

THE ALPHA KING CALL BOY

Chapter 51 They Were Up To Something



Fiona

It did not take long before I realized exactly what my coworker had meant when he told me that this project would be impossible to get off the ground.

The concept behind the project was simple. Our biggest client, a real estate developer, had all the resources in place to support a rapid expansion into the residential housing market. The only problem was a competitor that was leasing similar properties at unbeatable rates.

Alexander had left the palace for the afternoon, leaving me to my research. I was in bed, propped up against a nest of soft pillows and sipping tea

absentmindedly while clicking around online, looking for information about the rival development firm when, suddenly, a familiar face was smiling up at me from the screen.

It was Scarlet. Alexander's stepmother, the Alpha King's Luna. The reigning queen.

And the very same ruthless, conniving woman who tried to turn me against my fiancé, attempted to frame me for theft, and then wickedly disparaged us both before Alexander's vicious father.

I gasped involuntarily as the pieces clicked into place in my mind, and wound up briefly choking on my tea as a result. Once I caught my breath, I continued reading and confirmed the daunting situation that lay ahead of me.

Scarlet was the primary shareholder in the rival

development company, which had cornered the market on residential housing across the nation. The further I researched, the more connections I found. All roads led back to Scarlet. She had a nearly complete monopoly on the industry.

It was not until my legs and hips began feeling achy that I realized I'd been reading for hours. I closed my laptop and eased my way out of bed. Stopped into the restroom and freshened up. Began to tidy up all my work clutter. All the while, thinking...

About what the future was going to look like, when my new job was requiring me to start a war with a powerful woman who already viewed me as an enemy.

"Is everything alright?" Alexander was looking across the dinner table at me questioningly, his honey-gold eyes full of concern. He reached out for my hand and

gave it a squeeze.

“Oh, yes, I’m fine.” I smiled, enjoying the warmth of his touch and relaxing my hand into his. “It’s just work. I keep thinking about the project I was telling you about this morning. I’m sorry that I am so distracted.”

Alexander nodded understandingly. “You don’t need to apologize,” he said, letting go of my hand. “Were you able to get your research done this afternoon?”

“Well, I would not call it done. But yes, I did some research and reading. And, well, I actually came across something interesting I wanted to tell you about... about your stepmother.”

“Oh? What about her?” Alexander filled his mouth with a forkful of steak and potatoes and looked away. I had been expecting him to be more alarmed, I guess, at the mention of Scarlet. But he looked as

cool as ever, and even, strangely, almost disinterested.

“Well, it looks like I am in for some more conflict with her soon,” I continued. “As it turns out, she is a part owner of the real estate company that we will be competing with once we begin the expansion project and break ground on new developments. I will have to go head-to-head with her at some point, competing for a share of the market that she’s currently dominating.”

Alexander swallowed down his food and cleared his throat. “I did know that she invests heavily in real estate.” He shook his head, looking down the length of the long dinner table contemplatively. “She will not be an easy opponent to challenge.”

“I don’t expect so.” I studied Alexander’s face, trying to read the complicated expression that had just

appeared on it. “I have only just begun my research, but her company’s profit margins seem tremendous. Competing with their rental rates will be our greatest challenge. I will have to figure out how they’re keeping their building costs so low.”

I could tell that this piqued Alexander’s interest. “Hmm. And how do you think you will be able to figure that out?”

I laughed. “Honestly,” I admitted, “I have no idea.”

I wound up thinking about Alexander’s question all that evening, and all throughout the following day as well.

How was I going to figure out what Scarlet and her company were doing to pull off their massive profits?

All I could do was simply get started. Research,

research, and more research. Find out everything that I could and see where the information would lead me.

Nina texted me Sunday night, asking if she was ever going to see me again now that I was working all the time. I wrote out a reply promising we'd hang out soon, but then deleted it slowly, thinking about my project. I simply had to devote all my time and energy to my work right now.

I wrote her back: The next month is going to be a beast for me. I'll have to keep you posted.

She replied: Ok. Just promise you'll take care of yourself while you're working so much, alright?

I found myself holding my phone to my chest for a moment, missing my best friend. I was grateful for her concern. I reassured Nina I was okay, then silenced my phone and flipped it over. And went right back to

work typing search queries quietly under the dim blue glow of my laptop screen, with Alexander fast asleep at my side.

I didn't plan to pull an all-nighter, but my mind would not have let me rest, even if I'd tried to sleep. I clicked every link I could find and learned everything I could about my competitor, from the founding of the company to every detail of their current public records, and everything in between.

Sunday night became Monday morning, and three a.m. found me dressing quickly, wired with adrenaline, and then I was seated in my office on the eighty-ninth floor less than an hour later. The pitch-dark sky and distant city lights beyond the wall of windows made it feel more like night than morning. Most of the floor was dark, but light and sound from Conrad's corner office told me that my boss was also here early.

The longer I thought about it and the more I learned, the more my mind was desperate for an answer to the question of how Scarlet's company was making the kinds of profits they were reporting quarter over quarter for the past ten years. The numbers simply did not add up.

Something was missing from the public record. Something that this company did not want anyone – not just their competitors – to know about.

The incongruities I was finding between what they should have been spending on construction and material costs and the business's gross revenue could not be chalked up to business strategy or trade secrets. They were up to something. Something illegal.

And I was going to find out what it was.

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Chapter 52 Voracious



Fiona

Monday at work rushed by in a blur of data compilation and catered meals that I devoured with an unusually voracious appetite.

Spending more time with Alexander was keeping me in better shape physically. And I had decided that I was done overthinking our relationship. Sure, I enjoyed Alexander's touch and found the sight and smell and feel of his body mouth-watering. But the

bottom line was that I needed his body close to mine for practical reasons. I had, after all, moved into the palace with him for the express purpose of sleeping beside the father of my child, whose strength our cub needed nearby to survive – without killing me in the process.

I wolfed down my breakfast, lunch, and dinner in my office, for the first time in weeks declining all meeting invitations, keeping my office door locked, and bossily telling all my colleagues that I was too busy to chat, consult on the projects, or endure their presence for any other reason at all. And I spent the day pulling all the data that I could find about Scarlet's development company. In the evening, I printed all the reports I'd compiled and brought them home with me to look them over later.

I was exhausted, nearly falling asleep in the car on the way back to the palace. I fully intended to get the

rest that I needed as soon as I returned to our room.

But I found that Alexander was still out in the training field with his soldiers, and though I could certainly eat without him, I wanted to wait to have dinner with him later. The more time we could spend together, the better. And waiting on Alexander for dinner also provided me with some time to kill. Time that I could use to do just a little more work before my Alpha was back here, narrowing his eyes at me and demanding that I take a break from my workaholism.

I looked over at our huge bed covered in golden silks, with all the plush pillows that were fluffed and arranged neatly by the maid staff daily in our absence. It looked much too comfortable right now, as sleep deprived as I was. I set myself up at the table in the corner of the room instead, sitting upright in front my open laptop with a stack of reports beside me, ready to start reading and taking notes.

I didn't let myself change into more comfortable clothes or even take my shoes off. I was sure that doing this would help keep me awake. I pulled my hair up into a tight bun, drank down a glass of water, and blinked at the computer screen determinedly.

Alexander

Returning to our room after an evening training session with my men, I expected to find Fiona working on her laptop as she always was these days. Probably in bed with pillows all around her.

I often admonished my pregnant Luna about needing to rest at home and leave work behind in the office, but I was wasting my breath. Fiona was going to do what Fiona wanted to do. And I was the one who had given her this job, after all, and I had a huge stake in her success, too.

Entering our bedroom, I found her passed out at the table, looking absurdly uncomfortable. My eyes widened and I could not help but laugh aloud at the scene, which was like a poster warning against overworking yourself. She was dead to the world, snoring loudly, with her face flattened sideways on her laptop keyboard.

I came around beside her and gently lifted her head, cradling it in my hands. She stopped snoring but remained limp, deeply unconscious. I smiled, trying to stifle my laughter so as not to wake her, and gently lifted her body into my arms, holding her against my chest and carrying her to the bed.

I got her head set comfortably on a pillow and sat down on the bed beside her, then started undressing her. I was quite sure that I would wake her up at some point and continuously shook my head in disbelief as

she remained fast asleep, out cold. I removed her shoes, jacket, dress, and stockings, then finally covered her over with a blanket, taking a strange pleasure in having an opportunity to take good care of her while she was in such an uncharacteristically vulnerable state.

Papers were scattered all over the floor around the table, obviously having been shoved off the surface by the sleeping Fiona as she crashed down into them, unconscious. I went over to pick them up. As I collected all the loose papers, I noticed that they were all one type of document. Spreadsheets full of data.

Once all the papers were back on the table in a big, clumsy pile, I looked over at Fiona in bed. She was still dead asleep. It did not seem like she would rouse anytime soon.

I took the opportunity to rifle through her

spreadsheets, studying the headers and sources and quickly ascertaining that Fiona was digging into my stepmother's rival real estate company. She was looking for something. I recalled our brief conversation over the weekend, when Fiona told me she was going to figure out how exactly Scarlet's company was dominating the market.

Just as I was about to get up and head into the shower, something on one of the reports stood out to me suddenly, catching my eye. The name on a vendor account.

I recognized the company name from somewhere, which was not surprising. I was, after all, the controlling owner of Crescent Ventures, and though my other responsibilities leading the King Pack and fighting in the vampire wars kept me away from my work in the business world for stretches of time, I was well versed in the affairs of my company. I had been

keeping tabs on Scarlet's property development and management companies for many years.

And this vendor listed on Fiona's report... My instinct told it was fraudulent. Not a real company.

Maybe it was a shell corporation, a front that Scarlet or her cohorts were using to launder income from other activities. I had never heard of the business, and if it had been legitimate, that would simply not be true. Its name was also strangely familiar, though I couldn't pinpoint where I had heard it.

I wished that I could tell Fiona about my suspicion. Tell her why this data point was relevant and worth further investigation. But how would I be able to explain how I knew anything about her work without revealing that I was secretly her boss, the one who hired her and set her up with this project? I simply could not.

I jotted down the name of the company in the notes app on my phone, then placed the report back on top of the stack of papers and straightened it out. I closed Fiona's laptop quietly and plugged it into a charger she kept plugged into the wall near her bedside table.

Standing beside the bed, near her where she lay still fast asleep, propped like a ragdoll in exactly the place I'd positioned her, I could not help but reach out and touch her. I ran my fingers across her soft silver hair and brought my lips to her face...

I did not kiss her lips – I had promised – but kissed her cheek instead. And endured an unexpected pang of longing for the sweet flavor of her mouth and the incredible rush that had overtaken me the one and only time I'd tasted it.

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Chapter 53 She's Better On Your Side

Fiona

“There she is,” Conrad said, a broad, toothy grin on his face as he rounded the corner into my office. “My superstar.”

I squinted at my boss, looking for a trace of sarcasm on his face. But he seemed to be acting genuinely. I didn't reply, waiting for an explanation for this sudden effusion of praise and suspicious cheerfulness.

“I just got off the phone with the escrow company.” Conrad sat across from me at my desk. It felt odd. He

had never sat down in here before, and his large frame looked out of place in a chair designated for visitors. “I don’t know how you pushed that paperwork through so quickly, but it’s already been approved, and we are ready to break ground on the first site next week.”

My usually well-controlled professional demeanor faltered for a minute, a huge smile breaking across my face. “Really? I tried to pressure them into moving up the close date, but I didn’t actually think they’d give me the first date that I asked for.”

Conrad pressed his fingertips together in front of his chest, making a steeple with his big hands. He looked to the right, studying a spot on the wall or perhaps visualizing something in its place. “Whatever you did,” he said, turning back to me, “it worked. Keep doing it.”

“I heard you’re breaking ground on the first building

project already.” Gerald, my coworker who had laughed in my face the day he learned that I was trying to launch this project within a month, was looking sheepish. His eyes were flicking up and down from me to his coffee and then back again.

“Yep.” I held back a smug smile. There was no need to gloat. I could see in his eyes that my colleague was already eating crow. I rinsed my mug in the sink and set it upside down to drip dry while my tea water boiled.

Gerald’s head bobbed up and down. “It’s impressive,” he said quietly. “How are you pulling it off?”

I took a seat in a cushioned armchair across the table from Gerald, who was eating his lunch alone in the break room while reading a newspaper.

“Relentless badgering,” I answered with a sigh, a

combination of fatigue and newly emerging confidence making me recklessly honest for the moment. “Wildly lowballing negotiations just to see what would happen. Weeks of sleep deprivation and a total lack of work-life balance. Ha.”

Gerald froze, a forkful of steak tartare suspended in the air about an inch away from his half-open mouth.

The tea kettle started to whistle. I stood, crossed the room, and fixed my tea.

“I’ll see you later, Gerald,” I said on my way out, flashing him a polite smile.

He looked at me with his lips closed over a mouthful of food, chewing slowly, his eyes still looking stunned, and nodded once before I slipped away.

Third person

Scarlet was pacing the length of the empty boardroom, shaking with anger.

She had been working for so many years to ensure that Lucas would inherit the throne and become Alpha King. But that infuriating, relentless Alexander just could not be killed, no matter how many plots Scarlet devised to put him in harm's way. Her son's rival seemed to survive everything, always coming crawling back, like a cockroach.

And even more of Scarlet's hard work had gone into her business dealings. For years, she labored over strategic acquisitions and investments, working toward a long-term plan that had only just begun bringing in that beautiful, endless influx of cash she'd been waiting on. And now, Alexander and his pregnant whore were again interfering in her business.

As if it weren't bad enough that Alexander had revealed to the King that Scarlet had been embezzling from the royal accounts. His accusations had not yet been definitively proven, but they did leave Scarlet scrambling to hide evidence before it could be found by investigators. And it could still possibly land her in prison, or worse, if the King found anything he believed incriminated his wife beyond doubt.

And now, Fiona was suddenly working for Alex's uncle's investment firm, and leading the cause to expand one of their client's businesses. A client that would directly compete with Scarlet's company. Scarlet had only just heard about Fiona's involvement with the firm, but then within days, Crescent Ventures announced they already had a series of housing tracts under construction and would be leasing them within a month.

It was unbelievable. The world of real estate was notoriously slow-moving. Buyer delays, seller delays, and escrow delays were the norm. Somehow, Alexander's pretty, young Luna fast-tracked her deals.

If Crescent's project was successful, they were set up to directly squeeze out a third of Scarlet's market. And something about it being Fiona's doing just made it so much worse.

Fiona not only got herself knocked up and then moved, unwelcomed, into Scarlet's palace, but also had the nerve to defy the queen in public. Not once, but twice. And now the bitch was coming after Scarlet's money. That was the line. It had been crossed.

A woman cleared her throat behind Scarlet, catching the queen's attention. "I am SO sorry," the assistant

said, taking more steps into the room than Scarlet considered to be necessary. “But are you ready to start the meeting? I have the board of directors waiting. They’re all here, Ma’am. I mean, Your Highness.”

Scarlet raised a thin black eyebrow at the young woman, silently judging everything about her. “Send them in,” she said, pleased when the girl went away without further awkward chatter.

The board president, sitting nearest to Scarlet, made a constricted, groaning sound in his throat before he spoke. “However effective your plan could be, the amount of money you are asking to invest in this price war, on top of the ad campaign, is simply beyond the realm of possibility.”

“Thank you for your opinion,” Scarlet replied, giving the man a stern look. “But while you may lead the

board, you do not speak for all members.”

She moved her gaze to the next board member beside the president. He hesitated a moment, then stated, ambiguously, “It’s a risky move.”

“A calculated risk,” Scarlet replied confidently. “We cannot sit idly by while a new competitor begins to build an empire on our backs. We cannot let Crescent Ventures encroach on our target market and do nothing to counter-attack.”

After challenging each of the board members individually in turn, Scarlet then ordered an official vote. Again, they moved around the table in a circle, with each person now saying only “Aye” or “Nay.”

“The ayes have it,” the queen said in summation, smirking at the board president after all the votes had been cast.

His only response was a slight, resigned shrug of his shoulders.

“I will assemble a team right away,” Scarlet continued, addressing the room at large. “The advertising campaign will make all the difference. We’ll be sure everyone knows they can’t trust Crescent Ventures and remind them of their loyalty to our brands.”

The energy amongst the group was mixed. Those who knew Scarlet well, even if they were not thrilled about investing company resources in a blatantly unethical smear campaign, knew better than to oppose her outright. The board had an obligation to voice dissent to their CEO when necessary, but they only ever did so meekly, never supporting that dissent with their votes.

They knew that it was, simply, better to have her on

your side.

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Chapter 54 Betting On Myself



Fiona

I was already standing in front of the TV, mouth agape in shock, watching one of the ads as it played live, when Nina called.

“Yeah, I’m looking at it now,” I answered, scoffing.

“How can they even air something like this? It’s totally baseless.”

Nina snorted. “You can put anything on TV. And on the internet. And people really do.”

I took a huge breath in and out, trying to calm myself. But the voice on the commercial kept droning on, unnerving me more with each over-enunciated word. It was basically a smear campaign against Crescent Ventures and our development partner, warning people against what the ad claimed was a dishonest business that would swindle them out of their hard-earned money.

My body suddenly felt shot, depleted of every ounce of energy.

If people really believed these ads, my project was going to tank. And I had already allocated every dollar in my operating budget, with a team preparing our new construction sites as we spoke. I suddenly regretted not budgeting for a contingency plan.

I turned the TV off and sat down on the bed, feeling queasy. I put my phone on speaker and set it on the pillow next to my head.

“You okay, Fiona?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” I sounded breathless and exhausted all of a sudden.

Nina growled quietly. “You haven’t been doing what you told me you would, have you, Fi? You promised me you were gonna take care of yourself.”

“I know.” I groaned, frowning.

“When’s the last time you ate?” she asked. “When’s the last time you slept?”

“Not that long ago,” I answered honestly.

“Okay, well did you eat enough? Sleep enough?”

“Alright, you got me Nina. Yes, I need more food and more sleep. I’m lying down in bed right now if that helps you. What else do you want me to do?”

Nina paused, contemplating. “Can I come over?” she asked. “I know you’re busy, but I won’t stay long. Just want to drop in and give you a hug, and make sure that you eat something. Can I?”

“Let me guess. You’re already with Kayden as we speak.”

“Uh, no. I’ve put him on ice, actually. He was getting a little clingy.”

I laughed. “Oh, poor Kayden. How are you planning on getting here, then?”

“Oh, I’m gonna call him. I’ve been keeping him waiting for a few weeks, so I’m sure he’s thirsty. He’ll come running.”

“Nina,” I said with a tone of mock reprimand. “You are evil!”

She giggled innocently. “Nah. He likes it. Listen, I’ll call you back after I talk to him, okay? Don’t go falling asleep before you can eat anything.”

I got up and changed out of my work clothes while I waited for Nina, my body moving slowly while my mind raced. I could still hear the annoying voice from the TV commercial playing in my mind, warning people not to rent or buy our new properties.

But I could not give up on this project, even if it was dead in the water. I had put so much of my life force

into it already.

Everything I told Gerald about my early successes with the project was completely true. I was working myself to the bone for this venture. I absolutely could not let all that effort be in vain.

When Conrad hired me, he gave me an initial salary offer that just about made my heart stop. It was far beyond what my father had ever paid me. But I swallowed my surprise and excitement and negotiated with Conrad for an even bigger number. He would have been turned off if I didn't.

I was proud of my salary, but the strangest part was that I didn't even need the money. Not now, at least, while all my needs were taken care of at the palace. So far, my income only ever went directly into my savings account, and nowhere else.

I headed into the bathroom to wash my face, trying to revive my energy before Nina came over, and thinking over the facts at hand.

The smear campaign was out there, wreaking havoc on our brand. It required a response. A response would cost money. And I had nothing left in the budget for new press and advertising. I could, of course, simply ask Conrad for an increase in the budget, but there was no telling how that would go over. At a minimum, it would give him a reason to doubt that I could handle unexpected obstacles on my own.

I finished touching up my makeup and brushed out my hair, then went back to sit in bed, where I opened my online banking app and checked the balances in my accounts. There was a substantial amount there to work with.

It was a gamble, throwing my own resources into fighting our competitor. But I had a feeling it was going to pay off, and betting on myself was the only move I had.

Alexander beat Nina to the palace, arriving a few minutes ahead of her. I told him I'd invited her over and he smiled in response.

"I'm glad you're making time for something other than work. How long has it been since you've seen Nina?"

"A few weeks, I think. I miss her a lot."

"Let me guess," he said with a knowing smile. "My Beta is already on his way to retrieve her?"

I mumbled mm-hmm, pressing my lips closed tightly. I didn't feel like I could speak to Alexander on this topic without revealing too much about my wild friend's

gameplay with his second-in-command.

Alexander narrowed his eyes at me questioningly, looking like he was trying to hold back a smile as well. I got the feeling that maybe Kayden had been confiding in Alexander about Nina, too. For whatever reason, thinking about this made me burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“I’m sorry,” I said, doubled over and trying to catch my breath.

“No, I get it.” Alexander never really laughed, but I heard in his voice a hint of a chuckle. “They’re quite a pair.”

“And you really don’t mind her joining us for dinner?”

Alexander shook his head, his brow furrowed. “Of course not. I’ll ask Kayden to stay and eat with us,

too. It'll be fun.”

My phone chimed with a text from Nina, confirming they were at the palace already and heading through the West Wing now. I conveyed this to Alexander, and we took a few minutes to ready ourselves separately.

“Wait,” he said from behind me when I touched the doorknob, just about to leave.

“What?” I turned and found Alexander approaching with one hand outstretched. I placed my own into it and he pulled me in close, wrapping me up in a big hug. I let my face fall comfortably against his chest, breathing in his scent. His energy started flowing into my body immediately, reviving me.

Alexander bent to press his mouth and nose to my neck, sniffing my skin compulsively. His beard tickled, making me start giggling again.

“Sorry,” he said, pulling away with an amused smile. He stroked my cheek lightly and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Let’s get going. We probably should not leave those two alone and unsupervised for too long.”

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Chapter 55 She Doesn’t Fight Fair



Fiona

My press release went out in morning, and though it was just one step of many toward recovering our public image, I felt like I was at least making progress.

But then, only hours later, the other shoe dropped.

The first domino to fall was a phone call from one of our suppliers, from whom we sourced wood, stone, and other natural building supplies. The company abruptly terminated their contract with our developer, offering no explanation. This would be a significant setback on its own, but it should not have been too debilitating. I expected it would cause a delay while I found another supplier to work with.

But the worst was yet to come. I began to look for another vendor, but quickly found it was not going to be easy. I ended up contacting just about every building supply company and lumber yard across the country, and every single one of them refused to sell us any materials.

“Our entire inventory was bought out just yesterday. We will have more wood available next month.” That

was the reply from one vendor – the only one willing to speak to me for longer than two seconds.

“We can’t accommodate on short notice.” That was the most popular answer.

One woman simply hung up on me when I asked why I could not place an order with her. And many more vendors did not even take my call or return my messages at all.

I was sitting in my office, watching big white clouds blowing by outside my window and contemplating just how much money it must take to monopolize an entire nation’s supply of a basic resource like wood, when my phone rang. It was Scarlet.

“Queen Luna,” I answered through gritted teeth. “I see that you have been busy.”

She laughed mirthlessly. “You are one to talk, Fiona. That silver tongue of yours must be useful to you in the workplace, in addition to making you so very insufferable. You have managed to make some impressive deals for Crescent Ventures over the past few weeks.”

“What is it that you want, Scarlet?” I snapped, growing impatient.

“Ooh. That’s right, you have a lot to do. No time for chit-chat.” She chuckled once again, then dropped the cocky sarcasm when she continued. “Your path forward is simple, Fiona. Cancel your project, sell the properties you have been acquiring, and be grateful that you are not looking at a much larger loss than whatever measly startup investment you have already thrown into this ill-advised enterprise.”

I was furious. “This is criminal extortion,” I snapped.

She chuckled. I could practically hear the smug smile on her lips and see it in my mind. “You and your fiancé have a bad habit of accusing me of crimes without any real evidence to back up your claims. You should be careful about that.”

I paused, taking a long but quiet breath. I did not want Scarlet to think that she could bait me into an emotional outburst with her taunting. “You would really stoop to such a low,” I asked calmly, “just because you’re afraid of a little business competition?”

“I am simply protecting my assets, and I am afraid of nothing.” Scarlet’s voice became hoarse, almost a growl as she added, “And you would do very well to remember that.”

I was exhausted when I got home. I was lying in bed

awake, just staring at the wall, lost in thought, when Alexander came in.

“Hey. Are you okay?” he asked immediately, looking very concerned.

“I’m fine.” My voice came out sounding raspy, and I realized that my throat was sore from talking on the phone all day as I tried to sort out the crisis at work. I cleared my throat and sat up, resting my weight against the headboard. I wanted to put Alexander’s mind at ease. He was always anxious about my health lately. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to worry you. I’m alright. Just had a tough day at work.”

Alexander nodded. “Conrad called me, actually. He told me all about what happened.” He jutted his chin at a glass of water on my nightstand, reminding me to take care of myself. I took a sip.

I was glad I did not need to explain the whole thing to him. Living through this workday was hard enough. I did not want to have to repeat the whole awful story. “I feel like I am almost at my wit’s end,” I confessed. “Scarlet doesn’t fight fair. And she has all the power in this situation. I have no leverage against her.”

He shrugged, frowning. “That may be true. But my stepmother has also never had such a tough opponent before.”

The vote of confidence felt nice, but I could not be sure if Alexander was just trying to make me feel better or if he really believed this sentiment. “Either way,” I said, dismissing the compliment, “all I can do is keep trying. Keep showing up and doing everything that I can, until someone tells me that it’s over.”

A half-smile crept up one side of Alexander’s mouth. “That is a good attitude,” he said. “Persistence is an

underrated virtue. People like Scarlet often get their way not by force, but by intimidation. She's a bully. She expects that when she puts pressure on someone, they will eventually give up and give in."

"You might be right then, that I am not the type of opponent she is used to fighting. Giving up isn't something that I do. I'll fight her until I can't anymore."

Alexander grinned. I suspected it was because he liked hearing me say that he was right. Then it looked like he was just about to say something, but he stopped himself.

I took the opportunity to continue talking through my thought. "Right now, Scarlet is just throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks. She can't keep doing that forever. Even she will run out of lies and money to tell them with, at some point. Maybe somehow, I can outlast her."

Alexander approached my bedside and held out his hand. I slipped mine into it, and he tugged gently, encouraging me to get up.

“You need to eat something,” he said. “And all this business with Scarlet is not going to be resolved tonight. You can take a break from worrying about her to take care of yourself. Or at least, to let me take care of you.”

I let him pull me out of bed and was a little surprised when he pulled me in close to his body, hugging me tightly. But it felt amazing. Every time he touched me, it was a reminder of how necessary it was for us to be together like this. I felt my strength returning, his energy warming the blood in my veins.

Pulling back to look at me, Alexander stroked my cheek and neck gently, making my spine tingle. I

couldn't help that my eyes fluttered closed, and I purred a little at the pleasure of his touch.

“Let's go get you some food,” he said, dropping his hand. “Before we get too distracted.”

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