



Chaining Justice

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Category: Romance, Adult, Action

Description: The stage for our big fat mafia wedding is set. But instead of champagne and cake, we might end up serving bullets and blood.

The Miami Knives are with me, but now, there's a new gang in town.

My heart has been captured by four extraordinary men. I've seen them at their worst, battled with them, fought for my own survival, and found my family. But we can't let our guard down—not with us set in the crosshairs of a violent and powerful enemy.

Our plans take an unexpected turn when it's time for me to start planning my wedding. It seems like a brief respite—a moment of peace in the storm. If I've learned anything, it's that nothing good in my life comes without a price.

Our lives—and our love—hang in the balance. I won't let anything shatter the precious bond I have with the Knives. After everything we've been through, we deserve our happy ending.

But the road to happiness is never easy...especially when there's a trail of bodies behind you and a gun pointed at your head.

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Chapter One: Justice

The afterglow of the setting sun bathed our Miami hideout in a warm, golden light. I sat on the worn leather couch, surrounded by the familiar faces of my makeshift family: Skylar, Zane, Hassan, and Bash—Sebastian "Bash" Rivera, leader of the Miami Knives and guardian of young Sebastian Jesse Rivera, who was currently napping in his room.

They were talking business while I played around on my phone, barely paying attention to what they were saying. This had become part of my nightly routine; listening to the men I loved strategize, talk about business and make plans.

I took a sip of my green tea and looked up at them when I realized that they had stopped talking.

They were all looking at me. I straightened up, running my hand through my hair. "No, I still haven't decided on the cake," I said as Bash's gaze bore into me.

He smiled, his green eyes shining. "No," he said. "That's not...we need to talk to you about something."

"We?" I asked, swinging my legs off the couch. "Doesn't sound wedding related."

His gaze caught Zane's, just for a second. "It's not," he said. "Remember when Alicia died, and we brought Sebastian here from West Palm Beach? He was living with her parents at the time."

“Yeah, like a year ago,” I said. “Of course I remember.”

That period had been one of heartbreak and adjustment for all of us, but especially for Bash, who had taken on the role of Sebastian's guardian without hesitation. We'd had to postpone the wedding, but it had been worth it.

"Right," Bash continued, taking a deep breath. "Well, it turns out there's more to Alicia's past than any of us knew."

“What?”

“Yeah, so I don't know how we missed this,” Bash said. “She was some sort of mafia princess.”

My heart dropped into my stomach as the words echoed through the room. A heavy silence fell over us, only broken by Skylar's incredulous laugh. "You're joking, right?"

"Unfortunately not," Zane interjected, his eyes focused on me. "Alicia was part of the De Luca family, one of the most powerful crime syndicates in the world."

I shook my head. “I don't understand. How is it possible that we didn't know this? Is this why they returned Sebastian to you? I'm trying to wrap my head around this and I just like...okay, walk me through all of this.”

Bash leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "We're still piecing it together ourselves. But from what we can tell, Alicia was the daughter of Vito De Luca, the head of the De Luca family. She ran away when she was a teenager and built a new life for herself here in Miami, away from the mafia. That's why we never knew."

He paused, glancing over at Zane again before continuing. "The De Lucas must have

tracked her down after she died. They want to take Sebastian back because they see him as heir to their empire. But now..."

"I guess I get that. But why give him back after they had him? That's the part I can't wrap my head around," I said.

"Right, so they said their businesses were failing at the time, and they couldn't keep up with a baby," Bash said. "Which we both understood. But on doing a little more research, it looks like they might have been targeted by another gang. So they brought him here to keep him safe."

I shook my head. "Okay, two things," I said. "Thing number one, how did you find this out? Thing number two, why do Alicia's parents want to take him back if they brought him here for a reason?"

Bash exchanged a glance with Zane before answering my questions. His expression was serious, his jaw clenched. "We found out because someone from the De Luca family contacted me anonymously. At least they said they were from the De Luca family," he explained. "They wanted to make sure Sebastian was safe and away from their grasp. They knew we would protect him."

Zane chimed in, his voice low and measured. "As for why they want him back now, it's most likely because they've gotten their affairs in order. The threat they faced has been dealt with, and now they're ready to reclaim what they believe is rightfully theirs."

I felt a surge of anger bubble up inside me. How dare these people think they have any claim over Sebastian? He was ours, a part of our family. He was also a child. Still in diapers. Not a fucking pawn in any mafia games.

Bash leaned closer, his intense gaze never wavering. "We're not giving him up," he

said firmly. "Sebastian belongs with us."

I nodded, tears stinging my eyes as I imagined the life that awaited Sebastian if the De Luca family were to claim him. He was only two years old, innocent and pure, completely unaware of the darkness lurking within his own bloodline. He didn't know what his father had been like, what his mother had been like.

He only knew us, and we weren't perfect, but we tried our damndest.

"Promise me that we'll fight for him, Bash," I whispered, my voice shaking. "No matter what happens, we have to protect him from this."

"I don't have to promise you anything. I will die before I let them take that kid away from us."

"So what do we know about them?" Hassan asked, his bare feet on the coffee table. "I figure the more information we have, the easier it'll be to take them down."

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"Vito De Luca," Bash began, his voice low and tense as he paced the room. "The man is a monster, more ruthless than any I've ever encountered. He's the head of the De Luca family, one of the most powerful criminal organizations in the world."

"Worse than your dad?" Hassan asked.

"My dad was a fucking pussycat compared to this man," Bash replied.

"Even with all the raping and everything."

I froze at Hassan's words, the crude reality of the situation hitting me like a ton of bricks. This was not a game. It wasn't just about protecting Sebastian from the clutches of the De Luca family; it was about saving him from a life of unimaginable horrors. My heart sank as I realized the depth of the darkness we were up against.

Bash stopped pacing. "You know better than anyone that my old man...and Jez...the things they did were unforgivable."

Hassan held his gaze, saying nothing.

"But I don't think we should underestimate Vito. I still don't know what that means for us, but I'll tell you that I'm worried what it could mean for Sebastian. Because Vito De Luca is something else."

Hassan cocked his head, his expression softening slightly. "And you're worried about your son."

Bash's face tightened with anger, his knuckles turning white as he clenched his fists. "Not just him. I'm scared for all of us," he replied. "Vito De Luca is a sadistic monster who revels in his power and inflicts pain on anyone who crosses his path."

Zane cleared his throat. "Jez was brutal, but Vito...he's homicidal. He likes taking his enemies out personally—and through very slow, very painful means. We don't want to cross paths with him if at all possible."

"Wait a fucking second," Skylar said, and we all looked over to see what he had to contribute. "Alicia's Italian?"

"That's what you're thinking about right now?" Zane said, trying to hold back a smile.

I laughed, appreciating the much-needed levity in the tense atmosphere. I gave him a small smile before turning my attention back to Bash. "Okay, so we know that he's a dangerous man. But what's the plan? How do we stop him from taking Sebastian?"

"Vito is calculating, cold, and completely without mercy," Bash continued, his jaw clenched. "He won't hesitate to take out anyone who stands in his way, and that includes us."

"Then we'll have to be smarter," I said. "We can't let them get their hands on Sebastian. We have to fight, whatever the cost."

"Agreed," Bash said firmly, his eyes meeting mine. "I don't care what it takes; we're not handing over Sebastian to those monsters."

The rest of the Knives nodded and muttered in agreement.

"So here's the plan," Bash said, determination etched on his face. "We need to gather

as much information as possible about the De Luca family and their operations. We need to know everything they're capable of so we can stay one step ahead in this battle."

"Already on it," Hassan replied, pulling out his laptop from the bottom of the coffee table. He started to type furiously as the rest of us continued talking.

"Sebastian can't ever know about this," I said.

"He wouldn't understand," Bash countered.

"Right. He wouldn't understand now. He's all of two years old," I said. "He will be able to understand eventually. Sebastian cannot know about his parents and he absolutely cannot know about his grandparents."

Bash nodded in agreement. "We have to protect him from the truth, at least until he's old enough to handle it. It would only bring pain and confusion if he were to learn about his parents and the De Luca family at such a young age."

Skylar interjected. "They're coming after us, though, aren't they?" he said with a smirk.

Bash's expression hardened. "We'll be ready for them. We won't give them the satisfaction of taking Sebastian away. We'll do whatever it takes to keep him safe."

"Good," I said. "Because if anyone tries to touch our baby, I'll kill them myself."

Chapter Two: Skylar

Lately I'd been thinking about the past...and I didn't fucking like it.

Before I had to move to my grandparents' village, I grew up in the dark corners of a London council estate, where the smell of damp concrete and the sound of sirens were constant companions. And here—the docks where our most dangerous deals go down—has always reminded me of that stench. It isn't the same...not exactly...but it gets to me just as much.

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The council estate was nothing like Miami. London is grimy in every way.

Miami is grimy...it just dresses up its dirt in sunlight and neon.

Back then, our council house wasn't part of one of the brutalist buildings downtown. It stood alone, invisible to the busy world just streets away. It's now been turned into some sort of high-end rental property. When I was a kid, it was a world of broken windows and stolen dreams, where I scraped by with my wits and quick fingers. My mum's boyfriend, Scott...he used to beat us bloody. He'd come home in a rage, fists like hammers, and we'd bear the brunt of it. I had no choice but to learn how to take a hit, how to fight back.

When I was fourteen, the house caught fire.

The Miami heat was nothing compared to that blaze. I could've saved Scott, but I didn't. His screams haunted me for years, but they were nothing compared to the silence from my mum. She sent me away to live with my grandparents, cutting me off like a gangrenous limb.

I was a killer, sure.

But I did it for her.

And I take a lot of pride in that...in killing for the people I love. Maybe it makes me a monster, but sometimes you want a monster in your corner when the stakes are high.

The metal walls of the warehouse reverberated like the slamming of our estate's

door—final, damning. And normally I wasn't one for flashbacks...but having Sebastian around had me thinking about my own fucked-up childhood, and how awful his would be if he fell in with the de Lucas. While I knew Sebastian wasn't mine, he was part of our weird little family, and it was my job to protect him as much as it was Bash's or Justice's or Hassan or Zane.

They were playing parents, so I would be their fucking pitbull.

The harbor lights flickered, a dodgy bulb fighting to stay alive. Shadows lurched with the rhythm of my heartbeat.

Thoughts of Sebastian's safety collided with bad memories of having to fend for myself.

The responsibility weighed me down. I didn't know how to handle it. I didn't know what I was supposed to do with him most of the time. He was a funny little boy, easy, though he seemed to have a bit of a temper.

He reminded me a lot of Bash.

He reminded me less of Jez, but I had no idea what Jez had been like when he was a kid. His past had broken him.

Mine? It made me stronger.

After I'd left London, I found a new family of sorts with Bash Rivera and his crew, the Miami Knives. I started out as a drug dealer. As time went on, I proved my loyalty and skill, rising through the ranks to become an enforcer, one of Bash's right-hand men. Eventually, I became one of his core group of men. So there I was, standing sentinel over a contraband op like a guardian over dreams I never even allowed myself to have.

That was a long time ago, though. Now I shared my bed with one of them and my woman with all of them. It was a strange kind of brotherhood, one that was intimate in ways I never anticipated when the only heat I'd ever shared was from the flames of a burning childhood...a burning home.

Eh, fuck it all.

I could dwell on my fucked up past some other time.

"Skylar, you got eyes on that shipment?" Bash's voice crackled through the earpiece, pulling me back to the present.

"The bulk of it is here, but we're still waiting for the last few shipments. They should arrive before dawn," I replied, scanning the crates piled high in the warehouse. This was all going too well; I'd actually hoped to have the opportunity to crack some skulls, given the mood I was in. "I'm bored, Bash."

He chuckled. "Good. Keep watch until the deal goes down. We can't afford any attention on us right now."

"Okay, boss. Understood."

"Is Zane with you?"

"No, I can handle this myself."

Bash sighed. "Alright, buddy. If you're sure."

I could've responded to that, but I tapped my earpiece and turned my attention back to the warehouse. As I stood there, surrounded by shadows and silence, I couldn't help but reflect on the choices I'd made. My past might have been a tangled web of

blood and betrayal, but it had forged me into someone who could face the darkness head-on. I had come to accept the consequences of living this life.

My loyalty to the Knives was unwavering.

As I listened to the distant hum of the city, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was coming—something that threatened everything I'd built. The idea that Sebastian's grandparents would come for him...the very thought of it sent a shiver down my spine.

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“Alright, mate, get a grip,” I told myself, my voice echoing in the darkness around me.

"Hey, Skylar," came a voice from behind me. Darius, one of the men who worked for us—mostly for Hassan, but sometimes for me—had just done a walkabout of the harbor. "Are you seeing anything?"

“Nothing that looks out of the ordinary,” I said.

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “Good. To tell you the truth, I was worried about those De Luca bastards.”

Those De Luca bastards. The mafia family that happened to be after my boss and my girlfriend’s son. The very mention of them sent a shiver down my spine. “Why? What have you heard?”

“Just a couple of people mentioning their name,” Darius replied. “Nothing worth talking about.”

“Yeah, I haven’t heard a thing,” I said. "Just the usual rumors."

But the truth was, the De Lucas had been on my mind a lot recently. Their brutal control and ruthless reputation within the criminal underworld were legendary, and it was only a matter of time before our paths crossed again.

Back in the day, when I was just moving product for Pedro and Jez, I had run into them. I was sure of it. I just couldn’t recall any of the details.

“Keep looking, Darius,” I said. “We won’t be able to leave the harbor until all our shipment arrives.”

Darius nodded. “You got it, boss,” he said, before he turned around and walked away.

"Skylar! Do you copy?" Zane's voice hissed in my ear through the earpiece, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yeah,” I said. “Everything okay, doc? You sound out of breath. Have you been touching yourself thinking about me?”

“Fuck’s sake, everyone can hear you,” Zane said, though I could hear the smile in his voice.

“That makes it even hotter.”

“Let’s keep your dick out of this,” Zane said. “We have trouble.”

"What's going on?" I asked, the urgency in his tone echoing the unease that had settled in my gut.

"I seem to have lost comms with Lee. He was surveying the harbor and...he's gone. Vanished without a trace," Zane explained, his usually calm voice strained with worry.

"Right. The De Lucas may be involved," I whispered into the earpiece, glancing around the dimly lit street for any signs of danger.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” Zane said. “You want me to go down there?”

I shook my head, quite aware he couldn’t see me. “No, don’t worry. I got this.”

I heard footsteps approaching me and wrapped my hand around the handle of my blade. I knew it wasn't Darius or Lee, they both seemed to have disappeared.

"Skylar?"

Shit...I knew that voice.

Right out of a damn memory of a run-in with a rival gang when I'd been beaten bloody.

Because the voice belonged to Constantine Brusco, smooth as silk and just as suffocating. He was a capo for Vito de Luca. The guy had been on my level at the time, but he'd been just as crazy as I was—which was saying something. He liked hurting people. I liked hurting people. And when our kind of people clash...

...well, shit gets intense.

And it meant the De Luca family was already on our case after all.

He emerged from the shadows with a wicked smile on his face.

"Coco," I said, my tone guarded. "What a coincidence."

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“Are you here on a job?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yes, I like hanging out on dingy docks all by myself in the middle of the night,” I replied. “Fuck...of course not. We have an agreement with the harbormaster.”

“The agreement changes now,” he replied. “Vito wants his cut.”

I glared at him. “Vito doesn’t get a cut. He didn’t negotiate this agreement, Bash did. I don’t want any trouble, Coco. I’m just coming to collect.”

“You don’t want any trouble?” his smirk widened. “I don’t see you for a couple of years and you have totally changed.”

I took a step toward him. He wasn’t as tall as me, but I knew he could hold his own. I had seen him fight before. “Don’t give me an excuse, Coco,” I replied. “I’m trying not to start a war. “

“Oh, start one,” Coco said, his smirk now a grin. “I can happily tell Vito the Knives didn’t want to play nice. See what happens when you don’t give him a cut and you keep his grandchild away from him.”

I bit the inside of my mouth. I would have really liked to kill him, but now with Sebastian under Justice and Bash’s custody, I had to hold back. I didn’t want to put them in more danger. “I’ll discuss this with the skip.”

“There is nothing to discuss. Vito wants twenty-five percent of whatever you make

here,” he said. “And access to his grandson.”

“For fuck’s sake, Coco,” I said. “You know I can’t make decisions like that.”

“A shame,” he said, looking at his watch. “I’ll come to collect his cut tomorrow.”

“Do I work for you now?” I asked, baring my teeth at him.

“Yeah,” he said. “You all do.”

“Fuck you, Coco,” I said.

He looked up at me, dark eyes narrow. “Brave words, Skylar. Just remember, bravery can be a...costly trait.”

“That’s the worst threat I’ve ever heard,” I said. “What are you going to do, tax me?”

He went for his piece before I could go for mine, pointing it right at my head. My hand shook slightly as I gripped the handle of my blade, but I tried to maintain a calm exterior. Coco De Luca was a dangerous man, and facing him down was no small task. But I couldn't let fear dictate my actions. Not now, not ever. I was fast, I could be scary. But I couldn't outrun a gun.

"Hands," he said. "Don't do anything stupid."

I took a sharp intake of breath but let go of my knife.

"You're making a mistake, Coco," I said, my hands by my sides.

"You forget your place, Skylar," Coco snarled, his gun steady against my temple.

"This isn't a negotiation. It's an ultimatum. We take our cut, or we take your head."

"Or you can just walk away," I replied, my voice steady despite the fear gripping my stomach. I took a deep breath, weighing my options. "This is a game you can't win, Coco. You're not taking twenty-five percent of anything. And you can't have Sebastian. He's under the protection of Justice and Bash."

Coco's face twisted into a mask of anger and frustration. "You don't understand what you're playing with, Skylar," he said, his voice low and dangerous. "You think you're a stone player? You're a pawn. That's all you are. And pawns are moved, and sacrificed, when the game demands it."

"If I'm a pawn, then what the fuck are you?"

He took a step toward me. My hands were still by me, I was trying my best not to show him how shaken I was. "I'm the kingmaker," he replied. He swung at me with the butt of his gun and I didn't have time to duck. I grunted in pain as I felt the impact of the gun against my temple, my vision blurred for a moment. Fury coursed through my veins as I stared at his silhouette, my head throbbing.

I didn't think.

I should have, but I didn't.

I swung at him instinctively, my hand connecting with the side of his face. The impact was audible as Coco's head snapped to the side, momentarily stunned. I seized the opportunity, rushing forward and grabbing his gun hand, bending it unnaturally behind his back.

I wanted to fucking break something.

The gun clattered to the ground as Coco snarled in pain, his arm limp like I'd dislocated his shoulder. Coco brought his knee up and got me in the crotch with all

his strength, and I stumbled backward, doubling over in pain. I wanted to tell him that it was a cheap shot, but I wasn't able to speak. To my surprise, I was still standing, and from the corner of my eye, I could see Coco trying to catch his breath.

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"Tell your boss what I said," Coco said between sharp breaths.

"I'll tell him you had some big talk for a man who just got his ass beat," I hissed.

I watched as he finally managed to gather himself and started to run. I knew I needed to go after him, make sure he didn't take the news back to his boss...but I just needed a second.

One second to let my dick recover.

Asshole.

"Skylar, you okay?" Zane's voice came through in my ear loud and clear.

I didn't even have time to answer him before I noticed him running toward me from the parking lot.

"Yeah," I grunted, trying to catch my breath. "You didn't have to come here. I had this under control."

"Yeah, it looks well under control," Zane said. "You look like you're about to throw up."

"I'm not seriously injured. He just...went for a cheap shot," I said.

"You don't know if you're seriously injured," Zane replied.

Despite the pain in my stomach, I managed to smile. "You want to see?" I said. "I'm happy to show you."

Zane rolled his eyes. "I'll help you ice your testicles later," he said. "Which way did he go?"

I gestured toward where Coco had disappeared, and Zane nodded, sprinting after him. There was no way I could keep up without doubling over in pain. Zane was fast, skilled at tracking people, and never slowed down even in a chase. I heard the sound of grunting, and then dragging. I was in pain, but I had recovered a little, and I wanted to go help Zane. I grabbed the gun and limped towards the commotion, my hand shaking slightly as adrenaline started to pump through my veins. I could hear Zane and Coco struggling, the sounds of punches landing and grunts of pain. My heart raced, and I sucked in a deep breath, trying to ignore the pain in my gut. I knew that I couldn't let Zane get hurt. The very idea of it sent chills down my spine.

I limped towards the commotion, my hand shaking slightly as adrenaline started to pump through my veins.

I clutched the gun tightly, my body trembling with the pain and adrenaline. I took a deep breath and started to limp towards the sounds of struggling. As I got closer, I could see Coco grappling with Zane, attempting to break free from his grip. I didn't hesitate. I took aim, counting down in my head before I took the shot.

I had worked hard on thinking before shooting. It was something Zane expected of me. Something Justice expected of me.

But when I saw Constantine Brusco ready to kill Zane, I knew there was no thinking.

Only action.

I pulled the trigger and it pierced Coco's shoulder, making him let go of Zane.

"Fucking asshole," Coco roared, the anger in his voice clear as he clutched his shoulder, blood flowing from the wound. His eyes were filled with a mix of pain and fury, but he didn't make any move towards me.

Zane stumbled to his feet, panting heavily, his eyes wild.

I pointed the gun at Coco.

"Don't kill him," he said.

"Excuse me, what?" I replied, my finger itching on the trigger.

"Don't," Zane said. "You'll start a war."

Confusion momentarily clouded my thoughts. If we weren't going to kill him, why had Zane even chased after Coco in the first place? The answer hit me quickly, though; we needed to send a clear message to the De Luca family that even if they came after us, they weren't going to find us easy prey.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I think it would be so satisfying."

"Skylar," Zane said softly.

He was right, of course, but it didn't make it any easier. Ceding the opportunity for immediate vengeance was a bitter pill to swallow. The tension in my shoulders eased slightly as I lowered my arm slowly, the gun tucked back into my waistband.

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"Wars usually end," I replied, the tension in my voice clear.

"This one won't," Zane sighed. "You don't know what they'll do to us if you kill him. To Justice. To Sebastian."

He was right. "Fair enough," I said. "Fuck this guy, though."

I shot a warning glance at Coco before holstering my weapon.

"You're lucky I don't kill you right now," I said. "Thank the doctor here."

"You really played this wrong, Skylar," Coco said. "Vito won't be pleased."

"Well, I'm pleased," I said. "And you can go fuck yourself. Now go away before I change my mind."

Coco sneered at me, the blood from his wound dripping onto the pavement. "You can't stop what's coming," he said. "Vito will find you. And when he does, you'll wish you'd never crossed him."

"I honestly don't care," I replied, my voice hard. "You've shown me that you can't be trusted. I will do whatever it takes to protect Sebastian and Justice, even if it means going to war with you."

Zane stepped in front of me, a protective look on his face. "You heard the man," he said to Coco. "Get lost."

Coco glared at us for a moment before finally turning and walking away, limping slightly from my gunshot wound.

"You okay?" Zane asked me, concern etched on his face.

"I'll live," I replied, trying to brush off the pain. "He's not worth worrying about."

Zane nodded. "Maybe not him, but his boss will be an issue," he said, grabbing me. "Come on. You can lean on me."

"What about Lee and Darius?"

"They probably already went back," he said. "They know to scamper as soon as they hear a gunshot. We'll have them come back for the rest of the shipment. You need to recover."

I nodded, sighing deeply as I did. As we walked back to the car, my thoughts were consumed by the threat that Vito posed. I kept glancing over my shoulder, half-expecting him to appear and finish what Coco had started. But Zane was right - we couldn't let fear dictate our actions. We needed to be prepared for anything, to defend ourselves and those we cared about.

But fuck, I had really wanted to kill Coco.

"Where's Bash?" I asked.

"Different car," Zane said. "He already left with Hassan."

"Justice?" I asked.

"She's home," Zane said. "I'm not going to be able to talk you into going to the

hospital, am I?"

I leaned against the headrest of the passenger seat. "You can try," I said. "But why would I do that when we could play doctor at home?"

He sighed. "Okay, I'll look you over," Zane said, his hand on my shoulder as he pressed a button to start the car. "But don't scare me like that again."

"Doc," I replied, savoring the air conditioning as it hit my skin. "This time, it wasn't really my fault."

Zane gave me a half-smile, his eyes still filled with concern. "True, but that doesn't mean it won't happen again. And this was a warning shot—next time, it won't be by your choice. You need to be prepared."

"I know," I said, trying to sound convincing. "I just really wanted to kill that guy. I was going to leave him alone, but then he was on top of you, and he was hurting you..."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know, doc, but you don't have to," I replied, leaning my head against his shoulder. "I'm right here."

He leaned his head down to kiss the top of my head. "I know, babe," he replied. "I know."

Chapter Three: Justice

The dim glow of candlelight flickered across the white tablecloth as I gazed into Bash's dark, intense eyes. Our hands, slightly rough from years of fighting and survival, met in the middle of the table, fingers lacing together effortlessly.

"Justice, this place is incredible," Bash said, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down my spine. "I can't believe I've never brought you here before."

"Me neither," I replied, a warm smile spreading across my face. "You're a terrible fiancé."

He laughed. The upscale restaurant was elegantly decorated, with dark wooden accents and soft lighting that created an intimate atmosphere. A soothing melody drifted through the air, courtesy of a live pianist tucked away in a corner. Ever since we had started planning the wedding, it had been hard to make time to just go on dates.

This was good.

Bash took a sip of his Old Fashioned, looking around, his green eyes twinkling. "Man, back then," he said. "I would have never thought we would end up in a place like this."

I nodded. "So fancy," I said. "I still feel out of place in a nice restaurant like this."

He looked me up and down, appraising me. "You look perfect," he said, his eyes

never leaving mine. "And that dress is gorgeous on you."

I blushed, feeling flattered by his compliment. "Thank you," I said, glancing down at my red strapless dress. "It's not something I wear often."

"I know, and that's a shame," he said, reaching over to brush a lock of hair from my cheek. "You should wear it more. You look incredible."

"I don't think I'll ever feel like I shouldn't be in jean shorts and a halter top."

"Also looks very good on you," he said. "But you fit in everywhere, whatever you wear. You're stunning."

I shook my head, taking a sip of my gin and tonic. "Still, it's wild to think about," I said. "I remember the first time I saw you back in the apartment complex."

He raised his eyebrows.

"You were with your brother," I said. "Playing basketball, I think."

"You think?"

I shook my head, my cheeks reddening. He always knew exactly what to say to get to me, even years after we had gotten back together again. "No, I definitely was," I said. "I was just like...staring at you."

Laughing, Bash took another sip of his drink. "That was probably a sight to see," he said. "At a time when we were both just trying to survive."

"But we've come so far," I said, holding Bash's gaze. "And now we're here, in this fancy restaurant. It's amazing to think how much has changed."

Bash leaned in closer, lowering his voice. "But one thing hasn't changed," he whispered. "And that's how I feel about you. I'm just as captivated as I was back then, Justice."

My heart swelled with love for him, and I couldn't help but smile. "Thanks," I said, feeling heat rise to my cheeks once again. "I feel the same way about you."

"Are you excited for the wedding?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I said. "But no wedding talk tonight. I'm elbow deep in looking for vendors and choosing the right decorations. Today, I just want to talk about food and fuck."

Bash's eyes widened in amusement. "Food and fuck, huh? Sounds like my kind of night." He leaned in closer, his voice growing low and sultry. "What do you want to eat?"

Before I could answer, a waiter appeared at our table. I thought he was going to take our order, but he looked somber. Upset, even.

"Are you Justice Rosales?" he asked me.

I nodded. He pressed his lips together.

"There's been an urgent delivery for you," he said.

Puzzled, I accepted the envelope he presented to me. The weight of the paper was heavy in my hands; its contents, unknown. Bash watched me curiously as I carefully tore open the seal, revealing the official documents inside.

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"Justice?" Bash prompted, concern creeping into his voice. "What is it?"

"Sebastian..." My voice broke as I held up the custody papers, shock rippling through me. "Someone's trying to take him away from us."

Sebastian had gone into my custody after his grandparents had returned him. Giving him back to Bash would have been difficult, considering he was a convicted felon, but as far as the law was concerned, I was squeaky clean.

We just had to reassure the judge that we were going to get married.

But Alicia's grandparents were still next of kin and Bash and I hadn't even gotten married yet.

I stared at the custody papers in disbelief, my heart pounding in my chest. Bash reached over and took the documents from my trembling hands. "Don't worry. We knew this was coming. I have my lawyer on speed dial."

"So do they, Bash," I replied. "And from what you said, they're scary people."

"We're scary people."

I bunched up the papers in my hand. Without another word, I bolted from the table, my heart pounding in my chest. Panic clawed at my insides, threatening to consume me. How could this happen? Sebastian was like my own flesh and blood—even though he wasn't biologically mine, the love I felt for him was fierce and unwavering. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before. The idea that he could be torn away

from us and raised by the parents of that monster...

I couldn't even think about it.

"Justice, wait!" Bash called out, catching up to me as I stumbled into the restaurant's foyer. His strong arms wrapped around me, offering support and comfort. "We'll figure this out, okay? We won't let anyone take Sebastian from us. I promise you. I will not let that happen."

I took a deep breath, trying to regain my composure. I knew Bash was right, and I believed him. But the thought of losing Sebastian was too much to bear. I buried my face in his chest, inhaling his comforting scent.

"I need to talk to him," I said.

"Okay," Bash said. "That's a good idea. Let's call."

We stepped away from the foyer and turned a corner into a small alleyway. Bash's hand was still on my shoulder. I took my phone out of my little clutch purse and took my phone out, dialing Skylar's number. He and Hassan were in charge of looking after Sebastian that night while Zane had to do some sort of work thing.

He answered straight away.

"Hi, pet," Skylar answered the phone. "Did you call to see if I'm beating Hassan at checkers?"

"He's beating you, right?" Bash asked.

Skylar rolled his eyes. "Hey, guys," Hassan said from behind him. "Everything okay?"

I didn't answer him. "How's the baby?"

"We took him to the pool and wore him out," Hassan replied. "He's sleeping soundly now."

I sighed, nodding. "Okay, that's good. Thanks for taking care of him."

"Of course, you know we love him as if he was our own," Skylar added.

My heart swelled with gratitude. I knew our relationship might seem unconventional to other people, but Sebastian had gotten lucky that so many incredible men cared for him.

"So, what's going on?" Hassan asked.

I took a deep breath. "We just got some...uh...custody papers." I hesitated, struggling to find the words. "And it's...it's a situation."

"The De Lucas?" Hassan asked. "Fucking assholes."

"Yeah," I confirmed. "What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry," Skylar said, sounding as calm as ever. "We'll get through this. Just focus on preparing for the wedding and we'll handle the custody issue. Trust us."

"He means kill them, right?" I asked Bash.

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He shook his head, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "Don't worry about what he means. He's right, we'll take care of this."

"Justice, listen to me," Hassan said earnestly, leaning closer to the camera. "We're family. And we've got your back, now and always."

"Now go enjoy your food," Skylar said. "We can regroup at a hotel later if you want."

I smiled. "Okay," I said. "That sounds good."

"Let's go back to the restaurant," Bash suggested, his hand still resting on my shoulder. "I want to enjoy this night, too. It's been a long time coming."

I nodded, feeling slightly reassured by their support. As we walked back inside, I couldn't help but feel that the night was off to a rocky start. But Bash's words reminded me that we had each other, and that was all that mattered.

As we settled back into our seats, I couldn't shake the feeling that the custody papers were just the beginning of a long, challenging battle. But as we continued to enjoy our meal, laughing and flirting throughout the night, I tried to forget about it for a moment.

After the meal, Bash and I returned to the hotel room. The sleek black car pulled up to the luxurious hotel where we'd decided to regroup. The imposing building loomed above us, its sparkling chandeliers casting a warm glow on the opulent lobby below. I took a deep breath, my chest heavy with the weight of our current predicament and the slightly-too-tight red dress.

"Come on," Bash said gently, taking my hand and leading me inside. "We need a plan, and we need privacy."

"More than that," I added quietly, "we need security."

"Agreed," he replied, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. "But don't worry about that. I have that covered. You enjoy your night instead, darlin'."

We walked up to the hotel room, Bash firmly holding my hand. The room was spacious and luxurious, with a king-sized bed in the middle of the room and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city skyline.

Skylar was already in the room, wearing black slacks and a white button-up shirt.

"Hi," he said, catching my gaze. "How are you doing?"

I shook my head. "I'm having a great night, but it could be better."

He crossed the room to envelop me in a tight hug. "Don't worry so much, pet," he murmured into my hair. "We're gonna get through this."

"Thanks," I whispered, pulling away and trying to muster a smile. "I just...I can't help it. I'm scared for him. I don't want them to take away our baby."

"That's not going to happen," Bash said. "I would never allow it."

"I know. You keep saying, but..." I trailed off.

"Let's take your mind off things for a bit, yeah?" Skylar suggested, his eyes glinting mischievously. "You look like you could use a massage."

"Skylar..." I began hesitantly, but a stern glance from Bash made me reconsider. He was right – I needed to relax if I was going to be any use to our family.

"Alright," I agreed, sitting down on the plush bed and trying to push my fears and anxieties aside. "Just...keep it professional, okay?"

Skylar laughed. "Absolutely not," he said.

Bash laughed too. "Just let him do whatever he wants," he said, sitting on the chair across the bed, his hand already on his hardening cock. "I want to watch."

The hunger in his eyes always ignited something inside of me. Something primal. I loved it.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. I didn't know you had invited him."

"He's getting you ready for me," Bash said, winking at me.

Skylar laughed. He undressed me slowly, revealing the red lace bra and matching thong beneath my dress. His eyes lingered on my body for a moment too long as he did so, but I didn't mind. It didn't matter that we had been together for years, he always seemed to drink me in. He began to massage my shoulders, his strong hands kneading out the tension that had built up over the course of the day. His touch was firm but gentle, sending shivers down my spine as he worked out every knot and kink in my muscles. His thick fingers kneaded deeply into my skin, and I couldn't help but moan softly.

"That feels amazing," I whispered, closing my eyes and leaning into his touch. Every now and then, his hands would slip beneath the fabric of my bra, teasing me with his touch.

His other hand pressed between my thighs, feeling the wetness that had already begun to pool there. I trembled slightly at his touch as he started to rub against my clit, applying pressure just right. "You're so fucking turned on," he whispered against my ear as I gasped softly at his touch. "Do you want more?"

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I nodded, unable to find words to express how much I wanted him. He chuckled softly, kneading my shoulders harder, before sliding his hand back into my bra to continue teasing me. My heart raced, and my breaths became faster as he continued to toy with me.

Bash watched from across the room, his eyes never leaving our interaction. I could see the hunger in his eyes, and it made me feel even more turned on. Skylar continued to tease me until I thought I might explode. He pulled away suddenly, sitting back and taking off his shirt.

As Skylar slipped his pants off, I realized that I wanted him more than ever. With a quick glance at Bash, who nodded eagerly, I scooted to the edge of the bed.

Skylar smiled and laid down, spreading his legs wide and undoing his belt. He slid his pants down his muscular legs quickly. "Come on, flower," he said. "Show me how much you want me."

I climbed on top of him, straddling him. He reached for my hips, pulling me closer to him.

With a deep sigh, he reached up and cupped my breasts, squeezing them gently as I moaned softly. "Fuck, you're so beautiful," he murmured, his voice thick with lust.

He guided my hips, pressing himself inside me slowly and smoothly. I moaned out loud, loving the feeling of being filled by him.

Bash stood up and walked over to us, his erection straining against his pants. He

unzipped them and pulled out his erection, stroking it gently. "Look at you, Justice," Bash murmured as he stared at my exposed body. His eyes never left mine as he began to stroke himself, the sight of him doing so only igniting my own arousal. "You're so fucking beautiful."

Skylar's eyes widened when he saw Bash, and he grunted softly. "Okay, pet," he said. "Take off his pants."

I did as he instructed, pulling Bash's pants down and freeing his erection. Skylar watched us intently as I stroked Bash.

"God, look at your hands on him," Skylar groaned, his eyes locked on Bash's erection. "So big and thick. He's going to feel so good inside you, Justice."

Hearing Skylar's words and seeing the desire in his eyes only fueled my arousal. Bash leaned down to kiss me, my lips lingering on his. As we kissed, I felt Bash's hand grip my hair, tilting my head back and exposing my throat. He broke the kiss, his eyes darkening with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

"Open wide, Justice," he commanded, and without hesitation, I obeyed.

He gently cupped my jaw and thrust himself, filling my throat as I began to gag slightly. Skylar watched with hunger, his hand stroking himself faster and harder.

As I struggled to control my gag reflex, I felt a hand on my hip, guiding the movement of our bodies. Skylar watched and encouraged, his eyes locked on the sight of Bash's erection filling my throat.

"That's it, Justice," he groaned, his voice becoming hoarse. "Take him deep."

He fucked me as he helped me move, my hands gripping onto his own as I tried to

keep myself upright. Bash's erection was so thick and hard, filling my throat completely. I could feel his hips slamming against my jaw, the sensation both intense and exhilarating. He thrust his cock into my pussy as Bash fucked me, the feeling of being filled by both men overwhelming me. Bash's hands gripped my hair tightly, controlling me as I moved, his eyes locked on mine.

Skylar's eyes were fixed on the sight of Bash's erection sliding in and out of my throat as I struggled to breathe. I could see it from the corner of my eye.

I could feel my orgasm building within me, the sensations of being filled by both men becoming too much to bear. I desperately needed release.

"Fuck, Justice," Skylar groaned, his hand speeding up his strokes. "You look so fucking hot taking his cock like that."

I could feel Bash's erection throbbing in my throat, and I knew I was close. I tried to keep my breathing controlled, but every slam of Bash's hips against my jaw sent waves of pleasure coursing through me.

"Oh my god," Bash grunted, his thrusts becoming more erratic. "I'm gonna come, Justice."

I struggled to keep my head up, swallowing desperately as Bash continued to thrust into my throat.

My pussy was on fire, the sensation of Skylar's erection pulsing inside me becoming too much to bear. Skylar groaned, his hand on my hip, his own orgasm close.

"Fuck, Justice," he moaned, his voice ragged as he watched Bash's erection sliding in and out of my throat. "You're going to make me come too."

I could feel my orgasm building within me, the sensations of being filled by both men becoming too much to bear. I needed release, and I needed it now.

With one final, deep thrust, Bash filled my throat with his cum as I swallowed every drop, the taste of his salty, warm cum making my own pussy twitch with desire. As I struggled to catch my breath, Skylar's hand on my hip urged me to move faster. "Fuck, that's it, Justice," he groaned, his voice raw with lust. "Take it, flower, take all of it."

His words sent another jolt of pleasure through my body, and I redoubled my efforts, my hands gripping his own as I took him deeper. His erection was so hard and thick, filling me completely as he thrust into me, our bodies moving in perfect sync.

Finally, as the pleasure reached its peak, my orgasm exploded within me, my body trembling with the force of it. I screamed out loud, my voice hoarse from the pleasure, my pussy clenching around Skylar's erection as I came, my body arching against him.

Skylar watched me, his eyes locked on my face as he felt me tighten around him, his own orgasm building within him. With one final thrust, he filled me with his cum, his pleasure echoing mine.

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As we came down from our high, Skylar pulled me close, his arms wrapping around me, his breaths ragged against my neck. I could feel his erection softening inside me, his cock still throbbing with the force of his orgasm.

Bash sat on the edge of the bed. I slowly opened my eyes and looked at Bash, his eyes still dark with intense desire. He reached out to brush a strand of hair from my forehead, his touch gentle but firm.

He reached out and ran his finger along the rim of my ass, tracing the line of my pussy, and then moved it to Skylar's mouth, painting my wetness on his lips.

Skylar grinned as he licked Bash's finger, and I could feel his erection inside of me twitching with desire. "Thank you," he said.

I rolled off Skylar's body, still trying to catch my breath. "Did you swallow?" Bash asked me.

I shook my head. "Good," he said. "Now kiss him."

I looked at Bash, willing my heart to calm down. I leaned forward and kissed Skylar's lips, feeling the wetness of his mouth and the taste of Bash's come on my lips, and now on his. Skylar kissed me back, his tongue searching, hungrily exploring my mouth. "Fuck," he said. "Can I come inside you again?"

"Yes," Bash answered for me.

And I nodded, my eyes locked onto Skylar's as he moved between my legs, his

erection throbbing with anticipation. I felt Bash's finger trace the line of my ass again, and then he inserted it, slowly and gently, preparing me for what was to come. It was a lot. I threw my head back, whimpering.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard," Skylar growled, his eyes dark with desire.

He was hard as fuck again, still inside of me. I moaned as Skylar's cock pushed into me again, filling me up slowly but surely. It hit my g-spot and I squirmed on top of him, trying to get more of that delicious friction. His hand found my clit again, rubbing it roughly as he began to thrust in and out of me. Bash watched us, stroking himself leisurely.

"Fuck, Skylar," I groaned, "you feel so fucking good." My hips bucked against him in rhythm with his movements. The bed creaked under our combined weight and the sound of flesh slapping against flesh filled the room. Every thrust made my insides tingle with pleasure.

I reached over to grab Bash's massive bulge and stroked him, but he held my hand. "Just focus on your own pleasure right now, darlin'," he said in a growl.

I nodded, and let out a cry as Skylar's cock hit me in just the right spot, making me tremble. I bucked my hips, constricting Skylar's erection with my pussy muscles, feeling the intense pleasure building within me.

"Fuck, babe, you're so tight," Skylar groaned, pulling out then plunging back in, his eyes never leaving mine. "Are you ready for me to come inside you?"

I nodded, my voice ragged from the intensity of the experience. Skylar groaned and picked up his pace, his eyes locked onto mine. Bash continued to fuck my ass with his finger, adding another one to stretch me out more.

"Fuck, yes," Skylar growled, his hips driving into me harder. "I'm going to fill you up, Justice. I'm going to mark you as mine."

I could feel his cock throbbing inside me, so close to the edge.

"Fuck, yes," I cried out, my orgasm building within me. "Come for me, Skylar. Fill me up."

Skylar grunted, his thrusts becoming erratic. "I'm gonna come, Justice," he groaned, his voice hoarse with lust. "You're going to feel every drop."

Bash's fingers continued to stretch me, his other hand stroking his cock. I watched him as he fingered me, my eyes locked onto his.

As Skylar's orgasm washed over him, I felt his cock twitch inside me, pulsating with each spurt of cum that filled my pussy. My body convulsed around him, him shooting his load inside me. The feeling of his release was overwhelming, and I could feel it running down my inner walls.

Bash watched us intently, his eyes never leaving mine. He slowly withdrew his fingers from my ass, and I could see the satisfaction in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Bash asked me as I got off Skylar.

"Yes," I replied between heaving breaths. "I'm okay."

I looked at Bash, still feeling the afterglow of our lovemaking. He had a satisfied smile on his face, and his eyes were smoldering with desire.

"That was incredible," I whispered, my voice still hoarse from the intensity of the encounter.

Bash nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. "It certainly was. You were amazing," he said. "Now let's get cleaned up and get some sleep."

He extended his hand so I could take it and walked me to the shower, my legs wobbly. After we were all settled in, my body sandwiched between them, Skylar traced the outline of my shoulder with long fingers before he spoke.

"I've got to tell you about something that happened earlier. During the job, Coco approached me. Zane interfered, and he almost got hurt."

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Bash stiffened next to me. "What do you mean?"

"Yeah," Skylar said. "I think we need to talk."

Chapter Four: Hassan

The silk lining of my suit glided against my skin like a reminder—here in the opulent halls of the De Luca's domain, I was a wolf in sheep's clothing. My fingers deftly adjusted the tie, a nondescript navy that blended seamlessly with the sea of tailored suits and glittering dresses. The air was thick with the scent of wealth, each breath a heady mix of perfume and power.

We had all been invited because the De Lucas needed to keep up appearances, but Justice and Bash sent their regrets because they didn't want Sebastian to be around his grandparents, even in public like this. Just in case.

Zane and Skylar were on a job.

That left only me, which was good enough to keep Vito De Luca from feeling insulted. I was one of Bash's capos and my presence there meant that he couldn't act insulted, even if he was. It was a tactical move, too; I would be able to run the party and figure out any information I needed to have so we could hopefully avoid a war.

"Blue dolphin," I murmured to the bartender, my request for the non-alcoholic concoction masked by the clinking of glasses and the low hum of conversations. Sobriety was a silent vow I had taken, not for lack of temptation, but as an anchor to the reality that beneath this veneer, we were all predators hunting or being hunted.

I remembered losing control, and nothing scared me as much as losing control again.

My gaze swept over the room, where Vito De Luca, ever the charming host, navigated the crowd with an ease born of entitlement. His daughter had looked a lot like him. He was a tall, bronze-skinned man with salt and pepper hair, wearing an expensive tailored suit and a Patek Phillipe gold watch. His handshakes were weighted with promises and threats alike, his smiles brokered alliances more binding than any contract.

I sipped my drink, the cool, sweet tang of the mocktail a stark contrast to the warmth bubbling in my chest—a mixture of anxiety and adrenaline. Every nerve ending was attuned to the undercurrents of the event.

"Keeping away from the good stuff, Hassan?" drawled a voice I recognized—one of Vito's henchmen, Mario, his eyes sharp and knowing.

"It's been a while, Mario," I said.

"It's always good to see you," he replied. "You're looking well."

"As are you. I heard you got married?"

He nodded. "Yes," he said.

"Italian?"

"Cuban," he replied.

"Your parents must be thrilled," I said.

He laughed. "Better than a paki—"

“Really? Grow up, Mario,” I said.

He shook his head, taking a sip of his beer. “I’m just busting your balls, man. It is genuinely good to see you.”

I tipped my drink toward him. “Congrats on your wedding,” I said.

“Yeah. I better mingle,” he replied.

I nodded and watched Mario leave. Every detail was a piece of a puzzle I was assembling—a nod here, a whisper there, all coalescing into a larger picture only I could see. It was a dance of shadows, and I had become adept at tracing their steps.

"Keep it together, Hassan," I whispered to myself, the mantra grounding me to the present. I couldn't afford to let memories cloud my judgment—not when there was so much at stake. Justice, Bash, Skylar, Zane...they were counting on me. And I wasn't about to let them down.

"Everything alright?" The bartender's question jolted me from my thoughts, and I realized my grip on the glass had tightened.

I shook my head. "Never better," I lied smoothly, setting down the empty glass with a clink that felt too loud in the silence of my mind. "Just enjoying the show."

“Do you want another one?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “Keep my tab open.”

“You got it, boss.”

I stood up and walked toward the crowd. This wasn't just a show—it was a battlefield, and I was right at the heart of it. With every heartbeat, I wove through the throng of guests, my smile a mask, my mind a weapon. The Knives were my family, and in this den of vipers, I was their eyes and ears. And nothing, not the gold that gilded these walls nor the ghosts of my past, would distract me from my duty.

The chandeliers dripped with diamonds, casting prisms of light that danced across the marble floors like specters teasing the night. I leaned against a pillar, the coolness of the stone a stark contrast to the warmth of the bodies milling around me. My eyes scanned the crowd, decoding alliances and enmities hidden behind practiced smiles and clinking glasses.

"Quite a spectacle, isn't it?"

Her voice, a soft purr that grazed the edges of my consciousness, pulled me back from my surveillance. Valentina Rossi stood before me, her presence commanding attention without demanding it. Her gown, a cascade of black silk, hugged her curves with the possessiveness of a shadow in love with the form it followed. Since the last time I had seen her, she'd let her hair grow long, until it was practically at her waist.

"Valentina," I greeted, my tone measured, a balancing act between familiarity and detachment. "It's been too long."

"Too long or just long enough?" she teased, a playful glint in her emerald eyes. She took a step closer, the faintest scent of jasmine swirling between us.

"Depends on whom you ask," I replied, keeping my guard up while letting nostalgia color the edges of my words. "You look...I like the hair."

"Flattery will get you everywhere—but not tonight, Hassan." She lifted her champagne flute in a mock toast. "To old friends—or whatever we were."

"Acquaintances with history," I corrected.

"And here I thought you were trying to flatter me."

I laughed.

"Speaking of history, what brings you here, mingling with West Palm Beach's elite? I thought the Knives usually didn't leave Miami." Her gaze was sharp, searching, a reminder that for all our shared memories, Valentina played her cards close to her chest.

"We don't," I replied. "And you know. Business as usual. What about you?"

"I wasn't going to miss this party," she said. "I can't wait to see what charitable contributions the De Lucas make tonight."

"Nor can I," I said, looking at Vito and his wife. She was wearing a green gown cut at the waist which flowed every time she walked, diamonds sparkling on the fabric as she moved.

"Aren't you curious?" she asked.

I nodded. "Always."

She sighed, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. "I hear the Knives have been busy."

"Rumors tend to exaggerate," I said lightly, though my mind raced to catalog this tidbit. Valentina was more than idle gossip; she was information incarnate—if only one knew how to listen.

And I knew how to listen.

"Of course," she replied, but there was a weight to her concession, a silent dance of meaning between the lines. "Do you want to get out of here?"

I looked her up and down. "Don't take this personally. You look amazing, but I'm not available."

"Who is she? Is she here?"

I shook my head. "Don't worry about that. Can I get you a drink?"

She nodded. "It is the least you could do," she said.

I smiled at her, gesturing toward the bar. "I'm surprised you're here alone, Valentina. I heard you were engaged."

"I was. Didn't work out," she said, her smile widening. "And you know. Work never stops."

"I hear that. Though this is a party," I said. My eyes scanned the darkness behind her—a force of habit—before settling back on her form. She was close enough for me to catch the scent of her perfume, a mix of jasmine and something darker, like secrets pressed between pages.

"Careful, Hassan," she said. "Even shadows can betray you in this city."

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“Yeah, it’s a good thing I don’t live here,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter,” she replied. “You should watch your back.”

“From who, exactly?”

“I couldn’t tell you, even if I knew,” she said. After the bartender handed her a drink, she took my arm. “Walk with me. Let’s go to the garden. It’s stuffy here.”

I knew what she meant: there are eyes everywhere and I can’t actually tell you what I know.

We stepped out into the garden, filled with a thousand dancing colors from the party within, but still, an oasis of calm. The night was warm and humid, just like this city, and the lavender bushes' sweet scent, mixed with the smoky scent of cigars, created a heady, intoxicating aroma.

"So, what do you hear about Bash and Vito's grandson, Sebastian?" she asked, looking at the shadows that lurked between the trees. The topic change was a little surprising, but I didn't question it. "Is it true that he wants custody?"

"Are you working for him, Val?"

"I'm working for the highest bidder," she said. "You know that."

"Hmm," I replied, taking a sip from my drink. The ice clinked against the glass, echoing the tension in the air. "So you're here because you got paid well enough to

attend this little shindig? Or are you just playing a long game? I can't tell."

Valentina laughed lightly. "You're still as sharp as ever, Hassan. And yes, I'm here because someone was willing to pay enough for my time. As for the long game...you should know better than anyone that we both always have one."

"But of course," I responded, matching her light tone with my own. We turned a corner, the noise from the party becoming a distant murmur. "You wouldn't be who you are if you didn't."

"Neither would you," she retorted, glancing up at me through heavy lashes. Even in the dim light, her eyes sparkled with an intensity that had always been uniquely Valentina.

"Touché," I said, letting out a soft laugh.

We continued our walk in silence, the only sounds being our footsteps on the cobblestone path and the faint rustle of leaves in the breeze. The moon hung low in the sky like a pearl dipped in gold, bathing everything in a soft, ethereal glow.

"So, Sebastian De Luca," Valentina finally said, breaking our silence. "What's your angle?"

"I don't have one," I said plainly. Most of the time, that wouldn't have been true. But Sebastian had become one of the most important presences in my entire life and I wasn't willing to let him go. "I'm just doing what the skip says."

Valentina chuckled. "You mean to tell me you've grown soft for him?"

"For Bash? He grows on you," I said. "And he is my boss. He hasn't stopped being my boss."

"I hope he's treating you well."

"Careful, Val," I warned, meeting her challenging smirk with a hard gaze. But there was no real heat in my words. We'd walked this line of playful banter and calculated jabs many times before.

In another life, it could have been her.

I wonder if she would have made me share.

"I'm always careful." Her voice held a touch of amusement. "That's how I stay alive in this game, Hassan."

"I know," I said with a small chuckle. "But honestly, Val, Bash is...different. He's not like the others."

She regarded me with an arch brow—clearly surprised by my words and perhaps even a bit skeptical—but there was also something else in her eyes. A flicker of curiosity, maybe even interest.

"Different how?" she asked, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear in a manner that was both absent-minded and yet somehow calculated.

"He's...he cares about his people," I said, finding it surprisingly difficult to put into words exactly what made Bash stand out from the other crime bosses I'd dealt with over the years. "He's not just in it for the money or the power. He genuinely wants to make things better for those under his command."

Valentina's gaze dropped from mine. "Isn't his father Pedro Rivera?"

"Bash is not his father."

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Valentina picked up her head again. "I don't believe you," she said.

"You don't have to," I replied nonchalantly, swirling the ice in my glass. "Just saying, you might want to look deeper than the bloodline."

There was a silence then as Valentina mulled over my words. We had arrived at a quiet corner of the garden, secluded from prying eyes. The soft murmur of music from inside the mansion reached us as a faint lullaby.

"Is that why you're here then? Protecting Bash?" Valentina asked. Her voice was softer now, curious rather than confrontational.

"The job is more about uprooting enemies than babysitting," I said, sounding more dismissive than I intended. "Bash can handle himself."

"What about his brother's child?"

"That's his child," I said. "He has custody now."

She cocked her head. Valentina laughed and there was no malice in it this time. "You've always been good at deflecting, Hassan. But I see through you."

"Is that so?" I said, raising an eyebrow. "And what exactly do you see, Val?"

"A loyal man," she said. "More than a hired hand. You're his friend."

"I'm not..." I began, but trailed off, shaking my head instead. Valentina had always

had a knack for reading people. It was one of the reasons she was so good at her job. How could I explain? I'd done a lot of thinking about what Bash was to me, and beyond someone I considered a brother--and as complicated as our relationship was, I did consider him a brother--I had no idea where I landed.

"You don't have to defend yourself, Hassan," she said gently, reaching out and laying a hand on my arm briefly before pulling away. "We all have our reasons for doing what we do."

I nodded. "Speaking of that. What do you know about the De Lucas?"

She stilled, her eyes growing distant as if she was sifting through a library of knowledge. After a moment, she responded. "I won't give you information for nothing."

"So I'll be in your debt. It's nice to have me owe you a favor."

"I know," she said, playing with one of her silver rings. "Okay. Here is what I know. The De Lucas are a dynasty. They've been in power for generations, ruling with an iron fist and leaving a trail of destruction in their wake."

"Why didn't we know that Alicia was their daughter until now?"

"Because they made a huge effort to keep it hidden," she said. "Everyone knows that families don't get messed with, but you know who's truly untouchable?"

I raised my brows.

"Civilians," she said with a nod. "They knew that if Alicia had been connected to them, she would have become a target. For rivals, for the police, for anyone looking to hurt the De Lucas. They sent her abroad to study, to New York for college, and

they expected her to get married to a doctor or a lawyer or someone important up there. But she came home and ran into one of the Rivera kids."

"Jez."

"Right," she said. "And then it was even worse for Vito because that meant that his kid wasn't just exposed to enemies of the De Lucas, she was exposed to enemies of the Miami Knives. So he told Jez he could marry her as long as they kept her association with his own family on the downlow."

"And then she died."

"Weirdly," Valentina said. "Someone broke in and shot her. Then the nanny walked in and called 911."

"But it could be anyone," I said, my insides twisting as I fought to keep my voice steady. "If she had ties to two dangerous gangs."

"Right. Which made him very paranoid," she replied.

"That's why Bash has her son now," I murmured, connecting the dots. "To keep him safe."

"His wife wanted to keep him; she said as grandparents, they were the best choice," Valentina continued. "But I heard Bash asked and pleaded, using the fact that his brother was dead too and that no one had touched members of the Knives. So..."

"So the child went with Bash," I finished.

"Well. With his girlfriend," Valentina said. "For legal reasons."

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I nodded, as if I was just learning this bit of info now.

She nodded, her hazel eyes meeting mine with a soft curiosity. "Hassan," she began, pausing as though choosing her words cagily. "Is that why you're here? Because of the kid?"

The question took me aback. Sure, the boy was part of it— but it wasn't just about him. It was Bash, it was loyalty, and honestly, a slice of it was myself too. You don't endure what we've been through without finding a part of yourself entwined in all the chaos and bloodshed.

"No," I said at last. "It's more than that."

"If it had been up to Vito, they would have sent Sebastian to boarding school when he was old enough. Kept him far away from all of this."

"There's a gravitational pull to this," I said. "Look at the baby's mother."

"Alicia," she noted, her voice becoming a mere whisper as if the echo of the name might resurrect her lost ghost. "She was far away, wasn't she? Living a different life entirely. Yet the underworld found her."

"Or she found it," I countered. "Sometimes it's not just about escaping... it's about belonging."

Valentina looked at me for a long moment, as though putting together a puzzle she hadn't realized she'd been given. A frown tugged at her delicate features, but soon

dissolved into a conceding nod.

"That might be true," she admitted softly, the moonlight catching her gaze and turning it almost silver. "This world, as brutal and unforgiving as it can be...it has its own allure. Its own bonds."

"More like shackles," I said wryly. But there was truth in both our words—the underworld was a treacherous ocean that could drown you as easily as it could cradle you. An ocean that twisted and turned with the tides of power and betrayal, and yet, there was a strange beauty in it. We were both addicted. Alicia had been, too. And even when I'd tried to pull Justice away from all this...it hadn't worked.

We were back in Miami.

You didn't just leave. "So why do Vito and his wife seem to want custody of Sebastian now? What changed?"

Valentina shrugged, a hint of uncertainty in her eyes. "Word on the street is that Vito's been asking around. The veil of grief has lifted and now...I mean, everyone knew there was a rift between Jez and Bash. Who says Bash didn't kill Jez and then kill his wife?"

"Bash didn't kill Jez."

"You'd know," she replied. "In any case, maybe he's gotten wind of something, something that's made him antsy about the boy being with Bash."

Something cold and sharp prickled at the back of my neck; an old instinct, a survival mechanism born from years of navigating the treacherous waters we were discussing. "What kind of something?"

"I'm not sure," Valentina admitted, her gaze suddenly nervous and fidgety. "It's just rumors, whispers in the shadows. People are saying Vito ain't what he used to be. There's talk of a sickness, and not the kind you recover from. It's possible he wants to secure his line, ensuring his blood continues to rule."

The news hit me like a punch to the gut. Vito was an institution in this world of ours, a constant—ruthless, powerful, unyielding. The idea of him succumbing to something as ordinary as disease seemed almost...wrong.

"So Bash has his son, and possibly Vito's only chance at a lasting legacy," I mused aloud, my mind racing with the implications. "That would make Bash...vulnerable."

Valentina nodded, her earlier playfulness replaced with grim seriousness. "And it makes Sebastian more valuable than ever. If Vito dies..." she let the sentence hang in the air, its ominous implications settling in the silence between us.

The breeze wafted through the sparse trees, rustling leaves and playing with Valentina's hair. We both stared out into the shadowy landscape, lost in our thoughts. Sebastian was not only a child caught between two powerful factions—he was now a potential heir, a pawn in a game of power and control that none of us ever truly escaped from.

"Then Sebastian becomes the key to controlling the De Lucas empire," I finished, my voice rough with the understanding. "And anyone who has him would have that power."

"Ding ding ding," she said. "You get a prize. And your boss? Your friend? His girlfriend?"

I looked at her, not saying anything.

"Yeah," she said. "They're all dead. And so are you."

Chapter Five: Justice

The familiar hum of voices and laughter filled the air as I stepped into the Miami Knives' luxurious headquarters. Sunlight streamed through floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city's skyline, casting a warm glow on the sleek modern furniture and polished marble floors. The scent of coffee mingled with the rich aroma of leather and expensive cologne.

It was past Sebastian's bedtime, so I knew he would be asleep. I would check on him later.

This was home—the penthouse in Brickell, Bash's apartment, Miami Knives HQ.

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The place where we were raising our child.

Because even if Sebastian wasn't technically ours...he had been with us since he was a baby. We protected him, taught him how to talk, how to walk.

He was ours, and I didn't intend on letting him go.

My head was pounding when I walked in. It was still light outside but it felt like I had been awake forever. After dealing with Miami traffic, the courthouse and a meeting with a wedding planner I really didn't like, I just wanted to go home and curl up with a book.

But clearly, the boys had other plans.

"Justice!" Skylar called out, his British accent standing out among the others. He raised his glass in a mock salute before taking a generous sip of whiskey. "You're just in time for the meeting."

It was nice to see them all there, just hanging out. It rarely happened without planning nowadays.

I rolled my eyes at him, but couldn't suppress a smile as I took a seat next to Zane on the plush sectional sofa. "What have you got for us today, boys?"

Bash, our fearless leader and my soon-to-be husband, cleared his throat and straightened his tie, commanding the attention of the room. His hair was greying slowly, at the sides and the back, and he looked hotter than ever.

Hassan leaned against a nearby wall. "Okay," he said. He wore a leather jacket, one sleeve pushed up past his elbow where a bright splash of a tattoo peaked out. It was new. The scales of justice. I loved looking at it. I loved looking at him. His eyes were hard as flint now. "We've got a problem."

A chorus of groans echoed around the room. Skylar muttered something about a never-ending circus, earning chuckles from Zane.

"What kind of problem?" Bash asked. His tone was calm, but I could see the tension etched on his face. He was always so good at hiding his worries behind that strong façade of his, but to me, he was an open book.

Hassan glanced at me before turning back to Bash. "It's about Sebastian."

It felt like air was sucked out of the room.

Hassan rubbed his temple. "I ran into Valentina at the party last night," he said.

"Valentina?" I frowned.

The others exchanged cryptic looks—usually a sign that this was someone Hassan had a history with. I understood that he had a history with a lot of women, but...

...yeah, that didn't mean I had to like it.

We had other things to worry about though.

"An information broker who's in with the De Lucas," Hassan muttered. "She told me that there's a rumor that Vito is sick."

Bash's gaze sharpened, his eyes like ice. "What kind of sick?" he demanded, voice

hard as granite. Hassan hesitated, and I could see the tension ricochet around the room.

"Dying," Hassan finally said, releasing the harsh truth like a bullet. "Terminal."

"Well...shit," Zane muttered, leaning back against the couch and running a hand through his dark hair.

"Isn't that a good thing?" I asked. "I mean—we have a problem with Vito, but if Vito dies, the problem goes away, right?"

"It's not just that," Hassan added, looking at Bash with gravity. "Vito has been sniffing around Sebastian."

Bash and Hassan looked at each other for a long moment.

"But why wouldn't he leave Sebastian alone if he's terminal?" I asked. "We count his age in months, not years. A terminal man can hardly look after an energetic toddler."

"He wouldn't have to look after him, doll," Hassan said, walking over to where I was. "He has staff for that. And, uh..."

"Sebastian is Vito's last chance at a legacy," Bash said when Hassan trailed off.

I sighed heavily, my headache worsening. "Fuck that."

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"Right," Bash said. "Don't worry about it."

"So what do we know about the De Lucas?" Zane asked. For the first time in a couple of weeks, I really looked at his face, which was bruised and purple around his lower lip. "Beyond them controlling West Palm Beach and Alicia being the boss' daughter."

"Well, the De Lucas are pretty insular," Hassan began, pacing the room now. "Keep to their own, fiercely loyal. They've been running their operations in West Palm Beach for nearly half a century now."

"Rumored to have ties with the Calabrian mafia," Skylar added, swirling the whiskey in his glass thoughtfully. "So, not exactly small fry."

"Right," Hassan agreed. "And Alicia...Alicia was Vito's only child. She was just as ruthless as her father, maybe even more so."

"Figures," Bash said. "Makes sense my brother found someone like that to marry."

"Well, she knew the risks," I said. "She stayed with Jez even though she knew exactly the kind of person he was."

"I didn't kill him even though I knew what kind of person he was," Bash said under his breath.

"He was your brother," Hassan said. "It was a whole thing."

Bash stopped short of smiling gratefully at him.

"Anyway, she's dead, he's dead, and now we're left in a power vacuum for West Palm Beach," he said. "No one to head the whole thing, and it's not like his wife can take over."

"And with Vito potentially on his deathbed, there's even more uncertainty," Zane chimed in, his face a mask of concern. "Sebastian is now a key player, whether he knows it or not."

"Which he doesn't, because he's a toddler," Bash pointed out with a sigh.

The room fell silent again, everyone lost in their own thoughts. It was Hassan who broke the silence, rubbing at the bright splash of color on his arm as he turned to Bash.

"So what are we going to do? If Vito gets his hands on Sebastian..."

"He won't," Bash cut him off, his voice leaving no room for doubt. He glanced at me, reaching over to take my shaking hand in his. I tried to smile but I knew it didn't quite reach my eyes.

Before he could say anything else, we heard little footsteps approaching us. With a devilishly bright laugh accompanying the patter, Sebastian burst into the room, a toy car clutched in his pudgy hands. I watched as his large hazel eyes scanned the room, focusing on each of us with a flicker of childish curiosity.

"Juju!" he squealed suddenly, his eyes lighting up when he spotted me. But to get to me, he had to clamber over Bash's outstretched legs. He attempted this feat with much enthusiasm but little grace, nearly toppling over twice before he got to me.

I scooped him up into my arms, hiding my wince at the reminder of how much he was growing. "Hey there, gordo," I greeted softly, pressing a loving kiss to his forehead.

His body felt warm and solid against mine, a reminder of how precious this tiny life was. I pressed my lips to his forehead, inhaling the soft baby perfume of his skin.

"Da!" Sebastian exclaimed, pointing to Bash. He reached out with his chubby hand, wiggling his fingers until Bash leaned over and high-fived him.

The tension in the room eased a little at Sebastian's innocent interaction. Zane chuckled, ruffling his toddler nephew's hair, while Skylar made a silly face that had the little boy giggling with delight.

Bash watched them all, before leaning over and whispering into my ear, "We'll keep him safe."

I nodded, but the knot of worry in my stomach didn't quite go away. Looking at all these men in the room—Skylar with his whiskey, Zane with his bruised face, and Hassan donned in leather—I realized how deeply they all cared for Sebastian.

He wasn't just someone we were obligated to protect because of his lineage; he was family.

"Come on, mijo," Bash said. "You need to go back to bed."

Sebastian, with his eyes bright and curious, gave Bash a nod so serious it was endearing. He hurriedly placed his toy car in my lap before reaching out for Bash, eagerly wrapping his arms around his uncle's neck. I watched as Bash stood up, holding Sebastian securely against his chest. His gaze met mine, promising once again to keep the little boy safe.

"Juju," he said, reaching out for me.

"Don't worry, baby, I'm coming too," I said, getting off the sofa.

With the toy car in my hand and Sebastian's giggles echoing in my ears, we left the rest of the guys behind. They would stay up late into the night, scheming and planning for a war we were all too aware was brewing. It was a long walk to Sebastian's room, lit only by the sputtering wall sconces, but Bash carried him as if he weighed nothing. Once we reached his room, a haven of blue and white, Bash gently laid him down in his crib.

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"Story," Sebastian demanded as Bash tried to put him down.

With a chuckle, Bash shot me a glance as he settled back down onto the tiny chair by the crib. Sebastian, his eyes gleaming at the prospect of a story, settled himself as comfortably as he could on his tiny pillow. I sat on the edge of his crib, running a hand down his soft curls.

"Alright then," Bash said, clearing his throat dramatically. "Once upon a time there was a little prince named...Sebastian."

The toddler giggled excitedly, clapping his hands together.

"This prince lived in a grand castle with his Uncle Bash and Aunt Juju," Bash continued with a smile, winking at me.

"And he was very brave," I interjected. Sebastian beamed at me, looking proud.

"Yes," Bash agreed. "He was brave and kind, and loved by everyone in the kingdom."

With my hand idly tracing the checkered pattern of Sebastian's blanket, I watched as Bash's eyes lit up with each word of the tale he spun. His voice had a soothing rhythm to it that was surely magical for a child so young.

"And every night," Bash continued, "the prince would go on an adventure in his dreams, exploring enchanted forests and sailing across candy-coated seas. He fought dragons made of fluffy clouds and rescued princesses who turned into beautiful butterflies."

Sebastian's eyelashes fluttered, his little body sinking deeper into the soft mattress as his eyelids grew heavy. We watched as his small chest rose and fell steadily, signaling the arrival of sleep.

"And then," Bash's voice dropped to a hushed whisper, his eyes never leaving Sebastian's peaceful visage. "The prince would go back to his castle, and sleep, knowing that he was safe and loved."

As he finished the story, I looked over at Bash, finding him already looking at me. The room was silent for a while as we watched Sebastian sleep. His tiny hands clutched the blanket, his mouth slightly open as he breathed in and out peacefully. I reached out to touch his rosy cheek gently before standing up.

"I will fucking kill anyone who tries to touch this baby," I said under my breath.

Bash looked at me, his eyes dark and serious. "I know," he said quietly. "So will I."

We stood there for a few minutes more, watching Sebastian sleep, two ruthless guardians ensuring the safety of an innocent life. The silence was broken only by the soft sound of Sebastian's breathing and the occasional distant laugh or shout from the meeting still going on in the living room.

"We should get back," Bash said finally, standing up and wrapping an arm around my waist. "We have this thing tonight and I need to work it."

"Don't you have men for that?" I asked.

"I do, but I need to oversee this one personally," he said, his tone leaving no room for further questions. He gently kissed the top of my head before leading us out of the room, carefully closing the door behind him. "I'm taking Skylar and Hassan with me, too. Don't worry. I'm not going on missions alone anymore."

"Good. What about Zane?"

He shook his head. "Nah," he said. "As important as this shipment is, I don't want to leave the two of you alone."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know, darlin', but you don't have to," he replied. "And obviously I'm going to take care of my child and my wife."

As we slowly descended back into the heated chaos of the living room, I looked up at him, a question on my lips. "And if something goes wrong tonight?"

Bash paused, his hand tightening around mine. His eyes met mine in the dim light. "Then you take Sebastian and run," he said firmly. "You don't look back. You don't wait for me or Zane or anyone else."

"But—"

"No 'buts.' Promise me," he cut me off, the gravity of his gaze making my heart pound.

"I promise," I muttered, feeling a cold shiver run down my spine. The possibility of losing Bash—of losing any of them—was chilling.

Leaving Bash with Skylar and Hassan, I walked over to where Zane was nursing his bruised face with an ice pack, his eyes deep and thoughtful as he watched the scene before him. He smiled when he saw me approach him; it was a sad sort of smile, but it reached his eyes, lighting them up in a way that made the room feel a little less tense.

The rest of the guys left, leaving Zane and I alone in the room. The laughter, the jokes, the plans...they all seemed to fade away, leaving behind a deafening silence.

I settled down next to Zane. "You okay?" he asked, turning to face me.

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"I look better than you," I said, pointing to my eye.

"Rude," he replied, laughing.

"How did you get that shiner?"

"Staircase," he replied, the smile still playing on his face.

"Fell down or tripped up?" I asked, the corners of my mouth tugging up in a teasing manner.

"Bit of both," Zane admitted with a sheepish grin. He eased back into the sofa, the ice pack making a soft crinkling noise against his dark stubble. "He was huge."

"The staircase?"

"Oh, yeah," he replied.

"Well, you're not the first man to be bested by a set of stairs," I said. I settled back, watching as Zane's smile remained. Despite the grim situation we found ourselves in, his ability to keep spirits high was admirable.

"Are you worried about tonight?" he asked quietly. The smile faded slightly from his face as he gently turned the conversation to a more serious topic.

I sighed, "Of course I am." I admitted, looking down at my fidgeting hands. "But it's not like we have much of a choice. I'm worried about every night as long as Vito is

after our kid."

Zane nodded solemnly, agreeing with my sentiment. "For what it's worth," he began, turning towards me. "I would do anything to protect you."

I smiled at him. "Yeah," I said. "I know."

Chapter Six: Zane

Bash left me in charge of Justice. I wasn't going to say no to that.

Once the rest of the guys had gone and our brief conversation was over, Justice had gone to the office to look up any information about the De Lucas. The noise had ebbed away, and in the quieter hum of Bash's study, my attention honed in on Justice. There she was, a figure of steadfast resolve amongst scattered papers and murmuring screens, carrying the day's weight in the set of her shoulders and the shadows under her eyes.

"I brought you a cup of green tea," I said.

She looked up from her laptop, flashing me a weary smile. "Thanks, Zane," she murmured, accepting the steaming mug and cradling it between her hands. Her fingers, usually so deft and sure, trembled ever so slightly from fatigue.

Her gaze was drawn back to the documents strewn before her, but I could tell the words were blurring together. She was pushing herself too hard again. A familiar worry tangled with a deeper desire in my chest.

"Justice..." I began, unsure of the right words to convey my concern and longing. "You're running on fumes. Let me help."

She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as if to ward off a headache. "I know, Doctor Silva," she said lightly, trying for a teasing tone that didn't quite land.

"Consider this an intervention," I told her, hoping to lighten the tension. "Working yourself into the ground isn't going to help anyone, least of all you."

Her lips twitched in a small smile, but her eyes were still clouded with worry and exhaustion. "I know you're right... but we need to be prepared, Zane. There's too much at stake."

I nodded, understanding seeping deep into my bones. The responsibility she shouldered was heavy. She had to take care of all of us and we were a nightmare.

"I know. Here, let me take a look," I offered, my hands coming up to gently knead the tension from her shoulders. She stiffened at my touch before sighing into it, her head lolling forward as I worked.

My fingers brushed against the soft tendrils of her hair, their touch sending a shiver down my spine. Heat pooled in my belly, stoking the flames of an ever-present desire I'd kept carefully in check for too long. It was hard; she was busy, she was planning a wedding, she had a child to raise.

It wasn't like we weren't intimate, but carving time for just the two of us had become a challenge. As soon as Skylar got the vibe that we were going to do something, he also wanted to be included. And I couldn't blame him a bit.

But right now, her skin was warm under my hands...and I wasn't going to miss this chance.

"Breathe, Justice," I murmured, my voice low and soothing as I leaned closer.

"A little hard to concentrate when you're doing that," she retorted, her words muffled by her arms as she rested her forehead against them. It was meant as a jest, but the strain in her voice was apparent.

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"I can stop..." I began, my words trailing off as I withdrew my hands slightly. She didn't reply verbally, instead reaching back to grasp my wrist and pull it back into place. A chuckle escaped me at that, the act so endearing, so Justice.

"No need to stop, Doctor Silva," she sighed out finally, leaning into my touch once more. "How many massages did you give when you were practicing as a surgeon?"

"Not many," I confessed, my hands gliding across the contours of her neck and shoulders in soothing strokes. The intimacy of the moment, the quiet camaraderie between us, held me captive. "But for you..."

"A lot's riding on your hands, then," she said.

"That's why I had them insured."

She laughed. "You have always been very good with your hands."

"And I intend to keep proving that," I told her, leaning closer and letting the words hang in the air between us. My fingers glided down her spine, tracing each vertebra through the thin material of her shirt.

"Zane..." she began, the teasing gone from her voice. She turned to face me, her dark eyes gleaming in the warm lamplight of the office. There was a soft blush blooming on her cheeks, a delightful contrast to her usual spirit. It tugged at something within me, a storm of longing and protectiveness. "What are you doing?"

"What I've wanted to do since I saw you this morning," I said. "What you're ready

for. Because you're ready for me, aren't you?"

Her breath hitched as she locked eyes with me, a silent question hanging between us. Her lips parted slightly as my fingers trailed down to the hem of her shirt, toying with the material.

"Zane..." Her words came out as a whisper, her dark eyes reflecting a different kind of tension. Anticipation.

Hunger.

"Justice," I murmured, my voice low and husky as my hand traveled higher on her back. My fingers brushed against the lacy edge of her bra strap, and she sucked in a soft breath. The air around us thrummed with expectation as heat bloomed between us. "We don't need to rush things. No matter how much you want me to fill you up. Because you want me to fuck you until you can't think. I know you do. I can practically smell how wet you are."

Her lips parted as if to speak, but no words came out. I let my hand fall back down, skimming her stomach through the thin material of her shirt. A shudder passed through her and I reveled in it. "But we'll go slow," I vowed, dropping my voice to a whisper that was barely audible in the dimly lit room.

"Slow?" she echoed.

"I always have to rush to get a bit of you," I said. "Tonight, I'm going to savor you."

She stared at me, her eyes dark and throbbing with heat. It was an intense gaze, one that held a promise of things to come. Her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, the curve of her breasts outlined beneath the fabric of her shirt, stirring a lustful hunger in me. But I stayed steady; tonight was about slow exploration and agonizing

anticipation. I wanted to grab her and push her against the wall and fuck her until she screamed, but I also wanted to take it slow.

I wanted to savor her.

Her lips parted and a soft sigh escaped, sending a shiver down my spine. "I think I'd like that," she confessed, her voice unsteady. Encouraged by her words, my fingers boldly slipped beneath the hem of her shirt, tracing the softness of her skin.

"Just lay back," I whispered, guiding her gently until she was sprawled out on the notes scattered on Bash's desk.

My fingers gently cradled her head, supporting her as she settled onto the hard surface. Papers rustled beneath her, words of strategy and revenge now hidden beneath the glorious expanse of Justice Rosales.

And she was a fucking sight to see.

"Comfortable?" I asked.

Her eyes fluttered open to meet mine, and for a moment, we simply held each other's gaze.

"As I'll ever be on a desk," she shot back, her lips curving into a smirk. The playful banter was familiar territory, but the intimacy of our moment added a thrilling edge.

I chuckled, my fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead. As I held her gaze, I was reminded of all the reasons I had fallen for her; her resilience, her wit, her warmth. She had a way of casting light into the bleakest corners of my world.

"Your poor back," I said, feigning concern as I moved to unbutton her shirt.

She chuckled, but there was anticipation in her eyes as they followed my movements. Each button undone revealed a little more skin, fair and soft under the harsh office lights. My heart pounded in my chest, echoing the deep thrumming of desire throughout my body.

"Zane," she said, her voice tinged with amusement as she caught me staring. "If you're going to take this slow, at least be thorough."

My mouth tugged into a smirk as I leaned forward, pressing a kiss on the valley between her breasts. "Does this count as thorough?"

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Her breath hitched at my touch, her fingers tangling in my hair as she held me there. The warm whisper of silk against skin sent a shiver coursing through me, a primal affirmation. "It's...a start," she managed, her voice husky and laden with desire.

My hands roamed freely over her bare skin now, fingers tracing the curves of her waist and belly. Her body responded to every touch, every stroke; a tiny gasp here, a shuddering sigh there. It was intoxicating, this power I held over her. And yet I knew that it was she who truly held the power over me.

"Do you want me to check your pussy?" I asked.

Her lips parted, her eyes glossy and dark. "I thought you were taking this slow, Zane," she managed to gasp out, the words saturated with a veiled invitation.

"The offer is merely professional," I countered, my voice steady even as my pulse thrummed in my veins. My fingers ghosted over the edge of her jeans, pulling a shiver from her body. "I should ensure that everything is in working order. I'm supposed to be looking after you."

"Alright, Doctor Silva," she said.

"Good girl," I murmured, placing another soft kiss against her collarbone. Slowly, my fingers began to trail downward, but I paused when they reached the waistband of her jeans.

"What are you waiting for?"

I looked up at her, fixing her with the kind of stern look I would have worn at the hospital. "I'm the doctor, you're the patient," I said. "You need to trust my expertise."

"Yes, sir," she teased.

I gripped her by the jaw, sudden, making her gasp.

"If you mouth off to me I'll have to stuff it with something."

She took a shuddering breath, but nodded, and for real this time said, "Yes, sir."

I unbuttoned her jeans with practiced ease, my fingers exploring lower as I murmured words of praise. "God, Miss Rosales," I breathed, my thumbs finding the delicate lace edge of her panties. They were drenched with arousal, and it only took a split second for her musky scent to nearly overwhelm me. "You're so warm...so wet."

Her body arched beneath my touch, a soft gasp escaping her lips as I continued to explore. My fingers ghosted over the fabric on top of her clit.

She let out a shaky breath. "Zane..." Her gaze was locked onto mine, the tension thick between us.

"Relax," I whispered, brushing my lips against her ear. A shiver ran through her, and I stroked her hip gently in response. "You're so beautiful, Justice," I murmured, tracing my fingers lightly over her lace-covered center. She moved against me, her breath hitching. "Such a perfect little slut."

A gasp of surprise escaped her, turning into a low moan as my fingers pressed through the thin fabric. She was so wet, so ready.

"You like that, don't you?" I whispered, my fingers inching further down. Her thighs parted in anticipation, a provocative invitation that had my heart thundering in my chest.

"Yes..." Her voice was a breathy whisper, her dark eyes searing directly into my soul. My fingers began to move at the sides of her panties, teasing her just enough to make her gasp.

"Tell me," I murmured, pressing closer to her. "Tell me how much you want this."

Her reply was a ragged whisper that sent a shiver of anticipation spiraling down my spine. "I want you...I want this...so much..."

"Of course you do," I said. "It's all you want, a fucking cock in every hole all the time. That's why you're so wet, isn't it?"

She groaned, not answering my question.

"Well, medically," I said, pushing her panties aside. "I need to check." I lowered my voice to a near-whisper. "May I?"

She nodded, her chest rising and falling rapidly. The anticipation was thick, making my skin tingle with need. Carefully, I slipped my fingers beneath her panties, brushing against her wet folds. She gasped, a soft, pleading sound that set my blood on fire.

"Does that feel good?" I asked, not breaking eye contact as my fingers continued their exploration. A part of me wanted to make this last, to draw out every gasp and moan from her lips until she was begging...but another part wanted to get my hard cock inside her before we were interrupted. I had to fight against that instinct; I knew we had time. It was easier when I looked at her face, even as her eyes glazed with desire.

Her flushed cheeks were enough to tell me that she was enjoying this, enjoying me.

"Very good," she murmured after a beat, her voice strained. She bit her lower lip, a small smile pulling at its corner as her fingers curled around the edge of the desk.

With every inch I claimed, her breath hitched. She squirmed beneath me, a subtle dance of anticipation that sent my pulse racing. I held my gaze steady on her face, watching as the pleasure etched across it deepened with each gentle stroke.

As I continued to explore her, she began to writhe and moan, her body arching towards me. I could feel the heat radiating from between her legs, sending a surge of arousal through my own body. And yet, despite the intense desire coursing through me, I took my time with her. I wanted to savor every moment, to make this experience as pleasurable for her as possible.

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"You are so responsive," I whispered, trailing kisses along her neck as my fingers dipped lower. "Do you like that?"

"Yes," she breathed, her voice shaky and filled with need. "Please...don't stop."

I had no intention of stopping. Instead, I increased the pressure of my touch, circling my fingers around her clit before plunging them deep inside of her. She cried out in ecstasy, gripping the edge of the desk tighter as she rode out the waves of pleasure.

"God, you have such a pretty pussy," I said. "How could I stop?"

The moan that tumbled from her lips was pure music. I slid my fingers in and out, savoring the way she clenched around them as if begging for more. I teased her, drawing out a rhythm that had her bucking her hips against my hand.

"There's that dirty girl," I murmured against her neck, positioning myself between her thighs. She responded with a whimpered moan, her body quivering in anticipation. "Such a perfect little whore. All you think about is your next orgasm, isn't it?"

Her hands were clutching at the desk, her knuckles white as she bit down onto her lower lip to muffle her gasps. She was so beautiful in surrender: head thrown back, lips parted, eyes closed tight against the pleasure that was threatening to consume her entirely.

"Look at you," I whispered, pressing another slow kiss along the column of her throat. "So desperate for me...for my touch."

"Yes," she gasped, her voice thick with desire. "Zane...I need-"

"Tell me what you need, Justice," I urged, my voice gentle yet firm. "Say it. Out loud."

Her cheeks flushed deeper and her lashes fluttered closed. She swallowed hard and finally parted her lips to speak, words slurred and heavy with lust. "I-I need you inside me, Zane."

My heart pounded in my chest at her confession, a visceral thrill rushing through my veins. "That's my good girl," I praised, a half-smile curling the corner of my mouth as I withdrew my fingers from her, edging her jeans down further along with her panties.

"You're doing so well for me," I murmured huskily, appreciating the view of her laid out before me.

Her body was a study in perfection, the curves of her hips invitingly soft, the wetness between her thighs shimmering in the low light. I let my gaze sweep over her as I positioned myself at her entrance, the head of my cock brushing against her sensitive folds, her panties still pushed to the side.

"Look at me," I ordered, needing to see her eyes as I claimed her.

Her eyes fluttered open, glassy and filled with need. I gave her a moment to adjust to my size before I moved again, setting a slow and deliberate pace.

"Feel how well you take me...how perfectly you fit around me," I purred, my fingers tracing over her clenching walls. Each stroke was heaven, sending spirals of pleasure coursing through me.

Her moans echoed in the silence of the room as she succumbed to the pleasure. It was a sight to behold – Justice Rosales, soon-to-be wife of the boss of the Miami Knives, on the precipice of shattering apart beneath my touch.

"Such a good girl," I praised, my voice a raw whisper in her ear as she trembled under me. "Always so ready for it."

I stilled my pace for a moment, allowing her to adjust to all that was happening.

"You okay?" I murmured, brushing her disheveled hair out of her face.

She nodded, gasping.

"You're such a perfect little whore for me," I praised, pulling back to look at her flushed face. "Taking me so well..." I traced the outline of her lips with my thumb, watching as she parted them, letting out a low moan when I pinched one of her hard nipples through the fabric of her shirt.

Justice's eyes fluttered closed, surrendering herself fully to the pleasure. Her head lolled onto my shoulder as another wave of pleasure washed over her, raking a gasp from her throat.

"Oh, love," I murmured against her ear, "you're so close." Her body, tightly coiled and shaking with want, was a clear testament to that.

"I... I can't..." Her voice came out in shaky gasps, her hands gripping my shirt as if it were the only thing keeping her grounded. She was on the edge, her sweet release just a moment away.

"Give in," I coaxed, my voice a low purr. "I want to see you unravel."

She whimpered in response, a broken sound that made my heart pound fiercely in my chest. I felt a sudden sense of power at bringing such a strong woman to the brink of ecstasy with just my touch. It was intoxicating.

"Gorgeous slut," I said, raking my teeth against her collarbone.

Her entire body shuddered beneath me as she let out a gasp, her walls clenching around me. "Zane..." She moaned my name, the sound echoing through the room.

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"That's it, beautiful," I murmured against her neck, my own pleasure creeping up on me. "Let go for me."

She called out my name again, her body squirming beneath me as her orgasm washed over her. Her breath came out in ragged pants as waves of pleasure rippled through her. Her walls tightened around me and I gripped the edge of the desk tighter, my body trembling with the effort to hold back my own release.

"Justice," I moaned, her name a rough plea on my tongue as she continued to convulse beneath me, her body wringing every last ounce of pleasure from mine.

Finally, I allowed myself to let go, my climax rocketing through me with such force that I saw stars. My release came in hot bursts, each thrust pushing me deeper inside her until there was nothing left to give.

We collapsed into dizzying breathlessness, time suspended in the aftershocks of our shared ecstasy.

"Oh, love," I murmured again, brushing away a loose strand of hair sticking to her sweat-dampened forehead. Her eyes fluttered open, glassy and sated. "I should've taken you to bed."

She shook her head, clearly still unable to speak.

"It's okay," I said. "I got you."

Silently, we rearranged our clothes and I eased her up from the desk. She wobbled

slightly, her knees weak and unsteady. Chuckling softly, I swooped her into my arms, cradling her against my chest.

“Zane...” she murmured, her hand splayed over my heart. “That was...”

“Incredible?” I finished for her, grinning down at the woman in my arms. Her cheeks blazed red, a testament of the naughty activities we’d just indulged in.

She laughed.

"How is your head?"

She blinked, brows furrowed in confusion. "My head?" A beat, and then understanding dawned on her face. "The headache. Right." She paused, considering before a slow smile spread across her face. "I think it's gone."

"Good to know my methods are effective," I teased, carrying her towards her master bedroom. The heated flush that spread across her cheeks was worth the weight in my arms. "Do you know when they'll be back?"

"No clue," she replied, her hands gripping my shirt. "But you did say you're going to do whatever it takes to take things off my mind, right?"

I laughed. "You're so naughty," I said, then looked into her eyes. "Yes. I am."

Chapter Seven: Bash

I hadn't told Justice what the op was because I didn't want her to worry. I was worried enough. Hassan had taken his Lamborghini Aventador ahead of us, and I had taken my Escalade. Skylar was driving me, but his eyes scanned the streets with a predator's intensity. Silence hung heavy in the vehicle, the two of us lost in our

thoughts as the neon lights of Miami whipped past.

Despite all the bravado, the mood was tense as we navigated through the streets bathed in neon lights, each turn bringing us closer to our dangerous rendezvous.

We were making our way to one of Miami's most exclusive restaurants, but I didn't have an appetite.

The L'ombra was a gilded cage of lavish indulgence, its walls whispering secrets that could turn the tides of power in Miami's underbelly. The facade was all sophistication and opulence, but the air inside held a musk of danger, a scent I knew all too well. It clung to the velvet drapes and marble floors like an expensive perfume, masking the stench of blood that had been spilt in the name of ambition.

This was deep in the heart of De Luca territory...we were guests here, and we had to watch our steps carefully.

One of us could get killed tonight.

But that made sense, when everything was on the line.

"Evening, sir," the maître d' greeted with a respectful nod, his eyes a guarded fortress. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Keep the table warm," I told him, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through me. I slipped him a hefty bill, the currency of silence, and made my way to the heart of the restaurant—a sanctuary for the wolves in sheep's clothing.

I couldn't shake the feeling of déjà vu as I navigated the familiar maze of backstreets within these walls, each step a dance with the devil. My hand instinctively brushed against the hidden holster under my jacket, a comfort against the unknowns that lay

ahead. My men were at my side, neither one of them saying anything as the host lead us to our table.

"Isabella De Luca," I muttered to myself, the name rolling off my tongue with a mix of respect and caution. She wasn't just any high-profile mark; she was the queen on a chessboard where every move could mean life or death. Seeking an alliance with her was like playing with fire—necessary, yet fraught with the potential to get burned.

But this wasn't about me.

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“You good, boss?” Skylar asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. Fine.”

I paused at the entrance of our designated meeting spot, the heavy door shielding us from prying eyes. For a fleeting moment, the weight of my family's legacy bore down on me—the violence, the sacrifices, all the damned souls we couldn't save.

"Blood doesn't always have to define you," Justice's words echoed in my head, her voice a balm to my fraying nerves. Her faith in me, in what the Miami Knives could become under my command, was the beacon guiding me through this darkness.

Inside, the atmosphere was charged, as if the very room anticipated the crossroads we were about to navigate. I walked in, the sound of my footsteps absorbed by the thick carpet, carrying with them the gravity of this encounter.

"Isabella," I greeted, my tone a delicate balance of strength and diplomacy. "Thank you for meeting me."

"Sebastian," she acknowledged with the slightest tilt of her head, her presence commanding even in stillness.

“It’s Bash, actually,” I said. “Silly name, I know...but your grandson has that name now. It’s his, not mine.”

A smile ghosted over her lips, unexpected. “You care about him.”

“I do,” I nodded. “He’s...”

More mine than my brother’s.

Mine and Justice’s.

I didn’t say it, even though I wondered what her reaction would be.

As I took my seat opposite her, I felt the presence of my brothers in arms, their silent support a tangible force.

We were the Miami Knives, ready to carve out a future for Sebastian—one without the shadows that had plagued us for too long. Hassan sat beside me, stoic and proud; Skylar on my other side, flashing Isabella an affable grin that showed off sharp teeth. My most diplomatic associate on my right...the most feral on my left. Two sides of the same coin, with me at the center.

I knew I needed to show her my power. And I knew she liked it.

Isabella raised her eyebrows.

"Insurance," I said. "You understand."

"Of course," she replied, her tone devoid of any surprise. Her cool gaze scanned each one of us in turn, her analytical mind undoubtedly gauging the situation, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of her current company. I didn't underestimate her for a second.

Hassan was silent, his eyes sharp as they watched Isabella with an unending vigilance. The air thrummed with tension as he maintained his role as our eyes and ears in this delicate dance. He had been the one that suggested looking into her. He'd

said that Valentina had never referred to Vito's wife as Alicia's mom, and that was good enough for me.

"Still," she said. "You better be careful. I have a feeling Vito is watching you closely."

"Vito's always watching," Skylar intervened, his British accent a stark contrast against the Italian nuances in the room. "It's like his favorite hobby, innit?"

The comment hung in the air for a moment—a beat of humor in our grim reality before we all returned to the matter at hand. I admired Skylar's ability to find levity in tense situations. It was one of the things that made him indispensable to our crew.

Mostly the fact that he was a psycho, though. That one really, really came in handy.

"I was surprised you wanted a meeting," Isabella said, "but I suppose I shouldn't be shocked when you seem to enjoy keeping dangerous company."

"It's all part of the job," I replied. "Dangerous company is powerful company."

"You're overestimating how much power I have," she said with a bitter laugh. She picked up her glass of wine, took a sip. "Vito's made sure of that."

"Yeah...I heard he got a younger, less interesting model," I said.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Not a compliment; just a fact," I said. "You were a player. His new wife...I'm not so sure."

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“Unfortunately, playing the game often gets you burned,” Isabella murmured.

We sat for a moment, and I considered what to do next. If Isabella wasn’t going to be an asset...well, this meeting may have just put us in more hot water.

But I had to believe she still cared.

Sebastian was her grandson, after all.

“Care to explain what that means?” I finally said. “Honestly...I was surprised how everything went down. You practically dropped off the map. Never expected that from you.”

She nodded, her grip tightening on the stem of her wine glass.

"I worked hard to escape my ex-husband," Isabella started, a tendril of wispy black hair falling in front of her face as she spoke. "I kept my head down, changed my name. I lost contact with my daughter for a number of years, thinking that was the best thing for all of them. My daughter was innocent in this. My ex-husband...he wanted another child, but I wasn't able to give him one. He wasn't happy about it. He became more brutal, more obsessed with power. After one particularly violent episode, I left."

Her voice broke, an echo of pain surfacing in her eyes. The air grew heavier, bearing the weight of her past. A silence fell on us—a respectful pause before she continued.

"I thought about taking Alicia with me. Maybe that would have been better. But she

needed...money. She loved her father."

I took a swig of my water. "I get it."

She picked her head up, her eyes narrowing. "Do you, young man?"

"Yes," I murmured, meeting her gaze square on. My hands tightened around the water glass. "More than you know."

Hassan, ever watchful, shifted slightly in his seat.

Isabella put her wine down. "I have no reason to trust you."

I cleared my throat. "When I was ten years old, my father raped my mother in front of my brother and I," I said. "Then he killed her. When he was done, he had us take care of her body."

Isabella's eyes widened, and for a moment, her carefully constructed façade crumbled, revealing the woman beneath—mother, victim, fighter.

Her gaze softened, and she reached across the table, placing her hand gently on mine. The icy touch of her hands sent shivers through me. It felt like the cold touch of death, a memory from my past that I wished to forget but served as a constant reminder of who I was. Who we all were in this room.

"What happened to your brother?" she asked.

"Jez?" My mouth was dry despite the water I'd just sipped on. "When he was an adult, he became my dad's right-hand man. Then one of my men killed him."

Isabella's eyes held mine in a gaze that was both questioning and understanding.

"And how do you feel about that?"

I swallowed hard, my mind reeling back to the fateful day when Zane had pulled the trigger, extinguishing Jez's life and a part of my soul with it. I could feel Hassan's eyes on me, watching, waiting for what I would say. I knew I still had a lot of work to do to make things up to Hassan—to acknowledge Jez as the villain in his story, and in mine.

"Relieved," I admitted, the word leaving a bitter taste on my tongue. "But also guilty."

She nodded slowly, her grip on my hand tightening for a moment before withdrawing. Those few seconds were the closest thing to a mother's comfort I'd felt in years. "Guilty because..."

"Because I loved him," I said. "But I should have killed him long before he and your daughter were running the Devils."

Without missing a beat, she retorted, "You loved him because he was your brother. The heart isn't rational, Bash. It doesn't pick and choose who to care about based on their sins."

"Yeah," I muttered, "I've noticed."

Isabella fell silent once again, her eyes taking on a faraway look as if she were traversing paths in her mind no one else could see. I cleared my throat. "Anyway. I'm not here for therapy. You said you could help me protect my nephew."

She snapped back to the present, her eyes meeting mine with a renewed vigor. "Yes, I did," she confirmed, her tone steeling with determination. "But let's be clear about something, Bash. I'm not doing this for you or your alliances. I'm doing this for

Sebastian."

I watched her, trying to decipher what lay behind those steel-lined eyes. It was an irony—an echo of my own mother's plight—that it was a woman who might hold the key to their salvation—a woman whose life had been scarred by the very men we opposed.

I nodded. "That's the only reason any of us are here."

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Hassan, who had been quiet until now, leaned forward in his chair, his gaze fixed on Isabella. "What do you suggest we do, then?"

Isabella's lips curled into a wry smile as she reached into her purse and pulled out a thick envelope. She slid it across the table towards me. "The first step is always information," she said cryptically.

Carefully, I opened the envelope to reveal a collection of documents—bank statements, legal papers and photographs that looked like they were taken from surveillance cameras.

I gave Isabella a questioning look. "What's all this?"

"Proof," she said, her tone darkening. "Proof of Vito's dealings. His financial transactions, secret meetings, and unknown associates." She paused to let the weight of her words sink in. "With this, you can expose him."

I furrowed my brow, playing with the envelope in my hands.

"But I can't expose him," I said. "I'm in the business myself, and he's established, powerful. The cops are in his pocket...and any payoff from us is small change compared to what he can do."

"You came to me for help and this is what I can do; it's my life's work, now that my daughter is gone." Isabella's gaze didn't waver from mine. "This is every scrap of evidence I've been able to gather against Vito over the past few years. Records of his illegal operations, names of corrupt officials in his pocket, and a few...compromising

photographs."

"I see," I said, digesting the information. For a while, the silence was only interrupted by the sound of other tables quietly talking.

"I know you're not in a position to expose him," she said. "But you need to be ready. He's going to come after you with everything he's got. Legally, not just with lawyers but with our friends in blue. He has more than a few cops in his pocket. He's going to go after you in the media. You're an easy target, Bash. You're a boss with a pretty hefty rap sheet."

"What about my wife?"

"She's going to be married to you," Isabella said. "It wouldn't surprise me if the judge called her judgment into question because of it."

Her words hit me like a sucker punch, leaving me gasping for air. "He wouldn't..."

"Oh, he would," she interjected, her voice cold and calculated. "He's ruthless. That's why he's been so successful. Once he knows Sebastian won't miss you, he'll kill you and he'll kill Justice."

Hassan cleared his throat, breaking the tension. "But with these documents, we can turn the tables on him, force him onto the defensive. Even if we can't go to the police, we can use these, boss."

"Yes." Isabella nodded, her eyes glinting with the beginnings of a plan. "You can use them to secure allies. To make his friends your friends. To set up traps and catch him off guard."

"You mean blackmail," I said, a chill creeping up my spine.

"You're a little naive for a man in your position," she said, no malice in her voice.

"Yeah...my brother took the brunt of a lot of it," I said, then shook my head. "But that's not really the point. I don't mind being ruthless, but if it's going to harm Sebastian, I'm not willing to do it."

Isabella leaned back in her chair, surveying me with those intense eyes that had seen more than the average woman. Those eyes that held a lifetime of sorrow and strength. "What you fail to understand is this isn't about what you're willing to do, but what you have to do. Sebastian's safety depends on it."

I ran a hand through my hair, my fingers brushing against the beginnings of a headache formed from this whirlwind conversation. "It's not as simple as you make it sound, Isabella."

"Of course it isn't," she retorted. "Nothing worthwhile ever is. But you're capable; I wouldn't be here if you weren't. With you and your wife, there's a chance Sebastian isn't going to be in this life. With Vito..."

I picked up the envelope again, flipping through the damning evidence against Vito. The file was thick, heavy—and the documents inside were detailed. Isabella had done a lot of work toward taking down her husband, so it was no wonder she'd gone into hiding.

Vito probably wanted her dead.

She was taking a risk here.

"I know who to take this to, if you accept," Hassan murmured. "Leak little bits of information...bring it up in conversation, make Vito uncomfortable. But it's up to you."

My mind whirled back to Sebastian—my nephew, the innocent soul caught up in this dangerous game of ours. I thought of how much he reminded me of Jez, his father, who too had been pulled into this world before his time. The weight of my choices crashed down on me like a tidal wave; it was a burden that threatened to drown me.

"All right," I said finally, sliding the file folder toward me. "I'll do it."

Isabella nodded once, an approving glint in her eyes. "Good. Remember, Bash, you're not alone in this. I can't loudly support you, of course, but know that I'll be watching you from the shadows. Honestly, I could even take him, run—"

"He's our child, Isabella," I said, feeling defensive for the first time since I'd gotten to the restaurant. "That's not what this is about."

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She held up a hand, silencing me. “I know, I know. My offer was not out of disrespect but out of concern.”

I clenched my teeth. She might have had good intentions, but the mere idea of my nephew growing up in someone else’s house was unacceptable for me. The silence hung heavy between us as she waited for me to calm down and process what she had said.

Hassan shifted in his seat uncomfortably, breaking the tension. “We’ll figure it out, boss. We have some tools now, thanks to Isabella. Perhaps we can even get ahead of this if we move fast...”

“Indeed,” Isabella said, her intensity seeping back as she turned her attention away from me and towards Hassan. "Timing is crucial here."

I sat back in my chair and watched as they began to exchange thoughts on the best strategies and actions we could employ with the information we now had. Isabella was a well of knowledge about Vito; they might not have been married for decades before Alicia died, but she still knew her ex-husband much better than I did.

My thoughts, however, were not on the strategies at hand. They were on my nephew. On my soon-to-be wife, Justice. On the potential onslaught we were about to face, and how much we had to lose.

It was silly, unexpected...but at this point, all I wanted was to be a dad and a husband. But in my line of work, that went hand-in-hand with danger.

Not to mention the fact that my adopted son was heir to one of the most powerful criminal dynasties in the world.

“There’s one other thing,” she said. “But this one is a longshot.”

“I’m listening.”

“Alicia had a half-sister,” Isabella said. “Vito’s estranged daughter from a short affair years before we married. She lives in Boston.”

“But she’s not in the life,” Hassan said.

Isabella shook her head. “She’s stayed out of the business, lives an ordinary life. She wants nothing to do with Vito, if she truly knows about him at all...but I’m not sure how much she knows.”

My head spun with the possibilities. If Vito had a daughter...we could potentially deflect the attention on Sebastian to her. It would be cruel to bring her into this life, but I was quickly realizing that, when it came to Sebastian, I didn’t much care if anyone else got caught in the crossfire.

That was what it meant to be a father.

Protecting my family at any cost.

“It’s good to know about any potential factors in the fight for Sebastian,” I said. “So...thank you. For telling me this. For telling me everything.”

Isabella’s face softened. “Of course,” she said.

At that moment, all I could do was nod in agreement at whatever Hassan and Isabella

suggested while Skylar threw a few grunts of assent in here and there, my mind already preparing for the inevitable storm that was to come.

I would do what Isabella said.

And if that didn't work...

Well, then I guessed I was just going to have to kill Vito myself.

And I was planning on making it hurt.

Chapter Eight: Bash

I left the meeting with Isabella feeling emboldened and scared all at once. The envelope was tucked away securely in the inside pocket of my jacket, a toxic secret pressed against my chest. Hassan and Skylar flanked me as we left the restaurant and walked back towards Hassan's car.

Skylar broke the silence first. "Bloody hell, Bash, what have we got ourselves into?"

"We're doing what we have to protect Sebastian," I murmured. "This isn't about us...it's about him."

"That's all well and good," Skylar said, "but this is...what? Are we planning on taking down the De Lucas now? Don't get me wrong, I'm in for a bloody good time, but--"

"The kid cannot end up in their hands," Hassan interrupted. "Vito brought this on himself. He came for us, now we have to fight back."

"Thank you," I said, meeting his eyes as we walked around the car to get in. "I know

this is hard.”

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Hassan stilled, his hand on the door handle. “That...doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he muttered. “Bad things happen to kids in this life. Sebastian needs to be kept safe, no matter the cost.”

Even Skylar sobered, the two of us fully aware of what Hassan was talking about. “I’m sorry,” Skylar said, his voice hollow.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hassan said, opening the door. “Let’s get going—”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence.

The world...fuck, I couldn’t even process it.

A massive boom rattled my bones, immediately followed by a deafening ringing. The shockwave launched us backward, hot debris rained down around us, and Hassan's car was engulfed in an inferno.

Fucking hell.

Someone had rigged Hassan’s car to blow.

We hadn’t been paying attention...and now we were all fucked.

I rolled onto my side, coughing in the billowing smoke from the wreckage of the car. My head felt like it was full of shrapnel, my whole body instantly aching.

I had to see if they were okay.

"Hassan!" Skylar's voice sounded strange, tinny, strangled. He was already on his feet, though, tossing debris aside like it weighed nothing, his hands bleeding. I wrestled against the disorientation, focusing my attention on the burning car. Terror squeezed my heart like a vice as I took in the blazing scene.

Hassan couldn't be in there, could he? He hadn't gotten in the car yet, I didn't think, but my memories were fuzzy. We'd been talking about Sebastian, Isabella, Vito...what happened to Hassan...

He didn't deserve this.

He didn't deserve any of it.

I wouldn't be able to live with myself if he was hurt, or even worse, dead.

My stomach roiled, but I somehow managed to get to my feet, racing toward Skylar. There were people watching in horror, but their faces were a blur; the only thing that mattered was Hassan.

"Skylar!" I shouted, joining him in his frantic efforts to reach the car. It was a mess, charred metal still hot and glowing red in places, a fire burning in what was once Hassan's lambo. If he was in there, he was dead. That was it. There was no way around it—

But someone was coughing from the other side of the car, and I froze when I saw Hassan staggering out from the other side of the vehicle. He was coated in dust and his clothes were tattered, but it didn't look like he'd been burned, just...bloodied. Very bloody—his face was covered in it, liquid red pouring down from a gash in his forehead.

He wasn't okay.

The force of the blast could kill just as effectively as the fire, and Hassan had taken the brunt of it since his door was the only one open.

"Oh, fuck," Skylar breathed but didn't pause, barreling over to help Hassan. He looped an arm around Hassan's waist, steadying him as Hassan coughed violently. My stomach turned again when I realized there was blood in his hand—not from a cut or scrape, but from his lungs.

Fuck, fuck...

"Can you walk?" Skylar asked almost calmly, although I could see the shake in his hands. The casual bravado seemed to reassure Hassan, who nodded weakly, leaning heavily on Skylar.

"No need to make such a fuss," Hassan rasped out between coughs. "I'm alright."

"Bullshit. You can't even stand straight," I retorted, not bothering to hide the worry in my voice as I joined Skylar in supporting Hassan's weight. His eyes were glazed over, but he offered me a weak smile underneath the soot on his face.

"Yeah, well...you should see the other guy," he joked, but his laugh dissolved into a hacking cough that left him gasping for breath.

"We need to get him to Zane," Skylar said, his usual sharp-tongued humor absent as he studied Hassan's state. "Now."

Not only that, but the cops would be here any second. I could already hear the sirens, see people racing toward us to help. They thought they'd just seen a horrible accident.

But this was a hit, plain and simple.

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“Let’s get the hell out of here,” I muttered. “You got him?”

“I got him,” Skylar nodded. “Let’s go.”

We half-dragged, half-carried Hassan away from the smoking wreck and towards the Escalade. Every minute was critical, and I hoped like hell that Zane was still with Justice because we didn't have time to waste. As soon as we had settled Hassan into the backseat, I grabbed my phone out of the pocket of my slacks.

"Dialing Zane," I murmured, my heart pounding like a jackhammer in my chest. Every second felt like an eternity as the phone rang before Zane's steady voice came through.

"Bash?" he questioned, concern lacing his tone.

"We're coming in hot, Zane." I rushed out, my eyes fixated on Hassan's ash-covered face in the rearview mirror. "Hassan's been in an explosion. He's conscious but disoriented."

“What—what did he just say about Hassan?” I heard Justice say in the background. “Is he okay?”

A heavy pause echoed over the line before Zane responded, and I could picture their faces. Justice, heartbroken, Zane angry.

I was always putting them in danger.

It had to stop.

"I'll be ready," Zane finally said.

Disconnecting the call, I tossed my phone on the dashboard and pulled out of the parking lot at full speed. Skylar kept his hand pressed against Hassan's bleeding forehead, trying to keep him awake with forced banter. But I could see the panic in his blue eyes. He was good at hiding his fear but not from me.

As we raced down the streets of Miami, the neon lights and towering palm trees were mere blurs that mirrored my tumultuous thoughts. Each beat of my pulse echoed with a haunting question: How did this happen? The De Lucas were always a threat but even with their extensive reach, this kind of direct attack felt totally unprecedented.

Had Isabella betrayed us?

What if she wanted to take the baby?

I swerved a bit and re-focused on the road, trying desperately to remind myself to breathe. Right now, we needed to worry about Hassan.

"Stay with me, mate," Skylar urged from the backseat, his voice echoing through the car like a grim anthem. As Hassan's eyelids fluttered, a thin line of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, making my heart lurch.

"Lay off him, Skylar," I barked more harshly than I intended. There was enough tension in the car without Skylar's incessant chatter.

"Just trying to keep him awake," Skylar shot back defensively. But he fell silent, and the only sounds filling the car were Hassan's ragged breaths intermingled with the incessant hum of the engine. He wasn't talking anymore. That was bad. Maybe he

needed to go to the hospital, maybe Zane couldn't help.

"Okay, I was wrong," I said. "Keep talking."

The corners of Skylar's mouth twitched upwards in an attempt at a smile, and he squeezed Hassan's shoulder reassuringly. "You heard him, mate. I've got free rein to ramble now."

Despite his unsettling pallor, Hassan managed a weak chuckle, his gaze flickering to the rearview mirror where our eyes met. His smile didn't reach his eyes, but that fight in his gaze was all too familiar. He was going to fight. Hassan was always going to fight.

We arrived at the Knives' building within minutes, tires squealing against the dark pavement as we pulled up.

"He's probably downstairs," I said as I killed the engine. "Let's get you there, Hassan."

The three of us were stumbling out of the car, Hassan sandwiched between Skylar and me as we walked up to the building. The night was quiet, a stark contrast to the chaos we'd just left behind. As I reached out to open the front door, my eyes landed on a dark object at the top of the steps. A cold chill ran down my spine, the hair on my neck standing straight.

I registered what it was a second too late.

"Shit!" I cursed. Darius' severed head lay there, his eyes wide open in terror, a pool of blood congealing around the macabre trophy under the lights.

Skylar let out a low growl, his arm tightening around Hassan.

“Is that...?” Hassan started, his voice weak, eyes bleary.

“Motherfuckers,” Skylar spat. “They’ll fucking burn for this, I’ll—”

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"Focus, Skylar," I muttered. "Later."

I quickly moved forward, kicking the door open and guiding them inside, away from the grisly spectacle.

"Fuck!" Skylar spat out once we were safely inside, his wounded gaze searching mine. He looked like he was barely holding it together. I couldn't blame him.

"Yeah," I agreed, my heart pounding furiously in my chest. It felt like a bad dream, but the metallic tang of blood lingering in the back of my throat was all too real. It reeked of the De Lucas and their savage tactics.

This wasn't just a custody battle anymore.

It was war.

"Let's get Hassan inside," I urged, desperation seeping into my voice. Every second counted now. Darius' head was a clear message—they were ready for war. And while our emotions drowned in shock and anger, Hassan's life hung in a dangerous balance.

We practically hauled him toward the front entrance, praying Zane was already prepared to deal with his injuries. "You're going to be okay," I reassured Hassan, even though I wasn't sure I believed it. His face was pale underneath the still-flowing blood, his tattered shirt soaked with it. He already looked like a ghost.

My lungs seized up.

Breathe, Bash.

His eyes fluttered open, a flicker of defiance shining through the pain. "I better be," he managed to grit out before another coughing fit took over.

The reception room of our headquarters was a paradox: a sleek merging of home and hospital, business and pleasure. The entrance expanded into a cavernous, circular space, lit by hanging crystal chandeliers that refracted rainbow hues across the polished marble floor. High-backed leather sofas occupied one corner, offering a cozy nook of hospitality. Right now, the white marble was stained with blood, a trail left from where we hauled Hassan toward the clinic.

Adjacent to the seating area was Zane's territory: his makeshift infirmary that was more well-equipped than any standard ER. It was all steel and sterility, with a surgical table sitting at the heart of it like a grim monument. We'd upgraded in the last few years on Justice's urging—she wanted us to be safe, and if we were doing something dangerous, she needed the security of a fully equipped clinic.

At the time, I'd thought it was silly. Jez was out of our lives, Alicia too. We were settling into a strange sort of domesticity.

But now, I realized it had been smart. I was glad we had done it.

We were never going to escape danger, were we?

The elevator doors opened to reveal Zane standing there, a makeshift medical bag in hand. His eyes widened at the sight of Hassan's state and he quickly moved forward, his professional demeanor taking over.

"Get him on the table," he ordered, setting down his bag and opening it.

Skylar and I carried Hassan to the table, carefully laying him down on the gleaming metal surface. Zane quickly donned a pair of latex gloves and set to work, his eyes scanning Hassan's body with a practiced precision. His touch was gentle but firm as he probed Hassan's injuries, his face a mask of concentration.

While Zane worked, my gaze strayed back to Skylar, who was watching over the procedure with an intense focus. His fists were clenched so tightly that his knuckles had turned ghostly white, and I could see the muscle in his jaw twitching.

"Hey," I said under my breath, reaching for him. He flinched when I touched his arm but didn't pull away.

"We'll get them for this," he vowed, his voice trembling with unshed tears and furious rage. There was a dangerous promise in his words - one I knew we'd all uphold.

"We will," I returned softly. "But we need to let Hassan heal first."

Zane looked down at Hassan. "Scale of 1 to 10, bud, how bad is the pain?"

Hassan's lips twitched in a bitter smile, his eyes glazing over with pain. "An eleven," he rasped weakly, sweat beading on his forehead.

A grim look passed over Zane's face as he reached for his supplies— a suture kit and a slew of painkillers. "Hang in there, buddy," he said. "I'm going to have to give you pain medication."

"Zane, I'm an addict..." Hassan barely managed to croak out.

"I know. I promise you, this is mild."

"I trust you, doc," Hassan finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. A wisp of

hair fell across his sweaty forehead and he closed his eyes, seemingly preparing himself for what was to come.

"Good man," Zane replied before he reached for a syringe filled with an amber-colored solution. "This will take the edge off. It won't make you feel high."

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As Hassan sank into a pit of drug-induced relief, Skylar and I looked at each other. We were both lost in our thoughts yet fully aware of the gravity of our situation. Zane's gaze fell on me, then moved to Skylar. The look in his eyes was uncompromising, and it spoke volumes. "Both of you, out. Give me some space to work."

"But—" Skylar started, immediately cut off by a sharp look from Zane.

"Now," he ordered. It wasn't a request.

We exited the makeshift infirmary, each step feeling like a dagger in my chest as I left Hassan behind. I could feel Skylar's anguish radiating off him in waves. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides as we stood there, helpless.

"Darius was one of us," Skylar murmured, his voice choked.

"Yeah," I breathed out. I didn't know Darius well, but he was a good earner and a loyal man. "You don't think Justice saw his head, do you?"

"God, I hope not," Skylar replied. "With any luck, she's still asleep and this will all be resolved by morning."

With our luck? No way.

The silence that ensued was deafening. It surrounded us, crept into our souls, and wrapped its cold hands around our hearts. I could see the unshed tears in Skylar's eyes, the grim set of his jaw as he struggled with his emotions. I leaned on the wall,

shutting my eyes and taking deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart. In the background, I could still hear Zane working...flesh tearing, blood flowing.

I couldn't stop fucking things up for everyone around me.

Maybe I didn't deserve to keep Sebastian.

A soft sound broke our silence. The elevator dinged open, and Justice stepped out. Her raven hair was disheveled, her eyes swollen and red rimmed. She looked pale as though she had seen a ghost. Our gazes met, her dark eyes filled with a sort of pain that made my insides twist with worry.

"Bash," she croaked, her voice choked with emotion. "Is he..."

"Keep her out of here while I work, please," Zane said, glancing over his shoulder.

I stepped into her way, Skylar in front of the doorway. She looked over my shoulder anyway, though, and her eyes widened as she covered her mouth.

"Oh my god," she breathed. I opened my arms just in time to catch her as she crumbled into me. Her body shook against mine as soft sobs escaped her lips.

"He'll be okay, darlin'," I said.

I stopped, not knowing how to continue. The comforting words felt hollow in my mouth.

But I had to believe it. We all had to believe it.

Justice nodded against me, her body trembling. "I know," she whispered back, but her voice lacked conviction. Her hands were on my chest, her fingers digging into the

fabric of my shirt as if she was trying to hold onto something real.

"The De Lucas will pay for this," Skylar growled, his voice hard and cold and filled with a barely restrained fury.

"You're talking like he's already dead," Justice said. "We can't talk like—"

"Not him," I murmured. "Darius. He was keeping watch over a shipment tonight and they..."

Justice met my eyes, challenging me. "They what, Bash? I can take it."

Skylar's expression hardened. "His head's out on the front stoop."

Justice seemed to gather herself at that, the opposite of how I thought she would react. I needed to remember that she was in this life with us now—the queen of the Knives. She was tough, and she deserved the truth.

"We need to be careful," she said softly. "This is just the beginning. They're playing dirty now."

Skylar's face went grim. "Then we play dirtier."

I nodded. "Yeah," I said. "Anything to protect our family."

Her grip on me tightened. "Anything, Bash," she said. "And I mean that. Anything."

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I nodded, kissing the top of her head. "Yeah," I said. "I know."

Chapter Nine: Zane

Hassan had gotten so lucky.

He lay there on the table, face a mask of painful resignation as he wrestled with his demons. His skin was a sickly shade of grey, contrasting sharply against the pristine white of the makeshift hospital sheets. I had seen worse, but knowing how close we had come to losing him...it rattled me. He had been hit by debris, flames had licked at his skin. He hadn't had any major burning and that, in itself, was huge.

His once vibrant eyes were now glazed with a mixture of pain and exhaustion, the whites a stark contrast against the purple bruises that had begun to bloom across his battered face. It was a painful sight, but what really got to me was the silent acceptance in his gaze that seemed so out of place on such a young face.

He'd seen too much for his age, experienced horrors that no one should have to endure. And yet, here he was, still fighting.

Again. Again.

Because, for some reason, he always got the worst of it.

I sat on the stool next to Hassan's bed, my eyes fixated on the heart monitor. The steady beep was a comforting sound against the silence of the room. A sigh escaped my lips as I leaned back in the chair, running my fingers through my messy hair. I

hadn't slept in a while and exhaustion was beginning to take its toll, but I wasn't leaving Hassan's side until I knew he was out of danger.

I heard a soft knock on the door. I barely looked up before I told them to come in.

Justice took a step into the makeshift infirmary, flashing me a tight smile. "How is he doing?"

"Pretty good," I said, getting up from my chair. "All things considered. We should let him get some sleep."

"Agreed," Justice replied, her gaze softening as she looked at Hassan. She stepped up to the side of the bed, gently tapping his hand. "You need rest, Hassan," she told him softly.

There was a slight nod from Hassan and a resigned sigh before his eyes fluttered closed again. Justice leaned down and kissed him on the forehead before stepping back, allowing me to pull the blanket over him. She shot me a questioning look, her brown eyes filled with concern.

"Is there anything else we can do for him?" she asked.

"He needs time," I said, my voice barely above a whisper as I tucked the blanket around Hassan. "His body has taken quite a beating, but he's a fighter." I glanced back at her, mustering up a reassuring smile. "He'll pull through."

Justice nodded, tears shimmering in her eyes. "I pray you're right, Zane."

"I am right. This is my job. I don't make promises I can't keep."

Justice nodded, her eyes brimming with gratitude. "Thank you, Zane," she whispered,

her voice choked with emotion. She cast a final worried look at Hassan before she pressed a kiss against my cheek. "I'll take the next shift, okay? I'll just hang out here and read to him. You've done everything you can. Get some rest."

"Justice..."

"Do it," she replied.

I sighed. "Okay," I said. "Alright, Miss Rosales."

That rare vulnerability in her gaze was a sight only a few got to see, and each time it left me just as undone.

As I watched her settle into the chair I had just vacated, the sweep of her hair around her shoulders, the determined set of her jaw despite tired eyes, I felt my resolve waver. This mess we were dealing with...the storm that was looming on the horizon - it wasn't just about us anymore. It was about her. About Sebastian, about our own family...

The stakes had gone up tenfold.

Skylar was waiting for me by the elevator, in the shadows. We all had different responses to these kinds of things, and Skylar's was decisively bloodthirsty. In this case, I had a feeling he was going to make things worse.

I was afraid. Afraid of the De Lucas, afraid of Skylar.

Always, always afraid of Bash. Especially now that we had Sebastian.

Skylar's blue eyes flickered with concern as I approached, his jaw set. "Hassan?" he asked, his voice low.

"Stable," I replied, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders. "Justice is with him now."

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Skylar relaxed at the news, slumping against the elevator wall. Relief etched lines on his face, emphasizing the tiredness that shadowed his eyes. It was a sight that tugged at my heartstrings. We were all worn thin, stretched to our limits.

I moved closer to him, gently nudging his shoulder with my own. "We did all we could," I said quietly.

"I know," Skylar murmured. He glanced at me, his gaze holding a hint of tenderness. "You always do your best when it matters. It's one of the things I love most about you."

My breath hitched in my throat. Those words, spoken so casually, meant the world to me. Skylar had always been a man of few meaningful words. His emotions were predominantly expressed through actions--really, through chaos--not verbal affirmations. But when he chose to reveal himself, it held such a profound weight.

I studied his face, the sharp angles softened by fatigue, the usual spark in his eyes noticeably dim. I leaned in, my lips brushing against his in a soft, lingering touch. His hand reached up to bury itself in my hair, pulling me closer as he deepened the kiss.

His taste was intoxicating-- a heady mixture of adrenaline and fear and relief that was uniquely Skylar. He pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes reflecting the same tumult of emotions I could feel thrumming through my own veins.

"I didn't even get a chance to check you out," I said. "You okay? Any injuries?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. I think I was the one who got out with the least harm.

Although...I don't mind you checking me out."

I let out a hollow laugh, but I didn't respond.

Right now, his words felt all wrong.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep," I said. "I'm too worried."

"I can think of other things we can do in bed," he said, calling the elevator.

I chuckled, the sound swallowed by his mouth as he pressed against me again. There was an urgency to his movements, a desperation that mirrored my own. He tugged me inside the elevator, his hands exploring my body as if it was something he couldn't get enough of. As if he was trying to imprint every inch of me into his memory.

He wasn't just angry.

He was scared too.

The doors closed on us, and we were alone, giving me room to explore what that meant—how he would respond when he was afraid, how much he needed me. His touch was intoxicating, each caress leaving behind a trail of fire that stoked my desire. It was a very Skylar thing—how he always managed to find humor, pleasure, life during the times we felt most afraid. My hand slipped under his shirt, fingers trailing down his muscled back. The tension in his body eased under my touch.

"Skylar," I whispered into the hollow of his neck as he pressed me against the cold metal of the elevator wall.

"Zane," he echoed back, the way he said my name sending a shiver down my spine.

His lips brushed against my earlobe, sending a bolt of desire straight to my core. "I need you," he confessed, and the raw intensity of his words made my stomach knot.

"I'm here," I murmured, tightening my arms around him. I could feel the erratic drumming of his heart against my chest, as fevered as my own. Our breaths mingled in the enclosed space—hot, frantic gusts that spoke of our shared need.

The elevator ground to a halt at our floor, but neither of us moved away from each other. Skylar reached out blindly and hit the button to close the doors again. His hands were back on me in an instant, gripping my hips hard enough to bruise.

There was no finesse in our movements; we were too desperate for that. We stumbled from the elevator into the hallway, lips locked together and hands fumbling with clothing. By the time we reached our doorstep, we were both half-undressed and breathing hard, bodies pressed together in a tangle of relentless desire.

Skylar turned the knob and pushed open the door, guiding us into the relative darkness of the apartment without breaking our heated kiss. We staggered inside, and he kicked the door shut behind us. His hands found their way back to my body, tugging at my shirt until he finally managed to pull it over my head. His own shirt followed shortly after, landing in a neglected heap on the floor.

"Zane...." His voice was low and husky in my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "I need..." His voice trailed off into a groan as I ground back into him, buckling his knees. His hands were tight on my hips, nails digging into the fabric of my pants as he held me flush against him.

"I know," I murmured, my fingers seeking the fastening of his jeans, freeing him from the rough material. His breath hitched as I stroked him through his boxer briefs. "You need this...and so do I."

In a swift motion, he turned us around and pushed me onto the couch, making quick work of his own pants before crawling over me, the hard planes of his body flush against mine. I wrapped an arm around him, pulling him closer as my free hand roamed across his bare skin that shivered under my touch.

His head dipped down to my neck, teeth nipping at the sensitive skin and eliciting a sharp inhale from me. "Skylar," I gasped out, fingers digging into his shoulders. His body rocked against mine, the friction driving us both to the edge of sanity.

His mouth found mine again, swallowing the moan that ripped from my throat. My hands tangled in his hair, tugging him closer as we lost ourselves in each other. The world outside our apartment disappeared; there were no knives or De Luca, no rivers of blood or impending danger.

Only us.

His fingers slipped inside my boxers, wrapping around me and stroking me in time with our rocking rhythm. I broke off the kiss, head falling back against the couch as he worked me over.

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He moaned into my ear. "Can I fuck you?"

"Yes," I breathed, the single word almost lost in the rush of my pulse pounding in my ears. Heat pooled low in my belly as he withdrew his hand to fumble with the top drawer of the side table—a move we'd done countless times but never lost its desperate urgency.

"Fucking you is one of my favorite things in the world," he said. "Who knew men could be so...soft."

I laughed. He didn't have a lot of experience with men, but he was a quick study, and an incredible lover. Plus, we liked to put on a show. Justice liked to watch us.

He lifted himself just long enough to strip us both of our remaining clothing, our bare bodies now in full contact. The sensation was overwhelming—the feel of his skin against mine, the heat radiating off him, the raw need in his eyes...I was drowning in him. His fingers ventured between my legs, slicking up with lubricant before teasing my entrance. I bucked under him, my heart pounding in my chest as he stretched me open.

Skylar was never one for patience, but when it came to this—to us—he took his time. His eyes never left mine as he slowly pushed inside, his breath hitching at the tight heat. "Zane..." He breathed out, running his hands down my chest to intertwine our fingers together.

"Move...please..." I begged, tugging at our locked hands to urge him on. He stilled for a moment more before finally pulling back and thrusting in. The sensation of him,

the rhythm of our bodies moving in unison, was intoxicating. His face was close to mine, lips brushing over my sweaty skin, whispering words of love and need that only heightened the pleasure. "I need your dick inside of me."

"Ah, well, I live to serve." He removed his fingers and pushed into me, hitting a spot that had my eyes rolling back. "You good?"

"Yeah...so good," I gasped out, my nails digging into his shoulders as he began to move.

The world narrowed down to Skylar and the sensation of him moving within me. The rhythm became our heartbeat, quick and urgent. Everything was heat and friction, our bodies slick with sweat. Our heavy breaths filled the room, punctuated by sharp gasps and low moans as he hit that sweet spot inside me over and over again.

I reached down between us, wrapping my hand around my own hard length and stroking in time with his movements.

"Jesus, you're so fucking tight," he said, his voice strained.

He angled his hips, grinding harder, deeper. I gasped, a strangled sound as the pleasure coiled tight in my gut. He was relentless, his body a solid weight pressing me into the cushions of the couch, pinning me to him.

"Skylar," I murmured, lost in the sensations threatening to consume me. "God...don't stop..."

His eyes were locked on mine, the intense gaze almost too much to bear. He grunted something unintelligible and stiffened above me. His rhythm faltered for a moment before picking up again, this time faster, more desperate. I could feel him unraveling; he was close.

His mouth descended on mine once more in a frenzied kiss that tasted of sweat and desperation. His tongue darted inside my mouth, mapping its contours as if he were trying to memorize each taste, each sensation before it slipped away.

The world tilted as my own release tore through me: a white-hot surge pleasure that made my muscles clench and my body arch beneath him. My hand tightened around myself, strokes becoming erratic as the waves of ecstasy tore through me.

"I've got you, love," he breathed out, voice roughened by the same edge I'd just toppled over from. His thrusts became even more staggered, until he was pushing deep and stilling, a low moan reverberating through his chest as he found his own release. He collapsed on top of me, his body heavy but comforting.

We lay there spent for what felt like hours, our ragged breaths gradually evening out. I played idly with his hair, sweat-soaked golden strands sticking to my fingers. He nuzzled into my neck. "Thank you," he murmured.

I laughed. "You were the one doing the fucking," I said. "You have never let me do that."

He laughed too. "Maybe one day I'll be ready for bottoming," he said. "Not today."

"I won't hold my breath."

"But you know," he continued, raising his head to look at me with a serious expression, "you've got your own way of fucking me up. In here." He brought my hand to his chest, pressing it over his heart.

My smile faded a bit at that. The moment felt heavier than the lighthearted banter we'd been sharing just seconds before.

"That was oddly heartfelt for you," I said.

"Yeah, that's the sex," he replied. "Don't expect it to happen again."

I shook my head. I definitely expected it to happen again. It wasn't that Skylar was ashamed of me or ashamed of being with a man, that wasn't it. And when I had told him it might be intense, he had happily made it public. He didn't care about any of that. But being emotional in a way that actually got to the core of him...I could tell that was scarier.

But that was fine. I didn't expect him to change overnight. It had taken me years to get comfortable being emotional, and I had the benefit of supportive sisters to help me through it. Skylar...well, his childhood hadn't been so generous. Until he had been with the Knives, he hadn't really had a family. His grandparents tried, but the scars of his mother's neglect ran too deep.

"I mean it," he said, drawing my attention back to him. "I think things have been...better. Like in my head."

"That's all you, Sky," I replied lightly, tracing a finger down his cheek. "You're the one who decided to change. I just...helped."

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"I haven't changed," he said, shifting away from me a little.

"Really? Who did you clip last?"

"It's been a while," he admitted, a sheepish grin playing on his lips. "But that's not the point."

I chuckled, tracing the outline of his dimples. "You've come a long way, Skylar. And you're still on your path. We all are."

I paused, staring at him seriously. "Just because you're not where you want to be yet doesn't mean you haven't made progress."

His eyes softened at my words, the edges of his hardened exterior crumbling away. "How do you always know what to say?"

"Years of practice," I said with a shrug, though we both knew it wasn't that simple. "Med school."

He laughed. "But you worry about this."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Yeah, all the time."

"About what, exactly?" he prodded, a hint of worry creeping into his tone.

"About us," I admitted, despite the raw vulnerability the confession brought with it. "About Justice. About Sebastian and Bash. About this...unconventional family we've

created. I wonder if we're doing more harm than good staying here..."

Skylar's face fell slightly at my words, but he didn't pull away or interrupt me, allowing me to voice the thoughts that had been plaguing me for so long now.

"We're not exactly traditional, are we?" he asked after a moment, his eyes studying my face as he waited for my reply.

"No," I admitted. "Not even close."

"But does that really matter?" he asked, his hand moving from my chest to clutch at mine. "Does it matter how unconventional or messy our arrangement is, Zane?"

I looked at him, suddenly annoyed at how naive he was being. Skylar wasn't naive. He just refused to see the truth sometimes when it didn't suit him. "Bash's dad tied Hassan up on an old ratty mattress, got him hooked on drugs and then him and Jez took turns raping him," I said. "Remember that?"

Skylar blanched.

"We crashed into this homeless girl who Bash knew from school, and we told her that she could stay with us as long as she gave us sex," I said. "As long as she was always available for any of us. And Bash watched, right? He had cameras, and he liked seeing it all. We liked it too. All of us liked it. Justice didn't have a choice."

His jaw hardened. "Justice loves us."

"That's not my point," I snapped. "My point is, how much of that love was real and how much was survival?"

His voice was quiet when he finally spoke again. "She could have left."

"No, she couldn't have," I argued back. "We're all too deep in this life to just walk away. It's not that simple and you know it."

I could see the conflict in his eyes, the self-doubt creeping in. But instead of lashing out or denying it, he did something that surprised me.

"You're right," he said. "We've done terrible things. And we'll probably do more before this is all over."

But then he smiled at me, a small and sad smile that had no place on a face like his.

"But through it all, there's one thing I know for sure," he continued.

"And what's that?"

"That you're overthinking this whole thing," he said. "She's here. Hassan is here. We rescued him. We rescued her. We have done horrible things to each other, but we have helped each other a lot."

"That's true," I said. "But life isn't a balance sheet. We can't just tally up the good and the bad and hope they equal themselves out."

His smile dimmed but didn't leave his face altogether. "I know," he said softly.

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"Honestly, Skylar," I said as he settled into the crook of my arm. "Before Sebastian, I didn't care about any of this. But now that there's a little boy here...now that Bash and Justice are fighting for custody of him...are you sure it wouldn't be better if we weren't around?"

"We're soldiers, Zane. We don't just leave."

"Okay. We're soldiers. What does that make the little boy?"

His gaze intensified, a flicker of understanding crossing his features. "A civilian," he muttered, the reality of our world dragging the words out with a somber echo. "Our civilian."

I nodded, squeezing his hand tightly, grappling with the stark truth to his statement. We weren't just lovers in this tangled web we'd spun—we were soldiers, players in a deadly game that didn't spare anyone. And Sebastian was the innocent soul caught up in our chaos.

"And if there's one thing true about war," I added, feeling Skylar's grip tighten around my fingers, "It's that civilians always pay the highest price."

Chapter Ten: Hassan

I was getting better. It had been weeks of watching and waiting and checking in with Zane to make sure I didn't have any nerve damage, but I was getting better. No one had even noticed at a few parties I'd been to; I'd only gotten one comment about a bruise, which was standard for me.

None of our high-rolling customers knew about the bandaged burns under my shirtsleeves.

They didn't know I'd almost died.

Again.

The explosion had rattled me, stolen my breath, and for a moment, I was back in that dark basement with Jez and Pedro. But then Bash was there, dragging me out of the wreckage, and Skylar was on the other side, shouting, his voice mingling with the alarm ringing in my ears.

Alive. I was alive.

So why did it still feel like I couldn't breathe?

I could move again without wincing and my mind was slowly untangling itself from the fog of shock. But every now and then, when I was alone in the silence of my apartment, I'd see the flames licking at my vision again and my heart would race like a trapped bird in my chest. Today was one of those days. I sat alone in the dark, fingers twitching restlessly as phantom flames danced behind my closed eyelids.

It was stupid, really. I wasn't afraid of fire. I had been around enough explosions to know that the heat wasn't what you should be scared of—it was the silence that followed. The suffocating quiet that blanketed everything in its wake, swallowing up screams and cries until all there was left was the deafening silence.

Those were the moments that killed you. Quiet moments. Because they snuck up on you like a thief in the night.

My phone buzzed on the table, pulling me from the haunting memory. It was Justice,

her pretty face showing up on the contact card. It was a picture of her from when she and I had run away—when I'd briefly thought that we were going to escape this madness.

I should have known then that it would never last. She liked the life too much.

It wasn't just about the baby.

The same thread of violence ran through the woman I loved that ran through my three best friends...and that had somehow skipped over me.

I was the odd man out.

But I picked up the phone and answered like nothing was wrong, clearing my throat. It still ached sometimes from the bombing; it still felt like I might cough up blood, like my lungs were filled with smoke.

"Hey," I said.

"Hassan," her voice came through softly, "are you okay?"

I managed a small laugh, "You aren't even going to greet me?"

"I am," she said. "Hi. Are you okay?"

"Hi," I returned, swallowing past the lump in my throat. "I'm okay, Justice. I promise."

"I'm coming over."

"No, I'll be okay, Justice," I hurried to reassure her. But truth was, I craved the

comfort her presence offered.

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"I didn't ask if you need me to come over," she said firmly. "I told you. I'm coming over."

Whatever protest I had died on my tongue as the line went dead. Even in the small things, Justice ran our world like a trained strategist – always precise, always in command. Sometimes it made me forget that beneath all that steel will and tenacity hid a woman who had known more pain than anyone ever should.

The soft knock on my door came sooner than expected; she must have already been on her way, and the call was nothing more than a formality. Justice walked in, her eyes scanning the room before they finally landed on me.

She didn't say anything, her lips pressed into a thin line as she closed the door softly behind her. Then she was moving, shedding off her jacket as she made her way to me. Her touch was gentle when she finally reached me, even though her gaze remained hard.

I sighed, leaning back as she came up to me, my eyes closing. Her hands were on my shoulders, touching me gingerly. She knew what had happened, what was going on under my clothes.

I didn't want to take them off. Didn't want to see.

I didn't like that my scars were visible now. It was a new level of vulnerability that made me ache somewhere deep...and that no pain meds could help, even if I was willing to take them.

"Open your eyes," she commanded softly. I did as she asked, and for the first time since the explosion, I found something other than darkness to stare at. I wanted to dive into those eyes, swim in her.

Maybe drown.

"Your hair is getting too long," she whispered. "And I don't know if I've ever seen you with your beard like this."

I huffed out a laugh. "Unkempt, you mean?"

"Yeah..." she trailed off. "I'm worried about you."

"Don't worry about me," I said, reaching up to touch her face. "I'm not your responsibility."

"You're not my responsibility, right," she shook her head. "You're my love. Which means I'm going to worry. And you don't get a say in it."

I nodded—because of course she was worried. I'd been staying in my own apartment more than usual, grappling with the pain and resisting any of Zane's offers of pain meds.

I'd been an addict. I'd been a victim. I couldn't lose control of myself.

She studied my face for a moment longer before sighing heavily, "You need a shower."

It wasn't a suggestion; it wasn't even a demand—it was an order. And I found myself nodding in agreement even before I could process her words. But more than that, what struck me was the fact that she could see through my tough exterior with such

ease—see my fear and my lingering trauma like they were ink stains on a blank piece of paper.

I wasn't even that dirty. I was just not as impeccably dressed or groomed as I usually was.

"It's hard," I said. "With the bandages on my skin."

"Then I'll help you."

And before I could utter any form of protest, Justice was pulling me up and leading me to my bathroom.

"Justice," I began, not sure how to articulate everything that was swirling inside of me. She cut me off with a single look.

"Just shut up and let me help," she said, rolling her eyes. But underneath the playful façade, there was a firmness that left no room for argument. "You did really good at the party."

"Which party?"

"Doesn't matter. You did good at all of them."

"That's my job," I replied.

"Good. Get in the shower."

I couldn't help but smile at her assertiveness.

I allowed myself to be led to the bathroom and watched as Justice ran the water,

adjusting the temperature just the way I liked it—warm enough to soothe my aches but not too hot to agitate the healing wounds. Her hands were gentle as she helped me out of my clothes and bandages, her touch careful but not hesitant. And even though there was nothing amorous about the act, I couldn't help but feel a surge of heat rise within me just by the sheer proximity we shared.

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"Step in," she ordered softly, her gaze not meeting mine. She was trying so hard to maintain a semblance of normalcy amidst our chaos; it made me want to hold her close and reassure her that it was okay for her to be scared too.

"By myself? Feels like I'm at a disadvantage."

"You need to recover your strength," she said.

"Right," I replied. "I'm sure seeing you naked will help."

She rolled her eyes and helped me into the shower before turning around to give me some semblance of privacy. "You're impossible, Hassan."

"Only for you, Justice," I retorted back, my heartbeat thumping rhythmically against my chest as I allowed the warm water to cascade over my body. The heat seeped through my pores, relaxing my aching muscles and washing away traces of lingering smoke.

I could hear her sigh deeply from behind me. "Are you okay?" she asked again. I didn't respond; I just closed my eyes, reveling in the sensation of water against my skin. When she didn't get an answer, she turned back to face me, her brows furrowed in worry.

"I'm okay," I reassured her, opening my eyes to meet her gaze. Her eyes softened with relief and she smiled faintly. "Lonely."

"I'm sorry, I just...I don't have much time," she said. "I need to meet up with Bash."

We have a meeting with the wedding planner..."

"Hey," I said, cutting her off. "Thought we weren't going to talk about your wedding plans."

"Sorry," she said, her cheeks reddening. "How can I make it up to you?"

"Well, if you don't want me to exert myself, you could get down on your knees."

She bit down on her lower lip, her eyes darkened with desire. "That right?"

"Absolutely," I replied, my voice barely above a whisper as the playful banter started to morph into something else—something that had heat simmering in my veins and my heart pounding in my chest. "Take your clothes off first. I want to see."

She let out a breathless chuckle, that familiar twinkle of mischief shimmering in her eyes. "Only if you promise to be a good patient and take it easy."

"Cross my heart," I replied, my voice gravelly.

Her figure silhouetted against the bathroom light was a sight to behold as she began to undress. Each movement was deliberate, her eyes locked with mine, daring me to look away. Her shirt fell to the floor first, revealing the delicate curves of her body outlined by her bra. There was the faintest of pauses before she reached for the clasp, but when it finally fell away, I caught my breath at the sight of her in all her glory.

She stood there for a moment, letting me drink in the sight of her. Then she smirked and hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her jeans. Slowly, agonizingly so, she slid them down her hips and stepped out of them. All that remained was her lace underwear. A moment passed. She hesitated, then slid those down as well, until she stood before me, bare in every sense.

I extended my hand to help her into the shower.

The water cascaded down on her, making her skin gleam under the soft bathroom light. The anticipation was killing me. I wanted—no, needed—to touch her. As much for my sanity as for my lust.

"Is this what you wanted?" she asked, breaking the silence. Her voice was husky from desire and the steam filling the room only added to our intoxication.

"Yes," I managed to rasp out. I reached out then, pulling her closer until our bodies were pressed together. I kissed her softly, then nibbled on her lower lip. "Get on your knees."

I watched as she sank gracefully to her knees, the water rolling down her body in rivulets. The sight was nothing short of beautiful. My heart pounded against my chest, and I could feel my desire for her pulsating through my veins.

It was enough to make me forget about the burns.

Forget about everything.

That was what kept me coming back.

Her hands skimmed up my thighs, gentle yet firm as they traced their way up. Her gaze never left mine—fierce yet tender, challenging yet inviting. A shiver ran down my spine.

Then she was touching me, her fingers wrapping around my arousal—a touch so familiar and yet always thrilling. I hissed in a sharp breath, the sensation shooting straight to my core as she started to move her hand. The slow, languorous strokes were torturous—as if she was testing my patience.

She chuckled softly when I growled at her teasing touch, her grip tightening around me. "So impatient," she chided playfully, mischief glinting in her eyes. And then she leaned forward till I could feel the warmth of her breath against my skin.

"Justice," I moaned, clutching at her shoulders for support. All thoughts of self-control were rapidly evaporating from my mind at the scent of her mingled with soap and steam—sweet and intoxicating. Her mouth moved over me with such divine precision that my head was swimming. My body tensed as she increased her pace, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

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"Stop," I gasped, pulling back before the pleasure became too intense. Her eyes fluttered up to meet mine, confusion clouding her features.

"I want to..." I panted, struggling to articulate my thoughts. "I want you with me."

Understanding dawned on her face and she rose from her knees, wrapping her arms around my neck as she pulled herself closer. Our bodies molded together under the warm water, our breaths mingling as we kissed passionately.

"This okay? It doesn't hurt?"

"It's better than okay," I told her. "It doesn't hurt at all."

Her hands trailed down my chest, sending shivers down my spine as she explored every inch of me. I cradled her face in my hands, studying the beauty that was Justice Rosales. The woman who was a tempest and calm all at once - a woman who had walked into my life and irrevocably changed it.

I slid one hand into her hair, the other resting on her hip. I pulled her closer, until our bodies were as close as they could get. Her soft curves pressed against my hard lines.

"Justice," I whispered, my voice filled with a raw desire that left me feeling vulnerable. "You're beautiful."

Her soft giggle echoed in the bathroom, bouncing off the tiled walls and filling the air. "And you, Hassan," she said, her voice husky and filled with emotion. "You're not so bad."

"Up," I whispered against her lips. She wrapped her legs around my waist, her arms tight around my neck as I positioned us just right. My body screamed for release but I held back, wanting to savor every second.

As I entered her, we both gasped out in pleasure. Her nails dug into my shoulders while her teeth bit down on my lower lip—little points of pain that only heightened the pleasure coursing through me.

"Fuck," she breathed out, burying her face in the crook of my neck. I could feel her walls clenching around me, the sensation driving me closer to the edge. But I held back, determined to make this last as long as possible. I wanted to remember every detail—the way her body moved against mine, the way her breath hitched every time I shifted inside her, the way her moans filled the room.

Slowly, I began to move, my movements perfectly mirroring hers. Every thrust elicited a soft gasp from her, each one louder than the last. The wet sound of our bodies moving together echoed in the room—thrust, sigh, gasp, moan—reminding me that I was alive.

No one would take me away from her.

Not Jez. Not Vito fucking De Luca.

Her nails dug deeper into my shoulders as I increased my pace. Her body shuddered against mine, and I knew she was close. I reached down between us, my fingers finding her clit with practiced ease. Her thighs trembled against my waist as she came undone, her body clenching around mine as she screamed out in pleasure.

The sound of her release triggered my own, and I groaned, burying my face in her neck as I came. The world spun around us as we clung to each other, the water from the shower washing away the remnants of our pleasure.

I held her close as we rode out our climaxes, our bodies trembling together under the steady stream of water. Gradually, our breaths slowed and the tremors subsided. She leaned back to look at me, her eyes soft and filled with a tender love that took my breath away.

Eventually, we untangled from one another, standing under the warm water as we caught our breaths. Her head rested against my chest, her arms wrapped around my waist. I kissed the top of her head, smelling the sweet scent of her hair mixing with the steam from the shower.

"I love you," she whispered against my chest.

"I love you too," I replied, holding her tight against me. This woman was everything to me, and I would do anything to keep her safe.

Our moment of blissful peace was abruptly interrupted by the muffled ring of a phone. Groaning, I reached out for it on the bathroom counter, catching sight of Bash's name flashing across the screen.

"What does he want?" Justice said, then her eyes widened. "Shit, am I late?"

I held back the urge to laugh. "I'm not that sorry to have kept you."

"I'm sure you aren't," she said. She snatched the towel and wrapped it around herself, her movements quick and efficient. "I have to go, Hassan. This meeting with the wedding planner is just a cover. Bash and I...we've found something big, something that could change everything for us."

My heart sank at her words—not because of the impending danger, but because every time she walked out that door, I was gripped with the fear that she might not walk back in.

"Be careful," I whispered, capturing her hand and pressing my lips to her knuckles. The underlying current of danger that ran through our lives never ceased to remind me how fragile our bliss was.

She nodded, her eyes locking with mine with an intensity that said more than words could. And then she was gone—out the door in a flash of urgency—leaving me alone with the echoing silence and a creeping dread that settled in my stomach like lead. It was then that I noticed it—a small, almost imperceptible red dot dancing across the floor, coming to rest on the bathroom door just moments after Justice had left.

A laser sight.

Someone had followed her here. Someone was watching us. And as the red dot disappeared, only one thought echoed through my mind.

They were coming for her next.

Chapter Eleven: Bash

We stopped by the side of the road in the Everglades, Zane killing the engine of his Tesla before we got out. It had been a relatively quiet drive, with me glancing every now and then at the backseat, where Darius' head remained. As if it could roll off.

"It's just adding insult to injury," I said as Zane killed the engine. "That we have to get rid of the evidence when we're the ones threatened with it."

Zane pushed open the car door and shot me a rueful look, "Ain't that always the way?"

I yanked the back door open, cringing at the dull whack of Darius' head rolling against the side of the seat. The smell hit me first, thick and coppery. God, the things you never thought you'd get used to in this life. We'd put it on ice for a few weeks while Hassan recovered, not wanting to be seen driving out to the Everglades...

...but then we'd had to do something.

Tell his family.

Fuck, this was rough.

"Remind me to add 'body disposal' as a non-negotiable in my next contract negotiation," I muttered under my breath, pulling out a pair of thick latex gloves from

the glove compartment.

"Did you say something?" Zane called from where he was checking our surroundings, his sharp gaze scanning the overgrown foliage and murky waters for any sign of movement.

"Nope," I replied too quickly, struggling to pull on my glove with more force than was strictly necessary.

We'd chosen this particular spot for its remoteness and accessibility to alligators - nature's perfect disposal system. But as I crouched next to Darius' head, I couldn't help but feel a cold chill creep up my spine. This was Vito De Luca's message to us: we were as disposable to him as this lifeless head was to us.

"Ready?" Zane asked, breaking into my thoughts. He had already rolled up his sleeves and was wearing a matching pair of gloves as he reached for the black garbage bag in the trunk.

I nodded, swallowing down the bile that rose in my throat. We each grabbed a side of the bag and hoisted it over the side of the road, letting gravity take care of the rest. The splash echoed ominously through the quiet night as ripples spread out across the surface of the water.

"Did you tell Justice about this?" Zane asked.

I licked my lips. "Yeah," I said. "And if I hadn't, she would've heard it from one of you. I don't want..."

"What?"

"I saw a lot of shit growing up. I don't want my nephew to see half of what I saw."

Zane nodded, his gaze lingering on the dark waters. "You're not your father," he said, the sunlight casting shadows over his features. "Hell, you're not even your brother. You're better than both of them ever were."

Somewhere between the chaos and the bloodshed, Zane had seen something worth saving. We were a team; we had each other's back no matter what. But there was more than just loyalty there. There was respect, understanding, and trust.

I punched him lightly on the shoulder, a small smile tugging at my lips. "Look at you getting all sentimental."

Zane snorted in response. "I'll push you into this swamp, Rivera."

"Promises, promises." I laughed, feeling the tension leave my body for the first time that night. "Hey, actually, I wanted to ask you something."

He turned his head to look at me as he took the gloves off his hands. "What?"

"I, uh, still need to choose a best man. And obviously the three of you are going to be in the party, but..."

Zane blinked, his expression turning from surprise to a wide grin. "Are you asking me to be your best man, Bash?" His tone was teasing, but I could see the genuine warmth in his eyes.

I coughed, trying to mask my nervousness with faux irritation. "Well, I've got to ask someone, don't I? Not got many options."

His laughter echoed in the quiet of the night, a stark contrast to the grim task we'd just undertaken. "I'd be honored, Bash," he said, clapping a firm hand on my shoulder.

Relief flooded through me at his acceptance. Despite everything going on—the threats, the fear, the uncertainty—there were still moments like this. Moments where we could forget about our blood-covered hands and bullet-riddled pasts and just be... us.

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"Thanks," I said sincerely. "Honestly, I couldn't imagine anyone else standing by my side when I marry Justice."

His smile softened at that. "You're very lucky. I would marry her in a second."

"I know."

A smile slipped onto his face at the admission. "Well, at least you know I won't try to steal her away."

"Who says you could?" I shot back, feeling the familiar comfort of our banter fill some of the empty spaces in the otherwise grim morning. There was a moment of silence before Zane responded.

"Nobody needs to say it." He paused, then added, "She already has her fair share of men."

We headed back to the car, where my phone was ringing on the dashboard. "Weird," I said, then cast the call on the car's speaker. "Hassan? You okay?"

"I'm fine. Listen, Justice was just here..." Hassan's voice crackled with urgency.

"What?" My heart pounded like a war drum in my chest. "What happened?"

"She's fine," Hassan reassured me quickly. "She left, and right after...I saw a laser sight, Bash. Someone followed her here. I think they're watching us."

A chill ran down my spine, cold dread pooling in my stomach. This wasn't just about sending us a message anymore. They were making their move.

"A laser sight?" Zane asked incredulously. "Like in a spy movie?"

"Exactly like in a spy movie," Hassan's voice wavered, and I could tell he was trying to keep calm, for both our sakes.

My grip on my phone tightened as I tried to process the information. My mind raced with possibilities. Could it have been...

"A reflection? A prank? A goddamn hallucination?!" Hassan snapped angrily as if he could read my mind, his frustration palpable. It wasn't directed at me; we both knew that. It was the situation, the helplessness we both felt. "No. It was a laser sight. And whoever it was, they're gone now."

Zane and I exchanged a glance filled with concern and determination.

"Stay put," I ordered Hassan, my voice firm. "Double check your security system, and make sure you're not alone tonight. Is Skylar with you?"

"No," Hassan said, his voice tinged with worry. "He's at the harbor. We were due to get a huge shipment of cars last night, but the vessel was delayed."

"And the baby?"

"Justice said the nanny was on duty tonight. If the laser sight had been at your place..."

He didn't have to finish that sentence.

We had to act fast. Time was running out, and our enemies were closing in.

And I wasn't sure but I didn't think I had ever been this scared in my life.

Chapter Twelve: Hassan

I cracked my knuckles as I started to run down the asphalt. I could've exercised in the building, but it was a beautiful day and I wanted to feel the sun on my face. My mind was a tornado of thoughts, spinning faster with each step I took. The laser sight...someone was watching us.

Maybe it was stupid to go for a run when we were being surveilled—and when there was almost definitely a target on our backs—but I was done hiding. They'd already tried to take me out, had destroyed one of my favorite cars, and they were terrorizing my family. They thought they could get to us that way. But what they didn't know was that I'd been through hell and back, and Justice was the one thing I had to hang on to.

I wasn't letting her go.

I wasn't letting anyone put her in danger.

And if I had to get my hands dirty, I would.

I pulled off my sweat-soaked shirt, tying it around my waist. The sun felt good against my bare chest, and for a brief moment, I allowed myself to forget the danger looming over our heads and just enjoy the feeling of freedom. My burns were healing up better than I'd expected, Zane having gotten to them fast enough that I was able to recover with barely a mark. A week ago, the sun would have burned my skin, but right now I felt free.

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My thoughts drifted to Justice, her smile, her fierce spirit. God, I loved her so much it hurt sometimes. But seeing her with Bash—happy and in love—it eased the pain somehow. They were good together. They deserved each other. I was a little jealous, sure...but mostly I was just happy for them.

Maybe I was fooling myself, but I had to believe that was true.

I wanted her to be happy.

And if Bash made her happy, so be it.

Sunlight streamed through the skyscrapers, casting long shadows on the pavement as I followed the familiar paths I had navigated thousands of times. Running was my therapy, my escape from intrusive thoughts that threatened to overwhelm me in quiet moments. It was my way of reminding myself that I was alive and in control of my destiny.

The entire Miami skyline seemed to glisten, winking at me under the sunlight like a well-kept secret. Yet beneath its glamour, I knew the city held dark corners that were anything but picturesque. It was a city of contrast—dazzling beauty blanketing a rotten core.

This was where I'd grown up.

Where my family had settled after leaving Pakistan.

Where I'd been trafficked, hooked on drugs, and...

I looked around, trying to shake off those dark thoughts and focus on the road. I needed to relax, to let myself move and forget about my past.

But that's when I saw the van.

And it reminded me that there was no escape.

I hadn't paid a lot of attention to it, but before I had rounded the corner, I was almost entirely sure that the people in the van had been watching me. My heart pounded in my chest as adrenaline rushed through my veins. I didn't want to overthink, but the scenario was too much of a coincidence considering what had happened in the past few days. Slowly, I started to take steps back, not breaking my gaze from the van.

I wasn't that kid anymore.

No one could hurt me like this.

Right?

Suddenly, it revved up and darted towards me, leaving a cloud of dust behind. Panic took over me and I started running for my life. The memories of getting kidnapped and tortured flooded back.

Not again, I told myself.

I turned towards an alley but found myself at a dead end. The van screeched to a halt, blocking my only way out. The back doors flung open and out stepped two masked men. They didn't say anything; they didn't have to. Their intentions were clear.

The closer one charged at me as I braced myself for impact. Using his momentum against him, I sidestepped and landed a punch square on his jaw, sending him

crashing back into the van. But his companion was already on me, a flash of silver catching my eye as he swung.

I barely managed to dodge the knife, feeling the rush of air as it swished past my face. My heart pounded in my chest as I launched myself at the second man, gripping his wrist and twisting sharply. The knife clattered onto the pavement, but my relief was short-lived as he landed a punch on my side.

Pain shot through me, but I refused to let it show. With a grunt, I rammed my elbow into his gut and followed up with a knee to his face. He crumpled beside his companion, and I took a moment to catch my breath.

But the respite was fleeting. The sound of a third man exiting the van filled the alleyway and, before I could react, something hard slammed against the back of my head. My vision blurred as pain radiated from the point of impact, drawing a strangled groan from my lips.

Seriously?

Why did it always have to be me?

I fell to my knees, struggling to stay conscious. The world spun around me as I clutched the side of a dumpster for support, willing myself not to pass out. From the corner of my eye, I saw the third man tower over me, a silhouette against the glaring sun, a steel pipe gleaming in his hand.

I ducked and rolled, finding the cool handle of the blade in my hand. I knew I had to fight back.

Despite the constant throbbing in my head and the taste of something metallic in my mouth, I staggered to my feet, wielding the knife defensively. The man seemed

unfazed; instead, he laughed, his deep voice echoing eerily within the alley.

"Little boy thinks he can take me on," he sneered, twirling the pipe in his hand.

My adrenaline spiked as I lunged forward with a sharp cry, slashing at him with the knife. He parried my attack with his pipe, sparks flying from the metal meeting metal. I barely had time to react before he swung at me again.

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I growled through gritted teeth as his blow landed on my shoulder, the force sending me sprawling onto the ground. My vision wavered dangerously as I tried to focus on my assailant.

I couldn't afford to lose this fight. Not when I had so many people depending on me.

Fueled by rage, I pushed through the pain, forcing myself to my feet once again. The man's mocking laughter echoed around the walls of the alley, fueling my determination. I threw myself at him, catching him off guard.

He grunted as I rammed my shoulder into his chest, knocking him back against the van. Before he could recover, I lunged with the knife, tearing through his shirt and into his side. His pained scream was music to my ears, and with a swift kick to his knees, I brought him crashing down to the ground.

My entire body protested in agony as I stumbled back from him, gasping for breath. The adrenaline rush that had kept me going was quickly fading, replaced by a nerve-racking pain that threatened to consume me. But there were two more men, and if I wasn't quick, they would kill me.

Swallowing the pain, I kicked away the pipe from the third man's reach. My gaze then snapped towards the two unconscious men. Just as I had anticipated, one of them was already stirring. With a hard kick to his head, I sent him back into darkness.

"Good boy," I muttered mockingly, wiping my brow with the back of my hand. Sweat and blood mixed on my skin, leaving a sticky trail that made me grimace. I searched his pocket for the van keys. "You're coming with me."

The sound of sirens in the distance caught my attention. The cavalry would be here soon but so too were the cops. And with the way I looked now - bloody and holding a knife - it wasn't a scene I wanted to stick around for.

Hoisting the unconscious man up, I hauled him over my shoulder. Every step towards the van was a test of willpower, the sirens echoing a painful rhythm in my ears. I gritted my teeth and pushed forward, the metallic taste of blood on my tongue growing stronger with each breath. Heavier than he looked, the man was a burden not just physically but mentally as well. If his friends woke up before we were out of here, I'd be back in square one, if not worse.

The inside of the van smelled like stale beer and unwashed socks. I tossed him in the back, wincing as my shoulders protested violently against the strain. I needed to get out of here fast. The sirens were getting louder, piercing through the relative quiet of the afternoon like a loud alarm.

I slammed the van doors shut and jumped into the driver's seat. My fingers fumbled over the keys—damn nerves—and they slipped from my grasp onto the dirty floor of the van. Cursing, I bent over to retrieve them, gritting my teeth against a sharp pain that shot through my ribs.

With the keys back in hand, I quickly turned on the ignition. The van roared to life, lurching forward as I gunned the engine, the pain in my side fading to a dull throb as adrenaline coursed through my system again.

The sirens were deafening now. My heart pounded in sync with the blaring noise, threatening to burst free from my chest. With one last look at the bloody scene behind me, I steered the van onto the road and drove away just as a pair of police cruisers pulled into the alley.

The sun-drenched streets were a blur as I maneuvered the van through traffic,

constantly checking the mirrors for any sign of pursuit. The guy in the back groaned and I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, my knuckles white against the grungy plastic. I didn't want to go to HQ straightaway, not even if there was a small chance that the police might be watching me.

I needed to get him somewhere safe. Somewhere we could question him without interruption.

And I had to do it without losing my cool.

Unbidden, images of the last time I was in this situation flashed through my mind. Blood-soaked concrete, screams echoing off the buildings, the stench of fear and death heavy in the air.

No, not again. This time would be different, I told myself. Everything was different now.

With that thought, I felt a wisp of hope curl through the fear and the pain. It was a chance to turn the tides, to finally seize the control we'd been gradually losing. An opportunity to gain some much-needed answers, maybe even find a way to end this bloodied game.

The guy in the back groaned again, louder this time. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, my mind pulled in multiple directions. He was starting to wake up, and I had no idea how long he would stay subdued. Maybe it was foolish to hope we could get information out of him. After all, people like that—they were more likely to die than betray their comrades.

But still...we had to try.

I glanced at the rearview mirror just in time to catch a glimpse of him stirring on the

floor of the van. He let out a strangled groan, his hand reaching up towards his head as if trying to find answers for his sudden discomfort.

"Stay still, asshole," I said. "I'm taking you to my boss."

His hand fell back to his side, defeated and trembling. I smirked, feeling a perverse satisfaction from his discomfort. Every lurch of the van drew a pained grunt from him, each one making me feel better about the situation.

It felt good to be in charge for once.

The drive to our safehouse was filled with a tense silence, only punctuated by the man's intermittent groans. Nestled in the warehouse district, the van wouldn't be out of place—and no one would hear him screaming. I grabbed my phone to call Bash, splitting my gaze between the road and the guy coming to in the back.

"Bash? It's me," I began, keeping my voice low as my gaze flitted to the rear view mirror. "Got a package for ya. He ain't too happy about it."

Bash's voice was gruff on the other end of the line, "You okay, man?"

I sucked in a hissing breath as a fresh wave of pain surged through me. "Been better, but I'll manage."

"You alone?" he asked.

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"Yeah," I replied, glancing back at the groaning man. "I'm alone. Going to the Den."

"The Den" was what we called our safe house—an old warehouse reinvented into a fortress of sorts. Its dreary exterior masked the haven within, complete with stocked weapons, medical supplies, and a holding cell for when things got really dirty. We rarely used it, much preferring to use our building in Brickell. But the problem with that was that Sebastian was there, and Bash had made it clear that he wanted to avoid Sebastian seeing any criminal activities if possible.

And, well, it wasn't really ours.

It had been Jez's after Pedro died. I hadn't gone back in years. And I had never been the one driving the van.

"Alright. Be careful. It'll be Skylar and Zane; there's an appointment Justice and I can't get out of. I'll tell them to wait for you there," Bash warned, his voice carrying the weight of the world.

"Understood," I gritted out, hanging up and tossing the phone onto the passenger seat.

The grumbling man in the back was starting to flail about, his murmurs growing into feeble attempts at protest. While a part of me was pleased that he was suffering, another part of me was seething with uncontrollable rage. He was just a pawn in this messy game, a symbol of the enemy that had been chipping away at us for way too long.

The road ahead stretched out like a path to purgatory, the heat mirroring the flames I

felt licking at the edges of my sanity. This man in the back, he was the key to understanding who had turned my life into a living hell. Each moment of peace with Justice felt like it was bought with blood—and I was running out of currency.

I checked the rearview mirror again and caught his eyes open this time, a lucid terror reflected in them that matched my own smoldering anger. "You'll talk," I whispered to myself more than to him, feeling a grim satisfaction at the slightest nod he gave, an involuntary submission to his situation.

Fuck this guy.

I was done being a punching bag for these people.

I was back.

And I was angry.

Angrier than I had ever been in my entire life.

Chapter Thirteen: Justice

Bash looked pale when he hung up the phone with Hassan. I was getting ready to go out, and we were in our apartment, Bash sitting on the edge of the bed as he tied the laces of his boots and I pinned my hair up in a high ponytail.

Sebastian was with the nanny at story time, so that was one less thing to worry about, but our lives meant that the other shoe could drop at any minute.

"Everything okay?" I asked Bash as I stared at my reflection on the mirror above our wardrobe.

Bash shook his head, his gaze far away. "Hassan's on his way to the Den. He's picked up a...guest."

I furrowed my brows, tossing aside a few hair pins onto the vanity table. "Guest? You mean like, a De Luca?"

Bash nodded solemnly. "Seems like it."

The room suddenly felt tighter, air thinner. I could feel my heart pumping in my chest, adrenaline rushing through my veins just at the thought of another De Luca entering our territory. "Is he okay? I worry about him."

"He sounded okay," Bash replied, though his knitted brow suggested he shared my concern. I knew too well the undertone of pain Hassan tried to hide from us in his voice. "Zane and Skylar are going to be waiting for him at the Den."

"Good," I muttered, relief washing over me for a moment. At least he wouldn't be alone with the enemy.

Bash moved behind me, his large hands finding my shoulders as he began to massage them gently. His touch was soothing, calming the storm within me. For a moment, I closed my eyes, placing my hand over one of his.

"We could use some good news," Bash murmured into my ear. His warm breath tickled my skin, sending chills down my spine despite the worry that gnawed at me.

"Mmm," I murmured in agreement, turning to face him. His green eyes had that haunted look about them again and it tore at my heart to see it there. He kissed behind my ear and I let out a shuddering breath, my forehead resting against his broad chest. I found solace in his familiar scent—the unique combination of leather, his cologne and something purely Bash. It was grounding and I let it wash over me, soothe the

frayed edges of my worry.

"Hassan's a fighter," Bash murmured, pulling back to look into my eyes. "He's got us, he's got you, Justice."

"So he doesn't need you there?"

Bash's lips lingered on my skin as he slowly moved to my shoulder. "No, darlin'. This is where I'm supposed to be."

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With Bash, I found a comfort I hadn't known I was craving. His touch was grounding, his words were a soothing balm to my frantic heart. But beyond that, there was the shared understanding between us—we were in this together, whatever 'this' entailed.

With him by my side, I felt like we could face any storm.

"Promise?" My voice trembled slightly as I looked up into his eyes.

"Promise," he echoed, giving me a small smile before pulling me into a comforting embrace. I rested my head against his chest, his heartbeat steady and calming beneath my ear. "Do you want me to make you forget?"

I picked my head up to look into his eyes. "Yes."

His smile turned wicked as he swept me up in his arms, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. "Then let me make you forget," he whispered against my lips before he crushed them with his, swallowing my moan as his hands roamed over my back.

His fingers traced the lines of my spine down to the curve of my waist, pulling me closer till there was no space left between us. I gasped into his mouth as he walked us towards the bed, never breaking our kiss. He laid me down gently, hovering above me as his hand trailed up my thigh, his breath hitching when he realized I wasn't wearing any panties under my dress.

I grinned up at him beneath hooded lids, a surge of desire coursing through me at the sight of his darkened eyes. He growled low in his throat, a predatory glint in his gaze

that sent shivers tracking down my spine. "Tease," he muttered against my lips.

"Aren't we going to be late?" I asked.

"Is that a challenge? I can make you come in a minute."

I grinned at him, pulling him closer to me. "I'd like to see you try."

His lips instantly found mine, his tongue demanding entrance. I moaned as he pulled my dress up, his hand travelling up my thigh towards my core. His fingers brushed against me, causing me to twitch in anticipation. He chuckled against my lips, the sound dark and promising.

"Ready?" he murmured against my skin. I could only nod in response, lost in the electric connection between us. He took a moment to savor the expression on my face before his fingers sank into me.

I gasped, clutching onto him as he began moving his fingers expertly. Every thrust, every brush against that sensitive spot inside of me drew out gasps and moans from me. He watched me unravel beneath him with a satisfied smirk on his face.

"God, you're so wet," he said. "So tight."

His other hand gripped my hip, holding me in place as his fingers continued their torture. My breath hitched as a warmth spread from my core—a feeling that was all too familiar. "Bash," I gasped, clutching at his shoulders.

"That wasn't even thirty seconds," he said.

He leaned down to capture my lips with his again, muffling my cries as he pushed me over the edge. The world exploded around me, colors and sounds blurring together as

I came undone beneath him.

As my breathing finally started to return to normal, he gently pulled his fingers out of me, bringing them to his lips to taste. His eyes bore into mine as he licked them clean, a satisfied smirk playing on his lips. "Told you," he said with a cocky grin.

"What about you?" I asked.

He grabbed my hand, put it on his hardened cock. "You make me crazy," he said. "So you're going to blow me in the car."

"What?"

He didn't give me time to answer him. Instead, he swooped down and captured my lips in a heated kiss, leaving me breathless and wanting more. He pulled back, his eyes intense as they roamed over my face.

"You heard me," he said simply as he helped me to my feet and fixed my disheveled dress. Despite the lingering fog of passion clouding my mind, I felt a shiver of anticipation. Bash being dominant was a sight to behold—it turned me on more than I would ever admit.

With one last lingering kiss, we finally left our room, our hands entangled together naturally. We took the elevator to the garage, his grip on my hand tight and protective. I leaned into him, my body humming with the afterglow of our moment upstairs. The familiar burn of desire was still there, simmering beneath my skin, ready to ignite at his touch.

I slid into the passenger seat, Bash taking his place behind the wheel a moment later. As we pulled out of the garage, he placed his hand on my thigh, creating a trail of goosebumps wherever he touched. With the quiet hum of the engine and the soft

glow of streetlights passing by, the car felt like our own private world.

His hand slid up my dress again, causing a shiver to run down my spine. "Remember our deal?" he asked with a teasing grin, his eyes glinting with mischief.

"You have to watch the road."

"You worry about your job, darlin', I'll worry about mine."

I gave a soft chuckle, heat flooding my cheeks. "You really want to do this now?" I asked, glancing at him.

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"I want you," he replied simply, tightening his grip on my thigh. "And I want you to remember this moment."

Something in his voice resonated with me—a sort of passion that held both an erotic promise and a deeper connection. It was enough to quell any doubts or reservations that flitted through my mind.

"Alright then," I said, turning slightly to face him. With slow but sure movements, I reached for his belt. His sharp intake of breath was gratifying as I loosened it and unzipped his jeans.

He shifted slightly under me, pushing the confines of his trousers down enough to make room for my hand to explore. His cock immediately sprang free, hard and long, jutting toward me. A bead of precum had collected there, making my mouth water.

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding in my chest. His size never failed to impress, to intimidate, and to excite me. I gave a cursory glance at the road, checking how deserted it was before I turned my focus back to him.

His hand tightened on my thigh as I wrapped my fingers around his length, giving him a few slow strokes that made him groan. The sound sent a thrill through me, spurring me on.

In the flashing lights of the neon streets, I could make out the outline of his chiseled body, strong and commanding. His cock twitched in my hand, precum slicking the head. My mouth watered at the sight.

"Justice," he murmured, his voice rough with desire. He looked at me then, his eyes dark and intense even in the sunlight. "Don't stop."

I gave him a teasing smile, my hand squeezing him in response. I moved my hand leisurely, my grip tightening on the upward stroke. Every twitch of his cock, every low groan he let out made heat pool between my thighs.

"Use your mouth," he said.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I leaned over the console. His cock twitched in my hand as I leaned closer, my lips hovering over him. "Eyes on the road," I whispered softly, letting my breath ghost over him. He let out a soft groan in response, his grip on the steering wheel tightening.

Ignoring the butterflies fluttering in my stomach, I opened my mouth and took him in. His hips lifted off the seat as he let out a low curse, his hand instantly going to my hair. The taste of him was intoxicating—something raw and masculine that made my head spin.

I began to move my head slowly, taking him deeper with each stroke. His groans filled the car, drowning out the soft hum of the engine and the distant city noise. Each sound from him only added to my pleasure, making me more confident in my actions. I let my tongue trace a vein before swirling around the head, earning another moan.

"Fuck, Justice," he hissed through gritted teeth, his grip on my hair tightening. His breath hitched in his throat as I increased my pace, sucking hard and stroking with my hand in rhythm. His hips jerked uncontrollably as I took him deeper, pushing him closer to the edge.

"Justice," he growled, a warning in his voice. But my only response was to take him even deeper, hollowing out my cheeks and applying just the right amount of suction.

He groaned loudly, his body tensing momentarily before he came undone in my mouth.

I swallowed every drop of him as he gasped for breath, slowly pulling back when I was sure that he had been thoroughly taken care of. As I adjusted myself back into my seat, I could see the afterglow in his eyes, a mixture of satisfaction and adoration shining through. He reached out and gently stroked my cheek, a soft smile on his lips.

"Thank you," he said softly.

I chuckled lightly at his words, adjusting my dress and brushing stray strands of hair away from my face. "Anytime," I replied, grinning at him.

He laughed. "You better mean that."

"Yeah," I said. "Of course I mean that."

Chapter Fourteen: Skylar

No one liked going to the Den.

Yeah, I was a fucking psycho. I owned it. I liked making people hurt, especially when they threatened the people I loved. But even I didn't like going to the Den...because things had happened here that even I wouldn't do.

Things had happened to people I cared about.

And sometimes, when the thought crossed my mind...flames licked at the edges of my consciousness, and I considered burning the damn place down.

Back in the day, when it was still just me and Bash, his dad had secured this location

for operations. An abandoned warehouse in the heart of the city, too grimy and inconspicuous for anyone to suspect as our safe house. The air was always thick with the scent of decaying brick and damp wood mixed with the faint trace of rusted iron, a constant reminder of previous bloody encounters held within these four walls. Bodies, too.

The name "Den" had been a stupid joke I'd made once, a laugh in the face of danger when we were just two street-smart kids with nowhere else to run. We claimed it as our own, and it became our sanctuary against the world. However, despite its significance, it was more a place of last resort than anything else—'cause if we were at the Den, it meant shit had seriously hit the fan.

Pedro, of course, had loved it. So had Jez. Bash had rolled his eyes, but at the time, he wasn't even in line to be boss. We were both running product together.

But that was a lifetime ago.

As we pulled up to the Den, I turned to look at Zane. "You've never been here before, have you?"

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"Once," he said. "When we were trying to get Hassan out the first time."

I nodded, remembering that cataclysmic night. It seemed like a lifetime ago, yet the memories were as fresh as if it had happened yesterday. The desperate drive across town, the frantic scramble to get Hassan out of the den of snakes he'd been thrust into...it all came rushing back. Not that we had found him at the Den. Still, I couldn't believe he had come here of his own volition, when it was a place where such bad things had happened.

In a strange twist of fate, Bash had inherited everything Jez had ever fought him for. The Devils—Jez's gang—were no more.

And the Den was ours.

No matter how much we didn't want it.

We stepped out of the car, our boots crunching on the gravel that lined the entrance of the Den. We shared a glance, tension heavy in the air, before pushing through the rusted metal doors. The interior was just as I remembered—grimy and dark, forgotten by time and ignored by progress.

Zane looked around, his eyes wide in surprise. "Doesn't look like much," he commented softly, his voice echoing in the cavernous space.

I shrugged. "It's not meant to."

I could hear the vague sound of someone whimpering, and it brought back all kinds

of ugly memories. Grown men weeping, begging...not right now, but in the past, in that same awful room. Hassan had brought his attacker to the same place where he had been attacked years and years ago.

Dude was fucked up.

Of course, if I was being honest with myself, we all needed therapy. Him more than me.

“Back here,” I murmured, gesturing for Zane to follow me. I tried to keep my cool as we walked toward the rusted out door, my stomach dropping as I opened it, wondering what I would find on the other side.

Hassan stood on the other side, looking a little worse for wear. His face was bruised, his lip swollen and still a bit bloody, his clothes dusty from being thrown to the ground. Yet, he was standing stall, his eyes hard as steel.

I'd never really seen him like this.

Looking...tough.

And I wasn't sure if I liked it.

I clapped him on the shoulder as I approached, my gaze flicking towards the man tied to the chair in front of him. "Who's this?" I asked.

Hassan flicked a glance at the unconscious man slumped in the chair, looking more annoyed than anything else. "Some lackey from De Luca's crew," he said. His voice was rough, stripped raw from whatever had transpired before Zane and I arrived. “Had this shithead followin' me around town.”

"Did you get anything out of him?" Zane asked, stepping closer to inspect the man.

"Nothing useful," Hassan replied with a grunt. He ran his fingers over his bruised cheekbone, wincing slightly as he touched the tender area. "Bastard wouldn't open his mouth."

Zane crossed his arms in front of his chest. "What a surprise," he said. "You can be...persuasive."

Hassan chuckled, a harsh sound that echoed in the cavernous room. "Let's see if you can do any better, then."

Zane looked at me then, already fixated on the task at hand. I would be happy to do this, but there was something so sexy about Zane taking charge, giving in to this side of himself. I gave him a nod, stepping back to give him space as he crouched down in front of the man. "Let me know if you need help."

Zane cracked his knuckles. "I won't. Wake up," he said, his voice echoing in the silence. "Did you knock him out twice?"

"Yeah, once when I dragged him into the van and once when I dragged him in here," Hassan said. "He wouldn't let me move him otherwise."

Zane silently nodded, his eyes on the unconscious man. The gritty warehouse seemed to draw in a collective breath as he reached out and slapped the man sharply across the face. There was something about his cool, clinical demeanor that gave me chills.

I was just as threatened as I was turned on.

That was a very potent combination for me.

"Bloody hell," I muttered from behind, but I knew there was a spark of excitement in my voice. A part of me revelled in the rush—in the game. Zane was definitely good at shaking things up.

The thug grunted in pain, his eyelids fluttering open revealing a pair of glassy, disoriented eyes. He made a feeble attempt to break free from his restraints, his wrists chafing against the crude rope.

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"Ah-ah-ah..." Zane chided softly as he stood up and towered over him. "You really should stop trying to escape."

The man responded with a low grunt, his eyes narrowing into slits as he studied Zane. There was something about the way he looked at him, an undercurrent of defiance in his hazy gaze. But Zane simply stared back, a glacial calmness radiating from him that seemed to unnerve the man even more.

"I'm going to ask you some questions," Zane said, leaning in closer so that their faces were mere inches apart. "And you're going to answer them."

"This is so hot," I said.

"Shut up, Skylar," Hassan said.

"We want names," Zane said. "We know you're with the De Luca family...but what we're looking for is specifics."

"I don't know anything."

Zane walked back toward me, gesturing toward the briefcase he'd brought with him. I passed it over, then he knelt on the ground to open it, revealing a set of surgical tools. I knew I shouldn't have been turned on...but I was.

I loved it when Zane played doctor.

"What the hell, man?" the thug said. "You...what the fuck is this?"

“What’s your name?” Zane asked.

“I’m not giving you—”

He was cut short when Zane, in one quick motion, lunged toward him and plunged a scalpel into his thigh. He howled in pain, a choked sob in his throat. Hassan didn’t so much as flinch. Meanwhile...I was getting harder by the second.

“Danny, it’s Danny!”

Sitting back on an overturned milk crate, arms folded across my chest, I watched Zane work. It was fascinating to see this different side of him, this raw dominance. His usual calm had turned into a chilling authority that held both me and the captive in its icy grip.

There was no arrogance in his voice, no unnecessary cruelty. Just a relentless pursuit for truth that made my stomach flutter in a heady mix of fear and attraction.

The man spat at Zane, and I winced as the glob landed on Zane's cheek. For a second, everything seemed to freeze as we all watched the saliva slide down his face. Zane's expression didn't change. He took out a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his face clean, and then returned his icy gaze back to the man.

"That wasn't very polite," he said flatly.

Hassan snickered, leaning against the wall with a smirk on his face. "You're going to pay for that."

I watched as Zane leaned back in, his eyes darkening by a shade, his demeanor cold but determined. The air around him was tangible, powerful even, and I found myself getting more and more drawn into this side of him.

I wondered if he would cut me if I asked him to.

Just to know how it felt.

Tie me to a chair, make me his bitch.

Zane reached out for the man's collar, hoisting him up from the chair with ease despite the bindings on his wrists, causing the captive to let out a strangled gasp of surprise.

"I'm not a patient man," Zane warned in an eerily calm voice, his gaze never leaving the man's face. "So I suggest you start talking."

The man tried to lunge at Zane, but the restraints held him back. His struggle was in vain and only resulted in him being roughly jerked back into the chair, his thigh letting out a slow trickle of blood. Zane was precise; he knew where to cut to make it hurt without causing permanent damage.

He could drag out a death for days.

Yeah...so fucking hot.

Zane dug his knee into the man's stomach. "You will answer my questions, starting with your last name."

"Fuck you," Danny gritted out through clenched teeth, his eyes darting between each of us before finally landing back on Zane. He spat again, this time missing Zane's face by a mere inch.

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Zane chuckled softly, a jarring sound in the otherwise silent warehouse. "Very colorful, but I don't believe your mother named you that," he quipped, returning to his briefcase.

The captive's eyes widened as he followed Zane's movements, his lips parting slightly as Zane pulled out another scalpel from his collection. The sharp edge shimmered wickedly as he slowly twirled it between his fingers.

"A doctor's best friend," Zane said, his voice soft as he looked at the scalpel. Turning his gaze back to the man, he continued, "And quite useful in extracting information too."

For the first time, fear flickered in the man's eyes and he shrank back in his chair. But even if he wanted to escape, there was nowhere to run. The panic was almost visible as it started to set in.

"You're Dr. Silva," the man said, his eyes widening.

Zane smirked. "Finally. Some recognition."

"Just what the fuck do you want from me?" Danny stammered, his gaze fixed on the scalpel that Zane twirled menacingly in his fingers.

"Like I said," Zane replied in a deceptively soft voice. "Information." He rose to his full height, and for a moment, we were all silent, captivated by the raw power radiating from him.

I leaned against a steel beam, my arms folded across my chest. Watching Zane's interrogation had stirred something primal within me. We were definitely going to have to fuck when this whole thing was finished.

"Name," Zane said as he brought a tool out. "First and last."

"Danny. My name is Danny Marino," the captive relented finally, his eyes darting nervously between Zane and the scalpel.

"Good boy, Danny," Zane replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. His grip tightened around the scalpel but he didn't make a move yet. "And tell me, Danny...who sent you? Was it Vito De Luca?"

Danny's eyes flickered at the mention of De Luca's name. It was a fleeting reaction, but Zane and all of us caught it instantly. The muscles in Zane's jaw tightened ever so slightly as he took a step closer to Danny.

"Spit it out, Marino," Zane practically snarled. "Who wanted Hassan dead? Why Hassan? Why not Skylar or me?"

"I'm not supposed to say anything about Vito," Danny said.

"But you already said too much, didn't you?" Zane replied, his voice dangerously low. He reached out with the scalpel, causing Danny to flinch back in his chair. "Why Hassan?"

Danny swallowed thickly, his gaze flickering helplessly between Zane and the sharp instrument in his hand. His lips moved without a sound as he tried to form the words.

Zane inched his knife closer to Danny's face. "There's this artery in your neck," he said. "The carotid. It supplies blood to the brain. You knew that, didn't you, being

one of De Luca's men?"

Confusion flickered in Danny's gaze like a faulty bulb before it was replaced by pure unadulterated fear. The blade was now a hair breadth away from his throat. "I—I don't know!"

"But the thing about bleeding out is that it's quick...so if I wanted to make it slow, I'd have to get creative, wouldn't I?" Zane's voice was low, almost a whisper, but it echoed chillingly throughout the space. His fingers tightened around the scalpel's handle while his other hand held Danny's chin steady.

The fear in Danny's eyes was palpable—a rabbit caught in a trap. Yet, he remained silent. I could see him weighing his options, calculating how much he could reveal and survive this ordeal. But the longer he hesitated, the colder Zane's gaze grew.

"What is it they say? A good physician heals with the hand as much as the mind," Zane went on. "Something like that." He let go of Danny's chin; his fingers traced over the pulse drumming at Danny's throat. "I can patch you up as well as I can rip you apart. So why don't we make this easier for both of us?"

"Alright," Danny gasped, his body sagging in relief as Zane pulled the scalpel away. "Alright...I'll talk."

"That's my boy," Zane said approvingly, stepping back to give Danny some space. He carefully placed the scalpel back into its case before crossing his arms over his chest, waiting for Danny to start speaking.

"It wasn't like you think," Danny began, his voice trembling slightly. "Vito never wanted Hassan dead...not really."

I squinted at him, struggling to process his words. Not really? What did that even

mean? A bomb under your car seemed pretty damn final to me.

"Explain," Zane demanded.

"He wanted Hassan on his side," Danny said. "Said he thought he would be the easiest to flip, particularly if he was hurt."

The words hung heavily in the air, cutting through the tension like the scalpel Zane had yielded earlier. It was a moment before anyone could speak.

"Vito wanted to turn Hassan into a mole?" I asked.

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Danny nodded rapidly, his hands fidgeting against the hard metal of the chair. "He...he thought Hassan was the weak link. Easiest to manipulate."

I looked over at Hassan, who was completely silent. His expression was opaque—I couldn't get a read on how he was feeling, what he was thinking—and it scared the hell out of me.

He wouldn't...would he?

"And he thought sticking a bomb under his car was going to achieve that?!" The incredulity in my voice echoed through the room, bouncing off the cold iron walls and steel beams not unlike the lump forming in my throat.

"He didn't think you'd stick around to help him out. He was going to swoop in, help him, and then try to convince him that having him and his wife raise Sebastian was the best thing to do."

"That's insane," Hassan said. "I would never flip."

"But that's the thing," Danny continued, his voice barely a whisper. "Vito believed you would. He thought he could exploit your trauma. Thought you'd be...grateful for his help. And in return, he expected you to get him close to Sebastian through Justice."

Silence thundered around us, a vast void that seemed to stretch into a chasm of outrage and disbelief. I could feel my fists clenching at my sides. The audacity of the De Luca clan never ceased to amaze me.

"How very sickeningly noble of him," I sneered, rage seething beneath my words.

A grim smile stole across Zane's face. "And yet here we are, Danny boy," he murmured menacingly. "Hassan hasn't flipped, and Vito's grand plan has been reduced to rubble."

Danny swallowed hard, beads of sweat trailing down his face. "You don't understand," he stuttered out, "Vito won't stop until he gets what he wants."

Zane snorted in derision. "Oh, we understand perfectly," he said, his voice like ice. "But understanding doesn't equate to giving the fucker what he wants. Thanks for the help, Danny. I'll make this quick."

Danny's wide eyes were filled with dawning horror as Zane reached for the scalpel again. "Wait! I told you everything. Y—you said—"

"What?" Zane interrupted, his voice eerily calm as he twirled the scalpel in his fingers, studying it with a detached fascination. "That I'd make this easier? Sure, I did. And I will."

There was a swift movement, a sharp intake of breath from Danny and then silence—an agonizing, deathly silence as red bloomed on Danny's shirt. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and his body slumped forward.

Zane wiped the scalpel on Danny's jacket before sliding it back into its case. He straightened up, glancing at me with a smirk that didn't quite reach his eyes. It was over for Danny but our problems...they were just beginning.

"There'll be others," Hassan murmured, his voice hoarse and ragged.

"We know," I said. "Come on. Let's get rid of this body."

Chapter Fifteen: Justice

I knew there was a need for secrecy, but going to an office in a downtown building to have a meeting over video conferencing seemed like overkill. Then again, what did I know? There were lots of things about this world that I still didn't understand. Bash had told me that it was better to be away from home when we were planning all this, and we were going to go meet up with the wedding planner.

As we entered the nondescript building, nestled between a glossy corporate tower and a quaint corner coffee shop, an incongruous feeling washed over me. The Miami sun was unforgiving as always, baking the concrete beneath our feet. Bash gestured for me to enter first, his hand resting gently on my lower back.

We were going to plan our wedding...while unspeakable violence was happening with the rest of our family.

It was weird.

Dissonant.

It didn't feel good...and planning your wedding was supposed to feel good, wasn't it?

Inside, the cool air conditioning was a welcome respite from the sweltering heat. The receptionist, a woman in her early fifties with a matte of blonde hair and steel-rimmed glasses, looked up from behind her desk and smiled at us.

"Mr. Rivera?" she asked, her eyes shifting from Bash to me before they settled onto the large diamond ring on my finger. "Right this way."

We were ushered through a labyrinth of never-ending hallways into an office that was remarkably stark compared to the ornate exterior of the building. One single table

stood in the middle of the room with six chairs around it and a large monitor. "As requested, we'll give you the office for the first thirty minutes, then Nora will join you."

"Thank you," Bash replied, his voice smooth, allaying any lingering nerves. As soon as the door closed behind us, he turned toward me, the concern etched into his handsome features.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly. The intimacy of our surroundings magnified his words, making it seem like we were the only two people in the world.

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"I'm fine," I replied, forcing a smile onto my face. But the truth was far from it. "How do you think Hassan is?"

"Ask him later," he said as I grabbed the laptop I'd brought from home.

I fixed my gaze on him for a second, wondering if I should call him out. But he was right—I thought. Skylar and Zane were taking care of Hassan, and we needed to focus on the wedding so we could ensure Sebastian had a future with us.

"So what do we know about this guy?" I asked as I started to connect to the network.

"Jace? He's my cousin's man," Bash said. "Some sort of tech genius. Teo had him hack into Vito's accounts for information for us."

"Really?" I asked, raising an eyebrow as I logged into the system. "And we trust him?"

"Teo vouches for him. That's good enough for me." Bash seemed unworried, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned against a white-painted wall.

I frowned as I connected to the video call, staring at the screen in front of us. The blue video chat logo blinked back at me momentarily before it switched to the face of a man who could not have been older than twenty-five. His sharp jawline was dominated by a smattering of freckles, framed by blond slicked back hair. He looked nothing like a tech nerd. He looked like a man who would play a tech nerd on TV.

"Jace," Bash said. "Thank you for your help."

"Of course," he said. "Let me skip pleasantries here. I'm mostly doing this to help Teo, but I dislike the De Lucas a lot. Long story, but they had some association with my parents. Anyway. I'm very happy to bring them down."

Bash caught my eye and smiled. "What do you know?"

"I hacked into his personal computer," Jace answered. "It was hard. He has a lot of security. It appears Vito has been funneling money into several offshore accounts. He's preparing for something big...or maybe he already started it. He's planning his estate, wants custody of Sebastian. And he's getting all this money...ready. He's trying to make himself look more financially stable, as a better option for Sebastian."

"But the money is coming from his drug ops, right?" I asked.

"Sure, but there's no way to track that from these," Jace said. "The way he's laundering it, it just looks like he's selling off art or stocks or something."

"Can't we expose him?" Bash asked, his brow furrowed with worry.

"I thought about that," Jace said. "But who are you going to show? The police? They're in his pocket. The court? It's full of his friends and associates."

Bash cursed under his breath, running his fingers through his hair. I could see the frustration etched on his face and it was a mirror of my own feelings. We were playing a game with rigged rules, against an opponent who held all the cards.

"So what do we do?" I asked Bash.

"I know you didn't ask my opinion," Jace said. "But I think you have to hit them where it hurts."

"And where would that be?" I asked, staring hard at the screen.

"His business," Jace replied. He tilted his head to one side. "You take out his supply chain and his ability to launder money, then you've really done something."

Bash nodded slowly at the idea. "That's not a bad plan," he said thoughtfully. He turned to me, his eyes searching mine for approval, for dissent—for anything.

"Right. It's a solid plan. But how?" I asked.

"I don't know, man. I'm just the tech guy."

Bash chuckled, a low, husky sound that broke the tension in the room. "Thanks, Jace." He turned to me, his expression serious again. "We'll need to call a meeting."

"Agreed," I said, signing out of the call before closing the laptop. I helped myself to a chair, letting out a long sigh. We stared at each other across the table for what felt like an eternity. To say the situation was dire would be an understatement.

"I know that look," Bash said finally, his intense gaze softening. His fingers brushed against mine on the tabletop, offering reassurance.

"What look?" I asked, my eyes flicking from our entwined hands back to his face.

"The wheels turning in your head," he murmured with a small smile playing on his lips. "You're planning your next move."

"And you're not?" I countered, squeezing his hand lightly as I responded.

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Bash shot me a knowing smile and stood up. He walked over to the window, crossing his arms as he stared out at the Miami skyline. His reflection rippled on the glass as though he were a ghost, his face softened by the sunlight streaming through the window.

"I'm thinking we hit 'em where they least expect it," he said finally, his voice barely more than a whisper. "We get Sylvia to help us."

"Sylvia? Who's Sylvia?"

"Isabella's contact," Bash said. "Vito's estranged daughter."

"I didn't know Vito had children other than Alicia."

"She doesn't live here. She probably doesn't want anything to do with her father...well, until now."

My head felt like it was swimming. "Wouldn't that make her heir?"

"Heir? A woman?" he smiled at me. "No, Justice. That makes her a liability. And we're going to exploit it."

"Exploit?" I asked, tightening my grip on his hand. The word hung heavy in the room, sounding all too much like the kind of thing Vito or Pedro would do.

His eyes met mine, dark with resolve. "Yeah. We're going to use her."

"But how? And won't that put her in danger?"

"Maybe," Bash said, his voice softer now. "But we don't really have a choice, do we?"

I took a deep breath, staring at him as I tried to work out what he was planning. It wasn't just about Sylvia anymore; it was about something far larger than us. It was about survival.

"If she is estranged, she might not know anything about Vito's operation," I said.

"I have a feeling that she's not as estranged as we think," I replied. "Obviously I looked her up. She's a pretty average artist living well above her means with a partner who is...I don't know, unemployed?"

I raised my eyebrows.

"I don't know what he does, but I promise you he isn't raking it in."

"So she's on the take," I murmured, my gaze falling to the laptop that now sat closed on the table. "Her father's keeping her quiet with money."

"Seems like it." Bash's eyes glinted, predatory. He acted like he just wanted a tidy little domestic life, but I knew him better than that.

He was excited about this. The prospect of destroying someone.

I exhaled slowly, rubbing my forehead as I thought. It wasn't ideal. Nothing about this was ideal. But when you're in a war, you have to play with the hand you're dealt. I didn't want collateral damage...but I definitely, definitely didn't want Vito De Luca raising our child.

"Alright," I said finally. "We use Sylvia."

Bash's eyes softened with relief before he turned to look out the window again. He was silent for a moment, his thoughts far away.

"Let's not forget what we're fighting for," he said in a hushed whisper, his back still to me. I knew he was thinking of our innocent Sebastian and the dangerous legacy he had been unwillingly born into. His voice floated back to me, a bare thread of pain woven into it. "Justice, we have to win this for Sebastian."

"We will," I reassured, meeting his gaze in the reflection on the window. "We'll do whatever it takes."

His eyes closed momentarily, a pained expression crossing his features. Bash was no stranger to difficult decisions, but something about this one was taking him to the edge. And I hated seeing him there, teetering on the brink.

After a few heartbeats, he turned back to me, his eyes taking on a new intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

"One more thing," he said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"I think we should move the wedding date."

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I cocked my head. "You want to focus on this? Postpone the wedding?"

His eyes widened. "What? No," he said. "I mean bring it forward. Get married sooner."

"Bash..."

His gaze held mine, full of a quiet desperation. "I want to secure our legacy, Justice. If something happens to me," Bash's voice faltered for a moment, "if something happens, I need you to be prepared, to have legal rights over Sebastian."

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach. "I already have legal rights over Sebastian," I said. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

"Right. This will guarantee we keep it that way. And we don't know that," Bash said, his gaze steady and resolute. "You know this world, Justice. You know what we're up against."

My heart clenched in my chest at the unspoken implications of his words. It was a reality I'd always known—we'd both always known—but hearing it acknowledged so openly felt like a punch to the gut.

He stepped closer to me then, the distance between us disappearing as he wrapped his arms around me. I buried my face in his chest, closing my eyes against the harsh truth we found ourselves facing.

"I need you to promise me, Justice," Bash murmured into my hair. His voice was raw

with emotion, a stark contrast to his usual cool demeanor.

I pulled back slightly to look at him, my heart aching at the intensity in his gaze. "Bash..."

"No," he cut me off, shaking his head gently. "I need to hear you say it."

I swallowed hard but nodded. "Of course I'm going to look after him, Bash. He's our son."

He gently lifted my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. In it, I saw a myriad of emotions; worry, fear, love—but most importantly, determination. "Hey. I love you. I'm not just doing this to protect you."

"I know," I said, searching his face. "I love you too."

"I know you'll fight for our son no matter what happens to me," he said. "And, outside of all of this shit, no matter what happens, I want to call you my wife. I need to call you my wife."

Bash's words hung in the air. I blinked rapidly, struggling to keep my emotions at bay. The weight of what was happening, what we were facing, it was enough to crush me. But Bash...he was my rock, my anchor in this sea of chaos.

"I don't want to wait," he whispered, brushing a strand of hair from my face with his thumb. "I say we do it as soon as possible."

I looked into his eyes, seeing the resolve behind them. He wasn't asking for an answer; he was telling me what he wanted—no, needed—to do. And who was I to deny him?

"Okay," I said on an exhale, surprising myself at how quickly I agreed. But more than anything else, I realized I wanted this too. "We'll move up the wedding."

Chapter Sixteen: Justice

I looked at myself in the mirror, barely able to recognize myself in the long siren-shaped wedding gown and delicate veil that crowned my loosely pinned hair. The dress was simple yet elegant, nothing too ostentatious, but it felt strange. I mean, it was ridiculously expensive. Bash's doing, of course. But this was weird. I was used to the comfort of worn jeans and the reassuring weight of a blade at my side. This was a far cry from what I considered normal, but for Bash... for us, I'd play the part. Smokey eyeshadow, mascara, and a touch of plum lipstick were all I had allowed my makeup artist for the finishing touches.

The veil cascaded down my back. I was nervous, my hands shaking as I adjusted the tiara that Zane had surprised me with, claiming it was the perfect mix of femininity and lethal sharpness just like me. He was right. The glistening diamonds were set in a blade-like design; it felt like a crown fit for a mafia queen.

I heard a soft knock on the door.

"Justice?" Hassan's voice called out. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," I replied, my voice barely above a whisper, my eyes still transfixed by my reflection in the mirror.

He walked in, stopping in his tracks as his eyes fell on me.

"You look stunning," Hassan finally managed to say. His eyes were soft, filled with emotion that made my heart clench.

I smiled, turning to face him. "Thanks, Hassan."

He walked over to me then, his footsteps echoing throughout the room. He looked at me for a long moment before he pulled out a small velvet box from his pocket.

"I...uh," he stuttered, uncharacteristically nervous. "I'm aware you're marrying another man right now. I just..."

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He trailed off, his gaze dropping to the box in his hands. He licked his lips nervously before continuing. "I just wanted you to have this."

He flipped the box open to reveal a delicate diamond necklace. The gem glittered brightly in the dim light, reflecting hues of blues and greens. "As a reminder that...that you're not alone. That we're all with you, every step of the way."

My breath hitched as I stared at the necklace, then back up at Hassan. "I know I'm not alone."

"I don't want to lie to you," he said. "I wish it was me up there, waiting for you. But I understand that it's a privilege that I get to have you at all. And please, don't tell Bash, I don't want to offend him or anything."

I reached out, placing my hand over his. "Hassan," I began, my voice thick with emotion. "You won't offend anyone. And believe me, I feel privileged to have you in my life too."

Tears welled up in his eyes as he gave me a short nod. He carefully took the necklace from the box and began to clasp it around my neck.

"I know I don't talk about this much," he started, "but where I'm from...a man gives a set of gifts to his woman when they get married. This is just the first—to tell you that I'll provide for you and care for you, even though you legally belong to Bash."

"I don't..."

“Just let me do this,” he whispered. The clasp clicked shut like a promise, then he stepped back to look at me, eyes fixed on the jewel nestled in the hollow of my throat.

My heart sank. "I wish I could tell you I won't go through with this," I said. "I know it makes you uncomfortable, I just..."

He shook his head. "I know what needs to happen. I want you to be happy."

"Hassan, look at me. You make me happy."

His gaze met mine, earnest and a little bit lost. "You're supposed to be telling that to your groom," he said with a weak smile.

"I will," I assured him. "But it doesn't mean it's any less true for you."

"I feel so stupid. They're all so happy to share you, and sometimes, all I want is to have you all to myself. I'm sorry, I shouldn't be thinking about this when you're literally about to get married," he said.

"Hassan," I began, my voice shaky. "Your feelings aren't stupid. They're natural. And I love you for them."

He pressed a soft kiss to the shell of my ear. "I want you to have everything, though. If that means other men, then that's okay. I just wish I knew how to share better."

His words were thick, choked with emotion, but they were honest. Raw in a way that made my heart clench. I turned around to reach up, my fingers gently tracing his jawline.

"You're doing just fine, Hassan," I whispered, hoping to convey all the honesty and

sincerity I felt in those simple words. "You're...more than okay. How can I make this easier for you?"

His dark eyes roved over my face, down toward my chest. "Can I fuck you? Right now?"

"In my wedding dress?" I asked, my cheeks burning as I held back a smile.

He tilted his head, as if considering. "Yes."

I didn't know whether to laugh or scold him. Instead, I ended up grinning at the ridiculousness of the question. "You are insane."

"Is that a no?"

I shook my head. "Don't mess up my hair, and don't mess up my dress."

Hassan grinned. His eyes lit up with a spark of mischief. "I promise to be very, very careful."

In the next moment, he was on me, his strong arms cradling my body against his as he leaned in to capture my lips in a passionate kiss. It was heated, desperate, filled with all the unsaid words and hushed feelings we kept buried.

"Justice," Hassan whispered against my lips. He slid a hand down my back, fingertips just barely brushing against the fabric of my dress. I shivered under his touch, my heart pounding in my chest as I clung onto him.

"Do it," I breathed out.

And Hassan did just that.

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With practiced precision and a tenderness born from our years of shared intimacy, he swept me into his arms. I was in his world now, suspended in the quiet calm that shrouded us as if the rest of the world ceased to exist. His hands were gentle as they traced up my thighs, lifting the delicate fabric of my gown with reverent care.

“Can I just...pretend for a second?” he murmured against my skin. “Pretend this is after the wedding, that you’re all mine.”

“Yes,” I gasped.

Hassan's hand trailed higher, his fingers dancing on the edge of my underwear. A delicious thrill ran through me at his touch, and I couldn't help but let out a soft moan. His gaze never left mine, as he whispered, "Tell me to stop at any time."

I didn't want him to stop. "I want you to come inside of me."

"Inside you?" he questioned, a teasing smirk playing on his lips.

“Well...I am your wife, aren’t I? So come inside me," I confirmed, my eyes never leaving his. "Right now."

He let out a harsh breath and kissed me again, harder, his tongue invading my mouth. His hands were moving to pull my gown up to my hips, finding the scalloped lace edge of my red lingerie, and he pulled away from the kiss to look.

“Red?” he chuckled.

I nodded, breathless. "I thought Bash..."

"Don't talk about him—he doesn't get to see these anyway," Hassan said as he slid them down my hips. I couldn't do anything but watch as he slipped them into the pocket of his slacks. "I'm keeping them as a souvenir...and you get to walk down the aisle wearing nothing underneath."

My breath hitched as he lifted me effortlessly to sit on the vanity, spreading my thighs and stepping between them. His movements were smooth as he unzipped his pants, his cock springing free, and he pressed himself against my aching core.

"Fuck," I cursed.

"Tell me you're all mine and I'll fuck you," he said.

"I'm yours," I instantly responded.

He thrust all the way in, his hips knocking against my inner thighs. I groaned and threw my head back, the veil pooling around my hands, braced on the vanity.

"Again," he said.

"I'm yours, Hassan!"

With a primal need driving us both, Hassan began to thrust his hips hard and fast, the heat of our bodies melding together. A low, guttural groan escaped from deep within him as he fucked me, his movements deliberate and measured. Waves of pleasure washed over me like a tidal surge, threatening to consume every inch of my being.

"Justice," he sighed out my name like a prayer, his voice thick with desire and longing. I arched my back, inviting him even deeper. My hands found their way to his

waist, gripping tightly as I pulled him closer.

A breathless whisper escaped my lips as I felt him fill every part of me. "Fuck," I gasped in awe and ecstasy. Our eyes locked in an intimate gaze, reflecting the raw hunger and connection that bound us together.

His dark eyes smoldered with desire as they met mine. "You feel so damn good," he rasped hoarsely. "So tight."

The words sent a thrill through my veins, and I reached up to rake my fingers through his tousled hair. "I've always been yours," I murmured, pulling him down to me as our lips clashed.

And it was true.

Sure, I'd known Bash first. I loved Skylar and Zane.

But Hassan...he'd seen me in a way none of the other three had.

We'd been victims in this together, clinging to each other.

And it felt like I was losing him, and it really fucking hurt.

But I willed myself to forget, focusing only on the pleasure. Each stroke of his hips found that sweet spot inside me that had my breath hitching in my throat. Waves of pleasure washed over me, each one more intense than the last. I tightened around him, my body reacting instinctively to his rhythm.

"Look at me—" His plea was ragged and raw as he gripped the back of my neck, forcing my eyes open. His breath fanned hot against my skin. "I need you to look at me."

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"Always," I vowed, drawing him even closer as I cradled his face in my hands. His eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and it broke my heart to see him so vulnerable. But that was Hassan, always wearing his heart on his sleeve.

He surged into me then, desperate and possessive, as if to prove a point. Everything about this moment felt so right—so perfect—that I couldn't help but tear up. He was mine. Despite everything and everyone else, Hassan belonged to me—and I to him.

The rhythm of our bodies became more frenzied as we chased our release. Our breaths mingled together in the tense silence of the room, each gasp and moan echoing through the otherwise empty space. Each roll of his hips hit that spot within me that made stars burst across my vision, my breath hitching in awe and pleasure.

"Gonna—," Hassan panted, his gaze never leaving mine.

The words died in his throat as a shudder ran through him, his entire body going rigid. My walls tightened around him as I felt the hot rush of his release filling me to the brim. The sensation sent me spiraling over the edge, my own climax washing over me in powerful waves.

"Hassan," I moaned, my body trembling with the force of my orgasm. His name left my lips like a prayer, echoing throughout the room in a breathless plea for him to never stop making me feel this way.

I clung to him tightly as he collapsed against me, his head resting on my shoulder as he took slow, labored breaths. The weight of him pressed into me was oddly comforting, like a warm blanket on a cold night. We stayed like that for several long

minutes, our bodies intertwined, basking in the afterglow of our shared passion.

“Justice,” he whispered against my neck, his hot breath sending shivers down my spine. “I don’t ever want to lose this...us.”

His words struck a chord within me, reflecting my own fears and desires. Despite the chaos that constantly swirled around us, we found our solace in each other—a respite from a world filled with violence and uncertainty.

“You won’t,” I assured him, lifting his chin so he would meet my gaze. The raw vulnerability in his eyes took my breath away. But it was beautiful; it reflected the depth of his feelings for me—feelings I reciprocated entirely. “We won’t. We literally live in the same building. I might become his wife, but nothing about how I feel about you changes.”

He looked into my eyes, taking a moment to process my words before a soft smile graced his lips. The tension in his body faded away as he relaxed against me, his hand gently tracing circles on my bare skin.

“Good,” he murmured, “Because I don’t think I could survive without this...without you.”

He planted a soft kiss on my lips then leaned back, resting his forehead against mine. His dark eyes gazed intensely into mine, holding a promise of forever in their depths.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you," he replied. "I'm sorry, I think I messed up your hair a little. But this is how Bash likes you, right? Freshly fucked?"

I laughed, a raw and honest sound that echoed through the room. "Bash isn't the only

one," I reminded him, reaching up to rake my fingers through his tousled hair.

He pulled away from me, a smile on his face. "C'mon, doll. Let's get you married."

He took me by the arm and walked me to the door, and it felt like one world was ending and a new one was beginning. Even though I'd told him it wasn't going to happen...I had this horrible feeling I was losing him.

So I just reminded myself it was his cum dripping down my thighs when I walked down the aisle.

And the panties I'd intended for Bash were in Hassan's pocket.

Chapter Seventeen: Bash

It turns out that when you fork over enough money, any wedding planner will throw you a lavish, last-minute wedding.

The scene was set, and all our friends were here—mostly people from our operation, friends and family, and even some who had just come to witness the mafia wedding of the year. The aisle was decked out with red roses, the rich aroma of their petals wafting over me, candles lit all around the space.

It was beautiful...but I had no doubt nothing would measure up to my wife-to-be.

I was standing in a crowded church with Zane next to me. As I looked out into the sea of familiar faces, all anxiously awaiting the bride, my heart pounded in my chest. The stained glass windows cast kaleidoscopic shards of colored light onto the wooden pews, and the scent of incense hung heavy in the air.

At the sound of the organ starting to play, all heads turned towards the back of the

church. My breath hitched in my throat as I caught sight of Justice. She was resplendent in her wedding dress, her dark hair falling in loose waves around her shoulders from a half up-do, her eyes shining even across the aisle.

I couldn't see her that well yet, but I could already feel myself getting choked up.

Then Sebastian waddled in front of her, throwing petals around as Hassan held him by the hand. I watched, entranced, as the pair made their way down the aisle, their bond evident in the protective grip Hassan had over our little boy's hand. Sebastian was looking every bit adorable in his little tux, his innocence bringing a much-needed reprieve to the weight hanging heavily in the air.

I glanced at Zane, his eyes mirroring my emotions. He clenched his jaw as he watched the spectacle before him, his knuckles white as he tightly gripped the edge of the pew. Skylar, standing on my other side, had a handkerchief at the ready, his eyes already wet with unshed tears.

We'd already ribbed him for it—he wasn't much of a crier—but this was Justice. The woman all four of us loved more than anything else in the world.

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By the end of the ceremony, I might need that handkerchief too.

As Justice drew closer, every detail of her became clearer. The way her dress hugged her curves, the sparkle in her eyes, and most importantly, the radiant smile on her face. There she was, walking down the aisle towards me, looking every bit as beautiful as I had always imagined. Maybe even more beautiful.

I couldn't believe that in a few moments, she would be my wife. I felt a lump form in my throat as tears welled up in my eyes.

Once she was within arm's reach, she extended her hand towards me. I took it without hesitation, marveling at how soft her skin felt against mine. She gave me a comforting squeeze as she looked deep into my eyes with a sweet smile.

"You look amazing," she said.

"You look..." I blinked, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Justice."

Her smile grew wider, her eyes shining. A soft chuckle bubbled out of her lips as she used her other hand to wipe at my eyes, carefully removing a tear that had slipped down my cheek. "Don't make me cry. It'll mess up my make-up."

The priest began the ceremony, his voice deep and rhythmic as he recited the sacred vows. As I stood there, holding her hand, staring into her eyes, everything else melted away. It was just the two of us in that moment. Her. Me. Our love. Our bond.

That feeling only intensified through the long ritual of a Catholic wedding—liturgy, gospel, homily. We sat and then stood again, knelt before the priest.

When it came time to exchange rings, Zane handed me a small velvet box. My hands trembled as I opened it, revealing two simple yet elegant bands of gold. Every eye in the room was on us as I took her hand in mine, sliding the ring onto her finger.

"With this ring..." I began in a shaky voice. "I vow to love you, cherish you and protect you...until death do us part."

She nodded, tears glistening in her eyes as she took the other band from Hassan and slipped it onto my finger. "With this ring," she echoed, her voice strong and clear despite the tears streaming down her face. "I vow to stand by you, to fight for you, and to love you...until death do us part."

The priest gave a nod of approval before he gestured for us to face each other. "By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Without wasting a moment, I pulled Justice into my arms and kissed her passionately. The room erupted in applause and cheers but all I could hear was the drumming of my heart against my chest. She was mine. Truly and legally mine.

As we parted for air, I looked into her eyes, seeing the love and devotion reflected back at me.

And then I felt a little hand pull at the fabric of my pants.

I glanced down to see Sebastian looking up at me, his bright eyes sparkling with innocent curiosity. "Da?" he questioned, a slight frown on his face as if he was trying to make sense of everything happening around him. He held up a fistful of petals he'd

picked off the ground, offering them to me. The sight was so endearing; I could feel my heart swell with love.

"Flowers for Juju," he said, his voice filled with pride as if he had plucked these himself from a garden. He looked up at Justice, his eyes matching the warmth in hers.

"Thank you, gordo," she said, choking back tears as she leaned down to take the petals from him. "They're beautiful."

For a moment, everything seemed to stand still. The church, the guests, the echoes of our vows...it all faded to a soft murmur as I watched Justice kneel in front of Sebastian, taking his small fist in her delicate hands.

She wore an expression I'd seen only a few times before—pure, unfiltered happiness that radiated like the sun. It was that very look that had first drawn me to her, the inner light that made her so damn irresistible. When we had first met, when we were kids. Outside of everything else that had happened to us, around us. Seeing her happy was the most incredible thing in the world.

As she stood back up, she glanced at me over her shoulder, her dark eyes shining with unshed tears. There was so much love in that look. So much promise.

"I guess we're official now," she said softly.

"We've always been official," I replied, pulling her against me. "This just makes it legal."

She chuckled, shaking her head as she looped her arms around my neck. "You always know how to ruin a romantic moment, don't you?"

I grinned, leaning forward to press my forehead against hers. "Is that so? Maybe I

should fix it then." Without any further warning, I captured her lips with mine, kissing her deeply as the crowd erupted in cheers once more.

We stayed like that for what felt like forever, lost in each other, oblivious to the world around us. When we finally pulled away, she was panting softly, a blush staining her cheeks. "You certainly know how to make up for it," she whispered.

After the ceremony, Hassan grabbed Sebastian, and Justice and I went to the car to take us to the venue for the reception. We had invited almost everyone we knew; partially because it was what was expected of me, but also because I thought that Vito De Luca needed to be reminded of just how many people we had on our side.

The reception was held at a beautiful estate on the outskirts of Miami. It was opulent, lit by dozens of twinkling chandeliers, and adorned with extravagant decorations fit for the royalty we were in our world.

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"I feel like a princess," Justice said as the vintage car parked in front of the estate.

I wrapped my arm around her, pulling her close to me. "You are a princess."

She laughed, throwing her head back. "Not like, a mafia princess. A real princess."

I chuckled. "Well, I'm not sure about the tiara and the whole 'living in a castle' thing, but you are incredibly important to a lot of people. More importantly, you're not a princess. You're our queen."

She licked her bottom lip as she looked at me, her eyes shining with mischief. "You know Hassan fucked me before I walked down the aisle?" she asked.

My heart seized at the confession; not with shock or even a tinge of jealousy, but with pure, unapologetic arousal. I wasn't sure if it was the possessiveness I felt for her or the fact that she was so unabashedly herself in the moment, but all I could manage was a low growl. "Is that right?"

She nodded, a wicked smirk playing on her lips. "Yeah. He said he wanted to be the first to congratulate me."

I felt a jolt in my chest, and then I laughed. "That's my girl," I said, pulling her closer. Her eyes widened and then she laughed along with me, a delightful sound that warmed me from the inside out.

Her cheeks reddened. "You can probably still taste him. If you, I don't know, ate me out now."

My eyes darkened with lust as I met her gaze. "Is that an invitation, Mrs. Rivera?"

She bit her lip, the tease clearly setting her on edge as much as it did me. "Might be," she said, her voice coming out in a breathy whisper.

Without giving it another thought, I pulled her into my lap, my hands wandering beneath the layers of white lace and silk. She gasped, a hot flush spreading across her cheeks as I slid my hand up her thigh. "You're not wearing any underwear."

"I wanted my husband to be able to just reach in without any obstructions," she said. "How am I doing so far?"

"You're doing just fine," I murmured against her lips, my fingers tracing the bare skin beneath her dress. I could feel her heat, the slickness of her arousal that hadn't subsided since her tryst with Hassan. My mouth watered at the thought.

"Are you going to make me wait?" she asked, running a hand through my hair.

"No more waiting," I said, nuzzling her neck and eliciting a shiver from her. "But we've got guests."

"They can wait for the fucking Riveras," she said.

I laughed. "Yes, they can. But tasting you is going to have to wait, too."

With a wicked grin, I unbuckled my belt and opened my trousers. A low groan escaped my lips as she straddled me, positioning herself over my straining erection. She whimpered as I guided myself into her, both of us shuddering as I filled her to the hilt. Our eyes locked, and we were lost in each other—husband and wife, lovers, partners in crime—united by a bond stronger than blood.

Her eyes fluttered shut, long lashes casting soft shadows on her flushed cheeks. I watched her, entranced by the way she bit her lower lip in concentration, the way her beautiful face transformed with each wave of pleasure. It was a sight I would never tire of.

"Look at me," I growled, voice rough with desire. Her eyes shot open, surprise flashing across them before being replaced by pure lust. Good god, she was beautiful.

"You feel so good," she whimpered, nails digging into my shoulders as she leaned closer.

Her tight walls gripped me possessively as she began to move, the delicate lace of her dress rubbing against my taut abdomen as she rocked against me. I watched her with growing arousal, the sight of her pleasure sending my heart racing and making my blood roar in my veins. My hands roamed over her body, their familiar paths charting the soft curves of her waist, the swell of her hips, the tantalizing roundness of her ass. Her body was a masterpiece, and I was its devoted worshipper.

Slowly, she picked up the pace, grinding against me in rhythm with our panting breaths. She pulled away from my mark on her neck to look at me—those deep brown eyes filled with insatiable need. The need that mirrored mine.

With a growl, I enveloped her in my arms, pulling her into me as close as humanly possible. I needed more. More heat, more contact, more of her. She buried her face in the crook of my neck, sending a shiver down my spine as her breath ghosted over my skin.

"Shit," she gasped when I thrust up into her, setting a pace that was fast and hard and so damn good.

I reveled in the sound of our bodies coming together, the intoxicating scent of her

arousal mingling with the faint hint of sandalwood from my aftershave. The noises she made were sinful—moans, whimpers—and they spurred me on. What had started out as a game was quickly becoming an urgent need for release.

Teeth nipped at my shoulder while one of her hands tangled in my hair and tugged hard enough to make me groan.

"Justice," I growled, my grip on her hips tightening as she moved faster. Our lips met in a messy, passionate kiss, my tongue delving into her mouth to taste the sweetness that was uniquely hers. The sounds of our pleasure echoed around the confined space, the raw intensity of our union threatening to shatter the calm exterior of the luxury car.

"You feel so good," she panted against my ear, her hot breath sending shivers down my spine. "I'm so full..."

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With every thrust, I drove deeper into her, the slick warmth of her body swallowing me whole. My eyes fluttered shut as she tightened around me, her body convulsing with each wave of pleasure. This was heaven—there was no other way to describe it.

Overwhelmed by the sensations flooding over me, I pushed Justice gently onto her back in the car's plush leather seat. She gave a low moan of approval as I climbed over her, my weight pressing down on her and drawing a gasp from her lips.

As we kissed, I guided myself back into her, sliding in inch by inch until she had taken all of me again. Her hands clung to my shoulders, nails biting into my flesh as she let out a soft whimper. My body tensed at the sensation—pain and pleasure intertwining in the most intoxicating way.

She arched her back off the leather seat, pressing her breasts against my chest. The lace of her barely-there dress did little to mask the hard points of her nipples—another intoxicating sensation that prompted me to grind further into her.

"Bash," she gasped as I thrust harder into her. "Oh God...don't stop."

As if I could have stopped. The taste of her on my lips, the feel of her beneath me. This was what I craved, what I'd always want.

I wouldn't dream of it. Anchoring myself on the plush leather, I delivered punchy thrusts, each one aimed at driving her to the brink. "Fuucck," she groaned, biting down on her lip to stifle her cries. Her walls clamped down around me, setting fire to my nerves as I struggled to hold back my release.

She was a vision beneath me: eyes closed in ecstasy, chest heaving, her long dark hair pooling around her shoulders. The sight sent a jolt straight to my groin, and it took every ounce of self-control not to dive over the cliff then and there.

"I need you to look at me," I managed to grit out between gritted teeth, before crashing my lips against hers in a desperate kiss. She whimpered into my mouth as I gripped onto her hips harder, leaving no doubt that she was mine—today, tomorrow, forever.

The world shrunk down to just us in the back seat of the car, the hum of the outside world dulled by our heavy breathing and shared desire. I quickened my pace, taking her with an unrestrained urgency that shook the vehicle. Slowing down wasn't an option; not while she was writhing beneath me, begging for more.

The fire inside me grew with every move she made, feeding off her pleasure. Her body tensed up again, a low keening sound escaping her lips. I could feel her shuddering around me, signaling her impending release. "Let go," I whispered against her ear, my hand slipping between us to stroke her sensitive bud.

That was all it took. With a cry muffled against my shoulder, she shattered beneath me. Her nails dug into my back as she convulsed, waves of pleasure washing over her. The sight and feel of her climaxing tipped me over the edge.

With a guttural growl that echoed in the confines of the car, I buried myself deep inside her, riding out the waves of pleasure that washed over me. Her body continued to spasm around mine, making each pulse of my release even more intense. Every nerve in my body felt electrified, sparking in rhythm with my pounding heart.

As I collapsed onto her, spent and satisfied, she wrapped her arms around me and held me close. Her eyes were closed, but a soft smile played on her lips as she nuzzled my neck. The tenderness in that gesture tugged at something deep in my

chest and I tightened my grip on her.

"Damn," she murmured sleepily against my skin. "We should get married more often."

As we lay there, hearts still racing, the car's silence was suddenly pierced by the shrill ring of my phone tucked away in the inner pocket of my jacket. I cursed under my breath, knowing that only an urgent matter would pull me from this blissful cocoon with Justice. Reluctantly, I disentangled myself from her warmth to answer the call.

"Talk to me, Skylar," I answered gruffly, trying to steady my breath.

The voice on the other end was rushed, panicked even, a stark contrast to the afterglow we were just basking in. "Boss...it's Vito. He's here—at the reception."

A cold dread settled over me as I sat up straight, every muscle tensing. The abyss of our criminal world was encroaching on our newlywed paradise. Justice's eyes snapped open, mirroring my concern as she mouthed 'Vito?' I nodded grimly.

That was when we first heard gun fire.

Chapter Eighteen: Justice

I needed to find Sebastian. It didn't matter that my dress was messed up or that I smelled like sex and all of the guests at the venue would know what we were doing, I needed to find my son. My heart pounding in my chest, I scrambled out of the car, my bare feet hitting the cold pavement. I didn't even bother pulling my dress down—it was a ruined mess of lace and satin anyway. The sounds of gunshots filled the air, followed by screams—a cruel reminder of the danger we were in.

"Bash!" I called over my shoulder, my voice shaky. I didn't wait for him to respond,

knowing he'd be right behind me. Adrenaline fueled me as I sprinted towards the venue, my hand clutching the hem of my dress to prevent myself from tripping.

I could hear Bash behind me, his heavy footsteps matching mine in speed. "Justice, wait!" he called out, but I couldn't—I wouldn't.

A sea of people came into view as we approached the entrance. Panic was evident on their faces as they scattered in all directions, scrambling to find an exit. A cold dread settled over me—where was Sebastian?

Through the chaos, I heard a distinct sound—a child's whimpering cry. My heart seized. Sebastian. The world slammed to a halt and my focus narrowed to find him among the panicked crowd.

"Out of the way!" I bellowed, adrenaline coursing through my veins like a roaring river. People parted before me, their faces blurring into insignificance as I shoved my way towards the noise.

There he was—huddled beneath a table, his small form trembling with fear, his wide eyes wet and glassy. His tiny hand clutched a toy car—a gift from Bash during the wedding ceremony.

Hassan was next to him, his piece in his hand. Skylar and Zane were flanking the table he was hiding under.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I closed in on them, ducking beneath the table to gather my son into my arms. Sebastian clung to me, his small form shaking with fear. "It's okay, baby," I whispered into his hair, pressing a reassuring kiss onto his forehead. "Juju's here."

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I didn't know how this had happened. Security was tight...we should have known...

We should have known, and we'd been fools to think Vito would let us do this.

Skylar's eyes met mine over Sebastian's head, conveying a silent message. We needed to get him out of there. I nodded in agreement as he turned to scan our surroundings.

"Justice," he said urgently, catching my attention. "There's a back exit. We can sneak him out and get him somewhere safe."

I looked down at Sebastian. He was only about to turn three years old; too young to be caught up in this bullshit.

"I agree," I said, my voice barely audible over the chaos. "Let's get him out of here. Bash coming in hot behind me."

Skylar shook his head. "Don't think so, pet," he said.

"Wha—?" I started to ask when I caught sight of Bash's figure through the crowd, his imposing form making a beeline for Vito De Luca. I felt my heart freeze.

"Zane and I will back you up. Bash is dealing with Vito."

"I'll go with you," Hassan said.

My blood ran ice cold at his words. I could handle many things, but the thought of Bash being in danger was not one of them. But right now, Sebastian was our priority.

I hid my fear behind a determined nod. "You keep your eyes closed, amor. Let's move."

With that, we crawled out from under the safety of the table, Hassan and Skylar moving in unison to shield us. Zane lingered back, his eyes locked on Bash's figure cutting through the chaos of the crowd.

"Keep him close," Hassan murmured to me as he rose to his full height to provide additional cover. I clutched Sebastian tighter, nodding at him. Hassan never took his gaze off of the crowd, every muscle in his body coiled and ready to attack.

Skylar led us through the pandemonium, a forceful determination hardening his usually playful features. "It's going to be okay," he reassured me over his shoulder, offering me a strained smile.

I nodded, even though fear was gnawing at my insides—fear for Sebastian, for Bash, for all of us. I watched Skylar's back as we moved.

He seemed larger, taller, stronger than ever before. His muscles rippled under his shirt as he shoved guests aside, clearing us a path through the chaos. I realized then, in the midst of all this madness, how much I loved this man. Not just Skylar but Bash and Zane too. And Hassan...sweet, scarred Hassan who was willing to put his life on the line to protect Sebastian and me.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash and a gunshot rang out. Shouts echoed around us as the crowd scattered even more frantically, panic raising the volume of their screams. A bullet hit the floor inches from my foot. I gasped, my heart hammering so hard it felt like it could break through my chest any second.

"Down!" Skylar barked over his shoulder, roughly pushing me to the ground and throwing himself over Sebastian and me.

His body, warm and solid, became our shield. The scent of his cologne mixed with the musk of adrenaline and danger filled my nostrils. His quick, shallow breaths seemed to match the frantic pace of my own heart.

“Everyone okay?” Zane’s calm voice cut through the storm of panic, as he knelt down on the other side of us. His cold eyes scanned the area in search for any immediate threat.

“Yeah,” I gasped out in response as I cradled Sebastian tighter against me. His little body was trembling beneath mine, his whimpers muffled against my chest as I tried to shield him from the terror around us.

Another gunshot rang out, closer this time, followed by a scream. Instinctively, I tightened my hold on Sebastian while Skylar pressed himself even more protectively over us.

"Stay down," Hassan's harsh whisper echoed in my ear as he moved closer.

I nodded, my pulse pounding in my ears as we crouched there. Fear surged through me with every passing second, but I couldn't afford to break down now. Sebastian needed me.

"Are you okay?" Skylar's voice was soft against my ear, his breath warm on my hair.

Pulling in a shaky breath, I managed to nod, forcing out an unsteady "Yeah."

His hand squeezed mine briefly before he straightened up again, putting himself back between us and the danger.

Zane moved too, his quiet strength a welcome presence even in the chaos. Hassan remained close, his eyes constantly scanning our surroundings. Skylar, Hassan and

Zane had their guns at the ready.

Despite the sharp bursts of gunfire, they seemed eerily calm—the kind of calm you have when you've been pushed to the edge and there's nowhere to go but through.

"We can't stay here. Gotta move," Zane said almost inaudibly, his gaze never leaving the chaos around us. "There's an exit to the left, clear path."

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"Let's do it," Skylar responded, his voice equally low but firm with determination.

Hassan nodded in agreement, giving me a quick glance before turning his attention back to scanning our surroundings. His eyes were hard, unflinching.

With another nod from Zane, we moved again, Skylar and Hassan taking the lead while Zane covered our backs. The exit was now in sight, a narrow door half hidden behind thick velvet curtains.

My heart pounded so violently I could feel it reverberating through my whole body. I could hear Sebastian's breath hitching in sync with mine. I murmured soothing words into his ear, hoping to calm him despite the shakiness of my own voice.

Shouts erupted from the crowd followed by another round of gunshots that seemed closer than before. My blood ran cold as an instinctive terror gripped me.

"Keep moving!" Skylar barked out the command, not bothering to look back at us. I clung tighter to Sebastian, my mind spinning in terror as I forced myself to keep up with their pace.

As we reached the door and Hassan yanked it open, I felt a sudden tug on Sebastian and turned just in time to see a hand reaching for him. "Sebastian!" The scream tore itself from my throat as a man tried to wrench Sebastian out of my arms. I reacted instantly, pulling Sebastian back and kicking the man square in his gut. He doubled over in pain but didn't release his grip on my son.

"Just go!" Zane yelled, having turned back to help us. His expression hardened as he

pulled out his gun and shot the man point-blank, causing him to let go of Sebastian and collapse onto the ground.

"Run!" Zane emphasized, pushing us toward the door. My heart was pounding like a drum as Skylar took Sebastian from me, cradling him close. Nodding at Zane, Skylar rushed through the door with Sebastian, Hassan following closely behind them. A bullet whizzed past my ear.

And Zane, who had been behind me, collapsed at my feet.

Chapter Nineteen: Skylar

My ears were ringing as I watched Hassan take Sebastian to his car. I looked back, expecting Justice and Zane to come stumbling out, but neither of those things happened.

All that greeted me was the unrelenting chaos of the crowd, waves of terrified party-goers running and screaming. I felt my heart drop to my stomach as the seconds ticked by and they didn't appear.

"Hassan!" I barked, turning back to him. "They're not—"

"I know," he cut me off, his eyes on the door. Sebastian was wrapped around him, his little legs dangling on Hassan as he buried his face into Hassan's shoulders. "I can go back for them, but..."

"No. Take him. Get away from this," I said. "I'll go back for them."

Hassan held my gaze for a split second before he nodded, settling Sebastian in the backseat of his car. I watched them peel away from the curb before turning back to the club.

Cursing under my breath, I pushed my way back into chaos. Panic clawed at my chest as I shoved through the frenzied crowd, their screams and cries echoing around me. "Justice! Zane!" I yelled, scanning the heaving mass of people but there was no sign of them.

Suddenly, a shot rang out and people scattered, screaming and ducking for cover. My heart pounded in my chest as I sprinted towards where it had come from. As I rounded a corner, my eyes landed on them-- Justice kneeling over Zane's prone form.

"No..." The word ripped from me as I rushed towards them. "Zane!"

"Skylar!" Justice's voice was panicked, her hands pressed against Zane's abdomen where he'd been shot.

"I'm here," I replied, quickly dropping to my knees beside Zane. Blood was pooling under him, staining his once white dress shirt a dark crimson. His face was ashen, eyes half-closed in pain. "Zane, stay with me," I muttered, ripping off my jacket and pressing it firmly against his wound.

I didn't know anything about wounds. He was the doctor; he was the one who always made sure we were okay. From Hassan's injuries, to my near drowning experience, to Bash being shot...fuck, to picking up Justice in the first place. Zane was the only reason we were alive.

And now, here he was, bleeding on the ground, with his life in our hands.

The world spun around me as I fought to keep myself together, for his sake and for Justice's. She was crying, her hands shaking as they pressed down on the makeshift bandage, trying to stem the flow of blood. Her wide eyes met mine, filled with a desperation that mirrored my own.

"Zane," she choked out, her voice barely above a whisper. "You can't leave us."

For a moment, Zane's eyes flickered to her, a ghost of a smile crossing his lips before disappearing beneath the sheen of pain and exhaustion. He tried to say something but all that came out was a ragged gasp.

"We need to get him out of here," I said.

"Get him to a hospital," Justice nodded, her voice shaky but determined.

"Justice, can you lift his legs?" I asked, already preparing myself to take on Zane's weight. Before she could answer, Bash burst around the corner, his face pale and drawn, a stark contrast against the blood smeared across his jaw.

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Time stood still for a second as I parsed through the chaos in my head. I was angry—angry at Bash for putting us in this situation.

If Zane died...if Zane died, there would be fucking hell to pay.

But I moved past it, focusing on what was right in front of me—Zane, bleeding out. Bash rushed toward us, eyes wide.

"What happened?" he demanded, dropping down next to me. His eyes darted from Zane's slackened face to the red seeping through my jacket, and then to me.

"He's been shot," I said, barely able to get the words out.

"We need to move him," Justice added urgently.

Bash nodded and, without another word, slid his arms underneath Zane and hoisted him up as if he were weightless. I rose with them, keeping pressure on the wound. Every second felt like a lifetime as we moved as quickly as possible without jostling Zane too much.

Suddenly, the world outside seemed eerily quiet compared to the chaos in the venue. Our car was no longer where we left it, and the only sound was the faint echo of sirens far in the distance.

"Bash," Justice said, her voice trembling but her expression resolute. "Take him to your car. We have to get him to a hospital."

He started towards his car, parked across the street. I stayed by Zane's side, my heart pounding as I watched his chest rise and fall unevenly. His face was tinged with an alien grayness that made my stomach turn.

"Help us," Justice ordered, pulling me out of my stupor. I moved, assisting Bash in maneuvering Zane's limp body into the back seat of his black Mercedes.

"Get in," Bash said to me, not unkindly.

I nodded and climbed into the backseat, my hands still pressed firmly against Zane's wound. His normally vibrant eyes were glossed over and his breaths were coming in shaky, too shallow to be normal. Bash slid into the driver's seat, his face tight with worry as he started the car.

Bash and Justice climbed into the front of the car.

"Stay with us, doc," I whispered to Zane, my voice choked with emotion. "You're not allowed to clock out yet."

Justice was sobbing, her small frame shaking with wracking sobs as she tried to keep it together. Bash's knuckles were white on the steering wheel, his every instinct focused on getting us to the hospital as soon as humanly possible. "Where's the baby?" Justice asked. "Is he..."

"Safe," I reassured her, my confirmation serving to settle her chaotic tears into silent sobs. "Hassan took him. They're safe."

The car fell silent except for the sound of tires on asphalt and Justice's quiet sobbing. The seconds turned into excruciating minutes as I watched Zane's face get paler, his breaths getting shallower.

"Zane, hang in there," I pleaded with him. My hands were slick with his blood as I kept up the pressure on his wound. "You're not dying today."

His lips moved, whispering something I couldn't hear over the pounding in my ears.

"No," I told him firmly, refusing to let fear choke me. "You don't get to say goodbye."

He said something else, his lips barely moving. Leaning closer, I strained to hear him over the sound of the car and Justice's continued sobs. "...love...you..." He breathed out, his voice barely a whisper. My heart clenched at the words.

"I love you too, Zane," I told him, my voice choked with unshed tears. "We love you. And because we love you, you have to fight this." His lips twitched in what might have been a smile, but his eyes were growing glassier by the second.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and glanced up to meet Justice's tear-filled gaze. Her face was a mask of devastation, but in her eyes I saw the same determination that had carried us through countless battles before. "We're not losing him, Skylar," she said, her voice steady despite her sobs. "He's going to make it."

"Yes," I agreed, turning my attention back to Zane. "You hear that? You're going to make it."

We pulled up in front of the emergency entrance, Bash barely slowing down enough for us to jump out before he was off again, searching for somewhere to ditch the car. Justice was already shouting at hospital staff, commanding their attention in a way only she could. Before I knew it, they were swarming us, lifting Zane onto a gurney and whisking him away.

"No!" I tried to follow them but a nurse blocked me. "I need to be with him."

"You can't go further," the nurse said, her expression sympathetic yet firm. "They're doing everything they can."

I fell against the wall, sliding down until I sat on the cold tile floor. Everything felt surreal. The white walls, the smell of antiseptics...it was all too much.

The last thing I heard before they disappeared was Zane's ragged sighs, a ghostly anthem of the night's events that continued ringing in my ears long after they were out of sight. My blood-soaked hands felt heavy with the weight of Zane's life, the red stains seeping into the white fabric of my shirt, a stark reminder of what we might lose tonight.

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Justice was beside me, her fingers tangled in mine, her pulse thrumming against my skin. It was the only anchor that kept me tethered to reality in the face of looming uncertainty. We sat there, lost in our thoughts and dead silence.

It was good to have her here, but Zane...he was mine.

He'd become my partner.

My everything.

I couldn't...he couldn't...

Bash joined us in a few minutes, looking worse than ever. "Are you okay?" Justice asked. "Is it Sebastian?"

"No," Bash said. "He's fine. Hassan is fine, we just spoke a little while ago. He's got the baby, they're laying low for a bit."

"Well, at least there's some good news tonight," I muttered, squeezing Justice's hand.

She squeezed back, her grip surprisingly strong despite how shaken she was. "He's going to pull through," she murmured, more to herself than to us. "Zane's tough as nails, he'll pull through."

"Damn right he will," Bash joined in. Despite the reassurances we were giving each other, I could see the same fear mirrored in his eyes. "But...there's more bad news. I'm sorry."

Justice looked up at him. “Lay it on me.”

“The venue...it’s gone,” Bash said.

Justice looked at him, blinking rapidly. "Gone?" Justice echoed. “What the hell does that mean?”

“There was an explosion—probably the same stuff as the car bomb if I had to guess,” he said. “They knew where we’d be...and they planned to take out our whole op. Make it bloody.”

“And Vito?”

“No trace of him,” Bash said. “The cops are saying it was a gas leak. Our whole op...fucking gone, and the cops...”

There was nothing else to say.

We were all fucked, thanks to this stupid fucking wedding.

The already cold hospital corridor felt like it had dropped a few more degrees. The De Lucas were playing for keeps, and Zane's life hanging on the line was all the proof we needed.

Justice squeezed my hand again, her knuckles going white with the effort. "Bastards," she spat out, her voice shaking with rage. "They just had to wait until our fucking wedding day, didn't they?"

Bash nodded. "Seems like it."

Just then, a doctor in green scrubs approached us, his face drawn and tired. "Are you

family?"

"We are," Justice said immediately, pushing off the wall and standing up straighter despite her tears.

The doctor took a deep breath before speaking, his words coming out in a slow and steady flow. "We've managed to stop the bleeding and stabilize him for now. But he lost a lot of blood."

Justice sucked in a sharp breath at his words, her fingers digging painfully into my hands. "Is he...will he be okay?" Her voice was a faint whisper against the sterile silence of the hospital corridor.

"It's too early to say," the doctor replied honestly. "He's strong and that's working in his favor, but the next 24 hours will be crucial. He will need surgery."

Justice nodded, her cheeks wet with tears, her grip on my hand never wavering. "Can we see him?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"We're preparing him for surgery at the moment," the doctor explained, his expression compassionate but firm. "After that, he'll need rest. You'll likely be able to see him soon, but...we'll have to wait and see."

With that, he turned and walked away, leaving us in the cold silence of the hospital corridor once again.

Wait and see. The worst words you could possibly hear in a fucking hospital.

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I wasn't good at waiting.

"Fuck," Bash muttered under his breath. He was pacing back and forth, his face ashen. "This is all my fault."

I shook my head vehemently, trying to convince myself as much as him. "No, Bash," I refuted firmly. "This isn't your fault. This is on the De Lucas."

"But if I wasn't so focused on getting married...if I wasn't so hell-bent on doing this, then he wouldn't have attacked us," Bash said. "I should have seen this coming."

"No," Justice cut in sharply, her voice carrying an edge that made us both stop. "Don't you dare, Bash." Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, but fiery with resolve. "This isn't on you. I wanted this wedding just as much as you did. And we knew the risks."

"And they came to get Sebastian," I said. "They didn't get him. They didn't get him."

Justice nodded, her gaze steeling as she anchored herself in that one victory. "Right. They didn't get Sebastian. And Zane's going to pull through."

We fell into silence, each lost in our own tumultuous thoughts, the hospital corridor our temporary sanctuary against the chaos beyond its walls.

I really, really hoped Zane was okay.

Because I had no idea how I was going to do any of this without him.

Chapter Twenty: Hassan

I could still hear sirens in my head.

We were in my apartment in Brickell, the safest place I could think of. The walls were thick enough to block out the noise from outside, but not enough to quell the ringing in my ears. Sebastian was curled up in my lap, his small body shuddering with the aftermath of the day's events. His face was smeared with his tears, and he was still clutching the little toy car he always held.

A call from Bash had brought news; it wasn't good. Zane was shot. He was in surgery now while we were holed up in this haven, hiding from the war that raged on outside. My heart hammered in my chest, trying my best to stay calm for the baby.

I looked down at Sebastian, his innocent eyes clouded with fear. His grip tightened around his toy car, a small anchor of normalcy in the midst of the turmoil. "Hey, baby boy," I whispered, brushing a curl from his forehead. "You okay? You want some juice maybe?"

Sebastian blinked up at me, confusion etched into every line of his tiny face. He didn't understand what was going on, and I didn't blame him. How do you explain to a little kid that the men he should call family might not be around anymore?

I got up from the floor carefully, making sure not to disturb Sebastian. He was still holding onto me when I made him some apple juice, an attempt to bring some semblance of normalcy into the nightmare we found ourselves caught in. The silence was suffocating but there was comfort in it too; it meant we were safe for now—safe from gunshots and violent men thirsting for power.

I looked at his little face, his long eyelashes casting shadows down his pale cheeks. "Were you scared?" I asked him.

He blinked his big brown eyes at me, those eyes that were far too innocent for the world we lived in. He nodded, his chubby little fingers curling around the juice box.

"That's okay," I whispered, wrapping an arm around his tiny body. "I was scared too."

His eyes widened at that, surprise replacing the lingering fear. "You were?" he asked. "You get scared, Tío Sol?"

I chuckled lightly, ruffling his hair. "Yeah, baby boy. Even Tío Sol gets scared sometimes. It's okay to be scared."

He seemed to contemplate on my words for a moment, his little brows furrowing in thought. Then he sighed softly, cuddling closer to me. "I don't want you to be scared," he mumbled, his voice muffled against my shirt.

I felt a pang in my chest at his words—this little boy, so concerned for me when he should be the one being comforted. "I know, kiddo," I murmured, hugging him a bit tighter. "But it's going to be okay, alright? We're safe here."

Sebastian didn't reply but he nodded against my chest and I could feel his body relax a little bit. He was just as exhausted as I was—we both needed some rest but the adrenaline from the earlier events still had its claws sunk deep into me.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, jolting me out of my thoughts. I pulled it out and saw Bash's name flashing on the screen. My heart lurched in my chest. "Hey," I greeted, trying to hide the fear that colored my voice.

"Hassan," Bash's voice was strained on the other end. "How are you holding up? How's Sebastian?"

"We're okay," I replied, glancing down at Sebastian who was starting to doze off on

my lap, his grip on his toy car finally loosening. "Any news on Zane?"

Bash sighed heavily into the receiver. "Still in surgery." The words carried a heavy weight of uncertainty and dread, echoing our shared fear.

"And Vito?" I asked, already anticipating the answer.

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"Got away." Bash's tone hardened with frustration and barely concealed rage. "Escorted by his men."

A cold dread settled in my gut. "Should I...?" My voice faltered, the thought of leaving Sebastian with a nanny making my heart squeeze painfully.

"No." Bash answered quickly, definite. "You stay with Sebastian. He's our priority."

"Right," I murmured, trying to swallow down the bitter taste of worry. Vito was still out there, a looming threat that we couldn't ignore. But right now, our little beacon of hope was more important. "I heard about the bomb at the venue."

"Yeah, it was a mess." Bash's voice dropped an octave, the image of the wreckage clearly playing in his mind. "But we got everyone out, thanks to Skylar, thanks to you. Thanks to Zane. I'm just grateful you and Sebastian weren't caught up in that."

I looked down at the sleeping child in my lap, his innocent features unmarred by the brutal world around him. "We're safe, Bash," I reassured him; a promise I intended to keep.

Bash let out a sigh that sounded like relief. "That's good to hear, Hassan."

It was maddening—being stuck here while Zane clung to life somewhere else. But I knew I had a duty to fulfill; keeping Sebastian safe was just as important.

"Hey, Has?" Bash spoke again after a pause, his voice softer. "Thanks. For getting Sebastian out of there."

I let out a low chuckle, though it held little humor. "No need for thanks, Bash. You know I'd do anything for the little guy."

"I know you would," he replied quietly, a hint of sadness seeping into his tone. "And I...I'm sorry about Zane. He was just trying to protect us all."

"Yeah..." I swallowed around the lump in my throat. "He always does, doesn't he? The hero doctor of ours. When he wakes up, tell him I'm sorry I'm not there."

"I will," Bash's voice echoed with a shared sorrow. "Hassan...take care of our boy, okay? And take care of yourself."

I pulled the phone away from my ear, looking at the screen as Bash broke the connection. His words echoed in my mind. Take care of our boy. Take care of yourself.

It was his way of saying he was sorry things had turned out this way. Bash wasn't one for apologies, but I knew him well enough to read between the lines.

I paused, staring at the empty screen before putting it away. My gaze fell on Sebastian once more, sleeping soundly against me. His chest rose and fell with steady breaths, his face serene in slumber.

My hand instinctively moved to stroke his back, tracing small circles on his tiny body. I watched him sleep for a while, my thoughts wandering to Zane.

Where was he now, I wondered. Was he conscious through it all, or was he lost in a world of darkness? I knew Zane; he was strong. But the thought of him lying on a cold operating table with life slipping away from him sent chills down my spine.

I took a deep breath, letting the image fade away. I couldn't afford to lose myself in

fear. If not for me, then for this innocent life in my hands and those who were fighting out there to keep everything together.

Gently, I moved Sebastian onto the couch, tucking a blanket around him. His peaceful sleep was a stark contrast to the storm brewing within me. My thoughts kept returning to Zane and Bash, and how much we stood to lose if things went south.

We didn't just need him—we obviously did need him, but it wasn't just that.

We loved him. I loved him. Zane was more than our doctor, more than our friend. He was a part of us—a part of me. And the thought of losing him...

I shook my head forcefully, ridding myself of the dark thoughts. They weren't helping anyone, least of all Zane. Instead, I got up from the couch and walked over to the kitchen. My body craved the calming familiarity of cooking—the rhythmic patterns of chopping, stirring and sizzle had always been one of my forms of meditation.

As I went through the motions, creating a simple pasta sauce from scratch, my eyes kept drifting towards where Sebastian lay sleeping on the couch. I had put on one of his favorite cartoons on low volume, hoping it would keep him calm if he woke up before I finished cooking.

Following the simmering rhythm of my thoughts, I added crushed tomatoes into the pan, their rich fragrance filling the room, soothing my senses. Steam rose up from the pot.

The sizzling sound of onions and garlic sautéing snapped me back to reality. With a furrowed brow, I stirred the sauce, letting it reduce. Cooking was an art that required patience, just like healing required time. I found myself praying silently for Zane's recovery as I stirred, the steady rotation of the wooden spoon in sync with my racing heartbeat.

Bash was right, our priority was keeping Sebastian safe. His small life depended on us and we needed to do whatever it took to keep him that way. From where I stood, I could see his chest rhythmically rising and falling with each breath. His small fists were clenched around his favorite toy car, a sign that even in sleep he held onto some sense of security. It was hard not to feel a sense of fierce protectiveness over the tiny life entrusted into our care.

I could hear the sounds of the city just outside our window—the relentless pulse of Miami life. But in here, in this small apartment, it felt like a different world. A safe haven. And I would do whatever it took to keep it that way.

I wasn't sure what that meant yet...but it was becoming clear that we couldn't keep going the way we had been.

Something had to change.

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The pasta finished cooking, and I took a moment to stare at it, letting the steam curl up and warm my face. I'd lost track of how much time had passed since I'd started cooking but looking over to Sebastian, still lost in peaceful oblivion, reassured me. Time seemed to have slowed down, granting me small moments of reprieve from the chaos outside.

I was draining the pasta when my phone buzzed again on the counter. A surge of fear passed through me as I looked at the caller ID. It was Skylar. My heart thundered in my chest as I answered.

"Skylar," I greeted, trying to keep the worry from creeping into my voice. "How's Zane?"

There was a pause at the other end before Skylar's voice filtered through, heavy with emotion. "He's out of surgery."

A wave of relief washed over me, leaving me feeling weak in the knees. "And?"

Skylar exhaled, the sound heavy and strained through the phone. "He's stable, Hassan. But he's not...he's not awake yet."

My heart lurched at his words, but I forced a calm into my voice. "But he made it through the surgery, right? That's...that's good."

"Yeah," Skylar agreed quietly. I could hear Bash and Justice talking quietly behind him. "That's good."

"How are you holding up, man?" I asked.

He laughed, no humor in his voice. "As good as anyone can be whose boyfriend just got shot, mate," he said. "But thanks for asking."

"Yeah, sorry," I murmured, feeling stupid. Of course he wasn't doing great. None of us were. "How's Justice?"

"She's...she's shaken up," Skylar admitted. "Just like all of us, right? But you know Justice; she's a fighter. She's holding up." There was a pause, and I could imagine him running his hand through his hair, a habit when he was nervous. "Has, could you...when the kid wakes up, could you let him know everything's okay? And that we'll be back soon?"

"Yeah, I will," I promised, feeling my throat tighten at the mention of Sebastian. "Take care of yourself, Skylar. And take care of Zane."

"I will," he answered, his voice resolute. "You too, mate. Take care of the baby."

"And Justice," I added, more of an order than a suggestion. My heart was pounding against my rib cage like a caged bird, trying to break free. How had things spiraled so quickly into chaos? One minute we were at a wedding, the next Zane was in surgery and Vito De Luca was on the loose.

"I'll see to it," he assured, his voice clipped by a sudden static. The line went dead and I was left staring at my phone screen, the flickering light mocking the storm raging in my mind. All I could do was wait.

Lost in thought, I barely registered the ringing of the intercom, telling me that someone had gone into the lobby. The building was ours entirely, there should have been no one else there.

I wrapped Sebastian tightly in his blanket, tucking him securely into the corner of the couch, before I stepped cautiously towards the intercom. The screen showed a figure in a hooded sweatshirt, their face hidden, holding a large box.

"Who's there?" I demanded into the intercom, one hand reaching casually for the gun tucked against the small of my back.

"Pizza," came the raspy reply. It was a voice I didn't recognize.

"Bullshit. We didn't order any pizza. Show me your face."

"Okay," the man said.

He grabbed something from a box, then showed me a face alright, but not his own. It was Lee's, one of our men. His eyes were vacant and lifeless, giving me a chilling stare. I nearly dropped the intercom in my shock.

"Jesus Christ," I gasped, the blood draining from my face and my heart pounding against my ribs like a drum. The image of Lee's severed head would be etched into my mind forever, like a gruesome tattoo.

I backed away from the intercom, my breathing heavy and shaky. Suddenly, the apartment seemed too small, too enclosed. I felt trapped, like a rat in a cage.

"What do you want?" I asked into the intercom, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Nothin'," came the reply, casual as if he wasn't showing me one of our own men's severed heads. "Just thought you'd want your friend back."

He dropped it in a box again, then put it softly on the ground.

As if in slow motion, I watched his obscured figure retreat from the camera's view, leaving the box eerily alone in the frame. My heart was hammering now, a thunderous beat in my ears as fear coursed through my veins like liquid ice. I gripped the intercom tighter, my knuckles white with the strain.

"Who are you?" I demanded again but received no answer this time.

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The screen went blank for a moment before it returned to its normal view of the empty lobby. The box sat there ominously, a chilling reminder of the threat just beyond our front door.

I rushed over to Sebastian, making sure he was safe and undisturbed. He lay still, peacefully oblivious to the horror unfolding outside.

I wanted nothing more than to keep it that way.

So I had to come get this guy before things got worse.

Before he tried to get in here, I had to be the one to get him.

Chapter Twenty-One: Zane

I woke up to blinding white light.

My head pounded and my body ached. I blinked, trying to adjust my vision but finding it difficult. A machine beeped rhythmically beside me and IVs were taped to the back of my hand.

I tried to sit up, but my body refused to cooperate. Pain shot through my abdomen as I groaned low in my throat, falling back against the pillows. It felt like someone had stabbed a knife into my stomach and twisted it around for good measure.

I squeezed my eyes shut, blocking out the harsh hospital lights and trying to remember what had happened. The memories came rushing back like a series of

stormy waves crashing onto a beach—Bash leaving the room, the gunshots, the way Justice's eyes widened in fear...

I searched for any sign of life in the room; the only other presence was Bash sitting slumped in a chair across from me. His eyes were closed, skin looking worn and tired under the harsh hospital lights. The mere sight of him made my heart hurt.

"Bash?" I called out, my voice raspy and dry. I was so thirsty.

Bash picked his head up, his eyes widening. "Zane?"

"Yeah," I gasped, pain flaring up as I tried to shift. Bash was at my side in an instant, pressing me gently back into the bed.

"Don't move, Zane," he warned, his tone soft but commanding. "You're going to hurt yourself."

My eyes were drawn to the bandages peeking out from beneath the hospital gown. The stark white fabric was a stark contrast against my bronze skin, a reminder of how close I'd come to death.

"What happened?" I asked, even though I vaguely remembered; I needed Bash to confirm it wasn't a nightmare.

"You were shot."

I closed my eyes tightly. "Water?"

"Sure," Bash said, reaching for a glass on the bedside table. He helped me sit up slightly to sip, the cool water soothing my parched throat.

"...Skylar and Justice?" I rasped out after a moment. My mind was racing, piecing together fragments of memories - the piercing sound of gunfire, Justice's terrified eyes...

"They're safe," Bash assured me quickly, his strong hand on my shoulder giving me a sense of comfort. "They're here. We've been here for hours. They just went to get a coffee."

"Sebastian? Hassan?"

"Hassan grabbed him and they got away," he said.

I could still feel the phantom touch of Bash's hand on my shoulder, a reassuring presence in this sterile environment where needles pierced my skin and monitors beeped in an infuriatingly steady rhythm.

"Hassan...he's okay?" I asked, trying to hide the worry in my voice. Hassan had seen more than his fair share of violence and trauma. The last thing he needed was to see one of us, one of his family, lying in a pool of our own blood.

"He was shaken up," Bash admitted with an apologetic grimace. It didn't take much imagination to picture the fear etched on Hassan's face. "But he did exactly what he needed to do. Kept Sebastian safe."

"He's a good one," I said, more to myself than to him.

Bash nodded. "Always has been," he agreed, his gaze distant. I vaguely noticed he was on his phone, probably telling Justice and Skylar that I had woken up. There was a pause before he added, "We're going to get whoever did this to you, Zane. De Luca won't get away with this."

The hollow fury in his voice echoed the one pulsating within me, a savage thirst for vengeance that wouldn't be quenched until the guilty paid their dues.

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"You're damn right," I growled, the anger aiding to push through the haze of pain that clouded my thoughts. I'd always been one for strategy over brutality, but the weight of Justice, Skylar, Hassan, and Sebastian's safety on my shoulders called for a different game altogether.

I closed my eyes, drawing a deep breath as I tried to let the pain medication do its work. My mind was racing with questions and fury. The De Luca's were crossing lines they shouldn't dare to cross. Images of Darius' severed head flashed across my mind's eye, filling me with a dread I hadn't felt in years.

I was about to ask Bash more about what happened when the door creaked open, pulling both our attention towards it. It was Skylar and Justice, their faces worn but carrying an undeniable relief upon seeing me awake. She was still wearing her wedding dress, now drenched in dried blood, and it made my stomach turn.

Not because of the blood—I'd seen plenty of that in my life.

Because I was angry.

"Zane!" Justice said. She threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around me. It made me yelp in pain, but I appreciated it all the same.

"Easy, love," I groaned softly, my hand instinctively reaching up to stroke her hair. The sharp sting of pain was a dull throb compared to the soothing effect her presence had on me.

Skylar came up behind Justice, his hand resting on her shoulder as he tried to smile.

"Glad you're awake, mate," he said quietly, his blue eyes showing traces of lingering worry.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak just yet. The room was beginning to spin slightly from all the movement and emotion.

"I'm going to get some coffee myself," Bash said, even though they had clearly brought him some. He stepped outside to give us some space, a gesture I was thankful for. Skylar moved to sit in the chair Bash had vacated while Justice perched herself carefully on the edge of my bed, taking care not to jostle me too much.

"Been keeping you on your toes, have I?" I tried to joke, doing my best to lighten the mood.

"Don't be flippant about this, Zane," Justice admonished, worry creasing her beautiful features.

I brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face. "I'm sorry," I murmured, squeezing her hand in reassurance.

She frowned but didn't say anything else, her thumb tracing small circles on the back of my hand. The silence was comfortable, if not entirely devoid of the tension clawing at us.

The silence was broken by Skylar's faux-casual, "So, you're not going to make a habit out of this gunshot business, are you?"

He was raising his knee up and down nervously, in a way that didn't feel very much like him at all.

"No," I promised hoarsely. "Once is more than enough for me."

Justice's fingers tightened around mine while Skylar gave a nod of approval. A heavy pause followed, filled with unspoken worry and unsaid words. After a moment, Justice broke the silence.

"We were so scared, Zane," she said softly.

"You can't do this," Skylar said, his eyes brimming with tears. "I don't know who I am without you."

I looked at them both, taking in the fear in their eyes. It was a strange thing to see, fear in the eyes of the strongest people I knew.

"I'm not going anywhere," I reassured them, though I knew no words could truly ease their worry. "Not leaving my family. Not now, not ever."

Skylar nodded slowly, pulling a breath in sharply before letting it rush out in a shaky exhale. Justice glanced at him with concern before reaching over to give his hand a squeeze.

"We'll figure this out," she said quietly, her voice filled with determination. "We're not going to let the De Luca's get away with this."

"Yeah," Skylar agreed, although he didn't sound quite convinced yet. He gave Justice's hand a squeeze back before releasing it and running his fingers through his hair. "Okay."

The door swung open again, and this time, Bash came in with the doctor. She was a middle-aged woman with graying hair tied into a no-nonsense bun, and she gave us a curt nod as she grabbed my chart. I wondered if she handled cases like mine on the regular since she seemed so poised and prepared. But there were dark circles underneath her eyes and a telltale slump in her shoulders.

"Good to see you're awake, Mr. Silva," she said, making her way across the room to check my vitals. I barely even flinched when she prodded around the bandage on my chest.

"Dr. Silva," I replied. "I'm a surgeon. You can just...talk to me like a colleague."

Bash shut the door behind him and wordlessly took a sip of his coffee.

The doctor let out a faint chuckle, her eyes flickering up to meet mine. "It's different when you're the one on the bed," she pointed out, her voice carrying a hint of sympathy that managed to cut through the clinical detachment.

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"Still," I responded, "I'd prefer facts over empty reassurances."

Her gaze lingered on me for a moment longer before she nodded. "Alright," she said, folding her arms across her chest and leaning against the foot of my bed. It was an oddly informal gesture, one that seemed more fitting of a seasoned colleague than a doctor speaking with her patient. But then again, maybe that was her way of granting my request. "I was the surgeon for your case. My name is Dr. Ospina."

I nodded, vaguely recognizing the name from some medical journal I had read in the past. "Kelly Ospina?"

She nodded. She was a respected trauma surgeon with a reputation for being ruthless in her pursuit of saving lives. It was comforting to know I was in capable hands.

"My bullet wound?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

She eyed me for a moment before starting, "The bullet missed your heart by an inch. It pierced your liver but we managed to control the bleeding and repair the damage during surgery. You were very lucky, Dr. Silva."

Lucky. Right. I wasn't feeling very lucky at the moment. But I nodded, biting back a groan as my muscles protested even that small movement.

"As you know, with a GSW like this, there's always the chance of secondary complications, like infection or clotting," she continued. "We've got you on prophylactic antibiotics and anticoagulants to prevent these potentialities, but you'll need to be closely monitored in the coming weeks."

I could feel the room go still, my mind meticulously processing her words. Complications.

"And another concern is the bile leakage from the liver damage," Dr. Ospina added. "We have placed a drain to help prevent any buildup, but you may need an ERCP procedure if the leakage doesn't stop. You'll also need to adjust your diet and minimize physical strain during recovery."

Justice's grip on my hand tightened, her eyes meeting mine as she gave me a small reassuring smile. She was trying to stay strong, for me. For all of us. I squeezed back, giving her a nod of understanding. Skylar looked a bit pale but he kept his poise, ever stoic.

"So basically," I summarized with a forced chuckle, "I am going to be incredibly boring for the foreseeable future."

Dr. Ospina's lips quirked up in an amused smile. "Well, you could put it that way," she said. "But it's better than bleeding out on an operating table."

As jokes went, it was a pretty grim one. But she was right and I knew it.

"The catheter?"

"Can be removed tomorrow," she replied with a small nod.

Bash, who'd been quietly observing the conversation from the corner of the room, stepped forward. "And when can he leave the hospital?" he asked, his voice gruff.

Dr. Ospina seemed unperturbed by Bash's impatience. "We'll see how he recovers in the next few days," she said calmly. "If the bile leakage stops and there are no signs of infection or complications, we can consider discharge in a week."

"A week?" Bash echoed incredulously. "That's..."

"Non-negotiable," Dr. Ospina cut him off, her tone firm and final.

"He's got a lot of healing to do, Mr. Rivera," she added in a softer tone, almost sympathetic. "Contrary to what you might believe, Dr. Silva here is not invincible. This was luck. Now, obviously, with a GSW the hospital needs to notify the authorities."

The room shifted again. There was a collective held breath; we all knew what that meant. More trouble we didn't need. But there was no use in making a fuss. This was standard procedure.

"I understand," I replied curtly.

Skylar muttered something under his breath, some unrepeatable British swear words that would've drawn a laugh from me on any other day.

"We'll cooperate fully with the investigation," Bash assured her, his tone brokering no argument. Dr. Ospina watched him for a moment before giving a noncommittal nod.

"Alright then," she murmured, turning back to me. "Try to rest, Dr. Silva."

With that, she exited the room, leaving the tension behind her like an unwelcome residual presence.

"I'll worry about the law, Zane," Bash said. "You just recover, okay?"

I nodded slightly, his words rolling around in my brain. Recover. It was a more daunting task than it should've been. But looking at Justice, Skylar, and Bash before me, their faces etched with worry and resolve, I knew it was something I needed to do

and quickly.

"Listen," I started carefully, trying not to let my physical pain seep into my tone.

"Vito De Luca...he won't stop." It was a simple truth, one that we all knew too well.

"And as long as I'm stuck here, I'm an easy target."

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"Vito de Luca is none of your business," Bash said. "I told you. I'm taking care of it. And I'm taking care of it. You recover, okay?"

I swallowed, my throat dry. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah, okay."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Hassan

I raced downstairs. I didn't even call the elevator, I just didn't want Sebastian to see the gruesome head in our lobby.

My heart was pounding in my chest, the same rhythm as my feet against the stairwell. The thing about living in a high-rise was that it also had its disadvantages. Like having to run through twenty-two floors because the elevator was too damn slow.

Reaching the ground floor, I pushed open the door with a force that sent it crashing against the wall. Eyes wide, I took in the sight before me. A large box in the middle of our pristine lobby, blood seeping from its sides to form a grotesque pool around it.

Another damn message from Vito De Luca.

I couldn't let Sebastian see this. Not with everything else he had seen. He didn't deserve any of this.

Feeling numb, I moved to the box and wrenched it open. My stomach churned at the sight of the severed head. I'd already seen it, of course; the fake pizza delivery guy had made sure to show it to me through the intercom screen. But this had, at one point, been Lee. This had, at one point, been one of my men.

And now I was holding his head, blood dripping down my skin and on the cardboard below it.

For a moment, I just stood there, staring at Lee's face. It was pale and lifeless, a grim reminder of the price we were paying in this war with Vito De Luca. His eyes were closed, as though he'd drifted off to sleep, but his mouth... his mouth was twisted in an eternal scream. Jesus, this was so fucking grim. I'd been so worried about Sebastian that I hadn't even asked Skylar or Zane where our men were after the op.

I reached out a hand, my fingers trembling as they brushed the cold skin of his cheek. "I'm sorry," I murmured, my voice choked with grief and guilt. "I should've been there."

But apologies were hollow offerings at a time like this. They didn't bring back the dead or heal the broken. They were just words strung together to try and make sense of a world that had gone mad.

It took me a second to realize that there was something pinned to the side of his head, a thumbtack pressed into his skin.

I reached out, pulling the thumbtack free and flinching at the squelch it made as it came loose. Turning it over in my hands, I realized it was holding a Polaroid in place. I almost dropped it when I realized what was on the image.

It was us. Bash, Justice, Skylar, Zane, and me. All of our faces were crossed out in red marker, with the words "one down, four to go" scrawled underneath. The photo had been taken at Bash and Justice's wedding—we had all been so happy, so carefree then. It felt like a lifetime ago. It hadn't even been a day.

This wasn't just a declaration of war from Vito De Luca. This was a promise—a vow that he wouldn't stop until we were all lying in our graves just like Lee.

Panic welled up inside me like a tidal wave; I had to warn the others. But just as I reached for my phone to call Bash, it buzzed in my hand. It was Justice.

I quickly accepted it, my heart pounding in my chest.

Justice's face filled up the screen, her brown eyes wide with terror. She was at the hospital, the sterile white backdrop a stark contrast against her dark hair. Something was wrong; I could see it in her eyes.

"Justice, we need to--" I started, but Justice cut me off.

"Hassan, I need you to listen carefully," she said hastily. Fear laced every syllable and her gaze darted anxiously over her shoulder. "Get Sebastian..."

The phone jostled and Vito De Luca's face filled the screen, a wicked grin spread across his features. My heart dropped in my chest. In the matter of a few seconds, several realizations came to me. First, they weren't in Zane's room, they were somewhere else; it looked like a lobby, but it was clearly private.

Second, I couldn't see Bash anywhere, and third, Justice seemed to be his captive. He was holding her free hand in place behind her back, and I assumed he had a gun pointed at her. His eyes were cold as ice as he spoke, the amusement in his voice making my blood run cold.

I could see Skylar's tense back over Vito's shoulder as he worked on something—or rather, someone—on the ground.

"Like the wedding?" Vito said, smugness dripping from every word. "I thought I'd send you guys a little wedding present."

The sound of Justice's low sob echoed across the phone line, causing my stomach to

twist. My heart pounded in my chest, echoing the ruthlessness of Vito's voice.

"Bash is quite indisposed at the moment," Vito chuckled, giving Bash's body a nonchalant kick.

Justice's mouth tightened into a hard line of determination, her eyes burning with a mix of fear and defiance.

"Now give me the boy," Vito demanded, his voice taking on an icy edge.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:23 am

Justice glared at him. "No, Hassan, run—"

Vito whipped the side of her head with his gun. Despite his age, he was terrifying. Her scream of pain sent a jolt through me. I gritted my teeth, the phone trembling in my hand as Vito sneered at Justice.

"Shut up," he snarled at her before turning his attention back to me on the screen. "Now, Hassan...let's not make this harder than it has to be."

I clenched my fist, the edges of Lee's Polaroid digging into my palm. "You hurt Justice, and I swear—"

"Swear what?" He interrupted me with a laugh. It was harsh and grating, scraping against my nerves like sandpaper. "You're going to do what exactly? Call the cops? They can't help you now."

I could hear the implication in his words—the threat cloaked in false concern, the undisguised glee when he spoke about Bash. He was enjoying this, reveling in the power he held over us.

I hadn't felt this helpless since...since the assault. All those years ago, when Jez had come after me and I'd been too young, too scared to fight back. But now, I wasn't that helpless little boy anymore. I was a member of the Miami Knives, and we were a brotherhood. We protected our own, no matter what.

"You touch any of them again and you'll wish you were in the ground with Lee," I shot back.

Vito grinned at my threat, a wicked smile spreading across his face. "Oh, is that so?" He sounded far too amused for my liking.

My mind raced as I tried to figure out my next move. Justice's eyes met mine through the screen, the fear in her gaze making my heart drop with guilt. How had things gone so wrong?

Suddenly, Vito's grin dropped as fast as it appeared and his voice turned cold, serious. "Enough talk," he spat out. "Bring me Sebastian or I kill Skylar next. And then I'll kill your sweet little Justice. But I think..."

He took a step toward her, dipping his head down, sniffing her deeply. "Maybe I'll sample the goods first."

"No!" The word erupted from my mouth before I could stop it, raw and blistered. "Don't you dare lay a finger on her."

Vito only cackled, that sickening laugh I wanted to rip from his throat. He was a predator, toying with his prey. My heart pounded in my chest as if it were trying to keep up with the maddening chaos unfolding before me.

"Or what?" Vito sneered, his eyes glinting darkly. He moved a stray lock of hair from Justice's tear-streaked face, letting his fingers dance down her cheek. "Or what, pretty boy?"

Skylar rose to his feet from behind him, and I could see the shadow of another man pointing a gun at him.

"I want the boy," Vito said. "Bring me the boy. And I might let them live."

And then the screen went black.