



A DARK MAFIA
ROMANCE

sinful
LORD

SASHA LEONE

SINFUL LORD

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RUTHLESS DYNASTY BOOK 3

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Who is Sasha Leone??

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PROLOGUE

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MELINA

1 year ago...

The moment I turn into the long dark hallway, the air shifts.

Something is wrong.

I've lived in this house all of my life, I know how it's supposed to feel.

Not like this.

"... Hello?" I whisper, gazing into the shadows ahead. Pale moonlight drifts through the drapes, slicing the black carpet into pieces.

I squint harder, staring down the long column before me. Nothing moves.

Then, I see it.

A shape. A giant outline. It looms just feet away, tall and still and massive.

My heart stops. Every hair on my body lifts. The strange air is sucked from my lungs.

When it moves, I whimper in fear. But my body won't budge.

Explanations race through my mind. Could it be one of my brother's bodyguards?

No. I know where they station at night, and it's not here. In fact, they've been given direct orders to stay away from this part of the mansion. The path from my basement studio to my upstairs bedroom is to remain clear of any reminders that I'm a captive in my own home.

My kingpin brother meant it as an act of mercy, but now it feels like a foolish mistake. Anyone could be lurking in these shadows.

My heart pounds as I blink back the darkness and try to focus on what I just saw. When I don't immediately see anything, I almost manage to convince myself that it was all just a trick of my tired mind.

It would be understandable. I've been spending way too many hours in my studio, and there isn't much ventilation in that place.

But when I see the colossal shadow move again, my doubts are dashed. I'm not hallucinating.

I'm ready to scream when a cool breeze wraps around my face. Directly in front of me, a pair of long drapes flutter harmlessly off the wall.

For a moment, I relax.

It's just the drapes, I tell myself. That's all. Just the—

But I stop when I realize what that means.

An open window.

When your family is part of the mafia, you learn to keep all windows locked and closed. It's a cardinal rule—an unforgettable safety measure.

"Maksim?" I whisper, hoping beyond hope that my uncle is nearby. He could be coming down the hall to check up on me. It wouldn't be the first time.

The drapes flap back into place.

"I'm afraid not," a voice replies.

It's so unexpected that my body reacts before my brain can. I jump back against the wall and hug it with all my might.

"Now, now, don't be scared, little one. I'm not here to hurt you..."

A cold sting pricks my skin as the air shifts again. I can't hear the approaching footsteps, but I can feel them. They're as heavy as the weight pressing down against my pounding chest.

The blinds flap again, obscuring my view.

"Who... Who are you?" I whisper, remembering all the warnings my brother and uncle peppered me with after they explained the danger we were in.

I'd brushed them all off.

I was naïve.

Now, I'm in trouble.

Deep trouble.

Still, I was raised by killers. By hard men and even harder women. Instinctively, my clenched fingers unfurl and my hand blindly searches the wall for something to defend myself with.

But even that instinct withers when the drapes die down again. They fall back into place, and in the darkness up ahead, I spot the giant shadow.

It's even closer now.

I freeze into place as a chill of terror descends upon me.

And then, the shadow steps into a slice of pale moonlight, and the ice cracks.

Ahead, just feet away, stands the intruder, so tall that I can barely see the top of him. He's split down the middle, half covered in darkness, half in moonlight.

"You..." I croak.

The beautiful monster smiles, his thick lips lifting a pair of heavy cheekbones.

"Hush, princess," he says, raising a finger to his mouth. "You mustn't scream... yet."

Beneath his strong brow shimmers a single icy-blue eye. Silver shards sparkle behind its glare.

My breath catches in my throat. My body refuses to move.

But my eyes aren't so restricted. They wander down the monster's hauntingly gorgeous face to the thick neck covered in sharp tattoos. They make his head look like it's planted on a spike or floating in the darkness, bodyless.

But he isn't bodyless.

Because below his ink-marked throat, I can see a tight black t-shirt. It's been partially ripped, revealing a hard, inked-up chest. Steam seems to rise from his skin. His broad shoulders stretch out forever. Another tear in his shirt appears near his abdomen. A hard layer of armored muscle protects his gently heaving ribs.

He softly pants, each breath undercut by a low growl.

"What... what are you doing here?" I quietly beg.

Turning his head, the monster reaches into the endless darkness behind him. The ground trembles.

"I believe this belongs to you."

Even in a whisper, his voice is so deep it rattles my bones.

My lowered gaze drifts back up again as he pulls something forward. Something even more massive than him.

A small gasp escapes my clenched throat.

“... My painting.”

I know that canvas, and the art splashed across it.

It was my most ambitious piece to date. A gift to my brother on the day of his coronation. My first step into the abstract. A point of pride.

But on the day I was supposed to give the masterpiece away, it was stolen, right along with my freedom.

I didn't see who took it, but I've heard who committed the crime. My family's most dangerous rival. A brutal Polish mobster named Tytus Ryzdon.

“Not just any painting,” Tytus says as his singular silver-blue eye studies the painting. “A masterpiece. The colors, the contours, the commitment. It's cutting edge. Bold. Brilliant...” That silver-blue eye turns back onto me. “Beautiful.”

My toes dig into the floor as a dreadful heat rushes through my rigid body.

“You're the one who stole it,” I remind him, my words wavering against the danger I know I'm in.

“How could I not? Just look it at. Irresistible.”

“It wasn't meant for you.”

“Does that matter?” he smirks. “Art is for whoever sees it, wouldn't you agree?”

“I would not.”

“Spoken like a true spoiled princess.”

The heat swirling around in me suddenly turns angry, and the ice encasing my limbs shatters.

“Watch it,” I weakly warn, fingers curling into an even weaker fist.

“Or what?”

I scramble to find a suitable threat.

“... Or I'll scream.”

But we both know I can't. I'm too scared to scream. It's a miracle I'm even able to talk.

I've heard stories about this man. Horrible stories.

The only time I've seen him before seemed to confirm every last one. He was covered in the blood of the men who were tasked with protecting

me. If my uncle Maksim hadn't shown up on time, Tytus might have dragged me back to hell with him.

Maybe he's returned to finish the job.

"No, you won't scream," Tytus says, shaking his head. "If you could, I'm sure I would have already heard it."

With an unbecoming grace, he gently places the giant canvas against the wall, then steps forward.

"What's the matter, princess? Throat too dry?"

"I'm not scared of you," I lie.

"Well, you should be." Another step forward is followed by a brief pause. "Your family sure is."

He's not wrong. After the chaos at the coronation, I saw something I never thought I'd see in my brother's eyes. Fear.

But he quickly swallowed that fear, because that's what people like him do. It's what I should be able to do.

So, why can't I swallow?

"My family isn't scared of anyone," I croak, even if I know that's not entirely true. If there's one thing my family is scared of, it's losing the people we love. It's why I've been locked away: for my own protection.

To my surprise, a gnash of anger takes a small bite out of my fear.

In a way, this is Tytus' fault.

He was responsible for what happened at the coronation. Him and his sister, Rozalia. They scared my family and sealed my fate.

Now, I'm a prisoner.

And it's because of the man standing before me.

"Why are you here?" I ask with all the venom I can muster. The drapes to my right momentarily lift again, flapping against a short breeze before fluttering back down into place.

"A show of goodwill," Tytus shrugs, cranking his bulky neck. "Someone told me that your brother wanted his painting back. But I know it was never really his, so I decided to return it to its rightful owner. And here I am, offering an olive branch in these trying times."

"No," I whisper, brushing aside his mocking words. "You're not here for that."

He's playing with me. Like a predator with his prey.

"You better hope I am," Tytus huffs. One more step forward brings him close enough to feel. That hard body gives off so much heat it's suffocating.

“Because if I’m not here to help, then you are in loads of trouble, little girl.”

“If you’re here to help, then why are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything from you.”

To my complete shock, he lifts a huge hand up to the hole in his shirt and rips it open a few more inches—just enough to expose the deep contour of his tatted peck... and his hard nipple.

The act is like an intense, hot shove against my chest. I’m pushed deeper into the wall. My eyes begin to water. But my toes also curl. My thighs clench. And a worrisome pressure appears in my core.

My reaction must be obvious because even Tytus seems to notice it.

A predator’s instinct dilates his black pupils. He takes another step forward, then another. The sliver of pale moonlight moves across his face, illuminating his other eye briefly before he’s once again shrouded in darkness. But my vision has adjusted, and he’s close enough now that I can see every hard, rugged, smoldering inch of him.

It's overwhelming.

What’s worse than the sight, though, is the smell. An arctic-like aftershave that lifts my chin; tightens my chest; makes my lips quiver.

I can’t help but swallow, even if it hurts. My dry throat contracts against the effort, as raw as ever. But something else threatens to dampen. Something between my legs.

I want to cry.

This is a nightmare and a dirty dream all rolled into one.

“What... what do you want?” I rasp.

In response, Tytus leans forward and sniffs the air right by the most tender part of my neck. I’m completely exposed to the monster, and there’s nothing I can do but wait for him to bite down.

But instead of tearing me apart, he pauses.

“I left something for you on the back of the canvas,” he whispers, his voice impossibly deep. “A little gift to show you just how sincere I am. When you feel like setting fire to this old, boring sheltered life of yours, you take a look, and you take advantage. A bird as pretty as you deserves to be free.”

His words burn into my brain, setting my skull on fire. My pounding heart tugs upwards.

What does he know about me?

“Oh, the fun we could have together,” he growls, his hot breath washing against my virgin skin.

“Please...” I whimper. “... Leave.”

“Only if I can take you with me.”

To my horror, I feel him reach for my wrist.

Something inside of me breaks.

My throat clears. My chest opens up. Finally, I find the strength to do the one thing that can save me from hell.

I scream.

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Present day...

She's even more stubborn than I remember.

"I'm not giving you shit," Yasha spits.

Crossing her thin pale arms, the heiress dips her hip at me. She's doing her best to put on a tough façade, but I know it won't hold up for long.

I'm privy to her all of her weaknesses. The question is, am I willing to act on them to get what I need?

"I didn't ask you for shit," I roll my eyes. "I'm looking for something a lot more valuable than shit. Access. Information."

A girl.

"And you think you can just waltz into my city and ask me for something that precious?"

"Oh, Berlin is suddenly your city?"

"Berlin belongs to the rich, and I'm the richest among them all. So, yes. Berlin belongs to me."

I bite my tongue. This is typical Yasha. A foolish part of me thought she might have softened over the years. Looks like I was wrong.

"Perfect. Then you'll be able to help me get what I'm after," I say, holding back my growl.

"And what exactly are you after?"

"Access. Information," I deflect. Yasha is the jealous type; if she knew what I really wanted, she'd turn right around and walk away, but not before

trying to land a hard slap against my cheek.

“You want access to my company’s security cameras?” she asks. “You mean, the ones we sold to the government? The ones they use to keep watch over these empty streets? The ones we’re not supposed to have access to? You want access to those?”

I shake my head and flick my thumb across my lower lip.

“No,” I grumble. “I don’t want access to *your* security cameras. I want access to your *father*’s security cameras. The ones he put a backdoor into, even after promising the government he wouldn’t. You know, the ones he uses to creep on all the little German school girls as they skip home from class every afternoon.”

Yasha’s painted black lips twist into a grimace at the truth is my accusation. But it’s hardly a well-kept secret.

“I’m afraid my dear old papa’s creeping days are coming to an end,” she snarls.

That lifts my brow. “You’re planning a coup?” I ask, almost impressed. “Didn’t think you had it in you.”

Yasha smiles, sharp cheekbones throwing shade over her sunken cheeks. “You misunderstand me,” she says, taking a seductive step forward. “I’m only planning one thing...”

I let her get close enough to touch me, but when her long black fingernail lifts to trace a line down my chest, I grab her wrist and hold on tight.

“I’m not yours to touch anymore,” I remind her.

Yasha’s spindly fingers stretch and curl as she tries to break free from my grip. But it’s no use.

“You were never really mine,” she finally sighs, giving up. “And I was never really yours, was I?”

“Now you’re starting to understand.”

The moment I loosen my grip on her, Yasha rips her arm away. A temperamental fury clamps her lips shut as she scrunches her nose and looks down at the marble perron.

Behind her, a giant mansion rises to the clouds. When I first arrived, the grandeur of the place made her seem so much bigger than she actually was. Now, it makes her look so much smaller.

“You know, I’m not upset with you,” she starts, looking back up at me with ready-made doe eyes. “I know how this world works. I know how men

like you work. Powerful people use each other.”

“How profound,” I dismiss her, looking back over my shoulder. My car is still running. The exhaust billows into the cold air like smoke. A cold breeze washes over my shoulder.

This is getting tiresome. I could use some warmth, but Yasha isn’t the one who’s going to give it to me. I already have my mind set on someone else.

Melina Kilpatrick is somewhere in this city. I’m sure of it. Yasha’s cameras are going to help me find her. All I need to do is gain control of them, and quickly.

Because I’m not the only one looking for the Irish princess.

“You want to use me for access,” Yasha continues. “But what do I get in return? How can I use you?”

“How do you want to use me?” I instinctively reply, looking back at her.

“You know how,” she whispers, her black lips parting.

When she reaches for my arm, though, I pull back. It’s a concentrated effort. Usually, I’d lean into her desire. I’d give her what she wants in order to get what I need.

All my life, I’ve used sex as a tool. A weapon. A first resort. It’s been a way to climb ladders and gain immeasurable power. But now, it feels wrong.

I’ve committed myself to someone else. And for as deranged as I can be, there’s no denying my loyalty.

Right now, that loyalty is directed toward the daughter of my greatest enemy. The runaway mafia princess who, strangely enough, has somehow become my estranged sister’s best friend.

That odd connection won’t save her from me, though.

Melina Kilpatrick is my number one priority, whether she likes it or not.

“Think of another way,” I say, sternly.

Slowly, Yasha’s doe-eyes turn sharp again. “There’s someone else, isn’t there? Who is it? Who’s tamed the savage and wild Tytus Ryzdon, huh? Tell me!”

Her shout is muffled by the thin sheet of snow on the ground. But her rage cuts through the frosty air like a knife.

“No one’s tamed me,” I sneer back. “And no one ever will.”

“Yeah, right,” Yasha snorts. “Don’t expect me to help you.”

She whips around, but before she can reach the safety of her home, I grab her wrist and twist her back around.

Only a small yelp manages to escape her throat as I push her against the door.

“You misunderstand,” I growl, throwing those words right back in her face. “I’m not asking. I’m telling.”

A flash of fear quivers behind her pale green eyes before something far more disturbing appears in its place.

“I missed this,” she smirks, puffing her chest out towards me.

I release her before we can make contact.

“You’ll miss breathing too if you don’t give me what I want.”

“No. You would never kill an innocent woman like me, Tytus,” Yasha sighs. “You’re not the type, I know that much. Your brutality only goes so far.”

“I can show you just how far it goes,” I growl, reaching into my pocket.

“Oh, you already have,” Yasha quickly responds, throwing her hands up in surrender. “And I’ll never forget it. Hell, I still touch myself to the memories we share. No one has ever made me feel like you did, or pushed me so close to my limits. No one has ever invaded me like you have. Controlled me.”

“You don’t seem like a woman who’s under someone else’s control.”

“That’s because I’m not. Not out here. I’m too rich for that. It’s only behind closed doors that you will see me beg, and unless you want to drag me behind this one, I will not bow to your demands. Go have fun with whatever hussy you’ve fallen for. I doubt she will be able to give you as much as I can.”

Once more, Yasha turns to leave, and once more I remind her that neither of us are going anywhere. Not until I get what I want.

This time, though, she manages to grab the knob and open up the door an inch before I punch it shut again.

“Yasha von Bingen, you will give me what I want.”

“Or what?” she snaps, twirling back around.

I warn her with a single look.

She shivers. But, to her credit, doesn’t back down.

“I’ve changed, you know,” she says. “After you, I decided that the snug little life of a spoiled heiress wasn’t enough for me. I went searching for more men like you. There are none. But at least I got something out of it.

Now, I know people in the underworld. People other than you. I know how this works. You think you have something on me, otherwise, you'd give me what I really want in return for my help, and we'd already be done with each other."

"Now you're starting to get it."

"So what is it?" She asks, studying my steely glare. "Ah, I see. You think I'm scared of what you know. Really? You'd go to the government, Tytus? You'd become a snitch and tell them all about how my father built a backdoor into their precious little security system? How we can watch every inch of this city with an eagle's eye?"

I let her talk as I pull out my phone.

"You don't even have to tell me how you'd do it," she continues. "I bet that whiz-kid sister of yours—what was her name again? Rozalia?— I bet she could hack into our systems and find some proof of our wrongdoings. Something you could present to the authorities that bring my father down. Is that your plan? Is that really how far you've fallen?"

Yasha's fury builds as I ignore her for my phone. My thumb slides up and down as I search for the long-buried piece of blackmail.

"Well, let me tell you," she starts to scream. "It's not going to work. You heard me earlier. Papa von Bingen isn't long for this world. The old man is sick and fading by the minute. Any heat we get for the illegal spyware that *he* installed into our cameras will be put at his cold, dead feet. And when he finally kicks the bucket, I'll inherit the company; I'll denounce his actions, and I'll have a clean slate to start with. Your threats won't work on me, Tytus Ryzdon. Your blackmail is useless."

"No," I chuckle, pulling up the video that will shut Yasha up once and for all. "My blackmail is never useless. There will be no clean slate for you, Yasha von Bingen. Not unless you do what I say."

Without another word, I lift my phone and flip it around so she can see what has started to play on my screen.

At first, her pale green eyes don't quite seem to understand what she's looking at. But that confusion slowly contorts into horror.

Her plastic jaw drops.

"You... you recorded that?" she gulps.

"This and so much more," I reveal. "Or don't you remember how you begged me to document everything I taught you? Ah, you were such a dirty

girl. Imagine the scandal. The von Bingen heiress does... this?" Sliding my thumb up, I start to increase the volume.

"No..." Yasha swallows, understanding everything.

Her hate melts away.

"What will the tabloids say?" I continue to push. "What will the board of directors think? They can't have someone like this tarnishing their company's reputation. Can they?"

"You... you're despicable."

"Surprise, honey. Looks like I haven't fallen as far as you thought. I was always at the bottom, kicking around in hell. Now, run inside and get me the specs I need to use your cameras. I want eyes on this entire city by midnight."

Yasha opens her lips to respond, but when I give my head a stern shake, she understands that our conversation is over.

I've won.

"Those videos better not get out," she spits.

"There's only one way to guarantee that."

A heavy pause fills the air between us. For a moment, our smoky breaths swirl in silence.

Then, finally, Yasha gives in.

"You're a fucking villain," she says.

"And don't you forget it."

Turning on her heels, she reaches for the door and pulls it open.

I let her storm inside.

She's going to get what I need. Finally.

Shoving my phone away, I turn from the door and look back out into the cold night. Tiny flakes of snow have started to fall again. My car idles peacefully, the inside bathed in soft yellow light.

A deep, crisp breath fills my lungs. I close my eyes.

Melina Kilpatrick's bright hazel eyes stare back at me. Her intoxicating figure comes into view. I remember her scent. The warmth that radiated off her body the night I returned her painting.

I could have taken her then, but that would have ruined everything.

For my plan to work, she has to want me. *Need* me.

Choose me.

I can make that happen. Even if it means employing some of my more sinful tricks.

But first, I have to find her. And I have to do it before anyone else can.

The entire underworld is after the escaped Kilpatrick princess. They'll show up eventually. When they do, Melina Kilpatrick must already be mine. Entirely.

It's the only reason I helped her escape that overbearing family of hers.

She'll quickly learn the price of freedom.

It starts by giving me what I want.

Everything.

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“You don’t belong here.”

The raspy voice skips through the low beating bass and jumbled din of the underground bar.

I’ve been working here for long enough now to know that those words are meant for me. There’s no point in pretending I didn’t hear them. The more you ignore the creepy customers, the louder they get.

Reaching under the bar, I grab an empty glass and look toward my newest challenge.

He’s a rough-looking middle-aged man, portly and covered in a glistening film of sweat that weighs down the three or so greasy strands of hair he has left on his pale bald head.

“I could say the same about you,” I try to play along.

I try to hold back my sigh, but inside, I’m already cringing. This isn’t how my life was supposed to turn out. Berlin was supposed to be an escape, not another trap.

“No, no, no,” the man slurs. His tiny black eyes pounce around the dim light, shimmering with dull mischief. “I belong here. Believe me. I’m the scum of the earth. A complete loser. It’s written all over my face. But your face? It was clearly drawn by a master. By God-himself even!”

“We’re all drawn by God, aren’t we?” I mutter. Placing the empty shot glass on the table, I lift my chin and gesture for him to order.

He chooses to ignore me.

“Ah, how true. You—you must be a poet,” he burps, leaning closer. “There are a lot of those in Berlin. Poets. The good ones have wealthy

patrons. They don't have to work in Kreuzberg bars."

"I guess I must not be a good one then."

"Or maybe you're not a poet?"

At that, the man lets out another table-shaking burp. Someone elbows him in the back, but he hardly notices.

"What will it be?" I ask, pointing down at his empty glass.

When I first started working here, I might have jumped at the opportunity to speak about my art, about what I do. But the longer I'm stuck here, the less it feels like I do anything but serve drinks, fend off handsy customers, and hope that I'm not found by the army of mobsters I'm sure are looking for me.

The designation of what exactly I am has become a sore spot for me.

Last year, the answer would have been obvious.

I was a mafia princess. The youngest daughter of the Kilpatrick crime family. In my free time, I painted. My dream was to travel to Italy and study under a master.

But then life got in the way. War broke out. I was locked back into my gilded cage with more force than ever before. I was forcefully reminded of my true identity.

I wasn't a mafia princess.

I was a captive.

Until I met him...

"What will it be? Hmmm," the man ponders. "Can I have you?"

Thinking about Tytus makes my stomach flutter and my chest clench. But it also gives me a strange sense of confidence. If I can survive an encounter with that monster, I can deal with this drunk asshole.

"I'm not on the menu," I say, reaching for the empty glass.

But the second I'm in range, the man lunges out and grabs my wrist.

"Does that mean I don't have to pay for your services?" he grins. "Because—"

Before his damp fingers can dig too deep into my wrist, they're shocked backward by the snap of a whip.

"Ouch!"

He lets go and I stumble back, dropping the glass. It rolls towards the bar ledge, pausing on the ridge before finally tipping over. All I can do is flinch as it shatters against the floor.

"Oops, my bad. I'll let Elsa take that one out of my paycheck."

When I look over to my left, I see the newest bartender. A short stocky woman who just started last night. She runs a hand through her short dyed-blue hair and shrugs.

"I... It's... it's okay," I stutter, still reeling from the small shock. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," the woman smiles, before reaching out her tattoo-covered hand. "I'm Dana, by the way. I don't think we've been formally introduced yet."

Behind us, the man who just laid his hand on me is shouting. But his angry words fade into the background as I reach out. In the back of my mind, all I can think of is how lonely I've been. Making friends in this city seems impossible.

"I'm Mel," I respond. "It's nice to meet you."

We shake, and I feel this cold city's first bits of warmth.

"The pleasure's all mine," Dana nods, before lifting her little leather whip up to the side of her face. "Before you ask, it's for the tips," she laughs. "I've found that the men around here like that sort of thing. To be dominated. Most of the women too. I can do you next if you'd like?"

Our hands fall apart and I instinctively caress my wrist.

"I'm alright, thank you."

"Suit yourself."

The smile wipes from Dana's face when she turns back to confront the shouting customer.

"I think you've had enough," she tells him.

"Hey, wait a minute—" he begins to plead, but then she points her whip at him and he freezes.

"Don't make me call in the bouncers," she threatens.

In response, she receives a few grumbled German curse words. Then, with a final huff, the unhappy patron turns and disappears into the semi-crowded bar behind him.

"I'm guessing this isn't your first day working at a Berlin bar?" I laugh.

Bending down, I grab a small broom from under the bar and begin to sweep up the mess my fallen glass made.

"I've worked at far worse, and it shows," Dana replies, gesturing a faint mosaic of scar tissue on her knuckles. "You, on the other hand..."

"I know, I don't belong here," I quickly finish for her.

But Dana just bends down and stops my sweeping with a gentle touch to the back of my palm.

“Everyone belongs here,” she says, nodding upward. “Even the worst of us. It’s what makes this city so... unique.”

“And hard,” I sigh.

“And hard,” Dana confirms.

When she lifts her hand, I finish sweeping and toss the broken glass into the trash.

“So what brings a pretty little princess like you here?” Dana asks, leaning against the bar, her back to the customers. “Not to judge, but as a local, it’s clear as day. You’re not from around here.”

The word princess makes me wince, but I try not to show it.

“Is it my accent?” I attempt to smile.

“No,” she laughs. “It’s that untouched porcelain skin. No one from Kreuzberg makes it to drinking age without some ink or some scars, or both.”

“Not even the artists?”

“Especially not the artists,” Dana guffaws, before narrowing her eyes at me. “Is that why you’re here? To be an artist?”

“I’m no artist,” I sigh. My gut sinks at the depressing thought of how long it’s been since I last painted.

This city was supposed to be the stage for my artistic awakening. Instead, it’s suppressed every desire I’ve ever had—all while exposing a side of me that I didn’t think existed.

“Then what are you?”

“I’m a runaway,” I admit.

“Hey, me too!” Dana proclaims. “Looks like we’re not so different, after all.”

She slaps me on the back and I can’t help the pathetic little laugh that trickles from my lips.

But our little moment is quickly cut short.

“Hey! One Black Russian, don’t skimp on the vodka or the caffeine!” a customer shouts, leaning over the counter so sharply that he nearly falls onto our side.

Dana hardly even has to look. Her little black whip comes snapping down on the side of the man’s head. He springs back into place.

“I’ll make you a Black Russian,” she says. “But only if you behave.”

Unlike the last guy, this drunkard actually seems to enjoy Dana's display of dominance.

"Yes, ma'am," he smirks.

Dana rolls her eyes. It instantly reminds me of someone from my past life.

Rozalia Dorn.

My best friend.

An ache appears in my chest at that thought.

How pathetic. Before I left home, I'd only known Rozalia for about a year, and all of that time, she was dating my brother. So, I wasn't even closest to her in my own family.

Yet she was still the best friend I ever had. A badass who unintentionally inspired me to take the biggest risk of my life.

I miss her.

A small pinprick of warmth rolls through me as I think of how proud she would be of me for taking control over my own life.

Proud and pissed off.

That's the best I'm going to get, though. The rest of my family is probably just pissed off.

And probably scared shitless too. I don't blame them.

"So, what kind of art do you make?"

Dana's stern voice pulls me back to the present as she gets to work on that Black Russian.

"Who said I was an artist?" I mumble.

"You did, by accident," Dana replies, pointing over my shoulder. "Grab me a bottle of the City Vodka, will you, doll?"

I do as I'm told "How?" I ask, handing her the bottle.

"*Not even the artists?*" she says, doing her best American accent.

A sad little laugh peters out of my down-turned limps.

Still a sore spot.

"I'm... I'm supposed to be a painter," I reluctantly admit. "Or, at least, I thought I was until I came here."

"What changed?"

At this point, Dana isn't even looking at me. She's more focused on her Black Russian. But the conversation has already become therapeutic.

This stuff has been locked so far deep inside of me that I was starting to think it was disappearing.

“What changed?” I huff. “I met other painters—well, not so much met, as served.”

“You thought working at a bar in Kreuzberg would be a good networking opportunity?”

“In hindsight, it sounds stupid,” I agree. “But this is supposed to be where all the cutting-edge artists in Berlin live.”

“It is,” Dana says, handing me back an emptier bottle of vodka. “But the only time you want to meet any cutting-edge artist is when they’re sober, and honey, when they come here, they ain’t sober. This is a last stop. Not a first.”

“I should have figured...”

“How’s that?” Dana teases. Before I can answer, she slams the finished Black Russian onto the bar. “Here you are, you bad little boy.”

The patron makes a big show of shivering with delight.

“*Danke meine liebe*,” he swoons, rubbing his shoulder before taking a big sip. “*Perfekt*.”

I wince away when he smacks his lips. But Dana doesn’t even budge.

“Elsa, the manager, said she didn’t even care about my qualification,” I explain. “She just needed someone to work the bar. As far as she was concerned, I could learn on the job.”

“This is the kind of place with a high turnover rate, for sure.”

“Elsa told me as much. Do you think it’s because of all the creeps?”

“Creeps and artists,” Dana smiles.

“Is there any difference?”

That makes Dana laugh.

“Now you’re starting to get it.”

“It shouldn’t have taken me this long,” I say, shaking my head. “If only Elsa had warned me.”

“Probably just didn’t want to scare you away. Would you still have worked here if you knew the extent of it?”

“Probably,” I reluctantly admit. “And I think she knew that too. I was desperate. I still am desperate.”

“For money?”

“For money... and to network. Elsa assured me I’d meet plenty of artists here.”

“And have you?”

“I’m sure I have—now, how many have I connected with?”

“Zero.”

I nod.

Looking over her shoulder, Dana leans in closer to me and whispers, “You didn’t hear it from me, but something about Elsa rubs me the wrong way. It doesn’t help that some of my friends tried to stop me from getting a job here. There are rumors about this place. About her...”

Before I can inquire further, the front door bursts open and a temporary hush seems to momentarily fill the bar.

My heart immediately drops to the floor.

From the moment I ran away from home, I’ve been expecting to be dragged back... or worse.

Every unexpected noise reminds me of my situation. It’s exhausting, and my nerves are slowly wearing thin.

But when I gather the courage to turn around, I don’t recognize the large man stumbling inside. He doesn’t even look around. Instead, his shaded eyes stay glued to the floor as he collapses into an occupied booth.

The raucous returns. It was all in my head.

Dana doesn’t seem bothered.

“Elsa’s not all bad,” I say, trying to distract myself from the heaviness pounding in my chest. “She’s been giving me advice on where to find a cheap studio to paint in. And she keeps insisting that she’ll introduce me to her artist friends.”

“And you still believe her?” Dana asks, skepticism lacing every word.

I shrug. “At least she’s trying to help me. No one else has done that. Not since I got here. She asks me about my passions and even tells me about hers. You know she used to be a dancer? She’s been showing me some moves. Last night she even brought me to that precious pole they have in the backroom and taught me how to work it.”

“Sounds like she’s grooming you,” Dana chuckles. “Think she might be trying to get you into that backroom? It would be smart. A pretty little thing like you would surely fetch a high price...”

“Oh, god, I hope not,” I nervously laugh, clutching my beating chest. “And if she is, I’m not interested.”

“That’s no work for an artist, right?” Dana grins.

“Right...” I sigh.

For a moment, we just stare past each other. Then someone orders another drink, and Dana gets back to work.

I do the same, but my mind stays put.

Even if Dana was only playing around, it still feels nice to have someone finally call me an artist again—it's especially nice when it's not coming from a well-meaning member of your own family, which is all I really got before.

I want to be a real artist. A daring, brave painter who makes art that challenges people. But that kind of art is hard to understand when you live in a harsh reality. And the killers and businessmen in my family exist permanently in a state of harshness.

It's not their fault. It's just not in their worldview to consider the abstract. To see the beauty in it...

Suddenly, my beating heart starts to lightly flutter.

There is a killer who gets it, though. A mobster who understands me and my art.

Slowly, I allow myself to remember the encounter that changed my life.

Tytus Ryzdon doesn't have such a harsh view on reality, and when he cornered me that night in the hallway and told me all the things I've ever wanted to hear about my art, he did more than just open up a path for me to escape.

He started an obsession. An addiction that I haven't been able to kick.

I close my eyes and see his silver-blue eyes. They look like corrupted ice crystals perched atop a throne of ink and muscle.

Even through the stench of booze and desperation that surrounds me, I can still remember his arctic scent. It was somehow both bone-chillingly cold and warmer than any hug I've ever received.

My breaths shorten as I go through the motions of my dreary job. Tytus stays stuck in my mind, just as he has every night for the past year.

He saw the beauty in my art and he saw the trapped artist behind my eyes. The message he left on the back of my painting gave me a way out, a path to freedom.

I took it.

But now I'm more trapped than ever.

When the bar door bursts open again, I'm snapped out of my daydreams and plunged back into my loud reality.

My heart catches in my throat, just like it does every time.

But when I turn around to see who's come for me, I realize that no one has. It's just another drunk asshole who is quickly pulled back outside by

the bouncers.

An unexpected sigh escapes my lips. Then, I feel a hand come down on my shoulder, and I jump again.

“Easy there, killer,” Dana says. “It’s just me.”

“Sorry,” I say, shaking my head. “What’s up?”

“Not sure. Elsa wants to see you out back.”

My chest tightens.

“Why?”

For as much as I’ve come to loathe this job, I still need the money it brings in. I wasn’t able to save up much before I flew the coop. If I’m about to be fired, then I’ll need to prepare myself.

But Dana just shrugs.

“Something about introducing you to an old artist friend of hers.”

That perks my sunken heart right back up.

“Really?”

“I say it’s about time,” Dana huffs. “I’ll cover you. Go network. You deserve it.”

“Thank you!” I scream in a whispered hush.

When I give Dana a quick hug, she hardly reacts. But I don’t stick around to force her into another one.

“Maybe this job wasn’t such a mistake, after all,” I tell myself, bounding through the bar and out of the back door.

But the second I step outside, that excitement falls flat on its face.

Elsa is leaning against a large black van, smoking a cigarette. Her long fur coat flaps in the cold wind. Black and blonde strands of hair whip across her face.

When she looks at me, I see nothing behind her eyes.

“This is the girl?”

My tight chest twitches at the sound of the unexpected voice. In the alley shadows, standing by the hood of the van is a tall, dark figure. He wears a black fedora; brim tucked down over his eyes.

“That’s her,” Elsa confirms.

“What’s going on?” I ask, hugging my body.

“I wanted you to meet a friend of mine,” Elsa says, flicking her cigarette into the light layer of snow that coats the ground.

“An artist?” I desperately hope, looking back toward the black figure.

Just as I do, he lifts the brim of his hat, revealing the same lifeless glare that has taken over Elsa's eyes. They don't warm up as he studies my body from head to toe.

"You said she can dance?" the man asks, his voice gravelly and sharp.

"I said I've been trying to teach her to dance," Elsa responds. "She can move her body well enough."

"What does that—"

I stop when Elsa raises a painted finger to her lips. "Hush now, darling. Be a good girl."

A pit of fear appears in my throat.

"What is this?" I weakly demand.

Elsa only rolls her eyes. "A girl's got to eat," she says, so casually it sends a shiver down my spine. "And in this city, there are only a few ways someone like me can make a good living. What do you say, Viktor?"

She looks towards the towering figure.

He nods, pulling the brim back over his eyes. Shadows cover his face, revealing only a pair of thin lips that whiten into a tight smile.

"She'll do just fine."

"Elsa, I—"

"Don't say my name," she snaps. "Don't you ever say my name again. I'm dead to you."

"What... why?" I gulp.

The man takes a step toward me. I shuffle backward, before hitting something hard.

"Because you don't exist anymore," Elsa says. Stomping her heel down on her discarded cigarette, she grinds it into nothing. "And you never did."

Horror rushes through me as another figure appears from behind the front of the van.

My mouth opens to scream, but before I can manage to make a sound, two frozen hands wrap around my mouth.

"Now you'll know why our turnover is so high," Elsa chuckles.

It's the last thing I hear before a suffocating black bag is shoved over my head.

The air inside her apartment is hardly any warmer than the freezing hallway outside.

“You deserve better than this, princess.”

Immediately, my gaze is pulled toward the windows. There are only two of them, but they’re both big enough to be a problem. I search for cracks in the glass. Nothing.

Pulling aside the raggedy drapes, I search the linings for leaks. Again, nothing. The windows are sealed well enough. So why is it so cold in here?

Turning back into the living room, I try to find some warmth. Not for my sake, mind you, but for Melina’s.

How does she keep warm at night?

My search comes up empty. The grates in the floors aren’t breathing and the ventilation shaft near the ceiling might as well be a dead spot.

There are no two ways about it. This place is a dump. Unbefitting of a mafia princess.

And that makes it the perfect place to hide.

Perhaps I’ve underestimated this little dove.

Is she really willing to suffer like this for the sake of her art? Of her freedom?

It’s almost admirable.

Almost.

But I know better. I once lived like this. It wasn’t a choice. My childhood was filled with illness and an unescapable cold. The second I felt the warm flames of hell, I jumped into them, head-first.

If I'm lucky, Melina will be smart enough to do the same.

"Now, where do you keep it, princess," I mumble to myself. There isn't much room to hide anything in this old studio apartment. I check under the bed. But it's just as empty as the rest of the place.

The kitchen cabinets tell a similar story. I move to her dresser drawer. The thing is ancient and covered in knicks and scratches. I wouldn't be surprised if it came with the place. Hell, it's probably older than the cold war.

What's inside, however, is much fresher.

I pause when I open the first drawer.

Panties.

My cock instantly swells. A warmth fills my insides, melting away the frigid air. I grind my teeth and lift my chin.

"I really shouldn't..."

As if I could stop myself.

My nostrils flare and my hand sinks into the silky warmth of Melina's unmentionables.

For some reason, Yasha's words come screaming out from the back of my mind.

You're a fucking villain.

It doesn't bother me. I always have been. But not because of shit like this. At least, that's what I tell myself as I take a fistful of lingerie and carefully sniff every last intoxicating inch of it.

"Delicious..." I growl, a hot shiver descending down my spine. "But I'm sure the real thing will be even better."

It takes a second, but I finally manage to regain control of myself. Cranking my neck, I place Melina's secrets back into their hiding place and then shove them all aside.

That's where I find her passport, as well as some jewelry and a clip of cash.

But I'm not after any of that.

With one last long look, I shut the cabinet drawer and begin searching the rest of them. Each one turns up empty, though. And by the time I'm done plundering, a little ball of disappointment has appeared in my gut.

"Have you just given up, princess? And so easily?"

My heart doesn't want to acknowledge it, but as I stand by her bed and look for another nook where Melina could be hiding her art supplies, I

slowly come to the sad realization.

There are none.

She's giving up on her dream.

A half-sincere sigh leaves my chest as I check the clock on my phone. There's no more time to mourn. Melina will be getting home soon and I still need to set up her surprises—aka my safety nets.

Turning my back to the drawer, I try to will away the arousal constricting my pants. But it proves to be an impossible task. Even through the chilly air, the apartment just smells like her, and the dewy scent I caught on her panties lingers on my nostrils like a wet dream.

So I just learn to accept the fact that I'll be doing this job with a half-hard cock. Even if the promise of what I'll be getting out of it slowly inches that halfie into a full-blown erection.

"Calm down, you animal," I mumble at the growing beast. "Be patient."

If only that fucker had any ears.

I remain at full mast as I take off my big backpack and unload a neat nest of wires and gadgets.

"Where will you go?" I ask the first camera.

But it's as deaf as my cock. So I answer for it.

"I think the ceiling vent will make a good home," I say, looking up at the dead space just under the ceiling. "That will provide a good view of the apartment."

It's also high enough that Melina will never be able to get up there to check it out.

The process is quick enough, and before I know it, I have my first set of secret eyes in this forbidden room.

"This is so much better than watching through your window," I smile, bringing up the newly live feed on my phone.

Satisfied with the view, I toggle through all the other cameras I have in my possession—at least, the most pertinent ones. In total, there are almost too many to count.

The von Bingens really did a number on this city. With the surveillance state they imposed, it's a miracle this city has any crime left.

That is, unless the von Bingen's are involved in Berlin's seedy underbelly. Yasha foolishly let that slip. I'll find a way to use it against her, if I need to. For now, though, she's done me proud.

After she handed over the necessary information, I was able to access the city's broad camera network, along with its cache of illegally recorded footage.

That's how I found my girl.

Melina Kilpatrick. Unmistakable, even under a half-pulled-up hoody and a downward gaze. She walked through the streets like a girl who had no business being in Berlin.

It made her easy to spot.

I followed that alluring figure throughout the cobblestone streets. Across the Spree river, and to this downtrodden neighborhood.

Fortunately for me, there was a perfectly placed camera right above her apartment's back entrance. From there, I watched her eventually leave again, sulking through the city towards the part of town where I first suspected she'd be living.

Kreuzberg.

Berlin's main hub of cutting-edge art and deplorable degeneracy.

I'd been there years ago on a job, and the vibe had always stuck with me. It had an aura that I never thought I'd find anywhere else... until I saw a hint of it in Melina's coronation painting.

That's part of the reason I stole it—or maybe I was just pulling her pigtails. It doesn't matter.

What does matter, is the insight that painting gave me.

Melina wasn't just some spoiled princess who painted because she had nothing else to do.

She was an artist.

She had passion and vision, and that drove me wild.

It also gave me the first clue as to where she'd end up after escaping her gilded cage.

Berlin was the perfect fit.

Her family wouldn't get it. They're probably still scouring Italy. That's where she had been scheduled to go before the war, after all.

But It would have been too easy for her family to track her down there. And while Melina is definitely naïve, she's anything but stupid.

Though, I guess even the smartest among us fuck up every once in a while.

Because it's quickly become apparent that Melina forgot to bring along something very important on this little adventure of hers.

Money.

I guess when you grow up surrounded by it, you assume it just falls from the sky.

Her apartment confirms it. She didn't bring enough cash. What I saw when I followed her through the city's camera system was just another clue.

When she disappeared down a seedy alleyway, I almost hoped that she'd found a studio to paint in. But when she stayed hidden for almost nine hours straight and then came out the other side with a booze-soaked shirt and an even heavier head than before, I knew she wasn't making art.

She had a job.

Imagine that. What kind of spoiled princess gets a job, let alone one like that? Hell, what kind of self-respecting artist?

Well, when I'm through with her, she won't have to work anymore. And she'll be able to paint to her heart's desire.

In fact, I'll insist she does.

Biting my bottom lip, I imagine stripping Melina down to her bare nothings and sitting her in front of a canvas. I think of how badly I want to dot my fingers in paint and cover her body, all while she does the same to me; how I want to knock over that canvas and take her on it; sully it with my corrupted desire. Sully her.

"Soon..."

I put one more camera behind a bedside lampshade, then another in the cracks between two kitchen cupboards.

Then I reward myself with a single, red-laced strap of lingerie from Melina's drawer. It twirls between my fingers as I turn off the lights and plop down on the old, ratty sitting chair across from the window.

I check my phone and smile.

She'll be walking in through that door any minute now. Hopefully, she's not too opposed to my presence.

I'm the one who helped her escape, after all. She should be thankful.

Sinking into the chair, I remember the poem I wrote to her on the back of that painting. The one I painstakingly drew with a mixture of invisible ink and my own blood.

Your artwork is beautiful,

And so are you.

If you want to be free,

Then I can show you what to do.

*At the far end of your studio,
Beneath the very last light,
There's an escape hatch you can use,
To take your very first flight.
Yours truly,
The shadow.*

Not my best work, but it clearly did the job. I'll have to ask what she thought of it.

Strangely, my heart thumps at the idea. Are those nerves?

Shit. It's been a long time since I got nervous. It's almost... nice, to feel something other than hurt and anger, and emptiness.

Making a fist with Melina's panties, I lean on my chin and stare towards the door.

"Come to daddy..."

The longer I wait, the more restless I become. Time stretches on in this cold empty apartment. I look over my shoulder. White snowflakes softly fall outside the window.

A chill runs under my skin.

Shit. At a time like this, I almost wish I had gone to Italy first, just to feel some sun. I've heard it's warm in the southern islands during this time of the year.

But if I had done that, I definitely would have run into some of the Kilpatricks. Maybe even Roz and Gabriel too.

My dull heart begins to ache at the thought of my sister and brother. It's hard to admit, even to myself, but I miss them.

Hell, everything I'm doing now; everything I've done to get here, it's for them. It's to get back to them. Only I'm making sure it's on my terms. Because even if they don't see it, those two are trapped.

That's what happens when you marry the enemy, after all. When you fall in love with them.

That's not going to happen to me. Melina is my key out of this lonely hole I've dug myself into. And that's it. No matter how alluring I find her, how fascinating, she's only a means to an end.

I'm going to use her to get what I want. And I'm going to have fun along the way.

She just has to come home from work first.

But the longer I wait, the less that seems like it's going to happen.

Frustration starts to set in as I pull out my phone. She's late. I'm going to find out why.

With a few clicks, I pull up the live camera feed from outside the bar she works at. It's quiet. Clearly after closing time. I rewind.

Melina doesn't appear as I get closer and closer to the end of her shift. She doesn't walk out of that alleyway or burst through the front doors.

My fingers tighten around her panties.

"What's happening, little dove?" I quietly wonder.

The longer I search without finding her, the more I begin to doubt myself.

I've always found pride in my ability to plan ahead, to be two steps ahead of everyone else, but it feels like, lately, I've been falling behind.

First, it was with my sister. I practically gave Roz away, because I thought it would be for the best, and maybe it was, but at the time, not even I could see through the blackness of complete solitude that shrouded my future.

Turns out, there was nothing to see.

Life is empty without family. And mine has been taken from me.

I won't let the same happen with Melina.

With quickening fingers, I pull up the feeds of all the cameras on all the streets near Melina's bar. I furiously rewind and fast-forward, searching for any clues as to where my pretty little chess piece has disappeared to.

That's when I see it.

An unmarked black van. It screeches around a nearby corner, blasting out of a blind spot, before disappearing into another.

I pause the video and check the time on the corner of the screen.

That happened about an hour before Melina's shift was supposed to end, while I was setting up the cameras in this dump.

Melina's panties shift beneath my clenching fist.

She's in that van. I know it.

Someone has gotten to her first.

Fuck. That. Shit.

Rage explodes behind my chilled skin. The chair crashes into the wall as I stand up and follow the van's path on my phone, swiping through camera feeds like a madman.

"Who got to you before me?" I growl.

Grabbing my bag, I burst through the door and out into the hallway. Then, I start running.

If Melina is really in that van, she's in trouble. There's no way her family would treat her so harshly. And as bad as it would be for me if she was recaptured by the Kilpatricks, there are worst threats out there trying to hunt her down.

Through my search for the lost princess, I've already come across some of them and heard rumors about many more—some more terrifying than others.

A sneer contorts my face as I race down the steps and careen out into the snowy night. My car sits parked in the darkness ahead. I make a beeline for it.

Violent thoughts bash through my mind as I open the driver's door and start the engine.

No one else is allowed to have Melina Kilpatrick.

That girl belongs to me.

And I'll fucking prove it.

The hand planted on my thigh is tight, unfriendly, and icy cold. Every time the van hits a pothole, five sharp fingernails dig into my flesh. I wince in pain. I shiver in fear. But I try not to move. I dare not make a sound.

They're talking about me.

About my fate.

If I've learned anything from being the daughter of a mafia kingpin, it's that in a situation like this, every little detail matters.

I need to listen. It could be a matter of life or death.

"And here I was thinking Elsa had lost her touch," someone says in a thick German accent.

"The old hag still knows how to bag 'em," another responds.

A glob of fear trickles down my throat as the van takes a sharp turn. The hand on my lap tightens. An unwelcomed shoulder leans into mine. Even through the black bag wrapped around my head, I can feel the putrid breath of the man sitting next to me.

"Stop..." I can't help but whimper.

But no one hears me, and if they do, I'm ignored.

"We'll see," a third voice speaks up. "Looks aren't everything for a camwhore. No one wants to watch a dead fish flop about for eighteen hours a day. We aren't going to make any money off of her if she does that."

"Hey, maybe we can use her to tap into that dead fish fetish market," the man next to me laughs. I cringe when he presses his mouth right into my temple, pushing the fabric into my ear. "Can you flop like a fish for me, honey?"

“Elsa said she can dance, right? That oughta be good for something.”

“Elsa said she’d been trying to teach this slut how to dance, not that she already could.”

“I’ll teach her how to dance just the way I like...”

“Hey, honey, you alive in there? Tell me, do you know how to dance?”

I try to ignore the cruel taunts, but each one hits me like a sharp knife.

I’m in serious trouble. Serious fucking trouble.

“The man asked you a question, sweetie.”

The fingers digging into my thigh lift and a new hand grabs me by the jaw. When I gasp, the bag is pulled into my mouth. For a second, it feels like I’m suffocating.

“Answer,” the man across from me demands. His deep voice crawls through the darkness like broken glass. “Do you know how to dance?”

The hand around my jaw tightens. A finger slips into my mouth. Before my mind can stop it, my body reacts.

I bite down.

The man next to me howls as he jumps back.

“You fucking bitch,” he cries.

Something hard hits me in the temple. A flash of sharp pain cuts through my skull as I hit the hard van floor.

For a moment, I just lie there. But my pride won’t let me stay still. All I can think of is how my brother would react; how Roz would handle herself in a situation like this.

I come from a family of fighters. Right now, I need to be one too.

But the tears are already welling up in my eyes.

“I know how to fight,” I rasp, my voice choppy and weak.

It’s a lie, but one I wish was true; one that I’ve always wished was true.

All my life, I’ve been surrounded by powerful men who fight for what they want. They’ve always been there to protect me from the evils of this world. But now they’re not. And I can’t fight for myself.

Someone grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls me back into my seat.

“No, you don’t know how to fight,” he hisses. “You know how to kick and scream. They all know how to kick and scream... until we help them forget.”

All of a sudden, the bag is ripped from my head. It’s dark in the van, but still brighter than it was behind the hood. My eyes clench shut against the light. My temples throb.

A bloody hand reaches back around my jaw and pries my lips open.

"Sleep tight, you stupid little bitch," a snake hisses into my ear. "Because you're never getting out of this nightmare."

Another hand shoves something into my mouth. My lips are clamped shut again. Then a new set of fingers pinch down on my nose, cutting off all my airways.

My eyes bulge open. I try to kick my captors away, but I only hit air. Air that I desperately want to suck into my lungs. Air that I can't get.

A scream rips from my throat, but it gets caught in my mouth.

"Swallow."

There are no lights on in the back of the van, but I can still recognize the outline of the man in the fedora. He sits directly across from me, unmoving, as his goons hold me down.

"Coward," I try to mumble, but it comes out as nothing more than a high-pitched whimper.

"Swallow and I'll let you breathe again." A hot gust of moldy breath swirls into my ear. My vision starts to blur. Cold tears trickle down my cheek. My body doesn't give me a choice.

I swallow. The thick pill tumbles down my throat.

"Now was that so hard?"

Without pause, I'm pulled back down onto my ass. Despite the force, I don't feel any pain. Even the pounding against my skull has stopped. Hell, I can't feel my head at all. It's like it's been detached from my body.

The darkness in the back of the van starts to sway. The voices fade away. My jaw is released, and my chin snaps down to my chest. If it weren't for the two bodies sandwiching me into place, I'd hit the floor, and I wouldn't even care.

I just want to lie down, close my eyes, and sleep...

"Shit!"

That single shout cuts through my haze, plummeting me back down to earth. But it's what comes next that truly shocks me awake.

The sounds of squealing tires rip through my ears. A split second later, I'm flung against the van door. It partially collapses against the force. Then someone falls beside me and I hear a sickening crunch. It's followed by a deep wail.

Glass breaks. Metal dents. Suddenly, everything goes silent. But only for the briefest moment. I hardly get a chance to gasp before chaos erupts.

The van starts to flip. I'm thrown around like a ragdoll. Somehow, though, I don't hit the hard metal walls again. Instead, my falls keep getting cushioned by the men who dragged me in here.

Ironically, they're the only things that keep me from shattering into a thousand tiny pieces. And by the time the van stops flipping, I hardly feel any worse for wear.

That is until I try to move.

It's like trying to push myself up from the bottom of the ocean; like I'm being weighed down by an invisible force.

"Help..." I mutter. But a harsh ring has invaded my ears, and I'm not sure if the plea even escapes my lips.

It doesn't matter, though. No one is going to help me.

Slowly, the bodies strewn around mine start to move again. They crawl over me and push open the twisted van doors, falling outside before disappearing into the darkness.

A gust of cold air rushes inside. It's enough to slap me out of my daze, if only partially.

It still feels like there's an anvil crushing my head, but I somehow manage to push myself up and crawl toward the light. A sheet of white snow greets me outside. As does a pool of blood.

By the time I manage to stand, my hands and knees are coated in a layer of frost. The world spins. I pinch my nose and blink, desperately trying to regain some of my senses.

It's no use.

"... What's happening?" I mumble to myself. I'm already falling back into the daze that pill has pulled over me.

My eyelids begin to flutter. I'm filled with a warm apathy. It's almost peaceful. No matter how hard I try to shake it, every part of me just wants to shut my eyes and let whatever happens to me happen.

But then an ear-piercing shriek rips my attention outwards again. My vision dances in and out of focus as I stare ahead. Pieces of the van litter the street, but otherwise, it's empty.

Another cry snaps my neck to the left just in time to catch a pair of bloody hands desperately clawing at a building's brick wall. I blink and they disappear, yanked into a black alleyway. All that remains is the echo of their cry and a pair of crimson hand prints.

"Shit."

A blast of fear wakes me up the rest of the way. The ringing in my ears fades and I start to notice what's really going on.

A gunshot blasts off around the corner. A terrified curse rises up from behind me. I twist around to see the driver climbing out of the toppled van. His face is covered in blood and he wobbles on his feet as he shouts into the alley.

A dozen or so yards behind him, I see a thick black jeep idling on the corner. Its headlights blast through the night, light sliced into thin strips by a cage fitted over the front bumper.

"Come out here and face me like a man," the driver calls into the darkness of the alley. Reaching under his belt, he pulls out a gun.

But his left arm has been mangled, and his body trembles as he tries to aim it forward.

All I can do is watch as he fires the first wobbly shot. I'm still frozen in place as he fires another bullet into the darkness. And then another.

It's only after the third volley that my brain starts to work again.

Run.

Whatever's happening, it's given me a chance to escape my cruel fate.

I'm about to do just that when another sound yanks me back into place.

Crying.

The man with the gun, the driver of the overturned van, has started to openly weep. I watch in horror as his gun wavers.

"Who... who are you?" he whimpers into the darkness ahead.

My eyes follow his until we're both staring at a black wall.

Nothing moves.

Then, a piece of the darkness shift. A gasp rips from my throat as a massive figure detaches from the black wall.

"No... stop..." the driver begs. Once more, he tries to aim his weapon, but he can't manage to get a straight shot off.

His muzzle flashes twice before the gun drops from his hands. The shadow advances, completely unphased, slowly shedding the darkness as it's illuminated by the jeep's thinly cut headlights.

My already addled brain short-circuits. I can't get a good look. The night blurs in and out of focus. It's hard to tell if it's a trick of the light, an effect of the pill forced down my throat, or just a hard, cold reality, but what I see walking toward the injured driver hardly seems human.

"... What the hell?" I hear myself rasp.

A demon, half-eaten by darkness looms over the injured gunner. Without mercy, it reaches out and grabs him by the throat.

Someone says something, but I can't hear what. The ringing hasn't returned to my ears, but my heart is pounding so loudly that nothing else is audible.

That is until the driver utters his final words. "Please... I—"

That's all he gets out before his neck is snapped.

The demon releases the dead man's limp body. The second it hits the ground, I come to.

What the hell am I doing?

Fear rips through my body as I turn around and start to run. But no matter how scared I am, I've still been drugged. It's like pushing through water. I might as well be scrambling through a dark seabed... or a living nightmare.

"Shit, shit, shit..."

My legs feel numb, and my body feels both weightless and so heavy it's nearly impossible to move—yet, somehow, I trudge forward.

I even manage to make it down the street and turn a corner before I slip. My fall is softened slightly by the snow, but I don't feel anything anyway—only fear lives in my body right now.

Fighting through it all, I frantically crawl forward. My mouth opens to scream, but nothing comes out, at least nothing that I can hear.

I blink and suddenly I'm back on my feet and further down the street. But I don't know where I am or where I'm running to. Up ahead, there's nothing but empty roads and sidewalks. Parts of Berlin become ghost towns at night. I must be in one of the quiet neighborhoods. It's the only explanation.

My only hope is to get to a part of town where I can call for help. My only hope is to keep running.

So, that's what I do. Stumbling around a corner, I push myself through the nightmare until I spot a bridge ahead.

Hope.

If I can just get over the river, I might be able to find people on the other side. Safety.

But the harder I push myself, the further away the bridge seems to get. Slowly, my numbness begins to wear off. My lungs burn. My muscles ache. But my head remains hazy. My eyelids are as heavy as ever.

Part of me just wants to give in. Slink against a building and let myself fall into a deep sleep.

Maybe this has all happened in my mind. Maybe I'm not even being chased...

Suddenly, my shoulder catches a lamppost and I'm flung around. A shock of pain rips through me. I whimper and stumble against the nearest surface, a dark shop window. My back rests against the glass. Swirls of smoky breath cloud my sight.

That's when it all hits me.

I start to cry.

A huge hole grows inside of me. An empty, lonely hole that stretches out until it consumes my entire being.

I'm all alone.

There's no one here to help me. To save me. To hold me.

Shit. That's why I'm here. For some independence. For some freedom. But I wasn't ready. I never was.

The world is a cold, dark, violent place, and I'm just a sheltered princess who can't fight back.

A jerky sigh rattles from my throat as I look towards the bridge. To my surprise, it's closer than I thought. On the other side, I can see twinkling lights. People.

You have to save yourself, Mel.

But my body is growing numb again. I don't know if I have the strength to make it. My chin bobs as I'm overcome by the weariness. I'll just close my eyes. That's all.

For a moment, it's almost a peaceful surrender. My eyelids flutter. The cold, dark, violent world starts to disappear.

Then I spot something out of the corner of my eye. Something approaching from the way I just came.

I don't want to look, but it's like I don't have a choice. My chin lifts. My neck turns. My eyes open wide.

I stare back down the street.

"No..."

It's him. The dark figure from the accident. He's still shrouded in darkness, but I see the blood dripping from his hand as he slowly advances.

He's following a trail of bloody footsteps. My bloody footsteps.

My heart drops.

“No... no... no...”

There’s no hiding from this monster. There’s no resting. Not until I’m safe.

I have to make it over the bridge.

Somehow, I manage to tear myself from the shop window. But my legs are even heavier than before. I can barely lift my feet off the street as I shuffle forward.

It feels like a miracle when I take my first step onto the bridge. But the upward arch it takes might as well be a mountain.

I have to grab onto the rail and practically pull myself up it. I can feel the monster approaching from behind. He’s getting closer. I’m getting slower. My dread builds. My hopelessness spreads.

I’m barely halfway over when the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight on edge. A primal scream ravages my insides.

I can feel him.

He’s reaching for me. It’s over. Whatever he wants, he’s going to get it.

He’s going to get me.

My heavy head droops over the side of the railing. Through half-shut eyelids, I watch the water below rush into a blur. The fear is too much. I close my eyes.

I let the drugs take over.

Everything stops. It feels like I’m falling. Falling into the darkness...

Then, all of a sudden, I’m shocked back awake.

Ice-cold water rushes into my nostrils as I’m plunged beneath the Spree river. My eyes rip back open, but I can’t see anything, not until my body floats back up to the surface.

That’s when I see the bridge. It’s already starting to shrink into the distance. I’m being pulled away by the frigid water.

But it’s hardly a relief, because right in the middle of the bridge’s arch, right where I had been standing, looms the hellish figure that chased me here.

It stands there, unflinching. A human-shaped void of pure evil.

Fear pounds me until I can’t even think straight. And that’s not even the worst of my problems.

It’s getting so cold I can hardly breathe, and not even the frigid water can keep me awake anymore. With a final, difficult breath, I close my eyes. My body gives in. My mind accepts its fate.

The fear begins to fade. But in its place comes something worse. An immense sense of loneliness.

I'm going to die alone. I'll never feel warmth again. And it's all my fault.

Those thoughts increase in intensity as I start to fade. I try to think of my family, but nothing can get past the ice that encases me.

Until something does.

At first, it's just a warmth around my wrist. But as I'm pulled from the frigid water, that warmth spreads up my arm, through my chest, and into my very core.

My body shivers as I'm held tightly against the source of heat. My eyes won't open, but the strong embrace is so comforting that I don't care. I let myself sink into the sudden sense of safety, whether it's real or not.

"Thank you..." I hear myself whisper.

"Hush," a strong voice insists. "Rest. It's going to be alright, princess. I've got you."

For some reason, I believe it. And that's all the permission I need to finally give in.

Slowly, I let myself fade away—happy that, at the very least, I won't die cold and alone.

She's still out cold when I pull up to the hospital. I try to warm her with my body, but even I'm starting to freeze over.

My red-hot anger is fading. It's slowly replaced by something far less useful.

Fear.

Don't die on me, angel. You're not allowed to die on me.

Melina's red lips have turned blue. Her soft skin has hardened into a pale, almost translucent glass. She seems so fragile. Too fragile. Even more so than before. Yet somehow, her beauty shines through.

I remember how warm she was in that dark hallway. I won't lose that warmth. I can't.

Holding Melina close to my body, I carry her from my car and in through the hospital's front doors.

Every nurse and doctor in the vicinity races to our aid when they see the state Melina's in. One by one, they try to get me to lay her down on a gurney, but I insist on carrying her.

My rage may be dwindling, but my shame is slowly creating enough heat to make up for it. This is my fault.

It doesn't take long before, I'm on fire again.

You were too late, I tell myself. You got too cute. You should have broken down the door of that bar she worked in and dragged her somewhere safe the second you knew she was there. Instead, you let the city take her. You let the cold win. Never again.

When I lay her down in the hospital bed, a part of me stays with her. But all I can do is step back and let the doctors get to work.

I wish I could fix her up myself, but I'm better at making wounds than mending them.

"Will she be alright?" I ask a doctor, pulling him into the hallway outside.

"She should be," he says. "She's just in shock. Something has invaded her system and it's not mixing well with the hypothermia. But we'll reheat that frozen blood of hers. Get some warm fluids into her veins. And make sure she's back on her feet in no time."

My relief is palpable.

"Thank you," I nod. Looking back into the hospital room, I watch as the nurses stick her pale skin with needles.

The sight makes me flinch. She doesn't deserve this.

Slowly, my fury is allowed to return. Now that I know she's going to be okay, I can get angry.

"What happened to her?" the doctor asks.

"I don't know," I sneer. "But I'm going to find out."

"Well, the sooner you do, the better. We should know what drugs she took before—"

My mind goes blank at the accusation. Suddenly, my hand is around the doctor's throat and I'm pinning him against the wall.

"She's not a junkie," I growl. "If there are drugs in her system then it's because someone forced them into her."

The doctor's eyes bulge with terror. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean to imply that she was an addict," he chokes. "I... I just need to know everything... in order to treat her properly... I need to know everything that happened..."

"Fuck," I grunt.

The moment I let go of the doctor's throat, he slides down the wall and lets out a deep gasp.

"I'll find out what happened," I tell him. "I fucking promise you that. Until then, what else can I do?"

He's still struggling for air when I reach a hand down to help him up. He hesitates to accept my help, but I'm not exactly in a patient fucking mood, so I reach down, grab him by the collar, and pull him up myself.

“You... you can make sure she rests,” he sputters, his pale cheeks slowly regaining color. “No big surprises over the next few weeks. And definitely no wrestling matches.”

I keep my fingers tied tight around his lab coat

“What is that supposed to mean?” I growl.

“Are... Are you her boyfriend? Brother? Or—”

“I’m her guardian,” I interrupt, immediately regretting it. But not because I don’t think it’s true—rather, because it only highlights how badly I’ve fucked up.

If I’m actually Mel’s guardian, then I failed to protect her. There’s no point in taking that anger out on this guy.

I let the doctor go again and he lets out a sigh of relief. But my rage only grows as I glare back into the hospital room. It’s a chaotic scene. A team of nurses rush to save the girl I’ve prematurely claimed.

But clearly, she isn’t mine yet. Because no one in this world is foolish enough to knowingly fuck with what’s mine.

I’m going to have to change that, and it starts punishing those responsible for this.

“Make sure to keep me updated on her condition,” I tell the doctor. I’m already too restless to stick around. This wrong won’t right itself, and, like the good doctor said, there’s nothing I can do now but let Mel rest.

Grabbing the notebook and pen protruding out of his lab coat, I scribble down the number to one of my burner phones, as well as an encrypted email address I only use for personal matters.

“How’s security in this place?” I ask, shoving the notepad back into his chest.

“I... this is a hospital, sir.”

“So it’s not good, then?”

“Our job is to treat our patients, nothing more.”

“Fine. I’ll take care of security,” I say. Turning around, I take out my phone and start writing a text to my nearest subordinates.

“Sir, we can’t accept—”

Stopping in my tracks, I turn around and shoot the feeble doctor a searing glare. It shuts him right the fuck up.

“You will accept whatever I give you, understand?”

“I... we don’t want any trouble.”

“Good, because I plan on making this hospital the safest place in Berlin. You’ll be hearing from my people. Soon. Don’t get in their way.”

I don’t give him another chance to respond. Turning away, I storm down the hall and out of the hospital.

When I step outside, the frigid air greets me like a slap to the face. I fight through it. Ahead, I can see the silhouette of the city’s foreign skyline. It’s covered in snow.

The sight is a taunting reminder that I’m a stranger in these lands. This isn’t my home turf. The people here don’t know that they shouldn’t fuck with me. Not yet.

I’ll teach them. I’ll teach every last one of them.

My fingers clench into fists as I get into my car. I light the ignition and peel out, raging directly into the unfamiliar city. But the chill doesn’t leave my skin. Even my anger has turned cold.

Fucking hell.

I crossed an ocean to get here, and it was for one singular reason.

Melina Kilpatrick.

She’s my key to everything. My guilty pleasure. My little dove.

This trip was never supposed to be anything more than a quick stop on a much larger journey. But now I can’t leave until I’ve taught Berlin a lesson it will never forget.

Don’t fuck with me.

I’ll conquer this skyline for Melina. Punish the people in it for daring to touch her. Burn the whole thing to the fucking ground.

That’s how I’ll warm her up, in the fire I light for her. When I’m done, she’ll never have to be cold again.

... And neither will I.

My phone rings as I jimmy open the door to Melina's apartment. I ignore the call. There are more pressing matters on my mind, even if I desperately miss the person I know is reaching out.

Soon, I tell myself. *Everything will come together soon.* First, I just need to make sure everything is in place. And that starts with Melina.

Nothing matters more.

Not even my estranged sister. Not yet.

"These should warm the place up," I mumble, picking up the two boxes I grabbed on my way over here. Inside are two small but strong space heaters. I pull them out of their packaging and set them up around the apartment.

The small space immediately warms up. I didn't think they'd work this fast, but I'm glad they have. Melina will be on her way home from the hospital any minute now and I need to get out of here before she arrives.

But I won't leave until everything is set up.

No big surprises over the next few weeks.

Fuck. Those were the doctor's exact words. There's little more I want to do than take care of her in every little way as she recovers from her nightmare, but I know seeing me would only plunge her into a whole different kind of bad dream.

For her sake, I'll make sure my reintroduction is slow and gentle—even if I'm already getting restless.

It's been two days since I left Melina in that hospital bed, surrounded by nurses and doctors. Her cold blue lips and pale white skin still haunt me,

along with all the guilt and rage I feel for letting her down.

In an attempt to calm my inner storm, I've put myself to work. For the last forty-eight hours, I've been furiously trying to find out who's responsible for what happened. But I keep hitting dead ends.

Hell, even the van crash that led to Melina's escape had been almost entirely cleaned up by the time I managed to trace its location. No cops seemed to be involved. There was no mention of it in the news this morning. I've only heard crickets.

It feels like something big is being covered up. But no one wants to give me a clue.

I don't know this town, and it doesn't want to get to know me.

My phone starts ringing again as I reach into the hallway and pull a suitcase inside.

Once again, I ignore it for bigger problems.

How the hell am I going to figure this shit out?

Usually, I can brute force my way through a case. I can kill and maim and threaten my way to clarity. And if somehow that doesn't work, I've always been able to outmaneuver all of my rivals.

But it's hard to outmaneuver shadows, especially when you don't speak their language. And it's even harder to physically force my way through the underworld when I don't know anyone in it.

I'll have to find a way, because whoever tried to take Melina will be back, and more will follow in their footsteps.

She's a hot commodity. A mafia princess on the run. Everyone wants to use her for their benefit.

But she's not theirs to use.

She's mine.

Zippping open my suitcase, I pull out everything else I've brought for my little runaway. That includes a cache of top-of-the-line art supplies; paints, brushes, and every small canvas I could get my hands on.

I also fill her tiny bathroom with medicine and pain relievers, both doctor-prescribed and personally recommended—I've been through my share of recoveries before, and I know what helps most.

When I'm finished up in there, I head into the kitchen and open the fridge. It's no surprise that it's nearly empty. I was thinking of bringing over some food, but then I realized I don't know what Melina likes to eat.

What's her favorite food? Her favorite drink? Her favorite dessert?

Shutting the fridge door, I look towards where one of my cameras is hidden. I'll know all about Melina soon enough, but not just because I'll be watching her. I'll also be tracking her.

Running a hand through my hair, I head back into the living room and rifle through the rest of the suitcase.

A few wads of cash transfer from my hand to Melina's nightstand, as do two pre-paid credit cards. This way she can order in whatever food she likes without having to go outside. That means I'll always know where she is. It also means I can keep count of each cent she spends.

But that's only the beginning.

Melina's new laptop and phone go directly on the bed. These are the most important items I brought, even more important than the heaters and the medicine. These are how I'm going to communicate with her, all while keeping a respectful distance. It's how I'll work my way into her life without having to threaten it with my presence. Only when she's recovered and ready for me will I appear to her. Only then will I take what I came for.

My eyes drift toward her dresser drawer. The scent of her panties practically wafts from the seams. My fists clench. My cock swells. But somehow, my mind is able to stay focused.

Patience, I tell myself. Be patient and you will get all you want and more.

Still, those words quickly ring hollow. Because as I open up Melina's new laptop and sign into the email account I create for her, it doesn't feel like I just want the Kilpatrick princess.

It feels like I need her.

Her body may have been ice cold the last time I touched her, her skin glassy and fragile to the touch, but the memory of her warm, soft panties reminds me that it's all temporary. Her natural state is delicious, and with my help, she'll be back to her old self in no time. That's when I'll swoop in to lap up the rewards. *My rewards.*

I'm practically biting through my lower lip when I take out my phone. Swiping past the countless missed calls I've already ignored, I open up my own secure email account and send Melina her first anonymous message.

Don't worry, princess. Nothing can be traced. Your secrets are safe with me ;)

The second after I send it, her phone pings. I smile and put mine away.

"Almost done," I whisper.

Turning back to the open suitcase, I see that there's only one item left.
My satisfaction falters at the sight.

Birth control pills.

Well, *fake* birth control pills.

They've been in the cards since I first started planning this whole thing. But now, it almost doesn't seem right. Melina's tight little body has been through so much already. Could she really handle a pregnancy?

It doesn't matter, I tell myself. It won't come to that. Getting her pregnant is a last resort. If she doesn't give in to my advances, then she'll give in to the blackmail. If somehow, she manages to resist both, then I'll have an ace up my sleeve. An ace she'll never see coming.

Bending down, I pick up the unassuming box. It looks just like the real thing, but it feels heavier than it should.

That's the guilt. Don't get weak on me, Tytus. Do what you need to do. Remember, you're not some knight in shining armor. You're a villain. Act like it.

Tightening my fingers around the box, I crank my neck... then I go into the bathroom and roughly place the box by the sink.

This is what needs to be done.

Still, my fingers won't unclench. Not until my phone starts ringing again.

Sure enough, it's Rozalia. I already regret giving her a way to reach me.

But just like with the pills and Melina, I'm hesitant to cut my little sister off so entirely. Really, I should shatter my phone against the porcelain toilet, then flush the remains, just to make sure Roz can't use it to track me down. But much like I'm starting to care for Melina's well-being, I'm finding it harder to push aside my family—even if this is all to get back to them.

For my plan to work out, I need to remain ruthless.

Still, I know I won't be able to ignore Roz for too long. Soon, I'm going to have to make a drastic choice. But that can wait.

Shoving my phone away, I move back into the bedroom. With a quick scan, I make sure everything is in place. Inevitably, my eyes fall back onto that tempting dresser.

Without thinking, I march towards it. Acting on pure instinct, I open up the top drawer. The soft smell that spills out fills my flared nostrils. My pants tighten.

“Fuck it.”

Reaching in, I grab a pair of Melina’s irresistible panties. Deep down, I know It’s a primal, unreasonable act, but I tell myself it has a purpose. These will serve as a reminder. A symbol of what’s to come. A promise that my patience be rewarded.

And what a wonderful reward that will be.

Without further delay, I take a whiff of her sinful red-laced wonder. They smell like her, and they’re just as warm as I remember.

“These are mine now,” I mumble, shoving them into my pocket.

That’s enough to finally snap me out of my lustful haze. Shifting my hard cock with my hand, I turn back to the suitcase and pick it up. But before I can head out into the hallway, I find myself stopping in the doorway and gazing back into the apartment—specifically, towards the drawer, then to Melina’s bed.

I can feel the soft weight of her panties in my pocket. They’re mine now. And soon, she will be too.

But first, I will stalk her. I will watch her. I will hunt her. Like the predator I am, I will learn her every move. I will understand her every desire. That way, when the time comes to pounce, she won’t have any choice but to surrender to me, because I’ll be everything she ever hoped for and more—even if she doesn’t know it yet.

It's him. It has to be.

Who else would do something like this?

Who else would I *want* doing something like this?

"Shit," I mumble.

The newest mystery email sits open on my laptop screen. But this one isn't like the rest—not that anything has been the same since I returned from the hospital four days ago.

Each day has been stranger and more unexplainable than the last.

The first thing I noticed was the warmth. The second was the painting supplies. Then it was the stack of cash on my dresser. Beside that were two sleek black credit cards. But even weirder was what was on my bed. A brand-new phone and laptop.

And someone had already left a message on both.

Don't worry, princess. Nothing can be traced. Your secrets are safe with me ;)

If only that was the end of it.

Every day since, I've been getting reminder notifications to take my doctor-subscribed medication. Two days ago, another anonymous email arrived in my inbox that implored me to start painting again.

If I'd had the energy, I would have run the second I pushed in through that door and saw that someone had clearly broken in. But I was completely drained from my stay at the hospital—not to mention the events that led me there—and the private warmth of this once cold apartment felt so

comforting that I couldn't help but collapse beneath my covers and sleep for an entire day.

When I woke up, it was to a fresh email. But unlike the first, this one contained no words. Instead, all I saw was a link to a food delivery app. Again, I should have shut it down and scrambled away. I should have used the laptop to email my brother or my father or anybody from my family. I should have been begging for someone to save me. I was kidnapped, after all. I was chased into a freezing fucking river.

But then I was saved.

A new warmth had washed through me at the memory of how tightly my rescuer held me. Then my stomach growled, and my hazy brain decided that I could wait on being dragged back to my gilded cage for a little longer. This didn't seem so bad, not right now, especially not after what I'd been through.

So I clicked on that link. I downloaded that app to my new phone. And I ordered a big, steaming pizza, with a healthy serving of hot sauce on the side.

Still, the second I finished that amazing meal, my mind cleared enough to remember what had really gotten me into this mess.

Elsa. She must have sold me into some kind of camgirl brothel.

Immediately, I was up on my unsteady feet, searching every inch of my apartment for signs of a webcam.

But before I could even get halfway through, fatigue took over me again, and I quickly found myself back in bed, tucked under covers, drifting off.

Now, all of a sudden, it's been four days, and another anonymous email has appeared in my inbox.

Start painting again. You can do it.

That's all it says.

My eyes drift to the easel set up by the living room window. Yesterday, I unpacked some of the brushes. But I couldn't push myself any further.

I look down at my fingers.

They're shaking. My skin feels cold.

Clamping my hands together, I place them between my thighs and squeeze. It provides a little bit of relief, but the lingering fear doesn't dissolve. Especially not when I look toward the window. The curtains are closed, but a small opening has appeared in the middle of them.

Outside, the city is dark.

A gulp slides down my throat.

I want to get up and close that opening, but I can't move. I'm paralyzed. Flashes of what I went through spray through my mind as I clench my thighs tighter and tighter.

The only reason I'm not plagued with nightmares must be because of the medication I'm taking. It occasionally numbs my worried mind and helps me sleep.

But when I'm awake, even the slightest slice of darkness will make me freeze. It's why I haven't turned off the lights since I got back.

"Fuck," I sigh. "Maybe I should email Rian..."

But not even the thought of my brother coming to my rescue is enough to comfort me. I just feel lost. And so alone.

A ping comes from my phone, and the sound is just barely enough to snap me out of my sad, terrified daze.

Another email.

I open it on my laptop.

Paint. Please.

There's a vulnerability in the pleading message that somehow melts away some of my fear. Only some, but any little bit helps right now.

... *I don't know if I still can*, I type in response, but I don't hit send. Not yet. The reply is honest to a fault, and I'm not even sure who I'm talking to.

Though, part of me knows who it must be.

Tytus Ryzdon.

It has to be. No one has ever been so invested in my art.

But it's not just that.

I never saw the man who saved me from the freezing Spree river. The man who drove me to the hospital and carried me inside. I tried asking the nurses and the doctors, but they all said they were too preoccupied with me to take note of anybody else.

Someone else might have believed their excuses, but I saw the fear in the back of their eyes. They were scared. I don't blame them. Tytus is terrifying.

So why don't I feel scared when I think about him? When I imagine being in his arms, all I can feel is the same comforting heat that saved my life.

He saved my life.

If it was even him...

No. There's no other option. If it had been someone from my family, I wouldn't still be in Berlin. I'd be back in New York, under intense supervision. Instead, I'm still free—well, in a way.

... *I don't know if I still can.*

My index finger falls onto the laptop's "return" button.

The email sends.

Part of me hopes that it is Tytus on the other end. That those silver-blue eyes are watching me in some way. Protecting me.

My thighs clench again, but this time, it's not in an attempt to warm myself up. There's already a warmth spreading through me. It's growing at the memory of the man who started this complicated journey of mine.

I remember the way he cornered me in the hallway of my own home, the way his ripped shirt exposed his muscular body and dark tattoos, and the way his hot breath felt on the most tender part of my neck.

I also remember the pressure that appeared in my core when he got close. The one that cut through the fear and made my toes curl.

Another ping reels my mind back in from the past. I check my email. I've already gotten a response.

Of course you can. Talent like that doesn't disappear. Here I took a picture for you to paint. Start with this.

With hardly any hesitation, I click on the email's attachment. To my surprise, a gorgeous photograph of the downtown Berlin skyline appears on the screen.

Snow speckles the rooftops, dark clouds swirl above a dimming dusk sky. There's enough light to illuminate the breathtaking beauty of it all, and enough darkness to hide the dirty truths beneath it all.

A sigh slips from my lips. It would make a beautiful painting. A few years ago, I would have tried to recreate the image, detail by detail. But my style has changed. Now, I would want to capture the beauty, the grandeur, the history, and I would paint whatever I felt represented that best. I would not allow myself to be limited by the physical makeup of the skyline. I would follow my heart.

But my heart has frozen over. My hands are still shaking. And all I can see in the dark pockets of the photograph is the evil that nearly killed me.

I can't paint. Not anymore.

Closing my eyes, I let the disappointment wash over me. But before I can sink too deep, a new image appears behind my shut eyelids.

At first, it's just a pair of silver-blue eyes, shimmering through the darkness like corrupted ice crystals. But then, a face is revealed. A face with heavy cheekbones and thick lips.

From up close, Tytus' facial features almost look slightly swollen, like he's still suffering from a lifetime of fighting. Somehow, though, it looks good on him—as does his tuff of brown hair, subtly burnt with a taste of auburn fire.

Slowly, his neck tattoos are revealed. Then the rest of his body.

His powerful biceps flex as I work my way down his chiseled arms. I try to imagine what it would feel like to be held by them, but part of me knows I already have.

The warm pressure inside me grows.

I didn't see the man who saved me, but I can still remember the monstrous strength he picked me up with. I can feel his otherworldly heat. It snakes down from my memory, over my chest, through my legs, and into my core.

My fingers slip back beneath my thighs. But this time, it's not to find warmth. It's to satisfy it.

Maybe I could paint Tytus, I think as a blind pleasure grows inside my body.

The artist in me starts to study the vision. I try to find the essence of the monster, of the man, of the savior.

But the girl in me can't get past the physical image of him.

He's gorgeous. Ruggedly beautiful in a way I've never seen before.

I know how those arms feel. How that chest beats. Even if I was on the brink of death when it happened, it's not the cold embrace of the grim reaper I think of when I remember that moment.

It's Tytus.

His warmth. His strength. His determination.

I stare deep into those silver-blue eyes. They gaze back at me.

Then, those thick red lips curve into a smirk.

My eyes rip back open.

A gasp escapes my throat when I see my reflection in the slit between the curtain. It flutters against the window, ever out of focus. But even in the

blurry image, I can see that some color has finally returned to my pale cheeks.

It would be a relief, if I wasn't so shocked by the position I find myself in.

With my hands between my legs. Back arched. Legs open.

My fingers are pressed against my clit. My panties are drenched. My pussy is soaking wet.

My heart pounds as a strike of shame flashes through me. But something else quickly muffles the intensity of that embarrassment.

Curiosity.

Curiosity *and* arousal.

Both are more intense than anything I've ever felt before, and together, they send my damp fingers flying across the laptop keyboard.

Send me a picture of you, I type, only hesitating a second before I hit send.

The moment the deed is done, I regret it. My arousal is already starting to fade. My curiosity is being replaced by fear.

Then my phone pings again and every sensation returns with a vengeance.

No. You won't see me until it's in person, the new email reads. *Paint landscapes, princess. Start slow. You're not ready for me yet.*

A warm shiver runs down my spine.

What the hell is going on?

My fingers hover over the keyboard. But I don't know how I could possibly respond. I don't think that I *should* respond. But something keeps me tied in place.

It's hard to tell how long I'm staring at the message on the screen before I finally manage to rip myself away. Shutting the laptop, I throw myself into bed and rip the covers over my head.

But the curiosity and the arousal and the fear and the shame don't leave me. My hand drifts back beneath my legs, but instead of satisfying my cruel urges, I try to suffocate my horny fingers with my thighs.

The pressure in my core doesn't seem to care. It remains, begging to be dealt with.

No, I scream internally. *This is insane.*

Every reasonable part of me wants to take a step back and acknowledge how crazy this all is, but I've been shrouded in a haze of heat and lust and I

know full well that there's only one way to end it.

My thighs unclench. I start to rub. The pressure builds. I try to keep my mind blank, but every time I whimper or close my eyes, I picture him.

"Fuck," I groan. "Tytus..."

The slow buildup reaches its pinnacle. My body writhes beneath the covers. I burst.

Shoving my face into my pillow, I whine and rip my hand out from between my legs. But the pleasure still throbs. It's a warm throb. A satisfying one. A stark contrast to the pain I've endured recently.

I let it wash over me like morphine. For the first time since I escaped my gilded cage, I feel satisfied.

It's that satisfaction that helps rest.

When I open my eyes again, I feel rested. Truly rested. Not like what the medication does to me. This is deeper than that.

Pulling the covers off my head, I look towards my window. The slit between the drapes is still there, but it's not dark anymore.

I've slept through the night and reached morning.

"... How?"

Before I can get too comfortable, a gentle knock comes at my door. Every nerve in my body jumps at the sound, but I don't allow myself to move an inch.

All I can do is stare ahead and wait for another knock.

It never comes.

Still, I wait until my clenched limbs are stiff before I dare budge. When my stomach growls, I try to remember if I ordered any food last night.

Could that have been a delivery person?

"... Hello?" I croak. But I know no one is there. Not anymore.

With great caution, I pulled myself out of bed. The second my feet hit the ground, though, I nearly fall flat onto my face.

My thighs are unexpectedly sore.

Grinding my teeth, I push through it.

The curiosity that pushed me over the edge last night is edging me forward again, even if a familiar dread is weighing me down.

But all of that is a welcomed distraction from the shame.

Shit. I masturbated to the thought of Tytus Ryzdon. My family's most dangerous enemy. Rozalia's older brother.

... And it was the hottest thing I've ever done—though, I guess that's an easy task for a virgin.

When my hand falls on the doorknob, I take a shaky breath, then I rip the band-aid off.

When the door pulls open, I get ready to flinch. To run. To scream. But no one waits for me in the hallway. No one's down the hall either.

The place is empty... except for a package at the foot of my door.

The beige cardboard container is about twice the size of a shoebox. A pretty red bow wraps around it. When I bend down to inspect the thing, I notice that a small letter has been tucked beneath the string.

I look down the hallway one last time before slipping back inside. The box comes with me. I set it down on the bed as I consider if I should open it or not.

The answer comes quickly enough.

Of course I'm opening it.

By this point, even my fear is outweighed by my curiosity. I carefully pull at the ribbon. It easily comes undone.

Biting down on my lip, I lift the cover.

What's inside steals my breath away.

"No way..." I almost laugh.

A massive dildo stares back at me.

"This is insane," I mumble.

Still, I lean in for a closer look.

My tongue flickers across my lips as I see the veins wrapping the thick shaft. A gulp slips down my throat at the size of the girthy mushroom head.

Just like that, I'm wet again.

I've never owned a dildo before. Are they supposed to be this detailed? It almost looks like someone took a cast replica of their dick. Who the hell would do something like that? And why?

Suddenly, I remember the tiny letter that came with the box. I scramble to find it. Then I furiously rip it open.

But maybe I shouldn't have been so eager. Because the message inside hits me even harder than the gift it came with.

"Start slow, princess," the handwritten note warns. "Because I won't."

How fucking delicious.

The video playing on my phone is one I've already watched a thousand times since it was recorded last night, but I can't get enough of it.

In fact, I'm already starving for more.

If it weren't for this meeting, I could sit here watching Melina masturbating until the end of time—or, at least, until I couldn't take just watching anymore.

Soon, that will be your hand between her legs.

Biting my lower lip, I put my phone away and take a deep breath. Really, I should be preparing for what's about to go down. But even without the recording, I can still picture what I saw.

Because it wasn't just the hidden cameras that caught Melina's naughty behavior. I was sitting on the rooftop across from her building, hard as a rock, observing her through the tiniest slit in her closed drapes.

It was like she left that opening there on purpose. Like she sat at her new laptop and responded to my emails in just the right spot to give her peeping tom a full view of everything.

And I saw everything.

Well, everything until she dove beneath her covers. Not even my cameras could see through those bedsheets. But they did pick up something she whispered while she was touching herself.

Tytus...

No matter how many times I've replayed that moment, no matter how hard I've tried to enhance the audio, I haven't been able to get a clear take.

Her voice is too airy, the sheets are rustling too loudly. Still, in my heart, I know what she said. It echoes loud and clear in my mind.

She said my name. And she said it while she was masturbating to the thought of me.

A big fucking smirk come over my face.

When the time comes, I'll have to remember to confirm my hunch with the naughty runaway.

"What are you smiling about?" Yasha's cold voice shatters through my warm fantasy.

Fuck.

"Just excited to see you," I grumble, quickly wiping the smirk from my face.

But even as Yasha approaches and the hotel lobby turns a shade more frigid, an irresistible warmth remains deep inside of me. As does a wicked sense of mischief.

I hope Melina is enjoying the package I sent her. It's a 1:1 scale replica of the real thing. If all goes according to plan, it will help prepare her for our first encounter. Because when the time comes, I don't think I'm going to be able to hold myself back.

"The feeling isn't mutual," Yasha rolls her eyes. "This is Manfred. Manfred Schulz. He's my partner... uh, business partner that is."

To my surprise, a tall, lanky man with a bad comb-over and a junky smile steps out from behind her. Shit, I didn't even notice him—that's how forgettable he looks, even in an immaculately tailored suit.

"We're slowly becoming more than partners," Manfred replies, seductively brushing past Yasha's shoulder as he reaches out to offer me his hand.

Instead of returning the greeting, I give Yasha a death glare. This meeting was just supposed to be between the two of us. But then I see her blatantly lean into Otto's arm, and I can't help but smile.

She's trying to make me jealous. Foolish girl. Even if Melina didn't exist, this embarrassing display wouldn't work. In fact, I'm going to make sure it blows up in her face.

Allowing the smile to return to my face, I shake Otto's hand. It's thin and bony and cold.

"You've come a long way," I say, glancing a teasing look at Yasha. "From roughhousing with lowlifes like me to becoming, uh, 'partners' with

someone as refined as Manfred Shulz here.”

Yasha immediately looks horrified.

“What we have is nothing like what we had,” she clarifies.

“... Sorry for interrupting,” Manfred leans in. “But what exactly did you two have?”

“A partnership,” I smirk.

“But not like ours, Otto,” Yasha tries to recover. Her bejeweled hand falls on his thin shoulder then spreads down his back.

Immediately, his suspiciousness melts away. Hell, I’m pretty sure I see something in his pants move. Damn, this guy must be an easy mark. I’d bet Yasha hasn’t even had to sleep with him yet, and she’s probably using him for all he’s worth.

“I’m sure yours is a lot more fun,” I subtly prod.

“Oh, it will be. Soon, I’m told,” Manfred nods. Looking down at Yasha, he places his hand on her hip. “Isn’t that right, dear?”

“That’s right,” Yasha blushes, clearly embarrassed. “Some things are better when you wait.”

I can hardly hold back my laugh.

“Oh, you’ve been waiting?” I jab.

The sneer that twists Yasha’s face is so intense I worry all the plastic in it might melt away.

“I think Tytus and I need to speak alone,” she hisses. Pulling away from Otto’s loose grip, she goes to grab my arm. I don’t let her. Only one woman is allowed to touch me now. And she’s currently bedridden with a replica of my cock.

“I agree,” I say. “How about we talk business in that ballroom over there.”

Yasha follows my gaze down the hall towards the tall set of doors at the end of it.

“That works for me.”

“I hope I don’t catch you two dancing together,” Manfred intervenes, grinning at me like he’s ready to share some big secret. “Her first dance is promised to me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” I assure him.

“Let’s go!” Yasha has already started walking.

“Don’t be long, dear,” Manfred calls after her.

“Oh, you know I never am, darling,” she replies. I can hear the sarcasm in her tone, but I’m not sure Manfred even knows what that is.

“How embarrassing,” I mutter under my breath, easily catching up to Yasha.

“Oh, as you’ve never made sacrifices?”

“I guess you’re right,” I say, stepping ahead of her. “I was with you, after all.”

Grabbing the handle to the ballroom, I open the door and gesture her inside.

Now it’s Yasha’s turn to shoot me a death glare

“Watch yourself,” she warns.

But I’m not having it.

“Inside,” I command

Yasha huffs but still follows my orders. She knows better than to disobey me.

When the door clicks shut behind me, she whips around. “What do you want? Haven’t I given you enough already?”

I ignore her.

“So, Manfred thinks you’re a virgin, huh?”

Yasha’s eyes narrow as she tries to pierce through my soul. Luckily, I don’t have one.

“Fuck, I knew I shouldn’t have brought him. That simpleton can’t keep his mouth shut.”

“That man might be naïve, but he’s no simpleton. That suit looks like it costs even more than your dress.”

“You can be a brilliant businessman while also being blind in all other areas of life.”

“Do you think he’s a virgin too?” I taunt her.

“Enough!” Yasha shouts, her sharp voice echoing around the cavernous ballroom. “Manfred is none of your concern. He’s of use to me simply from a business perspective. That fool will help me take over the company when my father passes, and then he’ll make sure I am given the respect I deserve. From the other members of the board, from our business partners, and from our clients. That will be his duty.”

“And all you have to give him in return is your non-existent cherry...” I nod.

“Don’t act like you were the one who took my innocence.”

“What a curse that would have been.”

In response, Yasha’s pale green eyes fall to the carpeted floor. “He can’t know,” she says. “You can’t show him that video... or any of the others you supposedly have.”

“I won’t,” I quickly reply. “That is, if you give me what I want.”

Those green eyes quickly come flying back off the floor. “I’ve already given you what you want,” she glares at me.

“You know how insatiable I am.”

I immediately regret my choice of words. It’s too flirty. Yasha will pounce on any opening I give her.

“What do you really want?” she whispers, dipping her chin as she struts closer to me.

I raise my palm and stop her.

“Last time we met, you said you had contacts in the Berlin underworld. I want to meet them. There are some questions I need answers to.”

Yasha looks intrigued.

“What questions?”

“That’s none of your business,” I growl, suddenly upset.

She’s hit a sore spot. A man like me shouldn’t be slinking around asking favors from women like her. But I’ve hit dead end after dead end, and I’m no closer to finding out who put Melina in danger.

Hell, even the manager from the bar she was working at has disappeared. And the only worker who knew anything about Melina had just met her the night of the incident. There was frustratingly little information to find at that place. But there was even less at every other crime scene.

Somehow, the street where the van had crashed had been swept clean before I could search it for myself. And when I’d used Yasha’s cameras to trace the route of the van back to its place of origin, I’d found a blind spot in the security system. Still, I managed to sweep the camera-less area and find one possible garage where it could have come out of. Unfortunately, the place had recently been burned to the ground.

Someone has to know what’s going on. This is too big to be kept secret. I just need to find a way into the right circles. And right now, Yasha’s my best bet.

“If you’re asking me to stick my neck out and introduce you to these scumbags, then it is my business,” the feisty heiress says. “I’m already on

thin ice with them.”

“Why are you on thin ice with a bunch of crooks?” I ask, raising my brow.

Yasha hesitates to respond.

“There have been some... recent complications in our arrangement.”

“And what arrangement is that?”

“Why would I tell you?”

“It sounds like you could use some help,” I note.

“I do not need your help,” she spits, her narrow eyes growing wide and wild. “You should see the scope of the organization I created! The money it brings in! Sure, it doesn’t rival the business I’m about to inherit, but it could support me if that ever fell through.”

The ferocity of her response catches me off guard.

“Why the hell would you ever need to worry about money?” I prod, unable to help myself.

“I don’t. Not anymore,” Yasha huffs, slowly cooling back down. “But I did once... You gave me a taste of darkness, Tytus. When you left, I only wanted more.”

“What are you talking about?”

Initially, Yasha hesitates to respond, but it’s like she can’t help herself.

“My father forbade me, but I couldn’t help it,” she mumbles, vaguely. “Of course, no one else in the underworld is anything like you, but by mingling with enough of them, I got my fix. And that pissed daddy off. He threatened to cut me off. To disown me. He didn’t like the rumors that were starting to swirl. So, I took a pre-emptive step. I started my own underworld business. A failsafe in case I was cut out of the will.”

“What underworld business could *you* have possibly started?” I doubt her, remembering how, when we first met, she had never even seen a gun before.

“I...” Clearly, Yasha wants to brag, even if she knows she shouldn’t. It’s an internal struggle I quickly put an end to.

“Tell me,” I demand.

That’s all it takes.

“Have... have you ever heard of camgirls?” she finally gives in, a small smirk lifting her plastic cheeks.

A prideful glint sparkles around her pale green eyes.

“You started a camgirl show?” I ask, unimpressed. “And you’re worried about Manfred seeing your little sex tapes?”

“I started a brothel,” Yasha corrects. “Hundreds of girls work around the clock to make me and my associates money. I provide the... uh, lodging... and they provide the warm bodies. They dance and they entertain and they earn and I collect. It’s my own little empire... or at least, it was...”

“The lodgings you provide must be nice,” I say, trying to make sense of what I’m hearing. “Otherwise, why would these girls work for you? Couldn’t they just as easily make money on their own? Your story doesn’t make much sense...”

“They don’t work on their own because I don’t give them the option to,” Yasha responds, grinning like she’s solved world hunger. “I find the prettiest girl, the most innocent, the most naïve, the ones you would never see on any kind of stream anywhere else, and I put them in front of a camera. I make them work. I make them earn. For me and for my associates.”

“And if they don’t want to?” I ask, starting to understand where this is going.

“Like I said, they don’t have a choice.”

“So slaves. You trade in sex slaves now. That’s your big criminal organization?”

She shrugs

“Sure. Call it whatever you want. It’s lucrative.”

“I’m calling it what it is. You’re evil.”

“I learned it from you, daddy,” Yasha whispers, her grin only growing wider.

“We are nothing alike. I have my limits. My rules. My code.”

That makes her groan. “Oh come on, lighten up. You recorded us having sex, didn’t you? And you’re using it as leverage. What I’m doing is practically the same thing.”

“No. It’s not. What we did was consensual. It sounds like you’re forcing girls into servitude. That’s slavery. That’s evil.”

“You’re just going soft,” Yasha rolls her eyes. “Must be that girl you’re crushing on.”

A fire erupts inside of me.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

“You heard me. You have a crush on someone else. It’s making you soft.”

My fingernails dig into my palms as my hands curl into fists. I think of Melina in her little apartment, alone and vulnerable. I remember how exposed she was last night. How I’m the only one who’s allowed to see her like that. No one else should even know she exists. Not yet.

“... How the fuck did you find out about that?” I hear myself mumble.

“I didn’t,” Yasha laughs. “But you just confirmed it. All I had was an idea. A jealous, invasive idea. I haven’t been able to shake the thought of some other girl getting to have that body of yours. Still, it almost feels better to know. Before, it was just a hunch from the last time we met. I could see the twinkle in your eye. For a second, I thought it was for me. I should have known better.”

“You keep to yourself,” I warn her.

“Only if you promise to do the same to me. Destroy those tapes. Stop asking for favors... unless you’re willing to pay for them like I’m willing to pay Otto.”

She struts towards me and I have to call on all of my willpower not to throw her across the floor.

“Never again,” I grit.

“Because of your new girl,” Yasha nods.

But she’s not allowed to talk about Melina.

Ripping my phone from my pocket, I pull up a stopwatch and set the timer.

“You have twenty-four hours to get me a meeting with your underworld connections,” I tell Yasha, showing her the screen. “If it doesn’t happen by then, I send that video I showed you to Otto.”

“You wouldn’t...”

“Just watch me,” I snarl.

“Fuck... fine. You’re no fun. I’ll set something up.”

“Good.”

That’s all I needed. Turning my back on Yasha, I march for the door.

“Wait, where are you going? Don’t want to stick around and dance?” Yasha taunts.

I decide to hit her right back with a taunt of my own. Stopping at the door, I look over my shoulder.

“I have a date,” I say.

Yasha's teasing smile immediately drops into a defeated frown.

"Asshole..." she calls after me, as I step back into the hotel hallway and slam the door shut.

I don't care enough to respond. All I can think about is Melina.

Her beauty. Her body. Her artwork. The way she touched herself and moaned my name.

Fuck.

I'm going to make her dance. And if she doesn't know how, I'll teach her.

Hopefully, she's making good use of my gift. Because the real thing's coming for her. And I'm not going to be able to hold myself back.

So she better be ready.

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Each brush stroke is cathartic.

My vision spills onto the empty canvas filling it with bits and pieces of what I feel inside. The process is hard, much harder than I remember, but I can't stop.

The familiar smell of fresh paint swirls into my nostrils, mixing in with the warm air. My tired mind jumps with electricity. My exhausted body keeps pushing me forward.

I'm painting again. And it feels fucking amazing.

When I run out of silver paint, I let myself pause. Naturally, my eyes drift to the window. My curtains remain closed, but I don't need to look outside to know how long I've been at this.

Just behind the canvas, perched atop one of my kitchen stools, is my open laptop. The clock on the top right corner of the screen tells me that I've been painting for almost an entire day and night.

Not straight, obviously. My body can't handle that. Neither can my mind. But every second that I have been putting brush to canvas has been euphoric—even if my breaks are filled with doubt.

For a moment, I just sit on the edge of my bed, peering past my newest creation to stare at the open laptop.

Beneath the clock is an open email. But it's not from my mysterious admirer. And it's not one I've written to him.

No. The draft I wrote during one of my doubt-filled breaks from painting is directed toward my brother. Rian Kilpatrick. King of the Irish mafia. The

man who would move worlds to come rescue me, if only he knew where I was.

The unsent draft contains my current whereabouts. That's all.

His email fills the address bar. I haven't found the guts to hit send yet.

What's stopping me?

The laptop blurs as my gaze focuses back on the painting. A heavy pride drifts down my chest. This is my most abstract piece ever, and it's not even done. Not by a long shot.

But that doesn't matter. Even unfinished, it stands as a symbol of everything I came to Berlin for. Finally, I feel like an artist.

I'm living in a cutting-edge, artistic hub. I'm painting. My apartment is warm and cozy. This is what I dreamed of—even if the circumstances that led me to this moment haven't exactly been... uh, ideal.

Placing my brush aside, I take a deep breath.

Reality slowly begins to seep back around me.

My current circumstances aren't exactly ideal either. If it really is Tytus who's set me up like this, then I could be in more danger than ever. Men like him are always looking for an angle. Chances are, he's playing me for his own benefit.

But at this point, I'm not sure I even care. He's hitting all the right buttons. I'm tired yet rejuvenated. I'm satisfied, but still extremely motivated. It feels like I'm slowly recovering from the horrors I've faced.

Everyone goes through their tribulations. Maybe I've finally been through mine.

Yet as I stand up and turn my back on the painting, I suddenly remember why I drafted the email to my brother in the first place.

No matter how warm the inside of this apartment is; no matter how tightly I've shut my curtains and shunned the cold dark world that nearly killed me, I'm not safe, I'm not protected, I'm not loved.

I'm alone.

And I feel every decimal of that deafening loneliness as I shuffle to the bathroom.

But then my phone pings—a scheduled reminder to take my medication—and I remember that I'm not completely alone. In a weird, twisted, mysterious way, I have a guide. A terrifying, monstrous guide, but still, a guide.

I take that pill and another as I close the mirror and give my reflection a good look.

Paint stains my skin, but underneath, I can see a rosy glow. The sight makes me smile. I'm not dead yet. There's still so much more to do. I just have to hold on. I just have to keep pushing.

I look back over my shoulder, toward the glow of the open laptop.

If I hit send on that email, I'll hardly be able to take another breath before my brother will come rushing to my rescue. But his version of a rescue will be dragging me back into the gilded cage I was so desperate to escape from.

Deep down, I'm still desperate to stay on the other side of those gold bars. But is the loneliness and the constant threat of danger worth it?

When I make my way back to the living room, my gaze once again falls on the first painting I've made in months.

That's where I find my answer.

Yes. This is worth it. Artists suffer for their art. They stare danger in the face for their art. They risk it all for their art.

I've risked so much, and it's finally paying off.

"I painted that..." I whisper to myself, getting a fresh look at the dotted canvas.

The piece probably isn't even halfway done, but I can already see how much better it is than anything I've ever created before.

I can't help but wonder if part of that is because of the subject I chose to paint. The complexity of my muse is impossible to ignore. Perhaps that's why, when I finally set up my easel and my little station at the edge of the bed, I didn't choose to paint one of the landscapes my mysterious benefactor keeps emailing me. Hell, I didn't choose to paint anything at all.

I just started. And this is what came out.

But no matter how cuttngly abstract the painting is, there's no doubt in my mind as to what I've just painted—or, rather, who.

Tytus.

... Well, some of him. Bits and pieces. I've only ever met him once, after all. There's no way that's enough to get the full picture of a man as complicated as him.

Still, I somehow feel as if I've managed to capture some of his essence.

The danger, in sharp red brushstrokes that cut through the white canvas like thrashing knives. The power, in towering black lines that reach almost

past the edge of the frame. The fierce intelligence and cunning that sparkles in the silver dots at the center of it all.

But most of all, I feel connected to the warm orange flecks that hide beneath it all. They remind me of the warmth of his breath, of his body, of his heart.

There's more to this monster than meets the eye. I believe I've felt the surface of it. Can I survive being thrown into the deep end?

A gulp slips down my throat as I remember the last gift I received at my door... and the note that came with it.

Start slow, princess. Because I won't.

A warm shudder passes over my skin as I look over my shoulder. That note and accompanying gift are stashed beneath my bed. I haven't looked at them again, but the jolt they provided was part of what got me painting again. I needed to make use of that nervous energy. I needed something to distract me from the implication.

The terrifying, delicious, exhilarating implication.

Without permission, my tongue lashes across my lips. The nagging pressure in my core takes the opportunity to return, in full force.

My hand wants to dip back between my legs, or at the very least reach for what's inside the box beneath my bed.

I just don't know if I'm ready for it.

You'd better be.

Even though the words come from inside my own head, I swear they take on Tytus' deep, primal tone.

I can't help but jump.

"... What the hell is going on?" I whisper to myself.

When I look down at my hands, though, they aren't shaking. They're as steady and as confident as they've been in a long time.

They know what they want.

And it's not to do any more painting.

Still, I force myself to sit on the edge of my bed and take a deep breath. Part of me hopes that I'll come to my senses. That I'll realize the danger I'm in hasn't passed, just changed forms. That I'll hit send on that email to my brother.

But my eyes won't leave the painting. All I can concentrate on is how there's something missing.

I haven't captured all of Tytus Ryzdon yet. I haven't seen all of him yet.
And I definitely haven't felt all of him.

He could be my masterpiece.

My heart starts to flutter. My toes curl. The pressure in my core begins to whirl, picking up speed and strength and intensity.

The artist and the girl inside of me collide into one desire.

Him.

I need to stay.

It's the only way to satisfy my curiosity. To finish what I've started. To become the girl I've always wanted to be.

Leaning around my incomplete canvas, I pull my laptop forward.

With a strong and steady finger, I delete the draft to my brother. Then I slam the computer shut, place it on my bedside table, and reach under the mattress.

The box slides out. The note slips off. But I don't care.

I only want what's inside.

I *need* what's inside.

I'm tired of being unprepared, of being overwhelmed.

Tytus sent me this gift so that I could prepare myself for him.

And that's exactly what I'm going to do.

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TYTUS

From the moment I step out of my car, something feels off.

The two guns tucked beneath my belt instantly grow heavy. A smoky breath curls from my lips.

For a moment, I just pause and scan the unfamiliar area. I've had plenty of shady meetings in countless warehouse districts around the world, but this one is different.

Maybe it's the almost fluorescent graffiti that glows through the darkness. Nearly every inch of every worn-out brick and shattered pane of glass is covered in twisted artwork.

Brightly colored demons mix in with sharp foreign words, taunting me. I don't belong here.

But that's never stopped me before.

I have questions that need answering.

I have a girl to avenge. To protect.

Looking down at my phone, I double-check the coordinates Yasha sent me. I also memorize the names contained in her email.

Lothar Muller. Fritz Kahn. Sepp Klinsmann.

Apparently, these are some of the top dogs in the Berlin underworld. If anyone will know what happened to Melina, they will.

At least, that's what Yasha said.

I'm still not sure I entirely believe her.

"Are you The Warthog?" a heavily accented voice seeps from the darkness ahead.

A disgusted laugh lifts my lips.

“So that’s what Yasha is calling me behind my back nowadays?”

“Hush, no names,” another hidden voice calls out.

“You expect an audience?” I ask, scanning the claustrophobic skyline. We’re walled in on all sides but one.

Only an idiot would come into a meeting like this blind. Yasha’s cameras provided me with an eagle-eyed view of the surroundings long before I decided to take the chance and actually show up.

Luckily, there aren’t many above-ground hiding spots here. If someone is listening, they’ll have to be on the same level as me. And that means they won’t be hiding long.

I’ll smoke out anyone who tries to ruin this.

Melina deserves that much.

“One can never be too careful.” Finally, a face appears to match that voice. And what an ugly face it is.

At first, only a single man steps out of the shadows ahead. He’s older than I expected, but definitely just as haggard. His hollow cheeks are so worn they look like they’ve been melted from his bone. Dead black eyes glare back at me.

Slowly, a crew steps up behind him.

I quickly count a dozen men. The number clenches my fists. Either Yasha warned these fuckers I was trouble, or they’re planning to push me around.

“I can see that,” I nod to his entourage. “Didn’t know I already had such a fearsome reputation in Berlin.”

“Oh, this isn’t for you,” the leader says, stoned-face. “There have been far more dangerous creatures lurking in the night lately.”

Immediately, I know he must be talking about the figure that chased Melina from the car crash. That’s what I want to know about most. Because somehow, he managed to stay out of sight for nearly the whole incident.

It’s like the fucker knew where the cameras were watching.

I must have gone over those recordings a thousand times, trying to get a freeze frame that I could use on a wanted poster, but the shadow barely showed his body, let alone his face.

“So, you’re looking for the same shadow I am,” I say, keeping my fists curled.

“No, not just any shadow,” the man shakes his head. “The devil’s.”

“Sounds like you scare easily,” I taunt, but my pulse is already quickening.

These fuckers don’t look like the types to be scared of anyone or anything. But even through the leader’s dead gaze, I can see an amount of caution that could easily be construed as fear.

“I think you’ll find that not to be the case,” the man practically whispers. “For example, we are not scared of you. Though, you are indeed an impressive specimen.”

“I’m guessing you’re Lothar,” I roll my eyes, remembering the sparse notes Yasha provided me. Lothar Muller is the supposed leader of this gang.

“No names,” someone hisses from behind him.

“Fritz Kahn?” I assume.

But when that thin bald man shares a quick glance with his neighbor, I know I’ve gotten them mixed up.

“Ah, you’re Sepp. That must be Fritz,” I point out.

“Enough of this,” Lothar grunts. “You’ve been giving my associate a hard time. I would appreciate it if you stopped.”

It’s hard to believe he’s talking about Yasha.

“And I would appreciate it if you gave me what I came for,” I snarl.

“What did you come for?”

“Answers. I know about your little sex slavery ring. I know about your connections to Yasha von Bingen. I know that a week ago, you tried to take a girl from a bar and someone stopped you...”

“Sounds like you already have all of your answers,” Lothar sneers back.

“I still need to know who stopped you.”

“You didn’t get a good look on the cameras either, huh?” Sepp mumbles out loud.

“So you have access to them too?” I ask, raising my brow.

Yasha really can’t keep it in her pants.

“It’s part of my arrangement with the associate who sent you here,” Lothar explains.

“So you saw what happened?”

“We did,” Lothar nods. “Well, as much as you have; as much as the cameras caught. We saw an armored vehicle racing towards our transport van. We saw a girl stumble away from the blind spot where the crash occurred, and we got glimpses of the devil who pursued her. Then, when we arrived for inspection, we saw that our entire crew had been massacred. We

had to clean up the bodies of our friends before dawn. I can still feel their cold skin and taste the blood in the frigid air.”

“So it was you who cleaned the scene before I could get there...” I mumble to myself.

“Indeed. And now that we have apparently answered a question you had for us, I ask that you answer one for me: Who is that girl, and why is she so important to you?”

At first, the question sends a shock of primal adrenaline rushing through my body. If they’re interested in Melina and they have access to the city’s security cameras, then we’re in trouble.

But then a moment of clarity comes over me, and a new realization settles me back down.

If this is their big question, then they must not know who Melina is. Not yet. Thank god for that.

Still, their ignorance won’t last much longer. Someday, others are going to come to Berlin looking for the Kilpatrick princess, then the secret will be out.

Hopefully, Melina and I will be long gone by then.

“She’s a contract,” I lie. “A job that needs doing. That’s it.”

Lothar doesn’t seem convinced. “Our common associate has told me you are an important man in the underworld outside of ours. Surely, someone of your stature wouldn’t waste his time on someone unless they were important or valuable.”

“Yasha is misguided,” I grumble. “I’m a hired gun. Nothing more, nothing less. She must just think I’m bigger than I am because of other parts of me she’s experienced.”

That finally brings a smile to the ghoul’s weathered face. His cracked lips twist as he glances over to one of his men.

“As I suspected,” Lothar nods. “And the devil who chased your girl into the Spree river, is he part of your contract as well?”

I just shake my head as the realization sets in that these fuckers aren’t going to give me what I need. They’re just another dead end.

“I was hoping you’d know more about him than me,” I say.

“Perhaps we do,” Lothar teases. “But what would we receive in return for that information?”

That piques my interest.

“What do you want?”

“I’m not sure you have anything to give us.”

“Then why did you agree to meet me?”

Lothar just shrugs. “My associate seemed desperate to get rid of you. I offered to do her dirty work.”

My clenched fists immediately unfurl.

I’m already reaching for my gun when I see the weapons flash out from behind Fritz and Sepp.

The rest of their crew quickly follow suit.

“Fuck,” I curse, lunging out of the way just as the first bullet rushes through the frigid air.

It’s a fucking ambush.

My gun is out before my shoulder hits the ground. Snow upends around me as I fire back into the crowd. I immediately hit someone in the shoulder, then someone else cries out in pain as they get a bullet to the stomach.

Somehow, I manage to avoid getting tagged as I scramble back onto my feet. Up ahead, I see my only chance to get some cover. A flimsy-looking window covered in bright graffiti. I barge forward, barely outpacing the gunfire.

When I get close enough, I lower my gun, close my eyes, and burst through the glass. It shatters around me as I’m propelled into a sliver of safety.

“There’s no way out,” Lothar booms, his crew’s bullets following me into the dark, damp warehouse room. “Your grave is in Berlin.”

“We’ll fucking see about that,” I growl. Dipping behind the sturdy brick wall, I reload my gun, then pull out my second Glock.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Sepp taunts. He’s trying to scare me, but really he’s just sealed his own fate.

The fucker’s creepy voice gives away his position. I barely even have to peek over the shattered window to know where he is. Still, I make sure I get a good view before I shoot, just so I can see the fucker’s head explode.

“Fuck!” Fritz shouts, as his friend’s headless corpse collapses beside him. “Fucking get the bastard!”

The hellfire increases as I slip back down behind the brick wall and reload again.

“Yasha, you fucking bitch,” I grumble. Looking around, I search for a way out of the trap she set for me. But it looks like I’ve just crashed into my own tomb. Everything is already sealed off.

“You aren’t getting off that easy,” I huff. Placing one of my guns on the floor, I let the bullets rain over my head as I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone.

That’s when I see the blood on my hands.

Fucking hell.

I quickly find the source, a slice over the back of my hand. I must have been grazed by a bullet.

The sight fills me with even more fury.

I’ve dealt with enough bullet wounds to know that this shit is going to leave a scar. And that means, in a roundabout way, Yasha has marked me.

She didn’t have any fucking right.

My bloody hand swipes through my phone’s video folders as I search for the blackmail that will be my retribution. Every swipe fills the screen with more blood, but I know when I’ve found it.

The scene is unmistakable.

Immediately, it’s attached to an email. Overhead, I hear the sound of a quickly approaching round of fire. I lift my own barrel just over the precipice of the broken window and start to fire, all while blindly typing Manfred Shulz’s name into the contact field.

I only give a quick look down to confirm that the address bar has been filled out before I hit send.

“Fuck you, Yasha,” I spit, stuffing my phone back into my pocket. With a primal rage steaming from my skin, I pick up my other gun and jump off my ass.

It’s time to end this.

“Oh—“ I immediately come face to face with one of Lothar’s goons. His black eyes open wide at the sight of my barrel.

It’s the last thing he ever does.

My bullet slices right through his forehead. But before his lifeless body can hit the snow-covered ground, I grab him around the collar and pull him to my side.

He becomes my human shield as I hop back over the broken glass and escape my tomb. I’m not ready to die.

Flashes of rage push me forward. Round after round of enemy fire pounds into my human shield’s lifeless body, but his bulletproof vest protects me from the worst of it.

Hell, by the time I manage to get back to my car, I'm barely in any pain at all. And that's bad news for Lothar and his crew.

"It's fucking over," I roar.

Opening my back door, I dip beneath the seats and pull out a briefcase filled with hand grenades. Bullets bounce harmlessly off my shielded window as I pull the pin on the first one.

The fuckers don't know what hits them. I've already tossed the second explosive over my open door when someone finally realizes what's about to happen.

"Grenade!"

He's barely able to finish before the first explosion shuts him up. The agonizing wails that rise up from the smoke are swiftly silenced by a second explosion.

When I look up through my window, I see that only Lothar and another man are left standing. But they're hardly a threat anymore. Both are frozen in the smoke, shocked still by the sudden turn of events.

I grab my gun and take full advantage of their little naps.

Lothar's last soldier tastes my first bullet. It rips through his throat and he immediately collapses to the ground. My second bullet pierces Lothar's thigh. The third into his ribcage.

Shit, that might have hit an organ.

He's barely had a chance to shout out in pain before I'm on him, barrel pressed against his forehead.

"Looks like Berlin isn't my grave, after all," I sneer. "But it definitely is yours."

"I always knew it would be," Lothar coughs. Blood dribbles from his cracked lips as I pull him up by the collar.

"Yasha should have warned you about me," I growl.

To my surprise, that makes the old ghoul chuckle. "She did. But I didn't believe her."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because you failed," he abruptly states. "The girl my men kidnapped, the girl who escaped the crash... she clearly means more to you than you care to admit. But you let my men take her. Then you left her on her own as she desperately tried to escape from something much worse. How could a man with any power let that happen to someone he cares for?"

“She’s just a job...” I hopelessly lie, unsure of who I’m trying to convince more.

“Just a job,” Lothar weakly repeats. His black eyes are glossing over. I’m losing him. He can’t go without giving me my answers.

“What else do you know about this devil?” I ignore him, pressing my barrel deeper into his wrinkly forehead.

“... The devil...” Lothar rasps, his eyelids fluttering as his glassy eyes fill with fear. “... What he did to my men...”

“Tell. Me. What. You. Know,” I roar.

Lifting my gun, I smack him across the cheek with the back of my hand. That seems to temporarily shock him back to life.

“What I know...” he croaks. “Not much. Not much at all... only what I found at the crash site before we managed to clean it up.”

“What did you find?” I press, growing more and more impatient. I need answers. At the very least, I need a clue.

Lothar is right. Clearly, there’s more happening between Melina and me than meets the eye. I’ve claimed her. But how could I do that and still let her go through all of that hell?

I’ve been fooling myself, and it nearly cost us everything.

I’ll make it up to her. That starts here. After Lothar goes, I’ll have wiped out the men who took her from the bar. But there’s a devil out there that needs to pay too.

“I found corpses,” Lothar chokes. “Blood and death... and a message written in entrails along the crimson snow...”

My heart catches in my throat.

“A message? What fucking message?”

“Only two words...” Lothar is fading fast. I try to smack him back awake again, but he hardly even groans.

“Tell me.”

“I didn’t understand what it meant... I still don’t...”

“But maybe I will. Tell me.”

“Please do. Tell me what it means. Before I die...”

“What did the message say?”

“It said... it said... ‘For Drago’...”

My grip goes limp and Lothar falls to the ground, but I don’t even hear him hit the snow.

The world goes silent.

Did he just say what I think he said?

“Dad...”

No. There’s no way. I must have heard him wrong.

But when I grab Lothar again and look down, I see that it’s too late.

He’s dead.

“Fuck,” I mumble, but my words are weak. It’s like I’ve been plunged into a nightmare.

Berlin is the last place I ever thought I’d hear my adoptive father’s name uttered. *My DEAD adoptive father.*

Drago’s been rotting in the ground for a year now. So why is someone dedicating massacres to him?

My gut drops at the implication.

No. It couldn’t be...

“... What the fuck is going on?” I whisper.

Pushing away from Lothar’s corpse, I pinch the bridge of my nose. Blood spills from the cut on the back of my hand.

If what he said is true, I need to confirm it. Fuck, if it’s true, Melina is in even more danger than I feared.

Melina.

I close my eyes and her hazel eyes appear in the darkness. My pounding heart grows heavy. A gust of dread blows through me.

I can’t fail her again.

I won’t.

Putting my guns away, I open my eyes and take out my phone.

I need more answers. More access. More control. And as much as I hate it, that means I need Yasha’s help.

But I already sent Manfred the blackmail.

Shit.

My mind reels as I think of possible solutions. I need Yasha’s knowledge. She’s the only connection I have to this city’s underbelly. She can pay for what she’s done after I’ve used her all up. In the meantime, though, I’m going to have to take control.

But now, if I want to control her, I’m going to have to control Manfred first.

How am I going to manage that?

The answer comes quicker than I expected.

Fuck. It shouldn't be hard. He's just a weaselly little businessman, after all. What could he do but crumble against my threats?

Opening up my email, I try to find the message I sent him during my shootout.

I'll follow it up with a warning. He'll fall in line after that.

My panic starts to lift. I haven't fucked up too badly. Everything will be just fine...

But when I go to my 'sent' folder, I receive the gut punch of a lifetime.

Because it's not his name in the address bar of the delivered email.

It's Melina's.

"Oh shit..."

I accidentally sent her my fucking sex tape.

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MELINA

I never knew pain could feel so good.

I've only managed to slip the tip of the silicone cock into my pussy, but it already feels like I'm being torn apart.

Yet the sensation is intoxicating. I want to keep pushing. The idea of having every last girthy inch deep inside me makes my heart clench and my back arch.

Still, no matter how sharply I contort my body, there's no easy way to take this monstrosity. All I can do is bite down on my lip and sigh as I circle my outstretched hole.

Every second is intense beyond belief. My eyes are clamped shut in concentration.

Slowly, but surely, I slip the giant, lubed mass deeper and deeper. It will only go so far.

A gasp escapes my lips. The pressure in my core is starting to burn. I focus on that pressure as the pain increases and the pleasure expands.

Then, I'm snapped awake.

My phone pings from nearby.

Another message.

My eyelids gradually flutter open. My neck turns and my lazy gaze floats over to the bedside table.

The phone screen is lit up, but I can't see what's on it—not that it matters. Only one person has been contacting me.

Tytus.

It has to be him. I need it to be him.

Keeping the dildo wrapped securely in one hand, I use my other to reach out for the phone.

“... What do you have for me this time?” I whisper, nearly quivering with barely restrained anticipation.

Sure enough, the email is from the same anonymous address as before, but this message isn’t entirely the same as the rest.

There’s no subject line. In fact, there are no words at all. Just an attachment.

A video attachment.

My grip around the rubber cock goes limp.

Instantly, I know this won’t be another beautiful photograph of the Berlin skyline.

This is going to be something more intense.

Is Tytus ready to reveal himself to me?

My teeth sink deeper into my lower lip. My fluttering heart starts to race. My outstretched hole pulses around the bulging prosthetic I’m convinced is a replica of his cock.

“Show me more,” I croak. With surprising desperation, I drop the dildo and flip over. My shut laptop is on top of my other bedside table. I rip it open and go straight to my emails.

But before I open up the attachment, I prepare myself. Whatever this is, it's not going to be something I'm used to seeing.

Tytus wants to push me.

Well, I want him to.

I click on the video.

For a moment, I’m left in a state of suspended anticipation as the video preview loads on the screen. But the second the first frame comes into view, I know I’m in for a wild ride.

Whatever I was expecting, it wasn’t this.

Because the silver-blue eyes I half-expected to greet me are nowhere to be found. Instead, all I see is darkness.

Then, a dim source of light switches on, and I gasp.

“What the...”

On the screen before me is a woman. A beautiful woman. My gaze is immediately drawn to her stunning pale green eyes. They smirk at the camera, lifting smooth cheekbones into a wicked portrait. Her long black hair falls over her shoulder. Her face is framed by a large headboard.

Slowly, she looks from her left to her right.

My racing heart starts to pound when I notice the position she's in. Her long elegant arms are outstretched, her wrists restrained to each side of the bed posts by leather straps.

She's completely naked.

Her perfect, perky tits gently heave over a flat stomach. Her shaved pussy blares between two lifted legs. I can just barely see the leather restraints that tie her ankles to something above her head, just out of the camera's view.

The woman looks like a human sacrifice. Like she's being offered up to a god on a silver plate.

It's both terrifying and arousing. And then I see who else is in the room with her.

The god she's offering herself to.

There's no other way to describe him, even if I can only see his backside as he steps into the frame.

The giant figure makes the outstretched woman look like a tiny doll in comparison. His broad shoulders nearly spill out of the confines of the camera. And every muscular inch of him is covered in attention-grabbing tattoos.

"Holy shit..."

A sigh swirls up from my throat like a tornado. My thighs clench.

A soft white light falls over his dark and gorgeous back like an illuminated waterfall. I gulp. He is muscular beyond belief, chiseled to a gritty perfection, with wings for shoulder blades, an ass like raised stone, and triceps that are as thick and sharp as knives.

They all work together in intricate detail as he steps in front of the woman and starts doing something to her.

My initial instinct is to try and peek around his massive body to get a better look, but I'm quickly embarrassed by how foolish that is.

This is just a video... I tell myself. *No matter how big his presence is.*

Still, that presence keeps me glued to my seat as his powerful shoulder blades unfurl and he goes to work on the hidden woman.

The hair on my arms stands on edge. Somewhere deep inside of me, a primal battle is raging. This is dark. This is dangerous. But this is too thrilling to ignore.

Should I turn away and run, or should I turn the volume up?

The volume...

My fingers are immediately on the speaker keys, pressing down with frantic excitement.

I guess that answers that.

As the volume rises, I start to get an insight as to what's happening, if only because I recognize the woman's light whimpers. They echo the sounds I was just making.

I focus.

What could this monster be doing to that tiny doll? My imagination runs wild. I want to see. I want to learn.

I want to do.

Then, the man turns, and my pounding heart stops dead in its tracks.

I recognize that face.

The silver-blue eyes, shining like corrupted ice crystals under the falling white light.

Tytus.

I should have known.

But it's still the biggest shock of my life.

Did... did he send me his sex tape? With another woman?

I'm not sure how to feel about it. But I can't turn away, especially not as I get my first glimpse of the giant silhouette rocking between Tytus' thick, bare thighs.

I swallow my shock. My heart starts to pound again in thick and heavy beats. The monstrous outline is just out of view, hidden by the darkness, but I can still get a sense of its size; of its power.

Blindly, my hand searches for the dildo. It takes a second because I can't seem to rip my eyes off the screen, but when I feel the familiar grip of the slick, girthy shaft, I can't help but let out a sigh of relief.

"... What is wrong with me?"

A conflicted pleasure becomes trapped in the pressure growing in my core. It's sandwiched between the sheer sexiness of what I'm witnessing and the unwelcome jealousy that accompanies it.

Why would Tytus send this to me?

It doesn't even factor in that my mysterious pen pal has finally been confirmed. That surprise has been completely overwhelmed by another.

I thought he was on my side...

Still, even as part of me sinks into an expanding sadness, the rest of me rises. My back arches. My legs spread. My lips open.

I stare at that shrouded cock of his. I yearn for it. I watch with bated breath as he trails his thick, tatted fingers down the woman's lifted thighs, towards her pussy.

That should be my pussy.

"Beg for it, darling," Tytus growls, his deep voice practically shaking the laptop speakers. "Tell me what you want."

"You," the woman immediately gasps in response. "I want you. Inside of me."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Daddy, please. I'm yours. Ruin me..."

In response, Tytus sits on the edge of the bed. The mattress sinks under his muscular weight. Rubbing his fingers together, he gently pinches the mystery woman's clit.

My reaction is almost as visceral as hers.

"Holy shit," I croak, unconsciously sliding the dildo back between my soaking pussy lips. My stomach clenches as I'm stretched out again.

"Ruin you?" Tytus whispers, his voice a low and raspy rumble. "Like this?"

Keeping the woman's clit between his fingers, he uses his other hand to grab something from the floor. It must be lube because his girthy thumb glistens when it returns to the falling light.

A jittery whimper furrows my brows as he circles that same thumb around the woman's tiny little pink asshole.

My own asshole clenches in anticipation.

When Tytus slips his thumb inside of her, we both cry out.

"Fuck," I rasp, instinctively sliding the silicone cock deeper into my pussy. My shoulders furl against the pressure, but I don't let up.

Neither does Tytus.

"Yes. Please. Rip me apart, daddy. Pound me into dust. I beg you. I want to be your little whore."

The woman starts to loudly pant as Tytus slides another finger up her asshole. Her outstretched thighs flex and unflex as she takes more of him.

A third finger comes next. Slowly, those fingers form a fist.

I almost can't process what I'm seeing.

"That's too much..." I mutter. But that doesn't stop Tytus.

Not that the woman wants him to stop.

His fist disappears inside of her. Somehow, his thick, tatted forearm starts to vanish too.

At this point, I'm just holding my breath. This is too much. How is she taking it all?

"Please..." the woman whines. "Fuck me with your cock. Fill me with your cum. Finish inside of me."

"... Until you leak," Tytus growls in response.

With a surprising amount of control, he unsheathes himself from her. I stare, utterly shocked, as her once tiny asshole is now a gaping, throbbing entrance.

I'm strangely transfixed by it until Tytus stands up, and the mattress lifts, finally free from his massive weight. That's when my attention is turned back to him.

But this time, those silver-blue eyes don't fill me with warmth. Not completely.

Instead, I whimper; less from arousal and more from fear.

There's something so procedural about his movements, something so planned. It doesn't matter how hot it all is, there's a distinct lack of passion from his end.

Shit.

This is the man who's been watching me. The man who's been preparing me.

Now I know for what.

I gulp.

But before I can process it all any further, a sound rips my eyes from the laptop screen to my apartment door.

A knock.

Then, another. Even louder than the last.

Someone is here.

There's no time to understand what's happening. To guess who's come for me. To fear it.

In the blink of an eye, the door splinters, then cracks, ripped off its hinges by some massive force.

All I can do is cover my eyes and scream.

TYTUS

“You... You’re not hurt...” I stumble.

The scene I’ve barged into is like something from my dirty dreams.

Melina has jolted onto her feet so quickly that the skimpy nightgown she’s wearing is still swaying against the force. Her long pale thighs stretch out below, so delicious I have to swallow my desire.

At her feet, the dildo she just dropped spins on its side. It glistens under the warm light of her little apartment, covered in lube... and her juices.

My pants tighten.

She was using it.

Fuck.

A warm wave of pride pounds through my chest—that is, until my frenzied gaze lifts and I see the laptop screen on the bed behind her.

Then it all comes crashing down.

It’s the sex tape.

She’s seen it.

“You...” Melina rasps, fear filling her tiny voice.

I’m not sure how to respond.

“Are... are you alright?” I ask. “I heard you...”

I stop myself before I can finish. Sure, just before I knocked on her door, I heard her whimper, but now it’s clear that it wasn’t caused by pain or fear—even if I swore I heard a hint of both.

It was from arousal.

Maybe this isn’t so bad, after all...

“Heard me what?” Melina spits, immediately becoming defensive. Before that fire can grow any wilder, though, she seems to realize just how exposed she is in her little lace nightgown.

All the fight drains from her face as she hugs her chest and crosses her thighs.

“I thought I heard you cry out,” I explain, my open lips slowly closing. “I thought you were in trouble.”

But she’s not in trouble. At least, not the kind I thought she was in.

This is a whole new degree of sinful.

Shit.

Has my naughty little runaway been masturbating to my sex tape?

The thought is so salacious that I can feel my face contort into a confused, yet aroused, smirk. I knew Melina was slowly shedding her innocence. But this is something else.

“... You need to leave,” she quietly quivers.

That wipes the smile from my face.

“I’m not here to—“

Before I can step forward, I’m stopped in my tracks. But it’s not because of the sex tape paused on Melina’s laptop screen, or the cast replica of my cock that has finally stopped spinning at her feet.

It’s the painting.

The easel I got her stands just behind the chaotic scene. Untouched by the madness I’ve just dragged in with me.

“Is... is that me?” I ask, immediately feeling a connection to the piece.

Melina’s wide eyes snap to the spotted canvas.

“I...” she starts, before trailing off. “It’s not done...”

Her voice is so quiet and shaky I can barely hear it. The fear tugs at my pounding chest. I take my first step forward. But when the shards of Melina’s broken door crunch under my feet, she snaps back to attention.

“It’s beautiful,” I say. “I’m so glad you finally started—”

“Stop!”

To my surprise, Melina jumps back. But her bed is right behind her, and it catches her under the knees. She falls onto the mattress with a thump.

That lifts her nightgown well above her waist, and for a moment, I get an unimpeded view of the glistening wetness staining the inside of her thighs.

And of her pink pussy lips.

The sight steals my breath away.

“Get out!” Melina whimpers, those pale cheeks of hers turning red with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” I insist, shaking my head. But my chest has been pumped full of adrenaline. It’s impossible to shake what I just saw... and the desire it’s filled me with. “Here, let me—”

In an act of compassion, I look toward her dresser drawer. There must be some less revealing clothes I can cover her in. Lifting my hands in a show of peace, I start to move again, slower this time.

But that only makes Melina scramble to the other side of her bed. Her movements are so janky and desperate that I worry she’ll hurt herself.

“Please,” I stop. “I’m only here to help.”

Melina doesn’t seem to believe me. Before I can blink, she reaches across her mattress and grabs the cell phone on her bedside table.

“What do you want with me?” she cries, lifting the phone into the air like it’s a weapon.

The pain and fear in her voice hit me like a ton of bricks.

Shit. Here I was, thinking, in some weird way, that we were someone growing close—even if it was from a distance.

Clearly, Melina doesn’t feel the same way.

“You won’t throw that at me,” I say, my voice lowering as the harsh reality sets in.

I’ve misread the situation. I’ve misread her.

I feel foolish.

“... Why not?” Melina squeaks, her thin arm trembling as she tries her best to hold the harmless smartphone high and mighty.

“Because then how would you call for help?”

A shallow gulp slides down her tender throat and a primal part of me needs to be restrained.

“You... You’re a monster...” she croaks.

“If only you knew...” I sigh. My chin drops with my shoulders. I’m about to pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration when I see the blood on my hand.

Fuck.

I must be covered in it. I just came raced here from a massacre, after all. No wonder she’s so scared.

Just like that, I'm not quite as upset by Melina's reaction. It's far more understandable now.

"... What are you doing here?" Melina asks.

I lift my chin. But my gaze slips past her, falling instead on the laptop screen at her back.

She immediately understands.

"That was an accident," I assure her. "I came to make sure you didn't have to see it."

"It's too late for that," she huffs.

I almost want to laugh.

"I can see that."

"Well, I'll delete it, if that's what you want."

Slowly, her outstretched arm falls.

But when she turns to her laptop, I try to stop her. Pieces of the shattered door crunch beneath my feet as I step forward.

She freezes.

"Easy there, little dove," I coo. "The tape doesn't matter anymore. You've already seen it..."

You've already enjoyed it, the devil on my shoulder taunts. I swat it aside.

"I wish I didn't," Melina mutters, a soft sneer scrunching her little button nose.

"Is that so?" I playfully question, raising my brow at her.

Out of respect, I don't look back below her waist. Still, I can't help but picture what I just witnessed beneath that thin little skirt.

Wet thighs. A soaking pussy.

The reason my pants are so tight they could rip at any moment.

Fuck.

My hands shake as I try to fight away the blood rushing below my waist. It's a useless endeavor. All I can do to delay the inevitable is bite down on my tongue. But when that forces me to breathe through my nose, I get my first deep whiff of the apartment.

Melina's scent is stronger than ever before. It wraps around me in an embrace so intense I nearly choke.

This is even better than her panties. Even more alluring. Even more dangerous.

Unconsciously, I feel my palm pat against the tiny bulge in my pocket. The soft silk must be soaked in blood by now.

I'll have to replace them soon.

"The things you did to that girl..." Melina whispers, referencing the tape I made with Yasha so long ago.

"Are they things that you would like done to you?" I ask, unable to help myself.

My cock is rock hard.

So much for biting my tongue.

"Wha... what?" Melina gasps, her pretty hazel eyes nearly bulging out of her head. "No. I... I... that's too much... I..."

For some reason, her unabashed shame is insanely arousing. I take a careful step forward. She flinches, but this time doesn't jump back or crawl away.

Maybe I wasn't entirely wrong about her. About us.

Maybe she does want me, after all.

"We can start slow," I assure her, an unavoidable smirk filling my face as I look down at the fallen dildo.

"Oh my god, it *is* yours..." Melina gasps. The red blush on her cheeks deepens. It looks like she could collapse in on herself at any second.

I want to rush forward and keep her from doing that. I want to grab her by the shoulders and pull her into me. But I know I haven't given her enough time to prepare for that.

No. Instead, I had to fucking jump the gun because of that stupid sex tape. Because of Yasha von Bingen's traitorous ass.

No. No thoughts of other women while you're with Melina, I order myself. She deserves all of your attention. She needs all of it. Otherwise, she could crumble.

"I see you've been following my instructions," I say, lifting my gaze back up from the floor. But before I allow myself to look at Melina again, I give her painting another long glance. "How wonderful..."

"Why are you doing all of this?" she asks, interrupting my study.

"Doing what?"

"*This*," she huffs, weakly gesturing around the tiny apartment and all of her gifts.

"Because I want to," I admit. "Like I said, I'm here to help."

For some reason, my claim seems to light a fire under Melina's pretty little ass.

"Help?" she gapes, pushing herself up straight. "You've been stalking me. How is that helping me? I almost died. Where were you? Fuck. I almost died. And why? Because you convinced me to come out here alone!"

Her words hit me in the gut like a hammer. But even as I process the pain, a part of me drifts back to that first meeting.

My eye shut, and I can see the dark hallways of the Kilpatrick mansion. I can see her.

That was the closest I'd ever gotten to Melina. One more step toward her, and I can change that. Will she be able to survive being that close to me? Shit. I'm just not sure how much longer I can control myself.

My eyes snap back open.

"You were never alone," I growl.

"Bullshit," Mel starts to shiver. "Even now, with you in *my* apartment, I'm alone. You don't want to help me. You only want to use me..."

The truth in her accusation hurts. But part of me knows there's a different side to all of this. Part of me needs her to know that I don't just think of her as a pawn or a tool or an object.

But the other side of me won't stand down. It's too stubborn. Too strong. And it flares up against Melina's harsh words.

"Use you..." I huff. "If I wanted to use you, I would have already done it, sweetheart. Men like me don't wait patiently for princess pawns. We take them. Savagely. Have I been savage to you, little dove? Have I hurt you? Have I wronged you? Hell, I could have dragged you right back here after you fell into that river. I could have tried to mend you myself, like a shattered doll. But that would have been selfish. I don't know how to fix broken things. So I didn't. I did what was best for you."

"Why?" Mel heaves. "Why do any of this for me unless it's for your own benefit? You think I don't know how men like you function? I grew up in the same world as you, *Tytus*. I know it all too well how it works..."

The way her lips twist into a sneer when she says my name sends a hot flash racing through my body. This is only the second time I've heard her say it, but it's just as delicious as the first.

In anger or in lust, the sound of my name coming out of her mouth fills me with something I can't control.

My fingers tighten into fists. But not because I'm angry. It's the only way I can control myself.

I'm too turned on. Too desperate to taste her.

I didn't know my little runaway was capable of such fire. It's even more irresistible than her innocence.

"You don't know me, little dove. Not yet. But I mean to change that."

"And if I refuse your advances? If I fight and scream and ask where you were when I was running from the nightmare that nearly killed me? If I doubt every word you say? Every gift you give? Every motive you hold?"

"Then I will tell you the truth. Plain and simple," I snarl.

This time, Melina hardly even flinches as I step toward her.

"I almost died," she chokes as if the cold water still needs to be pumped from her lungs. "I almost fucking died."

The dread and sadness in her voice stops me at the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my shadow covering her completely. "I failed you. It won't happen again."

Melina's shoulders sink into my words. It's like she wants to believe me—or maybe she's just tired. I wouldn't blame her.

"... At least my apartment's warm now," she sighs, curling up into a tiny ball.

"And you've started painting again," I note, nodding over to the colorful canvas. "Life isn't so bad. *I'm* not so bad."

I've never wanted to hug someone so badly. She looks so lonely and isolated in her little corner of this cold dark world. So desperate to be held.

I could be the one to hold her.

But I need to be careful. Melina can't break. I can't let her break.

Don't forget what this is all for, I tell myself.

But in this tender, vulnerable moment, those words ring shallow.

"No. You are that bad," Melina weakly huffs, looking up at me again. Those hazel eyes lift and fall over my bloody body. "But maybe that's what I need right now..."

"What else do you need?" I quickly ask. "Tell me. More money? More medicine? A bigger place? More art supplies?"

But we both know that's not what she really needs. Those are just distractions, a way to avoid the obvious.

Melina doesn't need things. She needs someone, if even only for one single tender moment. She's been starved of that ever since she escaped her

gilded cage.

Since *I* helped her escape.

Her loneliness is my responsibility now.

“You already got all of that stuff for me...” she sighs.

“I can get more,” I stubbornly insist.

“I don’t want more of that,” she says. “But... thank you... I guess... for taking care of me... for giving me a second chance...”

With a great deal of care, I kneel down until our eyes are level with each other.

“It’s what you deserve,” I say.

“Why do I deserve it?” she asks, faintly. “Because I paint for you? Because I...”

Her hazel eyes drop and the red hue of her cheeks turns a rosy shade of pink.

“I don’t need a reason to take care of you,” I tell her, my heart pounding through the half-truth, half-lie. “But that painting is a good start.”

To my surprise, that draws a little laugh from Melina’s plump lips.

“You could have seen it earlier if you weren’t such a little stalker,” she huffs.

“Oh, nothing about me is little, princess. That’s why I had to stay away. You weren’t ready for me.”

“I am now?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I was tired of waiting.”

The subtle smile on her perfect lips grows. Another laugh slips out. But it’s not because she thinks any of this is funny.

“I can’t believe you sent me your sex tape,” she says, shaking her head in disbelief. “You’re Roz’s brother. You’re—”

Before she can finish, I gently caress her chin.

Fuck. She’s so warm I could melt. And to my satisfaction, she doesn’t pull away. In fact, I swear I feel her subtly sink into my palm.

“That’s enough talk about the past,” I say.

“You’re just embarrassed.” Her voice is barely more than a breath, but there’s a thread of strength in it, and an undercurrent of warmth.

Is that the connection I thought was growing between us? Is it real, after all?

“Oh, don’t think I’ll ever let you forget about that,” I say, my hand falling down her neck to her collarbone. “In fact, I think it’s about time you make things right.”

Melina’s button nose scrunches with confusion.

“Make things right?”

I slip a finger under the strap of her nightgown. She doesn’t resist.

“You’ve seen me naked now, little dove. It’s only fair that you return the favor.”

Mel stops breathing. But only for a moment.

“And if I say no?” she rasps.

I can feel the rhythm of her pounding heart through her soft skin.

It’s synced with mine.

“Then I’ll get up and turn around and leave you alone forever, just like you want.”

“I... I don’t want that...” Mel is slow to whisper. “... At least, I don’t think I do...”

“Then what do you want?”

For the first time since I burst through her front door, she looks me directly in the eyes. Both of our pounding hearts stop dead.

The sparkle in her hazel gaze tells me all I need to know.

“Fuck it,” I growl.

Grabbing her cheeks between my palms, I lean in and kiss her.

MELINA

His lips taste like heaven.

Out of all the craziness I've had to endure over the past week this is the most insane.

Tytus Ryzdon is kissing me.

And I'm not sure I ever want him to stop.

Holy shit.

But his kiss isn't the only thing driving me wild. If Tytus' lips taste like heaven, then the heat throbbing from the bulge between his legs is like a preview of hell. Not a bad place, mind you. Just one filled with such intense heat that even thinking about the pain and pleasure hidden there makes me sweat.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My mind runs in all directions as Tytus' hot palms press me into place. The power in his hands is unbelievable, yet his touch is somehow also filled with such tenderness and passion.

Is this what a kiss is supposed to feel like? Is this what I've been missing out on?

It doesn't matter. My past and my future don't matter as I sink into Tytus' steady embrace. Slowly, my shock wears off, melted away by the scorching heat of the act. The conflict inside of me vanishes.

I want to kiss him back.

But before I can, he pulls away.

"Was that too much for you, angel?"

His hot breath is strangely refreshing. It drops my guard and makes me want to taste him again. The pressure in my core swirls and jumps. I feel so wonderfully dirty.

“I’m no angel,” I quietly sigh.

“Compared to me, you might as well be.”

Those silver-blue eyes shimmer from mere inches away as I stare at the man who’s inadvertently dragged me across an ocean.

Is this why? To give me my first kiss?

For some reason, the thought is thrilling, even if that excitement is undercut by a strong current of fear.

Tytus seems to feel this hesitation. When I sigh again, his hands drop down my face, but before I can lose his touch, something inside of me snaps, and I reach up and grab his wrist.

He’s so girthy that my fingers barely wrap halfway around the thinnest part of his forearm, but it’s still enough to stop him.

His searing palms stay caressed around my jaw, if only just for a little while longer.

“Do you want me, little dove?” he asks, his voice low and raspy.

My spine tingles. My body freezes. The truth is, I don’t know what I want. Not in the grand scheme of things. But what I want at this very moment is clear as day.

Him.

A jittery breath leaves my lips. I reply with the subtlest nod.

Tytus smiles, those thick, blood lips teasing me with their movement.

“Good girl.”

His praise tears a silent gasp from my beating chest. Yet that rush is stopped dead when those silver-blue eyes drift down my body, to the floor.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see what he’s looking at.

The toy he gave me glistens under soft apartment lights. My thighs start to tremble. A red-hot wave of shame laps up against my flushed cheeks.

“Do you think you’re ready for the real thing?” he asks.

The question hits me like a thunderbolt. My body clenches, both with arousal and fear.

I swallow.

“I… I don’t know,” I manage to rasp.

“Let’s find out.”

Without further ado, Tytus drops one of his hands from my face. It finds a new home against the small of my back. I gasp as he softly leads me down onto the bed.

“You’ve been busy,” he smirks, his gaze finding the glistening wetness on the inside of my thighs.

My initial reaction is to cross my legs and cover up the shame, but Tytus immediately plants his forearms between my knees, preventing me from hiding anything.

“If you want me to stop, just say so, angel. Do you want me to stop?”

His veiny forearm flexes and the inky tattoos that cover his skin seem to move through the blood that stains nearly every inch of him.

The sight is equal parts stunning and terrifying.

“Are... Are you okay?” I hear myself ask when my line of sight falls on the back of his closed fist.

A deep cut suggests that at least some of this blood is his.

“You should see the other guys,” he chuckles.

“Other guys? Plural?” I ask, surprised.

He nods.

“I ran into some trouble before I raced over here.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

Tytus' voice is calm and collected, but not even he can seem to hide the subtle twitch that temporarily morphs his smile into a sneer.

“So that’s not all your blood, I guess...”

Tytus shakes his head. “If it was, I would be dead in some alleyway, not here. But let’s not talk about that. I can shower if you’d like?”

At first, I want to say yes, but only for one specific reason. To see him naked. But then I think about him getting up and turning away. I think about the blanket of heat he’s laid over me disappearing. I think about the desire throbbing between my legs and how it begs to be satisfied.

I think about all of that being pulled away. And I don’t think I want that.

“It’s alright...” I whisper. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen blood.”

That makes Tytus laugh. “Ah, yes, I’m sure to a mafia princess like you, blood was just another household decoration.”

“They always tried to hide it from me,” I find myself confessing. “But I was sneakier than they gave me credit for.”

“I don’t doubt it, you little runaway,” Tytus laughs.

My chest tightens. For a split-second, all I can think about is my old life; about how claustrophobic and stale it was.

This moment might be just as claustrophobic as any I've experienced before, but it's anything but stale.

This is new. It's exciting.

It's mine.

"Why are you here?" I suddenly feel the urge to ask.

In response, Tytus' silver-blue eyes drift over my shoulder.

I know what he's looking at. But before I can turn to see the video still quietly playing on the laptop screen, he reaches over and clicks it shut.

"I thought I might be able to stop you from seeing that filth."

"It wasn't all bad," I shamefully admit, far too quickly.

My toes curl as I remember how this giant man looked naked.

My eyelids flutter. The pressure in my core expands. I want to see it again. I want to see it in person. No matter how crazy that is.

I'm clearly losing my mind. And, right now, I'm okay with that. This moment is mine—even if I'm not really in control.

"Interesting," Tytus muses, a playful lilt running through his voice. "I thought you'd be horrified by the video."

"Well, I was... eventually."

The forearm Tytus has planted between my legs relaxes as he purses his blood-red lips and shakes his head.

"I won't treat you like that," he gently insists. "You deserve so much more care."

The assurance helps ease some of my fear. But part of me is strangely disappointed too.

"And what if I didn't want you to treat me so gently?"

The stare Tytus gives me makes my whole body shiver.

"You can't handle that, little dove."

It's only when my chest starts to pound that I realize it had stopped beating.

"What *can* I handle?" I breathlessly ask, entirely lost in the intimate moment.

I'm flirting. For the first time, I'm freaking flirting, and it feels... right.

It feels good.

I want more.

"There's only one way to find out."

The forearm fixed between my legs finally lifts. But so does the hand around my jaw.

For a moment, I'm returned to a cold empty world.

Then, both hands are on my legs, stretching out just above my knees. My thighs are pulled apart.

"Open your legs for me, angel. I promise to make you cum before I fill you up," Tytus grumbles. "It's the only way I'm going to fit."

Before I can respond, he touches those thick blood-red lips of his against the inside of my thigh.

A gasp rips from my throat. My fingers are immediately in his hair, grabbing on for dear life.

"Slow..." I beg. "Please."

I'm not sure how much I can take. But I'm already desperate to find my limit.

The arousal that had disappeared just moments before Tytus burst through my door has returned in full force.

I need to see how far I can go.

"As you wish," Tytus says.

His next kiss falls further up the inside of my thigh. Every inch of me reacts. My legs clamp around his ears even as I try to pull him up by the hair.

"Oh my god..." I whimper, voice shaking.

But Tytus isn't having it. Those strong hands pry me apart with ease.

"If it's too much, you tell me to stop and I will. Do you understand, Melina?"

The way he says my name nearly makes me cry, it's so beautiful and intense.

"Do. You. Understand?" he repeats, refusing to continue until I give him what he wants.

Fortunately, it's the exact same thing I desperately want.

"Yes, I understand."

"Good girl," he huffs. "You're not allowed to shatter on me, little dove. Only a certain type of woman can bring me to my knees. And no one has ever done it this quickly. I can worship you. All you have to do is let me."

"I'll let you," I plead. "I'll let you... I'll let you..."

Each repetition takes on a higher frequency as Tytus returns his lips to my skin.

“You are absolutely delicious,” he growls, his hot breath washing up my legs until it hits me in just the right spot.

I squirm, but Tytus reaches up to my hips and holds me down. The faint stubble on his face tickles my skin as he descends deeper into the untouched.

The pressure in my core is ready to erupt. It just needs a spark. Anything will do. I’m already preparing myself when Tytus gives me what I need.

But it’s more than a spark. Shit. It feels like he plunges me into a wonderful fire.

“Yes!” I cry as his tongue comes out to lap up the residue of what’s left on the inside of my thighs. He paints my skin in broad strokes, each one more ravenous than the last.

“You taste so good,” he grunts. “And I haven’t even gotten to the best part yet.”

It doesn’t take him long to rectify that. That thick, wet tongue lashes between my soaking lips, finding my clit in a rapturous instant.

It’s like my soul is sucked from my body. My nails dig deep into his scalp as my chest is launched from the mattress. I can’t breathe. I don’t want to breathe. I want to suffocate in this feeling.

But Tytus has hardly even gotten started. And I only truly understand that when those juicy lips of his close in around my swollen clit.

He sucks me up like a lollipop.

I lose it.

“Please. Yes,” I repeat. Over and over again. It’s all I know how to say. And it hardly even matters when I realize I’m just repeating part of what I heard on that sex tape he accidentally sent me.

I want Tytus to turn me into his slut. Because if this is how good his mouth feels, I can’t imagine how amazing the rest is.

“You like this, angel? Do you want more?”

“Yes!” I shout. “Please!”

Tytus’ head rapidly shakes between my legs. His lips and tongue flash across my clit in aggressive strokes that crack the pressure in my core.

I explode.

“That’s a good fucking girl,” he growls, his voice shaking right along with my entire body. “Erupt for me. Do it. More!”

But I don't need to be told. Every last inch of me shakes until the mind-blowing satisfaction is so complete that I feel it in my soul.

To my surprise, though, that satisfaction is joined by something else. Something even stronger.

A deep desire for more.

Tytus must really be an expert because he seems to pick up on that almost as quickly as I do.

"That was nice, wasn't it, angel?" he smiles up from between my legs. Blood stains his temples like dark birthmarks. His lips glisten with my cum. "Now, do you want the real thing?"

Keeping his silvery gaze trained on me, Tytus reaches to the floor and picks up the toy I'd dropped when he barged in here.

When he barged in here...

Shit.

Just like that, my eyes bulge wide open. My neck snaps to the side.

"The door..." I gasp, slapping a hand against my open mouth.

Sure enough, the spot where my door used to be is completely uncovered. I can see into the hallway.

Oh no...

I was so loud.

"Oh, yeah," Tytus grunts. Keeping the silicone cock wrapped between his fingers, he rises.

I can only watch as he walks to the entrance, picks up the partially shattered door, and leans it against the doorway.

That provides some privacy, but not much.

Still, Tytus seems satisfied. And when he turns back around, I can't help but lose sight of my concerns about the door.

The bulge in his pants is massive.

"Fuck..." I gulp, involuntarily.

Like, fuck is right. The outline looks even bigger than the supposed replica in his hands.

The satisfying glow throbbing through my body tenses up. I can't help but remember how that dildo stretched me so thinly—and that's when I was in control of it.

"Now, back to where we—" Tytus starts before I quickly stop him.

"I'm not ready!" I blurt out, my voice sharp and filled with panic.

That stops him in his tracks.

His silver-blue eyes race for a moment before settling.

"Fine," he licks his lips. "That's understandable. We don't want to move too quickly, now do we? But do me a favor..."

He steps forward and the remaining shards of the door crunch beneath his massive feet.

"What?" I gulp.

"Get on all fours."

The order is so unexpected I can't help but gulp.

"But I thought you said..."

"I'm not going to fuck you, princess," Tytus assures me, his voice strangely warm and welcoming. "But I am going to prepare you, just like I promised. Now," he kneels on the side of the bed and reaches over me. The mattress sinks as his bulge brushes over my stomach. "Where's the lube I sent you?"

Before I can gather myself enough to point to the bedside drawer, Tytus opens it up, almost as if he already knows it's there.

My hazy mind isn't sharp enough to think about that any further, especially not as he straddles my ankles and pours a glob of lubricant over the already glistening dildo.

"Get on all fours, angel," he reminds me. "Don't be scared."

"Scared of what?" I ask, slowly obeying his command.

It's like my body and mind have separated. I'm under his control—for better and for worse.

"Nothing," Tytus mumbles. "I won't do anything you won't like. Promise."

When I'm in position, he applies pressure to the small of my back, arching my spine downward.

"It will hurt less this way," he says.

I swallow. "Hurt?"

That draws a deep belly laugh from him. "It will feel better. I swear it."

"I don't want anything to hurt."

"It won't. And if it starts to, you just say so and we'll stop. Okay?"

"... Okay."

No matter how loudly my mind screams for control, it loses to the warm satisfaction retreating from my inner shores. I need to be filled up again. I need to be emptied.

I need him to teach me how to cum in a thousand different ways.

Please.

Somehow, I manage to relax.

Strangely, my body trusts Tytus, even if my mind is rightfully skeptical.

Maybe it's because this doesn't feel like only the second time we've truly met. Maybe that's why he sent all these gifts and all those emails, to warm me up. To prepare me.

For what?

I'm about to find out.

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TYTUS

“Pleasure yourself.”

Fuck. The idea alone is so intoxicating that I have to take a deep breath after the words tumble from my mouth.

Do in person what I’ve been watching you do from afar, I think, keeping that part to myself. Let me see every wonderful inch up close. Finally.

“I... what do you mean?” Melina asks, clearly confused.

I bend my fingers and try to steady my racing heart. The taste of her cum still lingers on my lips. Her back is bent and her ass is directly in my face, but I stop myself from taking another bite.

The way Melina shook when I sucked that orgasm out of her was the most amazing experience of my life, but it also showed me just how fragile she really is.

Hell, she shook so violently I was worried she might break. At this point, I’m glad she had the guts to shut things down before I could take them too far. Because if my pants had come off, there would have been no more controlling myself.

It might have been the end of Melina Kilpatrick as I understand her.. And I can’t have that.

“Pleasure yourself,” I calmly repeat, lifting my chin at the delicious buffet in front of me. “Show me how you make yourself cum.”

The insides of Melina’s thighs glisten even brighter than before. Only now it’s not just a mixture of cum and lube. My saliva also coats her skin.

Fuck. I tasted her insides, and it was so fucking delicious I nearly lost my mind.

“Pleasure myself? Right now? In front of you?”

“That’s right,” I confirm.

Reaching under her, I place the dildo by her left hand. The soft silk of her thin useless nightgown brushes over my forearm, and I want to rip it off. But I manage to grind away that savage desire. I need to be gentle—even as my cock throbs so hard it hurts.

“I... I don’t know what you mean,” Melina hesitates.

To be fair, I’ve put her in an awkward position. Who masturbates on all fours, anyways?

I should let her lie down on her back, the way she always does. But I can’t willingly let her move out of this position. It’s too fucking hot.

My obedient little pet, kneeling on all fours, her back bent and her ass raised directly in my face.

The blood-soaked panties in my pocket hardly feel worth my time anymore. I’m inches away from the secrets they once covered. I’ve tasted the forbidden cherry.

It’s mine now.

“Here, I’ll help,” I say. “I know just how you like it.”

For some reason, I don’t expect Melina to fall to the bed when I lift her left hand off the mattress. But the rest of her just can’t stay upright without that second support system.

The moment her forearm bends, that beautiful peach of an ass tumbles from my line of sight. But I’m already so starved I hardly pause to commemorate it.

“Start here,” I whisper, taking Melina’s thin wrist as she cozies up on her back.

Her fingers go limp against my grip as I lead her hand between her soaking legs. Through the material of her nightgown, I can see the faintest image of her hard nipples and perky tits.

I lick my lips.

Patience, I tell myself. You’re not here to break her. You’re here to build her.

“Oh,” Melina whimpers when I lead the tips of her fingers to her preferred starting spot. Her hand stiffens, instinctively applying pressure.

She closes her eyes and gasps and I look up to the vent by the ceiling. My camera is recording. Through its lens, I've already watched her do this to herself. Now, I'm going to teach her how to do it even better.

Hopefully, by her next orgasm, I'll have gotten a little closer to her heart. If not, then I'll at least have some footage for my blackmail folder.

You naughty little princess.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" I say, leading her fingers up and down, and from side to side.

Melina just nods, eyes still clamped shut.

"Here, try this. I want it inside of you."

But when I try to replace her fingers with the silicone replica of my cock, Melina stubbornly shakes her head.

"It's too much," she quietly rasps.

My cock twitches, desperate to see something fill up her tiny hole. But I don't let it take control. Not yet.

"Alright," I nod. "We can go as slow as you want."

"Thank you," she whispers.

I'm rewarded for my patience as Melina builds her way to another orgasm. This time, though, she doesn't shake so violently. Instead, her flat stomach and perky chest start to softly undulate and heave against the growing pressure applied between her legs.

It's an incredible sight. But it's not enough.

Fortunately, Melina doesn't stop me when I start to lead her wrist in faster strokes... or when I place my giant hand on the back of her tiny one, pressing her palm deeper into her pussy so that I can feel her swollen clit against my skin again.

"That's a good girl," I groan, my hips practically thrusting in the air as my cock begs for more. "Let me take care of you."

When I gently pinch her clit between two of my fingers, Melina lets out a sharp gasp. Her hazel eyes rip open and immediately search for me.

When they land on my strong gaze, they twinkle. My racing heart flutters. I start to rub her clit faster.

"Can you cum for me again, angel?" I ask, staring deep into her soul. "Will you?"

"Yes," she rasps. "Yes... yes..."

At first, her voice fades and her breathing increases. Then I stop rubbing and start twisting and her cries come rushing out at full volume, only to

crescendo in a single unbroken wail.

“Hold on just a little longer,” I demand, sneering down at her with an animalistic urge. “I’m not done with you yet.”

“No. Tytus. I can’t—”

Melina’s nails dig into my forearm as she holds on for dear life. Her hips lift off the ground, pumping into my hand. I don’t tease her for much longer. I can’t. I want her to bathe my hand in cum.

And with one last primal cry, she does just that.

I nearly cream my own fucking pants at the sight of her writhing body. Somehow, though, I manage to keep pumping until exhaustion takes over Melina’s pale little body.

“How was that, angel?” I ask when she finally slumps into the bed.

Her arms flail outward, her head sinks into the mattress. Deep breaths swirl out of her parted lips, each one lifting her pretty chest a little higher.

“Good...” is all she can manage to rasp.

I can’t help but chuckle. And for a moment, all I do is sit here and watch her slowly sink into the satisfaction.

Then my phone starts to vibrate.

At first, I ignore it—I know who’s messaging me, and I don’t want to let her break into this intimate moment—but then another text comes through, and another. Soon enough, it’s like an avalanche is buzzing in my pocket.

Fucking hell.

I sneer at the thought of Yasha furiously typing away. It has to be her, after all. The heiress is the only one who has this number. The last thing I want is to bring another girl into this tiny apartment—even if it’s just in thought.

But I’m guessing Yasha has finally seen the message I sent her as I raced over here. She knows how much trouble she’s in. She’ll try and dig her way out of it.

... And I might just give her the shovel. Because as Melina’s body calms and her breathing relaxes, I feel the fluttering in my heart harden into a steady pound.

Fuck.

She looks so angelic. So pure. So peaceful. Even after what I just did to her, she looks too good to be in a dump like this. My gaze drifts over her body, and I notice the faint redness on her shoulders. The fading scrapes from her near-death experience.

My hard heart splinters with rage.

Suddenly, the cracks in the wall above her bed seem too deep to ignore. The rusted bedposts holding up her flimsy mattress too fragile for what I plan to put her through. When my foot shifts, I feel the shards of the door I busted down to get in here. There's no fixing those hinges, I fucking shattered them.

Melina deserves better than this. And I'm going to make sure she gets it. Even if it means using another woman.

With a great deal of reluctance, I lift myself from the side of the bed.

Melina's eyes immediately snap open.

"You're leaving?" she asks, her voice cracking.

My hand falls over my pocket. The phone is still vibrating with new messages. Yasha better shut up soon before I change my mind.

"I'll be back," I promise. "Don't go anywhere."

With a lazy heaviness, Melina turns her cheek and looks past me.

"The door..."

"I'll take care of everything when I return," I assure her. "Just don't leave. Promise me that, okay?"

I can see the gears whirling in her head as she slowly looks around the apartment. Each time her gaze falls on one of the gifts I've gotten for her, a new level of acceptance seems to come over her stunning hazel hue.

Is she starting to trust me?

Shit. Already?

"Okay," she whispers, her voice so tired that I imagine she'll fall asleep the second I leave. Hell, I'll probably be back before she even wakes back up.

"Thank you, angel. I won't be far. If you need help, just call my name."

Without thinking, I reach down and take her limp hand. It feels strange to be so tender, but as I rub my thumb across the back of her hand, it just feels right.

I want Melina to be comfortable. Right now, that's all I want. But I also *need* her to be safe.

Killing those wannabe mobsters who kidnapped her was a good start, but there's still some monstrous shadow wandering the streets out there.

Apparently, it's the devil. And somehow, he knows my dead father's name.

For Drago.

That message was left for me. It had to be.

But why?

I have to figure that out. First, though, I have to get Melina to a safer location. Somewhere close enough to continue my investigation, but far enough that she's out of harm's way.

I think I know just the place.

The problem is, to get there, I'm going to need Yasha's help. And I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to control myself around her. Not after what she did.

"Sleep tight, angel," I whisper, removing the broken door and then carefully placing it back into place when I'm out in the hallway. "I'll keep the nightmares away—even if I have to become one to do it."

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TYTUS

Fortunately, the spot where Yasha agreed to meet me isn't too far from Melina's apartment—not that I gave her a choice.

The heiress must be panicking. Hell, each text she sent me was more pitiful and desperate than the last.

If I didn't have such a precious package to protect, then I might not have sent her any reply at all. Instead, I would have let her stew in her fear, at least until I decided it was time to release every last tape I have on her.

But those tapes can stay hidden for a little while longer. I want something from Yasha. And she's going to give it to me—whether she likes it or not.

"Finally," I grumble when Yasha's black Cadillac pulls to a stop across the empty street.

Cranking my neck, I take one last look at the video feed playing on my phone. Melina is still sleeping peacefully, undisturbed, as I shove my phone in my pocket and head toward the idling car.

The tinted window on the driver's side door rolls down as I approach. All I see is a pale forehead. The heiress' eyes are covered by thick sunglasses. Clearly, she's trying to hide her fear from me.

It's not working. I can practically smell it.

"No more funny shit," I bark, my patience already wearing thin.

"I wouldn't—"

But even the sound of Yasha's voice sets me off. All I can think of is what I just shared with Melina. I would have never gotten to experience any

of that if Yasha and her goons had gotten their way. No. I'd be rotting in some warehouse alleyway. Dead.

Now it's my turn to feel a strike of fear. But it's not a fear I'm used to feeling. This fear is more abstract. It's a fear of missing out on something I've already experienced; of losing a future that I'm already obsessed with.

No one is allowed to rip me away from Melina.

No one.

"Shut up," I growl. Grabbing the edge of Yasha's half-open window, I pull down with a brutal tug.

She yelps as the glass shatters beneath my bloody hand.

"Tytus, I'm so sorry. I didn't know what they were—"

"Stop," I growl. "I'm not here for your excuses. I'm here for what you can give me. It's the only reason you're still alive."

That shuts her up. Yasha's quivering upper lip freezes and even the Botox can't keep her cheeks from melting.

"You wouldn't kill an innocent woman..." she croaks.

"Oh, come off it," I spit. "You're anything but innocent."

"But you don't kill women, remember?" she desperately reminds me.

"You're making me rethink my policy."

Crocodile tears start to well up in Yasha's pale green eyes.

"Tytus, please. I did everything you said. I came here even though I'm terrified. I set up a meeting with a connected slum lord for you. I brought the vault I keep in my office. Look, it's all in the trunk, take everything inside, I don't—"

"Open it for me," I interrupt.

Taking a step back, I grab the driver's side handle and pull the door open. Glass crunches beneath my feet.

Yasha hesitates to get out.

"You aren't listening to me," I warn. "I need you to step out of the car, open up the trunk, and unlock the safe."

Her hands shake as she clumsily reaches into her pocket and pulls out a keychain.

"Here, take it. I don't care. Whatever you want in there, it's yours. Just please, don't kill me."

"You aren't listening, Yasha," I roar, my impatience erupting. "Do as I fucking say."

A few blocks away, Melina is sleeping peacefully, waiting for me. But it doesn't matter how close I am. Until I'm right back by her side, she's not entirely safe and I'm not satisfied.

"Okay. Okay," Yasha worryingly relents. I step aside and she scrambles out of the driver's seat.

But for some reason, she decided to wear fucking heels, and she keeps stumbling as she feels her way along the side of the Cadillac toward the trunk.

Even more wasted time.

"Did you really take the time to get all dressed up before you 'raced' over here?" I angrily question, following her around the taillight.

"It's instinct," she mutters. "I can't turn it off."

The trunk opens and I spot the vault. Yasha doesn't look up as she sticks the first key in its slot.

"I'm not sure I believe you."

The second key slips in, and Yasha takes a final deep breath before turning them both in opposite directions.

The vault door pops open.

"Why else would I get all dressed up?" she asks, stepping aside so I can inspect the safe.

I just give her a nasty side glance and clench my fists. Her top is so low cut I can see the skin between her breasts. This is not something someone just throws on when it's this cold out.

She still thinks she can seduce me into submission.

Is she so naïve to think that she ever could?

"I guess you're right," I huff. "You just can't turn it off."

Reaching into the vault, I find the box I came for. Yasha immediately recognizes it.

"The lake house?" she foolishly questions.

"That's right," I nod. Inside the velvet rectangular box is a piece of paper with all the details for my meeting with Yasha's slum lord. There's also a keypad and a set of gold keys. They'll allow me to bypass Yasha's old Wannsee lakeside mansion's security system and use the place as a home base.

Really, it's perfect.

Not only is the summer home shrouded by trees and bordered by water, but it's also a secret. A getaway that only Yasha and I know about. She

bought it when we first started our complicated affair so we'd have a private place to bump boots. A place far enough outside the city that no one could hear her cries of pleasure.

Melina should be safe there.

She should also be comfortable. Because the place is opulent as hell. A perfect hideout for an angelic runaway who deserves better than a rundown apartment.

"... We share a lot of memories in that old place," Yasha whispers. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her brush aside a strand of raven-black hair.

There it is.

"If only I could forget every last one of them," I sneer.

"You don't mean that."

I've barely even shut the box and shoved it into my pocket when Yasha begins her little dance, twirling toward me like a schoolgirl.

"Back. Off," I warn.

She stops, but her twisted brain isn't done yet. She just can't let go.

"Don't you just want to drag me back there and forget about all of this?" she asks, tilting down her forehead in a pathetic attempt to look cute. "We can fuck just like we used to. All wild and depraved. You can even film it if you want. I'll throw everything away for you, Tytus. I've always been willing to do that. You know that, right?"

When she reaches out to touch my shoulder, I step aside and glower at her with all the hate I hold in my heart.

She's despicable, and she nearly got Melina killed.

"You never meant anything to me," I spit. "I've only ever used you for my own selfish gain. You were a boring, selfish lover. I've—"

I stop myself before I can say that I've found someone better now.

But Yasha seems to hear it anyway. Her mood instantly turns when it becomes clear her games won't work on me. A flash of jealousy churns behind her pale green eyes.

"And you said I was a monster," she sneers. "If that's the case, then what does that make you?"

"The devil," I grunt.

"I hear you aren't the only one."

Of course she knows about that. Fuck.

"You'll hear a lot of things when you return to Berlin in a few months," I brush her off.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re going on a trip. I can’t risk you telling anyone about the lake house.”

Yasha just gapes at me.

“And where the hell do you plan on sending me?”

“Get in the trunk and find out.”

“I am NOT getting in that trunk.”

“Get. In. The. Trunk,” I repeat, stepping forward.

“You said you wouldn’t kill me,” Yasha panics, scrambling back. But there isn’t anywhere to go. Not in those heels.

“I’m not going to kill you. I’m just going to take you somewhere safe until I’ve figured all of this shit out.”

“Safe for who?”

“For me, Yasha,” I bluntly state “I can’t have you organizing any more ambushes, or telling anyone about our secret lakeside hideaway.”

“I won’t tell a soul!” she loudly insists. “I’ll take a long vacation. I won’t come back until you tell me to. I fucking promise! Don’t you see how scared I am?”

She’s not lying. Even the smoke drifting from her mouth retreats from me as I continue my approach.

“Just think of this as a forced vacation.”

“Please! What do you want? I’ll do anything!” Yasha’s back hits a storefront window and she’s trapped. Those wide green eyes search for help, but no one’s coming. She should have brought backup, though I’m almost convinced those fuckers she sent to kill me were the only connections she really had.

“When you get back, you can do plenty for me. For one, you can put an end to that disgusting camgirl ring of yours and set whoever’s still trapped free. Then, you can go ahead and leave the underworld altogether. If I’m feeling righteous, I might just keep those tapes tucked away and let you run your daddy’s company. Anything to keep you out of my world. But none of that really matters because that’s not what I want most.”

“.... What do you want most?” Yasha gulps.

“For you to leave me the fuck alone. Forever.”

To my surprise, Yasha hesitates to accept this term.

She’s fucking crazy.

“Fine,” she finally mumbles. “I’ll leave you alone.”

“Good. Now, was that so hard?”

The defeat on her face almost makes me feel bad. But when her chin falls to her chest and her eyes close, I remember how she thought she could seduce me into forgiveness.

I remember what she’s done.

Those scrapes I saw on Melina’s arm, they’re Yasha’s fault. The trauma my little runaway endured has direct ties to what Yasha started.

It’s despicable. She’s despicable. An evil little rich girl who thinks exploitation was a fun way to rebel against her father.

How many have suffered because of her? How many more will before I have the time to put an end to it?

“You can get in the passenger seat instead of the trunk,” I grunt, taking a step back to give her some breathing room.

As much as I loathe this woman, it only takes a deep breath to calm me down and clear my mind.

I’m not the type who shoves women in the trunks of cars, and I don’t want to be—no matter how much this one might deserve it.

Still, I’m in a hurry, and my patience is already wearing thin. Especially as Yasha ignores me so she can pout a little longer.

“I’ll count down from three,” I say. “If you don’t move by one, then I might just change my mind. Three... Two...”

“One.”

The strange, deep voice suddenly appears from behind me.

It’s accompanied by the cold steel of an unfriendly muzzle. The pressure pushes into the back of my skull.

“What the fuck...” I grumble.

Yasha’s sad gaze rips off the ground. Her wide eyes stare at someone standing just behind me.

“Go,” the stranger orders to her.

Yasha only hesitates for a second before complying. She doesn’t even give me a final look as she brushes past my shoulder.

When I try and turn around, the gun is shoved deeper into my skull.

“Don’t fucking move,” the stranger growls.

But my fingers are already clenching, my hands slowly moving to the gun tucked beneath my belt.

Before I can reach it, though, I hear the crunching of glass. Yasha’s car door slams shut. Tires squeal as she pulls away.

“Fuck!” I roar. “You fucking son of a bitch. Do you have any idea who the fuck you’re messing with?”

My growing fury blinds me from the risk of reaching for my gun. I keep inching closer to the hidden handle, even if I know it’s stupid. Whoever’s holding their gun to my head is too close. One wrong move and it’s all over. But I’m too angry to care...

That is, until my mind suddenly fills with the image of what I left to come here.

Melina.

Even as I try to swat her from my thoughts, her warmth sticks. She’s all alone in that little apartment. Asleep. Vulnerable.

I need to survive. For her sake.

My fists unclench.

“I know exactly who you are,” the voice says. His hand falls on my shoulder and I’m roughly turned around. “Tytus Ryzdon.”

The barrel quickly finds a new place right between my eyes, making it hard to see who’s holding the gun.

“You better kill me quick,” I instinctively snarl. “Otherwise, you’re in for a world of hurt.”

My only hope is that this fucker does something rash. Something I can take advantage of.

But that hope is quickly put to rest.

“No. I’m not going to kill you, Tytus,” the blurry figure reveals. “Not until you help me find my niece.”

With that, the gun retreats slightly from my skull, and I get a clear look at the fucker who got the jump on me.

The sight is like a hard punch to the gut.

“Fuck,” I grunt, immediately recognizing the face.

It’s Maksim Smolov.

Melina’s uncle.

MELINA

I shouldn't be this upset.

Actually, that's not true. I should be far more upset than I am, but for different reasons.

Yet here I am, sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at my broken doorway, not so subtly hoping that Tytus will appear again.

Shit.

Why did he have to leave?

My fluttering heart sinks.

How could he leave?

That's what I'm most upset about. Not that Tytus Ryzdon—my family's most dangerous rival, my best friend's older brother, my stalker—stole my first kiss. It's not even that he was the first person to ever make me cum.

It's that he reached into my chest and found my soul; he caressed it and made me feel so good I nearly shattered; and then he left, like it all meant nothing to him.

I wish it meant nothing to me.

But it doesn't. It can't. There's no going back. He was my first.

And I want more.

So why isn't he here giving it to me?

"Shit," I grumble, pinching the bridge of my nose. Every muscle in my body still aches from the cascade of orgasms I experienced last night. I've never felt so satisfied in my life, yet I can't stop thinking about what I want to do next.

Everything.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the replica cock. It's no longer shining with my juices or with lube, but it still taunts me. I want to grab it and put it to good use. I want to see if I've loosened up enough to plunge it all the way into my pussy.

But I know it won't matter how deep I can go on my own. It won't be as good as what Tytus can do to me.

Hell, all those years of lonely masturbation seem like a complete waste now. I wasn't preparing myself. Nothing could have prepared me for *that*.

How did I survive with such a plain, boring sex-life? My fingers won't do anymore. Not after Tytus replaced them with his own. Not after he led me to ecstasy.

He knew just what I liked...

My brow furrows.

... He also knew where the lube was.

What are the odds?

Turning my gaze from the broken doorway, I look towards the bedside table on the far side of the mattress. Sure, it's common sense to assume that I'd keep my lube in one of my bedside tables, but why didn't Tytus reach for the closer one first?

A vine of suspicion starts to grow behind my chest, tightening my pounding pulse into a heavy thump.

Has he been watching me?

Slowly, my cheeks fill with heat.

God, I hope not.

How many times have I masturbated since I returned from the hospital? I can't count. All I can think of is how Tytus seemed to know exactly where I like my fingers to start when I rub one out. How he led me in just the right direction before taking over and showing me something new.

He warmed me up with a familiar routine so I would be comfortable with what came next. But how did he know what was familiar to me?

My heart drops as I look toward my window. The curtains are shut tightly, but, as always, a small slit has appeared down the center.

"No," I whisper to myself, sizing up the angel. "He wouldn't be able to see."

Fighting through my soreness, I let curiosity lead me to my favorite spot on the bed. With my back against the wall. It's how Tytus positioned me

after realizing I couldn't handle being on all fours for too long, not after what he did to me.

Saddling up, I let my hand fall between my legs and look toward the slit in the curtains.

"There's no way he could see me from this angle," I think out loud. "Unless..."

My constricting heart starts to race as I find my shut laptop. The second I rip it open, though, I'm greeted with a shocking reminder.

The sex tape is still up on the screen. I'd nearly forgotten about that. A shot of painful jealousy rips through me.

"Shit."

Trying to ignore it, I exit the video player and scan the physical design of the personal computer, searching for a built-in webcam.

But as far as I can tell, there doesn't seem to be any.

"Then how have you been watching me?" I ask.

For some reason, I can't shake the idea that he has been. Why wouldn't he? It's not like spying on a girl crosses any kind of line for a man like Tytus.

My obsession grows as I search for my phone. Sure enough, there's a camera on the back, but that wouldn't make much sense either.

My phone is always face down, which means the camera would be pointed directly at the ceiling.

Tytus would never get a good view of me masturbating from that angle, and he probably wouldn't be able to figure out where I stashed the lube.

There's only one other explanation.

The hair on the back of my neck lifts as I stare up at the ceiling, specifically, at the corners. I can remember the panic I'd had when I first returned from the hospital; the paranoia that I was being watched. Filmed.

Those bastards who kidnaped me from the bar had wanted me to join some sick camgirl cult or something. So I vaguely remember searching my apartment for a webcam... but for how long? How thoroughly?

I can hardly remember. The first few days after I'd returned from the hospital are still so blurry. I couldn't have been sharp enough to uncover every little hiding spot.

With a deep breath, I decide to rectify that.

At least now I know who's been watching. Not some pathetic camshow pimps. Not the devilish shadow that chased me into the Spree river.

Tytus.

He's still a mystery to me, but I'm not so afraid as I cautiously stand on my bed and scan the apartment for good vantage points.

"Where are you?" I rasp, my thighs still shaking ever so slightly from their big night.

My first guess is somewhere by the kitchen. A camera above the fridge would give a perfect view of my bed. But when I pull up a chair and sweep the dusty top, I come up empty-handed.

"I know it's here," I tell myself. "Somewhere..."

But it's not just because Tytus knew where the lube was or how to butter me up. I'm starting to remember more.

Like what he said before he left.

I won't be far. If you need help, just call my name.

I was already half asleep when he said that, but it comes back to me like a rush of water.

Unless he's just gone down the hallway, Tytus will need to have a listening device stashed around here somewhere if he wants to hear any cries for help.

But a listening device could be hidden anywhere, and it doesn't explain the lube or his knowledge of my habits.

A camera is what I need to find. And I'm still convinced there is one. Somewhere.

For a moment, I just stare through the apartment from atop the chair. But the longer I look, the more hopeless it all becomes.

Someone like Tytus would know how to properly hide a camera. There's no way it would be so easy to spot that I could do it with my bare eyes from the top of a simple chair.

... But maybe I don't have to.

"Rozalia," I whisper, as a lightbulb goes off over my head.

Descending from the chair, I race over to the bedside table where my phone is. The gears are turning in my head as I try to remember my best friend's exact advice.

Let the flashlight catch what your eyes can't see.

It went something like that. At least that's how I remember the advice she gave me after I told her how much I enjoyed a good slice of late-night pizza.

In response, the notorious femme fatale had told me to meet her in the main kitchen at midnight for girl talk and extra pepperoni.

But when I'd told her that I wasn't allowed out of my section of the compound after dark, she'd challenged me to do just that.

But what about the cameras? I'd naively asked.

Find their blind spots.

How? I don't even know where they are, just that they're there.

With a Cheshire grin, she'd taken out her phone and clicked the camera light on. Then she'd turned off all the lights in the hallway leading up to the kitchen and directed the beam over all the corners we could find. Sure enough, the light reflected off the lenses, revealing the cameras, movements and all.

From there, I was able to formulate a route to get me to the kitchen.

Shit, that first slice was like heaven. I'd never felt so badass. The two of us talked and laughed until dawn, then I'd carefully snuck back to my room and had the most satisfying sleep of my life.

My heart sinks.

I miss Rozalia.

"This is for you," I say, turning on my phone's camera light.

Scrambling back to the kitchen, I click off all the lights, then carefully boost myself back up on the chair and start scanning.

"Come to mama," I whisper, full of confidence. But the longer I scan without getting a result, the quicker that confidence fades.

Am I just losing my mind? Is there really a camera?

Then, I see it.

A reflection. Coming through the dingy vent in the ceiling corner above my bed.

Of course.

"Bingo."

I practically jump down from the chair and run from the kitchen, flicking the lights back on along the way.

But before I can hop on my bedside table and rip the vent off, something stops me.

Something that hits me in the chest like a jackhammer.

Tytus tricked me. He deceived me.

Shit. That kiss he gave me last night was so tender I almost forgot who he truly was.

A hardened mobster. An irredeemable monster.

A creep.

He's been spying on me.

It's how he knew where the lube was. It's how he knew where I liked my fingers when I masturbated.

It's how he could make sure I was safe.

An inner conflict roots me into place as I battle with the implications.

Tytus saved my life, but he was also the one who put it at risk in the first place. Then he helped mend me back to health. He gave gifts and warmth and a sense of safety. In return, he watched me, closely, and without my permission.

The confirmation of his peeping almost makes me sick. But then that sense of betrayal turns anger. And then disappointment.

But through it all is a wicked, unmistakable sense of arousal— as well as something that could be mistaken as gratitude.

He's been watching me. Not for profit or for selfish reasons, but to make sure I'm alright.

Right?

Hell, I don't know. And I'm starting to feel nauseous from turning myself around so quickly.

Shaking my head, I try to think clearly.

How do I know what Tytus true motivations are? For as tenderly as he kissed me last night, he still hasn't told me shit.

For all I know, I could be the key to some master plan of his. Rozalia always said that her brother was a mastermind, a chess player making moves with human pieces.

So, am I one of his expandable rooks?

... Or am I something more.

The fact that I have no idea makes me angry again. Tytus was my first kiss. The way he held my cheeks and gently led me along should tell me all I need to know.

But it doesn't.

I'm still in the dark. I'm still alone. Tytus is still nothing more than a beautiful and dangerous mystery.

I feel myself sniff back a bout of sadness. But I don't wallow in it for long.

Slowly, the anger returns.

The thought of being used by a handsome stranger sparks something in me that melts away all the soreness in my limbs.

No. He's not a stranger. He's your rival. He's your best friend's forbidden older brother. He knows the power he holds over you.

But do I hold any power over him?

Swallowing my disappointment, I glare up at the vent and remember how Tytus stopped when I told him to.

"Who wants who more?" I quietly ask.

I almost hope he's watching. But even just the thought of those silver-blue eyes glaring at me makes every hair on my body stand on edge.

"I don't need you," I say, louder this time.

Without breaking eye contact with the vent, I stride over to the painting of him. Then, with one purposeful shove, I knock it over.

A strike of satisfaction flashes through me when the canvas falls onto the floor, face down.

Out of view, out of mind, I tell myself.

If only it were that easy.

"You want this?" I glare up at the hidden camera, gesturing at my barely clothed body. "I'll fucking give it to you."

Turning around, I reach out for the pipe that runs up the cracked wall separating my room from the kitchen. It's cold and rusty, but I don't care.

I remember what that bitch Elsa taught me before she threw me to the wolves. How she almost made me feel like I was making a friend when she taught me how to pole dance.

At the time, it seemed like harmless fun. But now I know all about her hidden motive. She was grooming me to be a cam girl. A slave locked in some tiny room for all eternity, dancing for the entertainment of hundreds of creeps across the world.

Fuck that.

I'm not a dancer. I'd never danced for anyone before. And I never want to dance for anyone again.

So why am I getting the sudden urge to do just that.

Something inside of me wants to tease Tytus. Taunt him. Right now, he's the creep on the other end of the camera.

But he's shown me that he'll listen when I tell him no.

So, I'll put on a show. Then when he comes racing back, all hot and horny, with that giant bulge throbbing beneath his pants, I'll look him in

those eyes and tell him exactly what he doesn't want to hear.

No.

It's the one bit of control I have left in my life. Even my privacy is a mirage.

He's been watching me.

"Watch this, you bastard."

I almost want to strip out of my little nightgown and voluntarily give him the view he's already taken from me by force.

But I stop before that thought can go any further. Instead, I wrap both hands around the rusty poll and dip my back.

Then, I freeze.

Suddenly, the feeling that I'm being watched explodes in a spine-chilling gust. It's so strong that I can't even move.

I just hang there, my hair falling back like open drapes as I feel an overwhelming fear run through me.

That's when I see it.

Outside, the sun has nearly set. But there's just enough light left to outline the figure watching me from the roof across the street.

I only see it out of the corner of my eye, just barely through the open slit in my curtains. But it's enough to floor me.

My arms go limp and I fall.

"What the hell..." I mumble, biting back a shock of pain.

Slowly, I push myself off my side, but it's harder than it has any right to be.

It feels like I'm being weigh down by a blanket dread.

Lifting my head, I look back towards the window, but from this angle, I can only see the sky.

"Please, no," I croak.

I want to run and hide bury my head in the sand and hope for the best. But I know I can't do that.

With a great deal of effort, I start to crawl over to the window pane. Dread drags me along like a stubborn anchor.

Bile sits heavy in my throat as I place my hands on the window pane and pull myself up just enough to peek over the edge.

"No..."

The gasp that escapes my throat is sharp and painful. I swear I can feel the cold water of the Spree river rush over me as I stare at the very same

figure that watched me float away from the bridge on that horrific night.

He stares back at me, unflinching.

My heart vanishes. My chest becomes an open hole.

It's too dark outside to make out any features, but that monstrous outline is unforgettable.

With a terrified whimper, I fall away from the window, landing on my overturned canvas. I hear a rip, but that hardly matters.

Blood rushes to my ears as I scramble back to my bed and pick up my phone.

He's here! Tytus! Please come back! He's fucking here!

The email is hastily written, and I wish I could call and tell him to hurry back, but it's the best I can do.

I hit send and turn back to the window. From this angle, I can't see through the opening.

Part of me expects to get an immediate response.

I'm not so lucky.

The harsh truth sets in quickly enough.

I'm on my own.

Again.

Fuck. So much for the safety Tytus promised me.

It was all a trick.

Still, I can't help but pleadingly look up to the vent where I know his camera is hidden.

Please, Tytus. I need you, I silently beg.

Even if I'm starting to hate your guts.

Obviously I get no response.

Fear swirls with anger and disappointment as I turn away from the hidden camera and try to gather myself. A flurry of deep breaths allow me to fight back the terror enough to get on my feet.

But when I dare return to the window and cautiously glance through the opening in my curtains, I'm met with an even more horrifying sight than before.

The figure is gone.

My head snaps around. I look at the sad state of my door. Shit. There's no protection here. No safety. No real warmth.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Flashbacks of that cold dark night in the snow pound at me as I scramble over to my dresser. My chest burns. Fear blurs my vision.

Still, I manage to rip open the drawers, and with frantic desperation, I start to gather all the warm clothes I can find.

I need to change. And quick. It's cold and dark and lonely outside, but every instinct in me is screaming the exact same thing.

Run.

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TYTUS

“How did you find me?” I ask, keeping my hands glued to the back of my skull as the fearsome Maksim Smolov leads me around a corner down the street. “Did Yasha sell me out again?”

“She had no idea I was tailing her,” Maksim grunts.

But I don’t buy it.

“Bullshit,” I growl. “She must have reached out to you. How else would you know about her?”

“I have my ways. Now shut up and follow my instructions.”

The notorious Russian gives me a courteous kick to the back and I stumble through the light film of snow covering the streets.

“Easy there, old man,” I warn. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re in no position to hurt anyone,” he quickly responds.

“You underestimate me.”

“No. I don’t. Not anymore.” The frustration in his voice is palpable. It sounds like he’s been waiting a long time to catch up to me. “This whole catastrophe is entirely your fault. Right now, I should be enjoying my retirement. Instead, I’ve been running around the fucking globe, chasing the girl you let loose.”

“Sounds like we’re not so different.”

I get another kick to the back. Up ahead, I see an idling car. That must be where we’re going. The trunk is already open.

I can’t let Maksim get me in there. If he does, I might never see Melina again. Fuck. It might already be too late. What are the chances Maksim is here alone. Someone could already be at the apartment.

Clenching my fists, I get ready to do something stupid. I just need an opening. Anything to get back to Melina.

“We’re nothing alike, you scumbag,” Maksim spits. “Now, hand over your weapons and get comfy. We’re going on a bumpy ride.”

“Don’t you want to question me first?” I ask, trying to buy some time. All I need is a bit of time to figure out how I’m going to get out of this.

“Your interrogation can wait until we’re at a more secure location,” Maksim stubbornly insists. ‘I’m not about to risk losing my prime suspect.’

“There’s no time for that shit,” I huff, slowly coming up with a plan. “Melina is in danger.”

That stops the old man in his tracks. The snow stops crunching beneath his feet. I pause too.

Here we go.

“You know where she is, don’t you?” Suddenly, Maksim shoves his pistol into the center of my back. I flinch against the force, but I don’t bend.

“Wait? You don’t?” I ask, trying to hide my relief.

“If I did, you’d already be dead.”

Cranking my neck, I take a deep breath. For a second there, I was worried Maksim might not be here alone. For all I knew, he was sent to neutralize me while someone else picked up the lost princess.

But he must be the first one in Berlin. I still have a chance.

“Well, then stop fucking around. There’s no time to waste. Ask me your questions now, because Melina is in trouble, and I want to save her just as badly as you do.”

Even without turning around, I can sense Maksim’s hesitation. It thickens the crisp winter air.

He cares too much about his niece to pass up on any opportunity to save her, no matter how much he loathes the source of information.

“Keep moving,” he grunts. Placing his hand on my back, he pushes me forward.

“We don’t have time for this!” I shout, letting my very real frustration bubble to the surface.

“Why the hell do you want to save her so badly?” he replies, suspicion filling every word.

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it fucking matters.”

Without warning, Maksim grabs onto my shoulder and pulls me around.

His gun stays trained at my gut, and his face remains a twisted mixture of disgust and fury. But there's something else twinkling behind those dark eyes. Something I recognize all too well now.

Fear.

My heart sinks. For a moment, I can't help but feel a sliver of sympathy for the old man.

He's just as worried about Melina as I am. Sometimes, I forget that she's from a family that actually cares for her.

Shit. That was part of the problem. They cared too much for her. They suffocated a wild, artistic spirit. Caged it. And so she ran. She ran right into my arms.

And I'm not ready to give her up.

"Call it a crush," I shrug, allowing myself a brief moment of honesty.

That brings the butt of Maksim's pistol blaring across my temple. The force nearly knocks me off my feet. But I don't let myself stumble.

Men like this don't respect weakness. And as much as I hate the idea, I need to earn this fucker's respect.

"No. You don't have a crush, you fucking freak," Maksim sneers. "You want to use her. Rozalia warned me about you. Well, here's a warning about me. I don't play chess, I fucking set the board on fire."

"I've never been scared of a little fire," I snarl back, skull throbbing.

Maksim steps back and lifts his gun. The barrel points directly at my forehead. Behind me, the idling car's taillights cast a soft glow over the dark night.

Smoke rises from the bear's massive body. He's steaming mad and ready to kill. But I force myself to focus on his fear.

"This isn't a game," Maksim growls. "Tell me what you know or I end you right now and go find out on my own."

All I can do is shake my head. "You'd be dooming Melina to hell if you did that. Every second we waste squabbling is an extra second she has to suffer."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

As far as I can tell, Maksim is completely blind to what's happening. He must have just gotten here and he's probably desperate for some insight.

That's my way in. And my way out.

"How long have you been in Berlin?" I ask.

"That's none of your business."

“I’m guessing not long enough to do anything but track me down.”

“You aren’t exactly hard to miss,” Maksim huffs. “In fact, the first thing I heard about when I touched down in Germany was how some sloppy American had slaughtered a whole faction of thugs down in Berlin’s warehouse district. A little more snooping led me to the person who set up that meeting. When I saw the beautiful young heiress, I figured questioning her was a waste of time. Eventually, she was going to lead me right to you. And I was right. But it didn’t look like you two we’re meeting for the reason I assumed...”

“It’s not like that,” I say, a genuine pit of disgust churning my lips. “Yasha is a tool. She was only useful because her connections could help me find out who took Melina.”

To my surprise, Maksim’s shoulder slumps.

“... Someone took her?” he asks, devastated.

“Yes,” I lie. “That’s why time is of the fucking essence. Or did you think I was just playing around when I said she was in trouble?”

“I... I thought you meant something else...” Maksim mumbles, his dark eyes racing as he tries to make sense of what he’s hearing. Clearly, he was hoping for the best.

Fool. He let his heart get in the way of reality. It’s a harsh reminder not to make the same mistake.

“What did you think I was talking about?” I push, prying for any little bit of information that might help me when I finally get out of this bind.

As far as I know, no one else from the Kilpatrick family is in Berlin yet. But if there are others out there—other hunters from other families—I need to know.

I can’t risk another surprise like this.

“Everyone back home is after her,” Maksim says. “The good, the bad...”

“And the ugly,” I add. “Luckily, it doesn’t sound like she’s been caught by anyone from back home. If what I’ve learned is true, no one in this city has any clue who the fuck Melina is. We can use that to our advantage. But only if we hurry. Because the Germans might not be the only ones here.”

“Who took her?” Slowly, the old man starts to stiffen again. His focus returns. But now, he doesn’t seem nearly as disgusted by me.

Good. I can work with that.

“Apparently, she was taken in by a group that trades in a certain kind of sexual slavery. Do you know what a cam girl is, old man?”

My words might as well be a hammer.

“Did you just say sexual slavery?” he gapes.

I can’t imagine the shock. Melina is his perfect innocent little niece, after all. This should get his blood pumping.

“The modern-day equivalent of gold-chalice pimps,” I explain. “But there’s no point in standing around explaining that whole mess to you right now, because I have everything recorded in a hard drive. It’s yours. You can study it, and hopefully, you’ll find something that I missed. Maybe then we’ll know who Melina is with now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those pathetic pimps lost her,” I update him. “They don’t have Melina. Not anymore.”

I’m thinking on my feet and practically making up my plan as I speak. But I think I just found my footing. I know where this lie is heading now.

It’s the only path forward.

“What the fuck is going on?” I can nearly see Maksim double take at the twist.

He’s so worried about Melina that I could tell him nearly anything at this point and he might believe it. Still, I take a second to get my story straight before I continue. There needs to be enough truth to make it believable, but not enough to clue him in on what’s really happening.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” I assure him.

“No, I want to know right fucking now. If those pimps don’t have her, then who does?” His frustration is rising again, but his focus is being spread thin.

I’m confusing the old man. Even his gun begins to drop as he tries to make sense of my twisted web. Hell, it’s barely even pointed at me anymore.

“I’m not sure,” I sigh, letting the lie take over me. “But whoever it is, he stole her directly from those digital pimps. There was a big car crash. A massacre. And...”

I stop myself before I can reveal too much. But part of me wants to keep talking.

Should I tell Maksim about the message?

My stomach drops as I think about the implications of that fucking message.

For Drago.

Maybe Maksim will know something I don't. And even if he doesn't, at least I won't be the only one chewing over that mystery anymore.

The idea offers me a smidgen of relief, and my mind settles.

"And what?" Maksim asks, slowly regaining his senses again.

I can't pussyfoot around it anymore.

"The person who took her from the pimps left a message at the scene," I explain. "I didn't see it, but those crooks I slaughtered in the warehouse district? They did. And there's no way they could have faked what they told me."

"What did it say?" Maksim asks, his concern only outweighed by a morbid curiosity. It's a curiosity we'll soon share.

"For Drago..." I grumble. "Apparently, whoever took Melina left a message saying that he did what he did for my dad."

The look of shock on Maksim's rugged face is exactly how I imagine I looked when I heard first head the news.

"Drago is dead..." he whispers, his thick brow furrowing in confusion.

"And it sounds like someone is trying to avenge him."

To my delight, his pistol drops even further. At this point, it's practically pointed at the street.

I decide this is my only chance to escape.

As fast as I can move, I jump aside and reach for the gun tucked beneath my belt.

Maksim doesn't realize what's happening until it's too late. Before he can lift his weapon back off the ground, I have mine trained directly at him.

"Easy there, old man," I warn. "Drop the gun and I might just let you live."

"You fucking bastard," he growls, lucidity returning to his dark eyes. "Were those all lies?"

"Every single word was the truth," I confidently fib. "But that doesn't mean I appreciated being held hostage."

Maksim seems to struggle with the idea of what to believe and what not to believe before finally accepting that it doesn't really matter anymore. My gun could go off at any moment. He needs to keep that from happening.

“So why not kill me?” he asks, bending down to softly place his weapon in the snow. “If you’re so worried about Melina, why not end this and go on with your search and rescue mission alone?”

“Why would I kill my crush’s uncle?” I can’t help but tease. “That’s no way to get into her good books.”

“You really like her, huh?” Maksim’s asks, incredulously.

“I appreciate her,” I sincerely admit. “She’s a special girl. Too special to be locked up in some gilded cage for all eternity.”

“It was for her own good.”

“It was killing her. She had to go free.”

“That freedom could end up getting her killed too.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

Maksim sighs. “I just need her to be alright. We all do.”

“And I’m sure she feels the same way about you. That’s why you’re going to live to enjoy retirement.”

“You’re letting me go?”

“No,” I shake my head. “I’m the one who’s leaving. My concern isn’t here, with you. It’s with Melina. Wherever she is.”

But I know exactly where she is, and the thought of her sleeping on that tiny bed, in that skimpy little nightgown, with my saliva glistening on the inside of her thighs and the taste of my lips lingering on hers makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

I need to get back to her. I need to protect her.

Sure, Maksim could probably guard her almost as well as I could—hell, he would probably do a better job, since he’d instantly have her on a jet back home.

But I’m not ready to give up my little dove yet. She still needs to live the life of an artist, the life she deserves, and she definitely needs to be further seduced. The opportunity is there. I can sense her falling for me.

But I can also feel myself falling for her.

“And I thought I was getting slow,” Maksim chuckles.

His voice snaps me out of my daydream. It’s only then that I notice a new barrel is pointed at me. It reaches out of the old man’s sleeve like some kind of violent card trick.

“What the fuck?”

“You wouldn’t believe how many sticky situation this thing has gotten me out of,” he smiles. “Now drop the gun.”

“No,” I sneer. Entrenching myself in the snow, I stiffen my trigger finger. “You’re not calling the shots here.”

“And you are?”

Our standoff simmers in the cold night like a boiling pot. Someone’s got to make the first move, but neither of us seem willing.

I can’t take the risk. Not with Melina waiting for me. Maksim surely feels the same way.

“What now?” I ask, quickly becoming impatient.

“You answer some clarifying questions,” he responds. “And I might just let you leave.”

“Or I could just shoot you,” I grunt.

“I promise to tag right back.”

“So what? We all bleed out on this cold dark Berlin street and leave Melina to fend for herself?”

“Her family knows where I am, it would only be a matter of time before they came looking for her.”

“We don’t have time. The devil has her. There’s no telling what he might do.”

That lifts Maksim’s brow. “So, you do know who took her?”

“I have my suspicions,” I grumble, feeling foolish for even considering them.

“Tell me.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I promise to try.”

Shifting uncomfortably, I stare the old man deep in the eyes.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I ask.

“No,” he says, shaking his head.

“Well, neither do I. But as far as I can tell, that’s the only answer to our little mystery.”

“You think a ghost took Melina?”

“I think my brother took Melina.”

Saying it out loud seems so foolish, but it’s like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I hardly even dared entertain the thought, let alone speak it. But now that it’s out, I can’t help but breathe a sigh of relief.

“Gabriel?” Maksim asks, cocking his head to the side.

“Not Gabriel,” I explain. “My older brother. Another adopted outcast. Though, not one that I ever liked.”

Maksim's eyes grow wide as the realization sets in.

"You're not talking about..."

"Krol," I finish for him.

"Krol is dead. Melina's own brother killed him."

"That's what I thought too. But who else could it be? Who else would leave a message like that? *For Drago...*"

Maksim's dark eyes dart back and forth as he tries to come up with an answer. "Someone could just be trying to lead you in the wrong direction."

"Maybe," I admit. "But when I heard about that message, it reminded me of something my dad said in the weeks before his death."

"And what would that be?"

A whirlwind of conflicting emotions whip around inside of me as I remember that complicated past.

"He wanted his family back together. One last time. All of us."

"Did you happen to remind him that Krol was already dead by that point?"

"I did."

"And what did he say?"

I take a deep whiff of the crisp night air.

"He just tapped his chest, right where his heart would be, and said he'd take care of that."

"He went a little mad in his final days, didn't he?"

"He was trying to find redemption."

Maksim considers that for a moment before replying. "Well, now, it sounds like someone is trying to find revenge for him."

"Krol..."

The name swirls in the smoky air. But before either of us can break the curse it brings forth, the thick silence is shattered by the subtlest sound.

A ping from my phone.

My heart immediately jumps.

That's the sound of an incoming email. And only one person knows the email attached to this phone.

Melina.

This conversation has gone on long enough. But how the hell do I get myself out of it?

"Listen," I start, hardly knowing where I'm going. "I've got something for you. The more eyes on this case the better. I'm going to reach into my

pocket and pull my phone out, promise not to shoot me?”

“Only if you promise the same thing,” Maksim cautiously replies.

“Deal.”

With a wary hand, I find my phone, as well as the velvet box Yasha gave me earlier. When I pull them out, I do my best not to look at the message that Melina just sent me. Whatever it says, I’m not sure I’ll be able to control my reaction. Maksim will be curious. I can’t risk him finding out. If this turns sour, one of us will die, if not both.

And I’m growing oddly fond of the old man.

“What’s that?” Maksim asks.

Clicking open the back of my phone, I pull out one of two USB sticks.

“This is all the info I’ve gathered so far,” I explain, making sure the second hard drive stays out of sight. “And this,” I continue, taking the piece of paper out of Yasha’s velvet box. “This is where I’ll gather the next bits of info. It contains the time and place of a meeting I’m supposed to crash between that woman you just scared away and a certain slum lord who might have connections to the underworld here. I have a feeling she won’t show up, but we still can. And hell, if you’re any good, maybe we can torture some useful information out of the fucker.”

“We?”

“That’s right,” I nod. “I’ve already memorized all the info. I’ll meet you there.

“Oh, you think you’re leaving without me?”

“Come on,” I smirk. “No one likes a clingy old man.”

“I’d prefer that over a young liar.”

“You think I’m lying to you?”

“I’ve been around long enough to know when someone’s not telling me the whole truth.”

Well, well, well, the old man’s sharper than I thought.

“We don’t have time to stick around and go through every little detail,” I remind him. “Take what I’m giving you and come to our meeting with some fresh info. With any luck, one of us will find our girl before we even have to see each other again.”

Maksim hesitates to quip back, and I can tell that it’s because he’s desperate to believe me. He wants Melina to be safe.

That makes two of us.

“Fine. Toss me your info,” he finally relents. “But you better fucking show up at this meeting. No funny stuff.”

“I’m deadly serious,” I say, letting a little smirk fill my lips. “Always am.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

When Maksim motions for me to place the hard drive and piece of paper down on the road, I comply. Still, I don’t take my gun off him for a single second.

“So how is this going to work?” I ask. “One of us needs to drop their weapon first.”

“We’ll do it at the same time,” Maksim says. “Ready? Three... two...”

“One,” I finish for him.

We both hold our breath and take the plunge. I tense up, expecting the worse, but nothing comes.

Turns out Maksim Smolov is more trustworthy than I am.

Shit. Hopefully, he never finds out I lied to him. Otherwise, he’s going to have a hard time accepting me into his family.

And that is exactly what’s going to happen. I haven’t forgotten about my long-term plan, even if shit is getting messy in the middle.

“The meeting is in two days,” I tell him, slowly backing up from the valuables at my feet. “I expect to see you there.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

When I feel my heel hit the curb, I give the old Russian a final nod, then I slip behind the corner.

Immediately, I’m on my phone, checking the email from Melina.

When I see what it says, my heart drops.

He’s here! Tytus! Please come back! He’s fucking here!

Fuck.

The devil.

He’s found Melina.

I don’t even stop to check the video feed. I just start to run.

Hold on, angel, I beg. The stories I told your uncle aren’t allowed to come true.

Reaching behind my back, I pull out my second gun. If Krol really is the devil of Berlin, then I need to be ready. Because that brutal bastard fights dirty. And I’m sure he’s pissed.

But not as pissed as I'll be if he lays a finger on my girl.
She's mine, you fucker, I want to scream. And I'm coming for her.
So get ready to find out who the real devil is.

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MELINA

The second I burst out into the cold dark world, I instantly want to retreat back into the warmth I just abandoned.

The cold air stings. My lungs burn. The ground is slippery with snow.

But I can't turn around. That *thing* knows where I am. My only option is to run.

But where the hell do I go?

Dipping my chin into the thick winter coat I managed to grab on my way out, I look left. Then right. The streets are predictably empty in both directions.

A knot tightens in my gut.

From experience, I know there's a nearby district that will be busier than this. Even at this time of night, those streets should be littered with drunkards and prostitutes and hopefully some undercover cops too. Their greedy eyes will protect me. All I need are some witnesses.

I just need to get there.

With a deep breath, I take my first step in the right direction. The sidewalks are unsteady and chalked with ice. It takes a second for me to gain my footing. Once I do, I start to walk as fast as my tired legs will take me.

"You'll be safe soon," I lie to myself. The entertainment district can't be more than a twenty-minute walk away. But that's going to feel like an eternity.

When I reach my first corner, I can't help but pause. A primal fear lifts the hairs on the back of my necks. Up ahead is the building I was being

watched from. Even though I know the figure won't be there anymore, it still feels like I'm being watched.

Something rattles behind me and I nearly jump out of my skin. I don't look back to investigate. Instead, I just lower my head and start pushing forward.

The coat I have tugged around my body is thick—a gift from Tytus that showed up at my front door one day—and I'm grateful for it, but it quickly becomes clear that the chill I'm experiencing isn't entirely from the weather.

Shit. How did I get back here?

It feels like nothing's changed since the night I fell over that bridge and into the river.. I'm back at square one. Alone and in way over my head.

"Fuck," I mutter, my teeth clattering as I push ahead.

When I push around the next corner, I have to stop and take note of where to go next. The entertainment district is in the opposite direction of the bar I worked at, and I'm not all that familiar with the route there.

Still, I swear I can see a warm glow radiating from the skyline to my right. So, that's where I decide to head.

Before I can take another step, though, a big hulking van peels onto the street, racing past me so fast I barely have time to react.

I watch its taillights disappear. It feels like I'm losing my mind.

"Come on, grab hold of yourself," I whisper to myself. If my hands and cheeks weren't already numb, I might give them a slap. Anything to jolt some sense into my overwhelmed mind.

"How about I grab you instead?"

The voice comes out of nowhere, crawling over my back like nails on a chalkboard.

My eyes go bug-wide.

Somehow, I know it's the figure who was watching me through my window.

I don't bother to figure out where the voice came from. I just run. But there's so much ice on the ground that every frantic step I take nearly sends me to the pavement.

"Leave me alone," I pant, desperation clogging my throat. "Please."

"Never," the voice hisses.

It doesn't sound like it's gotten any further away. Cold tears start to well up in my eyes. When I reach an empty intersection, I don't stop to figure

out which way to go, I just keep running.

That's a mistake.

Because the next block turns directly into a dead end.

"No," I choke, sliding to a stop.

Immediately, I understand that my only option is to turn around and head back to the intersection. The idea is so terrifying I want to cry.

"Tytus," I hear myself whisper. "Where are you?"

My hand digs into my jacket pocket, searching for my cell phone. I haven't heard the ping of him answering my email, but it's possible I just missed in my panic.

Yet the deeper I dig into the big jacket pocket, the deeper the hole in my chest becomes. There's no phone.

Did I forget it at the apartment? Did it drop from my pocket while I ran?

I don't know. All I know is that I can't stay here.

Closing my eyes, I turn around and start to run back in the direction I came. But the blindness doesn't do me any favors. When I nearly face plant after tripping on a curb, I'm forced to open my eyes and face the terror that follows me.

But the street ahead is empty.

I whip around, fully expecting the shadow to be standing mere inches away.

The street behind me is empty too.

What's happening to me? I want to sob. Am I losing my mind?

For a split-second, that almost seems like the most likely answer. Then, I turn back to face the street that leads to the intersection, and I'm reminded of just how real my nightmare is.

Because, there, standing at the exact corner I need to turn down, is the devil himself.

I can't tell if it's a trick of the night or if I'm just losing control of my senses, but it looks like a chunk of him has been eaten by the darkness. The form is hardly human.

But it is full of evil.

"No," I whimper, backing up. "No. Leave me alone. Please!" With that final cry, I turn and run back the way I came, even though I know it's a dead end.

I'm not thinking straight. How could I? I'm stuck in a terrifying dream that blurs the line between reality and fiction.

Still, something inside of me keeps an eye out for an alternative escape route. There has to be one. It's my only hope.

But the further I run, the less hope seems to matter. All I see are empty storefronts and dark windows, reflecting my nightmare right back at me.

I should have stayed at the apartment. I should have sat on the front steps and screamed until someone called the cops. Anything is better than this. Anything is better than trying to run through the darkness and the cold on my own.

Just before my hope can shrivel up into a useless husk, though, I spot the thinnest out.

An alleyway, barely discernable from the brick monoliths that surround it. The fact that this is my best option only solidifies how bad of a spot I'm in.

Without thinking, I lunge for it. My heavy heart jumps for joy when I see a gate at the end of the dark pathway. On the other side is light. Maybe I'm not so screwed...

But when I take one last look back into the street, my frozen face drops. The dark figure is so close that I can actually make out a face.

A horrible, disgusting, disfigured face.

The sight turns my legs to jelly. An air-piercing wail escapes my lungs. I claw at the alley wall and pull myself in.

That's when I run face first into something so solid I'm knocked right onto my ass.

"Melina?"

Even through the ringing in my ears and the black stars blurring my vision, I know that voice.

"... Tytus?" I croak, frigid tears streaming down my cheeks.

"Angel..." he whispers. I can feel him bend down to wipe the sadness and the fear from my face. His fingers are so warm. "It's okay. You're safe now."

"No. He's right there," I blubber, leaning into his palm as it spreads to take me. "I saw him..."

"Where?" the softness in Tytus' voice quickly turns hard.

"just around the corner," I cough. "I... I saw his face."

"Stay here."

His growl lingers in the air like a protective blanket as he leaps over me.

"No. Don't go," I quietly beg. But it's too late.

For what feels like an eternity, I'm returned to my cold, dark, lonely reality. It's hard to say how long that lasts before Tytus finally returns.

The heat of his body is like a fire. He kneels down at my side. Without another word, I'm engulfed in his embrace.

All I can do is sob into chest.

"No one's there, angel. The streets are empty. It's just you and me. I promise."

"No, that doesn't make sense. It doesn't..."

"It's true. It's alright."

"I was so scared," I gasp, unintentionally hugging him back.

"I know, angel," Tytus sighs. "It's my fault. I'm sorry for leaving. It won't happen again."

His broad embrace tightens and I let myself sink into the safety of it all. That arctic-like aftershave of his somehow becomes warm and comforting. His muscles turn into pillows. His strength into a stress ball.

Together, we huddle in the lonely alleyway. He doesn't even try to get me to move. In fact, I'm the one who finally speaks again.

"I forgot my phone," I foolishly try to explain. As if Tytus needs to here why I got so turned around.

"I'll get you a new one. Laptop too. We're leaving that apartment behind, along with everything in it. I've found us something better."

My first reaction to that is pure relief. But then Tytus pulls back and I get a look at those heart-stopping silver-blue eyes. Even in the darkness of the alleyway, they shine. They capture. They inspire.

"What about my art?" I blurt out, before turning coy again. "My painting..."

"The one of me?" Tytus understands.

My cold cheeks flush with a soft heat as Tytus wipes another tear away. I nod.

"I... I think I might have ripped the canvas," I remember.

To my surprise, that makes the gorgeous beast smile.

"By accident or on purpose?"

"A bit of both," I weakly admit.

"That's alright, angel. We'll fix it up. Right after I fix you up."

His words send a strike of fear through me.

"Fix it up?" I repeat. "Does... does that mean we're going back to get it?"

“We can’t just leave your masterpiece behind, can we?”

“You go. I don’t want to go back there.”

“I’m not leaving you again, angel. But we don’t have to go. Not if you don’t want to.”

After gingerly helping me to my feet, Tytus bends back down and picks up two items from alley floor. My thumping heart hardly pauses when I see what they are.

Guns.

He must have dropped them when we ran into each other.

Oddly enough, the idea of him being strapped to the teeth isn’t even the least bit terrifying. For all he conflict he’s inspired in me, one thing has become crystal clear.

There’s no one else I’d rather have here to protect me.

Shit. The thought itself is nearly enough to knock me back onto my ass.

Out of all the people in my life who would and *could* defend me to their dying breath, why would I choose Tytus?

My tongue flashes across my lips as I consider that question. But the answer remains hazy as his giant hands softly brush bits of snow from my sore shoulders.

“We can go back,” I swallow, fighting away my fear. “I don’t want to leave my painting behind.”

After all, isn’t that what I came out here to do?

Paint.

Tytus wasn’t being condescending when he called that painting a masterpiece. And while I wouldn’t go that far myself, it is definitely the best thing I’ve ever created. And I want to finish it.

I need to finish it.

“Are you sure?”

With a concerned glance, Tytus leans down to get a good look at my eyes, like he’s checking for a concussion.

I try to brush him off, but his wide fingers hold me into place by the shoulder. It feels like he could pick me up if he just clamped down a little harder.

I decide to sink into that confounding strength. The mystery of what’s happening is more comfortable if I don’t question it. And right now, I need some comfort.

“I’m sure,” I insist, forcing myself to hold his intense gaze.

But it's harder than it has any right to be. Those silver-blue eyes do things to me that I can't explain.

My stomach flutters. The knot in my gut loosens, if only just a little.

"Alright. Then stay close. Let's go recover that masterpiece of yours."

"And what if the monster is there?" I can't help but ask.

Tytus doesn't look worried, but his silver-blue eyes do narrow as he looks off into the distance.

"You're already with the only real monster in Berlin," he says. "Everyone else is just a pale imitation. And if they try me, or you, they're going to learn that the hard way."

With that, he stops looking into the distance and focuses his gorgeous gaze back onto me.

"Okay," I swallow.

"Thatta girl."

The smiles returns to his thick red lips. And when he offers me his giant hand, I hardly hesitate to take it.

"Let's go get that painting."

His thick fingers close in around mine and a budding confidence begins to simmer just under my fear.

It's all going to be okay, I tell myself. I just need to stick close to this monster.

My monster.

TYTUS

The lake house is smaller than I remember.

But maybe that's just a trick of the snow. Half the courtyard is hidden beneath a mountain of thick white powder, after all.

Still, as I turn from the window and look down the long hallway behind me, I feel as though the insides have also shrunk.

It's not a bad thing—the place definitely feels cozier now—I just can't seem to wrap my head around why. Usually, I'm good at remembering how things are. It's part of what helps keep me one step ahead of everyone else.

With Melina, though, my senses seem to warp. Everything feels more intimate. More precious.

The last time I was here, I took full advantage of the multiple rooms and floors. Anything to escape Yasha after I was finished using her.

But now I don't want to stray far from the girl I'm with. In fact, I can already feel her presence pulling me back to the bedroom I left her in just moments ago.

Easy now, I warn myself, knowing full well what's to come. Shit is about to go down, but you can't lose yourself, or else you might lose her.

Fuck.

Our position has been made. If Maksim has any common sense, he'll have already called in every last member of the Kilpatrick crime family. Berlin will be crawling with those Irish bastards, and their Russian allies too.

And they'll all be looking for my little runaway.

But she isn't theirs to take.

She's mine.

All that's left for me to do is claim her.

My cock twitches.

A stone drops in my gut.

Feelings of dread and arousal mix into a strange concoction that stops me just feet away from the half open bedroom door.

If my plan is going to have any chance, I'll have to speed up my seduction of the Kilpatrick princess.

Fortunately, I think her mind is ready for that increased pressure.

Her body, however, is a different story. She's just so fucking fragile and petite, and she's already been through more than any princess should. What more can she take?

My heart wrenches at the thought of breaking the thin seal of trust that Melina has clearly developed in me.

Still, my chest hardens with resolve.

Do what you have to do, no matter how badly it hurts, the devil on my shoulder hisses.

If only I'd ever had an angel on my other shoulder, it might tell me what I actually want to hear. Unfortunately, I've never been anywhere near heaven. And that means I've never had a chance to pick an angel up.

Until now.

"Angel?"

The door creaks as I gently push it open.

My eyes immediately fall on the heavenly creature staring out the large double windows ahead. Her perfectly curved figure is silhouetted by the lake glistening outside.

"It's beautiful," Melina whispers, not turning around.

Still, I can see those hazel eyes forget the water to focus on my reflection.

"I figured a place like this was more up your alley."

"Maybe," she says. "I don't know anymore. Honestly, I was getting kind of used to the destitution."

"Hey, your place wasn't so bad," I smile, stepping closer to her. "Not after we fixed it up a bit."

Melina doesn't wince or run away as I approach from behind. Instead, our eyes lock in the glass of the window.

"Thank you, Tytus," she sighs.

“For what?”

“I... I don’t know... taking care of me... saving me?”

“You don’t sound so convinced that you’re saved,” I try to joke, but the smile slowly dissolves from my lips.

“My mind is telling me I’m not safe, but...” Melina trails off.

I place my hand on her shoulder. The warmth of her skin is a breath of fresh air. My entire body shivers in delight.

I want her.

“But what?”

“I don’t know. It... It’s just that things don’t seem as bad as they should. I don’t know why.”

“It’s because you’re with me,” I tell her. “It’s because we’re together.”

“Is that supposed to mean something? We hardly even know each other...”

There’s no venom in Melina’s words, but that doesn’t stop them from stinging. She’s right. No matter what’s already happened between us, we’re still so far apart.

I need to change that.

“Sure feels like it means something, don’t you think?”

Melina doesn’t respond. Not with words. Instead, she dips her cheek to the side, far enough that it nearly brushes against the back of my hand.

The act is so affectionate and unexpected I don’t know what to do with myself. No one’s ever trusted me enough to bare their neck to me.

Before I can process it properly, though, Melina sighs and slips out of my grip. An icy breeze seems to pass through the new space between our skin.

“I should shower,” she says, turning from the window.

“I should join you,” I say, following her.

But that just causes her to stop and look at me.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather shower alone.”

Despite the coldness of the request, the courage it took her to make it causes me to briefly swell with pride. It’s a strange feeling that mixes in with a subtle disappointment—though, I’m not sure if that disappointment is more personal or professional.

Melina is giving me mixed signals. That’s not great. Especially since I’ve got to figure shit out sooner than later.

“That’s alright, I’ve got work to do around here anyway,” I assure her, before allowing a fresh smile to lift my lips. “I guess I’ll just have to make you wet some other way.”

That makes her blush. My disappointment evaporates as I watch her shuffle away. She even looks back over her shoulder at me before disappearing into the ensuite.

“You little minx,” I mumble, shaking my head.

With a deep chuckle, I reach into my pants and dislodge my half-hard cock. It throbs with desire as I picture the scene that will unfold behind that bathroom door.

She’ll be undressing soon.

Sure, I’ve already seen Melina naked. But once isn’t enough. I need more. My cock lifts. Soon enough, I’m going to have to take control of her. For my sake, and for hers.

“Time to get to work, you big lug,” I mumble to myself.

Time passes at an excruciatingly slow rate as I put my head down and go about the task of making sure this place is secure.

That starts with a deep sweep of all the security devices in the mansion. When they’re all accounted for, I take them offline and replace them with my own system.

The few cameras I managed to bring along go up too. Most of them stay pointed outside—a way to catch any potential intruders. Still, a part of me can’t help but position a handful inwards.

It’s just instinct at this point. The protector in me doesn’t even want to think about the harm a trove of blackmail would do to Melina. But that devil on my shoulder is still pulling a few strings, and it gets its wish as I make sure at least one camera covers our bedroom.

At the very least, it will make good jerk-off material.

“That should do it,” I huff, wiping my hands clean of the task.

Behind me, I can hear the shower still running through the half closed ensuite door. Checking my phone, I note that it’s been almost an hour since I left Melina to her own devices.

“What are you up to, little dove?” I mumble, a rattle of concern leading my gaze towards the forbidden room. Steam has started to seep out into bedroom.

Surprisingly, my mind doesn’t immediately wonder to the naughtiest explanation. Instead, I just feel a deep need to make sure she’s alright.

“I’m coming in, princess,” I warn, slowly pushing the door open.

When I don’t get a response, I speed up. My steady pulse quickens as I work my way through the steam.

But then I see Melina’s fleshy outline through the frosted shower walls, and a sigh of relief blows the steam from my face.

That relief is quickly followed by something far more primal. Because even if I can only see her blurry figure, it’s clear to me what Melina is doing.

The naughty girl is touching herself.

Is she thinking of me?

She better be. And if she’s not, I’ll change that soon enough.

I hardly even hesitate. A man like me can only control himself so much. Ripping off all my clothes, I move through the misty bathroom and gently knock on the frosted glass.

At first, Melina doesn’t seem to hear me. Through the clear slits of glass that border the frost, I can see that her eyes are closed. She’s leaning against the marble wall, hand between her legs, flat stomach gently heaving as she remembers some dirty dream or another.

“Having fun?” I ask, giving the glass a harder knock.

That tears Melina from her fantasy. Those stunning hazel eyes bulge wide with surprise as she catches my teasing gaze.

“Tytus!” she gasps.

“Expecting someone else?”

When Melina’s gaze drifts down to my body, I can tell that her shock isn’t from my appearance, but rather from how I’ve appeared.

Butt naked.

“I... you... sorry,” she flushes. “Have I been in here too long?”

“No,” I shake my head. “Not nearly long enough. Mind if I join you?”

Those wide eyes somehow grow wider. The way I’m positioned, Melina must not have a clear view of my body. The frosted glass clearly reveals that I’m naked, but if she wants a more detailed view, she’s going to have to let me in.

I can see her struggling with her own desires, so I decide to help push her in the right direction.

“I promise I don’t bite,” I smile, inching open the glass. “But if your hand is getting tired, my tongue can be used as a replacement.”

It's only then that Melina seems to remember she's touching herself. Her thin fingers jolt out from between her glistening thighs.

"I... I wasn't... it's not... showers are just my safe place," she sheepishly stumbles.

I step through the door and her eyes are immediately on the ceiling, like she can't bear to see the entirety of me.

So innocent. So naïve.

It's almost a shame I'm going to have to ruin that.

"I can see why," I tell her. The first drops of hot water fall over my head and a calmness breathes through me. It's warm and cozy in here. The perfect place to hide.

And the perfect place to play.

"I can get out if you want," Melina says. Keeping her eyes glued on the steam-covered ceiling, she tries to slide by me.

I don't let her get far.

Reaching out, I grab her slippery wrist and pull her into my wet body. She whimpers but doesn't pull away.

"You can look if you want," I tease her. "There's nothing interesting on the ceiling."

"I'm alright, thank you," Melina huffs. Still, she doesn't try to escape. My half-hard cock is growing stiff against her flat stomach. I can tell she wants to feel it at full mast.

Each breath she takes deepens as my wet shaft slides up her slick skin. My desire deepens.

I *need* her.

Biting my lower lip, I hold her close and study the beauty of her body. Fuck. She's truly breathtaking.

But something's off...

"There's still some dirt on you," I slowly notice.

"I haven't had a chance to wash up yet," Melina swallows.

Her eyes drop an inch and I'm sure she sees me lick my lips.

"Good," I grumble. "I'll wash you. No one's allowed to touch your body but me, angel. Not even you."

To my delight, that finally cuts through her fascination with the ceiling. A defiant glare lights up her hazel eyes as she sets them on me.

"You don't own me," she states, not entirely confident in that assertion.

"Not yet."

“Is that your plan? To own me?”

“My plan is to make you shiver, angel.”

With a short tug, I pull her to the side and my cock springs free. Melina gasps and I feel her fight the desire to pull herself back into me.

“Is that why you’ve been watching me?” she asks, distracted.

“You don’t like it when I watch you?”

“Not without my permission.”

“Should I ask for your blessings every time I glance your way?”

Melina’s naivety melts as a fierce stubbornness fills her features.

“There was a hidden camera in my apartment,” she accuses me.

“I know. I put it there,” I easily admit.

Melina gulps.

“Why?”

For your safety and my pleasure, I think, barely resisting the urge to lick my lips.

“To make sure you were safe.”

“Is that all?”

My cock twitches under the water as I admire my little dove’s new fiery side. Maybe she’s ready for more than I thought. God, I hope so. I’m not going to be able to control myself much longer.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” I say, ignoring the implication in her question.

Spinning her around, I place my palm between Melina’s shoulder blades and push her down. A groan rumbles from my lips as Melina’s tight little ass comes into contact with the head of my throbbing cock.

“I don’t need your help to clean myself,” she gasps. Her words are hardly convincing.

“This dirt on your shoulders proves otherwise,” I taunt. “How long have you been in here? An hour? And you’re still filthy. But don’t worry, angel, when I’m done with you, you’ll be a whole different kind of dirty.”

Pushing my cock against her ass cheeks, I reach over Melina’s shoulders. A heavy sigh lifts through the steam and she pushes back, unable to resist.

“That’s a good girl,” I rumble. “Now, where’s the shower gel we brought from your apartment?”

“In the niche,” Melina trembles.

Her fingers stretch out against the wet marble walls and she holds herself in position. I don't waste any time grabbing the cleanser.

"I've always enjoyed a good shower," I tell her, spreading the slick gel over my hands. "But for me, it's never been a safe place. You know why?"

My hands fall on her hips and her entire body reacts.

"Why?" she rasps, pushing back into my cock with so much force I already want to burst.

Tipping my throbbing head down, I slip it between her thigh gap until it slides through to the other side. Then, I lean down and whisper into her ear.

"Because it's too much damn fun."

"Oh my god," she whines as I find her clit with my soapy fingers.

"This is how you like it, right?" I growl, gently kissing her neck.

"Yes," she rasps.

My other hand slips around her waist and works up her body until I'm palming her tits. Melina's perky pink nipples get a similar treatment to her clit.

With all the care in the world, I pinch both swollen nubs.

Her whole body shakes.

My cock slides between her soft wet thighs, veins pulsing with desire. I'm so hard it hurts. I need to fuck her.

"Maybe this is why I was watching you, angel," I snarl into her ear. "To learn how I could worship you. Would that be so wrong? Huh?"

"No..."

"That's what I like to hear."

Unhanding her tits, I let my fingers spread out across her tender throat. My lips travel over her cheeks. My tongue slithers out and I shove it right into her ear.

"Who do you belong to, princess?" I demand to know.

My cock shakes like a fucking earthquake against her soft skin. It needs to know that her pussy is mine.

"No one," Melina croaks.

I bite down on her earlobe and twist.

"Who. Do. You. Belong. To?"

She cries as I use my knees to shut her thighs in around my engorged cock.

"Answer me, angel."

My fingers press into the tender flesh of her neck.

“You!” She shouts.

“That’s fucking right.”

The two fingers I have caging her clit descend, filling her soaking pussy lips until I find her hole.

“Do you want me inside of you?” I ask, my fingertips pressing down on her threshold.

Below, my cock starts to thrust between her thighs.

“Please...”

I slip my fingers inside.

Melina’s orgasm is almost instantaneous, and I have to keep my two fingers planted inside of her pussy just to keep her wet body from flailing out of my grip.

“Oh my god,” she chokes. “Oh my god. Oh my god...”

“No. God wouldn’t dare get in my way,” I growl. “This is between you and me.”

Melina sobs as her body shakes beneath my slippery grip. When it feels like she’s had enough, I prop her up against the wall. But I’m not done with her yet.

“You’re still dirty,” I explain, my hands working over every inch of her shimmering skin. There’s pre-cum leaking from the tip of my cock. All I want is for Melina to taste it.

We’ll get there.

“What was that?” she pants, barely holding herself up.

“Did you like it?”

Melina nods. “But you didn’t learn that from watching me. So where did you learn it?”

All I can do is shrug. “Experience.”

I quickly regret saying that.

Melina’s body immediately stiffens and it’s obvious why.

Jealousy.

The protector in me hates that I just made her feel anything other than good, but the animal in me fills with pride.

I have her.

No woman gets jealous of a man unless she thinks he belongs to her.

“It’s alright, angel,” I whisper. “I would react far worse at the thought of you being with someone else.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that, because I’ve never been with anyone else,” she counters.

“You’re a virgin?” I ask, lifting my brow.

“That’s right.”

I don’t tell her that I already assumed she was. Instead, I lean back into her ear.

“I can change that.”

Melina jumps so fast she nearly bashes me in the chin.

“Easy there, angel,” I command. When she whips around, I take her by the shoulders. It’s the only thing that keeps her from falling to the wet floor.

Hot water lashes across her perfect face as she glares at me with a mixture of every emotion imaginable.

“You’ve watched other girls through that camera of yours, haven’t you?”

I bite my lip.

“I have,” I carefully admit. There’s no point in lying. She’s seen one sex tape.

“Were you watching on that camera when I started dancing for you?”

That catches me off guard

“No,” I smirk. “I’ll have to watch that later.”

“You’ve been recording me too?”

After what we just did, the sudden return of her naivety is surprising. But it’s also hot as fucking hell.

“I’ve been watching you for a very long time now, angel,” I say, spreading my fingers out across her shoulders. “But that’s not enough anymore. I need to touch. I need to feel. I need to *taste*.”

“You’ve already tasted me,” she shyly looks away, the fire fading against her shame.

“Only with my mouth.”

“What else could you taste me with?”

With a single thrust, I push my rock-hard cock back into her belly.

“I’ll show you. But before I do, you’re going to be ready for it.” Reaching over her shoulder, I grab some more shower gel. This time, though, I lift her hand up and pour some into her palm. “It’s time for you to explore my body, angel. It’s the only way you’ll learn. Touch wherever you want.”

She gulps. Her gaze falls down to my chest, but it doesn't dare drop any further.

"Even down there?"

"Especially down there," I insist. "That's how I'm going to taste you next, after all."

She hesitates.

"But... if I touch you down there," Melina swallows, her eyes descending another inch. "Won't you want more?"

"I'll take whatever you give me. I can control myself."

"And if you can't?"

I let my tongue run along my lower lip.

"Then you win."

Melina lips curl in confusion.

"What do I win?"

"One free lesson from the master. *Your* master. How does that—"

Before I can finish, Melina takes a deep breath and grabs my cock.

A deep rumble rises from my chest.

"Yes," Is all I can manage to moan.

"A lesson from the master, huh?" she says, her grip light around my throbbing shaft. "What an honor."

"Is that sarcasm?" I ask.

My eyelids drop, heavy with desire. An intense pressure flashes through my body, rushing up from Melina's tiny fingers.

"Maybe."

"Well, then maybe I won't give you a lesson," I huff, chest lifting as it fills with a primal lust. "Maybe I'll just take your virginity instead."

Melina gulps.

"And if I say no?"

"Then I'll keep working until you say yes."

MELINA

It's like trying to hold onto a tree trunk.

A thick, throbbing, fleshy trunk that rises out of the hottest body ever carved from this earth.

Tytus' tattoos seem to curl beneath the steam. They slither down his hard body, past his hulking chest and chiseled abs, across his defined hip bones and powerful thighs. Only one place on his body seems to remain unmarked.

His cock.

Finally, I allow myself to look.

"Oh my..." I stop myself before I can invoke god's name again.

Tytus was right. There is no god here. Only him.

And right now, I wouldn't have it any other way.

"How does it feel, angel?" he groans. Each breath he takes is like a revving engine. Really, I should be terrified. Tytus is a beast, and I'm not entirely convinced he can control himself.

Strangely, though, I'm not scared.

I'm too turned on for that.

"It... It feels... right," I admit, my jaw dropping at the sight of what's between his legs.

A girthy shaft covered in throbbing veins, topped by a thick swollen head. Each line on his cock looks like it's ready to burst. He's stretched to his limit.

Have I done this to him?

"Wait until we get to the fun stuff," Tytus says.

The hot steamy air suddenly feels a lot more suffocating as I try to take deep breath after deep breath.

“What now?” I ask, unable to take my eyes off the throbbing trunk wrapped beneath my fingers.

“Now we get to the fun stuff.”

To my surprise, Tytus takes my wrist and pulls me off of him.

It’s like being hit by a frigid gust. Fortunately, I’m not gone for long.

Stepping in front of me, Tytus wraps my arms around his waist and yanks me forward. I barely have time to turn my cheek before it’s shoved against his slick back.

“How are you so soft?” I hear myself wonder out loud. Despite the hardness of Tytus’ inked-up muscles, his wet skin might as well be velvet. All I want to do is sink into his broad comfort. But there’s work to do.

“One hand here,” Tytus instructs, placing my right hand at the base of his massive shaft. “And the other here.”

My left hand goes a little higher up.

When I slide my fingers up his cock to get a better grip, Tytus’ round ass clenches against my pussy. I shudder. He groans.

“Does that feel good?” I ask, filled with curiosity.

“It feels amazing, angel. But it can feel so much better.”

“How?”

“Let me show you.”

Placing his wide palms on the back of my hands, he leads them in a new motion.

“Move your fingers like you’re unrolling a canvas,” he tells me, his voice getting deeper as we pick up speed. “Just like that. Good girl.”

When he drops his hands from mine, I don’t stop. The thickness of his cock is intoxicating. I just want to make it grow bigger. I need it to throb harder.

“Am I doing a good job?” I ask. My forearms are already starting to burn from the effort, but I won’t stop. I’m too addicted to this feeling of control.

Tytus’ is a giant mountain of a man, the devil in every aspect of the word, a villain in countless stories. And I’m making his knees weak.

And I’m doing with just the touch of my hands.

“Fuck. You’re doing so good, Melina,” he growls. “Don’t stop.”

The way he says my name only drives me to jerk him off even harder. Faster. With more passion.

My mind drifts into fantasy as I turn my cheek and plant my lips against the dark tattoo at the center of Tytus' back. When I kiss his soft skin, his shoulder blades unfurl and his sculpted arms flash out.

In the blink of an eye, he's reached backward and clamped both my ass cheeks in his palms.

"Tytus!" I gasp, as he pulls me closer. My tits slide up his soft skin.

"Don't. Stop."

I do as I'm told.

But I also start to rub myself against his broad, muscular back. His hard ass spreads my pussy lips. My swollen clit meets his powerful body. He pulls me tighter.

I start to lose it.

"Holy shit," I whimper. "You feel so good."

"You haven't felt anything yet, angel."

Tytus' fingers dig so deep into my cheeks they start to burn.

Together, we shake and tremble. But before either of us can implode, he rips his hands from my ass and grabs at my wrists.

My furious motions are stopped. My fingers are torn from his cock.

"No..." I whisper, disappointment replacing the pressure. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," Tytus says, turning around. Those silver-blue eyes glow through the steam. Water runs over his burnt brown hair, dripping down his face and off his thick lips. "You're doing so well, angel. So fucking well. I want to reward you for your hard work."

I swallow.

"How?"

He looks down at his throbbing cock.

"Do you want to taste?"

"Yes," I respond, biting down on my lip.

There's no hesitation in me. No fear. I'm in full exploration mode. Whatever Tytus' motivations are, they don't seem so nefarious anymore. He's being too intimate. Too vulnerable.

How can I do anything but melt for him?

"Then let's get out of this shower," Tytus says, punching down on the shower handle.

Just like that, the water I'd been hiding under for the past hour stops pouring down. All that's left is the lingering steam and the droplets that cascade down our bodies.

"You don't want to stay in here?" I ask, a pinprick of fear threatening the thick blanket of lust I've been tucked under.

Nothing bad can happen in the shower. But out there? I don't know if I'll be strong enough to handle everything that happens outside of these frosted glass walls.

"No," Tytus shakes his head. "I don't want you drowning in anything but my cum."

The dirty talk makes my skin tingle and my insides collapse. Suddenly, the shower feels damp and uncomfortable. I want to dry off under the sheets of my new bed. I want to wipe away the water on my skin against Tytus hulking body.

"Do you think you can handle that?" Tytus asks, wrapping his giant palm around my hand.

There's a pressure in my core that needs to be satisfied. My toes curl against the intensity of what I'm sure is to come; of what I *hope* is to come.

"There's only one way to find out," I say, looking Tytus straight in the eyes.

The smile that washes over his face is so mischievous it steals my breath away.

What am I becoming?

"This way."

Without stopping to dry off, Tytus leads me out of the bathroom by the wrist. We don't stop until we're at the edge of the bed.

"Remember when I got on my knees for you?" he asks. "Now it's time to return the favor."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. Tytus puts a hand on my shoulder, but before he can apply even an ounce of pressure, I follow his orders.

My shins sink into the thick carpet below as I descend down his massive body, trailing my fingers over every inch of him on my way.

A fiery electricity jumps between our damp skin. Warm shivers take hold of my spine. I take a deep breath and open my lips as wide as they'll go.

Tytus' raging erection stares me in the face, so big and girthy that I'm not sure I can make it fit. But it doesn't really matter. I'm not here to feast.

Not yet.

I'm just supposed to taste.

Closing my eyes, I take the plunge.

The second I feel Tytus' fleshy goodness hit my lips, I sink. But the sigh that wants to escape my lips is shoved back down my throat.

There's no room for anything but his cock. My lips stretch out. My tongue flattens. I gag. But I don't pull away, because the first taste is beyond anything I could imagine.

"Deeper," Tytus demands from above. His voice rumbles through the darkness. I obey.

Somehow, I manage to fit the entirety of his engorged head between my lips. Drool leaks down my chin.

As if by instinct, my flattened tongue starts to flutter across the broad side of Tytus' cock.

He rumbles like a god. His cock swells even more. Hot tears well up behind my closed eyelids before streaming down my flushed cheeks. The world becomes wet and dark and suffocatingly wonderful.

I'm on the verge of exploding.

But before my fingers can find my clit, Tytus delivers a new commandment.

"Now do what I taught you in the shower. With your hands."

He pushes further into me and I choke. Pulling back, I let the tears and the saliva stream down my face as I look up at him through blurry eyes.

"Yes, sir."

A primal snarl comes over his face. He's more beast than ever before.

I want to be savaged by him.

The fingers on my right hand wrap around the base of his shaft. The fingers on my left take hold of the throbbing flesh directly above.

I go to work and Tytus groans up to the ceiling. The tears clear from my eyes and I watch as his big Adam's apple lifts and descends.

My thighs clench and my pussy begs to be touched. But my hands are busy. Soon, Tytus' hands are too.

"Use your mouth, angel," he moans, palming the back of my head. "Open wide and lick the tip. But don't let your hands stop. Understand?"

I barely get a chance to nod up at him before I'm plunged back into the dark delicious world of his fleshy goodness.

The drool returns, so do the tears, but this time I'm ready. I take pleasure in every last bit of wetness as the shower water dries from my skin.

It doesn't take long before I find myself getting into a rhythm.

"You're going to make me cum," Tytus moans.

That's all I want.

Forgetting my own desires, I lather him in more of my saliva. I tighten my grip around his swollen shaft. I pick up speed.

I want to taste his cum.

I need to taste his cum.

But before it can get to that, the palm on the back of my hand widens, and Tytus' fingers curl through my hair.

"Fuck," he growls, pulling me back.

Drool bursts from my lips. I blink away the tears. His cock twitches before me, completely covered in my saliva.

Tytus angles my neck upward, so I can see his face. He stares down at me with a primal intensity.

"Are you ready for me?"

My naivety momentarily relapses as I stare up at the naked beast.

"There's more?" I gulp.

"Come here, angel."

Uncurling his fingers from my hair, Tytus plants his palms against both of my cheeks and lifts me onto my feet. For a moment, I'm unsteady. My thighs are already sore from all the clenching they just did. But when Tytus pulls me close and kisses me, all of that soreness melts away.

This time, I come to my senses quickly enough to kiss him back. But this kiss isn't like the first. This one is far dirtier. Less controlled. Completely wild.

"You're so fucking delicious," Tytus growls, his tongue slipping past my lips. "Taste me."

With a fierce desperation, he searches every last inch of my mouth. I taste him right back.

My mouth starts to water. He's fucking heavenly. I want to crawl inside of him and hug his thick wet tongue until I cum.

I don't get the chance. The kiss is over far too soon, and when our lips fall apart, I'm thrown onto the bed.

"So wet," Tytus sneers, his thumb pressing between my soaking pussy lips as he reaches into one of the bags at the side of the bed. "You might not

even need lube.”

My mind is so focused on the pleasure that I hardly even think about what he’s reaching for.

Not until I see it.

“Your cock…” I gasp, watching as Tytus places the dildo we brought from my apartment next to his dick.

Sure enough, they’re nearly identical copies of each other.

I fucking knew it.

“No, angel,” Tytus shakes his head. “*Your* cock.”

A gasp rips from my throat as he slips the silicone replica between my pussy lips. He applies pressure and I grab onto the sheets.

“No, this won’t do,” Tytus grumbles, pausing at my pleading entrance. “I can’t control myself anymore. We need the real thing, don’t we, Melina?”

Without waiting for a response, Tytus blindly throws the dildo across the room. It smacks into the wall as he climbs over top of me.

I can feel the heat of his enormous erection thrumming just above my pussy.

“You’ve lost control?” I squeak, thrusting my hips up just to touch his burning body.

“That’s right, angel.”

“Does… does that mean I win?”

The callback makes Tytus pause, but only for a second. Then his primal snarl turns into a sinful smirk.

“Yes, Melina Kilpatrick. You win. I’ve lost control. Here’s your prize.”

His hands curl into fists as he locks me between his forearms. My back arches. The pressure builds.

When I feel his thick head press against my hole, I grab onto his arms. He keeps pushing. The air rips from my lungs.

And then, he’s in.

It feels so good, and hurts so bad I want to cry. But instead, I just claw at his inky forearms and let small breaths squeak from my clogged throat.

“Fuck,” Tytus groans. “You’re fucking perfect. You were made for me.”

He pushes deeper and I cry out. The pain is so blinding I can’t tell it from the pleasure.

“You’re too big,” I whine, squirming under his grip.

“No, you’re ready,” he insists. “Just open up, angel.”

“Will… will it stop hurting?”

“No. But you can take it.”

He treats me to a small thrust and I see what he means. It’s like he’s passed the stiff threshold and reached my more flexible insides.

The pain doesn’t go away, but it takes a back seat to the pleasure.

And god, what fucking pleasure.

It’s a searing hot ecstasy that flashes through my body in building waves. The pressure in my core spreads. My throat opens back up.

“That’s my good girl,” Tytus praises as my hips start to softly sway around his cock. “Do you think you can take more? Do you *want* more?”

“Yes. Please,” I rasp. “I want you inside of me. All of you. Please.”

“As you wish.”

It doesn’t feel like I can fit any more of him, but somehow, Tytus manages it. When his hard abs hit my pelvis, a warm wave of satisfaction joins the pressure building in my core.

“Fuck me,” I hear myself rasp. “Please.”

“So polite,” Tytus growls.

It’s all he says before his gentle streak come to an end. He pulls that giant cock of his hallway out of my pussy before ramming it back down. The force nearly knocks me out. I’m instantly light headed.

But I only want more.

“Please,” I mutter again. “Ruin me.”

It’s only when Tytus doesn’t follow through that I realize what I’m saying.

These words, they aren’t mine. They belong to the woman from the sex tape. I’m just repeating them because that’s my only experience with this sort of thing; with Tytus.

But the man throbbing inside of me is having none of it.

“No. I’m not going to ruin you,” Tytus growls, leaning down so that I can feel his hot breath against my ear. “I’m going to *make* you.”

He nibbles down on my earlobe and I grab onto his back. His next thrust isn’t so violent, and it slides through my outstretched hole much easier.

The pain is still there, but it becomes less of a sting and more of a simmering undercurrent to the ecstasy.

“Make me yours,” I whisper, nails digging into his inky back.

“You already are.”

Wrapping his muscular arms around the back of my neck, Tytus digs his face into the mattress, covering me from head to toe with his body. Then he

uses his knees to push my trembling legs together until my ankles click.

All the while, he keeps thrusting. His cock slides in and out of my slick pussy, even as my thighs touch. The feeling is so intense I start to heave.

His thrusts quicken. His body rumbles.

I explode.

“Tytus!” I scream, holding onto him for dear life.

But he doesn’t stop pounding the tiny gap between my closed thighs. In fact, his careful thrusts only become wilder.

My orgasm grows with it. The pressure in my core splinters, filling my squirming body with carnal-lined shrapnel. It feels like I’m being pushed apart from the inside out. And that feeling only gets more intense as Tytus holds me tighter and tighter.

“I’m going to cum,” he roars.

I’m blinded by greed. Emptied by lust.

“Finish inside of me!” I beg, hardly in control.

That seems to snap Tytus out of his primal rhythm. His arms unwrap and he pushes himself off my body just in time to rip his cock out from my pussy.

I barely have time to blink away the stars and the black spots before I feel his hot creamy cum burst over my heaving stomach.

“Fuck,” Tytus growls. “Holy fuck.”

His stream is nearly endless. My body twitches as I’m covered like a living canvas.

When he’s finally empty, Tytus collapses on top of me, then rolls to the side. The mattress sinks under his massive weight and I’m pulled towards him.

He takes me in his arm.

For a blissful moment, we just pant next to each other, our hearts so close that I swear they start to beat in rhythm.

“That’s it,” Tytus finally says, breaking the satisfied silence.

“What’s it?”

Taking my wrist, Tytus places my hand on his burning chest.

“You’re mine now, angel,” he says, turning his neck so I can see the determination in his silver-blue eyes. “Forever.”

TYTUS

Her blood is thick and sticky.

It's the blood of a virgin—well, it *was* the blood of a virgin.

I changed that.

“Does it hurt, little dove?” I ask, tracing my fingers up the inside of her thigh.

“I... I think so,” Melina whispers, filled with uncertainty.

“But the satisfaction outweighs the pain, doesn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

My pounding heart relaxes as I lower myself towards the pussy that just made me cum harder than I ever have before. On my way down, I pass the dried cum that stains her stomach and chest.

Fuck. I've never unloaded this much. But it's no surprise. Melina was tight. So fucking tight it almost hurt.

Every time I looked down at her face and realized I was finally fucking the Kilpatrick princess, I wanted to burst. Somehow, I managed to hold out until she came first.

It was harder than I could have imagined. But it was worth every second.

Now, it's time for me to clean her up.

“Relax, angel,” I tell her. “I'll take over from here.”

First, I kiss the inside of Melina's bloody thigh, just to prepare her for what's to come. When a satisfied sigh escapes her lips, I know I can go further.

With a deep breath, I start to lick up the mess I made.

“Tytus, I—” her hands lift to grab my hair, but I gently swat them away.

“We’ll clean the cum off you in the shower, but you won’t ever bleed virgin blood again. This is something that only happens once in a lifetime.”

“You... You’ve never been with a virgin before?” Melina cautiously questions.

“What I’ve done in the past doesn’t matter. All that matters is that I’ll never be with another virgin.”

I can hardly believe the words as they leave my mouth, yet they feel so true. So right.

Am I losing my mind, or was the sex just that good?

“What does that mean?” Melina asks.

I can feel her trying to make sense of what I just said as I continue to lap up her sweet discharge.

“It means there’s only one person I ever want to fuck again. You.”

Laying my tongue flat against her skin, I paint a streak through the crimson aftermath.

Melina gasps. But she doesn’t resist.

I continue until there’s hardly anything left.

“Now, let’s have another shower, huh?”

Standing up, I take a moment to stare down at the fallen angel lying before me. Even covered in my cum and stained with lingering spots of scarlet, she glows like a heavenly creature.

Surprisingly, I don’t feel guilt for what I’ve done. And I quickly understand why.

What we just did wasn’t part of my plan. It was too sincere. If the whole thing was just an act of manipulation, I would have finished inside of her.

Instead, I only wanted to please her. I needed to worship her. Melina’s first time had to be perfect. And I think I made it special, if only because I forget about everything else in the world except for her.

“You have some blood on you,” Melina notes as she gingerly pushes herself up onto her elbows.

I look down at my cock. It’s still half swollen. Streaks of drying blood curve over the veins.

“You’re right,” I shrug. “Collateral damage.”

“Do... do you want me to clean it off you?”

The question is so scandalous that it catches me off guard. But only temporarily. My answer comes easily enough.

“Yes, angel. Lick away the last bits of your innocence. That would be delicious.”

What a naughty girl I’m raising.

I step forward and reach out a hand to Melina. Light grunts flutter from her lips as she pushes herself up and accepts my help.

Without further instructions, she leans in and kisses my head.

“Just like that,” I groan.

Working her way up my shaft, Melina lets her tongue flicker over the virgin stains she’s left behind. By the time she’s done, I’m so hard I can’t think straight.

“Shower. Now,” I order, pulling her to her feet.

But she’s still sore from our fun, and I have to dip down and catch her before she can collapse to the floor.

“I don’t know if I can take anymore,” Melina whispers, head nuzzling into my chest.

“Then we won’t do anymore,” I assure her. “Not until you’re ready.”

Bending down, I sweep the little runaway off her feet. She gasps, then sighs as I carry her to the bathroom.

“You won’t touch me in the shower?” she asks, a tinge of disappointment filling her little voice.

“I didn’t say that,” I smile. “We need to clean you up. And no one’s allowed to touch your body but me. Not even you.”

This time, the declaration doesn’t seem to offend her so badly. Hell, I even catch a subtle smile come across her perfect face.

I bite down on my lip and study the rest of her petite body. My cock twitches. I take a deep breath.

Melina was made for me, it’s never been more obvious. But I need to be careful. The blood is a sign that I went too hard.

It’s a mistake I can’t make again. This girl is mine to protect. And that doesn’t just mean defending her from everyone else.

It means sheltering her from the worst parts of me too.

The next two days go by in a blur.

At first, Melina is too sore and exhausted to do much but sleep. Slowly, though, something unexpected awakens inside of her.

Something amazing.

By the time she can make it to the bathroom and back without my help, she's insatiable.

It's like we both abandon our human forms and become animals. All we do is explore each other's bodies, fuck, wash up, sleep, eat and fuck some more.

That orgy lasts a solid day and a half before our humanity hesitantly returns. Only then do we finally seem to realize where we are.

For the few moments we can keep our hands off each other, we unpack and get comfortable—not that we should be here long.

Still, I try not to think about everything that could go wrong. Instead, I focus on everything that's gone right.

Melina seems to be falling for me.

And I'm definitely falling for her.

By sundown on our third full night at the lake house, it almost feels like we're a real couple—that is, if we both ignore the circumstances that brought us together.

"Do you think the red is too bright?" Melina asks.

I barely hear her through my trance. For the past hour, I've been laying half naked on the bed as she tries to salvage the masterpiece we saved from her apartment.

"I'm not the artist," I tell her, admiring the view. "These decisions are yours to make."

Melina seems to find comfort in the freedom, but only after momentarily struggling with the breadth of it.

I watch the gears turn behind those pretty hazel eyes as she stares off through the windows. The soft bedroom light practically dances off her naked skin. It doesn't matter that we've already fucked half a dozen times today, the sight of her perky tits already has me pitching a fucking tent.

But I control myself. This is Melina's time to paint. I'm just grateful she's allowing me to observe.

"It needs to be a little darker," she decides, sweeping her brush through the pallet on the table next to the easel I set up for her.

"Haven't we had enough darkness?" I tease.

That earns me a quick side glance. “I thought these were my decision to make?”

“They are,” I smile. “I’m just thinking out loud.”

“Well, can you do that any quieter?” she smirks. “I’m working.”

All I can do is laugh. Shit. I could get used to this.

As if on cue, I hear the muddled sound of my phone pinging from inside the bedside table.

Immediately, I know what it’s about.

“Fuck, I almost forget,” I mumble to myself, reaching into the drawer.

Sure enough, my phone screen is alight with a reminder notification.

Meeting with slumlord. One hour.

“Fucking hell,” I grumble, ripping aside the covers.

“What’s wrong?” Melina asks, turning from her canvas.

“Keep painting, angel,” I insist. Picking up my clothes from the floor, I start to get dressed. “There’s something I need to take care of.”

“Wait? Wait!”

I’ve hardly even slipped my shirt on when Melina stands up from her stool.

“What is it?”

Her face is scrunched. Her brow is furrowed. She looks just as confused as I am.

“You said you wouldn’t leave me again,” she whispers.

My heart drops.

I did say that. And I meant it.

So why the hell am I in such a hurry to rush out?

“You’re right,” I pause.

But my body stays clenched and ready for action. At this point in my life, it’s just instinct. How do I turn that off?

“Is something wrong?” Melina asks. She’s dropped her brush. I bend down and pick it up for her.

“No. Nothing’s wrong,” I insist, placing the brush down on her palette.

“I just remembered that I have a meeting tonight. I don’t need to go.”

“Is... Is it an important meeting?”

I hesitate to respond. The mobster in me is screaming out in frustration. Of course it’s an important meeting. In my line of work, every meeting is life or death.

“It is important,” I allow myself to admit. “I was going to make sure the shadow that chased you into the river and out of your apartment will never bother you again. But I can stay, if you want me to? Hell, I should stay. It’s safer that—”

“No,” Melina recoils against my words. “You should go.”

I’m not sure how to respond. After the past two days, I would assume she wants exactly what I want. To cozy up in bed and spend the night in each other’s arms.

That desire is currently battling against my mafia instincts. What’s her excuse?

“You want me to leave?”

“I want you to get rid of that demon,” she whispers, hugging herself.

When I step forward to embrace her, she steps away.

It might as well be a slap to the face.

“You won’t be scared?” I ask. “I’d have to leave you alone.”

Just the thought is enough to make me uncomfortable. But it’s not just because of what could get in.

It’s also about what could get out.

What’s gotten into Melina?

If I left her, would she try to escape?

“Sure, I’ll be scared,” she says, looking down at her feet. “But I’d rather you get rid of that... thing. Wouldn’t that be better than waiting around for it to come find us?”

“It’s not going to find us here,” I growl.

“Then I should be safe, right?”

“You’re not going to like the safety precaution I take,” I warn her.

But I’m not sure Melina even hears me. She turns around and starts to pick her clothes up off the floor. Watching her pale skin disappear behind a t-shirt almost makes me angry.

Why is she doing this?

“Go. I’ll be fine.”

But I’ve had enough.

Storming up behind her, I grab Melina’s arm and turn her around. When she doesn’t immediately look me in the eyes, I pinch her chin and make sure she does.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” she huffs. “I... I just know how men like you are...”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m not going to keep you somewhere you don’t want to be. I know what it’s like to be caged, Tytus. I won’t be the bars on your prison. I can see the fire in your eyes. You want to go to work. I understand. Go.”

Grabbing both her shoulders, I hold her in place..

“I want to be with you.”

“You are.”

Her words rush into my lungs like a hot breeze. My hands fall from her shoulders.

Does Melina think we’re... together?

Are we? Have I done it? Have I seduced her?

... Or are we just falling for each other?

“I wouldn’t be gone long,” is all I can muster in response.

What the hell is going on?

I’ve got no time to think about it. My phone pings with another reminder and Melina takes it as her cue to increase the distance between us.

“I’ll be fine,” she says, stepping back. “Go. Save the princess. Do what you do best.”

“I’m not a hero,” I remind her.

“Then go be someone else’s villain, because you’re not mine. Not anymore.”

Fuck.

She turns and stares at the dark lake outside. My heart pounds like it never has before.

I’m losing control. Have I really fallen for this girl?

“I won’t let you down,” I promise.

When I approach Melina from behind again, she just barely looks back over her shoulders.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she quietly offers.

Running my hand over her shoulder, I hold her in place and place a gentle kiss on her warm cheek.

“No. You stay here. Keep filling up that canvas. When this is all over, you’ll be able to paint for the world. But for now, you paint for me. And I want that masterpiece finished by the time I return. Understand?”

“No promises,” Melina sighs, and I can tell she’s using all of her strength not to melt into my hand.

This is getting dangerous.

“Get comfortable,” I tell her. Without another word, I leave the bedroom, but I don’t head outside yet. Instead, I go into the kitchen and pull out all of Melina’s favorite snacks.

I also rifle through the main floor vault and pick out the key to the bedroom door. My stomach twists at the thought of what I have to do.

When I return, Melina’s back at her stool, mixing paints like a good girl. But she freezes when she sees the food.

“I could have gotten that myself,” she says.

“No. You wouldn’t have been able to.”

The realization isn’t immediate, but I can see the horror melt her face as it dawns on her.

“Tytus, no...” she steps forward and I take a big step back into the hall.

“I’m sorry, angel. This is for your own safety. If you want me to leave, then it’s what needs to be done.”

I pick the key out of my pocket and Melina’s hazel eyes go wide.

“You can’t lock me in here!” she yelps, moving towards the door.

I lift my palm and command her to stop.

To my surprise, she listens.

But that only makes this harder.

I grab the doorknob and take one last long look at my captive angel. The heartbreak and betrayal in her eyes is so intense it’s painful. But I know there’s no going back. Not now.

What I can do, though, is push forward. I can take a stupid leap. Maybe that will make her feel better.

“I’m falling for you,” I blurt out. “That’s never happened before. Excuse me if I’m not handling it with grace. It’s not from lack of trying.”

With that, I start to shut the door. But I stop when Melina responds.

“If you’re falling for me, then why are you locking me up?”

A deep breath fills my lungs.

“Because I have to make sure you’re safe,” I grunt, my skin already hardening. “But you were right. I can’t just sit back and wait for trouble to come to us. I need to go out and find it. I need to snuff it out before it can interrupt... this.”

My eyes scan the comfortable room.

“What is *this*?” Melina asks.

“I’m not sure yet, are you?”

“I thought I was starting to figure it out...”

Her sigh is like a knife through my chest. But I don't let it deter me. In fact, I let the pain push me in the direction I know I need to go.

"Sleep well, princess," I say, slowly closing the door. "Paint hard. Don't worry too much. I'll be back soon, and then we can figure everything out."

The door clicks shut, and I'm met by silence as I turn the key and lock my angel into her new cage.

"Fuck..." I grumble, tucking the key into my pocket.

Guilt threatens to bolt my feet to the floor. I fight through it. These human emotions can't win. I won't let them.

This is for the best, I tell myself. You were getting too comfortable. And in this world, that's a death sentence.

Turning my back on the bedroom, I start down the hallway. The warmth I'm leaving behind fades even faster than I expected, and a cold darkness washes over me. I let it encompass every inch of my being.

If this story is going to have a happy ending, I need to become the villain I truly am.

But can Melina survive that monster? Or will she shatter beneath my tightening grip?

Unfortunately, there's only one way to find out.

The devil of Berlin needs to be dealt with. For Melina's sake.

I just hope I've prepared her enough to take the worst of me.

Because when I return, it might be all that's left.

TYTUS

This night feels colder than the rest.

The wind harsher. The darkness more opaque. The emptiness less forgiving.

The reason is obvious.

This is how the world feels when you're a monster. It's lonely and dangerous and endlessly hopeless. And it's all my fault.

I've locked my free little dove back into another cage.

It feels awful. But that awful feeling is exactly what I deserve.

It doesn't matter that Melina was right—about how we couldn't sit around waiting for the fight to come to us; about how we couldn't run either—it still hurts.

So does the fact that this is all I'm good for.

My skillset is useful for one thing, and one thing only. Attacking. So, that's what I'm going to do.

First, though, I need to find out who I'm attacking. And that's proving more difficult than expected.

Fortunately, it doesn't look like I'll have to pick a fight with the Kilpatrick's first.

From my rooftop vantage point, I carefully watch the shady figure leaning against the alley wall below.

Maksim Smolov.

It really looks like he came alone.

How is that possible?

“What tricks do you have hiding up your sleeve this time, old man,” I grumble to myself.

Reaching into my pocket, I feel for my phone. Part of me wants to call Rozalia, maybe even Gabriel, and get an update from someone I can trust.

Why isn’t the entire Kilpatrick army racing around Berlin looking for their lost princess?

The answer escapes me. Still, I think better of calling my estranged siblings. My guilt is already strong enough. Talking to them would just weigh me down more.

I need to push forward, and I need to do it on my own.

Sliding down the fire escape ladder on the opposite end of the building, I crank my neck and promise myself I won’t hurt Maksim, no matter what kind of mood he’s in.

For any of this to work out, I’m going to need to use my words. But I can’t allow myself to get trapped either. I’m the only one who knows where Melina is, after all. And if I die, then she just might too.

No. You won’t let that happen, my conscience interrupts.

It’s right. There’s no ignoring it. I wasn’t lying when I said I was falling for my little runaway. If I die, I’m not taking her with me.

Pulling out my phone, I write the location of the lake house in my notes app, then I take a screenshot. That photo becomes my lock screen.

If I get killed, someone’s going to search my body. They’ll find my phone, and then they’ll find Melina.

But that puts me in another awkward situation. No one who might harm Melina can be allowed to kill me. That honor must be saved for Maksim, and Maksim only.

Hopefully, it doesn’t come to that.

“You’re early,” I note, turning down the alley to find the grizzled Russian still leaning against the alley wall.

The old man grunts as he pushes himself off his post.

“And you’re right on time,” he huffs, looking down at his watch. “Which means you’re late.”

“No. It means I’m right on time,” I roll my eyes. “Let’s get going.”

“In a rush?”

“Yes. And you should be too. Melina’s still in trouble, and I’m no closer to finding her. Are you?”

“Fuck,” Maksim curses. “I’m not. But I did find something you might have missed.”

That stops me in my tracks.

“What?” I ask, turning back to the old Russian.

“I found out where she was staying,” he says, nodding towards me with a begrudging respect. “Thanks to the info on the hard drive you gave me.”

His respect is misplaced.

Still, I have to physically hide my relief.

Obviously, Maksim doesn’t know anything I don’t already know. But I guess he was able to track down Melina’s apartment from the breadcrumbs I afforded him.

Good thing we got out of there.

“Where she was staying?” I ask, playing dumb.

We continue walking. When we turn out of the alleyway, my sights set on our destination. A club run by the slum lord we’re supposed to meet.

“The apartment had recently been cleared out,” Maksim grumbles. “It looked like I had just missed whoever had wiped the place clean.”

“Shit.”

“Shit’s right. This meeting better put us on the right path, because if it doesn’t, every single last member of the Kilpatrick crime family, as well as all of their soldiers and allies, are going to descend on this god-forsaken city and raze it to the ground until we find our girl.”

“I’m surprised they’re not already here.”

Maksim curses under his breath as we slow to a halt not far from the club’s guarded backdoor. Two bouncers stand watch. They don’t acknowledge us.

“They were on their way,” Maksim explains. “But... circumstances bound them to America. If they weren’t trapped, they would already be here, dissecting every inch of this city.”

I feel my brow furrow.

“The almighty Kilpatricks have been trapped in their own country?” I ask, filled with genuine surprise. “How is that even possible.”

“It’s a long story,” Maksim rumbles, watching me with a suspicious side-eye. “I’m surprised you haven’t already heard.”

“I’ve been busy,” I deflect. “Only one thing matters right now.”

“Ah yes, finding the girl you let loose.”

“It wasn’t supposed to go like this.”

“Obviously.”

Before I can respond to that, the bouncers turn to face us.

I guess we’ve been idling for too long.

“Keinen Schritt naher,” one of them says.

“English,” I snort, already fed up with these games. Maksim’s accusation has cut deeper than expected.

“Not a step closer,” the second bouncer sneers, lifting his hand at me.

I take an aggressive step forward, but Maksim places his arm in front of my chest.

“Easy,” he whispers to me, before turning his attention to the beefy guards. “We have a meeting with Timo Raum.”

“Timo does not have any meetings planned with you.”

“We’re with Yasha von Bingen,” I tell them, frustration boiling over.

The bouncers share a long look. “She is not here yet.”

“Ah fuck it,” Maksim sighs.

In the blink of an eye, he pulls out his gun and downs the two fuckers. They drop to the floor like anchors, immediately dead, dark blood pours from the bullet wound in their skulls.

“Shit,” I say, almost impressed. “What happened to taking it easy?”

“That was for you,” the old Russian chuckles, tucking his gun back under his belt. “I, on the other hand, can do whatever the fuck I like. Now, let’s get the hell in there and find out what’s happened to our girl.”

He brushes past me and quickly disappears behind the club’s back door. But it takes me a second to follow after him.

Our girl.

Is Maksim starting to trust me?

Why the hell would he do such a thing? He seems smarter than that.

My gut churns and the guilt returns.

Shit. Is that why? Can he see the desperation written on my face? The dread? The guilt? He must be misattributing them. At least he got one thing right.

We both care for Melina.

If he figures out the truth, though, I’ll be the next sucker with a bullet hole between my eyes.

“Crazy old man,” I grumble. Stepping over the bodies, I make my way inside.

I'm immediately met by a gust of pounding music. Even through the walls it's so loud I can hardly hear myself think.

Still, I manage to discern a familiar voice call to me.

"Over here!" Maksim shouts, his head poking around the corner up ahead. I cautiously follow his voice.

"What the fuck..."

When I turn the corner, I find that Maksim has made quick work of another pair of guards.

Two dead bodies lay motionless on the floor. This time, the blood pours from their throats. Maksim wipes his bloody blade on the inside of his shirt before stuffing it away.

"Couldn't save one for me?" I ask, catching up to him.

"Maybe if you were a little quicker, you could have gotten one for yourself."

"Probably would have been better that way," I quip. "Don't want you over exerting yourself. If you pull a muscle, am I going to have to carry you around for the rest of the night?"

"Keep running your mouth and I'll pull one of your muscles," Maksim warns, pushing forward. "This way."

We're not met with any more guards as we make our way through a twisted series of halls. In fact, the rest of the way is so empty that, by the time we see the slum lord's office door, I'm suspicious enough to call for a quick timeout.

Has Yasha set me up again?

No. She wouldn't dare. I saw the fear in her eyes. That woman is probably halfway around the world by now, thanking her lucky stars Maksim showed up to save her from my wrath.

"Shall we?" Maksim asks, placing his hand on the golden door handle.

"How about we knock first."

"That sounds like fun," he taunts, sneering as he steps back.

Lifting his hand, he curls his ring-covered fingers into a fist and knocks.

It takes a while, but eventually, the heavy metal door creaks open.

"Who are you?" a bald-headed man asks. His pale white skin is littered in colorful tattoos, and his black lips are painted into a snarl.

"We're—"

"Yasha's bodyguards," I interrupt, before Maksim can spoil anything. "We're sweeping the place before she arrives."

“Shit, is that meeting still on?” the bald fucker mumbles to himself. When his gaze drops, I step forward and give the door a savage kick.

It snaps open, flinging the fucker off his feet.

Maksim and I immediately have our guns out, and we burst into the room ready to end anyone who dares test us.

Sure enough, there are more guards inside. I’m about to take care of them when a powerful voice puts a stop to the chaos.

“Enough!”

The fuckers all pause. The voice turns to us. “Please, don’t shoot. I heard what you said. Yasha is my partner. We don’t want any trouble.”

Maksim and I share a troubled glance as the three-armed men in front of us put their guns down. When they step aside we get our first look at the man behind the voice.

“Timo Raum?” I ask. But I don’t need the confirmation. It’s obvious who’s in charge.

“That’s right,” Timo nods. “And who are you?”

He’s a thin man with short blonde hair. Despite the dimness of the office, he wears thick sunglasses. His thin body is covered in a shiny silver suit.

He remains seated as Maksim and I hesitantly lower our guns. I’m sure we’re both having the same thought—no more killing until we get our answers.

This is important.

“Who we are doesn’t matter,” I reply, my voice harsh and unflinching. “All that matters is that you answer the questions we have for you.”

Timo seems confused. “Why has Yasha suddenly become so paranoid? Have I done something to offend her?”

“Fuck Yasha,” I exclaim. “This isn’t about her. This is about you.”

“Me?” Timo asks, placing a hand on his chest.

I can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic or not. But his guards seem to take the act as a sign to start lifting their weapons again.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Maksim warns them.

“Easy now, fellas,” Timo eases. “Let’s all get along.” He doesn’t sound nearly as scared as he should be. “If you aren’t here for Yasha, then what are you here for?”

“Answers,” I sneer.

“Answers about what?”

As a show of good faith, I slowly holster my weapon.

“About the devil of Berlin.”

That seems to catch Timo’s interest. Leaning forward, he studies me through his dark sunglasses.

“The devil of Berlin? I like it. Maybe I should start calling myself that...”

“You can take the title after I kill the fucker,” I growl.

“Gladly,” Timo smiles. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to help you with that, though. Because I’ve never heard of this devil in my life.”

“The name is irrelevant. All I care about is what he’s done.”

“And what has this devil done?”

“He’s taken something that belongs to me.”

For a second, I forget that Maksim is in the room. But when I see him shift out of the corner of my eye, I can’t help but wonder if I just went too far.

“He took a girl that wasn’t his to take,” Maksim clarifies. “And we believe he took her from some men who worked for you and Yasha.”

Obviously, Maksim has been doing his homework. Part of me worries that there was too much information on the hard drive. For an old man, he sure works quickly.

“What were my men doing with your girl?” Timo asks, hardly trying to hide his knowing smirk.

“We’re not here to play games,” I snarl. “You tell us what you know about the car crash or this gets ugly.”

Timo’s posture stiffens at the mention of the crash.

“You’re after that demon?” he asks, sitting up straight. “Well, then it sounds like we have something in common. He killed a half-dozen of my men. I’d like to find him too.”

A pit opens in my gut.

“You don’t already know who he is?”

“Well, now I know he’s the devil of Berlin,” Timo jests.

That seems to push Maksim over the edge.

“This isn’t the time for jokes,” he snarls.

“Oh, calm down. It’s all—”

I hardly even have to time react. Out of the corner of my eye, I can practically see Maksim turning red.

A second later, his gun goes off.

At least I'm semi-prepared this time. The old Russian only gets that one shot off before I manage to pull my gun back out.

Together, we pick off Timo's guards. One by one, they fall to the floor. Some only take a single shot to end, others take a few more, but when the smoke clears, only three of us remain among the living.

Maksim. Me. And our new friend Timo.

The German gangster is cowering in the corner, hands over his greasy yellow hair.

I go to gather him.

"Stand up, you pathetic piece of—"

"No, please! Don't kill me," Timo screeches as I lift him up by his shiny collar. "I'll tell you all I know, I swear!"

"Fucking coward," Maksim grumbles from behind me.

"You're lucky I haven't already killed you," I sneer. "Fucking pimp piece of shit"

"I'm a landlord, that's all," Timo squeaks.

"Idiot. You already connected yourself to the men who stole my girl. Or did you forget?"

I no longer care that Maksim is here, I'm not holding anything back. Melina is my girl. And I just want to get out of here and back to her.

It's a strange feeling.

Usually, being on a job like this is my version of heaven. Killing, scheming, conquering. When I'm doing that, I'm in my element. But now it just feels like a fucking side quest. Something I need to do in order to ensure the safety of what really matters.

God damn. What has she done to me?

"Just acquaintances," Timo squirms. "They were just acquaintances."

"You called them 'your men'," Maksim reminds him. "You said you wanted to find out who killed them too."

"No. No. That was a lie. I... I already know who killed them... he came to me... he confessed... he..."

"You MET him?" I roar.

Yanking Timo's collar, I shove him against the wall so hard the entire office rattles.

My heart is absolutely pounding. I have tunnel vision. This fucker *knows*.

"Yes," Timo chokes. "Please, I can't breathe..."

My patience is non-existent. Still, I'm so close to finally finding the truth that I give the coward his wish.

Throwing him aside, I let Timo crash into his desk.

"Start talking," I demand.

But before the slum lord can speak up, a whirring sound snaps my attention to the far wall. My gun is drawn before I even know what's happening. It only takes a second to figure out what's happening.

The far wall of this office isn't a wall at all, but rather a window. The giant grey blind slowly lifts, and we're greeted by a mirage of strobe lights.

Suddenly, we're overlooking the dance floor. Across from that, a crowded balcony throbs with people.

"Fuck," I curse, covering my eyes. "Did you fucking do that?"

Storming forward, I grab Timo again and shove him into his chair. Then, I press the barrel of my gun directly between his eyes.

"No," he whimpers. "Well, yes... but it was an accident. There's a button on the desk. It must have dislodged when—"

"Enough!" I demand. "Fuck your desk. Fuck the window. Fuck those lights and those people. Tell me what I want to know. Who came to you? Where is the man I'm looking for?"

"No... not a man... barely a man..." Timo sputters. "A monster... A half-dead demon in a rotting suit of flesh..."

My heart drops.

"Who did he say he was?"

"He didn't. He... He just took responsibility for what happened. He asked if I knew where the girl from the van was. I didn't know. He... he told me not to tell anyone he came. He threatened to kill me if I did."

"Where did you meet him? Where did he come from? Fucking tell me!"

My gun digs so deep into Timo's flesh his eyes roll into the back of his head. I slap him back awake.

"He'll kill me..." he croaks.

"I'll kill you," I boom. Lowering my gun, I press it just under his shoulder. "And I won't make it so quick."

"Fuck," Timo coughs. "Fine... I'll tell you..."

"Tell me what?"

"When the monster left, my men... they followed him.... They found his—"

Before Timo can finish, the glass window shatters. Then, Timo's head explodes.

I'm flung backward as his skull comes apart in a gory eruption of blood, bone, and brain matter.

"What the..."

Suddenly, I'm being tackled to the floor. Another bullet whirls right over my head as my shoulder smacks against the hard wood.

When I look up, I see Maksim over top of me.

"What are you doing?" I ask, still stunned.

"Saving your life," he grunts.

Just above us, a piece of wall is eviscerated by a bullet. Then another. Shit.

"The window..."

"Way ahead of you."

Maksim jump off me, gun drawn. I turn around and watch him roll through the broken glass until he's protected by the heavy metal door by the front.

Thumping music blares into the office, as does the sound of countless screams.

Fucking hell.

What's gotten into me? I lost sight of my surroundings and it nearly got me killed. If it wasn't for the old man...

No. There's no time to think about that.

Using the desk as cover, I push myself up and gather my own gun.

"Do you see who's shooting at us?" I yell over to Maksim.

"I can't see shit. You take a look."

"Fuck," I grunt.

Taking a deep breath, I jump up over the desk. A bullet immediately tears through the wood just below my shin. It's a near miss, but one that affords me exactly what I need.

"He's on your seven!" I shout at Maksim, dipping back behind the desk.

I can hear the Russian fire off a quick round in that direction before I find another angle to look out through.

For a split-second, I catch a glimpse of the familiar figure. He's on the balcony across from us, gun pointed my way.

Then, he's running.

... if you can even call it that.

The shadow moves in jerky, unnatural movements as he races away. It's only when he disappears down some unseen doorway that I snap out of my trance.

"He's getting away," I tell Maksim, racing by him as I storm back into the hallway. "I'll try to cut him off out back. You go to the front. We need to get this fucker."

"On it."

Maksim vanishes behind me as I rage back through the club's twisted labyrinth. It feels like an eternity before I burst outside again.

The cold air hits me like a sledgehammer, but I don't let it slow me down. Sirens are already starting to wail in the distance. On the other end of the building, I can hear the screams of fleeing civilians.

I ignore it all to scour the alley.

But I don't find anything.

"Fuck!" I roar, slamming my fist against the club's back entrance. "Where the hell did you go? Come face me like a fucking man!"

No one answers, and I'm about to accept the failure when a figure comes rushing into the alley from around the corner.

"There you are," I rumble, lifting my gun.

I'm nearly ready to pull the trigger when Maksim comes into view.

Fuck.

It's just him.

I lower my gun.

"He wasn't out front," Maksim curses, coming to a stop. "Any luck back here?"

"Nothing."

My lungs burn as I stare off into the darkness. Steam rises from both of our bodies. The sirens get louder.

"We should leave," Maksim says.

He's right. But my mind won't stop racing. We were so close. I almost got a glimpse of that fucking devil.

Why won't he face me head-on? Clearly, he knows who I am. He must know what I'm after, too. So why—

Suddenly, I have an epiphany.

My neck snaps up. I sniff the cold air, then turn to Maksim.

"Do you trust me?" I ask him, tucking my gun away.

"No," he quickly answers.

But I know it's not a completely genuine response. Otherwise, why would he have saved my life? Surely, if he believes even a word of what I've told him, then he should believe he can find Melina on his own.

He doesn't need me.

But I need him.

"Well, open up your heart a little, old man," I say. Taking out my phone, I airdrop him my number. "Try and trust me, even if it's only for a day."

"Why?"

"Because I know what to do. But first, I'm going to need you to find some more of Timo's men. See if you can get a hold of whoever tracked this devil of Berlin fucker down, or at least someone who knows what they found. I'll give you a day, then let's meet up again. Right back here, same time. Understand?"

I'm already starting to run when Maksim shouts after me.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"I'm not sure yet," I mumble to myself. But that doesn't mean I'm lost.

No. I'm anything but fucking lost.

I know exactly what needs to happen next.

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MELINA

There's no escape.

Unwrapping the towel from around my waist, I look to the bedroom door. It's firmly shut. I don't even have to try the handle to know it won't move.

But it's not just the door that has me feeling like a captive.

It's Tytus.

I see him everywhere I look. The bed. The windows. The bathroom. The painting. They're all reminders. And there's no running away from them.

Trust me, I've tried.

The shower I just got out of was my third one since he left. Each time I step behind those frosted glass doors, I hope I might finally be able to escape him, even if just for an hour or so.

Usually, the hot water clears my mind. Instead, it did the exact opposite.

Even as I towel myself dry, a wetness lingers between my legs.

Tytus has captured me in more ways than one. And I know it's wrong. This is all wrong. I *want* it to be wrong.

So why does the thought of being with him feel so right?

"Fuck," I mumble, tossing the towel aside so I can dress into some ratty sweats. "What's happening to me?"

When I turn from the closet, the answer stares me directly in the face.

The painting.

Over the past few hours, I've been occasionally sitting down at the stool and mixing colors on the pallet. I'm having a hard time adding anything,

though. The painting has hardly changed.

Tytus will be upset. His orders were clear.

Paint.

But he didn't give me much else to work with.

How could I add to the piece without learning anything new about my subject?

It feels like I'm at an impasse. Locking me in here was a huge step backwards, and it reminded me of who I once thought Tytus was.

A heartless monster with an ounce of humanity. That ounce of humanity is what hooked me in the first place. I'm not sure it's enough anymore, not at this rate.

For a while, I thought I saw it growing before my very eyes. I could feel it's warmth and its tenderness and I let it lead me along.

Now, though, I'm wondering if I wasn't tricked; I'm wondering if I shouldn't revise some of what I've already painted.

Am I truly capturing Tytus as he is, or what I want him to be?

It's an impossible question to answer. And every time I lift my brush to change anything on the canvas, I freeze.

It's the same feeling over and over again. A conflict.

Something just feels right—too right to change—no matter how wrong everything else is going.

Maybe it's the captivity. Maybe I'm just so used to being locked up that I find comfort in the familiarity of it all. That would make sense. It would also be less troubling than the truth.

I'm falling for Tytus Ryzdon.

"Why?" I whisper, sitting back down on my stool. I try to find reason in my art, but I already know it doesn't exist. The canvas is filled with chaos, a perfect reflection of my heart.

I pick up my brush, but it feels too heavy. All the confidence I'd gained back in Berlin is being washed away. Tytus has become less of an inspiration, and more of a distraction.

My thighs throb with a subtle heat. The pressure in my core won't disappear. No matter how hard I shut my eyes; no matter how deep I breathe, I can't shake the warm shadow blanketing me.

Tytus has trapped me. There's no question about it.

But how do I escape?

"Fuck it," I curse, tossing my brush aside.

With a loud huff, I throw myself on the bed. My legs open. My hand drifts to smother the wetness below.

Somehow, I can still feel the dried blood sticking to my skin.

It doesn't matter how many times I shower, the proof of my inexperience is still there. Strangely, I'm almost ashamed of it.

Maybe he left because I wasn't as good as he thought I would be.

The troubling thought flashes through my mind like a lightning bolt. It's accompanied by a thunderous roar of jealousy.

Without warning, my mind latches onto the sex tape. *His* sex tape. The sex tape he made with another woman. A woman who was clearly far more experienced and willing than I am.

Stop it! I try to order myself. This isn't just some thrilling little affair anymore. You're officially a captive. Don't misplace your anger or your disappointment. This is about you and Tytus, and no one else.

But no matter how hard my conscience tries to lead me back onto a reasonable path, I can't seem to follow. My mind continues to veer down this dangerous detour.

"Where are you?" I mumble.

Ripping my hand out from between my legs, I roll off the bed and stumble to the closet. It almost feels like I'm drunk, I'm just not sure what on.

Envy? Shame? Lust? Anger?

It's impossible to say. What's not hard to figure out, however, is what I want.

I want to see that fucking tape again; wallow in all the bad feelings it gives me. Maybe then I can break free from this spell.

At least, that's what I tell myself, if only because the other option feels far too pathetic.

I want to learn. I want to be better for him, so that Tytus never wants to leave again.

"There you are."

It doesn't take long to find the duffle bag Tytus and I frantically stuffed my electronics into. At the time, we were worried the terrifying figure might return to confront us. But Tytus must have scared him off, because we had all the time in the world to collect what we needed.

Taking my phone too, I return to the bed.

When I open the laptop and search for the tape, I'm oddly surprised that the email still exists. I thought Tytus might try to rid it from existence as soon as he could, but I guess he's been busy...

My toes curl and my heart flutters as I remember all we've been through. All that we've done together. The warmth of his body fills mine as I hover over the attachment.

My heart drops when I click it open.

The familiar video fills the screen. I watch, transfixed, as everything plays out just like I remember. But the whole time, something kicks at me.

When I finally realize what's bothering me, my jaw drops.

Immediately, I'm on my feet. Holding the laptop up to my face, I make my way to the edge of the bed, then I back up until I hit the wall.

This is where the camera was.

The sex tape. It was filmed in this room.

My limbs go limp and the computer falls from my hands, slamming shut as it harmlessly bounces off the soft carpet below.

For a moment, I'm stunned still. Then, a nervous energy takes hold of me. Racing back to the bed, I grab my phone. With it in hand, I begin flipping off the bedroom lights.

When all is dark, I turn on the flashlight and begin scanning the room.

It doesn't take long before I see my first reflection. The light shimmers off the lens, revealing exactly what I feared.

Another camera.

A quiet sob fills my throat.

Tytus is filming me. Again.

Just like he did with the woman on the tape.

I start to feel lightheaded as I lazily switch the main bedroom light back on. I rest against the wall as the conflict raging inside of me turns so intense it hurts.

I'm just another one of his conquests. This isn't special. We aren't special. It only feels that way because it's my first time.

But this isn't Tytus' first time. No. It's not even close.

How many women came before me? How many will come after?

... *There's only one person I ever want to fuck again. You.*

When I remember how confidently Tytus made that claim, I want to cry.

Shit. I believed him.

I'm such a fucking idiot.

Slowly, I sink to the floor.

But before my ass can even hit the carpet, a sound stiffens my neck.

My gaze snaps towards the door.

The handle. It's moving.

Without warning, the lock clicks and the door bursts open.

Tytus walks in.

His hair is damp from sweat. His skin glistens and steams. Blood and dirt stain his shirt. But when those silver-blue eyes find me, my fallen heart lifts again—no matter how badly I don't want it to.

The reaction is so confusing I can't control myself anymore. A tear cascades down my cheek.

"Angel," Immediately, Tytus is on his knees. His rough thumb wipes the salty tear from my lips. "What's wrong?"

The strongest part of me wants to wither into his palm. But a weaker voice urges me to remember what I just found.

Tytus can't be trusted.

Well, neither can I.

"Nothing," I whisper. "It... it's just been a long night."

I can feel those corrupted ice crystals studying me.

"I'm sorry," Tytus sighs. The next second, his arms wrap around my body. I plunge into the warmth of his chest, hating the comfort I find in it. In him.

This man should be suffocating. So, why don't I feel like I'm drowning?

"Come with me," Tytus says.

I don't get the chance to refuse. Scooping his bulging arms beneath my thighs, Tytus sweeps me off my ass.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, choking back the tears.

We step out into the hallway and Tytus takes a left.

"I've got some work to do," he says, carrying me into a room right by the staircase. "But I'm not about to leave you alone again."

"Maybe I want to be alone," I whisper.

"You will never be alone again, angel."

The claim sparks something in me. Finally, I'm snapped out of my daze.

"You've said that before," I huff.

With little concern for my own well-being, I lurch myself from Tytus' grasp.

The act surprises him enough that I'm able to break free. Still, I need to grab onto his shirt to keep myself from falling to the floor.

"Woah, easy there, Melina," Tytus says, taking my arm.

I pull away.

"Do your work," I tell him. Looking around the distinguished room, I spot a tasteful mahogany desk by the far wall. "I won't bother you."

When I turn to leave, Tytus lashes out and grabs my wrist. His grip is stronger than I expected.

Still, I foolishly try to pull out of it.

It's no use.

"You aren't going anywhere," Tytus growls.

I whip around to face him, but the intensity of his glare is almost too much to handle.

"So what?" I question, powering through his silver-blue gaze. "I'm your captive of convenience? Something to be locked up however you desire?"

"You're not my captive," Tytus claims, even if we both know it's a lie. "You're my..."

I don't let him finish.

"Your what?" I demand to know, frustration building.

Tytus only shakes his head.

"You're just mine."

But that's not enough. All I can think about is how he fucked me in the same bed as the girl from the video. Fuck. I lost my virginity in that bed.

How many other girls have there been?

"I'm your toy," I snort, crossing my arms. "I'm your chess piece. Your subject. You're only keeping me around to use. For what, though? Power? Money? Revenge?"

With a hard tug, Tytus yanks me into his hard body. Even through the thick muscles that cover his chest, I can feel his heart.

It's pounding.

"Keep talking," he warns. "Name all of the things you think I'm using you for. I'll burn every last one to the ground just to prove I'm only here for one reason. You."

"I don't buy it," I insist, my voice breaking halfway through.

Tytus isn't convinced. Hell, neither am I.

The comfort of his broad chest is unavoidable. Why does it feel so right to be this close to him?

I want him to hold me tighter. I want him to push me away. I want him to kiss me. Hold me down and fuck me. But I also want him to burst into a thousand tiny pieces and scatter to the wind—even if I know I’ll just spend the rest of my life collecting the bits to put back together.

“Come. Sit on my lap, angel.” Sliding his hand up the back of my skull, Tytus intertwines his fingers with my hair. “I’ll show you what daddy does for a living.”

There’s no fighting him off as I’m dragged to the mahogany desk. When Tytus sits down on the black leather chair behind it, I come with him, my ass spreading across his thick thigh.

His forearm wraps around my stomach, barring me into place as he opens up a drawer and pulls out a laptop.

“Wouldn’t you prefer if I kept painting?” I struggle to accept my fate.

Sitting on his lap just feels too good. Right now, I would rather stew in my loneliness. I want to remain angry at him.

But when he holds me like this, how can I stay mad?

“You’ve had enough time to paint,” Tytus grunts. “Now we keep each other company.”

“And if I don’t want to keep your company?”

“Then you’re shit out of luck.”

All I can do is cross my arms and pout as Tytus reaches around me and opens up his laptop. I stubbornly avert my gaze as he starts to type and click away.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I recognize one of the images that pops up on his screen.

“Rozalia...” the name slips from my lips like a long-lost memory.

“That’s right. I’m glad you haven’t forgotten about my sister.”

“She’s not your sister to me,” I sigh, my crossed arms dropping just a little. “She’s my friend.”

“Best friend, I hear.”

My heart clenches as I remember one of the few good things I left behind.

“Why are you looking her up?” I ask, trying to ignore my complicated history.

“Not her,” Tytus grumbles.

He types some more and an image of Gabriel pops up beside Rozalia’s. They both look so much younger than I’m used to, even if their twisted

expressions age them.

They look pissed off. Are these mugshots?

“What are you doing?” I ask, shifting forward to get a closer look. Slowly, curiosity leaks through my stubborn anger.

It’s fascinating to see these two from before they became part of my family. There’s something so dark and gritty about their appearances. Not even their youth can hide all the shit they’ve been through.

“I’m looking for my brother,” Tytus growls.

The sudden anger in his tone takes me by surprise.

“Wouldn’t Gabriel be back in America?” I meekly suggest.

“Not Gabriel.”

“You... you have another brother?”

“That’s right.” With an aggressive click, Tytus brings up another mugshot. “And here he is.”

Despite not recognizing the man in the image, the sight of him still pricks at my skin. A small chill skates up my spine. I lean in for a closer look.

“Alex Whittaker?” I mumble, reading the name written beneath the photograph.

“No, that was just an alias we used for the job,” Tytus explains. “His real name is Krol Cieni—well, that *was* his real name... or maybe it still is. That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

My clenched heart falters.

“Your brother’s dead?”

A frown comes over Tytus’ thick red lips. “If only I knew for sure.”

A sliver of sympathy worms its way through my inner conflict.

“I’m sorry,” I offer. “It must be hard, not knowing what’s happened to your brother.”

“It’s not like that,” Tytus sighs, straightening up again. His hand falls on my thigh. There’s a stiffness to his touch that I haven’t experienced before.

It’s like I can feel a hole opening up inside of his chest. My curiosity grows. I want to peek inside.

“Are you trying to find him?” I ask, studying the photograph.

The man looks older than the photos of Tytus, Gabriel and Rozalia. If I had to guess, I’d say his mugshot was taken when he was around Tytus’ current age. And while he’s not nearly as good looking as any of his siblings, he definitely isn’t ugly, nor does he look particularly evil.

So why am I suddenly pushing myself deeper into Tytus' warm body?
For protection?

Or is it out of sympathy?

"I'm trying to find out if he's still alive," Tytus confirms.

"How long have you been doing that?" I wonder, not wanting to be so direct as to ask what's really on my mind.

With all that's going on, why look for him now?

"It's complicated," Tytus mutters. "But it's important, trust me."

Even if I'm currently having a hard time trusting him, sympathy keeps my mouth shut. Instead, I look over the three mugshots on the screen.

Each person looks so different, and I have to remind myself that Tytus didn't grow up with the same kind of family as me. None of his siblings are blood related. Even his father was a stranger until he informally adopted him.

Rozalia has told me as much.

But why didn't she ever bring up Krol?

"Were there any more of you?" I wonder out loud.

"No. Our group was small. Small enough to call a family. Though, we might have been too troubled to ever really fit into that mold..."

"I don't think that's true," I say. "Look at my family. Trouble might as well be our last name, and I've never doubted for a second that we're—"

"It's different for you," Tytus interrupts. "You're related by blood. We weren't. There was never anything keeping us together. Nothing but..."

He trails off. But the word he doesn't say echoes through the office like a bullhorn.

"Love?" I gather the courage to suggest.

"Maybe," Tytus sighs. "But it's hard to think of love when I look at that bastard's face."

"You two didn't get along?"

"No one got along with Krol. He was a selfish, brutal deviant who only ever cared about impressing our father."

"So why didn't you ditch him?" I mindlessly blurt out.

"Because he was..."

"Family?" I finish for him.

This time, I don't get it right.

"No," Tytus shakes his head. "... Because he was all we had."

All of a sudden, I can see a young Tytus. He's surrounded by darkness, completely alone. He looks miserable. And then, a tiny Gabriel appears by his side. Rozalia follows closely behind.

Slowly, little Tytus doesn't look so lonely or upset. And when a third person arrives, the darkness only brightens a little more. Even if Krol stands apart from the group, he still fills up the emptiness.

Still, there's so much emptiness. So much darkness. The four kids huddle together in the middle of it all. They only have each other.

And though they look happier together than Tytus did alone, I can still sense the same terrible fear lurking behind each of their little faces.

The fear of losing this little slice of light.

It keeps them together, but it also keeps them from being completely happy or relieved or grateful. No one smiles. In fact, their lips are shut so tight I can't imagine anyone of them ever smiling. Not for real. Not genuinely.

A sadness fills my heart as the vision fades.

When I come to, I turn from the laptop screen and look at Tytus. Those silver-blue eyes gaze right back at me.

On his lips is the subtlest smile.

My heart nearly breaks. Have I done this to him? Have I made that lonely child smile?

Before any tears can fall from my eyes, I turn back to the screen.

"Were all these mugshots taken at the same time?" I ask, trying to distract myself from the emotion clogging my throat.

Tytus only laughs. "Yeah. This was from one of the first jobs we ever did together. One of the last too."

"What went wrong?"

"Just your typical bickering. Gabriel and Krol got into an argument on the steps of a bank in Krakow... right after we'd robbed the place. I was waiting in the getaway car, just a few feet away. We could have easily made out like bandits. Shit. I can still picture the look on Roz's face. She's said I had the same look on mine. We were both completely fucking bewildered—that is, until Krol brought us into the argument. Then it was just four orphans swinging at each other on the street, our hard-earned cash flying like leaves from our ripped burlap sacks. We didn't even hear the cops arrive. It just happened. Luckily, Drago eventually came by to bail us out..."

Tytus trails off and his subtle smile fades.

“Who’s Drago?” I ask.

“He was our adoptive father.”

Was.

That makes everything as clear as it needs to be.

“You want to see your family again, don’t you?” I realize.

“Yes,” Tytus whispers.

“I wish I could help you...”

My chin drops at the heaviness of it all. But then I feel Tytus’ fingers spread across my jaw.

I sink into his palm as he turns me to face him.

Those silver-blue eyes shimmer. The subtle smile returns.

“You want to help me, angel?”

“Yes,” I nod.

Leaning forward, Tytus plants a gentle kiss on my lips. When he pulls back his smile widens.

I try to hate him. But I can’t. Not right now.

“You already have, angel,” he says, brushing my cheek. “But there’s something else you can do for me.”

MELINA

“What?”

I try to swallow, but my throat is clogged.

“You see these tattoos?” Tytus asks, lifting his arm. The gothic mural starts just beneath his palm.

“Yes.”

“Trace them.”

My brow furrows as I look into those silver-blue eyes. What is he trying to say?

“Like this?”

Placing my finger on his wrist, I outline the fiery sword that pierces his forearm.

“Just like that, angel. Keep going.”

Tytus’ voice turns deeper as I paint a line to the wolf wrapped around the hilt of the sword. When I get to its eye, I pause. They look so familiar. Is this supposed to be Tytus? Maybe a relative...

Before I can ask, Tytus taps the back of my hand, urging me to continue. I do as I’m told. My finger brushes over his inky skin, across his bulging veins, and around his hard muscles until I reach his rolled-up sleeve.

“I can’t go any further,” I say. “What now?”

Tytus bite down on his lip. A new heat rises from between his legs. Suddenly his lap is sweltering hot.

I can feel his cock getting harder. It swells beneath my ass, desperate to get inside of me.

I bite down on my lip.

"Would you like to see where they lead, angel?" he asks, nodding down to his painted forearm.

Immediately, I'm sent hurling back to the first time I saw him naked. My congested throat clears at the memory of his powerful body, nearly every inch covered in inky goodness.

Only one place remained untouched.

His cock.

"Where?" I gulp.

Tytus' smile twists as he leans into my ear.

"To bed."

Without warning, he springs up from his seat, scooping me up under the legs.

"Tytus!" I yelp, instinctively grabbing onto his broad shoulders.

"Hush now, Melina. You can scream when I'm inside you."

The wetness returns between my legs. It's joined by an all too familiar pressure. All my worries forcibly melt away, even as my conscience desperately tries to grab hold of them.

I shouldn't be into this. It's so wrong.

But it doesn't matter. My body wants what it wants.

And it wants him.

"Out of those sweats," Tytus orders.

In the blink of an eye, we're back in the bedroom. After throwing me onto the bed, Tytus strips down to his underwear. His bulge is so huge my jaw drops.

"I... I don't know if I should..." I babble.

Still, I watch eagerly as Tytus dips his fingers beneath his briefs. But instead of giving me what we both know I want, he pauses.

"If you say no, we stop here," he says. But when he starts to pull his hand out of his briefs, I gasp.

"No!" I shout. "Wait, no, not no. Yes."

Tytus takes a big step forward and I'm covered by his steaming shadow.

"Take a deep breath, angel. Answer me. Do you want me to fuck you? Yes or no."

A big gulp fills my throat. My mind goes clear. I'm plunged into a primal state.

"... Yes."

Tytus smiles.

“Good girl.”

With that, my prize is swiftly revealed.

“Fuck,” I sigh, my shoulders slinking as Tytus’ throbbing cock springs free.

He just shakes his head and leans forward.

“Such a filthy mouth,” he smirks. “Have I really corrupted you so badly?”

Before I can answer, Tytus grabs my throat and licks my face.

A warm shiver blasts through my entire body as he drags his tongue across my cheek, clearing any trace of the tears I just shed.

“You’re only allowed to leak from one place,” Tytus explains, his free hand cupping my pussy. “Understand?”

This time, I can’t swallow because his fingers are wrapped too tightly around my neck. The searing heat of his grip arches my back and thrusts my hips into his palm.

“I understand,” I choke.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Sliding his hand to the back of my neck, Tytus twirls me around and shoves my face in the mattress, then he presses up on my pussy so that my ass is presented to him.

Face down, ass up.

Shit.

I’m like sacrifice being offered up to a greedy god.

And I love it.

All of the sadness and betrayal I’d felt shatters beneath the weight of my arousal. The fear is drowned by the flood raging between my legs.

It doesn’t matter how dangerous this all is. Right now, I just want one thing, and Tytus is the only person who can give it to me.

“Fuck me,” I plead, my voice muffled by the mattress.

Still, Tytus hears me loud and clear.

“Gladly.”

With a single tug, he ruthlessly tears the sweatpants down from my waist. They fly off my ankles, exposing my bare pussy to my beastly captor.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he growls.

I whimper at the first lash of his tongue. His fingers dig into my ass cheeks, spreading them apart so he can get a better taste.

“Holy fuck,” I cry, shoving my face deep into the bed.

“No, this isn’t right,” I hear Tytus grumble from behind me. “We’ve already been here. I want something new.”

His hands glide up my ass until they’re wrapped around my waist. Another ruthless tug lifts me into the air. Tytus falls onto the bed, holding me above him like a fucking play toy.

“You’re going to ride my face, angel.”

I furiously nod. “Please...”

I just need his tongue back on my clit.

Lowering me, Tytus grants my wish. But in this position, his tongue is even more powerful. His teeth join in on the party too. As do his lips.

They all work together to make me squirm.

“Wait,” I gasp. Reaching down, I pull at Tytus’ hair, but he doesn’t slow down. “It’s too much. Please...”

The pressure in my core is thrashing about like a fucking wild fire. The pleasure is so intense I can’t see straight. I’m going light headed, but when I press my knees into the mattress and try to push myself up for a breather, Tytus catches me.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” he growls, my juices dripping from his lips. His silver-blue eyes have turned primal. His canines flare out from beneath his lips.

A jagged sigh rips from my throat.

“You’re going to make me cum,” I warn him, knowing that he’ll want this to last longer than that.

But Tytus doesn’t give a shit.

“Then fucking cum,” he sneers, pulling me back down onto his glistening lips. “Drown me, angel. Fucking suffocate me. You’re not allowed to go anywhere until I’ve sucked every last ounce out of you.”

True to his promise, Tytus starts to inhale me.

My swollen clit has never been treated so roughly. It feels fucking amazing, like I’ve been caught in a burning hurricane. I’m thrown about like a ragdoll, all while being held in place by the strongest hands I’ve ever felt.

Then, I snap.

The pressure in my core erupts, spreading to the tips of my toes and back again.

“It feels so good,” I sob, my entire body trembling.

But Tytus isn't done with me.

With a savage grace, he slips out from under me. A second later, his hands are back around my hips and I'm being lifted into the air.

This time, he doesn't put me back down.

Instead, I feel his cock pound into my dripping hole from behind. I'm held like a machine gun as Tytus fucks me without mercy. His thrusts are so powerful my whimpers begin to warble—not that either of us can hear anything over the smacking of his hard pelvis against my ass.

Smack. Smack. Smack.

Our skin sticks and pulls.

Each thrust sends a searing hot flash through my body. My arms stretch out, desperate for something to grab, anything to transfer just a little bit of this intensity onto.

Tytus does not allow for it. He keeps me suspended in the air as he fucks my tight little pussy.

I hold my breath, taking every last girthy inch.

"Breathe, baby girl," I hear him demand from behind me. "Save that air for when I'm choking you."

I try to do as he says, but when I open my mouth, only a loud whine emerges. In response, Tytus fulfills his promise.

His massive biceps bulge around my waist as he reaches a hand across my belly, over my tits and around my throat.

His strong fingers dig deep into my tender flesh.

"Do you like it when I handle you like this?" he growls into my ear. "Do you like it rough?"

"I... I love it..." I rasp, hardly even aware of what I'm saying.

"That's what I thought."

His deep voice trembles as he impales his cock deep into my hole. I cry out and he covers my mouth, his hot breath swirling in my ear as he holds me in place.

My eyelids flutter. The pressure in my core shatters. I flail beneath his strong body, shaking with another world-breaking orgasm.

In response, Tytus' cock seems to grow even thicker. I can feel him swell inside me.

"I'm going to cum," he rumbles.

"Do it," I beg. "Cum inside me."

"No."

He pulls out and shoves me onto the bed. An instant later my back is covered in his thick, creamy seed. The downpour seems to last an eternity. When it's finally done, I only want more.

"You are fucking amazing," Tytus growls.

Planting his fist into the bed right next to my ear, he leans down and kisses my cheek.

"No more tears," he orders.

"No promises," I whisper, my voice so hoarse the words hardly come out.

But as Tytus lifts himself off the bed and walks off towards the bathroom, the words ring true. All the emotions that had been put on pause for the sake of my primal desire threaten to return.

Pushing myself off the bed, I follow Tytus into the bathroom. Before I can ask, he starts to towel off the mess he made on my back.

"I should probably shower," I meekly suggest.

"No, you've showered enough already," he replies, tossing the towel aside. "Now it's time for you to rest."

He directs me back into the bedroom. I let him lead me onto the mattress, and I allow him to tuck me in. Hell, I even sink into the warmth of his lips when he places a surprisingly gentle kiss on my forehead.

But the whole time, my mind is racing.

I've regained my senses.

You've showered enough already.

Those words snapped me back to reality. He's been watching me—well, that or he thinks my showers earlier were enough.

Either way, I can't shake the returning dread. The hurt. The conflict reappears as I roll over and let my cheek sink deep into the pillow.

When I close my eyes, I'm not sure if sleep will bring dirty dreams or terrifying nightmares.

Shit. At this point, how could I even tell the difference?

I wake up to the sound of clicking.

When I turn over in bed, I find a shirtless Tytus propped up against the headboard, pounding away on his laptop's keyboard.

“Sorry, angel. Did I wake you?”

Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I look past him. The lake outside sparkles under a tall sun.

“No,” I yawn, stretching out. “I’ve slept enough.”

Tytus’ fingers rest as he looks me over. “You had me worried there for a second.”

“Worried?” I ask, confused.

“You’re a very still sleeper. At least, you were last night. I’m not used to it.”

“Neither am I,” I mumble, wiping my eyes. Usually, I wake up to my sheet hanging off my bed.

Did I not dream at all last night?

Shit. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.

“How do...” I’m about to ask how Tytus knows about my sleep patterns, when it all comes rushing back to me. The cameras. The tapes. The lies. The deception.

My rested heart withers.

I want to pull away from the man in bed next to me. But his warmth keeps me from doing anything drastic.

It feels so wrong. It feels so right.

I push myself up, leaning against the headboard.

“Are you still looking for your brother?” I ask, glancing at the screen.

“Sort of,” Tytus nods. “It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always.” My gaze drops as I remember what happened last night. The turmoil of what we went through threatens to saddle me with a migraine, but before I can get too far into my own head, I focus onto one particular thread.

For some reason, though, it’s not the cameras or the tapes that grab my attention. It’s Tytus’ family. It’s his words.

“Last night...” I start, still trying to hang onto a singular issue amongst the mountain range of problems. “You talked about your family....”

“I did,” Tytus sighs, almost like he regrets getting so vulnerable.

“It sounded like you missed them.”

“I do.”

“Even Krol.”

A powerful huff blows from Tytus nostrils. He purses his lips and looks off into the distance.

"I wouldn't be looking for him otherwise," he grumbles.

"Is that why you're searching for him? To make your family whole again."

After a bit of soul searching, Tytus shakes his head. "No," he admits. "My family will never be whole again, and I know it."

"So why are you so desperate to find Krol? Why now, when all of... *this* is happening?"

I gesture broadly to the space between us. "I... shit," he grunts. "Like I said, it's complicated."

Clearly, he's holding something back. It's a stark contrast to how he was last night.

My doubt comes back in full force. But so does that sliver of sympathy. I can still picture young Tytus, all alone, cursed to never smile.

"Last night, you said I could help," I remind him. "I... I'm still willing to do what I can."

"I said you've already helped me," he corrects.

"How?"

Tytus hesitates to respond. I can see the gears turning behind his silver-blue eyes.

I want to reach into the complicated soul churning behind them and find answers. I want to reach the man I started to paint. I want to find what I need to finish his portrait.

It feels like that's the only way I'm ever going to figure out what's actually going on, both inside of him and inside of me.

But how the hell does that happen? He's so guarded.

"You've helped me by being yourself," Tytus finally admits. But it's a dismissive answer. I need more. If I'm going to stay calm in the face of all he's put me through, I need to see behind his fortified walls.

"Bullshit," I spit. "Tell me the truth. How have I helped you? You also said there was something else I could do for you. What is it? Was it just to sit on your face? To take your cock? To—"

"Give into your feelings for me," Tytus interrupts, his silver-blue eyes shifting. "That's how you helped me. That's how you're going to help me. We were talking about family, angel. About loneliness and separation and regrets. I felt the same emptiness inside of you that I feel inside of my chest. We could fill them both up. But only if we give into our feelings. I wasn't lying when I said I was falling for you. Are you falling for me?"

His hand falls on top of mine and I nearly melt on the spot. But something inside of me stays strong.

That stubborn conscience of mine bombards me with all the bad memories. The cameras. The tapes. It all comes rushing back once again.

I pull my hand away from his.

"I've seen the camera," I tell him, before clarifying. "The new one. In this room."

"I had to make sure you were safe," Tytus starts. "But this time it wasn't about—"

"No. That can't be it," I shake my head, inching away from him. "I... I watched that tape you sent me again. I recognized the bed... the room... we're here. That tape... it was blackmail, wasn't it? That's what you're doing, right? You're recording my corruption, so if I ever step out of line, you can threaten to show my..."

Family.

The revelation appears as I speak it, and every word sends me deeper and deeper into a pit of despair, until I choke on the horror of it all.

Holy shit, it all makes sense.

The covers come flying off, I jump out of bed. But I don't get far. In a flash, Tytus reaches out and snags my wrist.

He doesn't pull me into his body, though. I think he can tell how scared I am.

"Easy there, angel," he tries to soothe me. But it's no use.

"Stop calling me, angel," I cringe, thinking of the context. Would Tytus really show any of our tapes to my family? I.. I couldn't live with myself if he did that.

But then I'd be his perpetual hostage.

Fucking hell. What's his plan? What is he using me for?

I should have never given into him last night. When I recognized the room in his sex tape, I should have done my best to resist him.

Now, it might be too late.

"My name is Melina," I breathe. "Melina Kilpatrick."

"I know," Tytus carefully responds, placing his laptop aside. "You need to calm down, Melina. You're getting into your own head. You're scaring yourself."

"*You're scaring me,*" I shout. "How can I trust you? You aren't telling me everything. Hell, you aren't telling me anything. I... I want to leave. Let

me leave. Please. I—”

“Stop,” Tytus roars.

Rising from the bed, he lets the covers drop from his body. Luckily, he’s wearing briefs. Still, I dare not stare for long.

Shit. Maybe I really have been corrupted. How could a simple cock even be a threat right now? I should be able to look at Tytus in all of his animalistic glory and say no.

But after last night, I’m truly terrified that I’m not strong enough.

“I want to go home,” I shiver, holding myself.

“You are home,” Tytus says, stepping around the bed. “Our home is together.”

“I... I’m not falling for your shit anymore...”

When he reaches out to take my hand, I jump back.

Tytus lifts his chin. A deep breath bobs his Adam’s apple as he closes his eyes and cranks his neck.

“It’s alright, angel,” he sighs. “It’s going to be alright. I’ll take you home. If that’s what you really want. But first I need to tell you the truth. I can’t lose you without telling you everything.”

He takes another step forward and I take another step back. I won’t allow myself to get lost in his body again. I can’t afford to.

To my surprise, Tytus halts his advance, respecting my plea for space.

“You have a strong voice,” I say, for good measure. “If you have something to say, you can say it from over there.”

“Fine.”

Tytus chews on his tongue as I prepare myself for a barrage of half-lies and hidden truths.

Still, part of me desperately wants him to fix it all with his words.

He said he was falling for me, after all.

There’s no denying that I’m falling for him, too.

That’s the big fucking problem.

“I’m listening,” I whisper.

“I’m going to prove my loyalty to you the only way I know how,” he starts, clenching his jaw. “By telling you exactly what I hoped for when I first helped you escape your gilded cage.”

I take a deep breath and straighten myself, preparing for the worst.

“Do you think you can tell me the truth?”

"I can do better than that," Tytus says. "I can tell you all of my hopes and dreams. I can explain my plans and my schemes. I'll reveal what I've only ever held inside."

"So do it."

"I think I love you."

Whatever I was expecting to hear, it wasn't that.

Tytus' words spark the tense air between us, growing thicker and thicker until I finally find the sense to breathe again.

"That... that's not an explanation," I tell him, flabbergasted.

"It is," he replies. "From the moment I first laid eyes on you, I've been unable to think of anyone else. It cost me my family. It cost me my empire. It might cost me my sanity. But it will be well worth it."

"... How?" I swallow.

My brain swims against the storm Tytus has just unleashed upon me.

Love.

How can he say such a thing?

Why would he say such a thing?

"All my life, I've been the brains behind the operation. The planner. The schemer. My big problem was that I never thought for myself. Someone needed to tell me the goal, then I would tell them how to achieve it. But what happens when the family who gave you direction falls apart? First, Gabriel left. Then Rozalia. Krol. Drago. I was left to fend for myself. I was left to find meaning in an endless void. And then, just like that, I did. You. Melina Kilpatrick. You gave me meaning."

I feel a tear well up in my eye as I'm returned to that vision of little, lonely Tytus. His siblings have gone. The emptiness has returned. He stares at his feet.

Then, he looks up.

Our eyes meet.

He smiles.

My heart clenches.

"At first, I didn't understand it," Tytus continues. "And the more I tried to make sense of it, the less I understood why you seemed like the answer to all my questions. So, I tried to approach you as I always approach my problems. With a cold calculated assessment. With a plan. You were my plan, Melina. And you were supposed to be nothing more than that. But you've made me understand the warmth beneath all of my decisions."

The first tear falls down my cheek. Tytus starts to step forward, but he stops himself.

“What was your plan?” I ask quietly.

“To seduce you,” Tytus bluntly states. “To corrupt you. To make you mine, no matter what that took. You were right. In the past, I’ve used women and cameras for blackmail. If you didn’t play along, I was going to do the same to you...”

Closing his eyes, Tytus shakes his head.

“But I can’t. I won’t. You aren’t a pawn, angel. You aren’t a piece in a bigger plan. No matter how hard I tried to turn you into something I could understand, you never changed. And I can’t tell you how thankful I am for that. Because it’s made me realize the truth. It was love at first sight, Melina. I’ve been your captive ever since.”

A second tear joins the first. The floodgates threaten to open.

I believe him.

How could I not?

But the conflict raging inside of me doesn’t vanish. No. There’s still so much baggage. So many questions.

“What about the tapes?” I sniffle. “If I ask you to take me home, will you still use them to blackmail me?”

“No.”

“But you’ll keep them?”

“If you want, I can destroy them,” To my surprise, a small laugh breaks through Tytus’ hard face. “... But if you stay, we could use them for something a little more fun.”

“Fun?” I ask, confused.

My brow furrows as Tytus turns and walks back around the bed. Picking up his laptop he holds it to his face and types in commands as he sits down on the mattress.

“Come here,” he says, before adding, “If you’d like.”

I don’t move. I can’t. It feels like a single step could dislodge the buildup in my eyes. I’d start sobbing.

“Here’s what we can use the tapes for,” Tytus says. Clicking down on a file, he turns to face me. I look past him as a video fills up the screen.

It’s this room.

I’m on the bed. Tytus is on top of me. His powerful ass thrusts me into oblivions.

I remember how good he felt. But it doesn't excuse what he's done.

"Why are you showing me this?" I rasp.

"Do you like this position?" Tytus asks, pointing at the screen. "Or do you prefer this one?"

With another click, he switches clips. Now, I'm on my side and he's pounding me from behind, arms smothering my breaths as my hips sway against his hard body.

"Please..." I whisper, not understanding.

"The tapes," Tytus says. "They could be used as... lessons. You tell me what you like. The positions. The places. The dirty talk. We can watch it all together, piece our favorite bits into a—"

"I'm... I'm not worried about sex right now," I interrupt.

"What are you worried about?"

"I'm worried about what you just said," I shout, overwhelmed. "About the tapes. About everything. About how you said you love me..."

"It's the truth."

"I..." I'm not sure how to respond. "Your plan," I divert, shaking my head clear. "You wanted to use me. But to what end?"

Tytus closes the laptop.

"To get back to my family."

"How was I going to help you do that?"

"By marrying me. By carrying my child. By being my way into the Kilpatrick empire. So that I could be with my brother and sister again."

"And if I refused, you would have shown me those videos... as a threat?"

"Yes."

"And if I didn't care that my family saw them?" I bluff, knowing that I would never dare do anything that might risk those tapes falling into my family's hands.

"Then I would have gotten you pregnant."

The blast of that revelation nearly blows the tears from my cheeks.

"I.. I asked you to cum in me..." I realize with horror.

"And I didn't."

I'm about to snap at him when I remember something else.

"I've been taking birth control pills," I recall. "So how were you—"

I stop myself when I understand the truth. "Wait. You put those pills in my apartment. They're fakes, aren't they?"

Tytus nods.

“But I’m not going to trap you with a child,” he says. “Or with a forced marriage, or with blackmail. I’m done seducing you, too. My family is lost, I understand that now. But what we have still exists. We can help each other, angel. All we have to do is give into our feelings. Can you do that for me?”

My mind races as I try to handle the deluge of information. Before I can get anywhere close to responding, though, a buzzing noise draws our attention to one of the bedside tables.

It sounds like a vibrating phone.

“Ignore that,” Tytus grumbles.

“Is that your phone?” I ask. “Who’s calling you?”

When Tytus hesitates to tell me, my heart drops.

This was all a show, wasn’t it? A way to manipulate me into playing along. Hell, maybe Tytus really did just tell me his entire plan, but if he’s still being secretive, how can I believe that he’s truly changed?

“Fuck it,” Tytus grunts. Tossing his laptop aside, he opens up the vibrating drawer and pulls out his ringing phone. “You want the truth, angel?”

“... Yes,” I gulp, wiping back my tears. “Who’s calling you?”

A day ago, I wouldn’t have cared if Tytus was hiding a simple phone call from me. In fact, I would have easily accepted his secrecy. But now?

He said he loved me.

My heart pounds.

There’s no denying the reality of this situation anymore.

“I’ll tell you who’s calling me,” Tytus huffs. Pulling the phone up, he shows me the number. “It’s your uncle Maksim. Would you like to speak with him?”

MELINA

All I can do is stare.

I don't recognize the number, but why would Tytus lie about someone like this?

Could it really be my uncle?

My heart tugs me toward the phone, but before I can get too close, an invisible hand swats me away.

My cheeks flush with a shameful heat.

It hardly matters that Tytus has promised to destroy our naughty tapes upon my request. That doesn't change what we've done.

I can still feel his giant cock between my legs. His cum on my back. His tongue on my clit.

Fuck.

I'm not the same innocent girl who ran away from home.

What would uncle Maks think of who I've become? Would he even be able to tell?

I'm not sure I'm willing to take that risk.

Still, I barely get a chance to refuse Tytus' offer. In the blink of an eye, the phone call ends.

Tytus grumbles.

"I'm sure he'll call back."

"No," I whisper turning from him. "Don't answer."

I can feel those powerful silver-blue eyes on me as I sink into my inner conflict. It's so heavy I could fall through the floor.

Then, the phone starts buzzing again.

“Are you sure?” Tytus asks. “I’m not playing games. If you want to talk to your uncle, you can. No consequences.”

“There are always consequence...”

I can’t even look at the ringing phone. Each vibration seems to get louder. I shut my eyes.

This is all too much.

When the phone stops ringing again, I sigh in relief. But that relief only lasts a short moment. Another call quickly comes in.

Tytus must see me flinch at the sound, because I can hear his frustration as he tries to end this.

I hold my breath as he answers.

“I’m busy,” he growls into the receiver. Then he hangs up.

It’s hard to tell if Tytus turns his phone off after that, or if my uncle just takes the hint, but a long silence follows.

I don’t open my eyes. Not until I feel Tytus approach.

My initial reaction is to flinch away, but when my eyes flutter back open, I see that he’s stopped at a respectful distance.

Sympathy twists his expression. My heart rattles back and forth, unable to settle on any one side.

“Why is my uncle calling you?” I finally find the strength to ask.

“He’s helping me with something,” Tytus answers vaguely before catching himself. He knows that there’s no way forward unless he tells me everything. “The shadow that’s been chasing you... The devil of Berlin... Maksim wants to find him just as badly as I do.”

I’m not sure how to feel about that.

Shouldn’t Uncle Maks be looking for me?

“Why?” I ask.

Tytus sighs.

“He thinks that’s who’s holding you captive.”

It’s so obvious I almost laugh.

“So you’re playing my uncle too?”

“I’m not playing you anymore,” Tytus snaps. “And I’m barely playing him. Your uncle and I want the same thing. To keep you safe. But in order to do that, we need to work together. If he knew where you actually were...”

“Then he’d know who the real threat is.”

“Then he’d misunderstand my intentions,” Tytus corrects. “As you seem to be.”

My rattling heart drops.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” I huff.

“Believe what I just told you.”

“That you love me?”

The reminder almost knocks Tytus off his feet. It looks like he might regret telling me that. I wonder why?

Because it’s true?

No. Don’t fall for his words. No more.

“Yes,” Tytus grits. “Believe that.”

“And does my uncle know you love me?”

“No. But I think he understands that you mean more to me than I let on.”

“How would he know that?”

“Because I’ve said as much. I’ve proven as much.”

My uncle isn’t an easy man to fool. If Tytus is telling the truth, then he truly must have done something significant to gain Uncle Maks’ trust.

So, is he telling the truth?

Maybe I should speak to my uncle, after all...

“So, he’s in Berlin?” I ask, trying to piece everything together.

Tytus nods.

“Who else is in Berlin?” I push. A sudden realization grabs hold of my racing heart, squeezing it temporarily still. “Wait. If my uncle thinks I’m here, does that mean the rest of my family does too? They’ve come to Germany...”

“No,” Tytus stops me. “No one else from your family or their organization is here.”

But that’s even more shocking than the alternative.

“How is that possible?”

Maksim would never keep anything from my family. But if they thought I was here, nothing would keep them from coming to get me.

Tytus must be lying. There’s no other explanation.

“Apparently, they got held up at the border,” Tytus explains.

Suspicion pierces through my confusion.

“Why?” I squint.

But Tytus only shrugs. “Don’t know. Maksim didn’t go into detail and I didn’t ask. We were too focused on figuring out who’s been harassing you.”

“You’ve been harassing me,” I snip, even if, deep down, I know that’s not entirely true. Tytus saved me. And for all the bad he’s brought with him, he’s also given me some of the best moments of my life.

I know there’s so much more we could do together, too.

There’s so much more I *want* to do together.

But how can I trust this man?

“I freed you,” Tytus reminds me.

I look over my shoulder towards the bedroom door.

“I don’t feel very free.”

“You are, angel. My offer still stands. Tell me you want to go home and I will take you there myself. And then I will go right back to finding out who’s threatening you.”

The thought of being returned to my gilded cage is so jarring that I physically wince. Why can’t things go back to how they were after I returned from the hospital? For a small window, I was free. I was living my dream. Then that nightmare showed up again, and Tytus had to drag me out into the middle of nowhere. He had to lock me up. He had to make me question his intentions.

A knot twists in my gut as I remember how nice that small period of time was. It’s not so far in the past, yet I’m already nostalgic for it. All I want to do is return that moment, freeze it, breathe it in, savor it.

My mind wanders, and I can picture a life in that brief window. One where I paint and shop and explore, as free as I always dreamed. On my face is a smile. At my side is the man standing before me.

We do it all together.

My clenched heart aches. Conflict rages through me.

Why does this have to be so hard?

“I don’t know if I want to go back,” I admit.

“What do you want, angel?”

“I... I don’t know.”

I need time to think. I need space to figure shit out. But how can I do that with Tytus standing so close? When he’s around, I can’t think straight.

Before we can exchange another word, a ping comes from Tytus’ phone.

He ignores it. But I can’t.

“My uncle?” I ask, looking up into those heart-stopping silver eyes.

“Most likely.”

“What if it’s important?”

“Nothing is more important than this. Than you.”

I swallow my sadness and try to gather myself.

“What if it’s about the shadow?”

“I’m sure it is.”

“Don’t you want to catch him?”

“Only so you’re safe,” Tytus grunts. “Only so you can be happy again.”

His words fall over me like a warm blanket. I don’t need to ask to know what he’s referring to when he says happy *again*.

He knows all about that brief window; the gradual closeness we experienced at my apartment—does he know that’s the happiest I’ve ever been?

He must. Clearly, Tytus wants to get me back there. And I want to go back. Behind all the lies, I can at least tell that truth.

But that only makes my decision harder.

“I’d be happiest if I knew that monster was gone,” I whisper, quietly formulating a plan of my own.

“You want me to kill him?”

“I want to have a chance at happiness again.”

Tytus shifts uncomfortably as he considers what I’m saying.

“I’d have to leave you.”

“I think I need the space,” I sigh.

“I would lock the door.”

I dip my head. “I know.”

A thick silence fills the air. Part of me is desperate to see Tytus leave, anything to give me a chance to think for myself. But another, louder part is terrified of losing his warmth. Of losing him.

“Are you sure, angel?” Tytus asks.

Pulling up his phone, he reads the message on it. A sneer twists his blood-red lips.

“What is it?”

“Your uncle thinks he’s found the man from the car crash. The man who chased you into the river and then out of your apartment.”

My stomach drops.

“Is Uncle Maks alone?”

Tytus nods.

“You have to go help him,” I beg, leaning into my concern. Tytus seems hesitant to buy it.

“You really want me to go?” he asks, a sliver of hurt piercing his suspicion.

My heart pound as I gather to courage to say what needs to be said.

“Yes.”

Tytus’ shoulders slink as he sighs, but just as quickly as his disappointment appears, it vanishes, replaced by a hard look of determination.

His silver-blue eyes flicker.

“Fine. I’ll go.”

To my surprise, he doesn’t come to me to say goodbye before gathering his clothes. Instead, he just turns his back and silently changes. His eyes stayed glued ahead as he marches to the door.

I just stand at the side of the bed and hold myself. The silence is more painful than I expected.

Is... is Tytus angry at me?

The thought should be terrifying—a man like him could rip me to shreds—instead, it’s utterly devastating.

I can already feel the tears welling up in my eyes when Tytus opens up the door and steps into the hallway.

Before he shuts it, though, he stops. A deep sigh empties his chest. Finally, he looks back at me.

“I’m doing this for you,” he says. “I’m doing this because I want to make you mine. Forever. Are you mine, angel?”

I can’t answer. All I can do is stare at him and wish this wasn’t so complicated.

Tytus just nods

“Then I have to keep working.”

With that, the door closes. The lock clicks into place. I’m trapped, once again.

Tytus’ heavy footsteps slowly disappear down the hallway. But I don’t budge. I can’t. It feels like a single movement could unleash the flood building up behind my eyes.

I’m sick of crying. I’m so tired of fighting every last little feeling that Tytus inspires in me.

But I can't just ignore it. I can't forget about him.

He loves me.

Do I love him?

"Fuck!" I cry out. My legs give out on me. I plunge into the bed and start crying into the mattress.

The exhaustion builds. The conflict spills from my eyes.

It's hard to tell how long I sob for, but when I finally pull back from the covers, the sheets are soaked through.

I sob just a little bit more.

Why am I so helpless? Why have I always been so helpless?

For once in my life, I want to feel in control. But how the hell do I do that?

I'm being pulled apart by two different forces. On one side, I have the love of my family, desperately trying to drag me back home. On the other end is Tytus. Whatever we have is so strong that it pulls me away from everything I've ever known.

He said he loves me.

But what have I done to deserve such a thing?

Slowly, my tears dry up. My brain starts to work again. I try to think my way out of this mess.

I'm running out of options. I need to regain control of my own life.

No. Not regain. Begin.

I need to begin taking control of my own life. Never before have I actually had any say in what I do next. Even escaping my gilded cage turned out to be Tytus' idea.

So, what do I want to do next?

Shit.

I have no fucking clue.

Turning onto my back, I stare up at the ceiling and let my swollen brain run wild.

I think of Tytus. I think of my family. I think of his family.

... His family...

I remember the story he told me about their first heist. I picture the mugshots. I see a young Gabriel. I see Krol.

I see Rozalia.

Rozalia.

My mind latches onto her.

What would she do?

Rolling onto my side, I stare towards the bathroom. Part of me wants to give up. Strip away all my worries and let them wash down the drain with a hot shower.

But I know I won't be able to shake this.

So, how do I control it?

My brain stays fixed on the thought of my best friend.

Rozalia.

If she were in my situation, how would she handle it?

The answer seems obvious. She would play both sides to her advantage. She would wrap everyone around her little finger and make them dance.

But I'm not as strong as her, and despite Tytus' best intentions, I'm not nearly as experienced either.

But maybe I don't have to be...

Suddenly, I have an idea.

Pushing my sore body off the bed, I wearily search for my laptop. It's easy enough to find. Opening it up, I plop down next to Tytus' computer.

Without thinking too hard about it, I go to my emails and open up a new message.

Then I start writing.

In my mind, I'm talking to my brother. I'm telling him about everything that's happened, about where I am, about what I miss back home, about what I fear for my future.

Every thought comes pouring out.

It's so therapeutic I don't even realize I've practically written an entire essay until I take a moment to breathe.

But the moment, I stop, so does the relief the writing has provided. All of a sudden, I'm intensely homesick.

I miss you, are the last words I type.

Leaning back, I study the wall of text I just created and chew on my tongue. Eventually, my gaze falls on the address bar at the top of the email. It's empty.

I fix that.

After typing in Rian's email, I take another moment to breathe. Outside, a peaceful afternoon shimmers off an endlessly blue lake.

I think of how far I've come.

And how much further I want to go.

But I also think of how dangerous and uncertain my future is.

It's comforting to think that I have the option to send this email at any point in time. To play both sides.

I know the second Rian reads my rambling message, he'll come racing to find me. No border can hold my brother, no matter what Tytus thinks he heard.

That thought helps soothe me. I can play both sides too...

But then I spot the wi-fi bar in the corner of the screen. It's empty. There's no connection.

A knot twists in my gut. The illusion I just built for myself falters.

I couldn't send this email even if I wanted to.

Fuck. I'm still not in control.

The realization threatens to crush me all over again. But then Rozalia slips back into my mind.

What would she do? I ask myself, over and over again like a calming mantra.

When I look down at the bed and see Tytus' laptop, a lightbulb goes off over my head.

"Come on," I pray, opening it up. "Shit."

Of course, his account is password protected. Sure, Rozalia would know how to hack through that, but I'm no Rozalia. I'm about to give up when something catches my attention.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see something pop up on my laptop screen. My gaze rips towards the notification.

Allow userx367 to share wi-fi password with you?

"No fucking way..." I mumble.

Without thinking, I hit accept.

The wi-fi icon at the top of my screen buffers. I hold my breath.

When it fills to the top, I gasp with joy.

"I did it!" I blurt out, hardly believing it.

But my joy is short lived. Beneath the now-filled wi-fi icon is the message I just wrote. My brother's email fill the address bar.

My little flash of self-therapy has turned into a jarring reality. At any moment, I could hit send. I could end this strange dream.

When I look down at the keyboard, I'm shocked to find that my index finger is already hovering over the return key. I hit that, and this will all come to an end.

But I'm not so sure I want it to end.

Shit. The thought of reaching out to my brother and sealing my fate is anything but comforting.

No matter how much Tytus confuses me, I know how much I'd miss him. I understand how much I'd miss what he promises me.

With Tytus, my future is uncertain, the possibilities are endless.

In a way, that's a type of freedom.

But it's also a type of cage.

How could I ever plan my next move when nothing is determined? When I'm not sure how much I can trust the man I'm sharing my life with?

At least with my family, I know I can trust them.

What do I value more?

The answer dances around my exhausted mind. I think of all that Tytus has done for me; the way he's supported my passions. The respect he seems to have for my work.

Then I remember the studio my brother built for me at our compound. He supported me too.

But Rian didn't understand, not like Tytus does. My brother just wanted me to be happy. To be comfortable.

Tytus wants me to feel fulfilled.

Fuck.

Why is this so hard?

Doubt crawls over me like a growing shadow. One second, I'm thinking about all the excitement my life could still hold if I stay with Tytus for just a little longer. The next, I'm realizing just how terrifying that option is.

How could I ever trust Tytus?

Sure, he might have just spilled the truth, but before that, there was nothing but lies between us.

He didn't help me escape my gilded cage because he saw a tortured artist yearning for freedom, he did it because he saw a pawn ready to be used.

My family was only ever trying to protect me from that. And after all I've been through, I can actually appreciate it.

God, I miss my family.

Looking over my shoulder, I stare at the locked door. It weighs heavily on my mind. Loneliness fills the bedroom.

Suddenly, I see little Tytus again. He's still surrounded by emptiness... until I appear. I stand next to him. We're almost smiling. And then, he disappears, and I'm all alone.

"Shit," I mumble.

A jittery breath escapes my throat. I turn back to the computer and close my eyes.

My finger falls onto the return button.

I click send.

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TYTUS

This doesn't feel right.

None of this fucking feels right. But it's not the pressure of being so far underground. It's not the sewage water dripping from the ceiling or the stale dank air.

It's the fact that I'm not with her.

My fingers tighten around the handle of my gun. My eyes glare through the shadow ahead. Maksim quietly stalks at my side. We silently trudge forward.

I'm filled with dread.

I told Melina I love her.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Fuck," an audible curse slips out, echoing around the oversized tunnel.

"What?" Maksim asks, already on-guard.

"Nothing," I shake my head, quickly catching myself. "It... it just feels like we're running out of time."

"We're not far from where my contact said the devil is hiding out."

"Your contact, huh?" I huff. "You mean the fucker you tortured to death to get this information?"

"I did what needed to be done. Unfortunately, Timo's men weren't nearly as afraid as they should have been after what happened to their boss. The stubborn fools actually tried to put up a fight. It would have been fun if there wasn't so much at stake."

"And you're sure your methods are sound? How can we trust that we're heading the right way?"

“Because I got a hold of one of the very spies that our dearly departed friend Timo sent to track the devil. The fucker had physical evidence. Photographs. Timestamps. Coordinates. It was enough to afford him a swift death... eventually.”

“You sick old fucker,” I grunt, not hiding the growing speck of admiration I have for the grizzled Russian.

I thought he was far past his prime, but I guess he’s still got some fight left in him... or maybe he’s just called on the reserves for Melina’s sake.

Shit.

Melina.

“This way,” Maksim grumbles.

My heart kicks and screams as we cautiously turn down a tighter tunnel.

The way she looked at me before I left, it was like all that we’d been through had vanished and all she could see was the monster I truly am.

She wanted to believe me, I could feel it, but I gave her no choice.

Love be damned, she’s not mine yet. And that fucking hurts—but it’s also my fault. I won’t stop working until I’ve made it up to her.

“How many fucking tunnels are down here?” I sneer.

Up ahead, this path branches out into four more.

“It’s hard to say,” Maksim explains. “These were all built in secret, during the cold war. No official record exists. If it did, I’m sure our little devil would have been much easier to find.”

“I’m going to make him pay,” I growl, thinking of all *he’s* put Melina through.

“Easy now, young buck,” Maksim warns. “You keep that weapon ready, but don’t let it go off until we’re sure Melina is safe.”

My gut churns.

Poor old man, he thinks we’re actually getting close to his lost niece.

I almost feel bad for him.

“I’ve been through this kind of shit before,” I remind him.

“Not as many times as I have.”

If things weren’t so serious, I might laugh at that.

In another life, I could see myself actually developing a friendship with the Kilpatrick consigliere. Hell, that could still happen. But with the way I left things between Melina and I, a happy ending to this mess seems like a stretch.

No. I won’t let this end poorly.

“Third to the left,” Maksim whispers.

I lead the way through an even smaller tunnel as we prepare ourselves for a dog fight. Down here, there’s no room to hide, no option to run. When we find this devil fucker, it’s going to be sink or swim. And I’m not ready to drown yet.

I still need to win Melina back. Because I know I had her. Even if it was just for a day or two, it was the best time of my life. What she does to me is just... fuck. It’s nearly impossible to describe.

It’s not like I’ve never felt love before. Gabriel, Roz and I are a kind of family, after all. But the love I hold for Melina is so different. It’s more passionate. More alive. And far more fragile.

That’s what makes it so dangerous. For the first time in my life, I don’t have a plan. Hell, I have no idea what to do next. All I can think about is what needs to happen. How I get there is a hazy mess.

I guess that’s what love does to you.

“Tytus.”

When I look over my shoulder, I see Maksim lift a finger to his lips. His other hand points ahead. I squint through the shadows until I see it.

A door, baked into the curved and rusted walls.

I click down on my safety, ready for hell.

“Remember what I said,” Maksim reminds me, his voice so quiet it might as well be my conscience. “Easy.”

My shoulders drop and I try to play along. But unlike him, I know there’s no princess behind that decrepit door. Sure, Melina has been locked away by a monster, but not here. And I’d never do anything to hurt her.

Never *again*.

“On the count of three,” Maksim mouths as we post up outside the door.

Pressing my ear against the worn metal, I listen for any signs of life. All I can hear is my own heartbeat.

It picks up speed as I consider what might actually be waiting for us.

Could Krol really be behind this door?

Shit. I can’t even imagine what he’d look like. Last I’d heard, he’d fallen down some endless pit, pushed to his death by both Gabriel and Rian. I suppose that bit of teamwork could mirror our current situation, with Maksim and I working together for the greater good. But this time, if Krol appears, I’m going to make sure he’s dead before I turn my back.

No one threatens my girl.

“Three... Two... One...”

Taking a wide step back, I fling my heel into the door. It flies off its hinges and we barge inside.

“Where the fuck are you?” I growl, wildly scanning the room with my gun raised.

But it’s quickly clear that we’ve been duped.

“Fuck!” Maksim roars.

He kicks at something and it rattles across the empty floor until it hits one of the empty walls.

This place is fucking barren.

“No one’s here,” I growl, my disappointment turning to rage. “You said he’d be here.”

“Don’t let your anger cloud you,” Maksim glares at me. But true to his word, the fury in his eyes slowly dims. “Look around for clues. Right now, this is our only option. All paths lead to this place.”

“This place is fucking empty,” I grumble.

“Obviously not,” Maksim corrects me, pointing to the rusted can he just kicked across the floor. “Now, swallow that pride of yours and get to work.”

I have to bite my tongue as the old man turns his back on me. He’s right, obviously. But he doesn’t know why I’m so blinded by rage. Usually, I’d be the one talking some sense into my partner—If only Melina hadn’t stolen every last one of my senses.

No. Not stolen. You gave them to her. Willingly.

It wasn’t willingly, I snap at myself. Love at first sight is never a consensual act.

But everything after that was.

Shaking my head, I try to appease my begrudging partner.

“Nothing over here,” I huff, kicking at a wall stained with filth. “Not over here either. How about—”

When I punch the wall at the far corner of the room, something shifts.

I freeze.

“What was that?” Maksim asks.

“No fucking way,” I mumble. “I think I just dislodged a hidden door.”

A cold stale wind seeps through the thin black cracks that have just appeared before me.

At my back, I hear Maksim re-arm himself. I do the same.

“Be careful,” he warns.

To my surprise, it almost sounds like he's more worried about my safety than anything else.

Is the old man actually coming around to me?

Or can he just smell how close we are to finally getting some answers?

Lifting my gun, I press the sole of my foot against the wall and push. With a groan, the hidden door creaks open.

"Stairs," I observe. "... And light."

At the bottom of a short, dark staircase is a rectangle of light. I lift my hand, stopping Maksim's approach. Together, we hold our breaths and listen.

"I don't hear anything," Maksim finally whispers.

"That's because you're old," I can't help but taunt.

"You hear something?"

"No."

"Asshole."

With Maksim at my back, I take my first step down toward the light. It grows larger as we approach it. But even as the light fills the darkness, the cold stays put.

In fact, the air becomes more frigid with every step. It's like we're walking into an ice fridge. By the time I hit the last step, I can see my own breath. It temporarily shrouds my view.

"Shit..." Maksim gasps.

I swipe the smoke from my face.

"Shit is right," I grumble.

It's clear from the get-go that there's no one in this tiny room except for us.

But that doesn't mean we aren't in the right place.

"What the fuck is this," I mumble, looking around.

"Trouble," Maksim grunts, brushing past me. "It's—wait... is that you?"

Confusion fills his gruff voice as he stares at the wall in front of us. When I look over his shoulder, my stomach drops.

"And Gabriel..." I huff, dread worming through my chest. "... And Rozalia..."

Ahead, on a stained and rusted wall is a morbid collage of photos. Secret surveillance shots of me and my siblings hang in a twisted web beneath a flickering yellow light.

It takes a closer look to understand the full horror laid out before us.

In each photo, our eyes have been systematically gauged out. Our bodies are burned. Our faces are crossed off with red ink.

No. Wait. Not red ink.

Blood.

“What the fuck is going on?” Maksim croaks.

The room is hardly any bigger than two or three upturned coffins. It reeks of piss and blood and hate and nightmares. A ratty pile of clothes fills one corner. Yellow jugs another.

Beside that, an old police radio quietly hisses and cracks. Behind it is a mountain of medical equipment. Pill bottles. Gauze tape. Surgical scissors.

A dreadful chill skates up my spine.

“Fuck,” Maksim coughs, nearly retching. “This is disgusting. Who the hell could be living here?”

“I know exactly who’s living here,” I sigh, a pit forming in my stomach. It doesn’t feel any better to know I was right.

“Who?”

“My brother. Krol Cieni.”

A tense silence fills the heavy air as I look back towards the ghoulish collection of photos pinned to the front wall.

Beneath the overflowing collection is just the subtlest sign of another print-out.

I walk by a paralyzed Maksim and pull aside the other pictures, ripping them from the wall, one by one.

“Krol is dead,” Maksim finally manages to mumble. “Your brother killed him... Melina’s brother helped... there was no surviving what happened.”

I ignore him and continue tearing down the mangled photographs until I get to the one hidden beneath all the mayhem.

“Fuck,” I curse.

As if this shit couldn’t get any worse.

It’s Melina.

A pin-up sized print-out of a secret photograph taken without her knowledge. It’s hard to tell exactly when the picture was taken, but she’s clearly in Berlin.

A single blood-red arrow points to her. A dripping heart has been drawn right next to it, then crossed out.

Krol is going after Melina.

The confirmation momentarily stops my racing heart. I'm frozen in place. I knew this was happening, but to see it spelled out so brutally is still staggering.

He's not supposed to be alive...

Endless horrible outcomes race through my melting mind as I try to force myself to concentrate. What's the next step?

The answer quickly becomes clear, but not before I hear a vibrating ping come from behind me.

The sound tears me from my nightmare.

When I look over my shoulder, Maksim is staring down at his cell phone. The white light illuminates his weathered face as it twists from shock to horror... before finally settling on rage.

"You fucking bastard," he rumbles.

Those dark eyes tear off the screen and set onto me.

"What?"

My feet stay planted in place as Maksim takes an aggressive step forward.

"You fucking bastard!" he roars. "I can't believe I was starting to trust you...."

That's the last thing I hear before the butt of his gun comes crashing down into my temple.

The first hit merely stuns me. The second one sends me to my knees. I watch my blood drip to the stained floor, too shocked to react. A ringing fills my ears. Black spots blur my vision.

The final blow turns off the lights.

MELINA

The bright morning sun does little to lighten the darkness I wake up to.

All the questions and conflict from last night still weigh me down. They sit like an angry boulder on my chest as I turn over in bed and stare at my laptop.

It's closed. And it's grey shine seems so cold compared to the shimmering lake outside.

Taking a deep breath, I wallow in a potent stew of regret... and relief.

Still. the longer I stare, the louder the regret goes.

With a jittery sigh, I reach out and open the laptop. I'm quickly met by a reminder of my monumental decision.

The email chain between my brother and I fills up the screen like a searchlight.

I have one unread message. It's from him.

My stomach drops. I look away.

For what feels like an eternity, I stare aimlessly off into the distance. The blue lake outside glimmer's like faultless gold.

All the while, a storm rages inside of me.

With a conscious effort, I force myself to look back at the laptop.

Last night, a few hours before I passed out from exhaustion, I received the first reply from my brother. Rian, clearly typing quickly, assured me he was on his way. He told me he loved me and missed me and that he would fix whatever problems I had.

There was no judgement in his response, no anger or disappointment, only relief. Though, I swear I could sense his frustration in every word.

That had just made my storm churn all the harder. A few minutes later, he'd sent a follow up email.

Rian asked if there was a webcam on the computer I was using, so I could prove it was really me and that I was alright.

I told him there wasn't any webcam. I promised that I was fine, at least physically.

He'd then asked if I could describe where I was being held.

I did my best, but for as magnificent as the view is from the bedroom window, it doesn't exactly provide many landmarks to work with.

After that, Rian had gone surprisingly quiet. For almost half an hour, I paced back and forth, biting my nails and furrowing my brows, unsure if what I had done was the right thing.

Then, I had gotten Rian's final email of the night.

Be strong. I'll find you.

That's all it said. I didn't respond. I couldn't. I was too tired. Too worried. Too torn.

I fell into bed, stuffed my face into a pillow, and the next thing I knew I was waking up to a new day.

... And another email from my brother.

Mel,

There's some kind of signal blocker over your location. High-tech security-ware that I haven't been able to break through. Rozalia is working on the problem now too. Just hang in there. We won't be much longer. I promise.

PS. Don't worry about Tytus. I'll take care of him.

Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I push myself up against the headboard and pull the computer onto my lap.

When the blurriness clears from my vision, I read the email again. Slower this time.

My stomach drops further with every word. Then, at the end, I nearly implode with dread.

PS. Don't worry about Tytus. I'll take care of him.

Suddenly, I realize something I hadn't before.

Tytus. He was with Maksim last night when I sent the email. The thought barely crossed my mind as I was typing. I was so distracted by everything else.

It was just supposed to be therapeutic, but then I clicked send. Now, there's no going back.

What have I done?

There's no way Rian didn't immediately contact our uncle. Were the two together when Maksim learned of Tytus' treachery?

My pounding heart sinks.

I don't even want to imagine what a fight between those two looks like. How does anyone survive something so vicious?

"Fuck," I breathlessly sob, equally worried for both men.

That anxiety quickly festers until my entire body is gripped by it. This is my own fault. I wasn't thinking. And because of me, those two might have torn each other to bits while I slept.

The laptop slips from my grip, toppling over on the mattress as I stare blankly ahead.

How could I forgive myself if anything happened to either of them?

The question thrashes through my mind as I try to fight back all the horrifying possibilities. Nothing works—that is, until three words rip through the chaos.

I love you.

Somehow, the memory of Tytus' confession calms me enough to think straight again. But the strange warmth I'm filled with also brings up a new question.

How can I be just as concerned for Tytus as I am about my Uncle Maksim?

One is family. A man I grew up with. A man who taught me and protected me and loved me unconditionally.

The other is Tytus.

What has he done that can be compared to what Uncle Maks has?

He's taught you, a tiny voice in my head says. He's protected you. He loves you.

I give myself a good shake, hoping to come to my senses, but the voice doesn't leave.

You've grown so much because of him. For a brief window, you almost became the woman you dreamed of. If you stayed with him, maybe you could recapture that dream...

My heart lurches and I leap from the bed.

Every word is so dangerous I could run from it... or directly into its thrilling comfort.

Shit.

Do I love Tytus back?

No matter how much I've tried to ignore that possibility, it's the only explanation. Why else would I worry about him so much?

But even the thought of loving him doesn't completely put my mind at ease. Instead, it only gets everything churning again.

We might never see each other again. Whatever we had, I ripped it apart, and in doing so, I may have torn my own dream to pieces.

A knot grows in the pit of my stomach.

With Tytus, there was at least hope for the future. Even now, I can imagine us running around the world together, jumping from country to country as I paint to my heart's desire.

If I go back to my family, though, that will never happen. They mean well, but that well-meaning protectiveness is what pushed me away in the first place.

If Rian gets to me first, he will only drag me home. He'll lock me away, maybe forever, under the guise of my own safety. And he'll really believe it's for my own good...

My pumping heart shivers.

But isn't that exactly what Tytus has done?

Glancing over to the bedroom door, I curl my toes into the carpet. Then, I look up to where I know his camera is watching.

If only those were the only objects trapping me. But it's not just the locks or the cameras that Tytus uses to box me in. My captivity to him is far less defined than that.

He wanted to put a baby in me.

Placing my hand on my belly, I remember how he ripped his cock out of my pussy, even as I begged him to fill me up.

He didn't. He wouldn't. Not without my permission.

Hell, even this bout of captivity is partly my choice. Same goes with the last one. I convinced Tytus to leave. I accepted the consequences and precautions that would come with him going out into that big, scary world.

Even then, I remember the guilt I saw in his silver-blue eyes.

He knows I don't belong in a cage. He doesn't want to put me in one. But we both knew it was for the best, even if it didn't feel like it. And

unlike Rian, Tytus is actually spending our time apart to take care of the threat that keeps me locked away.

Shit.

I don't know what to think.

Has Rian changed? Has Tytus?

I so desperately want to believe he has. Why else would he admit his entire plan to me like that?

Shit.

My hand sinks into my stomach. A warmth pulses beneath my skin. Strangely enough, I don't hate the idea of having his baby, but I do hate the idea of being trapped by it.

So what the hell do I do now?

Before I can even think to answer that, an all too familiar ping turns my attention back toward the overturned laptop.

Another email has come through.

Instantly, a new wave of dread crashes over me. Any warmth and comfort that came from remembering Tytus' monumental confession is replaced by a frozen fear.

Don't worry about Tytus. I'll take care of him.

What if Maksim managed to get the upper hand on my monster? What if Rian is emailing to say that I never have to worry about Tytus again?

My hand starts to tremble.

Still, I manage to stumble back to bed and reach for the laptop, led only by a dreadful curiosity.

Please, no.

I'm so filled with fear that I close my eyes while I straighten the screen and hold it up to my face.

Everything will be alright, I tell myself. He'll be okay.

My eyes flutter open... and my brow furrows in confusion.

Because this new email isn't from my brother.

It's from Tytus' sister.

Rian's partner.

My best friend.

Rozalia.

Blinking the blurriness away, I read through her message. It's not long. And it's not filled with as much visceral concern as I expected. Instead, Rozalia plays it cool—as always.

Hell, it almost sounds like she's proud of me, if not a little pissed off that I've been so reckless.

By the end of the email, I can almost feel a little smile coming across my lips. But that smile stops dead in its tracks when I read one of her final lines.

How is Tytus treating you?

The question plunges me back into the darkness and reminds me of the possibilities waiting outside that door.

Did Maksim capture Tytus? Are they trying to figure out what to do with him?

"No," I croak.

Arching over the laptop, I start to furiously type a reply.

I hardly see the words as I write them, but the exact syntax doesn't matter, only the meaning behind it.

Without stopping to breathe, I spill my guts to Roz. I tell her the truth. The good and the bad. All of it.

I tell her how Tytus has treated me, how he said he cared for me, how I think I care for him—hell, how I think I more than just care for him.

Still, I don't dare type the most dangerous of all four-letter words. *Love*. Instead, I just describe the feelings that made me think it in the first place.

Beneath it all is a plea. A plea to grant some level of mercy to the man who has given me so much.

If my family really does have Tytus, I might be his only hope. This email could be all that keeps him from death.

It's my turn to protect him.

I do the best I can. I write until I can't write anymore. And when I run out of steam, I write a little more.

I just want to see Tytus again.

By the time I'm finished, my heart is in my throat. But I don't waste any time. There's no hesitation left in me as I hit the return button and send the email hurling toward Roz.

It feels like I've hardly had a chance to recover from that outpour before I hear something that yanks my attention away from the computer.

... And towards the bedroom door.

"... Tytus?" I rasp.

The laptop shuts gently as I turn around in bed. For a second, nothing moves and I'm almost convinced I just imagined the sound.

Then, I hear it again.

In the distance, on the other side of the door, somewhere down the hall.
A small commotion. Then a faint bang.

Without thinking, I stand up. But I don't move forward.

My troubled thoughts return as I consider what could be out in the hallway.

Is Tytus home?

My heart starts to pound as I hear another bang. This one is slightly louder. It sounds like someone is opening or closing doors. I can't tell which.

Either way, it doesn't seem like something Tytus would do. This is his place, after all. He knows where everything is. He knows where *I* am.

Another bang makes me flinch.

Someone is searching the house.

The thought hits me like a freight train.

Could it be Rian? Maksim? Roz?

Am I being rescued?

I... I don't know how to feel about that. Something's off. But it could easily be in my own head.

When another bang nearly rattles the walls, I open my mouth. But I don't call out. Not when I suddenly realize what feels so wrong.

No one is calling out for me.

If this was a rescue mission, if my brother or my uncle or my best friend were here, they would be shouting my name.

But all I hear is silence.

That is, until another door bangs open... or shut, I still can't quite tell. All I'm sure about is that the sound is getting louder. And closer.

I try to swallow, but a new fear has filled my throat. My only option is to stay quiet as the noise approaches.

A silent gasp tears out of me when I see the handle on my bedroom door rattle. That gasp is shoved back into my lungs when I recognize the sound of a key being placed into the lock.

The handle is pulled down. The lock clicks. The door is pushed open.

But Tytus doesn't appear in the doorway.

In fact, I'm so used to his towering height, that I have to force my gaze downward to meet the eyes of the woman standing in the doorway.

"Who... Who are you?" I ask, completely bewildered.

The woman looks oddly familiar. Her raven black hair bounces softly as she turns a pair of pale green eyes back into the hallway and calls to someone.

“Found her! The bitch is in here!”

The harshness of her words slap me awake.

I shake my head.

“Who are you?” I demand, my tone strengthening.

“Oh, no, you don’t get to speak to me like that,” the woman sneers, turning back to face me. “Not in my own house.”

Just like that, I make the connection.

It’s the woman from Tytus’ sex tape.

All of my strength vanishes—especially as I notice the sound of uneven footsteps pounding down the hallway.

“I... you... he...” I stammer, unable to form a complete thought.

My blubbering only turns the woman’s sneer all the sharper. Those pale green eyes tighten as she looks me from head to toe.

“So, this is what that tasteless brute ignored me for? A common whore?” Her black fingernails curl into a trembling fist. “You’re nothing special. But that... that only makes it worse.”

Glaring over my shoulder, she scans the room. “Where’s the camera, you hussy? Huh? He must be using you too. That’s the only explanation. Stupid bitch. You don’t know how to please a man like that. And you definitely aren’t worth the effort. I am, though. When you’re gone, he’ll be starved enough to come back to—”

Before she can finish, a gun appears from the other side of the doorframe. I only have time to gasp before the muzzle is pressed against her temple.

I blink, and her head explodes.

The roar of the gunshot stuns my world into silence. I stumble backward, watching in horror as the woman’s lifeless body crumples to the floor. The edge of the bed catches me behind the knees and I fall onto my ass just as the shadow steps into view.

“No,” I want to rasp, but my mouth is already stuffed with a scream.

Filling the doorframe is the most terrifying monster I’ve ever seen. His crooked jaw cracks as his scarred white lips turn into a mangled grin.

“Yes, scream for me, princess,” he laughs, his voice like shards of broken glass. “Just like you screamed for my little brother. Ah, I’ll make

you scream twice as hard. Just you wait.”

He steps into the bedroom and dread replaces the air. I’m suffocated as I realize what’s happening.

It’s him.

The figure.

My nightmare.

The devil.

He’s finally caught me.

“Get away!” I hear myself screech.

But he just shakes his broken head.

“No. There’s no one left to stop me, princess. You’re mine now.”

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TYTUS

When I come to, it's with a pounding headache and a heart full of dread.

Behind my shut eyelids, I can see those rusted walls, deep underground, covered in mutilated photos. Beneath all of that hate and violence was Melina. She doesn't deserve any of this.

Yet she's the target.

"Fuck," I grunt, trying to push away the pain. But my hands are tied behind my back, and my ankles are restrained to the legs of a cold chair. Even the slightest movement drags me into a whole new realm of agony—it also reminds me of what happened just before my world went dark.

Maksim.

Why?

"Sounds like he's awake."

The old man's voice is so much colder than I remember.

"That's too bad," someone replies. "I was looking forward to waking him up myself."

Somewhere nearby, a heavy metal object is set down. The threat reverberates behind my shut eyelids. My chin sways against my chest.

"Don't do anything foolish now, Rian," Maksim warns.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

My eyes stay clamped shut as someone takes a handful of my hair and yanks. A knife is quickly placed against my newly exposed throat.

"Open up, Tytus," Maksim orders.

I feel his palm tap against my cheek. When I refuse to play along, the tap turn into a hard slap.

Despite the pain, I pry my eyes open.

“You idiots,” I grumble. My vision is so blurry that I can hardly make out the old Russian standing before me. “Why are you wasting time playing games with me? Melina—”

Before I can finish, the knife slashes across my throat. But it’s just a warning, and the cut is only deep enough to start me bleeding.

“We. Are. Not. Playing. Games,” Rian growls.

Wiping his bloody blade off on my shoulder, he steps around my chair to join his uncle. A glitzy hotel room sways behind them... or maybe it’s just my head that’s swaying...

“Wake up,” Maksim back hands me.

The sting does its job. A short breath flares my nostrils as I fight off the nausea.

“I’m fucking awake,” I grunt, snarling. “But you two must be dreaming if you think this is a good use of your time. Krol is out there! He’s going to use her to punish me...”

But the effort is too much for my addled body.

My chin dips again as black spots fill up my line of sight. A new wave of nausea threatens to drown me. Blood trickles down my neck as the cold steel of an unfriendly gun brushes against my jaw.

When I come to again, I’m staring directly into Rian Kilpatrick’s hate-filled green eyes.

“Why the hell would that bastard use MY sister to punish YOU?” he growls. His gun digs deep into my clenched jaw.

Before he can do anything stupid, though, Maksim places a strong hand on the young king’s shoulder.

“Easy now,” he grumbles. “Let him speak. We need answers first...”

Cranking his neck, Rian seems to seriously consider ending me right here and now. His anger is so intense that I’m actually slightly surprised when he pushes himself away.

Still, his gun remains trained on me.

“Answer me,” he orders. “Why the hell would Krol Cieni use my sister to punish you?”

“Because I...”

Shit.

Love is on the tip of my bloody tongue, but I don’t dare let it pass my lips.

“Because you what?” Rian roars, all of his pent-up frustration pouring out.

“Because I care for her,” I stubbornly bite back.

“Bullshit.” Reaching into his pocket, Rian pulls out his cell phone. “If you cared for my sister, why are you keeping her captive?”

He turns his phone around, showing me the screen. But my vision is still too unfocused to read anything. Still, I can tell I’m supposed to be looking at an email.

“What... what is that?” I ask, desperately trying to blink away the blurriness.

“It’s an email. From Melina. Explaining everything.”

My stomach drops.

No. It can’t be. She wouldn’t.

Then, I remember how we left each other. My confidence falters. My chin dips again. A broken breath leaves my lungs.

“... What does it say?” I ask, expecting the worse.

“It says that you’ve been using her. Hiding her from me. From her family.”

My heart twists into a knot.

“You’re lying.”

“If only you could fucking read,” he huffs, pulling the phone away.

“I was just giving her what she wanted,” I mumble. The scent of blood fills my mouth, but somehow, I can still taste her.

What has she done?

What have *I* made her do?

“How fucking dare you.”

Rian’s fist swipes across my cheek and my head is snapped aside. But the pain is nothing compared to the thought of what led me here.

Somehow, Melina was able to send an email to her family. She asked to be rescued.

This is her reply to the question I asked before I left.

She doesn’t want to be mine.

“All I ever did was care for her,” I whisper, dropping my head.

“No. I’m not fucking falling for it,” Rian huffs. “Not even for a second. If you cared for my sister, why the hell would you lock her up? Huh?”

Fighting through my growing agony, I force myself to look up at the raging king. He shakes the pain from his hand. My blood paints his

knuckles.

“I could ask you the same question.”

That freezes him. But only for a moment. Then his fury takes over again.

“She was safe at home,” he bellows.

“She was safe with me,” I return. “But now she’s all alone. And that’s your fault.”

The reminder seems to snap Rian back on track. He glares over at Maksim and the old Russian nods in silent agreement.

“Enough of this,” the young king sneers, his tone flattening. Lowering his gun to my kneecap, he glares at me without mercy. “Where is she?”

“A house on Wannsee lake,” I quickly reveal, not because I’m scared of any pain he might inflict upon me, but for the sake of Melina’s safety.

I wasn’t lying. She’s all alone. And I only care about her safety, even if she doesn’t care about me at all.

“Give us the address,” Maksim demands, taking out his phone.

But I find myself shaking my head.

“No. You’ll have to take me with you. I need to see her one last time. Just to tell her—”

“That’s out of the fucking question,” Rian interrupts. “Now give my uncle the address or I blow you kneecap to hell.”

“Please...”

“Rian, I—”

Before Maksim can finish, a loud thud draws his attention away from me. Rian whips around too. Together, they aim their weapons into the darkness.

For a tense moment, no one makes a sound.

“Who is it?” Rian finally calls out.

“Let me help,” I silently croak, my fingers flexing as I try to break from the rope confining me to this chair. But it’s no use. Neither men hear me as they stalk towards the danger.

Then, a new voice enters the fray.

“What’s got your panties all up in a bunch?”

Considering the circumstances, the words are so casual it’s jarring. Hell, I almost manage to convince myself I’m imagining things... until Rozalia pops around the corner.

Gabriel follows in her footsteps.

They both stop dead when they see me.

“You’re supposed to be out finding Krol,” Rian growls.

Roz isn’t the least bit intimidated. A primal snarl twists her painted red lips as she glares over at Rian.

“And you were supposed to NOT hurt my brother—so I guess we’re fucking even.”

“You saw the email,” Rian defends himself. “He’s holding Mel captive. She’s in danger. We need answers. Fast. I did—”

“That wasn’t the only email your sister sent,” Roz stops him. “Mel sent me one too. I just forwarded it to you. Give it a good once over, maybe it will be enough to knock some sense into you.”

“Another email?” Rian asks, flabbergasted.

“You aren’t the only person in this family she trusts.”

Brushing by her partner, Roz sets her eyes on me. It’s so nice to see her again that I could smile—that is, if it didn’t hurt so much.

“Boys,” Gabriel nods, coming up behind Roz. “Maksim, you look well.”

Maksim just grunts.

“And you look like shit,” Roz huffs, shaking her head at me. “How’d you manage to get caught so easily? Huh?” she teases, kneeling down.

“The old man caught me off guard,” I cough. “Thought we were becoming friends...”

“Well, there’s still time for that,” Roz laughs.

“What are you doing?” Rian asks, stepping forward when Roz begins to untie my restraints.

“I’m freeing my brother.”

“I didn’t say you could do that.”

“Good thing you don’t get to tell me what to do.”

The playfulness in my sister’s voice sits in stark contrast to Rian’s. But even Roz hardens as she turns to him and flashes a bejewelled ring finger in his direction.

“Or did you already forget our arrangement? I agreed to marry you on one condition. You don’t change. This doesn’t change. We don’t change. That means no orders. No wifely duties. No doubts. We trust each other. Do we still trust each other, boo?”

Rian stiffens against Roz’s words, but when his green eyes fall onto the shimmering engagement ring, he melts, if only just a little.

"I trust you with my life," he mumbles.

"And I trust you with mine," Roz nods. "I fucking love you Rian Kilpatrick. Now, throw me your knife. I'm freeing my brother."

"I love you too," Rian grunts, only hesitating for a moment before tossing his knife toward my sister. She effortlessly catches it by the hilt and starts cutting my ropes.

"Congratulations you two," I rasp, swallowing the blood I can't spit out. "Can't say I ever expected it to happen."

"It took a lot of convincing," Rian grumbles, turning his back on me.

"And it's going to take a lifetime of commitment to keep this heavy cuff on my finger," Roz reminds him.

My ankles go free and I stretch my legs as Roz gets to work on my wrists.

"Thank god Bianca isn't as stubborn as you two," Gabriel chuckles. "Don't know if I could stand being in such a competitive relationship."

"It's the only way I could stand to be in any relationship at all," Roz jokes back.

My hands go free and I slink into the chair, free at last. But there is no relief. Mel is alone and in danger. Krol is looking for her. I can't sit around and wait until my body is ready to go.

"We need to move," I grunt, trying to stand up. But I'm too weak. Gabriel and Roz both have to jump forward just to keep me from hitting the floor.

"YOU need to stay here," Rian barks. "Maksim. You come with me. Roz. Get the address to Mel's location from your brother. Send it to me. Pronto... please."

"I need to come with you," I plead, but Roz and Gabriel hold me back.

"You need to rest," Rozalia corrects. "Let these two handle the rescue. I'll make sure you see Mel again."

"Roz..." Rian starts. "You read the email. You know what he's done."

"I did read the email Mel sent you," Roz confirms. "Now, it's your turn to read the one she sent me. Like I said, I've already forwarded it to you. I'll get the address from Tytus here, you start reading on your way to the car. Their relationship isn't as clear cut as you think..."

"Melina sent another email?" I question, confused.

"This morning."

"What did it say?"

Roz just smiles.

"Are you sure about this, babe?" Rian asks, his fury faltering against his fiancée's direct orders.

"I am," Roz nods. Lifting her hand to the side of her face, she flashes that shiny ring one last time. A simple reminder. "Now, start moving that pretty ass of yours. I'm sure Melina misses her big brother."

For a tense moment, Rian doesn't move. I can practically see the conflict tearing him apart from the inside out. But his love for my sister eventually wins out.

It's obvious their love always will. That's what I want. It's what I need.

"Don't forget that address," Rian mutters, giving me one final look of pure disgust before he walks away. "Roz. See you soon. Maksim. With me."

The old Russian doesn't even look my way. He just follows his boss around the corner. I hear the door open, then close.

Just like that, only the three of us remain.

It's a strange feeling.

Something in me desperately wants to be happy. To be satisfied. In a way, all of my plans and schemes were to get here, shoulder to shoulder with my long-lost siblings.

But circumstances have changed.

I still love them with all my heart. But I love another too. And until I can confront that new love head on, I will never fill the hole in my chest. I will never be whole.

I will always be incomplete.

At least there's hope now.

"The email, what did it say?" I beg, turning to my sister.

"We'll worry about that later, big brother," Roz assures me. Pursing her lips, she gives me a once over. "First we need to get you taken care of."

"No. fuck me," I burst. "I deserve to suffer. But she doesn't. Krol is back. He wants to hurt us. He wants to hurt me. And he thinks that he can do that by hurting Melina."

"We won't let him," Gabriel steps in.

"That's damn right," Roz agrees.

"Then we need to go with Rian and Maksim," I implore. "They don't know what they're up against. We do."

"No. We don't," Gabriel challenges. "Krol is supposed to be dead. I was there when he was shot to bits. I saw his mangled body fall into that endless

pit. Whatever's come back isn't the same creature we all knew."

"His body may be mangled, but I'd bet his mind works the same," I insist. "You didn't see what I saw. The photos. The bunker. He's still fueled by hate. By vengeance. We need to make sure he can't hurt us or anyone we care about ever again."

Roz and Gabriel share a long glance as they silently contemplate my plea.

"And then what?" Roz finally asks, turning back to face me. "Even if Mel has feelings for you, Rian doesn't. He's not going to just forgive what you've done..."

But Roz's warning falls on deaf ears. All I hear is what she said about Melina.

Even if Mel has feelings for you.

"The email," I beg. "What did it say?" I need to know. "Roz, please..."

She bites down on her tongue.

"It... well, It sounds to me like Melina might be in love."

Just like that, all of my pain evaporates. All of my doubt vanishes. All of my dread lifts.

I knew it.

I fucking knew it!

Still, the confirmation is almost more than my body can handle. I want to fucking jump for joy. Instead, I nearly fall to my knees again.

Luckily, Roz and Gabriel are there to catch me.

"I... I'm in love with her," I quietly admit. "I have been ever since we crashed Rian's coronation. I should have told you sooner."

"I know what it's like to hide your feelings for the enemy," Roz chuckles, patting me on the shoulder.

"So do I," Gabriel wryly adds.

Forcing my chin up, I push myself off them and try to stand on my own two feet. It takes a second, but when I manage it, I know that nothing can stop me from taking that next step.

"So, we're going with them?" I nod in the direction of the door.

"Rian won't like it," Roz mumbles.

"Since when have you ever let a man tell you what to do?" I weakly tease, coughing blood along the way.

"Since that handsome-ass man put this ring on my finger—you know, the man who just handed you your ass?"

Roz lifts her hand again.

“That’s still so weird to see,” Gabriel huffs.

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. It’s just symbolic. I probably won’t wear it all the time.”

“All engagement rings are symbolic,” I note.

“Shut up.”

With a little giggle, Roz spins out from under my arm. It’s almost enough to send me to the floor. But somehow, I manage to stay upright without her support.

“It... It’s nice to see you two again,” I nod, swallowing my pride.

“It’s been a while,” Gabriel agrees.

“Hey, you started this whole falling-for-our-enemies business,” Roz nudges him.

“Would you have preferred it if I didn’t?”

She shrugs. “I guess it’s alright.”

“No. It’s not alright. Not yet,” I remind them. “Melina is still in danger. And until she’s safe, I’ll never be full again.”

“You’re so dramatic,” Roz taunts. “... But I understand how you feel.”

“So do I,” Gabriel nods.

“Let’s go then.”

“Are you sure can carry your own weight?” Roz asks, lifting a hand as I stumble forward.

Digging my feet into the ground, I will away the remaining nausea and dizziness.

“Anything for her,” I growl, my focus settling onto one unmovable task.

Mel loves me back.

Fuck. She loves me back.

With that in mind, I could move heaven and earth to see her again. I *will* move heaven and earth.

I can only hope that she’ll forgive me for the mess I’ve caused.

“Good,” Roz nods. “Then let’s go get your girl.”

MELINA

My nightmare is only just beginning.

Even through the darkness, that's clear as day. Whatever this demon has in store for me, he's going to stretch it out. He's going to play with it. He's going to make me wait.

"Help me," I try to squeak, but my mouth is too dry. Nothing comes out but a cracked whimper. I'm paralyzed by fear. By what I know lurks somewhere in the darkness that surrounds me.

Flaring my nostril, I force myself to swallow. It hurts, but it's all I can do to feel useful. My hands have been tied behind my back. My ankles are restrained to a metal chair. Up until a few minutes ago, I'd had a black bag stuffed over my head.

But then, that... *thing* had ripped it off. He did it from behind, so that I didn't have to look at him again. I imagine that's the last bit of mercy he'll provide me.

After that, he's just watched me, his cold shadow seething with hate and malice. Then, he'd disappeared back into the darkness. But the dread remained.

Now, I wait for him to return.

My eyes snap shut and I remember the terrifying face that took me. A shattered cry gets stuck in my throat. I don't ever want to see that face again. But I know it's coming.

I'd tried to put up a fight. But I was so paralyzed by fear. I've met monsters before. I've lived with them. Looked up to them. Now, I've even made love to one.

I know a monster when I see one. I can deal with monsters.

But this... this is no monster. This is something more. Something pure evil. Something impenetrably dark.

"Please," I silently beg, my voice barely anything more than a wispy breath.

No one answers me.

It's hard to tell if the thing is still behind me, but if I had to guess, I'd say he wasn't. All throughout this ordeal, I've been able to hear his sickly wheezing. Now, though, there's nothing. Just a sense that I'm being watched; that I'm being prepared for something horrible.

The thought gives a jolt of fearful energy. I open my eyes and yank at my restraints. That only makes my chair rattle uncomfortably loud.

"No, shhh..." I quietly plead. The last thing I want is to draw any attention to myself. Whatever's coming, it doesn't need to get here any quicker.

All I can do is hold my breath as the sound of the shaking chair echoes through the cleared-out penthouse.

This is my new prison. It's the most terrifying one yet.

I try to keep my eyes glued on my feet But that only makes my stomach churn even worse.

The dark, wood-panelled floors are covered in plastic sheets.

A wave of nausea threatens to knock me out. I force my chin up, desperately trying to fight back the urge to vomit.

The walls on either side of me are glass. Out of the corner of my eyes, I can see the sparkling Berlin skyline. Snow falls softly from the black sky, covering every inch of the city in a soft white sheen.

It provides enough light to illuminate what's around me.

Emptiness.

It looks like an entire living room has been cleared out. Everything except for a giant, floor-to-ceiling painting that fills up a multi-story wall.

Through the dim light reflecting off the snow, I can just barely make out the sharp white lines that fill up the black canvas. Somehow, they seem to form a familiar subject.

But that just makes everything even more confusing.

"Where am I?" I croak, dehydration shriveling my swollen brain.

"You are in hell."

The voice comes from a blackened doorway to the left of the painting. It's filled with such jagged hate. An impossibly cold shiver skates up my spine.

"Who are you?" I choke, struggling against my restraints. "Why are you doing this?"

"One question at a time, princess," the voice barks.

Then, a demon steps out of the darkness.

The man is... hardly a man. More like a walking corpse. Half of his face is shattered beyond repair, the skin black and scaly. His left eye nothing more than a dark socket. Yet his right eye is somehow worse. The pale white pupil glares out from a scarred pit, practically glowing beneath a mangled brow.

When he spots the fear in my face, his crooked jaw cracks and creaks into something like a smile. But his cheeks are indented, and his scarred lips look so painfully charred that the smile quickly turns into a sneer.

"Who... who are you?" I hear myself ask.

But I already know the answer.

"I'm the brother-in-law you almost had," Krol hisses. When he takes another janky step forward, I get my first glance at his lower body. His shoulders look permanently displaced, as does his left leg. He walks like a stringless marionette.

"What does that mean?" I whisper, breathing through my nose.

Stopping himself in front of the painting, Krol carefully brushes aside a greasy strand of his thin black hair. When he turns to look out the window, I see that the left side of his head is completely bald. It looks like the skin is dead, or at least shaven where a huge scar flashes across his skull.

His hand is missing multiple fingers.

"It means that you are never seeing my dear brother again," Krol says, staring at the snowy Berlin skyline. "And though, he may get to see parts of you, it won't be enough to marry."

That twisted snarl returns to his lips as he turns his attention back to me. It's like he's trying to smile, but can't quite manage it.

"Why are you doing this?" I tearlessly sob, remembering all that Tytus told me about his long-lost brother. "Why would you betray your family like this?"

Without warning, Krol lunges forward. Suddenly, he's right up in my face, his putrid breath crashing against my skin. I hold my breath and try to

wince away. But there's nowhere to go.

"Because they betrayed me first!" he roars, his voice like broken glass.

"... How?"

Through all my fear, I have enough sense to make a decision.

I need to buy some time. It might be the only way to save my life. There's no way someone isn't out there looking for me. Tytus. Maksim. Rian. If I just give the chance, then maybe this won't end so horribly...

"They killed my father," Krol hyperventilates, his one pale eye growing wide and wild.

"Drago?" I remember out loud.

That pale eye snaps up. Just like that, Krol's hand is clenched around my jaw, his stubs digging into my skin like callous knives.

"Don't you dare speak his name!" he shouts.

"He was Tytus' dad too," I somehow gather the courage to say, remembering how tender Tytus had gotten when he talked about his family's ragtag past. "And Roz's. And Gabriel's..."

"No! No! No!" Krol shouts, his rancid breath blasting me in the face. For a moment, his grip tightens, then he pushes himself back and bellows up to the ceiling. "It's their fault he's dead. And it's only because of him that I'm still alive," he looks down at his broken body, his voice trailing into a whisper. "If you can even call this living."

"Drago saved you?" I ask, grabbing onto the tiniest thread of curiosity. It's all that's keeping me from drowning in terror.

"My father found me in that pit," Krol remembers, his knees crumbling as he nearly falls to the floor. "He tended to me. He found someone who could save me. He did whatever it took to make sure they did. And then, when I was nearly back on my feet, he went to find my 'supposed' siblings. All he wanted was to get us back together again. But he never came back. And I knew exactly who to blame."

"No," I rasp. "Tytus would never... he... he only ever wanted to get his family back together too. That's what all this was for. That's what *I* was for..."

I hang my head as I remember everything. But the sadness that permeates my soul isn't because of all the lies and deception. No. The bad stuff hardly fills up any space.

Instead, all I can remember is every time Tytus made me feel good. With his body, with his words, with his love.

Deep down, behind all the muscles and tattoos, he's a family man.
Just like that, it hits me.

His plan, it was to use me to get back to his family. Did I interrupt that?
Is it my fault this is happening?

He fell for me... but at what cost?

The idea hits me like a sledgehammer. But that pain quickly turns back into fear when I hear Krol's approaching footsteps crunch the plastic sheets lining the floor.

"Don't be so naïve, girl," Krol spits. "My brother was never using you for anything other than his own selfish desires. Even from the shadows, that was clear. And it's the only reason you're involved in this. If I thought you were just another one of his pawns, I'd have already offed you like that bitch who led me to the lake house."

"Her..."

My chest heaves as I remember the woman who unlocked my bedroom door. I see the gun lift to her temple. I see her brain splatter against the walls.

"Yasha von Bingen," Krol grumbles. "Another one of my brother's old whores. That was her lake house, you know? It took some... convincing, but without her help, I would have never found a way to get around Tytus' security measures. Yasha led me to the underground entrance... and straight to her doom. Once I found you, I didn't need her anymore."

"You monster."

"No. I'm not a monster," Krol grimaces. "I'm far worse."

Composing himself, he turns his twisted back on me.

"You'll find that out soon enough," he coughs, bending his neck as he glares up at the painting. "This is her penthouse, too," he mumbles, wiping his lips. "Or, it was. Don't you recognize the painting? It's supposed to be him. Tytus. She had it commissioned not long after they first met. That rich idiot was obsessed with my brother. They all are. Yet somehow, *he* was the one obsessed with you."

I swear I can hear his bones crack as he turns to look over his shoulder.

"I don't see it," he huffs, glaring at me. "To me, you're just another spoiled brat who's never felt real pain. But I'll change that."

When he starts to walk away, I panic.

"Stop!"

Whatever Krol's planning on doing to me, it's about to happen—unless I can stall him just a little bit longer.

Someone will come for me. They have to.

Rian. Roz. Maksim.

Tytus... please...

"What is it now?"

To my shock, Krol actually stops before he can disappear back into the darkness.

"I... uh..." I stammer, trying to think of anything to keep him talking. "How... did you even find me? Us?"

Fortunately, that seems to pique his interest.

"My brother isn't as discreet as he thinks," Krol growls.

I guess that's the key. Just get him venting about Tytus and he could talk for hours. Hopefully that's enough to save me.

"What do you mean?" I pitifully ask.

It's hard to tell if Krol knows what I'm doing or not, but it doesn't take him long to give into the temptation.

"Your little flame. Tytus Ryzdon. For all his plans and his schemes, it only takes one unexpected move for him to turn into a wild bull. He was making unnecessary noise the moment he stepped in Berlin. Before that, I'd been hopelessly scouring the globe for him. So when I heard rumblings that he could be here, I raced over as fast as my broken legs could take me. After that, he wasn't hard to find... And then he led me to you. The only hard part was figuring out exactly what the two of you meant to each other. At first, I didn't think much of it. My brother is notorious for using women. But the more I watched, the clearer it became. I'd been wondering how I'd hurt Tytus for what he did to my father—you gave me the answer. I'd just hurt you."

Looking down at the plastic sheets covering the floor, Krol seems to consider something in silence.

All I can do is watch, heart in my throat, as he shakes his head.

"Tytus needs to feel the loneliness I feel. The helplessness. The horror." That pale eye glares back at me. "I'm going to cut you up, nice and pretty, and deliver you in pieces to those who love you most. That means Rozalia and Gabriel too. They won't miss out on this suffering and I've heard you three have become fast friends—but it will all start with Tytus."

My stomach fills with dread.

“Tytus doesn’t love me!” I shout, overflowing with desperation. Anything to buy myself just one more second.

But my lie is so unconvincing that Krol hardly even flinches.

“I only have one eye left, and even I can see that he does. It will only make my revenge all the more delicious.”

He’s right.

Tytus loves me.

And I love him back.

So why didn’t I say anything when I had the chance?

Without another word, Krol starts to disappear back into the dark doorway.

I sob, despair pulling hot tears down my cold cheeks.

But it’s not just the fear of what’s to come. That seems unavoidable now. What hurts even more is what brought me here.

Tytus didn’t want to leave. But I pushed him away. He opened himself up to me, and I shut him off.

I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d been honest. No matter how upset or betrayed I’d felt.

I’m his.

But now he’ll never know that.

“Wait...” I choke through the tears.

“No. No more waiting, princess,” Krol’s broken voice slithers from the growing darkness. “Stay put now. I’ll get the knives ready.”

TYTUS

My head is still spinning by the time we pull up to the lake house.

But I don't let that slow me down. I can't.

Maksim is waiting out front. He looks pissed.

Something is wrong.

"Where is she?" I blare, pushing my way out of the car. Roz is immediately at my side, just to make sure I don't fall. Fortunately, I manage to stay on my feet as I scramble towards the mansion.

"Stay back," Maksim growls.

A second later, Rian comes storming around the corner.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"He's with me," Roz warns. "Now, where's my bestie?"

Rian and Maksim share a troubling look.

My pounding heart sinks.

"As far as we can tell, no one's in there," Maksim grumbles.

"Not that we can get a good look," Rian sneers, glaring at me. "You failed to mention all the traps you set up around this place."

"They're for her safety."

"Well, you can get rid of them now. Because we can take care of her safety from here on out. Do you—"

"Stop it," Roz barks, stepping between the two of us. "We don't have time for bickering, ladies. Get your heads out of your asses. Tytus, let us in. Rian, take a deep breath. We got this. Everything's going to be alright. Okay?"

Rian's nostril's flare as he takes a reluctant step back.

“There better not be a scratch on her,” he threatens, clenching his fists.

“Agreed.”

Stepping aside, Maksim gestures for me to approach the front door. It’s still shut, but not in the way I left it.

“I hope you did this,” I mumble, bending down to get a better look. The wood around the lock has been splintered, like someone tried to kick their way in. My eyes turn upward, towards the flash bomb I tucked beneath the top of the door frame. It’s clearly been triggered, but neither Maksim or Rian seem to be suffering from an acute case of sudden blindness.

“That shit nearly knocked me off my feet,” Rian swears, following my gaze. “You’re lucky it didn’t, because I would have paid you back tenfold.”

I don’t bother responding. I’m too relieved. If this door is still secure, then Melina should be fine.

Still, there’s a stone in my gut that won’t go away. It grows heavier as I deactivate my other traps and click the door open.

Rian immediately races past me.

“Out of my way.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I try to blink away the pain raging through my skull. But it’s not like I have all the time in the world.

“Good job,” Maksim murmurs, stepping up behind me.

“Aren’t you glad you kept me alive?” I dryly taunt, buying time as I push myself back to my feet.

“Barely.”

“Grumpy old man,” I humorlessly chuckle.

It takes a second before I gather my bearings. But I’m less worried now. Especially as I hear Rian storm down the stairs to the basement. He must think I’m keeping Melina in some kind of dungeon. Fool.

All he’s doing is giving me a head start.

I’ll get to see her first. Maybe, if I move discreetly enough, I’ll even get a chance to explain everything before she’s ripped away from me again.

My heart sinks as I picture the inevitable.

“No,” I mumble to myself, stumbling into the house. “Don’t think about the bad. Only the good.”

Behind me, Roz says something, but the world quickly becomes muffled. My ears fill with white noise. My heart tugs me upstairs. I don’t even look back to see if anyone’s following me. I just go to Melina.

“Please don’t be too mad.”

I practically have to pull myself up the railing. My body is fine, but my head won't stay put. It feels like my brain is being tugged in a thousand different directions, even if at the center of it all there's only one thing.

Her.

"... Melina?"

When I reach the top of the staircase, my stomach drops. The blood rushes from my ears. My mind goes blank.

Down the hall, I can see the door to her bedroom.

It's open.

On the floor outside is a body.

It's not moving.

"No!" I roar.

It feels like the ground collapses beneath my feet as I race forward. The walls disappear. The black spots and the blurriness all explode into a singular focus.

But then, suddenly, the world comes rushing back and I come to a sliding stop.

That's not Melina.

"... What the fuck?"

Slowly, I approach the corpse. A dark pool of blood has crusted around the woman's ruptured skull. Her lifeless eyes stare up at the ceiling.

Yasha.

There's no relief. My pumping heart aches. But I don't stop to pay tribute. A sneer twists my lips as I look into the bedroom.

I already know what to expect, but it still hurts.

"Melina?" I call out. Stepping over Yasha's body, I charge inside.

It's empty.

Krol's been here.

Fuck.

FUCK.

Despite my certainty, I still search every inch of the bedroom, desperation pushing me closer and closer to the brink.

"Who the hell is this?"

Gabriel is the first to arrive. He's standing in the doorway, looking over Yasha's body when I burst from the empty bathroom.

"The owner of this lake house," I growl. "She must have shown him how to get in here..."

“Shown who?”

My fists shake with rage. My heart withers with dread.

“Krol.”

The name leaves my lips just as Roz shows up.

“Thank god,” she gasps, clearly relieved that the body isn’t who she thought it was.

But when her eyes meet mine, she understands that worst is yet to come.

“This is his work, isn’t it?” she snarls.

“Fuck,” I roar. Without thinking, I turn and send my trembling fist through the drywall. My knuckles come out the other side. “I should have dealt with her when I had the chance. There must be some secret entrance. Some way in I didn’t know about. Krol found her, and she led him straight to—”

“Hey, hey, hey. It’s okay. It’s not her!”

When I look over my shoulder, I see Roz disappear down the hallway. Immediately, I know she’s trying to calm Rian down.

Her effort is only momentarily rewarded.

“Where is she then?” he bellows. Gabriel steps aside and the young king bursts into the bedroom.

Those wild blue eyes have lost all sense. He knows his sister isn’t here, and he wants answers. They’re answers I desperately want as well.

But they’re answers I don’t have.

“I’ll find out,” I promise. But the oath is more to myself than to him.

“You had my sister, and you fucking lost her?” Rian rages.

Even Rozalia is barely able to hold him back as I retreat into myself.

Where would Krol take Melina?

I need to figure it out. There’s no other option.

Slowly, my ears fill with white noise again. Rian’s fury fades into the background, as does everything else. I concentrate.

“Where are you?” I whisper, my eyes darting around the bedroom, frantically searching for clues. I don’t find anything—that is, until my gaze wanders back to the doorway.

The world comes rushing back as I lunge for Yasha’s corpse.

“What is it?” Gabriel asks.

He still knows me well enough to understand when I’m having a breakthrough.

But I don't respond. Not until I find the keychain tucked beneath Yasha's cold dead body.

"How many soldiers do you have in Berlin?" I ask Maksim, barely even bothering to look up at him.

"Enough," he growls. "... And more are on the way."

"Good. Send a few dozen to Krol's underground hideout. He's not there. But I'd be more comfortable knowing that for sure."

"If he's not there, then where the fuck is he?"

"Yeah, where are we going, Tytus?" Gabriel joins in.

Behind us, I can hear Rian and Roz. Their conversation is loud, yet there's an unexpected control to each and every word. Roz continues to act as the lion tamer while I search my memories.

"I know these keys," I murmur, sliding each one aside as I check them off. When I get to the last one, I know exactly where we're going. "There's one missing."

"A missing key? Does that mean—" Gabriel starts.

"What the fuck are you on about?" Maksim interrupts. "What's happening here? Why is this woman lying dead outside the door you locked my niece behind? You better start fucking explaining, or else—"

"I know where Krol took her," I claim. Rifling my way back through the keychain, I find a slightly smaller key snuck into the middle of them all. "And I know exactly how to get in without him knowing it."

Pushing myself back to my feet, I sneer through my throbbing headache. But there's no ignoring the icy grip clawing at my heart.

Krol has Melina.

Fucking hell.

We need to get moving. Now.

"Where are you going?" Gabriel shouts, racing after me as I start to sprint away from the scene.

"Hey!" Maksim joins. "Fucking slow down."

I've barely reached the stairs when a strong hand digs into my shoulder. Without warning, I'm thrown around and shoved against the nearest wall. The whole house seems to shake against the force.

Rian Kilpatrick stares me down. He's practically on fire.

"What. The fuck. Is happening?" he demands to know.

The fury in his gaze is clear, but so is something else. Something I recognize all too well, because I feel the exact same thing.

Fear.

He's worried sick about Melina.

"This lake house doesn't belong to me," I tell him, talking as quickly as possible. Rian deserves an explanation, but we can't just sit around all day. "It belongs to Yasha von Bingen—well, it did. She was an old flame of mine. We had an... arrangement. And I foolishly didn't think she'd have the guts to break that arrangement. Obviously, I was wrong. Krol got to her. She must have known a way in here that I wasn't fucking privy to. Krol obviously used Yasha to get to Melina, then he killed her when she stopped being useful. He took your sister. He wants to do horrible things to her. But we're going to stop him. Understand?"

The fear only grows behind Rian's eyes. By the time I'm done speaking, his anger has been almost entirely replaced by desperation.

"You know where he took her?"

I lift the chain in my hand, singling out the tiny key in the middle.

"I remember this keychain," I reveal. "I know which door each one opens. Sure, there are some new ones—it's been a long time since Yasha and I were a thing—but one is missing. Krol took it. He's holding Melina at Yasha's penthouse in Charlottenburg. I've been there plenty of times before. I regret each visit. But they were good for one thing. There's a private elevator that leads from the parking lot up to the apartment. Clearly, Krol doesn't know about it. If he did, he would have taken this little key here. But he didn't, so we have it. This is our way in. This is how we save Melina."

Rian's hard gaze falters.

"What if he left it on purpose?" he sneers, staring at me with suspicion. "How do we know it's not a trap?"

"Does it matter?"

Just like that, something clicks in him. It's like he finally understand what I am, and what I'm after.

The same thing he is.

"No," he grumbles.

"Good," I huff, pushing him off me. "Because I don't give a shit. All I care about is getting Melina back, safe and sound. Do you think we can work together for long enough to make that happen?"

"It's not like we have a choice."

"Glad to see we agree on something."

Cranking his neck, Rian looks back down the hallway. Roz and Gabriel come racing up. Maksim isn't far behind.

"Are we good?" Roz asks, glancing back and forth between the two of us.

"For now," Rian grunts.

"Do we have a plan?" Gabriel asks.

"I'm working on that," I mumble. "In the meantime, let's get fucking moving."

Maksim's just barely caught up to the action when we all start racing down the stairs.

"Fucking hell," I hear him curse.

"Hurry up, old man," I shout back at him, my mind racing with ideas on how to get a foot up on Krol.

I stop in the doorway when a plan hits me.

"Do you think you can trust me?" I ask, turning to Rian.

He pauses, then looks over at Roz.

When Roz nods, he snarls.

"What do you have in mind?"

"A scheme," I say, waiting as Maksim catches up to the rest of us. "I'll give you the address to Yasha's penthouse. We'll split up then meet up there ASAP."

"Where the hell are you going?" Maksim questions.

The scheme isn't fully formed in my mind yet, but I know one thing for sure. Krol already has the advantage. If we're going to get past him, I'll need to outsmart him.

Fortunately, I know that I can.

"I need to pick someone up first," I say, heading toward Roz's truck. "Gabriel, you come with me. Roz, you keep Rian and Maksim focused. Let's go get our girl."

To my surprise, no one objects. We all know what we have to do.

Fuck.

It almost feels like old times. Like we're a team.

Like we're a family. A dysfunctional, ragtag, contentious family. Hell, that's the only type of family I'm used to. All that's missing is the most important piece.

Melina.

Her life is in my hands. And my future is in hers.

I won't let her down.

I can't.

She will be mine again.

Even if I have to kill the last cancerous bits of my old family to get her back.

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MELINA

There's no use in staying calm. It won't do me any good.

But it feels like I've already done enough kicking and screaming. I'm worn out.

If only I had the option to rest.

Instead, I'm trapped in a fucking horror movie, and the end is near.

Just around the corner, I hear Krol sharpening his knives. In the window to my left, I can just make out his reflection. His demonic figure is occasionally lit by the spark of his whirling belt sander.

The terror builds with every sighting.

But every time I try to take a deep breath, or do anything to keep my limbs from violently shaking, I get a whiff of something I hadn't noticed before.

The stench.

Maybe I'm just losing my mind, or maybe there's no distracting myself anymore, but the smell of rotting flesh and blood has been progressively creeping into my nostril ever since Krol disappeared around the corner.

"No, no, no," I murmur, clenching my eyes shut. But I can still hear that whirling belt in the other room. Why are his knives so dull?

Fear tears at my heart.

It seems obvious. He's been practicing. That's why this place smells like it does. I'm not his first victim. Though, I might just be his last.

"Don't die afraid," I tell myself, whispering those words over and over again in a foolish mantra. "Don't die afraid. Don't die afraid..."

But what other options do I have? I'm surrounded by evil. Restrained by death and hate and revenge.

Shit.

Death and hate and revenge.

Who does that remind me of?

For a split-second, my suffering is forgotten. My mind latches onto the only two men who could save me from this nightmare.

Rian and Tytus.

Their lives have been filled with death and hate and revenge. And I haven't done anything to rid them of those burdens. When I sent that email to my brother, did I doom them both to repeat that cycle with each other?

... Or did I just doom myself?

No. Only positive thoughts, I order myself. Rian's coming. My email will help lead him in the right direction. Somehow. And even if he doesn't make it, Tytus will.

Tytus.

My pounding heart clenches at the thought of my monster. My captor.

My lover.

Somehow, thinking of him helps calm me, if even just a little. I let myself sink into his warm, comforting memory.

My flexed jaw relaxes as I imagine resting my head against his warm chest. My trembling limbs rest as I remember how tightly he holds me.

He's saved me from this evil once before. He can do it again.

He has to.

Finally, I'm able to take a deep breath. The stench of death and misery is still there, but so is a new scent. An arctic-like musk that drags me back to the moment we first met, in the shadows of the home from which he helped me escape.

I live in that moment for as long I can.

Who could have guessed how far we'd come?

... Or how badly we would have screwed it all up.

How badly *I* screwed it all up.

"Which limb shall I start with?"

Krol's gargling voice rips through my peaceful vision, dragging back into the horrifying present. I try not to look up—in my last moments, I want to remember things that make me happy—but my brain won't listen.

Tytus vanishes. My eyelids flutter open. Krol appears in his place.

But to my surprise, the half-dead demon doesn't quite look as scary as before. Compared to Tytus, he just seems pathetic.

Unfortunately, I'm no better.

"Fuck you!" I croak, straining my throat just to make sure my burst of courage doesn't fall short.

But Krol just twists his charred lips into that mangled snarl again. He wants to smile so badly, he just can't manage it.

"That can be—"

Before he can finish, a sound snap his attention away from me.

A knock.

Then another.

My withering heart fills my throat.

For the first time since Krol dragged me from the lake house, I feel a pinpoint of hope.

Someone's here.

"Who the fuck is that?" Krol grumbles to himself. The massive blade in his hand shimmers against the soft light seeping in through the windows. He lifts the knife to his ear and waits.

A thick silence follows.

I don't dare break it, fearing that I might be imagining the whole thing.

But when another round of knocking breaks through the tension, even I manage to perk up.

Unfortunately, Krol is unfrozen as well. With his butcher's knife held high, he slowly approaches the door.

I desperately try to swallow, anything to lather up my broken throat. I might only get one chance to scream. It's going to have to be loud.

"What the hell is this fucker doing here?" Krol curses, blinking through the front door's peephole with his one remaining eye.

He pulls back and that eye darts back and forth as it tries to figure out what to do next. His knife lowers, my stomach drops.

Whoever's outside, it isn't someone Krol thinks is a threat. That means they're not here for me.

Shit.

"You," Krol hisses, glaring my way. Without another word, he lifts a bent finger to his lips.

That's enough.

It doesn't matter who's outside. This is my one chance to do something.

My dry lips open wide.

But before I can scream, a loud bang ruptures the silence. Just like that, the front door bursts open, flying off its hinges and right into Krol.

He's flung out of sight. A flash accompanies his disappearance. Then, the newly uncovered doorway starts to fill with a sickly-looking smoke.

The yellow-tinted fog fills the front room, shrouding Krol's guest.

No. Not guest.

Guests.

Four figures sway unsteadily in the smoke. Then, they collapse.

I don't even get my chance to hope. Suddenly, the upended door is pushed back into view. Krol groans as he stumbles into the living room, shirt stretched over his nose and mouth in a makeshift gas mask.

"Fucking idiots," he coughs toward the door, leaning against the painting. "You didn't think I'd set up some security measures of my own? Have fun choking on your own tongues. This smoke is a special concoction. Poison, made just for you. It will leave you paralyzed until your body starts shutting down on its own. That means you'll get to watch what I do to her before you die. And you won't be able to move an inch to stop me."

Pushing himself off the painting, Krol lifts the massive butcher's knife back up to his face.

"Fuck. Who do I send your parts to now?" he taunts me, taking a limping step forward. "Grandpa maybe?"

"No," I gasp, my eyes trembling as I look back to the hazy doorway. "Your lying..."

It can't be.

The four figures lie in a heap, one stacked on top of another. I can't make out any features, but Krol's words are enough to confirm my worst fears.

There's no holding back the scream that tears from my throat. But My cry doesn't even slow Krol down. He just limps forward, knife raised, snarl lifting his sunken cheeks.

There's no more hope. Anyone who could help me is lying paralyzed by the front door.

Four figures.

Rian. Tytus. Maksim. Roz.

It must be them.

Maybe they set aside their difference to come save me. Maybe they broke the cycle themselves.

They're going to die for it.

And so am I.

"I was hoping I'd be able to take my time," Krol spits. "But I'm sure there will be some kind of backup on its way. So, I guess I'll have to speed things—"

Suddenly, the mangled monster freezes. His pale dead eye snaps off me.

He sees someone in the other room. The room he just came out of. The room where he was sharpening his knives.

I follow his gaze.

My fallen heart jumps.

Standing in the doorway is a hulking figure.

It's a figure I'd recognize anywhere.

"Tytus!"

He steps forward, as his face is illuminated by the snow falling outside.

Those silver-blue eyes shimmer like intense beacons. A heart-tugging smile lifts his heavy cheekbones.

"Miss me, angel?"

I want to scream with joy. Tell him how much I've missed him. Tell him that I regret how we left things.

But instead, my mind turns back to the hazy doorway. My eyes follow.

The smoke has started to clear. Finally, I can make out some of the faces.

My jumping heart stops dead.

Rian's face is the first one I notice. It's been so long since I've seen him that I can hardly believe it. Then I recognize Roz. Gabriel too. I don't know who the fourth body belongs to, but it doesn't matter.

"You have to help them," I rasp, turning back to Tytus. "The smoke... it was poisonous..."

With a dutiful nod, Tytus steps forward.

But he doesn't get far.

An ear-ringing roar fills the dark penthouse. Tytus falls to the ground with a grunt and thud.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Krol. His arm is raised, a smoking gun shakes in his hands.

"No!"

My yelp is interrupted by the sound of shattering glass.

In the blink of an eye, the penthouse is filled with a frigid gust. Something hits Krol in the shoulder. The gun goes flying from his hand.

The old air outside howls in through the broken window at my back. The room is thrown into chaos.

All I can do is watch as Krol quickly finds his knife and starts to crawl through the broken glass toward Tytus' turned over body. My monster's broad shoulders heave. A heavy groan slips from his lips, cutting through the raging wind.

"Watch out!" I cry out. But I doubt he hears me.

Snow whips over my aching body. I frantically shake at my restraints. Krol lifts his knife. But just before he can lunge it into his brother's back, Tytus snaps around and grabs his wrist.

The tip of the sharp blade trembles just above Tytus' throat as the two men struggle for control.

Luckily, my monster is stronger. With a loud roar, Tytus manages to fling Krol off him. The fucker slides across the floor until his back hits the far wall.

Somehow, Krol manages to hang onto his knife. It's all that protects him as Tytus lunges himself at his long-lost brother.

"You fucking bastard!" Krol screeches, waving his knife in the air. "You've taken enough from me."

I watch in horror as Tytus slams his shoulder into Krol's gut, pinning him against the wall. The force is enough to rattle the entire penthouse. The painting dislodges, sliding sideways down the wall until it collapses to the floor, blocking us off from Rian and Roz and Gabriel.

It's just the three of us now.

Tytus shouts something in response to Krol's claim, but I can't make out what he says against the howling wind. Whatever he it is, though, it clearly enrages Krol, because his knife comes barreling down into Tytus' back.

It's like I'm ripped from reality. Everything around me disappears as Krol stabs Tytus between the shoulder blades, over and over again.

Then, it all comes rushing back.

"You don't get to decide my fate," Tytus booms. With an ear-shattering roar, he lifts Krol up the wall. His grip is so strong that Krol can't escape, not even as he continues to stab at him.

With a primal grunt, Tytus throws Krol across the room.

The bloody knife careens out of Krol's fingers as he hits the glass covered floor. Tytus grunts and groans, pushing himself along the wall.

"Tytus," I sob, watching as my injured beast almost slips in his own blood. His shirt is soaked through with dark scarlet stains.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Krol rages. My mouth goes dry when I see that he's picked up the gun that had fallen out of his hand earlier.

It lifts again, aiming toward the only man who has ever truly understood me. I want to scream, but dread clogs my throat.

"Fuck you," Tytus grimaces. Without fear, he moves for Krol. He's not scared.

But I am.

"Please," I barely manage to squeak.

All of a sudden, I feel a bullet hiss over my shoulder. It hits Krol directly in the hand.

"Fuck!" he curses. The weapon drops. Krol tries to go after it, but he doesn't get far.

"You should have stayed dead."

Tytus voice is so low and rumbling it shakes my soul. He grabs Krol by the collar and lifts him from the floor.

Blood trickles from my wounded beast as he cocks back his fist.

"You should have—" Krol doesn't get a chance to finish.

Tytus' fists connects with his already broken face. Something cracks. Tytus doesn't stop. Without flinching, he punches Krol again, then again, and again... beating the demon's head until it's nothing more than a bloody pulp.

But Krol isn't dead yet. His mangled hands still twitch and claw at Tytus as he's held like a shattered ragdoll.

Slowly, Tytus looks over at me. Those silver-blue eyes send a warm chill over my skin.

"Don't worry, angel," he says, his voice heavy with pain. "It's over."

With a deep grunt, he lowers his fist and drags Krol over to the window. Snow whips against his bloody face. But he doesn't care.

I get a whiff of his arctic scent as he marches past me. All I can do is turn my head and watch out of the corner of my eye as he holds his brother up to the shattered window.

"We could have been a real family," Tytus grumbles, his voice filled with pain. "But you never really wanted that, did you? You just wanted

power. You just wanted favor. Well, I'll do you one last favor. It's more than you deserve. But this time, I'll make sure you're dead. That way, you can join Dad. You can be his only son for as long as the rest of us live. How does that sound?"

Snow swirls around the two broken brothers as Tytus waits for a response. Krol can't manage much. Blood spurts from his beaten lips as he gargles something unintelligible.

That's enough for Tytus.

"Take the shot, Maksim."

Straightening his arm, Tytus holds Krol out over the edge of the shattered window. A split-second later, Krol's head is snapped sideways by a bullet.

Another quickly hits him in the neck. Then another slices through his jaw.

The bullets don't stop coming until his head is severed from his body.

Tytus hardly reacts. In fact, he doesn't even kick the skull away when it rolls up to his feet. Instead, he just throws Krol's corpse onto the ground and takes a deep, heaving breath.

"Fucking finally."

With that, he turns to me. Those silver-blue eyes cut through the white snow and crimson blood, as bright as ever.

I stare back at him, my chest heaving.

He tries to smile, but it doesn't look like he has the strength.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" he coughs, stumbling over to my chair.

"Tytus... you... you're bleeding..."

I'm paralyzed with worry as he stumbles over to my chair.

"You can wash me up, angel," he whispers. Bending to his knee, he presses a finger to his ear. "Get over here and help the others," he mumbles. "They've been poisoned."

He's close enough that I can just make out Uncle Maksim's voice shouting something over his earpiece.

But Tytus doesn't respond. He just starts undoing my restraints.

"It's alright, angel..." he slurs. "It's all going to be alright."

It's clear as day that he's in bad shape. My heart aches for him. But I can't do anything about it until I'm free.

The second the restraints come off, though, I jump out of my chair, desperate to feel him again. But I'm not exactly in the best of shape either.

All the blood rushes from my head and I start to fall. But before I can hit the ground, Tytus catches me.

When I open my eyes, I see him staring down at me, a small smile painted on his red lips.

“Tytus,” I whisper, touching his arm. “You saved me...”

He sways on his knee, but somehow manages to hold me steady.

“Melina.” Taking a deep breath, Tytus focuses those blurring blue eyes. “I fucking love you.”

That’s all he has the strength to say. His energy drains. His heavy eyelids start falling again. His chin dips to his chest. But I don’t let him pass out. Not yet.

“I love you too,” I sob. With a weak hand, I lift his chin and stare back into those stunning silver-blue eyes. “Never leave me again.”

“I won’t,” he promises, clumsily shaking his head. Pressing his forehead against mine, he tries to fill his lungs with another deep breath. But this one doesn’t take. His grip loosens around me. His body grows heavy. Still, he finds the strength to plant a final kiss on my lips before his eyes close.

“Stay with me,” I beg. Pressing into his plush lips, I savor every last moment of him. “Please.”

“I will,” he whispers. “I... I just need to take a quick nap...”

His head drops against my shoulder.

It doesn’t matter how heavy he is, I carry his weight.

I always will.

TYTUS

I wake up in a room I don't recognize.

Yet somehow, it feels right.

It feels like home.

It only takes a second to understand why.

"There you are," I quietly rasp, my throat so dry it hurts. Still, a smile lifts my sore cheeks when I spot the torn painting hanging at the foot of my bed.

Melina's unfinished masterpiece.

... But that's not all.

The room, it's filled with her paintings. Most of them look like they've just been finished, but I'd recognize the powerful style anywhere.

She painted these.

Shit. How long have I been out for?

Gritting my teeth, I turn my head. The room smells like paint. It's a wonderful scent, one that reminds me of her. It helps ease my throbbing headache and calm the terrible soreness gripping my body.

But even that's not enough to keep my heart from twitching as I remember what happened before I passed out. The penthouse. Krol. The knife. Maksim saving my ass with his sniper. Yasha's business partner, Manfred Shulz, hardly being worth the detour it took to kidnap him.

Fuck. I should have expected Krol to set some traps of his own. But I guess I wasn't thinking straight. All I wanted was my girl.

Hell, that's all I still want.

So, where is she?

My answer comes quickly enough, and it's joined by a deep breath of sweet, yet painful relief.

Out of the corner of my eye, there's an easel. It props up a half-finished painting. On the floor beneath that is the girl I risked everything for.

Melina is curled up in the lush carpet, hugging her glistening paint brush. I push myself up in bed, desperate to get a better look. The second I move, she jolts awake.

"Tytus?" she asks, dreadingly searching the room with sleepy eyes. When her gaze lands on me, the weariness disappears. She jumps to her feet and lunges at me.

There's no time to prepare. The pretty little cannonball smashes against my ribs, wrapping me in a groan inducing hug.

"Easy there, angel," I cough. "It feels like I'm more bruise than man right now."

"Oh, shit—I'm sorry..." she starts to pull away, but that hurts more than any hug ever could. Calling on every last bit of strength, I lift my arm around her back and pull her into me again.

I can practically feel my ribs crunch against her soft body, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm never letting you go again," I tell her, sliding my hand around the back of her head. She sinks into my chest and takes a deep breath.

Fuck.

This is where I belong. All of the agony and anguish in my past dissolves. The physical pain melts away. I hold my girl as tight as my tired body will allow. And I don't let go.

Melina hugs me back just as desperately.

"Did... did you mean it?" she suddenly whispers, forehead nuzzling into my chest.

"Mean what?" I ask, brow furrowing.

Even through her warmth, my head still pounds as I try to remember every last detail of what happened.

"... When you said you loved me."

No matter how much it hurts, I can't help but laugh.

"Yes," I chuckle, ribs creaking with every amused breath. My heart starts to swell as I remember the exchange we had just before I passed out.

"Did you mean it when you said you loved me too?"

There's no hesitation.

“Yes.”

“Wish you had told me sooner,” I quietly tease. “But I’ll take it.”

“Good.”

“Then I guess we’re in love.”

“I guess so.”

Those heavenly hazel eyes peak out from my chest. It takes a second, but I manage to lift my hand high enough to caress her jaw.

“I fucking love you,” I rasp.

Our eyes close as we share a deep, passionate kiss. My hard life sinks into the feathery pillows of her lips, satisfied.

Nothing else matters. Only this. Only her.

“Does this mean I’m yours now?” Melina whispers, when our lips fall apart.

“Only you can answer that.”

This time, she does pause for a second. But it’s not because she doesn’t know the answer, she just wants to make sure it’s the truth.

“I’m yours,” she finally nods.

“Atta girl.”

Her light smile tugs at my heart. Pulling away, she reaches down and rests a hand against her flat stomach.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for a baby though,” she says, only half-joking.

“That can wait,” I softly chuckle, still surprised at myself. I can’t believe I revealed my entire twisted plan to her. It should have been the end of us, but it felt like the right thing to do. I guess it was. “All I really care about is having you forever.”

“Then take me.”

Another painful cough rattles my sore lungs.

“I think I need another day or two of recovery before I can do that,” I laugh.

“Not like that,” Melina playfully slaps at my shoulder. A warm pink hue fills her cheeks. “We’re at my brother’s place, after all...”

Now that’s a true shock.

“And I’m still alive?”

“I think I’m wearing him down. Same with the rest of my family. But at least Rian saw what you did for me while he was paralyzed.”

“Shit,” I grumble, remembering that grizzly scene. “How is everyone?”

“They’re fine,” Melina assures me. “They all recovered long before you. Thankfully, Uncle Maksim is quicker than he looks. He managed to race over and get everything under control before we could lose anyone...”

“He’s an impressive man, that uncle of yours,” I acknowledge. “Do you think he’ll ever be able to forgive me?”

“I’ll make sure he does.”

That draws another painful laugh.

“With the hold you have over this family, it’s a surprise they don’t crown you queen.”

Melina just shakes her head and looks around the room. “I’m no queen. I’m an artist.”

“And what an artist,” I note, taking a closer look at all the new pieces surrounded my bed. “Looks like you’ve been busy.”

“You’ve been out for a long time,” she shrugs. “So I took your advice. I did what I do best... it also doesn’t hurt that I was worried. Painting is how I deal with stress.”

“Oh, I thought you dealt with stress by running away to strange lands?”

That earns me another small punch to the shoulder. I lean into this one.

“I wasn’t going anywhere without you.”

My smile widens.

“Then I’m just going to have to get better so we can travel the world together.”

“Is that a promise?”

“It is.”

Turning her cheek, Melina rests her head back against my chest.

“I’m in no hurry, though,” she sighs. “Just make sure you get better. I can live like this for a little bit longer.”

“So can I,” I whisper. Running my fingers through her hair, I lean back against the headboard and let the weariness catch up to me. “So can I...”

My heavy eyelids flutter shut and I let myself drift off.

For the first time in a long time, I’m not worried about what comes next.

We’re together.

And that’s just fucking perfect.

The next few weeks are long and grueling, but every second is made more than bearable by Melina's constant companionship. In essence, she becomes my bodyguard, silently fighting battles with her still uncertain family.

Hell, I don't blame them, but it's not like I have the energy to convince them of my intentions. For almost a month, all I have the strength to do is eat, sleep... and fuck.

It's impossible to keep my hands off Melina. And she barely has any restraint when it comes to staying off me. To my surprise, she actually seems to like the idea of sneaking a quickie in here and there. When I ask her why, she just shrugs and says she figures it feels like she's making up for lost time.

Growing up, she never got a chance to sneak boys in, and now she's got a live-in fuck toy all to herself.

I don't complain. I just give her what she wants, over and over again...

Then, one day, I find myself up and about. When that happens, the Kilpatrick's don't let me stick around for much longer, but Gabriel and Roz hook me up with a full floor condo near their homes.

I appreciate the gesture, but as soon as I get a chance to move around some money and access my old bank accounts, I buy a big house down the block from Gabriel, and not just because Melina is always over and she deserves a big place after all of the captivity she's experienced.

It's also because I finally have family to entertain again.

At first, it's just Gabriel and Roz. But slowly, Gabriel is able to convince his wife, Bianca, to let him bring the kids around.

Two nephews. Shit. That's two more than I ever thought I'd have. But I also never figured I'd see the day when Roz got married. Yet her wedding is scheduled to happen two months from now.

The whole thing blows my fucking mind, so much so that I had to take a step back. This is all I ever really wanted, but to have it so suddenly is almost overwhelming.

So, I go back to my roots. I turn my back on this new life, but only until I've sorted out my past... and prepared it for destruction.

"This way," I call to Melina.

A rattle comes from around the corner as she picks up one of the toys our nephews left over.

"Coming," she calls back, after finding a drawer to temporarily stuff them in.

When she comes into view, I can't help but smile. It happens every time. Fuck, she's beautiful. And she's all mine.

I just need to make that clear. Even if she already believes it.

My past is gone. All that exists is our future.

After all we've been through, after all she's seen, there's only one way to do that. I'm going to burn the worst parts of me right in front of her. Melt them into dust so that we can rise from the ashes together, hand in hand.

"In here," I say, gesturing toward my new office. A little bundle of nerves tighten inside my gut as Melina follows me inside.

I'm still not sure if this is a good idea or not. Part of me just wants to leave the past in the past. But I know I can't just ignore this forever. Melina needs to see a physical symbol of my commitment.

And I need to give that to her.

"What is it?" she asks, hand spreading across my back as she joins me in the doorway.

"Come, sit with me by the fireplace."

Taking Melina by the wrist, I gently lead her to the giant opening at the far end of my office. I can feel her hesitate as she gets close enough to see what I've put inside.

"Is... is that a computer?" she asks, confused.

"It is. And a couple of hard drives."

"Why are they in the fireplace?"

"We're going to burn them."

That stops her.

"Tytus, what's going on? Talk to me."

Bending down, I open the laptop. The relevant folder is already up on the screen. The files are marked clearly.

Melina gasps.

"Are those what I think they are?"

I nod. "All the footage I took of you in Berlin... including all the footage I recorded of us..."

Her fingers find my wrist. "For some reason, I thought you'd already gotten rid of those."

"I hadn't even thought of them until recently. But when I remembered they exist, I knew they had to go. Will you do the honors?"

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a matchbook.

"Is... is that gasoline?" Melina asks, sniffing the air.

“The fireplace is drenched in it.”

“Are you sure this is safe?”

“If the house burns down, then I’ll buy us another.”

“And we burn with it?” Melina asks. Still, she takes the matchbook from my hand.

“Then we’ll rise like phoenix from the ashes.”

“Okay, that sounds pretty cool.”

“Light us up, angel.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her light a matchstick. But before she can throw it into the fireplace, she turns to me.

“But how will you teach me to be better in bed?”

I can’t help but laugh.

“You’re already perfect in bed,” I tell her. “But if you want to learn some new techniques, or if you just want to watch us fuck, we can make new tapes. But these ones have to go, they’re tainted.”

“I guess you’re right,” Melina whispers. Lifting the lit match, she stares into the fireplace. “To a thousand new sex tapes!”

“Cheers,” I smile.

She tosses the match into the fireplace and it immediately takes. A small fireball erupts around the open laptop. The screen starts to melt. The hard drives sink alongside it.

I take Melina’s hand and we watch the flames skip and dance over the dark side of our past together.

But it doesn’t take long before her grip tightens.

“Wait,” she whispers, dipping her head. “What about the sex tapes you have with other women? Like the one you accidentally sent me...”

Leaning over, I plant a gentle kiss on her warm forehead.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“What does that mean?”

“Throw another match in there,” I tell her, unwinding our fingers. “We need a bigger fire.”

Walking to my desk, I open the bottom drawer. It’s filled with a dozen or so USB drives. I scoop them up and make my way back to the fireplace.

I hand Melina the first tape.

“Right in the flames, baby girl.”

She smiles. “Yes, sir.”

One by one, she tosses the women from my past into the burning inferno. Each time one of those little hard drives melts into ashes, it feels like another chain has been severed.

Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea, after all.

By the end, I feel free. Reborn. And more in love than ever before.

"Now it's just you and me," I say, turning to Melina. "Forever."

"Forever's a long time," she smiles.

"Not long enough."

Pulling her into my body, I give her a kiss that proves my commitment. It makes her knees so weak I have to scoop her up by the small of her back.

"What now?" she rasps, hazel eyes sparkling in the flames.

"Now, we live our lives how we want. Together. Surrounded by family, but not trapped by it."

We kiss again.

I'll never get tired of how her lips taste. The way she sinks into my hands when I hold her tight. The way she loves me.

This is all I've ever wanted, even if I was too stubborn to accept it for most of my life.

"Hey, answer something for me, will you?" Melina asks, after our endless kiss has run its course. Her hazel eyes turn back to the fireplace. Nearly everything is melted, but a few remnants of the USB sticks remain. "Were they all as obsessed over you as Yasha was?"

I can't help but smirk.

"Why do you want to know that, angel?"

"I'm just wondering," she playfully shrugs. "I mean, what's so special about you anyway?"

"I thought you would have figured that out by now. Haven't I proven myself to you already?"

"Not yet," she giggles.

"Well, let me fix that." Lowering my hand, I sweep Melina off her feet. "Would you like me to do that here or in our bed?"

She gasps as I carry her to the nearest wall and pin her against it.

"Okay," she giggles, lips brushing playfully against mine. "Maybe I get it."

"I fucking love you, Melina Kilpatrick."

"I love you right back, Tytus Ryzdon."

Her words are so sweet they could melt my heart, But the best part isn't how delicious they taste, it's that how true they are.

Melina Kilpatrick loves me. There's no doubt about it.

I've got my girl. And she's got me.

I call that a happy fucking ending.

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EPILOGUE

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MELINA

5 months later...

It doesn't matter how long we've been at this or how exhausted I am, I will not stop following him.

Just up ahead, Tytus pauses at a corner and looks back at me. His silver-blue eyes shimmer through a familiar scene.

Snow. In Berlin. At night.

Shit. I can't believe we're back.

"How are you holding up?" he asks when I reach him.

"Never been better," I pant.

"I can see that."

Taking my hand, he leads me forward. I let him. There's something about this city at night, especially when it's covered in snow, that's so magical I don't ever want to look away.

It's a far cry from my last visit, when all I wanted to do was keep my head down.

"Where are we going again?" I ask as we shuffle up a slippery sidewalk.

"You'll see," Tytus smiles down at me.

It isn't the first time I've gotten that response. Throughout our travels, this man has managed to surprise me again and again.

That all started when he somehow convinced Rian to let me leave the country again. Rumor has it that Roz was essential in helping relax my brother's restrictions—and by rumor, I mean that Roz told me exactly that.

Tytus insists that it was mostly his doing. Him and Rian are slowly gaining a begrudging respect for each other, after all. And even Maksim eventually gave his blessings, but only after he took Tytus hunting for a long weekend.

I still don't know what happened out there in the woods, but when the two men returned, they didn't need to say a word. I could tell that they'd accepted each other. It made my full heart even fuller.

By now, it feels like my chest is going to burst. Only this time, it's in the best way possible.

For the past few months, Tytus and I have been travelling the world almost non-stop, seeing all the sights I've always dreamed of seeing. Painting. Exploring. Fucking.

Experimenting.

Hell, just last night, I had a wild idea that Tytus couldn't wait to help me with.

We went out and bought the biggest canvas I could find, then we went back to our apartment and placed it on the floor. Then I painted an almost exact replica of the Berlin skyline. Before the paint could fully dry, I stripped Tytus down and started painting his body. He covered his hands in paint and did the same to mine.

We started kissing. We started touching each other. Next thing I know, we're sprawled out over the canvas, covering it in primal figures as we fuck each other's brains out.

"Shit," I shiver, a deep warmth spreading through me at the memory.

"Everything alright?" Tytus asks.

"Just remembering last night," I blush. "I think some of that paint seeped into my brain."

"Through which hole?" he smirks.

"All of them."

"Worth it. In my humble opinion, it's your best piece yet."

"Is it the colors that you like so much?" I tease. "Or the fact that the canvas is covered in your cum?"

He licks his lips. "More that it's covered in yours."

My back furls as he pulls me into his body, blocking a chilly breeze before it can reach me.

"We'll have to do it again," I nod.

“Oh, I insist. I’m going to buy you an art gallery, angel. On one condition. You fill it entirely with those kinds of portraits.”

“It’s too bad we only had the idea on our last trip. We should have done that over every skyline we visited.”

“There’s always time to go back,” Tytus assures me. “But I don’t think that’s why we waited for Berlin to do it.”

“No?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “After all that happened here, I think we needed to solidify our claim over it. Conquer it for ourselves. What better way to do that then to personally turn it into our fuck-art?”

“Fuck-art,” I laugh. “Looks like we just discovered a new genre.”

“I say we keep to that genre for a while,” Tytus smirks. “Seeing the proof of our love laid out so viscerally was such a fucking turn on.”

“Maybe next time we’ll film it,” I suggest.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Tytus squeezes my hand and we both share a laugh. But something he says rings through my mind.

Tytus is right. We had to come back to Berlin in order to conquer that part of our pasts. I can already notice the difference. After last night, the shadows don’t seem so big or scary. The alleyways don’t feel like portals to hell anymore, either—more like private nooks we can sneak off too if we feel like fucking in public.

Fuck.

I love what my life has become.

Rubbing my cheek against Tytus’ shoulder, I let him lead me in silence. White snow falls all around us. The skyline twinkles in the distance. If I look hard enough, I swear I can see the streaks we left with our painted bodies in the darkness ahead.

It makes me feel powerful. Finally.

My mind wanders as we continue to walk. It’s not until Tytus stops us that I realize where we are.

Suddenly, my confidence vanishes. A little wave of panic takes over me. It’s the first time I’ve felt scared in a long time.

But how was he expecting me to react?

We’re back at the bridge.

The one I fell off of after that car crash. Below, the freezing Spree river rushes along. We stand right where Krol watched me float away.

Tytus must sense me stiffening, because he drops my hand and wraps me in a big hug. The fear melts a little.

Still, I'm confused.

"Why did you bring us here?" I ask.

Tytus squeezes me extra tight before letting go.

When he takes a step back, I see a familiar sparkle in his silver-blue eyes. He's excited.

But about what?

"I wanted to replace this bad memory with a good one," he smiles, reaching into his pocket. "Smother it out forever with something unforgettable."

My heart catches in my throat when he pulls out a little black box and drops to one knee.

"Melina Kilpatrick. You are the love of my life. I promise to always protect and cherish you. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," I immediately croak, unable to contain my emotions.

Hot tears trickle down my warm cheeks.

Tytus gestures for my hand, and I lift it out toward him. He takes my finger and slides a gorgeous, shimmering diamond ring onto it.

"I fucking love you," he says.

Shooting to his feet, he kisses me.

I melt into his lips. Nothing has ever felt so right.

"I love you too."

The panic and fear washes from my body. All that remains is love and happiness.

Together, we can conquer the world. Because wherever we go instantly feels like our home.

I belong with him.

And he belongs with me.

Forever.

EPILOGUE

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TYTUS

2 months later...

“Enjoy your vacation?”

I swear there’s less venom in Maksim’s voice nowadays, but sometimes it’s hard to tell. Still, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he’s finally coming around to me.

“It was hardly a vacation,” I laugh. “I was always on the clock. It’s a lot of work watching out for a girl like Melina.”

“Don’t I know it,” Rian huffs, walking around his desk. “That’s why I’ve called you all here today.”

“That and he wanted an excuse to see his nephews,” Roz teases, following him.

“You don’t need an excuse,” Gabriel chuckles. “They love their uncle Rian... and their uncle Tytus.”

“What about their Uncle Maksim?”

“They LOVE their great-uncle Maksim,” Roz assures the old man.

“Great uncle,” he grunts, picking up a paperweight from the desk. “Am I really getting that old?”

“Hey, you look great for your age,” Roz smiles. “And you know it. Hell, just the other day I had to fire an assistant for getting distracted when you stopped by the office.”

“You fired that poor girl?”

“No,” Roz laughs. “Not really. She was just... reassigned. Our family out west needed a good trustworthy secretary and she’d always wanted to live in California. So, I used you as an excuse to ship her out.”

“So she wasn’t interested in me?” Maksim says, a hint of disappointment undercutting his smile.

“She wouldn’t shut up about you,” Rian grumbles. “Same goes with all of the other young girls with daddy issues around here.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment,” Maksim says, his rich brown eyes scanning the room. “Considering the competition.”

“I think it’s more that you’re the last single man around,” Gabriel chuckles, placing his hand on Maksim’s shoulder. “They know better than to fuck with us.”

“Because then they’d have to deal with me,” Roz nods. “And Bianca. And Mel. And we’re not to be trifled with, and neither are our men.”

“That makes it less flattering,” Maksim notes.

“Take what you can get,” Rian says. “Now, let’s get this meeting on track. What do you say?”

“I like the sound of that,” I mumble. Anything to get me out of this office and back to Melina. It doesn’t matter that we’ve just barely returned from a globe-hopping trip together, or that she’s just outside with Bianca and our nephews. I miss her.

“Very well,” Rian nods, looking over at Roz. “Here’s the deal. Roz and I have been talking. We think it’s about time we change our ways, particularly when it comes to how we treat our girls. Locking up those we care about, even if it’s for their own safety, only ever seems to lead to more danger and a lot of unhappiness. I don’t want any of my cousins or future nieces to ever feel like they’re trapped. What happened with Mel can’t happen again. No matter how well it ended. Can we all agree on that?”

Grunts of approval echo around the room. I’m right there with everyone else.

The only reason Melina made it out alive was because I realized my love for her just in time. In any other scenario, she’d probably be dead... or worse.

My fingers curl into fists.

“Agreed,” I huff.

“Good,” Rian accepts. “But if we’re going to let our girls be completely free, then we’ll need to make sure they’re ready for this dark and depraved

world. They need to be trained. Taught.”

“And how are we going to train them?” Gabriel asks.

“With a private tutor,” Roz answers.

The answer seems intuitive, but it appears to immediately bother Maksim.

“You’re going to hire someone from the outside to teach our girls?” he says, stepping forward. “No offence, Tytus. But we just barely dodged a bullet with you. I don’t think it’s wise to let anyone else into our family for a very long time. Not unless they’re born into it.”

“We don’t plan on hiring someone from the outside,” Rian corrects him, his ocean blue eyes focusing in on his uncle.

“Then who’s going to take on that responsibility?” Maksim asks.

But it feels like we all know the answer already.

“A man who has more experience than anyone else here. A man who’s been loyal to this family for decades. A man I trust with my life, and with the lives of everyone I care about. You. Maksim Smolov. You will be their teacher.”

We all turn to the grizzled Russian as a respectful silence grips the room.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” he stutters, a rare hesitation coming over him.

“Say yes,” Roz tells him.

But Maksim just shakes his head. “After what happened in Berlin, I’m not sure I can be trusted with such a delicate responsibility.”

“What went wrong in Berlin?” I ask, only half-joking. “We all made it back in one piece. Now, we’re stronger than ever.”

“I let you run-circles around me,” he growls. “I trusted you when I shouldn’t have. If you hadn’t turned out to be who you actually are, then it would have meant Melina’s doom.”

“But you read my brother right,” Roz reminds him. “Even if you didn’t know it. You trusted him because you saw the man behind the monster. Your instincts told you to work with him. If you hadn’t, things might not have ended as well as they did.”

“That’s right,” Gabriel agrees, patting Maksim on the shoulder. “In the end, you saved us all.”

But the grizzled Russian doesn’t seem convinced.

"I... I'm not sure I deserve the responsibility," he avoids. "If we're speaking of outsiders, then why am I not considered one? You call me uncle, but it's more of a title than anything. A nickname even. I'm not blood related to any of the Kilpatricks, to any of my nieces..."

"Stop it," Rian demands. "You're just as much part of this family as I am. And you always will be."

"That's damn right," Roz joins in.

Rian straightens, sharp blue eyes burning with determination. "Maksim. We don't want any of our girls to be unprepared for this violent world ever again. We NEED to start treating them as equals. Not caged birds. First, though, they need to be taught how to handle it all. And they need to be taught by you."

Maksim sighs, dropping the paperweight as he stares over Rian's shoulder and out of the window.

"Why would any of them listen to me?" he asks.

"Because they respect you. We all do."

"And if I fail?"

"You won't."

"Rian. Listen, I appreciate—"

"No, stop appreciating," Rian interrupts. "And start *doing*. I've already assigned you your first pupil. Uncle Nolan and Aunt Valentina's daughter. My oldest cousin. Bree. She may be twenty-four already, but it's never too late to start learning something this useful. Hell, look at how far Melina's come at the same age."

"That was mostly Tytus' doing," Maksim huffs.

"Well, I'm too busy to take up a teaching gig," I tell him. "So, it looks like it's all on you."

"Oh, and I'm not too busy?" Maksim replies, lifting his brow at me. "Shit. I should be retiring soon."

He seems to be looking for excuses not to take this job. It's funny, for some reason, I would have expected him to jump right into it. But it feels like he's hesitant. I wonder why?

"You're not that old," Roz says.

"Now stop with the excuses," Rian adds. "Bree will be in New York next week. Show her around the city. Make sure she's comfortable. Then teach her everything you know. Alright?"

"Everything?" Maksim swallows.

“Everything.”

I can see the conflict raging behind those deep brown eyes. They shimmer like a distant fire, darting back and forth as he fights an inner battle.

But Maksim has always been a loyal soldier. And it doesn't take long before his nature takes over.

“I'll do my best,” he finally sighs, accepting his role.

“I know you will, old friend,” Rian smiles. “You make sure our girls are prepared for any trouble that comes their way. And you start with Bree. Understand?”

“Understood,” Maksim nods, pursing his lips. “I just hope she can handle me.”

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