







# Bear With Me (Grizzly Affairs Wildhaven Clan #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** One minute, she's avoiding men. The next, she's stuck with one who refuses to let her go.

A grumpy bear shifter. A sassy city girl. And a fated bond neither of them wants—but neither can deny.

Blythe Oaken planned the perfect escape—no stress, no drama, and absolutely no men. Just fresh mountain air, a cozy cabin, and a well-earned break from the chaos of city life.

Then she nearly crashes into a bear the size of a truck.

It doesn't run. It doesn't flinch. It just stares her down with eyes that feel almost... human.

The next day, she meets Edric Stone—broody, built like a mountain, and radiating 'keep the hell away from me' energy. He watches her just like the bear did.

Coincidence? She wishes.

Edric has spent years avoiding attachments, suppressing his primal side, and keeping his beast in check. But Blythe's scent ignites something inside him—something raw, possessive, and utterly impossible to ignore.

He's a grizzly shifter. She's human. The bond snapping into place between them? It shouldn't exist.

Blythe doesn't believe in fate, and she sure as hell isn't looking for love. But Wildhaven isn't just a sleepy mountain town. Danger is closing in, and whether she likes it or not—she just became part of it.

Now, there's only one thing more terrifying than the enemies lurking in the shadows.

A fated mate who refuses to let her go.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

THE AIR FELT DIFFERENT at three in the morning—denser somehow, like the darkness itself had weight. The woman's fingers moved across her keyboard with practiced precision, her face illuminated only by the blue glow of her monitor. Behind her, the venetian blinds cast prison-bar shadows across her apartment walls.

She'd been scanning the dark web for hours, running automatic alerts tied to specific encryption patterns—the digital fingerprints of Viktor Biancardi. The man was a ghost, practically a myth in certain circles—brilliant, brutal, and now gone without a trace. But she remained vigilant, honoring the debt she owed him. A debt of blood.

Her screen suddenly flashed, and her body went rigid.

Someone had breached the protected servers. Someone had found what Viktor had spent a fortune to hide.

"No," she whispered, fingers flying across the keyboard as she tracked the leak to its source.

There it was. DNA records. Medical reports. Birth certificates. All uploaded less than thirty minutes ago to a hidden forum frequented by information brokers, mercenaries, and killers.

"Kleah Martell," she whispered, the name heavy on her tongue.

The screen showed a woman with soft eyes and gentle hands that worked with wax and fire. A craftsman. An artist. Viktor's secret half-sister—the one he'd protected from afar, never revealing himself to her.

She studied the DNA marker that matched Viktor Biancardi's paternal line with 99.8% certainty, now exposed for anyone with the right connections to find.

The woman leaned back, her face grim. This wasn't just information. This was a death sentence in a world where bloodlines determined who lived and who disappeared. She needed to act fast.

She couldn't remove the leak—it had already been downloaded seventeen times by users with masked IPs. But she could fulfill her promise to Viktor. She could contact the one person he'd trusted to protect his sister if anything ever happened.

With determined keystrokes, she began composing a letter.

AT 5:47 AM, SHE SLIPPED into a post office near the waterfront, wearing oversized sunglasses despite the early hour darkness. The small package in her hands felt heavier than it should, weighted with consequence.

Inside was a single letter, sealed with red wax—old-fashioned, perhaps, but appropriate given the contents. No return address. Just a name scrawled in precise handwriting:

\*Gabriele Bronzetti\*

She knew his villa overlooked the Mediterranean on one side and the mountains on the other. She knew he'd left the family business—officially, at least—three years ago. And most importantly of all, she knew he was the one Viktor had chosen, and this, the reason why a blood debt must be collected.

The woman dropped the package into the outgoing mail slot and walked away without looking back. Some debts required payment. Some secrets demanded witnesses.

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC , in a Manhattan penthouse that took up the entire fifty-second floor of a steel and glass monument to wealth, another woman set down her phone with trembling hands.

Valentina Biancardi—sister to Viktor's father, keeper of the family fortune since her nephew's unexplained absence—stared out at the skyline with hard eyes.

"You're certain?" she asked, not bothering to turn toward the man who stood in the shadows behind her.

"The DNA report is authentic," he confirmed. "Some hacker put it on the dark web three hours ago. It's been viewed seventeen times already."

Valentina's manicured nails tapped against the marble countertop, the rhythm steady as a ticking clock. For thirty years, she had maintained control of the Biancardi empire through a delicate balance of fear, respect, and carefully placed bullets.

"A sister," she said, the word acid on her tongue. "A legitimate half-sister."

The implications hung in the air between them. If Kleah Martell was recognized as Viktor's blood—if she could lay claim to even a fraction of the Biancardi holdings—the power Valentina had cultivated for decades would crumble beneath her Louboutins.

"Find her," Valentina said, voice dropping to something barely above a whisper. "Make it look like an accident." She picked up her glass of red wine, swirling it gently before taking a slow sip. Blood-red liquid caught the light as it moved. Family. Such an inconvenient thing when it involved sharing.

THE VILLA WAS QUIET when the mail arrived, filtered sunlight spilling across terracotta tiles. The housekeeper placed the day's correspondence on the antique desk

in Gabriele Bronzetti's study, pausing only briefly at the unmarked envelope with its peculiar red seal.

It sat there, waiting. Innocent as a blade before it cuts.

Some debts are repaid in blood. This one ends in fire.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

THE SCENT OF MELTING wax fills my little shop, warm and comforting like a childhood memory. I inhale deeply, letting the familiar notes of honey and cedar ground me as I work. Some people have coffee to start their day. I have this—the ritual of heating my tools, selecting the perfect wax blend, waiting for that precise moment when everything reaches the ideal temperature.

Too cold and the wax cracks. Too hot and it loses definition.

Like so many things in life, timing is everything.

It's late afternoon, and golden light spills through the windows of Sealed With Love, my little sanctuary in this quiet coastal town. Tourist season won't start for another month, which means these peaceful hours belong just to me and my craft.

I'm working on a commission for a local beekeeper's wedding invitations—an intricate honeybee seal that took weeks to perfect. The beeswax blend I've created for him carries subtle notes of lavender and sea salt, custom-made to reflect the coastal location of his apiary. Each seal will be unique, with tiny variations that make them artisanal rather than mass-produced.

That's what my clients pay for—the knowledge that no one else will ever have exactly what they have. Each seal carries my touch, my breath, my careful attention to the way wax behaves under different conditions.

Some days, I think I understand wax better than I understand people. Wax is



predictable in its unpredictability. It tells you what it needs if you pay attention. It doesn't hide its nature or pretend to be something it isn't.

Unlike people who hide behind masks. Who present one face while concealing another.

I've had enough of watchers in my life. My foster father taught me early that eyes can violate as deeply as hands—a lesson I discovered when I found his hidden camera. I still check for lenses in unfamiliar bathrooms, still change with my back to the wall.

It's why I've kept men at a distance, never letting anyone close enough to truly see me, much less touch me. The few dates I've had ended quickly when they realized physical intimacy wasn't on the table.

No, I'm much better with wax than with people.

I'm so focused on pouring the perfect honeybee seal that I don't notice the door open. The little bell should have chimed, but it remains silent. My first clue that someone has entered is a shift in the air, like the atmosphere itself has suddenly grown heavier.

When I look up, my breath catches.

He stands just inside the doorway, so still he might be carved from stone rather than flesh. Tall—impossibly so—with broad shoulders beneath a tailored charcoal suit that speaks of old money and quiet power. His skin is olive-toned, his jaw sharp enough to cut glass, and his eyes...

His eyes are like precious onyx held to sunlight, and they're watching me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

I've never seen him before. I would remember a face like that.

"Can I help you?" My voice comes out steady, which seems like a miracle.

He doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he moves further into the shop, his gaze sweeping over my displays of handcrafted seals, vintage stationery, and artisan candles. His movements are measured, deliberate—a man who calculates each step before taking it.

Unlike wax, which can be molded and shaped to my will, this man seems hewn from something far more unyielding. Marble, perhaps. Or steel.

"Khlea Martell, yes?" His voice carries the faintest trace of an accent—Mediterranean, maybe Italian. And while his words are framed like a question, we both know it's not. He knows who I am while I have no idea who he is.

I nod, setting down my tools carefully. "That's me. Are you looking for a custom piece?"

Again, that strange pause. It's like he's measuring me, weighing something I can't see.

"I'm looking for you," he says finally.

Something cold slips down my spine. Not fear, exactly. Something else. Something older and more primal—like recognition.

"I don't understand." I wipe my hands on my apron, leaving faint red smudges from the wax I'd been working with. "Do I know you?"

"No." One word, clipped and certain. "But I know you."

I should be reaching for my phone. I should be asking him to leave. Instead, I find myself fascinated by the contradiction of him—the rigid control in his posture against

the heat banked in his eyes.

"Is this some kind of joke?" I ask, glancing toward the windows, half-expecting to see friends with cameras. But the street outside is empty, bathed in late afternoon shadows.

He moves closer to my workbench, and I instinctively take a step back. Not because I'm afraid, though maybe I should be. It's because he radiates an energy that's almost overwhelming up close—like standing too near an open flame.

My fingers instinctively curl around the edge of my worktable, seeking the familiar comfort of my tools, my space, my world. Here, I know precisely how much pressure to apply, exactly when to ease back. Here, I am in control.

With this stranger's eyes on me, I feel anything but.

"Your craft is beautiful," he says, picking up one of my finished seals—a compass rose design I'd completed earlier. His fingers, long and strong, handle the delicate piece with surprising gentleness. "You create permanent marks on impermanent things."

The observation is so unexpected that I blink. "That's... poetic."

"It's truth." He sets the seal down exactly where it was. "Do you believe in fate, Kleah Martell?"

"I believe I don't need to answer that question—" I strive hard to regain my footing in this bizarre conversation. "—since I still don't know who you are."

Something that might be amusement flickers across his face—there and gone so quickly I wonder if I imagined it.

"Gabriele Bronzetti." He offers his name like it should mean something to me. When I show no reaction, that almost-smile touches his lips again. "And I'm afraid we have serious matters to discuss."

"I'm pretty sure we don't." I move around the counter, putting solid wood between us. It's not that he's threatening me—he hasn't made a single menacing move—but something tells me I need all the barriers I can get.

"You received no letter?" he asks, his head tilting slightly. "No warning?"

"Warning about what?"

His eyes narrow, just slightly. Then he reaches inside his jacket—slowly, like he doesn't want to startle me—and removes an envelope. Red wax seals the back, unbroken.

The seal catches my eye immediately. It's not one of mine, but I recognize quality work when I see it. A custom design—something like a family crest with an intricate B at its center. The wax is high quality, deep crimson with flecks of gold, melted to precisely the right temperature for a clean impression.

"This arrived yesterday," he says, placing it on the counter between us. "It concerns you."

I stare at the envelope, then back at him. "I don't understand. Why would someone send you a letter about me? I don't even know you."

"The man who sent this knew both of us." Gabriele's voice softens almost imperceptibly. "He's no longer here to deliver his message himself."

Something about the way he says it—the careful neutrality that doesn't quite mask

what sounds like respect, maybe even grief—makes me pause.

"Who?" I ask, but I'm not sure I want the answer.

"Open it," he says instead.

Against my better judgment, I reach for the envelope. The wax seal breaks with a satisfying crack, and I withdraw a single sheet of heavy paper. The handwriting is elegant, precise—not a style I recognize.

As I read, the world seems to tilt on its axis. Blood rushes in my ears. Words jump out at me: \*danger...sister...Biancardi...protect...blood.\*

I look up at Gabriele, finding it suddenly hard to breathe. "This is insane."

"It's the truth."

"I don't have a brother." My voice sounds distant to my own ears. "My parents died when I was twelve. I grew up with my aunt. There's no—this isn't—"

"Your father wasn't your father," Gabriele says quietly. "And the man who wrote that letter wasn't a liar."

I want to laugh, to tell him this is ridiculous. But the certainty in his face stops me. That, and the way he's looking at me—not with pity or mockery, but with a kind of solemn determination that makes my heart beat faster.

Wax, when it cools, reveals its true nature. The bubbles rise to the surface, imperfections become visible, the essence of what it is can no longer be hidden. I feel like I'm cooling now, hardening into something I don't recognize—a different shape, a different purpose than I ever imagined for myself.

"Who are you?" I ask again, but the question means something different now. "Why would you come here? Why would you care about any of this?"

"I made a promise," he says simply. "And now I'm here to keep it."

I shake my head, feeling like I'm dreaming. "What does that even mean?"

He moves then, closing the distance between us in two long strides. I should back away. I should run. But I find myself frozen as he reaches out, his hand hovering just above my cheek without touching.

"It means," he says, voice dropping to something just above a whisper, "that there are people who will kill for the blood that runs in your veins. And I'm the man who will stop them."

The air between us feels charged, electric with something I can't name. His eyes hold mine, unflinching and impossibly deep.

"You're Kleah Martell," he says. "And you're mine to protect."

The words settle over me like a seal pressed into hot wax—immediate, indelible, marking me as something different than I was moments before.

GABRIELE

She stands before me, this woman I've come to find, and she is nothing like I expected.

The intelligence photos had shown a pretty woman with a craft business, living a quiet life in a coastal town. But they hadn't captured the grace in her hands as she worked the wax, or the quiet confidence in her movements. They certainly hadn't

prepared me for the impact of her eyes—a mesmerizing shade of hazel, one that photos of her don't do justice at all.

I watch her absorb the impossible truth I've brought her, watch her world reshape itself around this new reality. She doesn't collapse, doesn't try to deny what's in front of her beyond the initial shock. Instead, she processes, adapts, meets my gaze directly despite her fear.

Impressive, for a civilian.

"I don't understand," she says, her voice steadier than most would manage under the circumstances. "Why would anyone want to hurt me?"

"Because of who you are. Who your brother was." I keep my voice neutral, factual. "And when he...disappeared, someone had to take over his business interests. But now that your identity has been leaked? It's possible some may think of you as his rightful heir."

She looks at the letter again, her delicate brows drawn together. "I make wax seals for wedding invitations. I'm not exactly crime lord material."

"Intent is irrelevant. Your blood is what matters to famiglia ." I move toward the window, checking the street again out of habit. "The fact that Viktor kept you hidden, protected your identity all these years—it suggests importance. Value. Those who knew him well understand that."

"So what happens now?" Her fingers trace the broken wax seal on the envelope, a craftsman's appreciation evident even in her distress.

"Now I do what I promised your brother I would do." I turn back to her. "I keep you safe."

"How?"

A fair question. One without simple answers.

"First, I stay close. No one makes a move while I'm with you." I glance around her shop, this peaceful haven she's created that will never be the same. "We maintain normal appearances while I assess the immediate threat level. Then we make arrangements for more permanent protection."

Her hands, so steady while working her craft, tremble slightly now. But her chin lifts, a quiet determination in her posture. "And if I refuse? If I decide this is all insanity and ask you to leave?"

"They'll still come for you." No point softening this truth. "Only difference is, you'll face them alone."

She absorbs this, her gaze dropping to her workbench where tools and wax await her return. Her world—small, contained, carefully built—shattering around her through no fault of her own.

"I need time," she says finally. "To think. To process this."

"Time is the one thing in short supply." I step closer, needing her to understand the gravity of her situation. "The fact that I received this warning means others already know about you. Every hour increases the risk."

She looks up at me, a flash of stubborn pride in her eyes. "One day. Give me one day to wrap my head around all of this before you upend my entire life."

I should refuse. Security protocols dictate immediate extraction to a controlled environment. But something in her steady gaze makes me reconsider. Breaking her



spirit serves no purpose—and Viktor would expect me to protect more than just her physical body.

"Until tomorrow morning," I concede. "But I stay with you. Where you go, I go."

"Like a shadow."

"Like a shield." I correct her, holding her gaze. "Between you and whatever comes."

Something shifts in her expression—surprise, perhaps, at my willingness to compromise. Or maybe at the intensity of my protection. Either way, she nods slowly.

"Fine. But I have clients scheduled all afternoon. I can't just—"

"Maintain normal operations," I agree. "I'll position myself as a business consultant. It explains my presence without raising questions."

She eyes me skeptically. "No one will believe you're interested in wax seals."

"They'll believe I'm interested in you." The words come out more suggestively than intended, and I watch color rise to her cheeks. "Professionally speaking."

The blush deepens, but she recovers quickly. "Right. Well. I should get back to work then."

She returns to her bench, but her earlier focus is gone. Her hands move less confidently, her attention repeatedly drifting to where I stand watching the street. The honeybee seal she attempts twice before setting it aside in frustration.

"I can't work with you staring at me," she says, not looking up.

"I'm not staring at you. I'm surveilling the street."

"Well, your surveillance is very... present."

I suppress a smile. Most people become meek in my presence, especially after learning what I am, what I've done. This woman—this civilian artisan with delicate hands and hazel eyes—speaks to me with unvarnished honesty instead.

Fascinating.

"I'll make myself less obtrusive," I offer, moving to a corner where I can still see both the street and her, but am less directly in her line of sight.

She mumbles a thank you and returns to her work, visibly trying to recapture her earlier concentration. I observe as she selects a different project—something simpler, with clean lines rather than the intricate honeybee design she'd abandoned.

Her movements grow more confident again as she loses herself in the familiar rhythm of her craft. Heat the wax, test the temperature, pour with precise timing, press the seal with just the right pressure. Each step performed with a reverence that speaks of true vocation rather than mere occupation.

I've known artists before—painters, sculptors, musicians. All obsessives in their way, all chasing perfection in their chosen medium. But there's something different about her work—something intimate and tactile, a direct connection between her hands and the material she shapes.

When she finishes the seal, she holds it up to the light, examining it with a critical eye. Only when she's satisfied does she place it on a cooling rack with others of its kind.

The shop bell chimes, startling her slightly. A middle-aged woman enters, smiling broadly.

"Kleah, darling! I was hoping you'd still be open. I need to add another dozen to that order for Melissa's wedding. The guest list keeps expanding, you know how these things go."

I fade further into the background, watching as Kleah transforms—her professional persona taking over, all warm smiles and focused attention. She remembers details about the client's daughter, asks thoughtful questions about the wedding preparations, offers suggestions about color variations that might complement the expanded order.

To all appearances, she's simply a shopkeeper having a normal interaction. Nothing in her demeanor betrays the fact that less than an hour ago, her entire understanding of her identity was shattered.

The customer notices me eventually, curiosity evident in her expression. Before she can ask, Kleah smoothly introduces me as a business consultant exploring expansion opportunities for her custom seal work. I offer a bland smile and a firm handshake, playing the role of corporate interest with just enough charm to be believable.

When the woman leaves, clutching her receipt and promising to return next week, Kleah's professional mask slips. She leans against the counter, exhaling slowly.

"That was harder than it should have been."

"You performed admirably." I mean it as simple fact, but she glances up in surprise, as if unused to direct praise.

"Thanks." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "Two more appointments this afternoon, then we're done."

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

She studies me for a moment, as if trying to reconcile the man who brings news of danger and death with the patient observer willing to wait through her workday.

"You're not what I expected," she says finally.

"What did you expect?"

"Someone..." She gestures vaguely. "Scarier, I guess. More obviously dangerous."

"The most dangerous people rarely look it," I tell her. "That's why they survive."

Something in my tone must reveal more than intended, because her expression shifts to one of curiosity. "How long have you been... whatever you are?"

"A lifetime." I leave it at that.

She accepts the non-answer with a small nod, turning back to her workbench to prepare for her next appointment. The rhythm of her afternoon continues—clients arriving, discussing custom orders, leaving with carefully packaged items or promises of future work.

Throughout it all, I maintain my vigilance, watching the street, scanning each person who enters for potential threats. My phone buzzes periodically with updates from my security team—surveillance patterns on her shop, background checks on her regular clients, preparations for tomorrow's extraction.

By closing time, the sun has begun to set, casting long shadows through the shop windows. Kleah moves methodically through her closing routine—banking the heating elements, securing her tools, counting the day's receipts.

"You've been standing all day," she observes as she locks the register. "You can sit, you know. I do have chairs."

"I prefer to stand."

She rolls her eyes. "Of course you do."

The casual exchange, so normal amid the abnormal circumstances, catches me off guard. There's a directness to her, an unvarnished honesty that's rare in my world of calculated words and veiled meanings.

As she reaches up to draw the blinds, the setting sun illuminates her profile—the graceful line of her neck, the gentle curve of her cheek, the way her hair catches the light like burnished copper. For a moment, she's framed in gold, a tableau of quiet beauty performing a simple, everyday task.

Something shifts in my chest—a recognition of innocence that hasn't been part of my existence for decades. This woman, with her careful hands and her shop full of beautiful, useless things, represents a world I glimpse only from its edges.

And I've come to shatter it.

She finishes closing up, gathering her bag and a light jacket. "I usually walk home. It's only a few blocks."

"We'll walk," I agree, scanning the street through the blinds one final time. "But we won't go to your apartment."

She frowns. "Why not?"

"First place they'll look. We'll go somewhere unexpected for tonight."

Worry creases her brow. "My things—"

"Can be replaced. Your life cannot."

She falls silent, the reality of her situation visibly sinking in once more. Then she squares her shoulders, that quiet resilience asserting itself again.

"Lead the way, then."

We exit through the back door, taking an indirect route through side streets and alleyways. She follows without question, matching her pace to mine, occasionally glancing over her shoulder as if expecting to see pursuit.

"Where are we going?" she asks finally.

"Hotel on the edge of town. Reservation isn't in either of our names."

She absorbs this, walking in silence for several minutes before speaking again. "You knew my brother."

"Yes."

"What was he like?"

"Complicated." A complex question with no simple answer. "But famiglia mattered to him, and you are that to Biancardi."

"Even though we never met?"

I guide her around a corner, keeping to shadows. "He kept you hidden to protect you, not because he didn't care."

She considers this, trying to form a picture of a brother she never knew existed. "Did he... did he watch me? Keep tabs on me?"

"As soon as he learned of your existence, yes."

"But he never reached out. Never introduced himself."

"In our world, distance was the greatest gift he could give you." I check the street before we cross. "Anonymity kept you safe."

"Until now."

"Until now," I agree grimly.

We reach the hotel without incident—a modest establishment that won't attract attention. The room is simple but secure, with sight lines to all approaches and multiple exit routes. I've already had it swept for surveillance and stocked with necessities.

She stands in the middle of the room, looking lost amid the generic furnishings. Her world has been reduced to this—a hotel room with a stranger, the life she built left behind.

"Try to rest," I tell her, moving to check the window locks. "Tomorrow will be challenging."

"Where will you be?"

"Here." I gesture to the chair positioned to view both the door and window. "I'll keep watch."

"You need to sleep too," she points out reasonably.

"I'll manage."

She eyes me skeptically, but doesn't argue. Instead, she disappears into the bathroom, the sound of running water following shortly after. When she emerges in the hotel robe, her face scrubbed clean, she looks younger, more vulnerable.

"I keep thinking I'll wake up and this will all have been some bizarre dream," she says, sitting on the edge of the bed. "That tomorrow I'll open my shop and everything will be normal again."

"It would be nice if that were true. But it's not." And the sooner she gets her head out of the clouds, the easier it would be for me to keep her alive.

"What's going to happen to me?" she asks, meeting my gaze directly. "Really. No platitudes."

"Your life is going to change. Significantly." I give her the truth she's asked for. "Your safety will require sacrifices, compromises, adaptations."

"But I'll survive."

"Yes." This, at least, I can promise. "You'll survive."

She nods slowly, absorbing this. "Because of you."

"Because that's what I promised your brother."

She studies me, her hazel eyes searchingly direct. "Is that the only reason? A promise to a dead man?"



The question catches me off guard. Is it the only reason? The debt I owe Viktor is real, certainly. But something else has taken root alongside it since I entered her shop and watched her work with such careful precision. Since I witnessed her absorb impossible truths with quiet courage.

"Get some sleep, Kleah," I say instead of answering. "Tomorrow comes early."

She accepts the deflection with a small nod, sliding beneath the covers and turning off the bedside lamp. In the darkness, her breathing gradually slows, deepens, as exhaustion overcomes fear.

I remain in the chair, watching over her sleep, contemplating the path ahead of us. The security measures needed, the contingencies to plan, the life she knew dismantled and reassembled into something unrecognizable but survivable.

She shifts in her sleep, her face catching the faint light from the window. In repose, the worry lines smooth from her brow, and I'm struck again by the innocence she carries—not naivety, but a fundamental decency that's become foreign to my world.

Viktor knew what he was asking when he extracted my promise. Knew that placing her under my protection meant dragging her into shadows she'd never chosen to enter. But he also knew there was no alternative if she was to survive once her identity was revealed.

The letter had been clear: Kleah's safety was the priority. She must be kept alive, no matter the means, no matter the cost.

I study her sleeping form, this woman I've sworn to protect with my life if necessary. This woman whose world I've shattered in the name of preserving it.

Tomorrow I'll tell her what that protection truly entails. The arrangement that will

bind her to me in ways she cannot yet imagine. The sacrifice of freedom for security, of normalcy for survival.

She doesn't know it, but her world just melted.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

I BARELY SLEEP. HOW could I? Every time I close my eyes, I see Gabriele Bronzetti's face—that perfectly carved jaw, those dark eyes that seemed to see right through me.

You're mine to protect.

The words echo in my mind as dawn breaks, and I catch a glimpse of pastel-colored skies outside our room. I'd spent most of the night researching, first the Biancardi name, then Gabriele himself.

What I learned of my half-brother, I still need to come to terms with. But Gabriele, though? He was like a ghost in the business world. A ghost with billions of dollars to his name. But no photos to go with it. I didn't think that was possible in today's age. But apparently, it is. You just need to have enough money to afford anonymity.

I drag myself out of bed and into the shower, letting hot water beat against my skin as if it might wash away the surreal events of yesterday. But when I emerge, dripping and pink, nothing has changed.

I still have a brother I never knew. A brother whose mysterious disappearance is still an open case with the police, but many also presume to be dead. And now, people also want me six feet under because we happen to share the same father.

I dress carefully, as if the right outfit might somehow armor me against whatever comes next. Dark jeans. White button-down shirt. Camel-colored cardigan. Sensible

but cute ankle boots. Normal clothes for a normal day that will be anything but.

When I'm ready to go, so is he. Today, Gabriele's dressed differently: dark jeans similar to mine, a slate-gray henley that does nothing to hide the muscular breadth of his shoulders, a leather jacket that's been broken in just enough to look impossibly soft.

Less formal than yesterday, but no less intimidating.

He straightens when he sees me approach, and something flickers across his face. Something that might be relief.

"You're sure about this?"

No. I've ceased being sure of anything the moment I learn of my ties to mafia. But I nod anyway because I'm still holding on to the hope that I can go back to living a normal life...someday.

I'm hoping he'll leave as soon as we make it to the shop, but Gabriele follows me inside instead, and the place suddenly feels much smaller with him in it. I switch on the lights, trying to reclaim some normalcy in my routine.

"Are you sure you don't need to be somewhere else?" It's not that I want to get rid of him, but it's just harder to work when he's around.

"The tone of your voice..."

What about it?

"You've researched me."

"I'd be stupid not to, wouldn't I? I hardly know you—"

"We can remedy that."

"How?"

He studies me with those dark eyes, intense and unreadable. "You could start by making us coffee."

The request is so mundane, so unexpected, that I almost laugh. "Coffee?"

"If I'm going to explain everything, I'd prefer to do it with caffeine."

There's something disarming in the simple request—something strangely human about this dangerous man asking for coffee like we're just two people having a normal conversation.

"Fine," I say, gesturing to the small back room where I keep a decent coffee setup for long workdays. "But answers come with the coffee."

"Fair."

I busy myself with the familiar ritual—measure beans, grind, heat water, prepare the pour-over. The everyday actions settle my nerves slightly. When I return with two mugs, he's examining one of my custom seal designs—an intricate Celtic knot pattern I'd finished last week.

"You have remarkable attention to detail," he says, setting the seal down carefully.

I place his coffee on the counter. "It's necessary for the work."

"And for survival." He takes the mug with a nod of thanks. "Details matter in my world."

"Your world," I repeat. "The one I apparently belong to without knowing it."

He takes a sip of coffee, considering me. "You don't belong to any world but your own, Kleah. But Viktor Biancardi's blood means his world will come looking for you regardless."

"Because he was a criminal."

"Yes." No sugar-coating, no excuses. Just confirmation.

"And you? What were you to him?"

He takes another sip before answering. "Someone who could have died if not for his help. And in return, I owe him a blood debt."

"And if that debt means you'd have to kill people?"

"So be it."

I wish I had the confidence to tell him it wouldn't come to that. But after seeing all the crimes that have been linked to Viktor Biancardi's name...

"Isn't there a way I can just let everyone know I don't plan to take over his 'empire'? I'm me. And my brother is...my brother," I end lamely.

"You share his name. That's enough to make you a threat for most people. A loose end that they have to get rid of, no matter the cost."

"But I'm not crime lord material," I protest. "Surely that would be obvious—" The shop bell suddenly chimes, the sound cutting me off and also causing Gabriel to tense. But just as he shifts his position to place himself between me and the door in one fluid motion—

"Good morning, Kleah!"

An older woman comes barreling in, and it's just Mrs. Lee, one of my regulars.

"I was hoping you'd be open. I need more of those lovely dragonfly seals for my garden party invitations—" She stops, frowning slightly as she looks first at me, then at Gabriele. "Oh! I'm sorry, dear. I didn't realize you had a... visitor."

The way she says "visitor" makes it clear she's jumping to all sorts of conclusions about the gorgeous man in my shop, and I feel heat rise to my cheeks. "It's fine, Mrs. Lee," I say quickly. "He's a... consultant. For a new business opportunity."

Gabriele only smiles, and Mrs. Lee nods understandingly. "Then I shan't be on your way."

"Oh, that's not—"

"It's fine, Kleah. It's not like I haven't been saying for years that more people need to know of your work." The older woman hands me her credit card, tells me not to bother wrapping up her purchase, and gives me a wink as I hand her the seals. He's hot, Mrs. Lee mouths before leaving.

I quickly turn around, hoping that he hasn't caught that—

"It's true," he acknowledges with a shrug. "I am hot."

But no such luck.

"DON'T...DON'T LET THAT get into your head," I say lamely. "Mrs. Lee is very easy to please."

But Gabriele acts as if he doesn't hear this. "Do you expect more customers to come by?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Are you good with them being collateral damage if the people who want you dead trace you here?"

Ten minutes later, and we're in a cafe a good distance away, and one that I've never been to. This, he tells me while driving, is how to survive when someone is hunting you.

Keep moving and never revisit old haunts.

The cafe we choose is small. And although all of its tables are still occupied, we still choose one near the back exit, and Gabriele positioning himself with clear sightlines to both the door and the kitchen. I order a vanilla latte with cinnamon; he gets a black coffee.

"So what happens now?" I ask once our drinks arrive. "Do I just... wait for someone to try to kill me?"

"No." His voice is firm, absolute. "I'll be with you. Watching. Protecting."

"For how long?"



"As long as necessary."

I wrap my hands around my mug, absorbing its warmth. "I can't just put my life on hold indefinitely. I have a business, clients, responsibilities—"

"You can't fulfill any responsibilities if you're dead." His bluntness is jarring but not unkind. "Biancardi kept you hidden your entire life for a reason, Kleah. Now that protection is gone."

I stare into my latte, watching the cinnamon swirl across the foam. The reality of my situation settles over me like a heavy cloak. My life—my small, ordinary, carefully built life—suddenly feels like sand slipping between my fingers.

"Can we just take things one day at a time?" she asks awkwardly. "I know I'm not making things easy for you, but I'm just...this is all new to me. And I don't know how to think like someone who's in danger. Or someone with a target on her back."

Something shifts in his expression—a softening almost too subtle to catch. "You don't have to know. That's why I'm here."

A man brushes past our table, his shoulder accidentally bumping mine. I flinch instinctively, recoiling from the contact as if burned. The stranger mutters an apology and continues to the counter.

Gabriele notices my reaction, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," I say quickly, but my heart is racing from the unexpected touch.

We sit in silence for a few moments, the weight of my new reality settling between us. Gabriele's presence is solid, reassuring despite the dangers he represents. When his hand brushes against mine as he reaches for his coffee, I don't flinch.

The realization hits me with startling clarity: I recoil from strangers' touch, but not his. This dangerous man with his dark eyes and lethal grace doesn't trigger my instinct to flee. I don't know why that is. And honestly? I don't think I'm ready to know the reason.

"You have a fear of men."

He noticed how I reacted, I realize uneasily.

"Fear is not always bad. It can be even useful, keep you from making foolish mistakes in the right circumstances. But between the two of us..." His jaw clenches. "This may be asking for much—but I need you to trust me."

What he's asking for is exactly what he says. It is a lot. For someone like me. But because it is him...

"I do," I whisper. "I trust you, Gabriele."

GABRIELE

She says the words so softly I almost miss them.

I trust you, Gabriele.

And it's not just the words that makes my chest tighten. But it's the fact that it's the first time I've heard her say my name.

I've been called many things in my life. Dangerous, certainly. Ruthless. Efficient. Cold. But never this. Someone who, just by saying my name, already feels like she's cleansed my soul.

Her eyes shine with trust that I don't deserve even though I have no choice but to demand it. I'm danger personified—have been since I was fourteen and held my first gun. But in this moment, with sunlight catching in her hair and her hazel eyes holding mine without flinching, I find myself wanting to be what she sees.

But since such things are impossible for someone like me...

I rise to my feet, the abrupt motion startling her. "We should get back to your shop. The sooner you finish whatever you have to do, the better."

My hand hovers near the small of her back without quite touching. I hear her breath catch because of this, but I tell myself to ignore this.

Outside, the morning has warmed slightly, the coastal fog burning off to reveal blue sky.

"What about...my father?" she asks jerkily all of a sudden. "The real one. What do you know of him?"

"He was not a good man." I glance at her, saying grimly, "Neither am I."

"Yet you're here to protect me——"

"Because blood debts are always paid in our world. And protecting you simply means this is not a rule that I care to break."

She slowly shakes her head. "You're not as evil as you think. And more redeemable than you let yourself believe."

The naivety of her assessment should irritate me. Instead, I find it oddly warming, like sunlight on skin long kept in shadow. Dangerous, that warmth. Comfort leads to

complacency, and complacency leads to death in my world.

When we reach her shop, a customer is waiting outside. Kleah unlocks the door with an apologetic smile, slipping seamlessly into her role as shopkeeper. I stay back, observing her interaction with the customer—an older gentleman seeking a custom seal for his daughter's wedding.

She's good with people—attentive, genuine, her enthusiasm for her craft evident in every gesture as she shows him sample designs. The interaction is so normal, so far removed from the shadow world I inhabit, that for a moment I can almost forget why I'm here.

Almost.

My phone vibrates with an encrypted message. Security update from my team—they've identified surveillance on Kleah's shop. Not immediate threat level, but concerning. Valentina's people, most likely, assessing the situation before making a move.

Time is shorter than I'd hoped.

When the customer leaves with a promise to return tomorrow, I move to the counter where Kleah is sketching design options.

"We need to talk," I say without preamble.

She looks up, the shift in my tone registering immediately. "What's wrong?"

"Not here." I glance toward the windows, the street beyond. "Is there somewhere private?"

She hesitates only briefly before nodding toward the back room. "Through here."

The workspace is small but organized—a desk with specialized tools, shelves of wax in various colors, a small electric burner for melting. The scent of beeswax and cedar hangs in the air, warm and comforting.

"There's surveillance on your shop," I tell her, keeping my voice low. "Nothing immediate, but we need to move more quickly than I anticipated."

Fear flashes across her face, quickly controlled. "What does that mean?"

"It means we leave today. I'll stay close, keep watch, and tomorrow we'll establish a more permanent security arrangement."

"What kind of arrangement?" Her knuckles whiten as she grips the edge of her desk.

I hesitate, weighing how much to reveal now. "We'll discuss options tonight. For now, focus on getting through the day as normally as possible. Don't let on that anything has changed."

To her credit, she nods, swallowing visibly but accepting the instruction without argument. "Okay."

"I'll be nearby, even when you don't see me," I assure her. "Just continue as you would on any normal day."

She takes a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. "I can do that."

I believe her. In the short time I've known Kleah Martell, I've seen a quiet resilience in her that many hardened criminals lack. A different sort of strength, but no less real.

For the rest of the day, I maintain my vigilance, sometimes visible in her shop as a "consultant," sometimes watching from carefully chosen positions outside. I identify three separate surveillance operatives—all Valentina's people, none immediate threat level, but all concerning.

Kleah performs admirably, maintaining her normal routine with customers, working on orders, even stopping for lunch at her usual time. The only signs of her awareness are the occasional glances toward where she knows I'm watching and the slight tension in her shoulders.

As closing time approaches, I send her a text—a number I had her program into her phone this morning.

Lock up normally. Walk to the bookstore as you usually would. I'll meet you inside .

She gives no indication of having received the message, but when she closes her shop, she follows the instructions precisely, strolling casually toward the bookstore three blocks down. I follow at a distance, watching for any tail.

The bookstore owner—an old friend who owes me several favors—nods as Kleah enters, then again as I follow a minute later. He leads us through the back room to a private exit that opens onto a side street where my car waits.

"You okay?" I ask as we drive away from her town, taking a circuitous route to ensure we're not followed.

"No," she answers honestly. "But I'm here."

The simple statement carries more weight than elaborate reassurances would have. She's chosen to follow me, to trust me, despite having every reason not to.

"Where are we going?" she asks as familiar roads give way to highway.

"A property I maintain for security purposes. We'll be safe there tonight."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we discuss more permanent arrangements."

She falls silent, staring out at the passing landscape. The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across her face, highlighting the delicate curve of her cheek, the stubborn set of her jaw.

"Do you want to know what I got to research about you online?"

What was it with these out-of-the-blue questions of hers? Where the heck were they coming from?

"The articles never confirm it's true. But they say there are whispers of you being made to join the family business when you were just fourteen."

"And?"

"And you need to stop blaming yourself for all the things you've done since then. Because what happened to you wasn't right. You were powerless to stop it when you were young. But you chose to get out of that world when you were old enough."

"No." If we're going to talk about the past, we might as well keep it real. "It's not when I was old enough."

She looks at me uncertainly. "Then——"

"I got out when I was strong and powerful enough for my own father to fear me."

Her face pales, and a humorless smile twists over my lips. Now you know, cara. Still think I'm good?

Her silence is deafening as we continue north along winding roads that parallel the sea. The landscape changes from coastal town to rugged cliffs to forested hills. The safe house is tucked away on a private peninsula, accessible only by a single winding road that's easily monitored and defended.

As we approach, I watch her reaction from the corner of my eye. The property comes into view suddenly—a modern structure of glass and stone perched at the edge of a cliff, ocean spreading endlessly beyond it.

Her breath catches audibly. "This is yours?"

"One of several properties." I park and come around to open her door—a courtesy that seems to surprise her. "It's as secure as anywhere can be."

I lead her inside, watching her reaction as she takes in the soaring ceilings, the minimalist but expensive furnishings, the wall of windows overlooking the ocean below. The view is the property's crown jewel—180 degrees of untamed coastline, wild and beautiful and deadly.

She moves to the windows, silhouetted against the sunset-painted water. For a moment, I simply watch her—this woman thrust into my world through no choice of her own, standing with remarkable composure despite everything.

"It's beautiful," she whispers, her palm resting against the glass.

"It serves its purpose." I move beside her, careful to maintain appropriate distance.



"The entire property is secured—perimeter alarms, motion sensors, bulletproof glass. You're safe here."

She turns toward me, the dying light catching in her hair, turning the brown strands to copper and gold. "Thank you."

The simple gratitude catches me off guard. "Don't thank me. I'm only fulfilling my obligation."

She accepts this with a small nod, turning back to the view. "What happens now?"

"Now you rest. Tomorrow we'll discuss our next steps."

"Our next steps," she repeats, a question in her voice.

"Your life has changed, Kleah. Permanently. How we navigate that change is something we need to decide together."

She wraps her arms around herself, suddenly looking very young and very alone against the vastness of the ocean behind her. "I'm scared," she admits, the words barely audible.

The confession—simple, honest, without expectation of comfort—moves something in me.

"Fear is only a weakness if you deny its existence. It can only be eliminated when you confront them head on."

I only realize I'm touching her cheek when she looks up at me, startled, and I bite back an expletive as I swiftly yank my hand away.

"Gabriele——"

I cut her off, saying in a harsh tone, "Get some rest. The east wing is yours. There are clothes in the closet that should fit. The kitchen is fully stocked if you're hungry."

I can feel her staring at me, but I ignore this as I lead her to her suite—a spacious bedroom with attached sitting room and bath, all overlooking the ocean. She pauses at the threshold, turning back to me.

"I'll be in the west wing. If you need anything, there's an intercom system in each room."

"Thank you." She says it again, despite my earlier deflection. "Not just for the protection. For the honesty. And for making it clear w-what this is...and isn't."

She slips inside before I can respond, closing the door softly between us.

I remain in the hallway longer than necessary, staring at the closed door, and turning her words over in my mind...because I'm no longer sure if everything she says is still true.

I've made it clear to her that all of this is because of my blood debt. But that doesn't explain the way my chest tightens every time I look at her.

I force myself to turn away, to focus on security checks and preparation for tomorrow's difficult conversation. There are plans to make, contingencies to organize, a future to arrange for a woman who never asked to be part of my world.

As I work into the night, her words echo in my mind, a truth I'm not ready to face.

You're not as evil as you think. And more redeemable than you let yourself believe.

She's wrong, of course. I am danger incarnate. Even my own father thinks so. So why then? Why does she insist on seeing a man underneath the blood and shadow? Why I am undone by words that are supposed to be a lie?

Her words haunt me. Memories of her face torment me. They keep me from sleeping, and all I can think of is just one thing. And before I realize what's happening, I'm already at her door. Knocking.

She opens it immediately, as if she'd been waiting.

"G-Gabriele?"

"Marry me." The words escape before I can shape them into something more logical, more calculated.

"W-what?" She takes a step back, eyes widening.

Damn it. I've frightened her. "I don't mean—" I rake my fingers through my hair. "It would be an arrangement. Protection. My name would shield you in ways nothing else can."

"Marriage?" Her voice trembles, and something in my chest twists painfully.

"You don't have to answer now." But she does. We both know it. "It's just the only way I can guarantee your safety."

"It's not that I'm afraid of you," she whispers, and the admission hits me like a physical blow. "It's just... everything's happening too fast."

Too fast, she says.

How long will it take her to realize that time won't make a difference? She can wait as long as she likes, but someone like me will never change. Someone like me will never deserve her. But because she was born with Biancardi blood running in her veins, she has no choice.

Time is not on her side. And for better or for worse, her brother chose me to protect her, by all means possible.

"Think about it," I say instead, stepping back into the hallway. "Until morning."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

IT'S THE SECOND NIGHT that I've hardly slept.

Marry me.

Two simple words that had knocked the breath from my lungs. Not a request born of love or even desire, but a strategic solution to an impossible problem. A way to shield me using his name, his reputation, his power.

I'd asked for time, and he'd given it—until morning. Well, morning has arrived, and with it the weight of a decision that will alter my life irrevocably.

Outside my window, the ocean stretches endlessly toward the horizon. The safe house is nothing like I'd imagined—not the stark, utilitarian fortress I'd expected but a beautiful coastal retreat with breathtaking views. The contrast between its elegance and the ugly reality of my situation feels jarring.

I dress in the clothes Gabriele provided—soft leggings and a comfortable sweater, both in my size. The thoughtfulness of this small detail catches me off guard. How does a man this dangerous, this controlled, notice something as mundane as clothing sizes?

The scent of coffee draws me from my room. I follow it to the kitchen, where Gabriele stands at the window, his back to me, a mug in his hand as he gazes out at the ocean. He's changed into dark jeans and a fresh henley that does nothing to disguise the muscular breadth of his shoulders.

He turns as I enter, as if he sensed my presence before I made a sound. There's something different in his expression this morning—a vulnerability quickly masked by his usual controlled facade.

"Did you sleep?" he asks, his voice low and rough.

"Not much," I admit. "You?"

He doesn't answer, just reaches for another mug and pours coffee for me. The domestic gesture seems incongruous with the dangerous aura that surrounds him.

"I've been thinking..."

"And?" No pressure in his tone, just careful neutrality.

"I have questions first." I move to the kitchen island, setting my mug down with deliberate care. "This marriage you're proposing. What exactly would it mean?"

He considers for a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Legally, it would establish you as my wife, entitled to my protection and resources. In the world we're dealing with, it would mark you as claimed—no longer just Viktor Biancardi's sister, but Gabriele Bronzetti's bride. That status creates complications for anyone planning to harm you."

"Complications," I repeat. "Not impossibilities."

"Nothing is impossible for someone determined enough. But marriage raises the stakes considerably. An attack on you becomes an attack on me, my honor, my position. Few would risk that lightly."

I take a sip of coffee, the warmth of it spreading through my chest. "And practically?"

Day to day? What would this marriage look like?"

His dark eyes study me over the rim of his cup. "Whatever we decide it should look like. There are appearances to maintain in certain circles, yes. But behind closed doors, the parameters are ours to set."

"Parameters," I echo. "You make it sound like a business arrangement."

"Isn't that what you'd prefer?"

The question catches me off guard. I should say yes immediately. Of course that's what I'd prefer—a marriage in name only, a protective shield with no messy emotions or physical entanglements. And yet, something holds me back.

"I don't know what I prefer," I say helplessly. "Twenty-four hours ago, I was leading a normal, ordinary life. Then you suddenly show up, telling me I'm in danger because I'm related to a mafia ——" I break off when I notice his lips tighten. "What is it?"

"It's nothing."

"It looks something."

"It's the word you use," he says reluctantly. "Mafia ."

I'm fascinated with the way this term actually makes him wince.

"We do not call ourselves that. We prefer something else."

"Oh, so like, boy bands are now like boy——" I stop myself in time when I realize how close I am to having my neck snapped by the man currently glaring at me. Right. Comparing big, bad wolves like Gabriele to boy bands was not exactly the smartest

thing to say, was it?

I clear my throat. "So, um, what's the more politically correct term for, um——"

Mob bosses? Organized crime lords? Outlaw?

"——people in your world?"

His lips tighten again, and I don't know what to make of this——

"Famiglia. "

——until I hear it for myself. I even remember him using it in passing in the past, but it's only now, with the strained silence between us, that the weight this word carries becomes all too clear.

Famiglia means family. And in their world, blood is a good enough reason to kill, a good enough reason to die for. Famiglia also means when one claims a wife, it's an unbreakable bond, for better or for worse, till death do them part.

"I know it's a lot to process."

That might be the understatement of the century.

"Can I...can I take a walk outside?" I ask awkwardly. I just need some time and space——

"I'll join you."

——from him, but of course I can't tell him that now.



I follow Gabriele through glass doors onto a stone terrace that wraps around the side of the house. Comfortable seating is arranged to maximize the view, and the ocean stretches endlessly before us, waves catching the morning light.

Gabriele keeps a careful distance between us as we stand at the railing, the breeze carrying the scent of salt and earth. He seems more relaxed out here, as if the open space eases something tight within him.

"Do you have any idea who wants me dead?"

"There's a good probability it's Valentina, your father's younger sister."

"And my aunt."

"Another unfortunate thing about our world? Money may also be thicker than blood."

I take a deep breath, facing the reality of my situation with as much clarity as I can muster. My old life is gone—that much is certain. Whether I accept his proposal or not, I can never go back to being just Kleah Martell, artisan with a quiet shop and a simple life.

The question is what comes next.

"I need something from you," I say without turning.

"Name it."

"Honesty. Complete honesty. No matter how ugly or difficult the truth might be." I turn to face him. "I can't navigate this world if I'm working with partial information. I need to know what I'm facing, always."

He studies me, his expression unreadable. "That level of honesty comes with its own dangers."

"I'll take my chances."

"Very well." He inclines his head slightly. "Honesty, then. In return, I require obedience in matters of security. Without question, without hesitation."

The word 'obedience' bristles against my independent nature, but I understand the necessity. In matters of life and death, there's no time for debate.

"Agreed," I say, "but only for security. Nothing else."

"Nothing else," he confirms.

We stand there, the wind and waves the only sound between us, this strange bargain hanging in the air.

"I'll marry you," I say finally, the words both surrender and declaration. "But you...you can't—you won't touch me unless I ask."

GABRIELE

Her words are clear, firm—a boundary drawn in the sand between us. I should be relieved. Complications of desire have no place in what must be a strategic alliance. And yet, something in me resists the limitation, chafes against it.

Not because I want to force her—the very thought is repulsive—but because she speaks as if proximity to me is something to be endured rather than desired.

Pride. A foolish reaction when survival is at stake.

"Agreed," I say, my voice betraying none of my inner thoughts. "Your body is your own. Always."

Relief softens her features, and I wonder what she expected from me. What stories has she heard about men like me? What fears keep her awake in the marble and silk sanctuary I've provided?

"I'll have papers drawn up today," I tell her. "The ceremony can be private, discreet. Just the necessary legal witnesses."

She nods, her gaze returning to the dark expanse of water below us. The morning light catches in her hair, turning the brown strands copper at the edges. She looks ethereal, untouchable—and yet so very human in her vulnerability.

"What happens after?" she asks, her voice almost lost in the sound of waves. "After we're married. Where do we go? What do we do?"

"We divide our time between secure properties—here, my villa in Sicily, perhaps my apartment in London when necessary. You'll learn security protocols, how to recognize threats, who can be trusted and who cannot." I move to stand beside her at the railing, careful to maintain a respectful distance. "When the time is right, we make strategic appearances in circles where your status as my wife will strengthen your position and deter potential threats."

"How long?" The question is barely a whisper. "How long will this last?"

"Until your position is secure. Until all threats are neutralized."

"Years, then," she says, not a question but a realization.

"Most likely."

She only nods, her profile delicate against the morning sky. I find myself studying the curve of her cheek, the soft fullness of her lips, the stubborn set of her jaw. She is lovely in a quiet, unassuming way—nothing like the calculatedly beautiful women who typically populate my world.

"I should hate this," she says suddenly. "Being forced into marriage, having my life stolen from me because of blood I didn't choose and connections I never made."

"You should," I agree.

"But I don't. Not entirely." She turns to look at me, her hazel eyes reflecting sunlight. "I'm terrified. I'm angry. I'm grieving for the life I thought I'd have. But hatred requires energy I can't spare right now."

Her honesty is disarming. Most people in her position would rage or collapse, fighting futilely against immovable reality or surrendering to despair. Instead, she assesses, adapts, acknowledges the complexity of her own emotions.

"You're stronger than you realize," I say, the observation escaping before I can measure its wisdom.

A small, sad smile touches her lips. "Necessity, not strength."

"They're often the same."

We fall silent again, the rhythm of the waves below creating a hypnotic backdrop to our unlikely negotiation. This woman beside me—this stranger who will soon bear my name—carries herself with a dignity that belies the chaos of her situation.

"I should have the final paperwork by midday," I tell her. "A judge I trust will perform the ceremony whenever you're ready."

"Tomorrow," she says, decision crystallizing in her voice. "If we're doing this, let's not drag it out."

She disappears inside before I can respond, leaving me alone with the wind and waves and the unsettling feeling that this arrangement may be more complicated than I anticipated.

I remain on the terrace long after she's gone, staring out at the dark water below. In my world, marriages are typically strategic alliances even when they purport to be love matches. Power wed to power, wealth to wealth, obligation to obligation. The honesty of our arrangement should be refreshing, uncomplicated.

Yet something about her quiet dignity, her clear-eyed approach to an impossible situation, makes me uneasy. As if the parameters we've so carefully established might prove insufficient to contain whatever grows between us.

I pull out my phone, sending encryption-secured messages to set tomorrow's plans in motion. Legal documents, witnesses, security arrangements—all the practical elements of our impending union. When I'm finished, I reach into my pocket and withdraw a small box that I've carried since yesterday.

The ring inside is simple but exquisite—a cushion-cut diamond flanked by smaller stones, set in platinum. Not ostentatious, but unmistakably valuable. The kind of ring that makes a statement without needing to shout.

I hadn't planned to offer it to her. The marriage we're arranging requires no such trappings of romance or sentimentality. A simple band would suffice for legal purposes, for the appearance of legitimacy.

And yet, I found myself selecting this particular ring from my family's collection—one of the few treasures I kept from my mother when I left Sicily behind.

Something about its quiet elegance reminded me of Kleah—understated but resilient, complex beneath a seemingly simple surface.

Foolish sentimentality. A weakness I can ill afford.

I snap the box closed and return it to my pocket. Tomorrow she becomes my wife—a contractual arrangement born of necessity and obligation. No more, no less.

The wind shifts, carrying the salt spray higher against the cliffs. In the distance, a light appears on the horizon—a ship, perhaps, navigating through darkness toward some unseen harbor. Its journey reminds me of our own: charting a course through treacherous waters, seeking safe passage through forces beyond our control.

I turn to go inside, making one final sweep of the property's perimeter on security cameras before retiring. She's already in her room, door closed, light visible beneath it. I resist the urge to check on her—a strange, unfamiliar instinct that has more to do with reassurance than protection.

In my own room, I draft the final version of our agreement, detailing the terms we've discussed. Protection for obedience in security matters. My resources in exchange for her public cooperation. Privacy and autonomy in personal matters for both parties. Duration contingent on threat level rather than calendar dates. Provisions for dissolution once safety is assured.

When I finish, I print two copies and seal them in an envelope. Traditional contracts are typically signed in ink, perhaps notarized. But for this agreement, something more binding feels appropriate.

From my briefcase, I withdraw the seal I noticed in her shop yesterday—the Celtic knot pattern that caught my attention. I'd purchased it after she left to prepare for our departure, a small acknowledgment of the craft that defines her.

I heat a stick of deep red wax, holding it over the envelope's closure until melted wax pools on the paper. Then I press her seal into it—a perfect impression, binding our agreement in the material of her chosen craft.

She signs the contract. I seal it in wax.

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*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

MARRIAGE. TO A STRANGER . Because of blood I never knew ran in my veins.

The thought circles in my mind as I stand in a small, private room within the courthouse, dressed in clothes I didn't even own twenty-four hours ago. A simple cream-colored dress—elegant but understated—that appeared this morning alongside a note from Gabriele: For today, if you wish. Your choice .

I chose to wear it, though I'm not entirely sure why. Perhaps because in a life suddenly spiraling beyond my control, the dress is one small choice I can make. Perhaps because some part of me wants to honor the magnitude of this moment, strange as it may be.

Or perhaps simply because it's beautiful, and beauty has always been my weakness.

I study my reflection in the narrow mirror. The dress fits perfectly—of course it does—falling just below my knees in a clean, classic line that makes me look more sophisticated than I feel. My hair is loose around my shoulders, my makeup minimal. I look like a bride, I suppose, though not the kind who dreamed of this day her whole life.

A soft knock at the door signals that it's time. I take a deep breath, hands smoothing the fabric of the dress in a nervous gesture I can't quite suppress.

"Come in," I call.



Gabriele enters, and my breath catches. He's wearing a perfectly tailored dark suit that emphasizes the breadth of his shoulders, the leonine grace of his movements. His eyes, those dark eyes that see too much, widen slightly at the sight of me.

"You wore it."

"It seemed appropriate."

Something flickers across his face—surprise, perhaps, or approval. "It suits you."

"Thank you." I fidget with the small clutch in my hands. "So... how does this work?"

"Simply. We go in, the judge performs the ceremony, we sign the papers, it's done."

"That's it? No witnesses?"

"Two from my security team. Discreet, professional. They won't speak of it." A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Ready?"

No. Not remotely. But what choice do I have?

"As I'll ever be."

He holds out his arm, and after a moment's hesitation, I place my hand on it. The solid warmth of him is oddly reassuring as he leads me down the corridor to a small, wood-paneled chamber where an elderly judge awaits behind a polished desk. Two men in dark suits stand against the far wall—the promised witnesses, I assume.

The room is cool and quiet, sunlight slanting through venetian blinds to cast striped patterns across the floor. It feels oddly peaceful, despite the surreal circumstances.

The ceremony itself is brief, perfunctory. The judge speaks of commitment and partnership in formal terms that seem divorced from the reality of what Gabriele and I are doing. We're not uniting our lives out of love or shared dreams, but out of necessity—my need for protection, his obligation to my brother.

When it comes time for rings, Gabriele produces a simple platinum band. Nothing ostentatious, but the quality is unmistakable. He slides it onto my finger with surprising gentleness, his hand warm against mine.

I have no ring for him. This thought bothers me more than it should.

"By the power vested in me," the judge intones, his voice echoing slightly in the small chamber, "I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Just like that, it's done. I am Kleah Bronzetti now, legally bound to the dangerous stranger beside me. A stranger who holds my life in his hands.

We sign the papers in silence, my signature looking small and uncertain next to Gabriele's bold strokes. The witnesses add their names, and then we're walking back down the corridor, my hand still resting on Gabriele's arm.

I wait until we're in the car to speak. "So what now... husband?" The word feels foreign on my tongue, but when I see how it has Gabriele disconcerted?

I like it.

My husband clears his throat. "Now we go home." He starts the engine, pulling smoothly away from the courthouse. "

We're both silent during the drive, but the silence feels different now—charged with unspoken questions, with possibilities I'm not ready to examine. Outside, the first

drops of rain begin to hit the windshield, fat and heavy against the glass.

By the time we reach the safe house, the rain has become a steady downpour. Gabriele pulls into the garage, the automatic door closing smoothly behind us.

"Go on in," he says. "I need to check the security system."

Inside, the house feels different somehow. Maybe because I'm entering it this time not as a guest, but as...what? A resident? A wife? The thought is too strange to fully grasp.

I wander to the great room, drawn to the wall of windows despite the gray gloom outside. The rain lashes against the glass, the ocean beyond a churning mass of slate and foam. It matches my mood—turbulent, uncertain, beautiful in its wild way.

"Do you like storms?" Gabriele's voice comes from behind me.

I turn to find him standing in the doorway, jacket removed, collar unbuttoned. More casual than I've seen him before, yet no less imposing.

"I do, actually," I admit. "There's something cleansing about them."

He nods, as if my answer confirms something for him. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"You should eat something. It's been a long day."

The concern in his voice catches me off guard. It's practical, yes—he needs to keep me alive, after all—but there's something else there too. Something almost... gentle.

"I could make us something," I offer.

His eyebrows lift slightly. "You cook?"

"I'm not a chef, but I can manage the basics." I smile at him ruefully. "I just want to do something...normal?"

"Understandable. The kitchen is yours, then."

I find the kitchen well-stocked with high-quality ingredients—another sign of Gabriele's meticulous planning. I decide on a simple pasta dish, something comforting for a rainy evening. The familiar routine of chopping, stirring, tasting grounds me, anchors me in the present moment rather than the unknowable future.

Gabriele gives me space, disappearing into what I assume is his office, but returns as I'm plating the food. He's rolled up his sleeves, exposing strong forearms marked with a few faint scars. The sight of them reminds me of who he is, what he's done.

My husband.

The word still doesn't feel real.

We eat at the kitchen island, the rain creating a soothing background rhythm. The pasta is good—not exceptional, but satisfying. Gabriele eats with the focus he seems to bring to everything, present in the moment in a way few people manage.

"This is good," he says. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

After dinner, he insists on cleaning up, waving away my offer to help. I take the

opportunity to explore the house more thoroughly, wandering through rooms that balance luxury with practicality. The east wing that he'd assigned to me contains not just a bedroom and bath, but a sitting room and even a small library.

It's in this library that I finally settle, curled in a window seat with a book I can't focus on, listening to the steady beat of rain against glass. The storm outside matches the one in my mind—thoughts swirling, questions mounting, future uncertain.

Night has fully fallen when Gabriele finds me there. He pauses in the doorway, as if uncertain of his welcome.

"May I join you?"

I nod, closing the book I wasn't really reading. He moves to sit in an armchair near the fireplace, not crowding me but close enough for conversation.

"Would you like a fire?" he asks. "The nights get cool here, especially during storms."

"Yes, please."

He builds it efficiently, with the practiced movements of someone who's done it many times before. Soon, flames are dancing behind the grate, painting the room in warm golden light.

"How long do you plan staying up?"

"I'm not sure I can sleep," I admit. Too much has happened, too much has changed. My mind keeps circling back to the reality that I'm now legally bound to this man—this stranger who knows more about me than I know about him.

"Would you like something? Tea, perhaps? Or something stronger?"

The offer surprises me. It's so... normal. Domestic, even. "Tea would be nice."

He nods and rises. "I'll be right back."

Left alone with the fire, I find myself staring into the flames, mesmerized by their dance. Fire transforms, consumes, reduces to essence. It takes what was and creates what will be. So much like this situation I find myself in—my life before reduced to ash, something new and unknown rising from the remains.

Gabriele returns with two steaming mugs, offering one to me. The tea is fragrant, soothing—chamomile with honey and a hint of something else I can't identify.

"What is this?" I ask after taking a sip. "It's lovely."

"An old family recipe. My grandmother's. For sleep and peace of mind."

Another small personal detail offered freely. I find myself collecting them like precious stones, these rare glimpses into who Gabriele Bronzetti is beyond the dangerous protector.

"Tell me about her," I say. "Your grandmother."

He looks surprised by the request, but after a moment, he settles back in his chair. "She was... formidable. Tiny woman, barely five feet tall, but she ruled our household with absolute authority. My grandfather might have been the priest, but she was the true moral compass."

"You loved her." It's not a question.

"Very much." His voice softens. "She took me in after my parents died. Raised me until I was fourteen."

"And then?"

"And then life took a different turn." His expression closes slightly. "That's a story for another time, perhaps."

I don't push. We each have our boundaries, our private spaces. Perhaps in time, those boundaries will shift. For now, I'm grateful for even this small insight.

We finish our tea in companionable silence, the fire crackling softly, rain still pattering against the windows. Despite the strangeness of my situation, despite the fact that I married a stranger today, I feel a curious sense of calm.

When I finally rise to go to bed, Gabriele stands as well.

"Thank you," I say, though I'm not entirely sure what I'm thanking him for. The tea? The fire? The brief glimpse into his past?

"Sleep well, Kleah." His voice is gentle in a way I haven't heard before.

In my room, I change into the soft nightclothes provided, sliding between sheets that feel impossibly luxurious against my skin. Despite my earlier certainty that sleep would elude me, I find my eyelids growing heavy, my thoughts slowing.

My last conscious thought is of Gabriele sitting by the fire, firelight casting shadows across his face, his voice soft as he spoke of his grandmother.

My husband.

Perhaps not such a stranger after all.

GABRIELE

She sleeps now, in the east wing of the house.

My wife.

The title sits strangely in my mind, foreign and familiar at once. I've never imagined myself married, never saw it as part of my possible future. Yet here I am, bound by law and word to a woman I barely know.

Outside, the storm continues, wind driving rain against glass in steady percussion. It suits my mood—this restless, elemental force contained behind civilized barriers.

I move to the windows, watching lightning illuminate the churning sea beyond. Kleah Martell—Kleah Bronzetti now—is unlike anyone I expected to find. I imagined someone... fragile. Someone who would crumble under the weight of revelation, who would need to be managed rather than partnered.

Instead, I found a woman of quiet strength and surprising resilience. A woman who absorbs impossible truths and adapts to them, who faces fear without being consumed by it.

A woman who made pasta tonight, as if the simple act of cooking might restore normalcy to a world turned upside down.

There's something disarming about her directness, her emotional honesty. In my world, such transparency is dangerous—a weakness to be exploited. Yet she wields it almost like a shield, her genuineness creating a space around her that seems to demand authenticity in return.



I find myself telling her things I hadn't planned to share—small truths, but truths nonetheless. It's unexpected and unsettling, this pull toward openness with her.

I turn away from the window, moving through the darkened house to my office. Work is the answer—it always has been. Plans to make, security to reinforce, intelligence to analyze. Valentina's next move to anticipate.

But as I pass the east wing, I find myself pausing, listening. The house is quiet save for the storm outside. Is she truly sleeping? Or lying awake like me, mind racing with too many questions?

Our strange union is barely hours old. A marriage of necessity, of protection rather than passion. Yet already I feel a responsibility toward her that goes beyond my promise to Viktor. Something more personal, more... human.

In my office, I rebuild the fire mechanically, muscle memory guiding my hands in the dark. When it's burning steadily again, I take the letter from my pocket and read it one final time. Then, with deliberate care, I hold it to the flames.

The heavy paper resists at first, then catches, curling as fire consumes it. I watch until nothing remains but ash, the final words of a dead man transformed into heat and light.

A new beginning. A clean slate. Whatever happens now will be between Kleah and me, unburdened by Viktor's shadow.

I sit in the armchair, watching the fire grow stronger, listening to the storm begin to fade. Dawn will come soon, and with it, the first day of our strange new reality.

Upstairs, Kleah sleeps in the east wing, my protection and my responsibility.

My wife.

She'll never be afraid in my hands, I promise silently. Not of me, not of anyone.  
Never again.

I don't know how long I sit there, thoughts drifting between strategy and unexpected sentiment. Eventually, I must doze, because I wake with a start as the first light of dawn creeps through the windows.

The storm has passed. The fire has died. And somewhere in this house, Kleah Bronzetti is beginning to stir.

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*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

FOR A BLISSFUL MOMENT between sleep and wakefulness, I forget where I am, who I am now.

Then reality floods back. The safe house. The marriage. Gabriele.

My husband.

The title still feels foreign, surreal. I'm married to a man I've known for mere days. A man who moves like a predator and speaks like a philosopher. A man who built me a fire and made me tea from his grandmother's recipe.

I rise slowly, adjusting to this new life one careful movement at a time. The shower in the en-suite bathroom is a luxurious affair, with multiple jets and steam options I don't fully understand. The towels are thick, soft, absurdly expensive. Everything in this house speaks of wealth carefully applied, luxury without ostentation.

Dressed in another of the outfits that mysteriously appeared in the closet—casual but perfectly tailored to my body—I make my way toward the kitchen, drawn by the scent of coffee and something baking.

I don't expect to find Gabriele there, sleeves rolled up, dusting flour from his hands. The domesticity of the scene stops me in the doorway, momentarily speechless.

He looks up, catching my surprise. "Good morning."

"You bake?" I don't mean to sound quite so astonished.

A flicker of amusement crosses his face. "Occasionally. My grandmother insisted it was a necessary skill."

"Your grandmother sounds like a remarkable woman."

"She was." He gestures toward a fresh pot of coffee. "Help yourself."

I move to the counter, hyperaware of his presence as I pour a cup. The kitchen feels both spacious and intimate, morning light streaming through windows that frame the ocean beyond.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks, sliding a tray of something that looks like pastry into the oven.

"Yes, actually. Better than I expected." I take a sip of coffee—perfectly brewed, of course. "And you?"

"Well enough."

I'm not sure I believe him. There's a stillness about him this morning, a watchfulness that suggests a mind working overtime. He looks rested enough, but there's something in his eyes—a distance, a calculation.

"What are you making?" I ask, nodding toward the oven.

" Sfogliatelle ."

"Another one of your grandmother's recipes?"

" Sì ."

It's my first time to hear him speak Italian. It's just one word, but I like it. Enough to have my toes curl hard.

"I'll need to remember to thank her when we meet in heaven."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "It must be nice to be so assured of salvation."

"It's a free gift," I say lightly. "You just have to accept it."

Mm.

I let it go, knowing that this is one of those things I mustn't push. It's a gentle dance we're doing, this careful exchange of small truths, and it feels too delicate to rush.

Instead, I move to the windows, gazing out at the ocean beyond. The storm has left everything washed clean, the sky an impossible blue, the water below glittering like crushed diamonds.

"I can't get over how beautiful this place is."

"It serves its purpose." His voice is closer than I expected, and I turn to find him standing beside me, his own gaze directed outward. "The isolation provides security."

"Is that all you see when you look at it? A security feature?"

Something flickers across his face—surprise, perhaps, at the directness of my question. "No," he admits after a moment. "Not all."

He doesn't elaborate, and I don't press. Instead, we stand side by side, watching the

waves crash against the rocks below. There's something peaceful about sharing silence with him, this quiet morning moment suspended between the chaos of yesterday and the uncertainty of tomorrow.

The timer chimes, breaking the spell. Gabriele moves to retrieve the pastries, and I return to my coffee, settling on a stool at the kitchen island.

"So..." I look at him ruefully. "I really don't know what to do with my time."

Dark eyes gleam at me in amusement. "Would you prefer a schedule? '8 AM: Breakfast. 9 AM: Avoid assassination. 10 AM: Coffee break'?"

The unexpected flash of humor catches me off guard, and I can't help the laugh that escapes me.

"I like that."

"What?"

"The sound of your laugh."

"Oh." I fight off a blush. Who knew former mob bosses could be such a flirt?

Gabriele places a pastry on a plate and slides it toward me. "Try it."

The sfogliatelle is still warm, the shell crisp and flaky, the filling sweet but not cloying. I make an appreciative sound that's embarrassingly close to a moan, and Gabriele's eyes darken slightly.

"Good?" he asks, his voice a shade deeper than before.

"Incredible." I take another bite, savoring the complex flavors. "Your grandmother would be proud."

We eat in companionable silence, the pastries disappearing quickly. I'm licking sugar from my fingers when I catch Gabriele watching me, his gaze intent in a way that makes my skin prickle with unfamiliar heat.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious.

"You enjoy simple pleasures," he observes. "Without restraint or pretense."

I'm not sure if it's a compliment or an observation. "Is that a bad thing?"

"I find it refreshing, actually."

The moment stretches between us, charged with something I'm not ready to name. I look away first, gathering our plates as an excuse to move, to break whatever spell was building.

"We should discuss practicalities," Gabriele says as I rinse the dishes. "Your safety, your training, how we present ourselves to the world."

Reality crashes back in. This isn't a romantic honeymoon, a getting-to-know-you period between newlyweds. This is a strategic alliance, a marriage of protection.

"Of course," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "Where do we start?"

"Security protocols. The house system, emergency procedures, communication channels." He gestures toward the hallway. "In my office?"

I follow him through the house to a room I hadn't explored yesterday. Unlike the rest

of the property, with its airy, open design, the office is contained, almost fortified. The windows are narrower, the furnishings more utilitarian. A large desk dominates one side, multiple monitors glowing with data.

Gabriele spends the next hour walking me through the security systems—panic buttons hidden throughout the house, emergency exits, safe rooms I hadn't even known existed. He shows me how to access the secured communication system, how to recognize signs of surveillance or intrusion, how to use the basic security features of the various devices now at my disposal.

It's overwhelming, this crash course in paranoia. By the time we finish, my head is spinning with codes and protocols and contingency plans.

"This is a lot," I admit, sinking into a chair across from his desk.

"It's necessary." His voice is gentle despite the unyielding words. "Your life may depend on remembering these details."

"I know." I rub my temples, trying to organize the flood of information. "It's just... yesterday I was making wax seals in my little shop. Today I'm memorizing panic room access codes and emergency extraction protocols."

"It's an adjustment." He leans against the desk, arms crossed. "But you're handling it well."

I look up at him, struck again by how impossibly handsome he is—all chiseled angles and controlled power. A man designed by nature to inspire both fear and attraction.

"Am I?" I ask, suddenly uncertain. "Handling it well?"

Something shifts in his expression, a softening I'm starting to recognize. "Better than



most would in your position."

"I don't feel like I have much choice."

"We always have choices, Kleah." His voice is surprisingly gentle. "They're just not always good ones."

I nod slowly, understanding what he means. My choices now are limited, constrained by danger and necessity, but they still exist. I chose to marry him rather than face the threat alone. I choose, each moment, how to respond to this new reality.

"Thank you," I say quietly.

"For what?"

"For making this feel like a partnership, not a capture."

He studies me for a long moment, something unreadable in those dark, dark eyes of his. "It is a partnership. Unequal in some ways, perhaps, but a partnership nonetheless."

The sincerity in his voice touches something in me, a tender spot I didn't know was there. This dangerous man, this former criminal, treats my agency with more respect than some supposedly "good" men I've known.

"What about you?" I ask suddenly. "What do you get out of this arrangement, beyond repaying your debt to my brother?"

"Security," he answers without hesitation. "Stability in territories where Viktor's absence has created uncertainty. Your blood carries weight, whether you want it to or not."

"So I'm a political asset."

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

His gaze holds mine, steady and unreadable. "Time will tell."

Before I can press further, his phone buzzes. He glances at it, his expression shifting immediately to something harder, more focused.

"We have confirmed surveillance on the property," he says, his voice all business now. "Nothing immediate, but we should accelerate your training."

Just like that, the moment is gone, replaced by the harsh reality of our situation. I straighten, pushing aside the strange intimacy of our earlier conversation.

"What do I need to do?"

"Self-defense basics, for now. Physical training, then weapons."

I must look as alarmed as I feel, because he adds, "Precautionary only. If all goes well, you'll never need to use any of it."

But he can't guarantee that, and we both know it.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of activity. Gabriele becomes an exacting teacher, putting me through basic self-defense moves in a gym I hadn't even realized the house contained. He's careful with me, always explaining before touching, always demonstrating before asking me to try. But he's also relentless, making me repeat movements until they begin to feel natural.

By evening, every muscle in my body aches. I've never been particularly athletic—my craft requires dexterity and patience, not physical power—and the training has pushed me well beyond my usual limits.

"You did well," Gabriele says as we finish, handing me a bottle of water. "Better than I expected."

"You mean for someone who spends most of her time hunched over a workbench?"

"You need not be too harsh on yourself."

Who knew former mob bosses could also be this nice?

I take a huge gulp of water and wipe sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. "Will it be enough? If something happens?"

"It's a start." He's careful not to lie to me, not to offer false reassurances. "Combined with the security measures in place, it improves your odds significantly."

"But not to one hundred percent."

"Nothing is ever one hundred percent." His eyes meet mine, serious now. "But I will do everything in my power to keep you safe. That is absolute."

The conviction in his voice sends an unexpected shiver through me—not fear, but something else entirely. Something warm and unfamiliar.

"You should rest. Tomorrow will be demanding as well."

He's right, of course. My body screams for recovery, for a hot shower and a soft bed. But something keeps me standing there, reluctant to end this strange day.

"Will you join me for dinner later?" I ask impulsively. "I could cook again. Or we could order something."

He studies me for a moment, as if trying to decipher my motivation. "If you wish."

"I do." The words come out more emphatic than I intended. "I mean, we're in this together, right? We should at least get to know each other beyond security protocols and self-defense techniques."

A hint of amusement touches his expression. "A reasonable point."

"So... dinner? At seven?"

He inclines his head slightly. "I'll look forward to it."

In my suite, I stand under the hot shower until my muscles begin to relax, the ache transforming from sharp to dull. The bathroom fills with steam, fogging the mirrors, creating a cocoon of warmth and privacy.

As I dry off, I catch a glimpse of myself in the clearing mirror—flushed from the heat, hair damp around my face, eyes bright with some emotion I can't quite name. I look... different. Changed, somehow, by these few extraordinary days.

I dress carefully for dinner, selecting a simple but elegant outfit from those provided—soft gray pants and a silk blouse in deep blue. Not formal, but a step up from the workout clothes I've been in all day. A small application of makeup, a touch of perfume. Normal things, feminine things, in a situation that's anything but normal.

Gabriele is already in the kitchen when I arrive, opening a bottle of wine. He's changed as well, into dark slacks and a charcoal sweater that makes his dark eyes seem even more striking by contrast.

"I ordered in," he says, gesturing to an array of containers on the counter. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." The food smells amazing—something Italian, rich with garlic and herbs.

"It's from a place I trust." He pours two glasses of wine, handing one to me. "The chef is an old friend."

"You have friends?" The question slips out before I can stop it, more teasing than I intended.

Instead of taking offense, Gabriele actually smiles—a small, genuine curve of his lips that transforms his face. "A few. Carefully selected."

"I'm honored to be among them," I say lightly, raising my glass in a mock toast.

"Are we friends, Kleah?" The question is serious despite his light tone.

I consider this, taking a sip of wine to buy time. "I'm not sure what we are," I admit finally. "Husband and wife by law. Protector and protected by circumstance. Friends... maybe we're working on it."

He nods, accepting this complex truth without argument. "A fair assessment."

We serve ourselves from the containers—handmade pasta with a rich sauce, crusty bread, a salad of bitter greens and sweet tomatoes. The food is exceptional, the wine perfectly paired. For a few moments, we eat in companionable silence, appreciating the simple pleasure of a good meal.

"Tell me something about yourself," I say eventually. "Something I wouldn't know from researching you."

He considers this, twirling pasta on his fork with elegant precision. "I play the piano."

Of all the things I might have expected, this wasn't one of them. "Well?"

"Well enough."

"Classical?"

"Primarily. Some jazz."

I try to picture it—this dangerous man with deadly hands creating music instead of violence. It's a surprisingly compelling image.

"Will you play for me sometime?" I ask.

Something flickers across his face—surprise, perhaps, or pleasure at my interest. "If you wish."

"I do." I take another sip of wine, feeling warmth spread through me—from the alcohol, from the food, from his company. "Your turn."

"My turn?"

"To ask me something. Something you wouldn't know from your research."

He studies me over the rim of his wineglass, considering. "What made you choose wax seals as your craft?"

The question is unexpected, thoughtful in a way that catches me off guard. Most people ask about the business aspect, the practicalities. Not the why.

"The permanence," I answer honestly. "The way something so fluid can become so fixed, so defining. The moment of transformation from liquid to solid, capturing an impression that will last."

His eyes hold mine, intent and unreadable. "A tangible mark of identity."

"Yes." He understands in a way few people do. "And there's something intimate about it, too. The act of sealing something—a letter, a package, a promise. It's a deliberate choice to make private things sacred."

The words hang between us, charged with meaning neither of us fully acknowledges. We're talking about wax and seals, yes, but also about boundaries, about trust, about the careful disclosure of what matters.

We finish dinner slowly, trading questions and answers that gradually become more personal, more revealing. I learn that he speaks five languages, that he dislikes the taste of cinnamon, that he once broke his arm jumping from a balcony on a dare when he was twelve.

In return, I tell him about my first art teacher who recognized my talent for detailed work, about my childhood dream of becoming a restoration artist, about the sea glass collection I've maintained since I was eight.

It's strange how normal it feels, this getting-to-know-you dinner with a man I married yesterday. Strange, and yet somehow right.

We move to the library after dinner, drawn to the comfort of the space we shared last night. Gabriele builds another fire, the familiar ritual soothing in its ordinariness. I curl into the same window seat, watching the play of firelight across his face as he works.

"Can I ask you something personal?" I say when he's settled in the armchair nearby, the fire crackling between us.

"You can ask," he replies. "I may not answer."

"Do you miss it? The danger, the power?"

He considers this with the same deliberate care he seems to bring to everything. "I miss the clarity," he says finally. "When you are famiglia , roles were defined. Enemies known. Objectives clear."

"And now?"

"Now everything is...complicated, and most times, unnecessarily so." His eyes meet mine across the space between us. "But then there are things which are simply harder to categorize. Or control."

"Like me?"

" Sì ."

The honesty in his answer touches something in me, a place that recognizes truth when it's offered. Whatever Gabriele Bronzetti is—criminal, protector, my unlikely husband—he doesn't lie to me. That alone sets him apart from most people I've known.

"It's getting late," Gabriele says eventually, his voice low in the quiet room. "You should rest."

What if I don't want to?



His gaze narrows, and my breath catches. It's as if he'd heard me even though I haven't said a word.

"What do you want, Kleah?"

The question hangs between us, weighted with possibilities neither of us has voiced. What do I want? Safety, yes. Understanding, certainty, a way forward through this maze I've found myself in.

But in this moment, with firelight playing across his face and wine warming my blood, I want something else entirely.

"I want—" I start, then stop, unsure how to articulate the confusing tangle of emotions inside me.

"Tell me," he says, his voice gentle but insistent.

"I want to not be afraid." The words come out in a rush. "Not of the people hunting me, not of this new life, not of... touch."

His expression shifts, understanding dawning in his eyes. "Your foster father," he says quietly.

I nod, throat tight. Of course he knows. He probably knows everything about me, every sordid detail of my past.

"He took something from you," Gabriele continues, his voice careful but not pitying. "Trust. Safety. The ability to be seen without being violated."

"Yes." The word is barely a whisper.

He rises from his chair, moving to kneel before me, close but not touching. "What he did was unforgivable."

"I know."

"And what Biancardi did to him in return was justice."

I look up at that, surprised.

"Your brother was furious when he realized he was too late from saving you. But he made sure that your foster father would not be able to do the same thing again."

"W-What exactly did Viktor do?" Please, please, please don't tell me he killed Richard. I just don't want that kind of death on my conscience.

"Your brother was surprisingly merciful—"

Oh, thank God.

"—and simply had his men gouge Richard's eyes out."

I think I'm going to be sick.

"You asked for honesty," he reminds me. "Always."

"Yes." I meet his gaze directly. "I did."

Something shifts in the air between us, a tension building that has nothing to do with danger and everything to do with proximity, with intention, with the fire-lit intimacy of this moment.

"What else do you want, Kleah?" Gabriel is still kneeling before me, close enough that I can feel the heat of him, smell the subtle cologne he wears.

Fears cloud my mind. Urging me to take a step back and slow things down. But something in me—something new and unfamiliar and surprisingly insistent—wants more.

"I want to know what it feels like," I whisper. "To be touched by someone I choose. Someone I trust."

Heat flashes in his dark, dark eyes. "Are you asking what I think you're asking?"

"Yes." No hesitation, no qualification. Just certainty.

"We agreed," he reminds me, though I can see the restraint in every line of his body. "You said I couldn't touch you unless you asked."

"I'm asking."

For a moment, he simply watches me, searching my face for any sign of hesitation or fear. Then, with deliberate slowness, he lifts his hand toward my face.

"May I?"

I nod, heart racing.

His fingers brush my cheek, so gently I might almost imagine it. A whisper of contact, warm and careful, tracing along my jaw, down to my neck, back up to my temple. Slowly, so slowly, giving me every chance to pull away.

I don't.

Instead, I lean into his touch, my eyes fluttering closed as his thumb traces the curve of my bottom lip.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, the word barely audible.

I open my eyes to find him watching me with an intensity that should frighten me but somehow doesn't. His hand cradles my face now, strong and sure, and I feel anchored by his touch rather than threatened.

"More?" he asks, and I understand he's giving me control, letting me set the pace and boundaries of whatever this is becoming.

"Yes," I breathe.

He shifts closer, still kneeling before me, his free hand coming to rest lightly on my knee. "I can stop anytime," he says, his voice a low rumble. "Just say the word."

"I know."

And I do know, with a certainty that surprises me. This dangerous man, this former criminal with blood on his hands, would stop instantly if I asked. Would never push past my boundaries, never take what I didn't freely give.

It's an intoxicating kind of safety.

His hand on my knee slides upward, just slightly, warm through the fabric of my pants. "What do you want me to do, Kleah?"

The question—direct, honest, empowering—sends a shiver through me. "I don't know," I admit. "I've never..."

Understanding dawns in his eyes. "Never?"

I shake my head, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. "No."

Something shifts in his expression—surprise, yes, but also a fierce kind of tenderness I wouldn't have expected. "Then we go slowly," he says, his voice gentle but certain. "Only what feels right to you."

His hand moves from my face to my hair, fingers threading through the strands with careful appreciation. "So soft," he murmurs.

The simple touch sends warmth cascading through me, a pleasure so pure and uncomplicated it takes me by surprise. No one has ever touched me like this—with reverence, with attention, with absolute presence.

"Gabriele," I whisper, his name a question and an answer all at once.

"I'm here." His eyes hold mine, steady and sure. "Right here with you."

His hand on my knee moves slightly, a question in the touch. I nod, granting permission, and he slides it higher, fingers tracing patterns through the fabric of my pants. Nothing demanding, nothing frightening—just connection, just warmth.

"I want to show you something different," he says quietly. "If you'll let me."

"Yes," I breathe, the word barely audible.

He leans forward, slowly, giving me every chance to pull away. His lips brush my forehead, a touch so gentle it's almost not there. Then my temple, my cheek, the corner of my mouth.

"May I kiss you properly?" he asks, his breath warm against my skin.

Instead of answering, I close the distance between us, pressing my lips to his in a gesture of trust that surprises us both.

The kiss is tender, unhurried—a meeting rather than a taking. His lips are warm, firm, moving against mine with careful attention. No demand, no pressure, just the sweet exploration of something new.

When he pulls back, I feel dazed, my heart racing in a way that has nothing to do with fear.

"Okay?" he asks, studying my face.

"More than okay," I whisper.

A smile touches his lips, transforming his face into something so beautiful it makes my breath catch. "Good."

His hands frame my face now, thumbs stroking my cheeks with gentle appreciation. "You're exquisite," he murmurs. "Perfect."

The words send a flush of heat through me, a pleasure that's as much emotional as physical. No one has ever looked at me the way he does now—as if I'm precious, as if I'm worth cherishing.

"I want..." I start, then falter, unsure how to ask for what I don't fully understand.

"Tell me," he encourages, voice low and gentle. "Anything."

"I want to feel good," I admit, the words barely a whisper. "To know what it's

supposed to be like."

Understanding dawns in his eyes, followed by something darker, more primal. "I can give you that," he says, voice rough with restraint. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

He studies me for a long moment, as if memorizing every detail of my face. Then, with deliberate care, he rises to his feet, extending his hand to me.

"Not here," he says. "Somewhere more comfortable."

I take his hand, letting him lead me from the library to a part of the house I haven't explored—the west wing, his territory. We pass through an elegant sitting room to a doorway that must lead to his bedroom.

He pauses there, turning to me. "Are you certain, Kleah? We can stop right now, no explanation needed."

The consideration in his voice, the genuine concern in his eyes, confirms what I already know: I trust this man. Despite everything, despite the suddenness of this connection, I trust him in a way I've never trusted anyone.

"I'm certain," I say, meeting his gaze directly. "I want this. I want you."

Something flashes in his eyes—hunger, yes, but also something deeper, more complex. "Then come with me," he says, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine.

His bedroom is spacious but not ostentatious, dominated by a large bed with simple, elegant lines. The colors are neutral—grays and blues and warm woods—the overall

effect one of masculine sophistication without showiness.

He leads me to the edge of the bed, then stops, his hands coming to rest lightly on my shoulders. "We go at your pace," he says, his voice gentle but firm. "You set the boundaries. You say stop, and we stop. Immediately. No questions, no hesitation."

I nod, touched by his care, by the way he puts my comfort above all else. "I understand."

"Good." His fingers trace along my collarbone, a feather-light touch that makes me shiver. "I'm going to touch you now. Just touch. Nothing more unless you ask for it."

"Yes," I breathe, anticipation coiling low in my belly.

His hands move to the top button of my blouse, pausing there. "May I?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

With deliberate slowness, he begins to unbutton my blouse, his eyes never leaving mine. There's nothing rushed about his movements, nothing demanding—just careful attention, absolute presence.

When the last button gives way, he slides the silk from my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. I stand before him in my bra, feeling strangely unself-conscious despite my inexperience. Something about the way he looks at me—with appreciation rather than assessment—makes me feel beautiful, desirable.

"Lovely," he murmurs, his fingers tracing the curve of my shoulder, down my arm, back up to the strap of my bra. "So lovely."

His touch is electric, sending warmth cascading through me with each careful



exploration. He traces the lines of my collarbones, the hollow of my throat, the curve of my waist, all with the same reverent attention.

"Still okay?" he asks, his voice rougher now.

"Yes," I whisper. "Please don't stop."

A smile touches his lips, darkly sensual. "I won't."

His hands move to my waist, fingers tracing the waistband of my pants. "These next?"

I nod, breath catching as he slowly unfastens them, sliding them down my legs until I can step out of them. Now I stand before him in just my underwear, pulse racing with a combination of nervousness and excitement.

"Beautiful," he says again, and this time I believe him. The hunger in his eyes, the way his breath catches when he looks at me—it makes me feel powerful in a way I've never experienced.

He steps back slightly, giving me space. "Lie down," he suggests, gesturing to the bed. "Get comfortable."

I do as he asks, settling against the pillows, watching as he removes his sweater to reveal a fitted t-shirt beneath. His body is magnificent—broad shoulders, defined chest, the subtle play of muscles under olive skin. He keeps his pants on, another consideration that touches me deeply.

He stretches out beside me, propped on one elbow, his free hand hovering over my midriff. "I'm going to touch you," he says, his voice a low murmur. "Tell me if anything doesn't feel good."

I nod, anticipation making it hard to speak.

His hand settles on my stomach, warm and solid, before beginning a slow exploration upward. He traces the curve of my ribs, the valley between my breasts, the line of my collarbone, all with the same careful attention he's shown since the beginning.

When his fingers brush the swell of my breast above my bra, I gasp, the sensation sharper, more intense than I expected.

He pauses immediately. "Too much?"

"No," I breathe. "No, it's... good."

A smile curves his lips, knowing and gentle. "It gets better."

His fingers trace the edge of my bra, following the lace where it meets skin. The teasing touch makes me arch slightly, seeking more contact without knowing exactly what I'm asking for.

"Patience," he murmurs, amusement coloring his voice. "We have all night."

All night. The promise in those words sends heat pooling low in my belly.

His hand slides beneath me, finding the clasp of my bra with practiced ease. "May I?"

"Yes," I whisper, beyond hesitation now.

With a flick of his fingers, the clasp gives way. He draws the straps down my arms, removing the garment with gentle efficiency. Then he simply looks at me, his eyes darkening with appreciation.

"Perfect," he says, voice rough with restraint.

Before I can feel self-conscious, his hand is there, cupping my breast with exquisite gentleness. His thumb brushes across my nipple, and I gasp at the sensation—sharp and sweet and utterly new.

"Good?" he asks again, watching my face intently.

"Yes," I breathe. "So good."

He repeats the caress, more deliberately this time, and my eyes flutter closed as pleasure courses through me. I've never felt anything like this—this focused attention, this careful building of sensation.

"Open your eyes," he rasps out. "I want to see you."

I do as he asks, meeting his gaze as he continues his gentle exploration. There's something intensely intimate about it—not just the physical contact, but the way he watches me, learning my responses, gauging my pleasure.

His hand moves lower, tracing patterns across my stomach, fingers dipping just beneath the edge of my underwear. "Tell me if you want me to stop," he says, his voice low and controlled.

"Don't stop," I whisper.

His smile is darkly sensual, a promise of things to come. "As you wish."

His fingers trace along the elastic of my underwear, teasing rather than taking. The anticipation builds, a delicious tension coiling tighter with each passing moment.

"Gabriele," I breathe, his name a plea I don't fully understand.

"I know," he soothes. "I know what you need."

His hand slips lower, cupping me through the fabric of my underwear. Even that slight pressure is enough to make me gasp, my hips lifting instinctively to meet his touch.

"Sensitive," he observes, pleasure evident in his voice. "Responsive."

He continues to touch me through the fabric, building a rhythm that has me panting, chasing a sensation I've never felt before. It's good—so good—but somehow not enough.

"Please," I whisper, not even sure what I'm asking for.

He understands. His fingers hook into the waistband of my underwear, drawing them slowly down my legs. Now I'm completely naked before him, vulnerable in a way I've never been with anyone.

But I don't feel afraid. Not with Gabriele looking at me like I'm precious, like I'm beautiful, like I'm worthy of the care he's taking.

"You're exquisite," he whispers, his hand returning to my thigh, tracing patterns on the sensitive skin there. "A work of art."

His touch moves higher, and I find myself parting my legs without being asked, an instinctive response to the pleasure he's building in me. When his fingers find their target, I cry out, shocked by the intensity of sensation.

"Too much?"

I shake my head, restlessly. "N-No. It's...more."

Gabriele smiles, understanding what I can barely articulate. "More it is."

His fingers begin to move again, more deliberately now, finding a rhythm that has me writhing against his hand. He watches my face the entire time, gauging my responses, adjusting his touch to maximize my pleasure.

"That's it," my husband growls as my breath comes faster, as tension builds low in my belly. "Let go for me, Kleah. Let me see you."

I don't fully understand what he's asking, but my body does. The tension builds and builds, a coiling pressure that seems impossible to contain. And then suddenly it breaks, pleasure washing over me in waves so intense I cry out, my back arching off the bed, my hand clutching at his arm.

Gabriele doesn't stop, his fingers continuing their gentle movements, drawing out my pleasure until I'm trembling, oversensitive, gasping for him to stop.

Only then does he withdraw his hand, bringing it to his lips in a gesture so erotic it makes me blush despite everything we've just done.

"Beautiful," Gabriele croons. "So beautiful."

I lie there, dazed, my body humming with the aftershocks of pleasure. I've never felt anything like it—this boneless satisfaction, this profound release.

My dazed eyes meet his, and I have this sudden need to make him feel the same. To reciprocate. But when I try reaching for him, Gabriele catches my hand and brings it instead to his lips for a gentle kiss.

"Not tonight," he says, his voice gentle but firm. "Tonight was for you."

"But I want—"

"I know." His smile is tender despite the hunger still evident in his eyes. "And I want that, too. But not yet. Not until you're sure."

GABRIELE

She sleeps in my arms, trusting and vulnerable, her breathing deep and even. Her naked body curves against mine, skin like silk beneath my fingers, hair spilling across my chest.

I didn't expect this. Didn't plan for it. Didn't even allow myself to think it might happen.

Yet here she is, my unlikely wife, sleeping in my bed after I've shown her pleasure for the first time.

The knowledge that I'm the first to touch her like this—the only one—awakens something primal and possessive in me. Something I've never felt for any other woman, in any other circumstance.

Mine to protect. Mine to pleasure. Mine to cherish.

These thoughts are dangerous, a complication I can't afford. This marriage is strategic, practical—a measure to ensure her safety, to honor my debt to Viktor. It should not involve this tangle of emotion, this fierce tenderness that's taken root inside me.

And yet here we are.

She stirs slightly in her sleep, her hand curling against my chest. Even unconscious, she seeks contact, connection. It's remarkable, given her history, given the violation she suffered. That she can trust anyone, let alone me, with her body, with her pleasure...

It humbles me in a way I didn't expect.

I look down at her sleeping face, peaceful in repose, lips slightly parted, lashes dark against her cheeks. She's lovely—not in the calculated, artificial way of women I've known before, but in a genuine, unguarded way that's far more compelling.

And she's mine. At least for now, at least while the danger persists.

What happens after? When the threat is neutralized, when she no longer needs my protection? Will she stay? Would I want her to?

Questions without answers, complications I didn't foresee. Best not to dwell on them now, not when they might distract me from the immediate goal: keeping her safe.

I ease away from her carefully, not wanting to wake her. She makes a small sound of protest, reaching for me even in sleep, but settles again as I tuck the covers around her.

Standing beside the bed, I watch her for a moment longer. This woman I've married, this stranger who's somehow become something more. Something I'm not ready to name.

What have I gotten myself into?

I leave her to sleep, moving quietly through the darkened house to my office. Work will focus me, as it always does. Security reports to review, intelligence to analyze,

contingency plans to refine.

The computer screen glows in the darkness as I pull up the latest data. Surveillance remains constant at the perimeter, but no active threats yet. Valentina's people are still in assessment mode, weighing their options, calculating risk versus reward now that Kleah bears my name.

They'll make a move eventually. They have to. Valentina won't accept defeat, won't relinquish her claim on the Biancardi fortune without a fight.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

GABrIELE

THE HOUSE IS QUIET as I move through it, checking security systems out of habit. Everything remains secure, no alerts overnight. The danger still looms, but it hasn't found us. Not yet.

I pause outside my bedroom door, listening. Silence from within. Is she still asleep? Or awake, perhaps wondering where I went, why I left?

Before I can decide whether to check, my phone vibrates with an incoming call. Sammy, one of my most trusted men, currently managing security for Kleah's shop.

"Report," I answer, moving away from the bedroom door.

"Someone tried to access the back entrance last night," Sammy informs me. "Professional job, minimal damage to the lock. They retreated when they encountered the secondary systems."

"Description?"

"Male, medium build, dark clothing. The cameras only caught partial images."

"Valentina's people?"

"Most likely. The technique matches her usual contractors."

"Increase surveillance. If they return, do not engage. Monitor and report only."

"Understood."

"And the items I requested?"

"Collected as instructed. The box is secure in the secondary location."

"Good. I'll retrieve it personally."

I end the call, mind already mapping contingencies, adjusting timetables. Valentina is moving faster than I'd anticipated, already targeting Kleah's property. A warning, perhaps, or simple information gathering.

Either way, it accelerates our timeline.

"Good morning."

The soft voice behind me belongs to Kleah. I turn to find her standing in the hallway, wrapped in what appears to be my robe, her hair tousled from sleep, her eyes still soft with lingering dreams.

She's beautiful in a way that catches me off guard—unguarded, natural, with a quiet dignity even in this vulnerable state.

"Good morning," I reply, tucking my phone away. "Did you sleep well?"

A flush colors her cheeks, memories of last night evident in her expression. "Yes. Very well. But you were gone when I woke up."

There's no accusation in her voice, just quiet observation.

"I had work to do," I say simply. "I didn't want to disturb you."

She nods, accepting this. "Is everything okay? I heard you on the phone just now."

I consider how much to tell her, how much burden to place on shoulders already carrying so much. But we agreed on honesty, and I intend to keep that promise.

"Someone attempted to access your shop last night," I say. "They were deterred by the security systems."

Her eyes widen slightly, but she doesn't panic, doesn't crumble. Instead, she straightens, processing this information with remarkable composure.

"Valentina's people?"

"Most likely."

She absorbs this, her expression thoughtful rather than fearful. "What happens now?"

"Now we accelerate your training. And I retrieve some items I had my men collect from your shop."

"My tools?"

I nod, impressed by her intuition. "Yes. The specialized equipment you requested. And your personal items."

Relief softens her features. "Thank you. I've been missing my work."

The simple gratitude in her voice touches something in me, a place rarely reached by others. "You should be able to continue your craft, even here. Especially here."

"Even with people trying to kill me?" A touch of gallows humor colors her tone.

"Perhaps especially then." I step closer, drawn to her despite my better judgment. "Creation in the face of destruction. A powerful statement."

She looks up at me, something vulnerable and yet strong in her gaze. "About last night..."

Here it comes , I think. Regret. Reconsideration. A request to slow down or stop completely. I brace myself for it, ready to accept whatever boundaries she needs to establish.

"Thank you," she says instead, surprising me. "For making me feel safe. For showing me what it could be like—"

How the heck did I end up with the world's most appreciative wife? There's not a day she hasn't found a reason to thank me, and more than once, too.

"And..." Her tone turns shy. "I want you to know that I don't regret it. Any of it."

Heat courses through me at the words, and even though I know it's too early, and that I owe her to be patient and gentle—

I just can't help it. I'm pulling her close, and I allow myself to steal just one kiss from her soft lips.

Her cheeks have turned rosy when I lift my head. "Um...thank you?"

If she gets any sweeter than this, she'll have me eating from her hand in no time.

"I should shower," she says finally, though she doesn't move away. "And find something to wear besides your robe."

"It suits you." The words escape before I can censor them.

A smile touches her lips, pleased and slightly shy. "Does it?"

"Yes." I allow my gaze to travel over her—the soft curve of her shoulder where the robe has slipped slightly, the delicate line of her collarbone, the flush still warming her cheeks. "But there are clothes for you in your room. Whatever you need."

She nods, taking a step back, breaking the spell of the moment. "I'll see you at breakfast, then?"

"Yes. I'll make coffee."

Another smile, this one brighter. "You seem to be good at everything."

"Not everything," I admit, thinking of all the ways I've failed, all the mistakes I've made. "But coffee, yes."

She laughs softly, the sound warming something in my chest. Then she turns, heading toward the east wing, my robe trailing slightly behind her like a queen's robe.

I watch her go, desire and something more complex tightening my chest. This is dangerous territory—this softening, this connection. It complicates an already complex situation, adds variables that can't be easily controlled.

And yet I find myself unwilling to retreat from it, to reestablish the professional distance that would be safer for us both.

In the kitchen, I prepare coffee with the same focused attention I bring to all tasks, finding comfort in the familiar ritual. When Kleah comes back, she's dressed in slim jeans and a soft sweater, her damp hair pulled back from her face. She looks younger

like this, more vulnerable, though the quiet strength I've come to recognize is still evident in her posture.

"That smells amazing," she says, moving toward the coffee.

I pour her a cup, noting how she takes it—a touch of cream, no sugar. A small detail to add to the growing catalog of things I know about her.

"I need to leave for a while. But I'll only be gone for a few hours."

Unease crosses her features. "Is that safe?"

"The house is secure. You'll have a panic button—" I stop when I see her shaking her head.

"I'm worried about you ."

Ah.

Right.

It's been a while since someone last worried about me. And the fact that it's Kleah who cares about my safety has my chest tightening anew.

"There's nothing to worry about," I say gruffly. "I'll be gone three hours, max. And when I get back, we'll set up your workspace."

"Are you trying to bribe me?"

"Only if it's working."

She walks me to the door. "Please be safe."

I'm stunned to see her fighting back tears, and before I can think better of it, I lean down and kiss her—a brief, gentle press of lips that nonetheless sends heat coursing through me.

"Trust me. I'll be back. I promise."

THE DRIVE TO THE SECONDARY location takes less time than expected, traffic light on the coastal roads. Sammy meets me in a nondescript warehouse, security tight but invisible to casual observation.

"Everything's here," he confirms, leading me to a storage room in the back. "The specialized tools were in a hidden compartment in her workspace, just as you suspected."

"Any further activity at the shop?"

"Nothing since last night. But they'll be back."

"I know." Valentina's people are persistent, if nothing else. "Continue surveillance. Inform me of any changes."

The box of Kleah's belongings is exactly as requested—her specialized tools for seal-making, personal items from her apartment, the wooden case of seals that seemed most important to her. I check each item personally, ensuring nothing is missing, nothing has been tampered with.

Sammy watches me with barely concealed curiosity. It's unusual for me to take such personal interest in these details, to oversee an operation this minor myself.

"She means something to you, huh?"

"She's under my protection, that's all." I sound defensive even to my ears.

She means something to you," he observes, his tone carefully neutral. "Beyond the arrangement."

"Whatever you say, boss."

I load the box myself back into the car, unwilling to delegate even this small task. Then, with final security instructions for Sammy, I begin the drive back to the safe house, to Kleah. I'm halfway back when my phone rings—the secure line, the one only my most trusted associates have access to.

"Bronzetti," I answer, immediately alert.

"We've got movement." It's Toole, another of my security team. "Two vehicles approaching the safe house perimeter. Still on the public road, but the pattern suggests reconnaissance."

My blood turns cold. "Description?"

"Black SUV, civilian plates. Dark sedan behind it, keeping distance. Professional."

"Time to intercept?"

"Seven minutes at your current speed."

"Inform the house security. Activate Protocol Seven."

"Already done. They're on high alert."



I increase speed, taking the coastal curves with precision born of years of practice. The box of Kleah's supplies shifts in the passenger seat, her tools rattling with each turn.

"Has she activated the panic button?" I ask, already knowing the answer. If she had, different protocols would be in effect.

"Negative. House systems show no internal alarms."

So she doesn't know. Doesn't realize danger is approaching, circling the sanctuary I promised would keep her safe.

"Keep me updated. I'm three minutes out."

I end the call, focus narrowing to the road ahead, to the calculations of time and distance and threat assessment. The cars Toole described are almost certainly Valentina's people—too soon for a direct attack, but perfect timing for surveillance, for testing our defenses.

The timing is suspicious. Too convenient to be coincidence, too soon after my departure. Which means they were watching the house, noted when I left, decided to take advantage of my absence.

Or it means there's a leak in my security team.

Neither option is comforting.

I reach the turnoff to the private road leading to the safe house, taking it at speed, gravel spraying beneath my tires. Through the trees ahead, I catch a glimpse of movement—the black SUV that Toole mentioned, moving slowly along the public road that winds past our private drive.

They haven't made any move to enter the property yet. Just watching, assessing, gathering intelligence.

I continue up the private drive, out of their line of sight. The house comes into view, secure and seemingly peaceful, no outward signs of heightened alert. But I know security protocols are active, that every approach is being monitored, that defensive systems are ready to deploy if necessary.

I park in the garage, moving quickly inside, the box of Kleah's supplies momentarily forgotten.

"Kleah?" I call, tension coiling in my chest until I hear her response.

"In the library."

I find her curled in the window seat, a book open on her lap, sunlight streaming across her face. She looks up as I enter, a smile beginning to form before she catches the expression on my face.

"What's wrong?" she asks, immediately alert.

"We have visitors," I say, moving to the window, carefully staying to the side where I can see without being seen. "Surveillance only, for now. Nothing to be alarmed about."

She joins me at the window, and I resist the urge to pull her away from potential sight lines. The windows are treated, impossible to see through from the outside, but instinct runs deep.

We stand there a moment longer, watching through the window as the black SUV completes its slow circuit of the public road before disappearing around a bend.

"They're gone?" she asks.

"For now. They'll be back."

She nods, accepting this reality without drama. "So we continue as planned? As if they weren't watching?"

"With additional precautions, yes." I step away from the window, already mentally adjusting security protocols, patrol schedules. "We don't let them dictate our movements or routines. That gives them too much power."

And to prove this, I ask Kleah to close her eyes while I head back to the car.

When she opens them, her eyes light up, and she looks at me like I'm more angel than devil.

Na?ve is still my wife's middle name, but I'm no longer going to complain about this.

"This is why you left?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't have risked—"

"It wasn't a risk. And we do not give them power over our lives. Sì? "

She nods even as her lip trembles. "Thank you."

Sweet. My wife is too damn sweet. And it has me starting to wonder why God allowed her to be with someone like me.

I watch Kleah runs her fingers over the tools inside, checking each one as if greeting old friends. "I can't believe they're all here," she whispers. "Even my special blending tools."

"I had my men retrieve everything from your workroom. Including the items in the hidden compartment beneath the floorboard."

Her eyes widen. "H-How did you—" I simply look at her, and Kleah's expression turns rueful. "You're going to tell me it's part of your job to know these things, aren't you?"

"Just be used to the fact that there is nothing you can hide from me."

She makes a face, but I pretend not to see this and instead ask her where she wishes to set up her workspace.

"Maybe...the sunroom, if that's alright?"

"You are my wife. What is mine is yours."

The sunroom proves to be the perfect choice. It's bright and airy, with ample workspace and a view of the ocean beyond. I clear a table for her, positioning it to take best advantage of the natural light while remaining out of direct sight lines from the windows.

My wife unpacks her tools with reverent care, arranging them with precision that speaks of long practice. Each item has its place, its purpose, its particular importance in her craft.

When I see she's about to work, I decide to leave, but she calls my name. "Would you stay?" Kleah asks shyly.

The request is unexpected, touching in its openness. She's inviting me into her world, offering a glimpse of something personal, something that matters to her.

"I'd like that," I say, meaning it.

I pull up a chair, positioning myself where I can watch her work while still maintaining sightlines to the approaches outside. Security never fully leaves my mind, even in moments like this.

I ask her to explain the process, and my wife looks at me in surprise. "You'd really like to know?"

"Yes." Because I'd like to know everything about her.

"First, you choose your wax," she explains, selecting a deep burgundy block from her supplies. "Different compositions for different purposes. This one has a higher beeswax content, which makes it more pliable but also more prone to cracking if cooled too quickly."

She places the wax in a small copper pot, setting it over a portable heater she's brought from her shop. "The heat has to be gentle, consistent. Too hot and the wax loses definition. Too cool and it won't take the impression properly."

I watch as she works, her movements confident and precise. There's something meditative about it, about the careful attention she brings to each step of the process.

"While that's melting, we prepare the base material." She selects a thick cream-colored card from her supplies. "The surface needs to be receptive but not absorbent. Like paper that's been treated with a slight sizing."

She marks the center point where the seal will go, then sets the card aside. Returning

to the melting wax, she tests it with a small tool, assessing its consistency.

"Not quite ready," she murmurs, more to herself than to me. "A few more moments."

There's something deeply compelling about watching her work—the focused attention, the quiet confidence, the respect for the materials in her hands. It reminds me of my grandmother, of the way she approached cooking not as a chore but as a sacred act, a form of care.

"Can you see it?" Kleah breathes. "How you'll know when the wax is ready? When it moves like this, like honey rather than water..." My wife lifts the pot, pouring a precise amount of the burgundy wax onto the center of the card. The wax pools, a perfect circle of deep crimson that catches the light like liquid garnets.

"The timing here is crucial," she explains, setting down the pot and reaching for a seal. "Too soon and the wax is too soft, the impression blurs. Too late and it's too hard, the seal won't penetrate deeply enough."

She holds the seal poised above the cooling wax, watching with intense concentration. Then, with deliberate pressure, she presses it into the center of the pool.

"Firm, even pressure," she murmurs. "Hold it... hold it..."

After several seconds, she lifts the seal with a smooth, decisive movement. The impression left behind is crisp, detailed—a design I recognize as her maker's mark, the stylized "KM" surrounded by a simple knotwork border.

She looks at me with a beaming smile. "Done!"

"It's perfect." I mean this. The edges are clean, her impression deep and precise, and

the color of the seal rich and consistent.

"Would you like to try?" Kleah asks eagerly.

I hesitate, unaccustomed to being a novice at anything. It's been years since I approached something with complete inexperience, with no certainty of success. But when I look at my wife again and see how her hazel eyes are shining—

"I'd be honored."

Kleah guides me through the process step by step, her voice calm and encouraging. When the wax is ready, she stands beside me, watching as I pour it onto the prepared card.

"Perfect," she says as I set the pot down. "Now wait... wait... a little longer..."

I hold the seal as she instructed, poised above the cooling wax. Her hand covers mine, guiding the pressure as I press down.

"Firm," she murmurs. "Steady. Now hold..."

The contact of her hand on mine, the warmth of her beside me, the scent of her hair—all distract me momentarily from the task. But I maintain focus, keeping the pressure even as she instructed.

"Now lift," she says. "Smooth, decisive movement."

I do as she directs, lifting the seal with a single fluid motion. The impression left behind is surprisingly good for a first attempt—the design clear, the edges clean, though not with the perfect definition of Kleah's work.

"Well done," she says, genuine approval in her voice. "That's remarkably good for a first try."

Pride—a sensation I rarely experience these days—warms my chest. "I had an excellent teacher."

"Thank you." A blush steals over my wife's cheeks. "Would you like to try another?"

We work together for the next hour, Kleah teaching, me learning, both of us focused on the delicate craft before us. It's strangely peaceful, this shared activity, this creation of small beauties amid the larger dangers surrounding us.

I find myself watching her as much as the wax—the graceful movement of her hands, the way she tucks her hair behind her ear when concentrating, the soft curve of her lips when she's pleased with a result.

"What?" she asks, catching me watching her.

"Nothing," I say. "Just appreciating your expertise."

I watch her gather the seals carefully, setting them aside to fully cool and harden. I help her with the cleaning, and then Kleah is smiling at me again like I've just made all of her dreams come true.

"Thank you for——"

I can't remember ever being turned on by someone's gratitude. But that's exactly what happens when I hear my wife say those words again. And the next thing I know, I already have her in my arms, and she's gasping as my tongue drives inside of her mouth.



The kiss deepens naturally. Her tongue mating with mine, shyly at first, then just as boldly, her need matching mine, and both of us are panting when I finally give her a chance to breathe.

"Gabriele... "

Her hazel eyes complete the rest of what she's asking, and my whole body turns rigid.

"Are you sure?" I grit out.

"No," she says shakily. "I'm not. B-But the one thing I'm sure of is how much I want you—here."

My eyes widen.

"Now."

I can't believe I just heard what I heard. Or that she's asked what she's asked.

"P-Please..."

But the moment I hear her plead like she can't wait any longer—

My control breaks.

And then there's no turning back.

I lift her easily, setting her on the edge of the work table, positioning myself between her thighs. Her legs wrap around my waist instinctively, drawing me closer, creating a delicious pressure where we both want it most.

"Tell me what you want," I murmur against her neck, pressing kisses to the sensitive skin there. "Tell me what feels good."

"Everything," she gasps as my lips find a particularly responsive spot. "Everything you're doing."

I smile against her skin, pleased by her honesty, by the uninhibited way she responds to my touch. My hands move to the hem of her sweater, pausing there in silent question.

She nods, lifting her arms to help as I draw the garment over her head. Beneath, she wears a simple bra, nothing fancy or designed to seduce, and yet the sight of her partial nakedness sends heat surging through me.

"Beautiful," I growl, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

Color rises in her cheeks, but she doesn't look away, doesn't try to cover herself. Instead, she reaches for me, her hands surprisingly confident as they find the buttons of my shirt.

"Let me..."

I allow her to undress me, to explore at her own pace. Her fingers trace the contours of my chest, the definition of muscle, the occasional scar from a life lived dangerously.

"You're..." she begins, then stops, seemingly at a loss for words.

"What?" I prompt gently.

"Magnificent," she finishes, color deepening in her cheeks. "Like something carved

from stone."

The admiration in her voice, the genuine appreciation in her eyes, affects me more deeply than the practiced seductions of far more experienced women ever have.

"May I?" I ask, hands moving to the clasp of her bra.

My wife nods, breath catching as I release the fastening, drawing the straps down her arms. The garment joins her sweater on the floor, leaving her bare from the waist

I take a moment simply to look at her, to appreciate the beauty she offers so trustingly. Her breasts are perfect—full and firm, with dusky rose nipples that tighten under my gaze.

"You're exquisite," I tell her, my voice rough with desire.

She doesn't look away, doesn't try to cover herself. Instead, she watches me with those remarkable hazel eyes, open and trusting and filled with a desire that matches my own.

I lean forward, pressing a kiss to the hollow of her throat, then lower, tracing a path down to the swell of her breast. When my mouth closes around her nipple, she gasps, her back arching, hands flying to my shoulders for support.

"Good?" I whisper against her skin.

"Yes," she chokes out, fingers tightening on my shoulders.

Encouraged by her response, I continue my exploration, using lips and tongue and the gentlest scrape of teeth to draw sounds of pleasure from her. Her responses are uninhibited, honest —every gasp, every moan a genuine reaction rather than a

practiced performance.

My hands find the button of her jeans, pausing there in silent question. She nods eagerly, lifting her hips to help as I slide the denim down her legs. Her underwear follows, leaving her gloriously naked on the edge of the worktable.

I step back slightly, drinking in the sight of her—all soft curves and smooth skin, flushed with desire and gorgeously, unabashedly bare for me.

"G-Gabriele..."

Her voice turns my name into an entire language all on its own. She only has to say my name like that, and I already know what she wants.

"P-Please."

I comply, removing the rest of my clothing with efficient movements. Her eyes widen slightly as she takes in my fully naked form, her gaze lingering on my evident arousal.

"May I touch you?" she asks, the question so earnest, so endearingly direct, that it makes my chest tighten with something beyond desire.

"Yes," I manage, voice rough with restraint.

Her hands reach for me, tentative at first, then with growing confidence as she explores my body. The simple, honest wonder in her expression as she touches me is more arousing than the most practiced caress from a more experienced lover.

When Kleah's fingers finally wrap around my length, I have to stifle a groan, the sensation almost overwhelming after the prolonged anticipation.

"Like this?" Her tone is nervous, her touch hesitant.

"Perfect," I manage to grit out as I guide the movement of her hand. "Just like that."

She's a quick learner, her touch growing more confident, more purposeful, until I have to stop her—

Her eyes fly up to me, and I say roughly, "It's too much."

And if I let her touch me a second more, it would be over far too soon.

I step closer again, positioning myself between her thighs, my hands trailing up her legs, thumb brushing against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. She shivers at the touch, legs parting further in unmistakable invitation.

"I want to make this good for you," I tell her, my fingers finding her center, testing her readiness. She's wet, gloriously so, her body primed and eager despite her inexperience.

"It already is," she gasps as my thumb finds the bundle of nerves at her core.

I work her with careful attention, watching her face for every sign of pleasure, every hint of what she needs. My fingers slip inside her, first one, then two, stretching her gently, preparing her for what's to come.

Her head falls back, eyes closing as sensation overwhelms her. "Please," she whispers, hips rocking against my hand. "Gabriele ..."

The trust in her eyes, the clear desire, the absolute certainty—it undoes me in ways I never expected. This woman, this artist with her wax-stained fingers and her brave heart, has found her way past defenses I thought impenetrable.

But I still have to ask her one last time.

"Are you sure?"

"G-Gabriele, p-please——"

I position myself at her entrance, the head of my shaft pressing against her slick heat.

"Look at me," I rasp out.

My wife's hazel eyes lock with mine.

"If anything hurts, if anything doesn't feel right, promise me you'll tell me."

"Y-Yes."

Only then do I begin to press forward, entering her with exquisite slowness, giving her body time to adjust to the intrusion. She's tight, gloriously so, her inner muscles clenching around me in a way that makes restraint almost impossible.

A small gasp escapes her as I breach her virgin barrier, her fingers digging into my shoulders. I freeze immediately, watching her face for signs of discomfort.

"Don't stop," my wife urges, her voice breathless but certain. "Please, don't stop."

I continue my careful advance, inch by inch, until I'm fully seated within her, our bodies joined as completely as possible.

And then I wait.

Even if it's killing me not to move.

I wait until I finally feel it.

Her body starting to writhe with restlessness, and that's when I finally start moving, building her pleasure with thrusts that drive deeper and deeper past her moist folds.

"More," my wife gasps against my mouth. "Please, more."

I give her what she asks for, deepening my strokes, increasing the pace while still maintaining control. One hand supports her lower back, the other slides between us to where we're joined, thumb finding the bundle of nerves that will heighten her pleasure.

Kleah's response is immediate and gratifying—a sharp gasp, a tightening of her legs around my waist, a flush spreading across her chest and neck. She's close, I can feel it in the way her body tenses, in the quickening of her breath.

"That's it," I encourage, voice rough with my own mounting pleasure. "Come for me, cara——"

Kleah's release is beautiful in its intensity—back arching, muscles clenching around me, my name spilling out in a whimper. The sight of her, undone by pleasure I've given her, is enough to push me to the edge of my own control.

I pull out just in time, my release spilling across her stomach in hot pulses that leave me shaking, vulnerable in a way I rarely allow myself to be.

For a moment, we simply breathe together, foreheads touching, her hands still clutching my shoulders as if she might float away without the anchor of my body. Then I reach for a clean cloth from her workspace, gently cleaning the evidence of my passion from her skin.

"Are you okay?" I ask quietly.

Kleah's smile is luminous, transforming her face into something so beautiful it makes my chest tighten anew.

"Not just okay," she whispers, "but perfect."

I help Kleah down from the table, supporting her as her legs tremble slightly beneath her. We dress in comfortable silence, exchanging small touches, private smiles, the air between us charged with something new and precious.

When she's fully clothed again, I pull her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "No regrets?" I ask, needing to be certain.

"None," she assures me, meeting my gaze directly. "It was... everything I hoped it would be. More, even."

The simple honesty in her voice, the clear contentment in her eyes, settles something in me I didn't know was restless.

I watch my wife turn back to her workplace, gathering the seals and checking them one at a time. It makes me want to do something - anything - so that I can seal her in my possession.

Because this time, it's no longer enough to protect her.

I also want to own her. Forever. No matter the means. No matter the cost.

KLEAH

I've never felt anything like this.



My body hums with lingering pleasure, with the sweet ache of new muscles used, with the strange and wonderful awareness of having been thoroughly, completely loved.

Because it was love, I think, even if neither of us has said the word. Not just sex, not just physical release, but something deeper, something that connected us beyond flesh and sensation.

Gabriele moves around the kitchen with his usual grace, preparing dinner while I sit at the counter, watching him with a contentment I've never known before. There's something different about him now—a softness beneath the controlled exterior, a tenderness in the way he looks at me.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asks, glancing over his shoulder as he stirs something on the stove. "No discomfort?"

"I'm fine." He's asked me that five times in the past seven minutes. It's so adorable, really, but even I know better than to tell him that.

"Don't lie."

"Fine then," I concede with a sigh. "I'm a little sore—"

My husband's jaw clenches.

"But I swear you'll break my heart if you use that as an excuse not to touch me again."

A few seconds pass.

And just as the reality of what I've said hits me—

Have you no shame, Kleah Martell?

My husband's dark eyes gleam, and oh, the heat I see it in simply makes me catch my breath.

"Just remember, cara. You asked for this."

Why do I suddenly have this feeling I've asked more than what I can chew?

We eat dinner on the terrace, watching the sun set over the ocean, and afterwards, we move to the library. We're starting to have a routine, my husband and I...

And I like it.

No, actually, I love it. So, so much. To the point that I'm starting to worry everything we have is just too good to be true.

Gabriele and I talk well into the night. We talk about anything. Everything. It's already half-past one when he catches me yawning. But as soon as we're back in the bedroom——

Oh no.

That's when my husband makes his move.

"Don't forget," he growls, and my heart jumps to my throat. In excitement. Not fear.

"You asked for this."

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

TWO WEEKS. THAT'S HOW long I've been married to Gabriele Bronzetti. Two weeks since I stood in a courthouse and bound my life to a stranger's for protection. Two weeks of learning to navigate this new reality—danger and desire, fear and fascination intertwined.

In some ways, it feels like years. In others, mere moments.

I watch him now from the doorway of his office, unaware of my presence as he works. His focus is absolute, brow slightly furrowed as he studies whatever's on his computer screen, one hand absently rubbing the tension from his neck.

My husband looks handsome. Strong. Disciplined . If it were up to me, I'd love to spend every waking moment with him making love. I'm pretty sure he'd like that, too. But because there are still threats looming over my head, Gabriele hasn't let me slack off from my training.

And with every day that passes, the training has become more intense, to the point that I sometimes wonder if I'll just pass out in exhaustion one day.

But I don't complain, of course. I know it's for my own good. And while a part of me wants this to be over, another part of me is terrified. What will really happen once the danger has passed? Will Gabriele still keep me as his wife? He says we have forever. But can I truly believe him?

I step into the room, deliberately making enough noise that he won't be startled. His

head lifts immediately, eyes finding mine, expression softening in a way that still surprises me.

"I didn't hear you," he says, pushing back from his desk slightly.

"You were focused." I move closer, perching on the edge of his desk. "Important work?"

"Security updates. Nothing immediate, but developments we need to monitor."

I nod, accepting this. I've learned not to ask for specifics when it comes to security matters. Some details are better left unknown, for my peace of mind if nothing else.

"Is there something on your mind?"

Oh. Right. I did come here for a reason.

My husband arches a brow. "You have a surprise for me?"

"Yup."

"This, I'll have to see then."

I lead him through the house to a part we rarely use—the Roman-style bath installed by the previous owner, a decadent space of marble and glass that feels almost mythical in its luxuriousness.

"I found it a few days ago while exploring," I explain as we enter. "It seemed... indulgent in the best possible way."

The space is magnificent—a sunken bath large enough for several people, surrounded

by smooth marble, with subtle lighting that can be adjusted to any intensity. Glass walls on one side reveal the ocean beyond, the view private due to the property's isolation.

I move to the controls, having already figured out how they work during my earlier exploration. Warm water begins to fill the sunken bath. Steam rises, fogging the glass walls slightly, creating an atmosphere of dreamlike intimacy. I wait until everything's ready before turning to him, and I'm surprised (but also slightly embarrassed) to find my voice turning husky as I hear myself say...

"Take off your clothes, husband."

Gabriele doesn't answer.

He simply does what I ask, and I can feel myself starting to get wet as I watch him slowly unbutton his shirt, his movements deliberate. Unhurried. And so impossibly seductive that jealousy suddenly makes my heart ache.

"Have you done this before for other women?" I blurt out.

My husband laughs. "I'll take that as a compliment."

My throat dries when Gabriele finally stands before me, magnificent and powerful and big. In every way he can be.

I just can't believe this is my husband!

"Your turn, cara. "

I find myself turning into a clumsy mess under his gaze. But not once does he offer to help me. All he does is stare. And make me burn hotter with every passing second.

When we're both naked, I step into the bath first, the hot water a delicious shock against my skin. I settle on one of the underwater benches, extending my hand to him in invitation.

He joins me with characteristic grace, lowering himself into the water across from me rather than beside me. The distance is deliberate, I think—giving me space, letting me set the pace of whatever this becomes.

"This was a good idea, Kleah."

Hearing his praise is like having sun shine on me for the first time, but the huskiness of his voice also makes me tingle all over. "You've been taking care of me since the moment we met." The words spill past my lips in a breathless tone. "I just wanted to take care of you in return, for once."

"You don't owe me anything."

"I know." I move closer, the water rippling around me as I shift to sit beside him. "That's what makes this a gift, not a debt."

My heart thunders as I place my hand on his chest. "You're always so careful with me..." Being this close to him makes it so hard to speak. "So controlled." Because all I can think of right now is how perfect my husband is.

"You deserve care. Consideration."

"But this time, I want more. I want what you need."

"And what do you think I need?"

The thickness of his voice makes me dizzy with desire.

"W-What you need...is s-something I need as well."

A shiver runs through him, subtle but unmistakable. "Kleah..."

"Let me." I'm begging, coaxing, and tempting him at the same time. "Let me do this for you."

My hand slides lower, and I find Gabriele already half-hard from our closeness, from the anticipation of what might come. His breath catches as I wrap my fingers around his shaft under the water, the way he taught me that first night.

His eyes darken, but I don't give him the chance to say something to stop me. I kneel on the submerged bench. The water comes to just below my breasts, warm and buoyant around me.

"Tell me if I do something wrong," I whisper. "Show me how to please you."

I lower my head and notice how my husband's hands clench on the edge of the bath, knuckles whitening with the effort of restraint.

I've never done this before, but I've felt his mouth on me, know the pleasure it can bring. I want to give that to him, to watch his careful control shatter under my touch.

When I finally take him into my mouth, his sharp intake of breath is immensely satisfying. His hand comes to rest on my head, not pushing, just a gentle weight, an anchor.

"Like this?" I ask, looking up at him through my lashes.

"Yes." My husband speaks between clenched teeth. "Just like that."

I try to experiment with different rhythms. Different pressures. Different angles. And I'm rewarded by the beautiful expression on Gabriele's handsome face—eyes heavy-lidded, lips parted, the usual perfect control beginning to fray at the edges.

Pride blooms in my chest when I hear my husband's breathing grow more ragged, and the hand in my hair tightens slightly.

"Kleah."

Who knew the sound of a man's growl can be just like the most beautiful strand of music?

I can feel my husband's control crumbling, and it's intoxicating.

"Give it to me, Gabriele..."

A growl escapes his beautiful lips, and his release, when it comes, makes an exquisite sight. I don't think I'll ever forget how Gabriele looks, with his dark head thrown back, and his big, hard body jerking as my mouth tightens around his length.

GABRIELE

My wife sleeps in my arms, trusting and peaceful, her breathing deep and even. I watch her in the dim light, taking in details I rarely allow myself to study so openly—the delicate curve of her cheek, the fan of her lashes against her skin, the soft parting of her lips.

What she gave me tonight was unexpected. Not just physical pleasure, though that was profound in its intensity, its genuineness. But something more valuable, more rare in my experience—the gift of being seen, of having my needs recognized and met without having to articulate them.



I hadn't realized how tightly I'd been holding myself until she offered release. How much tension I'd been carrying, how much restraint I'd been maintaining—not just with her, but with myself.

The relief of letting go, even briefly, was more powerful than I'd anticipated. More necessary than I'd been willing to admit.

When was the last time someone gave to me without expectation of return? When was the last time I allowed myself to receive, to be vulnerable, to surrender even a fraction of control?

I can't remember. Perhaps never.

Kleah shifts in her sleep, nestling closer, her hand coming to rest over my heart as if even unconscious, she seeks connection. I tighten my arm around her, protective and possessive in equal measure.

Mine .

The thought rises unbidden, fierce and primal. Mine to protect, mine to cherish, mine to defend against whatever comes.

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

RAIN POUNDS AGAINST the windows, turning the world beyond into a blur of gray and green. The storm hit suddenly, clouds gathering on the horizon and racing toward shore with unexpected speed, bringing wind and water in violent gusts.

I watch from the library window, mesmerized by nature's fury. There's something cleansing about storms, something primal and honest in their unrestrained power.

It's been three days since Gabriele left. And ever since, I've worn the necklace he's given me, and the key that acts like its pendant resting heavily against my skin. I find its weight reassuring. It makes me feel my husband is with me wherever I go.

The house phone rings, startling me from my thoughts. "Mrs. Bronzetti, it's Toole."

His tone is deeply respectful. Everyone of his staff talks to me this way, actually, and it's still something I struggle to get used to.

"We've had reports of potential flooding on the lower access road. Mr. Bronzetti asked me to inform you he may be delayed returning from town."

Unease squeezes my chest. "Is he alright?"

"There's nothing to worry about," Toole assures me quickly. "Mr. Bronzetti is just taking the longer route back as a precaution."

I thank him and hang up, relieved but unsettled. I've grown used to my husband's

presence, to the subtle ways he fills a space without seeming to try. The careful attention he brings to every task, the quiet competence that makes even mundane activities feel purposeful.

The shift in our relationship since that night in the Roman bath has been subtle but undeniable. I find myself missing Gabriele when he's gone, even briefly. Seeking his company not from fear or obligation, but from genuine desire to be near him, to share thoughts and silence equally.

It's unexpected, this attachment. Unplanned. Perhaps unwise, given the circumstances.

But undeniably real.

Lightning flashes, followed almost immediately by thunder that shakes the windows. The storm is directly overhead now, intensifying rather than passing. I move away from the window, restless energy driving me to explore parts of the house I haven't fully investigated.

Beyond the kitchen, past a rarely used dining room, I discover a door I haven't noticed before. It's unlocked, opening to reveal a short passage that ends at another door—this one glass, leading to what appears to be a greenhouse attached to the side of the house.

Curious, I continue forward, pushing through the glass door into a space that takes my breath away.

The greenhouse is larger than it appeared from outside, a cathedral of glass and greenery. Rain drums against the roof, creating a cocoon of sound that feels both wild and sheltering. Plants of all varieties fill the space—exotic flowers, practical herbs, climbing vines that reach toward the ceiling.

It's magical—a hidden garden protected from the storm yet still part of it, still connected to the elemental forces raging outside.

I wander through, fingertips brushing leaves and petals, inhaling scents both familiar and strange. The temperature is warmer here, the air humid and rich with life. At the far end, a small seating area has been arranged—cushioned benches surrounding a low table, as if designed for peaceful contemplation amid the greenery.

I settle on one of the benches, drawing my knees up to my chest, watching rain stream down the glass walls and ceiling. The storm creates a private world in here, a bubble of tranquility within chaos.

"I should have shown you this place sooner."

The voice startles me, though I recognize it immediately.

Gabriele!

My husband stands in the doorway, rain still glistening in his dark hair, his clothes damp at the shoulders.

I run to him without a word, and his arms close around me like chains that I never want to escape from.

"Missed me?"

"So much." My voice is muffled against his chest.

"Toole says you were worried about me."

I can only nod this time. Because I'm crying, and I have no idea why.

He tips my chin up just as a flash of lightning illuminates the greenhouse, and his gaze narrows. "Why the tears?"

It's only when he asks that I realize the truth.

I love you.

But the thought of saying it terrifies me. And so the only thing I can do is wrap my arms around his neck as I stand on my toes so I can cover his mouth with mine.

My husband doesn't need another invitation, the swiftness of his response causing me to gasp as I suddenly find myself holding on to a rack, bent from the waist down, and my husband positioned behind me.

He slams into me so hard that an involuntary cry spills past my lips.

And then he slams even harder into me with his next thrust that I start seeing stars.

His lovemaking is just like the storm raging outside the greenhouse. Wild. Furious. Uncontrollable.

And I can't get enough of it.

And when we come at the same time——

It's even more intoxicating.

But what truly destroys me is when he slowly pulls out...so he can turn me to face him.

Aaaah.

My back slides up against the wall as he thrusts back into me, my legs wrapping around his waist as I hold on to his broad shoulders for dear life.

Our eyes meet.

Oh, Gabriele.

And that's when I see it.

I love you, too.

His gaze locks with mine as he pounds into me. And every thrust, he says the words with his heart again and again.

I love you.

A whimper escapes me even as my tears run faster down my cheeks.

I love you.

Everything about this feels like a dream. But it's not. And it couldn't get any more real than the feel of my husband spilling his seed inside of me for the second time.

Gabriele loves me. Life can't get any more perfect than this. And it's true.

But it can get worse.

And it does.

Because there are still people who want me dead.

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

GAbriELE

"SECURITY brEACH AT the eastern perimeter."

Toole's voice through the secure line is calm, professional, but I hear the tension beneath it. Three weeks since our last incident—longer than expected. Valentina has been patient, calculated. Which means whatever's happening now is serious.

"Details," I respond, already moving toward my office, mind shifting into the cold focus of combat readiness.

"Two vehicles. Professional team. They've disabled the outer sensors but triggered the secondary system."

"Numbers?"

"At least six. Armed. Moving with purpose toward the main house."

Not surveillance then. Not testing. An actual incursion.

"Let's go on full lockdown. I want Kleah in the safe room immediately."

"Already initiated." Toole's efficiency is why I hired him. "Extraction team is twenty minutes out."

Too long. If they've breached the perimeter with this level of coordination, we need to move now.

"Negative on extraction. We secure in place." I've reached my office, entering the code that opens the hidden armory. "I'll take point on Kleah's protection. Focus on containment."

"Understood."

I end the call, selecting weapons with practiced efficiency. Handgun with silencer, backup in ankle holster, ceramic blade at my belt. Non-lethal options as well—I prefer to interrogate rather than kill when possible.

My mind catalogs facts, assesses options, maps contingencies with mechanical precision. This is the world I inhabited for years, the mindset that kept me alive through situations where most would have perished. Cold. Calculated. Ruthless when necessary.

But beneath it all, a new concern burns—Kleah. Her safety, her fear, what this intrusion might do to the peace we've carefully built together these past weeks.

I move through the house with silent efficiency, security alerts flashing on my watch—intruders closing in, security team engaging, house systems locking down. I need to reach Kleah, get her to the main safe room where we can wait out the attack if necessary.

I find her in the kitchen, already moving toward the hidden entrance to the safe room, fear evident in her expression but controlled, focused. She's learned well these past months.

"This is it, isn't it? What we've been preparing for?"

"Yes." No point softening the reality. "We need to get to the safe room. Now."



My wife falls into step beside me without hesitation or panic. The training we've done showing in her composed demeanor, her focused movements.

"Your security team?" she asks as we move swiftly through the house.

"Engaging. Extraction team en route." I keep my voice calm, factual, though my hand at the small of her back is perhaps more protective than necessary. "We'll secure in the safe room until the situation is contained."

We reach the hidden entrance to the main safe room—a space designed to withstand virtually any attack, with independent power, air filtration, communication systems, and supplies for days if needed. The biometric lock responds to my palm, the reinforced door sliding open with a soft hiss.

Once inside, the door sealing behind us, I turn to Kleah. "Are you alright?"

She nods. "I'll do everything you say. I just want this over with."

Kleah stands by my side as we watch movement through the wall of monitors we have installed. Security footage shows the intruders—black-clad, professional in their movements—being engaged by my security team. The firefight is silent on our screens but clearly intense, tactical positions shifting, advantage flowing back and forth.

On the monitors, I see the tide turning—my security team gaining the advantage, intruders retreating toward their vehicles. Toole's voice comes through the communication system, confirming what the visuals suggest.

"Threat contained. Two hostiles neutralized, four retreating. Pursuing but maintaining perimeter integrity as priority."

"Casualties on our side?" I ask, fingers flying over the keyboard to access additional camera views.

"Paxton took a round to the shoulder. Nothing critical. Otherwise, all clear."

Relief eases some of the tension in my shoulders. Paxton is experienced, tough—he'll recover. And the rest of my team is intact, the perimeter nearly secured again.

"Maintain full alert," I instruct. "I want confirmation of complete withdrawal before we change status."

"Understood."

I turn to Kleah, finding her still watching the monitors, her expression composed despite the violence displayed there. "The immediate threat is passing," I tell her. "But we'll stay here until I'm certain it's safe."

She takes my hand and surprises me by bringing it to her lips. "Thank you for doing everything to keep me safe."

We've been together for two months now, but my wife's appreciative side still turns me on, even at times like this.

Her eyes widen when she sees my nostrils flare.

She takes a step back, and I take a step forward.

"S-Seriously?"

"Seriously," I confirm.

"But—"

We end up spending more hours than we should have in the safe room. And when we come out of it, my security team looks at us knowingly, which has my wife mumbling some incoherent excuse before quickly walking away, face flaming, and unable to meet anyone's gazes.

I want to think that the danger's finally over, but I know it's not. We'll have to keep looking over our shoulders for as long as Valentina's alive. And that is not the kind of life a woman like Kleah deserves.

KLEAH

The kettle whistles, a startlingly normal sound in a day that has been anything but normal. I prepare tea with methodical movements, finding comfort in the familiar ritual—water at the right temperature, leaves measured precisely, steeping time observed carefully.

Outside the kitchen windows, I can see increased security presence—men in tactical gear patrolling the grounds, others reinforcing entry points, checking surveillance equipment. Evidence of the danger that found us today, that may find us again.

My hands tremble slightly as I pour the tea, the reality of what happened finally catching up now that the immediate crisis has passed. They came for me. Armed men breached the property, prepared to kill or capture me because of blood I didn't choose, connections I never made.

It's one thing to know the danger exists. Quite another to see it materialize, to watch it unfold on security monitors, to understand viscerally what Gabriele has been preparing for all along.

I take my tea to the window, watching as medical personnel attend to an injured security team member—Paxton, Gabriele had called him. A man hurt defending me, defending us, from those who would do us harm.

The weight of that responsibility settles heavily on my shoulders. Not guilt exactly—I didn't choose this situation, didn't bring this danger upon myself or others. But awareness, profound and sobering, of what my existence costs, what protection requires of those who provide it.

Of what it requires of Gabriele.

I'd seen him change today—shift from the man I've come to know, to care for deeply, into something colder, more focused, more lethal. The transition had been swift, complete, and clearly well-practiced. A necessary adaptation to immediate threat.

Yet beneath it all, I'd still seen him—still recognized the man who holds me at night, who treats me with unfailing gentleness despite the violence in his past, in his capabilities. The man who has become essential to me in ways I never anticipated when I agreed to this arrangement.

My husband. Not just on paper now, not just for protection or strategic advantage. But in truth, in substance, in ways that continue to deepen with each passing day.

The tea warms my hands, grounds me in the present moment despite the chaos unfolding beyond the windows. I'm safe, I remind myself, and so is Gabriele. The immediate danger has passed, and tomorrow's worries will take care of itself.

I'm still standing at the window when Gabriele joins me, and one look at my husband's face tells me he's thought of something. "What is it?"

"There's something I need you to do, and it will require your full trust."

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

THE GALA IS EVERYTHING Gabriele described—opulent, secure, filled with the kind of people who measure power in billions and influence in nations rather than neighborhoods. I stand beside him in the blue dress he requested, smiling when appropriate, speaking when addressed, playing the role of devoted wife with more genuine feeling than I could have imagined when this arrangement began.

His hand remains at my waist throughout the evening, a constant reassuring presence. Not possessive exactly, but protective, communicative—a silent reminder that I'm not alone in this unfamiliar world of wealth and carefully veiled power.

"You're doing wonderfully," he murmurs during a brief moment alone, his lips close to my ear to prevent others from overhearing.

A helpless smile touches my lips because I know he truly means it...even when I haven't done anything worth praising. How did I not know I have the sweetest husband in the world? I only have to say 'hello', and it already makes Gabriele act like I've won the Nobel Prize.

"I need to check something with security," Gabriele murmurs after we've circulated for nearly two hours. "Will you be alright for a few minutes?"

"Of course," I assure him, genuinely confident in my ability to manage brief interactions on my own now. "I'll stay in the main room, near the center where visibility is best."

Approval flickers in his eyes—recognition that I've absorbed his security training, that I'm thinking strategically even in this social setting. "Ten minutes at most," he promises, pressing a kiss to my temple before moving away with the efficient grace that characterizes him in all settings.

I maintain my position near the center of the grand ballroom, smiling politely at passing guests, exchanging brief pleasantries when approached but avoiding extended conversation. The venue's security is extensive—Gabriele's team supplementing the already significant measures in place for an event of this caliber—but caution remains our watchword, especially with Valentina's recent escalation.

"Mrs. Bronzetti?" A server approaches, holding a silver tray with a single envelope. "A message for you."

I hesitate, security protocols warring with social convention. Gabriele's instructions were clear—accept nothing, consume nothing that hasn't been verified by security, especially in his absence.

"I'm sorry, but I'll need to verify the sender," I say politely but firmly. "If you could direct them to speak with me directly, I'd be happy to receive their message in person."

The server smiles, but something in the expression doesn't reach his eyes. "The gentleman insisted on privacy. He said to tell you it concerns your brother."

My brother. Viktor. A name few in this room would connect to me, a relationship known only to those directly involved in our situation.

Warning bells sound in my mind, security training intensifying my already heightened awareness. This is wrong. Dangerous. A trap of some kind.

"I'm afraid I must insist on speaking with the sender directly," I say, voice pleasant but unyielding. "Or perhaps you could direct the message to my husband? He'll be returning momentarily."

The server's expression shifts subtly, calculation replacing the practiced smile. "Of course, Mrs. Bronzetti. I apologize for the confusion."

He withdraws, moving through the crowd with slightly too much purpose for a genuine server. I scan the room, looking for Gabriele, for one of his security team positioned strategically throughout the venue.

Toole is nearest, stationed near a side entrance, attention already focused on me as if sensing something amiss. I make eye contact, giving the subtle signal Gabriele taught me to indicate potential threat.

He acknowledges with an equally subtle nod, hand moving to his ear where I know he's communicating with Gabriele and the rest of the team. Help is coming. I just need to maintain position, to avoid isolation or vulnerability until Gabriele returns or security intervenes.

Simple enough in theory.

Then the lights go out.

Not just dimmed for effect, but completely extinguished—the grand ballroom plunged into absolute darkness as power fails throughout the venue. Gasps of surprise ripple through the crowd, followed by nervous laughter, by assurances from staff that emergency generators will activate momentarily.

I remain perfectly still, pulse accelerating but mind clear. This is no accident, no coincidental power failure. This is coordinated, deliberate—Valentina making her

move with precision timing. It's also what we expected. And what Gabriele asked me to trust him with.

Because we're done hiding. This time, we're taking matters into our own hands, and we intend to win and take back control of our lives.

Emergency lighting activates within seconds, casting the ballroom in dim, reddish illumination—enough to prevent panic or injury, not enough for clear visibility across distances. Perfect conditions for an extraction.

I begin moving immediately, not toward Toole's position—too obvious, too expected—but toward the kitchen. Gabriele and I had reviewed the venue's floor plan extensively before the event, mapping primary and alternate exit routes, identifying security positions and potential vulnerabilities.

The kitchen connects to service corridors, to staff exits—routes less likely to be targeted in an extraction plan focused on the main public areas. If I can reach it before they locate me in the confusion...

I slip through the crowd with practiced ease, keeping my movements calm but purposeful, just another guest seeking stability in the unexpected situation. No running, no obvious evasion—attention-drawing behaviors that would make me easier to track.

The kitchen entrance is ahead, partially hidden behind an elaborate floral display. I'm almost there when a hand closes around my upper arm, grip firm but not bruising.

"Mrs. Bronzetti," a voice murmurs, cultured and pleasant. "Please don't make a scene. We have snipers positioned throughout the venue, targeting your husband's security team. One signal from me, and they start firing into the crowd."



I turn slightly, finding myself face to face with the false server, his expression now stripped of pretense. Beside him stands a woman I've never seen before but instantly recognize from descriptions—elegant, silver-haired, with eyes cold as arctic ice.

Valentina Biancardi.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, my dear," she says, voice honey over steel. "I've heard so much about Viktor's little half-sister."

The direct confirmation of her identity, of her knowledge of my relationship to Viktor, sends ice through my veins. But I keep my expression composed, chin lifted slightly in the posture Gabriele coached me to adopt when confronted directly.

"Ms. Biancardi," I acknowledge, neither submissive nor challenging. "I presume you arranged this theatrical entrance."

A hint of surprise flickers across her perfect features, quickly masked. "Resourceful and composed," she observes. "I can see why my nephew found you worth protecting. And why someone like Gabriele would be willing to tie himself down with marriage."

The implied intimacy in her tone, the suggestion that she understands Gabriele's feelings, sets my teeth on edge. But I know better than to rise to such obvious bait.

"What do you want?" I ask directly, maintaining eye contact despite the fear coiling in my stomach. "Surely this public venue isn't ideal for the conversation you're seeking."

"Perceptive, too," she notes with what appears to be genuine approval. "You're quite right. We have a more private setting prepared. You'll accompany us there now, quietly and without resistance."

"And if I refuse?"

Her smile is terrible in its gentleness. "Then, as my associate mentioned, we begin eliminating Gabriele's security team. Followed by random guests. Children first, I think. There are several in attendance tonight."

The calm certainty in her voice leaves no doubt she would follow through on this threat without hesitation, without remorse. Lives mean nothing to her compared to getting what she wants.

I consider my options, limited as they are. Screaming would create confusion but not effective help, not quickly enough to prevent snipers from firing. Physical resistance against trained professionals would be futile. Waiting for Gabriele or his team to locate me in this chaos is a gamble with innocent lives as collateral.

"Very well," I say, keeping my voice steady despite the fear coursing through me. "But you should know that Gabriele will find me. And when he does..."

I leave the sentence unfinished, the implication clear enough without specific threats.

Valentina's smile widens slightly, something almost like respect in her cold eyes. "Perhaps he will," she allows. "But by then, our business will be concluded."

The false server's grip tightens slightly on my arm, guiding me toward the kitchen with subtle but irresistible pressure. Valentina follows, her elegant evening gown exchanged somehow for a server's uniform that allows her to blend seamlessly with the venue staff now working to restore order in the power disruption.

We move through the kitchen—staff too busy with the emergency situation to notice anything amiss about two servers escorting a guest—and into the service corridors beyond. The route is clearly planned, clearly rehearsed, with just enough natural

variation to avoid obvious patterns that might trigger security algorithms.

My mind races, cataloging details, mapping our path, looking for opportunities or weaknesses I might exploit. Gabriele's training echoes in my thoughts—observe, remember, maintain awareness, conserve energy for when action will be most effective.

We exit through a loading dock, a black SUV waiting with engine running. The transition from venue to vehicle takes less than ten seconds—efficient, professional, expertly timed to minimize exposure.

"Inside," the false server directs, opening the rear door.

I comply, seeing no viable alternative at this moment. Valentina slides in beside me, the false server taking the front passenger seat as the driver pulls away immediately, no words needed to confirm the extraction was successful.

"You're very calm," Valentina observes as we merge into evening traffic, nothing about the vehicle's movements drawing attention. "Most people would be hysterical by now."

"Would hysterics improve my situation?" I ask, genuine curiosity beneath the rhetorical question.

A laugh escapes her—brief, surprised, almost genuine. "No," she acknowledges. "They would not."

"Then what would be the point?"

She studies me with those cold eyes, assessment shifting into something more thoughtful. "You're not what I expected, Kleah Martell. Or should I say, Kleah

Bronzetti now?"

"Either is accurate," I respond, maintaining the outward calm Gabriele emphasized was crucial in hostile situations. "Though I'm curious which aspects of me have surprised you."

"Your composure, primarily. Your apparent acceptance of circumstances beyond your control." She gestures elegantly. "Most civilians faced with abduction become emotional, irrational. You've maintained remarkable presence of mind."

"I've had excellent training."

"Gabriele," she says, understanding immediately. "He prepared you for this possibility."

"As much as anyone can be prepared for abduction by their husband's business rival," I acknowledge, deliberately using the most benign description of their relationship, knowing it will irritate her to have the blood vendetta reduced to mere competition.

Her expression tightens slightly, confirming my assessment. "Is that how he described me? A business rival?"

"Among other things," I say vaguely, allowing her to fill in the blanks with whatever worst suspicions she harbors.

The tactic works—her composure slips just slightly, irritation flickering across her perfect features. "I imagine he painted me as quite the villain in his narrative. The grasping aunt, the power-hungry usurper of what rightfully belongs to Viktor's blood."

I say nothing, letting the silence prompt her to continue, to reveal more in her desire

to justify herself, to correct what she assumes Gabriele has told me.

"What he fails to mention," she continues after a moment, "is that I built the Biancardi empire alongside my brother. That I was the one who maintained it during the difficult transitions, who expanded it beyond old territorial limitations, who modernized operations while maintaining traditional values."

"And yet Viktor inherited control rather than you," I observe, watching her reaction carefully.

Fury flashes in her eyes, quickly contained but unmistakable. "A disappointing decision by my brother, based on outdated notions of male primogeniture rather than merit or capability. One Viktor was intelligent enough to recognize as flawed, which is why he began including me in strategic decisions toward the end."

The revision of history is breathtaking in its audacity. From everything Gabriele has told me, Viktor kept Valentina at arm's length precisely because he recognized her dangerous ambition, her willingness to sacrifice anything and anyone for power.

"And now that Viktor is gone," I say carefully, "you believe control should revert to you rather than to his blood relatives."

"Half-blood relatives," she corrects immediately. "Products of my brother's infidelity, with no upbringing in our traditions, our values, our methods. What could you possibly know of leading the Biancardi interests? What training have you had? What sacrifices have you made?"

The questions are rhetorical, designed to emphasize my unsuitability rather than genuinely seek information. I answer anyway.

"None," I acknowledge simply. "Which is why I've never claimed any interest in the

Biancardi empire or its leadership."

This gives her pause, breaking the rhythm of her self-justification. "You expect me to believe you have no designs on your brother's position? His fortune? His influence?"

"I didn't even know Viktor existed until Gabriele told me," I point out. "I was perfectly content with my life, my craft, my small business. I never sought connection to the Biancardi name or the power it represents."

Skepticism colors her expression. "Everyone wants power, my dear. Some are simply more honest about it than others."

"Not everyone," I counter quietly. "Some want peace. Purpose. Connection. Things power often precludes rather than provides."

She studies me again, something almost like puzzlement in her gaze. "You truly believe that," she says, sounding genuinely surprised. "How... quaint."

I say nothing, recognizing the fundamental gap in worldview that makes true understanding between us impossible. To Valentina, everything is viewed through the lens of power—acquiring it, wielding it, preventing others from taking it. The idea that someone might genuinely not desire it is incomprehensible to her, can only be interpreted as naiveté or deception.

The SUV continues through the city, taking turns seemingly at random but undoubtedly following a carefully planned route to evade tracking or pursuit. I maintain awareness of our direction, noting landmarks when visible, counting approximate distance and travel time.

Eventually, we turn onto a private road, trees close on either side preventing clear sightlines. The property beyond is substantial—not as large as Gabriele's coastal

estate but significant, with security features visible even in the growing darkness.

"Welcome to one of my more private residences," Valentina says as the SUV pulls to a stop before a low, modernist structure built into the hillside. "Not as ostentatious as some of my homes, but functional for our purposes."

I'm escorted inside by the false server, Valentina following with unhurried confidence. The interior is minimalist, elegant, with the kind of cultivated simplicity that speaks of extreme wealth rather than actual restraint.

We move through the main living area to a lower level, where the décor shifts from residential to something more utilitarian—concrete floors, steel furnishings, recessed lighting that creates more shadows than illumination.

"You'll wait here," Valentina directs, gesturing to a sparsely furnished room with a single chair positioned in the center. "I have matters to attend to before our final conversation."

The implication is clear—this is my holding cell until she's ready to conclude whatever she has planned. The door closes behind her with a definitive click, followed by the unmistakable sound of a lock engaging.

Alone for the first time since the abduction, I allow myself a moment of genuine fear. The carefully maintained composure, the strategic engagement with Valentina—these were tactics Gabriele taught me to buy time, to gather information, to keep my abductor talking rather than acting.

But now, in this sterile room with its single chair and its locked door, the reality of my situation hits with full force. I've been taken by a woman who has already tried to kill me multiple times, who sees me as an obstacle to her ambitions, who has demonstrated absolutely no moral restraint in pursuing her goals.

My hands tremble slightly as I examine the room, looking for anything useful, anything that might offer options beyond passive waiting. The walls are smooth concrete, the ceiling solid, the floor seamless. The chair is metal, welded rather than bolted, offering no components that could be repurposed as tools or weapons.

A perfect holding cell, designed by someone with experience in containing unwilling guests.

I sink onto the chair, mind racing through possibilities, through the training Gabriele provided for exactly this scenario. Stay calm. Conserve energy. Observe everything. Look for patterns, for routines, for any inconsistency or opportunity.

And most importantly, remember that Gabriele will be looking for me. That he has resources, contacts, methods beyond what most could imagine. That he will not stop, will not rest, until he finds me.

Unless Valentina's snipers succeeded in their mission at the gala. Unless Gabriele is injured, or worse.

The thought sends ice through my veins, fear sharper than any concern for my own safety. I push it away forcefully, refusing to indulge possibilities that would only paralyze me, only prevent effective action.

Focus on what I know, what I can verify, what I can affect.

I'm in a secured room in a private residence. Valentina plans some "final conversation" that almost certainly ends with my death, however she might phrase it. Escape through conventional means appears unlikely given the security features I observed upon arrival.

What remains?



I close my eyes, centering myself in the quiet of the room, in the reality of my own breath, my own heartbeat. Gabriele's training emphasized physical solutions—observation, tactical assessment, strategic response.

But there are other resources, other approaches beyond the physical and tactical.

I used to feel close to God. Used to talk to Him all the time and trusted Him completely. But when my foster father did what he did...

I blamed Him for letting it happen. But I never realized I felt that way until now. Never realized I was trying to punish Him, childishly so, with my silence. And yet...He's never abandoned me. And I know this to be true because in this sterile room with its impenetrable walls—

It's in this place that I feel His presence the most.

I'm sorry, God. I'm so sorry. Thank You for never giving up on me. And thank You for being here.

It's the simplest prayer. But because every word comes from the heart, I know it's also the kind that He hears and answers, and already I can feel Him working inside of me. A quieting of fear, a clarifying of purpose. It's His peace that surpasses all understanding making me see everything with new eyes.

Ah.

That's when I see it. A ventilation grate. It's the escape route we see being used in every action movie there is. And now there's only one way to find out if the same method proves effective in reality.

I move the chair beneath it, climbing carefully to peer through the slats. The duct

beyond is dark but clear, running horizontally for several feet before turning upward. It's too small for a person to fit through. But when I'm standing this close, it's enough for me to hear voices—distant but distinguishable, echoing through the metal passageway.

Valentina, speaking to someone about security arrangements, about timetables, about "wrapping this up quickly before Bronzetti gets too close."

So Gabriele is alive, is pursuing. Relief floods through me, sharpening my focus, strengthening my resolve. I need to stay alive long enough for him to find me, need to create any advantage possible in the meantime.

I continue listening, gathering what information I can about the layout, the personnel, the schedule Valentina has established. The ventilation system connects multiple rooms, creating not just an audio channel but potentially a navigation guide to understanding the structure beyond my immediate confinement.

Eventually, the voices fade as Valentina and her associates move to different areas of the residence. I remain on the chair, thinking through what I've learned, what options it might create.

The most significant revelation is timing—Valentina plans to "conclude our business" within the hour, before moving to a secondary location in anticipation of Gabriele's eventual tracking of this facility. I have less time than I thought, but more information to work with.

I examine the ventilation grate more carefully, noting the standard screws securing it to the wall. No tools available to remove them, but perhaps...

The key Gabriele gave me—the antique from his grandmother's house that "unlocks something worth opening." I wear it always on its platinum chain, tucked beneath my

clothing, a tangible reminder of the connection we've built, the trust we've established.

The bow of the key is ornate, with protrusions that might, with careful application, serve to loosen the screws securing the grate. Not as effective as a proper screwdriver, but potentially workable given sufficient patience and precision.

I remove the key from around my neck, testing its edge against the first screw. The fit isn't perfect, but with careful pressure and the right angle, it begins to turn—slowly, grudgingly, but definitely moving.

The work is painstaking, each screw requiring minutes of careful manipulation, of tested angles and applied pressure. But gradually, one by one, they loosen, until finally the grate comes free in my hands.

The opening beyond is dark, confined, but large enough for me to enter if necessary—a last resort if Valentina returns before I can develop a better plan. I replace the grate loosely, returning to the chair to think through next steps now that this potential escape route exists.

The ventilation system might allow movement to adjacent rooms, but without knowing the layout, without understanding where guards might be positioned or exits located, blind navigation would be dangerous at best, fatal at worst.

I need more information, more understanding of the facility and its vulnerabilities.

Returning to the chair beneath the vent, I listen carefully for any sounds that might provide additional insight. Distant conversation, footsteps moving between rooms, electronic beeping that might indicate security systems or communication devices.

Gradually, a picture forms—the facility is not large, with perhaps five or six rooms

on this level, minimal personnel present other than Valentina and her immediate associates. Security appears concentrated on the perimeter rather than internal movement, suggesting confidence in the holding cell's effectiveness at containing prisoners.

Overconfidence, potentially. A vulnerability I might exploit.

I continue listening, gathering what information I can, when a new sound captures my attention—faint but distinctive, a rhythmic tapping that doesn't match any natural building noise or human movement.

Morse code. Someone is sending a message through the structure's infrastructure, using the pipes or ventilation system as a conduit.

G-A-B-R-I-E-L-E

My heart leaps. He's here, somehow. Close enough to communicate, to coordinate, to offer hope beyond my own resources.

The message continues:

C-O-M-I-N-G - F-I-V-E - M-I-N - F-I-R-E - D-I-S-T-R-A-C-T-I-O-N

Five minutes. Fire as distraction. Gabriele coming for me, as I knew he would, as I trusted he would regardless of obstacles or opposition.

I tap back, using the key against the metal ventilation duct:

U-N-D-E-R-S-T-O-O-D - R-E-A-D-Y

The exchange complete, I return to the floor, replacing the chair in its original

position, concealing any evidence of my exploration or preparation. Valentina must find me exactly as she left me—compliant, contained, unaware of the approaching rescue.

I sit, hands folded in my lap, expression composed but with the appropriate level of fear and uncertainty expected of a prisoner awaiting their fate. Inside, however, I'm calculating, planning, preparing for the moment when distraction becomes opportunity.

True to the message, approximately five minutes later, alarms begin blaring throughout the facility—harsh, insistent, impossible to ignore. I hear shouts, running footsteps, confused commands as Valentina's people respond to whatever diversionary tactic Gabriele has implemented.

Fire, he'd indicated. And indeed, the distinct smell of smoke begins filtering through the ventilation system, not overwhelming but definitely present, definitely concerning to those responsible for the facility and its security.

The lock on my door clicks, the panel swinging open to reveal the false server from the gala, expression tight with controlled urgency.

"We're moving you," he says tersely. "Now."

I rise, maintaining the appearance of compliant fear while inwardly calculating angles, distances, potential weaknesses in his approach. He gestures impatiently for me to precede him into the hallway, unwilling to turn his back on a prisoner even in emergency circumstances.

Professional. Cautious. But also distracted by the alarms, by the growing presence of smoke, by the chaos Gabriele has orchestrated specifically to create such distraction.

The hallway beyond is utilitarian, concrete like my holding cell, with numbered doors suggesting similar rooms along its length. The false server directs me toward a stairwell at the far end, his attention divided between my movement and the commotion happening elsewhere in the facility.

We're halfway to the stairs when the overhead sprinklers activate, drenching us both in seconds. He curses, using one hand to wipe water from his eyes while the other maintains its grip on what I now see is a concealed weapon.

The momentary distraction is enough. I drop to the floor suddenly, using the slick surface created by the sprinklers to slide between his legs, throwing him off-balance as he tries to compensate for my unexpected movement.

He staggers, weapon coming up but aim compromised by the water, by the surprise, by the training that emphasizes capture over killing for valuable prisoners. I roll to the side as he fires, the bullet striking concrete rather than flesh.

Before he can readjust, I'm on my feet, driving forward with the full force of my body, shoulder connecting with his midsection in the precise manner Gabriele taught me for opponents larger and stronger than myself.

He goes down hard, head cracking against the concrete floor with enough force to daze if not disable. I don't wait to find out which, already moving toward the stairwell, toward potential freedom, toward the rescue Gabriele promised was coming.

The stairwell is dark, emergency lighting providing minimal illumination as I ascend, moving as quietly as possible despite the continued blaring of alarms and rushing of water from sprinklers. At the top, a heavy door stands closed but not locked—an oversight in the chaos, a gift I accept without questioning.

Beyond lies what appears to be the main level of the residence—sleek, modern architecture now transformed by emergency lighting and water damage from the sprinkler system. The smoke is thicker here, suggesting the fire Gabriele mentioned as distraction is primarily focused on this level rather than the containment area below.

I move carefully through rooms that show signs of hasty abandonment—monitors still active, doors left open, personal items scattered as if security personnel had deployed rapidly in response to the emergency. No immediate sign of Valentina or higher-level associates, suggesting they've either evacuated or relocated to a more secure area of the property.

Navigation is challenging in the semi-darkness, with smoke creating additional visual obstruction, but I continue forward, seeking exits, seeking Gabriele, seeking any advantage over the forces arrayed against me.

A hallway leads toward what appears to be the main entrance, now visible through periodic flashes of emergency lighting. I move toward it, hope rising with each step closer to potential freedom.

Then a figure steps into my path, elegant even in crisis, expression cold despite the chaos surrounding us.

Valentina .

I consider my options. Calculate escape routes against the likelihood of success like Gabriele taught me to. The other woman holds no visible weapon, but her confidence suggests one is present, suggests she believes herself fully in control despite the evident breach of her security.

"It's over, Valentina." I need to keep her from doing something. Or get her to talk.

"Gabriele is here. Your security is compromised. Whatever you planned for me ends now."

A smile touches her lips, cold and certain. "It seems you're too stupid to understand what's really going on. Gabriele might well be here, yes. But you're still with me. And that means I have leverage."

I slowly shake my head. "You're the one who doesn't understand. You've already lost Valentina."

And despite the flash of outrage in her eyes, my words are no exaggeration.

Because the man I trusted to save me is standing right behind her.

GABRIELE

I've been tracking her through the smoke-filled corridors, moving silently as Toole's distraction fire does its work.

Valentina, as expected, was unable to resist the temptation to make another attempt to eliminate my wife. And now she's about to pay the price for daring to harm the woman I love.

The sprinklers have created chaos, disorienting Valentina's security team, providing the perfect cover for my advance. I watched with pride as Kleah escaped her escort using the exact moves I'd taught her—precise, efficient, beautiful in their execution.

Now I stand behind Valentina Biancardi, gun pressed against the base of her skull, watching my wife's face transform with relief.

"It's over, Valentina," I say, voice steady despite the rage coursing through me. "Tell



your people to stand down."

Her body stiffens, but she doesn't turn. Smart—a woman who's survived this long knows better than to make sudden movements with a gun against her head.

"Gabriele," she says, voice admirably controlled. "How predictable that you'd come for her personally. Always so hands-on with your... attachments."

"Radio," I say, ignoring her attempt at provocation. "Now. Tell them to stand down."

She reaches slowly for the radio at her belt. "This is Biancardi," she says into it. "Stand down. Repeat, stand down."

Static crackles, then confirmation from multiple security positions.

"Kleah, come to me," I say, never taking my eyes off Valentina. "Stay behind me."

Kleah moves carefully, positioning herself safely out of potential harm's way. She's pale but composed, displaying the quiet strength that first drew me to her beyond obligation or duty.

We stand in tense silence, water still dripping from the ceiling, smoke thinning around us.

"One last chance, Valentina," I say. "Walk away. Permanently. Disappear from our lives, and I allow you——"

Her movement is sudden, practiced, almost too fast to track—body twisting, hand reaching inside her jacket, emerging with a small pistol.

Almost too fast.

I fire once. The bullet enters her forehead just above the right eye, a clean kill that drops her instantly, weapon unfired.

Silence follows, the only sound the dripping water and distant shouts of confused security personnel.

I'm already stepping toward Kleah, shielding her from the sight with my body, tucking her against me as I assess for additional threats.

My wife buries her face against my chest, arms around my waist, body trembling slightly with delayed reaction, with the emotional aftermath of captivity and escape.

I hold her tightly, one hand cradling her head, keeping her close.

"It's over," I tell her, voice rough with emotion I no longer attempt to suppress. "Truly over. She can't reach you now, can't threaten what's ours."

Hazel eyes made blurry with tears meet mine, and no words are needed.

I love you.

I love you.

And when she touches my cheek with a trembling hand, I hear her just as fine.

Take me home, Gabriele.

I sweep her up in my arms even as my heart continues to pound against my chest.

I could've lost her.

So easily.

A thousand things could've gone wrong.

But instead everything went right.

Thank You.

It's my first time to pray. But I know it won't be the last.

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:55 am*

KLEAH

ANOTHER MONTH HAS PASSED . And life can't get any better.

The terracotta walls of our Sicilian villa have become home in ways I never anticipated when I first agreed to marry Gabriele. My studio overlooks the Mediterranean, light pouring through arched windows as I create my seals. My work has evolved since our lives stabilized—custom pieces for a carefully vetted clientele, designs that blend traditional artisanship with symbolism drawn from our shared journey.

My husband is still the sweetest man there is, though of course I know better than to say this to his face. He's famiglia , after all. Appearances must be kept and all that. His reputation remains fearsome in certain circles, a protection we both know serves us well, even as he shows me sides of himself no one else is permitted to see.

And speaking of famiglia ...

My stomach ties itself in knots as his limo cruises to a stop in front of the hotel. The sleek black vehicle purrs against the curb, its tinted windows reflecting the ornate facade of Milan's most exclusive luxury hotel. Gabriele's security team moves with practiced efficiency, taking positions that appear casual but provide perfect coverage of every potential approach.

We're about to meet my half-sister and her husband, who once belonged to the same world that gave birth to my husband and Viktor. I'm excited and hopeful. But I'm also anxious and fearful. I'm really hoping we'll get along, but...

My fingers worry the edge of my silk blouse, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles. Gabriele's hand covers mine, stilling the nervous movement, his touch warm and grounding.

"I feel like I'm about to throw up," I confess to him as we walk past the hotel's front doors. The marble lobby stretches before us, opulent yet understated in that way only true old wealth can achieve. "What if she doesn't like me? What if—"

"Stop talking nonsense."

My husband's patient tone makes me smile despite my nervousness.

Riiiiight .

The words sound harsh, but I hear what lies beneath them. I've forgotten how adorably blind Gabriele is where I'm concerned. He believes wholeheartedly I'm perfect and assumes everyone thinks so, too.

It's both ridiculous and comforting, this unwavering faith in me. The man who questions every scenario, who plots contingencies for contingencies, who calculates risk with cold precision—this same man has a blind spot exactly my size and shape.

We step inside the elevator, Gabriele's hand at the small of my back, a touch both possessive and supportive. The doors slide closed with a soft hush, surrounding us with polished wood and beveled mirrors. My reflection shows a woman I'm still getting used to—designer clothes, subtle security jewelry (tracking devices disguised as elegant accessories), the quiet confidence that comes from standing beside one of the most dangerous men in Europe.

But my eyes still betray me—wide with anxiety, darting toward the floor indicator as we ascend toward the penthouse restaurant where my half-sister waits.

"You're fidgeting," my husband observes with a frown.

Oops .

My fingers have found the pendant at my throat—the key he gave me months ago, now transformed into a custom setting that maintains its function while disguising its significance. A nervous habit I've developed, touching this physical reminder of the moment trust truly formed between us.

"I'm just really, really nervous." I look at him helplessly, seeing my own reflection multiplied in his dark eyes. "What do I do? I don't want to make the wrong impression."

Gabriele studies me for a moment, expression softening in that way reserved only for me, when no one else is watching. When he can allow the facade of cold calculation to slip, revealing the man beneath the carefully constructed exterior.

"What you need is a distraction."

His voice drops lower, a register that sends immediate heat spreading through me despite months of marriage, despite the intimacy we've shared almost daily since establishing our life together.

"From my nervousness?"

"Sì."

The single syllable carries layers of promise, of intent that makes my pulse quicken despite the wholly inappropriate timing.

Uh oh.

The elevator jerks to a stop when my husband hits the red button. The emergency stop. In a luxury hotel elevator. On our way to meet my sister and her husband.

I'm dead.

I start talking in a rush, "You know what? I actually think I'm okay—"

My husband is on his knees.

Oh no.

His hands slide beneath my skirt, fingertips tracing patterns against the sensitive skin of my thighs. The contrast is exquisite—his calloused hands, capable of such violence, now touching me with exquisite gentleness. His eyes never leave mine as he pushes the fabric higher, a question and a command simultaneously.

And now he's under my skirt.

Oh dear.

I should protest. Should remind him of the security cameras likely recording our every move. Should point out that we're expected at an important meeting, that this is hardly the time or place for such activities.

Instead, I widen my stance slightly, granting him the access he seeks. His approving hum vibrates against my inner thigh, sending shivers that have nothing to do with nervousness racing through me.

My back falls helplessly against the wall at the first flick of his tongue. The sensation is electric, immediate, overwhelming in its intensity. My fingers slide into his hair, not to guide or direct—Gabriele needs no instruction in this particular skill—but simply to anchor myself as pleasure spirals outward from his expert touch.

Best.

Distraction.

Ever .

The End

Thank you for reading Claim Me. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a quick rating or the shortest review. Your feedback makes a world of difference for indie authors like me.

Until our next journey,

Marian Tee