

ALWAYS BEEN MINE

By Victoria Paige

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Teaser Chapters

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CHAPTER ONE

A clap of thunder jolted Beatrice awake.

Disoriented, she took in her naked body under the cool satin sheets. She smiled like a cat who'd had her fill of cream. Pure feline satisfaction. A night of wild sex with Gabriel Sullivan would do that to you.

She frowned at the empty space beside her. *Where is he?*

Her brows furrowed deeper when a streak of lightning and the ensuing rumble followed too closely behind it. Damn spring storms. They better not delay their flight to Barbados in the morning.

Beatrice swung her legs to the floor, stood and slipped into a robe. Eyeing the open suitcase laid out on the floor, she remembered the whirlwind development of their relationship in recent weeks. She'd been seeing Gabe on and off for the past four months. It was only in the last three weeks that the dark-haired former Navy SEAL finally staked some sort of claim on her. Well, really staked a claim. Beatrice had been having drinks with a male friend when he rudely butted in and asked to speak to her.

He laid it out. He wanted their relationship to be exclusive.

This four-day trip to Barbados was a way of cementing the definition of said relationship: Gabe and Beatrice were a couple.

Shaking her head at how easily he had changed her rules about dating someone who was currently serving or had served in the military, she went to look for her man.

She descended the stairs of her two-story row house and found him in the study, standing by the French windows with the phone to his ear. His voice was low and gruff. He heard her

come into the room; lightning illuminated his grim face and tight mouth.

Something was horribly wrong.

“I need to go,” Gabe spoke into the phone. His whiskey eyes were black in the darkened room, but she could feel them drinking her in. “I’ll see you in a few.”

“Is everything okay?” Beatrice asked anxiously as he ended the call.

Gabe lowered his gaze. Striding past her, he exited the study, crossed the living room, and mounted the steps leading to their bedroom.

A familiar knot of abandonment tightened her gut, freezing her where Gabe had left her. Taking deep breaths to calm down, she followed him upstairs.

The sight that met her in their room unleashed her worst fears. Gabe was pulling out his stuff from the meticulously packed suitcase and was shoving them into his black duffel.

“What are you doing?” Beatrice asked hoarsely. “Our flight leaves in six hours. Are we canceling?”

Gabe paused; the muscle tic in his jaw pulsed a few times before he finally looked at her. “I made a mistake.”

Beatrice forced herself to smile; sure she had misheard him. “What do you mean? You don’t like Barbados? We don’t have to go if that’s not your thing.”

“Us, Beatrice.” His tone was calm. “We’re not going to work.”

His statement doused her denial of what was clearly unfolding before her. He was ending it.

“Explain, Gabriel,” Beatrice said coldly. “Three weeks ago, you practically bulldozed me into a committed relationship. Now you’re wimping out? Uh-uh, a simple ‘we’re not going to work’ *is not* cutting it.”

Gabe flinched, but didn’t respond. He pulled the zipper on his duffel and tried to get past her. She was having none of that and stood smack in front of him.

“I deserve an answer.”

Gabe’s eyes blazed at her. Wait, was he angry at her?

What the hell!

“You want the truth?” Gabe rasped. “I have a job to do.”

“You’re done with the SEALs or did you lie?”

“No. This is something else.”

“You’re working for Dad,” Beatrice whispered. The disapproval of her father regarding their relationship dawned on her.

He looked straight into her eyes. “No. Someone else. I need to leave.”

“No. That’s not a freaking explanation,” Beatrice fired back.

“You deserve more—”

“Don’t feed me that bullshit!” Beatrice screamed. Tremors shook her body. This wasn’t happening. Why was this happening?

“Okay, you want the fucking truth?” Gabe replied tersely. “I’ll always care for my job more than I’ll ever care about you. I realize that now.”

She inhaled sharply at his blunt, if not cruel, declaration. Heat burned behind her eyes. She wasn’t going to cry. Oh, no, she wasn’t. She wasn’t becoming her mother.

A tear slid down her cheek.

Gabe cursed. “You asked for the fucking truth. You got it.”

He made to move past her again, but she couldn’t let him go.

Against her better judgment, she raised a palm against his chest.

“Please, Gabe—”

“Jesus, Beatrice,” Gabe growled. “You’re an admiral’s daughter. Have some fucking pride. Don’t beg a man to stay if he doesn’t want you.”

The final stake was driven into her heart. She dropped her hand and swallowed hard. She stepped aside. Gabe didn’t even hesitate as he walked briskly away from her.

Yet what hope was left inside her made her walk to the window. The rain had slowed to a trickle, and there were still rumblings of thunder in the distance. The scene outside was pretty much what she felt inside—pure desolation. She watched the headlights of Gabe’s car flash as he bleeped the locks. Seconds later, his tall silhouette emerged from the sidewalk fronting her house.

Look up. Look up. Don’t leave, Gabe.

He never looked up.

Three years later

“Rise and shine, Beatrice Porter!”

The smell of coffee hovered around her nose, but Beatrice shoved her face further into the pillow. “Go away.”

“Tsk. Tsk. Late night? Or can’t sleep?” The amused masculine voice teased.

“Both,” Beatrice grumbled, finally flopping on her back and sitting up. She glared at the leanly built blond man smirking at her. Douglas Keller—her personal assistant, her confidante, her everything actually. Because he did everything for her security consulting business that she had no patience to do. Besides, he took good care of her. She eyed the Styrofoam cup of morning brew held so tantalizing close to her face.

“From your favorite corner coffee shop,” Doug said as Beatrice grabbed the cup from him. He sat on the edge of her bed. “Drink up. You’ll need it.”

She groaned, “Don’t tell me there’s another article.”

“Front page of the DC Tattler,” Doug said. “Not too shabby a picture of your altercation with Rocker Boy in front of a Georgetown restaurant.”

Eric Stone, lead guitarist of Titanium Rose, was a moment of female weakness. She had succumbed to all those tattoos and bad boy image, and somehow fell into an intense fling that lasted for five weeks. That ended two weeks ago when she walked in on him snorting cocaine off a naked groupie.

It was official: Beatrice Porter had become a cliché and she hated it. Right now, she hated the disapproving look Doug was giving her. He had warned her, after all.

“He’s spreading the word that he’s begging for a second chance. He accepts full responsibility for the breakup.”

“He said he had stopped using.” Beatrice took a big gulp of her coffee and thought she should have brushed her teeth first. Setting the cup down, she padded to the bathroom, leaving the door open so Doug could talk to her.

“He said he was missing you.”

“Seriously? That’s his excuse? I was gone for less than four days. If I had not cut my trip short . . . I would have . . .” She shuddered before sticking the toothbrush in her mouth. It was a good thing she refused to forego using condoms with him. God knows if this hadn’t been the first time. Still, it was a good thing to have herself tested.

“I’ll schedule an appointment with your doctor,” Doug said, reading her mind. She later shooed him out of the room so she could take a shower. While she let the spray of water wake her up, she contemplated the damage to her reputation. So far, none of her clients had canceled their appointments. Her friends Travis Blake and Nate Reece, who ran a partner security firm, Blake Security Inc. (BSI), offered to beat Eric up and make it look like an accident. All her other friends simply teased her about this whole situation. She snorted inwardly. Her clients were probably afraid of canceling on an admiral’s daughter. Though she hated leaning on the clout of her father, she admitted it had its uses.

Beatrice didn’t know what her father, Admiral Benjamin Porter, exactly did for the CIA. Their relationship was an ebb and flow. Sometimes tumultuous where they clashed, sometimes cordial, sometimes cold. Turning off the water, Beatrice grabbed a towel and dried off.

There were times when he let his guard down and showed her some genuine warmth. Those occasions were rare. Beatrice wondered if he just wanted her to toughen up for whatever life plan he had in store for her. She wasn’t obtuse enough not to realize her father’s deft manipulation of her life had landed her as a security consultant.

Doug was already pounding away on his laptop in her home office. Beatrice lived in a penthouse apartment right on Pennsylvania Avenue. She realized as a consultant, she didn’t need to rent office space and just conducted her initial meetings in one of the many swanky restaurants inundating the nation’s capital.

“I’ve already typed up a brief for your lunch appointment with Senator Mendoza and his Chief of Staff.”

“And they only want security for their delegation to South America?”

“Yes. That’s their immediate requirement.”

“Have you done a background check? Any known threats to the senator?”

“He’s a member of the Intelligence and Homeland Security committees, so there are the usual threats. However, there is concern regarding his travel to Colombia.”

Beatrice sighed, trying to remember what she knew about that part of the world.

Senator Alex Mendoza was second-generation Colombian American. A success story. The son of poor immigrant parents, he impressed his teachers in school and won a scholarship to Harvard and graduated with the highest honors. He would be facing a delicate challenge when the Immigration and Border Security bill hit the floor early next year.

“Cocaine jungles,” Beatrice said. “Russian-supplied guns arming private armies.” She inhaled her coffee. “Source of one of the best coffee beans in the world. Should be interesting. What else is on the agenda today?”

“We have that Mayflower Charity Ball tonight,” Doug piped in.

“Ah, yes,” Beatrice scoffed. “You’re still fine as my date?”

“Of course.”

“Great. Right now, I don’t want to go by myself, what with that little scandal with Eric. The last thing I want to look like is some pathetic woman scorned.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll look great as a couple.” Doug waggled his eyebrows.

Beatrice pouted. “Why can’t you just fall in love with me?”

Her assistant smiled wryly before leaning in and giving her a kiss on top of her head. “I do love you, sweetie.”

Beatrice exited the G Street level of the Metro Center stop and walked up to La Grenouille—a ritzy French restaurant in the heart of DC. She checked the time on her phone. It was almost noon, and she was sure the place was already buzzing with lobbyists dressed in Armani suits. It was the first week of November, so everyone was pushing their agenda before Congress adjourned for the Christmas break. Heads turned her way as she neared the restaurant. She was used to the attention that her willowy, designer-clad figure attracted. She’d been approached several times by top modeling agencies, but sashaying down a catwalk held no appeal for her. No. She relished playing hardball in a business dominated by men. She thrived on

the challenge. However, Beatrice was not her confident self today; she cringed at the attention. Were they looking at her as a beautiful woman, or the woman who walked in on her cheating rock star ex-boyfriend? The details didn't even come from her. Her only response to the media was "no comment." All the information came from the groupie who she caught with Eric.

Unbidden feelings of another rejection came to mind, one that happened one stormy night, three years ago. Beatrice shuddered as bile churned in her gut. Thankfully, she didn't even love Eric. He was good in bed, although nowhere near as—

Damn it, Beatrice Porter. Snap out of it.

Irritated with herself, she heaved and pushed the brass bar of the wood-framed, glass revolving doors of the restaurant.

"Ah, Ms. Porter, your party just arrived," the maître d' greeted her. "We have you seated at your regular table."

"Excellent." Beatrice smiled, shrugged off her cream peacoat, and handed it to a member of the waitstaff while another led her further into the dining area toward one of the secluded corners. The nutty aroma of browned butter wafted through her nose, and the earlier turmoil in her stomach receded.

A distinguished gentleman, clearly of South American descent, rose from the table and smiled at her. Senator Alex Mendoza's shrewd dark eyes crinkled at the corners, and a dimple appeared. "Beatrice, it's been a while."

"Senator."

"How have you been? How's the Admiral?"

"I'm fine. Dad is doing well, too." The truth was, she had not seen or spoken to her father since the scandal broke out. Knowing him, it was his silent disapproval. Thoughts of her father didn't linger in Beatrice's mind for her eyes landed on the senator's companion. *Well, hello, handsome.*

The senator gestured to the man beside him. "Zach Jamison, my new Chief of Staff,"

Beatrice held out her hand and it was caught in a firm handshake and held a bit longer than was normal.

Her eyes locked with Zach's. The man was all-dark. Dark hair, dark eyes, and deeply

bronzed skin. He looked sinful. She should be used to blatant male perusal, but she was caught off guard and felt her skin blushing.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Beatrice said, wanting to congratulate herself for her steady voice.

“Pleasure’s all mine.” Zach’s eyes penetrated deep into her.

Pulling her hand away, she addressed the senator and expressed condolences regarding the untimely death of his former Chief of Staff.

The senator nodded gravely as all three of them took their seats. Senator Mendoza’s former Chief of Staff recently passed from a heart attack. She had met the man twice before. Sharp and very protective of the senator, his death was a big blow to the senator’s office.

Zach Jamison had big shoes to fill.

Regaining some of her composure, Beatrice launched straight into business. “I believe my assistant has sent you the questionnaire?”

“Yes, we received the paperwork from Mr. Keller,” Zach answered. “We’re concerned with some of the questions. They’re very intrusive.”

She was prepared for the pushback. “Understand this, Mr. Jamison. Each principal is encouraged to answer the questions truthfully. People who want to harm Senator Mendoza will use every dirty trick in the book, every weakness. A food allergy, a relative who has a debt, etc. We need to prepare for every threat.”

“I have nothing to hide,” Senator Mendoza said. “Though my medical—”

“We’re not discussing that here,” Beatrice cut him off. “That’s for when I determine which security company will be most suited to you. I’m merely assessing your high level needs for now.”

Both men nodded.

Their server arrived to fill their glasses with water and take their drink orders. While each of them perused the menu, Beatrice led in with her questions. “I understand the Immigration and Border Security bill is high on your priorities right now.”

“That is correct.” The senator nodded. “My constituents are divided regarding some key aspects of the bill.”

“Understandable. Florida is a melting pot of different ethnic groups, and yet, a majority of the demographic is white.” Beatrice shut the menu. She knew most of the entrée items listed by heart. “You’ll have to find a happy medium.”

“As I’ve stated in our advance brief, the President wants me to meet with several heads of state from the South American continent. Our last stop is Colombia. Their government is beginning to gain control over the drug trafficking problem, but that will largely depend on talks with the left-wing guerrillas and the right-wing paramilitary groups.”

The waiter arrived with their drinks. After giving her lunch order, Beatrice took a sip of her Riesling. “There was a recent flare up of violence between the government and the guerillas. You may need bigger guns.”

“No. I want BSI,” Senator Mendoza said.

“That’s for me to determine.”

“I know which firm you are considering, but we couldn’t afford them.”

“I’m not sending BSI into known hostile territory. Their specialty is executive and dignitary protection. You almost need a team that functions as a private army,” Beatrice reiterated.

“Listen, Beatrice. May I call you Beatrice?” Zach’s mouth tilted in a grin. Oh, the man was turning on the charm. “Bring the matter up with BSI and see if they’ll take it. Travis Blake is a living legend—the Navy SEAL who saved a senator from an assassin. Folks on the Hill talk about him whenever extra security is needed.”

Beatrice inwardly agreed that Travis’s guys were very capable of handling extreme life or death situations. She was just more protective of them. She considered them her boys.

“All right,” Beatrice agreed. “I’ll bring it up with Nathan Reece. Travis is on his honeymoon right now and should return this Friday.”

“I’ve met Reece.” The senator nodded in approval. “I really think BSI has the team we need. They provided outstanding security for the senate contingent the U.S. sent to Ukraine. I heard you negotiated that deal.”

“I did.”

“So what made you go into the security business?” Zach asked. “You are not what I

expected.”

“Should I be offended?”

“I meant that as a compliment,” the Chief of Staff replied smoothly. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Beatrice winced. Zach, realizing his faux pas, turned a shade darker under his tan. The senator chuckled. “You shouldn’t worry about the tabloid write-ups, Beatrice. You’ve worked hard for where you are now.”

Fortunately, their food arrived and the elaborate way the dishes were served gave her enough time to gather her wits about her.

“It’ll blow over,” Beatrice quipped and shrugged her shoulders. She looked at Zach who was staring at her with remorseful eyes. She raised a brow. His eyes turned mischievous, and then he flashed her a toothpaste-commercial-worthy smile.

Suddenly, Zach’s attractiveness diminished, and the devilish grin of another man came to mind.

Beatrice Porter! Get a grip!

“Now, I believe, I’m the one asking the questions?” Beatrice brought the conversation back to point.

“Bitch whore!”

Beatrice watched in horror as a wave of red ruined her new cashmere wool peacoat.

What the hell?

She had just returned from her successful lunch meeting with the senator and was about to ascend the steps leading to the lobby of her condominium when she heard her name. Three women, all of them wearing Titanium Rose t-shirts, attacked her with red paint. How did they find out where she lived?

The older of the women, who sported bottle-blond hair, continued to call her all manner of derogatory female names.

Building security rushed out and was about to restrain the women when Beatrice signaled

them to back away.

She also noticed a tall figure rapidly approaching from her right peripheral vision.

Doug.

She kept her eyes on her attackers.

“Can you repeat what you just called me?” Beatrice said to Eric’s rabid fans.

“Ms. Porter . . .” one of the guards started to say, but she raised a finger to shush them.

“Bitch whore!” Blondie repeated, her lips curling in a snarl.

“Is that right?” Beatrice said, wiping paint from her face. “I’m the bitch? I’m the whore? Didn’t you read the papers?”

Blondie’s eyes widened. “Well, yeah, Eric wants you back.”

“Not that part,” she said irritably. “You do know he cheated on me, right?”

“That was just a groupie . . .” Blondie’s voice faded. “He’s Eric Stone. Everyone wants to fuck him.”

“So that makes it okay?”

No answer from the three women.

“You think it’s okay for your man to step out on you when you’ve agreed to be exclusive?”

All three shook their head.

“I’ve made my point. You three are lucky I’m not about to press charges, because I’m so done with this fiasco, it’s not funny,” Beatrice snapped. “Now get out of here before someone takes pictures and I find myself splashed all over the tabloids again. This is DC. I understand there’s no place more symbolic where freedom of expression is demonstrated every day, but dousing a person with red paint is not part of your first amendment rights. Do I make myself clear?”

The women just stared at her. The guards started sniggering but stopped when Beatrice glared at them.

“Go on before I change my mind.”

All three women slowly backed away before turning and running off.

“Beatrice,” Doug said. His eyes were sympathetic, but his lips were twitching.

“Don’t laugh,” she warned. “Damn Eric.” She whipped out her phone and called him. She got his voice mail. Just as well. She didn’t want to talk to him, just leave him a message. A warning.

“Eric. Beatrice. Call off your fans. You and I? Not happening again. Get that through your damn head. The next time I get attacked or harassed, you *will* not like what I’ll do to you.”

She ended the call. Doug sighed.

“What?”

“You threatened your ex over the phone.”

Beatrice paused. *Shit.*

“That’s not the way to keep yourself out of the tabloids.”

“Damn it,” Beatrice hissed.

“Come on, *Carrie*, let’s get you cleaned up.”

Beatrice grunted.

“You’re lucky they didn’t use pig’s blood.”

She grunted again.

They were making their way up the steps when Beatrice felt a shiver go up her spine. She stopped and looked around.

“What’s wrong, honeybee?” Doug occasionally used that annoying endearment on her, but right now, Beatrice’s attention was riveted to her surroundings.

“I feel like . . . I feel like someone’s watching me.”

“You’re just spooked by the attack,” Doug reassured her. He was probably right. He put his arm around her and she leaned into its comfort as they walked into the lobby together.

The Mayflower Charity Ball was a black-tie affair, but Beatrice decided to forgo the formality of a limousine. Too much fanfare to pull up at the entrance of the trendy Larkspur Manor in McLean. At the moment, she preferred to remain inconspicuous, asking Doug to pick her up in his low-profile Toyota sedan. Some part of her hated how she seemed to be hiding, but the ugly scene in front of her condo earlier only proved the prudence of her decision.

Pulling up by the valet, a doorman opened the passenger door and assisted her from the car. Beatrice was wearing a simple satin sheath gown. Its platinum color set off her creamy skin tone. She set her hair in big curls and gathered them in a sophisticated off-center ponytail. Doug offered his arm, and together, they walked the short distance to the main entrance. They veered to the side walkway, which led to a discrete door that guests who preferred anonymity used during such events.

“Your hands are clammy,” Doug murmured. “Are you still shaken from this afternoon?”

“I wish I could blame the incident earlier,” Beatrice replied, “but that’s not it.”

“Don’t tell me fearless Beatrice Porter is afraid to face down this crowd?”

“Of course not.” *Lie*. But that wasn’t it either. The idea that she was being watched had been festering for weeks now. The mess with Eric Stone had thrown some white noise into her intuition, and she could not, for the life of her, determine what was causing her all this disquiet.

The door opened to reveal a brightly lit, opulent ballroom.

Showtime.

Beatrice excused herself from the huddle of diplomats and lawmakers to get another drink. She had sent Doug off to eavesdrop on another conversation of a rival security consultant.

A dark-haired woman with a pageboy bob, dressed in a tacky emerald-sequined gown, waylaid Beatrice on her way to the bar.

Kelly Winters. Her nemesis and the main society reporter for the DC Tattler.

“Beatrice.”

“Ms. Winters. I didn’t know they allowed barracudas in these functions.” Beatrice’s voice was glazed with saccharine sweetness.

Unfazed, the reporter shrugged. “You’re not the only one with political connections, Beatrice.”

“It’s Ms. Porter to you,” Beatrice responded. “Well, if you’re going to be mixing in these social circles, I suggest you fire your fashion consultant.”

The gloves came off. The reporter’s face turned ugly and she sneered, “You’d do best not to antagonize me. Your reputation is not exactly stellar at the moment.”

Beatrice gave a short burst of mirthless laughter. She shook her head. “Don’t threaten me, Ms. Winters. You print one lie, and you and your tabloid just bought yourselves a lawsuit.”

“Everything all right here?” a low baritone voice interjected.

Zach Jamison.

Kelly’s brow arched. “You’ve moved on pretty fast.”

“Come on, Beatrice,” Zach gently grasped her arm as he glared at the reporter. “Looks like you need a drink.”

When they reached the bar, Zach asked what she wanted and ordered their drinks. Giving her his full attention, he asked, “Was she a reporter?”

“Yes.”

“She the one who’s been printing all this garbage about you?”

Beatrice nodded.

“How did she manage to get into this exclusive event?”

“No idea,” Beatrice replied tersely and winced when she saw Zach’s face fall. “I’m sorry. I’m just not very good company at the moment. It’s been a weird day.”

He frowned and Beatrice realized how her statement came across. “Oh, no. No. Our lunch meeting was the most productive part of my day, actually.”

Zach grinned at her. “Okay. You got me worried there for a moment. We’re pretty set to work with you and whomever you choose for us.”

“Bee!” Doug reached them. He looked worried. “I saw Winters ambush you. I couldn’t get away from the French ambassador.”

“No worries, man. I got her covered,” Zach replied.

Both men exchanged strange looks she couldn’t decipher. Beatrice suddenly felt suffocated. She needed a blast of November chill.

“Guys, do me a favor? Make sure Winters doesn’t leave the ballroom,” Beatrice said. “I’m stepping out for a bit.”

“It’s forty degrees out there,” Doug said. “I’ll come with you.”

“Doug,” Beatrice said sternly. “I’ll be fine. Keep an eye on things.”

“Well, at least put this on.” Her assistant removed his tuxedo jacket and draped it across

her shoulders.

“Thanks,” Beatrice said, and then nodded to Zach. “Thanks for rescuing me from Winters.”

“Not a problem, lady.”

Afterward, Beatrice couldn't walk fast enough to the French doors that opened to the balcony. Because of the chilly weather, there wasn't a soul outside. She closed the embellished glass door behind her and took a couple of steps toward the marble balustrade. Invigorating air refreshed her lungs. She had the odd desire to run.

“Beatrice.”

Whatever breath she took in was punched right out of her. She turned in the direction of the familiar voice and stilled.

Gabriel.

CHAPTER TWO

Gabe couldn't breathe. She was still the vision he remembered.

His Beatrice.

No. Not his. He lost that right three years ago when he left her. Now, he had to earn her forgiveness, and hope she'd take him back.

She didn't know it yet, but he wasn't giving her a choice.

In that moment where time stood in a vacuum, he studied her. Beatrice always had the face of an angel, an almost perfect oval that tapered to a delicate, yet stubborn, chin. It really depended on her mood. Cutting wit and dry humor were some of the traits Gabe loved about her. His eyes zeroed in on the jacket keeping her warm and his jaw tightened. When his gaze returned to her eyes, he realized the shock had left her only to be replaced by pure unadulterated fury.

Gabe turned rigid with anticipation. What did he expect? That she would welcome him with open arms?

"What are you doing here?" Her tone was sharp. The hatred dripping from her voice bore a hole in his gut like acid.

"I hoped to see you."

"And then what?" Beatrice snapped. "Be friends? I'm sorry, Gabe, but friends do not leave the way you did."

"We were not friends when I left, do not delude yourself. You were my woman." Giving Beatrice an inch would only make her take a mile. He couldn't waver and fuck around with what he wanted. Not with her. He'd have to make it clear. His voice turned hoarse. "I threw you away
—"

“Yes, you did.”

“I want you back, poppy—”

He expected it, the stinging slap. It cracked in the silence of the night.

The coat over her shoulders fell to the ground, drawing Gabe’s eyes to her nipples, which were pushing against the fabric of her gown, tempting him to just rip that dress from her, suck on her tit, and fuck her senseless. The burn on his cheek was insignificant to the lust that seized him. He’d had a semi since he’d seen her. Now his cock was threatening a full-blown erection.

“You’re the fucking delusional one,” she hissed. “I will never, ever take you back.” She cursed. “Stop looking at my boobs!”

He couldn’t help grinning, but resisted the urge to make a sexual innuendo.

Eyes on the prize, Sullivan.

“I know it’s going to take some time, babe.”

“Oh? For what?”

“For you to trust me again.”

“Trust you to make a fool of me again? You really think I’d waste my time on you? Are you really that hard up, Gabe? If all you want is a fuck, I’m sure there’ll be—”

He didn’t let her finish. Something broke inside him when she had dared think he would fool her again. He wanted her to feel how much he needed her. His hand snaked out and yanked her against him. His mouth came crashing down on hers. Her lips were sealed tightly. Gabe growled low in his throat as he backed her into a dark corner. His fingers dug into her ass, preparing to boost her against the wall.

That was when he felt it.

An unholy pain between his legs.

He lost the ability to breathe, to think. He imploded like a pile of bricks.

“Fuck.” Was that his voice? *Fuck.*

“Boy, that felt amazing,” Beatrice gushed. Triumph and exhilaration were rolling off her in waves.

Gabe was on his knees, his hands over his crotch, looking up dazedly at her. “You do realize, poppy,” he pushed between gritted teeth, “you could have ruined our chances of ever

having children.”

Fuck, he felt like puking. Cold sweat started beading his forehead.

“Hmph, still delusional. I don’t freaking care if you ever get another erection. Period.”

“That’ll be a shame for you, babe.”

“You deserve to be castrated, you asshole!” Beatrice spun on her heels and stalked away from him.

Gabe tried to get up, but the pain was still so intense, he crawled. “Damn it, Beatrice! Wait!”

“What’s going on here?”

This just keeps getting better, Gabe thought darkly. Beatrice’s assistant showed up and he was down on the floor like a pathetic bastard. Not that he didn’t deserve it, but he’d rather not look too diminished in front of a potential rival, even if the admiral assured him Douglas Keller wouldn’t be competition.

The blond prick glared at Gabe and acted like he was going to beat him up.

Really, buddy? I just got kneed in the balls.

“What did he do, Bee?”

“I took care of it, Doug. Don’t worry,” Beatrice cast another wrathful stare his way. “The air out here has gone rotten. Take me home before I get sick.”

Gabe watched the woman who meant everything to him walk away with another man. A searing pain burned in his chest. He deserved it, but he wasn’t giving up. Not by a long shot.

“So who is Mr. Hottie?”

Beatrice collapsed against the passenger seat of Doug’s car. The calm she was feeling left her, and now she was a bundle of anxiety.

“That—is Gabriel Sullivan.”

“The *Gabriel*?”

“Yup. So stop perving. I don’t want to talk about it either.”

Doug was silent for a while and then, “He’s the reason you’re so messed up about

relationships, honeybee. We need to talk about it, but not tonight. This day has sucked you dry.”

Understatement.

They were quiet on the ride home. Doug would have normally dropped her off, but this time, he insisted on accompanying her inside. It was only when Beatrice stepped into her condo that she felt safe enough to let go. It started with tremors in her hands until her whole body started shaking. Years of suppressed emotion, of keeping a facade that she had gotten over Gabe, finally caught up with her.

She broke down and wept.

Doug reached for her and clasped her neck, bringing her head to his chest.

Pain, rooted so deeply, prevented the sounds of her cries from escaping. She opened her mouth, but it was a silent cry. It hurt. The pressure in her chest pushed against her throat. All the inadequacies and insecurities she had held in for years threatened to unhinge her completely.

“Breathe, sweetie,” Doug whispered in her ear.

After one mighty indrawn breath, a wail of anguish finally escaped her and she sobbed until she thought she couldn’t stop.

“Why . . . wh . . . why did he have to . . . come back . . .” she mumbled between sobs. “I was fine. I. Was. Fine.”

This went on for a while—speaking incoherently between her tears. All through this, Doug held her and didn’t say a word.

Finally, Beatrice exhaled a shuddering breath. A feeling of cleansing and calm overwhelmed her. “Whoa, that was cathartic.”

“Feeling better?” her friend asked her quietly. His face was grim.

Beatrice nodded and pulled away.

“You should have let me beat the shit out of him.”

“I can fight my own battles.”

“I’ve never seen you this way, Beatrice.” Doug’s eyes flashed angrily. “Whatever happened broke you. I don’t like it.”

Beatrice shook her head. “Maybe tonight was the closure I needed.”

Doug looked at her dubiously. “He doesn’t seem like a guy who’d give up easy.”

Her heart pinched. “Wrong, Doug. He gave me up easily once before.”

When he kinda promised her an eternity.

She remembered that night, three days before he had left her.

Beatrice liked clubbing; Gabe did not.

They had gone out to dinner, and then at her insistence, to a dance club afterward.

Beatrice had to drag his ass out of the chair more than once to dance with her.

Even then, he was as stiff as a board and clearly uncomfortable.

Fed up, she called it a night and decided to go home.

“You need to loosen up, Gabe,” Beatrice grouched on their way back to her row house.

“I told you when we got together I’m not dancing.”

“I know, but I thought that was just macho-man speak.”

Gabe shot her an annoyed look, but didn’t say anything.

She remained quiet on the way home and heard Gabe exhale a resigned breath.

When they entered the house, he gripped her hand and led her to the study.

“What’re you up to, Gabe?”

He grinned and shushed her. Letting go of her hand, he walked to the antique cabinet that held a vintage turntable and old records.

“Can’t let your mom’s collection go to waste,” Gabe said, rummaging through the records. He picked one and loaded it on the sound player.

Strains of Etta James’s “At Last” filled the study.

Beatrice started shaking her head. A silly grin formed on her lips as her frustration with Gabe melted away. He opened the French doors that led to the patio.

“Shall we?” He held out his hand.

“Gabe, you don’t have to.” For some strange reason, a lump formed in her throat.

Their hands linked, Gabe pulled her close and whispered, “Anything for you, poppy.”

They slow-danced on the stone patio to the tune of Etta James’s haunting voice, her head on Gabe’s chest, his chin against her temple. When the music ended, she looked up at him and asked, “Why do you call me poppy? Is it because of my hair?”

Gabe nodded. “Yes. Also, in some cultures, the poppy is a symbol of eternal love.”

His eyes were intense as they stared into hers. Unable to speak, she hid her face on his chest, contemplating what he just revealed. They swayed together in silence.

Eternal love, Beatrice fumed as she snapped back to the present.

Fool me once, Gabe. Only once.

Gabe walked into his house and dropped the keys on the small table by the foyer. His rescue military dog, Rhino, a nine-year-old German Shepherd, was sitting right by the small table. His tail thumped eagerly, waiting for Gabe to greet him.

“Hey, buddy.” Gabe crouched and gripped his dog’s head in an affectionate squeeze. “Ready for your walk?”

The minute Rhino heard “walk”, he started whining excitedly and shuffling his front legs. Chuckling, Gabe reached for the leash and hooked one end to Rhino’s collar. He had long since removed his tuxedo bow and unbuttoned his shirt.

It had been almost four months since he had shed his Dmitry Yertzov persona. The first few weeks were a challenge to integrate back into normal society. Gabe had no close relatives. His parents were dead and he had no siblings. This made him an ideal CIA operative. The only family he knew were the SEALs, and even then he had to give up his brothers to descend into the twisted world of the Russian mafia. He had killed all his emotions to take the job. Once he had ceased to exist as his deadly alter ego, images of every person he had assassinated flooded his dreams. It was hell. He’d been to see the CIA shrink at the NEST—the agency’s special rehabilitation center. Screw the stigma. The sooner he fixed his fucked-up self, the sooner he could go after her. Beatrice was his prize.

He exited his all-brick Victorian row house in Old Town Alexandria, Rhino at his heels. Beatrice had sold her old house in this area and moved into her new condominium a few months after he’d left her. Guilt clawed at him. She loved that house and this area. He had thought to buy the same house back for her, but decided maybe it was best to start fresh. The back patio needed some work, but the front of the house had a small yard with mature landscaping and wrought-iron fencing. He remembered Beatrice stopping to gaze at this house in particular whenever they

went for their walks in the neighborhood.

Confident aren't you, Sullivan? She kneed you in the junk.

Gabe winced at the memory. His Beatrice was still a spitfire.

He walked a couple of blocks more, Rhino happily marking each tree, when he noticed a black sedan parked a couple of cars up. Rhino must have felt the change in Gabe's body language and started growling softly.

"Easy, boy," Gabe said tightly.

When the back door swung open, Gabe knew who was stepping out even before the figure fully emerged.

Admiral Benjamin Porter—top-level recruiter and strategist of CIA black ops and Beatrice's father. A reminder of everything Gabe told himself he shouldn't be, and yet he admired the man. However, from what little Beatrice had told him during their time together, the admiral was a shitty father and husband.

Rhino's growl grew louder as the admiral approached.

"Gonna call off your attack dog, Commander?"

"Not sure."

The admiral sighed. "We have a problem."

"Not mine."

"Gabriel—"

"I told you, sir. I'm done with the agency." Rhino started snarling. Gabe decided to calm down his dog. "Friendlies, Rhino."

The dog immediately stopped his aggression.

"My priority is Beatrice."

"I know that," the admiral said. "That's why I procured your admission into the Mayflower Charity Ball. I've given you information about her whereabouts for the last two weeks and stood back while you stalked her."

Gabe snorted but didn't contradict the admiral, because that was exactly what he did. Thankfully, he didn't catch her at a time when she was with Eric Stone. Judging from the tabloids, the relationship was a hot mess. He was so proud of how his girl handled herself with so

much class against three crazed fans earlier this afternoon.

The admiral had now fallen into step by his side as the three of them continued to walk without missing a beat.

“I don’t want to fuck up again with her. I want to prove to her that I’m in it for the long haul.”

“Is that what the dog is all about? A show of your commitment?”

Gabe didn’t answer, so the admiral continued, “Or is he helping you regain your empathy. Teaching you how to feel?”

“Don’t psychoanalyze me, Ben,” Gabe snapped. “Rhino was a loyal military dog who was about to be classified as equipment and left behind. He may be partially deaf and blind, but he deserves a second chance.”

“Sounds familiar.”

Gabe cursed. “Look, say what you gotta say. Be done with it.”

“Someone might be aware that Dmitry Yertzov is still alive.”

“Impossible. How?” Gabe was used to the admiral’s penchant for drama and constant scheming. Gabe should know. He had let himself be a part of it.

“Philip Crowe aka Leonid Belov must have had a partner that we weren’t aware of,” the admiral said. Crowe/Belov had worked with Gabe in an undercover capacity in the Zorin Bratva—a Russian arms dealer they had brought down almost four months ago.

The admiral had his full attention now. “Go on.”

“The off-shore account that Crowe was going to use to siphon the thirty-five million dollars was shut down before we could get our hands on it. All indications point to the Fuego gang.”

“Shit. The Colombian gang that we sent after Travis and Caitlin?”

“The same.”

The wheels started spinning in Gabe’s head. That would mean Crowe had an “in” with the gang. Nothing would stop Crowe from having insurance just in case something happened to him, which it did. Crowe knew most of the true identities of CIA agents involved in the Zorin Bratva takedown.

“What else?”

“Nothing as of now, but I may have to call in a marker from an old friend.”

A pained look crossed the admiral’s face.

“Something tells me this old friend isn’t really a friend.”

“A buddy from my earlier days in the Navy. We had a falling out. Or rather, his ideals didn’t align with the U.S. government any longer.”

“Look, I’ll help if I can. I don’t want a crosshair on you or Beatrice,” Gabe said. As much as he despised Porter sometimes, he cared for the crazy bastard.

“All I wanted was to give you a heads up,” Porter said. “I’m not sure if there’s anything you can do. I’m sure if Crowe gave Fuego all the information from the Zorin takedown, you’re compromised.”

“I’m adept with disguises, in case you’ve forgotten.” Shit. Did he just volunteer himself? Backtracking, and in a harsh tone, he repeated, “Beatrice is my priority. I’m not officially involved. I’m out of the agency. Don’t ask me to refer someone to help either, because I’m not having another friend’s death on my conscience.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Gabriel.”

“I know, but for a long time, I felt it was. It’s done. He’s not coming back. He’s dead, and the people responsible are dead as well,” Gabe stated flatly. His skin prickled as his alter ego reared his head. “Are we done?”

The admiral nodded. Gabe hastened away with Rhino. There was an urgent need to distance himself from Porter.

~ Dmitry, about three years ago

The twelve-year-old boy stared up at him—bound, gagged, and crying quietly, snot mixing with all the tears. He’d been brave for the most part, defiant even. He would have made a good lieutenant for the Bratva, except his father was a traitor, and Zorin wanted the bloodline ended.

Starting with the first born son.

Angel of Death.

The poor lad peed in his pants.

For a moment, Dmitry wavered, and then he said, "You won't feel a thing. I'll be quick."

Present

"Refill?"

Gabe looked up to see the diner waitress holding a carafe of coffee.

"Sure."

"You must like our food a lot; you've been here for the past two weeks."

"Yeah."

"All you ever order are pancakes and bacon," his chatty waitress pressed on, leaning against the table suggestively. "You need to try other items on the menu."

Gabe was amused. "Are we still talking about this menu, hon?"

"I don't know, handsome, you tell me."

He looked around the diner. It was after 9:00 a.m. and the crowd had thinned considerably. He leaned back in the booth, taking in the woman's red-striped uniform, a size too small and five inches too short. Gabe smiled wryly. "I'm taken, sorry."

"Shame." She leaned closer. "Well, if you get untaken, let me know."

"I believe you were going to pour me some coffee."

The waitress's eyes flashed angrily as she poured coffee into the cup. Gabe made a mental note to change the location of his stakeout because the waitress would probably spit on his food the next time.

He stared across the street at Beatrice's condominium. She usually didn't leave her residence until noon. Doug's car frequently passed the front of the condo around 8:30 a.m., rounding the building to pull into the underground parking, but he didn't see him arrive this morning. Gabe was sure Douglas Keller was gay, but he definitely wasn't the flamboyant or even the effeminate type. Gabe knew Beatrice's assistant would have had no qualms beating him up last night, not that Gabe would have let him. Balls kicked or not, he would have flipped the guy over before he'd even gotten to throw a punch.

A flashy car stopping in front of the condominium drew his attention. With recognition came swift fury. Rock dick Eric Stone. Gabriel forced himself to remain in his seat and wait before getting himself involved. The last thing Beatrice needed was an ex-boyfriend getting into the business of another ex-boyfriend.

It didn't take long. Eric the dickhead started causing a ruckus. Shaggy brown hair, t-shirt, torn-jeans, and sporting converse sneakers, he was arguing with the guard who apparently had orders not to let him in. Twenty minutes later, his spitfire flew down the steps of the condo to confront him. Beatrice was speaking normally, but Stone was yelling at her and gesturing wildly.

The escalation of tension was inevitable.

Gabe stood and threw a couple of bills on the table as he hurried outside. He was just in time to see Stone lay his hands on Beatrice's shoulders to yell further into her face. Even from the distance, Gabe could see the fire in her green eyes, and for a second, he was feeling sorry for Eric.

"Take your hands off me, Eric."

Wait for it.

"Stop being so fucking stubborn, Bee—oomph!"

Rocker boy released his hold on her shoulders and doubled-up on his stomach.

Punched in the gut.

Gabe had taught her that move—tip of fingers to fist—not much momentum needed.

Eric was lucky he didn't get kicked in the balls.

Gabe slowed his approach as a smirk formed on his lips. Beatrice spotted him.

"I don't believe this," Beatrice yelled. "What are you doing here?"

"Watching over you," Gabe stated simply.

An undecipherable look passed over her face. Then her eyes shifted between him and Eric.

"Who's this asshole, Beatrice?" Eric wheezed through his mouth, glaring at Gabe.

"Her man," he responded levelly, ignoring Beatrice's gasp of outrage.

"You fucking replaced me with this gorilla?" Eric snapped.

Gabe paused. He'd gotten back his muscles after he'd deliberately shed some pounds to

fit the mold of a lean assassin who looked good in a suit, but he was far from ape-size right now.

“I didn’t know Beatrice’s taste had changed to pansy-assed rock dicks,” Gabe drawled in response.

Eric straightened and balled his fists at his sides. Indecision was written all over his face whether he should take a swing at Gabe or not. As for Gabe, he almost wished he had, so he could have an excuse to thrash him.

“Hit me. Come on. You know you want to,” Gabe goaded softly.

“Screw this,” Beatrice snapped. “I don’t care if you two kill each other.”

She turned and stalked back into the condo.

Eric started to follow Beatrice, but Gabe blocked him.

“Be a good boy. Get back into your overpriced car and get out of here.” His hands were itching to squeeze the life out of this little shit.

“We’ll have to ask both of you to leave the premises or we’re calling the cops,” a building security guard announced firmly.

Gabe sighed. The last thing he wanted was to get arrested. He raised both his arms in acquiescence. He looked in the direction of the condo and saw Beatrice with her arms folded over her chest, staring at them. He lifted his hand to give her a two-finger salute and walked away.

“So, how about some dinner?” Zach Jamison asked Beatrice after they concluded their first meeting of Senator Mendoza’s security detail. The senator was busy with senate committee hearings and couldn’t make the appointment.

Beatrice had dreaded the question throughout the whole meeting because Zach had hinted at it earlier when he arrived at the BSI office. Doug was frowning at Zach. Nate pretended he didn’t hear the question, and excused himself politely, heading into his office.

“I’ve got a load of paperwork to do.” Beatrice hoped her smile softened the lame excuse. She’d been tense as violin string ever since Gabe had returned. Two days had passed since that confrontation in front of the condo. Eric continued to hound her with phone calls, but hadn’t

shown up at her building again. There was no contact from Gabe, which was adding more to her uneasiness.

Zach shrugged. “Some other time then. Great meeting. The senator will be pleased.” The senator’s Chief of Staff grinned brightly before heading out to the reception area.

When he was out of earshot, Beatrice said, “That smile of his gives me the creeps.”

“Something is not adding up with that guy,” Doug said.

“Huh? How so?”

“He’s coming on to you in public—”

“And?”

“I was pretty sure he was eye-fucking me three nights ago.”

Beatrice stilled, her lips were twitching. “Maybe he’s bi. Look, he’s all yours if you’re jealous.”

Doug huffed. “Don’t be silly. I just don’t trust a guy who does that.”

“Maybe he’s making you jealous?”

“Well, he’s not my type.”

Beatrice had to agree with her assistant there. Doug preferred blue-collar. For all his clean-cut, neatly pressed look, he favored rough-looking guys.

“I’m heading out. I need to drop a couple of contracts with our attorney for them to look over,” Doug said. “You leaving?”

“Nah. I need to catch up with Nate.”

“See you next week then?”

“Enjoy Florida!” Beatrice stepped toward Doug and gave him a hug.

He held her tightly. “I won’t go if you need me here, sweetie. There’s way too many things going on with you.”

“Don’t worry, Nate will take care of me.”

Beatrice found Nathan Reece going over some building blueprints. He was the other partner in Blake Security Incorporated. Because he had been a clandestine agent with the CIA, he preferred not to be identified with the company name. Nate worked more as a silent partner,

having Travis handle most of the face-to-face meetings with the client—or the principal—as was the term professionally used in the security business.

“So what do you think of Zach?”

Nate looked up briefly from the prints before him. “Uh . . . seems like a nice guy.”

“Lame. What is up?”

“Look, Bee, I don’t want to make an assessment of someone based on one meeting.”

“Lie. You were formerly CIA, Nate. Rapid assessments are your forte.”

“He’s our client. I shouldn’t let it affect me.”

“What are you talking about?”

Nate squirmed uncomfortably. “I think he likes me . . . uh . . . that way.”

Beatrice burst out laughing. “Oh, God, how could I be so blind in all this? Well, I don’t ever get any sexual vibes from him except his cheesy smile. How come I’m the one getting a dinner invitation?”

“Search me,” Nate shrugged. “He’s a client. I’ll deal.”

Beatrice walked beside Nate and tucked her arm into his. “We need to find you a nice girl.”

“Leave me alone, Bee. You’re the one who needs to get her ducks in a row.”

Beatrice harrumphed.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but you better not consider taking him back.”

Who was Nate talking about? Gabe or Eric? Had Doug mentioned something to him?

“Uh, who?” Beatrice hedged.

Nate rolled his eyes. “Who else? Eric Stone.” Ever the astute observer though, his eyes narrowed. “Why? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Don’t say anything to Travis yet, okay?”

Nate nodded.

“His SEAL buddy, Gabriel Sullivan, is back in town.”

Nate silently cursed. “You better not consider taking him back either. Is he bothering you? Do you want me to put someone on you?”

“I can handle myself, Nate,” Beatrice snapped.

“He’s bothering you.” Her friend’s brown eyes grew cold. “That fucker. You wanna stay with me for the weekend?”

Beatrice sighed. This was so sad. Before her was the perfect male specimen: tall, a physique that belonged on the cover of a sports magazine, a smile that wouldn’t creep women out, but most likely make their panties drop, and she was friends with the man.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Nate asked warily.

“Like what?”

“Like I was a bug you crushed under your shoe.”

Beatrice shook her head in amusement. “I’m just pissed that all the reliable men in my life are not relationship material. First there’s Doug. Gainfully employed. I don’t know what the hell I’d do without him. He cares for me, loves me, but he’s gay. Then, there’s you. Women drool all over you, and yet you do nothing for me.”

“Wow. Thanks,” Nate said sarcastically, but his eyes glinted merrily. “You’re sexy as hell, too, Bee. I see men look at you and it pisses me off.”

Beatrice raised a brow.

“Because it’s like they’re ogling my little sister,” Nate chuckled and caught her head under his arm and ground his fist on the crown of her head.

Beatrice squealed and kidney punched him. Nate grunted, but continued chuckling.

“Ugh! Stop that. You’re not much older than me,” Beatrice yelled.

“Okay, okay.” Nate let her go. “What do you want?”

“Jeez, you really sound like an older brother being pestered by his five-year-old sister.”

“What do you want, Beatrice?”

“When will Travis and Cat be back?”

“You know when,” Nate said, annoyed. “Tonight. What do you really want?”

Beatrice perched half her butt on his desk, eyeing him knowingly.

“I’m not giving it to you,” Nate said. “I shouldn’t have told you about the inner room at the Diamond Owl. Why do you want to learn about BDSM anyway? You’re not made for that shit, you know.”

“Are you?”

“No.” Nate sat on the chair and leaned back. “It’s not as simple as leather, chains, and whips, Bee. It’s about trust. People think it’s all the rage and think a set of handcuffs translates to BDSM. It doesn’t.”

“You sound knowledgeable.”

“I know some folks who are into that lifestyle. Not for me.”

“I’m curious to know how to control a man’s orgasm. They say—”

“Christ! This conversation has gotten weird—”

“I read that there’s this sub-space—”

“Stop!” Nate growled. He reached for his sticky pad and scrawled a word on it. “Here. It’s Friday night. Now get out of here. I need to get some shit done.”

Grinning triumphantly at a scowling Nate, and with the password to the BDSM club safely in her clutches, she gave him a quick hug and skipped out of the room. Friday was the day after tomorrow. Caitlin should be back by then, and Emily was easy to persuade. She didn’t need to tell them exactly where they were going. For the first time in days, Beatrice felt more like herself—in control and conniving.