



His Ruthless Vow (Devils in Armani Suits #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Being attached to anyone is a death sentence in the mafia.

But one look at her...

Made death a price I'm willing to pay to be with her.

Kendras too pure for my world.

Too pristine for the blood on my hands.

But Im already obsessed.

Especially when my enemies start circling.

And Im afraid shell be in their sights.

So I offer her a deal-

I'll save her friend.

If she'll come whenever I'll call.

She thinks Ive trapped her-

She has no idea how far Ill go to keep her.

I've broken every rule. Crossed every line.

I'll do whatever it takes to protect what's mine.

And Ill burn this city down before I let anyone touch her.

Total Pages (Source): 37

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KENDRA

The champagne buzzes in my veins as Griffin spins me around, my navy blue dress flaring out around my thighs. In all our parties through college, I've never seen him move like this.

The reception is stunning—strings of twinkling lights hang from the trees surrounding the outdoor dance floor, creating a ceiling of artificial stars. Jazz and Nerio spared no expense, transforming this garden into something magical.

I was skeptical when my childhood best friend Jazz said yes to the Buetti capo, but she's happy. And now that our mutual friend, Skye, is married to the Mantione Don—yes, rival families—I've accepted that I'm now surrounded by made men. Ones that are more than willing to destroy each other no less.

Not to mention Mikayla has a huge crush on a well known criminal hacker, Elliott Romano, who she brought as her date. It seems I'm the only one who brought a man who isn't entrenched in the underworld.

"You're actually not terrible at this," I tell Griffin as he pulls me back in, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Four years of forced ballroom lessons as a teenager. My mother was convinced it would make me a gentleman." Griffin's hand settles on my waist, warm and familiar in the most platonic way possible. He's been my closest friend—besides Jazz—for six

years now and while we tried to make it work once, we realized we are far too perfect as friends.

"And did it?" I arch an eyebrow.

"Absolutely not." He grins, that perfect jawline catching the light. "But it does make me look good at weddings."

I laugh, grateful I brought him. When Jazz announced she was marrying Nerio Bueti—of all people—I knew I needed a buffer. Nothing says awkward like being the only single woman at a table of coupled-up friends.

Across the dance floor, I spot Mikayla in a blush pink gown, looking up adoringly at Elliott. His hand rests protectively on her lower back, dark curls falling into his eyes as he whispers something that makes her grin. For a tech genius who runs a cybersecurity firm, the man moves with surprising grace.

"Think they'll be next?" Griffin nods toward them.

"God, I hope so. She deserves someone who looks at her like that."

Even if she tries to deny there's anything there, none of us believe it.

We twirl past Skye and Luca, newlyweds themselves having only married four months ago. Skye's amber eyes glow with contentment as she leans against her husband's chest. Luca, ever the ice prince, has actually managed something resembling a smile today—though his calculating blue eyes never stop scanning the crowd, though he is in enemy territory I guess.

"Thirsty?" Griffin asks as the song ends.

"Dying for water. Too much champagne."

"I'll grab some. Meet you back at the table?"

I nod, letting Griffin disappear into the crowd. The night air feels good against my skin, a slight breeze carrying the scent of jasmine from the surrounding gardens. I turn to head back to our table, then freeze.

Eyes. On me. Not a casual glance but an intentional stare—heavy, deliberate.

I scan the crowd until I find the source, and my heart stutters. Enzo Rossi, leaning against a marble column at the edge of the dance floor. His steel-gray eyes lock with mine, unwavering and unreadable.

A capo in the Mantione family, Enzo commands attention without trying. His broad shoulders fill out his tailored black suit with lethal elegance. Those intricate tattoos I've glimpsed before are hidden tonight, but I know they're there beneath crisp white fabric. His presence feels like a physical thing—dangerous and magnetic.

I've run into him before—at Skye's boutique a few times, and several times during Skye and Luca's wedding festivities. Each time, our interactions were brief but charged with something I couldn't name.

He doesn't smile or nod or give any acknowledgment that our eyes have met. He simply watches me, his gaze so intense it feels like a hand on my skin.

I force myself to break the stare, tearing my eyes away from Enzo's magnetic gaze. The air between us feels charged with electricity, making my skin tingle in a way that's equal parts warning and invitation.

"Well, well, well." Skye's voice cuts through my thoughts as she appears at my side,

radiant in her cream wedding gown that hugs her curves before flaring dramatically at the bottom. "Someone's caught the attention of a very dangerous man."

"Don't start," I mutter, taking her glass of champagne and downing half of it. "I saw you coming from across the dance floor with that look in your eye."

"What look?" She blinks innocently, but those amber eyes gleam with mischief. The small diamond stud in her nose catches the light as she tilts her head.

"The 'I'm going to meddle in Kendra's love life' look." I hand her back the glass. "You've been wearing it since college." I grew up with Jazz, knew her all my life, but she and Skye met in college. It didn't take long for the two of us to click.

Skye's perfectly manicured nails tap against the crystal. "I'm just saying, that man hasn't taken his eyes off you all night. And don't pretend you haven't noticed."

I glance over my shoulder. Enzo hasn't moved, still watching us with that calculated intensity that somehow makes me feel both exposed and protected at the same time.

"He's probably just sizing up potential threats," I say, smoothing down my dress. "That's what these guys do at social gatherings, right? Threat assessment?"

Skye laughs, the sound light and musical. "Keep telling yourself that, honey." She leans closer, her sleek black hair brushing against my arm. "You know what I think? I think you're just what the Mantione family needs—another strong woman to keep these men in line."

I snort. "Right. Because what I want most in life is to join your little mafia wives club."

"You could do worse." She smirks, looking pointedly at Griffin who's chatting with

Mikayla at the bar. "And you know I just want someone else in the family. It gets lonely being the only one married to?—"

"A psychopath?" I offer helpfully.

"I was going to say 'a complicated man,'" she counters, but her smile doesn't falter. "Besides, wouldn't it be fun to have someone to share my secrets with?"

Before I can respond, Luca appears behind his wife, sliding an arm possessively around her waist. Even at what should be a casual social event, he maintains that unnervingly calm demeanor, ice-blue eyes giving nothing away.

"I need to steal my wife," he says, his voice smooth and controlled. It's not a request.

Skye pouts playfully, but leans back against his chest. "We were having girl talk."

"I'm sure Kendra won't mind," Luca says, his eyes briefly meeting mine with something that might be amusement. I'm still not sure when it comes to him. He's literal ice. Except with his wife.

Skye sighs dramatically but gives me a wink as Luca pulls her away. "This conversation isn't over," she calls over her shoulder.

I've barely caught my breath when a dark presence materializes beside me, the air around us suddenly charged with electricity. I don't need to turn to know who it is—my body has already registered Enzo's proximity, responding with a rush of heat that has nothing to do with the summer night.

"Running from me, Washington?" His voice is low and rough, like whiskey over gravel.

I turn slowly, determined not to show how his sudden appearance affects me. Up close, Enzo Rossi is even more devastating—sharp cheekbones, strong jaw dusted with precisely maintained stubble, and those steel-gray eyes that seem to strip away every defense I've carefully constructed.

"Considering I didn't know you were following me, that would be difficult." I take a deliberate sip of my champagne, using the glass as a barrier between us. "Shouldn't you be lurking in some corner, plotting whatever it is capos plot at weddings?"

His mouth curves into something too dangerous to be called a smile. "Maybe you're what I'm plotting."

"Original," I say dryly, but my heart kicks against my ribs. "Do women usually fall at your feet when you use lines like that?"

He steps closer, and the space between us shrinks to almost nothing. I can smell his cologne now—something expensive and woodsy that makes me want to lean in despite myself.

"I don't waste lines on women who fall easily." His eyes track over my face, lingering on my lips. "You're far more interesting than that."

"You don't know anything about me." I hold my ground even as every instinct screams to create distance.

"I know enough." He leans in, his breath warm against my ear. "I know you've been watching me since you arrived. I know you're far too witty for the guy you brought with you. I know that dress was chosen to command attention, not hide from it."

His observation unsettles me. I hate that he's been paying such close attention—hate even more that he's right.

"I also wore comfortable shoes," I counter, lifting my foot slightly to show my strappy but sensible heel. "Because I'm practical above all else. And getting involved with a Mantione capo would be the opposite of practical."

His laugh is unexpected—deep and genuine. "At least you recognize the danger. Most women don't."

"I'm not most women."

"No," he agrees, eyes darkening as he studies me. "You're definitely not."

Before I can respond, Griffin appears, slightly breathless and holding two waters.

"Sorry that took so long," he says, glancing between Enzo and me with obvious curiosity. "Bar was packed."

Enzo doesn't move back, doesn't surrender an inch of the space he's claimed near me. Instead, he extends his hand to Griffin with calculated politeness.

"Enzo Rossi."

Griffin shifts both waters to one hand and returns the handshake. "Griffin Taylor. Friend of Kendra's."

The word "friend" hangs in the air, and I watch Enzo's expression shift microscopically as he processes this information.

"Come on," Griffin says to me, oblivious to the tension. "They're playing our song."

It's not our song—we don't have a song—but I recognize the lifeline he's throwing me. Even Griffin, who knows nothing about these families, can sense the dangerous

current flowing between Enzo and me.

"Right," I say, taking the water and downing half of it. "Nice chatting, Enzo."

Enzo's eyes don't leave mine as he steps back, a predator willing to pause the hunt but not abandon it. "We'll continue this conversation later, Kendra."

The way he says my name—like he's tasting it—sends an unwanted rush of something through me. Something I choose to ignore.

Griffin leads me to the dance floor, his hand light on my back. "So, do I need to ask what that was about?" he says once we're safely swaying among other couples.

I glance over his shoulder. Enzo hasn't moved, his gaze still locked on me from across the reception.

"Absolutely nothing," I say firmly, even as my body hums with awareness. "Nothing at all."

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ENZO

The reception spills across the sprawling garden like expensive champagne—calculated extravagance beneath the Chicago twilight. White silk tents glow with warm light, and flower arrangements worth more than most people's monthly rent perfume the air. Jazz and Nerio spared no expense celebrating their unholy matrimony, bringing together Chicago's criminal elite under the guise of class and sophistication.

I stand at the edge of the crowd, nursing a glass of whiskey while scanning the perimeter. Old habits. Even at a wedding, I'm counting exits, identifying threats, keeping mental notes of who talks to whom. Mingling between the families has everyone on edge, shifting alliances like tectonic plates.

"You're going to wear a hole through that woman if you keep staring," Luca says, materializing beside me with his characteristic silence.

I don't turn to look at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Luca lets out a low, humorless laugh. "Sure you don't." He adjusts his cufflinks—platinum, understated wealth that matches the ice in his eyes. "Kendra. You've been watching her all night."

My jaw tightens. Across the garden, Kendra stands in a navy blue dress that hugs every curve like it was created specifically to torment me. But it's not the dress that

has my blood running cold. It's the man beside her—tall, perfectly styled brown hair, expensive watch, leaning in too close as he whispers something that makes her laugh.

"Who's that?" I ask, keeping my voice deliberately casual. I know he told me his name, but I want to know more about him.

Luca follows my gaze, the corner of his mouth lifting in that knowing smirk that makes most men nervous. "Griffin something. They went to school together. Marketing, I think."

I take another sip of whiskey, letting the burn distract me from the urge to cross the garden and introduce Griffin's face to my fist.

"Seems friendly."

"Does he now?" Luca sounds amused. "Interesting you'd notice."

"Just making conversation," I say, eyes still fixed on Kendra and the way she touches Griffin's arm when she laughs again.

"I could tell you something else about him that might interest you," Luca offers, swirling the champagne in his glass with practiced indifference.

"I don't care either way."

"No? Then you wouldn't care that he's up to his neck in debt to Armando. Last I heard it's nearly eighty grand. Been avoiding him for weeks."

My eyebrow rises at this, attention finally shifting from Kendra to Luca. "Is that right?"

Luca shrugs, straightening his Italian silk tie with those calculated movements that make people forget how dangerous his hands can be. "Not my problem. Armando can handle his own collections." His emotionless eyes scan the reception, uninterested in anything that doesn't directly benefit him. "Unless it somehow affects Skye, I don't give a shit who owes what to whom."

His dismissal only fuels my curiosity. I set my empty whiskey glass on a passing server's tray, my focus returning to Kendra and this Griffin. The band transitions to something slow and jazzy, the kind of music that gives people permission to stand too close together.

Griffin's hand settles on Kendra's waist, fingers splaying possessively against the navy fabric. She doesn't move away. Instead, she leans into him when he whispers something against her ear. Her laugh carries across the garden—rich and genuine—the kind of laugh she's never given me.

I tell myself I'm just cataloging details. Assessing dynamics. It's what I do. It has nothing to do with the way his thumb brushes the small of her back, or how she tilts her head to look up at him, that half-smile playing on her full lips.

"You might want to ease up," Luca says, motioning toward my hand. "Before you snap it."

I look down to find my replacement whiskey glass clutched in a white-knuckle grip. I force my fingers to relax, one by one.

"Eighty grand," I say, more to myself than Luca. "Seems like a lot for someone in marketing."

"Gambling," Luca replies, already bored with the conversation. "Started with sports betting, escalated to high-stakes poker. Armando gave him plenty of chances before

word started getting around that the guy can't pay up. He's blacklisted and watched right now—at least with us.”

Griffin leads Kendra toward the dance floor, his hand never leaving her body. Something sharp and cold settles in my chest as I watch them move together. Not jealousy—I don't do jealousy. Just annoyance. Professional irritation at seeing someone so clearly in over their head acting like they own the world.

"Funny how debt makes men desperate," I observe, straightening my own cuffs. "Makes them do stupid things."

“It seems like the only thing you find stupid is the way he's so close to her.” Luca chuckles, the sound as cold and empty as everything else about him. "Thinking of collecting another stray?" he asks dryly, watching my face for any reaction.

I know exactly what he means. First Paige, the chaotic yellow Lab who burst into my life by chasing a squirrel through my yard and demolishing everything in her path. Then Penny, the neurotic Australian Shepherd I found cowering behind a dumpster during a collection. Both disasters in their own way. Both now sleeping on my imported leather couch every night.

"Fuck off," I tell him without heat. We've known each other long enough that he can cross lines no one else would survive. Just like few would talk to a Don that way.

"You've got a pattern, Rossi," he continues, unmoved by my dismissal. "Broken things with big eyes that need saving."

I take another drink instead of answering. On the dance floor, Griffin's hand slides lower on Kendra's back, nearly grazing territory that would force me to separate his fingers from his hand. She shifts subtly, repositioning his touch to somewhere more appropriate without breaking their rhythm.

Smart. Assertive without creating a scene. That's Kendra all over.

"She doesn't need saving," I finally reply, the words coming out rougher than intended. "But her taste in men is questionable."

"And yet here you stand, watching her from across the reception instead of doing something about it."

I shoot him a dark look. "I'm not doing anything about it. I'm making observations."

"About?"

"About how interesting it is that she has no idea what kind of trouble her date is in." I straighten my tie, a deliberate movement to conceal the tension coiling through me. "While I know exactly how deep that particular hole goes."

Information is currency in our world. Griffin might have Kendra's attention right now, but I already have the upper hand. Nearly eighty grand to Armando isn't just debt—it's a noose. And Griffin's neck is already in it.

Kendra laughs again at something he says, her head tilted back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. For a second, my mind flashes to how that smooth skin would feel under my lips, my teeth.

"You're doing it again," Luca observes, that damn knowing smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.

"What?"

"Looking at her like she's already yours."

I don't answer.

Probably because it definitely feels like she is .

KENDRA

I balance the bottle of prosecco between my arm and hip as I knock on Griffin's door. The hallway of his apartment building smells like someone's cooking curry—not unpleasant, just unexpected in this upscale neighborhood. I check my watch. Eight o'clock on the dot. Right on time, as usual.

Griffin had texted me earlier about hanging out tonight. Said he needed some company, which isn't like him. Griffin's never been the needy type. Usually, he's the life of the party—always surrounded by people, always on. That's what made his text strange. Something felt off.

I knock again, harder this time. "Griffin? It's Kendra."

A thud sounds from inside, followed by what might be a muffled curse. My instincts kick in—something's not right with this picture.

The door swings open, but it's not Griffin standing there.

The man who answers is tall with broad shoulders that fill the doorframe. Dark hair slicked back, expensive watch glinting on his wrist, suit tailored to perfection. But it's his eyes that catch my attention—cold, calculating, like he's constantly running numbers behind them.

"Well hello there," he says, voice smooth as aged whiskey. "Griffin didn't mention he

was expecting such lovely company."

I straighten my spine, meeting his gaze directly. "And Griffin didn't mention he already had company."

His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Just finishing up some business."

Something in his tone makes my skin prickle. I glance past him into the apartment, catching sight of Griffin standing stiffly in the living room. His brown hair is disheveled, his blue eyes wide with what looks suspiciously like fear.

I take a step forward, but the man doesn't budge.

"Armando," Griffin calls out, voice strained. "We were just finishing up, right?"

Armando. The name registers somewhere in the back of my mind. I've heard Jazz mention that name before—something about the Mantione family.

I duck back, pretending I've forgotten something, and step away from the door. "I'll just wait out here."

Instead of leaving, I press my back against the wall beside the doorway, listening. Thankfully, neither of them say a word to me. But Armando also doesn't shut the door.

"Like I said," Armando's voice drops to a menacing whisper, "your deadline's coming up. I don't appreciate waiting for what's owed to me."

"I'll get it," Griffin says. "I just need?—"

A dull thud interrupts him, followed by a groan of pain.

"That's a reminder," Armando says casually. "Next time it won't be just your ribs."

My heart hammers against my chest. Without thinking, I step back into the doorway.

Griffin is doubled over, one arm wrapped around his midsection, face contorted in pain. Armando stands over him, adjusting his cufflinks like he just checked the time instead of assaulting my friend.

"What the hell is going on?" I demand, stepping into the apartment, prosecco still clutched in my arm.

Griffin's head snaps up. "Kendra, don't?—"

Armando turns to me, that cold smile returning. "Nothing that concerns you, sweetheart. Your friend and I are just settling a business matter."

"Business doesn't usually involve punching," I say, moving toward Griffin.

"Kendra, please," Griffin pleads. "Just go."

"Not until someone tells me what's happening." I plant my feet, crossing my arms.

Armando chuckles, the sound chilling. "You've got a brave friend here, Griffin." He looks me up and down appreciatively. "She doesn't know what kind of trouble you're in, does she?"

"It's nothing," Griffin insists, straightening with obvious effort. "Just a misunderstanding."

"Doesn't look like nothing to me," I challenge, glaring at Armando.

He seems amused by my defiance. "You want to know what's going on? Your buddy here got in over his head at our tables. Thought he could beat the house." Armando shrugs. "House always wins."

"Griffin?" I look at him, waiting for him to deny it.

The shame in his eyes tells me everything.

"How much?" I ask, my voice tight.

Griffin shakes his head. "Don't worry about it."

"Seventy-five thousand," Armando says casually. "Plus interest."

The room seems to tilt beneath me. "Seventy-five thousand dollars?" My voice rises. "Griffin, what were you thinking?"

"I was on a streak," he says weakly. "Then I wasn't."

Armando checks his watch. "Touching as this is, I've got other stops to make." He straightens his jacket. "Two days, Griffin. Or we move on to breaking things that don't heal."

I step closer to Armando, my heels clicking deliberately against Griffin's hardwood floor. The prosecco bottle feels heavy in my hand now. I could swing it if I needed to—not that I would, but the weight is reassuring.

"I'll take care of it," I state, my voice steady and firm.

Armando's laugh fills the room—deep, dismissive, and utterly patronizing. "You'll take care of it? Honey, this isn't some overdue library book. This is seventy-five

thousand dollars, plus interest."

I lock eyes with him, refusing to flinch. "I said, I'll take care of it."

"And how exactly do you plan to do that?" He looks me up and down again, his gaze lingering inappropriately. "Though I'm sure we could work out some kind of payment plan that would be mutually beneficial."

My lip curls with disgust. "I'll speak to Luca directly."

The change is immediate. The amused glint in his eyes dissolves, replaced by something wary and cold. His posture stiffens ever so slightly.

"Luca Mantione?" He tries to sound casual, but I catch the edge in his voice. "And what makes you think the Don would give you the time of day?"

"That's my business," I reply coolly. "But you can tell the rest of your crew that Griffin's debt is now my concern, and I'll be discussing terms with Luca himself."

Armando steps closer, invading my space. I force myself not to back away. "You know who Luca is?"

"I know he's running things now. And I know he prefers to handle business directly." I'm bluffing, pulling fragments of information Skye has mentioned, but my face betrays nothing.

He studies me for a long moment before stepping back. "Forty-eight hours," he says finally. "That's all I'm giving you." His eyes flick to Griffin. "Or I'll start taking my payment a different way."

Once the door closes behind Armando, Griffin collapses onto his sofa, face in his

hands.

"Jesus, Kendra. What the hell did you just do?" He looks up at me, blue eyes wide with panic. "You can't just name-drop Luca Mantione like that. Do you know what he's capable of?"

I set the prosecco down, suddenly not in the mood for celebration. He knows that he was just at a wedding with Luca and didn't even tell me about this.

What else isn't he telling me?

"No, Griffin, what I want to know is how the hell you got mixed up with the Mantiones in the first place. Gambling? Really?"

He has the decency to look ashamed. "It started small. Just a few hands of poker at the Emerald Oyster. I was winning at first, then—" He gestures helplessly. "I kept thinking I could turn it around."

"Seventy-five thousand dollars worth of 'turning it around'?" I rub my temples, feeling a headache brewing. "You should have called me before it got this bad."

"I never wanted to drag you into this." His voice cracks. "I'm so sorry, Kendra."

I wave him off. "I'll handle it."

But as I walk away, a chill runs up my spine. I just made a promise I'm not entirely sure I can keep. I don't actually know if Luca will help me. He's only loyal to one person really—his wife.

I just have to pray she can get me out of this.

4

ENZO

Wasting time isn't something I do. Yet here I am, leaning against my Audi, arms crossed over my chest, waiting for Kendra Washington to round the corner. The wind picks up, carrying the first chill of fall, but I don't adjust my position. Control is everything—even over something as simple as showing discomfort.

I check my watch. I happen to know that Armando went to pay her friend a little visit, and I suspect that she will be coming here after. I've been trying to figure her out, and I think I finally have. Not because I'm obsessed—I'm meticulous. There's a difference.

Movement at the corner catches my eye. Kendra appears, phone in hand, those long legs of hers eating up the sidewalk as she strides with purpose. Even in simple jeans and a tailored blazer, she carries herself like she owns the fucking block. I respect that.

The moment she clocks me, her steps falter. Just for a split second—but I catch it. Her eyes narrow, that glossy mouth tightening at the corners. She recovers fast, though. I'll give her that.

"You following me now?" Her voice is sharp, casual, but I hear the edge underneath.

I don't move from my spot against the car. No need. She's already walking toward me like I knew she would.

"I've got vested interest in the area." My eyes slide over her, taking her in as she watches. "Where are you coming from?"

Her brow arches. "I don't see how that is any of your business."

I shrug. "Maybe it's not. But I hear one of my guys was visiting your friend. Thought you might need a hand with it." I keep my tone conversational, like we're discussing the weather instead of her friend who's currently in debt to some very dangerous people.

Her shoulders stiffen under that expensive blazer. Surprise flickers across those dark eyes before she masks it.

"Are you offering?" She stops a few feet away, close enough to talk, far enough to run. Smart girl.

A smirk pulls at my mouth. I like that she doesn't waste time asking how I know about Griffin. She's already accepted that I know things—that I make it my business to know things. "I'm offering a deal."

Her eyes narrow. "What do you want?"

"You. At my call. Whenever I want." I say each word slowly, deliberately, watching them land with precision and weight.

It's something that's been going through my mind since I saw her at the wedding—in his arms. I knew she'd want to help him once Armando shot me a text, more for me to know that Luca's girl's friend got caught up in his business than anything. And I instantly had an itch to trap her in a deal with me.

I'd give her what she wanted. And I'd get the chance to finally solve her so I can get

her out of my brain.

I don't like people I don't understand. I like ones I can control even less. It's why I love my deals.

Her jaw tightens, eyes flashing. She crosses her arms, mirroring my stance. It's a defensive move, but she makes it look like a challenge.

"So what, you're my Hades now? I make a deal, and you own me?" Her voice drips with contempt, but there's something else there too. A curiosity she can't quite hide.

I tilt my head, considering the reference. Greek mythology. Interesting choice. I roll it around in my mind—Hades, ruler of the underworld. The god who took what he wanted and never gave it back.

"If the shoe fits." I straighten up from the car, closing the distance between us by a single step. Just enough to make her have to look up at me.

I see the moment she realizes the name will stick. That little flash of regret in her eyes, knowing she's handed me something I can use. Hades. I like it. The master of the underworld. The man who never lets go of what belongs to him.

Kendra's pulse jumps in her throat—a tell she can't control. She hates how well the comparison fits. How easily I've stepped into the role she's assigned me.

I watch her hesitate, her mind working behind those sharp eyes. Kendra Washington isn't used to being cornered. She's the one who usually holds all the cards—but tonight, she's coming up empty.

I step closer, not touching her but making sure she feels me. The air between us becomes charged, electric. Her scent hits me—something expensive and subtle that

doesn't announce itself but lingers. Just like her.

"Think about it," I murmur, letting my voice drop to that register that I know makes people uneasy. With her, I see it has a different effect—her pupils dilate slightly, that steady pulse in her throat jumping. "But we both know you're out of options."

I don't need to spell it out for her. Griffin's debt isn't going away, and Armando isn't known for his patience or mercy. She knows exactly what happens to people who can't pay. And now she knows I'm offering her a way out—at a price.

I turn and walk away, feeling her eyes on my back as I slide into my car. In the rearview mirror, I watch her standing there, unmoving, her silhouette sharp against the streetlight. She's still processing, still weighing her options. Still thinking she might find another way.

She won't.

I never force. I tempt. I create situations where the choices are clear, and the only logical path leads right to me. It's a game I've perfected over the years—one I never lose.

The drive home gives me time to think. Kendra's "Hades" comment replays in my mind. Most people in this city know me as many things—businessman, enforcer, capo. But a god of the underworld? That's new. I roll down my window, letting the cool night air clear my head. She's getting under my skin, and I'm not entirely sure I hate it.

When I pull up to my home, I already hear the commotion inside. The security system beeps as I unlock the door, and I'm immediately greeted by a storm of fur and excitement.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter as Paige, my yellow lab, crashes into my legs with all the grace of a drunk elephant. Her tail whips back and forth with enough force to clear a coffee table, which she's done more than once. Behind her, Penny hangs back, her brown and black fur practically vibrating with anxiety as she waits her turn.

I crouch down, letting Paige assault my face with sloppy kisses while I reach out to scratch Penny under her chin. "Come here, girl. I didn't forget about you."

Penny approaches cautiously, like she always does, her full tail wagging with measured enthusiasm. Where Paige is chaos incarnate, Penny calculates every move. She reminds me of myself in that way.

"At least someone in this house has some fucking dignity," I say, running my hand through her thick fur. She leans into my touch, finally convinced I'm not bringing danger home with me.

Luca's words from last week float through my mind as I watch them. 'Collecting another stray?' he'd asked with that empty grin of his. Like these dogs, he'd implied—another broken thing I was trying to fix.

I smirk to myself as I stand, shrugging off my jacket. Maybe. But Kendra Washington isn't broken. She isn't lost or scared or in need of saving.

This one fights back.

And that's exactly what makes her interesting. She's not afraid of me—or at least, she's determined not to show it. In a world where most people either fear me or try to use me, her defiance is... refreshing.

I move to the kitchen, the dogs trailing behind me. Paige nearly slips on the hardwood in her excitement, banging into the wall with a thud that doesn't even slow

her down. This dog has survived purely on luck and my intervention.

"You two eat yet?" I ask, knowing damn well my housekeeper would have fed them hours ago. But their expressions suggest starvation is imminent if I don't immediately remedy the situation.

So I give in. Just like I always do with them. They've always been my exception to my rules.

I fear I've just found another.

5

KENDRA

I didn't go to Skye's boutique yesterday after I saw Enzo. Instead, I went home, debating what I should do.

I still am now as I go to Rosemary's, our favorite brunch spot. I'm running late—mostly because I got lost in my thoughts and what I agreed to for Griffin—and I know they're all going to be there when I get there.

I push through the door of Rosemary's, the bell announcing my arrival with a cheerful jingle that feels completely at odds with the storm brewing inside me. The familiar scent of cinnamon and coffee wraps around me, but even that comfort can't settle the unease that's been my constant companion since yesterday.

My friends are already seated at our usual corner booth by the window. Jazz notices me first, raising her hand in a wave, her stack of gold bracelets catching the light. Her curls are piled high today, framing her face like a crown.

"Look who finally decided to grace us with her presence," she calls out, but there's no bite to her words. Just the familiar teasing that's been our love language since we met.

I slide into the booth beside Mikayla, who scoots over to make room for me. Her gentle smile is as warm as always, her optimism radiating like a physical force.

"Sorry I'm late," I say, shrugging off my jacket. "Work was a nightmare."

It's a lie. Work was fine. But the truth—that I spent forty-five minutes staring at my closet, wondering what one wears when contemplating a deal with the devil—isn't something I'm ready to share.

"We ordered you a mimosa." Maria slides a glass toward me, her brown eyes kind. "You look like you need it."

I take a generous sip, letting the cold, bubbly sweetness wash down my throat. "God bless you."

"So," Skye says, leaning forward, her amber eyes narrowed with that laser-focus intensity that's helped her build her boutique empire. "What's going on with you? You've been quiet and didn't show yesterday. Didn't even respond to the group chat."

I wave my hand dismissively. "Nothing. Just swamped."

"Bullshit," Skye replies without missing a beat. "I've seen you swamped. This is something else."

Before I can formulate another deflection, Mikayla jumps in, either sensing my discomfort or genuinely excited to share her news.

"I finalized the pieces for my exhibition next month," she says, her eyes bright. "The gallery owner loved the new series."

"That's amazing," I say, grateful for the reprieve. "The ones with all the blues and golds?"

Mikayla nods enthusiastically. "Yes! He said they have a 'haunting quality' which I think is good? I mean, art-speak is so vague sometimes."

Jazz laughs, the sound rich and full. "In art-speak, 'haunting' is definitely a compliment. It means you made that man feel something, which is more than most of these pretentious gallery types can say."

"We're all coming to opening night," Maria adds, her voice warm with pride for our friend. "We'll even make sure Luca will be there too."

At the mention of Luca, my mind immediately jumps to Enzo. His steel-gray eyes, cold and calculating. The way he stood too close in that alley, his presence overwhelming even in the open air. His offer hanging between us like a loaded gun.

"Kendra?" Skye's voice cuts through my thoughts. "Where'd you go just now?"

I blink, realizing I've been stirring my mimosa mindlessly, the tiny spoon clinking against the glass in a nervous rhythm. But the weight of my secrets are becoming too much and I've never hidden things from my friends before.

"Griffin's in trouble," I blurt out, surprising myself with the sudden confession. "Gambling debts. Big ones."

The table goes quiet. Jazz sets down her coffee cup with deliberate care.

"How big?" she asks, all business now.

"Seventy five thousand," I say, the number still making my stomach clench. "Plus interest. To one of the Mantiones."

Maria's eyes widen slightly. Even though she's family to them, she still understands the gravity of owing that kind of money to people like her cousin. Mikayla looks between us, worry etching across her sweet face.

"Jesus, Kendra. What's he going to do?" Jazz asks, ever practical.

"What am I going to do, you mean," I correct her. "I...might have stepped in when I saw him getting a 'warning.'"

"And?" Skye presses, her gaze too sharp, too knowing. Like she can see right through me to the parts I'm not saying. To Enzo's voice in my head, offering a solution wrapped in silk and thorns.

"And I'll figure it out," I say firmly. "I always do."

What I don't say is that the plan involves putting myself directly into Enzo Rossi's orbit. That it means being at his call, at his mercy. That part of me is terrified by the prospect—and another part, a part I don't want to examine too closely, is thrilled by it.

Maria and Skye exchange a look across the table—one of those silent communications that tells me they're about to tag-team me. Maria tucks a curl behind her ear, her delicate gold earrings catching the light as she leans forward.

"Ken," she says, her voice dropping to ensure our conversation stays private despite the bustling brunch crowd, "Luca could wipe that debt with a single phone call. It wouldn't even be a favor—it would just be business."

I press my lips together. That had been my initial thought too—go to Skye, get her to ask Luca. Problem solved. Except...

"No," I say firmly, setting my mimosa down with more force than necessary. "Absolutely not."

Skye arches a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Why not? It's the easiest solution."

"Because he's the Don, Skye." I drop my voice even lower. "You think his men wouldn't notice if he started clearing debts because his wife's friend asked? It undermines everything." I can't fuck with his organization like that.

What I don't say is that Enzo wouldn't pose the same problem. He's the newest capo, already viewed with suspicion after his convenient defection from the Cappallettis. If he decided to handle Griffin's debt, nobody would connect it back to me. They'd just assume he was making power moves, building his own reputation separate from Luca's shadow. They'd respect it, even.

"Kendra," Skye leans in, her amber eyes intense in the sunlight streaming through the window, "Luca wouldn't blink. He'd consider it a business transaction, not a favor. Nobody would question it."

"I've made up my mind," I say, cutting a piece of my untouched waffle with unnecessary precision. "I'm not involving Luca."

Jazz studies me from across the table, her dark eyes narrowed. "So what's the alternative plan then? Because I'm not seeing one."

Mikayla reaches over and squeezes my hand. "Whatever you need, we're here for you."

I smile at her, grateful for the simple kindness, even as I know there's nothing any of them can do. This is my mess to clean up—or rather, Griffin's mess that I've somehow inherited.

"I appreciate that," I say, "but I'll figure it out. I always do."

The conversation shifts to safer topics—Mikayla's art show, Jazz's latest club drama, Maria's charity gala planning. But I catch Skye watching me with that penetrating

stare of hers, like she's trying to read between the lines of what I'm not saying.

By the time I get home that night, my apartment feels too quiet, too empty. I kick off my heels, pour a glass of cabernet, and sink onto my couch, staring at the Chicago skyline through my windows. The city lights blur as I let my mind wander to all my options.

There aren't many.

Griffin can't pay. I don't have that kind of liquid cash. Asking Luca is off the table. Which leaves...

Enzo. His offer hanging in the air between us. The memory of him standing too close in that alley, his cologne mixing with the night air, his voice low and confident because he knew—he fucking knew—I had no real choice.

I hate him for that. I hate how he cornered me, how he saw through my defenses like they were made of glass. I hate how he weaponized Griffin's stupidity against me.

But most of all, I hate that when I close my eyes, trying to find a way out of this mess, all I hear is his voice, smooth as whiskey and twice as intoxicating: "Think about it."

And I am. God help me, I am.

KENDRA

I pull up to Enzo's house, surprised by the quiet, upscale neighborhood. Somehow, I'd imagined him living in some gothic mansion on the edge of town, or perhaps a penthouse overlooking the city—not this sleek modern structure nestled between mature oak trees on a peaceful street. It's unsettling how normal it looks from the outside. Like a wolf wearing sheep's clothing.

I sit in my car, drumming my perfectly manicured nails against the steering wheel, giving myself one last pep talk. "This is your choice," I whisper to my reflection in the rearview mirror. "You're making this decision. You're in control."

The words sound hollow even to my own ears, but I cling to them anyway. Pride is sometimes all we have, and I refuse to walk into this arrangement feeling like a victim.

Skye's knowing look when she gave me the address still haunts me. The careful neutrality in her voice when she said, "You know what you're doing, right?" As if she could already see exactly how this would play out even though I wouldn't really explain why I wanted it.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," I'd told her with more confidence than I felt. "Just give me the damn address."

Now here I am, parked outside the devil's doorstep, about to sell my soul on my

behalf of a friend so close he's practically my brother. Griffin has no idea what I'm doing for him. He never will—at least the full truth.

The path to Enzo's front door is lined with neat landscaping—minimalist but expensive-looking, just like the man himself. Each step I take in my stilettos feels like a deliberate choice. My heartbeat quickens, but I keep my chin high, shoulders back. My burgundy wrap dress hugs every curve, a subtle armor of confidence.

I press the doorbell before I can second-guess myself.

The door swings open, and there he stands—Enzo Rossi in dark jeans and a charcoal henley that clings to his broad shoulders and chest in a way that should be illegal. His steel-gray eyes take me in, and I feel exposed despite being fully clothed. His dark hair is slightly disheveled, as if he's been running his fingers through it.

"You came," he says, his voice a low rumble that seems to vibrate through me. Not a question. A statement. Like he never doubted I would. He doesn't even seem surprised that I've shown up at his house unannounced, though I imagine Skye would have warned him.

"I did." I meet his gaze directly, refusing to show weakness.

He steps aside to let me in, and I move past him, catching the scent of sandalwood and something darker, more primal. His home surprises me immediately—open concept, clean lines, but unexpectedly warm. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame the skyline, while a perfectly arranged bookshelf spans one wall, filled with actual books that look read, not just displayed. The kitchen gleams with high-end appliances, and a cabinet full of expensive liquors.

Before I can comment, chaos erupts. A yellow blur comes barreling around the corner, paws skidding on the hardwood floors, followed by a second, more cautious

shadow.

"What the—" I barely have time to brace myself before seventy pounds of enthusiastic dog crashes into my legs, nearly knocking me off my heels. Wet nose, wagging tail, excited whines—the yellow lab looks up at me with pure joy, as if I'm the most exciting thing to happen all day.

Behind her, a black and brown Australian shepherd hangs back, watching me with intelligent, wary eyes, pressed against Enzo's leg as if for protection.

My mouth opens, then shuts, all my carefully rehearsed lines forgotten. "You have dogs?"

Enzo leans casually against the kitchen counter, arms crossed over his chest, watching my reaction with what almost looks like amusement. "Problem?"

I'm too stunned to answer immediately. My brain short-circuits trying to reconcile the cold, calculating capo who cornered me on the street with this man who apparently has not one but two dogs that shed all over his expensive furniture.

Hades isn't supposed to have dogs. He's supposed to sit on a throne in the dark, not collect strays. He's supposed to be harsh and unforgiving, not have a home that feels lived-in, with dog toys scattered across an otherwise immaculate living room.

The lab—completely oblivious to my internal crisis—decides my momentary silence means we're best friends now and proceeds to enthusiastically sniff my shoes and up my legs.

"Down, Paige," Enzo commands, though his tone lacks any real authority. He's clearly soft on her, not that I can blame him.

The lab—Paige, apparently—ignores him completely, instead opting to circle me with her entire body wiggling in excitement. Her tail whips back and forth with such force I worry she might hurt herself. It's endearing in a chaotic sort of way, and I find myself fighting the urge to reach down and pet her.

But then Enzo straightens, stepping toward me, the playful moment dissolving. His features sharpen, his relaxed posture transforming into something predatory. The warm domesticity of the scene evaporates like morning dew in summer heat.

"I assume you're not here for them. So say it." His voice drops into something silky and dangerous, each word carefully measured, designed to slip under my skin.

I square my shoulders, refusing to let him rattle me. This is exactly what I expected—the mask dropping, the wolf showing its teeth. This version of him, I understand. This version fits the narrative.

"Fine. You win. I'll take the deal."

The words taste bitter on my tongue, but I keep my voice steady, my chin high. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me hesitate.

Enzo's smirk is slow, victorious, but he doesn't gloat. Instead, he just tilts his head, studying me like I'm a chess piece he's finally maneuvered into the perfect position.

"Of course you will."

The casual confidence in those three words makes my blood simmer. He knew all along I'd cave, knew exactly how much this meant to me, knew I would never let Griffin suffer if I could prevent it.

Instead of acknowledging me further, he turns away as if I'm not worth another

thought and grabs a crystal tumbler from a cabinet. He pours himself a finger of amber liquid—whiskey, from the looks of it—his movements unhurried and deliberate.

Paige bumps into his leg, her entire body still wiggling with uncontained joy, completely at odds with the tension crackling between us. The Australian shepherd hasn't moved from her spot, her intelligent eyes still fixed on me with obvious suspicion. She shifts closer to Enzo, pressing herself against his calf as if trying to protect him from me.

I clench my fists, the reality of the situation crystallizing with brutal clarity. This isn't the moment I take control. It's the moment I lose it.

Enzo reaches down with one hand—the one not holding his whiskey—and absently scratches behind the Australian shepherd's ears. The gesture is automatic, intimate, a glimpse of genuine affection that feels almost invasive to witness.

"This Penny," he says suddenly, glancing between his dogs. "And that's— Paige, knock it off. You'll tear her dress."

Paige, ignoring him completely, has decided that my stillness means I need more enthusiasm and places her paws on my thighs, nearly dislodging my carefully arranged wrap. I instinctively catch her, unable to stop myself.

"She's just excited." I pet her, no longer able to hold back. "You can tell I need a friend, hmm?"

My voice is quiet, but when I look up, Enzo is watching me. I swallow hard, the tension blooming between us. Then he clears his throat, looking away. "Don't get too comfortable. This is just a deal after all."

My stomach drops at the reminder and Paige nuzzles against me like she can tell. But nothing can wipe away the ice cold feeling pouring through me as I face what I have done.

I've signed my soul over to my own personal Hades.

KENDRA

I leave Enzo's house feeling shaky, disoriented. The carefully constructed image I have of him has been disturbed by something as simple as two dogs and a home that doesn't scream "ruthless mafia capo." It throws me off-balance in a way I wasn't prepared for.

My fingernails dig into my palm as I drive across the city, the evening traffic letting me stew in my thoughts longer than I'd like. I've always prided myself on being logical, calculated. Not the kind of woman who makes rash decisions based on emotions. Yet here I am, having signed away who knows how much of my time and autonomy for Griffin's sake.

"It's handled," I rehearse under my breath, checking my reflection in the rearview mirror. My dark curls are still perfectly styled, lipstick intact. Nothing on the outside betrays the chaos within. "Griffin, it's handled. Simple as that."

I pull up to his apartment building—one of those converted factories in the arts district with exposed brick and pipes that cost way more than they should. I've never understood why Griffin insists on living here when he could get twice the space elsewhere, but image has always mattered more to him than practicality.

As I climb the stairs to the third floor, I rehearse my speech. I'll be casual but firm. "Hey, so that gambling debt you had with Armando? It's been taken care of. Don't ask me how, don't worry about paying me back. Just stop gambling, you idiot."

I've known Griffin since college—marketing classes, group projects, late-night study sessions that turned into drunken confessions. He's always had a weakness for anything that gives him an adrenaline rush. But I never thought he'd get himself this deep.

I knock on his door. Wait. Knock harder.

Nothing.

"Griffin?" I call out, pressing my ear against the door. The silence on the other side feels wrong.

I slide my key—the one he gave me "for emergencies" after I helped him home from the hospital that time—into the lock. It clicks open, and I step inside.

The apartment feels...hollow. The furniture is still there—couch, TV, coffee table—but the framed vintage movie posters that usually line the walls are gone. So are the shelves of vinyl records he prides himself on. My footsteps echo against hardwood floors as I move deeper inside.

"Griffin?"

His bedroom door stands ajar. I push it open to find the closet emptied, hangers dangling like skeletons. The bathroom: toothbrush gone, expensive hair products missing. A half-empty bottle of cologne sits abandoned on the counter—the cheap one he never liked.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I pull out my phone, dialing his number. It rings once, twice, then straight to voicemail. His cheerful voice echoes in my ear. "You know what to do!"

I try again. Same result.

A throbbing starts behind my temples as I sink down onto his stripped bed. This doesn't make sense. Griffin wouldn't just leave. Not without telling me. Not when he knows I'd worry.

Unless...

A chill slides down my spine. I scroll through my phone, dialing the number of the bar where he tends to hang out—Milagro's on West End.

"Hey, this is Kendra. Griffin's friend? Have you seen him tonight? Or this week?" I ask when someone finally answers.

"Griffin? Nah, he hasn't been in for...damn, at least a few days now."

A few days. Probably since Armando came to visit him.

"Thanks," I mumble, ending the call.

I try another friend, then another. Same story. No one's seen him. No one's heard from him since I last did.

My fingers hover over Skye's name in my contacts. She might know something through Luca. But the thought of admitting I've been played makes bile rise in my throat.

Instead, I stand up and walk back to the living room, stopping at the kitchen counter. That's when I see it—a stack of mail. Right on top is a postcard. A glossy shot of Miami Beach, the colors so vivid they hurt my eyes. Something pushes me to turn it over.

Sorry, K. Had to bounce. Take care of yourself. —G

Bounce. Take care of yourself. As if I haven't spent the last six years doing exactly that for him—picking him up, dusting him off, making sure he doesn't self-destruct. I thought we were close, the best of friends, and instead, he's just left me behind like I'm nothing to clean up his mess.

The anger comes suddenly, burning through my chest and up my throat until I can taste it, metallic and hot. I slam the postcard down on the counter.

"You selfish bastard!"

My voice echoes through the empty apartment. Empty like the promises Griffin made, empty like the friendship I thought we had. He knew about his debts. He knew what would happen if he didn't pay. And instead of facing it, he ran—leaving me here holding the bag.

And what a bag it is. I've tied myself to Enzo Rossi, a man who makes my skin prickle with equal parts fear and something I refuse to name. All for someone who couldn't even be bothered to say goodbye to my face.

I sink onto a barstool, burying my face in my hands. I don't know what's worse—the anger or the humiliation. I've always been the smart one, the one who sees the angles, who doesn't get taken for a ride. Yet here I am, played like the world's biggest fool.

I sold myself to Hades to save someone who abandoned me the second he could.

I stare at the postcard until the palm tree blurs into a green smudge. My deal with Enzo plays on repeat in my mind—his cool gray eyes watching me like I was a chess piece he'd been waiting to move.

How am I going to face him now?

He'll see right through me, through this facade of control I've carefully constructed. Worse, he'll enjoy watching me squirm, savoring my humiliation like fine wine. I can already imagine his expression—that barely-there smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, his calculating gaze stripping away my defenses layer by layer.

He never guaranteed Griffin's loyalty—only his life. That's what he'll say, with that infuriating calm of his. The debt is cleared now. Griffin is safe, probably lying on some Miami beach sipping cocktails while I'm here, still bound to a man who practically radiates danger.

I'm still his. The thought sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine.

Instead of going home where my thoughts might suffocate me, I grab my keys and head for the door. I need noise, distraction, something to drown out the voice in my head telling me I've made a colossal mistake.

Twenty minutes later, I'm sliding onto a barstool at Thorn, a sleek lounge downtown where the lighting is dim enough to hide in and the music is just loud enough to make thinking difficult. Perfect.

"Whiskey, neat," I tell the bartender, a tattooed woman with a silver septum ring who nods without judgment.

The first sip burns all the way down, exactly what I need. I'm halfway through my second drink when I catch my reflection in the mirrored backslash behind the bar. I still look put together—my curls still falling just right, my lipstick only slightly faded. No one looking at me would guess I'm unraveling inside.

I take another sip, letting the whiskey warm me from the inside, but even alcohol

can't blur the memory of Enzo's eyes when I agreed to his deal. Steel gray, sharp as blades, with that glint of satisfaction. Like he knew exactly how this would play out. Like he was ten steps ahead while I was stumbling in the dark.

Had he known Griffin would run? Had he counted on it?

The thought makes me drain my glass, signaling for another. Three whiskeys in and I'm still too sober, too aware of how completely I've backed myself into a corner.

"This seat taken?"

I glance up to find a man gesturing to the stool beside me. Tall, well-dressed, with the kind of practiced smile that usually works on women in bars.

"Yes," I lie, not in the mood for conversation.

He raises an eyebrow, looking around at the very empty space beside me. "I don't see anyone."

"That doesn't make it available to you." My tone is ice, my expression deliberately blank. I've perfected this look over years of corporate meetings—a clear "don't waste my time" warning.

He holds up his hands in mock surrender, muttering something under his breath as he moves away. Any other night, I might have handled that differently. Tonight, I just want to be left alone with my regrets and my whiskey.

I pull out my phone, staring at Griffin's contact. My thumb hovers over the call button, but what would I even say? 'Thanks for leaving me to clean up your mess'? 'Hope your tan is coming along nicely while I'm indentured to the mob'?

Instead, I turn off my phone and try to numb away the reality of what I've been tricked into.

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8

ENZO

I wait exactly twenty-four hours after Kendra discovers Griffin's betrayal before I make the call. I knew that he was gone that night after I offered her the deal, knew he had already been on a plane when she agreed to it. But a deal is a deal.

So, I gave her a little time. Not because I'm kind—I'm not—but because timing is everything in my world. Let her anger ferment. Let it settle in her bones. I want her raw when I claim what's mine.

Skye's voice had been ice when she gave me the number. "Don't fuck with her head, Enzo. She's not one of your projects."

I'd smiled at that—the protective fury in Skye's eyes. I can't help but have a little soft spot for her. "Noted."

Now, I sit in my living room, the city lights scattered across the dark horizon beyond my windows like fallen stars. Penny is curled into my side and Paige is sprawled across my leather couch. They're already asleep, but I have to leave soon.

Which means I need to make a call.

I smile to myself as I pull my phone out, tapping her number. On the third ring, she answers. "What?" A single syllable, sharp as a blade.

I let the silence stretch, just long enough that most people would start to fidget. I know she won't. I've studied Kendra Washington long enough to understand her edges.

"Is that how you answer all your calls, or am I special?" I keep my voice low, controlled. The same tone I use when I'm about to destroy someone—or when I'm genuinely amused. Few can tell the difference.

Instead of answering the question, she sighs. "You're really calling in a favor already?" Her voice shifts from irritated to wary, and I can practically see her spine straightening.

"You belong to me now. Time to start acting like it." I run my hand over Penny's fur. There's amusement in my voice, but the words aren't a joke. They're the simplest truth—a contract sealed the moment she agreed to my terms.

The silence from her end tells me everything. I know exactly what's happening on the other side of this call: the conflict between pride and necessity battling behind those sharp brown eyes. I can only imagine that she thinks she can get out of this now that her friend is gone.

"I didn't agree to late night booty calls," she finally says, but the fight in her voice is measured. Controlled. She's weighing her options.

"I don't recall specifying hours of operation in our arrangement." I stand, walking to the window. Paige lifts her head, watching me with attentive eyes. "And if we're being technical, I haven't actually told you what I want yet."

"Fine." Kendra's voice hardens, that professional edge taking over. "What do you want?"

"I'll text you an address. Be there in an hour."

Another pause. "For what?"

"For whatever I want." I let the implication hang between us. "Unless you'd prefer I call in the full debt immediately. Griffin owes—or rather, you now owe—quite a substantial amount."

"I'll be there in an hour." Each word sounds like it's being dragged across broken glass.

"Smart choice, Kendra." I can't help the satisfaction that colors my voice. "And wear something nice. You're representing me now."

I end the call before she can respond, slipping the phone into my pocket. She won't back out. Not after what Griffin did. Not with what's at stake.

Paige rises, stretching before padding over to nudge my hand with her nose. I scratch behind her ears, looking out at the city spread before me.

"Good girl," I murmur. "Just don't go getting attached."

I'm not entirely sure which one of us I'm talking to, though.

I send the text with the address five minutes after I hang up, then make a few more calls before leaving the house. Penny gives me those anxious eyes—the ones that say I'm abandoning her for life—while Paige simply flops on her side, already over my departure.

"I'll be back," I tell them, adjusting my cuffs. I've chosen a charcoal suit tonight, perfectly tailored to emphasize the breadth of my shoulders, the power in my frame.

My watch—an understated Patek Philippe that cost more than most people's cars—gleams against my skin.

I arrive at Elysium thirty minutes before Kendra is due. The club is high-end, exclusive—the kind of place where the rich and powerful come to play without worrying about cameras or consequences. The owner owes me favors, which means I get the best table, the best service, and absolute privacy when I want it.

The VIP section is elevated above the main floor, glass walls providing a perfect view of the club while maintaining separation. I settle into the curved booth, my back to the wall, eyes on the entrance. Old habits.

When she walks in, I know immediately.

Even without seeing her, I can feel the shift in energy, the way heads turn. And then she's there, at the bottom of the stairs that lead to VIP, speaking to the security guard who nods and steps aside.

She's wearing a sleek black dress that hugs every curve while somehow remaining elegant. Her hair falls in those perfect curls around her face, and her lips are painted a deep red that makes me think of sin and satisfaction. There's a hardness in her posture, though—shoulders back, chin high. She's armored herself for battle.

I don't stand when she approaches. I simply watch her, letting my eyes trail over her form with deliberate slowness.

"Right on time," I say, gesturing to the space beside me. "I appreciate punctuality."

Kendra slides into the booth, maintaining a careful distance. "Let's not pretend this is a social call. What kind of deal am I here to witness?"

I smile, signaling the waitress who appears almost instantly. "Macallan 25 for me. And for the lady?"

"Vodka martini. Three olives." Kendra's voice is clipped, professional.

When the waitress leaves, I turn my body toward Kendra, one arm stretching across the back of the booth. Not touching her, but close enough that she can feel my presence.

"I've already handled my deals for tonight tonight," I say, watching her reaction carefully.

Her eyes narrow, confusion flickering across her face before she masks it. "Then why am I here?"

"Because I wanted you to be." The simplicity of my answer clearly irritates her. Good. I like the way her eyes flash when she's angry. Our drinks arrive, and I take a slow sip of my scotch, savoring the burn. "How is Griffin?"

The question catches her off guard. Her fingers tense around her glass. "Why do you ask?"

Maybe I shouldn't push it, but I can't seem to help myself. "Did he call to explain why he left? Or did he just disappear?" I already know the answer. I have people who track these things for me. But I want to hear it from her.

"I'm sure you already know." She takes a deliberate sip of her martini, refusing to give me the satisfaction.

I lean in closer, my voice dropping. "I do. But I want to hear how it felt to be betrayed by someone you trusted."

Kendra's jaw tightens. "Is that what this is? You brought me here to gloat?"

"Not at all." I can't help the slight smirk that forms. "I'm simply curious about your taste in friends. First Griffin, now me. You seem drawn to dangerous men."

"You're not my friend." She says it with such conviction that I almost laugh.

"No," I agree, watching her over the rim of my glass. "I'm something else entirely."

The music pulses around us, but inside our booth, it's like we exist in our own world. Women at the bar keep glancing our way—at me—with hungry eyes. But I keep my attention fixed on Kendra.

She drinks deeply, eyeing me the whole time. "So I came out for this? To have a drink with you?" Her lips curl to the side. "Too hard for you to find anyone willing to put up with you?"

I shift closer to her though still not touching. "Not at all. If I came alone, those women would be over here in minutes. Having you here keeps them away."

Kendra follows my gaze to where three women in tight dresses are watching our booth. Something flickers across her face—a flash of what looks almost like jealousy before it's gone.

"So I'm a human shield. How flattering." But there's an edge to her voice that wasn't there before.

"A companion," I correct, enjoying the way she bristles. "One who intrigues me more than she should."

And it's true. I wasn't even sure why I made this deal with her in the first place.

Griffin's debt was substantial, but nothing I couldn't handle differently. Yet something about Kendra Washington pulls at me. The way she refuses to be intimidated. The sharpness of her mind. The fire that burns behind those eyes.

"Funny," she responds, turning to face me fully. "I don't find you intriguing at all."

It's a lie. I can see it in the way her eyes linger on my mouth, the slight flush across her cheekbones that has nothing to do with alcohol.

"Liar," I say softly, watching her reaction. "But that's okay. We have plenty of time for you to admit the truth."

And I'm going to enjoy forcing it out of her.

KENDRA

I slam my phone down with more force than necessary, staring at Enzo's text message like it might spontaneously combust.

Dinner tonight. 8 PM. Wear something nice. I'll send a car.

It's the fourth summons this week. No please. No explanation. Just another imperial command expecting immediate obedience. I consider throwing the phone across my living room but reconsider—I've already replaced two this year, and Apple doesn't need more of my money.

The rational part of my brain reminds me I agreed to this arrangement. I made a deal with the devil himself to save Griffin's worthless ass, only to discover he'd already skipped town. Now I'm left holding the bag—or more accurately, holding whatever Enzo Rossi decides to hand me.

When I agreed to be "at his call," I'd braced myself for something sinister. Sexual favors. Illegal activities. Using my marketing connections for something that would get me fired or worse. Instead, I've gotten... dinner dates. Club appearances. Silent companionship while he conducts mysterious business meetings that seem to consist mostly of men in expensive suits nodding reverently in his direction. I don't even get why I'm there most of the time.

I pull open my closet door with enough force to rattle the hinges. What does

"something nice" even mean to a man whose watch probably costs more than my car? I finger through dresses, each one seemingly inadequate for whatever game he's playing.

The car arrives precisely at 7:30. Of course it does. The driver doesn't speak beyond confirming my identity, and I don't offer conversation. Twenty minutes later, we pull up to Antica, the kind of Italian restaurant where the menu doesn't list prices and the wine list requires its own leather-bound volume.

Enzo is already seated when I arrive, his broad frame dominating a corner table that gives him full view of the restaurant. He doesn't stand when I approach—why would he? That would suggest manners, consideration, something human underneath all that calculated control. Instead, his steel-gray eyes track my approach, taking in the midnight blue dress I'd finally settled on, neither approving nor disapproving.

"You're punctual," he says, as if bestowing some great compliment.

"You didn't give me much choice." I slide into my seat, refusing the help of the hovering waiter. "Your text was typically informative."

A slight twitch at the corner of his mouth might be amusement. "I find brevity effective."

"Is that what you call it?"

I watch as he swirls amber liquid in a crystal tumbler. His tattooed forearms peek out beneath rolled sleeves, intricate designs disappearing under expensive fabric, telling stories I'm not allowed to read. He's freshly shaved, the sharp line of his jaw softened only by the shadow that's already threatening to return.

"You seem tense tonight, Kendra." He takes a measured sip of his drink. "Problem at

work?"

"My problem is sitting across from me." I reach for the wine already poured at my place setting. "Is this what I signed up for? Being your dinner companion?"

Enzo leans forward slightly, and the subtle shift commands my attention. He doesn't need to raise his voice or slam his hand; the slight tilt of his head is enough.

"Are you complaining?" He arches one perfect eyebrow, challenge evident in every line of his face.

I hold his gaze, refusing to be the first to look away. "I'm questioning the allocation of resources. If all you wanted was someone to watch you eat pasta, you could've hired an actual escort. Probably would've been cheaper than forgiving Griffin's debt."

Something dangerous flashes behind those steel-gray eyes. I've poked the bear, and part of me—the reckless, self-destructive part—relishes it.

His hand moves across the table, not quite touching mine but close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his skin. "Maybe I enjoy your particular brand of company."

The tension crackles between us, electric and unbearable. I should pull away, put distance between us. Instead, I find myself leaning slightly forward, drawn into his orbit despite every warning bell clanging in my head.

"Lucky me," I whisper, hating how my voice betrays me, dropping to a register that's more invitation than rebuke.

His fingers brush against mine as he reaches for his glass again, the contact brief but deliberate. My skin burns where he touched it.

I'm slipping. God help me, I'm slipping.

The rest of dinner is...complicated. Enzo orders for both of us—something I'd normally fight anyone else over—but his selections are impeccable. Conversations flow more naturally after our initial clash, though each word feels like we are stepping through a minefield, both searching for weak points in the other's armor.

Now, confined in the plush leather backseat of his car since he insisted on taking me home, I'm acutely aware of his presence. He sits with casual dominance, one arm stretched along the seat back, not quite touching me but close enough that I feel the heat radiating from him. His cologne—something expensive and subtle—fills the enclosed space, mingling with the lingering scent of the grappa he'd insisted I try.

"That wasn't so terrible, was it?" His voice breaks the silence, low and smooth.

I glance sideways, catching the ghost of a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. "The food was excellent. The company remains under evaluation."

A low chuckle rumbles from his chest. "Always ready with that sharp tongue."

"Would you prefer I simper and fawn like everyone else in your orbit?" I turn my head fully to face him. "Sorry to disappoint, but that's not part of our arrangement."

"No," his eyes darken as they trace the contours of my face, "it's not."

The car pulls to a stop outside my building, but before I can reach for the door, Enzo is out and circling around, opening it for me.

"I can manage," I say, but he extends his hand anyway.

"Humor me."

I hesitate before placing my hand in his. His fingers close around mine, warm and sure, and he helps me from the car with surprising gentleness. When I expect him to release me, he doesn't, instead placing his other hand at the small of my back.

"I'll walk you up."

It's not a question. With anyone else, I'd resist on principle, but something about the quiet certainty in his voice makes argument seem childish.

The elevator ride is excruciating. Five floors of standing too close, his broad frame making the spacious elevator feel suddenly claustrophobic. I focus on the numbers lighting up, one after another, rather than acknowledge how my body betrays me—pulse racing, skin heating wherever he stands closest.

When we reach my door, I fumble with my keys, suddenly clumsy under his watchful gaze. The hallway light flickers, casting dramatic shadows across the sharp planes of his face. I'm hyper-aware of how alone we are, how the silence between us feels charged with unspoken intentions.

"Thank you for dinner," I say, finally managing to unlock my door. I turn to face him, expecting a quick goodnight.

Instead, he steps closer, eliminating what little space remained between us. My back presses against the door frame as he looms over me, not threatening but overwhelming in his presence.

Enzo reaches out, tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers linger against my jaw, and his voice is a low murmur. "You want this."

The touch sends electricity cascading down my spine, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing how he affects me. Maybe this was the end game. He wants to

see me want him, so he can use me and discard me, too.

That's not going to happen.

I tilt my chin up, meeting his steel-gray eyes with defiance. "Not even a little."

Time suspends as we stand frozen in this moment. His thumb traces the outline of my bottom lip, so lightly I could almost believe I imagined it. His eyes drop to my mouth, and I catch myself holding my breath, my body betraying my words as I unconsciously lean toward him.

Then, just when the tension becomes unbearable, when I'm certain he's going to close that final distance between us—he smirks and steps away, the sudden absence of his heat leaving me cold.

"Liar." The word is soft, almost tender in its accusation.

And then he's gone, retreating down the hallway with that confident, measured stride, not looking back once. I remain frozen, watching until he disappears into the elevator.

I slam my door shut, leaning against it, heart hammering in my chest. My skin feels too tight, too hot, my breathing uneven. I press my fingers to my lips where the ghost of his touch lingers.

Damn him. Damn him for walking away. Damn him for knowing exactly what I want before I'm willing to admit it to myself. And damn me for this wildfire burning through my veins, for the frustration building in my core.

He's playing a game, and somehow he's always one move ahead. I hate it. I hate him. I hate that he can read me so easily while remaining an impenetrable mystery himself.

10

ENZO

I slip my phone back into my pocket, seeing Kendra's read receipt glaring back at me with no response. The woman is a challenge—refusing to play by anyone's rules but her own. It's infuriating. Intriguing.

A small smile threatens my composure as I picture her deliberately ignoring my text, probably rolling her eyes at her phone screen. I've never met someone who fights her own attraction with such determination. The challenge only makes me want her more.

The streets are quiet tonight, just how I prefer them. The chill in the air keeps most people indoors, leaving me to my thoughts as I walk the three blocks from my car to the upscale restaurant where I'm meeting one of Luca's contacts. The solitude shatters when two figures step out from the alley to my left.

My body tenses instantly, hand moving instinctively inside my jacket before recognition hits. The movement is so subtle no one would notice unless they were looking for it.

"Zenon," I say, voice flat as I face my older brother. His lean frame is wrapped in an expensive coat that screams of trying too hard, hair slicked back with meticulous precision that speaks of a man desperate for control. Behind him looms his son, Ercole, all brute force with none of the finesse, the permanent bruising on his knuckles matching the perpetual sneer on his face.

I don't stop walking, forcing them to fall into step beside me. "What an unpleasant surprise."

"That how you greet family now?" Zenon's voice carries that familiar mocking edge, the one he's cultivated since we were boys. Always the puppetmaster, always thinking he's three steps ahead.

"You're not my family."

Ercole moves with surprising speed for his size, stepping in front of me to block my path. His massive frame casts a shadow across the sidewalk, his stormy eyes burning with the kind of violence that's always lived just beneath his skin. My nephew might be massive but there's not much going for wonder boy besides making his father happy with his strength.

"Traitor," he spits, the word landing between us like a gauntlet. "Family doesn't do what you did."

I meet his gaze without flinching. "Which part bothers you more? That I betrayed the Cappallettis, or that I succeeded?"

"You turned on your own kind," Ercole growls, taking a step closer, invading my space with his bulk. "What kind of man does that make you?"

"A successful one." I don't back away. Never have, never will. "If loyalty meant anything to Giovanni, he wouldn't have let Alfonso throw me aside like garbage."

Zenon circles closer, always the shark. His perfectly calculated movements contrast with Ercole's raw aggression. "You think Luca will protect you forever?" His voice drops, words precise and cutting. "He's got his own kingdom now. He doesn't need you."

I allow my lips to curve into the slightest smile. "Is that what keeps you up at night, Zenon? Wondering who needs who?"

"We know what you did," Zenon continues, ignoring my taunt. "Every detail. Every name. Every betrayal."

"Good." I adjust my cuffs, the motion deliberate, unhurried. "Then you know exactly what I'm capable of. What I'm willing to do."

"You think you're untouchable." Ercole's fists clench at his sides, knuckles whitening with barely contained rage.

"I think you're in my way." I step around him, shoulder checking him as I pass. The contact is brief but intentional—a reminder that I don't fear him.

Zenon's laugh follows me, hollow and calculated. "Family is forever, Enzo. Blood doesn't wash off so easily."

I turn back, meeting his cold gray eyes—so like mine yet stripped of anything human. "We share DNA, not loyalty. There's a difference."

"Not to us," Ercole rumbles.

"That's your problem." I straighten my jacket, eyes never leaving theirs. "Not mine."

I continue walking, leaving them behind, their presence like a bad taste I can't quite spit out. Zenon's words might have rattled a lesser man, but I've been playing this game too long. Family reunions were always destined to be bloody in our world.

The restaurant comes into view, its elegant facade concealing the darker dealings that happen within. Inside, I meet Luca's contact—an aging politician with greedy fingers

and frightened eyes. The meeting is quick, efficient. Money changes hands, promises are made, and I secure the zoning approval Luca needs for his newest venture. Simple. Clean. The way I operate.

Throughout the meeting, I feel my phone vibrate twice in my pocket. I don't need to check it to know who it is. Kendra Washington has been a persistent thought in my mind since the moment I saw her at Skye's boutique—tall, confident, with those knowing brown eyes that see right through bullshit. The kind of woman who commands a room without trying. The kind of woman I rarely encounter in my world of yes-men and sycophants.

When I finally step back onto the street, the night air feels cleaner than the corrupt deals sealed with handshakes inside. I pull out my phone, my finger sliding across the screen to reveal her message.

Found something better to do tonight. Maybe next time.

A smirk plays at the corners of my mouth as I read between the lines. She's pushing back, testing to see how I'll react. It's deliberate defiance wrapped in casual dismissal.

I like it. I like her.

Most women in my orbit either fear me or want something from me. Kendra does neither. She took my deal to save her friend, but she's determined to do it on her terms. It's a pointless struggle—she'll learn soon enough that I always get what I want—but her resistance is unexpectedly appealing.

I slide into my car, the leather seat cool against my back as I type out a response.

Enjoy your evening of "something better." I'll see you tomorrow. 8pm. Wear something nice.

I hit send, knowing the command will irritate her. I can almost see her now—those full lips pressed into a line, her eyes narrowing as she reads my message. She'll probably curse under her breath, maybe throw her phone onto the couch in frustration. But she'll be there. We both know it.

The thought of her simmering anger sends a rush of heat through my veins. There's something intoxicating about a woman who doesn't bend easily. Breaking her won't be my goal—no, taming Kendra would be like caging a wildcat. The beauty is in the fight, in the dance between us.

My phone buzzes again. I glance down, surprised to see her response so quickly.

You don't command me, Enzo. I'm not one of your soldiers.

I chuckle, the sound filling the empty car. She has no idea what she's playing with, yet she stands her ground. It's refreshing in a world where most people cower at my reputation alone.

"We'll see how long that lasts," I murmur to myself, sliding the phone back into my pocket without responding. Let her wonder. Let her mind race with possibilities of what tomorrow will bring.

The engine purrs to life beneath me, and I navigate through Chicago's streets toward home, where Penny and Paige will be waiting. They'll be my company for tonight, but tomorrow...

Tomorrow I'll remind Kendra that she is mine .

11

KENDRA

I tap my manicured nails against my keyboard, staring at the email that's been sitting in my drafts for twenty minutes. The client wants changes to the campaign—again. For the third time this week. I've rewritten this response four different ways, each version getting progressively more direct while still maintaining that veneer of professionalism.

My phone buzzes against my desk, and I glance down to see Enzo's name on the screen.

Don't forget about tonight. I'll be there at 8.

No question mark. No "if that works for you." Just a statement, an expectation that I'll comply. And the most infuriating part? I will.

I pick up my phone, fingers hovering over the keyboard. This has become our dance over the past two weeks. He gives an order disguised as a casual comment, and I push back just enough to remind him I'm not one of his soldiers.

I'll check my schedule , I type back, even though we both know damn well I'm free tonight.

Three dots appear immediately. Don't bother. You're free.

Heat crawls up my spine—not anger, something more complicated. The way he says it, so certain. Like he knows my movements, my patterns. Maybe he does.

Pretty presumptuous of you. I send before I can stop myself.

Is it presumptuous if I'm right?

I set my phone down without responding, returning to my email with renewed focus. I'll make him wait for a reply. Let him wonder if he pushed too far.

Two hours later, my assistant pokes her head into my office.

"The Morton account called. They love the new direction."

I look up from my computer and smile. "Good. Tell Jamie to start on the visuals—I want mock-ups by Friday."

She nods and disappears, and I lean back in my chair, satisfaction warming my chest. I'm good at what I do. Damn good. I know how to read people, how to package exactly what they want before they even know they want it.

So why can't I figure out Enzo Rossi?

I pick up my phone again. He hasn't followed up, hasn't pushed for a response. That's not how most men operate in my experience. They demand attention, validation, confirmation.

But Enzo just... waits.

It's maddening. And effective.

Because by six, I'm standing in my closet, towel wrapped around me, staring at my options. "Something nice," he said. Deliberately vague. Another move in our game.

I run my fingers over a red dress that hugs every curve, the neckline low enough to be interesting without veering into desperate. I pull it out, hold it against me, considering.

This is dangerous. Every time I see him, I step closer to the flame. Every text, every loaded silence between us, every time those steel-gray eyes lock on mine—I'm playing with fire. And I know it.

But I don't stop.

Maybe it's the way he looks at me—like he sees past all my carefully constructed walls. Maybe it's how different he is from the men I usually encounter, men who mistake arrogance for confidence, volume for power.

I hang the red dress back up and pull out a black one instead. More subtle. Sophisticated. Less like I'm trying to prove something.

As I apply my makeup, I recognize the pattern that's emerged between us. Enzo never pushes first. He creates the space, extends the invitation, but waits for me to step into it. He lets me hover at the edge of admitting what I want—what I really want—and then pulls back just when I'm about to fall.

I apply a final coat of lipstick, the rich burgundy catching the light as I press my lips together. Perfect. Not too much, not too little. Just like everything else about tonight's look—calculated, deliberate. The black dress skims my curves without clinging, the neckline modest but the back dipping just low enough to be interesting. My curls fall in defined waves around my shoulders, and gold hoops catch the light when I turn my head.

I look good. I know I look good. And I hate that I care so much about looking good for him.

When the doorbell rings precisely at eight, I wait an extra thirty seconds before answering.

Enzo stands in my doorway, one hand in the pocket of tailored black slacks, the other holding his phone. His button-down is a deep navy, no tie, the top buttons undone just enough to make my eyes linger a second too long on his throat. His dark hair is styled in that perfectly imperfect way that probably took him all of two minutes to achieve.

"You're ready." His eyes sweep over me, taking in every detail without a single change in his expression. But I catch the way his jaw tightens just slightly. "Good."

"Don't sound so surprised," I grab my clutch from the entryway table. "Some of us make it a point to be punctual."

"I wasn't surprised," he says, stepping back to let me lock my door. "I expected nothing less."

There it is again—that certainty, like he's catalogued all my habits, all my little tells. Like he knows me.

"Where are we going?" I ask as he guides me toward his car with a hand hovering near the small of my back, not quite touching.

"Dinner with some associates." The vagueness is deliberate, I'm sure. "Nothing too formal."

"Associates," I repeat, sliding into the passenger seat of his sleek black Audi. "Interesting euphemism."

His mouth quirks as he closes my door, and I watch through the windshield as he rounds the hood. Every movement is fluid, contained power, like a predator that doesn't need to rush because the prey isn't going anywhere.

When he slides in beside me, the car suddenly feels too small, his cologne filling the space between us—something woody and expensive that clings to my senses.

"Would you prefer I call them business partners? Colleagues?" He starts the engine, the car purring to life. "Friends?"

I snort at that last one. "I wasn't aware men like you had friends."

"Men like me?" His eyes stay on the road, but I can hear the amusement in his voice. "And what kind of man am I, Kendra?"

I turn to look out the window, watching the city lights blur together. "The dangerous kind."

He doesn't respond, and I don't look at him, but I feel his eyes on me at the next stoplight, a weight that raises goosebumps along my bare arms.

The restaurant is upscale but not ostentatious—the kind of place with no prices on the menu and waitstaff that appear and disappear like ghosts. Enzo guides me through the main dining area to a private room in the back, his hand finally making contact with my lower back. Even through the fabric of my dress, his touch burns.

Inside, two couples are already seated at a round table. The men rise when we enter—one older with salt-and-pepper hair, the other around our age with a scar cutting through his left eyebrow. Their companions are polished, beautiful women who smile at me with varying degrees of warmth.

"Kendra, this is Vincent and his wife Elena, and Marco with his date, Sophia." Enzo's introduction is smooth, his thumb tracing small circles against my back as he speaks.

I smile, shake hands, play my part. Over the next two hours, I watch Enzo navigate the conversation with calculated charm, slipping between Italian and English when speaking to the men about things they clearly don't want me to understand. I catch enough to know it's business—shipments, territories, profits.

Throughout dinner, Enzo's attention never fully leaves me, even when he's deep in discussion with Vincent. His hand finds my knee under the table, fingers trailing along the hem of my dress. When he leans close to ask if I want more wine, his breath tickles my ear, winding me so tight with a need I desperately try to control.

By dessert, I'm wound so tight I can barely breathe normally. Every accidental brush of his arm against mine, every time his thigh presses against my leg when he shifts in his seat—it's a deliberate assault on my composure.

When we finally exit the restaurant, I'm relieved to escape the scrutiny of the others, but then it's just us again, walking down a dimly lit hallway toward the back exit where his car is parked.

Enzo stops suddenly, turning to face me in a recessed alcove, backing me against the wall without ever actually touching me. He's so close I can see the tiny flecks of silver in his gray eyes, smell the faint trace of whiskey on his breath.

"You were quiet tonight," he murmurs, reaching up to brush a curl from my face, his knuckles grazing my cheek.

"I was observing." I tilt my chin up, refusing to be intimidated by his proximity.
"Learning."

His lips curve into that maddening half-smile. "And what did you learn?"

"That you're exactly who I thought you were."

Something flickers in his eyes—amusement, challenge. He leans closer, one arm braced against the wall beside my head. His other hand catches my wrist, thumb pressing lightly against my pulse point.

"I think you're learning how much you want me," he says, voice low and smooth.

I huff a laugh, ignoring the racing of my heart beneath his fingertips. "That's just wishful thinking."

Enzo smirks, a slow, knowing thing that makes heat pool low in my belly. "If I kissed you, you'd never forgive yourself." His thumb drags against the inside of my wrist, pulse pounding beneath. "You'd like it too much."

The air between us crackles with tension. His eyes drop to my lips, and for a split second, I lean in—then catch myself, reality crashing back. What am I doing? This man has me in his debt. He owns a piece of my life now. This isn't attraction; it's a power play.

I hate that he's right. Hate that I want to close that final distance between us, to see if his mouth is as skilled as everything else about him suggests.

I pull away first, scoffing to cover the tremor in my voice. "In your dreams, Hades."

He lets me go, stepping back with that infuriating smirk still in place. But his eyes—those cold, calculating eyes—tell me this isn't over as he takes my elbow lightly, guiding me toward the exit and back to his car.

12

ENZO

I press the buzzer at the front gate of Luca's estate, noting the new security cameras installed since my last visit. Smart move. With threats from every direction, Luca never leaves anything to chance. The gate slides open silently, and I drive up the winding driveway, the winter sunlight glinting off the massive windows of his modernist monstrosity of a house.

Most people would be intimidated by such ostentation, but I know what it really is: a fortress disguised as luxury. Every sightline, every entrance, every piece of "decorative" landscaping serves a purpose. Nothing about Luca's life is accidental.

I park beside his collection of European cars and step out, straightening my jacket. One of Luca's guards nods at me as I approach. He knows better than to try searching me. The implied trust isn't personal—it's business. I've earned my place in Luca's inner circle.

The door opens before I knock. Luca stands there, ice-blue eyes assessing me in that unnervingly blank way of his.

"Enzo." No smile, just acknowledgment. His expression never betrays anything—it's what makes most men fear him.

"We need to talk," I say, stepping inside.

He gestures toward his study. "Business first, then?"

I follow him through the house, past rooms decorated with the kind of precise taste that suggests someone else made all the decisions. The place looks lived-in now—Skye's influence. Before her, it was like walking through an architectural magazine, beautiful but sterile.

"Zenon approached me," I say as soon as the study door closes behind us. "Him and Ercole."

Luca's expression doesn't change, but I catch the slight shift in his posture. Alertness. "When?"

"Two days ago. They know I wasn't kidnapped. They know I flipped on the Cappallettis."

Now he moves to the bar cart, pouring two glasses of whiskey. "Your own family. Interesting."

"Not all blood is loyal." I take the offered glass but don't drink. "They'll come at me first, but this is about territory. Your territory."

Luca sits in his leather chair, leaning back slightly. "You think they're trying to start a war."

It's not a question. Luca doesn't ask questions; he states facts and waits for confirmation.

"I know they are. Zenon's ambitious. He's been waiting for a chance to move against you, and I gave him the perfect excuse. Family honor. Blood betrayal." I gesture dismissively. "All that theatrical bullshit."

Luca swirls his whiskey, staring into it with that empty gaze. "Numbers?"

"Fifteen, maybe twenty men directly under Zenon. Ercole's got his own crew too, maybe another dozen."

Luca nods, but something catches his attention. His eyes drift past me, toward the door, and the change is so subtle most people would miss it—but I've spent years reading the micro-expressions of dangerous men. The ice in his eyes thaws, just slightly.

I turn to see what he's looking at.

Skye stands in the hallway with Maria, both of them laughing about something. Skye's elegant in a way that seems effortless, her amber eyes bright with amusement. Maria says something else that makes Skye throw her head back in laughter.

When I look back at Luca, I barely recognize him. The transformation isn't dramatic—no broad smiles or outward displays—but it's there in the softening around his eyes, the slight release of tension in his shoulders. Peace. Certainty. Completion.

I've known Luca long enough to understand what I'm seeing. A man who has everything he wants. A man who built a kingdom and found someone to share it with.

The realization settles in my chest like a stone. My world is different. Everything I've built is temporary—territory that can be taken, alliances that can shift, power that can be lost in a moment of weakness.

Kendra is temporary.

The thought ambushes me. She's a deal, a transaction. A momentary distraction in a life that doesn't allow for permanence.

I drain my whiskey, the burn matching the uncomfortable realization forming in my gut. Luca has found something I didn't know was possible in our world. Something I never thought to want.

The thought unsettles me, so I don't call Kendra that night.

Instead, I drive home alone, the city lights blurring past my windows as I press the accelerator harder than necessary. My territory stretches before me—streets and businesses that answer to me, that fear me—but tonight it feels hollow.

My house is silent when I arrive, except for the clicking of dog nails against hardwood. Paige comes bounding toward me first, all golden chaos and wagging tail, while Penny hangs back, watching with her mismatched eyes, waiting to see if I'm in a mood worth approaching. Smart girl.

"Hey," I murmur, dropping to one knee to let Paige crash into me. Penny inches forward, and I extend my hand to her. "It's fine. Come here."

I feed them, check my security system, and pour myself another drink. The routine is familiar—comforting in its predictability. This is my life. Controlled. Organized. Exactly as I've built it to be.

So why does it feel incomplete tonight?

I settle at my desk, opening my laptop to review the week's numbers. Business is good. Territory is secure, apart from Zenon's threat. I should be focused on that—on strategy and survival—not on brown eyes that see too much or full lips curved into a knowing smirk.

"This isn't real," I mutter to myself, draining my glass. "It can't be."

Kendra is a transaction. A way to settle a debt and entertain myself. Nothing more. The pull I feel toward her is pure biology—she's beautiful, she's smart, she challenges me. Any man would want her.

But I'm not any man. I don't have the luxury of wanting things I can't control.

I shut the laptop harder than necessary. Penny flinches at the sound, and I reach down to stroke her head in silent apology.

Sleep doesn't come easily. I lie awake, staring at the ceiling, haunted by the image of Luca's face when he looked at Skye. I've never seen that in him before—that sense of something beyond survival. Beyond power.

I tell myself it's weakness. A vulnerability I can't afford.

But by morning, the lie tastes sour.

I'm restless, checking my phone too often, angry at myself for the impulse. I take the dogs for a run, pushing faster than usual until my lungs burn and my thoughts quiet. It helps, but only temporarily.

By afternoon, I'm pacing my office, irritable with my crew over minor issues, snapping at Rome when he brings the weekly reports.

"Everything alright, boss?" he asks, brow furrowed.

I dismiss him with a wave. "Fine. Just handle it."

When he's gone, I stand at the window, looking out over the city—my city, or at least a piece of it. I've fought for every inch of this territory, sacrificed for it, bled for it. It should be enough.

I want her here. The realization hits with uncomfortable clarity. Not because of our arrangement, not as some twisted power play, but because something in the air feels lighter when she's around. Because she looks at me like I'm a puzzle she's determined to solve, not just a threat to fear.

I pull out my phone, staring at her contact information. One call, and she'd come. That was our deal. But using the deal feels wrong suddenly, like cheating at a game I didn't know I was playing.

I want her to want to be here.

The thought is so foreign, so dangerous, I almost laugh at myself. Since when do I care about what anyone wants? I take. I demand. I control. That's how I survived. That's how I built everything I have.

But as I look down at my phone, thumb hovering over her name, I realize something has shifted—something I'm not sure I can control.

KENDRA

I check my phone for the fifteenth time in twenty minutes, my jaw clenching at the absence of his name on my notifications. Nothing. Not that I want to hear from Enzo. Not that I've wondered why I haven't in almost two days. Absolutely not. I toss the phone face-down on my desk with more force than necessary, drawing a raised eyebrow from my assistant as she walks in.

"Hot date cancel on you?" she asks.

"No date to cancel," I say, smoothing my expression into professional indifference. "Just waiting on that feedback from Westman Corp."

The lie slides off my tongue with practiced ease. I've become too familiar with lying lately—to my friends, to myself. Especially about a certain steel-eyed mafia capo who sucks up mental real estate I can't afford to give him.

I force my attention back to the marketing proposal on my screen, attacking the keyboard with renewed determination. I've stayed late at the office every night this week, burying myself in work that could easily wait until tomorrow. The strategy isn't subtle, but it's all I have. When I'm knee-deep in demographics and conversion analytics, I can almost forget the way Enzo looked at me the last time we were together—like he'd already mapped every inch of my body in his mind.

Almost.

I roll my shoulders, feeling the tension that's taken up permanent residence there. I try to shake it off, try to ignore the way he has me twisted. And then my phone vibrates against the desk.

The small sound makes my stomach flip over itself, a Pavlovian response I hate with my entire being. I don't move for a full ten seconds, my fingertips hovering over my keyboard as I debate whether to check it.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter, snatching up the phone.

It's just an email notification. Of course it is.

I should be relieved, but instead, a strange disappointment twists through me. I shove it down, hard and fast. I refuse to sit around waiting for a man who thinks he can call and I'll come running just because he cleared some debts I never even asked him to handle.

Gathering my things, I make a decision. My finger hovers over the power button on my phone for just a moment before I press it firmly, watching as the screen goes black.

"Let's see how you like being ghosted, Rossi," I whisper to the dark device.

A small, juvenile act of rebellion? Absolutely. But the satisfaction it brings is immediate and delicious. For once, I'm controlling the narrative. If Enzo wants to reach me tonight, he'll hit a wall of silence. The same wall I've been hitting every time I've made the mistake of thinking about him, about his home, about those damn dogs of his that made him seem almost human.

I slip my phone into my purse and head for the elevator, my heels clicking against the marble floor with renewed purpose. The air hits me as I push through the revolving

doors, cool enough to make me pull my blazer tighter around my shoulders.

Chicago has always felt like home, but tonight, everything feels slightly off-kilter. I scan the street automatically, a habit I didn't have before Enzo crashed into my life. The shadows between buildings seem deeper, every corner capable of hiding someone I shouldn't be looking for.

I feel the absence of something—someone—watching over me. It's ridiculous. I never asked for his protection, never wanted it. Yet I find myself glancing over my shoulder as I walk, half-expecting to see a sleek black car trailing at a distance.

Nothing but empty pavement stretches behind me.

The hollow feeling in my chest intensifies, and I quicken my pace, annoyed at my own disappointment. This is exactly what I wanted—my life back, free of complications with tattooed men who look at me like I'm something they want to devour.

So why does the city feel so different? Like there's a shadow at my back, a presence missing where I've come to expect it.

I unlock my apartment door, sinking into the familiar comfort of routine. Toss keys in the ceramic bowl. Slip off heels. Breathe.

The sunset filters through my west-facing windows, painting molten gold across the hardwood floors. I move through my evening ritual on autopilot—change into black silk lounge pants and a soft tank top, twist my hair up into a messy bun. The ordinary acts should calm me, but tonight, they feel hollow, performative.

In the kitchen, I pull a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet—not the cheap stuff I keep for guests, but the good Bulleit I save for bad days. The amber liquid sloshes against

crystal as I pour two fingers deep. The first sip burns in the best way, warming my chest and loosening the knot that's been sitting there since I left the office.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter, the words echoing in my empty living room.

The bourbon warms my throat but doesn't touch the chill that's wrapped around my spine. I grab the remote and drop onto my plush sectional, flicking through streaming services with increasing irritation. Nothing catches my interest—not the true crime documentary I'd been saving, not the trashy reality show that usually makes me laugh, not even the period drama Mikayla's been raving about.

I settle on a cooking competition, the vibrant colors and manufactured drama washing over me without penetration. The host's enthusiasm grates on my nerves. I change channels. A medical drama where everyone's too beautiful. Change. Home renovation. Change. Some action movie with explosions.

Nothing feels right. The restlessness crawls under my skin like ants marching in formation, impossible to ignore and even harder to satisfy.

I refill my drink, this time not bothering to measure. The bourbon spills slightly over the rim, and I lick it from my fingers before it can drip onto the countertop.

"This is not about him," I tell the silence.

The silence calls me a liar.

I pace to the window, watching the last threads of daylight surrender to dusk. Street lights flicker on below, cars passing like glowing insects. In the distance, Chicago's skyline twinkles to life, a constellation of commerce and ambition.

It's been two days since I've heard from him. Two days of waiting for my phone to

light up with demands or instructions or whatever the hell this arrangement entails.

I want him to call, I realize with sudden clarity.

The realization makes me drain my glass.

Night falls completely, wrapping the city in velvet darkness. I stand at the window, my reflection ghostly against the glass. The woman staring back at me looks unnerved, uncertain—a stranger wearing my face.

This isn't just about a deal anymore. Somehow, without permission, Enzo has carved out space in my life. He's in my thoughts in the morning, in the quiet moments between meetings, in the shadows of my apartment at night. He's become a presence even in his absence—a dark expectation lurking at the edges of my day.

I set my empty glass down with too much force, the crystal base hitting the marble countertop with a sharp crack. The sound cuts through my thoughts, bringing me back to myself.

"Get it together, Kendra," I whisper, rubbing my temples.

But the uneasiness persists, wrapping around me like a second skin as the night stretches on in unsettling silence.

14

ENZO

The warehouse smells like desperation and disinfectant. Blood has a way of seeping into concrete if you don't clean it up fast enough, and Rome's crew is nothing if not efficient. I watch as they finish loading the last of the shipment, my arms crossed over my chest, eyes tracking every movement.

"Enzo?" Rome approaches, wiping his hands on a rag that was probably white once. He's one of my guys that used to work for me under the Cappallettis and he's been by my side since we switched. "Everything's set."

I nod, scanning the space one more time. "Any problems?"

"Nah." He shrugs, but there's something in his posture—a slight tension in his shoulders—that makes me pause.

"Spit it out, Rome." My voice drops, the command unmistakable.

He shifts his weight. "It's probably nothing, but there were some guys asking questions at Miko's bar last night. Not our people, not Luca's either."

I keep my face neutral, but internally, I'm mapping out possibilities. Zenon moves fast—faster than I expected. I make a mental note to increase security around my territory.

"Keep an eye out," I tell him, reaching for my phone. "Let me know if they come back."

Rome nods and retreats, giving me space as I check my messages. Nothing from Kendra. Again. I haven't seen her in two days and it's eating me alive.

I dial her number, unable to resist, listening to it ring until voicemail picks up. I hang up without leaving a message. The first time I called, I figured she was busy even though I waited until the end of her work day. The second time, I thought she might be in a late meeting. Now? Now it's clear she's ignoring me.

Something about that knowledge crawls under my skin—not worry, but irritation. She made a deal. My time, my terms. That's how this works.

I slide my phone back into my pocket, check my watch. Almost seven. The last rays of sunlight filter through the high windows, casting long shadows across the warehouse floor. I could head home, work through the reports Luca sent over this morning. But instead, I find myself heading toward my car, keys in hand.

Twenty minutes later, I'm pushing open the door to Skye's boutique, the bell chiming softly overhead even though she's about to close. The space is elegant—all clean lines and strategic lighting—with clothing displayed like art rather than merchandise. It's exactly what I'd expect from a woman who married into the family and still managed to build something entirely her own.

Maria spots me first, her face lighting up with genuine warmth. That's her problem—she's too soft for this world, too quick to welcome people in. If she weren't Luca's cousin, someone would have used that against her by now.

"Enzo!" She waves me over to the counter where she's arranging a display of silk scarves. "I was just telling Skye about the restaurant I went to last weekend. You

should try it—they have this wine list that would make you cry."

"I don't cry over wine lists," I say dryly, scanning the store out of habit. No other customers. Security cameras positioned at the entrance and over the register. One rear exit. Old habits.

"Where's Kendra?" Maria asks, her tone innocent even as her eyes spark with something knowing.

I keep my face carefully blank. "How would I know?"

Skye emerges from the back room, arms crossed over her chest, lips curving into a smirk that immediately sets my teeth on edge. She's too observant by half—always has been.

"Maybe she finally got tired of your whole 'dark and dangerous' act," she suggests, leaning against the counter with calculated casualness.

I clench my jaw, feeling a muscle tick in my cheek. "She had better things to do," I lie, slipping my phone into my pocket as if her silence means nothing, as if I haven't been checking it all day.

Skye hums, clearly unconvinced. "Mm-hmm. That's why you look pissed, right?"

I scoff at Skye's knowing look. "I'm not pissed. I don't get pissed over women."

"Right," Skye draws out the word. "That's why you're here, asking about her location like some brooding hero from one of those romance novels Kendra pretends she doesn't read."

Maria laughs, and I shoot her a glare that would make most men flinch. She just

smiles wider.

"I came to check on the security system Luca had installed," I say smoothly. The lie rolls off my tongue effortlessly. "Making sure everything's functioning properly."

"Of course you did." Skye's voice drips with sarcasm. "The cameras are working fine, by the way. Caught you looking for her the second you walked in."

I bite back a retort, choosing instead to redirect. "How's Luca?"

"Busy. You'd know that if you answered his calls instead of hunting down my friend."

I spend another ten minutes with them, enduring their thinly veiled amusement at my expense. They catch me up on trivial matters—Maria's new apartment, Skye's upcoming fashion show—while I nod and respond with appropriate interest, all while calculating my next move.

As soon as I leave the boutique, I make a call. The phone barely rings once before it's answered.

"I need a location," I say without preamble, sliding into my car. "Kendra Washington. Last known whereabouts, current location if possible."

"Consider it done." The voice on the other end is efficient, professional. "Timeframe?"

"Within the hour." I start the engine. "And make it discreet. I don't want her knowing she's being tracked."

I hang up and pull into traffic, fingers drumming against the steering wheel. This isn't

how I operate. I don't chase women. I never have to. They come to me—drawn by power, by danger, by the promise of something they can't get from ordinary men. But Kendra isn't just some woman—she's mine. The contract between us made that clear, even if she's pretending otherwise.

The thought of her deliberately avoiding me sends a current of irritation through my veins. She made a deal. My time, my terms.

And if she thinks she can just disappear on me? She's about to learn otherwise.

My phone buzzes twenty minutes later as I'm reviewing territory reports. The message is brief, precise: she went straight home after work, hasn't left her apartment since 6:15 PM.

Something sharp and possessive settles in my chest. She's testing me. Seeing how far she can push before I push back.

Fine.

I close my laptop and stand, stretching muscles tight from too many hours at a desk. I feed the dogs, scratch behind Penny's ears when she nudges against my leg, anxious as always. Paige nearly knocks me over in her enthusiasm.

"Easy," I murmur, steadying myself. "I'll be back later."

I let the evening stretch a little longer, savoring the anticipation. I shower, change into a fresh shirt—dark gray, expensive—and select a watch from the collection on my dresser. The ritual of preparation calms me, focuses my thoughts.

By the time I get in my car and drive to her apartment, night has fully settled over the city. I park directly in front of her building—a newer complex with decent security

but nothing that would keep me out if I didn't want to be kept out.

I step out of the car, adjusting my cuffs, and look up at her window. Light spills from behind her curtains, confirming she's home, alone, deliberately ignoring my calls.

Perfect.

15

KENDRA

A sharp knock at my door makes my breath catch. The weight of it, the deliberate force, seems to rattle through my otherwise silent apartment. My stomach twists—I know exactly who it is. For a fleeting second, I consider ignoring it, curling deeper into the corner of my couch with my whiskey, pretending I'm not home.

But something in my gut tells me Enzo wouldn't just leave.

I set my glass down, smooth the invisible wrinkles from my lounge pants, and drag my fingers through my curls. Not to look good for him—absolutely not—but because I refuse to appear disheveled before a man who probably sleeps in tailored pajamas.

The second knock doesn't come. That makes it worse somehow. He's just waiting, knowing I'm inside, knowing I've made the calculation and realized there's no escape.

I cross to the door, my bare feet silent against the hardwood. Through the peephole, I catch the distorted image of him—tall, imposing even through curved glass. I draw a steadying breath and swing the door open.

When I open the door, Enzo's leaning against the frame, arms crossed, eyes cool and unreadable. The soft light from my hallway catches the sharp angles of his face, casting shadows that make him look like something carved rather than born. His steel-gray eyes flick over me once, taking in my casual clothes with clinical detachment.

But there's something in his posture—a stillness that sets my nerves on edge. The kind of quiet that precedes something dangerous. His dark hair is slightly mussed, as though he's been running his hands through it, the only indication that something might be off.

"Two hours," he says, voice low. "Two hours I've been trying to reach you."

His voice is calm, but it carries a quiet warning. "You're in a deal with me. You don't get to ignore me."

I step back, pulse hammering, but I keep my chin high. The confidence I project in boardrooms doesn't abandon me here, even as my heart threatens to break through my ribcage.

"I didn't realize I signed away my right to personal space." The words come out steady, thank god. "Was there a footnote in our verbal contract?"

Enzo follows me inside, slow and deliberate, shutting the door behind him with an unnerving sense of finality. The sound of the latch clicking into place feels significant somehow, like the period at the end of a threat.

"Not personal space," he says, his eyes never leaving mine as he advances a step closer. "Just me."

The air seems to thin between us. I don't answer, can't answer. Something about him tonight feels different—there's a tightly coiled energy humming beneath his controlled exterior. His jaw is set harder, the lines around his eyes deeper. Despite myself, I catalog these changes, these microscopic shifts in his demeanor that most would miss.

Before I can retreat, he's moving forward with predatory intent, backing me against

the wall. My spine hits the cool surface as his hands slam down on either side of my head, boxing me in completely. He doesn't touch me—doesn't need to. The cage of his arms is enough to trap not just my body but my breath.

The heat radiating from him is overwhelming, like standing too close to an open flame. His scent engulfs me—that expensive cologne I'd noticed before, but underneath it something raw and masculine that makes my stomach tighten. I inhale involuntarily, and immediately regret it. The scent of him floods my senses, clouding my thoughts, making it harder to remember all the reasons this is a terrible idea.

"You're testing me," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear. His breath skates over my cheek, warm and intoxicating. "You say you don't want me, but you can't help seeing how far you can push me."

My back is pressed so hard against the wall I swear I can feel the texture of the paint through my thin shirt. I lift my chin, refusing to shrink under his intensity. His steel-gray eyes burn into mine, searching for weakness, for the crack in my armor he can exploit.

"You don't know what I want," I manage, but my voice betrays me, coming out husky instead of defiant.

He leans closer, the space between us narrowing to nothing. His body hovers a breath away from mine, not touching but promising. For a heart-stopping moment, I think he's going to kiss me—his eyes drop to my lips, lingering there with such focused attention that I can almost feel the phantom pressure of his mouth.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he shifts, bringing his face alongside mine, his lips grazing the shell of my ear. "You're waiting for me to touch you, aren't you?" he whispers, each word a

caress against my skin.

A shudder runs through me that I can't hide—not with him this close, not with every nerve ending in my body suddenly, traitorously alive. My fingers curl into fists at my sides to keep from reaching for him.

"Not even a little," I breathe, the lie bitter on my tongue.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, and the smirk that curves his mouth is pure satisfaction—he knows. His eyes gleam with victory as he steps away, leaving cold air rushing into the space where his heat had been.

"Liar," he says, the word somehow both accusation and praise.

Then, without another word, he turns and walks toward my door, each step deliberate and unhurried. The bastard doesn't even look back.

The door closes behind him with a soft click that somehow sounds like laughter.

I stay frozen against the wall for several seconds, my chest heaving, fury and frustration pulsing through my veins like poison. My skin feels too tight, too hot, too sensitive. I want to scream, to throw something, to chase after him and—what? Slap him? Kiss him? Both?

The realization hits me like a bucket of ice water: this is exactly what he wanted. He's playing me, trying to make me want him, to make me give in. The worst part is that it's working. My body is humming with a need I haven't felt in years, maybe ever.

But two can play this game. If he thinks I'm going to break first, he's underestimated me. Maybe I can use him for pleasure without letting him use me. Maybe I can beat him at his own game.

I push away from the wall on unsteady legs, already plotting my counterattack, even as I know I'm walking straight into dangerous territory. I need some control and there's only one way for me to get it.

16

ENZO

At precisely 7 PM, I pull up to Kendra's building. The engine purrs quietly as I wait, drumming my fingers against the steering wheel. At 7:03, she emerges through the glass doors.

Something in my chest tightens.

She's dressed simply—dark jeans that hug her curves, a cream silk blouse that drapes across her body like water, and a leather jacket that adds just enough edge. Her hair falls in loose curls around her shoulders, and she's wearing minimal makeup—just enough to enhance what's already perfect.

The simplicity is what grates on me. She isn't trying, and that's the problem. The women in my world spend hours, thousands of dollars, crafting an illusion of effortless beauty. Kendra just... exists, and it's enough to make my mouth go dry.

She slides into the passenger seat without a word, a subtle waft of vanilla and something distinctly her filling the confined space.

"You're late," I say, pulling away from the curb.

"Three minutes." She doesn't look at me, instead focusing on fastening her seatbelt. "I'm sure your schedule will survive."

I don't respond, focusing on the road instead. The silence stretches between us, neither comfortable nor uncomfortable—just charged. I can feel her studying my profile.

"So what's the occasion?" she finally asks.

"Luca needs to meet with me and Skye made him invite me to dinner." A half-truth. Skye really told me that I was taking up too much of Kendra's time and this is my way of giving Skye her fix without losing any of my own claim on her. Not that I'll say it.

"And I'm your plus one?"

"You're whatever I need you to be." I keep my voice cool, detached. "That was the deal."

She turns toward the window, but not before I catch the slight tightening around her eyes. "Right."

Luca's house sits on three acres of prime real estate, a modernist mansion of glass and steel that somehow manages to feel like a fortress. I punch in the gate code and drive up the long, winding driveway.

As we step inside, Skye materializes from somewhere deeper in the house, her face lighting up when she spots us.

"Kendra!" She crosses the marble foyer in quick strides, pulling Kendra into a hug with easy familiarity. "I was hoping Enzo would bring you."

I watch the tension in Kendra's shoulders dissolve as she returns Skye's embrace. "Hey, girl. You didn't tell me you were hosting tonight."

"Last minute thing," Skye links arms with her. "Come on, I need someone sane to talk to. These men have been discussing business all day, and I'm losing my mind."

Luca appears behind his wife, nodding at me before offering Kendra a near smile. It's...unnerving. "Kendra. Good to see you again."

"Hey, Luca." She winks at him and he blinks slowly. I'm not sure he can process emotions not attached to his wife.

Instead, he turns to me and gestures toward his study. "Enzo, a word before dinner?"

I nod, my eyes lingering on Kendra as Skye pulls her toward the kitchen, their heads already bent in conversation. Something about the ease between them unsettles me.

Luca's study is all dark wood and leather, a stark contrast to the minimalist aesthetic of the rest of the house. He closes the door behind us and moves to a decanter of whiskey on his desk.

"Zenon made contact with Armando." He pours two glasses, handing one to me. "He's trying to map our operations."

I take the glass, my mind dividing itself between the threat at hand and the sound of Kendra's laughter drifting through the closed door. "He's getting bold."

"Bold is dangerous." Luca sits on the edge of his desk. "We need to send a message."

I force my attention fully to Luca, but my awareness remains split—part of me calculating the moves and countermoves of this chess game with my brother, part of me attuned to Kendra's presence just rooms away.

"I'll handle it," I say, taking a sip of the whiskey.

Luca nods, but his ice-blue eyes narrow slightly. He glances toward the door, where another burst of laughter—Kendra's—filters through.

"She's interesting," he says casually. Too casually.

"She's useful," I correct, keeping my expression neutral.

A knowing smirk plays at the corner of Luca's mouth. "You can play the long game all you want, Enzo, but she's already yours."

I scoff, the sound sharp in my throat. "I don't keep what I can't control."

"Don't you?" His eyebrow arches. "She took your deal. She's here. She hasn't walked away."

His words sink beneath my skin like barbs, precisely because they echo thoughts I've been fighting. Kendra fights me at every turn, challenges me in ways no one else dares, and yet—she remains. By choice or circumstance hardly matters.

The next morning, I walk into Romano Security Solutions, a steel-and-glass monolith that serves as the perfect cover for Elliott Romano's less legitimate enterprises. The receptionist—a sharp-eyed woman who I'd bet knows exactly what her boss really does—waves me through without question. I've been expected.

Elliott's office occupies the entire top floor, with windows offering a panoramic view of Chicago that probably helps him feel like the god he thinks he is. I find him sitting behind a glass desk, fingers flying across three separate keyboards while multiple screens flicker with code I couldn't begin to understand.

"Enzo." He doesn't look up, but his fingers pause briefly. "Right on time."

Elliott Romano embodies contradictions. His unruly dark curls and thick-framed glasses give him the appearance of a harmless tech genius, but the intricate tattoos peeking from beneath his rolled-up sleeves tell a different story. His movements are precise, deliberate—a man who approaches both coding and combat with methodical efficiency.

"This place is a bit much, isn't it?" I gesture to the sleek office with its minimalist furniture and excessive technology.

Elliott finally looks up, his dark eyes sharp behind his glasses. "Says the man who drives a custom Audi."

I concede the point with a slight tilt of my head and settle into the chair across from him. "I need information on the Cappallettis. The kind that makes them... agreeable."

"Blackmail material." It's not a question. Elliott leans back, studying me with that analytical gaze that seems to dissect everything it touches. "For your proposed truce?"

I raise an eyebrow, not surprised he already knows about my plans. Information is his currency, after all. "Can you do it?"

A slow grin spreads across his face, revealing the edge beneath the tech-genius facade. "So you want me to make it so the Cappallettis have no choice but to agree to this truce?"

I nod once. "That a problem?"

"Not at all." Elliott's fingers resume their dance across the keyboard, pulling up files I can't see from my angle. "The Cappallettis have always been careless with their digital footprint. Giovanni especially—man can't resist his online poker." He glances

up again, the screen's blue light reflecting off his glasses. "I can have preliminary findings by tomorrow, complete dossier by the end of the week. Standard rate?"

"Triple it if you can get me something concrete on Alfonso Figarello." I lean forward slightly. "He's the real obstacle."

Elliott's eyes narrow with interest. "The underboss with the squeaky-clean image? That'll cost you."

"I'm sure we can handle it."

We shake on it, his grip firm and uncompromising. As I stand to leave, Elliott's voice stops me.

"So...Kendra Washington." He leans back in his chair, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. "Mikayla mentioned you've been spending a lot of time with her."

I feel my expression harden. "Problem?"

"Not at all." His smirk widens. "Just interesting. She's not your usual type. Too smart to fall for your bullshit."

I shift tactics, my own smirk forming. "Speaking of women too smart—how is Mikayla? Has she figured out what you want from her yet?"

The satisfaction is immediate as Elliott's charming smile vanishes, replaced by something cold and dangerous. He rises slowly, his movements suddenly less tech genius and more predator.

"Don't push me when it comes to Mikayla." His voice drops to something just above a whisper. "You really don't want to know what it's like to be on my bad side, Enzo."

The tension crackles between us, two men accustomed to control finding their limits tested.

I incline my head slightly. "Fair enough. We should leave the girls out of it."

Elliott nods once, agreement reached.

As I step into the elevator, my phone buzzes in my pocket. Kendra's name flashes across the screen, and I feel the corner of my mouth curl up. Perfect timing.

I swipe open the message.

Do you need me tonight or can I have ONE evening to myself? Some of us have actual jobs with actual hours.

Warmth spreads through my chest at her fire, her refusal to be cowed by what I am or what I represent. Even in a text, her defiance burns bright, and I find myself inching closer, wanting more.

I'm not sure with her I'll ever stop wanting it all.

KENDRA

I 'm running late, and it pisses me off. Not because I care about Enzo's schedule, but because it feels like a concession—another inch of control I'm surrendering to him. The evening traffic crawls through downtown Chicago as my GPS directs me toward his penthouse, a place I'm growing far too accustomed to.

"Take a left in five hundred feet," my phone chirps, and I grip the steering wheel tighter, remembering how I got into this mess. Griffin's gambling debts. My misplaced loyalty. A deal with the devil in an expensive suit.

I park in front of Enzo's building, take a deep breath, and stare at myself in the rearview mirror. My curls are behaving today, bouncing just past my shoulders, and my makeup is still intact despite the ten-hour workday I just powered through.

"You're Kendra fucking Washington," I tell my reflection. "You don't take shit from anyone, especially not beautiful, dangerous men who think they own the world."

The elevator ride up to his penthouse feels like ascending to some modern Olympus. When the doors slide open, I'm hit with the scent of something delicious cooking and the faint notes of jazz playing from hidden speakers. I hate that his taste is impeccable.

Enzo opens the door before I can knock, leaning against the frame with casual dominance that makes something in my stomach flip. Steel-gray eyes assess me from

head to toe, his face a masterpiece of sharp angles and perfect symmetry. He's wearing dark jeans and a charcoal henley pushed up to his elbows, revealing the intricate tattoos that map his forearms.

"You're late," he says, voice low and smooth.

I brush past him, my shoulder intentionally bumping his. "I had actual work today. You know, the kind that doesn't involve threatening people or whatever it is you do."

The space is exactly as I remember—modern luxury with unexpected warmth. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame the Chicago skyline, the city lights twinkling against the darkening sky. I find myself looking around, and he chuckles behind me.

"What?" I drop my purse on his obscenely expensive-looking couch. My heels click against the hardwood as I turn to face him, arms crossed.

"I took them for a long walk. They're both asleep in my room."

I try to ignore how my heart sinks a little, not even realizing I was looking forward to seeing the dogs. His features soften a little as he takes me in, clearly touched by how much I've come to adore his dogs.

I straighten up, shrugging. "I don't see why you need me here."

Enzo barely acknowledges my words as he hands me a glass of red wine, lounging comfortably against his kitchen counter. The casual way he moves through his space, like a predator completely at ease in his territory, is infuriating.

"Didn't ask for your opinion, just your presence." He takes a sip from his own glass, eyes never leaving mine.

The tension between us is suffocating, thick with unspoken things. I take the wine and move to the windows, needing distance. The liquid coats my throat, rich and velvety. Of course he'd serve perfect wine.

"So what exactly am I doing here? Supporting your fragile ego? Being your arm candy for some mob thing?" I pace along the window, the energy building under my skin too much to contain.

"Why do you insist on fighting me at every turn?" His voice remains level, which only irritates me more.

"Because I have self-respect? Because normal people don't just summon others like you're a king and I'm your subject?" I gesture with my free hand. "Some of us need more than cryptic texts saying 'Be at my place at 8.'"

"And yet here you are." The corner of his mouth lifts in that infuriating half-smile. "Right on cue."

I take another sip of wine to stop myself from throwing the glass at his perfect face. "Because we have a deal. But the deal was to help you, not be your pet."

"You think I treat you like a pet?" He sets his glass down, moving closer. "If that were true, you'd be much better behaved. My girls are downright spoiled."

"Then what do you want, Enzo?" The words fly out before I can stop them. "I'm not one of your soldiers who jumps when you say how high."

"No," he says, voice dropping dangerously. "You're much more interesting than that."

I roll my eyes. "Spare me the charm. It doesn't work on me."

"Evidence suggests otherwise." His eyes flick over me, and I hate how my skin heats under his gaze.

"I don't belong in your world," I say, setting down my glass harder than necessary. "And you don't control me."

"Don't I?" He moves closer, closing the distance between us. "The way I see it, Kendra, you gave me control the moment you signed our deal."

I grind my teeth. "You have no control over me."

My stomach flips when he grins. "I'd love to show you how wrong you are."

I open my mouth to argue, but he's already prowling toward me, guiding me backward until my legs hit the couch. In one swift movement, he pulls me down, positioning me so I'm sitting on the edge. His large hands grip my thighs, spreading them apart as he drops to his knees between them.

"What are you doing?" I manage to ask, my voice embarrassingly breathless. But God, every time I've seen him the tension has only grown more unbearable.

Enzo looks up at me, and the intensity in his gaze only has me growing more eager for him. "Proving a point."

His hands slide up my thighs, pushing my dress higher. My skin burns everywhere he touches. I should stop this. I should stand up and walk out. Instead, I watch, mesmerized, as he hooks his fingers into my panties and slides them down my legs with agonizing slowness.

"Are you going to tell me to stop, Kendra?" he asks, his eyes never leaving mine.

The challenge in his voice ignites something in me. "Would you, if I did?"

"Immediately." His answer is instant, serious. "But you won't."

He's right, and we both know it. The power he has over me isn't from our deal—it's from whatever this electric tension is between us. It's been building since the first moment we locked eyes across Skye's boutique.

When he lowers his mouth, nipping at the insides of my thighs, my head drops back. Heat pools low in my stomach, tension building until finally— finally— his mouth closes around my clit and my back arches involuntarily. His hands grip my thighs firmly, keeping them spread wide as his tongue explores with devastating precision. Every stroke is deliberate, like he's memorizing what makes me gasp and shudder.

I bite my lip to hold back sounds, but when he finds a particularly sensitive spot, a moan escapes. "Enzo..."

He looks up, maintaining eye contact as his mouth continues its relentless assault on my senses. The sight of him between my legs, those dangerous eyes watching my every reaction, is almost too much to bear. My hands find their way into his dark hair, gripping tightly, and a growl of approval vibrates against me.

The pressure builds quickly, embarrassingly so. His skilled tongue pushes me higher and higher until I'm balancing on the edge of something monumental. When he sucks gently on my clit, the world shatters around me. My thighs tremble as waves of pleasure crash through my body, his name falling from my lips like a prayer.

As I come down from the high, trying to remember how to breathe, Enzo sits back on his heels. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"You can go now," he says with that infuriating smirk.

Humiliation and rage wash over me, dousing the lingering embers of pleasure. I stand on shaky legs, yanking my dress down while searching for my underwear.

"You're an asshole," I spit, spotting my panties near his knee.

"Never claimed otherwise." He holds them out, dangling them from one finger.

I snatch them away, stuffing them into my purse rather than giving him the satisfaction of watching me put them back on.

"This meant nothing," I say, grabbing my bag. "And it won't happen again."

His expression shifts almost imperceptibly—a flash of something that might be disappointment before the mask of smug satisfaction returns. "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

I turn on my heel and storm toward the door, refusing to look back, refusing to acknowledge how my body still tingles from his touch. Refusing to admit, even to myself, how much I want to stay.

How much I want him.

18

ENZO

I scan the room from my corner booth—habit, not paranoia. This place exists for people like me: men who need private conversations away from curious eyes. The Golden Hour isn't flashy from the outside—just another storefront in a row of businesses that close by five. Inside, though, everything whispers exclusivity: amber lighting that casts everyone in a flattering glow, leather booths worn to perfect softness, bartenders who mix drinks without asking names.

The ice in my whiskey shifts as I take another sip. Thirty minutes early, as always. I never walk into a meeting without knowing the exits, the faces, the potential threats. The crystal tumbler feels heavy in my hand—three fingers of top-shelf bourbon that costs more than most people make in an hour. Worth every penny for the burn it leaves behind.

My phone vibrates once. I don't bother checking it. Only one person has this number right now, and he's just arrived.

Elliott Romano walks through the door like he's entering his own living room, all casual confidence and calculated calm. His unruly dark curls somehow look intentionally disheveled, and those thick-framed glasses don't hide the sharp intelligence in his eyes. I watch how he moves—the fluidity, the awareness. He's scanning the room just like I did, only he makes it look like he's simply deciding where to sit.

He spots me immediately but takes his time, stopping at the bar first. The bartender nods in recognition—another interesting piece of information to file away. Elliott says something that makes her smile before he takes his drink and finally makes his way toward me.

He slides into the booth with enviable grace, setting his glass down without a sound. His sleeve rolls up slightly, revealing the edge of those infamous tattoos—Italian art blended with circuitry designs. An interesting representation of the man himself: traditional power merged with modern methods.

"You look like a man getting impatient," Elliott says, his voice carrying just enough amusement to border on irritating. He doesn't extend his hand for a shake—smart man.

I don't waste time with pleasantries. "Tell me what you have."

Elliott's lips curl into a grin that doesn't reach his eyes. He takes a deliberate sip of his drink—some pretentious cocktail with herbs floating on top—making me wait just long enough to establish that he's not intimidated by me.

Those clever fingers tap a rhythm against the table before he reaches into his messenger bag and pulls out a sleek black folder. The movement is casual, but his eyes never leave mine, reading my reaction with the precision of someone who makes his living understanding people's weaknesses.

"You're not going to like it, but it'll work," he says, tapping his fingers against the folder but not sliding it toward me yet. The implicit power play isn't lost on me—he has something I need, and he wants me to acknowledge it.

His confidence would be insufferable if it wasn't backed by results. That's why I'm here, after all. I've heard the stories about Elliott Romano—the last survivor of a

family that chose independence over alliance. The mistake his father made is one I won't repeat. In our world, you pick a side or you die. The trick is choosing the winning side.

I flip the folder open, letting my eyes settle on the first page of data. Elliott Romano has a reputation—the man gets what you ask for, not what you need. There's a difference. But this time, he's delivered exactly what I required.

The financial records sprawl before me—a pattern of transactions that would look innocuous to someone who doesn't understand how the Cappallettis launder their money. But I know their methods. I helped design some of them before Alfonso decided I was too ambitious for my own good.

"All verifiable?" I ask, running my finger down a list of off-the-books payments that tie Alfonso Figarello to three judges and a police captain. The kind of connections that keep a man like him untouchable—until now.

"Every last digit." Elliott leans forward, tapping a particular set of numbers. "That account there? Points straight to Alfonso's pet project. The one he doesn't want Giovanni knowing about." His voice drops. "Apparently, our friend has been skimming from the top for years. Building his own insurance policy."

I bite back a smile. Alfonso always was a greedy son of a bitch, but I hadn't realized he was stupid enough to steal from Giovanni. The Don has overlooked many sins in his time, but theft isn't among them.

The next page holds transaction records for two of the Cappalletti capos—both men who stood by and watched when Alfonso stripped me of everything I'd built. Their dirty laundry is spread before me like a feast. Drug habits, gambling debts, payments to women who aren't their wives.

This is power in its purest form. Not a gun, not a threat—information. The kind of leverage that forces men to bend, to give up their grudges for self-preservation.

"This will be enough." I close the folder, already calculating how best to use what I've been given. But I know who it will be of most value to.

Elliott smirks, leaning back in the booth. "It always is." There's a smugness in his tone that should irritate me, but I can't fault him. The man delivers.

But as we settle the details of when and how the information will be deployed, Elliott leans back, studying me with too much interest. His analytical gaze shifts from professional to personal in a way I immediately recognize.

"And here I thought you were a man who never let himself get distracted." His tone is lazy, but his eyes flicker with amusement.

I maintain a perfectly blank expression, though something cold settles in my stomach. I simply pick up my drink, swirl the amber liquid, and smirk. "Stay in your lane, hacker." My voice carries just enough edge to make it clear this topic isn't open for discussion.

Elliott chuckles but he nods, message received. We agreed not to bring the girls into this—neither my Kendra nor his Mikayla. Some things remain separate from business, even in our world.

KENDRA

I slide into the plush booth at The Vault, my third home after my apartment and office. The familiar bass thrums through my body, but not even the top-shelf whiskey in my hand can ease the tension lodged between my shoulder blades. The sleek black tables, the purple mood lighting, the exclusive clientele—normally this atmosphere energizes me. Tonight, it feels like I'm performing.

Jazz paces alongside our booth, her curls bouncing with each emphatic gesture. "These assholes trashed the VIP section last night. Champagne on the walls, cigarette burns in the new velvet couches—do you know how much those cost?" She stops, hand on hip, eyes flashing. "And Nerio expects me to smooth it all over by tomorrow night for some bigshot client."

I take a long sip, letting the whiskey burn a path down my throat. "Send them the bill. Double it."

"Triple it," Jazz corrects, finally sliding in next to me, her silk blouse catching the light. "Already done. But that doesn't fix my immediate problem."

Across from us, Mikayla hunches over a cocktail napkin, her pencil moving in swift, delicate strokes. Her soft features are creased in concentration, completely absorbed in whatever she's creating. The sweetness of her focus is a stark contrast to the rest of us—hardened in ways she isn't yet.

Then there's Skye, looking like she just stepped off a runway in her tailored jumpsuit, amber eyes fixed on me with that look I know too well. The "I can read your mind" look. The "you can't bullshit a bullshitter" look.

I narrow my eyes, downing more whiskey. I'm not ready for this conversation.

If only Maria was here tonight to distract her. But she's been more and more absent lately, and I don't even know why.

"So," Jazz continues, signaling the server for another round. "The cleaners are working overtime, and I've called in reinforcements from that disaster restoration company that owes me a favor."

"Smart," I nod, grateful for the distraction. "Did you?—"

"Alright, out with it." Skye cuts through Jazz's rant with surgical precision, manicured finger pointing directly at me.

I arch an eyebrow, aiming for nonchalance. "Out with what?"

Skye makes a sweeping gesture toward me, her diamond bracelets catching the light. "The reason you look like you've been overthinking yourself into an early grave. This wouldn't have anything to do with a certain 'Hades' I keep hearing about, would it?"

I groan, dropping my head against the table with a thud that rattles our glasses. The cool surface does nothing to soothe the heat crawling up my neck.

Jazz snickers, the ice in her drink tinkling as she swirls it. "I like the nickname. Fitting, really. Making deals, lurking in the shadows, terrifying but sexy."

I don't need to look up to know she's wearing that smug smile, the one that says she's

enjoying my misery far too much.

Mikayla finally glances up from her sketch—something that looks eerily like Enzo's Dobermans. "I still think it's a bad idea," she says, her voice carrying a gentle concern that cuts deeper than Skye's directness.

I sigh, lifting my head. "It's not a bad idea because there's nothing happening." The lie tastes bitter on my tongue.

Jazz squints at me, leaning forward. "But you wish something was happening."

I huff out a laugh that sounds hollow even to my own ears. "I wish he'd leave me alone."

The look Skye and Jazz exchange is quick but loaded—a silent conversation about my obvious bullshit. My stomach tightens. I've built my career on reading people, on control, on never showing weakness. Yet here I am, transparent as glass to the women who know me best.

But then Mikayla speaks up, her voice softer than the others. "Are you sure?"

I blink, caught off guard. Sweet, naive Mikayla isn't usually the one pushing. But her gaze is steady, full of something close to concern that pins me in place.

"Because from the outside, it looks like he's already gotten under your skin."

I open my mouth to argue—but nothing comes out. The words are there, ready to deny, deflect, dismiss. They're my standard weapons, my professional armor.

But the truth is, they're right. With one phone call, one arrangement, one goddamn deal, Enzo has managed to invade every corner of my mind. And that realization sits

heavy in my chest, even as Jazz launches into another story and Skye signals for more drinks.

I'm staring into my closet when my phone vibrates on the nightstand. It's been exactly twenty-four hours since my girls' night, and I still haven't figured out what to do about the Enzo situation. My heart sinks when I see his name lighting up my screen.

I answer with my professional voice, the one I use for difficult clients. "Hello?"

"Be ready in twenty minutes."

No preamble, no greeting. Just that voice—deep, controlled, authoritative—the same voice that turned husky as he kneeled between my legs the last time we were alone. My body reacts instantly, a flush of heat that has nothing to do with the temperature in my apartment.

I should argue. I should tell him I have plans. I should remind him that this arrangement doesn't include him ordering me around on a random Tuesday night.

Instead, I hear myself ask, "Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He hangs up without another word.

Nineteen minutes later, I'm standing in front of my building in a fitted black dress that hugs every curve, my hair swept up in a deliberately messy updo. I've chosen understated makeup—just enough to enhance my features without looking like I'm trying too hard.

When his car pulls up, sleek and dark like everything else about him, I draw in a steadying breath. The passenger door opens, and there he is—Enzo Rossi in all his controlled glory. He's wearing charcoal slacks and a crisp white shirt, the top buttons

undone to reveal a glimpse of tanned skin and the edge of one of his tattoos. Even in this simple outfit, he exudes danger and control.

His steel-gray eyes sweep over me, lingering just long enough to make my skin prickle with awareness. "You look good."

I slide into the passenger seat, keeping my expression neutral despite my racing pulse. "So do you. Where are we going?"

His mouth curves into something close to a smile—not that cocky smirk I'm used to, but something quieter. "You'll find out."

We drive in silence, the city lights painting shadows across his sharp features. I watch his profile from the corner of my eye, studying the way he holds himself—back straight, one hand relaxed on the wheel, the other resting on his thigh. There's a tension in him tonight, something coiled tight beneath the surface.

The restaurant he takes me to isn't what I expected. No flashy valet service, no crowd of Chicago's elite waiting to be seated. Instead, it's a small, elegant place tucked away on a quiet street, with warm wood paneling and soft lighting that creates pockets of intimacy around each table.

The host greets Enzo by name, leading us to a corner table partially hidden by a curved wall. It feels... private. Protected.

"I didn't take you for the quiet restaurant type," I say once we're seated, the candle between us casting a golden glow across his features, softening the hard lines of his face. "I figured you'd be more about making a statement."

He shrugs one broad shoulder, picking up his menu. "Sometimes the statement is in what you don't show."

The conversation flows easier than I expected as we order, as the wine arrives, as our appetizers disappear. He asks about my work, listens with actual interest when I tell him about a campaign I'm developing. I find myself laughing at his dry commentary on Chicago's business elite—people we both know, though from very different angles.

Not once does he mention the deal between us. Not once does he make me feel like I'm here because I owe him. If I didn't know better, I'd think this was just... a date.

"Why here?" I ask halfway through the main course, curiosity finally getting the better of me.

His eyes flick up to mine, assessing. "Do you always need to know the 'why'?"

"With you? Absolutely."

That pulls a real smile from him—small, but genuine. It transforms his face, and for a second I glimpse what he might have been in another life, one without the weight he carries.

"The chef is an old friend," he says simply. "And the food is good."

After dinner, instead of leading me back to the car, he gestures toward the sidewalk. "Walk with me."

The night air is cool against my skin as we move side by side down the quiet street. He walks with his hands in his pockets, shoulders relaxed but that underlying tension still present in the set of his jaw.

"What's your favorite part of the city?" I ask, testing the waters of how much he'll share.

He considers this, head tilted slightly. "The lake at sunrise. Before the crowds come."
A pause. "You?"

"The old buildings downtown. The ones with all the history and architectural details no one notices anymore."

We continue like this—small exchanges, little truths offered and received. His favorite season (fall), whether he prefers coffee or tea (espresso, always), the book he's reading (to my surprise, he's working through Dostoevsky).

I study him as we walk, the way the streetlights catch the planes of his face, the careful distance he maintains between us. He's beautiful in a dangerous way, like something wild temporarily at rest.

"You grew up here?" I ask when we pass a neighborhood park.

Something flickers across his expression—a shadow, there and gone. "No. South side." He doesn't elaborate, but there's weight in those two words, history I can sense but can't see. But he lets me keep asking questions until we go back to the car.

By the time we reach my building again, I'm unsettled in a way I hadn't anticipated. Tonight wasn't about power or control or our strange arrangement. It was about something far more dangerous—seeing glimpses of the actual man beneath the capo exterior.

I'm not just attracted to Enzo Rossi anymore. I'm curious about him. I want to know more. And that terrifies me more than any threat he could make, any power he could wield.

Because wanting to know Enzo Rossi means admitting he's more than just a monster in an expensive suit. It means acknowledging the complexity beneath the

danger—and that's a complication I never saw coming.

20

ENZO

I follow Luca through the back corridors of Callisto, his exclusive nightclub in the heart of the city. The main floor throbs with bass and bodies, but back here, everything is hushed opulence—thick carpet absorbing our footsteps, dim lighting that feels intentional rather than secretive.

There's only one guard posted at the door to Luca's private lounge—a calculated choice. Too many men draw attention; Luca Mantione prefers to appear unprotected though I know he's anything but. The guard nods at his boss, his eyes flicking to me with the briefest assessment before he steps aside.

"Your tech guy's already here," the guard murmurs, and Luca gives a barely perceptible nod.

The lounge feels like old money wrapped in modern taste—leather furniture in rich browns, a fully stocked bar gleaming with crystal decanters, and floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the city, protected by one-way glass. The kind of place where serious decisions happen without anyone beyond these walls ever knowing.

Elliott Romano sits on one of the couches, his laptop balanced on his knees, fingers flying across the keyboard. He doesn't look up when we enter, which is either arrogance or focus. With Elliott, it's probably both.

"I hope that's worth the money I'm about to pay you," Luca says, voice smooth as the

whiskey he pours himself at the bar.

Elliott finally looks up, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. "Depends what you consider valuable. Blackmail? Leverage? Evidence of corruption? Because I've got all of the above." His voice carries that particular cadence of someone who knows their worth to the minute detail.

I pour myself a drink and settle into an armchair, watching the exchange. Elliott might look like some harmless tech nerd with his unruly dark curls and lean frame, but there's something in his eyes that tells a different story. I've heard the rumors—he operates in the shadows between all the families, selling information to the highest bidder without ever truly belonging to anyone. Dangerous game. Impressive that he's still breathing.

"Show him," I say, impatient with the posturing.

Elliott's eyes shift to me, calculating and cool. "Enzo. Heard you've had an interesting few weeks." The corner of his mouth twitches up. "Family reunions can be a bitch."

I keep my expression flat. "The files."

He shrugs, turns his laptop around and focuses on Luca. "I've organized it by potential usefulness. Alfonso's been skimming from the Cappalletti treasury for years—probably to fund his side businesses that Giovanni doesn't know about. He's got three judges and a police captain on regular payroll."

Luca takes the laptop, scrolling with deliberate attention. It's what I've already seen, with a little more thrown in, and I know it will be enough. The ice in his whiskey clinks as he takes a sip, his face betraying nothing. Those ice-blue eyes scan the information with mechanical efficiency.

"And here's where it gets interesting," Elliott continues, leaning forward. "Two of Giovanni's most trusted capos are in deep shit. One's got a cocaine habit that would impress a cartel boss, and the other likes to gamble away money that isn't his. Both are hiding it from the Don."

"This is everything?" Luca asks, his voice giving away nothing.

"And more. Bank accounts, dates, amounts. Even some recorded conversations—turns out these guys aren't exactly careful with their phones." Elliott's pride is evident, but not misplaced. This kind of intel takes skill.

Luca scrolls for another minute before nodding, seemingly satisfied. He passes the laptop back and reaches inside his perfectly tailored jacket, pulling out a thick envelope. The movement is casual, as if he's retrieving a business card instead of what I know is enough cash to buy a decent car.

"This should be what you and Enzo agreed on, plus a little extra," Luca says, placing the envelope on the coffee table between them. "For the expedited timeline."

Elliott grins, all sharp edges and satisfaction, as he tucks away both his laptop and the money. "Always a pleasure doing business with you, Manton." He stands, slinging his messenger bag across his body. "Call me when you need something else impossible."

I watch Elliott stand, his posture relaxed yet somehow alert, like a predator who knows he's the most dangerous thing in any room. The way he moves tells me he knows exactly how valuable he is—to Luca, to me, to anyone who needs information in this city.

"No favor this time?" I raise a brow, leaning back in my chair with deliberate casualness. "That's new. Usually you're collecting debts like trading cards."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Luca watching our exchange, his ice-blue gaze calculating. Nothing escapes that man—not even the subtle shift in dynamics between me and Romano.

Elliott's mouth curves into that infuriating grin of his, the one that says he knows something you don't. "You owe enough people already, Rossi." He adjusts his glasses with one finger. "Let's just say I'm investing in future goodwill."

I don't like the implications of that statement, but I keep my face neutral. Elliott Romano doesn't do anything without a reason, and his reasons usually cost something eventually.

"Smart investment," I reply, taking a slow sip of my drink, letting the burn coat my throat.

Elliott gives a two-finger salute as he heads for the door. "Always." The door closes behind him with a soft click that feels too final for my liking.

Luca sets his glass down, the crystal meeting the mahogany with precise control—everything about him is controlled, from his breathing to his violence. "Since when did you get so antagonistic with Romano?" His voice carries that familiar emptiness, like someone trying to mimic human curiosity without understanding the emotion.

I stand, straightening my jacket with a practiced hand. "I wasn't aware I needed your approval for how I speak to our associates."

Luca's face remains impassive. "You don't. I'm simply noting the change. You used to be more... diplomatic."

"Yeah, well." I drain the last of my drink. "Things change."

I move toward the door, mind already on my next move—how to use the information on Alfonso that Elliott provided, how to shore up my defenses against my brother's inevitable next attempt, how to expand my territory without stepping on too many Cappalletti toes.

"Enzo." Luca's voice stops me, hand on the doorknob. "Family issues aside, your position here is secure. Remember that."

Something in my chest tightens at his words—not gratitude, I don't do gratitude. Maybe recognition. Luca Mantione doesn't offer reassurance often. It's as close to loyalty as men like us get.

I give him a short nod and leave without another word.

The corridor feels cooler now, or maybe it's the weight of everything settling on my shoulders. My phone vibrates in my pocket as I make my way toward the exit. I pull it out, expecting one of my men with an update.

Kendra's name flashes on the screen.

My steps slow, then stop entirely. Kendra Washington doesn't call me—ever. Our arrangement has been strictly text-based, her pride too stubborn to give me the satisfaction of hearing her voice unless absolutely necessary. She's been ducking my calls since our deal was struck, keeping me at arm's length despite the invisible chain I've wrapped around her wrist.

I stare at the screen, something like interest stirring in my blood. Kendra calling means something's changed—and change usually means opportunity.

Whatever has driven her to break her own rule must be significant. The thought of her on the other end, probably pacing, probably cursing my name with those full lips—it

brings a smile to my face that has nothing to do with business and everything to do with the game we've been playing.

KENDRA

I stare at my phone for a full five minutes, my thumb hovering over the call button like it might bite me. The phone's screen dims from inactivity, and I tap it impatiently to brighten it again. Enzo's name and number glow up at me, taunting me.

This isn't me. I don't reach out first. I don't put myself in positions where I'm waiting for someone—especially not a man—to pick up, to answer, to decide whether I'm worth their time. But this work event has me backed into a corner, and the thought of showing up alone makes my skin crawl. Not because I need a man, but because the vultures from the Westlake account will be circling, waiting to introduce me to their "very eligible" nephews and cousins like I'm some charity case.

I need someone who can silence a room with his presence. Someone who won't embarrass me with small talk about sports teams or cryptocurrency investments. Someone who understands power plays without explanation.

I need Enzo.

My finger finally makes contact with the screen, and I bring the phone to my ear, standing straighter even though no one's watching. Each ring stretches like taffy, making my jaw clench tighter.

He answers after two rings. "Kendra." My name in his mouth sounds different—smoother, edged with that quiet curiosity that makes the hair on the back

of my neck stand up. Not a question, not a greeting. Just an acknowledgment that carries weight.

I square my shoulders, refusing to let this feel like surrender. "I need a date. A business thing. Interested?" My voice comes out clipped and professional, like I'm offering him a business proposition rather than asking for a favor.

There's a beat of silence before he hums, considering. I can almost see him—leaning back in whatever sleek, expensive chair he's in, those steel-gray eyes calculating what this means, what advantage it gives him. The image makes me want to hang up, but I wait, my foot tapping an impatient rhythm against my hardwood floor.

"And you want me?" It's not a question, not really. The subtle emphasis on "want" makes my teeth grind. He's enjoying this, the bastard. Making me say it. Making me ask.

I exhale sharply, my free hand curling into a fist. "Forget it." The words come out harsh, defensive—a reflex when I feel cornered.

But before I can pull the phone away from my ear, his low chuckle stops me. The sound slides down my spine like warm honey, and I hate my body's instant reaction to it.

"I'll pick you up at seven," he says, and there's that quiet command in his voice that reminds me exactly who he is—not just some suit I can drag to a corporate function, but a man who's used to being obeyed. A man who's probably killed people who didn't listen.

My Hades, coming to collect.

I hang up and stare at my phone, despising the flutter in my chest. Seven o'clock.

Four hours to get ready for a man who shouldn't matter but somehow does. A man who holds my brother's debt over my head like Damocles' sword.

And yet here I am, standing in front of my closet an hour later, pushing hangers back and forth with increasing frustration. Nothing feels right. Too casual, too stuffy, too obvious, too safe.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter, yanking out a black dress I've worn to a dozen corporate events. It's perfectly appropriate, perfectly forgettable.

I hang it back up.

My fingers linger on a deep crimson number I bought six months ago during a moment of weakness—a dress I've never had the courage to wear. The fabric drapes like liquid, cut to hug every curve before falling to mid-thigh. The neckline dips just low enough to be suggestive without crossing into inappropriate.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I pull it from the hanger.

By six-forty-five, I'm a bundle of nerves I refuse to acknowledge. My hair falls in glossy curls around my shoulders, my makeup precise but not overdone—a sweep of gold across my lids, lashes thick with mascara, lips painted the exact shade of my dress. The woman in the mirror looks like me but isn't quite me—she's dangerous, confident in a way that makes my stomach twist into knots.

The doorbell rings at six fifty-nine. Of course he's early.

I take a steadying breath, slip on my heels, and open the door.

Enzo stands there in a suit that fits him like a second skin, charcoal gray against a white shirt, no tie. His hair is styled in that perfect mess that probably took longer

than he'd ever admit, and the scent of his cologne—something woodsy and expensive—hits me like a physical force.

His eyes meet mine for one electric second before dropping to take in the rest of me, moving with deliberate slowness from my face to my feet and back again. Something flashes in those steel-gray depths—hunger, appreciation, calculation—I can't tell which is more unnerving.

"You look beautiful," he says, voice a low rumble that seems to vibrate through my bones.

The compliment settles warm in my belly, and I hate myself for it. I grab my clutch from the side table, brushing past him into the hallway. "Let's go. I don't want to be late."

"Whatever you say," he murmurs, close enough that I can feel his breath against my neck.

The gala is held at the Sinclair Hotel downtown, all marble floors and crystal chandeliers dripping from coffered ceilings. As we step through the doors, Enzo's hand finds the small of my back—a light, possessive touch that shouldn't feel as comforting as it does.

"Remember," I say under my breath as we approach the first cluster of my colleagues, "you're just arm candy tonight."

He leans down, lips brushing my ear. "We both know I'm never just anything."

The shiver that runs through me has nothing to do with the air conditioning.

What follows is nothing short of a masterclass in social manipulation. Within an

hour, Enzo has charmed the CEO's wife, impressed the head of finance with his knowledge of market trends, and somehow convinced the notoriously stingy board chairman to consider increasing our department's budget. He moves through the room like he owns it, all quiet confidence and calculated charm, and I find myself watching him with a mix of professional admiration and something far more dangerous.

"Your boyfriend is delightful," whispers Annette from HR, who last week tried to set me up with her divorce attorney. "Where have you been hiding him?"

"He's not my—" I start, but Enzo chooses that moment to return, sliding an arm around my waist.

"Not your what?" he asks, handing me a glass of champagne. His thumb traces small circles against my hip, the touch burning through the thin fabric of my dress.

"Nothing," I say, taking a sip to hide my expression. "Annette was just singing your praises."

His smile is all predator. "I'm full of surprises."

The worst part is how right he feels at my side. How perfectly we fit together, moving through the crowd like partners who've danced this dance a hundred times. I catch myself laughing at his dry observations, leaning into his touch when his fingers trace patterns on my bare shoulder, forgetting—for moments at a time—exactly who and what he is.

By the time we leave, the night air cool against my flushed skin, I'm light-headed from champagne and proximity. The ride back to my apartment passes in comfortable silence, his presence filling the car like smoke.

At my door, I fumble with my keys, suddenly awkward. "Thanks for coming tonight.

You were..." I search for a word that won't give too much away. "Helpful."

Enzo steps closer, one hand coming up to brush a curl from my face. "Is that all I was?"

My breath catches as he leans in, his body a wall of heat just inches from mine. For one wild moment, I think he's going to kiss me—want him to kiss me—but he only smiles, that knowing curl of his lips that makes my knees weak.

"Sweet dreams, Kendra," he whispers, and then he's gone, leaving me standing at my door, keys clutched in my hand, desire a living thing under my skin.

22

ENZO

I walk two paces behind Luca as we approach Giovanni Cappalletti's office, keeping my steps measured and my facial expression carefully blank. The building itself is unassuming—a renovated warehouse with brick walls and reinforced steel doors. The type of place that doesn't attract attention unless you know what to look for.

Working for the Don for so long, I do.

"You ready?" Luca asks without turning, his voice low and even. The question is perfunctory. Whether I'm ready or not is irrelevant.

Am I ready to face the Don I turned my back on and ask that he never retaliate against me?

"Of course."

We're here to end a war—though war might be too dignified a term for the endless cycle of retaliation that's been going on between our families. Territory disputes. Men disappearing. Product intercepted. The usual bloody chess match played out across Chicago's underworld.

Giovanni's men pat us down at the door—a formality since everyone knows we wouldn't be stupid enough to bring weapons to this kind of meeting. I submit to the search with practiced indifference, though I note how the guard's hands linger longer

on me than on Luca. They all know what I am. Traitor. Turncoat. The man who walked away from the Cappalletti family and lived to tell about it.

The interior of Giovanni's office carries the stench of cigars and expensive cologne. Dark wood paneling lines the walls, and hunting trophies stare down with glass eyes. The man himself sits behind a mahogany desk, his fingers steeped under his chin. At sixty-five, Giovanni Cappalletti still cuts an imposing figure—silver-streaked black hair, shoulders that haven't lost their breadth with age, and eyes that hold decades of calculated violence.

Those eyes narrow when they land on me.

"Luca," he acknowledges with a slight nod, deliberately ignoring my presence. "I assume this is important enough to warrant bringing... him ... into my house."

Luca doesn't bother with pleasantries. He never does. His face remains a perfect mask of indifference as he steps forward and tosses a manila folder onto Giovanni's desk. It lands with a soft thud that somehow carries more weight than it should.

"I've had enough of this little war with the Cappallettis," Luca says, his tone conversational, as if discussing the weather instead of territory and bloodshed. As if I don't know that he'd love to kill this Don like he did his father for kidnapping his cousin Maria. "It's time we end it, no?"

Giovanni's gaze flicks between Luca and the folder, suspicion evident in the tightening of his jaw. "And what's this supposed to be?"

"A repayment of sorts," Luca answers simply. "Open it."

I remain still, watching the drama unfold with calculated detachment. I already know what's in that folder—the fruits of Elliott Romano's digital excavation. The hacker

had delivered more than expected: financial records that would make the IRS salivate, evidence of Alfonso Figarello skimming profits, proof of bribed judges, compromised cops. Enough dirt to bury the entire Cappalletti operation six feet under.

Giovanni's thick fingers flip through the pages, his expression darkening with each turn. A vein pulses at his temple. His knuckles whiten around the edge of a particularly damning document.

"Where did you get this?" he demands, voice dangerously low.

"Does it matter?" I interject, speaking for the first time. "What matters is we have it."

Giovanni's gaze snaps to me, hatred burning in his eyes. "You don't speak in my house, Rossi. Not after what you did."

I meet his stare without flinching. "What I did was survive."

"Enough," Luca cuts in, his voice soft but carrying finality. He leans forward slightly, those ice-blue eyes of his devoid of emotion. "Here's what's going to happen, Giovanni. This war ends today. You call your men off. We call ours off. We respect territories and stay out of each other's business. Just like we do with the Buetis."

Giovanni's jaw works, back teeth grinding as he weighs his options. I can practically see the calculations running behind his eyes—what he loses by agreeing, what he loses by refusing. The manila folder sits open before him, a Pandora's box of secrets that could tear his family apart from the inside.

After what feels like an eternity, he gives a single, curt nod.

The victory settles between us like fine mist as we walk out of the Cappalletti

fortress, but I barely taste it. Giovanni's surrender should feel sweeter after what Alfonso Figarello did to me, how he stripped my ambitions away, relegated me to fucking babysitting duty. I should be savoring this moment—watching the old man squirm as he realized we had him by the throat. Instead, my mind keeps drifting elsewhere, to dark curls and a razor-sharp tongue that cuts just as deep as it entices.

"That went better than expected," Luca comments as we slide into the back of his black Bentley. His driver pulls away smoothly, leaving Giovanni's compound behind.

I nod, my eyes drawn to the notification-free screen of my phone. Why am I even checking? It's not like I told her to contact me today. Our arrangement doesn't require her constant attention—just her availability when I call. And yet here I am, like some fucking teenager, waiting for a message that isn't coming.

"We've bought ourselves at least six months of peace," I say, forcing my thoughts back to business. "Time enough to secure the north side properly."

Luca watches me with those ice-blue eyes that make hardened criminals piss themselves. Nothing escapes him—it's what makes him both an excellent ally and a dangerous enemy.

"You're distracted," he states flatly. No question, just observation.

I exhale slowly, rolling my shoulders to release the tension building between my shoulder blades. My territory needs attention. The businesses need reviewing. The soldiers need direction. A million things should occupy my mind right now—none of them involving Kendra Washington's smile or the way her fingers unconsciously stroked Paige's fur when she thought I wasn't looking.

"Handling multiple things at once isn't a distraction. It's efficiency," I counter, meeting his gaze evenly.

Luca's lips curve into that trademark smirk of his—the one that makes people wonder if he's about to laugh or order their execution. "Sure." His tone makes it clear he doesn't believe me for a second. "But if she's the reason you slip up, I'll kill you myself."

There's no real threat behind his words—just an older brother's warning. Luca might be the Ice Man to everyone else, but I've seen behind the mask enough to recognize the twisted form of concern. Still, he isn't wrong. A woman like Kendra is a complication I don't need right now.

"Won't be an issue," I say simply.

The remainder of the ride passes in silence. Luca respects my space, absorbed in his own thoughts as the city slides by outside our tinted windows. When we reach the neutral territory of the Emerald Oyster, he exits with a final nod—no further warnings needed.

I direct the driver to take me to my own territory. There are men waiting for updates, businesses that need checking, and a thousand other responsibilities demanding my attention.

Yet as we pull away, I find myself pulling out my phone, checking the screen before I even realize what I'm doing. No messages. Nothing from Kendra. I exhale, annoyed—at her, at myself, at the fact that I suddenly want to hear from her first.

This woman is already taking up too much space in my head. I didn't anticipate wanting her beyond the physical, didn't plan for the way her presence lingers in my thoughts like smoke that won't clear. She's supposed to be a simple arrangement. A debt settled.

Not this... whatever this is becoming.

23

KENDRA

I sip my latte, letting the rich espresso coat my tongue while I scroll through work emails on my phone. The café buzzes with mid-afternoon energy—writers hunched over laptops, business people fitting in quick meetings between calls. I've claimed my favorite corner table by the window, sunlight warming my shoulder as I work through my lunch break.

The chair across from me scrapes against the floor. I look up, ready to politely inform whoever it is that the seat's taken—even though it isn't—when I freeze.

A man slides into the chair uninvited, his movements too smooth, too deliberate. Young—maybe mid-twenties—with dark eyes burning with that particular brand of arrogance that comes from having power without the wisdom to wield it. His jaw is sharp, set hard as he stares at me, a hint of a smirk playing at his lips. He wears a tailored black shirt that stretches over broad shoulders, a gold chain peeking out at his collar.

I know what he is before he opens his mouth. The way he scans the room without seeming to. The subtle bulge at his waist that isn't a phone. The confidence that borders on something dangerous.

Mafia. One of those young ones with something to prove.

And he looks a touch too much like Enzo for it to be a coincidence.

I straighten in my seat, unimpressed. "Can I help you?"

He leans forward, elbows on the table. His eyes trail down my face to the open collar of my blouse, then back up again. The look makes my skin crawl.

"You're Kendra Washington." Not a question.

I don't give him the satisfaction of asking how he knows that. Instead, I reach for my coffee, keeping my movements casual while my mind races. Mantione? Has to be. A message from Luca perhaps?

"Erole Rossi." He taps the table with his index finger, the gesture somehow threatening. "Enzo's nephew."

My eyebrow rises of its own accord. Enzo never mentioned family. A nephew? The resemblance is there in the jawline, the broad shoulders—but where Enzo radiates controlled danger, this man practically vibrates with volatile energy.

"Fascinating," I say flatly. "Is there a reason you're interrupting my lunch?"

His lips twitch, like he expected me to be impressed, or perhaps frightened. "I'm giving you a chance," he says, voice dropping low, serious.

I take another sip of coffee, letting the silence stretch. When he doesn't continue, I set the cup down with deliberate precision. "A chance for what?"

He leans closer, the scent of expensive cologne mixed with cigarettes invading my space. "To get out. Before it's too late."

The words hang between us like they're supposed to mean something profound. Like he's the hero in some twisted story, offering rescue to the damsel.

I nearly laugh. Instead, I lean back in my chair, studying him the way I would an underwhelming presentation at work.

"Get out of what, exactly?" I keep my voice cool, professional.

"Whatever arrangement you have with my uncle." His eyes narrow. "You think you know what you're getting into? You have no idea who he really is."

I think of Enzo's face when his dogs tackled him to the ground. The careful way he handled my deal. The control in every movement.

"And you're what? Rescuing me?" I can't keep the edge of mockery from my voice.

I exhale slowly, purposely controlling my expression. I know exactly what this is. This isn't about warning me or saving me. This is about power. About territory.

Ercole leans forward, his voice dropping to something that's probably supposed to sound concerned. "You don't understand what he's capable of. The things he's done."

He thinks he's some tragic hero, riding in on a white horse to rescue me from the monster. How many women has he tried this with before? How many fell for this act? He's painting his uncle as a sinking ship that will drag me to the underworld with him, like I'm some innocent caught in Enzo's web.

What he doesn't realize is that I don't need saving. I made my deal with eyes wide open.

"But you don't have to let him own you." He's still pushing. "My father and I can make this all go away. The debt, the deal... just say the word." I quirk a brow and he leans in even closer. "He betrayed our family once. He'll betray you too."

I exhale, setting down my coffee and leaning forward slightly. I drop my voice to something smooth and sharp—the tone I use in boardrooms when someone has severely underestimated me.

"And what makes you think I want out?"

The question lands like a slap. Ercole falters—because he didn't expect that. His cocky expression flickers, uncertainty replacing arrogance for a split second. He expected fear or gratitude, not this calm challenge. His hand tightens on the edge of the table.

"You think you?—"

Before he can recover, a shadow looms over our table, and the air shifts. The café noise seems to dampen, like someone turned down the volume. I don't even have to turn around. I know exactly who it is.

Ercole's face tells me everything. The color drains from his cheeks, his eyes widening just enough to betray his fear.

The dangerous stillness radiating off Enzo is palpable, like the charged air before a lightning strike. He doesn't speak. Doesn't move. Just stands there, his presence alone transforming our little corner of the café into something electric with tension.

I take a slow sip of my coffee, watching Ercole over the rim of my cup. Watching him realize his miscalculation. He came here thinking he could manipulate me, could steal what he sees as his uncle's possession. Now he's learning what happens when you try to take something that belongs to Enzo Rossi.

"Uncle." The word comes out steady, but I catch the slight tremble in Ercole's hands.

Enzo places one hand on the back of my chair, barely brushing my shoulder. The touch is light, casual even, but the message is clear. Mine.

"Ercole." Enzo's voice is deceptively soft, but I hear the steel beneath. "I don't recall inviting you to join Kendra for lunch."

I lean back in my chair, letting the warmth of Enzo's presence wash over me as I watch his nephew squirm. This isn't a rescue. This is a predator discovering someone hunting in his territory.

And heat pools in my stomach at the thought of watching what he'll do next.

24

ENZO

I see the empty table before I spot her, and for a moment, I think she's stood me up. It wouldn't surprise me—Kendra Washington isn't the type to be dragged anywhere against her will, deal or no deal.

Then I catch sight of her across the café, and everything in me goes still.

Ercole. Sitting across from her. Leaning in close with that predatory smile I've seen him use before he breaks someone's fingers.

Something cold and violent settles in my chest as I watch my nephew—if I can even call him that anymore—invading the space of the woman who, by the terms of our arrangement, belongs to me. His massive frame dwarfs her, though she doesn't seem intimidated. I can only see her profile, but her spine is straight, her chin lifted. She looks bored, but I know better.

I move through the afternoon crowd, weaving between tables with silent precision. No rushed steps. No raised voice. I don't need to announce myself to be seen—a lesson Ercole clearly never learned.

"...don't have to let him own you," I hear him saying as I approach, the words carrying across the noise of the café. "My father and I can make this all go away. The debt, the deal... just say the word."

I'm close enough now to see Kendra's expression—the slight quirk of her eyebrow that suggests she's measuring bullshit by the pound.

Ercole hasn't noticed me yet, too busy trying to impress. He leans even closer. "He betrayed our family once. He'll betray you too."

I ignore the way my heart rate has picked up as Kendra shifts. "And what makes you think I want out?"

"You think you?—"

At this range, I can see the moment Ercole finally senses me. His shoulders tense, his confidence wavering as he turns. The swagger drains from his face when our eyes lock. Despite his size—that brutish Rossi build that skipped my generation and landed squarely on him—he still shrinks under my gaze.

"Uncle." He tries to keep his bravado but I see through it.

I grip Kendra's chair, not looking at her. But I feel the pull toward her the same as I know she does with me.

"Ercole." I've never felt such anger swirl toward me. "I don't recall inviting you to join Kendra for lunch."

I don't acknowledge her. Not yet. My focus is entirely on Ercole—the idiot who thought he could take something that wasn't his.

"Uncle, I?—"

"Leave. Now," I tell him, my voice quiet but deadly. I don't raise it. I don't need to. But it takes everything in me not to launch myself forward and grip his throat, to

squeeze and remind him that he is no match for me.

Ercole hesitates, his jaw tightening. For a second, I think he might be stupid enough to challenge me. His hands curl into fists beneath the table, and I can see the wheels turning in his thick skull, weighing the humiliation of retreating against the consequences of defiance.

But something in my stillness gives him pause. The careful control I maintain over the fury simmering beneath my calm exterior makes him rethink his options. Even animals recognize when they're outmatched.

He stands, towering over the table with his ridiculous height. The chair screeches against the floor as he pushes it back—a final, petty display of dominance that fools no one.

He throws one last glance at Kendra, and I catch the flash of possessiveness in his eyes—like he's already marked her as territory in his mind.

"You can't say you weren't warned," he mutters, directed at her but meant for me to hear.

I don't move until Ercole is out the door, watching him retreat like the coward he is beneath all that muscle. Only when he disappears from view do I shift my focus to Kendra—and she's watching me, her expression unreadable. Those deep brown eyes reveal nothing, studying me with the same calculating intensity I use on rivals.

A test. Always a test with her.

I exhale sharply, my control hanging by a thread. I grab her wrist, pulling her up from the chair in one fluid motion. Her skin is warm under my fingers, her pulse jumping beneath my thumb.

"We're leaving." Not a question. Not a suggestion.

She doesn't resist, but I feel the tension in her body—not submission, but a choice to follow. There's power in that distinction, and it only makes the rage inside me burn hotter.

The drive to my penthouse is silent, tension coiled so tight it's suffocating. I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles whiten, aware of every breath she takes, every slight shift of her body in the passenger seat. The scent of her perfume—something expensive but subtle—fills the confined space, making it impossible to think straight.

I catch her glancing at my profile, studying the hard set of my jaw, the muscles flexing in my forearm as I shift gears. She doesn't look away when I catch her staring. Instead, her chin lifts slightly, that perpetual challenge in her eyes that makes me want to break something—preferably the wall between us.

When we arrive, I lead her through the lobby with my hand at the small of her back. Not touching, but close enough that she can feel the heat of my palm through her dress. The elevator ride is twenty-three floors of controlled breathing and calculated distance.

But the second the door shuts behind us in my penthouse, the restraint snaps.

My dogs don't even come running to greet us—they must feel the tension rolling off me in waves, choosing to remain wherever they've hidden themselves away.

I push her against the wall, hands gripping her waist, voice rough with barely contained fury. "What the fuck was that?" Her body is soft against mine, a maddening contrast to the hardness in her eyes. "Did you arrange to meet him?"

"He found me," she answers, her breath catching when my fingers dig deeper into her

curves.

But my mind is racing with what he said. He offered her an out. And all I can think over and over is...does she want one?

I lean closer, one hand sliding up to press against the wall beside her head, caging her in. "Tell me you don't want this," I demand, breath hot against her throat. I need to hear it—need to know she's not playing both sides. "Tell me you want out of our arrangement."

Kendra's fingers dig into my arms, shaking—but not with fear. Her nails press crescent moons into my skin through my shirt, and the sting feeds something primal in me. Those full lips part, and for a moment, I think she might actually reject me.

"I think I already made it clear that I chose you," she answers, and that threatens to undo me.

Steel-gray meets deep brown as I search her face for any sign of deception. There is none—only that same fierce determination I've come to expect from her. The same fire that drew me to her in the first place.

"Chose me," I echo, the words rough in my throat. Not belonged to me. Not submitted to me. Chose me. The distinction matters, though I'd never admit how much.

Instead, it cracks through me, gripping me, and I know that she just shattered the last of my control.

25

KENDRA

The moment Enzo's mouth crashes against mine, I know there's no coming back from this. I think I knew it the second my stomach dropped at the idea of no longer being tied to him. He asked if I wanted out, and I should have said yes. Instead, I chose him.

The tension between us shatters into something raw and consuming, something that's been waiting to explode since the first time I saw him across the room at Skye's boutique. All those loaded glances, careful distances kept, and barbed comments exchanged—just kindling for this fire.

His kiss isn't gentle. It's possessive, demanding, those steel-gray eyes finally revealing what he wants. Me. Without pretense or negotiation. His stubble scrapes against my skin, the slight sting only heightening everything else.

"Fuck," he growls against my mouth, the single word vibrating through me as his hands find my thighs, my hips. His fingers dig in like he's been starving for this, like he's marking territory.

I should stop this. I made a deal to be at his beck and call, not to fall into his bed. This complicates everything—and I don't do complicated. Not with men who carry guns and deal in territories. Not with men who know exactly how dangerous they are.

I fight for control, but it's a losing battle. My body betrays me, responding to his

every touch like he's finding switches I didn't know existed. The wall presses cold against my back as he crowds me against it, all solid muscle and controlled strength.

"We shouldn't—" I try, but the protest sounds weak even to my ears.

I push against his chest, feeling the solid wall of muscle beneath his shirt, only for him to catch my wrists, pinning them above my head with one hand. The move is swift, effortless—a reminder of exactly who I'm dealing with. A man who handles threats for a living.

"Tell me to stop," he challenges, his face inches from mine, voice rough with need. "Tell me you don't want this."

His eyes connect with mine and I don't say a word.

Then, his mouth is back on mine, devouring me as I surrender to him. I give in like I've been dying to for weeks—months really. His free hand slides up my side, thumb grazing just beneath my breast, and I'm arching into him instead of resisting, chasing the touch.

"That's what I thought," he murmurs, and I feel his smile against my lips—that infuriating confidence that makes me want to slap him almost as much as I want to tear his clothes off.

"I hate that smug look," I breathe against his mouth, but there's no conviction in it.

"No, you don't." His lips travel to my neck, finding a spot that makes my knees weak. "You love that I know exactly what you want, even when you're too stubborn to admit it."

His grip on my wrists loosens, but I don't move them. The surrender is its own kind

of thrill—letting go of the control I cling to everywhere else. With Enzo, I don't have to be the one holding everything together. For once, I can just feel.

And God, do I feel. Every inch of my skin is alive, hypersensitive. The contrast of his rough hands and deliberate touch. The heat of him pressed against me, his expensive cologne mixing with something darker, something purely him.

His grip on me tightens, a possessive claim I should resist but can't. Enzo spins me around in one fluid motion, pressing me against the cool wall. My cheek meets the smooth surface, his chest a wall of heat against my back. The contrast leaves me dizzy, caught between his burning touch and the chill against my skin.

"Tell me what you want," he demands, his voice a rasp in my ear as his hands find the hem of my dress, sliding beneath the fabric. His fingers trail fire up my thighs, mapping territory that's been his since the moment I agreed to his deal.

"You already know," I challenge, refusing to give him the satisfaction of hearing me beg, even as my body arches back against his.

His laugh is dark, knowing. "I want to hear you say it."

I feel his hardness pressing against me through his pants, the evidence of how much he wants this—wants me. His hand slides higher, teasing along the edge of my underwear, and I bite my lip to stop from making a sound that would give me away.

"You're mine," he growls, voice rough with something primal and possessive. His teeth graze my earlobe, sending shivers cascading down my spine. "Say it."

I should argue. Should spin around with some sharp, cutting remark about how I don't belong to anyone, especially not a man whose business is built on violence and control. I'm Kendra Washington—I don't yield, don't submit, don't give men like him

the satisfaction of ownership.

But I don't say any of that. Because in this moment, pressed between his body and the wall, his words feel true. I am his. Just as surely as he's become mine in ways neither of us planned.

"I want you," I gasp out.

Enzo groans as his fingers hook into my underwear, dragging the lace down my thighs. Cool air hits my skin, followed immediately by the heat of his palm as he cups me from behind. I can't stop the moan that escapes my lips, my nails dragging against the wall seeking purchase against the storm of sensation.

"So wet for me already," he murmurs, the smugness in his tone only turning me on more. He knows exactly what he's doing—playing my body like an instrument he's studied for years rather than weeks.

I hear the sound of his belt, the zipper, clothes being pushed aside rather than removed. There's no patience here, no slow seduction. This is raw need, too urgent for niceties.

His fingers find me first, testing, circling, making sure I'm ready. The gesture holds more consideration than his rough words suggest. That's Enzo—danger wrapped in surprising moments of care.

"Now," I demand, grinding back against him, past the point of pride.

He enters me in one deep thrust, filling me completely, stretching me to the edge of pleasure and pain. I choke on his name, my body yielding completely to his invasion, giving him everything he's claimed as his. My hands flatten against the wall, searching for stability as he withdraws almost completely before driving in again,

setting a relentless pace.

One of his hands wraps around my throat—not squeezing, just holding, asserting control—while the other grips my hip hard enough to leave marks. Tomorrow, I'll wear the evidence of this moment beneath my carefully selected work clothes, a secret reminder of what happens when my control slips.

Our sex is fast, hard, desperate—the kind of claiming that leaves no room for second thoughts or regrets. It's not gentle, not sweet. It's fire and ruin, the collapse of every wall I've tried to build between us. My body responds to his every thrust, every touch, like he's unlocked something wild in me that I've kept caged for too long.

"Look at you," he growls, his rhythm never faltering. "Taking me so perfectly."

I lose track of time, of place, of everything except Enzo. His body drives into mine with relentless precision, each thrust hitting deeper than the last. I'm losing myself, fragmenting under his assault, pleasure building in impossible waves until I can barely breathe. This isn't just sex—it's claiming, marking, a battle neither of us can lose.

My legs begin to tremble, muscles tightening as he pushes me toward the edge. His pace becomes punishing, desperate, his grip on my hips almost painful as he pulls me back against him.

"Come for me," he commands, voice hoarse and strained. "Now."

My body obeys before my mind can process the demand. The orgasm crashes through me with devastating force, tearing a cry from my throat. I feel myself clenching around him, waves of pleasure so intense I might black out. My vision blurs, fingernails scraping uselessly against the wall as I try to anchor myself against the storm.

Behind me, Enzo groans, a primal sound that vibrates through his chest into my back. His rhythm falters, hips jerking against mine as he follows me over the edge, emptying himself inside me with several hard, final thrusts. The sensation of him pulsing within me triggers another smaller aftershock, my body milking him for everything he can give.

For several moments after, neither of us speaks. The only sound is our ragged breathing as we try to recover, my forehead pressed against the cool wall, his against my shoulder. We stay locked together, my back against his chest, his arms wrapped around me, hands still gripping my hips like he's afraid I'll disappear if he lets go.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken questions. What just happened? What does this mean? Where do we go from here? But I don't voice any of them, and neither does he. We just breathe, letting our heartbeats slow together, his warmth seeping into me where our skin touches.

Finally, Enzo shifts, slipping out of me with a gentleness that contradicts everything that came before. I expect him to step back, to recreate the careful distance we've maintained until tonight. Instead, his arms slide under my legs, and he lifts me against his chest in one fluid motion.

I'm too exhausted to protest, my body limp from the intensity of what we just shared. I let my head fall against his shoulder, inhaling the scent of his skin—cologne mixed with sweat and sex.

He carries me through his apartment with sure steps, as if my weight is nothing to him. When we reach his bedroom, Paige and Penny lift their heads from their plush dog beds in the corner, tails immediately thumping against the floor at the sight of me. They look happy, almost expectant, like they've been waiting for me to arrive. It strikes me as odd that these animals have accepted me so easily when their master has fought it at every turn.

Enzo sets me on the edge of his bed, those steel-gray eyes finally meeting mine. Something unreadable passes over his face—vulnerability, maybe, though I'm not sure he's capable of it.

"You can leave," he says, voice rough but quiet. "If you want."

My throat tightens at the unexpected offer. After everything—the deal, the threats, the possessive way he just took me—he's giving me a choice. It's the last thing I expected from him. From the dangerous capo who demands loyalty, who takes what he wants without asking.

I should go. Walk away before this becomes something more than a business arrangement complicated by sex. Before I forget who he is—what he is.

But I don't move. Instead, I shake my head, my decision already made.

"I've made my choice," I say, my voice steadier than I feel.

His eyes darken, that controlled mask slipping just enough for me to see the satisfaction underneath. He doesn't smile—Enzo rarely does—but something in his expression shifts, softens for just a moment before the predator returns.

26

ENZO

I wake to the first light of morning seeping through blinds I forgot to close, my internal clock doing its usual job of dragging me from sleep before my alarm. There's a moment of disorientation as my senses register the unfamiliar weight on the mattress beside me.

Kendra.

She's curled on her side, facing away from me, the sheet draped low across the dip of her waist. Her bare back is exposed—smooth brown skin that I can't take my eyes off of. Her curls are splayed across my pillow, wilder now after sleep and what we did last night.

I study the curve of her shoulder, the elegant line of her spine. In sleep, she's lost that razor-sharp edge she carries like armor. Something constricts in my chest—something I don't want to examine.

Women don't sleep in my bed. They don't stay the night. That's a rule I've never broken until now.

But looking at her—the way her body has claimed half my mattress like it's her goddamn divine right—I'm struck by how natural she looks here. Like she belongs against my sheets, in my space.

I need to move. Get up. Reclaim whatever the fuck is happening to me.

Before I can extract myself from this dangerous moment, a blur of yellow fur crashes onto the bed with the subtlety of a freight train. Paige lands between us, tongue lolling out, tail slapping against the sheets with chaotic enthusiasm.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, reaching for the lab who's now trying to step on Kendra's hair in her excitement.

Kendra stirs, a low groan escaping her throat as she rolls over. Her eyes crack open, pupils constricting against the morning light before her sleepy glare fixes on me. Even half-conscious, she manages to look thoroughly unimpressed.

"Your dog is obnoxious," she mumbles, voice husky with sleep. She pushes herself up slightly, the sheet falling to her waist, revealing more of that skin I spent hours exploring last night. She doesn't reach to cover herself—Kendra isn't the type to suddenly find modesty in daylight.

Paige, the traitor, immediately abandons me to nose at Kendra's face. Instead of pushing her away, Kendra scratches behind the dog's ears with a reluctant half-smile.

Movement at the foot of the bed catches my attention. Penny is inching forward on her belly, her wary eyes fixed on Kendra. This is new. Penny doesn't approach strangers—hell, it took her weeks to stop hiding when I first got her. Yet here she is, cautiously making her way up the mattress until she settles at the edge near Kendra's feet.

Kendra notices too. Her eyes flick down to Penny, then back to me with a raised eyebrow. "At least one of them has sense," she says, but her hand reaches down to scratch gently behind Penny's ears. The shepherd's eyes close in pleasure, leaning into the touch without hesitation.

The sight does something to my insides—twists them into a shape I don't recognize. Penny trusting Kendra feels significant in a way I'm not prepared to analyze. This woman in my bed, charming my most selective dog, fitting into my most private space without effort.

Kendra sighs, settling back against the pillows, one hand still absently stroking Penny's head. She looks comfortable. At ease.

Like she's not planning on leaving.

And I don't want her to.

But then Kendra stretches, arching her back like a cat in the sunlight. She sits up fully, careless as the sheet slips down, exposing the curve of her breasts. Her skin glows in the morning light, all smooth cocoa warmth against the stark white of my bedding. My mouth goes dry at the sight, and I have to look away before I give in to the urge to reach out and pull her back down beneath me.

"I should go," she murmurs, though her body tells a different story. She makes no effort to move, her fingers still absently tangling in Penny's fur. Her other hand smooths over the expensive sheets like she's memorizing the feel of them. Of my bed. Of this moment.

I lean against the headboard, crossing my arms over my chest, and watch her internal debate play out across her face. The corner of my mouth lifts in a knowing smirk.

"Then go," I say, my voice low and rough from sleep. Challenge runs through the words—we both know what she wants, what I want. But this is her move to make.

She scowls at me, those full lips pursing with irritation. But beneath the annoyance, I see it—the hesitation, the reluctance to leave the warm cocoon we've created. Her

eyes, still soft with sleep, betray her. She wants to stay. She wants me to ask her to stay.

I don't.

For once, I let her make the choice. This isn't part of our deal. There are no terms to enforce, no debts to collect. Whatever she decides now is on her—free will in its purest form.

The silence stretches between us, filled only with Paige's panting and the rustle of sheets as Kendra finally slides out of bed. The grace in her movements draws my eye—the deliberate swing of her hips, the languid way she bends to collect her scattered clothes from the floor. She's moving slower than necessary, dragging out every second.

She steps into her dress, pulling it up over her curves without hurry. She doesn't turn away as she dresses, doesn't hide from my gaze. It's not modesty that drives her—it's power. She knows exactly what she's doing to me.

I remain still, a predator at rest, tracking her movements around my room as she gathers her things. Her heels dangle loosely from her fingertips. Her hair is a wild tangle of curls that she doesn't bother to tame. She looks thoroughly fucked and completely unconcerned about it.

The sight of her like this—marked by my hands, wearing the evidence of our night—stirs something possessive in my chest that I refuse to acknowledge.

She pauses at the bedroom door, her hand on the knob. For a moment, I think she'll leave without another word.

Then she glances back.

The morning light catches in her eyes, turning them from dark to amber. Her lips part slightly, words forming and dying before they reach the air. There's so much tension between us, so much want that it's practically a living thing in the room.

I hold her gaze, keeping my expression deliberately unreadable. I won't give her the satisfaction of seeing how much I want her to turn around. How much I want her back in my bed. My territory. My life.

Neither of us say a word. We don't need to. The silence speaks volumes, heavy with everything we refuse to voice.

And it's even heavier when she leaves me staring after her.

27

ENZO

I try to tell myself I'm here because I need to discuss the terms of our arrangement. That my being at her office is strictly business. But it's bullshit, and I know it. I want to see Kendra, plain and simple. Haven't been able to get her out of my head since she walked out of my bedroom three days ago.

The receptionist is too busy on her phone to question my presence as I walk past, my steps silent on the carpeted floor. I know where Kendra's office is—end of the hall, corner space with her name on the door. Executive privilege.

I'm almost there when I catch sight of her through the break room doorway. She's leaning against a counter, coffee mug in hand, dressed in a form-fitting burgundy dress that hugs every curve I spent the night memorizing with my hands. But it's not her outfit that makes my jaw tighten—it's who she's talking to.

Some slick corporate type in a tailored suit, standing too close, looking at her like she's something to be devoured. I watch his eyes drop to her lips when she speaks, the way he leans in, invading her space. The familiar weight of my gun against my ribs is suddenly very present in my mind.

Instead of interrupting, I slip into her office. Let her finish her little flirtation. I want to see what she does when she thinks I'm not watching.

I settle behind her desk like I own the room, leaning back in her chair. The space is

immaculate—glass desk perfectly organized, awards and credentials displayed on the wall, everything in its place. Just like Kendra. Always in control.

Minutes later, the door swings open. She walks in, head down as she scrolls through something on her phone. When she finally looks up and sees me, she freezes, one hand instinctively rising to her throat.

"Jesus Christ," she hisses, her composure shattering for just a second before that mask of cool indifference slips back into place. "Do you make a habit of lurking in women's offices, or am I special?"

I don't smile. Don't move from my position behind the desk.

"Who was that?" The question comes out lower, rougher than I intended.

Her eyebrows rise slowly, that sharp intelligence in her eyes picking apart my tone, my rigid stance. Then, unexpectedly, she smiles. Not her professional smile, not even her sarcastic one. This is something more dangerous—a slow curve of those full lips that says she's just discovered something she can use against me.

"That's Alex. Marketing director for our biggest client." She moves further into the room, closing the door behind her with a soft click. "Why? Does it matter?"

"He wants to fuck you." I state it like the fact it is.

She laughs, the sound rich and darkly amused as she sets her phone on the desk. "Most men do," she counters, stepping closer to me, the scent of her perfume—something expensive and subtle—filling my senses. "Including you."

My hand shoots out, fingers wrapping around her wrist. Not tight enough to hurt, but firm enough to make my point. "You made a deal with me, Kendra."

"About paying off Griffin's debts," she replies, eyes flashing. "I don't recall sexual exclusivity being part of our arrangement."

She's right, and we both know it. I never specified those terms. Never thought I'd need to. The realization that she could be with someone else while still fulfilling our deal makes something primal and ugly rise in my chest.

"Jealousy looks good on you, Enzo," she murmurs, stepping even closer until she's between my legs. "Brings out all those alpha mafia tendencies you try so hard to control around me."

Before I can respond, she drops to her knees in front of me, hands sliding up my thighs. The sight of Kendra Washington—proud, fierce Kendra—on her knees should feel like victory. Instead, it feels like she's still the one in control, like I'm the one being conquered.

She maintains eye contact as her fingers work at my belt, deliberately slow. "Is this what you want? Proof that I'm only thinking about you?"

My hand finds her chin, tilting her face up. "I want you to remember who you belong to."

"I don't belong to anyone," she corrects, but her hands are already unzipping my pants, reaching inside my boxer briefs to wrap around my hardening cock. "But I choose you. Right now."

The feel of her warm palm stroking me, the sight of her on her knees with that defiant look still in her eyes—it's almost too much. She works me with precision, like everything else she does, learning what makes my breath catch, what makes my fingers tighten in her hair.

“You look so perfect like this.”

Her eyes darken at my words, and then she's taking me into her mouth, those full lips stretching around me as she holds my gaze. The wet heat of her tongue, the slight pressure of her teeth—she's not being gentle, and I don't want her to be.

I keep my hand tangled in her hair, guiding her movements as she works me with that clever mouth. Every slide of her tongue, every hollow of those cheeks—it's fucking perfect. But it's the defiance in her eyes that's pushing me to the edge, that refusal to fully surrender even as she's on her knees.

The door swings open without a knock.

"Kendra, I was thinking about that campaign pitch?—"

The voice cuts through the room, followed by sudden silence. I don't break eye contact with Kendra, whose movements falter for just a second before she continues, hidden beneath the desk I'm still behind.

Alex stands frozen in the doorway, his polished appearance suddenly comical as confusion washes over his face at finding me seated behind Kendra's desk.

"You're not Kendra." He states the obvious, his gaze darting around the office. "Where is she?"

I lean back in the chair, my expression neutral despite the exquisite torture happening beneath the desk. "She's busy at the moment."

His eyes narrow slightly, the wheels turning as he tries to make sense of who I am and why I'm in her office. I haven't bothered to button my suit jacket, and the telltale bulge of my shoulder holster is visible if he bothers to look.

"I'll, uh, come back later then," he says, already backing toward the door.

"She'll be busy for a while," I reply, voice rougher than intended as Kendra does something particularly devastating with her tongue. A groan escapes me before I can stop it, and I cup the back of her head, guiding her down further.

Comprehension dawns on Alex's face—slow at first, then all at once. His eyes widen, darting to the desk and back to my face, now twisted in obvious pleasure.

"Jesus," he whispers, his hand frozen on the doorknob.

The pressure builds, heat coiling at the base of my spine as Kendra increases her pace. Her mouth is relentless, knowing exactly what I need. I lock eyes with Alex as I come, making sure he sees exactly who's claiming her, letting him witness my pleasure as she swallows everything.

Kendra emerges from under the desk, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. When she spots Alex, she freezes, the confident mask slipping for just a moment to reveal genuine shock. Clearly, she thought he left.

I don't give her time to be embarrassed. I simply pull her onto my lap, one hand possessively splayed across her stomach, the other brushing her hair away from her flushed face.

"Get out," I tell Alex, my voice leaving no room for argument. "She deserves her reward."

He stands there for another moment, stunned, before backing out of the office and closing the door with a soft click. I half-expect Kendra to explode, to rage at me for the deliberate show of dominance, but when I look down at her, there's something dark and hungry in her eyes.

"What the fuck was that?" she demands, but there's no real heat behind it. If anything, she sounds breathless, turned on.

"That was me making sure everyone knows you're taken." I stand, lifting her with me before bending her over her pristine desk. Papers scatter, her phone clatters to the floor, but I don't care. All I see is the curve of her ass as I push that tight dress up around her waist.

"You can't just—" she starts to protest, but the words die in her throat as I tear her lace underwear aside and thrust into her in one swift motion.

She's soaking wet, her body contradicting any objection she might voice. I hold her down with one hand between her shoulder blades, the other gripping her hip hard enough to bruise. Each thrust is deliberate, claiming, marking her from the inside out.

"I can . I will . And you want me to," I challenge, knowing she won't deny it. Knowing she wants this as much as I do.

Instead of answering, she pushes back against me, taking me deeper, a low moan escaping those lips that were just wrapped around my cock. The sound ignites something primal in me, erasing any remaining restraint.

I pound into her until her walls tighten around me, squeezing the fucking life out of me. She moans so loud I hope that everyone on the floor hears it, and it's enough to have my orgasm build, hitting me unexpectedly as she convulses under me. I pump her full, pulling out to watch my cum leak down her legs and I grin.

"I should make you go talk to him like this." I smear my release across her pussy and she jolts, sensitive. "Covered in my cum, with my taste on your tongue."

"Enzo," she groans when I smear it more.

"God, you look so good right now." I pull her upright, taking in how messy she looks.
"Let's go."

To my surprise, she doesn't argue.

I drive faster than usual, the sleek lines of my car cutting through traffic with a controlled aggression that matches my mood. Kendra sits beside me, silent. I don't need to look at her to feel her eyes on me—analytical, assessing, trying to make sense of what just happened and where we're heading.

I take a turn that clearly isn't toward her apartment, and I catch the slight shift in her posture from the corner of my eye.

"We're going to your place?" she asks, voice carefully neutral.

I nod once, not trusting myself to speak. Not now, when everything inside me feels too raw, too exposed. The truth is, I don't know why I'm taking her to my home instead of dropping her off at hers. All I know is that I'm not ready to let her go yet.

She watches me, those clever eyes picking apart my silence, my grip on the steering wheel, the muscle working in my jaw. I can practically hear the gears turning in her head as she tries to decode what this means. What I mean.

I keep my eyes fixed on the road because looking at her means acknowledging the question hanging between us. And the problem isn't that I don't have an answer—it's that I do, and it scares the shit out of me.

When we pull up to my building, she follows me up without a word. At my door, I punch in the security code, feeling her presence behind me, warm and real and increasingly difficult to keep at arm's length.

The moment the door swings open, chaos erupts. A flash of golden fur barrels toward us at full speed, followed by the distinctive click of nails on hardwood. Paige—seventy pounds of pure enthusiasm with zero awareness of her own size—launches herself at Kendra, front paws up and tail whipping with excitement.

"Jesus!" Kendra laughs, stumbling back as the dog nearly knocks her off her feet. The sound catches me off guard—genuine, unguarded, nothing like the calculated responses she usually gives.

She drops into a crouch, letting Paige shower her face with affection while those nimble fingers scratch behind golden ears. Penny approaches with more caution, keeping a respectful distance until Kendra extends her hand. After a careful sniff, Penny presses her head against Kendra's palm, seeking affection but still keeping those watchful eyes on me.

"Hi there, pretty girl," Kendra murmurs, her voice softening in a way I've never heard before. "Missed me?"

Something shifts in my chest at the sight—Kendra Washington, who has never backed down from anyone, melting over my dogs. Her professional mask is gone, replaced by something genuine and unguarded. It's unsettling how much I want to see more of this side of her.

"Come on." I head toward the kitchen, needing a moment to collect myself. "You want a drink?"

She follows, Paige trotting happily at her heels while Penny shadows them both. I pull down two glasses, reaching for the bourbon I save for occasions that matter. When I turn, she's watching me with that same intensity from the car, only now there's something else mixed in—curiosity, maybe. Or something deeper.

I pour us each two fingers, sliding her glass across the counter. She takes it, our fingers brushing briefly.

"So, what now?" she asks, the lightness in her voice not quite masking the weight of the question. We both know what she's really asking.

I lean against the counter, swirling the amber liquid in my glass. For once, I don't have a strategy, a calculated response designed to maintain control.

"You tell me," I say finally, watching her over the rim of my glass as I take a slow sip. The bourbon burns pleasantly down my throat, a welcome distraction from the intensity of her gaze.

She considers me for a long moment, those dark eyes unreadable. Then, unexpectedly, she smiles—not the sharp, predatory smile I'm used to, but something softer.

"Were you always with the Cappallettis?" she asks, and it's not at all what I expected. But she's been asking more questions, ones that she shouldn't.

I find myself answering before I can think better of it. "Born into it. My father worked for Giovanni. It was expected."

"And you left."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "The Cappallettis talk about loyalty like it's sacred, but it only goes one way. Alfonso made sure of that."

"What happened?" She leans against the counter, mirroring my stance.

I hesitate, weighing how much to reveal. "I was on track to be a capo. Alfonso saw

me as a threat to his son's position. Started working against me."

Her eyes never leave mine. "So you flipped."

"I made a business decision." I take another sip, the memory still bitter despite the years between then and now. "Luca offered me something better."

She nods, processing. "Your family stayed with the Cappallettis."

"Family isn't always blood." My voice hardens slightly. "My brother made his choice. I made mine. You can see from my nephew how they feel about it."

We migrate to the living room, glasses in hand. Penny, to my surprise, settles beside Kendra on the couch, her head resting cautiously on Kendra's thigh. Paige collapses at my feet with a dramatic sigh, exhausted from her burst of excitement.

"What about you?" I ask, letting myself relax into the cushions. "Always planned on corporate domination?"

She laughs, fingers absently stroking Penny's fur. "Would you believe I wanted to be a teacher? Until I realized I had better things to do than manage other people's bratty kids."

"I can see it," I muse, studying the elegant lines of her face. "You'd be terrifying with a red pen."

This pulls another laugh from her, freer than before. "I still am, just with marketing proposals instead of essays."

We talk—really talk—for what feels like hours. She tells me about growing up with Jazz, about her parents who worked themselves to exhaustion to give her

opportunities, about the first campaign she landed that put her on the map. I find myself sharing pieces of myself I rarely acknowledge—memories of my mother, growing up in a made family, what it was like to compete with Zenon my whole life.

With each exchange, I can feel something shifting between us. The careful distance we maintain, the walls we've built—they're not gone, but they're lower now. Permeable.

Penny has fully relaxed, curled up against Kendra's side, while Paige snores softly at my feet. The sight of them, comfortable and trusting, stirs something I'm not ready to name.

Kendra glances over, studying me with those perceptive eyes. A small smirk plays at her lips, though it lacks the usual edge.

"You know," she murmurs, "for a man who likes to act like he's untouchable, you collect a lot of strays."

I exhale, shaking my head slightly. "That's Luca's line."

Her smirk blooms into a genuine smile. "That's because it's true."

And for the first time in a long time, I don't feel the need to argue. I don't feel the need to defend or deflect or maintain careful distance. Instead, I just let myself be seen—by her, by the dogs, by myself.

28

KENDRA

I stare at the spreadsheet on my monitor, numbers and data points that should command my focus, but I might as well be looking at hieroglyphics. My brain refuses to concentrate, wandering repeatedly to last night like a tongue prodding a sore tooth.

Enzo's voice in the darkness. Our long talk the day before. The way his defenses slipped, just for a moment, showing me something raw. Something real.

I click randomly between cells, pretending to work while my mind replays every second with him over the last week—his hand at the small of my back, the heat of him, the way my body responded before my brain could intervene. I've had sex before. Good sex, even. But with Enzo...

"Fuck," I mutter, dragging my hands down my face, smudging my carefully applied eyeliner. This is exactly what I swore wouldn't happen. I don't catch feelings—especially not for dangerous men with tattoos and power and eyes that see too much.

It meant nothing to him. A transaction. A debt.

So why did he let me see beneath that perfect control? Why show me anything genuine at all?

My phone buzzes against the desk, screen lighting up with a name that sends an

involuntary flush of warmth through my chest. I stare at it for three long seconds, hating myself for the little jump my heart makes, the anticipation tingling in my fingertips.

Enzo.

I swipe to answer, leaning back in my chair and keeping my voice deliberately neutral. "You need me for something?"

The sound of his breathing fills the line for a heartbeat before he speaks.

"Come over for dinner," he says. His voice carries that smooth, commanding tone I've come to expect, but underneath it lurks something different. Something almost... gentle.

I raise an eyebrow reflexively, though he can't see it. The air conditioning hums in the background as I cross my legs, trying to ignore the warmth curling through my stomach.

"Is this another part of the deal?" I ask, my words carrying a defensive edge I hadn't quite intended. A challenge, because challenging him feels safer than admitting I want to see him again.

He exhales, a soft sound that somehow feels more intimate than it should.

"Just come over, Kendra."

My name in his mouth—it shouldn't affect me like this. Two syllables that feel like fingers trailing down my spine. I press my lips together, fighting the smile that threatens to form, grateful he can't see me now. The smart move would be to decline, to establish boundaries before I'm in too deep.

But when it comes to Enzo Rossi, I stopped making smart moves the moment I took his deal.

"What time?" I hear myself ask.

"Seven. I'll cook," he adds, like it's normal. Like dangerous men in his position regularly transform into domestic gods.

"I'll be there."

A pause on his end. "I'll see you then."

The line goes dead before I can respond, a new heat lingering in my cheeks. The rest of my workday crawls by in excruciating slow motion. Every email feels like a distraction, every meeting a waste of time pulling me away from thoughts of tonight. I plow through my tasks with mechanical efficiency, wanting everything cleared so I can leave on time.

"It's just dinner," I mutter to myself, reorganizing the same stack of papers for the third time. "Just another obligation. Another box to check."

But as the clock inches toward five, I find myself refreshing my makeup in the bathroom mirror, reapplying the eyeliner I'd smudged earlier, adding a touch more mascara. Running a hand through my curls, fluffing them just so. Checking the outfit I'd worn to work—navy blue dress, fitted but professional, heels that make my legs look endless.

It's nice, but is it nice enough?

"This is ridiculous," I tell my reflection. "It's not a date."

My reflection doesn't look convinced.

By five-thirty, I've packed up my desk, leaving fifteen minutes earlier than I usually do. My coworkers barely notice—I've spent enough late nights to earn an occasional early departure. My purse feels heavy on my shoulder as I walk to the elevator, scrolling through emails one last time before tucking my phone away.

The trip from my office to his penthouse takes exactly twenty-three minutes with good traffic. I know because I timed it on my GPS, leaving enough cushion to arrive exactly on time. Not early—I'm not eager. Not late—I respect his time. Just... precisely on time. In control.

It's only when I catch myself smiling at nothing while waiting at a red light that I realize I'm lying to myself. This isn't just another night. It isn't just fulfilling my end of our bargain. I want to be there. I want to see him.

The steering wheel feels suddenly slippery beneath my fingers, my heart rate picking up as I pull into the parking garage of his building. Security nods at me—they know me now, another unsettling realization—and I stride across the marble lobby to the private elevator.

The doors slide open onto his floor, and I hesitate before knocking. I can already smell something rich and savory wafting from inside—actual cooking, not takeout. The thought of Enzo in an apron, handling knives for something other than intimidation, almost makes me laugh.

Then I'm knocking, and there's no turning back.

The door swings open, and before I can properly register Enzo standing there, a blur of yellow fur launches itself at me. Paige barrels into my legs with the force of pure canine joy, nearly toppling me sideways.

"Jesus—Paige, down," I laugh, steadying myself against the doorframe as the Labrador dances excitedly around me, tail whipping back and forth like a metronome set to maximum speed. One of these days I'll start to anticipate her coming at me and be ready.

From behind Enzo's legs, Penny emerges with significantly more dignity, approaching with cautious optimism. She sniffs at my hand, then presses her muzzle against my palm before curling up right at my feet, as if we've known each other forever. It does something to my heart every time she comes to me.

I glance up to find Enzo watching the scene, his broad frame leaning against the kitchen counter. The sleeves of his dark shirt are rolled to the elbows, revealing the intricate tattoos mapping his forearms. His steel-gray eyes track every movement between me and the dogs, something unreadable flickering in their depths.

"They like you," he murmurs, his voice low and smooth in the open space of his penthouse.

I straighten, recovering my composure while scratching Penny behind the ears. A smirk curves my lips as I meet his gaze. "They have good taste."

But the truth hits me as I step fully into his space—I like them too. These chaotic, sweet animals that somehow belong to a man who makes people disappear. And I like coming here, to this place that no longer feels unfamiliar. The sleek furniture, the floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the glittering Chicago skyline, the unexpected warmth that contradicts everything Enzo is supposed to be.

I like it all far too much.

29

ENZO

I lean against the glossy main counter of Skye's boutique, letting my gaze drift over the carefully curated displays of designer clothes. The place screams exclusivity—all clean lines and strategic lighting that makes even the most mundane items look worth their exorbitant price tags. It's the kind of calculated elegance I usually appreciate.

But today, I'm not really seeing any of it.

My eyes flick down to my phone as a notification lights up the screen. It's Kendra, responding to my earlier message about a schedule conflict.

Maybe your meetings would run smoother if you weren't texting me during them, tough guy.

My lips twitch before I can catch them—a momentary slip in control. I begin typing back, thumbs moving with more haste than I care to admit.

And yet you're responding just as quickly.

I'm supposed to be here checking in on Maria, making sure everything's running smoothly in this part of our territory. It's what I told Luca, anyway. The truth is more complicated, and I'm not willing to examine it too closely.

"That face doesn't look like business," Maria's voice cuts through my thoughts.

I glance up to find her watching me, arms folded across her chest, brown curls cascading over her shoulders as she leans against a rack of dresses worth more than most people make in a month. Next to her, Skye's lips curve into a knowing smile that immediately sets my teeth on edge.

"What face?" I slide my phone into the inner pocket of my tailored jacket, expression smoothing into practiced neutrality.

"The one where you almost smiled," Maria pushes off from the rack, moving closer. "Since when does Enzo Rossi smile at his phone?"

I straighten to my full height, steel gaze sweeping over both women. "I was confirming details for a shipment."

Skye snorts delicately, amber eyes gleaming with amusement. "A shipment named Kendra, perhaps?"

The muscles in my jaw tighten, but I keep my expression blank. Years of practice make it second nature to hide reactions—whether I'm facing down a rival or nosy friends who think they know too much.

"No one important." The lie falls flat even to my own ears.

Maria hums, clearly unconvinced. She circles the counter until she's standing directly across from me, perfectly manicured nails tapping against the polished surface.

"Right. So, are you and Kendra still in that stupid contract?" she asks, voice casual but eyes sharp.

I give her a look that would make most men take an involuntary step back. Maria merely raises an eyebrow, waiting. The tattoos on my forearms seem to burn beneath

my shirt sleeves—reminders of all I've survived, all I've had to become. This conversation shouldn't make me feel cornered.

"That's between me and her," I say, voice dropping to that quiet register that usually ends discussions.

Maria leans on the counter, watching me carefully. "You're texting her like this is real, Enzo."

Skye moves to stand beside her, head tilting thoughtfully. "Maybe it is."

The simple statement hangs in the air between us. I should have a sharp response ready, should cut this conversation off at the knees. But for once, no words come. I stand there, a man who's built his reputation on calculating every move, suddenly unable to formulate a response.

Because a part of me knows they're right.

I've been treating this like more than just a deal. The texts. The dinners. The way I find myself thinking about her when she's not around. The earth shattering sex and the way I'm letting her in. None of that was in our agreement.

Maria crosses her arms, expression turning serious. "You need to cut her loose. Give her a chance to choose you."

I exhale slowly, running a hand down my face, feeling the faint roughness of stubble against my palm. The thought of ending our arrangement sits like lead in my stomach. Not because I fear losing leverage—I have plenty of that elsewhere.

No, the possibility of her choosing to walk away is the only thing more dangerous than keeping her tied to me.

But Maria's words are still haunting me hours later as I place two wine glasses on the kitchen table, feeling an unsettling rhythm in my chest that I'm not accustomed to. My dogs have already warmed to Kendra—Paige sprawled across her feet within minutes of her arrival, while Penny, ever cautious, watches from a respectful distance with those nervous shepherd eyes.

This feels too domestic. Too normal.

"Your kitchen is cleaner than mine will ever be," Kendra says, running her fingertips along the edge of my marble countertop.

She's dressed in something casual tonight—dark jeans that hug every curve and a simple top that somehow makes her look more striking than if she'd arrived in designer wear. Her thick curls are gathered loosely at her neck, a few strands escaping to frame her face. Even now, even here in my space where I control everything, she looks untouchable.

"I like order," I respond, pouring a rich cabernet into her glass.

"So I've noticed." Her full lips curve into that knowing smile that gets under my skin, the one that suggests she sees more than I want her to.

We move to the table with an ease that should concern me. There's a familiarity in our movements now—how she knows which drawer holds the silverware, how I automatically pull out her chair before taking my own. We've developed rituals that weren't part of our arrangement.

The tension between us remains electric, but it's shifted into something I can't quite name. Less like a game of power and more like something waiting to ignite.

She takes a sip of wine, her dark eyes meeting mine over the rim of her glass. "You're

quiet tonight."

I lean back, watching her. The tattoos along my arms seem to pulse beneath my rolled-up sleeves. "Got a lot on my mind."

We eat, we talk. She tells me about a client who's driving her marketing team insane with constant revisions. I share a heavily edited version of trouble with a supplier. It all feels so goddamn normal that I almost forget who we are, what brought us together.

Almost.

Halfway through our second glass of wine, I make my decision. The words have been sitting on my tongue all evening, heavy like lead.

"The deal's done," I say, watching her carefully, my expression revealing nothing while my heart hammers against my ribs.

Kendra stills, her glass suspended halfway to those lips that have haunted my thoughts for weeks. "What?"

I lean back in my chair, swirling the dark liquid in my glass with deliberate casualness that masks the storm beneath. "You're free. No more calling on you, no more favors. It's over. You paid your debt."

I expect relief, perhaps gratitude. What I don't expect is the way she freezes, those sharp eyes suddenly unreadable. She doesn't answer right away, and the silence stretches between us like a live wire.

She could walk out my door, could throw my mercy back in my face with some cutting remark—she has options. Instead, she tilts her head, studying me with an

intensity that makes me feel stripped bare despite the clothes between us.

"Why?" The single word contains multitudes.

I smirk, masking vulnerability with confidence, a skill I perfected long before I ever met her. "Thought I'd give you the chance to run."

The words hang in the air, charged with everything unsaid between us. Something flickers in her expression—understanding, perhaps. Or recognition.

Kendra sets down her glass, standing slowly. For a moment, tension coils in my gut, the certainty that she'll walk away washing over me like ice water. Instead, she steps around the table with deliberate movements, her gaze never leaving mine.

When she moves onto my lap, straddling me with practiced ease, my hands instinctively find her hips—not controlling, just steadying. Her weight grounds me, the heat of her body against mine a tangible reminder that this is real.

Her hands slide up my chest, nails grazing skin through the thin fabric of my shirt, leaving fire in their wake. I force myself to remain still, to not reveal how her simplest touch affects me.

"And if I don't want to run?" Her voice is low, challenging.

I exhale sharply, fingers tightening on her hips, feeling the curve of her beneath my palms. My control slips, just for a moment, revealing the hunger I've been fighting.

"Then you stay," I murmur, voice rough with everything I won't say.

When she kisses me, it's different from all the times before. No games, no power plays, no debt between us—just Kendra choosing this. Choosing me. And as we lose

ourselves in each other, my hands mapping the familiar terrain of her body while her fingers thread through my hair, I know this has become something neither of us planned for.

Because now, there's nothing holding her here except her own choice.

30

ENZO

Kendra's already left for work and I'm still reeling from the shift in our relationship after she stayed over again when my phone buzzes—not the casual vibration of a text, but the insistent rhythm of a call. Kendra's warmth still lingers on my skin as I check the screen, something uncomfortable settling in my chest when I see Rome's name flashing up at me.

Rome doesn't call unless it's important. More significantly, Rome doesn't call at this hour unless something's wrong.

I press the phone to my ear, listening to his rapid breathing before he even speaks. "Boss, we need to meet. Now."

"What happened?" My voice drops to that dangerous register that usually makes my men stand straighter.

"Can't say over the phone. It's urgent." There's something in his voice—tension, fear maybe—that sets my instincts on high alert. "The old Bianchi warehouse on 47th."

The location alone sends warning signals flaring through my system. Abandoned. Isolated. Perfect for an ambush.

Perfect for a betrayal.

"I'll be there in twenty." I end the call, already calculating angles, risks, possibilities.

I shoulder my holster and grab my jacket. This isn't something I can delegate. Rome is one of mine—one of the few who followed me from the Cappallettis to the Mantiones. If he's in trouble, I handle it myself.

If he's causing trouble, I'll end it myself.

The drive to the warehouse is tense, my mind cycling through scenarios, preparing for whatever's waiting. I park two blocks away, approaching on foot, senses heightened. The building looms against the night sky, all rusted metal and broken windows, a shadow of its former purpose. I circle it once, noting exits, entrances, places where someone might hide.

Everything about this feels wrong.

I enter through a side door, gun drawn, moving silently across concrete floors stained with years of industrial use and neglect. The air smells of dust and metal and something else—something that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Fear. It smells like fear.

The main floor is cavernous, moonlight streaming through broken skylights, creating pools of silver amid the darkness. And there, in the center of one of those pools of light, is a sight that turns my blood to ice.

Kendra.

She's bound to a metal chair, wrists secured behind her back, a gag cutting into the corners of her mouth. Her business attire is rumpled, tear tracks cutting through her makeup. But it's her eyes that stop me cold—wide with a genuine terror I've never

seen in her before. This isn't Kendra the marketing executive or Kendra the sharp-tongued woman who challenges me at every turn.

This is Kendra stripped of all her armor, vulnerable in a way she would never willingly allow herself to be.

For a heartbeat, I forget every rule of survival I've ever learned. I forget to check corners, to assess threats, to maintain distance. All I can think is: get to her .

That's when Zenon's voice slices through the silence, stopping me in my tracks.

"Did you really think she was yours?"

My brother steps from the shadows, that familiar smirk playing across his lips. He's dressed impeccably as always—dark suit, polished shoes, hair slicked back with precision. The gray eyes that mirror my own are cold, calculating, filled with a malice that's startlingly personal.

In an instant, everything falls into place. The urgent call. Rome's strained voice. This wasn't just business—this was Zenon making his move.

And he's used the one piece on the board I never expected him to touch.

I don't move, hand still gripping my gun but caught in that dangerous moment of hesitation. My brother circles Kendra like she's a trophy, his footsteps echoing in the cavernous warehouse. Each click of his Italian leather shoes against concrete makes the muscles in my jaw tighten.

"She's quite convincing, isn't she?" Zenon's voice carries that familiar lilt—the one that always made our father smile and always made my skin crawl. "The way she looked at you. The way she made you believe she was choosing you."

My eyes never leave Kendra's. Her head shakes violently, desperate denial in every movement, tears streaming down her face and soaking into the gag. She's trying to tell me something, but doubt—that poisonous, insidious thing—has already started to seep in.

"Tell him how long we've been planning this," Zenon continues, stopping behind her chair, placing his hands on her shoulders. His fingers dig into her skin, and I watch her flinch. "Tell him how you sought me out after Skye's wedding. How you knew exactly what you were doing when you took his deal."

Something cold and heavy settles in my stomach. "You're lying," I say, but the words lack conviction.

"Am I?" Zenon's smile is all teeth. "Who do you think got me an in? Told me when you'd be alone? Arranged to meet up with Ercole? She played her part beautifully, didn't she?" His fingers trail up her neck to her face, wiping away a tear with mock tenderness. "Poor Enzo, so desperate for something real he never questioned why a woman like her would choose a man like you."

Kendra's eyes are wild now, pleading. She makes muffled sounds against the gag, thrashing in her restraints.

And for one heartbeat—one fucking heartbeat—I hesitate.

That's all it takes.

The shot rings out—not from my brother, but from somewhere to my left. Pain explodes in my abdomen, white-hot and searing. My gun clatters to the floor as my hand instinctively presses against the wound, blood seeping warm between my fingers.

My knees hit concrete. Hard.

Through the haze of pain, I see Ercole step from the shadows, gun still raised, satisfaction etched into his brutish features.

"Uncle," he says, the word a mockery.

Zenon sighs, shaking his head as he steps around Kendra's chair. "You were always too sentimental, brother. It's what made you weak." He straightens his cuffs—a gesture so trivial, so ordinary while my blood pools on the warehouse floor. "A shame, really. You had such potential."

Ercole moves closer, towering over me, that familiar smirk twisting his face. "A fitting end for both of you." He kicks my gun further away, then glances at Kendra. "She might have been worth keeping, but damaged goods are damaged goods."

My vision blurs at the edges, but I force myself to focus. Kendra. I need to get to Kendra.

Zenon watches me struggle, amusement dancing in his eyes. "You know what they say about Zeus and his divine lightning, brother." He pulls something from his pocket—a lighter, the flame catching as he flicks it open. "The gods always punish those who betray their family."

With a nod to Ercole, he tosses the lighter toward a pile of debris. The flames catch immediately, hungry and eager, licking at the dried wood and years of accumulated dust.

"Goodbye, brother." Zenon's voice floats back as they walk away, unhurried, confident. "Perhaps in the next life, you'll choose more wisely."

The smoke rises faster than I expected, thick and choking. But I have to get us out of here.

KENDRA

I 'm straining so hard against the restraints that my wrists are slick with blood, the metal biting into flesh with every frantic twist. The gag in my mouth has turned damp with saliva and tears, but the only sound I can manage is a muffled, animal keening as I watch the chaos unfold.

The warehouse is being consumed. Flames lick up the sides of wooden crates, dance along oil-stained concrete. I can already feel the heat changing the air, making it heavy, making it hurt. Black smoke rolls across the ceiling, thickening with each passing second.

But I barely register any of it. My entire world has narrowed to Enzo's body on the floor, the growing pool of crimson beneath him. His gray shirt is soaked through, darker where the bullet tore him open.

Please. Please don't die. Not like this.

My lungs burn from the smoke, from screaming against fabric that won't let sound escape. Tears streak down my face, cutting clean lines through the grime. I've never felt so utterly helpless, so completely trapped. The chains rattle again as I thrash, the sound lost beneath the roar of spreading flames.

And then—movement.

Enzo's fingers twitch. His broad shoulders tense. An agonized sound escapes him, raw and primal, as he presses his palm against the wound in his abdomen. Blood seeps through his fingers, a startling crimson against his olive skin.

His steel-gray eyes open, finding mine immediately through the growing haze. Something flickers in them—recognition, determination, rage—before he braces his free hand against the concrete.

Don't. You can't. Stay down.

But Enzo Rossi has never been a man who stays down.

His jaw clenches so tightly I can see the muscle flex as he hauls himself upward, fighting gravity, fighting blood loss, fighting death itself. He makes it to his knees first, swaying dangerously, face contorted in a grimace that reveals how much this costs him. His breath comes in harsh, ragged pants, visible even through the thickening air.

I sob against the gag, shaking my head violently. He needs to save himself. He needs to get out. A support beam crashes somewhere behind him, sending sparks cascading like demonic fireflies.

But Enzo's eyes never leave mine. There's a terrible, beautiful focus in them—cold and clear despite everything. He gets one foot planted, then pushes upward with a strangled sound that's half growl, half groan. Blood drips onto the concrete, marking his path as he staggers toward me, one hand still pressed tight against his wound.

Each step looks impossible. His face is ashen beneath his tan, jaw locked, shoulders curled inward around the pain. But his eyes—God, his eyes remain sharp, calculating, refusing to dim. This is the man who deals in calculated violence and careful control, channeling every ounce of that legendary will into simply not falling.

He stumbles once, catching himself against a crate that's already starting to burn. The contact draws a hiss of pain from him, but he pushes off again, closing the distance between us with the relentless determination of a force of nature.

I'm crying openly now, chest heaving with sobs that can't escape past the gag. The smoke burns my eyes, my throat, my lungs, but all I can focus on is this impossible man, bleeding out and burning up, who refuses to leave me behind.

Finally, Enzo reaches me. His hands, slick with his own blood, fumble at the gag first. The fabric tears away, leaving me gasping and coughing, gulping down air that tastes of smoke and fear.

"I never—" My voice breaks, raw from screaming into fabric that wouldn't let sound escape. My eyes burn from more than just the acrid smoke filling the warehouse. "I never betrayed you."

His jaw tightens, the muscle there flexing under his skin. Despite the blood loss, despite the flames licking closer, his steel-gray eyes lock onto mine with absolute clarity. His fingers work at the restraints, trembling but determined, leaving crimson smears across my wrists.

"I know."

Two simple words, spoken with such certainty that something breaks open inside me. He knew. He always knew. Even when Zenon tried to poison him against me, tried to make him believe I'd turned on him.

The second my wrists come free, I'm throwing my arms around him, mindful of his wound but desperate for the contact. He's heavy against me, all muscle and barely contained pain. I position myself under his shoulder, taking his weight as best I can.

"I got you," I whisper, feeling his blood soak into my clothes. "We're getting out of here."

He growls in pain, the sound vibrating through his chest and into mine, but he lets me hold him up as we stumble toward what I pray is an exit. Each step is a battle. The floor beneath us grows hotter, the smoke thicker, making every breath a struggle.

"Left," he manages, voice rough as gravel. "There's a... service door."

I adjust our direction, half-carrying this impossible man who should be dead or unconscious by now. Instead, he's fighting, each labored breath a testament to sheer willpower. The Enzo I first met—cold, calculating, dangerous—is still there in the rigid set of his jaw, in the merciless determination pushing him forward.

A support beam crashes behind us, showering our backs with sparks. I bite back a scream, pushing us faster despite the way Enzo's breathing grows more ragged with every step.

"Stay with me," I demand, my voice stronger than I feel. "Don't you dare check out on me now, Rossi."

His lips quirk in what might have been a smile under different circumstances. "Wouldn't... dream of it."

The service door appears through the smoke—a rectangle of darker gray in a world gone orange and black. My heart leaps, but we still have to cross fifteen feet of burning warehouse to reach it.

"Almost there," I say, more to myself than to him.

Enzo straightens slightly beside me, summoning reserves from somewhere

impossible. "Run," he grits out. "When I say."

I tighten my grip around his waist. "I'm not letting go of you."

"Wasn't asking you to."

We brace ourselves as a wall of heat rolls toward us. The fire has found something new to devour, and the roar is deafening now. Enzo's eyes narrow, calculating even now, waiting for the exact moment.

"Now!" he commands.

We lunge forward together, a desperate, stumbling sprint. The distance to the door seems to stretch impossibly. My lungs scream for clean air. Enzo's weight grows heavier with each step.

The door handle is hot against my palm as I reach for it, twisting with desperate strength. It gives way, but beyond is only darkness—whether salvation or another trap, I can't tell.

Flames rush toward us, hungry and merciless, as we fall forward.

32

ENZO

Blood seeps through my fingers as I press against the wound. Hot, sticky, metallic—I'm losing too much, but there's no time to dwell on that. The warehouse behind us crackles with flames, casting Kendra's face in flickering orange light. She looks like fury personified—wild-eyed, determined, and so fucking beautiful it hurts more than the bullet.

"Lean on me," she commands, sliding her body under my arm.

My vision swims as we stumble toward my car. Every step sends white-hot pain shooting through my abdomen. The bullet is still inside—I can feel it grinding against something it shouldn't.

"I've got you," Kendra says, her voice steady even as her hands tremble against my side.

I focus on her—the anchor keeping me present. Her hair smells like smoke and that coconut shampoo she uses. Blood smears across her jacket where I'm gripping her shoulder. My blood. Zenon's parting gift.

The car appears before us, black and sleek against the night. Kendra fumbles with the door, struggling under my weight.

"You need to—" I start, but she cuts me off.

"Shut up and help me get you in."

The world tilts as she maneuvers me into the passenger seat. Pain explodes through my core, and I bite back a growl. Not in front of her. The leather seat accepts me like an old friend, and I sink into it, head spinning.

Kendra's already pulling out her phone. Her fingers leave bloody smudges on the screen.

"No hospitals," I manage, catching her wrist. Hospitals mean questions. Hospitals mean cops. Hospitals mean Zenon finding us.

She whips her head toward me, eyes flashing. "You were shot, Enzo!"

I meet her gaze steadily, even as my vision blurs at the edges. "I've had worse."

The lie tastes like copper in my mouth. I haven't had worse. Not like this.

Her jaw clenches, and for a moment, I think she might slap me. Instead, she slams my door shut and storms around to the driver's side. Behind us, the warehouse roof collapses, sending embers spiraling into the night sky.

"Keys," she demands, palm outstretched.

I dig them from my pocket, leaving crimson fingerprints on the silver fob. She snatches them, jams them into the ignition. The engine roars to life.

"You better not die in my car," she mutters, throwing the car into reverse.

"It's my car," I remind her, letting my head fall back against the headrest. I have enough of a presence of mind to send a short text to Luca. He'll get someone

dispatched to my place.

She peels away from the burning building, tires screaming against asphalt. Her driving is aggressive, efficient—a woman who knows exactly how much pressure to apply. Typical Kendra, all control even in chaos.

"They lied to me," she says suddenly, knuckles white against the steering wheel. "Zenon. He said—he said you were with them, managed to get me away from everyone and cornered on my way to work. I never would have just gone with them."

I force my eyes to stay open, watching her profile in the passing streetlights. "I know."

"I fought them, Enzo. I wouldn't—I didn't betray you."

"I know," I repeat, softer this time.

Her voice cracks as she continues, "When I saw you on the ground, I thought—" She swallows hard. "I thought you were gone."

Something in my chest twists that has nothing to do with the bullet. "You were scared for me."

She scowls, eyes fixed on the road. "You're an idiot."

My lips twitch, but I don't push. The city blurs past us, and I focus on staying conscious. One breath. Then another. My shirt is soaked through now, warm and wet against my skin. Not good.

By the time we reach my building, I'm barely hanging on. The garage door closes behind us, sealing us in concrete darkness. Kendra kills the engine.

"We're here," she says, unnecessarily.

Getting me out of the car is worse than getting in. My legs don't want to cooperate, and darkness threatens to overtake me with each movement. Kendra's arm is rigid around my waist, her shoulder wedged under my arm.

"Stay with me," she orders, her voice close to my ear.

The elevator ride is a haze of pain and the scent of her hair. My blood leaves a trail across the marble floor of my hallway.

When the door to my penthouse opens, I hear the scramble of paws against hardwood. Penny's anxious whine cuts through the fog in my head.

"It's okay, girls," I mutter as Kendra guides me to the couch.

I collapse onto the leather, unable to hold myself upright any longer. Penny hovers nearby, her intelligent eyes tracking every movement. Paige, the eternal optimist, wags her tail despite the obvious tension.

"Where's your first aid kit?" Kendra demands, already moving toward the bathroom.

"Cabinet above the sink. There's more in my office. Second drawer."

She disappears, returning with arms full of supplies. My eyes find her face—there's blood smeared across her cheek, ash in her hair. She's never looked so fierce.

"Take off your shirt," she commands.

I try to smirk. "Usually I get dinner first."

"Not funny." Her hands are gentle despite her tone as she helps me remove the ruined fabric.

The wound looks worse than it feels, which isn't saying much. Kendra inhales sharply at the sight. Without hesitation, she begins cleaning it, her movements precise despite her obvious lack of medical training.

"This is going to hurt," she warns, holding up antiseptic.

"Do it," I grunt.

The antiseptic burns like hellfire when it touches raw flesh. I grit my teeth, refusing to flinch as Kendra works over me with steady hands. Every touch sends lightning through my nervous system, but I keep my face neutral. I've learned long ago that pain is just information. Useful, but ultimately manageable.

"You need stitches," she mutters, dabbing at the wound with gauze that comes away crimson. "I don't know how to?—"

"Just clean it, pack it, wrap it," I instruct, my voice rougher than intended. "I've got someone coming."

Her eyes flash to mine, skeptical but not surprised. Of course I have someone—I'm not stupid enough to bleed out on my expensive couch. But watching her hands move over my skin, determined despite her obvious exhaustion, stirs something uncomfortable in my chest.

Penny whines softly from beside the couch, her mismatched eyes never leaving my face. She's always been the sensitive one, attuned to pain and danger. Paige, meanwhile, shoves her nose repeatedly against Kendra's elbow, seeking attention even in crisis. Typical.

"Stop moving," Kendra orders, pressing a fresh bandage against my abdomen.

I obey, watching the concentration on her face. The way her bottom lip disappears between her teeth. The furrow between her brows. Blood and ash streak her cheeks, her clothes. She's a goddamn war goddess kneeling beside me.

When she's done, she secures the bandage with medical tape and sits back on her heels, suddenly looking every bit as drained as she should. Without ceremony, she drops from her knees to sit on the floor beside the couch, her back against the cushions where my hand rests. Paige immediately curls against her side, head in her lap, while Penny presses her warm weight against my uninjured side.

Kendra exhales, running a hand through her tangled curls. The sound is shaky, betraying the emotions she's been suppressing.

"Don't ever do that again," she says, voice soft but edged with steel.

I feel my lips twitch despite the pain. "Can't make promises."

Her head tilts back, just enough that I can see her profile—the proud line of her jaw, the soft curve of her lips. She doesn't respond, but her fingers find mine where they rest on the couch, twining together as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Days crawl by in a haze of pain, medication, and Kendra's steady presence. Luca's doctor—a man who asks no questions and takes payment in cash—removes the bullet, stitches me up, and provides enough painkillers to sedate a horse. I take half of what he prescribes. I need my mind clear.

By the third day, I'm moving around the penthouse, ignoring Kendra's disapproving glares. By the fifth, I'm making calls—including one that has Rome dropped off in Cappalletti territory where they will dispatch the traitor for me. By the seventh, Luca

arrives—right on schedule.

He enters my space like he belongs here, steel-blue eyes taking in every detail. He's dressed impeccably, as always—dark suit tailored to perfection, shoes polished to a mirror shine. Nothing about him suggests he's the most dangerous man in Chicago. Nothing except the emptiness in his eyes.

Kendra stiffens when he enters, though she'd known he was coming. She's sitting at my kitchen island, fingers wrapped around a coffee mug, watching him with the wariness of a woman who recognizes a predator.

"Skye sends her regards," Luca tells her, his voice neutral. Not cold, not warm—just factual, as if emotion is a foreign concept. "She's been worried."

Kendra nods once. "Tell her I'm fine."

His attention shifts to me, assessing. "You look like shit."

"Always the charmer," I respond, gesturing toward the living area. "Shall we?"

Luca follows me to the sitting area, taking a seat in the leather armchair across from me. He doesn't fidget, doesn't look uncomfortable. He simply waits, patient as death.

I don't waste time with pleasantries. "Zenon made his move. Him and Ercole."

Luca's expression doesn't change as I detail the ambush, the warehouse, Kendra's kidnapping. I explain how they used her as bait, claimed she was working with them, tried to drive a wedge between us before killing me. I tell him about the bullet, the fire, the escape.

Throughout it all, Luca's face remains impassive, but I know him well enough to see

the subtle tightening around his eyes—the only indicator of the rage building beneath that controlled exterior.

When I finish, he exhales slowly, deliberately, looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the Chicago skyline. "Zenon broke the rules."

Four simple words, heavy with meaning. The truce between the families was sacred—even to someone like Luca, who respects very little. The silence stretches between us, but I don't fill it. I don't need to.

"Their Don has been informed," Luca continues, his gaze returning to mine. "This matter is... outside family concerns now."

Translation: I have permission to handle this my way. No blowback. No consequences. Zenon and Ercole have been marked—not by the Mantiones, not by the Cappallettis, but by me personally.

Luca rises, buttoning his jacket with graceful precision. "Take care of it," he says, and I nod once. No further instructions needed. We understand each other perfectly.

As he passes Kendra on his way out, he pauses. "You chose well," he tells her, cryptic as ever, before disappearing through the door.

KENDRA

The heat of the coffee shop wraps around me as I step inside, the familiar scent of roasted beans a welcome comfort after everything. I spot them immediately—three pairs of eyes zeroing in on me before I'm even through the door. Skye's amber gaze narrows to slits, her manicured fingers freezing mid-gesture. Jazz's expression shifts from animated storytelling to concern in an instant. Even sweet Mikayla, usually lost in her own world, looks up from her phone with widening eyes.

My heart sinks. I'd thought the bruising wasn't that noticeable. The foundation I'd carefully applied this morning—layer after meticulous layer—apparently isn't doing its job.

"Hey," I offer casually, sliding into the empty chair. My voice sounds normal to my own ears, but the table stays silent, the weight of their stares making my skin itch.

I reach for the water glass already waiting at my place, a move that sends a sharp pain through my ribs. I mask the wince with a smile that feels like plastic stretched over my face.

Skye leans forward, her sleek black hair falling in a perfect curtain as she studies me. Even in casual clothes, she's immaculate—designer jeans and a simple top that probably costs more than my rent. Her boutique is doing well, and she dresses the part. But it's the razor-sharp intelligence behind those eyes that makes me squirm.

"What the hell happened?" she demands, voice low but intense.

I open my mouth, ready with the excuse I'd rehearsed in the car—a clumsy fall, nothing to worry about—but Jazz cuts in before I can speak.

"You look like you've been through hell." Her full lips press into a tight line, dark eyes flashing with a knowing that comes from years of working in Chicago's rougher side. Her curls are piled high today, gold hoops dangling as she tilts her head. "And since you're tangled up with Enzo, I'm guessing you actually have."

Mikayla fidgets with her napkin, uncomfortable with confrontation as always. Her sweetness is refreshing in our circle—she hasn't been hardened by the city yet. "We're just worried," she adds softly, the Midwestern accent still clinging to her words after months in Chicago.

I exhale sharply, rubbing my temples where a headache threatens. The movement pulls at the bruising along my collarbone, hidden beneath my high-necked blouse.

"I'm fine," I say, the lie sour on my tongue. My fingers tap against the table, a nervous tic I can't seem to control. "Just busy with work. The Bellingham campaign is kicking my ass."

Skye doesn't blink. "Cut the bullshit, Kendra. Your face looks like you went ten rounds with someone's fist."

"It's not as bad as it looks," I counter, knowing damn well it's exactly as bad as it looks—probably worse where they can't see.

Jazz snorts, leaning back in her chair. "Sure, and I'm next in line for the British throne." She gestures to her own face. "That split in your lip isn't from biting it too hard during a conference call."

The weight of keeping secrets suddenly feels suffocating. These women know me—really know me. The flimsy excuses I'd planned crumble under their collective gaze.

"Look," I start, voice lower, "I appreciate the concern, but some things are better left alone."

Mikayla's eyes widen further. "That sounds... ominous." Her delicate fingers stretch across the table, wrapping around mine with surprising strength. Her touch is warm, comforting—and it makes my throat close up. "You can tell us if you're not, you know," she says, her eyes wide and sincere. Genuine concern radiates from her in waves. No ulterior motives, no angle to work—just pure, unfiltered worry.

And that, more than anything, makes my chest tighten. These women sitting around me, they're looking at the aftermath without knowing the cause. They see the bruises, the split lip, the careful way I hold myself to minimize the pain in my ribs. But they don't know about the warehouse. About Ercole's meaty fists or Zenon's calculated cruelty. They don't know how it felt to be used as bait, a pawn in a game between brothers with decades of hatred between them.

But the worst part? I don't even know how to explain it. How does one casually mention being kidnapped by mafia men? How do I tell them that when Ercole dragged me into that van, I should have been terrified, but all I could think about was saving Enzo? That when Zenon pointed that gun at my head, I was more afraid of losing Enzo than dying myself?

The truth sounds insane even in my own head. I'm a marketing executive, for god's sake. Two months ago, my biggest concern was landing the Westbridge account. Now I'm tangled in a deadly family feud between men who kill as easily as they breathe.

Instead, I force a smirk, taking a sip of my drink to hide the tremor in my hands. The coffee scalds my split lip, but I welcome the pain—it's grounding, present, unlike the chaos in my head.

"You guys worry too much," I say, settling the mug down with deliberate casualness.

Skye scoffs, amber eyes flashing. She leans forward, expensive perfume wafting across the table. "You mean we care too much," she corrects, perfectly manicured nail tapping against the table. It's a nervous habit she's never managed to break, despite her otherwise flawless composure. "There's a difference."

I swallow hard, forcing myself to keep smiling even as I feel it cracking at the edges. My friends see through me—they always have—but they don't push further. There's an unspoken rule between us: we support without demanding. We offer shelter without requiring explanations.

Because the truth is, I'm scared. Not of Enzo, with his steel-gray eyes and controlled power. Never him. I trust him in ways that should terrify me, given what he is, what he does.

No, I'm scared of what I'm starting to feel for him. This isn't just attraction anymore, or even the twisted fascination that first drew me to him. It's something deeper, something that made me choose him over self-preservation. Something that makes my heart stutter painfully when I think about where he is right now—gone to confront his brother, to end this thing between them once and for all.

34

ENZO

It doesn't take long to track my brother down. And his arrogance means that it's not hard for me to confront him either.

I stare Zenon down, the weight of everything leading to this moment pressing against my spine like a blade. My body still aches from the gunshot wound, a constant throb beneath the bandages that reminds me of my own mortality. The blood has stopped, but the memory remains fresh—his smug face as he pulled the trigger, the shock in Kendra's eyes as they dragged her away.

Pain is secondary—revenge is the only thing that matters now.

The warehouse smells of rust and neglect, concrete floors stained with decades of industrial fluids and God knows what else. Dim light filters through grimy windows high above, casting long shadows across the space where Zenon sits like some discount king on his makeshift throne—a weathered office chair that squeaks when he shifts his weight.

His remaining men flank him, five in total. Not the army he'd promised himself, just the desperate dregs willing to follow a sinking ship. They shuffle nervously as I approach, hands hovering near concealed weapons. They've heard the stories. They know what happens to those who cross me. Their eyes dart between us, calculating odds, wondering if their loyalty is about to get them killed. Smart money says yes.

They know what's coming. Retribution.

The Cappallettis and Mantiones were supposed to have a truce, an agreement written in blood and sealed with marriages and territorial concessions. Zenon broke those rules the moment he decided to use Kendra as leverage. He broke them when he put a bullet in my gut. He broke them when he decided his ambition mattered more than carefully negotiated peace.

But my older brother doesn't run—he smirks when he sees me, sipping amber liquid from a crystal glass like this is nothing more than a family dispute. His slicked-back hair catches the light, not a strand out of place even now. That controlled appearance, that facade of calm superiority—it's always been his tell.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," Zenon muses, tossing his glass aside. It shatters against the concrete, the sound echoing through the cavernous space. "Come to kneel before the king of criminals? To settle this matter before I truly end you?"

I don't answer. His arrogance was always meant to be his downfall anyway.

My steel-gray eyes hold his, two mirrors reflecting nothing back. The warehouse falls silent—no breathing, no shuffling feet, just the distant drip of water somewhere in the shadows and the pounding of my heart in my ears.

Let him talk. Let him posture. Men like Zenon need an audience, need to hear their own voice bouncing off walls to convince themselves of their own importance. I've never needed that. I've never needed anything but patience and the absolute certainty that when the moment comes, I won't hesitate.

And that moment is now.

I don't waste another second on words. Words are luxuries for men with time to

spare, and Zenon has stolen enough of mine already.

I lunge forward, my body screaming in protest as the stitches pull at my abdomen. The pain is secondary to the surge of adrenaline pumping through my veins. Five against one—terrible odds for them.

The first man goes down with a broken windpipe before he can even draw his weapon. The second catches my elbow to his temple, crumpling like paper. Three remaining men scatter, trying to flank me. Amateurs. I've survived worse odds against better men.

"Is this supposed to impress me?" Zenon laughs, but there's a crack in his confidence now. A thin veneer of bravado over growing fear.

I grab the third man, using him as a shield as the fourth fires wildly. The bullet meant for me finds a home in his friend's chest instead. I let the body drop, sweeping low to take out the shooter's knees. Bone cracks under my boot. His scream cuts short when my fist connects with his jaw.

The fifth man runs. Smart choice.

Then it's just us. Brothers by blood, enemies by choice.

Zenon draws his knife, circling me with the practiced ease of someone who's spent decades perfecting violence. "You were always so righteous," he sneers. "So controlled. The perfect soldier. Did you really think you could escape what we are?"

His blade slices air where my throat had been a second before. I counter, landing a blow to his kidney that makes him stagger.

"I never wanted to escape," I growl, blocking his next strike. "I just wanted real

loyalty. I'm not willing to be shoved aside and discarded like you might be."

The fight becomes a blur of movement—brutal, efficient, neither of us holding back. Zenon lands a slice across my shoulder, but I barely register the sting as I drive my knee into his stomach. He's good—experienced and ruthless—but there's something desperate in his movements now.

He fights like a man defending his ego. I fight like a man with everything to lose.

My mind flashes to Kendra—her defiance when facing Ercole, choosing me even when given every reason to run. The way she looked at my dogs, surprised by the glimpse of humanity beneath the monster. The softness in her eyes when she thought I wasn't watching.

That split-second distraction costs me. Zenon's blade bites into my side. Fresh blood seeps through my shirt, warm against cold skin.

"Thinking about your whore?" Zenon laughs, pressing his advantage. "She was so easy to break. Screamed your name until her voice gave out."

The last thread of my control snaps.

I barrel into him with my shoulder, pure rage channeling into one devastating surge. We crash into a steel beam, the impact reverberating through the warehouse like a war drum. My forearm pins his throat, pressing against his windpipe with enough force to make his eyes bulge.

"You touch her again, I'll make the Marquis de Sade look like a fucking amateur," I snarl, blood dripping from a cut above my eye.

Zenon wheezes out a laugh, blood speckling his teeth. Even now, facing death, he

clings to his delusions of superiority. "Even if you kill me, you'll always be one of us. Blood doesn't wash clean, brother."

I draw my knife—the same one he gifted me when I turned sixteen, telling me I'd need it someday. He was right about one thing.

"No," I drive the blade between his ribs with surgical precision, finding his heart. "I never was."

Shock registers in his eyes as the steel slides home. His body convulses once, twice, blood bubbling past his lips. The smirk that's haunted me for years finally falters, dissolving into something almost childlike in its confusion.

I lean closer, my lips brushing his ear as his life drains away. "The king," I scoff, the word bitter on my tongue, "of criminals is dead. Consider this your Titanomachy, brother. See how weak you really are."

I pull the blade free with a sickening sound. Zenon slides down the metal beam, leaving a crimson trail in his wake. His body crumples, eyes fixed on mine until the light behind them fades completely.

Standing over my brother's body, I feel nothing—not triumph, not relief, not even guilt. Just emptiness where a threat once stood, and the burning need to find Kendra.

35

KENDRA

I feel the cold metal muzzle of a gun press deeper between my ribs as Ercole drags me forward. The zip ties around my wrists dig painfully into my skin, but the sensation barely registers against the fury boiling through my veins. I've spent the last hour being yanked around by this discount knockoff gangster, listening to his disgusting plans about "claiming" me once Enzo is dead. All because he managed to grab me after brunch.

Enzo is going to have to teach me a thing or two about not getting kidnapped I suppose.

Ercole kicks open the door to the warehouse, not even flinching at his father's body lifeless on the ground. He manages to make out whatever Enzo is saying as he yanks his blade free, but I'm too busy cataloging his body, making sure he isn't hurt.

There's fresh blood on his side, and I'm shaking with rage at the sight.

"Touching." Ercole's sneer brings me back to the moment. "But you're not the only one settling scores tonight."

The warehouse air hangs thick with gunpowder and blood. My eyes lock on Enzo immediately—standing over Zenon's body, his shirt soaked through with his own blood. He looks like he's been through hell. But alive. Thank god, he's alive.

Enzo's head snaps up at Ercole's voice, and when his eyes land on me, something dangerous shifts in his expression. The steel-gray of his gaze hardens to gunmetal. His jaw clenches so tight I can see the muscle jump beneath his skin.

"I should have let you burn," Ercole sneers, jerking me closer. His breath reeks of cigarettes and desperation. "But this is better. You die, I take Kendra, and the world keeps turning."

Enzo doesn't respond. Not with words. But his eyes—those cold, calculating eyes—move between my face and the gun at my ribs. I watch his breathing change, becoming deeper, more controlled. It's like watching a storm gathering. His broad shoulders straighten despite the pain that must be tearing through him. Blood seeps through his shirt, but he moves as if it's nothing more than an inconvenience.

The rage in his expression isn't the uncontrolled fury of a madman. No, this is something much worse—the cold, deliberate wrath of a man who's already decided how this ends.

Enzo takes a step forward, and I feel Ercole's grip tighten reflexively. Every movement of Enzo's body speaks of lethal intent, wound tight like a predator ready to strike.

"You think taking a woman makes you a man?" Enzo's voice comes out as a low growl, controlled but deadly. "You're a fool, Ercole."

I feel something shift in Ercole—a flicker of uncertainty beneath his bravado. His fingers dig deeper into my arm as if I'm the only thing keeping him alive. And in this moment, watching Enzo advance with that dark purpose in his eyes, I realize I probably am.

But I'm not some helpless prize to be fought over. Not some trophy to be claimed.

I catch Enzo's eye for just a fraction of a second. Something passes between us—understanding, trust. I don't need words to know what he's telling me. Take the chance.

In one fluid motion, I twist my body sharply to the side, driving my heel down onto Ercole's foot with all my strength. The momentary shock loosens his grip just enough. I throw my elbow back, connecting with his ribs. The satisfying crack and his howl of pain give me the opening I need.

I spin around, my bound hands grabbing for his gun. The weight of it is cold and heavy in my fingers, but I don't hesitate. One pull of the trigger and the bullet tears through Ercole's shoulder. He drops to his knees, his scream echoing through the warehouse.

I turn to Enzo, my chest heaving, adrenaline coursing hot through my veins. Our eyes lock across the space between us, and everything else falls away. The zip ties cut into my wrists. Blood—Ercole's, not mine—spatters my clothes. But none of it matters.

I saved him. I saved myself.

The realization hits us both at the same time, and I see something shift in Enzo's expression—pride, relief, and something deeper I'm not ready to name.

I stand frozen in place, gun still warm in my trembling hands, as Enzo's eyes shift from me to Ercole's kneeling form. The warehouse air feels electric, charged with something primal. Something final.

Enzo doesn't hesitate. There's no moment of moral consideration, no weighing of options. He steps toward Ercole with deliberate, unhurried movements, like a predator who knows his prey has nowhere to run. Each step echoes against the concrete, the sound amplifying the inevitable. His presence swallows the room, dark

and commanding, making everything else fade to background noise.

"You think this is over?" Ercole spits through gritted teeth, one hand still clutching his bleeding shoulder. Blood seeps between his fingers, staining his shirt a deep crimson. "You think you've won?"

Enzo doesn't answer. Doesn't need to. His silence speaks volumes as he continues his approach, gun hanging loosely at his side. The steel-gray of his eyes has gone flat, emotionless, like the surface of a frozen lake. His jaw is set, his movements fluid despite the blood still spreading across his own shirt.

For the first time, true fear flickers across Ercole's face. The bravado crumbles, replaced by a dawning realization of his own mortality. His eyes dart wildly, looking for an escape that doesn't exist.

"Enzo, listen," Ercole's voice cracks. "We're family?—"

"You never should have touched her," Enzo says calmly. The quietness of his voice somehow makes it more terrifying, like the silence before lightning strikes.

No rage. No shouting. Just cold certainty.

I watch as Enzo raises his gun, the movement smooth and practiced. Ercole's eyes widen, pupils dilating with fear. Time seems to stretch between them—uncle and nephew, blood turned against blood.

"Wait—" Ercole begins.

The gunshot cuts through his plea. A single clean shot to the head. The sound reverberates through the warehouse, bouncing off metal walls and concrete floors, somehow both deafening and final.

Ercole's body slumps forward, a marionette with its strings cut. His eyes remain open, but the light behind them is gone. Just empty windows now, staring at nothing.

I exhale, a shuddering breath that seems to come from somewhere deep inside me. My shoulders shake with the force of it, the adrenaline crash hitting me all at once. But I don't look away. Can't look away. This is my world now—I chose it the moment I made that deal with Enzo. The moment I chose him.

Enzo turns to me, his movements softer now. The hardness melts from his face as his eyes find mine, replaced by something that looks almost like concern. He crosses the distance between us, careful not to crowd me, and brushes his fingers against my bound wrists—just a touch, just enough to remind himself that I'm real, that I'm safe. The gentleness of it stands in stark contrast to the violence I just witnessed, and somehow that makes it all the more powerful.

"Are you hurt?" His voice is low, intimate in the vast space.

I shake my head, unable to find words yet. The zip ties dig into my skin, but it's distant, secondary to everything else happening in this moment.

Enzo pulls out his phone and dials, his eyes never leaving my face. When Luca answers, his words are simple, direct.

"It's done." No explanation needed, no details given.

Luca doesn't ask questions. There's a brief pause before his voice comes through, equally concise. "I'll handle the bodies."

And just like that, it's over. Two men dead on a warehouse floor, blood pooling beneath them, and a phone call that erases it all like it never happened.

36

ENZO

My body functions on muscle memory as I drive us away from what should've been our death. One hand on the wheel, the other clasping Kendra's—warm, solid, real. Blood still flecks my clothes. I can taste copper and gunpowder in the air between us.

Zenon. My brother. His body cooling on concrete.

Ercole. My nephew. Dead beside his father.

I feel nothing but the pressure of Kendra's fingers intertwined with mine. She doesn't speak during the drive, just keeps her gaze fixed on the city lights blurring past. Every few minutes, her grip tightens, then relaxes, as if reassuring herself I'm still here. As if I'm the one who almost slipped away.

When we pull up to my home, the building looms dark and silent. This place has never felt more like sanctuary.

"You're safe now," I tell her. It's not what I want to say, but it's all I can manage with my throat closing around words that feel too dangerous to release.

The moment we step through the door, the silence shatters. Nails click frantically against hardwood as Paige and Penny tear around the corner, a blur of yellow and tricolor fur. Their whines pierce the air—high-pitched, distressed sounds of animals who've sensed disaster.

Paige reaches us first, her entire body wiggling so violently she nearly topples over. Penny circles more cautiously, ears back, eyes darting between us.

"Hey girls," Kendra whispers, her voice cracking. She sinks to her knees, and something in my chest constricts at how natural she looks in my home, on my floor, with my dogs swarming her. Like she belongs here. Has always belonged here.

Paige immediately plasters herself against Kendra, licking every inch of exposed skin she can reach. Penny presses close, trembling slightly as Kendra buries her fingers in her fur, stroking the spot behind her ears that usually takes weeks for Penny to allow anyone to touch.

"They know something happened," she murmurs, face half-hidden against Paige's golden coat as the lab attempts to climb into her lap despite being far too large. "They can smell it on us."

When she looks up at me, the dim light from the hallway catches the shadows beneath her eyes, the smudges of mascara, the slight swelling where Ercole's grip left marks. Her expression is unreadable, stripped of the sharp edges and defenses she usually wears like armor.

My jaw works as I stare at the marks, knowing that I did this to her when I made that damn deal. And she must be able to see it on my face.

"Are you going to tell me you don't want me caught up in your world?" she asks. The question hangs in the air between us, weighted with everything we've survived. "That I need to leave before you get me hurt again?"

I exhale slowly, rubbing my jaw, feeling the stubble rasp against my palm. The smart answer is yes. The right answer is to push her away, to cut whatever this is before it drags her deeper into blood and violence she never asked for.

"I should," I admit, voice rough.

Kendra gently disengages from the dogs, rising to her feet with a grace that shouldn't be possible after everything. She steps toward me, her movements deliberate, closing the distance between us until I can see the flecks of gold in her brown eyes.

"But?" she prompts softly.

I meet her gaze, something tight coiling in my chest. For a man who calculates every move, who plans three steps ahead, who never speaks without measuring the consequence of each word, I find myself suddenly stripped of all strategy.

"But I love you."

The words escape before I can trap them, raw and unguarded in a way I haven't been since I was too young to know better. I've never said them before—not to anyone. Never meant them before. Never wanted to.

"I love you, and I am a selfish bastard who isn't willing to let you go."

Kendra's lips part, her breath catching. For a heartbeat, I see it—vulnerability, fear, the weight of what those words mean in my world. But then she smiles. Slow. Certain. Dangerous. A smile that tells me she knows exactly what she's choosing.

"I love you, Enzo." She steps closer, pressing a hand to my chest, right over the thundering of my heart. "And I choose you. Even if you try to push me away, I won't go anywhere."

I don't even know how to respond. The words hang between us, heavier than any threat I've ever made, any deal I've ever struck. Love is a vulnerability I've never allowed myself. Yet here I am, bleeding it out for her to see.

But Kendra doesn't seem to need my response. Her eyes—those deep brown eyes that saw through my bullshit from the first day—soften in a way I've never witnessed. She steps closer, close enough that I can feel the heat from her body, smell the faint traces of her perfume mixed with sweat and fear and determination.

When she kisses me, it's different.

It's not a battle, not a negotiation, not the careful dance of power we've been circling since the beginning. This kiss feels like coming home to something I never knew I needed. Her lips are soft against mine, yielding but not weak. Never weak. My Kendra wouldn't know how to be weak if she tried.

I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her against me while my other hand cradles the back of her neck. The dogs shuffle away, sensing the shift in energy. Paige bumps into the coffee table in her retreat, sending a book clattering to the floor.

I lift Kendra, feeling her legs wrap around my waist as I carry her to the couch. Her weight is perfect in my arms, substantial and real. When I lay her down, I take my time, my hands mapping every curve, every edge of her body like I'm memorizing territory I can't afford to lose. I need to feel her, to know she's okay.

"Enzo," she breathes against my neck, my name becoming a prayer on her lips.

I slide her blouse up, exposing the smooth expanse of her stomach. A bruise is forming where Ercole grabbed her—dark against her brown skin—and something primal roars in me at the sight. I press my lips there gently, a silent promise that no one will ever mark her like this again.

"Let me see all of you," I murmur against her skin, and she arches, helping me remove the fabric barriers between us.

Each piece of clothing discarded reveals more of her—the curves of her breasts, the strength in her thighs, the softness of her belly. I worship every inch, my hands and mouth learning the map of her body in a way that's reverent. This isn't fucking. This is something else entirely.

Our movements are slow, deliberate, the kind of desperation that comes when you almost lost something you didn't realize you needed. When I finally push inside her, the sensation nearly breaks me. The tight heat of her, the way her fingernails dig into my shoulders, how her breath catches on a moan—it's everything.

"Look at me," she demands, and I do.

Kendra grips my face between her hands, forcing me to meet her eyes. Even now, even with me buried inside her, she commands. And I yield willingly, something I've never done for anyone else.

"I love you," she whispers, her lips brushing mine, her voice a mix of vulnerability and demand that only she could balance.

I thrust deeper, watching her eyes flutter but never close, never break contact with mine. My voice is hoarse when I answer. "Say it again."

She clenches around me, her body responding to the truth in my voice before she can form words. "I love you, Enzo," she whispers back, and something in me breaks open.

We move together, finding a rhythm that speaks what words can't—how close we came to losing this, how we chose each other despite everything. When she starts to tremble, I slide my hand between us, circling that sensitive bundle of nerves until she's calling my name, her body arching beneath mine.

I follow her over the edge, climaxing hard as she pulses around me, my forehead pressed to hers, our breath mingling in the space between us.

"I love you. And I'm never letting you go," I tell her afterward, my voice rough with emotion I've never allowed myself to feel. "Never."

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Sunshine streams through the restaurant's windows, making the mimosas on our table glow like liquid gold. I run a finger along the condensation on my glass, enjoying the chatter of the busy brunch spot around us. My friends' faces are bright with weekend freedom—and relentless curiosity.

"Okay, spill it," Jazz says, leaning across our corner table, her curls bouncing as she narrows her eyes at me. "You've been dodging my texts all week."

For once, I don't feel the immediate urge to deflect. The weight I've carried for so long—the constant vigilance, the walls I built—feels lighter somehow.

Skye eyes me over her avocado toast, a knowing smirk playing across her perfectly lined lips. "You look different."

"Different how?" I ask, but I already know. I can feel it myself—something's shifted inside me.

Jazz grins, swirling her mimosa with practiced elegance. "Maybe because she finally got laid properly." She raises her glass in a mock toast. "And thank fucking god for that."

I roll my eyes, but I don't argue. The memory of Enzo's hands on my skin sends a pleasant shiver down my spine. But it's not just that. It's not just the sex—though holy hell, the sex is incredible. It's something more fundamental.

"It's not just about getting laid," I say, surprising myself with my honesty. "It's about... I don't know. For once, I'm not running."

My words hang in the air between us. I've spent years perfecting the art of keeping people at a distance, of never letting anyone see beyond the confident exterior. But here I am, laying myself bare to the three women who know me best.

Mikayla watches me carefully, her sweet face thoughtful as she toys with her French toast. Then she asks softly, "You're happy, aren't you?"

The question catches me off guard. Am I happy? Not just satisfied, not just content, but actually happy?

I pause, then nod. "Yeah. I am."

And it's true. The realization washes over me like warm water. I'm happy. With Enzo. With his dogs. With the life we're building in the aftermath of everything we've survived.

"Well, shit," Skye says, but her eyes are warm. "Never thought I'd see the day Kendra Washington would fall for a man with a criminal record."

"Says the woman who married a literal crime boss," I counter, and we all laugh.

"To complicated men," Jazz raises her glass. "May they always be worth the trouble."

We clink glasses, and for the next hour, I tell them everything—well, almost everything. Some parts of what happened with Enzo, with Zenon and Ercole, are still too raw. But I tell them enough. About his dogs. About his books. About the way he looks at me when he thinks I don't notice.

About how I've fallen in love with him. Skye is particularly happy and I'm going to have to fend off her pushing for a wedding soon.

When we finally part ways outside the restaurant, their hugs linger a little longer than

usual.

"I'm happy for you," Mikayla whispers in my ear. "You deserve this."

I don't tell her that she deserves the same. But I have a feeling that her happily ever after is around the corner.

When I get home—and it feels like home now, not just Enzo's place where I stay—the afternoon light fills the living room with golden warmth. Enzo is on the couch, Penny at his feet, Paige sprawled over his lap like she weighs ten pounds instead of seventy. He's nursing a tumbler of something amber, his other hand absently stroking Paige's ears.

He barely looks up from his drink as I drop my bag and slide onto the couch beside him. The leather is cool against my bare legs.

"Did you survive brunch?" he asks, voice rumbling low in his chest.

I smirk, stealing his glass and taking a sip. The whiskey burns pleasantly down my throat. "Barely. Jazz thinks you've corrupted me."

"She's not wrong."

"Skye says you're trouble."

"She's definitely not wrong." His lips twitch with amusement.

I shift, resting my head on his shoulder, and he goes still. This is new for us—this casual intimacy without the heat of sex behind it. I feel his chest rise and fall with a deep breath.

After a beat, he sighs, pressing a kiss to my hair. His lips linger there, and I close my

eyes, savoring the moment.

"You're a menace," he murmurs against my hair.

I smile, feeling more content than I have in years. "And you love it."

Paige shuffles, her paws digging into Enzo's thigh as she readjusts, and Penny looks up at us with her anxious eyes. This little makeshift family we've created.

And for the first time in my life, I'm exactly where I want to be.