Chapter 163 I Didn't Mean To Kill Him

Third Person

The lights never went completely off on the top floor of the Crescent Ventures tower.

Around ten p.m., most of them went into energy-save mode, flickering to less than half their daytime brightness, before turning back up at four a.m.

But the CEO's office lights never timed off or dimmed at all. What a nuisance it would be to have to keep turning them back on. He was in and out of the office at all hours of the day and night, even in times of stability, normalcy. And days like this... well, Conrad was lucky to be able to get out of here at all.

The attempted assassination of the Alpha King had of course thrown the public into a frenzy.

Conrad had spoken to many clients over the past several hours. All the big ones. Had given many reassurances. Had advised against a lot of unwise, panic-fueled ideas. He was exhausted.

But it was not even three a.m. yet, he noted, reading his watch while the elevator doors rolled closed. He was going to come back pretty soon, of course. But he needed to crash out for at least a few minutes, and not in his desk chair. Fifteen minutes, maybe he could get away with.

Or twenty. Maybe even twenty-five. And he needed a proper shower. He smelled like sweat and adrenaline.

What happened today, to Alexander's father, was of course not good. Not good for the firm. Not good for the national economy.

But... at least, Conrad thought privately, hating himself for it all the while... at least it would have Alexander preoccupied. At least his nephew would be busy, and his eyes would not be on his uncle. For at least a little while.

It was not until he was turning the key in his penthouse apartment's front door that Conrad sensed something was wrong.

Something was off.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck.

There was... a presence behind this door.

But he was already opening it.

Fear had always made Conrad bold. There was no "flight" reflex inside his body, no trace of it anywhere. Never had been. Only "fight."

Heart suddenly pounding, Conrad took one big step inside and flicked on the "all lights" switch at the top of the control panel beside the door.

He turned his head.

And found himself face to face with Alexander.

"Oh—son! My boy, you startled me, what are you—what are you doing—?"

His nephew, a few inches taller than him, was still as concrete, his face hardened into something dark that Conrad didn't

recognize, looking down at him with an expression Conrad had never before had the misfortune of witnessing firsthand...

Alexander didn't speak.

The look on his face, though, said enough without words. It said, ENOUGH.

Conrad's fear began to take a new shape, twisting in his stomach like pain.

His faux-innocent blubbering faltered, quieted, and ceased.

His wolf told him to lower his head, to cower. Told him, "It's over."

The stillness, the silence was intolerable.

Conrad's hands were shaking. He had to reach over and release his housekeys into the bowl next to the door, before he dropped them to the floor. His eyes felt wet. He was afraid to blink.

Alexander just stared, and stared, and stared. His eyes, more orange than ever in the too-bright apartment, flickered like fire.

He was done playing games. That's what his eyes were saying.

And he was not happy to have had to play them with Conrad in the first place.

Conrad backed away, slowly, feeling his shoulders hunching as he went, and his head bowing.

He bent to fall backward into an armchair. Had to put his elbows on his knees for balance.

He regretted deeply ever seeing this side of his nephew. If he was still alive in the morning, that look on Alexander's face was still something Conrad would never forget, an image that would stick like resin in his mind's eye and plague his nightmares.

Alexander finally moved. Confirming he was not a statue. Confirming this itself was not a dream. It was really happening.

He paced over to another chair, one that faced his uncle's directly.

Quietly, so, so quietly, he said, "The truth. Where is he?"

Conrad's throat was dry. His voice didn't work.

He knew it might come to this. Alexander was not known for mercy. Conrad thought, hoped, that maybe his own uncle would be the exception. But that was all he had: maybe.

Alexander had come to love Fiona.

He'd put a ring on her finger. A big one.

He loved her.

He married her.

And that made what Conrad had done so much worse.

Without Fiona involved, this still would have been a problem. It would always have been a mistake to disobey a direct order from Alexander.

But now, there was a whole other element at play. An element that, yes, Conrad was aware of, and he should have thought about... but...

The "what-ifs" didn't matter, though. What was done was done.

Conrad coughed to clear his throat. Tried again to speak, to answer.

"I'm sorry, Alexander." The most he could muster was a whisper. "It was an accident."

Alexander

"I'm so sorry. I swear to you, nephew. I didn't plan to kill him. I didn't mean to do it. I didn't mean for any of it to happen."

Oh, Conrad. You fucking idiot.

And I was an idiot, too.

To have believed his stupid story about Fiona's father going into hiding... I hardly paid attention to it at all. My uncle had conned me expertly. I was disgusted with myself for having been such an easy mark.

For trusting someone so blindly.

Even if he was family.

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

Conrad, silent, started shaking like a leaf in the wind. That told me the answer to my question was, "No." All the blood had gone from my uncle's face, leaving it gray.

He had a very particular look in his eyes, one familiar to me. It was the fear of imminent death. The resignation to one's life ending, and ending soon.

But I was not going to hurt Conrad, or anything close to it. Not right now, anyway. And hopefully not ever.

"Where is the body?"

He frowned deeply, shaking his bowed head from side to side.

I dislike repeating myself.

The anger, the frustration, the rage that had been growing ever since I stepped foot inside my uncle's apartment and started waiting for him—it was coming to a simmer inside my veins. Getting my blood hotter, closer, closer to a boil, till—

"WHERE?!" I demanded. My voice was suddenly inhuman, all growl. The sound of it exploded in all directions and smashed again the room's glass walls, shook them, left them vibrating.

"Gone," Conrad whispered. "There's nothing left."

He was about to cry. Or maybe piss himself.

"Enough of that," I barked impatiently. "You're not going to die tonight, Conrad."

The choking sigh of relief he breathed next was like a death rattle.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "Alexander, I..."

"Stop." I didn't want to hear any more apologies or excuses. "Just tell me what happened, Conrad. The real story. The truth."

"I wasn't lying when I left. I've... I've been keeping eyes on him for some time."

"Tell me what that means."

Conrad was still being stupid. It would serve him better to stop hedging. Stop stalling and pleading. I was tired. I just wanted my answer, and wanted to get back to Fiona.

"I was having him followed. Sometimes. Not total, twenty-four hour surveillance."

"Followed..."

"By some well-paid investigators, who signed NDAs."

This mess just kept getting worse and worse. Now there were witnesses involved.

"And then... well, they saw him packing. They saw him leaving town, they followed. They told me. I went where they told me he was, and then called them off. And I followed him myself from there."

Conrad swallowed, his Adam's apple protruding more than ever, bobbing up and down nervously.

"He, uh... he saw me. He made my car. He confronted me. He's... he's a weasel, and stronger than I expected, he got some licks in, but I won him out, of course, and then... well... I couldn't just let him go. I took him and... and..."

I rose to stand slowly. Conrad flinched.

I walked over to the bar and poured him a whiskey.

Thought about it. And poured one for myself, too.

The drink helped. Conrad calmed down and told me the rest of his story with less pauses, hemming, and having.

It helped me calm down, too. Enough to be able to get up and walk out of there when the story was over, without laying a hand on my stupid, stupid uncle.

I did tell him, though, before I left, that he wasn't approved for any more vacation days. And warned him not to leave town again without my permission.