

A dramatic, high-contrast photograph of a shirtless man and a woman. The man, on the left, has a large tattoo on his chest featuring the word "DUTY" above a cross. The woman, on the right, has a tattoo on her shoulder and upper arm depicting a heart with the word "TRUE". They are set against a dark, swirling background filled with red roses.

BRATVA

Prince

T J MAGUIRE

Bratva Prince

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Contents

[Follow T J Maguire](#)

[AUTHOR NOTE](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

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T J Maguire

Bratva Bride

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To all my supporters,

Thank you so much for believing in me. It truly means everything.

*If you're in any way related to me, please don't read chapters 5, 12, 21, 25,
28 and 35.*

Trust me on this.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Before you continue, please be advised that this book has a content warning. If you are a sensitive reader, please proceed with caution.

- Extreme violence
- Harsh language
- Graphic sexual scenes
- Talk of sexual abuse
- Torture scenes
- Primal play

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Chapter One



I checked the chamber of my gun, pulling the slide back just far enough to glimpse the bullet in the chamber before letting it go with a *click*. I adjusted my grip, holding it firmly in my hands with the barrel pointed towards the two-story house a few miles away.

I steadied my breathing, taking a few deep breaths to calm myself down despite the anger coursing through my veins.

My baby sister is in there.

From the moment she was born, it has been my job to protect her, to keep her safe and look out for her. And for all her life I've done that. Been there for her, comforted her when she was upset or when she was going through a hard time. Even though she was a grown woman now, in my eyes she was still that scared seven-year-old girl who would wake up screaming from nightmares in the middle of the night. The little girl who needed me to sleep at the foot of her bed to protect her from the bad dreams.

She needed me now more than ever, and I was prepared to do whatever it took to get her back.

Nero, Boss of the Chicago Outfit, had kidnapped her and now held her prisoner in the farmhouse a few miles away. He'd done it because he was angry about the Bratva's involvement in his war with La Cosa Nostra. He wanted us to back off. Kidnapping the *Pakhan*'s only daughter was his way of trying to gain the upper hand. But all it did was piss my father off.

The weight of the Kevlar vest strapped to my chest was uncomfortable but necessary. We had no idea what we were walking into. I had one handgun strapped to my waist, another tucked behind my back and a P-90 hanging over my shoulder.

Father came up to my side, his anger like a dark cloud hanging over our heads as he scowled at the house. “*Ty so mnoy. My zachistim kazhdyyu komnatu, prezhe chem dvigat'sya dal'she. Nasha rabota - okhranyat' dom.*” You’re with me. We’ll clear every room before moving on. It’s our job to secure the house, he commanded in Russian, ramming a clip into his handgun. He tucked it behind his back and gripped his P-90 tightly in both hands.

I nodded once, taking aim.

Vladimir, Father’s *Sovietnik* came jogging over, slightly out of breath. He was relatively new to his position, but he proved everyday he was more than equipped to handle the responsibility.

“Charges laid, boss,” he panted, pulling out his gun. “A few rounds of C4 under two cars and one attached underneath the back deck near the back door.”

Father nodded. “Were you spotted?”

“No, boss.”

Not surprised. Vladimir was as light as a feather on his feet. He could go anywhere, move over any surface, without making a single sound.

Father turned as Arturo, Alessandro and Vincenzo walked up from behind, guns at the ready, a group of their own men at their backs.

I’ll admit, I didn’t like Arturo when I first met him. I didn’t like any of them. When Father first told us of their request for a meet, I was sceptical. I was sure they had some ulterior motive. That they were going to double cross us and try to take us out. I had sat the whole time with a hand on my gun, ready to put a bullet in their heads the second they made a wrong move.

I did my research on them. I learnt everything I could about them before that day, both from what I could find on the internet and through my own contacts. I dug deep into Arturo. I had to. If there was a chance he was going to marry my little sister, I had to make sure he was good enough.

In my opinion, he wasn’t.

Arturo had a little black book full of women he would call on the regular. To fuck. To use. He never kept a woman longer than a week and

had no problem flitting from bed to bed. I wasn't sure if he could keep his dick in his pants once he married my sister.

Even though Illayana tried to hide it, I knew she was a romantic at heart. She wanted an epic love. A love with trust, understanding and loyalty. Could Arturo give her that?

I wasn't sure.

"Here's the plan," Father began, eyes on the Cosa Nostra men, "when we get in there, spread out. Go room by room. Find Illayana. Kill anyone you come across. *Except* for Nero. I want that bastard alive. He's *mine*." He glanced at my younger brothers, Nikolai and Lukyan. "You two are with Arturo."

"*Da Otets,*" Yes *Father*, they both replied in Russian, nodding their heads.

"We clear?" Father asked when Arturo hadn't responded.

Arturo's blue-green eyes shone with fury and he glared, his grip on his gun so tight that the veins in his forearms popped. "Clear," he gritted out.

Whether his anger was from the situation or from the fact that Father was giving him an order, I wasn't sure. And quite frankly, I didn't care. It didn't matter right now. Only one thing did.

Getting my sister back.

Father nodded at Vladimir. "Blow it."



In teams of two, we entered through the massive hole we'd created in the back of the house, plaster and wood crumbling beneath our feet. Smoke curled in the air, hindering my vision. Screams echoed in my ears as Father and I stepped into what was left of the kitchen and moved further into the house.

We didn't have a floor plan for the place. We didn't have the time to acquire one, so it was crucial we take the time to clear each room as we went. A few bodies laid on the floor, bloody and broken. I put a bullet in each of their heads as we passed, not willing to take the risk of them getting back up and attacking us from behind.

We all peeled off in different directions. Arturo, Vincenzo, Nikolai and Lukyan went left. Father, Alessandro and I went right. A mixture of Bratva and Cosa Nostra men split between us, some coming with us and the others going with them.

I kept a tight grip on my gun as we stepped into a large dining area, glass and broken pieces of furniture littering the floor. Three men rushed in. The barrels of their guns were the first thing I noticed and I took cover, flipping a long table over and shielding my body from their gunfire. Father and Alessandro joined me, firing back.

I poked my head around the side, lined up my shot and fired, hitting one of the fuckers right between the eyes. Blood exploded out of his head, splattering the walls. Bullets whizzed in every direction as an epic gunfire battle took place.

Using military hand signals, Father told me to rush them while he and Alessandro provided cover. I nodded, pulling out another gun so I had one in each hand.

They jumped up, firing relentlessly, forcing the men to pull back and take cover or risk getting shot. They each took shelter behind a section of wall, one on the left and the other on the right, leaving the entryway into the hall clear. Adrenaline pumping through me, I sprinted over to them and dove, rolling along the floor and coming to a stop on my knees right in the entryway. Before either of them could react, I flung both arms out to my side and fired, killing them both. I spun quickly, keeping both guns up as I scanned the rest of the room.

It was clear.

I got to my feet as Father and Alessandro reached my side.

“You move fast for a big *coglione*,” *ucker*, Alessandro said, wiping blood off his face with the back of his hand.

I grunted, tucking one gun back away.

“Alright, Alessandro, you and your men take the stairs. We’ll go right, down the hall,” Father instructed, reloading his P-90.

Alessandro nodded. He barked an order in Italian to his men and they followed after him, heading up a flight of stairs and disappearing around the corner.

Father laid a hand on my shoulder and tapped twice, signalling he was ready to go. Keeping my gun up, I took the lead, heading down the hallway, Father matching each of my steps with his own. He kept close to my back,

his hand staying firmly on my shoulder as I led the way. When I turned, he turned. When I slowed, he slowed. When I crouched, he crouched. We were like one. Cohesive. Fluid. Both an extension of each other.

When the corridor came to an end, I plastered my back against the wall and peeked around the corner, checking if the coast was clear.

The hallway was empty. Not a single soul in sight. There were four rooms; two on the left and two on the right.

I tapped Father's hand, which still sat snugly on my shoulder, letting him know we were good to go.

Like a well-oiled team we moved as one, footsteps quick and guns up as we hurried down the hall. I stopped at the first door on my right. Father stepped around me to stand on the other side. He gripped the handle tightly, his eyes boring into mine.

We'd done this same dance a thousand times before. Whether it be infiltrating a crack den or a simple B&E, the routine was always the same. We swept the place room by room, checking for any potential threat and eliminating them before they became a problem.

The drills Father put my siblings and I through prepared us for moments exactly like this. The training was rigorous. Bloody. Brutal. And I loved every minute of it. He would turn our warehouse into a giant obstacle course, filled with all different kinds of danger. From trip wires that released electric nets with enough power to knock us out, to Father's men placed strategically throughout the space, armed with rubber bullets.

Do you have any idea how much it hurts getting hit in the nuts with rubber bullets?

A-fucking-lot.

Father's lips moved, not making a single sound as he mouthed, "*One, two, three.*" He opened the door and I rushed in, quickly checking the space. It was a small bedroom. A single bed was tucked away in the far corner, with chains connected to the headboard and foot posts. The mattress was stained with blood, piss and God knows what else.

I wrinkled my nose at the horrid stench and turned around, walking back out. "Clear," I said, heading to the next door.

We repeated the process, checking each room before moving onto the next. There were two more bedrooms exactly like the first. Except one of them had a naked, unconscious woman lying on the bed, her body bloody and bruised, as well as a tiny bathroom with no mirror.

All clear.

The hallway turned left and right, screams and gunfire echoing from both sides. Thudding footsteps reached my ears a moment before someone came bounding around the corner, running smack into my chest.

At first glance, I thought he was just a kid. He was definitely short enough to pass as one. No taller than 5'3. But the bushy beard and gang tats on his face proved he was anything but a child.

The man-child stared up, and up, and up at me, his eyes going wide open in shock.

I couldn't really blame him. At 6'7, I was taller than most people. Not to mention that I worked out 24/7, so I was pushing a tight 240. My thighs were literally the size of his body.

Indecision flashed across the man-child's face before he reared back and punched me in the jaw. Or tried to.

He didn't quite have the reach, so instead of hitting my face, he got my chest.

The blow was weak, sloppy. But his downfall was the hesitation. If you're going to hit someone, *hit* someone. Don't half-ass it. Don't second guess yourself—especially if it's a matter of life and death.

I arched an eyebrow, raised my gun and fired, hitting him in the middle of the forehead. The armour-piercing round tore through his head, spraying blood and brain matter all over the walls. His body thumped to the ground. More footsteps echoed around me, like a stampede of gazelles were running towards us.

Father plastered himself to the wall opposite me, leaned over to get a count of how many Outfit/Zeta men were about to be on top of us and then jerked back. He held up four fingers.

Sweet. Two for him and two for me. I held up a hand to our men that had been following us the whole time, a silent message to hang back and let us handle it.

I reached behind me and pulled out my knife. I spun the blade in my hand, holding it in a reverse grip and brought it up to sit parallel with the gun in my right hand. I took aim and waited, my complete and total focus locked on the space in front of me.

Across from me, Father gripped his P-90 tightly with both hands, aiming it towards the sounds of rushing footsteps. The second someone stepped into view, I fired my gun, hitting him in the side of the head. As he

dropped, I stepped forward and spun, my knife ramming into the chest of another guy as he ran right at me. He didn't even see me coming, he just impaled himself right on my blade. All I had to do was apply the slightest bit of pressure to pierce his flesh. He did the rest.

The other two men had their guns aimed at me, reacting fast to the death of their comrades. I hunkered down, using the dead guy's body in front of me as a shield. Father fired a stream of bullets, taking them both out before they could send off a single shot. Stretching my neck to the side, I checked the coast was clear before yanking my blade from the guy's chest and letting him fall to the ground.

I wiped the blood on the sleeve of my shirt, cleaning both sides of the blade before tucking it back away.

Father stepped up to my side. "Good work," he grunted, checking to see how many bullets he had left in his magazine. He must have had enough, because he didn't bother reloading.

I inclined my head at his compliment. It wasn't often Father gave them, so acknowledging it was the only thing I could think to do.

Father looked behind him into the darkness of the hallway. His head whipped back and a frown creased his brows. I knew why. We were going to have to split up to cover more ground. This place was bigger than it looked from the outside.

I hooked a thumb over my shoulder at the hallway behind me. "I'll go this way. You go that way," I said, pointing in the other direction.

Father looked like he was going to protest. I didn't give him the chance. I looked at the group of Bratva men waiting off to the side for their next command. "You three with me, the rest with the *Pakhan*." That gave Father a backup of six men. More than enough.

As I turned to walk away, Father spoke. "Aleksandr."

I froze, but didn't turn around.

"*Bud' ostorozhen, syn moy*," *Be careful, my son*. He said in Russian, a deep sincerity lacing his voice I'd never heard before.

The kidnapping of my sister must have affected him more than he was letting on. He never usually said stuff like that.

I nodded once and continued on, not turning back. I was a lot like my father that way. We both didn't handle emotion very well. We were hard. Tough. Preferred to act instead of speaking.

With the Bratva men trailing behind me, we made our way through the house, checking each room we came across. We ran into a few more men, having to fight our way through. I fucking loved every minute of it. The brutality of it. The violence. The way it felt taking their lives. Ramming my blade into their bodies. The blood pooling on the floor. It was cathartic, in a way. Relaxing.

Well, it was for me anyway. I'm pretty sure normal people didn't feel that way about killing. But I wasn't normal. I was a blood-thirsty killer.

When we came to a set of wide, double doors I stopped, my head tilting as I studied it. Just from the door alone, I could tell whatever laid in the room beyond would be different to anything else we'd come across. I raised my gun and flicked my head to Erik, signalling for him to open it. Erik nodded, twisting the handle and flinging the door open wide.

I marched in, prepared for the worst and stopped dead in my tracks.

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Chapter Two



I blinked, taking in the scene in front of me. Sitting on a massive king-size bed with a thick metal chain cuffed around her ankle was a small Hispanic woman.

And by small, I meant *small*, barely pushing five feet. She had beautiful, caramel skin, long dark hair and enough curves to make even a priest break his oath with zero regrets. She had a diamond-shaped face, soft delicate features and dark eyebrows that sat above the most mesmerising amber eyes I'd ever seen.

The state of the room was the next thing I noticed. Unlike all the others I'd seen so far, this one was in pristine condition, apart from the broken lamp on the floor. It had expensive oak-wood furnishings, black silk sheets and exotic Persian rugs covering a wide section of the floor.

This had to be Nero's room.

A *thud* and a *clank* drew my attention back to the small woman. The cuff was no longer around her ankle. It now laid in a crumpled mess on the floor, a piece of wire clasped firmly in her hand.

She picked the lock.

I eyed the woman curiously as she shook out her leg and slowly got to her feet. There was something...different about her. The few women I'd seen so far in this shithole were just shells of their former selves. Dirty. Filthy. Drugged up. Covered in blood and semen. Used and abused.

But the woman in front of me was the picture of perfect health, full of life and light. Not a blemish on her fine caramel skin.

An image of me biting into that soft, smooth skin and leaving a mark of my own soared through my brain and blood rushed to my cock, hardening it.

I cursed inwardly. Fuck. Now was not the time for me to be getting a fucking hard-on. I shook my head slightly to clear the lustful thoughts and focused on the matter at hand.

“Move aside, Big Guy,” the woman said, faint traces of a Spanish accent coating her words. “You’re in my way.”

I stayed where I was, blocking the door, my gun still aimed at her chest. “Who are you? What are you doing in this place?”

She was someone important to Nero. That was glaringly obvious considering there wasn’t a hair out of place on that pretty little head of hers. And yet, every other woman I’d come across here looked like the living dead. There was also the fact that she was wearing clothes, while the others had been as naked as the day they were born.

A pair of dark, ripped skinny jeans covered her legs, the fabric sticking to her skin, accentuating those curves. She had on a black t-shirt with a skull printed on the front, a bloody knife sticking out of the head. She was covered in ink, two full sleeves of graphic images running up her arms and neck, stopping just before the jawline.

She held her hands up in front of her and took one step forward. “You wouldn’t shoot a poor, unarmed, tiny woman, would you?” she tilted her head, feigning innocence. She took another step.

I narrowed my eyes and cocked my gun. I didn’t think for a second this woman was as sweet and innocent as she was trying to make herself appear to be.

No.

There was something deadly in the way she moved. The way she glided across the floor. That laser-type focus she had on my gun. The cunning look in her eyes. It showed her for what she was.

A predator.

“Take another step and I’ll put a bullet in your pretty little head,” I warned darkly, letting my voice take on the deep, menacing tone that has made men three times her size piss their pants.

But she just smiled. And what a radiant smile it was.

Either she had no concept of danger, or she did and she just didn't care. Both were dangerous.

"Aw, you think I'm pretty?" she ran her fingers down her neck in a light caress, drawing my attention to her breasts. Her eyes darted up and down my body. "And you're just a tall glass of hard, toned and sexy, aren't you?" she bit her lip. "Look at all those muscles. God, what I'd like to do to you. Are you on the gear? Because that would be highly disappointing. Not to mention cheating."

I ignored the comment. It wasn't the first time I'd been asked if I took steroids. When you were as big as I was, people automatically assumed it was because you took performance enhancing drugs. But in reality all it took was hard work, commitment, a healthy diet and, well, good genes.

She was being overly sexual. Was it a ploy to distract me? If it was, it was a stupid one. Yeah, I was hard for her, but I wouldn't let that rule me or cloud my judgement.

When she took another small step, one so small she thought I probably wouldn't notice it, I fired a warning shot, nicking the top of her ear.

She ducked, wincing in pain.

I expected her to scream. To cry. To drop this carefree, crazy act she had going on.

What I did not expect her to do was fucking *smile*.

She lightly touched her ear, a few drops of blood coming away on her finger. Maintaining eye contact with me, she put her finger in her mouth and sucked it clean, hollowing her cheeks.

Fucking hell. My cock throbbed painfully in my pants at the erotic show she put on. I envisioned her on her knees in front of me, hands tied behind her back while I fucked that pretty little mouth hard enough to make tears stream down her face.

Jesus. Why was I all of a sudden so pent up? I'd have to call Mila when I got home.

"Alright, Big Guy, you're in charge here. And you've made your point clear. I won't move. So why don't you just tell me what you want so I can be on my way."

"I want to know what it is you're doing here. Who are you?" I asked, keeping my guard up. I didn't believe for a second she all of a sudden decided to be cooperative.

“Nero paid me for the night. But when I heard all the screaming and gunfire, I decided to cut my losses and run,” she shrugged idly, her bottom lip jutting out in nonchalance.

“Paid you?”

“Yeah, you know. Paid me,” she did some vulgar gesture with her hands and poked her tongue into her cheek repeatedly.

My brows raised. “You’re a hooker?”

“We prefer the term ‘escort’.”

I narrowed my eyes, scrutinising her closely. She was lying. I wasn’t sure how I knew it, but I called bullshit. She wasn’t telling the truth. She was hiding the real reason why she was there.

Why? Why lie about it? The whole thing baffled me and made me even more determined to get to the bottom of it all. Unravel the mystery surrounding her.

And I would.

I slowly lowered my gun, tucking it away securely. Taking one step to the side, I cleared a path through the door for her and flicked my head to the side, signalling for her to go.

She gave me a bright, beaming smile and made her way towards the exit, a bounce in her step. “You know, it really is a shame we met under such crappy circumstances,” she said, skipping towards me. “You...I’d fuck for free,” she winked.

I didn’t respond, despite how much her words excited me. She actually thought I was letting her go.

When she got within reach I grabbed her, tossing her over my shoulder. She was so tiny compared to me it was like lifting a pillow. I was over a foot and a half taller and at least four times heavier. Her weight was literally nothing to me.

She screeched in surprise and unleashed all that fire and spirit I knew she was trying to hide behind that sweet and innocent part she was playing.

She beat into my back with her fists and kicked into my stomach with her legs. All while she screamed and cursed at me in Spanish.

“Put me down, you big behemoth! ¡Voy a cortarte las pelotas! ¡Cómo te atreves! ¡Hijo de puta! I’m going to cut your balls off! How dare you! You son of a bitch!

When she realised no amount of hitting or kicking was going to get me to let her go, she lifted her upper body up and tried to wrap her arms around

my neck in some sort of reverse choke hold.

The move cemented my original thoughts about her. She was *definitely* more than she was portraying herself to be.

I wound my arm around her thrashing legs to hold her still, pulled a knife from one of the sheaths at my waist and held the blade to the soft, smooth skin of her hip.

She stilled instantly.

“You’re coming with me, whether you like it or not. Best accept it now. I’m not afraid to hurt you if that’s what it takes to get you to cooperate,” I warned, caressing the flat of the blade against her skin.

A shiver racked her body. Was it from fear or excitement? Was she into knife play?

I shook my head to clear those thoughts from my mind. What did it matter if she was or wasn’t? I wasn’t taking her home to fuck her. I was doing it to find out who she was and what she was doing with that Chicago Outfit bastard, Nero.

“Why?” she choked, like she was a heartbeat away from crying. “I-I’m nobody. I don’t know anything. P-please, just let m-me go.”

She wasn’t fooling me. I had to give her props though. She was one hell of an actress.

I scoffed and put my knife away. “You might as well stop with the tricks. I don’t believe you’re as innocent as you claim. No. You’re hiding something, and I’m going to find out what.”

Her personality switched again so fast it was a miracle I didn’t get fucking whiplash. She went from scared and upset to angry and violent at the drop of a hat.

“You bastard! Let me go! I swear to God you’re gonna regret this! *;Maldito imbécil! ;Voy a hacer que te comas mi maldito cuchillo!* You fucking asshole! I’m going to make you eat my fucking knife!”

I don’t think she realised I could understand everything she said in Spanish. Or maybe she did and she just didn’t care. Either way, I kept a tight grip on her flailing body and marched back through the house, dispatching any fucker I ran into that I hadn’t already killed with a bullet to the head.

The smoke from the explosive had dissipated and I expected her to scream and cry at the sight of all the blood on the walls and dead bodies on the floor. Or at least when I started shooting people.

But no. She just kept pummelling my back with her tiny fists, cursing me out six ways from Sunday.

Not that I particularly minded. I fucking loved her fighting spirit. I loved the feel of her body thrashing against me. It made my cock hard as fucking steel.

Now that I thought about it, that probably wasn't a good thing. I'd likely have to kill her.

I could always fuck her *before* I kill her?

No! Fuck. I really needed to call Mila.

I rounded a corner, ignoring the tight, curvy little body currently threatening my self-control and saw a tall, dark-haired woman I'd recognise anywhere.

Illayana.

A tidal wave of relief rushed through me. She was dirty and wet and looked like she was covered in blood, but she was alive. My baby sister was okay.

Emotion choked me, and for a second I almost faltered. I wanted nothing more than to throw my arms around her and hug her to death. But I wouldn't. I could never allow myself to show such emotion, especially in the eyes of our enemies.

So I did what I always did. Locked down my feelings.

Illayana gave me a surprised look at the woman over my shoulder.

"Glad to see you, brat," I grunted as I walked past, heading for the front door. The second I stepped outside, the cool night air hit me smack in the face. I took a deep breath in. It wasn't until then that I realised how hot and stuffy it was inside the house.

Nik and Lukyan stood in the driveway, herding a group of men into a blacked-out van. Lukyan's eyes flicked to me and his brows shot up at the woman flung over my shoulder, kicking and screaming her head off. He barked an order at one of our men and started making his way towards me.

I walked down the steps of the front deck—keeping a tight grip on the flailing woman screeching in my ear—and headed towards Ivan, one of our soldiers who stood next to a dark sedan.

"Keys," I barked, tucking my gun away and holding my hand out.

Without missing a beat, he pulled them out of his pocket and dropped them into my open palm.

I clicked a button on the fob and the lights flashed, the boot popping open. I pushed it all the way up and chucked the woman in just as Lukyan got to my side.

She grunted on impact. Her amber eyes snapped to me, burning with anger. “I’m gonna fucking kill—”

I slammed the boot shut.

A muffled screech reached my ears, soft thumping coming from inside the trunk. She was beating her fists against the car.

“Who’s the crazy chick?” Lukyan asked, staring down at the trunk.

“I don’t know. I found her locked up in Nero’s room.”

“No shit?” Lukyan took out a cigar from inside his suit jacket and lit it up, smoke billowing into the air. “Why didn’t you stick her with the other prisoners?” he gestured to the blacked-out van behind him with a flick of his head.

“For all we know, she’s tied to the Zetas somehow. Better to keep them apart for now, until we figure out who she is.”

“True, true, true. Smart, smart, smart.” Lukyan took another drag of his cigar, puffing the smoke into my face.

I glared, swatting it away. “Why aren’t you wearing your Kevlar?”

Lukyan shrugged. “I took it off after we got outside. Fight’s over. I don’t need to wear it anymore. I hate the fucking thing. It itches.”

“Father will have your head if he catches you without it on. Fight’s not over until we’re safe at home. You know that. Go put it back on.”

“But—”

“Now, Lukyan,” I ordered, leaving absolutely no room for debate over it.

He grumbled but walked away to do as I commanded. He knew better than to disobey an order from me, even if he was a little shit half the time.

As Father’s firstborn, I was the one due to inherit the role of *Pakhan*, leader of the Bratva when he passed. It was a role I was born for. I’d trained my whole fucking life for. From the moment I was old enough to understand what would be passed down to me, I worked endlessly to become the strongest I could be. Not only physically, but mentally too.

I’d watched every move Father’s ever made. Studied every attack and defensive plan he’s ever had in the hopes I could be even half the *Pakhan* he was when the time came. The legacy of the Volkov name fell on my shoulders, and I refused to be the one to tarnish it.

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Chapter Three



“Fucking fucker!” I pounded my fists against the inside of the trunk, burning with pure frustration. I knew no matter how hard I hit it, nothing would happen. I wasn’t fucking Wonder Woman. But it made me feel better, despite the pain that throbbed up my arms each time I struck it.

How the fuck did you manage to get yourself in this position again, Drea?

At least when Nero kidnapped me, I knew who that fucker was. He may have caught me off guard (which, let’s be honest, was the only way that shit stain would be able to lay a hand on me), but it was my fault. I underestimated the size of his *cojones*. A mistake I never planned to make again.

I would have escaped earlier, except Nero was a hell of a lot smarter than he looked. He kept me under 24/7 guard. Two inside the room with me, watching my every move and another two outside, ready to jump in at the slightest hint of trouble.

I was good, but I couldn’t take four guys out at once. So I sat. I waited, biding my time for the perfect chance to escape. That came in the form of a massive explosion rocking the entire house.

My guards had run off straight away, either to check on their boss or save their own asses.

Either way, it gave me the opportunity I needed, smashing the lamp on the bedside table and using the wire in the light bulb to pick the lock.

It was piss easy. Nero had spent a good couple hundred bucks on a quality metal chain, but used a cheap lock to secure it. One you could buy at any garden variety hardware store.

Amateur.

I thought I was finally home free, until the door opened and in strolled that hunk of premium prime rib.

Fuck. Just thinking about him made my lady bits get all tingly.

I've always had a size kink; I get turned on by a distinct difference in size to my partner. I wasn't ashamed of it. I had a lot of kinks. But *fuck me*, that Russian blue-eyed fucker was so fucking big that for a second I forgot all about my escape. All I wanted to do was climb that out-of-this-world chiselled body and ride him until I passed out from orgasms.

He was Arnold Schwarzenegger *big*. I'm talking about his pre-movie days, back when he won Mr Olympia six years in a row.

He had the height (6'7, easy) the weight (enough muscles to rip through his fucking shirt like The Hulk) and a face carved from stone. His eyes were the most remarkable shade of blue I'd ever seen in my life, light and sparkling, like the sunshine reflecting off the ocean's surface.

He was the entire goddamn package, and then he had to go and ruin it all by kidnapping me.

I had no idea who he was. His accent gave away his heritage, but that's about all I could gauge from him. That, and the fact that his presence demanded obedience. It was in the way he held himself. The air surrounding him. He expected complete and total submission. And if you didn't give it, he had the power to take it.

Case in point, me locked in this fucking trunk.

I beat against it one more time before slumping back, my breaths coming out short and quick.

Okay. Stop and think for a second. Weapons. Look for something to use as a weapon.

I couldn't see a thing. It was pitch black and the air was stuffy, like there wasn't enough of it. I felt around the small space for anything I could use to whack someone over the head with. A crowbar. A shovel. A jack. Fucking anything.

There was shit all, which only made my frustration at this whole situation soar higher.

For fuck's sake. Would it have killed them to leave something in there? It was the cleanest trunk I'd ever fucking seen.

The car shook as the engine roared to life, the vibrations jostling me so much I had to grip the walls for stability. The car lurched forward, causing me to fly back, hitting the back of my head hard.

"Hey!" I yelled, rubbing the back of my head. "Watch it! You've got precious cargo back here!"

Whoever was driving responded by turning the music up so loud it drowned out my voice.

I narrowed my eyes. *Asshole.*

We drove for about an hour. Every time we stopped, I tensed, waiting in anticipation for the trunk to open. But then we'd be off again. I wanted to scream. This whole thing was filling me with nerves and adrenaline. I could barely sit still.

When we eventually came to a stop and the engine turned off, I knew we had reached our destination—wherever the fuck that was.

Thanks to my small stature, I was able to position myself so I was in a deep, low squat. It was by no means comfortable. I was hunched over to the point that I had to have my hands braced on the floor in front of me, but it was the best option I had.

I doubted I possessed the reach to kick my attacker when they eventually opened the trunk. My legs were just too short. I didn't want to risk my one chance of escape on a plan that had the potential to fail. Whereas I knew I had the skill to leap up from a squatted position. I might have tiny legs, but they are powerful.

Leg day was my favourite day of the week, and I *never* skimped on it.

I stayed quiet, deathly still, taking small, controlled breaths as my mind ran over all the possible scenarios. I had to throw everything I had at these fuckers. I had to escape.

I knew I was safe with Nero (to a point). He had to keep me alive to keep the cartel in line. He couldn't hurt me.

But these guys? Yeah, there was no doubt in my mind they'd hurt me or kill me the second they got what they wanted.

Muffled voices reached my ears. The crunching of footsteps on gravel surrounded me.

Fuck. How many of them were out there?

It didn't matter. It was do or die, kill or be killed. I had to fight, regardless of how many of them were out there waiting for me.

Restlessness filled my bones. I clenched my fists on the floor repeatedly, waiting, tension tightening my body.

The voices outside got louder. Closer. A *beep* rang out and I shifted slightly in preparation. A sliver of light cut through the darkness as the trunk slowly began to open.

In a move that would have made my PT proud, I shoved the trunk wide open and leapt up in a powerful jump, wrapping myself around the guy who stood at the back of the car.

I managed to catch a brief glimpse of him. Tall. Slim build. Dark hair. Brown eyes. But that's all I saw before I gauged that motherfucker's eyes out, ramming my thumbs deep into his pretty eyes.

He screamed, thrashing wildly from side to side, trying to dislodge me. I clung to him, refusing to let go. He lost his footing and tumbled backwards. I held on and rode him all the way down, his back smashing into the ground hard. At the very last second, I managed to unwrap my legs from around his waist so my knees took the brunt of the fall.

I'm not going to lie, it fucking hurt. A *lot*. But I gritted my teeth and ignored the pain.

My head snapped up, my eyes flicking around quickly, taking in my surroundings. A beautiful Victorian-style house lay in front of me, its dark sconces illuminating the exterior in the darkness. Structural damage was evident, one side of the house undergoing massive repairs, but that didn't take away from its beauty.

It was one of the most hauntingly stunning pieces of realty I'd ever seen. A true piece of architectural history.

As much as a part of me was dying to see if the inside was just as spectacular as the outside, I knew I had to run in the opposite direction. Despite its alluring beauty, whatever lay in that house was deadly for me. I had to get as far away from it as possible.

My hands were wet and sticky with blood, the soft squishy sensation of his eyeballs throbbing against my thumbs making me shiver. He was still screaming, thrashing beneath me like a bucking bull.

I ripped my thumbs out of his eye sockets with a sickening squelch and got to my feet, giving him one last kick to the side just because I bloody well felt like it.

Guards appeared from the house, their guns drawn and aiming my way. I backed up a few steps and spun on the balls of my feet, preparing to make a run for it when I ran smack into a wall of immovable muscle.

“Ow! What the fuck?!” I grunted, falling back and landing hard on my ass.

Standing over me was the handsome Russian giant.

He arched an eyebrow. “Where are you running off to, *malyshka*? ”

Shivers ran down my spine. Fuck, that deep rumble voice. I had no idea what he just called me. Russian wasn’t a language I was fluent in, but who the fuck cared when he sounded like that?

Not me.

I glared up at him, getting to my feet. Brushing my hands against my legs, I ran my eyes over the wide-open space surrounding me. Off in the distance I glimpsed tall iron fencing (likely encompassing the entire property), and what looked like a guard house stationed at the main gate.

I looked at the fine specimen before me. This dude was big, but was he quick? Surely all those hard, toned muscles ought to slow him down, right?

Could I make a run for it?

As if sensing my thoughts, Big Guy narrowed his eyes suspiciously. His muscles strained against his dark, long-sleeved shirt as he put two fingers in his mouth and blew a loud, ear-piercing whistle.

Vicious barking ripped through the air. Half a dozen dogs came barrelling around from both sides of the house, their paws kicking up dirt and gravel as they raced towards me.

They were Rottweilers. Big, beefy dogs. Strong, muscular. They surrounded me on all sides, barking and growling like savage beasts, their sharp canines snapping in the air.

Alright, making a run for it is out of the question.

The noise was deafening. The rabid snarling. The screams of the guy flailing on the ground behind me. It was a constant irritating racket that was slowly driving me mad.

Big Guy barked out a harsh command in Russian. “*Sidet!*”

All the dogs sat down, their barking cutting off in an instant. He had complete and total control over the dominant animals. They didn’t move a muscle without his say so.

He locked eyes with me, a taunting challenge in his eyes. “You can either come willingly, like a good little girl, or I can throw you over my

shoulder and drag you, kicking and screaming. The choice is yours.”

“What do you want with me?” I hissed in frustration, my eyes darting left to right, looking for a way out.

I was surrounded on all sides by either dogs or armed guards. Movement in my peripheral vision made me stiffen. A tall, lean man with long dark hair that was up in a man bun was pulling people from a black van, each of them cuffed with zip ties. I recognised him from when that barbarian dumped me in the trunk. He had similar features to the mammoth standing before me.

Were they related somehow?

“I told you before, I want to know who you are,” Big Guy said, drawing my attention back to him.

“And I told *you* before, I’m nobody. Nothing. Just a high-class hooker in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I thought you preferred the term ‘escort’?” he asked, one brow hiking up.

“Whatever,” I scowled. “The point is, I’m not who you think I am.”

“I don’t know who you are. That’s the problem.”

“Well, who are you, huh? What’s *your* name? I’m the one who’s been kidnapped here. If anyone deserves fucking answers, it’s me.”

He stared at me for a long moment, as if debating whether or not to answer my question. I honestly didn’t think he would, which was why I was surprised to hear him grunt, “Aleksandr Volkov.”

I tensed, nervous energy filling my body. *Volkov?* As in the Bratva Volkovs? *Shit.* I knew who they were. Anyone involved in the world of organised crime knew who the Volkovs were. There were plenty of rumours floating around on the streets about them. About their brutality, their mercilessness. They were tough sons of bitches. Vicious. Strong. Fearless. Not to mention the fact that they had the best guns.

My dad warned me about them before he died. Told me to steer clear of them at all costs. That they weren’t to be fucked with.

And now I was in the lion’s den.

“Your turn,” Aleksandr inclined his head towards me. “Your name?”

“Mary Smith.” It was the first name I could think of that wasn’t my own. He knew it was fake though. He gave me a ‘Do I look stupid to you?’ look and I just smiled. He was never getting my real name, my real identity.

Especially now that I knew who he was. If he found out who I was, I was as good as dead.

“*Kabluk!*” Aleksandr thundered. The six Rottweilers bolted to him, standing tall at his side. He took a step towards me and the dogs followed, mirroring each of his steps.

Unease gripped my chest. I backed up, keeping my distance. It was a menacing sight. This big, hulking figure, surrounded by his vicious beasts. Like Hades and his guard dog, Cerberus.

I loved Greek Mythology. Anything to do with the Gods—Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo—I was all for. That shit fascinated me. Especially Hades. I couldn’t tell you how many Hades and Persephone-inspired books I’d read. It bordered on obsessive. And right now, the way Aleksandr was stalking towards me with his dogs at his side, reminded me of the countless images I’d seen of Hades and Cerberus.

“*Belka, Boris, Igor, stado!*” Three of the dogs peeled off and ran at me, nipping at my heels.

They forced me in a completely different direction, herding me around the side of the house. Aleksandr and the other three dogs stayed close, tracking me across the yard.

“What’s this? I thought you were gonna toss me over your shoulder, caveman style?” I asked, walking backwards, forever conscious of the dangerous predators circling me, keeping me from running off.

The tiniest smirk graced his lips. It was so minute I questioned whether or not I actually saw it. “Is that what you want, *malyshka*? You want me to throw you over my shoulder?”

Yes.

“No,” I scoffed like the idea was utterly ridiculous, when really it made my whole body fucking tingle. “You kidnapped me. Why the fuck would I want that?”

He gave a small shrug. “Some women are into that kind of thing.” There was a certain tone in his voice. One that said he had personal experience with women like that.

I was suddenly envious of all the women who’d been lucky enough to be trapped beneath that mammoth of a man. You could just tell by looking at him that he knew his way around a woman’s body. That he was the type to leave a woman completely and utterly satisfied. It was always the cool, calm, collected ones that were complete savages in bed.

“Yeah? Well, not me,” I said, shuffling my feet to the side.

I was lying through my teeth. The idea of being hunted by him, chased and thrown over his shoulder and dragged to his bed, turned me on more than it should have.

One of the dogs barked, snapping its teeth an inch from my ankle, and I cursed, jumping back.

“Hmm,” Aleksandr ran his eyes up and down my body in a slow, sensual caress, his tongue running across his lips. “Pity.”

He and the dogs steered me towards a large industrial-style warehouse a little way from the house, herding me like I was a flock of sheep. Any time I stepped too far in another direction, the dogs would snarl and bark, biting the air in warning.

Behind Aleksandr, Man Bun stepped into view, another man equally big and imposing as him at his side, helping usher a row of prisoners towards us.

When I locked eyes with one of the prisoners, my whole body stiffened. I tried to hide the flare of recognition from my eyes, but it was too late. Aleksandr caught it. His narrowed gaze studied me suspiciously before he glanced over his shoulder, somehow managing to keep me in his line of sight at the same time.

“Lukyan!” he barked, his voice ringing in the air. “Bring them over here.”

The long-haired guy—Lucas, or whatever the fuck he called him—came right over.

I locked down my emotions, blanketing my face.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out Aleksandr was incredibly astute. He seemed to have a real knack for assessing situations and reading between the lines. For seeing what others didn’t want him to see. I couldn’t give him anything to go off. I couldn’t let him figure out I knew each and every one of the prisoners personally.

With a rough hand, Aleksandr grabbed Javier by the back of the neck, making him wince. He dragged Javier so he was facing me, his back to Aleksandr’s chest.

“Do you two know each other?” he asked softly, his eyes locked on mine.

“Never seen her before,” Javier answered a little too quickly.

Aleksandr shoved Javier to the ground and put a heavy boot to the side of his face, smashing his cheek into the tiny stones that made up the pathway.

Javier grimaced, a painful grunt falling from his mouth.

“Care to try that again?” Aleksandr asked, grinding Javier’s face deeper into the gravel.

“I don’t know her, man! Argh, Jesus, stop! I swear, I don’t fucking know her!”

“I don’t believe you,” Aleksandr growled. He removed his boot and pulled out a hella impressive Beretta, holding the barrel right against Javier’s temple. “Tell me the truth or you die, right here, right now.”

Javier swallowed. “I already told you the truth. I don’t—”

Aleksandr pulled the trigger. A loud *bang* cut through the air, ringing in my ears. Blood spattered across Aleksandr’s face, staining his skin bright red.

Anger thundered through me, as violent as a torrential thunderstorm. I clenched my fists to refrain from raking my claws down that ruggedly handsome face. On the inside, I was fuming. Boiling with rage. But on the outside, I was cool as a cucumber, acting as if what just happened didn’t affect me in the slightest.

Aleksandr straightened, running a hand through his hair. He stepped over Javier’s lifeless body and grabbed another prisoner—Roberto—dragging him before me.

“How about you?” Aleksandr thrust his gun against the base of Roberto’s skull. “What do you have to say?”

Roberto locked eyes with me. A silent message passed between us. “Don’t know her,” he grunted out, his voice heavy with a thick Spanish accent.

Aleksandr shook his head, lines of frustration marring his face. He cocked his gun.

Roberto closed his eyes, resigned to his fate. He didn’t try to move. Didn’t try to fight what was coming. He knew there wouldn’t be any point.

Anger and despair coiled around my heart. I felt trapped. Trapped between wanting to save him and keeping my real identity a secret. In the end, I knew what I had to do. I knew there was only one option. I couldn’t risk them finding out who I was. They would use me the same way Nero did. But I could offer Roberto reassurance.

“Tu familia será cuidada.” Your family will be cared for, I whispered in Spanish for Roberto’s ears. Of course, I knew Aleksandr could hear me. He was right there. But I highly doubted the big oaf spoke Spanish.

Roberto’s eyes opened, glistening with unshed tears. He already knew his chances of getting out of this situation alive were slim to none. It was the price you paid for living this kind of life. But his loyalty to the cartel would be repaid ten times over.

Aleksandr watched me closely. His gaze flicked between Roberto and I, a calculating look in his eyes. Whatever he saw, whatever conclusion he’d come to, made him switch tactics.

He charged towards me, his grip still tight on Roberto’s nape as he forced him to scuffle along.

I didn’t balk. I didn’t retreat as he ate up my personal space, standing nose to nose with me, and placed the barrel of his gun under my chin, threatening me instead.

Chapter Four



Something wasn't right. I knew it the second 'Mary' spoke in Spanish, thinking I couldn't understand her words.

I didn't believe for a fucking second her name was actually Mary. It was obviously fake. She was determined to keep me from finding out who she really was, even at the expense of me hurting people she so clearly knew.

Oh, she'd tried to hide it. Tried to conceal the recognition that flashed across her face for the briefest moment. But it was too late. I saw it, and it confirmed what I already suspected.

She was tied to the Zetas.

I had no idea how, no idea who she was to them, but I would sure as shit find out.

My gun tucked under her chin, I forced her head back, staring down at her. Anger burned in her eyes, her jaw locked tight.

She was such a pretty little thing. Defiant. Full of fire and attitude. All things that turned me on and made my cock throb. My eyes darted to her lips. What I wouldn't give to see them wrapped around my cock, preferably with that same angry glare still burning on her face.

The guy I held off to the side by the back of the neck thrashed. I tightened my hold, making him hiss in pain.

"Why don't we try this again. And if either of you lie to me, I'm going to kill you instead," I said huskily, tapping my gun on her cheek.

I didn't necessarily *want* to kill her. I wanted to feel that curvy body writhing beneath me, her screaming my name in that sexy Spanish accent of hers at least once before I killed her.

But if need be, I would.

"Do you two know each other?"

When neither of them answered, I started counting down. "One. Two. Thre—"

"Wait!" the guy croaked out.

"*;Mantén tu maldita boca cerrada!*" *Keep your damn mouth shut!* she hissed angrily.

"But—"

"*Me escuchas. No. Otro. Palabra,*" You heard me. Not. Another. Word, she growled, her eyes never wavering from mine.

Even if I didn't understand Spanish, the fact that they were having a conversation answered my question for me. It also revealed she was high up in the ranks of the cartel, since he obeyed her command, not saying another word.

She glared at me like she wanted nothing more than to claw my fucking eyes out. Her hand locked around my wrist, her fingers still coated with Darryl's blood. At first I thought she was pulling some stupid move, trying to steal my gun, but then she jammed it harder into her skin, no doubt leaving bruises with the amount of force she used.

"If you're gonna kill me, kill me. I'm not afraid to die. So if you're gonna do it, hurry up. Otherwise, get the fuck out of my face."

For the briefest moment, all I could do was stare at her in shock. I could tell by the look in her eyes she was entirely serious. She wasn't scared to die. There wasn't an ounce of fear on her face. Just total calmness, complete ease, like this was just another day at the office.

I'd never met a woman like her. She was fearless. Even in the face of death.

Bratva women were tough as shit. If they decided they wanted to be in the life, they were put through the same rigorous training as the men. Taught to be just as ruthless. Just as cunning. To be willing to die for the family, like any of us would.

And yet, none of the Bratva women I'd met had ever shown such a complete and total lack of fear.

Except maybe my sister. But she was batshit crazy.

The sound of my phone ringing cut through my thoughts. It made me realise I'd been staring at her. And she had been staring at me. Her face had taken on a slight softness. For what reason, I couldn't say. If she was looking to bring out that same thing in me, she was wasting her time. I didn't do soft. I was incapable of it.

Keeping my gun locked under her chin (because if I was being honest, looking down at her while she glared up at me, my much larger frame towering over hers, did all kinds of things to the filthy beast inside of me), I gripped the neck in my hand more tightly and hurled the man backwards, confident my brothers would secure him before he even got off the ground.

I reached behind me and pulled out my phone from my back pocket. “*Da?*” Yes? I answered, never taking my eyes off the little firecracker before me. So much sexual tension burned between us, like a solar flare.

Oh, she hated me. It was obvious by the look in her eyes. But she wanted to fuck me too. And that was okay. Hate sex was fucking amazing.

“What are you lot doing standing around out there like a bunch of idiots?” Father’s voice echoed in my ear. “The mission debrief is in thirty minutes. Lock those prisoners down and get your asses inside.”

I hung up. There was no need for a reply. When Father gave an order, he expected it to be followed without question.

I tucked my phone back into my pocket, keeping my gun pointed at Firecracker. Since she refused to give me her real name, Firecracker would have to do. It suited her a hell of a lot better than ‘Mary’ did.

“Erik, take the prisoners to the pit. Put them in the same room and make sure they’re locked down tight,” I commanded, looking at the man to my left.

Erik was one of our high-ranking Captains, responsible for keeping the soldiers in check. He’d been with the family for over twenty years. Loyal to the bone, with an impeccable work ethic. He had a solid build for a man in his late forties, with a full head of dark hair, a big bushy beard to match and dark brown eyes.

“Yes, boss,” Erik nodded, pulling a pair of zip ties from his back pocket. He slapped them on Firecracker’s wrists and signalled to a few of the soldiers standing around to grab the other prisoners.

Firecracker fought, like I knew she would, struggling as Erik dragged her into the warehouse, cursing us all in Spanish along the way.

My brothers appeared at my side, Nik on my right and Lukyan on my left.

“You sure it’s a good idea putting them together? You know Father prefers them kept separate to make it harder for them to form an escape plan,” Nik said, bending slightly to pat Boris on the head. He was still wearing his dirty, bloody clothes, Kevlar vest strapped to his chest and his body riddled with guns and knives. He was only an inch or so shorter than me, but he had a similar build.

I grunted, turning to head back to the house. The dogs followed me, and I released them with a command. “*Vol’no.*” *Free.* Their demeanour changed in an instant and they ran off, nipping at each other playfully.

“I want to hear what they say to each other when they think no one is listening,” I said as Nik and Lukyan walked beside me. “Make sure the cameras are turned on in the room.”

“Got it.” Nik pulled out his phone, logging into the surveillance system. He was really into that techy shit. He had an affinity for it. He rigged the entire thing so he could remotely access it from his phone whenever he wanted to. It was also highly secure, riddled with firewalls and shit. No one could gain access unless he allowed them to.

“Did you notice the interaction between that chick and the other prisoner?” Lukyan asked, a thoughtful look in his eyes. “You were totally right, Zander. She’s hooked up with the Zetas. Whoever she is, she ranks highly enough for the grunts to listen to her. Do you need any help with the interrogation? I wouldn’t mind getting a little closer to her,” he winked.

I stiffened, the image of my younger brother touching Firecracker soaring through my mind. “No,” I grunted. There was no fucking way I was letting Lukyan anywhere near her. He was a goddamn sex fiend.

Like me, he would never force a woman. But with those good looks and charm, he never had to. Women literally threw themselves at him. If he was alone with her, in an enclosed space, with nothing but him and her and those suave pickup lines he loved to throw out all the time, who knows what could happen.

No. There was no way I was going to allow that.

Lukyan frowned, his brows lowered in confusion. “No? Why? You always let me get in on the fun.”

By ‘get in on the fun’, he meant torture them until they cried. Or pissed their pants. Or both.

Though I knew that wasn't what he had in mind for Firecracker.

"Because I said so."

"But—"

"I said no, Lukyan," I snapped, grabbing his shoulder and forcing him to a stop. "You stay away from her, you hear me?"

"Aww, what? Come on, Zander," he gave me a shit-eating grin. "I bet she's never had a Bratva man before."

"Lay one finger on her and I'll break it off, got it? *I'm* dealing with the Zeta prisoners. Not you. If I need your help, I'll ask for it. Until then, stay out of the pit. Now go get your ass ready for the mission debrief." My voice dropped to a dangerously threatening tone, so he'd know I wasn't fucking around.

This was Lukyan though. He never could take a hint. Even when it was staring him right in the face.

"Seriously, what's the big dea—ow!"

I squeezed his shoulder to the point of pain, making him cry out.

"Okay! Okay! I got it. Jeez." I let him go and he rubbed his shoulder, glaring at me. He pounded his chest like a gorilla. "Hulk angry," he grunted, imitating me.

That little shit.

I stepped forward at the same time he stepped back. Lukyan's childish laughter hit the air as he ran back towards the house.

Turning back to face Nik, I frowned at the look on his face. "What?"

His brown eyes studied me closely. "Nothing," he eventually said, shaking his head. "Nothing."

I wasn't sure I believed that. He clearly had something he wanted to say. The thing about Nik, though, was if he didn't want to talk about something, he wouldn't. And I wasn't in the mood to beat it out of him. At least, not right now.

"Whatever. Clean yourself up and get to Father's office for the debrief," I said, heading towards the house.



After I showered and got a quick bite to eat, I walked into Father's office feeling refreshed but tired. It had been a loooong forty-eight hours. First with the attack on Illayana's wedding, then tracking down those fuckers who stole hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of inventory from our armoury, and lastly mounting a rescue mission to get my little sister back. It had all left me running on fumes. The last of my energy was all but depleted.

My limbs ached, the faint traces of a headache starting to creep into the far corners of my mind. The smell of weed and alcohol lingered in the air, curling around the room. The weed was courtesy of Lukyan, who sat in front of Father's desk, hair still wet from his shower.

Father had a strict 'no drug' policy. He needed all of us with clear, sound minds. Not hyped up on drugs. But he was a bit more lenient with weed. Especially right after a dangerous mission.

Lukyan had switched his combat gear for a pair of grey sweats and no shirt, leaving his chest bare. A joint hung loosely from his lips, his eyes dazed and glassy.

Nik sat beside him in his own chair, one hand clasped around a tall glass of vodka. He didn't look any worse for wear, but I knew he had to be just as exhausted as I was. His laptop sat closed in his lap. The damn thing was like a security blanket for him. He carried it everywhere.

Like Lukyan, he was wearing a pair of sweats (his dark blue) and he also had a dark, long-sleeved shirt on.

"Good, you're here," Father said, his deep voice cutting through the silence. He sat behind his desk still dressed in his bloody clothes, his fingers tapping impatiently on the wood. "We can begin. Sit down," he inclined his head to the couch off to the side and I took a seat, stretching out my body.

"What about Illayana?" Lukyan asked, puffs of smoke leaving his lips as he spoke.

"Your sister is exempt from this debrief. She needs to rest."

Father was a man of many rules. He was a creature of habit. Routine. Always doing the same thing the same way for as long as I can remember. One of those things was the after mission debrief.

It didn't matter if we were doing an unplanned infiltration—like tonight—or a regular drop with one of our clients. We *always* had a debrief afterwards. We discussed everything that happened and if there was anything we could have done better.

Father believed there was always room for improvement. That we could always be better. Do better. He expected the best from his children, and if we didn't give it...

Lukyan coughed violently. "What?" he choked, smacking his chest. "How is that fair? Even when I broke my leg when that deal with the Triad went bad, you *still* made me show up to the after mission debrief."

Nik snorted. "Not exactly a solid argument on your part, idiot. You *had* to be there. It was your fault the deal turned sour."

"Hey! How was I supposed to know the chick I fucked the night before would turn out to be the *Yakuza's* daughter? Or that she was engaged? She didn't say shit to me about it."

"You should have known better than to hit a Triad club the night before a meet with them," Nik said, taking a sip of his drink.

Lukyan waved a hand. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever. The point is—"

"Enough you two," Father cut in. "We have a lot to get through tonight, so sit back and shut up."

Father began, delving right into it. He checked things off one by one on his notebook as he addressed each issue he had with our actions. "Lukyan, you fucked around too much, not taking things seriously enough. Pull your head in. Nikolai, too slow, move faster. Aleksandr, pay more attention to your surroundings."

He spoke about both the gun retrieval mission and Illayana's rescue, focusing on key points he thought we needed to improve on, as well as questioning us on why we pulled certain moves.

By the time he was done, we had all been well and truly put in our place.

"Alright, onto the next point of business. Your sister said Rayna was the one who drugged her and handed her off to Nero—"

"Wait, what?" I frowned, leaning forward. "Rayna? As in our *cousin*, Rayna?"

Lukyan turned slightly to look at me. "Oh shit, that's right. You weren't in the car when she told us what happened. Rayna pulled her away from her guards and stuck a needle in her neck, knocking her straight on her ass."

Adrian—one of Illayana's guards—told us Rayna had asked to speak to her privately. It was the reason they weren't with Illayana when she was taken. But I never would have thought she was the one responsible for

kidnapping Illayana. She was a selfish, entitled bitch, but she was family. We'd never had a betrayal so close to home before.

"Do you think Dominik knew? That he was involved?" Nik asked.

"He has to be. Rayna doesn't do shit without her father's say so," I replied, shaking my head in frustration.

There was a lot of bad blood between us and them, but betraying the family and handing Illayana over to be raped and murdered? No. Even *I* would never have foreseen such a treacherous move.

Father leaned back in his chair. "I agree. My brother had to have known, maybe he even orchestrated the whole thing. The truth is, we have no way of knowing exactly how involved he was with the whole thing until I speak with him. At this moment, he's ignoring all my calls and has gone into hiding, like the little bitch he is," his eyes locked on Nik. "How long will it take for you to find him?"

Nik frowned in thought. "Depends how well he hides, if he chooses to stay out of the spotlight. But I can set up a facial recognition program that will scan for him over the thousands of cameras in Vegas, and it will alert me when he shows his face. If he's still here."

A dark, angry look crossed Father's face. "Oh, he's still here alright. This was a power move of his. There's no way he'd leave the country now. Do it. Find him. And search for Rayna too. I want them both."

"Yes, Father." Nik flipped open his laptop, typing with one hand as he slowly sipped from the glass in his other.

Father's gaze cut to me. "While Nikolai's doing that, Aleksandr, I want you to interrogate the Zeta prisoners. Find out everything you can about them, including why the fuck they're taking orders from the Outfit. If they don't talk, you *make* them talk."

I inclined my head. There was no point in telling him that was what I was planning to do anyway. He wouldn't take kindly to it. Not in the presence of others, at least.

Father was a bit more lenient when we were alone. He didn't care if I spoke back to him or disagreed with him, as long as it was done privately.

Father continued handing out our next assignments. "Lukyan, you're on inventory."

My younger brother groaned. He *hated* inventory. Loathed it. But it was a necessary evil. We inventoried our supplies once a week to ensure

everything matched with our records. And since our armoury had recently been raided, an inventory was even more essential.

“Go through all the guns we recovered and match them with what we have on file. Make sure none are missing,” he continued.

“Yes, Father,” Lukyan all but whined.

“Good, now we have another issue to address. We’ve been approached by a new up and coming MC gang operating out of North Las Vegas. The Dirty Vultures. They’re wanting to buy a case of MP5s and M4 SOCOMs.”

Lukyan whistled. “That’s alotta hardware.”

“How did they get our information?” I asked.

Father was paranoid at the best of times. He only ever did deals with people he knew or people that had been vetted. Which meant someone we’d worked with in the past had given them our details.

“I have no idea. They refused to say. But they were adamant we could provide them with what they needed. And they offered to pay double.”

“*Double?*” Nik placed his now-empty glass down on Father’s desk. “Where are they going to get that kind of cash?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Father grunted. “You know I don’t deal with people I haven’t vetted.”

“So you told them no?” I highly doubted they took kindly to that.

“Of course I did. They weren’t happy about it, obviously. Said we’d regret turning them away, that we didn’t want to make an enemy out of them. All that threatening, posturing bullshit. So I want to keep a close eye on them, monitor their movements and make sure they’re not planning anything stupid. Everyone reach out to your contacts on the streets and gather as much intel as you can about them. I want to know where they eat. Where they sleep. If they’ve got wives, children. Everything.”

“I think they call them Ol’ Ladies in the MC. Which I never quite understood. Who would wanna call their woman an old lady?” Lukyan took a long drag of his joint, blowing smoke rings. “Seems super weird to me.”

“It’s a position of authority in the MC. Some of those Sweet Butts hang around for years hoping to be made someone’s Ol’ Lady.” Nik’s eyes never left his laptop screen as he spoke.

“I know that,” Lukyan snapped. He hated when Nik explained things to him like he was stupid. But that was just Nik being Nik. He was a fact checker, and sometimes he really couldn’t help spouting off some technically correct statement.

Nik and Lukyan started to argue, which I wasn't all that surprised with, to be honest. Lukyan had the power to make anyone argue with him.

"Alright, enough," Father sighed, cutting in. "That's all for tonight. Go get some rest and you can start your tasks tomorrow," he waved towards the door, dismissing us. "Aleksandr, you stay," he said briskly when I stood to leave.

I held in my sigh of annoyance because I knew if Father wanted to talk to me alone, it meant something bad was about to happen.

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Chapter Five



As Nik and Lukyan said their goodbyes I pulled my phone out, sending a text to Mila.

Me: My house—30 minutes.

She responded instantly.

Mila: Can't wait ;)

I shot another quick text to Ethan and Daniel, the guards manning the front gate, telling them to let her in when she arrived, and then tucked my phone back into my pocket, taking a seat again.

Mila was Erik's daughter. She and I had been seeing each other casually for years. She was by no means my girlfriend, despite what she liked to think sometimes. We didn't go out on dates, or cuddle, or do any of that other couple-y shit people did.

We fucked. And that was *all* we did.

Mila liked to think that made her more important than she actually was. That fucking the *Pakhan*'s son, the future leader of the Bratva, somehow gave her power and authority over others. She wielded it like a weapon against the other Bratva women.

I didn't give a shit. What she chose to say, how she chose to act, meant nothing to me. She was hot, a good fuck and had the same sexual kinks I

did. Those were the *only* reasons I put up with her crap.

When the door to Father's office shut, my brothers taking their leave, Father stood, shrugging out of his Armani suit jacket. He unclipped his Kevlar vest next, plopping it on the desk like a giant weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

A comfortable silence hung between us, one neither one of us felt the need to fill, as he unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt and rolled up his sleeves.

Lines of tension marred his face, exhaustion flaring in his eyes. I knew Illayana's kidnapping affected him greatly, but it wasn't until moments like this, when he dropped the *Pakhan* mask that I was able to truly see his vulnerable side—a side he very rarely allowed others to witness.

Father picked up a pitcher of vodka and poured himself a tall glass. He took three big mouthfuls.

"What's going on?" I demanded. Father only drank like that when something was seriously wrong.

He chuckled softly, swirling his glass in slow circles. "You know, there was once a time when you wouldn't have dared speak to me like that."

I scoffed, leaning back and resting one foot on the coffee table in front of me. "That was a long time ago, old man."

Growing up, Father always treated me differently. Expected more from me. Held me to a higher standard than that of my younger siblings. He knew that one day, I would take his place.

He was tougher. Stricter. Downright fucking evil at times.

But he also encouraged me to question him. To never be afraid to speak my mind with him. Privately, anyway.

It took a long time for me to get comfortable with that. Right up until my late teens, I'd been absolutely petrified of the man. Not in a 'my father's abusive' kind of way, but more in a 'his presence demands fearful respect' kind of way. And then eventually that fearful part just faded away.

"What's going on?" I asked again.

Father sighed heavily, collapsing into his chair. His drink sloshed out of the glass, liquid splattering on the floor. Father didn't care. He just took another drink, draining what was left. "Your Grandfather is coming to Las Vegas."

I blinked once, twice, three times in complete and utter shock. My foot slammed back to the ground as I leaned forward, my arms resting on my thighs. "Grandfather? Really?"

“Really.” Father poured himself another tall glass. “He called just before Illayana’s wedding. He’s due in two weeks.”

“Why?” I asked in confusion.

Grandfather never left Russia, and I mean *never*. When he sent us over here to establish a Bratva base in Las Vegas, he never once came to visit. Not even when my mother died. All he did was send a fucking ‘my condolences’ card.

Guilt and anguish slammed into me like it always did whenever I thought about my mother. I clenched my fists hard, grinding my teeth together. I locked my emotions down tight, banishing any thought of my mother to the back of my mind, refusing to acknowledge it.

“He didn’t elaborate as to why,” Father answered, throwing his head back and downing another mouthful of vodka. If he kept going at this rate, he’d blackout soon. I had a feeling that was exactly what he wanted. “Just told me he was coming and then hung up. The bastard.”

“Do you think he knew about the shit Dominik and Rayna pulled? That maybe he’s coming over to handle it? Handle them?”

Father scoffed. “Sergei would *never* get in the middle of a dispute between Dominik and I. If anything, that old fucker would encourage it. You know how he always used to pit Dom and I against each other. In his mind, if Dom is strong enough to take the role of *Pakhan* from me, I didn’t deserve the position in the first place.”

“So then why is he coming here? What other possible reason could there be, if not that?”

“I don’t know. That’s what worries me,” Father sighed, rubbing his temples. “There’s so much to prepare for his arrival. He’ll check our records, our inventory, everything. He’s a stickler for the small things. The minutest of details.”

“So are you,” I grunted. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it all. I’ll keep on top of Lukyan and make sure he does the inventory *properly*.”

“No, I’ll do that. I need you to focus on the prisoners.”

I frowned. “I can do both.”

“I know you can. That’s not the issue. If Sergei gets here and we still don’t have a clear, definitive answer as to why the Los Zetas are taking orders from the Outfit, I’ll never hear the fucking end of it. He’ll think we’ve gone soft, that we can’t handle our business. I don’t need that shit.”

“Who’s to say it was even the Outfit they were taking orders from? What if it was just Nero, and now that he’s dead they’re back to doing their own thing?”

Father thought on it for a moment. “It’s a good theory. But we’ll never know for sure unless we get one of them to talk.”

An evil look crossed my face. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about that, Father. I’ll get them to talk. One way or another.”

Father smiled. It was a truly dark and vicious smile. “Of that I have no doubt, my son. Now, there’s something else I need to tell you.”

Fucking hell. “What? What is it now?”

“You’ll be getting a trainee in a few days.”

My brows snapped together. “A what?”

“Trai-nee,” he enunciated, like I didn’t understand the word.

I glared.

“It turns out Mikhail has a son.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Mikhail? A son? Since when?”

“Since a woman turned up on his doorstep and dumped the kid there, along with a paternity test.”

“Oh shit,” I laughed. “How old is he?”

“A few months shy of eighteen. And according to Mikhail, he’s a total pussy—his words. Apparently he cried when he saw some guy get shot.”

I shrugged. “He’s a civilian, not born into the life. It’s probably the first time the kid has ever seen a person die before. Can’t blame him for freaking out.”

“I agree. But a man of Mikhail’s position can’t afford to be seen as weak. Having a son that bursts into tears at the first sign of violence threatens their lives.”

“So, Mikhail’s sending him to you to train? Toughen up?”

Father nodded. “Essentially, yes. Considering the bulk of Mikhail’s soldiers are men we’ve trained, it makes sense.”

It did, which annoyed the shit out of me. I didn’t have the time or patience to deal with a new trainee right now. Especially one as fresh as this kid.

“How do we know he can even be trusted? He’s lived the first seventeen years of his life as a law abiding citizen. Who’s to say he’s not just going to run to the cops the first chance he gets and tell them everything he’s seen?”

Father gave me his ‘Do you think I’m an idiot?’ look. “He’s not going to be involved in the day-to-day workings. You’ll train him in hand-to-hand combat, weaponry. Take him on a few routine jobs. Teach him self discipline, control. Toughen him up so he doesn’t faint at the sight of blood. That’s it. He’ll be assigned a tail the entire time he’s here. All his texts and calls will be monitored. Plus, he’s been warned by Mikhail about what will happen to him if he snitches.”

Well, fuck. I couldn’t really argue with any of that, could I?

“Why can’t Nikolai do it? I don’t need some kid shadowing me while I’m trying to get shit done.”

“Because I want *you* to do it, Aleksandr. You’re not *Pakhan*—”

“Yet,” I smirked.

“And until you are, you’ll bloody well listen to me.”

I had to refrain from rolling my eyes. He let me get away with a lot of shit, but rolling my eyes at him? No. If he caught me doing that shit, I’d be in the ring with him. “Yes, Father.”

“Good.”

My phone dinged in my pocket. I pulled it out, glancing at the screen.

Mila: I’m here. Just walking through the gate.

I got to my feet. “Was there anything else?”

Father waved me off. “Nothing that can’t wait until later. Go on. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I bowed my head and left. As I walked out of his office, I heard the front door open, Lukyan’s voice echoing down the hall.

“Eck. What are *you* doing here?”

“Hi, Lukyan,” Mila said back, a fake sweetness in her tone. “It’s nice to see you too.”

“I didn’t say it was nice to see you.”

I rounded the corner just in time to see Lukyan slam the door in Mila’s face. Relentless knocking followed next.

I shook my head. “Was that necessary?” I asked as Lukyan made his way towards me, an icy pole in his mouth.

“Yes,” he slurped. “She’s annoying. Don’t know why you put up with her. She’s a conniving little bitch. You know she’s only fucking you because you’ll be the next *Pakhan*, right? If it was me or Nikolai, she’d be bouncing on our dicks, not yours.”

“Of course I know that,” I scoffed. “You think she’s the only one using someone here?” I moved to the front door and opened it.

Mila stood there dressed in a long black trench coat, her dark hair left free, flowing down her back in long curls. She was tall, but the pair of ‘fuck me’ pumps on her feet made her even taller. She had a slender face, clear, pale skin, full, plump lips, and dark hazel eyes.

“Alek,” she smiled, stepping in for a hug. The glare on my face made her rethink it, her smile faltering.

She did this every time, even when she knew I didn’t do hugs. She constantly tried to push the boundaries, hoping the more time we spent together, the more affection she tried to push on me, the closer we would become.

We wouldn’t, and I told her that. She knew I wanted nothing more than a casual sexual relationship. But that didn’t stop her from fucking trying, did it?

“Let’s go,” I grunted, using my body to usher her backwards.

Lukyan yelled, “Try not to catch any STDs!” as I shut the door.

Mila’s face turned red with anger, but she said nothing as I steered her towards the warehouse.

Lukyan wasn’t a big fan of Mila, and he had no problem letting her know about it. Lukyan didn’t have a problem letting anyone know anything. The damn idiot had no filter, had no issue saying the first thing that popped into his head. Even if it was completely inappropriate. It was why he got his ass into trouble 99% of the time.

“I was glad to get your text. I wasn’t sure if I was going to see you this week.” She walked like a pro along the gravel pathway, not a single misstep as she trailed behind me.

I grunted. With a woman like Mila, you had to be extra careful with the signals you put out there. Making plans with her more than once every few weeks would make her think things were more serious than they were. Considering I only saw her a few days ago, I could see why she thought we wouldn’t be meeting again this week. But I had a sexual itch that needed scratching, one that was amplified by my encounter with Firecracker.

When we got to the warehouse, I opened the door and flicked my head, signalling for Mila to walk inside. She gave me a sultry smile, running her fingers across my chest as she strutted past me, adding an extra sway to her hips.

Blood rushed to my cock. Adrenaline from the fight still flowed through me, amping up my sexual needs. An image of that dark-haired, tattooed, amber-eyed woman downstairs soared through my mind. It only made things worse, making me painfully hard.

I shut the door with a loud bang and Mila jolted in surprise. I kept the lights off, leaving the place shrouded in darkness. A few streams of light cut through the room, giving off just enough illumination to be able to see.

“Strip,” I commanded harshly, whipping off my shirt.

Mila turned to face me. Heat flared in her eyes as she stared at my naked chest, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. “Don’t you want to talk for a bit first, Alek? I know your sister’s kidnapping must have been hard for you. We could get some dinner and talk about it? You know I’m always here for you if you need someone to confide in.”

Yes, I did know that. But it wasn’t because she gave a shit about me. It was because she was trying to get me to care about her. To need her. To want her past a physical relationship. Everything she did had an ulterior motive to it, some other purpose than the one she portrayed. It had nothing to do with me and everything to do with my position.

“That’s not what you’re here for Mila, and you know it. So you can either take off your clothes, or I’ll find another woman who will.”

Her lips pursed in agitation. She looked as though she was going to argue, but in the end decided against it. She walked her fingers down her chest and gripped the sash belt wrapped around her body, undoing it quickly. Her trench coat fell away, pooling at her feet.

She was completely naked, and my dick stood to attention. Mila was a beautiful woman. She had a runway model body. Tall and slim, not a single ounce of fat. Her tits were on the smaller side, but high and perky. And her legs? It was like they went on for days in those six-inch heels.

“Safe word?” I grunted, cracking my neck from side to side.

“*Yablonki*,” *Apples*, she said in Russian, goosebumps pebbling her skin.

I nodded. Her safe word hadn’t changed the entire time we’d been fucking, but I always made sure we went over it before we got intimate.

I rolled my shoulders back and leaned forward until my lips were an inch away from hers.

Her breath hitched, her eyes darting down to my lips before flicking back up to my eyes.

A wicked smile crossed my face. “Run,” I whispered.

Mila spun and sprinted off, her heels clicking along the concrete floor.

Adrenaline surged in my blood, my heart pounding in my chest with excitement. The thrill of the chase. I fucking *loved* this part. The anticipation. Watching my prey run as fast as they could to get away from me, only to wind up beneath me in the end. I could barely keep still, my hands twitching with an overwhelming need to chase. To catch. To fucking devour.

I counted down in my head from ten, giving her enough of a head start to make things fun. Interesting.

I heard every movement she made. Every step she took. Every time she banged into a piece of gym equipment, the lack of light making it difficult for her to see. I could hear it all. It only excited me further, fuelling that deep, primal beast within me.

I bent down, picking up her sash belt and wrapping it around my hand before I went after her.

I hunted her, tracking her across the wide-open space as she ducked and weaved, trying to find a place to hide. I moved when she moved, slowly gaining ground until I was only a few paces behind her. She had no idea.

Mila shivered, glancing around uncertainly. She knew I was close. Prey instinctively knew when a predator was closing in. She could feel me, my presence, but she couldn't see me.

That was the way I liked it.

I stayed low and off to the side of her, using the leg press machine to hide my large frame. I brushed my fingers lightly over her lower back and she shrieked, spinning fast, only to find the space behind her empty.

She backed up a few paces before turning to run off again, this time faster than before. Her breaths were coming out short and fast, her whole body trembling.

I took chase, my footsteps thudding loudly behind her. It was a tactic. If need be, I could move silently, but I wanted her to hear me. Hear me gaining ground on her, getting closer and closer.

She took cover hiding behind the boxing ring located in the centre of the room, her chest rising and falling hard, her head darting left to right, looking for me. I gave her a few minutes to catch her breath, waiting patiently, never taking my eyes off my prey.

When she went to move again, I pounced, running up on her from behind. I wrapped an arm around her torso, slapping a hand to her mouth to

muffle her shriek of surprise. Her legs flailed wildly as I lifted her off her feet, her nails digging into my forearm. She fought against me with everything she had, bucking and twisting, screaming and scratching.

That primal part of me roared, loving the fight. It hungered for more. To bite. To claw. To play without the restraint I held over him. But my beast was too wild, and I'd yet to find a woman who could handle his savagery.

I dragged Mila down to the ground, pinning her down by the wrists, face down.

"Alek," she moaned, pushing her ass out into the air.

It grated on my fucking nerves when she called me that.

I slapped the back of her thigh. "Spread your legs."

Her legs opened far and wide, stretching to the point that I knew it had to be uncomfortable. I unwound the sash belt from around my hand and used it to tie her hands together, then I tied the remainder of it around the bench post in front of me.

Once I was done, I leaned back, admiring my prey.

Mila squirmed beneath me, her skin flushed, a sheen of sweat covering her back. Her hips swivelled, searching for something to grind against, and an impatient, frustrated noise left her mouth when she couldn't find anything.

I palmed her ass, digging my fingers roughly into her skin. She winced but didn't say her safe word.

I gripped her by the hips and hiked her ass up into the air until her pussy was lined up with my face. Her upper body was still stuck to the ground, hands tied securely around the bench post, gripping it tightly.

"Please, Alek," she whined, her body shaking.

I pushed her up a little higher. Her pussy was dripping wet. Glistening. I blew softly against her clit first, and she whimpered, then I dragged my tongue from her clit to her entrance,

Fuck, I loved eating pussy. The feel of my tongue between those slick folds. The softness of that delicate pink flesh.

Good lord.

Next to sex, it was my favourite thing to do. Every woman had a unique taste, specific to them. Some were bad. Some were good. And some were downright heavenly.

I usually enjoyed Mila's taste, but for some reason I wasn't as into it as I usually was. And it was pissing me off.

I swirled my tongue around her clit, sucking it hard into my mouth.

Mila groaned deeply. "Yes, Alek. Yes. Feels so good, baby."

I yanked my face away like she burned me, glaring down at her even though she couldn't see me. "How many times have I told you not to call me that?"

"I'm sorry! It was an accident. Please, keep going," she whined in desperation, but it was too late. I allowed her to call me 'Alek', but 'baby'? Fuck no. That I'd never allow.

I dropped her lower half back to the ground.

"No! Alek, please. I'm sorry! I won't do it again," she cried, trying to look back at me.

I gripped her roughly by the chin and forced her head to face forward. "You've lost the right to look at me. You know the rules Mila, and you broke them. Now you suffer the consequences."

She begged and pleaded. Apologised over and over again. But if I permitted her even a shred of leniency, she'd take full advantage.

I pulled out a condom, the plastic crinkling as I tore it open with my teeth.

Mila propped herself up on her forearms and knees. Like I knew she would, she murmured in a sultry voice, "You know you don't have to wear a condom. I'm on the pill."

She said it every time we fucked. Like clockwork. And like all the other times, I ignored her, sheathing my cock.

Mila was ambitious. Driven. Manipulative. She had her eyes set on being Queen of the Bratva. There was no way I was risking an accidental pregnancy.

I ran the head of my cock over her pussy, coating it in her wetness before I rammed into her in one deep thrust.

Chapter Six



Someone was getting fucked. And I mean well and truly *fucked*. Moans of pleasure echoed out of the vent high up on the wall, feminine squeals reverberating around my small prison.

Whoever it was, was having the time of their fucking life, screaming 'keep going' and 'don't stop' over and over again.

She sounded like a damn pig being gutted in my opinion, but hey, that could just be my jealousy talking. She was having a *way* better time than I was. I wish I was getting railed right now, instead of being stuck in this fucking place.

I was shackled to a chair in the middle of a plain, nondescript room, my hands cuffed behind me. Roberto, Angel, Julian and Liam were all in the same boat as me, crammed into this tiny space like fucking sardines.

Dry blood coated the walls and floors, a smell of death permeating the air. This was obviously a torture room of some sort and keeping us in here was meant to scare us. Intimidate us.

It didn't work, at least not for me. I had a place just like this back home, and mine was ten times more menacing.

But the men? Yeah, they were freaked the fuck out.

Angel thrashed for what had to be the hundredth time in the span of the last hour, trying to get free. The others had long since given up.

"We have to get out of here," he barked, straining against his restraints. "They're gonna kill us. *Oh, dios.* They're gonna fucking kill us." He kept

chanting it like some stupid mantra, his voice shaking.

“Shut up, Angel,” Roberto snapped, his brows creased in an angry frown.

Out of the four of them, Roberto had the highest rank as Lieutenant. The rest were all Falcons, the eyes and ears for the cartel, one of the lowest ranks within the organisation. But Angel didn’t give a shit about decorum right now. He was letting his fear consume him, clouding his judgement.

“You shut up. This is *your* fault. All your fault. If you didn’t lower your guard around Nero, he never would have been able to—”

“*Suficiente,*” *Enough,* I hissed in Spanish, cutting in. “*Pelear entre nosotros no va a hacer ningún bien. Y hablar en español. Por lo que sabemos, podrían estar escuchando.*” *Fighting amongst ourselves isn’t going to do any good. And speak in Spanish. For all we know, they could be listening.*

Angel very wisely shut his mouth. He could get away with back chatting to Roberto. If we made it out of this alive, the most he’d get is a beatdown. But talking back to me? He’d have his head cut from his fucking shoulders.

I glanced around the room again. High up in the far-right hand corner of the room was a sleek, modern camera. The flashing red light showed it was recording our every move. There were no windows and only one door.

It was smart to assume there were guards stationed outside. There were five of us, so unless they posted a guard for each of us, we had the numbers. But they were more than likely armed and we were at a serious disadvantage, what with us being cuffed and all.

Plans formed in my head. Some good, that had a slight chance of working, and some bad. Horrible.

“*¿Que hacemos ahora?*” *What do we do now?* Roberto asked.

“*Esperamos, averiguar exactamente lo que quieren de nosotros. Qué cartas temenos.*” *We wait, find out exactly what they want from us. What cards we hold.* I turned my body slightly to look Roberto in the eyes. “*Cuéntame todo lo que pasó, justo hasta tu captura.*” *Tell me everything that happened, right up until your capture.*

From the moment Nero kidnapped me, I was kept completely isolated from the crew. I had no clue what transpired in the last few months. I needed Roberto to catch me up.

After he was done, I had the overwhelming urge to bash his fucking face in.

“*¿Estás bromeando?*” Are you fucking kidding me? I hissed angrily. “*¿En qué mundo pensaste que era una buena idea ayudar a secuestrar a la hija del jefe de la mafia rusa? ¿En qué demonios estabas pensando?*” In what world did you think it was a good idea to help kidnap the daughter of the boss of the Russian mafia? What the hell were you thinking?

Roberto swallowed nervously. “*Nerón no nos dio opción. Nos dijo que si no ayudábamos, te mataría. Juan dijo que teníamos que hacer lo que quisiera. Nero didn't give us a choice. He told us if we didn't help, he'd kill you. Juan said to do whatever he wanted.*

I cursed. Fucking Juan. I don't think he realised that by giving the order that not only had he kept Nero at bay, but he'd made enemies of not only the Cosa Nostra, but the Bratva too.

He'd well and truly fucked us.

When Nero first approached the cartel for an alliance, we denied him. Getting involved in squabble between mafia families wasn't our thing, and he had nothing to offer that could sway our decision.

We operated primarily in Columbus, which was roughly halfway between Chicago and New York. That put us smack dab in the middle of the feud between the Outfit and the Cosa Nostra.

Over the years, we'd had very little to do with either of them. We imported our drugs straight from Mexico and were very careful about only selling within our territory, never venturing close to either side of the border between us and them. We had no interest in interacting with them.

We should have kept it that way. Agreeing to meet with Nero to begin with had been a grave mistake, one with dire consequences we'd be paying for for years.

“*No es como si realmente la fuéramos a violar.*” It's not like we were actually going to rape her, Julian tried to justify. “*Estábamos allí principalmente por intimidación. Solo sus hombres estaban en esa mierda de lotería.*” We were mainly there for intimidation. It was only his men in on that lottery shit.

“*¿Lo saben? Do they know that?*” I asked.

“*Javier intentó decírselo. No lo escucharon.*” Javier tried to tell them. They wouldn't listen.

Yeah, I couldn't really blame them on that one. If I thought someone was trying to rape someone I loved, I wouldn't give them a chance to explain themselves either.

"Argh, this is such a clusterfuck," I groaned, my head rolling back on my shoulders. How the fuck were we going to convince them we didn't want any part in this?

You could always tell them the truth. Who you are.

I shut that voice down straight away. That was a stupid fucking idea. Nero found out who I was (though I've still got no idea how) and that fucker kidnapped me to use me against the cartel.

Who's to say the Bratva won't do the exact same thing if they find out?

No. I'd rather die than be used like that again, as some sort of stupid bargaining chip.

"Muy bien, escuchen, cuando regresen, todos mantengan la boca cerrada, ¿me oyen? Yo hablaré todo. Hasta entonces, por difícil que sea, trata de descansar un poco." Alright, listen, when they come back you all keep your mouths shut, you hear me? I'll do all the talking. Until then, as hard as it might be, try and get some rest.

"Rest?" Liam snorted. "Who can get any rest with all that fucking noise?"

He had a point. The sex noises coming from above were beyond obscene. It was like a damn porno was going on. Whoever the chick was, she was going all out to make sure her partner knew she was enjoying it.

"Just try." I closed my eyes, trying to take my own advice. It was hard. She was screeching like a dying cat, and I wanted to drive a fucking spike through my ear.

"Why don't we just tell them who you are—"

"Cállate, Roberto." Be quiet, Roberto.

"I'm just—"

"No voy a decírtelo de nuevo. Le han dado sus órdenes." I'm not going to tell you again. You've been given your orders.

Roberto clamped his mouth shut and nodded stiffly.

The sex sounds upstairs reached a crescendo, and then died off in an instant. Relief filled me. Hopefully I could finally get some fucking sleep.

Chapter Seven



I knocked on Illayana's bedroom door the following morning, a tight stiffness in my shoulders. Last night had not gone how I thought it would. After a good fuck, I usually woke up feeling relaxed and refreshed, ready for the coming day. This time, I woke up irritated and unfulfilled instead.

Part of it was the sex; it wasn't as satisfying as it had been in the past. On top of that, Mila had thrown a fit when I told her she couldn't stay the night. It wasn't like that was new information. She never spent the night. She was here to fuck and that was it. But she seemed to forget that whenever it damn well suited her.

The whole ordeal had left me frustrated and annoyed when I should have been fucking relaxed.

I cracked my neck left to right, trying to relieve some of the tension building in my muscles. I knocked again when there was no answer, half debating leaving and coming back later when the door cracked open.

Illayana's tired eyes locked on me, a frown forming on her face. "Aleksandr? What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Why are you whispering?"

Illayana stepped out of the room, shutting the door behind her. She tied the silk sash of her robe around her body as she said, "Arturo's only just drifted off to sleep. I don't want to wake him."

I checked my watch, brows lowered in confusion. "It's 8am." By this time, I'd already had breakfast, done a two-hour workout, gone for a light

jog and cleaned all my weapons. Gun maintenance was *very* important.

“He had a hard time lowering his guard enough to rest. He finally passed out from exhaustion about an hour ago.”

I nodded in understanding. In a way, I could sympathise with Arturo in that regard. If my woman had just been kidnapped, I wouldn’t be able to relax either.

“I just wanted to check on you. Make sure you are okay. See if you need anything.”

Illayana’s face softened. Her arms wrapped around me in a tight hug. “I’m fine, thank you *starshiy brat*.” *Big brother*.

I patted her back awkwardly with one hand. I wasn’t a big hugger, but I’d tolerate it for my baby sister.

“Good,” I grunted, stepping back. “Are you hungry? Do you want me to have some food sent up for you?”

“I want some food!” Lukyan’s muffled voice yelled from the bedroom behind me. Nosy bastard would have had to have his ear up to the door to overhear our conversation.

“Get it yourself!” Illayana yelled back, glaring at Lukyan’s door. Her eyes flicked back to me. “Flora already sent up a mountain of food for breakfast—”

The door behind her burst open in a rush, Arturo standing there with a gun pointed right at my head, a laser-type focus in his mismatched eyes as he locked onto Illayana. He was shirtless, his whole upper body covered in tattoos, and a pair of grey sweats hung low on his hips.

Illayana sighed, her head falling forward. “Goddamn it,” she hissed under her breath. She turned to face him. “Everything’s fine. Go back to sleep.”

The frantic, wild look on his face made it pretty clear he wouldn’t be going back to sleep any time soon. “I heard you yell,” he said, his voice laced in that thick Italian accent.

“She’s always yelling!” Lukyan boomed from his bedroom.

Illayana yanked off one of the slippers on her feet and hurled it at Lukyan’s door. “Shut up!”

“Make me!”

Arturo grabbed Illayana at the same time she lunged forward, his arm snaking around her waist. She kicked and thrashed, demanding to be let go and cursing Lukyan out in Russian.

I shook my head in mild amusement. They'd been doing shit like this since they were kids. If anything, this was tame compared to some of the shit they'd pulled on each other in the past. In my experience, it was easier to just let them go at each other. It never got *too* out of hand.

Okay, that was a lie. It actually got pretty violent sometimes.

When Lukyan started yelling crap back, riling Illayana up even more, I decided to step in. "Be quiet, Lukyan," I yelled over my shoulder.

He shut up.

I looked back at my sister. Her chest rose and fell with quick, short breaths, a scowl etched on her face. Arturo wove a hand through her hair and began massaging her scalp in an effort to relax her.

It worked. The tension seemed to melt away from her with every passing second.

"You'll let me know if you need anything?" I asked.

She nodded, taking a deep breath. "I will."

"Alright. Get some rest. I'll come back to check on you again in a few hours."

"You don't have to, Aleksandr. I told you, I'm fine."

I gave her a hard stare that meant business. "I'll be back in a few hours to check on you," I repeated sternly.

She exhaled heavily. "Okay."

As strong as Illayana was, she'd just been through something extremely traumatic. She'd try to deny it, but she'd need time to recover both mentally and physically. I wanted to make sure she knew I was there if she needed anything.

A look passed between Arturo and I. I still didn't trust him, not completely. There was a lot I still didn't know about him, but one thing I did know was that he cared for Illayana, and that was enough. For now.

I said my goodbyes and left. I had a lot of shit to do, but I always made time for my baby sister.

Before making my way to the warehouse, I went down to the main floor, heading for the security room at the back of the house, just to the right of the kitchen. Nik was sitting at the kitchen table when I walked in, hunched over a bowl of cereal. His laptop sat open beside him, a picture of my uncle on the screen with other faces flashing sporadically beside it. Flora and a few of the other housemaids were fluttering around in the background, cooking and cleaning.

“You got a minute?” I asked, stepping up to the table.

Nik looked up at me, chewing softly. “What’s up?”

“I want to take a look at the footage of the prisoners.”

Nik frowned, flicking his eyes down to his bowl and back up at me.
“Now?”

“Now,” I said curtly. Before I walked into that room, I wanted to be prepared. I wanted to see how they interacted with each other when they were alone. When they were free to talk amongst themselves, thinking we couldn’t understand them. I wanted to watch them, their faces, their bodies. See who was freaking out and who was holding strong. Find out who the weakest link was and poke at them, make them crack and tell me everything I wanted to know. I wanted to know exactly what I was walking into.

Shoving one last spoonful of food into his mouth with a groan, Nik got to his feet, grabbing his laptop. “Let’s go.”

He took the lead towards the security room. A wall of monitors greeted us when we walked in, screens flicking through the different camera angles in and around the house. Two men sat in front of them, only taking their eyes off the monitors long enough to greet us before turning back.

Nik placed his laptop down on a side table near the door and wedged himself between Dean and Oleg. “Go take a break, we’ll take it from here. Be back in thirty minutes.”

Both men nodded and left the room. Nik took a seat and started typing away. He logged into a program with his username and password, and the screen filled up with twelve individual camera feeds, each showing a different room in the pit.

The lower ranking members of the Bratva didn’t have access to the cameras in the pit. We trusted our men explicitly, but that didn’t stop us from being cautious.

Three of the rooms were occupied. One with the Zeta prisoners. One with Maxim, Father’s former *Sovietnik*, and the other with a local gangbanger who thought it was a good idea to jump one of our soldiers’ kids and beat the crap out of him.

We looked after our own. If someone fucked with one of our people, they suffered the consequences.

“How far back do you want to see?” Nik asked, clicking on the feed with the Zeta prisoners.

“From the moment they were locked down.”

Nik nodded, rewinding the footage. He pressed play and I watched as Erik and our men dragged them in, shackling them to chairs. Firecracker kicked and screamed the entire time, right up to the point that they tied her down. Just as Erik stood after strapping her legs to the chair, she smashed her face into his, catching him completely off guard. Erik fell back on his ass with a painful grunt, hand flying to his now-broken nose.

A chuckle rose up from my throat. I couldn't deny how much I enjoyed that fighting spirit of hers.

"Shit," Nik laughed. "That was a good shot."

Erik got to his feet in a fluster. He wound his arm back and punched Firecracker right in the nose.

My hands clenched, a torrent of anger soaring through me. I frowned at the reaction. I shouldn't care if she got hurt. She was the enemy. I planned to do much, *much* worse to her to get the answers I needed. And yet, all I wanted to do was choke the life out of Erik for laying a hand on her.

I banished that feeling away. I couldn't afford to be sympathetic towards her. Not when Father was counting on me to get to the bottom of all this.

Once Erik and our men left, I listened intently to their conversation. They spoke in Spanish, which I wasn't at all surprised by. They were trying to hide their words behind another language. But they had no idea it was a wasted effort.

"Do you think they're telling the truth, or just bullshitting?" Nik asked after one of the Zeta men claimed they were never planning to rape Illayana.

"They've got no idea we can understand them, or that we're even listening to them, for that matter." Though I suspected Firecracker did. She was smart. She'd see the camera and assume we were listening to every word they said.

"So you believe them?"

"It's too early to assume anything." I continued to listen as they spoke, studying every expression they made, if their voices cracked in fear. It didn't look like they were lying or putting on a show for our benefit.

The one they called Angel squirmed a lot. His eyes constantly darted around the room, as if looking for a way to escape. He was dripping with sweat, a permanent mask of unease and nervousness on his face.

He was the weak link. My way in.

Nik watched too, brows creased in concentration. “Their dynamic is strange. The woman seems to be in charge of them. And yet she knew nothing about what was going on, what the men were doing? How is that possible?”

Pieces clicked together in my mind like a jigsaw puzzle. “When I found her, she was chained. She claimed she was an escort and Nero had bought her for the night, but I don’t think she was there by choice. Nero was holding her captive.”

“Okay?” Nik could see the wheels turning in my head. “You think she’s someone important to the cartel? That Nero was holding her hostage as leverage or something?”

“Considering his history, it makes sense. Do you remember what Miguel said when Father interrogated him after the first time they tried to kidnap Illayana? That they did it to keep Father in line? To keep him from interfering between the Outfit and The Cosa Nostra? What if Nero did the same shit to the cartel? Kidnapped someone important to the boss so he’d do whatever the fuck Nero wanted to keep them safe?”

Nik nodded. “It definitely fits with Nero’s tactics.”

“So, we just need to figure out *who* she is.” That was easier said than done, though. So far, she’d been more than unwilling to share that information, and I had a feeling she’d take it to her grave.

An idea formed in my head. I pulled out my phone and called Thomas. He was one of our contacts at the LVPD (Las Vegas Police Department). We paid him five grand a month to be our eyes and ears within the department. To provide us with information about anyone we asked—names, addresses, social security numbers, you name it—and to cover for us when needed. Like when our house got blown to shit at Illayana’s wedding.

Even though our closest neighbours were miles away, the massive explosion and all the gunfire that followed had people calling the police. Thomas, as well as a few others, had covered for us, reporting no disturbance.

It was always smart to have people in the police department who were on your side. Not only did they help out with situations like that, but they also got rid of any incriminating evidence that could bury us. They let us know any time the police were getting a little too close to home, helping us steer them in a different direction.

“Yeah?” Thomas answered, his voice laced with a deep Boston accent.

“I need you to come to the house.”

He sighed. “When?”

“Now.”

“I can’t. I’m on shift.”

“You’ve got thirty minutes. Bring your fingerprint scanner.” I hung up, not giving him a chance to protest.

At five grand a month, I didn’t give a shit if he was busy. If I called and demanded his presence, he bloody well better show up.

“What’s your plan?” Nik asked, logging out of the camera feed system. He spun in his chair to face me.

“I’m going to scan her prints and find out who she is.” I was confident a feisty, hardass woman like her had to have some kind of record, and it would tell me everything I needed to know about her.

That curious expression I saw last night crossed Nik’s face again. It aggravated me.

“What?” I snapped.

“Why bother with the scanner? I’m sure you could make her talk without it. You’ve made grown men fucking piss their pants and tell you anything you wanted to hear.”

True. And I enjoyed every second of it. But I had a feeling those tactics wouldn’t work on Firecracker. She was tough as shit. Absolutely fearless. I didn’t think there was any amount of pain I could put her through that would make her talk.

But that wasn’t the main reason.

“If our theory is right and it turns out the Zetas were only doing Nero’s dirty work because they didn’t have a choice, because of *her*, we need to tread carefully. Us torturing and killing her could cause more problems than it solves, and with Grandfather coming, the last thing we need is more trouble.”

Nik had been tapping his finger idly on the table as I spoke, his gaze watching the movement, but at the mention of Grandfather his head snapped up, a deep frown on his face. “What? Grandfather, coming here? When?”

“Two weeks. And we need to get everything ready for his arrival. The sooner we sort out not only this shit with the Zetas, but also the crap with Dominik and Rayna, the better. Before he gets here would be ideal.”

Nik nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

“What you’re already doing. Find Dominik and Rayna. As soon as you have a location, let me know.”

Firm lines of determination set on his face. “Will do.”

“And keep an eye on that idiot brother of ours. Make sure he does as Father has asked. Father is stressed, and he doesn’t need the added hassle of double-checking Lukyan’s work.”

It’s not like Lukyan was bad at his job. It was actually the complete opposite. When he put his mind to it, he was capable of doing great things. But that was the problem. He rarely put his mind to anything unless absolutely necessary, and he had a tendency to be lax with his responsibilities. Not that he had many to start with.

“Got it.” Nik got to his feet. “I’ll also see what I can dig up on the Los Zetas. I know the last time we tried to get information on them we couldn’t find anything on their boss, but who knows, maybe we’ll get lucky.”

I doubted it. The identity of the boss of the Los Zetas was some kind of well-kept secret within their organisation. The man we knew who used to be in charge before he died of cancer four years ago was Andres (or El Diablo, as he liked to be called). But the identity of the man who had taken his place had been a mystery to us ever since.

We knew of their second—Juan—as confirmed by Miguel before we killed him. But that was it.

“Alright, keep me informed.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, brother.”

Chapter Eight



I met Thomas in the driveway, his slightly chubby frame stepping out of his white sedan at the same time I walked down the front steps.

He was wearing a cheap dark suit a few sizes too big for him, his blonde hair the same shade as the pornstache over his upper lip. His face was etched in irritation, his thin lips pursed, his olive-green eyes narrowed on me as he slammed the door shut.

“Aleksandr,” he greeted in an annoyed tone.

I inclined my head. “Thomas. Did you bring the fingerprint scanner?”

“Yes.” He pulled out a small device from his pocket. “What do you need it for?”

“What do you think?” I replied, giving him a deadpan look. One scan of Firecracker’s finger and I’d know exactly who she is. The prints were checked against the government and federal databases containing fingerprints of anyone taken into custody in the past as well as any non-citizens who had entered the country. I’d bet a million dollars she was in one of those systems.

I took the scanner from him, giving it a once over. I was familiar with it. This wasn’t the first time we’d called Thomas to use it.

“I’ll need it back as soon as possible. My captain will notice it’s missing.”

“Come back tomorrow for it,” I told him, pulling out a roll of \$100 bills. We paid the \$5,000 a month as a retainer, essentially to keep him on call

24/7. Whenever he did extra things like this, I always liked to pay him a bit more on top.

One thing I discovered watching Father interact with his contacts was that they all held a high level of loyalty and respect for him because he treated them well. He was tough, and didn't take any shit, but he always made sure they were well compensated for the work they did for the family.

Thomas nodded, taking the money. He tucked it away. "Is there anything else you need?"

I thought about it for a moment. Father's conversation from last night streaked through my mind. "Do you have any intel on an MC gang called The Dirty Vultures?"

Thomas' brows snapped into a frown. "Out of North Las Vegas? Yeah, they're on our radar. Been causing some troubles for the locals there."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Just low-level stuff. A couple B&Es, some reports of harassment and intimidation. They've also been approaching local businesses demanding a small cut of their profits for being in their 'territory.'" He put that last word in air quotes. "We can't prove any of this, of course. It's all just circumstantial at this point. We have no evidence, and all of the residents are too scared to testify against them."

It was a really good thing Father refused to deal with them then. They sounded like trouble, through and through, and we had enough of that shit going on as it was.

"Who are they?"

"Just a bunch of ex-cons, from what I can tell. All recently released from different prisons across Nevada. They're smart though. They've got their prospects doing all their dirty work so they can keep their noses clean. They never miss a check in with their parole officers. Never fail a piss test. If you looked at nothing but their records from the moment they all got out of the joint, you'd think they were all upstanding fucking citizens."

"I want you to send me everything you've got on them." The more information I could gather, the quicker we could deal with them before they became a threat.

"Consider it done." Thomas opened the driver's side door of his car, leaning against the frame. "They causing you trouble?"

“Not yet.” But I had a feeling they would. Very, very soon. I raised the scanner in the air, shaking it slightly. “I’ll have this back to you by tomorrow.”

Thomas gave one quick motion of his head. “Appreciate it. Talk soon.” He got into his car and left, driving back towards the main gate.

One of the things I liked most about Thomas was he didn’t waste time on pointless, idle chit chat. He came, did what he needed to do and then left.

I put the scanner in my pocket and headed for the warehouse. A glimmer of excitement coiled low in my stomach. And I fucking hated it.

I shouldn’t be excited to see Firecracker, shouldn’t find the idea of engaging with her thrilling. Exhilarating. I shouldn’t hope that she somehow got out of her cuffs and was ready to attack me the moment I stepped into the room. Ready to fight me, claw me, bite me.

Great. Now I was hard.

I adjusted myself with a grumble, rearranging my cock to hide my now-raging hard on as I flung the warehouse door open in anger.

I was a man of control. Order. Discipline. I didn’t let my emotions, my feelings dictate my actions. Didn’t let my most basic urges rule me. Control me. *I controlled them.*

I refused to allow Firecracker so much power over me. To let just the mere thought of her make me ache with need.

I refused it.

I fucking refused it.

So why are you still hard then?

I gritted my teeth and, in the end, chose to ignore it. I headed straight for the steel door at the back of the building. A few of our men were working out on the machines, pulling and pushing large amounts of weights back and forth, back and forth, sweat shining on their bodies. They greeted me with grunts of acknowledgement and short, brisk ‘hellos’ as I walked past. I returned their greetings with a nod of my head, never losing stride.

When I reached the steel door, I put my finger on the scanner on the wall and it opened with a *click*, the light above turning from red to green.

Thoughts of Firecracker flitted through my mind as I walked down the stairs into the pit. Those fiery eyes. That hot as fuck angry glare she kept throwing my way. It made my blood heat in my veins.

The room the Los Zetas were being held in was guarded by two men—Sasha and Pavel—their bulky frames standing either side of the door as I

rounded the corner and walked towards them. Pavel was young and short, with a long, thick beard and close-cropped hair. Sasha was roughly a few inches taller. He had a round face, broad shoulders and shaggy blonde hair.

I clasped forearms with Sasha. “They give you any trouble?”

He shook his head. “Haven’t heard a peep.”

“Alright, good. Both of you come in and take the male prisoners out. Put them in another room. I want to talk to the woman alone.”

Sasha nodded, signalling Pavel with a wave of his hand to come stand at his side.

I rolled my neck, taking a deep breath in and opened the door.

The Zetas hadn’t moved from where I’d seen them on the camera. Not that I expected them to. Firecracker was right in the middle, her amber eyes burning with hatred. I felt the desire to smirk, but I held it in. My eyes travelled over the rest of them with mild interest. I pointed to three of them.

“Take them out. Put them in another room.” I looked at the one I saw fighting on the camera feeds. Angel, I think his name was. Nervousness vibrated from him, his gaze flitting from person to person as Pavel and Sasha dragged the other three men out. When my men returned, I pointed to Angel, finally letting my smirk fall free. “Put him in the Vault.”

Angel’s eyes widened, his face paling like a ghost. “What-what’s the Vault?”

“Oh, you’ll see.” I looked at Sasha and flicked my head to the side. He walked over and grabbed the back of Angel’s chair, pulling him towards the door.

“Wha-what’s going on?” Angel’s voice cracked with fear, his eyes darting around wildly. “Stop. Just wait a second. I’ll—”

“*Cállate, Ángel,*” *Shut up, Angel,* Firecracker growled.

It looked like Angel was going to argue, but in the end, he decided against it.

I leaned back casually against the wall, crossing my arms over my chest as Sasha took Angel out of the room, shutting the door behind him. My eyes trailed over Firecracker. Her long dark hair. That smooth, creamy caramel skin I just wanted to take a bite out of. My primal beast stirred with excitement. It wanted to play. It liked seeing her all tied up, just ready for the taking.

“Are you just gonna stand there all day or are you gonna get on with it?” Fire burned in her eyes, a dark, angry scowl etched on her face.

I did another slow, languid sweep of her body. “Get on with what exactly?”

“Stop fucking around. You’re here to get answers, right? Well, do your worst, but I’ll tell you right now there’s no amount of pain you can put me through that will get me to talk.”

At least she wasn’t pulling the sweet and innocent ‘I-don’t-know-what’s-going-on’ bullshit anymore.

I pushed off the wall, walking towards her with slow, measured steps, like I had all the time in the world. I crouched in front of her until we were face to face. I made sure to stay far enough back, just in case she decided to headbutt me like she did Erik.

“You’re a Zeta.” I didn’t pose it like a question, because it wasn’t one. I knew she was. I didn’t need her to confirm or deny it, but she did anyway.

“Yeah, so what? Women can’t be in the cartel? You sexist as well as a kidnapper?”

“Retract the claws, *malyshka*. *Little girl*. Are you ready to tell me who you are yet?”

“Get fucked by a knife and die.” She tugged on her restraints and let out a small growl of frustration when nothing happened.

I gripped her chin, smashing her cheeks together until her lips puckered. “Such a filthy little mouth,” I whispered, my gaze flicking down to her lips and back up again.

Her eyes flared for the briefest moment before they shifted to an angry glare. She ripped her face out of my grasp. “Touch me again and I’ll use this filthy mouth to bite your fucking face off.”

A chuckle rumbled in my throat. “Don’t tempt me with a good time, *malyshka*.”

“Stop calling me that,” she growled, thrashing in her chair with frustration.

“Give me your name and I’ll call you that instead.”

She raised her chin in the air, clamping her mouth shut. A defiant glint shone in her eyes.

I smirked. “I figured that would be your response. So I brought this.” Pulling the scanner from my back pocket, I held it up in the air, shaking it from side to side.

Her eyes widened. “Where the fuck did you get one of those?”

“Oh, so you know what this is?”

“Uh, no.” She looked away for a second, before nervously glancing back at the device.

I felt like laughing. “You’ve shown your hand already. There’s no point in lying anymore. I’m going to give you one chance. *One*. You tell me what I want to know, and I’ll consider going easy on you. Might even upgrade you to a nicer room if I’m feeling particularly generous. But you make me use this—” I shook the scanner again, “—and my generosity vanishes.”

Any trace of nervousness from Firecracker fled, replaced with a burning rage hot enough to sear me. “Go ahead. Use it. It doesn’t matter if you find out who I am, and you wanna know why? Because I’m gonna get out of here, and when I do, I’m gonna slit your fucking throat.”

Ah, there it was. That glare. The one that made my cock fucking throb.

“I’d love to see that...” I walked behind her, pried one of her fingers open from her clenched fist and placed it on the scanner. Sixty seconds later, a picture of her popped up on the screen, along with her name. “Drea Ortega,” I finished.

An adorable little growl left her mouth, made from pure anger and frustration. She tried to kick her legs out in what I assumed was her own little form of a tantrum, thrashing and cursing me out in Spanish.

I studied the information on the screen as I walked back in front of her. “Aggravated assault, grand theft auto, destruction of property, assault with a deadly weapon resulting in grievous bodily harm—”

“I wasn’t officially charged with that one,” she cut in.

“Disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, theft, indecent exposure—”

“That charge was bullshit. I took a skinny dip in the ocean at three in the morning. How was that indecent exposure? No one was around.”

“Vandalism, resisting arrest, drug possession—”

“Was only a little weed. Doesn’t count.”

“Defacing public property, dangerous driving—” I looked up from the scanner, my brows raised, “kidnapping of animals?”

“They were experimenting on them! Some big pharmaceutical company. What was I supposed to do? Leave them in there to suffer?” she shook her head. “No. I didn’t kidnap them, I saved them.”

I shook my head, chuckling softly. “How is it you’re still walking free after all these charges?”

She shrugged casually. “I’ve got a good lawyer.”

Nobody was *that* good. It was suspicious. Another mystery to solve. Maybe she was higher up than I originally thought. Had friends with deep pockets. Reach that extended not only into law enforcement but the judicial system too. That was the only way someone with a record like that wasn't in jail.

"What's your position within the cartel?" I asked, skimming through the rest of the basic, personal information the scanner provided. Thirty-one years old, 5'1, born in Guadalajara, Mexico, immigrated to America fifteen years ago with her father, mother and twin brother.

She scowled at me. "Remember what I said earlier? About getting fucked by a knife and dying? Why don't you go do that?"

I scrolled through the long list of known associates listed in her file. One name stood out, giving me pause.

Interesting. Very interesting.

I spun on the heels of my feet, heading for the door.

"Hey! Hey! Where are you going? Let me the fuck out of here! You can't keep me locked up in this shithole!"

I turned to face her as I opened the door. I ran my eyes over her body again. Over those thick hips, perfect for grabbing onto. Over all those curves and those huge tits just begging to be sucked, squeezed. So many indecent thoughts flicked through my head.

Her breath hitched, her pupils dilating like saucers.

I wasn't sure what she saw on my face, but whatever it was made the air snap between us with sexual tension. She trailed her gaze over my body like I did hers, teeth digging into her bottom lip.

This weird, animalistic sexual attraction burning between us was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. She was the furthest thing from my type and yet, I'd never been hotter for a woman.

I was so tempted to loosen her cuffs, to allow her just enough give to escape just so I could hunt her. Chase her down and bring her back kicking and screaming. Maybe when the house was empty—and I was sure no one else was around—I could. The idea made me fucking salivate.

"I can do whatever I want. You're mine now, *malyshka*. And as long as you misbehave, you'll stay down here, strapped to that chair, with nothing and no one. You'll eat when I say you can eat. Go to the bathroom only when I give permission. Your life is mine to control, to do with as I see fit. If you want that to change, I suggest you start to cooperate."

“You son of a bitch,” she hissed, any trace of arousal vanishing in an instant.

I tutted. “It’s language like that that keeps getting you into trouble. You have to be a *good girl* to get out of here, Drea. Behave.”

Her glare was like daggers, sharp enough to cut my skin. “Get. Fucked,” she spat.

“You offering?”

“Not if you were the last man on Earth, *estúpido, arrogante gilipollas,*” *you stupid, arrogant asshole.*

A smirk curved on my lips. “*Estas segura de eso?*” *You sure about that?* I responded in Spanish.

Her mouth fell open in shock, eyes going wide.

“*Hasta pronto, Drea,*” *See you soon, Drea,* I said walking out.

The surprise wore off quickly, and she hurled profanities at me as I slammed the door shut. I could still hear her on the other side, screaming so loud it would only take minutes for her voice to go hoarse.

Sasha and Pavel stood outside. “Everything okay?” Sasha asked, eyes darting to the closed door behind me and back.

Drea was still going crazy, screaming and cursing. “Everything’s fine. Take her to the bathroom and bring her a bowl of rice and beans in an hour. Plastic utensils and cutlery only. Keep her cuffed the entire time. She’s not under any circumstances to be out of her restraints. Understood?”

“Yes, boss.”

I nodded. “Good. Any problems, contact me immediately.” I headed back up towards the top level, pulling my phone from my pocket as I locked the steel door. As soon as I had reception, I called Nik.

“What’s up, Zander?” he asked when he answered on the third ring.

“Zetas second, Juan, what’s his last name?”

“Ortega, I think. Why?”

That’s what I thought. “The woman, her name is Drea. Drea Ortega. She’s Juan’s twin sister.”

Chapter Nine



That fucking bastard.

I yanked on the restraints to the point of pain, the metal cutting into me and bruising my skin.

After Aleksandr left, he sent his lackeys in to take me to the bathroom. It was utterly mortifying. Completely humiliating. Without a doubt one of the worst experiences of my life, having to pee in front of two random men.

But hey, I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity. Who knew when that giant brute was going to grant me permission to go again.

I scoffed, shaking my head. *Permission*. Argh, who the fuck did he think he was? First he kidnapped me. Then he locked me up in his little torture dungeon. *Then* he had the audacity to tell me I was his to do with as he saw fit?

I wanted to strangle the life out of him with my bare hands. And fuck him until I couldn't move.

Goddamn it. Why did he have to look so fucking good? It made it hard to focus on my anger. He was exactly my type. The sheer, ginormous size of him. Those ruggedly handsome features, and that dominant, commanding personality was everything I craved in a lover.

It was just my shitty luck that it all happened to be wrapped up in that asshole of a man.

I mean, I shouldn't really be surprised though, should I? I'd always been attracted to the rough, bad boy type. To the kind of man that just *took*.

Controlled everything, completely unashamed of their wants and needs.

There was a big difference between a confident man and a cocky man. A confident man was sexy. He was sure of himself, but not to the point of complete arrogance, where he assumed he could get any woman he wanted with a simple click of his fingers.

That was Aleksandr. He knew he was hot. He had a body women would stab their sisters in the eye for a chance to touch. But he wasn't conceited. He didn't strut around like some frat boy with a giant stick up his ass. He wasn't vain, even though he had every right to be with those good looks and a body carved from fucking stone.

In saying that though, he knew how to harness those good looks and use them like a weapon if he needed to. My body was still on fire from his touch, from the way he gripped my face and stared at my lips like he wanted to take a bite out of them.

Such a filthy little mouth.

I groaned, clenching my thighs together as a torrent of lust rolled through me. He had to have the sexiest voice I'd ever heard. Deep. Husky. Thick with that Russian accent. It was the kind of voice that made your whole body shiver. That made your insides *burn*.

It honestly wasn't fair that a voice like that belonged to a man that looked the way he did. Seriously. Women didn't stand a chance against him. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if he had women throwing themselves at him everywhere he went.

And didn't that thought just piss me the fuck off.

I tried not to think too much about it, chalking the emotion up to me being horny, since it'd been months since I'd gotten laid.

Yeah, that was it. I was just a horny bastard and in need of a good dickin' to get myself back on track.

It had nothing to do with the mountain of muscle known as Aleksandr.

I glanced around the room again, looking for anything I could use that might help me escape, but the room was completely bare. There was nothing but four walls, a door and me.

Oh, and that stupid camera.

I narrowed my eyes on it. Was he up there right now, watching me? I wished I had a hand free to give him the finger but sticking my tongue out would just have to do. Childish, I know, but it made me feel better.

A part of me was still reeling from the fact that he somehow managed to get his hands on a police fingerprint scanner. I hadn't been expecting *that*, and it put a serious hitch in the whole 'keeping my identity a secret' thing.

But that was okay. He had my name. My record. Basic personal information. But he didn't have my story.

And he never fucking would.

The most pressing issue at the moment, believe it or not, was Angel. If he caved and opened his big, dumb mouth, we were done for.

If I couldn't get out of here, I at least needed to figure out a way to get to him...and kill him.

My stomach grumbled loudly. I groaned, my head falling forward. The pitiful bowl of rice and beans they'd given me did shit all to curb my appetite.

I was a big eater. I *loved* my food, and if that was all they planned to give me for the day, I was going to get hangry really fucking quickly.

Nero might have been an ass, but at least he fed me whatever I wanted. Let me use the bathroom whenever I needed to. Unlike a certain Russian behemoth.

"Hey! Hey!" I yelled, trying to get one of the guards' attention outside the door. "I know you're out there and I know you can hear me! My voice travels!" When there was no response, I continued, undeterred. "Oi! Dumb and Dumber! Get your asses in here!"

That did it. The door opened, the short and stumpy one with the dark Santa beard walking in. He was younger than I first thought, maybe early twenties. That was good for me. It might make him more susceptible to influence.

"What?" he grunted.

"I need more food."

"You've been given your allotted food for the day."

"It wasn't enough."

"You're a prisoner. Prisoners don't get a say." He turned to leave and I thrashed, making my chair scrape across the ground loudly.

"Wait!"

He sighed. "You're not getting any more food."

"This is really in *your* best interest, you know. You ever been around a woman when she's hangry?"

His face paled, a terrified look flashing in his eyes.

I felt like laughing. He was thinking about someone. Maybe a sister, or an ex-girlfriend? Possibly his wife? Either way, the look on his face made it quite clear he had firsthand experience with a hungry woman. And he did not want a repeat.

“Exactly,” I whispered, letting my voice take on a dark, scary edge. “You *really* want to get me some food.”

An uncertain look crossed his face, like he wasn’t sure what to do. He scratched the back of his neck in discomfort, his lips pursed in thought. He opened his mouth to say something when another deep voice cut through the air.

“Pavel! What are you doing in there?” The Shaggy-from-Scooby-Doo lookalike came bursting into the room, his eyes hard and full of reprimand.

Damn it. He was older, years of fight and wisdom on his face. There would be no influencing him.

“You know you’re not allowed to talk with the prisoners.”

“But she—”

“I don’t care what she did or said. If the boss finds out you’re in here chatting away with her like you’re best friends or some shit, he’ll have both our heads. Out.” He pointed to the door, one hand on his hip like a disappointed parent.

Pavel backed out of the room without further argument.

“Psst, Pavel,” I whispered.

He paused in the doorway, looking back at me with a questioning gaze.

“What does *malyshka* mean?” I blurted out randomly.

“What?” he frowned, confused by the sudden change in conversation.

I couldn’t really blame him. My mind tended to jump from one topic to another at the drop of a hat. Short attention span and all that.

“*Malyshka*. What does it mean? It’s Russian, right?”

“Yes, it means—”

“Pavel!” Shaggy snapped, cutting in. “Go. Now.”

Pavel left the room, disappearing around the corner.

“What about you, Shaggy? Do you know what *malyshka* means?”

He stared hard at me. “Yes.” Then he turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

“Rude!” I yelled, loudly enough that there was no way he didn’t hear me.

I huffed out a frustrated breath, glaring at the closed door. The silence surrounding me put me on edge. It made my skin itch, an uncomfortable feeling creeping down my spine. The unbearable solitude wasn't helping matters, either.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember the words of advice my father used to say to me when I was on the brink of losing my mind—which, growing up, was pretty much twenty-four-fucking-seven.

As a teen, I had a teensy-weensy bit of an anger problem.

Okay, it wasn't just as a teen. It carried well into adulthood, but it was something I was working on, and I was actually quite proud of the progress I'd made.

Now, instead of losing my shit any time someone cut me off on the road, I took a deep breath, counted to ten and swore silently, instead of sticking my head out the window and cursing them out six ways to Sunday.

I just had to remember not to let my anger rule me. Not to let my frustrations over a situation I couldn't control make me want to throw a tantrum like a two-year-old. To keep my cool. Relax.

There was nothing I could do right now except sit and wait for whatever was going to happen next. The problem was, I wasn't good at sitting still. I liked to always be on the move. Doing something. Anything.

Aleksandr didn't know it, but this was the worst kind of torture for someone like me. I worked to hide my discomfort, though. I didn't want them to see how much it really bothered me. They'd taken enough from me. I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me filled with so much unease.

My mind wandered to Juan. How long had it been since I last spoke to him? I didn't even know. I could take a guess, but I had no way of knowing if it was right. I wasn't even sure what fucking day it was. What the date was.

Anxiety spiked within me. I loved my brother, but sometimes he didn't always think his decisions through. What had become of the cartel since my incarceration? Had he kept up with all our regular orders? Had he overseen all the packing and distribution?

More importantly, how was he handling The Outfit? There had to be repercussions after Nero's death. Did he know I was no longer their prisoner? Was he still taking their orders to keep me safe?

I had so many questions, and not knowing the answers, not having the opportunity to *find* those answers, put me on edge.

I had to get out of here before Juan did irreparable damage to the cartel. He wouldn't do it intentionally, but like I said, he didn't think about the consequences of his actions. He would launch into something without thinking it all the way through, and the result would be disastrous.

What could I offer the Bratva in exchange for my release? Everyone knew they didn't deal in drugs. They were arms dealers. Perhaps that's what we could offer? A chance to corner the drug market in Las Vegas.

I didn't know who already ran the drug trade in Vegas, but I knew whoever they were, they wouldn't be able to hold it against the Bratva if they had a steady supply of the purest drugs at their disposal.

I ran through scenarios in my mind, trying to come up with the most enticing deal to offer the Bratva. What would tempt them?

If I could just find out what they wanted the most, I stood a chance of getting out of here alive before Juan fucked things up.

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Chapter Ten



My fists hit the punching bag ferociously, the jarring sensation of my hands making contact travelling up my arms with each blow. Sweat dripped down my face onto my bare chest, my breathing tight and controlled as I ran through different combos: jab, jab, left hook, right uppercut, knee followed swiftly by an elbow strike.

I viciously attacked the punching bag like it was my worst enemy. Like every strike I delivered would somehow alleviate all my pent-up anger and frustration over the last few days.

It didn't. But it did make me feel a little better. Beating shit up usually did.

It had been five days since we rescued Illayana and kidnapped the Zetas, and so far the only thing we'd learned was that Drea was Juan's sister.

Our usual torture techniques had no effect, which I'll admit I found surprising. Even Angel, who I could have sworn would be the weak link, my way in, proved to be tougher than he looked.

Father didn't care about their claims of innocence. Neither did Arturo. In their eyes, they were all guilty for being in the same room with Illayana that night. For helping Nero in his crusade against the Cosa Nostra that put her in danger. They wanted blood and pain as penance for their crimes against her.

And they paid it. Ten times over. We all watched as Arturo cut each of their dicks from their bodies. As he carved them into pieces. Their blood now stained the walls of the pit, along with all the others who'd stood against us in the past. Tried to hurt our family.

Except for Drea.

I rammed my fist into the bag with a grunt, my frustration spiking all over again. Drea's only saving grace was the fact that she wasn't in the room that night with the rest of the Zetas. If she had been, Father would have demanded her death too.

The part that pissed me off the most was I wasn't sure if I would have allowed it. The thought of Drea dying, of her sassy attitude and that fiery personality disappearing forever, made my chest tighten.

What would I have done if Father told me to kill her? To torture her like the others?

All my life I'd done what my father asked, never disobeying a single order. If Father told you to do something, you did it. End of discussion.

And yet, as I laid into the punching bag with everything I had, I couldn't say with complete certainty that if he told me to kill her, I would have. Because I honestly didn't know.

Since finding out her identity, I'd made a conscious effort to stay away from her. I didn't trust myself around her. Didn't trust the feelings she brought out in me. My loss of control over the whole situation irritated me to no end. I was a man of action. Always had been. If I wanted something, I took it. I didn't quibble over the ramifications, the consequences. I did what I wanted, when I wanted. Which was why my feelings towards Drea annoyed me so much.

I couldn't act on them. She was the enemy. Part of a gang that kidnapped and tried to rape my sister. Yet, despite all that, I wanted her.

I'd never felt such an overwhelming need for another, such a burning ache boiling in my blood. That feral, primal side of me just wanted to hunt her. Take her. Take her and fuck her into submission. Until she was screaming my name into the night. Those full, pouty lips, luscious curves and tight little body made me crazy. Wild. Fucking savage. Add in that sassy attitude that screamed for someone to just fuck it out of her and I was absolutely consumed with the thought of having her.

Once a day, I went to see her. To offer her a chance to change her circumstances if she answered my questions. Simply told me what I wanted

to know. And every day she told me to go fuck myself.

Not that surprising, to be honest.

Usually, if a prisoner behaved the way she did, I scoured their flesh, unleashed the most amount of pain a person could endure before they died. It irritated me that I couldn't bring myself to do that to Drea, that the idea of causing her physical harm made my stomach churn. The thought of her in any type of pain brought out a fierce, protective instinct inside me that was only reserved for family.

She was beautiful. Strong willed. Brave, with a crazy erratic personality that completely excited me. I never knew what she was going to say next, what insults she was going to hurl my way. It thrilled me. And it really shouldn't.

I normally hated when people talked back to me, disrespected me. But for some reason when Drea did it, I got hard as a fucking rock.

"Who pissed in your Wheaties this morning?"

I finished off my combo with a brutal high kick, my shin smashing into the bag with such force it swung backwards, the metal holding it in place groaning in protest. I took a deep breath and turned, finding Illayana leaning against the boxing ring, arms crossed over her chest. A cheeky as fuck grin was plastered on her face.

She was dressed casually in black sweats and a white long-sleeved shirt, her hair wound up tightly in a bun.

"Shouldn't you be packing?" I walked over to a small bench off to the side, grabbing a towel and wiping the sweat from my face.

Tomorrow, Illayana would leave to go join her now husband in New York. I was sad to see her go. The house was never going to be the same without her and Lukyan. I would never admit it to them, but I was going to miss them both.

Neither of them could go a day without getting in each other's faces, their ridiculous fighting being one of our main sources of entertainment. Nik and I would actually bet on who would win whenever they got into a scrap. Which was often.

Speaking of, that fucker still owed me fifty bucks from the last time.

Illayana shrugged. "I don't leave until tomorrow. I've got time."

I shook my head, taking a sip from my water bottle. "You're going to leave it to the last minute, like you always do. Then, you're going to flip out and snap at everyone because you're stressed about not being on time."

“Oh, you think you know me so well, don’t you?” she said in a snarky tone.

“Because I do.” I took a seat on the bench, draping the towel over my shoulder. “For example, I know that the reason you’re standing in front of me right now is because you want something.”

She gasped, feigning innocence. “How dare-I can’t believe you would say that to me. Can’t a girl just want to spend some time with her brother before she leaves?”

I gave her a ‘who do you think you’re trying to fool’ look. “Just tell me what you want, or whatever it is, the answer will be no.”

“Okay, okay,” she blew out quickly. “I wanna spar.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Who pissed you off?” Illayana only ever wanted to spar when someone made her angry. It was her outlet, what she used to work through her anger.

“Who do you think?” she huffed, taking a seat where she stood, crossing her legs.

The sound of weights clanking, rough, masculine grunting as a few of our men worked out echoed around us. The atmosphere stunk of sweat and BO, the stench making my nose wrinkle.

“Arturo’s pissed I’m not in New York already. He wanted me there days ago, but I kept putting it off because I didn’t want to leave with everything going on right now.”

“I told you before, we’ve got it covered. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I know, it’s just—” a distraught look crossed her face and she stopped speaking, eyes flicking to the ground.

“You’re scared,” I finished for her. “Scared something’s going to happen while you’re gone. But you’ve got to have faith that we can handle it, otherwise you’re never going to be able to relax.”

She nodded, a deep exhale leaving her mouth. “Yeah, you’re right.” Her phone dinged and she reached into her pocket, pulling it out. Her lips pursed in annoyance.

“Arturo?” I asked.

“Yes. He’s trying to bribe me into coming early.”

“Bribe you? With what?”

Her gaze shifted away from me awkwardly and I quickly raised my hand. “Nope. Forget I asked. I don’t want to know.”

She laughed softly. “Maybe I could go early. If I leave within the next few hours, I could get there by tonight.”

I got to my feet. “You can’t. You didn’t hear this from me, but Father’s planning you a surprise farewell dinner for tonight. He’s having Flora make all your favourites, and he’s even breaking out all the old school boardgames.”

Her face softened. “Aw, he’s just a big ol’ softy deep inside, isn’t he?”

“Don’t let him catch you calling him that. He’ll beat your ass just to prove he’s not.”

She winced. “Good point. You think games are a good idea though? Remember the last time we played monopoly?”

Amusement rippled through me. She had a point. The last time we played, she stabbed Lukyan in the hand with a fork when she caught him cheating, dipping into the bank and stealing money when no one was looking. From that point on, monopoly had been banned from the house.

“I’m sure it will be fine. As long as you keep your cool.”

“Me?” she pointed to her chest. “Me? Talk to Lukyan. He’s the cheater.”

I rolled my eyes. Those two were so competitive with one another. It was insane. They would compete over *everything*. Who could eat their dinner the quickest. Who was faster in a race. Who was the better shot. If they could compete over it, they did it.

I walked over to the boxing ring and jumped up, climbing under the ropes. I held them up in invitation. “Still want to spar?”

An excited smile curved on Illayana’s lips.



I hurled Illayana over my shoulder and body slammed her to the ground, a painful grunt falling from her lips. I scurried over her, locked her in an arm bar and reared back, stopping just before I snapped her arm in half.

Illayana screeched, her legs flailing. She tapped repeatedly on my leg, and I let her go, rolling back and landing in a crouch.

“Goddamn it!” she yelled, slapping a palm down in frustration. “Again!” she jumped to her feet, rotating her arm a few times before taking a fighting stance, her hands up guarding her face.

I chuckled softly, standing tall. Did I mention that on top of being uber competitive, she was always a sore fucking loser? “Are you sure you want to go again?” This would make attempt number three, and with each one she grew more and more annoyed that she couldn’t win.

Illayana glared. “Put your fucking hands up.”

She didn’t even give me the chance to do so. She ran at me, swinging a right hook that, if it had connected, would have hurt like a bitch. But I locked my hand around her forearm, guided her fist around me as I spun into her and hit her with a reverse elbow to the side of the head.

“Motherfucker,” she hissed, stumbling back. She shook her head out, like she was trying to clear a daze before her eyes snapped to me, full of rage.

“Ha!” Lukyan laughed, stuffing his face full of popcorn as he watched from the sidelines. He’d wandered down from the house sometime after round two, an excited look on his face, like he was a kid in a candy store. A few of our men sat beside him, whispering amongst themselves and taking bets.

We both ignored Lukyan’s taunts, Illayana advancing again. She struck out with a series of impressive combos, and I had to work hard to block each of her strikes. She put me completely on the defensive. She tracked me around the ring, attacking me from every angle. She faked right and lashed out with a high kick from the left. I brought my arm up and blocked, the contact jarring. I threw a right hook and she ducked, following through with a savage uppercut. I reared back, narrowly avoiding her fist and spun on the balls of my feet, delivering a kick to her chest (which she just managed to block using her forearms). She brought them up in an X formation across her body, so they took the brunt of the attack, grunting at the hit.

We continued to trade blows, attacking each other ruthlessly. When she realised she couldn’t get past my guard, she growled and switched tactics.

You see, the thing about my sister was she was a creature of habit. She had moves that she liked to use all the time. Now, there’s nothing wrong with that. But when you’re fighting someone who knows *those* moves, it puts you at a disadvantage.

She liked to do a lot of twists and turns, tapping into her gymnastics training and utilising her long legs.

So, when she leapt into the air, trying to wrap her legs around my head to slam me to the ground, I was prepared.

I coiled one arm around her leg, gripped the front of her shirt and hurled her into the ropes to my left. She didn't have time to stop her body's momentum, and she flung back towards me fast. I stuck my arm out and closelined her. The breath whooshed out of her and she cried out, her back hitting the ground hard.

I straddled her chest and with a quick jab, punched her straight in the face. I pulled my punch a little, making sure not to hit her with my full strength, but hard enough to make it hurt...a lot.

Her lip split, blood running down her chin, and she groaned in pain.

I got to my feet, staring down at her. "You're done."

"No," she groaned again, rolling to her side. "One more."

I shook my head. She was so fucking stubborn sometimes.

She pulled herself up, wiping the blood off her face with the back of her hand. She looked out into the small crowd gathered outside of the ring, her gaze locking on Lukyan.

He was leaning back in his chair, feet propped up and hand stuffed in the bucket of popcorn in his lap. There was an arrogant, cheeky smile on his face, like he was enjoying watching Illayana get her ass kicked.

The little shit probably was.

"Get up here," she snapped, glaring daggers at him.

"Nuh-uh. No way. I don't got a death wish," he said, shaking his head.

I walked over to the ropes and held them open. "Let's go," I grunted, flicking my head.

When Illayana couldn't beat me one on one, she always called Lukyan in to help her. They had more of a chance of winning if they fought together—not that they had yet. But who knows, maybe today was that day.

Lukyan's eyes widened. "What? Why? I haven't done anything!"

"Get your ass in here, Lukyan. I won't ask you again."

He groaned, taking one last handful of popcorn and stuffing it into his mouth before handing it off to one of the men. He got to his feet, licking the butter and salt from his fingers as he walked to the ring and jumped up, climbing under the ropes.

"This is bullshit. I never said I wanted to spar."

He was right. It was a little unfair. But this was probably the last time I'd get to spar with either of them for a while. Maybe I was getting nostalgic in my old age.

Illayana and Lukyan went to one corner of the ring, and I went to another, tightening the cloths over my hands. They spoke in hushed voices, trying to come up with some sort of strategy.

Illayana grasped the air like it was somebody's neck, shaking it violently before she started ramming her knee upwards over and over. Lukyan shook his head. He pointed at her, then himself, smashing his fist into his open palm. It was Illayana's turn to shake her head. The voices got louder as they started to argue with each other.

I rolled my eyes. They were more likely to get into a fight with each other rather than me at this point.

Eventually they came to an agreement about how they wanted to handle the fight. They both moved, taking up their positions.

I joined them in the centre of the ring, adrenaline surging through my body. I shook out both my arms before bringing my hands up, taking a fighting stance.

I waited them out, letting them make the first move. I knew it wouldn't take long. Both Illayana and Lukyan were impatient. They could never stand in one spot for too long without moving.

Sure enough, seemingly at the same time, they launched towards me like a rocket blasting off into space. Lukyan went for my legs, tackling me while Illayana jumped at my chest, all of us crashing to the ground in one big heap.

The move caught me by surprise. It was one they'd never used before.

They clambered over me, Lukyan trying to lock me in a knee bar and Illayana going for an arm bar.

I thrashed, bucking my body.

"Hold him still," Illayana snapped, her legs wrapping around my arm. She was a heartbeat away from locking the hold in place.

I couldn't allow that.

"I'm *trying*," Lukyan bit back with a growl. His teeth were clenched, veins popping in the side of his neck as he tried with all his power to keep me from moving my legs.

I heaved with every bit of strength I possessed, and Illayana lost her grip. I capitalised on the opportunity. I ripped my arm out of her grasp and flung it back, smashing the back of my fist into her face.

She cried out, hands flying to cradle her busted nose.

Upper body now free, I sat up, gripped Lukyan by his hair and yanked his head back painfully. I punched him in the jaw. His hold on my legs loosened enough for me to kick free and I jumped to my feet.

Lukyan rolled and scrambled to a stand. His hand flew to the back of his head. "You ripped out some of my hair!" he yelled in outrage.

"I've told you for years to cut it. It's a disadvantage," I smirked, letting the strands in between my fingers fall to the ground.

Lukyan growled and charged me. He lashed out with a kick and I blocked it, clasping his leg tightly. I stepped into his space, hooked my leg around his and shoved him, making him lose balance and smash to the ground.

Pain shot up my back from a powerful blow and I flew forward. Years of training made me react without conscious thought, my body curving into a somersault, rolling along the floor and springing to a stand. I spun.

Illayana rushed me with a flying knee strike, hitting me in the chest. I flew back into the ropes, having just enough sense to coil my arms around the ropes to stop myself from propelling back to her.

My gaze snapped to her, and I narrowed my eyes, rubbing the ache spreading across my chest from her attack. A dark look crossed my face.

"Oh fuck," Lukyan whispered, his voice shaking with fear. He squatted and hit the ground twice with his hand, tapping out.

Illayana had the good sense to look a little uneasy, but she didn't back down. She squared her shoulders and raised her fists.

"On your feet," I barked at Lukyan as I strode towards them. He wasn't getting out of this that easy.

The second he stood I went on the offensive, attacking them both at the same time. I gave everything I had. I was done playing nice, taking it easy on them. I lashed out with both hands, throwing punch after punch, alternating between the two of them with each strike. Lukyan was too slow to block, and my punch connected with his face. I ducked under a swing from Illayana and rammed my fist into her stomach, making her wheeze and hunch over. I whirled, hitting Lukyan with a spinning back fist that knocked him on his ass.

Illayana was still bent at the waist, and I aimed a kick to her face. She quickly brought her arms up to block, but the force of the blow made her stumble back. I ran at her, faked left, stepped right and spun so I was behind

her instead of in front. I wrapped my arms around her neck and squeezed, lifting her off her feet.

Lukyan came barrelling from the side and struck high with a kick. I moved Illayana into the path of the blow and he hit her on the side of the head. Illayana groaned in pain and I dropped her.

“Shit, sorry,” Lukyan winced.

I attacked him with a combo I could do in my sleep. Right hook, left jab, right uppercut, front kick. He blocked the first two but didn’t quite have the speed to stop the last two. He flew backwards, landing in a heap next to Illayana.

They both scrambled to their feet and came charging back. At the same time, they lashed out with a high kick—Lukyan on the right, Illayana on the left. Attacking simultaneously was a smart idea. But I was pissed and wasn’t about to be made a fool of. I braced, brought up both arms and blocked, pain shooting down each arm. They were powerful strikes, ones I’d commend them on later.

I coiled my left arm around Illayana’s leg, pulled her towards me and headbutted her. As she fell, I struck Lukyan with a side kick to his chest. He blocked, gripped my foot, and twisted. I rolled with the twist, using it to swing a roundhouse kick into Lukyan’s face just before my back hit the floor. I jumped back to my feet.

Lukyan recovered fast, his adrenaline soaring. He tried to tackle me, but I planted my feet to the ground, refusing to go down. He jabbed into my ribs and kidneys with short, quick punches that hurt like a damn bitch. I smashed the back of my fists down onto his back and he cried out, letting me go. I grabbed him by the back of his shirt and hurled him into Illayana just as she stood back up. They both tumbled to the ground.

Neither one of them got back up to go again.

I wiped the sweat from my brow, my chest rising and falling with deep breaths. I looked at my siblings groaning on the floor. Maybe I should feel bad for how hard I went on them, but I didn’t. I wasn’t the type of big brother who *let* their siblings win. I was a firm believer in making them earn it.

Today wasn’t the day they beat me, but each time we fought they were getting closer and closer. And that made me smile.

Chapter Eleven



“**H**a! That’ll be \$900. Pay up, sucka!” Lukyan thrust his hand out towards Illayana, palm facing up, demanding his cash for her landing on his property.

I snickered at the look of pure rage on my sister’s face. Even though monopoly was a game of complete chance, she still let herself get all worked up when she was losing.

After a huge dinner that was fit for a king, we all gathered in Father’s office to spend the night playing all the board games we used to play when we were kids. It had been a long time since we’d done this.

Since before my mother’s death.

The thought of my mother stirred up the same feelings it always did, and I locked them away, refusing to acknowledge them.

Father had rolled his big leather chair out from behind his desk so he could watch, a glass of vodka in one hand and a cigar in the other. He didn’t play any of the games. Never did. He just sat and watched, like he was committing everything to memory to look back on later. Every so often, his lips would kick up in the smallest hint of a smile.

We were all sitting in a circle in the middle of the room, the Game of Thrones monopoly board smack dab in the centre of us. All the furniture had been pushed up against the far wall, so we had enough space. Lukyan sat across from me, a smug as fuck smile on his face as he took the cash

from Illayana and fanned himself with it tauntingly. My sister sat to my left, seething. Nik was on my right.

“He’s cheating,” Illayana bit out, rearranging her properties so they all lined up neatly.

Lukyan gasped. “Well, I never,” he said in a feminine tone. “I would never do such a thing. I’m just better than you,” he winked.

Illayana growled and threw the dice at him. “Shut up and take your turn.”

Lukyan scooped them up and rolled. He moved his piece, landing on Castle Black. “Buy!” he yelled, picking up his stack of cash.

“You can’t buy every property you land on, Lukyan! You don’t even need it!” Illayana fumed, her face going red.

“No, I don’t. But *you* do,” he laughed. It was true. She had the two other corresponding properties—Pyke and Winterfell. All she needed was Castle Black to finish the set and then she could have started putting Keeps and Villages on it. But now that Lukyan had purchased it, it was too late. He handed the money over to me and Nik gave him the card with Castle Black on it. He put it with the rest of his properties.

Illayana looked like she was going to strangle him.

“Stop letting him rile you up so much,” I whispered as Nik took his turn. “He does it deliberately to piss you off.”

“I know,” she gritted out. But she couldn’t help it. I understood. Lukyan had a real fucking knack for getting under your skin. For making you want to stab him in the eye with a fork. If pissing people off was a superpower, it would be his. And he loved doing it too. It was like it was an integral part of his personality. You couldn’t have Lukyan without also having his innate ability for making people mad. It was just who he was.

I looked down at my properties. Pentos. The Eyrie. Dragonstone. Braavos. Harrenhal. Astapor. All of mine were useless. I didn’t have a full set, and I never would. Each of my siblings had at least one of the others I needed that would make it complete. There was no way I was going to win.

Not that I cared. Like I said, monopoly was a game of complete chance, so I didn’t see the point in getting competitive over it. It was the luck of the dice.

I sneaked a glance at Illayana’s properties and smirked. Nik handed the dice to me and I handed them to Illayana.

She frowned. “What are you doing? It’s your turn.”

“I’m out,” I said, scooping my properties up and getting to my feet. We’d been playing games for the last two hours, and I was done. The entire time we’d been playing my mind hadn’t really been here. It had been down in the pit with Drea. I wanted to go see her. To fight with her. To hear that sexy as fuck accent as she cursed me out in Spanish.

I knew I shouldn’t. Knew it was only going to make it harder for me to fight my attraction towards her. But I didn’t care anymore. My body came alive at the thought of going down to see her. That was all the incentive I needed.

I was sick and tired of fighting myself. Denying myself. If I wanted to see her, I was damn well going to see her. No one was going to stop me. Not even myself.

I handed my properties to Illayana. “You can have these.”

Lukyan choked. “Whoa, you can’t do that! If you quit, the properties go back up for sale! Those are the rules.”

“They’re not *our* rules and you know it.” We followed the main set of rules that came with the game, but we also made up our own too. Like if you ever had to pay tax or pay \$100 because you picked up a card that said you had to, or pay to get out of jail, it all went in the centre of the board instead of in the bank, and whoever landed on FREE PARKING got all the money. Well, this was another one of ours. If someone wanted to quit, they could choose to give all their cash and properties to someone else. I chose Illayana.

“But that’s not fair!” Lukyan yelled with all the grace of a toddler throwing a tantrum. “You’re giving her two full sets!”

Yeah, I was. I saw her properties. Three of mine would give her two complete sets, and one of them was the most expensive set in the game. King’s Landing and Braavos. If anyone landed on those when they were full of Keeps, they’d owe her thousands.

Illayana smiled evilly and snatched the cards and money from my hands. “You heard him, he’s giving them to me. No take backs.” She started counting out the cash she needed to add Keeps, her entire focus on the game.

I shook my head, a small chuckle in my throat. She was twenty-one and still acted like such a child sometimes. Both of them did.

I said my goodbyes to them all and left.



I walked down the hallway in the pit, excitement surging through my body. My skin buzzed, a shiver of anticipation curling down my spine as I got closer and closer to the room that held Drea. When I turned the corner, I saw Sasha and Pavel standing in front of her door as usual. Their heads turned to me, a flash of confusion on Sasha's face.

I knew why. For the last week I'd been coming to see Drea once a day at the same time. I wedged it into my daily routine. Wake up. Shower. Eat. Workout. Perimeter check. Visit Drea.

It was now 9:17pm.

Father and Illayana were both creatures of habit. I was one of structure. Order. My morning routine was not to be trifled with. Especially my workout. If I didn't hit the gym at least once a day, very bad things would happen.

It was my release. My happy place. Where I went to rid myself of my inner demons. In a way, it was like therapy for me. The ache I got in my muscles after an intense workout was euphoria.

"Boss," Sasha said, nodding his head in greeting.

"Any problems?" I asked, coming to a stop in front of them.

"Just the usual ranting and raving. Nothing out of the ordinary," Sasha responded. "She did demand a shower though."

"Did she?" Indecent thoughts streaked through my mind. Drea...wet. Soapy. Her hands running over her body.

I think a shower sounded like a good idea.

"Take the rest of the night off. Come back in the morning," I ordered.

Sasha frowned. "Uh—"

I narrowed my eyes in warning.

Sasha straightened. "Sorry, boss. Let's go, Pavel." The younger man followed after Sasha, leaving me alone in the hall.

Sasha knew better than to question an order. All it took was a look to remind him of that.

I opened the door and stepped into the room. I flicked the switch on the wall, light flooding the room. Drea was slumped in the chair, head hanging forward, her dark hair curtaining her face. She lifted her head at my arrival

and squinted, like she was having trouble seeing me properly through the light.

She groaned, letting her head fall forward again. “My, my, my, two visits in one day? Whatever did I do to earn such a privilege?” She sounded tired. Trying to sleep in an upright position like that, with her hands cuffed behind the back of the chair, wouldn’t be comfortable. I’d be surprised if she managed to sleep at all.

I didn’t like how exhausted she looked.

I tilted my head to the side. “How are you tonight, *malyshka*?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic. And yourself?” She lifted her head. “Oh wait, I just realised I don’t care.”

“Lovely as always, I see.” I leaned against the doorframe, watching her intently. “Any thoughts on my offer?”

“Hmm, let me think.” She pursed her lips. “Nope. Still not a fucking snitch. Sorry. Now, can you leave? I’m trying to fucking sleep, in case you couldn’t tell.”

“You don’t want your shower then?”

She narrowed her eyes. She didn’t say a word, just looked at me suspiciously, like I had some ulterior motive.

Maybe I did.

I walked behind her and undid her cuffs. Red lines marred her wrists. She’d been fighting against them.

“What’s the catch?” she asked, lightly massaging her red and bruised wrists.

“No catch. Let’s go, before I change my mind.”

She went to stand and her knees buckled. Before I even knew what I was doing, I rushed forward. My arms wrapped around her almost without thought, shielding her from hitting the ground. Her body pressed to mine. My mind went completely blank. All I could think about was how good it felt having her so close, all those luscious curves pressed against me in all the right places.

Drea shoved at my chest. “Don’t touch me. I don’t need your help,” she snapped, but the moment I let her go she fell to the ground.

And I let her. If she wanted to be stubborn and reject my help, then fine.

She landed roughly on her hands and knees, breathing hard.

I walked to the door. “Hurry up, I don’t have all night.”

Her eyes snapped to me in anger. With a growl she pushed to her feet, a slight wobble in her legs. She took a hesitant step, as if testing to make sure she wasn't going to fall flat on her face again before she straightened her spine and marched past me without so much as a glance in my direction, her head held high.

She turned right.

"Wrong way."

She huffed and spun on the balls of her feet, heading in the opposite direction. I stepped into line behind her, not giving her an inch of space. When she went to turn down another corridor, I put my hand on her shoulder and steered her back the right way.

She spun abruptly, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at me. "Why don't you just lead the way then?"

"I don't mind you leading. I like the view." My eyes darted down her body. More specifically, I liked the way her ass swayed from side to side with each step she took.

She scowled, moving to press herself right up against the wall. She waved her hand through the air in a 'you first' gesture.

I shrugged and headed down the corridor towards the steel door. It didn't make me nervous having her at my back. If anything, it made me excited. I wanted her to try something. To attack me. To give me a reason to throw her to the ground and pin her down with my body.

But she didn't. How disappointing.

I led her up the stairs, through the steel door and across the main floor. It was now empty—not a single person in sight—all the gym equipment sitting idle and waiting for use. I glanced over my shoulder.

Drea's eyes were darting in every direction. Looking for a way out, no doubt. Possibly memorising the layout to use in an escape attempt later.

Or right now.

Quick as lightning, Drea bolted for the door, hurtling over machines and benches as she sprinted for the exit.

Adrenaline spiked through me and I gave chase, excitement filling my bones. She might be quick, but I knew the layout of this place better than anyone. I spent most of my time in here. I could manoeuvre around here with my fucking eyes closed.

She was an inch away from the door when I caught her, my arms wrapping around her waist and lifting her off the ground.

“Let me go, you son of a bitch!” She swung her elbow back and hit me in the side of the face, a brutal cut slashing down my eyebrow.

I cursed, my hold loosening on her slightly.

She slipped out of my arms like jello, landing in a crouch at my feet. She spun, kicking my legs right out from underneath me and my back smashed to the floor with a loud *thud*.

Fuck.

She lunged for the door and I wrapped my hand around her ankle, her body airborne for all of two seconds before she came crashing to the ground face first, an ‘*omph*’ falling from her lips.

I kept my grip tight on her ankle as she fought me. She turned, kicking out at me with her other foot. I deflected her blows, wrestling for the dominant position. I went to cover her body with mine, planning to use my body weight to subdue her when she flung her head forward, her skull whacking into my lips.

Pain lanced through me, blood pooling in my mouth. I smiled.

Drea brought her knees up between us and pushed against my chest, the strength of her legs surprising me as she shoved me away. She scrambled on her stomach for the door and I pounced on her back, flattening her to the ground and making it impossible for her to move. I held myself up a little so I didn’t crush her under my weight.

“Fucking asshole!” she thrashed below me, throwing her head, arms and legs in every direction trying to hit me.

I grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back, making her wince. Winding a hand under her body, I collared her throat. “Enough,” I barked out roughly. “You can’t beat me.” Though she definitely put up a worthy fight. Better than anyone else before her.

“Yeah? Watch me.” She dug her fingers into some sort of pressure point on my wrist and pain shot through me like a speeding bullet.

“Son of a bitch!” I hissed, letting go of her throat.

She flung me off her and scrambled to her feet, bolting the first chance she got. I followed, ignoring the pain throbbing in my wrist as I chased her.

Okay, I may have slightly underestimated her.

Drea used the gym equipment to keep distance between me and her, running the opposite way from me every time I got close. It was like a game of cat and mouse. Or tag. At one point, we just ran in circles around one of the machines over and over again until I’d had enough.

When I stopped, she stopped. We both stared at each other, sizing the other up to see who'd make the first move. Her eyes darted down to my crotch and back up.

"You're enjoying this," she panted, slightly out of breath.

My whole body was on fire, adrenaline and lust surging through me, making my cock so hard it hurt. Sex and fighting went hand and hand with me. So yeah, I was enjoying it.

I took a step left and she mirrored it, keeping the distance. "What's not to enjoy? Chasing a beautiful woman, feeling her body fight against mine. That's a good time in my book." I lunged for her and she dove away, rolling along the ground and springing back up in one quick move. She placed the leg press machine between us instantly and we were right back where we started again.

"Aw, you think I'm beautiful. How sweet. Too bad you're a kidnapping asshole. That compliment might have gotten you laid in a different scenario."

"I wasn't giving you a compliment. Just stating a fact." I lunged for her again and she *just* managed to slip out of my grasp. "You're a fast little thing aren't you?"

She smiled, full of cheekiness and confidence. "Someone my size has to be. Can't go getting caught by the big bad wolf." She picked up a two-kilo dumbbell and hurled it at me.

I jumped to the side, dodging it. It clambered to the ground.

"You're fast too," she stated, observing me closely. She watched me with a predatory glint in her eyes, taking note of everything I did. The way I moved. If I favoured one side over the other. It was like she was cataloguing it all, trying to figure out my weakness.

Whatever she saw gave her the confidence to strike. Or maybe she was just done fucking around. She moved out from behind the machine and bolted for the wall of weapons.

It was a mistake that cost her the game.

Like I said before, I know this place better than anyone else. I know the entire layout like the back of my hand. I know where each machine was. The distance between one machine and the other. I know that the mat beneath my feet runs all the way along the room, and that she'd need to step on it to get to the wall.

I crouched and yanked on the mat at the same time her foot landed on it, pulling it right out from underneath her.

Drea squealed in surprise, her back smashing to the ground.

I ran, not wasting a single moment. I reached her just as she got back on her feet. I picked her up and slammed her back down, covering her with my body. I grabbed her hands and pinned them above her head as she screamed and cursed.

Her legs flailed wildly. Her head reared forward, trying to headbutt me, but I wasn't going to fall for that again. I leaned back just out of her reach.

"Caught you," I whispered, smirking down at her. "Now, what to do with my prize?"

She breathed heavily, anger and frustration in her eyes. But there was also something else. Something I recognised. "Is this the part where you rape me?" If it wasn't for the breathy moan in which she said it, I would think she was afraid I would actually do it. Then I felt her hips swivel beneath me—almost as if she couldn't control it—and I knew she was just as turned on as I was.

Did she like the fight too?

"I don't take women by force. If they want me, they need to tell me first."

I didn't like the word rape. Not even in a roleplay scenario. CNC was something I'd dabbled in before, but not very much. Primal play and CNC were similar in some ways, but drastically different in others.

They both centred around dominance and submission, which was one of the main things I loved to explore.

"I want you," Drea moaned, clenching her teeth. "I always want to stab you in the eye with whatever sharp object I can get my hands on." I loved her honesty. It was refreshing.

A chuckle rumbled in my throat. "What an interesting conundrum you're in then."

I pulled back, getting to my feet and taking a few steps back. Drea propped herself up on her elbows, looking at me with a confused expression. Her face was flushed, chest rising and falling in breathy pants, eyes burning with the fire I felt inside.

Yeah, she definitely liked the fight.

"Well, hurry up. On your feet."

She picked herself up, that feisty glare on her face telling me all I needed to know. She wanted to escape, but she also wanted to fuck me too. This burning attraction was affecting both of us, it seemed. Her eyes darted to the door, the thought of running again so obvious it streaked across her features.

“You run again, and I’ll take you back to that room and you can sit in your own filth.”

Her glare intensified tenfold. She looked as though she was still considering it.

“We both know I’ll catch you,” I taunted, keeping my body loose, ready to strike.

She stood there for a few moments, debating what to do. She kicked the bench beside her, a growl of frustration falling from her lips. “You can’t keep me here! People will come looking for me.”

“They won’t find you.” That I was confident in. “Last chance. You want your shower or not?”

She stamped her foot. “Yes.”

I pointed to the door at the other end of the warehouse. “Walk.”

When we got to the shower room, I opened the door and held it open for her.

She snorted. “What, you’re going to start acting like a gentleman now?” It was a rhetorical question. She marched right past me, not giving me a chance to answer. Not that I would have anyway. I wasn’t a gentleman. Far fucking from it.

At the back of the room sat a row of showers. To the left of them was a mirror that ran the entire length of the wall, with sinks spread out evenly in front. To the right were enough lockers for twenty people to store their belongings, as well as a shelf with towels and shower products.

I waited for Drea to do her scan of the room. Her eyes ran over everything from left to right. The mirror, the showers, the lockers. Her head snapped back to the showers, doing a double take. She turned to face me, eyes full of fury.

They didn’t have any doors on them. They were completely open.

I held in my smirk. “Well, hurry it up then. You’ve got ten minutes.”

She glared. “Ever heard of privacy?”

“You lost the right to privacy the moment you tried to escape.” There were several windows in here she could crawl out of. No way was I leaving

her alone.

Her glare intensified. Oh, I just loved that look in her eyes. Antagonising her was quickly becoming my new favourite thing.

Drea walked to the right side of the room and grabbed a towel, yanking it from the shelf with aggression. She picked up bottles of shampoo, conditioner and body wash and marched back, dropping them on the long wooden bench seat in front of the showers.

“Turn around,” she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest.

I copied her stance, leaning back against the door, making it crystal fucking clear I had no intention whatsoever of doing as she demanded.

We stared at each other, sexual tension zapping between us.

After a few more seconds of intense eye fucking, she stood tall, her head held high and whipped off her shirt. Full, plump breasts in a black cotton bra greeted me. My mouth went dry. It was just a plain bra, nothing particularly racy or exciting about it. And yet on her it was the sexiest thing I’d ever fucking seen.

Her whole upper body was covered in tattoos. Skulls, bloody daggers, roses. A huge fire-breathing dragon that spanned the entire width of her chest. An array of different graphic images over every inch of skin I could see. She was the complete opposite of every woman I’d ever been with. Majority of them were elegant. Refined. Classic.

Drea was rough. Foul-mouthed. Hot-headed. And I’d never been so attracted to another before.

Drea popped the buttons on her ripped jeans and pushed them down, stepping out of them. Her underwear matched her bra. Black. Cotton. Plain. *Sexy as fuck.*

More tattoos ran down her legs.

Jesus, was she covered from head to fucking toe?

Not that I minded. Tatts weren’t usually my thing, but I was quickly discovering anything to do with Drea was a turn on.

Eyes locked on me, she reached back and unclasped her bra, letting it fall away.

Lord have mercy. Her nipples were pierced.

She pulled down her underwear next. It took every ounce of self control I possessed not to jump on her and ravage her. On the inside I was ravenous, my beast screaming to take her now and rut her like some wild,

feral animal in heat. On the outside, I was cool, calm and collected, like having a naked woman in front of me was nothing. No big deal.

Drea turned, giving me her back as she strolled towards the shower with complete casualness. I almost fell to my knees in worship.

I was an ass man. Not only was Drea's ass so luscious I wanted to take a bite out of it. It was also plump and toned, as if she'd spent hours working the muscles to perfection.

Surprise, surprise. More tattoos ran down the back of her body, over her ass and down her legs. She really *was* covered head to toe.

It wasn't just her body that turned me on; it was the way she held herself. Here she was, naked, exposed, and it didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. She didn't cower or try to cover herself under my intense scrutiny. There was no nervousness or shame. Not that there was a damn thing to be ashamed about. Her body was perfection. A literal work of art.

Drea was completely confident in herself, her body. And fuck if that didn't make me ten times hotter for her.

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Chapter Twelve



O kay. Deep, calm breaths, Drea. In and out. One, two. That's it. Ignore the big, brooding asshole behind you. Just focus on the task at hand.

I ran my wet, soapy hands over my body, trying desperately to keep them from shaking as I cleaned myself. I could feel Aleksandr's eyes on me, the intensity of his gaze burning me from the inside out despite the cool water running over me.

Why did I have to be so attracted to him? It wasn't fair.

I should have known running would be a wasted attempt, but I had to try. And he'd proved exactly why I wouldn't be going anywhere unless he permitted it. The damn brute was quick for such a big guy.

When I first realised there were no doors on the showers, I was *livid*. I knew there had to be some sort of catch. That Aleksandr didn't just decide to let me take a shower out of the goodness of his heart (because I was pretty sure he didn't fucking have one). That catch? Watching me the entire time.

That wasn't even what pissed me off the most though. What pissed me off the most was that I *wanted* him to watch me. Having a man like Aleksandr—all that power and strength, that dominating gaze and masculine energy—focused on me was the biggest adrenaline rush I'd ever had before. Not to mention the fact that my body was still buzzing from our fight earlier.

My pussy was dripping for him, for the hungry look he gave me when I took off my bra. He had a very good poker face, but even he wasn't able to hide the look of pure want and need flaring in his eyes. From clenching his fists like he was fighting to keep his hands off me.

It made me feel...powerful. That I could affect this man to the point that his body shook, his teeth grinding, was euphoric.

I didn't know why, but for some reason I had the feeling I wasn't his usual type. I bet he was into the tall, leggy ones. With model-like bodies and elegantly good looks. The classy, stuck-up type.

That was so not me.

I was the rough-and-tumble type. The down and dirty, if-you-piss-me-off-I'll-shove-my-foot-up-your-ass type.

My entire body was covered in ink, except for my face. My mother made me promise not to get any tattoos there because she said, and I quote, "You have the face of an angel, don't ruin it with those hideous images".

Que eye roll.

My mother was old school. She hated tattoos, piercings, coloured hair. Anything out of the norm really.

I was the complete opposite of the prim and proper type Aleksandr was probably used to. And yet his eyes hadn't left my body once.

I ducked my head under the stream of water. *God.* It felt so good. You don't realise how much you miss something until it is taken away from you. Like the luxury of showering once a day.

I rolled my neck from side to side, letting the water flow down my back. The pressure was amazing.

"Two minutes," Aleksandr barked from behind me.

I scowled. I'd almost managed to forget the bastard was even there. I glanced over my shoulder as subtly as I could.

Yep, he was still looking at me. His eyes were plastered to my ass. I turned back around to hide my smirk. All those long hours at the gym were totally paying off.

Mischievousness shot through me. I wanted to play. To tease. To fuck with Aleksandr, like he'd done me. I still wasn't sure why he really wanted to watch me shower. Was it a power move of some sort to show how little control I had? Or was it more like a dare? To see if I had the *cojones* to do it?

Either way, it was my turn to mess with him. Tussling with him had ramped up my sexual needs and I was dying to get off. I liked things rough. Hard. I liked to fight, punch, kick, scream while my partner fought to keep me down. Even though I had been trying to escape, feeling Aleksandr's body on mine as he pinned me to the ground was fucking amazing. Irritating because I was trying to get away, but amazing at the same time.

Fucking hell. These conflicting feelings were really fucking with me.

I'd never once wished I was normal with vanilla sexual desires. But now I wished I was, because then I wouldn't be so turned on by his dominance.

I turned on my side so he had a perfect view of what I was doing. I slowly ran my hands down my body, starting from my neck, down over my breasts, giving them both a hard squeeze that had me tipping my head back as pleasure soared through me.

I loved having my tits played with. The piercings on both nipples just accentuated the pleasure.

I looked at Aleksandr out of the corner of my eye. He was stiff as a board. So stiff I wasn't even sure if he was breathing. His gaze was locked on my hands as I walked my fingers down my stomach slowly, heading straight for my pussy.

"Thirty seconds," Aleksandr growled, his teeth bared and fists clenched. The veins in the side of his neck bulged, throbbing with all the restraint it was taking for him not to move.

I couldn't help the devious smile curving on my lips. Thirty seconds was more than enough time for what I had planned.

I lightly ran my fingers over my clit, a shudder rolling through me. Pleasure soared inside me and I moaned.

Fuck, I was so pent up. With Aleksandr's eyes burning a hole in the side of my body, the water running over my hyper-sensitive skin and fingers lightly touching my clit, I was already embarrassingly close to cumming.

I'd always been a very sexual person. I wasn't shy in the slightest. And if I'm being honest, this wasn't even the first time I'd done something like this, pleasured myself in front of someone else. I wasn't what you'd call a 'Sex Addict'—at least not officially. But I was definitely close to it. I loved sex. Thought about it a lot, did it a lot... whenever the situation presented itself really. I was free with my sexuality. I never hid that adventurous aspect of my personality.

My skin was on fire, my breathing rapid. Having Aleksandr's complete and undivided attention was the ultimate high. It made me feel powerful. Wanted. Like I was the only woman in the world.

In reality, I knew I should hate him. Hate what he did and how I ended up here. But right now, I couldn't bring myself to give a shit about any of it. Not when Aleksandr was looking at me like he wanted nothing more than to throw me to the ground and fuck me until I couldn't walk, couldn't think.

I'd deal with the consequences later.

"Time's up. Get out or I'll drag you out," Aleksandr snapped, taking a step forward.

With complete nonchalance, I turned off the shower and stepped out, grabbing my towel from the bench. I gave Aleksandr a full-frontal view as I dabbed myself with casual aloofness, like he wasn't even in the room.

His eyes flicked to my pussy and a frown formed on his face.

I knew why. He wasn't sure if he was actually seeing what he was seeing.

He was.

Along with the multitude of piercings I had all over my body—ears, eyebrow, tongue, belly button, tits—I also had my clit pierced.

Out of all the tats and piercings I'd had done, *that* one was definitely the worst, the most painful. But man, was it worth it. Not only did it accentuate the pleasure, but guys went *crazy* over it.

Aleksandr tilted his head, eyes still locked on the tiny bit of metal he could glimpse between my thighs.

I lightly ran the towel through my hair as I walked towards him, adding a bit of an extra sway to my hips. I had no idea what I was doing. At this point, I was running on pure animal instincts. The teasing show I put on for him had only increased my own arousal, wanting him to touch me. Kiss me. Grab me with such ferociousness, it left bruises on my skin. On my soul.

Aleksandr watched me, a dark, predatory look in his eyes. He didn't move, still standing in front of the door. His muscular, broad shoulders spanned the entire width of the door, drawing even more attention to his gargantuan size.

I stopped in front of him. Our eyes locked. Sexual tension crackled between us with the force of a lightning strike, burning my insides. He was so goddamn hot. Those blazing blue eyes. That jaw. The sharp, sculpted lines of his face.

I walked my fingers from one side of his chest to the other, feeling nothing but hard, firm muscles. “Enjoy the show?” I whispered, running my tongue over my bottom lip before catching it with my teeth.

His nostrils flared, his chest rising and falling with a quick breath. His hand snapped around my wrist, halting my movements. “I’ve had better,” he rumbled deeply.

I arched an eyebrow, not at all offended. He probably had. My eyes flicked to the raging hard on in his pants and back up. “Little Aleksandr seemed to like it.”

He stepped into my space so his cock pressed tightly against my stomach. “There’s nothing *little* about me.”

I held in the moan that threatened to slip free. *Dear lord.* He wasn’t freaking kidding. Every inch of him was hard, toned muscles. Firm. Defined. And his cock? Based on the length and width of it, it was huge. Just like the rest of him.

All I wanted was for him to force me to my knees and choke me with it.

Somehow, Aleksandr knew my head was filled with dirty, depraved thoughts. Maybe it was the look on my face that gave me away. Or maybe it was the fact that I had inadvertently started rubbing up against him.

Whatever it was, it made him snap.

He growled and gripped my throat with his free hand, spinning us until my back slammed into the wall next to the door. My toes scraped the floor as he held me up by my throat alone, the pressure perfect. It wasn’t too tight, cutting off my ability to breathe, but just tight enough to make my head swim. It was...exquisite. Just how I liked it.

“Be careful, *malyshka*.” He leaned forward until we were nose to nose, his breath fanning over my face. “I’m not the kind of man you play around with.”

“What if I wanna play?” I licked at his lips playfully.

He inhaled sharply, his eyes closing.

What was I doing? This was crazy. *I* was crazy. Aleksandr was the enemy. He killed my men. Strapped me to a chair in his torture dungeon for almost a week. But none of that dimmed the overwhelming attraction I felt towards him. Sometimes that was how attraction worked though. You could hate someone’s guts and still want to fuck their brains out.

By touching myself in front of him, I’d opened the gates to allow my arousal for him to run rampant. Right now, I didn’t give a shit about

anything but satisfying the burning, all-consuming craving I had for him and his body.

Aleksandr's eyes snapped open, burning with lust. "You can't handle me. I'd break a little thing like you."

I gave him a cheeky smirk. "That's fine. I don't mind being broken. As long as you put me back together." And then I smashed my lips to his.

He kissed me back for all of three seconds before he ripped his mouth away. "No." He flexed his hand around my throat, warning me not to move again. "You haven't earned the right to kiss me yet."

A shudder rolled through me. I squirmed, clenching my thighs together to try and relieve the pressure building in my pussy.

Yes. Yes. Make me earn it.

He let go of my throat and my feet flattened on the floor. He grabbed a fistful of my hair and dragged me back towards the showers. There was nothing soft or gentle about his hold. It was rough. Forceful. Exactly what I wanted.

Aleksandr manoeuvred me right where he wanted me, standing with my back to the showers, my front to the wooden bench seat. He grabbed a fresh towel from the shelf and laid it out on the ground behind me.

Goosebumps pebbled on my skin, anticipation zinging through me. I had no idea what was going on, what Aleksandr had planned, and I didn't care. I was so excited I could barely stand still, my body trembling.

Aleksandr brushed against me as he walked around me and took a seat on the wooden bench directly in front of me. "Sit down and spread your legs," he commanded.

I sat down on the towel and did as he ordered.

"Wider."

I spread my legs until I felt a slight sting from stretching them out too far. My heart thumped so hard I could feel it in my ears, like it was going to explode out of my chest.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I was completely exposed, open for him, my whole body on display for his perusal.

He tilted his head to the side, eyes running over every inch of my skin. A curious expression flashed across his face at the piercing dangling from my clit. Heat burned in his gaze. He placed both hands on the bench behind

him and leaned back, his muscles bunching, threatening to tear through his shirt as he supported his weight.

He nodded towards my pussy. “Finish what you started.”

I frowned. “What? I—” realisation dawned on me. He wanted me to pleasure myself. While he watched.

Considering his current position, it gave him a front row seat to the show.

My lips curved with devious excitement. I drifted my hands down my chest, grasping my breasts and pinching my nipples. My head rolled back as a moan slipped free. I continued further down, brushing my fingers over my clit. I tugged lightly on my piercing and bit my lip to smother my cry of pleasure.

Aleksandr watched with unwavering focus, his pupils dilating, his breaths deepening. His hands moved and gripped the edge of the seat near his thighs, the wood groaning under the bulk of his strength. It was as if he was using it to hold himself back. To keep himself still. To stop himself from reaching forward and taking control.

“You like to watch?” I breathed, my hips moving in slow circles, swirling and swirling as I chased the orgasm that was fast approaching.

“I like to do lots of things,” he answered absentmindedly. His gaze was fixed entirely on my movements, like I was the most riveting thing in the world.

Having him in front of me, all of his attention focused solely on me made me even hotter, my skin burning.

“Yeah? Like what? Tell me.”

Those crystal blue eyes flicked up to my face. “Why?”

“I like your voice.” Every time he talked, every word he said pushed me closer and closer to the edge. His accent. That rough deep voice...

My legs began to shake, my pleasure soaring.

Oh, God.

I was already close from before, and now—

“You want to hear what I like to do, *malyshka*? How I like to fuck? What turns me on?”

My fingers moved faster over my clit. My pussy clenched, desperate for something to grasp. I pushed two fingers inside, whimpering and moaning as my orgasm drew closer.

Aleksandr sucked air between his clenched teeth, palming his cock through his grey sweats.

It looked big and thick, and I desperately wanted to get my hands on it. Feel it inside me as he held me down and fucked me like there was no tomorrow.

“You want to hear about all the nasty, depraved things I’ve thought about doing to you?” Aleksandr growled, so much want and lust burning in his eyes it set my whole body on fire. “About how I imagined you choking on my cock, tears streaming down that pretty face of yours until I shoot my cum down your throat? Until you’re drowning in it?”

My orgasm was there. Right there. So close. I could see it. Taste it. I just needed—

“Or maybe you want to hear about how I chase you. Hunt you. Throw you down and fuck you while I call you my good, dirty little fuck toy?”

That did it. White-hot pleasure shot up my spine, spreading through every nerve inside me as my back bowed, my pussy rippling around my fingers. I moaned long and deep, tugging on my clit piercing again to prolong the pleasure. My body trembled, my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

And then I was weightless, surrounded on all sides by hard, toned muscles.

Aleksandr hauled me off the ground and into his lap. His hands were in my hair, on my ass, digging deep into my skin as he latched his mouth to mine. Our teeth clashed, tongues fighting with one another in an all-consuming, mind-numbing kiss.

Aleksandr’s hungry growl vibrated down my throat. “You taste so fucking sweet,” he murmured against my lips. “Are you sweet everywhere?” His hand fluttered down and he cupped my pussy roughly, fingers delving inside.

I squealed in delight, grinding myself against him.

He pulled them out far too quickly and I whined, desperate to have them back where they belonged. He brought them up to his lips and eyes firmly locked on mine, ran his tongue from the bottom to the top of his fingertips.

“Mmm, definitely sweet all over.” He rubbed them against my lips, coating them in my wetness before he kissed me again. Harder. More savage.

His hands cupped my ass and he rubbed me against him, the friction from his pants and cock against my pussy making me moan. My hands delved into his hair, nails scraping along his scalp.

He groaned, kissing me with more force.

I was ready, so ready for him to take me. Fuck me. Own me. I never needed anything more than I needed Aleksandr to make me his. To fuck me so hard it left a mark on my body and soul.

“I want to hear you scream,” he rumbled, biting and nipping his way across my jaw, down my neck. His teeth gripped one of my nipple piercings and tugged.

I cried out in shock, pain and pleasure melding together, spreading out over my chest.

“More.” He sucked my nipple into his mouth, tongue swirling around the sensitive bud. His hand palmed my free breast, fingers pulling and yanking on the piercing at the same time he sucked and sucked on the nipple in his mouth.

“Yes, yes. Oh, dios. *Que bueno, que bueno,*” Oh god. So good, so good. My words switched from English to Spanish without conscious thought. With his lips on me, my pussy grinding against his cock, and all those strong, solid muscles surrounding me, my mind was frazzled. The only thing I could think about was the pleasure shooting through me.

“You’re a sensitive little thing, aren’t you? Responsive, so responsive.” He rammed three fingers inside and I screamed at the rough invasion. “And tight. Scream. Scream for me, *malyshka*.”

I was close, ready to explode all over again. “*Aleksandr*,” I moaned, dragging out his name. Almost there. Only a few-yes, yes—

The door burst open. “Zander, you in here? You’ve got—”

I froze, my whole body locking up. Over Aleksandr’s shoulder, I saw his brother standing frozen in the doorway, his eyes wide, mouth dropped open in shock.

Aleksandr clutched me closer to him, head whipping to the side. “Out!”

“But there’s-someone’s—”

“Out now, Lukyan!”

He left, slamming the door behind him.

An awkward silence lingered in the air. My arousal was still there, slightly deflated now—but still, it was there. I leaned back, looking into

Aleksandr's eyes. They were wild. Feral. Animalistic. Like a man starved for more.

Knocking echoed into the room. "Zander, you're *really* gonna want to get out here." The muffled voice called out.

Aleksandr snarled, frustration lining his face. He banded one arm around my waist and stood, holding me to him as he got to his feet. He slowly set me on my feet, my body caressing his on the way down. "Get dressed," he barked harshly, heading towards the door.

I pursed my lips, watching him walk away. I wasn't expecting some grand, heartfelt romantic gesture. Aleksandr wasn't exactly the type. But nothing? Not even a slap on the ass or a sexy smirk to acknowledge what happened between us?

Rude.

I picked up my clothes, frowning.

Where is my underwear?

I got down on my hands and knees, looking under the seat. Nothing. Frown deepening, my head swivelled from side to side, scanning the floor.

What the fuck?

They were nowhere in sight. It was like they'd just disappeared.

"Come on, hurry it up." Aleksandr crossed his arms over his chest, an impatient look on his face.

"Yeah, yeah. Hold your horses." I quickly put on what clothes I did have, still looking for my underwear. It wasn't like I was going to wear them. That would have been unhygienic. But still, it was weird they just seemed to vanish into thin air.

When I joined Aleksandr at his side, he opened the door, and we made our way out. His brother sat on the edge of the giant boxing ring, legs swinging back and forth. Apart from him and some woman hovering at the entrance of the warehouse, the place was empty.

Aleksandr didn't acknowledge either of them as he led me back through the maze of machines, heading back to my prison. His brother smirked, wagging his fingers at me in greeting. I frowned slightly, giving him an awkward half-wave in return. He winked.

The woman was far less friendly. She glared at me, hostile energy coming off her in waves. She was beautiful. Tall. Slim. Dark-haired. Clear, porcelain skin. I had no idea who she was, or what I'd done to make her look at me like she wanted to stab me in the eye.

And I didn't care. Whatever her problem was, was *her* problem. Not mine.

As Aleksandr led me back down into the pits of hell, an awkward silence hung between us, one I had no intention of filling. If he wanted to ignore what happened and pretend like we weren't just a second away from fucking the shit out of each other, then fine.

My eyes roamed over his body. Over those broad shoulders and the ass so tight you could bounce a quarter off it. I was hoping the attraction I felt towards him, this burning need to touch him, *feel* him, would dissipate after cumming in front of him. But it hadn't. If anything, it was even more ferocious.

I was still so fucking hungry for him.

When Aleksandr opened the door to my 'room', I paused, hesitating in the doorway. This was the longest I'd spent out of the cuffs since I got here. I didn't want to go back to being locked up, unable to move. Stretch out my arms or legs. It was unbearable.

I took a step back, shaking my head. No. I wasn't going to be locked up, tied down again.

Aleksandr clamped a hand around my wrist, stopping me. Something flashed in his eyes. I'd almost say it was concern, but the more I thought about it, the more ridiculous that seemed.

"You're going to have to drag me kicking and screaming if you want me back in that chair. I'm not getting cuffed again without a damn fight." I squared my shoulders, trying to make myself taller, more authoritative. Determination snapped my spine straight. I would fight him, even though I knew I didn't stand a chance in hell.

Aleksandr stared at me, one brow hiked up ever so slightly. He looked over his shoulder into the room and back to me. He exhaled softly.

When he started pulling me along forcefully, I fought against him. Then he abruptly let me go, making me stumble just as I stepped into the room.

"Behave, *malyshka*," he warned, darkness dripping from his tone. "You cause any trouble and being cuffed to a chair will be the least of your concerns." He slammed the door in my face, leaving me free.

Chapter Thirteen



My fingers clenched around the small piece of fabric in my pocket, my body shaking from how much effort it was taking for me not to turn around and finish what Drea and I started. To take her how I wanted to take her. Fuck her against the wall. On the floor. Bent over my desk.

I wanted it all, and that was dangerous.

I could still taste her on my lips, on my tongue. Could still feel her smooth skin beneath my fingers. Still feel the warmth of her pussy grinding against me.

Fuck, she was glorious.

The way she just let go. The freedom she had. She wasn't afraid to be herself. To chase her pleasure. To tell me what she wanted, what she needed to get herself there.

I was completely blown away by her. In awe of her. I'd never had any trouble resisting women before. Being the future *Pakhan* of the Bratva came with certain perks. Women literally throwing themselves at you was one of them.

But with Drea, I honestly thought I was going to die if I didn't get my hands on her. Those sweet little sounds she made, how she breathed my name with pleasure, fuelled my obsession for her to the point that I did something I'd *never* done before.

Stolen her underwear.

It was something perverts did. I was a lot of things; murderer, monster, sexual deviant. But *pervert*?

No.

I didn't take her underwear to do weird and twisted things with it. I took it because...well...I wanted to keep something of hers with me. That's it.

See? Not so bad, right?

I groaned, running a hand down my face. I was losing it. Absolutely, fucking losing it. The thing was, though, even though I knew what—or more *who*—was responsible for my impending insanity, I knew I wasn't going to stop.

It was too late. My need for her had progressed too far.

Drea was like a violent thunderstorm; wild, chaotic, untameable. The destructive beauty she could cause was impossible to look away from. If you found yourself in her path, she could rip you apart with that fiery spirit and quick wit.

I wanted to be the one to tame the untamable. To bring her to her knees, knowing I was the only man she submitted to.

Lukyan's voice snapped me out of my head, making me realise I'd come up from the pit on total autopilot. He still hadn't moved from his position on the boxing ring, but the playful expression that was dancing all over his face when Drea and I walked past was gone, replaced with agitation that was aimed directly at Mila.

I had no idea what she was doing here, or how she'd gotten through the main gate without authorisation. I hadn't spoken to her since the last time we fucked. Which, if I'm being honest, was less than memorable. She texted a few times since then but I never responded.

I had nothing to say, and I wasn't interested in listening to anything *she* had to say either.

As I crossed the main floor, heading towards Lukyan, Mila took a step in my direction. I glared, letting my frustration over her just showing up here blaze in my eyes.

Mila blanched, her confidence plummeting. She took a step back.

"Now I see why you didn't want any help interrogating the Zeta woman," Lukyan chuckled, jumping down from the ring. He sauntered over to me. "Though I'll admit, I'm a little jealous. I could have sworn I called dibs."

“Shut up, Lukyan.” I flicked my head towards Mila. “When did she get here?”

“Like ten minutes ago. Just strolled on up and knocked on the front door, looking for you.”

“How did she get through the main gate without prior approval?” There were strict rules in place when it came to people stepping foot on the property. Father was meticulous with his rules. No one was supposed to be able to gain entry without one of us approving it first. If the guards hadn’t been told beforehand, they were meant to call ahead and check before letting anyone pass. Someone had royally fucked up and as soon as I found out who it was, they were going to be punished.

“Ethan said she *did* have approval?”

I frowned. “By who? You?”

Lukyan reared back in shock. “As if I would *ever* approve that devil woman stepping foot on the property.”

I rolled my eyes. He was such a damn drama queen sometimes. “Then who?”

It couldn’t have been Nik. He didn’t like her anymore than Lukyan did. And I highly doubted my father even knew who she was.

“I don’t know. Call down to the main gate and ask them if you wanna know. I’m not a damn mind reader.”

“No, you’re just a pain in my ass,” I exhaled. “Get out of here. I’ll deal with it.”

He gave a two-finger salute in a farewell gesture before spinning on his heels and walking out.

I turned my attention to Mila. She still stood near the entrance. There was a hesitant look on her face. Like she was worried about what I’d do, what I was going to say—but there was also anger simmering in her eyes too.

She was pissed about something. Likely watching Drea and I leave the showers together.

“Who was that woman, Alek?” she asked, staring me down.

Yep, just like I thought.

I ignored her question. “What are you doing here, Mila?”

“You didn’t answer any of my texts.”

“So you just decided to show up here unannounced?”

“I was worried about you. Who was she?” Mila demanded again, her anger climbing.

“Who she is, is irrelevant.”

“Bullshit!” she hissed. “Did you fuck her?”

I narrowed my eyes, her attitude annoying me. “We’re not exclusive, Mila. Whether I fucked her or not is none of your concern.”

“It most certainly is! How would you feel if you saw me with another man?”

“I wouldn’t care in the slightest.” I answered honestly, because I wouldn’t.

What Mila did—or more specifically, *who* Mila did—was of no concern to me.

Hurt flashed across her face. “How can you say that? We’ve been sleeping together for years.

I frowned. “And?”

“A-and?” she stuttered in outrage. “*And?!*” she shrieked, marching towards me, her heels clicking along the concrete floor with every step she took. “We’ve been seeing each other for six years. *Six years.* You can try to deny it, but I know you care about me. I know—”

“Care about you?” I scoffed. “Let’s get something straight here. I *do not* care about you. You’re a warm body for me to stick my cock into. That’s it. If you’ve deluded yourself into thinking you’re something more, that’s on you. Now, let’s not waste time pretending you care for me either. We both know all you care about is that I’m the future *Pakhan*. If it had been Nikolai or Lukyan, you would have attached yourself to them instead of me.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock.

“It astounds me that after all these years, you still don’t know your place. That you have the audacity to show up here, *unannounced*, like you have every right to be here.” I stepped into her space, gripping her throat. There was nothing sexual about it, even though I’d pulled this move on her a dozen times in the past right before we fucked. It was threatening. Full of anger and frustration.

Mila choked, gasping for air. Her hand clawed at mine, nails digging into my skin.

“I suspect your father was the one who told Ethan you had authorisation to enter through the gates, and that will be dealt with in due time. Right now, I’m dealing with *you*.” I lifted her in the air by her throat. Her feet

kicked uselessly as she fought for breath. “The next time you pull a stunt like this, you’re going to see a whole different side of me. One reserved only for my enemies.” I dropped the mask I kept in place, letting the darkness deep inside me run free. My voice fell to a deeply menacing tone. “Do you understand me?”

Tears welled in her eyes, her face turning red and drenched in fear. She nodded frantically, gasping for air. She was a heartbeat away from passing out. Or dying. I wasn’t sure which and I honestly didn’t care. I was tempted to see what would come first, but instead I dropped her. She crashed to the floor, landing in a heap at my feet. She coughed, sucking air into her lungs in one huge breath. Terror-filled eyes looked up at me.

“I suggest you get out of my face before I decide to punish you instead. And it won’t be a punishment you’ll enjoy.”

Mila picked herself up with shaky limbs. She rubbed at her red, sore throat, whimpering as she attempted to swallow before she sprinted out the door without a look back.

I turned off the lights and the warehouse plunged into darkness. I walked out, shutting the door and locking it behind me. Lukyan leaned casually against the warehouse, legs crossed at the ankles.

“What are you doing here? I thought I told you to go.” I headed towards the house and Lukyan followed.

“The opportunity to watch Mila run away crying was just too tempting to pass up.”

I shook my head. Of course it was. Lukyan loved to watch others suffer—especially if he disliked them.

“So when do I get a turn interrogating the Zeta woman?”

I froze, my back stiffening. I turned to face him. “What?”

Lukyan smirked. “What? You don’t wanna share?” he winked.

Images of the two of them raced through my mind and my anger soared.

No. Fucking. Way.

“Remember what I said about breaking fingers?” I glared, continuing towards the house.

That stupid smirk stayed plastered on his face. He practically skipped at my side, giddy and full of that childish cheekiness I hated so much. “God, I love this. Wait until Nikolai finds out.”

I whirled on him, gripping him roughly by the arms. “No,” I growled.

“Ow, ease up. You’re hurting me,” Lukyan whined.

“You keep your mouth shut, you hear me? Not one fucking word. To anyone. You saw nothing. You *know* nothing.”

“You know nothing, Jon Snow,” he said in a feminine voice, quoting a line from *Game of Thrones*.

I shook him hard, making his head whip back and forth. “Stop joking around. I’m serious, Lukyan. You say anything and I’ll tell Father who *really* crashed his Bugatti last year.”

Lukyan gasped, eyes widening. “You wouldn’t,” he breathed shakily.

My brows slammed down in determination. “Try me.”

His mouth opened, shut, opened again. His voice croaked, like he was having trouble getting the words out. “You’d tattle over a girl?”

“You tattle, I tattle.” Though, I didn’t really see it as tattling. More like payback. If he blabbed, I was going to make damn sure he was punished for it.

He huffed. “Fine,” he grumbled. He yanked himself out of my grip. “I won’t say shit. Nothing is worth incurring Father’s wrath. My shoulder still hurts from the last time he made me get in the ring with him.”

I grunted. I had a list a mile long of injuries my father had caused me over the years.

Lukyan studied me suspiciously. “You’re acting super weird. What gives? Don’t tell me you actually *care* for that chick?”

I gave him a level stare. “When have you ever known me to care about someone that wasn’t family?”

He snorted. “True. Have you managed to gather any more information from her? Surely after your ‘interrogation,’ you should have come away with some more info. Unless she wasn’t satisfied with your...skills.” He pumped his eyebrows up and down suggestively and I shoved him, making him laugh.

“My skills are unparalleled.”

“So, what’d she tell you then?” When I didn’t answer, he laughed again. “I’m guessing from your silence, nothing. You’re losing your touch, big brother,” he winked.

I went to slap him, and he jumped back, narrowly missing my hand.

“Uh oh. See? You’re getting slow in your old age.”

I shook my head, chuckling softly. Despite how much he annoyed me sometimes, I really was going to miss him when he left for New York tomorrow.



I stepped into Father's office the following morning, trying to mask my irritation from the moment he called me in here. I knew exactly what it was regarding.

He warned me for days it was coming, but a part of me hoped it would fall through. That I wouldn't actually *have* to do it. There were so many other important things I had to deal with. Having to train some kid who's probably never thrown a decent punch in his life wasn't exactly high up on my list of priorities right now.

Add in the fact that I'd barely gotten a lick of sleep last night and I was in a *terrible* fucking mood.

Sitting on the three-seater couch against the wall was Mikhail's son, Dayton. He was a tall, lanky kid, with dark blonde hair that was tucked beneath a black snapback hat. A pair of huge headphones covered his ears, music blaring so loud I could hear it from the moment I opened the door.

He was slouched back into the couch, legs resting on the coffee table in front of him. He chewed loudly on a piece of gum, eyes plastered to his iPhone, not giving an ounce of his attention to my father or I.

First impressions were important, and he was already off to a bad start. I'd been around him all of three seconds and I already knew all I needed to know about him. He was disrespectful. Undisciplined. Rebellious.

Father didn't raise his head from the mountain of paperwork taking over his desk as he waved me in. I was fairly confident all that paperwork was the only reason he allowed Dayton's total lack of respect. He was too preoccupied with whatever was on those papers. "Come in, come in."

I shut the door behind me and moved to stand in front of him. My eyes flicked to Dayton. He was still staring at his phone like neither my father nor I was even in the room.

That phone would be the first thing to go.

"Father," I nodded.

"This is Dayton," he said, pointing towards the couch, a stack of papers in his hand. "Dayton, this is—" he cut himself off when he realised the kid wasn't listening, his eyes narrowing in annoyance. "Dayton," he snapped.

No response.

“Dayton!” he tried again, his anger climbing.

Dayton continued looking at his phone, completely oblivious to the fact that my father was a second away from beating the crap out of him.

It was those damn headphones.

I marched over and snatched them off his head, snapping them in two.

“Dude! What the fuck?!” He shot off the couch in outrage and I shoved him back down with a push to the chest.

“When you step into this office, you give your complete and undivided attention to the *Pakhan*.”

Dayton glared. He opened his mouth to respond—something snarky and disrespectful, I assumed—but I didn’t give him the chance.

I slapped him across the face. It wasn’t meant to be hard or cause pain. Its primary objective was to be demeaning. Shocking. To make him shake his head and think ‘Did I really just get bitchslapped?’

Dayton cradled his cheek, eyes wide and mouth open in shock, like he couldn’t believe what just happened.

I continued talking, towering over him. “Not only will you show your respect by standing—”

“How can I stand when you just shoved me back down?” he grumbled under his breath.

“You will also only speak when spoken to.”

“You’re talking to me now. Does that count?”

Great. He had a snarky attitude to go along with that disrespectful nature. Training him was going to be a joy. I could already tell he was going to be way more trouble than he was worth.

I turned to Father. “Does Mikhail expect him back in one piece? Because I can’t guarantee he’ll be whole by the time I’m done with him.”

Father shrugged, unconcerned. His focus went back to the papers on his desk. “He didn’t specify. As long as he can still form coherent sentences, I don’t anticipate it being an issue. Did you see this?” He held up one of the papers, shaking it in the air at me.

I walked over and took it, scanning it quickly.

“What the fuck?” I growled, anger thundering through me.

It was insurance paperwork for a fire that burnt down one of our buildings a few days ago. According to the chief fireman, they’d found evidence of arson.

“Someone intentionally set the fire?”

“Yes,” Father ground out, teeth clenched. “There were remnants of a device found that they think ignited the fire. Traces of gasoline on the walls and floors, as well as other accelerants.”

“Any idea who did it?”

Father exhaled heavily, leaning back in his chair. “Take your pick. We have enemies surrounding us on all sides. The Los Zetas. The Dirty Vultures. The Outfit. My brother.” He shook his head. “For all we know, it could be someone we don’t even know about. The point is someone’s made a move against us, and we need to retaliate soon. We can’t leave this unanswered.”

He was right. If people heard about this, it would open the door for other attacks. People would think we were getting weak, that we couldn’t handle ourselves anymore. We couldn’t allow word to spread.

“I agree, but we need to be smart. We can’t just lash out without proof of who did it first.”

“I know that. Get Vladimir on the phone. I want—”

A loud *pop* cut through the air. My eyes snapped to Dayton. He chewed on his gum loudly, drawing it out into a large bubble until it popped again.

The vein in my father’s forehead throbbed like some angry beast. I don’t think Dayton realised how close my father was to shooting him in the leg. I’d seen him do a hell of a lot worse to someone for a hell of a lot less of an indiscretion than the one Dayton just displayed.

Shit, I’ve seen him cut one of our mens’ ears off because he wasn’t listening during a mission briefing. The fact that Father hadn’t snapped yet was a goddamn miracle. I had a feeling the only reason was because Dayton was Mikhail’s son.

Father’s phone rang. His attention switched from Dayton to his phone like a flick of a switch.

“*Da?*” Yes? He answered. “Yes, make sure it’s fuelled up and ready to go within the hour.” He hung up and looked at me. “Go make sure your sister is packed and ready to leave. The jet is being prepped. I’ll deal with this,” he said, waving the insurance papers. “And take *him* with you.” He glared at Dayton, who looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but here. “Give him a tour of the grounds. Show him his room and get him settled in. I don’t want to see him again until he learns some fucking respect.”

I hauled Dayton to his feet by his shirt. He fought against me, trying to push me away.

“Get the hell off me, man!”

“Shut up and walk.” I shoved him hard towards the door and he tripped, smashing his head into the wood. He cried out in pain. A string of profanities flew out of his mouth.

“I’ll look into the fire, try and figure out who’s responsible,” I said, opening the door.

“I said I would deal with it,” Father snapped.

“Yes, I heard you.” I walked out, pulling Dayton along.

I knew my father was more than capable of handling it, but I also knew how stressed he was at the moment, how much he was dealing with. He was stretched pretty thin right now with everything going on. Add on Grandfather’s impromptu visit in less than a week, and the fact that his only daughter was getting ready to fly the nest, and Father was liable to snap and kill anyone who pissed him off.

The last thing we needed was a visit from Mikhail because we killed his long-lost son.

I’d known Mikhail my whole life. He went to boarding school with my father and he was also Illayana’s Godfather. But the man was crazy.

I gave Dayton a quick tour of the house. He complained the entire time, muttering condescending things under his breath like ‘rich people’, and ‘how many bathrooms does one place need?’. I showed him the kitchen, dining area, warehouse (minus the pit hiding underneath) and finally his bedroom, which was on the second floor.

Dayton stomped into his room, glanced around and snorted. Ruth, one of the house maids, was straightening the bed when he walked in, fluffing the pillows and tucking the blankets in. She turned to face us at the sound of Dayton’s snort.

“Mr Volkov.” She bowed her head, standing with her hands behind her back.

Dayton shook his head. “What, do they spoon feed you and wipe your ass too?” he scoffed. “Lazy fucking rich people,” he grumbled, heading for his suitcases along the wall next to the bathroom.

Ruth’s face turned red in embarrassment. She shifted from foot to foot nervously, avoiding eye contact.

She was a kind old woman who did her job well and didn’t ask any questions. And she sure as fuck didn’t deserve to be embarrassed by a little shit like Dayton. My mother always taught us to honour and treat the maids

and butlers with respect. That just because they served us, it didn't give us the right to treat them like garbage. To disrespect them. It was something my siblings and I learnt at a very early age.

Dayton sifted through his luggage until he found another pair of headphones, slamming them over his ears. Music blasted from them instantly. He flopped down on the bed, listening to something heavy-metal, full of screaming. He kicked his shoes off and focused on his phone.

That's it.

"You're excused, Ruth. Thank you."

She bowed again and left.

I waited until she was gone before I walked over, ripped the headphones from Dayton's head and snapped them in half like I did his first pair.

"What the fuck is your problem?!" Dayton shrieked in fury, jumping to his feet. He threw a punch and I caught it in my palm, my fingers wrapping around his fist.

I could tell from that one move alone what I suspected about him was true; he couldn't throw a decent punch to save his life. There was little to no power behind the strike. The technique was all wrong and if his hit had actually connected, he most likely would have broken his hand.

I twisted his wrist sharply, making him cry out in pain and drop to his knees. I was tempted to break it, snap it in half and show him what *real* pain was. But, as much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn't. He would be even more useless to me than he was now with a broken wrist.

"Fuck! Let me go! You're hurting me!" he yelled. "You can't do this! My dad—"

I pulled out my knife and held it to his throat. Dayton froze, his eyes widening. A myriad of emotions flashed across his face all at once; fear, shock, disbelief.

"Your father sent you here to be trained. He knows *exactly* what that entails. You're not the first person he's sent to us. I obviously wasn't clear enough back in my father's office, so I'm going to clarify it for you. The next time you step out of line, I'm going to cut you." To get my point across, I carved a line into his cheek.

It was a shallow cut. Superficial. But he screamed like I was sawing off one of his fingers. He had a low pain tolerance. We'd have to work on that.

"You get two cuts. One, for continuing to be disrespectful after I warned you not to. And two, for speaking out of turn," I said, cutting a similar line

down his other cheek.

“You’re fucking crazy!” he shrieked, trying to fight against me.

I tightened my grip on his wrist and he winced. I cut into his skin again, this time on his arm. “Can you guess what that one was for?”

“Fuck you!”

Another slice down his arm.

“Argh! Stop cutting me!”

“Stop talking!” I roared in his face.

He flinched, shrinking back in fear.

I leaned forward, getting into his space, and lowered my voice. “The sooner you understand that things are very, *very* different here, the easier your life will be. You are now a part of a world that normal, everyday people never get to see into, probably don’t even know exists. It’s a world of violence. Blood. Death. It’s completely different to the one you know. Things are expected of you here. Certain behaviours and actions *will not* be tolerated. Dissension is dangerous in our world and puts everyone at risk. It is something we will not accept. Whether you want to be here or not doesn’t matter. You’re here now and you will learn to abide by *our* rules, or suffer the consequences.”

When he didn’t say a word back, managing to keep his mouth shut longer than ten seconds, I let him go and stepped away.

Dayton watched me cautiously, rubbing his wrist. He was looking at me completely differently, like someone to be weary of. To fear.

As he should.

Blood trickled down his face and arm, bright red splotches staining his white bed sheets.

“Get yourself cleaned up and be waiting in the front yard in fifteen minutes.”

He glared but wisely didn’t say a word.

I should have known it wouldn’t last though.

As I walked out, shutting the door behind me, he yelled, “You owe me two pairs of headphones, asshole!”

Chapter Fourteen



I jogged up the stairs towards the top floor of the house, heading for Illayana's room. The slightest trickle of surprise fluttered through me. I had to give it to the kid, he had balls.

I expected him to be quiet. Meek. Docile. Based on what Father told me about him, I thought he'd be a shy kid who was afraid of his own shadow. Not some disrespectful little shit who had no problem speaking his mind, even if it got him into trouble and reminded me too much of Lukyan for his own good.

I could definitely see glimpses of Mikhail in him. They had the same eyes. The same dark blonde hair. The same stubborn streak a mile long. If Dayton inherited Mikhail's ruthlessness and business smarts, he'd be a force to be reckoned with when he got older. But only time would tell on that.

Tatiana, my sister's best friend, came bounding down the stairs. "Hi Aleksandr. Bye Aleksandr," she said, running past me and out of my field of vision before I could even respond.

I shrugged, continuing up the stairs. I rounded the corner at the top and froze when I saw Illayana and Lukyan in the hallway. "Why do you two look like you're up to no good?"

"No reason," they both responded at the same time, and my suspicions grew tenfold.

I know those two better than anyone else in the world. When our mother died and our father was so overcome with grief and rage he went on a killing spree, I was left to pick up the broken pieces of our family.

Illayana was only eleven when the Voznesenskys murdered our mother. Lukyan was thirteen. At twenty-four, I didn't know shit about taking care of kids. Up until that point, my life had consisted of training, fighting and being one of my mother's personal guards.

The look on my younger siblings' faces right now was one I'd seen many times over the years—primarily when they were about to do something they weren't meant to be doing. Something that would get them into trouble.

I narrowed my eyes. "Right," I said, letting the trace of suspicion I felt linger in my voice. I waved to the pile of suitcases next to them. "Come on, let's get your stuff and get down to the car. The plane is waiting."

They both shared a look with one another.

"Alright, seriously. What's going on with you two?" I barked.

"I wanna talk to the girl. The one you took from Nero's," Illayana breathed out in a rush.

"No," I growled instantly, leaving no room for debate on the matter. I didn't need my little sister peppering Drea with question after question. Especially since I hadn't seen her since our little...incident.

"But—"

"I said no, Illayana. Now get your shit and move it." I grabbed one of her suitcases in each hand and walked away, confident they would follow.

Father was waiting in the foyer when I got downstairs. All the stress I'd seen when I was in his office was gone, hidden behind the *Pakhan* mask he kept in place around others. Father was an expert in compartmentalising his emotions. You would never be able to tell something was wrong just by looking at him. He made sure people only saw what he wanted them to see; a strong, ruthless leader without a worry in the world.

"Your sister on her way down?" Father asked, adjusting the cuffs on his Armani suit.

I nodded. "She's right behind me."

The guard standing by the front door opened it and I walked outside. A black SUV was parked in the driveway, Dayton leaning casually against it. He was still dressed in the same clothes; ripped jeans and a black shirt with a denim jacket, his hat flipped backwards.

He looked up at the sound of the gravel crunching beneath my feet as I made way towards the car. He scowled and looked back down at his phone, dismissing me. The cuts on his face were angry and red, sticking out like a sore thumb on his pale skin.

Raised voices reached my ears. Nik and Tatiana were locked in a heated argument halfway down the driveway (what else was new?), screaming and yelling at each other like they did the majority of the time.

They were like two opposing forces, constantly fighting against one another, refusing to accept there was something deeper, something more meaningful going on between them.

Frustration radiated from Nik, his hands in his hair as if he was a heartbeat away from ripping it out in sheer exasperation. Tatiana was smirking, as if she was enjoying putting my brother through such turmoil.

I couldn't hear what they were arguing about but whatever it was, it was driving Nik crazy.

I thrust one of the suitcases in my hands at Dayton, the force jostling him. "Put these in the trunk," I said, dropping the other one at his feet.

Dayton grumbled but didn't argue. I grabbed the keys from Sam—one of our men, who drove the car here from the garage—and unlocked it, popping the boot open.

Lukyan stepped outside of the house a moment later, carrying one of Illayana's suitcases in one hand and a duffel bag in the other. He reached my side just as Dayton threw the suitcases I gave him into the boot, slamming it shut a bit more aggressively than was needed. Dayton climbed into the back seat next, slamming the car door with just as much force.

Lucky for him, he'd managed to keep quiet the entire time, otherwise I would have added another indiscretion to his count.

"Who's the kid?" Lukyan asked, throwing Illayana's luggage in.

"His name is Dayton. He's Mikhail's son."

Lukyan frowned. "Mikhail has a son?"

"Apparently," I grunted. "He's here for training."

"Uh oh," Lukyan sang with humour. "If you're the one doing it, I wish him all the luck in the world. He's gonna need it."

My brows lowered. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're a hardass. Even more so than Father."

Nik's angry voice cut through the air. "Fine! Get yourself killed! See if I fucking care." He turned his back on Tatiana and marched towards the

house.

Lukyan opened his mouth.

“Don’t,” Nik snapped, stomping past. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Lukyan held his palms up, not saying a word.

Like me, he knew there was no point. When it came to Tatiana, there was no reasoning with Nik. He was stubborn as hell on a normal day, but whenever Tatiana was involved, he was even more headstrong.

Tatiana had her hands on her hips, glaring after him. She took a step in his direction, stopped, shook her head and turned around, walking away.

“The sooner those two get over their issues, the better,” Lukyan said, shaking his head.

I grunted in agreement. I wasn’t sure they ever would though. Something happened between the two of them a few years ago. I had no idea what, and I was pretty sure Illayana didn’t even know about it. The only reason I did was because I ran into Nik right afterwards. I’d never seen my brother so broken.

Whatever it was created a rift between them, one that despite their overwhelming sexual tension and feelings for one another, they couldn’t seem to get past.

Adrian came around from the side of the house, a large duffel bag slung over his shoulder. As Father’s personal bodyguard, Adrian usually went everywhere he did. But when Illayana agreed to marry Arturo, there were a number of families within the Bratva that were very unhappy about it.

The opportunity to marry into the *Pakhan*’s family was something a lot of the other families vied for. Since Illayana was Father’s only daughter, that opportunity vanished the moment she said ‘I do’.

Nobody was stupid enough to voice their displeasure outright. Questioning the *Pakhan* was a death sentence. That didn’t stop them from talking amongst themselves though, from causing discontent to grow within our ranks.

Father, being the overly paranoid man he was, wanted to make sure Illayana was always protected in the event someone decided to act on their anger. Assigning his top fighter to be her permanent guard was his way of ensuring she always had someone watching her back.

Adrian greeted me with a nod of his head before climbing into the back of the SUV.

Illayana walked out of the front door, her blue eyes glistening, sadness etched all over her face.

I frowned. She looked like she was going to cry. My sister *never* cried. I took a step towards her and froze, my back stiffening. My eyes hooked onto the necklace around her throat.

A painful memory slammed into me with such force it took my breath away, making me choke. I couldn't stop it from taking over, dragging me under like a powerful current in the ocean. The world around me slipped away as I was thrust into the past.

"Aleksy, come help me with this," my mother Yekaterina said, looking at me from the mirror in front of her.

She sat at the vanity table in her bedroom, holding a silver locket in between her manicured fingers. She was in an elegant, long-sleeved black lace dress, her dark hair down with a few strands braided back. Her blue eyes were a few shades lighter than my own. There was the smallest amount of make up on her heart-shaped face, just enough to accentuate her delicate features.

I pushed off the wall, making my way over to her. "I don't think this is a good idea. Maybe I shouldn't go."

Mother spun in her chair to face me. "Don't be ridiculous. You have to go. You've been waiting for years for an opportunity to prove yourself to your father."

"If he knew I was leaving you unprotected to attend this meet—" I shook my head, my words dying off at the thought.

I knew exactly how he would react. As one of my mother's bodyguards, it was my job, my responsibility to keep her safe. Ever since I was seventeen I went where she went, a constant presence looming over her, warning others away. I never left her side when we were out of the house. If Father knew I was even entertaining the idea, he would beat me within an inch of my life.

Shrugging, Mother smiled, a twinkle in her eyes. "He doesn't have to know." She handed me the necklace and turned around, lifting her hair off her shoulders.

It was one of her most prized possessions and she never left the house without it on.

I sighed, clipping it around her neck. “Father will find out.”

“And if he does, I will deal with him,” Mother said, straightening her shoulders.

If there was anyone in the world that could put Dimitri Volkov in his place, it was his wife. There was nothing he wouldn’t do to make her happy.

“I don’t think it’s worth the risk. What if something happens? No. There will be other opportunities.”

Mother stood, turning to face me. “I will be fine. I’m only going to The Arch and back home. I promise not to go anywhere else. Plus, I’ll have Aaron and Borik with me. That’s more than enough protection.”

Her words should have made me feel better. The Arch was a casino we owned. It was in our territory. Our men were the security guards. Aaron and Borik were both skilled soldiers. So why did the ball of anxiety in my chest continue to grow, expanding until it felt like it was going to crush me?

I couldn’t shake this horrible feeling that something bad was going to happen and I wouldn’t be there to protect her.

“No.” I shook my head. “No, I’m coming with you. I’m not—”

“Aleksy,” Mother cut in, gripping my arms and forcing me to look at her. Even with her heels on, she was still several feet shorter than me. “Relax and breathe. You’re stressing yourself out over nothing. As far as your father knows, I’ll be here, but in the event he finds out I went to The Arch, I will tell him it was an unplanned trip. Totally spontaneous—which it is. Up until a few hours ago I had no intention of going out, but Natasha invited me, and it’s been so long since I’ve spent quality time with her. Nothing bad is going to happen. I’ll be perfectly safe at The Arch. I know you take your job as my bodyguard seriously, but you’re the future head of the Bratva. The responsibilities that come with that outweigh your responsibilities to me. You can’t worry about me when you’re meant to be focused on the task in front of you. This deal your father has with The Triad is an important one. You need to be there not only to learn from the interaction, but to watch your father’s back.”

I grumbled, turning away. Everything she said made sense. I knew she was right. I just hated the idea of leaving my mother’s safety in the hands of others.

“Fine,” I exhaled heavily, rolling my neck. “You win. I’ll go.” I should have known better than to argue with my mother anyway. She was who we

all inherited our stubbornness from. I was sure of it. “And stop calling me Aleksy. I’m twenty-four years old. I’m not a baby anymore.”

Mother smiled a beautiful, radiant smile that lit up the entire room. “You’ll always be my baby, Aleksy.” She touched my cheek softly. “Moy pervenets,” My firstborn.

Those were the last words my mother ever said to me.

The memory faded just as quickly as it came on, tearing me back into the present.

Illayana’s worried eyes were on me. “Aleksandr—”

“Quiet,” I barked out, raising my palm in the air, trying to get a grip on the chaotic emotions quickly overtaking me.

It had been ten years since that day and the pain of her death was just as bad now as it was back then. The guilt I felt for not being there to protect her ate away at me every day like a cancer. In that one moment, I sealed my mother’s fate. Because of that one decision, I would never hear her voice again. Never watch on as she gave Father a hard time for being too strict on us. Never enjoy the hot bowl of *botvinia* soup she would make me when I was sick.

I would never see her smile again. Out of everything, it was the thing I missed the most. When Mother smiled at you, you couldn’t help but smile back. It didn’t matter what was going on in your life, if you were sad or angry. Her smile was comforting, warm. Like a tight hug.

Hesitation flashed across Illayana’s face, her mouth opening and closing like she wanted to say something but wasn’t sure if she should or not. Her suitcase was on the ground at her feet, her arms up as if she wanted to reach out and hug me, to offer comfort.

I didn’t deserve her comfort.

I turned my back to her, heading for the car. “Get in,” I said, opening the passenger-side door. “We need to go.”

Adrian and Lukyan were already in the backseat next to Dayton, having moved sometime after Illayana came outside.

Illayana picked up her luggage and rushed over. She looked at me, brows forming into a small frown. “Aleksandr—”

“Get in, Illayana.”

Her lip curled in dissatisfaction, but she did as I said.

I climbed in, turned on the car and pulled away from the house, heading down our long driveway. The iron gates swung open when we got close and I drove out onto the road towards the airstrip.

An awkward, tense silence hung in the air, thick and uncomfortable. Lukyan, being the class clown he so naturally was, decided to fill it.

He turned to the sullen teenager sitting next to him. “I’m Lukyan.” He offered his hand.

“Dayton,” he grumbled back, not even looking at Lukyan, staring out the window like he was the main character in some emotional rom-com movie.

It didn’t bother Lukyan in the slightest though. I glanced in the rearview mirror just in time to see Lukyan point at the cuts on Dayton’s face.

“That courtesy of my brother? He can be such an ass sometimes.” Lukyan lifted the sleeve of his shirt, revealing a scar roughly the same size. “He did this to me when I was sexting a chick during a training session.” He turned his head slightly and stretched out his neck, pointing to another scar. “This one I got because I showed up late to a deal with The 18th Street Gang. And this one—” he rolled up the bottom of his pants, showing another long, thin scar, “—was for the time I packed an order wrong for a client while I was drunk and accidentally gave them waaaay more than I should have.”

Dayton looked at Lukyan in shock, his mouth open and eyes wide.

“A little advice from someone who’s been in your shoes?” Lukyan leaned towards him and lowered his voice, though I could still hear him. “Do what he says. Don’t be disrespectful and don’t fuck around. My brother has no problem hurting someone to get his point across. All the scars on my body are proof of that. If you want to learn from him—”

“I don’t want to learn from him,” Dayton cut in, glaring at me through the rearview mirror. “I don’t even want to be here.”

Lukyan frowned, leaning back. “Why are you then?”

“My mum’s a whore and a junkie, and I didn’t get along with her new husband. Out of the two of us she likes him more, so she sent me off to live with my sperm donor of a father, who sent me here instead,” Dayton scoffed. “The moment I can get away from this place and you crazy people, the better.”

My head tilted to the side in thought, Dayton’s words flying through my mind. Something was off about the way he spoke of his mother. There was

so much anger and contempt drowning in his voice. He clearly didn't like the woman. And if what he said was true, she didn't hold much love for him either.

I couldn't even begin to understand what that would be like, having the one person who was meant to always love and protect you choose someone else over you. He'd been abandoned by her, shipped off to a man he'd never met before who, in turn, sent him somewhere else.

No wonder the kid was so bitter.

A lone figure jogging up the side of the road caught my attention. It was Tatiana. She lived about fifteen miles from us and was very big on running. Apparently it was one of the main sources of Nik's frustration with her. Tatiana didn't care if it was bright and sunny or pitch-black outside. If she wanted to run, she did.

Illayana put down her window and stuck half her body out. She put two fingers in her mouth and blew a loud wolf whistle at Tatiana as we drove past.

Tatiana gave the middle finger in return.

Illayana laughed, climbing back into the car and putting the window back up.

The rest of the drive was surprisingly uneventful. I'd even go as far as to say it was relaxing, which is a word I *never* thought I'd use around Lukyan and Illayana.

When we got to the airstrip the jet was already on the tarmac, fuelled up and ready to go. Two flight attendants, a man and a woman, were standing in front of the stairs that led onto the plane. Once the car came to a stop they rushed over, taking all the luggage and putting it onboard. Adrian jumped out, giving them a hand.

They, along with the pilot, were paid very, *very* well for their time, making themselves available to us whenever we needed them.

"Well, this is it big brother," Lukyan sniffed, pretending to wipe a tear from his eye. "No, no, no. You don't have to say anything. I know how emotional you get with farewells, so I'll do all the talking." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I—"

"Get out of my car, Lukyan," I cut in, turning in my seat to face him, my arm resting on the steering wheel.

Lukyan's bottom lip dropped, like a toddler about to break out in a fit of tears. He shuffled along the backseat until he got to the door, his head bent.

Then, out of nowhere, he sprang forward like a jack-in-the-box and planted a wet, sloppy kiss on my cheek. “Love you!” he yelled, bolting from the car.

“Argh, yuck Lukyan! *Ty der’mo!*” *You shithead!* I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. “Disgusting! Good riddance.”

Illayana chuckled in the front seat. “You going to kick me out too?” she winked.

I grunted. “You get five minutes. If you want them.” I knew my sister very well and I noticed the change in her the moment we got to the airstrip.

She was nervous. Hesitant. Anxious. Here, she knew her role. As an Enforcer, her responsibilities began and ended with whatever job we assigned her. She didn’t have to think about anything else, worry about anything else.

She was about to go from having no responsibility to having a mountain of it. And she was so uneasy about it, I half expected her to throw up from the stress. I could see the panic in her eyes.

“Hey,” I said softly. “You’ve got this. There’s nothing you can’t do if you put your mind to it. You go to New York and show them what us Volkovs are made of.”

She smiled softly. “But I’m not a Volkov anymore.”

“*Sestra,*” *Sister.* I laid a hand on her shoulder in comfort. “It doesn’t matter what your last name is. You’ll always be a Volkov.”

Chapter Fifteen



After dropping Illayana, Lukyan and Adrian off at the airstrip, I headed back towards the house. Dayton was still in the backseat, quiet as a mouse. He hadn't said a word since they left. I wasn't sure if he was afraid to talk or if he just didn't want to talk to *me*.

It didn't bother me either way. I was fine with silence.

We cruised down the highway at a comfortable speed, the world flying past us outside. Music played lightly in the car, so low I was able to hear the rumble from Dayton's stomach.

The kid was hungry.

"You want something to eat?" I asked, my hands gliding over the steering wheel as I took a turn.

Dayton grumbled a barely audible, "No."

I felt like rolling my eyes. If he wanted to act like a pouty child, fine. I wasn't going to baby him.

My phone rang, Nik's name flashing on the display screen on the dashboard.

I answered the call.

"I've got a hit on Rayna," Nik's voice blasted through the car before I could even get a word in.

"Where?" I growled, adrenaline surging through my body.

Yes. This was exactly what I needed, an outlet to focus all my anger and frustration on.

“A small café in North Las Vegas. My facial recognition program picked her up about an hour ago coming out of Crave Café.”

“Send me the address.”

“Already done.”

My phone pinged with an incoming text. I picked it up and put the address Nik sent into the GPS. Once it calculated the route, I sped towards it like a man on a mission.



I parked the car in an alley behind Crave Café, my excitement reaching new heights. There were two different types of hunts I loved indulging in. One was with a woman. When she ran from me and I chased her down (all consensual, of course). The sounds of their feet pounding along the ground, the way their breath quickened as I got closer and closer. It was a hunt I thoroughly enjoyed.

Then there was when I hunted down an enemy. There was nothing sexual about it. It was filled with blood, death and violence—three of my most favourite things. It was all about the strategy. The intricacies of tracking them down. The anticipation of knowing that with each step, I got closer and closer to my mark.

I stepped out of the car, tucking my Beretta behind my back. I had another two in a holster strapped to my chest, concealed by my black suit jacket.

When Dayton didn’t get out of the car, I tapped on the window. “Come on, let’s go.”

He begrudgingly got out, a sour look on his face. “Where are we? What are we doing here?”

I led the way out of the alley and towards Crave Café. “Business,” was all I replied with.

A small bell dinged overhead when we opened the door and walked into the café. Chatter and laughter swirled around the air. The smell of coffee and freshly cooked pastries filled my nostrils. People sat at tables and stood in clusters, totally immersed in whatever they were doing and who they were with.

I took a thorough look around. Rayna was nowhere to be seen—not that I was expecting her to still be here. A line of people led up to the wooden counter, where a young teen stood serving them. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but here, a bored expression on his face as he took people's orders.

We joined the line. After a few minutes we reached the front.

"What'll you have?" The name badge pinned to his shirt read 'Matt'.

I slipped into another persona, one completely different from my own. I changed the sound of my voice, making it lighter, more pleasant, and spoke with a smile.

It felt completely foreign to me, but it was a necessary role I had to play to get the answers I needed.

"Hello, my name is Doug. I'm looking for someone. A young woman. Brown hair. Blue eyes. About 5'8. She would have come in about an hour ago?"

Dayton's jaw dropped open at the change in me, staring at me like he had no idea who he was looking at.

Matt chewed slowly on the piece of gum in his mouth, studying me closely. There was a flare of recognition on his face while I described Rayna, so I was confident he knew who she was. At the very least, he had seen her before.

"Why, you lookin' for her?" he asked.

"I'm a bounty hunter. There's a warrant out on her arrest. If you help me out, I'll cut you in."

Matt's eyes widened at the prospect of money. At a job like this, I bet he was earning minimum wage. Maybe less. "How much?"

"A thousand dollars." I pulled out the roll of \$100 notes I travelled with to show him I was serious.

His eyes widened further. "The chick you're looking for comes in once or twice a week. Always on different days. She orders a half-cap, no foam caramel macchiato with a chocolate chip cookie. She always sits at that booth over there and waits for a guy who joins her. They sit, eat, chat and then leave a half an hour later."

I was impressed with the amount of detail he gave. "The guy, what does he look like?"

"I dunno. Tall. Dark hair. I wasn't looking at him. I was lookin' at her. She's hot."

Could be Dominik, I thought.

I pulled out a plain white card from my pocket with nothing but the number to a disposable cell phone on it. I handed it to Matt. “The next time she comes in here, you call me. Try to keep her here as long as you can. Screw up her drink order. Chat her up. Do whatever you have to do to keep her here as long as you can.”

Matt nodded. “I gotchu man. I’m your guy.”

I took one of the \$100 bills from the roll and held it out to him. He hesitated for only a second before snatching it up.

“Thank you, Matt,” I said, putting on my best non-threatening smile. “I look forward to hearing from you.” I turned and left the café, Dayton hot on my heels.

“What the fuck was that?” Dayton shrieked once we were outside.

“What was what?” My voice slipped back to its natural tone, my Russian accent coating my words.

“That! The whole alter ego thing. It was like you were a completely different person. In there you were almost...nice. I’ve only known you for half a day, but I know you’re not fucking nice. You’re rotten to the core. Just like my dad.”

“Mikhail’s not rotten.”

“I know what he does. He *sells* people, like one of those human traffickers you always hear about on the TV. He’s vile.”

I stopped him on the sidewalk. The bend in the alley where the car was parked was just up ahead. “You clearly don’t know him well enough, because you’re wrong.”

There was a certain persona Mikhail liked to portray. He wanted others to *think* he was this evil, terrible guy, that he did horrible, unspeakable things. But it wasn’t true. Yes, he was involved in the skin trade, but it wasn’t in the way most people thought.

“Mikhail doesn’t sell people. Anybody who’s there is there by choice.”

Dayton scoffed, not believing me. “I’m not an idiot. I saw their faces. They didn’t want to be there, being tossed from person to person like some worn out sex doll.”

“They might not have *wanted* it, but they *chose* it. Mikhail is a businessman more than anything else. And as a businessman, he knows what sells the most: sex and violence. He grants small loans to people. If they can’t pay it back he gives them two choices. They earn it back by

working for him, either in the sex den or the fight pit, or he takes the amount they owe him as pounds of flesh. He doesn't kidnap people and sell them to others like actual human traffickers."

Though he liked others to believe he did. A man in Mikhail's position had to always be weary of others trying to challenge him, to remove him from the game. Enabling the rumours that circled around the streets about him helped deter those who thought they could take him on.

Case in point: when we interrogated Miguel after Illayana's first kidnapping attempt. We used all those horror stories about Mikhail to scare Miguel into answering our questions.

It worked perfectly.

"It's not much of a choice though, is it?" Dayton said, shaking his head. "Either they do it or they get hurt. It's an ultimatum, one where each option is just as bad as the other."

I shrugged, continuing on. Dayton followed. "Regardless, it's their choice. They don't *have* to borrow the money to start with. They're warned of the consequences if they can't pay it back in time, and they still choose to go through with it."

When I turned the corner into the alley, the first thing I noticed was the motorbikes. Three of them. One parked in front of my car, one at the side and one behind, essentially boxing it in.

Lounging on my SUV were the three riders, smoking cigarettes and laughing amongst themselves. They were loud, boisterous, like a group of rowdy teenagers hanging around trying to intimidate anyone who walked past.

I didn't slow down as I made my way towards them. Dayton faltered behind me when he noticed the bikers.

"Stay behind me and don't say a word," I whispered over my shoulder. I took a second to glance at him. He looked nervous.

"This your car?" one of the bikers asked as I came to a stop a small distance away.

The name on his motorcycle vest read *The Dirty Vultures*. The word PROSPECT was stamped across the front. He had peroxide bleach-blonde hair and a slim but athletic build. He stayed exactly where he was, ass on the hood of my car, leaning back against the windshield like he owned it.

The other two bikers were on the roof, the one with the bald head sitting cross-legged and the young tweener-looking one standing behind him.

Arrogant, smug smiles were plastered across their faces. They assumed because they outnumbered us, they held the upper hand.

They didn't.

"Hey, Gorilla! You hear me? I said, 'Is this your car?'"

My eyes snapped to him at the ear-piercing scrape that followed. Peroxide dragged the tip of a knife along the hood, keying my car.

Oh, you're going to pay for that.

I slipped into another persona like I did in the café, but this one was different. I hunched my shoulders slightly, making sure to give off a terrified, docile aura. "Yes, this is my car."

"Good," Peroxide smiled. He jumped off the car and the other two followed, flouncing over to me. "I'll take the money you owe us now."

My brows creased slightly. "Money I owe?"

"For parking here." He gave me a 'Duh' kind of look, as if I should know what he was referring to. "The Dirty Vultures own these streets, and if you want to park on them you need to pay a parking fee." He lifted up the front of his shirt, revealing a gun tucked into the waistband of his pants. It was a crude weapon compared to what I was packing. It'd seen better days. He still had a knife in one hand and I'm sure he thought he was an intimidating sight.

"I wasn't aware of any parking fee." I could feel Dayton at my back, inching closer and closer. I didn't have to see him to know he was frightened. He might talk a big game but in reality, he was just a scared little kid surrounded by danger.

Peroxide smirked, lowering his shirt like the threat of the gun would be enough to keep me in line. "Well, now you are. So pay up big boy, otherwise—"

"We'll beat the shit out of you," one of the other bikers cut in, saddling up to Peroxide's side.

Their threats could use a bit more work. They were mediocre at best.

This guy was a little older. Bald head, fat nose, a little on the chubby side. PROSPECT was stitched across the front of his vest, like it was on Peroxide's.

I put my hands up, palms out, feigning total compliance. "Alright. I don't want any trouble. You guys want money? I've got money."

When I reached into the inside of my suit jacket and pulled out the roll of hundreds, three pairs of eyes gleamed with greed. They all rushed

forward, lining up side by side in the hopes of appearing more intimidating.

I held the cash out at arm's length, hunching my shoulders even more to give off the illusion I was scared of them.

Peroxide laughed, pointing at me. "All those muscles are just for show, aren't they big boy? You're just one of those gym junkies who's all about the looks and has none of the power."

I didn't say a word, my arm still hanging in the air, hand still holding the cash.

"That's the problem with guys like you," Peroxide said, stepping forward. "You think big muscles make you a man but in reality, you're just a fraud and a pussy."

Baldy and Tweener laughed.

Peroxide reached for the money and that's when I dropped the act, letting it melt away, my true self rushing to the surface.

I let the money fall through my fingers, gripped Peroxide's wrist and pulled him towards me, smashing my forehead into his face.

His cry of pain was like music to my ears.

I kept my hold tight and spun around him, delivering a reverse elbow to Tweener's nose. As he fell, I stretched my leg across Peroxide to kick Baldy in the face, knocking him out.

Three strikes in three seconds and none of them saw it coming.

Peroxide screeched as I took him to the ground. I straightened his arm out so the inside of this wrist sat against my bent knee and smashed the side of my fist into his elbow, snapping the bone.

Peroxide screamed and screamed and screamed. I let him fall face first and he curled into a ball, cradling his broken arm close to his body. Tears began to flow.

Fucking pussy.

I flattened him to the ground, grabbed a fistful of his disgusting, bleach-blonde hair and slammed his face into the hard concrete. Not just once. Not just twice. But over and over and over again.

Tweener watched in shock and horror, trails of blood running down his chin.

I didn't take my eyes off Tweener as I slammed Peroxide's head into the ground repeatedly. Even when Peroxide went completely limp beneath me, his cries dying off, I didn't stop.

Slam.

Slam.

Slam.

Blood pooled around us. Splattered in all directions.

Slam.

Slam.

Slam.

Tweener lurched to the side, vomit spilling from his mouth.

Slam.

Slam.

Slam.

Something crunched. Snapped. Squelched.

Huffing out a breath, I got to my feet, straightening the lapels of my jacket. I ran a hand through my hair as I stepped over Peroxide's dead body —there was no way he was still alive after that—and marched towards Tweener.

I could feel the blood dripping down my face, seeping into my clothing. I was covered head to toe.

Baldy was still unconscious, not moving an inch. I barely gave him a second glance as I focused entirely on the young biker currently scurrying away from me on his hands and feet. His back smashed into the brick wall, giving him nowhere else to go.

He whimpered, drowning in fear. It poured off him in waves, making his whole body tremble. His teeth clattered. His breath quickened. Sweat mixed with the blood dripping down his face.

It was a wonderful sight.

I stopped in front of him and slowly brought myself down into a crouch so we were at eye level. He pressed himself further into the wall, trying to get as far away from me as humanly possible.

Gone was the tough, arrogant kid that was here when I showed up, standing on the roof of my car. In his place was the frightened little child he really was.

I ran a hand down my face, smearing Peroxide's blood into my palm. I gripped Tweener's chin, forcing him to look at me. "I want you to go back to your Prez and tell him *he* does not own these streets. The Dirty Vultures *do not* own these streets. The Bratva do." I wiped the blood across his face, staining his skin bright red. He gagged and choked, trying to squirm away, but I kept his chin pinched between my fingers. "The next time one of you

gets in my way, I'm going to come down to that little clubhouse of yours on the corner of Smith and Third street and burn it to the ground with all of you in it."

A wet patch grew at his crotch, expanding outwards.

He pissed his pants.

"Do you think you can remember all that, or should I write it down for you?"

Tweener's body trembled. "I-I'll remember," he croaked.

"Good," I smiled. It was a dark, evil smile, one full of violent promises. I flicked my fingers towards the entrance to the alley. "Run along."

He was so scared, so eager to get away from me, he completely forgot he had a perfectly good motorbike only a few metres away. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted like someone was chasing him with a chainsaw.

I ran a hand down my body, straightening my jacket as I moved to a stand. It would seem that Thomas was right. The Dirty Vultures were definitely trying to carve out North Las Vegas as their own. The intel he sent over about them explained as much, but it was another thing to actually see it with my own eyes.

I read the reports from the burglaries, the firsthand accounts from business owners claiming they were being harassed by the MC. I saw the photos of the damage that occurred if they refused to pay. But no one was willing to go on record and make an official complaint. Threats had been made not only to the business owners but their families too, and that was more than enough to deter anyone from talking.

I sighed when I turned to face Dayton. He was staring at Peroxide's dead body, pale as a ghost. His eyes were dull, a sheen of sweat running down the side of his face. He swayed on his feet slightly, like he was having trouble staying upright.

"If you're going to be sick, do it over there." I pointed to the dumpsters lining the other brick wall. "You throw up in my car and you'll be cleaning it up."

Dayton made a sick, choking noise in his throat. His hand flew to his mouth and he ran, barely making it to the other side before vomit rushed from his mouth with the force of a fire hydrant.

I shook my head, pulling out my phone. It was going to be a mammoth task getting this kid ready—if it was even possible to begin with.

I understood that Dayton's situation was different than usual. By the time I was his age, I'd seen more death than a mortician at a funeral home. I knew I couldn't judge him for reacting the way any sane person would in the face of a dead body.

And that was why I was willing to give him a pass.
This time.

I dialled Nik and he answered on the third ring.
"Yeah?"

"I need you to hack into the CCTV cameras surrounding Crave Café and erase the footage."

Nik sighed heavily through the phone. "Why?"
"Just do it and you'll see why."

A few minutes of silence passed, the only thing I could hear being the *click-clack* sound of what I assumed was Nik's fingers typing furiously on his keyboard.

"Okay, I'm in the café. I don't see anything weird."
"Check the surrounding cameras."

Another few seconds.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Zander," Nik hissed. "What the hell happened?"

"Later. I need you to go back and erase the last few hours of footage on this camera, inside Crave and any other cameras in a five-mile radius."

"On it."

"I also need you to call the Cleaners."

The Cleaners were a small, privately owned business who specifically took care of messes like the one I'd just created. They were a neutral organisation, meaning it didn't matter who called them; us, the Italians, the Triad, Gangs or MCs. As long as they got paid they cleaned up your mess, disposed of the bodies, didn't ask any questions and, most importantly, kept their mouths shut about anything they'd seen.

"Already on the way. Did you find Rayna?"

"No. She was already gone by the time I got there. Speaking of which, I also need you to go through the footage at the café over the last week or so. Apparently, she met up with a man there and—"

"And you want to see if it's Dominik."

"Yes."

"Leave it with me. Anything else?"

"Nyet." No. "Find out what you can. I'll be home soon."

I hung up.

The sound of Baldy groaning caught my attention. He was slowly gaining consciousness.

“Dayton. Get over here.”

Begrudgingly, Dayton shuffled over. He still looked a little sickly, clutching his stomach like he might throw up again. “What?” he grumbled.

I grabbed his arm and marched him over to Baldy. “Knock him out.”

Dayton frowned deeply. “Huh?”

“Knock.” I kicked Baldy onto his back. “Him.” I placed my foot on his chest, making him wheeze. “Out.”

“I-I can’t do that,” Dayton exclaimed, eyes wide.

“I’m going to make this really simple for you, Dayton. Either *you* knock him out, or *I* knock you out. Decide.”

“But, I—” His eyes darted between us, back and forth, back and forth.

“Three, two, one—”

Dayton lunged forward and punched Baldy in the face. Well, it was more of a slap really.

First thing on the list: teach the kid how to throw a decent punch.

Dayton wailed on the biker with both fists, a war cry filling his lips. It was...pathetic. But it did the trick.

Baldy groaned and slipped back into unconsciousness.

Dayton panted heavily, as if that tiny display had exerted all his strength.

Task two: work on his stamina.

Blood coated his knuckles, his hands shaking. Whether it was from adrenaline or shock, I wasn’t sure.

I removed my foot from the biker’s chest. “Put him in the trunk.” I popped the boot with a click of a button.

“What?” Dayton huffed, his chest rising and falling. “Why?”

I didn’t answer his question, just continued to stare at him until he squirmed uncomfortably. He eventually got the message and picked himself up. He clasped Baldy’s motorcycle vest and started dragging him along the ground towards the car.

I could have helped him, but I wanted to see if he could actually do it. What he was capable of.

He grunted with exertion, heaving the man’s body across the concrete one pull at a time.

My eyes darted to the entrance of the alley. Luckily we were obscured enough from the dumpsters, pallets and trash. No one would be able to see what was going on unless they looked hard enough. That didn't mean someone wouldn't notice eventually, and we'd been here long enough.

After watching Dayton try and fail for the third time to lift Baldy into the trunk, I'd reached the end of my patience. I pushed Dayton aside, lifted the body with ease, hurled him into the car and slammed the trunk shut.

Dayton looked at me with annoyance, like he couldn't believe how easy it had been for me, while he was a heartbeat away from pulling his back out.

There was also a tint of jealousy in his eyes too, like he wished it could have been that easy for him too.

I could use that to my advantage.

"Get in the car," I said, heading for the driver's side. "We're going home."

Chapter Sixteen



I heaved my body up and down, up and down, taking my chin all the way down to the ground before coming back up as I counted the push ups in my head.

Forty-six.

Forty-seven.

Forty-eight.

My arms shook, sweat dripping down my face, but I pushed through until I reached my goal.

When I got to fifty, I took a quick thirty-second breather and then flipped over, starting on the sit ups. I put both hands behind my head, palms flat against the back of my skull and counted.

One.

Two.

Three.

The burn in my abdomen was a comforting kind of ache, one I had missed while being shackled to that chair. It was exactly what I needed to calm and centre myself.

I may still be stuck in a tiny room with no windows and dry blood coating its walls and floor, but the ability to move around helped quell the crazy. It helped keep me from going completely and utterly insane. It helped pass the time.

If I was being honest though, I was using it to try and distract myself from the fact that Aleksandr hadn't come back since our...*interaction* last night.

There was no clock in here. I didn't have a watch. I had no way of gauging the time. Whether it was morning or night. But I knew the day was almost over and he hadn't come by.

My days were boring. Repetitive. Usually Aleksander would show up some time after I woke up and offer me some sort of deal to get me to talk. I'd tell him where to shove it and he'd leave.

Dumb and Dumber out there guarding the door would come in a few hours later, give me a bowl of food and take me to the bathroom.

And that was it. That was the extent of my day. I would fall asleep, wake up and it would happen all over again, like some bad song on repeat.

Except for today. Today was different. Today Aleksandr hadn't shown up.

I refused to allow myself to feel the disappointment. If he wanted to be a little bitch and hide away from me, fine. But I hated that I felt like I had been rejected in some sort of way. You know, like when you sleep with someone, and they ghost you.

We didn't even sleep together and yet I felt that way.

It pissed me off.

It was an irrational feeling, one that didn't make any sense. Especially when you took into account the fact that Aleksandr was my kidnapper.

I shouldn't want his attention, his touch. I shouldn't want to feel his breath on my skin, his hand around my throat as he called me his good little fuck toy.

And yet I did.

I craved it. *Burned* for it.

I'd gotten more pleasure from that one experience with Aleksandr than I had with any other man or woman from my past.

Aleksandr had this presence—this *powerful* presence—that just made me shiver. Made my pussy throb. My skin flush. Made my body react in some primal way, like a lioness in heat.

Once I was finished with my sit ups, I moved onto another drill. I jogged lightly around the room for a few minutes, focusing on controlling my breathing, my heartbeat—and not on that giant bastard.

After that, I moved onto chin ups. There was a long steel bar running across the length of the roof. That evil, torturous side of me saw what that was for. It was perfect to hang people from. I wondered how many people had endured that fate, how many people had died in this very room.

I manoeuvred the chair directly under it and stood on it. I was still a few inches short from reaching the bar, but I was confident I could get it if I jumped.

I was right.

I leapt upwards, my fingers curling around the bar. I hung suspended in the air, adjusting my hands to make sure I had a good, solid grip. Then I stuck my legs out straight so my body made an 'L' shape and began lifting myself up and down, enjoying the burn in my muscles.

I'd only really just started when the door opened. I expected my guards, or maybe even Aleksandr. What I had not been expecting was the leggy, dark-haired woman I glimpsed last night strolling right on through, looking like some Victoria Secret model.

I paused mid-lift, my arms, legs and abdomen burning as we stared one another down, her face curled up in disgust and contempt.

Okey dokey. Looks like we're not going to braid each other's hair and become best friends.

Dumb and Dumber stayed outside but the door remained open as Leggy came to a stop a few feet away from me.

I was curious about her. About who she was, and what she was doing here in my cell, staring at me like I just kicked her dog.

Which I would *never* do. I was the type of person who (if given the choice) would choose to save a dog over a human in a deathly situation any day.

I straightened my legs and let go of the bar, hurling my body forward to do a superhero landing at her feet.

Deadpool was right. It was hella impractical. But hey, at least it looked cool.

I stood up, ignoring the ache in my knees as I stood toe-to-toe with Leggy. Or tried to. With those hooker heels, she practically towered over me. But I wasn't intimidated in the slightest.

I could take her.

Probably.

"And you are?" I asked, raising an inquisitive brow.

She sneered at me. It really ruined the beauty of her face.

“I’m Aleksandr’s fiancé. And I want you to stay the hell away from him.” She shoved me, and I was too stunned by her words to do anything about it. I fell back, landing flat on my ass.

What?

My head was reeling. Aleksandr was *engaged*?

Argh, I felt like such an idiot. I should have known. Of course a man like Aleksandr—strong, handsome, every woman’s wet dream—already had a woman. And a fucking stunning one at that.

Anger pounded in my chest. I did *a lot* of questionable things. I had no issues with stealing, beating the shit out of someone, even killing them. But taking another woman’s man?

That was something I was adamantly against.

I know, my priorities and morals were a little whack. But I’d been *that* woman before. I was with someone I loved with my entire heart and soul. Someone who I *thought* loved me just the same.

And then I walked in on him while he was licking another woman’s pussy.

In our bed.

It was a moment that shattered me. It broke me. Not only my heart but my ability to trust another. Even though it happened years ago, it still affected me and the decisions I made to this day.

“Aleksandr is *mine*,” Leggy growled, and that’s when I realised I was still on the ground with her standing over me. It was an extremely vulnerable position and I wasn’t having it.

I jumped to my feet, making her stumble back. “You can fucking have him,” I hissed. “I don’t want or need another woman’s man.”

“Please,” Leggy scoffed. “You think I don’t know what you’re trying to do? You’re trying to drive a wedge between us so you can be Queen of the Bratva. Well let me tell you something. He will *never* marry some Spanish *suka* like you. He’ll play around with you. Fuck you. But eventually he’ll get bored of you like he has with every other woman who isn’t me. And when that happens, he’ll chuck you back into the dirt where you belong.”

“Helloooo paranoid city. First of all, I didn’t even know you existed, so how could I have been planning to drive a wedge between the two of you? Second of all, I have no interest in being Queen of anything. And third of all, you put your hands on me again and we’re gonna have problems.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “What are *you* going to do to *me*? You’re *our* prisoner. You lay a hand on me and you’re dead.”

She had a very good point. And I didn’t give a flying fuck about it. There was no way I was going to stand here and just take her shit.

“Touch me again and find out.” My eyes flicked to the guards standing just outside the door. They didn’t *look* like they were going to intervene, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t.

Her lips curled into a cocky smile. There was certain air surrounding her. A privileged, self-entitled, no-one-can-touch-me-I’m-important type of air.

I didn’t give a shit who she was or what her position was in the Bratva. I was prepared to throw hands if she stepped to me again.

She got one free pass because yes, I did almost fuck her fiancé. But that was all I was willing to give.

Leggy raised a hand as if to strike me and I reacted...by punching her in the face.

Her nose crunched beneath my knuckles, her pain-filled cry filling the small space.

As she fell, I prepared myself for Shaggy and Pavel. I knew they wouldn’t allow that kind of disrespect.

They did nothing. Just stared at Leggy on the floor, crying and writhing in pain.

I felt like rolling my eyes. I didn’t even hit her that hard.

“Get her!” Leggy screeched, one hand holding her nose, the other pointing a finger at me. “Get her now!”

Shaggy and Pavel didn’t move. “We don’t take orders from you,” the older one grunted.

I snorted out a laugh. She was so confident I would be punished if I laid a hand on her.

How wrong she was.

Leggy pulled herself to her feet, her face full of rage. She charged at me, screaming some sort of weird battle cry that hurt my ears.

She was much taller than me, so ducking under her swing was easy. I rammed my body into her side and she stumbled, thanks to those ridiculous fucking heels.

She cried out as she fell to her knees. “You fucking bitch!” she hissed, getting back up. “I’ll kill you!”

She went to charge again, but a rough voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

“Mila! That’s enough!” A bulky man walked through the door, his eyes dark.

I recognised him. He was the man who dragged me into the torture dungeon when I first got here.

I busted his nose with my head.

Ah, what a fond memory.

Words flew between the two of them as they had a tense, heated discussion in Russian. I was a little annoyed that I couldn’t understand it because it sounded like he was telling her off, his veins throbbing in his neck, his finger pointing at her in reprimand.

Whatever the man said made Mila glare at me with pure hatred. She stomped past me and out of the room without a second glance.

“Nice to meet you!” I yelled out, waving at her retreating back.

A sharp blow to the face rocked me, sending me flying. I landed in a heap on the floor, pain exploding across my cheek.

“Argh! Fuck!”

The man had struck me so quickly I hadn’t even seen it coming.

“The next time you lay a hand on my daughter, I’ll slit your throat,” he threatened, the glare on his face matching his daughter’s perfectly.

I could finally see the resemblance between them.

I stood, cradling my sore cheek. “She hit me first.” Well, she pushed me, but all the same.

“I don’t care what she did. Do it again and I’ll kill you myself.” He turned and left, striding past Shaggy and Pavel.

The younger guard stepped forward, grabbing the door handle. He smirked. “Nice hit.”

“Shut the door, Pavel,” Shaggy commanded. There was the slightest hint of smirk on his face too.

Pavel winked, shutting the door.

I chuckled softly. Clearly Mila wasn’t very well liked among her own people.

I blew out a breath, pain still radiating across my face. I walked backwards until my back hit the wall, sliding down to sit.

Mila’s words circled through my mind over and over again. *I’m Aleksandr’s fiancé.*

God, how could I have been so fucking stupid?

Instead of trying to find a way to escape, I'd been canoodling with the very man who kidnapped me.

Stockholm Syndrome was a very real thing, obviously. But then again I hadn't had any feelings for Nero after he kidnapped me, and I'd been with him a hell of a lot longer than with Aleksandr.

It was hard to explain, hard to put into words. With Aleksandr, it had been an instantaneous attraction. The second I laid eyes on him, my whole body shot to life. The fact that he took me captive didn't negate any of that.

But still, how could I have let myself get so distracted, so consumed with Aleksandr that I completely ignored that he was holding me against my will?

I groaned, running a hand down my face. I had to be honest with myself. I was more pissed off he had a fiancé than I was about him kidnapping me.

How warped was that? Just goes to show how fucked up in the head I really was.

I couldn't help the sting of betrayal coursing through my body. Of course I knew how utterly ridiculous that was. Aleksandr didn't owe me a goddamn thing. The only thing between us was the overwhelming, sexual attraction. Nothing else.

I knew what I was feeling right now was completely irrational. I understood that, but nevertheless, I felt it.

I had to get out of here, away from him and the Bratva and back to my people. The cartel.

I thumped my head softly against the wall, trying to come up with some sort of escape plan.

The only time I was out of this room was for a bathroom break once a day. Shaggy and Pavel guarded me closely every time they led me to the bathroom, one in front and one behind me. They took the same route each time. A right, two lefts and another right.

This place was like a fucking maze. Not to mention it was more secure than Fort Knox. I paid attention to everything Aleksandr did when he took me up to the main floor for the shower and back down again.

That huge steel door seemed impenetrable. And the only way to open it (from what I could tell) was with a fingerprint.

The only way I had any chance of escaping was if I could somehow get back to the main floor. Then I would need to incapacitate whoever I was with, whether that be Shaggy, Pavel or even Aleksandr. Maybe get my hands on a set of keys and steal one of their cars?

I nodded to myself. My plan might only have a slim-to-none chance of actually working, but at least I had one now. And I wouldn't let Aleksandr distract me from it again.

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Chapter Seventeen



I cuffed The Dirty Vultures biker to the old rickety chair in the centre of the room, his body limp and smelling of rotten fish. His head hung forward, dry blood coating his skin and a painful groan falling from his lips. He hadn't woken up since Dayton knocked him unconscious, not even when I dragged him from the car into the pit.

After arriving home, I sent Dayton off to enjoy the rest of his night as he saw fit. One of our soldiers had been assigned to follow him around wherever he went, making sure he didn't get into anything he shouldn't.

Dayton was all too glad to get away from me, rushing off quicker than I'd ever seen him move. I couldn't really blame him. He'd seen a side to me I hadn't been prepared to show him yet. I was planning to work up to it, ease him into the more violent aspects of this life. But the bikers had forced my hand, leaving me no choice but to unleash that dark side of me I kept locked up inside. To put them in their place.

There was no way I could allow their disrespect, regardless of whether or not they knew who I was. They had to be punished for their indiscretions to see that we would not tolerate anyone making the slightest move against us.

It was the only reason I let Tweener live. I *wanted* him to go back to his prez and tell him exactly what happened while he was covered in the blood of one of his other prospects. To warn him that if they got in our way again, they would suffer ten times worse.

Taking Baldy had been an impulse decision, one I hoped would work out in our favour. If The Dirty Vultures were responsible for the fire that burned down our building, I planned to find out.

I highly doubted a prospect had much information. They were the grunts of the MC world, the lowest ranking members. They did whatever they could, whatever was asked of them, in the hopes of earning their patch and finally being given a road name (they were usually the worst, most tedious jobs too).

But I'd take any information I could get out of him. Even if it was just the layout of their Clubhouse or how many members there were.

"So how did this happen again?" Nik leaned casually against the wall, watching as I secured each of Baldy's legs to the chair.

Nik had come out of the house the moment we pulled up. I suspect he'd been waiting for us. He informed me the Cleaners had arrived shortly after we'd left, and he wiped all footage from the cameras. As a precaution, he also called our contacts in the LVPD and told them to be on the lookout for anyone who comes in reporting a murder on 22nd Street—just in case there happened to be a witness.

"Three of them were waiting at the car when I left the café." I described what happened in detail, making sure to include the parking fee they charged to anyone who parked on the streets. "It seems the information Thomas gathered on them was right. They're trying to corner North Las Vegas as their own territory."

Nik shook his head in disbelief. "The fact that they're threatening random citizens on the streets shows how ballsy they are. They don't seem to care about the other gangs and MCs already established in that area."

He was right. There were several other gangs and MCs up and down Las Vegas. A few of them were our customers, buying a small number of untraceable handguns. And in some cases, they bought machine guns from us too.

I suspected that was one of the reasons why The Dirty Vultures reached out to us; they needed guns to challenge the others and enforce their word.

"They're definitely determined," Nik finished, brows creased.

"Yes," I nodded. "And that makes them dangerous." There was nothing wilder and more unpredictable than people with something to prove. The Dirty Vultures were nothing, not even a blip on the radar, but it was clear

they wanted to be. They wanted to be known, and that was the dangerous part.

Nik pushed off the wall, eyeing Baldy with mild curiosity. “What are you going to do with him?”

“What do you think?” I grunted, testing the restraints one more time before moving to a stand.

“He’s a Prospect. He won’t know anything substantial.”

“He’ll know enough.” And even if it didn’t lead to anything, I would still get the satisfaction of killing him.

Nik shrugged. “Alright, if you say so. What about the retaliation from his Prez?”

“What about it?” I asked, unconcerned. “If he’s stupid enough to challenge us, his little motorcycle club will be over before it ever really begins.”

It might sound cocky and arrogant, but I wasn’t even the slightest bit worried. They were seriously outmanned and out-gunned. Not to mention the fact that the only resistance they’d encountered so far was from normal everyday people who were too scared to stand up to them. If they came for us, they’d soon see why they were at the bottom and we were on top.

Nik followed me as I stepped out of the room, locking the door behind me. I went into the room next door that held a small bathroom and washed my face, cleaning Peroxide’s dried blood off my skin. I shrugged out of my jacket—stiff and crusty from his blood—and left it hanging on the rack as I walked out.

“I managed to dig up a bit more information on the Outfit/Zeta alliance,” Nik said as we wound our way through the maze of hallways, heading back towards the main floor. We walked past the room holding Drea and my footsteps slowed until I stood in front of it.

Why, I had no idea.

Sasha and Pavel greeted us with a head nod but said nothing as Nik continued to talk.

“According to one of my contacts, Nero reached out about two months ago for a meet. He ended up kidnapping the representatives the Zetas sent to establish the deal.”

“Drea,” I confirmed. We had suspected this was the case, but at least now we had confirmation.

“Yes. Ever since, the Zetas have been fielding men out to the Outfit whenever they wanted, doing whatever they asked. They’ve been supplying them with men, cash, drugs—you name it.”

“This is information we were already aware of.”

When we first met with Arturo and his family, they mentioned the alliance between the Outfit and the Los Zetas. It was one of the main reasons they’d reached out to us. They could handle the Outfit on their own, but when the Zetas got involved, they needed a bit of extra help.

We did some digging into the cartel. The month prior to the meet between us and The Cosa Nostra, there had been a definitive increase in men coming from the Outfit and an increase in drugs in Chicago.

It was obvious it had come from the Zetas. What hadn’t been obvious was why. Until now.

“How about the fact that Juan, the Zetas’ second, is actually Andres’ son. Since Juan and Drea are siblings, that makes her—”

“The daughter of the former leader of the cartel,” I finished, my mind reeling.

When I scanned Drea’s fingerprint, the information it revealed showed her and her family—her brother, Juan Victor Ortega, her mother, Sofia Torres Ortega and her father, Jose Andres Ortega—had immigrated from Guadalajara fifteen years ago.

Jose Andres Ortega.

The former leader of the Los Zetas only went by El Diablo or Andres. Nothing else. I should have realised it the moment I saw his name on the scanner. The two were one in the same.

I assumed using his middle name instead of his first name was some sort of preventive measure. A way to keep his real identity a secret from the many, *many* enemies the cartel had.

Like father, like daughter.

“Okay,” I began, pacing up and down the hallway, my mind moving a mile a minute trying to piece everything together. “So Andres is Juan and Drea’s father. Andres died four years ago from cancer. He named a successor before he passed, one who chose to remain hidden instead of out in the open. His son is second in charge, so it’s clearly not him. Does Andres have any other children?”

“No. None that I could find anyway.”

“And the mother? His wife?”

“I couldn’t find much on her, but I don’t think she’s the one calling the shots.” Nik’s brows were lowered in thought. “If it’s not the wife, and it’s not the son, that means the only other person it could be is—”

“Drea,” I finished, straightening my spine. “Drea is the leader of the Los Zetas.”

It all made so much sense now. Why Nero kidnapped her. Why she was so determined to keep her identity a secret. Why the other men listened to her when she gave them a command.

Drea was in charge of it all. We had the leader of the Los Zetas locked up in our pit. The repercussions were astronomical.

I had to commend her. She did a fantastic job of hiding her true identity. I never would have guessed it. I knew she was high up in the food chain. I just didn’t realise she was actually on top of it.

The moment the Zetas realised we had her, all hell would break loose.

How Nero managed it, I had no idea. He’d obviously threatened Drea’s life in order to keep the cartel under his thumb and do his bidding. I had questions, so many questions. Finding out her identity was meant to make things easier. Instead it created more problems, more unanswered questions.

I was done playing games. Enough was enough. I was getting the answers I wanted—and she was going to give them to me.

“All of you, go. I want to talk to her alone.”

Sasha and Pavel left, but Nik remained. He eyed me curiously. “What’s the plan here, Zander?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You don’t need to worry about that right now. Just go. And turn the cameras off in her room.”

“Why?”

I arched an eyebrow. “Do I need to explain myself to you?”

“No. But you usually do.”

“Not this time.” I shook my head. “Just do what I ask, brother.”

He huffed, arms lowering to his side. “Fine. But the next time I see you, you’re going to explain to me what the deal is with you and her.” He pointed to the closed door. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed there’s something going on. You’re not the merciful type. Yet you haven’t tortured the information we need out of her. You’ve given her food, bathroom breaks, a shower. All things we’ve never allowed other prisoners—not even the men she came in here with. Either you’re slipping or there’s more to it, and you’re going to tell me what.”

“Fine,” I shrugged with indifference. “I’ll tell you what’s going on when you tell me about what happened with you and Tatiana.”

He reared back as if I’d slapped him. Hurt and sadness flashed in his eyes for the briefest moment before he could hide it. “That—that’s different.”

“Is it?” I asked, a questioning look on my face.

“Yes! Tatiana isn’t the leader of a rival cartel. She’s—”

“What?”

He clamped his mouth shut.

“Exactly. What goes on between the two of you is none of my business. Just like what goes on between Drea and I is none of yours.”

“It’s not the same thing, Aleksandr, and you know it,” he spat.

Ha. He called me ‘Aleksandr’. That meant he was definitely pissed. He only called me that when he was mad at me.

“It is and it isn’t. So unless you’re planning to spill the beans, go do what I asked you to do.”

Nik glared, eyes full of frustration and anger. “Fine,” he gritted out. “But you owe me a round in the ring.”

Yeah, I should have seen that one coming. Bringing Tatiana into it was a bit of a low blow on my part. I knew how sensitive he was when it came to her.

If I was being honest, I only mentioned her to throw him off his game. Because he was right about Drea. I *had* allowed her certain luxuries other prisoners weren’t given. Nik noticed. I needed to distract him and Tatiana was the perfect way to do that.

He was going to try and make me pay for it now, by going head-to-head in the ring.

“Sounds like fun,” I smirked, which pissed Nik off even more.

It was very rare we got into the ring with one another, outside of a light spar or training. He was thirty-two—only two years younger than me—and he had a build similar to my own. He was shorter by only an inch or so.

We’d never fought each other out of anger before. Being so close together in age, we had a strong bond growing up. It had always been Nik and I against Lukyan and Illayana. There was over a ten-year age gap between us and them, so it made sense that Nik and I were close and Lukyan and Illayana were close.

That’s not to say we all weren’t close as a whole. Apart from the odd sibling squabble, we all got along with each other, cared for one another.

There was just a definitive line between the older siblings and the younger ones.

Nik narrowed his eyes. “You won’t be smirking when I put you flat on your back.”

I felt a chuckle rise up in my throat. “You haven’t been able to do that yet, brother. But I look forward to the day you do.”



I opened the door to Drea’s room, walking inside and shutting it behind me. She was lying flat on her back, feet propped up on the wall at a ninety degree angle. Her hands were on the back of her head, heaving herself up and down in what looked like sit ups or ab crunches.

She paused halfway back up when I entered the room, glancing over her shoulder. She gave me what could only be described as an evil death glare before turning back around, continuing what she was doing as if I hadn’t just come in.

There was a mountain of things she could possibly be angry at, so I didn’t think too much about it. I walked towards her.

She didn’t say a word, the only sound in the room being the small puffs of air she breathed out with each rep.

I stared down at her as I towered over her, waiting for that sassy attitude that always made my dick hard. For her to say something, to yell at me, curse me out in Spanish, insult me. But nothing came. I don’t know what I had expected, but Drea’s silence and complete indifference certainly wasn’t it. She was acting like I wasn’t even in the room.

I didn’t fucking like it. From that very first moment I met her, she’d been a breath of crazy, eccentric air. She was a chatterbox, talking a mile a fucking minute. She had no problem with telling me off. In fact, she seemed to enjoy it.

Where was *that* Drea?

“Are we not talking today, *malyshka*?”

She didn’t respond, her upper body going up and down, up and down.

I gritted my teeth. Was she pissed off about last night, about the fact that I’d essentially ignored her for the day?

“Or would you prefer I call you Don Ortega?”

Her whole body stiffened, head snapping to me. Disbelief flared across her face. “How did you—”

“How is irrelevant, don’t you think?” I arched my brow. “Do you realise how different things might be if you’d just told me who you were when I asked you the first time?”

Drea snorted, jumping to her feet. I didn’t move back to give her space, so she was wedged between me and the wall. There was no fear, no discomfort. She didn’t look like a person scared of being boxed into a corner. She glared up at me like *she* was the one in charge.

“You would have used me the same way Nero did.”

I felt the desire to scoff, but held it in. “You are aware of who we are, *da?*” Yes? She hadn’t asked outright, but I suspected she knew. Most people involved in organised crime knew who the big players were.

The Italian Mafia, the Triad and The Bratva. The Holy Trinity. Although we were anything but holy.

There were, of course, other smaller syndicates and gangs that might not have been as well known.

“You’re the Bratva.” Her voice didn’t quiver, didn’t shake. Her eyes didn’t hold an ounce of fear, even though I knew our reputation was the stuff of nightmares.

I stepped closer, loving the way the fire in her eyes intensified as my body pressed her into the wall. “Yes, we’re the Bratva. And we have no need for your men, drugs or guns. We have our own—and they are all better than yours.”

“My, my, aren’t we a cocky, arrogant bunch.”

One of my shoulders lifted in a small, casual shrug. “When you’ve been on top for as long as we have, you have the right to be. It comes with the territory. Now that there’s no point in hiding anymore, you might as well tell me how you got yourself in this position.”

“Uh, are you serious?” she scoffed. “You *kidnapped* me. That’s fucking how.”

I placed my hands on the wall either side of her head, boxing her in. “And how did Nero kidnap *you*?” I asked, leaning in. “How did you end up chained to *his* bed?”

She headbutted me. It was so quick, so unexpected, it took me completely by surprise.

I stumbled back in shock. Pain throbbed from my lip, blood trickling down my chin from the fresh cut. I swiped my finger through the blood and looked at it, still trying to register what the fuck just happened.

Why I felt the need to smile, I had no idea. Out of all the things I should be feeling, amusement shouldn't be one of them, right?

"I am sick and tired of you telling me what to do. Demanding all these fucking answers from me, like you have any right to them," Drea growled, her fists clenched at her side. "I don't want you to *talk* to me. I don't want you to *touch* me. I want *nothing* to do with you. Send in one of the other guys—Lucas, or whatever his name was. I'll answer his questions. But yours?" she shook her head. "No. If your boss wants answers, he'd better send someone else because I'm not saying a goddamn thing to you."

"Quite a drastic change from last night, *malyshka*."

Something was off and I couldn't figure out what. Even when I kidnapped her, she wasn't this raging mad. Her whole body was shaking, teeth grinding together, her jaw clenched.

She glared at me with this seething, repulsed look, like I disgusted her. "I've said what I needed to say. Unless you plan to torture the information out of me, get the fuck out of my face."

"All this because I didn't come see you today? Really?" I had no idea if that was why she was so angry, but it seemed like a good enough guess. Some women got that way, expected something from you after you'd hooked up with them. I didn't peg her as the type though, which was why I was so confused.

She threw her head back and laughed. My eyes hooked onto that long, slender neck, itching to wrap my hand around it. "Get over yourself. I couldn't give a flying shit about that. You think it means something that I dry humped you naked? Sorry to disappoint you Big Guy, but that's a regular Tuesday fucking night for me."

"Then what the fuck is your issue?" I snapped, my anger rising.

"Apart from being locked in this fucking room that reeks of stale blood and piss, you mean?" she barked back.

"I gave you the chance to change your surroundings. You chose not to take it."

"Because I'm no snitch," she hissed. "I'll die before I talk."

I stared deep into her eyes, seeing nothing but truth. She would die before she told me a thing. That only left me with two options: torture the

information out of her, or let her go. Both options didn't sit well with me.

I shook my head. I had to get a fucking grip. Another option formed in my mind. I walked towards the door, opening it wide. "Let's go," I grunted.

She scowled. "I'm not going anywhere with you." Maybe she thought I was taking her to the showers again, hoping for a repeat of last night.

I won't lie, the idea made blood rush to my cock instantly, but that wasn't what I had in mind.

"Do you want a different room or not?"

Blinking slowly, she processed my words. "Different room?"

"Unless you *want* to stay here?" I arched an eyebrow.

She studied me, suspicion burning in her eyes. She huffed. "Well of course I don't want to fucking stay here," she snapped, marching towards me, shoulders back and head held high. "I don't know what your game plan is, but I'm not going to fall for it."

To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure what my game plan was, either.

I led Drea up to the main floor and outside the warehouse. I kept a close eye on her as I led her towards the house. Her eyes were scanning everything, and I saw the exact moment she decided she was going to try something.

I spun so quickly it caught her off guard and rammed my gun under her chin. Her eyes widened in shock. "Do it," I whispered softly, bringing my lips an inch away from hers. "I'd love nothing more than to chase you down and drag you back here kicking and fucking screaming."

Her pupils dilated, lust and need swallowing them whole. She looked like she was still debating actually doing it. My pulse spiked.

Yes, the beast in me purred. It wanted to hunt, to chase. To dominate.

Would she do it?

I ran the barrel of my gun down her neck, through the valley of her breasts and over her flat stomach. She squirmed, her hips rolling so slightly I don't think she was even aware of it. I wedged it between her clenched thighs and her breath hitched.

"No?" I tilted my head to the side, lowering my voice. "Scared?" I taunted.

Her spine stiffened and she glared. "There wouldn't be a point," she snapped, frustration lining her face. "I wouldn't make it five feet."

True.

I stepped back, tucking my gun away. I waved a hand through the air.
“Go ahead. I’ll give you a head start.”

She licked her lips, her hands clenching and unclenching as she looked at her surroundings again. I saw the desire in her eyes. She wanted to do it, and I wanted to fucking let her.

“I’m not playing your stupid, twisted little games.”

I ran my eyes slowly up and down her curvy body. My blood felt hot in my veins, an overwhelming sexual need twisting my gut. I’d never wanted to hunt someone so fucking badly. To hear her breath quicken as I closed in on her. To feel her body fight against mine as I dragged her to the ground and fucked her so hard she’d forget everyone who came before me.

“Pity,” I said nonchalantly, acting like I wasn’t fucking dying inside for the taste of her. I gave her my back as I made my way up the gravel pathway towards the back of the house.

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Chapter Eighteen



Damn him. Damn him and that sexy voice. That rugged, handsome face. That hard, chiselled body. Damn every goddamn inch of him.

I glared at his muscular back, trailing behind him, seriously debating making a run for it. But my goal wouldn't be to get away, it would be to make him chase me. The thought was exhilarating. It made shivers dance down my spine.

He was just so...freaking...big. So unequivocally male. When he surrounded me, towered over me, I felt helpless. He could do anything he wanted to me and I wouldn't have the power to stop him. Why that turned me on, I had no idea (probably my size kink at play).

I'd tried so hard to hold onto my will, my anger. To not let our burning sexual chemistry get in the way of my escape. That all went flying out the fucking window the moment he got in my personal space.

All I wanted, all I could think about, was that deep husky voice taunting me as he chased me down. Telling me I would never escape him, never outrun him. I would kick, fight him, but he would just pin me down with little effort and rut into me like a man possessed.

Wetness pooled between my legs and I held in my groan. At least, I thought I did.

Aleksandr turned around, one eyebrow hiked up and a deadly, sinful look on his face.

Yeah yeah, yeah. You got me all worked up, get over it.

I smiled innocently and gave him the finger. He chuckled softly, turning around again. He walked up the back deck and opened the glass sliding door, poking his head inside.

My eyes darted to the two men standing either side of the door, their hard eyes watching my every move. I glimpsed two handguns at each of their waists, wondering if I could pull a little sleight of hand and try to take one.

Aleksandr seemed to read my mind, to sense my intent. He narrowed his eyes, marched over to me, gripped me by the back of my neck and herded me inside.

I ignored the clench of my stomach, the lust exploding in my body at his manhandling ways and slapped his hand. “Let go of me, you brute. I don’t need help walking.”

He steered me in the direction he wanted me to go and released me. I walked down the hallway, my eyes darting in every direction, trying to memorise every inch of the house. Another two guards were posted at the front door in the foyer and my hope of escape plummeted.

The interior of the house was beautiful, which I expected. There was a dazzling crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Brightly lit sconces. Mahogany walls with ornate carvings. Expensive furniture and exotic rugs. The whole place screamed grandeur.

Aleksandr led me up a large winding circular staircase, stopping at the second floor. He turned right, walked past two bedrooms and stopped in front of the third. He twisted the handle and opened the door, sweeping an arm through the air to beckon me forward.

Such a gentlemanly gesture from such an asshole of a man. Go figure.

I walked in, taking a good look around. I turned back to face him, crossing my arms over my chest and spreading my legs to strengthen my stance. I wasn’t falling for it. It was a beautiful room. A massive improvement from my previous accommodation—but it came with a catch. I fucking knew it did.

“You might as well take me back, because whatever I need to do to stay here isn’t going to happen.”

Aleksandr strolled in, his body brushing past mine. He took a seat on the edge of the bed. “Are you sure?”

The suggestive hint in his voice made me stiffen. I scowled. “I’m not fucking you for a better room,” I hissed.

He rolled his eyes, getting back on his feet. “Calm down, *malyshka*. That’s not why I brought you here.”

It wasn’t? Why was I disappointed?

“I’m willing to offer you a deal. You tell me what I want to know, and you can stay here.”

“I told you already—”

“Yes. You’re not a snitch. I know. I’m not asking you to snitch. I’m asking you to fill in the blanks. We’ve figured out most of it on our own. We know Nero kidnapped you when you went to a meet with him. He used your life as leverage to get the cartel under his thumb. I know this because he tried to do the same thing to us. With the help of your men, he kidnapped my sister and would have used her the same way he used you if we hadn’t found her first. What I want to know is *how* Nero found out who you were, how the events unfolded.”

I narrowed my eyes in frustration. When he put it like that, it didn’t *sound* like snitching. If I was going to strike some sort of deal for my release, I had to start cooperating. I knew that, and out of all the information I had, he was asking for something that didn’t even matter. Something I didn’t even really know.

What harm could it do answering his question?

I blew out a breath. “I don’t know, and that’s God’s honest truth. One of my men came to me and told me the leader of the Outfit wanted a sit down. I’d never met the man before. Usually the answer would be a flatout no, but my brother convinced me to meet with him. Before my dad died, he told me to steer clear of you guys. All you mafia guys. That you were all crazy and we didn’t need to get involved with you. That our little corner in Columbus was all we needed. But Juan always felt like we could do better, expand into other places and earn even more cash. I shouldn’t have listened to him. I should have trusted my instincts, but—”

I cut myself off before I could say more. My family drama wasn’t information he needed to know.

Aleksandr stayed silent, his eyes studying me critically.

“Anyway, I eventually agreed and met with Nero on what I thought was neutral ground. Turns out he owned the building. We had barely sat down when he double-crossed me and one of his men held a knife to my throat. I have no idea how he found out who I was. I spent years cultivating myself as just one of the cartel’s lieutenants to anyone on the outside. He shouldn’t

have known I was Don. It was privileged information only someone within the cartel would know.”

“So, you have a rat.” There was no judgement, nothing scrutinising in his tone. Just understanding.

“Yes. I still haven’t found out who it is, but I have my suspicions. And I’ll deal with it when I get back.”

“Why conceal yourself?” he asked, a slight frown on his face. “Why keep your identity a secret?”

It was a good question. One I didn’t technically have to answer, but I wanted to. My brother often asked me the same thing and he never seemed to understand. I wondered if Aleksandr would. Would he see the cunning behind it, or think it was stupid like Juan did?

“Have you ever seen *The 100*?”

His frown intensified. He looked completely confused. “What?”

“*The 100*. It’s a TV show on Netflix.”

He stared at me for a few seconds as if I’d gone crazy. He waited for me to elaborate. “No,” he grunted when he realised I wasn’t going to say anything else until he answered.

“Oh, you should. It’s really good. Well, the first few seasons are. It gets a bit weird towards the end, but anyway. There’s this character, her name is Lexa. She’s this badass woman leader of the grounders. I’ll explain who they are later—”

“Please don’t.”

“Anyway,” I dragged out, not happy with his interruption and ignoring it completely, “she holds two people from a rival clan captive in a cell. To find out their true intentions, she pretends she’s nothing more than a lowly servant locked in the cell with them. She listens to them, studies them. And because they think she’s a nobody, they talk as if she’s not even there. She’s able to gauge what kind of people they are, whether they can be trusted. All because they assume she’s no one of importance.”

Aleksandr’s head tilted slightly, understanding flashing in his eyes.

“People act differently when they’re in the presence of a leader. They tell you what you want to hear. Stroke your ego. Kiss your ass. I didn’t want that. I wanted to see people for who they *really* were, and the best way to do that wasn’t by being Don. It was by being a nobody. You have no idea how much shit I’ve overheard from people who wanted to make a deal with the cartel. All the insults they made about us. About me. Shit they’d *never* say

to my fucking face.” I smirked, a memory flashing in my mind of the last time someone did that. I rammed my knife into their eye. “They all paid the price in the end.”

Bright blue eyes studied me with such focus it made me want to squirm. His gaze swept me from head to toe, something flashing across his face that I couldn’t place.

Did he understand? Did he think it was a good idea? A smart plan? Fucking what?

He was a bloody hard man to read. He was very good at hiding his emotions, what he was thinking in that big head of his. It was incredibly frustrating.

Based on the fact that he hadn’t said a damn word, I was pretty sure I knew what he thought of it. He agreed with Juan.

I blew out a breath. “You think it’s stupid too.”

“I think it’s one of the smartest things I’ve ever heard of.”

My head snapped to him in shock.

He what?

“You’re right,” he nodded, sincerity lacing his voice. “People *do* act differently in the presence of someone with authority, power. They put on their best behaviour, their most dazzling smiles and tell you whatever they think will win them your favour. I see it every day with my father. The amount of people that kiss his ass—” he snorted, shaking his head. “It’s ridiculous. Especially when you *know* behind closed doors they’re saying something completely different.”

“Y-yes,” I stuttered, taken aback by his words. “Yes! Exactly!”

I couldn’t believe he actually understood. Juan always made me feel like I was an idiot for doing it that way, for not just coming out and letting people know *I* was the one in the charge.

“It was a smart move to play,” Aleksandr continued, and I couldn’t help but beam in the presence of his praise.

Then I remembered I was pissed off with him and that feeling vanished so fast I stumbled back. How could he make me forget everything so fucking quickly? Why was it that when I was around him, the rational side of me just seemed to disappear? Along with everything else he’d fucking done to me. Kidnapping me. Deceiving me. Playing me. It was like my brain just forgot it all when I was with him.

“Yeah, well, I’m a smart cookie. If there’s nothing else, I wanna get some sleep. I answered your questions. So I’d appreciate it if you’d honour your end of the deal.”

His eyes narrowed. “I always honour my deals, *malyshka*. I’m a man of my word.”

I didn’t say anything and his glare intensified. He stared at me, as if willing me to react, to respond. But I didn’t. He’d managed to pull enough out of me for one night. I refused to give anything else.

But Aleksandr wanted a rise out of me, and he refused to leave without getting it. “Did it hurt?”

“Did what hurt?”

His eyes darted down to my pussy and back up again.

For fuck saaaaake. He was talking about my clit piercing. Dozens of inappropriate responses flashed through my mind. ‘Yes, but it was worth it because now it makes me come like a rocket.’ ‘No, why don’t you pull it with your teeth and make it hurt?’ ‘Yes, wanna see it?’

I didn’t say anything though. I knew he was trying to pull me in with our overwhelming sexual chemistry, and I wasn’t having it. I didn’t touch anyone who had a partner. Yes, I still wanted to fuck him silly, but knowing what I did now I would never act on it.

Ever.

“Goodnight, Aleksandr.” I turned my back on him and walked into the adjoining room, hoping and praying that when I came out he would be gone.

Chapter Nineteen



I leaned back, avoiding Dayton's fist with ease and rammed my knee into his stomach. He hunched over, his eyes wide, a pain-filled groan falling from his lips. I drove my elbow into his back, flattening him to the ground, and took three steps back.

"Again," I barked, not the least bit impressed with his efforts so far.

For the last hour we'd been sparring in the ring. Though I wouldn't even call it that. Dayton was swinging his arms around like an uncoordinated idiot, just hoping one of his hits would land while I moved around him, blocking and evading his strikes.

I had to give it to the kid though, what he lacked in fighting skills, he made up for with willpower and determination. I half expected him to demand a break within the first thirty seconds. But he kept getting up, more determined each time to try to land a blow.

I was still frustrated over my interaction with Drea last night, and I knew I was taking some of that frustration out on Dayton.

I had no idea what had caused the drastic change in her. It made no sense to me. The night before last she'd been all over me, literally grinding in my fucking lap. Now she wouldn't even look at me without prompting. That sassy attitude that made my dick hard as a rock was gone and in its place was a cold, hard, ice queen. One that refused to engage in conversation with me unless absolutely necessary.

Dayton's arms shook as he tried to push himself off the floor, his teeth clenched and eyes locked on me, glaring with the promise of retribution. Of revenge.

The warehouse door swung open and Father walked in, heading straight towards me. I held in a sigh. The look on his face told me I wouldn't like where this conversation was going to go. He wore one of his dark three-piece suits, his face clean shaven and not a single hair out of place.

"Father," I acknowledged with a slight tilt of my head.

Dayton tried to take advantage of the situation. Maybe he thought since I wasn't looking at him, he could finally land a strike—or that my father's intimidating presence might throw me off.

None of that happened.

Dayton ran at me and threw a right hook, aiming for my face. I ducked and drove the heel of my palm into his solar plexus. He cried out, hands flying to his chest as he flew back, landing in a heap on the floor.

I straightened, my focus still on Father. "Dare I ask what's caused the look on your face?"

Father's glare held a note of parental reprimand. "Why is the Zeta woman locked in one of our guest bedrooms?"

Ah. I suppose I should have expected that. This morning when I woke up Father was already gone, so I hadn't had the chance to tell him about Drea yet.

"Have you seen Nik today?"

Dayton lashed out with a kick and I blocked it, wrapping my arm around his calf. He wobbled unsteadily on his other foot, trying to keep his balance as he attempted to yank his leg out of my grasp. I timed it and let go at the exact right moment, causing him to fall back and land hard on his ass.

"God fucking damn it!" Dayton cursed.

"No, why?" Father frowned, completely ignoring Dayton's attempts to hit me. It was like he wasn't even there.

"He found out some very...interesting information last night."

"Such as?"

"That woman in our guest bedroom is the leader of The Los Zetas."

Father blinked, the briefest flash of surprise streaking across his face.
"Say again?"

“Drea Ortega is the daughter of El Diablo, Don Andres,” I clarified, blocking another strike from Dayton. “After he died, she took over and now runs the cartel.” I twisted Dayton’s arm behind his back and shoved him away, making him growl in frustration.

“How reliable is this information?”

“She confirmed it, so I’d say pretty reliable.”

“Hmm.” Father’s brows drifted into a hard frown. “That changes things.”

I grunted in agreement. Like me, Father understood the repercussions of having the leader of one of the most violent and bloodthirsty syndicates locked away in our house.

Before Alessandro approached us, we’d had very little to no contact with The Los Zetas. We were aware of each other, like predators out in the wild, keenly aware of where the lines of our territory began and ended, but that was the extent of it.

They primarily dealt in hardcore, high quality drugs that we had no interest in, so there was never any reason to build an alliance with them.

“I thought you found her chained to a bed in Nero’s house? Explain to me how that *kusok der’ma, piece of shit*, managed to do that?”

I relayed the information I’d learnt last night from Drea while blocking more of Dayton’s attacks, slapping him upside the head in return each time the opportunity presented itself. It was too tempting to miss. His face reddened with embarrassment and anger each time.

The amusement bubbling within me at his expense was unexpected. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had so much fun sparring before.

“He used her as leverage, threatened to kill her if the cartel didn’t do exactly as he said. It was what he would have done with Illayana too, if we hadn’t rescued her.” I ducked underneath Dayton’s fist and sidekicked him, sending him sprawling to the ground. “You’re done,” I told Dayton, taking pity on him.

“Thank God,” he groaned, staying flat on his back.

I faced Father, draping my arms over the top rope. At the mention of Illayana’s kidnapping, a thunderstorm of anger rolled over his face. He was still mad Arturo took that kill away from him.

“We need to tread very carefully here. So far, the playing field is even. We’ve killed some of their men, they’ve killed some of ours. There’s an

opportunity to part amicably, but if we kill her, harm her in any way, we'll find ourselves in an all-out war with the cartel."

Father narrowed his eyes. "You think we should let her go." It wasn't a question. His voice held an accusatory tilt to it, like the mere thought was an act of betrayal.

I sighed, jumping down from the ring. Father wasn't an emotional man unless it involved his children. His anger over what happened to Illayana, the Zetas' involvement in it, was clouding his judgement. Otherwise he would have realised what I did already.

"What I think is Grandfather is due here in a matter of days, and it might not be a good idea to start a war when it can be avoided. We've got enough on our plate as it is with Dominik and Rayna, the burning of our building, our alliance with the Cosa Nostra in *their* war against the Outfit and The Dirty Vultures. The last thing we need is to add the Zetas to that list."

Father studied me, an odd look shimmering in his eyes. "What would you suggest we do, *moy syn? My son?*"

There was something more to his question, something lying deep in the undertones of his words that I couldn't quite figure out.

"I think we should contact Juan, her brother and current second, to arrange a sit down and come to an agreement."

"A truce." Father rolled the word over his tongue, like it caused him physical pain to even say it.

Dimitri Volkov didn't do *truces*. He demolished his enemies with an animalistic ferocity. He didn't sit down and make peace with them.

"An agreement," I repeated, giving him a hard stare. "You know as well as I do, we don't have the men to fight on five different fronts. Maybe four, but not five. We need to eliminate one of the risks. I've thought long and hard about this. The Zetas are the obvious choice. In exchange for letting Drea go, we demand a ceasefire and all contact with the Outfit to stop."

"And what makes you think they'd honour that?" Father asked, the scepticism in his voice clear as day.

I thought back to Drea, to everything I knew about her. Everything I'd witnessed so far. She was fiery. Hot-headed. Prideful. And incredibly smart. She was focused, with the mind of a leader and a natural born alpha charisma that put men three times her size in their place. Above all, she knew how our world worked, where the cartel sat on the board. They were

fierce but small. She'd know how outgunned they were, that it would be in the best interest for her and her people to make a deal with us. Especially when I made her realise that, regardless of the reasons, *they* were the ones who drew first blood. We were well within our rights to kill them all.

"She would honour it," I answered confidently.

Father watched me closely, a few tense seconds passing before he finally spoke. "Alright," he nodded. "Contact them, organise the sit down and handle it."

I kept the surprise I felt hidden but it wormed its way into every cell of my being.

As Father's second, I had a wealth of responsibilities. I kept track and maintained all our accounts, the money and the inventory. I oversaw the transfer and training of all our men. I packed and distributed our orders. All on top of handling the usual day-to-day tasks.

The one thing Father had yet to let me handle on my own was the sit downs with other rival syndicates. He firmly believed that as *Pakhan* it was his duty, his responsibility to be there, front and centre at every negotiation, every alliance we formed. *He* was the face of the Bratva, and anyone we worked with needed to see that.

This would be the first time he wasn't present at an important sit down. I knew what it meant, understood the significance of what he was asking of me.

And I was so fucking ready.

"Consider it done."

Father nodded. "Any progress on finding out who's responsible for burning our building?"

I clenched my jaw. "No. There were no fingerprints on the device they used that started the fire. No camera footage. Nothing."

"I suspected as much." Concern flashed across his face. "Another two buildings burned down yesterday."

Shock slammed into me. "You're joking."

"I wish I was," Father scoffed. "They were both abandoned, like the first one. But it won't take long for things to shift, for whoever is doing this to start burning the occupied ones. We need to find out who's responsible, and quickly."



“Ow, ow, ow.”

I watched, mildly amused as Dayton struggled to sit in a chair at the kitchen table, his limbs shaking and face scrunched up in pain. Bruises were already starting to form on his pale skin; over his face, arms and, even though I couldn’t see it, his chest. I’d struck him there hard enough to pretty much guarantee it.

“Ow, ow, ow, ahhhhh,” he breathed out a sigh of relief the moment his ass landed in the chair, his head tipping back. “God, I never wanna do that again. Everything hurts,” he groaned, closing his eyes.

Eager to burst his bubble, I took a sip of my water and said, “Too bad.”

His head snapped to me. “What? Noooo.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” I grunted, eating a forkful of my beef stroganoff. “I didn’t even hit you that hard.”

“Not that hard, he says,” Dayton laughed mirthlessly. “Not that hard. Okay then asshole, what’s this then?” He pointed to his still-blooming black eye. “Or this?” He lifted the front of his shirt, showing me an angry bruise spreading out across his chest. “Huh? What do you call all this?”

I gave him a blank stare. “Training,” I said emotionlessly, then went right back to eating my food.

“Well, I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“Why?”

“Because I got my fucking ass handed to me, that’s why,” he growled.

“And?”

“And it was embarrassing! I sucked so bad I couldn’t land one hit on you, and you weren’t even paying attention half the time. I’m not cut out for this shit.”

Flora came over with a bag of frozen peas. She wrapped it in a cloth and pressed it against Dayton’s face, over his eye. “Hold this here, child.”

Dayton winced, doing as she asked. “Thank you.”

I pushed my empty plate away and leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. “Have you ever been in a fight before?”

The one eye I could see glanced away awkwardly. “Depends on your definition of a fight,” he grumbled.

I just stared at him, waiting for a proper answer. I was a patient man. I had no problem waiting him out.

He sighed, shoulders slumping forward. "My mum's junkie ex-boyfriend used to hit me all the time when she couldn't pay what she owed. I tried to fight back, but he was a lot bigger than me. Stronger. I'm not a fighter. Never will be."

Dayton was tall but lanky. A lot of men would be bigger than him. We needed to fatten him up a bit, put some meat on him.

I drummed my fingers lightly on the table. "I've been fighting all my life, Dayton. Since I was a little kid just barely learning how to walk. You were never going to beat me. That wasn't the point of it."

He frowned. "What was the point, if not to win?"

"For me to see your potential. Yes, right now you're not a fighter. You throw yourself around hoping you'll hit something, which is the worst way to fight. You're slow, clumsy, and one of these days you're going to break your hand because you don't know how to throw a proper punch." With each word I said, Dayton slumped further into his chair, his confidence diminishing by the second. "But none of that matters because that can all be taught. Learnt. What you possess is something far better. Determination and willpower. I beat your ass into the ground time and time again and you didn't let that stop you. You got back up and tried again, refusing to lie down. Those skills are what makes a good fighter. The willpower to keep going no matter how crappy the odds are. Everything else can be learnt, you just have to be willing to put in the time and hard work."

Dayton stared at me, his mouth slightly open in shock. "You-you think I could learn that? To be as good as you?"

I didn't know much about his life before arriving here, but based on what he'd said so far, it was easy to see he'd been neglected. His mother was a junkie and likely prioritised her next hit over him. She left him to fend for himself on numerous occasions while she was whacked out of her mind. He was scrawny, like he'd never had a steady stream of food. Slightly malnourished. He'd been beaten up so much he wore the emotional scars of it on his sleeve. I was confident he craved the ability to look after and defend himself.

"Is that what you want?" I could show him all the moves in the world, but none of it would matter if he didn't have the drive to learn it, if he didn't

put in the time and effort he needed to. So far he'd been very vocal about his lack of desire to be here.

Dayton removed the bag of peas from his face, laying it on the table. He gave me his complete attention, his eyes hard and serious. It was the first time I'd ever seen him like that. "I do. I'm sick of getting my ass beat. *I* wanna do the beating for once. I want to go back home and see how Brent likes it when *he's* the one getting *his* head kicked in." Venom and hatred dripped from his words, his hands clenching into fists.

"That can very easily be arranged. It would only take one phone call."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You tell me what he looks like and where he likes to hang out and I'll send someone to kill him," I said casually, shrugging one shoulder.

Dayton stared at me. "You'll send someone to kill him," he repeated in disbelief. "Why? You don't even know him. He hasn't done anything to you. Why would you do that?"

I sighed, leaning my elbows on the table. It wasn't his fault. He didn't understand how we worked, didn't know there wasn't anything we wouldn't do for the people we cared about. I would just have to explain it to him.

"Mikhail is like family to me. For as long as I can remember, he's been there. He taught me how to drive. How to fire a gun. He was there—" my throat closed up and I closed my eyes briefly, breathing through that familiar pain. "—he was there for us when my mother was killed. *He's* the one who brought my father back from the edge. He's more of an uncle to me than my actual uncle. And you're his son. That makes you family too."

"I'm not his son," Dayton gritted out. "Biologically, we're related. But he doesn't give a shit about me. He palmed me off to you guys the first chance he got."

I shook my head, placing my hands on the table. I pushed myself to a stand. "That's where you're wrong. Had Mikhail known about you, he would have come for you. He never would have abandoned you to be taken care of by a junkie. Not his own flesh and blood."

Dayton scoffed. "We'll just have to agree to disagree on that one, won't we?"

"I suppose so."

I could see why he was reluctant to believe me. He did have a point. Mikhail had just discovered he had a son and instead of spending time with him, bonding with him and getting to know him, he sent him here.

But I don't think Dayton understood that it was for his own good. He was too close to see it from any perspective other than the 'abandoned child' point of view.

Without training, Dayton wouldn't survive in Mikhail's world. Mikhail knew that. As much as it would have pained him, he *had* to send Dayton away to get the training he needed.

The world we lived in was so vastly different to the one Dayton knew. Dayton would hesitate to kill someone, even in a life or death situation. That kind of hesitation could cost him his life.

Dayton would see this was the best option...eventually.

I picked up my empty plate and placed it in the sink, leaving Dayton to his own thoughts. The kid had a lot to think about. Flora and a few of the other housemaids were moving about the kitchen, cleaning and tidying up after preparing lunch.

"Has Drea been given her lunch yet?" I asked Flora, washing my hands.

Flora placed a steaming hot plate of beef stroganoff on the counter. "I was just about to take it to her."

Even though she was still technically a prisoner, Drea had to be treated a little differently now. We were never going to form an alliance with the cartel but if we were going to part amicably with them, we had to start treating her like a 'guest'. A guest that was locked in her room and couldn't roam the house without an escort.

"I'll do it." I ignored the look of surprise Flora sent my way and picked up the plate, heading out of the kitchen.

"Zander," Nik called out, his body standing in the doorway of the security room. "A word?"

"I'll come see you later." I was far more excited than I should have been to see that little firecracker upstairs, to try and sort out what the fuck her problem was.

"You're going to want to hear what I have to say."

My spine stiffened. Whatever it was, I knew I wouldn't like it. Nik was using his cautious voice, the kind of voice a zookeeper would use on a wild animal to try and keep them calm.

I handed the plate of food back to Flora. "Keep it warm. I'll be back in a minute."

Flora nodded.

Nik stepped back into the room so I could walk in and I shut the door behind me. "What? What is it?"

"Before I tell you, please remember all the equipment in here is really expensive. If you need to hit something, take it to the warehouse."

I rolled my eyes. "I broke *one* computer *one* time."

"It was an OrionX2 Dual System Extreme Overclocked PC and it was \$37,000," Nik growled.

"I know. You told me that when I broke it." Well, he more or less screamed it. "Now what did you have to tell me?"

Nik gave me one last hard glare (communicating that he was still pissed about the whole thing even though it happened years ago *and* I bought him a new one) before dropping into the chair and typing on the keyboard.

I frowned when the camera feed from Drea's room came up on the screen. The date and time read yesterday, late afternoon.

Why was he showing me this?

When Mila's thin frame stepped through the door, it clicked into place.

"What the fuck?" I hissed, leaning closer to the screen, my hands squeezing the edges of the computer table so hard the wood groaned under the pressure.

Nik's eyes darted nervously to me but I ignored him, watching the events unfold. Listening to Mila say she was my *fiancé*.

A strong urge to eviscerate her, to cut open her stomach and rip out all her internal organs pounded through me when she tried to attack Drea.

How fucking dare she?

Mila was wild. Chaotic. But I never would have imagined she'd do something this colossally stupid. Especially after our last conversation.

How did she even get into the pit?

This explained Drea's sudden personality change. She thought I was engaged when we fooled around. Any woman worth a damn would hate going after someone who was taken, and clearly Drea agreed because she was no longer fun and flirtatious. She was cold and angry. Even when I tried to engage her in a little light banter, she wasn't interested. She was disengaged. Like she'd rather be anywhere else than stuck in a room with me.

When Erik punched Drea so hard in the face she flew back, anger exploded in my chest. A white-hot, burning rage that completely consumed

me and made me want to carve his fucking eyes out. The table cracked underneath my hands, splintering from the unrelenting pressure.

Nik visibly winced. It looked like he wanted to push me away from the computer but thought better of it.

Considering my increasingly foul mood, it was a smart choice.

“So what are you going to do about Mila?” Nik asked once he clicked off the recording.

As much as I hated it, “Nothing,” I grunted, straightening my spine.

“Nothing?” Nik frowned. “You’re just going to let her make a huge claim like that? She’s going around telling people she’s your *fiancé*, the future Queen of the Bratva. How can you be so okay with that? Unless—oh God. Zander, please don’t tell me you’re actually planning on marrying her?”

I reared back in disgust. “Don’t be an idiot. Of course I’m not going to bloody marry her. I’m also not going to give her what she wants, which is so clearly a reaction. The worst thing I can do to a woman like her isn’t to hurt her. It’s to ignore her.”

And it would drive her crazy.

Nik chuckled. “Oh, she’ll *hate* that. Especially when she hears someone else has been getting all your attention.”

“Exactly,” I nodded. “She’ll step further out of line because she just can’t help herself, and then I’ll be within my rights to give her a lashing.”

Nik snorted. “You’re well within those rights now.”

True. Lashings were a severe form of punishment we gave to our people when they stepped out of line. It was exactly like it sounded. A brutal whipping that left their back bleeding and scarred.

Erik had been the last one to receive a lashing for telling Ethan at the main gate that Mila had permission to come through.

“Alright, I gotta run. I’ll talk to you later,” Nik finished, heading towards the door.

“Is Erik still on duty?” I asked, making him pause in the doorway.

He threw a frown my way. “Yeah. I saw him doing a perimeter check not too long ago. Why?”

“Send him to me.”

Nik’s frown grew. “Zander—”

“Send him to me, Nikolai,” I repeated, my voice laced with authority.

He cursed under his breath before turning on his heel and walking away. A few minutes later he returned, Erik in tow.

Dark brown eyes locked onto me, the same shade as Mila's. He bowed his head and then stood tall. "Boss," he greeted.

I ran my eyes over him, my anger climbing. "Erik. Do you have anything to report?"

His brows snapped together in confusion. "About the perimeter check? No. Everything was in order."

I nodded, walking towards him. He stiffened when I began to slowly circle him, nervous energy flowing off him. "Nothing else to report then?" My hands were clasped behind my back, footsteps echoing around with a loud *thud, thud, thud*.

"Uh, no?" he said with a questioning tone.

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

He squirmed uncomfortably. "Telling, Boss."

"You don't sound so sure about that." I came to a stop in front of him, staring him dead in the eyes. "How did Mila get down into the pit last night?"

His eyes shifted away from me for a moment before returning. He sighed, lowering his head. "I let her in."

"Any particular reason?" I was sure I knew the 'why' already, but I wanted to hear it from him.

"She wanted to talk to the prisoner. I know she's not permitted down there, but she said she might be able to get her to talk, so I-"

"Thought you'd just ignore the rules, *again*, and do whatever you like?" I cut in, taking a menacing step forward. "Did you not learn your lesson last night?"

He winced, as if the mere mention of his last punishment caused him pain. The lashes on his back would still be fresh. Sore and tender.

"Not only did you let her back through the gates, you also decided to let her down into the pit when you knew damn well she's not allowed down there. Tell me Erik, do you want to die?"

"No, Boss," he answered immediately, body shaking. Eric was a big man. Hard to intimidate. But in this moment he was terrified because he knew if I wanted too, I could put a bullet in his head without a second thought.

“You knew it was against the rules. You knew we’d find out. Yet, you did it anyway. Funny this is Erik, that’s not what I’m most angry about.”

He glanced at me, frowning again. “It’s not?”

I grabbed his hand, the same hand he’d used to strike Drea with and twisted sharply. He cried out in pain, dropping to his knees. “If you ever lay another finger on Drea again, I’ll cut your fucking hand off. Do I make myself clear?”

He sucked in painful breaths as he nodded vigorously. “Yes, Boss,” he groaned.

His agreement should have been enough. But it wasn’t. The video of him hitting Drea played out in front of my eyes over and over again, making it impossible for me to release him unscathed. I wanted retribution.

I pulled a knife free and rammed it straight through his wrist, all the way to the hilt. An ear-piercing scream exploded out of his mouth, loud and full of agony. I let him go and he dropped to the ground. He cradled his arm close to his body, being careful not to cut himself on the blade sticking out of his wrist.

“This is your last chance, Erik. Fuck up again, and you’ll wish I’d killed you here today.” I walked out of the room, not looking back.

Chapter Twenty



Okay, as far as prisons went, this one wasn't *too* bad. I had a comfortable king size bed, a TV with every streaming service known to man, bookshelves with a variety of different books, an adjoining room with my own bathroom. There was even a fancy drink cart in the corner, like the ones those old rich people have in movies. The closet was filled with designer clothing, all brand new with the tags still on. Some of it didn't fit, but there was more than enough there to work with, which I was happy about because I'd been wearing the same clothes for I didn't even know how long. It felt great to wear something else, even if it was just a plain shirt and pants.

It was as nice as any five-star hotel room.

And I was suspicious as hell about it.

Aleksandr explained it well enough last night. I answered his questions and he let me stay here instead of that horrid torture chamber. I gotta hand it to him, it was a sneaky fucking move to play. Showing me all this luxury when for the last few weeks, I couldn't even piss without having someone watch me.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew exactly what he was doing. Ordinarily I would have told him what I'd been telling him every day since he kidnapped me.

'Get fucked.'

But I knew I had to start cooperating if I wanted to get the fuck out of here.

If he asked for something vital, like information on the cartel, our dealings or our clients then of course, I wouldn't have said a word. Since all he wanted to know were the details about how Nero kidnapped me and how he knew I was Don, I gave him the answers he wanted.

I was still *raving* mad about the whole fiancé thing, so I didn't even *want* to say a damn word to him. Aleksandr seemed to be the designated spokesperson for the Bratva though, and that meant speaking with him was unavoidable. Apart from Shaggy, Pavel, Mila and her pops, I hadn't seen or spoken to anyone else.

My hand curled around the doorknob and I twisted it, giving it a hard tug.

No luck.

I released a frustrated sigh. From the moment Aleksandr left me in here, the door had remained locked. I tried picking it. Kicking the door in. Each attempt was utterly pointless.

There were three windows—two in the bedroom and one in the bathroom. All were locked and made out of some weird type of glass that wouldn't break, no matter how much I beat the shit out of it. The bright side was though, the ones in the bedroom gave me the *best* view.

This morning when I woke up I heard yelling coming from outside, like someone was barking orders. When I went to the window to see what was going on, I got a front row seat to the best show I'd ever seen in my life.

Over twenty men, all shirtless, and a few women in activewear. Some of them were running around the yard while others participated in different drills. Their bodies were glistening with sweat, their muscles bulging and contracting. I had to fan myself, it was so damn hot.

Aleksandr was there. He was the one barking out orders like he was a drill sergeant. He was shirtless too and *good lordy*. I thought I might faint. He walked up and down a line of people, arms behind his back, face hard and serious as he watched them do push ups, sit ups and jumping jacks.

There were also target boards set up across the yard. People would put together a gun, take their shot and then pull the gun apart before moving onto the next drill. It was like some damn military training base. The whole thing was super impressive. And a little scary. Was this how they trained their men?

If it was, we were seriously fucked. How could we compete with that?

I sat there a little longer than I was willing to admit, watching them. Watching Aleksandr. He was amazing, totally in his element. Everything he demanded of his people, he participated in as well, running, jumping and shooting right alongside them.

There was a tall, lanky kid with a backwards cap trying and failing to hit the target boards. Aleksandr had gone over and shown him how to hold the gun properly. How to load and unload it. How to stand. He was patient, never losing his cool, even when the kid still struggled to make contact with the target.

I was fairly sure they'd been out there for hours. It was crazy.

A click echoed through the room and the door opened, Aleksandr's broad shoulders filling the width of the doorway.

My heart pounded at the sight of him.

Nothing new there.

My blood heated, that rock hard body making my insides tingle.

I hated it.

A plate of food sat in his big open hand, the smell of beef and some rich, decadent sauce filling the air.

"How are we this morning, *malyshka*?" His deep rumble voice sent a shiver down my spine, as per fucking usual.

Asshole.

I answered his question with a hard glare.

He rolled his eyes. He placed the plate down on the side table and shut the door, crossing his arms over his chest. He was wearing a dark button-up shirt that clung to him so well it had to be fitted. The sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showing off his forearms. Veins throbbed under his skin and I almost fainted. Dark pants covered his muscular thighs. I had the overwhelming desire to try and get him to turn around so I could check out his ass.

"We need to talk."

"Do we?" I drawled, eyeing the food. The nice old lady—Flora, I think her name was—delivered a bowl of oats and fruit this morning, but I was still hungry.

After being stuck on a diet of fucking beans and rice for over two weeks, I was ravenous.

"I think we did all the talking we needed to last night." I inclined my head towards the plate of food. "That for me? Or did you just bring it in

here to torture me?”

He picked up the plate and held it outstretched towards me in the palm of his hand. The message was clear. He wasn’t going to bring it to me. *I would have to go to him.*

The nerve of this fucking man. He knew I didn’t want to be near him, knew I didn’t want to be within touching distance of him. I’d made that abundantly clear, and yet he was still playing this bullshit.

Too bad for him. He clearly didn’t realise I was a stubborn bitch and I wasn’t going to play his stupid little games.

I sat crossed-legged on the edge of the bed. “You said we needed to talk. So talk.”

He shrugged and put the plate back down. “Before we get to that, there’s something else we need to discuss first. I understand you had a visitor yesterday.”

I didn’t say anything because it didn’t warrant a response.

“Despite Mila’s claim, she’s not—nor has she ever been—my fiancé.”

“That’s great. And you’re telling me this, why?”

He gave me a deadpanned look. “One can’t help consider Mila’s unexpected visit and your increasingly foul mood and bad attitude to be connected in some way.”

I threw my head back and laughed. I mean, he was right. But I wasn’t about to tell him that. “Man, the ego on you. I’m surprised you can both fit in the same room. Relax, Big Guy. I don’t give a shit who you fuck and it’s kinda insulting you think I do. Now, if that’s it on that *ridiculous* issue, what is it you wanted to talk about? I’m kind of busy.”

Aleksandr narrowed his eyes, a tick throbbing in his clenched jaw. He pulled his phone from his back pocket and threw it towards me.

I caught it, giving him a frown.

“Call your brother and arrange a sit down.”

I turned the device over in my hand. It was a black iPhone, the latest model. An old picture of Aleksandr and what I assumed to be his family lit up when I touched the screen.

“Why would I need to call my brother for that? We can do it right here, right now.”

“Any arrangement we come to needs to be finalised in the presence of others. It can’t be done with a simple one-on-one.”

My face scrunched up. “Kind of old school, don’t you think? Can’t we just settle this between us?”

Aleksandr shook his head, leaning back against the door. “That’s not the way we do things.”

I sighed, annoyed. If I could do this without involving my brother, the better it would be. Juan knew me better than anyone else in the world. He would see this weird, physical connection Aleksandr and I shared in a heartbeat. I didn’t want to deal with the huge freaking lecture he’d hurl my way.

Aleksandr inclined his head towards the phone in my hand. “Call him.”

“Look, I get it might be the way *you* do things, but the cartel is different. *I’m* the one with the authority, not my brother. There’s no need to involve him at all.”

“Either you call him, or I will. It wouldn’t take me long to track down his number, and I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to talk to me. Especially once he realises I have you.”

I growled, glaring at him. “God, you’re such an asshole.”

“Never claimed I wasn’t. Call him. Last chance.”

“Alright, alright.”

I dialled his number and put the phone up to my ear.

“Who the fuck is this?” Juan answered on the fifth ring. “How did you get this number?”

A smile curved on my lips. It wasn’t until I heard his voice that I realised how much I missed him.

Before I could respond, Aleksandr barked, “Speaker.”

I rolled my eyes and placed the call on loudspeaker so Snoopy Snooperson over there could listen in.

Nosy bastard.

“Baby brother.”

A sharp intake of breath from the other side. “Drea? What the fuck!? Is this really you?”

“Of course it’s me, *cabrón, dumbass*. Who else would call you ‘baby brother?’”

Juan grunted. “True. And you need to stop with that shit. You’re only three minutes and seventeen seconds older than me. Are you okay? News about Nero’s death hit weeks ago. Where the fuck have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“It’s...uh...hard to explain.”

“Well, the most important thing is you’re alive. When I heard the Bratva were involved, I feared the worst.”

My eyes flicked to Aleksandr.

“The thought of you with those barbaric lunatics gave me enough stress to take years off my life.”

I winced. “Listen, Juan—”

“I have no idea how you managed to get away from those savages, but I’m glad you did. I was ready to knock their fucking door down and demand to know what they’d done to you. I fucking *hate* the Bratva. Pretentious, arrogant assholes.”

Aleksandr arched an eyebrow.

I chuckled dryly. “Juan—”

“Especially that big, brutish looking one. You know the one I’m talking about. Dad warned us to stay away from him. What was his name again? A —”

“Juan!” I yelled, cutting him off.

“Ow! What? Why the fuck are you yelling at me?”

“To shut you up before you say anything else stupid, *cabrón*.” I took a deep breath. “I didn’t get away from the Bratva. They took me from Nero’s and I’ve been with them ever since. In fact, that big, brutish guy you were talking about is here right now, listening to every word we’re saying.”

A beat of silence. “*¿Qué carajo estás diciendo?*” *What the hell are you talking about?*

Aleksandr smirked, knowing full well Juan switched to Spanish in the hopes he wouldn’t be able to follow along with the conversation.

“He speaks Spanish, Juan.”

“What the fuck, Drea? You couldn’t warn me someone was listening in on our conversation?”

“I would have if you’d shut your damn mouth long enough for me to get a word in,” I snapped back.

“You—” Juan broke out in a flourish of Spanish and I responded, a heated argument between us quickly taking over.

No surprise there. Juan and I were too much alike. Stubborn. Hot-headed. Short tempered. We argued all the time.

“Enough!” I eventually shouted, making him go quiet. “We can fight later. Just shut up and listen to me. I need you to come for a meet.”

“They want to negotiate your release,” he stated.

“I assume so.”

“Where and when?” he asked without hesitation.

I looked at Aleksandr. He didn’t say a word, just studied me intently with that piercing gaze of his. The one that saw too much.

“I’ll, uh, text you the details.”

Aleksandr prowled towards me.

“I gotta go,” I whispered.

“Wait, Drea. Are you okay? They’re not hurting you, are they? Tell me you’re okay. Please, tell me you’re okay.” The concern in his voice was heartbreaking.

“I’m alright. Don’t worry about me. I’ll see you soon. *Te amo.*” *I love you.*

I waited for him to say the words back and then quickly hung up before he could say anything else.

It was an important family tradition of ours. We lived harsh, dangerous, violent lives that could end at any moment. So we made sure when we were saying goodbye to one another, whether that be in person or over the phone, we always said ‘I love you’.

If the worst should happen, if we died, our last words to each other would be of love. It was our mum’s idea, something she ingrained in us from a very young age. She was big on family.

When Aleksandr stopped in front of me, I offered him the phone. He grabbed it from my hand, his fingers brushing against my skin softly.

“You and your brother are close.” It wasn’t a question. He said it like he was stating a fact.

“Yes,” I sighed, suddenly feeling tired. Not just physically but mentally.

“You miss him.” Another fact.

I had no idea why Aleksandr was still here, talking to me. He wasn’t a talkative man. That much I knew about him. Yet here he was, towering over me, watching me, waiting for me to respond. Like he wanted us to have a conversation.

I had to tilt my head all the way back to look at him. It didn’t make me nervous, having him standing over me the way he was. In fact, I liked it. Which was exactly why I shimmied to the side and got to my feet, stepping back from him.

"If there's nothing else, I'd like you to leave," I said, waving a hand towards the door.

Annoyance flared in his eyes. He didn't take the hint, remaining exactly where he was. Not that I was really expecting him to. Aleksandr wasn't the kind of man to be ordered around. *He* did the ordering.

He strolled to the drink cart in the corner of the room and poured himself a drink. He took a seat on the two-seater couch next to it, leaning back and stretching out his body, his thick, muscular thighs spreading wide. He swirled the liquid in his glass before bringing it to his lips, taking a drink, then spread his arm out over the back of the couch, his eyes never leaving mine.

Why I found the whole thing attractive, I had no idea. But it was hot. As. Fuck.

I sighed irritably. "Guess you're not leaving then. Whatever." I plopped down on the bed and picked up the book I had been reading the night before from the bedside table, intent on ignoring him.

I couldn't force him to leave, but maybe when he realised I had no intention of engaging him at all he would leave on his own.

The problem was, I was *hyper* aware of him, of every move he made. Every time he lifted that glass to his lips. The way his throat moved as he drank. His Adam's apple bobbing up and down. I noticed every minute movement he made. It made it incredibly hard to focus on the words on the page. Especially since he *still* hadn't taken his eyes off me.

What the fuck did he want?

Just keep reading, Drea. Ignore him.

Easier said than done.

When I read the same sentence four times, I'd had enough. I slammed the book shut and scowled at him. "What?!" I snapped.

He shrugged one shoulder lazily. "Nothing."

"Why are you still here? Why are you looking at me?"

"I can't look at you now?"

"If you're going to sit there and stare at someone, it should be your fiancé, not me."

He rolled his eyes, an exasperated sigh falling from his mouth. "I told you, Mila isn't my fiancé. She's not my girlfriend. She's nothing."

"Sure seemed like someone," I grumbled under my breath. Then I felt like a goddamn idiot.

Way to let him know you're jealous, Drea. Really! Good going.

I had to recover quickly.

"Look, it doesn't matter anyway. We hooked up, big whoop. It was fun, but that's *all* it was. Who you spend your time with is no concern of mine."

"No, it isn't," Aleksandr agreed.

I clenched my fists. Just because I said it didn't mean I wanted to hear him agree with me.

"Exactly," I ground out. "There's no denying that we're attracted to each other. Let's just throw that one out there now and admit it. But attraction doesn't mean shit. You don't know me and I don't know you. Except that you're an asshole who likes to boss people around."

He narrowed his eyes, a dark warning streaking across his face.

"Ordinarily, I'd be more than happy to indulge myself in you. Ride the fuck out of you until I squeezed every ounce of cum out of your cock." His body stiffened, heat flashing in his eyes. "But that's never going to happen. Your brother walking in on us was the best thing that could have happened. We're enemies, you and I. Altering the status quo of our relationship is foolish, not to mention reckless."

The dark look on his face morphed into a predatory one. He straightened to his feet, somehow managing to look elegant and masculine all at the same time, and prowled towards me.

I tensed, sensing the change in him. It was like a switch had been flipped. The Aleksandr I was looking at now wasn't the same one that walked into this room. It was a darker, filthier version—and I was all for it.

Everything I just said disappeared from my mind. All I could focus on was the way he moved. All those muscles. That sculpted face. Those mesmerising blue eyes. The way he looked at me as if he was about to devour me.

Despite the whole speech I just gave him, I suddenly didn't care if indulging in this sexual attraction between us was foolish. I wanted it, and I was going to fucking take it.

Chapter Twenty-One



I stalked towards Drea, a singular focus on my mind. Hearing her say that nothing else would ever happen between us made the dark beast in me roar to the surface. I never envisioned myself as the type of person who, when denied something, wanted it even more.

Well, it turned out I was.

It made me feel like a fucking child.

A lot of what she said made sense. She was right. Acting on this attraction between us was stupid and reckless. It would cause a fuckton of problems. But right now, in this moment, I didn't give a flying fuck about any of them.

I wanted Drea. And after her little spiel, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that she wanted me too.

I stopped at the edge of the bed, staring down at her. Her eyes were wide, dilated. Fixed on me. Her chest rose and fell with quick, short breaths. Anticipation shone on her face. She was eager to see what I'd do.

I was too.

Keeping my gaze locked on her, I tilted my head back slightly as I poured what was left of my drink past my lips. I gripped her jaw and she moaned at the roughness. I applied the tiniest bit of pressure and her mouth opened. Leaning forward, crowding her space with every inch of my body, I let the liquid fall from my mouth into hers.

Another moan.

Her eyes closed, as if savouring the taste and she swallowed, her throat working up and down.

My cock was already painfully hard. It always was around her. But watching her moan at my touch, her body shivering against mine made it even more so, an agonising ache quickly filling me inside.

I threw the glass over my shoulder and it smashed on the ground as I grabbed her head with both hands and slammed my lips to hers. She tasted so fucking sweet, with the slight hint of alcohol adding to her flavour.

Drea moaned, long and loud, and scrambled up my body, locking her legs around my waist. Her nails scoured my neck, my scalp, as she deepened the kiss, her tongue diving into my mouth.

I'd never been with a woman as aggressive as her in bed. *I* was usually the aggressor, but I couldn't deny it felt good having her paw at me like she couldn't get enough of me.

The bed was right there but I had something more devious planned. I marched us over to the couch and lowered her onto it, prying her legs from around my waist. She whined in protest, trying to lure me back in with a sensuous roll of her hips, but I refused to be deterred.

I gripped her throat and shoved her back into the couch. "Stay—," I rumbled deeply, adding just the right amount of pressure. "—still."

Her body went lax in an instant, all but melting.

She might have an aggressive side, but she also had a submissive side. The way she just melted at my command proved that.

I straightened and stared down at her. She was so goddamn pretty. Those amber eyes blinking up at me, full of want and need. It was the hottest thing I'd ever fucking seen. Not to mention the fact that she had the softest lips in the world. I couldn't wait to feel them wrapped around my cock.

But that would have to wait. This time *I* was doing the tasting.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small piece of black fabric I'd carried with me every day since our interaction in the showers.

Drea's eyes widened when she saw them. "You took my underwear?"

I smirked, running my fingers through the soft material. I'd washed them since taking them and had thought of them as a good luck charm of sorts.

I balled them up and shoved them into her mouth.

Drea squealed in shock, her eyes bulging. She went to remove them and I pinned her arms down, towering over her. “Touch them and I stop.”

Confusion flashed across her face.

I roughly spread her legs wide and ripped the tight pants from her body, leaving her lower half completely bare.

She groaned, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. Her hips rolled, eager, searching. I pinned her ass to the seat to keep her still.

I wanted a moment to look. Admire. Explore.

The tattoos that ran over her stomach were beautifully intricate, so detailed. They travelled over every inch of her soft skin, right down to her pussy.

I dropped to my knees at her feet, this overwhelming need to worship the ground she walked on all but consuming me.

Drea’s breath hitched, her eyes dilating as she stared down her body at me between her legs.

I traced the vine-like pattern of her tattoo over the top of her pussy with my fingers.

She shivered.

“Who did these?” The idea of someone else this close to her pussy made anger shoot through my blood.

She mumbled something around the fabric in her mouth, a scowl aimed my way.

As much as I loved how she looked right now—exposed, desperate, completely at my mercy—I wanted her to answer my question. I removed her underwear to allow her to speak, putting them back in my pocket for safe keeping.

Her eyes tracked the movement. “A friend,” she breathed heavily. Her body tried to move—whether intentionally or not, I wasn’t sure—and I had to secure my forearm across her stomach to keep her still.

“What kind of friend? A normal one, or one like me?”

“You’re not my friend,” she fired back instantly, and I smirked.

“That hurts my feelings, *malyshka*.”

“You don’t have any feelings.”

I hummed in amusement, my fingers dancing over her skin, spreading her folds wide to get a good look at her clit and the piercing dangling from it.

I never thought it would be something I'd be attracted to but fuck, I was.

Desperation burned in Drea's eyes. "Do you plan on talking the entire time? Because I can think of way better things you can do with your mouth."

I chuckled softly. I loved the freedom Drea had with her sexuality. The way she had no issue voicing her wants and desires, the confidence she had within herself and her body.

It was a huge fucking turn on.

"I thought you liked listening to me talk?" I drawled, thickening my Russian accent.

She whimpered, goosebumps pebbling her skin. "I do. You know I do."

"Then sit back and shut up. I won't be rushed, Drea." I swiped my tongue through her drenching folds and she squealed in delight, her body jolting.

So fucking delicious.

"My new favourite flavour," I groaned, her taste flooding my senses. I circled her clit and sucked her piercing into my mouth.

Drea cried out in pleasure.

"Tell me, *malyshka*," I breathed against her, enjoying the way she squirmed. "Did this—" I sucked on her piercing again, "—hurt when you got it done?" I'd asked her that question last night and she hadn't answered.

I was dying to know what compelled her to get this done.

"You have no idea," she panted, her hips swivelling, chasing her orgasm.

I kissed her pussy sensually, my tongue fluttering lightly over her delicate pink flesh, trying to figure out what she preferred.

When it came to getting their pussies licked, some women liked it hard and fast. Some liked it slow and soft. Based on the way Drea moaned, the way her body writhed as if she found it impossible to keep still, she preferred slow and soft.

Perfect for me. I liked to fuck hard, but I liked eating pussy slow. Taking my time, enjoying every single moment of it. The way their clit pulsed on my tongue as they came.

It was heavenly.

"You enjoy a little pain?" Considering all the tattoos and piercings, I was fairly sure I knew the answer.

“I love a little pain. Especially with my pleasure.”

My cock throbbed, pulsing in my pants, desperate to sheath itself inside her.

I wasn't a believer in ‘the perfect woman’. Everyone was flawed. But right now, in this moment, Drea was fucking perfect.

I clamped my mouth over her and sucked. Licked. Nibbled. Devoured. I fed from her like a man starved. Desperate for every ounce of pleasure I could wring out of her.

I was.

Drea moaned, incoherent words in Spanish flying from her mouth as she ground her pussy into my face.

She was stunning. Mesmerizing to watch. Addictive to listen to. Every sound she made was like music to my ears.

I reached underneath her with both hands and palmed her ass. Hard. My fingers dug painfully into her skin, sure enough to leave bruises, and I lifted her lower half up off the couch, holding her at the perfect height, my tongue swirling around her clit, never losing momentum.

When a gush of wetness poured into my mouth, I hummed in appreciation, praising her in Russian.

“Takaya khoroshaya devochka,” Such a good little girl.”

“Na tvoy vkus . czert voz'mi. Takoi sladkii, takoi vkusnyi,” Your taste. Fucking hell. So sweet, so delicious.

“Konchi mne na litso, Drea. Nu davay zhe. Day eto mne,” Come all over my face, Drea. Come on. Give it to me.”

Drea's breathing increased, panting moans falling from her lips with each word I said. “Dios, your voice. More, Aleksandr, more. Please.”

I loved the way she said my name. In the throes of pleasure, her Spanish side took over, making it sound exotic.

“That's it, *malyshka. Beg me.*” I speared her pussy with my tongue, her inner walls fluttering around it.

She was close, and I knew exactly how to tip her over the edge.

Lowering her back down to the couch, I spread her legs wider and replaced my tongue with two fingers, impaling her roughly.

“Fuck!” she cried out.

“We'll get to that. Soon,” I promised darkly, pumping my fingers in and out, my eyes never leaving her, committing every detail to memory.

I placed my other hand on her pelvis and pushed down as I curled my fingers inside her.

Drea exploded. Her pussy clamped down, squeezing me as a long, deep, pleasure-filled moan fell from her lips. Her body shook, her back arching before she slumped back, her breathing hard.

I pushed my fingers in and out a few more times before pulling them out slowly, admiring all the wetness dripping from her. I got to my feet, staring down at her as I brought my fingers to my mouth and sucked them clean.

Drea watched me with glassy eyes. Her gaze darted down to the bulge in my pants and back up again. Her teeth dug into her bottom lip.

I leaned forward and pulled her lip free, running my thumb along it slowly, admiringly. “I’ve thought about these pretty, soft lips around my cock since the first moment I met you.”

A smirk danced on Drea’s face. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip tauntingly, rising up off the couch. “Have you now?”

I gripped her throat and pushed her back down, snapping my belt open with my other hand. “Yes, I have. Now, are you going to take my cock like a good little girl? Or do I need to force it down your throat like you’re a bad little whore?”

Her eyes lit up with excitement. “Bad little whore,” she said breathlessly, eagerness in her tone.

I grinned darkly.

Fucking perfection.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Keeping my grip on her throat tight, I pulled my belt free with my other hand and snapped the button on my pants open.

After weeks of wondering how it would feel being inside her, I was finally going to find out.

At least, I thought I was.

The blaring noise of my phone ringing cut through the air and I stiffened.

“Don’t answer it,” Drea begged, her fingers curling around my hand, making me squeeze her throat tighter.

My cock throbbed painfully. I groaned. “I have to.” It was my personal phone. Only my family members had that number. They wouldn’t call unless it was important.

I leaned back, pulling my phone from my pocket and glancing at the screen.

Illayana.

Despite how annoyed and frustrated I was at being interrupted, I couldn't help the smile flashing over my face.

I hadn't spoken to my sister since dropping her off at the airport. She'd been busy establishing herself within the Cosa Nostra. And with the amount of shit I'd been dealing with over the last few weeks, I hadn't had the chance to check in with her.

"*Sestra*," *Sister*, I said affectionately, shaking my head. "This isn't a good time."

Illayana's soft chuckle rang through the phone. "Nice to hear from you too, *starshiy brat*." *Big brother*.

Drea stiffened beneath me, her face morphing into an unreadable expression. She pushed away from me and got to her feet, making me frown at the sudden change in her.

"Really. It's not a good time. I'll call you back." I watched as Drea put her clothes back on, my confusion skyrocketing.

"Don't you dare hang up on me, Aleksandr Grigoriy Volkov."

I huffed out a breath. "Don't 'middle name' me, Illayana. I'm your older brother."

Drea paused, glancing over her shoulder at me. She bit her lip, an embarrassed blush rising on her cheeks.

What the fuck was going on in that woman's head? She was driving me crazy.

"Whatever. Since you're *soooo* busy then, I'll make it quick. I'm calling to invite you to a surprise party I'm throwing for Arturo's thirtieth birthday."

"Pass," I grunted. Just because she was married to the guy didn't mean I wanted to spend time with him or his family any more than I needed to.

"Oh come on, please?! I already called Nik and he said he'd go. You have to come. Pretty please?"

"I'd rather not."

"Well, I'd rather not have a grumpy, antisocial older brother, but we don't all get what we want, do we?" she snapped back.

I frowned. "I'm not grumpy—"

Drea snorted and I narrowed my eyes at her.

“And I’m not antisocial either.”

“Prove it then. Come to the party. You owe me,” Illayana said firmly.

“For what?” I said, my voice rising in disbelief.

“I dunno. Give me a few days to think of something and I’ll let you know.”

I shook my head in exasperation. “Fine. Text me the details.”

“Yes! Thank you.”

I grunted.

We talked for a few more minutes, catching up quickly with the promise of talking again soon, before we said our goodbyes and hung up.

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Chapter Twenty-Two



I took a seat on the edge of the bed, trying and failing to not listen in on Aleksandr as he spoke to his sister. When he first answered the phone, the wave of affection that had washed over his face following that sweet, feminine voice on the other end made me stiffen, jealousy coursing through my bones.

I couldn't hear what was being said but I could hear it was a woman, and the first thing I thought was that it was Leggy. That he'd answered a call from *her* while between *my* thighs.

I'd pushed away from him so fast, ready to fucking go off, when I realised he was actually talking to his sister.

God, I felt like such an idiot.

I was big on assuming the worst in people. Especially men. I didn't trust easily. I never put my heart on the line because the last time I'd done that, it had been shattered. I was still trying to pick up the pieces.

Things with Aleksandr had gotten very physical, very quickly. As much as I didn't want to admit it, we shared a connection. A deep, physical connection that was unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

The attraction burning in my veins for him scared me. Actually, it terrified me. It was an all-consuming kind of attraction. The kind that flamed to life the moment we were in the same room, in each other's orbit.

We were like magnets, drawn to one another despite not knowing a damn thing about each other on a personal level.

Why did that thought make me sad?

I studied Aleksandr intently. Curiosity sparked within me. Since Daniel, I hadn't been even remotely interested in getting to know another man beyond the physical level.

For the first time in years, I wanted more. I wanted to know what made him tick, what he liked and disliked. Why he was the way he was, the scars of his past.

I wanted to know it all.

Aleksandr's rough goodbye snapped me out of my thoughts. He blew out a breath, tucking his phone back away. He turned to face me, buttoning his pants back up.

Lines of frustration marred his face, a scowl etched onto his face. Veins pulsed in his forearms, his fists clenching with unleashed energy—the same energy he was about to use on me, before we were interrupted.

Fuck, I'd never been more disappointed in my life. What did a girl have to do to get laid around here?

Aleksandr huffed. "My sister always did have the worst timing."

I laughed humourlessly. "I'd have to agree with you on that one."

With a grunt, Aleksandr stepped towards the drink cart and poured himself another drink.

I'll be honest, I was surprised he didn't just leave. What reason could he have for sticking around? It was clear the mood was ruined. Nothing doused the fires of passion quicker than getting a call from a sibling.

Aleksandr slumped onto the couch, in the very seat where he'd just given me the best orgasm of my life. He tipped his head back and spread his legs wide, getting comfortable. He swirled his glass over the side of the couch, seemingly lost in thought as he stared at the ceiling.

"Is she the one who was kidnapped by Nero?" I asked, desperate to fill the silence. I wanted to hear his voice.

His head rolled lazily to the side and he stared at me. Want and need burned in his eyes, but there was also something else. "Yeah. Illayana."

I nodded. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. She was calling to invite me to some surprise party she's throwing for her husband."

I could tell by the tone in his voice that going to this party was the last thing he wanted to do.

"You don't want to go?"

“I do and I don’t.” He sat up a little straighter and brought the glass to his lips, taking a sip. “I want to see my sister, and even my shithead of a brother. But I don’t want to have to go to some big party to do it.”

A memory flashed in my mind of a tall, lean, long-haired man, his fingers waggling at me in greeting as he sat on the edge of that huge boxing ring.

He definitely seemed like he had a mischievous personality. One that I’m sure drove Aleksandr mad.

“You’re the oldest, aren’t you?”

He snorted. “That obvious?”

“Kind of,” I snickered lightly. “You’ve got that ‘older sibling’ vibe. The one that comes from years of having to deal with annoying younger siblings.”

“They’re not too bad,” he chuckled, affection in his tone. “After taking care of them for years, I barely notice it anymore.”

Taking care of them for years? What did that mean?

I didn’t have a whole lot of information on the Bratva. The only thing I *did* know was there was some guy called The Bratva Butcher who murdered the entire family line of those responsible for the death of his wife.

It was from that point on that my father warned us to stay away from them. That anyone capable of doing something like that was not someone we wanted to mess with.

Curiosity and my big mouth made me ask it. “You’re not...The Bratva Butcher, are you?”

Aleksandr cocked his head, letting the silence linger for a few tense seconds. “And if I was? Would that scare you?”

“Nothing scares me,” I answered honestly.

I tried to do the math in my head. The Voznesensky massacre happened ten or so years ago. I didn’t know Aleksandr’s age, but if I had to guess I’d say late twenties, early thirties. That meant he would have been old enough to do it. He certainly had the brutality for something like that.

“Yes, I suspect that’s true.” Aleksandr finished the rest of his drink, resting the empty glass on the armrest of the couch. He ran a finger over the rim of the glass in slow circles, staring off into space with a sad look in his eyes. “It’s my father. After my mother was raped and murdered, he became The Bratva Butcher.”

My breath hitched, my eyes widening not only from the shock of his statement, but also from the fact that he was opening up. He was telling me something personal about himself, something deeply private that no doubt caused him incredible pain to even think about, let alone put into words.

“Yekaterina Volkova was a beautiful woman. She had a warm soul and a smile brighter than the sun. She might have looked like a sweet, innocent angel, but she had more guts and more fierceness than my father and I put together.”

The way he spoke about her, with so much love and affection, made my heart ache for him.

“And it’s my fault she’s dead.”

I gasped softly. “I’m sure that’s not true, Aleksandr.”

“It is,” he stated firmly. He wasn’t looking at me, his eyes staring off into the distance as if he was seeing the moment right now in front of him, lost in the past.

“I’d been assigned to be her personal bodyguard since I was seventeen. Me and three others. It was my job to protect her, keep her safe. A job I failed.”

“That’s a lot of pressure to put on a kid,” I murmured sympathetically.

His gaze snapped to me. “I was never a kid. Not a normal one, anyway.”

I nodded in understanding. I wasn’t really a normal kid either. Most kids growing up worried about trivial things like who they were going to sit next to in class, or coming up with excuses as to why they didn’t complete their homework. They didn’t worry they were going to get shot in their own bed by their dad’s enemies.

“For most of my adolescent life, and the first few years of my adult one, I’d been her constant shadow, shielding her from anyone who’d do her harm. My responsibilities as my father’s heir took a back seat so I could focus on keeping her safe. But as time went on this overwhelming need to be more involved, to learn more about my birthright, consumed my every waking thought. My father valued no one more than his wife. He trained me himself the moment I could walk.” A nostalgic smile graced his lips. “I remember this one time when I was twelve, he’d just kicked my ass in the ring and given me bruises all over my face. My eye was swollen shut. My lips were cut and bleeding. He even hit my ear so hard he busted my eardrum.”

“Jesus Christ,” I blew out. “Sounds like child abuse to me.”

He chuckled, his shoulders shaking with amusement. “You’d think so, but no. When I was younger, he used to go easy on me. Never hit me *too* hard. Just hard enough to make it hurt without leaving any damage. I started working out when I was eleven. I’d gone through a growth spurt and grown, both in height and weight. Unfortunately, so had my ego. I was taller than my father at that point, so naturally I assumed I could finally beat him in a *real* fight. I told him I wanted everything he had. I believe my exact words were ‘show me what you can really do, old man’, and he knocked me out in less than thirty seconds,” he laughed humourlessly. “God, what an idiot I was. Anyway, my mother saw the damage he’d done to me, all the blood and bruises and..well,” he smirked fondly, “to this day I’ve never seen my father more terrified of someone than he was of my mother that day.”

I couldn’t help the smile spreading across my lips. The look on his face as he spoke about his family was one of complete adoration. It was the happiest I’d ever seen him.

Then it changed in the blink of an eye. His face morphed into one of pure darkness and despair. Anger and pain.

“I was twenty-four when it happened. My mother was meant to stay in, but a friend unexpectedly called and asked to meet her at The Arch, a casino we owned. I had an important meet to attend with my father that night. It was the first time he was letting me take the lead on a negotiation—with his supervision of course. My father is a bit of a control freak.”

“Ahh, so that’s where you get that from,” I joked, trying to lighten his mood a little.

The corners of his mouth tilted up slightly.

“I didn’t want to miss the opportunity to finally prove myself to him. My father was a difficult man to impress. I spent weeks studying everything I could on the Triad, hoping this would finally be the moment when he told me he was proud of me. So I didn’t tell him my mother was going out, even though I knew something wasn’t right, that something didn’t *feel* right. If I had, he would have made me skip the meet and go with her. She had her other guards, and I thought because she was going to a casino we owned, guarded by *our* men, she would be okay. That she wouldn’t be in any danger. But I was wrong.” His voice cracked with pain and my heart hurt for him. All that guilt he was carrying around would be so overwhelming. “If I’d been there, guarding her like I was supposed to—”

“Aleksandr, no,” I rushed, shaking my head. I got up and went to him, dropping to my knees between his spread thighs. “It’s *not* your fault. There was nothing you could have done.”

He blew out a hard breath. “That’s where you’re wrong. I saw the footage. I watched those men walk right into the casino and stalk my mother. They followed her from a distance and her guards didn’t even notice. But *I* would have. If I was there, I could have gotten her out. I *know* it.”

I ran my hands up and down his legs soothingly in an offer of comfort. “What happened?” I whispered softly.

My therapist used to go on and on about how talking about your trauma could help you process certain events in a way you may have been avoiding. That the only way to really deal with it and move on was to face the reality of it.

Aleksandr was a strong man. Prideful. The kind of man who wouldn’t burden those around him with his problems.

I wanted him to know that he could share whatever was going on inside his head with me, free of judgement or criticism.

Aleksandr studied me, intensity burning in his gaze. “The Voznesenskys coordinated their attack. With almost military-like precision, they hit all our major bases of operations. Our clubs, restaurants, casinos. Even our home. It was a takeover. We later found out that one of their main objectives was capturing us so they could make an example out of our family. My father, my mother, my siblings, me. The only one they managed to get a hold of, though, was my mother.” He went silent for a few moments. “We found her a few days later,” he murmured, so softly I struggled to hear him. “We’d received an anonymous text with nothing except the address to a warehouse. She was inside. Beaten. Naked. Almost unrecognisable. Autopsy results showed semen from twelve different men.”

My breath hitched, my hand flying to my chest in outrage and horror.

That poor woman.

Aleksandr’s voice was devoid of all emotion as he spoke, a haunted look in his eyes. “I was the one who found her body.”

“Oh, Aleksandr,” I whispered sadly.

The weight on his heart would be almost too much to bear. The guilt he felt would be enough to eat him alive, picking at his soul until there was nothing left.

I didn't even realise I was moving until I was in his lap, my arms wrapping around his neck as I pulled him in for a hug.

He stiffened at first, as if he had no idea what I was doing, and then he relaxed, banding his arms around me to return the hug.

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Chapter Twenty-Three



This was weird. Nice, but *weird*. I've said it before and I'll say it again, I'm not a hugger. The only reason I wasn't fighting it was because my head was nestled between her breasts and it was...comforting.

I had no idea what came over me. One minute, we were hot and heavy, ready to rid ourselves of this intense sexual attraction burning between us. The next thing I knew, I was pouring out all my demons, everything I'd kept locked up inside since that horrible night. The unbearable, overwhelming guilt I felt every time I thought of my mother.

It was like the floodgates had been opened, and I couldn't stop until I'd gotten everything out.

Drea was freakishly easy to talk to. There was no judgement or criticism in her eyes, no pity. Just understanding and compassion.

I was more than aware of the fact that I hadn't dealt with the issues of my past. Like my father, I was an expert at compartmentalising. Thinking about my mother brought me nothing but pain, sadness and anguish. So I stopped thinking about her. If even the slightest thought about her managed to worm its way into my mind, I shut it down instantly.

Somehow, the conversation between Drea and I had morphed into one I'd spent a decade avoiding. But now I felt...lighter, like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. My soul.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," Drea murmured into my hair, her hands running up and down my back soothingly. "I can't imagine how

hard that must have been for you.”

I hummed, burrowing my head deeper into her chest. “It was harder for my father. He lost his wife.”

“But you lost your mother.” She sifted her fingers through my hair and I groaned, goosebumps rising on my skin.

I was a sucker for head scratches.

“Something I don’t think he’s ever forgiven me for. Not really.”

Drea pulled back slightly, looking down at me with a frown on her face. “Surely he didn’t blame you for what happened, right?”

I snorted. “He didn’t speak to me for years after she died. While he was off exacting his revenge on the Voznesensky family and tracking down all the men that had raped my mother, he would call from time to time to check in on my siblings. Never said a word to me. Refused to talk to me altogether, actually. Would only talk with Illayana, Lukyan, Nikolai and our housekeeper, Flora. When Mikhail, one of my father’s closest friends, managed to drag him back home after he was finished with his rampage, he’d worked through most of his anger. But he never treated me the same.”

Sympathy burned in Drea’s eyes, but thankfully no pity. I didn’t want her pity.

I blew out an exhausted breath, leaning my head back to rest on the back of the couch. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” The topic was emotionally draining, and I was done with it.

I curled my fingers around Drea’s hips, gripping her tightly. Drea moaned, swivelling and grinding her pussy into my cock. She was easily excitable, and I was glad for it.

I leaned forward, running my head up the valley of her breasts, my lips grazing the soft, smooth skin of her neck. “Tell me about you.”

“What,” she licked her lips, breathing hard. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Everything.”

She chuckled softly. “Okay. Well, I’m a Gemini. I like fast cars and grilled cheese sandwiches. I think aliens are real and that they’ve been to Earth before. Not like, kidnapping people, but just keeping an eye on us, you know? I love dogs, but cats freak me out. You never know what those little bastards are thinking. They’ll either cuddle you or cut you. Christmas is my favourite time of the year. And I think coffee tastes like a horse’s ass.”

I blinked, momentarily stunned by the random bits of information she just told me. This woman continued to surprise me at every turn.

I wanted something more though, something deeper. Those were all superficial details, nothing personal. I wanted something important and significant to her.

“I think the Bermuda Triangle is a hoax,” Drea continued, her lips pursed in thought. “My secret guilty pleasure is sneaking ice cream at three in the morning and pretending it was only a dream. I don’t know how to ride a bike, and—”

I placed a finger over her lips, stopping her from saying another word. “As much as I enjoy these random little insights into your crazy, chaotic mind, I want something real.”

She stiffened slightly, an uncomfortable look in her eyes. “Real?” she mumbled around my finger.

“Yes.” I moved my hand, placing it over her heart. “Something from here.”

Her brows wrinkled. It looked as though she was going to refuse, but then she shook her head and blew out a small, exasperated breath. “I don’t want to die lying in a bed, sick and withered. When it’s my time, I want to go down fighting.”

I frowned, the idea of her dying making my chest tighten.

“When my dad was diagnosed with cancer, it hit us all very hard. Living the life we do, we don’t expect something like disease to be the thing that takes us out. So it was quite a shock to hear my dad only had a year left to live. My mum jumped into research mode, trying to find anything that could help cure him—or at least prolong his life. Chemo and radiation were the only solution. By the time we found out he was sick, the cancer had spread to every major organ in his body, so cutting it out wasn’t an option.”

I nodded, waiting patiently for her to continue. I could tell by the tense way she held herself this wasn’t easy for her to talk about.

“My dad didn’t want to do the chemo or radiation. To him, the side effects didn’t make what little time it may give him worth it. But my mum convinced him to try it.” Her face dropped in sadness, unshed tears glistening in her eyes. “By the end, he was barely recognisable. He’d lost most of his hair. His skin had turned dry and patchy. He could barely move. His ankles had swelled to three times their size. He was too weak to do anything for himself. We would take turns taking care of him. Cleaning him

and feeding him. None of that stuff was the hardest part, though. It was that when he looked at me, he didn't see *me*. It was like he wasn't really there anymore. I would stare into his eyes and there would be no awareness, no recognition. They were dull. Lifeless. His body was still there but his mind was gone. The man I knew, who raised me and taught me everything I knew, was gone. The cancer had eaten away at him, leaving only the shell of his body behind."

I drew small circles into her skin, trying to find the words that might bring her comfort but coming up empty. I couldn't imagine what that would be like.

"I don't want that to be me. I don't want to wither away in a bed, having my loved ones look after me. Having them clean me, change me." She shook her head adamantly. "I never want to put my children through that. I want them to remember me as strong and beautiful. Not sick and weak."

"Children? You have kids?"

"No, not yet. But I will someday. And I won't put them through that."

The thought of her having children with another man made an uncomfortable feeling creep up my spine. It was a foreign feeling, akin to jealousy.

"My mum never recovered from my dad's death. They were high school sweethearts. Did literally everything together. She was his right hand woman. She watched his back through all his dealings, supported him in everything he did. When he passed, my mum didn't know what to do with herself. She latched onto me, trying to help me run the cartel." She leaned forward and whispered, "by help, I mean take charge." She laughed softly before continuing. "She meant well, but the truth was I didn't need her help. I'd been helping my dad with everything since I was a kid and my mum knew that. She just needed something to do to keep her busy, to make her feel useful, since there was nothing she could do to help my dad in the end. I know with me gone right now, she'll be losing her bloody mind, and my poor brother will be paying the consequences for it."

"Why would your brother be paying for it?"

"Because it was his stupid idea to take the meeting with Nero. My mother and I were both against it, but he whined and bitched about how I never take his advice and I don't value him, so I went against my instincts to appease him. And look what happened. My mum will be blaming him for the whole thing and no doubt making him suffer."

A chuckle rose up in my throat. There was nothing worse than a parental reprimand from your mother. They had a unique way of laying it on thick and making the guilt ten times worse than it needed to be.

“Is it just you and your brother? No other siblings?” I asked. Of course I knew the answer to that question already, but I wanted to hear it from her. I loved listening to her talk, hearing the faint traces of her heritage coating her words. It was like a soothing song, calming to the soul.

“We both know you already know the answer to that,” Drea scoffed, shaking her head. “But I’ll answer it anyway. No. No other siblings. Our births—Juan’s and I’s—were rough. My mum almost died. Once it was all done, the doctors told her she couldn’t have any more children. My parents said they were fine with that, that we were all they needed, but I knew if they had the choice they would have had more. My mum’s been hounding me for grandkids since I turned twenty-five.”

“I know what you mean,” I exhaled. “My mother was the same. She first brought it up when I was twenty-one, telling me to get started early and build a family.”

Drea laughed when I shuddered. “You don’t want kids?”

“Of course I do. I just didn’t want them *then*. Twenty-one is young to start. There was still so much I had to learn, so much I wanted to see before I even thought about bringing a child into the world.”

“Yeah, I hear that. But then, before you know it, you’re thirty-one years old and afraid you’re going to run out of time.”

I tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, studying her closely. “Speaking from experience?”

She shrugged idly. “Maybe. Up until a few years ago, I thought I was on the way towards children. My boyfriend—well, *ex*-boyfriend—and I had been together for a few years. We were living together. Everything was on the right track.”

“What happened?”

“The same thing that always happens,” she blew out, gripping my shoulders. “I walked in on him with another woman and all the hopes and dreams I’d had of building a life with him came crumbling down. I haven’t bothered trying since then. What’s the point?”

Ah. That explained her reaction to Mila then. “Not all men are like that.”

“Yes, I know. But the odds of finding a decent one, one who can handle the world I live in, are slim to none. Daniel was the son of a family friend. He knew about the cartel. I tried being with someone who wasn’t born into the life. Didn’t end well.”

Yes, normal people had a hard time adjusting to this life. It wasn’t impossible, but it was difficult.

Something she’d said earlier zinged through my mind and I studied her closely. “Did you say you don’t know how to ride a bike?”

Her face flushed. “Yeah. I just never had the opportunity to learn. We were dirt poor when I was a kid. Could barely afford food, let alone money to buy a bike. Once my dad got into the cartel, things changed. But by that point it was too late. I was too old. What fifteen-year-old doesn’t know how to ride a bike?” she shook her head. “I always wanted to learn, but the older I got the more embarrassing it was, so I just forgot about it.” She shrugged her shoulders idly like she didn’t care, but I could tell she did. She still wanted to learn.

I filed that information away for later.

We spoke for hours. It amazed me how easy it was. I wasn’t the type of person who shared private thoughts, and yet I felt like there was nothing I couldn’t tell Drea. Nothing I couldn’t talk about.

She ended up falling asleep on my lap, her head resting on my chest. I didn’t want to move. I wanted to stay but I knew I couldn’t, as much as I wanted to. There was still all that shit with our buildings being burned down that I had to deal with.

I tightened my arms around her and got to my feet. I held her close as I made my way over to the bed and softly lowered her down. She stirred slightly, mumbling, “Juan, fetch me my cape,” before settling down.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to laugh. She was so adorable. I covered her with the blanket, taking a moment to just look at her, admire her. I tucked her hair behind her ear and lightly traced the side of her face with my finger before leaning forward and placing a soft kiss on her forehead.

“*Spi spokoyno, detka,*” *Sleep well, baby.*

I frowned at how easily the endearment slipped from my lips. I knew I should probably be concerned with how attached I was becoming to her, but I couldn’t find the energy to actually care. When I was with her, I felt warm, light. I didn’t want to lose that. To lose her.

I left her room and headed downstairs. As I walked past the lounge room, I saw that the TV was on, someone sitting on the couch. I checked my watch. 11:30pm. Who was up at this time of the night?

As I got closer, I saw it was Dayton. One foot rested on the coffee table in front of him, his arm hung over his bent knee with the remote in his hand, flicking through different titles on Netflix.

“What are you doing up?” I asked, stopping beside the couch.

He turned to face me. “Can’t sleep.” His gaze flicked to the TV and back nervously. “Do you...do you want to watch something with me?”

I should have said no. I had so much shit to do, it was actually overwhelming to think about. But the look he was giving me right now made it impossible for me to do that. It was like he was silently begging me to join him, for someone to hang out with him.

I exhaled and took a seat in the chair next to the couch.

Dayton visibly perked up. “Cool.” Had no one ever watched a movie with him before? “What do you wanna watch? There are some cool shows on Netflix at the moment. *Brooklyn-Nine-Nine*, *Black Mirror*, *Vikings* *Valhalla*—”

“Is there something called *The 100*?”

Dayton frowned slightly. “Yeah I think so. I’ve never seen it, but I’ve heard it’s good. Why do you want to watch that?”

“Someone told me I should check it out. Go on, put that on.”

Excitement visible on his face, Dayton searched until he found it and then put it on. I wasn’t sure why he was so excited to have someone sit and watch something with him. Until it started, then it became abundantly clear.

He was the type that liked to talk while the show played. He liked having someone there to bounce theories off and engage him while he watched. He’d ask questions I couldn’t possibly know the answers to, because I’d seen just as much as him. I knew just as much as he did about what was going on.

“Oh shit, who are they?”

“I don’t know, Dayton.”

“Do you think that bald dude is going to kill Octavia?”

“I don’t know, Dayton.”

“I feel like Clarke and Bellamy are gonna get it on. An enemies-to-lovers kinda thing. What do you think?”

It wasn't until right there, at the moment, that I realised Dayton was lonely. He just wanted company. Someone to talk to.

It didn't take long for both of us to get into the show. It was actually pretty good. Episodes were forty minutes long and before I knew it, we'd managed to watch nearly the whole first season.

By the time Dayton fell asleep, it was 4:30am. I exhaled a tired breath and turned the TV off, getting to my feet. I stretched my body out, feeling every little kink in my muscles. Staying awake all night probably wasn't a good idea, but I didn't regret it.

Dayton was snoring his head off, his cap sitting haphazardly on his head and his mouth wide open with a bit of drool dripping down his chin. The sight made me chuckle.

I removed his cap, sitting it down next to him, and covered him with a throw blanket before I left. Regardless of the fact that I hadn't gotten any rest, I had work to do.

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Chapter Twenty-Four



“Son of a bitch!” I hissed, stumbling back, pain lancing through my jaw.

I blocked another strike from Nik and rammed my fist into his stomach, making him wheeze and hunch over.

I brought my knee up and smashed it into his nose. His head snapped back. I hit him with a spinning roundhouse kick and he went flying, landing in a heap on the floor of the ring.

I danced back a few steps, light on my feet as Nik picked himself up. He wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, determination set in his eyes as he stared me down.

When Nik said he was going to make me pay for what I’d said about Tatiana, the bastard hadn’t been joking. For the better part of an hour we’d been sparring, and it was taking everything I had to keep him back. He was coming at me with everything he had, intent on making me suffer.

He ran at me again and we dove right back into it, trading blows. Nik and I were pretty evenly matched. It made the fight a lot more interesting.

“Any more hits with facial recognition?” I asked, blocking his attack and lashing out with my own.

Nik dodged. “No.” He threw a punch. “And I couldn’t find anything on the guy Rayna has supposedly been meeting at the café either. They only keep their footage for forty-eight hours before it’s deleted.” He front kicked me and I grabbed his foot, grunting at the impact.

He jumped up and kicked me in the face with his other leg. I lost my hold on his foot and dropped, landing roughly on my back.

Fuck, the bastard kicked hard.

Nik straddled me and wrapped his hands around my throat. The fucker was trying to choke me out. I fought against him but his hold was tight. He was sitting on my chest, making it hard for me to buck him off.

In the corner of my eye I saw Drea, watching me. She'd asked if she could use the gym to work out and I didn't see a reason to deny her. She was surrounded by our soldiers doing workouts of their own. If she tried to escape (I didn't think she would, but *if* she did), they'd stop her.

Her face was marred with worry. She was concerned for me. It would look like Nik was trying to kill me from an outsider's point of view, but I knew my brother. He might be pissed at me but he wasn't trying to kill me. Trying to hurt me, sure. But not kill.

I was struggling to breathe now. I had to do something or he really *was* going to make me pass out.

Sorry, little brother.

I hit him in the nuts. His eyes bulged and he groaned deeply, his hold loosening immediately. I threw him off me and jumped to my feet. He was curled up in a ball, his hands between his legs cradling his balls.

"You...ass...hole," he breathed out painfully.

I went over to him and patted him on the back. "You left yourself open."

His eyes snapped to me, full of anger. "You know we're not allowed to strike there."

Yes, we weren't. We also weren't allowed to choke each other out either. When we sparred there were certain rules we had to follow. We couldn't do any permanent damage to each other, and blows to the privates were off limits.

"Consider us even then," I winked. I straightened and turned to face Dayton, who had been watching from the sidelines. "Alright, your turn."

He licked his lips nervously, glancing down at Nik and back up again. "Uh, I think I'll skip this one."

"Nope. Let's go."

He begrudgingly got in the ring. Nik slowly got to his feet, still holding his balls. He hobbled to the end of the ring and with some help from one of our soldiers, jumped down. The look he cut my way told me he was going to make me pay for that one.

I sparred for a bit with Dayton, teaching him how to move, how to strike, the correct way to curl his fingers into a fist so he didn't break his hand. He was showing improvement. He was a quick learner. His aim with a gun was still shit, but overall he was doing better. Whether he could apply these skills into a life or death situation, I wasn't sure yet.

Once it started getting dark outside, I let him go.

"Alright, we're done for the day. Go get some rest."

He was panting heavily, sweat dripping from his face and drenching his shirt. He nodded thankfully and limped to the edge of the ring. He looked back at me. "Want to watch some more TV later?" There was such vulnerability in that one question, it actually made me feel a little bad for the kid.

"Sure."

He smiled. It was a real smile, one I hadn't seen from him since he'd been here. "Cool." He jumped down from the ring, grabbed his water bottle and towel and left.

Drea came over, staring at me intently. "You like him," she said affectionately. "He's not your brother. The two of you look nothing alike. Who is he?"

"A pain in my ass," I huffed, stretching my arms over my head. "Ready to go back?" I asked, ignoring what she'd said. Truth was, I did like him. He was a cool kid once you got past all the angst and resentment wafting off him.

Drea bit her lip, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I was thinking something a little different, actually."

I arched an eyebrow as she climbed into the ring, standing toe-to-toe with me. "And what would that be?"

She didn't answer, just took a step back and put her hands up.

Excitement rose up within me like a tide. She wanted to spar. "Are you sure about this, *malyshka*?" I asked, my voice deepening.

She darted forward and struck me in the face. My head whipped to the side, pain exploding across my jaw. She ran back out of my reach, quick as a cat, bouncing lightly on her feet as a playful smirk curled on her lips.

I ran my tongue over my bottom lip, rubbing my jaw. "Alright then." I cracked my neck from side to side, bringing my hands up.

Drea blew me a kiss and lunged. She was *quick*, so quick. And careful. She lashed out at me with swift, sharp blows, always managing to slip away

from me before I had the chance to retaliate.

I swung a right hook and she dodged it easily. She hit me in the kidney and I grunted at the pain that shot through my body. She darted away, putting space between us.

Drea knew her strengths and her weaknesses. She knew she had to keep her distance because she didn't have the physical size to beat me.

I wasn't sure how long we went for, Drea darting in and out, her strikes quick and precise as she literally danced around me, inflicting blow after blow.

She eventually huffed in annoyance, staring me down. "You're going easy."

I didn't deny it. I was. I didn't want to hurt her.

"Cut it out and fight me."

The determination in her eyes showed me she wanted a proper fight. She didn't *want* me to go easy on her.

Fine. I'd kick it up a notch.

I beckoned her forward with two fingers. She ran at me. I watched her closely and when she went to strike, I grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

Her eyes widened in shock.

I flipped her onto her back, wound my legs around her arm and pulled back. Drea cried out, flailing wildly. She tapped the ground twice and I let her go, rising to my feet.

She picked herself up, eyes narrowed into slits. "You've been holding back a lot."

I shrugged lazily. "Not a lot. Just...some."

"Well stop it! I want a proper fight."

"I outweigh you by 150 pounds, at least. It's not a fair fight."

"Did I say I wanted a fair one? No. Let's go." She ran at me again and I realised that I didn't need to hold back as much as I was.

Drea was skilled. Quick. Her blows held power, enough that they'd cause me bruises later. And she knew some fancy moves.

She kicked me in the face. I punched her in the shoulder. I grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back, and she swung her elbow into my eye. She kneed me in the stomach and I tackled her to the ground. We went hard at each other, striking and striking and striking.

I still pulled my punches a little, but I didn't hold back nearly as much as I did at the start. She had proved she could handle it. It would be an

insult to go so easy on someone as skilled as her.

My body ached. I could taste blood in my mouth. There was a small bruise forming on Drea's cheek. We were both a little worse for wear and yet, my smile mirrored hers as we circled each other inside the ring.

We were both having fun.

Drea did an impressive combo of kicks, forcing me back with each strike. I blocked, left, right, left, right. I grabbed her leg and kicked her other one out from underneath her, taking her down.

I flattened her with my body, panting hard, my heart pounding. Adrenaline and lust soared in my veins. Drea stared up at me, her chest rising and falling with quick, deep breaths, sweat rolling down the side of her face.

I couldn't hold back. I had to kiss her.

I smashed my lips to hers and groaned, her feel and taste driving me higher. Drea returned the kiss with as much passion, her teeth biting into my lips hard. She clawed at me, trying to rip my clothes off. I could feel eyes on us, my men still working out in the warehouse watching us, but I didn't care. Didn't care if they saw what was going on. Drea was mine, and I wasn't going to hide it.

God, I wanted her so bad.

I ripped my lips from hers and kissed across her cheek, palming her breasts roughly. Drea moaned, thrusting her chest out and pushing those full, plump tits further into my hands.

I latched my teeth onto her ear lobe and bit down lightly. "How fast can you run, *malyshka*?"

Chapter Twenty-Five



O h god. The sinful way he asked that question made my excitement soar. My heart was beating wildly in my chest, heat coursing through my body. I was so hot for him I was literally shaking.

“Fast,” I breathed out, grinding against him. Fighting with him had been the biggest turn on and now I was desperate for a release. To feel him inside me. Fucking me.

Aleksandr smirked down at me. “I want you to run,” he ran his tongue over my lips, tasting me. “Run hard and run fast, *malyshka*.”

He wanted to chase me. Fuck, the idea of that made my pussy throb. Wetness slicked down my legs and I clenched my thighs around his waist.

“Pick a safe word,” he rumbled.

“I don’t need a safe word.”

“You do with me. Pick one or we stop.”

Pleasure zinged through me as my clit rolled over the bulge in his pants. I was embarrassingly close already from his voice and the feel of him alone. It wouldn’t take much to push me over the edge. If I could just—

Aleksandr’s hands clamped down on my hips, stopping my movements. I growled in frustration.

“Bad, *malyshka*,” he chuckled. “You’re not getting off until I say so.”

“Aleksandr—”

“If you want to continue, pick a word.”

"Fine! How about 'asshole'? Is that a good enough one for you?" I snapped, my sexual frustration reaching an all time high.

He chuckled again. "Fine. If that's the one you want, so be it. Just remember it and use it if you need it. I won't be gentle." He touched his lips to mine lightly (which contradicted his words because it was a very soft and gentle kiss) before he pulled back and got to his feet, standing over me.

He pulled out his phone, firing off a message. To whom, I had no idea. He arched an eyebrow and looked at his watch. "Off you go. You've got a thirty second head start. It starts now."

I sprang to my feet and ran. You'd think I'd use this opportunity to escape, to get away. But somewhere over the last few days, my desire to escape had almost disappeared completely. There was no point in denying it anymore. I enjoyed spending time with him. Talking to him. Getting to know him. Kissing him.

I had an addictive personality, and I found myself getting addicted to Aleksandr very quickly.

So no, I didn't take advantage of the opportunity in front of me. Partly because I didn't *want* to escape, and partly because I didn't want to break the trust Aleksandr had put in me.

I cleared the space across the warehouse quickly and burst out the door. It was nighttime. The air was cold. Small, misty clouds appeared every time I breathed out. The sounds of cicadas echoed around me.

As I ran for the house, I looked over my shoulder. Aleksandr was standing in front of the warehouse, a truly dark and feral look in his eyes. He sprinted towards me.

My heart rate kicked up a notch and I ran harder. Two guards stood at the back door and it made me stumble. Would they think I was trying to escape? Would they try to stop me?

My own question was answered when they both simply looked away from me. Had Aleksandr somehow told them to leave me be?

It confused me, but I didn't have time to think about it right now. Aleksandr was gaining on me quickly. I had to move my ass.

I pulled open the glass sliding door and ran inside.

Fuck, I didn't know the layout to this place. I was in the kitchen. There was a room to the left and a room to the right, as well as a hallway. I remembered the hallway. It led towards the stairs. I rushed forward.

When I turned the corner at the end of the hallway, I ran smack into someone and fell flat on my ass.

“Ow,” I groaned. My whole body froze when I saw who was standing over me.

It wasn’t Aleksandr like I thought, but fuck, he looked exactly like him. He had the same hard jaw. The same symmetrical features. The same hypnotising blue eyes. But he was older, much older, with shades of silver mixed into his dark hair.

He arched an eyebrow, the move reminding me eerily of Aleksandr. “And which one of my sons do you belong to?”

Holy fucking shit. It was The Bratva Butcher. I swallowed nervously, slowly getting to my feet. “Aleksandr.” Was all I could breathe out. I’d told Aleksandr before I wasn’t scared of anything, but I realised now that was a bold-faced lie.

The man standing in front of me was the stuff of nightmares. The literal bogeyman. *He* scared me. You’d be an idiot not to be afraid of him. The stories I’d heard about him, about what he’d done...

He ran his eyes up and down my body, giving me a judgemental look. “He’d break a little thing like you in half.”

That snapped my spine straight. “He hasn’t yet,” I barked back, insulted.

Humour danced across his face. The sound of the back door slamming shut made me stiffen. Fuck. Aleksandr was going to catch me.

The Bratva Butcher stepped to the side, allowing me to pass. I eyed him suspiciously, taking a cautious step, then another, then another. He didn’t move. Just kept his gaze locked on me as I slowly backed away, studying me intently.

I bolted around the corner, breathing a huge sigh of relief. The man freaked me the fuck out. I was about to run when Aleksandr’s voice made me pause.

“Father.” I peeked around the corner, watching. Aleksandr’s eyes darted left and right, looking for me, filled with unease. “I...didn’t know you were back.”

The Bratva Butcher smirked. “No, I suspect not.”

“Have you...uh...seen anyone?”

He tutted. “Now son, that would be cheating.” He began walking down the hall. “I’ll be in my office. Try not to break anything.”

Aleksandr watched him leave and then swivelled back around. His eyes locked on me. I yanked my head back. Shit.

I'd barely made it a step before he came barrelling into the room. He gave me a purely dark and evil smile. "There you are."

My heart slammed into my chest as he tracked me like a predator, his eyes never leaving mine.

"I see you met my father."

"Yes, lovely man," I said sarcastically. I judged the distance between him and the next room. I could make it.

"Most people wouldn't describe him as such."

"Can't really blame 'em." I backed into a table, the objects on it clattering. They looked like little knick knacks. I picked one up and lobbed it at him.

Aleksandr dove to the side and I bolted for the next room. He was hot on my heels as I ran for the stairs, taking them two at a time. He had longer legs, so it didn't take him long to catch up.

His hands gripped my hips and I spun on him with a spinning back fist. His head whipped to the side and he lost his grip. I quickly ran up the rest of the stairs and smirked down at him.

He turned back to face me, blood coating his teeth.

"Maybe *I* should have given you a safe word," I said tauntingly, waggling my fingers at him, and then I took off again.

A growl hit the air. Heavy footsteps followed.

I didn't know where I was going. This place was huge, but I just kept running up to the third floor. I ran right at the top of the stairs, picked a random room and went inside, quietly shutting the door behind me.

It was dark. I couldn't see a damn thing. I went over to the curtain and opened it slightly, using the moonlight to help me see. It was a carbon copy of the room I was staying in. More than likely another spare bedroom.

The door creaked open and I ducked, hiding behind the two-seater couch. Aleksandr's large frame walked into view.

"Run, run, run as fast as you can," he sang, creeping forward.

I couldn't hear a single step he took. He moved as quietly as a mouse. If it wasn't for the fact that I'd seen him come in, I'd have no idea he was even in the room.

Aleksandr crouched to check under the bed.

I snuck out from behind the couch and kicked him in the back, yelling, “You can’t catch me, I’m the gingerbread man!”

He grunted and barked out a curse in Russian when his head dunked on the floor. I spun, preparing to run again, but Aleksandr was done playing games. He kicked his legs out, causing me to trip and fall face down on the ground.

I felt the delicious, heavy weight of his body next, pinning me down, and a shudder ran through me.

“You made me work for it, *malyshka*,” he rumbled in my ear, his breath hot on my skin. “And I’m going to reward you for it.”

My whole body hummed with excitement. Rough hands clutched the back of my shirt and a *ripppp* cut through the air.

Oh God. He’d just torn the shirt right from my body like it was nothing.

I pushed my ass into the air, craving his touch.

“Look at you,” he chuckled tauntingly. “All needy and desperate. I like you desperate.”

He kissed his way down my back, biting into my skin. They weren’t soft bites, they were hard ones. Ones that no doubt left indentations of his teeth on my flesh.

“Fuck, I just want to mark you,” he groaned, a chunk of my skin clutched between his teeth. “I want to brand you so everyone knows who you belong to.”

“That didn’t work out so well for me last time,” I breathed out, barely paying attention. I was far too focused on his hands slowly creeping down to the waistband of my pants.

I felt his whole body go rigid above me. A dark, angry growl ripped from his mouth. “You have another man’s name on your body?”

I shrieked in surprise when I was all of a sudden weightless. Aleksandr picked me up like I was a sack of potatoes and turned me around, slamming my back to the ground.

“Where?” he snarled, searching me frantically. “Where is it?”

Should I like the way he was manhandling me right now? Twisting me this way and that way as he examined every inch of my skin closely?

No, I shouldn’t.

But you know me well enough by now to know I did.

Oh fuck, I did.

“Alright, alright, calm down.” I slapped his hands away and pushed at his chest. He let me up and I got to my feet.

Aleksandr was still on his knees, so it put my pussy right at his eye level. Which was perfect, because that was exactly where the name was.

I had a feeling he wasn’t going to like what he saw but hey, he was the one demanding to see it.

I unbuttoned my pants and pulled them down, kicking them away.

His eyes flared as they locked onto my pussy, hunger in his gaze.

I began to trace the name through the vine-like pattern of my tattoo. It was written in an abstract kind of way, making it very difficult to read (or even notice) unless you knew it was there.

Deep lines of concentration marred Aleksandr’s face as he followed my finger with his eyes. “Who the fuck is Logan?”

Logan was an asshole of a man. He was the one who had done the majority of my tats. He was also a frequent bed buddy who thought it would be funny to put his name on my pussy.

“He’s nobody,” I answered.

“He’s obviously somebody if you let him get his fucking name tattooed on your pussy,” he snapped angrily.

I narrowed my eyes and gripped him by the ear, yanking him towards me sharply. He winced. “Don’t talk to me like that,” I growled, baring my teeth. “And I didn’t *let* him do anything. Fucker did it without asking. Now, you said I’d be rewarded for making you work for it. Do you plan to deliver on that, or are you just full of shit?”

He narrowed his eyes right back at me. He reached up and wrapped his much larger hand around mine, prying my fingers apart, making me let go of his ear.

My pussy throbbed as he slowly got to his feet, staring down at me with this dangerous, wild look in his eyes.

I glared at him and that only seemed to turn him on more.

He picked me up in a running tackle and slammed me up against the wall. I sucked in a breath, shock and a little bit of pain shooting through me. He faltered, guilt flashing across his face. He didn’t mean to be so rough, and now he felt bad. He started lowering me back to the ground.

I grabbed a fistful of his hair roughly and he hissed, his eyes flaring. “Don’t you dare fucking stop.” I smashed my lips to his in a brutal, violent kiss, one that made us both groan.

We attacked each other ruthlessly. Biting. Scratching. Grinding. Aleksandr still had his clothes on and the friction it created against my bare skin, against my hardened, pierced nipples was exquisite.

I could barely catch my breath as he kissed me harder and harder, demanding more from me. Every time I'd turn my head to suck air into my lungs, he'd grab my jaw and force my lips back to his, like he couldn't get enough of me.

His hands gripped me tight enough to leave bruises and I moaned, swivelling my hips, grinding my pussy against his stomach.

“You’re fucking perfect.” His voice was thick and raw, laced with arousal. “My perfect little fuck toy.” He snatched both my hands up and pinned them above my head with one of his. He fished a condom out of his pocket with his free hand and held it between his teeth as he hurriedly pulled his cock out.

I rubbed myself against him, my desperation soaring. I was aching so bad for him, for his cock to fill me. My whole body was burning. I felt like I was on fire.

He ripped the condom open and sheathed his cock quickly. Anticipation exploded inside me.

Yes. Finally.

He lined himself up and thrust deep, a purely masculine groan rumbling out of him, full of satisfaction. I screamed at the invasion, bucking against him. Fuck, he was big. He stretched my pussy wide with his girth, the pressure painful and pleasurable all at the same time.

“You’re tight,” he grunted, sinking deeper. “I knew you would be, but *blyad’*.” My tits bounced as he thrust hard, drawing his attention. He closed his mouth over my nipple and sucked. I moaned, arching my back.

God, it felt so good. *He* felt so good.

He never lost momentum, fucking me like some wild beast. He drew his hips back until the tip of his cock was sitting at my entrance and then slammed back into me. Withdrew and slammed. Withdrew and slammed. Over and over again.

The wall at my back shook from his brutal fucking.

“This pussy, fucking hell. I’d kill for this pussy.” He gripped my jaw roughly, forcing me to look at him. “You hear me, *malyshka*? I’ll gut any man that tries to have what’s mine.”

My pussy clenched, pleasure spiralling down my spine. He groaned, burying his head into my shoulder. His teeth dug into my skin as he held me in place, forcing me to take everything he was giving me.

I strained against him, meeting him thrust for thrust, chanting his name. He was everywhere, surrounding me, consuming me.

“You’re going to cum, aren’t you? I can feel it. Feel your pussy getting tighter and tighter. Squeezing me.” He let go of my hands and gripped my ass painfully, driving into me as he yanked me down onto his cock.

“So good, oh fuck, Aleksandr. You feel so good. Don’t stop. Don’t stop.” I clutched him tightly, grasping the wide breadth of his shoulders, relishing the strength he possessed.

“I’ll never fucking stop. You’re mine. I’m never letting you go.”

His words ignited the fire that had been burning inside me and I came hard, white-hot pleasure blasting through me. My inner walls clutched his cock and his eyes flashed. His fist smacked hard against the wall next to my head as a deep, Russian curse flew from his mouth. His thrusts turned wild. In and out. In and out.

His head flew back and he roared out his pleasure.

Chapter Twenty-Six



I stood at my father's side in his office, feet planted firmly on the ground and hands behind my back. I stared across the room as my grandfather walked through the doorway, flanked by two hulking figures dressed in dark clothing.

Despite being in his late seventies, Sergei Volkov was in excellent shape. 6'3, with hard, broad shoulders and short, grey-white hair. Even though we were in the middle of a brutal heat wave right now, he was still wearing his long, heavy fur coat, his hand curled around an antique bear walking stick that doubled as a sharply pointed sword.

It had been years since I'd seen the man, yet he looked exactly the same. Harsh. Focused. Brutal. His face was littered with scars, ranging from small little nicks to a massive slash across his cheek. He didn't have any tattoos. He was the type that found them pointless. But, the scars on his body *were* his tattoos. They told the story of the harsh life he'd lived, of how many people had tried to take him out and failed.

My last trip to Russia had been pleasant enough, the only memorable thing to happen being the threesome I had in the club before I left.

It was a business trip that ended in pleasure. We needed to pick up a shipment of guns and my father sent me to collect, preferring not to go himself.

My father's relationship with Sergei was strained at best. They only communicated when absolutely necessary, mainly in regards to shipments

or stock, if we needed more guns or Sergei wanted confirmation on a big order.

Sergei looked around the office with his nose in the air, distaste evident on his wrinkled face. He was an old man set in his ways. Tradition was hardwired into his DNA. I could tell from the way his eyes swept across the room that he hated how Americanised it was., the lack of Russian culture.

My mother was the one to decorate the house, and since her death my father hadn't changed a thing. If something broke, he fixed it. If one of the rugs got stained with food or blood, he got it professionally dry cleaned. Our whole house was a shrine to my mother. Keeping everything exactly the way it was before she died was my father's way of preserving what he could of her. He still had all her personal belongings. All her clothes were hanging in the closet of the room they'd shared. He hadn't gotten rid of a thing.

Father got to his feet, buttoning up his suit jacket. He stepped around his desk and walked towards Sergei. “*Otets, dobro pozhalovat'. Nadeyus', u vas byl priyatnyy polet.*” *Father, welcome. I trust you had a pleasant flight.* He stopped in front of him and bowed his head slightly in a show of respect.

Sergei grunted in displeasure. “*Priyatno bylo by voobshche ne byt' zdes'.*” *Pleasant would be not being here at all.* His crystal blue eyes cut to me. “*Aleksandr, idi syuda i pozdorovaysya s dedushkoy. Ili ty poteryal vse svoi manery?*” *Aleksandr, get over here and say hello to your grandfather. Or have you lost all your manners?*

Father's jaw clenched in frustration at Sergei's blatant dismissal of him.

I waited. Sergei may be my grandfather, but my first loyalty was to my father. *He* was the one I took orders from.

I didn't trust Sergei. Not really. He was a brilliant man. Smart, strong. But he was also conniving. The only thing he cared about was the family name, not our family itself. If he thought for one second you were in jeopardy of tarnishing that family name, he'd end you without a moment's hesitation. Even if you were his own flesh and blood.

Father glanced over his shoulder, locking eyes with me. He gave the slightest tilt of his head.

I moved out from behind the desk and walked over to them.

Sergei's guards watched me closely. Too closely. It looked like Grandfather didn't trust me either.

Sergei slapped me on the shoulder, pulling me in. “*Akh, moy mal’chik. Posmotri na sebya. Ty stanovish’sya bol’she kazhdyy raz, kogda ya tebya vizhu,*” Ah, my boy. Look at you. You get bigger every time I see you.

I begrudgingly accepted his affections. Sergei had said on numerous occasions I was his favourite. It had nothing to do with me as a person. For some reason I reminded him of himself, and that was the *only* reason he favoured me over the others. Even his own son.

“*Zdravstvuy, dedushka.*” Hello, Grandfather. I stepped out of his embrace, moving back to my father’s side. “*Ty khoroshо vyglyadish’.*” You look well.

“*Kak i ty, moy mal’chik. Kak i ty.*” As do you, my boy. As do you. Sergei’s look of pride didn’t sit well with me. Like he was somehow responsible for me, for the man I’d become.

Everything I was, everything I am, I owe to my father. Not this man who didn’t even know when my birthday was.

I followed Father as he made his way behind his desk, taking a seat in his chair. “*Priznayus’, ya udivlen videt’ vas zdes’, otets. Chto privelo vas v takoi put’?*” I’ll admit, I’m surprised to see you here, Father. What brings you all this way?

Sergei eyed the desk, looking for anything amiss. Anything to nitpick and lecture my father about. But there was nothing. It was the cleanest I’d ever seen it before. Not a single thing out of place, no papers overflowing the mahogany surface, not one speck of dust. Just a closed notebook, some pens and a black photo frame with an old family photo in it.

In preparation of Sergei’s arrival, Father had made sure there was *nothing* he could possibly use as ammunition against him. He’d made sure the house was spick and span, the repairs finished so Sergei wouldn’t ask questions about what happened (though the man likely knew already). You couldn’t hide a thing from Sergei. He had spies everywhere.

“*Uchityvaya, chto vy vydali moyu vnuchku zamuzh za ital’yantsev, vy ne dolzhny udivlyatsa. Osobенно, kogda ya skazal tebe, chto khochu vudalt’ jeje zamuzh za Tarasovykh,*” Considering you wed my granddaughter to the Italians, you shouldn’t be surprised. Especially when I specifically told you I wanted her married off to the Tarasovs.

My eyes sliced to Sergei.

He what?

The audacity of this man. The arrogance to think he had any right whatsoever to do something like that.

“And I told you I wouldn’t be selling my only daughter off like some bitch in heat,” Father snapped, his fists clenching on the desk. He was so angry he’d slipped back into English, and Sergei was furious about it.

Sergei understood English, could even speak it if he wished. He just refused to. He only spoke in Russian, and he expected all of us to do the same.

“To, chto vy khotite, neznachitel’no.” What you want is insignificant. Sergei narrowed his eyes in warning. *“YA dogovorilsya s Tarasovymi. V obmen na dostup k svoim marshrutam snabzheniya oni vyydut zamuzh za chlenov sem’i Volkovykh.” I made an arrangement with the Tarasovs. In exchange for access to their supply routes, they would marry into the Pakhan family.*

Father leaned back, careful not to let the smile he was holding back slip free. *“Chto zh, dumayu, ochen’ zhal’, chto ona uzhe zamuzhem, ne tak li?” Well, I guess it’s too bad she’s already married, isn’t it?*

If I didn’t know better, I would think Father planned the meet with the De Lucas to save Illayana from being married off to some guy in Russia. Could he have? Could he have orchestrated the whole thing in the hopes Illayana would choose Arturo?

I looked at the back of my father’s head. The man was cunning enough, that was for sure.

Sergei took a seat in one of the chairs opposite Father’s desk, laying his walking stick across his thighs. His guards stood behind him, one on the left side, one on the right. He smirked, his voice taking on a mocking tone as he said, *“Chto zh, ya dumayu, khorosho, chto u tebya troye sovershenno zdorovykh synovey, kotoryye mogut zanyat’ yeye mesto, ne tak li?” Well, I guess it’s a good thing you have three perfectly healthy sons who can take her place, isn’t it?*

I stiffened as Sergei’s eyes landed on me.

Father growled. *“YA skazal vam, kogda vy podnyali etot vopros, chto ya ne budu prinuzhdat’ svoikh detey k braku, kotorogo oni ne khotyat.” I told you when you brought up this issue that I will not force my children into a marriage they do not want.*

Sergei arched a condescending brow. *“Eto srabotalo khorosho dlya vas, ne tak li?” It worked out well for you, did it not?*

I gripped Father's shoulder, squeezing it tightly to keep him from lashing out like I knew he wanted to.

My parents had an arranged marriage, and although it resulted in a loving union, originally it was something neither of them wanted. My mother wanted to pursue her love of dance. She'd been accepted into Juilliard and was packing up her life to move to New York when her father forced her into the marriage.

He threatened to break her legs if she put up a fight. To make it impossible for her to ever dance again, professionally or otherwise.

My father's only desire had been to become *Pakhan*. At eighteen, he didn't want a wife. But Sergei didn't give him a choice. If he didn't do as he was told, Sergei threatened to give the role of *Pakhan* to Dominik, and by that point the feud between them had reached boiling point. My father refused to allow Dominik to win, so he begrudgingly accepted.

They *hated* each other when they first met. Mother resented him for the marriage and Father found her hard-headed, smart mouthed and cold. All traits he came to love about her in the end.

There was a bedtime story they used to tell us when we were kids, about the time Mother had tried to strangle him in his sleep and as retaliation, Father threw her off the second story balcony into the pool.

They would tell the story together, using sound effects, imitating each other's voices, and it would end the same way every time, explaining that despite their harsh beginnings, they'd found love and comfort with one another.

Those moments were the closest I'd ever had to a normal childhood.

Father tapped my hand once, signalling he was in control of himself and I removed my hand, glaring daggers at Sergei. He'd had shit all to say about my mother over the years and yet here he was, using her as leverage to win an argument.

If it wouldn't get me killed, I'd strangle the fucker.

"*Nevazhno, kak eto poluchilos' u nas s Yekaterinoy. My poobeschchali drug drugu, chto nikogda ne budem prinuzhdat' nashikh detey k tomu, chto nam navyazali, nezavisimo ot iskhoda.*" It doesn't matter how it worked out between Yekaterina and I. We promised each other we would never force our children into what had been forced upon us, regardless of the outcome.

Sergei rolled his eyes with derision. "*Menya ne volnuyut obeshchaniya, kotoryye ty dal svoyey pokojnoy zhene. Vy budete vypolnyat' svoy dolg.*

Cherez polgoda odin iz vashikh synovей priyedet v Rossiju, chtoby zhenit'sya na Ane Tarasovoy. Konets obsuzhdenia,” I don't care about the promises you made to your dead wife. You will do your duty. In six months time, one of your sons will be in Russia to marry Anya Tarasov. End of discussion.

Father's anger was strong enough to stifle the air, as if all the oxygen was being burned out of the room. “*A yesli net?*” And if they're not? He gritted out.

“*Togda tebya zamenyat.*” Then you will be replaced.

Tense silence followed. Father placed his hands on the desk and pushed himself to a stand, leaning forward threateningly.

Sergei's guards reached for their guns, watching Father's every move, and I reached for mine, prepared to defend him.

I'll take out the one on the right first, I thought.

He seemed like the bigger threat.

Father's desk groaned under his weight as he brought himself to eye level with Sergei. “*Vpered, prodolzhat!*” Go ahead, he whispered menacingly.

Sergei narrowed his eyes. “*Proshu proshenia?*” Excuse me?

“You'd never allow anyone other than a Volkov to be *Pakhan*. You have no siblings. No other children, apart from Dominik and I, and we both know Dominik isn't fit to lead. He'd destroy everything we've built within a month.” Father had slipped back into English again, but I don't think that's what made Sergei so angry.

It was because every word he said was true.

Father continued. “So go ahead, Father. Have me replaced. See how fast your empire crumbles without me.”

Sergei's scowl grew, his jaw clenching and his eyes burning with anger. His guards looked anxiously at one another, their hands still hovering over their guns. He placed his walking stick back on the ground and stood, tilting his head to the side. “It would be a shame if something happened to that lovely granddaughter of mine, wouldn't it?”

Father tensed, his whole body going rigid. The fact that Sergei was now talking in English, something I'd never seen him do before, spoke of the gravity of the situation.

“I've heard New York is such a dangerous city. So many accidents happen on their streets. Just last week, there was a woman who'd been raped

and murdered in Central Park. Dreadful, absolutely dreadful.”

Father lunged and I just barely got my arms around him to hold him back before he did something that would get us all killed.

Sergei’s guards had their guns aimed at us in an instant. Sergei laughed as I wrestled to keep my father in my grasp.

“Like I said, in six months’ time one of your sons will be in Russia to marry Anya Tarasov. I don’t care which one, you can pick. But one of them *will* be there, or it won’t be you who suffers the consequences. my son.” A smug smile flashed across his wrinkled face as he took his seat once again. “Now why don’t you tell me all about what’s been going on around here? I’ve heard it’s been quite an eventful last few months.”

It took a few minutes to calm my father down. Sergei’s smug face didn’t help matters, but eventually he managed to reign in his anger and sit down. He kept the hateful glare on his face as he told Sergei about The Los Zetas and The Outfit. About The Dirty Vultures and the burning of our buildings.

I was worried that when he found out we weren’t any closer to figuring out who was responsible for that, he’d lose his mind. But he had been surprisingly understanding about it. About most of it, actually. He seemed to understand that when you were at the top, there were plenty of people who tried to take you down. He took it as a compliment.

After two hours of going through everything, the inventory list and placing an order for more supplies, Sergei left, hobbling back to his car and driving away.

“That fucking bastard!” Father roared the second the front door shut, punching the wall in the foyer. His fist went right through it, plaster crumbling around him. “How dare he!”

“Father, calm down.”

He spun to face me, his rage unlike anything I’d ever seen. “Don’t tell me to calm down, Aleksandr,” he spat. “You heard him! He threatened Illayana.”

“I know, I heard. Losing your temper and yelling like this isn’t going to solve the problem.” I knew what would, though. “I’ll do it.”

“Do what?” he barked out.

“I’ll marry the woman.”

Father stared at me, his chest rising and falling quickly with each breath he took. The anger he was feeling slipped away, replaced with sadness. “No, Aleksandr—”

"There's no point arguing with me," I said, raising a palm in the air. "I've decided, and there'll be no changing my mind."

I was the only one who *could* do it. Nikolai was in love with Tatiana, as much as he'd try to deny it. Even though there was only the slightest chance of them working things out, I wanted him to be free to do so. To get what he wanted. What he deserved.

Lukyan was...well...Lukyan. Something this important couldn't be left to him. I loved my little brother, but he couldn't be trusted with a delicate situation like this. He didn't do well when given no options, when forced and backed into a corner. The last thing I needed was him backing out at the last second, risking Illayana's life. Grandfather would go through with his threat without a second thought.

Father looked as though he was still planning to fight me, indecision flashing over his face. "Aleksandr—"

"Why didn't you tell me about what Grandfather had planned? About his plans to marry Illayana to the Tarasovs?" I asked, hoping to distract him from fighting me on the issue.

He huffed, walking towards the kitchen. I followed. "What would have been the point?" He opened the fridge, grabbing two bottles of water. He handed one to me. "Sergei had dictated it, expecting his order to be followed."

"And you didn't tell Illayana either?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. He opened the water and took a drink. "I knew if I told her, she'd do it. Not because she wanted to, but because she knew what would happen if Sergei's orders weren't followed. She'd do it for me."

I nodded in understanding. Illayana would have done exactly that.

I opened my water, taking a sip before placing it on the kitchen counter. "Did you arrange the meet with the Cosa Nostra?" When he called us into his office that day, he told us Alessandro's son, Vincenzo, had been the one to reach out. Was that true?

Father's eyes flicked to me. "I didn't," he replied hesitantly. "However, I did take advantage of the situation."

His words to my sister that day flitted through my head.

"There's a chance a marriage proposal could be offered."

"I would never force you to marry."

"The choice in the end is yours, Illayana. Always."

“You hoped she would fall for one of the De Lucas,” I stated.

Father nodded, taking another drink. “I knew they would be better suited for her than whoever Sergei picked out. I don’t know much about the Tarasov family, but I do know they’re a bunch of brutes. I couldn’t let her marry one of them. Marry into that family.”

But now I was.

I wasn’t afraid. No matter how brutish the men in their family were, I wasn’t scared of them. If they got in my way, I’d kill them.

What scared me the most was the fact that once I married this Anya Tarasov, I would more than likely never see Drea again.

Once that thought wormed its way into my head, a tidal wave of anger consumed me.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven



“What are you doing, Emily?! Tell him you love him! Tell him!!” I screamed at the TV as Emily Cooper let the door shut, not telling Gabriel—the man she loved—she had feelings for him.

I never considered myself a lazy person, but since being locked up here I’d found that if the situation called for it, I could be lazy. So lazy, in fact, that I’d managed to binge watch the first two seasons of *Emily in Paris* on Netflix.

I was just as confined here in this house as I was down in that torture chamber. At least here, I had a comfy bed and a flatscreen TV. That kind of made up for it.

After Aleksandr left last night, I’d fallen straight to sleep, emotionally and mentally drained. I hadn’t planned on fucking him, or spilling my entire life story to him, but Aleksandr had a way of pulling things out of you. And after his own declarations, it’s not like I could deny him answers. Not after he’d been so forthcoming. After he’d told me what happened to his mother.

His poor, poor mother.

I’d thought numerous times about what it would feel like, if the situation were reversed and it had been *my* mother who’d been raped and tortured.

I couldn’t stand it. Not even the thought of it.

I had no idea how Aleksandr was even walking around with all that guilt and anguish. Even though it wasn’t his fault.

It just showed what a strong man he was, to be able to put all that away and continue on.

I hoped, after talking with me, he understood that it really wasn't his fault. That he shouldn't blame himself. I wanted to relieve him of all the pain he was feeling, all that guilt he was carrying around. If I could, I would take it for him, so he didn't have to live with it anymore.

Any thoughts of escape vanished with that one conversation. He'd not only shown me his vulnerability, but he'd made it crystal clear he planned to release me, that he wasn't going to hurt me. By letting me call Juan and arranging a sit down, he'd proven that he was hoping to part amicably. That he didn't want a war between the cartel and the Bratva.

Which was a good thing for us, because I didn't think we could survive a war against them. They were too well organised. The number of men I'd seen patrolling this place alone showed me how outmanned we were.

I didn't know what they'd ask for in exchange for my release. All I could hope for was that it was something we could give them.

I picked up the remote and pushed play on the next episode of *Emily in Paris*, much more invested in this show than I should be. I reached for the half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich somewhere on the bed next to me without taking my eyes off the screen, taking a bite out of it.

When the old woman who brought me food gave me this earlier, I almost couldn't believe it. I mentioned once to Aleksandr that I love grilled cheese sandwiches and next thing I know, I have an entire plate heaped with them.

The man knew the way to a woman's heart, that's for sure.

I snuggled further into the bed, watching the TV while munching on my food when the door suddenly burst open. Aleksandr strode in, startling me. I fumbled for the remote, bouncing it from one hand to the other as I quickly tried to turn off the TV.

There was nothing wrong with watching rom-coms. I just didn't want Aleksandr to know I'd wasted a solid twelve hours doing nothing but watching this show.

But he wasn't looking at me. He was pacing up and down, anger prominent in every thump of his booted feet hitting the floor. He muttered to himself in Russian, waves of fury flowing from him, his muscles bunching, his hands clenching into tightly balled fists.

I frowned, pushing the blankets off and slowly getting to my feet.
“Aleksandr?”

He didn’t acknowledge me, just marched from one end of the room to the other, lost in his own thoughts.

I approached him like I would a skittish animal in the wild.
“Aleksandr?” I tried again.

“*Glupyy, staryy ublyudok. Kak on posmel.*” He continued to speak in Russian, making it difficult for me to understand him.

“What’s happened? What’s the matter?”

“He just thinks he can come in here and order us around. Who the fuck does he think he is?”

My frown deepened. “Who? Who are you talking about?”

“*Moy dedushka.*”

I took a step closer. “I’m gonna need you to switch it back to English, Big Guy. I can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

His eyes finally landed on me, full of fury. “My grandfather. He’s here, from Russia.”

“Okay?” Usually, a visit from your grandparents was a good thing, but the way Aleksandr said it made me think it was the opposite.

“You know he tried to sell my sister? Like a piece of meat at the market. He made a deal with another Russian family. Her hand in marriage for access to their supply routes.” He shook his head, his voice shaking with agitation. “We haven’t seen the man in *years* and yet, here he is, trying to tell us what to do.”

I tried to keep up with him. “I thought your sister was already married? To that Italian guy? Artis?”

“Arturo. She is. My father orchestrated it to keep her out of the Tarasovs’ hands. And my grandfather is *pissed*.” Aleksandr resumed his pacing. If he didn’t stop soon, he was going to wear a hole in the floor.

“Here, come sit down.” I took a seat on the edge of the bed and pointed to the ground in front of me.

He obeyed (which just went to show how out of it he was). He sat down, leaning his back against the bed, legs bent and arms resting on his knees.

I gripped his shoulders, pushing my fingers into his skin, massaging his tense muscles.

Aleksandr groaned, his head rolling forward. “Fuck. That feels good.”

I smirked, running my hands down his back and up again, applying pressure here and there. “So, your grandfather is mad because he didn’t get to marry your sister off like he wanted to?”

I’ll admit, I had a hard time understanding the whole arranged marriage thing. The cartel didn’t operate that way. We married for love. At least, my parents did. It wasn’t used as some sort of bargaining chip or to form alliances. I’d noticed the mafia was big on it though.

“Mad would be an understatement.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” I asked, pushing my fingers deeper and deeper, relishing in the low moans falling from his lips.

“Yes. An angry Sergei Volkov is something to be very, *very* wary of.”

I moved my fingers to his hair, running my nails over his scalp. He groaned again, relaxing a tiny bit.

Some of the anger had faded but he was still tense, still boiling with frustration.

I realised a simple massage wouldn’t relieve him of all that anxiety and fury. Whatever was going on in that head of his was too much. He needed something more. A bigger distraction.

“Hey, can I take you somewhere?”

He looked over his shoulder, frowning at me. “Take me somewhere?”

“Yeah. Just this little place I’d go to any time I needed to work out some of my anger.”

He eyed me suspiciously, looking for some ulterior motive.

Honestly, I couldn’t even really blame him for that. I’d hesitate too if our roles were reversed. But I wasn’t trying to escape. I wasn’t using this as some sort of ploy to bolt the second he turned his back.

I genuinely thought this would help him.

“I promise, I won’t try anything. I won’t run. I won’t fight. I won’t cause a scene or draw attention. I just want to take you somewhere I think might help you deal with all that anger, like it did for me.” Because no matter how long I massaged him for, I knew it wouldn’t get rid of all that tension.

His piercing blue eyes ran over every inch of my face, studying me intently. After a few silent seconds he exhaled heavily, shaking his head in disbelief, like he almost couldn’t believe what he was about to do.

“Where do you want to go?”

I smiled brightly, jumping to my feet. “It’s a surprise. I need your phone first.” He didn’t hesitate, pulling it out of his pocket and handing it to me. I quickly searched up locations and then gave it back. “Come on, come on.” I grabbed his arm and tried to pull him up, with no luck. “Jesus, how much do you weigh?” I grunted in effort, leaning back, trying to use a combination of my body weight and gravity to move him. It still didn’t work.

Aleksandr chuckled softly, pushing himself to a stand. “Enough.” He steadied me when I stumbled, his big hand wrapping around my shoulder.

“You big lug.” I tried the door handle, but it was locked. “What the?”

Aleksandr brushed his chest against my back as he stood behind me. I shivered at his closeness. He reached around me and knocked on the door twice.

It opened, a burly looking man with dark hair standing in the hallway. I glanced over my shoulder, arching an eyebrow.

Aleksandr simply shrugged. “Can never be too careful around someone like you.”

“Someone like me?”

“Devious. Sneaky. Vicious.”

I placed a hand on my heart. “Aw, that’s probably the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me before. You big softy.”

He rolled his eyes.

I turned back around. “Hiya.” I smiled, waving a hand at the man still blocking the doorway.

The man reached for his gun.

“It’s fine, Czar.” Aleksandr placed a hand on the small of my back, ushering me forward. “Let’s go.”

“Bye Czar.” I hoped I pronounced his name right. It was a tough one.

Czar glared at me before stepping to the side, allowing me to pass.

“Such a lovely bunch of people you’ve got working here. Truly lovely,” I commented, skipping ahead.

One of the doors to my left opened and a skinny kid wearing a backwards cap walked out, almost colliding with me. I’d never spoken to him but I’d seen him before, out training in the yard with Aleksandr in the mornings, and in that home-gym warehouse thingy.

“Whoa. Watch it, Short Stuff.”

His face was all banged up, like he'd just been in one hell of a fight recently, a spattering of bruises marring his light skin.

"Come on, let's go." Aleksandr tried to push me along, but I resisted.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Dayton," the kid grumbled.

"I'm Drea."

"Okay." He gave me a confused look, like he wasn't sure why I was talking to him or telling him my name.

I wasn't sure either, to be honest. He just had this 'lost puppy' kind of vibe. Where I got that from, I had no idea. Maybe it was the eyes. They were just so...sad. Filled with pain and sorrow, like life had pushed him to the ground and kicked him in the balls.

"Hey, you wanna come with us?"

Dayton frowned. "What?"

"We're going somewhere that I think might help Big Guy over here deal with his anger issues," I said, hiking a thumb over my shoulder at Aleksandr.

Scoffing, Dayton mumbled under his breath, "Don't think that's possible" at the same time Aleksandr grunted, "I don't have anger issues."

I patted Aleksandr on the chest in a soothing yet slightly condescending way. "It's okay. We all have our flaws. I myself have a bit of a problem controlling my anger too."

"No, really?" he drawled, rolling his eyes. "I never would have guessed."

"Shush you." I pushed him lightly and he chuckled.

Dayton's eyes darted between the two of us, brows lowered in a frown.

"Anyway, you wanna come? It'll be fun, I promise."

"What kind of fun? My kind of fun or *his* kind of fun?" Dayton asked, eyes narrowing at Aleksandr with an accusatory glint.

"I'm not sure what the difference is between the two, but it's the 'smashing shit up' kind."

"Damn," Dayton blew out. "That does sound fun. Alright, count me in."

"Sweet!" I grabbed Aleksandr's hand, dragging him along. "Let's go."



I swung the sledgehammer into the flatscreen TV, bits of glass and plastic raining down around me as I hollered out an Amazonian war cry.

Around me, Aleksandr and Dayton were immersed in the same kind of destruction, beating the shit out of electronics and smashing glass crockery and bottles.

The Rage Smash Room was a place specifically designed to help people vent their anger and frustrations by destroying an array of different items in a safe, controlled environment. For only \$79, you got one hour and all the shit you could smash before the clock ran out. TVs, microwaves, printers. You name it, they had it.

It was the perfect outlet. The perfect way to release that pent-up energy, de-stress and have a shitload of fun.

My therapist was the one to suggest it to help with my anger issues. Instead of smashing car windscreens with a crowbar and getting arrested, I would smash broken TVs and appliances with a sledgehammer.

Much, much healthier.

The amount of money I'd spent in this place over the years was ridiculous. I'd come here every time I needed to work through my anger (pretty much once a week, if I was being honest with myself).

After my dad died, this place became like a second home to me. I was *so angry*. Angry at my dad. At myself. At the world. At just...everything really.

I had no reservation about the type of man my dad was. He'd killed people. Tortured them. Sold a shitload of drugs on the streets of Columbus. Drugs that were more than likely responsible for fucking up a lot of peoples' lives.

He wasn't a bad man, but he wasn't necessarily a good man either.

No matter what he'd done though, he didn't deserve to go out the way he did. Crippled. Lying in a bed, unable to move. Overwhelmed with pain.

I remember thinking how unfair it was for something like this to happen to him. However illogical it was, I'd been so angry at the cancer itself. Like it was a living, breathing being I could get mad at.

The Rage Smash Room was my safe haven. Maybe it could be Aleksandr's too.

I adjusted the safety goggles on my face, watching Aleksandr drive his sledgehammer into the refrigerator, denting it inwards.

He had on the same protective gear I did; coveralls, gloves, boots and safety goggles.

Once all three of us had suited up, Aleksandr paid the owner \$2,000 to disappear and let us have the place to ourselves for the hour. The owner was more than happy to oblige, snatching up the money and running out the door before Aleksandr had even finished talking.

Aleksandr pummelled the fridge over and over again, the muscles in his back and arms bulging, threatening to tear through his coveralls.

The sound was relentless.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

The door to the fridge crumbled under his strength, bending inwards, the hinges creaking.

At his side, Dayton was throwing glass plates at the wall like frisbees, whooping and cheering each time they shattered to pieces. Every now and then, he'd turn to Aleksandr and call out to him, giving him only a few seconds of preparation before lobbing one of the plates at him.

Aleksandr would swing his sledgehammer like a baseball bat, smashing it into the plate and sending pieces of glass hurtling into the air before going right back to whatever he was beating the shit out of.

Once he was all out of ammunition, Dayton turned to me, a huge beaming smile on his face.

The metal head of my sledgehammer clunked to the ground as I put it down. I lifted the goggles off my face, resting them on top of my head.

“Was I right, or was I right?”

Dayton laughed, slightly out of breath. “Yeah, you were right. I’ll give it to ya, you know how to have fun. I had no idea places like this even existed.”

“There’s a bunch all over. Just gotta know where to find ‘em.”

“Do they have a membership? Because I have a feeling I’m going to become a frequent customer.”

“Yeah, they do actually. Comes with a card with discounts and everything. We’ll get you signed up before we leave,” I winked.

Aleksandr moved onto the next appliance. And the next and the next. He worked his way around the room, smashing everything in sight until there was nothing left.

I looked at the clock high up on the wall. We still had twenty minutes to go.

“Why don’t you go grab something to eat?” I tugged the gloves off my hands, chucking them to the floor amongst the rubble.

There was a small café attached to the building for people to get food after they’d finished releasing their inner demons. ‘Cause you know, bashing the shit out of stuff really worked up an appetite.

Dayton pulled his goggles down to rest around his neck. He glanced at Aleksandr uncertainly, who was back to pummelling the fridge again even though there was barely anything left of it but a crumpled metal heap.

“It’s alright. I’ve got him.”

Dayton still hesitated. “What if he gets pissed that I left?”

I shrugged, unconcerned. “If he gets pissed, he gets pissed. It’s no big deal.”

“You’re not—” his eyes flicked to Aleksandr and back and he lowered his voice, “—scared of him?”

I don’t know why he all of a sudden decided to whisper. Aleksandr wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to us. He was completely focused on the task in front of him, decimating one item at a time.

He was a man of pure focus, and right now all that focus was on hitting shit as hard as he could.

“No, Dayton,” I chuckled, shaking my head lightly. “I’m not scared of him.”

Don’t get me wrong, Aleksandr was a scary dude. It was a combination of his size, the harsh lines of his face and that dangerous, ruthless aura he exuded that made people back away from him on the streets.

But I wasn’t scared of him. I saw past all that shit, all the walls he put up, and saw him for what he was. A loyal, protective (albeit violent) man who would do anything for those he loved.

Dayton studied me closely. “Jesus Christ. You’re just as crazy as he is, aren’t you?”

I smiled widely. “No, I’m crazier.”

He unzipped his coveralls and stepped out of them. After removing the rest of his gear and placing it in a pile, he made his way to the exit door. He placed his hand on the doorknob, glancing over his shoulder at me. “Are you the 100 girl?”

I frowned. “The what?”

“He said someone told him to watch *The 100*. I was just wondering if it was you.”

A light feeling spread out over my chest. “Did he watch it?”

“Almost the whole first season.”

Down, girl. Don’t go getting all swoony.

When I’d told him to watch it, I didn’t think he’d actually do it. A tiny sense of accomplishment fluttered through me.

I’d managed to get Aleksandr Volkov to do something. Who would have thought such a thing would be possible?

“So? Is it you?” Dayton asked, staring at me.

“Maybe,” I winked. “Go on.”

He looked between Aleksandr and I one more time before turning around and leaving, shutting the door behind him.

I took off the rest of my gear as Aleksandr finally put down his sledgehammer. His chest rose and fell with hard, deep breaths, sweat dripping down his forehead like he’d just run a 10k marathon. He took off his safety goggles, tossing them over his shoulder. He wiped the sweat away with the back of his hand while he lowered the zip of his coveralls with the other, stepping out of them.

He looked at me, lips tilted up in an honest-to-God smile.

My breath hitched. Aleksandr was gorgeous. No doubt about it. He had that sexy, smouldering thing going on. It totally worked for him.

But when he smiled? A real, light, carefree smile like that? It made my heart stop.

“Feel better?” I asked, happiness creeping into my soul. Seeing him happy made me happy. His smile was contagious.

“Much,” he exhaled, eyes closing briefly. “Is this place somewhere you’d come often?”

“Often...all the time...same thing, really,” I shrugged. “It helped me get through some pretty tough moments in my life.”

He nodded in understanding. “Your dads’ death.”

“Was definitely one of them, yes.”

His head tilted to the side. “What are the others?”

I huffed out a laugh, looking up at the clock. “We don’t have nearly enough time left in this room to start *that* conversation. Besides, it’s *your* turn to talk, and don’t pretend like you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

He rolled his eyes and headed for the table and chairs over in the far corner of the room. The numerous signs posted around it made it clear it wasn't a part of the furniture to be smashed. It was merely a place for people to sit down and take a breather if they needed it.

"I thought all of this—" he waved a hand through the air as he took a seat, "—was so I didn't *have* to talk about it."

"No, this was to help take the edge off, like weed. You still gotta talk about it." I sat down beside him and nudged his shoulder with mine. "Come on. Out with it."

He released a heavy breath. "My grandfather promised my sister's hand in marriage to another Russian family."

"Right," I nodded. "But she's already married and he's pissed about it."

"Yeah. He still wants to honour the arrangement though."

"How does he plan to do that? Force her to get a divorce?"

Aleksandr snorted. "He'd rather kill her husband. Would be easier. But no. The official agreement was for the Tarasovs to marry into the *Pakhan's* family. Turns out, he doesn't need Illayana to do that."

"I'm confused," I said, frowning. "You have another sister?"

"No. But the Tarasovs have a daughter, and according to my grandfather, he has three perfectly healthy, unattached grandsons."

Chapter Twenty-Eight



My whole body stiffened like an electric wire had just touched my bare skin. He wasn't saying what I thought he was saying, was he?

"He's going to make one of you do it?"

His blue eyes cut to me. That frustration I'd seen earlier was starting to work its way back into his body.

"Me," he grunted, never taking his eyes off me. "It'll be me."

I blinked, shock slamming into me. "Why-why you?"

"It's complicated," he said, leaning his head back.

I felt the anger start to rise within me, but I pushed it back. "Then dumb it down and explain it to me."

He exhaled. "Between Nikolai and Lukyan, I'm the obvious choice. The *only* choice, really. Nik is more than capable of handling something like this, but just because he can doesn't mean he should have to. As much as he tries to deny it, his heart belongs to someone else. It has for a long time and he deserves to be free to pursue it if he wants to. If he can get over his shit. Lukyan is...well...Lukyan. He's just not suited for something like this. My youngest brother doesn't handle responsibility well. He's a free spirit, live in the moment kind of guy. He always acts first and thinks never. Something this important, with such severe consequences, can't be left to him. It just can't. I love my brother, but he has a hard time taking anything seriously. He's more likely to fuck up the arrangement than be the solution

to it. That leaves me. If I don't go through with the marriage, Sergei will hurt Illayana."

"Seriously?" I asked incredulously. "He would hurt his own granddaughter?"

"Titles like that don't matter to a man like Sergei Volkov. He'd do anything to get what he wants. *Hurt anyone*. With him, there's no limit. He wants this deal, so he'll do whatever he has to do to get it done."

A man like that was the most dangerous type of man in the world. They couldn't be trusted. You couldn't turn your back on them. You'd have to always be on guard, keeping an eye on everything they did because you'd never know when they might turn around and decide today was the day you'd get a bullet in the back of your head.

I stared off over the broken wreckage littering the floor, processing everything he'd just said.

He was going to marry someone else, take some prim, proper Russian woman as his wife. Someone his family would more than likely approve of.

Unlike me.

I was loud. Boisterous. Foul-mouthed. Vulgar. The list went on and on. I was the total opposite to Aleksandr in every way.

He didn't act like it, but you just knew he came from money. That he'd been raised and taught proper manners and decorum.

He had that air about him. The one that screamed, 'I know which one's the soup spoon and which one's the dessert spoon'. Whereas I would just lift the bowl and drink out of it like a glass. I wouldn't even bother using a damn spoon.

I understood why he was doing it. What was at stake for him. That didn't make it any easier to grasp, any easier to deal with.

Aleksandr wasn't mine. We weren't together. But hearing this meant he would *never* be mine. He would be someone else's.

Considering how I met him, I was surprised I felt so attached to him. That the idea of him bound to another woman, marrying her, fucking her, spending his life with her made me so..*angry*.

"What are you thinking? You've got a pretty dangerous look on your face right now."

I inwardly winced. Yeah, I had a hard time concealing my emotions sometimes. I didn't want Aleksandr to know any of it, to see how much this was affecting me.

I wanted—no, *needed*—a distraction.

“I’m thinking we should take advantage of the time we have left.”

I jumped off my seat and straddled him, enjoying the look of complete and utter surprise flashing across his face before I slammed my lips to his.

Rough hands gripped me tight, fingers digging deep into the skin of my waist. I rolled my hips as my tongue dove into his mouth, colliding with his.

Fucking hell. He tasted incredible.

I felt like I’d die if I didn’t touch him, if he didn’t touch me.

Aleksandr wound his hands through my hair and snatched my head back, making me gasp. He ran his tongue up my neck, peppering my skin with kisses and bites. “You think I’m this easily distracted, *malyshka*?” he tutted, a rumble of amusement leaving his chest. “I’m going to take advantage of this situation because I’m dying to have your pussy wrapped around my cock. But don’t think this conversation is over.” He bit down on the side of my neck, hard, and I hissed. “You’re just a filthy little whore deep down, aren’t you? Desperate to have your pussy filled.”

I panted, my heart pounding in my chest and my body shaking as he dug his teeth into my flesh over and over again, like he wanted to mark everywhere.

“Mmm, YA *lyublyu, kogda ty izvivayesh’sya dlya menya.*”

Fuck, I loved when he spoke Russian. Even though I couldn’t understand a word of it, I still loved it. It gave me shivers all over my body. It could relax and excite me all at the same time.

How one voice could do all that, I had no idea.

He gripped my chin roughly, his large hand swallowing almost the entirety of my face. His eyes bored into mine, filled with so much passion and heat I thought they might devour me whole.

“I need you to know this isn’t going to be some sweet, soft, fairytale moment between us. No. It’s going to be a brutal, hard fuck. Can you handle that?”

My stomach clenched and wetness slicked down my thighs. I nodded eagerly.

He ran his tongue over my lips. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I can handle it.”

He bit my jaw lightly. “Such a good little fuck toy you are.” He wound one arm around my waist and held me close as he dug into his pocket. He stiffened, an annoyed groan falling from his mouth. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a condom. The one fucking day I don’t have a condom.”

“It’s fine. I have an IUD and I was tested a few weeks before I was kidnapped. I’m clean. If you are, I’m good to go without one.” I kept grinding my pussy onto his muscular thigh, panting in pleasure.

Aleksandr looked at me, eyes burning. He seemed to be having some internal debate with himself, though over what, I had no idea. And quite frankly I didn’t care. I was so pent up, so ready for him that if I had to, I would just get myself off on his thigh if he wasn’t comfortable fucking me without a condom.

“Fuck it.” He picked me up and slammed me down onto the table. I gasped in surprise, moaning and swivelling my hips. He grabbed both of my hands and pinned them above my head, looking down at me with a smirk on my face. “Tell me, *malyshka*, do you like feeling helpless?”

I whimpered as he trailed one hand down the front of my body, keeping me completely restrained with the other. I strained against him, and the ease with which he held me in place fuelled the fire burning inside me.

“You do, don’t you?” he whispered in my ear, trailing his tongue over my skin. “You like knowing that no matter how much you fight me, there’s nothing you can do to stop me. I can do whatever I want to you.”

I panted, my heart beating a mile a minute as I squirmed beneath his hold. He was right. He was totally right. I did like it. I fucking *loved* it.

We both knew all it would take was one word from me and he’d stop straight away, but that wasn’t part of the game.

“So why don’t you do it? Fight me. Fight me like I know you want to. You won’t be able to get away, no matter what you do.”

With a man like Aleksandr, I wondered how much I could get away with. I’d tried play like this in the past, but it had never worked out. *I* was the one who always ended up being too rough. They freaked out when I fought them too hard.

When I said I liked it rough, I meant *rough*. Not just some spanking and a little choking, like most guys thought.

No. I liked to be thrown around, my clothes ripped off. Held down and fucked ruthlessly while I punched and kicked and scratched at them.

Was Aleksandr the type to be able to handle that side of me?

Time to find out.

I reared forward and headbutted him. He cursed, stumbling back as blood poured down his chin from his now-busted lip. I kicked him in the chest and climbed off the table, ready to bolt, but Aleksandr recovered fast.

He charged me, gripping me tight and flipping me over, shoving me face first into the table.

I growled, thrashing wildly, but all he did was chuckle at my attempts to get away.

“That’s it, *malyshka*, show me that fiery side of you. I like it.” He held me down by the back of the neck and kicked my legs apart, using his lower half to keep me pinned to the table. He wedged one hand between us, ripping my pants down and exposing my bare ass. “No underwear,” he tutted, squeezing my ass cheeks painfully. “Bad girl.”

Pleasure and pain burst through me when he roughly speared me with two fingers, pumping them in and out.

“Wet for me already. You really *are* a dirty little whore, aren’t you?”

“Fuck you,” I groaned, pushing back against him.

He pulled his fingers out and flattened me with his body, his weight crushing me to the point that I struggled to breathe. “Look.” He turned my head forcibly to look at his fingers. “Look how wet you are. Fucking beautiful.” He shoved them into my mouth. “Suck.”

My cheeks hollowed as I sucked hard, twirling my tongue, tasting myself on him.

“Good girl,” he whispered huskily in my ear, his accent thick and rough.

My whole body shivered under his praise and that goddamn voice. He knew exactly what he was doing with it, too. Not that I was complaining.

He leaned back and I pulled air into my lungs, taking a deep breath. I moved to push off the table, but he snapped his hand out and gripped my nape firmly, pushing me back down. “If I want you to move, I’ll tell you. Until then, stay fucking still.”

“Or what?” I breathed, taunting him. “What are you gonna do?”

“You don’t want to test me, *malyshka*.”

“I think I do.” I knew I did. I thrashed, kicking out with my legs and flailing my arms, trying to hit him from behind. My attempts were mediocre at best. Aleksandr was too big, too strong for me to overpower. But I liked the fight. The struggle.

He grunted as he tried to hold me down. “Fine. You want to play? Let me show you what happens to bad little whores who don’t know how to

listen.”

I squealed as he picked me up like I weighed nothing at all and slammed me back first onto the table. One hand collared my throat while the other snapped his belt open, pulling it free.

He wrapped it around my neck, feeding the strap through the buckle and pulling it tightly. Not so tightly that I couldn’t breathe, but tight enough to make my stomach clench, lust shooting through me.

“Remember your safe word,” was all he said before he shoved his cock deep inside me, a groan of pure, masculine satisfaction falling from his lips.

I moaned as he pounded into me, his thrusts as brutal and savage as he promised. Pleasure soared through me, my nerve endings on fire. The feel of his cock was every bit as good as I remembered. Better even.

So much better.

The belt around my neck only added to the pleasure, the filthiness of it all. It was everything I’d ever wanted.

“What a good little fuck toy you are, taking my cock so well,” he grunted, pulling the belt a little tighter, making my head swim. “You want to be my fuck toy, don’t you *malyshka*? Owned by me. Possessed by me. Here to pleasure me and me alone.” He pumped in and out hard, never slowing down, never losing pace, his pounding relentless.

“Yes, Aleksandr, yes. Don’t stop. Oh fuck, so good. So, so good.” I groaned, meeting him thrust for thrust, grounding myself down onto his cock.

It was hard, thick. Better than any dildo I owned a thousand times over. Even Big Ben—and he was my favourite. He never failed to please me.

Aleksandr widened his legs and strengthened his stance, hammering into me over and over. “Such a wet, tight fucking pussy,” he growled, his free hand coming between us to tug on my pierced clit. “Squeezing the life out of my cock like my good little fuck toy should.”

I moaned deeply, overwhelmed with the sensations swarming my body. *God.* I could feel myself getting closer and closer, each deep thrust making pleasure pulse through my body.

He let go of the belt and gripped my hips with both hands, slamming me down onto his dick. His head rolled back, veins throbbing in his neck. He grunted. Growled. Barked out random words in Russian I couldn’t understand as he railed me so hard the table slid across the floor with each brutal thrust.

“Fuck. Yes, baby. I’m gonna come.” I panted hard, squirming and bucking against him.

He stiffened for the briefest moment, something flashing in his eyes before he resumed his pounding, keeping that same, steady pace. It was a goddamn relief because most guys changed the tempo when they heard you were close. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn’t.

He leaned over me and it was right then that I wished we were both naked so I could feel his skin on mine. “Do you know how good you look with my belt around your neck, all hot and needy for me?” He pried my mouth open, hovering his lips over mine. “I want to utterly consume you, consume your every waking thought, like you do mine. I want you a hot, wet, crumbling mess, begging for the pleasure only *I* can give you.” Saliva dripped from his mouth into mine and I moaned, my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

He shook my face roughly. “Look at me. I want your eyes on me when you come all over my cock. I want to remember the look on your face.” He thrust deeply, pulling on the belt around my neck again and I exploded. My back arched, a scream ripping from my mouth as the world’s most intense, mind-blowing orgasm assaulted my senses.

Currents of white-hot, blistering pleasure ran through every inch of me, right down to my fingertips and toes. My pussy clamped down, spasming around his cock and he groaned, his thrusts turning chaotic. Savage. Wild.

His grip on me tightened to the point of pain and he came hard, spurts of cum shooting inside me, dripping down my thighs. He groaned again, his whole body shaking as he emptied himself and fell forward, just managing to catch himself on his elbows before he crushed me.

“Fucking hell,” I breathed out, barely able to move. I’d been fucked before, but never—never—like that. I didn’t think it could be better than last time, but man was I wrong.

Aleksandr turned his head and kissed me softly on the cheek. It was sweet and tender. Two things I never thought he would be. He undid the belt from around my neck, looking down at me. His fingers danced lightly over my throat in a soft, soothing massage. “You okay? Did I hurt you?”

“Are you kidding?” I huffed out, wrapping my limbs around him despite the fact that they felt like jello. “That was the best sex I’ve ever had. Hands down. You definitely know what you’re doing, Big Guy.”

His throaty laugh made me smile. “I thought you’d call ‘Asshole’ once I put that belt around your neck,” he said, referring to my safe word.

“Ha. I told you, I don’t need a safe word. You could stab me while you’re licking my clit and I still wouldn’t say it.”

He arched an eyebrow.

“Well, not ‘stab me’ stab me. But you know, I wouldn’t be averse to a little nick here and there,” I winked.

“I’ll be sure to remember that,” he smirked, his voice taking on a dark edge. One filled with the promise of fulfilment.

Oooo, goody.

None of my other bed buddies had been into blood play. And fair enough. It’s a pretty out there kinda kink. One I couldn’t wait to explore with Aleksandr.

If I get the time.

At that thought, my good mood plummeted instantly. The sex had done wonders for making me forget, for distracting me from the fact that Aleksandr was going to be marrying someone. But I should have known it wouldn’t last long.

The door opened abruptly. “Hey guys, you’ve gotta try these, they’re so —oh, what the fuck?!” Dayton dropped the food in his hands and covered his eyes, his face scrunched up in disgust.

Aleksandr jumped off me, using his body to shield me as I climbed down from the table and quickly put my pants back on.

“Seriously? Seriously?! We’re in a public place and you guys decide to do the nasty on a table people probably eat at?! Animals!” Dayton shrieked, still covering his eyes.

Aleksandr put his dick away, lifting his belt from the table and wrapping it back around his hips. He threw me a seductive wink, one that said ‘I’m going to be thinking about this moment every time I put this on’ and I bit the air, wishing it was his skin.

“Oh fuck, I think I’m gonna throw up.” Dayton whined, one hand covering his mouth while the other stayed over his eyes.

“Relax kid, it’s just sex. A perfectly healthy and normal bodily activity between two consenting adults. Stop freaking out.” I laughed at the look on his face.

“Easy for you to say. You didn’t get a close, unobstructed view of *his* bare ass.”

"No, I didn't. But I want to," I purred at Aleksandr.

Dayton gagged. "Yep. Definitely going to throw up. Oh god, I can't stop seeing it. I want to gauge my eyes out."

"That can easily be arranged," Aleksandr said flatly and Dayton took a step back, finally removing his hands from his eyes to shake them in the air.

"No, no, no, fuck I was kidding. Don't do that. I'll get over it. I just need to wash my eyes out with soap. Or bleach. Yeah, bleach ought to do the trick." Dayton shuddered, wrapping his arms around himself like he'd just been through a traumatic experience.

"You're a virgin, aren't you?" I asked, chuckling with amusement.

"What?! No!" Dayton stuttered, offended. "I've fucked hundreds of girls. *Hundreds*."

Yeah, sure. With the awkwardness now rolling off him and the blush rising to his cheeks, it was clear he hadn't been intimate with anyone before. He fidgeted uncomfortably and averted his eyes, looking at anything but Aleksandr and I.

I suddenly felt bad for the kid and I blew out a breath. "Sorry you had to walk in and see that. Trust me when I say it wasn't planned. Right Aleksandr?"

That big lug just shrugged, an uncaring air surrounding him. He didn't care that we'd just been walked in on.

If I was being honest, I didn't either. I only cared that it was the kid who had to see it. I was just glad we'd managed to finish before he came in.

Aleksandr's phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket, glanced at it, put it back and pulled out another one.

How many fucking phones did he have? And what were they for?

He cleared his throat before answering. "Doug here."

My mouth dropped open. His accent was gone, his voice taking on a pleasant and warm tone. I looked at Dayton and mouthed, "*Doug?*"

Dayton shook his head in a 'you don't wanna know' gesture. Except I did want to know.

"Right now? Okay, listen to me very carefully Matt. Keep her there as long as you can, understand me? I'm on my way. *Do not* let her leave. Do whatever you need to do to stall her." Aleksandr hung up abruptly, eyes flying to me. The Aleksandr that had fucked me mere minutes ago was gone. The one looking at me now, with this quiet, deadly expression on his face was someone different. Someone darker, more savage.

“We need to go. Now.”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine



My hands gripped the steering wheel hard as I raced down the highway, trying to get to Crave Café before Rayna left. Drea sat in the passenger seat, throwing me weird looks that I didn't have time to decipher right now, while Dayton sat in the back.

When I'd first gotten the call, excitement had burst inside me. Finding Rayna and Dominik had been one of our top priorities, but no matter how hard we looked we just had no idea where they were hiding. We'd get hits from Nik's facial recognition software every now and then, but by the time we showed up at the location she was always long gone.

She never stayed in one place too long, always making sure to leave before we had the chance to catch up with her. Dominik hadn't been sighted once, which was strange. If he was still in Vegas, a camera somewhere should have picked him up, but there was nothing. Not even a whisper of his presence.

Which meant he was either laying really, *really* low, or he was gone.

If he left Vegas, it would make tracking him ten times harder.

The opportunity to finally catch Rayna was too important to pass up, and that meant I had no choice but to take Drea with me.

I would have much preferred to take her back home, but I simply didn't have the time. I couldn't risk Rayna leaving before I got the chance to come back.

So here she was, riding shotgun while I went on an important mission for the Bratva. For my family.

If my father ever found out, he'd have me in the ring so fast I'd get whiplash.

"Are you gonna tell me what's going on? You squeeze that steering wheel any harder and it's gonna pop in your hands," Drea said, staring at me with those pretty amber eyes that saw way too much.

My blood heated at the memory of her pinned beneath me, of her pussy squeezing my cock so hard I saw stars.

She was fucking perfect. Wild. Free. She had a sexual appetite that matched my own, and that was a damn hard thing to come by.

I'd tried the belt on Mila once but she'd called on her safe word instantly. Of course, I understood. It took an immense amount of trust to let someone do that to you. To let yourself be so vulnerable around another person.

I'll admit I'd expected Drea to do the same, and it surprised the hell out of me when she didn't. The woman was fucking fearless.

I'd broken so many of my rules with her already. I couldn't even bring myself to care at this point. I'd never allowed myself to fuck a woman without protection, regardless of what contraception she might have been on. And yet, one word from Drea and I couldn't get inside her fast enough.

It was like a compulsion. I *needed* to know what she felt like. I wanted to feel her pussy rippling around me with nothing between us.

It was...*heavenly*. Those sweet little moans she made. The way she moved against me, grinding herself on me like she couldn't get enough. The way she said my name, rolling the 'R' with that hot, Spanish accent—*fuck*.

Just thinking about it all made me so hard I had to readjust myself.

How was I supposed to marry another woman and just forget about her? Never see her again? The thought alone made me angry enough to fucking kill someone.

For the first time in my life, I was frustrated with the obligations of the Bratva. It made me frown.

I loved my life. Even though it was hard, brutal and bloody, I fucking loved it. I'd never once felt the desire to pack up and leave. Not that I ever would. I would never abandon my family.

Still, the fact that I had the thought at all was concerning.

“Well?” Drea prompted. “What’s going on? Why are you driving around the place like you’re in a Mario Kart race with that sour look on your face?”

I frowned, glancing her way. “I do not have a sour look on my face.”

“Uh, you kinda do,” Dayton piped up from the backseat. I glared at him through the rearview mirror.

His hands flew up in surrender. “What? You do! It’s your ‘I’m about to kill someone’ face. I know. I’ve seen it before.”

I grunted, my focus back on the road.

“Come on, Big Guy, tell me what’s happened. Who was that on the phone earlier? Why are you so pent up after we worked so hard to rid you of all that tension?”

Dayton gagged. “Please, God. Don’t remind me.”

“Ignore him,” Drea said, throwing him a scowl. “Come on.”

I was conflicted. On one hand, I wanted to tell her everything. I wanted to open up to her and share all the shit that had been going on lately, all the stress I was under. But on the other hand, I knew I couldn’t. This was family business. *Bratva* business. I couldn’t go sharing private details with someone who was still technically the enemy.

So I gave her the basics. I told her Rayna was someone who betrayed us and handed Illayana over to Nero.

Considering she’d been betrayed the same way by her people, she understood and didn’t dive any further into it.

“I hope you’re going to kill her,” she stated firmly, eyes hard.

“Not at first. But she’ll die. Eventually.” I parked the car in the same alley behind Crave Café as last time.

The Cleaners had done a phenomenal job cleaning up the mess I’d made. You couldn’t even tell someone had died here. The only evidence remaining of Peroxide was the dark stain of his blood on the concrete and even then, you couldn’t really tell it was blood.

“Good.” A dark smile crossed her face. “Can I watch?”

My lips curled into a devilish smirk. Of course the woman would want to watch. Vindictive little thing. As much as I would have loved that, I couldn’t allow it. Father would likely be there during the interrogation if I managed to catch Rayna.

There was no reason to justify having Drea there. None that I could think of right now, anyway.

Instead of answering, I leaned forward, running my tongue over her bottom lip. *Fuck*. She had the softest lips I'd ever felt. Full, plump and attached to the most fuckable mouth in the world.

Drea's breath hitched slightly, her eyes flaring with desire.

"Stay here," I rumbled over her lips before I opened the door, stepping out of the car.

"Wait, what?" Drea exclaimed, leaning to the side to look at me. "I don't get to come?"

"Sorry, *malyshka*," I said, pulling out my Beretta, checking the clip and chamber before tucking it behind my back. "I need you to stay here. I can't focus on doing what I have to do if I'm worried you'll run down the street the first chance you get."

Her jaw dropped in outrage. "Are you serious? If I wanted to do that, I would have done it back at the Rage Room. Besides, I gave you my word I wouldn't bolt."

"And I believe you. To a degree." I slammed the door shut and held the key fob up in the air so she could see it.

Her eyes widened. She lunged for her door handle, but I locked it before she got the chance to open it. "Aleksandr! Don't you dare leave me in here! *¡Hijo de puta!* You son of a bitch!" She screeched. Her voice carried out through the small crack in the window I'd allowed so they wouldn't suffocate in there.

"I'll be back soon," I yelled as I rounded the hood of the car, heading for the entrance into the alley.

"You're seriously going to lock me in your car and leave me here when I've got your cum dripping down my leg?!"

I turned, amusement shooting through me. I stared through the front windscreen, Drea glaring back, and Dayton's face flushed with embarrassment at her words.

"Be a good girl, Drea. I'd hate to have to punish you," I taunted.

That was a bold-faced lie. Just the thought of punishing her made me hard as a rock.

The scowl Drea threw my way said she was going to make my life a living hell for leaving her locked in the car.

Bring it on, malyshka. I loved to play.



I stared through the window of Crave Café, watching Rayna as she sipped on her coffee, laughing at something her male companion said.

She sat at the back in a corner booth wearing a floral red summer dress, her brown hair up in a ponytail. A few tables away sat two men dressed in dark clothing, their faces hard and impassive. One kept an eye on Rayna while the other continuously scanned the room, looking for danger.

Despite not playing an active role in the Bratva, Rayna still had a guard detail. She knew how to fight like all of us. Sergei Volkov couldn't be known for having weak grandchildren, after all. But she wasn't as vigorous about her training as we were.

My cousin liked to bitch and moan about how she would have made a good Enforcer if only my father had given her a chance, but the truth of the matter was, she simply wasn't built for it. She cared more about going viral on Tik Tok than she ever did about the Bratva.

Her entire life revolved around social media, around finding out what the next biggest trend was and jumping on it as quickly as possible.

My father had decided to give her a chance once. He let her tag along to a merch drop with The Latin Kings, who were in the middle of a brutal turf war with the 18th Street Gang. They wanted enough hardware to wipe them off the map. Machine guns, assault rifles, shotguns, handguns—the works.

The deal was made. All we had to do was show up with the merchandise, count their cash and part ways. A super simple job with almost zero chance of anything going wrong.

Of course, that was until Rayna decided to whip out her phone and try to take a group selfie of us all, cash and guns clearly on display. She'd held the phone up in the air, posing with those stupid duck lips like we were her girlfriends at the bar on a girls' night out instead of in the middle of important fucking business.

Her idiocy had cost us not only that deal, but The Latin Kings as a client. They didn't want anything to do with us after that. Not that I could blame them.

Father didn't trust her, but he gave her a chance because she's family, and she threw it back in his face with that stupid stunt.

From that point on, she wasn't allowed to have anything to do with Bratva business.

I glimpsed Matt at the counter, that same bored expression on his face I'd seen the last time as he served customer after customer. I couldn't go inside. The second Rayna or her guards saw me, all hell would break loose.

Our contacts in the LVPD made it easy to cover our tracks, but even they would have a hard time covering for a shootout in the middle of a bloody café.

I needed to draw Rayna outside. Preferably without her guards.

Matt's gaze swept over me as he waited for the customer in front of him to decide what he wanted. His eyes snapped back to me, brows lowered in a frown.

I gestured with two fingers for him to come outside.

He took a quick look around before turning back to face me, pointing a finger at his chest and giving me a questioning look as if to say, 'Me?'

Yeah, you, dumbass. I nodded, beckoning him again.

He handed his customer off to another coworker and came outside, the bell above the door dinging as it opened and closed. "You got here quickly." He wiped his hands on the apron around his waist, looking back into the café. "She's right there, in the corner. That's her, right?"

"Yes." I pulled him out of view of the window just in case Rayna happened to glance outside. I held up the roll of \$100 bills I'd promised him, snatching it back when he went to grab it. "How would you like to earn some more cash?" I made sure to slip into my 'Doug' persona, putting on my Boston accent.

His eyes narrowed. "I'm not sucking your dick, dude, no matter how much you pay me."

"What? No. All I want is for you to lure her outside."

"Outside? How am I meant to do that?"

"Tell her there's someone that wants to talk to her. Describe him as an older guy. Dark hair. Blue eyes. Russian accent."

He frowned. "Who is that?"

"Doesn't matter who it is. Just say he wants to talk to her outside. Alone. Stress the alone part, okay? Is there a back door that leads to the alley behind the café?"

"Yeah."

"Take her out there. I'll be waiting in the alley. As soon as she steps out, shut and lock the door. I'll take it from there."

He glanced nervously inside. "I-I dunno man. This all seems a little too G.I. Joe for me."

He was hesitating. I had to sway him my way.

I pulled out the extra \$5,000 I kept with me for emergencies and held it up next to the other roll of hundreds.

His eyes widened.

"\$5,000, and it's all yours if you—"

"Get her outside. I heard ya, I heard ya." He yanked the money from my grasp, tucking it away in his pocket. Seriousness washed over him. "Describe the guy again."

I ran through Dominik's description again, going into as much detail as I could in the hopes that when he relayed it to Rayna, she would recognise it as her father.

"Leave it to me." He marched back inside, every ounce of nervousness in his body gone, replaced with steely-eyed determination.

I took one last glance at Rayna and the man she was with. Who was he? He wore plain clothing and had long, scraggly hair that ran past his shoulders. His face was hard, his eyes simmering with anger.

Was this the man she met with every time she came here?

I went back around to the alley, confident the kid could get the job done. He did seem nervous at first, but the prospect of all that cash seemed to strengthen his resolve, which was exactly what I needed.

Once Drea saw me coming back down the alley she perked up, her whole body coming to life. She pressed her lips to the gap in the window, ready to spout something off that was no doubt riddled with attitude, but stopped once she got a look at my face.

I wasn't sure what she saw, but it was enough to make even her pause.

"You look positively predatory right now," she commented as I leaned up against the side of the car, crossing my arms over my chest. "Is she on the way? Do I get to watch after all? Come on, let me out so I can have some fun too. You know I can help you, right?"

I shook my head, chuckling softly at the whiny tone in her voice. I had no doubt she could help. She moved with an almost predatory grace, light on her feet and her movements fluid, like liquid. Her small stature made her

quick and lethal. She would be invaluable backup. But this was something I had to do on my own. For the Bratva. For Illayana.

“Sorry, *malyshka*. This is something I need to do alone.”

She huffed, clearly irritated, but didn’t argue further.

There were several doors in front of me, each one leading to one of the businesses at the front of the street. I wasn’t sure which one belonged to Crave Café, so I kept a close eye on all of them as I waited.

There were several things that could go wrong. Matt could fail in his attempt to lure Rayna outside. She could become suspicious and bolt. Someone could come down the alley and witness me kidnapping her.

I had to hope none of those things happened. I needed one fucking thing to go right. Just one. That wasn’t a huge ask, was it?

A few minutes passed before the door to my left opened, Rayna stepping out. Her eyes widened when she saw me, her whole body stiffening in fear and shock. She spun on her heels and lunged for the door at the same time Matt slammed it closed, locking it behind him.

She cursed, yanking on the handle in distress as she banged on the door repeatedly, demanding someone open it. When nobody did, she decided to cut her losses and bolt for the exit.

I took a giant step to the right, blocking her path.

She stumbled to a stop, her eyes wide with panic. “A-Aleksandr.” She put her hands up in front of her, palms facing me as she took a step back.

I smiled darkly. “Hello, Rayna.”

“Look, I don’t know what Illayana told you—”

“That’s the last time you say my sister’s name,” I said, moving closer.

She took another step back, swallowing nervously. “Cousin—”

“Don’t try and play the ‘family’ card. It’s too late for that.” I matched her movements, tracking each of her steps as she tried to back away from me. “Did you really think you’d get away with it?”

“I-I’m not trying to *get away* with anything, Aleksandr. Honestly. I didn’t—”

“Shut your mouth before I shut it for you. No more lies, Rayna.”

Her lips clamped shut, a hateful sneer streaking across her face. “I’m not going with you. You’ll have to kill me first.”

“Do you really think you have any say over what’s about to happen?” I backed her into a corner, giving her nowhere to go. Her back pressed

against the dirty, filthy brick wall, her eyes darting left to right looking for an escape.

One she would never find.

“Aleksandr, just wait. Listen to me—no, wait, stop!” I grabbed her by her hair, making my grip as painful as possible as I dragged her over to the car.

She fought hard, flailing her limbs and lashing out against me. She screamed next, a loud, high-pitched, ‘help I’m being kidnapped’ kind of scream that would attract attention if someone heard it.

I pulled out a knife and held it to her lips, the blade cutting into her skin. “Make another sound and I’ll cut out your fucking tongue.”

She whimpered, her scream dying off in her throat. “A-Aleksandr, cousin, please. Don’t do this,” she begged as I hauled her by her hair, stopping at the boot of the car.

I opened the trunk and shoved her inside, copping an elbow to the cheek that made me grunt. I punched her in the face, hearing her nose crack beneath my knuckles, and she passed out, her body slumping.

Should have done that to start with.

I rubbed my cheekbone, a little annoyed with the sharp burst of pain now streaking across my face. But honestly? I would have been more annoyed if she didn’t put up any fight at all.

A Volkov should never go down easily.

I blew out a breath, a small weight lifting off my shoulders. With Rayna now locked securely in the boot of my car, it brought us one step closer to Dominik. To finding out exactly what their goal was in handing Illayana over to Nero. To getting to the bottom of this whole fucking mess.

Even weeks later, we still had no idea what their reason was for betraying us, what they wanted. They’d just dumped Illayana in Nero’s hands and bolted. There *had* to be a reason, a plan they had we just weren’t seeing.

It made me nervous. Dominik was a conniving bastard, just like Sergei. Whatever plan he had wouldn’t end well for us, I was sure of it.

I took a step towards the drivers’ side door, eager to get home and finally get the answers we needed, when the back door to Crave Café suddenly opened, one of Rayna’s guards stepping out.

There was a brief second of hesitation, both of us staring at each other before we reacted. The guard pulled out his gun and I ducked, taking cover

behind the car. A stream of bullets impacted the side of the car, the sound of metal crunching on metal echoing through the alley.

I stayed low, shuffling forward on my feet and pulling out my gun.

Girlish screams came from inside the car as bullets rained down. I frowned. I never would have pegged Drea as the type to scream in the face of danger.

I peeked over the hood of the car, catching a glimpse of the guard reloading. Through the windscreen I could see Drea frantically trying to get out, ramming her elbow into the window over and over again. In the back seat, Dayton was screaming.

I rolled my eyes. *I should have known it was him.*

The car itself was an armoured vehicle, with bullet proof glass and run flat tyres. The safest place for them was actually inside it, even if it was being shot at.

I aimed and fired. The guard jumped to the side, narrowly missing a bullet to the head. He rolled along the ground and smacked into the side of the car. I charged him, hitting him in the chest with a flying knee strike.

The guard grunted, crying out in pain as I ground my knee deep into his chest, wedging him between me and the car. I shoved my gun down his throat and fired. Blood splattered over my face, down my neck and across my skin, staining it red.

“Aleksandr! Behind you!”

I vaulted right, just managing to avoid the booted foot that slammed into the car door right where my head was a second ago. I rolled and sprang to my feet, blocking another blow as Rayna’s other guard came at me again.

He was young. *Really* young. Like a kid fresh out of training. He was tall—well built for someone his age—with dark brown hair and pale skin. He knocked the gun out of my hands with some fancy kung-fu kick, swinging his legs and jumping through the air.

Who was this motherfucker? Jacky Chan?

He flounced around with elaborate punches and kicks, striking out at nothing but air while I just stared at him, my brows lowering deeper and deeper into a frown. It was like he was trying to intimidate me with all those crazy moves and the constant ‘hiyah’ cries he kept screaming over and over again.

He did one last spin, ending with his feet planted firmly on the ground, arms up in a fighting pose, eyes locked on me.

I arched an eyebrow. “You done?”

He gave me a smug smile, arrogance wafting off him. “Yep.”

“Good.” I struck fast, throwing a right punch, my knuckles smashing into his jaw.

His head whipped to the side, his body swaying slightly as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He dropped, thunking to the ground.

If I had time, I’d wake the kid up and give him a lecture about proper fighting etiquette, about how you don’t waste time throwing a bunch of fancy moves around, trying to show off what you can do.

You just attack.

Where did Dominik find this idiot?

I unlocked the car and Drea burst out, a wild, frantic look in her eyes. “Fuck, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I frowned as she ran her hands over me, looking for injuries.

“Oh, good. I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

I didn’t know you cared so much, malyshka.

“Because I want to be the one to hurt you,” she hissed, slapping me across the face.

Oh.

My cheek burned, the imprint of her hand likely spreading out across my skin from the force of the blow.

“That’s for locking me in your car, you jackass. Now hurry up, grab his legs. We gotta get them all in the car and get out of here. The gunshots likely drew attention.” Drea bent down, wrapping her arms underneath the kid-guards’ armpits and hefting him up.

She was right. Besides Rayna’s scream, the sound of the gunshots almost definitely led to someone calling 911. We needed to get out of here quickly and do damage control. Drea’s quick thinking impressed me.

I rotated my jaw, the sting of her slap still throbbing over my face. I narrowed my eyes at her as I picked up the guy’s legs, shuffling him towards the car.

“Dayton! Open the damn door!” Drea yelled, kicking the car.

Dayton opened it, shuffling backwards as we threw both bodies into the car. He gagged when the guard with a hole in his head landed beside him.

“Oh, God. I’m gonna throw up,” he whined.

“Don’t you dare,” I warned, jumping into the driver’s seat.

Once Drea was inside, I turned the car on and sped out of the alleyway, merging onto the busy road so quickly several people honked at me.

I pulled up Nik's number on the display screen on the dashboard and hit CALL.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“I need you to wipe the cameras at Crave Café again.”

He breathed out an irritated sigh. “Honestly, Zander. Can’t you just kill people in an area not littered with fucking surveillance? It would make my life so much easier. Do you need the Cleaners?”

“No time. Police are probably already on the way. Just monitor the radios and let our contacts at LVPD know about it.”

“Will do. You gonna tell me what happened?”

“I have her.”

Nik was quiet for a moment. “*Her* her? Rayna?”

“Yes. Let Father know.”

“You got it.” Nik hung up.

I glanced at Drea. She smiled brightly, all sunshine and roses, like the fact that we’d just killed a man and kidnapped two people was something totally in the norm for her.

Being the leader of the cartel, I suspected it was.

In a lot of ways, Drea was perfect for me. She lived and breathed this life, just like me. She wasn’t afraid to get her hands dirty. To hurt. To kill. She was just as cutthroat and brutal as I was.

The truth of the matter was, I didn’t want to give her up. Not now, not ever.

Chapter Thirty



Once we got back to the house, I quickly herded Drea back up to her room before my father noticed she was with me. She wasn't happy to be taken back to her room. She pleaded to not be locked away again, even though it was a perfectly nice room to be locked into. She'd dragged her feet and tried bargaining with me. When that didn't work, she went on the offensive, kicking and screaming at me.

Little did she know, however, that I liked it. I liked it when she fought against me. It eventually got to the point that I had to hurl her over my shoulder and carry her to the room while she beat into my back with her fists.

The entire thing gave me a sense of nostalgia, reminding me of the first time I'd met her, dragging her from Nero's house in the same fashion.

God. That felt like a lifetime ago now.

It was easy to forget I was actually holding her hostage. Most of the time, Drea didn't act like a prisoner. She seemed content with what was going on, just going with the flow and waiting for the meet with her brother (which I had scheduled for the day after tomorrow).

I'd messaged Juan shortly after leaving Drea the afternoon she'd called him, telling him where and when the meeting would take place. Considering I held all the leverage, he didn't really have a leg to stand on, negotiation wise. He had no choice but to accept my conditions.

We were meeting at one of the buildings we owned downtown at noon. We were both permitted to bring one man. *One*. Any more than that and it would be considered an act of aggression, which meant any hope of a deal between the cartel and the Bratva would be off the table.

The ideal outcome would be a ceasefire between us, as well any assistance the cartel was providing the Outfit to stop. Immediately. If an agreement was made, it would mean Drea would be leaving with Juan.

I'd gotten so used to having her around, to being able to see her whenever I wanted that the idea of her leaving made my chest tighten with anger and distress.

But I had to put those thoughts and feelings away and deal with them later. I couldn't afford to be distracted. I needed to be focused. Calm, in control.

And the only way I could do those things was if I put Drea far out of my mind.

“Is she awake yet?”

I turned at the sound of my father’s voice, watching as he walked into the room.

“Not yet.” I looked back at Rayna dangling from the ceiling, thick, metal chains wrapped around her wrists and pulling her arms tightly. Her bare feet barely touched the concrete floor as her body swayed lightly through the air.

A table was up against the wall. It was lined with various torture implements, all crusty and rusted with dry blood.

They served two purposes. First, to intimidate. To scare. The moment Rayna saw them, she would understand the full gravity of the situation she was in. And second, to be used on her to get her to talk.

That's what I was looking forward to the most.

Father circled Rayna’s unconscious form, rage burning in his eyes.
“Any problems bringing her in?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.” I inclined my head to the two men in the corner, one with a hole in his head and the other bound by his wrists and ankles, his head slumped forward.

Father grunted. “Good. She say anything?”

“Nothing of importance. At least not yet.”

Nodding, Father moved to the table, studying the weapons with a sense of nostalgia, like they all brought forth fond memories for him.

They probably did. Father liked to torture people almost as much as I did.

“We’ll wake her when your brother gets here. How’s the boy going?”

I blew out a breath, pushing off my spot on the wall. “As well as can be expected. He’s similar to Lukyan in a lot of ways. Brimming with potential, but he lacks the drive to really tap into what he’s capable of. He handled himself well with The Dirty Vultures, even if he did throw up.”

Father chuckled. “He’ll get desensitised to that very soon.”

Yes, I suspected he would. Speaking of The Dirty Vultures...

“Any more problems with the MC?” I asked, fighting the urge to pace up and down the room. I was eager to get started. The sooner we dealt with Rayna, the sooner I could get back to Drea.

Considering I only had limited time left with her, I wanted to take full advantage of it. There was a large part of me that feared that the moment she left here, that would be it. I would never see her again.

I knew she was attracted to me, knew she enjoyed the sexual aspects of our time together. But beyond that? *That* I wasn’t so sure of. There was this voice inside my head telling me she was only with me to help pass the time of her imprisonment, and that once she was free, she wouldn’t come back.

It made me hesitant to let her go.

What if she left with Juan and I never saw her again?

I didn’t care if she didn’t want to be here. *I* wanted her here, and that was all the incentive I needed to keep her.

“None,” Father answered, pursing his lips. “They’ve been very quiet since your...incident with them. *Too* quiet.”

I frowned at the unease lacing his voice. “You’re suspicious.”

“Very. They’re planning something. I know it. I *feel* it. It feels like something is about to happen, something bad.”

“If you’re worried, why don’t we just do a pre-emptive strike? Take them all out before they have a chance to make a move?”

Father considered it. “Let’s deal with this first. Once Rayna and Dominik have been dealt with, we’ll take care of them.”

I nodded. “Alright then.”

Nik jogged into the room a few minutes later, slightly out of breath, sweat glistening on his forehead. “Sorry, I got here as fast as I could.”

“Where were you?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

He glared. “None of your business.”

He was with Tatiana.

If we were alone I would have pushed harder, but now wasn't the time.

Since Illayana moved out, Tatiana's visits to the house have basically been nonexistent. She still runs her usual route every day, which takes her right past our house, but that was the extent of her presence here.

If Nik was with her, it meant he'd tracked her down, and it made me curious. I would bring it up with him later.

"Let's get to it," Father said, cracking his neck. "Wake her up."

Nik picked up the bucket full of piss and shit that sat in the corner (which was from the original occupant of this room before we moved them to another) and threw it all over Rayna.

She startled awake, coughing and gagging at the bodily fluids now running over her skin. "Oh my god, oh my god," she cried, retching. Her lips quivered, her eyes darting around the room in a panic. "What are you doing?!" she shrieked, flailing wildly. "Let me go! Let me go right now!"

Father, Nik and I watched her with bored expressions, waiting for her to tire herself out, which didn't take long. Once she settled down, Father looked at me and inclined his head towards Rayna.

Nik frowned, his gaze darting between the two of us.

I was just as confused as he was, but I refused to show it. I'd done plenty of interrogations in my life. We all had. But when Father was in the room, he always took control. He wasn't the type to sit back and let his boys do all the dirty work. He liked to get his hands bloody like the rest of us.

Why was he all of a sudden handing over his control? First the meet with the Los Zetas and now this? What was going through his head?

I moved to stand in front of Rayna. She breathed hard, whimpering as she tried to pull her arms free.

"I'm going to give you one chance, Rayna. You tell me what I want to know and I won't kill you."

She eyed me suspiciously. "I don't believe you."

Couldn't really blame her for that.

I moved and grasped the table holding all our torture weapons, pushing it over to Rayna. I stopped it directly in front of her, giving her plenty of time to look over them all as I ran my fingers over each one.

Pliers, knives, axes, daggers, machetes, stun belts, spiked batons, hacksaws. The list was endless.

She swallowed, fear flashing across her face.

I took my time picking the one I wanted. I had favourites (like I'm sure everybody does). The spiked baton, for example. But today I felt like getting up close and personal, so I picked up one of the curved daggers, holding it up in the air.

This would do very nicely.

"Aleksandr, wait—"

I stepped around the table until I stood in front of her. My head tilted to the side as I studied her closely, wondering where I was going to cut first. There were just so many options. I wanted her to hurt, to bleed. But I didn't want her to die. Not yet, anyway. Not until we got the answers we needed.

Rayna was as vain as they came, so I decided to start with her face.

I ran the tip of the blade across her skin, from the middle of her forehead, down the bridge of her nose to underneath her eye.

She stiffened, staying absolutely still, too scared to even breathe.

"Why did you hand Illayana over to Nero? Why did you betray us?"

She licked her lips nervously. "You'd seriously hurt me? A woman? Your own cousin?"

"You think being a woman will save you? That being related to me will make me hesitant to hurt you?" I tsked, shaking my head in disappointment. "I really thought you knew me better than that, Rayna."

I didn't go out of my way to hurt women, but I also wasn't afraid to do it if I needed to. If a woman was coming at me with a knife trying to kill me, you bet your damn ass I'd end her before she got the chance to end me.

Women were just as, if not more, dangerous than men.

"I do, I do. I know family means everything to you and I-I'm family Aleksandr, I am. I—ahhhh!"

I slashed the blade down her face, making sure to slice right through her eye. She screamed, flailing back as blood poured down her cheek.

"You are *not* family, Rayna. Family doesn't do what you did. Don't try to appeal to that side of me, because you're just going to piss me off." I grabbed her, holding her still as I placed the tip of the dagger over her other eye.

"Wait! Wait! Please don't," she begged, crying.

I loved it when they cried.

"Why did you betray us?"

When she didn't answer, I started from her hairline, dragging the dagger down her forehead towards her eye, her skin splitting open. She screamed, flailed, twisted, trying everything to get herself away from the pain.

As the blade sliced through her eyebrow she screamed, "Because my dad told me too!"

I stopped, a mere millimetre away from taking her sight completely. I glanced over my shoulder at my father. His whole focus was on Rayna, his body tight with tension and anger.

Rayna continued, her words coming out in a rush. "He told me to hand her over, okay? I had nothing to do with it. It was all him. Him and his stupid plan."

"What plan?"

"How the fuck should I know? You think he includes me in his plans? He doesn't tell me shit," she spat, groaning in pain.

There was a small part of me that believed that.

Dominik was very much a singular person. Whatever this 'plan' was, I doubted he involved her in the fundamentals of it, even though she was his daughter. Rayna was so desperate for his approval, she'd do anything for him without question.

Still...she knew *something*. I was sure of it. Call it an inkling, or intuition, or just your average gut feeling. Whatever it was, it was screaming at me that she knew more than she was letting on.

"He told you *something* though, didn't he, Rayna?" I asked, lowering my voice.

She averted her gaze, hissing at the pain from the small movement.

Just like I thought.

I sighed, shaking my head in disappointment. "Honestly, Rayna, I would have thought you'd know better than this."

A sneer streaked across her face at the tone of my words. My voice was laced with reprimand, the same kind I'd heard Dominik use on her time and time again—which was exactly why she hated it.

"You might not have been actively involved in the Bratva, but you *know* how we deal with people who betray the family. Now, I'm willing to be lenient with you. I swear on my mother's grave, I won't hurt you anymore—and I won't kill you—if you tell me what you know."

She eyed me suspiciously, trying to figure out if she could believe me. If she could trust me.

In the end, she decided she could. She knew that when it came to my mother, I didn't fuck around.

"Look, I don't know much, okay? I swear. Just that he had some sort of deal with Nero. The guy wanted your sister. He wanted to use her to get Dimitri to back out of the fight between the Outfit and La Cosa Nostra. My dad offered to help him."

"In exchange for?" I highly doubted Dominik would do a damn thing unless he was getting something in return.

She glanced nervously behind me, no doubt looking at my father, who I'm sure was letting his anger show.

I clicked my fingers an inch away from her face and her eyes darted back to me. "Don't look at him. Look at me. What did Dominik want from Nero?"

"Once Nero was done with Illayana, he was to give her to my dad so he could use her to force Dimitri into giving up control of the Bratva."

Nik scoffed, joining in for the first time. "That never would have worked."

Rayna arched an eyebrow condescendingly. "Are you sure about that? Parents aren't meant to have them, but they *all* have favourites. I should know. My brother was my dad's favourite, and he died in the womb. Hadn't even been born yet. Did that stop my dad from loving him more? No. If he could trade my life for the life of his dead unborn son, he would have. Illayana is Dimitri's favourite, and we all know why. It's because she looks the most like your mother. He would have done whatever he needed to do to get her back safely."

Silence fell over the room.

She was right. If Dominik had succeeded in his plan to use Illayana as leverage, it would have worked. There was nothing—*nothing*—my father wouldn't do to save her life, because Rayna was right. She *was* the favourite.

My brothers and I, we all knew it. We didn't care. Father loved us all. He just had a real soft spot for Illayana. We all did, really. She was the baby of the family. The youngest always got babied, regardless of how old they were.

I was actually quite surprised, even a little impressed. I never would have thought he'd be able to come up with something so...well...devious. Smart.

I glanced over my shoulder, locking eyes with my father. Anger radiated from every inch of him, his eyes burning with the need for vengeance. To hurt. To kill.

I recognised the look. I saw it in the mirror every day.

I expected him to take over, but he just inclined his head at Rayna again, his own silent way of telling me to deal with it.

I'd find out what that was about later.

I turned back to face Rayna. "What does Dominik have planned now?"

"What makes you think he has something else planned?"

"Don't bullshit me, Rayna. We both know how tenacious Dominik is. Getting to Illayana in New York surrounded by La Cosa Nostra would be next to impossible for someone like him with limited resources. So he would have come up with another way to get what he wants. What. Is. It?"

"I don't know," she whined in pain. Whether it was from the cuts still bleeding down her face, or the pressure being suspended in the air like that put on her wrists, I wasn't sure.

As long as she was in pain, I was happy.

"I swear, I don't know what he has planned next. I don't."

"What were you doing at the café?"

She hesitated for the briefest moment. "Meeting a friend."

A friend? Right. I called bullshit.

"I'm sorry, I should have been more clear with you about what happens if you lie to me." I moved back to the table, putting down the curved dagger and picking up another weapon.

"I'm not—" her words died off in her throat when she got a look at what was now in my hands.

The pliers.

"For every lie you tell me, I take a tooth."

She whimpered, trying to get away from me as I made my way back to her. "A-Aleksandr—"

"Choose your next words *very carefully*, Rayna," I warned, darkness dripping from my voice.

"Okay, okay," she breathed out, licking her lips. "I go there once a week to meet someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

I gripped her face, shoving the pliers into her mouth and clasping one of her central incisors, the teeth at the very front.

“No, I really have no idea who he is!” she mumbled around the pliers, tears bursting from her eyes. I pulled the pliers out, giving her a chance to talk. “My-my dad just told me to meet the guy there. I don’t know his name. I don’t know a thing about him, apart from his horrible sense of personal hygiene. I just meet him at the café, take the bag of cash he gives me and leave. That’s it.”

“What do you do with the cash?”

“I get a text with a location shortly after and I drop it off there.”

“Where’s your phone?” She didn’t have it on her when I kidnapped her. I know, I checked.

“In my handbag back at the café. I wasn’t anticipating getting jumped,” she said angrily.

That’s unfortunate.

“Who picks up the money?”

“I don’t know. I’m gone by the time they get there.”

Goddamn it. Dominik was being extra vigilant in covering his tracks. So far, all her answers seemed genuine. I was pretty good at being able to tell if someone was lying to me, and my instincts weren’t screaming ‘lie’. So I was inclined to believe her.

Whoever this guy was, he was paying Dominik for something. The question was, what? Dominik had the same connections we did. Was it guns? Or maybe protection?

There was still this nagging feeling in my gut telling me Rayna was holding something back.

“You might not know who he is, but you have an idea, don’t you?”

She eyed the pliers in my hand, picking her words carefully. “I saw him get on the back of a motorcycle once. He wasn’t wearing a cut, so I didn’t think anything of it at the time. But today when he pulled up at the café, I saw there were a bunch of other bikers riding with him.”

“What MC were they a part of?”

“I didn’t get a good enough look at their patches.”

Her information was both helpful and useless all at the same time. Dominik was clearly in league with an MC. But there were dozens of different MCs in this corner of Vegas alone. Finding out which one it was would take time.

I was inclined to think it was The Dirty Vultures. They could have easily turned to Dominik when my father refused to work with them.

I moved onto the last question. One I was fairly sure I knew the answer to already. “Where is Dominik?”

Rayna scoffed. “Your guess is as good as mine. I haven’t seen him since Illayana’s wedding. He calls me when he wants me to do something for him. Always from a different number.”

And like the good little bitch she was, she always did it without question.

I looked back at my father. He gave me the briefest nod before turning on his heels and leaving the room.

“Okay,” I said, putting down the pliers. “Then I guess we’re done here.”

“D-done?” she stuttered. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” I smirked.

“You bastard!” she screeched, flailing wildly. “You swore you wouldn’t kill me if I told you what I know! You swore!”

“Yes, I did, and I’m a man of my word Rayna. So don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you.”

She breathed out a huge sigh of relief, her entire body slumping as if all the energy left her at once.

“Your life isn’t mine to take.”

Her head snapped up, her brows lowered in confusion.

Behind me the door opened, the *click-clack* of high heels hitting the concrete floor echoing throughout the room.

“Fuck,” Rayna choked, her eyes widening in fear. Liquid splattered on the ground between her legs, the stench of urine reaching my nose, and I laughed.

Yeah, my sister had that effect on people.

I turned, a smile spreading across my face as Illayana walked in.

Chapter Thirty-One



It had only been a few weeks since I last saw my sister, but somehow in that short amount of time, she'd already changed so much.

Illayana had always been strong. Confident. A force to be reckoned with. She'd been raised to be just as cutthroat and ruthless as my brothers and I, and it showed in everything she did. The way she held herself.

Her time away in New York had somehow made her even stronger, more lethal. Even the way she'd walked into the room, the air surrounding her had changed to something darker, fearful.

It was powerful. Purposeful. The kind of walk that demanded every person's attention and respect.

Her whole demeanour had gone from light and carefree, to hard and stoic. More determined. The fun, energetic, crazy Illayana I knew wasn't here. She was replaced with this mature, no-nonsense woman.

"She looks good," Nik commented, eyeing the closed door in front of us, Rayna's screams from inside so loud they echoed out into the hallway. "Different, but good. Happy."

I grunted, crossing my arms over my chest. Illayana had wanted the room to herself while she tortured Rayna. No idea why. Maybe she just didn't want an audience while she had her fun.

Her guards, Christian, Luca, Lorenzo and Adrian were inside with her, having refused to leave her side. After her kidnapping they'd grown a

backbone and stopped crumbling to her every whim (which I'm sure she hated).

Nik and I didn't care and moved out into the hall to give her her space. Based on the pain-filled screams reaching my ears, she was enjoying herself a hell of a lot more than Rayna was.

"She looks...older somehow, don't you think? More polished. Refined."

"Yes," I agreed. I didn't think it was Arturo who brought out this change in her. Illayana wasn't the type to bend to someone else's will. And based on what I witnessed, he seemed to like her just the way she was.

No. This change was brought on by her new position as Queen of La Cosa Nostra.

There was a certain level of seriousness and professionalism required of someone in an authoritative position like the one she was in, and it was clear Illayana had adopted that to a tee.

"What do you think about what Rayna said?" Nik asked.

"I think Dominik is a bigger threat than we first anticipated."

"Yeah, I think you're right. I never would have thought he'd do something like this. Shit, I knew he wanted Father's position, but I didn't realise he was *that* desperate for it."

"I think Dominik is a lot like Rayna," I said, glancing at him. "Both desperate to gain the approval of their parent, but always coming up short, no matter what they did. In the meeting with Sergei yesterday, Father told him to replace him with Dominik."

Nik's brows slammed down into a frown. "Why the fuck would he do that?"

I hadn't told him about the arranged marriage with Anya Tarasov yet, and I wasn't planning to until it was too late for him to do anything about it. He'd try to play the 'selfless brother' card and take my place.

I wasn't going to let that happen. I ignored his question by continuing on with what I was saying. "Sergei had the opportunity to put Dominik in charge, and he didn't take it. Why? Because he doesn't think Dominik is capable of handling it. Sergei has no problem voicing his thoughts. I'm sure he's told Dominik time and time again that he isn't good enough—"

"And Dominik would have gotten sick of hearing it," Nik said, finishing my train of thought.

"Exactly," I nodded. "If Sergei wasn't going to give him what he wanted, he was going to take it himself and by doing so, prove to Sergei he

was smart enough, strong enough, ruthless enough to be *Pakhan* all along.”

“Grandfather would have been fine with that?” he asked sceptically.

“Sergei values strength over anything else. You know that. He would have bought Dominik a drink and toasted to his victory if he’d won.”

Nik scowled. “He’s a real fucking asshole. I have no idea how Father managed to survive with him for so long.”

“If Sergei didn’t need him to continue on with his legacy, I highly doubted he would have even had children.”

“True.” He wiped a hand down his face. “What about the whole MC thing? Are you thinking what I’m thinking about that?”

“That Dominik is in league with The Dirty Vultures? Yes.” It was the only thing that made sense. “We need to interrogate the prospect in the next room.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t already.” He gave me the side eye.

“I’ve been busy,” I grunted.

“Getting busy, more like it. Does Father know?”

“Know what?” I asked, playing dumb. I should have known better though. Nik was incredibly perceptive.

“Come on, are you seriously going to deny it? Anyone who knows you can see you’re hot for the Zeta woman. I’ve watched you with her.”

My eyes cut to him. “You spying on me, *mladshiy brat?*” *Little brother?*

He lifted one shoulder carelessly. “More like looking out for you. If she turns around and fucks you over, I need to know so I can cover your ass.”

“She wouldn’t do that.” Even *I* was surprised with the amount of confidence I sunk into those words. I didn’t realise I trusted her that much.

“Zander.” Nik’s voice held a mountain of seriousness. “Have as much fun with her as you want, but don’t forget who she is. She’s the Don of the Los Zeta cartel. She’s not an ally, she’s the enemy.”

My fists clenched, anger shooting through me.

“Besides, a woman like that would never be satisfied with being your Queen. She has her own empire. One I’m sure she wouldn’t give up for you.” His phone rang and he fished it out of his pocket. A dark cloud of anger crossed his face.

There was only one person in the world capable of bringing out such a reaction from my usually calm and collected brother.

“Tatiana?”

Nik grunted, putting the phone away.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” He answered a little too quickly for me to believe that.

I punched him playfully in the arm, making him wince. “Out with it. You think you can pry into my life without giving me something from yours. No way.”

He rubbed his bicep, staring off into space with an expression on his face I couldn’t place. “She’s leaving.”

My brows raised in surprise. “Really? Ivan is going to allow that?” Tatiana’s father, Ivan, was one of my father’s many advisors. I’d known him for so many years, I’d actually lost track.

He was incredibly protective of Tatiana. So protective, in fact, he made my father look tame and relaxed in comparison.

“She got into some fancy college in New York and she’s going to study fashion. She’ll be leaving in a few weeks.”

Ah. That explained the look on his face then. It was sadness. Despair. Hurt.

“She can’t find a college here to go to?” I asked, trying to find a solution to help take that depressing look off his face.

“That’s not the problem. She *wants* to leave Vegas. She wants a fresh start, away from—” his words cut off abruptly, agony in his eyes.

“You,” I finished softly, sympathy squeezing my chest. “Alright, I’ve had enough. No more stalling. No more avoiding my questions or telling me to ‘mind my own business’. What the fuck happened between the two of you, Nikolai?”

He released a ragged breath. “I fucked up, Zander. Big time. And there’s nothing I can do to fix it. I’ve tried. I can’t—”

“What did you do?” I’d seen the glances Tatiana slid his way when he wasn’t looking. They were filled with longing, desire. Whatever he’d done couldn’t be that bad if she still felt that way about him. Unless— “did you cheat on her?” I wasn’t aware of them ever dating, but that was something most women would never tolerate.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “What I did was worse.” A stricken look crossed his face, filled with heartbreak. “Zander, I—”

The door in front of us opened and Nik clamped his mouth shut, his whole face shutting down and suddenly void of all emotion.

Illayana walked out covered head to toe in blood. It dripped down her face. Soaked into her hair. Drenched her clothes so much her white pantsuit was now stained red. Christian, Luca, Lorenzo and Adrian were at her back, the La Cosa Nostra men looking sickened and pale while Adrian seemed no worse for wear.

Adrian was used to the brutality with which we tortured our enemies. I suspected Christian, Luca and Lorenzo were not, based on the nervous and skittish glances they kept throwing Illayana's way, like they were terrified of what she might do to them. What she was capable of.

I looked back at Nik. There was no way I was going to get anything more out of him right now. He'd completely shut down. The look on his face made it perfectly clear he wasn't going to say another word.

I tamped down the flicker of irritation shooting through me. I'd been trying for months to get him to open up and talk to me about what happened. This was the first time he'd been willing to share.

"I gotta go," Nik said gruffly, looking at Illayana. "I'll catch up with you before you go."

"Actually—" Nik walked away, his footsteps thudding in the small space. "—I'm not staying," Illayana finished, frowning at his retreating back. She glanced my way. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," I answered, covering for him. "How did it go in there?"

Satisfaction glimmered in her eyes. "Very, very well." She looked at her guards. "Wouldn't you say so, guys?"

Christian blanched. "Sure," he said hesitantly, avoiding her eyes.

Luca cleared his throat. "Was definitely something we've never seen before, that's for sure."

I arched a brow, intrigued. I leaned to the side to get a glimpse inside the room. Rayna was still hanging from the ceiling, her eyes dull and lifeless, her face frozen in unimaginable pain. She was naked, a straight cut running from the hollow of her neck all the way down to her pelvis. Her skin had been pulled outwards, her organs spilling out onto the floor. You could see directly inside her body. Illayana had completely eviscerated her.

"Huh," I said, looking back at her. "I thought you would have chosen something that didn't kill her straight away. You know, drag it out a bit."

Illayana huffed, walking down the hallway. I followed, her guards falling into line behind us. "I wanted to, *believe me*. But I don't have the time. I have to get back."

“Rushing off so soon?” We made our way up out of the pit and across the warehouse, stepping into the cool Las Vegas air. The moon shone down brightly around us, helping to illuminate the path as we walked back towards the house.

She came to a stop. “Give us a minute guys,” she said to her guards.

They looked at each other, having a silent discussion amongst themselves about what to do.

Illayana growled. “Just step back and give me some space. I want to talk to my brother. *Alone.*” She was clearly frustrated with having a guard detail. Before Arturo, she’d never had one before. Never needed one. Since her kidnapping, Arturo must have demanded stricter rules be in place to prevent it from happening again. Rules that were smothering her.

All four men took several steps back, placing themselves barely out of ear shot, but that was as far as they were willing to go.

I levelled my gaze on all of them and narrowed my eyes.

They each took another four steps back.

Good enough.

“Thank you,” Illayana breathed out, rubbing her temples. “I honestly don’t know how much more of this shit I can take. They follow me everywhere, Aleksandr. *Everywhere.* Even into the goddamn bathroom.”

I shrugged. “It’s their job. And after what happened with Nero, you can’t really blame them.”

“No, I guess not. Especially after what Arturo did to them for failing to protect me. Still, it’s infuriating.”

“You knew what you were getting into when you married the man.”

Illayana grunted. Lines of worry marred her face, an anxious energy vibrating from her.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“Shit with the Outfit is bad. Franco is causing us some *real* trouble. Little fucker keeps hitting all our distribution houses and stealing our supplies. I need the guns Father promised.”

I nodded. “I’ll handle it.” In the original agreement with La Cosa Nostra, Father agreed to give them cases of weapons to help in their feud against the Outfit. The shipment had been all ready to go—until Nero bombed our house and stole the guns. We’d managed to get them back, but we hadn’t had the time to send them over yet.

“What’s your plan?”

“Gonna hit that shithead where it hurts,” she smiled vindictively. “I need them by the weekend. Can you bring them with you when you come for Arturo’s party?”

I groaned. I’d completely forgotten about that.

Illayana narrowed her eyes. “You already said you were going to come. Don’t even think about backing out.”

I was thinking about it, to be honest. I’m sure I could come up with some sort of excuse. A deal to be made. Someone to kill. Something.

“I need you.”

I growled, an overwhelming urge to stamp my foot on the ground like fucking toddler zinging through me.

You little shit.

Illayana knew I wouldn’t say no if she said she needed me.

“Fine,” I grunted out between clenched teeth.

She smiled brightly. “Thank you. Oh. And I need you to take Lukyan.”

“Take Lukyan?” I frowned.

“Yes. He’s driving me fucking crazy, Zander. I mean, I appreciate him coming with me. Having him there really helped the adjustment period. But if he doesn’t leave, I’m honestly going to kill him.”

Rolling my eyes, I slowly began walking the path back to the house. “What’s he doing?”

“What’s he *not* doing? When he’s not purposefully antagonising Arturo, he’s hitting on anything with a pair of tits. You know he fucked one of the Capos’ wives? Almost got himself fucking killed. If I don’t murder him in his sleep, someone else will. I guarantee you. I need you to take him back with you when you come to the party. Tell him you need him for something. I dunno, just get him the hell out of New York before he winds up dead.”

“Alright, alright. Calm down, I’ll take him.” Lukyan was going to be the death of me one day, I was sure of it.

Out of all my siblings, he was the one I worried about the most. He was twenty-three and still had the maturity of a fourteen-year-old boy. It was one of the reasons I didn’t even bother considering him for the arranged marriage with the Tarasovs. He wouldn’t take it seriously enough. He’d treat the entire thing like a fucking game.

“Thank you. I just can’t handle him right now. On top of the Outfit, there’s shit going on within the *famiglia* and I can’t waste time worrying

about what he's going to do next, who he's going to insult or piss off. He's going to give me grey hairs from the stress alone."

"What's happening?"

She tsked, agitation wafting off her. "What I knew would happen. Families are pissed Arturo married an outsider. A 'non-Italian woman'." She put that into air quotes, rolling her eyes. "Honestly, it's ridiculous. They act like their women are *so much better* than me. They can't even defend themselves. None of them can. They just cower and cry behind their husbands any time anything happens. They're fucking useless."

"You know their women don't fight, Illayana. That's not the way they do things."

"Well they should," she snapped, her eyes burning. "They shouldn't be relying on their husbands to save them. They should have the strength to save themselves."

I placed my hand on her shoulder, looking her deep in the eyes. "Don't go trying to instigate crazy changes to their way of life, not right away. They'll just rebel against it. You need to *show* them a better way, not force it. Show them how valuable you can be."

She took a few deep breaths, calming herself down. "I know. Father said the same thing. It's one of the reasons why I want the guns. I plan to unveil them at Arturo's birthday party for all his men to see."

I smirked. *Smart idea.* One of the quickest ways to a Mafia man's heart was fancy weaponry. And we had the best.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, the crunch of gravel beneath our feet the only sound ringing in the night air. Her guards kept a respectable distance back, which I could tell helped her relax slightly.

"Are you happy?" I asked as we stopped in front of the large black SUV parked in front of the house.

Illayana looked at me, a sparkle shimmering in her eyes. "Happiest I've ever been. Apart from all the shit that's been going on, that is. Arturo is... everything I could have ever wanted—and more."

I nodded. As long as she was happy, that's all that mattered. "Good. Alright, you get going. I'll see you in a few days."

She reached up onto her tippy toes and kissed me on the cheek. "

"*Skuchayu po tebe, starshiy brat,*" *Miss you, big brother.*

Chapter Thirty-Two



“On your feet, *malyshka*,” Aleksandr rumbled, standing in the doorway to my prison.

I sighed, pausing my workout to glare at him. “Hello to you too, Big Guy. I’m great, thank you so much for asking. And how are you this morning?”

His lips tilted up in the slightest hint of a smile. “Better now.”

I tried not to read too much into that, but flutters bloomed in my stomach anyway.

“Come on, I have something to show you.”

Colour me intrigued.

I only had three sit ups left, so I quickly finished my set and jumped to my feet, stretching out my body. Aleksandr’s eyes trailed over me, flaring with heat. I loved the way he looked at me, like I was the hottest thing in the world. It was definitely a confidence booster.

“Lead the way,” I said, sweeping a hand through the air. I followed him out of the room, my eyes gliding over my surroundings out of pure habit. I noticed the lack of security instantly. The guard that was usually posted at my door was no longer there.

Interesting.

Did that mean he trusted me not to try to escape?

No. If that was the case, I wouldn’t be locked in every night.

“How did things go with that woman? The one you kidnapped?” I asked as we walked down the stairs. Curiosity zinged through me. Where was he taking me?

Aleksandr grumbled. “Good.”

“Doesn’t sound good. What happened? Did you kill her? Tell me how you did it. Did she cry?”

He chuckled softly, his eyes lighting up with amusement. “I didn’t kill her. My sister did. She was the one Rayna handed over to be raped, so the kill was rightfully hers. She eviscerated her.”

“Reaaaally?” I drawled out, my interest peaking. Evisceration was *brutal*. It required someone with a very strong stomach. “I think I like your sister.”

Aleksandr laughed. It was a full body, boisterous laugh that instantly brought a smile to my face. I had no clue what he found so funny, but I’d say it again and again if it meant I got to hear that sound again.

The two guards at the front door looked at Aleksandr in shock, like they’d never heard him laugh before.

“Fuck, I think she’d like you too,” he said, his body still shaking. “I don’t even want to know the kind of shit you two would get up too if you ever met.” He opened the front door, holding it open for me.

I walked out into the brutal Las Vegas heat. The sun bored down on me, the air hot and sticky. Aleksandr placed a hand on the small of my back and led me around the house. He wasn’t taking me back to that torture dungeon, was he?

God, I hoped not.

When we turned the corner I froze, stopping dead in my tracks. In front of me was a bike course of some kind. Laid over the grass was a large foam track the size of a tennis court. It had little roads going off in dozens of different directions, with safety cones placed throughout as obstacles. It was done up like a miniature town with traffic lights, bench seats, free standing lamps and fake bushes.

A beautiful, black bike sat smack dab in the middle of the track, a helmet hanging off the handlebars.

I turned to face Aleksandr, my eyes wide. “What’s this?” I breathed out in shock.

“You said you’ve always wanted to learn how to ride a bike.” He shrugged a shoulder idly, like it wasn’t a big deal. But fuck, it was.

This would have taken him *ages* to set up. He'd gone to all this trouble for me? Oh man, my heart swooned. I was lost for words. No one had ever done anything like this for me before. Ever. I was stunned into silence (which didn't happen very often).

"You're going to teach me?"

He nodded, leading me towards the bike. It was perfect. Exactly how I envisioned my first bike to be. There was no basket or ugly tassels hanging off the handles. It had a gorgeous fire-breathing dragon sticker on it, reminding me of the tattoo on my chest. Was that why he got it?

"I don't know what to say." I swallowed the lump in my throat. I was not going to cry.

Hold it in, Drea. "Thank you," I croaked.

"It's nothing," he grunted.

I jumped up on my tiptoes to try to kiss him, but he was too damn tall. I settled for grabbing his shirt instead and yanking him down towards me. He chuckled as his mouth met mine. I could feel him smile against my lips. It made my heart soar.

"Come on. Let's go, let's go," I said excitedly, jumping up and down. I climbed onto the bike and used my feet to push forward, eager to get started. The bike started rolling, gaining momentum. I tried to put my feet on the pedals, but I couldn't get them on.

When the bike slowed down and began to shake, panic set in. I didn't know where to look. My head darted down to my feet and then back up to my hands. Down and up, down and up.

"How do I stop?!" I shrieked. I was going to fall off.

Aleksandr's big hands gripped me by the waist, steadying me. His rumbling laugh hit the air. "You need to steer and pedal."

"At the same time?"

"Yes," he chuckled. Glad he was enjoying himself. This was terrifying. He brought me to a stop. In his hands was the helmet that had fallen off the handles. "Safety first." He put it on my head and clipped it together under my chin. "Now, feet on the pedals." I did as he said, looking down to make sure I'd placed them on properly. "Good. Hold the handles tight, but not too tight."

Not too tight? What was 'not too tight'?

"That's it. Okay, start pedalling."

"I'm going to fall."

“No you won’t. I’ve got you.”

I hesitated for a second, but the feel of his strong hands on my waist gave me confidence and I began to pedal. I went slowly and he stayed with me every second of the way, keeping me balanced.

“Good. Focus on steering the bike. Keep it in the middle of the road on the track.” His voice was soft. Comforting, patient.

I focused on keeping the bike straight, trying not to let it shake while my legs pedalled. When the road curved, I steered it to follow and Aleksandr praised me.

“Very good. Now pedal a little harder.”

I did and I started to go faster. Hey, this wasn’t so bad.

A smile bloomed across my face. I was doing it. I was riding a bike!

We went around the track over and over again. Aleksandr kept up with me, his hands firmly on my waist as he gave me more instructions. I was so lost in concentration, focusing on steering and pedalling, steering and pedalling, that I didn’t even notice Aleksandr had let me go until I’d biked past him.

“Oh my god!” I jerked in fear and the bike shook.

“You’re alright! Keep going.” Aleksandr called out, his voice soothing. “You can do it.”

I righted the bike, determination filling my bones. I put all my focus into the task before me, remembering everything Aleksandr had said, and kept going. Around and around I went, never losing momentum. Confidence burst in my chest. I picked up a little more speed.

This was so much fun! I started going faster and faster, the wind whipping in my face, and I hollered out in excitement.

“Woohoo!”

I zoomed past Aleksandr as he stood on the outside of the track. He just watched me loop the course over and over again, not an ounce of boredom on his face. There was a warmth in his eyes I’d never seen before, a softness that made my heart skip a beat.

As I made my way back to him, I recounted everything he’d said about braking and came to a stop in front of him. I placed my feet back on solid ground and a huge, beaming smile broke out across my lips. I softly lowered the bike to the ground (because I didn’t want to scratch it) and ran to him.

He caught me as I leapt into his arms. I kissed him all over, on his lips, cheek, forehead, nose. I peppered him with kisses and he scrunched up his face, laughing. I'd never seen him like this before. I liked it. He was so carefree. It was a beautiful thing to witness.

"Thank you," I breathed out, slightly overwhelmed. I still couldn't believe he'd done this for me.

Aleksandr stared deeply into my eyes. "Anything for you."

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Chapter Thirty-Three



I was nervous, which was strange for me because I didn't *get* nervous.

Under any circumstances. I could be facing a room full of people with guns pointed at my head and my hands cuffed behind my back and I'd shrug it off, not the least bit concerned.

But this?

Yeah, I was nervous.

I wasn't scared. Scared and nervous were two very different things. This meeting with Juan was like child's play for me. I'd been in situations far worse than the one currently in front of me.

What made me anxious was the outcome of this meeting. What it would result in. Either an all out war with The Los Zetas, or Drea leaving. Leaving me.

I know it shouldn't matter. In six months' time, I'll be marrying Anya Tarasov. Nothing substantial could ever happen between Drea and I. But like I've said before, I was an expert at compartmentalising, so I was good at ignoring things until they became an issue.

In my mind, I still had six full months to spend with Drea. Getting to know her more. Understanding how her brain worked. Learning what made her happy. What made her sad. Enjoying the feel of her body against mine. The look on her face when she'd seen the bike course I'd put up for her was beautiful. It had given me this light, warm feeling in my chest that I'd never

experienced before. Seeing her so happy made me happy. I just wanted to spend all of my time trying to bring that smile back.

My attachment to her was now out of control. Any time I was away from her, I felt...uneasy, twitchy. Like the longer I was away from her, the more anxious and angrier I became.

It didn't bode well for when she left. I honestly couldn't say how I was going to react.

And that terrified me more than anything.

Drea fidgeted at my side as we waited for her brother to arrive, her eyes glancing to the door and back repeatedly. We stood in one of many buildings the Bratva owned in downtown Las Vegas, a tense silence filling the air around us.

Was she as nervous as I was? Did she feel that same unbearable anxiousness *I* felt thinking about her leaving?

I wouldn't know, would I? Because she was damn near impossible to read sometimes, to know what was going on in that pretty little head of hers. When she was overwhelmed with stress or anger, she was an open book. But in moments like this, when she had on this cool, calm façade, I had no idea what she was thinking.

I suppose I could always ask her, but a part of me was afraid to know the answer.

What if she *wanted* to leave? To never see me again? The thought kept bouncing around my head like a ping pong ball, making it impossible for me to relax.

Nik leaned against the wall behind me, staring at his phone, silent as always as he glared at the screen. He'd avoided me since our last conversation, refusing to give me the time of day because he knew I'd pester him about Tatiana.

And I would. I wasn't going to let him shut me out again. I just had to wait for the right time.

The rattle of chains echoed around the room, Drea itching at the cuffs around her wrists. It was a precaution in case Juan tried to take her and run.

Surprisingly, Drea hadn't put up a fight when I told her I'd be cuffing her. She'd actually smirked and told me she'd wished I did it when I fucked her.

The fact that she'd used past tense didn't slip by me. It meant she expected to leave here with Juan, free of me.

The thought made a tight feeling spread across my chest. It felt like I couldn't breathe.

The door opened suddenly, two men walking through.

"Juan!" Drea lurched forward, running for her brother. She abruptly stopped when the chain snapped tight less than a step away from me. She threw me an annoyed look over her shoulder.

Juan was similar to Drea in appearance; the same caramel skin and amber eyes, that same hardened expression I'd seen on her face numerous times before. Except his didn't make me harder than steel. He was wearing black jeans and a sleeveless tank top, tattoos winding up both arms.

At his side was a tall, well built man with dark hair and dark eyes, and those eyes were currently plastered on Drea, longing burning in his gaze.

Who the fuck was this guy?

A dark, jealous possessiveness rose up within me, making my fists clench. The intimate way he was looking at her said all I needed to know.

They'd fucked.

I tightened the chain in my hand as a torrent of anger soared through me. It was connected to the cuffs around Drea's wrists, keeping her tethered to me. A savage growl slipped from my lips at the thought of another man with his hands on her body. It made me so enraged I wanted to smash his face against the wall until blood oozed out of his ears and eyes.

"Zander." I stiffened as Nik came up to my side cautiously. "You good?" he whispered, keeping his voice low.

I cracked my neck, pushing those feelings to the side. I'd deal with them and what they meant later. "Fine. Let's get on with it."

Nik stared at me for a few seconds more before he stepped back, going back to his position on the wall behind me.

"Drea," Juan breathed out in relief, taking a step towards her.

Nik had his gun out and pointed at his chest before he could blink.

Juan raised his hands, showing he was unarmed. "I just want to hug my sister."

Nik didn't lower his gun, waiting for my approval.

"Aleksandr." Drea stared up at me with those big, beautiful amber eyes, filled with desperation.

I groaned in irritation. Why did she have to go saying my name like that? I was incapable of denying her when she looked at me with such sad, pleading eyes.

I flicked my head towards Juan, giving her the permission she was searching for.

Gratitude shone over her face, a bright, beaming smile on her lips.

My heart thumped in my chest. Having her smile at me like that made it worth it, even though it was risky letting her get so close to her brother.

Juan studied us, brows lowered slightly as his gaze darted between the two of us. I unwound the chain around my hand as Drea moved away, giving her just enough slack to make it over to him.

“Hermano bebe,” Baby brother, Drea murmured, wrapping her arms around him.

Juan rolled his eyes, but a smile played across his face as he hugged her back. “How are you? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for coming.”

“Of course.” When he pulled back, the man who’d come with him stepped forward, quickly embracing her.

“Glad to see you’re okay, Minx. I was worried about you.” The man whose name I’d yet to learn placed both hands on the sides of Drea’s face, his mouth descending on hers.

Oh, fuck no.

I yanked hard on the chain and Drea yelped, stumbling back to my side. I cupped the back of her neck possessively, a dark look in my eyes as I stared down this fucking dead man walking. He glared back, his hands lowering back to his side.

Drea grunted but didn’t fight me.

“Easy,” Juan said, narrowing his eyes. “We don’t want any problems. Just ease up. There’s no need to hurt her.”

“Am I hurting you, *malyshka*?” I asked Drea, my gaze sweeping to her brother.

“No,” she huffed. Her eyes cut to me, that familiar flare in her irises telling me she was annoyed but that she enjoyed the rough handling.

Juan’s frown increased as he studied us, calculation lying deep within the depths of his eyes. He decided to move on, introducing the man at his side.

“This is Logan.”

My whole body stiffened. *Logan*. This was the man who had his name on Drea’s body. On her fucking pussy. My hand tightened uncontrollably as

a torrent of dark anger soared through me. Drea hissed softly, talking out of the side of her mouth so Juan wouldn't hear her. "Okay, that one hurts."

I loosened my hold immediately, cursing silently. I needed to get myself under control, but I found it difficult. I'd never felt this emotion before. Such pure, animalistic, jealousy. Possessiveness.

Never.

Logan sneered at me, his full attention still locked on my hand around Drea's nape. Anger and jealousy vibrated from him, pulsing through the air.

I'd smirk if I wasn't so pissed off by the whole situation. He was looking at me like *I* was the one stealing *his* woman.

Drea was fucking *mine*.

I didn't want him looking at her, didn't want them in the same room together. I didn't want Drea thinking about her time with anyone else except *me*. I wanted to own all of her. Her body. Her thoughts. Her mind. I didn't want there to be any reminder of her sexual past.

If I could, I'd wipe all her memories of the men who'd come before me, leaving only me behind.

Did that make me a bad man?

Probably.

Did I care?

No.

I wasn't sure how to handle this new feeling quickly taking me over. I never gave a shit about any of the women I'd fucked before. I didn't care if they were screwing someone else or if they ended things between us. It just rolled off my shoulders.

Things with Drea were different. I realised that the moment I had the overwhelming urge to pluck out Logan's eyes for daring to look at her in such an intimate way.

"This is Nikolai." I gestured to my brother behind me, who still had his gun pointed at Juan and Logan.

"What is it you want?" Juan asked.

Straight to the point. I liked him already.

I took a seat at the long conference table that separated us, herding Drea into the one next to me and keeping her close.

Juan watched with calculating eyes, seeing more than I originally wanted to reveal. He and Logan slowly sat down, their bodies tight and riddled with tension.

I leaned back, as casual as you please, resting a hand on the back of Drea's chair. I picked up a lock of her hair, twirling it around my finger. "Your arrangement with the Outfit. Tell me about it."

Juan scowled and clenched his jaw, the movement telling me he didn't want to talk but knew he didn't have a choice in the matter. "It wasn't an arrangement. Nero kidnapped my sister and told me if I didn't do what he said, he'd kill her. When he demanded men for a raid, I gave them to him. When he wanted access to our drug supply, he got it. Does that sound like a fucking 'arrangement' to you?" he shook his head, blowing out a breath. "Being second to the boss comes with privileges, and he had no problems providing what was needed to keep Drea safe."

My eyes swept to Drea. Oh, that's right. Her identity as Don was a secret, one I wasn't meant to know.

She bit her lip nervously, anxiously awaiting my reply.

Don't worry malyshka, I'm not going to give the game away.

"Once I heard about Nero's death, we pulled back our men and supplies. I went looking for Drea but couldn't find her anywhere. Turns out, you fuckers had her. Now tell me what you want for her."

I continued to play with Drea's hair, my head tilting to the side. What we wanted, they'd already given us. Well, at least one of them. Their 'arrangement' with the Outfit to stop. The second thing, well...

"You and your people made an enemy of the Bratva when you went after my sister."

"That wasn't—"

"I wasn't finished talking." Juan slammed his mouth shut, glaring at me. "Regardless of your reasons, you drew first blood. Not us. You attacked us at our home. Ruined my sister's wedding. Kidnapped her and served her up to Nero to be raped. We're well within our rights to kill you all and just go about our day like nothing happened."

Juan and Logan reached for their guns, looking around the room anxiously, like they were expecting a group of people to burst in and shoot them.

Honestly? If he wasn't Drea's brother, I probably would have just done it myself.

"Lucky for you, we have no desire to continue this...feud." Was feud the right word for it? I wasn't sure. "The way I see it, we've each committed transgressions against each other. You've killed some of my

men, I've killed some of yours. You kidnapped my sister, I kidnapped yours. The playing field is even in my book."

Juan frowned, slowly putting his hand back on the table in plain view.

"The only thing we demand is a ceasefire between us."

"That's it?"

"As well as breaking off any and all contact with the Outfit. You're not to aid them in any way."

He was silent for a moment. His eyes flicked to Drea and back. "I need to speak to my sister. *Alone*."

"Not going to happen." I knew the reason why he wanted to speak to her without us around. It was so Drea could tell him what to do, whether to agree to my terms or not. *She* was the one in charge, not him.

Soft fingers wrapped around my arm, goosebumps pebbling on my skin. I looked down. Drea's hand was on mine, her eyes giving me that same, sad pleading look as earlier.

God fucking damn it.

Irritation flowed through me. She was going to use that look any time she wanted to get her own way, I just knew it.

"Fine," I gritted out through clenched teeth. "But *he* leaves too," I said, pointing to Logan. There was no way I was leaving Drea alone if he was going to be in the room too, no matter what pretty look she threw my way. It wasn't going to happen.

"*Vete a la mierda, imbécil. No recibo órdenes tuyas.*" Fuck you, asshole. *I don't take orders from you*, Logan spat in Spanish.

"Logan, cállate." Logan, be quiet. Drea snapped.

Dark eyes glared at me from beneath bushy eyebrows. Logan didn't like being silenced, but he did it, snapping his mouth shut.

"Thank you, Aleksandr," Drea whispered softly for my ears only.

I grunted, puffing out a breath.

Fuck, what was becoming of me?

I got to my feet, Drea, Juan and Logan following suit. I pulled out the keys to Drea's cuffs and unlocked them, the metal clunking to the ground.

"You have five minutes, *malyshka*. Not a second longer."

Chapter Thirty-Four



“For fuck’s sake Drea, really? A Bratva guy? What the fuck is wrong with you?” Juan hissed low in his throat after Aleksandr, Nik and Logan left the room.

I laughed halfheartedly. I knew Juan would see the connection between Aleksandr and I in a heartbeat. Though to be fair, Aleksandr’s actions made it pretty fucking obvious.

Ordinarily, I wasn’t a big fan of the whole jealousy thing, but I had to admit watching him get all territorial over me made my skin all tingly and shit.

Logan and I had a ‘will they-won’t they’ kind of relationship for years. After Daniel, I wasn’t interested in a serious relationship, and Logan loved his playboy lifestyle, so fucking whenever the need arose worked out really well for the both of us.

People in the cartel wondered if we’d ever get together ‘officially’. We were similar in a lot of ways. We got along really well, and he wasn’t threatened by me or my position, which was a damn hard thing to come by. To be honest, if I *was* going to get with someone, he would have been the ideal choice.

Until I met Aleksandr, that is.

He’s getting married, remember?

Ugh. Sometimes I hated my inner voice. She was always a bitch, pointing out rational shit I’d rather forget or ignore.

“Calm down, it’s not what you think.”

He snorted, giving me a derisive look. “Who do you think you’re talking to here? I’m your twin. I know you better than anyone and I *know* you’re hot for that guy. And he’s hot for you.”

“Really? You think so?”

His jaw dropped. “Do you even hear yourself right now?” he hissed, the glare on his face the same as the one I’d seen on my dad’s face countless times before. “Is this some weird case of Stockholm Syndrome or something? This guy *kidnapped* you, Drea. You understand that, right? Please, oh please, don’t tell me you fucked him.”

I stared at him blankly. “Do you want me to lie to you?”

“Of course I don’t want you to lie to me,” he whispered harshly.

“Then don’t ask stupid questions,” I snapped back. “Obviously I fucked him. Are you telling me you wouldn’t if you got the chance?”

He stuck his nose up in the air. “We’re not talking about me.”

I scoffed. “That means yes.” I couldn’t tell you how many times I’d walked in on Juan fucking one of his boyfriends.

“No, it doesn’t. It means—oh no. Don’t you dare try and change the subject. You fucked the enemy, not me. I can’t believe—”

“Okay, we don’t have time for this,” I said, cutting my hand through the air. “Aleksandr gave me five minutes, and trust me when I say he won’t go a second longer than that.”

“Oh, I trust you. If anyone would know it would be you, wouldn’t it, hoe bag?”

“I’m gonna get you back for that later. We’re accepting his deal.”

“Well obviously. It’s not like I was going to leave you with them. We have to get you out quickly before they find out who you are.”

I bit my lip, glancing away.

Oh man, he’s gonna kill me.

“They already know.”

Juan stared at me, unblinkingly. “Come again?”

“They found out a while ago. They’ve got some contacts in high places. He managed to get his hands on a fingerprint ID scanner and he scanned my prints the first night. He was able to figure out my identity from there.”

“He knows you’re Don?”

I nodded. He was taking this a lot better than I thought he would.

“What the fuck am I doing here then? You could have negotiated this deal on your own and come home ages ago.”

“You don’t think I tried? The Bratva are old school. They’ll only make a deal if there are others there to witness it.”

He scrunched up his face. “What? Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just the way they do it and Aleksandr refused to budge on it.” I glanced at the door that Aleksandr, Nik and Logan had walked out in and back to Juan, lowering my voice. “Did you find out who ratted me out to Nero?”

“No.” Frustration streaked across his face. “But Oliver is missing.”

Oliver was one of Juan’s longtime bed pals. They’d been friends since they were kids and were actually each other’s first. Deep down, I knew Oliver loved Juan—but he loved power more.

When my dad passed and named me as his successor, Oliver had tried to convince Juan to take it from me. He wanted Juan in charge so that, by extension, he would be too.

“You think he’s the rat,” I stated, feeling sorry for my brother. It made sense. Oliver wanted me out of the way so Juan would be Don.

“I think it’s suspicious. You and Oliver get into a fight, Nero all of a sudden reaches out and requests a meet, he kidnaps you and I get put in charge by default. Oliver went missing shortly after you were taken. I’ve been looking for him but so far, no luck.” Guilt shone in his eyes. “I should never have pushed you to take that meeting. It’s all my fault. All of this.”

“No, it’s not. It’s Oliver’s.” If he actually was the rat, that is. “One thing I don’t get is if he was the one to tell Nero who I was, why did he run? He would want to take advantage of you finally being Don, or acting Don, but whatever. It doesn’t make sense that he’d just bolt when he finally got what he wanted, unless—”

“Unless he’s dead,” Juan finished, his jaw clenching. “It occurred to me, and I’ve wondered about it. Maybe Nero killed him when he got the information he wanted, I don’t know. I’m not ruling anything out. I’ll keep looking for him until I find him, dead or alive.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry, brother. I know you—”

“Don’t say ‘love’. I don’t love him.” But he did though—he just refused to admit it because Oliver had hurt him more times than either of us could count. He was the one who outed Juan to our parents because he was sick of

hiding their relationship. He took it upon himself to tell Juan's secret before he was ready to share it.

Despite that, and everything else that bastard had put my brother through, Juan still loved him. He just wouldn't admit it. Not even to me, or to himself.

"One thing I don't understand about this whole thing with the Bratva is why they're even willing to make a deal with us," Juan said, changing the subject entirely. I got the feeling talking about Oliver was just too hard for him right now.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"We're small-time compared to them. It probably wouldn't be hard for them to squash us under their boot and move on. So why don't they? Why are they even bothering to negotiate with us?"

It was a good question. One I'd wondered about myself, to be honest. Juan was right in saying we were small-time. We didn't have the same reach the Bratva did. But we were fierce and cutthroat.

Juan leaned closer, his voice barely above a whisper, "There's talk, on the streets."

"What kind of talk?" I asked suspiciously.

"That they're losing their edge." Aleksandr? Losing his edge? The idea was laughable. "There are rumours circulating that they're in the middle of some brutal internal war or something and are spread thin. Can't even monitor their own territories properly. A bunch of their buildings have burned down and there's been zero retaliation for it."

"That doesn't mean they're losing their edge. It could mean they haven't found the people responsible for it yet."

"We should take advantage of the situation," Juan uttered, completely ignoring what I'd said. "If the Bratva are distracted, it's the perfect time to strike. Can you imagine? The Los Zetas being the one to cripple and take down the all-mighty Bratva? We'd be goddamn legends."

I growled, baring my teeth in anger as I grabbed him by the ear and pulled him down to eye level.

"Ow! Drea!" he whined.

"Shut up," I hissed, my eyes darting to the door and back in alarm. I prayed they didn't just hear what he said. "Don't ever say something that colossally stupid again, you hear me? Even if what you're saying is true—and that's a big fucking if—we're still no match for the Bratva. I've seen

what they can do. I've seen their men. They train every morning like they're in the fucking army. They have a military-type focus, Juan. Trust me when I say they'd crush us with little to no effort."

Juan's face was scrunched up in pain, his whole body hunched over as I kept a tight grip on his ear. "But—"

"It's this kind of stupid, ambitious thinking that got me kidnapped to begin with."

He snapped his mouth shut. Guilt clutched my chest at the heart stricken look flashing in his eyes, but I couldn't think about that right now. I let him talk me into the meeting with Nero even though all my instincts were screaming about what a bad idea it was. I wasn't doing it again.

I let go of him and he straightened, rubbing his ear in discomfort. I gave him a level stare. "The Bratva are far better to have as an ally than as an enemy, Juan. If there's ever a time in your life when you listen to me, it's now."

He blew out an irritated breath. "Fine," he nodded. "Are you excited to come home?"

I hesitated in answering. The truth of it was, I wasn't. Not really. I missed Juan and my mum, but I was afraid I'd miss Aleksandr more. I'd taken a peek through his hard, rough exterior, getting a glimpse of the person he was inside, the one he hid from everyone else. And I loved it.

He was strong, caring, selfless. He always put others before himself, especially his family.

I didn't set out to like him, or even care for him for that matter. But it happened. I was powerless to stop it. It didn't matter how I felt though, because in six months he'd be married. Come to think of it, leaving today before I got even more attached to him was probably for the better.

I'd get over him.

Eventually.

Maybe.

Probably not.

"How's mum?" I asked instead of answering his question. I hoped he wouldn't notice the blatantly obvious subject change.

He didn't, thank God.

"She's about as good as you'd expect someone who's had one of their children kidnapped to be. I had to lock her in one of the rooms in the main house to keep her from showing up here. She wanted to come and wouldn't

listen to me when I told her I could only bring one person, and that one person had to be someone who could shoot a gun.”

I felt a chuckle rise up in my throat. Sofia Ortega was like a big mama bear. Fiercely protective of her babies, with a pension for destruction built into her very core.

“I bet she wasn’t happy to be left at home,” I laughed. “Do you think—”

An angry roar ripped through the air, followed by loud shouting and a hard thump.

Juan and I looked at each other. “What the fuck was that?” we both said at the same time.

I ran for the exit, Juan hot on my heels. I flung the door open and froze.

Shit.

Aleksandr was straddling Logan’s chest, his hands wrapped around his throat and squeezing so hard there was blood seeping into Logan’s eyes.

Shock slammed into me at the ferocious look on Aleksandr’s face, at the way he bared his teeth an inch away from Logan’s face, his eyes burning with rage.

I’d never seen him this way before. Even when we went to the Rage Room (where the sole purpose was for people to express their anger by beating the shit out of stuff), he’d still been in control, hitting things with precise, direct blows, never truly releasing the reins on that tight self control he possessed.

What the fuck had Logan done to make Aleksandr snap?

“Zander! Enough!” Nikolai barked, trying to pull his brother off Logan and failing.

Aleksandr was like a brick wall. Completely unmovable. He didn’t even seem bothered by Nikolai’s attempts, he just kept his rage-filled eyes locked on Logan as he strangled the life out of him.

Something spurred me forward. What specifically, I couldn’t say. Maybe it was the fact that Aleksandr was literally seconds away from killing Logan. Or maybe it was the *click* of Juan’s gun as he cocked it, the barrel now pointed right at Aleksandr’s chest.

Whatever it was, it propelled me towards Aleksandr like a magnet.

I wrapped my arms around his huge bicep, pulling back as hard as I could while Nikolai did the same with his other arm, both of us working in unison to try to dislodge Aleksandr.

“Damn it, Big Guy, let go,” I grunted with exertion.

Nikolai unwound himself from around Aleksandr's arm and ran to his front. He threw a brutal right hook into Aleksandr's face, the blow stunning him and making his grip on Logan's throat loosen. Nikolai ploughed into his brother with the force of a linebacker and we all tumbled to the ground in one big heap.

Ow.

Juan rushed to Logan's side, checking his pulse. The relief that washed over his face told me all I needed to know.

He was alive. Unconscious, but alive.

I picked myself up, wincing at the slight pain shooting across my chest. Getting crushed under over two-hundred pounds of hard, toned muscles wasn't nearly as much fun as I thought it would be.

Aleksandr shoved his brother off him and got to his feet, the anger still evident on his face. His eyes snapped to Logan's unmoving form. It looked as though he was debating lunging for him again.

"The deal is off," Aleksandr growled, his hand clamping around my forearm. He pulled me close to him and I was too shocked to do anything but follow.

Wait, what? What the fuck is happening right now?

Juan jumped up, aiming his gun at Aleksandr, which prompted Nikolai to aim *his* gun at Juan. "Let her go!" my brother yelled.

Fuck. I needed to deescalate the situation as fast as possible. "Guys, stop. We don't need to do this. Everything's fine."

Aleksandr didn't say anything, marching me towards the elevator that would take us down to the undercover parking lot while Nikolai covered him.

"Hey! I said let her go! I'll shoot you, I swear to fucking God."

Aleksandr punched the button to call the elevator and turned, placing me behind him protectively as he stared down the barrel of Juan's gun. "No you won't. Because we both know you're not the one in charge here. The deal is off. You hear me? Take your man and go home before I change my mind and kill you both. We're done here."

A ding announced the arrival of the elevator, the door whooshing open. Aleksandr ushered me inside with Nikolai at his back. Juan looked at me for guidance. He didn't know what to do, whether to let me leave with them or put a stop to it.

I shook my head, urging him to stand down. I wasn't sure what happened with Logan. But whatever it was, it was bad enough to not only make Aleksandr lose control on that tight leash he kept on himself, but also make him go back on the deal *he* put forth.

I needed time to figure out what was going on and what I needed to do to fix it before an all out war broke out between the cartel and the Bratva.

The elevator ride down to the underground parking lot was silent and tense. Like an awkward family dinner where everyone hated each other. Neither Aleksandr nor Nikolai spoke a word. I was standing, wedged between two hulking men who were both fuming with rage. It made for an unpleasant time.

"Okay. Someone going to tell me what happened?"

Fucking crickets. I might as well have been talking to myself.

The elevator dinged. Aleksandr's hand tightened on my arm as he steered me out of the elevator and towards his car, our footsteps echoing around the empty lot.

"Aleksandr, we need to talk about this."

He said nothing, just unlocked the car and shoved me inside without so much as a 'how do you do'. He slammed the door shut and locked it.

Not again.

I opened my mouth, ready to yell my fucking head off, but the words died on my tongue. It wasn't only anger rolling off Aleksandr. It was also distress, something I'd never seen in him before.

He and Nikolai stepped far enough away that I struggled to hear what they were talking about. I could catch little snippets as Nikolai yelled at his brother, veins throbbing in the side of his neck as he pointed an accusatory finger at him.

"What is wrong with you...get yourself together...who cares if he...she's not yours—"

Aleksandr struck him hard across the face. Nikolai dropped, taken completely by surprise.

Aleksandr stomped away, his jaw clenched and brows lowered in an angry glare. He flung the driver's side door open, climbed in and started the car, not looking at me once.

Nikolai picked himself up, scowling in our direction. He rubbed his jaw as he marched towards the car. Once he was inside Aleksandr sped off, heading towards the house.

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Chapter Thirty-Five



Aleksandr's grip on my nape was tight, restrictive as he led me through the foyer of the house and up the wide circular staircase. He hadn't acknowledged me once in the car ride here, even though I'd tried breaking the tension with conversation several times. Neither Aleksandr nor Nikolai engaged in it. They both weren't interested in talking to each other, let alone to me.

I decided to wait until I was alone with Aleksandr to pry into the logistics of what had happened. Which, with the way he was marching through the house, would be any second now.

Instead of taking me to the room I'd been staying in, he opened another door on the same floor, pushing me inside.

"Okay, enough with the manhandling," I snapped, shoving away from him. I took a cursory glance at the room. A huge four-poster bed with exotic black silk sheets. Dark curtains and dark furniture. A rich, alluring scent that surrounded me from all sides, somehow managing to comfort me and turn me on all at the same time.

It was a purely masculine smell, Aleksandr through and through.

The *slam* of the door made me spin, facing Aleksandr down. We glared at each other. He was mad about whatever the fuck happened with Logan, and *I* was mad we were even in this position to begin with.

"What the fuck, Aleksandr?" I said, trying not to let myself get too worked up. "Why did you do that? What did Logan—"

Aleksandr lunged forward, his hand wrapping around my throat. I gasped at the suddenness of it. He pushed me backwards until I collapsed onto the bed, his body folding over mine. “I *never* want to hear his name come out of your mouth again,” he growled, staring me dead in the eyes.

My mouth dropped open. “You’re jealous,” I breathed in disbelief. Was that whole thing with Logan all because he was jealous?

“Of course I am,” he admitted with no problem whatsoever. “You think I like hearing about his hands on your body? That he knows how you taste, what you sound like when you come? You’re *mine*.”

What the fuck had Logan said to him?

His mouth descended on mine, full of want and need and passion as he kissed me deeply.

Jesus, this man and his tongue! Wait, what did he just say?

I ripped my mouth away. “Yours?” I echoed, licking my lips, savouring his taste.

He gripped my jaw roughly. “Mine and only mine.” He kissed me again, his words igniting a fire in my belly.

There was still so much we needed to talk about, so much we needed to address. He couldn’t keep me here any longer. He needed to let me go. I’d managed to convince Juan not to open fire, but I knew my brother. With the way we’d left things, he’d be anxious. Chomping at the bit to do something—anything—to get me back and out of harm’s way.

But all of that was second on my mind right now. First was Aleksandr. His lips. His touch. His smell. I was borderline obsessed with him and everything about him. Obsessed with his rough, dominating ways. His kind, caring heart he kept guarded behind a mountain of obstacles.

Aleksandr tore my shirt from my body and then, using a knife, cut my bra in half, my breasts spilling out.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmured, staring down at me in awe. He leaned forward, taking my nipple into his mouth. He swirled his tongue and my back arched off the bed, pleasure soaring through me.

“Fuck, Aleksandr,” I moaned, holding his head to my chest.

He switched to the other nipple, lavishing it with the same attention as he had the first.

I panted, licking my lips, so eager for him to move further down and put that very talented tongue to good use. But I should have known Aleksandr wouldn’t be rushed, no matter how many hints I gave him. He liked to take

his time. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but when I was as horny as I was right now, I didn't want to go slow.

He kissed, licked and nibbled at my skin, leaving tiny little love bites over my breasts and stomach. I squirmed underneath him, lust pulsing low in my stomach. He abruptly got to his feet, leaving me aching and confused. I propped myself up on my elbows, tilting my head to the side as I watched him slowly shed his clothes.

Fuck me. His body was to diiiiiieeee for. Washboard abs. Hard, toned muscles. Clear, distinct v-line (which, I'll be honest, was one of my favourite parts on a man).

His pants hung low on his hips, a dark, sinful look on his face as he crooked his finger at me, urging me forward.

Tingles shot up my spine, shivers dancing over my skin. How could one simple movement be so sinfully erotic?

I crawled to him on my hands and knees, the height of the bed putting me at exact eye level with the monster in his pants.

"On your back, head hanging over the bed," he commanded.

Oh boy.

The world flipped upside down as I turned over, excitement exploding within me. Aleksandr unzipped his pants, pulling his cock out.

Big. Thick. Heavy. Suckable, for sure.

He moved until his cock hovered over my lips, his hand stroking up and down leisurely. "Open." His voice was rough. Husky. Deep. Laced with want and hunger.

I opened my mouth wide. He bent his knees slightly and eased his cock past my lips. His hand collared my throat in a light hold as he slowly thrust in and out.

"*Blyad,* I knew your mouth would feel good," he groaned, his head rolling back.

My stomach tightened, my pussy tingling at his rough, masculine groans. It turned me on so much hearing men groan. There was just something different about it. Something hot and sexy and utterly intoxicating. I wanted to make him feel good and drown the room in his pleasure.

I hollowed my cheeks, trying to move my head to take more of him.

"No." Aleksandr's hold on my throat tightened slightly. "If I want you to move, I'll tell you. You just lie there like a good little fuck toy and take

my cock until I'm done with you."

I moaned, saliva dripping out of the side of my mouth as his thrusts increased. His cock hit the back of my throat and I gagged.

"Swallow. Breathe through your nose. That's it. You're doing so well, *malyshka*." His hands moved, grabbing the sides of my face and holding me completely still. He thrust in and out, using my body and my mouth as he wanted.

Wetness slicked down my thighs at the way he just *took* his pleasure. The forcefulness of it, the way he grunted and growled as he moved faster and faster.

"Use your teeth. Ah fuck, that's it. You like having your mouth stuffed full of cock, don't you? You like having your face fucked. Fuck toys always do."

It was next to impossible to even try talking, so I simply nodded, moaning around him. I moved my hand down my stomach, shoving it into my pants and tugging on my clit piercing. He turned me on so much I could barely stand it. I was so eager, so pent up I was literally shaking.

With each thrust he plunged himself further and further down my throat, tears streaming down my face.

"You look so pretty when you cry, *malyshka*," he praised, pulling his cock out. He tapped it against my lips. "You did very good. Stand."

I climbed to my feet on the bed, my skin on fire and my heart pounding. A predatory gaze shone in his eyes as he studied me from head to toe. He picked up the knife he'd used to cut my bra off, twirling it around his fingers in a way that showed how skilled he was with the blade.

A shiver wracked my body. God, he looked positively devilish right now, staring at me like he wanted to eat me.

I hoped he would.

"Don't move." He sliced the remainder of my clothes from my body, the fabric falling away. He ran the tip of the blade up my thigh slowly, and I had to squeeze my hands into fists to stop myself from jumping him. I wanted to see what he'd do next.

I stood before him in all my naked glory, his eyes running over every inch of my exposed tattooed skin.

His eyes sliced to my pussy and anger flared in his eyes. I knew he was looking at Logan's name there. "I *hate* that you have another man's name on your body," he growled darkly. "I want it to be mine instead."

He leaned forward, burying his head between my breasts as he picked me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. His hand wound its way into my hair and he snatched my head back, his tongue running up my neck, over my chin and plunging into my mouth.

I moaned, grinding my pussy against his hard abs.

“Needy little thing,” he whispered into my mouth, his kiss turning feral. Ferocious.

My back smacked into one of the vertical columns of the four-poster bed and Aleksandr hoisted me up, diving his head into the apex of my thighs as he threw my legs over his shoulder. His mouth closed over my clit and sucked hard.

I squealed in delight. I gripped his hair for stability, my hips bucking as I rode that perfectly chiselled face.

Pleasure burst through me with every lick and stroke of his tongue and I moaned.

“I fucking love that sound. And this pussy. So pretty, and pink, and—” his tongue speared inside me, a deep, guttural groan falling out of his mouth and vibrating along my pussy, “—tight,” he finished, lavishing at my entrance. “So fucking tight.”

“Oh, *mierda*, Aleksandr, don’t stop,” I panted, my orgasm fast approaching.

“You’re so wet, baby,” he praised, hands gripping my ass tightly as he ground me harder against his face. His tongue moved from my entrance to my clit in long, languid strokes, delving between my folds and completely ravishing me.

He was eating my pussy like he couldn’t get enough of it. Like he was starved for it. For the taste of me. For my pleasure.

There was nothing sexier than a man who loved going down on a woman. And fuck, did Aleksandr love it. It was clear in the way he just threw himself into it with eagerness and excitement.

“Fuck, I could eat you all day and it would never be enough. I want to imprint your taste on my tongue forever.” Said tongue swirled around my clit twice before his teeth tugged on my piercing and I came undone.

My orgasm hit me hard, rocking straight through my body. My back arched, my hands pulling at his hair as I moaned deeply, white-hot pleasure burning in my veins.

“That’s it, baby. Squeeze my head with your legs. Suffocate me with your pussy.” I thrust against him, his filthy words prolonging that amazing pleasure soaring inside me.

Aleksandr cradled me tight, lowering me back onto the bed. He climbed up my body, looking down at me with the savageness of a man eager to fuck, and *fuck hard*.

“You’re mine, aren’t you Drea?” he rumbled softly. He didn’t say my name very often. The majority of the time he called me by some Russian word that, even though I had no idea what it meant, gave me all the tingles. But when he did say my name, I swear my heart skipped a beat. “Tell me you’re mine.” He cupped my pussy roughly and I gasped. “That *this* is mine. That every inch of you belongs to me.”

I didn’t answer, because we both knew it wasn’t true. How could it be when he was marrying someone else? But that was something we were both willing to ignore in the moment.

Instead I leaned forward, kissing him with all the emotion I couldn’t voice. He kissed me back, cradling my face in his hands in what could be seen as a tender movement, but I knew better than that.

Maybe Aleksandr cared for me on some level, maybe he didn’t. I doubted I would ever find out to be honest.

He spread my legs, easing his cock inside. Pleasure surged within me, spreading out to all my limbs in a rushing wave. I felt full. Complete. Whole.

Aleksandr moved, first slow and deep, his hips rotating in sensual circles, then gradually getting faster and faster with each stroke until the bed started banging into the wall.

His hands were all over me. In my hair. Gripping my breasts. Palming my ass. His deep, masculine grunts ricocheted around the room. I met him thrust for thrust, scratching at his skin. I clamped my teeth down on his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood and he hissed, his eyes flaring.

“You remember your safe word?” he breathed huskily, picking up the pace.

I nodded, a chill running down my spine. What did he have planned?

“Use it if you need it.” He pinned both of my hands down above my head with one of his, the action leaving me completely vulnerable and open to him. I strained against him, testing his strength. I didn’t move an inch.

He smirked down at me. “Is that all you’ve got, *malyshka*?” he taunted, driving forward with deep thrusts.

I moaned, the force that he was fucking me with making my tits bounce up and down. God, he felt so fucking *gooooood*. I never wanted it to stop.

A delightful mix of surprise, pain and pleasure rocked through me when he slapped me across the face. It wasn’t a hard blow. In fact, I doubted he used even 5% of the power he was capable of. It didn’t hurt in the slightest. He knew exactly what he was doing.

I’d never been hit during sex before, but fuck did it do something to my insides. I was on fire, my pussy dripping so much you could hear it every time he moved in and out of me.

He chuckled smugly. “I knew you’d like that. My perfect little fuck toy.” His pace quickened, leaving me gasping and breathless.

The pleasure was so intense I couldn’t keep still, thrashing and bucking against him. “Yes, Aleksandr. Fuck, you feel so good.”

“So do you, baby. So do you.” He buried his head into the crook of my neck, pounding and pounding and pounding. He kept one hand wrapped around both of my wrists, holding me down and forcing me to take what he was giving me.

His teeth latched into the side of my neck and that was all I needed for my orgasm to take over. I screamed out his name as mind-numbing pleasure overtook me, washing away all my worries and replacing it with the best, most euphoric feeling I’d ever experienced.

My pussy clamped down hard on his cock and his head snapped up, a loud, long groan falling from his mouth. One hand slapped onto the headboard as he fucked me ruthlessly, prolonging my own pleasure while he chased his own.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he chanted, his thrusts turning wild. Chaotic. Veins throbbed in the side of his neck, his muscles bulging and his jaw clenching. The sight of him alone was enough to get me started all over again.

His lips smashed against mine, his tongue diving into my mouth. He moaned low in his throat as he emptied himself inside me.



“Are you going to tell me what happened between you and ‘he who’s name I am forbidden to say’?” I asked, drawing light circles into Aleksandr’s chest while my head rested on his shoulder. We were both still naked, our limbs intertwined and bodies relaxed.

After he’d cleaned me up with a warm cloth, he climbed back into the bed, pulling the blanket over us both and wrapping me up in his arms. It was the first time we’d ever cuddled like this, not that I was complaining. His size made him one comfy cuddler. And it was just nice to be with him, to spend time with him in such a calm and peaceful setting.

I don’t think we’d ever been this relaxed around one another.

Aleksandr toyed with a lock of my hair, twirling it around his finger as he stared ahead. He was relaxed—emphasis on the *was*. Because the moment I asked my question he’d tensed beneath me, a small, annoyed growl rumbling in his throat.

“Growl all you want, we’re talking about this.” I propped myself up on my elbows, giving him a hard look. “What happened? What did he say?”

He studied the expression on my face, releasing an aggravated breath. “He spoke in great detail about the sexual experiences you shared together.”

I wrinkled my nose. Well, shit. That could mean anything. Logan and I had done *a lot* of stuff together.

“Like what? What did he say, specifically?”

“That he was the first and only man to ever fuck you in the ass, and that meant your ass belonged to him. That the moment I let you go, he was going to fuck you and make you forget all about me.” His whole body vibrated with anger, a dark, evil look streaking across his face.

Fucking Logan.

I mean, he was right. In a way. He *was* the only man I’d ever done anal with. But that didn’t mean *any* part of me belonged to him. We had great sexual chemistry, but that was it. We never emotionally connected, which was one of the reasons why our relationship never progressed past ‘fuck buddies’.

He likely saw Aleksandr’s possessiveness towards me and decided to fuck with him. Logan wasn’t a particularly jealous man, but he did have a bit of an ego on him. Aleksandr was bigger, stronger, sexier, and that would have made Logan feel threatened. So, he did what he needed to do, finding a way to one up Aleksandr.

“And that pissed you off?” That was a stupid question to ask. He’d basically choked Logan out.

“I don’t like hearing about you with other men. I don’t like *thinking* about you with other men.”

I didn’t like picturing him with other women either, so I couldn’t really blame him for getting pissy about it. If it was me I’d probably do the same thing, to be honest.

I blew out a nervous breath. Now was as good a time as any to talk about what we needed to talk about. I hated ruining the peaceful moment between us, but it had to happen.

“Aleksandr.”

He stiffened at my serious tone.

“You need to let me go.”

“Do I?” he drawled, leaning forward to plant tiny little kisses over my exposed chest.

I knew exactly what he was trying to do: distract me with that very talented tongue of his. And it was very close to working, but I pushed the fanny flutters down. I wouldn’t be swayed.

“Yes.” I placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back. He retreated instantly, a frown on his brows. “Enough is enough. You can’t keep me here any longer. There’s no reason to. What happened between the cartel and the Bratva was unfortunate, but there’s no need for our rivalry to continue. I can put a stop to it all if you just let me go.” As much as I hated the idea of leaving him, I knew it was for the best. Not only for both of our organisations, but for myself as well. I needed to distance myself from him now, before he left for Russia. Before he married someone else. Otherwise it would hurt me more in the long run.

“I don’t need to do anything,” he said, smirking. “You belong to me, and I’ll keep you here for as long as I like.”

I let my vulnerability show across my face. “I can’t belong to you if you can’t belong to me. It works both ways. Do you expect me to sit around and be your side piece while you go off and marry another woman?” I shook my head. “No. You and I had fun together, but that’s all it will ever be. You need to let me go now.”

Anger and frustration burned in his eyes. He got to his feet, giving me his back as he angrily put his clothes back on, shoving his arms into his

shirt and his legs into his pants. He mumbled something in Russian as he tucked his shirt into his pants, running a hand through his hair.

I sat up, the blanket falling to my waist as I watched him with cautious eyes. "Aleksandr?"

He turned, eyes darting down to my tits for a moment, like he couldn't help it, and back up again. "Put your clothes on."

I was irritated with him and his attitude. Surely he didn't expect me to be his dirty little mistress? The woman on the sidelines while he fucked, married and had kids with someone else?

Maybe it was my fault. Even after he told me about the arrangement his grandfather made, the one being forced upon him, I didn't take a step back. I pushed on, fucking him on the table at the Rage Room. I suppose that could have been classified as mixed signals.

Well, no more. I had to think about what was best for me, because as much as I wished for it, Aleksandr couldn't put me first.

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Chapter Thirty-Six



I ran a finger over the rim of my glass, my eyes sweeping across the large outdoor area as I tried my hardest not to glare at anyone who came close to me.

Please don't kill anyone, Illayana's soft voice fluttered through my head. She had sat all three of us down before the party started and pleaded with us not to cause any trouble.

I need this to go well, she'd said, staring us all in the eyes, looking every bit like our mother as she sternly told us off like *she* was the older sibling.

RnB music played over the air, laughter and chatter swirling all around me. The atmosphere was light, fun.

I hated it. I wasn't a social creature by nature. I much preferred to be on my own. Parties weren't my scene, yet here I was celebrating the birth of a man I couldn't really give a shit about.

Despite the clear divide among the guests, people seemed to be enjoying themselves. On one side of the lawn sat the La Cosa Nostra, the men loud and boisterous as they drank their beers and smoked their cigars. On the other side was us, the Bratvas. A few of our soldiers, Tatiana, Adrian, Nik, Lukyan and myself.

Animosity burned between our groups. It was clear we didn't like each other. We were being forced to get along like two naughty school kids having to play nice in the playground.

Illayana's wedding had come to such an abrupt ending that this would technically be classed as our first social setting as a group, and it was quickly becoming evident that this is what it would have been like if her wedding hadn't have literally imploded.

Not that I cared. I was perfectly happy to sit here and not talk to any of them.

Illayana fluttered around from person to person, doing her duties as hostess as she mingled, making sure they all had enough food and drinks. Arturo followed close behind, shaking hands with everyone and thanking them for coming.

The 'surprise' part of the party had gone exactly as it should. We were all waiting in the backyard when Illayana led Arturo outside with a hand covering his eyes. Everybody screamed 'Surprise!'. People clapped and cheered. Arturo *acted* shocked, but I could see it in his eyes. He knew about the party, but he was playing the part to please Illayana, who—based on the mountain of food and decorations spread out everywhere—had gone through a huge amount of effort to put the party together for him.

Once that part was over with, we all peeled off into our own groups.

"Food's good," Nik grunted in the seat across from me, shovelling another forkful of pasta into his mouth. His plate was loaded with a splattering of everything—pizza, chicken, steak, salads, lamb, shredded beef, bacon—the list went on. On the plate beside that one was an assortment of sweets, cupcakes, muffins, caramel slices and custards.

It might sound like a lot of food, but Nik was more than capable of putting it all away. He'd likely still be hungry afterwards.

"You're not eating?" he asked in between bites.

"Not hungry." If I was being honest, I wasn't really here. Physically, I was. But mentally, my mind was far, far away.

With Drea.

She wanted to leave. The moment she'd said the words, a tight ball of anxiety had lodged itself in my throat and hadn't left. Panic quickly followed after that.

How could I let her go? I needed Drea like I needed air in my lungs. Blood in my veins. Food in my belly. She was everything I needed to survive, and the thought of being without her was...unbearable.

I felt like I was drowning. Being pulled under by a powerful current and I didn't have the strength to kick free, because kicking free meant putting

my family in danger. And I couldn't be responsible for the death of another person I loved. I couldn't.

I would not survive it.

Nik slapped \$100 down, making the table shake. He pointed his fork behind me and I turned, my mood lightening slightly as I took in my two youngest siblings.

They were yelling at each other near the food table, the stirrings of a fight about to take place. I wasn't sure what they were arguing about but I'd seen those looks on their faces before. Lukyan's, filled with mischievousness, and Illayana's, filled with anger and frustration.

Whatever happened, Lukyan started it. I was positive about that.

No surprise there.

I pulled out \$100 and slapped it down on top of his. "On Illayana." I dropped another \$50. "Bet she knocks him out in under a minute." My baby sister was stressed and itching for a fight, an outlet to take her anger and nervousness out on. I was confident she could do it.

Nik pursed his lips in thought. His eyes darted back and forth between them and I. "I'll take those odds," he said, adding his \$50.

I repositioned my chair so I could get a better view and Nik and I watched, waiting for the inevitable to happen.

Their voices got louder, attracting attention from others. Illayana stepped into Lukyan's space, her teeth grinding. Lukyan smirked.

"Here it is. She's about to blow."

"I see it, I see it." Illayana had little tells that told us when she was at her breaking point, that moment before she lunged and attacked. And she was displaying them right now. Lowered brows. Laser-sharp focus. Clenched fists. It was going to happen.

Arturo's eyes widened in a panic. He knew exactly what was about to go down. His gaze quickly swept across the dessert table. He picked up what looked like a chocolate cupcake. He wrapped one arm around her shoulder, pulling her in close while he held the cupcake up to her lips.

Illayana covered Arturo's hand with her own, taking a bite as she continued to glare at Lukyan. Her husband slowly began to turn her away, his head lowered to her ear as he whispered something to her. She took hesitant steps as she allowed Arturo to lead her away, still scowling at Lukyan while taking small bites of the cupcake.

Just like that, the fight had dissipated.

Nik and I looked at each other in bewilderment.

“Fuck,” he chuckled softly, shaking his head. “How did we never figure out we could distract her with food? That would have come in handy years ago.”

I grunted, taking back my cash. Arturo seemed to know our sister better than we did at times.

Nik picked up his money, tucking it away. He ate the rest of his food without saying another word, a comfortable silence hanging between us. Once he was finished he pushed both plates away, wiping his mouth with a napkin. He took a sip from his drink, placing it down on the table and giving me a hard stare that meant business.

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

I stiffened. There was only one thing he could be referring to. My gaze cut to him, but he spoke before I could reply.

“Don’t lie,” he said sternly, his eyes narrowing into slits.

Sighing, I glanced away. This wasn’t something I was wanting to talk about, especially right now when my mind was plagued with thoughts of Drea. But the cat was out of the bag. Might as well get it over with.

I would have preferred to discuss this in six months, when it was too late for him to do anything about it, but life didn’t always work out that way you wanted it to.

If it did, I wouldn’t even be in this situation to start with.

“How did you find out?”

He leaned back, satisfaction streaking across his face when he realised I wasn’t going to lie or avoid the conversation. “I put a bug in Father’s office.”

My head whipped back to him. “You what?”

One side of his lips tilted up in a small smirk and he lifted a shoulder innocently. “I’m a nosy bastard. I wanted to hear the conversation with Grandfather.”

“You could have been there for the meeting.”

Nik snorted. “And have to actually talk to the man? No thank you. My way was better. I got to listen in without having to see him. Win win for me.” He studied me with soulful eyes. “I didn’t get a chance to listen to it until this morning. You don’t have to do it, Zander.”

“Yes, I do,” I answered automatically.

“No. You don’t. Fuck Grandfather and this stupid arrangement he made with the Tarasovs. Let him deal with it. It’s not our responsibility.”

“If you listened in then you know exactly what will happen if we don’t honour this deal.”

Anger swept across his face. “He wouldn’t. He’s bluffing.”

“Do you honestly believe that?” I asked, giving him a hard stare. Because I knew for a fact that he didn’t.

He stared back. “No. But there has to be something we can do. You shouldn’t have to go off to Russia and marry some woman just because our crazy, senile grandfather told you to.”

“That’s exactly what I have to do, because we both know Sergei has the capabilities to make something happen to Illayana with a click of his fingers.”

He blew out an irritated breath. “Fine. You make a valid point. But that doesn’t mean *you* need to be the one to do it.”

I shook my head. I knew he’d do this. “No. Nik.”

“Zander, just hear me out—”

“No, *you* hear *me* out,” I snapped, making him clamp his mouth shut. “This is the first and last time we’ll ever be having this conversation, so listen up. *I’m* going to be the one marrying her. Not you. Not Lukyan. *Me*. The decision has been made. It’s final.”

“But—”

“Are you willing to give up Tatiana forever?” Whatever words he planned to say next died in his throat. “I still don’t know what happened between the two of you—and believe me, I will get those answers soon—but what I do know is that you marrying another woman will make Tatiana run in the opposite direction. Any chance of mending what you broke will be impossible with you tied to another. Is that something you want? Are you willing to shut the door on you and Tatiana permanently?”

His eyes flew to the woman in question, who was dancing and laughing with Illayana, her blue sundress twirling around her as she spun in a circle, her face tilted up towards the sky and sunlight beaming across her face.

Nik’s whole demeanour changed the moment he saw her, warmth and love sparkling in his eyes. There was also pain and anger, like there always was when he looked at Tatiana, but none of that diminished how much he cared for her. That much was obvious.

I saved him from answering. “You don’t have to say anything, because I already know the answer. And it’s okay. You deserve to be happy, to try and fix things with her. I’m not going to let you give up your chance of happiness for this. Not when I can shield you from it.”

He looked conflicted, like he wanted to disagree with me but knew he couldn’t. A life without Tatiana was as painful for him to think about as it was for me with Drea.

“I’m the oldest. It’s my responsibility, Nik. End of discussion. I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

“What about Lukyan?”

I scoffed. “Be serious.”

“I am. He’s capable.”

“Capable, yes.” That was never in question. “I say this with love, but he can’t be trusted with something as important as this. He’s more likely to piss off the Tarasovs and get himself killed. It’s what he’s done here,” I said, waving a hand through the air. “It’s what he’ll do there, except he won’t have anyone in his corner to watch his back in Russia. He’s not serious enough, Nik. He treats everything like it’s a goddamn game. He also can’t keep his mouth shut to save his life. How long do you think it will take for him to say something completely inappropriate and stupid?”

Nik’s brows creased slightly. “Alright, I see where you’re coming from. I do. But, I think you should give him a chance. You’re too hard on him sometimes, Zander. Just talk to him about it. Explain how serious the situation is. He might surprise you.”

“Surprise me how? By getting himself killed on the first day instead of the third?” I shook my head. “No. It’s better if I just do this myself. Easier. Like I said, I love him, but Lukyan will just fuck it up. He’s unreliable.”

Nik opened his mouth to respond when his eyes drifted behind me, his whole body stiffening. I turned. Lukyan stood behind me, that same cheeky and mischievous smile on his face like always, but it looked strained. Forced. The light in his eyes seemed dimmer.

Fuck. Did he hear me?

Lukyan flounced forward on the tips of his toes, being careful not to knock any of the food off his plate as he sat down at the table. “Don’t even think about taking any of my food,” he joked, elbowing Nik playfully in the ribs. “What are you guys talking about?”

I blew out a small, relieved sigh. He didn't hear me. If he had, he would have been incapable of not mentioning it. "Nothing."

"Actually," Nik cut in, his eyes dancing like he couldn't believe this opportunity had fallen into his lap. "We were just talking about—"

"Is that Tatiana leaving with one of the Cosa Nostra men?" I pointed behind him, desperate to deflect.

Nik spun so fast I'd be surprised if he didn't hurt his damn neck in the process. A feral growl erupted from his chest and he jumped to his feet, flinging his chair back. He stomped after them without saying another word to us, our conversation completely forgotten.

How lucky I was that Tatiana had chosen that exact moment to walk off with another man. I don't think there was anything else that could have possibly deterred Nik.

"Should we stop him?" Lukyan whispered out of the corner of his mouth, taking a bite of his burger. "He'll probably kill the dude."

Yes, Nik probably would.

I shrugged. "Not our problem." Nik had been throwing out 'don't touch' vibes towards Tatiana all afternoon. He glared at any man that went near her. If one of them was stupid enough to try something with her, it was their own damn fault.

Illayana plopped down into the seat Nik had just vacated, blowing out an exhausted breath. "Man, hosting parties suuuucks," she dragged out, plucking a french fry from Lukyan's plate.

Their fight from earlier was all but forgotten. That was the good thing about those two. They fought like cats and dogs but forgot all about it a minute later, acting like it never happened. "Have you told him yet?" she asked Lukyan, her gaze sliding to me.

"Told me what?" Dread filled me. I looked at my brother. "What did you do now?" I sighed with irritation.

A flicker of hurt flashed in his eyes. It made me frown. It wasn't like him to get hurt or offended over something like that.

"He didn't do anything," Illayana jumped in, defending him. "He has a...what would you call it? An admirer? A stalker?"

"A stalker?" I repeated, confused.

She nodded, a cheeky grin on her face, like she was enjoying this whole thing. "Go on, tell him," she pushed.

"It's nothing," Lukyan mumbled.

“It’s obviously *something*. What’s going on? Are you in danger?”

Illayana barked out a laugh. “In danger of falling in love, maybe. Isn’t that what the letter said? ‘*You’ll love me as much as I love you, Lukyan, my darling*’,” she said in a sweet, high-pitched voice, her tone mocking.

“Shut. Up,” Lukyan growled.

“Make me,” she taunted, poking out her tongue.

Lukyan jumped to his feet and Illayana followed, both of them glaring at each from across the table.

“No.” I cut my hand through the air. “We’re not doing this again. Both of you sit down. Now.”

They sat.

“Good. Now, you——” I pointed to Lukyan. “Start talking.”

He huffed, taking another bite of his burger first. “It’s really nothing. Just some weird shit going on.”

“Like?” I asked, staring him down. My interest was piqued. Based on their body language, they weren’t worried, they didn’t seem freaked out or scared. Whatever was going on, Illayana found it hilarious, and Lukyan found it strange and annoying.

“It started off small. Just little things here and there. I got this feeling someone was following me. Watching me. I couldn’t see anyone, but you know when you can just *feel* someone’s eyes on you? It was like that. Then the calls came. Two or three a day. No one ever spoke. They’d call, I’d answer, they’d hang up. Then my shit started going missing. Never anything of value, just random stuff I kept in my locker at the gym. A shirt. Towel. Can of deodorant. Even my toothbrush.”

“I told him she probably took it to cast some crazy voodoo spell on him to make him fall in love with her.” Illayana frowned thoughtfully. “Hang on, are we even sure it’s a girl?”

Lukyan glared. “It’s a girl,” he stated firmly.

“How do we know though? It could be some fat, old, balding, middle-aged man who still lives in his mother’s basement. Maybe he saw you from across a crowded room and it was love at first sight. Or maybe——”

Lukyan aimed and threw a french fry right into her mouth. Illayana choked, her eyes going wide in alarm as she pounded at her chest with panic. She spat out the fry, panting heavily. Arturo rushed over, fretting over her in concern, and she waved him away, clearing her throat.

“Serves you right,” I grunted.

"I know it's a girl because she's been in my car, and she left her smell behind."

"Her smell?" I asked, arching a brow.

"Mm hmm," Lukyan nodded. "Fruity and sweet and 100% *feminine*," he said, scowling at Illayana. "Nothing was taken from my car, not even my wallet that I'd left sitting in my centre console. There was no damage to the car. No indication it had even been broken into except for the scent clinging to the upholstery."

I frowned in thought. This sounded like it was way more than a simple admirer. It definitely wandered into stalking territory. "Was there anything else? Illayana mentioned a letter?"

"Letter-s," Illayana said, dragging out the 's'.

Lukyan ignored her. "The first few were about the size of an envelope and all they had on it was a lipstick kiss. The next few had some writing. Just random shit really. *We're perfect together. You're my soulmate. Soon we'll be together.* Blah, blah, blah. And the last one, I got this morning." He pulled out a black card the size of an envelope, handing it to me. Sprawled in beautiful red cursive writing was:

*My love,
I am both devastated and hurt by your act
of betrayal last night. Don't you see how
perfect we are for each other? How well we
fit together?*

*We're inevitable, you and I. Like death.
We're bound together by forces beyond our
control. I felt it the first moment I laid eyes
on you. Didn't you feel it too? I know you
did.*

*Let this gift be a lesson for you, my love.
Not only a show of my complete and utter
devotion to you, but also a display of what
shall happen should you betray our love again.*

Yours always, in this life and the next,

My eyes shot to Lukyan. What nine kinds of crazy was this? This went far beyond the limits of stalking and crossed right into the realm of delusional thinking.

“What betrayal is she talking about? And what gift?”

“Well, I went out last night and ended up fucking this chick in the alley behind the club. She was *hot*. Big tits. Nice ass. A screamer,” he winked.

Illayana gagged.

“I’m *assuming* that’s the betrayal she’s talking about,” Lukyan continued. “Because this was her gift.” He pulled out a medium sized box, the kind you get from a jewellery store, and placed it on the table.

I picked it up. God, did I even want to know what was in here? Lifting the lid, I saw ten perfectly manicured fingers inside. Written underneath the lid in the same writing as the letter was:

*She lost her fingers for daring to touch
what doesn’t belong to her. Take care of who
you allow to touch you, my love.*

“They belong to the chick I banged. I recognize the rings.” Lukyan inclined his head towards the box as he popped a fry into his mouth. He didn’t seem the least bit concerned about any of it, and that concerned me.

“When did all this start?” I asked, studying the fingers closely. The cuts were clean. Precise. There was dry blood around where they’d been cut off, staining the parchment paper underneath.

“A few days after I got here,” Lukyan answered. That meant this obsession had progressed quickly.

“Is there any footage of her? Maybe at the gym when she went through your locker, or when she broke into your car?”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “The cameras had some sort of glitch and went down around the same time anything happened.”

Concerning. Very concerning.

“I’m going to send this to Thomas, see if he can lift any prints off the box.” We needed to find out who this was, and quickly, before it escalated any further.

Lukyan shrugged. I didn’t like the look in his eyes. This chick’s crazy matched his to a tee.

“Maybe he should go home with you,” Illayana said, giving me a knowing glance. “Get him out of New York and away from her.”

I hid my smirk. She was definitely taking advantage of the situation, but hey, I wasn’t going to complain. It made the whole thing easier.

“I agree. Pack your bags, Lukyan. You’ll be coming back with me.” A woman walked past, her god-awful wig catching my attention. It was cheap, like the kind you’d find at a two-dollar store. She fiddled with it uncomfortably, glancing around with a sulky look on her face. It didn’t fit on her head properly, and the look of it reminded me of a tumbleweed blowing through the desert. “What happened there?” I asked, flicking my head towards the woman. She looked familiar, like I’d seen her before, but I just couldn’t remember where.

Illayana turned. When her eyes landed on the woman she spun back around, an evil grin on her face. “That’s Gabriella.”

“Why does she look so miserable? And why is she glaring at you?” I asked, studying the woman.

“She ‘accidentally’ walked in on Arturo in the shower,” Illayana said, using air quotes. “Accidentally my ass. She did it on purpose. So I set the bitches hair on fire.”

My brows shot up at the same time Lukyan barked out a laugh. “God, that was so funny,” he rumbled, eating more of his food. “Wish you could have seen it, Zander. Her head went up like a fireball,” he cackled.

“She’s been staying at the house ever since I moved in. But don’t worry, I have it on good authority that she’s going to have a terrible accident very soon. One that’s going to kill her,” Illayana chuckled evilly.

“I’m surprised you haven’t killed her already.”

“Where would be the fun in that?” she said, a wicked smirk curling on her lips. “You know I prefer my victims to suffer first. A woman like that cares about her appearance. It defines her. I plan to make her as ugly on the outside as she is on the inside before I take her life.”

Lukyan and Illayana broke out in a fit of laughter, sharing a look with one another like they had some sort of inside joke on the situation. I joined in, my body shaking with amusement. Fuck, I missed these two.

The rest of the party was seemingly uneventful. People danced and laughed. Arturo’s younger siblings, Theodora and Lucien, ran around like chickens with their heads cut off, squealing and chasing each other. Lukyan and Illayana argued some more. Neither Nik nor Tatiana had been seen since she walked off with the Cosa Nostra man. All in all, it wasn’t *too* bad of an afternoon.

The only person missing from the festivities was Arturo’s younger brother, Vincenzo. But I didn’t care enough to ask about him.

Halfway through the party Illayana unveiled the guns Nik and I brought with us from Vegas. The Cosa Nostra men loved the new weaponry. We also threw in some AK-47s and AA-12s. Which, based on the way the men went crazy, worked in Illayana’s favour.

Hopefully it would help smooth over the tension between her and the men. It would make them see how advantageous it was when a Bratva princess married their Boss.

I was getting ready to leave, throwing the last of Lukyan’s bags into the car, when Illayana sidled up to my side.

“You heading out?”

I nodded, slamming the boot shut.

She hugged me. “Thanks for coming. I know you didn’t want to, so I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it,” I grunted, pulling back.

She glanced around quickly before levelling me with a serious stare. “I didn’t get a chance to talk to you alone. There was just so much shit going on and I was getting pulled into a million different directions, but I wanted to see if you were okay.”

I frowned. "I'm fine."

She looked at me with sympathetic eyes. "*Starshiy brat, big brother*, you think I haven't noticed the change in you? You're different. Distant, more closed off. I can't believe I'm even going to say this, but you seem... sad. I noticed it first when I came to the house earlier in the week, but I didn't want to say anything because I was sure I was imagining it. But I saw it again today. These moments when you'd just zone out and shut down, your mind going somewhere else. What's going on? Talk to me."

I sighed, looking away. Sometimes, Illayana was far too perceptive for my liking. There was a part of me that wanted to sweep it under the rug. Pretend she was imagining it like she thought. Plaster on a fake smile and tell her everything was fine. But there was a bigger part of me that wanted to talk about all this shit with Drea.

So I did.

I started from the beginning, telling her about the initial connection I felt when I met her. I dove further into our time together, omitting a few details here and there that Illayana didn't need to know. I told her my fears about letting Drea go. The worry I felt clutching my chest. And Illayana listened, not a single ounce of judgement on her face. I didn't tell her about Anya Tarasov, because I knew she would feel guilty about it, like it was her fault. But it wasn't.

"I know her people were partly responsible for what happened to you
—"

"No, Aleksandr, don't think about that. I don't blame her. It was out of her control. The only person to blame is Nero and that fucker is long dead. Do you want my advice?"

Did I? I wasn't sure. I nodded anyway.

"You need to let her go."

Anger shot through me, like it always did when that thought entered my mind.

"Here me out. I understand your worries, but that's something that you *need* to face. You can't just keep her locked up in that house forever. Not only will she likely go mad being stuck there, but the repercussions from the cartel could have drastic effects on the Bratva. You need to have faith that if you let her go, she'll come back to you."

I didn't have that faith though, did I? Because I wasn't sure if she cared about me the same way I cared about her.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven



Aleksandr was being a real asshole.

He currently sat in the chair I had placed by the window so I could watch and ogle him when he did his daily training, book in hand and eyes plastered to the pages. It was a fantasy novel I'd plucked from the bookshelf, one I hadn't had the chance to properly read yet because I kept getting distracted staring at Aleksandr's bare freaking chest every morning.

We hadn't talked much since I told him he had to let me go. At all, really. Which was fine by me because I was *pissed*. He'd come in, sometimes we'd fuck—because hey, a girl's gotta get some—and sometimes we'd just sit in silence, me watching some TV show and he either reading a book or staring at his phone.

The topic of leaving never came up again, because he shot it down every time I brought it up. It ticked me off. He'd given me his phone to contact Juan and I'd managed to convince my brother not to do anything stupid, like attack the Bratva. He was concerned, even though I'd told him countless times they weren't going to kill me.

Aleksandr had an endless amount of opportunities to do so already if that's what he wanted, and he never did. Not even when I was first brought here and refused to answer any of his questions, refused to comply with any of his demands. He never laid a hand on me. At least, not in the way Juan feared.

I felt like I was slowly losing my mind here. Losing myself. Aleksandr was right when he said it was a perfectly nice room to be locked in. It had everything I could ever want or need, except the ability to leave when I wanted.

I missed my family. My mum—who I’m sure was probably worried shitless, especially when Juan returned empty handed. God, I could only imagine how much shit she’d be giving him over that. The thought made amusement trickle through me.

“What are you laughing about over there?”

I jolted at that husky, accented voice. I hadn’t even realised I’d laughed. My gaze cut to him. His eyes were still plastered to the book in his hands, giving off the vibe he wasn’t even paying attention, but I knew he was. Aleksandr never missed a thing.

He filled the width of that chair snugly, his ankle resting comfortably on his knee, his posture perfect.

The way the sunlight was beaming in through the open window, bathing him in a gorgeous golden light took my breath away.

Fuck, I was so head over heels for him. It was too late. The damage was done. There was no saving myself from the pain and heartbreak of him leaving to get married. Both my heart and soul were deeply in it, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

I’d fallen hard for the man who kidnapped me, who kept me locked in a room day after day, refusing to let me go. A man who was strong. Fierce. A huge grump but who also did the sweetest things for me, like bring me grilled cheese sandwiches every day because I’d told him *one time* they were my favourite. Or when he brought me my own very first bike and taught me how to ride it.

Aleksandr was an extremely hard man to get close to. He was quiet. Reserved. He guarded his thoughts and feelings like his life depended on it.

But that was okay, because it was often the hardest struggles that ended up being the most rewarding.

The moment Aleksandr opened up and let me in, the moment he shared his deepest, most darkest secrets made everything that’s happened to me since Nero kidnapped me worth it.

No question.

“Are we back to not talking, *malyshka*? I thought we were past that?” A playful smirk danced over Aleksandr’s lips and I was helpless to do

anything but smile back.

His words were a play on something he'd said to me before.

Truth was, I *wasn't* talking to him, because like I said before, I was pissed off with him for not letting me go. For not understanding that it was in *my* best interest to get away, so I didn't have to watch him commit himself to someone else when I wished it could be me.

So I replaced my smile with a glare and turned away from him, focusing back on the TV. Ross and Rachel were fighting, the whole 'we were on a break' thing complete and utter bullshit, in my opinion.

Rachel never said they were on one. She said 'maybe we should take a break'. *Maybe.* And I'm sorry, even *if* they were on a break (which they weren't), you don't go and sleep with someone else a few hours later. That's a dog move.

Totally Team Rachel.

In the corner of my eye, I saw Aleksandr shut his book. He turned his chair to face me, his head tilting to the side.

I glared harder at the TV, determined not to look at him. It was *hard*. I loved staring into those magnetic blue eyes. Fucker knew it, too.

"You know that angry look on your face just makes my cock hard," he rumbled, sending shivers down my spine.

Yes, I did know that, because for the past three days, any time I'd given him that look, we ended up fucking. In the bed. On the floor. Against the wall. In the shower.

Angry sex just hit on a whole other level.

"We're not fucking today," I snapped, though I wanted to. "So you might as well just go."

His brows creased in the most adorable little frown. "Why would I do that?" He asked it like it was the stupidest question he'd ever heard before. "If you think I'm only here to get in your pants, you've drastically underestimated your value to me."

It was my turn to frown.

"It's not just about the physical things for me, Drea. I mean, don't get me wrong, the physical side of things is—" a sinful grin curled on his lips, "—mind blowing."

I smirked. Yeah, our sexual chemistry was off the charts.

"But there's more to it than that for me. Being around you soothes my mind, it quiets the storm raging inside of me. It brings peace to my soul. I

could be having the worst, most frustrating day and seeing your smile—yes, that smile right there—would make all my troubles just fade away.”

My heart raced at his declarations, flutters exploding in my stomach. The sincerity burning in his eyes made me believe every word, and it excited me. Excited me to know that he cared for me as much as I did him. That he craved my presence and thought of me as more than just his fuck toy (which, FYI, I did love being). It was just nice to know he liked *me* as well as my body.

“You look surprised.” Aleksandr cocked his head. “Why?”

“I guess I just didn’t know that, well—”

“That you mean so much to me?”

I blew out a laugh. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“You shouldn’t be. Why else do you think I just sit in here with you for hours on end? Even when we don’t say a word to each other? Even when you’re just glaring at me the whole time? Because I—”

Bang!

Aleksandr bolted up right, his spine snapping straight as his brows dropped into a deep frown. His head tilted slightly to the side, deep lines of concentration marring his face, like he was straining to hear what the noise was.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Aleksandr was up, jumping to his feet seconds before the screaming started. It took me a moment to realise the banging noises were gunshots.

Fuck! Gunshots! Someone was shooting.

I expected Aleksandr to run out of the room, but he went straight for the bedside table, his hand disappearing underneath. A *click* rang through the room as he pressed a hidden button. The bookshelf along the wall swung open, revealing a thick, metal door.

My mouth dropped open. *What. The. Fuck?*

Aleksandr ran to it. He put in some sort of code on the keypad and the door unlocked. He gripped it tightly and yanked it open with a grunt before running inside.

I kicked the blankets off and followed. I stood at the entrance of what I could now see was a safe room of some kind. Aleksandr was in front of a wall of monitors at the back, his eyes moving from screen to screen as he watched a bunch of armed people run through the house.

“Fuck,” he growled, anger vibrating from him. He plucked a bulletproof vest from the wall to his left, strapping it over his chest. He moved to the wall to his right that housed a range of different weapons. He put on a chest, waist, thigh and ankle holster, his movements quick and precise like he’d done this a thousand times before. His eyes never left the computer screens as he swiftly armed himself, shoving guns and knives into the holsters around his body. He picked up a huge machine gun last, pushing his arm inside the strap so it was wrapped around him tightly.

“Aleksandr—”

“Get in and shut the door behind me,” he commanded harshly, writing something down on a piece of paper. “Don’t come out, no matter what you see or hear. There’s a phone, call your brother. Tell him to come get you. This is the address,” he handed me the paper.

Everything was happening so quickly I was having a hard time keeping up. More gunshots and screams came from outside. I didn’t want to be locked in this room. I wanted to help.

I tried again. “Aleksandr—” he kissed me, my words cutting off as he wrapped me in his arms and picked me up off my feet, his tongue diving into my mouth. I moaned, gripping his face tightly as I kissed him back with everything I had. We kissed like it was the last time we’d ever see each other, full of love and passion.

And then he was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Someone was attacking. I had no idea who. I had no idea why. All I knew was there was a small force currently making its way through my house, and they weren't here with peaceful intentions.

From what I could see on the cameras, they were all wearing black jumpsuits. No masks. Some had guns, others had knives, machetes or axes. I wasn't sure how many of them there were, or how'd they had managed to get all the way up to the house without an alarm being raised. That was all shit I'd have to figure out later. Right now, I needed to eliminate the threat and find my family. Make sure they weren't hurt.

As I walked out of Drea's room, I quickly pulled out my phone and fired off a text in our WhatsApp group chat that held all of our soldiers. It was one character. Just the explosion emoji. That was all that was needed. Every one of our men knew what that message meant. It meant we were under attack, and we needed reinforcements. It would take roughly ten to fifteen minutes before anyone would arrive. I needed to clear as much of the house as I could before then.

I took slow, measured steps down the hallway, my gun up, eyes sweeping over everything as I listened out for the tiniest noise. So far, everything was coming from downstairs. There were hollers and whoops. People cheering followed by loud banging, like they were trashing the place. There was screaming and crying. People calling out for help.

We had three maids that permanently lived at the house, as well as a few that rotated in and out on a day-to-day basis. Someone was obviously hurt. It made me grind my teeth together. These fuckers were going to pay big time.

Creaking reached my ears. Someone was walking up the stairs. I plastered my back to the wall and dropped to one knee, taking aim. I leaned around the corner. Two assailants, both armed with guns. I waited, lined up the shot and fired.

The first guy's head *exploded*, the bullets ripping through his forehead and out the back of his skull, spraying blood all over the wall. I moved an inch to the right and fired again. The second guy dropped just like the first.

Bullets smashed into the wall I was using as cover and I jerked back. Shit. There was someone else there, but they weren't in my line of sight. I'd have to move to get a clear shot.

The gunfire suddenly stopped, the *click, click, click* that followed telling me they were out of bullets. Now was my time to strike before they were able to reload.

I went to move when the door to my right opened, making me pause. Dayton walked out, his head darting side to side in alarm, like he wasn't sure what was going on. What all the noise was about.

Another pair of those stupid fucking headphones hung around his neck, which was probably why he hadn't heard what was going on until right then.

The world slowed around me. Dayton was right in the line of fire. If he didn't move before whoever was on the stairs reloaded, he'd end up dead.

I ran for him at the same time a new stream of bullets unleashed. I dove, tackling Dayton to the ground in the doorway. Pain flared from my arm, but the intensity of it told me it wasn't serious. More than likely just a graze.

Dayton screamed as wood rained down all over us, bullets shredding through the door like it was made of paper.

"Stay low!" I barked, trying to shuffle him further into the room. "Move it!"

Dayton army crawled along the floor, me staying close behind. "What's going on?!" he yelled.

I didn't bother answering. The events taking place were pretty self explanatory. We were under fucking attack. I didn't need to clarify that for him.

The gunfire stopped. My ears rang inside my head, the sudden silence disorienting. "Under the bed. Go, now," I whispered harshly.

Dayton didn't hesitate. He crawled under.

I ran for cover. We had only minutes at best before whoever was shooting came looking for us.

Sure enough, not even forty-five seconds later, I heard them. Three different voices whispering to each other. Three didn't make me nervous, but I'd have to be smart, dispose of them quickly before they had the chance to use their numbers against me.

The broken wood crunched under their feet as they cautiously stepped into the room. I took deep, quiet breaths, my hands tightening around my MG3 machine gun as I peeked around the side of the couch.

Three men dressed in black jumpsuits began to spread out into the room. One had a gun, the other two an axe and machete. They weren't wearing masks so I could see their faces, but I still wasn't sure who they were. Something to be figured out later.

I needed to take the guy with the gun out first. He was the biggest threat. I stayed low, moving around the couch as the men moved further and further into the room, so I ended up behind them instead of in front.

I jumped up and let loose a spray of bullets, hitting two of them in the back, but the third managed to dive out of the way just in time, taking cover behind the bed. Dayton's screams could be heard over the gunfire and I lifted my finger off the trigger. I didn't want to risk hitting him.

The guy jumped to his feet and threw his axe. I turned my body to the side, the axe scraping across the top of my bulletproof vest as it whistled past me and buried itself deep into the wall.

Fuck. That was a close one.

The guy charged me, picking up the dropped machete off the floor at the same time. He swung hard and I brought my gun up to block, sparks flying at the contact. I kicked him in the chest and he flew back.

I dove on him before he had the chance to get back up, wrapping my legs around his arm in an arm bar. I squeezed, putting unrelenting pressure on his arm and the bone snapped. He screamed, his legs kicking out wildly.

I pulled a knife from my ankle holster and stabbed him in the head. The screaming stopped and all the fight vanished from him.

I rolled to my feet, tugging on the strap around my shoulder until my machine gun was back in my hands.

"Dayton, let's go," I grunted, taking out the magazine and replacing it with another. He slowly crawled out from underneath the bed, his eyes red and puffy, tears streaming down his face. His eyes landed on the knife sticking out of the guy's head and he vomited.

I walked over to the bedside table, putting a bullet in the other two guys' heads on the way. I had to ensure they were dead before I left, otherwise I ran the risk of them coming up on me from behind. When I pushed the button underneath the bedside table, the bookshelf on the right opened, revealing the safe room behind it.

There was one in each room of the house. When my father built this house for my mother, he built in a few extra things; trap doors in the floor, hidden passageways in the walls and safe rooms. He was paranoid *before* my mother was murdered. Her death just exacerbated that trait.

I put the code into the keypad and the door unlocked. I pushed it open and gestured for Dayton. His eyes were wide as he took in the room, much like Drea's had been. "Don't come out until I come for you, you hear me?" I said, shoving him inside. "Don't open this door for anyone you don't know. Stay. Here." I didn't wait for him to say anything. I didn't have the time. I walked out, shutting the heavy metal door behind me.

I rushed out of the room, keeping my gun up as I moved through the hallway and down the stairs. I stepped cautiously, picking where to place my feet with each step. I knew this house better than anyone. I knew where all the kinks were, knew where to step so the staircase didn't creak. So I could move silently, stealthy.

I reached the foyer and paused, listening carefully. I had a clear view of the lounge to my right and it was empty. I went left, moving into the dayroom. I fired on the first fucker I saw. He was bent over the body of one of our soldiers, ramming a knife into his gut with a sadistic smile on his face.

Someone came running in from the hallway, swinging an axe at my stomach. I used my gun to block, pulled out a knife and stabbed him in the shoulder. He cried out in pain, dropping the axe. I yanked out the blade, flipped it into a reverse grip and slashed it across his throat.

My instincts screamed at me to move and that's when I heard the footsteps behind me. I pivoted to the side, narrowly missing the thrust of a knife. I kicked the blade away and it clattered to the ground.

He backed up a step, putting his fists up. “You’re a big fucker aren’t you?” he laughed, dancing on the balls of his feet like some prime time boxer. “I take you down and all the boys will think I’m the man. So let’s go big boy. Show me whatchu got. But I promise you, I know some moves. I’m a black belt in karate and I’ve been known to dabble in MMA. Come on, let’s get it on.”

I pulled out one of the handguns from my chest holster, aiming it right at his head. His eyes widened in shock. Did he really think we were going to have some big macho showdown? He’d broken into *my* house with a gang of armed men. Like fuck I was playing this game.

“You talk too much.” Was all I said before I shot him clean between the eyes.

As he dropped, someone else walked in from the entrance that led into the kitchen. The machine gun in his hands made me curse.

I spun and ran for the lounge room. He opened fire and I dropped, skidding on my knees as I grabbed the wall and used it to fling myself around the corner. Without losing speed I jumped to my feet and darted for the mirror. Pressing my hand to the reflective surface, it popped open and I squeezed inside, just managing to hide myself in the hidden passageway before the guy with the machine gun followed behind me.

I held my breath as he walked past, the two-way mirror giving me the ability to see out but not allowing him to see in.

There was no way anyone was killing me in my own goddamn house. I knew this place like it was the back of my hand. For years, Father would surprise my siblings and I at all times of the day and night with drills where we had to work our way through the house and outside while dispatching anyone we came across. We’d use the hidden trap doors and passageways to our advantage, which is exactly why he had them built in the first place. If someone decided to attack us, we would have the upper hand.

Once the guy with the machine gun walked past, I slipped out silently and sneaked up behind him. My hand slapped over his mouth, silencing his scream as I rammed my knife into his back. It went under his rib cage, through his lung and into his heart. He slumped against me and I lowered him to the ground.

Quickly checking over his weapons, I decided what was worth taking and what wasn’t before moving on. I swept the rest of the downstairs area,

coming across the dead bodies of our guards and one of our maids. She mustn't have been able to get to the safe room in time.

I moved through the kitchen, my eyes sweeping outside through the glass sliding doors as I moved fast and proficiently. Someone came running at me from the left and I shot him in the chest. Another guy charged me from the right, his fist flying towards my face. I reared back, avoiding the blow, and smashed the butt of my gun into his nose. He cried out in pain, falling back. I shot him in the heart.

Pain shot up my spine as someone tackled me from behind. I flew forward, crashing into the kitchen table with a grunt, the weight of another body holding me pinned.

I swung an elbow back, connecting hard and pushed away from the table, turning quickly to face my new opponent.

A nasty gash cut through his eyebrow, blood pouring down his eye. He picked himself up and stared me down. He had balls, I'll give him that.

I aimed my machine gun and fired.

Nothing happened.

Fucking out of bullets. Should have kept count.

I unclipped the strap around my shoulder and let the gun fall to the ground. I only had enough room to pack one extra clip for it, so with no more bullets it was nothing but dead weight.

The man charged me, throwing a vicious right hook. I ducked under his swing, wrapped an arm around his and flipped him onto his back, stabbing him in the chest the moment he slammed into the ground.

Someone ran in from the right. I yanked my knife out of one body and impaled it into another, hurling the blade across the room and into the guy's throat.

Pain exploded in my shoulder. I growled, my teeth grinding as I felt a blade slice through my skin. I kicked out behind me, smashing my foot into the guy's knee and forcing him back.

I ignored the pain coursing through my body and went after the little fucker. I ran, faked left and spun right, coming up behind him to wrap my arms around his neck. I lifted him off the ground, his legs kicking out in panic as I squeezed.

The *click* of a gun being loaded made me stiffen.

"Let him go!" someone yelled.

I glanced over my shoulder. Standing in the entranceway to the kitchen was a guy holding a shotgun, the barrel pointed right at me. His eyes darted around the room, taking in all the death and carnage, and he swallowed nervously. The gun shook in his hands.

I slowly turned to face him, lowering the guy in my arms so his feet touched the floor. I kept my grip tight around his neck, just giving him enough to draw breath.

“I said let my brother go!” the guy with the shotgun screamed, pointing the weapon at me aggressively.

Brother? That worked to my advantage.

I used the guy in front of me as cover, curling my body inwards so I hid as much as was possible behind his smaller frame. I needed a second to think about my next move. Based on the way the shotgun trembled in his hands, Nervous Nelly wasn’t a confident shooter. If he was, he likely would have tried to take me out already. But it was clear he was afraid of hitting his brother too, so he was resorting to posturing and threatening.

The guy in my arms wheezed, his face no doubt turning purple from the lack of oxygen. All it would take is one tight squeeze and he’d be dead.

“You-you let him go or I swear I’ll shoot you!” Nervous Nelly shrieked, his shotgun shaking through the air so much I was afraid it might accidentally go off. “I’m going to give you until the count of three before I blow your fucking brains out! One! Two! Thr—” his words cut off abruptly as he cried out in pain, dropping to his knees.

Standing behind him was Drea, her hair drenched in blood, a truly dark and savage look on her face. Two curved blades were in her hands, the same ones from up in the safe room she was *meant* to be inside. She was splattered head to toe in blood. On her face, arms, all over her clothes. She looked like a vicious little attack dog. Bloody and brutal.

She leapt onto Nervous Nelly’s back and rammed her blades into his chest over and over again, stabbing him all over in quick, deep punctures like a woman possessed with a need for death.

The guy in my arms screamed and cried. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he flailed against me.

I snapped his neck and dropped him to the ground. I marched towards her. “I told you to stay in the safe room.”

“I think what you meant to say—” she exhaled heavily, pushing a strand of bloodied hair out of her face as she straightened from Nervous Nelly’s

dead and mangled body. “—was thank you.”

I gripped her by the hips and lifted her off the ground, bringing her to eye level. Her feet dangled loosely in the air. She didn’t fight me, her hands curling around mine as best they could with the weapons in her hands.

I smashed my lips to hers in a brutally punishing kiss, pushing my tongue deep into her mouth. I groaned at the feel of her, the taste of her. She was so unbelievably sweet. I kissed her like I couldn’t survive without her, like she was my everything. Because she was.

I bit her bottom lip before pulling back. “Thank you,” I murmured, placing soft, little kisses over her lips. “Thank you, *malyshka*.”

She gave me a beaming smile. Then her eyes widened in shock. “Fuck, Aleksandr! You’ve got a knife in your shoulder!”

Did I?

I turned my head, seeing the hilt of blade sticking out of me. Oh, that’s right. That fucker stabbed me. I’d completely forgotten about it. Adrenaline did a lot to mask pain.

I hefted Drea up higher, wrapping her legs around my waist. “Pull it out.”

“What?! Are you crazy? We need to leave it in there and get you to a doctor!”

I repositioned her on my hip, reached back and yanked it out myself. I hissed through my teeth at the pain, throwing the knife away. It clattered on the ground.

“Aleksandr!” She climbed over me, her stomach digging into my other shoulder as she leaned around to get a good look.

“Relax. It’s a flesh wound. I’ll be fine.”

“*Maldito idiota.*” You fucking idiot, she chastised, pulling back and shaking her head.

“Aw, isn’t this sweet?”

My whole body stiffened at the deep, baritone voice that filled the air. I slowly lowered Drea back to the ground, keeping her body close to mine as I turned to face the new threat.

Recognition flared through me the moment I laid eyes on him. It was the man I’d seen in the café with Rayna. I’d recognise that long, scraggly mop of hair anywhere. Men swarmed into the room a moment later. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Where the fuck were they all coming from?

They surrounded us, forming a loose circle around Drea and I. They each held a weapon of some sort in their hands—a knife, axe, machete, pipe, crowbar, baseball bat. The only one with a gun was Scraggly Hair.

I sized up my options, trying to figure a way out of this mess. My brain ran a mile a minute going through all the different scenarios. I had three knives and two handguns left. Drea had a knife in each hand. Maybe she had other weapons hidden on her, I wasn't sure.

The odds were stacked against us either way.

Scraggly Hair rested his AK-47 on his shoulder, a taunting look on his face. "Take him alive," he said, pointing directly at me. "Kill the bitch."

That's going to cost you your tongue.

One of the men laughed, licking his dirty lips. "I want to fuck her first."

"Since when does a woman need to be alive for you to fuck her?" the guy on his left chuckled.

"Good point. Dibs on her body."

I kept tight control on the anger thundering through me at their words. Getting pissed off would do nothing but hinder me and help them. I had to keep calm, even though I wanted nothing more than to smash their fucking faces in for even thinking about touching Drea.

All in good time.

"Get them," Scraggly Hair ordered.

When they ran towards us, I front kicked a guy in the chest and then rear kicked another one with the same leg in a fast double touch. I whipped out my gun and managed to get two shots off before someone whacked it away. My body went into autopilot, attacking and defending as knives, baseball bats and axes came swinging towards me.

Drea darted around like the Flash, using her small stature and quick speed to dart in and out, slicing and dicing. She never let herself get too close, maintaining a safe distance away from whoever she was attacking as she ducked and weaved, her curved blades carving into flesh as she ran past.

I threw an uppercut and the man's head snapped back. Drea ran past and kicked him in the stomach. Then she was off again, running circles around me, lashing out at anyone coming at me from behind. She stayed close, ducking under my leg when I threw a kick, or crouching under my arm when I threw a punch. She was like a snake, her movements swift and fluid as she bent her body like a contortionist to work around my strikes.

I blocked a kick to the head, yanked out a knife and stabbed him in the thigh and then the chest in two quick blows. I spun, hurling the blade through the air. It sank deep into another man's throat, his body flying back from the force of the blow.

A fist came flying towards Drea's face. I gripped it in my palm and twisted it. He cried out in pain. Drea sliced her knife across his stomach and I headbutted him.

We worked in tandem with each other, like we'd done this a thousand times before when in reality, this was the first time we'd ever fought alongside each other. You wouldn't know it by looking at us though. Drea and I were perfectly in sync, feeding off one another and using our strengths to cover each other's weaknesses.

Drea threw both her knives, impaling one of the blades deep into one man's chest and the other into another man's leg. She looked over her shoulder and winked at me.

Of course the woman would be enjoying herself.

She tapped her back and it only took me a second to understand what she wanted.

I gripped the back of her shirt tightly and spun her through the air. Her foot smashed into a man's face as she hollered a war cry, blood and teeth flying.

Someone rammed into me with the force of a car. Drea's shirt slipped through my fingers as I smacked into the wall. Swift punches to my kidneys made me grunt out pained breaths. My eyes widened when I saw a fist from another attacker coming right for my face. I yanked my head to the left and the fist went into the wall right where my head was a second ago.

I was still being pinned to the wall by the man who tackled me, his fists driving into my ribs and making pain explode inside my body as the other man wrenched his arm out of the wall and prepared to hit me again.

A knife burst through his forehead, the tip of the blade staring me right in the face as blood splattered all over me. As he fell I glimpsed Drea in the background, her hand still hovering in the air from when she'd thrown the blade.

Panic set in when I saw someone creep up behind her. I wrapped myself around the man who was holding me to the wall and spun us to the floor in a quick Jiu Jitsu move, holding him in a Rear Triangle Chokehold, my legs curled around his neck. I yanked out my last knife from my ankle holster

and sent it flying. The blade whistled through the air and lodged itself firmly in the shoulder of the man sneaking up behind Drea.

I twisted my legs, breaking the man's neck. I got to my feet, fists up and eyes running across the room for the next attacker, but there was none. All that was left was Scraggly Hair, his eyes burning with rage as his gaze swept across the dead and bloody bodies of his men on the floor.

He pointed his machine gun right at me. "I don't give a fuck if he wants you alive, I'm gonna fucking kill you," he hissed, pulling the bolt back and arming the weapon.

He?

Drea moved to my side and I pulled her behind me, using my body to shield her from Scraggly Hair's line of fire. She tried to fight me on it, but I kept my grip on her forearm tight and unrelenting.

He was too far away to try charging him. I'd be dead before I even made it one step. The look on his face was one filled with anger and vengeance. He wanted me dead. Fine. But I had to think of a way to give Drea a fighting chance.

"I'm going to shoot you and then fuck your woman on your dead fucking corpse," Scraggly Hair threatened, the gun shaking in his hands from how enraged he was. "Maybe I'll keep you alive so you can watch first, huh? Watch her take a real man's dick. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" He tried to look around me to see Drea, but I stood taller, not allowing his eyes to even glimpse her.

The hilt of a blade hit my palm. Drea passed me one of her knives. I gripped it tightly. I just needed one opening.

"Yeah, we're gonna have a good time," Scraggly Hair continued, unzipping his pants. "I think a bullet to the stomach should do it. It'll take you a few minutes to die from that, so you can writhe in agony while you watch me fuck—"

Bang!

Scraggly Hair choked, his eyes shooting wide open as blood seeped out from the centre of his chest. He looked down in disbelief, his body swaying before he fell face first onto the ground.

Behind him stood Dayton, a handgun shaking in his hands, smoke billowing upwards from the barrel. His face was frozen in shock, his eyes plastered firmly to the man he'd just killed.

Did no one in the house fucking listen?

I couldn't be too angry though. He did just save my life.

Drea stepped out from behind me, taking in the scene quickly. "Go Dayton!" she cheered, pumping her fist in the air.

The smallest hint of a smile touched Dayton's lips.

"Yes, yes, good job," I said, rolling my eyes as I walked towards him. "Now, give me that thing before you—" my words died as a knife plunged straight through Dayton's throat.

Shock paralysed me. For a moment I couldn't move, couldn't think. All I could do was stand there, my eyes wide as I took in what just happened. All I could see was the look of pure pain on Dayton's face before he fell to his knees. I ran for him, catching him before he hit the floor. Drea went after the guy who'd stabbed him while I held Dayton in my arms, looking down at him in disbelief.

What the fuck just happened?

The blade went right through his larynx. Blood poured out of the hole in his throat quickly, forming a puddle around us.

Fuck. FUCK!

My hands shook as I tried to figure out what to do. How to save him, even though I knew it couldn't be done. He looked up at me with tears in his eyes, his mouth opening and closing like he was trying to speak.

"It's alright kid. You're going to be fine. Try not to talk." I ripped fabric from the sleeve of my shirt and tried to apply pressure to the wound, but it was hard. The harder I pressed, the more he choked.

Blood seeped out of his mouth, spilling down his chin. "I...don't... want...to...die," he cried softly, each word a struggle to get past his lips.

My heart fractured. "You're not going to die. You hear me? You'll be fine. It's okay. I-I'll fix this."

How? How can you fix this?

Nik and Lukyan appeared, bloody and bruised, helping Drea carry the guy who'd stabbed Dayton. I briefly noticed Tatiana was there, too.

"Fuck," Lukyan exhaled, looking down at Dayton.

"Call the doc," I barked. The fabric I held to his wound was completely drenched in blood. There was too much blood. I couldn't contain it.

Nik's eyes darted from my hands to my face. "Zander." He knew what I knew. What I was refusing to allow myself to believe. There was no saving him.

“Call!” I roared, my anger climbing. It was building higher and higher, the pressure getting too much to hold back.

Dayton gripped the front of my shirt like a newborn clinging to their mother, tears streaming down his face. “Please,” he choked out, “...hurts,” he gasped. His breathing turned into painful pants, small whimpers falling out of his mouth. His eyes were wide, his body trembling. I’d never seen him so scared before. He was looking to me to save him. To make it all better. To make the pain disappear. To protect him.

Guilt, pain and anguish gripped me hard, squeezing my heart. I felt helpless, like I’d failed him.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I repeated it over and over again, like the more I said it the more chance I had of it being true.

Dayton’s cries never eased. He cried right up until the moment he took his last breath.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine



The change in Aleksandr was instantaneous. He cradled Dayton's lifeless body in his arms, staring down at him like he had no idea what had just happened, like a parent who'd just lost a child. He rocked slightly back and forth, as if he were trying to soothe the poor boy, despite the fact that he wasn't here anymore.

Then the fucker who'd stabbed Dayton coughed and Aleksandr's head snapped to him like a lion locking onto its prey. His whole body tensed, his face morphing into the most savage and ferocious look I'd ever seen in my life. The Aleksandr I knew was gone, replaced by the dark, enraged version that wanted nothing but revenge.

He slowly put Dayton down and got to his feet, darkness literally pulsing from him as he bared his teeth and marched towards the man.

I'd never once been scared of Aleksandr. Not even when he kidnapped me or held a gun to my head. But right now, in this moment, Aleksandr was the scariest thing I'd ever witnessed.

We all got out of his way, parting for him like the red sea.

The man groaned as he slowly started to sit up. Aleksandr kicked him in the chest, forcing him back down. Aleksandr straddled him and began punching him over and over again in the face. Right hook, left hook, right hook, left hook. He smashed the sides of his fists down on him like a gorilla beating at the ground, once, twice, three times, before switching back to punching, alternating between hands with each blow. He never slowed.

Never lessened. He just kept hitting and hitting and hitting, like a man possessed.

The man's face crumpled from the unrelenting onslaught, denting inwards. Teeth and blood flew through the air with every strike, spraying across the room. And still Aleksandr didn't stop. Didn't slow down. An animalistic roar exploded out of him as he dug both of his thumbs deep into the man's eyes, shaking his head violently and slamming it to the ground before returning to pounding his face with his bloodied fists.

"Jesus Christ," Lukyan breathed out, watching on with terrified eyes. "Stop him Nik, before he hurts himself."

Lukyan was right. If we didn't stop him soon, Aleksandr would hurt himself. If he hadn't already. There was a petite blond woman standing next to Nikolai, looking at him with worried eyes. Her yellow sundress was bloody and torn, what looked like a mallet of some kind in her perfectly manicured hands. She didn't *look* like the type to get her hands dirty. In fact, if it wasn't for the ease in which she stood surrounded by all these dead bodies, I would have thought she was the prissy cheerleader type who shrieked at the first sign of blood. But she was far too comfortable in this environment for her to be that way. Was she a Bratva woman too?

Nikolai hesitated for the briefest moment before taking a cautious step forward. He approached from behind slowly. He reached out and lightly touched Aleksandr's shoulder. "Zander—"

Aleksandr spun and punched his brother in the jaw. Nikolai flew backwards and Aleksandr went right back to punching the mangled body below him like nothing happened, never once losing momentum.

"Fuck," Lukyan exhaled.

The woman shrieked and ran to Nikolai's side, fretting over him worriedly.

I watched as Aleksandr continued to beat on the man. There was no indication he was going to stop any time soon. I needed to do something—anything—to help him.

I took a step towards him and Lukyan grabbed my arm, stopping me.

"No, don't," he warned, shaking his head.

I shrugged him off and continued on. If anyone could stop Aleksandr in this fit of rage, it was me. I knew it. I was the only one that could understand what he was feeling right now, the grief and guilt that would be consuming him from the inside out.

I approached carefully, making sure to take loud steps so he'd hear me and not be taken by surprise. I crouched behind him and took a deep, calming breath.

“Aleksandr?”

He spun on me like he did Nikolai. His fist halted in the air an inch away from my face. I didn't back away. I didn't flinch as his bloodied fist hovered mere millimetres from my jaw. I just stared into his wild, frantic eyes, his chest rising and falling with deep, ragged breaths.

Even in his darkest, and cruellest moment, one where he was so consumed with rage he couldn't see straight, he refused to hurt me.

There was so much anger in him it seemed to swallow him whole. The Aleksandr I was staring at wasn't the one I knew. The kind, caring, grump of a man who secretly had a heart of gold for those he loved and cared for. No. This one was full of darkness. An unfathomable beast fuelled by rage and hate.

I could also see the guilt lying deep in the depth of his eyes and my heart broke for him. Because of what happened with his mother, I knew this would be tearing him apart inside. I needed to talk him down from the ledge he was standing on somehow. Pull him back from the darkness.

I reached forward and wrapped both of my hands around his fist that still hung in the air, pulling it close and nestling it between the valley of breasts. “*Regresa a mí.*” *Come back to me.* I spoke softly, coating my words thickly in my Spanish accent because I knew how much he liked it.

Aleksandr's face twitched. I could see the struggle burning in his eyes, like a part of him was beating behind the wall of anger, desperate to get back in control. He was torn, not sure what to do. Whether to let himself drown in his anger or listen to me and let it go.

“*Regresa a mí,*” *Come back to me,* I repeated, holding his hand tightly.

A tiny bit of light worked its way back into his eyes. He pulled me to him and I went willingly, climbing into his lap. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he buried his head into my chest, holding me tight.

He didn't cry. Aleksandr wasn't the type of man to cry. But he held me like I was his lifeline, like he needed me to keep him grounded. His body trembled, his hands squeezing me like he was afraid I'd disappear.

I whispered nonsense in Spanish to him as I ran my fingers through his hair, trying as best I could to soothe him. To let him know I was here, and I wasn't going anywhere.

I don't know how long we stayed like that for, locked in each other's embrace. It could have been hours. It could have been minutes. I truly didn't know.

Aleksandr stiffened when someone cleared their throat awkwardly. He lifted his head, looking at his brother. A little bit more of that darkness had receded.

Nikolai rubbed his jaw, a bruise already starting to form on his skin. He approached cautiously, like he was afraid Aleksandr would strike him again. I tried to move off his lap but Aleksandr gripped me even tighter, refusing to let me go.

It gave me all the flutters.

"Is there anyone left alive?" Aleksandr grunted, his voice thick.

Nikolai glanced around. "If they are, they won't be for long."

"Find out what you can from them quickly, before they die."

Nikolai nodded. "On it." He went to leave but stopped, glancing back. "I'm sorry, Zander." He didn't need to elaborate on what he was sorry for. It was pretty obvious.

Tension worked its way back up Aleksandr's spine as he took a deep breath. He didn't say anything, just jerked his head once in acknowledgement.

Lukyan surveyed our surroundings with scrutinising eyes. "Where's Father?" he asked, his head swivelling from side to side like he expected the man to appear out of thin air.

Aleksandr frowned. "I thought he was with you?"

"No," Lukyan's brows snapped together. "I haven't seen him."

Aleksandr's frown deepened. A concerned look streaked across his face. His arms tightened around me as he used nothing but his core muscles to get to his feet.

The strength it took to not only do something like that, but to do it while carrying another person, was phenomenal. Not only that, but he'd done it with such fluidity it didn't even seem hard to him.

He lowered me to the ground and gave me a soft, gentle kiss, cradling my head in his hands. He kissed me like he cherished me, like he didn't want to let me go, his tongue moving in slow, deep strokes.

I melted into him like an ice cream on a hot summer's day, my body just moulding to his as I kissed him back. I wanted nothing more than to drown

myself in him. His touch. His smell. His everything. But Aleksandr pulled back far too quickly for my liking.

He rested his forehead against mine, those gorgeous crystal blue eyes staring deep into my soul. He kissed me lightly one more time, his lips lingering against mine before he turned around and walked away,

The look on Lukyan's face was priceless. His mouth was wide open, his eyes literally bulging out of his head as he tracked Aleksandr out of the room, staring after him like he had no idea who he was even looking at. His gaze swung back to me.

"Okay, who was that man and what the hell has he done with my brother?"

I smirked, and lifted a shoulder innocently.

Did it give me a gooey feeling inside to know that this behaviour was out of the ordinary for Aleksandr? That he wasn't the type to display such tender moments of affection?

Yes. Yes, it did.

"Peculiar," Lukyan mumbled thoughtfully, turning on the balls of his feet. "Very peculiar." He followed behind Aleksandr and I hurried after them.

Aleksandr walked into another room and I stopped, looking in from the doorway. It was an office space of some kind, and it had been absolutely trashed to pieces. The thick mahogany desk was on its side. The chairs were all askew, knocked upside down or toppled over. Little odds and ends were strewn across the floor—papers, pens, personal items, a lamp. The three dead bodies sitting in a pool of their own blood made it very clear that an epic fight had taken place here.

Aleksandr moved cautiously, his steps slow and precise while he manoeuvred his way through the wreckage. He studied every detail carefully, meticulously, his face full of anxiousness and worry as his eyes ran over everything. His whole body stiffened and he lowered to his hunches, picking something up.

"What? What is it?" Lukyan asked, walking over. When he glimpsed what Aleksandr was holding, he drew in a sharp breath. "Fuck."

Aleksandr stood, a grim look in his eyes.

I squinted at what he held in his hands. It looked like a...I don't even know.

What the fuck is it?

Whatever it was, it was bloody, and it had a string of what looked like flesh dangling from it.

“Tell me that’s not what I think it is,” Lukyan said, dread filling his voice.

“It is,” Aleksandr grunted. “It’s Father’s tracking chip. It’s been cut out of him.”

I’m sorry, tracking chip?

Surely I didn’t hear that right.

Aleksandr stared hard at his brother, the weight of his next words weighing heavily on him, as if saying them was almost too much.

“Father’s been kidnapped.”

Chapter Forty



I stood in the entryway to Father's office, staring out over the sea of destruction that lay before me, trying to process everything that happened.

We'd managed to win the battle but it had come at a heavy, *heavy* price. Twenty-one of our soldiers had been killed, along with two maids who weren't able to take refuge in the safe rooms before the attack started.

And Dayton. Poor, poor Dayton. I'd failed him, and the guilt from that was eating me up inside.

Every room in the house had been torn apart. Completely destroyed. TVs and mirrors were smashed. Furniture broken. Cupboards and drawers had been raided, all our possessions thrown across the room and trampled on. They'd even gone so far as to piss on the beds and couches.

This wasn't a simple act of vandalism. No. This was about humiliation. Whoever was responsible, the mysterious 'he' Scraggly Hair referred to, didn't just want to hurt us. He wanted to humiliate us too.

Turned out though, we weren't the ones to be humiliated.

They were.

We'd faced a small army, been taken completely by surprise and yet, despite all odds, we'd managed to prevail.

Lukyan was still in the middle of counting their dead, but last time I'd checked he was up to twenty-seven.

Twenty-seven.

Our soldiers were good. One of ours would equate to roughly three of theirs. The rigorous training we put them through every day ensured that. But that didn't matter if you were overrun with much higher numbers. If it wasn't for the reinforcements that had arrived, this might have been one battle we couldn't win.

I stared at Father's tracking chip sitting in my open palm. The tiny little thing weighed virtually nothing, and yet it felt incredibly heavy in my hands. The enormous responsibility that now fell on my shoulders didn't scare me. It was hard to be scared of something you'd been preparing for your whole life.

What scared me was the fate of my father.

The fact that they'd cut out his tracking device and kidnapped him was technically good news. If they wanted to kill him, I would have found his body instead. But this begged the question of what they wanted with him.

Most people would think having the leader of the Bratva was a great bargaining chip, that it gave them the power to ask for anything they wanted. Money. Guns. Drugs.

Except that anyone who actually *knew* my father would know he wasn't the type to bargain for his life. His children's lives, yes. But his own? No.

And he'd kill me if I tried to do it instead.

I hoped Nikolai was having some luck with the prisoners. There were only a few left still alive, however I doubted it would be for very long. Their injuries were life-threatening, and I wasn't going to waste the time or resources trying to save their lives.

"Oh, Aleksandr," a soft, feminine voice squeaked. "I didn't realise you were in here."

I turned to see Flora standing behind me, a mop and bucket in her hands. She was one of the maids that permanently lived at the house. I'd known her for over twenty years. She'd come here with us from Russia. I was glad to see she wasn't hurt.

"I'm just here to clean your father's office," she said, glancing over my shoulder at the bloody mess that waited in the room behind me.

I tucked Father's tracking chip into my pocket and held out my hand. "I'll do it."

She frowned slightly but didn't argue, handing over the cleaning supplies.

“Take the rest of the night off. I’ll call The Cleaners in to take care of everything.” There was far too much damage for one person to clean up on their own.

“I don’t mind.” No, she never did. She never complained or argued about any of the work she had to do.

“I know. It’s been a traumatic day. Just go take it easy.”

She placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. She didn’t say anything, just stood with me for a moment in silence before she turned and walked away.

I faced the room, taking a deep breath. I’d never seen my father’s office in a state like this. It was always neat and tidy. Never a thing out of place. Father was a man of order and efficiency. He didn’t like messes, let alone in his private spaces. I swear, he spent more time in this office than he did anywhere else in the house.

I started cleaning. I cleared out all the rubbish and damaged furniture. I picked up all the books and put them on the shelves on the back wall, making sure each of them went back exactly where they belonged. Father had them organised alphabetically.

I righted his desk and moved it to its spot, which was hard because the thing was fucking heavy. A wheel on his leather chair was broken, which was an easy fix, so I just popped it in the hallway for now. I’d deal with it later.

Something crunched underneath my foot and I paused in reorganising his desk, looking down. Pain squeezed my heart when I realised what I’d stood on, and I had to take a moment to breathe through it. I bent down slowly and picked it up with as much care as I could.

It was an antique photo frame, and inside it was a picture of our family. The glass was smashed, blood staining the tiny little cracks that spread out across the broken surface like a spider’s web.

My fingers hovered over the picture, sadness clutching my chest, threatening to overcome me. It was an old photo, back from when my mother was still alive. Lukyan and Illayana were just kids. We were all smiling, even Father, which was a rarity in itself. We looked so...happy.

Life was good then. We were all together. Happy. Healthy. Alive.

And now?

I exhaled heavily as I sat the frame back on Father’s desk where it belonged, thinking about how much things had changed. How much I

wished I'd done things differently.

If I had come downstairs sooner, maybe I could have saved him. Like I could have saved my mother. Like I could have saved Dayton.

Guilt exploded inside me, so crippling I struggled to breathe.

Nik walked into the room and I quickly turned my head away, wiping the tear that had managed to escape. I cleared my throat, mentally berating myself before I turned back to face him.

He'd paused in the doorway, a wet cloth in his blood-stained hands as he studied me with worried eyes.

"What did you find out?" I asked, going back to the task of setting up Father's desk, pretending like he hadn't just walked in on me in a moment of weakness.

Nik played along, but the look he gave me made it clear he wasn't going to let it go completely. "A few things," he said, stepping further into the room. "There were six still alive. Two died before I got the chance to interrogate them. Their wounds were too severe. Out of the four, two of them were Dirty Vultures."

"Just two? What about the others?"

"They were part of another MC, The Chaos Lords."

I frowned as I put a stack of papers away into the desk drawer. "Never heard of them."

"Me either. But it turns out it wasn't just those two. They said there were four different MC Gangs that were a part of this raid."

That explained where the numbers came from then.

"Apparently, they'd all been brought together by one man. None of them knew his name but they described him all the same. Big. Dark hair. Blue eyes." He levelled his gaze at me. "Russian."

I clenched my fists, a vortex of anger swirling inside me. "Dominik," I growled.

Nik nodded. "These MCs are all small-time, not even a blip on the radar. Dominik has somehow convinced them all to work for him. Maybe he's paying them. Maybe he's giving them something in return. I don't know. But he's behind this whole thing."

I cracked my neck, battling the rage that threatened to take me over. I needed a calm, level head if I was going to figure out the next course of action. "Rayna's death pushed him to attack."

“Yes,” Nik agreed, his face tense. “It’s something we should have anticipated.”

“How could we have? Rayna was his daughter, but he never gave a shit about her. Not really. We all knew that. Fuck, even *she* knew that. No. He was using her death as an excuse to attack. A justification should Sergei question him about it.” My mind ran a mile a minute trying to piece everything together. “What I still can’t figure out is why he kidnapped Father. That’s what I can’t make sense of. The whole MC thing is easy. If they’re small-time, he would have offered them something they’d be dying for. Money and status. The ability to move up and finally be known and feared in the organised crime world. He’s brought them all together under his leadership and convinced them to do his bidding. He’s built himself his own little army and came knocking on our door, trying to take us down. He took Father. He ordered his men to take me alive. Why? What was his real goal?”

Nik’s face was grim. “I have no idea, but we need to figure it out quickly before he strikes again. I think the only way we’ll ever know is if we catch Dominik himself.”

I nodded. God, I was tired. I just wanted to lie down and sleep for a week. My whole body was aching and sore. I had cuts and bruises all over me, and the stab wound on my shoulder was throbbing like mad, shooting pain all across my back.

“About Drea—”

I groaned, running a hand down my face. “Not now, Nik.”

“Yes, now,” he demanded harshly, giving me a hard stare. “You’re too close to this, so you can’t see it, but you *need* to let her go.”

“Nikolai,” I growled, clenching my jaw. I wasn’t in the fucking mood to hear this. I had a million other things flying through my head. A million other things to sort out and deal with. I didn’t want this to be one of them.

Drea was so much more than what I thought. She was beautiful, kind, fierce, loyal, and a million other things that made her up to be the amazing woman she was. She could have run when the attack started. Just focused on herself and what was best for her and left.

But she didn’t. She stayed by my side. She fought next to me and saved my life.

“Word of this attack has already hit the streets. Her brother is mounting a force and it doesn’t take a genius to guess what he plans to do with it. If

he attacks us now before we've had the chance to recuperate, we're done for. Keeping her does nothing but hurt us. I understand—”

“You don't understand a thing,” I hissed, stepping up and going nose to nose with him.

“Then explain it to me,” he said back, glaring at me. He didn't move an inch, not the least bit intimidated by me. Nik never was.

“If I let her go, she won't come back.”

He frowned.

I growled, frustration twisting inside me, and I began to pace up and down the room. “I understand what I need to do. I know I have to marry Anya. But I don't want to let Drea go because if I do, she will never come back. She won't sit idly by while I marry another woman.”

“So you plan to force her to do it anyway? Force her to stay locked up in that room forever?”

“Yes. If it means I get to keep her in my life, then yes.”

“Even at the risk of her hating you?”

“Even then.” At least she would still be in my life. At least I would still get to see her every day. That was better than nothing at all.

Nik shook his head. “Aleksandr, I say this with all the love in the world, but you need to stop being such a fucking idiot.”

I blinked. “What?”

“You heard me. I didn't fucking stutter. There's a simple solution to all this and that's not going through with marriage. No, don't say a word. Shut up and listen to me. I don't know when you decided your happiness wasn't as important as ours. It is, and you deserve to have what you want. You think Lukyan and I haven't noticed all the sacrifices you've made for us? For our family? Fuck this arranged marriage. Do something for yourself for once. Tell Drea you're not going through with it and then let her go. You can't force a relationship, that's something I've learnt the hard way. If she wants to be with you, she'll come back. But at least she can convince her brother to stand the fuck down.”

“It's easy to say that, but it's not possible, Nik. If one of us doesn't marry Anya Tarasov, Grandfather will kill Illayana.”

“I'll do it.” Lukyan stepped into the room, his face more serious than I'd ever seen it before.

I exhaled, rubbing my temples. The stirrings of a headache were starting to form, and I could tell it was going to be a doozy. “Lukyan—”

“I heard what you said at Arturo’s party.”

I stiffened, guilt twisting my stomach.

“I’m not unreliable,” he said, his voice cracking slightly, and that guilt inside me exploded, consuming me entirely. “I know I joke around a lot. I know I say stupid shit sometimes. But I can be serious. I *can*. Give me a chance to prove it to you.”

Blowing out a breath, I looked at my brother closely. There was nothing but sincerity burning in his eyes, this need to prove himself radiating from him. But it wasn’t fair to force this on him either.

“Lukyan, I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean for you to hear it—”

“But you think it’s true, don’t you? That I’m just a fuck up?”

“You’re not a fuck up.” He waited for me to continue. “But you do have this tendency to screw things up sometimes. And this is a delicate situation. If something goes wrong, it could put Illayana in jeopardy.”

“I can do this, Aleksandr,” he said, standing tall. “Let me do this. Trust in me. Believe in me. I won’t let you down, I promise.”

I glanced at Nik. He nodded earnestly.

God, I hoped I wouldn’t regret this. “Okay.”

We went through the particulars, what was expected of him and the details of when he’d be heading over to Russia when the sound of a car door slamming shut made me pause, tilting my head in curiosity.

“Who’s that?”

A second later Illayana came bursting into the room, her eyes wild and frantic. She ran up to me, gripping my arms tightly. “Tell me it isn’t true,” she breathed out heavily, her nails digging into my skin.

I didn’t need to guess what she was talking about. Nik would have called her to tell her what happened.

“It’s true. Father’s been kidnapped.”

Her face crumpled, tears gathering in her eyes. “How? How can something like this happen?” Arturo and her guards walked in. Arturo went right to his wife, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her away lightly, trying his best to soothe her.

It was a good question. I looked to Nik. “Did you have a chance to look at the security footage?”

“Yes,” he replied, boiling with anger. “And you won’t believe what I found.”

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Chapter Forty-One



“Come on, let’s go.”

I spun around so quickly it made me dizzy, a shriek falling from my lips. Standing in the doorway of my room was Nikolai, arms folded across his chest and a hard look on his face.

My hand flew to my heart. “Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me.” I hadn’t even heard him open the door. I’d been standing near the window, gazing longingly outside, completely lost in my own thoughts when he’d suddenly appeared, as if out of thin air.

His words zinged through my brain and I frowned. “Wait, what? Go where?”

He didn’t answer. Just spun on the balls of his feet and walked away, leaving the door wide open.

I eyed it suspiciously. What was going on? And where was Aleksandr?

I hadn’t seen him since the attack yesterday. Which, if I was being honest, I kind of expected. I knew he would be busy dealing with the fallout from what happened and the fact that his father had been kidnapped.

I wasn’t sure what that meant for him. Was he now in charge? Or had they somehow managed to find their father?

I had decided to give him the night because like I said before, I knew he had a lot to deal with, but that was all I was willing to give.

I wanted answers. I wanted to know what happened. Mostly, I wanted to know if he was okay.

Dayton’s death had hit him hard. I was worried about him. Worried he was blaming himself and letting grief and guilt consume him. Worried—

“Hey!” I jumped at Nikolai’s rough voice. He was back in the doorway, staring at me like I was some sort of freaking idiot. “I said let’s go.”

“And I said, go where?” I barked back, staring him down. I wasn’t going to let him intimidate me. I didn’t know him. I didn’t trust him.

He narrowed his eyes at me and then snorted, shaking his head. “No wonder my brother likes you,” he mumbled.

I didn’t know what he meant by that, so I said nothing.

“Hurry up. I don’t have all goddamn day.” He left again, and I had a feeling that this time he wouldn’t be coming back.

I bit my lip, hesitating for all of two seconds before I hurried after him. I was a curious person by nature, so even though I didn’t trust him, I wanted to know what was going on. Especially if there was a small chance he could be taking me to Aleksandr.

I caught up to Nikolai at the top of the stairs and we walked down together. He didn’t say anything to me and I didn’t say anything to him, both of us content to walk in complete silence.

At least, I thought we were.

When we stepped off the stairs and into the foyer he held his arm out, stopping me from taking another step.

“Why didn’t you run?”

I frowned at his question.

“During the attack,” he clarified. Ah. “You had the perfect opportunity to do so. Aleksandr told me he gave you this address and told you to contact your brother, to tell him to come get you. But you didn’t. Instead you put your life in danger and fought alongside my brother. You helped us. Why?”

“Because I love him.” Duh.

After Aleksandr left me in that safe room, walking away without a second look back, a panic unlike anything I’d ever experienced exploded inside me. I knew I had to do whatever I could to help him. That I couldn’t just leave him to walk into danger alone.

I’d only just managed to stop the bedroom door from shutting when he left. I had to dive, sticking my hand in the doorway to catch it. That door locked every time it was closed. I knew if I didn’t stop it, I’d be stuck in that room with no way to help him.

Once I had placed something in the doorway to keep it open, I had quickly run back to the safe room and loaded up with as many guns and knives as I could carry.

I didn't bother calling my brother, like Aleksandr told me too. I didn't want to waste the time. Every second was crucial.

It had been a brutal fight getting to him. I was terrified that I wouldn't reach him in time. That I'd find him dead on the floor, the light drained from his magnetic blue eyes. I'd fought harder than I ever had before, determined to get to him before the worst happened.

"There was no way I was going to abandon him when he needed me the most," I finished, staring Nikolai down.

"Even though he kidnapped you?"

I laughed halfheartedly. "Oh, we're way past that now. Yeah, in the beginning I was pretty ticked off. He'd kidnapped me and killed my men. Who wouldn't be angry about that? But *my men* had kidnapped *your sister* first. Which, by the way is something I never would have allowed if I wasn't chained up in Nero's bed. Everything that happened after that was fair and justified in my opinion, and I'm not looking to retaliate. In fact, in your position, I probably would have done the same thing."

He studied me closely, trying to figure out if he could believe any word that was coming out of my mouth. "Aleksandr's not marrying Anya Tarasov. Lukyan will be." He walked across the foyer and out the front door without looking back.

I had the distinct urge to shove a finger in my ear and clean it out to make sure I'd heard him correctly.

"Hey! Wait!" I jogged after him, running out the door and down the porch steps. "What do you mean he's not getting married? Did something happen? Where is he? I want to see him."

Nikolai didn't answer me. He marched towards the yellow cab parked in the driveway and opened the passenger side door. He pulled out a wad of \$100 bills, handing it to the driver. "Take her wherever she wants to go." And then he was gone, walking back into the house.

Confusion wracked me. I stared at his retreating back, my mouth dropping open. What the fuck was going on right now? He was letting me go? Aleksandr was letting me go? I was positive he had to know about this, because I don't think anything happened in this house without his approval.

My gaze swivelled back to the open car door, to the driver looking at me with patient eyes, waiting for me to get inside. I'd been demanding for days for Aleksandr to let me go and here it was, the opportunity to finally leave right at my fingertips.

So why was I hesitating? Why wasn't I jumping at the chance to finally go home?

That was a stupid question. I knew why. I didn't *want* to leave. And if he wasn't going to go through with this arranged marriage, why should I?

I wasn't sure how long I stood there for, just staring at the inside of the cab as I tried to sort through the chaotic thoughts going through my head. The sound of someone walking up the gravel driveway snapped me out of my daze. I looked up, a thunderstorm of anger rolling through me.

What. The. Fuck.

Long legs in a short, skin-tight dress. High, hooker heels. Thick, dark flowing hair. Mila strutted towards me with that air of superiority surrounding her, nose up in the air and an evil, vindictive smile on her lips. "I told you he'd get bored with you," she said smugly as she walked past me and up the stairs. The two guards standing at the door opened it for her, allowing her entry.

Dark jealousy exploded inside of me and my feet moved, following after her.

Oh, hell fucking no.



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Aleksandr Volkov

I turned away from the window when Nik opened the passenger side door, holding it open for Drea. I didn't want to watch her leave, didn't want to watch her get in that cab and never come back.

I had been standing in my office on the second floor, peering out the window like some creeper, anxiously waiting for her to appear. Desperate for one final glimpse of her before she left.

God, I missed her already. How was that possible? It had been only one night and I missed her so much it hurt. I missed her laugh. I missed her smile. I missed the way her nose would scrunch up when something she didn't like happened on whatever ridiculous television show she was watching.

I knew *I* should have been the one to do it, to put her in the car and say goodbye, but I had to be honest with myself. I'd barely been able to stop from marching down there and bringing her back. From throwing her over my shoulder like the first time we'd met and dragging her back to my room, where she belonged.

There was no way I could handle watching her go when I was barely in control of myself.

It was the reason why I sent Nik instead of me.

I had it all planned out. I'd let her go. Give her space and time to think. And if she didn't come back on her own, I'd drag her back.

Knock. Knock.

I exhaled heavily, moving to stand behind my desk. A range of emotions hit me all at once.

Anger. Frustration. Excitement.

"Come," I called out, cracking my neck.

The door opened, and Mila walked in. The sultry look she threw my way told me she thought she was here for a good reason, a fun time.

How wrong she was.

"Alek," she breathed, biting her lip. She went to close the door.

"Leave it open."

She frowned, and then shrugged her shoulders, stepping further into the room. Her gaze wandered around idly, taking everything in. "This is nice."

I could tell she didn't mean it, that she was just saying it because she thought it was what I wanted to hear.

"I didn't know you had an office."

That's because I never used it. Never had the need. But with Father gone, I needed somewhere to work, and it didn't feel right using his. I had put it back exactly the way it was before the attack, and planned to leave it undisturbed until he came home.

When I still hadn't engaged her in conversation, she began to fidget uncomfortably.

Good. I wanted her to be uncomfortable.

She reached for the zipper that ran down the front of her dress, probably hoping to use sex as some sort of distraction tactic, but I held a hand up, stopping her.

"That's not what you're here for, Mila."

Her unease grew tenfold. She knew that if I didn't call her here for sex, it meant something bad. I'd told her enough times I wasn't interested in anything other than sex from her.

"Did you really think you'd get away with it?" I asked, my voice dropping low.

She swallowed, visibly nervous. "Get away with what?"

I wasn't in the mood to play games. I was tired, still in pain from the stab wound in my fucking shoulder, and pissed off I wasn't balls deep in the woman I loved right now.

Whoa, loved?

I thought about it for a moment and then internally shrugged. Sounded about right.

I turned the laptop on my desk to face her and pushed play. When her eyes darted down to the screen, her face dropped.

The surveillance footage from the night of the attack played out over the laptop. It showed Mila entering the guardhouse at the front gate and giving a plate of cupcakes to the two soldiers on duty. Not even thirty seconds later, they both vomited up blood and fell to a heap on the floor.

Mila then ran to the controls and opened the gate, allowing four blue vans to drive onto the property—the vans that held the MC army Dominik had sent to take us out.

When Nik had first shown me, I'd been stunned into silence. Out of all the possible scenarios I'd envisioned, Mila being the one to betray us hadn't

once entered my mind. I had watched it over and over again to make sure I was seeing what I was actually seeing. *She* had been the one to let them in.

Mila slammed the lid of the laptop down, her unease shifting to anger. “What did you expect?” she hissed, her face turning red. “You think you can just throw me aside and start fucking that Spanish *suka* with zero consequences? That I was just going to sit by and let that happen? *I* was meant to be Queen, Alek. Me! Not her. *I’m* the one that deserves it. I loved you! I would have made a great wife! But you never gave me the chance to be anything more than a—what did you call it? ‘A warm body for you to stick your cock into’.”

Amusement shot through me and I couldn’t hold back my laugh even if I tried. Mila was so shocked she took a step back, her eyes bugging out of her head. She’d never heard me laugh before.

“That’s because there’s no substance to you, Mila. There never has been. I had no interest in getting to know you because there’s nothing about you worth knowing.”

Her face grew another shade of red in embarrassment.

“What I want to know is, what was your plan exactly? Did you think helping my uncle overthrow us would get you the position you’re so desperate for? That attention you crave so much?”

“I do not crave attention.”

In the background I could hear what sounded like loud, angry footsteps. Someone was stomping around the house, doors being opened and slammed shut.

“You’re a power hungry whore. All of you crave attention.”

Her hands curled into fists at her side. “I don’t have to stand here and listen to this.” She turned to leave, but my next words stopped her in her tracks.

“I don’t know why you showed up here in the first place. We didn’t think you’d be that stupid. You betrayed us and yet you still came running when I called. Why?”

She spun. “Because I thought—” her mouth clamped shut.

“Thought what? That I was finally going to choose you? Did you think we wouldn’t find out what you did? That we didn’t have security cameras in the guardhouse?”

She averted her eyes.

“Oh, you didn’t,” I chuckled softly. “You see Mila, *that’s* where you went wrong. Thinking you were smart enough to pull something like this off.”

“I did pull it off!” she yelled, stomping back to the desk. “I killed those guards and let those men in. If they’d done their fucking job, I would be Queen!”

“Is that what Dominik promised you if you helped him?”

“I went to him! *I* offered to help *him* and he agreed to marry me when he became *Pakhan*.”

“And when that plan failed, you thought you’d still try your luck with me?” I shook my head. “It’s unfathomable to me how someone could be that fucking stupid.”

Behind Mila, I saw Drea walk up the stairs through the open door, her chest heaving and eyes darting around frantically.

I frowned. What was she still doing here? I thought she’d left.

Her head swung our way and her gaze locked on Mila. Fury overcame her and she marched towards us with single-minded focus, each step full of determination. Her brows were lowered in an angry frown and her jaw clenched so hard I was afraid she’d shatter her teeth.

Mila was in front of me saying something else, something I hadn’t heard because I stopped listening. All of my attention was on Drea as she pushed my office door open wider and went right up to Mila. She grabbed a fistful of Mila’s hair from behind and slammed her face into my desk.

Mila screamed, her arms flailing. Drea didn’t stop. She slammed Mila’s head down over and over again, her face completely consumed with rage.

I arched an eyebrow in amusement, watching her with a pleasant mixture of surprise and eagerness.

Blood splattered over the desk. Something cracked. Possibly Mila’s nose. I wasn’t sure.

Slam!

Slam!

Slam!

Drea released her grip and Mila crumbled to the floor with a pain-filled groan.

But Drea wasn’t done. Not by a long shot. She began kicking her, stomping on her with the heel of her foot while she swore at her in Spanish.

“*Puta estúpida,*” You stupid bitch

Kick.

“Te voy a matar,” I’ll fucking kill you.

Stomp.

“Zorra sucia y podrida,” Dirty, rotten whore.

Drea grabbed the antique letter opener on the desk and stabbed Mila in the chest, twisting it slowly before yanking it out and stabbing her again. She then straightened, blowing out a breath as she pushed a strand of hair out of her face. Her eyes cut to me, the anger increasing all over again, her lips curling up into a snarl.

“You couldn’t even wait for me to leave before you called in your whore, huh?”

I frowned. “I didn’t call her here for that.”

“No?” Drea jumped up on my desk, staring down at me. It was the first time she’d ever been in the position to do so, and I didn’t particularly mind it. She was looking at me with that angry glare I loved so much.

“No. I brought her here to kill her. She’s the one that opened the gates yesterday. The one that made sure the alarm wasn’t raised when the raid started.”

Her eyes narrowed, like she was trying to figure out whether to believe me or not. She must have decided she did because she let the subject drop. She placed a foot in the centre of my chest and pushed, forcing me down into my seat.

My brows shot up in surprise, but I didn’t fight her.

“You sent your brother to let me go.” She said it with an accusatory glint in her eyes, her voice taking on a threatening tone.

“I did. Because if I did it myself, I wouldn’t have let you get in the car.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“You know why.”

“Tell me anyway.”

I ran my eyes over every detail of her face. Those soft, feminine features. Beautiful caramel skin. Mesmerising amber eyes. That warm, fuzzy feeling I always got when I thought about her bloomed in my chest, coated in a thick, dark possessiveness that almost choked me. “Because I love you.”

Her breath hitched.

“I love you so much it hurts. It physically hurts to be without you, to not see you. To not speak to you. To think of you gone. You’ve managed to

burn yourself into my mind, my soul. Branded yourself in my heart. So, now you own it.”

Drea smiled, but it was still steeped in anger. “Good. Because I love you too.” Relief filled me at her declaration. “But that doesn’t change that I’m pissed at you.”

I arched an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For thinking you can just send me away without even bothering to say goodbye.”

I was about to say that it wouldn’t have been goodbye. That I would have tracked her down and brought her back if she didn’t come back on her own, but the words died in my throat when she snapped the button of her jeans open and pulled them down, kicking them away.

My heart pounded in my chest, my mouth going dry. She was so goddamn beautiful. I ran my eyes over her curvy hips, those strong, tattooed legs, staring at her in worship. I wanted to lick every inch of her, to trace all those tattoos with my tongue.

She was still standing on my desk, glaring down at me like she wanted to punish me. She hooked her fingers into her underwear and tugged them down. My cock throbbed in my pants as she lowered herself to sit on the edge of the desk, spreading her legs wide, her feet resting on the arms of my chair.

Fire burned in my veins. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. That pretty pink pussy, glistening wet. Her little pierced clit, just begging to be sucked into my mouth. I had a front row seat to the best goddamn show on Earth.

God, I needed her, and I needed her *now*.

“You’re going to make it up to me,” she breathed, leaning forward and wrapping a hand around my tie. She tugged me towards her and I went willingly, completely enraptured by her. I’d do whatever the fuck she wanted. “You’re going to lick my pussy until I come all over your face. And then you’re going to do it again, and again.”

“Is this supposed to be a punishment?” I rumbled, running my tongue up the inside of her thigh. “Because I have to be honest with you *malyshka*, it sounds more like a fucking dream.”

Drea chuckled, her hand squeezing my tie as she pulled me closer and closer to where I was dying to be. “Oh, but it is a punishment baby. Because afterwards there’ll be no fucking. I’m gonna make you walk around with my taste on your tongue all day, your cock so hard it hurts, and you’ll be

given no relief. Not until I've decided you've earned my forgiveness." She gave one sharp tug on my tie, and I was there, my mouth latching onto her clit.

I groaned in both pleasure and pain. I was painfully hard already, and she was going to keep me like this all day? Evil little vixen.

Her mouth-watering taste flooded my mouth and I drank it all in, my tongue moving in slow, languid circles over her pussy. A shudder ran through her and she breathed out a sigh of pleasure, her head tipping back.

My hands gripped the back of her thighs, and I pushed her legs back, opening her up even more as I devoured her. Licking. Sucking. Nibbling. Fuck, I loved the feel of her on my tongue. The way her clit pulsed inside my mouth, the slickness between her folds. Everything about her turned me on. It made me so fucking hard I just wanted to pound into that tight, little pussy until my come was dripping out of her.

I flattened my tongue and ran it from her ass to her clit in one, long stroke.

Drea cried out in pleasure, so I did it again and again, groaning when her pussy got even wetter, moisture coating my lips. She *really* fucking liked that.

She panted, her hips gyrating, moving in fast, wide circles. "Dios, you're gonna make me come already. You and that fucking tongue," she groaned, her chest heaving.

I kept the same rhythm, moving my tongue up and down, up and down. Drea grabbed a fistful of my hair and held my face right against her clit, grinding against me. I curled my fingers around her hips and held her tight, urging her on. Helping her to move faster. Harder.

"Fuck Aleksandr, yes. Yes, baby."

I'd always hated when women called me 'baby'. It was an endearment I shut down instantly. But when it came from Drea, falling from her lips coated in that alluring Spanish accent she had, it didn't bother me in the slightest. She could call me whatever she wanted, and I would still fall to my knees at her feet in worship.

I sealed my lips around her and moaned low in my throat, the vibrations causing her undoing. Drea came hard, her body shaking as she screamed out my name. Her grip on my hair turned painful, but it just made me harder, pleasure zinging down my spine. I felt like I could come just from

the taste of her, from the way she rolled her hips. The sexy, little sounds she made as her clit pulsed on my tongue.

Drea let me go and slumped back, panting breathlessly. She propped herself up on her elbows and smirked, eyes flicking down to her pussy and back up. "Again."

I dipped two fingers inside her, scooping up some of that delicious wetness literally pouring out of her and brought it to my lips, sucking them clean. I wanted so desperately to stick my cock inside that tight, little hole and lose myself in her. Fuck her until I'd drained every ounce of come from inside my body. But I could tell from the look on her face that wasn't going to happen any time soon.

So I went right back to it, latching my tongue onto her pussy again.

This was both the best and the worst goddamn punishment of my life. But fuck, I enjoyed the hell out of it, because there was nothing better than making Drea come over and over again. And it was even better that I got to taste it all.

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Chapter Forty-Two



“Are you sure this is a good idea, Zander?” Nik asked me. I could see the trepidation in his eyes, the anxiousness rolling off his skin.

He’d made it very clear where he stood with this, and I understood where he was coming from. He made some very good and valid points. But I was confident this was the right course of action.

“Yes,” I nodded, giving him a hard stare.

I sat in my office, Nik standing on my right and Lukyan on my left. Illayana was in front of my desk, leaning back against it with her legs crossed at the ankles and her arms folded over her chest. The tension in the room was so thick you could cut it with a butter knife. My siblings didn’t agree with my plan. They thought it was too risky. ‘Fucking crazy’ Lukyan and Illayana had said. But they weren’t in charge here, I was. And I was sure this would work.

And if it didn’t, well...

It had been a week since the attack and we were still no closer to finding Father. We’d tapped all of our resources, reached out to all of our contacts and so far, nothing. It was like he’d just dropped off the face of the Earth.

Grandfather hadn’t given a shit when he heard the news. Not that I was really expecting him to. He just told me I could handle being *Pakhan*, reminded me about the agreement with the Tarasovs and then hung up on me.

Son of a bitch didn't care at all that his son was missing. He didn't even care that it was Dominik behind it all. He just laughed and said, 'That boy had bigger balls than I thought'.

It baffled me how he could care so little about what was going on here, about this war happening between his own children. It was like it didn't matter to him. As long as a Volkov was *Pakhan*, he was happy for things to just play out and see how they ended up.

Something needed to be done about Grandfather, but that would have to wait until later.

My eyes swept to Drea and my heart lightened. Just looking at her calmed me down. It soothed that chaotic storm brewing in my chest and gave me clarity. She sat on the hard surface of my desk, legs crossed, knife spinning in her hands.

The relationship between us had moved fast. Exceptionally fast. Not that I was complaining. After she had killed Mila and spent the entire goddamn day torturing me with her body and seductive touches, she'd called her brother and told him she wasn't coming back to Columbus. That she was going to stay here. With me.

I almost couldn't believe it.

Juan didn't react well, which was to be expected. Drea had to go meet with him personally because he wanted to make sure she wasn't being coerced into anything. I let her go, along with two soldiers to watch her back.

She had returned a few hours later, eyes red from crying and completely, mentally exhausted. Her mother had been there too and tried convincing her to come home. But Drea had still chosen to stay, had chosen me.

I was afraid she'd be upset about giving up her role as Don of The Los Zetas cartel, but she'd assured me she wasn't, that with a little guidance, Juan could be just as great as their father. Better even. She was confident her brother was capable, and with their mother there to help him she knew he would be fine.

Drea had promised to check in and visit regularly, which would be hard for me because any time she was out of my sight I felt anxious and annoyed, like I was a heartbeat away from smashing someone's face into a wall if they so much as looked at me funny.

I'd never had anything as precious to me as her before. Drea had the power to absolutely ruin me. To break me. If anything ever happened to her, I don't know how I could go on. She was the most important thing in my life.

I gained a newfound respect and admiration for my father. If he felt even a modicum of what I felt for Drea for my mother, I had no idea how he was still functioning. The idea of someone taking Drea from me the same way my mother was taken from my father terrified me. It made me want to take Drea and run somewhere safe where she'd never be in danger.

But I couldn't do that. I had a responsibility to my family. To my father. He was counting on me to find him, and I wouldn't rest until I did.

Someone knocked on my office door.

"Vkhodit'," Enter, I commanded, my voice ringing out across the room.

The door opened. Czar poked his head through. "He's here."

I cracked my neck, taking a deep breath in. "Bring him in." Czar disappeared. Any unease about my plan vanished from my siblings as the door opened and in walked Dominik.

The overwhelming urge to cut that stupid, smug smile off his face slammed into me and it took every ounce of strength I possessed not to lunge across my desk. When Dominik had first made contact, I thought I was dreaming. Surely he wasn't that fucking stupid.

Turns out, he was. He'd requested to meet, and I almost couldn't believe my luck. After weeks of searching for him, *he* was going to come to *me*. But once the surprise wore off, my brain started to work through the situation and I quickly realised Dominik held the upper hand.

As long as he had my father, there wasn't a damn thing I could do to him. Dominik was the type of man to have contingencies in place. He'd have a backup plan for his backup plan in case his original plan didn't work. He always thought three, four, sometimes five moves ahead. I knew that if anything happened to him, I'd be signing my father's death warrant.

My siblings of course knew that too. But they were blinded by worry and anger. They wanted to just take him the moment he stepped foot on the property and torture the information out of him. At least, Lukyan and Illayana did. Nik was a bit more clear headed. He was able to put his emotions to the side and see what I saw.

He thought it would be a better idea to meet Dominik elsewhere though, not at the house. But I disagreed. I wanted Dominik to see his attack hadn't

worked. That despite the (as much as I hated to admit it) impressive army he'd managed to bring together, we were still in one piece. Still strong. That even though he'd kidnapped our King, the Prince was ready to take the throne.

I stayed seated in my chair behind my desk as Dominik walked in, my siblings surrounding me and presenting a united front. Nik and Lukyan at my back, Illayana at my front and of course the beautiful Drea sitting on my desk to my right, knife still spinning casually in her hand.

Dominik had four men with him, all wearing motorcycle vests with different patches on them. The Reapers, The Warriors, The Chaos Lords and The Brotherhood. They were all small-time MC Gangs, because I hadn't heard of a single one of them. The Dirty Vultures were noticeably absent, and I wondered if the death of their Prez during the attack meant they were down for the count.

"*Plemyannika,*" *Nephews*, Dominik said warmly, opening his arms as if he expected us to embrace him in a hug. "*I plemyannitsa, tak priyatno vsekh vas videt'*," *And niece, so lovely to see you all.*

The four guards I had stationed in the four corners of the room whipped out their guns and Dominik laughed, stopping in his tracks.

"Hell of a way to greet your only uncle, children," Dominik chuckled. The men at his back slowly reached for their weapons, but Dominik signalled for them to stop. "It's okay. This is my family. They wouldn't hurt me, would you children?"

The innuendo was clear: hurt him and my father would suffer the consequences. The fact that he was calling us 'children' didn't slip by me either. He was trying to make us feel smaller than he was, like he was the one in charge.

"You wanted a meeting Dominik, so here it is. Why don't you just tell me what you want so we can move on?" I said, sounding bored.

Instead of answering, his eyes swept to Drea. "And who is this lovely little bird?"

Everything in me wanted to pluck his eyes out for the way he was looking at her, but I kept my composure, silently grinding my teeth. It was important that Dominik not sense an ounce of discomfort from not only me but any of my siblings. He needed to see we were a united front. Stronger than ever.

Drea lifted her left hand into the air, showing Dominik the diamond ring on her finger. “I’m Aleksandr’s wife.”

The flash of surprise on Dominik’s face was priceless.

Things in our life always moved quickly. Death was around every corner. You couldn’t afford to waste the time you had, because you were never sure if your time was coming. So, once we’d finished dealing with the aftermath from the attack, I organised a surprise for Drea, to show her how much I cared for her. How much she meant to me.

I had an extension built into the warehouse, a large room that mirrored the Rage Room she’d taken me too exactly. It was my gift to her. Somewhere for her to go any time she wanted to be alone or had the strong desire to beat the shit out of something. I wanted to give her a new safe haven. And yes, it just so happened to be on property grounds—the closer I could keep her to me, the better.

She was so excited about it, she’d ripped off my clothes and demanded I fuck her in the middle of the room. To christen it. Afterwards, I pulled out the ring I’d bought for her and asked her to marry me. Neither of us were interested in a big wedding, so we eloped the next day with just our families in attendance.

Dominik placed a hand on his heart. “I’m hurt I wasn’t invited to the wedding,” he said, a sulky look on his face.

“Given what happened the last time you attended a wedding, I’m sure you can understand why.”

Dominik laughed. “Touché, nephew. Touché.”

“Why did you come here, Dominik?” I pushed, staring him down.

It was something I was dying to know. Why did he risk coming out of hiding? Why did he risk coming into a house with people who wanted nothing more than to see him dead?

“To take what’s mine, of course,” he smiled. “You’ve got a decision to make, little nephew. I’m sure you’ve figured out by now I was responsible for the attack last week. Yes, you always were the smart one. You know I have Dimitri, and you know I have no problem killing him. So, if you want your father to live, you and your siblings will renounce all your rights to the Bratva and hand it over to me. You will leave this house, this country, and never return. If you do as I ask, I will release your father and allow you all to live. Do the right thing for you and your family and concede to me here, now. Accept you’ve been defeated and I will have mercy. We both know

that without your father, your days are numbered. You may be a tough son of a bitch, Aleksandr, but you're no Dimitri Volkov."

He must have actually thought I was an idiot, because only an idiot would accept any kind of deal from a man like him. Dominik was the epitome of an untrustworthy man. The moment he got what he wanted, he'd turn around and kill us all. There wasn't a doubt in my mind about that.

I chuckled lightly, interlocking my fingers on the desk. "A very... interesting offer, Dominik. Truly. Here's my counter." I let the silence drag on for a moment, building the suspense. "We settle this the old way." Drea hopped off the desk, coming to stand by my side.

"The old way?" Dominik frowned.

I slowly got to my feet, shrugging out of my suit jacket. "A fight to the death." My siblings moved on cue, grabbing all the furniture, the desk and the chairs, and pushed them up against the wall, creating a wide-open space.

"You and me," I continued, never taking my eyes off him, "one on one." I handed my jacket to Drea and began unbuttoning my long-sleeved shirt.

Dominik watched, unease flashing across his face. He wasn't sure if he could take me, that much was clear. It was in the way he shifted uncomfortably on the spot, the way he licked his lips nervously.

He was a big man, like my father. But he lacked the same skills in a fight. My siblings thought it wasn't worth the risk. The fact that there was a small chance Dominik could win didn't sit well with them.

"If you win, my siblings won't fight your claim to *Pakhan*. But if I win, I get my father. You'll give one of your men his location so that when you die, I know where he is."

Dominik tried to hide his anxiousness with a boisterous laugh. "So confident you'll win are you, little nephew?"

This whole 'little nephew' nonsense was new. He was using it as a derogatory term to try and make me uncomfortable. It didn't work. The word 'little' didn't apply to me, regardless of the fact that Dominik was my elder.

"Confident enough."

Dominik studied me closely, his eyes narrowing slightly. "As *tempting* as this challenge is, I don't see why I even need to bother with it. You can't win against me and my men."

I arched an eyebrow, giving 'his men' at his back a judgemental glance. "We both know your *men* are no match for ours. It's why, despite the

element of surprise and your higher numbers, you still lost.” By the time we were done cleaning up the mess from the attack, our final count for their dead was thirty-nine.

Dominik clenched his jaw but he didn’t deny it.

“You have a chance right now to claim what you’ve always wanted. All you’ve got to do is beat me.” I took a step forward, spreading my arms out wide in invitation.

Because I knew Drea so well, I could tell how anxious she was. One look into her eyes was all I needed to see she was nervous, worried about me. No one else would be able to tell. She had a mask of complete confidence on her face, like my siblings. They didn’t want to show any unease, but I knew they all felt it.

Dominik ran his tongue over his teeth, assessing me. We stared at each other, the tension building in the air between us.

My heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline surging in my veins. *Say yes, motherfucker. Say yes.*

Shaking his head, Dominik scoffed, taking a step back. “You’re not going to trick me into this. Last chance, little nephew. Hand over control or your father suffers.”

I said nothing.

“Fine. Remember I tried to offer you a way out. You’ve made your bed, now you’re going to have to lie in it. What happens next is on you.” He spun on the balls of his feet and stormed out of the room.

I looked at Lukyan. “Follow him.”

My brother nodded, taking off after Dominik.

“Can you believe the nerve of that fuckwit?” Illayana growled, glaring out the door. “Did he honestly think you’d agree to just hand everything over?”

I don’t know what he was hoping for. What he was expecting. Dominik and I weren’t close, but even *he* should have known I’d never take his oh-so generous offer. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. My father would have my fucking head if I negotiated control of the Bratva for his life.

Fear and worry overtook me. I’d just sealed my father’s fate. Whatever happened to him now was on me.

Soft hands stroked my lower back. Drea stepped up to my side, her face warm and comforting. “We’ll find him,” she said softly, sensing my thoughts.

Yes, I knew we would. But what condition would he be in when we did?

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Chapter Forty-Three



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One week later

“Mikhail’s here.”

I sucked in a breath, spinning in my chair to face my brother. I had my iPad in one hand, a glass of vodka in the other as I studied the inventory list from a shipment we’d just received.

Nik’s words took me completely by surprise. What the fuck was Mikhail doing here? After the attack, we had called him to inform him of Dayton’s death. He didn’t take it well. He had hopped in his private jet and flown here in record time.

We explained what happened. Unfortunately, Dayton had become collateral damage in the war with Dominik. That despite my best efforts, I couldn’t keep him safe. I took complete ownership of it, because it was my job to protect him. And I’d failed.

Mikhail had sat there the entire time, listening. Once I was done, he’d gotten to his feet, straightened the lapels of his jacket and then punched me in the face. He didn’t say another word as he stormed out of the room. He collected Dayton’s body and left.

I didn’t think I’d see him again for a long time, and yet here he was barely a week later. Why?

I put my iPad down on my desk. “Show him in.”

Nik nodded, a troubled expression flashing across his face before he opened the door wider, revealing Mikhail.

Tall. Broad shouldered. Dark blonde hair. Mikhail was the textbook definition of the high school quarterback. He had sharp, symmetrical features, a strong jaw and light grey eyes. He wore a long, black trench coat, dark shirt and dark pants.

He strode into the room with two men at his back, stopping a foot away from my desk. Nik came to stand behind me, posture stiff. He kept one hand clasped over his wrist in front of him in a bodyguard-like pose, eyes never leaving Mikhail.

He knew Mikhail was still angry about Dayton’s death. And since he’d shown up unannounced, Nik was wary.

Mikhail was one of only a few people who could enter through our gates without prior permission. I didn’t think he was a danger to me. He

was mad about what happened to his son, which he had every right to be, but I didn't think he'd come here to hurt me.

Not in a life threatening way, anyway. Maybe he wanted to go a few rounds in the ring, who knows? If he did, I'd grant it to him. It was the least I could do.

"Mikhail," I said, rising to my feet. I offered my hand and it surprised me when he took it, giving it a firm shake. "I'm surprised to see you."

Mikhail nodded, taking a seat in one of the chairs in front of my desk. "This isn't a social visit."

I suspected not.

"Have you heard of the Til Death Games?"

I frowned, easing my body into my chair. "No. Should I have?"

"It's a fight-to-the-death, gladiator style tournament that's held once a year on a remote island off the coast of Europe. World leaders and the insanely rich gather to watch and place bets on who will win."

I glanced over my shoulder at Nik. He just shrugged. He'd never heard of it either.

"The man who oversees the Games is called Talon. A few weeks before the Games begin, he sends out a roster of who will be competing, along with their stats, so people can make informed decisions about their bets. He sends little previews of what the fighters are capable of. Videos of them fighting, etcetera, etcetera."

"Like horse racing?" Nik asked.

"Yes, but with people instead." Mikhail pulled out a tablet, starting it up. "These people in the Games aren't always there voluntarily. Some are, but most of them aren't. They've been trafficked specifically to enter into the Games to make them more entertaining. Boxers. UFC fighters. Marines. People who'd guarantee a good fight."

I didn't like where this was going.

"I've never attended the Games, but I get notifications for when a new one is about to begin. I received this encrypted email yesterday. It holds the roster for this year, who will be fighting, along with clips of the fighters showing off their skills in one-on-one battles to the death. It's a small preview of what's to come. This is a clip of one of the fighters being put into the Games." He handed the tablet over to me.

I grabbed it, studying it closely. It was paused on a video. Nik leaned over my shoulder to watch as I pushed play.

It was a close up of a brutal fight. I couldn't see anyone's faces, just two muscular backs and toned arms swinging violently at each other. It reminded me of a promo video where they deliberately clipped videos together to make it more appealing to the audience. It showed different angles of the same fight. Bloody fists connecting hard with soft flesh. Savage blows and painful strikes, all while never showing the faces of those fighting.

A voiceover blared out of the speakers.

"Oh, and what a brutal uppercut!" the male voice said, crowd cheering in the background. *"I don't think he's going to get back up from that one folks! Oh wait, he's going to try again! What a fight!"* A set of big hands grabbed a man's face and twisted sharply, breaking his neck. *"And, we have a winner!"* The camera panned out, showing a man standing in the middle of the ring, sweat gleaming on his back, muscles bulging. He dropped the dead man in his arms and turned to face the camera.

My breath caught in my throat.

"Your winner, ladies and gentleman, The Bratva Butcher!"

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