



T J MAGUIRE

BRATVA

~~Butcher~~



BRATVÅ BUTCHER



BY T J MAGUIRE

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CONTENT WARNING

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

This is a ***dark mafia romance*** story that contains the following themes:

- Harsh language
- Graphic and detailed violence
- Murder/death
- Blood and gore
- Crippling grief/loss
- Mentions of stillbirth/infant loss
- Graphic sexual scenes
- Knife play
- Blood play
- Choking
- Hate sex
- Graphic and detailed torture scenes
- Mental health struggles (ie, hallucinations)
- Vivid descriptions of dead bodies
- Mentions of sexual assault
- Mentions of suicide

Grief is a powerful emotion, capable of bringing even the strongest person to their knees. For all the people who have lost someone they love and feel guilty about moving on, everyone deserves a second chance at happiness. Only you know when your heart is ready.

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PROLOGUE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“SORRY TO INTERRUPT, BOSS. There are some people here to do some scheduled maintenance?”

I looked up from my notepad with a frown. “Scheduled maintenance? I don’t recall seeing anything in the calendar about work being done?” The damage incurred at my daughter’s wedding a few months before had all been repaired. There was no reason that I could think of to explain why people were there to do any kind of work. No damages needed to be fixed.

“There isn’t, Boss,” Aaron replied, voice shaky with nerves. “I checked, but they said they were hired by your son to repair some kind of wall damage.”

“Which son?”

“Aleksandr, Boss.”

My frown deepened. *That doesn’t sound like Aleksandr.* If he’d scheduled work to be done on the house, he would have put it in the calendar. He was meticulous with following procedures.

If he had said, “Lukyan”, *that* I could believe. My youngest son was the one with the most potential yet the worst drive when it came to applying himself—something I hoped he would grow out of as he got older.

“Send them away,” I told Aaron. The whole thing didn’t sit right with me. Suspicion ran rampant through my mind. How they even got through the main gate without pre-approval was a mystery. If they weren’t on the calendar, if they hadn’t been given prior permission to enter the grounds, then someone should have called up to verify before allowing them entry.

I picked up the phone as Aaron nodded and walked away. Heads were going to fucking roll when I found out who was responsible. I had enough shit to deal with. My brother, Dominik, grew more bold, more reckless in his quest to take my place as *Pakhan* of the Bratva.

Joining forces with Nero to kidnap Illayana, knowing full well what her fate would be, was the final fucking straw. He’d put his foot in my business for the last time.

Then...there was my father.

Sergei Volkov was a terror to grow up with. He wasn’t just tough or strict. He was cruel. Malicious. Vindictive. And he didn’t love anything except himself and his legacy.

A man like that should *never* have had children. He didn’t punish to discipline. He punished because he enjoyed inflicting pain and suffering.

The earliest memory I had of my father was when I was roughly three. He’d struck me across the face because I interrupted a meeting with a client to ask for more water.

“Ne bud’ neblagodarnym Dmitriy, i nikogda bol’she ne preryvay menya.”
Don’t be ungrateful, Dimitri. And never interrupt me again.

Dominik had rushed to my defence, and I think that very moment was what solidified the idea my father had to pit us against each other. Where it all started. Where our rivalry truly began.

He saw what could happen if he allowed our bond to grow too strong. Saw that we could band together against *him*.

So, he made sure we grew to hate each other instead. Always competing against one another. Never—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I bolted to my feet, picking up my gun at the same time as a group of men came barreling into my office.

Seven of them, dressed in black jumpsuits, each one holding a weapon of some kind. We stared at each other from across the room, sizing one another up. The odds were stacked against me, sure. But I never let that shit bother me. I had a quick trigger finger. I'd be able to take a few of those fuckers down with me.

There was only one man with a gun—my first target.

Screaming, crying and gunfire rang out through the house, along with cheers, whoops and hollers, no doubt from the other men attacking my home.

I'd deal with the who, how and why later.

"Come along, old man. Don't make this any more difficult than it needs to be. Our orders are to take you alive."

It was the man with the gun who spoke. He stood slightly in front of the rest. *The leader, perhaps?*

I arched an eyebrow. "By who?"

"You'll find out soon enough." He waved the gun back and forth. "Let's go."

I weighed my options, considering every scenario. "I think not."

He sighed. "There's *seven* of us and only *one* of you."

"I know." My hand moved underneath my desk discreetly until I felt the cool steel of the flashbang grenade taped there. "You should have brought more." I ripped it free, tore out the pin, lobbed it into the air and took cover beneath the desk, closing my eyes and shielding my ears.

BOOM!

The floor trembled from the small blast. Screams of pain and loud curses rang out around the room. I jumped out from under the desk and immediately went on the offensive.

It was...child's play, really. Not even close to a fair fight. All of the men were either on the ground groaning, scratching at their eyes or trying to crawl out of the room.

I made my way through the path of destruction of overturned furniture and broken glass, picking them off one by one.

Headshot here. Headshot there. Dickshot then headshot because his whiny cries annoyed the fuck out of me.

The designated leader lay crumpled at my feet, moaning. I kicked away the gun within his reach, crouched down at his side and forced him onto his back. Without hesitating, I shot him in the arm.

He screamed.

“Who sent you?” When he did nothing but continue to scream, I dug my thumb deep into the bullet wound.

He screeched, this irritating, high-pitched sound as he flailed wildly. “Ahh!! I don’t know!”

I shot him in the leg. “Care to try that again?” I asked in between his weeping.

“I’m telling the truth! I don’t know!” he screamed. “I don’t know his name! All I know is that he looks exactly like you!”

I stiffened. *Dominik. That motherfucker.*

He had finally made a move. I was going to fucking kill him——

I hissed when a sharp, stinging pain jammed into my neck. I swung back blindly, the side of my fist connecting hard with someone’s knee. Dizziness washed over me, but I ignored it, pushing through to twist around and shoot him in the face.

My hand drifted upwards, and my fingers curled around a syringe.

Son of a bitch.

I pulled it out, looking down at it.

Shit. Shit, shit.

My whole world tilted when I got to my feet, disorientation sweeping through my mind, causing my vision to blur. One by one, my limbs started to go numb. My legs wobbled, trying to support my weight.

“Grab him! Hold him down!” Hands grasped me, pushing me up against my desk. I fought, but it was pointless. A wasted effort. Whatever drug was coursing through my veins was making it impossible for me to fight back.

One man held down my left arm, another my right, while a third pinned my head down to cut out the tracker in the back of my neck.

That was the last thing I felt before I slipped into darkness.

CHAPTER ONE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

PAIN WAS SOMETHING I was very familiar with. We were old friends, pain and I. Physical pain. Emotional turmoil. The sting of betrayal. It didn't matter what kind of pain it was. I was so accustomed to it, so used to it, had experienced enough of it within my lifetime that I was almost numb to it.

That was why, despite the cigarettes being burnt into my skin by my twin brother, it didn't hurt. Not really.

Because I wasn't there.

I was with *her*.

Yekatarina Volkova.

She was the woman who owned my entire heart and soul. The love of my life. My forever. I was lying in our bed with the woman who haunted not only my dreams but every waking moment of my life. Holding her. Kissing her. Smiling as she chastised me for being too hard on the children.

I wasn't there, getting cut into, burnt and beaten like a personal punching bag. I wasn't there, watching Dominik smile every time he put the lit cigarette against my flesh.

Thinking of her brought forth a whole different kind of pain. A harsher, more crippling kind that overrode the physical torment I was being made to endure. Because there was nothing more agonising, more soul-crushing than losing the person who was your everything. Your entire reason for being. The only person who knew exactly who you were and loved you anyway.

That pain blocked out everything else happening to me to the point where I barely felt what Dominik was doing anymore.

Which, of course, angered him further.

He breathed out a frustrated sigh. “You know, this isn’t any fun if you don’t play your part, baby brother.”

He *wanted* my pain. My cries. Wanted me to beg him to stop, beg for mercy, but I refused to give him any such satisfaction. Refused to give him any indication that what he was doing was hurting.

I’d rather fucking die.

Maybe it was stubbornness. Maybe it was stupidity. I didn’t know. Either way, I refused to give in.

My wrists burnt with unrelenting pressure, the cuffs digging painfully into my skin. The tips of my toes scraped across the cold cement floor as my body swayed back and forth. The air stank of piss and blood, a nauseating mixture of that strong metallic scent and ammonia.

Soft whimpers echoed around the room from the other prisoners. I wasn’t sure how many were in there. Who they were. What they were doing there. All I did know was that they’d no doubt be feeling some sense of relief because the longer Dominik spent on me, the longer they were all left in peace.

He flicked his lighter open and let the flame burn, holding it in the air between us. I didn’t look at it. Didn’t acknowledge him. I just kept my eyes forward and head held high. He moved the open flame closer and closer, waiting for me to react, anticipation shining in his eyes.

My heart rate sped up. I controlled my breathing so it wouldn’t show. So he couldn’t see how much I was dreading what was about to happen.

There were a lot of things I could ignore, but having a hot, open flame pressed against me?

No. Not even *I* could ignore that.

Heat flared across my skin as the flame neared the sensitive area of my lower abdomen. I closed my eyes and squeezed my hands into tight fists,

breathing through the pain.

In and out. In and out. One, two.

It was *scalding* hot. Unbearable. That horrid stench of burning flesh wafted up my nose. I growled low in my throat, half out of frustration, half out of anger and pain. He was keeping the flame on the same spot, allowing it to just burn and burn and burn through me, straight through the layers of skin, fat and sinew. It would be a third-degree burn, at least.

A sadistic smile curled on Dominik's lips. "*Finally.* A reaction. Let's keep that momentum going, shall we?" He moved the open flame around to my side, and I hissed, my body involuntarily twisting to try to get away from the pain.

You fucking son of a bitch.

Dominik released a giddy laugh. "Yes! Yes! Now the fun *really* begins!"

I hated that fucking look on his face. Hated that I'd inadvertently given him what he'd been searching for.

That hatred fuelled my determination. My willpower to never let that bastard win. Never let him see me weak.

Yekaterina. Yekaterina.

My mind focused on her, not on what was happening to my body.

Yekaterina. Yekaterina.

Numbness drifted into my limbs.

Yekaterina. Yekaterina.

The pain morphed from a roaring agony to a dull ache, humming in the background. My mind conjured up her image—a way to deal and cope with the stress my body was under.

She looked exactly as I remembered. Long, beautiful dark hair. Smooth, pale skin. The softest lips in the world. Eyes the colour of the ocean on a bright, sunny morning in the Maldives.

A big, beaming smile broke out across my face.

My beloved.

"I think you broke him, Boss," one of the men under Dominik's thumb said, stepping into the light. He walked right through the ghostly image of my Yekaterina, and she swirled away.

It wasn't the first time I'd hallucinated her before. In fact, it wasn't even the third or fourth. I'd done it so many times that I was sure I was actually starting to lose my mind.

She never said anything. I mean, she was a figment of my imagination... What could she say? But I cherished those moments when my mind was so far gone, it showed me the only person in the world who could bring me peace.

I'd looked it up. Apparently, it was a condition quite common among people who'd lost a loved one. Bereavement hallucinations, they called it, where one subsequently experienced sensory perceptions of the deceased.

I never told anyone. It was for me and me alone. If going crazy meant that I got to see her, then I hoped I went fucking insane.

Dominik looked at the soldier who spoke. "I think you're right. I have broken him," he sighed, disappointment layering his voice. He tucked the lighter away into his pocket and patted the top of my head condescendingly. "We'll try again tomorrow, baby brother, and the next, and the next. You and I are going to be spending *a lot* of time together. I can't wait."

I said nothing. Any outburst would show how much his words and actions affected me, and that was something I absolutely could not allow.

He gripped my chin roughly and *forced* me to look at him, amusement dancing in his eyes. "If only Father could see you now."

"Why don't you show him then, *Dominika?* Hmm?" His hateful glare could have burnt down the room. He *hated* it when I called him that. It was a teasing nickname from when we were children. I gave him an arrogant smile. "Because you know as well as I do that he wouldn't be impressed by this. It would show him exactly what you're so desperate to hide." My smile widened. "How *weak* you really are."

"I. Am. Not. Weak," he growled. "Would a weak person have the *Pakhan* of the Bratva in his fucking basement? Huh? Huh?!"

Getting called weak was a pressure point for him—one I thoroughly enjoyed pushing. It was all he'd heard from our father growing up.

"*Ty budesh' slabym, malen'kim mal'chikom vsyu svoyu dolbanuyu zhizn'*? Are you going to be a weak little boy all your fucking life?

"*Pochemu ty ne mozhesh' byt' bol'she pokhozhim na svoyego brata?*" Why can't you be more like your brother?

"*Ty slab! Slab, slab, slab!*" You're weak! Weak, weak, weak!

Before our rivalry had reached this point, I used to actually feel sorry for him whenever Father would pick on him. But that was a long, *long* time ago.

“But that wasn’t you, was it?” The look on his face was worth all the pain and torture I’d just endured ten times over. “You didn’t even have the balls to join the raid yourself. You just sent your lackeys in to do it for you. *Slabyy! Weak!*” I spat, channelling Sergei Volkov, that terrifying aura he exuded when he was angry.

It worked.

Dominik flinched, an involuntary response from years of emotional trauma and physical abuse. It was exactly what I was hoping for. To that day, Dominik was still scared of Sergei. Was still trying to impress him. Earn his love and affection, even after all of those years, after everything he’d done. He refused to see what was right in front of him. What *I* had realised when I was only ten years old.

Our father didn’t give a fuck about us. He didn’t love us or care about us or want us to be happy.

The only thing that mattered to him was his legacy.

My smile turned downright feral. Psychotic. Once Dominik realised what he’d done, the fear he’d shown me, his jaw clenched in anger, hands squeezing into tight fists at his sides.

He struck hard. Fast. I didn’t even see the blow coming. His knuckles pounded into my jaw, and my head snapped to the side, pain exploding across my face. Blood pooled in my mouth, coating my teeth. Despite the throbbing pain, I couldn’t help but laugh as my body slowly swayed back and forth in the air.

The cuffs around my wrists had rubbed my skin raw. Nearly everything hurt, but still, I laughed and laughed and laughed.

I might have been the prisoner. *I* might have been the one chained up and being tortured for hours on end. But *he* was the one who was hurting. Dominik’s face turned bright red in embarrassment the longer I laughed at him. It wasn’t a good look for him, especially in the presence of his men. Or even the other prisoners, for that matter. It undermined his authority. Made him look bad. Not in control.

Weak.

With an angry huff, he spun on the balls of his feet and stormed out, his men following behind him.

The moment he was gone, it was like all of my strength just evaporated, making my whole body sag forward. Now that he wasn’t there, now that he couldn’t see me, I didn’t have to put on a front and act like I wasn’t hurting.

Exhaustion filled me, and I didn't even try to fight it as I slowly slipped into unconsciousness.

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CHAPTER TWO



AUTUMN DEVALOS

HE'S ONE TOUGH MOTHERFUCKER, I thought, watching from the shadows as Dipshit held an open flame to his identical twin brother's stomach. The man barely fucking flinched. Barely made a sound except for what sounded like a frustrated growl.

For hours, I'd sat there—we'd all sat there, actually—watching the man dangling from the ceiling take a fucking beating without screaming or crying out in pain once.

I mean, shit, I thought I had a high tolerance for pain, but this guy? He was on a whole other level. A whole other fucking planet.

Since my incarceration in that shithole, I'd seen a lot of people being tortured... Myself included. Some of it was very unoriginal.

"Tell me what I want to know!" Punch. *"Who sent you?"* Kick. *"Answer me!"* Slice.

When that didn't work, they got a little more creative. Waterboarding. Electric shocks. Sharp objects under the fingernails. I'm not going to lie, it all hurt. A lot. But no amount of pain would ever get me to talk.

Client confidentiality was a *big* thing in my profession. If I revealed who hired me to kill Dominik Volkov, it wasn't only my job I could kiss goodbye, but my livelihood, too. My life.

No one would ever hire me again. There'd be a black mark on my name, saying I couldn't be trusted. I'd be blacklisted from every event. All my contacts would shun me. And that was *only* if my employer didn't kill me first for ratting.

So, no, I was never going to say a damn word, no matter what that bastard put me through.

Was I still salty because Dominik had somehow managed to figure out I was trying to kill him? And thwarted it?

Yes.

Was *that* one of the reasons why I refused to give him the answers he so desperately wanted?

Yes.

I was petty like that.

A month's worth of gruelling research, hard work and sucking up to his lackeys, trying to get close to him... All fucking wasted. Not to mention the resources and favours I had to call in to even get the information I needed on him.

When I was hired, I was given a file containing basic details about my mark. Name, age, last known location, a photo so I'd know what he looked like. Anything else I needed, I had to acquire on my own. I dug deeper into his history. I knew he had a twin brother, Dimitri. Knew he had a daughter, Rayna. No wife. A slew of barely legal girls in his harem. Never stayed in one place too long. Was paranoid by nature.

I studied *everything* I could on that motherfucker. His likes, dislikes, where he got his fucking coffee. Everything.

But in the end, it didn't matter. He somehow managed to find out what I was up to and stopped me before I even realised what had happened.

I was still bitter about the whole thing. *That stupid, ignorant asshole—“Slab!”*

My eyebrows rose in surprise at that harsh, abrasive tone and Dominik's flinch of fear. I didn't know what that word meant, but the way it was delivered was downright fucking menacing.

I listened closely as the brothers spoke, studying their interaction for any angle I could use. They hated each other. Clearly.

Dominik was brimming with anger, resentment and jealousy. Dimitri was just angry. So, so angry.

From my vantage point, I had an unobstructed view of what was going on. I could see the blood dripping down Dimitri's torso. That deep, primal rage hidden in his eyes. The way he looked at his brother with complete and utter contempt.

When Dimitri started to laugh, Dominik struck him so hard across the face that his body swayed back and forth. It didn't stop the man from continuing to laugh, though, despite how much that must have hurt.

Embarrassed, Dominik stormed out of the room with his goons behind him. The moment he was gone, Dimitri slumped forward, almost like his body was just completely drained of energy. He wasn't moving, and his eyes were closed.

He'd passed out.

I had to give it to the guy. He'd clearly been on the brink of losing consciousness, but through sheer willpower and determination, he had managed to pull through so he didn't pass out in front of his brother. His torturer.

As someone who'd been in the exact same position as him not even twenty-four hours earlier, I understood that drive, the compulsion not to let that bastard win. Not to let him see me crumble and break.

Movement made me glance to my left. I rolled my eyes. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Ana shuffled forward regardless of my words, the chain around her neck rattling. "He needs water." She was a nice woman. Old—well, older than me, and I was in my early forties. She had a very motherly nature about her. I'd have wagered a bet she was somebody's grandmother. Fuck, even great grandmother.

My eyes focused back on the old woman inching her way towards the unconscious man dangling from the ceiling. She hadn't quite spilt the beans on what she was doing trapped in that shithole, but then again, neither had I.

With a sigh, I got to my feet and intercepted her path before she could take another step. I didn't have to go too far. She moved slower than a fucking turtle. I took the small bowl filled with her water ration for the day and walked the few steps back to her spot on the wall, placing it back on the ground.

She gave me a smile that showed barely any teeth. Just all gums.

Seriously. What could a frail, old woman like her possibly have done to Dominik to warrant being trapped down there?

I was dying to ask, but I knew I couldn't. It would open the door for her to ask the same question in return. My business was nobody's business.

"You're a nice girl, aren't you? Deep down, behind that rough and tumble exterior."

"I'm really not." She was just *ancient*, and I had a soft spot for the oldies.

I took her by the elbow and led her back to her little corner of the room. We all had them. The chains around our necks were long enough to provide us with the ability to stand and stretch our legs. They definitely weren't long enough to reach the staircase at the opposite end of the room.

I knew. I'd tried.

Along with myself and Ana, there were two others. A guy who called himself Wink—real name unknown—and Veronica, a shy young woman who spent more time crying than talking.

She annoyed me, if I was being honest. But I was trying to be empathetic because I was sure the situation would be hard for normal, everyday people to handle.

"Normal" was a ship that had sailed a long time ago for me, and it didn't even have anything to do with the fact that I was essentially a gun for hire, which I was well aware was far from ordinary.

Even from a young age, I knew I was different. That my mind and emotions just didn't work the way everybody else's did. Things that *should have* affected me didn't. Like when my older brother died. I didn't shed one fucking tear. Though I'm pretty sure that was because he tried to rape me when I was eight.

My parents had called me heartless.

"*How can you not care that your brother is dead?*"

"*What kind of monster are you?*"

It wasn't like I killed him. Fucker had died in a car accident. But when I heard the news, I just shrugged and went right back to cutting the heads off all the Barbie dolls my mother insisted on buying me, even though I told her I didn't fucking like Barbies.

My parents chucked me into therapy, where they told me I had the personality traits of a psychopath. A little extreme to tell a ten-year-old, but whatever.

After I helped Ana sit back down, I went over to where Veronica was. There was a tiny bit of light illuminating the room from the single light bulb dangling over Dimitri's head. It was barely enough to see where I was going, but I'd been in that room for so long that I'd mapped out each direction I was able to go.

Veronica scrambled away as I neared, begging me not to hurt her. To please let her go, like I had any fucking say in what was going on there.

Idiot.

I picked up her small bowl of water and, with cautious steps, approached Dimitri's unconscious form. His entire body hung limp, the only thing keeping him upright being the metal cuffs no doubt digging painfully into his wrists.

I pursed my lips, studying him carefully. There was no denying that he was an attractive man. Dark hair with spatterings of silver. Sharp, angular features. Strong jawline. Narrow nose. Full lips.

Even though he and Dominik were identical twins, there was a clear difference between the two—at least, as far as I could tell.

Where Dominik had quite a haggard appearance—like he'd aged well beyond his fifty-four years due to stress—and a noticeably smaller build, Dimitri had the body of a twenty-year-old frat boy and the face of a finely ageing Henry Cavill. Bulging muscles. Hard, defined abs. Powerful chest and big, broad shoulders. It was clear that he worked out. Kept himself in incredible shape.

Was it twisted that my lady bits did a little dance at how fucking hot he looked with all that blood dripping over him?

Probably. Oh well.

Almost as if sensing my presence, Dimitri jostled awake, his gaze snapping to me. There was a brief moment of disorientation, his brows creasing together as he took me in.

Then, he fucking *attacked* me.

His hands wrapped around the chains holding him to the ceiling, and he lifted himself up, swinging his leg in a powerful arc, aiming for my head.

“What the fuck?!” I shrieked, barely managing to rear back in time and avoid the strike.

The chain around my neck snapped taut and propelled me back towards him. He swung again, this time with the other leg. I ducked underneath it, cocked my arm back and socked him right in the mouth.

“Will you cut it out?! I was just trying to help you!”

Dimitri spat out a mouthful of blood, glaring at me. “I didn’t ask for your help,” he grunted, voice like granite. Then he struck out again with another kick.

I dodged it—barely—and backed up so I was no longer within his reach. “Excuse me for being fucking hospitable,” I spat. “Fuck ya, then.”

That’s the last time I try to do something nice.

Without another word, I marched back to my corner and spent the rest of my time awake scowling at him through the darkness.

A short time later, Dominik returned, absolutely brimming with anger. He made a beeline right for his brother and punched him in the face. Dimitri’s head snapped back, his laughter ringing in the air.

“Let me guess,” Dimitri started, eyes lit with amusement. “You tried to negotiate with my son. My release in exchange for *Pakhan*? Oh, *brat*, you’re so predictable. I’m actually embarrassed for you.”

Dominik’s face turned bright red. “I don’t know what you’re laughing at,” he hissed. “You boast about this strong family connection you all share, and yet, none of your children would lift a finger to save your life.”

“Of course they wouldn’t. They know better than that. The role of *Pakhan* doesn’t belong to you, Dominika. It belongs to my son. There’s nothing you can do that will make Aleksandr give that up. It’s *his* legacy. Not yours. He knows to never negotiate with you, not even to save my life.”

Dominik pounded his fists into Dimitri’s torso over and over again in a frenzied, bloody rage.

I had no idea what was going on, what they were arguing about, and I didn’t care. I rolled over and went to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

TIME HAD NO MEANING in that room. The days bled into the nights. The nights into days. A terrible and vicious cycle took place where Dominik tortured me for hours on end, only stopping when *he* became exhausted.

After the beating he'd given me when Aleksandr refused his ridiculous offer—my freedom for the *Pakhan* role—he'd been more careful in his tactics to cause me pain.

“Don’t want to damage you. At least...not on the outside,” he’d said. *“No one will buy a broken horse.”* He’d laughed.

His original plan had clearly backfired. He’d foolishly thought my capture would be enough to force my children into doing whatever he wanted, but Aleksandr knew better. He knew I would never negotiate to save my life, least of all with my brother.

So, Dominik had a plan B, and based on the not-so-cryptic taunts he continuously threw my way, I had a feeling I knew what it was.

He was going to sell me to the highest fucking bidder.

The Bratva had a lot of enemies. A lot of people who would pay good money to make me suffer.

The question was... Who was it going to be?

Until that moment, he had still wanted to cause me pain. He'd just chosen meticulous methods so he wouldn't "damage the merchandise" because, as he constantly pointed out—usually while laughing in my face—no one wanted to buy a broken horse.

There was nothing my brother wanted from me except my pain. He wasn't after answers or apologies. He just wanted to hurt me. Make me pay for outdoing him at every turn while we were growing up. Punish me for having our father's admiration and respect while he only got contempt and disappointment.

It was all about making me suffer. Nothing more. Nothing less.

I rolled my neck along my shoulders and leant back against the wall behind me. Sometime during the beatings, I'd been released from the cuffs hanging from the ceiling and moved. Unlike the other prisoners—four by my count in little glimpses throughout my never-ending torture, I was cuffed by the wrists, ankles *and* neck. Dominik wasn't taking any chances with me, apparently, which was a compliment in and of itself, really, but still incredibly irritating. There was zero chance of escaping out of that hellhole, even if I had the energy.

Which I didn't.

I barely had the energy to glare at the annoying redhead chained to the wall beside me.

I didn't know who she was. Didn't know her name or what she was doing there. I didn't know a damn thing about her except that she infuriated me to no end.

She talked...a lot. To herself. To the other prisoners. To the wall. And when she wasn't talking, she was fucking singing.

I'd never been a prisoner before, but I was fairly sure there was some sort of unspoken etiquette to it. Some unspoken rules for anyone in the same position as you, like don't piss off the other people trapped in the room.

Does the redhead care?

No. She doesn't.

Because she is doing it right-fucking-now!

"Have you ever heard the expression, 'don't pull that face because if the wind changes, it'll be stuck like that forever'?" She was looking directly at

me, so I suspected her question was intended for me, but I did nothing but glare at her. “I think that’s what’s happened to you. You’ve had that same look on your face for hours now. This perpetually sour and grumpy as shit look.”

“That’s because you won’t shut the fuck up,” I hissed out in frustration.

“He speaks,” she gasped in mock horror. “I’m shocked. I thought the extent of your vocabulary was just grunting and snarling.”

“That’s the only response you warrant.”

“I don’t know what *you’re* so crabby about. It’s not like *I* attacked *you* for no good reason.” She lay on her back, tucking her interlocked fingers behind her head and crossing her feet at the ankles.

She was tall. Just over six foot, if I had to guess, with a lean, athletic build that showed she worked out and took care of herself. Cuts littered her tanned skin. Some old, some new, yet her face was clear of any injuries. Her eyes were a sparkling kind of green. She had a heart-shaped face, sharp and angular, and long, thick red hair.

“Something you haven’t shut up about since,” I snapped, growing more and more irritated by the second.

I swear, Dominik placed me next to her deliberately as another form of his sick, twisted torture. I was sure of it.

I hated people. Especially the chatty ones.

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I annoying you?” Her head rolled to the side lazily, and she flashed me a big, beaming smile. “Good.”

Yep. Definitely torture.

I glared even harder. It should have made her recoil. Tremble in fear. I’d spent many years perfecting it to ensure that very reaction. But she just frowned at me.

I growled out an irritated huff. She didn’t like me because I tried to kick her in the head when we first met—something she demanded I apologise for, which I absolutely refused to do.

And I didn’t like her because... Well, I didn’t like anyone, really. That woman, though... She pissed me off more than usual.

We’d gotten off on the wrong foot, and we both had zero intention of righting that wrong. It was a hill we were both prepared to die on together.

Or, at least, I was. Fuck knew what was going on in that devil woman’s head.

When she started singing some pop culture song—rather badly, I might add—my left eye started to twitch uncontrollably. “I swear to God, if you don’t cut that out right now, I’m going to fucking kill you,” I seethed.

“Oh, reallyyy?” she dragged out, giddiness in her tone. She sat up and spun to face me, crossing her long legs eloquently. “And how do you plan to do that? It isn’t lost on me that you’re on a much shorter leash than the rest of us.”

Fuck. Her.

She was right.

She knew it was nothing but an empty threat. If I was capable of reaching her, she’d have been dead already. Regardless, I moved into a low crouch, like a tiger about to strike, and leant forward menacingly, as far as the chains wrapped around me would allow.

'The Butcher Staredown', a term coined by my youngest son. Something he’d seen me do countless times that made grown men shit their fucking pants. It was a threatening glare with the sole purpose of intimidating and instilling fear.

I’d yet to come across a single person it hadn’t worked on, my children included.

Instead of being terrified, like she damn well should have been, she looked...confused.

“What’s going on with your face?” Her head tilted to the side in assessment. “That’s the second time you’ve had that look. Are you... Are you trying to intimidate me?”

Then, she burst out into a fit of laughter.

If I was within reaching distance, I would have fucking strangled her. I growled and flopped back down onto my ass.

I guess it wasn’t as scary if you didn’t have the full story. She clearly didn’t know who I was, otherwise she wouldn’t have reacted that way.

Yes, that was it.

She was still laughing. “Oh... Oh, that was just... I can’t-can’t breathe,” she wheezed out. “Do it again, do it again.” She slapped her thighs and held her stomach as if all that laughter was causing her pain. She then did a very unflattering imitation of my staredown, essentially mocking me, and what little restraint I possessed vanished. I hadn’t been mocked like that since elementary school.

I picked up the metal bowl containing my water (the fact that it resembled a dog bowl didn't allude me) and threw it like a frisbee right at her fucking head.

A very satisfying "*donk*" hit the air, followed by an angry screech.

"You bastard! I'll kill you!" She lunged for me, and because she had more slack on her chain than I did, she hit me like a ton of bricks, knocking me flat on my back.

"Oommff." The air rushed out of me as her hands wrapped around my throat, trying to squeeze even more air out of my lungs.

I had been taken completely by surprise. She was far less innocent than she appeared to be.

I didn't think she had it in her to kill someone—or to even *try*—but clearly, I was fucking wrong because she was squeezing harder and harder with no indication of stopping.

"Get...the fuck...off me," I rasped, thrashing.

She came nose-to-nose with me, this dark, evil look glittering in her eyes. "I think I'd rather watch the life drain from your eyes."

Who the fuck is this woman?

Before I had the chance for any kind of retaliation, the door to our prison opened, a beam of light shooting down the staircase. Footsteps followed, along with a male voice.

"Oh, Miss Autumn," he sang excitedly, eagerly. "It's time for our date."

The woman strangling me to death stiffened. She cursed, punched me in the face and then scurried back to her side of the wall just as the man stepped off the last stair into the basement.

I sucked in a huge breath of air.

That fucking bitch.

The light cast from the open door illuminated the man's body, allowing me to see who it was. I didn't know his name, just that he was part of an MC Gang, based on the cut he was wearing. It was something I'd noticed all of Dominik's little lackeys were wearing; he'd paid for MC muscle.

The guy was wearing one that said "THE BROTHERHOOD". Small time but well organised. The word "PRESIDENT" was stamped across the symbol on the front of his leather vest, making me frown.

I kept close tabs on *anyone* who was even remotely a threat to me and mine. The Brotherhood charter in Vegas was run by Ward Russell. That wasn't this man. That I knew for sure.

I coughed, massaging my throat, giving the redhead who I now knew as Autumn an angry scowl before focusing back on the man, studying him closely. I ran through the dossier of men I knew about in this particular MC, and his image barrelled its way through my mind. He was the VP, second in command, and now he was in charge. There'd been a change in leadership.

The timing was suspicious.

Ward and I didn't have any kind of working relationship, but we stayed out of each other's way, an amicable agreement that suited both parties. He wouldn't have authorised a strike against me, so he'd been removed—most likely with a deadly method—and replaced with someone who would. Someone who clearly didn't know better because whether he was aware of it or not, he'd just signed his fucking death warrant. His and those of his men.

"Isn't this all a little pointless, Samuel?" Autumn lounged back, giving off the illusion she was completely relaxed. However, there was a slight stiffness in her shoulders. Tension in those cunning green eyes. She wasn't feeling as casual about the whole thing as she was trying to make herself appear. "You know I'm not going to talk."

"I know," Samuel smiled. "And I hope you never do. Because it means we can continue our little dates until you die." He hauled Autumn to her feet, unlocked her from the wall and used the chain still strapped around her neck to lead her to an old, crusty reclining chair like a dog on a leash. "Now, be a good little doggy and sit."

She took a seat, not putting up any fight.

I scoffed. *What an obedient little bitch—*

Autumn front-kicked Samuel right in the family jewels. He went down like a house of cards, hands tucked firmly between his legs, eyes wide and groaning in agony.

I arched an eyebrow in surprise.

Samuel writhed on the ground, and Autumn just sat there watching him, looking bored. She didn't try to make a run for it. Didn't try to escape. Maybe because she knew what a wasted effort it would be. I knew my brother. He'd have contingencies in place to counter anyone who tried to escape his prison.

Autumn crossed her legs elegantly like a well-mannered woman from the upper class, tilted her head to the side and said, "Woof, woof."

A chuffing laugh burst out of me before I even knew what was happening. My eyes widened in shock.

What. The. Fuck?

I glared at Autumn like it was *her* fault the sound slipped past my lips. I didn't want to find *anything* that woman did funny.

She was insufferable.

"You bitch," Samuel hissed, legs shaking as he slowly got back on his feet. "You're going to pay for that."

She rolled her eyes. "You say that every time." She lay flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling. "Can we get on with it, then? I'm sick of looking at your stupid face."

She's either brave...or stupid.



"Who hired you?" It was the fiftieth bloody time he'd asked that stupid, infernal question, and like every time prior, Autumn didn't say a word.

Frustration marred the lines of Samuel's face, and he picked up the needle and thread. It was an ingenious torture technique. Even *I* had to admit it. He would ask the question, and when she didn't answer, he'd cut her deep enough that it would require stitches. He'd then give her the opportunity to answer again (which, of course, she didn't), and then stitch the wound closed with no anesthetic. No pain relief.

It was effective in two ways.

For one, it was *incredibly* painful. Don't believe what all of those Hollywood movies show you where the main character gets hurt, and they stitch themselves up with nothing but a bottle of alcohol to quell the pain.

It hurt a lot more than they depicted. The skin, already agonisingly tender and sore from being sliced open, felt like it was being burnt off your bones.

And second, it helped prevent the victim from bleeding out, ensuring they didn't die before getting the information they were after.

Like I said... Effective.

Autumn sucked air in between her teeth, squeezing her eyes shut as Samuel weaved the needle through the open wound, humming joyfully.

"Who hired you?" he sang like he was stitching a blanket and not sewing human skin.

"Your mother," she spat, rearing forward to try and headbutt him. He dodged it expertly, almost as if he'd anticipated the strike.

It was the same question over and over again. Nothing different. Just always "Who hired you?", "Who hired you?"

The curiosity was inevitable. I mean, who wouldn't be curious after hearing the same question a thousand fucking times?

"Who hired you?"

Hired her to do what? What was it she was trying to do? Or, more specifically, what was it she got caught doing?

Curiouser and curioser.

The torture session lasted for a little while longer. He continued to slash and dice, stitching her up as he went. He was very precise with his cuts, making sure not to slice anywhere that would cause massive blood loss. The intent wasn't to kill but to cause as much pain as possible to get the answers he was seeking.

Begrudgingly, I had to give Autumn my respect. Despite being an annoying, chatty, massive pain in the ass, I had to give respect where respect was due.

I'd seen men crack under less pressure than she was being put under. Seen full-grown men, hardened criminals, crumble after the first fucking slice. But that woman had managed to take one of the most brutal torture sessions I'd ever witnessed without shedding one fucking tear, and I was an expert on the subject.

Autumn... The name suited her.

A silhouette appeared in the light shining down the staircase. A few moments later, Dominik appeared, shadowed by three of his MC men. His eyes sought me out instantly, and our gazes clashed. That annoying fucking smirk curled his lips. I clenched my hands into tight fists, hatred pumping through my veins.

I hated being at his mercy like that. Every single fibre of my being rebelled at my circumstances. At how much control Dominik had over me. The only thing keeping me sane was knowing my children were okay, and I knew that with one hundred percent certainty.

If they weren't, if they'd been hurt or killed during the raid, Dominik wouldn't have been able to resist rubbing it in my face, knowing the immense pain it would cause me.

I kept my expression neutral, an almost bored air surrounding me as Dominik moved further into the room.

He went straight towards Autumn and Samuel.

"That's enough, Samuel." He was trying so hard to emulate our father. From his stance to his voice, right down to the look in his eyes.

Samuel paused mid-slice, a frown on his brows. "Boss?"

"I said that's enough. No more damaging the merchandise. If I want to get a decent price for her, I can't have her all cut up."

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CHAPTER FOUR



AUTUMN DEVALOS

I HAD QUITE A substantial list of people I hated.

My mother.

My father.

My seventy-four-year-old neighbour, who would always park his car in my driveway, even though he knew damn well it wasn't his.

My dentist.

Anybody who talked on the phone at the movie theatre.

Whoever wrote Cole Turner's storyline on *Charmed*.

But Dominik? That bastard flew right to the fucking top of my shit list.

He was going to *what*? Sell me to the highest fucking bidder like I was some kind of barnyard animal?

My eyes flicked to the knife Samuel was holding loosely in his hand. I could take it and fling it into Dominik's eye before either of them knew what happened, but I knew such an action would result in my immediate death.

I'd stopped trying to escape after the fourth failed attempt. Even if I'd managed to kill both Samuel and Dominik, there were three huge metal

doors that blocked my access to the top floor, each one locked by a twelve-digit code that changed daily. Killing either of them wouldn't get me out of there. I had to bide my time and wait for the perfect opportunity.

"But, what about finding out who hired her?" Samuel asked, an almost disappointed ring to his voice at the prospect of having to stop what he was doing.

"The bitch is never going to talk. Might as well try and get something good out of this whole thing. I'll find the information I need some other way."

He wasn't going to find out shit. The only people who had the details about my contract were me and the person who hired me. It was safe to say neither of us were going to say a damn word.

"Can I keep going for a little while longer? We're having so much fun, aren't we, Autumn?"

Oh, yes, riveting, riveting fun.

I said nothing.

"You heard me. I said enough. Bandage her up and make her presentable. I've got people coming to inspect the prisoners, and with the way she looks, no one will pay a fucking penny for her."

With an overexaggerated huff, Samuel did as he was ordered, roughly slapping a dirty cloth around the cut he'd just inflicted and hauling me back towards my spot on the wall. I didn't fight because I was glad to no longer be in the firing line. Granted, the solution to that problem came in the form of another equally (if not worse) problem, but still, I'd take a win where I could get one.

A grunt flew from my lips when Samuel threw me to the ground. Pain exploded in my side after he delivered a brutal kick right to my kidneys, making me groan.

Fingers gripped the base of my skull and yanked my head back roughly. "Don't think this gets you off the hook," he whispered in my ear, his foul cigarette-scented breath making me want to vomit. "I'll come back to visit you before you leave, and we'll have ourselves a good old time. If you behave, I might even make you enjoy it, too." His free hand came around my front and squeezed my breast.

Anger pulsed deep in my veins, and I fucking snapped. That rational side of my brain—the part that kept me from making bad decisions in the

interest of self-preservation—disappeared, and The Crimson Death came out to play.

I gripped his fingers and twisted sharply, hearing a very satisfying *crack*. I swung my elbow back as he let loose a howl of pain. Another *crack* hit the air, this time from his nose.

He hadn't yet chained me back up to the wall, so I took full advantage, grabbing the loose chain connected to the collar around my neck. Years of acrobatics training made flipping over him easy. It was all in the legs, how much power I could muster in a single jump.

As I soared over the top of him, I hooked the chain so it got caught around his throat and then pulled sharply when I landed on one knee behind him, snapping his neck in one clean move. His body slumped backwards, and I pushed him to the side before his weight could drag me down with him.

Click, click, click.

I looked up, staring down the barrel of three guns in the hands of Dominik's men.

Slowly, carefully, I dropped the chain and raised my hands in the air. Unwanted sexual advances were one of my triggers. I'd prefer the bite of a blade than to ever experience that again.

"Say the word, Boss, and I'll end her," the guy on the right said, the gun in his hands surprisingly steady considering the rage rolling off him.

My gaze sliced to Dominik, who was watching me closely. Studying me. Interest sparked in his eyes. "You just got a lot more interesting, Autumn DeValos."



In my peripheral vision, I could see Dimitri staring at me. His piercing gaze was burning a hole in the side of my face. I didn't acknowledge it. Or him. I

just continued to stare straight ahead, eating the disgusting, cold oatmeal Dominik had one of his men bring in a few hours before.

I'd expected to receive some sort of punishment for killing Samuel, but Dominik had done nothing but turn on his heels and walk away. The men at his back hadn't been impressed by that. I couldn't say why he'd chosen to let me go unscathed for that indiscretion. Perhaps he had something else in mind to punish me later.

Dimitri could no longer bear the silence.

"Who are you?"

The sludge that could barely be considered food slid down my throat. I tried to swallow it without gagging. As much as it made me want to vomit, I took another bite, and another, and another, ignoring his question entirely.

"Are you deaf, woman? I said, 'Who are you'?"

Again, I said nothing.

I felt a small sense of satisfaction knowing a man as high profile and well-connected as the great Dimitri Volkov had absolutely no idea who I was.

I'd spent a long time cultivating my image. Hiding my identity. Ensuring people only saw what I wanted them to see. In a profession like mine, it was vital no one knew who I *truly* was. My livelihood depended on it. Autumn DeValos wasn't even my *real* name. It was an alias I'd come up with a long time ago.

None of my previous marks—before Dominik, that was—had ever lived after being assigned to me, but they all had loved ones. People who would avenge their deaths if given the chance. All anyone knew about The Crimson Death, however, was that she had long, thick hair the colour of blood.

I'd spent a fortune to ensure that.

Chains rattled as Dimitri adjusted into a low crouch, his focus never once leaving me. "I know all the major players. The Triad. The Outfit. La Cosa Nostra. The Los Zetas. Harmine's Cartel. Small and big time MC and Street Gangs...but you?" His head tilted to the side, eyes lit with suspicion. "You... I don't know."

"What makes you think I'm anyone worth knowing?"

His scoff was incredulous. "Anybody that can do that" —he pointed to Samuel's dead body, or, more specifically, the odd angle his head was now in—"is worth knowing in my world."

“Your world?”

“Are you really going to sit there and pretend you don’t know who I am? You didn’t so much as flinch when my brother was slicing into me, and you handled your own torture like someone who’s endured it before.”

“That’s because I have. Before you arrived, I was the go-to around here.”

He shook his head. “No. That’s not it. The fighting skills. The confidence. The high tolerance for pain. You’re in the life, I’m sure of it.” He pointed to Veronica without even looking at her. “The woman in the right hand corner hasn’t stopped crying since I got here. Civilian. My brother is not above grabbing random women off the streets to satisfy his sick, perverted needs.” Veronica burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably.

His finger moved to Ana next. “The old woman is collateral. Most likely some gangster’s grandmother, taken to ensure a debt is paid.”

Ana gasped.

“The man is one of Dominik’s soldiers. That iron burn on his face? Classic Dominik tactic. He does that to the men who disobey him, and you”—he looked me up and down “—you are the only one whose presence here does not make any sense. You’re not a whore. Or a junkie. You’re far too skilled to be a civilian. Possibly could be collateral, however, I think that’s highly unlikely since they were torturing you for information. There’s no way my brother would hire someone smarter than him to work under him. Which means you’re not one of his soldiers. So, I’ll ask again. Who. Are. You?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “How incredibly perceptive you are, Sherlock Holmes.” The sarcasm was a front. In truth, I was actually quite impressed, albeit a little intimidated. He’d been there only a matter of days and he’d already deduced so much. Even something I myself had yet to figure out—what the hell Ana was doing there.

I’d suspected Veronica and Wink’s situation, but Ana’s? That had continued to elude me until right that moment.

“Perception plays a small part. The rest is logic. For example, based on the questions our recently departed friend over there kept asking during your interrogation, it’s logical to assume Dominik caught you doing something you weren’t meant to be doing. ‘Who hired you?’ ‘Who hired you?’ That’s what he kept asking you. Hired you to do what? Spy on my brother? Steal from him?” He eyed me suspiciously. “Kill him?”

Shit.

“An assassin would tick all of the boxes,” he said thoughtfully to himself.
“Quick, deadly...”

Double shit.

I need to deflect. Now. Before he figures out who I am. His deduction skills were infuriatingly good.

“As much as I appreciate all the attention, you’re not my type.”

He frowned. “What?”

I licked the last bit of oatmeal off my spoon, going for nonchalance. “The last man who showed this much interest in me tried to get me to fuck him in the middle of the club.”

Dimitri reared back as if I’d slapped him. As if the mere mention of something intimate happening between us was completely abhorrent.

“That’s not—I’m not trying—”

“Now, I’ll admit, you’re not bad to look at.” *More like fucking lickable.*
“But I’m not interested.”

“Neither am I,” he hissed.

I smiled sweetly with just the right amount of pity. “No need to be embarrassed. We’re both adults here. I’m flattered, truly—”

His snarl was feral, like something a wild beast might do moments before it pounced for your jugular. “*Ty nesnosnaya zhenshchina!*”

“Uh-oh,” I sang, my brows raised. “That didn’t sound very nice.”

“*Odnazhdy ya pererezhu tebe gorlo i iskupayus’ v tvoyey krov,*” he spat harshly before spinning around, giving me his back, effectively ending our conversation.

A smirk curled my lips.

Autumn: 1

Dimitri: 0

CHAPTER FIVE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“*T*Y NESNOSNAYA ZHENSHCHINA!” *Insufferable woman!*

“Uh-oh,” she sang playfully, her brows rising. “That didn’t sound very nice.”

“*Odnazhdy ya pererezhu tebe gorlo i iskupayus’ v tvoyey krov.*” *One of these days, I’m going to slit your throat and bathe in your blood,* I spat out and before I lost what little control I had left, I turned, choosing to face the wall instead of continuing that ridiculous conversation any longer.

I prided myself on my ability to stay in control. Mastering my emotions was a necessity after the death of my wife. I needed to be strong for our children. Give them the best chance I could to succeed and survive in the harsh, cruel, fucked up world that didn’t give a shit about them.

That meant always being in control. Never losing my shit over small, minuscule things. People who let their emotions rule them and dictate their actions made mistakes. Mistakes that cost lives.

I’d vowed to never let that happen again.

But that woman... She tested my fucking patience more than anyone I’d ever met in my life.

She knew damn well that I wasn't making a move on her. She was just trying to deter me. Distract me. Confuse me.

What annoyed me the most was that it fucking worked.

Under normal circumstances, a tactic like that would have never worked on me. But the idea of seeing her in a romantic way... Even her just uttering those words was like a punch to the gut.

Never.

In the ten years since my Yekaterina's murder, I'd never touched another woman. Never even *looked* at another person like that.

The opportunity had presented itself, sure. Several times, in fact. The title I held as leader of the Bratva in America had a certain appeal to it, to those both in the USA and in Russia. The power of my position drew others in. Women and men threw themselves at me all the time.

Well...at first.

They hoped to take my late wife's place. By the time I'd killed the fourth person to make advances towards me, word caught on and the advances drastically declined. The lingering looks from those hoping to get a seat on the throne never faded, though. Hoping that one day, I'd be ready to marry again.

Never.

Yekaterina was—and always would be—the only one for me.

Autumn's comments about me showing interest in her were enough to throw me completely off balance.

The tight hold I had over my emotions all but vanished.

Frustration mounted inside me. I clenched my fists to refrain from lashing out. The fact that I'd allowed myself to be manipulated in such a way was making me angrier and angrier with each passing second.



For the next few hours, I kept my back to her, not moving even though the position inevitably grew uncomfortable. I knew that if I looked at her, my control would slip yet again, and I would attempt to take her life.

Not that killing her bothered me in the slightest.

It didn't.

It was more that I would likely injure myself trying to strangle her to death. And at a time like that, where my future lay in the hands of someone other than myself, it was imperative to be in the best condition possible. That meant not hurting myself just to kill someone who annoyed me. No matter how much killing her would please me.

Surprisingly, Autumn didn't say a word. Didn't sing any stupid, incessant songs or quote any ridiculous lines from a television show. She sat in complete silence until the moment my brother returned with the person I least expected.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I hissed under my breath, glaring daggers at the man walking towards me.

Talon Scardo.

Out of all the fucking people Dominik could have called, he called Talon fucking Scardo. The one man on Earth who probably hated me more than he did.

Our history was a long, dark one, going all the way back to when I was just a teenager attending boarding school. It was filled with anger, backstabbing, jealousy and attempted murder.

You know, just the usual, everyday stuff.

"Well, well, well. You were actually telling the truth, Doiminik." *Ugh, his voice is just as irritating as I remember.* "The great Dimitri Volkov, chained

up like a dog. I never thought I'd live to see the day."

Talon stepped completely into the light, shadowed by four hulking bodyguards who looked like they could have been linebackers in another life.

Despite the fact that it had been forty years since I last laid eyes on him, I still saw that desperate little boy who was determined to be someone of importance when I looked at him.

I couldn't see that from the exterior, though. On the outside, he looked like he had it all in his Armani suit, Graff Diamonds Hallucination watch and Testoni shoes. His hair was perfect, not a single blonde strand out of place. His face was clear of any possible blemish, any wrinkle a man his age should possess.

But the eyes? Those were something he couldn't change. Something he couldn't just throw money at to hide what he didn't want others to see.

I could see it, though. The insecurities. The desperation. The self worthlessness.

I had *always* seen it.

Talon pouted. "What, I don't get a 'hi'? Now, is that any way to treat an old friend, Dimitri?"

"You're not a friend. You weren't then, and you're certainly not now."

"Oh, you wound me," he said in mock hurt, clutching his chest. "What about all those good times we had? Taking apart the headmaster's car and reassembling it in the natatorium so we could push it in the water? Or how about the time—"

"You tried to burn me to death?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

He flashed me a big, broad smile. "Ah, yes. What can I say? I had a bit of a temper back then."

"What are you doing here, Talon? Don't tell me you finally left that little island of yours for the first time in years just to see little old me?"

"Keeping tabs on me, are you, Dimitri?"

I'd be an idiot not to. He had grown into a significant threat. He had endless money and quite a formidable force under his employ.

The truth of it was, I hadn't bothered to think of him until that first invitation for his games arrived.

I'd stupidly assumed his silence over the years meant he'd died, not emassing his own private army and creating a completely self-sufficient island, entirely cut off from normal society.

These “games” were his way of showing off his wealth. The control he had not only over others but *everything* around him. He’d always been a power-hungry prick.

My eyes widened slightly as realisation kicked in.

“You’ve figured it out, haven’t you?” Talon whispered like it was some sort of big secret. “What I’m doing here. Why I left the comfort and safety of my home for the first time since its creation? Come on, Dimitri. Say it. I know you know.”

Of course I did. It was so obvious that he might as well have hit me over the head with it. But I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of doing what he asked.

Talon smiled. It was strained. Forced. A man in his position didn’t like to be disobeyed. I’d dealt with men like him all my life. My father *was* one of those men. “It’s no matter. We *both* know what your fate is. I don’t need you to admit it.”

Yes, he did. And it was driving him crazy that I wouldn’t.

During our time together at boarding school, he’d tried his hardest to get me under his thumb. It had started out small; just little things like trying to get me to backchat the teachers or bully other students he didn’t like. He, Mikhail and I had been almost inseparable those first few years. The best of friends. Then, during our final year, he tried exerting more force. *Ordering* us to do things instead of just suggesting.

When we wouldn’t, his personality had done a complete 180. He’d threatened to use the power his father had to destroy us before our lives even really began.

I’d been threatened by men so much more powerful than him. I’d actually laughed in his face when he tried to intimidate me into bowing down to him.

Being the son of the most ruthless man in the world made me immune to a person like Talon. I’d killed, burnt and flayed men twice his size. Watched them cry and beg for their life as I cut into them with my blade. And a little spoilt rich kid thought he could tell me what to do? Bend *me* to *his* will?

The idea was laughable.

“You want to hear something funny?” *Not really.* “When your brother called me and told me he had you, I didn’t believe him. The great Dimitri Volkov, finally bested? Who would have thought?”

“Is there a point to all of this, or do you just love the sound of your own voice?”

Talon looked thoughtful. “Both, actually,” he laughed. “Anyway, as I was saying, Dominik told me that if I wanted you, it was going to cost me a small fortune. The funny thing is, I would have paid that for this image alone. You, chained up and at my mercy.” His smirk was smug. I would have given anything to punch it off his goddamn face.

“Looks like I missed out on an advantageous opportunity, then.” My brother strolled into the basement, stepping to Talon’s side. Deep satisfaction vibrated from him. *He thinks he won.*

We went to the same boarding school, so he knew Talon and I did not get along. Knew our history. He couldn’t possibly know that our animosity had continued to fester over the years, though, getting worse and worse like a deep, infected wound.

We weren’t close enough for him to be privy to such details, and yet he’d managed to figure out that out of all my enemies, Talon would be the one to enjoy my downfall the most.

“Well, here’s your chance to make up for it.” The arrogance fled from Talon’s face, replaced with the utmost seriousness. “Name your price.”

“Five million.”

“Done,” Talon answered with zero hesitation. He glanced over his shoulder to one of his guards. “Send the money.”

Anger thundered through me, but I said nothing. I would give neither of them the satisfaction of a reaction.

Dominik smiled widely. I couldn’t recall a time I’d ever seen him so happy. “Nothing to say, brother? Even now? You’re not going to beg me to save your life? Hmm?”

There would be no point, I thought to myself, still refusing to say a word. I was mildly surprised he’d decided to sell me instead of keeping me as his own personal punching bag. He hated me and loved causing me pain. It had shown with every single punch and slice he’d inflicted on my body. But the money must have been too good for him to pass up. With that kind of cash, he’d be able to hire more people to work for him and build his own empire, since he would never be given mine.

Talon’s eyes sliced to Autumn, who had remained quiet the entire time. Interest sparked in his gaze before he quickly shut it down. “How much for the woman?”

“You want her?” Dominik asked, surprised. His brows furrowed. “Why?”

“Why not?” Talon shrugged. He was trying to play off like he couldn’t care less if he got her or not. That this was simply an opportunity that had fallen into his lap. But I could see there was more to it than that.

I’d spent a lifetime learning how to read people. Catching those tiny micro-expressions that revealed what they were truly feeling. It was a... speciality of mine, you could say. A deeply trained skill.

Beneath the interest, there was something else there. Something...more. If I had to guess, I’d say it was recognition.

I glanced at Autumn. She didn’t look any different. It could very well be a façade, though. She’d already proved to be a devious woman.

“I’ll give you her for free under one condition.” He stood taller, puffing out his chest. “When the time comes, I want to be there to watch her die. To watch *both* of them die.”

Talon flashed his teeth in a broad smile. “Deal.”

CHAPTER SIX



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“**M**MM, YOU SERIOUSLY NOT going to eat? It’s so good,” I mumbled, bending forward to slurp the gravy off my fingers.

Dimitri gave me a disgusted look, his nose scrunched up in repulsion. I got the feeling eating food without a knife and fork was a serious offence to him.

Mr Uppity was too good for that, apparently.

The roar of the engine from the private jet rumbled beneath my feet. The air smelt clean, the seats so comfy that I swear I could have fallen asleep right there and then.

I knew nothing good could possibly come from it. I didn’t know the guy—Talon, I’d heard Dimitri call him—but whoever he was, he must have been rolling in the cash.

During my time as a professional hitwoman, I’d been aboard a fair few private planes. This one, though, had to be the best by far. I didn’t own one, personally—the upkeep for something like that was *insane*. However, with the right identification and enough cash, it was fairly easy to charter one.

Over the course of my career, I'd only had to do it a handful of times. Mainly when the mark was in a different country, and there was a pressing time limit to adhere to.

Ordinarily, I liked to have at least a month or so to do reconnaissance. Learn the mark's routine. It made it easier to achieve a clean, effective kill.

Every now and then, though, a job would arise as "high priority", meaning it needed to be completed as soon as possible. I liked those jobs for one reason and one reason only...

I could charge more for them.

"You eat like a goddamn barbarian," Dimitri commented, his nose high in the air with a very "hoity-toity" attitude.

He was sitting right next to me, strapped down in the seat by a mountain of chains, just like I was. A table sat in front of us, completely overflowing with food. All different kinds of meats, roasted potatoes, vegetables, salads. It was like a damn smorgasbord.

Of course, I was skeptical at first. What if it was laced with something? What if it was poisoned?

Rationality won out in the end. It didn't make much sense for Talon to try and poison us when he'd just dropped five *million dollars* on us.

Well, Dimitri.

I still had no fucking clue why he wanted me, too. I'd never met the man before. Never even heard of him.

Something to figure out later.

I turned my head to look at Dimitri, reached forward to grab a huge leg of lamb and chomped down on it without taking my eyes off him, ripping into the meat like I was the very thing he described: a barbarian.

It had been God knows how long since I had eaten a proper meal. Damn straight I was eating like a fucking barbarian.

"You don't want to eat, that's fine," I mumbled, chewing *extra* loud to annoy him. "But I do. So, shut your trap before I do it for you."

"Go ahead and try it. You won't live to see another sunrise."

"Tomorrow," I responded in between bites.

His frown was filled with irritation and annoyance. "What?"

"The saying is, 'You won't live to see tomorrow'. Another sunrise just doesn't have the same ring to it. Don't you agree?"

He stared at me dead on, his left eye doing that weird, twitchy thing it always seemed to do when he was pissed off. Then, he slapped the lamb leg

right out of my fucking hands.

“You old bastard,” I hissed. “I’m sick of your shit!” I didn’t have a weapon or the proper maneuverability to throw a punch worth a damn. My wrists were cuffed together, and that chain was bolted to the floor at my feet, allowing me only the slightest bit of movement left to right, but it was enough.

I grasped a chicken drumstick and smacked Dimitri across the face with it. It made this very satisfying *splat* sound, thanks to all the gravy. His eyes bulged wide in shock, mouth dropping open as if he couldn’t believe I had the audacity to slap him in the face with a piece of chicken.

The fact that there was now a big blob of gravy on his cheek made the whole thing even more hilarious, and I couldn’t help but snicker at the picture it all painted.

That was the catalyst for the events that took place next.

All hell broke loose.

Even though we were both restricted to the point where we could barely move, we still tried to kill each other.

His fist came flying towards my face. I leant back and it abruptly halted in the air an inch away from my nose, thanks to the cuffs. He growled and slammed it down on my thigh instead.

Pain shot through me, but so did anger, and that helped mask some of the sting.

I struck out with a swift elbow strike, hitting him in the cheekbone. He retaliated by ramming into me with his shoulder.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck. That hurt.

I shoved him back as hard as I could, but he outweighed me by at least 150 pounds, so of course, it barely nudged him. I tried to punch him, he deflected with his hand. He tried to punch me, I dodged. Back and forth, back and forth we went, grunting and snarling at one another as we tried to maim the shit out of each other.

I just need one good shot. One hit to show him I’m not going to sit back and take his fucking crap.

Strike, block, strike, block.

Fucking asshole—

“Enough!” One of Talon’s goons screamed at the top of his lungs, making Dimitri and I freeze in our attempts to kill each other. I had his wrist

gripped with my fingers, and he had his palm blocking my elbow from hitting him in the face again.

The man marched the few steps and glared down at us. “I’m sick of hearing you two argue all of the time. You’re driving me fucking insane! Shut up! Just shut up! Your constant bickering and bitching... I can’t take it anymore! ‘I’m gonna kill you’ this and ‘you’re an asshole’ that. Blah, blah, blah. Just shut your goddamn mouths before I do it for you! Permanently!”

I held in the scoff that threatened to break free. *Barely*. Talon dropped five million on us—well, Dimitri, but whatever. I didn’t think we were as easily expendable as his minion was trying to make us believe. Nor that he even had the authority to do what he was threatening.

With one last glare, I shoved Dimitri away from me and turned to look out the window. Clouds floated by, so close that I felt like I could almost reach out and touch them. I immediately began to calm down, the motion of the wings of the plane cutting through the clouds relaxing me.

I’d always loved flying. Some people hated it. Feared it, despite the fact that there was about a one in an eleven million chance of something actually happening. Statistics showed that you were actually more likely to die from a car accident than a plane crash.

I was a stickler for statistics.

The man returned to his seat a few isles down, sitting next to another goon. There were twenty-four other people on board; two stewardesses, a pilot, a co-pilot and twenty guards to watch our every move and make sure we didn’t try anything stupid, like take over the plane.

The idea had definitely occurred to me. I contemplated it several times when they were loading us onto the aircraft. However, knowing how to fly a plane was not on the list of skills I possessed. That, and the fact that they had me wrapped head to fucking toe in steel.

Talon was nowhere to be seen. Mr Richy Rich just dumped us on the tarmac and took off without a word. Probably to go buy more people like they were fucking merchandise.

For that indiscretion alone, he’d made my list *and* moved to the top.

I glanced around the cabin for the umpteenth time, assessing. *I need to prepare. Make a plan.* Just because the odds of escaping were shit all didn’t mean I shouldn’t try.

The only shot I had was when we were disembarking.

I had to take it.

Or die fucking trying.

I knew what I had to do next...and I hated it.

Begrudgingly, I turned to look at the stupid fucker sitting next to me. “You know this guy, don’t you? Talon?” I asked Dimitri, picking at the food with dainty fingers. I couldn’t really go pissing him off when I needed his intel.

His gaze sliced to me from the corner of his eyes before looking back ahead. He just sat there with his perfect posture and aristocratic air, not even bothering to acknowledge me or the question I’d asked.

I pushed down my initial instinct to bite his fucking head off. I had to be calm—rational—if I hoped to get any answers out of him.

If I could make him see why talking would be in his best interest, too, he might be more forthcoming.

“Look, the idea of working together absolutely repulses me,” I whispered out of the side of my mouth so I wouldn’t be overheard by the guards. The grunt that followed told me that Dimitri thought the same thing.

Would you look at that? We actually agreed on something. Hell must have truly frozen over.

“But I don’t think we have any other option. The way I see it, we’re both in the same boat here. We’ve got more of a chance of pulling off an escape if we work together.”

“There will be no escape. Not from a man like Talon.”

A response. Oh my lord.

“You’re not even going to try?”

“There would be no point.” He kept his head forward, not looking at me as he spoke. “Talon is smart. With unlimited resources. Look what he’s done here. A twenty-person security escort for two people? Not to mention all of this.” He thrashed with frustration, making the chains wrapped around him rattle. “He’s not taking any chances with me. There’s too much history between us. Too much bad blood. He’s not going to risk wasting this opportunity. It’s just not going to happen.”

“You seem to know him well,” I observed.

“Well enough,” he said plainly.

My eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You know why he spent a small fortune to buy us from your brother, don’t you?”

“I know why he bought *me*.” He finally looked at me, staring right into my eyes. I felt like he could see into my goddamn soul. He had such a

penetrating gaze, filled with so much darkness. It was a little eerie, having all his focus like that.

My heart thumped a little faster in my chest. He really was quite nice to look at. All those hard, sculpted lines of his face. The jaw that was so sharp, I could cut glass on it. Being a cunt didn't make him any less attractive, unfortunately.

"You, though," he continued, completely unaware of the thoughts flying through my mind—*thank god*. The last thing I needed was him knowing I was hot for him. "Well, that's the real question, now, isn't it? He looked right at you as if he recognised you."

That wasn't possible.

"I don't see how. I've never seen him before. Never met him. Didn't even know his name until I heard you say it."

"And yet, here you are." The suspicion, the skepticism in his voice put me on edge.

There he was, poking and prodding again.

I held his stare, refusing to cower. Oh, he had a powerful stare. Dark and dangerous. The kind of stare that said, "I'll end your life without even thinking twice about it". But I'd looked into the eyes of pure evil before. The kind of evil that made fear curl down your spine.

Dimitri was a bad guy, sure. But I didn't think he was an *evil* guy. There was a distinct difference between the two.

"If you've got something to say, go ahead."

"I don't have anything to say to you."

"Then stop fucking looking at me," I snapped.

He held my gaze for a few more seconds, no doubt to let me know that when he did look away, it was because *he* chose to, not because I told him to.

Fuck. Him.

I'd figure out a way to escape on my own, and then, I'd leave him there to fucking rot.

CHAPTER SEVEN



DIMITRI VOLKOV

FROM THE MOMENT I saw Talon enter that basement, I knew what was going to happen, almost as if I had a crystal ball that could show me the future.

I knew he'd spend whatever he needed to buy me from my brother. I knew he'd stick me on a plane. Knew he'd fly me halfway around the fucking world to the private island he was always boasting about.

I knew *exactly* what he had planned for me.

The timeline matched. Every year, towards the end of April, the emails began for Talon's Til Death Games. A gladiator-style tournament where people were pitted against each other and forced to fight to the death while an audience-filled arena watched on, taking bets on who would emerge victorious.

The invitation to such an event was extremely exclusive. What took place on that island wasn't exactly legal, so not just anyone could attend. The list usually consisted of corrupt politicians, sometimes world leaders, other criminals like myself and the insanely rich because of course, there was a buy-in if you accepted the invitation.

Two and a half million. Chump change to a lot of the people who fell into those categories, myself included.

I remember the first year I'd gotten one. Mikhail, a close friend of mine, had received one, too, and my surprise had matched his. We'd both presumed the bastard was long dead. Then, one day, he just popped up out of the blue with more money to his name than anyone I'd ever met and a list of credentials a mile long.

It didn't take me long to figure out that his father had died, and being his only child, Talon had inherited everything. He'd used that money to create his island. To hire all of those people to work for him. And now he was using the revenue he made from his games as a way to increase his net worth even more.

It would never be enough for a man like him. In his eyes, there would always be more money to earn.

There was only one reason Talon had sent Mikhail and I invitations to his games over the years. It wasn't because he truly wanted to see me. It was because he wanted *me* to see *him*. See all that he'd accomplished.

One of the last things I'd said to him all those years ago was that he'd never amount to anything. That he'd always be a spoilt little rich kid who had to have his Daddy fix all of his problems.

Plus, I had a sneaking suspicion that if I ever stepped foot on that island, I wouldn't be stepping off.

Maybe it wasn't such a ridiculous notion to take Autumn up on her offer to work together. I knew there was no way I was going to make it off that island alive. I had to do something. But I wasn't much of a team player, especially with people I didn't know. Didn't trust. Didn't *like*.

I looked at her subtly from the corner of my eye. She was staring out the window, her long, red hair tumbling down her shoulders. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent so long in the presence of another woman before, apart from my daughter. Of course, I interacted with women all the time. I had women who worked for me as guards, maids and cooks. But I'd never spent *time* with them. Never spoke more than a few words to them unless I was giving them orders.

I just had no desire to ever get to know another woman again. To ever get close to anyone else like that. I was perfectly content to continue living my life without someone by my side.

No one could replace my Yeketarina in my heart, so why bother?

Seeing, talking or spending time with other women held zero appeal to me after her death, so I never did it.

My current circumstances, however, were making it impossible for me to keep to that. Autumn was *everywhere*. I'd had no reprieve from her or the powerful presence she exuded since Dominik kidnapped me.

She was pretty fucking hard to ignore.

"I said stopping fucking looking at me," Autumn snapped, her gaze still staring out the window.

How the fuck did she know I was even looking at her?

"I'm not, you insufferable woman. I'm looking out the window." *Good comeback, Dimitri. Don't need her thinking you were looking at her. That shit would go to her head.*

"There's twelve other windows on here. Pick a different one. I don't even want you looking in my general vicinity."

"Anybody ever tell you that you're the most infuriating person on the fucking planet?" I hissed.

"Yes, actually." She turned, flashing her teeth in a proud smile. "I think it's a wonderful compliment.

"Figures. Psychotic people always do have grand delusions."

"Do not call me psychotic!"

"Or what? You going to slap me in the face with another piece of chicken?" I scoffed.

"I'll break every goddamn bone in your body before I disembowel you and make you eat your own fucking intestines."

I arched an eyebrow. *Violent little thing.*

A *ding* rang through the cabin, followed by a male voice. "We are beginning our descent. Please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts. We will be landing shortly."



Talon's security team was very cautious as we disembarked from the plane. They took zero risks, making sure to keep us cuffed as they led us from our seats to the exit at the front of the aircraft.

With a heave of exertion, the blonde flight attendant opened the door and rolled out the staircase so we could step down from the plane. The first thing that hit me was the scent of the sea, salty and fresh. It was a distinct aroma that told my brain I was somewhere tropical, open and free.

From my position at the top of the stairs, I had a wide view of the tarmac. Beyond it lay a field of big, beautiful trees, and then nothing but wide, open ocean as far as the eye could see.

It was...breathtaking, I have to admit. From a purely non-bias point of view, it seemed like literal paradise. The sight. The smells. Even the sounds of birds tweeting and the wind ruffling through the trees. It all gave off the illusion that it was a place of calm and serenity. Of peace and tranquility.

And I was falling.

I didn't know what the fuck happened, except I felt hands shove at my back moments before I started to tumble. Pain burst throughout different parts of my body as I literally rolled down the hard, unforgiving stairs.

Son of a—fuck-shit-ow.

I landed in a heap on the rough asphalt, my skin scraping across the ground. My head snapped up, catching sight of Autumn leaping over the railing and landing on one knee, grimacing slightly before she took off, making a run for it across the tarmac.

She literally pushed me out of the way to make her escape.

That fucking bitch.

Okay, I was mildly impressed. It was a savage fucking move.

A gunshot rang out into the air. Autumn jumped back with a fright when the ground in front of her, where she was just about to take her next step, exploded into a cloud of rock. She lost her footing and landed flat on her ass. Men swarmed her not even a second later, pinning her down with harsh, violent hands.

The glint shining off in the distance from one of the buildings told me what I already suspected: Talon had sharp shooters placed all around the makeshift airport to stop anyone from escaping.

Not that they'd get very far anyway. We were surrounded on all sides by a vast, unforgiving ocean.

But Talon always had been a paranoid bastard.

After I was lifted onto my feet by the guards from the plane—none too carefully, I might add—they ushered me towards the big glass building next to the airstrip. As we neared Autumn, I finally put up some resistance. My guards tried to get me moving, but I refused to budge, glaring down at the red-haired woman who was very quickly becoming the bane of my existence.

“I’m glad I didn’t tell you Talon would most likely keep snipers upon entry. I just wish their aim was better,” I hissed before marching away, not looking back.



After being ushered from the airstrip with an unfortunately very alive Autumn (I’d hoped that, after her failed escape attempt, they would kill her right there and then, but nothing ever worked out my way), we were led through a town on the island.

The more we walked, the more evident it became that the place was so much more than it appeared to be. So much more grand in its design.

It appeared to be entirely self-sufficient. Of course, the extremely limited information I'd managed to dig up since finding out about its existence had suggested as such.

Even so, it was one thing to hypothesize and a whole other thing to actually see it with your own eyes.

With everything you need within walking distance, there'd never be any reason to leave.

It certainly explained how Talon had managed to completely disappear for all of those years. The egotistical bastard had even gone the extra mile and named all the businesses after himself.

Scardo Grocery. Scardo Auto Repair. Scardo Mall. Scardo twenty-four-hour Diner. Scardo, Scardo, fucking Scardo.

It honestly wouldn't have surprised me if he had a twenty-foot bronze statue of himself right in the middle of town.

What did surprise me was the colosseum. It looked like it had been ripped right out of the page of a history textbook.

It was...magnificent. Truly magnificent. I had no problem admitting that...to myself. Outwardly, though? I didn't even spare it a second fucking glance.

I knew somewhere, somehow, Talon was watching. He wouldn't be able to help himself.

So, despite how impressive everything I'd seen from the moment I stepped foot on the island was, I refused to show it, keeping a bored expression plastered on my face.

Autumn, who had walked silently beside me the whole time, did the same. She *looked* uninterested in what was going on, but the eyes gave her away.

She had that penetrating gaze of a huntress: calculated, assessing, dark. Knowing what I did about this place, about what was going to happen, curiosity peaked.

How long would she last? Not to the end, that I was sure of.

There could only be one winner, and I had every intention of making it me.

If I got to be the one to kill her myself, though, well... That might make the whole ordeal completely and utterly worth it.

CHAPTER EIGHT



AUTUMN DEVALOS

I 'M SO FUCKED, I thought repeatedly as I was pushed and shoved down the cobblestone pathway into the colosseum. That place... Jesus Christ, it was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Absolutely incredible didn't seem like a good enough phrase to describe it.

It was like an entire civilization was out there all on its own, cut off from the rest of the world. The rest of society.

I didn't know Talon personally, but I felt like one walk though that town was all I needed to figure him out.

Spoilt little rich boy who never got Daddy's love. It was so blatantly obvious that he might as well have a big neon sign saying so on every building.

Oh, wait, he does. Ha.

The overcompensation was laughable. Like when a guy with a small dick buys a huge, luxurious car.

“Small dick syndrome” is what I called it.

Couple that with the ego I'd witnessed on him at Dominik's dungeon, and it was pretty fucking clear the man had *severe* daddy issues. All that shit

aside, though, Talon had built himself a pretty impressive operation.

I catalogued everything, leaving no detail out; if I ever managed to get away from the guards, I needed to remember the way out.

Dimitri and I were led deep beneath the colosseum, down long, dark, twisting hallways and winding staircases made entirely out of stone.

Loud cheering echoed up to us from the bottom, like something you'd hear at a football or basketball game. The further down we went, the louder it became. It drowned out every other noise. The rattle of our chains. The *thump, thump, thump* of the guards' heavy combat boots.

My suspicions were confirmed the moment we were shoved into the room.

There were only a few things in the world that had the power to rile up a crowd like that.

A gruesome fight match was one of them.

Smack dab in the centre of the room was a professional boxing ring—a bit of a history clash, considering the monument sitting above it, but whatever.

On one side of the ring, sitting on long, wooden benches, were other prisoners like myself. The chains made that obvious. On the other side was the crowd, cheering, gyrating and screaming for the people in the ring to continue fighting.

Based on the uniforms, I guessed they were other guards and soldiers.

In front of the ring sat three people, narrating the fight like commentators in the WWE, and then behind them were a few other prisoners, battered, bruised and bleeding. Several cameras were recording the ring, making sure to catch the fight from every angle.

A pile of dead bodies sat off to the side.

It didn't look good.

What the fuck was going on?

I stole a glance at Dimitri, but the fucker was unreadable. All I saw when I looked at him was a strong, confident stance and hard eyes.

“Move it,” one of the guards barked, shoving me forward.

We were directed to the bench with the other prisoners and roughly forced to sit down.

“And we have our winner!” the commentator with the bald head cheered as one of the men snapped his opponent's neck, killing him instantly. “Give it up, ladies and gentlemen, for Reggie Green!”

The crowd roared in triumph. Reggie didn't share in the excitement, though. He fell back in shock as if he couldn't believe what he'd just done. He looked at his hands, shaking and covered in blood, tears welling in his eyes.

Guards rushed the ring, grabbing him and the dead body. Reggie was deposited next to the other prisoners behind the commentators—the winners from any previous fights, I suspected—and the dead body was dumped promptly on top of the others in the corner.

The next two prisoners at the front of the line were forced to take their places, and the whole ordeal began again. And again, and again.

"What the fuck is this?" I hissed under my breath.

Dimitri's gaze flicked to me. Something flashed behind those cunning blue eyes.

He knows.

He knew what was going on.

"What. Is. This?" I repeated sternly.

He just smirked and said, "Pray you don't get matched up to fight me."

I glared. "I hope I do. That way, I can finally fucking kill you."

"Right back at you," he snapped.

I didn't know what his goddamn problem was with me. He'd had it out for me since the moment he opened his eyes and saw me in Dominik's dungeon.

We locked into our usual battle of scowling at each other as fight after fight took place. The commentators continued to describe every move, every action, congratulating every winner. Some of them had clearly killed before. There was no remorse. No hesitation. But others struggled with it, and ultimately paid the price for their humanity.

There was no room for humanity in an environment like that.

Two women were forced into the ring next—a tall blonde and a short, plump brunette. When the commentators announced the fight to begin, neither of them moved.

"We're not fighting!" the blonde yelled out, shaking her head. She stood tall, trying to appear strong, but her voice quivered slightly.

"You can't do this to us," the brunette said, looking around for someone to help. "Let us go. Please."

Talon's face appeared in an instant on a television mounted along the wall. He gave a smug, condescending smile. "You know the rules. Fight or

die. I want nothing but the best for my Til Death Games. If you're not willing to perform and fight to the death here, then I can't trust you'll perform up there, and I *will not* be humiliated."

The more he spoke, the more confused I became. "*Til Death Games*"? *What the fuck is that?*

"You beat the person you're matched against here, and you'll be given a chance to fight for your freedom. Refuse, and you'll be skinned alive. The choice is yours. Decide now."

The screen went black.

There was a brief moment of silence, then the two women lunged at each other.



"On your feet. You're next."

I looked up at the guard, contemplating whether or not I could get away with punching him in the balls. In the end, I decided against it for one simple reason. Whether I liked it or not, I was about to fight for my life. I couldn't waste what energy I had on something so trivial.

But the fucker was on my shitlist. In fact, *everyone* there was. And that was a place you didn't want to be.

I was escorted to the side of the ring, where another guard unlocked my cuffs and then shoved me so hard that I fell to my knees in the centre of the ring.

Fucking prick.

A few seconds later, a tall, dark-haired woman was thrown in with me.

The announcers were talking, introducing us and riling up the crowd of guards (I felt like they, too, were practising, preparing for the Til Death Games), but I barely paid any attention to them.

My mind switched completely to survival mode. Fight mode.

I released my hair from my hair tie and then quickly did it back up in a tight bun to make it harder to grab. She was tall. Powerful legs. Strong body. She worked out and took care of herself.

But can she fight?

I took one step to the left, and she took one to the right, mirroring me. And again, and again. She was studying me with just as much focus as I was her. Only one of us was going to leave that ring alive.

I could tell she wasn't the type to hesitate. She would kill me if it meant her survival.

Around and around we went, watching each other closely, waiting to see who would make the first move, who would attack first.

It was me.

Fuck being on the defensive. I needed to take control of the situation. Control the narrative, control the outcome.

That was what I hoped, anyway.

I charged forward, lashing out with alternating punches and kicks, trying to fluster her and throw her off balance. Take her off guard.

She was quick, with good instincts. The way she moved, her footwork and level of skill in evading strikes and striking back told me she had some sort of training in hand-to-hand combat.

It wouldn't be enough, though. I'd been trained by Elias Huber, a world-renowned assassin trainer. Spent over twenty years perfecting my skills. Trained every single day. Killed on an almost weekly basis. I didn't have a conscience, a voice telling me what was right from wrong. I had no qualms ending a life, especially if mine was on the line.

She was good, but not better than me. That wasn't ego. It was just a fact.

I ducked under a powerful swing of her fist, skidded on my knees around her as I wrapped one arm around her leg, and then tackled her to the ground in one fell swoop. With a sharp twist, I snapped the bone in her leg in half.

She screamed, the sound loud and deafening, full of pain, suffering and fear. Her scream morphed into a cry of anguish as she clutched her broken leg, a river of tears streaming down her face.

As a general rule, I tried to avoid killing innocent people. Not because I felt bad about it or anything. I didn't possess those kinds of feelings. Was incapable of it, really.

It was because it was... Well... Boring.

There was no challenge in it, and the majority of the time, they just cried and begged for their life. There was no fun in that. No adrenaline pumping through my veins.

This woman—Tara, I think I heard the commentators announce—had managed to get my heart beating that little bit faster, and for that, I'd give her a quick death.

Let no one say I'm not the merciful type.

She was still crying when I kicked her down onto her back, far too overcome with pain to even try to stop me.

I crouched over her, grabbed her face in my hands and—

Snap.

Her cries ceased, and her body went limp.

I only had a second to stand to my full height before the ring swarmed with guards, and my cuffs were slapped back on my wrists.

Cautious, that lot were.

I was escorted over to the winners' bench while Tara's dead body was dumped on the pile like the rest, and on and on it went, like a vicious, never-ending cycle.

In pairs, the prisoners went into the ring, and only one walked out. Sometimes none. Talon would occasionally appear on the TV and deem the winner unworthy, ordering them to be killed despite having won their match. He only wanted the best of the best—the ones guaranteed to put up a good, entertaining fight.

I watched, eagerly waiting for that jackass' turn. When a guard finally went over to him and pulled him to his feet, I smiled. Disappointing as it was that I wouldn't personally be the one to end his life, at least I would get a front-row seat to the show.

Here's hoping all those muscles were just for show.

CHAPTER NINE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

I FOLLOWED AUTUMN WITH unwavering focus as she moved around the ring, trading blows with her opponent. The fight didn't last long. A minute, maybe two. But for that entire time, I studied every move she made with narrowed eyes.

She was *fast*, which was a hard thing to achieve, given how tall she was. Light as a feather on her feet. And extremely skilled. The way she tackled the other woman and broke her leg in one quick move? That was a jiu-jitsu move, through and through. I'd seen enough of it over the years to spot it.

I'd seen her kill two people so far without a shred of hesitation. She had a sharp, agile mind. Quick reflexes. Was proficient in at least two different fighting styles. *How is it that I've never heard of her before?* A fighter of her calibre would be well-known within my world. And I was one hundred percent confident she was somehow involved in the life, whether she be from another crime syndicate, a gang, MC or possibly even an assassin (I was definitely leaning more towards that).

Alarm bells went off in my head. She was dangerous. *Far too dangerous.* Despite what I was sure *she* thought, my ego wasn't that big. I could

recognise a potential threat, and Autumn DeValos was *exactly* that: a threat. One I would need to get rid of as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Once she'd killed her opponent, she was escorted to the bench behind the commentators and forced to sit down by a rough shove of the shoulder. She sneered up at the guard and shook off his touch. Her gaze collided with mine. We glared at each other. More fights continued on, but Autumn and I just continued to scowl at one another from across the crowded room.

It was nothing short of a challenge, a dare from both her and me. That we had a score to settle.

It wasn't until it was my turn to fight that our silent battle of wills ended.

Like all the others, I was led over to the side of the ring. A guard unlocked the cuffs around my ankles first, then my wrists. He tried to shove me forward, but I planted my feet and held my ground. I'd seen the guard pull that exact same crap with each prisoner who stepped up for their turn. I wasn't going to be another person he could push down.

I looked over my shoulder, an evil, deadly glare in my eyes. I didn't say anything, just stared at him with malicious intent.

He shrivelled under my gaze, his eyes darting to the floor.

I released a derisive snort before taking the few steps up to the ring and ducking under the ropes.

I moved to one side and took stance, waiting. My arms hung loosely at my side, my shoulders squared.

"Well, well, well, ladies and gentlemen, this next fight promises to be a good one. We have a notorious mafia *Pakhan* in our midst." I glanced to my right, seeing the commentators with headsets on their heads eyeballing me.

One of the cameras panned around the outside of the ring, ensuring to get me from every angle as the commentators continued to speak.

Others might have been confused by what was going on. I wasn't. I recognised the room the moment we entered. Every year, when Talon would send the invitation for his Til Death Games, the email contained other details. Little bits of information about the event, such as videos of the fighters and what they could do. A great way to build anticipation and excitement around the games.

That's what this was. What the cameras were for. The small crowd. The commentators. It was all to entice those receiving an invitation and convince them to pay the buy-in. To show them what they would witness on a much larger and grander scale.

My opponent stepped into the ring, and the entire thing shook. He was a beast of a man with a body built entirely out of muscle. He was bigger than me, that was for sure. Taller. Wider. He was by far the biggest person there, and of course, Talon had chosen him to fight against me.

He was so predictable.

The man took up position opposite me. One side of his mouth hiked up in a cocky, arrogant smile. He thought because he was bigger, he would win. Despite what a lot of men liked to believe, size wasn't everything. It was how one used that size that truly mattered.

My eyes involuntarily moved to the annoying redhead sitting behind him. Her smirk mirrored the man standing before me. She thought the same thing.

How disappointed they were both going to be. The man especially.

There was no bell to signal for the fight to begin. One moment, we were staring at each other from across the ring, sizing each other up, and the next, he was charging at me with all the grace of a raging bull, his feet thumping hard against the ground.

Thump, thump, thump. He raised his fist into the air, preparing to strike.

I didn't move a muscle as he ran right for me. *Waiting, waiting. Almost there...*

I ducked under his swinging arm, spun on the balls of my feet and delivered a brutal roundhouse kick to the side of his head from behind.

He went down like a house of cards, the entire ring shaking from the impact of his body slamming onto the ground.

Casual as you please, I walked over and stared down at him. He'd landed on his back, staring up the ceiling with vacant eyes. I stomped down on his exposed throat with the heel of my foot, killing him instantly.

The neck was a complex structure, filled with blood vessels and organs that were detrimental to one's survival. Damage it in the right spot, with enough force, and there was no coming back from it.

The entire room fell silent for a moment before the crowd broke out into a loud, roaring cheer. I turned. The look on Autumn's face almost made me want to smile. It was fucking priceless. Thinned lips. Lowered brows. Snarled nose. Tense jaw. The anger and disappointment at me having won couldn't have been more obvious.

Usually, I wasn't one to show off or play games, but in that instance, the compulsion to rub it in Autumn's face was simply too great, too compelling

to resist.

Slowly, I lowered myself into a gentleman's bow, wrapping one arm around my middle while the opposite leg swept out behind me. Proper etiquette dictated you also bow your head at the same time to show respect, but that wasn't what this was about. It was more like a bow someone would give to a crowd at the end of a performance, except it was for Autumn and Autumn alone. My way of saying, "I'm still standing, bitch".

Based on the middle finger she threw up at me, she understood its meaning. I smirked before rising back to my full height.

I made my way to the edge of the ring, preparing to jump down and take my place among the winners, but a guard stopped me with a raise of his hand. I frowned.

What now?

His head was bent slightly to the side, his other hand up to the earpiece in his ear, as if he were listening to someone communicating with him. A moment later, he signalled for two more prisoners to be brought into the ring.

I looked to my left, staring down the lens of the camera. *Fucking Talon.* Clearly, he was hoping for a more entertaining fight, and he wasn't going to let me leave without it.

Fine.

I took three steps back and waited, keeping my body loose and ready for action. That fight lasted a little longer than the first. Both men were cautious after witnessing what had happened during the first round, being mindful to keep a safe distance from me, though it did not last long.

Eventually, they came for me at the same time. One went high, the other low. Smart move, but in the end, they met the same fate as Muscle Man: death on the floor of the ring. Talon must not have been satisfied with the outcome because he issued another two prisoners to fight again.

And again.

And again.

By the fifth round, exhaustion was starting to weigh heavily on me. My movements slowed, my reflexes not as sharp as they were when I'd first stepped into the ring. My body hurt all over from the strikes I'd been unable to avoid. Blood dripped down the side of my face from a brutal blow. Despite all of that, I kept going, refusing to show even a modicum of the

pain I was feeling. I had enough in the tank for this fight, but if there was another? Who knew?

I was stuck in a grapple with my opponent, an athletic, dark-haired male. His partner lay dead a few feet away, his neck and several limbs twisted at ungodly angles.

We wrestled for supremacy, twisting, turning and ramming our blood-stained knuckles into each other's sides; ribs, abdomen, kidneys. *I just need one opening. Just one. Just—*

Pain exploded in my head. *Fuck!* Looked like he'd gotten an opening first. A wave of disorientation washed over me. I did my best to fight through it, but some of his strikes hit home regardless.

Fed up and full of anger, I unlocked that dark, evil side of me. The one that felt nothing. No pain. No remorse. No mercy.

The Butcher.

With a burst of strength sizzling in my bones, I clocked him under the chin with a brutal uppercut. The man flew back, landing roughly in a heap. He jumped right back up and came charging towards me again, never slowing down.

I met him head-on. We threw punch after punch, going at each other with a primal velocity that showed we would fight until our last breaths. I rammed my fist into his stomach, and he groaned, bending over. My hands grasped his face, and I twisted sharply, breaking his neck.

“And we have a winner!”

Relief filled me with those words, and I dropped the dead body carelessly at my feet. None of my other victories had come with such a declaration, which meant that had to be it. The final fight.

I turned.

“Your winner, ladies and gentlemen, the Bratva Butcher!”

The camera panned in close to my face, so close that all I'd need to do was lean forward, and I would touch it. My body was still pumping with so much adrenaline and anger and I snapped. I grabbed the camera and smashed it on the ground, over and over again.

The cameraman screeched and jumped back, abandoning his equipment as I continued to lift it and smash it down. Guards swarmed me, trying to restrain me, but I was still in fight mode, survival mode, and I lashed out at everyone who came near me.

Fuck this. Fuck them.

Fight, fight, fight.

Pain exploded in the back of my head, and I fell forward. Darkness took over quickly, and I welcomed it, sinking away.

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CHAPTER TEN



DIMITRI VOLKOV

MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, a sharp, piercing sound echoing in my ears. The first thing I saw was the cell bars. Memories from before I was knocked out slammed into me, wiping away some of the disorientation.

It was to be expected, I supposed. Talon couldn't very well let the destruction of his property go unpunished. Still, it was worth it. I was sick of that stupid camera being in my fucking face all the time.

Holding in a groan, I rolled over to my side and—

“Good morning, sunshine.”

This time, I let my groan slip free, but it was for an entirely different reason.

Exasperation instead of pain.

Sitting on an identical cot to the one I was lying on was that annoying red-haired devil woman, Autumn.

Why?

Why me? Why did the universe fucking hate me?

She sat with her back against the concrete wall, one leg hiked up, her arm dangling over her knee. She was in different clothes than the last time I'd

seen her: a black sports bra and short black shorts. The chains were gone, as were mine, but there was a thick metal collar locked around her neck that looked like some sort of mediaeval torture device. The heavy weight around my own neck told me I had the same device around me.

Wonderful.

I sat up slowly, taking stock of my surroundings. Someone had changed my clothes as well. No shirt—which was the same—but I was in a pair of black shorts instead of the pair of grey slacks I'd been wearing when Dominik kidnapped me.

A dozen cages lined the walls, each one home to two prisoners. Some of them, I recognised as winners from the fights in the ring. Others, I'd never seen before. All of them were dressed in the same attire as me and Autumn, including the collar.

My hand drifted upwards to touch it. Thick. Metal. What was its purpose? I tried to take it off—

“Don’t,” Autumn said, shaking her head. “They said that if we try to take it off, it’ll blow our heads off.”

A deterrent to stop anyone from trying to escape... Clever.

One thing became evidently clear to me as I got to my feet, stretching out my body. Those people would be my opponents—the ones fighting in the games.

Only one person in that room would walk away alive, and despite how hard I was sure Talon was going to make it for me, I had every intention of being that person.

I had maybe ten seconds to get my bearings, studying the layout, the cells, the security, my competition, before that bitch pounced on my back, her legs hooking around my waist at the same time as her arms wrapped around my neck in a tight, inescapable chokehold.

Impressive, given the barrier the collar provided, not that I’d ever admit that to her.

“I told you I would kill you,” she hissed in my ear, squeezing tighter. “And now, I finally will.”

“You...fucking...bitch,” I choked out, thrashing from side to side, trying to get her off me. “Let...go!”

“We’ve been here before, Butcher, so, to quote myself, ‘I’d rather watch the life drain from your eyes’.” The pressure increased—painfully so—and I rammed into the cell bars in the hopes of dislodging her.

It didn't work. Her hold was firm. Unwavering.

Left, right, side-to-side. I slammed into the bars over and over again, but she held tight.

"Give in, Butcher. Let the darkness take you. You can't win. I'm locked in. It's time to die."

The darkness she spoke of danced in front of my eyes, my lungs *burning* for air. Refusing to let the panic set in, I hurled myself backwards, and since that bitch was attached firmly to my back like a goddamn spider monkey, she took the brunt of the fall with *me* landing on top of *her*.

She grunted, blowing out a wheeze of pain. Shaking off her hold after that was easy. I got up quickly and tried to stomp on her neck like I'd done to Muscle Man in the ring, but she was fast, rolling away at the last second. Then, she was up, putting distance between us.

We circled each other—hard to do in the limited space we had, but nonetheless, we managed, eyeing each other cautiously.

It was the first time we'd had the freedom to move properly, freely without the restrictions of chains, and all those threats we'd thrown at each other were about to come to fruition.

"I didn't know I was in the presence of mafia royalty. The famous Bratva Butcher. My, my. I feel like I should ask for your autograph or something. Everyone knows who *you* are."

"Sure. Why don't you come a little closer? I'll sign whatever you want."

She smirked. "If you insist." Then, she lunged, attacking with a swift roundhouse kick. I reared back and threw a punch, knee, elbow combo. She deflected each strike with ease, lashing out with her own in response. Back and forth, back and forth we went, exchanging blow after blow, blocking and attacking.

She was good. Very good. Quick, decisive. Never hesitant in the moves she made. When she saw an opportunity to strike, she took it.

Her skills made me firmly believe she'd had some sort of training. It was in the way she moved. Silent. Deadly. Confident. The way each of her strikes were coordinated to cause as much damage as possible. She also didn't have a problem fighting fucking dirty, pulling hair, biting and scratching, doing whatever she needed to do to get a leg up in the fight. Like a true fucking savage.

She clipped me on the side of the head with a kick. My body was still recovering from everything it had endured at the hands of my brother and

the fights from earlier, so I wasn't as quick as I knew I could be. I faltered, and she didn't waste a single second capitalising on it, unleashing strike after strike after strike, forcing me to back up each time I blocked.

Frustration mounted inside me. It was taking everything I possessed to hold her back. She was intent on killing me—that much was clear, and I'd had e-fucking-nough.

With a snarl, I charged through her next round of attacks, picking her up in a running tackle and slamming her up against the wall at the back of the cell. Her head whacked against the concrete, which I guessed must have been painfully hard, but she kept fighting, kicking and thrashing as I pinned her up by the arms, her feet inches from the ground.

She took a cheap shot, trying to knee me in the balls. I barely managed to avoid it by twisting slightly out of the way. With both of my hands occupied with holding her up against the wall, I had no choice but to use my body to flatten her against the wall.

"Let me go!" She fought with everything she had, but there was no denying she was outmatched. I was bigger, stronger. She couldn't beat me. Not that way. "I said let me go, you bastard!"

Her body continued to thrash against mine. Involuntarily, unwanted feelings began to surface. It had been a long, *long*, time since I'd had a woman pressed up against me like that. Adrenaline was pumping hard through my veins, making everything even more difficult to ignore. Her breasts pushed up against my chest. All those plump curves. Soft skin.

It's just your body's natural response. Ignore it.

Gritting my teeth, I slammed both of her hands above her head with one of my own and then collared her throat, wedging my free hand in between that metal collar and her neck.

I lowered my head to stare her dead in her eyes. "I think I'd rather watch the life drain from your eyes," I whispered darkly, throwing her own words back in her face.

She glared, her chest heaving, her breasts rising and falling, the movement drawing my attention because with each breath, they brushed up against me.

Why the fuck does it feel good?

I squeezed, those unwanted feelings helping fuel my anger. There was no denying the fact that I enjoyed watching her struggle. Choke. Gasp for air. I had no qualms killing a woman. Women had proved to me time and time

again that they were deadly, vicious creatures and shouldn't be underestimated just because they had a pair of tits and a pussy. If anything, that made them *more* dangerous. Men were easily distracted by that shit.

"Stop! Stop it!" someone from my left yelled. Another prisoner?

"Mind your own business," I snarled, never taking my eyes off Autumn. I told her I was going to watch her die, and I fucking meant it.

I had to give it to her, though, she was one tough son of a bitch. Even so close to death, there wasn't even a flicker of fear in her eyes. She held my gaze, glaring at me with nothing but burning anger and hatred. No fear.

"You're going to kill her!"

"Good," I smiled evilly, squeezing even harder. Her face started changing colour. She bucked. Thrashed. Strained to get free.

And still, no fear.

A sliver of admiration cut through me. I valued strength in a person. I despised weakness, and it was becoming quite clear that Autumn didn't have an ounce of weakness in her.

"But she's your partner in the games!"

I stiffened. "What?!" I barked, my head snapping in the direction of the female voice.

Big mistake.

That brief lapse in focus was all Autumn needed to take control.

She somehow managed to yank one of her hands free, and then struck me hard across the side of the head. She connected with a fresh cut already on my forehead—probably inflicted sometime during my own fights in the ring—and the blow jarred me, making me let her go and stumble back.

Autumn fell to her knees, one hand at her throat as she sucked in a huge breath of air. I thought she'd come charging at me again, but instead, she went running to the bars that separated us from the woman who spoke.

"What the fuck do you mean I'm his partner?" she rasped, her voice barely above a whisper.

The woman wasn't someone I recognised from the fights earlier. She was tall, with broad shoulders and short, curly red hair. She backed away the moment Autumn got close, almost as if she feared she would attempt to kill her through the bars.

Something that crazy, devil woman would surely try.

"I told you to leave it alone, Rebecca," her cellmate grunted, crossing his arms over his burly chest. "The less they know, the better our odds are. One

less pair to worry about.”

“That’s not fair, Gregory.”

“Who the fuck cares about being fair? We’re fighting for our lives here.”

I ran my eyes over the room again, this time looking at things from a different perspective in light of the new information. Twelve cages, each home to two prisoners, one man and one woman.

I groaned, burying my face in my hands as I dropped into a low crouch.

A pairs fight? With Autumn as my partner? It couldn’t get any fucking worse.

“What?” Autumn demanded. “What do you know?”

When I didn’t answer, she marched over to me and whacked my hands away from my face. I glared up at her.

“What. Do. You. Know?” she growled out behind clenched teeth.

“A great deal more than you, I’m sure.”

“Do you know I’m going to shove my foot so far down your throat that it’s going to pop out your ass if you don’t start fucking talking?”

I jumped to my feet, using my full height to tower over her. “Considering you were at death’s door mere moments ago, I’d suggest you get the fuck out of my face before you find yourself there again.”

She glowered at me. “That was luck.”

“No, it wasn’t. Your form needs work. You drop your guard on your left side when you kick from the right.”

Her mouth dropped open in outrage as if I’d just gravely insulted her. I supposed I had. There was nothing more insulting than telling a fighter their form sucked. “I do not!”

“Yes, you do.”

“Yeah? Well...your eyebrows crease right before you throw out a combo, making them super easy to avoid.”

I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t know I did that. I had been wondering how she was able to avoid them so easily.

So, not only was she quick on her feet, efficient at fighting and mentally and physically strong, but she was also extremely observant.

A deadly combination.

I should have just killed her then, partnership be damned.

“No one’s explained what’s going on to you?” Rebecca asked, breaking the glare-down between us.

“No,” Autumn answered. She touched her throat lightly, wincing. A nasty bruise was already starting to form in the shape of a handprint.

“We’ve been brought here to fight against each other to the death. The person you’re sharing a cell with is your partner in the games. It’s two vs two. The winning pair earns their freedom. Someone should have explained it all to you after your match-ups?”



Sure enough, a few hours later, a guard came by with our food rations and explained everything. The games. The rules. Even a more detailed account of the collars around our necks. That if we even tried to leave our cell, they would automatically detonate and blow our entire fucking heads off.

They were fitted with sensors that were rigged to explode if we tried to escape. They even had anti-tampering devices, prohibiting us from trying to remove them ourselves.

Smart. Annoyingly smart.

“I want a different partner!” Autumn demanded after the guard finished talking.

“Not possible. The pairings have already been decided and cannot be changed.”

“Sure they can. Just get on the horn with the boss and tell him. I can’t work with that asshole.” She pointed at me, sitting on my cot.

I snorted out a laugh. “That’s something I’m sure Talon is counting on.”

The guard frowned as he pushed the last plate of food through the small gap at the bottom of the cell. He was probably wondering how I knew Talon’s name. I moved and picked up the plate. It was a generous helping of lamb chops, potatoes, vegetables and gravy. My stomach *rumbled*. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d eaten. It had to have been days before.

I didn't eat on the plane because I thought perhaps Talon might have laced the food with something. That was no longer a concern. He had his fighters. Poisoning them when he needed them to fight didn't make much sense.

"What do you mean by that?" Autumn asked.

We weren't given any cutlery, so I picked up one of the pieces of lamb with my fingers. "Our animosity isn't exactly a secret. It's plainly obvious," I said in between bites. "My guess is, Talon is hoping our hatred for one another will hinder our ability to work together effectively. In a pairs fight, it's crucial to have a good relationship with your partner. Trust. Communication. Without that, you might as well get on your knees and let them kill you."

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CHAPTER ELEVEN



AUTUMN DEVALOS

I ATE MY FOOD quietly, pondering Dimitri's last words. He sat across from me on his own cot, focused entirely on the plate in his lap.

I was still reeling from everything that had happened, so the moment to gather my thoughts was a welcome one. I studied him covertly out of the corner of my eye as I ate. My body zinged to life.

Jesus fucking Christ. I had to be the most idiotic person on the planet. The man had literally been a heartbeat away from killing me, and yet I wanted to jump on his cock and ride him while he had one of my tits in his mouth.

He was just so...*powerful*. He was doing nothing but sitting there eating, his back leaning against the cell bars, one knee hiked up, completely at ease but somehow radiating a dark, dangerous vibe that made shivers dance down my spine. It was just *him*. The way he was. Masculine energy literally dripped off him, vibrated around him—the kind of energy that warned you not to get too close to him. That he had the power to snap your neck with his bare fucking hands, which I knew to be completely true. I'd seen it with my own eyes.

I picked up one of the roasted potatoes and popped it into my mouth, silently berating myself. It wasn't the time to let my libido take the reins. I had to get a fucking grip, get my hormones under control and start thinking logically.

It made it easier that the man had shown zero interest in me, sexual or otherwise, since I'd met him. I wasn't the type to chase after someone who didn't want me.

What he'd said earlier made sense. Unfortunately, I wasn't much of a team player to start with. I much preferred to work on my own. But, if I was to start becoming a team player, I would want to trust my partner explicitly. Feel assured they had my back and would watch out for me.

That definitely wasn't the case with that jackass over there.

How could I trust him? We'd already tried to kill each other. Multiple times. And he'd almost succeeded. Had it not been for Rebecca calling out and distracting him, I'd most likely be very dead already. How could I ever really trust that when my back was turned in that arena, he wasn't just going to come up behind me and chop my head off or something?

It was a very real possibility because I would consider doing that exact same thing to him.

The whole thing was completely and utterly fucking insane. Fighting to the death in a gladiator inspired tournament? What kind of Hunger Games May The Odds Be Ever In Your Favour bullshit did I fall into?

Dimitri seemed unnaturally calm about the whole thing. In fact, not once did I detect even a hint of surprise from him in regards to our current predicament. Almost as if he'd suspected the outcome. Knew exactly what was in store. What was going to happen to us.

We hadn't said a word to each other in the past hour. Not since the guard had left. What was there to say? "Sorry I tried to kill you, but let's put that aside now and try to work together?"

We'd never trust each other to the point where we could ever work together effectively.

Then again, what if we didn't need to? What if there was some way around that?

I licked the gravy off my fingertips, contemplating how to approach the situation. I was fairly certain I knew how the interaction was going to go, but nevertheless...

"I have a proposition for you."

“Not interested,” he fired back instantly, not even bothering to look up from his plate.

Yep, sounds about right.

“Do you want to live or not?” I snapped. His eyes finally flicked up to me. “I’m suggesting a *temporary* truce. Emphasis on the temporary part.”

“Not—”

“Interested. Right,” I finished with an irritated sigh, shaking my head. “Question. Have you always been this unbelievably pig-headed?”

He growled low in his throat, his narrowed gaze locked firmly on me like he wanted nothing more than to wring my neck. I’d have betted that someone in his position wasn’t used to being spoken to in such a fashion.

Tough fucking shit. I wasn’t going to bow down and kiss his ass because he was some hotshot mafia leader.

“It wasn’t a rhetorical question,” I continued. “I’m genuinely curious if you’ve always been this way, or if it’s a skill you’ve been honing since your balls dropped?”

“Watch how you speak to me,” he warned darkly.

“Or what? News flash, Your Royal Grouchiness, you might be top shit in your world, but guess what? You’re not there. You’re here, locked up like the rest of us lowly peasants. We’re all in the same boat. So, why don’t you get off your high fucking horse and work with me. You might be content with rolling over and dying, but *I’m not*. I’m prepared to fight to my last, dying breath. And should that time come, I plan to take as many of those fuckers down with me as I can. So, you can either work with me, and *together* we might actually stand a chance of getting out of here alive, or I’ll kill you right here, right now, and just go at it solo. What’s it going to be?”

He stared at me, deathly still, not moving a single muscle. I thought I’d had his entire focus before, but this was something entirely different. If fear was an emotion I was capable of experiencing, I had no doubt it would be pumping through my veins with how he was looking at me. Like he’d just realised how big of a threat I really was, and was trying to decide whether or not to just cut his losses and end me.

His gaze moved slowly to my left. An unreadable expression fell over his face. I had no idea what the fuck he was looking at. There was nothing there except for pounds of solid concrete. Maybe he’d finally lost it. Cracked under the pressure, and was seeing things that weren’t there.

His eyes returned to me, and he ran his tongue over his teeth. “What do you mean by *temporary* truce?”

I held in my triumphant smile. It would probably piss him off, and it looked like I was finally winning him over. “While we’re here, fighting in these games, we agree not to try and kill each other.”

“And after?”

“If we manage to win, and if we manage to somehow get out of here...all bets are off. The next time we see each other, we’re free to do whatever we want.”

He thought it over for a moment. “How do we know the other will stick to the truce and not go back on their word?”

Valid question.

“We don’t know, at least not with one hundred percent certainty.” I slipped to the edge of the cot and placed my empty plate on the ground. “But I’m a person of my word, and I’ve *heard* you are, too.”

He grunted.

“We both know we have more of a chance of winning if we work together.” He took a sip from his water bottle, neither confirming or denying it. Fed up, I got to my feet, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’m sick of playing devil’s advocate. Either agree to the truce or get ready for round two.”

“I think you mean round four, or is it five?” he scoffed, shaking his head. His eyes drifted to the side again—*what the fuck is he looking at?*—before he released a begrudging sigh. “I agree to your truce.”

He moved, standing toe-to-toe with me, a vicious promise laced in his next words. “But the second this is all over, I’m going to do what I swore I would do the moment I met you, and that’s kill you.” His hand wrapped around my throat. I allowed the move because why not? “I’m going to squeeze every ounce of air from your lungs until your heart stops, and then I’m going to smile down at your lifeless corpse.”

How cute. A threat from the Bratva Butcher himself. If I was right in the head, I would have been scared. His exploits were legendary. Something that would survive the ages. Everyone had heard of the Bratva Butcher. Of his malevolence. His brutality. His lack of empathy for those he considered his enemies.

It didn’t scare me, though. It made me...excited. *What would it feel like to be hunted by the Bratva Butcher? To finally be the hunted instead of the hunter?*

hunter? The thought intrigued me far more than it should have.

I grasped his wrist and twisted sharply. He winced, completely unprepared for the move, and involuntarily dropped to his knees. The angle at which I held his wrist didn't give him much of a choice. Either he dropped, or I broke his wrist.

"Ahh, exactly where a man belongs, on his knees."

He scowled up at me.

"Let's get one thing straight, Butcher. I'm sure you're used to being the superior one out of everyone you face, but that shit isn't going to fly with me. Believe me when I say that if I'm going down, I'm dragging you down with me."

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CHAPTER TWELVE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“THIS HERE IS THE training area.” The guard who spoke swept his hand through the air, gesturing to what I could only describe as an underground cavern.

After being woken by a bright, blinding light, a deep male voice had boomed, “Up we get, fighters. It’s time for your first training session.”

A guard had come in after that with our breakfast. A smorgasbord of eggs, bacon, sausages, hash browns and toast. Each and every plate had been overloaded with so much food that it was practically falling to the ground.

At first, I’d been suspicious. Usually, prisoners were served the bare minimum. Just enough food to stay alive. The less energy prisoners had the better, so if they tried to escape, they couldn’t get very far.

But Talon was doing the opposite by going overboard with the food. Once I’d figured it out, it all made perfect sense, really. The Til Death Games were his baby. His only way to the fame, admiration and respect he so desperately craved. He wouldn’t get that if the fighters passed out from dehydration and malnutrition.

The same principle applied to the training. He needed the fighters in the best possible condition to guarantee a good, entertaining fight.

So, our location made perfect sense to me.

After eating breakfast, we were all led down dark, gloomy corridors and long winding staircases in single file until we got to that room. The ground was covered entirely in hard, dense sand. Rows of weapons lined the walls; swords, spears, knives, axes and different sized shields. Lit tiki torches surrounded a makeshift ring in the centre of the room. I felt like I'd been plucked right out of the twenty-first century and dumped into a time where Roman gladiators fought each other mercilessly for the appeasement of others.

Given what I knew about what was to take place there, it wasn't that far off.

"You will be brought here twice a day to practise," the guard continued, walking down the line with his hands behind his back, expression hard. "Whether you choose to train or not is entirely up to you. We're not going to hold your hands and walk you through it. Last year's games were single matches. This year, it's pairs fighting. Your cellmate is your partner. Everyone else is your competition. If you and your partner make it to the end, you'll be granted your freedom."

I scoffed.

The guard cut me an angry look. I held his stare. The chances of Talon actually letting the winners go was slim to none. They would have seen too much, know too much about his operations. But you had to give people something to fight for, otherwise there would be no point in playing along with any of it.

"As I was saying, train or don't train. It's up to you. I don't need to tell you what a serious disadvantage it is not to practise with your partner in a pairs fight. It's crucial to learn each other's moves and anticipate each other's actions so you can both move on to the next round. In the event that your partner dies, you will move on by yourself. You will not be awarded another partner. Watching each other's back is important if you don't want to end up fighting in the next round all on your own. Defeating two opponents at once is doable, but extremely difficult. Don't risk it. If your partner dies, so will you. It will just be a matter of time. Now, for the rules. There is to be no killing or seriously injuring other fighters. Any disputes you may have can be settled in the arena. Should you be caught

significantly injuring another fighter to the point where they are unable to compete, your life shall be forfeited.”

Some outraged gasps came from the other prisoners. Autumn and I glanced at each other. The knowing glint in her eyes matched my own. Had we not reached an agreement with one another, we still would have tried to kill each other, consequences be damned.

“Should you try to escape, your life shall be forfeited. Should you attempt to attack any of the guards with any of the weapons you see here, your life shall be forfeited. Should you attempt to remove any of the weapons from this room, your—”

“Life shall be forfeited. God, this guy is like a broken fucking record,” Autumn mumbled under her breath.

Don't laugh. Don't laugh. It's not even that fucking funny.

“Spend your time in this room wisely. The first round of the Til Death Games will commence a lot sooner than you think.”

Restlessness moved through the other prisoners. The guard glanced at his watch. “You have three hours left of this morning’s session.” When no one moved, his brows slammed down into a frown. “Well? Get to it!” he barked.

Half the prisoners jumped and scurried off. The other half, though, did exactly what I did: stare, unimpressed, not the least bit intimidated by the guard’s outburst.

“These are the ones to watch out for,” Autumn whispered at my side, her eyes locked firmly on the prisoners still around us.

I grunted in agreement. *In this, she couldn't be more right.*

There were a few prisoners I’d already deemed a significant threat, purely based on their build and demeanor, all of whom were now studying me as carefully as I was them.

People peeled off into their pairs. Autumn and I moved to one of the corners of the room, far enough away so we couldn’t be overheard but still close enough so that we could watch the others.

She shuffled closer to me, her body almost touching mine, and lowered her voice. “Alright, Butcher, it’s time to come clean. Tell me everything you know.”

I looked at her. She was only a few inches shorter than me. She’d somehow managed to tame that chaotic mess of red hair. It sat in a tight bun on the top of her head, the tiny tendrils too short to be put up framing her face.

I'd never been so close to her before—not without trying to kill her, that was. I could see all the little details I'd been too preoccupied to notice before. The spattering of freckles on her nose. The tiny flecks of brown in her eyes. The fullness of her lips.

Something stirred in my lower belly.

What—

“Butcher.” She clicked her fingers right in front of my face. “Focus now, daydream later. We’ve got to prepare, or have you failed to notice that you and I are currently public enemy number one?”

She had a point. A lot of the other pairs were watching us cautiously with a slight hint of fear and trepidation. Those who saw our fights in the ring when we first arrived would know what a significant threat we were individually, and suddenly, we were working together, making us an even bigger threat.

“Of course I noticed,” I hissed down at her, and now we were glaring at each other.

Again.

Honestly, it would be a goddamn miracle if we were actually able to work together efficiently.

“You know more about this whole thing than you’re letting on, and now that we’re”—she ran her tongue over her teeth like the word she was about to say left a foul taste in her mouth—“partners, the more prepared *I* am, the better for both of us.”

Annoyingly, she had a point. Again.

I put my arm against the wall behind her and leant closer. “Everybody here, whether they look like it or not, has the capability to end your life. The people Talon selects for his games are highly trained and highly skilled. The games would be boring if they weren’t.”

“What exactly is this Til Death Games? I’ve never heard of them before.”

“No, I suspect not,” I sighed. “You don’t exactly have the net worth for that kind of information.”

She arched an eyebrow. “And what do you know of my net worth, *Butcher*? ”

“All I need to know. That it isn’t high enough. If it was, you would have received an invitation to attend. Now, do you want me to keep going?”

“What I want is for you to stop being such a stuck-up, snobbish asshole.”

“Snobbish,” I stated incredulously.

“I didn’t stutter. Yes, snobbish. Surely, this can’t be the first time someone has called you that.”

Yes, actually, it was. People didn’t speak to me the way she did. Most of them were too scared to. I’d flayed men alive for lesser transgressions.

“I am *not* stuck-up, nor am I snobbish.”

“Right, and I don’t like to have my hair pulled and my ass spanked during sex,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes and looking out into the room.

I stiffened. Despite the fact that I didn’t want it to, the image of what she described barrelled into my mind. Her, bent over in front of me, my hand wrapped around those thick, red locks, her ass red and covered in handprints.

My handprints.

What. The. Fuck?

The comment seemed to have been made flippantly, almost like an afterthought on her account, like she hadn’t meant that particular scenario with me. Yet, I’d envisioned it anyway.

Her gaze swung back to me. Her whole body locked into place, eyes widening slightly.

Usually, I was an expert at hiding my emotions. People only saw what I wanted them to see. But that feeling... That hot, *burning* need scorching in my veins stunned me so much that I was unable to hide it.

Something primal passed between us. Something dark. Powerful. Animalistic. We’d somehow moved even closer to each other. I wasn’t sure who moved first. Was it me? Was it her? We were suddenly only mere inches from each other, so close that I could almost *feel* her heart pounding in her chest, feel her breath fan out over my throat.

My eyes moved to her lips. More thoughts shoved their way into my head. Dirty, vile thoughts. It was like now that one had managed to get through, more and more were slamming into me, and I was powerless to stop them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



AUTUMN DEVALOS

WHAT IN THE EVER-LOVING fuck is going on right now?

Hypnotising blue eyes were currently locked on me, burning with so much heat that I thought it would sear me. Swimming with what I could have sworn was lust.

Who would have thought? His Royal Grouchiness was capable of feeling something towards me other than exasperation and irritation.

I'd have betted it was killing him.

There was no denying the man was hotter than sin. You'd have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to see it. Not to notice all that raw sex appeal. Feel all that pure, masculine energy. The man practically *oozed* sex. From that handsome, sculpted face to the broad shoulders and muscular body... He was what every woman pictured when reading about the male character in a raunchy romance novel.

I'd just ignored it, because hello, the guy was an ass. But this? *This* was hard to ignore. I had over 6'5 feet of hard, masculine man towering over me, looking at me with this dark, predatory edge.

I wasn't sure what it was that set him off. It was like the flip of a switch. One second, he was glaring at me with disdain and contempt, and the next, he was staring at me like he wanted to rip my damn clothes off.

It couldn't have been the little fly away comment I'd made about sex. That shit was tamed compared to what I'd heard mafia men like him were into.

I was really regretting not digging more into Dimitri's history. When I'd accepted the contract on his brother, I hadn't bothered to look extensively into his family. I didn't see the point. It was Dominik's routine and structure I had to learn.

I'd just acquired the basics.

But suddenly, I wished that I had, if only so I could have an upperhand in our interactions.

Dimitri was still staring at me. His eyes moved to my mouth.

What are you going to do, Butcher?

If he tried to kiss me, I was inclined to let him. Yeah, I had the overwhelming urge to strangle him until he stopped breathing, but like I said, the man was hot, and I very well might die in that place. One last romp didn't sound that bad, even if it was with someone I despised.

Maybe—

“You can't keep us locked up like this!”

Our locked gaze broke at that loud, frightened voice, the spell that had momentarily taken over us evaporating into thin air. He stepped back, moving away from me quickly.

We both looked to see what was going on. One of the other prisoners—a well-built man with dark, shoulder-length hair and a goatee—was yelling at a guard, one of the swords in his hands, the tip pointed right at the man's chest.

“This should be interesting,” I muttered under my breath.

Dimitri said nothing. Didn't look at me. Didn't acknowledge me. The shutters were back down, making it impossible to guess what he was thinking or feeling. Whatever had taken over him was well and truly gone, like it had never been there in the first place. He was back to being hard and stoic. The Dimitri I knew.

“Let me go! Let me go right now, or I swear I'll kill—”

There was a small *click*, and then his head just *exploded*.

Blood rained down like confetti. Someone—actually, several people—screamed. Half the prisoners lost their shit, wailing in horror, their hands grasping at the sides of their heads as they crumbled to their knees. The other half simply studied the scene with mild interest.

So that's what happened when the collars went off. It was interesting to see.

"As previously stated, your life shall be forfeited if you threaten any of the guards," a booming male voice declared over the speakers on the walls. "You have two hours and forty-seven minutes left remaining in this training session." Then, the voice disappeared.

No one moved to collect the headless body. It stayed right where it was, staining the sand a deep, dark red.

Some of the prisoners went back to what they were doing; talking, practicing light hand-to-hand combat in their designated pairings.

"Alright, back to what we were talking about," I said, lowering my voice. "Explain the games to me."

"To put it simply, the Til Death Games is an event held once a year," Dimitri replied gruffly, his posture stiff and uncomfortable. He'd moved even further away from me some time during the mayhem, creating a very noticeable distance between us.

Whatever.

"It's a gladiator-style tournament where people fight to the death as a source of entertainment for those in attendance."

Okay. So many questions. Where to start?

"How is it I've never heard of this before? And don't say it's because of my net worth," I snapped when Dimitri opened his mouth, no doubt to say that very thing. "I mean it as in, how is this shit not front page fucking news? How has the FBI or CIA or some other police organisation not found out about what's going on here and put a stop to it? How has Talon gotten away with being in operation for so long?"

"Simple." He shrugged. "He's incredibly selective about who he chooses to invite, and his security protocols are through the roof. I also suspect he has those very organisations in his back pocket. He doesn't take chances. As frustrating as it is for me to admit, the systems Talon has in place are foolproof. I've been trying to circumvent them for years with no luck."

"You seem to have a pretty extensive history with this guy."

Dimitri narrowed his eyes. “My history with Talon is none of your business.”

“I beg to differ. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that you two have it out for each other. He made you fight ten extra people in that ring before letting you be declared the winner. That tells me he plans to make things a lot harder for you than everyone else, and since my fate is firmly tied up with yours, I have a right to know.”

He said nothing, neither confirming or denying if I was right. I didn’t need him to. *I knew he* knew I was right. Asshole was just too stubborn to admit it.

“Whatever. We’ll circle back to that later.” I rubbed my forearms because I was wearing next to nothing, and it was fucking cold down there. “So, I’m guessing that, since this place is so hard to find, we can’t expect some miraculous rescue from your people?”

“No,” he replied flatly.

“Okay. The only way we’ll be getting out of here alive, then, is if we win the games.”

I hadn’t phrased it like a question, but he answered anyway with a gruff, “Yes.”

My bullshit radar went off like an alarm inside my head. He didn’t look any different. There was no nervous twitching. No avoiding eye contact. Nothing to indicate he was being deceitful in any way, and yet, I’d sensed it.

Call it a woman’s intuition.

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“A lot of things. Like how it’s taking a great conscious effort for me not to kill you right now.” The look in his eyes told me he was being one hundred percent serious, and honestly, I felt the same way. I was getting a little sick and tired of his whole deflecting tactic.

“Trust me, the feeling is fucking mutual, Butcher,” I hissed, aggravated. It was like the fucker wanted to be at a disadvantage. “Just watch the other prisoners,” I snapped, turning to plaster my back to the wall, crossing my arms over my chest. “We need to figure out who the biggest threat is and watch them closely for weaknesses since your buddy will most likely pair us up against the strongest fighters here.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” I snapped again.

He looked at me, smirking condescendingly. “Fine.”
I will not kill my partner. I will not kill my partner.



“Son of a bitch!” Pain exploded across my face from Dimitri’s fist, his knuckles plowing into my cheekbone with zero hesitation.

I jumped back, narrowly avoiding another strike, and went on the offensive.

I know what you’re thinking, and no, we weren’t trying to kill each other. It would be a fair assumption, though, so I don’t blame you for assuming.

We were training.

Mr Paranoid over there said he didn’t want to train in front of the other prisoners. Didn’t want to show them what he was capable of or what our game plan for the fights were so they couldn’t prepare for it.

So, there we were, trying to fight each other in the fucking dark.

We’d spent both the morning and afternoon training sessions studying our opponents. The way they moved. If they favored their right side or left side. Trying to gather as much information as we could on them.

“This is ridiculous,” I hissed, blocking blow after blow. “I can’t see shit in the dark.”

“Neither can anyone else,” Dimitri replied, swinging again.

I ducked, blocked another strike with my forearm and then lashed out with a kick. My eyes had adjusted to the lack of light enough that I could see the outline of Dimitri’s body. See his face shrouded in shadows.

He was intent on training when everyone else was asleep. That way, no one could see our moves. I didn’t see the point in it, to be honest. Half the people in the room had been present when we’d both fought for our place in the games. Most of them already knew what we could do and how big of a

threat we were. I suspected it was why we were getting eye-balled in the training area.

But still, I agreed anyway because I had to pick my battles with a man like him. Conceding to such a small thing would be more beneficial for me in the long run.

I'd hoped.

"They're most likely going to try and split us up. Separate us. Get us one on one. It's important to remember that if that happens, we need to keep an eye on each other. If one of us is in trouble, the other needs to be able to render assistance." Dimitri front-kicked, and the impact of stopping it made me wince. The dude wasn't holding back in the slightest. Most men would pull their punches when fighting a woman, knowing they were likely stronger than them and could cause a fuckton of damage, but Dimitri had no inclination to do that. He was going as hard as he would if he was fighting a male, and it was actually refreshing. I hated being babied because I was a woman.

He moved quickly, darting around to my side to attack me again. I jumped away, rolled and sprung back to my feet just in time to see him rush me. He shoved me up against the cell bars with a forearm against my throat. "Dead," he whispered, a smirk dancing on his lips, an almost playful expression on his face.

I'll show that motherfucker "dead".

I reached up between us and twisted his nipples. He whipped back in shock, eyes as wide as saucers. The unexpected move caused him to drop his guard, and I took full advantage...by punching him in his Adam's apple.

He choked, stumbling back another few steps. I dropped, sweeping my leg out as I spun around quickly, knocking him off his feet. Pouncing on top of him, I rammed my forearm into his throat like he did me, and gave him a dazzling smile.

"Dead," I mocked softly, breathing heavily, my heart pounding in my chest.

Heat flared in his eyes for the briefest moment before it morphed into frustration. "Nice move," he grunted begrudgingly.

My smile widened, which just seemed to piss him off even more. "Must have absolutely *killed* you to say that to me."

He grunted again. "Get off me."

It was a lot harder to do that than I would have thought. He felt...good beneath me. My legs were either side of his body, my own body flushed right up against his. I could feel *everything*. He was all hard defined muscles. Pure masculine strength. All that power he had... There was no denying it was a massive fucking turn on.

It didn't matter that he was an asshole of massive proportions. That he would kill me the first chance he got. Attraction was attraction. I didn't have to like the dude to want to fuck him.

In saying that, though, I also wasn't one to throw myself at someone who didn't want me. Sure, there'd been a time or two where I'd glimpsed something in his eyes, something that could definitely be interpreted as attraction.

But then again, maybe not.

So, I pushed myself off him.

"Are we done?" I didn't move far. Just shuffled a few feet over until my back hit the side of the cot so I could lean against it.

Dimitri did the same, dangling his arms over his bent knees, sitting directly across from me. "For now."

We'd been sparring since lights out hours before, and I was exhausted, not that I'd ever admit it. What I couldn't believe was that Dimitri looked no worse for wear. Meanwhile, I was trying to stop myself from huffing and puffing like I'd just run a fucking marathon.

I was in good shape—trained every day—and yet, I was finding it difficult to keep up with him. The guy had incredible stamina for someone his age, which, based on the information I'd gotten about his twin brother, I knew was fifty-four.

I stretched my legs out flat. "Tell me about Talon."

Who are you to demand things of me, peasant?

"And what gave you the impression I will tell you anything?"

I internally scoffed. *Close enough.*

He said "you" with a layer of derision that spoke volumes about what he thought of me. Like I was nothing better than the dirt beneath his shoes.

"Must be that dazzling personality you have." I blew out an irritated sigh. "Look, I'm tired, grumpy, haven't had a shower in God knows how long—"

He grumbled, "Trust me, I know," under his breath, which I chose to ignore.

“—and I’ve been having a very bad flare up from my endometriosis for the last hour. I’m not in the mood to play any more games. So, I’ll make you a deal. An answer for an answer. You answer my questions, and I’ll answer yours.”

“I have no interest in knowing anything about you.”

God, he was so fucking annoying.

“You owe me.”

“For what?” he barked out, aghast. “For pushing me down the stairs and almost breaking my goddamn neck when you tried to escape? For trying to strangle me to death *several times*? For—”

“Hey! I only did those things *after* you attacked me for no reason.”

“I had just passed out from enduring hours of torture at the hands of my sadistic twin brother when I felt someone standing over me. Excuse me for being a little defensive.”

“That could be used to excuse the first shot. *Maybe* even the second one. But that third one? No way in hell, mate.”

He was silent for a moment. “You have an accent.”

Shit.

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. And you hide it. Why?”

My smile was wide, like a Cheshire cat’s. “Thought you had no interest in knowing anything about me?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



DIMITRI VOLKOV

FUCK. She had me there.

In normal circumstances, I wouldn't give a rat's fucking ass, but I prided myself on being an excellent judge of character. On being a person with the skills to deduce when I'm being lied to. And yet, Autumn had been lying from the very moment I'd met her, and I had no idea.

Her American accent was damn near flawless. It wasn't until that last sentence that I detected a slight shift in her tone. She wasn't from the US, and yet, she was pretending to be.

Why?

I'd flat out lied to her when I said I wasn't interested in knowing anything about her. The truth of it was that I had so many questions that I wouldn't even know where to begin, and I didn't like that. I didn't like that I was somewhat interested in the devil woman I'd sworn to kill.

"I never took you for a coward, Butcher."

Autumn's words snapped me out of my over-analytical brain, my eyes cutting to her. *"Excuse me?"*

She laughed, her head rolling along her shoulders as she propped her elbows up on the bed behind her and crossed her legs at the ankles at the same time. If I moved, if I stretched out my own legs just a little bit, I would touch her.

“The way you say things is a trip sometimes. There’s this incredulous tilt to it like you can’t believe someone has the audacity to call you out on your bullshit. It’s hilarious.” We might have been surrounded by darkness, but I could see her staring me down. Could feel those piercing green eyes locked on me. “I said you’re a coward, Dimitri. You can’t admit there are some things you want to know. Instead, you’d rather lie and pretend you’re not interested. *Coward.*”

She was challenging me. Daring me to contradict her words by proving I was the exact opposite of what she was accusing me of. It wasn’t going to work. I wasn’t one to be manipulated.

“You seem to be under the impression that I give a fuck what you think.” I got to my feet, towering over her. Such a position put her at an extreme disadvantage, but she didn’t care. She just tilted her head back and looked up at me, no hint of fear or anxiety on her face at all. “I don’t. Call me whatever you want. It doesn’t affect me. Wolves don’t lose sleep over the opinions of sheep.”

“That sounds vaguely familiar. Did you steal that from somewhere?”

Tywin Lannister from *Game of Thrones* had said something similar. I hadn’t watched the show, but Illayana and Lukyan had, and that was one quote that had always stuck with me.

Because it was true.

The annoying thing was, though, was that Autumn wasn’t a sheep. She was very much a wolf. Intelligent. Cunning. Vicious. And absolutely fucking fearless.

The more time I spent around her... The more I got to know her... The more I hated her. And it was because I didn’t hate it at all. She had qualities I respected and admired. She was tough as shit. Had no problem saying whatever was on her mind, even if it offended someone bigger and stronger than she was. Strength was something I respected. I despised weakness, and it was becoming clearer with each passing day that there wasn’t a weak bone in Autumn’s body.

“Look, enough of the bullshit, Dimitri,” she huffed, getting to her feet, bringing herself almost toe-to-toe with me.

A zing shot through my body, an electric hum buzzing beneath my skin. I took a step back instantly and almost sighed with relief when it disappeared.

“Whether you like it or not, we’re partners here. That means we have to work together. Open the fuck up and tell me what I need to know.”

Silence drifted between us as we stared at each other. *She’s right.* Of course, I knew that. The more she knew about Talon—what kind of person he was—the better prepared she would be. And the more prepared *she* was, the better *my* chances were.

Talking about my past wasn’t an easy thing for me to do—especially with someone who drove me absolutely fucking insane—but I knew it was the right course of action.

“I met Talon in boarding school,” I sighed, moving backwards to sit down on my cot.

Autumn’s eyes widened slightly. “You guys go *that* far back?”

“Forty years,” I said idly. “Sunset Boarding School was *the* school for not only the rich and famous but also the offspring of the criminal underworld. It was clean cut. Had the best academic excellence on record, with graduates moving on to become the top people in their field of choice. And most of all, it was known worldwide for its discretion when it came to those who attended. Meaning that when students stepped out of line—like trying to kill a fellow student by trapping them in a fire in their dorm room—it got swept under the rug for a hefty price of a donation entering somewhere in the hundreds of thousands.”

Autumn blinked. She took a seat on her cot, leaning back against the wall and getting comfortable. “So, who tried to kill whom?”

I kept forgetting about her perceptiveness. She was able to hone in on the one detail that mattered in a sea of useless words. “He took the first shot.” The memory of said event moved to the forefront of my mind. The flames. The heat. The panic that inevitably crawled under my skin when I realised our only way out had been blocked. Having to resort to jumping out of a third-storey window to escape. “From that point on, it was a bit of a blow-for-blow situation. He went after me, so I went after him. In a one-on-one fight, I could have taken him. Easily. It didn’t matter that I was sixteen—technically still a child by society’s standards. Not by my father’s, or the life we lived though. From the moment I could grasp, my father put a knife in my hand. Fighting was second nature to me. Talon might not have had the physical skills to best me, but he was smart. After he tried to kill me and

Mikhail, he realised his life was in danger and started walking around with armed guards. That didn't stop me from trying to get even, but it made things more difficult."

"Mikhail?" she questioned.

"A very, very old friend. From before boarding school. We ended up attending Sunset together, and that's where we met Talon. For a while, we were all really close."

"Wait, wait, wait. Let me guess." She leant forward, something twinkling in her eyes. "The three of you were the big hotshots on campus. People moved out of your way when you walked down the halls. All the guys wanted to be you, and all the girls wanted to fuck you. Am I right?"

I refrained from smirking, even when the compulsion to do so almost consumed me. "Somewhat."

"So, what happened then? If you guys were so close, what happened to make all that change?"

I settled back, the cool steel of the cell bars pressing into my skin. "If I were to boil it down to one, pivotal moment in time, I'd say it was Parents Weekend."

"Parents...Weekend?" Her face scrunched up. "A hoity-toity school like that had a *Parents Weekend*?"

"Every year," I said, shrugging a shoulder. "My father never attended one, not that I minded." In fact, I preferred it. Even at that age, I hated the man.

"And your mother?"

My brows slammed down into an angry frown. "My mother is not up for discussion. She has nothing to do with Talon, and I will *not* be talking about her. Don't ask again."

Autumn put her hands up, palms facing me in a show of surrender, indicating she wasn't planning on pushing any further.

Good.

My mother was a...sore subject. One I never liked to discuss.

Like most marriages in the Bratva, my parents' was one of convenience. It wasn't about love, trust or building a connection with another person. It had been arranged for the sole purpose of building an alliance, gaining power and producing an heir for my father's empire. Sergei kept his slew of mistresses, and my mother allowed it. She allowed everything, never once standing up for herself.

It wasn't her fault. Sergei held all the power. All the money. All the influence. He crushed her beneath his strong-willed personality. She never stood a chance.

He never laid a hand on her in violence, but then again, he didn't need to. He was an expert in emotional abuse. Making someone feel less than, like they were nothing. *Nothing* without him and what he could provide.

When I was twelve, she hung herself by turning the sheet on her bed into a noose and hanging it from the chandelier in her bedroom.

I never blamed her. She hung on for as long as she could, tied to a man who only cared about using her as an incubator, and in the end, Sergei won.

Sergei always won.

"It was the end of junior year," I continued like nothing happened. I was good at compartmentalising, so moving the pain I felt towards my mother out of my mind was easy. "Parents swarmed the halls, stayed with their children in their dormitories. Attended classes alongside them. The ones who bothered to show up, that is. Talon's father was one of them. He didn't stay the whole weekend. Just showed up for a few hours to make it seem like he was a good parent who cared about his child and then left. During that small window when he was actually present, however, there was an incident. One of the fathers of another student got in my face. The reason was so bleak and unimportant that I can't even remember it now, but it took zero effort for me to put him on his ass. He was nothing more than a weak man in a five-thousand-dollar suit. Talon's father was there. He saw it, and the look he gave me was a look Talon had been trying to get from him his whole life. Like he was completely and utterly impressed. I don't think he'd ever seen a sixteen-year-old put a man three times his age and size down like it was effortless. Because in truth, that's what it was."

She shook her head, chuckling under her breath. "I don't think I've ever met someone so cocky."

"Sure you have. Just look in the mirror."

"Touche, Butcher." *At least she can admit it.* "What happened next?"

"Talon's father, Stuart, gave me his card and told me he could use someone with my skills, and that if I ever wanted a job, to call him. He then turned to his son, looked down his nose at him with disgust in his eyes and said to him, in front of all the other students, 'If you were more like him, you wouldn't be such a fucking disappointment,' and walked out without looking back."

Autumn winced. “Ouch. Brutal.”

“Hardly,” I scoffed. “That was nothing compared to the shit my father used to spout at me.”

“Yeah, but saying that in a room full of your peers? That must have embarrassed the shit out of Talon.”

I nodded. “It did. Teenagers in general can be real assholes. But elite school teenagers? They’re even worse. They laughed. Pointed. Teased. Talon ended up running out of the room crying, which didn’t help his case. Like I said, teenagers are assholes. He was ridiculed for the rest of the year because of it. If Talon had any spine, he would have let all that shit just roll off his back. But he’d spent his whole adolescence trying to impress his father, make him proud. So, when he came in, showing that to *me* instead of *him*, embarrassing him in front of all his friends—”

“He turned on you,” Autumn finished.

“More or less. He tried to get me under his thumb first. Break my will. Control me. When that didn’t work, he decided to just try and get rid of me instead.”

“Seems a bit extreme, don’t you think? All that because his father called him a disappointment in front of his classmates?”

There was more to it than that. For Talon, anyway. For him, it was a slap in the face. He’d done everything he could growing up to impress his father, but nothing was ever good enough for the man. In some way, I could relate to that. It was why we’d become such close friends to begin with; we’d bonded over the fact that we both had asshole parental figures.

I stretched out my body, raising my arms up over my head. “For a man like Talon, no. All he ever wanted was his father’s love and affection. To make him proud. For Stuart to give that so freely to someone else—someone he didn’t even know, a friend of his, no less—broke something in him. Made him jealous. Resentful. Full of hatred and rage.”

The funny thing about opening up—sharing pieces of yourself, your past—was that once you started, it was hard to stop. That particular part of my life was something I hadn’t spoken about since before Yekaterina died. Even my children, the people I was closest to in the world, knew nothing about Talon or the past we shared. It was one of the reasons I held such little hope for a rescue. They had no idea who Talon was. No idea I was in his grasp. And I highly doubted Dominik would tell them.

However, Mikhail would know the instant he received his invitation to the games.

If he received an invitation, that was.

Out of the two of us, Talon hated me more. He didn't like Mikhail because he'd chosen to side with me instead of him. He didn't hold the same hatred towards him as he did me. He might not want to risk Mikhail attempting some sort of rescue mission the moment he found out I was in his grasp.

Then again, Talon's massive ego might rear its ugly head—a scenario far more likely—and make it impossible for him not to brag to Mikhail about the newest fighter in his games.

"I think I understand now." Autumn nodded. "Talon's going to do everything he can to make you suffer because, in his mind, you took the validation from his father that he felt was entitled to him. In his mind, it's easier to blame you than his dickhead of a father, and he's had forty years for those feelings to grow and fester, for his rage to build and build. Killing you won't ever be enough. He wants to embarrass you like you did him. Make a spectacle of your death, a grand show to show the world he got the last laugh."

I said nothing. There was no need. Everything she'd said was correct.

"I just have one more question." Autumn scooted to the edge of the cot, placing her feet on the ground. She braced her forearms on her thighs, interlocking her fingers. "Well, more of an observation, really."

I waved a hand through the air idly, signalling for her to continue.

"While what you revealed *was* interesting and certainly explained a lot of things, like why Talon has such a massive hard-on for you, I just don't understand why you put up such a big fight to share it."

A tight ball of anxiety wound its way through my chest. "You're right. That *is* more of an observation than a question."

She gave me an "are you serious?" kind of look, head tilted slightly to the side, brows slightly lowered, eyes narrowed. "We're getting along so well, Butcher. Don't ruin it now with your shitty personality."

I rolled my eyes.

"Let me guess. You find it hard to talk to anyone about anything, whether it be something small and inconsequential like this or something huge and secretive, like your favourite colour."

Humor trickled through me, slow at first, like a blocked dam, only allowing tiny rivulets of water to slip through. “You think something as simple as a favourite colour is some huge secret?”

“For you? Almost definitely. I suspect you’d guard something that deeply personal with your life.”

She was being cheeky. Almost playful, if that smirk on her lips was any indication. And for some strange reason, I felt like playing along. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d spoken so much with another person.

I didn’t want it to end.

“Yellow.”

“Yellow,” she repeated, confused. Her eyes widened. “Yellow,” she stated, voice stronger. Then she frowned. “Wait, yellow? *Yellow* is your favorite colour? Seriously?” She didn’t let me answer, quickly saying, “No way. No. Way! The Bratva Butcher’s favorite colour is *yellow*? I don’t believe it.”

Her response would have been fucking hilarious if it wasn’t for one simple truth. “It’s my wife’s favorite colour.” Sadness enveloped me, gripping my soul, threatening to pull me under. “*Was*,” I corrected, voice rough.

It was impossible to hide my emotions. When it came to my late wife, the grief, the agony, the absolutely gut wrenching emptiness I felt at her absence was something I couldn’t hide. So, I knew that, regardless of the slightly stunned expression on Autumn’s face, she could see it.

She wasn’t stupid. She knew I was the Bratva Butcher, and therefore, knew what I’d done to earn that title.

And the why.

Most people, when faced with someone else’s grief, always said the same things.

“*I’m so sorry for your loss.*”

“*I wish there was something I could do.*”

“*If there’s anything you need, let me know.*”

But Autumn said nothing like that, surprising me for the umpteenth time when she softly murmured, “What does love feel like?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“W HAT?” DIMITRI ECHOED, HIS eyes lit with surprise.

I suppose I couldn’t blame him. It was a bizarre question for a woman in her forties to ask, but after seeing that look of utter reverence and devotion in his eyes, I couldn’t help but wonder what it felt like.

What it *really* felt like. Was it all mushy and gooey like they showed you in movies? Or was it deeper than that?

Love was not something in my world. Never had been. Not even with my family. My parents didn’t even *like* me. I was far too different for them, and they made that known to me every single day of my life. I said things I shouldn’t and did things that most normal kids wouldn’t do. They couldn’t handle that, and I’d grown up feeling like an outsider among my own blood.

Over the years, that rift just grew bigger and bigger. I never learnt how to build proper connections with others; those meaningful kinds of connections you needed to really become close with someone. And then, eventually, it got to a point where I didn’t even want it. I didn’t want

friends. I didn't want a boyfriend or a girlfriend. It all held zero appeal to me.

So, there I was, a forty-three-year-old woman who'd never experienced love before.

"You've never been in love?" There was no judgment in his voice. No pity. Only surprise, like it was a hard thing to comprehend, someone going their whole life without experiencing something that was fundamental to human nature.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so."

"Trust me, if you had, you would know." His gaze drifted to my right and held. His eyes turned vacant, unreadable as he stared off into the empty air. I waited. It wasn't the first time he'd done something like that. I made a mental note to confront him on it.

Another time.

"Love is..." There was almost a dreamlike note to the words as if he was reliving some sort of memory associated with the word. "Everything," he breathed reverently. "It's everything. It's like coming home. An overwhelming sense of peace and serenity. It's joy. Happiness. Awe. And a million other things that make your heart race so fast, you feel like it's going to burst out of your chest. It's warmth. And sunshine. And light and laughter. A hurricane of emotions that just knock you off your feet. It's waking up early just so you can watch them sleep. It's three A.M. trips to the store for ice cream because that's what they feel like, and you'll do anything to make them happy. It's having all your worries and troubles just wash away with one smile on their lips." Then his face turned sad. Full of pain. "Ultimately, though, love...is death. Because to love someone—and I mean truly, *truly* love someone—your heart...your soul...are tethered to theirs. So, when they die, you die too. Air might still enter your lungs. Your heart might still beat. Blood might still pump in your veins. But you're not *alive*. Not really. Not anymore. That part of you that made you *you* died along with them. You might laugh or smile, but it will be empty. It will be meaningless. *Everything* will be empty without them. You'll live your days like a zombie, coasting through life but never really *living*, waiting eagerly for the day when it will all end so you can be reunited with the other half of your soul."

I was completely speechless. The way he spoke about love—about *her*—all that devotion... It was beautiful. And heart-wrenching. Was I glad that

I'd never experienced that before? Something that was obviously so consuming, so crippling? Or was I jealous? Jealous that I might die before anyone would love *me* that fiercely?

"I don't know whether I'm relieved to have never experienced love, or sad that I might die before I'm able to," I said honestly, telling him exactly what was on my mind. Honest truth deserved honest truth in return. He'd shared more than he needed to with me, something incredibly personal. The least I could do was share something, too.

He remained silent for a moment, still staring off to my right before his eyes moved back to me, filled with so much emotion that I honestly thought I was seeing things. "Despite how painful love is, I wouldn't give it up for anything. I'd suffer through it all over again if it meant one more day, one more hour, one more second in her presence. Every slash to my soul, every hit to my heart... I'd endure it a thousand times over because it's worth it."

Jesus. I never realised love was something I was missing out on until right then. What must it feel like to have someone so devoted and so dedicated to you and you alone?

I wanted that.

A silence stretched between us. Not awkward, but comfortable. I didn't think either of us expected a conversation such as that to blossom between us, especially since we didn't even like each other. But I suppose being locked up changed things. Being at death's door changed things. We were both most likely going to die within the following few days. Sharing a few secrets didn't seem so bad when you knew the person you were telling them to wasn't going to live to spread them.

"I was hired to kill your brother."

Dimitri's eyes widened slightly, his body straightening and coming to life. Although it was dark, I could still see it—see *him*—clearly. His body was a fucking marvel. "So you *are* an assassin?"

"Picked up on that, did ya?"

"I called it the second you killed the man who was torturing you. Samuel." His eyes ran the length of my body, down and up before settling on my face again. "What's the name you work under?"

Most assassins had a name they liked to use when making their kills. A moniker. A way for them to claim the kill without giving up their identity. Mine was The Crimson Death.

But I wasn't going to tell him that.

A girl's gotta keep some of her secrets.

"It kills you that you don't know it, doesn't it?" I chuckled.

"Yes," he surprisingly admitted. "I like to know who I'm working with."

"It's such a pity you'll never know, then, huh?" I settled back into the cot, lying flat on my back, interlocking my fingers and putting them behind my head at the same time as I crossed my ankles. "You're not surprised I was hired to kill your brother?"

"No. I've been trying to kill that fucker for years. I'm not surprised to hear someone else wants to as well. Who hired you?"

"Uh, uh, uh," I tutted. "Client confidentiality is a big thing in my profession." It wasn't like I could tell him anyway. I didn't even know. When I was contacted for a job, anonymity was something the client could choose if they so wished it. Instead of meeting up with me directly, this client chose to send one of his henchmen in his place. We met in an abandoned office building, where I was handed the file on Dominik, given my timeframe and half of the payment. The other half would be paid upon completion.

Which was never going to happen. *Shit.* If I ever did get out of there, I was going to have a serious problem on my hands that would need to be dealt with as soon as possible. Assassins were only as good as their reputations. If word got out that I failed to complete a job, my days as a hired killer would be well and truly over.

"What happened?" When I turned my head to look at him, a frown on my face at his question, he cocked his head. "All the assassins I know got into the business of killing people for a living because something happened in their life—something usually dark and twisted—that made them go down that path." He held eye contact, never once looking away. "What happened to you?"

If he hadn't just shared his own past, I might have told him to shove it up his ass and then rolled over and went to sleep. But, I was in a giving mood. So, why not?

Traumatic as the event was for me at the time, it was something I could now talk about freely. The scars from that day had healed, both mentally and physically, making it easier to open up.

"My parents and I went to Switzerland for a 'family holiday,'" I began, using air quotations because the entire thing was a fucking joke. "It was something suggested by my therapist to help bring us closer together. Help

us bond, or whatever it is families are meant to do. Things had always been fucked up in our family. My brother, Corey, was the apple of my parents' eye. Their firstborn. Their miracle child, as they so often told him, because he was the first pregnancy to make it to term after a string of miscarriages."

"You keep saying '*was*'. It almost sounded like there sympathy in his voice.

There shouldn't have been. My brother didn't deserve any sympathy.

"He died in a car crash, and I'm fucking glad."

His brow arched up high.

"He was a dick. Bullied me my whole life, and my parents let him because he was the golden child and I was the accident. They always took his side. Never mine. Not even when I told them about what he tried to do to me when I was eight years old."

Dimitri frowned. "What did he try to do?"

I gave him a deadpan look.

"You're joking," he all but growled.

I shook my head. "Nope. Lucky for me, I had an affinity for sharp objects, even at that age. He'd been far too preoccupied feeling me up to notice when I grabbed the screwdriver and stabbed him in the eye with it. Unfortunately, he didn't die. Just lost his eye. But he never tried that shit again, so it was a win-win, I guess."

Anger burnt in his eyes. "There's nothing more cowardly than hurting children."

I debated not saying anything. I really, really did. We were having an actual conversation—one that didn't involve us growling at each other or threatening to kill one another. But, of course, keeping my mouth shut when I had something to say wasn't exactly my strong suit.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you—"

"No, I didn't," he snapped instantly, somehow knowing exactly what I was going to say. "I've never harmed a child."

I frowned. Everyone knew the story behind the Bratva Butcher. After the death of his wife by a rival family in the Bratva, he took retribution by killing everyone in that family, and I mean *everyone*. Man, woman and child.

"But I thought—"

He cursed and abruptly got to his feet, moving towards the front of the cell. He leant against the bars, his arms crossed over his chest, face hard and

stoic as he stared out into the darkness. “I know what you thought. What everyone thinks. And I let them believe it. Truth of the matter is, though, even in my state of anger, I could never kill a child. I’m a bastard, and evil to the core, but that’s one line I will never cross. During that dark time in my life, I killed a lot of people. Too many to count. Some of them had children. After I’d killed their parents, I couldn’t leave them there to fend for themselves. I had enough deaths on my conscience. I didn’t need more. So, I made sure they were taken care of.”

“And let everyone believe you’d murdered them?” I queried.

“Why not?” he asked, shrugging idly. “It made me a bigger monster in people’s eyes. Made them think twice about attacking me and my family. Only someone truly heinous could murder children. So, I let them think that I had. Instead, I took them to an orphanage. A baby, three toddlers and a couple of teenagers.”

So, the Butcher has a heart. Who knew?

“You’re not worried these kids are gonna come back when they’re all grown up and take their own form of retribution against you?”

“They’d be entitled to it,” was all he said. He turned to face me fully, arms crossed over that wide, expansive chest. “Switzerland?” he questioned, steering the conversation back to where it had originally begun.

“Switzerland,” I exhaled, sitting up and spinning around to plant my feet on the floor. “It was just my parents and I. It was supposed to be this huge bonding moment for us up in those mountains. Nothing but us and nature. Quality time.” I scoffed, shaking my head as the memories flooded back in a rush. Along with the anger. And the betrayal. “I knew they never really loved me. Corey was planned. *I* was the accident they didn’t want but were forced to have. But even *I* hadn’t been prepared for what they had planned.”

He frowned. Moved a step closer.

I kept going like I didn’t notice, but I did. I noticed everything he did.

“Imagine my surprise when they took me out to those mountains not to bond, not to finally build some sort of connection with me, but to hand me over to some man they’d met on the internet. To *sell* me to him.”

He took another step.

“I don’t even know how they knew someone in that game. My parents owned a shitty little furniture store in Australia. They weren’t drug users. Or dealers. Or killers. And yet, they’d managed to find some perv to sell me off

to. Who knows, maybe there's some sort of website out there where you can contact them. PervsRUs.com.”

Another step. “Australia?”

I whipped up a finger, pointing it at him. “If you ask me to say, ‘throw another shrimp on the barbie, mate’, I’ll knock your two front teeth out,” I warned.

His hands flew up, palms out. He said nothing, but the smirk on his lips told me he’d been thinking about it.

I’d lived in America for over twenty years, but that Aussie twang never quite went away. I started talking with an American accent somewhere around the hundredth time someone asked me about crocodile fucking dundee.

“There were no tears. No apologies. No heartfelt goodbyes. To them, this was nothing more than a business arrangement. They just handed me over to that man and his two friends and walked away without looking back. What happened next... Well, it doesn’t take a genius to figure it out.” I exhaled, continuing. “I fought as much as I could, but a fourteen-year-old girl was no match for three grown men. After they were done, I ran for it. Didn’t get very far. When they caught me out in those woods, they each took me again before beating the crap out of me and leaving me for dead.”

He moved again, coming closer and closer, bit by bit, until he was right there next to me. I didn’t look at him, but I could feel that intense gaze burning a hole in the side of my face.

“It was night. Cold. I was in so much pain that I could barely breathe, but I kept crawling. And crawling. And crawling. Everything hurt. Sticks and rocks cut into my skin with every movement, and still, I kept going. I don’t know why I fought so hard to survive. I had nothing. I had no one. And yet, I kept going, dragging myself across the dirt one agonising pull at a time. That was how Uncle E found me.”

“Uncle E?” Dimitri questioned softly, lowering himself into a crouch at my side.

“That’s what I call him,” I said, turning to look at him. “His name is Elias.”

Something flashed in Dimitri’s eyes. I ignored it and kept going.

“He found me out there, naked, bleeding and barely clinging to life. He took me in, nursed me back to health, gave me a roof over my head, clothes

on my back. I asked him a couple years later why he did it, and you know what he said?"

"What did he say?" Was his voice softer? It sounded softer. Almost... kind.

"That I had a fighter's soul."

"*You didn't give up, even when it would have been so easy to do so. You're a fighter, little one. You didn't deserve to die in a ditch.*"

"He taught me the skills I needed to ensure nothing like that ever happened to me again. For years, I trained. Every single day. Learning, perfecting those skills. And when I was ready, I got my revenge." A smile curled my lips at the memory.

"You killed the men who raped you?"

"Not just them."

He nodded in understanding. "Your parents."

I searched his face for judgement and saw none. Given what his own flesh and blood had done to him, I should have known he'd understand.

There was something unbelievably freeing about talking to him in the dark. I could see him and not see him at the same time. Being surrounded by nothing but darkness just made me want to blurt out all my secrets.

Or was that just Dimitri?

He was *surprisingly* easy to talk to when he wasn't being an uppity douchebag.

"There's nothing quite like the sting of betrayal from someone who is supposed to be your family," he whispered softly.

And that was when I knew. Knew that despite our obvious dislike for one another, there were certain parts of us that could relate to one another's experiences. That we were a lot more alike than I had originally thought.

Shit. When did he get so close?

I took a deep breath in, trying to calm my erratically beating heart. My gaze was locked with his, nothing but the sounds of our breathing filling the air. Something passed between us. Something different. Unknown. Foreign.

His eyes flicked to my lips. Held. One second. Two seconds. What was he thinking? Was he wondering what my lips felt like? What I tasted like?

Why did I *want* him to be thinking those things?

Just as quickly as the moment between us appeared, it vanished, the shutters slamming down over his eyes, his face growing tense.

Uncomfortable. He cleared his throat, rose to his full height and took three big steps back, almost running into the bars behind him.

“We should get some sleep,” he said gruffly, running his fingers through his hair. “We’ve got a busy day tomorrow, and I don’t want to hear you bitch about how tired you are.”

Andddd the asshole was back. Wonderful. Hadn’t even lasted an hour.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“I ’M TIRED,” AUTUMN WHINED. She sat on the ground of the training arena at my feet, drawing idly in the sand with her finger.

I sighed, irritated. “You’re supposed to be watching the other fighters.”

“I am.” She was still doodling.

“No. You’re not. You’re fucking drawing in the sand, not even looking at the others.”

“If you must know, Your Royal Grouchiness, I’m using my peripherals.”

I ground my teeth together. Despite the fact that we’d somewhat connected the night before, sharing a moment together that neither one of us had wanted to acknowledge, we still argued like crazy because there was nothing else to fucking do. It was like some kind of fucked up source of entertainment. The back and forth. The push and pull. It was oddly addicting—something that had come as quite a shock to me, to be honest.

Her past resonated with me, and I could understand how she would have felt in that moment, knowing the two people who were meant to love and protect her ended up throwing her to the wolves instead.

My father, my mother, my brother; they'd all betrayed me in some way. Let me down. Fucked me over. And if given the opportunity, I would kill them, too.

Well, maybe not my mother.

Deciding the best thing to do would be to ignore the infuriating woman before me, I ran my eyes around the room again, taking note of everything. I didn't want to spend too much time thinking about our conversation from the night before. So we had a few things in common. So we'd connected. So we'd shared some kind of moment together. It didn't mean fuck all. She still pissed me off just by breathing.

It was pretty much the same as the day before. Majority of the pairs practising, training while the others were curled up in the corners of the room, their arms wrapped around their knees, rocking back and forth, sobbing.

In retrospect, I understood. The entire thing would be a lot for normal, everyday people to deal with. Criminals like myself? Well, we had a slight advantage. We didn't have that pesky little voice inside our heads, telling us it was wrong to murder.

That was how I knew who the biggest threats in this game were.

I'd been listening to conversations not only there but in the cells as well, so I knew almost all the prisoners by name.

Roger Ward, Harrison Sheln, Oliva Nulan, Marcus Hook, and Pearl Verish were the ones to watch out for. One look at them was all I needed to see they held little to no mercy. That they had no problem doing whatever they needed to survive. An all too familiar darkness lay deep in the depths of their eyes. One I recognised within myself.

"Three o'clock," Autumn whispered without raising her head, her finger drawing small circles in the sand.

I casually glanced in the direction she so subtly indicated. One of the male prisoners was making his way towards us. Scratch that. Towards Autumn.

My spine snapped straight, eyes narrowing. I recognised that look. That hungry flare in his eyes. There was one thing and one thing only on *his* mind.

Anger burnt in my veins, hot and unrelenting. He didn't pay me any fucking attention. It was like I was invisible. Like I wasn't even there. Like

none of us were there. The way he was looking at Autumn, undressing her with his eyes... I wanted to rip his fucking throat out.

“Hey.” She glanced up at the man’s greeting. “I’m Mac.”

Autumn *smiled*. She fucking *smiled*. Why had she smiled at him? He’d barely fucking said anything.

“Hi Mac, I’m Autumn.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

I rolled my eyes. That was a line if I’d ever heard one.

Autumn laid a hand on her chest, drawing Mac’s gaze right to her breasts. “Oh, thank you,” she gushed.

“I’m going to cut right to the chase. We’re all probably going to die within the next few days. Wanna bang one out?” *Classy. Real fucking classy.* “You know, one last fuck before it all ends?” he smirked, giving her his best “come hither” look.

Autumn arched an eyebrow. “Very forward of you, Mac.”

She didn’t say no. Why didn’t she say no?

He shrugged. “What can I say? Imminent death tends to remove any shred of embarrassment from a person’s mind.” He ran his tongue over his bottom lip suggestively, and I wanted to cut it out of his mouth. “So? What do you say? You’re hot. I’m hot. Wanna fuck?”

One side of Autumn’s lips hiked up into an amused smirk. She opened her mouth.

An emotion I hadn’t felt in over a decade barrelled through me with such force that it made me take an involuntary step forward. “No, she doesn’t,” I growled.

Surprise flitted through me next. Followed by anger. Why? Why had I said that? Why did I react that way? Why did I give a fuck what Autumn did? Or, more specifically, *who* Autumn did?

I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t have given a shit.

And yet, I did.

I hated her. She was rude. Obnoxious. Self-centered. Annoying.

There was also something about her that excited me. Made my heart race. Made my skin buzz. The extremely territorial being I was didn’t like the idea of another man making a move on her. She was *my* partner in the games. Mine to torment. Mine to fuck with, and eventually, *mine* to kill.

Autumn spun her head around to face me, her eyes glaring daggers at me.

Mac finally decided to acknowledge my presence, his brows raised in surprise. “I didn’t realise you were already spoken for.”

“I’m not,” Autumn snapped, jumping to her feet. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Butcher?” she hissed, moving closer to me.

“What the fuck do you think *you’re* doing, woman?” I hissed back angrily, scowling down at her. “He’s the *enemy*, in case you forgot. Our competition. You don’t fuck the competition.”

“Who I fuck is none of your goddamn business.” She went to turn around to go back to Mac, and I gripped her arm, stopping her.

“As you so eloquently stated previously, our fates are firmly tied together. That means *your* fuck ups are *my* fuck ups. I don’t want to risk you getting some kind of soft spot for him in the middle of that arena and hesitating to do what needs to be done,” I spat. “It could cost me my life.”

Yes. That was it. It wasn’t because I was jealous. Because I definitely wasn’t. It was just because I didn’t want her putting me at risk. That made a lot more sense.

Amusement twinkled in those bewitching green eyes. “You don’t need to worry about that. I’ve got no problem killing a man I’ve fucked. I’ve done it before.”

“That’s great. You’re a praying mantis,” I replied dryly. “Thing is, I don’t care. You don’t fraternise with your enemy. That’s common fucking knowledge. If you’re too stupid to realise that, you deserve to get killed in that arena.”

Her brows slammed down into an angry frown. She flitted her gaze between me and Mac, then smiled. It was a victorious smile. As if she’d just won some kind of long fought battle. “Fine. I won’t fuck him, but you need to give me something in return.”

My body zinged to life. Heat flared in my eyes. Involuntarily, my gaze moved to her lips. *She can’t possibly mean—*

Her smile widened. “That’s not what I meant, but good to know where your head’s at.”

Anger was quick to replace the burning lust running through my veins. “Whatever you’re thinking is wrong,” I hissed. “I wouldn’t touch you if you were the last woman on Earth. Even then, it would be a fucking chore.”

She tutted. “Lying is bad for the soul, Butcher.”

“I don’t have a soul.”

“I won’t disagree with you on that. What I was going to say was, you’ll owe me one.”

I frowned. “Owe you one what?”

She shrugged a shoulder casually. “Anything. A favour from the Bratva Butcher could come in handy one day.”

My eyes narrowed in skepticism. It seemed like an easy enough bargain, especially when I considered the fact that we were most likely not going to get out of there alive. There was a very good chance I’d never have to make good on that favour.

“Fine,” I agreed. “But you need to stay away from *all* the other prisoners. We’re not here to make friends. We’re here to kill each other. And if you compromise me, I’ll end your life in a fucking heartbeat. Got it?”

She cocked her head to the side and ran her eyes down my body, then up again slowly until she landed on my face. She took a step forward, bringing herself completely into my space.

I had to remember how to breathe. What the fuck was going on with me? How was she affecting me that way? I didn’t understand it. Didn’t understand this powerful pull I had to look at her fucking lips again.

I kept my eyes locked with hers. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed.

She leant forward, rising up onto her tippy toes so she could whisper in my ear, “Not if I end yours first.”

Why the fuck does that excite me?



It was eerily quiet with everyone asleep. A short while after dinner was served, the lights went out, encasing the room in darkness. Almost everyone got the message, going straight to sleep. Only a few remained awake:

myself, a blonde woman in the far cell, who was sobbing quietly, and a short, dark-haired man doing push-ups.

Autumn had the right idea. She was sleeping, gathering her strength, but there was something keeping me awake.

No—*someone*.

Yekaterina.

She was there, looking as regal as she always did. However, this time, something had changed. I knew she couldn't possibly be there. She was dead. I'd come to terms with that a long time ago. But never in the ten years since I'd been sporadically hallucinating her had she ever said a word. She'd just stood there. Sometimes she'd smile. Sometimes she'd just stare. I quickly figured out there was almost a pattern to when she'd appear.

She tended to show up at moments when I needed her the most. Like a guardian angel. Those moments when I was in dark, volatile places, barely clinging onto my humanity. Or moments when I desperately needed her advice. Her guidance. Her support.

The first time had been at her funeral. She'd appeared out of thin air, hovering above her coffin. There was this ghostly, ethereal glow surrounding her. She was hauntingly beautiful, with this sad, almost remorseful look on her face.

At the time, that rational side of my brain—the part to tell me she couldn't possibly be real—wasn't working. I was far too overcome with grief and pain. All I saw was her, right there, within my reach. I leapt onto the coffin and pried it open with my bare hands, *certain* she was alive. In there. That she needed me to save her.

Chaos had ensued. There had been screaming, crying. My sons had tried to restrain me, but I'd refused to stop. In the end, I had to be sedated.

The next time was when Illayana was fourteen. She'd just gotten her first period, something Yekaterina and I had discussed before. We'd decided when the time came, *she* would handle it, just as I had handled the sex talks with the boys when they became of age.

I'd tried to fill Yekaterina's place, but Illayana refused to talk to me. She locked herself in the bathroom, and wouldn't come out for anything or anyone. Desperation had filled me. I'd struggled to find the right words to support and comfort her.

Suddenly, Yekaterina appeared, looking exactly the same as she had the first time. I'd always questioned whether or not I had *truly* seen her that

day. So, when she appeared again, I knew it hadn't been a dream like my brain had been trying to rationalise.

Whether it was real or not, I'd seen her.

She didn't speak, no matter how much I tried to get her to. She just stood in my office, her presence providing comfort regardless of the fact that she wasn't saying a word.

That was when it clicked in my head. *That* was all Illayana needed. For me to be there, like Yekaterina would have been.

So, I sat outside that bathroom door for over seven hours, waiting for her to come out. When she eventually did, her eyes were red and glassy. She'd told me she missed her mother, and then hugged me.

Over the years, I'd seen Yekaterina a total of twelve times, and this was the first time she'd ever spoken a word.

"I like her."

She was referring to Autumn. Those three words had shocked me so much that, for the first time in my life, I'd been completely speechless. Not only was I hallucinating my dead wife, but now she was talking to me? A figment of my imagination was talking to me.

"It's finally happened. I've finally gone insane," I thought.

"You haven't gone insane," she'd replied.

That had been—what I guessed—several hours ago, and she was still there. Yekaterina was still there.

"You've got to speak to me eventually." Her ghostly image hovered a few feet away from me, her pale and translucent skin a clear indicator she wasn't alive, just in case I needed the reminder.

Her hair was as dark as night, running freely down her back, and she was wearing what she always wore when I hallucinated her: the last outfit I had seen her in alive. A black dress with lace running all the way down the sleeves. Around her neck was the necklace I'd gotten her for our ten-year anniversary—the one I'd given to Illayana when she left for New York.

Yekaterina was absolutely beautiful, and every part of me ached to hold her.

"You're not real. You're not real." I didn't bother whispering. I didn't give a fuck if the other prisoners overheard me and thought I was crazy for talking to myself.

I was crazy.

"Of course I'm not real," she laughed playfully.

I closed my eyes, savouring the sound. I never thought I'd hear it again.

"That last blow to the head from your cellmate over there did it in."

I touched my forehead. I winced at the contact, pain lancing through me. Autumn had managed to get me in the side of the head with one of her kicks during our last training session. I'd tried the best I could to patch it up with what was available to me, which was just toilet paper.

"That bad, huh?"

"Yes and no," she smiled. *"In truth, I'm here because there's something you won't admit to yourself. Something you refuse to acknowledge. Something you're keeping so deeply buried that your subconscious has decided it needs to step in and make you open your eyes."*

I frowned. "That is...absolutely absurd."

"The brain is the most complex organ in the human body, Dima."

I sucked in a sharp, painful breath. Nobody had called me that in ten years.

"We still don't entirely understand it, or what it's capable of, despite centuries of research. How else do you explain me standing here in front of you?"

Simple.

"I've. Gone. Insane," I enunciated slowly.

She laughed again. Shivers danced down my spine. If it wasn't for that ethereal glow surrounding her, I could have sworn she was right there with me.

"Maybe you have. Maybe you haven't. I suppose we'll never really know, will we?"

My dead wife standing in front of me having a conversation with me was all the proof I needed.

Despite knowing the harsh truth—that she wasn't truly there, that she was nothing more than a figment of my imagination—my heart still pounded in my chest at the sight of her.

Who cared if she wasn't real? I could see her. I could talk to her. I didn't care that she was clearly a hallucination from my crazy, deranged mind.

Seeing her, delusion or not, was better than not seeing her at all. I would happily take any moment in her presence, even if it meant I had to give myself a concussion every time to achieve it.

She gave me a small smile, eyes sparkling with sadness.

"I'm not her. Not really."

I knew that, and I didn't give a fuck.

"Besides, the moment you finally acknowledge what you're trying so desperately to avoid, I'll disappear, and you'll finally be able to move on."

Anger and panic lashed through me, rocketing me to my feet. "I will never move on," I snarled.

"Okay, that's it!" Autumn screeched, flinging herself up in her cot. My gaze darted to her at her outburst. When I moved them back to where Yekaterina had been standing, there was nothing there but empty air.

She was gone.

"You must be unaware, so let me give you a quick lesson in prisoner etiquette 101." Autumn had a hell of a lot of nerve talking to *me* about prisoner etiquette. Bitch never shut the fuck up. "When you're stuck in a room with a bunch of other people who are all trying to sleep, keep your fucking trap shut," she hissed. Her green eyes were on fire, her red hair in a big tangled mess, sticking up haphazardly in every direction. The image of Doc Brown from *Back to the Future* flashed through my mind. The resemblance was so close, I barely managed to hold back my snicker.

Without saying another word—or giving me a chance to say a word back, for that matter—she laid back down with a growl, her back to me, and flung the blanket over her head so she was completely hidden underneath it.

And that was it.

There was no mention of the fact that I'd been talking to myself. No odd or weird looks. Absolutely nothing to indicate what she'd just witnessed was strange or out of the ordinary.

I glanced around the cell one final time, hoping to catch just one more glimpse, one more second of my Yekaterina, but she didn't return.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



DIMITRI VOLKOV

THE NEXT FEW DAYS consisted of the same bullshit. Eat, sleep, train. Eat, sleep, train. It all became extremely repetitive. Tension between all the prisoners grew thicker and thicker with each passing day. Any day, the games would begin, and people would start to die. That kind of atmosphere put a bit of a stigma on things. Made it hard to unwind.

Yekaterina hadn't returned, and for the first time, I wasn't sure if I wanted her to.

She'd said there was something I was refusing to acknowledge. Something I wouldn't admit to myself. But I had no idea what she could have been talking about.

It terrified me. Not only the not knowing, but also the fact that once I did acknowledge whatever it was, she would disappear.

I didn't want that. I wasn't ready to let her go. I wasn't sure if I ever would be.

A comforting kind of strain ached in my muscles as I heaved myself up and down, up and down, completing my third set of pull-ups in my cell. Our

afternoon training session had ended about an hour earlier, and we were all waiting for dinner to arrive.

Autumn was sitting on her cot, leaning back casually against the wall, her face drenched in boredom. She had a roll of toilet paper at her side, ripping pieces off and scrunching them up into balls to throw right at me... And it was pissing me the fuck off.

But I wasn't going to react. Nope. That was what she wanted. She was bored out of her mind, and her only source of entertainment was seeing how far she could push me until I fucking snapped.

She wasn't going to win. I wasn't going to let her. I could control myself. I didn't need to wring her pretty little neck with my bare hands, no matter how much I wanted to. No matter how much the thought of it excited me.

Up. Down. Up. Down.

Another ball of that infernal paper hit me on the side of the face, and I had to bite back a snarl.

In through the nose, out through the mouth.

My muscles burnt, but I welcomed the pain, the distraction. It was getting harder and harder to be in her presence. For some reason, unwelcome thoughts kept pushing their way into my mind, regardless of the fact that I didn't want them there. Sexual thoughts. Suggestive thoughts. Thoughts of her in compromising positions. Thoughts of her body. How it would feel pressed against my own without the barrier of clothing.

Once those thoughts surfaced, so too did the guilt. The cut of betrayal. How could I have thoughts like that about another woman? I loved Yekaterina. It didn't matter that she was gone. That she had died over ten years ago. She was the only woman for me, and thinking of someone else in such a way made me feel unfaithful. I couldn't handle it. It wasn't right. Those games needed to hurry up and start so that either one or both of us would die, and the thoughts would cease.

I kept my eyes pinned to the spot on the wall in front of me, my gaze never wandering.

Up. Down. Up. Down.

Nothing was going to distract me. I was going to finish my set without thinking about her. Nothing was going to break my focus. Not the other prisoners, talking and laughing amongst themselves, trying their best to distract themselves from their current predicament. Not Autumn, throwing

those stupid balls of paper, trying to get a rise out of me. Not the sound of the steel door to our prison opening, signalling the arrival of our dinner.

Not anything. Not—

Shock paralysed me, my whole body freezing in mid-air as my gaze collided with a set of familiar, icy blue eyes.

My son.

Nikolai was there, not even ten feet from me, pushing the cart containing our food instead of one of Talon's soldiers.

What the fuck—

My body began to move again as if on autopilot, continuing on with the exercise like my whole world hadn't just tilted upside down.

I had no idea what he was doing there.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to look at him. There were cameras over every inch of the place. I knew we were being watched 24/7. If I showed even a modicum of interest in him, Talon would see it and wonder why.

So, I kept going with the pull-ups like it wasn't secretly killing me inside not to acknowledge my son. I used nothing but my peripheral vision to track him as he moved about the room.

How had he found me? How did he get there? Were my other children there, too, risking their lives to foolishly try and save me?

If I did make it out of there alive, they were all getting time in the ring for that stunt.

Half of the prisoners did what they always did whenever anybody entered the room: begged and pleaded to be let go. It was such a wasted effort. It made me internally scoff every time.

One by one, Nikolai handed the food and bottles of water to the prisoners through the small gaps in the bottom of the cells. He didn't dawdle, but he also didn't go too fast. When he finally approached me, I released the bar and dropped to the ground.

So many different emotions pounded through me. Happiness. Excitement. Anger.

He shouldn't have been there. He shouldn't have put himself at risk. If Talon ever found out who he was, how much he meant to me, it would be all over. I would do anything he asked to save him. I'd be his little bitch for all eternity if it meant keeping my son alive.

I rolled my neck along my shoulders, trying and failing to rein in my temper. I stepped towards the front of the cell. Casually. Like it was just any other day.

"What are you doing here, boy?" I whispered out of the side of my mouth.

Nikolai didn't rise to the bait. He grabbed one of the plates and slunk down into a crouch. I did the same.

"We have a plan to get you out," he said equally softly, passing me the plate of food.

"We?" *Goddamnit*. "You roped your siblings into this?" I hissed, putting the plate down to grab the next one.

"It was a joint effort, actually. Tell me about the collar."

"Titanium steel. Set to explode if we pass through the cell doors unless deactivated first. Equipped with anti-tampering and remote activation."

His brows slammed down into a frustrated frown. He knew what I did—that escape with that collar on would be near impossible.

He rolled a water bottle to me, his eyes semi-vacant like his brain was running a mile a minute trying to come up with some sort of solution, regardless of how impossible the task might be.

"Go home, Nikolai. There's no way out of this. Get out while you can. That's an order."

He stood to his full height, and I followed suit. He fiddled idly with the cart. A tactic to not arouse suspicion. Clever boy.

"Sorry, Father," he whispered, barely moving his lips. "You're not *Pakhan*. You don't give the orders anymore. Aleksandr does."

My eyes narrowed in mild agitation. It vanished quickly, replaced with an overwhelming sense of pride. Aleksandr had stepped up. Of course, I hadn't doubted that he would. He'd been ready for the role for years. But knowing it for certain made it easier to accept my fate.

Everything would be okay with Aleksandr watching over them.

Autumn came skipping up to my side, and I cursed. I had hoped she'd just stay on her cot and not get involved. I still didn't trust her. Not one hundred percent. And until I did, I didn't want her anywhere near my family.

She picked up one of the plates and grasped a piece of steak with her fingers, holding it up to her lips as if she was about to take a bite. "Who's

this?” she asked covertly, making sure to hide her mouth so the cameras couldn’t tell she was speaking.

“Mind your own business, devil woman,” I hissed over my shoulder.

She smiled.

Oh, fuck.

To most, it would look like a completely innocent smile. Like she was happy. But I knew fucking better.

That was her psychotic smile. The one she gave right before she hurt someone. I’d seen it a dozen fucking times, each time aimed at me. I knew it so well that I could probably draw it from memory alone.

My suspicions were confirmed when she stomped down on the back of my leg. Pain shot through me, and I stumbled forward, my head whacking against the cell bars.

“Asshole,” she hissed back before walking away, going back to sit on her cot.

I grumbled out a Russian curse under my breath, wiping away the blood trickling down the side of my face. How many times was the woman going to make me bleed?

Nikolai gave me an odd look, his gaze moving from me to Autumn. Suspicion laid in the depths of his eyes. It made my spine snap straight.

“What?” I barked.

He studied me for a second longer, but in the end, decided not to say anything about it, shaking his head. “I’ll see you soon, Father.” And then he left.

My hands curled around the bars, squeezing tightly. It was difficult to watch him walk away, knowing he was in the belly of the beast. Knowing he was surrounded by danger on all sides.

I began to pace up and down the cell, my thoughts wild and chaotic, spiralling out of control. It was even more difficult not knowing what the fuck was going on. Were my other children there, too? What was the plan? I needed more information. More than anything, though, I needed them to *go*. Having them there put me on edge because I couldn’t protect them. I couldn’t help them. There was nothing I could do. I was completely powerless—something that didn’t happen to me very often.

I was capable of dealing with that feeling when it was just me at risk, but my family, too?

That I couldn’t deal with.

“Was that your son?”

I whipped around to face Autumn, eyes wide with panic. *How did she—*

“He has your eyes,” she said idly, eating her food. Her lips smacked together loudly as she chewed on the steak, gravy rolling down her hands and arms. I swear, she ate like that to piss me off. She knew it bugged me. “You guys have the same eyes. And the same dark hair. And that same grumpy as fuck aura.”

I didn’t know what to say back to that, so I said nothing, continuing my pacing.

“Jeez, what gives?” She picked up a roasted potato and popped it in her mouth next. “I thought this would be a good thing, but you look even more pisser than usual.”

“What exactly is supposed to be good about this?” I hissed at her under my breath. “My—” I snapped my lips shut, my gaze cutting around the room in alarm.

“Relax,” she mumbled in between bites. “We figured out the first day here that those cameras don’t have audio. They can’t hear you.”

No, they couldn’t. But the other prisoners could. They were all eating their dinner, talking and laughing amongst themselves. But what if someone was listening? All it would take is one ambitious person to say something in the hopes they could be released in exchange for the information.

“That asshole might be a gajillionaire, but he’s also a cheapskate.” She scooped up some vegetables with her fingers, slurping them into her mouth. “Like, seriously, if you’re going to drop millions into something like this, spring for the high-tech stuff,” she said, mouth half full. “And five-ply toilet paper. Don’t be stingy. You gonna eat that?” She pointed to my plate of untouched food, still sitting on the ground.

My mouth dropped open in outrage as she moved and picked it up, not even waiting for me to answer her.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked casually, like she hadn’t just stolen my fucking food. “Is your son—”

I leapt into action, jumping across the cell and slapping my hand over her mouth to keep her from saying another word.

“Be. Quiet,” I hissed. “If anyone finds out my son is here, it will put him in danger.” I brought our faces even closer together until we were only inches apart, and lowered my voice to barely above a whisper. “You don’t want to see what I’m willing to do to keep my son out of danger.”

She narrowed her eyes but said nothing. Or maybe that was because I still had my hand over her mouth. I kept it there, staring down at her.

Fuck. I was so close to her.

So, so, close.

Electricity sizzled down my spine, curling around to grip my cock in a tight vice.

Jesus. Fuck.

Danger! Back away!

I removed my hand and went to step back, but she gripped my wrist tightly, keeping me exactly where I was. Not by force, but by touch alone.

Her touch.

“Your son being here can only mean one thing,” she whispered. “And when the time comes, you’ll be taking me with you, Butcher.”

Will I now?

That was never going to happen.

Even if—and that was a big fucking if—we managed to find a way to escape, there was no way I could allow her to come with us. There was no way I could allow her to *live*.

The feelings she invoked within me were far too dangerous. The only way to make *them* disappear was to make *her* disappear. With her gone, everything would go back to normal. The inappropriate thoughts would vanish, the guilt I felt right along with them.

If an opportunity came up in the games where I had the choice to save her or let her die... I would have to let her die. If that meant continuing on in the games by myself, so fucking be it. Our truce was for us not to hurt *each other*. But if someone else did it? Well...we had no truce about that.

Her nails dug deep into my skin, snapping my attention back to her. “Alright?” she pressed, demanding an answer.

I snatched my wrist out of her grasp. “Just shut up about what you saw.” I pulled my plate off her lap. “And don’t touch my fucking food.”



“See this? See this line? Don’t fucking cross it. This is *my* side, okay? And that’s *your* side.” I pointed to the makeshift line I’d created out of toilet paper that ran through the middle of the cell, spanning from the bars at the front all the way to the concrete wall at the back.

Autumn stood on her cot, hands on her hips, looking at the line incredulously. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, yes, I fucking can.” I’d had enough. It was bad enough that I was sharing a cell with the woman, but having her constantly up in my space all the time? Always coming over and sitting on my bed, taking my blanket because it looked warmer than hers, stealing my fucking food, drinking out of my water bottle... No.

She was fucking *everywhere*. All the time. There was no escape from her.

It would be fine if the only thing I felt about it all was annoyance. I could handle that. What I could not handle, however, was the fact that my heart beat that little bit faster whenever she was close to me. Especially when she was close enough that all I’d have to do is reach out to be able to touch her annoyingly soft skin.

I needed space from her, which was damn near impossible considering our circumstances, and the only solution I could think of was to establish boundaries.

Yes. Boundaries. I need boundaries.

Dear God, what’s become of me?

“This cell is the size of a fucking bathroom. We already have barely any space, and you want to minimize that even more? Are you insane?” she hissed, her face turning red.

“Consider it a pre-emptive strike. Because if you continue the way you’re going, I’m going to end up fucking murdering you.”

She pointed to her chest, aghast. “*Me?* What the hell have I done?”

“What haven’t you done is the appropriate question,” I seethed. “You keep touching all my stuff.”

“What stuff!?”

“My blanket. My pillow. My food.”

“You really shouldn’t touch his things,” Rebecca chimed in from behind me.

I spun to face her. “Did I ask for your fucking help?” I growled.

She recoiled, stepping away from the cell bars.

I looked back to Autumn. I pointed at her side. “Your side.” I pointed to mine. “My side.” I pointed to hers again. “*Your* side.” Back to mine. “*My* side. Got. It?”

She jumped down from her cot and moved towards me.

“Ah!” I pointed to the line. “Don’t you dare take another step.”

“Or what?” she taunted, her leg up in the air, hovering over the line.

Fuck. Or what? What could I do? I didn’t have a whole lot to work with. Thankfully, I didn’t have to answer because the lights blinked out, encasing the room in total darkness. We both stayed where we were, letting our eyes adjust to the lack of light, then we both grumbled at each other before moving to sit on our beds.

“Here’s one thing you probably didn’t think about, Your Royal Grouchiness,” she huffed, her annoyance dripping with every word she said. “How are we supposed to train if we’re meant to stay on our designated sides?”

A very good point. One I actually hadn’t thought about... But I wasn’t going to tell *her* that. So, I just lied out of my ass. “Training is done for now. I don’t trust that I won’t snap your neck by accident.” Oh, would you look at that? It turned out I didn’t have to lie after all.

Funny that.

“Whatever,” she grumbled under her breath. “I hated it anyway.”

I didn’t. It gave me an excuse to touch her. One that didn’t leave me riddled with fucking guilt.

And that was the damn problem, wasn’t it? I’d come to look forward to our training sessions when really, I should have hated them. Fucking dreaded them. Dreaded the idea of laying my hands on a woman who wasn’t my wife.

My wife.

I closed my eyes, willing Yekaterina to appear. I needed to see her. To banish any thought of Autumn from my mind.

Come on. Come on.

When I opened my eyes, disappointment filled me. She wasn't there. I closed my eyes again.

Please. I need you.

I prayed for her to come to me. To help me. I couldn't handle what was going on. I needed her to make it all disappear. But I knew before I even opened my eyes that she wasn't there. She wasn't coming.

Shadows started to form shapes as my eyes adjusted in the darkness. Autumn was sitting on her cot directly opposite me, glaring at me. She of course made no attempt to hide it. That was something I couldn't miss.

We sat in silence for a while—a silence I had no intention of filling. The tension building between Autumn and I was getting out of hand. Constantly being stuck in her presence, having no choice but to be around her, the close proximity being forced upon me... It was driving me fucking insane.

The games couldn't start any fucking sooner.

I was enjoying the peace and quiet—a luxury not easily afforded in that kind of environment—when sounds from the cell adjacent to us made my spine stiffen.

“Oh, oh, oh.”

My eyes darted to the right. It was too dark to see exactly what was going on, but then again, I didn't need light to figure it out.

Flesh slapping against flesh... A woman's pleasure-filled moan filling the air. It was pretty obvious.

Someone was fucking.

It was Mac. The noises were coming from his cell. Looked like he'd managed to find someone to bang one out, after all.

Sexual energy buzzed in the air. The deep panting. The grunting. The rhythmic moaning.

“Yes, oh, god. Just like that.”

Shit.

I readjusted, trying to ignore what was going on, but it was hard. It wasn't just because I hadn't had sex in over ten years. I hadn't done *anything*. That included self pleasure.

Fuck, I hadn't even gotten hard in a decade. Hadn't felt the need to do anything like that since my wife died. It was like that part of me had

completely disappeared when she did. It wasn't until recently that the desire had started to return...and I wasn't going to stop and think about why.

"Oh, yes. Harder, Mac."

"You want it harder?" The sound of the bed banging against the wall rocketed through the room like a gunshot. "Yeah, take my cock," Mac grunted.

My eyes connected with Autumn's. She didn't look away. Neither did I. Heat travelled down my body. My cock began to stir, growing thicker and thicker in my shorts the longer we stared at each other.

The sounds of kissing hit the air. Suckling. Slurping. More moaning. More grunting.

I needed to look away. *I needed to.* But I couldn't. *I fucking couldn't.*

Autumn squirmed, a small, almost unnoticeable swirl of her hips as the sex noises got louder, more prominent.

My heart hammered so hard that I thought it might burst out of my chest. I swear, I could feel it in my cock. No. It was my cock *throbbing*. God, I hadn't felt that in so long. My blood pounded in my ears.

Look away. Look away.

It was impossible. I was ensnared in her fiery green gaze with no hope of escape.

Did I even want it?

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so fucking alive...and I wasn't even touching her.

What would it feel like to touch her?

The woman moaned again, long and low.

Would Autumn moan for me like that?

No!

I closed my eyes, taking a big, deep breath in through my nose, trying to calm myself. It didn't help. The air stunk of sex, of a good, hard fucking. I quickly realised that it wasn't those sounds that were turning me on. It was staring into Autumn's eyes while that moaning filled my ears. It was imagining *her* making *those* sounds because of *me*.

My eyes snapped open, burning with fire. Autumn's hooded gaze was roving freely over my body, trailing across my chest. Lower. Lower.

It might have been dark, but I knew she could see how heavily I was breathing. I just hoped she couldn't see how rock fucking hard I was.

More sounds of pleasure echoed around me, but this time, they were closer. A lot closer. It was coming from the cell right next to mine.

I didn't need to look over my shoulder to know Gregory or Rebecca, possibly both, were now "taking care of themselves". Either individually or together. In fact, it became abundantly clear as the chorus of moaning got louder and louder that it was coming from all directions. Several of the other prisoners were joining in.

I was smack dab in the middle of some kind of voyeurism orgy.

Based on Autumn's wide-eyed expression as she surveyed the other prisoners, she knew it, too.

When her gaze came back to me, she smirked and shrugged lazily. "Why the fuck not?"

I stiffened. *She's not going to do what I think she's going to do, is she?*

The tips of her fingers ran down the column of her throat slowly, sensually, moving through the valley of her breasts and heading right for the waistband of her shorts.

She is. Oh, fuck, she is.

My pulse skyrocketed, my BP well and truly entering the danger zone.

I knew the exact moment she touched herself because she let loose the softest, sweetest fucking sound I'd ever heard. My hand itched to grasp my cock. To stroke it while she watched me and I watched her. Lust *burnt* in my veins, threatening to boil over like a volatile volcano.

"Oh, Mac. Mac! Yes!" the woman moaned over and over and over again.

Autumn's hips rolled, her chest rising and falling fast as she chased her own pleasure. She wasn't even the least bit shy about it, staring me dead in the fucking eyes, her free hand reaching up to squeeze her breast.

"You can join me or watch. It's up to you," she panted heavily, her words falling on a breathy moan.

I clenched my hands into tight fists to restrain myself from pouncing on her right there and then. There was a part of me that was *dying* to join her. Dying to replace her fingers with my own. With my tongue.

I hadn't felt the touch of a woman like that in so long, and now that it was right there in front of me, I fucking *craved* it like an addict in desperate need of their next fix.

Then there was another part of me—a part that was *screaming* in my head that it was a betrayal. Guilt cut through the lust like the sharp edge of a blade slicing through butter.

This is wrong.

I can't do this.

The desire was still there, beating like a drum beneath my skin. It was too strong to disappear into thin air, but some clarity had managed to squirm its way back into my mind.

It took everything I had, every ounce of strength and willpower I possessed to move. I kept my movements slow and precise, fearful that my body would just take over and pounce on her if I didn't use all of my concentration, all of my focus to turn over.

I glimpsed the small flash of surprise in Autumn's eyes right before I laid on my side, facing away from her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“YOU CAN JOIN ME or watch. It’s up to you.”

Something feral flashed in Dimitri’s eyes. Something so raw and animalistic, I thought he might lunge at me from across the cell.

I wanted him to. God, I wanted him to. I was wetter than Niagara Falls down below, and that was only partly because of the communal orgy happening around me, but entirely because of Dimitri fucking Volkov. Because of those magnetic blue eyes, burning with so much intensity that it could engulf me.

Pleasure shot up my spine when my fingers brushed over my clit. I didn’t even try to hold back my moan. I wanted Dimitri to hear it. To entice him into joining me. To break that iron-steel control he had.

And I thought I might actually have succeeded.

We were sitting at opposite ends of the cell, him on his cot with his back pressed against the bars, me on my cot with my back against the stone wall, staring each other down like we were the only two people in the room. Sexual tension vibrated between us. Hot. Aching. And completely fucking addictive.

I knew he felt it too. There was no denying that look blazing in his eyes. The tenseness in his whole body, like it was taking all of his strength to hold himself back.

So, it was one fuck of a surprise when he slowly turned over and lay down with his back to me.

You'd think something like that would embarrass me. I'd offered for him to join me, and instead of doing that, he'd chosen to roll over and essentially ignore me...while I had my hand on my pussy.

It was basically a flat-out rejection.

But one thing I didn't do was live my life with regrets. There was every chance that I could die in the coming days, and I didn't want to die wondering if something could have happened between Dimitri and I if I'd only had the courage to ask.

I took my shot. It didn't work. And that was okay. Disappointing, but okay.

Despite the panting, moaning and cries of pleasure surrounding me on all sides, my lust plummeted now that Dimitri was no longer looking at me. It was still slightly there, humming just beneath the surface, but without the object of my desires staring me in the face, it just wasn't the same.

I removed my hand from my underwear and held in the disappointed sigh that threatened to slip free. He might have had his back to me, but I didn't want to risk him hearing that I was disheartened by his choice. I had to save face somehow.

With strands of desire still vibrating in my lower belly, I laid down on my back and waited for sleep to take me.

Strong, calloused hands whispered over my bare skin, starting from my lower ankle and slowly moving up and up and up. I shivered, a whimper falling from my lips.

"Shhh. This is what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Dreams were fickle things. You knew you were dreaming. You knew you were asleep. You were aware that the events flashing right before your eyes weren't really happening, and yet, they felt so real that you could almost swear it wasn't a dream at all.

But I knew it was for the simple fact that it was Dimitri's hands currently touching me, his voice breathing in my ear.

"What are you doing?" I stayed completely still, not moving a single muscle.

“Shh, shh, shh, I know you’re aching.” His fingers walked up my leg before he cupped my pussy roughly. “I’m aching, too. Ever since you tried to kill me.”

“Which time?” I panted.

“Every. Fucking. Time,” he growled as if he was frustrated because of that very reason. “And now I’m going to give us what we both want, and you’re not going to stop me, are you? Because you want it just as badly as I do, don’t you?”

I bit my bottom lip, not wanting to admit how excited I was to have him finally touching me. My legs opened with hardly any conscious thought, granting him more access, and he chuckled darkly. Sinfully.

“Yeah, you fucking do. Look at you, opening up wide for me.” He pulled down my shorts and underwear but kept them clamped around my thighs, somewhat restricting my movements.

I fucking loved it.

“Now, let’s get a good look at that pussy that’s been plaguing my fucking mind.” His fingers spread me open, and a hungry growl rumbled down his throat. “Fuckkk. I need to know how you taste.”

“Oh, God,” I moaned as his warm, wet tongue circled my clit before he sucked it into his mouth. “Dimitri, oh, yes, Dimitri.”

He hummed in appreciation, his hands coming up underneath me to cup my ass. He squeezed almost painfully, and more pleasure mixed in with that delicious lick of pain he’d caused.

“Fucking heaven,” he groaned, closing his entire mouth over me and moving his tongue faster. He buried his face into my pussy like he couldn’t get enough of me and absolutely feasted.

I knew I was about to come undone, and it felt soooo good. The way he moved his tongue, swirling it around my clit over and over again. He was kissing my pussy like it was my mouth, and I was fucking living for it. I was about to fucking explode.

He grabbed my hands and put them on the back of his head, pushing them into his hair roughly as if he wanted me to push him closer, harder into my pussy so that it almost smothered him.

I did, and he released this deep, masculine groan of satisfaction that had me shivering all over. He ripped my shorts and underwear away and then curled my legs around him.

My hips moved in time with the strokes of his tongue, pleasure building and building. “Dimitri,” I breathed, my orgasm so close that I could almost taste it.

“Say my name again,” he growled, licking faster.

“Dimitri, Dimitri, Dimitri,” I moaned over and over again.

He roughly pushed two fingers inside me, and I would have shot off the bed if he hadn’t clamped one arm across my stomach. “Lie the fuck back down. I’m not done.”

I fought him, loving the way he pinned me down to keep going. The way he fought to keep me still so he could keep licking me. Keep fucking me with his fingers.

“Shit, I’m coming. I’m coming. I’m—”

Something soft smacked me in the face. I shot up, looking around in confusion, my chest panting and sweat trickling down my forehead. A pillow laid on the floor right next to my bed.

What the?

The room was quiet except for the sounds of a few people snoring. I picked up the pillow, inspecting it. My eyes shot to Dimitri over in his cot. He was still lying with his back to me, but his pillow was missing.

He’d thrown it at me.

I internally winced. My dream must have trickled over into real life. What had he heard? No. The more important question was, what did I fucking say?

Had I only moaned? God, I hoped I hadn’t said his name out loud. I didn’t need him knowing that I just had one of the best sex dreams I’d ever had...and that *he* was the leading star.

I fluffed the pillow before adding it on top of my own, lying back down. He wasn’t getting it back. It was on *my* side, and now it was mine.



I bounced on the tips of my toes, anticipation and excitement beating through my blood as I anxiously stared at the TV screen.

All of us were gathered in the training area, but it wasn't to train. No. The games had finally begun.

And I couldn't be more excited.

That morning, the first round had commenced. We had all been standing around like we were now, clustered together in a group while Talon's guards surrounded us in a tight circle, their machine guns ready and pointing at us in warning in case any of us got any ideas about trying to escape.

The crowd had chanted, roaring so loudly that it could be heard through the thick stone walls.

We all knew what that'd meant: the event we had all been preparing for had finally come.

I'd realised halfway through Talon's grand speech that he intended for all of us to watch the fights. That was why they'd gathered us all there, to watch it on the TV screens. Maybe it was to help prepare us. Maybe it was to torture us. I wasn't sure, but I was inclined to believe it was the latter.

What made it even more torturous was that we had no idea who was fighting. Not until right at the last moment, when it was announced to the crowd.

Talk about keeping us on our fucking toes.

The first pairs to fight were Samuel Marlon and Jessica Clifford vs Ronnie O'Hara and Leah Asner. After their names were called, guards had swarmed us, pulling them from the group, removing their collars and shoving them into the arena all within thirty seconds.

We'd watched them on the TVs mounted to the wall in the training area. It had been brutal to watch. There was absolutely no censorship. You saw

everything as it was happening. All the blood. All the gore. All the tears and cries of pain.

Some of the other prisoners had thrown up. Others passed out. The weapons in the arena made the whole thing more barbaric. More bloody.

I also suspected they'd placed microphones in the arena itself, because you could hear every single thing. Every swoosh as axe's sliced through the air. Every squelch as blades cut into bodies. Every cry of pain.

You could hear it all.

And now, it was time for round two.

Tense, nervous energy suffocated the room as we all waited to see who would be the next to fight. I cracked my neck, restlessness humming beneath my skin, just dying to be unleashed.

I tried to pay attention to what was happening on the TV, but I was acutely aware of how close Dimitri was to me. My skin felt hot, hypersensitive, my whole body electrified from the events of the night prior and that fucking sex dream.

We hadn't said a word to each other all day, both of us choosing to ignore everything and pretend like none of it happened. Pretend that we hadn't been eye-fucking each other the whole time as a massive orgy played out around us. Pretend he hadn't thrown a pillow at me to wake me up because I was most likely moaning as I was coming in my dream.

We ignored it all, and I was partly glad. I didn't want any questions about what it was exactly I had been dreaming about.

My eyes were on the TV, but I wasn't really taking anything in. I wasn't really listening as the presenters droned on and on. My mind kept replaying the dream like a movie. Usually, I couldn't remember what I dreamed about, but that one didn't seem to want to go away. I could still feel how real it felt having his hands on me. *His lips. His tongue. His—*

“You look a little...tense.”

I jolted at Dimitri's deep, husky voice in my ear. I turned my head to look at him. He was *right there*, in my space, a smirk on his lips. “Rough sleep last night?”

I cleared my throat. “No. I slept like a baby.”

“Did you? Hmm.” Amusement twinkled in his eyes. “Sounded a little... Oh, what's the word... *Eventful?*” he breathed against my skin.

I narrowed my eyes at that teasing tone. Dimitri didn't tease, so the fact that he was put me on edge.

“Nope. It was completely *uneventful*.”

“Well, what was it about?”

I tried to ignore him, but he moved even closer, his chest brushing against my shoulder as he stayed bent to whisper in my ear.

I straightened, determined not to react, like it was just any normal conversation. “Just the usual things. Murder. Death. Squirrels.”

He leant back slightly, looking at me with humor in his eyes. “Squirrels?”

“They’re cute and fluffy and we don’t have them in Australia.”

“I see,” he chuckled. “Nothing else, then? Nothing more...exciting?”

That prick. He wanted me to say it. Wanted me to admit I’d had a sex dream.

Well, I sure as shit wasn’t going to do that.

“Nope.” I forced my eyes to look around the room. Anywhere but at him. “In fact, there was nothing even remotely exciting about it at all. Boring, you could say. Dull.”

“Dull? Oh, it didn’t sound dull to me.” I didn’t move a muscle as he pushed even closer to me and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear. Shivers danced down my spine, and I worked hard not to let it show. His lips brushed against the sensitive skin below my ear, and he moaned seductively, softly, “*Dimitri, oh, yes, Dimitri.*”

I ground my teeth together and rammed my elbow deep into his ribs. He grunted, then threw his head back and let loose a boisterous laugh, even as he gripped his side where I’d hit him.

I blinked, too shocked to do anything but stare. In all the time we’d been forced in each other’s presence, I’d never seen him laugh. Reluctantly chuckle, yes. But laugh? Full-blown laughter?

No. I honestly thought I’d die before witnessing such an unlikely event.

I would have never thought a man’s laughter could be a beautiful thing. But staring at Dimitri with his head thrown back and body shaking convinced me otherwise. He should definitely have laughed more.

“Are we ready for round two of the Til Death Games?!” a voice roared from the TVs, and just like that, any trace of laughter and playfulness vanished from between us in an instant like it had never been there to begin with.

The room fell inexplicably silent, everyone waiting on bated breath to see who would be called on next to fight. The camera panned to the massive jumbotron that hung suspended above the arena, revealing the first pair.

Lily Cole and Roger Ward.

There was barely a one-second delay before the guards swarmed forward. Almost as a collective, the other prisoners took one wide step back away from Lily and Roger as if they feared they might be accidentally mistaken for them and taken in their place.

Quickly and efficiently, the guards removed their chains and collars, and shoved them through the open door in front of us, right into the arena.

“We have a special treat for you tonight, ladies and gentlemen. A truly special, special treat. Let’s meet our next team.”

Their faces appeared on the TV, slightly dazed as the announcer continued to introduce them.

“Lily Cole is a master sergeant in the Marines with over thirty-three confirmed kills.” The camera zoomed in right on Lily, giving the crowd plenty of time to admire her.

I was mildly surprised. She was such a little thing. Barely five feet tall. I’d dismissed her as a threat the instant I’d seen her.

The fact that she was a Marine would be both an advantage and disadvantage for her. An advantage because she possessed the necessary skills it took to not only physically take a life, but mentally, too.

And a disadvantage because, as a Marine, she would have some sort of moral compass that may make her hesitate in the arena.

A bad thing for her. A good thing for whomever she faced.

“Weighing in at only ninety pounds, she might seem small and unthreatening, but she is anything but! Her skills guarantee a good fight!”

The crowd let loose a mighty cheer as the camera panned to her partner.

“Roger Ward is someone to watch, folks! President of a vicious motorcycle gang in Las Vegas, he’s dangerous, ruthless and has no qualms getting a little blood on his hands.”

I knew it, I thought. I’d had that guy pegged from the moment I laid eyes on him. There was something dark about him. Something that made me weary. A predator could always sense another predator, and Roger Ward was definitely one.

The announcer continued to talk Lily and Roger up, trying to get the crowd more and more excited for the upcoming fight. They were doing a great job of it. Cheers, whoops and hollers could no doubt be heard for miles.

I looked around the room again. *Who would be their opponents?*

They would be one hell of a team to beat.

The arena darkened. Anticipation sizzled in my bones.

“Alright! Time to meet their opponents! I have a feeling you guys are gonna *love* these ones! That’s right! It’s the duo we know you’ve all been dying to see!”

This time, there was no pre-warning about who they would be facing. The guards just came into the group, pushing and shoving prisoners out of the way until they got to who they were after.

Dimitri and I.

Our gazes clashed as the realization hit. We were both jostled roughly as they removed our chains and collars, and then we were pushed through the door into the dark arena. A bright, blinding light shone on us.

“The Bratva Butcher and The Crimson Death!”

The crowd went wild, screaming and cheering so loudly that it became almost disorientating. I forced myself not to look around, not to scan my surroundings like I was so desperate to do. It was unfamiliar terrain. I needed to scout the new environment I was in so I could prepare, but I didn’t want to seem like I was worried, scattered or scared. I needed to portray an easy air as if the whole thing was nothing but a mild inconvenience for me.

Instead, I looked up at Dimitri and couldn’t help but smile brightly at the look of complete and utter shock on his face.

He knew I was an assassin, but he had no idea that the moniker I worked under was no doubt one he’d heard. Usually, I’d be pissed to have my identity revealed, however, in this case, it was totally worth it to see the surprise in his eyes.

“*You’re* The Crimson Death?” he whispered as the crowd roared for us, clapping their hands and stomping their feet.

I just smiled brighter and said nothing. If we survived, we would have plenty of time to talk after.

“Alright! I see everyone is eager to get the night going! So, why don’t we get to it?! Ladies and gentlemen, round two of the Til Death Games!”

The arena flooded with light and I took everything in quickly. I’d expected to be on sand or rough asphalt, but it was grass beneath my feet. Tiny obstacles were placed haphazardly throughout the space; rocks, boulders, logs. There was even a small stream running from one end of the arena to the other.

Roger and Lily stood on the other side of it, the stream separating us. They must have moved after they'd entered the arena so they would have a chance to acclimate to their surroundings.

Dimitri and I exchanged one last look with each other. Something flashed in his eyes like he wanted to say something, but he was holding himself back. The vibe I got from him—the energy he was giving off—mixed with that look in his eyes made me wonder what it was that he was thinking about.

He looked almost... remorseful. As if he'd come to some sort of decision, but it was one he wasn't entirely happy about.

Before I could question him on it, music blasted in the arena. Something dark and bassy that fit with the current mood of events. We both turned to face our opponents, letting the moment pass.

Across the arena, standing on the other side of the small stream, Lily and Roger stared us down.

Excitement burnt in my veins. I loved to fight. Nothing got my blood pumping quite like it. I knew it was a life or death situation, but if anything, that made me even more excited. One wrong move and it was all over.

The thought was exhilarating. I was an adrenaline junkie and this... This was the fix I needed.

Dimitri and I spread out as we inched forward, making sure not to go too far away from each other. We had come up with a plan. Whichever pair we faced, I would take the woman and he would take the man. We would keep each other well within our sights at all times. That way, if anything happened, we would be close enough to help if need be.

I honed in on Lily, watching her every move. I noticed two weapons: an axe and what looked like a machete. It would be a race to see who could get to them first.

There was a brief standstill, all of us staring at each other across the arena, the tension rising and rising, and then things kicked into high gear like the flick of a switch.

We bolted across the field, me going for Lily, Dimitri going for Roger, the crowd cheering us on, the music blasting loudly around us. Lily and I clashed in a fury of fists, swinging violently. We kicked and punched, exchanging strike for strike, locked into a grapple to try and gain the upper hand.

She was very good, her training from the Marines coming through loud and fucking clear. She moved well, hit hard and wasn't showing an ounce of hesitation like I thought someone in her profession might.

"I'm really sorry about this," she grunted, taking a hit to her gut like a fucking champ. "But I've got to win, and that means I have to kill you." She sounded sincere. Like she truly felt bad about it.

That was the clear difference between us. I didn't feel bad at all. I would do whatever I needed to do to survive, and if that meant killing everyone, then so be it.

"You think you can?" I ducked and swerved, barely managing to avoid her.

"I know I can. I've seen you fight, but I'm better."

Was she?

We were about to find out.

We threw more punches and then, by some stroke of luck, Lily slipped, losing her footing. The opportunity to take the lead flashed before my eyes, and I rolled along the grass to pick up the machete on the ground. I swung it towards Lily's head. She dove out of the way and scrambled back, her frantic gaze searching for something to use. A shield plopped down in front of her, someone from the crowd throwing it down to her. She picked it up quickly and blocked my next strike.

Son of a bitch.

I hacked at it over and over, the sound of metal on metal blasting through the air. She kept it up regardless of how hard I swung the machete, protecting herself. I kicked it away, but before I could strike again, she slammed her foot into my shin.

Pain rocketed up my leg, and I stumbled. She kicked again, this time hitting the centre of my chest, and the force pushed me back far enough for her to be able to get up and charge me.

She tackled me, and we both went tumbling to the ground. The machete flew out of my hands. I used all of my strength to keep her from getting the dominant position, the two of us rolling along the grass. If she managed to get on top, it would all be over.

With one last heave, I pushed hard, slamming her down with my hands on her shoulders. Her head whacked against a log, and she groaned. I clambered over her quickly, going right for her leg. I needed to take her out,

and the best way to do that was to incapacitate her. My arms locked around her knee, and then I reared back with everything I had.

Something snapped, and she screamed.

The crowd roared so loudly that it hurt my ears. I thought it was because of us, but when I looked up, my eyes widened in horror.

Everything around me slowed down as if someone had just paused time. Roger was on top of Dimitri, his arm raised in the air with a rock in his hand, preparing to hit him in the face with it. An attack that close from a weapon like that would be game over.

I was moving before I even realised it, sprinting across the field as fast as I could. A feeling smothered my chest... One I'd never felt before, but there was no mistaking it.

It was fear.

Fear for Dimitri.

I didn't know why, but seeing him like that caused an overwhelming urge to take over. The urge to protect him. Save him. Not to let him die.

I ran harder than I'd ever ran before.

I slammed into Roger with the force of a freight train, tackling him off Dimitri just in time. One second later, and it would have been too late. We rolled along the ground, fighting for the dominant position. He was a lot bigger than me, and heavier, too. Despite the fact that I'd taken him completely by surprise, he still managed to put up a good enough fight to make it difficult to gain the upper hand.

In the end, I decided to top from the bottom.

We came to a stop. He might have been the one on top, but I was in charge. My arms were wound tightly around his neck, my legs around his torso in a textbook rear naked choke.

He struggled, but I held tight.

Dimitri appeared, his face dark and murderous, an axe in his hand. He swung hard, lodging it deep in Roger's perfectly exposed chest in a brutally powerful swing.

Roger bellowed in agony, his whole body bucking above me. I let go and scrambled out from underneath him just as Dimitri took another swing. This one took his whole arm off, blood splattering everywhere, drenching Dimitri from head to toe, but that didn't stop him or slow him down.

I watched as he hacked and hacked and hacked into Roger, not even stopping when the man was long dead. Arousal bloomed in my stomach.

The Butcher, ladies and gentlemen, had entered the building, and I was all fucking for it.

Nothing turned me on more than fighting and murder.

As much as I didn't want to, I turned away and started making my way back to Lily. She wasn't where I'd left her. She was curled up in a ball, clutching her chest and sobbing quietly only a few feet away. She must have been trying to get to Roger to help him, but it would have been impossible to do that quickly with the damage I'd caused to her knee.

I picked up the machete, kicked Lily onto her back and then swung hard, embedding the blade deep into her forehead. Her face, dirty and wet with tears, froze in a mixture of horror and pain before her entire body slumped to the ground.

The crowd released an ear-splitting, thunderous cheer, chanting, "Deadly Duo! Deadly Duo!" over and over again.

To be honest, I didn't really mind the nickname. It kind of fit.

Dimitri stepped up to my side. I turned to look at him. Holding an axe, absolutely drenched in blood and gore, the man had never looked hotter.

"Your winners of round two of the Til Death Games! The Bratva Butcher and The Crimson Death!"

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CHAPTER NINETEEN



DIMITRI VOLKOV

I STARED AT AUTUMN'S sleeping form, trying and failing to come to terms with what happened in that arena.

She saved me.

She actually put her own life at risk to save me from a potentially fatal blow. While we had initially agreed to keep an eye out and help each other in the arena, I hadn't expected her to truly honor it... Because if the situation had been reversed, I would have let her die.

Not because I wanted to, but because I *needed* to.

She was far too dangerous. Not only in the physical sense, but in her ability to make me *feel* for the first time in ten fucking years.

To make me laugh. Smile.

Horny.

And the thing that frustrated me the most was that I had no idea why she invoked those feelings in me.

"It's because you like her."

My gaze flicked to Yekaterina's ghostly image, sitting next to me on my cot. This time, her appearance didn't bring forth the same rush of emotions

it usually did... Because of what she'd said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, not bothering to quieten my voice. The only people down there were Autumn and myself. After we'd returned from our fight in the games, all the other prisoners were gone.

I was suspicious about it from the very start. Talon didn't do anything unless it served a purpose. So, what was this one? Why were all the other cells empty? I feared I wouldn't know the answer to that question until it was too late.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Dima."

Did I?

"The reason why you're so consumed by her. It's because you have feelings for her."

I scoffed, the ludicrousness of such a statement making me shake my head. "You're out of your mind."

Yekaterina stared at me, not allowing me to look away from her. *"Think about it. Why do you think you get so excited when she's close to you? Why does your heart beat that little bit faster when she looks at you? Why does the idea of another man touching her make you want to cut his hands off?"*

That was the problem with arguing with a figment of your imagination. They knew your deepest, darkest secrets. Things about yourself that you yourself didn't even know. Things you were trying to ignore.

"So, what are you trying to say? That I love her or something?"

She rolled those mesmerising crystal blue eyes, getting to her feet. *"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you don't love her. You barely know her."* She moved to stand over Autumn, staring down at her with a small smile on her lips, almost as if the words she was about to utter made her happy. *"But you like her."*

"I hate her."

"You hate her because you like her. There's a difference. Sure, at the start, it might have all been hate. But throughout the time that has been forced upon you, you've come to admire her. Her strength. Her bravery. Her tenacity."

"Even if what you're saying is true, and I don't entirely believe that it is, it doesn't mean anything. Nothing will ever happen," I said, refusing to even allow the notion, the *idea* of something romantic blossoming between me and Autumn.

“Let me ask you something.” She turned to face me, crossing her arms over her chest. *“Do you think the real Yekaterina—the real one, not the one you’ve made up in your head”* —she waved her hands up and down her ghostly form to signify herself— *“Do you think she would want this for you?”*

I squeezed my hands into tight fists. “It doesn’t matter what she would have wanted. *She’s dead.*”

Sadness streaked across her face. *“She would want you to be happy, Dima. You know that.”*

I gritted my teeth and turned away from her. *Of course I know that.* I knew that with one hundred percent certainty because it was something Yekaterina and I had discussed previously.

She’d said repeatedly that if anything ever happened to her, she’d want me to move on. To be happy. To remember her, but let someone else in.

She’d made me promise to do it.

And I did.

But I didn’t fucking mean it.

“I never thought I’d say this to you, but I want you to go away.” I couldn’t handle what she was saying to me. I didn’t want to hear it anymore.

“I can’t do that.”

“What do you mean ‘you can’t do that?’” I asked, frowning. “You’re a figment of *my* imagination, aren’t you? That means *I* control you. And I’m telling you to go.”

She smiled, but there was nothing happy about it. It was drenched in sadness. In pity. *“That’s not the way it works. There’s only one way to get me to leave you alone.”*

“And that would be?”

“Confront yourself.”

Confront myself? “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means—”

A bright, blinding light blasted through the room. I winced, raising my arm up to shield my eyes. After a few seconds, when I lowered my arm back down and my eyes had adjusted, Yekaterina was gone.

For once, I was thankful. Our conversation was making me uneasy.

Autumn groaned. She sat up slowly, groggily rubbing her eyes. “What’s going on?”

I didn't answer her because I didn't know. It couldn't possibly be morning yet. Lights out was only a few hours before.

I watched Autumn as she got to her feet and stretched out her body, studying her very closely. Since her true identity had been revealed, I'd been feeling like such an idiot. *How could I have not put it together?* She was The Crimson Death. One of the most renowned and feared assassins in the world. Her exploits were fucking legendary.

She'd managed to kill one of her marks by shooting him through a window on a moving train from over 200 feet away. Straight kill shot to the head. Another one I heard about was when she hijacked a private plane, killed one of the lieutenants in The Triad and then just jumped out while over 30,000 feet in the air.

She was fucking deadly.

We hadn't yet spoken about that new revelation, but believe me, I had every intention of bringing it up when the time came. That whole time, I'd been a step behind. At a disadvantage. She knew everything about me while I knew jackshit about her.

That new piece of information made her even more dangerous in my eyes —something I honestly didn't think was possible.

My eyes darted to the door when I heard the lock snap open. It slowly began to swing open.

Panic clutched my chest so hard that I couldn't breathe, pain exploding inside me. "No. No, no, no." I shot to my feet faster than I ever had, running to the front of my cell. My fingers curled around the bars, squeezing tightly. "No, this can't be happening. No. No," I whispered under my breath as I watched four of Talon's soldiers carry in a limp body.

Aleksandr. No.

Each of the soldiers had one of Aleksandr's limbs in their hands, and despite the fact that there were four of them carrying him, they each struggled to hold up the weight of his unconscious form, their faces red and strained, their feet shuffling forward one minuscule step at a time, all grunting with excretion.

How did this happen? What is he doing here?

My mind went crazy with question after question, my panic-filled eyes watching on in agony as they carelessly dropped my son to the ground, unlocked one of the now empty cells and dragged him inside.

I prayed that was it. That he was the only one of my children in harm's way.

But I knew before the next round of soldiers even entered the room that it wouldn't be the case.

One by one, Talon's soldiers brought in the only people in the world I loved, and what was left of my heart after Yekaterina died shattered into a million pieces.

First, Lukyan, my crazy, erratic, Golden Retriever little boy who drove me crazy half the time but could always make me laugh. Then Illayana, my beautiful baby girl who looked so much like her mother that it hurt to look at her sometimes. And finally, Nikolai, my brave, strong genius who would do anything for the people he loved.

I clutched my chest, trying to keep myself from succumbing to the pain smothering me. The pain of knowing my children, my beautiful little babies, were going to die, and I was going to have to watch it happen.

Because I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Talon would make it happen, knowing it was the only way he had to truly, *truly* hurt me.

A cyclone of emotions hit me all at once. Anger. Frustration. Fear. I stared at my unconscious children, lying on the floor of their locked cells, knowing there was nothing I could do to help them. To protect them.

In all my life, I'd never felt so fucking helpless. Powerless.

How could this happen?

“What—”

I spun so quickly that Autumn gasped in surprise as I grabbed her by the chin roughly, stopping her from saying another word.

“For once in your life, be. Fucking. Quiet,” I snarled, breathing heavily.

I was at my breaking point, my emotions threatening to bubble over, my control all but gone.

My children were in danger. The panic. The anger. The *fear*. It was all too much for me to handle, and I was close to exploding.

Autumn's eyes darted to my children and back to me, widening even more in surprise. I wasn't sure what it was she saw on my face, but whatever it was made her gaze soften the slightest touch.

Did she know? Did she know that those people Talon's soldiers had just brought in were the most cherished, important people in my life?

Of course she did. She was far too observant not to notice.

“Do you want to fight it out?” she whispered softly, understanding lying deep in her green eyes.

I did. God, fuck, I did. I wanted to hit something. *Someone*. To take my frustrations out the only way I knew how: beating the shit out of something.

The fact that she knew that was what I needed pissed me off even more.

Who was she to know those things about me?

I pushed her away from me and immediately swung my leg into a fast roundhouse kick. She ducked, evading the strike with plenty of time to spare because she was good, quick and could anticipate my moves frustratingly well.

She returned with her own kick, and then we locked in a battle of blows. Punch. Kick. Elbow strike. Knee strike. We attacked and blocked. Attacked and blocked. Over and over. Exchanging blow after blow, never letting up.

I didn’t bother going easy on her because she was strong as fuck, and I knew she could take whatever I dished out.

I front-kicked, and she swerved out of the way with the grace of a dancer. She hit me with a spinning back fist, making my head snap to the side and blood pool in my mouth. She spun and ran. There wasn’t anywhere to go, yet I gave chase anyway, staying right on her heels.

She surprised the fuck out of me by pulling some action movie kind of shit, running up the wall and flipping behind me. I barely managed to stop myself from plowing into the wall. Pain rocketed up my spine instantly from a blow to the back, and I shot forward, smashing into the wall anyway.

Fucking shit.

I kept forgetting how fucking fast she was.

I swung back blindly, which she of course ducked under because, like I said, she was irritatingly good at anticipating my moves.

Well, lucky for me, I was good at anticipating her moves, too. I hunched inwards, tucking my arms into my side to block the relentless onslaught of punches she unleashed.

When the opportunity came, I lashed out with a knee strike to her abdomen. She blocked it like I knew she would.

We were just too evenly matched for one of us to truly get the upper hand.

That didn’t stop us from fucking trying, though.

It made me genuinely curious. In a true fight to the death between Autumn and I, who would win?

If you'd asked me a few weeks before, I would have said me, hands down. But after witnessing her in action and being the recipient of her brutal attacks, I honestly couldn't say anymore.

A deep groan from one of the other cells made us both stiffen, our fists freezing in the air. My eyes snapped to the left to see Aleksandr stirring. I ran to the bars separating us instantly, forgetting all about the fight.

"Aleksandr."

He groaned again, rolling over onto his back. Autumn came up to my side, wiping a trail of blood away from her chin.

"Aleksandr," I tried again, edging more steel into my voice.

His eyes snapped open. Lightning fast, he was on his feet, his gaze whipping around the room frantically as his fists came up in a boxer's pose. When his eyes clashed with mine, his whole body went deathly still.

"Fuck," he breathed out, his arms lowering to his side.

Fuck? That's all he has to say?

Now that I could see he was okay, the worry I'd felt over his safety was replaced with anger.

"Look behind you," I all but growled out.

He turned slowly, almost as if he feared what he might see. "Fuck!" He rushed forward. "Lukyan! Illayana!"

It was no use. They were both out cold. So was Nikolai. Lukyan had one arm flung over his face and was snoring loudly. Illayana was lying face down with a puddle of drool forming around her mouth.

I would have been worried something was seriously wrong if it wasn't for the fact that she'd been drooling in her sleep since she was a child.

"What the fuck happened?" Aleksandr asked, confusion on his face.

My anger spiked to dangerous levels. Again. "I was going to ask you that question."

"I don't..." He ran his fingers through his short, black hair. "I don't know. I was out when a van pulled up next to me. Four guys got out. One shot me with a dart or something. I killed him. A few of them, I think. I'm not sure. It's all a little...hazy."

"And Lukyan? Illayana?"

He looked back at them. "I'm not sure."

My jaw clenched. "You're not sure," I repeated, my tongue running over my teeth in distaste. "It's your responsibility to look out for your siblings, is it not?"

He cleared his throat and stood up a little straighter. “Yes, Father.”

“Then explain to me how they ended up here.”

“I...can’t.”

“*Bozhe proklyat eto, Aleksandr!*” *Goddamn it, Aleksandr!* I thundered, banging my fist against the bars. “You have one job. One job. Keep your brothers and sister safe. And look at them. Look at them!” I roared.

He flinched. Barely, but I saw it. He did as I ordered.

“Do they look safe to you?”

“No, Father.”

“You sent Nikolai in here, knowing how dangerous it would be. How could you do that?”

“We were trying to save you,” he defended, his own anger starting to rise.

I growled, slicing my hand through the air to silence him. “I didn’t need saving! You should have known better!” I spat. “If your siblings had some ridiculous notion to rescue me, you should have shut it down! My life isn’t worth all of you being at risk!” I looked him dead in the eyes. “*YA tak razocharovan v tebe.*” *I am so disappointed in you.*

He recoiled as if I’d struck him. He looked down, his hands clenching at his sides.

Guilt burst in my chest, and I instantly regretted my choice of words.

The last time I used those words was after I’d found out he didn’t escort his mother when she left the house.

He’d been her bodyguard since he was seventeen. It was his job to keep her safe when I was not around to do so. I trusted him with one of the most precious people in my life, and he’d let me down.

For years, I’d blamed him. Blamed him for what happened to her.

Of course, I eventually realised how irrational that was. It wasn’t his fault. My anger and grief was just looking for someone to blame, and he was the easiest target at the time.

I looked at Aleksandr, and the guilt increased tenfold. So lost. So vulnerable. And it was all because of what I said. The specific words that I knew would cut him like a blade.

I was about to apologise when Autumn shoved me so hard that I stumbled. “Ease off him,” she snapped.

What the fuck?

I righted myself and glared down at her. “This is *family business*. It has nothing to do with you. Stay out of it.”

“I will when you stop being such a fucking asshole,” she hissed.

Aleksandr gasped, unable to hide his shock. I ignored him.

“What are you talking about?”

Instead of answering me, she turned to Aleksandr, her face a mask of disgust. I didn’t fucking like it. “This kind of shit happens so often he can’t even see it, can he?”

Irrational jealousy snapped my spine straight. Why the fuck was she talking to my son like I wasn’t even there? Why was she jumping to *his* defense? She didn’t even fucking know him. If she was going to defend anyone, it should have been *me*.

I gripped her roughly by the chin and forced her to look at me. “Don’t talk to him. *Talk to me.*”

She scowled, those fiery green eyes I was slowly coming to adore burning with anger.

I should have taken that as the warning sign it was.

She stomped down on the top of my foot with the heel of her own. Pain shot up my leg, and I winced. She pushed my hand away from her, stepped forward until she was right in my space, standing nose-to-nose with me, and then jabbed her finger into my chest.

“You want me to talk to you instead? *Fine.* I don’t know your kids personally, but if they’re anything like you, I’m willing to bet they’d do just about anything to save someone they love.”

My jaw clenched as she jabbed me in the chest again.

“Why the fuck are you having a go at him when *you* would have done the exact same thing in his position?”

“Do you have children?”

She was silent for a moment. “No.”

“Well, until you do, you have no right to comment on my parenting.”

“I can comment on whatever I want to comment on. It’s a free country, and in case you haven’t noticed, I’m very vocal about my opinions.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed,” I scoffed. “And that’s part of the problem. You voice your opinions even when no one fucking asked for them.”

She cocked her head. “Aw, and here I thought that was one of the things you liked most about me.”

“I don’t like *anything* about you,” I growled behind gritted teeth.

“Reallyyyy,” she dragged out, a smirk on her lips. Her eyes flicked down and back up again quickly. “I think there’s one thing you like about me.”

I didn't bother looking down because I knew exactly what she was referring to. I was rock fucking hard, getting harder and harder the more we argued.

I didn't realise until right at that moment that fighting with her turned me on.

A lot.

Well, two can play at that game.

I stood taller, not shying away or trying to hide what was going on. I didn't want her to think I was uncomfortable and that she had the upper hand. "Should we revisit your little dream from last night?"

Her face turned bright red. I took a mental picture, wanting to remember that moment forever. It was fucking priceless.

"I'm sick of your shit!" she shouted.

"I'm sick of your shit!" I shouted back.

"Oh, you know what—"

"Ahem, ahem," Aleksandr cleared his throat loudly. Autumn and I both looked at him. His gaze ping-ponged between the two of us, incomprehension in his eyes. I could see the gears turning in his head, that intuition I'd always praised him for working double time. He studied our faces, how close we were standing next to each other...

Shit. We're so close, our chests are practically pressed right up against each other.

I shoved her away quickly, an almost erratic edge to my movements like I was some sort of teenager who'd just been caught by their parents with a girl in their bedroom.

Admittedly, I might have pushed a little too hard because she went flying, landing roughly on her ass.

"You dickhead," she hissed under her breath, but she made no move to retaliate.

At first, I was confused. Autumn never passed up the opportunity to hit me. What I saw in her eyes wiped away any confusion.

Understanding.

She knew the reason I shoved her away was because my son was staring at us with that questioning look on his face. Her gaze flitted back and forth between me and Aleksandr. She grumbled while she got to her feet, went to her cot and sat down with her back to me, facing the wall.

I knew what that meant. She did that any time she was pissed at me.

It was probably for the best. Now that I knew what fighting with her did to me, I had to try my absolute hardest to avoid it.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“I KNOW IT WAS you who ate that last brownie!”

I rubbed my temples, a brutal headache well and truly taking root in my brain. For the past hour, all my children had done was argue. It was pretty much a guarantee that no matter what the circumstances were, my children would find a way to fight with each other, either physically or with their words.

It didn’t matter if we were at a family dinner, a black-tie event or a life and death situation, like the one we were all currently in. Aleksandr, Nikolai, Lukyan and Illayana would end up arguing about something.

They’d been doing it all their lives. It never bothered me because I knew when push came to shove, they would all move Heaven and Earth to protect each other.

Something I never had growing up.

It was very much a “*I can pick on my sibling but you can’t*” kind of scenario. God forbid anyone else try to yell at them like they yelled at each other. All hell would break fucking loose.

“You know what? I did!” Illayana yelled back at Lukyan about his brownie accusation. “And it was fucking delicious!” She whipped an accusatory finger up at Nikolai. “And you! Are there any other friends of mine you’d like to fuck?!”

Ahhh, so the cat is out of the bag. Sometime during my incarceration, Nikolai and Tatiana’s relationship had finally been revealed.

Interesting.

I’d found out a few years ago during one of the worst things any parent can endure... Their child’s heartbreak.

Nikolai had no idea I knew. About any of it. He was far too out of it, consumed by so much grief and pain to even know what was going on at the time. I’d always planned to talk to him about it, but I was waiting for him to be ready. To bring it up with me first.

That never happened, and now we might all die before I had the chance.

“What friends?” Nikolai bit back harshly. “You only have one because people can’t stand you.”

Illayana gasped in outrage. “You—” she turned to Aleksandr. “You just gonna stand there and let him talk to me like that?”

“This doesn’t involve me,” he grunted.

“Oh, don’t go running to Aleksandr to save you,” Nikolai scoffed. “Fight your own battles.”

“This is amazing,” Autumn whispered under her breath.

I opened my eyes to look at her. She sat cross-legged in front of the makeshift line I’d created, respecting the boundary it represented...for once.

Her entire attention was locked on the spectacle my children were making, watching it like it was the most entertaining, most riveting thing she’d ever witnessed before.

“Are they always like this?”

I wanted to say no. I really, really, did, but...

“Yes,” I groaned, going back to rubbing my temples.

“You wait until I get out of here!” Illayana growled. “I’m going to fuck you up.”

“Right. Because that worked out so well the last time, huh? Tell me, how’s your arm?”

Lukyan laughed, pointing at his sister. “Ha. Ha. He kicked your ass.”

“I’m gonna kick *your* ass!”

“TIKHIY!” QUIET! I roared. They all snapped their mouths shut instantly.

Silence followed. For a moment. Then Autumn coughed awkwardly. “Well—”

“Not one word out of you,” I warned, pointing a stern finger in her direction.

She threw her hands up in surrender. “Aye, aye, Mr Grouchy.” Then she whispered under her breath only loud enough for me to hear, “Or maybe I should call you Daddy Dimitri.”

I shot her an angry glare, but she just smirked. I looked back at my children. It was time to stop the squabbling and get fucking serious.

“Alright, now we need to come up with a plan—”

My whole body shot to alertness when the main door to our prison opened, revealing my brother.

Of course.

Of course that fucking asshole would be there. He wouldn’t want to miss a front-row seat to my demise.

Was he responsible for my children being there, too? I was inclined to think so, yes. Aleksandr, Nikolai, Lukyan and Illayana were smart, resourceful. Kidnapping just one of them was no easy feat, but kidnapping all of them at the same time?

Impossible to do without inside information. Information about us. About how we operated. Information Dominik would possess.

He strolled on in with a million-dollar smile on his face and an expensive Armani suit on his body. A suit he most likely purchased with the money he’d gotten from selling me.

“My family.” My idiot brother smiled, his gaze moving over each of us, one after the other. “It’s so nice to see you all again. It’s been so long since we’ve all been together like this.”

“You mean, since you blew up my wedding?” Illayana snarked.

Dominik brushed off that statement with a wave of his hand. “Oh, that little thing? That was just a little fun.”

Illayana smiled, all dark and evil and fucking crazy. “So was disemboweling your daughter.”

It was a good dig, but Dominik didn’t truly care about his daughter’s death. Not in the way a father should. He only cared about the fact that he

lost someone willing to do his dirty work. To do anything for him. A lackey to use to help implement his plans.

“If she wasn’t such a fucking disappointment, I might actually care,” Dominik chuckled, confirming my thoughts. He walked down the row of cells, one at a time, his face absolutely alight with happiness. He stopped in front of Aleksandr first. “You remember our last conversation, don’t you?” He cocked his head. “I bet you’re wishing right now that you took my offer.”

Aleksandr said nothing. He leant forward menacingly, his eyes shrouded in darkness, face hard as stone, and a purely evil, violent aura vibrating from him. Dominik slanted back on auto-pilot, almost as if he feared Aleksandr would strangle him through the bars.

My son had that terrifying effect on people.

Dominik moved on quickly, stopping in front of Nikolai’s cell next. “Hi, nephew. Sorry about the dart.”

“No, you’re not,” Nikolai scoffed.

As they continued to talk, I stared at my brother, so many vivid images of decapitating his stupid head flying through my mind. *He is responsible for this. For all of this.* Guilt hit me hard. The second he’d tried to murder me in my sleep in Russia, I should have slit his throat. I should have killed him when I had the chance, but I’d been lenient in the hopes that one day, our relationship could be repaired. That things might change if we ever got out from underneath our father’s thumb. That maybe, one day, we could have a bond like the one my children shared.

What an idiot I’d been.

“I really am sorry.” Dominik sounded so sincere, I almost believed him. But I knew he was full of shit. He was incapable of feeling anything. “You’ve always been my favourite, you know. I would have liked to keep you out of this, but when I saw you here at the first round of the games, I knew I couldn’t.”

“You saw me?” Nikolai questioned, a frown on his face.

Dominik laughed humorlessly. “I’ve been waiting to witness Dimitri’s downfall since I was ten years old.” *Of course he has.* “Did you really think I wouldn’t be here to watch him die?” He shook his head. “I was up in one of the box seats watching the fights when I saw you as one of the security guards. Smart, sneaking in as one of the workers. Talon couldn’t believe it when I told him.”

That explained how Nikolai got caught, then. Illayana, Lukyan and Aleksandr had already explained what happened to them. Illayana was taken while out for a jog with Tatiana—something that had caused Nikolai to lose his mind, of course. And Lukyan had been...indisposed with a woman when he'd been shot with a dart.

"You waited until I watched Father fight before capturing me," Nikolai stated.

A sly smile crossed Dominik's face. "Talon and I thought it might be fun for you to watch your father in the games."

Another sick form of torture from those two, no doubt.

With one last look of pure smugness, Dominik moved on, stopping in front of my cell. We stared at each other, years of pent up hatred and resentment rushing to the surface, drenching the air. If that cell wasn't between us, I'd have wrapped my hands around his throat and squeezed the life out of him, like I should have done years ago. I'd do it slowly, so I could watch it. Enjoy every second of it.

"How does it feel, Dimitri? To finally be beaten by me?"

He couldn't be serious.

I snorted. "You haven't beaten me, Dominik, and you never will. If you thought you could beat me on your own, you would have challenged me. But instead, you hid behind Talon and resorted to subterfuge. That shows how weak you *really* are. No wonder Father never gave you a position worth any substance."

Anger flared in my brother's eyes, and I knew without him even saying a word that I'd hit a sore spot. During our teens, he'd begged Father repeatedly for an important position within the Bratva. I'd been one of Father's enforcers, responsible for collecting unpaid debts since I was fourteen, while Dominik couldn't even be trusted to do inventory without having someone check his work because he'd screwed it up so many times.

"There's different forms of strength, baby brother. There's the physical, and then there's the mind." He tapped his temple twice. "Who cares how I did it? I outsmarted you. And once you and your children die, the role of *Pakhan* will fall to me. Where it should have been all along."

What frustrated me the most was that he was right. Partly, anyway. I'd underestimated how cunning he was, and it came back to bite me in the fucking ass.

When Talon walked in, flanked by half a dozen of his men, Dominik smiled, giving us all a pretentious wave. “I look forward to seeing you all very soon. For the last time.” And then he was gone.

My gaze locked on Talon as he came to a stop in the middle of the room. Anger bombarded me, so much so that my whole body shook. He looked at us one by one, like a king looking down at peasants in his kingdom, all haughty and smug.

“Hello, Volkovs.”

It was so quiet, you could hear fucking crickets. None of us said a damn word.

“Not a very chatty bunch, I see. Understandable, given your circumstances.” He strolled down the line of cells with his hands behind his back, slowly, casually, inspecting us like we were animals at the zoo. He stopped when he reached my cell. “Ah, Dimitri,” he exhaled. “Dimitri, Dimitri, Dimitri. You know, I didn’t want it to come to this. Truly, I didn’t.”

I had the overwhelming desire to roll my eyes. “Really?” I drawled, bored. I didn’t believe that for one fucking second. It was exactly what he wanted.

“I would have been happy with just you, but then you had to go and send your little herd after me,” Talon said, waving a hand towards my children. “Now, you all get to be a part of my games.”

My spine stiffened, panic worming its way deep into my heart. I curled my hands around the bars and leant forward. “You’re even more deluded than I thought if you think for one fucking second that I’m fighting my children.”

“Aw, come on, give me a little credit. Even *I* know what a pointless task that would be. After all, the love you have for your family is famous, *Butcher*.”

There was so much contempt in that last word that it made me think there was something else going on. Something lying deep beneath the surface he was trying to hide.

Then Nikolai, my smart little genius who had a real knack for reading between the lines, spoke, revealing what it was Talon was trying to mask.

“You don’t like the fact that the crowd cheered louder for my father than they did you, do you?”

Of course. It all makes so much sense now.

The first night when the games had begun, Talon gave a big, grandiose speech about himself and what he'd created—the island, the games, the entire fucking thing. The crowd had applauded, sure, but it was nothing compared to the roar of excitement they'd unleashed for me and Autumn when we stepped out into that arena.

"That's what all this is about, isn't it?" Nikolai continued. "You're jealous of my father. And what better way to bring him down than to make him fight in your little games?"

Talon's jaw clenched. "It's ridiculous, you know? *I'm* the one who created *all* of this." He spread his arms out wide, gesturing to everything around him. "*I* created the games. *I* made this island and the arena. *I* created a safe place for the rich and powerful to come and let loose all of those nasty, little demons they keep locked up in the real world. And yet, *you're* the one they cheer for?" he sneered. "Why? Because you killed a bunch of people? What the fuck makes you so special, Dimitri?"

So much hatred and resentment. It basically poured off him. "Sounds like you've been projecting what happened all of those years ago into the present." I smirked. "So, your father told you he wished *I* was his son. So what?"

Oh, if looks could kill.

"I brought you here so I could get a front-row seat to your death, and not only do I get to watch *you* die, but I get to watch your whole family die along with you," he spat, an evil, diabolical smile gracing his lips. "What I have planned will make you beg for your life and the lives of your children." He turned his attention to Autumn. This overwhelming, protective instinct reared up inside of me. I had to force myself not to move, not to place myself in front of her. "You, Miss DeValos, have a choice. You are not involved in this, so I will give you the opportunity to switch fighting partners. Jessica Clifford, the female winner from the first round has... unexpectedly passed away. Samuel is in need of a partner or he risks continuing on in the games alone. Because I am *such* a gracious host, I will allow you to untangle yourself from this situation and leave the Volkovs to suffer on their own."

The world grinded to a halt. He was offering for her to be someone else's partner? Why did that thought make me feel so...uneasy? I should be fucking ecstatic to finally be rid of her. To say goodbye and never have to see her again.

So, why was I feeling the exact opposite?

Her eyes connected with mine. We didn't say a word to each other, and yet, so much was said through that one look alone.

Would she do it? It was her chance to finally get away from me like she'd been saying she wanted to do from the moment we met...would she take it?

I held my breath, waiting.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm going to have to pass." Relief filled me, and I had to work hard to hide it. "I've seen what Samuel can do, and no offence, but I think I have better odds with this lot."

Talon smiled evilly. "It's your funeral." He walked to Aleksandr's cell, stopping in front of it. I squeezed the bars tightly in my hands out of frustration. I didn't want him anywhere near my children.

"You killed three of my men, even *after* they darted you."

My son just grunted, his usual form of communication.

"I assume I couldn't convince you to fight for me in a different competition? Could make you a lot of money."

That fucking bastard.

"I have a lot of money."

"*More* money."

"Not interested."

Talon hummed. "Disappointing." He moved away, making a beeline right for Illayana. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, a horrible feeling sinking right down into my bones. "You lot have proven to be very resourceful, so I think a few extra precautions are necessary to ensure you don't try to pull off some sort of ridiculous escape plan." He stepped back. "Open the cell," he commanded the guards.

No. No, no, no.

The cell doors opened. Four guards strolled in and surrounded Illayana, two of them slapping a pair of thick, metal handcuffs on her wrists before escorting her to Talon's side.

"You touch her, Talon, and I swear to God, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Talon smirked, victory shining in his eyes. He moved behind her, pressing his body up against hers and burying his face in her hair, smelling her.

I squeezed the bars even tighter, my teeth grinding.

She stayed completely still, head up, face strong, acting like what Talon was doing wasn't affecting her.

My brave little girl, putting on a strong front. Not for herself, but for us. For me.

“There’s nothing you can do, Dimitri. *I’m* the one in control here. You can spend the next few days thinking about all the nasty ways I’m defiling your pretty little daughter here.”

NO!

I rammed my body into the cell bars over and over again. “Don’t you fucking touch her, Talon! Let her go!” I screamed, Aleksandr, Nikolai and Lukyan all doing the same, but Talon just smiled, like that was exactly what he wanted to happen.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, ecstatic about the reactions his words and actions brought forth. “Let that anger build! It will make for a more entertaining fight.” He ran his tongue up Illayana’s cheek, and she shivered in repulsion.

I roared, pounding against the bars with everything I had. I couldn’t let him do it. I couldn’t let him take her. Touch her. Not my daughter. Not my fucking daughter. I had to protect her.

“*Ostanavilvat’sya,*” *Stop*, Illayana whispered, tears in her eyes from watching us hurt ourselves trying to get to her. To stop Talon.

How could I stop? She was my little girl. It was my responsibility as her father to keep her safe. I beat my fists against the bars until they were red and bloody. I slammed my shoulders into the bars until they ached with pain. I refused to give in.

“*Ostanavilvat’sya,*” *Stop*, Illayana begged, pleaded.

I was never going to fucking stop. Never. I didn’t care if it killed me. I couldn’t let him leave with her, knowing what he would do to her.

One by one, her brothers listened to her pleas, but I couldn’t. I had to keep trying. I had to save her.

“*Otes. Ostanavilvat’sya. Pozhaluysta.*” *Father. Stop. Please.*

I punched. I kicked. I screamed. I tried to rip the bars off with my bare hands. Kick them down. I did everything I could, ignoring the pain in my body with each failed attempt, but it was no use. Nothing worked.

“Dimitri,” Autumn whispered, so softly that I could barely hear her.

Releasing a defeated sigh, my aching limbs fell to my side. Illayana gave me a small smile. It broke my heart.

“*Vse normal’no.*” *It’s okay*, she said, voice strong. “I’ll be okay.”

“Aww,” Talon cooed. “How sweet. You all should try and get some rest. Trust me when I say that you will need it.”

Agony gripped me hard, refusing to let me go as I watched Talon walk out of the room, dragging my only daughter behind him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“ARE YOU OKAY?”

What a stupid fucking question to ask. Of course the man wasn’t okay. He’d just watched his only daughter being taken away by someone who would do anything to see him suffer, and the rest of his children were locked in cages right beside him.

Dimitri didn’t answer me, not that I really expected him to. He was sitting on his cot, staring at the steel door with every shred of his focus, like he was trying to will it to open. For his daughter to return, safe and unharmed.

That lost, hopeless look on his face did something to me. Made me feel something I’d never felt before—an overwhelming compulsion to help.

Argh.

What was happening to me? Since when did I give a shit about that kind of thing? Since when did I give a shit about...Dimitri?

I wasn’t a selfish person, but I also wasn’t the type to give a rat’s ass about anyone who didn’t matter to me. It just so happened there wasn’t a single soul on Earth I gave a shit about.

At least, that was what I thought.

“Butcher. You alright?” I tried again.

Still nothing. He didn’t even look in my direction.

Two of his children, Nikolai—the man I’d met briefly when he snuck in and delivered our food—and the long-haired class clown, Lukyan I think his name was, were both asleep. Aleksandr was sitting up with his back to the concrete wall at the back of his cell, his legs crossed at the ankles and arms folded over his chest. His eyes were closed, but I wasn’t sure if he was actually sleeping.

He looked exactly like his father, and I mean, *exactly*. Just a younger, slightly stockier version. Dimitri 2.0. He’d tried consoling his father after Illayana had been taken, but I wasn’t the only person Dimitri was ignoring.

He hadn’t said a word to anyone since it happened, and it had been at least a day since she walked out that door. I was sure of it.

Fed up, I decided to act.

I threw a pillow at his head. It jostled him out of his stupor, and he cut me an angry look. I waved.

“Forget I was here, did ya?”

He huffed like an angry dragon blowing smoke out of its nose, then he turned his head, going right back to ignoring me again.

He needed a distraction. Something to get his mind off what might be happening to his daughter. Something to get him talking.

“How old is she?”

His eyes flicked to me. *Jackpot*. The Butcher only had one weak spot, and it was his children.

His gaze moved back to the door. I thought he wasn’t going to answer me until he said in a deceptively small voice, “Twenty-one.”

Okay, progress.

“She’s beautiful.”

One side of his lips kicked up into a small smile. “She is. Just like her mother.”

A stab of jealousy punched me in the gut. He was still so hung up on his wife. It made me feel like such an idiot for trying to tempt him earlier.

Still, I felt compelled to try and take that sad, defeated look off his face.

“You must have started young. You barely look old enough to be *her* father, let alone your doppelganger over there.” I gestured with a tip of my head towards his son behind him.

Aleksandr's eyes were no longer closed. He was staring right at me. There was a slight crease to his brows as his gaze flicked between me and his father, but he said nothing, not interrupting us.

"I was twenty when Aleksandr was conceived. Yekaterina, nineteen. Dominik and I were married off the moment eligible wives became available, and told to make an heir as soon as possible."

"Eligible?" I questioned.

"A woman of good breeding, from the right family, who could offer my father the most advantageous deal. Sergei Volkov is all about appearances."

His father sounded like a right cunt, if I was being honest.

"It all worked out for the best, though, didn't it? Your children seem lovely."

He snorted. "My children are demons." He finally turned to face me. "Do you want children?"

I hid my shock at the fact that he'd asked such a personal question. "No," I said, shaking my head. "Don't get me wrong, I like kids. They're cute and cuddly and have no filter, so they tell it like it is. If they think you're ugly, they'll tell you. If they think you stink, they'll tell you. I like that kind of honesty. But I've never felt the desire to be a mother. I vibe more with the 'cool aunt' role. The one who would load them up on sugar and then send them home. The one they'd call to pick them up from a party their parents told them not to go to. That's about the extent of my maternal instinct." I looked away, avoiding his eyes and the inevitable judgement I knew I would find at my next words. "Kids deserve a mother who will love them, and that's not something I'm entirely sure I'm capable of."

I'd only told a handful of people about my lack of desire to have children, and each one had given me a horrified, disgusted look, like they couldn't believe a woman didn't want to do the one thing her body was literally made for.

Their opinions never mattered to me, but for some reason, Dimitri's did. I didn't want to see that same look on his face.

"Speaking as a child who had one parent who didn't love them enough and one parent who didn't love them at all, you're doing the right thing."

My eyes shot back to him. He was facing me entirely, his feet planted firmly on the ground, forearms on his thighs, fingers interlocked.

"My father was a soulless bastard who only had me because he needed an heir for his empire, and my mother might have loved me, but it was never

enough to stop the endless beatings and emotional torture my father put me through almost daily.” He focused on his hands, watching them close tightly. “I vowed the moment Aleksandr was born that I would never be like either of them. That *my* children would know what love felt like. That they would know I cared about them. That I loved them.” His eyes turned glassy. “A vow I fear I have broken.”

I slunk down onto the ground, feeling more drawn to him than ever before. *Who would have thought a lack of love and affection during our childhoods would be another thing we’d have in common? Another thing we share.*

“Your children know you love them, Dimitri.”

He shook his head, refusing to believe me. “I was tough. Strict. I had to be because of the harsh world we live in. I—” he cursed, looking over his shoulder.

Nikolai and Lukyan were still passed out cold, and Aleksandr’s eyes were closed once more, but I didn’t think he was actually asleep. Dimitri must have thought the same thing because he joined me on the floor and shuffled forward. I moved closer, and we both stopped before the line in the middle of the room.

“I’ve never said the words.” Shame layered his voice.

I knew what he meant without him having to say it. I stared at him, studying every hard line of his face. It was the rawest I’d ever seen him, and I knew it was because of the inner turmoil he was going through. I was sure seeing his daughter being taken away by a man like Talon, a man who wanted to hurt him as much as possible, had broken something inside of him.

Being cut up open like that, forced to endure every parent’s worst nightmare—well, except for mine of course—was like a form of mental torture.

“So say them,” I whispered. He searched my eyes—for what I couldn’t say, but he was utterly focused on me as if I held all the answers to his problems. I wished I did. “Say them, Dimitri. We all might die soon. Very, very soon. Tell your kids you love them before it’s too late.”

His face scrunched up in what I thought might be anguish. “It’s already too late. For Illayana.” He went to turn his head back towards the door, but I reached out and grabbed his chin, forcing him to keep his eyes on me. I

didn't want him to get sucked back down into that dark pit I'd only just managed to drag him out of.

"I don't think it is," I said, shaking my head. I let go of him, and I could have sworn he moved the slightest inch to follow me. "I know you know Talon better than I do, but I think if he was going to do something to her, he would make you watch. I think he would make you sit here, in this cell, and watch everything he did to her, knowing how utterly powerless it would make you feel, not being able to stop him." A frown crossed his face. "I think he took her to fuck with your head. It's been a day since they left, and you've done nothing but stare at that door, waiting for them to come back. So consumed with worry, you haven't slept, haven't eaten, and barely said a word until now. This is all some twisted, fucked up mind game Talon is playing. Don't let that fucker win, Dimitri."

His face hardened. A little bit of fire came back into his eyes. I smiled. A feeling overcame me, and I didn't fight it. I leant forward and hugged him.

He stiffened, going as still as stone. He didn't hug me back, but he didn't push me away either, so I was classing that as a win.

"I still plan to kill you if we make it out of here alive," he gruffed.

I laughed. "Right back at you." My gaze clashed with a set of icy-blue eyes over Dimitri's shoulder. Aleksandr was watching us again, his gaze narrowed in suspicion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“S O, TELL ME, WHAT’S been going on at home?” I asked the following day, trying to keep myself distracted. Autumn’s words from the night before had calmed me down somewhat and helped me to see things with more clarity.

She was right. If Talon was going to do anything to Illayana, he would make me watch it, knowing how powerless the whole thing would make me feel. He took her to fuck with my head, and I wasn’t going to allow it.

Still, the thought of my daughter with him made me feel uneasy. I needed to keep my mind busy and occupied, or I risked spiralling back down into that deep, dark pit of despair and hopelessness.

Aleksandr, Nikolai and Lukyan stayed silent, exchanging awkward glances with one another. I knew that look and what it represented. They did that whenever they had something they didn’t want to tell me.

It was like an unspoken rule amongst my children. That if one of them had something they didn’t want me to know, they would *all* keep quiet about it, presenting a united front against me.

However, there was always one weak link.

I stared down my youngest son. He avoided my eyes, looking everywhere but my direction. He glanced at the ceiling. Inspected his fingernails, acting shocked like he'd never seen them before. Played with the hem of his black trousers. Fiddled with his shoelaces.

I continued to stare, waiting him out. I didn't mind. I had all the patience in the world. Lukyan wouldn't be able to help himself. He would look at me eventually.

His gaze flicked to me from the corner of his eyes.

"Lukyan. Is there something you'd like to say?"

His eyes moved to Aleksandr and back to me quickly.

Something about Aleksandr, then.

Lukyan pinched his lips together like it was taking everything he had not to just open his mouth and tell me whatever it was.

Aleksandr glared in warning. Nikolai shook his head at Lukyan, eyes wide.

Lukyan's face turned red.

Any minute now. Any minute—

"Aleksandr got married!"

I whipped back in shock. *What?*

Nikolai slapped his palm against his forehead.

Aleksandr growled. "You're such a tattletale!" he barked, thumping his fists against the cell bars.

"What? You saw the way he was lookin' at me, all evil-eyed and shit. I'm not chancing a round in the ring with him!"

"A round in the ring," Aleksandr blew out, aghast. "We're most likely going to die here, you idiot. You're never going to *get* to the ring."

Lukyan stayed quiet for a moment, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Huh. I didn't think about that." He laughed softly to himself. "Whoops."

Aleksandr spun to face me. "Lukyan's the one who crashed your Bugatti last year."

Lukyan gasped in outrage. He jumped to his feet. "Yeah, well, Belka didn't smash that upstairs window, Aleksandr did!"

The dog? What the—

Aleksandr snarled, glaring daggers at his younger brother. "Lukyan fucked someone in your office!"

My office? No, not my office. That little—

Lukyan spluttered, his gaze whipping around the room. “Nikolai broke that coffee table three years ago!”

The coffee table they all denied smashing?

“Hey!” Nikolai yelled.

Lukyan covered his face with his hands. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t think of anything else for Aleksandr.”

“So you threw me under the bus?! You dick.”

They all began to yell at each other. *Again.* I sighed. They switched between English and Russian, pointing and gesturing with aggression.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Soft laughter came from behind me, and I turned to glare at the culprit. Autumn sat cross-legged on her cot, picking at what was left of her breakfast that had arrived an hour or so ago.

“Not one word,” I warned.

She zipped her lips shut and pretended to throw away the key.

Funny.

I put two fingers in my mouth and blew a loud, ear-piercing whistle. All three of them shut up. I ignored all the bullshit secrets they’d blabbed about and focused on the only one that mattered.

“Aleksandr.” He turned to face me, expression guarded. “You got married?” The hurt cut deep. My firstborn child had gotten married, and he didn’t even want to tell me?

Was I more like my father than I thought?

“Who?” I asked. “That cartel woman?”

“Drea, and I don’t want to hear any bullshit about how it’s too quick and I barely know her. She’s strong and fierce and utterly loyal. Her soul is like the sun. Beautiful and bright. She’s magnificent, and there’s nothing you can do or say to make me give her up—”

“Aleksandr,” I said softly, interrupting him. “Does she make you happy?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

I nodded. “Then that’s all I need to know.”

He blinked, surprised. Did he really think so little of me? All I cared about was if my children were happy.

If we *did* make it out of there alive, I would need to find a new place to live. A married couple needed their privacy. The family house would have gone to him eventually, anyway, might as well do it now.

I blew out a tired breath, running a hand through my hair. “Fill me in on everything else I’ve missed while I’ve been gone. *Everything.*”

And they did. Aleksandr told me all about the aftermath of the attack Dominik launched. The one that led to my incarceration. How many men we lost. The damages caused to the house. Dayton.

I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t really like the kid much, if I was being honest, but he should have been safe in my home.

Instead, he’d died.

Poor Mikhail. He was my oldest friend. He sent his son to me to be trained, and he’d returned in a body bag.

Jesus. How did everything get so fucked up?

Nikolai spoke next, telling me about his trip to New York to canvas for new clients—an order given to him by Aleksandr, the new *Pakhan* in my absence. It had come as quite a surprise to me. It was Valentino’s territory. Even after hearing about what happened to him—that he’d been caught by the police—I still might not have done the same, perfectly content to keep things as they were.

Aleksandr was thinking ahead. Expanding the business and doing it the correct way, making sure to vet clients first and put them through rigorous testing before committing.

It showed me what I already knew. Aleksandr was ready to take my place.

I thought perhaps it would bring forth feelings of sorrow and grief, knowing my time was coming to end.

But it didn’t. Pride bloomed in my chest instead.

Nikolai also told me about Tatiana, and I had to act like I didn’t already know about their relationship because the conversation we needed to have was one to be had in private. Just the two of us.

It killed me not to say anything. I had already left it too long, and regret slithered down my spine at my decision to wait for him to be the one to bring the topic up.

Lukyan had a stalker—a *female* stalker—which was a bigger surprise than the initial news itself. But of course, Lukyan was excited about it, though he tried his best to hide it. There was no denying the way his eyes lit up with anticipation as he talked about it, though. He couldn’t wait to find out who it was, and most likely, stalk them back.

Then, there was the news about his engagement to Anya Tarasov instead of Aleksandr. I suspected that was because of the cartel woman. And that

my father, upon hearing the news about Dominik's attack on my home, had garnered nothing but some amused one-liner.

Fucking asshole.

All in all, everything seemed like it was going fine without me. Better than fine, actually. They all seemed to have everything under control.

But that left me wondering who was the one running the shots now that they were all there with me.



The time had come.

Aleksandr, Nikolai, Lukyan, Autumn and myself were all standing in the middle of the training area, anxiously waiting for the next round of Talon's games to begin. We'd been dragged from our beds, cuffed and shackled from head to toe and marched down into the depths of the colosseum in single file. We could hear the crowd behind the stone walls, cheering and chanting, demanding the show they'd come for.

I had no more time. I needed to tell my children I loved them. Illayana was still missing, but I had three others standing right there in front of me, and knowing what our odds were, I couldn't let it happen without saying the words.

"Go warm up. I don't know when we'll be called to the arena, but I want you all to be ready when we are," I commanded.

"Yes, Father," they all parroted back.

But when Nikolai went to turn, I grabbed his arm, stopping him. He frowned, looking down at my hand in confusion.

Autumn was standing at my side. "Give me a moment with my son," I told her.

She saluted me. "As His Royal Grouchiness commands." She bowed eloquently and then bounced away. Humor trickled through me, and I had

to refrain from letting a smile slip free.

I focused on Nikolai. “Are you sure you’re okay with what we discussed last night?”

When the lights had gone out, we’d all had a family talk about what we were going to do when the games began. Talon might have said he wasn’t going to make me fight my children, pitting us against each other, but I wasn’t going to take his word on that. There was every chance he might change his mind, shove us all in that arena and tell us to fight it out. That only one person could leave alive.

If that was the case, we needed to come up with a plan.

And we had.

Nikolai smiled sadly. “I’m sure. I’m not capable of killing any of you.”

“Nor am I.” I squeezed his shoulder softly. Guilt smothered my chest, making tears burn behind my eyes. “It’s a father’s job to protect his children, and I am so sorry that it is a job I have failed miserably.”

“Father—”

I held up a palm, silencing him. I needed to get it out, and I needed him not to interrupt me. “If I thought for even a moment that it would make a difference, I would beg Talon to let you all go.” And I meant it.

I would get on my hands and knees and beg Talon, tell him anything he wanted to hear if I *really* thought it would make a difference. But I knew it wouldn’t. Talon was never going to give up the opportunity to watch me suffer.

“But we both know that’s pointless,” I continued, overwhelmed with so many emotions that I felt like I was going to explode. “I wish this was never a position you had to be in—”

“*Father,*” Nikolai pressed sternly, cutting off my rambling. I looked him in the eyes and held nothing back. I’d learnt from such a young age to hide my emotions. Not to let anyone see what I was feeling. Whether I was happy or sad. Scared or surprised. I got so used to it that it became hard for me to express anything anymore.

But at that moment, I *wanted* Nikolai to see it all. To see everything I felt. The sadness. The hopelessness. The desperation. And most importantly, the love I had for him.

“We all agreed,” he whispered softly. “If only one of us can get out of this place alive, it’s Illayana.” There was no resentment in his voice. No anger or distress. Just conviction. And it made me feel ten times worse.

I could never pick between my children. I loved them all equally. I might favour Illayana a tiny bit because she was my little girl, but that didn't mean I loved my boys any less. They were *all* my everything. Every single one of them.

But if, worst case scenario, Talon decided to make us fight each other to the death—something none of us were capable of doing—we all decided to sacrifice ourselves so that Illayana would be the last one standing.

I'd flat out refused the idea when Aleksandr first suggested it. How could I possibly let that happen? How could I just stand by and let my sons die? But none of the other solutions I'd managed to come up with would ever work.

So, the plan was simple.

Autumn had agreed to end my sons' lives, quickly and painlessly. Then, I would kill *her*. She wasn't privy to that specific detail of the plan, though. It was something Aleksandr, Nikolai, Lukyan and I had discussed while she was asleep. In Russian, just in case she happened to wake up and overhear us. After she was dead, I would slit my own throat, leaving Illayana as the sole survivor.

It was a horrible plan for a thousand different reasons, one of which being that the idea of killing Autumn made my stomach churn. Made me feel so sick I felt like I would throw up. But I had no choice.

I could never kill my children. *Never*. And I already knew from experience that if I refused to fight, Talon would just kill us all anyway. So, after Autumn took care of my sons, I would take care of her so that at least one of my children would survive.

I leant forward and rested my forehead against Nikolai's. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath in. Images flashed behind my eyes. The day he was born. His first laugh. The first time he'd called me "Dada". Him running around the house at two years old, giggling and smiling.

"YA tebya lyublyu," *I love you*, I whispered.

He stared at me, completely dumbfounded, his mouth hanging open, and it made me feel like the worst father in the world. *Does he not know that I love him? More than anything?*

Before he could respond, I moved away, leaving him to stare after me in complete shock. I had two more sons to talk to, and I was even more determined than ever to make sure they knew exactly how important they were to me.

“Aleksandr.”

My eldest son straightened from his stretch, standing tall with his hands behind his back, posture perfect. My little soldier. God, the guilt smothering me... I could hardly fucking breathe.

I stared at him, wondering where to even begin. There was so much to say. So much I felt he needed to hear. That he *deserved* to hear.

One thing, though, stood out from all the rest.

“I’m sorry.”

He whipped back in shock, eyes wide.

I continued on like I didn’t notice. “I put a lot of pressure on you. Was tough on you. Expected more from you than anyone else. Blamed—” I sucked in a harsh breath, finding it hard to voice my next words. “Blamed you for things that weren’t your fault, and I am so sorry. You deserved better. You all did. I struggled with what happened to your mother, but that doesn’t excuse my behaviour. I never should have treated you the way I did all those years after her death.”

I remembered it vividly as if it only happened yesterday. The way I ignored him whenever I called the house to check on things. The way he would try to talk to me, and I would just shut him down. He held everything together when I left to avenge Yekaterina, and I never thanked him.

Aleksandr swallowed, visibly upset by what I was saying, as was I. But I had to keep going, no matter how much it hurt me to acknowledge what a terrible father I had been all those years.

“I treated you unfairly. Said things I regret. That I wish I could take back. I can’t change the past, but I want you to know, I couldn’t be more proud of you, *moy syn, my son.*” It took everything I possessed to keep my voice steady. “You’re everything I wish I was and more, and I love you with every fiber of my being.”

His whole mouth dropped open at my revelation, much like Nikolai’s had done. He spluttered, completely at a loss for words, and that was okay. I wasn’t sure I was prepared for whatever he would say, anyway.

So, I gave him a small, sad smile and moved on. I wished I was stronger than I was, but the truth of it was that I was fucking coward. Aleksandr was the type of man who would forgive me for my sins, despite the fact that I didn’t remotely deserve it. He would do it because family meant everything to him, and he constantly put those he loved before himself.

Lukyan looked at me when I approached, pausing in his movements of sparring with an invisible opponent. “Don’t worry, Father,” he said, coming to a stand. “I know the plan. I won’t let you down.” His face was a mask of complete and utter seriousness, absolutely no sign of the jokester personality he possessed.

It was a side of him that rarely made an appearance. My youngest son was carefree by nature. He liked to laugh. Make other people laugh. Crack jokes during awkward and inappropriate times. He always saw the best out of bad situations and never let anything drag him down. He was wholly himself, every second of every day, and he didn’t give a fuck if people didn’t like it.

The truth of it was... I admired him. He was everything I was not.

He deserved to know that.

“You know, I always wished I was more like you.”

His jaw gaped open.

I internally sighed. *Looks like I am surprising all my children today.*

“You have this way about you, Lukyan. This fun, devil-may-care attitude towards everything you do that *used* to drive me absolutely mad. Until I realised the reason why it made me so crazy was because I wished I could be a little more like you. I wished I could see the fun side of things. Wished I enjoyed my life the way you do.”

He didn’t move, didn’t speak. His jaw remained open like those stupid clowns at carnivals that you try and throw a ball into to win a prize. I tapped under his chin, and he closed his mouth, still looking at me like I’d grown an extra head or some shit.

“We most likely won’t make it out of this alive, so I want you to know how incredibly smart I think you are. I think you’re so smart, you sometimes get bored because you’re not being challenged enough, and that’s my fault. I should have given you more responsibility. Trusted you more. You have so much potential, *moy malen’kiy ogonek, my little light*, and one of my biggest regrets in life will be that I never gave you the proper opportunity to show that.”

Lukyan sucked in a breath, his lip quivering. “You haven’t called me that in a long time,” he murmured softly.

Another kick to the gut.

Lukyan in Russian meant “light”, and when he was a toddler, running around the house with a smile that would just light up the entire room, I

used to call him that. But he was right. I hadn't done it in a very long time.

"I love you, Lukyan. So much—"

"Oh my god! I love you, too!" he screamed.

I grunted when he slammed into me with so much force that I stumbled back, his arms coming around to lock me in a tight bear hug. Chuckling softly, I patted him on the back, a smile pulling at my lips.

"Ladies and gentleman, are we ready for the next round of the Til Death Games?!" My spine stiffened at the voice that came blaring from the TVs hanging on the wall.

I pulled back, seeing a man dressed in a tuxedo and holding a microphone displayed on each screen.

Aleksandr, Nikolai and Autumn joined me and Lukyan as the man introduced himself and the events that would be taking place tonight. Tension filled me.

Here we go.

But where is—

"Father!"

I spun around quickly, seeing Illayana running towards us. The huge pressure disappeared completely from my chest at the sight of her.

"Illayana!" I caught her when she jumped into my arms. Overwhelming relief made me exhale a deep breath as I squeezed her tightly. *She's alive. She's okay. She's alive.* The words chanted in my head over and over again.

When I hadn't seen her there when we first arrived, I had started to panic. I thought perhaps Talon had done what I feared he would do all along. But she was there. She was alive, and she was okay.

Her brothers swarmed us not even a second later, pestering her with question after question that made her laugh at their fretting.

"I'm fine," she said, stepping out of my embrace. "Talon didn't touch me." *Thank fucking God.* "That's not what he wanted me for. He just wanted to fuck with you all. Rile you up for the games. Plus, I told him I'd die before I let any of his men touch me, and he said that would interfere with what he had planned, so he just left me locked up in a room the whole time."

My gaze sought out the pair of fiery green eyes at my side. Autumn looked up at me, a happy smile on her face. She was right. Talon just took Illayana to fuck with my head, and she'd called it. She was able to see what I had been too distraught to see myself.

For that, I felt indebted to her, more so than I already was.

Before anything else could be said, Talon's soldiers surrounded us, barking out a command. "You two, against the wall" –he pointed to Autumn and myself– "You four, over near the door," he said, signalling to my children.

Nobody moved.

"Now!" he demanded, waving his machine gun around like a lunatic.

I couldn't speak for Autumn, but my children wouldn't move unless *I* gave the order. They were loyal like that. They all looked at me, and I chose to wait a few extra seconds to show that they weren't moving because he had ordered it, but because *I* had.

I gave the slightest nod, and they all moved to where the guard indicated.

Autumn and I went to the wall and placed our palms against it, our legs shoulder-width apart. We'd done that dance before, right before our first round of the games. That was when they'd finally remove the collars, and that was something I wasn't going to fight them on.

The guard approached from behind and used a key to unlock my collar. I may have forgotten I was wearing the thing half the time, but I was glad to no longer have pounds of explosives around my neck. The moment it left my skin, I stretched out my neck, moving it left to right. Autumn did the same.

We were herded back over to Aleksandr, Nikolai, Lukyan and Illayana, the roar of the crowd getting louder and louder with each passing second.

I hated the fact that I didn't even have a second to talk to Illayana like I'd spoken to my other children, because the next words out of the presenter's mouth signalled the start of the games.

"Introducing the next competitors of the Til Death Games, The Crimson Death and the most notorious family in the Bratva, the Volkovs!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



AUTUMN DEVALOS

THE CHEER OF THE crowd was so loud that it hurt my ears.

“Volkov!”

“Volkov!”

“Volkov!”

I stepped out into the arena, bright, blinding lights bearing down on me, making it difficult to see anything up in the stands. It was probably better that way. If I caught the faces of anyone up there, I’d hunt them down and kill them.

If I got out of there alive, that was.

My toes sunk into the sand with each step, my skin buzzing with excitement despite the danger I was about to face. Dimitri’s children took in the arena, his youngest, Illayana and Lukyan, looking around with wide eyes. It would be a sight to behold if you were seeing it for the first time, that was for sure.

There was only a moment to adjust to our new surroundings before that asswipe, Talon, appeared on the massive jumbotron suspended over our heads.

“Wow! Aren’t we excited?!”

The crowd cheered even louder, something I honestly didn’t think was possible.

“I present to you, the Volkovs, the most lethal and dangerous family in all of the mafia,” Talon continued. “You’ve all heard of the Bratva Butcher. Allow me to introduce you to his children. All cut from the same cloth as their murderous father. All born and raised to be ruthless, violent killers. And all brought here to you by *me*, to fight for their lives in what promises to be the show of a lifetime!”

I eyed Aleksandr, Nikolai, Lukyan and Illayana out of the corner of my eye, my interest officially peaked. Based on their behaviour down in the cells, I never would have chosen those specific words to describe them. Then again, the people I was looking at were suddenly not the same people I’d been locked up with for the past few days.

They were completely different. Gone were the squabbling siblings who fought and argued over every little detail, and in their place were hardened individuals, not a shred of playfulness or humanity on their faces.

Well, everyone except for the long-haired one. He raised his hand and waved to the roaring crowd with a smile on his face like he was some sort of superstar out on the red carpet, and they were his adoring fans. Then Aleksandr thumped him on the back of his head.

Ha.

“Now, I’m sure you’re all dying to know what we have planned for the family tonight.” *Aren’t we all?* “As these are not ordinary people, I thought something special was in order, something different. Something to even the odds a little bit and ensure there is a good, brutal fight for you all to see. So, tonight, it will be a fight to the death between the Volkovs and me. Or, more specifically, *all* of my men.”

Oh, shit.

The arena flooded with soldiers not even a second later, all coming in from different points of entry.

What in the Kill Bill fuckery is this?

“Back to back!” Dimitri ordered, and in unison, his children spun on the balls of their feet, forming a tight circle, standing shoulder to shoulder, facing out towards the small army descending upon us.

I stood outside of the circle with my jaw open. *Who the fuck are these guys? The fucking military?*

They conducted themselves like they were—on a battlefield, anyway. Moved as if they'd had some sort of formal training. It was like a flip of a switch. They went from being normal, everyday siblings who liked to roast the shit out of each other to serious, deadly soldiers in the blink of a fucking eye.

It was actually quite impressive. No wonder they were so notorious.

Dimitri clasped my arm, jolting me out of my daze. He moved me into position beside him as more of Talon's soldiers entered the arena, so many that I couldn't even fucking count. There had to be *at least* fifty of them. Probably more. Some of them carried weapons; knives, machete's, axes, baseball bats. No guns that I could see, though.

How disappointing.

Fuck. Maybe I should have taken Talon up on his offer to switch partners.

“Aleksandr, with your sister.”

Dimitri 2.0 stepped back at his father's command, moving next to Illayana.

Talon's stupid, smug face was on the jumbotron, his arms spread out wide. “Have I delivered, or I have delivered?!” he roared.

The crowd cheered, stomping their feet and clapping their hands so hard and so loud that it felt as though the entire arena shook.

“Now, as this is a fight with the Volkov family, it's only fair that *all* members of the family participate. And, would you look at that, we have another one right here!” The camera panned out, revealing Dominik.

He was instantly surrounded by soldiers. “What? What's going on here?!” Dominik demanded, but no one answered him. The soldiers grasped him tightly, and he disappeared from the screen. A few moments later, he was thrown right into the arena with us.

Ohhh, karma is good.

“Father,” one of Dimitri's son's growled.

“Leave him. He's *mine*,” Dimitri vowed. His gaze was locked on his brother like a lion sizing up its prey.

Talon continued to drone on and on, but I stopped listening. My eyes moved over the soldiers before me one by one, my adrenaline soaring. The thundering screams of the crowd fuelled the bloodlust pounding in my veins.

Never in my life had I been in a situation like that. I killed people for a living, sure. But that was through planning and subterfuge. Sneakiness and

lies. I killed from the shadows. I embedded myself deep within people's organisations, earned their trust, and then, when they least expected it, slit their throats.

Very rarely would I find myself in a position where I was forced to fight that many people at once.

That didn't make me nervous, though. It made me *excited*. Exhilarated.

Finally, a fucking challenge.

It was going to be a complete free-for-all. No holds barred.

I couldn't wait. I knew I was going to die; there were simply too many of them to even hope for survival.

At least I would be able to take a few of the fuckers with me, though. As many as I could get my hands on.

Deep, bassy music began to play, signalling that the games were about to begin. We all prepared in different ways. Dimitri cracked his neck, one side then the other, before putting his fists up. Lukyan jumped up and down on the spot, shaking out his hands. Illayana cracked her knuckles and let her hair down before tying it back up in a tight bun. I stretched my arms above my head, twisting my body at the waist, left to right.

Talon's soldiers shifted from foot to foot, tossing their weapons from hand to hand. Some of them looked nervous, sure—it was a nerve-wracking situation—but most of them had smug smiles plastered to their faces. They knew how drastically outnumbered we were. That *they* were going to win the fight.

I felt the need to say something, so I went with what came naturally. "If we don't make it out of this, Your Royal Grouchiness, it has *not* been nice working with you."

What a bold-faced lie. Those last few weeks... I'd never felt so alive. But I would take that secret to my grave.

Dimitri grunted. "Same to you, devil woman." Our gazes clashed. He could see I was full of shit. *I* could see *he* was full of shit. Neither of us acknowledged it.

What cowards we were.

"Let the games begin!" Talon roared.

Things kicked off with a motherfucking *bang*. There was no hesitation. No fucking around. Everyone just ran forward, throwing themselves right into the chaos.

Without a weapon, I was at a disadvantage, but that didn't last long. I didn't need a weapon to kill someone.

It came naturally to me.

I dodged multiple attacks as I ran, blades whistling past my skin by a hair's breadth. When I returned with my own strikes, I didn't falter. I dodged left and struck out with a roundhouse kick to a soldier's face so hard that he spun through the air, landing roughly on the ground. I ducked under the swing of a baseball bat and front-kicked a soldier right in his solar plexus before lashing out with a punch to the left and then the right.

I jumped back, narrowly avoiding the sharp edge of an axe, and then side-kicked a soldier in his chest.

It was a never-ending, brutal onslaught of attacks. I would defend from one side just to be attacked from another. The adrenaline hammering in my body helped mask the pain of the strikes I couldn't avoid.

All I could do was fight, fight, fight. If I stopped, if I slowed down for even a moment, I was dead.

Despite the fact that I was very much preoccupied with trying to keep myself alive, I couldn't help but be...distracted, my gaze constantly seeking out Dimitri.

We weren't technically partners anymore. At least, I didn't think we were. It wasn't a round in the games. It was an execution. A massacre with only one outcome. It was every man for themselves. And yet, I couldn't help but follow him with my eyes as he worked his way towards his brother, prepared to help him if he needed it.

Strong hands grasped me tightly, and I locked into a grapple with one of the soldiers. *Shit.* We wrestled, his stupid face an inch from mine, his yellow teeth bared in a growl.

Yuck. "How often do you brush your teeth, dude?" I asked, disgusted. I gripped his vest tightly, using it for leverage as I jumped up and kicked him in the chest with both feet. We both flew back. I swung my arms behind me, planting my hands on the ground to flip myself and land back on my feet in a textbook backflip.

In the span of two seconds, I clocked one soldier sneaking up behind Illayana as she pummelled someone with a rock and one soldier swinging an axe right towards Lukyan's throat.

Panic pushed me into overdrive. Not for them. I didn't know them. Didn't care for them. But Dimitri *did*.

If he were to witness his children fall, it would break him.

Cursing, I rolled along the sand, snatched up a knife with each hand and hurled them in their direction with every bit of precision I possessed.

My blades hit their targets, one slamming into the soldier's chest, the other burying deep into another soldier's forehead.

I only had enough time to watch them fall before a heavy body landed on top of me. Pain blasted through me from my shoulder, hot and burning. I screamed. I swung my elbow back, hitting my attacker in the nose and knocking him off me.

I pushed to my knees, gritting my teeth at the pain slicing through me with each movement. Reaching back, my fingers curled around the hilt of a blade.

Argh, fuck.

One, two— “Son of a bitch!” I cursed, yanking out the knife. “Fucking cunt.”

The solider responsible for stabbing me in the fucking shoulder was holding his nose, blood dripping between his fingers.

“Here. Have your fucking knife back.” I threw it right at him. His head snapped back when it sunk deep into his forehead. He thumped to the ground, sand wafting into the air around his now-dead body.

A quick rotation of my shoulder told me the wound wasn't serious despite the blood I could feel dripping down my back. Fatigue started to weigh on me, but I pushed through it, getting to my feet.

Chaos surrounded me on all sides. People fighting. Screaming. Blood spraying through the air. Cries of pain echoing out into the night. It was complete and utter mayhem.

I glimpsed Dimitri across the blood-soaked battlefield, locked in a brutal fight with his brother. Every now and then, he'd have to drop his guard with Dominik to defend an attack from one of Talon's soldiers. It propelled me toward him, overwhelmed with a feeling of desperation.

I fought my way over to him inch by inch, punching and kicking, slicing and dicing with weapons I picked up along the way. I ignored the aches in my body, the cuts and bruises on my skin, and fought with a single-minded focus, one thought in my mind.

Get. To. Dimitri.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“DOMINIK!” I ROARED OVER the booming crowd, my insides burning with hatred.

Every part of me ached, pain pulsing from different parts of my body, but I ignored it all, honing in on my twin brother with every shred of focus I possessed.

The vicious sounds of combat beat in my ears. The ring of steel on steel. The bellows of agony. The pleas of mercy... It all contributed to the war raging on around me.

“Dominik!” I bellowed again, pouring every ounce of anger I felt into that one word. Every ounce of pain and betrayal.

My brother’s gaze snapped to me. He snarled, baring blood-stained teeth at me. He snapped the neck of one of Talon’s soldiers in his hands and then stood to his full height, puffing out his chest. His arm rose into the air, and he moved his fingers back and forth in a “bring it on” gesture.

Oh, it’s on, motherfucker.

I flipped the blades I’d collected on my way over into a reverse grip and charged ahead. We were still a fair distance away from each other, so I was

forced to defend myself as I ran.

I blocked a punch with my left hand and sliced the soldier's throat with my right. Someone ran at me head-on. I didn't slow down.

Pumping my legs even harder, I launched myself into the air and hit him with a flying knee strike right into his chest. He flew back. I landed into a somersault, rolling along the ground to stop next to his body. I plunged my knife deep into his forehead, ripped it out and threw it to the side to hit another soldier in the chest. I spun, throwing my other knife as someone else came running towards me, hitting him in the thigh. He went down hard.

Then I was up, running again. Dominik and I clashed like a pair of raging bulls locking horns. We grappled, snarling at one another.

"You just *had* to show off, didn't you?" Dominik spat, his fingers digging painfully into my arm.

That was his problem. What was *always* his fucking problem. He thought I was constantly trying to one-up him in everything I did. When, truth be told, I didn't even care enough to try.

It just came naturally.

"Jealousy is such an *ugly* emotion, brother." Condescension dripped from my words, and it pissed him right off.

Like I knew it would.

He snarled, attacking me in a blind rage. I defended his blows with minimal effort. Any smart person would know I was intentionally trying to rile him up because a person who fought with anger made mistakes.

But my brother wasn't a smart man. Never had been.

"Why did you have to have *everything*?" Dominik shouted. We danced in a circle, both of us attacking and blocking strikes. "All of Father's attention." *Strike*. "All of his time." *Strike*. "All of his *love*."

I blocked his next strike by trapping his arm under my armpit, and then I grabbed a fistful of his shirt, pulling him close to me. "*Otets ne lyubit nikogo, krome sebya!*" *Father doesn't love anyone but himself!* I growled in his face. "How is it possible that after all of these years, you still cannot see that?!"

Dominik shoved me away, refusing to hear or even comprehend anything I was saying. He'd always been blind to the horrible acts our father committed, never able to think anything bad of the bastard.

One of Talon's soldiers charged me, swinging his leg in a powerful arc. I hooked my arm under his leg and swung him over my shoulder, slamming

him to the ground. Then I snapped his neck, turning my attention right back to Dominik like nothing had happened.

“Oh, I see it!” He bit his words out through his teeth. “I see how you manipulated him! Made him think *you* were the better son. Turned him against me. ‘Be more like Dimitri’. ‘Fight more like Dimitri’. ‘Think more like Dimitri’. All my life, it was always you, you, *you!*” An angry, bloody-thirsty look crossed his face, one filled with so much hatred that I thought it might burn me alive.

Another one of Talon’s soldiers came at me. I ducked under his fist and front-kicked him in the chest, sending him flying back. Several times, I was forced to take my eyes off Dominik to defend against someone else.

It was infuriating.

Dominik picked up a blood-stained axe from the sand and hurled it towards me, zero hesitation in his movements. I turned my torso to the side. As the weapon whistled past my chest, I stuck my arm out behind me and caught the axe by the handle. I spun in a circle, building momentum, and launched it right back at him.

In Dominik’s hands was a shield, as if he’d anticipated exactly what I’d do and hurriedly picked it up. The axe clashed against the shield with a deafening *bang*. Dominik threw the shield to the side and stared me down.

“You took *everything* from me,” he hissed, hands clenched into fists at his sides. “My birthright. My title. *My life!* The role of *Pakhan* was mine! And you just took it from me!”

“It was never yours! It was *ours!*” I snarled. “We came into this world together!”

“And we’ll leave it together,” he vowed. “We *all* will.” Triumph shone in his eyes. “Look behind you, Dimitri. Look at your children, fighting for their lives, getting weaker and weaker with each passing second. I might die here today, but I die knowing my last act on this earth is taking *you* down.”

I shook my head. “As short-sighted as always, Dominik.”

He frowned, failing to comprehend the meaning behind my words.

“Father can’t have any more children. The old bastard has tried. He’s got no more swimmers left. When he dies, he’ll have no heirs to succeed him, and it will be all *your* fault.” I moved forward, covering the distance between us inch by inch. He was far too preoccupied processing my words to notice. “You know what that means? It means your last act on this earth won’t be taking me down. It will be destroying *Father’s legacy*.” Dominik

paled, the consequences of his actions finally hitting home. I moved closer. “You’ve worked your entire life trying to impress that man. Trying to make him proud of you. And you know what you’ve done instead? You’ve given Father one more reason to be disappointed in you. To hate you.”

His eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Good. I continued to twist the knife.

“Father’s only memory of you now will be the son who destroyed his entire empire. The son responsible for letting the Volkov name die out, and we both know how important that is to him.”

Dominik’s head hung forward in what I could only deduce as shame.

That wouldn’t work for me at all.

I stopped in front of him and placed a hand on his shoulder as if I was offering comfort. “Dominik.” I softened my voice, giving off the illusion I cared.

He raised his head. I waited until his eyes were locked with my own, and then I plunged the knife hidden behind my back deep into his heart.

Shock registered across his face, a pain-filled gasp falling from his lips.

I smiled, evil and sinister.

“I want *my* face to be the last thing you see,” I whispered, dangerously low. “For you to know that your last desperate attempt to beat me...*failed*.” I twisted the blade deeper, and he choked, blood slipping out of the side of his mouth and down his chin.

I wished I had the time to savour the kill. To truly enjoy it. I had envisioned the moment hundreds of times. I wanted him to suffer. To beg. To cry.

But there just wasn’t enough time.

“*Svidimsya v adu, brat.*” *See you in hell, brother.* I ripped out the knife, flipped it into a reverse grip and ran the sharp edge of the blade across his throat.

Blood poured out, running down his front and drenching his clothes. He fell to the ground, crumpling like a piece of paper.

I stared down at him, sure some emotion was about to smack me in the face. Regret? Sorrow? Grief?

I felt nothing but pure satisfaction.

Finally. He’s dead—

Bang!

I spun, my eyes frantically moving around the arena.

That sounded like a gunshot.

A million thoughts streaked through my head at once. Where did that come from? Who was shooting? Who got shot? Had Talon finally had enough of this stupid farce and decided to just pick us off one by one?

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I crouched to one knee, searching desperately for my children through the sea of bodies around me. That was when I noticed Lukyan running towards Illayana, and any of Talon's men who got even remotely close to him wound up with a bullet to the head.

Someone is protecting him?

The glint of metal out in the distance, high above the stands confirmed what I already suspected. There was a sniper up there, and they were protecting Lukyan.

What was going on? Was it a rescue?

I didn't have time to waste thinking about it. I had to keep fighting. I had to make my way back to my children. Where was Autumn?

Did I care where Autumn was?

No.

Yes.

Oh, fucking hell.

Even as I tried to deny it to myself, I knew I was full of shit because as I searched for my children, there was a small part of me that was looking for her too.

I'd been so consumed with getting my revenge I'd failed to keep an eye on anyone.

I stood to my full height, took one step and—

BOOM!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“WHAT THE FUUUUUUUCK?!” I shrieked as my body was hurled into the air by a strong, concussive force. I barely had the right mind to curl myself inwards to try to lessen the blow. It all happened so fast.

I crashed into a hard body. We went tumbling to the ground. Reflexes took over, and I tried to jam the knife in my hand into the guy’s eye without stopping to process *who* I had actually landed on top of.

He blocked it just in the nick of time, the tip of the blade hovering an inch from his eye. “What the fuck, Autumn?!”

It was Dimitri. I’d just almost killed Dimitri. I would have felt bad about it, but I’d tried to kill him half a dozen times... What was one more?

“Oh, whoops.” I gave him an awkward smile, tucking the blade away. “That’s my bad.”

He narrowed his eyes and then threw me off him roughly.

Fair.

When I got to my feet, I stared wide-eyed at the destruction that lay before me. The colosseum, once a grand, beautiful monument was in ruins,

one half of it completely blown to pieces, smoke, dust and sand bellowing into the air. The people who had been sitting in the stands were now running for their lives, screaming, trying to get away from the fire and rubble falling around them.

People in tactical gear carrying machine guns swarmed the arena, coming in from all different entry points. They shot at Talon's men.

A rescue?

My gaze shot to Dimitri. He was wiping the sand off his body, his eyes moving around the arena, going from person to person. Recognition flashed across his face.

He knew who they were.

“Your people?” I asked.

He gave the barest nod as an answer. He looked about as shocked as I felt. Like me, he hadn't expected anyone to actually find us—

“Duck!” I threw my knife as Dimitri ducked quickly. It sunk deep into a soldier's chest who had been running up behind him.

“Left,” Dimitri barked. I spun right at the same time he launched himself forward, his fist smashing into a soldier's face who was about to ram a sword into my back. He looked at me, breathing heavily. “Keep up if you want to get out of here.” And then he was off, running towards the gunfire.

Guess that was better than him just straight up abandoning me.

I smiled.

He totally likes me.

I bolted after him.

Talon's soldiers were dropping like flies, no match for the high-powered weapons Dimitri's people carried. The smart ones ran away now that the tables had turned, but over half of Talon's army remained despite the overwhelming odds stacked against them.

Five of said soldiers stepped into our path, stopping us dead in our tracks. They each had a weapon of some kind in their hands.

Dimitri and I put our fists up. “You take the three on the left. I'll get the two on the right.”

He just grunted in response.

Because a simple “okay” would have been too many syllables. The dick.

I tensed my muscles, preparing to strike when a rain of gunfire came out of nowhere, taking them all out instantly. A blonde-haired man jogged over

a second later, a shit-eating grin on his face as he hiked his machine gun up onto his shoulder.

“Ahhh, DeDe, always getting yourself into trouble,” the man said, smirking at Dimitri.

I turned to Dimitri, arching a brow. “*DeDe?*” I mouthed, trying to keep myself from breaking out into a fit of laughter.

He said nothing, just glared at me, as per usual. He looked at the blonde. “Mikhail. How did you find us?”

“Kill now, catch up later.” He clicked a button on the gun, and the magazine slid out, crashing to the ground. He reached behind his back, pulling out another one, and slapped it into place before handing the weapon over to Dimitri.

Dimitri checked it over with the experience and precision of a man who’d been around guns all his life and knew exactly how to use them. Quick, precise movements, checking the mag, checking the chamber.

“And, who is this lovely lady?” Mikhail asked like he’d only just noticed I was standing there.

Dimitri barked something out aggressively in Russian that made Mikhail’s mouth drop open in shock.

“What?” My gaze whipped back and forth between the two of them. “What did he say? Did he insult me? He does that a lot. Whatever he said, it’s not true.”

Mikhail blinked. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Dimitri cut him off, speaking in Russian again.

Okay, this is getting irritating.

Mikhail responded in Russian. It sounded like they were arguing, but honestly, I had no idea. They could have been threatening to kill each other or declaring their love for one another, for all I knew.

“Okay, enough,” Mikhail shouted, switching back to English. “We don’t have time for this. We need to go.”

Dimitri gave him an affronted look. “I’m not leaving without my children.”

“They’ll meet us at the rendezvous point. Reinforcements have already been called. If we’re going to get out of here, we need to leave now—”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Dimitri snarled, cutting him off. “I’m not leaving this arena until I’m sure all of my children are out of here.”

“Argh, fine. We’ll do a lap before we leave.” He pointed to me. “She coming?”

That bastard actually had the audacity to hesitate. My mouth dropped open in outrage. “Yes, I’m coming!” I snapped.

Mikhail didn’t take my word for it. He waited for Dimitri to give the all-clear, *which he still hadn’t done!*

I marched over to him and kicked him in the shin.

“Ow! Fuck!” Dimitri hobbled, holding his shin. “Yes, she’s coming!”

I crossed my arms over my chest and nodded. *Damn straight I’m fucking coming.*

“Alrighty, then,” Mikhail cleared his throat. His hand came up and touched the earpiece in his ear. “Dimitri secure,” he said to whoever was on the other end. He signalled to the men who had formed a protective circle around us, guarding us from Talon’s men. “On me. Move out.”

Guns up, Dimitri and Mikhail took point, leading the way through the chaos and shooting anyone that got in our way. Since no one gave me a gun, I swiped up a sword and an axe from the ground as we went.

The way Dimitri moved—slick and confidently—and the way he held the machine gun perfectly left no doubt in my mind he’d had some sort of military training.

“I’ve got confirmation Illayana, Lukyan and Aleksandr are out of the arena and on the way to the rendezvous point,” Mikhail said, blasting a soldier in the chest with a rain of bullets.

“What about Nikolai?” Dimitri grunted, using his gun to block a strike from a longsword. He front-kicked the soldier and put two bullets in his chest before moving on.

“Vincenzo confirmed he had him, but there’s been no update about whether or not he’s left the arena.”

“Well, I’m not leaving until—”

“Father!”

That one word was filled with so much fear and desperation that it made even *me* stop, searching for the owner of that voice, like Dimitri and Mikhail.

“There.” I pointed across the field to where Nikolai was on his knees, cradling a blonde woman in his arms.

Dimitri took off like a speeding bullet. We followed. Some dude was fighting around them, doing his best to try and protect them from Talon’s

men. Mikhail ordered the men under his command to help as Dimitri crashed to his knees next to his son.

“What happened?” he asked, looking down at the blonde with concern.

Nikolai looked at his father, completely distraught, his eyes red with tears and voice cracking with panic. “S-she pushed me out of the way and took a bullet to the chest. The vest stopped it, but on her way down she hit her head on a rock, and now I can’t wake her. Help me. Please. Help me, Dad. I can’t—I can’t lose her. Please. Help me, help me, help me—” his whole body trembled as he spoke, his hands shaking the woman frantically, trying to wake her up. “Help me, help me—”

Dimitri stared at his son, his whole face crumpling with helplessness at the pain he could see Nikolai going through. “Okay, okay. Calm down, calm down,” he soothed, placing a hand on Nikolai’s shoulder. “She’ll be okay. We’ll get her help.”

“I have a team of doctors waiting onboard the submarine to deal with any injuries,” Mikhail offered.

Submarine? This guy has a submarine? Who the fuck are these people?

Dimitri nodded. “Alright, we need to get her on board. Come on, pick her up.”

I should have kept my mouth shut. It had absolutely nothing to do with me. And yet, I couldn’t help but offer my two cents after seeing that look of utter helplessness on Dimitri’s face when he saw how much pain his son was in.

“Stop,” I said when they went to raise her from the ground. “You need to get the bleeding under control first. Depending on how bad the injury is, she could possibly bleed out before we get there.” Nikolai paled, his eyes shooting to the woman in alarm. “Take your shirt off. Rip it up. I need about three long strips. Leave a big enough piece intact for me to use as a bandage to apply pressure to the wound.”

Nikolai immediately did as I ordered. He handed me the tattered pieces of his shirt.

“Turn her to the side, carefully. Okay, good.” I looked at the back of her head. She had long, beautiful locks of blonde hair, making it easy to see where the bleeding was coming from. There was a nasty cut right on the back of her skull. It was deep enough to be concerning—possibly life-threatening, but I didn’t say that. I could tell just by looking at him that Nikolai was holding on by a thread. He was so scared for that woman.

I pushed the fabric onto the cut and tried to apply enough pressure to stem the bleeding. The woman groaned. Quickly, I used the long strips to tie around her head to hold the shirt in place, pressing against the wound to soak up as much blood as possible.

“Okay, that’s the best we can do here. You need to get her to the doctor as soon as possible.”

Nikolai nodded. He picked her up so, so carefully, like she was the most precious thing on Earth and cradled her close to his body, tucking her into his chest.

“You four,” Dimitri began, pointing to several of the men. “Stay with him. It’s your job to keep them safe.”

“Yes, boss,” they all parroted back.

“Everyone, move out!”

Dimitri and Mikhail took point again, with Nikolai, the woman and me right behind them.

Getting out of the arena was the easy part. There were holes blasted into the side of the colosseum from what I guessed were pretty powerful explosives. But trying to make it through the town and down to the rendezvous point Mikhail kept referring to?

That was the hard part.

It was utter mayhem. People running in all directions, screaming and crying for help. Several buildings were on fire, burning to absolute crisps with no one stopping to put them out. The whole place was going down and none of Talon’s people knew what to do about it.

I didn’t give a rat’s fucking ass about any of them. Let the whole place burn with all of them in it, for all I cared.

We kept a tight formation as we moved through the chaos surrounding us. Mikhail said the rendezvous point was along the beach line, so we headed straight for it, not letting anyone or anything in our path stop us.

Luckily, we weren’t met with much resistance. Everyone was more concerned with saving their own asses than trying to stop us at that point.

When we finally reached the beach, a dozen speedboats sat idle, some of them already being loaded with people. Out in the ocean, I could see the submarine Mikhail had briefly mentioned, the light from the moon reflecting off its surface, shining like a massive beacon of hope. Of escape.

We moved quickly, rushing down the small embankment to get to the boats. Some of Talon’s people were begging to be let on. The fire raging

from building to building was slowly starting to make its way towards us, and they were all freaking out about it.

None of the armed men guarding the boats allowed them to board. They'd clearly received instructions not to let anyone else enter them, and they were prepared to follow that command to the letter, even going so far as to shoot those who tried to get on a boat anyway.

The rest of Dimitri's children were there. Illayana, upon seeing us, rushed over quickly, going right for the unconscious woman in Nikolai's arms.

"Tatiana! What-what the hell happened?!" she asked, voice frantic.

"Not now. We need to get her onboard!" Nikolai pushed past her and jumped into the last free speedboat. "Come on! Let's go! Now!"

Dimitri, Mikhail and I joined him, while Illayana, some tall guy with multi-coloured eyes who hovered over her like he was afraid she would disappear and Lukyan jumped into another. Aleksandr and a woman literally half his size, covered head-to-toe in tattoos and piercings, were already waiting in their own boat with several other people, prepared to leave.

I couldn't miss the odd looks even if I tried. Apart from Nikolai, who was completely focused on Tatiana, rocking her back and forth, whispering in her ear, the other Volkov siblings kept giving me the side-eye, unable to hide their surprise at my presence.

None of them objected, though, so I supposed that was a win.

Two men pushed our boat into the water and climbed in. The engine roared to life, and then we were off, speeding across the water.

My fingers gripped the sides of my seat so tightly that they turned white. Out of all the modes of transportation we could have used to get out, it just *had* to be by fucking boat.

The ocean freaked me out.

Instead of focusing on the fact that there was thousands of feet of water below me, with god knew what swimming in it, I looked back at the island, thoroughly enjoying watching it all fall apart. Watching all the trees burn. All the buildings crumble. All the people scream. The smoke billowing into the dark sky. The flames racing along the grass.

Burn, motherfucker, burn.

Exhaustion began to seep deep into my bones. Now that we were no longer fighting for our lives, all that adrenaline that had been pumping through my body was starting to wear off. That sucked for a multitude of

reasons, the main one being that it helped keep the pain at a manageable level. Particularly the stab wound in my fucking shoulder.

My hair whipped around me in a chaotic frenzy as the boat plowed through the water, zooming towards the giant, dark grey submarine. It sat just above sea level, a tall tower with sails on either end sticking up high from the rest of the watercraft. People were disembarking from the speedboats and walking along the outer hull when we pulled up next to it. They moved towards a hatch located at the bottom of the tower that would allow them access to the inside of the submarine.

We were the last boat to arrive.

I swallowed the massive lump in my throat and tried my best to wipe any unease from my face.

I am going to have to do that? Are you having a fucking laugh? There was no protective barrier to keep you from falling into the ocean. One wrong move, one slip, and you'd find yourself plowing towards the water and right into the jaws of a fucking shark.

Aleksandr stood on the submarine, feet planted firmly, arms crossed over his chest, expression hard. Dangerous. When Nikolai got to his feet with Tatiana still in his arms, the boat rocked, causing him to stumble.

A small shriek fell from my lips. *Dear God, don't let me get eaten by a shark.*

Dimitri glanced over his shoulder at me, and I gave him a thumbs up, plastering a smile on my face as quickly as I could. His narrowed, suspicious gaze had me thinking he didn't believe the act I was trying so desperately to put on.

That hard expression dropped from Aleksandr's face immediately, replaced with what I guessed was sympathy. "Give her to me," he grunted, stretching out his arms.

Nikolai clutched Tatiana closer to his chest like the mere idea of handing her over to someone else was inconceivable. He must have realised how hard it would be trying to get onto the submarine while still holding her because he kissed her forehead softly, tenderly, before begrudgingly handing her over.

"Be careful. Don't drop her. Watch her head."

"I've got her, Nik. I've got her." Aleksandr held her tightly as Nikolai jumped up onto the submarine. He quickly took her back from his brother.

Mikhail jumped up next. "Head straight down into the ship's galley. There will be a team of doctors waiting for you."

Nikolai nodded once and took off, running surprisingly well along the wet surface of the submarine. It gave me a fucking anxiety attack.

Dimitri climbed up next. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves.

Don't freak out. Don't freak out. You'll never live it down if he sees. You can do this.

I went to follow behind him but froze when he turned, placed his hands on my waist and lifted me up onto the submarine like it was nothing at all. Beautiful blue eyes locked with mine, staring so intensely at me that it was like he was looking into my soul.

The man was such a fucking enigma. One second, he was telling me he'd leave me behind if I don't keep up, and the next, he's helping me up with such tenderness and care. It was like the dude couldn't make up his damn mind about how to deal with me.

Dimitri frowned, looking down at his hands, still on my waist. He immediately let go and stepped back, his face turning hard, impassive. He shook out his hands before they closed into tight fists. He gave me a cross, angry look, like it was *my* fault he'd reached out and helped me, and then he spun on the balls of his feet and marched away.

See what I mean? Fucking enigma.



The inside of a submarine looked exactly as I predicted. Dull. Cramped. Bland. It had long, thin hallways that I had to turn sideways to get through, and ugly steel walls. It was kind of what you'd expect if you crossed a spaceship with the NASA Command Centre. Enormous computers and monitors everywhere. Big, oversized buttons and dials. Giant machines that looked like they could destroy the world with the press of a button.

Decor aside, it was actually a pretty impressive vessel. I'd never seen a submarine before, let alone been inside one. Despite how fucking awesome the whole thing was, it made me incredibly wary. What kind of connections did these guys have to be able to call in a fucking *submarine* like they were calling a goddamn uber?

We were all sitting in the galley—a space usually reserved for cooking meals and eating them, but it had been reconfigured as a makeshift infirmary. Based on what I'd observed on my way through the vessel, I suspected it was because it was the biggest space available on the submarine. Several doctors were tending to the injuries some of the soldiers had sustained during the rescue. Stitching up open wounds, strapping broken bones, etcetera, etcetera.

Across from me, one of said doctors snapped off his pair of latex gloves and threw them into the trash. "That's all we can do for now."

Nikolai apparently didn't like that answer. He jumped to his feet, and if it wasn't for the fact that Dimitri stepped into his path, I was sure he would have tackled that doctor to the ground and beaten him to death. "What the fuck do you mean 'that's all you can do'? She's still unconscious!"

"And I suspect she will be for quite some time."

Nikolai growled.

The doctor licked his lips nervously. "Mr Volkov, please understand. She's sustained quite a significant head injury. I've done all I can for her here, but she needs a CT scan to rule out any brain damage or internal bleeding."

Nikolai looked at Tatiana, clutching his chest. He swayed slightly, almost like it was all too much for him and he was going to pass out, but his father was right there, helping to keep him standing.

"So do the scan," Nikolai demanded.

"I can't." Fear flashed in the doctor's eyes, but he kept going. "We don't have that kind of equipment on board. We're a trauma team. We assess, triage, and for the really severe cases, we try to keep the patients alive until we can get them to hospital."

All the colour drained from Nikolai's face. "Is-is—"

"Is she going to die, Doc?" Dimitri asked in place of his son.

The doctor hesitated briefly. "I'm not sure. Look, her vitals are good. She's breathing on her own. The only thing I'm concerned about at the moment is whether the blow to the head has caused a brain bleed. For right

now, we monitor her. Keep an eye on her, and if there are any changes, come get me immediately.”

Nikolai took those instructions like they were the gospel. The man didn’t move from her side the entire time. He held her hand. Placed his ear on her chest to hear her heartbeat. Held his hand in front of her nose and mouth to ensure she was still breathing. He took a wet rag and cleaned her face and arms.

I’d asked Dimitri before what love felt like. He’d described it, but that... That was the best representation. I could see the love Nikolai had for that woman as clear as a bright blue sky. It was in everything he did. The way he cared for her. The way he looked at her. The way he didn’t give a shit about anything else going on around him, only focusing on her.

Even when others tried to talk to him—urge him to eat something, shower, or sleep—he refused, staying right by her side.

And at *his* side was Dimitri, watching over his son. It was quite strange. When I first met him, I’d pegged him as a ruthless, emotionless robot who didn’t give a shit about anyone or anything. And while the ruthless part was still true, I’d come to realise how wrong I actually was in my original assessment.

Dimitri hid his emotions behind a thick, impenetrable wall, and he only allowed those he cared about to get through. And even then, they only saw glimpses of the man behind it. Never the whole being.

Sitting back, observing him being there for his son, taking care of him, doing everything he could to try and ease the pain he knew Nikolai was going through, made me see him in a different light. See that whole different side to him I was sure not a lot of other people saw. That incredibly caring, loving side.

I wonder—

“Hello.”

“Jesus, fuck,” I hissed, startled, a hand flying to my chest. I looked up to see Lukyan standing over me, a boyish smile on his face. “Uh. Hello?”

“I’m Lukyan.” He offered me his hand.

I know? “Autumn,” I said instead. I glanced at his hand and then up at him. He didn’t lower it, waiting. With a sigh, I shook his hand. He took that as an offer to sit down next to me.

“You’re Australian, right?”

How did he—

“I heard you speak a few times. I have an ear for accents. Took me a while to place yours, but I eventually got it.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t sure what else to really say. *Why is he talking to me?* The rest of the Volkovs were making a point to ignore me. In fact, everyone on the vessel was. Not that I minded. I much preferred to be on my own, anyway.

“Do you know Margot Robbie?” Lukyan asked.

I frowned. “The actress? Uh, no.”

“Do you know the Hemsworth brothers?”

“No.”

“Nicole Kidman?”

“No.”

“What about Hugh Jackman?”

“No.”

“Crocodile Dundee?”

“Are you just going to name every famous Australian you know?”

He smiled. “Maybe.”

“Let me save you some time. I don’t know anyone.”

He pouted. “Damn.” He leant back, spreading his legs out wide, and exhaled loudly. “Thanks for the save, by the way.”

I looked at him from the corner of my eye. “What?”

“In the arena.” He pretended to throw a knife, sound effects and all. “*Swoosh. Pow. Ughh.*” He tilted his head to the side and stuck his tongue out, playing dead.

I stared at him, utterly bewildered.

“You hit that guy in the shoulder with a knife just before he took my head off with that axe,” Lukyan explained.

“Right.” I looked around the room awkwardly. My gaze moved over Nikolai, Dimitri and Tatiana, and my eyes did a double take when I realised Dimitri was watching us, his brows furrowed.

“It was a pretty sick move,” Lukyan continued. “Especially when you consider how far away you were. You were, what, 100 feet away? How did you do that?”

“Practise.” Dimitri was still watching us, his face getting angrier and angrier by the second. *What is his deal? Does he not want me talking to his children?* He was driving me fucking crazy with all the mixed signals he was sending me.

“Insane,” Lukyan breathed in wonder. “Anyway, here. I brought you some food.” He pulled a bowl of pasta out from behind his back and offered it to me.

Not wanting to be rude, I took it, even though I wasn’t hungry. “Thank you.”

He nodded. He leant closer to me, and I gave him a weird look, leaning back slightly. “Little piece of advice,” he whispered. “My father is a bit of a hardass, but he has the biggest heart out of all of us. I watched you guys interact. I haven’t seen him smile in over ten years, and yet, he smiled at *you*. There was this light in his eyes whenever he looked at you. Whenever he spoke to you. If you do anything to hurt him, I’ll gut you from throat to pelvis and let rats eat you from the inside out. We clear?”

All signs of that boyish, jokestar were gone, replaced by a hardened, utterly serious man, prepared to do exactly as he vowed. A dark, evil beast shone in his eyes and it put me immediately on edge. Behind that class clown exterior was a dangerous predator—one he chose to keep concealed until he needed to bring it out. A shiver of warning coiled down my spine, telling me to be cautious. That the man was a hell of a lot more dangerous than he appeared to be.

I felt the overwhelming urge to clasp my knives. “Clear.”

He smiled a dazzling smile, and the beast vanished, going back into its den. “Great! Now—”

“Lukyan!”

We both whipped our gazes to Dimitri, who was now standing, glaring in our direction. “Get over here,” he gritted out, pointing to the ground next to him.

Lukyan’s head swung back my way. “He’s also a grumpy old fart sometimes.”

“Lukyan!” Dimitri barked again.

Lukyan winked and then bounced to his feet. He waggled his fingers at me in farewell as he walked backwards to his father, who pointedly smacked him upside the head and gave him a harsh talking-to.

I shook my head and looked down at my bowl of food, chuckling softly.

What a weird guy.

For the rest of the trip, no one else said anything to me. Not even Dimitri, which I wasn’t overly surprised by. The man couldn’t make up his damn

mind about whether or not he hated or liked me, so whatever. I was fed up with the hot and cold game he was playing.

After god knows how many hours of travelling by submarine, we eventually stopped, rising to the surface where three giant cruise ships were waiting to take us the rest of our journey. I vaguely heard Mikhail explain that we had gone as far as we could via submarine, and we needed to take the rest of the way by ship—something about how a Russian submarine in American waters could cause some pretty big problems.

The entire time, both on the submarine and on the cruise ships, Dimitri stayed by Nikolai's side, supporting and comforting him as much as possible. And I just watched him—covertly, of course. I didn't want to make it obvious I was oggling him, but fuck, I was.

He'd showered and changed since then, and was in a well-fitted black three piece suit, looking every bit like a man you'd see photographed on the front cover of a GQ magazine. I liked how he looked before, rough around the edges, shirtless, covered in dirt and blood. But there was something about a man in a suit that just got my pussy tingling.

I was given clothes to change into as well, which I appreciated. Just basic pants and a long sleeved shirt that I put on after I showered. It felt good, refreshing, to wash away the taint of the island and everything I'd endured being there.

When we made port, it was chaotic. So chaotic that I was able to slip away easily. Dimitri and his children were so busy helping Nikolai with Tatiana that no one was watching me. I just stepped back and back until the shadows swallowed me up.

But a part of me kept me rooted in place, unable to walk away completely. I stayed hidden, watching Dimitri order his men around, committing every detail about him to memory because I knew it would be the last time I saw him.

Now that we were free of the confines of the island, we were also free of any promises we'd made to each other. Our truce was officially null and void. We were free to kill each other. Where once that idea had excited me, it now filled me with unease.

Dimitri shut the car door and tapped the roof twice with his hand. The car sped off with Nikolai and Tatiana inside, most likely heading towards the closest hospital. He turned, running a hand through his hair as he exhaled a deep breath.

My eyes ran over his face, that strong jawline, those mesmerising blue eyes. He really was a fucking marvel.

I saw the exact moment he noticed I was gone. His brows furrowed deeply, and he spun, looking around frantically, his eyes jumping from person to person. He marched forward, constantly roving his gaze over everything, searching, searching.

But it was too late.

“Bye, Butcher,” I whispered, stepping back and disappearing into the night.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



DIMITRI VOLKOV

ONE WEEK LATER

Someone knocked on my office door.

“What?” I snapped, not lifting my gaze from the stack of papers in my hand. Instead of coming in, the person just knocked again.

My anger spiked, which, let’s face it, was a recurring problem as of late. It had been a week since we’d returned from the Til Death Games. Tatiana had made a full recovery, which I knew Nikoali was ecstatic about. Illayana sustained minor injuries and was now back with her husband in New York. I had a feeling that man wasn’t going to let her out of his sight for the foreseeable future.

If I was being honest, I expected to come back and find everything in a fucking mess. To see our accounts in the red. Our inventory out. Possibly even a loss in clients. Even though Aleksandr told me he’d handled everything, I still thought things might not be as okay as he portrayed.

But I was wrong.

Everything was fine. Better than fine, in fact. I’d been gone for nearly two months, but you wouldn’t be able to tell because Aleksandr and his new

wife had done a spectacular job keeping up with everything.

Despite all the challenges they'd faced, they'd thrived, even going as far as bringing in new business, cornering New York and making it Bratva territory. An advantageous move. One I might not have taken myself, given what was going on at the time.

So, why was I angry all the time?

I had no idea.

It couldn't possibly be because of a certain annoying, infuriating redhead, about the fact that she just turned around and walked away without so much as a fucking goodbye. That I had no idea where she was. What she was doing. If she was alive or dead. Why would I possibly care about any of that?

I fucking didn't.

If she didn't care enough to even say a simple, "see you later", why should I?

The time we spent together wasn't by choice. I didn't miss her. Didn't miss her voice. Her laugh. Her smile. The way she made me feel.

I didn't miss any of it.

I didn't.

I. Fucking. Didn't.

My skin buzzed with annoyance and I found myself grinding my teeth together. My whole body felt tight. Like I couldn't relax, no matter what I did. Even when I pushed myself to the brink in the gym, working out until I physically couldn't stand anymore, my limbs aching and exhausted, I still couldn't fucking calm down. The irritability prickling at my insides just wouldn't relent.

Why did she just disappear like that?

Did everything we went through together mean fucking nothing to her?

Why did I even care?!

Fucking shoot me now.

There was another knock on my door, and I snapped. With a growl, I pushed to my feet and marched over to my office door, flinging it open in a rage.

"What?!" I snarled.

Mikhail stood there, that shit-eating grin he always wore plastered on his face. "Oh, I heard you. I was just waiting for you to get up and let me in."

"You couldn't let yourself in?"

“I could have. But, where’s the fun in that?” He breezed past me and strolled right on in, taking a seat in one of the armchairs in front of my desk. “We need to talk.”

I’d barely sat down before he leant over and punched me in the jaw. Hard. “What the fuck?!” I hissed, preparing to strike back, but his next words stopped me cold.

“That was for my son.”

Of course.

During all the chaos of the past week, we hadn’t had a chance to discuss what happened with Dayton.

I blew out a breath, rubbing my now aching jaw. “I’m sorry—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he cut in harshly.

The motherfucker just hit me in the face and now he doesn’t want to talk about it?

“Mikhail—”

“You heard me, Dimitri. Not now. I’m here to talk business.”

I wanted to argue. *Force* him to talk about it. But I knew from experience that I couldn’t force someone to talk if they didn’t want to. Especially when it concerned grief. It was something each person had to come to terms with in their own time.

“What business?” I asked, rearranging my stack of papers. It was all useless shit anyway. Quarterly reports on the various legitimate businesses we owned. Resumes for new soldiers. Employee profiles. Yadda, yadda, yadda.

“I want in. On Talon.”

I should have known he’d realise what I was up to. Since escaping the island, I’d tried to keep busy.

Keep your mind off Autumn, more like it.

Shut. Up.

I’d spent endless hours hunting Talon, trying to find out where that bastard had fled to after the destruction of his home. So far, I’d had shit all luck.

“Why?”

“Why not?” Mikhail shrugged. “I’ve got a score to settle with him, too. I was in that room with you when he set it on fire. He tried to kill me, too. Plus, you’re going to need backup, and I have this little inkling you won’t be asking your children for it.”

He was right about that one. I wanted to keep them as far away from Talon as possible. The crippling fear I'd felt in that arena...I never wanted to experience it again.

No. It wasn't their battle. It was mine.

Mikhail nodded. "That's what I thought." He reached into his suit jacket and pulled something out, flinging it across my desk.

I picked it up and groaned in distaste. "What the fuck is this?"

"You know exactly what that is, my friend. An invitation to Sir Allistair The Third's Annual Ball."

Yes, I could see that. And I wanted to light it on fire. "Why are you showing me this? You know I hate these kinds of things."

Smirking, Mikhail said, "Oh, I know. I remember."

For most of my life, Father had forced me to attend events just like that. High society gatherings and galas. Extravagant balls that only the rich aristocrats put together.

I was given etiquette lessons from a very early age. Taught how to conduct myself well and behave like some eighteenth century gentleman.

At first, I didn't understand why that kind of shit was so important to my father. If I didn't show up for the lessons, or fucked around during them, he used to have me whipped until I passed out.

When I was older, I found out the real reason why he treated those lessons like they were the fucking gospel: not because he told me, but because I'd uncovered the truth about our past. A truth he'd been so desperate to hide.

Our family hadn't started from the top, like my brother and I had been led to believe.

We started from the bottom. The *very* bottom.

My grandfather was nothing more than a cleaner in the Ivanov household, the family who ran the Bratva before we did. He was on the bottom of the food chain, which meant he got treated like garbage.

So did my father.

Sergei Volkov grew up dirt poor, bullied by the other children in the Bratva his entire life for being the son of a valet. After constantly being picked on, stepped on and ridiculed for his place in the hierarchy, he grew hateful. Vengeful. And he decided he was going to do something about it.

His ambitious mind came up with an ingenious plan. The help was so often ignored. A lot of people never saw them, never cared what they said in

front of them. And because of that, my father was able to screw with the Ivanovs in a way no one else could have. He watched. He listened. And when the time was right, he struck, toppling their entire kingdom. He turned the Ivanov soldiers against them with the promise of a better future under his rule.

Of course, that was complete bullshit. Once the men helped him with the takeover and served their purpose, Sergei executed them.

He could never trust them to protect him when they'd so easily betrayed their first *Pakhan*.

He'd then made sure to erase any knowledge of who he was before. He killed all the kids who used to bully him. Killed all their parents. Then, he started fresh with a terrifying reputation under his belt. He rebuilt the Bratva empire from the ground up, shaping it exactly how he wanted, making sure people only knew him as Sergei Volkov, *Pakhan* of the Bratva. Not Sergei Volkov, son of Arkadi Volkov, valet for the Ivanov family.

It was why his legacy was so important to him, why he cared about it more than anything else in the world. He'd worked his entire life to build his empire, to have people see him as more than just someone to clean their toilets. And he refused to have that image jeopardised by anyone or anything.

He took the same lessons he'd forced on me and Dominik, so people would believe we came from old money instead of the gutter. He worked his way through high society, either with bribery or threats, to ensure he was invited to all the big events until eventually, there wasn't a guest list Sergei Volkov couldn't get on.

I was dragged to them all. Forced to socialise and mingle with people I would have rathered disemboweled. Forced to dance with prospective wives set up by my father.

I hated every moment of it.

"Why the fuck would I go to this?" I asked Mikhail, flicking the gold-embossed invitation back and forth in the air. I had much more important shit to deal with than attend some frivolous party.

Like finding Talon.

And Autumn.

No!

I wasn't going to waste another fucking second thinking about her. She was out of my life. *Good riddance*. And if I ever saw her again, I'd kill her.

“Because I got a little peek at the guest list, and Anthony Danforth has marked that he’s attending.”

I stared at him. “Is that name supposed to mean something to me?”

Mikhail kicked his feet up onto my desk and leant back casually, hands behind his head. “When I first started looking into Talon, I decided to follow the money.” *Good idea. Money never lies.* “Talon has three separate bank accounts. One in the US, one in Switzerland and one in the Cayman Islands. Now, the US one and the Cayman Islands one didn’t interest me. There was nothing uber suspicious about his transactions. Just the usual rich boy shit. But the Switzerland one? *That* one was interesting.”

“How did you get access? Swiss banks safeguard their clients’ information like Fort Knox.” I knew that because I banked with one.

“A buddy of mine helped me out.”

I gave him a deadpan look.

He smiled. “Okay, okay, you got me. Someone was in the hole with me. 150 grand. I graciously offered to wipe her debt if her sister could get me some information. She just so happened to work in the accounts department at Talon’s bank,” he winked. “Pretty sneaky, huh?”

I grunted.

“Anyway, I took a look at his transactions. One in particular stood out to me. On the first of every month, like clockwork, Talon would transfer Anthony Danforth fifty thousand dollars.” He pulled out a tablet. He tapped away at the screen and then handed it to me.

On the screen was a photo of an attractive man. African American, looked to be in his early to mid fifties, with chestnut brown hair and eyes to match.

“Meet Anthony Danforth. Fifty-four years old. Born in London and moved to the States twelve years ago. He owns several high-end hair salons, and from what I can tell, has absolutely no ties whatsoever to any underground or criminal organizations. He’s just your normal, average working joe.”

“Then why is Talon sending him fifty grand a month?” I frowned.

“Swipe to the next screen,” Mikhail prompted.

When I did, a video sat idle. I pushed play. A grainy image of a sidewalk appeared, a bunch of stores lined up along the left side, the road on the right. People walked up and down the street, carrying shopping bags and chatting amongst themselves. A black Bentley pulled up and parked in front of a store called Vintage Elegance. A man got out of the car, dressed in dark

pants and a long, dark trench coat with the collar up, shielding half his face from the side. The dark cap on his head helped to further hide his identity, but familiarity sparked.

Anthony came running out of the hair salon in excitement and jumped into the man's arms. He kissed the man passionately, accidentally knocking off his hat and revealing his face.

My whole body shot to life. *Talon*.

"Anthony is Talon's lover," I whispered under my breath.

"Bingo." Mikhail clicked his fingers. "I dug further into Anthony. It turns out, once a year, he would take a sabbatical from work and travel. Whenever I tried to track down exactly where he went, I hit a break wall. No matter how hard I tried, I always lost him when he got to Naples. It was like the trail just went cold."

"He was taken to the Island," I said, connecting the dots.

"Bingo again."

My mind ran a mile a minute. "When was this video taken?"

"Three days ago. Now, before you get all excited, Talon's not there anymore. I sent men to talk with Anthony, and he clamped up instantly. He wouldn't talk. My men had orders to take him if that was the case, but Talon was smart enough to put a team of guards on him to protect him. My men couldn't do shit without attracting a fuckton of attention, so they had to leave. Unfortunately, that was exactly what Anthony wanted. The fucker went into hiding, most likely with Talon, and I can't find them anywhere."

Fuck's sake. "Here's where Allistair's Ball comes into play," I grumbled.

"Damn, Dimitri, you're really on a roll today," Mikhail said, pointing a finger at me. "Yes. Anthony has marked he's attending, so I'm thinking we go, kidnap him, torture Talon's location from him, then finish the night with some Chinese food. Sound like a plan?"

I dragged a hand down my face. It wasn't exactly ideal for me, but the pros far outweighed the cons. I could handle one night dealing with ridiculous, old-timely traditions, idiotic people and pointless conversations if it meant I got my hands on Talon.

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed with a sigh. "When is the ball?"

"In one week." Mikhail took back the tablet and stood, making his way to the drink cart in the corner of the room. "So, are we going to talk about what has you in such a foul mood, or are we just going to keep pretending everything's hunky-dory?"

Rolling my eyes, I leant back in my chair and shook my head. “Hunkydory? Who talks like that?”

“Me,” he said, giving me a thousand-watt smile. “Drink?” he asked, raising a glass in the air.

I waved a hand through the air and he brought one over, sitting it in front of me.

He took a sip of his drink before placing it down on one of the side tables. “It’s the redhead, isn’t it? What’s her name? Angela? Annabelle?”

“Autumn, and no, it’s not,” I gritted out before downing my drink in one hit.

Mikhail barked out a laugh. “Right. Are you trying to fool me or fool yourself about that?”

I slammed my glass down on the desk so hard that it shattered. “I said it’s not, so fucking drop it.”

Mikhail arched a brow, his eyes flicking to the shards of glass now all over my desk and back up at me. “So, yourself then? Interesting.”

“Mikhail,” I growled in warning.

“Dimitri,” he growled right back, completely unafraid. “You know you’ve got your people absolutely terrified of you right now? More so than usual. Your maids tried to stop me from coming in here because they were afraid you’d kill me, you’re in such a bad mood. People play the damn *Jaws* theme song when you walk down the hall.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But I did. That irritability I mentioned a while back? Yeah, that unfortunately was something I had a hard time hiding. Since returning from the island, I’d been snapping at everyone over everything.

Someone’s shoes squeaked as they walked? *Snap*.

Someone coughed or sneezed? *Snap*.

Someone ate their food too loudly? *Fucking snap*.

No one was safe. It didn’t matter if it was something small or something big. I was barking at anyone who came in my path, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“You’re going to have to talk about it eventually, my friend.” The sympathy and compassion layered in Mikhail’s voice just made me angrier.

I didn’t want to fucking talk about it.

There was nothing to talk about.

But before I could say anything back, Mikhail started backing towards the door, his hands raised, palms facing me in a show of surrender. “I’m just saying. If you won’t talk to me, talk to *someone*.”

“How about I just shoot you?”

He opened the door, a wide smirk on his lips. “You wouldn’t shoot your best friend.”

Wouldn’t I?

I got to my feet and pulled out my gun from behind my back.

“Or maybe you will. Okay, bye!”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



DIMITRI VOLKOV

I STOMPED INTO MY office a few days after my meeting with Mikhail, my mood as dark and angry as ever.

Despite keeping myself busy with preparations for Allistair's Ball, my mind continued to wander, images of fiery green eyes and vibrant red hair haunting my fucking dreams.

It didn't seem to matter that I told myself countless times *not* to think about her. Not to wonder what she was doing. Where she was. If she was fucking someone.

Denial was a funny thing. I'd told myself time and time again that I didn't give a shit about anything to do with Autumn, and yet, I found myself incapable of thinking about anyone else.

I was so sure the minute she was out of my sight that things would go back to normal. That my mind would become clear once again. That all those unwanted feelings she'd brought up within me would vanish.

But that didn't happen.

It was the opposite.

They got worse.

Why?

Why couldn't I get her off my fucking mind?

Why was I constantly having to stop myself from hunting her down?

Was I plaguing *her* every waking thought, like she was mine?

I fucking doubted it. And that pissed me off even more.

The conversation ceased the moment I stepped into my office, Aleksandr, Nikolai and Lukyan exchanging awkward looks with one another as they snapped their mouths shut in an instant. Like they were afraid to talk in front of me in case I lost it.

Smart.

Aleksandr and Nikolai were dressed for the day—full suit and tie—but my youngest son usually chose comfort over business attire. He was in a pair of grey sweats and decided it was a day to go shirtless.

I glanced around the room before locking my gaze on my eldest son. “Where’s your wife?”

The slight crease in his brows told me he was confused by my question. He slowly came to his feet. “She’s upstairs.”

“Get her here,” I snapped. “What part of ‘family meeting’ did you not understand? She’s family, isn’t she?”

I knew I was being...well...for lack of a better word, bitchy. But I honestly couldn’t help it. My patience was non-existent, my temper like a bomb about to detonate and explode.

Surprise flashed in Aleksandr’s eyes for the briefest moment before he left the room, returning a few minutes later with Drea in tow.

Standing at five feet tall, she might have been a tiny, little thing, but she was also full of fire and spirit. She was wearing a heavy metal t-shirt and ripped black jeans with a pair of combat boots to match. Every inch of skin was covered in tattoos and she had several facial piercings.

I remembered when I first met her. She’d literally run right into me. Fear had streaked across her face for the briefest moment, but then she’d surprised the shit out of me by standing her ground and not backing down. Not crumbling despite the fact that she was uneasy in my presence.

She impressed me then. And after hearing everything she’d done to help rescue us from Talon’s grasp, I was even more impressed with her.

Drea cleared her throat awkwardly. “Hello, Mr Butcher—I mean, Mr Volkov—it’s nice to meet you. Well, I guess we’ve met before. Not sure if you remember. You probably don’t, it was a long time ago. Well, not a long,

long time ago, but it was before you were kidnapped and everything—” She winced, and I found myself fighting the urge to chuckle at her rambling. “Sorry, um, Aleksandr said you wanted to see me? Maybe? Or was he wrong? I can go.”

“I remember you,” was all I replied with.

“Okay. Cool. Well, I remember you. Obviously. I mean, who wouldn’t remember you, you know, ’cause of the whole ‘kkkkkkkkkk’.” My brows rose slightly as she swiped a finger across her throat. “You’ve killed *a lot* of people. How many people *have* you killed anyway? Do you know? Do you keep count? I keep count—”

Huh. She’s a talker. Surprising, considering my son is a man of few words.

Aleksandr slapped a hand over her mouth to stop her rambling. Lukyan snickered.

I cleared my throat with a cough. “Right.” I wasn’t going to answer that question, partly because I didn’t actually know how many people I’d killed.

I stopped counting a long time ago.

Now that everyone was there, it was time to make things official.

I moved behind my desk, pulled out my chair, and instead of sitting down, offered it to Aleksandr. The room filled with silence. Nikolai and Lukyan shared a look with one another, shock mirrored on their faces.

“Father?” Aleksandr questioned.

Drea forcibly removed his hand that was still covering her mouth. “He wants you to sit down,” she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

“I know that,” he hissed back.

Aleksandr and I stared at each other from across the room, the significance of the moment not lost on him. He knew I wasn’t just offering him a place to sit down. I was offering him...*everything*.

When Dominik had kidnapped me, the role of *Pakhan* had gone to Aleksandr by default. With me gone, he’d had no choice *but* to step up, to take control. But now that I was back, they’d all assumed things would go back to normal. That we would all return to our roles prior to my kidnapping.

Me as *Pakhan*.

Aleksandr as second-in-command.

That wasn’t going to happen.

I'd come to realise several things upon my return, one of which was that Aleksandr was more than ready to take over. I'd spoken to several of my advisors, the soldiers, the maids—even to some of our clients, old and new—and everyone had nothing but high praises when it came to Aleksandr. They all said he'd handled himself well. Conducted himself professionally. That he'd thrived despite all the pressure he'd been under.

It was time for me to step aside and time for him to shine.

I remained silent, waiting, staring my son down. By offering him my seat, I was offering him the role of *Pakhan*. He, of course, had the choice to decline it if he wished. I would never force something like that onto my children. If it wasn't what he wanted, that was okay.

The choice was his.

Determination settled over Aleksandr's face. He straightened his spine, standing taller, and with his head held high, he walked over and sat down.

Pride burst in my chest.

The *shutter* of a photo being taken rang out through the room. We all looked at Lukyan. He had his phone in his hand, teeth bared in an innocent smile.

"What?" he shrugged. "We have to document this. It's a special moment."

My son, the class clown ladies and gentleman.

One down, one to go.

I moved to the corner of the room and grabbed another chair, wheeling it over to place it right next to Aleksandr. I looked pointedly at Drea, waiting again.

She glanced around awkwardly, like she wasn't sure if I was looking at her or someone else. "Is he looking at me?" she whispered to no one in particular, but Lukyan answered the way Lukyan always does.

With snark.

"Duh." Then he snapped his mouth shut at Aleksandr's scathing glare.

Any initial nervousness Drea had when she entered the room vanished in an instant. She walked over with absolute confidence, taking her rightful place alongside her husband, the new *Pakhan*.

What a lot of people didn't realise was that although Aleksandr was now the official leader of the Bratva, so too was Drea. A king needed a queen, and anyone with half a brain knew the queen was the one who held all the power.

Nodding, satisfied, I walked around the desk and stood in front of Lukyan, arching an eyebrow.

“I’ll just go sit over there,” Lukyan said, getting up and taking a seat on the couch.

“Father—”

I raised a hand, silencing Aleksandr as I sat down. I had something I needed to say before we officially began, and I didn’t want anyone interrupting me. Something both Aleksandr and Drea deserved to hear.

“During my absence, both you *and* your wife proved that you have what it takes to not only fill the role of *Pakhan*, but fill it *well*.” I poured every ounce of pride I felt into that one word, hoping he could hear my sincerity. “I see no reason why that has to change just because I’m back. I’ve spoken with the soldiers, with Ivan and Vladimir, and they did nothing but sing your praises. You held strong in the face of overwhelming uncertainty. Didn’t crumble under the pressure, but thrived. And your wife”—my gaze moved to Drea—“managed to pull off one of the biggest infiltrations I’ve ever witnessed. She showed where her true loyalties lay, and that she would go above and beyond for you. Which, my son, is one of the greatest gifts men like us can ever hope to get. It’s my time to step aside and your time to shine. *Both of you*.”

Aleksandr’s mouth dropped open. He looked at Nikolai and back at me, struggling to come to terms with what I’d just said.

I’d learnt a lot of things from being stuck in that arena, one of which was that I needed to be more honest with my children. I needed to stop holding myself back from them. I loved them all so, so much, and that love terrified me. I feared losing them like I lost Yekaterina. Feared experiencing that devastating, crippling loss all over again. Because of that, I held them all at arm’s length, thinking that by doing so, it might lessen that pain should I lose them, too.

But that was idiotic.

I was self-aware enough to realise that now.

“What... Uh,” Aleksandr licked his lips. “What will you do now, then?”

“Usually, there’s a transition period when new leadership is underway, but based on what I’ve heard, you don’t need it. I’ll still be here, though, in case you need me or need any advice. But ultimately, you’ll be in charge.”

That got my youngest son’s attention. “Ooo,” Lukyan sang, straightening in his seat. “Does that mean *he* gets to boss *you* around for once?”

A tiny bit of humor trickled through me. Aleksandr arched an eyebrow, waiting for me to respond. It was a good question, and I could feel the corner of my lips hike up into a smirk.

“I’m nothing if not respectful of the proper chain of command,” was all I said on that matter. *Let them infer whatever they want from that.* I nodded and leant back in my chair, crossing my ankle over my knee. “The meeting is yours, son.”

Aleksandr straightened, and with no hesitation, dived straight into it. He discussed several key problems going on, and every second I sat there listening, I just grew more and more proud of him.

Turns out, a lot of shit went down while I was gone. My children had been quite busy dealing with Franco—Nero’s brother, the fucker responsible for kidnapping Illayana (the first time). He was in hiding. They’d also tracked down and killed the MC Gangs Dominik had hired to raid our home over two months earlier. While I was happy about that, I was also slightly disappointed. I wanted in on that action.

When we got to the topic of Talon, I said nothing of my plans. Nothing about how, in a few short days, I would be on a plane to London to attend a stupid ball held by a pretentious asshole in hopes of getting my hands on the one person I knew who had recent contact with Talon. Luckily, Aleksandr, Drea, Nikolai and Lukyan were far too preoccupied to notice I was hiding anything, the topic quickly switching to that of Lukyan’s stalker.

“What about her?” Lukyan shrugged uncaringly. He didn’t seem to be too worried about the fact that he had someone following his every move.

“Did you know she was the one who sent the location of the island to Drea? Or that she was the sniper who saved you in the arena?” Aleksandr asked his brother sternly.

The first one, I didn’t know. I was curious how Drea, Mikhail, Arturo and Tatiana had found us. But the second one, I had suspected. What happened in the arena was chaotic, but I noticed that, whoever that sniper was, they were only interested in protecting Lukyan. The rest of us might as well have not been there at all.

Lukyan’s eyes widened. “She was? How could you possibly know that?”

Drea answered, “Because I didn’t order anyone up there. Neither did Arturo, Mikhail or my brother.”

Her brother, the new leader of The Los Zetas Cartel—the same cartel that assisted Nero in kidnapping Illayana.

Wow, how things have changed.

“Okay? I don’t get what the big deal is.” *Of course he doesn’t.* I found it more difficult than I thought it would be to keep my mouth shut. But Aleksandr was in charge, and he would have to handle it. Unless he asked for help, I wouldn’t say a thing. “If what you’re saying is true, it means she saved me, she saved *us*.”

Aleksandr’s face remained hard, showing he wasn’t fucking around. “The big deal is, the woman is highly-trained, highly-skilled, has managed to sneak in and out of our property completely undetected”—*wait, what?*—“and we have no idea who the fuck she is. The big deal is that she is a massive, *massive* threat, and the moment she realises she can’t have you will be the moment everything changes.”

For once, Lukyan had no sarcastic retort. He sat there, processing his brother’s words with a frown on his face.

“We need to find her and deal with her.” The intent behind that was clear. “She’s following *you*. That means you’re the only one who can do it. You do whatever you need to do to find her, and you kill her. Understand?”

The room was silent for a moment. I thought perhaps Lukyan would fight him on it, but eventually, he agreed. “Got it.”

Aleksandr addressed a few more issues; where we sat with inventory, our new clients in New York, the progress of the new soldiers that had been sent over from Russia to help replenish our ranks.

Once he was done, I spoke. “I will be going away for a few weeks. There’s something I have to do—”

“Does this ‘something’ have anything to do with a certain feisty redhead?” Lukyan sang, full of cheekiness.

My eyes snapped to him wicked fast, the mere mention of Autumn making that dark, angry beast inside of me—who had just started to go back to sleep—roar to life, scratching at my skin. Anger burnt in my eyes, my jaw clenching, hands closing into tight fists as I glared at my youngest son, who had the propensity to say whatever stupid thing popped into his head.

Lukyan winced, looking away.

Watching Aleksandr step into the role he’d been preparing for his entire life had helped distract me, however briefly, from the crushing thought of Autumn. But suddenly, she was right back there, slinking around in the forefront of my mind like she had every right to be there.

I had half a mind to take Lukyan to the ring and beat his ass for putting her back there—

“Since we’re sharing news, I have something to tell you all,” Nikolai cut in, stopping my train of thought.

Probably a good idea.

“I’m leaving,” he finished.

My gaze whipped to him in shock. Nikolai’s words had surprised everyone so much that we all spoke at the same time, talking over one another.

Me: “What are you talking about?”

Aleksandr: “Where are you going?”

Lukyan: “Can I have your room?”

We all gave him a deadpan stare.

He shrugged. “What?” he asked innocently, his eyes moving over us one at a time. “It’s not like it’s a surprise. Of course he’s leaving. As if he could live somewhere different than Tatiana,” he scoffed, looking at us like we were the idiots.

Well, he has a point there.

The love Nikolai had for Tatiana was the type of love everyone hoped to have in their lives. The type of love I had for his mother. I could understand completely why—

Wait—had? Past tense?

“Tatiana can’t move here?” Aleksandr asked Nikolai with a frown.

I tried to keep up with the conversation, but my mind started to spiral, the implications of my thoughts making me freak the fuck out.

What is going on? I love Yekaterina. Not loved. LOVE. It doesn’t matter if she wasn’t there anymore. I will always love her, no matter what. Love. Love. Love—

“She’s pregnant.”

My thoughts cut off in an instant, my head snapping to Nikolai. Surprise hit me hard, making my eyes bug out of my head.

Did he just say what I think he said?

“What?!?” Lukyan shouted. “Already?! Damn, how strong are your swimmers?”

“Oh my god! Congratulations!” Drea squealed, jumping up and down in her chair. “A baby! How exciting!”

Nikolai smirked. “Two, actually.”

Aleksandr's eyes widened. "Twins?" he breathed out.

Nikolai nodded, his face alight with happiness.

Whaaaat? All these surprises were liable to give me a goddamn heart attack. Delight exploded in my chest, and I got to my feet at the same time Aleksandr did, moving towards him.

"Congratulations, little brother," he said, hauling Nikolai up into a tight hug.

I came up from behind and patted him on the shoulder. "Congratulations, son."

It was such a significant moment for Nikolai, and I couldn't be happier for him. But with the news must have come unbelievable anxiety after what happened the first time.

Before he left, I would need to speak with him, like I should have done years ago. It was a conversation I was in no way looking forward to, but one we needed to have.

"I wanna get in on this." Lukyan slammed into us, his arms wrapping around us and his head resting on Nikolai's back. "This is so nice," he breathed dreamily.

Aleksandr grunted. "Get off me."

"Andddd look at that, you ruined it, ya big grump."

Laughing softly, Nikolai stepped back. We all took our seats again.

"Just because I'm leaving doesn't mean I won't still work," Nikolai began. "I'll coordinate with our new clients in New York and oversee the deliveries and payments. Tatiana only plans to stay at FIT long enough to gain enough credits so that, when a spot opens up at a college here, she can transfer."

Aleksandr nodded, satisfied with that plan. "So when do you leave?"

"Now."



“Nikolai, stay back a moment.”

“Oooo, someone’s in troubleeee,” Lukyan sang mockingly. At my glare, he snapped his mouth shut and pointed to the door. “I’ll just—”

“Leave? Good idea,” I grunted, still annoyed with his little comment about Autumn from earlier.

He shot out the door quicksmart. Aleksandr and Drea said their goodbyes next. Aleksandr gave me a slight bow of the head, something he was no longer required to do now that *he* was *Pakhan*, but I suspected he was so used to it that it had become second nature to him.

Drea looked awkwardly between the two of us like she wasn’t sure what to do. She started to lower herself into a curtsy.

Humor trickled through me. I grabbed her arm, stopping her. “Just goodbye is fine,” I chuckled softly, unable to help myself.

She smiled. “Goodbye.”

“Proshchay, doch,” Goodbye, daughter.

Aleksandr gasped.

“What?” Her gaze whipped back and forth. “What is it?”

“I’ll let Aleksandr tell you. Now, give us the room, please.”

Aleksandr swallowed thickly before bowing his head again, this time a lot lower than the first, and then he took Drea’s hand and pulled her out of the room despite her slight protest.

“That was nice of you,” Nikolai commented after the door shut. “I know it would have meant a lot to Aleksandr to hear you call her that. To know you accept her and approve of her.”

“It’s true.” I signalled for him to take a seat. “She’s my daughter now, and she’ll be treated as such. So will Tatiana.”

He bowed his head in thanks. "*Spasibo, Otets.*" *Thank you, Father.* He sat down, a certain tenseness to his body that told me he was wary of why I asked him to remain behind. "If you've kept me back to try and convince me to stay—"

"I wouldn't do that," I said softly.

He nodded, satisfied, and urged me to continue on.

I took a deep breath, wondering where on Earth to begin. Nervousness was not something I felt often, but right then, it skated across my skin, worming its way into my gut. I feared his response, that he would be angry with me once he knew the truth.

"I'm really happy for you and Tatiana."

He smiled, bright and beaming. I'd never seen him so happy.

I hated to ruin that.

"There's a conversation we need to have. One I fear we both have been avoiding for a while."

His whole body went rigid, going stiff as a board. "You know," he breathed, somehow figuring it out from just that one sentence alone. "How... how do you know? Did Aleksandr tell you?" he asked, a slight accusatory tilt to his words.

I shook my head. "No. Of course not. Though, I am glad you finally confided in someone."

"Then, how?"

I moved the other armchair until it was directly across from him, and then I sat down. "How much do you remember?" I whispered softly. "From... that night?"

He looked away, clearly not wanting to talk about it. Not wanting to remember.

I didn't blame him.

I placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "We *need* to talk about it, son."

"Why? It's in the past. What good could possibly come from talking about it now?" he asked, voice devoid of emotion.

"*Talk to me,*" I begged.

His eyes shot to me. Drawing in a shaky breath, he said, with pain dripping from every word, "I remember everything from before I left the hospital. I remember how beautiful my son was. How h-heavy he felt in my arms." Tears welled in his eyes as he looked down at his hands like he could

picture that little baby right there, in that moment. “How broken and completely devastated Tatiana was. I remember how impossible it all seemed, to love someone so strongly, so fiercely, and have them ripped away from you, not being able to do a thing to stop it. I remember the hurt in Tatiana’s voice. The betrayal in her eyes because I wasn’t there for her. The guilt. The shame... Why are you making me relive this?” he asked, pained.

“And what do you remember after?” I pushed, ignoring his question.

“After?”

“After the hospital.”

He frowned. “Not much. Everything is kind of hazy after that.”

I nodded.

I’d suspected as much.

Taking a deep breath, I began. “I was around the corner from the house when Aleksandr called me,” I said, getting lost in the memory, allowing it to take me over. “I’ve never heard him so scared. He was absolutely terrified. He told me I needed to get home as quickly as I could. That there was something wrong with you, and he didn’t know what to do. *That* in itself had made me so scared, I ended up driving my car straight through the gates instead of waiting for the guards to open them. Your brother *always* knows what to do. For him to say that... It meant something had to be very, *very* wrong. When I pulled up, you were lying in his arms, completely catatonic. You didn’t move, didn’t speak, no matter how much we tried to get you to. You just lay there, staring off into space. When I asked Aleksandr what happened, he told me he found you in your car, just sitting there with the engine running. Aleksandr dragged you out, and then you just snapped, screaming and clawing at your chest like you were trying to get something out. Then you just...dropped.”

Nikolai listened, the slight crease in his brows telling me he had no recollection of that.

“I called every single doctor on our payroll, and they all said the same thing. *Physically*, you were fine. That whatever you were dealing with was emotional. Of the mind. I used your tracker to retrace your last steps and found out where you’d been. You’d just come from Saint Royal Hospital. So, I called them. After bribing some nurses and threatening some others, I found out what happened. Found out Tatiana had been admitted for a stillbirth delivery.”

Nikolai's frown deepened. He looked at me, hurt blazing in his eyes. "Are you... Are you telling me you knew this whole time?" he asked, incredulous. "You knew *this whole time*, and never said anything?!"

Guilt slammed into me at the betrayal on his face. "Nikolai, I—"

He jumped to his feet, anger literally pulsing from him. "Why?" he growled. "Why didn't you say anything?! I needed you! I needed someone! Anyone! Why weren't you there for me if you knew what happened?!"

Panic began to smother me. "Nikolai. Let me explain. I knew what you were going through and—"

"You couldn't possibly know," Nikolai spat. "You couldn't know the hurt, the loss I was feeling—"

"Yes, I—"

"No, you couldn't!" he yelled, cutting me off again. "You have no idea —"

"Yes. *I. Do!*" I screamed, leaping up to stand toe-to-toe with him. I dropped my guard, the façade I kept in place all the time, and allowed him to see the pain I shared with him. The pain only someone who'd lost a child could know.

His chest rose and fell with deep, heavy breaths as his eyes ran over my face, studying me. He gasped softly. "Mother?"

I collapsed back into my seat, mentally exhausted. But I knew I had to keep going. "She wasn't as far along as Tatiana was. Only twenty-one weeks. But...yes." I stared off into space, every detail from back then bombarding my senses. "It was a few years after you were born. Everything was going great. We found out it was a girl." I smiled as the memory played before my eyes, the happiness and excitement Yekaterina had at finally getting the little girl she'd always dreamed of having. "Then, your mother had a terrible fall. She lost her footing and fell down the stairs. We rushed to the hospital, but—" I sucked in a breath, unable to even finish the sentence, the pain was so great.

Nikolai lowered himself slowly back into his seat, listening quietly.

Clearing my throat, I continued, but it took everything I had to keep my voice from shaking. "Your mother was devastated after it. She blamed herself, no matter how many times I told her that it wasn't her fault. It was an accident. No one was to blame. She was so traumatized by it, she decided that she didn't want to have any more children."

"Is-is that why there's such a big age gap between Lukyan and I?"

I nodded. "If she didn't want to have any more children, that was fine with me. I had two beautiful sons. I was happy. Then, when you were about ten years old, Aleksandr twelve, she fell pregnant with Lukyan. Everything obviously worked out okay, and he was born happy and healthy, so she decided she wanted to try one more time for another girl."

"And got Illayana," Nikolai finished.

"Yes," I said smiling. "When I found out what happened with your son, I made the mistake of assuming you'd want to deal with it and grieve the same way I did: alone. I never spoke about it to anyone. Not even your mother, unless she brought it up. The pain was crippling, and I preferred not to think about it at all. Hurt less that way. I foolishly thought that if you wanted to discuss it, you would have come to me. So, I waited. I waited for you to broach the subject. To confide in me. But you never did. Then, so much time passed, I wasn't sure how to approach it. I..." I looked down at my hands, ashamed of myself. "I let you down. I failed you. And for that, I am so sorry, my son."

Nikolai remained quiet for a moment. It was a lot of information to process, so I gave him the time he needed, not saying a word until he was ready. "I...understand your thought behind it. I do. But you had to know I was hurting. Did you just not care?"

"What? Of course I cared, Nikolai," I said sincerely, but the look on his face told me he didn't entirely believe me.

I couldn't really blame him for that, and in a way, I definitely deserved it. But I didn't want him thinking that. Thinking so little of me. That I didn't care about it or him.

I got to my feet and went to my desk, pulling out my personal iPad. This one was mine. Not for business. It had photos and videos of Yekaterina. Of Aleksandr, Nikolai, Lukyan and Illayana when they were children. Babies. Videos of their first steps. Their first words. It was the only device that had them. They were for me and me alone.

Activating it with a swipe, I entered my passcode and then went straight into the files I had hidden. Security footage from around the house.

I turned the device to face Nikolai and pushed play on the video that sat waiting. "I didn't leave your bedside for over seventy-two hours, Nikolai," I said softly.

I didn't need to watch it because I knew exactly what it would show. Nikolai, lying catatonic on an infirmary bed I'd had installed in one of the

dining areas, several IVs hooked into his body and a heart monitor machine next to him.

Nikolai took the iPad, watching the footage with wide eyes. He pressed down to make the video fast forward. The time stamp on the bottom of it showed how long he'd been in that state. The entire time, I was there, sitting and sleeping in a chair next to the bed, reading a book, eating food from a tray, pacing the room, repositioning him every few hours so he didn't accumulate bedsores.

I couldn't say exactly why I decided to keep the footage. Maybe it was for that very moment. So I could prove that I wasn't as much of a heartless bastard as I might have seemed. Maybe it was so I could alleviate the guilt I had over failing to be there for my son because I wasn't willing to deal with my own trauma.

I truly didn't know.

Nikolai's hands shook as he watched me zoom around the room, taking care of him. He looked up at me, his mouth opening and closing. "I... I don't know what to say. I don't...remember this."

Taking back the iPad, I locked it and put it on my desk. "No, I didn't think you did. Like I said, the doctors said that, physically, you were in perfect health. But losing your son, the guilt you felt over not being there for Tatiana, caused you to shut down. For three days, you lay there, and I couldn't leave you until you came out of it. When you eventually did, you had no recollection of it. I was afraid to push you on it because I feared you'd slip back into that unconscious state, and since you didn't mention anything about what happened with your son, I thought you were just dealing with the loss the same way I had." I shook my head. "It in no way excuses what I did. I should have been there for you after. I should have spoken to you about it. Let you know I knew so that if you wanted to talk about it, you knew you could come to me. I failed you as a father, and I'll live with that guilt for the rest of my life—ooff."

Nikolai hugged me, crashing into me and wrapping his arms around me so tightly that I struggled to breathe. For a moment, I sat there shocked, not sure what to do.

Hug him back. I looked up to see the ghostly image of Yekaterina standing behind him, a small smile on her face.

I raised my arms and hugged him, and I didn't let him go until he was ready.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



DIMITRI VOLKOV

*T*HIS IS GOING TO be pure hell.

I adjusted my cufflinks, trying to mentally prepare myself to walk through the double, gold ornate doors in front of me.

It was the last place I wanted to be, locked in a room with a bunch of pretentious people who were so used to having things done for them that I doubted they even wiped their own asses.

Despite knowing what could come from the night—a possible location on Talon—I was tempted to turn the fuck around and go home. Events like that just made me want to drive a spike through my head,

Allistair Vanderbuilt was a seventy-two year-old, uber-privileged man who had a slight obsession with the eighteenth century. He held a ball at his residence, Eughton Castle, once a year to feed that obsession, inviting all his aristocratic friends and anyone rich and famous enough to bring attention to him and his ball.

Criminals like myself were good for that. We brought a certain flair to those kinds of events that excited the guests. The thrill of being in the same room as a murderer was something all those bored housewives liked to

experience. Plus, if we were being honest, the majority of us were richer than everyone there put together.

We, of course, didn't advertise exactly what it was that *made* us criminals. But, rumours travelled fast in those types of circles.

I was known to the outside world as a ruthless businessman who'd done nefarious things to get to the position I was in.

Which, in part, was true.

Allistair took old traditions from back in the 1800s and incorporated them into his events, like the extravagant outfits and the dancing. But he also modernised it in other ways, insisting each year there be some sort of theme to make the night more memorable.

The year's theme was masquerade, which was why I was dressed in a \$600,000, all-black Stuart Hughes Diamond suit and holding a stupid mask that only covered the top half of my face in my hands.

"Tell me again why we can't just kidnap this guy *after* the ball?" I grumbled, looking at Mikhail. "That way we don't have to *actually* attend."

He rolled his eyes, coming to stand at my side. We were alone in the hall, having arrived over an hour after the ball had officially started. "You've been such a grouch, lately. You know exactly why. You want to risk this guy slipping away again, and with him, any chance of finding Talon. Huh? Huh?"

"No," I muttered under my breath.

"It's not going to be that bad," he said, snapping his mask onto his face. It only covered his eyes. It was black in colour, with an intricate design of lines and swirls similar to mine.

Anyone who actually knew Mikhail would know it was him in an instant. It did shit all to conceal his identity.

"We'll go in. We'll mingle a little. If we haven't found Anthony by the time dinner is served, we'll stay—"

"We are *not* staying for dinner," I cut in firmly, straightening my spine. "It's bad enough that I have to suffer through the formalities of this stupid thing. I'm not being subjected to sitting down and conversing with these people. I'll end up shooting someone. We find Anthony and we get out. End of story. No fucking around." With a frustrated grumble, I put on my mask and gestured to the door with a flick of my head. "Let's get this over with."

Mikhail placed his hands on the golden door handles and turned his head to smirk at me. "Remember, big smiles."

I glared. “Just open the fucking door.”

He barked out a quick laugh before opening the double doors with a great, big flourish.

The ballroom was a sea of people, all dressed eloquently in fashionable ball gowns and expensive suits. Classical music played lightly in the air from the string quartet sitting up high on the balcony overhead. It was a beautiful, wide open space, grand and opulent in its design with crystal chandeliers and ornate, gold fixtures. It was like stepping back in time, the outside world just completely fading away.

Mikhail and I stepped further into the room, the doors shutting behind us. One tradition I was glad Allistair didn’t carry over into the twenty-first century was the need to announce those who arrived. Mikhail and I were able to slip in completely undetected, the other guests already immersed in deep conversation and not noticing that another two patrons had entered.

Several waiters walked past with trays of champagne. Mikhail snatched one up quickly and leant into me to say, “Okay, you take the left side of the room, and I’ll take the right. If we find him, remember to play it cool. We need to get him alone so we can knock him out and slip away without drawing attention.”

“I remember the plan.” A waiter offered me a drink, and I shook my head. He moved on. “Call me when you find him.”

Mikhail nodded and stepped away, disappearing into the crowd of people.

Taking a deep breath in, I skirted the edges of the ballroom, my eyes constantly searching for my target. The masks everyone wore made it a little more difficult to find Anthony, but it wouldn’t make it impossible. I had his physical description memorised, down to every minute detail.

African American, 6’1, brown hair, brown eyes, small scar on his right cheek, slim nose, strong jaw, long sloping forehead.

I repeated it in my head as I moved, scanning everyone around me. Some of the people I recognised from previous events. Margaret DeShawn, a woman in her late sixties who liked to park herself in a corner of the room, surrounded by her minions and gossiping about the other guests without an ounce of subtlety. She was wearing a long-sleeved beige gown with a square neckline and luxury lace ruffles. Her mask matched her outfit, but instead of it being secured around her head, it was attached to a stick that she was holding up to her face.

Her husband, Micheal DeShawn, owned one of the biggest whiskey distillers in the world. He also had a propensity to sleep with his secretaries, who were usually on the younger side.

Dillion Newman, a well-known British politician, was talking with a few other men, a glass of champagne in his hands as he stared openly at the women in the room. Most likely trying to decide which one he was going to try and take home. I'd spoken to him once or twice. The conversation left much to be desired. He had the personality of a walnut.

So did Rafahel Van Burek, an auburn-haired man who owned several tobacco manufacturers. He inherited his fortune and businesses from his father, who was one of the most leading men in the world when it came to the manufacture and distribution of tobacco in the 1940s.

Jin Park and Minjun Han were also there. Half brothers who I knew for their illegal activities in counterfeiting luxury goods and money. I'd met them several times at various events. You had to be careful around them. They liked to steal from other guests—usually expensive jewelry—and use that to create near-identical fake pieces that they would sell for ten times what they were worth.

As I moved, skating through the sea of people around me, I spotted Allistair sitting on a gold ornate chair on a raised dais. It was where he always sat, like he was the king of fucking England and we were all his subjects. Another reason why I hated the man. He rarely mingled, always preferring to sit up there on his throne and have everyone come to him.

I would *not* be doing that.

Some people tried to converse with me. A few even recognised me and called me by name. I had zero desire to talk with anyone, so I merely gave a slight head nod in greeting and continued on my way, never slowing in stride. Several women attempted to approach me. They saw the suit—a suit that screamed money—and thought I would be easy pickings for them. They were beautiful women, gorgeous by society standards, and were most likely used to getting any men they set their sights on.

It happened every time I came to one of those stupid things, and it would always get on my fucking nerves. They would give me what I was sure *they* thought was a dazzling smile. A smile that had gotten men to fall at their feet in the past, and therefore, they expected me to do the same.

I wasn't the least bit interested, and I made that clear by glaring at every woman who threw me a seductive smirk, making them shrivel and back up

the way they'd come.

Where the fuck are you, Anthony? Where are you—

My whole body stiffened when my eyes landed on a woman in the crowd, dressed in a floor-length, silk green gown that hugged her body perfectly, accentuating luscious curves. She had her back to me, long, thick tendrils of vibrant red hair running down her spine. I couldn't see her face, but recognition sparked regardless, excitement exploding in my veins.

It can't be.

She was talking to a man I did not know. Average height, Dr Phil haircut, pointy nose, her hand on his shoulder in an intimate gesture as if they knew each other well. I was locked in place, unable to look away, my eyes running the length of her body. Up and down, up and down, that recognition just flaring to life. It didn't matter that I couldn't see her face. My body *screamed* at me that I knew her, so much exhilaration running through me that I started to shake. She whispered something into his ear and then began to walk away, her back still to me.

My feet moved to follow without any conscious thought, like I was possessed, unable to stop myself from going after her. From seeing if she was the woman who'd been haunting me day and night for the past two weeks. I tracked her, my eyes never leaving her as I slipped in and around the other guests, determination in my steps.

She walked with grace, her movements unhurried as she made her way out of the crowd and down one of the many corridors at the edge of the room. I sped up, slipping into the hallway behind her. If she sensed my presence, she didn't let on, continuing to walk at the same pace as she turned down another corridor, then another.

My heart slammed into my chest, pounding so hard that I could hear it in my ears. My skin buzzed with anticipation, every part of me almost trembling, my mind going into overdrive.

I was almost on her. *Almost there. Only a few more steps—*

She spun, quick as fucking lightening, and shoved me up against the wall with a knife to my throat.

Fiery green eyes locked with mine, and I couldn't help but smile as she whispered in a soft, silky voice, "Hello, Butcher."

I traced every inch of her face, my eyes running over her soft smooth skin, her nose, those plump, rosy lips. Excitement soured within me.

Like myself, she was wearing a mask that only covered the top half of her face, hers black and lacy, the design beautifully intricate. It added a certain mysterious flair to her persona, her red hair a stunning contrast around it.

My smile morphed into a playful smirk. “Hello, *malen’kaya d’yavolitsa, little devil.*”

Her eyes narrowed. She pushed the blade deeper into my skin, and I had to suppress a groan as a slice of pain cut through me.

“Give me *one* good reason why I shouldn’t just slit your throat right fucking now,” she growled low.

“As bloodthirsty as always, I see.” I tapped the blade I had pressed against her ribs in warning. She might be fast, but so was I.

Her gaze flicked down and back up again quickly. Challenge shone on her face.

“It’ll take me less than a second to drive this knife straight through your ribcage. You might get me, but I’ll *definitely* get you.” I leant closer, my lips mere inches from hers as I whispered, “Do you want to play, Autumn?”

Her body shifted even closer, pressing right up against mine. “Oh, I want to play.” Something dark flashed in her eyes. “I want to play with your head like it’s a goddamn soccer ball.”

Fuck, I’ve missed that fire.

I had no idea what the fuck had come over me. All I did know was all those emotions I’d been battling for the past few weeks were taking over, a dark, ravenous beast pushing its way to the surface, demanding not to let her slip through our grasp again.

But, as usual, when that beast tried to rise, I pushed it back into its cage with one thought.

Yekaterina.

And with that thought came the guilt. The anger. The despair. Guilt over thinking of another woman in a way that should only be reserved for my wife. Anger at Autumn for causing those unwanted feelings. And despair for realizing that I could never have her.

I shook off the lust burning in my veins and glared her down. “What are you doing here, anyway? I highly doubt you were invited.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” she asked, affronted.

I shrugged lazily. The knife to my throat remained, but I wasn’t scared. Wasn’t worried she would kill me. The only thing that worried me was how

excited I was that *she* was the one holding it there. “This is a pretty exclusive party,” I commented.

“And my *net worth* isn’t high enough to receive an invitation?” she implied, referring back to something I’d said to her when we were trapped on Talon’s island.

“I didn’t say that.” A smug smile tugged at my lips. “*You* did.”

She made an adorable, frustrated little growl that shot straight to my cock.

Cut it out! We hate her, remember? I mentally told the appendage, but the fucker didn’t listen to me, growing harder and harder the longer she glared at me like that. The longer she kept that damn knife pressed to my skin.

“I see you’re just as big of an asshole as I remember. Here I was thinking maybe it was the island that brought out that dickish personality of yours.”

“Yeah, well, you’d be wrong. And you still haven’t answered my question. What are you doing here, woman?”

“I’d tell you, but it’s none of your goddamn business,” she hissed.

Our glaring battle continued. Could she feel it? All that tension just blazing between us, hot enough to set the air on fucking fire? She had to. It couldn’t just be one-sided.

Footsteps echoed from up the hallway. Autumn and I looked in the direction they came from and back at each other. We both scowled. At the same time, we put our weapons away, me tucking it back into the sheath at my waist and Autumn stepping back to put hers in the sheath strapped to the inside of her upper thigh.

I missed the feel of her body instantly.

My eyes ran down the length of her smooth, tanned legs. *What would they feel like wrapped around my head?*

“Just stay the fuck out of my way, Butcher,” she said, manoeuvring her dress back into place to hide her knife. “I’ve got a job to do, and I don’t need you screwing it up.”

She’s here on a job?

As she marched away without even a simple goodbye—*again*—Mikhail came around the corner. He walked past her, stopped, turned his upper body around to check out her ass, turned back, pulled a face as if to say “not bad” and then continued on.

“Okay, so, little update,” he began, stopping in front of me. “I found Anthony, and—” He frowned, pointing to my neck. “What happened

there?”

I touched my throat. Blood coated my fingers.

Huh. Must be from Autumn.

“Cut myself shaving,” I said, sucking the blood away, my gaze still locked firmly on where Autumn disappeared around the corner.

Fuck. Why was I so disappointed she walked away? The image of *me* pushing *her* up against the wall, *my* knife to *her* throat as I fucked her raw soared into my brain. The beast thrashed in its cage. Guilt hit me again at the realization that there was a part of me that wanted to have sex with another woman, but it didn’t help quell the beast. It beat at the bars of its prison, and it was getting harder and harder to keep it locked away.

Mikhail’s frown deepened. “But you didn’t have that when we walked in —”

“I said I cut myself shaving,” I snapped. “What about Anthony?”

He gave me a cross, haughty look, propping his hands on his hips. “You know, one of these days you’re going to snap at me, and I’m going to lose it and punch you in the face.”

Exhaling a sigh, I rolled my eyes, pushing off the wall. “And when that day comes, I’ll most likely deserve it. Now, what about Anthony?”

“Well, I found him. Problem is, it’s proving more difficult than I thought to get him alone. I know you don’t want to stay for the dinner, but—”

“We’re staying for the dinner.”

“Now, just hear me out for a second because—wait, what?”

“We’re staying for the dinner,” I repeated more sternly, straightening the lapels of my suit jacket.

He looked at me as if I’d grown a second head or something. “I—wha—” he spluttered, shaking his head. “I don’t even know what to say to you right now.”

“So say nothing.” I ran a hand through my hair and rolled my shoulders back, determination settling deep into my bones. I let Autumn get away from me once. It wasn’t happening again. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



AUTUMN DEVALOS

O *F-FUCKING-COURSE.*

Dimitri Volkov, the man who'd consumed my every waking thought for the past two bloody weeks was there, and I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Fucking hell,” I blew out as I made my way back to the party.

Walking away from him had been one of the hardest things I’d ever done. Staying away from him... Even harder.

I didn’t expect it. I was sure once I was finally away from him that the strange infatuation I had would disappear right along with him. I mean, the man drove me batshit crazy half the time with his snobby attitude, annoying insults and stupid, handsome fucking face.

And yet, there was this aching need deep in my soul to be near him. To see him. To hear his voice.

I tried everything I could think of the past few weeks to keep myself busy in the hopes he would vanish from my mind. I worked out. Read. Binge-watched all my favourite comfort television shows. Even threw myself into my work, completing three contracts. I’d never done that before in that time frame.

But none of it worked.

Dimitri was still there, occupying my mind to the point where not a single day had gone past since the island that I hadn't thought about him. Wondered what he was doing. If he was missing me too.

How idiotic of me. The man hadn't missed me. Missed *insulting* me, maybe. Missed fucking with my head with his whole hot and cold routine.

But he hadn't missed *me*.

"Stupid, arrogant, good-looking son of a bitch," I grumbled under my breath.

My hand itched for the comfort of my blades, but given the social setting, I didn't think it would be acceptable to walk back into the main ballroom holding them.

Unfortunately.

Dimitri had been right about one thing, though I would never admit it to his face. Ordinarily, that wouldn't be an event I'd be invited to. The guest list was very exclusive, and the only reason I was even there was because I was somebody else's plus one.

"There you are, darling."

Ugh, speak of the devil. I plastered a big, fake smile on my lips and turned to face the owner of the male voice.

Dr Johnathon Warren, a forty-nine-year-old psychologist who owned several private practices in London. He was a close family friend of Allistair, the man hosting the night's ball, and my next target.

He was a rather average-looking man. Sandy blonde hair, thin lips. While he'd been nothing but kind to me, the same couldn't be said for other women. According to my source, he'd raped six women in his office. Women who were struggling, looking for someone to talk to, someone to help them. He'd taken advantage of them right there without a care in the world for the consequences, telling them that even if they reported it, no one would believe them. That he was a well respected doctor who came from a rich family, capable of burying whatever investigation they tried to bring against him.

He belittled those women. Made them feel small. Alone. Worthless. All while taking whatever he wanted from them.

And one of them committed suicide because of it.

Sabrina Kays was sixteen years old and struggling with depression. She went to Dr Warren in the hopes that he could talk her off the cliff she was standing on. Instead, he pushed her over it.

Her mother, Beatrice, contacted me and asked me to put an end to his reign of terror on young, vulnerable women. Being in the mood to kill someone, I took the contract pro bono.

“Johnathon.” I accepted his kiss on the cheek with no protest, despite the fact that his lips on my skin made me want to vomit. “My apologies. There was a line for the ladies room. You were looking for me?”

“Yes.” He handed my black clutch back to me. “They’re about to serve dinner, and we need to take our seats.” He offered me his arm. “Shall we, my dear?”

I smiled, and this time it wasn’t fake. Now that it was time for dinner, it meant I was one step closer to completing my goal and getting the fuck out of there.

Looping my arm through his, I allowed him to escort me out of the ballroom and into the formal dining area. Dozens of circular tables were set up throughout the space, each one adorned with beautiful white lace tablecloths and expensive gold place settings. Most of the guests were already seated, only a few free tables remaining.

I couldn’t help but scan my surroundings, searching for the set of mesmerising sapphire eyes that set my soul on fire as Johnathon led me to one of the tables at the front of the room. He greeted people as we walked past with a simple nod of the head or a friendly smile.

“Here you go.” He pulled out a gold-plated chair, sweeping his arm across it in a gentlemanly gesture.

If I didn’t know what he liked to do in the dark, I’d almost believe the act he was putting on.

I thanked him and sat down. Seven other people were already at the table, talking quietly amongst themselves. An elderly couple—the woman dressed in a beautiful Victorian era ball gown with her hair up in a stylish up-do, the man dressed in a black tuxedo with a pair of white gloves on his hands—introduced themselves as Mr and Mrs DeShawn. I didn’t know them, but I gave them what I hoped was a friendly smile in return.

Sitting next to them was a stunningly beautiful brunette woman, Richelle Winter. She had expensive diamond earrings dangling from her ears that matched the diamond pendant around her throat.

Next to her was a man named Ian Phillips and his wife, Victoria Phillips. He was an asshole. I’d only caught the very end of their conversation when I sat down, but that was all I needed to hear to know that he was a royal jackass and she was a whiny bitch. A match made in heaven.

There was a blonde gentleman sitting next to them, Joel Miller and his African American husband, Andre Miller, both dressed in black suits with matching red ties and pocket squares.

“She’s a pretty one, Johnathon,” Ian commented, pointing his champagne glass at me. “Better than last year’s, that’s for sure. How much did this one cost?”

Victoria snickered. I had a feeling she was one of those people who was more pretty on the outside than she was on the inside.

“More than you could afford,” I said casually as I placed my clutch down on the table.

A round of laughter went through the table.

“This is Natalie,” Johnathon introduced, taking his seat. “And if you must know, she’s actually a family friend.”

False.

False, false, motherfucking false.

The truth of it was, “Natalie” was hired by Johnathon’s mother to accompany him to the event. It just so happened *I* wasn’t the Natalie his mother actually hired. I’d been monitoring Johnathon’s text messages, trying to pick the right moment to strike, when he told his mother he desperately needed to find someone to come with him. Apparently, showing up alone to those kinds of things was considered bad taste.

I kidnapped the real Natalie, stuffed her in the boot of my car and took her place. It was actually a lot easier than I anticipated. Johnathon had never met her before, had no idea what she looked like, and because all of the details of where and when to meet were in the text messages, it wasn’t difficult to just slip right into the role.

“Right. Family friend.” Ian pumped his eyebrows up and down. “Honestly, it’s like they let anyone into these things lately. Absolutely no sense to the social order of things.”

“Yes, and their first mistake was letting *you* in,” Andre quipped, tipping his head back and taking a sip from his glass.

“Ha, ha. Hilarious,” Ian huffed. “Talk to me when you’ve made your first million.”

“It’s not the same thing if you didn’t earn it. Tell me, how does it feel to spend Daddy’s money all the time?” Andre asked, arching an eyebrow.

Ian’s face reddened in anger.

Andre turned away from him and gave me a friendly smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Natalie. Ignore him. We all do.”

“I think I’ll do that,” I chuckled.

Light chatter picked up around the table, everyone falling into the casual niceties those types of events brought forth. I remained silent, not having much to contribute to the conversation if I wanted to maintain my cover. Andre and Joel were the only ones who tried to include me, which I appreciated. They were the only people around the table I didn’t want to stab in the eye with my fork.

I picked up my champagne glass, casually glancing at Johnathon’s as I brought it to my lips. There was a small vial of Thallium in my clutch—a tasteless and odorless poison that was virtually undetectable in an autopsy. I needed to find some way to get it into his drink.

Being as high profile as he was, I couldn’t kill Johnathon the way I would usually kill all my marks. His death needed to be a bit more discreet. Be done with more finesse. It needed to look like natural causes.

The best way to do that was to poison him.

Thallium was a good choice because most doctors never thought to test for it and it could take several days to actually kill the victim. Making it absolutely perfect for what I needed.

“Mind if I sit here?”

Electricity sizzled down my spine at that deep, husky voice. I looked up over the rim of my glass to see Dimitri standing at the other side of the table, one hand on Ian’s shoulder.

Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

Richelle’s mouth dropped open when her eyes landed on Dimitri and the gorgeous fucking specimen he made, standing there in a suit that was molded to his frame so well that we could see every outline of his muscles. Lust burnt in her eyes. I wanted to cut them out of her fucking head.

“Yes, I do fucking mind—” Ian’s words cut off with a frightened choke when he turned and saw that it was Dimitri asking for his seat. He paled, his whole face going white as a ghost.

The expression on Dimitri’s face was pleasant enough, but there was a dangerous look in his eyes. One that Ian saw because that pussy backtracked so fucking quick that he stuttered.

“N-no. No, not at all. Here you go.” He got to his feet, dragging his wife up with him. “Come on, Victoria.”

“But I—”

“Shut up,” he hissed when she tried to protest. He fled quickly, dragging her behind him.

Dimitri undid the buttons on his suit jacket with one hand and then sat down, eyes firmly on me.

Shivers danced down my spine. The fucking *power* that man wielded. All it took was one glance from Dimitri Volkov to send Ian running for his life.

Why do I find that so fucking hot?

There was a brief moment of awkward silence as Dimitri's companion, Mikhail, took his seat.

Richelle, now next to Dimitri, batted her eyelashes and gave him a seductive smirk. "Hi," she whispered, voice raspy. "I'm Richelle." She offered her hand like she expected Dimitri to kiss it. As if she was royalty.

He looked her up and down with disdain and then turned away from her without even saying a word.

Ouch.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure, Mr..." Johnathon began.

Dimitri stared at me for several long seconds, tension building between us before he swung his gaze to Johnathon. "Dimitri Volkov," he said, accent thicker than I'd ever heard it before.

Mrs DeShawn smiled at him. "Lovely to see you again, Dimitri."

"You as well, Margaret," he said, nodding his head once in greeting. "Andre, Joel," he addressed politely.

Johnathon arched an eyebrow. A flicker of unease flashed across his face, though he tried to hide it. "Wow. Your reputation precedes you, Mr Volkov. Don't you own like half of Las Vegas?"

"Three-quarters," Dimitri corrected, shrugging a shoulder. "But who's counting?"

"You, obviously," I mumbled under my breath.

Dimitri narrowed his eyes at me.

"Quite impressive," Johnathon continued. "I'm Dr Johnathon Warren, a world-renowned psychologist. I own several clinics throughout London."

"And I'm Richelle," the brunette said again, placing a hand to her chest to try to draw attention to her breasts.

"I heard you the first time," Dimitri barked, making her flinch. He looked me dead in the eyes, holding my gaze. "And...you are?"

Okay, so he isn't going to blow my cover...yet.

"This is Natalie." Johnathon placed his hand on top of mine on the table. "My date."

Instead of balking at his touch, like I so desperately wanted to do, I manoeuvred my hand to grasp his.

Dimitri clocked the movement, scowling. He leant forward, bracing his elbows on the table and interlocking his fingers. “Natalie,” he said, rolling the word off his tongue like he was tasting it. “You know, you look so familiar. Have we met before?”

The dick.

“Nope, can’t say we have. And I would remember. I always remember rude people.”

“I’m rude?” he asked, hand to the chest.

“I’d constitute kicking someone out of their chair when there were plenty of available seats at other tables quite rude, wouldn’t you?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

Mikhail snickered into his glass as he took a sip.

Dimitri’s lips curved up into a small smirk. “I guess that depends on who you ask.”

I gestured to the other people around the table. “Why don’t we open it up to the floor, then?”

“I think it’s rude,” Johnathon piped in, and I wasn’t the least bit surprised with his answer. He and Dimitri were having some sort of invisible dick measuring contest, and I had no idea why.

“I think it’s fine,” Mrs DeShawn shrugged. “You see, you might not know this, dear, because of your social standing” —*subtle drive by insult there*— “but there are certain levels of class. Mr Volkov simply outclasses Mr Phillips, therefore, if he wants his seat, he has every right to take it.”

Aristocratic, entitled old bitch.

“One for. One against.” I looked at Joel and Andre.

Andre opened his mouth to answer, but Joel placed a hand on his husband’s shoulder. “I think we will abstain from participating in this particular conversation,” he said smoothly.

It didn’t end up mattering. The topic dropped immediately when nine waiters appeared out of nowhere, each one carrying a plate of food. In unison, they stepped forward and deposited a plate in front of each of us.

I looked down and—

Ugh, snails?! Seriously?! Rich people, man.

“Escargot, with a side of pickled cucumbers,” one of the waiters introduced.

“Uh, excuse me,” I rushed when he turned to leave. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t eat this.” *Not unless you want me to throw up everywhere.* “Is there another option for the appetiser?”

Disdain and disgust washed over the waiter's face. I felt like I'd just committed some horrible, heinous act by asking that one question.

"This is a pre-fixed menu, each item meticulously chosen months in advance and prepared by the best chefs in the world. You either eat what Sir Allistair has chosen for you or you do not eat." He stuck his nose up in the air and then spun on his heels, marching away.

Well, alrighty then.

Embarrassment shot down my spine when Mrs DeShawn broke out in a fit of laughter, looking at me like I was some sort of idiot. Richelle joined in, shaking her head as she ate her food.

I wasn't embarrassed because *they* were laughing. I didn't give a fuck what they thought of me.

But Dimitri? Yeah, I kinda cared about that.

Did he think I was an idiot, too?

I'd taken plenty of etiquette lessons. Uncle E had insisted on them because sometimes, to complete a contract, I would be required to infiltrate events exactly like that, and I would need to know how to blend in so I didn't draw unwanted attention to myself.

I knew how to dance. Knew how to walk. How to sit with perfect posture. How to talk. Knew how to behave like I came from money, with elegance and grace.

But this was something that I didn't know, and it was painfully obvious that I didn't belong there.

I was about to tell her where to shove it when Dimitri spoke, a smile on his face.

"Margaret, that's a beautiful necklace you have on."

She gushed, touching the ruby pendant around her neck. "Oh, thank you."

His smile dropped in an instant. "Too bad it's not real."

Margaret spluttered. "What are you talking about? Of course it's real."

"Is it?" He leant back in his chair, his finger tapping idly on the table. "Because I happen to know for a fact that your husband was recently charged with fraud and embezzlement. That, in order to make full restitution for the money he stole, you were required to sell nearly everything you own and move into your younger sister's basement."

Her entire face flushed red.

"Plus, I can spot a Park Han knockoff from a mile away."

She looked down at her plate, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

Dimitri and I locked eyes. Maybe it was because I knew him so well that I was able to decipher that look on his face. It seemed to say, “Only *I* can insult you. Only *I* can fuck with you.”

My phone dinged from inside my clutch. I exhaled a relieved breath. It was the perfect excuse I needed to tear my eyes away from Dimitri’s hypnotizing gaze.

I pulled out my phone and smiled at the text, humor trickling through me.

Vanessa: Is that him?

I refrained from glancing around the room and replied back.

Me: Yes.

Vanessa: He's way hotter than you described. Like way, way hotter. Hello silver fox.

A small chuckle fell from my lips. If I were to have one friend, it would probably be Vanessa. Technically, she was a work colleague. We were both trained by Elias ,and every now and then, we teamed up on particularly difficult contracts. She just so happened to have a target there as well.

I'd vented to her about Dimitri and the island when I first returned, so she knew everything.

Well, almost everything. Some things I thought were best to keep to myself.

In my peripheral vision, I could see Dimitri staring at me, his eyes narrowed on my phone like it was his worst enemy or some shit. He hadn't touched his food. I wasn't sure if that was because of me or because he didn't like snails, either.

More plates of food arrived, but I didn't touch any of it. I wasn't hungry anyway, my mind far too focused on the brooding, hulking male sitting across from me. Everyone else around the table continued to eat and engage in quiet, mediocre chit chat while I just kept my eyes on my phone, checking random social media platforms and texting Vanessa back.

Me: He's the Antichrist.

*Vanessa: He kicked some dude out of his seat so he could sit at the same table as you. He sooooo likes you. *kissing face emoji**

I laughed, shaking my head.

“You know, it’s considered rude to use your phone at the dinner table.”

My gaze rose and clashed with Dimitri’s.

Seriously, what was this guy’s fucking problem? One second, he was insulting me, then he was defending me, then he was putting me on blast in front of everyone.

Make up your fucking mind, Butcher.

“So, what you’re saying is, it’s okay to be rude as long as *you’re* the one doing it?” I locked my phone and placed it face down on the table. “I’m curious, Mr Volkov, are you this hypocritical in your normal day-to-day life, or do you reserve it just for special events like this? Or perhaps for people who intimidate you?”

He smiled broadly. He didn’t answer, instead turning his attention to Johnathon. “Dr Warren, you said you were a psychologist, correct?”

“Uh, yes?” Jonathan answered in between bites.

“So, you study the mind then. Tell me, if someone were to have a dream about someone else, what can that mean?”

What? Where is he going with this?

Johnathan frowned, confused by his question. “A dream?”

“Yes.” His eyes cut to me. “A dream of a sexual nature.”

Oh, that fucking asshole.

I glared daggers at him from across the table. My fingers walked across the surface and gripped the knife sitting next to my giant plate of uneaten slugs.

“Well, uh, it could mean a myriad of things. The most likely scenario is that it means nothing at all. Or, it could mean they have some sort of desire to get closer to the person they’re dreaming about. Dreams can often relate back to what is happening in our waking lives. Some believe that dreams are even our subconscious mind trying to tell us something. Something we may be refusing to acknowledge.”

That sounded an awful lot like denial to me. Dimitri was the fucking king of that, and he was trying to insinuate *I* was the one in denial?

Fuck right off.

“Interesting,” Dimitri sang, one finger tapping idly against his chin, smugness practically wafting off him.

I wanted to jump across the table and jab him in the throat, but this battle needed to be fought with a different, more subtle tactic.

"That kind of sounds like denial, wouldn't you say, Johnathon?" I asked casually, my eyes still on Dimitri, and his on me.

"I suppose," Johnathon replied, completely ignorant of what was going on. "There's quite a few different forms of denial."

"Would you say someone playing hot and cold with you—say, they're smiling, laughing, even going so far as to *flirt* with you, and then they do a complete 180 and start snapping at you and insulting you—could *that* be considered as a form of denial?"

"That is...oddly specific," he frowned, his confusion growing by the second. "But yes, it's a possibility. It could be that this person has repressed feelings they're refusing to deal with. Or possibly even refusing to acknowledge. And instead of dealing with these feelings, they lash out with anger at the person responsible for causing them."

"Interesting," I sang, mirroring Dimitri.

He scowled at me, a thunderstorm of anger rolling over his eyes. I smiled smugly.

Karma's a bitch, ain't it?

He wasn't an idiot. He knew I was talking about him, and *he* knew that Johnathon was describing him to a tee.

"What about people who can't take criticism?" Dimitri barked out of nowhere.

"I-I'm sorry?" Jonathan spluttered at the same time I snapped, "I can take criticism!"

Joel's gaze flicked between me and Dimitri. "Do you two know each other?"

"No," we growled at the same time.

Thankfully, an announcement from one of Allistair's men prohibited any follow up questions.

"Introducing our esteemed host of tonight's event, Sir Allistair Vanderbilt the Third." Jonathan, Mr and Mrs DeShawn, Richelle, Joel and Andre all turned to look behind me, where I assumed Allistair was entering from. But I was far too preoccupied death staring Dimitri to give a shit about what was going on behind me.

So was he.

We glared at each other from across the table as a round of applause went through the group. Weeks of repressed sexual tension vibrated between us,

hot and violent.

“*Shut. The. Fuck. Up.*” I mouthed to him, enunciating every word slowly so there would be no mistaking what it was I was saying.

He pointed a finger at me. “You *shut up*,” he mouthed back.

Somehow, we started arguing without actually saying a word, gesturing violently with our hands and cursing each other out while everyone else at the table had their heads turned. The only one watching what was going on was Mikhail, and he just seemed to find the whole thing humorous, leaning back in his chair and eating his food with an amused smile on his face.

Jonathan must have noticed something strange was going on, though, because he looked over his shoulder to glance at me, brows lowered.

I smiled and gave him an awkward thumbs up.

His frown deepened slightly before he looked away.

When I locked eyes with Dimitri again, his smirk made me snap.

Fuck subtly.

My fingers were still wrapped around the handle of my butter knife. I gripped it tight and hurled it right at him.

He lurched right, narrowly missing it all while staying seated in his chair. Without missing a beat, he grabbed his own knife from the table and threw it at me. I quickly picked up my clutch and used it like a shield to block the knife, the blade sinking deep into the fabric.

“Ugh. He’s coming over here,” Andre huffed.

I yanked the knife out of my clutch just as he and everyone else turned back around. Dimitri and I acted like nothing had happened, like we didn’t just try to fucking kill each other.

“Do you think he’s going to do his stupid dance tradition?” Andre finished.

“Of course he is,” Mr DeShawn answered, sounding none too happy about the idea, either. “He does it every year.”

“I pray he doesn’t pick us this time,” Joel said with a grumble.

Richelle smirked seductively at Dimitri. “I wouldn’t mind getting chosen,” she purred. “It could be fun with the right partner, don’t you think, Dimitri?”

His eyes slammed on her, burning with anger and irritation. And not the fun kind. Like the kind he used when he looked at me. This was something worse. Far worse. *Fucking hell. If looks could kill.* I thought he’d looked at me like he wanted to slit my throat before...but that was nothing compared to how he was looking at Richelle.

“Why are you talking to me?” he barked harshly.

Richelle blanched and looked down at her plate.

I held in my snicker. God, I forgot what a royal jackass he could be.

“What’s going on?” I asked Johnathon. “What is Allistair choosing people for?”

“For his dance,” Mikhail answered instead, rolling his eyes. “After dinner is served, Allistair makes the rounds. He visits each table, engaging in mindless, idiotic small talk before selecting two people to dance. Sometimes, he’ll pick couples. Sometimes, he’ll pick people who hate each other. Sometimes, he’ll pick a man and his mistress instead of picking the wife. It’s all about the drama, really. Rich people get bored easily, and they need to create their own chaos to keep entertained.”

I understood that one. Talon and his stupid fight-to-the-death island was a prime example of what a rich, bored person was capable of.

“Why the hell would anyone agree to do it?” I knew how to dance traditionally, the polka, the galop, the waltz. It was another thing Uncle E insisted I learn. But that didn’t mean I *liked* doing it. There was no way in hell I’d ever just dance because some rich asshole told me too—

“You either dance, or you’re escorted out of the ball and blacklisted from any future events.”

No.

“Status means everything to these kinds of people,” Mikhail continued, shrugging a shoulder as he glanced around the room aimlessly. “To be banned from one of the hottest events of the year would be social suicide for them.”

Crap. The vial of Thallium was still in my clutch. I hadn’t had the chance to slip it into Johnathon’s drink yet. I couldn’t be kicked out.

I looked over my shoulder. Allistair was making his way through the room, table by table. He would stop, chat for a few minutes and then, all of a sudden, two people would get up and make their way out of the dining area.

And all of them didn’t look the least bit happy about it.

If you ignored the fact that he was wearing a gold crown on his head and that he was covered head to toe in expensive jewellery, he was a rather plain man. Wrinkled skin, pale blue eyes, a full head of grey hair. Absolutely nothing overly memorable about him.

My heart sped up when he started making his way over to our table. There were eight other people sitting there, nine, if you included myself. So that meant I had a one in nine chance of being chosen.

Not the best odds, but also not the worst, either.

“How are we all tonight?” Allistair had a very thick British accent, but I had the sneaking suspicion he was making it more prominent than it actually

was. His gaze locked on Dimitri, and a huge smile broke out over his face. “Ah, Dimitri! I heard you were here.” He slapped a hand on Dimitri’s shoulder. “Such a wonderful surprise.”

Annoyance streaked across Dimitri’s face. He turned his head, looked at the hand sitting on his shoulder and then up to Allistair’s face. He didn’t say anything, letting that dark, dangerous look in his eyes do all the talking for him.

A slow grin quirked Allistair’s mouth. “My apologies,” he said, removing his hand. “It’s been so long since you attended one of my events. I forgot you don’t like to be touched. How have you been?”

“Fine,” Dimitri grunted.

“As chatty as always, I see,” he chuckled. He greeted everyone by name, including me—well, my fake name anyway—and gave us all a nod. Then, there was an awkward silence as everyone except for Mikhail and Dimitri avoided eye contact with the man as if they feared looking at him meant he would choose them. “Well, I think we all know who I’m going to select first to join the dance of the night.”

Slowly, methodically, he moved his gaze around the table, looking us all in the eyes before finally landing on Dimitri. He smiled triumphantly.

“No,” Dimitri growled instantly.

Laughing, Allistair shook his head. “Oh, come on, Dimitri! You *had* to know I would pick you! You haven’t been to one of my events in, what, ten years?”

“And it will be another ten years before I attend another.”

“All the more reason to pick you now, then.” Dimitri didn’t move, didn’t stand, refusing to even entertain the idea of it. Irritation flickered across Allistair’s face. “If you would rather not participate, I can have my men escort you out.” At the wave of his hand, four hulking men who were built like fucking linebackers appeared, standing behind him with the threat of deadly force lying deep in the depths of their eyes.

Dimitri didn’t seem remotely bothered by their sudden presence. After witnessing what he was capable of on Talon’s island, I wasn’t the least bit surprised by that. I was yet to see that man intimidated by anyone or anything, and I was pretty sure I would die before I ever got to.

Mikhail, however... Well, that was a different story. He pulled Dimitri to him and they began to have a heated discussion in Russian.

Spoiler alert: for the past two weeks I’d been secretly learning Russian by listening to “Learn Russian” audiobooks. I, in no way, knew enough to get by,

but I did know enough to pick up a few things during their conversation.

“I’m not...fuck no...”

“...have too...mission...get kicked out...fucking...do it!”

It sounded like Dimitri was refusing to dance to Allistair’s tune, and Mikhail was telling him he had no choice. That they couldn’t get kicked out of the ball because they had some sort of mission to finish.

What mission?

With an angry snarl, Dimitri got to his feet abruptly, buttoning up his suit jacket.

“Wonderful!” Allistair beamed. “Now, to select your partner—”

Richelle’s arm shot up in the air so quickly that I was surprised she didn’t pull it out of the fucking socket. “I’d be happy to—”

“Fuck. No,” Dimitri snapped.

“Well, okay then,” Allistair said. “Sorry, dear. Better not push my luck. How about”—*Don’t you dare say me, don’t you fucking dare say me*—“you, Natalie?”

I groaned internally. Plastering a smile on my face, I looked at Allistair. “Thank you so much for the opportunity to participate, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to decline. Dancing isn’t really my thing.”

He returned my smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes.” I suggest you make it your thing, darling. Same rules apply.”

The four men standing behind him all turned to face me and took a step in my direction, their intent clear.

I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my anger in check. I couldn’t afford to get kicked out of the ball yet. My mission was still incomplete. That meant that if I wanted to finish it, I would need to fucking dance. I moved my eyes to Dimitri. His face was impassable. I had no idea what the fuck he was thinking, but unlike when Richelle offered to be his partner, he didn’t say a goddamn word. Didn’t remotely object.

Why did my heart pound in my chest at that thought?

CHAPTER THIRTY



AUTUMN DEVALOS

DIMITRI ESCORTED ME ACROSS the ballroom, my hand in his, his hold soft but firm. After forcibly agreeing to Allistair's ultimatum, Dimitri and I left the dining area hand in hand, and that one touch sent my heart absolutely racing.

All of the other couples who had already been selected were waiting on the dance floor, a small crowd of people beginning to form around it—people who couldn't wait to watch what a giant clusterfuck it was going to be.

When we got to the dance floor, Dimitri swung me elegantly so that I was facing him, let go of my hand and took three steps back.

The song "Love Story" by Indila began to play lightly through the air.

He stood with absolute confidence. A man who knew exactly who he was and what to do. There was nothing sexier than a confident man dressed in a dark suit that was so perfectly molded to his body, I could see every outline of muscle he possessed.

But then, of course, he had to go and ruin it by opening up his big, dumb mouth.

“Do you even know how to dance?” he asked, one arm wrapped around his middle as he bowed at the waist. All around us, the other men did the same to their partners.

“The question isn’t whether or not I can dance,” I replied, lowering myself into a curtsy. I straightened and stared him dead in the eyes. “It’s whether or not *you* can lead.”

He raked his gaze over me from head to toe. One corner of his mouth twitched slightly. “Touche.”

We stepped towards each other and assumed the position, my hand lying gracefully on his muscular shoulder, his arm encircling me so his hand rested on my lower back and our free hands clasped together. His touch electrified me. My body hummed with awareness. He was so close. So, so, close. I could feel the heat of his skin despite the fact that the fabric of our clothes were in the way. It was like every single nerve inside me was on fire, *burning* for him to touch me. Touch me everywhere.

We stared into each other’s eyes. Something passed between us. I didn’t have a fucking clue what it was, but it was there, blazing as hot as the sun.

Will he ever acknowledge it?

Will I?

The music began to pick up, and it was as if I could sense exactly when Dimitri was going to move. He stepped forward, I stepped back and then we were off, spinning lightly around the dance floor. He moved us effortlessly through the other couples without missing a beat, like he was the master and we were all his students who should watch and follow his lead.

“This is ridiculous,” I hissed under my breath, not wanting to admit how much I was actually enjoying being so close to him. Feeling his hard, muscled body beneath my fingertips.

“It is,” he acknowledged. “Allistair is a man who enjoys doing ridiculous things.”

“You know him well.”

“Well enough.”

I’d forgotten how chatty he could be.

Not.

He twirled me without slowing down, and I found it unbearably easy to follow through, my arm gliding through the air. We moved together well. *Too well.* Almost like we were one person, each of us just an extension of the other.

The music was beautiful; soft and pleasant. It made the moment feel like we were in some sort of fairytale, our feet moving in tandem, our bodies inching closer and closer with each spin until we were pressed right up against one another.

His face was hard as stone, jaw clenched, body tight. I wondered if he was uncomfortable, but the way he held me... It felt like he didn't want to let me go.

Or maybe that was just what *I* was hoping he was feeling.

The truth of it was, I had no idea.

"Why are you here?" I asked, trying desperately to ignore the tension rising between us.

"Why are you?" he threw back.

"That's none of your business."

"Then what *I'm* doing here is none of *yours*."

"Fine."

"Fine," he parroted.

We sped up, spinning faster and faster as we made our way around the dance floor. It was like we were gliding, the movements almost effortless. Every now and then, he would twirl me and then reel me back into him, bringing me closer each time. Our faces were mere inches from each other, his lips only a hair's breadth away from mine. It was a fucking tease, having them right there and not being able to do a damn thing about it.

"Why did you leave without saying goodbye?" he asked casually, and I almost stumbled from surprise, but he danced us right through it, his hold remaining tight and unwavering.

"I didn't think you cared."

"I don't," he bit out between gritted teeth.

"Then why are you asking?"

"Just think it was quite rude of you." He pushed me away but kept holding my left hand with his right as our arms pulled taut. We took a few steps forward ,and then he spun me back into him quickly, almost as if he didn't want to be that far away from me. "You didn't think that after everything we went through, that I deserved a simple goodbye?"

Of course he did. But I knew my limits. I had an addictive personality, and Dimitri was the kind of man I could very easily become addicted to. If I wasn't already. I already craved those rare smiles he would sometimes give. That deep, baritone laugh of his. The sound of his voice. I feared that if I

didn't get away from him when the opportunity first presented itself, I never would.

"I said goodbye. You just didn't hear me."

He arched an eyebrow. "And how far away were you when you said this *goodbye*, hmm?"

My mouth twisted into a knowing smile. "Not that far."

"You're such a liar. What's the matter, *malen'kaya d'yavolitsa*, afraid to tell the truth?"

What the fuck did those Russian words mean? I was dying to know, but refused to ask.

When he turned his head left and then right as we floated across the dance floor, I mimicked him, moving my head in the opposite direction to him. "Careful, Butcher. It's really sounding like it bothered you that I didn't say goodbye to your face. That you, oh, I don't know, *care*. Perhaps about me?"

His eyes darkened with something feral. He twirled me and then yanked me back to him so sharply that I ploughed right into him, our bodies smacking together hard enough to force a grunt from my lips. "That would be foolish of you to think," he whispered, still spinning us around the dance floor, never slowing down. "If it wouldn't get me kicked out of here, I'd drive my knife right through your heart without blinking an eye."

Something I'd noticed about Dimitri was that he resorted to threats when he was put in uncomfortable situations. There was something between us. I knew there was, and he did, too. It wasn't just physical. We connected on a much deeper level. Something about his dark, ferocious soul called to mine. But he was refusing to acknowledge it, and like Johnathon said, he resorted to anger when confronted with it.

"Fine," I shrugged, pretending it wasn't fucking killing me that he would never admit it. "You stay the fuck out of my way, and I'll stay the fuck out of yours. After tonight, we never have to see each other again."

"Sounds fucking perfect to me," he growled out.

The music picked up, and we glared at each other as we spun faster and faster. His eyes held me captive, and I was powerless to look away, to do anything except stare at him and follow his lead.

We were so immersed in the dance, in one another, that neither of us even noticed when the other couples had slowly started to depart. We didn't notice the crowd staring at us in awe. Didn't notice that we were now

completely alone, everyone else just watching us from the sidelines as we glided around the dance floor. We just kept spinning and spinning and spinning, round and round and round, never taking our eyes off each other, the tension building to a point where I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest.

He twirled me once, twice, three times, perfectly in time with the music, and then he dipped me low, his body almost completely covering mine as he supported my weight like it was nothing at all to him. The music ended. The crowd cheered. And yet, our eyes stayed locked, our chests brushing together with each hard breath we drew. For the first time since I'd met him, I could read him perfectly. See the desire blazing in those mesmerising blue orbs. See exactly what was going through his mind when his gaze flicked to my lips.

And then, almost as if he couldn't help himself, as if he was being drawn towards me by some powerful, unseen force, he closed the small distance between us and kissed me.

Soft but firm, he pressed his lips to mine, and it was like the entire world burst into technicolour. I'd envisioned that kiss so many times. Pictured it. Dreamt it. Wondered how it would feel. And it was a thousand times better than I ever thought it would be.

His tongue dipped into my mouth, the taste of him making a moan bubble up low in my throat. Our lips moved together, perfectly in sync, desire quickly building in my lower belly.

I opened my eyes, not wanting to miss a single shred of the moment. I wanted to trace every sharp line, every detail of his face so I would remember it forever.

The moment Dimitri Volkov finally gave in.

I sifted my fingers through his hair, scraping my nails against his scalp. He groaned, kissing me harder, more forcefully.

Then, it all went to hell.

Because I had my eyes open, I was able to see the exact moment Dimitri realised what he was doing. His eyes shot open in shock. He still had me dipped from the dance, so when he abruptly let me go, I didn't have the time to catch myself, and I went crashing to the ground, pain shooting up my spine.

The crowd gasped in unison.

Fucking ow.

Dimitri retreated quickly, eyes as wide as saucers. He stared at me dumbfounded for a moment, not moving a muscle, and then his hand drifted upwards, lightly touching his lips. The look on his face... It *screamed*, “What have I done? What have I done?”

I’d seen Dimitri face down an army of men without so much as a shred of emotion. Seen him stare death right in the eyes and say, “Fuck you”.

And yet, kissing *me* was what brought forth that terrified, panicked look on his face?

What was so fucking bad about kissing *me*?

He stared at me for all of two seconds before he spun and marched out of the room without even an apology for dropping me on my ass in front of a room full of people.

An awkward silence ensued. I picked myself up off the floor, making sure to keep my head held high. I wasn’t going to show an ounce of the discomfort and humiliation I was feeling in front of those people, despite the pitying looks some of them were giving me.

I ran my hands down the front of my dress, straightened my spine, pushed my shoulders back and walked out the same way Dimitri had, my steps graceful and unhurried.

The moment I turned a corridor and was out of their line of sight, I let the rage fill me.

How fucking dare he.

I stormed down the hallway in search of Dimitri. There was no way I was letting that fucker get away with humiliating me like that.

He wasn’t hard to find.

The sound of furniture being smashed, of glass breaking, came from a few doors up and to the right. An angry scowl took over my face, so much adrenaline soaring through my body that I began to shake with rage. I grabbed a bunchful of my dress with both hands and marched towards the door. Irate Russian cursing came from behind it.

I’d definitely found him.

I front-kicked the door open. Pacing in the middle of what looked like some sort of bedroom was Dimitri, his suit jacket gone, discarded on the floor. He stopped moving, his head whipping to me. If I had to guess the emotions blazing in those sapphire eyes, I’d guess anger and sexual frustration.

“Leave,” he snarled, resuming his pacing.

I didn't.

He didn't fucking scare me. I couldn't care less that he was mad. *I* was the one that was mad here.

"What the hell was that?" I hissed, stepping closer.

He threw his hands up and backed away from me like I had the goddamn fucking plague. "I said *leave*. What part of that don't you understand?"

"Oh, I understand it just fine. I just *don't care*. You had no right to do that to me."

"Do what?" he spat, sounding genuinely confused, and it pissed me off even more.

I took off one of my heels and threw it at his head.

He ducked out of the way. "What the fuck is your problem, woman?!"

"You! You're my problem!" I yelled, pointing at him. "'Do what?' 'Do what?'" I mocked, mimicking him right down to that stupid, sexy accent of his. "You *humiliated* me in a room full of people just now. What the fuck do you mean, 'do what?'"

He frowned. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

My mouth dropped open in outrage. He didn't. He really didn't have a fucking clue what I was talking about.

Rage pounded in my veins. I took off my other heel and threw that at him too. He dove to the side, narrowly missing it. But I didn't stop there. There was a gold-ornate photo frame on the dresser. I threw that. There was a crystal ashtray probably worth \$50,000. I threw that too. Anything I could get my hands on, I threw at him and he ducked and dove, trying his best to avoid getting hit with whatever I was hurling at him.

I ripped a lamp from the wall and flung it at him. He somersaulted out of the way, and it smashed into the wall, breaking into a thousand pieces.

He sprung back up to his feet and whipped around to face me. "Stop throwing shit at me!"

"Stop saying stupid shit!" I'd run out of objects to throw, but I had one more thing left. I moved my dress to the side and reached for the holster strapped to my inner thigh, holding my knife.

Dimitri watched me, his eyes flashing. "Don't fucking do it."

A sadistic smile spread across my face. "Fuck you." He was just lucky I wasn't able to conceal my gun wearing this dress, otherwise I would have fucking shot him by then.

I flipped the blade between my fingers. “That was the last fucking straw, Butcher. I’m sick of this hot and cold game you keep playing.”

“I’m not playing *any* game!”

“Bullshit! It’s *all* you’re doing, and I’ve had enough.”

His face set into hard stone. He stormed towards me, dark, dangerous energy vibrating from him. I didn’t back away. “You think I like this?” he hissed, staring down at me. “You think I *like* this fucking torment warring inside of me? That I *like* feeling this way? You drive me absolutely fucking insane!”

“Me?! Are you kidding me?!” I shrieked, aghast. “*You’re* the one who kissed *me* and then just stormed away! If anyone is driving someone insane, it’s you! What the hell is it that you want?!”

“You!” he snarled, full of anger and fire.

“Then fucking take me!”

His chest rose and fell with deep, heavy breaths, his jaw clenched so hard that I feared he would shatter his teeth. He stared deep into my eyes and I stared right back into his, refusing to look away. Some internal struggle waged within him. I could see it, and I saw the exact moment he finally beat whatever it was.

“Fuck it.” He grabbed my face with both hands and slammed his lips onto mine. It was like a bomb went off. Weeks and weeks of repressed sexual tension came rushing to the surface between us, igniting the fire.

We kissed, and there was nothing sweet or romantic about it like before. It was all anger and lust. Teeth and ferociousness. I pulled back, punched him in the face, grabbed his head with both hands and yanked him back to kiss him harder. He didn’t seem the least bit bothered by it. In fact, it seemed to turn him on more because he snarled, picking me up and slamming me up against the wall. I moaned into his mouth, dropping my knife to grip onto his shoulders.

He kissed me harder. His hands moved all over my body like he couldn’t get enough of me. Squeezing my breasts. My hips. The insides of my thighs.

The kiss was fucking heavenly. Everything about him—his taste, the feel of him—added to the pleasure and excitement coursing through my veins.

“I need to know how you taste.” And then he dropped to his knees in front of me as if he couldn’t wait another fucking second. He pushed my

legs further apart, moved my dress up, hooked his fingers around my thong to push them to the side and closed his mouth over me.

His eyes rolled back into his head and he let loose a deep, masculine groan filled with nothing but pure satisfaction. Pleasure shot up my spine. “Oh, fucking hell,” I breathed out, my head falling back and thumping against the wall.

He fucking feasted. It wasn’t slow or soft. It was hard, forceful. He moved his tongue and his lips all over me, kissing my pussy like he’d just done with my mouth, full of eagerness and drive.

“Dimitri, shit. Fuck, yes. Yes.” I rolled my hips and gripped my breasts with both hands, squeezing tightly.

“Fucking show them to me. Now,” he demanded, and all I wanted to do was please him.

I pulled down the straps of my dress, followed by my bra. My breasts spilt out. He reached one hand up and closed his palm over one. He squeezed, and it felt ten times better when he did it.

His tongue, warm and wet, moved faster, circling my clit. Ecstasy swam in my veins. It felt so good. I knew I wasn’t going to last much longer.

Dimitri was already so attuned with my body that he knew. He fucking knew. Pleasure burst throughout my whole body when he rammed two fingers inside me, and turned his head to latch his teeth into my skin at the apex of my thighs. He bit down hard as he pumped his fingers in and out, and I screamed, pure euphoria drowning me. He rode me through the high perfectly, his fingers still moving inside me until my body stopped shaking. He took them out, absolutely covered in my wetness. He sucked them into his mouth, his eyes staying firmly on me.

My legs wobbled, but this time, Dimitri didn’t let me fall. His strong hands gripped my hips tightly, holding me in place. He kissed my pussy once before moving upwards, biting into me through my dress. Pain and pleasure mingled together beautifully with each delicious bite. He sank his teeth into the curve of my hip hard enough to make me hiss. He moved up, biting the skin right under my breast next. He sucked hard, and I had no doubt there would be a mark there later.

“I want you fucking covered in my marks,” he growled against me as he moved across to my other breast. He sealed his mouth over my nipple, and I moaned as more pleasure burst inside me.

Why does the idea of being absolutely covered in marks by Dimitri Volkov turn me on so much?

He nibbled up my chest, biting and sucking into my skin. He gripped my face, turned it to the side forcefully so he could keep going up my neck completely uninterrupted, and I let him. I let him mark me. Let him bite me. I fucking wanted it. More than anything.

“You’re fucking perfection,” he whispered huskily into my ear.

I shivered.

“I’m going to fuck you now, *malen’kaya d’yavolitsa*.” He moved his hands to his pants and pulled out his cock. I was desperate to see it. To put it in my mouth and give him the same pleasure he gave me. But he had other plans. He moved his head back slightly to look at me. “If you want to punch me again, go right ahead.” A dark smirk curled on his lips. “I fucking like it.” And then he rammed inside me with one, deep thrust.

We both moaned at the same time. He pinned my body to the wall and started hammering into me. No delicacy. No finesse. It was a pure rutting, and it was the hottest thing to ever happen to me. With each thrust, more and more pleasure assaulted me, taking me over.

“Give me your fucking mouth, Autumn,” he grunted, pounding and pounding and pounding.

I didn’t give it. “Fucking take it, Butcher.”

His eyes flashed. He gripped my chin painfully hard (I loved it) and he did exactly what I said. He clamped his mouth over mine and shoved his tongue past my lips. I kissed him back, our tongues dueling for supremacy.

His cock, gloriously big and thick, moved deep within me. My pussy rippled, the pleasure so fucking good that I bit down hard enough on his lip to draw blood. He hissed, fire blazing in those beautiful blue orbs. I reached up behind him and grabbed a fistful of his hair, pulling his head back roughly while still having his lip locked between my teeth. He groaned, and it was the best fucking sound I’d ever heard.

Dimitri Volkov liked it fucking *rough*.

I let his lip go with a pop. Blood trickled down his chin.

“You’re not the only one who likes to leave marks.”

That seemed to excite him more. He started moving faster and faster, his hips pistonning forward so hard that my ass slammed against the wall over and over again.

“Mark my cock, then, *malen’kaya d’yavolitsa*. Cum all over it. Fucking do it.”

Usually, I needed a little more to get there, but that moment had been built up for so long, the sexual tension and desire blazing between me and Dimitri so combustible that, for the first time in a long time, I didn’t need my usual kinks to get off.

All I needed was him.

His tongue ran up the side of my neck in one long lick, and then he latched his teeth into my skin at the same time as he powered forward. White-hot, sizzling pleasure ripped through me. Waves and waves of ecstasy washed over me, and I moaned Dimitri’s name as I came so hard that I saw fucking stars.

Dimitri cursed in Russian, hiked my legs up higher and drove into me once, twice, three times before he flung his head back and groaned, low and long, the muscles in his neck straining.

What a fucking sight he made.

He slumped against me, breathing heavily. There was a few minutes of post sex bliss, him just resting up against me until his whole body stiffened.

No. Don’t do it.

But I already knew. I already fucking knew.

Leaning back to look me in the eyes, that internal struggle he was battling earlier was back, taking over his face. He hesitated for a brief moment before pulling out of me and putting me back on my feet. He tucked himself back away into his pants.

I fixed my dress. Well, as well as I could, anyway. I pulled my bra and straps back over my shoulders and shifted the material back down to cover my pussy. He’d torn my dress, though, so my black thong was still semi noticeable.

We stared at each other.

Some of the tension had definitely dissipated, but the ache in my soul for him was still there. The sex had done nothing to quell it.

Is it the same for him?

He opened his mouth—

“Okay, I’ve let you stew for long enough—” Mikhail entered the room and stopped mid-sentence when he saw us. Dimitri immediately took three wide steps back from me, and I won’t lie, it hurt a little.

But was I going to show that?

Fuck no.

Mikhail looked around the room, his eyes running over the destruction of broken furniture and lamps and photo frames, and then his gaze flicked between us. He took a deep breath in through his nose as if he was scenting the air, and then the biggest fucking smirk graced his lips. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to interrupt—”

“You’re not,” Dimitri grunted.

“It’s fine, I’ll come back—”

“No need,” I smiled, praying to God neither one of them could see how absolutely fake it was. “We’re done, aren’t we, Dimitri?”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



AUTUMN DEVALOS

SOMETHING AKIN TO PAIN streaked across Dimitri's face, but he didn't deny it. He just nodded stiffly and something inside of me broke.

I cleared my throat and pushed off the wall. The front of my dress was ripped, but I did nothing to conceal myself. Instead, I marched past Dimitri with my head held high, not even sparing him one fucking glance as I picked up my heels and slipped them onto my feet.

His suit jacket was still on the ground near the door. I swiped it up and put it on so I wouldn't walk back into the party flashing my underwear to everyone. Neither man objected or tried to stop me. The sympathetic look Mikhail gave me as I walked past him made me want to throw myself off a fucking bridge.

I didn't *want* nor *need* his sympathy.

I breezed out of the room without looking back.

Taking Dimitri's jacket had seemed like a good idea at the time, but I was seriously regretting it as I marched down the hall. It was absolutely drenched in his scent. His intoxicating, mouthwatering scent. It enveloped me like a tight, comforting hug, teasing me with what I would never have.

The real thing.

With each step I took, my heart plummeted more and more. I shouldn't have been surprised. The moment that strange, visceral connection between Dimitri and I appeared, he'd pull away from me every time something happened to show it.

I should have known sex would result in the same outcome. How foolish it was of me to think otherwise.

I stopped at the corner of the hallway, unable to bring myself to turn the bend. Despite how much I desperately wanted to leave, I couldn't. I still had a job to finish. A person to kill. But I needed a minute to collect myself before heading back into the belly of the beast. If I turned left, it would take me back to the ballroom. However, if I turned right...

I didn't care that I had no idea where it would lead me. Anywhere was better than back with those insufferable people. I needed to get my head screwed back on.

I went right. Halfway down the corridor, there was a staircase. I took it, taking the steps two at a time, a sense of urgency vibrating in my bones. When I reached the top, I realised it opened up into one of the balconies overhead the ballroom.

It wasn't good enough. Wasn't *far* enough. I needed air.

To my right, there were huge, glass double doors that led to an outdoor balcony. *Perfect*. Rushing forward, I used both hands to push them open wide. Cold night air smacked me in the face, and I sucked in a deep, shaky breath.

Fairy lights were strung up all along the walls, casting the space in a beautiful, calming light. Various forms of furniture were laid out evenly, a couch on one side and three chairs on the other, surrounding a glass table. On that table were numerous packets of cigarettes and lighters.

This must be where they all come to smoke.

I eyed one of the packets. "Fuck it," I grumbled, picking it up.

I wasn't a full-time smoker. More of a stress smoker, and right then, I was pretty fucking stressed.

Pulling one out, I placed it between my lips and lit it. Taking a deep breath in, I let the smoke fill my lungs before exhaling heavily. A sense of calm washed over me...for all of three seconds. I took another drag. Then another. And another. That calm never returned.

“I need some fucking weed,” I muttered under my breath, smoke escaping from my mouth with each word.

My mind was a jumbled mess. Part of me didn’t regret what had happened between Dimitri and I, despite the preverbal diss I’d received afterwards. It meant I at least got to have him once, so how could I regret that? Got to experience what it was like to be ruthlessly fucked and owned by Dimitri Volkov.

Another part of me, though, did regret it, and it was for the exact same reason: having him *once* would never be enough.

Even then, I craved his touch again. Craved to have his lips on me, his teeth biting into my skin. Craved that closeness with him.

An ache quickly built up in the centre of my chest. I rubbed my sternum, a frown on my face. *This feeling...* I’d never felt it before. I had no idea what it was...except that it hurt. It hurt so fucking badly every time I thought of him.

I didn’t like it. I wanted it to go away-

“Lovely evening we’re having tonight, aren’t we, Miss DeValos?”

I spun around quickly at the sound of a deep voice coming from behind me. A man stood in the doorway, the top half of his face shrouded in darkness.

My heart slammed into my chest. *Jesus Christ.* I’d been so distracted by my thoughts that I hadn’t even heard him approach.

Wait, did he just call me Miss DeValos? Fuck, that means he knows who I really am.

“I know you?” I asked, throwing out an air of indifference.

“Not personally, no. But you did business with an associate of mine who was operating on behalf of me.”

I frowned in thought. The only contract I’d taken recently where I didn’t deal directly with the client was—

Dominik’s.

Releasing a sigh, I flicked my finished cigarette over the balcony and crossed my arms over my chest. “Look, if this is about the deposit, you’re not getting it back. I didn’t kill him directly, which was why I didn’t charge you the outstanding amount of your bill. But I *earned* that deposit. I put in a month’s worth of work, and ended up getting kidnapped and nearly killed for my trouble. That money is *mine*. I’m not giving it back.”

I expected him to fight me on it. Most clients would have, but he just frowned.

“He’s...dead?” he asked, confused.

“Saw the blade go through his heart with my own eyes,” I said, smiling at the memory.

His frown deepened. He glanced over his shoulder, staring back into the house and then turned back, studying me closely. He moved, crossing the small distance to look over the railing and down into the ballroom below. “If he’s dead, how is it that I’m looking at him right now?”

What?

“That’s impossible,” I whispered under my breath. I rushed forward, joining him at his side. I stared down into the sea of people below, searching and searching. I didn’t see Dominik, but I did see—

Dimitri.

I whipped around to face him, eyes wide. “The contract I received was for *Dominik Volkov*, not Dimitri Volkov.”

“Was it? Huh.” Then he threw his head back and laughed. I didn’t see what was remotely funny about the situation. “I used to always get my sons mixed up when they were children, but this is the first time it’s ever happened as adults. How humorous.”

Did he just say—

Oh, Autumn. You’re such an idiot.

Now that he’d said it, I could see the similarities instantly. It just hit me smack in the face. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed them the moment I laid eyes on him.

The size of him. The sharp lines of his face. The accent. The eyes.

The goddamn fucking eyes.

“You’re Dimitri’s father.”

He smiled, but there was nothing sweet or pleasant about it. It was vile, filled with maliciousness and cruelty. He bowed gracefully as he said, “Sergei Lekovich Volkov, at your service.” He straightened and offered me his hand to shake.

I didn’t take it, staring at it in disgust. “You put a hit out on your own son?”

He shrugged as if the idea of doing something like that was completely normal. “Dimitri has always been a good soldier. A good son. He has always done what was expected of him, and never stepped out of line. Well,

that is, until recently. Over the last few years, he has shown a lack of respect for my authority. Refused to do what I have expressly ordered him to do. That is something I simply cannot allow. Ordinarily, I wouldn't think of having him killed. He runs the Bratva in America, and is set to inherit everything when I die. If something were to happen to him, who would the title fall to? Who would keep the Volkov name alive? It has been what has kept him safe all these years despite his insubordination."

"What's changed, then?"

"During my last visit, I noticed that my grandson, Aleksandr, is more than ready to take his father's place. That means I no longer need Dimitri alive. He's done his job. He's given me three strong heirs. Raised them to be smart, ruthless killers."

"Doesn't he have four children?" I asked, brows lowered into a frown. He was forgetting about Illayana.

Anger flashed in Sergei's eyes. "My granddaughter is no longer a Volkov. She is a De Luca, and any children she has will be De Lucas, therefore she is of no use to me. I only care about *my* family name. *My* legacy."

He only cares about himself.

And I thought my parents were assholes.

No wonder Dimitri hates the man.

"So, I can expect the contract to be completed soon, *da? yes?*" he asked, giving me a smile that sent a fucking chill down my spine.

The fucking nerve of this man.

I met his gaze, refusing to show an ounce of nervousness. "I never agreed to kill Dimitri. Our contract was for Dominik. That's it."

Something terrifying flashed in his blue eyes. "A small technicality, Miss DeVilos. I'm sure we can negotiate new terms."

"Not interested."

His hand clamped over my arm, hard, and he squeezed. Any trace of niceties vanished in an instant. "I don't think you're understanding me, so let me make it perfectly clear: I paid you to do a job. Granted, there was a slight error in regards to the target, and had you killed Dominik yourself, then yes, the contract would technically be null and void. But you didn't, and you just admitted that yourself. Therefore, you're in debt to me right now. You took the money. *You owe me a kill.*"

Frustratingly, he had a point. There were certain rules when it came to the business, one of them being you couldn't just renege on a contract. If you

took it, you had to complete it. To not would mean bad, bad things. Blacklisted from any future jobs. Even a potential contract being taken out on *me*.

The fact that the contract I'd received was for Dominik and not Dimitri *could* save me. But then again, it could not. Most people in my business didn't care about those kinds of details. All they would see is that I took Sergei's deposit and didn't complete a kill.

Something that was considered a death sentence.

But I didn't take kindly to threats.

I yanked my arm out of his grasp. "Are you threatening me? Because I'll tell you right now, Mr Volkov, you *do not* want to do that."

He gave me a look that seemed to say "Oh, how cute". He placed his hands behind his back and began to walk around me like a predator circling their prey. "You might be formidable, Miss DeValos. One of the best assassins in the world—"

"—the best," I corrected.

"But you're no match for the power of the Bratva."

I gave him my back, staring down into the ballroom. It was nothing short of an insult. That I didn't find him a big enough threat to keep my eyes on him, to watch him. "If you're so fucking powerful, why don't you just do the job yourself, then? Why even bother hiring me?"

"You really think my grandson would do anything I say if he found out I was behind the death of his father?" he arched an eyebrow. "That's what I love about assassins. The anonymity."

That's what everyone loved about it. The ability to just name a name, and have that person killed with absolutely no evidence to trace it back to you.

My eyes locked onto Dimitri down below. At his side was Allistair, but it didn't seem like Dimitri was listening to what the man was saying. He was scanning the room, looking for something.

Or someone.

Is it me?

Foolish, foolish woman. How many times does he need to snub you to prove he doesn't give a shit about you?

Then, as if sensing my eyes on him, he looked up, and our gazes clashed. My heart *pounded*. Sexual tension still blazed between us, as hot as a fiery inferno.

Sergei stopped behind me, and leant in close to whisper in my ear. “Given what I witnessed earlier when the two of you were dancing, it should be easy for you to kill him. He trusts you. Just look at him. Look at how angry he is to see a man standing this close to you.”

I turned my head. Sergei was standing far enough behind me that his face was shrouded in darkness. I highly doubted Dimitri could see his face properly, but when I looked back at him, his narrowed gaze and clenched fists made me think he could at the very least see I was standing next to a man. Like Sergei had said.

And he didn’t like it.

Dimitri pulled his phone out of his back pocket and answered it without taking his eyes off me.

Sergei laid a hand on my shoulder. Dimitri took a threatening step forward. “You have two weeks, Miss DeValos, or the next contract I take out will be on *you*.” He patted me twice. “I look forward to hearing from you.”

And then he was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“D O YOU WANT TO talk about it?” Mikhail asked as we made our way back to the ballroom.

“No,” I answered instantly, despite the fact that there was a secret part of me that actually *wanted* to.

I’d had sex.

I’d had sex with another woman, and it had been...*amazing*.

Soft, supple skin. Glossy, luscious lips. That one kiss, that first touch to her lips had broken me. I was powerless to fight against it any longer.

Against *her*.

It was like I’d been in a trance. The music, the feel of her body pressed so agonisingly perfect against mine.... Something had just come over—no, *taken* over—me, and I couldn’t wait a second longer to find out how she tasted. How it felt to finally kiss those lips that haunted my thoughts day and night.

And then, I’d done something I’d never done before.

I ran.

I fled the room like a little bitch, unable to come to terms with that I'd done.

Looking back, I could see why she chased me down. In the moment, I was ignorant of it, kissing her and then just dropping her like that in the middle of the dance floor, with a crowd of people watching. It was a dick fucking move, and I deserved everything she threw at me.

More, if I was being honest.

But that had kickstarted me all over again. Fighting with her just did something to me. Woke up that dark, primal beast within me that wanted to mark her. Fuck her. *Own her.*

So, that's exactly what I did.

I let the beast out, and I fucking *took* her.

I thought it would make me feel better. Release me from that strange, magnetic hold she had over me. From the torment plaguing me every waking moment of my fucking life.

But it didn't.

It made it worse.

Now, I knew how she tasted. Knew how her pussy felt wrapped around my cock. Knew what she sounded like when she moaned my name.

And I wanted it all again. Over and over and over.

The guilt for that was overwhelming.

“Are you sure?” Sympathy flashed in Mikhail’s eyes. “I can read you like a book, old friend. I can see the guilt consuming you. You have nothing to feel guilty about. Yekaterina has been gone for over ten years—”

“Mikhail, *please*. Don’t.” I didn’t need to hear it. Not then. I couldn’t talk about it. The guilt, hurt, yes, but seeing that look on Autumn’s face when I backed away from her? That hurt even more.

“Okay, fine,” Mikhail agreed reluctantly. “But only because you said, ‘please’, and I’ve never heard you use that word before.”

That can’t be right. I was sure I’d used it at least once in my life.

Maybe.

“Let’s just get Anthony so we can get the fuck out of here.”

Mikhail saluted. “You the boss, man.”

When we stepped back into the ballroom, I scanned the area, but it wasn’t Anthony I was looking for, like it should have been.

It was Autumn.

My eyes moved from person to person with an almost frantic-like urgency, searching for her.

Where is she? She couldn't have just left. Where is she—

“There.”

My gaze shot to where Mikhail indicated, and my heart plummeted when I realised he was talking about Anthony. He'd found Anthony.

“Luck is finally on our side,” Mikhail said, excitement streaking across his face. “It looks like he's heading to the bathroom. We can nab him there —oh, fucking hell, Allistair is heading this way.”

Sure enough, when I looked to my left, I saw Allistair plowing through the crowd of people, making a beeline right towards us.

Towards me.

I did not have the energy to deal with him right now...but—

“I'll distract him,” I sighed, straightening my spine. “You grab Anthony. Call me when you've got him, and I'll use that as an excuse to leave.”

Mikhail nodded. “Gotcha.”

Allistair didn't even spare Mikhail a glance as he walked off, his entire focus on me. “I have to say, Dimitri, you sure know how to get a party going. People haven't stopped talking about your dance with the lovely Natalie. I truly hope you didn't mean it when you said you wouldn't be attending another one of my events any time soon. I *need* you back next year.”

I'd rather drink a bottle of hydrochloric acid.

“This was a one-time appearance. I have no intention of returning.”

His friendly smile turned strained. “What if I can make it worth your while? Say, \$100,000?”

I gave him a deadpan stare. “Don't insult me, Allistair. I have that much hiding in the cushions of my couch.”

Well, not really, but you get the point.

“What do you want, then?” he asked almost petulantly.

What I wanted, he couldn't give me.

“Nothing you have.” I searched the crowd of people surrounding me, but there was still no sign of Autumn.

Has she left?

The thought filled me with panic and dread.

Allistair was still talking, spouting off a list of things he thought I might be interested in, but I was hardly listening, my gaze constantly sweeping the

room, searching for red, fiery hair and mesmerising, emerald eyes.

Fucking Autumn had done nothing to quell my obsession with her. It was more insatiable than ever. More volatile. I felt like I was going crazy. Like I was going to absolutely lose it if I didn't lay eyes on her—

There. Relief flooded me. High up on one of the many balconies overlooking the ballroom, she stood, peering over the railing. Our eyes connected. Something indescribable burst in my chest.

She was so fucking beautiful.

There was something about having my jacket over her shoulders that satiated the beast within me. I liked seeing her in my clothes. Liked seeing the indent of my teeth on her skin. I could stare at her for hours—

Who. The. Fuck. Is. That?

Standing behind her was a man, his face concealed by the dark shadows surrounding them. I couldn't see him properly, but something about him seemed familiar, as if I had met him before. I just couldn't put my finger on it. I needed to see his face.

He leant closer to whisper something to her. My eyes narrowed, hands squeezing into tight fists.

Those were *my* motherfucking marks on her neck. *My* jacket on her body. Why the fuck was another man standing so close to her?

Allistair hadn't stopped talking, even though I'd said nothing back to him in minutes. My phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and answered it without taking my eyes off Autumn.

"Da? Yes?"

"I've got him, but I need your help to carry him out. Fucker weighs a tonne," Mikhail said.

"Where are you?"

"Look behind you." I turned and saw Mikhail at the other end of the room, one hand holding the phone to his ear while the other waved through the air so I would notice him over the sea of people.

When I turned back around, the man with Autumn was gone.

"Dimitri?" Mikhail prompted, urgency in his voice. "Kind of on a time crunch here."

"I'm coming." Then I hung up. *"I have to go,"* I told Allistair, cutting him off mid-sentence. *"Enjoy the rest of your evening."*

He spluttered, but I was already moving before he could muster a reply.

Turning my back on Autumn had to be one of the hardest things I'd ever done. But I *had* to do it. Things could not be allowed to progress between us, no matter how much I might want them to.

You love Yekaterina.

You love Yekaterina.

You love Yekaterina.

I chanted it over and over again in my head to stop myself from ignoring my mission. From hunting Autumn down and taking her again and again until I couldn't stand.

But there was a part of me—this small, minuscule, barely recognizable part—that wasn't entirely sure that was true anymore.



“Wake him up.”

Smirk on his lips, Mikhail threw the bucket of ice-cold water into Anthony's face. The naked man startled awake, gasping in shock. Dazed, confused eyes glanced around the room before landing on me, sitting in front of him.

I smiled. “Hello, Anthony.”

“Wha-what's going on?” he rasped. “Who are you? Where am I?” He tried to move, but he was securely strapped to the chair that was bolted to the floor. “Why the fuck am I tied up!?”

“So many questions.” I leant back in my chair with a sigh, placing my ankle over my knee. “I suppose, given the circumstances, I can understand. My name is Dimitri Volkov. The man behind me is Mikhail. You're in a place I call The Pit. And the reason why you're here is because you have information we need.”

It had been a bitch taking him out of Allistair's estate without arousing suspicion last night. We'd actually been stopped several times, but Mikhail

had come up with a wonderful excuse as to why we had Anthony's arms flung over our shoulders as we dragged him to the door.

He'd drunk too much, passed out and we were helping him get home.

Absolutely genius. No one questioned us after that, and we were able to get him in my car with zero interference.

"Information?" Anthony shook his head in confusion. He did a proper look around at his surroundings, and paled at the sight of the blood-stained walls. His eyes shot to the tray of rusty torture instruments next to me, and panic flashed across his face. "No. No, no, no. You've got the wrong person! I don't know anything! Please! Whatever this is about, I'm not involved. I just own a hair salon. You've got the wrong guy!"

He was actually pretty convincing. If it wasn't for the fact that I'd seen him on the security footage with my own eyes, I might have actually believed him.

"Talon Scardo," was all I said.

His body stiffened, then relaxed. "Never heard of him before."

I sighed. *They always say that.* Reaching for the iPad I had sitting on the tray, I brought up the video from outside his hair salon—the one where he ran right into Talon's arms—and showed it to him.

"Would you like to change your answer?"

Defiance flashed in the man's eyes. He sat up a little straighter and raised his chin. "No."

Admirable, considering there was literally brain matter on the floor right next to his bare feet.

"Okay, then." I put the iPad down and held my hand out, palm facing upwards. "Mikhail, care to choose the first weapon of choice?"

"Oh, yes. I would love to."

Something cold landed against my skin. I closed my fingers around it.

"A cheese grater?" I hummed. "Interesting choice."

Mikhail's lips curled into a sadistic smile. "I like the way it works on human flesh. It's the easiest, most effective way to skin someone."

Anthony's resolve faltered for a mere second before his face set into stone. "You can do whatever sick, twisted things you want to me. I'll never talk. I love Talon. I'll never give him up. *Never.*"

I tilted my head to the side, studying him intently. A sliver of respect cut through me. "You know, I've tortured a lot of people in this room," I said, returning the grater to the tray. I got to my feet and touched one of the walls

fondly, the memories swarming me. “Nine times out of ten, they always cave. Usually before I’ve even made the first cut. The prospect of pain can be just as terrifying as the pain itself.”

Anthony swallowed thickly, but remained silent,

“I hate people like that. If you *really* loved someone, no amount of torture, either real or imaginary could get you to turn on them.”

“So, you’re just going to let me go, then?” he asked, full of hope.

“Oh, he’s got a sense of humor,” Mikhail quipped, shaking his head with a chuckle.

“Not quite.” I sat back down. “You’ve got my respect, which is a hard thing to achieve. So, I’m going to do you a favour. I’m going to give you a chance—”

“I already told you, I’m not—”

I whipped out my blade and held it to his mouth. He froze, eyes widening in fear. “It’s rude to interrupt people,” I whispered, dangerously low. I traced the tip of the knife over his skin in warning.

“My apologies-s,” he stuttered.

Twirling the blade, I returned it to the sheath on my waist and took my seat again, straightening the lapels of my suit jacket. “As I was saying,” I continued like nothing happened. “I’m going to give you a chance. A chance other prisoners are not usually afforded. I’m not usually in the business of torturing civilians. As far as I can tell, your only connection to our world is Talon, so I’m willing to cut you a break.” I turned my head to the side and barked, “Tate!”

The soldier I had posted at the door entered the room. “Yes, Boss?”

“Bring me the prisoners from rooms four and seven.”

He nodded and left. A few moments later, he returned with two prisoners in tow, both chained by the wrists and ankles. They shuffled forward with slow steps, their heads staying down. One of them was severely malnourished, so skinny that I could see the outlines of his ribs. The other wasn’t quite as bad, but that was only because he hadn’t been down there as long as the first. They both had long hair that went to their shoulders, big, bushy beards and dirt and filth covering their entire bodies.

“Like I said, I respect people who don’t just crumble at the first sign of fucking trouble. I respect *strength*.” I looked at Tate as I got to my feet and moved my chair out of the way. “String them up right here, Tate. Where Anthony can see them clearly.”

Tate did as I ordered without delay. Mikhail stepped around so he was behind Anthony, excitement practically vibrating from him.

There was a reason Mikhail was so feared within our circles. His torture techniques were terrifying, and that was coming from *me*.

I grabbed the man on the right by his long, filthy hair, and pulled his head back roughly. Faded, brown orbs locked onto me, pleading for mercy.

Fucking never.

“This here is Maxim,” I said, staring him dead in the eyes. “He used to be one of my most trusted advisors. A *friend*.” My hold on him tightened, and he whimpered. “That is, until I found out he drugged my daughter and raped her while she was passed out. Now... Well, he’s just a thing for me to play with when I’m mad, which, if I’m being honest, is quite frequently.”

Anthony ran his eyes over Maxim’s naked body, noting all the scars that covered his skin, both old and new. Particularly, the ones around the groin area. He turned so pale, I thought he might throw up.

I let Maxim go and moved to the man beside him. “This,” I went on, grabbing his hair and flinging his head back. “This is Erik. He was a soldier of mine. Smart, strong and incredibly loyal. Or so I thought. His daughter was the one responsible for letting enemies through our gates, resulting in our house getting raided. In me getting kidnapped.” Erik’s brown eyes stayed pointed to the ground, refusing to look up. “Funny thing is, that’s not what I’m most mad about. That raid resulted in my children almost being killed. *That* is something I absolutely can not let slide. He had the chance to stop his daughter. Instead, he did nothing. That makes him just as responsible.” I released him with a shove, and turned back to face Anthony.

“Now, here’s what’s going to happen,” I said, picking up the cheese grater. “I’m going to torture these two in front of you, Anthony, and *everything* I do to them is what I’m going to do to *you* if you don’t tell me where Talon is.”

Anthony immediately slammed his eyes shut. With a snarl, I lurched forward and pried them open.

“You keep your fucking eyes open. You hear me? You close them, and I’ll fucking cut your eyelids off. Understand?” I threatened, my face hard and unforgiving.

Pure terror made him nod his head frantically.

I let him go and gave him a nice, pleasant smile like I hadn’t just threatened to permanently disfigure him. “Wonderful.” I turned around to

face Maxim and Erik. “Let’s begin, then.”



A few hours later, I walked down the halls of the pit, wiping my blood-covered hands on a black hand towel. Anthony’s eyes had remained open the whole time Mikhail and I tortured Maxim and Erik, watching every punch, every slice we inflicted on them, no matter how much he didn’t want to.

He’d begged us to stop. Begged us to let him look away. Of course, I allowed neither.

It was crucial that he watched and saw everything that would happen to him if he chose not to give me the information I wanted.

Even *I* had to admit that it was a particularly brutal torture session. We’d started off with the basics. A punch here. A cut there. Then, we got a little bit more creative, using the cheese grater against their skin and holding a blowtorch just far enough away to sizzle the exposed flesh.

I won’t go into all the nitty, gritty details. Some of it might make you vomit, like it did Anthony.

After we were done, we left the unconscious bodies dangling in the room so Anthony would be constantly reminded of the fate he was in for if he didn’t talk.

“So, what happens now?” Mikhail asked, wiping a spot of blood from his brow.

“Now, we wait.” I stopped at the foot of the stairs that led back up to the warehouse, throwing the hand towel into a wicker basket. “We’ll give him a few days to agonise over what he’s seen. Maybe even a week. If he still chooses not to talk, then... Well, it will be his turn to go under the knife.”

Mikhail nodded. “Alright. Sounds like a plan. I’ve gotta go deal with some business, but you’ll call me before you take that next step, *da?*”

“Yes. Don’t worry, I know you don’t like to miss out on the fun.”

“It’s not only that.” His face suddenly turned serious. “If you get Talon’s location, I don’t want you to do something stupid like go after him by yourself with no backup.”

His fears were warranted. That was something I would probably do. “I swear I’ll call you.”

“Good. You better. Now, let’s get the fuck out of here. I’m craving a ham and cheese sandwich right now.” Only Mikhail would want to eat something after skinning someone.

We both headed up the stairs and back into the warehouse. Over 50,000 square feet of space, the warehouse was a place I’d created to sit on top of the pit, making it its only point of access and escape. It was filled with every type of gym equipment available on the market, and had a world class boxing ring smack dab in the middle of it, perfect for sparring.

Speaking of which...

My eldest and youngest son were currently in said ring, exchanging blows. Several of the men were watching from the sidelines while others were working out on the machines. Rock music blasted from the speakers high up on the walls, creating a light and playful atmosphere.

A complete contrast to what was going on below.

Mikhail said his goodbyes and headed for the exit. As I walked past the ring, Aleksandr flung Lukyan over his shoulder and body slammed him to the ground. Lukyan groaned, curling himself up into a ball as Aleksandr flowed to his feet. He saw me, walked to the edge of the ring and dangled his arms over the ropes, allowing them to support his weight.

“Father. Fancy a spar?” he asked.

“Please, say yes,” Lukyan begged, dragging himself along the floor with one hand while his other was curled around his torso. “Please. For the love of God. Say. Yes.”

I chuckled softly at my youngest son’s antics. Shrugging a shoulder, I said, “Why not?” and climbed the few steps up to the ring and jumped in.

“Thank fuck,” Lukyan choked.

“Oh, stop being such a baby,” Aleksandr commented, but Lukyan was already making his escape from the warehouse at a hurried, brisk pace despite the fact that he was limping.

“I hope he deserved that beating, and you weren’t just picking on your brother,” I said, arching an eyebrow as I unbuttoned my suit jacket and

rolled it off my shoulders.

“Of course,” Aleksandr smirked. “I’m a fair and wise leader.”

My brows shot up in surprise. I took off my long-sleeved t-shirt next. Aleksandr wasn’t usually the type to joke around, but I had to admit that, since my return, I’d noticed there was something different about him. He seemed...lighter. Happier.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out why.

It started and ended with that five-foot nothing, dark-haired, tattooed cartel queen of his who was parked right in the front row, watching him with lustful eyes.

I threw my shirt and jacket out of the ring before rotating both of my arms and then putting my fists up.

Aleksandr winked at Drea, who in turn blew him a kiss before he finally gave me his full attention.

“Do you two need a minute alone first?” I asked as we began to circle each other.

A dark smile curled on his lips. “No need. This won’t take long.”

Oh, really?

The growing crowd around the ring “Ooooo-ed” at Aleksandr’s nicely worded insult.

“Fairly confident, are we, son?”

Aleksandr’s smile widened. He threw a light punch, no doubt to test my reflexes. I slapped it away. We kept circling. “I’m you, Father. Just a younger, faster, stronger, *better* version.”

“I see on top of getting yourself a wife in my absence, you’ve also acquired some cockiness.” I lashed out with a light kick, and he did what I did, slapping it away with ease. “Looks like I’ll have to bring you down a peg.”

It had been a while since we’d sparred together. He was right in some ways. I’d trained him to be *better* than me, but was he there yet?

Guess we’re about to find out.

He made the first move. I waited, watching for that slight shift in his stance that told me he was going to charge, and then I ran forward at the same time. We clashed into a strong grapple, fighting for the dominant position.

“How was London?” he asked casually, a slight grimace on his face as he tried to overpower me.

“Fine,” I grunted, pushing for the advantage. “Nothing of interest to report.”

“Really?” he hummed before gripping me tight.

I realised what he was going to do too late.

He reared back, placing a foot to my chest at the same time as he somersaulted backwards, hurling me over top of him and through the air. I smacked into the ropes and crashed to the ground. He rushed me quickly, striking out with a kick. I used my forearm to block, gritting my teeth through the pain.

“What do you mean, ‘really?’” I shoved him back and got to my feet again.

He bounced on the tip of his toes, keeping his fists up, guarding his face. “Just that I heard a few things. That’s all.”

“What things?” I demanded.

“Things that involve a red-haired, green-eyed woman.” He arched a knowing eyebrow. I narrowed my eyes and charged him.

I faked left and went right, but Aleksandr was too smart, too quick to fall for that trick. He met me head-on, and we exchanged blow for blow, blocking and then attacking, blocking and then attacking. I threw a punch to his side. He twisted out of the way and returned with a knee strike. I blocked and lashed out with a high kick to his head. He deflected it and took hold of my leg. With a simple twist, he took us to the floor.

“What did you hear?” I growled as we wrestled along the ground, him trying to lock me in a leg lock and me trying desperately to keep out of his grasp. If he got me in any type of hold, it would be over, and not because I would tap. I’d let him break my leg before I let that happen.

“I think you should focus more on the fight, Father,” he mocked. He was seconds away from being able to lock the hold in place, and he knew it. “Talking seems to distract you.”

He was right. But I needed to know what he’d heard.

He couldn’t possibly know about the sex?

Could he?

He straightened my leg, moved into position... *Shit, shit, shit.* Panic set in, and I heaved with every bit of strength I possessed to try and throw him off balance.

It worked.

He faltered. I punched him in the chest, and then hooked my leg around in a fast roundhouse kick, my calf smacking him in the face. The blow stunned him, and I pressed for the advantage, shoving him to the ground. I wrapped my legs around his arm quickly and then reared back, locking him in a perfect, textbook armbar.

“Arghh! Fuck!” He tried to fight, tried to move to somehow hit me, but I was in the optimal position.

“Tap,” I snarled, pulling back that little bit more. “Tap, or I’ll break it, Aleksandr.”

“Fuck you,” he spat, still fighting.

So much like me.

Of course, I would never follow through with that threat. It was a friendly spar. Not a punishment. In fact, I was a heartbeat away from releasing the hold altogether when, out of nowhere, a blow to the face rocked me, my head snapping back as blood filled my mouth.

I let go instantly and rolled back. *What the fuck—*

I looked up to see Drea crouched protectively in front of Aleksandr, facing me with a dark, savage look blazing in her eyes.

I flashed my blood-stained teeth in an amused smile.

Alright, you’ve earned my respect. Let’s see how good you are.

I charged her, and she didn’t back away. She met me head-on. I swung a punch, but she ducked under it with plenty of time to spare. She jabbed me in the kidneys and then shot away real fucking quick, before I even got the chance to retaliate. Then she was back, delivering a punch to my ribs. I grunted and swung, but she ducked again, missing my strike altogether before springing back up behind me to kick me in the back. I flew forward, pain shooting up my spine.

Fucking hell, she’s fast.

I picked myself back up just in time to block her next attack, bringing an arm up to protect the side of my face. I palm-striked the centre of her chest, and she flew back, rolled into a handstand and then flipped back onto her feet in a second flat.

Impressive.

She didn’t fuck around. She came running back at me with absolutely no fear, no hesitation. It made me like her even more. She was perfect for my son. Smart, strong and protective as all hell. It was a relief to know she would always have his back, no matter what, against anyone.

Including me.

I worked hard to avoid her strikes, but she was quick as a cat—quicker even—and more of her blows landed then not. Fed up with the pain, I charged through her next round of attacks, gripped her by the throat and held her up in the air.

Even when I snarled in her face, her feet dangling several inches off the ground, she didn't show an ounce of fear. I raised my free hand, closed into a tight fist and—

A strong hand gripped mine, halting it in the air. Aleksandr was there at my side. He bared his teeth in a savage growl. I dropped Drea instantly to block him as he attacked me ferociously. A second later, Drea was back. She ducked and weaved between Aleksandr and I, lashing out with strikes in between his. They worked perfectly in tandem with each other, and I was powerless to stop them. There was no way I could beat them together.

Aleksandr front-kicked me, and Drea swung around my body like some sort of circus contortionist, ensuring I landed flat on my back. Then, she wrapped her legs around my arm at the same time Aleksandr locked me into a knee bar.

They both pulled back at the same time and pain shot through me, so crippling that I yelled out.

“Jesus, fuck!” I cursed loudly.

Aleksandr didn't tell me to *tap*. He knew it would be pointless, but he honestly didn't have to.

They'd won. Fair and square.

Well, as fair as a two vs one fight can be, anyway.

I used my free hand to tap the floor twice.

There was a brief pause, almost as if they couldn't believe I'd actually done it.

“Hello,” I grunted. “I tapped. Means you let me the fuck go.”

“Oh, shit. Sorry,” Drea winced, unwinding her legs from around my arm. She got to her feet, standing over me at the same time Aleksandr did. Red stained her cheeks, and she reached down to try and help me up. “Oh my god, I am so sorry. I have no idea what came over me. I just—”

I raised a hand to stop her chatter. Keeping one hand to my back, I got to my feet and blew out a painful breath. “Nothing to apologise for. I like knowing you'd fight anyone to protect your husband. Even me. *Especially* me.”

“Oh.” She smiled. “Okay. Cool.”

When I turned to look at my son, he didn’t look as happy. His brows were lowered in an angry frown.

“What?” I shrugged innocently. “You won.”

He punched me in the face with absolutely no warning.

“*Blyad! Fuck!* Aleksandr—”

“That’s for hurting my wife, asshole.”

Okay, that was fair.

I rubbed my aching jaw, about to say what I was thinking out loud when Drea surprised both Aleksandr and I by slapping him across the arm.

“Hey!” she chastised, staring him down. “All is fair in a friendly spar.”

“But he—”

She cut him off with nothing but a scathing look. He grumbled out what sounded like a reluctant “fine” under his breath.

I chuckled, and then winced as pain flared through me. “Ow, fuck,” I blew out, holding my side. Now that the adrenaline from the fight was easing off, the pain was becoming a lot more noticeable. “Okay, I’m going to go sit down for a week—”

“Father, wait.” Aleksandr leant forward to whisper something in Drea’s ear. She smirked, bit her lip, nodded and then waved goodbye to me before darting off. Aleksandr turned to face me, standing tall. “About what we were talking about before—”

“When I was kicking your ass, you mean?” I joked, in hopes of derailing this conversation before it even started.

Shit luck there, though.

“About Autumn,” he said, ignoring what I’d said, but the slight clench to his jaw told me he didn’t like that little comment. “Word travels fast in our circles. You know that. I’ve managed to keep the others from finding out, but that won’t last forever. Dimitri Volkov kissing some woman on the dance floor of Allistair’s ball is pretty big news. Everyone is wondering who she is. What makes her so special to catch the attention of a man who has shown no interest in anyone else in over a decade.”

“Aleksandr—”

He raised a hand, palm facing outwards. “I’m not done.”

I arched an eyebrow, but made no objection as he continued.

“I know you’re still grieving Mother’s death, and I know that you’ll never allow yourself to be happy with another woman, but I’m telling you now

that you should.” His eyes held mine, blazing with the need to get me to listen to his words clearly. “You’ve held onto her for ten years, Father. There comes a time where you need to let her go and move on. I’m here to tell you that’s okay. That we all support you. Not to ruin this chance you have at happiness because you can’t let go of the past. Mother wouldn’t want this for you. She wouldn’t want you to spend your days alone. She would want you to be happy.” He gripped my shoulder, squeezing it tightly. “We all do. Don’t do what I know you will try to do. Don’t push Autumn away.”

I frowned, but he was already walking away, leaving me to ponder his words and their meaning on my own.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



AUTUMN DEVALOS

I BREATHED IN THE cool, midnight air of Las Vegas as I stood on top of a rolling hill overlooking the Volkov Estate.

A week had passed since Allistair's ball. Since the high of the best sex I'd ever had and the low of being pushed away—yet again—by Dimitri. Since finding out the person behind my contract was Sergei Volkov, and that it wasn't actually Dominik that was the intended target, but *Dimitri*, the man who'd done nothing but cause me inner turmoil for the last few months.

The man I feared I might...love.

That was the only explanation I could come up with for that feeling I'd never experienced before. I recalled all the things Dimitri said about love when we were locked in the cell together. Recalled how Nikolai acted with that blonde woman, Tatiana.

Love was the only thing that made sense, that could rationalise that agonising pressure smothering my chest. The only thing that could rationalise this ache in my soul for him. To be near him.

And didn't that complicate the fuck out of things?

I had two options before me.

I could either complete the contract and kill Dimitri, or refuse, and most likely have to live out the rest of my days in hiding because Sergei would put an open contract out on me for not doing the job. That meant anyone—assassin or not—could try to kill me to claim the money attached to the contract.

If it had been a few months before, back before I'd even met the bastard, it wouldn't even be an issue. Wouldn't even be a question.

I would have done it with zero hesitation and then gone home and slept on the giant pile of cash I'd earnt from it.

But now...

Now, things were different.

I knew Dimitri Volkov, and it was *because* I knew him that I wasn't sure if I was capable of killing him anymore.

Hurting him? Yes.

But killing him? I honestly didn't know if I could do it.

Which was why I was there, staking out his house. I needed to talk to him about the situation.

Maybe he would say something stupid, like he always did, and then I could kill him without a guilty conscience hanging over my head.

Using my high-powered binoculars that were equipped with night vision, I did another perimeter sweep of Dimitri's house. It was surrounded on all sides by thick, wrought-iron fencing that spread out for miles from the house itself. The home wasn't only well protected, but it was well guarded, with 360-degree rotating cameras, foot patrols *and* canines.

I'd been watching for at least a few hours, and I'd yet to see a way in without getting caught—

“What the fuck is that?” I whispered under my breath. I adjusted the dial in the centre of the binoculars to zoom in and sharpen the focus. “Is that—”

A woman in a black, skintight cat burglar outfit was climbing out of one of the windows of the house.

I was stunned. One, because she'd somehow managed to get in and out without anyone noticing. And two, because she was climbing down the side of the house with what looked like zero climbing equipment. She was doing it completely freehand.

She plopped down onto the ground and stretched her body left to right. I thought she was done for when a soldier stepped around the corner and

spotted her. I almost wanted to shout out and warn her, regardless of how pointless it would be to do so from so far away.

Turned out, she didn't need my help, though. She whipped out a gun and shot him in the neck with what looked like a dart before he even knew what was going on. She then shot forward and caught his fall, lowering him to the ground softly before snatching up the dart and pocketing it.

Without any further delay, she took off, running in the north-east direction, behind the warehouse.

I was genuinely impressed with her, and couldn't help wondering who she was and what she was doing in Dimitri's house.

When I realised she was making her escape, heading straight for some sort of exit point, I cursed. With quick, precise movements, I packed away my gear into my backpack, strapped it across my shoulders and ran to my bike.

I owned several different motorbikes, but this one—the Aprilia RSV 1000R Mille—was my favourite. It wasn't only fast but quiet, making it perfect for sleuthing. I much preferred bikes over cars because they made for quick, easy getaways. Given my profession, those two things were key to ensuring a successful escape.

I slapped on my black helmet and straddled my bike, turning on the engine. Pain shot through my body, and I winced, gripping my side.

Son of a bitch.

There was a seven-inch laceration just under my ribs, thanks to Johnathon. Fucker was more skilled than I thought.

After Sergei's ultimatum, I'd run back to try to find Johnathon and complete my mission, but he'd left. Most likely, after the kiss Dimitri and I shared on the dance floor. Having his "date" kiss another man in front of everyone else would have been a bit of an ego blow for the dude.

So, he'd ditched my clutch on the table and just left. The vial of Thallium was still inside, so I was confident my cover hadn't been blown. But still, it presented a conundrum.

How was I going to complete my contract and kill him?

The easiest solution I could come up with was to sneak into his house and put the Thallium in one of the bottles of water in his fridge. A plan I wished I'd thought of first, so I didn't have to endure the tedious events of that stupid ball.

In saying that, though, if I'd done that first, I never would have gotten to finally fuck Dimitri.

Everything happens for a reason, I guess.

Unfortunately for me, Johnathon had woken up in the middle of the night and caught me. He'd managed to get a few good hits in, one of which being a cut from a knife before I was able to take him down.

I'd been left with no choice but to kill him and make it look like a home invasion gone wrong to cover my tracks.

Shaking off the pain, I kicked the stand up and took off quickly, pebbles and dust shooting in the air as I sped forward. I took the winding roads at high speed, heading in the north-east direction. If I could get there in time to see where the woman was exiting from, I might be able to use that as my way in.

The wind whistled past me, the exhilaration that came with riding fast, with leaning into the swerves as I took corners quickly pounding into my veins. It was such an adrenaline rush, and I fucking loved every second of it —another reason why I preferred bikes to cars.

Since I knew what to look for, it made spotting her a little easier. She was running across the yard with one of the dogs on her tail, but it wasn't attacking her—another thing I didn't understand, but didn't have the time to think about.

I pulled over to the side of the road and switched off my bike. My head tilted to the side as I watched her approach a small bush. She simply picked it up and moved it to the side, revealing a hole in the fence that looked like it had been blowtorched open.

Interesting.

She patted the dog on the head and then climbed through the hole, emerging on the other side next to another motorbike—hers, I assumed.

I took off my helmet and left it dangling from the handlebars. She spotted me. Froze. Cocked her head to the side. Then waved in a friendly greeting.

At least she wasn't trying to outright kill me, which I took as a positive. I waved back. We both seemed to have similar agendas—getting into the Volkov house undetected—so I figured she might be open to helping me.

Swinging my leg, I dismounted from my bike and crossed the road quickly to get to her side. She was wearing a mask, so I couldn't see her face properly. Just a set of light, brown eyes.

"Hello," I greeted politely.

She smiled. “Hello!” *Fuck me, you’re a chipper one.* “Are you looking to get in?”

“Uh, yes.”

“You can use my entry if you want. I don’t mind. I was just visiting my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” I was confused. Beyond confused. If she was visiting her boyfriend, why was she, for all intents and purposes, breaking in?

She nodded emphatically. “Uh-huh! My sweet Lukyan,” she sighed dreamily. “He was sleeping, so I didn’t want to wake him. He had such a tough day. My poor little baby. I just sat there and watched him sleep! He was so cute.”

“Watched...him...sleep,” I dragged out, trying hard to follow along with the conversation, but she was like one of those energiser bunnies. Just go, go, go. No stopping. “How long were you in there?” I’d arrived a few hours before, and hadn’t seen her go in, so that meant she would have already been inside—

“Four hours and twelve minutes! My longest record yet.”

Yet? She’d done this before. Several times. Who the fuck was this woman?

Memories and conversations from back in Talon’s cell came hurtling back to me. I remembered something was mentioned about Lukyan having a stalker.

Is this her?

“How did you get in there without being seen? What about the cameras? The dogs?”

She waved a hand through the air like those things were nothing. “The cameras are on a loop. I got the idea from a movie called *Speed!* Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves. Have you seen it? It’s pretty good. It’s way better than the second one! And the dogs look tough and scary, but they’re really sweethearts. They’re used to me, so they see me as a friend. It might be a little harder for you. But I sent them all to bed, so if you’re quick, you might be able to make it to the house before they come out. Who are you here to see? I hope it’s not my Lukyan because then I’ll have to kill you!” she laughed, but I had a feeling she wasn’t joking in the slightest. She gave off batshit crazy vibes to a tee.

“Um, Dimitri.”

“The dad? Oof. You’ve got your work cut out for you there. He’s got issues upon issues upon issues. Not like my Lukyan. We’ve been together for a while now, you know? It’s coming up to our six-month anniversary. We’re going to celebrate big.”

“That sounds...nice.” She sounded delusional, if I was being honest.

“It does, doesn’t it,” she breathed out. “Anyway, Pops’ room is on the third floor, right-hand side, second door from the stairs. I’d avoid the shrine room right next to it, though.”

“Shrine room?” I questioned.

“Yeah. It’s pretty weird in there. I tried to go in there once, but it gave me the heebie jeebies. It’s like time just stopped in that room. Like no one has been in there in years. There’s so much layer of dust, you can’t even walk in without leaving footprints.”

I frowned, not really understanding much of what she was saying. “O-kay. Thanks for the advice.”

“No problem! The cameras will be on a loop for about another forty-five minutes. Is that enough time for you?”

There were so many things wrong with the conversation, but I just nodded and thanked her for the help.

She jumped onto her bike and gave me another smile, big enough to see straight through her mask. “It was so nice to meet you! Who knows, maybe the next time we meet will be at me and Lukyan’s wedding.” She leant forward and put her hand up over her mouth like she was telling me some sort of secret she didn’t want anyone else to hear. “I think he’s going to propose soon,” she giggled. “Bye!” Then, she sped off down the street.

I stared after her, blinking rapidly. “Oh, she’s motherfucking looney tunes.”



“Third floor, second door from the stairs. Third floor, second door from the stairs,” I whispered under my breath as I carefully moved up the stairs, one agonising step at a time. I’d managed to make it across the lawn and into the house without being seen, but it had been hard.

The dogs hadn’t come out of their little doggie houses, to which I was relieved, but the guards patrolling had been difficult to avoid. I had to get in some awkward as fuck positions to make sure I wasn’t spotted, but in the end, I’d managed to slip in without being noticed.

Since making it inside, I hadn’t seen a single guard. It seemed they only patrolled the outside, which worked well in my favor.

When I made it to the third floor, I turned right and stopped in front of the second door. If I believed Looney Tunes, Dimitri would be behind it. I placed my hand on the handle, but something was making me hesitate.

My gaze shot to my left. I eyed the door of the next room, Looney Tunes’ words streaking through my mind.

“It’s like time just stopped in that room. Like no one has been in there in years.”

Why? Why would there be a room in the house that no one had stepped foot in in years? It didn’t make any sense. Curiosity got the better of me, and I found myself unable to turn away from it.

Cursing softly under my breath, I moved to the next room and opened the door, slipping inside. It was dark. So dark, I couldn’t see a thing. I whipped out my small flashlight and turned it on, casting a small beam of light throughout the room.

Jesus, fuck.

Looney Tunes hadn’t been lying. It had been *way longer* than a few years since someone went into that room. The layer of dust was so thick that it covered every inch of the space. It was on the four-poster bed, on the dresser, the bookshelf—even on the walls. I was stunned, frozen on the spot, unable to move.

It literally felt like time had just stopped in that room and that room alone.

My eyes roamed around the room, following the light as it moved over every surface. Something caught my eye from one of the bedside tables. I took one step, then another, and it left very clear, distinct footprints behind me, but I couldn’t stop myself. It was like I was being drawn there.

A pair of heels were on the ground like someone had taken them off after a long, hard day and just left them right there. I moved closer, stepping over a towel covered in dust. It was what I imagined a room to look like after the world had ended, when people are moving from house to house decades later, scavenging for food, and they step inside to see what the room had been like right before disaster had struck. Right before people panicked and ran, leaving everything behind. Leaving everything exactly how it was.

Disaster had struck outside of that room, and ever since, no one had come back in.

My fingers shook as I reached forward and picked up a photo frame from the bedside table. Unable to help myself, I wiped away the layer of dust obstructing the photo, and sucked in a painful gasp.

The photo was of a couple. She was gorgeous. Long, dark hair. Bright, hypnotizing blue eyes. Soft, pale skin. Beautiful smile. And he...

He was Dimitri, but not the Dimitri I knew. There was a light in his eyes that I'd never seen before. A smile on his lips that I'd never been a witness to. I ran my fingers over his face. He looked younger, his hair devoid of those streaks of silver I loved so much, his face free of those harsh, hard lines. He looked...carefree. Happy.

This is what a happy Dimitri looks like.

Pain smothered my chest, making it difficult for me to breathe. Of course. It all made sense. The reason why he pushed away from me every chance he got. My eyes flicked to her, the woman standing next to him in the photo.

He still loved her.

After all these years, he still loved her.

The evidence of that was all around me. It was in all her belongings still there, in exactly the same spots they were in before she died. It was in her clothes I could see hanging in the open wardrobe. In her shoes lying on the floor. Her perfumes sitting on the dresser. Her make-up sitting on the table. He'd kept everything.

Everything.

Hot tears welled in my eyes. I blinked them back, refusing to let them fall. *I shouldn't have come in here. I should have listened to Looney Tunes.*

Using every bit of strength I possessed to keep my hands from trembling, I placed the photo frame back in its spot and backed out of the room slowly. Once I was back in the hall, I took a deep, shuddering breath.

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter, I told myself.

I was there for a reason. I had a mission. *That* was what I needed to focus on.

But as I inched my way towards the door Dimitri was behind, I couldn't help but feel like any chance of happiness I might have was slipping away with each step.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



AUTUMN DEVALOS

I SLIPPED INTO DIMITRI'S room, quiet as a mouse, trying and utterly failing to forget what I'd walked into just moments ago.

Everyone was entitled to grieve in their own way.

Dimitri had chosen to grieve by keeping every single possession his wife owned before her death. That was normal... Right?

His room gave off a completely different vibe to the one before it, that vibe being "guest room". There was nothing personal about it. No photos on the walls. No little knick knacks. Nothing to signify somebody actually *lived* in the room. Just four walls with the bare basics.

A king-sized bed. A bedside table. One lonely chair in the corner with a suit jacket folded over it. And a single pair of mens shoes sitting neatly on the ground at its feet.

That was it.

It was depressing as all hell.

Lying on his back in the middle of the bed was Dimitri. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness well enough that I could see that he was shirtless,

the blanket falling down to just below his waist. His chest rose and fell with deep, even breaths.

He was still asleep.

My gaze travelled down his muscular, tanned torso, along his rigid six-pack and that clear, distinct V line of his pelvis as I slowly began to approach him. Heat skirted across my skin.

Fuck, the effect he had on me... I didn't understand it. I'd been around plenty of hot men in my life. None of them turned me into a hot fucking mess. Set my blood on fire like Dimitri did.

I stopped at the side of the bed and just stared at him. He looked almost... peaceful like that.

My fingers curled around the hilt of my knife strapped to my thigh and pulled it free. I caught my bottom lip between my teeth, continuing to study him.

Ogle him is more like it.

He was right there, sleeping peacefully with no sense to the danger he was in, completely unprotected. I could slit his throat before he even knew what happened, ending all of my problems with one, clean slice of my knife.

I placed the blade between my teeth to keep my hands free as I climbed up, making sure the sharp edge was pointing outwards. The bed dipped slightly. I kept my movements slow and controlled so there was no risk of waking him. His eyes stayed closed, and there was no change to his breathing to indicate he'd been disturbed in his sleep.

Throwing caution to the wind, I put one leg on either side of his body, straddling him. I held my weight off him using my knees, took the knife out of my mouth and held it to his throat.

I sat there, frozen, unable to move. To take that next step.

Kill him. Do it, a voice said in my head. *Kill him, and all your problems die with him. Do it.*

The voice was right. All my problems *would* go away if I just killed him right then and there. So why was I hesitating?

I looked down at the blade pressed against his skin.

Do it. Do it. Do it.

“Are you going to kill me or not, *malen’kaya d’yavolitsa?*”

My eyes shot up and clashed with Dimitri's very awake, very alert crystal blue orbs. He made no move to protect himself. To stop me. Just continued

to lie there, casual as you please, curiosity streaking across his face.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I answered honestly. “How long have you been awake?”

“Since the moment you entered the room.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Why didn’t you stop me, then?”

His gaze ran over me, slowly, methodically. He shrugged. “Wanted to see what you would do. I like this,” he murmured, plucking the skintight fabric of my leather motorcycle pants. “You ride?”

“Yes.” The overwhelming urge to drop myself on him and *ride him* like a bitch in heat beat at my skin. “Do you?”

“Haven’t in a long time.” His hands moved, lightly touching both of my knees on either side of his body. It was the barest of touches, and yet, I felt it *everywhere*, my core throbbing for something more. “So, what’s it going to be, Autumn? Hmm? Are you going to slit my throat now?”

“If I said yes, what would you do? *Hmm, Butcher?*”

Something feral flashed in his eyes. “Then, I suppose I would have to stop you.”

“Stop me?” I scoffed. “How do you plan on doing that? I’m the one with the dominant position here—” a gasp flew from my mouth when he suddenly reared up and spun us so our positions were reversed.

He’d done it so fast and so smoothly, it was like I blinked and I was instantly on my back with him pressed firmly between my legs.

My insides *burnt*. I could feel him. Every glorious, hard inch of him. It made my pussy throb, desperation filling me. My knife was still somehow at his throat, a faint red line beginning to bloom along his skin.

He stared deep into my eyes as his head tilted quizzically to the side, studying me with every shred of his focus. That overwhelming sexual tension that was always between us burnt with the heat of a thousand suns.

My skin was hot. My mouth felt dry. My heart slammed so hard in my chest that I was sure he could feel it hammering against his own.

“How rude of me. I interrupted you,” he whispered huskily, his gaze locked firmly onto my lips. “You were saying?”

“That I...” I licked my dry lips and his eyes flashed. “I have the dominant position here.” Which, in truth, was technically still true since it was *my* weapon prepared to end his life.

“I see,” he chuckled darkly. “I wonder...” his hand slowly moved down my body. “Does it make you wet, holding a knife to my throat?” My breath

hitched when his hand disappeared down the front of my leather pants. That first contact made me moan. "Ahhh, it does." A sinful smirk curled on his lips. "My dirty little devil."

His finger dipped inside me, and I panted, rotating my hips, searching for more. He put another finger in, and I couldn't stop myself from moving. He watched me with hooded eyes, slowly moving his fingers in and out.

"Hmm, look at you. Fucking my fingers, your pussy just *squeezing* me." He came closer, regardless of the blade digging into his neck, and placed his lips over mine, hovering just out of reach. "Did you miss me, Autumn?"

Sick of being at his mercy, I reached down with my free hand and grasped his cock roughly. He grunted, eyes flaring wildly. "I can see you missed *me*." I squeezed, and he released a deep, masculine moan, thrusting his hips once, twice, almost like he couldn't help himself.

How lucky for me that the man slept naked.

"I didn't," he panted, pumping into my hand. "I didn't miss you at all."

"Same," I moaned as he started moving his fingers faster and faster. "I didn't think about you."

"No," he agreed, still thrusting. His tongue came out and licked at my lips.

"Didn't dream of you." Pleasure shot up my spine. I arched into him.

"No," he agreed again. His other hand came around and started shoving my pants roughly down my legs. I kicked them off frantically, along with my shoes. "Didn't miss your touch."

"No," I whimpered, my hips swirling.

"Didn't miss your taste," he grunted. He removed his fingers from my pussy and plunged them into his mouth, completely contradicting what he'd just said. His eyes rolled into the back of his head. He moved down, tore my pants away and pushed my legs all the way up to my chest before closing his mouth over me.

"*Oh, fuck,*" he groaned, licking, sucking, biting me. "Yes, yes, fuck. More. Give me more."

"Dimitri!" I thrashed, unable to handle the pleasure assaulting me. It was so fucking good, taking me over completely.

My knife slipped from my hands, landing beside me on the bed. Dimitri moaned, burying his face deeper into my pussy like *he* was the one about to cum. He licked me from ass to clit in one long, languid stroke. Then another, and another. He spat on my pussy and then went right back to

eating me out, a mixture of salvia and my own wetness running down the insides of my thighs.

“I can’t wait anymore,” he almost whined, like he was in physical pain. “I need to be inside you.” He let my legs go and reared up to his knees. His hand grasped his thick, hard cock and pumped it up and down a few times before he went to move into position.

“Stop,” I panted. He did immediately, a flash of confusion streaking through the lust burning in his eyes. “More. I want to see more.”

He looked down at his hand, wrapped around his cock, and back up at me.

I nodded. Fuck yeah, I wanted to see more. He had no idea how fucking hot he looked right now, his muscles rippling, veins popping in his forearms as he flexed his hand open and closed over himself.

Hot, hot, fucking hot.

He started moving his hand, slow at first, and then faster and faster, all while he stared me in the eyes. His head tilted back slightly, exposing the cords of his neck. Teeth clenched, powerful body tight and tense, small grunts and snarls slipping from his lips, he made the perfect fucking picture. One I would take to my fucking grave.

“Does it feel good?” I whispered, moving one hand to unzip my skintight leather jacket. My breasts spilt out and his eyes flashed with something dark. Something feral.

“Yes,” was all he grunted.

I opened my legs and used my fingers to spread my pussy wide. He snarled like a hungry beast, and his movements turned chaotic. “Do you want to stick your cock in here?” I tapped a finger against my pussy and shuddered. “Deep inside me?”

“Yes,” he spat with anger and lust.

I knew I was playing a dangerous game, riling him up that way, but dangerous was the only game I liked to play.

“Then beg me.”

He cursed, looked away, looked back, all while he continued to pump his cock with his hand.

“Come on, Dimitri,” I panted, putting one finger inside. “It’s so nice and wet, and warm. You want to feel it, don’t you? Feel me, squeezing your cock—oh,” I put another finger in and my hips moved, swirling, arching. “Beg me for it,” I demanded.

“Fucking *please*,” he all but snarled at me.

“Take me, Butcher.”

He didn’t hesitate. He lunged forward and thrust inside me. It was hard, rough, with a slight burn of pain and it made me moan, long and low. He moved instantly, rutting into me with harsh, frantic movements, and it felt fucking amazing.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he grunted into my ear. His teeth latched onto my neck in a savage bite.

“Ah, fuck,” I cursed.

He pulled back immediately. “Sorry, sorry.”

I gripped his head and shoved it back into my neck. “No. More. More,” I begged. “I like it.”

He groaned. “You’re fucking perfect.” He ravaged my neck with a mixture of bites and kisses. It was like he couldn’t get enough. Like he had to mark me everywhere. Touch his lips to every inch of my skin.

He gripped my hair and pulled my head back roughly before taking my lips in a savage kiss, his tongue plunging into my mouth.

“Mmm. Yeah. Squeeze my cock. Nice and tight. Yeah. Fuck yeah.” His words switched to Russian, and I had no idea what he was saying except that he was saying them with earnestness, his words coated in pleasure, his hips smacking into mine over and over again.

The sound of flesh slapping against flesh echoed around us, mixed beautifully with his masculine groans. He pushed up onto his knees, spread my legs even wider apart and fucked me ruthlessly while he watched my tits bounce up and down.

“Come for me, Autumn.”

My skin burnt, my orgasm just outside of my reach. I could feel it, right there. His cock felt so good, my pussy fucking drenched and throbbing, and yet, I couldn’t get there. I needed more.

“Come for me, Autumn,” Dimitri repeated, his hips powering forward in savage thrusts.

“I...can’t,” I moaned, arching into him. “I need...”

“What? What do you need?”

I shook my head. Men judged kinks. Even Mafia men. He wouldn’t understand. He’d want to stop-

“Tell me,” he demanded, fucking me harder. “Tell me.” *Thrust.* “Tell me.” *Thrust.* “Tell me what you need—”

“Blood,” I blurted out.

He stopped moving and arched a surprised eyebrow at me. A sinfully dark smirk curled on his lips. He reached for my knife on the bed, and cut a line across his chest with zero hesitation. It wasn’t a deep cut that would require stitches, but it was deep enough that blood started to trickle down his abs.

My pussy clenched, pleasure spiralling down my spine.

He resumed his thrusting, his cock hammering into me over and over again. Flipping the blade in his hand, he offered me the hilt. “Cut me wherever you fucking want. Write your name into my skin, for all I care. That shit turns me on,” he grunted, moving faster and faster.

“You don’t...have...to do this,” I panted. The pleasure was so intense that I could barely breathe, but I also started to feel guilty. It was a chat we should have had before. I didn’t want to pressure him—

“Hey.” He gripped my face and forced me to look him in the eyes. “I’m not the kind of man who does things he doesn’t want to do. You want blood?” He ran his hand across his chest and then smeared the blood onto my face. I moaned, my tongue falling out of my mouth. “Take mine. It belongs to you anyway.” He kissed me savagely. “Now, fucking come for me.”

He fucked me like some wild, feral beast, never slowing down, never losing momentum. I grabbed the knife from him and held it to his throat. He pounded into me faster, breathing harder. I ran the tip down his neck and applied a small amount of pressure, a small pool of blood emerging. He groaned, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

He *did* like it.

Currents of white-hot, blistering ecstasy hit me out of nowhere, and I screamed, my orgasm smacking me right in the face. It was all too much, the feel of his cock ramming into me, his sounds of pleasure, his body, his blood... It all sent me torpedoing to the best climax I’d ever had.

Dimitri didn’t stop. He kept going like a man possessed, his deep, masculine, grunts ricocheting around the room. His thrusts turned wild, frantic, his muscles bulging, veins throbbing in his neck. He smashed his lips onto mine and moaned long and deep as he emptied himself inside me.

His whole body collapsed on top of me, and I sucked in a wheezy breath. “Heavy. Heavy.”

He groaned, shifting half of his weight off me. His arm curled around my waist and then he just lay there, his head resting in the crook of my neck.

It fell quiet between us, but not an awkward kind of quiet. A more peaceful, tranquil kind of quiet that I rather enjoyed.

I knew the peace couldn't last forever, though. There was so much we needed to talk about. So much I still needed to tell him about his father. But I was hesitant to ruin the moment. That nice, loving moment between us.

I wasn't sure how long we lay there together in each other's embrace. It could have been hours. It could have been minutes. What I was sure of, though, was that Dimitri had somehow fallen asleep, and I knew that because he did something so un-Dimitri-like.

He. Snuggled. Into. Me.

That shocked me for a multitude of reasons, the main one being I never would have envisioned a man like Dimitri—rugged, hard, emotionally unavailable—doing something as mundane as snuggle. With *me* of all people.

The sex must have really worn him out. So much so that his guard had dropped, allowing a little bit of vulnerability to come through.

What we had to talk about could wait. There was still a week left on Sergei's ultimatum. I didn't want to ruin the peaceful moment for him. For us.

Slowly, quietly, I slipped out from underneath him and hopped off the bed. He groaned again and readjusted, moving to his back, but he didn't wake. Staying on the tips of my toes, I made my way over to the en suite to clean myself up.

When I got a look at myself in the mirror, I winced. I looked like I'd just fought for my life, my hair in complete disarray, blood smeared across my face and neck. Desire pulsed low in my belly. *Fuck, I want him again. Already.*

God, help me.

Shaking my head, I wet a hand towel and cleaned in between my thighs. The blood though... I should have cleaned it, but there was a part of me that didn't want to.

You can't go out in public looking like this, a voice tried to reason.

An idea popped into my head. I grabbed my phone from inside my pants and took a photo of me through the mirror—one with nothing but my motorcycle jacket on—and another standing completely naked, covered in Dimitri's blood.

That way, I would always have a memento from the moment.

When I was completely dressed and clean, I went back into the bedroom. Dimitri was still in the same spot, breathing softly. He was out like a light, and this time, I knew he wasn't faking it because he didn't move an inch when I began to wipe away the blood on his chest. His eyes didn't flutter when I applied antiseptic cream to the cuts. In fact, he started to snore just a little. Not the annoying kind, more the adorable kind that made a smile curl on my lips.

During our entire time incarcerated on Talon's island, I'd never seen him sleep so peacefully. It made me wonder if it could have been me. Could *I* have been the reason for it?

After I was done, I began to gather my things to leave when I noticed a notepad and pen on the bedside table.

Why the fuck not?

I wrote my number on it. I didn't write "Call me" or "This was fun, let's do it again sometime". Just ten digits. There would be no pressure that way. If he wanted to reach out and talk to me, he could.

The ball was in his court.

I quickly gathered up my shoes and backed out of the room without one last look at Dimitri's sleeping form. I feared if I were to lay eyes on him again, I wouldn't leave. And I had to. The moment had been perfect, in part because he had fallen asleep afterwards. He didn't have the chance to push me away like last time. If I stayed, if I fell asleep next to him, it gave him the opportunity to do exactly what he did last time when morning came.

I didn't want that.

I could pretend, remaining in complete denial that this time, he didn't regret the sex.

Shutting the door as quietly as possible with a wince on my face, I backed away from it one agonisingly slow step at a time. When it didn't immediately open with Dimitri bursting out, I released a deep breath, my shoulders dropping with relief.

I turned to head back down the stairs and—

"Oh, Jesus fucking Christ," I hissed under my breath.

Standing in front of me was Lukyan and Aleksandr, Lukyan with his mouth open and eyes wide in surprise, and Aleksandr with his arms crossed over his chest, face hard. An awkward silence passed between us as they stared at me and I stared at them. It was painfully obvious that I'd just been caught doing the walk of shame. My hair was a mess, I had my shoes in my

hands, the zip for my leather jacket was still half way down. There was no denying it.

Say something!

I opened my mouth, snapped it shut. I had no idea what the fuck to say.

Then, Lukyan surprised the fuck out of me when he whipped around and slapped the back of his hand on Aleksandr's chest.

"See! I *told* you they weren't trying to kill each other!" He raised his palm between them, moving his fingers back and forth quickly. "Pay up."

I frowned. *Did they bet on whether Dimitri and I were having sex or trying to kill each other?* The moment Aleksandr slapped a \$100 bill into his brother's hand, I had my answer.

Lukyan did an excited little happy dance. "Yes! I never win-hey!" he whined when Aleksandr snatched it back.

"You still owe me from the last one," he grunted, pocketing the cash.

"Damn, you're right," Lukyan blew out. He placed his hands on his hips. "What about an IOU?"

"Uh." I cleared my throat awkwardly. "I think I'm gonna go now."

Aleksandr narrowed his eyes. He looked so much like Dimitri when he did that, it actually freaked me the fuck out.

They were both blocking the entry to the staircase, so there was no way I could get off the third floor unless they moved out of the way. I didn't look away from him, keeping my gaze locked with his. You never showed fear or discomfort to a predator, and Aleksandr was his father's son to a tee. After a few seconds, he stepped back, and Lukyan followed.

"Use the front door next time," he stated as I walked past.

"Come back again soon!" Lukyan said cheerfully. Aleksandr thumped him on the back of the head and he winced.

I raced down the stairs and out the front door without looking back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

I STARED AT MY phone sitting on my desk, lips pursed, fingers tapping idly along the surface.

The night before, the unexpected had happened...in the best way possible. Autumn had somehow managed to get onto the property without detection and into my room.

I should have been *livid*. Should have had the soldiers on patrol lashed for allowing something like that to happen. For allowing someone to get through our defences and into our house.

What if that had been one of our enemies?

Of course, I wasn't *livid*, and I did nothing of the sort. The only thing I was mad about was the fact that Autumn had slipped away when I fell asleep. That she wasn't there when I woke up.

For the first time in years, I'd managed to fall asleep without effort *and* sleep through until morning. I wasn't that far down the denial rabbit hole that I couldn't see the reason for that.

It was Autumn. It had to be.

Having her next to me, feeling her soft, smooth skin on mine, her legs intertwined with mine had felt so good, relaxed me so much that I'd drifted

off into a peaceful sleep for the first time since Yekaterina died.

Once I realised what had happened, and what I was feeling, I waited for the eventual guilt to arise. For that all-consuming, gut-wrenching pain to cut through my happiness like it always did...

Only, it never came.

The guilt was still there, sure, but it wasn't as crippling. It wasn't as devastating as it had been the last time.

Did that mean I could enjoy this moment, and possibly others, without feeling like I was a cheater? Like I was betraying Yekaterina?

I wasn't sure.

My heart had literally skipped a beat when I'd gotten to my feet and seen she'd cleaned me up, not only wiping the blood away but applying antiseptic cream to my wounds. It was then that I'd discovered a note taped to my stomach. It had no words. Just ten digits and a kiss that looked like it had been done in blood.

Mine or hers?

Either one excited me.

Honestly, a blood kink? I thought I had her all figured out, but I never would have guessed she had something like that. I should have. Her moniker was literally *The Crimson Death*. And she was fucking crazy.

It had been a hot as fuck, pleasant surprise. I liked pain with pleasure, so being cut while deep inside her pussy had felt like fucking ecstasy.

And I wanted to do it again.

And again.

And again.

After discovering her note, I put her details into my phone straight away and then put the note into my safe for safekeeping. I'd had a shower, gone down stairs to have breakfast, endured weird looks from my sons and then gone straight to my office. It was 1:27 P.M. and I'd spent the last six hours and thirteen minutes staring at my phone, agonising over whether or not to use the number Autumn had given me.

I would pick up the phone, open a new text, stare at the screen with my fingers hovering over the letters and then slam my phone back down onto the desk. Ten minutes later, the process would start all over again.

I was driving myself crazy, acting like some sort of love-struck teenager.

I groaned, burying my face into my hands. *What is happening to me?* I was the Bratva Butcher, a man so terrifying, with a reputation so infamous that people walked the other way when they saw me coming.

If anyone saw me like that, tormenting over whether or not to message a woman, I would never live it down.

Determination set my spine straight. I snatched my phone from the desk, opened a new text message, typed five letters and then quickly pressed “send” before I could chicken out.

There. Done.

I relaxed back into my chair and exhaled heavily. I’d done it.

Me: Hello.

Five seconds passed. Then ten. She still hadn’t replied.

That’s okay. She might be busy.

After thirty seconds went by with no reply, panic set in. I abruptly got to my feet and began to pace up and down, mumbling incoherently to myself.

Oh, god, this was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have done it. Can you take back text messages? Is that a thing?

My phone vibrated. I lunged across the desk and snatched it up. It fumbled in and out of my hands, jumping from my left and then to my right. “For fuck’s sake,” I hissed, slamming it to my chest to get it to stop fucking moving. “Get. It. Together!” I chastised.

Forcing myself to take three deep breaths to steady my erratically beating heart, I looked at my phone.

Malen’kaya D’yavolitsa: Hello, Butcher.

A smile spread across my face. Somebody knocked on my office door, and I told them to enter without looking up from the device, too busy wondering what the fuck I was supposed to do.

“Hey, Boss.”

I recognised the voice instantly. “I’ve told you before, Ivan, you don’t have to call me that anymore.”

The man chuckled, moving further into the room. “It’s what I’ve always called you. Kind of hard to stop.”

I grunted in agreement, my eyes still on my phone.

What do I say now? How are you? No. That might make her think I care about how she is. What are you doing? No. Then she’ll know I’ve been wondering what she’s been doing. Argh.

Ivan sat down in one of the chairs in front of my desk. “Everything okay?”

I finally looked at him. He was a big man, with broad shoulders and a hard face. I’d known him for over thirty years, and despite the fact that he had worked for my family for over half his life, I definitely considered him a friend.

He was also Tatiana’s father, and considering the fact that our children were most likely going to get married in the near future, that also made him family.

But I couldn’t talk to him about it.

I could barely talk to *myself* about it.

“Everything’s fine.” The smile I gave to try and convince him my words were true felt strained and awkward.

“Uh, are you sure? Because I think you’re trying to smile at me right now, and you haven’t done that in years.”

I dropped the smile instantly, releasing a frustrated sigh. “I said everything is fine,” I repeated more sternly.

He threw his hands up in surrender, making me tsk. I put my phone down on the desk, deciding it wasn’t the time to reply. Whatever I replied with needed to be meticulously thought out and planned.

“Do you need something?”

“Yes, actually.” He sat up a little straighter in his chair. “I need to put in a request for some leave. I have to go to Russia.”

I frowned. “Didn’t you just get back from there a few months ago?”

“Yes.”

“And you weren’t able to get whatever you needed sorted then?”

He didn’t answer, avoiding my eyes.

“What’s going on, Ivan?” I demanded.

“It’s Svetlana,” he said, blowing out a tired breath. “She’s sick.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I really wasn’t, but that’s what you said when someone told you someone they loved was sick.

Svetlana Andreeva was a pisspoor excuse for a human being and a mother. She ran out on Tatiana and Ivan only a few weeks after Tatiana was born. Not one word from her for over twenty-four years, and then *bam*, she randomly called Ivan a few months ago and told him she needed to see him right away.

Despite the fact that I didn’t want to, I approved his request last time to take a few weeks off.

This time, though...

“It’s not up to me, Ivan. You know that. Aleksandr is *Pakhan* now. Any requests need to go through him.”

“Doc says she’s only got six months left, Dimitri. Maybe less.”

“As heartbreaking as that news is to me”—*not*—“it’s still up to Aleksandr. You’ll need to speak with him. Does Tatiana know?”

“No,” he exhaled, shaking his head. “I planned to tell her after I got back, but the raid happened, then that whole thing with Talon’s island. It just never seemed like a good time. Now, she’s pregnant, and I don’t want to cause any undue stress. She’s already incredibly anxious about this pregnancy, given what happened last time. But Svetlana’s only wish is to patch things up with her daughter before she dies.” He hung his head forward. “I don’t know what to do. I still love her and want to help her.”

“It will be hard, but you know what you need to do, Ivan,” I said softly. Sympathy bloomed in my chest for one of my oldest friends, and the torment he was going through. “Tatiana deserves to know what’s happening, and whatever she decides—whether it be seeing Svetlana or not—you need to respect her decision. Your first and *only* concern should be for your daughter, not some woman who abandoned you twenty-four years ago.”

He winced, and I instantly regretted my choice of words. I could have picked something that wasn’t so...harsh.

But he then raised his head, this sense of resolve rolling over his face. He straightened his spine and nodded. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I’ll tell Tatiana and let her decide what she wants to do. And—”

My phone vibrated on the desk, diverting my attention. Ivan continued to talk, but his words faded into the background as I glanced at the screen to see that it was another message from Autumn, but all it said was:

Malen’kaya D’yavolitsa: Attachment: 1 Image

Brows lowered into a small frown, I picked it up and opened the message—

My eyes shot wide open, lust exploding throughout my entire body, right down to my fucking fingertips. I clutched the phone to my chest to hide it and cut Ivan off mid-sentence.

“You need to go now,” I barked.

“Wha-what?” he asked, confused.

“Go. Now.”

He just continued to sit there, utterly dumbfounded. Of course, I could understand why. We’d been having a deep, heart-to-heart and then I was all of a sudden kicking him out. I would apologise later, but right then—

“Out.” I jumped up, marched around the desk to grip him by the shirt, pulled him to his feet and started dragging him towards the door. “Out. Out. Out.”

“Okay, okay, jeez. What’s going on—” I slammed the door in his face.

Spinning quickly, I placed my back to the door and looked at my phone again. “Oh, *fuck me*,” I groaned, palming my hard cock.

It was a photo of Autumn, wearing nothing except her leather motorcycle jacket, the zip completely undone to reveal the valley of her breasts and toned stomach. Blood—*my blood*—was smeared on her face and down her bare chest. All I could see was the rounds of her breasts, the jacket concealing her nipples, but it made me so fucking hard, it hurt.

She took this last night, in my bathroom.

Want and need thrummed in my veins, heating my insides.

I immediately called her. She answered after the fifth ring.

“Hello, Autumn speaking,” she sang, all innocent like she didn’t just almost make me cum in my fucking pants.

“What the hell was that?” I hissed.

“What was what?” Even her voice set my fucking blood on fire.

“That photo!”

“Photo? Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to send that to you. It was meant for someone else.”

Someone else? I squeezed the phone so tight, it cracked. “*What?!*” I roared. “Who?! Who is he, Autumn? I’ll fucking kill him—”

She started to laugh. “Calm down, I’m just kidding. You messaged me out of the blue and then just disappeared. I had to get your attention somehow.”

Mission a-fucking-complished.

She grunted over the line, what sounded like something smashing echoing in the background.

“What’s going on?” I asked, trying to listen.

“Nothing. You just kinda called me at a bad time is all.”

A bad time? “Why? What are you doing?”

“On a job.”

I knew what that meant. She was in the middle of trying to fucking kill someone. Panic smothered my chest, but I tried to stay calm.

A barrage of gunfire cut through the line a second later.

FUCK CALM!

“Where are you?” I demanded, running to my desk. I pressed the button underneath it to reveal the safe room located behind the bookshelf. I quickly

put in my twelve-digit code, and when the thick, steel door swung open, ran inside, heading right for the wall of weapons at the back.

“Why?” More grunting. Some cursing.

“So I can come—”

“Oh, hold on.” The sounds of fighting trickled through, of fists connecting with flesh and people being thrown into walls and furniture.

“Autumn. Autumn!”

“Yeah, what? Look, I’m kinda busy. Can I call you back? Ha! Missed me, idiot! You need to work on your aim!”

“Who are you talking to? Tell me where you are! Right now.” I plucked a bulletproof vest from the wall and put it on quickly, then grabbed several holsters, strapping them to my chest, waist, thighs and ankles. I loaded each of them with guns and knives before reaching for an assault rifle last.

“I’m fine, Butcher. And I don’t need help. I’ll call you later.”

“Autumn, don’t you dare hang up—”

Beep, beep, beep.

“*Blyad! Fuck!*” I slammed my fist into the wall out of frustration. “Think, Dimitri, think.”

Nikolai!

I quickly dialled my son, putting the call on loudspeaker so I could finish preparing.

“Yes, Father?” he answered.

“I need a trace on a phone. Right now.”

“What?”

“A. Trace,” I growled, my patience all but gone.

He sighed dramatically. “What’s the number?”

I told him. “Where is it?”

“I’m going to need a few minutes.”

“You have one.” I finished packing my gear, making sure to stuff extra magazines for the assault rifle into my suit jacket before bolting out of my office, heading for the garage.

Lukyan was making his way up from the warehouse when he spotted me. “Father, is everything okay?”

“Can’t talk,” I grunted, running past. “Nikolai! Give me a location.”

“I’m working on it. I’m working on it.”

I burst into the garage, flicking on a light. Dozens of cars laid idle, ranging from large SUVs to sleek, modern Lamborghinis and Porsches.

None of those were what I was after.

Lukyan came in a moment later, watching me with a frown on his face as I went to the corner of the room and moved a shelf out of the way, revealing a small, green button.

When I pressed it, a section of the floor in the middle of the room opened, and three Ducati motorcycles rose up from the ground.

Lukyan's mouth dropped open. "We have *motorbikes*!?" he screeched in shock.

"*You don't. I do.*" I ran forward, snatching up a helmet and quickly mounting one.

"Okay, got it," Nikolai said over the phone. "The phone is on the corner of Charleston Boulevard and Fremont Street in downtown Las Vegas."

"Charleston and Fremont?" Lukyan murmured thoughtfully. "Isn't that the location of one of the hideouts for the DK4 Gang?"

Yes. It is. Which meant whoever Autumn's target was was a member of that gang.

Fucking hell.

"What's going on? Do you need us?" Nikolai asked.

"No. Thank you for your help." I promptly hung up, tucking my phone away into my back pocket and kickstarted the bike. The engine roared, loud and deep, echoing into the garage.

"Father, wait." Lukyan stepped in my path. "I can help with whatever this is—"

"*Nyet. No.*" I put my helmet on and slammed the visor down.

"But I—"

The back wheel of the bike spun on the spot as I twisted the accelerator, smoke billowing into the air. Lukyan jumped out of the way when I shot forward and sped out of the garage.



Thirteen minutes.

That was how long it took for me to get there. Thirteen agonisingly long minutes.

Technically, it should have been twenty-seven, but I'd managed to cut the time in half thanks to taking the bike.

A lot could happen in thirteen minutes, which was why the pressure in my chest never eased the entire ride over. Why that all-consuming panic flooding my veins got worse every second I was on the road.

I couldn't think about it. I had to shut it out and focus on one thing at a time, otherwise the panic was likely to take me over completely, and then I'd be fucking useless.

When I got to my destination, I found a fenced-off, one-story building that was covered in graffiti. It was located in a particularly rough neighbourhood, which just so happened to work in my favour because it meant none of the residents surrounding it were likely to call the police.

I dismounted my bike and infiltrated quickly, my assault rifle up and focus hyper-alert. The motorcycle helmet on my head made it a little more difficult to see things once I got inside, but I had no choice but to keep it on.

We had a working relationship with the DK4 Gang. If anyone saw me, it would cause problems for business, so it was better that I remain a faceless entity.

With quick, hurried steps, I made my way through the building. Blood was everywhere. On the walls. On the floor. Even on the goddamn ceiling. I'd have to ask Autumn how she accomplished that one later on.

Dead bodies lay everywhere I looked. Some hunched over furniture like couches and tables, others with limbs bent at grotesque angles and knives sticking out of their heads. The further I moved into the building, the more bodies I came across. It was a goddamn bloodbath.

I moved cautiously, watching where I put my feet as I walked, making sure to take cover and check around corners before advancing despite the fact that all I wanted to do was bolt from room to room to find Autumn. I had to be careful. I had no backup. It was just me, and the DK4 Gang was a big operation with lots of men. Mainly pawns, but still, anyone could be dangerous with a weapon in their hands.

My assault rifle moved with me, my eyes firmly locked through its scope as I cleared each space before moving onto the next. And the next and the next.

When angry voices cut through the air, I crouched down to one knee and paused, straining my ears. They were coming from my left. Staying low, I

made my way over to the wall opening that separated the room from the adjoining one and peeked over.

Autumn was in the centre of the room, cuffed to a motherfucker chair.

Son of a fucking bitch.

Anger pulsed in my body at the sight of blood running down the side of her head. She didn't look the least bit worried about her predicament. In fact, the cocky smile on her face seemed to say she was enjoying herself.

Crazy fucking woman.

Six DK4 Gang members were glaring at her, while a seventh stood directly in front of her, holding a bloody rag to his eye.

"Who hired you?" he spat, full of anger. He was a big man, with a shaved, tattoo-covered head.

"Hired me?" Autumn replied, voice pitched with confusion. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I was just looking for a bathroom."

He backhanded her. Autumn's head whipped to the side. Rage pounded in my veins, dark and violent, making me see fucking red. My finger itched over the trigger of my assault rifle, the beast within me demanding that fucker's head.

But I had to be smart. As much as I wanted to take him out, doing so would put Autumn in danger.

There were six other people in that room, and the minute that bullets started flying, there was a high probability Autumn would catch one because she was stuck in that chair. I was quick, but I couldn't take out seven people fast enough to reduce the risk.

I needed to eliminate some of them first, quickly and quietly.

"I'll ask you again," Baldy said. "Who hired you?"

"You can ask me as many times as you like. The answer isn't going to change." She spat blood out of the side of her mouth and smiled. "I was just looking for a bathroom."

Keeping low, I edged around the outside of the room as the two of them continued to talk, heading for one of the men standing just on the outskirts.

"You're lying! Tell me! Which one of my enemies sent you?!"

Tucking the assault rifle behind my back, I snuck up behind the man, palming one of the knives strapped to my waist.

Autumn smirked. "Got no clue what you're talking about, chief."

I slapped my hand over the man's mouth and rammed the blade into his back once, twice, three times. He struggled, choking behind my palm and trying to call for help, but all of his fellow companions were too busy looking

at Autumn to notice. I pulled him behind a wall and slit his throat before lying him on the ground quietly.

Keeping my back to the wall, I stuck my head around the corner, eyeing my next target—a man with his back to me, standing next to an ugly, three seater couch that looked like it'd been to hell and back half a dozen times. He was the closest to me, which meant he was the furthest from Autumn and the other men.

“You expect me to believe that?” Baldy hissed. He removed the bloody rag from his face. “Look what you did to my eye!” he yelled, pointing to it.

Autumn leant forward, a quizzical expression on her face. “What eye?”

Baldy snarled and punched her in the nose. Her head snapped back, a curse flying from her mouth.

That motherfucker is going to lose that hand.

I slipped into the room without making a sound and took cover behind the couch. My target was to my right, only a few feet away from me. Adrenaline thrummed inside my body as I pulled another knife from one of the sheaths at my hip, waiting for the most opportune moment to attack.

It came when my target opened his mouth to yawn.

Swinging my arm in a fast and powerful arc, I sprung up behind him and plunged the blade into his open mouth at the same time as I swiped my other blade across his throat. He died instantly, unable to even make a sound. His body fell back onto me, and I guided him to the floor so the sound of him falling didn't alert the others.

I somersaulted to the right, shuffled forward with quick but quiet movements and rammed my knife into the neck of another gang member as I slapped my palm over his mouth.

Three down, four to go.

“You don't want to talk. Fine,” Baldy sneered. “I'll just have to *make* you talk.” Then his hands were around her neck, squeezing.

Autumn choked, thrashing in her chair.

I was out of time.

“Hey!” Four sets of eyes snapped to me in shock. I threw both of my knives, the weapons soaring through the air and hitting their targets, one lodging into a man's forehead while the other plunged deep into another man's throat.

I was moving before the men even fell to the ground, flinging my assault rifle into my hands as I dove out of the way of a stream of bullets.

“Who the fuck is that?! Get him! Get him now! Where the hell are Rob, Neil and Davidson?!” I heard Baldy yell, his voice laced with panic and fear.

That was good for me. Fear meant he wanted to live.

Too bad he isn’t going to.

I sprung up, sighted both men in half a second and fired.

Two bodies dropped to the ground.

Silence reigned over the room. The adrenaline hammering in my veins made my heart thump so fast that I could hear it in my ears. Unable to help myself, I did one more sweep of the space, even though I knew all the threats had been neutralised, before moving to Autumn.

I’d expected gratitude, possibly even a thank you to fall from her lips, but of course, I got neither.

“Who the fuck are you?” she snapped, glaring me down.

I pulled the helmet off my head, giving her a deadpan look. “Usually, people say ‘thank you’ when their life has just been saved.”

Again, I didn’t know why I expected gratitude or appreciation from her. I should have known by then that Autumn did the exact opposite of what I thought she would do.

“Did I ask you to save my life?”

My mouth dropped open in outrage. “Are you serious right now?”

“Fucking deadly. I told you I didn’t need help,” she hissed angrily.

“Really?!” I pointed erratically to her. “You’re tied to a goddamn chair right now. What the fuck do you mean you didn’t need he—” the words died on my tongue when Autumn suddenly got to her feet, the pair of cuffs dangling from her fingers.

“I had it handled, Butcher.” She threw the cuffs to the ground, frustration burning in her eyes. “And now, you’ve taken my bounty from me.”

“I—you’re what?!” I snapped.

“Dylan!” She pointed to Baldy, lying dead at my feet. “Someone was going to pay me quarter of a million dollars to kill that fucker, and now that money is just gone because I didn’t kill him. You did!”

It was like she was speaking an entirely different language to me. “So what? Claim the money anyway. No one will know it wasn’t you who killed him.”

She shook her head, those beautiful red locks flowing through the air. “I would love to, except that’s not the way it fucking works,” she seethed. “There’s a code we have to follow, and that code dictates that I don’t get shit unless I complete the kill myself!” She shoulder-barged past me.

I gripped her arm, stopping her. She whipped back around to face me, and I scowled at her. “You are absolutely insufferable!” I hissed down at her, anger and lust warring deep inside me. “I was trying to help you!”

“And like I said on the phone”—she tore her arm from my grasp and stood toe-to-toe with me, her chest pressing against mine with each harsh breath—“I didn’t need your goddamn help!”

I gripped her by the hair roughly, making her wince. “Fine,” I snarled, bringing my face closer to hers. “Next time, I’ll just let them fucking kill you!”

“Good! You do that!” she growled.

I glared at her. She glared right back. Sexual tension snapped the air taut between us. My body was on goddamn fire, the rush of adrenaline from battle soaring through me, making it impossible for me to fight against the magnetic pull she had over me.

I smashed my lips onto hers in a rough kiss, full of fire and lust. She moaned, kissing me back harder, her hands coming up to grip the sides of my face.

Or so I thought.

Instead, her hands wrapped around my goddamn throat and she squeezed, fucking *choking* me. I snarled into her mouth, my grip on her hair tightening to the point where she winced again, but she didn’t let go.

Neither did I.

The kiss turned violent, our teeth clashing as our bodies rammed into the wall. Into the furniture. We clawed at one another without breaking the kiss, tearing at each other’s clothes. I yanked down her pants roughly. She ripped off my suit jacket, her hands disappearing under my shirt a moment later. Her nails scratched down my fucking chest, hard enough to cause a flash of pain, and I groaned.

Fuck, she felt so good, pleasure already shooting down my goddamn spine from just her kiss alone.

“I fucking hate you,” she moaned into my mouth at the same time she climbed up my body, placing her hot, fucking pussy right over my hard, aching cock.

“Good,” I grunted, using one hand to undo my pants and pull my cock out. “Because I hate you, too,” I groaned, impaling her in one, deep thrust.

Pure fucking ecstasy.

Then I was moving, hammering into her with fast, deep strokes. Pleasure built fast within me, her tight little pussy squeezing my cock so good, so

fucking tight.

Autumn arched into me, her hips meeting me thrust for thrust. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was stunning. Gorgeous, flushed skin. Emerald eyes swallowed up with desire. Teeth biting into her rosy lips.

"Fucking hell. Why do you feel so good?" she whined, clawing at my skin.

I didn't say anything because I was wondering the exact same thing. The feel of her wrapped around me... It was excruciatingly glorious.

An image flashed before my eyes. An image I'd thought of a lot, and I couldn't help myself. I fucked her hard, never slowing down, never wavering as I pulled out a knife and held it to her throat.

Her eyes blazed with fire, and she moaned, long and deep.

"I've thought about this a lot, you know," I whispered over her lips, pounding and pounding and pounding. "Fucking you with my knife at your throat. I can see why you like it so much. It's fucking hot."

"Let me do it—"

I shoved the weapon harder into her skin, cutting off her words instantly. "Did I say you could talk? When you talk, you piss me off. So, do us both a favour. Shut up, and take your fucking."

Her pussy rippled around me, clamping down harder on my cock as she moaned again, my name falling from her lips.

I cursed, moving faster. I loved it when she moaned my name. "You fucking like that, don't you? My dirty little devil. Fucking perfect for me."

"Oh, shit. Fuck. I'm so fucking close."

And I knew exactly what she needed to fall over the edge.

Keeping up the pace, I cut into my palm and smeared my blood over her face.

"*Dimitri!*" she screamed.

"Jesus, fuck—" I choked as her pussy squeezed me so tight that I saw fucking stars.

I was already burning, my whole body on fire and set to explode, but hearing her scream my name like that, the feel of her pussy spasming around me as she came hurtled me straight into an inferno.

"*Autumn,*" I groaned deeply, an overload of pleasure assaulting me. My pace increased, thrusts turning wild and chaotic as I emptied myself inside her.

God, it gets better every time.

Some of that fire between us diminished slightly as if the sex had taken some of the edge off, but it wasn't entirely gone.

I wondered if it ever would be.

Panting heavily, I lowered her to the ground. She didn't avoid my eyes, didn't shy away like she was embarrassed. She held my gaze the entire time as she righted her clothes and straightened her hair with her hands.

"We need to talk."

Anxiety set my spine straight. "If this is about the fact that I've come inside you three times now without protection, there's no need to worry. I had a vasectomy after Illayana was born. And I don't have anything."

"What?" she frowned. "No. I was never worried about that. On top of not wanting children, I physically *can't* have children. A little side effect from what happened to me when I was a teenager."

My jaw clenched at the mention of it. It was a long time ago, I knew that, so my anger towards the people responsible for raping her was irrational. Still, I would have given anything to kill those fuckers myself.

"There's something I need to tell you."

I didn't like the sound of that.

She wants to have the "talk" with you, a voice in my head said, and panic smothered my chest.

I couldn't do that. Not right then. I still wasn't sure what was going on between us. What I wanted. I wasn't ready to sit down and talk about our feelings. *My* feelings. Especially when I was still harbouring some guilt over the whole situation.

"I can't," I grunted, stepping away from her. I picked up my suit jacket from the ground and put it on. "I need to go."

"Dimitri," she said sternly.

Thankfully, I was saved by my phone vibrating. I dug it out of my pocket. "Da? Yes?"

"Why the fuck haven't you been answering your phone?" Mikhail barked.

Whoops. I mustn't have felt it vibrating while I was infiltrating the building.

"I've been...busy."

Autumn smirked, teeth digging into her bottom lip.

"Well, get *un*-busy. I got a call from Tate—one of the men guarding Anthony. He called me when he couldn't reach you. Anthony's ready to talk."

Finally.

"I'll be right there."

Autumn's brows slammed down into an angry frown. "Dimitri—"

"Something important has come up," I said, heading towards the exit.

“We need to talk,” she growled.

“And we will.” *Maybe.* “But right now, I need to go.”

“Butcher!”

I stopped. Turned. Our eyes connected. Tension burnt between us, hotter than ever.

“It’s important. So, either make the time, or *I will.*”

Fear and dread mixed together within me. I nodded stiffly, not entirely sure I was ready for whatever conversation she was trying to have.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“Please. Take them out of here. I can’t stand it anymore,” Anthony begged, his whole body shaking and drenched in sweat. He was referring to Maxim and Erik, who were dangling in front of him with pools of blood, shit and piss on the floor beneath their feet, only mere inches from him.

“Tell me what I want to know, and I will.”

To be honest, I was quite surprised he’d lasted as long as he had. Being stuck in a nine-by-twelve box with no windows, no air flow and two people who’d been cut and beaten so much that the stench permeated the very air he was breathing into his lungs... It was enough to make even *me* want to gag.

And that was fucking saying something.

“I need your word you won’t kill him.” Tears welled in Anthony’s eyes, a look of utter desperation on his face. “I’ve heard of you. You’re a man of your word. And I want it. Otherwise, you’re not getting shit.”

“I am a man of my word,” I agreed. “And I swear, I won’t kill him.” What I had planned was far worse than simply killing him. Ending his life

meant ending his suffering. I wasn't prepared to do that any time soon.

If ever.

"Okay," Anthony breathed out with relief. "Talon and I had a plan in place in case things went sideways. If we were ever separated, we would meet at Mixton Hotel in Green Valley North within two weeks."

"Why two weeks?" Mikhail asked.

"Because we both knew that if we couldn't get to the hotel by then, it was because we weren't coming. That we were most likely dead."

"Fair assumption." I adjusted in my seat. "And what was the next step if you didn't show?"

"We each have a go-bag filled with enough cash to disappear forever and start over anywhere we want."

"And let me guess," I began, crossing my ankle over my knee. "Neither of you knows where the other would go, should that situation ever occur."

"Yes," Anthony agreed. "That way, if someone like you came sniffing around, it wouldn't matter how much you tortured us. We couldn't give you what we didn't have."

"But you did," Mikhail frowned. "You just told us where we can find Talon."

A conversation with one of my men came back to me suddenly. "Because he doesn't think Talon is there anymore." An amused smirk curled on my lips. "I was curious why you asked my guard what the date was yesterday. You're a smart man, Anthony, but unfortunately for you, I'm smarter."

He frowned as I flowed to my feet, buttoning up my suit jacket.

"You see, I know Talon. Very well. And in a lot of ways, he's still that same scared, overly paranoid, jealous little boy from boarding school. The moment I found out about you, I knew he would have some sort of backup plan in place. Perhaps even two or three of them. So, I told the men guarding you that if you were to say or do anything—anything at all, no matter how minuscule—I was to be informed immediately." I paused, allowing the silence and suspense to build. "Time is a fickle thing in a room like this. What can feel like months can actually only be weeks." I locked eyes with him. "Or days."

Anthony's eyes widened in horror. "No. No, no, no."

"Yes." I smiled evilly. "You think you've been here for three weeks, when in reality, it's only been nine days."

He chanted the word “no” over and over and over again as if saying it so many times would somehow make it true.

Excitement thrummed though my body. God, I just loved when shit worked out. It was about time luck broke my way.

I signalled Mikhail to follow me out as I opened the door. “I’m going to go get Talon now,” I said, running a hand through my hair and straightening the lapels of my suit jacket. “And then, I’m going to bring him in here and torture him in front of you.”

“No!” Anthony screamed. He thrashed wildly. “You gave me your word you wouldn’t hurt him!”

“I said I wouldn’t *kill* him. I didn’t say shit about hurting him,” I laughed.

Panic streaked across his face when I began to close the door. “What about Maxim and Erik?! You’re supposed to take them out of here!”

I paused, tapping a finger lightly on my chin, pretending to think it over. “I did say that, didn’t I? But that was before you tried to stoop me, Anthony.” I narrowed my eyes dangerously. “I don’t like to be played, as you’ll soon find out.” I slammed the door on his cry of mercy.

Mikhail looked at me. “You know, you can be kinda scary when you wanna be.”

I grunted. “Go get geared up. We leave in thirty.”



“This is going to be a pain in the ass,” I growled under my breath, staring at the hotel across the street from inside my car.

The Mixton Hotel was about as flashy as it came. Five star amenities, Michelin Star restaurant, service staff on call 24/7, blah, blah, blah. It meant trying any form of infiltration was completely out of the question. The minute bullets started flying, law enforcement would be called.

Which was probably why Talon chose it, the motherfucker.

“Yes, it is,” Mikhail agreed. His eyes ran over the building from top to bottom. “I see two guards patrolling the outside. Ex-military for sure. Most likely more inside on the ground floor.”

“And then more on whichever floor Talon is staying on,” I muttered under my breath.

“So, force isn’t going to cut it. We’ll need to use stealth.”

“Any ideas?” I asked, looking at my friend.

His lips pursed in thought for a moment. “We need to find a way inside and then find out which room Talon is staying in. We could call the front desk?”

“They won’t release client information. You know that.”

“What if we ask to speak to Talon? They would connect our call to his room.”

“And what? He’s just going to say, ‘Oh yes, I’m in this room here. Come get me?’”

He gave me a deadpan look. “Alright, genius, what’s your plan, then?”

I blew out an irritated sigh. I was so close to my goal. So close to finally getting my revenge. I wasn’t going to let it slip through my fucking fingers. I just needed to think of a way to get in that hotel, or possibly get Talon out.

A group of teens walked past the car, talking and laughing amongst themselves as they made their way down the street. An idea took root inside my brain and I looked at Mikhail, smiling.

“What?” he asked, frowning. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I didn’t answer. I quickly got out of the car, and he followed close behind me.

“Hey!” I called out.

One of the teens turned around.

Stopping in front of them, I lowered my voice and said, “Wanna make a thousand bucks?”

Ten minutes later, the fire alarm inside the Mixton Hotel went off. Occupants from inside came rushing out in a frenzy, fearing for their lives, one of them being Talon.

Adrenaline soared through me when I saw him. He was surrounded by his security team, but the street was pure mayhem, people pushing and shoving trying to get to safety.

The teen I’d paid to pull the fire alarm inside the building rushed across the street over to me, and I slipped the wad of hundreds in his hand without

taking my eyes off Talon.

He smiled. "Thanks, man."

"Thank you. Now, get outta here."

He nodded and joined his friends, taking off quickly.

"Okay, smart move. Now what?" Mikhail asked, making sure to stay behind the car and out of view. "How do we get him away from his security detail?"

A good question. From what I could see, he had an eight-man team. Like Mikhail had said earlier, they all had some sort of military training. It was clear in the way they stood, in their hyper-vigilant focus and their professionalism. The way they didn't let the craziness happening around them distract them from their goal; protecting Talon.

Sirens blared through the night from the approaching fire trucks and police vehicles. If we didn't act soon, they would declare it a false alarm, and everyone would be allowed back into the building.

"What if we just let him see us?"

"What?" I asked, looking down at Mikhail.

"Think about it. The second he sees us, he'll probably want to make a run for it. We could get him then."

I studied the men guarding him. "Half of his guards would probably break away to engage while the other half took him to a safe location."

"Okay, so we just let him see you. I'll hide, and when he takes off with his guards, I'll follow him. You can take four, can't you?"

I gave him a deadpan look. "Don't insult me. Of course I can."

Mikhail nodded. "Alright. Sounds like a plan. Now, we just need to figure out a way to get his attention—"

"Stay low," I ordered, pulling out my car FOB. I pressed a button and a loud, piercing, alarm blared into the night from my car, the lights flashing.

Eyes in every direction snapped to me, including Talon's. His gaze widened, and with frantic movements, he tapped one of the guards on the shoulder and pointed at me, shouting in his ear.

The guard—a big man with a buzz cut—barked something at his men, and just like I'd suspected, half of them came running towards me while the other half grabbed Talon and began sprinting down the street.

"To your left. Go!" I hissed under my breath. Mikhail went left and I ran right. The four guards pursued me, not even looking in Mikhail's direction.

I slipped down an alleyway and took cover behind a large dumpster. Footsteps echoed around me as the men followed me in.

“Spread out,” one of them commanded. The sound of guns being cocked hit my ears. “Find him and dispose of him quickly. We need to get back.”

I silently pulled out my gun and waited, holding my breath. The one street lamp in the alley provided minimal sight, but it was just enough to be able to see the shadows as they moved past me.

They moved together well. Like a well-oiled team. No holes or weak spots in their formation. There was one in the front, one on the right, one on the left and one bringing up the rear who had his front facing out towards the entrance of the alley, walking backwards and guarding their six.

Sneaking up behind them was out of the question.

Screwing a silencer onto the barrel of my gun, I looked around me for something useful. An empty tin can of food lay at my feet. I picked it up and hurled it across the alley. It smashed into the wall. As one, the guards all swung their guns towards the sound and I jumped up.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Four bodies dropped to the ground.

It all happened so fast, too quickly for any of them to be able to react.

Not wasting a single second, I ran out of the alley and back towards the main street Mikhail had been on, tucking my gun behind my back.

Police and firemen were on the scene, going into the Mixton Hotel. They might have been preoccupied, but seeing a man running down the street with a gun in his hand would definitely be a cause of concern for them.

Talon’s guards were professionals, and would most likely have a plan in place should they need to make a run for it quickly. My eyes ran over the other establishments on the street as I walked. A beauty salon. A bookstore. A cafe. A clothing store—

There.

A car park.

Within walking distance of the hotel, it was the perfect place to stash a getaway car.

I just had to hope Mikhail got there in time to stop them from escaping, otherwise there would be no telling where Talon would disappear to next.

Sprinting across the road, I slipped into the car park and pulled out my gun.

I’d have to go level by level.

The first was clear. So was the second and third. But the fourth?
Fucking bingo.

When I approached, all four of the guards were on the ground, either unconscious or dead, and Mikhail had Talon facedown on the concrete, hands behind his back. Mikhail's knee was firmly digging into the centre of Talon's back to keep him down as he struggled, cursing and trying to get free. Mikhail slapped a pair of metal cuffs onto Talon's wrists and stood, wiping a streak of blood from his forehead with the back of his hand.

I jogged up to his side and slapped a hand on his shoulder. "Good fucking job," I praised.

He smirked. "You too. Yours dead?"

I nodded, looking down at Talon. "Kind of feels a little anticlimactic, don't you think? I thought it would have been a little harder than that."

"Me too," Mikhail chuckled. He grabbed Talon by the arms and brought him to his feet.

Talon sneered at me, face full of unimaginable rage. "Congratulations. You fucking got me. Go ahead. Kill me," he spat, still struggling.

I laughed, shaking my head in disbelief. "You think I'm going to *kill* you? Oh, Talon. For such a smart man, you sure are dumb as fuck."

He finally stopped struggling, the meaning of my words making him stiffen. "What are you talking about?"

A dark, evil smirk curled on my lips. "I don't kill people who hurt my children, Talon. I take them home."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“**H**ELLO, I’M HERE TO see Dimitri.” I looked at the two guards manning the front gate of Dimitri’s home, a sweet, innocent smile on my face.

I’d debated just breaking in like I had a few days earlier, but Aleksandr had told me to use the front door next time, so I thought, “Why the fuck not?”

Sounded like an invitation to me.

“Name?” the blonde guard grunted.

“Autumn.”

He looked through a clipboard of papers. “You’re not on the list. I’ll need to call up for verification.”

“Okay.” I gripped the folder in my hands a little tighter as he picked up the phone, clutching it close to my chest, nervousness snaking through my bones.

Sergei had been so confident that I would do as he ordered that he had one of his goons slip an updated contract into my mailbox. One with Dimitri’s details on it instead of Dominik’s.

It had been a little unnerving to know that Sergei knew where I lived. It put the whole, “You’re not match for the power of the Bratva” schtick into perspective. No one had ever found out the location of my home before.

I saw the whole thing for exactly what it was.

A threat.

That if I didn’t do what he wanted, there wasn’t anywhere on Earth that I could run where he couldn’t find me.

Unfortunately for him, I didn’t get intimidated easily.

The deadline for his ultimatum had passed, and since he hadn’t heard from me, he would know what that meant. That I had no intention of doing what he wanted. Which meant an open contract would have been put on me almost instantly.

I needed to go to ground. Hide out for a few weeks until I could come up with some sort of plan to deal with Sergei.

But first, I had to warn Dimitri. Tell him what his father was up to. I’d tried to the last time I saw him, but he ran before I even got the chance to say anything. Sergei most likely hired someone else the moment he realised I wasn’t going to kill his son. That meant Dimitri was in danger, and that thought caused worry to gnaw at my gut.

“Got it.” The guard hung up the phone. “You’ve been granted entry.” He pushed a button on the table, and the double gates swung open. “Stick to the indicated path, and it will lead you straight to the house. Have a nice day.”

“You too.”

Taking a deep breath, I made my way up the long, winding driveway, my booted feet crunching under the gravel.

I’d deliberately chosen not to drive my car through, instead deciding to park in front of the gates because I needed the walk up to prepare myself. On top of telling Dimitri about his father, I also wanted to talk about us. More specifically, what was happening between us, because there was no denying the fact that there *was* something happening. Not anymore.

He had tracked me down and came for me all because he thought I was in danger.

If that didn’t scream, “I care about you”, I didn’t know what did.

I was just about to step onto the first stair leading up to the front porch when all of a sudden, the double doors swung open violently, smacking so hard against the side of the house that the two soldiers standing guard jumped.

Dimitri stood in the doorway, waves of fury pouring off him.

And it was all directed at *me*.

The smile on my face dropped instantly.

“*What the fuck* are you doing here?” he snarled.

I took an involuntary step back at the harshness of his tone. Sure, there’d been plenty of times where he’d spoken to me out of anger, but none of them compared to that moment.

Well, maybe one, but that would have been back when we first met.

“I—”

“You think because we fucked a few times, that gives you the right to just show up at my house unannounced like this? In the middle of the day? In front of my *children*? ”

Said children, Aleksandr and Lukyan, were standing just behind him, apologetic looks on their faces like they knew why he was acting that way and were incredibly sorry for it.

“I—uh.” For the first time in my life, I was completely and utterly speechless. My heart hurt at his words, a horrible, crippling feeling working its way through my entire body. I shook my head, trying to get myself under control. “I don’t, um, understand—”

“No, you don’t,” he spat, looking me up and down with derision. “You don’t understand. So, let me spell it out for you.” He stepped out onto the porch, and I found myself doing something else I’d never done before: retreating. “We’re not together. We’re not *boyfriend and girlfriend*. We’re not going to ride off into the sunset together and live happily ever after. We’re nothing. You hear me? *Nothing*. ”

My gut twisted. Pain stabbed me in the heart and I sucked in a harsh breath. *Why is he saying these things to me? Why is he talking to me this way? Like he...hates me.* And I didn’t mean the fun kind of hate, driven by passion and lust. I meant real hate. Like the idea of anything remotely happening between us was repulsive to him.

I licked my dry lips, my gaze flicking from Dimitri to Aleksandr and then to Lukyan. “Has something happened?” It was the only explanation I could think of for his behaviour. When things got too real for him, he retreated. Pushed me away. Was that what was happening here?

Dimitri shook his head, anger pulsing on his face. “You just don’t get it, do you? How stupid are you?”

I winced. Sorrow shredded my insides.

“Father!” Aleksandr chastised.

“*Tikhiy!*” Dimitri yelled at him, and he snapped his mouth shut, his jaw clenching.

Usually, when someone spoke to me like that, I had tons of witty rejoinders to throw back. But this time, I had nothing. I was so caught off guard, I could do nothing but stand there completely dumbfounded as a painful ache filled my soul.

The lines of his face were hard, not a single shred of warmth or affection in his eyes as he stared at me with abhorrence. “Everything that happened between us was a *mistake*. A big, fat, giant fucking mistake that I regret more than anything else in my life.” Pressure smothered my chest, making it difficult to breathe. “My heart does, and always will belong to Yekaterina. *My wife*. Not some random woman who doesn’t even know what it means to love someone.”

A heavy weight settled over my heart. Tears burnt in the back of my eyes, and it took everything I possessed not to let them fall. With each word, he’d just hacked away at my heart, cutting it down piece by piece until there was nothing left.

“I see.” I cleared my throat and straightened my spine, standing tall. His words hurt, more than any physical pain I’d ever endured before, but there was no fucking way I was going to let him see that. See that he’d just broken me. My soul. My spirit.

How could I have been so stupid? This entire time, every moment between us, had been nothing but a lie. Every touch. Every heated look. Every kiss. Nothing but a lie.

I was an idiot to think he would choose me over her, but that was as far as I would allow my idiocy to go. I wasn’t going to beg him. Wasn’t going to tell him we had something special, even if he wasn’t willing to admit it. I had my fucking pride, and there was no way in hell I was going to let him turn me into some snivelling little bitch who begged a man to stay with her.

“I guess we have nothing else to talk about, then.” I went to walk away when I realised I was still holding the folder in my hands.

After what he’d just said to me, I should have walked away and not said a damn word about Sergei. But I wanted to be the one to get the last word in.

“Oh, by the way,” I said, turning back to face him. “I didn’t come here for some midday booty call. I came here to tell you that the man who hired me to kill Dominik made a mistake. Dominik was never the intended target.

You were." I flicked the folder with the kill contract at his feet, and it opened, revealing a picture of Dimitri on the top page.

His eyes flicked down to it, and his brows creased in a slight frown.

"That man's name was Sergei Volkov."

He looked back up at me. Some of the initial anger he'd had when he first opened the door faded, as if reason was starting to worm its way back into his head.

I didn't care.

It was too late.

The damage was done.

Without saying another word, I turned around and walked back the way I came. I kept my footsteps slow and unhurried, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing me run away even though that was all I wanted to do.

I waited until I got back to my car to let the tears fall.

And they didn't stop.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



DIMITRI VOLKOV

I WALKED INTO THE lounge room a few days after capturing Talon, unable to keep the smile off my face.

It was over. *Finally*, it was over. I'd caught the bastard responsible for tormenting me for months and almost killing all of my children, and he was locked in The Pit, available for me to torture anytime I damn well felt like it.

Revenge never felt so fucking good.

“Uh-oh, I recognise that smile,” Lukyan joked. He was sitting in one of the armchairs beside the couch—more like lounging, actually, because he wasn’t sitting in it the way it had been designed for. He had his back resting against one of the armrests while his legs dangled over the other.

Aleksandr was spread out on the couch, one foot resting comfortably on the coffee table in front of him, half watching whatever show was on the television.

“This?” I pointed to my face, a thousand-watt smile spreading out across my lips. “This is—”

“Your torture smile, I know. I’ve seen it many-a-times,” Lukyan chuckled. “I take it you went to visit Talon again?”

“I did.”

“And?” Aleksandr questioned, his gaze still locked firmly on the TV.

“And we had a lovely time.”

Lukyan laughed. “I bet Talon doesn’t think so.”

I merely shrugged, unable to wipe the smile from my face.

Lukyan’s gaze swung to his big brother. “Hey, you think I could have a crack at him? There’s this new torture technique I’ve been dying to try.”

“He’s Father’s prisoner,” Aleksandr grunted. “Ask him.”

“I don’t mind.” I leant my shoulder up against the door jam, crossing my arms over my chest. “Just don’t break him. If he starts to pass out, stop and call the doc. I don’t want him dying any time soon.”

“Yes!” Lukyan jumped up, full of excitement. He saluted us both and went to leave when the phone on the wall started to ring.

It wasn’t a normal phone. It was only capable of receiving calls from the guardhouse at the front of the property. Whenever it went off, it usually meant the soldiers manning the gate needed something.

“Answer the phone,” Aleksandr ordered.

Lukyan blew out an irritated huff, but did as he was told. “Yello?” He frowned slightly before this shit-eating grin broke out over his face. “Entry granted. Let her up.”

Anndddd, that’s my que to leave. It was most likely some woman Lukyan was seeing, and I wasn’t in the mood for the fake pleasantries, especially since I had a woman of my own who I couldn’t get off my fucking mind.

A woman I was avoiding.

Since walking out on Autumn at the DK4 Stronghold, I’d been unable to bring myself to message her. Or even think about her.

The guilt over the past few days had been getting progressively worse, and I wasn’t sure why. At first, it had been manageable, like a small hum in the background that I could ignore most of the time. But something had happened to change that, and it was like a constant ache in my heart. A constant, unbearable pressure smothering my chest. Guilt was eating me alive from the inside out, and I didn’t know why.

Was it the sex?

No. The guilt had started a day or so *after* the last time we slept together.

So, what was it, then?

I had no idea, and it was driving me insane.

I pushed off the doorframe. "I'm going to my office."

"Wait, wait, wait. Father." The smirk on Lukyan's face made me narrow my eyes suspiciously. He moved to the window that faced out to the front of the house and pulled the curtain back. He turned back to look at me, eyes sparkling. "Your *girlfriend*'s here," he sang mockingly.

My whole body stiffened like an electric shock just hit me at full force.

Girlfriend?

The world started to fade away slowly, everything around me disappearing as I fell into a deep, dark pit full of sorrow and despair. Aleksandr barked something at Lukyan, but I couldn't hear it. I couldn't hear anything at all.

Girlfriend?

My eyes landed on a photo of Yekaterina and I hanging on the wall, and guilt exploded in my chest so violently that I couldn't breathe. I clutched my sternum, trying desperately to get a handle on myself, but it was impossible. Grief crushed me.

Everything hit me all at once. Everything I'd done over the past few months, all the impure thoughts, feelings and actions I'd committed with Autumn, catapulting me into an ocean of guilt I couldn't get out of.

Sadness tore at my insides. I'd stood over Yekaterina's grave and promised her that she would have my heart, forever and always. That no one would ever replace her, and what had I done?

I'd had sex with another woman.

I'd betrayed my wife, the sanctity of our marriage and everything our vows stood for. It was like I was drowning, unable to get my head above water. It muddled everything else within me until all I could feel was guilt and shame.

It was overwhelming.

And then came the anger.

Anger at myself. At Autumn. At everyone.

A dark cloud of fury washed over me, settling deep into my bones. The world snapped back into focus. My eyes locked on the door, hands clenching into tight fists at my side.

Girlfriend?

How could I have let this happen? How could I have let myself do this? *Girlfriend? GIRLFRIEND?* I had a goddamn wife!

The fury consumed me, right down to my fingertips and toes and I marched towards the door.

Aleksandr stepped into my path, his palms out. “Father, Lukyan was just kidding—”

“I was.” Lukyan nodded earnestly, panic in his eyes as he came up to his brother’s side. “I was just playing around—”

“Get. Out. Of. My. Way,” I demanded, voice cold and hard.

Aleksandr didn’t move. “Father, *please*. Don’t—”

I shoved him out of my path and slammed both of my hands onto the double doors, flinging them open.

Autumn stood at the foot of the porch steps, the smile dropping from her lips the moment she saw me.

“*What the fuck* are you doing here?” I snarled, the anger and guilt pumping through my veins making it impossible for me to calm down.

She took a step back in shock, eyes widening slightly at my outburst.

Yekaterina’s ghostly image appeared, swirling into view right beside Autumn. Desperation shone in her eyes. “*Don’t do this, Dima*,” she begged. Pleaded.

Uncertainty flashed across Autumn’s face. “I—”

“You think because we fucked a few times, that gives you the right to just show up at my house unannounced like this? In the middle of the day? In front of my *children*?” I hissed.

Her gaze flicked to Aleksandr and Lukyan behind me. “I-uh.” She shook her head as if trying to wake up from a daze. “I don’t, um, understand—”

No. Why would she? Why would she understand? She couldn’t possibly.

“No, you don’t,” I spat, leering at her. “You don’t understand. So, let me spell it out for you.” I stepped out onto the porch. Autumn retreated another step. “We’re not together. We’re not *boyfriend and girlfriend*. We’re not going to ride off into the sunset together and live happily ever after. We’re nothing. You hear me? *Nothing*.”

Autumn sucked in a harsh breath, pain flaring in her beautiful green eyes.

“*Dima, please*,” Yekaterina implored, voice laced with sadness and worry. “*You don’t want to do this. Not really*.”

I ground my teeth together. *Ignore her. She’s just a figment of your imagination.*

“*Yes! I am! Your imagination! Yours! And I’m telling you right now, this isn’t what you want.*”

Autumn licked her lips, her gaze moving between my son's and I. "Has something happened?" she asked, voice soft, almost calming, like she was trying desperately to understand what was going on.

More anger and frustration exploded in my body. I shook my head, exasperated. "You just don't get it, do you? How *stupid* are you?"

She winced as if I'd struck her.

"Father!" Aleksandr chastised.

"*Tikhiy!*" Quiet! I yelled at him, and he snapped his mouth shut, his jaw clenching.

Yekaterina stepped closer to me, the look on her face begging me to see reason. "*Don't ruin your chance at happiness, Dima. Don't do this. Please. I'm begging you.*"

I ignored her and embraced the guilt smothering me. That horrible feeling swam inside me, drowning me. I let it fill me because I deserved it. I deserved to feel it, no matter how much it hurt.

A coldness settled over me. "Everything that happened between us was a *mistake*. A big, fat, giant fucking mistake that I regret more than anything else in my life."

"*Stop! Stop now!*" Yekaterina pleaded.

I won't. I can't.

"My heart does, and always will belong to Yekaterina. *My wife*. Not some random woman who doesn't even know what it means to love someone."

Autumn stared at me, what looked like tears welling in her eyes. Yekaterina's shoulder's dropped, her head hanging forward. Then she disappeared, her image swirling away as fast as it had arrived.

A different kind of guilt started worming its way into my heart at the sight of Autumn. That look of hurt in her eyes. The light she'd had when I'd first met her was...gone. Bit by bit, she seemed to shut down in front of me, and I hated it. I hated that I was the cause of it.

I hated myself.

"I see," she said, voice devoid of emotion. She cleared her throat and stood taller. "I guess we have nothing else to talk about, then." She went to walk away and then hesitated. "Oh, by the way, I didn't come here for some midday booty call. I came here to tell you that the man who hired me to kill Dominik made a mistake. Dominik was never the intended target. *You were.*"

What?

She flicked the folder in her hands and it landed at my feet. The wind blew a page open, and I looked down to see a picture of me.

“That man’s name was Sergei Volkov,” she finished.

My father hired her to kill me?

And instead of doing it, she’d told me. Warned me.

My eyes moved back to her, but she was already walking back down the driveway. Every part of me *screamed* to go after her. To apologise. To explain the guilt consuming me made me say all of those horrible things, but I couldn’t move. I just stared after her, one hundred percent sure that my heart was leaving with her.

Lukyan shuffled his feet behind me. “Father, I—”

My brain exploded with fury. I spun so quickly that he gasped as I shoved him up against the wall with a forearm at his throat. “This is all *your* fault,” I snarled in his face.

Lukyan choked, eyes wide open with fear. He struggled against me, but I kept him pinned. “I—I—”

“Why do you have to say *every stupid thing* that pops into your fucking head?” I sneered, applying more pressure.

He wheezed, scratching at my arm and kicking his feet. The fear in his eyes, I’d never seen it before—not from any of my children, and it made me feel worse. It was *true* fear. As if he was afraid I was going to kill him. My stomach churned at the sight. It all piled onto the horrible emotions already taking over me, and yet, I couldn’t stop.

“Why couldn’t you for once—*just for once*—keep your goddamn mouth shut? Why? Why?!” I roared, shaking him.

“Father. Enough,” Aleksandr demanded.

I didn’t listen. I kept shaking him and shaking him, over and over again. “Why, Lukyan?! Why?! Why?!”

“I said *enough!*!” A hard body rammed into me from the side, and then all of a sudden, it was *me* being held up against the wall, Aleksandr’s hands clutched around the lapels of my suit jacket. Protectiveness shone in his eyes. “This isn’t Lukyan’s fault. It’s *yours!*” he snarled at me. “*You* said those words. Not me. Not Lukyan. *You!* *You* did this. You cut that woman down. Insulted her. Made her feel worthless. All because you’re too much of a goddamn coward to admit what we all already know!” Disgust washed over his face.

I froze, unable to move. He was right. Oh, God, he was right. What had I done? Shame engulfed me, taking over my limbs one by one. I slid down the wall, almost collapsing on the floor as if my legs could no longer hold me up. The only thing keeping me from falling was the fact that Aleksandr was pinning me to the spot.

“Aleksandr.” Drea was standing in the foyer, her face soft and voice calming. She reached a hand out to him.

There was a brief moment of hesitation before my son shoved away from me and retreated back to stand next to his wife. I fell, landing harshly on my ass. I didn’t even have the strength to stop myself.

“I told you not to do this. I warned you not to throw away your chance at happiness, but you did it anyway,” he scoffed, shaking his head. “If you want someone to blame, Father, look in the fucking mirror.” He moved and helped Lukyan to his feet. Lukyan massaged his throat, that fear still blazing in his eyes. He looked at me like I was some sort of wild animal, about to strike. I recognised the look. It was the way I used to look at my own father.

I stared at my hands, everything I had said and done over the past few minutes making me crumble inside. Unable to handle it, I retreated into my office and locked the door.

Everything within me broke.

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One week later

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

ILLAYANA DE LUCA

I BURST THROUGH THE doors of my childhood home, fear curling down my spine.

When Lukyan called me the day before, telling me to come home, I'd laughed. Cracked some stupid joke about how I knew he'd end up missing me even though he said I was annoying the last time I saw him.

But then I heard the tremor in his voice. It told me that, whatever the reason was, it was no laughing matter. Something was wrong. Seriously, seriously wrong.

I'd never heard my brother talk like that before. So serious. So tormented. It shocked me so much that Arturo and I had jumped on the jet and flew straight to Las Vegas without a moment's hesitation.

Anything that could make Lukyan—the most frivolous and carefree person I've ever known—shut down like that, begging me to come home... it had to be bad.

Arturo was on my heels, following me step for step as I marched into the lounge area to find all three of my brothers sitting in the room.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, coming to a stop.

Aleksandr was already getting to his feet. “Illayana,” he frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“Lukyan called me.”

Aleksandr and Nikolai gave Lukyan a deadpan look.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said plainly. “He’s been locked in his office for a week. We need help.” There was something different about him.

About his voice. That usual boyish, carefree charm he always had was gone, the light in his eyes all but diminished.

What the hell happened here?

Aleksandr crossed his arms over his chest. “I told you not to call her. We can handle it.”

I narrowed my eyes dangerously. “Is there a reason I’m being excluded?”

“Told you she’d be pissed if we kept her out of the loop,” Nikolai muttered under his breath.

“Shush.” Aleksandr cut him a warning look before facing back at me. “There was just no reason to bother you, Illayana. We’ve got it sorted.”

“Really?” I arched a brow. “Great. Fill me in, then.”

Aleksandr released an over-exaggerated sigh. He flicked his head, signalling for me to sit down before doing just that. He told me everything, leaving no detail out. He told me about Autumn. About catching her sneaking out of our father’s bedroom. About Father flipping out on her when she showed up at the house a week ago, and the harsh things he’d said to her.

I couldn’t lie, it had all come as quite a shock to me. Sure, I’d suspected something was going on between Autumn and my father after witnessing how they interacted on Talon’s island. But suspecting was one thing, and having cold, hard, definitive proof was another thing entirely.

My whole life, the only woman I’d ever seen my father with was my mother. Even after she died, he’d shown zero interest in the opposite sex despite the fact that everywhere he went, men *and* women threw themselves at him. So, it had been a little weird seeing that spark of interest in his eyes whenever he looked at Autumn.

But despite that weirdness, I was happy for him. Happy to see he was finally allowing himself to *live* again. To actually enjoy life instead of just cruising right on through it.

I should have known better than that, though.

“Okay,” I blew out, a mixture of emotions warring within me. Arturo stood behind me, his hand on my shoulder. I took comfort in it. It made me feel better having him there with me. “And he’s been locked in his office ever since?”

Aleksandr nodded stiffly.

“He hasn’t come out once?” I asked, panic starting to take root in my heart. Arturo somehow sensed it, squeezing my shoulder supportingly.

“What if something happened? What if—”

“Father isn’t suicidal,” Nikolai insisted, cutting in.

“Well, have any of you *spoken* to him? Seen him? Made sure he’s okay?” I pressed.

Lukyan sat across from me on the couch, his head down. He didn’t engage in the conversation whatsoever, his eyes staying plastered to the floor and hands clasped in front of him. Something was off with him.

“We’ve tried.” Aleksandr’s mouth set into a firm line. “He doesn’t respond.”

The panic got worse, almost taking my breath away. Arturo’s other hand landed on my other shoulder, and he slowly started to massage my skin.

“Breathe, *kotenok*. It’s okay,” he whispered in my ear.

I took solace in his words, his presence calming me.

“We know he’s alive.” Nikolai reached for his laptop, sitting on the coffee table between us, and turned it to face me. It showed a camera feed from inside Father’s office. He sat in front of the fireplace, countless bottles of alcohol on the floor around him. The angle didn’t give a shot of his face, just the back of his head.

My eyes flicked to my brother. “You put a *camera* in his office?” I asked incredulously. “Are you *insane*? Do you have a fucking death wish? Does he know? What am I talking about? Of course he doesn’t know. If he did, you’d already be dead.”

“The logistics are unimportant,” Nikolai grunted. “The point is, we can see he’s alive.”

“So, what was your plan, then?” I asked, my gaze moving between all three of them. “Just let him sit in there and drink himself to death?”

“No,” Aleksandr responded with offense.

I waited for him to say more, but he didn’t. “You don’t have a plan, do you?”

“I’m thinking,” he snapped back.

“Oh, great, as long as you’re thinking,” I snarked.

He narrowed his eyes. “If you have any ideas, I’m all ears.”

“Great.” I got to my feet and looked at Lukyan. “Get me an axe from the armoury.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” Aleksandr protested as Lukyan got up and disappeared from the room. “What’s your plan? You’re going to smash his office door down?”

“Yes.” I took off my floor-length black coat, letting the fabric slip from my shoulders, and deposited it on the couch. Tying my hair up into a tight bun, I rotated my body, twisting it this way and that way to warm up. Lukyan returned a moment later, and I took the axe from his hands.

Aleksandr held up his palms. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.” I tested the weight of the axe in my hands. “You should have called me days ago. This has gone on long enough. If he won’t come out of that room, I’m going in.”

“That is a bad idea.” Aleksandr looked at Nikolai. “Back me up here.”

“Sorry, I agree with Illayana.” He folded his arms across his chest. “This can’t continue. Especially after what Autumn said about Grandfather.”

I frowned. “What did she say?”

Aleksandr hesitated.

Irritation flowed through my body. “I’ve got a weapon in my hands, Aleksandr,” I warned.

He rolled his eyes, not the least bit intimidated. “Look, I haven’t been able to corroborate what she’s claimed.”

“But whatever it is, you believe it.” I could see it on his face. “What is it?”

Lukyan was the one to answer. “She said Grandfather hired her to kill Father.”

My stomach dropped. “What?” I breathed. “No. That—that can’t be right. Grandfather’s sadistic, but he wouldn’t orchestrate the death of his own son.” Even as the words came out of my mouth, I knew they weren’t true. It was just what I wanted to believe.

From as early as I could remember, Father instilled the importance of family on me. That no matter what, you needed to have your family’s back. Protect them always. But my grandfather didn’t feel the same way. To him, family was nothing more than a means to an end. The only thing we were good for was what we could contribute to *his* legacy.

When I remembered all of that, I hissed under my breath, “That motherfucker.” My eyes slammed on Aleksandr. “What are you doing about this?”

“Nothing right now.” He put his hand up, stopping me from the preverbal shitstorm I was about to unleash. “Before you start, just listen. Grandfather is too big of an adversary to take on right now, and you know it. We need to get Father sorted first, then go from there.”

Okay. He has a point. “Fine. But this conversation is far from over.” I spun on my heels and marched towards my father’s office, fingers curled tight around the axe in my hands, determination in my steps.

Aleksandr rushed up to my side. “Goddamn it, Illayana, just hang on. I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Really? Because I do.”

When I got to the door, Aleksandr blocked it with his body. “Look, Father is not in his right mind right now. Smashing down his door might make things worse.”

“Tough shit.” I studied him suspiciously. There was something else going on. Something he was hiding from me. He looked almost...worried. As if he feared something bad would happen. That *our father* would do something bad. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He didn’t answer. “Just trust me. I think the best thing we can do for him right now is just to give him space.”

Usually, I would listen to him in a heartbeat. But this was one of those rare, miraculous times when I didn’t think my big brother was right.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “He’s had a week’s worth of space. That’s enough.” I hefted the axe up into the air and strengthened my stance. “Either move, or I’ll go through you.”

He gave me an “As if you would” kind of look.

I smiled.

Nikolai, Lukyan and Arturo all took a step back.

“I’d listen to her,” Nikolai warned, his hands moving to cover his privates like he was afraid I’d kick him in the balls or something.

I’d only done that once.

Okay, twice.

Three times max.

Aleksandr stood his ground. “She won’t—”

I swung. Aleksandr ducked like I knew he would because he had the reflexes of a damn cat, and the axe smashed into the door, the wood splintering.

My brother jumped up in a fury. “Are you *insane*?!?” he hissed, moving out of my way. “You could have taken my whole damn head off!”

“But, I didn’t,” I replied cheerfully. With a grunt, I pulled the axe out and struck again, hammering and hammering until the muscles in my arms started to burn from the effort.

My wonderful husband asked to take over after the first few swings. I declined, but by the time I finished, I wished I hadn't.

This shit is hard.

Shards of wood fell away from the door with each strike. I glimpsed my father briefly on the other side. He didn't move. Didn't even glance in my direction despite the fact that I knew he could hear what was going on. It was like he just didn't care. He kept staring into the flames from the fireplace as if it held him in some sort of trance. Like he was trapped, lost within those flames.

Blowing out an exhausted breath, I dropped the axe. It clanged to the ground. The hole I'd created was far from perfect, but it would do the trick.

I slipped out of my Louboutin's, leaving them exactly where they were, and moved to climb through.

Aleksandr grabbed my arm, stopping me. "Be careful," he warned, staring me deep in the eyes.

"Why do you keep talking like Father is dangerous? Like he's going to hurt me?" I questioned.

He chose not to answer. Again. It was really starting to piss me off. "Just...be careful," he repeated before letting me go.

Whatever.

I knew my father. He would never hurt his children. Well, not seriously, anyway. He hurt us all the time when we got in the ring with him. But we usually deserved that.

Arturo reached out and clasped my chin with his fingers, pulling my face towards his. "I'm here if you need me," he murmured, placing a soft kiss on my lips.

I smiled, taking comfort in his presence. I gave him a swift kiss back and then climbed through the hole, stepping into my father's office.

Air filled my lungs as I took a deep breath in, preparing myself. The room was dark, the only light coming from the roaring fireplace he sat in front of. My father's office was usually pristine. Not a single item out of place. Not a single speck of dust or dirt on any surface.

Key word... Usually.

If I didn't know better, I'd think I just stepped into Lukyan's bedroom, the place was in such disarray. It was the complete opposite of everything I knew my father to be. Even all the empty alcohol bottles that lay in a circle

at his feet were out of character for him. Yeah, he drank, but not in excess like that.

“Father?” I stepped towards him slowly like I would if I was approaching a wild, skittish animal. “Father?” I tried again when he didn’t answer. His suit was crinkled and disheveled—another thing completely out of character for him.

He didn’t move. Didn’t say a word. Didn’t acknowledge me. It was like I wasn’t even there. Like he couldn’t see me. Couldn’t hear me.

“Father,” I whispered, pouring every ounce of emotion I was feeling into that one word, imploring him to hear me. Crouching at his side, I lay my hand lightly on his. The touch seemed to snap him out of whatever was holding him captive.

Bloodshot eyes moved to me. He frowned. One of his hands moved up to touch my hair. “Yekaterina...you’re really...here?” he rasped, voice thick, almost unrecognisable.

Sympathy tugged at my heart. “No, Father. It’s me, Illayana.”

I could have sworn relief flashed in his eyes. “Illayana. Yes. Of course.” He turned back to the flames, his voice and movements almost robotic in nature.

“What’s going on?” I asked, softly. “You’ve been in here for a while.”

“Have I?” He remained quiet for a moment like he was lost in his thoughts. He looked down in shame. “I’ve ruined everything,” he whispered softly.

The sadness in his voice... It caused my soul deep pain. “With Autumn?”

He gave me the barest form of a nod. “I don’t know what happened. I just...lost it.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe what he had done. Shame blazed in his eyes. “The way she looked at me... Oh, god.” He closed his eyes and clutched his chest as if he was being torn apart from the inside out.

My armour cracked. I’d never seen my father like that. I was ten years old when my mother died, and all I remembered from that time was his rage. It permeated the air around him. Surrounded him like some sort of protective shield, keeping everyone around him at arm’s length. Then, he just disappeared for two years to hunt down my mother’s killers. By the time he returned, he’d dealt with his demons.

At least, I thought he had. It was suddenly clear to me that he’d only buried them.

“Aleksandr told me what happened.” He said nothing, so much pain on his face that it hurt to look at him. “Why did you do it, Father? Why?”

His eyes landed on me. “I had to. Don’t you see, Illayana? *I had to.* She was getting too close.”

“Why is that such a bad thing?” I asked softly.

“I’m *married*,” he pressed, a tiny bit of fire returning in his eyes.

Time for some tough love.

“You’re *widowed*.” He reared back as if I’d struck him. I kept going despite how hard I knew it was going to be. “I miss Mother so much. I think about her all the time. About all the things she’s missed and all the things she’s *going* to miss. I think about her smile. How her hugs were like the sun. Warm and comforting and light. I think about how happy she would be to know I’ve found someone who loves me, wholeheartedly, for me.” Taking a deep breath, I ignored the ache in my chest from her absence and continued. “I’m *always* going to miss her and wish she were here, but I learnt a long time ago that you can’t let the ache of loss stop you from living your life.”

He scoffed, shaking his head, and took a huge gulp of the vodka in his hands. “It’s not that easy.”

“I never said it was easy. In fact, it’s probably one of the hardest things I’ve ever experienced before, and I’ve been locked in a room with a bunch of men who wanted to rape me.”

He gave me a look that seemed to say, “Really? You just *had* to bring that up right now?”

I bared my teeth in an innocent smile, laced with an ounce of cheekiness. “My point is, Father, there comes a time where you have to let go. Move on. *Let someone else in.*”

“*I can’t,*” he almost whined, like he wanted desperately to do just that, but something was holding him back, forbidding him from doing so.

“Why? Why can’t you?” A horrible thought crossed my mind. “You’re not using Autumn as some sort of twisted replacement for Mother, are you?”

“What? Of course not.” The way his voice pitched that little bit higher told me how offended he was with that question. “Your mother and Autumn are *nothing* alike. Nothing. Yekaterina was elegant. Poised. When she stepped into a room, the whole place brightened. Lit up like the sun. When Autumn walks into a room, she lights it on fire. She’s rude. Rough around

the edges. A complete and total smartass who says whatever the fuck she wants to say, no matter the consequences. She eats like a goddamn barbarian. You'd think the woman had never seen a knife and fork in her life. She talks in her sleep, and nine times out of ten, it doesn't even make sense. She—"

The smile on my face got bigger and bigger the more he spoke. He was no longer comparing them to each other. He was simply just listing things about Autumn as if all those things were plaguing his mind. I'd never seen him so animated before.

"And!" he continued, not even noticing how much he'd come back to life from just the topic alone. "She's incapable of saying thank you when someone helps her. It's maddening—why are you smiling? This isn't funny."

"Father," I said sternly, staring him deep in the eyes. "Whether you can see it or not, it's clear your heart has moved on. It's your mind that's holding you back. Tell me why. I want to help you."

He frowned and looked away, back into the flames. "I promised her."

"Promised who what?"

"Your mother." He took another pull from his vodka. Then another and another. "I stood over her grave and promised her that she would be the only one to have my heart."

Ah. It all clicked into place like a jigsaw puzzle. "You feel guilty." I should have seen it. Now that I realised what it was, it was so obvious, I couldn't believe it had taken me so long to notice it.

Guilt was a powerful emotion, capable of bringing even the most powerful man to his knees. My father had spent a decade keeping his promise, pushing away anyone who even tried to get close to him. Then Autumn came along, and it wasn't as easy to keep her away. She'd managed to worm her way inside his heart, and he felt guilty for letting her in. For not keeping her out.

I tried to think of the best way to approach the situation, a nervous tightening taking hold in my throat. If I told him to get over it, push past the guilt, he would just double down and push back. I needed to make him see that the guilt was his enemy, not his friend.

"If Mother were here, what would she say to you?" I squeezed his hand supportingly. "If she were here, do you think she would agree with what you've done? Or do you think she would want you to be happy?"

His gaze moved behind me. I thought perhaps one of my brothers had decided to come in, but when I glanced over my shoulder, there was no one there. I looked back at him, my brows lowering into a tight frown. He was still looking behind me, an almost vacant expression on his face. He was definitely looking at *something*, but it was almost as if whatever he was looking at... He was the only one that could see it.

He'd done stuff like that a few times. While I was growing up, every now and then, he would just zone out, staring off into the distance. Sometimes, it would be for a few seconds. Sometimes, a few minutes. And then, *bam*, he would just snap back into himself and act like nothing happened.

I didn't understand it then, and I didn't now.

"Father," I pressed, bringing his attention back to me. "What would she say?"

He exhaled heavily. His head hung forward. "She would tell me to be happy."

"She would tell you you *deserve* to be happy." I took the bottle of vodka from his hand and sat it on the ground in the middle of all the empty ones. "You've mourned her for ten years, Father. While the world continued to go on around you, you stayed frozen, unable to move on, barely existing. Just a shell of your former self. Autumn brought you back to life. She made you *feel* again. Smile again. Laugh again. And while it will be a little weird for me to see you with another woman, you deserve to find someone to spend your life with."

Even though he knew I was right, I could see him retreating, refusing to believe the words coming out of my mouth. He was looking at me, but I could see it in his eyes. I was losing him to the guilt.

I couldn't allow that.

"You know, she saved my life." He frowned slightly, not knowing what I was talking about. "In the arena. On Talon's island. I didn't know it at the time, but one of his soldiers was sneaking up behind me when I was smashing some guy in the face with a rock. Then, out of nowhere, this knife came soaring through the air and took him down right before he stabbed me in the back. It was Autumn. She saw it and saved me. Lukyan, too. Not even a second later, she got tackled by one of Talon's soldiers and stabbed in the shoulder for her trouble. She made herself vulnerable to save us."

"I didn't know that," he murmured softly.

I held his gaze, urging him to see how important my next words were. “She didn’t do it for me, Father. She didn’t know me. Didn’t care about me. We hadn’t even said a word to each other prior to that moment. She did it for *you*. She risked herself...for you, because she knew how much *we* meant to *you*.”

He processed my words, so many emotions flickering in his eyes.

“All I want is for you to be happy. *Autumn* makes you happy. Stop denying yourself your chance at happiness because of some promise you made ten years ago. Mother wouldn’t want it. *We* don’t want it. For the last decade, we’ve all watched you shut yourself off from everyone around you. Watched you deny yourself any chance of happiness because you can’t let go.” I got to my feet and stared down at him. “It’s time to say goodbye, Father.”



I stepped into the kitchen after leaving my father’s office to find Nikolai, Tatiana and Lukyan sitting around the island bench. “Mentally exhausted” was an understatement for how I was feeling.

The talk with my father had stripped me raw. Broken me down until there was hardly anything left. My soul *hurt* seeing him like that, but the pain would be worth it if he took what I was said on board. *If* he listened to me.

The jury was still out on that one, though.

“I need food,” I groaned, plopping down into the seat next to Tatiana.

My best friend offered me a sympathetic smile. “How did it go?”

“Shit,” I answered honestly. There was a bowl of fruit sitting on the bench. I picked off a few grapes and threw them in my mouth. “My father is as stubborn as a damn bull.”

“Ahh, so that’s where you all get it from,” she joked.

I gave her a deadpan look. “Ha. Ha. But yes, probably.” I pushed her lightly on the arm. “You bitch.”

Nikolai jumped to his feet. “Hey! Don’t push her. She’s pregnant!” he snapped.

“Nikolai, it’s okay,” Tatiana laughed. “She barely touched me. Sit back down, love.”

Nikolai glared daggers at me as he took his seat back on Tatiana’s other side.

I raised my brows at Tatiana. “Jeez, what’s with that?”

She patted his hand comfortingly. “He’s just a bit protective.”

“A bit?” I scoffed. “Hate to think what would happen to someone if they *really* hurt you.”

“Death,” my brother said with a completely straight face.

Sounds about right.

My eyes moved to Lukyan sitting across from me. A bowl of uneaten cereal was in front of him, his gaze fixated on the spoon as it glided back and forth through the milk.

“Lukyan.” He looked up at me. “You alright?”

“Fine,” he said, voice monotone.

He wasn’t fine. Nowhere fucking near it. He hadn’t cracked a single joke or said anything stupid since I got there. For anyone else, that would be normal. For Lukyan, it was incredibly alarming.

“You won’t believe what happened to me the other day,” I began, trying to coax that playful, fun side out of him. “I was walking down the street when my heel just snapped out of nowhere. I lost my footing and landed right in a pile of horse shit. Not dog shit. *Horse. Shit.*”

The normal Lukyan would have laughed. Pointed. Mocked relentlessly. Possibly asked if there were any photos or videos of the incident so he could see it for himself.

He did none of those things. Just mumbled, “That sucks,” and went right back to pushing his spoon through the bowl of mush in front of him.

With a sigh, he pushed it away and got to his feet. “I gotta go. See you guys later.” And then he left without another word.

Concern flashed across Tatiana’s face. It mirrored the look on Nikolai’s to a tee. I wasn’t sure if it was a relief to know that someone else had noticed how odd Lukyan was acting, or if that just made the whole thing even more terrifying.

“Do you two know what’s going on with him?”

Nikolai shook his head. “No. I suspect it has something to do with Father, but I can’t be certain.”

I picked a few more grapes, popping them into my mouth. “What did Aleksandr say?”

“He frustratingly refused to answer. I don’t think it was anything good, though.”

“Did you see the bruises on his neck?” Tatiana asked.

I did. I’d just assumed it happened from sparring or a fight. The cryptic things Aleksandr said to me before going into my father’s office streaked through my mind. “Aleksandr kept saying I needed to be careful around Father. You heard it. You don’t think...”

A troubled look crossed Nikolai’s face. “I honestly don’t know—”

“Pizza!” Aleksandr yelled from the front of the house. A moment later, he stepped into the kitchen with Arturo, both their hands filled with pizza boxes.

“We’ll talk about this later,” I whispered out of the side of my mouth.

Nikolai nodded.

Arturo made a beeline straight for me. “Pepperoni. Extra cheese.” He put one of the boxes down in front of me.

“My hero,” I groaned, flicking the box open. The scent of freshly cooked salami hit my nose, and I groaned again. “Fuck yes.” I didn’t hesitate to pick up a piece and take a huge bite. “Thank you.”

He ran his thumb over my lower lip before planting a kiss on my mouth. “You’re welcome.” He moved behind me as I tucked into the pizza and boxed me in, his arms coming around to rest his hands on the island bench in front of me. “How are you?” he whispered in my ear.

Shivers danced down my spine. God, I loved having him so close. “I’m okay.”

He leant closer, burying his face in my hair and inhaling deeply, breathing in my scent. “No, you’re not. But we’ll talk about it later.”

A few of the soldiers entered the kitchen through the double glass doors leading out to the patio. Aleksandr offered them some pizza, and all but one graciously accepted.

“Thanks, but my wife is on my back about watching my cholesterol.” Jonas moved to the fridge and pulled out a container full of food. He popped it into the microwave to reheat it.

“So how long are you staying?” I asked Tatiana in between bites. My unbelievably distracting husband didn’t move from his spot, staying cocooned around me. Not that I was complaining or anything. It just made it incredibly hard for me to focus.

“I’ll be staying for a few days, but I need to be back for classes on Monday. I told Nikolai to stay—”

“Which he will not be doing,” Nikolai cut in, reaching for a slice of pizza.

Yeah, I wasn’t at all surprised to hear that. I took a bite of my pizza and held it up in the air for Arturo. He leant forward and bit into it. “How are classes going?”

“Good!” she answered cheerfully. “They’ve only really just started, but I’m enjoying it so far—*oh, man.*” Her entire face paled, a look of nauseousness washing over her.

“What? What’s wrong?” Nikolai immediately asked, jumping to his feet and laying a hand on her back.

“Oh, nothing. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. You look like you’re going to be sick. Do you feel sick? Do you need to lie down? I can carry you upstairs to bed—”

“Calm down, love. I’m okay.” Tatiana took a deep breath in, and it seemed to make it worse. Her hand flew to her mouth like she was just about to throw up, her cheeks puffing.

“I don’t think you are.” I lay a hand on her shoulder. “Maybe you should rest.”

“No, no, I’m honestly fine. It’s just—”

“Just what? What is it?” Nikolai persisted, his eyes filled with concern.

Jonas joined us, placing his container of hot, steaming food down on the island bench. I couldn’t tell exactly what it was, but it smelt like some sort of fish dish. Tatiana’s eyes locked onto the food, and her face paled even more.

Nikolai noticed instantly. “Is it that?” he asked, pointing to it. “Is it making you feel nauseous?”

Tatiana seemed hesitant to answer. “It’s honestly okay. I can handle it—no, Nikolai, don’t.”

My brother was already moving. He picked up Jonas’ container, marched to the double doors and hurled the food outside.

“Hey!” Jonas barked incredulously. “My wife made me that!”

He still had a fork in his hand with some of the dish on it. Nikolai snatched that up too and threw it outside.

“Jesus. He’s really taking this ‘protective’ thing to a whole new level, isn’t he?” I chuckled, watching as Nikolai took things one step further by throwing Jonas out next.

“You have no idea,” Tatiana all but groaned.

“We should have some fun with it. Oh my god, I have a great idea for a prank—”

“No,” she said immediately.

“Oh, come on!” An excited thrill shot through me. “You don’t even know what I’m gonna say. What if we—”

“No, no and no.” Her stern voice left no debate on the matter. “I think I might head upstairs and take a nap. The smell of that fish has just made me feel yuck. Can you let Nikolai know?”

I exhaled a disappointed sigh. “Okay. Do you need any help?”

She shook her head, getting to her feet. “I’m good. I’ll see you later.”

We all said goodbye and she left. When Nikolai finally turned around and saw she was gone, panic took over his face.

“Where is she?”

An evil, villainous laugh echoed in my head. “She had to go lie down. Turns out, it wasn’t the food that was making her nauseous. It was your aftershave.”

Nikolai paled. “I’ll go shower right now.” He bolted out of the room at a speed I’d never seen from him before.

I broke out into a fit of laughter.

“You’re evil,” Arturo chuckled in my ear.

I glanced over my shoulder and shrugged. “You knew that when you married me.”

He smiled, bright and beaming. “I did. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

CHAPTER FORTY



DIMITRI VOLKOV

I STARED AT MY old bedroom door, so many thoughts running through my mind that I almost felt overstimulated by them all.

Illayana was right.

After she left my office, I spent the next few hours going over everything she'd said. While her words hurt, I knew deep down in my heart that she was right. And I felt like a fool for not realising it sooner.

Before I hurt Autumn.

I was ashamed of my actions. Ashamed of what I'd said to her. I had to make it right, but first, there was something else I had to do.

Taking a deep breath in, I reached for the handle and opened the door. For the first time in ten years, I stepped into the room Yekaterina and I used to share together. So many memories bombarded me all at once, but instead of making me feel sad, those memories brought a smile to my face.

It's time to say goodbye, Father.

Yes. Yes it was.

I took a turn around the room, just taking everything in. My fingers lightly touched the furniture, flashbacks of my time with Yekaterina playing

in my mind as I walked. Of her smile. Her laugh. The way her eyes would light up when she saw me.

It made me realise something I'd been trying to deny for a long time.

I loved Yekaterina, and I most likely would always love her. She was a big part of my life. The mother of my children.

But I was no longer *in* love with her, and the difference between those two things were monumental.

Despite the promise I'd made her, my heart belonged to another. While that should have riddled me with enough guilt to bring me to my knees, I stood taller, determination in my steps as I moved throughout the bedroom.

I mourned Yekaterina for so long that it was as if that was all I knew how to do. It was time to stop letting the guilt rule me. It was time to *stop* feeling guilty altogether. To let her go. To move on.

My heart felt lighter at the revelation, which was how I knew without a shred of doubt that I was doing the right thing.

I just wished it hadn't taken me so long to realise it.

After I was done doing a lap of the room, I sat on the end of the bed and closed my eyes. I wasn't sure how long I sat there for, reminiscing about all the good times Yekaterina and I shared together. All the moments with our children as they grew up. All the happy moments. All the sad moments. I took the time to remember it all. To honour the life we had together because she deserved that before I let her go.

Then, I started packing it all up.

It took me hours, and although I knew she couldn't hear me, I spoke to Yekaterina the whole time as if she could, putting all her clothes, shoes and miscellaneous items away. I boxed them up with tenderness and care, giving them the respect they deserved.

It wasn't only Yekaterina's belongings I packed away. It was all of mine, too. Everything from my previous life went with her because that was where it all belonged. I was no longer that man. He died with her, and he deserved to be buried with her.

Illayana had swung by, offering to help, but I told her it was something I had to do on my own. Something I *needed* to do on my own.

I gave her the option to take anything she wanted of her mother's. With tears in her eyes, she'd chosen some jewellery and a dark blouse.

By the time I was finished, the sun had long since set along the horizon. Darkness fell, blanketing the house in an ominous aura that fit my mood. It

had been a long, strenuous day, filled with so much emotional turmoil that I was absolutely exhausted.

But as I stood in the doorway, staring back into the empty room, I felt... lighter. Like a giant weight had been lifted off my shoulders, that pressure that had been squeezing my heart for the last ten years finally gone.

I looked around, my gaze travelling from wall to wall as a wave of nostalgia washed over me. It was something I never thought would happen. A moment that I always thought was out of my reach. Something I was incapable of.

But I was there.

Yekaterina appeared in the centre of the room, her face lit up with the biggest smile I'd ever seen and tears in her eyes.

I smiled back. "Goodbye, Yekaterina."

She closed her eyes and tilted her head up to the sky. Her ghostly form faded away into the night.

And I knew that would be the last time I ever saw her.



The next day, I sat in the lounge room, staring at my phone. I'd been there, in that exact same position only a week before, trying to figure out what to message Autumn.

How the hell did I fuck things up so badly?!

I wanted to bloody shoot myself.

I'd tossed and turned all night, wondering how I was going to fix things not only with Autumn, but my son.

There was no excuse for what I did to either of them. For the things I said to her *and* him. For putting my hands on Lukyan the way I did. I had to make it right with both of them.

The first thing I did when I woke up was find Lukyan and apologise. He'd shrugged and said it was fine, but it didn't take me long to notice the change in him. I'd crushed my son's spirit. He was no longer the same, and it was all my fault.

All my damn fucking fault.

I needed to fix it. Needed to get that crushed, hurt look out of his eyes. But I had no idea how.

Then, there was Autumn.

She'd be well within her right to shoot me on sight if she saw me again, and I feared she just might. That didn't trouble me. It was the fact that she might kill me before I even got the chance to apologise that worried me so much.

The best thing to do was to call her and hope she gave me a second to explain myself. If she didn't, then I would hunt her down and *force* her to listen to me. I'd just have to make sure she didn't have any weapons in her hands.

I blew out a breath. *Here goes nothing.* I pressed *call*.

An automated message came through. "*This number is unavailable.*"

"What?" I muttered under my breath. The damn thing didn't even ring. Shaking my head, sure it must have been some sort of error, I tried again.

And again.

And again.

The same thing continued to happen, and I almost flung the phone across the room.

"Why?!" I snarled, a hint of petulance in my tone.

Aleksandr, Drea, Nikolai and Tatiana walked into the lounge room. An awkward silence followed. Things between me and Aleksandr were still strained after what happened, which was fair. I'd acted like a right jackass.

"Everything okay?" Nikolai asked. His hand was clasped around Tatiana's as he led her to one of the armchairs beside the couch and helped her sit down. She gave me a friendly smile, which I returned.

"I don't know." I explained what happened every time I tried to call Autumn's number, and they all shared a look with one another. "What?" I asked, my gaze moving between them. "What's with the look?"

Drea plopped down next to me on the couch and brought her legs up to sit cross-legged. "Usually, when something like that happens, it means your number has been blocked."

I blinked. *She blocked me?*

Okay, given what I did to her, that is understandable. “How do I get a hold of her, then?”

“You can’t.” Aleksandr answered. “Not unless she unblocks you.”

“How can I tell her to do that if I can’t get through?” I growled, frustrated.

“You could try calling her from a different number?” Tatiana offered me her phone.

I thanked her and copied Autumn’s number from my phone into Tatiana’s. She answered on the third ring. “Hello, Autumn speaking.”

My whole world brightened at the sound of her voice, my heart pounding hard in my chest. “Hi, it’s—”

Beep, beep, beep.

I took the phone away from my ear, staring at it incredulously.

Drea winced. “Did she hang up on you?”

“Yes.” *Okay, I deserved that.* I cleared my throat and called her again.

“This number is unavailable.”

My mouth dropped open. “She blocked this number, too!”

“Ouch,” Nikolai grimaced. “She’s really pissed at you.”

I grunted. “Give me your phone.”

Nikolai handed it over with delay. I called her number again. This time, I would have to be quick and right to the point.

“Hello, Autumn speaking.”

“I know you’re angry—”

Beep, beep, beep.

“Son of a bitch!” Of course, when I tried to call her back, the call didn’t go through, either. She’d immediately blocked Nikolai’s number, too.

Aleksandr was already pulling his phone out of his pocket when I stuck my hand out towards him. I took it and called her. *Again.*

“Hello, Autumn speaking,” she answered.

“Just give me a second to—”

Beep, beep, beep.

“*For fuck’s sake!*” I went to throw the phone across the room when Aleksandr lunged forward, clasping his hands around mine to stop me. He snatched it out of my grasp with a scowl on his face.

“Here you go. Try mine,” Drea said cheerfully.

“Thank you,” I grumbled.

“Fourth time’s a charm,” Tatiana said encouragingly.

Fingers fucking crossed.

Except it wasn’t, because when I tried to call Autumn’s number again, it just went straight to voicemail. Confusion shot through me. “It’s going straight to voicemail.”

“No rings?” Nikolai asked.

I tried again just to check. “No.”

“Well, usually, that means she’s either turned her phone off or she’s smashed it.”

Are you fucking kidding me?!

Tatiana tapped a manicured finger to her chin. “I don’t think she would have smashed her phone. Most likely turned it off because you kept calling. No one walks around without a phone these days.”

“She could have a burner,” Aleksandr suggested. “Possibly even two or three. She’s an assassin. I highly doubt she has just one phone.”

Drea clicked her fingers. “That’s a good point.”

I looked at Nikolai. “Get me the numbers for those burners.”

My son rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t just look up Autumn’s name and find all the burners she has. They’re burners for a reason. They’re hard to trace back to people.”

Frustration mounted inside me. *Why does it have to be so fucking difficult?* I just wanted to talk to her. I *needed* to talk to her. I needed to apologise and tell her how incredibly sorry I was for what I said. That I didn’t mean a word of it. I was just struggling with my feelings for her and lashed out.

It in no way excused my behaviour or actions. But still, I needed to tell her that.

And beg her for forgiveness.

Whether The Crimson Death would give it to me, I wasn’t sure, but I would beg until she did.

Tatiana straightened, her eyes alight. “Do you know anyone who knows her? That maybe has the numbers for her burners or knows where she could be?”

“Yes, actually.” I got to my feet. “Thank you all for your help. I really appreciate it.”

Tatiana and Drea smiled whereas my sons gave me an odd look. “You’re welcome,” they mumbled, that slightly confused expression mirrored on their faces.

Not wanting to waste any time, I marched to my office and went right to my desk, sitting down. Knowing who I was going to call, I first needed to organise a delivery. Once that was done, I pulled out the Rolodex from the side drawer and flicked through it quickly, looking for a specific card.

When it came to my business associates, I was a little old school. I liked to keep their details off devices and have physical, hard copies. Call me paranoid, but that was what I just preferred.

As soon as I found the number I was looking for, I used the home line to call him.

“What?” he answered with a gruff voice.

“Elias. It’s Dimitri Volkov.”

“Yeah, I know. I have caller ID. What’dya want?”

Always so pleasant. “I need some information on one of your clients.”

“I ain’t no snitch,” he snapped immediately.

“There’s a carton of Johnny Walker Blue in it for you.”

Elias was silent for a moment. “Who is it?”

I smirked, leaning back in my chair, triumph shooting through me. Elias Huber was a well-known assassin trainer in our world. I knew from our time on Talon’s island that Elias was the one who not only trained Autumn, but held a close bond with her. If anyone knew where she was or how to get in touch with her, it would be him. He was a gruff man in his late seventies. Very blunt, very direct with a no-nonsense attitude.

“Autumn DeValos.”

“Ahh,” he chuckled. “So *you’re* the one.”

“The one?” I questioned. “The one what?”

“The one who sent her running away.”

I sat up, my spine snapping straight. “What are you talking about? Running? Running where?”

“Don’t know,” he grunted. “She just told me she’s leaving for a while. Going off the grid.”

Panic and guilt clutched my chest, stealing my breath. The Autumn I knew was strong and fierce. She *never* ran away from anything. She faced it head-on with her middle finger up in the air and a “fuck you” attitude.

It hurt to know I was the cause of all of it. It hurt even more to know my chance of fixing things with her was rapidly diminishing with every passing second.

“Well you must know *something*,” I insisted. I pulled at the collar of my buttoned-up shirt, trying to calm myself. I felt like I couldn’t fucking breathe.

“Nope. Just that she’s boarding a plane tomorrow.”

Tomorrow?! Fear twisted my gut. “I need the information for that flight. Now.”

Elias snorted. “Don’t got it.”

I snarled in frustration. “What do you mean you don’t have it?! She didn’t tell you?”

“She didn’t tell me shit. She didn’t tell me where she was going. What time her flight is. Nothing. Just that she’s leaving and won’t be back for a while.”

I covered my eyes with my hand. “What about the airline, then?”

“Uh,” he let loose a loud burp. “Delta Airlines, I think.”

That would just have to do. “Alright. Thanks.”

“Hang on a minute. Where’s my Johnny Blue?”

“It’s already on the way to you. It’ll arrive within the next few days.”

“It better.”

“Pleasure talking to you, Elias.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Then he hung up.

I slammed the phone down. “Nikolai!” I roared. A few seconds later, my son came bursting into the room.

“What? What’s going on?”

Standing up, I planted my hands on the desk and stared him down with every ounce of my focus. “I need you to get me the CEO of Delta Airlines.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“**E**XCUSE ME! PISSED OFF, frustrated woman coming through!” I ran through the airport, my carry-on suitcase trailing behind me and handbag continuously slipping from my shoulder as I sprinted towards my gate.

I was late. I was so fucking late. There was every chance I was going to miss my flight, and if I did, I was going to kill someone.

Probably that stupid taxi driver who made me late in the first place.

Right. Because being late had nothing to do with the fact that you were having second thoughts about leaving.

I ignored that pesky inner voice of mine, staying focused on my mission: getting to my gate so I could board the plane and get the fuck out of the US.

After I left Dimitri’s over a week ago, I entered into a deep, dark depression. It was hard coming to terms with the fact that the first and only man I’d ever loved not only didn’t love me back, but also regretted our whole time together. It hurt to know that all those moments we shared—all the long talks, heated touches and glances filled with longing—meant nothing to him. *Less than nothing.* That they’d all been a mistake for him.

I'd been beaten, stabbed, raped and tortured, but that?

That nearly killed me.

Then, while I was stuck in that deep pool of sadness and defeat, I'd had this moment of clarity.

If Dimitri didn't want to be with me, that was *his* fucking loss.

I was goddamn amazing. I was smart, funny, sexy and could hit a bullseye from a hundred yards away. I was a walking motherfucking wet dream, and I wasn't going to let Dimitri-Dickhead-Volkov make me think differently. Bring me down.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done.

Turns out, heartbreak wasn't something you could get over by just sheer will power, copious amounts of alcohol and a lot of cursing. No matter how many times I told myself I was better off without that douche-nozzle, my heart and soul still bled every time I thought of him.

So, I decided to turn that pain into anger.

It worked...somewhat. I liked being angry. Instead of crying all day, I just smashed shit and pretended I was doing it over Dimitri's head. It was very therapeutic.

"Excuse me! Watch out! Move, move, move!" The airport was packed with bodies, people standing in lines and waiting for their flights. Apparently, people had stopped understanding the phrase, "Get the fuck out of my way" because no one bloody moved, and I was forced to duck and weave in between the crowd.

"Gate twenty-four, gate twenty-four, gate twenty-four," I mumbled under my breath as I frantically ran. Technically, my flight details said I needed to be at my gate thirty-seven minutes ago for boarding. I was hoping that was more of a suggestion than an actual rule.

When I finally found it, I breathed out a huge sigh of relief. There was a blonde woman with brown eyes and red lipstick waiting behind the desk. That to me was a good sign. I rushed up to the counter so fast that I almost flung across it.

"Hello, hello, flight DA1794 to Australia. Am I too late? Am I too late?" I rushed out, barely taking a breath.

The woman's name tag read "Tasha". She smiled, but there was a hint of something else lying beneath the surface. Unease, maybe? "No, you're fine. Do you have your passport and boarding pass?"

“Really?” I exhaled heavily. “Yes, I have them right here.” After a quick search of my handbag, I found them and handed them over.

She quickly checked the documents before handing them back to me. “Okay, you’re all good to go. Have a nice flight.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much.” The relief filling my bones elated me. I’d truly feared it was too late, and I was going to miss the flight.

Unfortunately, all that elation made me miss certain details that showed something wasn’t quite right with the whole thing. The first one being that I was nearly forty minutes late and still able to board. The second one being the unease vibrating from Tasha. Then there was the third... The fact that when I actually stepped onto the plane, there were no other passengers on board.

My stupid brain had been too preoccupied with just getting on the plane so I could get as far away from Dimitri as possible, especially after what happened the day before, that all of that just flew over the top of my fucking head.

The bastard *really* tried to call me to talk. As if I would give him the time of day after what he said to me. I’ll admit, it had been very satisfying to hang up on him, and I got to do it not once, not twice, but three times!

I could just picture how frustrated that made him. It wouldn’t surprise me if he ended up smashing the phone. Dimitri didn’t like to be ignored. It made the whole thing even sweeter.

But knowing he was trying to reach out made my stupid heart scream to take a chance. See what he had to say.

I couldn’t allow that. I couldn’t give an inch because I knew there was every chance I just might forgive him. That was why it was so important that I made my flight.

I had to get away.

After double-checking my ticket, I went straight to my seat. I’d paid a little more to have the window seat and extra leg room. Once I found it, I stuffed my carry-on suitcase into the overhead compartment and sat down.

My handbag, I kept with me. It had all my essential items. My headphones, book, crossword puzzles and phone.

Even though we weren’t up in the air yet, looking outside the window gave me a little sense of peace, my body and mind calming down almost instantly.

Not much longer now, and I’ll be gone.

Half of me was glad at that, the other half... Not so much. There was still a part of me that wanted to stay in the hopes that things could be mended between me and Dimitri. But I refused to allow that. After what he said... things were fucking done between us. I wasn't going to play his games anymore.

Footsteps reached my ears. I kept my gaze on the window, watching the other planes on the tarmac take flight, when someone sat down next to me. My body hummed with awareness. I didn't even need to look to know who it was. There was only one person who could make my body react that way, and he was the last person I wanted to see.

Slowly, I turned my head to the left. Dimitri-Dickhead-Volkov sat there, looking as dashing as he always fucking did. The jerk. A dark, three-piece suit was moulded to his hard, muscular frame, his salt and pepper hair perfectly styled, and his scent?

Fuck me.

Dark, rich and utterly tantalising. My insides burnt with excitement just at the sight of him. Then came the pain. The anger. It squashed that initial hit of attraction almost entirely.

“Hello, Autumn.” His thick voice rolled over my skin like a soft caress.

Despite the fact that my heart pounded at having him right beside me, I looked at him with derision. My body and heart might have been happy to see him, but my mind was not.

“Usually, when someone hangs up on you and blocks your number—*several numbers*—it means they don’t want to talk to you,” I said coldly, refusing to allow myself to be happy in his presence.

His eyes traced over my face as if he was taking every single detail in, committing it to memory. “I missed you,” he admitted with no hesitation.

It took everything within me not to react. *The cold and hard Bratva Butcher just admitted he missed me? Hell must have frozen over.*

Had it been a week before, I would have been elated at the declaration. I would have smiled, cracked a joke and told him I missed him too.

But now... It just made me fucking angry.

Did he seriously think he could just show up like that, say he missed me and everything would be okay?

Unbelievable.

I looked around the empty plane, realising something. “You’re responsible for this, aren’t you?” I asked, waving a hand to all the empty

seats

A crinkle formed at the line of his brows. He nodded.

Thought so.

I didn't want to entertain him. Didn't want to talk to him at all, if I was being honest. *Lie.* But something was driving me crazy, and I needed to know.

"How did you convince all these people not to show up for their flight?"

"Simple," he shrugged. "I bought the airline and cancelled all their tickets."

"Ooo, fancy pants rich McGee over here." He frowned, not understanding the reference as I got to my feet, packing up my belongings with a huff. "Fuck you," I spat, and then squeezed past him to move to the other side of the plane.

I should have known it wouldn't be that easy, though. Dimitri Volkov wasn't the type to give up.

This time, I chose the seat closest to the aisle in the hopes of deterring him from sitting down next to me. Nobody liked having to squeeze past someone to sit down.

Did it work?

No.

Dimitri just jumped over the seats in front of me, and took his seat beside me with an air of complete casualness. I grinded my teeth together.

"I just want to talk."

"Okay."

He exhaled a sigh of relief. "I—"

I slammed my headphones over my ears and turned the music up all the way. Heavy metal rock music blasted out of them. Dimitri gave me a less than impressed look.

"I said you could talk!" I yelled loudly over the music in my ears. "I didn't say I would listen!"

He yanked the headphones off my head.

"Hey!" I chastised, reaching for them. "Give those back."

"Not until we talk."

I scoffed. "You don't want to talk to me, Dimitri."

"Yes. I do."

I stared him dead in the eyes. "No. You don't. You just want to fuck with me. Act all flirty and funny so that when I let my guard down, you can just

slam the door in my face and make me feel like an idiot.”

His face seemed to crumple right before my eyes. Guilt started to worm its way into my heart. I suddenly felt bad for making him look so sad and distressed.

Then, I remembered all the shit he’d said to me and the guilt went flying out the fucking window.

I got to my feet and started walking down the aisle away from him.

Dimitri followed. “Autumn, I—”

“Do you want to know why I don’t want to talk to you, Dimitri?” I asked, spinning around to face him. He stopped dead in his tracks. “Because I don’t care what you have to say.” He winced. I continued like I didn’t see it. “From the moment we met, all you’ve done is push me away with your threats, insults and abrasive attitude. In truth, I partly blame myself. The signs were all there. I just ignored them. I took what small, minuscule parts you were willing to offer me and ate them up like a crack addict. That gave you the impression you could treat me however you wanted—say whatever you wanted—and I would just roll over and take it.”

He started shaking his head. “I don’t—”

“Did I sound like I was finished?” I snapped.

His mouth clicked shut.

“I’ve taken a lot of shit from you, and you’ve taken a lot from me. I think that’s the way we like it. We like to push each other’s buttons. We like to fight. I’m fire, you’re ice. But I have *never* humiliated or disrespected you the same way you did me that day.”

Those beautiful blue eyes of his flashed with agony as if my words hurt him. Caused him physical pain. “Just give me a chance to explain.”

“Why should I?” I asked incredulously. “I heard everything you had to say then.”

“I’m *begging* you, Autumn.”

I scoffed. “Begging means getting down on your knees. A man like you doesn’t—”

He dropped to his knees right in front of me. I was so stunned that I could do nothing but stare at him in shock. He took that opportunity to talk. “You have no idea how much I regret my actions that day. How sorry I am. Because I am. I’m so, *so* sorry, Autumn. I wish I could take it all back. Every. Single. Word.”

Oh, hell.

What the fuck was going on? Who was this man? Because he certainly wasn't the Dimitri I knew. First, he admitted point-blank that he missed me. Then, *he got down on his fucking knees*. And finally, he said he was sorry. Dimitri Volkov. Said he was *sorry*. S-O-R-R-Y.

When I stepped on the plane, did I actually step into some kind of alternate reality?

Hope blossomed in my heart. *What if*—

No! my mind screamed at me. *It's just another one of his tricks. Don't fall for it.*

“Get up, Dimitri,” I said coldly.

His face scrunched up in distress. “Autumn, I—”

“I don’t want to hear it!” I screamed. If I did, I was likely to forgive him, and then when it happened all over again, it would be all my fault.

I spun on my heels and started marching towards the exit. *Fuck this.* Fuck all my belongings in my carry-on suitcase. I could buy more shit. Fuck my flight. There were plenty of others I could catch—ones hopefully out of Dimitri’s reach. Fuck—

“*Please!*” Dimitri cried out with desperation.

I stopped, my feet rooting in place, refusing to take another step.

Okay, now I know I’m in an alternate reality.

“Please” was not a word in Dimitri’s vocabulary.

Neither is sorry, and yet he said that, too. Maybe this time it will be different. Maybe he’s different.

I highly fucking doubted it. It was just what he did. He’d push me away, reel me back in just to push me away again. Except each time, it got worse and worse. Hurt that little bit more. I wasn’t going to fall for it again—

“I said goodbye.”

I frowned. *Goodbye?* Curiosity got the better of me, and I couldn’t help but turn around and ask, “Goodbye to who?”

He swallowed. “Yekaterina.”

Suddenly, I was even more confused. From what I understood, his wife died over ten years ago. What did he mean when he said he only *just* said goodbye?

The only way to find out was to ask.

I licked my dry lips. “I don’t understand.”

He took a deep breath in, almost as if he was collecting himself. His thoughts. “When Yekaterina died, a part of me died with her. I couldn’t

accept the loss, and because of that, I refused to let her go. I stood over her grave and promised her I would never forget her. Never let someone else into my heart. That it would always belong to her, even in death. For ten years, I held onto that promise, pushing away anyone who even tried to get close to me. Never even entertaining the idea of starting something with another woman. I felt as though if I let someone in, I was betraying her and the promise I made. It was easy. *Beyond* easy to keep that promise. For over a decade, I was never once tempted.” His eyes bore into mine. “Until I met you.”

My breath caught in my throat. Something in his words gave me pause. “Wait a second. Are you saying that since your wife died, you’ve never—I mean, you haven’t once—”

“You are the *first* and *only* woman I have been with in the last ten years.”

The significance of that statement made my heart skip a beat. I felt... oddly special. That I, Autumn DeValos, a nobody, had tempted such a strong and powerful man.

“When we first met, you were such a pain in my ass, I had no fears about something happening between us.” *You and me both, pal.* “But as time went on, things changed. When feelings started to emerge, I-I didn’t know what to do. I hadn’t felt emotions like that—such a strong, visceral need for another person—in so long that when it happened, I panicked. I pushed them down. I ignored them. I lashed out at everyone around me. I refused to acknowledge them in the hopes they would just disappear. But it was too late.”

It suddenly all made *so much* sense. Things started to click in my head as he spoke. Why he acted the way he did. Why he always held himself back. Why when things got too real between us, he seemed to just shut down right before my eyes. Push me away.

It was because he thought he *had* to. He not only felt guilty about his feelings towards me, but he also felt confused, angry and lost.

That would make anyone in their right mind lash out and say things they might later on regret.

Or am I just making excuses for him in a desperate attempt to reconcile?

I honestly didn’t know anymore.

Dimitri got up and moved closer, only to get right back on his knees at my feet. I looked down at him as he clasped my hands in his, my emotions pulling me in a thousand different directions.

“I cannot begin to apologise for my actions that day,” he said solemnly. “I was struggling with what was happening between us, but that in no way excuses my behaviour. I know that. Believe me when I say that I’ve been hating myself every second of every day since it happened. I didn’t eat. I didn’t sleep. I almost drank myself to death because I couldn’t stand what I did to you. The pain I caused you.”

I could see on his face that he meant every word. The despair in his voice begged me to understand, and I so desperately wanted to.

It was the realest he’d ever been with me. He was literally cutting himself open, baring his soul and everything he felt to me. It was like he was a completely different Dimitri. Open and honest. Not hiding a single thing behind cryptic phrases or unidentifiable looks. I didn’t know what to make of it. I was completely thrown off guard, unsure about what to do.

“What is it that you want from me?” I asked softly, my resolve almost cracking.

“Don’t you know?” he said, eyes filled with longing. He got to his feet and cradled my face in his hands, tilting my head up to look him in the eyes. It was insane how such a simple move could make me feel so... cherished.

Perhaps it was because Dimitri had never acted that way with me before.

“You,” he murmured over my lips. “Just you. From now until the end of time.”

My heart *screamed* to listen to him. To let bygones be bygones. Forgive and move on...with him. Just accept the apology and be happy.

But my brain couldn’t forgive that easily, a horrible, sinking thought playing in my head over and over again.

“I wish I could believe you.” Even though it killed me, I stepped back out of his reach. Hurt flashed across his face, his hands hovering in the air where my head was for a few seconds before falling dejectedly to his side. “But this has happened before. It could happen again—”

He shook his head earnestly. “It won’t. I swear.”

I smiled sadly. Tears stung in my eyes, but I held them back, refusing to shed any more tears over him. “You love her, Dimitri. That’s not just going to change. And while I can understand how hard this must be for you, I refuse to continuously compete for first place in your heart.”

“No, baby,” he murmured softly, stepping forward to grasp my face again with both hands. “There’s no competition. She was the mother of my

children. A huge part of my life. I'll always respect and care for her on some level. But my heart no longer belongs to her. *It belongs to you.*" When I went to look away, he forced my head back, and lowered himself until our eyes locked, his gaze focused entirely on me. "I'm in love with *you*, Autumn. You're the one I think about. The one I dream about. The one I can't bear to be without. *You*." He took my hand and placed it over his heart. "You own all of me. It's all yours, to do with as you wish. If you wanted to cut my heart out and destroy it in your hands for what I did to you, I would let you. I would do whatever it takes to make you happy. To see you smile. To hear your laugh." His thumb ran over my bottom lip in a soft caress. My breath hitched. "To feel your lips again. I would do anything because *you're* the one I cannot live without. My *malen'kaya d'yavolista*."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, staring into those mesmerising eyes, seeing nothing but truth. My heart and mind soared with happiness. A combination of his words and actions convinced me to take another chance on him.

But it would come with a warning.

I reached up and grabbed a fistful of his hair roughly. He hissed, lust and confusion flaring in his eyes. "Get back on your knees," I demanded.

He didn't hesitate, lowering himself before me. My stomach tightened at the sight, excitement fluttering in my core at his obedience. At the big, strong alpha male in an expensive Armani suit on his knees all because I told him to. I leant forward slowly until my lips hovered over his. "You fuck with me again, and believe *me* when *I* say, they'll never find your fucking body, Butcher."

He smiled, a big, beaming, over the moon type of smile that lit up his whole face. "Can I kiss you now?"

Keeping one hand tightly on his hair, I used my other to reach up and unzip my pants. Hunger flashed across his face. "You can kiss me here," I said, pointing to my pussy. "Because although I may have forgiven you, you've got some *serious* making up to do."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



AUTUMN DEVALOS

“OH, GOD. DIMITRI. FUCK. Yes. Yes.”

Dimitri moaned, his tongue lavishing at my clit in slow, soft circles.

This man and his fucking tongue.

It'd been three days since he cornered me at the airport, and it'd been the best, goddamn three days of my life. We'd retreated back to one of the many townhouses I owned under an alias and done nothing but eat, sleep and *fuck*. Literally. We actually hadn't left since we got there. When I told him he had some serious making up to do, he'd taken that as some sort of challenge, giving me orgasm after orgasm after orgasm. But it wasn't only about the sex.

Over the last three days, he showed me exactly what it was like to be loved by him. Cherished. He was the same Dimitri I knew, but also vastly different. Affectionate. Loving.

Don't get me wrong, he was still a giant pain in my ass. We found ourselves arguing almost every day about something or other, but it was the fun kind of arguing that served as foreplay for us.

Speaking of which...

My legs tightened around his head as my climax rushed to the surface, exploding all throughout my body, right down to my fingertips and toes. The pleasure soaring through my veins was complete and utter ecstasy. I couldn't think of anything fucking better.

Dimitri sunk his teeth into the skin at the apex of my thighs, marking me with a harsh bite. I hissed, the pain morphing into exquisite pleasure.

One thing I'd come to quickly realise about Dimitri was that the man had a serious marking kink. Not that I was complaining. In fact, I fucking loved it. I sported all of those handprints, bruises, hickeys and bite marks like badges of honor.

He rose up to his knees, a dark, sinful smirk on his lips as he swiped up my wetness from his chin with a finger. "You're fucking devine," he whispered in reverence, sucking his finger into his mouth. "Legs up. Spread them wide. That's it. Look at that pretty little pussy, dripping wet for me."

I melted under his praise, my skin burning hot. Another thing I loved about him was that he had a wicked fucking mouth.

"Dimitri," I whimpered, eyeing his cock with desperation. It stood tall, thick and hard, teasing me with its closeness.

"Don't worry, baby. I won't make you wait." His term of endearment made me feel all tingly inside, butterflies blooming in my stomach. He flattened his palms on the underside of my ass, his fingers digging into my flesh as he spread his knees wide and slowly moved his hips forward.

The head of his cock touched my entrance, and I shivered in anticipation. Inch by glorious inch, he sunk into me, going deeper and deeper, my pussy rippling around him.

When he bottomed out, his head tipped back, and a deep, masculine groan filled with pure male satisfaction fell from his lips.

I cupped my breasts, panting at not only the feel of him but also the sight. His hard body on complete display for me. Muscles bunching in his arms and chest. Veins throbbing beneath his skin. Abs so tight and defined, I could bounce a quarter off them.

It should be illegal to look that fucking good.

And he was all mine.

Lust-filled eyes snapped to me. His hand disappeared behind his back for a moment only to reappear holding a knife.

My pussy clamped down on his cock and he grunted, grasping my hip tightly with his other hand. He flipped it in the air so the flat side of the blade landed in his palm and then he offered me the hilt.

“What letter are we on now?”

Excitement pooled low in my belly. “T,” I breathed out, taking the knife. He grinned and held out his forearm, his hips slowly beginning to move. Pleasure hit me deep inside. Two letters were already etched into his flesh.

A and U.

The look of them sent me spiraling closer to my release.

When he first asked me to cut my name into his skin, I’d called him bloody crazy, despite how much that thought almost made me come on the spot. I’d done a lot of shit, but cutting my name into someone’s body was a definite first for me. He’d joked about doing something like that before, but never in a million years did I think he was actually serious.

“Do it, baby.” He moved at a slow, leisurely pace, his cock sliding in and out. “*Mark me,*” he groaned. “Carve your name into my skin.”

My eyes rolled into the back of my head for a brief moment. *Seriously, he is going to be my goddamn undoing.*

I mean, *fuck*. I knew we were sexually compatible, but it was just next level.

Panting heavily, I grabbed his wrist with one hand and brought the knife to his skin with the other. He started moving faster when the tip of the blade made contact, almost like the excitement was becoming too much to handle. Pleasure pulsed inside me with each thrust. It took all of my concentration to stop my hand from shaking.

Dimitri hissed, eyes flashing, a mixture of both pleasure and pain streaking across his face when I made the first cut. A straight line barely a few inches long. A small amount of blood trickled down his forearm, and my stomach tightened at the sight.

“Yes,” he growled, pumping faster and faster. “Cut me again.”

I did as he demanded, finishing off the letter with a horizontal slice. Once I was done, he gripped my hips with both hands and started slamming me down onto his cock at the same time he surged forward.

Bliss. It was pure fucking bliss.

“You. Feel. So. Fucking. Good,” he dragged out with a deep, low moan, punctuating each word with a hard thrust.

“So do you—oh, *fuck*, so do you. Harder, baby. Harder.”

He gave it to me full fucking force, holding nothing back. My whole body trembled as another orgasm built up quickly, almost taking me over.

I threw the knife to the side, and it embedded into the wall. Dimitri flattened his body down onto mine and slammed his lips against mine. His tongue pushed into my mouth with a messy, wet kiss, and I moaned, kissing him back.

I gripped his shoulders tightly and just held on for dear life as he fucked me ruthlessly with all the strength he possessed. He nibbled down my chin before latching his fucking teeth onto my neck. He sucked, *hard*, no doubt leaving another punishing bruise. His hands took mine and pinned them above my head, holding me down. I strained against him, not really wanting to be released but loving the force he used to keep me exactly where he wanted me.

“Dimitri! Fuck!” I screamed, the pleasure so intense that I couldn’t even draw breath. My climax hit me hard, obliterating my senses, a tidal wave of pure ecstasy washing over me.

I went limp. Dimitri kept fucking, his cock pistonning in and out, in and out, like he couldn’t stop, my body jolting forward with each of his harsh thrusts.

“Gonna fill you up so fucking hard,” he grunted against my skin, moving to another part of my neck to mark me some more with his teeth.

My eyes rolled into the back of my head. *Dear god.*

He moaned, low and long and deep, his tongue licking at my skin as he emptied himself inside of me. His hips pumped a few more times before he released a satisfied breath and then collapsed completely on top of me.



I started awake, shooting up in bed, my heart beating wildly. Confusion wracked me, my sleepy eyes looking around the dark, empty room. Beside

me, Dimitri slept peacefully on his stomach, his arms cradled under his pillow as his head rested on top of it. He didn't snore. Thank god, otherwise, he'd be sleeping in the spare bedroom.

Frown on my face, I stayed still, not moving a muscle. Something had woken me up from a pretty good fucking dream, and I had no idea what it was.

But it was *something*. I knew that much.

The sound of something clattering from downstairs reached my ears, and my entire body went into hyper-alert, my bones stiffening.

Is someone in my goddamn house?

Probably not, I thought to myself. It was most likely just Scuba Steve, my cat. He came and went as he pleased, sometimes leaving dead birds and mice on my couch. He was kind of an asshole, but what cat wasn't?

After one more quick glance at Dimitri, I slipped out of bed quietly. Part of me wondered if I should wake him, but he'd given me such a good fucking before, I thought it best to let him rest.

Keeping my footsteps light, I made my way across the room to the door, swiping up my underwear from the floor. If someone *was* in my house, I wasn't going to give them a free show.

Having carpet in my townhouse worked to my advantage, my footsteps soundless as I left my bedroom and started down the stairs. I paused every few seconds, listening intently. More clattering came from below, and I knew without a shred of doubt that someone was definitely in my house.

Whoever they were, they were fucking dead.

The bottom of the stairs opened up into a hallway. I could go left, entering into the lounge area or right, going into the dining room that led straight into the kitchen. I had guns and knives stashed in little hideaway spots in each room of the house. Whether or not I could get to one before being spotted was the question.

Hushed, frantic voices reached my ears. They were coming from the left, so I went right, darting through the dining room and going straight for the kitchen. A large, marble island sat in the middle of the room. I hurried forward, taking cover behind it. Keeping low, my hand ran along the outside of it until I found the little compartment I was looking for. I lightly banged the side of my fist against it and a gun popped out.

Hello, Maggie.

Maggie was a .22 Magnum Pistol. She was light, easy to conceal and always reliable. With quick movements, I picked her up, checked the mag and chamber and took aim just as I could hear someone enter the room.

"This is the last room," a man whispered, voice slightly muffled.

"Once we clear it, we make our way upstairs. Remember, shoot to kill. He's dangerous," another man responded.

He?

Fuckers were there for Dimitri. So many questions flew through my head. Who were they? Were they hired guns, sent by Sergei? How did they know he was here? That particular townhouse was under an alias no one knew about. It was why I'd specifically chosen it.

If any of them lived, I'd fucking ask them, and if they chose not to answer, I'd torture it out of them.

Any team worth a damn would spread out when clearing a room, which meant they were most likely going to be at opposite ends, making them harder to kill at the same time.

That was okay. I loved a challenge.

Reaching up, I pulled a knife from a draw and spun, quickly moving to the back of the island. Footsteps came from my left and right. They were each walking down one side of the island.

Excitement sizzled in my bones, The Crimson Death scratching at my skin, demanding freedom. A sadistic smirk curled on my lips as I let her take over. I flipped the knife into a reverse grip, adjusted my position until I was crouched, both feet flat to the floor and waited.

The one on the left stepped into my view first. So, he died first.

Sliding on my knees, I sliced the sharp edge of the blade across his shins in a brutal cut, spun around his body as he cried out in pain, shot up behind him and rammed the knife into the base of his neck at the same time I took aim at the other man across the island and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The bullet tore through the man's head, right between his eyes. He thumped to the ground. A rain of bullets came out of nowhere, and I dropped, a hiss falling from my lips. A small trickle of pain pulsed from my arm.

Just a graze, I breathed out in relief.

I army-crawled into the laundry room located beside the kitchen and slammed the door shut. Somewhere along the way, I'd dropped my gun, and

I wanted to kick myself. Bullets ripped through the door, wood raining down on me. When they suddenly stopped, I knew it was because they needed to reload, and that it would be my only chance to get back on the offensive.

Jumping to my feet, I ran out to see a man in tactical gear reloading the gun in his hands. A silencer was screwed onto the barrel. We locked eyes. He slammed the magazine into the gun. I threw my knife. He dove to the right, and I rushed forward, slamming my knee into his chest in a flying knee strike. He went flying back but recovered fast, rolling into a reverse somersault and springing back up to his feet.

We locked into a battle of blows, throwing punches and kicks at each other trying to gain the upperhand. He was *very* good. His services most likely cost a small fortune. Had it been six months before, he might have beaten me, he was *that* good. But I had something other than myself to fight for.

The man I loved.

And there was no way in hell I was going to let anything happen to Dimitri.

With love and determination pumping in my veins, I attacked him with everything I had.

He threw a punch. I ducked, wrapped my arms around his and twisted sharply. Something snapped. He roared in pain. I flicked my leg behind me and up, leaning forward so my foot would smash into his face. He stumbled backwards, a curse flying from his mouth.

Spinning on my heels, I hit him with a brutal, roundhouse kick right to the chest. He flew back, landing harshly onto my glass coffee table, shattering it. He groaned and went to get back up, then just collapsed, passing out.

Banging from upstairs made my eyes whip to the ceiling.

No. There were more of them, and I left Dimitri sleeping.

Leaving the unconscious man exactly where he was, I sprinted out of the room, up the stairs and barged into my bedroom.

Dimitri stood there, covered in blood, face a mask of pure rage. Three dead bodies lay on the floor around him, pools of blood seeping into my beautiful white carpet. A fourth assassin was on their knees in front of him, not moving a muscle thanks to the blade pressed firmly to their neck.

Dimitri's eyes snapped to me, and a tidal wave of relief seemed to wash over him right before me. "Are you okay?" His voice was like granite, hard and raspy.

"Fine," I panted. "You?"

"Pissed off," he snarled. "Why weren't you in bed?"

"I heard a noise downstairs, so I went to check it out."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm not sure I like your tone."

"Fuck my tone, Autumn!" he growled. "A group of assassins just broke into our house and tried to kill us."

"Awww," I gushed, stepping forward. "You called it 'our house'. You're so cute."

He glared daggers at me. I just continued to smile as I walked and stopped directly in front of him. I gave him a chaste kiss on the lips and he grumbled, his body relaxing slightly.

"This is such a sweet moment, I'd hate to interrupt it. Why don't I just go?"

My whole body stiffened at the sound of the assassin's voice.

"Shut up," Dimitri snapped. I saw the exact moment he decided to go for the kill shot, his arm swinging back to plunge the knife into the assassin's neck.

"Wait!" I rushed out.

Slight frown on his brows, Dimitri did as I asked.

The assassin was wearing the same tactical gear as the others, as well as a ski mask over their face. I pulled it off.

"Vanessa."

My kind-of-friend/co-worker smiled. "Hi, Autumn." She was a beautiful woman. Shoulder-length honey blonde hair. Perfect skin. Chocolate brown eyes. She was in her early thirties with a tall, curvy body.

Dimitri's gaze whipped between us. "You know her?"

"I'm her best friend," Vanessa said with confidence, her head held high.

"No, you're not," I said incredulously.

"Okay fine. I *would* be if you weren't so anti-social."

I said nothing.

She smiled again. "See. Told ya."

I took the knife from Dimitri's hand and pointed it at her. "Tell me what you're doing here right now, Vanessa, or I'll gut you from throat to pelvis."

“Dramatic much.” Dimitri shook her roughly. “Alright, alright, jeez. But only because you’re my best friend.” She winked at me. I rolled my eyes. “I’m here on a job.”

Fuck. So Sergei *did* put a contract out on Dimitri after I refused to kill him.

“Is the contract open?” I asked, trepidation curling down my spine.

“Yep. Sorry, Auty, I know Silver Fox is your man, but ten million dollars was just too good to pass up.” Her use of the nickname she insisted on calling me did nothing to quell the anxiety bubbling up within me.

Ten. Million. Dollars.

That high a sum would have every assassin in the world looking to cash it in.

I looked at Dimitri. “Your father is a real asshole.”

He just grunted in acknowledgement.

We hadn’t yet had a chance to discuss his father and the fact that he’d originally hired me to kill *him* and not Dominik. We’d been enjoying our little “Fuck fest” bubble too much.

But now we had no choice but to confront it.

“Is there one for me, too?” I asked.

Vanessa shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

That confused me a little, but one problem at a time. “If one comes up, will you be looking to take it?”

She didn’t even hesitate. “If the sum is high enough.” One of the reasons why I liked Vanessa was because she was brutally honest. She didn’t lie or try to sugarcoat things.

The smartest thing to do would be to kill her. It would mean one less assassin out there to worry about claiming the bounty.

Sighing, I said, “let her go.”

Dimitri did as I asked with zero hesitation. Vanessa got back on her feet, keeping her movements slow and unthreatening, a small smile on her lips.

“Because of our history, you get one free pass, Vanessa. *One*. And that’s it. You try this again, and I swear you’ll be dead before you hit the ground, and Cole will grow up an orphan.”

The smile dropped on her face instantly at the mention of her son. Dimitri was my one weak spot. Cole was hers. Her son was three years old and cute as a button. I’d met him a few times when we were both working the same jobs. She had a rule that no matter what she was doing, she would call her

son every night to say goodnight. She loved him more than money, and *that* was saying something, because Vanessa was all about the cash.

Her eyes bore into mine, any ounce of mischievousness and friendliness completely gone. I had a feeling our friendship had just taken a massive hit. “Understood,” she said, voice cold.

I flicked my head. “Get out of here.”

After she left, Dimitri encircled me in a tight hug. “You okay?” he murmured into my hair.

I nodded, breathing him in, his scent calming me instantly. “What are we going to do?” It took a lot to worry me. I wasn’t easily rattled. But that business with Sergei had fear and anxiety almost swallowing me whole.

I couldn’t lose Dimitri. I just couldn’t. I was sure I wouldn’t survive it.

He took my face in his hands and stared deep into my eyes. He emanated power and strength, not a single ounce of the fear flooding my veins showing on his face. “We call a family meeting.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



DIMITRI VOLKOV

“OULD YOU MOVE OVER?” Illayana growled.

“And where would you like me to go?” Nikolai snapped back.

“Incase you haven’t noticed, there’s no more room on this bloody couch.”

Sitting peaceful in her own armchair, Tatiana rubbed her growing belly with one hand, watching on with amusement in her eyes.

On Illayana’s other side sat Aleksandr, his shoulders hunched inwards to try and save room, but it wasn’t really making much of a difference.

It was a three seater couch, but the size of my sons meant Illayana was squashed in the middle between them. Drea was sitting in the only other armchair available, which meant Lukyan and Arturo were left to stand. It was a tight fit, all of us crammed into my office at the family house. In retrospect, it probably would have been smarter to have the meeting in the lounge room or dining area. Even the kitchen would have been a better spot. But I held all of my meetings in my office, and that was a hard habit to break.

I was standing behind my desk, Autumn by my side, just her presence calming my soul despite the yelling going back and forth between my children.

“I don’t care where you go, just move! You’re on my hair,” Illayana griped.

Nikolai shoved her with his shoulder. “Tie it up, then.”

“Argh! You’re so annoying!”

“You’re the youngest,” Aleksandr cut in. “*You* move.”

“Ever heard of chivalry?” she snapped.

I rubbed my temples. “Enough,” I bit out.

They either didn’t hear me or just chose not to listen. Illayana, Nikolai and Aleksandr started shoving and pushing, their voices raised in frustration as they yelled at each other.

My gaze flicked to Lukyan, who stood quietly, not joining in on the usual squabble with his siblings. It wasn’t lost on me how odd his behaviour was. How lost and down he seemed.

I knew it was all my fault.

No matter what I said or did to try and fix it, nothing worked. I was hoping that, after that day, things might go back to normal. I had a plan to show him how much I valued him. I was hoping it worked.

I was about to snap at them all to shut the fuck up when a loud, ear-piercing whistle cut through the room. Just like that, all the noise ceased. Beside me, Autumn removed her fingers from her mouth and threw me a wink.

My heart exploded. God, I loved that woman.

My children straightened with a grumble, getting in a few more begrudging shoves before settling down.

“Okay,” I began, moving to the front of my desk. “I’ve called you all here because we have something very important to discuss. It’s about your grandfather.”

“Is he dead?” Aleksandr asked bluntly.

“No.”

“Pity,” he grunted.

Ain’t that the truth.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “As you all know, your grandfather hired Autumn to kill me.” Seven sets of eyes cut to Autumn.

She smiled awkwardly. “What? Obviously, I didn’t go through with it.”

“Yes, and we’re all immensely grateful,” I said, patting her hand. “As I was saying, your grandfather has officially made a move against me. As much as the man values his legacy, he values obedience more, which he no longer gets from me. After Autumn refused to do what he wanted, he put out an open contract on me.”

Illayana gasped. Aleksandr and Nikolai growled. Lukyan’s face turned grim.

“Last night, a seven-person team of highly trained, highly skilled assassins broke into our townhouse while we were sleeping and tried to kill me.”

“What?!” Illayana screamed.

Aleksandr snarled in outrage. “That’s it. You’re getting a guard detail.”

“I don’t need one.”

“Don’t be foolish, Father.” A stern look crossed Nikolai’s face. “You need someone to watch your back.”

“You misunderstand me. I don’t need one because I already have one.” I looked at Autumn.

She wiggled her fingers through the air.

My children said nothing else on the matter. They’d all seen her in action. Her skills spoke for themselves.

Illayana leant forward, shoving her brothers with her shoulders as she went. “How do you know there’s an open contract? Were you able to question one of the assassins before you killed them?”

Autumn managed to expertly avoid answering that last question by showing the group her phone. “Because of this.”

Everyone moved closer.

“This is an exclusive website that only very select people have access to. Me being one of them. It’s a safe and secure place for people to upload open contracts that every assassin around the world can see.”

Autumn had shown me the website the night before, after we’d dealt with the bodies. I deduced it must be quite a tight-lipped secret among the assassin community, because I’d never heard of anything like it before. It’d been a damn shock to my system when she not only showed me the website, but also *my* contract.

As *Pakhan* of the Bratva—well, former—I should have known about something like that, and yet, I’d had no idea.

It pissed me off. I didn’t like feeling so unprepared.

“Open contracts are tricky,” Autumn continued as they all flicked through the website, looking it over with interest. “It means it’s open for anyone to take, and therefore can result in multiple people trying to claim the same bounty. The higher the sum, the more interest.”

Illayana’s eyes flicked upwards. “How much did Grandfather put down?”

“Ten million. The second-highest sum I’ve ever seen.”

“Second?” I questioned with a frown, feeling slightly offended. “Who was the first?”

“Doesn’t matter,” she shrugged. “He’s long dead.”

“Who got *that* kill?” Lukyan asked, speaking for the first time.

Autumn smiled wickedly. “I did.”

“Now I *have* to know how much it was.” Illayana pursed her lips in thought. “Fifteen mil?”

“Twenty?” Lukyan asked next.

“Twenty-five?” Illayana returned.

“Thirty?” We all stared at Aleksandr in surprise. “What?” he grunted, looking around the room. “I’m curious now. Fucking sue me.”

“I think we’re getting off topic,” Autumn chuckled.

It warmed my heart to see everyone getting along. I’ll admit, I’d feared things might get a little awkward and uncomfortable when I officially brought Autumn to the family home, but it was the complete opposite. My children had been nothing but nice, welcoming and hospitable.

“As I was saying,” she continued, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder. “With open contracts, anyone can try to claim the bounty. With a sum like ten million on the line, I suspect a lot of people will be vying for it. This can be both good and bad. Good, because more people means more competition. They’re likely to kill each other to try to stop anyone else from claiming the cash first. And bad, because in some cases, they can decide to team up. Kill the target together and split the reward evenly between them when they’re done, like the team from last night. As of now, there are twenty-seven people interested in taking Dimitri’s contract.”

“Where can you see that information?” Arturo asked, his blue-green eyes deadly and focused.

Autumn flicked through the website until she found it. She showed it to them. “People lodge their interest for several different reasons, but the main one is to try to deter others. If a contract has an abundance of interest, some might decide not to even bother trying. Another reason is that when certain

assassins put their name to a contract, it can scare others off because they don't want to risk facing them out in the open. Like this." She scrolled through until she got to a button that said "LODGE INTEREST". Once she pressed it, her name appeared beneath the contract, along with the others.

It looked like social media for assassins. She had a username, which was The Crimson Death, and a profile picture of a dagger covered in blood.

After attaching her name to the contract, five names withdrew almost instantly.

Drea blew out a low whistle. "You're kind of a badass, aren't you?"

Autumn gave her a sly smile, but said nothing.

"Can you shut the site down?" Tatiana asked, concern ringing in her voice.

"Some have tried, but it's protected behind mountains of firewalls. The people who run it have the best of the best working for them to protect and maintain the site."

I adjusted my tie, clearing my throat. "Right now, we have the upperhand. Autumn knows everyone on that site, which means she knows how they operate. But something needs to be done. This cannot be allowed to stand."

Aleksandr frowned. "What does that mean?"

I took a deep breath in, letting the air fill my lungs. "We're going to kill your grandfather," I said, running my eyes over my children, one by one. I stopped when I reached my youngest son, holding his gaze. "And Lukyan is going to be the one to do it."

Lukyan's mouth dropped open. Silence reigned over the room, everyone too stunned to speak.

Then, Aleksandr and Nikolai burst into action, jumping to their feet.

"Are you insane?!" Aleksandr shouted at the same time Nikolai yelled, "You can't be serious!"

I straightened my spine, standing tall, staring them down. "I'm deadly serious."

"Father, be reasonable," Aleksandr chastised. "Grandfather is far too dangerous. I'm sorry, Lukyan," he quickly added, apologising to his younger brother before continuing, "but he can't handle something like this. He's not serious enough. He treats everything like it's a goddamn joke. He'll end up getting himself killed!"

"Aleksandr's right," Nikolai joined in. "I love you, Lukyan, and I just want to protect you. Grandfather is too big of an adversary for you to take

on.”

Lukyan seemed to shrivel right before my eyes, the harsh words falling from Aleksandr and Nikolai’s lips making him feel small. I could see it in the way his body folded forward. The way his head hung down. They didn’t have the same confidence in him that I did, and that hurt him.

“Enough,” I snarled, glaring them down. “Your brother is more than capable of doing this, and you want to know why? Because he’s strong. He’s smart. He’s cunning. He has the drive and determination to fulfill any task he sets his mind to. And because he has a carefree attitude, he’ll be the last person on Earth your grandfather will ever suspect of something nefarious. Sergei will let his guard down around Lukyan because, like the two of you, he underestimates him. *I don’t.*”

Lukyan’s eyes widened.

“He will leave for Russia in a few weeks for his arranged marriage to Anya Tarasov, which will be the perfect opportunity for him to kill Sergei.”

Aleksandr looked like he wanted to pull his hair out. “I’ll repeat, *are you insane?*! You not only want him to kill one of the most dangerous and powerful men in the world, but you want him to do it on his own fucking turf? With no backup?”

“He’ll have backup. Autumn and I will be there.”

Aleksandr’s mouth clicked open and shut. He looked at Nikolai with an almost flabbergasted expression.

“I can see you’re struggling to understand, so I’ll explain. Your grandfather knows I don’t approve of this arranged marriage, and he knows I would never allow Lukyan to travel to Russia alone. If I don’t go, it will cause suspicion.”

“What about the fact that he’s trying to have you killed?” Illayana asked.

“This deal with Tarasov is more important than Sergei is letting on. It’s vital to the continuation of his trade. Without access to their supply routes, he’s in serious trouble of being unable to fulfill orders. He *needs* this deal to go through without any complications. Having people try to kill me in the middle of the wedding would be a complication.”

Something clicked on Arturo’s face. “You think it might get him to pull the contract?”

“Pull it? No,” I said, shaking my head. “But put it on hold? Yes.”

Autumn stepped forward. “With any contract, you can impose conditions that must be followed. Our hope is to get Sergei to put a blackout period on

the contract, meaning no one can attempt to claim the bounty during that time.”

“Once your grandfather realises I’m accompanying Lukyan to Russia, he’ll put the contract on hold. I’m sure of it. He can’t risk something happening at the wedding and the deal not being finalised. Because Autumn will be coming with me, Sergei will know *I know* what he’s trying to do. That he’s trying to have me killed. He’ll be paranoid and on guard around me... But Lukyan?”

All eyes landed on him. He stood taller under their gaze, shoulders back, spine straight, head held high.

“Lukyan will be able to slip in completely under the radar. *He*’s the one with the best chance of killing Sergei, and once he does, I’ll assume command. Make sure the men don’t do anything in retaliation.”

Tatiana shifted her in chair. “Will they listen to you? You would have just orchestrated the killing of their leader. What if they want revenge?”

“Some most likely will,” I shrugged uncaringly. “But I’ve been planning a move on Sergei for years. Over time, I’ve been slowly integrating myself into his ranks and turning his men. More than half have agreed to a change in leadership. That’s all I need. One show of power will be enough to force the others to bend.”

I could see by the looks on Aleksandr and Nikolai’s faces that they still didn’t agree with the plan. They were both concerned for the safety of their brother. They loved him. They didn’t want anything bad to happen to him.

But they needed to have the same faith in him that I did. Lukyan was more than capable of doing it. He just needed to be given a chance to prove himself. To show his siblings he wasn’t the joke they thought he was.

I locked eyes with Lukyan. “What do you say, son?” I asked. “You up for it?”

A dark, evil smirk curled his lips. “Fuck yeah.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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I THREW A PIECE of popcorn up into the air and caught it with my mouth, humming loudly. My gaze was locked firmly on the computer screens before me. Dozens of them, each one showing a different camera feed from inside the Volkov house. I'd planted them over the course of my time breaking in. I could have always logged into their feed and watched from there instead, but I wanted my own. Especially since they didn't have them in the bedrooms.

The only bedroom I put a camera in was Lukyan's, so I could watch him any time I wanted. My sweet, gorgeous Lukyan. *Ahhh*. He was so dreamy with his long, dark hair and beautiful blue eyes.

It had been love at first sight.

He had to have felt it, too. It was far too strong, too cosmic for it to just be one-sided. For it to just be me. I was sure of it.

With my feet up on the desk, lounging back in my comfy leather chair, I watched the Volkovs in Papa D's office, continuing to throw more popcorn into my mouth.

So, my Lukyan was arranged to marry another woman?

That sure as shit wasn't going to happen.

Looked like I was going to have to adjust my plan a little bit, but that was okay. I quite enjoyed it when things didn't go exactly my way. It was more fun like that.

Using the mouse, I zoomed in on Lukyan's face, my pussy rippling. He had no idea how gorgeous he really was.

On the desk beside me sat my most precious belongings. The knife I'd taken from his bedroom. A lock of his hair. The dark t-shirt he'd been wearing when he was working out in that warehouse of theirs. Thousands of photos of him lined the wall behind the computer. Some taken from afar of him doing normal everyday things. Walking down the street. Getting into a car. Waiting in line for coffee. Some were taken a lot closer, like him sleeping in his bed.

My obsession was getting out of hand. I knew that. Understood it.

I just didn't care.

Lukyan was *mine*, and no one was going to stop me from having him.

Not even him.

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A LITTLE NOTE FROM ME TO YOU

T HANK YOU SO MUCH for taking the time to read Bratva Butcher! I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

A little information about the series for you. As you know, the Bratva series is an interconnected series, where each book is centred around a different couple but the overall storyline and plot actually flows throughout the entire series. Some of the books even overlap with one another, giving you the opportunity to see things that have already happened, but from a different characters perspective.

The next book will be centred around Lukyan and his stalker.

Again, I would like to say a massive thank you to all of my readers. This story held a special place in my heart. I always knew I wanted to write a story about Dimitri. He's always been my favourite, with Aleksandr a close second, and I really wanted to give him a happily ever after.

If you have the time and enjoyed the story, it would mean a lot if you could please leave a review!

T J x

STALK ME

I LIKE IT ;)



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