrugs. “I wasn’t thinking. I mean, I was and didn’t pay attention,” she stammers

as she takes off her wet jacket. I pull out into traffic as I reach over and take her jacket, tossing it on my back seat while reaching behind me. I always keep a suit jacket in the car on the off chance I have a meeting. I remove it from the hanger and toss it at her.

“Thanks,” she mumbles as she puts it on. I glance over at her, seeing her nipples pebbled beneath her blouse before she wraps my jacket around her. Goddamn, do I miss those breasts. I look away, ignoring how much I like how she looks in my oversized clothes. I want to hate her for how badly my heart aches as I remember all the times she stole my sweatshirts and t-shirts. And how I loved removing them from her, as I worshipped her body.

I watch the road as I drive us to my house. I catch her stealing glances at me periodically, but she doesn’t speak.

“Warming up?” I ask as I pull up to my street.

She nods. “Yes, thank you.”

When I reach my driveway, I glance over to see her reaction. Her eyes widen slightly, but otherwise, she keeps her facial features neutral, which for Ella is impressive.

“Home sweet home, I state as I park in my garage and walk around the car to help her out. I hold out my hand, and she accepts it. If she noticed the security at the front of the house, she hasn’t said anything about it. She follows me into my kitchen.

“Let’s get you dry clothes,” I offer.

“I’m alright,” she assures me.

I give her a pointed look. “I call bullshit.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Fine.”

I reach out a hand to her, and she looks at it.

“I promise I won’t bite,” I add with a wink. Hard, I think to myself as she tentatively takes my hand. I lead us to my master suite. It’s on the ground floor, but with the topography of my yard, it’s two stories up from the ground.

I pull down an old college sweatshirt and some sweatpants and hand them to her. “Bathroom is through there. There’s a heated drying rack next to the shower. I’ll get us a drink.”

I turn and leave, giving her privacy as I pour us a glass of wine.

She emerges from my room. Her cheeks pinken slightly as I gaze at her. She looks just as sweet as she did eight years ago, the very first time she wore my clothing after a long night of passionate sex. She didn’t wear them for very long.

I clear my throat and hand her a glass.

“Thanks,” she says as I motion for her to take a seat on the sofa.

“So, what did you want to tell me?” I ask.

She drinks some wine and looks at me. “What do you know about Adam Blake?”

“The head of Halfagher?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“Yep. And the brother of Admiral Vance Blake.”

“Not much, why? I mean, I know they are brothers.”

“Are they...part of your fraternity?” she asks, swallowing more wine. A little bit drips on her chin and I reach out to wipe it away, bringing my finger to my lips and sucking the wine away. She watches my movement.

“Yes.”

She nods and then launches into what she’s found. All the research about sedatives by Adam and the contract that he has with the military to work on Vance’s project. She’s wondering if he was somehow involved with the drugs being brought in and if there’s more of a connection between Jared and him than we think.

When she finishes, she pauses and looks at me. “Do you think I’m crazy? Am I overthinking this?”

I pause to consider my options. I could tell her yes and it’s nothing and offer to take her home. I could tell her a watered-down version of the truth. Or I could tell her everything.

I go for the middle ground, unsure of whether I want to bring her into a dangerous situation even if she’s asking me to.

“I don’t think you’re crazy. I’m surprised it was allowed; the contract, I mean. But nepotism is rampant in these parts.”

“What about the drug? What about Tina? I think...” She trails off.

“You think what?” I frown.

She finishes her wine in a single gulp and sets it down on a side table. Staring at me, I watch her chest rise with a deep breath. Her face is void of makeup. She looks as beautiful as the first day I met her. Maybe even more beautiful.

“I think Tina was drugged with an earlier version of whatever was in that vial. I think someone is bringing it in illegally. I think that someone has government connections. I think Halfagher and maybe even Confervo are part of whatever is going on, and I think there’s a lot more to your brotherhood than frat parties and paddles.” Her words come out quickly and she doesn’t take a breath until she finishes.

“Well, damn, my star, you see a lot more than most.”

Her eyes bore into mine. Fuck, I’ve missed those eyes. I could get lost in those eyes. I have to stop staring at her. How am I going to maintain this close proximity without wanting to rip her clothes off and find out if she tastes just as good as I remember?

Chapter6

Ella

The way he’s staring at me has me squirming with need. He looks back down at his drink as he raises the cup to his lips, and I watch. I can’t look away. Those lips, God, I remember how those lips felt against my skin. I remember the things those lips could do to me.

Adjusting my legs, I look around his modern and sparsely decorated room. There’s a painting of an antique car driving down a road in the countryside. The painting looks

like it was done with spray paints. I stand and walk over to it.

Aiden always had a thing for old cars.

“You still like old cars?” I ask, trying to distract myself. My nerves are shot. Did he just tell me that everything that I was thinking is correct? I’ve had so many ideas in my head, and I thought I was crazy to think them, yet, maybe I wasn’t. That scares me.

He stands and walks over to me. We stand side by side, looking up at the painting. “I do. Would you like to see them?”

I turn my head to look up at him. “Them?”

He turns his head and looks down at me. “Them.”

I try not to grin, but he grins, and I can’t help it. His smile is infectious.

Nodding, he motions with his head for me to follow him. I comply. He leads me out a back door to another garage. He turns on the lights and I stand, completely overwhelmed by what I see. There are a dozen cars in here. Perfectly restored antique cars.

I look around slowly, taking in each one. “There are so many,” I whisper as I cautiously walk up to the closest one and run a finger over the cherry-red paint of the hood.

“That’s a 1968 Austin-Healey Sprite,” he says proudly. “Took me six months to restore it.”

I meander to the next car. “1962 Ford Thunderbird.”

I walk past a few. One looks to be in the process of being restored, and I walk over to it. “What about this one?” I ask, pointing at it.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

He smiles and I want to freeze-frame his face because it looks like the carefree young man I fell in love with nearly eight years ago. “1966 Jaguar Roadster. I just bought it last month at auction.”

A memory pops up in my head from where it’s been buried in some sort of brain file cabinet. I can recall sitting on his bed. I was reading a textbook for the class and he was flipping through a magazine about cars. He had paused on a page for a long time, so I glanced over. It was this car. I asked him about it, and he said he had always wanted one since he saw it at a car show with his grandfather years earlier. His father got in a fight with his dad, and that was the last time Aiden saw his grandfather. I wonder if they’ve spoken, reconnected ever, but I decide not to ask. Some things are better left unsaid.

“You finally got one,” I state as the memory recedes back into the recesses of my mind.

“You remember,” he replies softly as he comes up next to me, his arm grazes mine, and I swear I feel an electric current pass between us, but it’s probably just static electricity.

“I do. You were always looking at them in car magazines.”

“I could have used my father’s money to buy one, but I wanted to do it on my own. And then, I became obsessed with finding the perfect one. It took years, but I found it.” He motions to the car. “She needs to be refurbished, but when I’m done, she’ll be a beauty.”

I tuck my left foot behind my right one, balancing a bit on it. I'm not sure why I always do this. Maybe it's the years of yoga or karate, but I like standing on one leg. My dad used to call me his little flamingo.

I look over at Aiden and find him watching me. "You still stand on one leg, huh?" he says motioning to my feet. He remembers.

"I do." I look around again. "Why so many? Are you going to sell some?"

He shakes his head. "I don't have the heart to sell them."

"Won't you run out of room eventually?"

He shrugs. "I guess I can build another garage." His face suddenly morphs into a frown, and I wonder why.

"Maybe you'll find a different hobby?" I suggest.

He shakes his head. "I like rebuilding cars. You can always fix cars. They aren't like people."

I see a hint of sadness on his face. Without any thought, I reach out and take his hand in mine and squeeze it. He looks at our joined hands before slowly moving his gaze up to my arm to my chest and then my face. I see a myriad of emotions play out across his features.

"I like them," I finally say as I look around. "You did a good job. They look professionally rebuilt."

"You want to go for a ride?" he asks, pointing to the Ford.

“Sure,” I answer as he pulls free from my hand and grabs a set of keys out of a box that requires his thumbprint to open. He opens the car door for me, and I take a seat as I watch him walk around to the driver’s side. He turns the car on and revs the engine as he opens the garage door. I can’t help giggling at his boyish enthusiasm.

He peels out of the garage and down his long driveway, down the street, and out onto the main road. The rain has stopped, but the roads are still a bit wet. He carefully maneuvers us onto the parkway. I watch the cars on the road as he expertly drives us in and out of traffic. He veers off the parkway and onto a side road. I squeal in delight as the road dips down and my stomach does that little bouncing feeling like I’m on a roller coaster.

Aiden laughs and takes us down another hill. When he finally parks the car, I can see we are by the river. I can hear the water rushing and see the traffic of a highway in the distance.

“She runs like she’s new,” I say with a giant grin on my face.

“She does.” He pats the wheel.

I watch as his hand slides along it. More memories spring into my consciousness. Memories of the times we made out in cars. God, we made out in the car so many times. We couldn’t keep our hands off each other. Once we parked at a spot like this one and made love in the back seat. Until a park ranger came knocking on the car door. I blush at the memory.

His hand reaches over the console and clasps mine. I look over at him.

I wish I could put the past behind me. But it’s hard because so much has been left unsaid between us. There are loose ends everywhere. I don’t like loose ends. I want neat little bows.

“Ells...I...” He trails off as he searches my eyes. “I’m sorry for how we left things all those years ago.”

I swallow. This is happening, then. “We were young. I said some things too...” I stop because I’m not sure I’m ready to talk about it all. “I shouldn’t have left like that.”

“You shouldn’t have. You... It wasn’t fair,” he stammers, and I wonder what he was going to say.

“It wasn’t.” My agreement has him raising his eyes. “I was scared and young. I made a rash decision that changed the course of both our lives,” I admit with a shrug.

“But why?” he asks. His voice is almost pained as he speaks the question. Aiden puts up a strong front, but I know him better than that. He has a fragile inner core. He let his walls down once for me, but I’m not sure he’ll do it again.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I ponder for a moment if I should tell him, but I'm not ready for that. Not yet.

"I...was overwhelmed by everything. It was a fight-or-flight moment and I guess flight won out."

He looks at me, seeing through me. He turns the car back on and drives us home. A heavy air settles over us, neither of us speaking, both lost in the past.

When he parks the car in his garage, he looks over at me. "Why do you know so much about the fraternity?"

"I'm not stupid," I retort. "I was your girlfriend. I heard things, saw things. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out there was more going on there than your typical frat. I mean, hell, you were still so invested, and we were in med school, not undergrad."

"But you were never there. I just told you I was hanging out with frat brothers. It's not like you were around us. I mean, other than my pledge brothers."

"And do you still hang out with them?" I ask with a raised eyebrow.

I see his eyes darken. "I'm taking you home."

What. The. Fuck?

He gets out of the car, and I follow him to the other garage. He pulls a fob out of his pocket and the car unlocks. Why does he keep his car locked inside his own garage in

a neighborhood that is gated? What's with the crazy security?

He drives me home. I watch him, curious if he'll ever answer my question. When he pulls up to my apartment, he stops the car and turns it off as he puts the hazard lights on while double-parked.

"Yes. I still hang out with them. In fact, they all live on my street. Well, most of them do. But I think there's more that you aren't telling me. If you can't be truthful with me, then we're done. You ruined me once before, but I won't let you do it again."

I'm surprised by his words. I'm not sure why, but I am. I guess we aren't beating around the bush anymore. Fine, let's do this. I open the car door.

"Aiden, it's rich that you think I ruined you. Did it ever once dawn on you that maybe you ruined me? Maybe you're the reason that I haven't had one single relationship since we broke up. I'll probably die old and alone...because of you. So don't pull that 'woe is me' shit. Let's be honest. It's more about the fact that for once in your spoiled-ass rich life, you didn't get what you wanted. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I had to be the person to show you that life doesn't always end up how you wanted it to be. But fuck, maybe you needed to learn that lesson. So, you know what? You're fucking welcome. Do what you want with the information that I shared with you. I'm done here. I hope you have a great life."

I slam the car door and walk into my apartment building, proud of myself for taking a stand and not falling for his next-level charms. I give myself a proverbial high five as I take the elevator up to my penthouse. I will not be that woman. I will not go back to my ex. Jesus, what the hell was I thinking? I was over there totally falling for his boyish joy over his toys and his good looks that have only gotten better with age. I'm above that shit. I'm smarter than that.

He played me. Bringing me to his house. I'm not going to be enticed by money,

power, or prestige. He should know me better than that by now. I will not be broken again, especially not by him.

The door opens with a ping. And I step out of it and straight into a wall of human. I stumble backward, but giant hands grab my arms, steadying me. I look up and am in complete shock to find myself staring into Aiden's eyes.

Chapter 7

Aiden

If she thinks she can talk to me like that and then just leave, she has another thing coming. I will not be discarded like a forgotten toy.

"You are not going to walk out on me again. Not like that," I growl as I slowly let go of her and step back.

She straightens her shoulders and walks past me, unlocking her door and opening it. "Who says I'm walking out on you. That implies I had to walk into you. To be clear, we aren't an item, Aid. We aren't anything. Not anymore. And you sure as shit don't get to come barging into my life and demand things of me. Those days are over. I don't take orders in my personal life from you or anyone else."

"Funny, because I don't remember ever ordering you around," I retort as I follow her inside the apartment.

She groans and turns around to find me too close. She steps back away from me. "Listen, this"—she motions between us—"was a bad idea. OK? We can't be friends. We certainly can't be anything else. We're over."

"Woman, you are so fucking infuriating!" I scream as I charge toward her and take

her arms in my hands again. Walking to the nearest wall, I pin her arms above her head as I lean down and kiss her. It's rough and hard and I thrust my tongue between her surprised lips. She doesn't stop me. She's completely frozen at the moment. But this doesn't seem to stop me. I keep coaxing her. The slide of my tongue goes deeper, running along hers.

I don't know when she breaks free of her shock, but it happens in an instant. One second, she's seemingly unresponsive to my kiss, and the next she's responding with such fervor that I groan into her mouth. Fuck, this woman can kiss. I'd forgotten how good of a kisser she is. Our tongues war with each other, both of us trying to control the kiss. Both of us want to be in charge. This was always our game. We're both dominant. But I typically won. I don't know if it's because she liked to give up a bit of control in the bedroom, or if I'm truly just the stronger willed of us. But either way, she always allowed me to win. And right now, I feel like I've scored a jackpot. I've won myself a one-way ticket to paradise. I walk us to her sofa. My fingers start fumbling with the hoodie she's borrowed from me. I realize she's left her clothes at my house. I don't even care at the moment, I just want more of her. I want to expose every inch of her beautiful skin. I want to run my tongue along every curve of her body. I want to trace every scar as I remember where she got each one. I want my head to swim in the tales we'd tell each other as we'd lie naked at night, memorizing each other's bodies and sharing the stories of each of our battle wounds.

I want to reacquaint myself with how it feels to lick her pussy. Fuck me. I need her now. I'm angry and annoyed and deep down, I'm still hurt as fuck. But all I care about right now is sinking my cock into her.

I push down the sweatpants that she's rolled down around her waist. Her bare pussy greets my hand, and I groan as I slide one finger inside.

"You can say that we aren't anything, my star. But you can't erase what we were, and you sure as fuck can't erase the need that I feel between your legs," I growl as I push

a second finger inside her.

She whimpers, but her eyes flare with defiance. “This is just sex.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I give her a pointed look as I curve my pointer finger and find the spot inside her that I know will have her screaming my name. “If that’s what you need to think,” I whisper into her ear as I scissor my fingers back and forth inside of her.

Her breath hitches and her body trembles. “Don’t play with me, Estella. I know you inside”—I stroke her inner walls as she grips my arms—“and out.” I kiss her again. Feeling her tongue against mine.

“Fuck you, Aiden,” she whimpers against my lips.

“You, sweetheart, most certainly will be,” I assure her as I take one hand and release my cock, palming it. I look at the sofa behind her. The back of it is wide, maybe ten inches across. I lean her down. She looks at me perplexed as I lift her and set her down on the back of her sofa, letting her legs dangle on either side of it. I look down at her as I yank her legs free of the sweatpants and admire her pretty pussy. I once told her I could never tire of seeing it and it’s the truth.

I lean down, lifting her toned thighs in my hands, and lick her clit.

“Aiden!” she cries out as she grabs my hair. I smirk against her folds as I tongue her entrance. She tastes just as good as I remember, maybe even better. I set her one foot on the arm of the sofa and keep the other in my hand, stretching her open to me. I stand up and align myself with her entrance.

“Is your health situation the same?” I ask as I hold my cock in my other hand.

“Yes,” she whispers.

That's the only answer I need as I slam into her. We both grunt.

I'm home and it feels amazing. I don't move for a moment, allowing her body to acclimate to my girth while giving myself a minute to feel every inch of her heat around me. She can't deny how perfectly we fit together.

I start to move, pulling all the way out and slamming back into her. She grips the back of the sofa behind her head as she tries to stay on the narrow ledge. Her body is at the perfect height for me. I keep her legs spread open as I take her, over and over.

I watch as her eyes roll back in her head on a low moan. I grind my pelvis as I enter her, and I feel her body shake. She's close.

Sweat forms on my brow as I continue to move, increasing my pace. I grab her legs and put her feet up on my shoulders. The new angle allows me to go deeper.

Her muscles clamp down on me as her body goes rigid, and she screams my name.

"Don't stop!" she cries out. "Don't stop!"

I go faster, my body pistoning into hers. I watch where our bodies connect. My cock glistens with her release. It's hot as fuck. I could watch myself slamming into her tight pussy all day long and never tire of it.

It's when her body clenches one last time, clamping down so hard that I struggle to move against her, that I erupt.

"Ella!" I growl as I empty into her, pushing deeper and leaving my pulsing cock buried inside her. She clamps her muscles around me, keeping me there.

Her big brown eyes open and look up at me. There are so many emotions playing out

on her face. I'm not sure what she's thinking. I slowly pull out of her, watching my release drip out of her is as hot as I remember it.

She glares at me and clamps her legs together, obstructing my view as she sits up and hops off the back of her sofa.

"No," she says sternly. "You did not just mark me. I'm not yours anymore, Aiden Thomas."

I lean over her, looking down into her eyes as I place my hand at the base of her neck to feel her pulse. "You never stopped being mine," I whisper through clenched teeth.

Her mouth opens and then closes and then opens again before she shuts it and glares at me.

"Tell me I'm wrong, my star," I say to her, purposefully using my nickname for her, the one I only used when it was just the two of us.

Her lips form a straight line. I can see the inferno raging in her eyes. She's ready for a fight. I know we have to have one. It's coming like a herd of runaway horses, and nothing is going to stop it. It's years in the making.

But she surprises me when she steps away and leans down, pulling the sweatpants back on. "You should go," she says quietly as she motions to the door.

I don't know what to make of this. Our norm is to have a fight followed by amazing makeup sex. This...is a different side of Ella. For a moment, I wonder if we are beyond repair. But I won't let myself believe that. Seeing her recently, and then tonight confirms what I long suspected. We have unfinished business. I don't know what went wrong in the past, but I sure as fuck will be finding out. Tonight though, I'll let her have this small win. Because I'm not interested in winning this battle. I'm

in this to win the entire damn war.

Chapter8

Ella

He stands before me,his hair disheveled, his shirt partially unbuttoned. He looks freshly fucked. How did I let things get this out of hand?

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I went to him. I inserted myself in whatever fucked-up situation he's gotten himself into. I let him fuck me in my own apartment. Shit. My clothes are still at his house.

What am I doing? I need him to leave. I need to get my head on straight. I have my own shit to figure out, I can't be dealing with his.

"I'll leave, but this isn't over," he says as he turns to go to my door. He pauses with his hand on the doorknob. "I meant what I said, Ella. Whatever is between us, is still there."

With that, he opens the door and leaves. I continue standing in the middle of my living room completely confused. And quite frankly, not wanting to face the facts.

Eventually, I will myself to take a shower and wash off his smell. His sweatpants smell of his laundry detergent. The same one he's always used.

I take a long shuddering breath once I'm under the hot water falling from my rain showerhead. I try to still my overworking mind, but it's filled with a cascade of memories that won't stop. I hurry to get out of the shower, determining that it's not going to help me by staying in here.

Once I get into my own clothes, I sit on the edge of my bed. It's late, I should go to sleep, but I can't in this restless state. So instead, I go to my home office and start researching.

I look up the people I know in his life. I find out what they are currently doing. I look up his mentors. I look up his father. I look up his friends' parents. I continue

searching, for what, I don't know.

As the sun rises over the Washington Monument in the distance, I know one thing for sure. Every single one of his frat brothers holds a position of power. Their collective worth is staggering. They run...everything. Something about that doesn't sit well with me.

I pour myself a coffee and look at the screen. It's a photo of the president, Jason Lewis, yet another TOD brother. I know fraternities and Greek life, in general, is about networking, but this, this is beyond that. I begin to wonder if Aiden's advancements in his career are linked to his status as a TOD alumnus. Did he earn it? Or was he placed there? And why would someone want him working at the National Institutes of Health?

I pause as something I never considered dawns on me. If my boss was TOD, and his brother was as well, then the drug I have in my lab right now, may be being used for way more powerful reasons than I previously thought.

I sit and stare at my second screen, which has information on the pharmaceutical companies involved, Confervo and Halfagher. They want to merge. But why? There's the obvious, but I can't help thinking there's more to it than that.

I crawl into bed. I need a few hours to sleep. All of this is becoming a jumbled mess in my mind. I'm missing something, something key.

* * *

Dreams are strange and powerful. I wake with a start, sitting straight up in my bed. The embers of what I had been experiencing a moment ago start to die away, but one thing remains clear. Aiden. I was dreaming about Aiden. I fall back onto my pillow with a huff. What am I doing? Every time I'm around him, I lose my mind. I go from

playing it safe to throwing caution to the wind. He brings out some crazy fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants self that I've kept on lockdown for years. I've spent most of my adult life trying to plan and be calculated. College. Med school. Navy. Everything was wrapped up in a neat package until the day I walked into that summer clinic and took a seat next to Aiden Thomas. He made me see for the first time, really see the world. Until that day, it was like I was going through life with blinders on and then he took them off, and I suddenly realized how much I'd been missing. When I left him, it nearly broke me, but I managed to survive by immersing myself in my work. My work became my life. Maybe, just maybe, I chose the wrong path. I haven't cried in a long time. I honestly wasn't sure I could, but I feel a tear well in my eye and then spill down my cheek, followed by another and another. I grab a tissue and wipe my eyes. I can't break down. I need to be strong. I need to figure out what's going on, but I can't keep playing the lava game where Aiden is the lava. I'm going to have to force myself to figure it out, only I'm not sure I'm ready to do that. Should I tell him the things I've kept from him? I look toward my nightstand. Perhaps it's time.

I open my blinds. It's daytime, but I have no idea what time. I reach for my phone and groan when I realize I left it at Aiden's. Damn it!

I find the time on the laptop's screen. I slept in late. Shit.

I crawl out of bed and stumble to my shower. I need to go to his house. It's the last thing I want to do, but I need my phone.

I quickly dress after showering and head to my front door. As I pull it open, I freeze and look down at the floor in front of me. My phone and the burner phone he gave me sit neatly atop my clothes which are folded. Even my coat is there.

There's a small note card on top of the phone. Looking around, I slowly lift the card to read it. The front of it has a fancy monogram. AFT. Aiden Franklin Thomas. I open the note card, my hand shaking slightly.

My star,

I knew you'd want your things this morning. I don't know what happened between us all those years ago. There are more things to discuss. You know it and I know it. I'll be waiting for your call.

Your Aid

My Aid. I swallow back the emotions that threaten to erupt again. He can't be mine.

I pick up my clothes and turn my phone on. It's fully charged. I roll my eyes. Of course, he even charged it. I check my messages.

"Hey, Ella. You left some lab samples to finish. I just wanted you to know that they are done. The emailed results should be in your inbox. I wasn't sure what you wanted me to do with the sample though. I need to use the machine later," Michelle Schneider says. Michelle is my youngest lab tech. Straight out of the Naval Academy, she interned with me, and I requested that she be stationed here. She's brilliant and is going for her master's degree.

I press call.

"Hey, it's Ella. Just leave them on my desk. I'll be in shortly. I had some admin to do this morning, but I'm done and heading in now," I explain as I grab my purse and keys. I decided to run one last diagnostic on the sample from Aiden. It's not what he asked for, but I'm curious about it.

"Cool. Also, Admiral Blake was in here like fifteen minutes ago. He asked for you, so maybe call him?"

Shit. "Yeah, sure. Thanks, Michelle."

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I hang up and dial my boss as I walk toward my car.

“Commander Garcia,” he answers.

“Yes, Admiral?”

“You weren’t in the lab at oh seven hundred today.” His voice is disapproving, and I feel the anger rising in me. He can be a real hard-ass, but I also don’t give him much to complain about normally. Fucking Aiden. I would be on time if he hadn’t been such a dick.

“Yes, sir. I was feeling unwell this morning. I’m on my way in now,” I reply, hoping he doesn’t prod further.

“You should report that, then, so I know,” he chides.

“Of course, sir. I’ll make sure to note it. Can I help you with anything?”

“I was looking to see if you have your weekly report ready yet. I have a meeting this afternoon and wanted to present our latest information,” he says.

“I can have that for you in two hours, Admiral,” I assure him.

“I’ll expect it in my inbox then,” he replies and hangs up.

I groan. Admiral Blake is difficult to work with, always has been. If I didn’t get free rein to do my own side research projects, I would have never taken this gig.

I mutter under my breath as I walk to my car and drive the short distance to my office. By the time I get to my desk, I'm in a foul mood.

I take the elevators down to the bowels of the Pentagon, and when I reach my office, I march straight back to my desk with a muttered "hello" to Michelle who's looking at samples under a microscope.

I plop down and boot up my computer. I get to work on the report first. The admiral has been wanting us to run labs on the latest samples of the sedative he's developing in conjunction with the pharmaceutical company. He wants his own data on it.

I spend the next ninety minutes putting together graphs and making the report look perfect. I hit send, feeling proud of myself for putting together such a thorough data analysis summary in a short turnaround.

Michelle pops her head into my office. "Hey, I didn't want to bother you, you looked busy. Did you get the emailed report?"

I rub my forehead. "Oh, uh," I stammer as I open my inbox. "Yep. It's here. Thanks."

"Great. I figured you needed it. The admiral was muttering about some report he needed, but I didn't know what you'd been working on, so I played dumb."

I give her a small smile. "It's fine. I just sent it," I say absentmindedly until I process her words. She turns to leave. "Michelle?"

"Yeah?" she asks, as she spins back around to face me.

"Why did you think I needed the sample data for the report?"

"Oh," she says frowning, "because...I mean, the data...it's." She pauses. "It is just

another variation of the sedative sample, right?”

I neutralize my features, trying to remain calm, but inside, I’m freaking out. “Oh, right. Thanks again.”

Her frown disappears and she smiles. “Sure. No worries. We got some new samples in this morning. Should I start processing them?”

I nod. “Yes, please.”

She turns back around and heads into the laboratory.

I quickly pull up my email. I read through the information, and with each word and each line, I feel my pulse racing faster. Fuck. I need to talk to Aiden. Now.

Chapter9

Aiden

I’m sitting in Vivienne’s safe house, staring at the wall she’s posted photos and string on. Conner was not kidding. This place looks like she works at a police department from twenty years ago.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“What exactly am I looking at?” I question as I run a finger over a red string connecting a photo of my father with a photo of Conner’s dad.

“Well,” she begins as she places her hands on her hips, “the red strings connect who we know is an elite. The yellow strings connect the council members. The green strings connect TOD members. The blue strings connect council members to other people that aren’t TOD, but may in some way be connected. The orange strings connect family members.”

I stare at all the strings. It’s dizzying.

“And the colored dots?” I ask.

“Oh, right, uh, those are showing who we know might be involved in all the Confervo and Halfagher stuff.”

Conner is sitting on the bed, his back against the headrest, his long legs crossed at the ankles. “We have theories,” he says to Sebastian and me.

Alexis smirks. “Not theories, facts.”

Sebastian wraps his arms around her and rests his head on top of hers. I want to vomit. I’m happy for them, but I can’t help feeling bitter as I watch my two closest friends with their significant others.

“And what are these facts?” I ask.

“Well, one, we know that the elite is most definitely involved with whatever illegal activities are going on. But we don’t think all of the council is. I mean, you three aren’t,” Vivienne points out as she motions to all of us.

“OK,” I reply slowly.

“So, what if we only had to expose the ‘bad’ guys, and we leave the rest,” Alexis suggests. “We...clean house. A brotherhood isn’t bad by definition, but certain people have made it bad.”

Sebastian kisses the top of her head. I look away, focusing back on Vivienne.

“Then, we need to be sure we know all the players,” I state.

Vivienne nods her agreement. “Agreed. We know your three fathers, Jared, Adam, and Vance Blake, but we’re missing at least two elite members, and potentially some others who are on the council and may be involved.”

“Have you made progress on identifying them?” I turn to look at Alexis. “Have you remembered anything else?”

Alexis shakes her head. “No. I wish I could, but I haven’t been able to recall anything else.”

“We need to figure out the rest of the people involved,” Conner says as he puts his hands behind his head.

The way Vivienne looks at him has me wanting to step outside and give them privacy. Jesus, the chemistry between those two former enemies is fucking intense.

“I just feel like we’re missing some key links,” Alexis states as she stares at the wall.

Everyone nods in agreement.

My phone buzzes, and I see a text from the burner phone that I gave Ella.

Ella: We need to talk. Today.

Me: I have to be at my office.

Ella: I'll meet you there. I can make up an excuse. We do get some supplies from there, so I'll just make it so we ran out of something, and I'll go pick it up myself.

Me: OK. Meet me in medical ward four, room eight twenty-seven.

Ella: OK.

I put my phone back in my pocket. Everyone is staring at me.

"It was Ella. Just checking in on the sample report to make sure I have everything I need."

I hate lying, but if Ella wants to talk about us, then I want to keep that to myself for a bit longer.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Sebastian and Conner give me knowing looks. If Vivienne and Alexis weren't present, then I would be getting grilled about this.

"I've gotta run. I have a lot of work to do today," I state as I turn to leave. I stop at the door realizing we haven't finished game-planning. "Do we have a plan for how we are going to finish figuring out who is involved?"

Vivienne nods. "I'll keep digging for now, and so will Alexis. If you all could maybe discreetly ask around the other council members. Feel them out to see if they might know anything."

I shrug. "Shit," I say, running my hand through my hair. "That's gonna be tough. The three of us should discuss what we want to ask and how and who," I add, looking from Conner to Sebastian.

"We'll talk later," Conner says with a slight smirk. Asshole. I know he wants to talk about Ella.

I nod and leave. It doesn't take me long to get to my work. I make my way to the room. I know it's empty because this ward was just shut down for renovations, only some materials are delayed, so construction doesn't start for two more weeks.

When I get to the exam room, I peek inside and see her sitting on the exam table. I close the door behind me as a rush of memories floods my mind. We once had sex in an exam room. It was hot as fuck. And we nearly got caught by an attending physician.

I can tell that she remembers too when our eyes meet and she blushes, her hand gripping the edge of the exam table just above where the stirrups pull out.

She clears her throat, seemingly trying to get her wits about her. “I ran some additional tests,” she says quietly. I stop in front of her and she gazes up at me. I can see the worry in her eyes, and I want to do something to stop it. My desire to protect her is as strong as ever. It never waned. I kept tabs on her from afar, but as with most military assignments, I didn’t always know where she was. And I honestly was surprised when she ended back up in D.C. I would have found out eventually but seeing her again at the conference unleashed all the feelings that I had locked away for so long. And now, the floodgates have been fully opened.

“What tests are those?” I ask as I step in between her legs.

She swallows and looks down at my tented pants. I don’t even try to hide it. She bites her lower lip before speaking again. “The sample you gave me...it’s a version of the sedative drug that Admiral Blake has contracted Confervo and Halfagher to work on. I think it’s why they want to merge. If they are one company, then it makes things easier. It’s a drug that can be delivered through a microneedle system. I think this drug is being used for a lot more than just drugging some girls.”

She looks up at me to see my reaction.

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“Hear me out. Admiral Blake somehow got his brother, the CEO of Halfagher, a military contract to work on a special sedative that essentially sedates certain parts of your brain but allows you to do normal daily functions. Basically, you could do your job without thinking about your traumas or feelings. You are essentially like a puppet. You have no feelings, no reactions to things, you just do things. They even have been testing one that blocks pain as well. So, what if they were already using

this drug, and this is just another mechanism to make money off it.”

“Vivienne already thinks Adam and Vance are involved,” I state.

She nods. “Vivienne is right. They have to be. I want to help. I’ll go down with the ship if this ever is revealed. I’ve been doing all the lab work for the admiral. I need to help. I have to undo what I’ve done.”

I cup her cheek. “It’s not your fault, Ells. You didn’t know.”

Her eyes glisten a little, but she pulls herself together. “I know. But I want to help.”

“OK, my star. You can help, just know you’re risking your life to do it. And if I’m being honest, I’m not sure I want your life risked, not for this or for anything else.”

She relaxes her head against my hand as I bring my thumb up to rub her bottom lip. “I can protect myself, Aid.”

I lean down and plant a kiss on her lips. “I know you can. But that doesn’t mean I like it. Things are going to get...turbulent...and I need to focus. I don’t want you caught in the crosshairs.”

“I can protect myself,” she says again.

Her hands dig into the exam table as I run my thumb over her top lip. I don’t know if I need the connection or to help alleviate my stress, but right now, I want to fuck her on this exam table.

“Pants off, Commander,” I say with a smirk.

Her gaze flies up to meet mine. I motion to her pants. I can see her weighing her

options. Will she stay or will she go? It's a pivotal moment, but I think she needs it as much as I do.

Slowly, she stands, unbuttons her pants, pushing them and her panties down. She removes her socks and shoes. And then unbuttons her top, taking it and her bra off and placing all her clothes on the chair in the corner. She stands completely naked before me, like some sort of goddess.

I know she knows what I'm thinking. She smirks as she opens a drawer. I'm surprised they haven't cleared out the rooms yet, but I guess that process got delayed too because inside it are hospital gowns. She puts one on, tying it in the front, and lies down on the exam table.

"Good girl," I whisper as I lean down and pull the stirrups out of the table. I push them as far out as they can go. "Feet up, Miss Garcia. I'll need to examine you."

She rolls her eyes but complies with me. The hospital gown falls away, so I grab a paper blanket from a drawer and place it over her thighs, while I take a seat in the small circular rolling stool and wheel myself in between her legs. Her pretty pussy is on full display for me.

"Miss Garcia," I tsk. "I do believe you're wet." I run a single finger up and down her slit and she whimpers. "I'll have to do an internal exam. Let your legs fall open for me."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

She complies as I rub my fingers over her and slide them inside. She gives a small moan. I watch my fingers move in and out of her. I know she can only see the top of my head. I slowly lean forward and lick and suck her clit.

“Aiden!” she cries out softly. Her cry only makes me suck harder and move my fingers faster.

“I’ll need you wetter for the next part of this exam, Miss Garcia,” I whisper against her clit as I curve my fingers and add a third one, spreading her open for me. I flick my fingertips over her G-spot, scissoring them back and forth as fast as I can in the tight space.

“Oh my God! I’m going to come!” she screams, this time loud enough that I chuckle. I’m glad no one else is in this wing. Her body trembles and then she goes rigid as her release gushes out of her, coating my fingers. I slow down until her body relaxes. I pull them out and put them in my mouth, sucking off all her essence before I unzip my pants. I don’t bother removing my white coat or any of my clothing. I let my boxer briefs and pants fall to the ground because as wet as she is, she’d most definitely leave marks on them if I didn’t.

I grip my cock and stroke it before rubbing it up and down over her inner folds. I push the head into her opening, watching as it spreads around the tip of my cock. It’s hot as fucking hell. I keep doing this, torturing both of us.

“Please,” she begs, her voice coming out breathy and desperate.

“Since you asked so nicely, Miss Garcia,” I say as I run my erection up and down her

folds once more, coating it in her wetness before I line it back up with her opening and thrust inside.

We both release a groan as I fill her completely. I grab the sides of the table and I begin to move. But I want her at a different angle, a deeper angle.

I pull out and she whimpers.

“What are you doing?” she asks as her eyes fly open. I walk around the table and press a button, raising the back of it until she’s nearly sitting up. When I have her positioned how I want her, I walk back between her legs. Her body is nearly folded in half, her legs spread wide open for me. Her pussy glistens from my ministrations. I grab her thighs as I step between them. This time, my cock is so hard and wet from her. I don’t need to hold it as I move forward, it slowly sinks inside her. I watch it disappear into her heat that’s now gripping me tightly. I stop moving for a moment, letting myself just feel her. My body shudders at the intensity of her inner walls clamping around me.

“Move,” she commands.

I open my eyes and look down at her. “Let your doctor take care of you,” I scold as I give a small thrust. She moans but doesn’t look away from me as I adjust the stirrups, raising them a bit while I keep my cock buried inside her. It’s a bit tricky, but there’s no way I’m leaving her body right now.

Once her feet are elevated a bit, I grab the exam table behind her head and thrust hard. She grunts. She can’t move and I like that. I’m in total control, and right now, I need total control in some element of my life.

I start fucking her harder and faster, pulling out nearly all the way and then slamming back inside. Her eyes begin to close after a few moments.

“Fuck! You’re so deep, Aid,” she whispers. “Don’t stop.”

I smirk. I know my woman and she most definitely should know that I won’t stop until she’s screaming my name so loud that security might come to check this room.

The table makes noises as I move. She’s crying out, being her loud self and I love it. I want her to feel good. I want to bring her pleasure. If the other night was an angry fuck. And the last night was a reconciliation fuck, then today is a reconnection fuck. And right now, we are completely connected.

“I need more,” she says.

“Don’t worry, my star. I know what you need,” I say in a low voice as I reach my hand below my pistoning dick. My index finger feels for her puckered hole, and I slowly gather her wetness on it before pushing inside just a little.

“Yes!” she cries out. I can feel her body tensing, her orgasm coming hard and fast as she screams my name at the top of her lungs, her entire body convulsing as she comes for long seconds, her internal muscles undulating so hard that I can no longer hold back. On a grunt and moan, I spill inside of her as I feel my finger pressing against the bottom of my erection, separated only by a thin membrane. I thrust a few more times, letting my seed coat me as I slide back and forth, my body continuing to shudder as hers continues to milk me.

Chapter10

Ella

I can feel his release dripping down his cock as it runs out of me. I’m still full of him. He slowly removes his finger from my ass and then his cock from my pussy. Grabbing some tissues, he hands them to me and helps me get my nearly numb feet

out of the stirrups.

“I hope you found your exam today to be pleasant,” he says with a smirk as he helps wipe me clean.

I roll my eyes, but my body is still trembling. I haven’t come that hard...since before I left him. My legs dangle off the edge of the table and he swipes his finger between them, slowly sinking inside again.

“Is it bad that I want to go again?” he asks as he leans forward and presses a kiss to my lips. I glance down at his cock, which is already springing back to life.

“You always did have amazing stamina,” I state as I turn around and lower the back of the exam table. I’m on my knees on the table, and before I know it, he lowers the table and pulls me back to the edge and plunges inside me.

We both groan at the sudden intrusion. With this angle, I have some control, I can push back against him. “Again,” I whimper.

I know he’s smirking, I don’t need to look and I don’t even care. I feel his finger at my back entrance again and he pushes it inside. I love feeling full of him like this. I reach down and flick my clit as he moves faster. Our bodies slap against each other as we both chase another orgasm.

“Faster!” I cry out. He complies. The sounds in the room become louder. The slick slapping of our bodies echoes in the space. And then as I get closer, he pushes his finger a little farther inside me and angles his cock as he drives into me. And that’s all it takes. I cry out again, my voice hoarse from screaming. I feel myself clamp down on his erection and he quickly follows me over the edge.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Leaning over me, he plants a small kiss on my back before he pulls out and wipes me clean. “Here,” he says as he pulls on his pants and underwear and hands me my clothes. He helps me dress, lovingly caressing my body as he holds my panties and then pants for me to step into. It’s intimate and I don’t know how to feel about it.

Once he’s gotten me dressed, he tosses the offending dirty items in a bin and looks at me. “We have a lot more to discuss, but not here.”

I bite my lip and nod in agreement. What am I doing? I’ve just had sex with Aiden again, and we haven’t even spoken about the past yet. I’m afraid of the talk we’ll need to have. I’m afraid I’m falling back in love with him, and when I tell him the truth, I’ll lose him all over again. My eyes well with tears.

“Hey,” he says as he steps forward and cups my face. “What’s this?” He wipes a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

I shake my head. “I...nothing. I’m just...this is a lot.”

“I know, star.” He clenches his jaw, and his eyes darken. “I’m so fucking sorry that I got you involved in all of this.”

I put my hand on his chest, feeling his beating heart beneath his shirt. Somehow, the steady rhythm of it soothes me.

“I’m not sorry.” I look up at him. “I’m not sorry that you’re back in my life, regardless of how.”

He swallows and his tight facial features relax slightly as he caresses my jawline and pulls his hand away. “We need to be careful. From here out, use only the burner phone unless it’s part of your normal routine. Turn off your phone when—”

I place a finger to his lips. “I know. You don’t have to mansplain this to me.”

He grins beneath my finger and kisses it. “Sorry, I can’t help it. I know you’re capable.”

“Good, don’t forget, I’ve been trained to kick asses of men larger than you,” I say with a smile as I pull my finger away.

He grips my hips and pulls me against him, leaning down until his mouth is a hair away from mine. “I’d like to see you try, star,” he whispers, a smirk replacing the smile on his face.

“So cocky,” I chide.

Shrugging, he presses a quick kiss to my lips. “We should go. I’m assuming you are due back at work, and I have my own research program to run.”

I pause at his words. I know about his recent promotion.

“What?” he asks, sensing my unease.

“Aid, have you ever...never mind,” I stammer as I decide not to ask.

His hand comes up to my face again and he tips my chin up until our eyes meet. “What? You can ask me anything, Ells.”

I swallow my unease. “You’re young.”

He laughs. “I know. I mean, I guess I am still young.”

“No, I mean, you’re young to be running a whole program.”

He pulls his hand back a bit. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sure you earned it. I mean, you’re brilliant and all, but it’s just...unusual, don’t you think?”

He frowns. “Are you implying I didn’t earn it?”

“No,” I insist as I hold up my hands defensively. “Not at all. I just...you said I can tell you anything.”

He clenches his jaw again. “I didn’t think insults would be part of the ‘anything.’”

“I’m not trying to insult you. I swear it. I...I’m young to be in charge of my lab as well. Why do you think we are in charge of projects like this at our age? And Sebastian, as soon as it was legally possible, won an election for Congress and now he’ll probably win a Senate seat. And Conner, he’s running a powerful lobbying firm and he’s just barely thirty. Think about it.”

Aiden steps back and runs a hand through his hair. He looks at me, and I can’t read him. I’m not sure if he’s furious I said this out loud or if he’s furious that he’s never considered it.

“Shit, Ells. You probably aren’t wrong. These guys are in it for the long game. I mean, doors open for us. I know that. It’s part of being in the brotherhood. But I never considered how much every aspect of our lives would be predetermined without our knowledge.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. “You seriously never considered this?”

“I...” He trails off and frowns. “Not in the way you are implying, no.”

I shake my head and pull on my ponytail. “You know what, Aid, for some really smart men, you all are pretty fucking stupid at times.”

He glares at me. “Watch it, star.”

I roll my eyes and throw my hands up in frustration. “Or what? Seriously, Aid. What? What can you possibly do to me that you haven’t already done?” I feel the tears threaten again. He has no idea what he’s done.

I don’t realize I’m shaking until his hands come to rest on my upper arms. “Breathe, star. Take a breath. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you need to calm down. Please.”

I close my eyes because honestly, looking at him is too fucking painful right now. “When in the history of psychology has ‘calm down’ ever actually worked when spoken to someone upset?”

I open my eyes and find him fighting a grin. “Never.”

“Then, don’t fucking use it,” I say in a low voice through gritted teeth.

“Fair enough. I’m sorry...what you said makes sense. I guess I have a hard time accepting that all the hard work isn’t the reason I’m succeeding, but you’re not

wrong, star.”

We look at each other, unspoken words passing between us as he lowers his hands and steps back.

“We can talk about us later. Get to work,” he says after a beat.

I raise an eyebrow at his order.

“Please, get to work?” he grumbles.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. “You sound like the beast,” I say, referencing one of my favorite love stories.

He glares at me. “Please tell me that you didn’t just refer to me as a cartoon character that’s not even a man.”

I press a finger to his chest. “He is a man. Remember?”

He leans down until his breath is hot against my earlobe. “I remember, star.” I feel goose bumps emerge on my skin. The last time we watched that film together was a very intimate night, to say the least.

“I’ll call you later,” I reply as I step around him and put my hand on the doorknob. His hand comes out and covers mine as he leans back down to speak into my ear.

“We will be talking later. No running away from it, star. Understood?”

I roll my eyes at his alpha persona. I turn around and give him a sugary smile. “Yes, daddy.”

His eyes darken and he presses his forehead back to mine. “Oh, star. Don’t play with fire. You’ll get burned.”

“Maybe I like to live dangerously,” I reply with a wink as I pull the door open. He steps back and slowly follows me down the empty hallway.

When we reach the door to the stairwell, I turn to him. “Be careful,” I say, meaning it.

“You too, star. You too,” he murmurs as he leans down and kisses me once more. This kiss is slower, his lips tracing over mine as if he’s memorizing them again. When he pulls away, he reaches out and twirls the end of my ponytail between his index finger and thumb. “I’ll talk to you later.”

With a nod, I head downstairs as he turns to go upstairs. I’m not sure how to process everything that just happened, but now my guarded heart is worried about what’s to come when we do talk again. It’s one thing to deal with heartbreak alone, it’s another to deal with it together.

Chapter 11

Aiden

I walk into my office. For the first time in my career, I question the title on the placard under my name. Do I deserve it? Yes. Did I earn it? Maybe.

I can’t say her theory is bad. I also question why none of us have considered it before. I decide it’s time for the three of us to talk, alone.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Me: We need to talk. Just us three. Meet me at the bench at two.

Sebastian: Can we make it three? I have a meeting.

Conner: Three thirty?

Me: Fuck.

Conner: Tiny house for happy hour?

Me: Fine.

I sit down to go over results from a recent drug trial. I half pay attention to my work for the rest of the day. By the time I get home, I feel like the day has been ten days long.

I pour myself a glass of bourbon and walk over to Conner's tiny house in the back of his property.

Walking inside, I find Conner and Sebastian already sitting on the couch and chair. I sit down on a long bench along the front wall.

"What's up?" Conner asks.

"Have you guys ever thought about how we ended up in our exact career places?"

Sebastian groans. "Yes. My fucking family legacy."

Conner shrugs. “Not really. I mean, we got what we wanted. Why?”

“What if...our current positions were planned?”

“What do you mean? It’s what we want,” Conner asks as he leans back on the sofa and puts a hand on the back of it.

“I mean. What if they want me running my program? What if people in our lives were put in certain places so we could be watched and used for certain purposes for the elite?”

“You’re saying that you think our fathers have ‘arranged’ for us to be where we are in our careers at this very moment to get what they need?”

I nod and swallow. “Yes.”

“But, why?” Conner asks. “I mean, what are they getting out of it?”

“I thought about that the entire way home today. We all know we got our initial jobs thanks to the brotherhood. That’s a given. But our current positions and successes all being tied to it, it is a bitter pill to swallow. I agree. We work hard. However, I started thinking. Why would my father encourage me to specialize in anesthesia? And why encourage me to work in the research side of things? And why at NIH? Up until recently, he had monthly dinners with me. And they were always about what I was working on. He wanted to know the latest information. Doesn’t that seem...suspect considering what we know now? And, Sebastian, yours is less hidden. Of course, your dad wants the family legacy passed on to you. He wants someone sitting on that Transportation Committee. The bill, your big bill, the one that Conner is helping you with that Conner’s dad wants in place. If the regulations can be lifted on details relating to certain classifications in shipping manifestos, then that gives them greater leverage in bringing in these illegal drugs. We’ve been played.”

Sebastian and Conner just stare at me. Neither one speaks for long seconds after I finish.

Finally, Conner clears his throat. “Well, fuck. That all makes a lot of sense to me. But then, what the fuck are they doing with these drugs. What’s with the girls and the military stuff? What are we missing?”

I shake my head. “That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?”

“What about the other brothers? We need to start having conversations. I can talk to Aaron and Declan,” Sebastian says.

“Bradley’s lobbying firm sometimes works with mine. I can reach out to him,” Conner says.

“What about Kevin? We don’t have any real need for an FBI agent,” I state.

“Well, maybe I can figure out if there’s something in his area of expertise he can debrief me on,” Sebastian offers.

“I can deal with Paul and Paxton. I’ll just say I’m curious about some legal stuff with my mom’s estate. Not a total lie,” I say.

“What about Jason?” Conner says.

“Maybe I can get a meeting through Aaron?” Sebastian suggests. As we start talking about our pledge brothers, I begin to wonder if they were placed in careers as well. It would make sense. It’s also unsettling to think any of them could be behind what’s happening. I know we can’t rule it out yet, but having to speak to them like this leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“And the others?” I ask, inquiring about our other TOD brothers who are on the council but that we don’t deal with regularly, and also weren’t part of our pledge class or inner circle.

“We each take three or four. We can just reach out about a reunion or something for TOD. Maybe we can get Chuck to try to put together a happy hour. We haven’t had one in a long time. Any word from Bryce on the intel he’s supposed to get us?” I ask.

They nod. “We need to talk to everyone over the next few days. And no, no word from Bryce yet, but he said it could take some time,” Conner says.

“The storm’s coming. I haven’t spoken to my dad since last week. That’s...unusual,” Sebastian states with a grim look on his face.

“We all know I’ve been trying to track Theo down for weeks now,” Conner says with a huff.

“Monthly dinner is supposed to be next week,” I say with a shrug.

“How can you stand it?” Conner says. “Seriously, cut the umbilical cord. He’s pure evil.”

“I think we’re all about to do that, Pound,” Sebastian says dryly.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have actually had a normal, loving family?” I ponder.

“I wouldn’t know normal or loving if it hit me in the face,” Conner mutters as he sips

his drink.

“I’m sure Viv can show you that,” Sebastian says with a sly smile.

“Fuck off, Congressman,” Conner retorts. “Maybe Alexis is chilling that heart of ice.”

Sebastian glares at him. “Alexis is not a topic for discussion.”

Conner gives him a pointed look before turning to me. “But what about Ella? Now that’s an interesting topic of conversation, don’t you think so, Bastian?”

Sebastian leans against the arm of the chair and smirks. “Now on that topic, I can agree.”

“Fuck both of you. I’m not discussing it. She’s helping us out. End of story.”

“Is she ‘helping’ you out, too?” Conner questions.

Now it’s my turn to glare. “We are completely professional.”

“What type of profession would that be? The world’s oldest?” Conner quips.

I give him a look. “Listen, I don’t know what the future holds for Ella and me. We’d have to talk through a lot of shit before anything could even be considered.”

“What did happen between you two?” Sebastian asks. I can see Conner give him a look and I know they have most definitely discussed my love life or lack thereof before.

“Like I’ve said. We fought. She left. And she never came back.”

“What the hell was the fight about?” Conner asks.

I shrug. “Shit, I barely remember. It was so long ago. I think I said something about never wanting kids and she was all offended, and it just spiraled. You remember how we were. I mean, shit, we’re passionate as fuck. I just figured it was another moment of Ella just being Ella and she would come back after she cooled off, and we would work it out.”

“That’s weird, man,” Sebastian says. “Because that’s what I would have thought, too.”

“Well, it didn’t play out that way,” I state as I finish my drink. “I should head back. I need to work out and finish sending some emails.”

“Fine, I think we have our game plan, for now anyway,” Conner says.

“Aiden?” Sebastian starts. I turn to look at him. “Don’t write her off yet. It sounds like whatever happened between you two, it’s not over yet.”

Fucking Sebastian. He’s a Romeo at heart. Always has been.

“Noted. I’ll see you two later,” I say as I head out the door.

Chapter12

Ella

When I arrive backat the Pentagon, I'm surprised to see Michelle is not working. Instead, she's talking to one of our security guards.

"What's going on?" I ask as I look from her to the guard.

I can see she's been crying.

"I was just taking a walk on my break, and someone started following me. I didn't think anything of it, but then as I turned onto a lesser populated part of the path, he sped up. I only saw it because I had on those sunglasses you bought me for my birthday that stick out farther and act like a rearview mirror. I started running. He started running. I bolted through the brush and made it back onto the main path. I completely lucked out when a group of officers going for a jog passed by. I joined them and managed to get back up here without him seeing me."

She takes a deep breath.

"What did he look like, Michelle?" I ask.

"I really couldn't tell. He had on a baseball cap and sunglasses. Maybe six feet, medium build, light skin. I think his hair was brown. I honestly really couldn't tell much."

“Well, I’m glad you’re alright. I wouldn’t go jogging or walking alone. There have been so many abductions lately,” I point out, and she nods.

“I know. I just figured...it was the middle of the day, and I wasn’t on some obscure part of the path.”

“I know. You shouldn’t have to worry about such things. Are you filing a report?” I ask as I turn to the guard.

“Yes, Commander. I’m taking her statement now,” the young man says.

“Very good. Michelle, why don’t you take off the rest of the day. Go home and rest.”

Her eyes widen.

I hold up a hand. “I just mean for the afternoon. You can come back in the morning. OK. I need you focused, and I completely understand how hard it is to focus after something like that happens.”

“Right. Thanks,” she mumbles, her cheeks flushing.

I want to hug her. I know how that would look, so I refrain. I head back into my office with the supplies that I had to gather. I nod to another lab tech, a guy named Andy, as I head into my office.

I sit down, trying to process what just happened to Michelle and what just happened between Aiden and me. What a fucking day.

An idea dawns on me. I’ve been adding files to the admiral’s drive. I wonder if the short time period that he gave me access to his secured server has expired.

I log in and pretend to add an updated version of the report I had done to his drive. And it lets me. Once I am in, I look around at the other folders. I don't dare to open any of them, not from this computer.

Another idea hits me. I should check to see if his computer can download my report.

I walk to his office and find his secretary heading out the door. Marcia and I go way back.

"Hey," she says as she gathers some papers. "What brings you to these parts?"

"Oh, is the admiral here?"

"No, he's in a meeting."

"Oh." I pretend to be disappointed.

"Why?" she asks as she stands with several folders in her arms.

"Oh, I sent him a report, but I'm not sure his computer will show the graphics properly. I was going to have him check it before a meeting."

She opens his office door. "Go ahead. I was just on his computer to add something a second ago, so it's unlocked."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I want to smirk. The admiral is secretive, but he's also an idiot about certain things, so it's no shock that he'd have Marcia, who is an IT whiz, fixing an issue for him, so he wouldn't have to wait on IT.

"Thanks," I say. I head in as she leaves. I find my file and quickly pull it up. It looks fine. Then, I click on another folder and another. I don't see a single thing out of place. Until I double-click on a white space on the screen. It shouldn't do anything, so I'm surprised when a folder opens.

"What in the..." I trail off as I stare at the screen. He had a hidden folder on his computer. I quickly pull out a thumb drive and download the contents. Then, I backtrack through my moves on his computer, carefully removing any sign that I was there.

I hear Marcia return to her desk, and I walk out of the office.

"All good?" she asks.

"Yep. All good. Thanks," I say.

She holds a finger to her lips. "Don't tell him I let you in there. He'll be pissed."

I pretend to zip my mouth closed. "Your secret is safe with me."

She smiles as I leave.

I hurry back to my office. I need to get this home to my personal laptop that's offline.

I hurry through my tasks, attempting to wrap them up an hour early.

“I’m out of here,” I say to Andy and Kyle our other tech.

They wave. Kyle barely looks up from his microscope. It’s a normal day to them, but my mind is fixated on two things, what the hell happened to Michelle and what’s on this drive.

I walk by Michelle’s workstation and notice something odd. The samples she had set aside for me with the printout from our machine. It’s all at her station.

“Fuck,” I mutter to myself.

“What’s up?” Andy asks as he rolls his chair over to me. Kyle is still obliviously looking through his microscope with his earbuds in.

“Oh, I think Michelle may have mixed up some samples,” I state as I hold up the vials.

“Oh, uh, nope. She was concerned they would get put away wrong, so she had them with her stuff. But they are logged correctly into your data. She just hadn’t had time to relabel them. You were busy and she didn’t want to bother you, so those are just temp labels.”

“Oh?” I say with a frown.

“Yeah. Remember that one time you were running stuff that fit in with her samples, so you had her just label with hers but add that zero-two to the end?”

I look at the vials again and see she did the same thing. She didn’t know. Shit. Did someone see this? Is that why she was followed?

“Andy? Did anyone else come by this morning?” I ask.

He frowns. “No, I don’t think so. I did have to go pick up the mail earlier though.” He turns and taps Kyle’s shoulder. Kyle pulls his earbud out.

“Did anyone stop by earlier?” he asks.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Some guy...uh...shit, I can’t remember his name. He was looking for you,” Kyle says and points to me.

I point to myself. “Me?”

“Yeah, but he left before I could get his name. Actually, it was kind of weird. I think he said he was a new assistant to the admiral. But he was like old. And obviously, the admiral was here earlier. Anyhow, I gotta finish this,” Kyle says, putting his earbuds back in and pointing to the slide in his microscope.

I groan. Kyle is most definitely the weakest link in our group. Occasionally, we have deliveries that come straight to the lab, but it’s unusual. And Kyle most definitely should have let me know.

I leave and go straight to my apartment, pulling out my laptop that I keep offline. I click on the drive and wait for it to load. I groan when I see that it’s encrypted. I try a simple encryption software first, while I text Michelle to check on her. She claims to be fine, just a little shaken. I can’t help feeling like she was targeted.

I look back at the computer. No dice. The software didn’t work. I pick up my burner phone and call Aiden.

“Hey. You alright?” he answers.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“Do you have anyone you trust that can get me access to encrypted files?” I ask.

“I do,” he replies slowly.

“Like, right now?”

“I...yes.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“Ells, do not test me. What is going on?” he asks.

“I...” I trail off as I walk out to my balcony. “I found some files on the admiral’s computer. I suspected something and I got access to them, and I need to know what’s in there.”

“Ella, what’s going on?” I can hear the concern in his voice.

“I’ll come over if you think it’s safe.”

“I’ll see you in a bit.” He hangs up and I grab my things and hurry to my car. I check it for trackers, finding none. I turn off my personal cell phone and drive to his house. As the gates open to his private street, I can’t help reflecting on the craziness that has become my life in a matter of a few days.

I need to call my sister and my parents. I need some normalcy in my life. I’m hesitant about my sister coming to stay with me this week. What if something happens? But if

I stop her, will that flag me as suspicious? So many contradicting things are running through my mind as I pull into Aiden's driveway and park.

He's waiting at a side door, and I follow him inside.

"I take it you have a thumb drive?" he asks. I hold it up and he takes it from me.

"Our security guy knows someone who claims they can get us the files in a few hours," he states as he plugs it into a computer. I watch him get on a secured server and then upload the files. His phone rings.

"Yes. Just finished. Thanks. We'll be waiting." He hangs up and looks at me. "And now we wait."

I look everywhere but at Aiden. I feel the magnetic pull between us, and my instinct is to tap it down. Because it's only going to lead to a conversation that I'm not ready to have, not yet.

As I look past him at a painting on his wall, I feel his finger on my chin. It moves my face until I'm forced to look into his eyes.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"Nothing," I lie.

He narrows his eyes. "You were always a bad liar."

I narrow my eyes. "You were always an overbearing alpha male."

I watch his lips twitch as he fights the smirk that eventually wins out and emerges on his face. I roll my eyes at him.

“Typical,” I mutter under my breath.

I pull my head away from his hand.

“There is something important I think you should know.”

“What’s that?” His head cocks to one side as he considers my sudden change of subject.

“I have an employee who was followed on her jog today. And, when I was back at my office, I learned from another employee that she had labeled the samples I was running additional tests on, our samples, as hers. I have her follow a protocol on occasion to keep things separate, but it would appear to others that they were hers. Someone who I don’t know came by the office earlier. I don’t want to think these things are connected, but I think they might be.”

“Shit.” Aiden’s eyebrows furrow and he reaches for his burner phone and sends some texts. “Do you have security cameras outside or inside your office?”

“Yes,” I say slowly, not sure if I should share that information.

“Can you access them?”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I shake my head. “No. I mean, I could request to if I needed something, but...” I trail off and he nods his understanding.

“We don’t want to draw attention,” he agrees as he looks at me. I know that look.

“No,” I say like he’s a dog that just got into the trash can.

His eyebrow shoots up so quickly that I laugh.

“What did you just say?” he asks.

Damn it. I played right into it. “I said no.”

“To what are you saying no, exactly? I don’t remember asking a question.”

I glare at him. “Aiden, you know damn well what I was saying ‘no’ to.”

He flattens his lips, waiting for me to explain.

“Not playing the game,” I reply.

He leans forward, and I can smell his cologne. I hate that. I hate that everything about this man forces a thousand memories to instantly pop into my head like a damn memory carousel. I hate that I like the way he smells, hell, love the way he smells. I want to hate him so fucking bad, yet, I can’t. I can’t do it. And my body certainly doesn’t want to hate him.

His eyes watch my lips. I remember how his lips felt on me, and that memory is far too recent for my liking.

His computer dings and we both turn to look at it.

“They’re done.”

I don’t know if I’m disappointed by the fact that we can’t continue this banter, or if I’m relieved.

We both crowd around his computer, and he opens the files. We read them one after another.

They are classified correspondence with someone named D.M.

“Who’s D.M.?” I ask as we read one after another. It looks like something about the drugs that Confervo is making and also something about Halfagher.

“I don’t know,” he mutters as we continue reading.

Whoever D.M. is, they are telling the admiral about them. And how they work on their products.

“Products?” I ask out loud as I read another email. Admiral Blake asks for more details, saying someone had mentioned how well the products worked while on the drug and he thinks the drug could be used for other purposes.

“What in the hell?” Aiden murmurs as he continues to scan the emails.

I follow his gaze and see a spreadsheet detailing “assets” and the amount of drug given.

“Wait? Are products or assets people?” I ponder.

We keep reading, and at some point, the admiral mentions something about weapons, D.M. responds confirming that weapons would work as payment. Suddenly, the pieces start to come together.

“Wait, hold on,” I say. “Uh, do you have another computer or a secured server?”

Aiden nods. “This one is on a secured server that is connected to our security guy. What do you need?”

I swallow and bite my lip, almost afraid to find out if what I’m thinking is correct. “Look up...Damien Malroy.”

“The arms dealer?”

I nod. “Just do it.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

He pulls up a search on Damien, and we both read through the results. “There, stop scrolling.” He pauses over an article about Malroy from eleven years ago.

“Is there any crime he hasn’t committed?” Aiden mutters as we look at the long list of alleged crimes the article details. Among them are arms dealing, drug dealing, piracy, and sex trafficking.

“Why is the admiral encrypting messages to this guy?” I ask aloud.

“The bigger question is why do they know each other?” Aiden ponders.

I stand up and start pacing, it’s what I do when I need to think. “OK, let’s think this through.”

Aiden leans back in his chair and watches me. It feels oddly familiar, but I push that feeling aside.

“Say this is Damien. He’s managed to get an unapproved drug. But when? Let’s say it was eleven years ago. Why would he want it? Only one of those crimes seems to jive with needing a drug that makes you essentially unconscious yet able to move and follow directions but with almost no memory of what you did,” I state as I stare at Aiden, our eyes meet, and we both know the answer.

Chapter13

Aiden

“The women,” I say as I start to see how it fits together.

“Does Damien do business here in the area?” Ella considers.

“I don’t know. And how is Damien connected to Jared and Adam? I’m assuming that’s how he got to Blake,” I reply as I start to see how they all might be linked.

“We need to call Vivienne and the others,” I say after a beat. “We might be missing pieces here.”

Ella looks at me hesitantly. “Sebastian and Conner?”

“Yes.”

She blushes. “Do they hate me?”

I sigh and stand. I walk over to her and wrap my arms around her. She doesn’t fight it, which surprises me. Instead, she sinks into my embrace and leans her head against my chest. I wrap my arms tightly around her and kiss the top of her head.

“They don’t hate you. In fact, I never actually talked about what happened between us. So mostly they were just confused.”

“We should talk about that,” Ella says quietly. “Later, after we figure all this out.”

“I agree. Why do I feel like there’s more to it than what I remember?” I ask her as I pull back and look down at her.

“Because...there is,” she admits, her eyes glaze over and she pulls away and turns around. “Call them. We need to figure this out. The sooner, the better.”

I place my hands on her shoulders and kiss her head again. “This conversation isn’t over, star.”

She places her hand over mine. “I know.”

I pull out my phone and make the call. As luck would have it, they are home.

“They’re coming over.”

“Here?” she asks.

“Here,” I confirm.

“Is...it safe?” she asks as she looks around.

I smile. “Follow me.” I hold out my hand, and she pauses for a moment before taking it. I lead us out of my house and over to Conner’s tiny home.

“What...is this?” she asks as we approach it.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I laugh. “It’s a long story. But essentially Conner built this out of spite. He loves this fucking little house. I’m pretty sure he’s going to move into it someday and forget about his castle over there.

She looks at Conner’s home.

“Holy shitballs! His house is...it’s literally a castle.”

I pull her to me. “Don’t get any fairy-tale ideas in that head of yours. My house is just as nice. It’s just not...well, it’s not Conner.”

She giggles. “It is most definitely not Conner.”

I turn and walk up to the door. “You ready?” I ask as I squeeze her hand.

I can tell she’s nervous, but she shouldn’t be. My friends have no reason to hate her. Not anymore.

She nods as I open the door and we step into the house. Vivienne is sitting on the sofa next to Conner and Alexis is sitting on Sebastian’s lap on the oversized chair in the corner of the room. I want to roll my eyes at them.

“OK, so what’s with the meeting?” Conner says, clearly wanting to get back to what he was doing before, which I’m guessing from the look of his disheveled hair, was Vivienne.

“We have new information.” Everyone looks from Ella to me.

“Ella, this is Vivienne and Alexis. And you remember Conner and Sebastian,” I say as I remember that she doesn’t know half the people in the room.

“Hello,” she says softly.

We launch into what we’ve just learned, wasting no time. It’s now or never.

“Wait!” Vivienne stops us after we get to what we just learned.

“Damien Malroy?” she asks.

Ella nods.

Vivienne jumps up and starts to pace. She turns to Conner. “Do you have some sort of whiteboard?”

Conner rolls his eyes. “Viv, does it look like I have a fucking whiteboard in here?”

She groans and looks around and then holds up a finger. She grabs a plastic placemat and a marker from a drawer. She sets it down on the table and starts drawing and putting names down as she begins to explain.

“I knew all my years of research would pay off, eventually,” she mutters. “Look. It was reported that about a dozen years ago, Jared had a thing for young women. I mean back then he was only in his thirties, but still a little creepy. He knew Adam because they were both in TOD, although I’m not sure if Jared is a member of the brotherhood. He may just have pledged the fraternity. But somehow Adam and Jared were acquainted. How do I know this? Because there was this party back then. It was at Damien Malroy’s place. He has a place right here in D.C. in Georgetown. Some underage girls were there, one staggered out on the street and got hit by a car and killed. There was a whole investigation. But she was drunk and it was ruled an

accident. However, in the police investigation into that, a few of the other girls that were at the party had some photos on their phones. And one of them was a picture of Jared with Damien, all buddy-buddy. Now, I have never heard of them hanging out before or after that night. Not to say they didn't hang out, it was a while ago, but they clearly knew each other, and based on those photos, they were friends."

"Wait, you knew that Jared was friends with an arms dealer-slash-sex trafficker and failed to mention this?" Conner growls.

Vivienne rolls her eyes. "He's friends with all types of shady people. You didn't ask, and until right now, it wasn't relevant. Or at least, I didn't think it was. May I proceed?"

Conner waves a hand at her and Vivienne glares at him. I smirk. It's nice to see a woman put Conner in his place.

"Let's for sake of argument say that Jared shared with Damien something about the drug his company was making. Maybe he tells Adam too? And Damien says something about how he could use that drug for...his exploits. I mean, think about it, a drug that he can inject in women and they basically wouldn't remember anything yet be able to do stuff. It's ten times better than a roofie. But wait, there's more..."

"Hell yeah, there is!" Alexis jumps. "There was an investigation into Damien's company, Palarus Astra. They were shut down around that same time for tax evasion. Someone in my federal income tax law class was just talking about that. Some speculated that Damien had used the company to launder money from his illegal activity."

"Exactly, so Mr. Malroy was in the market for a new way to launder money and he also happened to really like a drug made by one of his friends," Vivienne says animatedly.

“Which means that Mr. Malroy might have bankrolled Confervo’s and Halfagher’s work in Geneva, and they may be trying to further hide it by merging and making it look like they need each other when in reality they are both swimming in illegal funds,” Alexis says as she hops off Sebastian’s lap. “But then there’s the admiral.” She pauses and looks at me. “Adam somehow got a coveted military contract. Yet it all seemed to evade publicity, which tells me—”

“That someone higher up is protecting him,” Ella finishes her sentence.

“Exactly!” Alexis squeals.

Vivienne holds up her placemat drawing showing how Jared, Adam, Damien, and Vance are all connected. She leaves open another box above Vance and points to it.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“We need to figure out who Mr. X is.”

“What if it’s Mrs. X?” Conner says, leaning in to speak against her ear.

Vivienne’s head whips toward his face. “Because women aren’t driven by their vaginas. That’s why.”

“Damn!” Sebastian says with a laugh.

Conner stares at Vivienne, but she doesn’t back down. She’s not even slightly intimidated by this man, and that is amusing.

“OK, so how are we going to find out who Mr. X is?” I ask.

Ella steps forward. “I could...try to find out.”

I step in front of her. “No.”

She raises a single, well-shaped eyebrow at me. “I don’t believe you get to make that decision.”

She looks past me at the others. “Do we have any better ideas?”

The room falls silent.

“I mean, she does work with the guy,” Conner mumbles.

“It does make sense,” Sebastian offers.

“We need a multi-prong approach,” Vivienne quips. “First, Ella can try to do some digging at work. Second, Alexis is going to use her insanely good research skills to dig up everything we can about who Admiral Blake has been friends with. Who did he serve with? Who did he go to school with? Who are his neighbors? Everything. And I will continue digging into Damien, Jared, and Adam.”

“And what are we supposed to do, sit around and look pretty?” Conner says.

Vivienne grins. “I mean, it’s not a bad idea.”

Conner’s hand twitches. “Don’t tempt me, curious cat.”

“We already have our marching orders. We need to figure out who we can trust in the brotherhood. We need to know who’s involved with all of this and we need to figure out those last two elite members,” I say as I look from Sebastian to Conner.

“Fine. Great. We all have a shit ton of work to do and limited time to get it done,” Sebastian growls.

“Remind me, uh, why do we have a deadline? And what is it?” Ella asks.

We all look at each other. “There are a few reasons. One, we need to bring this bitch down before Confervo and Halfagher can merge. Second, we need to stop these drugs from being used on girls, and we don’t know how or when that will be happening again. Third, we know that the longer we take to figure all this out, the more likely that they will catch us, and then...” Sebastian trails off.

“Dead. Like, they kill all six of us?” Ella asks.

We all nod.

“Shit,” she mutters.

“So that’s why we’re on a deadline,” I state.

“Well, those are pretty fucking good whys, but do you think they don’t have a clue, right now?” Ella asks.

“They have a clue. We just don’t know how much of one,” Conner interjects.

“Great. So we have an unknown enemy. We aren’t sure exactly how they are doing what they are doing or who is doing it and we have to figure all this out before they suspect too much or kill anyone else,” Ella summarizes.

“Uh, yep,” Alexis says with a frown. “That makes this all seem mighty impossible.”

“We are literally dismantling one of Washington’s oldest secret societies, so of course, it’s going to be mighty impossible, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try,” Vivienne points out.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“It also means we could all die,” Ella says quietly.

There’s a long pause as we all consider those words.

“But at least we’ll die trying to do the right thing,” I say. “Remember our oaths as doctors?”

She nods.

“We’re taking it a step further. Not only are we not doing harm, but we’re also trying to fix things, once and for all,” I say.

“Well, then, what are we waiting for, let’s go kick some ass...I mean asses? Hell, I don’t fucking know, but we should most definitely be getting to work,” Ella says.

Conner laughs. “I always did like you.”

Ella’s face flushes, and it unlocks something in me, a memory, a feeling, I don’t know, but I do know I need to take her back to my home right now.

“OK, well, back to the office it is, then,” I say as I take Ella by the arm, and we head back to my house. She gives me a curious look at our abrupt departure, but I keep looking forward. The air feels thicker as we walk. The impending storm outside mirrors the invisible one that’s brewing around us.

Ella

I haveno idea what we're doing. We're heading toward his home, through a trail that meanders between trees and then into an opening behind his garage. I can see a man walking the perimeter of Conner's property in the distance, but he pays us no attention.

My head is spinning with the information we just put together. There's so much to unwrap, so many more nuances to flush out, but here we are, going back to Aiden's home.

He opens a side door and keeps walking us forward until we reach his bedroom. I'm confused as I stand there in the stark white room with the giant bed and dark gray sheets.

He finally stops moving and looks down at me, cupping my face in his hand. His eyes search mine. I don't know what he wants.

He doesn't speak as he begins to remove my clothing and then his own. Piece by piece, our clothes pile around us until we're both naked. Only, it feels more than a physical nakedness, it feels like we've stripped away the world around us, baring our souls to each other for the first time in many years.

"No more games. You left me once. You didn't even give me a chance to explain or apologize for our argument. You dictated the course of our lives, Ella. But the universe is a funny place, and it brought you right back to me. So now, we're doing this."

"D-doing what?" I whisper.

He steps forward and takes my head in both his hands. "I'm going to make love to

you and then we are going to talk. We are going to discuss all the things we haven't been talking about, all the things we've kept buried over the past few years. And then...we'll see what happens."

I open my mouth to reply, but he doesn't let me. Instead, his lips crash to mine. He doesn't just steal a kiss, he robs it from me, taking a little piece of my soul in the process.

My body freezes as his tongue swipes against mine. My brain is at odds with itself. My left side says to do this, to allow myself to feel for the first time in years. My right side has alarm bells going off and says to run away and never look back because this can't end well. I desperately want to listen to my right side. I want to protect myself from the inevitable hurt that I know is going to follow this, yet I can't stop. I don't want to stop. I want this. I want him.

My irrational self takes control as I reach up and thread my fingers through familiar locks of hair. Aiden groans and tugs me against him. And for the first time since the night that I disappeared from his life, I feel the full length of his body against mine without any barriers.

I'm not sure what snaps inside of me. But a wall I built with his painful words begins to crumble as I let him own me with this kiss.

He reaches down behind my thighs and begins to lift me as I wrap my legs around his waist, feeling his erection press firmly against my belly. He walks us to his bed as he continues to kiss me. It's unhurried, as if the weight of the world isn't on our shoulders. He slowly leans me down until I fall flat on the bed, my legs dangling off the edge.

His kisses begin to trail down my neck to my breasts.

“Dear God, I’ve missed these,” he murmurs against my right nipple as he takes it in his mouth and sucks on it. My back arches involuntarily as he trails wet kisses over to my left nipple and repeats the process.

Once he’s satisfied with his reacquaintance of my breasts, he leisurely travels down my abdomen, tracing my belly button with his tongue as he nestles between my legs and begins to crouch down. I feel his hands making light strokes on the insides of my thighs. He doesn’t have to ask, I spread them as his face moves to their apex.

His thumbs caress my folds before spreading me open. His tongue presses against me but doesn’t move for a long moment. I squirm and his one hand comes up and presses down on my belly, compelling me to stop.

When I finally comply, he rewards me by flicking his tongue against my clit. I gasp as he takes it into his mouth and sucks while continuing to flick it with his tongue. I feel my body barreling toward a release as he slides a finger inside of me. He slowly drags it out and back inside of me before finding my G-spot. And then I’m gone. My climax hits me hard.

I scream incoherent things while he continues to drag out my release. I don’t have time to string my thoughts together as he moves back up my body and slides inside of me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

He kisses me again, and I taste myself on his tongue. Something about that feels wrong and yet so right. We kiss for long minutes as he slides in and out of me at a pace that's almost too slow. He's taking his time, letting me feel each inch of him, over and over.

"Aiden," I moan, wanting more.

His eyes open, and he gazes down at me. "We have all night. And I'm going to make use of each and every second of it."

Words fail me. My mind goes blank. Every movement feels better than it ever did. The touch of his skin is hotter than I remember. The sounds of his grunts are harsher. The smell of his cologne is more intense.

Everything seems to be amplified as I gaze into his eyes. I see a life we could have lived. What would it be like? I close my eyes, and just for a single moment, I let myself imagine what our lives might have resembled. It's too painful, too overwhelming.

"What's wrong, star?" he coos in my ear.

I shake my head, but it's too late. A tear trickles down the side of my face.

His movements become painfully slow until he stops altogether, still buried deep inside me.

"Ella," he says, his voice laced with concern.

I force myself to open my eyes.

“What is it?”

I shake my head.

He brings his hands up to cup my face as he places light kisses on my forehead. “Talk to me, star.”

I swallow. “Make me forget, first. Just for a minute, please,” I beg.

He doesn’t know what I’m really asking and that breaks my heart, but he nods and begins to move again as we watch each other. Our breaths become faster as our bodies thrust harder. He knows what I need, and he wastes no time in reaching between us to play with clit, until I’m panting and crying out his name. He follows me a moment later.

After one final thrust, he stills inside me and searches my eyes again. “It’s time,” he whispers.

I know what he means, but I don’t want it to be time. Because what that really means is my time is up. He’ll never forgive me. I’ll never forgive me.

I nod as he pulls out of me and rolls us, so we are lying side by side. I take a deep breath.

“I’m sorry that I yelled that night,” he starts. “I was frustrated.”

“Why don’t you want kids?” I ask, afraid to hear the painful truth. Our relationship had been so intense and happened so fast, we hadn’t had the normal conversations of couples that spend months or even years getting to know each other. We were

focused on the here and now. That night was the first time we had ever discussed children.

“My mother,” he replies quietly. “You can’t guarantee that you’ll be there for them. You can be there one second and gone the next. I can’t do that to a child.”

His words are profound. I always knew his mother had died of cancer, but he never talked much about it. I knew that it must be a painful memory, but to have impacted him like this is hard to hear.

“I should have talked about it sooner. We were just...” He trails off.

I reach over and squeeze his hand. “We moved too fast. It’s not your fault. Our relationship was like a nuclear bomb going off. It burned huge, bright, and intense but then ‘poof’ it was gone.”

“It was never gone for me,” he replies, his jaw clenching.

I look away from him. About this, I can’t lie. “It was never gone for me either,” I admit out loud for the first time.

“Then, why, Ella? Why did you just leave without a word?”

I sit up and pull my knees to my chest as I look over at him. “There’s something you don’t know.”

He sits up and looks at me. “What?”

“I...” I pause, my throat constricting with fear. I don’t know if I can say the words to him. I look over and there is so much worry on his face. I knew this day would happen. I just am not ready for it. “I was pregnant,” I finally force the words out of

my mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

His mouth falls open. He doesn't say a word for long seconds. I can feel my heartbeat accelerating with each passing moment of silence.

"We have a child?" he finally asks, his voice laced with pain and anger.

I shake my head. "There's no child," I whisper.

"You made that decision without me!" Now his voice is rising. He's mad, so very mad.

"I didn't—"

"How could you do that? You didn't even have the decency to tell me?" He's yelling now and getting out of the bed.

"Aiden, I—"

"No, no, you don't get to 'Aiden' me. Not after this."

"But—"

"No. I can't believe this. I can't believe you'd do this!" His scream echoes in the room. He won't even let me explain. He doesn't even understand. There's so much more to tell him, but he won't let me get the words out.

He picks up his phone and starts texting. I get out of bed and begin to dress. I can't do this naked.

“Aiden, listen, you need to understand,” I start, but he holds up a hand.

“No, I don’t need to do anything. But you need to leave. I just called a car.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You won’t even let me finish a damn sentence. And I don’t need a car. I drove, remember?”

“I don’t need to hear anything else,” he says with a clenched jaw as he throws on his pants and shirt.

“Fine. Whatever. I’m going. This is stupid,” I mutter. I can’t talk to him, not when he gets like this.

I walk to his front door as I slide my shoes on. When I reach it, I turn and look back at him.

“If you ever want the rest of the story, I guess you know where to find me,” I shoot back, my words like daggers flying through the air.

I open the door and slam it behind me, heading out to my car. I get in and pull away, watching my rearview mirror as his house disappears from my sight.

What the fuck just happened? One second, he’s making love to me, and the next, he just tossed me to the curb. Maybe my sister was right. The last time our relationship ended, she said we were too passionate for longevity. Perhaps this interlude was just a final curtain call for us.

Chapter15

Aiden

The anger coursing through my veins is unlike any I have ever felt before in my life. I can't even begin to comprehend what Ella has just told me.

I pace in my living room. I drink a glass of bourbon. I pace some more. But no amount of walking has me cooling down. I strip off my clothes that still smell of Ella and put on my gym shorts. I walk to my gym and grab my gloves. Using my mouth, I secure the Velcro fastening and look at my punching bag.

I use voice commands to turn on hard-core rap. I sample songs from the nineties and begin to pummel the bag. I lose myself to the beat of the music and the sound of my gloves making contact with the leather. Every swing of my arm brings my anger to a higher level until I don't know if my body could contain any more rage. I hit the bag for the loss of my mom, for my asshole father, and for the child I never got to meet.

I don't even know what time it is when I finally sink to my knees in total exhaustion. My phone rings and I look down. It's my father.

Fuck. My. Life.

"Yes?" I answer after removing a glove.

"Oh, so you aren't sick, then?"

I may have used illness as a reason to miss our monthly dinner together.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“I’m better, thank you for caring.”

“I heard about your promotion. Congratulations.”

There are so many things I could say right now, but I refrain.

“Thank you,” I mutter. I want to ask him if he got a promotion in his world of organized crime.

“It’s an impressive position for someone of your age. You should be pleased,” he says. His words have me pausing and remembering what Ella said about all of us being “placed” in positions for the gains of the brotherhood. The vows I took come crashing back to me in a new light.

“What do you think this is about? We already got inducted into the TOD,” Conner whispers as we are led inside a building. I can only tell by the sounds of the door opening and closing and the outdoor breeze disappearing as stillness takes over.

“I don’t know,” I admit. They had come for us in the night. We had only been initiated the previous day, but some of us at the encouragement of our big brothers had spent the night at the fraternity’s main house. And at the stroke of midnight, a group of figures in black cloaks that hid their faces entered the room and extended us a verbal invitation, announcing that we were hand-selected to join a secret society within the TOD. But in order to proceed, we would all need to sign NDAs. I remember we looked around at each other. There were nine of us out of our pledge class of fifteen. Six of our fathers had been alumni of TOD. And the other three were from wealthy or prestigious families. Those of us who were legacies had briefly

discussed our fathers, but mostly we were college students focused on having fun.

We were kept blindfolded until we arrived at our final destination. One by one our blindfolds were removed. We were in some sort of chapel. It was clearly old and also looked to be seldom used as cobwebs cluttered the high corners of the room, visible only through the moonlight from stained glass windows at the far end of the room and the candles in front of us. Around us stood about one hundred men. I assumed men, based on their size and stature, but it was hard to tell as they were all cloaked in black, only their hands visible in the dim light of the room. One of them stepped forward toward us.

“You have been hand-selected to join the brotherhood. By signing the NDA, you have chosen to stay. By taking the vow we are about to present to you, you are choosing a life of power, wealth, and prestige. These are the elements that divide the haves and the have nots in our society. They make us the kings of our kingdom.

“The brotherhood is comprised of individuals who were selected to join Theta Omega Delta, and then through their pledge process were deemed worthy to take one step farther into one of the oldest secret societies in Washington, D.C. Only a handful of TOD brothers at select schools may join this brotherhood. The brotherhood is governed by a council of twenty-five members, and a group of elder brothers called the elite. The elite may never reveal their status. In exchange for your vow this evening, you will have doors opened to you that would not otherwise occur. You will be considered the youngest and most successful in your chosen fields. You will never want for money. You will always have power and prestige.

If this interests you, then step forward. If it does not, then you may choose to leave now, but know that you have chosen the hard life, the difficult path, the road that does not lead to success.”

The room was quiet as one by one, we all stepped forward. We did it for different

reasons, but all of us were young and ambitious. We wanted to rule this city just like we ruled our university. We wanted to be the kings and the kingmakers.

“Repeat after me, I, state your name, hereby vow to protect my brothers at all costs, to sacrifice my comfort and my discretion for what the elite choose as the path for me, and do what I am told when I am told to do it by the brotherhood. I vow to never reveal the inner workings of the brotherhood. I vow to deny my involvement in the brotherhood. I vow to reference only to TOD when discussing the brotherhood in public or in front of those not part of the brotherhood. I vow, from this day forward, that my life no longer belongs to me, but to the brotherhood. And if I break the vow, I understand that I am forfeiting my future, in mind, body, and soul.”

The room is silent as we finish repeating the vow. The figure takes down his cloak.

“My name is Charles Richards. I will be your pledge class liaison. Each initiated class of the brotherhood is guided during their first six months by a liaison. After which, you will receive anonymous messages only. If there is ever an issue, you may come to me for guidance. You are also going to be assigned a mentor. Your mentor will be your lifelong membership confidant. Your ‘big brother’ if you will. Some of you are legacies. Your mentor will never be your family member. We find that a better way to structure the organization. Family squabbles are not acceptable in the brotherhood. You keep all family drama inside your homes at all times. Squabbles aired publicly are subject to the vows you just spoke. Additionally, if you believe you have ethical or moral concerns with what is being asked of you, then you may speak with your mentor. If the elite believe a different solution is possible, the task at hand will be altered. If not, you may comply, or be terminated. You may never speak of this to anyone, not a wife, not a child, not a lover. No one outside of this room right now shall ever know what has transpired here tonight. If you are ever put under duress, you may use the code word ‘Babylon’ to denote that you are in need of help from the brotherhood. The brotherhood will always do everything in its power to protect you, so long as you do the same. Quid Pro Quo.”

Charles pulls out a book that looks old, like well over a hundred years old. He cracks it open and sets it on a table next to an actual quill and ink well.

“This is the last step. Step forward as I call your name. You will sign it in our book. Your signature here is the binding contract for the vows you just spoke and the rules as I just explained them to you. Once you have signed here,” he says as he taps the book, “all the privileges of brotherhood are yours.”

I look around at the other cloaked figures as each of my pledge brothers is called to sign. I wonder if my father is here. He’s a TOD brother. And he’s said things that make me wonder if there’s not more to the fraternity.

My name is called, and I step forward. I don’t pause as I sign my name. I want to have the prestige that my father has. I want to be even better than him. I want to be more successful, so I can rub it in his face. I’m tired of being second best to his always first ego. Let the games begin, Daddy Dearest, I think as I scroll my name on the ancient paper.

After I step back, Paul and Paxton Young are called up to sign. And then, Charles closes the book.

“Welcome to the brotherhood,” he says with a warm smile as he claps his hands.

Every man in the room pulls down the hood of their cloak. I see my father across the room. For the first time in my entire life, he looks proud of me. I want that so badly that I don’t consider why he’s proud. He walks over to me and embraces me.

“Welcome, son. I am proud of you,” he says for the first time in my life.

After some brief conversations and introductions, Charles, who asks us to please call him Chuck, comes over to announce that he is my mentor in addition to our pledge

class liaison.

After some toasts, brothers begin to leave. I note the few members of TOD that are here and wonder how many pledge brothers get indoctrinated into this secret society of the brotherhood each year.

I also note that only the brothers from the most powerful and wealthy families are present. Some of their families are notorious, whereas others are descended from presidents and CEOs of major corporations.

Our TOD pledge dad, Spencer Barrington, who was in charge of us until we were initiated yesterday, steps forward. "Let's head back, guys."

We file out like the good new brothers that we are. We're all too excited to sleep when we arrive back at the TOD house. All of us stay up until daylight creeps through the blinds. And as Conner, Sebastian, and I walk back to our dorm rooms, we stop by the amphitheater on campus.

"We need to make our own vow," Sebastian states as he looks at us. We have formed a tight pack, the three of us. Spencer often refers to us as the three amigos. We can relate to each other. We all have horrible relationships with our living parents. We've all lost loved ones. We all like similar things from sports to drinks. We were all raised a certain way. In fact, our childhoods in many aspects are eerily similar.

"What's that?" Conner asks.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“We vow, right now, that in addition to TOD, and the brotherhood, we will always have each other’s backs. We will put each other first and protect each other. We will take a stand against anyone that would harm one of us. We are actual brothers, first and foremost. While we aren’t related by blood, the universe saw fit that we should be brothers, and so be it,” Sebastian states as he takes a folding knife from his key chain and makes a small slash on his index finger. We each follow suit. And then we do our TOD handshake and take our final vow.

“Aiden?” my father’s voice cuts like a knife into the bubble of my memory.

“Yes?”

“I need you to attend Hugh’s grad school graduation on Wednesday. He’ll be in town for it,” he says. I groan internally. Hugh had mentioned it but said it was super lowkey and I absolutely didn’t need to go. I said I’d try to attend if my schedule allowed, but that I would probably end up taking him out for a celebratory dinner later.

“I already spoke to him. We’re doing dinner sometime instead,” I say.

“This isn’t me asking you,” my father retorts. “Sadie and I have a previous engagement that we cannot get out of.”

So fucking typical of him.

“Fine,” I reply through clenched teeth.

“Excellent. I’ll have him send over the ticket to you. I presume I’ll see you for family dinner next month?”

Not if I have anything to do about it.

“I’ll do my best,” I reply. Knowing full well, that I’ll try to get out of this one just like I got out of the most recent one.

“Just do,” my father responds before hanging up. If I wasn’t livid prior to this conversation, I am most definitely ready for murder right now.

Chapter16

Ella

When I get backto my apartment, I nearly have a heart attack. Elena is sitting on my sofa eating out of an ice cream container and watching some sort of trash television show.

“Oh, hey,” she says, waving the spoon. “You need to go grocery shopping. Your fridge is barren, dude.”

It takes me a minute to remember that she is here because of the damn concert. Shit. I completely forgot.

She opens her mouth to speak again but closes it and squints her eyes. “Damn, mamacita, who we gotta kill?”

“What?” I ask as I try to get my bearings. I’m in no way ready to play hostess to my little sister. I am beyond angry at the moment. Elena sets down her ice cream and walks over to me, wrapping her arms around my middle and pulling me into a hug.

Whatever anger I had felt toward Aiden a minute ago dissolves as I hug my sister back. “I’m fine. Just had a fight with a guy I was seeing.” I don’t have the heart to share that it was Aiden. Elena loved Aiden like a brother. And she was heartbroken when I said we broke up. Also, there’s a nagging part of me that after Michelle was followed this week, doesn’t want Elena to know anything that’s going on.

She pulls back and smiles at me. “Well, you came to the right place. Sisters before misters, right? We got ice cream. There’s another tub of it in the freezer, and we can watch a movie.”

“Or I could go to bed because it’s the middle of the night and some of us have work tomorrow.”

“You’re so boring! Call in sick! How often do I visit? Seriously, you’re not going to hang out with me?” she whines.

She does raise a valid point. I struggle with how to answer. On one hand, if I go to work, I can keep an eye on things and potentially learn more about the admiral; but if I stay home, I can protect Elena.

“Come on! We have the concert tomorrow night, and I get it, it’ll be late, but then I leave the next morning and you won’t see me for like forever.”

I roll my eyes at her drama-filled explanation.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll call in sick tomorrow.”

“Yes!” she says with a fist pump. I smile over at her as we snuggle into my couch and queue up one of our favorite childhood movies.

This woman has no idea how much I need her right now. I couldn’t have asked for a

better distraction.

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

The sun's rays penetrated through the window. I hadn't pulled shut the blackout curtains. I look over and see Elena fast asleep next to me. I can't help smiling. She always did that, even when we were younger. She'd go to bed in her room and at some point during the night she'd end up in mine.

I grab my phone and call in sick. Then, I text Michelle to take off one more day. She replies with a question mark. I tell her that I am not feeling well, and I'd rather she stay home today, too. She says she will, even though I know she'll pepper me with questions tomorrow. I roll back over and stare at my sister. I decide that I'm going to make the most of today. I need a day to escape my life and everything going on at the moment.

I pick up my pillow and toss it at her.

She opens one eye and groans. "Elly-Belly" she says as she rolls over and pulls the covers over her head.

"Nope. Get the fuck up! We are having a skip day!" I announce as I grab the covers from her and yank them down the bed.

"Really?" she asks as she turns her head toward me with a grin on her face.

"Really. Get dressed. We're spending the day in the city."

"Woohoo!" she yells and launches herself at me. We hug and she heads to shower.

I toss my burner phone on my nightstand. I don't know what to do with that, but I'll

figure it out tomorrow.

After making myself presentable and forcing myself to not think about the events of yesterday, I get ready for a day of fun with Elena. Procrastination was always my strong suit. I have plenty of time to figure shit out, but I don't have plenty of time to hang with one of my favorite people. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

"Ready?" I yell once I walk into the main room.

"Ten more minutes!" she calls out from the guest bathroom. I groan. If I got an A in procrastination, Elena got an A+ because that woman is only on time if on time means thirty minutes late.

I make a coffee and stand out on my balcony, surveying the sunny day. The wind hitting my face wakes me up along with the caffeine. I get the distinct feeling that someone is watching me as I close my eyes to take in the sun's rays.

I open them and look around, but I don't see anyone and I'm up high enough that there's no one that would be looking down at me. I decide that I'm being paranoid, but just in case, I'll stay vigilant today and keep us in public places.

I head back in and find Elena grabbing a coffee.

"Oh no, we're gonna go get the real stuff," I tell her as I set her mug down.

"But you had one," she groans.

"And I will have another. Come on, my little pain in the ass," I say as I loop my arm through hers and drag her to the elevator. She giggles and then launches into a story about how she and a friend just found the best coffee shop.

We head into the city and go to a few museums after finding coffee. We decide on lunch at one of my favorite restaurants, followed by an afternoon of window shopping in Georgetown. I continue to feel watched, yet I can't spot anyone following us. I decide it's safer to eat near the arena and then grab a cab home.

I sit us by a back wall so I can watch everyone coming and going into the restaurant.

"What is up? You've been looking around all day like someone is spying on us," Elena says as she shovels a forkful of lasagna into her mouth.

"Nothing. I just felt like someone was watching us. It's nothing. I'm just being paranoid, you know me," I say with a laugh.

Elena looks around. "You know I read this article that sex traffickers will follow pretty young women and then try to coax them into a car by pretending they need help."

I roll my eyes for the hundredth time today. "Elena. Did you read an article or see that on social media?"

She glares at me. "Does it matter?"

I give her a pointed look. "How's Mom and Dad?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Seriously, how's Mom and Dad? Worst subject change ever. And they're fine. You should try calling them sometime," she says as she takes another bite of her dinner.

"I will. I've just been really busy at work."

"How's work?" she asks.

I shrug. “Busy.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“Can you really not tell me anything about what you do?”

“Nope. Classified,” I assure her.

“That’s so lame. Whatever. Oh, did you see who’s opening?” she says, switching our conversation over to the concert. I spend the rest of dinner trying to stay focused on our conversation while continuing to keep my eyes open for anyone appearing suspect or unusual.

We finish our dinner and walk across the street to the arena. I watch the crowd as we listen to the opening act. I follow Elena to the bathroom and then pretend I had to go too. The concert is fun, but I’m nervous the entire time. Part of me wants to call Aiden and tell him that I feel like we’re being watched, but that ship has sailed.

“You need this more than me,” Elena says as we wait for the encore. She hands me the rest of her beer. Laughing, I take it. She has a point.

“Thanks,” I say as I down the rest of her drink. “I’m glad you came down. I really needed a day off.”

“Clearly. Maybe we should shop for a new guy,” she says as she pulls out her phone to show me a dating app that she uses.

I shake my head. “No way. I’m over meeting guys on dating apps.” I haven’t actually done that, but I’m not about to admit this to her.

“You need to get back out there,” she insists. “Just try. You haven’t been the same

since..." She trails off and puts a hand over her mouth. "Sorry," she says but it's muffled.

"It's fine. It was a long time ago, right?" I say, wishing that the statement was true. In fact, it hasn't even been a full twenty-four hours.

"Maybe you should find him and talk to him. You did say you saw him at a conference recently, so he's still gotta be here."

"Elena, it's over. If he wanted to be with me, he'd be with me."

"Ella, you can be so stubborn! I don't know what your fight was about. But you never gave him a chance. And then, you hid...everything. Sorry...I know it's hard for you to talk about," she says, looking apologetically at me.

My sister had been there. It wasn't until after I lost the baby that I took the assignment overseas. Only Elena knows about what happened. I didn't tell my parents. And now, Aiden won't ever know the truth either. His stubborn ass just made assumptions. Meanwhile, after he had told me that he never wanted children, I decided I couldn't go back there. I'd raise our baby alone. I somehow ended up on my sister's futon in her college room crying. I didn't tell her everything about the fight. I merely said I broke up with Aiden and there was no way I'd ever get back together with him. We were just incompatible. We made a sister pact, and she kept her end of the bargain by never speaking about it. When I started having contractions at seventeen weeks, I went to the hospital, but it was too late. The baby was gone. Elena stayed by my side the entire time. I named her Angela Janis, in honor of Aiden's mom. Her ashes sit in my nightstand drawer. I wanted to tell Aiden all of this, but when he assumed that I just got rid of the baby without so much as a conversation with him, I was gutted. How could he think I would do that? That I wouldn't at least talk with him. I loved him. I wanted to spend forever with him. Did he not feel the same way that I did? Did he not want to spend forever with me? He

always had said he did, but maybe that wasn't true after all.

I feel tears well in my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ella," Elena repeats and hugs me.

"It's OK. We should have fun and not think about those things, alright?" I assure her as I sniffle. The band comes back out, and she gives me one more worried look. I smile and move my hips to the music. She takes my hand in hers and squeezes it before holding them high and waving them back and forth. And this is why I love her. She can pull me out of my darkest moments. She is the light, just like the meaning of her name implies.

When I first met Aiden, I had this thing about the meanings of names. His meant fire and mine meant a star. I thought it was a sign. How could I have been so wrong?

Chapter 17

Aiden

"Thanks for coming," Hugh says as we sit at the restaurant, eating our food in awkward silence.

"No problem. I'm just sorry our parents missed it," I reply because I truly am. It's shitty that they aren't here, especially Sadie.

"It's just grad school," he says with a shrug.

I want to argue with him, but Hugh is too kind. He'd let his mother get away with murder, and he pretty much has.

“Any plans for tonight?” I ask, trying to make small talk. Hugh might as well be like a distant cousin that I see only at holidays.

“Some friends want to meet up later for drinks.”

“That’s cool,” I note, grimacing at how I sound old saying those words.

“I suppose.”

I put my hand up to motion for the bill. Our server nods. I slide my credit card across the table.

“Thanks,” Hugh says.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“Sure. Can’t have you buying your own graduation dinner.” The server is quick with our receipt, and in a matter of minutes, we’re standing outside.

“I guess I’ll see you at family dinner,” Hugh says as he gets in a car.

“Yeah, I’ll see you later. Congrats again,” I say as he shuts the door and the car pulls away, leaving me on the corner.

I look around at all the people. It’s busy for this time of night. I glance toward the arena and realize that there must be a concert. I decide to walk the few blocks to my car. I know my security is in tow somewhere behind me, but I ignore the guy.

As I cross the street, I see her. Ella. I’m transfixed as I watch her throw her head back and laugh. Yet, something is off because as she brings her head back down, she looks around her and pulls out her phone. I look to her left and see Elena. Why’s she here? I haven’t seen Elena in years. She looks so much older. No longer a teenager, but a woman.

I watch, unable to look away. Does she care this little? She’s just out having fun. The anger boils to the surface as I begin to cross the street. It’s then that I see the person. A cloaked person. In the dark crowded street, it just looks like someone wearing a hoodie or hooded coat, but that is most definitely a cloak. They are watching her. Or are they watching me?

A paranoia that I have never felt before begins to creep into my psyche. How long have they been watching us?

My steps quicken as I reach the other side. I intentionally knock into Elena. It's low-hanging fruit. I know she'll recognize me. And even though I'm pissed as fuck at Ella, I don't want her harmed.

"Aiden?" Elena's eyes widen as she says my name.

"Oh, hey! How are you?" I say, feigning excitement and surprise.

"Oh my gosh! Wow! I can't believe it!" she says, nudging Ella.

Ella looks at me with eyes that beg me to leave them alone. I give the subtlest shake of my head possible and her features morph into confusion. She looks around again.

"Were you at the concert?" Elena asks, motioning behind us. I've lost sight of the hooded figure in the darkness of the evening and surrounding crowd. Could it be a new member? I missed the initiation ceremony a few months ago because of an issue with a patient in a drug trial. It's unusual that I miss them.

I try to remember how many new members we had, was it four this time? Our pledge class was a large one, unusual in its size.

"Oh, no. I was actually just having dinner with my little brother, Hugh. He graduated from grad school today," I explain.

"I didn't know Hugh was graduating," Ella says softly.

"Estella Maria Garcia! How can you not remember that? Hugh always wanted to get his MBA. He must be so excited! I can't wait to finish grad school. I wish I'd started earlier," Elena rambles on without a care in the world, because she's young, and she doesn't have any worries, at least not like the ones Ella and I have.

“Right. I had forgotten,” she mumbles as she looks away from me and back at Elena. “Well, it was nice to see you, Aiden, but Elena has to leave early tomorrow morning, so we should get back.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” I say.

“No, really, that’s not necessary,” she says, giving me a look. She’s angry at me? What the fuck? I want to have it out with her right here on the corner of the block with thousands of concert-goers walking around us, but I don’t. Instead, I make up my mind that I will see them home safely, and after that...well, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“It’s no trouble. I’m just parked a few blocks down,” I say as I look around again. I decide to take the long way and follow the hordes of people. We stick with a group of twenty or so people. Elena peppers me with questions. I politely answer them.

“In here,” I say as we walk by a door. I scan a card, and we wait for the elevator. As I look out the window of the door, I see the hooded figure across the street. Fuck. Do they know?

Whoever it is, stands and watches me. I wonder how many other nights I missed being followed. Or is this the first? I want to alert my security guy, but I don’t want to draw attention. Not right now.

As soon as the elevator dings, I usher them inside. Once we get to my car, I hesitate. Could it be a trap? My security comes walking up behind us and I look over at him. He gives me a nod that the car is fine to drive and motions to his car that’s parked across from mine.

I open the passenger and back doors for Ella and Elena, and they get inside.

“Is that a bodyguard?” Elena asks as she looks toward the man.

“Sort of,” I state as I start the car.

“Damn, Aiden, high roller,” she says with a whistle. I chuckle.

“Where to?” I ask as I glance over at Ella.

She rattles off the address that I already know. I nod and pretend I know the place as Elena launches into more small talk.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

We make it back to her apartment without being followed.

“You should come up. Have a drink with us,” Elena suggests as I pull up to the front door of the building, my security pulling in behind us.

“I’m sure Aiden has things to—”

“I’d love to,” I say, cutting Ella off and giving Elena a warm smile. If Ella could shoot daggers from her eyes, she would most definitely be doing that right now.

“Oh great! It’ll give you two some time to catch up,” Elena says, giving her sister a not-so-secret wink.

I pull around to the side visitor lot and park. My security parks next to me. He sends me a text saying he’ll stay here as long as we’re only going upstairs.

With a heavy sigh of annoyance, I follow Ella and Elena into the building. Elena’s phone rings as we enter the apartment. I can only assume she has arranged for someone to call her at this very moment.

“Sorry, guys, I need to take this. Important school project thing. It was so good to see you, Aiden,” she says, giving me a hug before running off toward a guest room.

I look at Ella, and she glares back at me.

“You can go now,” she says, her lips purse in anger.

“I know,” I reply.

“Aiden...just...leave. If you wouldn’t hear me out before, then why are you going to bother with it now.”

I let out a long slow breath. This woman has the ability to get under my skin and completely infuriate me.

“Was I not allowed to be angry?” I say through gritted teeth.

“Not as angry as I am,” she retorts.

“What are you possibly angry at? The fact that you got to decide the fate of our child. The fact that you never even told me. The fact that you kept all of this to yourself even after we were...” I trail off because saying “back together” doesn’t exactly reflect whatever the fuck we were up until this week.

She takes two long strides until she’s standing in front of me, and then she rises on her tippy-toes. She still doesn’t reach my face, but she’s at neck height now. She narrows her eyes and jabs a finger at my chest.

“I,” she begins, pointing back to herself before jabbing me again in the sternum, “didn’t decide anything. I”—she motions back to herself and then pushes her finger against me again—“was told by my then boyfriend that he never wanted children and that I was selfish to want them. I”—she motions again before poking me in the chest—“had to nearly bleed out while delivering our daughter at seventeen weeks. And I”—she motions back to herself—“would have been all alone if it wasn’t for Elena.”

Her eyes are glistening with tears now, and I feel like the biggest fool and worst human on earth. Fuck.

“Yeah, you really screwed up, Thomas,” she says, using my last name as she did in med school. “You made assumptions, twice now. I wasn’t being selfish, you fucking prick. I was trying to tell you that I was pregnant. Do you think I wanted to be pregnant? No. It was the wrong time. But the way you screamed at me. The way you carried on that I was selfish to want that...how could I have told you? You made it one hundred percent clear that you didn’t want Angela. And you know what? I fucking did. I wanted that little girl. I wanted her because she was a part of me and a part of you. I held her in my fucking arms for two hours after I gave birth to her lifeless body. She was so tiny. Elena held me while I cried over ‘our’ dead daughter. It should have been you,” she seethes and walks the fuck away from me.

What. The. Fuck.

I storm after her, following her into her bedroom where she whips open a nightstand drawer and grabs a small beautifully carved box, and tosses it on the bed.

I look at it and then at her.

“Meet your daughter, Angela Janis,” she whispers as tears stream down her face.

The power of her words nearly knock me to the ground.

I look at the small wooden box as emotions flood me. I feel my tears falling down my cheeks as I take three steps and pull Ella against me. Her body sags in my arms, but I hold her up. I have to be the strong one. She’s carried this alone for so long.

I’m angry at her, but more than that, I’m angry at myself. I should have tried harder to contact her. I could have tried harder, but I was young and proud and stupid.

I let us fall to our knees on the floor as I keep her in my arms. We both sob, for the loss of our daughter, for the loss of what could have been had we not wasted so much

time.

“I’m so sorry, Estella,” I whisper in her ear as I kiss the side of her head. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s my fault,” she whispers. “I should have told you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I shake my head as I pull it away from hers, so we are forced to look at each other's tearstained faces. "It's no one's fault. We were young and stupid." The words come out without me thinking because they are true. I'm still raging inside, but I can't deny the fact that I still love this woman. Envisioning her going through this alone kills me inside. I can't be angry with her, knowing what she went through.

We both look over at the small wooden box and she reaches for it, bringing it between our bodies. We stare down at it.

"I think she would have had your nose. She was so tiny. I got to hold her for a while. It was the best and worst two hours of my life," she whispers.

I stare down at her. "So, the six months before you deployed...wasn't because of a delay in your assignment," I say, remembering what she told me when I'd seen her at the conference, and we talked about what we'd been up to since we last saw each other.

She shakes her head. "No one knows but you, Elena, and me."

"Fuck," I whisper as I push hair away from her eye. I lean forward and kiss her forehead. "I should have been the one there for you."

"It is what it is. Like you said. We were young, we both made mistakes."

"No more mistakes," I say.

She looks up at me.

“I love you, Ella,” I whisper. “I never stopped loving you.”

She swallows and wipes her nose with the arm of her shirt. I smile down at her. It’s such an Ella thing to do.

“I love you, too, you giant pain in my ass.”

I chuckle as I lean down and kiss her, our hands both holding our daughter’s remains.

Chapter 18

Ella

We lie in bed. We haven’t made love. We’re still in our clothes. Angela’s box still lies between us. We’ve spent hours talking after Aiden sent a message to his security team about a cloaked figure he had seen near us after the concert. I told him I had felt like we were being watched all day. Apparently, his security guard is now outside my front door.

I tell him about what I did after I left him. He told me how he looked for me and even sent a few letters when he figured out that I was stationed abroad. I frown because I never got those letters.

It’s late now, so late that it’s beginning to be early.

“Why did we waste so much time?” he asks as he runs a hand over mine.

“Because we’re young and stupid? I thought we established that already,” I muse.

He glares at me. “Not completely true.”

I shrug. “I don’t know. But I don’t want to waste any more time.”

“We won’t. I promise,” he says as he stares into my eyes. I smile as a weight I didn’t know was on my shoulders lifts for the first time in so long that I feel physically lighter.

“What now?” I ask.

“Now, we begin,” he says as he leans over and kisses me, but our kiss is cut short by his phone ringing.

He leans back and pulls it out of his pocket.

“Sebastian?” His voice is laced with concern and his brows furrow as he listens.

“Shit. Yeah, on my way.”

He hangs up and looks at me. I thought our discussions all night were serious, but this, whatever it is, is clearly much, much more serious.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, swallowing down my fears.

“I’m sorry, star. I need to go.”

He sits up and puts back on his shoes that he kicked off several hours ago.

“Where? What do you mean?”

He pauses as though considering what words he wants to use.

“The truth. No more lies,” I repeat something we’ve talked about tonight.

He nods. “My father and Sebastian’s and Conner’s fathers are on a yacht right now talking to Jason Lewis.”

I freeze mid-step toward my shoes. “Wait...what? As in, the president?”

“As in the president,” he confirms as he finishes putting on his shoes and stands.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. We’re going to check it out.”

“You’re what? Are you crazy?” I whisper-yell so we don’t wake Elena.

“This has got to end. If we can get video and audio, we can find out what is going on...”

“Aiden...I don’t think that’s a good idea. In fact, that’s a stupid idea.”

“It’s happening. We aren’t sending in our security team. It’ll draw too much attention. They’ll wait nearby. Conner owns a yacht at this same marina. We can get there without it being considered weird. We used to meet there on occasion for a night fishing expedition.”

“No, that’s a bad idea. You can’t...” I trail off as I watch him.

He steps up to me and takes my face in his hands. “Ella...I have to. We have to end this. We’ve been dragging our feet, trying to get every last shred of evidence...but at some point, we’ll need to pull the trigger.”

His words have my blood running cold. “Aiden...” I say slowly. “You aren’t going to...” I can’t finish the thought.

“I don’t plan on it. But I’m not going there without protection. There’s a small, minuscule part of me that hopes somewhere deep down my father loves me, but the wise part of me knows that he’d put a bullet between my eyes if I ever got in his way.”

I grimace. This part of Aiden’s life, I can’t relate to. My parents love me. They love my sister.

“I’m coming with you. It’s early, but we can say you have to be at a surgery or something and we can drop Elena at the train station.”

“No.” His face says it all. He’s not going to agree to this.

“If you don’t let me come, I will use my...powers...to find out where Conner’s yacht is and I will show up. So, take me, or see me later.”

He runs a hand through his hair, pulling on the ends in total frustration. “You drive

me absolutely insane! You know that, right?”

I smirk. “And that’s why you love me.”

“Ella, it’s not safe.”

“Then why are you going?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“Because it needs to be done and the three of us can do it with minimal risk.”

“Then the four of us can do it with minimal risk,” I state as I cross my arms in defiance.

“Goddamn it, woman! Sometimes I wish you were more...” He trails off as my eyebrow rises again, daring him to say the words.

“But I’m not.”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

He runs a hand over his face. “No, you aren’t. Fine. We leave now.”

I shrug and walk into my closet, changing into dark jeans and a black sweater. I walk out to Elena’s room and open the door.

She rolls over. “Ella?”

“Hey, we both have to be up early, so any chance we can drop you at the train station. We leave in like five minutes.”

I know Aiden is giving me the look that says we leave in five seconds, but he can deal with it.

“Oh, uh, sure. That’d be great. I packed up last night, so just let me rinse off.” Elena is many things, but vain she is not. As to her word, she’s ready in three minutes.

“Damn, I stand corrected,” Aiden mutters as we walk into the elevator with a bubbly Elena who is clearly ecstatic that Aiden spent the night.

Elena manages to talk the entire time, completely oblivious to the situation. She hugs us both at the train station, assuring us that by being two hours early, she’ll get plenty of time to get some schoolwork done. Thank God she’s a morning person.

It’s still only four in the morning and I’m wondering if we’ll make it in time to see or hear whatever is happening at this marina.

I watch the road as Aiden drives us. It doesn’t dawn on me until we are nearing

Annapolis that he has no security with him.

“Uh...how exactly did you ditch your security?” I ask.

He smirks. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You hired them, right?”

“I did.”

“And now you don’t want to use them for the exact purpose you hired them for?”

“It’s not like that.”

“OK, riddle me that?”

He turns his head toward me and I know he’s on edge the second I see the fire in his eyes. He’s preparing for battle.

“This...what we might see and hear tonight...we still took a vow. Our security will be there, just not at the marina,” he explains.

“But you let me come with you.”

He reaches over and takes my hand in his and brings it to his lips. “Someday, I’m going to give you the ultimate vow, Estella Maria Garcia. And that vow will be more important. If I can’t show you all of me, then I don’t deserve you. So yes, you can be here. But promise me one thing.”

“What?” I ask, trying not to swoon at his words or yell that that’s what I want too because I’m honestly nervous that he’ll change his mind and everything we’ve fought

for will dissolve as fast as it formed back together.

“You do as I say. If I say run, you run. If I say hide, you hide.”

“You do know that I have military training, right? Don’t underestimate me, Aid,” I say as I squeeze his hand.

“Never,” he whispers, pressing another kiss to the back of my hand.

“Is Conner’s yacht still parked at the same place?” I ask, trying to remember the marina. He got it when Aiden and I were in med school.

“Yes.”

I turn slightly in my seat and look at him. “Are you sure that Conner and Sebastian don’t hate me?”

Aiden’s head whips in my direction. “We’ve been over this. Why do you still think they do?”

I bite my lower lip and then release it. “Because...I left you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Aiden fights a smile and I quirk my head trying to figure out why he's smiling.

“They did make a lot of comments about you. Mostly in jest. They wanted to cheer me up but they just ended up pissing me off. They stopped, and honestly, they haven't said much since then. I think Conner's comment was, ‘Damn, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde just got taken to a new level.’”

The mention of their nickname for Aiden makes me laugh. “Wow.”

“It was a long time ago. Things change. People change, Ella. They aren't going to hold a grudge over something like that. God knows both of those men have slept with...well, a lot of women and had a lot of...indiscretions that haven't ended well.”

“Jesus, you make them sound like the town whores.”

Aiden laughs a real laugh, one that reminds me of what he was like when we were younger.

“To be fair...they sort of are.”

I start laughing until I snort, which only makes me laugh more. My snort has Aiden laughing. We're nearly in hysterics as we approach the marina. When the boats come into view, we both stop our laughter.

“I needed that,” Aiden says as he kisses my hand again, the same hand he hasn't let go of for the entire ride.

“Me too,” I admit. I shake my head at the myriad of emotions we’ve had in less than twenty-four hours. What the hell are we doing?

He parks far away from the main parking area. Opting instead to park by the marina’s restaurant. The parking lot is empty at this hour.

“Aren’t we going to be conspicuous parked over here?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, the morning staff will start to show up soon. The restaurant opens at seven.”

“Where are Conner and Sebastian?”

He pulls out his phone and calls them.

“We’re here. Right. Yep. Will do.”

Hanging up, he looks over at me. “They are already on board. Apparently, there is a suggested route to take so we don’t run into our fathers’ security or the Secret Service.”

“How many Secret Service are we talking about? Do you think they saw us come in here?”

“No. They said that’s the weird thing. It’s just a few guys by the slip and one on board. My dad doesn’t do the security thing. Conner’s dad has two guys on the slip. And Senator North has one guy there.”

“That’s weird,” I say slowly because it is weird. Typically, there are several cars of the Secret Service, at the very least.

“Something isn’t right,” Aiden murmurs.

“Do we stay here?”

“No, we’ll go over there,” he says after a few seconds.

We get out of the car and he ushers me the long way to a far pier and then doubles back to the slip where Conner’s boat is parked. Fortunately, it’s on the far side of the marina. Conner’s father has such a large boat that it’s parked in the farthest possible slip. No boats are near it. We’re forced to duck around several vessels on our way. There’s something exciting and sensual about the danger of it. It sounds weird, but it’s true. The way Aiden’s hand presses against my belly to keep me flush with a boat as we hide behind it. The way he guides me with his hand on the small of my back. The touches aren’t sexual, but they are intimate.

“Damn, that boat is huge,” I whisper as we board Conner’s boat and I get my first clear look at his father’s vessel.

“Theo likes his toys...extra large,” Aiden mutters as we make our way below deck.

There are no lights on and it’s eerily quiet, but when we get into the galley, I see Conner and Sebastian sitting on opposite sides of a small booth. Conner raises an eyebrow at me.

“I didn’t know we’d be a party of four this evening...er...morning,” he says.

“I...insisted. Maybe my military training will come in handy,” I reply as I look toward Aiden.

Aiden wraps an arm around my waist. “Where I go, she goes.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

Sebastian is the one that raises an eyebrow at that statement, but neither one says another word as we take a seat on a small bench across from them.

“So, what’s happening? Have you been able to hear anything?” Aiden says in a low voice.

Conner shakes his head. “No. It’s too far away. But they are definitely there with Jason. And whatever they are talking about is serious. My father keeps pacing, which is not a good sign.”

“Where’s our security at?” I ask.

“They parked at an apartment complex down the road. Bryce is pissed, but he understands,” Conner says.

I pull out my phone and roll my eyes as I bring up an app that lets you listen to things far away. It’s not as good as an observation device, but it certainly helps. I put in my headphones and place my phone on a ledge outside the window.

I can hear words and raised voices.

“Can you hear them?” Aiden asks.

I nod. “I can hear some things. This app isn’t great.”

I hold up a finger as I try to make out what they are saying. “Something about money. Someone is playing them?” I pause and strain to hear what Theo is saying. “Pawns?”

I..." I listen again. "I think he's worried about something."

I put a finger to my lips as President Lewis begins to speak. "Tracking it to him? Lewis is worried. There's evidence? Who else knows?" I keep repeating what I hear.

"He says they need to stop him. He—"

My words are cut off as a fireball explodes, throwing me back against the bench and Aiden. The sound is deafening. All of us put our hands up over our heads as the sounds of glass breaking surrounds us.

It feels like minutes pass, and everything moves in slow motion. I've been around battle before, but I've never felt an explosion that close. I can feel the heat licking at my skin even after the flames subside and retract back to the yacht...what was a yacht.

"Holy fuck!" Conner says as he slowly lowers his arms from around his face.

"We need to leave now," Sebastian says as he looks at us. "Now!"

We all scurry behind him and make our way out the long way. There's a flurry of activity now over by where Theo's yacht was parked. Conner texts what I assume is our security. The security guards scramble to try to get inside what is left of the yacht that now leans precariously to one side. There is no doubt that the four men on board along with the several security guards perished instantly.

We run and manage to get to a tree line. Once we are hidden in the brush, we stop.

"We need to get to Alexis and Vivienne. Someone is coming for us," Sebastian says.

"I'm sorry," I murmur as the realization that these three men just watched their

fathers perish before their eyes dawn on me. Even if they all hate their dads, it's still not something they should have had to see.

Aiden's jaw clenches. "We need to go. I'll meet you all back at the safe house."

And without further explanation, he takes my hand and looks me up and down. "Are you alright?"

I nod. "Are you?"

"Physically, I'll be fine." He says no more as we run toward his parked car. We don't speak as he drives away from the scene. Two miles down the road, I can hear sirens, and as we all turn onto the main highway, I can see flashing lights coming our way in the distance.

My eyes widen as I realize that I just witnessed a presidential assassination that also took out the head of a major shipping company, a senator, and a pioneering world-renown doctor. We most definitely need to figure out what to do next because the outside world is about to descend upon us. I'm just not sure we're ready for that.

Chapter 19

Aiden

I drive on autopilot. What the hell just happened? I just watched my father be blown to smithereens. Someone killed them. It doesn't make sense. And now I know there is no doubt that the president was involved in whatever was happening with those drugs and the girls.

I glance over at Ella. She's staring out the window, clearly in as much shock as I am. We need to figure out what just happened, but we also need alibis. I dial Sebastian

first.

“Go home. We all need to go home. Go to your city house. Same with Conner. Call him now. Have Alexis and Vivienne meet you there. We’ll have to meet at the safe house once we can have enough people see us to know we were at home. Get inside undetected, however you have to. We need to have not been at the marina tonight. And we’ll need to talk with Bryce.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

I hang up and watch my rearview mirror where the sun is rising behind us. A new day is dawning and so is a new power regime.

Silence fills my car as I park a few blocks from Ella's apartment. Fortunately, her building is connected to another building with an underground garage. We enter the back way through an alley, and she uses her lock-picking skills to get us inside.

"You're scary with some of your skills," I mutter as my mind continues to swim with the events of the early morning.

By the time we enter her apartment, the sun is rising over the city. She walks out to her balcony and puts her forearms on the railing. I join her and we watch the sun get higher until it's above the Capitol building. I replay everything that's happened since last night over in my head. My brain feels slow and jumbled, probably from the shock.

She finally reaches her hand over to mine. "I'm sorry."

I place my hand over hers. "It's not your fault."

"I know, but still..." She trails off and looks over at me.

"What now?" she asks.

"Fuck if I know."

She turns toward me. "We need to find who did it."

I nod slowly. “I know. I just...I need to process it all. I mean, fuck, the president was just killed.”

“I know. That’s why we need to process it all now,” she says adamantly.

I look back in her apartment. I have no idea where we are being listened to and that unnerves me, but what makes me even more uneasy is that I don’t know “who” is listening. I don’t have a fucking clue because all the prime suspects just died in a ball of fire. Forget that one of them was my father. Forget that two of them were my best friends’ fathers. Forget that one of them was a fraternity brother who was also president. I can’t begin to process it all right now. But she’s right. We do need to know because we could be next.

My phone pings with an incoming text.

Conner: Done. We need to talk.

Sebastian: Same. When?

I look to Ella. “Now,” I text back.

“We’re meeting at the safe house,” I explain.

“The safe house?”

I forget that she doesn’t know about it. “Vivienne has this place she uses, and we’ve taken it over for the purposes of our current...mission.”

“What about our security?” she asks as we head down to my car.

“They are currently...dissolving any information that might compromise us,” I

explain as we ride down the elevator.

She rolls her eyes. I lean down and kiss her, pushing her against the back wall of the elevator. I'm taking what I need from her. I want to get lost in her, even if just for a moment. At first, she doesn't respond, but a few seconds later, we're clawing at each other as our tongues tangle. The ding of the elevator has us slowly pulling away from the other.

"We'll finish that later," I announce as I grab her hand and head to my car. I take us the long way and park at a grocery store parking garage. I can see the Washington Monument in the distance between the buildings. Something about that is comforting. If it can withstand everything it's seen, then perhaps I can, too.

We're quiet as we walk. The shock hasn't worn off yet. I haven't even begun to unpack the events of the past twelve hours. I'm not sure if I ever will be able to unpack them. In the course of one day, I learned that I had a daughter who died, and I watched my own father die before my eyes. A part of me that still feels wonders if Sadie knows yet or Hugh.

I glance around us as I open the door to the apartment building. When we get to the apartment, Ella reaches out and grabs my hand. I glance over at her.

"Do you think...it's safe?" she asks as she motions to the apartment.

"I do."

She nods. I squeeze her hand, letting her know it's fine. She looks up at me and mouths, "I love you." I gaze into those caramel eyes.

"I love you more, star," I murmur before I give a knock on the door. A moment later, Vivienne opens it and ushers us inside.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

The atmosphere in the room is heavy. Sebastian is sitting in an old recliner with Alexis in his lap. Her hand strokes the back of his neck as she looks at him with worry in her eyes. Vivienne is scurrying around the kitchen making coffee. Conner's staring out the window toward the Washington Monument.

"I have the shipping records," Conner says without turning around. "Not that it matters now. My father was approached by Jared, years ago. For his discretion, he was paid triple his normal fees. And apparently, given free product samples. I think that's how the president got involved as well as your fathers. They wanted to take what they wanted, whenever they wanted, and that drug let them do it, except when the drug didn't work, and we all know what happened then." Conner's face is a mixture of disgust and rage.

"How did you get the files?" I ask as I look back at Vivienne who's watching Conner from the kitchen.

"Bryce...he came through with some emails for us," Conner replies as he slowly turns to us. Conner looks at me and I know immediately that there's more.

"What else?" I question as I step toward him, Ella's hand still firmly in my grasp.

"We know where Tina is," he adds.

I swallow. "Is she..." I can't finish the statement because part of me isn't sure I want to know.

"She's alive," Sebastian answers. "She lives in Vermont." He pauses. "I have her

phone number.”

We all look at each other.

Vivienne sets the old phone from the side table in the living room on the coffee table in the middle of the room. “Do you boys want privacy for this call?”

“No,” Sebastian replies as Alexis moves to sit on the arm of the chair. “You are all part of this story now. Whatever she has to say, you should hear it, too.”

Conner pulls up a chair and sits in front of the coffee table, his elbows resting on his thighs as he stares at the phone. It feels full circle. Here we are nearly a decade after that night, and we’re going to bring all those memories back to the surface. A part of me feels guilty about calling Tina. What if she doesn’t want to remember? What if she doesn’t even want to speak to us?

“She may not—”

“I know,” Sebastian says. “But we need to at least ask. I don’t want to cause her more pain, but we need to know. We need closure on this.”

He picks up the phone and holds out his hand to Conner, who passes him his burner phone with a phone number on the screen. He dials it and puts the phone on speaker.

The phone rings once, twice, three times. Sebastian goes to hang up when a woman answers.

“Hello?”

We all look at each other. It’s her.

“Tina?” Sebastian asks.

“This is she.”

He clears his throat. “My name is Sebastian North...I—”

“I know who you are,” she answers, her voice a whisper.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m here with Conner Sterling and Aiden Thomas. We had a few questions for you.”

“Go on,” she replies after a few seconds.

“That night...in the woods...you were at a frat party beforehand, yes?”

“I was.”

“Which frat was it? Do you remember?”

“TOD.”

“Did you leave with someone?” Conner asks.

She sighs. “It was a really long time ago. I never got a chance to thank you all. I didn’t even know your names. Years later, I saw you on television, Congressman North, and I recognized you.”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:35 am

“You don’t have to thank us,” Sebastian says, “we were just glad we found you.”

“I didn’t leave with anyone that I can remember. In fact, the last thing I remember was talking to a man at the party. I was bumped from behind and I remember feeling a pinch on my arm. He was kind and pulled me aside. We started talking...and that’s all I remember.”

“Do you know who the man was? Was he a brother at the frat?”

“No...I mean, yes, but he wasn’t in college at the time,” she says. “I know who he is.”

We all look at each other and wait.

“I...men came to the hospital. I was offered more money than I knew what to do with. All I had to do was transfer schools to Vermont and never speak of anything to do with the party again.”

“Who was the man?” Conner growls. I glare at him, and he glares back at me. Conner lacks patience.

“President Lewis,” she whispers. “Did you hear?”

We all look at each other because no one has had time to check the news yet.

“No, what?” I ask, playing dumb.

“President Lewis was killed in a boating accident today. His friend’s yacht blew up. Sounds like a horrible accident.”

Chapter 20

Ella

The conversation doesn’t last much longer after Tina announces the news about the president. When Sebastian finally hangs up, everyone is silent for a long minute. I can only imagine that each of these men is processing a hell of a lot right now.

“Jason was one of the alumni, the ones that showed up at parties to get girls,” Conner states with a look of disgust on his face.

“So were all our fathers,” Aiden adds with a frown. “All those fucking times our dads said they were just dropping by for old times’ sake, fuck!” He pounds his fist on a side table. “We were so fucking stupid not to see this! They were raping women! Right before our eyes, they preyed on young women, and we didn’t even notice!”

“Shhh!” Vivienne says as she looks toward the neighboring apartment.

Aiden glares at her but sits down and runs a hand through his hair rather than speaking again. “Anyone turn on their phones yet?” he asks.

“We all did for a hot minute, but as soon as we left for this place, we turned them back off,” Sebastian replies as he looks to Conner who nods.

“We need to get somewhere to turn them on. People are likely trying to reach us,” Conner says. “We need to deal with this situation.”

“A situation?” Aiden growls. “Are you fucking serious? This is a goddamn

catastrophe! We didn't expect this. Hell, our entire plan is totally fucked up now. We can assume Jason was our fourth elite member, but what about the fifth? And we haven't finished questioning our other brothers. Could there be more of them involved? We've questioned our pledge brothers. They are definitely not part of this. And we've asked everyone on the council. I can't imagine other brothers not on the council are involved. At least, they wouldn't know they were involved. The elite likely used a number of us as pawns in their game. I'm sure whoever is behind this hired people, such as the guy who followed Michelle and the guy who came to the lab."

"What about Admiral Blake, Jared, Adam, and Damien?" Vivienne asks.

"We have enough to take them all down," Aiden assures her. "We just need to tie up the loose ends and pull together the evidence."

"I can work on that," Vivienne says as she heads into the guest room and comes out with a whiteboard. She writes their names down one by one. We're going to have a long night ahead of us. Conner groans.

"Viv, now is not the time," Conner grumbles.

"You three need to go deal with..." She trails off and gives them all a sympathetic look.

"No," Conner says as he walks over to her and gives her a possessive kiss. I feel myself blushing as I look away. Aiden's eyes meet mine, and suddenly it's not the blush making me feel hot. How can he look at me at a time like this? Adrenaline. I chalk it all up to adrenaline.

When Conner finally pulls back, Vivienne places a hand on his chest. "I'm serious. I have everything here. I can easily write an article that incriminates both the dead and

the living if that's what we want. We can make it seem like a crime amongst powerful friends and leave it at that if you want. I won't get into the brotherhood or TOD." I can see Aiden and Sebastian glance at Conner, but his face tells it all. He trusts Vivienne with his life, and so should we.

"OK," Aiden agrees. Sebastian nods.

"Then, go, and let us women sort out the details. We're all good at research, this shouldn't be rocket science. Plus, it's all here. We just have to put it together," Vivienne explains.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

I watch these three powerful men hesitate. That's when I know. Beyond a show of a doubt, these men love us. They don't want us to be left unsafe and unprotected.

Aiden surprises me when he pulls a gun out of the waistband of his pants and sets it on the table, pushing it to me.

I pick it up and stare at him. He motions to the gun. "You know how to use it."

I roll my eyes. "Yes, I know. I was literally trained by the U.S. government to kill people, so I think we're good here. Now, please go deal with things."

He nods and steps toward me. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Conner kissing Vivienne and Sebastian hugging Alexis. Aiden takes my chin in his hand and forces me to focus on him. "Do not leave here unless it becomes unsecure. We will come back to you."

"OK," I whisper, suddenly feeling unsure.

He leans down and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. "I promise you. We've got a second chance, Ella. And I'm not throwing that away."

"Be careful," I reply as he lets go of me and I step back.

The three of them give us all a final look, and then they leave, shutting the door quietly behind them.

"That was..." Alexis starts.

“Fucking intense,” Vivienne finishes.

“Have they always been like that?” Alexis asks me. I laugh. Alexis is young. She reminds me a bit of my sister, and I know that I’m going to be good friends with her based solely on that.

“Yes. Those three are...well, they are what they are,” I state not sure how to explain the men that just left us tucked away in this apartment.

“They won’t leave the brotherhood, will they?” Vivienne says with a sigh as she sits down in front of her whiteboard and opens her laptop.

“Nope,” I reply. “Loyalty is part of their souls. There’s a reason they all joined a secret society that promised them power, wealth, and prestige. That’s who they are. We can’t change that. But deep down, they all crave those things for a reason. The losses in their lives...shaped them and made them better men. I just don’t think they see that.”

“Well, I suppose we need to show them,” Alexis ponders as she looks at the whiteboard.

“I have a feeling that’s easier said than done,” Vivienne mutters.

“So,” I say, clapping my hands together, “I do believe we have a few loose ends to tie up. Let’s bring down a few CEOs, a crime boss, and an admiral, shall we?”

Vivienne laughs. “Now that, is my area of expertise.”

She tosses some documents on the table.

“It’s all here,” she states as she looks at the dozen or so manilla file folders. “I have

emails, memorandums, secret messages from the dark web, financial transactions, and calendar events. As Conner noted, we had Bryce using a source to pull additional information from the dark web and also from his dad's company's server. We can conclusively tie it all together. Jared, Jason, and Adam were friends with Damien. They likely shared a penchant for drugging ladies to use as they pleased. That sick bond turned into a business relationship when Jared's company stumbled upon something they could use, and Damien suddenly needed to launder some funds. It looks like Vance got brought in to assist with hiding the funds. If they were having to make a product for the military, then they would be receiving money and also spending more. It's the perfect way to launder. Who's going to figure that out? Since Adam's and Jared's companies were the only ones that had this drug and microneedle to deliver it, the military by default had to hire them. They won a bid based on no other company having that exact combination. By bidding together, they ensured their farce would be effective. Meanwhile, they had free range with the drug for their extracurricular activities. They essentially had free test subjects. I think the early version of the drug didn't work so well. Girls ended up dying, except for Tina. And recently, they needed to dispose of some girls because they were remembering things."

"Damn, you are a good investigative journalist," Alexis says with a low whistle.

"I have my moments," she says with a wink as she pulls out her laptop. "I've written most of the article already. Who wants to proofread it?"

Alexis and I both raise our hands and Vivienne smiles as she sets her computer down for us to see.

I look from one to the other. "Ladies, no matter what happens from here out, I want you to know it's been a pleasure. I always wanted Conner and Sebastian to find their soulmates. It makes everything complete."

“Let’s just hope we can finish this with all of us intact,” Vivienne says with a frown.

I pat her arm. “We can sure as hell try.”

Chapter21

Aiden

As we sit on Sebastian’s bench at the Tidal Basin, we all turn on our phones together. We’d spent the walk here talking. All three of us are still in shock, but we’re also ready to finish this.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

All our phones show missed calls and text messages.

“And so it begins,” Sebastian states dryly as he makes a phone call. Conner goes next. I look down and see texts from Sadie and Hugh. I call Sadie who shares the news of my father’s death. She’s upset, but not nearly as upset as she should be pretending to be, for the sake of appearances, of course. She’s arranging burial details and will let me know about the funeral tomorrow. I roll my eyes at her fakeness. She never loved my father. She just wanted his money and his name. I know from the prenup that she’ll inherit a sizeable amount. Even Hugh will get some money. I don’t even care about any of it at this point. I hang up with her and look to Conner.

He shrugs. “My grandfather is flying in for the funeral, which will be next week.”

Sebastian gets off his call and glances over at us. “My mother is a goddamn mess. Harriet and Jay are trying to figure out the press nightmare. Mom wants Dad to lie in state but obviously the president will be doing that. Anyhow, the next week is going to be a shitshow. I say we wait to have Vivienne print everything until after the funerals.”

Both Conner and I nod in agreement. “I should go see Chuck. I want to tell him in person,” I say.

“That’s probably a good idea. Maybe he knows more. Just...be careful, don’t tell him too much. I’m sure the old guy will be upset enough. We don’t need to drag him into this,” Conner says.

“I agree,” I state as I slide my phone in my pocket. It’s time to visit the last father

figure I have.

* * *

“He’s out back,” Gertie says with a warm smile. I have always liked her. She’s older and I know she’ll retire soon, but she’s been with Chuck for years now, helping to take care of his property since his wife passed away.

“Thanks, Gertie.”

I walk out back and follow the paths along the garden. Chuck has always had a thing for plants. The first time I came to his home on a clifly shoreline along the Chesapeake Bay, I was shocked by the variety of plants in his yard. Each species is marked with a placard. His fascination has always been in the medicinal uses of plants. I survey all his thyme as I follow the pebble pathway toward the cliff. I remember his fascination with thyme and how it could be used for good or bad when it came to the human body.

He has other plants in his greenhouse, some of which I’ve never heard of, but he always prided himself in discussing their medicinal values of them with me. There’s one I remember, *euphorbia resinifera*, an evergreen found in Morocco. I recall a funny story Chuck told me about how his hand became temporarily paralyzed while he was grafting the plant one day. I try to remember why that plant name seems familiar to me, but I can’t put my finger on it. Shaking my head, I keep following the trail. I smile at the memories of spending time here in college.

That’s where I first met Chuck. He was a faculty member who encouraged me to join TOD, even though I had already argued with my father about it. I didn’t want to follow in his footsteps. I wanted to be an oncologist. I didn’t want to run drug trials. Even in med school, Chuck had helped me to deal with the pressures from my father. In the end, when he pointed out that the drug trials were the heart of the fight against

cancer, I couldn't deny that point. And it changed the course of my career. Strings were pulled, networking happened, and suddenly I was at the National Institute of Health working on drug trials.

I still like to think that my hard work helped me get to where I am in my career, but as Ella pointed out recently, my TOD connections likely played a bigger role.

He is sitting on the bench overlooking the cliff. I've always hated that bench. There's no railing in front of you. One wrong turn or stumble and you would fall several stories down to your death on the rocky coastline.

"Chuck," I say as I walk across the sprawling grass field between the gardens and the cliff.

He turns and waves at me.

I make my way toward him and take a seat, wrapping my jacket tightly around me. The wind is wicked today even though the skies are clear.

"It's a cold day," I mutter.

"It is." He pats my leg. "I'm sorry to hear about your father and the others."

"The funerals are planned for next week. After all the presidential formalities are addressed, of course. Caroline wants Montgomery to lie in state at the Capitol, but the Speaker wants the president there alone for a few days."

"Yes, yes. So many formalities to address. Pomp and circumstance..." He trails off as he looks out at a sailboat in the distance. It's cruising fast with the wind behind its sails.

“I still can’t believe they are gone,” I admit with a small shake of my head.

“It was time...I mean, they can’t live forever. It’s a shame how it happened, but now you boys have your chance to shine,” he says as he glances over at me.

I furrow my brows at his words, all his words.

“You should head home. There are so many things to do,” he says as he stands with his wooden cane, the one with an eagle carved as the handle.

“Chuck?”

“Yes, Aiden?”

I stand. He’s shorter than he used to be. When I first met him, he was such a tall imposing figure, but now, he’s an old man, his age showing throughout his weathered body.

I don’t know when exactly the full picture comes to me. Somewhere between my walk through his garden and standing up from the bench, it’s dawned on me. I don’t know how I’ve been so blind. He’s the fifth member of the elite. A million memories, a thousand conversations play through my head.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

“Don’t give your father another thought, Aiden. He wants the power he can’t have.”

“Aiden, I need you to tell me exactly what your father said about that.”

“Aiden, let’s have lunch. You can tell me about the results of your latest trial.”

“You aren’t serious with that woman, are you? You need to focus on your future. Wives can come later.”

“Thyme has chemical compounds that can cause paralysis.”

“You know, my father was a famous botanist. He worked for a dictator.”

“It’s not the king that has all the power, Aiden. It’s the kingmaker. That is who pulls all the puppet strings.”

“Ah...you see. You finally see,” Chuck says with a wink. A fucking wink. My world turns upside down. Was everything a lie? Did he manipulate the entire thing?

“What year did you join the brotherhood?” I ask.

“It’s not what year that matters. It’s why. Choose your questions carefully, my boy.”

“Why did you join?” I entertain his request.

“Because my father was a coward. He made a secret society of TOD brothers that he liked. He was one of the founding TOD brothers. But I’m sure I told you that.”

“You did,” I say.

“He studied chemistry and botany. He had high aspirations. He didn’t want to end up a poor factory worker. He worked hard and then, during the first world war, he made friends with a man whose father ran a country. They invited him to work there, to help them learn about chemicals as weapons. He made friends with men that were smart and got what they wanted but weren’t kings or rulers. He wanted to be those men. He wanted to control men perceived as powerful. But he never accomplished his goal. But I did.”

The words have the air leaving my lungs. It suddenly feels like the world lacks oxygen.

“Oh, Aiden. You touched the bench. It will be a shame when you fall. But it happens. Such a sad ending to such a sweet, little family.”

I look at my hands. Shit. He’s poisoned me. My mind starts to think of what I can do to stop it.

“You can’t stop it, my dear boy. But just think. You were the perfect little kingmaker while you lived. You helped me find the right combination of chemicals. And then, I just had to get Jared and Adam to realize it. It was smart of you to date that doctor. She came of use later for me so we could test some more in secret. Vance got what he wanted, but really, he was just providing me with what I needed. And they were all so easy to control. They all wanted money, power, and prestige. That is in fact what they signed up for, now, wasn’t it? Even your fathers wanted that. They also wanted bad things though. Those poor girls. But then, I had to do it. That’s how I got on Damien’s good side. And Damien controls so much. He has the ins with other leaders. So naturally, I could control so many countries, industries, everything. I could get whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it.”

I can feel my limbs going numb. I can feel my phone buzzing in my pocket, but my hand doesn't work right, I can't pull it out. I can't make a call. I feel my legs start to buckle.

"I'm the king, you see. And the whole world is my kingdom."

"You are crazy, old man," I manage from beneath my clenched jaw that isn't working properly. My fuzzy mind tries to figure out what he's given me. What have I absorbed through my skin?

It dawns on me as my body convulses and I fall to the ground, inches from the edge of the cliff. Strychnine...the tree. He has a tree in his greenhouse. Jesus! I'm a dead man walking.

"I think that's quite subjective, now, don't you? Oh, don't worry, you won't likely die from the poisoning. It was such a small dose. But that fall...you won't make it." He peers over the edge and tsks. "A shame. I did so want you to be my protégé. You could have been one of the greats, just like me. But you and your little friends spent too much time trying to figure things out. You saw too much. They'll have to disappear too. It's really quite annoying. Now, I have a whole new president to break in, and the younger brothers are not ready for the roles I need them to have. I've already had to dispose of the ones who failed to get me what I needed. Of course, they had unfortunate overdose deaths in their dorm rooms. I should have hired professionals for all my needs. You've ruined so much of my work. I think killing you and your friends will be the most fulfilling deaths I've orchestrated."

He takes his cane and pushes me. I can barely move, but he manages to get my body to the edge. I try to think of a way to stop him, but he's beyond the point of rationale.

"You should have remembered your vows. You shouldn't put yourself first," he sneers as he takes his cane and presses it to my chest.

I manage to use my arm to knock the cane, and using the only control I have left in the muscles, I twist and push it with the little body strength that I have left. “It’s a good thing I put my brothers first, you selfish prick,” I mutter as I roll slightly to the edge.

“Aiden!” he cries out. I don’t see him lose his balance from the angle I lie on the ground, but I feel the cane give, and then I see him roll over the side of the cliff. He grabs for me, but my arm can’t move enough to get him. I close my eyes, unable to watch the man I viewed as a second father falls to his death, unable to look into the eyes of the man who has likely signed my death warrant.

I can feel the tears fall from my eyes. I need to wash my hands. Anyone who touches me or that side of the bench could die.

“Aiden!” I hear Conner yelling and then I see him, Sebastian, Alexis, Vivienne, and Ella.

“Stop!” I manage to say as they approach. I look to Ella. “He put strychnine on the bench. It’s on my hands. He said the dose was minimal, but...” I trail off because even a small amount can kill a person.

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

“Fuck!” Ella looks around, grabs her purse, dunks it in a nearby fountain, and douses the bench and then my hands. “We need soap. Get me soap and water.”

“Chuck...” I whisper.

Conner leans over the edge. “Fucking hell. I tried to text you. We figured it out...well, Alexis, Viv, and Ella figured it out. We tried to warn you.”

My phone buzzing.

Ella leans down, tears in her eyes. “Lie still. An ambulance is on its way.”

“Are there others?” I ask.

They shake their heads. “He took care of them all, except for Vance, Adam, Jared, and Damien,” Sebastian says as he drops to his knees by my head. “We were the last ones standing in his way. He was going to wipe the slate clean. Start fresh.”

“I know. He’s...was insane. He had connections all over the world. He was running multiple countries.”

“We know. We know. Rest. Where would he have kept the solution?” Ella asks, her doctor brain working in overdrive.

I hear an ambulance in the distance.

“Do not die on me! You hear me! We didn’t just go through all of that for you to

fucking die on me,” Ella yells. I open my eyes and see tears streaming down hers. I want so badly to take them away.

“I’m sorry, star,” I manage to whisper.

“Fuck no, don’t even say that. You are not going to apologize. And you are not going to die,” she says, her bossy tone making me want to laugh, which is absurd because I feel horrible.

I can hear men shouting. I know the ambulance is here.

She leans down and kisses my forehead. “I love you, you pain in the ass.”

“I love you, too,” I whisper before she is forced out of the way as medics work on me. I stay awake the entire way to the hospital, but at some point, with Ella sitting by my side, I lose consciousness.

They say death is peaceful, and I believe that. I don’t have a care in the world. I feel like I’m floating through a black void. It’s warm and dark. It’s like getting a decade worth of rest all at once.

Until I hear the beeping. It’s far away at first, but the closer it gets, the more annoying it is. I don’t want to hear it. Then, the light starts to appear. I try to retreat back into the dark void, but I can’t run or move. The light is rushing toward me and then...I take a breath, my eyelids opening. I look around. I’m in the hospital. A private room. I look to my left. Ella is curled into a ball in a chair, her hand reaching over and touching my arm. She’s fast asleep. I don’t want to wake her.

I look across the room. There are more chairs. Conner is sleeping in one, Vivienne next to him. And then Sebastian is on some sort of pull-out chair with Alexis curled up on his lap. I look past them to a window. It looks to be early morning. The sun is

still low in the sky, lighting it up with oranges and pinks.

As I look at my brothers, memories flash like fireworks in my brain. The first time we met at college. Knowing how strange it was that we hadn't met before that because our fathers had been brothers. Making the vow to each other. The night we found Tina on the trail. And a million mundane nights in between those moments and after. All the evening drinks we've shared. All the ball games we've gone to. All the laughter, pain, and love between us. Things we'd never speak to one another, yet feel so strongly that it invades every fiber of our being. We are more than just friends, more than just brothers. It's almost like we are one entity, breathing and moving together. We can have entire conversations without speaking a word. We can share experiences and never revisit them, yet know the other remembers them just as you do. It's visceral. It's human.

My mother once told me something when I was young. At the time, it didn't stick with me, but later, I remembered it. I played it over and over in my mind as one of our final "good" talks together.

She had visited so many places in the world and seen suffering and joy and every human emotion in between, and she said to me that it all boiled down to one thing. Happiness. She said we may all divide each other into groups, but at the end of the day, if you break down the human experience, we all just want one single thing, which is to be happy. For most people, happiness means they and their loved ones are healthy and happy, but what happiness means varies greatly amongst people, and we live in those differences when we should be living in the commonality of our existence.

There are so many emotions being portrayed at this moment that will live with me forever, fear, sorrow, and even happiness. But what stands out the most is we're free. For the first time in our entire lives, we are the captains of our own ships. We make the rules. We get to decide our fates. We are no longer slaves to the system that we

didn't create but were forced to be part of for many years.

For the first time in my life, I take a deep breath and feel freedom, real, true freedom. Is this what life feels like? The weight of my entire life bearing down on me is gone with the end of others' lives. It makes no sense. As a doctor, I shouldn't feel this way. Every human loss should weigh heavily upon me. I've sworn an oath to try to save every human I can, yet I haven't, I've done the exact opposite.

"Aiden," Ella cries out, her voice breaking my thoughts. Suddenly, everyone is awake and surrounding me. Ella's face is in front of mine. I can see the tearstains on her cheeks, and I hate that.

"I guess I'm gonna make it," I say as I look down at the IV in my arm.

"Thank God!" she says and leans down and hugs me as she cries. "They said if you made it through today, you would be alright."

"I have a feeling whatever he dosed me with wasn't going to kill me. He didn't think it would. He probably made it himself," I say.

"What do you mean?" Conner asks.

I tell them what happened, everything Chuck said, and how he died.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

They tell me what they found out, and how they ended up coming to try to rescue me. By the end of the tales, and a nurse visit, we're all caught up with the entire story.

Vivienne sits down. "I...don't think I should print anything. I mean, fuck, who the hell would even believe all of this. It's insane!"

Conner laughs. "The craziest things usually are."

"What now?" Alexis asks as she looks around at all of us.

"Now, we do good. Only good."

"Only good?" Ella asks with a raised eyebrow.

"OK, mostly good," I correct myself.

"Let's start with you getting out of here. The rest, we'll figure out later," she says as she leans down and kisses me.

I don't know where we go from here. Hell, I don't know what the world holds for us. But I do know that even Chuck didn't realize who he had brought together. He never knew the pact we made to each other that night, and he certainly didn't know what we were capable of. And that tells me just how powerful we are.

We don't need power, wealth, or prestige. All we need is each other.

Epilogue – Aiden and Ella

Aiden

I pat my pocket. My mother's ring is in there. I'm doing what I should have done so many years ago. Some men claim they are nervous when they propose. I'm not nervous at all. I'm focused on what I'm about to do. I want everything to be perfect for her.

I look at the garden, taking in my surroundings.

It's been six months since my world was completely flipped upside down. Six months of having Ella back in my life and God have I needed her. After the pomp and circumstance of burying our fathers, Conner, Sebastian, and I disappeared for a few weeks with our women. Conner rented a yacht in the Bahamas and took us around deserted islands. We laughed, drank, and forgot about the world back home. It was needed. We wanted to be gone when Vivienne's article was published. But we were tracked down in Nassau by our brother Kevin LaCosta. He'd come to chat with us as an FBI agent.

We found a small bar off the beaten path and sat at a table on a deck overlooking the water. He asked questions. We answered questions. And when we finished, he knew most of the story.

He had looked at us in awe, asking how we were able to keep this to ourselves while figuring out all the missing pieces.

I remember looking at Conner and Sebastian knowingly. "Because that's what brothers do," I answered.

Kevin is a good guy, don't get me wrong, but that level of trust is not something he could understand, not now, and not ever. I admit, I still struggle with trust issues, but the five other people sitting at that table had been through hell and back with me, and

I know to this day, any of them would have my back if I asked.

He had explained to us that the FBI was investigating Jared, Adam, Vance, and Damien based on Vivienne's article. She had sent Kevin all the files that she had used to piece together the connections between the criminals. Kevin, seeing that these were TOD members and brothers, decided that a visit to discuss things in person was warranted. After some consideration, we agreed.

He had left, stating that it was likely these four men would be taken into custody in the coming days. He had offered us protection, even asked if we wanted to join the witness protection program, but we declined. Do those four men have friends? Yes. Could they come after us? Yes. But we have friends, too. And we sure as fuck won't let the enemy win. It took us a long time to get over Chuck's betrayal. When Kevin visited, it was still a sore subject. Hell, it might always be one. But we had left that day, knowing we wanted to get as far away from it all as possible, at least for a little while, and we did.

Now, we're back. Sebastian is wrapping up his Senate campaign. After helping Sebastian amend and improve the transportation bill, Conner's lobbying firm has become the hottest ticket in town. And me, I did something crazy. I talked to the men that oversee my program and others to consider a new program. They agreed after months of discussions. And now, I run a medical trial program aimed at cutting-edge treatments for children with cancer. It's a way to honor both my mom's and Sebastian's sister's legacies. And I was able to put in a good word for Ella to take over my previous position.

Are we still the Kingmakers of Kensington as Vivienne had once dubbed us in an article? Yes. But this time, we've made our own kingdom, and we've earned our rule over it.

It took some negotiating, but Ella moved into my home last month. She spent the tail

end of the summer planting a garden. We took some of Angela's ashes and buried them there. We've talked about starting a family for weeks now. And I feel it's time to take the first step.

It's a beautiful sunset tonight. I couldn't have picked a better ambiance for what I'm about to do. This week, Ella was away for a conference, and I added a small patio with lights hanging overhead and wisteria climbing up the columns of a pergola. I told her to go look at a surprise I have for her in the garden.

I look out the back windows and watch as she takes it all in. I smile as she reaches out to touch the petals of roses that I've had planted along the edge of the patio. She's perfect, and she's all mine.

Ella

I'm tired from traveling, but when Aiden's eyes lit up on my arrival home and he told me he had a surprise, I suddenly felt very much awake. He has that effect on me. I can be having my worst day, but as long as he's there, it's alright.

I drop my things and walk down to the garden. I smile as I see the pergola, new plants, and a patio. We'd been talking about this for weeks. I know he's busy, so the fact that he made this happen makes me smile.

I feel the soft rose petals as I watch the sun begin to sink in the distance. The sky blazes with reds, pinks, and purples. It's beautiful.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

My life is so different than it was a year ago. It's no longer all about work. Now, I come home to Aiden. We've even talked about having a family. He's embraced my family, and we've had them come to visit us.

I finally admitted to my parents about my pregnancy loss. It was hard to talk about, but in some ways, it's helped me to heal. I don't have to hide Angela anymore. She was a part of my life, and I can celebrate her for the brief time she was with me. Aiden has been so supportive of me, as I finally deal with the emotions that I'd locked away for years. He even encouraged me to see his therapist. It's helped. All of it has helped.

For a while, I wasn't sure we could lead a normal life. Everything that happened was so intense. But somehow, we've made a new life in the middle of the storm. And now that things have calmed down, I am starting to envision what our future could look like. Could we actually have it all? Could we be a family? I want that. I want it even more than I did as a younger woman, filled with passion, waking up in Aiden's arms each morning. Now, I look at him and I want to grow old with him. I want to argue with him, and then kiss and make up. I want it all. I just hope he does too.

I hear him walking up behind me. His strong arms come around my waist, and he kisses the top of my head.

"It's beautiful," I say as I lean back against him. "Thank you."

He turns me around and I gaze up into his blue eyes. Somehow, when we have moments like this alone, the entire world around us disappears. All my stress, sorrow, anger, and anxiety leave. It's just Aiden and me. I hope it will always be like this.

“You’re more beautiful than any flower or sunset,” he says as he brushes the back of his hand over my cheek.

Suddenly, he drops to one knee. I start to ask if he’s alright, but when he pulls out a small velvet box, my mind goes blank.

“Ella, I should have done this years ago. I should have made things right between us. I want to spend the rest of my life supporting you, being by your side, and sharing a life with you. I know my life can be...a lot. And I know this year has been...eventful. But these last few months have made me realize that I can’t live without you, and I don’t want to. I want us to be a family. I want to have kids with you. I want to grow old with you and sit in those wooden rockers under that pergola and watch the sunset. I love you, my star. I always will. Marry me, Ella,” he says.

I don’t wait for my name to leave his mouth. I jump into his arms, and we go tumbling to the ground, both of us laughing as I lean down and kiss him.

He pulls back with a laugh. “Is that a yes?”

I poke his side. “Yes, that’s a hell yes!” I yell.

He sits up, and with me on his lap, he places the ring on my finger.

“It was my mother’s,” he says softly. “I know she’d love you just as much as I do, well, maybe not as much, but she’d love.”

I giggle and sigh as I look at the beautiful diamond ring. “I love it. I wish I could have met her.”

He looks into my eyes. “She’s here. Angela’s here. They’re all here with us.”

I nod, a single tear escaping and running down my cheek.

He wipes it away with his thumb and kisses me as the sun sets and the evening's colorful display gives way to night. The world may keep on spinning, life might keep giving us challenges, but as long as Aiden and I are together, I know we'll make it because our vow to love each other is more powerful than any other promise we could ever make.

Epilogue - Sebastian and Alexis

Alexis

The cherry blossoms are in full bloom. It's my favorite time of year in D.C. The weather has started to turn into the perfect spring medley of not-to-hot and not-to-cold. I hold on to Sebastian's arm as we walk from the Jefferson Memorial around the Tidal Basin.

He squeezes my arm and I look up at him. He looks...content.

I smile up at him and he returns my smile and then leans down and kisses me. "Let's go sit," he suggests.

I nod. "Wonderful idea, Senator," I say with a wink. He laughs as we continue toward his bench at a leisurely pace like we don't have a care in the world, and compared to nearly a year ago, we don't. So much has changed. I have one year of law school left. I don't work at his office any longer; instead, I've been interning with a law office that does a lot of pro bono work with health care issues. Since winning the election, Sebastian seems...settled. He assures me that he has no plans of running for the presidency. He works hard but also wants to enjoy his life, and he has most definitely committed to that. We've started traveling all over the world, seeing some of those monuments he once mentioned to me. I permanently moved in with him after he won

his Senate seat, although it was more of a formality at that point as I had spent nearly every night there with him.

I do miss living with Erin and Whitney, but they visit a lot. Erin is even starting to warm up to Sebastian.

My parents and little sister met Sebastian at Thanksgiving when he hosted his mother, my family, Conner and Vivienne, and Aiden and Ella. I was surprised his mother came, but he has slowly begun to make amends with her. My sister, Amelia, was completely enamored with Sebastian and his house. She's even talked about going to college in D.C. My parents are skeptical still because of our age difference, but they are coming around. Sebastian surprised us all on my spring break a few weeks ago by flying my entire family down to the Bahamas for a long weekend after my parents said they always wanted to go there.

I look at the bench as we approach it. I've come here a few times without Sebastian. I feel as attached to this bench now as he does. It's our spot and it makes me feel connected to Kara in some strange small way.

We sit down and look out at the water. Some ducks float by as I curl up and lean on Sebastian's shoulder.

"Shall we get brunch?" he asks.

"In a minute, it's so nice today. And it's early still, so we get all of this to ourselves for a few minutes before the tourists start coming out of their hotel rooms," I say.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

He laughs and kisses the top of my head. My stomach growls.

“I think we better feed you,” he whispers.

“One more minute,” I murmur as I watch the ducks.

He’s quiet for a few moments. “It was when I brought you here that I knew you were the one.”

I look up at him. “What do you mean?”

He turns to me and cups my face. “I have never confided in anyone like that before, and even though I couldn’t admit it to myself, I knew then that you were different. You meant more to me than I ever thought possible. You changed me.” He pauses and smiles as he pulls his hand away.

I grin, but then he pulls back from me, and I look at him in confusion as he slowly drops to one knee.

Sebastian

I love that I’ve surprised her. I pull the small velvet box from my pocket and crack it open, revealing a princess-cut diamond surrounded by small blue, green, and brown gems because it matches her extraordinary eyes.

She looks at me in shock.

“Alexis Nicole Martin, I don’t know how I didn’t notice you as an intern. I’ll never understand that. But the second you walked into my office for your job interview, my world turned upside down, and I never want it to turn upright again. Those eyes of yours—”

“It’s called central heterochromia,” she whispers with a giggle. My grin widens because I know she’s explained her unusual eye color to me before after I commented about it while making love to her one afternoon, but for the life of me, I can never remember what it’s called.

I wink. “They are beautiful, but not as beautiful as that big brain of yours and that wicked sharp tongue and that kind heart.” I press a hand to her chest, and she places hers over mine.

“You are the most beautiful soul I’ve ever met, inside and out. Kara couldn’t have sent me a more perfect angel on earth if she tried. I know it’s been a crazy start to our life together, but I promise to make it up to you every day for the rest of our lives.” I pause and search her eyes, hoping she’ll say yes. “I love you. You’ve shown me how to be a better man. You make me complete. And I don’t want to go a day without you. Be mine, Alexis, be mine forever.”

Her eyes glisten as she nods. “Yes,” she says and then grins and with a whisper only I can hear adds, “Senator.”

I laugh at my smart, sassy fiancée as I slide the ring on her finger and pull her onto my knee so that I can kiss her. We laugh as we pull away and stare at each other. For one brief moment, it’s just us, no other sounds can be heard...until the clapping starts.

Alexis turns and gasps as she looks to see Conner, Vivienne, Aiden, Ella, my mother, her parents, and her sister all standing behind us. She glances back at me.

I shrug. “I wanted our family to be here to celebrate.”

She climbs off me and runs over to give everyone hugs. I glance at my mother who actually has tears in her eyes. She walks over and hugs me. “I’m so happy for you, Bastian. So very happy.”

I stand there shocked at her showing of emotion. I don’t know if I’ll ever trust her completely, but slowly, very slowly, I’m starting to let her into my life.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say before turning to Conner and Aiden who both shake my hand and give me quick hugs with pats on my back. “Come on, everyone, let’s go get breakfast,” I add with a wave of my hand as a limo pulls up to take us to the restaurant where we’ll celebrate.

Everyone climbs inside, and when it’s just Alexis and I standing outside the car, she turns to me.

“You, Mr. Senator, are full of surprises,” she says as she wraps her arms around my neck, “and you know what?”

I pull her against me and lean down so our lips are nearly touching. “What, little dove?”

“I think I might just like that about you,” she answers as she leans up and kisses me. I smile against her lips because, for the first time in my life, I feel complete. This woman fixed something in me that I didn’t even know was broken. And no matter what I do, I’ll never fully be able to express to her how much she means to me, but I will sure as hell try to for the rest of our lives.

Epilogue – Conner and Vivienne

Conner

“Can I take off this bandana now?” Vivienne asks as her hands come up to her face. I reach over and grasp them.

“No, and stop trying to remove it,” I growl.

She grins and it makes me grin, and the fact that she can’t see me grinning only makes me happier. Even after all these months, I still love these moments of faux conflict between us. We like to press each other’s buttons. It’s our love language.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

“How much longer?” she whines like a petulant child.

The road gets bumpy as I turn off to the property. I place my hand on her thigh to keep her from bouncing around, but I don’t miss how her tits move with each dip in the road.

“Stop staring at my boobs,” she says.

I chuckle and squeeze her thigh. “Busted.” I lean over and whisper in her ear, “But I do love to look at what’s mine.”

I know she’s rolling her eyes beneath that mask. “You are incorrigible,” she says, but I see her lips fighting to smile again.

“I know, but you like me that way; don’t you, curious cat,” I say as I kiss her cheek and then focus back on the road. I’m not sure you can even call it a road, but it’s at least enough of a clearing to make it passable.

She’s quiet for a few seconds. “Do the others know where we are?”

I take her hand in mine and bring it to my lips, planting a kiss on her palm before answering. “Yes, gorgeous, they know. We’re safe.”

She gives a small nod and I move her hand to the stick shift and cover it with mine. It’s been a while since everything came to a head. After funerals and formalities, we’ve had to figure out our new lives. It’s uncharted territory. The brotherhood continues, but the true evil that was seeping through its veins has been purged. The

council met and took a special vote. All three of us were asked to be the new elite. They would only replace three members for now, if we accepted. We grappled with this for a long time, but in the end, we accepted because we want to change things. We still want power, wealth, and prestige. Maybe that makes us assholes, but once you taste those things, it's nearly impossible to let them go. Now, convincing our women that we were going to do it, that was another thing altogether. There were one-on-one conversations and group conversations, and in the end, they relented, each with their own conditions.

And today, I'm following through on Vivienne's. Only, she has no idea.

I look over at my gorgeous lady. I still can't believe she's all mine. I never thought I'd experience true love, but she's changed me. She's made me a fucking softy when it comes to her. I'd never admit that I'm fine with that, thus our games and pretend arguments so we can have amazing makeup sex. But every morning, I wake up before her and watch her sleep. I promise her things in those quiet morning hours. She doesn't know the promises I've made yet, but I've made a lifetime's worth.

I pull up to our destination and park the car.

"We're here!" she says, an air of excitement in her voice. I love hearing her excited. My first order as an elite was to financially cripple her father, and in the process, transfer his wealth to his son. Jeff and Vivienne still speak. We've even been to his horse farm to visit. It'll take years to mend their relationship completely, but at least now, they have a chance. Her parents had to move in with her grandparents. I had to explain that her grandfather was changing her articles related to the brotherhood and covering it up, so both she and her editor were unaware. She screamed, then cried. I bought her a horse to keep at her brother's horse farm to help ease her pain. She told me I was too much. I took her to bed and showed her just how much I am.

"We're here," I answer as I go around the car to help her out. I walk her forward. She

lifts her head and her nostrils flare as she sniffs the air.

I grin. She's well aware that we are at the beach. I can't exactly hide the sound of the crashing waves in the distance.

I scouted long and hard for years for a property. It was Felicia who ended up helping me find this island. Her cousin is a fisherman nearby, and she mentioned it to me.

It came just in time because Vivienne was not happy about the fact that I was staying in the brotherhood. After many nights of arguing, Vivienne and I had lain in bed one night, actually discussing the brotherhood's request like rational adults. She finally said she'd maybe, just maybe be alright with it, if we had a place to escape, an off-the-grid escape property. At her request, I made love to her again because it was exactly what I'd been planning all along. I told her I'd been searching for a property where we could all go if we needed to make a quick exit. And now, we're here.

I had to take her on a private jet, a boat, and this old four-wheeler to get here, but we made it. Fuck, we made it in so many ways.

I bring her to the front and stand behind her, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her shoulder. "This is all for you, Vivienne. I'll always try to give you everything you desire. And it starts with this, my love."

I take off the bandana that I tied around her head, letting her take her first glimpse of paradise.

Vivienne

I squint as my eyes adjust to the light. And when they do, I'm treated to the most spectacular view. We're on an island and there are three tiny homes and what looks like some sort of garage or shed unit. The homes are beautiful and modern and look

like they could withstand a hurricane. There are solar panels on top of them and wind turbines behind them.

“Where are we?” I ask as I turn around in Conner’s arms.

“We,” he starts and kisses me. “Are.” Another kiss. “Home.” I pull back and feel my eyebrows go up in surprise.

“Home?”

He grins. “It’s Lerna Key.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

He laughs. “I couldn’t help myself. They can try to take us down, but we’ll come right back to life. I wanted to...” He trails off for a moment as he gazes into my eyes. “Reclaim some of it as my own. I wanted to take a bad thing and make it good.”

I frown at his words as I reach up and cup his jaw. He leans against my hand. “You are good,” I state.

He gives me a knowing look.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:36 am

I move my hand down to his chest and rest it over his heart. “You’re good in here. And that’s what counts.”

He places his hand over mine. “I’m good when I’m with you. You make me a better man, Vivienne.”

He leans down and kisses me, slowly this time. I wrap my arms around his neck and he reaches down and hoists me up, forcing me to grip his waist with my legs as he begins to walk us up to the houses.

He lets me slide down his front and holds on to me until I’m standing again. “Let’s take a look at our home.”

He opens the sliding door, and we step inside. This tiny home isn’t so tiny. It’s probably twice the size of the one at his property in Virginia.

“How?” I ask as I start walking around and exploring it.

“I found this island before we were together. I’d been looking for a while. I wanted a getaway place. And then, well, things were expedited, so my search became more intense. I found this island and Bryce told me about a friend who builds homes, and the rest is history. We’re one hundred percent off the grid here. We can connect to the internet if we want, but otherwise, we’re not connected to the world at all, except by the ocean surrounding us.”

I walk up the beautifully carved stairs to a hallway with two doors.

“Turn left,” he says from behind me.

I open the door like I’m Alice in Wonderland. Inside is an actual bedroom with four walls. The bed is enormous. The far wall looks to have a closet. It’s designed similarly to his tiny home with the side of the room dipping lower so he can stand.

I blush at the memory of our first time together in his tiny house back home. I step forward, running my fingers over the silky sheets. I note a door in front of us.

“Go ahead,” he urges, nudging me from behind with a firm hand to my back. I open it and find a spiral staircase. I walk up to them and am treated to a rooftop deck with the most amazing views. “This is...” I trail off as I take in the island. It’s huge. I can see the shore of the mainland in the distance. The water is at least seven shades of turquoise.

Conner walks up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me back against him.

“It’s all ours, baby. Our escape,” he murmurs in my ear.

I wrap my arms over his and lean my head back against his chest. He places his chin on top of my head and I grin.

“Did I do good?” he asks.

I giggle and spin in his arms. “You did more than good,” I reply as I pull his head down to mine. He presses his lips to mine, and I’m home. This man is my home.

I pull back with tears in my eyes. “I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you more,” he replies.

“Not possible,” I retort.

“We’ll settle it in the bedroom,” he declares as he takes my hand to lead me back inside, but it feels more like he’s leading to my future, and if it’s with him, then it’ll be perfect.