



T J MAGUIRE

BRATVA *Knights*



Bratva Knight

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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.

- Extreme violence
- Harsh language
- Hand necklaces
- Murder/death
- Graphic sexual scenes
- Attempted sexual assault
- Torture
- Stillbirth/loss of a child
- Suicidal thoughts

Dedication

To everyone who picks up this book, thank you for taking a chance on me.
You've made this little Indie Author's dream come true.

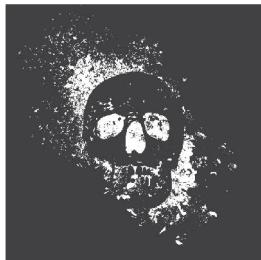
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Special mention

Special thank you to my ride or die, Carolyn, and to Nikita. Thank you both for your unwavering support.

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Chapter One



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“I SWEAR, YOU DRIVE me absolutely fucking insane!” I screamed, glaring down at the tiny little bombshell in front of me.

Tatiana Andreeva was the bane of my existence. Long, golden hair. Soft, sun-kissed skin. Curvy hips. She had the face of an angel and the attitude of the fucking devil.

For four years, she’d consumed my every waking thought. Made me ache with a burning, unrelenting need. For four years, she’d tortured me with heated glances and that sassy fucking mouth. Testing my patience, my self-control. She was always on my mind. Under my skin. In my heart. No matter what I did or how hard I tried, I couldn’t get her out.

Tatiana smirked, a sparkle in those bewitching hazel eyes. She enjoyed riling me up, fucking lived for it. “Calm down, Nicky, before you give yourself an aneurysm.”

I ground my teeth together. She knew I hated it when she called me Nicky. She did it on purpose just to piss me off, like everything else she did. A constant thorn in my side.

“How many times have I told you not to go running alone? It’s dangerous.”

“And how many times have *I* told *you* to mind your own damn business. What I do isn’t your concern. Not anymore.”

Pain lanced through my heart and I sucked in a harsh breath. Guilt flashed across Tatiana’s face for the briefest moment before she shut it down, returning to the cold, hard ice queen she always was around me.

She might think that was the case, but she couldn’t be more wrong. Anything and *everything* to do with her was my concern. No matter what happened between us, no matter where we stood with each other, she would always be my concern.

The blistering heat of the Las Vegas sun bore down on me, sweat trickling down the back of my neck. We were around the corner from my house. I could see the tall, iron fence surrounding the property standing tall in the distance.

Tatiana only lived a few miles away. I’d seen her jogging on the side of the road when I was on my way home. She had absolutely no sense, unaware of the danger she’d put herself in. It would be so easy for someone to just pull over and shove her in their car. Shit like that happened all the time in Vegas. People disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again.

Three blue vans zoomed past, pulling up into my driveway and stopping at the guardhouse. It made me frown in suspicion.

Who the fuck are they? I wasn’t aware of any visitors dropping by.

My suspicions vanished when the iron gates swung open, allowing them entry. Whoever they were, they'd been given permission to enter. Otherwise they wouldn't have been able to get in.

"Look, Nicky, I've got somewhere I need to be. So if we're done here—"

"No, we are not done here," I barked, cutting her off. I stepped into her space, standing nose-to-nose with her as I stared her down.

Tatiana's breath hitched slightly, her eyes flaring. Sexual tension snapped the air taught around us, raw and magnetised. My skin hummed with awareness at having her so close, our bodies less than an inch away from each other's.

That was the way it was with us. The way it *always* was. Any time we were in each other's orbit, it was like the attraction between us just exploded, igniting like gasoline on a fire.

The chemistry that burned between Tatiana and I was cosmic. The type of shit people wrote stories about, sang songs about. It would never fade. Never lessen. Never diminish. It would blaze as strong as the sun until the day we died.

The sound of a gunshot ripped my gaze away from Tatiana's, my eyes snapping to my three-story home in the distance.

Did that come from there?

More gunshots echoed out in the air and I jumped into action, pulling out my Beretta from behind my back.

I quickly handed my car keys to Tatiana. "Get out of here. Now."

I should have known she wouldn't fucking listen.

She stared at my open hand with derision, her lip turned up in disgust. "If you think I'm just going to leave when something is clearly going on, you're even dumber than I thought you were."

“Goddamn it, Tatiana, I don’t have time to argue about this with you. Get your ass in that fucking car, or I swear to God, you’re going to regret it. I’m not playing around with you.”

She plopped her hands on her hips, staring me down. “I’m. Not. Leaving.” Her shoulders were squared with determination, lips pressed firmly together.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I dug it out, keeping my irritated scowl firmly on her. I quickly glanced at the screen. It was a text from my brother, Aleksandr, in our WhatsApp group chat with all our soldiers.

There were no words. Just an emoticon.

I took off running.



Bodies littered the front yard, broken and bleeding. Some had been shot, others beaten and hacked at with what I guessed was an axe or machete of some kind. Screams echoed all around us, followed by gunshots and sounds of people fighting, grunting and growling, crying out in pain.

I moved quickly, my body hunched in a slight crouch as I hurried up the gravel driveway, my gun clasped tightly in my hand. I tried to focus, not to let my mind wonder. The fear I felt for my family consumed me, but I had to keep my head screwed on and deal with the target in front of me.

Tatiana was right there with me, her steps light and swift as she stayed on my heels. Her perfectly manicured fingers were wrapped around the handle of my spare gun, her hold flawless. Since she was so intent on coming with me, I had to give her something to protect herself with. I knew that, no matter what I said or how much I yelled at her, she was going to do whatever she damn well pleased. Tatiana never listened to me.

“Remember, stay by my side,” I whispered, bending down to check the pulse of one of our soldiers. Dead. It made me curse.

How the fuck did this happen? Who is attacking us?

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me,” she replied, a laser-type focus burning in her eyes as she scanned our surroundings.

Logically, I knew that. Tatiana might not be a Bratva soldier, but she’d gone through the same training we all had. She knew how to handle herself. She could even kick *my* ass if the occasion called for it.

But that didn’t stop fear from exploding inside me. She was putting herself in danger. There was a chance, no matter how small, that she could be hurt. Killed.

The thought alone made my heart fracture. In a world without Tatiana, I’d be lost. Life just wouldn’t be worth living.

I took the porch steps leading up to the front door quickly and quietly, watching where I put my booted feet so the boards didn’t creak. The door was slightly ajar. I went to push it open further but an angry voice from my left made me stiffen.

I know that voice.

I took off around the side of the house, coming out to the backyard. Groups of people were locked in fights of two or three, spread out across

the yard all the way up to the warehouse. It was chaos. Bloody. Brutal. Like a fucking warzone.

My eyes ping-ponged between each cluster of people, searching, searching—*there*.

My little brother, Lukyan, was lying flat on his back, a blade mere inches from his throat. He struggled with a man in a black jumpsuit who was straddling his chest, growling and snarling with exertion as he tried to push the knife away from his skin.

I took aim and fired. Someone kicked my gun away at the same time I pulled the trigger, making me miss the shot. We locked into a grapple, punching and hitting each other as we wrestled for control.

Tatiana was trying to get a clear line of fire, but with how much we were moving around, it was impossible. I could see her in the corner of my eye, hesitating to take the shot out of fear of hitting me.

“Tati...get...to...Lukyan,” I grunted, blocking hits from my attacker.

Tatiana hesitated. Her eyes darted to Lukyan, who was struggling to keep the knife from piercing his skin, the blade inching closer and closer by the second.

“Go!” I roared, the desperation in my voice spurring her forward. I needed her to save my brother.

A painful punch to the jaw stunned me, knocking me off balance. The man went to tackle me and I twisted my body out of his reach, wrapping my arms around his neck from behind. I squeezed hard, cutting off his ability to breathe as I lifted him off his feet. He flailed, kicking out wildly and gasping for air.

I applied even more pressure and snapped his neck. He went limp in my arms and I dropped him to the ground, breathing heavily. My eyes snapped

to Tatiana. She was expertly avoiding knife strikes from another man, her movements light and fluid as she twisted and turned, reminding me of a dancer. Lukyan fought ruthlessly at her side, attacking and defending, attacking and defending.

I saw red and jumped into the fight. I stuck close to Tatiana, helping her when she needed it (which, if I was being honest, was barely at all). I gripped a bony wrist and twisted it inwards, impaling the knife in a man's hand right into his stomach. I kicked him away and used the same leg to deliver another fast, swift kick to another man's head, knocking him out.

Tatiana picked up what looked like a mallet of some kind and swung it into a blonde man's face, teeth and blood spraying into the air. Lukyan kicked and punched, stabbed and sliced. He fought with that primal viscousness he kept buried deep beneath that mischievous, playboy persona, killing and killing and killing.

I wasn't sure how long we fought for. It felt like forever, but I knew it couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes at most. By the time we ended up killing the last of those fuckers, we were all panting, covered head to toe in blood and sweat. There was an ear on Tatiana's shoulder. Teeth peppered Lukyan's hair. Intestines and organs squished beneath my shoes from when I'd sliced open a man's stomach. It was like a damn bomb had exploded in our backyard, blood and body parts raining down like snow.

"What the fuck happened?" I breathed out harshly, looking out over the sea of dead bodies. Adrenaline still pumped through my veins, making it impossible for me to stand still.

"I don't know," Lukyan panted, wiping blood from his forehead with the back of his hand. "I was in the warehouse working out when I heard the first round of gunshots. Most of the men were. When we came out, we saw

these fuckers”—he kicked one of the bodies at his feet—“running towards us with weapons. I have no idea how they managed to get onto the property without the alarm being raised.”

“We’ll worry about the how and why later. Right now, we need to deal with them. Are there any more?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had the chance to check the house yet.”

“Alright,” I nodded. “You three”—I pointed to three of our soldiers hunched over with their hands on their knees, catching their breath—“clear the rest of the outside area. We’ll take the house. Have you seen Aleksandr? Or Father?” I asked, turning my attention back to my brother.

“No and no. They’re probably inside.” He looked at Tatiana. “Thanks for the save, by the way.”

She smirked, giving him a playful wink. “Don’t mention it.” Her smirk turned into a frown as she glanced over Lukyan’s shoulder, staring intently into the house through the glass sliding doors. “Who’s that?”

Chapter Two



TATIANA ANDREEVA

I WATCHED THE SMALL, pixie-sized woman leap onto the back of one of the attackers, tackling him out of sight. I'd never seen her before, and I knew everyone in the Bratva. Even though I wasn't a soldier, I was still very much a Bratva woman. I went through all the training, did all that hard work. I even went through the initiation, only to later discover it wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. Not really.

It wasn't the brutality of it. The blood and the killing. That shit didn't faze me (though it was annoying every time one of my nails would snap off after a sparring match, especially after I'd just spent \$500 on a new set). Not to mention the uniforms the enforcers had to wear were the ugliest pieces of fabric I'd ever seen in my life.

It *surprisingly* was none of those things that made me decide not to go down the same road as my dad. It was simply because my heart wasn't in it.

I wanted to explore fashion. I wanted to design my own clothing line, like Brooke Davis, and move to one of the fashion capitals of the world. Paris or Milan. Hell, I'd even take London. Anywhere that would take me away from the man who'd broken not only my heart, but my soul.

Nikolai Volkov was every woman's wet dream. Huge, broad shoulders. Hard, firm muscles. Dark hair. A face that put all of those Hollywood movie stars to shame. Square jaw. Flawless tanned skin. High cheekbones. He was tall. Hunky. Fierce. His eyes were what I loved the most, though. It was so easy to lose yourself in them. Sparkling blue, like the ocean.

I'd had a crush on him since I was sixteen years old, following him around like a little puppy dog. He barely noticed me though. I was just his sister's idiot best friend. He'd just grunt a "Hello" any time I was over, and that was it. He wouldn't even look at me, always having his head stuck in that laptop he carried around everywhere he went.

Some time after I turned nineteen, though, that all changed.

I'd been staying over one night and he cornered me in one of the many dark hallways of their home, looking all gloomy and mysterious.

"What are you doing wandering around all alone, Tati?"

A shiver ran down my spine. I stopped dead in my tracks, goosebumps pebbling my skin. The hallway was dark, so dark I could barely make out Nikolai's silhouette as he leant against the wall in front of me.

I was acutely aware of the fact that I wasn't wearing any pants. I'd woken up in the middle of the night, mouth as dry as the Sahara Desert. I always slept in my underwear, so I hadn't bothered to put on a pair of pants before going down to the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

If I'd known the big, bad wolf was stalking the halls...I still wouldn't have. Let's be honest, I'd been trying to get Nikolai's attention for years. And it

wasn't until recently that he'd started to return that attention with long, heated looks that burned my insides. He set my whole body on fire.

"I could ask you the same thing. Do you usually stalk around in the dark at three in the morning?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. I didn't cover myself because I wanted him to look at me, to see me as a woman and not just some little kid.

Nikolai took a step forward and a sliver of light brought his face into view. Fuck, I'd never get over how handsome he was. He took my breath away every time I saw him. My heart slammed in my chest, beating so hard that I could hear it in my ears. I wanted him so badly, to feel him touch me, his hard, calloused hands on my skin.

His eyes ran down my body and up again in slow perusal, like a man committing every single detail to memory. "Sometimes. Depends on who I'm stalking."

Why did that statement piss me off? Who the fuck was he stalking when he wasn't there?

I took a bold move and stepped closer. His head tilted to the side curiously, his gaze running over my legs again, almost as if he couldn't help himself. It was the most exposed I'd ever been around him. Did he like what he saw? I couldn't tell. There might have been a glimmer of interest in his eyes, but I wasn't sure.

"Are you stalking me, Nicky?" I whispered softly, trailing a hand slowly down my front. I stopped at the waistband of my underwear, running a finger over the exposed skin of my lower belly. I wanted to test him, to see if he really was interested. I didn't chase after men who didn't want me. Not anymore.

Nikolai watched my movements like a predator watching its prey. Deathly still. Laser focus. Muscles bunched, like he was ready to strike at any moment.

“Don’t call me Nicky,” he growled low in his throat, his eyes still locked on my hand.

“Why? I kinda like it. Nicky, Nicky, Nicky—”

A muffled gasp flew out of my mouth when he rushed me, his hand curling around my throat as he pushed me up against the wall. His body was flush against mine, his breath fanning over my face. I could feel every glorious inch of him. All those hard, toned muscles, built from a lifetime of training.

He’d never been that close to me before, never touched me before. The excitement bubbling inside me exploded to the point that I could barely breathe.

His tongue ran across his bottom lip as he stared at my mouth, eyes burning with what I was sure was want, desire. “Careful, Tatiana,” he rumbled. “I like to punish little girls like you.”

“Do you?” I whispered, exhilaration filling me up inside. “Show me.”

His deep, throaty chuckle made my pussy tingle. His hand caressed down the front of my body slowly and I arched forward, desperate for his touch. I’d dreamed of this moment so many times, it bordered on obsessive.

He gripped the fabric of my underwear and pulled back, letting it go with a snap. I yelped and he covered my mouth with his hand. “Shhh. You don’t want to wake anyone, do you?”

I shook my head, breathing heavily.

“That’s right. You’re going to be my good little girl right now, aren’t you, Tati?”

I nodded my head eagerly. My ability to speak was out, but I needed him to know that I would do whatever the fuck he asked, as long as he kept touching me.

“Good.” He kept one hand covering my mouth as he moved the other down my front slowly, tortuously, with an agonisingly light touch that had me squirming. “I’ve been wondering how you taste.”

“You have?” I mumbled.

He nodded, his eyes piercing into mine. “Ever since I saw you in that little red dress. Do you remember that?”

*How could I fucking forget? That was my nineteenth birthday. It was the first time I’d managed to get his attention. The first time he actually **looked** at me and saw me. I’d been riding high on cloud nine ever since.*

“Should I find out? Hmm, Tati? Should I find out what you taste like?”

I tried not to seem too eager, but fuck I was. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and pulled his hand away from my mouth. “I think you should.”

“I think I should too.” His hand disappeared down the front of my underwear and I moaned when his finger lightly grazed my clit. He gave me a reprimanding look and I bit my lip to keep from making another sound.

God, his touch felt so good. So unbearably good.

He dipped his finger inside me. I panted, my hips swirling as pleasure shot up my spine. He pulled it out far too quickly and brought it up between our bodies. His eyes stayed plastered to mine as he sucked his finger into his mouth and released a deep, masculine groan.

“Perfect and sweet, just like I thought.”

Fuck. This.

I reared forward and slammed my lips to his, unable to hold back for one more second. He kissed me back eagerly, his tongue pushing into my mouth.

He took control of the kiss quickly, holding my head tight in his hands, slanting it this way and that way to get better access. I moaned and he swallowed the sound before it could be heard by anyone else. He pushed up against me, smothering me against the wall, his hard body grinding into me.

Fuck, he felt amazing.

*The sound of someone laughing had him ripping his mouth away with a snarl. His hand moved along the wall beside me and he pushed a button hidden under one of the light sconces. Then he was backing me **into** the wall.*

I had no idea what was going on. I was just along for the ride as he shoved me inside and the wall shifted back into place, leaving us locked in some sort of hidden passage. His hand was back, covering my mouth again as the voices got louder and louder.

Oh, god, we are so going to get caught. Why that turned me on, I had no idea.

*I didn't want to stop, didn't want it to be the end. If this was the only moment we were going to share together, I was going to fucking remember it. And I was going to make sure **he** remembered it too.*

I took his free hand and put it back where it had been a moment ago. His eyes darted down to me in surprise and his lips curved into a wicked, feral grin.

“That’s Drea.”

I shook my head, the memory that had just taken me over disappearing in an instant. Where the hell had that come from?

Nikolai was already moving towards the house, a frown set deep on his brows.

“Drea?” I questioned.

“She’s Aleksandr’s plaything.” Lukyan walked beside me, checking the chamber of his gun. “He’s *very* protective of her, so don’t try and sleep with her or anything.”

I chuckled. “Okay, then.”

When we finally made it inside, Drea was trying to drag one of the attackers into the next room. She was such a small little thing, barely five feet and covered head-to-toe in tattoos. She had a real punk-rock kind of vibe.

I was a little surprised. The few women I’d seen Aleksandr with didn’t look anything like her. Not that that was necessarily a bad thing. The women Aleksandr tended to go for were a bit on the stuckup-ish side.

Nikolai picked up a gun from the floor and pointed it right at her. “What are you doing out of your room?”

She didn’t even seem phased. In fact, she didn’t even look at him, continuing to try and pull the unconscious man across the floor. “What”—pull—“the fuck”—pull—“does it look like?” she growled with exertion.

“It looks like you’re trying to save one of the attackers.”

“Save?!” She huffed and stood up to her full height. “This fucker just stabbed Dayton. I’m trying to drag him back to Aleksandr.”

Dayton? Who the hell is Dayton?

“What?” Panic laced Nikolai’s voice. “Where?”

“In that room behind me.”

“Lukyan, grab his legs.” Nikolai and Lukyan worked together to carry him into the room Drea indicated.

Aleksandr was on the floor, cradling a kid in his arms. Blood seeped from a hole in the middle of his throat, and he was deathly pale. If he was alive,

he wouldn't be for much longer.

"Fuck," Lukyan exhaled.

Aleksandr looked up briefly before focusing back on Dayton. "Call the doc."

I stuck by Nikolai's side as he moved closer. "Zander." That one word held a multitude of meanings. He knew just by looking that calling for help would be useless. The kid wasn't going to make it.

"Call!" Aleksandr roared.

My breath hitched. I'd never seen him so angry. So frantic. So desperate.

Dayton gripped the front of Aleksandr's shirt, clinging to him. He gasped and cried, his body trembling and eyes so wide and full of terror that it broke my heart. I'd never met the kid before, but he was just that: a kid. I felt bad for him.

"It's okay, it's okay," Aleksandr soothed, but I could tell he was saying that more to himself than to Dayton.

Then, just like that, the kid just stopped breathing. His body went limp in Aleksandr's arms and Aleksandr did nothing but stare down at him, shocked, like he couldn't believe what just happened.

The man responsible for stabbing him—the one Nikolai and Lukyan had carried into the room—coughed all of a sudden. Aleksandr's gaze snapped to him wicked fast, like a snake coiled to strike. A dark anger rolled over his face.

He put Dayton down with a gentleness I didn't realise he was capable of and marched towards the guy, baring his teeth as he released a deep, savage growl. Nikolai grabbed my arm quickly and yanked me out of his way. *Everybody* got the fuck out of his way, leaving a clear path between Aleksandr and the man.

He straddled his chest and just started hammering into him, over and over and over again. He slammed his head down into the ground, dug his fingers into his eyes. He absolutely fucking pummelled him—right hook, left hook, right hook, left hook—as he screamed out an animalistic roar that shook the whole fucking house.

Never in the twenty or so odd years that I'd known Aleksandr, had I ever seen him like that. He was...terrifying.

"Jesus Christ," Lukyan breathed out, watching on. "Stop him, Nik, before he hurts himself."

I didn't like the sound of that. Of course I didn't want Aleksandr to hurt himself. But that wasn't him. That was something else. *Someone* else. What if he turned on Nikolai?

Nikolai hesitated but took a cautious step forward. Panic gripped me and I couldn't stop myself from reaching out to him to stop him, but he was already approaching his brother. He touched him lightly on the shoulder. "Zander—"

He spun and punched him right in the face. Nikolai flew back and Aleksandr went right back to pounding at the dead body beneath him.

A shriek burst out of my mouth and I ran over to Nikolai, frantically running my hands over him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he grunted, rubbing his jaw. He went to get up and try again, but I pushed him back down.

"No," I hissed. "Don't go near him. Not until he's calmed down."

"He's not going to calm down, Tati. It took five men to subdue him the last time he was like this. If we don't—what the fuck?"

I glanced over my shoulder to see Drea in Aleksandr's lap, his head buried deep into her chest, his arms wrapped around her tightly as she whispered

something to him and him alone.

The whole thing shocked me. Aleksandr was not an affectionate person. Not the Aleksandr I knew. Who was this woman?

I helped Nikolai to his feet and he looked at them with the same shock I'm sure was on my face. He cleared his throat awkwardly to get their attention and Aleksandr lifted his head. Some of that darkness was gone. He seemed to be back in control.

Good. If he hit Nikolai again, I was going to fucking hit him.

"Is there anyone left alive?" Aleksandr grunted, his voice thick.

"If they are, they won't be for long," Nikolai said, glancing around at the numerous bodies littering the ground.

"Find out what you can from them quickly before they die."

Nikolai nodded. "On it." He paused, hesitating. "I'm sorry, Zander."

Aleksandr's jaw clenched. He said nothing, only jerking his head once in acknowledgement.

I followed Nikolai out of the room and back into the kitchen. "I need to start checking the bodies, see who's alive and who's dead."

"I can help you." There was no way I was going to leave. Yeah, I wasn't in the Bratva technically, but I could still help out with things like this. Plus, I didn't feel comfortable leaving just yet.

We worked together to move the dead bodies into a pile. It was a tiresome and tedious task, especially when we started dragging bodies down from upstairs. Anyone who was still alive was carried down to the warehouse and put in the pit—the place the Bratva kept all their prisoners.

We didn't talk while we worked. He didn't ask me why I was staying. I was thankful for it, because even *I* didn't have an answer to that question. Not one I was willing to acknowledge just yet, anyway. Roughly ten

minutes or so after we started checking the bodies, Lukyan came barrelling into the room, his face a mask of fear and distress.

Nikolai uncaringly dropped the body in his hands and rushed over to his brother. “What? What is it?”

“It’s Father,” he whispered, so softly I could barely hear him. “He’s been kidnapped.”

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Chapter Three



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“**H**OW ARE YOU HOLDING up?” I looked at my best friend sitting on the floor of her old bedroom, the blank expression on her face making worry clutch at my chest.

She was totally checked out. Gone. The lights were on but nobody was home. It was clear that she was in shock, having trouble coming to terms with the events of the last twenty-four hours. Not that I blamed her. I was having a hard time believing it too.

Dimitri Volkov was like a nightmare. The “John Wick” of our world. A literal boogeymen in expensive Armani suits. He was the type of man *monsters* ran away from. How was it that such a powerful and fearsome man had been kidnapped? From his own home?

It was something all of us were finding difficult to accept, but especially Illayana.

She had that “No one can beat my dad, he’s a superhero” kind of mentality. Except, Dimitri was more like a supervillain.

When Illayana didn’t answer, I climbed off the two-seater couch I was sitting on and crawled towards her. My arms wrapped around her tightly, squeezing, trying to give her as much comfort as I could. My touch snapped her out of her daze and she returned the hug earnestly, her grip almost painful. She sobbed into my shoulder, her emotions spiralling.

Loud banging came from her bedroom door. “Illayana? What’s going on? Are you okay?” a deep voice boomed.

I rolled my eyes. Her guard dog of a husband was still standing outside her room. Her cries had been loud enough for him to hear, and now he was losing his mind with worry. It took physically shoving him out of the room to get him to leave the first time.

I knew my best friend. She *hated* showing weakness in front of others. She tended to keep her feelings close to her chest, not revealing them to anyone. I understood that Arturo was her husband, but the relationship was still relatively new. All it took was one glance at Illayana’s face to know she wouldn’t let go until she was alone.

Well, there was no way I was going to allow that to happen. I wasn’t going to let her sit there all by herself and try to deal with the emotions I knew would bubble over at any moment.

She clung to me tightly like I was her lifeline, keeping her grounded. Her tears soaked into my shirt, her cries muffled as she buried her head deeper into my shoulder. I let her cry for as long as she needed, not rushing her. After a few minutes, she leant back, her eyes red and puffy.

“Fuck,” she breathed out, sniffling. “I haven’t cried like that since—” her words abruptly cut off. Pain flashed in her eyes.

I didn't need her to finish the sentence to know what she was talking about.

"I need to get a grip. All this crying isn't going to do shit," she chuckled humourlessly, trying to laugh it off. She was wanting a distraction. I was happy to oblige.

"How crazy is the whole 'Aleksandr and the cartel woman thing'?"

It had been one hell of a shock for me, that was for damn sure. I'd seen Aleksandr with women, sure. That gold-digging bitch, Mila, for example. But I'd never seen him like *that*.

That tiny woman had somehow managed to tame Aleksandr, the hard, control freak prince of the Bratva. I thought I'd die before I saw the day.

The subject change worked and Illayana smiled. "I know. So crazy. He told me about her before he left Arturo's party."

I gasped, hand flying to my chest in mock hurt. "And you didn't tell *me*?"

Her smile widened a little bit more. "Like *you* tell *me* everything," she said, rolling her eyes.

She was joking, just fucking around. But I laughed alongside her, pretending like I wasn't the big, fat, fucking fraud I was. Illayana *thought* I told her everything, that I'd never hide anything from her. The truth of it was, though, that I'd hidden the most agonising and traumatic thing that's ever happened to me. Guilt overcame me, like it always did whenever I thought about how much I was keeping from my best friend.

When things first started with Nikolai and I, I'd been afraid to tell her, afraid she would get mad at me for doing the nasty with her older brother. As more time passed, it got harder and harder to tell her.

Nikolai and I snuck around for over a year, fucking in those hidden rooms they had throughout that maze of a bloody house. It had been the most

exciting and exhilarating time of my life. The thrill of getting caught. The way he'd fuck me up against the wall, his hand covering my mouth so no one could hear my screams of pleasure.

“Such a wet, tight little pussy you have, my Tati.”

“Can you feel how deep I am inside you? Fuck, you feel so good baby.”

“Mine. All fucking mine.”

He'd whisper the filthiest, dirtiest things in my ear while holding me pinned to the wall, his breath hot on my skin, and I'd absolutely crumble beneath him.

And then it all changed.

In the blink of an eye, our relationship came crashing down, spiralling out of control. No matter what I did or said, I couldn't stop it. I couldn't—

I slammed the door shut on that train of thought instantly. The pain of what happened was too much to bear the first time around. I couldn't let myself go down that road again. I couldn't relive it. There's no way I'd survive it.

“Aw, T. It’s okay. I know you’re worried about my father and what it means for the Bratva, but don’t worry. We’ll find him. And until then, Aleksandr has it covered,” Illayana said, patting my arm comfortingly.

She thought I was upset about the situation, that the look of sadness and despair in my eyes was about the attack. All the lives we’d lost. Not about

NO!

“Thanks, girl. But I should be the one comforting you.”

Illayana smiled affectionately. “You did. Now it’s my turn. That’s what best friends do. We look out for each other.”

The guilt smothering my chest made it difficult to breathe. I ignored it, like I always did. I was getting pretty good at it, to be honest.

“I’m so excited for you to move to New York.” Illayana got to her feet and walked through the open door of her ensuite, going for the sink. She turned on the tap and splashed some water on her face before running her hands through her hair and tightening her ponytail. Her eyes locked onto mine through the mirror in front of her. “I’m sorry I won’t be there when you first get there. I can’t leave Vegas right now, not while my father is missing.”

I waved a hand through the air, getting up to join her. I leant against the doorframe. “Don’t even worry about it. I don’t leave for a few weeks anyway. Hopefully by then he’ll be found, and all this shit will be dealt with.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “Hopefully.”

I could tell that she didn’t believe it, that she’d already accepted in her mind that she wouldn’t be seeing her father again. At least, not alive.

I’ll admit, the odds weren’t great. But if she couldn’t have faith that we’d find him alive, I would just have to have it for her.

“Remember that time Dimitri took out an entire gang when they tried to jump you guys when you were kids? Or the time he killed six men with a knife sticking out of his gut? Dimitri is tough. The toughest, scariest son of a bitch I know. If anyone can make it out alive, it’s him, Illayana. Believe in your father. Have faith in him. Trust him.”

Illayana exhaled heavily. “You’re right.”

“I know. I’m always right,” I winked.

She turned, flicking water at me playfully. “Are you excited to finally move out and go to college? It’s what you’ve always wanted to do.”

Warmth spread through me, right down to my fingers and toes, and a bright, beaming smile curled on my lips. “Excited is an understatement.”

A month ago, I got my acceptance letter into FIT, The Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. I didn’t tell a single soul I was applying, just in case I got rejected. Not my dad. Not Illayana. Not even Nikolai. No one.

I filled out the application, wrote a kickass admissions essay and submitted pages and pages of my designs, not really thinking I’d *actually* get in. Imagine my fucking surprise when that letter came!

To Miss Tatiana Andreeva,

We are pleased to inform you-

I only read up to there before the scream erupted from my mouth. I’d jumped up and down with excitement, screaming so loudly that my dad had come running up from downstairs because he thought I was under attack or something. He kicked down the door like he was the LVPD doing a drug bust or some shit, a gun in each hand and eyes filled with panic.

I ended up telling him I’d seen a spider and he’d instantly relaxed, because a huge screaming fit was a perfectly normal reaction for me whenever I saw a spider. Creepy, eight-legged freaks.

“By the way,” I began, giving my best friend a suspicious look. “How did you manage to convince my dad to let me go?”

Illayana winced slightly. “Yeah, uh...look, I had to offer him something you’d never in a million years be okay with.”

“Then why did you offer it?”

“Because it was the only way to get him to agree. After you told me you’d been accepted—which, by the way, I’m still ticked off that you waited *three damn weeks* to tell me about—I spoke with Ivan. I offered him the damn

moon and stars and everything in between to let you go. When that didn't work, I threatened him."

I arched a brow in amusement. "Threatened him?"

"Not with pain. Come on, give me a little credit. I wouldn't hurt your dad." I didn't think she would, but I chuckled lightly as she continued. "I told him if he stopped you from going and living your dream, I'd have Father assign him to the pit."

A barking laugh ripped from my mouth. *Ohhh, that was cold.*

Having guard detail in the pit was considered one of the worst jobs amongst the soldiers. It involved standing in front of a door for the entirety of your shift, making sure whichever prisoner you were watching didn't escape.

"But he still said no," Illayana huffed, walking out of the bathroom. "I was ready to thump him in the head. I was getting so irritated."

"I bet," I chortled.

She flopped down onto her bed and turned to face me, lying on her side. She used her hand to prop her head up, arm bent at the elbow. "I asked him what it would take to get him to agree with the move. He said, 'Nothing'. I said, 'There must be something'. He said, 'Not unless you can guarantee her safety—'

"Which is impossible," I cut in, sitting back down on the small, two-seater couch opposite her bed.

"Well, not exactly. I told him I couldn't guarantee it, but I could get pretty damn close."

"Right. This 'mysterious' offer you mentioned that I wouldn't agree with." I tucked my bare feet underneath me, getting comfortable. I waved a hand through the air. "Okay, out with it."

Illayana hesitated for a moment, her eyes avoiding mine. “I said you’d be willing to have a tracking chip put in. Like mine.”

“You what?!” I exclaimed, my voice pitching higher. I slapped a hand to my forehead, groaning. “Illayana, why would you do that?”

“What?” She shrugged innocently. “He said yes.”

“Because he knows I’d never fucking agree to it. You know how I feel about that shit. I’ve got no idea why *you* even allow it. You’re chipped like a fucking animal.”

“Hey. This thing”—she touched the back of her neck lightly—“saved my life. Without it, I’d probably be dead and buried naked in a ditch somewhere right now.”

I huffed out a breath. “Okay, fair point. I’ll give you that one.”

“Just do it, T. It’s really not that big of a deal. You can’t even feel the thing. If it gets your dad off your back, and will give you the ability to move to New York guilt free, what harm is it gonna do?”

She had a point. I was twenty-four and had never lived on my own. I was dying inside for that freedom, for the ability to walk around my house stark naked if I bloody well wanted to.

For all my life, it had just been me and my dad. My good for nothing, so called “mother” walked out on us when I was just a baby, leaving us to fend for ourselves. The guilt I felt about moving stemmed from that. I felt like I was abandoning him. Like *her*.

I wanted to travel the world. To explore different things, different cultures. But every time I’d bring it up, Dad would rant and rave about how it wasn’t safe. Nothing had happened to make him think that way, to trigger that unbearable overprotectiveness. It was purely because he knew how dangerous and cruel the world could be, and he didn’t want me to fall

victim to it. He kept me close because he was afraid to lose me. I didn't want to fight it because I didn't want to hurt him.

But Illayana was right. If all I had to do was get chipped like a fucking dog to get my dad to be okay with me leaving, it was a small price to pay.

I shook my head, chuckling softly. "You know, I was surprised as hell when he called me the other day and said I could go. I was so shocked, I dropped my hot bowl of soup right into my lap. When I asked him what made him change his mind, he just said, 'Ask that best friend of yours'. He didn't think I'd agree to the terms."

"But you're going to, right? You're gonna do it?"

"Yes," I blew out, irritated. "This is the first time he's ever given me the opportunity to leave home. I'd be an idiot to waste it."

"Damn straight you would," Illayana nodded. "When will he get back from Russia?"

"Tomorrow." I'll admit, I was pretty ticked off he left. He wouldn't let me visit my best friend in New York without giving me a six-hour lecture on safety and all the bad shit that can happen. But he was allowed to go gallivanting halfway around the world? Talk about double standards.

Now, though, I'm glad he went. If he hadn't, he would have gotten caught up in the attack.

Illayana and I talked for a little while longer, catching up on everything we'd missed in each other's lives over the last month. She told me all about the trouble The Outfit was giving her and Arturo. How Franco was fucking with their distribution, making it difficult for them to sell their product. Somehow, he was finding out the locations of their manufacturing and distribution houses and raiding them before they even knew what was going on.

When I suggested they might have another rat, she was adamant that wasn't the case. After that whole mess with Diego and the money he'd stolen, Arturo had done a thorough check of all his men. He was beyond confident there was no one else in the Cosa Nostra whose loyalty could be questioned.

So how was Franco finding out the new locations of their operations only hours after they'd been set up? It was a serious problem. One I knew worried her a lot.

"How about I go to New York early and help out? That way you can stay here as long as you need and I can keep you updated on what's going on, so you don't pull your hair out from the stress."

Illayana blinked in surprise. "But what about college?"

"Eh," I shrugged. "Classes don't start for another month. I was only going early to get situated and move into the apartment. Which, by the way, I'm paying rent for. I don't care what you say."

Arturo (and Illayana now, I guess, by extension) owned several apartment buildings in the city and they offered me one to stay in while I was in New York.

I of course accepted, because finding a decent apartment in New York City was a fucking nightmare. But when the subject of rent came up, Illayana flat out refused to hear it.

"You chose not to be in this life, though. Are you sure this is something you want to do?"

"I didn't choose to go into the Bratva for two reasons. One: the uniforms are borderline nasty. I'd rather cut my own foot off and eat it than be caught wearing those ugly, vomit-inducing things you make those enforcers wear. And two: I needed the time to work on my fashion line. That's it. I love

blood and violence just as much as you do, maybe more. And I'm looking forward to it. As long as I get to pick my own outfits.”

Illayana laughed softly. “You’d really do that for me?”

I picked up a pillow and threw it at her head, making her laugh again. “Bitch, you should know by now that I’d do anything for you. You’re my ride or die. The Dominic Toretto to my Brian O’Conner. The Shrek to my Donkey. The James P Sullivan to my Mike Wazowski.”

“I get it, I get it,” Illayana cut in, barely containing her laughter. “And hey, why am *I* Shrek?”

“You wanna be Donkey?” I shrugged. “That’s okay, you can be Donkey. You’re kind of an ass anyway.

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Chapter Four



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

THE DOOR TO MY sister's bedroom swung open, Tatiana and Illayana stepping out in a fit of giggles.

Despite how much I'm sure she tried to hide it, I could tell Illayana had been crying. Her eyes were red and slightly puffy and her cheeks were flushed. I could count the amount of times I'd seen my sister cry on one hand. She wasn't a crier, not usually. But she was a "Daddy's Girl" through and through. The kidnapping of our father hit her hard. Harder than she'd ever admit to anyone. I was glad Tatiana was there to help her through it.

Arturo had been pacing up and down the hallway outside Illayana's room when I'd arrived, nervous energy in each step. We hadn't said a word to each other. I'd just taken a seat, my back resting against the wall opposite her room, forearms hanging over my bent knees. And we waited.

And waited and waited.

Aleksandr was in his office, dealing with the aftermath of the attack. He'd spent the last few hours driving to all the homes of our fallen soldiers to deliver the news of their deaths personally. Every single one of them had taken a toll on him, but the worst one by far was Dayton.

Dayton was Mikhail's son. His long-lost son that he had no idea about until recently. Mikhail sent him here to be trained. He'd grown up as a civilian, not privy to the life of organised crime. And as such, he didn't really have the stomach for some of the things he'd witnessed. Apparently, the kid had thrown up and cried after watching someone die. Something like that was dangerous for a man like Mikhail, whose reputation determined whether or not he lived or died.

So Aleksandr was assigned to train him. Toughen him up. Teach him how to fight. How to hold a gun. How to shoot. After spending a bit of time together, they had grown somewhat close. That kid had somehow managed to worm his way into my big brother's guarded heart. I don't think even *he* noticed how much so, until the kid died.

I'd only ever seen Aleksandr break down like that one other time: when we found our mother's body. And it had taken five men to subdue him in his fit of rage.

So you can imagine my surprise when that tiny woman, Drea Ortega, Don of the Los Zeta Cartel, had managed to do it all on her own. It shocked me right to my very core. It left me completely speechless.

I'd known from the start that they shared some sort of connection. Aleksandr wasn't merciful—furthest thing from it, in fact. He had no problem hurting whoever he needed to to get the answers he wanted.

But with Drea, there'd been hesitation, reluctance. And then flat-out refusal. He'd even gone so far as to hurt one of our own men because he'd

struck her. Never in my life had I ever seen him remotely protective or possessive over a woman. Until her.

Arturo's pacing stopped the moment Illayana's door opened. He marched towards her, grabbing the sides of her face in a tender embrace. "You've been crying," he whispered softly, resting his forehead against hers.

Illayana closed her eyes briefly, breathing him in, a loving smile creeping onto her face. "I'm fine."

Arturo looked deep into her eyes. "No. You're not." He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, caressing her cheek.

"Aw, you guys!" Tatiana gushed, fanning her face like she was about to cry. "You're so cute!" The annoyed look Arturo threw her way suggested that he didn't like being called "cute".

I got to my feet and Illayana stepped away from Arturo to give me a hug. "Thanks for coming to check on me, Nik. You really didn't have to."

I patted her on the back, not saying a word. Of course, there was a part of me that was concerned about her. After she ran out of Father's office upon hearing the news of his disappearance, we were all worried. I had started to follow her when Tatiana stopped us and said she would handle it.

But I'd be lying if I didn't say that the *main* reason I was there was because of the beautiful blonde bombshell standing next to her.

"I'm glad you're okay," I said, pulling back.

Arturo swooped right back in, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and steering her back to her room. "It's late. You need to rest."

Illayana didn't fight him. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, T. Well, later today, since it's like 3 a.m.," she chuckled.

"Catch you then, girly," Tatiana winked, wagging her fingers in farewell.

Once the door shut behind them, our eyes locked, the air around us charging with sexual tension. Neither one of us could help it. Our gazes were drawn to one another, determined to find each other even if we were lost in a sea of people. It was out of our control.

“You’re staring,” Tatiana sang, humour in her voice.

I arched a brow. “So are you.”

She laughed softly, and it was the most beautiful sound I ever heard. It felt like it had been a lifetime since I heard her laugh like that. A genuine one, from the heart, not riddled with contempt or annoyance.

“Alright, you got me there.” She gave me the smallest playful smile before it shifted to her other smile—her fake one. The one she always wore around me.

From an outsider’s perspective, it looked like a normal smile. Like she was happy to see me. Happy to talk to me. But I could tell the difference. The tiny crinkle at the corner of her lips. The way her eyes dulled the slightest touch when she looked at me. The disdain layered in her voice when she spoke to me. It all showed that she hadn’t forgiven me for what happened.

“I’m...uh, gonna get going,” she said, turning around and heading for the stairs.

I knew what that meant, and I wasn’t fucking having it.

“It’s three o’clock in the morning, Tatiana. You’re not running home.”

“Give it a rest, Nicky. I’m not in the mood to listen to you throw a tantrum right now.”

Annoyance flared inside me at her dismissive tone. I followed her down the stairs, trying to rein in my temper. Tatiana combated anger with anger. I

wouldn't get anywhere if I yelled at her and told her what to do. She didn't take commands very well (at least, not outside of the bedroom).

"I'll drive you home."

"No thanks," she threw over her shoulder without looking back.

"It wasn't an offer."

"And yet, I'm declining it anyway." She stepped into the foyer, walking right to the front door.

My restraint snapped. Years of repressed emotions came spiralling to the surface and I was powerless to keep them down any longer. Anger, guilt, pain. They all slammed into me at once. I couldn't bite my tongue for one more second.

"How long do you plan to punish me?" I hissed, my hands curling into fists.

Tatiana stopped dead in her tracks, her spine stiffening. She turned to face me slowly, her face a mask of anger. "Punish you?" she whispered softly, like she couldn't believe I even uttered the words. "You think I'm trying to punish you?"

"Aren't you?" Sadness dripped from my voice. "You blame me for what happened. You blame me—"

"I don't blame you for what happened, Nikolai. I *never* have. I blame you for what happened *after*."

I frowned. "What—"

"I called you 137 times!" Tatiana yelled, marching towards me. "137 times! And what did you do? You rejected my calls. You turned off your phone. You *ignored* me. When I needed you the most, *you weren't there*."

Guilt choked me, squeezing my heart, making it hard for me to draw breath. "Tatiana—"

“No!” She shoved me hard in the chest, forcing me back a step. “I don’t want to hear it! I don’t want to hear the same fucking excuses from you! You didn’t believe me! You didn’t *trust* me! You believed what Kurt said without even giving me a chance to explain. You cut me out, refusing to even talk to me. And then—” Her words cut off with a choke, tears glistening in her eyes. “I needed you, Nikolai. I needed you more than I ever needed anyone in my life, and you weren’t there. Do you have any idea what it was like? To hear that our son’s heart had stopped beating? To have to give birth to him, knowing he’d never take his first breath? Never open his eyes? That I’d never get to hear his first cry? I had to do it all on my own because you were mad at me for something that didn’t even happen!” Tears flowed freely down her face and everything inside me broke.

I dropped to my knees at her feet, overwhelmed by her words. I buried my head in her stomach, the same stomach that created our child, and cried alongside her. My arms wrapped around her, holding her to me as we both mourned the life of the son we never got to know.

“I’m sorry. Fuck, I’m so sorry, Tati.”

Her fingers combed through my hair, her touch soothing my soul. I didn’t deserve it. Everything she said was right. I had abandoned her when she needed me the most. There was nothing I could do to make up for it. But I had to try, even if it took the rest of my life.

She stepped back out of my embrace, putting distance between us. It hurt just as much as it did the first time. Seeing her right there, right in front of me, but never being able to reach her. Never being able to touch her. It killed me.

Tatiana wiped the tears from her cheeks, standing tall. “What happened—losing our son—was nobody’s fault. Not yours. Not mine. It was something

that was out of our control. I've never blamed you for that, Nikolai, and I'm sorry if I made you think I did." She took a deep breath, centring herself for what she was going to say next. "But I can never forgive you for abandoning me, for not trusting me. For accusing me of cheating on you and then just cutting me out of your life like I was nothing. Like *we*"—she laid a hand on her stomach—"were nothing. You were the one person in the world I thought I could depend on. Who I thought would always be there for me, to love me, comfort me, protect me. And you let me down."

Her words cut me like a knife to the heart. I knew she wasn't saying any of it to deliberately hurt me. She was just speaking her truth, and as much as it hurt, I was thankful for it. In the two years since that horrible night, she'd never once opened up about how she felt.

"I don't know if I can ever forgive you for that, Nikolai," she continued, opening the front door.

I jumped to my feet, panic squeezing my chest. I couldn't let the conversation end there. I couldn't let her walk out the door without at least trying to make things right.

"Tatiana—"

"Don't," she warned, raising a hand to silence me. "I need space from you. Why do you think I'm moving to New York? Because every time I look at you, every time I see you, I'm reminded of how much you hurt me. My trust in you, in your ability to be there for me when I need you, is gone. It vanished the moment you rejected my calls when I was lying in that hospital bed, crying out for you. While I was holding our precious little baby boy in my arms, begging God to somehow bring him back to me. I've tried and tried to forgive. To forget. To move on. But I'm not sure it's ever

going to happen.” She turned on her heels and walked out the door, not looking back.

I rushed after her, my feet stopping at the edge of the front porch. Conflicting emotions warred inside me as I watched her disappear into the darkness. I wanted nothing more than to follow her. To force her to talk to me. To forgive me. But I knew I couldn’t. I wasn’t there to give her what she needed when she was at her most vulnerable. She just poured her heart out to me. She told me she couldn’t rely on me.

I had to show her she could, that I was a man she could trust again.

I looked at the two soldiers guarding the front door. There was a slight awkwardness in the air from overhearing our conversation, but I ignored it. “Follow her. Make sure she gets home safe. Anything happens to her and *you’ll* be the ones to suffer.”

Both men nodded.

“And not one fucking word about what you just heard, or I’ll cut out your tongues.”

They paled.

“What are you waiting for? Go after her!”

They took off running after Tatiana.

I was willing to compromise and respect her wishes of needing space from me. I was not, however, willing to compromise on her safety. That just wasn’t going to happen.

She might balk at it, might get a little pissy when she realised I put guards on her tail. But I’d rather have a pissed off Tatiana than a dead one.

I breathed out an exhausted sigh, turning around. My gaze collided with a set of bright blue eyes and I tensed.

Aleksandr stood in the foyer, his usually stoic and guarded expression gone, replaced with shock.

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Chapter Five



TATIANA ANDREEVA

TWO YEARS AGO

I'm telling you, Doc, there's something wrong. I can feel it." I paced up and down the small living room in my aunt and uncle's house, hand on my swollen belly, silently begging Baby V to move. They say a mother's intuition started long before the baby was born. Well, they are right, whoever they are. And my Mama Intuition was telling me something was very, very wrong.

All day, I felt like something was off. Usually, Baby V was a ball of activity from the moment the sun rose. He kicked and kicked, moving up and down, side to side, rolling around like he was trying to find the comfiest position he could in the little, cramped space he had.

I'd grown to enjoy it. At first, it felt like there was a little alien living inside me. When he kicked, I could not only feel the movement but see it too.

It made me think of those spider-looking creatures in Aliens VS Predator, the ones that burst through your ribcage and out your chest.

I'm not gonna lie, it used to freak me the fuck out. But I'd grown to love it. I looked forward to it every morning. It was like clockwork. He'd push down on my bladder so hard, I had to run to the bathroom or risk pissing my pants. Then he'd move around, as if to say, "Good morning, Mama."

It made me smile every time. I would speak to him, telling him, "Yes, yes, I feel you," before going about my day.

But this morning was...different.

I hadn't felt him move once. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and my anxiousness had increased so much that I felt sick.

"Did you try the exercises I suggested this morning?" the doctor asked through the phone, his tone calm and understanding.

"Yes. I drank some soda, took a shower, tried eating spicy food. Nothing worked. I still haven't felt him move." My voice was shaking, the panic I felt evident. I poked at my belly for the umpteenth time, trying to provoke some kind of movement from him.

It didn't work.

"Any pains?" the doctor asked.

"There was a little bit of cramping earlier, but that was it. It wasn't exactly pain. More discomfort."

"Okay. It could be nothing, Miss Andreeva. Sometimes babies have periods of inactivity where they can go hours without moving. It could mean he's just sleeping. But if you're worried, why don't you come down to the hospital and we can check on the little guy?"

Relief filled me. "Yes, I'd like to do that. Thank you. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

“I’ll let the nurses at reception know, so you’ll be brought right through. Try not to worry. I’m sure he’s fine.” The doctor’s tone wasn’t alarming. It should have calmed me down, but it didn’t. There was this terrible feeling sinking deep into my gut. No matter how positive I tried to remain, it wouldn’t go away.

I rushed out of the house as quickly as I could, making sure to grab the baby bag I packed months ago, just in case. It was filled with all the things I might need for Baby V. Onesies in three different sizes, swaddles, beanies and little mittens, some soft toys (even though I knew he wouldn’t be able to play with them). To say I “overpacked” would be an understatement. My aunt and uncle weren’t home, but they left one of their cars at the house in case I needed it.

When I first contacted them and asked to come and stay for a while, they’d been pleasantly surprised. We didn’t see each other often, maybe only once a year for my dad’s birthday, but that didn’t mean we weren’t close. They called me every now and then to check up on me, and I would do the same for them. They only lived a few hours outside of Vegas, so getting to them hadn’t been an issue. Showing up pregnant, however? That had definitely been an issue.

They pestered me with a million questions.

“Who’s the father?”

“Are you getting married?”

“Does your dad know?”

They were all questions I hadn’t been in the mood to answer. I’d been staying there for over three-and-a-half months, and although they tried everyday to get me to talk, I’d given them nothing.

I wasn't ready to talk about it yet, to talk about what happened with Nikolai.

Argh, the whole thing still made me so raging fucking mad. I'd never pegged Nikolai as an idiot, but man he was really acting like one.

We'd been in a secret relationship for over a year when I found out I was pregnant. I'd been nervous as all hell to tell him, but it turned out all those nerves had been for no reason.

Nikolai was ecstatic when I told him. He'd actually dropped to his knees at my feet and kissed my belly, whispering nonsense to the baby in Russian, like it could understand him. He wanted to tell his family—and everyone else—the news, but I wasn't ready. I still hadn't worked up the guts to even tell Illayana that we'd been seeing each other. I needed time. Time to figure out what I was going to say, how I was going to say it. My best friend loved me, but I knew she was going to be pissed when I told her.

So, he reluctantly agreed to keep it quiet until I was ready. For five months, it had been easy to hide the pregnancy. I didn't start to show until well after my first trimester, and then after that I just wore baggy clothes. Designer baggy clothes, but baggy clothes nonetheless.

Then, one horrible afternoon, it all came crashing down. Nikolai accused me of cheating on him with Kurt, one of the Bratva soldiers I'd gone through training with. I had no idea where he got such a stupid fucking idea from, and he didn't even really explain it either. He just burst through my front door, screaming at me and saying the most awful things.

"I bet the baby isn't even mine, is it?" he'd hissed in my face, repulsion in his eyes.

Nikolai was the quiet, silent type, but when he was angry? Oh, boy. There was no calming him down, no talking to him.

I tried reasoning with him, tried telling him over and over again I had no idea what he was talking about. That I would never cheat on him, let alone with Kurt! But no matter what I said, he wouldn't hear it. It was like his mind was already made up, like he had proof. Even though there was none!

"I bet the baby isn't even mine, is it?"

Those words had played over in my head when he'd left. Once the befuddlement had dissipated, anger quickly stepped in. How fucking dare he? How dare he question my loyalty? Did he not know me at all? Didn't fucking seem like it.

After Nikolai stormed out, I decided to go away for a while. I was so angry at him for being so fucking stupid. The fact that he wouldn't accept any of my calls just pissed me off even more. He wouldn't even give me the chance to talk, to find out why he thought I'd slept with Kurt. It was like he'd just written me off without letting me try to defend myself.

Nikolai was a very possessive guy. If another man even looked at me, he had his gun out and against his head before the dude could blink. Whatever had made him think I'd cheated on him had brought forth this cloud of anger that made it impossible for him to see reason. There was a small, tiny, insignificant part of me that understood. Because if the situation was reversed, I'd be the same. Worse, actually. But that didn't excuse his behaviour, his words.

"I bet the baby isn't even mine, is it?"

Once I came to stay with my aunt and uncle, I tried calling again. And again. And again. He ignored every single one. I'd texted, telling him he was being a fucking idiot and that I never slept with Kurt. He never responded. Eventually, I just gave up. I'd give birth to our son, get a DNA

test and then shove it in his stupid fucking face. Then I'd make him grovel for the rest of his fucking life.

I pulled up at the hospital and quickly parked the car in the Emergency Bay. This constituted as an “emergency”, and if anyone tried to tell me otherwise, I’d stab them in the fucking throat.

Once I grabbed my baby bag, I quickly rushed inside, going right for the reception desk.

“Hi,” I greeted the older woman with the horn-rimmed glasses. “My name is Tatiana Andreeva. I’m here to see Dr Spendel.”

“Ah, yes. He told me you’d be coming. I’ll just grab a few of your details and then I’ll lead you right on through.”

After I answered her general questions and signed in, she picked herself up off her chair and hobbled to the door, opening it wide for me. I tried to get a grip on my nerves, but it was almost impossible as she led me through the hospital and past all the open exam rooms until she got to the one assigned to me. She pushed the curtain back, revealing a hospital bed, some monitors and one lonely chair in the corner. There was a TV coming down from the roof and some magazines sitting on the long table that ran against the wall.

“Okay, dear, take a seat and make yourself comfortable. Dr Spendel has ordered an ultrasound first, so we’ll get that done and then he’ll be in to see you. Do you need anything? Something to eat or drink?”

I shook my head, placing the baby bag on the bed. I was far too wound up to even think about eating. I’d most likely throw it up if I tried.

The woman, whose name badge read “Maureen”, gave me a reassuring smile. “Alright. If you need anything, don’t be afraid to push the ‘call’

button right there,” she said, pointing to the button. “One of the other nurses will come to help. The ultrasound tech shouldn’t be too long.”

I thanked her and she left, closing the curtain behind her.

With nothing to do but sit there and wait, I pulled out my phone and started flicking through Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter. I had accounts for them all. Instagram was purely for posting pictures of my fashion designs or photo aesthetics. Tik Tok was for when I was bored and felt like a laugh. And Twitter? Well, I didn’t even really know how to use that one, to be honest.

It took nine minutes and thirty-seven seconds for the ultrasound tech to show up. By the time he’d gotten there, I was just a big ball of anxiety and stress. Baby V still hadn’t moved.

“Hello, Tatiana. I’m Bill. I’ll be conducting the ultrasound for you today.” He seemed pleasant enough, with a nice head of dark hair and a pretty smile, but I wasn’t in a particularly chatty mood, so I tried my best to not give my “resting bitch face” and lay down on the bed.

Bill didn’t ask me any questions as he squirted gel onto my exposed stomach. He moved the transducer through it in small circles before expanding wider. My heart was beating a mile a fucking minute. I clenched and unclenched my hands, anxiously waiting to hear what was going on. My palms were sweaty and my breathing had quickened to the point that I was panting. My body started to tremble.

It was stupid of me to come here alone. I should have called someone. My aunt or uncle. My dad. Nikolai.

I needed Nikolai.

Bill frowned at the screen, moving the ultrasound wand over my stomach in the same spot again and again. He clicked a few buttons on the machine,

squinting hard as he continued to move the device. Something flashed across his face before he could mask it. It was so quick, I couldn't figure out what it was.

He gave me a small smile. "Okay. I'm just going to get the doctor now." He handed me a tissue to wipe the gel away as he rolled the machine to the side.

"Wait, what did the ultrasound say? Is the baby okay?" I asked, sitting up.

"Unfortunately, I can't discuss the results with you. I'm sorry. That's for the doctor. I'll just go get him and I'll be back in a moment."

"No," I exclaimed, my anxiety spiralling. "You can't do that. You have to tell me. He-he's okay, isn't he?"

Bill averted his eyes for the briefest second, the mask slipping away before he was able to put it back on his face. "I'll go get the doctor." He rushed out of the room, making it impossible for me to question him further.

Panic squeezed my chest to the point that I struggled to breathe. I didn't know what was going on, but I'd seen enough Grey's Anatomy episodes to know that, whatever it was, was bad. Tears welled in my eyes, blurring my vision. I took my phone out of my pocket, my hands trembling as I pulled up Nikolai's number and hit CALL.

The phone rang three times before it got sent to voicemail.

He'd rejected the call.

No, please, Nikolai. Please. Answer. I called him again and again, each one going straight to voicemail.

He turned off his phone.

Oh, God, no.

He can't do this to me. I need him. We need him.

Bill returned with Dr Spendel, their faces calm but eyes tense. My fear increased, heart pounding. Dr Spendel wore the traditional white lab coat, a stethoscope hanging around his neck. He had that comforting, older father vibe, the one that just put you at ease. He was slightly on the chubby side, with a thick head of hair and a kind smile.

“Miss Andreeva, I apologise for the wait. How are you doing?”

My first response usually would have been, “How the fuck do you think I’m doing?” But I held back from snapping at him so we could get on with it. I needed to know what was going on with my son, if he was okay.

Please be okay.

“Fine,” I replied, frowning as Bill pulled the ultrasound machine back over to the side of the bed.

Dr Spendel looked at me with sympathetic eyes. “I know from our earlier phone call that you’re worried, and you must be feeling incredibly anxious, so I won’t keep you waiting any longer. I’m just going to take a quick look and see what’s going on.”

I wanted to ask why he needed to look when Bill had only looked moments ago, but I said nothing as he lifted my shirt and squirted gel on my stomach.

Bill tried to fill the silence with mundane questions about me and my life. He was trying to distract me, but it wasn’t working. All of my focus was on Dr Spendel as he moved the ultrasound wand over my stomach, on the small crease in the middle of his bushy eyebrows that gradually got deeper and deeper.

“Well?” I asked, cutting Bill off mid-sentence.

Could he not read the bloody room? Why would I want to answer questions about what I like to do in my spare time when I was anxiously waiting to hear about what was going on with my son?

Dr Spendel cleared his throat and gave me a small smile. “Okay, we’re all done. Bill, if you could please take the machine and give us the room. Thank you.”

“Dr Spendel,” I pushed, irritated by the fact that neither of them were giving me an answer. “Is. The. Baby. Okay?”

Dr Spendel grabbed the chair and placed it next to me, sitting down. “Tatiana,” he exhaled, sadness layering his voice. “While conducting the ultrasound, I was unable to find a heartbeat. I am truly so sorry to have to tell you this, but your baby has passed away.”

My whole world came crashing down.

No. No. No. NO!

*Tears gathered in my eyes. I wailed, wrapping my arms around my stomach. “No!” I screamed, crying hysterically. Time slowed as the worst, most agonising pain I’d ever experienced cut through me. My heart, my soul, **everything** inside me died right there. With my son.*

I felt myself get pulled down into a deep, dark void where I couldn’t hear a thing. I could see Dr Spendel talking, see his lips moving, but his words were coming through like static.

“Cord...wrapped around...nothing you could have done...not your fault...”

I wasn’t sure how long I sat there, pretending like I could understand what he was saying, pretending like I was listening.

I knew I should have come in sooner. All day, I’d felt like something wasn’t right, that it was weird that I hadn’t felt him move. But I’d done nothing.

I’d. Done. Nothing.

I was his mother. It was my job to protect him. He was supposed to be safe with me. How could I let him down that way?

“I’ll give you the medication that starts dilation, then the pitocin, and your body will know what to do from there.”

I looked up into Dr Spendel’s eyes. “I’m sorry? Pitocin?” My voice was hoarse. I felt numb. None of it seemed real. Was it real? Was I dreaming?

Oh, god, please let me be dreaming. Let me wake up in my bed with Nikolai, with our son kicking like crazy in my belly.

Please, God. Don’t do this to me. Don’t take him from me.

He frowned slightly. “To induce labour.”

I repeated his words in a trance. “Induce labour?” More tears fell, the pain overwhelming. “You’re saying I have to give birth to him, even though he’s-he’s...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence.

Compassion flashed across Dr Spendell’s face. “Is there someone I can call for you?” he asked. “I know this is a lot. I want to make sure you’ve got the support you need.”

Nikolai. I need Nikolai.

With shaky hands, I tried to call him again. But he didn’t answer.

Chapter Six



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“**M**Y OFFICE. NOW.” ALEKSANDR stepped to the left and pointed up the stairs, looking every bit like a pissed off parent who’d just caught their kid trying to sneak out of the house at 2 a.m.

I rubbed my temple, sighing heavily. “Zander—”

“Don’t even try it, Nikolai. I’ve let you avoid my questions for *years*. I’m done. You’re going to march your ass up those stairs and talk to me, or so help me God, I will drag you up there myself and beat them out of you. The choice is yours. But there’s absolutely no way you are getting out of this conversation.”

My older brother, ladies and gentlemen.

“You know, when someone says they don’t want to talk about something, most people respect their wishes and let it go.”

He stared at me blankly. “I’m not most people. Walk.”

I rolled my eyes, doing as he so “kindly” asked. I could try and fight him on it, but honestly, what would be the point? Aleksandr would make good on his threat. I wasn’t sure how long he’d been standing there, what exactly he’d overheard. What I did know was that it was enough for him to get the general idea about what had happened. The cat was out of the bag.

Aleksandr stepped into line behind me as I ascended the stairs, his feet thumping like a warning that he was there, in case I decided to make a run for it.

Like that big oaf could catch me.

The door to Aleksandr’s office was open, so I walked straight through and stopped in the centre of the room.

“Sit,” Aleksandr demanded, shutting the door.

I was far too mentally exhausted to tell him off for trying to order me around. Everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours had zapped every ounce of strength out of me. The attack. My father’s kidnapping. Tatiana. Her words hurt more than any physical pain I’d ever endured before.

My trust in you, in your ability to be there for me when I need you, is gone.

I had nothing left in me to fight against my brother. I sat down.

Aleksandr went to his desk and pulled out two glasses from the drawer, placing one in front of me and the other in front of his empty chair. He moved to the drink cart in the corner of the room next, grabbing a bottle of vodka. After he’d filled my glass and his own, he took a seat, leaning back.

“Talk.”

I stared at my glass. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“The start is always a good option.”

“The start,” I repeated, chuckling humorlessly.

“Yes,” Aleksandr said, narrowing his eyes. “When did things...evolve into more between you and Tatiana?”

The suspicious tilt in his voice made my spine stiffen. “Long after she turned eighteen, and the fact that you’re even asking me that makes me want to break your fucking nose.”

“That’s not what I meant, but good to know,” he smirked.

I glared, taking a sip from my drink. The welcome burn of the alcohol sliding down my throat helped calm my nerves.

Usually, I loved Aleksandr’s playful side. It was rare for him to indulge in it. But I just wasn’t in the fucking mood. I appreciated the fact that he was trying to lighten the mood, though.

“I meant, when did you guys start seeing each other?”

“Four years ago,” I answered, the memory of that first night in the hallway—the first time I tasted her, felt her come around my fingers—making me smirk. “We were in a secret relationship for over a year.”

Surprise flashed across Aleksandr’s face. He knew something had been going on between Tatiana and I, but I don’t think he realised how far back it went.

“She wasn’t comfortable telling anyone, at least not until she’d told Illayana first. The more time that went on, though, the harder and harder it became for her to tell her. For that first year, everything was...”

I couldn’t even find the words to describe it. How could you describe the best thing that ever happened to you? How could you sum it all up in a few simple words? It just couldn’t be done, so I didn’t even try.

“Then, Tatiana told me she was pregnant, and my whole world got so much brighter. I don’t remember ever being that happy before. Not once in

my life, Zander.”

A genuine smile graced my brother’s lips. It disappeared a moment later, though, because he knew the happiness I spoke of didn’t last.

“She was about five months along when I fucked everything up. Looking back now, I realise what a fucking idiot I was for not trusting her, for letting old fears and scars from my past control my actions.”

Aleksandr frowned, trying to keep up. But he wouldn’t be able to, not until he got the full story.

“I’d just finished taking a shower in the warehouse and was getting dressed when I overheard some of the soldiers talking shit. Just normal locker room trash. ‘I got my dick sucked last night.’ ‘Out of Claire and Anette, who do you think has the tighter pussy?’ ‘Who’s the hottest chick you’ve ever fucked?’ It was around then that I zoned out. I got sick of hearing them. Then, one of the fuckers called Kurt said Tatiana’s name. I was so fucking angry, Zander. I saw red. I knew Tatiana wasn’t a virgin when we started fucking, but that didn’t mean I wanted to hear about her with another man. I told him if he didn’t shut the fuck up, I’d cut his tongue out.”

Aleksandr nodded in agreement, like my threat was completely justified. “Fair. Continue.”

“I don’t know if he was trying to show off to his friends or just piss me off, but he started boasting about how he’d fucked her six months ago. I didn’t believe him until he mentioned the tattoo she has on her ass. Once I heard that, I marched straight over to Tatiana’s and accused her of cheating. I accused her of lying about the baby being mine. I went crazy, Zander. I said the most awful things, and then I cut her out of my life without letting

her get a word in. I ignored her calls. And then she went into hospital and —”

“Okay, slow down.” Aleksandr laid a hand on my shoulder and it shocked the hell out of me. I hadn’t even noticed him getting up and making his way over to me. I was too lost in my past. “You’re spiraling. We’re going to do this one step at a time. First, how did you know when Kurt said he’d seen this tattoo, that he wasn’t just talking about a time they’d fucked in the past? Before you guys got together?”

“Because that tattoo was *new*. She got it a month or so before she fell pregnant. I was there. It’s the first letter of my name.”

Aleksandr arched an eyebrow. “You branded her ass?”

I pulled my shirt to the side, revealing the “T” tattooed over my heart. “She branded me too.”

“That’s why you stopped taking your shirt off whenever you jumped in the ring.”

“Pretty much. I didn’t need Illayana getting suspicious.” I blew out a breath. “Because of my history with Galina, I was quick to assume the worst. I assumed Tatiana had lied to me and cheated on me. It didn’t matter what she tried to tell me.”

“Of course,” he breathed, like something had just clicked into place for him. “I forgot about Galina.”

Galina was an ex-girlfriend of mine from back when I lived in Russia, before we moved to the US. I was young when I met her. I kept fucking her until I was in my early twenties. When I told her I’d be moving to America, she realised I had no intention of taking her with me. So she decided to try and force my hand instead. She deliberately got herself pregnant by fucking a bunch of random men and tried to pass the baby off as mine.

I found out the truth only days before we were set to leave. One of our soldiers approached me, telling me his wife received some concerning text messages from Galina. She'd been boasting about how her plan to manipulate me had worked, that there was a high probability the child wasn't mine. I left her in Russia with a team of doctors monitoring her closely, so I would know when she gave birth. There was still a chance, no matter how small, that the baby could have been mine, and I wouldn't abandon it if that was the case.

Eight months later, Galina gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. I wasn't the father. The disappointment I'd felt that day had been soul-crushing. It wasn't until right then that I realised how much I'd been hoping the baby was mine.

It had been a startling surprise. At twenty-one, I wasn't anywhere near ready to have a child. But to hear that you're going to become a parent, and then having it snatched away from you...it hurt. A small part of me had also cared for Galina. I easily envisioned a future with her, so her betrayal pissed me off.

Fast forward nine years to the moment that I thought it was happening all over again. To the moment when I'd heard that fucker Kurt claim he'd had sex with Tatiana right around the time she'd fallen pregnant. All those feelings from almost a decade ago had come rushing back. Except this time, they were worse, more explosive. Because, unlike with Galina, I was hopelessly and irrevocably in love with Tatiana. The idea that she'd betrayed me and lied to me had clouded all sense of rationality, making it impossible for me to see what was right in front of my eyes.

"What happened next?" Aleksandr pushed, his hand on my shoulder keeping me grounded, centred.

“Tatiana went to stay with her aunt and uncle for a while. She was pissed off with me for accusing her of cheating and wanted to get away. I was too stubborn and pigheaded to let go of my anger, so I let her go. I tried to find that little fucker Kurt, so I could kill him, but he’d disappeared after the whole ‘warehouse’ incident. Tatiana and I didn’t speak to each other for months. I think she was waiting for me to come to my senses. Or she was just icing me out, like I’d done to her. I’m not sure. Things took a turn for the worst around the time of the Campos job.”

“Delano Campos?” Aleksandr asked, a slight frown on his face. “I remember that job. You and Father arranged a sit down with him to see if he was the one selling guns in Vegas.”

I nodded. Vegas was strictly Bratva territory, which meant if anyone else even tried to sell weapons on our turf, it would cost them their life. We’d been getting reports of other guns being sold on the market, and it took me over two weeks to track down who was responsible.

Delano Campos.

He was small-time, just moved to Vegas from Ireland and was trying to establish himself as an arms dealer, not realising the territory he was trying to claim was already taken—by us. My father and I then organised a meet under false pretences, pretending we were interested in buying from him.

“Tatiana called me when we were at the table,” I said, breathing through the pain of the memory. “I glanced at the screen, saw her name and rejected the call.”

Aleksandr winced.

“When she immediately called back, I switched my phone off. In my mind, I used the excuse that I was too busy dealing with Bratva business to answer her call. But deep down, there was a small part of me that knew it

was just because I was still mad. I still hadn't dealt with my anger. I wanted to punish her, so I ignored her. I sat at that table talking with some wannabe gangster who I wanted nothing more than to disembowel, while the woman I love lay in a hospital bed, crying out for me."

Guilt, shame and grief all hit me with the force of a freight train. It hurt just as much as it had back then. Maybe more.

"When I eventually turned my phone back on a few hours later, there were over a hundred missed calls and text messages," I continued, staring off into the distance. "The moment I realised what was going on, I rushed to the hospital. But by the time I got there, it was too late." Tears formed, rolling down my cheeks. "My—" I sucked in a painful breath, the words I was about to say like a knife through the heart. "My son was gone. He died in the womb. Tatiana had to give birth to him all alone, with no one there to help her, to be there for her. She was holding him in her arms when I finally got there, and the look on her face"—I shook my head—"I'll never forget it, how broken she looked."

"*Oh, brat.*" *Oh, brother.* Aleksandr embraced me in a hug, providing me comfort that I in no way deserved. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell *anyone*?"

"I couldn't. After we buried him, Tatiana told me she didn't want anyone to know, that she just wanted to forget. After what I did, the least I could do was respect her wishes and be there for her in whatever way she needed, since I hadn't been there for her when it really mattered."

"But what about you?" he asked, studying me closely. "Who was there for you? Having to keep all this to yourself...it wasn't fair."

I shrugged uncaringly. It was hard not being able to talk about it with the people I was closest to. Tatiana had left abruptly after the small funeral

we'd held for him, and I promised not to say a word about it to anyone.

When she returned six months later, she acted like it never happened. She refused to talk about it, refused to acknowledge the past between us. She kept me at arm's length, never letting me get too close and giving me her usual plucky attitude, but shrouded in coldness.

"It didn't matter what I wanted, Zander. All that mattered was Tati."

My brother looked at me like he wanted to say something but thought better of it, keeping his mouth shut.

"What you saw earlier, that was the first time Tatiana ever spoke to me about that night. About our son. Every other time I've tried, she's ignored me, like I did to her. A sense of payback, I think. One I deserved."

"Okay, I've heard enough," he said, getting to his feet. He put his hands on his hips, staring me down like a parent about to give a ten-hour lecture. "Now you listen to me, Nikolai Vasili Volkov. No matter what you did or didn't do, you have suffered enough. Yes, you made a mistake. A big fucking mistake. But *you* lost something too. I can't even begin to understand how hard it must have been for Tatiana. Not only losing her child, but also still having to give birth to him with no one there for support or comfort. It would have been absolutely devastating for her. But this guilt you're harbouring? You need to let it go. It wasn't intentional. If you had even the slightest idea that something was wrong, that Tatiana needed you, you never would have ignored her calls. Anybody with a brain can see how much you care for her, that you would never have abandoned her if you knew."

I knew he was just trying to help, but his words angered me. He was trying to make me feel better. I didn't *deserve* to feel better. Aleksandr would never understand. He'd never understand what it felt like, knowing

you'd let down the woman you love. To have her look at you with dead, cold eyes filled with betrayal, knowing *you* were the reason for it.

It was gut-wrenching. Soul-crushing.

"That's a little 'pot calling the kettle black', isn't it?" I asked, getting to my feet and standing toe to toe with him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he frowned.

"It means, how can you stand there and tell me to let go of my guilt when you've been carrying yours around for ten years?" I snapped back, referring to our mother.

He thought I didn't know, but I did. I saw how he blamed himself for what happened to her. It was clear in every action he ever made. In the way he always put us first, never caring about his own wants or needs. In the way he was willing to sacrifice anything and everything to protect us. His life, his happiness. Did he really think I was that fucking ignorant? That I couldn't see it?

He stared at me with all the focus of a deadly king cobra, not saying a word. Silence descended between us. Guilt started to worm its way into my heart at my words.

When he was ready to talk again, he spoke slowly, softly, a dark tilt to his voice. "I know what you're trying to do, and it's not going to work." He closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep, calming breath. "You're hurting on the inside, *mladshiy brat, little brother*. I'm not going to help you hurt on the outside, too, no matter what you say to me."

That was the problem with older brothers, wasn't it? They'd literally been there for you your whole life. And that meant that, sometimes, they knew you better than you knew yourself.

I hadn't even realised that's what I was trying to do, not until he mentioned it. I was itching for a fight. To hurt someone and have them hurt me back. To punish me for what I'd done.

"No?" I exhaled questioningly, slumping back into my chair. "Not even if I say I'm going to pay a visit to your little cartel queen?"

He narrowed his eyes dangerously. "Okay, now you're pushing it."

I laughed, picking my glass up and finishing the rest of my drink. "I'm kidding. Kind of."

He grunted, moving back to his chair. He sat down, eyes never leaving mine as he asked, "What was his name?"

Sadness enveloped me. His name. Despite what I'd done, despite not being there for Tatiana, the name she'd chosen for our son was a name I didn't deserve. "Nikolas," I whispered, more tears falling from my eyes. "Nikolas Ivan Volkov."

Chapter Seven



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“**A**BSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT!” MY dad yelled, glaring down at me.

I hid my smirk behind my coffee mug, snuggling deeper into the couch. The TV played lightly in the background, the relaxing aroma of my lavender-scented candle surrounding me like a comforting hug.

Peter Sutherland in *The Night Agent* was kicking some major ass, drawing me in completely. I was only up to episode six, and I knew already that it was going to be one of my top ten favourite TV shows. I liked Rose. She was different than a lot of the other female leads. She didn’t run and hide when the male lead was fighting with some bad guy, trying to protect her. She jumped into the fight, swinging logs like they were fucking baseball bats, breaking bones. I loved me a savage queen.

“You said I could go.” I tried to keep the amusement I felt from trickling into my voice, but based on the grumpy-ass look my dad threw my way, I

don't think it worked.

"I said to talk to Illayana."

"Yep."

"And did you?"

"Yep," I repeated, popping the "p".

"So you agree to it then? Because I'm not joking around, Tatiana," he said sternly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I know, Dad."

"If you want to go to New York, you *have* to have the microchip put in. That's the condition."

I popped a cookie into my mouth, my words coming out in a mumbled mess as I replied, "I know, Dad."

He slapped me upside the head, like Agent Gibbs does to Tony in NCIS. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

I chuckled, rubbing the back of my head with one hand while I took a sip of my coffee with the other. "Face it, Pops. You're just pissed because you didn't expect me to agree to your terms. Well, I have. Illayana's already got me booked in to see the family doc the day after tomorrow. This move is happening."

He flopped down onto the empty seat next to me, kicking his feet up onto the coffee table in front of him. "It's like you *want* to give me a heart attack, moving all the way to New York with no one to watch your back," he grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It's the city where crime never sleeps. Maybe—"

"Nope. Don't even think about it," I cut in, elbowing him in the ribs. He grunted, gripping his side. "I don't want or need a bodyguard. Your only

condition was me getting that stupid tracker. You can't go adding other shit in to try and get me to back out.”

“Who said? I’m the parent here.”

“Don’t be an ass.” I offered him a cookie and he begrudgingly accepted.

“What are we watching?” he asked before stuffing it into his mouth.

“*The Night Agent*. It’s about a hunky FBI Agent who has to save this girl from a bunch of bad men who are after her.”

“Sounds boring. Put on that show we were watching before I left. You know the one I’m talking about, the one with the scientists.”

I smiled, laughing softly. “You mean *Big Bang Theory*?” I picked up the remote, switching to *Big Bang*, and Dad nodded. He settled back further into the couch, holding his hand out for more cookies as we watched TV together, enjoying each other’s company. It might sound *super* lame, but my dad is my best friend. Without a shadow of a doubt. Don’t tell Illayana.

It’s always been me and him. Him and I. Growing up, I was the textbook definition of a “girly girl”. Everything I owned *had* to be pink. I liked putting on make-up and wearing pretty dresses. I liked having tea parties with my dolls and doing their hair. I hated getting sweaty or getting dirt under my fingernails. You’d think a man like my dad would struggle raising a daughter; a big, rough, rugged Bratva man who had zero experience with children. But instead of trying to change me, shifting my interests into things he might have been more comfortable with, he embraced me. He would let me paint his nails bright pink, put make-up on him, style his hair with pretty butterfly clips. He’d sit there for hours and play dollies with me, pitching his deep, heavy voice higher to imitate whichever of my Barbies he was holding. He would read me books, fairy tales about princesses and their knights in shining armour.

I would fall asleep every night dreaming of finding my knight. Someone who would love me, protect me, take care of me. Be there for me in every way.

But when I needed my knight, he wasn't there.

Not once did I ever feel like I was missing something in my life, missing a mother. My dad was everything I ever needed. A father. A mother. A friend.

"You haven't asked me how my trip was?" Dad asked, giving me the side-eye.

"Maybe because I'm afraid if I ask, you'll tell me."

He exhaled an exasperated breath. "We have to talk about it eventually."

"Do we?"

Dad snatched the remote and turned the TV off. "Tatiana—"

"I don't even know why you went in the first place. Don't get me wrong, after what happened with the attack and everything, I'm glad you went. If you stayed, you could have been hurt. But she didn't deserve you flying halfway around the bloody world to see her."

"Despite what happened, what she's done, she's still my wife."

"She *abandoned* us," I snarled, my anger climbing rapidly. "Just packed up her shit in the middle of the night and *left us*. Left *you*, her husband of fifteen years. Left me, her two-week-old infant. She left us like we didn't mean a damn thing to her. Because guess what? We didn't. And now what? She thinks that after twenty-four years of silence, she can just waltz back into our lives like nothing happened?" I shook my head, getting to my feet.

Angry, restless energy flowed through my body. Any time the subject of my so-called "mother" came up, a dark, unrelenting rage took over my mind. I hated her. I hated her with every single cell inside me. I didn't care

what excuses she had for leaving us, why she did what she did. A mother was never meant to abandon her child.

My dad and I pretty much had this exact same conversation right before he left, and from the looks of things, this was going to end the same way too.

Dad leant forward, resting his elbows on his thighs as he steepled his fingers. He waited before responding, picking his words carefully. Smart idea, considering I had a pretty bad temper when I was riled up.

“You have every right to feel the way you do. She understands what she did, and she wants to apologise. Make it up to you.”

“I don’t need her to make it up to me. I need her to fuck off. I don’t understand why you’re so quick to forgive her, after what she did.”

He looked at me, eyes filled with sadness and hurt. “I love her,” he whispered, his voice the softest I’d ever heard it before.

I instantly felt bad. It was easy for me to forget that he’d had a life before me. A life with *her*. The daughter of Satan.

“She doesn’t deserve your love, Dad. Not then, and certainly not now.”

He gave me a small smile. “You know as well as I do that we can’t help who we love, Tatiana, whether they deserve it or not.”



I sat on the front porch at my house, the cool Las Vegas air nipping at my skin and making me shiver.

My thoughts were chaotic, volatile. The conversation with my dad about my mother still played over and over again in my head, worsening my mood by the second. How fucking dare she? Who did she think she was? What right did she have trying to come back into our lives like she had every right to be there?

The bitch that was my mother—Svetlana Andreeva—tried contacting me a few weeks ago, which I promptly ignored. I had no desire to hear a damn word that came out of her mouth. There was nothing she could say that would make up for twenty-four years of abandonment. For twenty-four missed birthdays and twenty-four missed Christmases. For never being there for me during all the moments a mother *should* be. When I lost my first tooth. The first time I got my period. My first day of highschool. My graduation. To teach me about make-up, or boys. To teach me what it means to be a woman.

All of that made it impossible for me to forgive her.

When she couldn't get in touch with me, she decided to go through my dad instead. She asked him to fly all the way to Russia, and he had no problem dancing to her tune. It irritated me how all she had to do was click her fingers and my dad would come running.

I told him not to go. That there was nothing either of them could say to me to get me to change my mind. I had no idea what she could possibly want from me, and I didn't fucking care. She didn't have to be six feet under to be dead to me.

The weight of my phone in my hand brought me out of my mind. I glanced at the screen for the hundredth time, staring at Nikolai's name, a

mix of emotions taking over me.

Part of me didn't want to talk to him. Didn't want to even go near that door, let alone open it. Then there was this other part of me. This part that was slowly getting bigger and bigger every day, that was dying to reforge that connection with him, dying to just let go of all that anger and resentment still burning within me and move on.

Out of everyone in my life—my dad, Illayana, my aunt and uncle—*he* was the only person I wanted to talk to. The only person I felt like would understand. The only person I wanted to confide in about what was going on.

Stop being such a little bitch. I hit CALL.

The phone barely rang once before Nikolai picked up, his voice frantic.
“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

My lips curled into a small smile at his reaction to me calling him. I couldn’t really blame him for it, to be honest. It was the first time since that night that *I’d* reached out to *him*.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.”

I could almost *feel* his eyes narrow with suspicion through the phone. Maybe my ability to guess came down to the fact that I knew him so well.

“You’re okay?”

“Yes...no, I mean,” I exhaled, shaking my head. “I don’t know.”

“Tati,” he said softly but sternly. “What’s the matter?”

This is why you called him, you idiot. Talk to him.

“My mother reached out to me a few weeks ago.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Your mother?”

“Mmhmm.”

“What did she want?”

“To see me? Talk to me? Fuck me up even more? I have no idea, really. I hung up on her the second I realised it was her, and I’ve ignored all her calls ever since.”

“How did she get your number?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. I want nothing to do with her. My dad, though,” I shook my head, still frustrated by the whole thing. “He wants to give her a chance. Do you know why he went to Russia?”

“No, but I have a feeling it has something to do with her.”

“Yep.” I got to my feet, walking the length of the front porch and back. “She called him and said she needed to see him. But she didn’t have a passport, so what did he do? He hopped on the first flight he could get and went to her. Despite *everything* she’s done, he’s still willing to forgive her. I’m not entirely sure what she really wanted from him, from us. Maybe she thought she’d have better luck getting him to convince me to talk to her if she could give him the crocodile tears in person. Maybe she just wanted to fuck with him. See if she still had him on the hook. I don’t know, and I don’t fucking care.”

He chuckled softly and it made me shiver. That deep, rumble sound always excited me. It made my heart race.

“Right. It sounds like you don’t care.”

“I don’t,” I snapped, still pacing up and down.

He chuckled again, and I wanted to smile at him and strangle him at the same time. “You want to know how I know you care, Tati? Because you babble when something matters to you. Your voice pitches higher and your words come out in a rush, like you’re trying to get the lies out as quickly as you can, so that maybe even you will believe them.”

My mouth dropped open in outrage. “I do not do that.”

“Yes, you do, love.”

Butterflies bloomed in my stomach. I should tell him off for calling me that. I should tell him pet names like that weren’t appropriate for the barely platonic relationship we now had. But the truth of the matter was, I didn’t want him to stop. I fucking liked it.

The last time we’d spoken, I told him I wanted space from him. That I didn’t want to see him or talk to him. At that moment, I meant it. I meant every word. I truly believed I wouldn’t be able to move on unless I distanced myself from him. Until I tried to forget him and the pain that came every time I saw him.

But how was I supposed to forget about him, to move on, when he still made my heart race like a jackhammer every time I so much as thought about him? Every time I heard his voice?

“You don’t know me nearly as well as you think you do, Nicky.”

“I know you better than anyone else in the world,” he fired back instantly, ignoring my attempt to get a rise out of him and shift the conversation. I called him Nicky to piss him off, to distract him whenever I was feeling vulnerable. He wasn’t falling for it this time, though. “I know you hate the colour orange because you think it washes you out. I know you prefer Dean over Sam Winchester. That you can’t stand the smell of cinnamon but love cinnamon donuts, that Twinkies are your favourite sweets, and I know that you’ve been pacing up and down your front porch since the moment we got on the phone.”

I came to an abrupt halt, frowning suspiciously. “How do you know I’ve been pacing?”

“Like I said, I know you.”

Uh-huh, right.

I glanced up at the security camera hanging up high on the outside of my house. “You’re watching me, aren’t you?”

He hesitated briefly before answering. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see for myself that you were okay.”

Shaking my head, I raised my hand into the air, extending my middle finger and smiling wide.

I wasn’t overly surprised he’d hacked into our security system. He’d done shit like that before; using cameras and shit to track where I was going, who I was seeing, what I was doing. At first, I was outraged. I felt like it was a huge invasion of my privacy. But now? I was honestly so used to it, it didn’t even bother me anymore. It just rolled right off my shoulders. Nothing Nikolai did really surprised me anymore.

“Oh, Tati,” he breathed, a hint of excitement in his voice. “Have you forgotten already what happened the last time you did that to me?”

I sucked in a breath, the memory of that day smacking me in the face so hard that I felt lightheaded.

“Anybody ever told you you look exactly like Blake Lively, only hotter?”

I rolled my eyes. The Cosa Nostra man I was walking beside—Giovanni? No, Matteo? No. Ah, fuck. Whatever his name was didn’t matter—was laying it on so thick, there was no way anything was going to happen between us.

When I’d first seen him, clapping and cheering as we all screamed “surprise” for Arturo at his surprise thirtieth birthday party, I’d entertained the idea of hooking up with him.

He was my type to a tee: big, tall, a little gloomy. He reminded me of Nikolai. I think that was what I was attracted to, if I was being honest with

myself.

*We chatted a little bit, flirting with each other, and when he asked if I wanted to go somewhere for a little “privacy”, I was keen—emphasis on the **was**. When I was alone with him, I realised it wasn’t what I wanted. That I was using him to fill a void for someone else.*

I hadn’t been physical with anyone else since Nikolai. Every time I’d tried, I couldn’t go through with it. I felt like I was being unfaithful, which was stupid. We weren’t together. Hadn’t been for a long time.

Enzo (again, not sure on the name) reached for my hand, intertwining our fingers as he brought us to a stop around the side of the house. The contact felt...wrong.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered, stepping closer. He pulled me towards him, bringing our bodies within inches of each other.

“I’ve been wondering if your lips feel as soft as they look.” He lowered his head, his mouth inching closer and closer to mine.

I placed my hands on his chest, pushing back. “Wait—”

“Tatiana!” A deep voice cut through the air, a voice I’d recognise anywhere.

I glanced over Eduardo’s shoulder, my eyes widening.

Oh, shit.

Nikolai charged towards us like a man on a mission, his hands squeezed into fists, muscles bulging. His jaw was clenched, a dark, primal anger radiating from him. I’d seen that look on his face before, right before he strangled someone to death for slapping my ass.

“Who’s that?” What’s-His-Face asked, frowning at the big, hulking man stomping our way, his body still dangerously close to mine.

I stepped away from him, my back hitting the brick wall behind me. “I’d run if I were you.”

He scoffed, looking offended. “Run? From him?” He hiked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m not scared of some two-bit thug whose arms are bigger than his brains—”

Nikolai grabbed a fistful of Elias’ hair and smashed his face into the wall. The idiot I warned to run cried out in pain, the crack of his nose breaking echoing in the air.

I sighed as he crumbled to the ground, blood trailing down the wall. “I told you to run,” I said, staring down at him crying on the grass.

“Don’t fucking talk to him,” Nikolai growled, picking him up by the back of his shirt. He pulled out a knife and held it to his throat.

“Nikolai, don’t. You’ll just—”

He plunged the knife up Emilio’s chin, killing him without a moment’s hesitation.

“—cause problems,” I huffed out, shaking my head.

He’d just killed a Cosa Nostra soldier in the house of the guy’s Don. Things were already tense between them and us. This would just cause more problems when people found out.

“Goddamn it, Nicky. You need to get that jealous temper of yours under control.”

Nikolai picked up Emilio’s lifeless body and threw him to the side like he was a piece of trash. Then he was right up against me, his body flush with mine.

I gasped at the feel of him, my mind going blank. He stared down at me, positively brimming with rage.

“Did he kiss those lips?” Nikolai whispered darkly, gripping my chin.

My heart slammed in my chest, my body on fire. It had been nearly two years since he touched me like this, and it felt just as amazing as it did the very first time.

“Answer me, love.” He leant closer, his voice skating over my skin. “Did you let him kiss you?”

“No,” I swallowed. I was incapable of resisting him when he was this close, when I could feel his body pressed against mine. When I could breathe in the intoxicating scent of his cologne, mixed with his alluring natural scent. It made it so easy to forget all the bad shit that's happened between us.

Nikolai’s mesmerising blue eyes trailed over my bare arms. “But you let him touch you, didn’t you?”

I rolled my eyes. “You seem to be forgetting one very important piece of information here, Nicky. It’s none of your business if he touched me, if he kissed me. I can do whatever I want. Fuck whoever I want. So, why don’t you take this right here”—I held up my middle finger—“and go fuck yourself?” I asked, smiling sweetly.

His gaze flicked to my hand and back to my face quickly. He moved with a deadly calm, wrapping his fingers around mine. The skin-to-skin contact was electrifying.

“Wha-what are you doing?” I shuddered as he slowly brought my hand down my body and between my legs. The way his hand was wrapped around mine prevented me from lowering my middle finger.

“You think I’m just going to accept that bratty attitude of yours, Tatiana?” he rumbled, his other hand brushing the inside of my thigh.

Anticipation zinged up my spine. My eyes darted around our surroundings, the music and laughter from the party floating in the air. We

were completely out in the open. Anyone could come walking around the side of the house and catch us.

“You’re going to stand here and fuck yourself with that finger you so rudely aimed my way,” he said huskily, staring deeply into my eyes.

I swear to God, I had to bite my lip to stop from whimpering. I couldn’t even put into words how good it felt having him so close, what his touch did to me.

“Nikolai,” I glanced from side to side, breathing heavily. “Someone could see.”

He chuckled darkly. “But you like that, don’t you, love? You like knowing we could be caught at any moment.” He hooked his fingers around my underwear and pulled them to the side, freeing my pussy. “The idea of someone stumbling onto us, seeing you at my mercy. It turns you on, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t bother answering because he knew I liked it. I did not by any means want to actually be caught. But the idea of it?

Yeah, it was thrilling as hell.

He brushed my own finger over my clit, making me gasp.

“Tell me what you feel,” he breathed against the side of my neck. “Are you wet for me, my Tati?”

There was no fucking way I could hold in the whimper that time. I had over six-and-a-half feet of pure muscle pressing me into the wall, whispering filthy things in my ear.

I was goddamn helpless, and he knew it.

“Yes,” I panted, swivelling my hips slightly, trying to increase the pressure. It might have been my own finger that was giving me pleasure, but

Nikolai was the one controlling it. Deciding where it was going, whether it was a light or a hard touch.

“How does my pussy feel, hmm?” he purred, pushing my finger through my folds. He stopped at my entrance, not letting me go any further. “I haven’t touched her in so long,” he practically whined. “I miss her.” He bit down on my neck and I groaned. “Does she miss me?”

“Let me stick my finger in and I’ll tell you.”

He leant back slightly, smirking down at me. There was a sinful look in his eyes, one that made my pulse fucking skyrocket.

He pushed my hand forward and my finger slipped right in, a moan falling from my lips. He pressed deeper and deeper, unwrapping his hand from mine as he went until my middle finger was knuckle-deep in my pussy. His grip moved to my palm, tight and restricting, not allowing me an inch to play with. I could still move my finger back and forth, but it wasn’t enough to get me to come.

And Nikolai knew it.

He knew I needed more, and I knew I wouldn’t get it until I gave him the answer he was looking for.

Stubborn, big-headed—

“Your pussy misses you,” I whispered.

He gave me a feral smile, one of pure, male satisfaction. He began moving my hand, manipulating it in a way that had my back arching from the pleasure. I moaned his name.

Nikolai watched me with hooded eyes, his arm disappearing under my sundress, along with mine.

“More, Nikolai, more,” I begged, completely lost in the moment, rolling my hips.

“Do you want my fingers, love? You need me to help?”

“Yes. Yes.”

He lowered his head, running his tongue over my bottom lip. “You know what I want to hear.”

I whimpered, my legs shaking. It had been so long since I’d come by someone else’s hand, so long since someone other than myself had given me pleasure. After what happened between us, I’d told myself time and time again that I’d never fall under his spell again. That we were done. Ancient history.

“I belong to you.”

Dark possessiveness shone in his eyes. His grip on my hand loosened, but when I tried to pull my finger from my pussy, he stopped me. I was about to yell at him, the word ‘asshole’ literally on the tip of my tongue. It vanished the moment I felt his finger slip inside me, right next to my own. We both groaned. Nikolai moved closer, his cock digging into my hip. It made the whole thing even hotter. Feeling how hard he was, knowing it was all because of me, was fucking exhilarating. Even after all those years.

“You’re so wet, baby. God, I’ve missed this. I missed your greedy pussy sucking me in.” He kept his touch light but firm. Exactly the way I liked it. Excitement burned in my veins. I moaned as the pressure between my legs built higher and higher, my orgasm approaching fast.

“I love that fucking sound,” Nikolai grunted, increasing the pace. “You better hurry, love. I think I hear someone coming. Unless, you want them to see you come all over my fingers? Is that what you want? Hmm?” He slipped another finger inside me and I cried out, gripping his shoulder and holding onto him as I bared down.

“Fuck, Nikolai,” I panted heavily, grinding against our hands.

I was going to come. It was right there. I could feel it inching closer and closer. The combination of his words, his scent, his touch, the prospect of someone catching us...it was all too much.

Fuck. Fuck.

Nikolai slammed his lips to mine to smother my cry as white-hot, blistering pleasure exploded inside me, spreading through me like a rushing wave. The feel and taste of his tongue in my mouth heightened everything. He kissed me sensually, slow and deep as he pumped our fingers in and out a few more times before pulling them out completely.

My head fell forward, resting against his chest as I tried to catch my breath. God, Nikolai gave the best orgasms. Without a shadow of a doubt. It was partly his skills, but a lot of it was just him. The way he knew me better than anyone. He knew exactly what I liked.

Taking a small step back, Nikolai brought our hands up between us, our fingers glistening from my orgasm. Hunger burned in his eyes. He stared at my wetness like a man starved, desperate to taste. His eyes locked onto mine, the intensity in his gaze hot enough to sear me as he slowly sucked our fingers into his mouth. My breath hitched.

He groaned, long and low, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

“Oh, fuckkkk,” he dragged out, hollowing his cheeks and sucking harder and harder, like he was trying to get every drop of me. There was something so fucking hot about a man who loved how you tasted. Who couldn’t get enough of it. Who—

“I’m telling you, man, getting a finger in your ass actually feels pretty good.”

I stiffened when Lukyan rounded the corner, one of Illayana’s guards, Christian or Luca (I could never tell which one was which) at his side.

They stopped dead in their tracks when they saw us; me pressed up against the wall, Nikolai with both of our fingers in his mouth.

Lukyan just smirked. “Are we interrupting?”

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Chapter Eight



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

I STARED AT TATIANA through my laptop screen, the slightly vacant expression on her face telling me she was reliving that moment between us at Arturo's birthday party.

I'd been sleeping when she called. The panic that gripped me when I first heard her ringtone had been so severe, it had literally stolen the air from my lungs.

Tatiana hadn't called me since the night our son died. She never texted, never tried to reach out to me. She actively ignored all of my attempts to get into contact with her.

So when I realised it was her calling, my first thought was that she'd been hurt. I thought that something must have gone so drastically wrong for her to contact me. It had been years of radio silence. Turns out, she just needed someone to talk to. And she'd chosen me.

It made a sliver of hope cut through my heart. Maybe there was still a chance that things could be mended between us, despite what she'd said the night before.

The subject of her mother was a touchy one. The conversation could go one of two ways: she could either laugh it off and switch the topic to something else, or she could just flip out and go off at you. It all depended on what mood she was in, really.

"Are you thinking about it, Tati?" I asked, lowering my voice.

I shifted on the bed, kicking one of my legs free of the blanket as I adjusted the position of my laptop. It had taken me all of two seconds to hack into their home security system. Even though she'd told me she was fine, I still needed to see it for myself, with my own eyes, to really believe it.

Tatiana jolted, her eyes flicking up at the camera. Despite the darkness surrounding her, I could see her perfectly. See those long, golden curls tied up in a messy bun, strands framing her beautiful, delicate face.

She cleared her throat, straightening her spine and standing taller. "No."

"I am," I breathed, my cock painfully hard at the memory of her taste. "I think about it every day. So, unless you'd like a repeat, I suggest you put that finger away."

Her eyes darted to her hand in the air, middle finger still aimed towards the camera, like she'd completely forgotten she was holding it up. Her eyes came back to me and narrowed in defiance. She tucked the phone between her ear and her shoulder and then held up her other hand, giving me both middle fingers with a bright, beaming smile on her face. Tatiana knew very well what happened when she tested me that way, what it would result in, and yet she'd done it anyway.

Was she doing it for a distraction? Hoping that I could help take her mind off the drama with her mother?

I was conflicted. On one hand, I wanted nothing more than to take advantage of the situation and act on the burning, sexual tension still blazing between us. Lust was literally pulsing inside me like a level ten migraine, except instead of being restricted to just my head, it was my whole body. Specifically, my cock. But on the other hand, I was worried about overstepping her boundaries and pushing her away.

The thing at Arturo's party had been different. I'd been completely consumed by jealousy, possessiveness and rage. The only thing that could have stopped me in that moment was Tatiana telling me to, which I was confident she would do if she didn't want anything sexual to happen. She was very strong-willed. She had no problem telling someone to fuck off if it's what she wanted.

I had to tread carefully. The last thing I wanted to do was compromise the little bit of progress we'd made so far. Luckily, I knew exactly how to find out if she was looking for a distraction only I could provide.

"Ty khochesh', chtoby tebya nakazali, lyubimaya?" Do you want to be punished, love?

She stared up at the camera, completely unmoving.

Here we go.

What she responded with would determine where it would go. If she laughed and switched the subject, it was a flat-out no. If she gave me attitude and said something bratty...

She gripped the phone in her hand again, a smirk on her lips as she said, "What are you gonna do, Nicky? Grunt and growl at me over the phone? Ooo, I'm shaking in my boots."

Excitement surged in my veins. I sat up a little straighter, taking a deep breath to try to hide the eagerness in my voice.

“What makes you think I won’t come down there and put you over my knee?” I zoomed in to her face, watching in rapture as her teeth dug into her bottom lip.

“I’ll just go inside and lock the door.”

I chuckled darkly. I was zoomed in close enough to see a shiver wrack through her body. Was it from the cold, or my words?

“You really think I don’t have a key to your house, Tati? Or that I wouldn’t kick down that door to get to you?” I tsked, enjoying the way her breath hitched.

“You can’t. My dad’s home.”

“Probably should have thought about that before you gave me that bratty attitude you know riles me up so much. Bad girls get punished, remember?”

Was that a moan?

I swear I could come from the sound of her moaning alone. I wouldn’t need anything else, not even to stroke my cock.

I was about to say something else when my bedroom door swung open so fast, it banged into the wall. I reached for my gun sitting on the bedside table and had it aimed at the doorway in under a second.

“For fuck’s sake, Lukyan,” I growled, glaring at my idiot younger brother.
“How many times have I told you to fucking knock?”

Lukyan gave me his signature mischievous smirk. His eyes flicked to the laptop sitting in my lap and back to my face. “Oh, my bad. Did I catch you at an inconvenient time?” he asked, pumping his eyebrows up and down.

“Get out,” I snapped, putting my gun down.

“Oo, is that Tatiana?” He stepped up to the side of the bed and squinted at the screen. “Is she about to do some sort of strip show or something?”

“What did he just say?” Tatiana shrieked in my ear, her face turned up at the camera, brows snapped together in an angry glare.

“Shit, is this live?” he smirked. “Kinky. Can I watch?”

“That’s it. I’m hanging up now.”

“Tatiana, wait—”

Beep, beep, beep.

I cursed, pulling the phone away from my ear to scowl at the screen.

Damn it.

Tatiana spun and marched into the house without so much as a glance back at the camera.

I slammed my laptop shut in frustration. It wasn’t even the fact that we’d been interrupted before things got sexual that bothered me. It was that it was an opportunity for us to progress forward and it was cut short, due to the idiot standing next to me. My scowl moved from my laptop to Lukyan. His hands flew up in surrender.

“Whoa, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m only here because Aleksandr sent me to get you. If you wanna blame someone for interrupting your little ‘phone sex’ session, it’s him.”

I sighed, placing my laptop on the bedside table next to my gun. “What does he want?”

Any trace of playfulness vanished from his face, the Volkov anger we all possessed quickly taking over. “It’s about Dominik. Fucker’s on the phone. Right now.”

I needed nothing further. As hard as it was for me to do, I put Tatiana and our chaotic relationship out of my mind and raced to my brother’s office.



“You’re not going to trick me into this, little nephew. Hand over control, or your father suffers.”

I stared at Dominik and the men at his back, anger pulsing in my body. I’d told Aleksandr the night Dominik made contact with us that the chances of him agreeing to a one-v-one were slim. “*Beyond slim*,” I believe was the phrase I used. Not only that, but that letting him anywhere near the house was a mistake. That we should have arranged the meet somewhere neutral. The last time Dominik was there, half of our house had been blown to pieces. I didn’t trust him not to try and pull a similar move.

But my brother was adamant about presenting a united front to our uncle, about showing Dominik that his attempt to take us out had done nothing but bring us closer together, make us stronger.

The atmosphere was tense. Lukyan and Illayana stood at my side, their usual playful and mischievous attitudes replaced with complete seriousness —a word I would have never used to describe those two.

Aleksandr’s new wife was standing a few feet behind him. Dark protectiveness radiated from her as she stared my uncle down, her fingers gripped tightly around the knife in her hand, like she was having trouble

refraining from stabbing him in the chest. Aleksandr didn't respond to Dominik's words, his posture remaining stiff, eyes hard.

"Fine. Remember that I tried to offer you a way out. You've made your bed, now you're going to have to lie in it. What happens next is on you." Dominik spun on the balls of his feet and stormed out of the room, the four MC men who came with him following him out.

Aleksandr looked to Lukyan. "Follow him," he commanded.

Lukyan nodded, taking off after Dominik. The chances of tracking him to where he was staying weren't great. He would assume we'd send someone to follow him once he left, and he'd take the proper precautions to ensure he wasn't leading us to his base of operations.

"Can you believe the nerve of that fuckwit?" Illayana growled, glaring after him. "Did he honestly think you'd agree to just hand everything over?"

Aleksandr didn't answer, the inner turmoil he was going through lying deep in the depths of his eyes. Drea offered him comfort and, much to my surprise, Aleksandr didn't balk at it.

I knew my brother well. If something happened to our father, he would blame himself, regardless of the fact that it wasn't his fault. He would just see that he had the chance to save him, and he didn't take it.

Illayana huffed, hands on her hips. "We should have killed him. Or at least captured him. Letting him go was a mistake."

"No amount of torture would have gotten Dominik to talk," I said.

"You don't know that. I've picked up a thing or two from my time in the Cosa Nostra. I could have gotten him to talk. Maybe."

I doubted it. Dominik might be a self-centred, backstabbing, arrogant asshole, but he had the Volkov resilience. We could have taken him apart

piece by piece and I don't think he would have said a damn word.

"Speaking of Cosa Nostra," Aleksandr began, giving Drea a small smile of appreciation before turning to face Illayana. "You should probably head back soon, don't you think? You've been gone for nearly a week."

Arturo returned to New York a few days ago to handle business. Illayana had chosen to stay behind to help search for Father, but she couldn't stay forever. Her place was by her husband's side, helping him in his fight against The Outfit.

"Nope." Illayana stretched her arms above her head, her bones cracking. "I told Arturo I'm staying until we find Father. It's okay, though. Tatiana is going to help out until I get back."

I tensed, my eyes snapping to her in shock. "What did you just say?"

"Tatiana." She said her name like I didn't fucking know who she was. "She's going to New York early before her classes start, to lend a hand with The Outfit." Illayana frowned. "What? What's with the face?"

Anger ran red through my brain. Tatiana was going to do *what*? It's not that I didn't believe in her. She was smart, capable. She had a unique ability to see things other people might not notice. Her skills weren't the issue. The fact that she was putting herself in danger was what made rage run rampant in my veins.

My hands balled into fists, teeth grinding.

Aleksandr glanced at me nervously. "Give us the room."

Illayana frowned again, this time at Aleksandr. Her eyes darted between the two of us as I began to pace. I couldn't stand still. The thought of Tatiana in danger filled me with such fear and restlessness, I felt like I couldn't breathe. It was like a huge, heavy weight was sitting on my chest, smothering me.

“Why?” Illayana asked, confusion in her voice.

“I need to talk to Nik alone. Go. Now, Illayana.”

Her lips pursed in agitation but she didn’t ask anymore questions. Drea gripped Aleksandr’s shirt and yanked him down to her level, planting a kiss on his cheek. My brother rolled his eyes, acting as if he didn’t enjoy the display of affection, but the small smile on his face said otherwise. She whispered something in his ear before letting him go. She nodded to me in farewell and then walked towards Illayana, looping her arm through hers.

“We haven’t really had a chance to talk. Let’s get to know each other. Aleksandr tells me you like to spar when you’re annoyed. Want to go a round?”

Eagerness sparkled in my sister’s eyes. She did love a good brawl, especially when she wasn’t in a good mood.

After Drea lead Illayana out of the room, Aleksandr closed the door and turned to face me.

“Don’t. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Tough,” he snapped, crossing his arms over his chest. “You need to go.”

I stopped pacing, surprised by his words. “What?”

“I know you, Nikolai. There’s no way you’ll be able to focus on anything except Tatiana, now that you know she’s involving herself in dangerous business. You’ll be of no use to me so distracted.”

“I can’t just leave.” Just the idea of it made a ball of guilt lodge itself deep in my stomach. I’d feel like I was abandoning my father if I did that.

“There’s nothing you can do here that you can’t do there. Take all the shit you need with you. See what you can find out about the MC gangs Dominik has under his thumb and send the data back to me. I can have Lukyan do all

the groundwork. You keep telling me I need to give him more responsibility.”

“You do. But I—”

“Plus, I need you to vet some new potential clients in New York. So it’s a win-win situation.”

My brows lowered. “That’s Valentino’s territory.”

“Not anymore. He got sloppy and got himself caught by an undercover cop in his ranks. He’s been charged with arms trafficking, murder, racketeering and about a dozen other offences. He and everyone in his organisation are going away for life. That frees up his territory, and I want to claim it before anyone else does.”

“Is that wise? With everything going on with Father and Dominik, we’re stretched pretty thin right now.”

“Grandfather is already sending men to replace the ones we’ve lost, as well as a new round of supplies. As my second, I need you to go and vet these new clients.”

Another round of shock blasted through me. I swear, at that rate, my heart was liable to give out with all of the fucking surprises people kept throwing at me.

Aleksandr blinked. “Don’t tell me you’re surprised? Who else would it be if not you, Nik?”

“I thought maybe Ivan? Or Vladimir?”

He shook his head, mildly amused. “I swear, it baffles me how someone so smart can also be so colossally stupid.”

I narrowed my eyes.

Gripping one side of his desk, he gestured with a flick of his head for me to grab the other as he said, “They’re both capable, sure.” We lifted the desk

together and moved it back to where it belonged. “But I trust you more than anyone, and there’s no one else I’d rather have as my second. Once we get Father back, everything will go back to normal. He will return to being *Pakhan*, I’ll be second again, and you can go back to the comfort of your tech. Until then, I need you on the ground floor, setting up for new clients. You can organise the meets so you can work it around Tatiana’s schedule. That way, you know she’s okay while you’re out handling business.”

I huffed air out through my nose in a snort as I picked up one of the chairs. “I know what you’re doing. You think that sending me to New York under the guise of Bratva business will make me feel better about leaving. It won’t, but I’m going anyway. You’re right. I’ll be completely fucking useless to you while I’m worried about Tatiana’s safety.”

Aleksandr began organising and tidying his desk as I placed the last of his furniture back in place. “There is another option. Tatiana is only getting involved in Cosa Nostra business because Illayana is here. We could just tell Illayana to go back. That way, neither of you have to go.”

I’d already considered that, and it wouldn’t work. Tatiana planned to move to New York anyway. She was already set to leave within the week. Even if Illayana returned, I feared it was already too late. Tatiana would want to help regardless. She would offer her services even if Illayana was there. She was going to involve herself no matter what, which meant I needed to be there to watch her back.

Thudding footsteps echoed around us. Aleksandr and I looked at the door just as it swung open, Lukyan panting and breathless.

“You...guys,” he huffed out, holding his side like he had a stitch from running so fast. “Come...quick. Illayana...Drea....they’re...” he shook his head, as if he couldn’t find the words. “Just come!”



The warehouse was in an uproar. Imagine yourself in a crowded stadium. Thirty seconds left on the clock. Tie-score. Everybody was screaming, cheering for their side to win.

That's exactly what Aleksandr, Lukyan and I walked into.

There was a mob of people surrounding the ring in the centre of the warehouse. All the gym equipment was sitting idle, not a single machine in use. Everyone was far too focused on the spectacle taking place; the fight between Illayana and Drea.

Aleksandr and I shared a look with one another, one that said, "This can't possibly end well," before we rushed forward. We pushed our way through the throng of people until we got to the front, catching sight of Illayana throwing a brutal right hook that made Drea's head snap to the side.

The crowd groaned as a collective, the sound echoing all around us. Aleksandr winced at the blood trailing down Drea's chin from her now-busted lip.

I dug into my pocket and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill, holding it up.
"On Illayana."

Aleksandr glared before matching my money with his own. "Drea," he grunted.

Of course he'd bet Drea. She was his wife, after all. It was still crazy to even think about. Aleksandr...married. Fucking crazy.

"You're both wasting your time," Lukyan said, pointing to them. "Look at those two. There's no way either of them are tapping out. The only way this fight ends is by KO."

He was right. With the way Drea and Illayana were laying into each other, it was very clear they both had zero intention of stopping until they were unable to fight any longer. They were both spattered with bruises. Illayana's eye was swollen shut. Drea was favouring her right leg, trying to keep weight off it, making me think my sister had gotten her into some sort of hold that was now causing her pain. Their knuckles were stained with blood, droplets of it on the floor beneath their feet. It was clear that neither of them were pulling their punches.

Drea threw a punch and Illayana caught it, her fingers wrapping around Drea's wrist and holding tight.

"Shit," Aleksandr cursed, face filled with unease.

I could understand why. Between the two of them, Illayana held a slight advantage with her long limbs and longer reach. Drea's skill was her speed, her ability to dart in and out, delivering quick and decisive blows before her opponent even realised what happened.

Now that Illayana had a hold on her, it meant she couldn't use her speed.

Illayana struck with a high kick to Drea's head. She blocked, bringing her free arm up and then charged, knocking Illayana down in a running tackle.

Illayana's grip loosened, giving Drea the opportunity she needed to yank her arm free and start pummelling into her with alternating punches from each hand.

The crowd roared at the brutality being unleashed. The viciousness.

One thing I'd noticed about Drea when watching her fight previously was she had this "brawler" type of attitude. She knew that, with her smaller stature, she had to be quick. Not allow herself to get too close to her opponent. But when she had them pinned, her fighting style changed from deadly and cautious to fucking animalistic.

Illayana did her best to deflect Drea's blows. When the opportunity presented itself, she went on the offensive, leaning forward to wrap Drea up in a headlock.

Drea struggled, ramming her fists into Illayana's side to try and get her to let go, but my sister held strong, gritting her teeth through the pain. Drea had only seconds left before she passed out. There was no way out. This fight was over—

Drea's hands ran frantically down Illayana's body, as if she was searching for something. Then Illayana cried out in pain, her back bowing. Breaking out of the hold, Drea scrambled away, hand to her throat as Illayana moved to her hands and knees, one armed wrapped around her side.

"What was that?" I whispered to Aleksandr.

He watched them closely. "Drea has a thing for pressure points."

"Ahh."

They glared at each other from across the ring before they rushed forward, starting all over again. You could tell they were both in pain and beyond exhausted, but it was like neither one of them wanted to be the first one to concede. As they went back to trading blow after brutal blow, Illayana's guards, Christian, Luca and Lorenzo made their way through the overflowing crowd, coming straight towards us.

"Heads up." I nodded to the Cosa Nostra men.

Aleksandr groaned, running a hand down his face. Like me, he knew exactly why they were approaching us. Also like me, he wasn't remotely interested in hearing it.

"You need to stop this," Luca, the more level-headed of the twins hissed.

"Do I?" my brother drawled, eyes never straying from the ring.

"Yes! Look at them! You need to get in there and break it up, or they're going to kill each other!"

It was a very reasonable assumption, considering how hard Illayana and Drea were going at each other. They were fighting like they hated one another, when really, it wasn't about that at all. It was about who was better. Plain and simple.

"I thought Christian was the dumb twin," Lukyan butted in, a smirk on his lips.

"Hey!" Christian barked, affronted, at the same time that Luca growled, "What?"

Lukyan pointed to the ring. "You never, *never* get in the middle of a chick fight. Not unless you want to lose an eye."

"Arturo will take *my* eyes if he finds out I just stood here and watched her get hurt like this." He looked at Aleksandr. "Either *you* get in there and stop your wife, or I'll—"

"Careful." Aleksandr's voice dropped dangerously low, his eyes snapping to Luca, full of anger.

"Excuse my brother." Christian laid a hand on Luca's shoulder, pulling him back as he took his place. "After the last punishment we all received, you can understand why we're all a little nervous. Arturo has given specific instructions for Illayana not to be harmed and, well," —he gestured to the

ring with a wave of his hand, Illayana and Drea locked in a grapple—“I’d say this constitutes as ‘harmful’, wouldn’t you?”

Lukyan frowned. “Okay, is this like a *Freaky Friday* kinda situation? Since when are you” —he pointed to Christian—“the voice of reason? And you”—he pointed to Luca—“the hothead?” He pursed his lips in obvious distaste. “It doesn’t suit you. I don’t like it. Switch back.”

Aleksandr and I rolled our eyes.

“Look,” I began, taking charge of the conversation. “You guys remember what Illayana did to Rayna, right? You were there?”

All three men winced.

“That’s *nothing* compared to what she will do to you if you try to stop her from fighting. You, on the other hand,” I said, looking at Aleksandr.

There was one man in the world my sister would listen to without a shred of hesitation. He wasn’t here, but Aleksandr was a very close second. He sighed, glancing at the ring uncertainly. I had a feeling that he was more worried about his wife’s wrath than Illayana’s.

“Lukyan’s right,” I pressed. “Those two aren’t going to stop until one of them gets knocked out. Best put an end to it now.”

Aleksandr’s grunt of agreement made Illayana’s guards almost drop to their knees in relief. He walked the few steps to the ring and slammed his hand down on the canvas floor. “Enough, Drea. End it.”

Illayana froze, looking his way with a frown on her face, her arms up in a boxers pose.

Drea pouted.

“Now,” Aleksandr said firmly.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Party pooper.” She rushed forward, her new burst of speed taking Illayana completely by surprise. Drea did what

could only be described as a “soccer tackle”, her foot smashing into Illayana’s shin and making her drop. Drea capitalised, scrambling onto Illayana’s back and locking her into a rear naked choke, her arms curling tightly around her neck. Her legs wrapped around her torso next, and then she pulled back. Hard.

Illayana thrashed, rolling from side to side, doing anything she could to get free, but it was no use. There was nothing she could do. The hold was air tight.

“Tap out, Illayana!” Luca yelled.

Lukyan scoffed. “She’s not tapping.”

Sure enough, not even three seconds later, Illayana’s head started to droop forward, her arms falling limp at her side. Drea instantly loosened her hold, guiding Illayana’s head down to rest softly on the floor.

The crowd went wild. Screaming. Clapping. Cheering.

Luca’s mouth was wide open. “You’re telling me she could have done that this entire time?” he growled as Christian and Lorenzo jumped into the ring to check on Illayana. “Why didn’t she just do that to start with?”

“Because Drea *likes* to fight. She doesn’t want it to end quickly,” Aleksandr grunted.

“This family is crazy. *You’re all crazy.* Look at your sister. Oh, fuck. Arturo is going to lose it. I’m fucked. *We’re fucked.* He—”

“Relaaaax,” Lukyan dragged out, cutting him off. “She’s fine. See.” He pointed to Illayana, who was slowly starting to sit up, a slightly dazed expression on her face. “You Cosa Nostra guys need to chill the fuck out. Women aren’t the fragile little creatures you think they are. They’re capable of so much more than you give them credit for. That sheltered box you keep

them in does nothing but put you at a disadvantage and waste all that untapped potential.”

Aleksandr arched an eyebrow at me in surprise.

Every now and then, Lukyan would say something...wise. It didn't happen very often, because for some reason, he liked to act like he wasn't as smart or insightful as he actually was. But when he did say something profound, it always took everyone by surprise.

Illayana shrugged off Christian and Lorenzo's attempt to help her stand and got to her feet.

My sister was a sore loser, so it surprised the fuck out of me when she broke into a full-blown smile, her teeth stained red with blood.

“You were holding back,” she said to Drea, offering her hand.

“Barely,” Drea responded, shaking her hand. “You’re very good.”

“So are you. And quick, too, so fucking quick. How do you move so fast?”

“Being barely five feet tall has its perks. You learn to take advantage of being smaller than almost everyone else.”

Illayana laughed and then gripped her side, groaning painfully. “I’ve never been so jealous of someone’s height before. You know I want a rematch, right? No holding back this time.”

Drea smiled, opening her mouth to respond, but she was cut off when Christian, Luca and Lorenzo all screamed, “No!”

Chapter Nine



TATIANA ANDREEVA

I WALKED INTO ARTURO'S office, excitement burning in my veins. I was dressed to the nines. Louboutin heels. Tight, form-fitting black slacks. Red lace corset that accentuated the ladies. A long-sleeved overcoat. Each piece designed and made by yours truly.

My hair was cut, coloured and blow-dried to perfection, not a single strand out of place. I had a fresh set of acrylic nails (red and black to match my outfit, of course) with a bloody dagger painted on my third fingernail on both hands.

I was nothing if not thorough when it came to matching my outfit with my accessories. First impressions were very important, after all. Who said you couldn't look good and kick some serious ass too?

Even though I didn't play an active role in the Bratva, I couldn't deny how thrilling it was to be there. To actually be getting in on the action for once.

I was more than happy with my life and the path I'd chosen, but sometimes I swear I was suffering from a bad case of FOMO. It wasn't like I wasn't interested in the life. I was. It was one of the reasons I jumped at the chance to help Illayana.

There was a part in me that loved violence, like all Bratva women. I liked guns. Knives. Grenades were my favourite; blowing shit up was a whole lot of fun. I was excited to get my hands dirty. Figuratively speaking, of course.

Arturo was sitting behind his sleek, black desk, dressed in an impressive three-piece suit when I walked in. His blue-green eyes were locked firmly on the iPad in his hands, brows set in a deep frown.

His brother, Vincenzo, was standing at his side. He was similar in appearance but also drastically different. The brothers shared the same bone structure: strong jawline, sculpted features, straight nose. The same dark hair, albeit styled differently. But that was where the similarities ended.

Vincenzo's eyes were a bright shade of green. Absolutely mesmerising to look at. He had this innate, boyish charm about him. One look and you just knew he was the textbook definition of "class clown". The outside world knew him as one of the most eligible bachelors in all of New York. The organised crime world, however, knew he was so much deadlier than he made himself appear.

Same as his brother.

"Miss Andreeva," Arturo greeted, putting his iPad down and getting to his feet. "Welcome." He offered his hand and I stepped forward, giving it a firm shake.

Vincenzo gave me a once over, his eyes racking me from head to toe before his lips curved into a mischievous smirk. "Nice to see you again... Tatiana, isn't it?"

“Yes.” We’d met once, briefly at Illayana and Arturo’s wedding before it all went to shit. He was just as hot in person as he was in the tabloids. “And that smirk won’t work on me,” I said, wagging my finger in the air.

He gave me a dazzling smile. “I do love it when they play hard to get. It’s my favourite game.”

“Quiet, Vin,” Arturo ordered. “Please, sit.” He gestured to the two armchairs in front of his desk with a wave of his hand.

I chose to remain standing.

He shrugged and took a seat, steepling his fingers. “I understand Illayana has informed you of our situation with Franco, and you’ve offered to help?”

“She mentioned you’ve been having some trouble with him. Something about how he keeps finding the locations of your stash and distribution houses, robbing and torching them. My classes don’t start for another month, so I figured I’d lend a hand. Illayana’s a stress head. If I can help alleviate some of that stress for her, I’ll do it.”

“Yes, she is,” Arturo agreed.

“No offence, Pretty, but how do you plan to help us? From what I understand, you’re not involved in the day-to-day business of the Bratva,” Vincenzo said.

“By choice, not because I couldn’t handle it. I have other plans for my future. But I’ve gone through the training, I’m resourceful and I’m a fresh set of eyes that could look at this situation from a different angle. One you may not have noticed before.”

“Illayana’s spoken very highly of you,” Arturo began.

“Of course she has. I’m amazing.”

“She said you’re smart, quick. Good under pressure. And that you’re the”—he looked to his brother—“what did she call it?”

“The Michael Scofield of the Bratva.”

My lips curved. She was always saying that. I didn’t really agree with it. I was good at spotting shit other people might miss, but that didn’t mean I was anywhere on the same level as Michael Scofield. The dude was fictional, but he was such a badass.

“Right. I don’t know what that means, but Illayana assures me it’s a good thing,” Arturo continued. “Now, I value my wife’s opinion, trust her word explicitly. She’s adamant you’ll be a great asset, and I believe her.”

“But?”

“*But* I’m sure you can understand why a man in my position needs to make sure the people in his employ are capable of doing the work.”

I stared at him for a moment. “So...what? You want to test me or something?”

“I guess you could say that.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, studying him closely. A flicker of annoyance shot through me. “Okay, fine. I’ll do your tests. If you answer me one question.”

He shrugged a shoulder, gesturing for me to go ahead.

“If I was a man, would these ‘tests’ still be necessary?”

“Ha!” Vincenzo clapped once, humour in his eyes. “Oh, she is good.”

Arturo glared at his brother before focusing back on me. “The fact is, Tatiana, that I don’t know you. I don’t know what you’re capable of, and I need to ensure that you’re able to handle not only yourself, but any situation you could encounter while acting on behalf of La Cosa Nostra.”

“And if I was a man, you wouldn’t be concerned about my ‘capability’. How about you just cut the shit, Arturo? Just admit it so we can move on to your stupid tests.”

His eyes narrowed in annoyance. “Fine. I’ll admit there’s *some* truth to it.”

Just as I assumed. The Cosa Nostra were old school. *Very* old school. Women were to be sheltered and protected, never put in harm’s way. Blah, blah, blah.

I knew Illayana’s appearance within the Cosa Nostra had caused issues. The soldiers weren’t used to taking orders from a woman. Or even *seeing* a woman so involved in the day-to-day life, for that matter. So, yes, in a way I could understand Arturo’s sexist thinking. It was all he and his men knew, after all.

Although I was sure my best friend was well on the way to changing that. “Good,” I nodded. “Let’s get on with it then.”

Arturo leant back, tapping his finger on the armrest. “My wife has mentioned several times that you’re quite observant.”

It didn’t really warrant a response, so I said nothing.

“When you entered, you scanned the room, much like Illayana does when she steps into an unfamiliar place. Something I have no doubt is part of your training. There are three ‘X’s’ hidden throughout the room. Without looking around, I want you to point them out—”

I triggered the mechanism in my right sleeve and the sliding rail strapped to my forearm quickly released a knife into my hand, my fingers curling around the hilt. I flung the blade right, hitting the small “X” drawn onto the wall as I activated the same mechanism on my left sleeve, another knife slipping into my palm. I twisted, sighted the next “X” I’d seen etched into the third shelf on the bookcase and released, my knife soaring through the air and hitting its mark dead centre. I reached into the holder around my waist, pulling out another knife. With a flick of my wrist, I sent it hurling

for the last “X” I’d spotted when I first walked into the room—the one right above Arturo’s head.

The Don of La Cosa Nostra didn’t flinch, didn’t bat an eye as my knife embedded into the wall directly above him.

Three targets. Three bullseyes. Under three seconds.

There was a beat of silence, both men staring at me in stunned surprise. Then Vincenzo spoke.

“God, I *love* Bratva women.” He leant forward, eagerness in his eyes.
“You seeing anyone?”

“Quiet, Vin.” Arturo looked at me. “A simple, ‘There they are’ would have sufficed.”

I shrugged, a playful expression on my face. “That was more enjoyable.”

“Yes. It seems you and my wife share the same affinity for knives.”

“It’s a Bratva thing.” I cracked my neck. “Was that it? If so, I’m immensely disappointed.”

Arturo looked like he wanted to smile but refrained. “Not quite. Vin, bring him in.”

Vincenzo left, returning a moment later with another man. He had dark blonde hair and pale skin. His hands were bound in front of him, a finely pressed Italian suit clinging to his body.

Vincenzo brought him to his knees in front of me and offered me a gun, holding it out to me.

Taking the weapon, I turned it over, admiring it. “This is one of ours.”

Arturo nodded. “Good eye.”

“And you want me to, what? Kill him? Is that the test?”

“Yes.”

I eyed him suspiciously. Something was...off. Surely it wasn't just to see if I had the balls to kill? It couldn't be that simple. Or idiotic, for that matter.

My eyes narrowed in concentration as I studied the man on his knees before me. The memory of his face flashed through my mind. I took all the facts into account before leveling my gaze on Arturo, one hand on my hip.

"You don't *really* want me to kill him."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, for one thing, this gun isn't even loaded." I threw it onto the desk, Arturo's eyes tracking it across the surface as it slid to a stop with the barrel pointing towards him. "And another, he's one of your men."

"My men?" he repeated, pointing to his chest. "How did you reach that conclusion?"

"Firstly, the suit. Brioni. Perfect cut, Italian made. The armholes are slightly higher and the overall shape is more streamlined. It's also the custom attire for all of your soldiers. Secondly, the earpiece. They can be hard to spot sometimes if you don't know what to look for, but I glimpsed it when he turned his head. Thirdly, he's armed. At least one gun in the waist, another strapped to his ankle. I highly doubt you'd allow someone you planned to kill to remain armed. And lastly, he was at your party. Security, if I remember correctly. Conducting perimeter checks. Now, I can only assume you wanted to see for yourself if I was as observant as Illayana claimed. Whether I'd be able to spot those minute details and, on the off chance that I couldn't, you gave me a weapon that wasn't loaded so I wouldn't accidentally kill your man."

All three men stared at me in stunned silence.

"What?" I asked, my gaze shifting between them. "Was I wrong?"

Vincenzo chuckled, that boyish charm of his oozing out in his laughter. “Not at all, Pretty. In fact, you’re dead on.” He looked at his brother. “Illayana told us this was a waste of time. Get up, Elio. The charade is over.”

Elio rose to his feet, a simple tug on his cuffs releasing them from his wrists.

“You may go. Thank you, Elio.”

“Boss.” He bowed in farewell and left.

“Are we done now?” I asked, glancing at my Cartier watch. “I’m getting kind of hungry.”

“Almost,” Arturo replied, looking beyond me.

Years of Bratva training told me to turn around—and to turn around *now*—my instincts literally *screaming* in my head that there was danger. I spun quickly, my arms coming up to block the knife coming right towards me, held by Elio. I kneed him in the stomach, took the knife from his hand, twisted his arm behind his back and kicked him in the leg, forcing him to his knees. His whole body locked, freezing on the spot when I pressed the sharp edge of the blade against his throat, holding his life in the palm of my hand.

Another round of silence went through the room.

Vincenzo was the one to break it again, his eyes burning with heat and focused entirely on me. “Seriously, are you seeing anyone? Let me take you out.”

Arturo sighed in exasperation at his brother. “You can let him go now.”

Because I was feeling slightly vindictive, I yanked Elio’s arm up higher, making him cry out in pain before finally letting him go. Flipping the blade,

I offered him the hilt as he slowly got to his feet. His glare was full of anger and embarrassment. He snatched it from my hand and turned to face Arturo.

“Boss—”

“Don’t make excuses. I hate excuses. Just go.”

Elio bowed, not daring to say another word as he rushed out.

“Alright, you’ve convinced me that you’re competent and can handle yourself. Let’s get down to business,” Arturo began, picking up his iPad. “You’ll be given access to all of our systems, anything you might need to conduct your investigation. I’ll need your fingerprint.” He held the device out to me and I placed my thumb on the screen. “My men will be made available to you when you need them. I am confident none of them have betrayed me. But, like we discussed earlier, Franco has somehow managed to get key information on my operations, which does suggest a leak of some kind. One I need to find and remove as soon as possible if I want to resume activities. This is where you’ll be coming in. I’ll be assigning you two bodyguards while you’re here. One of them will be my brother.” Vin waggled his fingers at me, lips curled in a smirk. “Because he is my second, it will verify to others that you’re working on behalf of La Cosa Nostra while also giving you added protection, should you need it.”

I nodded. “Good idea.” It meant that, if anyone doubted what I was doing or who I was working for, Vincenzo’s presence would be enough to squash any uncertainty. “You said two. Who’s the second?”

Arturo gestured for me to turn around. I glanced over my shoulder, anger slamming into me.

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

Chapter Ten



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

TATIANA IS GOING TO kill me.

The look on her face said it all. She was *fuming*. Enraged.

Actually, if there was an emotion worse than enraged, she was about three levels *above* that.

Outwardly, though, she showed no reaction to my sudden arrival. She was very good at only letting you see what she wanted you to. But I knew her better than anyone. I knew what that crinkle at the edge of her lips meant, what the slight crease in her brows represented. It meant she was focusing all her strength on not cussing me out in front of everyone. It meant violence, pain—mine, specifically.

She was dressed impeccably, as Tatiana always was. Her hair was straight instead of her usual curls, flowing down her back in a beautiful, golden waterfall. Her posture was perfect, strong. She vibrated complete and total confidence. She didn't give a shit what anyone else thought of her, because

she believed in herself and what she was capable of. That was all she needed. Even though she'd chosen not to be involved in the life, she was completely in her element. Like she was made for this. Made for me.

I'd been standing outside of Arturo's office from the moment she walked in. I'd overheard everything that had been said between them. Pride filled my chest at how amazing she was, at how easily she passed those ridiculous tests Arturo was insistent on putting her through. I'd told him it would be a waste of time. That Tatiana was better than any of his soldiers, and there was no way he'd best her or catch her off guard.

She was just too good.

Tatiana's angry eyes tracked me as I made my way to her side, like a predator watching its prey. My heart was racing, pounding in my ears. How was it that, after all those years, after everything that happened between us, my insides still turned to mush around her?

I was a thirty-two year old man, but around her I felt like a sixteen year old boy trying to find the confidence to speak to his crush.

"Nikolai, welcome," Arturo greeted, getting to his feet. He moved out from behind his desk and offered me his hand.

I shook it. "Thank you for allowing me to be here." As much as it annoyed me, we had to run it by Arturo first. I couldn't guard Tatiana while she was conducting Cosa Nostra business without asking for his permission.

He'd then told me he was planning to put two guards on her while she was here, so I simply suggested that I take one of their places.

"Of course. Illayana's family is always welcome. Well, except for one."

It wasn't hard to guess which one he was referring to. There was only one person who had the power to piss someone off that much.

"Right. Lukyan has that effect on people."

“Understatement of the century. Aleksandr mentioned that you’ll be checking out some prospective clients while you’re here?”

“Yes.”

“If you need any further information on them, let me know. I can have our tech guy, Renzo, help you.”

I nodded once. “Appreciate it.”

He looked at Tatiana. “Your apartment is ready. I’ll have a car made available for you to use while you’re here. There is a slight issue that I feel I should mention.”

“Issue?” Tatiana frowned.

“Your apartment was the last one available in the building, so it means the two of you will have to share. It’s a two-bedroom, so there’s plenty of space. Will that be a problem?”

Tatiana said “Yes” at the same time that I said “No.”

Arturo’s gaze darted between the two of us. “Right. Well, I’ll let you two sort it out then. Here are the keys.” He pulled out a set of keys and handed them to Tatiana. “The car is waiting out front for you and I’ve had your luggage loaded inside. You can spend the day getting situated and we can reconvene tomorrow to figure out the first step.”

“There’s no need. I’m ready to go now. I’ll just drop off my stuff and come right back,” Tatiana said, pocketing the keys. She was always one to get right to the point. “I need a list of anyone who was at the cash and distribution houses that Franco raided and torched, as well as a list of anyone who had access to them. Is there any video surveillance?”

“No. Cameras and drug houses don’t really mix.”

“Fair point. The fact that Franco keeps finding out the locations of your houses does suggest a leak within your organisation. If you’re sure it’s not

coming from one of your men, it could be as simple as someone tagging one of your vehicles.”

“Tagging?”

“With a tracker. It’s what I’d do. What better way to find out the coming and going of my enemy’s business than to track the vehicles their soldiers use? It would tell me everything I need to know: where they go, how long they were there for, if they stick to a schedule. I suggest doing a sweep of all your cars. Possibly all your belongings too—yours and your men. It’s possible to place a tracking device in anything these days.”

She had no idea how right she was on that one.

“That is actually a very good point.” He glanced at his brother. “Make it happen. Have all the men report to the house for a screening.”

“Aye, aye boss man.” Vincenzo pushed off the desk, sauntering towards Tatiana with a hungry look in his eyes that pissed me the fuck off. “Just one question, Pretty. How did you know that gun wasn’t loaded?”

“The weight was off,” Tatiana shrugged, like it was the simplest of answers. “A standard Glock 19 weighs roughly 1.7 pounds, fully loaded. It was too light.”

That hungry look grew, swallowing his eyes whole. “You. Me. A bottle of scotch and a can of whipped cream. Need I say more?”

I growled, stepping forward to place myself between them. It forced Vincenzo back a step, that stupid boyish smirk on his lips that he was well known for still on his face.

“So you *are* seeing someone. That’s cool. I can take a hint.”

“No, you can’t,” Arturo scoffed.

“You’re right,” Vincenzo snickered. His head darted around me to look at Tatiana. “What’d ya say, Pretty? You ever had someone lick whipped cream

off your entire body?"

Before I knew what I was doing, my hand was around his throat and I was forcing him back, his body bending over the desk. I growled again, this time right in his face, my teeth bared like a fucking animal.

At that point, I felt like one. My emotions were running high. I *hated* it when anyone flirted with Tatiana. Even more so when I could see it with my own fucking eyes.

Vincenzo was everything I wasn't: fun, light-hearted, charming. He could make Tatiana smile. I wanted to kill him.

There was a click and then I felt the barrel of a gun pressing against my temple.

"I kindly ask that you release my brother." Arturo spoke calmly, rationally. Yet I could still hear the underlying threat in his tone.

Movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention. I glimpsed Tatiana, her own gun pointed directly at Arturo's head, a dark look in her eyes that said she was willing to blow his head off to protect me.

I ignored Arturo, focusing entirely on Vincenzo, staring deeply into his eyes so he could see how serious I was.

"You make one more inappropriate comment or suggestion towards her again, and I'll kill you."

A tiny bit of the humor vanished from his eyes, replaced by fear. He had more than enough air to breathe. I wasn't completely cutting off circulation. But he was definitely struggling, gasping for breath. It would be so very easy for me to snap his neck and be done with it.

Arturo cocked his gun. "I will not ask again."

"It makes no difference to me how many times you ask it. I'm not letting him go until he understands," I replied coldly, my gaze still locked on

Vincenzo's. "Do you? Understand?"

He wheezed. "Got it."

I leant forward, lowering my voice to barely above a whisper so only he could hear me. "She's *mine*. You hear me? You hit on her again and I'll cut you up into a thousand tiny pieces and spread them across New York, so you can never be buried whole. So your soul can never find peace. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal," he gasped.

"Good." I released him, taking three steps back.

Arturo tucked his gun away and ran to his brother's side, helping him back to his feet. His gaze snapped to Tatiana, who was still pointing her weapon at him.

She chuckled awkwardly, a tense smile on her face as she lowered her gun. "Well, that escalated quickly." She aimed an accusatory glare my way. It was the first time she'd really acknowledged my presence since I'd entered the room. The moment we were alone, though, that would change. She was going to let me have it. I was sure of it.

Vincenzo had one hand to his throat, breathing heavily as Arturo whispered harshly in his ear. Hand to his shoulder, he guided Vincenzo out of the room and then turned to face me.

"You do something like that again and I'll kill you. I don't care if you're Illayana's brother. Now get the fuck out of my office." He held the door open, the message clear.

I arched an eyebrow. He sounded completely sincere but I highly doubted he'd go through with it. Illayana would never forgive him for killing one of her brothers.

Family was something we'd grown up valuing over anything else. Sure, we loved to beat on each other sometimes (okay, most of the time). But there was also nothing we wouldn't do to protect one another. It was one of the reasons why, no matter what Arturo said or did, he was safe from me. Harming him meant harming Illayana. For as long as my sister loved him, I wouldn't hurt him.

The same couldn't be said for his annoying little brother though.

"I'd apologise for his behaviour," Tatiana began, walking towards the door. "But it's your own fault for bringing him here."

"Hardly. He's not here for me. I'll have those lists you asked for emailed to you soon."

"Perfect. Thank you." She walked out, me close on her heels. She didn't say a word, not that I really expected her to. At least, not yet. I knew she had a lot to say though.

When we got outside, there was a car waiting in front of the house, one of Arturo's soldiers standing next to it. He handed the keys to Tatiana and then walked back into the house. There were two guards stationed at the front door. More patrolling the grounds. We weren't entirely alone, so it surprised the fuck out of me when she spun and punched me right in the face.

A Russian curse flew from my mouth as I stumbled back. "*Blyad, fuck, Tatiana! What the fu—*"

She swung again and I reared back, just managing to avoid her fist. Pain flared across my jaw from her first strike. She kept on swinging, forcing me to block as I retreated.

"You self-centered"—strike—"egotistical"—strike—"big-boned jackass."

Strike.

Strike.

Strike.

“Damn it, Tatiana. Enough!” She aimed a kick to my side and I grunted at the impact, my arm curling around her leg to hold her still. Her balance was perfect, despite the fact that she was standing on one leg and wearing six-inch heels.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Nikolai?” she growled, her fists up, guarding her face.

“You really need to ask?” She tried to yank her leg out of my grasp but I held on tight, refusing to let go.

She wanted a confrontation? Well, she was fucking getting one.

“The second you agreed to do this, you should have known I’d be here. You seriously think I’d let you walk into a potentially dangerous situation without me?”

“*Let me?*”

Fuck. Wrong words to say to Tatiana.

The thunderstorm of anger that rolled over her was enough to scare even me.

“Now, wait a second. Just calm—”

She twisted, placing her hands on the ground to stabilise herself as she swung her free leg around to kick me right in the fucking face. The force of the blow rocked me, making me lose my grip on her and tumble to the ground. The taste of blood filled my mouth.

Goddamn it. I forgot how hard she kicked when she was pissed off.

Tatiana pounced on me, the sharp edge of a blade pressing to my throat, making me stiffen.

Okay, she’s moved past the stage of “pissed off” and entered right into “totally bat-shit fucking crazy” territory.

Her legs were either side of my body, her soft curves moulding against me like she was made for me, fit me perfectly. It wasn't the first time Tatiana had held a knife to my throat, and I highly doubted it would be the last, either.

"You think I need your protection, *Nicky*?"

I narrowed my eyes and she glared back.

"*Need?* No." I grabbed her wrist, twisting the blade away from my neck and rolling us so I was now on top, the blade pressing against *her* throat instead.

Her breath hitched, eyes dilating.

"But I *want* to be there in case you do. You expect me to eat, sleep, do *anything* knowing you could be in danger?"

"I expect you to trust that I can handle myself," she hissed. Her elbow swung up, clocking me in the nose. My head snapped back and she throat punched me.

I choked, the knife slipping through my fingers as my hands collared my throat. Tatiana was skilled enough to make sure her strike wouldn't cause damage, but it still hurt. A lot.

She shoved me hard in the chest and I fell back. We scrambled, Tatiana getting to her feet and me only just managing to make it to one knee before she swung a powerful roundhouse kick to my face.

I blocked, my arm coming up to protect the side of my head. Then I went on the offensive, leaping to my feet to attack. Back and forth, back and forth, we traded blows, moving inch by inch across the gravel driveway. Arturo's guards watched us with bewildered expressions, not quite sure what to make of the whole thing.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” I grunted, rearing back to avoid her strike and then throwing a punch.

“The big deal is—” she deflected my punch, guiding my fist past her body as she twisted away. Then she kneed me in the stomach, making me groan. “—that I came here to get away from you.”

I rammed into her with my shoulder and she lost her balance, falling ass-first into a giant, muddy puddle.

“Ugh, Nikolai!” she screeched in horror. “Do you have any idea how *expensive* this fabric is?”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. She just looked so adorable with that pouty look on her face, her arms stretched out in disgust and dirty, brown water dripping from her hands.

“Are you...are you seriously *laughing* at me right now?” she brimmed with outrage.

“I can’t help it,” I chuckled, watching her slowly get to her feet.

She shook the water off and brushed a strand of hair out of her face, blowing out a breath. “I meant what I said earlier, you know. I told you I needed space. Why would you follow me here?”

“I already told you why. Just the thought of something happening to you makes it impossible for me to breathe. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. Involving yourself in Cosa Nostra business is dangerous. *Franco* is dangerous. I wasn’t there for you the last time you needed me. I refuse to make that same mistake again. Please don’t ask me to.”

Her eyes bored into mine, silence grating between us. A silence that spoke volumes. It was very rare to render Tatiana speechless. Indecision flashed across her face and suddenly I felt guilty for putting her in this position.

Finally, she exhaled. “Fine,” she all but groaned. “But let’s get something clear right now. You’re here purely as an observer. And the muscle. I don’t want you to interfere or try to take over.”

“I would never.”

She gave me a deadpanned look. “Yes, you would.”

“Okay, I would. But I swear I won’t.”

“You better not. This is *my* time to have some fun. I don’t need you ruining it with your Alpha male, ‘Look, my dick’s bigger’ attitude.” She flicked her hands to get rid of any access water and stepped out of the puddle. Her lips pursed in obvious disgust, looking at the mud on the bottom of her heels. “These were brand new,” she whined, plucking them off her feet.

“I’ll buy you a new pair.”

Her eyes widened slightly in surprise, then narrowed suspiciously. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to butter me up by buying me shit.”

She had me there. Tatiana had a long list of hobbies. Running. Reading. Binging ridiculous television shows. And shopping. Buying new clothes, shoes, accessories. I knew I had to make it up to her somehow. By being there, I’d thrown her off balance. The least I could do was replace her ruined shoes.

“Lucky for me, I don’t care,” Tatiana continued. “Louboutins. Spring Fall Collection. Size ten.” She handed them to me as she walked past, heading for the car.

I turned and followed, her heels dangling from my fingers at my side. Arturo’s guards were still staring at us strangely, a mix of bewilderment and shock on their faces. Not that I cared. They could think whatever they wanted about the situation. Their views on women were offensive and

outdated, to say the least. It was 2023. How they could still think the way they did was beyond me. The more they saw Illayana and Tatiana in action, the more likely they'd be to change their opinions and ways.

So, yeah, I didn't really mind that she'd just kicked my ass all over Arturo's front yard. It might make them think twice before imposing their sexiest ways on her and my sister in the future.

Tatiana unlocked the car and opened the door, throwing her wet coat into the backseat. A red lace corset clung to her body like a second skin, her luscious curves on full display. Memories of me gripping those curves...her thighs, tits, hips... soared through my mind, heating my blood. My cock throbbed when she bent over, ass in the air as she leant into the car. Fuck. The amount of times I'd had her in that exact same position. On my bed. The hood of my car. Over the dining room table—

“Get those thoughts out of your head, Nicky,” she said, not even looking back, her voice muffled inside the car.

“What thoughts?” I smirked, stepping closer. I rested my forearm on the roof and leant forward, crowding her. “You’re not even looking at me. How do you know what I’m thinking?” I was careful not to actually touch her, keeping my lower half a hair’s breadth away from hers.

Sexual energy snapped between us. She knew how close I was, even though we weren’t touching. She could *feel* it.

So could I. Our bodies literally craved each other’s, and when you were standing this close to something you craved, you were hyper aware of it.

She glanced over her shoulder at me. Her hands were plastered firmly to the back seat, supporting her weight. “You think I need to look at you to know what you’re thinking?” she asked, voice low.

My eyes ran down her slender back before returning to her face. “Was there a point to this?” I waved a hand at her body. “Or was it just to torture me?”

She stepped back, finally getting out of the car. “A little bit of both.” She held up her phone, shaking it lightly in the air. It must have been in her coat.

“Don’t act like you don’t enjoy being tortured, Nicky.” She went to walk away but I blocked her path, my arm shooting out to grip the roof of the car right next to her head, caging her in.

“The name, Nicky…retire it.”

“What do I get if I do?”

“I can tell you what you *won’t* get. You won’t get an apartment full of spiders and roaches and every other creepy crawly creature I can think of.”

She gasped. “You wouldn’t.”

“You really want to test how much I despise that fucking nickname, Tati?” I threatened.

Her outrage turned to an angry glare. “Fine. Consider it…‘retired’,” she mocked, using air quotes.

I smiled brightly, flashing my teeth. I’d won. For the moment, anyway. Knowing Tatiana, though, she was already in the middle of planning my death. Specifically, how to make it look like an accident. She *despised* insects of any kind. Especially if they were the type that had one too many legs. Illayana and Lukyan used to tease her all the time about how she’d be able to handle torture and never break, but if someone brought a spider into the room, she’d crumble.

Tatiana climbed into the driver’s seat and I followed, getting into the passenger side.

“Maybe I should drive,” I said nervously, watching her put her seat belt on.

“You swore you wouldn’t try to take over.”

“I’m not. I’m just offering to drive.”

“And I’m just offering to punch you in the throat. Again.”

I slammed the door shut and quickly put my belt on as she started the car. Her hands ran over the steering wheel admiringly, an eager look on her face.

Back home, there was a kind of unspoken rule between all of us that Tatiana wasn’t allowed to drive. Ever.

She knew how to, of course. That wasn’t the issue. The problem was that she had a slight road rage issue, and by slight I mean *severe*.

I wasn’t the praying type, not by a long shot. But fuck, I prayed. I prayed to whatever deity there was in the sky that we made it to our destination in one piece.

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Chapter Eleven



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“THE LIGHT IS GREEN, you idiot, go!” I screamed, pressing down repeatedly on the horn as I glared at the car in front of me. Nikolai grunted when I took off, his body slamming back into his seat as I dropped my foot down on the accelerator.

I swerved in and out of the lanes, racing down the highway towards the apartment building directed by the GPS. Nikolai’s face was filled with unease, one hand on the roof and the other gripping onto the centre console like he was afraid he was going to fall out of the car or something.

I was well aware of the fact that he didn’t like my driving. Nobody did.

“Slow down, Tatiana.”

“That was a red light you just went through, Tatiana.”

“No, you can’t run down the cyclist just because he takes up half the lane, Tatiana.”

Blah, blah, blah.

At one point, Nikolai had even installed extra seat belts in his car because he was *that* terrified of my driving.

It wasn't like I was a bad driver or anything. But I guess I wasn't necessarily a good one either. Driving was therapeutic for me, believe it or not. And right then, I needed some fucking therapy.

Conflicting emotions warred inside me for supremacy. I was happy. Angry. Annoyed. Excited. Frustrated. Nikolai's presence had surprised me. The last thing I expected was for him to follow me here, especially with everything going on with the Bratva at the moment. With his father.

The fact that he had spoke volumes, quelling some of that burning anger I still held towards him. Despite how hard I'm sure it was for him to leave his family at such a time, he'd done it. For me.

In a way, he'd been right. I *should* have anticipated his arrival because I *did* know him. I knew that the depth of his protectiveness had only gotten worse over time.

I'd mistakenly assumed, after our last conversation at his house, that he would understand why I needed to distance myself from him. What surprised me the most though was how *glad* I was to have him here with me. How...relieved I was. It had completely shocked me, to be honest, and was one of the contributing factors as to why I was so mad. I didn't *want* to feel that way—like I needed him.

That's what made the whole thing so fucking hard. Different parts of me felt different things. I just wanted to drop to my knees and scream for my emotions to get a fucking grip. It felt like I was being pulled into a thousand different directions, and I wasn't sure where I was going to end up.

There was also the very troubling fact that I felt safer when he was around (physically, anyway. Mentally was a whole different story).

I knew I couldn't rely on him again. Not when last time all it took for him to question me was some dickhead spouting false bullshit about me. How did I know that wasn't going to happen again?

Every day, though, bit by bit, he was working his way back into my closely guarded heart. It scared me, because I didn't know how much longer I could hold out against him. Especially when he kept doing and saying all the right things.

"Tatiana, please, for the love of God will you *slow down*? We're not in a hurry."

"Maybe I am." In a hurry to get out of that car. Away from him.

Being stuck in such a confined space, his scent filling the air, made me lightheaded. I always loved the way he smelt.

His eyes rolled my way. "Why? Is there a sale at Saks or something?"

"Ha. Ha. Very funny." I swerved left abruptly and Nikolai's head thumped against the window, making him grunt in pain. "Whoops. Sorry. Accident."

He glared at me and I smiled back.

A car cut me off as I was attempting to switch lanes and I braked, blaring my horn. "Ever heard of indicating, you bone-headed dipstick?!" I yelled out the window before focusing back on the road. "So, what hotel do you want me to drop you off at?"

"I'm not staying in a hotel."

"Uh, yes you are." He couldn't stay with me. He just couldn't. I'd crumble the first fucking night. "There's no way we're sharing an apartment, Nikolai."

"There's no way we're not. Do you think I'm an idiot? You've made it very clear you don't want me here. I know you wouldn't tell me if you were

going out, chasing down leads. By staying at the apartment, it guarantees you won't be sneaking off in the middle of the night without me."

"What if I promise I won't do that?"

"You'd be lying, and we both know it. So save your breath, because there's nothing you can say or do to change my mind. Let's talk about the job. You already have some ideas about where the leak in the Cosa Nostra could be coming from?"

My hands gripped the steering wheel tighter, my knuckles turning white. That was his stern voice. The one that said "I'm not budging on this so you might as well move on and fucking forget it." Well, I'd move on, (for the moment), but I had no intention of forgetting it.

"I have a few, yes. It depends on certain factors. Scenario one: one or more of their vehicles have been tagged, and Franco is monitoring their every movement. He knows that the best way to cripple Arturo's operation is to make it as hard as possible for him to make and distribute his product."

"Sounds plausible."

"Scenario two," I continued, "is that they really *do* have a rat, and they're relaying whatever information Franco is after directly to him."

"Plausible as well," Nikolai replied.

"I think there's more to it though."

He looked at me. "In what way?"

"I don't think this is just about taking Arturo down. I think Franco wants more. I think he wants to embarrass him."

He frowned thoughtfully. "What makes you say that?"

"Think about it." I drove into the underground parking lot of the apartment complex. "If Franco really wanted to destroy the Cosa Nostra, why hasn't he declared all-out war? Why hasn't he just attacked Arturo

head on at his home? He surely has the location of it. No, he's *dragging* it out, trying to make it as humiliating as he can for Arturo and his family. Maybe as revenge for his brother's death?"

"It makes sense. If that's the case, it changes the motivation behind the attacks."

"And that matters?" I asked, glancing at him.

"It may or may not," he replied, relief washing over his face when I parked the car and turned off the engine. He acted like he was in mortal danger whenever he got in a car with me. Big baby.

"Attacks driven with the need to humiliate have the potential to be more dangerous. There's no limit to how far someone will go to humiliate someone else if they feel they deserve it. Simply taking them down won't ever be enough. They'll want to tear down and tarnish everything they've ever built."

I winced slightly. "That doesn't bode well for the De Lucas."

"This feud between them and the Gambinos goes back *years*. Arturo's father stole Nero's bride. That would have certainly been a blow to his ego. He spent years hating Alessandro for it, and no doubt taught his brother to feel that same hate. Arturo is the result of that one act. Add in the fact that Arturo also killed Nero, and Franco has more than enough reason to come at the Cosa Nostra with everything he can think of. There's lots of bad blood."

I stepped out of the car and he followed. He opened the trunk and frowned, pulling out my two suitcases.

"This is it?" he asked. "This is all you brought?"

"It's all I could bring without having to pay for extra baggage."

His frown increased. “Since when has money been an issue for you? The Bratva pays very well.”

Yes, it did. The problem was that it wasn’t *my* money. It was my dad’s. For years, I’d gone on and on about having my freedom. A life of my own. This was a step in that direction, but I would never truly be independent if I kept taking my dad’s money, having him pay for everything for me. I needed to start paying my own way. Support myself.

It was going to be hard. So, so hard. I was well aware of the fact that I was spoiled. Anything I’ve ever wanted, my dad provided. Clothes. Cars. Ponies. “No” was not a word in my dad’s vocabulary when it came to material possessions. It made me accustomed to a certain type of lifestyle, one that would be hard to walk away from.

But I was determined to do it, to make it on my own.

“I’m not taking Dad’s money anymore,” I said proudly, squaring my shoulders.

“You’re not—how do you plan to support yourself while you’re here?”

“I’m going to get a job.”

He stared at me in complete befuddlement, not saying a word. Then he burst into a fit of laughter. Anger snapped my spine straight and I glared at him.

That fucking—

I wound my leg back and kicked him right in the shin. His laughter broke off in an instant, shouting out in pain.

“*Blyad! Fuck!* Tatiana! That hurt!” He was crouched down on one knee, gripping his shin with both hands.

“Good,” I snapped, popping the handles up on my suitcases and storming off, dragging my luggage behind me.

“Tati, wait.” Shuffled footsteps echoed after me. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of turning around, not even to see him limp, which I was ninety-nine percent sure he was doing. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

I ignored him, my head held high.

“I was just surprised,” he said, finally catching up to my side. “You’ve never had a job before.”

“So? That doesn’t mean the idea of it is fucking laughable.” I smashed the button for the elevator, refusing to look at him. I hated how embarrassed I felt. Yes, I’d never had a job before. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t capable of having one.

“I’m sorry, Tati. I shouldn’t have laughed. I really am proud of you. Most people in your position wouldn’t even bother. They’d be content living off family money. You’re going to do it on your own, and that’s amazing.”

I knew Nikolai well enough to know when he was being fake and when he was being sincere. He meant every word he’d just said.

“Thank you.”

The elevator arrived with a *ding*, the door opening wide. Nikolai helped me bring the suitcases in and then we were off, up to the seventh floor.

“What kind of job are you going to look for?” Nikolai asked, nudging me lightly with his shoulder.

“I have an interview at a small cafe across the road from campus.”

“A cafe?” he asked it plainly, but the twinkle in his eyes told me he wanted to laugh again. “I can’t picture you serving others.”

“Why? You think I’m that superficial?”

“What?” he frowned. “No. What I think is that you’ll punch the first customer who speaks rudely to you.”

“And that would be...bad?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“If you want to keep your job, yes, it would be very bad.”

The elevator plopped us out into a well-lit hallway. Nikolai took my suitcases and led the way until we got to 7c. I pulled out the keys and unlocked the door. Nikolai’s phone rang as we began to make our way inside. He left my suitcases by the door and pulled out his phone, answering it.

“*Da? Yes?*”

I left him to talk privately and walked further into the apartment. It was everything I expected it to be: charming, classic, elegant. A neutral palette filled with spatterings of black, white and greys. It had a spacious lounge room and a clean-cut kitchen with modern appliances. The bedrooms were at opposite ends of the apartment, which filled me with relief. The last thing I needed was one of those cliche movie moments where the main characters run into each other late at night. I placed my suitcases in front of one of the rooms and turned to face Nikolai as he made his way into the apartment.

“It’s nice. Spacious, like Arturo said.”

“Yes. Very.” He wandered around aimlessly and I couldn’t help but notice the somewhat vacant impression on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He stopped at the floor-to-ceiling window and stared out at the view.

I admired his long, muscular frame. The streak of sunlight shining on his hard, angular face, the way it made his eyes sparkle.

“Nikolai.” He didn’t look at me, continuing to stare outside like a man utterly consumed by his thoughts. “What is it? Who was on the phone?”

“Aleksandr.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Depends on your definition of the word, I suppose.”

I had a feeling that I knew what was troubling him. “Your father?”

“Mmm.” He moved about the room, lightly touching the furniture with his fingers. “There hasn’t been any luck finding him. Considering how things ended at the meeting with Dominik—”

“You’re worried he’s dead.” Guilt weighed heavy on my heart. Illayana told me how the meeting went. Dominik’s final words. I could see why he was so concerned.

“I’m worried that if he’s not dead yet, he soon will be.” He turned his face away. “The animosity between my uncle and my father is great. I was surprised to hear he hadn’t killed him the moment he got his hands on him, to be honest. After Aleksandr refused to hand over control of the Bratva, I can only imagine what Dominik has done to him—”

“Don’t.” I went to him, the agony on his face making it impossible for me to do nothing. I clasped his hands in my own tightly. The sudden contact shocked him, his eyes snapping to me. “Don’t think about it, Nikolai. Don’t imagine it. It won’t do you any good. I’ll tell you what I told Illayana. Have faith in your father. He’s strong. He won’t go down without a fight. I know it.”

“So do I,” he sighed. “I just feel so...helpless. Like I should be doing more.”

The guilt I felt increased tenfold. “Nikolai, you should go home. Your father needs you. Your family needs you. You shouldn’t be wasting your time here with me.”

“Is that what you think? That I’m just wasting my time?” he shook his head, moving his hands to cradle the sides of my face. “Watching out for you could *never* be considered a waste of time, Tati. Never. Haven’t you

realised by now that there is nowhere on this Earth I wouldn't follow you? Nothing I wouldn't do to keep you safe? Nothing I wouldn't sacrifice? Yes, my father needs me. But there's nothing I can do there that I can't do here. If we get even a hint of where he could be, I'll go."

"And I will too." I gripped his wrist tightly, pushing my face deeper into his hand. "Because no matter what's happened between us, I'll always be here for you when you need me. Always."

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Chapter Twelve



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“**S**O, YOU’VE VISITED THREE out of the five cash houses that have been raided by Franco, Mr Bianchi?” I asked the Cosa Nostra soldier sitting across from me as I scrolled through the information Arturo provided on the iPad.

5'11. Thirty-one years old. Child legacy, meaning he came from a long line of men who'd worked for the family: his father, uncle, brother, great-grandfather.

There was nothing alarming about him. No red flags I could see on his file. Apart from his attitude, that is. But that wasn't surprising, considering all the men I'd interviewed before him were exactly the same. They were all rude, obnoxious and downright dickish.

It was now 7 p.m. and he was the last soldier I had to talk to. I'd gone through the list of men Arturo gave me within a few hours, talking to each one and picking at their story. Based on the evidence in front of me and

their responses to my questions, I was inclined to side with Arturo and Illayana. I didn't believe any of them betrayed the Cosa Nostra. Not actively, anyway.

It hadn't been a particularly enjoyable time, I'll admit. Every single one of them weren't happy to be questioned by an outsider. A *woman*. They looked right through me, talked like I wasn't even there. Some of them even completely ignored me and tried to talk to Nikolai instead, who was standing behind me the whole time like a bodyguard. Or Vincenzo, who was barely paying attention, staring at his phone. It was as if a woman in charge was ludicrous to them.

Had we been home, and I was dealing with Bratva soldiers and not Cosa Nostra ones, we'd be having a much different conversation. One where I let my blade do all the talking.

But as much as I was dying to put these men in their place, I couldn't. I was a professional, there to do a job and help my best friend. I couldn't go around seriously injuring or maiming every soldier who spoke disrespectfully to me. Not then and there. The day would come though.

"Mr Bianchi?" I pushed, staring the man down.

He had a slim frame and dark brown eyes that were glaring at me like I'd just gravely insulted him by addressing him.

"What?" he barked in a tone filled with contempt. I had to work hard not to leap across the table and shove my knife down his throat.

"You visited some of the cash houses raided by Franco, correct?"

"So? Lots of us did. It's our job." He muttered something under his breath in Italian and Nikolai growled behind me.

I wasn't fluent in Italian, so I had no idea what he said, but based on the anger I could feel radiating from Nikolai, it wasn't anything good.

“Yes, it is your job. And surely you can admit how strange it is that Franco has been able to find the locations of those houses within hours of their set-up?”

“I don’t have to admit a damn thing, and I certainly don’t have to sit here and be questioned by *you*,” he sneered, jumping to his feet.

Vincenzo snapped to attention like a dog who just heard the word “treat”, his whole body stiffening. He stepped forward, as if preparing to intervene.

I stood, holding a hand up to stop him. “That’s fine. If you want to leave, you’re welcome to.”

He gave me a smug look, like he’d just won some battle between us.

I turned to Vincenzo. “Are you able to inform Arturo that Rocco Bianchi is unwilling to answer my questions, please?”

Vincenzo smirked, bowing his head slightly. “Of course, Miss Andreeva.” He managed to make it one step before Rocco spoke, his voice laced with panic.

“Wait! No. Don’t.” He huffed out an annoyed breath before plopping back into his seat.

“Fantastic,” I said brightly, making my way around the table, my finger dragging along the surface behind me as I walked. “Can you tell me what exactly your duties are at the cash houses?”

“It’s my job to collect the cash from the dealers and drop it at the houses. I’m barely in there for longer than ten minutes.”

“I see. And how many dealers are you responsible for?”

“I handle the lower east side. So roughly twenty to twenty-five dealers.”

“You meet with them all personally?”

“Yes.”

“How often?”

“Once a week.”

“At the same place? Same time?”

“Yes.”

I nodded, hopping up onto the table to sit down. I’d changed into a different outfit before leaving the apartment, since my scuffle with Nikolai had left me soaking wet. In more places than one.

But I wasn’t going to think about that because if I did, I wouldn’t be able to focus. It was hard enough being in the same room with him, feeling his eyes follow me wherever I went.

Even though the black pencil skirt I was now wearing went down to my knees, it still drew Rocco’s attention when I crossed my legs, his eyes snapping to my calves and back.

“So it’s safe to say you have a bit of a routine?”

“Uh..yeah, I guess.”

“Have you ever noticed anyone following you while you’re doing your collections?”

“No.”

“You’re positive?”

He scowled. “I know how to spot a tail.”

“I’m sure you do.” I dropped just enough condescension into my voice to piss him off. It worked, his jaw clenching. “Have you ever met Franco?”

“No,” he answered immediately without a single shred of hesitation. But the slight shift in his posture when I asked the question made me suspicious.

“Never? Not once?”

“Are you deaf, as well as stupid? I said no.”

Touchy, touchy.

“Do you believe the rumours going around that there’s a rat in the Cosa Nostra?”

“I haven’t heard any rumours, and even if I did, I wouldn’t believe them. You’d have to be a fucking idiot to betray them.”

“What about Diego? He stole over \$50,000, then cut and ran.”

“That right there is the perfect example. You heard about what they did to his body?”

Oh, yeah, I’d heard alright. Anyone even remotely connected to the life had heard what happened. Diego was one of the men who tried to rape Illayana when Nero, the former Don of the Chicago Outift and Franco’s brother, had kidnapped her. She killed him before he got the chance, so you’d think that’s where his punishment would have ended. But it didn’t. Not by a long shot.

Arturo skinned him. He sliced the flesh right from his bones from head-to-toe. Then, he cut out his tongue and his eyes before chopping off his head and leaving the pieces right in the middle of Central Park, artistically arranged like some serial killer madman.

After his body was found, Arturo leaked an anonymous story to the press, saying he’d been killed as retaliation for betraying the wrong people. Of course, no one knew it’d all been done post-mortem. Only the people who were there that day knew that. Arturo wanted others to think it had been done while he was alive. It was more terrifying that way. Talk about sending a message.

“He was stupid enough to steal and he got what he deserved.” Rocco squared his shoulders, his chest puffing out with what I was sure was pride. “Four generations of Bianchi men have worked for the De Luca family. I’d give my life for them. I’d kill for them. I’d do *anything* they ask of me,

even sit here and have my honor questioned by a woman who has no business being involved in this life. Arturo is my Don. He pays my wages, takes care of me and my family. He treats us with respect, despite the stain of my younger sister. If he hadn't killed Diego, I would have done it myself, because that fucker didn't deserve to live after betraying the Cosa Nostra."

I glanced over my shoulder at Nikolai, my brows raised slightly. Rocco spoke with such passion, such devotion to Arturo and his family. I found it hard to believe he would ever do anything wrong against them.

Nikolai shrugged, the first movement he'd made since these interviews began. He'd done quite well with not interfering, which was a shock. Especially when some of the soldiers started talking shit, saying disrespectful and derogatory things. I'd expected him to step in after the first insult, but true to his word, he was letting me handle it. I appreciated it.

"Okay." I hopped off the table, running a hand down my front to straighten my clothes. "That's all I have for you. You can go."

Rocco hesitated, his eyes darting to Vincenzo before moving a single muscle, as if he was searching for permission. Like me saying the words wasn't enough for him.

You can't kill him. You can't kill him.

Vincenzo said nothing, an awkward silence quickly filling the room. Rocco cleared his throat and got to his feet, buttoning up his suit jacket. He bowed his head respectfully to Vincenzo in farewell and turned, preparing to leave.

"Think you're forgetting something there, Rocco," Vincenzo warned.

"Boss?"

He didn't say a word, staring the man down, letting him figure out the issue for himself. With a begrudging sigh, Rocco faced me, bowing his head

the slightest bit before stomping out of the room.

“He’s usually not so rude,” Vincenzo commented, frowning in thought. “Wonder what’s gotten into him.”

“The same thing that’s gotten into all the others.” Women were nothing but trophies to be paraded around in the Cosa Nostra. He didn’t feel I deserved his respect, so he didn’t want to give it. “I appreciate what you did, but I would have preferred you not to interfere.”

“I know when you asked me to stay out of it, I agreed—which, by the way, I still don’t entirely understand—but I couldn’t allow that. It took everything in me not to put him—or any of them, for that matter—in their place when they spoke to you so rudely. You’re here as a guest, conducting work for us. That entitles you to a certain level of respect.”

“Agreed,” Nikolai grunted.

I sighed, picking up my iPad. “Ordinarily, I’d agree too, but this is a different situation. Your soldiers think women have no place in business, and the only way that will change is by *showing* them exactly what we’re capable of.”

Illayana was well on the way to achieving that already. She’d told me at Arturo’s party how she had to punish several soldiers for disrespecting her. A punch to the face here, a well placed kick there. As Mrs Don, she had the authority to do that.

“Having a man jump to my defense every time someone insults me undoes all the hard work Illayana is trying to do,” I finished, putting my iPad in my handbag and draping it over my shoulder.

“Okay, I see your point.” Vincenzo opened the wide double doors of the interrogation room and led us out. “What are your thoughts on him anyway? Rocco? Do you think he could be working against us?”

“No.” That, I was confident in. “He cares too much about the Cosa Nostra to ever do anything harmful to it. But, he’s definitely hiding something.”

“Really? Like what?”

“I don’t know. He’s *hiding* it.”

Vincenzo looked to Nikolai as he walked us down the hallway towards the front door. “Do you agree?”

“Yes,” was all he replied with.

Vincenzo paused in the foyer, waiting as if he expected Nikolai to say more. When he didn’t, Vincenzo shook his head. “You don’t talk much, do you?”

“Depends who I’m talking to,” Nikolai grunted.

“Oh, it’s like that, huh?” he laughed softly.

Nikolai didn’t bother talking to people he didn’t like. He would reply with the basics: “Yes.” “No.” “Fuck off.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll grow to like me.”

“I highly doubt it,” Nikolai replied plainly, his face conveying his absolute boredom with the entire conversation.

“You will. Everybody does,” he winked. “Come on, I’ll walk you guys out,” he said, heading towards the door.

“Actually, Illayana asked me to grab something from her room.” I put on a bright smile, acting completely innocent. Nikolai glanced at me. His face didn’t change, staying exactly the same, but I could see the questioning look in his gaze.

Vincenzo didn’t suspect a thing, shrugging a shoulder. “Whatever. I’ll show you where it is.” He led Nikolai and I up the circular staircase until we reached the top floor, stopping in front of a set of double doors. “This is

their room. Just don't touch any of Arturo's shit. He gets pissy about that kind of thing."

"Got it. We'll meet you downstairs."

Vincenzo frowned slightly. I kept the smile on my face and he eventually shrugged, walking off. My smile dropped the second he stepped out of view. I gripped Nikolai's hand, rushing back towards the stairs. "Come on."

"What are you—"

"Shh." I peeked over the railing, just catching a glimpse of Vincenzo stepping off the last stair and into the foyer. Taking light, quick steps, I raced down to the second floor, dragging Nikolai behind me. I turned right, went straight to the third bedroom and rushed inside, closing the door behind me.

"Quick, find the light switch." I felt along the wall when light suddenly flooded the room.

"There. Now will you tell me what's going on?" Nikolai asked, hands on his hips.

"No time. Just keep watch." Blinking rapidly to adjust to the sudden light, I looked around the room.

It was as grand as you'd expect from the Don of the Cosa Nostra: four-poster bed, ornate gold oil paintings on the walls, expensive mahogany furnishings.

There were slight feminine touches, which reassured me that I was in the right room: make-up on the dresser, heels on the floor, pink clothes on the bed.

There were only two women staying in that house, so I was fairly confident I was in the right place. But just in case, I did a more thorough check. Any doubt was squashed when I glimpsed the photo frame sitting on

one of the bedside tables. A photo of Gabriella with her parents. *Gotcha, bitch.*

I reached into my handbag and pulled out a pair of black latex gloves, snapping them on. I pulled out the small ziploc bag holding the leaves of poison ivy next, carefully taking them out.

Nikolai watched me with calculating eyes as I moved about the room, rubbing the poison ivy onto everything I could. I lifted up the blankets, smearing it into the sheets.

The pillow was next, and then I moved onto the dresser, opening the first drawer. It was filled with lacy underwear and bras. *Perfect.* Taking them out one by one, I ran the poison ivy through the inseam of each undergarment.

That evil, vindictive side of me reared its beautiful head, making me feel all giddy inside.

This will teach you to flirt with my best friend's husband, you bitch. I loved a little payback.

“Tati,” Nikolai hissed, his ear pressed against the door. “Someone’s coming.”

Fuck.

I shut the drawer and quickly put the poison ivy back into the ziploc bag. Rushing to Nikolai’s side, I took off the gloves and stuffed them into my handbag. The *click-clack* of high heels was unmistakable. We were going to get busted. An idea popped into my head, and before I had the chance to talk myself out of it, I gripped Nikolai by the lapels of his suit jacket and slammed him up against the wall, sealing my lips to his. He didn’t miss a beat, kissing me back with earnestness, as if this had been our plan all along —to find a room to fuck in. His hands moved down and grabbed my ass tightly, squeezing with just enough pressure to make it sting. Then he lifted

me up, wrapping my legs around him. A deep, masculine groan rumbled down his throat, one that set my pussy on fire.

God, he tastes so good.

His tongue was soft and he moved it well, like he was trying to fucking devour me.

One touch was all it took. It was like throwing kerosene onto a fire. We were going at each other as if it was the very first time. Biting. Kissing. Fucking dry-humping, rubbing up and down.

I was vaguely aware of the door opening. To be honest, I should have been paying more attention, considering we were just doing this as a cover. But the moment his lips touched mine, all thoughts just vanished from my mind. All I could focus on was his body against mine.

“Ahhh! Who the fuck are you?!” the shrill voice of Arturo’s ex screamed.

Nikolai and I didn’t stop, ignoring her completely. I’d like to say it was to sell the ruse, but that’d be a bold face lie.

It was because I didn’t want to stop.

Our kiss turned feral, our teeth clashing, hands digging deep into each other’s skin. My skirt was stretched up and I was wearing the thinnest thong I owned, so I could feel *everything* as Nikolai moved me, making me grind my pussy down against his hard stomach.

“Fuck,” I moaned into his mouth. Pleasure zinged up my spine.

“What the hell are you doing in here?!”

Nikolai ripped his mouth away and I literally whined, trying to bring his lips back to mine. “What the fuck does it look like?” he snarled, glaring at Gabriella.

She took a step back at his viciousness, visibly scared. It turned me on even more. I loved it when he got all growly.

He kissed up my neck, biting and nibbling at my skin. “Stay and watch if you want. Tati doesn’t mind, do you, love?”

Gabriella gasped in outrage, her face turning bright red.

I laughed. “You think Mrs Vanilla over here could handle watching us?” I moved my hips faster and didn’t even try to fight the moan falling from my lips.

“Get out of my room!” she yelled.

“We’re borrowing it right now. Can you come back later?”

Vincenzo stepped into view, shocked as all hell to see what was going on.

“Vinny! Look what they’re doing! Stop them!”

“Uh—” he was confused, that was blatantly obvious. Confused how we ended up in Gabriella’s room when he took us to Illayana’s. “Right. Come on, you two. I’ll find another room for you to fornicate in.”

“But this one has an audience,” I whined, dropping my feet back to the ground.

“You’re disgusting,” Gabriella hissed.

“I’m already angry you interrupted us,” Nikoali growled. “Don’t test me by insulting my woman.”

“It’s my bedroom!”

“There, there, darling. It’s alright.” I patted Nikolai on the chest and then interlocked our fingers, leading him away. “You know where to find us if you want to learn a thing or two,” I winked, walking out, followed by Nikolai and Vincenzo.

Gabriella slammed the door shut behind us.

There was a moment of silence and then I burst into laughter. Nikoali chuckled softly, which was about the equivalent of a fit of giggles from him.

“Do I even want to know what you two were *really* doing in there?” Vincenzo asked, raising his brows.

“Nope. You don’t wanna know.”

“Didn’t think so,” he laughed softly. “I don’t like her anyway, so it’s no sweat off my back. Neither does Arturo. He was about to get rid of her but Illayana told him not to.”

“Really? Why?”

“No idea. Something about how she’s got something planned for her. I dunno. Come on, let’s go. I’ll *personally* escort you to your car, since the two of you clearly can’t be trusted roaming the house on your own. Wouldn’t want Arturo to come home and see you guys fucking on the stairs. I wouldn’t mind the show though,” he winked.

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Chapter Thirteen



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“YOU GOING TO TELL me what that was all about?” I whispered in Tatiana’s ear as Vincenzo escorted us back down the stairs.

“What?” she smiled.

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t act all innocent with me. We both know you’re anything but.”

As much as I wanted to believe that display upstairs was for our benefit, I knew it wasn’t. At least, not at first. It started because she needed an excuse as to why we were in that room. Like always, though, the moment we touched it shifted into something *more*. Something raw. Animalistic. It had gone from zero to fucking a hundred in half a second.

“Alright, fine,” she huffed. “Twist my bloody arm, why don’t you. It was just a little payback. That’s all.”

“Payback?” I frowned. “For what? You’ve never spoken to the woman before.”

“So? I need to speak to someone first to have a reason to fuck with them?”

“Generally, yes.”

Vincenzo stopped to talk to one of the soldiers who came running into the foyer. I grabbed her arm, keeping her from taking another step.

“Spill it, Tatiana.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “The bitch deserved it.”

“I’m sure she did. Care to tell me why?”

“She keeps flirting with my best friend’s husband. So I rubbed poison ivy into her underwear,” she said proudly.

Of course. Makes perfect sense.

“Isn’t that something Illayana should be doing?” My sister wasn’t the type to let other people deal with her problems. She also inherited the dark jealousy that us Volkovs were well known for. So I was surprised to hear she hadn’t killed her. Especially after what she’d told Aleksandr and I at Arturo’s party.

“Oh, she’s got her own thing planned. And it’s diabolical. But you fuck with her, you fuck with *me*. I had to do something. It’s my job, as the crazy best friend.”

I felt the overwhelming urge to smile, a feeling that only ever arose around Tatiana.

Vincenzo made his way over to us and we turned our attention towards him.

“What’s going on?” Tatiana asked.

“You were right.”

“I usually am. About what?”

“We found these on our cars.” He held out three tracking devices, the flashing green light on each one indicating they were all still active.

Tatiana and I reached for them at the same time, our hands colliding. A shock ran through me. Our eyes locked, the look on her face confirming she’d felt it too. It was like our bodies *knew* we had unfinished business. I genuinely wondered if there would ever be a day where I wasn’t affected by her. By her touch, her taste, her presence. I highly doubted it.

I turned the tracker over, studying it closely. “Standard issue. Can easily be purchased online.”

“I don’t see an anti-tampering device,” Tatiana added.

“Nor do I.”

“What does that mean?” Vincenzo asked.

“It means they wouldn’t have been notified that you found and removed them.”

Tatiana rotated it in the air, getting a good look at it from all sides. “How long do you think the battery life is on these?”

“Most only have roughly six to eight hours. But I have seen them last up to four weeks. We can search the model number online and find out exactly, though.”

Tatiana nodded. “We should find out before we put them back. If they’re close to running out, they’ll be looking to switch them before they die.”

Vincenzo’s head darted between us as we spoke. “Hang on, hang on. Why would we put them back?” he questioned, looking confused.

“They’re using these to track your soldiers and find out where they’re going. More specifically, where you’re setting up your houses.” She gave the device back to Vincenzo. “Now that we know, we can use it against them.”

“You mean set a trap?” Eagerness shone in his green eyes.

“Exactly.”



I stared at the screen of my laptop, rubbing my temples, hoping to alleviate some of the pain throbbing behind my eyes. By the time Tatiana and I got back to the apartment, it was close to 11 p.m. After Vincenzo found the tracking devices, we came up with a plan to set a trap for Franco.

It was unclear whether or not he was there personally during the raids. The opportunity to find out was too promising to miss. Worst case scenario, we'd get one of his high ranking Lieutenants instead.

Tatiana went straight to bed, but there was far too much on my mind to even try and sleep. I decided instead to stay up and see if I could find my father, or at the very least, Dominik. I had no luck. None of my facial recognition programs picked up anything. There were hundreds of “possible matches” that turned out to be nothing. It took me hours to go through them all, but I had to be sure. It was like they'd literally dropped off the face of the Earth.

It shouldn't be possible. Especially in this day and age. There was a camera on every corner of every street. Sometimes two or three. How was he avoiding them?

It was the second time in my life that I'd felt like a complete and total failure. My jobs in the Bratva were security and tech, both of which I'd failed miserably at over the last few weeks.

Even though I'd never envisioned Mila's betrayal, I should have prepared for it.

I accepted responsibility for what happened, and I needed to fucking fix it.

With a deep sigh, I leant back in my chair, running a hand down my face. I'd been staring at the screen for so long that my vision was starting to blur. I knew I needed rest, but I just couldn't bring myself to go to bed. Not yet. This nagging feeling was itching at me, scratching at my brain and taunting me. I was missing something vital. Crucial. And I wouldn't be able to sleep until I figured it out.

"Nikolai."

I turned, Tatiana's soft voice startling me. She stood in her doorway in a tank top and a pair of short pajama shorts, a black silk robe hanging over her shoulders. I knew she'd put the shorts on for my benefit, because she always slept in her underwear.

"It's 2:30 in the morning." Concern flashed across her face. She moved, taking a seat at the table across from me. "Have you slept at all?"

"Not yet."

She sighed, shaking her head. "You should really get some rest. You must be exhausted."

I shrugged a shoulder, never taking my eyes off her. *You're so fucking beautiful.*

I wanted to say the words. They were right there, on the tip of my tongue. But no matter how badly I wanted to, I couldn't get them past my lips. I was

afraid to scare her away. In some ways, she reminded me of a skittish animal. Whenever anything from our past came up, she bolted in the opposite direction. That included compliments.

“What are you doing?” she asked softly, her eyes darting to my laptop and back.

She knew what I was doing. She was just trying to get me to talk about it in the hopes of making me feel better.

“Why are you up?” I asked instead of answering.

Her lips pursed. “You’re deflecting.”

I was, but I needed to. I couldn’t think about it anymore. I couldn’t think about what my failure to protect my family had resulted in, what was happening to my father right at this moment. If he was even alive—which, if I was being honest, I didn’t really believe.

Aleksandr turned down Dominik’s offer, and my uncle’s last words consumed my thoughts every second. *“Last chance, little nephew. Hand over control or your father suffers.” “What happens next is on you.”*

I’m not sure what Tatiana saw on my face, but she must have realised how desperately I wanted to avoid talking about it.

“You want a distraction,” she nodded, a look of determination in her eyes as she disappeared back into her room, returning a moment later with a deck of cards. She slammed them down onto the table, taking her seat.

“What’s this?” I asked, pushing my laptop to the side and bracing my elbows on the table.

“I’m giving you what you want. We’re going to play poker.”

I cocked my head, arching an eyebrow as she shuffled the deck. “Poker?”

“Yep.”

“No offence, but I don’t think a game of poker is going to help distract me.”

“Why not?” she began to deal out the cards. “It’s always worked in the past.”

“That’s because we played *strip* poker, Tatiana. It wasn’t the game that was distracting. It was you. Naked.”

Her eyes slammed on me, hand frozen in the air. Sexual tension snapped between us, hot and full of burning, sizzling energy. It was something we used to do all the time. We couldn’t go out like regular couples. Hiding our relationship was an idea we were both happy with, but it came with negatives. So, we’d come up with ways to entertain ourselves. After sneaking her into the main house (and let’s be honest here, fucking in the hidden passageways in the walls), we’d lock ourselves away in my bedroom and do all sorts of filthy, depraved things. Things a nun would have a heart attack over. Sinful, dirty things.

Our version of “strip poker” wasn’t the same as what I’m sure everyone else’s was. Whoever lost the hand didn’t just have to take off an article of clothing. They also had to do a dare, usually of the sexual nature, because those were the best ones.

Fuck, I was getting hard just thinking about it.

We stared at each other, neither one of us saying a word. The tension continued to build and build, so thick that it suffocated the air around us.

Tatiana resumed dealing. “Five card draw? Same rules?”

Despite the excitement pulsing through my veins, I had to say, “we don’t have to do this.” The last thing I wanted was for her to feel pressured, like it was her job to distract me. It wasn’t.

“Shut up and pick up your cards.”

A chuckle slipped free and I did as she demanded.

We both looked at our cards. Tatiana dumped one and I dumped three. Since she was the dealer, she dealt out the replacement cards before glancing at her hand again, lips pursed.

“I bet socks,” Tatiana said, projecting an air of nervousness I didn’t entirely believe. Like I mentioned before, our rules for strip poker differed from the way other people played. One person bet an article of clothing. Depending on how confident you were in your hand, you could match their bet. If you won, *they* had to remove the piece of clothing they originally bet. Or you could raise it by betting a different piece. Like pants. They could either fold, which meant they’d lost the hand and had to remove whatever article of clothing they’d originally bet, or they could match. Whoever had the lowest playing set of cards had to remove their pants.

You could play several different ways. You could bluff your way through, pretend you have a shit hand so the other person feels overconfident and bets higher, thinking they’ll win. Which was what I had a feeling Tatiana was doing at that moment.

Or you could come out hot, bet high, and hope you had the better hand.

I studied her closely, tapping my fingers on the table. “Raise. Shirts.”

Tatiana smiled. “Match.” She showed her cards.

Four of a kind.

Sighing, I got to my feet and unbuttoned my shirt, rolling my shoulders back as the fabric slipped from my body.

Chapter Fourteen



TATIANA ANDREEVA

EASY, GIRL. Heat spread out across my chest, my heart pounding. It was like he was literally sculpted by God himself. Tanned skin. Hard, defined lines. Bulging muscles. Chiselled abs.

I'd always had a serious weakness for Nikolai's chest. One look was all it took to make tears run down my thighs. Add in the 'T' tattooed over his heart and I was so fucking close to crumbling right there. To intentionally losing every round so I'd wind up naked in front of him.

I had no one else to blame but myself. By agreeing to the game, I'd put myself in exactly the position I was trying desperately to avoid.

That was Future Tatiana's problem, though. Present Tatiana was going to take full advantage and let FT handle the repercussions.

Nikolai's muscles flexed as he reached across the table to grab the cards.
“You sure you want to keep playing?”

“I’m not the one who just lost.”

He smirked. "Right."

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. He knew how much I loved his chest. Looking at it. Touching it. Licking it...the fucker lost on purpose. Probably to try and distract me. Well, he was going to pay for that.

"What's your dare?" he asked as he lazily shuffled the cards, a very smug look on his face. Any dare I chose would be a reward for him too. What could I make him do that would drive him crazy?

I pushed my chair out a little so I was away from the table. Nikolai watched me carefully, every shred of his focus on me as I straightened my leg out.

"Lick up my leg until I tell you to stop."

He didn't move at first, staring me dead in the eyes. I recognised that dark, feral look. It was a very, very dangerous game we were playing. And I didn't fucking care.

Nikolai got to his feet slowly and walked over to me. He dropped to his knees at my feet and stared at my leg admiringly. His rough, calloused hands wrapped around my ankle, lifting it into the air. He used a soft, light touch, those strong, powerful hands capable of so many dangerous things holding me with such tenderness and care. It made me fucking *burn*, pressure building in my pussy.

He leant forward and kissed the base of my ankle.

My breath hitched.

I felt his tongue next, running leisurely up my leg. My whole body was on fire, lit up like a fucking Christmas tree. I started to squirm, the overwhelming urge to grind against something making it impossible for me to stay still.

Fuck, this was a bad idea, I thought.

His tongue was wet and warm and, when I pictured it on my clit, I swear I could have come right there and then.

His hand snapped out, gripping my other thigh and he roughly pushed my legs further apart as he moved up and up, his tongue dragging over my hypersensitive skin. *Fuck...shit....fuck.* He pushed my shorts up out of the way as he continued to go higher.

“Stop,” I panted when he reached the apex of my thighs.

He stopped immediately, but kept his tongue pressed to my skin, staring up my body from between my legs. His eyes were dilated, his pupils swallowing almost the entirety of that beautiful, crystal blue. He looked at me with this savage, hungry look, like he wanted to eat me alive, to take a bite out of my skin.

I licked my lips, my chest rising and falling hard as I tried to catch my breath. “Your deal,” I whispered, my heart slamming in my chest.

He moved his face away and got to his feet, standing over me. Little Nicky was standing to attention, straining in his grey sweatpants, every glorious inch on display.

“You better hope you don’t lose the next round,” he rumbled, his voice deep and thick.

I smiled. “Same to you.” What I had planned next would make him snap. I was sure of it.

He returned to his seat and dealt out the next round, his movements stiff.

My hand was shit. Not even a single pair. I got rid of four cards, which wasn’t a good look and showed I had shit all.

Nikolai gave me a feral smile. He dumped two, and dealt out the replacement cards. I watched him carefully for tells, but Nikolai was hard to

read on a normal day. There were high stakes in this game. So, it was virtually impossible to try and read him now.

“I bet pants.”

I looked at my cards. I now had two pairs. Not a bad hand, but not necessarily a great one, either.

I could match, and probably lose, or raise it. Bluff the shit out of him and hope he folded.

Go big or go home.

“Raise. Pants *and* underwear.”

He arched an eyebrow. He glanced at his cards and then back to me, calculation in his gaze. I put on a calm, casual air, hoping he would see it as me being confident in my cards. I should have known better though. Nikolai could read me like a fucking book.

“Match.”

Shit.

He showed me his cards first and I wanted to pull my damn hair out. I wasn’t a big sore loser, like Illayana. But still, I didn’t like to lose. Nobody did.

He had three 7s and two Ks—a full house. His full house beat my shitty two-pair any day.

The wolfish smirk on his face sent my heart racing. He leant back, casual as you please, and waited, his fingers tapping lightly on the table. I wasn’t the type to back out. I got to my feet and didn’t hesitate to pull my shorts and underwear down, stepping out of them.

Nikolai’s whole body locked in place. He was deathly still, his eyes plastered to my pussy. I couldn’t blame him. I kept my girl clean and very well groomed. Water and pineapple were a part of my daily diet.

“Turn around,” he commanded harshly.

“Is that your dare?” I asked, my tone light, playful.

“More like a polite request.”

“A request usually comes with the word ‘please’.”

“You don’t like it when I use the word ‘please’. It’s too soft for you. Turn the fuck around.”

Goosebumps broke out over my entire body. He was right. In this context, I didn’t like when he said “please”. I craved that rough, dominating side of his personality in moments like this. Where he told me what to do, what to say, when I could come.

But you can bet your ass that if this was any other scenario—like him asking me to make him a sandwich or something—he better damn well use the word “please”. Otherwise, I’d cut his balls off and hang them on my Christmas tree as decorations.

I turned slowly, giving him plenty of time to admire the view. When I faced him again, his hands were clenched into fists, squeezing so hard that his knuckles turned white. It was like he was using all his strength to keep his hands right where they were.

His eyes were wild. Full of hunger and desperation. I liked it when he was desperate. He was more savage then.

“Your dare,” he started, cracking his neck. “Sit on the table with your legs spread wide, facing me. I want a good look at that pretty pink pussy. *My* pretty pink pussy.”

Oh, you—

That was a good one. A really good one. Lucky for me, and I guess him, there wasn’t a shred of self-consciousness left in my body. Nikolai had fucked those thoughts right out of me.

For the whole time we were together, and even well after, he showered me with compliments. They weren't always about my appearance either. He complimented my mind. My resilience. The loyalty I had for those I cared about.

I climbed up onto the table, scoothing forward until I was right in front of him, and spread my legs as far as they could go, giving him a completely unobstructed view.

His heated gaze was locked firmly on my pussy and I trembled. The look he was giving me made me so fucking wet, it was literally dripping out of me onto the table.

I was so turned on, I could barely breathe.

Nikolai leant forward and swiped his finger through the small puddle of my wetness, bringing it to his lips. "Your deal," he rumbled, sucking it into his mouth.

My clit *throbbbed*. I'd never been so desperate for him before. For his cock. His tongue. For fucking everything.

I gathered up the cards and shuffled them, all while Nikolai continued to taste my wetness with his finger like it was the most delicious thing he'd ever had before. The more he did it, the more turned on I got.

He'd better hope I lose this round, because I am going to make him suffer.

I dealt the hand. We dumped the cards we didn't want and I gave the replacements. We placed our bets. My shirt against his pants.

He won and I smashed my fist down on the table.

I said I wasn't a *big* sore loser, not that I wasn't one.

After whipping off my shirt, I sat there in all my naked glory. Well, except for the pair of fluffy socks on my feet. His tongue ran over his lips as he stared at my breasts. My nipples hardened under his gaze.

“Do something you’ve been holding back from doing,” he said, voice low.

I frowned. *Something I’ve been holding back from doing?*

The look on his face taunted me to do something daring, and I was never one to back down from a dare. There was one thing I’d been dying to do since the moment he’d taken off his shirt, and now I could do it under the preface of a dare.

Win fucking win.

I scooted to the edge of the table and pushed off, standing in between his legs. He watched me like I was the only person in his world. The hottest, most sexiest thing he’d ever seen in his life. It set my insides on fire.

His gaze trailed over every inch of my skin. Slowly. Methodically. Admiringly. With every shred of his focus. A level five earthquake couldn’t shake his focus right now.

My hands moved, gripping his muscular thighs as I lowered myself down to my knees. His nostrils flared, his body staying as still as a statue. Anticipation shone in his darkened eyes. I dragged the moment out a little, letting that anticipation build higher and higher until he started to squirm, eager to find out what the fuck I was going to do.

A smirk on my face, I leant forward and ran my tongue through his chiselled abs and up his herculean chest. He groaned, his head tipping back as I continued going up and up, dragging my tongue up the middle of his throat and flicking it over his chin. Nikolai breathed hard, his body trembling underneath me. The fact that I could affect him so much to the point where he was literally shaking made me feel so fucking powerful.

We were face to face, our lips barely an inch away from each other. Our gazes were locked, so focused on one another, like we were the only two people in the world.

I felt like I could stay like that forever, lost in his smouldering blue eyes. Time seemed to stand still, and I never wanted it to end.

“Is it my deal, or yours? I honestly can’t remember,” he breathed heavily, staring at my mouth.

I smirked. “Yours.” I straightened my spine, standing tall and his eyes snapped to my breasts, suddenly directly in front of him.

“This game is going to kill me,” he choked out, licking his lips like he wished they were my nipples.

My smirk turned into a full-blown smile. “Not yet. We’re not done.” I dragged my fingers over his hard chest as I turned around and went back to my chair, sitting down.

Nikolai cleared his throat, trying to adjust himself discreetly before reaching for the cards. Despite the uncomfortable look on his face, I could see his mood had improved. I was so fucking glad for it.

I couldn’t even describe the feeling that washed over me when I saw how tense he was, staring at his laptop as if it held all the answers to his problems. I knew how stressed he was. How hopeless he felt about not being able to find his father. All I wanted to do was make him feel better. To take him out of that dark place in his mind and pull him some place lighter. Just because he wasn’t there for me when I needed him the most, didn’t mean I wouldn’t be there for him when *he* needed *me*.

I would do anything to ease the emotional suffering he was going through then and there. Even put myself in a position I knew I’d probably regret later.

He dealt out the next hand. I picked up my cards, excitement flooding my veins when I saw them. Nikolai was great at picking up my tells, so I tried as hard as I could to remain nonchalant so he wouldn’t pick anything up.

“Last bet,” he said, dealing out the replacement cards. He only had his pants and underwear left, and I was naked except for the socks on my feet.

The stripping part was only a precursor, a stepping stone before the *real* fun began.

The dares.

We still played even when we both ran out of clothes. The object of the game was to make the other person snap. Lose their control. I was the reigning champion, and that was quite simply because I knew exactly what it took to make Nikolai break.

I flipped my cards first. Royal flush. Nikolai’s brows raised in slight surprise. He didn’t even bother showing me his hand, knowing damn well he couldn’t beat it.

He got to his feet and removed his sweats, leaving him in a pair of black boxer briefs. His thighs were mountainous; huge and overflowing with muscle. The nickname “Thunder Thighs” suited him well (I should know, I came up with it).

Then there was the snake in his underwear. Or, more accurately, the can of pringles, because that was how big and thick the damn thing was. It was fucking *monstrous*.

Nikolai spread his arms out wide. “Want me to turn for you?”

I laughed and twirled my finger through the air. “Go on then.”

He kept his arms outstretched and spun slowly, giving me plenty of time to enjoy the masterpiece of his body. I definitely did.

He faced me again, a devilish smirk on his lips.

There were so many different sides to Nikolai. His rough, dominating side. His vicious side. His take-no-bullshit side. But this one? His carefree, playful side? It was my favourite. Without a doubt.

It was a side of himself that he held back from others. He showed a little bit of it to his siblings, but even then, it was still partially stuck behind this impenetrable wall of restraint. I'd seen it more times than I could count.

"Your dare," he challenged, remaining standing.

I already knew what it was that I was going to do. I got to my feet and made my way over to him, adding an extra sway in my hips. Nikolai watched, eyes slightly narrowed in calculation, like he was trying to figure out what I was up to.

"I dare you not to lick your lips," I said, stopping in front of him.

He frowned, confused. "What—" his words cut off when he saw my hand move down between my legs. I slipped 2 fingers inside my drenching pussy and moaned.

"Tati," he growled in warning.

I just smiled as I pumped them in and out a few times, getting them nice and wet before I held them up in the air right in front of him.

He exhaled heavily, staying deathly still as I rubbed my wetness all over his lips. His jaw tensed, his eyes as fierce and savage as I'd ever seen them before, like a wild beast poised to strike.

"Are you ready to give up yet, *moya lyubov'?*" *My love?*" I whispered, sucking my finger into my mouth. The endearment slipped out before I could stop it.

I wasn't sure what it was that finally made him snap. Whether it was my wetness on his lips, me sucking it off my finger or the fact that I'd called him something I hadn't called him in two years. Maybe it was a combination of all three. I didn't know, and I didn't fucking care. The point was, he'd snapped.

He took me, slamming me down onto the table with a bruisingly punishing kiss. He pushed his tongue into my mouth and moaned, gripping my face roughly as I kissed him back. His hands were everywhere, touching every inch of my skin. He tugged on my nipples. Pulled my hair back to bite the side of my neck. Held me with a punishing grip that no doubt left bruises on my skin. I fucking *lived* for it.

“Tell me I can have you,” he begged, kissing me hard. “Please, Tati. Tell me I can have you.”

“Yes, Nikolai, yes. Take me. I want you so fucking bad.”

“Thank fuck.” He licked down my neck and sealed his lips around my nipple, sucking hard. He palmed my other breast and squeezed. “Fuck, I’ve missed you. I’ve missed you so fucking much. My beautiful love,” he rasped, moving his hands down.

Despite how much my heart swelled at his words, I knew it was wrong, that I couldn’t do that to him. It wasn’t fair to give him false hope that something more could blossom from it when I knew it couldn’t.

There was no denying the attraction we shared. The connection, not only physically but mentally. Emotionally. But I still didn’t trust him. Not with my heart.

“Wait, wait, wait.”

He stopped instantly, his hands freezing on my hips. “What’s wrong?” he asked, looking at me.

I swallowed nervously. “You know that this will just be sex, right? That it won’t be anything more?”

His brows slammed down into a frown. “What?”

I sighed, guilt filling me. “Nikolai—”

He pushed away from me and took three steps back.

I sat up quickly, reaching for him. “Wait, we don’t have to stop. I just wanted to make it clear.”

“Oh, you have. You’ve made it very clear,” he said numbly.

“Nikolai, please. Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad, Tati.” He picked up his clothes and started putting them back on.

“You’re not?”

“No.” He didn’t look mad, and I knew Nikolai well enough to know when he was angry, so I was inclined to believe him. But he was definitely *something*.

“Then what are you doing?” I asked, watching him closely. “We don’t have to stop. We can still have fun.”

He chuckled humourlessly. “I don’t just want to have fun with you, Tati.” He stood in front of me fully clothed, looking at me with complete and utter seriousness. “I want *all* of you. I want every single part of you, not just your body or the parts you’re only willing to give. I want *everything*. The good, the bad and every beautiful, precious moment in between. You’re not ready to give that to me now, and I understand. I do. I broke your trust and you’re scared to let me back in. But hear me now, Tatiana Vera Andreeva. I will never stop trying to get back what we had. What I destroyed. I will wait my entire fucking life for you. Because you’re worth every single second of that wait, no matter how agonising it is.”

Chapter Fifteen



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“S O, YOU THINK YOU’RE ready to serve your first customer?”

I put on a fake smile as I looked at Belinda, the woman who was training me at Rise and Grind cafe, trying to act more excited than I actually was. I had the worst sleep I’d had in a long, *long* time the night before. I was a big, hot, fucking mess. Pent up from all of the sexual activities of our strip poker game with absolutely no relief.

Believe me, I’d tried.

After Nikolai left me sitting naked on that table—something I never envisioned him doing—I retreated back to the safety of my bedroom. He had every right to stop things before they went any further. I couldn’t offer him what he wanted, even though the more time I spent with him, the more my cold heart thawed. Despite the fact that I grew closer and closer to forgiving him for what happened, I still couldn’t bring myself to trust him

again. To trust that he would be there for me when I needed him. To depend on him. I wasn't sure I ever would.

I'd taken a cold shower in the hope that it would quell the burning arousal our game had caused. It didn't do shit. I went to bed as horny as a man who'd just taken a boatload of Viagra.

In the morning, we acted like the entire thing didn't happen, avoiding the subject like the plague and going about our day as usual. We made small talk that wasn't the least bit awkward, despite what happened the night prior. He told me about his plans to check out prospective clients for the Bratva, and I told him about how much I was looking forward to my first trial shift at the café.

We took a quick tour of the grounds at FIT so I could get a feel of the campus. I was surprised he wanted to come with me, to be honest. I really didn't think it'd be his thing. But he followed me around like he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

He showed interest in everything I pointed out, everything I was excited by. He asked me question after question, even though fashion was not something he was even remotely interested in.

Regardless of the fact that he was extremely well off, he dressed plainly—usually in black or greys—and very casual. He wasn't the type to give a shit about labels, designer clothing. If it fit, he wore it. Plain and simple. His clothes were more for practicality than aesthetics. It didn't always work out that way, though. He looked good in everything he wore regardless.

After we'd done a few laps of campus and peeked into some of the lectures, he walked me across the street to the café with the promise that he'd be back in the afternoon to pick me up when my shift was over.

I'd then spent the day learning the ins and outs of the café from Belinda. I learnt how to make coffee (which I was shit at) and how to work the register (which I was shit at). And I learnt how to carry a tray properly, so I didn't spill the drinks or food (which I was actually *good* at. I had perfect balance).

They were all mundane tasks I'd never really done before. But I had the will and determination to fine-tune those skills, because I hated being bad at something. It was the perfectionist in me.

The café was a boujee little place with lots of high-end furnishings and beautiful décor. The tables were set up nicely in a certain order that soothed that slightly chaotic part of my mind. Scents of coffee, chocolate and freshly-baked pastries filled the air. There was a certain calmness and relaxation to it that instantly welcomed and enveloped you. It made you feel like you were at home, surrounded by the people you loved.

The truth of it was, I kinda liked the place. It was the whole "serving people" aspect that was getting on my fucking nerves. The customers I'd seen come through so far majored in asshole-ry. There were a couple of nice ones, sure. But ninety percent of them were uppity little douchebags who thought being nice was something waitstaff didn't deserve. And the worst part of it? The waitstaff just *took* it, letting people speak to and treat them like trash because they were afraid of losing their tips or their job. That was something I was really going to struggle with. Calling people out when they were being dickheads was something I thoroughly enjoyed.

Belinda nudged me playfully, a smile on her heart-shaped lips. She was the manager of the café, and the one who interviewed me before the trial shift started.

She was definitely my kind of vibe: young, but kind of a hardass, funny, flirty, quick-witted. Her sense of humor matched mine to a tee. She was dressed in the same black uniform as me, an apron tied around her waist. She had beautiful dark skin and long, flowing dark hair.

“Come on, you’ve gotta serve someone eventually,” she joked, pouring a cup of coffee and placing it on a tray. She passed it off to another waitress before turning back to me. “Why don’t you try that couple in the corner booth over there? They look nice.”

Her twat radar must be off because they definitely did not look nice. I clocked them the second they walked in. He was arrogant and obnoxious, and she was rude and bitchy.

“Maybe not.” I knew my limits. There would be no stopping me if they treated me like absolute shit. I’d cut a bitch.

“Well, too bad. You don’t get to pick your customers. Go,” she said sternly, pointing a finger. I groaned, picking up one of the tablets we used to place the orders and making my way over to them.

“Hello, my name is Tatiana. I’ll be serving you today.” Mr Douche looked at me with seedy eyes. It made my skin fucking crawl. “Did you want to start off with any drinks?”

“I want a caramel latte. Cream and three sugars,” Mrs Douche demanded. *Because please is too fucking hard to say.* “And two slices of avocado toast.”

“No problem.” I put her order into the tablet and sent it back to the kitchen. “And for you?”

“Black coffee and a plate of bacon, eggs and sausages. Make it snappy. Last time, you guys took nearly ten minutes to bring out my food.”

Yeah, because it takes time to cook it, asshole. It doesn't just appear out of thin air you slimy, big-nosed, pimply faced—

“I’ll see if we can put a rush on that for you. If you need anything else, let me know.” I took their menus and went back to the counter, the fake smile slipping from my face the moment I turned around.

Belinda gave me an encouraging smile as she wiped down the surface of the front counter. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it? You did great. Now, I’m going to get their drink orders done. Can you go clean down tables three and twelve? Remember my saying?”

“If you have time to lean, you have time to clean. And it’s actually Sheldon Cooper’s saying.”

She raised her brows. “Fellow Big Bang fan?”

“That’s putting it mildly. I’m pretty sure I can recite every word of every episode verbatim.”

“You should come to the Trivia Night they’re having at the Smoke and Mirrors Bar in a couple nights.” She placed two cups under the coffee machine, flicking and twisting different dials. “They have them once a month, and this month it’s on Big Bang Theory. Somebody just pulled out of my team and I’ve got a spot free.”

I frowned. “I’ve never been to a trivia night before.”

“What?” she exclaimed. “Oh my god, now you *have* to come. They’re so much fun. There’s drinks, mediocre food and a hella competitive atmosphere. Last month, there was almost a fist fight.”

“Really?” I arched a brow, my interest officially peaked. I loved a good old-fashioned fist fight. “Count me in. Just let me know where and when.”

Belinda squealed, jumping up and down. “Yes! Thank you. I didn’t want to go in one team member down. I’m determined to beat Jessica this time.”

“Who’s Jessica?”

She growled. “My nemesis. Her and her team win *every* month. Every. Goddamn. Month. I’m sick of it. And she’s not gracious about it either. She rubs it in my face and taunts me with it. Once, just once, I want to beat her so *I* can rub it in *her* face.”

I smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll help you get your win.”

“I knew me and you were going to get along,” she winked. “Now, go clean down those tables while I finish making these drinks. Please and thank you.”

I gave her a quick salute and then went to do as she asked. I was halfway through the job when I heard the shrill, annoying voice of Mrs Douche.

“Hey!”

I lifted my eyes to her, continuing to wipe the table down. “Yes?”

“I ordered my latte twenty minutes ago. What the fuck is taking so long?”

They weren’t even *in* the café twenty minutes ago.

Lying sack of—

“I’ll go check on that for you,” I pushed out through clenched teeth.

“Well, hurry up.”

I’ll hurry up and smash this chair over your head.

I chose to take the safer option and not say what I was really thinking, heading back to the counter.

“Your face looks downright murderous,” Belinda said, amusement in her eyes.

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this job,” I answered honestly. I wasn’t the type to bite my tongue and not say what I was really thinking. If someone was being a rude bitch, I told them they were being a rude fucking bitch. End of story.

Her eyes cut to the clock hanging on the wall and back. “You’ve been here for five hours and served all of two customers.”

“And I was *this* close to throat punching them,” I said, holding my fingers only a hair’s breadth apart. “Seriously, did you hear how rude they were? Commanding me around like I was their fucking servant?”

“People are rude. Especially to waitstaff,” she shrugged, placing two mugs in front of me. “Here’s their drinks. Don’t forget to take it over on a tray and remember to smile. Might help with the tip. You have a pretty smile.”

“They can take their tip and shove it up their asses, for all I care,” I said with the brightest smile on my face.

She laughed, shaking her head.

I took the drinks over to them and placed them down on the table. “Here you go, guys.”

“It’s about fucking time,” Mrs Douche grumbled. She took a sip and her face morphed into disgust. She slammed the cup back down, the liquid sloshing out all over the table. “I said *three* sugars. Three! What, are you deaf? How hard is it to make a proper cup of coffee? Take it away and get it right. Where’s our food?”

I stared at her, my eyes glazing over with a deadly rage. I didn’t even try to hide the look taking over my face. It was the look I had right before I killed someone. Oh, there were so many things sitting on that table I could use to do just that. A knife. A fork. I could smash the coffee cup and use a shard of it to slice her throat from ear to ear.

Mrs Douche swallowed nervously and lowered her gaze.

That’s right, bitch. I’m the Alpha here.

“I will go find out about your food,” I said slowly.

“Th-thank you,” she grumbled, still avoiding my eyes.

Maybe the look on my face told her I was definitely capable of killing her without blinking an eye, and now she was worried about pissing me off even further. Good.

I ducked into the kitchen to ask Jeffery how long until my orders were ready. He said only a few more minutes, so I used that time to clean the display cabinet that held all the freshly-baked pastries, muffins and cakes.

The café wasn’t busy. Apart from Mr and Mrs Douche, there were only three other customers, all being handled by other waitstaff.

A *ding* rang through the air. “Order up,” Jeffery barked, placing two plates of food under the heated lamps of the pass. I checked them over, making sure they were definitely my orders before taking them over to my customers. Neither one of them said a word to me when I placed their food down onto the table.

As their server, I was aware of the fact that I was meant to re-confirm their orders, but I wasn’t sure exactly what would come out of my mouth, so I chose to say nothing.

Belinda was finishing up serving someone at the register when I was making my way back behind the counter. “Did you threaten her? She’s as white as a ghost.”

“Who? Mrs Douche?” The smile on Belinda’s face told me she wouldn’t be angry if I did. That, in fact, she would find it quite amusing. “Not with words.”

Her green eyes sparkled. “You gave her ‘resting bitch’ face didn’t you?”

“No. I gave her my ‘I’m going to kill you’ face.”

She laughed, not taking my words seriously, even though I was being dead honest. “That’s probably going to cost you your tip.”

“I couldn’t care less,” I admitted. “She’s just lucky I didn’t stab her in the throat.”

She laughed again, her smile slowly fading away when I didn’t laugh along with her. “You’re...joking, right?”

“Nope.”

The rest of the customers I had for the day were pleasant and kind. They didn’t bring out that angry, murderous side of me, so that was a win in my book.

My highest tip of the day was \$7.64. My lowest was \$0.50, courtesy of Mr and Mrs Douche. In total I got \$54.17. My brain ran rampant, trying to figure out how I was going to pay for everything I needed to pay for if I was only going to make \$50 in tips a day. Making it on my own was going to be harder than I thought.

I got along with all the other workers, Belinda in particular. We talked shit and joked about random stuff all shift, which helped make the time go by quicker. She had no problem putting on her “boss bitch” cap whenever she needed to, separating personal from professional. It was a trait I definitely admired.

As much as I hated the “serving customers” aspect of the job, I was quite enjoying myself. Granted, it was just the first day. But still, I liked it. This was my first job, and it felt good to finally *do* something other than shop and watch TV. Yeah, I was working towards my fashion line. But I’d never actually *worked* a day in my life before, held a proper job. I’d never earned my own money or provided for myself.

So even though my feet were sore, my shoes were dirty, I had food in my hair and was completely covered in sticky sweat, I felt great.

“You did a good job today,” Belinda said, taking off her apron and popping it into her bag.

It was now 3 p.m., and we’d both just finished for the day. The staff room was overrun with chatter as the workers coming in to start the afternoon shift changed into their uniforms. Lockers slammed open and shut. Shoes squeaked across the floor. Greetings and farewells were exchanged. It was all a bit too much, really, like a sensory overload.

“Even though it was just a trial run, I can pretty much guarantee you’ve got the job. You’re hard working and a fast learner; two qualities I always look for in staff.”

An anxious weight that had been smothering me all day lifted off my chest. I didn’t want to have to look for another job. This one was perfect. In walking distance from campus, nice co-workers and pleasant atmosphere. Shitty customers excluded.

“Thank you.”

“I can offer you three shifts a week to start off with, and then we’ll see where we go from there?” She began to undress, taking off her work shirt and skirt.

“Sounds good. I don’t have my class schedule yet, but once I do I’ll let you know my days.”

“Perfect.” She slipped into a pair of skinny jeans and a tank top. “Aren’t you going to get changed? If you’re shy, there’s a rest room just through there.”

I was the furthest thing from shy. “Honest opinion, how do I look right now?”

She let her hair down and ran her fingers through it, shaking it out. “You sure you want an honest opinion? I’ve been told I can be pretty blunt.”

“Give it to me.”

“You look like a dog's breakfast. Your hair is a frizzy mess. Your make-up is smudged. You've got flour on your face, which absolutely baffles me because you didn't cook a damn thing today. So how did it get there? And your clothes are covered in food stains.”

I laughed, shaking my head in amusement at her words. “Perfect.”

Nikolai found the idea of me getting a job laughable. Yes, he told me he was proud of me, that he believed in me. But I knew what he was thinking, what he'd never voice. He didn't think I could actually do it and stick with it. I wanted him to see me after a hard day's work with nothing but a smile on my face.

Belinda frowned, opening her mouth to respond, but she was interrupted by a man with short, teal blue hair bursting into the staff room.

“Come quick,” he panted heavily. “Level five McHottie at the front counter.”

“Level five?” Belinda scoffed. “There's never been a level five here before.”

“Well, now there is,” he insisted. His eyes flicked to me. “Hey, new girl.”

“This is Darren,” Belinda introduced, flowing to her feet. “He's the afternoon manager.”

“Introductions later! You *have* to come check this guy out before he leaves. I damn near fainted, coming through the door.”

Belinda rolled her eyes. “You're exaggerating. Level fives never come in this shithole. Level four, maybe. But not—*oh my god*.” Her eyes widened as she peeked through the small gap of the staff room door, staring out into the shop. “He *is* a Level five.”

“Okay, is someone going to fill me in here?” I asked, watching them both salivate over this mystery man sitting in the café.

“A Level five is the hottest a person can be on our scale,” Belinda said, not even looking back at me. “To be a Level five, he’s got to be tall—”

“Dark-haired—” Darren continued.

“Muscly—” Belinda cut back in.

“Have that dangerous, bad boy vibe—”

“Gorgeous eyes—”

“Classic book boyfriend,” Darren finished.

They ping-ponged back and forth between each other like they were each reading a line from a list only they knew.

“Yes! Perfect description. Oh, shit. Here comes Desiree. You better get out there and shoot your shot before she gets her sticky paws all over him,” Belinda said, nudging Darren with her elbow.

“We don’t even know if he’s gay.” He began to fix his hair anyway, preparing himself.

Sick of not being involved in whatever the fuck was going on right now, I hiked up onto my tippy toes so I could peak over their heads and see this mysterious Level five. I internally rolled my eyes. *Of course.*

“He’s not gay.”

Darren glanced over his shoulder at me. “And how could you possibly know that, new girl?”

“The name is Tatiana.”

“Oh, how rude of me,” he stated in a snarky tone.

“Don’t be an ass, Darren. We like her,” Belinda said, winking at me.

“Okay, fine. *Tatiana*, care to explain how you know Level five isn’t gay? It’s not something you can tell just by looking at someone.”

“Very true.” I went back to my locker and picked up my handbag, draping it over my shoulder. “His name is Nikolai, and he’s my ex.”

Their jaws dropped open.

“Your-your ex?!” Darren gasped. “You lucky son of a bitch. How could you let go of a piece of prime rib like *that*?!”

Those familiar feelings of resentment started to creep their way back into me, like they did every time I thought about our past. But that feeling was quickly replaced by anger when Belinda spoke.

“Oh, shit. Desiree is going in for the kiss.”

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Chapter Sixteen



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“**S**O, WHY DON’T WE start with who you are and what you need?” I asked, flipping my binder open. I ran my pen down the page until I got to the name I was searching for.

Alex Delacourt, Prez of the Dark Knights Motorcycle Club. He ran the New York Charter, and from the information laid out in front of me, he was currently in a turf war with another rival MC—the Scavengers.

After dropping Tatiana off at the café for her trial shift, I’d headed straight for my meetings with the prospective clients Aleksandr had mentioned. It was a good distraction, something I desperately needed at this point.

Last night had been tortuous for a number of reasons. Walking away from a naked and willing Tatiana had to be just about the hardest thing I’d ever had to fucking do. Every part of my body literally screamed for her. I craved her soft, smooth skin, the taste of her pussy, the feel of her wrapped

around my cock, squeezing it with an almost painful pleasure. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy, though.

Tatiana was prepared to give me her body but not her heart. Her soul. Parts of her would never be enough for me. I wanted every single fucking inch. I wanted her laughs. Her smiles. Her sassy as fuck attitude. I wanted to be the one she could rely on, trust again.

I still wasn't sure how I was going to make that happen yet. So far, my only plan was to just be there. To constantly smother her with my presence and prove to her I wasn't going anywhere. That I planned to be right there, at her side for as long as it took for me to gain her trust again. Or die trying.

Alex took a drag of the cigar at his lips, blowing out a ring of smoke. He was wearing his cut: a black, leather motorcycle vest and a pair of ripped denim jeans. He was on the older side. Late forties, with short chestnut hair and dark grey eyes.

"Your little clipboard there doesn't tell you everything you already need to know, sport?" he asked, giving me a condescending look.

I had every bit of information there was available on him *and* his MC, from both public and private sources. But I wanted something more than I could find online or from word of mouth. We didn't work with people we didn't know or trust. Doing that shit got you killed, or worse, caught and thrown in jail. It was imperative I find out *exactly* what kind of man Alex was, whether he was the trustworthy type. The type who would keep his mouth shut and not rat out where he got his supplies from if he ever got caught by the cops.

I levelled my gaze on him, staring him down. He thought because he was older than me, that it gave him the right to speak to me like I was a child. To not give me the respect I was due. The respect my position demanded.

He cleared his throat, sitting up a little straighter and avoiding my eyes. I'd been told that people found me intimidating, especially when I was glaring at them for stepping out of line.

"I'm Alex Delacourt, and I'm the President of the Dark Knights Charter here in NYC."

"Very good," I nodded. "And what kind of ordnance are you looking for?"

"AK-47s, MP4s, some single-shot handguns, combat knives and bowie knives."

I wrote them down next to his name as he spoke, doing a mental tally of the inventory I knew we had available already.

"We're in the middle of a turf war at the moment and I want them for—"

I raised a hand in the air, silencing him. "I don't need to know what you want them for. I just need to know how many and when you need them by."

"I'll need a case of each by the end of the week."

It was definitely doable. We had everything he was asking for and I could easily organise delivery. The question remained though: was he the type of man we wanted to do business with?

"Deposit for such an order would be fifty grand."

"Deposit?" he frowned. "I never needed to pay a deposit when I worked with Valentino."

"Valentino took risks. That's why his ass is sitting in federal prison right now. The Bratva do not take risks. If you want to work with us, it will be on our terms, our rules. You can take it or leave it."

His lips pursed in obvious distaste. He was used to being the man in charge, dictating his own rules. Not having them forced upon him. Especially by someone who was his junior. Men like him hated listening to anyone younger than them.

“Fine. You have a deal. I can wire you the money.”

I shook my head. “Cash only. We don’t leave a paper trail.”

Annoyance flared in his eyes and he grumbled under his breath, “Valentino always did wire transfers.”

I made a quick note and then shut my binder, putting the lid back on my pen. I took a deep breath, tapping my fingers together as I studied him closely. My gut was telling me that he couldn’t be trusted. Based on this one, small interaction, I could tell he acted impulsively, that he let his emotions get the better of him. Coupled with the fact that he didn’t like being told what to do—and he had a problem taking orders from anyone younger than himself—and it meant working with him was a recipe for disaster.

I could only imagine what would happen if Lukyan tried telling him what to do.

He was the worst type of client.

“I’m going to be frank with you, Mr Delacourt. The Bratva will not be doing business with you.”

He blinked, waiting for me to elaborate. When I didn’t, his confusion turned to anger. “Is this a joke? Because if it is, it isn’t funny.”

“I don’t joke.”

He abruptly got to his feet, his chair crashing to the ground. “Who the fuck do you think you are, *boy*?” he hissed. He pressed his hands flat against the surface of the table and leant forward, trying to intimidate me by getting in my personal space. “Now you listen to me, you little shit. If you think—”

I jumped up and smashed his face down onto the table, my fingers gripping the back of his neck tightly. He struggled, grunting with excretion,

but the grip I had on his nape made it impossible for him to escape.

“Now *you* listen to *me*,” I whispered darkly in his ear, “I don’t take kindly to threats, or being treated with disrespect.” I pulled out a knife and held it right in front of his eye. He stiffened, going deadly still. “I want you to pick your next words *very* carefully, Mr Delacourt, because what you say next will determine whether or not you walk out of here alive.”

He swallowed nervously, his gaze locked on the knife millimeters away from piercing his eye. If he so much as flinched, he’d lose it.

“I apologise.”

“For?” I pressed. Apologises didn’t mean a damn thing unless you knew what you were apologising for.

“For talking to you like shit, okay?! Let me go.”

I held him for a few seconds longer, just so that he understood I wasn’t letting him go because he demanded it. That I was doing it because *I* chose to.

My grip loosened and he flung himself back, putting distance between us. I saw the exact moment that he decided to make a move flash across his face, his hand moving to his waist.

“Do it and I’ll kill you before you even get the chance to pull that gun,” I warned, my muscles tensing in preparation.

His hand hovered in the air right next to his hip, his fingers moving back and forth slightly like he was just *itching* to pick it up. We stood there, staring at each other like we were in an old-fashioned western duel, just waiting to see who would make the first move. It would take him half a second to clasp his gun. Another two seconds to pull it out and aim it at me. Plenty of time for me to kill him before he got a shot off.

Alex growled in frustration, all but slamming his foot as he stood down. I kept my guard up, watching him closely.

“You’ve made a big mistake, *boy*,” he sneered. “You have no idea who you’re fucking with. You’ll never get work in this city again. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Really?” I drawled. “I guess New York will now be the safest city in the world then, won’t it? Since there’ll be no more guns coming in at all.”

He frowned.

“You look confused. Allow me to elaborate.” I threw my knife, the blade sinking deep into his thigh.

He screamed, dropping to the ground and clutching his thigh, blood seeping through his fingers. “What the fuck!?” He reached for his gun and I rushed forward, kicking it out of his hand.

I flattened him on his back with a boot to the chest. “Valentino’s operation has crumbled, and now we’ve laid claim to his territory. Do you know what happens when you interfere in Bratva business?” I applied more pressure, grinding my foot deep into his sternum. He choked, gasping for air, his hands clutching at me with desperation. “You die.” I whipped out my gun and pressed it into his forehead, pulling the hammer back.

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” he rasped, his pupils swallowed by fear. “Please.”

A word like that from a man like him would have been extremely difficult to utter.

I had two options before me. Kill him, or show mercy. Usually, mercy was something I did not possess. But in situations like this, I thought five moves ahead. Killing him now with no one to witness it, or understand the reason as to why, would only cause more problems for us. We had a lot of shit to worry about. We didn’t need to add another enemy onto our list.

I leant forward until we were face to face, making him look at me dead in the eyes. “Understand something, Mr Delacourt. No matter how big or tough you think you are, you are *nothing* compared to the Bratva. Our reach is infinite. We have people everywhere, some even within your own organisation. You get in our way and you and everyone in your little club will be killed in the most horrific way imaginable. And I have a *very* vivid imagination. Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-yes,” he groaned.

“Excellent.” It was so much easier when they understood the gravity of the situation.

I stood to my full height, finally taking my foot off his chest. He gulped in a huge breath of air and curled up on his side, moaning in pain. “It is a shame we could not do business. One of the few things we do not tolerate is disrespect, and you had that in abundance. Perhaps you can use this as a lesson for next time.”



“How are things going?” I asked Aleksandr through the phone as I sped through the streets of downtown New York.

He grunted, the typical response my brother gave for pretty much everything. “The same. There’s still no word on Father or Dominik. It’s like

they literally just disappeared into thin air. Any luck on your side?”

“None.” I switched lanes and took a right turn, my hands gliding over the wheel. “None of my facial recognition programs have picked up anything. Thousands of possibilities, but that’s about it.”

“Do you think it’s possible they’ve left the country?”

“No. I’ve got all our contacts in the airports on high alert for him, and he doesn’t own a private plane. He could try to hire one but I have that flagged. If anyone tries to charter a plane matching his description, I’ll be notified.”

“Then where the fuck is he?” Aleksandr growled. Something clattered over the phone, most likely my brother kicking or hitting something out of sheer frustration. Then a light, feminine voice started yelling at him in Spanish. Drea.

“Eja de romper mierda. Acabo de limpiar el piso, imbécil!” Stop breaking shit! I just cleaned the floor, asshole!

“Es mi casa maldita, yo romperé todo lo que quiero romper!” It’s my goddamn house. I’ll break anything I want to break! He yelled back in Spanish.

“¿Quieres dormir fuera?! Di un puto mundo más.” You want to sleep outside?! Say one more fucking word.

My brother grumbled under his breath, “You can’t make me sleep outside, crazy woman.”

“¿Que ha sido eso?!“ What was that?!

“Nothing!” he growled.

“Eso es lo que pense.“ That’s what I fucking thought.

I laughed, the entire conversation amusing the absolute fuck out of me. “She’s a feisty one, isn’t she?”

“You don’t even know the half of it, *mladshiy brat, little brother.*”

“You sound happy though. Apart from all the screaming, that is.”

“I am happy. Well, as happy as I can be, given everything that’s been going on lately. How did the meetings with prospective clients go?”

I gave him a run down on everything. I’d only had time to meet with two of them so far. Alex Delacourt and Max Ines. Alex was not someone we would ever work with, now or in the future, but Max was. He was respectful, didn’t try to step out of place or dictate to me how things should be done and didn’t seem like the type that would ever rat out his suppliers.

“Alright, so we’ll organise an order for Max and Alex is out. What about the other three?”

I drove into the underground parking lot of the apartment complex and parked the car, but I kept the engine running. “I haven’t had a chance to sit down with them yet, but I’ll do it some time over the next few days.”

“Hustle on that. I need you back here in three days.”

“What for?”

“You really need me to remind you?”

I frowned. *What could he be talking about?* Then it hit me.

“Oh.” Guilt smothered me.

“Don’t feel guilty,” he said instantly. My brother knew me too well. “There’s been so much shit going on lately. I’m not surprised you forgot. You only need to be here for the night, then you can go back to Tatiana the following morning.”

“Of course I’ll be there.”

Even though he told me not to feel guilty, I still did. What kind of son forgot his own mother’s birthday? It had become a family tradition to spend her birthday together. We all sat around eating junk food and watching all of

her favourite TV shows. It would be the first time in seven years my father was not there. The tradition didn't start until after he got back from his killing spree.

"I know you'll be nervous to leave Tatiana—"

"No, no, it's fine," I cut in. "Things have progressed and we actually have a plan set in motion to catch Franco and some of his men. It's not set to go down for another week, so I have time. There's nothing Tatiana can do until then, so timing wise, it's actually kind of perfect. She'll just be preparing for classes and working at the café. Nothing too dangerous that requires a bodyguard."

"I'm sorry, I thought I just heard you say she's working at a café?"

"I did. That's what I said."

"Tatiana?"

"Yes."

"Tatiana Andreeva?"

"Is there another Tatiana you know that I'm not aware of? Yes, fucking Tatiana Andreeva."

A beat of silence...then full on laughter. "You're joking."

"Shut the fuck up before I fly down there and knock your teeth out," I growled. "She's going at it on her own and that deserves some fucking respect. I'm proud of her and—"

"Calm down, calm down. I'm sorry for offending your woman. It was a knee-jerk reaction. Picturing her in a café making coffee and serving people? Come on, I'm sure even you laughed at that image."

"No, I fucking didn't."

Liar.

"Uh-huh. Okay." He fucking knew I was full of shit.

“Was there anything else you wanted? Or has your mission been accomplished now that you’ve pissed me off?”

“Mission accomplished. I’ll see you in three days.”

“Actually, before you go, is Drea there?”

“Why?” he asked suspiciously.

“I just need to ask her something. Girl advice, you know?”

I knew my brother well enough to know he was narrowing his eyes.

“Just put her on the fucking phone, Zander.”

“Fine. *Malyshka!* Here, Nikolai wants to talk to you.”

Rustling came through the phone, then I heard her voice.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

“Do you want to chuck me on speaker so Aleksandr can hear me too?”

“Okay. There you go. What’s up?”

“Aleksandr called you a crazy woman and said you couldn’t make him sleep outside.”

“Hey!” Aleksandr shouted.

“Oh, really?” Drea drawled. “What else did he say?”

“Shut your mouth, Nikolai!” he yelled, his voice slowly getting softer and softer with each word, like the phone was moving further away from him.

“Drea, you get back here and give me that phone!”

I laughed and hung up. *That’s what you get for making fun of my woman.*

Drea was definitely a “no nonsense” kind of woman. The type that didn’t put up with any crap from her partner, even if he was five times the size of her.

I hoped she *did* make his ass sleep outside. Ahhh, what a sight that would be.

I turned off the engine and got out of the car, stretching my body with a groan. The day had been a long and tedious one, and it was only 2 p.m. It was partly my fault, though. I had tried to cram so much into such a short amount of time that I'd been moving non stop since I woke up that morning. But I was determined to succeed and finish the plan I'd come up with late last night, and nothing was going to fucking stop me.

I opened the trunk and stared inside, hands on my hips. I only had an hour before I had to go and pick up Tatiana. *How the fuck am I going to do this?*

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Chapter Seventeen



TATIANA ANDREEVA

I DIDN'T KNOW WHO this Desiree bitch was. I'd never met her, so she must have come in with the afternoon crew. But I had a feeling, based on what Belinda said, that she was the woman whose lips were moving towards Nikolai.

Oh, fuck no.

I stormed out of the staff room, heading right for them. Of course, I understood how unfair my anger and jealousy was. Nikolai and I weren't together because of *me*.

I'd told him countless times nothing significant would ever happen between us again. That I was desperate to move on from him. So I had no right to interfere with him and another woman. I knew that. *Understood* it. And I didn't give a flying fuck. I didn't care that it was irrational. I didn't care that it was unfair. I didn't care that it made me seem like the psycho ex-girlfriend.

Nikolai would always be *mine*, and I didn't want another woman even breathing the same air as him. Let alone touching him, kissing him.

Desiree was a short, curvy woman with long, dark hair. She was beautiful, with high cheekbones and perfectly shaped eyebrows. The type of woman any man would love to get their hands on.

Except for Nikolai. The annoyance on his face was as clear as a cloudless blue sky. He was sitting at the front counter when I marched out of the staff room, forearms planted firmly on the surface and body hunched forward. The stiffness in his shoulders showed how uncomfortable he was as Desiree leant towards him, trying to plant a kiss on his cheek.

He abruptly got to his feet and backed away. "I told you to back off. I'm not interested," he hissed, vibrating with anger.

Seeing him flat out reject this beautiful woman coming onto him made me feel all giddy inside. It meant that he was in no way reciprocating her advances.

"Well, that's just ridiculous. Every guy is interested in me." Her hips swayed way too much, prowling towards him.

Nikolai's eyes flicked to me as I came up behind her, his features morphing into distress, like he was afraid I'd think something was going on between them. "Tati—"

"He said he's not interested, Half-Pint. Need me to spell it out for you?"

Desiree turned around. "I'm sorry, and you are?"

"I'm the person who's going to smash your face into that display cabinet if you don't back the fuck up."

"Rawrr, we got ourselves a kitty cat fight," Darren sang, racking his fingers through the air.

Belinda barged her way between Desiree and I. “Okay, why don’t we all just calm down? Desiree, go get changed into your uniform. Your shift has already started. Tatiana, retract your claws and take your boy toy home. Darren, shut up and go do your job.”

“Yes, Ma’am. You know I love it when you get all bossy,” he winked. He grabbed Desiree’s arm and began to lead her away, but our gazes stayed locked, like two apex predators about to have a showdown.

Belinda clicked her fingers an inch away from my face, snapping my attention to her. “There’ll be plenty of other opportunities to get into a fight with her. Preferably not in the workplace. Word of advice though? Don’t bring Level Five in here. Desiree’s the type of person not to give a shit about whether you’re his girlfriend. She’ll try and fuck him regardless.”

“I’m not his girlfriend,” I stated automatically, the words feeling poisonous on my tongue.

“Well, you’re something. Most people don’t act like that unless—”

“No offence, but this isn’t something I want to talk about with a chick I just met.”

She put a hand to her chest in mock hurt. “Aw, and here I thought we were well on our way to becoming besties.”

I scoffed. “I have a best friend, and she’s the jealous type.”

“What? She’s going to kill me for being your friend or something?”

“*You and me.*”

Her laughter made me think she thought I was joking. I wasn’t. It’s not like I couldn’t have other girlfriends. The spot for the top one however was firmly taken by a crazy, knife-wielding slightly erratic Bratva-Princess-turned-Cosa-Nostra-Queen. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“You’re joking again, right?” Belinda asked with nervous eyes.

I glanced at Nikolai. “She’s *your* sister. What do you think? Am I joking?”

“No,” he answered bluntly.

Her eyes darted between us before landing on me. “You know, this is the second time you’ve mentioned killing someone. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were actually a murderer,” she chuckled, still refusing to see what was right in front of her. I guess it was to be expected. Most people found the idea of murdering someone absolutely abhorrent. Me, on the other hand? I found it fun.

“Alright, get going,” she continued. “I’ve got your number, I’ll text you the details for Trivia Night later.”

Once Nikolai and I were in the car and headed home, he spoke.

“You know nothing was going on, right? With that woman. I told her I wasn’t interested but she kept—”

“Nikolai, relax,” I said, cutting him off. Despite how cute he was when he rambled, I didn’t like seeing him so freaked out. “It doesn’t matter if something was going on. I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did. I have no right—”

“You have *every* right.”

“No, Nikolai. I don’t. You’re free to talk to whoever you want.”

He took his eyes off the road to glance at me. “It’s a good thing that the only person in the world I want to talk to is right here with me, then, isn’t it?”

Butterflies bloomed in my heart. For a man of such little words, he sure knew how to use them.

“How was your first shift, anyway? I didn’t see any cops outside, so I’m assuming you didn’t stab anyone?”

“It took every ounce of willpower I possessed, I’ll tell you that.” I told him about my day and he told me all about his. The whole thing was very... normal. Like a husband and wife having a long conversation and catching up at the end of their day.

I watched him closely as he spoke, admiring him. The way his body moved as he switched gears. The deep, baritone sound of his voice. I could watch him for hours and never get bored. Everything he did captivated me, made my heart pound like a jackhammer in my chest.

A thought streaked through my mind, spiralling into a daydream. I was powerless to stop it. Us together. Holding hands. Kissing. Falling asleep next to each other, wrapped up in each other's arms. Buying a house together. Getting married. Having kids—

Pain stabbed me like a dagger to the heart and I sucked in a ragged breath. I could almost *feel* the weight of our son in my arms, the memory so real, so vivid that I had to look down to make sure it wasn’t actually happening. He wasn’t there, but I could picture him as if he were. Wrapped up in a soft, baby blue blanket, his eyes closed like he was sleeping. Just sleeping.

The pain in my heart escalated from a light throb to pure, raw anguish, crippling me. My eyes welled and the tears fell before I could stop them, wetting my cheeks. God, I missed him. I missed him so much it physically hurt. Without him, I felt like half of me was missing. Half of my soul was gone. I couldn’t breathe, and I feared I might die from the pain. How could it still hurt so much?

Nikolai stopped mid-sentence, his eyes on me. “Tati,” he whispered worryingly. He quickly pulled into the underground parking lot and turned off the engine, jumping out of the car. He rushed to my side, flinging the door wide open and grasping my face, forcing me to look at him.

"Vse v poryadke, lyubov' moy. YA zdes'. YA prav zdes." It's okay, my love. I'm here. I'm right here.

He didn't need me to tell him what was wrong. Why I was crying. He just knew. Like he always did.

The tears increased, blurring my vision to the point that I couldn't even see. I would have given anything to hear him say those words back then. To have him holding me how he is right now, lending me his strength. Helping me through the pain. Supporting me. That's all I ever wanted.

The agony of not only losing Nikolas, but being abandoned by the one person who was meant to always be there for me, cut me just as badly as it had back then. My pain twisted into anger. It was a much simpler emotion to deal with, so I embraced it. Welcomed it.

“Don’t.” Smacking his hands away, I unbuckled my seat belt and got out, making sure to grab my bag before slamming the door shut.

“Are you okay—”

“I said don’t, Nikolai. Just go away. I don’t want you here.” I went to walk away but he gripped my arm, stopping me.

“I don’t care if you don’t want me here. You can hit me, scream at me, push me away, but I’m not going *anywhere*. You hear me, Tatiana? No matter what you say or what you do. I’m. Not. Going. Anywhere.”

We stared at each other, our heavy breathing completely in sync. He looked at me with complete and utter seriousness, eyes burning with determination, with the will to get me to see the truth in his words.

“I’m going to prove to you that you can trust me with your heart, Tati. I won’t let you down again.”

I wasn’t sure what to say back. The anger had dissipated, leaving only the pain behind. I didn’t want to deal with it, so I just walked away. He let me

go but kept pace with me, staying right by my side as we rode the elevator up to the seventh floor and entered the apartment. What I saw when I stepped into my bedroom shocked me, making me freeze in the doorway.

“What...what is this?” Boxes and boxes and boxes were piled up on my bed. So many, I couldn’t even count them all. The words “Christian Louboutin” were scrawled across the outside of them. They were shoes.

“I wasn’t sure what colour you wanted,” Nikolai said softly, standing so close behind me, I could feel his breath fan out over the back of my neck.

My eyes ran over all of the boxes. “So you, what, got all of them?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Nikolai.” I looked over my shoulder. “These are five thousand dollar shoes. Each.”

“So?”

“I—” Words escaped me. He’d actually gone into a store and bought all of these? The image alone was unfathomable. Nikolai...shopping? The fact that he would do that when I know how much he hated shopping meant even more to me. He put himself completely out of his comfort zone... purely for me.

I knew the smartest thing to do was to probably not accept them, make him take them back. But *fuck that*. They were mine now.

“You didn’t have to do this.”

“Did it make you happy?” he whispered softly.

“Yes.”

“Then yes, I did.”

The overwhelming desire to kiss him gripped me hard. Sometimes he could be so fucking sweet. And most of the time, it was completely

unintentional. He didn't do those things, setting out to be sweet. He just did them because, to him, it was a natural thing to do. In saying that, though, he was extremely selective about who he showed that side of himself to. I'd never seen him do something like this for anyone else.

Anyone.

And fuck, if that didn't make me feel special as all hell.

"Thank you for this. I really don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I'd do anything for you."

My heart lightened, a tiny bit of my soul healing at his words and what they meant.

I walked up to the bed, running my fingers over the boxes. "I have no idea where I'm going to put them all."

Nikolai leant casually against the doorframe. "Check your closest."

Frowning, I moved to the walk-in wardrobe at the other side of the room, shock freezing me on the spot for the second time in five minutes. Floor-to-ceiling shoe cabinets now lined the inside of the closet, something that hadn't been there when I left this morning. There was enough space to fit every single pair of shoes he'd gotten me...and then some.

"You got shoe cabinets installed?"

"No. I built them."

"You what?" This man continued to surprise me at every turn.

He shrugged, avoiding my eyes as if he was suddenly embarrassed. But that couldn't be right. I'd never seen Nikolai embarrassed before.

"When did you get the time to do all of this?" I asked, still in shock.

"I came back here after dropping you off. It took most of the day to build. Then I went to my meetings, bought out nearly the entire Christian

Louboutin store, came back here to drop off your shoes then picked you up.”

That meant he’d pretty much been running around non-stop all day. That he’d most likely worked himself to the brink of exhaustion. All for me. To give me something because he wanted to make me happy.

He just kept chipping away at that wall I kept between us. Soon it would crumble completely, and I wasn’t sure if I had the strength to build it back up again.

I didn’t even think I wanted to.

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Chapter Eighteen



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“**H**AVE YOU HEARD OF the Til Death games?”

I frowned, staring at Mikhail over my brother's shoulder. It was midday and we were in Aleksandr's office. Tatiana and I had arrived home early this morning for my mother's birthday.

I was surprised when she offered to come back with me. Actually, “offered” was too tame a word. She'd *demanded*. Wouldn't take no for an answer, actually.

“Have you been dipping into Arturo's merchandise? Because you must be high as a kite if you think I'm not going to be there for you or my best friend on a day like this.” Then she'd thrown up all over my shoes.

Tatiana never could handle her alcohol very well. She'd had two-and-a-half cocktails at the Trivia Night we went to last night, and *poof*—enter drunk Tatiana.

I think it was a combination of the fact that she rarely drank and her extremely low tolerance for alcohol. It was a good thing I'd arranged to take our private plane for the flight, because I highly doubted a regular airline would have let her board in the condition she was in.

She'd spent the entire flight snoring her head off in the cabin. Not that she'd ever believe that. She was adamant that she didn't snore. Even when I'd shown her concrete proof with a video of her sleeping, her mouth wide open and snoring so loudly that it sounded like a train going over its tracks, she still denied it.

"That's not me. You edited it." Then she turned around and went right back to snoring.

My brother's voice pulled me back into the present. "No, should I have?" "It's a fight-to-the-death, gladiator style tournament that's held once a year on a remote island off the coast of Europe. World leaders, politicians and the insanely rich gather to watch and place bets on who will win."

Aleksandr glanced over his shoulder at me with questioning eyes. I shrugged. I'd never heard of anything like that before. I wasn't surprised to hear Mikhail knew of it, though. That man had his fingers dipped into everything. He wasn't a man I was scared of, but he was definitely one who required caution. He was one of only a few people that had permission to enter the property without prior approval. So, I wasn't usually surprised when he just walked straight through the front door.

This time, however, was different. During his last visit, he'd punched Aleksandr clear in the face after hearing about what happened to his son. Having lost a child myself, I understood better than anyone what he was going through. That was the only reason why I let the attack go without

retaliation. If it had been anyone else, though, they would have been dead before their arm went back to their side.

It was my job to protect Aleksandr. Not only because he was now my *Pakhan*, but because he'd spent his entire life looking out for my siblings and I. It was *my* turn to watch out for *him*. The chances of Mikhail doing anything else were slim to none. But I still refused to let my guard down, watching him like a hawk.

"The man who oversees the games is called Talon," Mikhail continued. "A few weeks before the games begin, he sends out a roster of who will be competing, along with their stats. That way, people can make informed decisions about their bets. He sends little previews of what the fighters are capable of. Videos of them fighting, etcetera, etcetera."

"Like horse racing?" I asked.

"Yes, but with people instead." He pulled out a tablet, starting it up. "These people in the games aren't always there voluntarily. Some are, but most of them aren't. They've been trafficked specifically to enter into the games, to make them more entertaining. Boxers. UFC fighters. Marines. People who'd guarantee a good fight."

My brain clicked the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle as he spoke. Why he was there, when I'm sure it was the last place he wanted to be. Why he was bringing up some fight to the death game that we'd never heard of before. The fact that he mentioned people were forced to fight against their will.

It all began to make so much sense.

"I've never attended the games, but I get notifications for when a new one is about to begin," he continued. "I received this encrypted email yesterday. It holds the roster for this year. It's a small preview of what's to come. This

is a clip of one of the fighters being put in the games.” He handed the tablet over to Aleksandr. It was paused on a video.

I knew what it would show but I leant closer nonetheless, needing to see for myself if what I was thinking was right. It was one of those times that I was desperately hoping to be wrong.

Whoever edited the video made sure to keep faces out of it, just showing clips cut together of brutal strikes, arms swinging, fists connecting with soft flesh, legs flying through the air. Perhaps it was to build up the suspense, waiting until the last possible moment to reveal the fighters, thus ensuring the viewers’ complete and total attention.

It definitely worked. My eyes were plastered to the screen, cataloguing everything I saw, waiting for that one little detail that would confirm my suspicions.

The commentator narrated what was going on as it happened. “*Oh, what a brutal uppercut!*” the male voice said, a crowd of people cheering in the background. “*I don’t think he’s going to get back up from that one folks! Oh, wait, he’s going to try again! What a fight!*” A deafening crack blared through the speaker, one so loud that it could be heard over the roaring crowd as a set of hands grabbed a man’s head and twisted sharply, breaking his neck in one clean move. “*And we have a winner!*”

The camera panned out, showing a man standing in the middle of the ring, back gleaming with sweat and muscles bulging. He dropped the dead man in his arms and turned to face the camera.

I exhaled in defeat.

“*Your winner, ladies and gentleman, The Bratva Butcher!*”

The crowd went absolutely wild. Screaming, chanting, clapping. The camera stayed on my father for a few seconds longer and I committed every

detail to memory. The blood dripping down the side of his head. The anger burning in his eyes. The heavy rise and fall of his chest as he breathed hard.

The screen went black.

“Fuck,” Aleksandr cursed. He swiped across the screen, moving to another video, but this one was of someone else. “Are there any others?” he asked, continuing to swipe and swipe.

“No.” Mikhail took back the tablet. “That’s the only one of Dimitri. The rest are of the other competitors.”

“How many?”

“Twenty-four in total.”

“Why did they send this to *you*?” I asked, stepping closer.

“Talon and I have a bit of a...rivalry, I guess you could say. We went to boarding school together. Me, him and your father. We all used to be friends, actually.”

“What happened?” Aleksandr questioned.

“The same shit that always happens at elitist schools like that. He thought he owned the school and everyone in it, including Dimitri and I. The first few years, he wasn’t so bad, but when we were seniors he tried to order us around like we were nothing but worker dogs.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. There was no way my father would ever let some random kid walk all over him like that, even when he was technically a kid himself. He had too much pride, even at that age.

“Our reaction exactly,” Mikhail said, pointing at me. “We fell out hard our senior year. Talon’s the type who loves control. He thrives on the ability to get others to do whatever he wants them to do through fear and intimidation. That shit didn’t work on us though. Your father is the son of one of the most brutal men in Russia. And me? Well, I just hate being told

what to do. So, when we didn't blindly fall in line like all the others, things got violent. He set fire to our dorm room...with us inside it."

"Jesus Christ," Aleksandr blew out.

"We had to jump out of our four-story window to escape. Fucker had barricaded the door so we couldn't get out. Dimitri broke his leg and I broke three ribs and dislocated my shoulder. Talon was given a week's detention as punishment."

"*A week's detention?*" I repeated, my voice rising in exclamation. "For nearly killing two students?"

"Talon comes from *old* money. The type of money that can make problems disappear at the drop of a hat. His dad owns several big oil companies, and just threw money at the school until the whole thing was forgotten." Mikhail ran a hand through his blonde hair, pushing it out of his face. "After graduation, he fucked off to Europe. I didn't hear his name again until a few years ago. He'd amassed his own empire by then, built entirely on his daddy's money. He bought himself his own private island. From what I hear, he never leaves."

Aleksandr leant forward, elbows braced on his desk. ""Where is it? This island?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I've been trying to find it since the first moment I found out about it."

"Didn't you say the games are held on this island?" I asked with a frown. "So someone somewhere *must* know where it is."

"You'd think, wouldn't you?" he sighed, leaning back. "His security protocols are off the charts. You need an invitation to board the plane that takes you to an undisclosed location. From there, you're taken to a dock and put on a boat that takes you to another boat, and then another boat. All

while being blindfolded to ensure you have absolutely no idea where you're going.”

“Talk about thorough,” Aleksandr grunted.

“And the email is the invitation?” I guessed.

“There’s a QR code attached to the email that’s specific to each person. It holds a picture of the recipient, so once it’s scanned, they can verify you’re the invitation holder.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about the process,” Aleksandr said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Explain something to me. You told us that you guys are rivals. That this guy tried to *kill* you. So, how is it that you know so much about this whole thing? And were able to receive an invitation to his elusive private island?”

“Because Talon’s trying to show off,” I answered instead.

Mikhail’s brows raised slightly in surprise.

“He needs you out there so he can wave his hands around and say, ‘Look at all my shit. Shit you don’t have’.”

“You really *are* the smart one, aren’t you?” Mikhail chuckled softly. His eyes flicked to Aleksandr. “No offence.”

“None taken,” my brother shrugged. “He is.”

“Nikolai is right. Talon doesn’t send the invitations to us because he *wants* us there. He does it because he has a pathological need to be better than everyone. To be the smartest, richest, most handsome man in the room and have everyone fawn over him and treat him as if he’s royalty. The reason why I know so much about his security protocols is because I’ve tried more than once to circumvent them, to find a way onto his stupid private island so I can torch it to the fucking ground.”

“You keep saying ‘us’,” Aleksandr stated. “Does that mean—”

“Yes,” Mikhail nodded. “Your father received the invitations too.”

Aleksandr and I looked at one another. His eyes told me everything I needed to know. Father hadn’t mentioned anything about this to him either.

“Tell me everything about the games,” Aleksandr demanded.

“That I don’t have much knowledge of, I’m afraid. I can only show you the videos of the fighters and their stats. That’s it. Like I said, I’ve never attended the games, so I only know the basics. There’s twenty-four fighters and they fight to the death. That could be one-on-one, in pairs or in groups. Your father and I decided the first year Talon sent the invitations that we would never go. That we’d never give that fucker the satisfaction of our presence. I didn’t necessarily agree with that decision, though. Talon stepped into *my* territory with the creation of his Til Death Games. Encroached on *my* business earnings. I wanted to find a way to end it and end it quickly, regardless of whether or not Dimitri agreed. So I’ve been keeping close tabs on it, trying to find the location of his island.”

“Why not just accept the invitation and go, then?”

“Going by myself would be a death sentence. I highly doubt Talon would ever let me leave—alive, anyway. And there would be no way to sneak my men in with me. My best chance is to find the location of the island and plan a strike.”

“Any luck so far?” I asked.

“No. But I do have an idea that could lead to some promising results. What I want to know is, how did Talon get his hands on Dimitri in the first place? Your father isn’t exactly an easy man to get the drop on.” Aleksandr stiffened slightly. His hands clenched into tight fists on the desk, knuckles turning white. I didn’t need to see his face to know what he was feeling. My brother might be hard for others to read, but for me he was as easy to read

as a book. The moment he saw that video and understood the significance of it, he would have been riddled with guilt, blaming himself for not taking Dominik's deal and saving our father.

I laid a hand on his shoulder for support and squeezed lightly. "You know Dominik kidnapped him."

"Yes," Mikhail frowned. "Are you telling me he handed him over to Talon?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"Fuck. I knew he was a dick, but doing that to your own brother?" he shook his head in disbelief. "What a real asshole move."

"Is there anything else in the email?" I asked, trying to put together some sort of plan in my head. The precautions Mikhail mentioned would make it very difficult to get the location of the island. *If* by some miracle we were able to find it, there was also the problem of security. A man like Talon would have his own private army. An infiltration of that magnitude would require more than what we possessed on our own.

"Just the flight information."

"Alright," Aleksandr blew out, cracking his neck. I removed my hand from his shoulder and stepped back. He just needed a moment to get himself under control and now that he had, I had faith he wouldn't blow up. "We need to figure out what we're going to do. Nikolai, call Lukyan and get him home for a family meeting."

I nodded, leaving the room. After shutting the door behind me, I pulled out my phone and dialled Lukyan's number.

"Ring-a-ding-ding, you've got the king," he answered.

"Where are you?"

"Getting my dick sucked. Why?"

I wish I was surprised at his words, but it was honestly right on par with Lukyan. “We need you home, now. Family meeting.”

He was silent for a moment. “Can I finish first?”

I rolled my eyes. “We have a lead on Father.”

“Be right there,” he said instantly, hanging up before I could say another word.

I shook my head, chuckling softly. He might be a fucking idiot sometimes, but he always came through when it mattered.

Stuffing my phone back into my pocket, I went to turn around and re-join Aleksandr and Mikhail when my gaze collided with a set of hazel eyes that *usually* sent my heart racing.

This time was different, because those eyes didn’t belong to a crazy blonde who owned my soul. They belonged to her father. Ivan Andreeva was a big man, with broad shoulders and a bulky, wide chest. He had a slightly crooked nose from years of repetitive damage from fights and a neatly trimmed goatee. He was one of my father’s oldest and most faithful soldiers. Despite originally being hired by my grandfather, Sergei, he’d proven time and time again where his true loyalties lay.

Ivan stopped dead in his tracks at the top of the stairs when he saw me. We stared at each other, silence reigning between us. He’d never said anything to me directly, but I *knew* he was aware of what happened between Tatiana and I. His whole demeanor towards me changed. He went from quiet but friendly to doing nothing but glaring at me whenever he saw me. I suspect the only reason why he never confronted me on it was because Tatiana told him not to.

“What do you need, Ivan?”

“A word with Aleksandr,” he grunted, body tight.

I nodded. “I’ll let him know.” I turned around, reaching for the door handle when his next words made me freeze.

“I want you to stay away from her.”

Those eight words sent anger coursing through my veins. Of course, I understood where he was coming from. That he was just trying to protect Tatiana—a quality I admired in the man. But there was nothing in this world that could keep me away from her.

“You overstep, Ivan. What happens between Tatiana and I is none of your business.”

He marched towards me. “As her father, it’s my job to protect her, and that means keeping her away from *you*.” He stood toe-to-toe with me. “I don’t trust you. I don’t trust that you can take care of her, or be there for her when she needs you. You’ve made that clear already. She deserves better than you, and I’m going to make sure she gets it.”

There was an underlying threat to his words, one that did not sit well with me. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve organised for her to meet someone and if all goes well, she’ll marry ___”

I shoved him up against the wall with my arm firmly lodged against his throat. “The only person she’ll marry is *me*,” I snarled.

Chapter Nineteen



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“WAKEY, WAKEY, BITCH.”

I groaned, rolling over and smashing a pillow over my ears.
“Go away.”

“You’ve been sleeping all damn day. It’s time to get up,” Illayana said, trying to take the pillow away.

“I don’t want to.”

“Too damn bad. Up. Up!” Cold air hit my skin when the blanket suddenly disappeared in a rush.

“Illayana!” I whined, curling up into a ball. She always bloody did that. In some ways, we were so similar, but in others we were complete and total opposites. This was a prime example.

I *loved* my sleep. Cherished it. Needed it like a caffeine addict needed their coffee. I was definitely *not* a morning person. I was known to sleep well into the afternoon and *still* be pissed off when someone woke me.

Illayana, however, was bright and bubbly no matter what fucking time of the day it was.

“Come on, I need you up. You’re coming with me to the store.”

“Whyyyy?” I dragged out. My mouth was dry and I could feel a slight headache coming on. I really was a lightweight.

“Because there’s no junk food in this place and we need some for the movie night tonight.”

I snapped my eyes open. *Of course.* God, I could be such a ditz sometimes. The whole reason I was there was to help her through today, not lie on my ass all day.

Every year on their mother’s birthday, the Volkovs gathered together to watch all of Yekaterina’s favourite movies while eating all her favourite snacks.

Illayana had only been eleven when her mother was taken from her. Just a little kid. Because her father had run off to exact revenge on the people responsible, it left Aleksandr and Nikoali to take care of her. They’d come up with this family tradition to honor the day their mother came into the world, and they’d done it every year since her death.

“Okay, okay. I’m getting up.” I yawned, stretching out my body before kicking my legs over the side of the bed and getting to my feet. “When do we leave?”

“In ten minutes.” She put a few items into a black handbag: some lipstick, her phone, a couple of daggers and a Glock 19 handgun. The girl never went anywhere unarmed.

“Are you out of your mind?” I shrieked. “In what universe do you think I can get ready in ten bloody minutes? I need *at least* an hour. Minimum.”

“We’re literally just going to the grocery store,” Illayana said, shaking her head in amusement. “You can just go as you are. Maybe fix your hair up though. It looks like a bird’s nest.”

I narrowed my eyes, patting my hair down. “Ass.” Several huge bouquets of flowers caught my eye. I arched a brow. “You buy out a florist or something while I was away?”

Her lips curved, a look of love and adoration shining in her bright blue eyes. “They’re from Arturo. For today.”

“Aww, he’s such a sweetie-pie,” I gushed.

Illayana snorted. “Hurry up and get ready. I want to go.”

“As Her Highness commands.” I slipped into her ensuite and winced at my reflection in the mirror. “Oh, dear God.” She was going insane if she thought I was going to go out looking like this. Stripping off my clothes, I jumped straight into the shower, letting the water temperature get to an almost scalding hot before stepping under it. There was *nothing* better than a burning hot shower. The bathroom instantly filled up with steam. I hummed to myself as I washed my hair and cleaned my body, completely unfazed when Illayana opened the bathroom door.

“So, Arturo tells me you found tracking devices on our soldiers’ cars?” She moved to the mirror and wiped it down so she could see her reflection, touching up her hair.

“I didn’t. Your men did. I just told them where to look.”

“I can’t believe it didn’t occur to me to look for trackers,” she dejected, her shoulders slumping.

“You’re too hard on yourself. Adjusting from the Bratva to La Cosa Nostra would have been a bitch. Especially when you take into account the drastic differences in our lifestyles. Dealing with all of that would have

driven me mad, I can tell you that. I don't think my brain would have worked properly, trying to figure out what was going on in those circumstances."

She grumbled, folding her arms across her chest. "I still should have caught it. Or at least considered the possibility."

My best friend had changed a lot since becoming Mrs Don. She used to be wild. Carefree. Chaotic. She'd tear through a place like a tornado with little care of the damage she caused, the only desire running through her mind being to have fun.

Now she was pensive, full of seriousness and determination. There was almost this mature air surrounding her, like she'd somehow managed to age years in just these last few weeks.

She was hell-bent on doing a good job. On proving herself to the men in the Cosa Nostra and showing them she was so much more than a pretty face. That she deserved to be at Arturo's side.

"I'll tell you what I told Arturo. Sometimes, all it takes to figure something out is a fresh set of eyes." I turned off the shower and stepped out, making sure to face her head on so she didn't get a glimpse of the 'N' tattooed on my ass. Illayana held up a towel and I took it, wrapping it around my body. "He tell you about the trap he's setting up for Franco and his men?"

"Yes." She handed me a second towel for my hair. "A week seems like a long time to wait for it, though."

"Look at it logically. The last five distribution houses Arturo has set up have been raided and burned to the ground. It would make sense that Arturo takes precautions before setting up another one. If he just jumped straight into it, Franco might get suspicious and pull back. He's smart enough to

realise that eventually his luck will run out and you guys will catch on to what he's been doing.”

“True. I told him I'd come back for it.”

“What about your father?”

She blew out a tired breath, guilt flashing in her eyes. “There's nothing else I can do here. We have no leads. Nothing. With all our resources and all our contacts, I thought by now we would have *something*. A hint, a whisper —fucking anything. But it's like he's just dropped off the face of Earth. Like he's—”

“Don't say dead!” I cut in, my voice muffled by the towel over my face. I flicked my hair back and squeezed the still-wet strands with the towel. “He's not dead, Illayana. He's not. I'm *sure* of it. A man like Dimitri doesn't get killed quietly. He's the big, bad Bratva Butcher. A death like his would be made into a huge spectacle. Your uncle wouldn't be able to help himself, in that regard. He would want to make sure your father not only suffered but that everyone knew *he* was the one responsible for it. That he'd finally managed to beat him.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better? Because if you are, you're doing a shit job of it,” she grumbled.

“My words might be harsh but they have truth to them.” I threw the towels into the laundry basket and began to dress. “Your father is alive. Just focus on that for now and don't think about anything else. Don't let your fear and worry consume you. Be strong for him.”

Illayana huffed. “I'll try.”

Nodding, I stood beside her in the mirror, fully dressed and trying to decide what to do with the mop of hair on my head. “Don't feel pressured to

fly out to New York for this trap for Franco and his men. I'm sure Arturo would understand if you stayed here.”

“I feel like I *need* to be there though. Isn’t it my job as—”

“Mrs Don?” I shrugged. “Maybe. But you also have a duty to your family. You shouldn’t have to pick between the two.”

“Arturo told me the plan. You think it’s going to work?”

Scoffing, I said, “Of course it’s going to work. I came up with it.”

The plan was to pretend to set up another distribution house, with an elaborate trap hidden inside. From what they could gather, The Outfit would first enter the houses and raid them, taking anything of value. Afterwards, they would torch it, destroying anything left inside. If they stuck with their current MO, it meant they’d enter the house first, giving us the perfect opportunity to get the drop on them. The plan was already being set into motion. The Outfit would hit only hours after the houses were established, so timing was critical.

My presence wasn’t required for this trap. They didn’t *need* me there. But there was also no way I was going to miss it, either. The chance to get my hands bloody.

I fiddled around some more with my hair and added a few light touches of make-up. Illayana chatted beside me as I finished getting ready, telling me all about how, despite feeling guilty about not being with Arturo, that she was enjoying being back at home. There was something comforting about the familiar. About being surrounded by all the things you’d grown up with that just brought a sense of peace to your soul. I had a feeling that Illayana felt that way about home. That being there helped deal with some of the pressures that were currently taking over her life.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

Illayana chuckled, glancing at her watch. “Would you look at that? Only forty-five minutes. Must be some sort of record for you,” she winked.

“It actually is, smartass.”

Her soft laughter followed me into the next room. I grabbed my handbag that was slung across the back of one of the day chairs and checked inside to make sure I had everything I needed. That being my wallet, which had all of \$57 in it, my travel make-up bag, a handgun, a couple of daggers and my phone. There was also the emergency credit card my dad gave me just in case I needed it, which I absolutely refused to use.

“Did I hear right that you’ve gotten yourself a job?”

I turned, facing her. “Yes. And before you laugh, know that I am armed.”

Her hands flew up in surrender, lips tilted up in a smile. “I’m not going to laugh. I am confused though. Why did you get a job? You know Arturo will pay you for the work you’re doing for the Cosa Nostra, right? I mean, that’s technically a job right there.”

“I know, but I don’t want it. This is something I need to do on my own, without help from anyone else. I’ve never had a real job before, and I guess I want to see if I can do it,” I shrugged.

“You’re weird, but whatever.” She walked over and slapped me on the shoulder. “Just know, I plan to come in *all the time* and annoy the shit out of you, and you can’t say anything because ‘the customer is always right’,” she winked.

“I will spit in your coffee,” I threatened, only half joking.

Her phone rang. She moved to where she’d put her handbag down on her bed and fished it out, glancing at the screen. She smiled.

“Arturo,” she answered in a loving voice.

I stuck my finger into my mouth and gagged. She threw her middle finger up.

“I’m okay, how are you?” she answered. She stayed silent for a few moments, listening to him talk. “No, I have a few minutes. I can talk.”

“I’ll meet you downstairs,” I said, heading for the door to give her some privacy. She nodded, placing her hand over the receiver.

“I won’t be long,” she whispered.

“Take your time. I charge by the hour,” I winked.



Loud, angry voices reached my ears as I descended the stairs. My brows lowered into a deep frown.

I know those voices. My eyes widened. *Oh, fuck, I know those voices.* Urgency in my steps, I quickly rushed down to the second floor catching sight of my dad throwing a vicious right hook into Nikolai’s face.

Shock froze me solid. I stared, my mouth wide open as they grappled with one another, slamming into the walls, grunting and snarling.

What the ever loving fuck?

A door opened, Aleksandr and Mikhail appearing in the doorway. There was a deep frown on Aleksandr’s face as he watched the events unfold,

Nikolai and my dad going at each other like they hated one another. He made no move to intervene. Which meant I had to.

“Hey!” I ran forward and wedged myself between them when the first opportunity presented itself. I shoved at their chests, pushing them apart. “Enough!”

My dad was at my back and I was facing Nikolai head on. His eyes snapped to me, full of rage. I had no idea what was going on, what my dad said to him. But I knew it had to be bad. Nikolai didn’t snap like this out of the blue. He had unbelievable control over himself and his actions. It would take something drastic for him to all of a sudden start punching on with someone. Especially my dad.

“That’s enough,” I repeated, my voice stern.

His jaw clenched, like he wanted to say something, to fight me on this. But I held my ground, staring him down. He growled and stormed off, disappearing down the stairs. I’d find out his side of the story later.

I turned and locked eyes with my dad. There wasn’t a single ounce of regret on his face. Not that I was surprised. He’d been dying to get his hands on Nikolai since that day in the hospital. Since he found out what happened. The only thing holding him back was me. That was clearly out the window now.

Aleksandr and Mikhail hovered in the doorway, an awkwardness buzzing in the air. They had to walk through us to get past, and they seemed hesitant.

I arched an eyebrow. “If you’re done enjoying the show, I need a moment alone to talk to my dad.”

Aleksandr cleared his throat. He nodded once and brushed past, Mikhail in tow.

Once we were alone, I turned my angry glare on my dad.

“I’m not going to apologise,” he said instantly, standing taller.

I had no intention of asking him to apologise. I knew there wouldn’t be any point. My dad was just as stubborn as I was.

“What happened?”

Dad huffed, running a hand over his jaw. He winced slightly, the red mark on his skin an indication that Nikolai managed to get a good shot in. “What should have happened years ago. It was long overdue, and you know it.”

“Dad—”

“No, Tatiana. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear you defend him. I don’t want to hear the lecture. *I’m* your father. *I’m* the parent. *I* lecture *you*, not the other way around.”

I exhaled, crossing my arms over my chest. “Go on then.”

“How can you forgive him after what he did to you? How can you even talk to him? Stand the sight of him? Be in the same room as him? How—” he abruptly cut himself off, shaking his head in anger.

I tried not to balk at his harsh, abrasive tone. It was rare for him to talk to me this way.

“Where is this coming from?” I asked, confused.

“People talk, Tatiana. Especially in our world. I know he chased you to New York. I know you’ve been working together on this problem the Cosa Nostra are having with The Outfit. I just don’t want you to get hurt again. I’m trying to protect you.”

“How? By fighting with him?”

“By telling him to stay away from you.”

Ha! It would take more than an overprotective parent to scare Nikolai away. In fact, I don’t think anything could scare that man away.

“You had no right to do that.”

“You’re my daughter. My *only* daughter. It’s my job to take care of you. To watch out for you, no matter what. No matter how stubborn you’re being.”

“I’m not being stubborn, Dad,” I blew out, a sudden wave of exhaustion hitting me. “This thing with Nikolai...it’s complicated.”

“What’s complicated about it, Tatiana? He *abandoned* you—”

“Like Mum did? Yet you have no problem forgetting about that.”

He reared back as if I’d slapped him. Guilt bloomed in my chest. It wasn’t fair, I knew that. Yet I’d said it anyway. I couldn’t help it. It just slipped out.

“What happened between your mother and I was completely different.”

I scoffed. “Right. She was only your *wife* and abandoned a newborn baby instead. Completely different.”

“It is,” Dad growled. “Nikolai left you lying in a hospital bed, writhing in pain while you gave birth to the life inside you that was no longer living. How—”

A loud, audible gasp hit the air. I stiffened. Dad’s eyes flicked up and his face turned deathly white.

Oh, no. No, no, no. I didn’t want to turn around. I didn’t. I knew what I would find if I did, and I wasn’t ready for it. Fuck. How could I have been so stupid to have this conversation there and then? Of all places? I wanted to punch myself.

“Tatiana?” My best friend’s voice was soft, layered with confusion and hurt.

Dad looked at me, eyes filled with regret. “I’m sorry, Tatiana. I’m—”

“It’s not your fault,” I whispered softly. “Just...go.” There was no one to blame but myself. I had years to talk about it with Illayana and I didn’t. I

avoided it because I was too much of a chickenshit to deal with it. My past was catching up with me now, and I couldn't run from it. I couldn't hide. I had to face it head on.

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Chapter Twenty



TATIANA ANDREEVA

TWO YEARS AGO

“Push, Tatiana. You have to push.”

The pain was excruciating. Not only the physical pain, but the pain to my heart, my soul.

I didn’t want to do this. I just wanted to crawl into a dark, never-ending hole and die. My son was gone. There was no bringing him back. What was the point? What was the point of any of it?

Another wave of pain hit me head on and I cried out, squeezing my eyes shut. God, it hurt. They offered me an epidural to numb the pain but I didn’t want it. Despite how much it hurt, I wanted to feel every single second of it. It was the least I could do to bring him into this world.

I had one job. One job. Protect and nurture the life growing inside me... and I failed. I’d failed him.

I still didn't understand what was going on. I was too smothered in grief to really comprehend what the doctor had said. All I knew was that they wanted to induce labour so I could give birth. That I was too far along and had to get him out. It was heartbreaking to hear. Another hit to my already shattered soul.

Wave after wave of agonising pain gripped me hard, clutching me in its claws and refusing to let go. I cried out, tears falling down my cheeks.

"Try him again," I begged the nurse at my side, gripping the railing on the bed as hard as I could.

A look of pity crossed her face. "I've called him over two dozen times, darling. His phone is still off."

"Please," I sobbed. "Please, try again. Try again. I need him. He has to be here. I need him. I need—ahhhh." Another bout of pain hit me, the overwhelming urge to push bearing down on me. I twisted and turned, trying to find a way to get away from the pain, but nothing worked. Nothing worked.

"Okay, Tatiana. When the pain hits again, I need you to push, okay?" Dr Spendel's voice was calm but firm. His hands were between my legs, his brows lowered in concern as he focused all of his attention on what was going on.

I shook my head. "I can't." I couldn't do this without Nikolai. I'd never pictured myself as the type who needed a man, but god, I needed him. I needed him to hold my hand. To wrap me up in his arms and tell me it was all going to be okay, even though I knew it never would be.

Where was he? Why wasn't he here? I thought he loved me, that he'd always be there for me. I thought—

I screamed as more pain took over my body. "Call him again!"

The nurse looked at Dr Spendel for guidance. Dr Spendel nodded. “Keep trying,” he commanded.

The nurse hit redial on the phone. It didn’t ring, a generic messaging service playing out over the loudspeaker.

“No, no,” I groaned in agony. How could he do this? “Nikolai, please.” Another nurse came over and offered me a drink of water as she placed a damp cloth over my forehead.

“Is there someone else I can call for you?” the nurse asked. “What about your mother? Your father? A friend?”

The only person I wanted was Nikolai. He was the only one who could help me. I knew I could call my dad, or maybe Illayana. But the thought of either of them being here didn’t bring me comfort. Nikolai. I needed Nikolai.

The more I cried, the more my heart broke. He abandoned me. I couldn’t do this without him, I just couldn’t—

“Tatiana!”

My eyes snapped to Dr Spendel.

“I know this hurts. I know.” Were those tears in his eyes? “But I need you to push. Maureen is going to keep calling him but I need you to focus on me, okay? Just focus on me and pushhhh.”

A scream tore from my throat as I used all my strength to do what he said. The contractions ripped through me like a tsunami and I tried to ignore the pain of my broken heart, focusing solely on Dr Spendel.

“That’s it. Keep going.”

The more I pushed, the harder I cried, calling out for Nikolai over and over again, praying that he could somehow hear me. That he would suddenly burst through that door and hold me, kiss me and lend me his

strength. Because I couldn't do it on my own. The pain of knowing that, after all of it, I would never get to see my son smile. Never hear him laugh or cry. I'd never see him open his eyes or call me Mama. It was too much. It was all too much.

"Nikolai, please. I need you," I sobbed, begged. He wouldn't do this to me. Not my Nikolai. Not my knight.

"You're almost there. That's it. One more big push."

The nurse continued to redial Nikolai's number over and over again, the sound of the messaging service playing out through the room, a constant reminder that I was doing this alone. That he wasn't coming.

How many times had she called him? I didn't even know.

"Ahhhhh!" There was one last, agonising burst of pain and then nothing. Just instant relief. I slumped back into the bed, panting heavily.

Dr Spendel stood, cradling my son in his arms.

I cried so hard that the tears obscured my vision and I couldn't see properly. My baby. My precious, little baby. Since the moment I'd found out I was pregnant, I'd pictured this exact moment. The moment my child came into the world. It was meant to be the best moment of my life.

But instead, it was the worst.

I reached out for him and Dr Spendel placed him in my arms gently, with so much care and tenderness, making sure to cradle his head, even though we both knew it didn't really matter.

He was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

I ran my finger down the side of his face softly. "Hi, Nikolas."

Illayana sat quietly on her bed, tears in her eyes as I recounted what had happened. I told her everything, not holding a single detail back. I told her about how Nikolai and I first started seeing each other. I told her when I

found out I was pregnant. I told her about the fight Nikolai and I had. I told her everything. Every. Single. Thing.

She didn't say a word the entire time. She just sat there and listened as I poured my entire heart and soul out. There was no anger on her face, no judgment. Just complete and utter sadness.

When I was finished, she immediately got up and hugged me. She hugged me so tightly, I could barely breathe. I'd been avoiding this conversation for so long, I honestly wasn't sure what to expect when I finally told her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered into my hair, holding me tighter.
"Why?"

I just shook my head. I still wasn't entirely sure myself why I'd hidden it from her for so long. At first, I just didn't want to talk about it. With *anyone* —not just her. As time went on, I realised it was just easier pretending it didn't happen. Easier not to think about it at all than dredge up the horrible memory of that day.

She pulled back, staring me deep in the eyes. "I don't understand. How were you pregnant and I didn't know? Am I that bad of a best friend that I didn't notice?"

"Do you remember when I went away for a few months to visit my aunt and uncle?"

Realisation flashed across her face. "It was then?"

I nodded.

"And then when you dropped off the face of Earth because you said you were going backpacking across Europe?"

I dropped my gaze to my hands. "I needed time...afterwards. I wasn't really backpacking. I was here, at my dad's house. I didn't leave my room for months."

Her eyes widened. “Tatiana, why? Why didn’t you come to me? I would have been there for you.”

“I know you would have, Illayana. I know that.” The truth of the matter was, I didn’t want her there. I didn’t want to be comforted. I didn’t want to be held and told false promises about how it was all going to be okay. I just wanted to die. It was as simple as that.

She looked like she was going to push more on the subject, but in the end decided to drop it. “That guy, Kurt, the one that started all this shit between you and Nik. Why did he do that? Why did he say you guys slept together when you didn’t?”

“Well, we *used* to sleep together, remember? That trainee I told you about?”

“That was him?”

“Yes. We fucked for a few months while we were both going through the Bratva training. Then...”

“Nik?” It felt so strange talking about this with her, but only because I’d been hiding it for so long.

“Yeah. Once things started with Nikolai, I broke it off with Kurt instantly. He was pissed off but Nikoali is—”

“Whoa, whoa.” She held up her hands. “I don’t need those details. He’s my brother. I don’t want to know what you guys get up to.”

I chuckled softly. “Fair point. Anyway, Kurt didn’t take kindly to being dumped. I think he caused trouble between Nikolai and I as a way to get back at me.”

Illayana frowned. “How did he even know about the two of you, though?”

“He caught us. Once. We were fucking in the warehouse late one night when he walked in. Nikoali threatened to kill him if he said a word. Which

he took very seriously because, hello, your brother can be a scary motherfucker when he wants to be.”

Illayana grunted.

“Everything was good, for a while. We’d been seeing each other for about a year when I fell pregnant. But I guess Kurt decided he wanted to cause drama, so he kept dropping hints that he and I had slept together recently. So recently that Nikolai thought the baby was Kurt’s and not his. The rest, you know...”

She shook her head in anger. “God, he can be so pig-headed sometimes. I can’t believe he didn’t listen to you when you said you hadn’t slept with Kurt. Did he ever give any explanation as to why he acted like that?”

I looked away. He had. Nikolai told me all about Galina and the whole “passing off the baby as his even though she knew there was a high probability of it being someone else’s” thing. It finally gave me some clarity as to why he’d acted the way he did when Kurt ran his mouth. Nikolai had been stung in the past, and he thought I’d done the exact same thing to him. It excused his behaviour...up to a point.

I couldn’t tell Illayana that though. It wasn’t my secret to tell.

When I didn’t answer, Illayana asked, “Whatever ended up happening to him? Kurt?”

I shrugged. “Beats me. He disappeared shortly after Nikolai and I split. I know word got out that Nikoali was looking for him. I think he realised how much he fucked up and ran the first chance he got. I managed to have a brief conversation with him before he took off. If I hadn’t been pregnant, I would have tried to kill him. Turns out, he’d been spying on me for months, stalking me. It’s how he found out about the tattoo on my ass. He used to watch me in my room.”

“Creepy,” she shivered. “Is there anything else you’ve been neglecting to tell me?” Her face was tense, eyes hard.

Was there? I racked my brain, trying to think if there was anything else I’d been keeping from her. Better to air it all out now and just be done with it.

“My mother called me a few weeks ago.”

“Your mother?” she frowned.

I nodded. “She reached out. Said she wanted to see me.”

“What the fuck?” she exclaimed. “Where the hell has she been the last twenty-four years?”

“Didn’t ask. Just told her to fuck off and hung up. My dad went to Russia to see her during the time of the attack. She tried to convince him to talk to me, to get me to agree to see her, but I’m not interested in anything she has to say or whatever excuses she tries to throw my way.”

Illayana asked a few more questions. Some about my mother. Some about Nikolai, our relationship and how we’d managed to hide it for so long. I tried to answer as honestly as possible. The shift in her personality was so gradual at first that I didn’t even notice it. The sadness and compassion she’d shown slowly began to fade, replaced by that infamous Volkov temper.

When the conversation reached a standstill, I peaked a glance at her. Oh, yeah, she was pissed.

By the look on her face, I could have sworn she was getting ready to throw down right there and then. I was expecting it. Preparing for it. I’d seen that dangerous glint in her eyes dozens of times before she challenged her brothers to the ring. It was going to happen. It was—

Illayana stood abruptly and marched towards the door. She flung it open so hard that it smacked against the wall with a loud *whack*, and she disappeared around the corner without a glance back.

I frowned. She was itching to fight, yet she was ignoring it? That didn't sound like the Illayana I knew. Unless something was holding her back from fighting *me*? Maybe she felt bad for me. Maybe after I'd told her what happened, she didn't think it was right to be angry with me.

That only left—

My eyes widened. *Shit*. I jumped to my feet and bolted out the door.

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Chapter Twenty-One



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

I STARED AT MY laptop screen, lips pursed in mild agitation. My jaw ached, a slight flare of pain spreading out across my face as I opened my mouth to finish the rest of my drink. Fuck, Ivan hit hard. Had it been *anyone else*, I would have killed them for daring to step out of line like that. Ivan got away with it purely because he was Tatiana's father. And...well...because I deserved the strike. He was right. I had let Tatiana down. I didn't deserve her, but do you think that was going to stop me from having her anyway?

No fucking way.

Tatiana was probably going to kill me for getting into it with Ivan. Usually, I could hold myself back from retaliating against him. I could ignore the way he looked at me with disgust and contempt. I could ignore the disrespectful words he grumbled whenever I walked past. The one thing I could *not* ignore was him telling me that he planned to marry Tatiana off.

The rage that had consumed me swallowed me whole. There was no way I was capable of holding myself back from that. Even if I wanted to—which I didn’t.

Just the *idea* of it...the notion of her being bound to another man, kissing him, touching him, fucking him—

The glass in my hand *shattered*, my rage uncontrollable. I cursed, letting the remaining shards of glass slip through my fingers to join the others on the floor.

I’d marry Tatiana right fucking then and there if she’d let me. I’d plan a big, grand, elaborate proposal—one worthy of her—drop to one knee at her feet and ask her to spend the rest of her life with me, if I thought there was even the slightest chance she’d say yes. I knew there wasn’t though. I had to work my way up to that, which I was beyond determined to do.

My laptop beeped, letting me know the file I was downloading had finished. I opened it and quickly scanned the information. I needed to find out everything I possibly could on Talon. His strengths. His weaknesses. His fucking shoe size. I wanted to know everything there was to know about him. *Nothing* was off limits.

Talon Scardo. Fifty-four years old. Attended Sunset Boarding School for Boys and graduated top of his class.

I scoffed. Another perk of Daddy’s money.

No college listed, which meant he most likely didn’t attend one. CEO of a few massive Fortune 500 companies in the US, as well as several other companies all around the world. He had his fingers dipped into everything, from private security firms to run of the mill cleaning businesses. An idea flourished in my mind and I couldn’t hold back my grin. If it was possible, if I could somehow make it work, I had my in.

I need to run it by Mikhail first, if he is still here. See if he knows—

A hand slammed my laptop closed. “Get the fuck up.”

I looked up, staring into my sister’s angry blue eyes. She was glaring down at me like she wanted to slit my throat.

“Are you deaf? I said, get the fuck up,” she growled.

I arched an eyebrow. “A little early for a visit from the Red Dragon, isn’t it? That period calendar Lukyan and I made is usually pretty accurate.”

Her face reddened, teeth clenching so hard that I was sure she’d shatter them. If it was physically possible, there’d be steam coming out of her ears.

“Don’t joke,” she spat. “How could you?”

I sighed, rolling my eyes. “You’re going to have to be more specific. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Illayana was easy to anger. She could be talking about any number of things. Maybe I moved one of her belongings and didn’t put it back exactly where I found it. Or maybe I accidentally ate something in the fridge that she’d planned on eating herself (yet neglected to tell anyone about). Those were just a few examples of times she’d gotten pissed with me in the past.

“You’re seriously going to play dumb right now?”

I rubbed my temples in exasperation. “Illayana—”

Lukyan burst through the front door, panting heavily. His coat hung off his shoulders, like he didn’t want to waste the few extra seconds it would have taken to put it on properly, and his shoelaces were untied. “Okay, okay, I’m here. I’m—” he frowned, his eyes darting between Illayana and I. “Uh, what’s going on?”

We both ignored him.

“How could you keep something like this from me, Nikolai? *How?*”

I stiffened, my entire body going cold. That look in her eyes...the hurt layered in her voice...

Glancing over my shoulder, my eyes connected with Tatiana's. She was wringing her hands together in front of her, chewing her bottom lip nervously. My girl didn't *get* nervous, so it could only mean one thing.

I exhaled heavily, turning back to Illayana. "She finally told you."

"Told you what?" Lukyan asked.

"*You* should have been the one to tell me, Nik. *You!*" She shoved me hard in the chest, forcing me to hit the back of the couch. "I can't believe you would keep something like this from me. Both of you!"

Anger pulsed through me. "Don't make this all about you, Illayana. *Don't*. This was between Tatiana and I. It had nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me?" she breathed out, aghast. "You're *my* brother. She's *my* best friend. He was *my*—" she cut herself off, shaking her head. "Don't act like this doesn't involve me. It fucking does."

Aleksandr walked into the room, most likely having been alerted to the brewing confrontation by Illayana's loud, angry voice. "What's going on here?" His wife stood at his side, watching on with a frown on her face.

Illayana spun to face him. "Did you know?"

"Know *what*?" Lukyan demanded.

Aleksandr's gaze darted between the two of us, assessing the situation. He must have figured out what she was referring to, because his shoulders dropped slightly, head tipping forward.

Illayana's breath hitched. "You did," she choked out in shock. "You knew...and you never said anything?!"

"Illayana—" Aleksandr began.

"He told you?" Tatiana cut him off mid-sentence.

“Told you *what?*” Lukyan growled, cutting in again, his eyes flicking around the room. “I swear to God, if someone doesn’t tell me what’s going on *right now*—”

“Shut up, Lukyan!” we all yelled.

His lips set into a firm line but he didn’t say anything else, keeping his mouth shut.

“Not by choice,” Aleksandr quickly said to Tatiana. “I...overheard the argument you guys had here a few weeks ago.” He was defending me, trying to make it clear to Tatiana that I didn’t betray her confidence and tell him when she expressly told me not to say a word to anyone. There he went again, always looking out for me.

“This is unbelievable,” Illayana hissed, her anger climbing. “I didn’t realise this was the type of family we were. The type that kept huge, life-changing secrets from each other. Well, I’m glad I know now.”

“Stop being childish,” I snapped. “This heart-breaking moment happened to *Tatiana and I*. Stop making it all about *you*.”

“Oh, that’s it.” Illayana took two steps back, putting her fists up. “Get the fuck on your feet. I challenge you to the ring.”

“Illayana, no,” Tatiana said, shaking her head, her hands in the air in a calm, surrendering gesture.

She should have known what a waste of time it was, trying to reason with my sister when she was in a mood like this. The only one who could probably calm her down was thousands of miles away.

“I’m not going to fight you, Illayana.” There would be no point to it. She wouldn’t win, and it would just piss her off even more to lose. I could always *let* her win, but I was pissed off too, and wasn’t willing to concede to her bratty behaviour.

“You act like you have a choice in it. You don’t. Either get up and come to the warehouse or I’ll fight you right here.”

I scoffed, not believing a word she said. She knew as well as I did that we weren’t allowed to fight in that room—

Illayana charged, slamming into me, her hands wrapping around my throat. The couch tipped backwards and we tumbled to the ground, grunting on impact.

Son of a—

Illayana punched me in the jaw, pain shooting across my face, then she went right back to strangling me. She had the advantage, basically sitting square on my chest, using her weight to keep me down. But I was done placating her.

I gripped both of her wrists tightly, hard enough to make it hurt. She winced. I twisted outwards, forcing her to let go and then I reared forward, smashing my forehead into her lips in a brutal headbutt. Illayana cried out but recovered quickly, latching her teeth deep into my forearm, biting me.

“Ow! Illayana!” I shook my forearm, trying to dislodge her. She locked her jaw, refusing to let go, like she was some kind of rabid dog. She was certainly acting like a bitch.

I stuck her across the side of the face—once, twice. She finally released me from the death grip of her teeth, and I went to strike her again.

“Dostatochno!” Enough!

Years of conditioning made me freeze instantly, my fist hovering an inch from Illayana’s cheek. God, if I wasn’t entirely sure Father wasn’t there, I could have sworn that was him. It sounded exactly like him. *Exactly*. I knew that was the only reason Illayana froze too.

Loud footsteps reverberated around the now-quiet room and then Illayana was yanked off me by the back of her shirt. I jumped to my feet quickly, catching Aleksandr's disappointed glare. He was still holding Illayana up by the back of her shirt.

"Don't look at me like that. *She* started it." I pointed an accusing finger at Illayana.

She opened her mouth to respond, but Aleksandr shook her roughly.

"Quiet," he snapped. "You *both* know Mother's rule. No fighting in the family room."

"She's the one—"

Aleksandr growled, slicing his hand through the air to silence me. "I said, *quiet*. We have more important things to deal with, so we're going to settle this right now. Illayana has the right to issue you with a challenge, and *you* do not have the right to deny her. Father's rules."

My fists clenched at my sides. He was right. Father invented the concept of the ring for several reasons. One of which was to settle any disagreements between us. He didn't want us holding grudges or resentment towards each other. We would challenge them and fight it out instead. Once the fight was over, that was it. The matter was considered settled and we both had to move on.

Aleksandr finally let Illayana go and forced her to look him in the eyes. "Do you still—"

"Damn fucking straight I do," she gritted out behind clenched teeth.

"Fine." I cracked my neck. "Let's get it over with, then."



I reared back, avoiding Illayana's fist, ducked underneath her arm and jabbed her in the ribs. She sucked in a pain-filled breath, her eyes widening. I dropped, stuck out a leg and spun, kicking her feet out right from under her and making her slam to the ground. I rose to my full height and placed a foot in the centre of her chest, keeping her down. I didn't apply *too* much pressure. I wasn't trying to kill her. But she'd pissed me off so much, I wanted to at least make it hurt a little. Or a lot.

We'd been fighting for the better part of an hour, and I feared there was no end in sight. My sister was *angry*. Beyond angry. I think a lot of that anger stemmed from being hurt. Instead of dealing with that emotion, she leant hard on her anger, letting herself succumb to it.

I was having a hard time holding her back anymore. She just kept coming, and coming, and coming, refusing to tap out or give up.

As the challenger, the fight couldn't end until *she* ended it, by tap out or KO. And I was running out of options on ways to end this fight safely.

"Give up, Illayana." I'd said those same three words multiple times already and she'd done the same thing she was doing then; she bared her teeth and shook her head, flat out refusing.

"I'm not stopping until I knock your fucking teeth out."

I sighed, applying a bit more pressure, making her choke. “You’re going to look back on this moment and regret how much of a fucking idiot you’re being.”

She gasped. “No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will. You’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting?” she screeched. “You *lied* to me for years. You hid this massive, traumatic event from me—”

“Look how you’re acting!” I screamed down at her. “Can you honestly blame us?”

Movement behind me made me glance over my shoulder, catching sight of Tatiana climbing into the ring. People stood around the outside, watching on. Aleksandr, Drea, Lukyan, Illayana’s guards and a few other soldiers. Way at the back of the crowd stood Ivan, his feet planted firmly on the ground and arms folded across his chest.

“Let her go, Nikolai,” Tatiana commanded.

I took my foot off Illayana’s chest and stepped back. She immediately jumped up and went to run at me again, but Tatiana wedged herself between us, stopping her.

“I’m the one you really want to fight, Illayana. Not Nikolai. If it were up to him, he would have told you all about it the moment that it happened. I’m the one who told him not to say a word.”

“Tatiana—”

“No, Nikolai.” She put a hand up, telling me not to say another word. “You know it’s true. I’m the one who wanted to keep our relationship a secret. I’m the one who didn’t want to tell them. The only person to blame here is me.”

There was *nobody* to blame. Tatiana and I had the right to keep what was happening between us private. We weren't obligated to tell anyone a damn thing. I wanted to say it. I even opened my mouth to do so, but one glance from Tatiana had me snapping my mouth shut.

She looked at Illayana head on. "Once we do this, it's over. We leave it all here. We move on. Agreed?"

Illayana pursed her lips in distaste, her eyes still burning with anger. She nodded once. "Agreed." She stepped back and put her fists up.

Tatiana cracked her neck. She slipped a hand over her slender fingers and pulled off her rings, holding them out to me. I took them from her and she pulled out her earrings next, dropping them in my open palm.

"Tati—" I began.

"We both know this is the only way for this to end. She needs to fight it out. So I'm going to let her."

"You shouldn't have to."

She shrugged before giving me a wink. "If I wanted a sane, reasonable best friend, I wouldn't have chosen Illayana." She flicked her head to the side. "Go, quickly. Before she changes her mind."

I didn't care if she changed her mind. I didn't care if she was still pissed off. I didn't care if she wanted to fight until she couldn't stand on her own two feet any longer. At that moment, all I cared about was Tatiana.

She was putting on a brave face, but I knew reliving the past was painful for her, and that she was willing to accept whatever punishment Illayana dealt out because inside, she felt like she deserved it for hiding it from her all these years. Illayana was her best friend. The guilt of keeping this secret weighed heavily on her every single day, and suddenly it was all coming out.

Exhaling an annoyed grunt, I turned and climbed down from the ring. Cheering rang out through the room, loud and boisterous as Tatiana and Illayana ran at each other.

“Here. For your eye.” Lukyan shoved an ice pack at my chest, keeping his gaze locked on the ring, refusing to even look at me. He—like Illayana—was angry that I never told him about what happened. *His* choice of punishment, however, was the silent treatment (as much as Lukyan was capable of being silent, that is). He viewed the loss of his “dazzling personality” (his words, not mine) as a punishment worse than death.

The crowd groaned when Tatiana landed a brutal right hook, Illayana’s head whipping to the side, and then planted a fast front kick to her chest, sending her flying back. I’d feel sorry for her if she wasn’t being such a brat.

Aleksandr walked up to my side. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I grunted, wincing when I lay the ice pack against my skin. Fuck, she got me good. My face, arm, shoulder and abdomen all ached. Despite her anger, she didn’t cause any lasting damage. I’d have a shit-ton of bruises though.

Aleksandr sighed. “Nikolai—”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Not right now.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Fine. But, later.” His tone brokered no debate on the matter, so I just nodded my head, and focused back on the fight.

Chapter Twenty-Two



TATIANA ANDREEVA

I SPUN A KICK and Illayana deflected, lashing out with her own. I raised an arm up, protecting the side of my head and then reared forward, smashing my forehead into her nose. We traded blow after blow. There was no finesse, no strategy behind the attacks. We just ripped into one another like we were in a good old-fashioned bar brawl.

I knew the day was coming; the moment I told Illayana my deepest, darkest secret. The second I saw that anger roll over her face, taking her over, *I knew*. I knew she wouldn't accept anything less than this.

I'd betrayed her, kept things from her no one should keep from their best friend. She wanted to punish me for that. Despite the sadness she felt after hearing what happened, despite holding me and comforting me, she wanted to punish me. The hurt and anger consuming her prevented her from doing anything less.

Illayana rammed into me, tackling me to the ground. My back slammed onto the mat and I grunted, pain shooting up my spine. Illayana jabbed into my side over and over, showing no indication of slowing down. I heaved right and we rolled across the floor. The crowd went wild, cheering us on and demanding more violence. Even though we'd delivered an abundance of it already.

We grappled for the dominant position, grunting and snarling at one another. I ignored the pain in my body, locking it away behind a door in my mind, and used all my strength to put her on her back. I scrambled quickly, locking my legs around her head in a triangle chokehold and *squeezed*. Illayana choked, trying to draw breath, her free hand scratching uselessly at my skin, but I refused to let go. She was never going to give up, never going to tap out. There was only one way this was going to end. I had to make her pass out.

It took an average of nine-and-a-half seconds to render someone unconscious from a triangle chokehold when applied correctly. We were slowly creeping up to that point.

The moment I felt Illayana's body start to go lax, I immediately let go, unwinding my limbs from around her neck and lying flat on my back, panting from exhaustion.

Illayana gulped in a huge breath of air, hands moving to her throat as she gasped heavily.

"We done?" I asked, trying to catch my breath.

"Almost."

I frowned. Before I could think anything more of it, she reached over and struck me across the face.

"Ow!"

“Now we’re done,” she groaned, rolling back onto her back.

Bloody bitch.

She always had to get the last hit in, even if she lost.

I couldn’t help but smile, despite the pain coursing through my body. There was a lot I loved about my best friend. Her wild, crazy, somewhat erratic personality. Her unwavering loyalty. Her fierceness. But what I loved the most was her ability to be one-hundred percent herself. What you saw with her was what you got. Complete genuineness. If she was pissed off or upset with you, she had no problem letting you know it. Even if she knew she was being a tad bit irrational about it. Like then.

We laid sprawled out on the floor of the ring, both of us panting heavily and staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry, you know? Sorry I kept it all from you.”

Illayana turned her head to look at me. “I know you are,” she murmured softly, that anger and fight from moments ago all but gone. “I know you are.” Her voice...

“But you still haven’t forgiven me, have you?”

“I’m not angry anymore.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

She sighed. She sat up and crossed her legs, facing me. I did the same and we stared at each other. Her hair was a mess, a splattering of bruises spreading out over her skin. I had a feeling that I didn’t look much better. She got a couple of really good shots in.

In my peripheral vision, I glimpsed Nikolai leading everyone away, trying to give us the space to talk without prying ears. The only ones who put up a fight were Illayana’s guards. They’d moved too far away for me to hear

what they were saying, but I had a feeling it went a little something like this:

“Arturo said we couldn’t let her out of our sight.”

“She needs us to protect her.”

“Ow, why are you hurting me?”

That last one I knew for sure because Nikolai had one of the twins by the back of his neck and he was forcibly making him leave the warehouse.

Eventually it was just Illayana and I.

“I thought we were best friends—” she began.

“We are,” I insisted, cutting her off.

She shook her head. “No, we’re not. Best friends don’t keep something *this* big from each other. They don’t. You preferred to go through it all alone than call me. Why?” Tears glistened in her eyes. “Did you think I wouldn’t understand? That I wouldn’t be there for you when you needed me? What?”

“Illayana, I-its—” I couldn’t find the words. Not the right ones, anyway. Nothing I thought of seemed right, seemed sufficient to explain it all. But I had to try.

“In that moment, the only person I wanted was Nikolai. Of course I knew you’d come if I called. There was never any doubt in my mind about that. Not one. But...” My words broke off as that all too familiar pain burst inside of my chest, making it impossible to breathe. “In that moment, Nikolai was all I wanted. The only person I was willing to see. Take comfort from. Please, try to understand that.”

“I do.” She leant forward, placing her hand on mine. “I understand why, at the time, you couldn’t tell me. You were dealing with so much. Such loss.”

She shook her head. “I can’t even imagine the pain. I am so, so sorry you had to go through that.”

I breathed out a small sigh of relief. We were going to be okay. We—“What I don’t understand is why you didn’t come to me *after*. It’s been two years, Tatiana. *Two years*, and you never said anything. Were you ever planning on telling me? If I didn’t walk in on that conversation with you and your dad, would you have taken this secret to your grave?”

“No!” I answered instantly, then frowned. Now that she asked the question, I wasn’t entirely sure. Would I have? It was true that I didn’t have any intention of telling her anytime soon, but I would have eventually... right?

Illayana smiled but it held no warmth. Only hurt and sadness. “I think we both know that isn’t true, don’t we?”

My mouth opened yet nothing came out. As much as it pained me to admit, she was right. There was never a scenario I’d played out in my head where I told her. I realised that I’d planned to avoid this conversation for as long as humanly possible. That—unintentionally—I’d planned to take this secret to my grave.

“I couldn’t talk about it, Illayana. I just...couldn’t.” Tears fell from my eyes and I didn’t even bother trying to hold them back.

Compassion flashed across her face and she moved to her knees, shuffling forward. She embraced me, burying my face into her shoulder and I cried harder. I cried so hard I could barely breathe, clutching onto her like she was my lifeline. She didn’t say anything, slowly rocking me back and forth as she ran her hands through my hair.

I don’t know how long we stayed like that for. It could have been hours. It could have been minutes. All I knew was that, at the end of it, I was so emotionally exhausted, I felt like I could pass out.

When the crying subsided, replaced with quiet sobbing, Illayana pulled back. She wiped the tears from my face with her thumbs, and it was only then that I realised she'd been crying too.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I really am."

She gave me a half-smile. I could see in her eyes that she had more to say, but seeing me break down made her hesitant to voice it.

"Go ahead. Say what you want to say."

She shook her head. "Don't worry—"

"Say it, Illayana. We need to air it all out now. You've never let anything stop you from speaking your mind. Don't start now. Just say it."

She chewed on her bottom lip nervously. I nodded once in encouragement and she sighed. "I understand why you didn't say anything in the moment. I do. But we're supposed to be best friends, Tatiana. We're supposed to be there for each other. To comfort one another during those hard and difficult times. The fact that you felt like you couldn't come to me, confide in me... it hurts. You kept this huge part of your life from me. You *lied* to me for years. Best friends don't do that."

She was right. If the situation was reversed, I'd be incredibly hurt that she kept so much from me.

"There were so many opportunities for you to open up to me. I share everything with you. *Everything*. And all this time, you've been sitting on something huge. Monumental. How am I supposed to trust you now?"

I could tell her that I would never do this again, that I'll always be honest with her from this point forward. But she wouldn't believe me. I'd broken her trust, and that was a hard thing to get back. I knew from experience.

I hung my head. "I don't know where we go from here."

Illayana was quiet for a moment. "Neither do I."

Then she got up and left, leaving me sitting in the middle of the ring alone.



“Are you sure you want to leave?” my dad asked, standing in the doorway of my bedroom with the eyes of a concerned parent.

I nodded, stuffing the last of my clothes into my bag. After Illayana walked away, I hunted her down, desperate to fix things.

She didn’t want to see me.

Today was already a hard enough day for her. I didn’t want to add anymore to it than I already had. The best thing for me to do was leave. I wanted to be there for her. For Nikolai too. But I was afraid my presence would further upset her.

I tried texting and calling. No response. I didn’t want to make today all about me, so I told her if she wanted me there, all she had to do was tell me and I’d come straight away. Come hell or high water. And I left her in peace.

I figured I’d go back to New York and start working on some designs for my clothing line. The problem was, I didn’t have a working station. At home, I’d taken over one of the spare rooms and turned it into my “designing den”, set with an industrial table, sewing machine, mannequin,

rulers, cork boards, sketch books...everything I needed to create and design my own clothes. I didn't have anything like that in New York.

"She doesn't want me here, Dad."

"She's just upset. Give her a little time to calm down and I'm sure it will all be okay."

"That's what I'm doing."

"You don't have to run thousands of miles away to do it, though. You can stay here."

I shook my head again. "It's better if I just go."

He huffed, coming in to sit on the edge of my bed. He knew there was no point in arguing with me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Dad, this is in *no way* your fault. The only person to blame here is me. I should have told her a *long* time ago."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I had been telling you for a while that you should just bite the bullet and tell her. Could have saved yourself a whole lot of trouble if you'd just listened to me."

I glared and he laughed.

"I'm just saying. Your old man is wise beyond his years. It wouldn't kill you to listen to him every once in a while."

I threw a pillow at his head. "Stop talking about yourself in the third person. It's weird."

He laughed again. "Alright. All kidding aside, I have a favour to ask you."

"What?"

"I want you to meet someone."

"Someoneee...?" I dragged out.

"He's the son of one of my friends."

“You don’t have any friends,” I said automatically. Then his words properly registered in my brain, and I reared back in shock. “Hang on, are you trying to set me up on a *date*?!” I shrieked.

“No! Well, I mean if you like him, then yes, you could call it a date. But —”

“Dad! No!”

“Just hear me out! His name is Steve. He’s twenty-six, tall, handsome *and* funny. I think you two could really hit it off.”

“I’m not going out with some random guy,” I said, scrunching up my face.

“Not random. Steve.”

“Oh, well for sure then. Sign me up.”

Dad smiled. “Great! I really thought I’d have to talk you into this more —”

“I’m kidding!” I slapped him in the arm. “Even *if* I was interested in dating—which I am not—I don’t need your help in finding a date. I can do it on my own.”

“I know that. But I really think you’d like Steve.” I opened my mouth but he held a hand up, silencing me. “Just listen to me first, then you can talk. I’m not asking you to date him. I’m not. I just want you to *meet* him. Get some food and have a conversation with the man. That’s all. Nothing else.”

“Sounds like a date to me,” I grumbled under my breath. “Why?”

“Because I genuinely think you guys will get along, and even if nothing romantic comes of it, then at least it will give you a friend outside of this life. Outside of the Volkovs.”

I raised my brows in surprise. “He’s not Bratva?”

“No,” he shook his head, his dark blonde hair falling over his face. “Like I said, he’s the son of an old friend of mine from back in Russia. I saw them on my trip. Steve knows of the Bratva but he’s not an active member. Like you. He mentioned he was coming over to New York and I thought you could get together for dinner. That’s all. It doesn’t have to be a date if you don’t want it to be.”

“But you’re hoping it turns into one.”

He shrugged innocently. “If you like him, you like him. For the record, I don’t think he’d ever hurt you like Nikolai did.”

I studied him suspiciously. There was something else going on here. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but he was definitely up to something.

“Sorry, Dad, I’m not interested in dating anyone. Or making new friends. I have a hard enough time keeping the ones I already have. I don’t need anymore.”

“Tatiana, please.” He placed a hand on top of mine, capturing my gaze and holding it with intense, pleading eyes. “I don’t ask you for much. In fact, I ask you for nothing at all. But I’m asking you for this. Do this for me. *Please.*”

“Arghhh, Dad,” I groaned, dropping my head. He was laying the guilt card on pretty fucking thick. He knew there was nothing I wouldn’t do for him, especially when he begged like that. Insufferable old man.

“Fine,” I whined. “But it’s *not* a date. You make sure you tell him that. And you’re not allowed to use that again for the rest of the year. Actually, for the next two years!”

“Good.” He wiped the back of his hand over his forehead, relief filling his face. “Because I already gave him your number and he’s going to message you soon.”

“You what?!”

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Chapter Twenty-Three



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

THE ROOM WAS QUIET. So quiet, you could hear a pin drop. We all sat in Aleksandr's office the following morning, a tense and awkward air surrounding us, just like there was last night. It wasn't exactly how we all planned to spend our mother's birthday. Lukyan wasn't talking to me. Illayana wasn't talking to me. Or Aleksandr. We huddled around the TV watching all of our mother's favorite movies and eating her favourite snacks. It was our way of paying homage to the amazing woman who birthed us and raised us. Our way of celebrating her life. Except, unlike in previous years, where the night had consisted of laughter, bonding and food fights, this year was nothing but angry glares and snide remarks.

Even the *Prague* birthday cake Aleksandr and I had specially made for the night didn't relieve any of the tension. And my siblings *loved* chocolate cake.

Tatiana had texted me throughout the night, checking up on me and making sure I was okay. Cracking jokes to try and distract me from the crushing pain of this day. I appreciated it more than I could ever put into words.

Usually, she would be there with us. But she felt like, with everything going on, that it would be best to keep her distance. At least until Illayana had calmed down.

She'd texted her too, but my sister was too busy being the little brat she was to reply. The fact that it was the next day and she'd had the entire night to calm down hadn't helped whatsoever. If anything, all that time had just made her angrier.

Aleksandr had just finished relaying the news Mikhail brought to us to Illayana and Lukyan. They'd sat quietly and listened to every word, which was an indication on its own of the seriousness of the situation. They *never* sat still. It was extremely concerning. They were seated next to each other on the couch against the far wall, faces grim. Aleksandr was behind his desk and I was sitting in one of the armchairs in front of it. He was trying not to look as anxious as I knew he felt. I learnt a long time ago to pick up on the subtle cues of my brother's body language: the tension in his shoulders, the slight clench of his jaw, the unease in his pale blue eyes. It all showed me what he was trying desperately to hide. He wanted to appear unfazed by the whole thing, so he didn't worry Illayana and Lukyan.

Mikhail, much to his dismay, was still there. He tried to leave after telling us about Talon but Aleksandr had convinced him to stay, reminding him that despite how he might feel about us right now, Dimitri was his oldest friend. We needed his help if we were ever going to get him back.

He still held a lot of blame and resentment towards us because of what happened to his son. He wasn't interested in talking to any of us unless absolutely necessary, and had even insisted on staying in the same room Dayton had been in.

The fact that it was right next to Aleksandr's made it a little awkward this morning when they ran into each other.

"Okay," Lukyan blew out, leaning back. "So it's like a Squid Game kinda deal?"

Aleksandr frowned. "I don't know what that means."

"It's a TV show." Illayana kept her eyes locked on the ground, arms braced on her thighs, hands clasped together. "A bunch of people do deathly challenges for money while others watch and bet on who wins."

"Then yes, I guess it's like that."

"Except the people in the Til Death Games haven't signed up for it," Mikhail added.

"What's the plan?" There was a sense of desperation and urgency in Lukyan's voice that I'd never heard before. "If this island of his can't be found, then how the hell are we meant to rescue Father?"

"I have an idea for that, actually." I turned to Mikhail. "Where does Talon get his staff?"

"His staff?" he frowned.

"Yes. He has an entire island to run, catering to the rich and wealthy. He would need workers to maintain it. Waitstaff, chefs, gardeners, maids, security guards. Do you know where he gets them from?"

"No. But I could find out."

Lukyan cocked his head. "You want to go undercover?"

“I think it’s the quickest and most efficient way for us to find the island. One of us poses as a worker and slips in behind the scenes. We gather as much intel as we can. Details of the layout, how many people he has, their security measures and where they keep the prisoners so that when we infiltrate, we won’t be running around blind.”

“You really think that will work?” Illayana lifted her gaze from the floor. Her eyes were full of anger (whether that was at me or the situation, I wasn’t sure). “Considering the precautions this Talon guy already has in place, you really think he wouldn’t thoroughly vet anyone he plans to employ? I’m sure he’d find it suspicious when he sees one of Dimitri’s children has applied to work for him.”

I’d already thought about that. “We use an alias with an extensive background that would fool even the most paranoid person in the world. All he’ll see is a normal person looking for a job.”

“That still leaves the issue of *finding* the island,” Mikhail pressed. “Talon will most definitely have everyone—including his workers *and* their belongings—scanned for tracking and listening devices. It will be an instant bullet to the brain if he finds one.”

“Then we won’t have one,” I shrugged. “There would have to be a command centre of some kind there. We could use that to find out the latitude and longitude of the island. Then all we’d need to do is relay those coordinates.”

Aleksandr nodded. “I like it. How long will it take for you to create this alias?”

“I already have one. I’ve been building it for years.” I picked up my iPad from the small table next to me and, after a few swipes, had the information for a Damien Czar on the screen. I handed it to Aleksandr. He ran his eyes

over the screen and exhaled a grunt of approval. He offered it to Mikhail, standing behind him.

“Looks good,” Mikhail said, studying it closely. “Can you add in a criminal history too? Nothing too crazy. Maybe an assault and battery charge, or something like that? I have a feeling Talon would lean more towards the types who are willing to break a rule or two.”

It made sense, considering the illegal activities that took place on that island. He’d need to be confident no one went running to the cops.

I nodded. “Easy.”

“And replace it with an image of me instead,” Aleksandr commanded. “I’ll be the one going undercover.”

I snorted. “You’re kidding, right?”

His brows snapped together. “No, I’m not.”

“Aleksandr, out of all of us, *you* are the only one who *can’t* do it. You’re the spitting image of Father.”

“He’s right,” Lukyan stated. “One look at you and it’s plainly obvious that you’re Dimitri Volkov’s son.”

He huffed in annoyance but didn’t deny it. He knew we were right.

“We all know I’m the best choice. I’ve always looked more like Mother than Father,” I said.

“Alright, fine. We’ll leave it the way it is.” He definitely wasn’t happy about it, though. He looked at Mikhail. “How long will it take you to find out what we need?”

“Not long.” He pushed off the wall and pulled out his phone. “I’ll get my people on it right now. I should have something for you in the next few days.” With nothing else to add, he left.

“I want to see it again,” Illayana demanded.

Aleksandr and I shared a look with one another. She was talking about the video of Father fighting. The one sent in the email. I didn't know what good would come from watching it for the third time, but I nodded for Aleksandr to show her again anyway. He handed her the iPad. Lukyan leant over her shoulder to watch it too, eyes focused. It was the most serious I'd ever seen him before, the longest I'd ever seen him go without cracking a stupid joke. It worried me.

I got to my feet and went to Aleksandr's side, placing one hand flat on the desk to lean forward so our siblings couldn't overhear our conversation.

"We need to keep a close eye on them. This whole thing will be hard for them to deal with." For the first time in their lives, Father had been beaten. The man they'd looked up to all their lives was being held captive and forced to fight for his life, all while others watched and cheered.

Aleksandr grunted in agreement. His gaze was locked on Illayana and Lukyan as they rewatched the video over and over again. "Don't worry. I'll watch them."

I nodded. "Where's the missus?"

"Off seeing her brother. She's trying to get a rough idea of how many men she might be able to bring to the table if we need it."

"Is her brother really going to allow that? Our last interaction with him didn't exactly go very well."

"Drea seems to think so. But I don't think he'd be doing it for *us*. He'll be doing it for her. They might only be a small organisation, but their numbers will help." He looked at me over his shoulder. "I need you to take a dozen soldiers and handle something for me."

"What?"

“I’ve got the locations of two of the MC gangs that helped in the raid against our house. I want you to deal with them.”

A smile curved on my lips. “In any particular way?”

Cold darkness swept over his eyes. “Make them suffer.”



By the time I got home, it was late. My whole body ached, exhaustion flowing in every bone inside me to the point that my limbs felt like jello. There was blood in my hair. Underneath my fingernails. Drenched in my clothes. Seeping into my skin.

The night had been a *long* one. The first MC gang, The Chaos Lords, had set up their clubhouse in a crack den. Piss and vomit-soaked floors. Broken windows. Mouldy walls. I felt like I needed a tetanus shot just walking into the damn place.

It was easy to see how Dominik managed to convince them to work for him. All he had to do was throw a wad of cash at them and they’d be willing to do whatever the fuck he wanted. Junkies would do anything for their next fix.

It was a small charter, consisting of seven members. I assumed there were probably more before the attack, but now there were only seven left, all of

whom were completely whacked out of their minds on God knows what when we arrived.

It was an easy infiltration. We snuck in under the cover of darkness and slit their throats while they were passed out, not suffering a single casualty. There was no honor among thieves between us. Fuckers had broken into our house and tried to kill us. We were just repaying the favour. The difference was that we were successful.

We left the Prez and Vice Prez until last. Aleksandr's only request was to make them suffer. The others were merely pawns, lackeys. Just following orders. Those two, however, actively decided to go against us. And that came at a price—that price being their eyes, tongues, hands and feet. By the time we were done, they were unrecognisable. Just lifeless, bloody corpses that looked like they'd been mauled by Edward Scissorhands.

The second MC gang, The Brotherhood, were a bit more organised than the first.

For starters, they locked their bloody doors. There were eleven members in the MC. We still had the cover of night and the element of surprise working for us, but The Brotherhood adapted quickly when we attacked, and they fought hard. It was almost...admirable. The Prez and Vice Prez were killed in the shootout, so I wasn't able to torture them like I had The Chaos Lords. Disappointing but unavoidable.

I lost four soldiers, which was four too many. I had hoped to emerge victorious and unscathed. One out of two would just have to do.

Before we left, I carved a large 'V' in the centre of all their foreheads, just as I had done to all The Chaos Lords members, so there would be no doubt as to why their lives were forfeited.

I'd planned to go right up to my room and shower when I walked through the front door, but the lone figure sitting on the couch in the family room made me pause. It was Aleksandr. He sat perfectly still, shrouded in darkness, the only light coming from the TV in front of him. It wasn't playing, just paused on some TV show.

I waited a few more seconds, but he made no move to watch it. Just continued to sit there, staring at the screen.

You're tired. Hungry. Sore. Covered in blood. Just go up and take a shower and come down after. Just go. Just—

I cursed under my breath and walked into the room. I plopped down in the armchair next to the couch and groaned in satisfaction. It felt good to get off my feet. There was a bitch of a knife wound on my thigh that had been giving me grief since the moment the adrenaline started to wear off.

Aleksandr's gaze flicked to me and then back to the TV. "If Father were here, he'd have your head for sitting on Mother's furniture, covered in blood."

"Guess it's a good thing he's not here then, isn't it?" I didn't like the look on his face, the emotionless tone in his voice. It was even colder than usual.

"How did it go?"

"Fine."

"Any casualties?"

I rolled my shoulder and then leant back, staring up at the ceiling. "Four. Shane, Lev, Nina and Dima."

"That's a shame. Dima showed promise."

I nodded in agreement. "I made sure to bring their bodies back, so their families can lay them to rest."

When there was no response, I turned my head to look at him. He was still staring at the TV like a zombie.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he answered automatically.

“Swear on Mother?”

He said nothing.

Exhaling a huff of annoyance, I picked up the remote sitting on the coffee table. “Well, we’re not just going to sit here in silence—” his hand snapped out and clasped my wrist, stopping me from pushing play.

“Don’t.”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. *What the fuck is his deal?* If it was anger I was sensing from him, I’d probably let it go. Aleksandr was angry and grumpy all the time. But that wasn’t what it was.

I could have sworn it was...sadness.

“*Talk to me*, Zander. We both know I’m not going anywhere until you do. So have pity on me, because I’m tired and hungry and just want to go to sleep.” He only had mercy and compassion for those he loved. I was not above guilt tripping him into talking.

He tsked and let me go, settling back into the couch. I knew I’d won when he cracked his neck. He did that whenever he had to talk about something uncomfortable. A family trait, I think, because I did it too.

“I used to watch this...with Dayton. Before he was killed.”

Of course. This was about the kid. I should have known. He’d been avoiding the subject since it happened.

“You don’t want to watch it without him?”

“You know the first time he asked me to watch something with him, he was so nervous that he practically pissed his pants?” he said, ignoring my

question.

“I didn’t know that.”

“And then when I said yes?” he gave a mirthless laugh. “You’d think I just offered him a million bucks or something, he was so excited. It was like no one had ever sat down and watched a movie with him before.”

Based on what I’d heard about the kid’s life, I wouldn’t be all that surprised if it was true.

“He was such a little shit when he first got here. Disrespectful. Resentful. Bad attitude. You know what I do to people like that?”

“You beat it out of them.” I knew that from personal experience.

“That shit was never going to work on Dayton, though. That kid had been beaten down his entire life. Once I figured that out, figured out what he actually wanted, his whole attitude changed.”

“And what was that?”

His eyes moved to me and held. “He just wanted someone to give a shit about him.”

I tilted my head to the side, studying him closely. “What was it about him, Zander? You’ve seen plenty of kids with heart-breaking stories like his before. Why did *this one* affect you so much?”

He looked down, watching his finger move in a slow circle on the armrest. “I think part of it was the fact that he reminded me *so much* of Lukyan during his teenage years. But unlike Lukyan, he had this shyness about him that just had this way of breaking down your barriers. I felt... sorry for him. All he wanted was a family. Someone to care for him. I thought—”

“You could be that for him?”

He didn't respond but I had a feeling I was right on the money. My brother had a big heart. A big, *guarded* heart, but big nonetheless. If you managed to somehow get past it, he'd care for you until the day he died.

Silence descended upon us. I wasn't sure what else to say. I knew this would have been hard for him to voice, so I decided a distraction would be best. I pushed play on the remote.

Aleksandr immediately sighed. "Nikolai—"

"Shut up, I'm trying to watch."

"You've missed nearly the whole first season. You'll have no idea what's going on."

I kicked my feet up onto the coffee table and crossed them at the ankles.
"I guess you'll just have to explain it to me then."

Chapter Twenty-Four



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“FOR THE THOUSANDTH TIME, I don’t know where your fucking dagger is. I haven’t touched it,” Illayana growled, glaring at Lukyan from across the kitchen table.

“It was in my room last night before I went to bed. I wake up this morning and it’s *mysteriously* disappeared. You trying to tell me you had absolutely nothing to do with that? Huh?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you, you long-necked freak,” she hissed. Lukyan gasped in outrage, hand flying to his throat. “I *do not* have a long neck!”

I took another spoonful of my cereal, listening to my siblings bicker like a bunch of...well, for lack of a better word, idiots. They’d been going at it since they woke up this morning, and hadn’t stopped once. It was like they’d never left.

Apparently, Lukyan's favourite dagger had gone missing, and he blamed Illayana for it. A likely culprit, considering she used to do this shit a lot when they were kids; taking his stuff and hiding it somewhere in the house. But she was swearing left and right that she hadn't done it, and I was inclined to believe her.

Usually, she'd boast and taunt him about it. "*Nah, nah, na-nah-nah, you'll never find it.*" Or something to that effect. The fact that she wasn't doing that right now made me think she wasn't responsible.

"I didn't do it," Illayana snarled.

"No one else could have!" Lukyan aggressively shoved some toast into his mouth and ripped off a piece. "Unless someone climbed up the side of the house, snuck through my window, crept across my room while I was asleep, swiped it from my bedside table and then snuck back out—all without waking me up. Is that what you're saying happened?"

"It honestly wouldn't surprise me if someone went to all that trouble to fuck with you, considering how annoying you are," she hissed.

"You *are* pretty annoying," Christian agreed, taking a bite of his eggs.

Lukyan slapped him upside the head. "Nobody asked you."

"Are you sure you haven't just misplaced it?" I asked.

Lukyan straightened and turned slightly to give me his back. "Christian, could you please inform my brother that, due to his duplicitous ways, I am no longer conversing with him. And that, although I am saddened by what was revealed, I still want to punch him in the face."

I rolled my eyes.

Christian shrugged and faced me, opening his mouth.

"I got it," I said, raising a hand to silence him. If that was the game he wanted to play, then fine. "Christian, could you please ask my brother if

perhaps he just misplaced his dagger?”

Christian turned to Lukyan but before he could get a word out, Lukyan said, “Please tell my brother—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, *you* tell him,” Christian shoved him lightly in the shoulder. “I’m not your errand boy. And this is stupid.” For once, I agreed with the man.

“Wait, wasn’t your shit going missing in New York?” Luca took a sip of his coffee, brows formed into a deep frown. “Yeah, I remember you bitching about how someone stole your toothbrush or something?”

I paused mid-scoop, milk dripping from my spoon into my bowl. My gaze locked with Lukyan’s.

“No...you think?” he whispered, like he was afraid of the answer.

I was tempted to say, “*thought you weren’t conversing with me,*” but thought it best not to poke the whiny child.

“Could be.” Turns out, my youngest brother had himself a bit of a stalker. It all started after he moved to New York with Illayana. Someone had been leaving him little love notes, declaring they were soul mates. Destined to be together. A few of his possessions had gone missing as well. We hoped moving him back to Vegas would get him off his stalker’s radar, but clearly, they’d just followed him instead.

“No,” Lukyan denied again. “There’s no way. How the hell did she even get in the house?!”

If it was his stalker responsible, then she was a lot more cunning and resourceful than we originally anticipated.

It was definitely possible for someone to circumvent our security. Unlikely...but possible. The grounds were meant to be patrolled twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, in two rotating shifts, consisting of six

men in each. The odds of someone making it over the fence, across the yard, past the dogs, up the side of the house and into Lukyan's bedroom without being detected was slim. *Less* than slim. There was no way. No way.

Fuck.

"Go check the security cameras and see if they picked up anything," I told Lukyan. I had this sneaking suspicion in my gut that no matter how slim the odds were, Lukyan's mysterious stalker had somehow managed to do it. He nodded, stuffing the last of his toast into his mouth before getting to his feet.

"Uh, excuse me?" Illayana called out as he began to walk away.

"You're excused," he threw over his shoulder without looking back.

"Pretty sure you owe me an apology!"

Lukyan...apologise? I had a better chance of crapping out daisies than Illayana had of getting that shithead to apologise for anything. I finished the rest of my cereal and took my empty bowl to the sink, quickly washing it before popping it into the dashrack. Luca and Christian talked amongst themselves as they ate while Illayana played with her phone and picked lightly at her food.

Lukyan came back a few minutes later with an iPad in his hands. "Look." He flipped the device to face me.

"What am I supposed to be looking at here?" On the screen were six individual camera feeds, all showing a different angle of the outside of the house. Some pointed out towards the gate surrounding our property. Some pointed directly at the house itself. Nothing looking suspicious or out of place.

Then I saw it. A small figure dressed in what I could only describe as a black cat burglar suit darting across the lawn. The material was skin tight. Based on the slim waist and curves, I was inclined to agree with Lukyan's original assessment of his stalker being a woman.

She moved quickly and efficiently, taking cover when needed to avoid the soldiers on patrol. When one of the dogs—Boris, I assumed, based on the colouring—spotted her, I thought for sure she was done for. Instead of attacking her, like they'd been trained to do to any intruder, he went right up to her and let her pat his head.

That told me two things. One: he was familiar enough with her that he didn't consider her a threat. And two: this most likely wasn't the first time she'd done this.

Who is this woman?

After tossing Boris what looked like a cut of raw meat, she climbed up the side of the house—*freehand*—opened Lukyan's window (which meant the idiot hadn't locked it) and disappeared inside. The timestamp on the footage read 1:59 a.m. She didn't re-emerge again until 3:17 a.m.

What the hell had she been doing all that time? Watching him sleep?

I swiped to the internal cameras to see if she'd left the room and gone snooping through the house or something.

She hadn't. For the whole seventy-eight minutes she was inside, she didn't leave his room once. Troubling.

She climbed back out his window and started down the side of the house. She paused on her descent, stopping right in front of a camera. Using only one hand to keep herself from falling, she unzipped the front of her suit with the other and pulled out a piece of paper, holding it up for the camera to see:

You look so cute when you sleep.

She tucked the note away and then pulled out the dagger Lukyan had been bitching about all morning. She lifted the bottom of her mask up to reveal her lips and then ran her tongue up the dull side of the blade in a sexually suggestive manner. After blowing the camera a goodbye kiss, she dropped to the ground and left the same way she came: quiet and undetected.

I looked up at my brother. “You’ve seen this?”

“Yep.” And he didn’t look the least bit freaked out by it. No. He looked... excited. Exhilarated.

Only my brother would be excited at the prospect of having a crazy stalker.

“Why do you look like that?”

“Like what?” he asked innocently.

“Like you’re giddy with anticipation. You shouldn’t be. This woman broke into your room and watched you sleep for over an hour. She’s dangerous. And crazy.”

“I know.” His eyes practically *gleamed*. “My two favourite things. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Lukyan,” I groaned, burying my face in my hands.

He laughed. “Look, obviously she has to die. I’m not stupid. I know we can’t keep having her follow me around everywhere. She’ll eventually see something she’s not supposed to, if she hasn’t already. But I’m definitely going to fuck her first. Maybe twice. Once in that cat burglar outfit, for sure.”

“I wanna see, I wanna see,” Christian sang, coming over.

“See what? Us fucking?” Lukyan shrugged, unfazed. “Yeah, if you want. You can even join in, if that’s her thing.”

“No, the footage—wait, what?”

“Oh, my B.” He handed the iPad over to Christian and plucked an apple from the kitchen island. He took a bite, chewing annoyingly loudly as Christian watched the same video I did a moment ago.

“Damn. She really *is* crazy.”

Luca joined us. “My turn. Show me.”

“Okay, no.” I snatched the iPad out of Christian’s hands before he could pass it along. “We’re not glamorizing the crazy stalker bitch—”

“Hey, that’s rude. We don’t know that she’s a bitch, or that she’s any danger. She’s never done anything threatening.” Lukyan took another bite of his apple.

“Didn’t she cut the fingers off one of the girls you fucked?” Luca questioned, arching a brow.

“*To me,*” he amended, pointing at his chest, his mouth overflowing. “Never done anything threatening *to me.*”

I shook my head in exasperation. It was easy to see in moments like this why Aleksandr was hesitant to entrust Lukyan with more responsibility. His life was in potential danger, and he couldn’t take it seriously enough to at least stop cracking jokes. If Christian and Luca weren’t in the room, I’d reprimand him. This was family business, though, and I wasn’t about to air it all out in front of others. But it needed to be dealt with—and *now*.

So I did the one thing guaranteed to make the twins disappear. “Where’s Illayana?”

They both spun, staring at the empty seat where Illayana had been with horrified expressions. I’d seen her slip out a few minutes ago, taking advantage of the twins being distracted.

“Oh, shit,” they both said at the same time. Luca pointed at his brother. “You take upstairs. I’ll take downstairs. Go.” They bolted in different directions.

They were never going to find her. Not unless she wanted to be found. She knew this house like the back of her hand. If she wanted to stay hidden, no one had an ounce of luck finding her.

“I have a feeling I’m not going to like what you’re about to say.” Lukyan threw his apple core into the bin next to him. “You have the same look on your face as my tenth grade history teacher when I told him I didn’t do the homework. Angry disappointment.”

“You need to take this situation more seriously.”

“What situation?” He seemed genuinely confused, and it made me want to throttle him.

“The stalker situation,” I hissed. “Stop treating it like a joke and understand your life could very well be in danger from this woman. When stalkers don’t get the object of their obsession, they can become violent. This woman has already killed once for you. What happens if she decides she wants you all to herself? What happens when she finds out you’re arranged to marry Anya?”

He paled.

“That marriage is the only thing keeping Illayana safe. If something happens to Anya, Grandfather won’t care if we were responsible for it or not. He’ll just see that his arrangement was fucked with and punish us regardless. You want Aleksandr to stop treating you like an incompetent class clown and start taking you seriously? Give him a fucking reason to.”

I stormed away, the guilt from my words already starting to worm its way into my heart. I didn’t like telling him off or crushing his spirit. I liked his

carefree nature, but there was a time and place for it, and he needed to learn that.

I'd have to tell Aleksandr about the breach in security. He wouldn't be thrilled about it. I could picture it, his grunting and snarling as he pounded his fist into his desk. Lukyan liked to call him "The Hulk" when he got angry...a fitting name.

I rounded the corner into the foyer and headed for the stairs to go up to Aleksandr's office when someone yelling made me pause.

"Stop! Don't you dare! No!"

I frowned, my head tilting to the side as I listened harder. Was that... Drea?

"No! Don't! Get away!"

It was coming from the dining area. I whipped out my gun and ran back down the hall. Drea and I weren't exactly the best of friends, but my brother loved her. If she was in danger, I had to save her. For him.

The screaming got louder and more distinctive as I got closer to the dining room. Something was definitely going on. I raised my leg and kicked the door down, running into the room. What I saw made me come to a screeching halt, my mouth dropping wide open in shock.

Drea was tied, spread eagle on the dining room table, her arms and legs bound by rope. Aleksandr was standing in front of her lower half, shielding her body from view, but I had a feeling she was naked from the waist down. And in his hands was a tattoo gun.

"Nikolai. Oh, thank God. Help me. Your brother has gone insane!" Drea hissed, tugging at her restraints.

"I have *not* gone insane," Aleksandr responded calmly. "I told you, I am sick of seeing another man's name on your body. So I'm getting rid of it."

“And I told you I would get it covered! I just haven’t had the time. Logan was my tattoo artist. I assumed you wouldn’t want me to go to him for the job, so I have to find someone else.”

“You assumed correctly.” The *buzz* of the tattoo gun rang out through the room, and Drea screeched.

“Aleksandr, don’t you dare! You have no idea what you’re doing! You’ll fuck it up.”

He frowned down at her. “I know what I’m doing. I googled it.”

“You googled it...” she breathed out, aghast. “Oh, dear God.”

“Just relax.” He looked at the tattoo gun in his hands, twisting it this way and that way, studying it closely before nodding. “Yeah, I assembled it correctly...I think. We’re ready to begin.”

“Touch me with that thing and you won’t be allowed in my pussy for a whole month!”

Aleksandr actually hesitated, a stricken look crossing his face. Then he shook it off. “It’s happening, *malyshka*. I gave you time to get rid of it yourself and you didn’t. I’m taking matters into my own hands. No woman of mine will have another man’s name on her body.”

A flourish of Spanish curse words flew from Drea’s mouth. Lukyan approached from my side, his eyes widening when he looked into the room. Then he spun on the balls of his feet, going back the way he came.

I backed out and shut the door. Honestly, I was surprised Aleksandr held out for as long as he did. The possessiveness he showed towards his little Cartel wife was almost as strong as my possessiveness of Tatiana. There’s no way I’d tolerate another man’s name on her body. Frankly, in my opinion, Aleksandr had been quite generous with the timeframe. Drea

should have known that if she didn't get the name covered up or removed, my brother would then handle it himself.

Thinking of Tatiana made my heart stutter. God, I missed her. I missed her the second she was out of my sight. I wanted nothing more than to go to her, but I couldn't fly to New York then. There was too much planning to be done.

My thoughts were consumed with her. What she was doing. Who she was with. Whether she was happy or sad. Whether she was eating enough food or drinking enough water.

I might not be able to be with her right then, but I had a way of checking up on her. Just to see if she was okay. A way she was...unaware of. I pulled out the spare phone I kept charged and with me at all times. I flicked through some of the apps, just taking a cursory glance at them when my entire body locked up, a dark rage washing over me like a tidal wave.

What the fuck is this?

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Chapter Twenty-Five



TATIANA ANDREEVA

O*H, THIS WAS SUCH a bad idea.*

I looked across the table at Steve, seriously regretting my decision to do my dad this stupid favour. It wasn't a date. I made that very, *very* clear to Steve when he messaged me.

Steve. I internally scoffed, taking a sip of my water. What kind of a name was "Steve" anyway? He was everything my dad said he was. Tall. Handsome. Funny. He had light, curly blonde hair, deep brown eyes and a pretty face. He wore a nice, plain suit with no tie. The open collar was a good look on him.

But you know someone who looks better, don't you?

I shouldn't feel guilty. I knew that. I wasn't doing anything wrong. This *wasn't* a date. I told him that. I told my dad that. I told *myself* that.

Yet, as I sat across from Steve in this nice, somewhat fancy restaurant, I couldn't help but feel guilty anyway. If the situation was reversed—if it was

Nikolai sitting here having dinner with another woman—I'd be *pissed*. No matter what the circumstances were.

I'm such a fucking hypocrite.

When Steve first messaged me, I didn't even respond. At least, not right away. I ignored it, hoping that if I just pretended I didn't get it or something, I could just avoid the whole thing.

Then he messaged again, cracking a joke about how he'd never been ghosted by someone he's never met before. It made me laugh...so I replied.

He asked me to go to lunch (which, if I was being honest, I would have much preferred, because then it didn't seem so date-y). But I had day shifts at the café with Belinda to complete my training that I absolutely could not say no to. Why? Because all I could afford for dinner the last two nights were fish sticks.

Fish. Sticks.

Making it on your own was *hard*. If I wasn't so determined to show not only myself but everyone else that I could do it, I would have caved and used my emergency credit card.

Light chatter, the *clink* of utensils and the smell of delicious Italian food swirled around me. *L'ultima Cena* was a beautiful restaurant. It had a loud, fun atmosphere, a cute, rustic vibe, and was entirely owned and operated by La Cosa Nostra. It was one of the reasons why I'd chosen it. It meant that, if I wanted to stab Steve with a fork for being too handsy, I could. The entire place was made up of mafia people, from the waitstaff, to the chefs, to the security guards in the back. It pretty much guaranteed that no one would bat an eye if a little blood was spilled. I wouldn't even be surprised if most of the other patrons were mafia, too. I recognised a few of Arturo's soldiers that I'd seen at his house, sitting at the tables when I walked in.

I was pretty sure the whole place was a front, a business they used to funnel their dirty money into and turn it into clean, legal tender. I knew they owned a variety of different businesses for that very reason. The IRS was a bitch.

“So, your dad mentioned you’re a fashion major?” Steve casually flipped through the sleek, black menu in his hands, being nice enough to ignore the awkwardness buzzing between us. We’d been making awkward small talk since the moment we sat down.

We’d covered the basics: our names, ages, a few comments about the weather. You’d think with every question we asked, it would slowly become less uncomfortable...but it didn’t. If anything, it got worse.

“Yeah. Well, almost. My classes haven’t started yet.” There was a moment of silence. “Are you in New York for business? Or just visiting?”

“A little bit of both. My father wants to move to the US, so I’m here doing a little bit of scouting, trying to find a place.”

“Oh. Nice.”

A waiter came over and he ordered a bottle of wine and some appetizers for the table.

“This is a nice place,” he commented, looking around the room. “Have you been here before?”

“No, but I’ve heard good things.” I couldn’t really come out and tell him I’d chosen it so that I could kill him if need be.

He waited, like he was expecting me to say more. When I didn’t, he gave me a friendly smile. “You don’t really want to be here, do you?”

I laughed awkwardly. “Is it that obvious?”

“Kind of,” he laughed along with me and I felt myself start to slowly relax. “If you don’t mind me asking, why are you here, if you didn’t want to

come?”

“Because my dad is a meddler, and he’s hoping I’ll like you and forget all about my ex.”

“Ah, meddlesome parents. I know a thing or two about those.”

“He means well,” I breathed out. “There’s just a lot of history there. Some of it good, some of it bad.”

The waiter reappeared with the wine and food, placing it down on the table.

“Sounds like he’s just trying to protect you,” he shrugged, popping a slice of bruschetta in his mouth. “I know that, when my sister went through something similar with her ex, my father—” his eyes drifted behind me for a moment and he stiffened, his next words dying off.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, studying him closely.

He cleared his throat, adjusting in his seat. “Everything’s fine.”

“I’d believe that if you didn’t look like you’d just shit your pants or something. What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to alarm you.” He reached over and placed his hand over mine in what I’m sure he intended to be a comforting gesture, but the touch just felt foreign. Wrong. I pulled my hand away instantly and he frowned slightly but continued. “There’s a man behind you that keeps looking over here, and it’s not in a friendly way. Perhaps we should just go somewhere else? There’s something about him that doesn’t seem quite...right.”

What?

I turned around in my seat, my gaze colliding with a set of icy blue eyes that put my whole body on fire. Sitting three tables over, staring straight at us with absolute focus...was Nikolai. He was dressed in a black button-up shirt, the first few buttons open and revealing a beautiful, tanned chest. The

edges of the ‘T’ tattooed on his skin peaked out of his shirt, catching my attention like always. His sleeves were rolled up, showing off those thick, muscular forearms I loved so much. My lady bits all but *tingled*. God, he looked fucking delectable, like darkness and sin all wrapped up in one huge, brawny package.

The restaurant was full of people, full of noise and distractions, and yet it was like we were the only people in the room. Like he couldn’t see anyone else but us.

After giving me a moment to adjust to what I was seeing, Nikolai smirked and gave me a two-finger salute, as casual as you please.

My mind ran rampant. What was he doing there? How did he know *I* was there? Why did he have to look *so fucking good*? Why was he just sitting over there, watching us like some sort of creeper?

All questions I planned on asking him then and there.

I turned back to Steve. “You should probably go.” It may already be too late. If Nikolai thought this was a date, there was no doubt in my mind that he’d kill Steve.

“Go?” He scrunched up his face in confusion. “I’m not going to leave you alone, especially when there’s a guy right over there staring at us like he wants to kill us.”

You. Not us. Just you.

“His name is Nikolai. He’s my ex.”

Steve’s eyes widened. He leant forward, lowering his voice. “Is he stalking you?”

Yes, and I like it.

“It’s...complicated.” That was the best thing I could come up with at that moment.

His jaw hardened. “He’s Bratva, isn’t he?” When I didn’t answer, he scoffed. “Of course he is. Bratva guys like him always think they run the world and can do whatever the fuck they want, like harass their ex-girlfriends. This is exactly what happened to my sister. I have half a mind to march over there and—”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“What’s he going to do? It’s not like he’s going to kill me or anything. We’re in a public space, surrounded by people. I highly doubt—” his eyes flicked behind me and widened in shock and fear.

What now?

I glanced over my shoulder and felt the overwhelming urge to roll my eyes. Nikolai had his guns laid out across the table—three of them, by my count—all taken apart and in pieces. He sat there, completely relaxed, cleaning each individual piece while he continued to stare right at Steve, making it clear that although his hands were busy, his mind was not. He was completely and utterly focused on him, doing the work with an almost robotic nature, like he was doing it all on pure muscle memory alone.

Steve had gone as white as the cloth over our table. His whole body was frozen stiff, as if he was too terrified to move. Nikolai had his gaze locked with Steve’s as he cleaned the barrel of one of his guns, pushing the brush inside and out several times before placing it down and reassembling the weapon with practiced ease. The efficiency with which he worked showed how trained he was with the weapons, how skilled he was. That he possessed the ability to shoot anyone in this room right between the eyes without a shred of hesitation.

None of the other patrons in the restaurant paid Nikolai any mind. Neither did the waiter who came over and placed a clear glass of liquid on his table.

“Uh, maybe I should go,” Steve whispered nervously.

I smiled. “I think that would be best.”

“Will he shoot me if I get up?”

Probably.

“It’ll be fine. Just stand when I do and I’ll block his line of sight.”

He nodded, looking a little queasy. I found the whole thing quite hilarious, to be honest. Turns out, Steve was one of those people who was all bark and no bite. The type who liked to act tough, but was nothing of the sort. The type to use whoever was around him as a human shield so he could run in the opposite direction when things got dangerous.

Nikolai would never do that. He’d run *towards* the danger with a smile on his face.

I put the strap of my handbag over my shoulder and got to my feet. Steve followed, folding himself inwards to try and hide his frame behind mine.

“Maybe we can—”

I shook my head. There was no way in hell I’d ever meet up with this guy again, especially after this.

He looked regretful, indecision flashing in his eyes for a second before reality set back in.

“It was nice meeting you.” He offered me his hand.

I didn’t see the point in false pleasantries, so I said nothing as I stretched my hand out to shake his.

Something smashed, the sound of glass shattering making Steve jump back with a screech before our hands could touch. I looked over my shoulder, seeing a very smug Nikolai looking back at me with the remnants of his now-broken glass on the ground around his chair.

“*Really?*” I mouthed.

He just shrugged, all innocent like. Nikolai's possessiveness knew no bounds.

When I turned back around, Steve was gone.

I should have followed him out that door and not rewarded Nikolai's behaviour with an ounce of the attention I knew he was hoping to receive. There were a thousand different ways he could have handled the situation, and he chose to sit there, watching and intimidating Steve into leaving on his own. The power the man wielded...it was such a damn turn on.

You know you're going to go over there, so just do it already.

I inwardly sighed. Yes. Yes, I did. The pull towards Nikolai was far too strong for me to even try to fight it. Every part of me wanted to be near him. It was like his presence was a drug, and I was dying for another fix. Itching to just be in his vicinity, to feel the addictive nature of his presence.

Nikolai watched me closely as I made my way over to him. His eyes swept me from head to toe in a slow, heated caress, like a lion sizing up his next meal. The trail of his gaze over my skin set my blood on fire. I felt dizzy from that feral look in his eyes.

I came to a stop opposite him. He finished putting back together his last gun and then stared up at me. Silence reigned between us, but it wasn't an awkward silence. It was a building silence, like something big was about to happen between us.

“What are you doing here, Nicky?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. He cocked his head to the side, studying me with a predatory gaze. “I think I should be asking you that question, love.”

My belly did a flip. God, I loved it when he called me that.

“Your little stunt just cost me a free meal.”

He raised a hand and signalled a waiter to come over. The waiter placed a bowl of steaming hot carbonara pasta on the table and walked away. My favourite. He'd planned to have that ready for me. *Of course he did.*

I arched an eyebrow. "A little presumptuous. You think I'm going to sit down and have dinner with you, after what you just did?"

The chair in front of me slid out after he kicked it underneath the table. His eyes flicked to it and back to me, telling—no, *demanding*—that I take a seat. He said nothing. He just stared at me, waiting me out. The sexual tension between us continued to build with each passing second.

"Sit," he commanded, voice rough. Dark and dangerous.

I sat down.

He nodded, satisfied, and pushed his guns to the side. Another waiter appeared, dropping a meal in front of him before he quickly cleaned up the glass on the floor and disappeared.

"How did you know I was here?" I asked, digging into my food. I almost moaned. It was creamy and delicious.

He pulled out a phone and placed it on the table. I frowned. "That's not your phone." He unlocked it and my frown deepened. That was *my* screen saver. It was a photo of me and my dad. I dug into my handbag and withdrew my phone, placing it down right next to that one. They were identical, right down to the placement of the apps and the setting themes.

What the fuck?

I picked up his and flicked through it quickly, realisation hitting me like a ton of bricks. "You *cloned* my phone?"

Sure enough, when I went into the messages, right there on the screen where the few texts Steve and I had exchanged. The where and when to

meet up. Everything I did on my phone would show up on that one. *Everything*.

“You sound surprised,” he said casually, taking a small bite of his risotto. “But are you, really?”

I ignored that, because no, I wasn’t overly surprised. It was right on par with Nikolai, actually. “When did you do this?”

“You disappeared after Nikolas died, and I couldn’t find you. I vowed that would never happen again, so when you finally came back, I took your phone and cloned it, so I would always know where you are. You might as well know there’s a tracker in there too.” He didn’t know that I didn’t disappear. Not really. I just hid out at my dad’s house and he *assumed* I went running as far away as I could get, when in reality, I was right there. Under his nose.

I should probably be mad at this huge invasion of privacy. He was essentially monitoring *everything* I was doing. At any time, day or night, he could just look at this and find out what I was up to. I should have been mad. *Stark raving mad*. A normal woman would be. But I wasn’t. Because it was exactly something that was classic Nikolai. I already knew he was uber possessive and had zero boundaries. That when it came to those he cared about, he would do anything and everything to keep them safe—including invading their privacy.

I continued to eat my pasta. “So, you saw the texts between Steve and I and just decided to show up here?”

“You think you can go on a date with another man and I’d just allow it?” He took a sip of his wine, his Adams apple working up and down as he swallowed the liquid. He chuckled, shaking his head. “Tati, I thought you knew me better than that.”

“It wasn’t a date. I was just doing my dad a favour.”

“Oh, I know all about that.” Of course he did. Despite Illayana not talking to me, I still texted her and told her about the stupid favour my dad asked of me. She hadn’t responded, but that didn’t stop me from messaging her again and again anyway. Nikolai must have seen those texts. “And I’m going to deal with Ivan.”

My whole body stiffened. “What?”

He stared me dead in the eyes, his gaze never wavering. “You heard me.”

I dropped my knife and fork. “Nikolai,” I growled. “Don’t you dare do whatever it is you’re thinking about doing. I will never forgive you.”

“I’m not going to kill him.” I relaxed at his words. “But I am going to punish him. You’re *mine*. I don’t care what he says or how he feels about it. He tried to set you up with another man. For that, he. Will. Be. Punished.”

I recognised that look on his face. I could hear the finality in his words. Nothing I said would change his mind, but perhaps my actions would.

I channelled all the rage I felt towards him into the angriest scowl I could muster as I got to my feet. He had the right mind to look a little uneasy. *Good.*

Words didn’t work with Nikolai. Actions did. He needed to see what would happen if he went through with whatever he was thinking about doing.

Without another word, I marched away.

Chapter Twenty-Six



TATIANA ANDREEVA

I BARELY MADE IT out the door before Nikolai caught up with me.

“Tati—” I twirled and punched him in the gut. He doubled over, wheezing out in pain.

“That’s for cloning my phone.” I rammed my fist into the side of his face and his head whipped to the side. “And that’s for threatening my dad.” I shoved him and he lost his footing, falling to the ground.

I continued to walk on, thinking that would be the end of it, but strong hands wrapped around me and dragged me down the alley behind the restaurant. I fought, kicking and screaming, far too angry to try and be reasoned with, but Nikolai placed a hand over my mouth to muffle the profanity flying past my lips. He shoved me up against the brick wall, his chest pressed firmly into my back, keeping me caged between him and the wall.

“*Dostatochno*,” *Enough*, he snarled in my ear. Shivers shot down my spine. He sounded positively feral right now. “I’m sick of you giving your back to me. Walking away from me. No more.”

I bit into his hand and he hissed, removing it. But he stayed close, keeping me right where I was with his body, not allowing me an inch to move. “Promise you won’t lay a finger on my dad.”

“If I do, will you promise not to walk away from me again?”

“Yes.” Like I said, actions spoke louder than words with Nikolai. I could scream and shout for days, telling him not to hurt my dad, but he wouldn’t hear it. The only way I could get him to listen was by *showing* him what the consequences of his actions would be. Me...gone.

“Fineee,” Nikolai growled out, none too pleased. I expected him to let me go and step back, but he didn’t. He stayed exactly where he was, pressed right up against me, every curve of his body moulded with mine, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

I felt something big and thick digging into my ass and I couldn’t help the swirl of my hips. Nikolai shuddered and his hand slammed into the wall right next to my head.

“Don’t move like that,” he grunted.

I did it again and he groaned. “If I asked you to take me right here and now, would you?” I whispered, the lust that had been building between us for weeks spiralling to the surface.

There were so many factors that heightened what I was feeling. The adrenaline from fighting with him. The reality that we were out in public. The darkness of the alley surrounding us, hiding us from view, but the fact that I could still see people walking past the entrance. The danger of being

caught by someone. It all added fuel to my burning desire, and I felt like I was going to explode if something wasn't done.

I needed to tempt him, tip him over the edge so the control he had over his restraint snapped and the beast came out to play.

"That guy was cute, wasn't he?" I taunted and he stiffened, his body going ice-still behind me. "Tall. Handsome—"

"*Careful, love,*" he warned darkly, pressing me tighter into the wall. "You don't want to push me."

Oh, but I did.

I'd never been so hot for him before. So desperate to feel him over every inch of my skin, taking me like I'd been dreaming of for as long as I could remember. This passion between us was never going to die. Never going to lesson. It was going to *burn* forever.

"Just give in, Nicky," I panted, squirming, trying to find some sort of relief from the ache building between my thighs. "Just give us what we both want."

"I want more," he groaned like he was in physical pain. I was too.

"This is all I can give you right now. *Take it,*" I begged, thrusting my ass into his cock behind me. I said the three words that would guarantee his submission. "*I need you.*"

His hand slammed against the wall again in frustration as a Russian curse flew from his mouth, and I knew I'd won. I knew I was finally going to get what I wanted.

He took a deep breath in, as if he was getting himself under control, and then I felt his lips against my ear. "How do you want it, love? Quick and dirty?" He ran his tongue up the side of my neck in a slow, languid lick. "Dark and dangerous?" My breath hitched when I felt the sharp edge of a

knife scrape the inside of my thigh. “Or”—he gripped my face roughly and turned my head to the side, forcing me to look at him—“*downright filthy?*” He forced my lips apart and let a drop of his salvia fall from his mouth into mine. I moaned, my eyes rolling into the back of my head. Fuck, he made my whole fucking body *shiver*. Desire pulsed through my veins.

“Dark and dangerous.” My flesh tingled with anticipation when he chuckled low in his throat.

“As my girl commands,” he whispered, a wicked grin curling on his lips.
“Hands on the wall. And *don’t move*.”

Yes...yes.

Excitement soared through me, so much so that my body began to shake. I did as he ordered, placing my palms flat against the brick wall. He let me go but stayed close, the heat of his body burning into my back.

He kicked my legs apart and curled his fingers around my hips, holding me tight. My heart pounded in my chest. What was he going to do? With Nikolai, *everything* was on the table.

“You remember your safe word?” he rumbled in my ear, shivers dancing down my spine.

Like I could forget. *“Pauk.” Spider.*

“Good.” He sucked my earlobe into his mouth. *“Ty khotela tomnogo i opasnogo, lyubimaya? Nu, ty eto poluchish’.” You wanted dark and dangerous, love? Well, you’re going to get it.* He lifted the back of my dress and sucked air in between his teeth. “Did you wear this for *him*?” He was referring to my black lace thong.

“I wore it for me.” I was using every ounce of strength I possessed not to move, not to push my ass further into his probing hands. He told me not to

move. I'd be rewarded if I followed his orders, and Nikolai gave the *best* rewards.

The heat of his body at my back disappeared and then I felt his tongue running up my ass cheek, right over the spot where my tattoo was. The letter 'N'. I bit my lip, my hands clenched into fists.

"Do you know how many times I've thought about this ass?" he groaned, biting into my flesh. "How many times I've gotten myself off imagining being buried deep in *this ass*?"

"Nikolai," I moaned, my legs shaking. My pussy was wet. Hot. Aching to be filled.

He continued to lick, kiss, suck and bite me as if he was worshipping my ass, lavishing it with all of his attention while I was forced not to move a goddamn inch. Forced to take what he was giving me until he was prepared to give me more.

That glorious torture finally ended when he gripped my hips and turned me around. I stared down at him, my chest heaving. He was on his knees before me, eyes wild, pupils completely blown. He looked like he was barely holding on. Barely in control. Like he was a second away from snapping and tearing right into me. Not that I would have minded.

"I'm going to lick this pussy until you come all over my face." His hands drifted up my legs, disappearing underneath my dress. His fingers hooked around my thong and he tugged it down, helping me step out of it. I narrowed my eyes when he tucked them away into his pocket, but said nothing.

"You're not going to watch me. No. You're going to look over there." He pointed towards the entrance of the alley. "You're going to watch all those people walk past, knowing that at any moment, one of them could come

down this alley and see us. See *me*, eating this beautiful, wet cunt and wishing they were the ones who got the privilege of doing it instead.”

Good lord. He had the filthiest fucking mouth. I loved it.

“Does that sound like something you can do, love?”

I nodded enthusiastically. “I’ll do whatever you want. Just put your mouth on me. I can’t take it anymore. I’ve missed your tongue so much.”

There were lots of parts of Nikolai I loved—his thighs, his biceps, his eyes—but his tongue? Nothing could compare.

“Have you now?” There was a playful tone to his voice. “Maybe I should get you a Queening Chair. That way, you can call me to come service you any time you want.”

“I want you to service me *now*,” I whined. “You’ve been teasing me for long enough.” I lifted up the front of my dress to show him my bare pussy.

A hungry look flashed across his face. He gripped the inside of my thighs and forced my legs further apart to get a better look. “There’s my pretty, pink pussy,” he whispered in awe. And then his mouth was on me. *Right there*, where I needed him. He dove forward like he couldn’t wait one more second to taste me and sealed his lips around my clit. I jolted, crying out at the sudden contact.

Nikolai groaned deep in his throat, like *I* was the one giving *him* pleasure. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he *feasted*. That was the best—no, the *only*—way to describe it. He licked, nibbled, sucked...completely ravished me like he was a man starved and I was a five course fucking meal.

“*Fuck, Nikolai.*” My hands were in his hair, holding his head against my pussy as I ground myself down on him. “I like having you down on your knees.”

He hummed in appreciation, moving his mouth faster. He gripped my ass tightly with both hands and urged me on, pushing me to go harder. The pleasure was so intense, I could barely catch my breath.

I knew he told me to watch the entrance, to watch as people walked past. It was because the idea of getting caught made me so fucking hot. But Nikoali was hotter.

So much hotter.

Watching him was the biggest turn on. Some men only ate pussy because they wanted the deed reciprocated, not because they actually *wanted* to do it. Nikolai, though...oh, he fucking loved it. It was clear in the way he just threw himself into the task, not holding a single ounce of himself back.

His tongue dove between my folds and dipped into my pussy. “Mmm, I’ve missed this tight little hole.”

“Keep going. More, more,” I panted.

“You want more?” His hand disappeared behind his back and then there was a gun in his hand. He removed his mouth from my pussy to smirk at me. Then he ran the barrel of the gun through my lips, down to my entrance. Heat coursed through my veins.

Oh, here it comes. The dark and dangerous part he promised me.

I trusted Nikolai with my life. I knew without a shadow of a doubt he’d run through fire to save me, that he’d cut down an army of men to get to me.

So, when he clicked the safety off and started to slowly work the gun into my pussy, I wasn’t scared. I wasn’t scared that it would accidentally go off because I knew Nikolai had the steadiest hands, and that he would never do anything that put my life in danger.

Except stick a loaded gun in your hooha.

The fact that he kept his fingers well away from the trigger was a relief, though.

“Is this dangerous enough for you, Tatiana?” he asked, watching the gun disappear inside me, enraptured. “Or do you need more? Hmm?”

I whimpered when he swirled his tongue around my clit achingly slowly. The filthiness of the whole thing accentuated my pleasure and I groaned, moving my hips in time with each thrust of his gun.

I couldn’t hold back anymore. White-hot, blistering pleasure exploded in my core, so intense I feared my legs would give out, and I screamed Nikolai’s name into the darkness.

“*You. Are. Breathtaking,*” Nikolai whispered, kissing my pussy a few more times before pulling the gun out. He slowly got to his feet, keeping total eye contact with me, and put the gun in his mouth, sucking it clean.

I’m pretty sure I just had another orgasm.

“I’m glad to see your pussy-eating skills are still top-notch,” I panted, trying to catch my breath.

He smirked, a very smug, self-satisfied look on his face. He tucked the gun behind his back and then started to undo his belt. “I’m going to fuck you now, and I might as well warn you, it’s going to be quick.”

I chuckled softly as he lifted me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. “Been a while, hey?”

He ripped a condom open with his teeth and sheathed his cock. “I haven’t had sex with anyone since you.”

“What?” I gripped onto his thick, muscular shoulders as he moved me into position. “Are you telling me you haven’t sex in over two years? Not even once? With *anyone*?”

Neither had I, if I was being honest. Touching someone who wasn't Nikolai felt...wrong, even though we weren't together. But I didn't think *he* felt the same way, that he wouldn't have had sex at least once during our time apart.

"You're the only one I wanted." And then he drove forward, deeply impaling me with his cock.

We both groaned.

I didn't have time to think on his words because he started hammering into me *ruthlessly*. It felt so good, the pleasure taking over my body and mind completely, making it impossible for me to focus on anything else except him.

"Fuck, I've missed you. Missed *this*. You feel so good, baby. So hot, and wet, and tight."

My back scraped up and down the brick wall with each savage thrust of his cock. I moaned, an overload of pleasure and pain assaulting my senses, obliterating my nerves.

"Give me that fucking mouth," he grunted. He didn't even wait for me to do as he ordered. He just grabbed my face roughly in a strong, punishing grip and slammed his lips onto mine. He groaned as his tongue slipped into my mouth, battling with my own. We kissed like it would be our last time, all hot, heavy and utterly consuming. I was sure we'd both have bruises by the end of it.

"Yes...yes. Oh, fuck. Nikolai. Don't stop," I whimpered against his lips. My hands moved to the back of his neck, my nails digging into his skin.

"Harder, Tati," he groaned. "Make me bleed."

I was already on fire, my whole body wound tight and ready to explode, but hearing him groan, hearing his words laced with his pleasure sent me

hurtling towards an inferno. I dug my nails in deeper and bit down on his lip, *hard*. He hissed, eyes flaring. Blood pooled in my mouth. I lapped it up, running my tongue over his bottom lip and licking up every drop. His pace increased, thrusts turning wild. Chaotic. His cock pistoned in and out, in and out, and I came undone. I threw my head back and screamed out his name as a tidal wave of pleasure washed over me.

“Thank God,” he choked out. And then I felt him coming, felt his cock pulse as my pussy clamped down on him, squeezing.

Nikolai was a pleaser, the type who wanted to make sure his partner climaxed as well. He must have been holding off, determined to make sure I got there too.

He moaned, low and long, his hips pumping a few more times before he slumped against me, breathing hard. How he was still holding me up after all that, I had no idea. *I* was exhausted, and I’d done nothing but take a fucking.

His cock began to soften but he made no move to step back. He just continued to hold me, his face buried in the crook of my neck like he didn’t want to let me go.

If I was being honest, neither did I.

Nikolai and I were connected in a way I don’t think either of us entirely understood. If I believed in soul mates—in two souls being one, like both sides of a coin—then there would be no doubt in my mind that we were made for each other.

That moment held more significance than just two people fucking. I knew it the moment we started. That wall I’d been keeping between us was crumbling. It cracked more and more with every sweet thing he did for me.

With every loving word he said to me. Soon, it would be gone completely, and I had no idea what I was going to do when that happened.

I'd hoped to enjoy the post coital bliss for a little longer, but a deep, menacing voice made me stiffen.

“Is it our turn now?”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

MY BLOOD RAN COLD.

I didn't know who that was, who the owner of that voice belonged to, but years of experience and my instincts told me it wasn't anyone good.

If I believed in God, I would have cursed him the fuck out. We couldn't have one—just one—fucking night together without any problems? Really?

Tatiana and I locked eyes. Her gaze flicked over my left shoulder and back, and then she blinked six times.

Six assailants. Okay. Manageable.

If any of them had even the slightest bit of fighting skills, we were fucked.

I lowered her to the ground and quickly tucked my cock away. In retrospect, I suppose I should be grateful that they at least waited for us to finish before announcing their presence.

But then, that begged the question...how long had they been there? How long had *six men* been watching us while I had absolutely no fucking clue?

It wasn't the time to berate myself, but I definitely would later. If anything happened to Tatiana because I was too consumed to monitor my surroundings, I would never forgive myself.

I turned around and assessed the situation with quick eyes. Six men, spread out in a wide arch in front of us. They each wore a motorcycle vest, the words "THE BROTHERHOOD" stamped across them.

Shit.

The Brotherhood was one of the MC gangs I dealt with back in Vegas. They must have a charter here in New York and, after hearing about what happened to their brothers, decided to enact their own revenge.

One of the men stepped forward. He had long, scraggly hair and a big, bushy beard. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Bern," he said, placing a hand on his chest. "And you are Nikolai Volkov." He looked to me for confirmation but I said nothing.

If it was Lukyan in my place, he probably would have cracked a joke and made a wise-ass comment. If it were Aleksandr, he'd just grunt. Me? I didn't waste the time talking unless it was necessary—especially with an enemy.

And that's definitely what these guys were. They weren't there to have a nice, pleasant conversation. They were there to kill me.

"Nikolai." Tatiana peeked out from behind me like a scared little dove. "I'm scared," she whispered, her body visibly shaking.

"It's okay, baby. It'll all be okay," I said, playing along. She whimpered, a tear falling from her eye. She had a vice-like grip on my arm, staring at the men in front of us with a look of absolute fear.

If I didn't know her, didn't know with one-hundred percent certainty that she was putting on this act to appear weak and defenceless so they would underestimate her, I would believe it myself.

"Don't be scared, Pretty." The man on the right with the misshapen head said. "We're only here for him. We won't hurt you. Why don't you come over here to me? I'll take you away from here. Come on."

Everything in me rebelled at the thought of her stepping away from me. Of her going anywhere near those guys. But our chances of survival greatly improved if she was over there with them. She would be able to attack and take them completely by surprise, since all they saw was a snivelling, scared little woman. A part that Tatiana was playing exceptionally well.

"Leave her alone. She has nothing to do with this."

"I agree," Bern nodded. "So why not let Al here take her away? She doesn't need to see what's about to happen."

Tatiana's hands drifted down my back and grasped the gun tucked into my waistband—the same gun I'd fucked her with only moments ago.

"And what would that be?" I asked, watching the men carefully. They'd begun moving forward inch by inch, so deceptively slowly that I'm sure they thought I wouldn't notice. But I did.

"You think that you can just come after our own and we wouldn't retaliate?" Bern tsked. "I thought you Bratva folk were meant to be smart. But I can see you're not, because if you were, you wouldn't have come here all alone. Now you're ours." He peeked around my body to lock eyes with Tatiana. "Come on out, darling. Come on. We're not going to hurt you."

Her bottom lip wobbled and she stepped out tentatively from behind me. I had no idea where she'd stashed the gun. I couldn't see it, and yet I'd felt her take it.

“I just want to go home to my mum and dad. Please. D-don’t hurt me.” Her voice quivered so much, I honestly thought she was about to burst into tears. Her acting skills were goddamn phenomenal.

“No one is going to touch you, Princess. We just want to talk to your boyfriend. That’s all.”

“Just t-talk?”

Bern smiled, all non-threatening. “Just talk. You know, man to man.” He stretched his hand out in offering. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to take my knife and cut that fucking hand off, especially when Tatiana stepped away from me to take it.

She obviously had some sort of plan to get out of this, and it was my job to be ready when she put it into effect. Tatiana was a born tactician. The way her brain worked, her ability to think ten moves ahead and come up with quick, effective strategies was something the Bratva had been dying to get their hands on. When she decided not to go through with the initiation to become a Bratva soldier, my father was beyond disappointed. He wanted to put that genius mind of hers to work.

I watched in agony as Bern led her towards Al. I had all of three seconds to regret the decision to let her walk away when she glanced over her shoulder at me.

My Tatiana was back. Her eyes held that fire, that craziness I loved so much that she’d been hiding behind all those tears. Her lips were set into a dark smirk and I saw the exact moment she planned to strike. Bern’s face dropped slightly when he took in her expression, but by then it was too late.

Tatiana *moved*. She pulled Bern towards her with a strength that surprised the man and he stumbled into the gun she pulled out, the barrel pressing

right into his abdomen. She fired, spun and fired again, a clean shot straight through Al's forehead.

Everything kicked into overdrive. I whipped out my guns and took two shots, both hitting their targets before I dove for Tatiana, tackling her out of the line of fire.

Bullets whizzed past us, bouncing off the brick walls and slamming into the metal dumpsters. We scrambled into a crouch and stayed low as the last two MC men fired relentlessly.

The *click-click-click* ringing out in the alley told me they'd run out of bullets. Tatiana and I locked eyes. She peeked over the top of the dumpster and said, "11 o'clock and 3 o'clock."

I nodded. "I'll take eleven. You get three. Ready? Go."

We sprung out and charged. I fired with both guns but he ducked down, just managing to avoid the shots. Someone rammed into me from the side, taking me completely by surprise.

Fuck. There must have been someone else hiding out of sight.

I lost my hold on my guns as my back slammed into the ground. Pain shot up my spine, but I ignored it to stop the knife suddenly going right for my throat.

A man in the same motorcycle vest as the others sat on top of me, fingers curled around the hilt of the blade that he was trying desperately to jam into my skin. We wrestled for control, pushing back and forth, back and forth, the sharp edge getting dangerously close to slicing into me.

You motherfucker.

I kept one arm up to block and quickly reached down to pull out my own blade. Then, I stabbed him in the kidney, the chest and the side of the neck, all in quick succession. Blood sprayed all over me. The man gurgled, his

body going slack. I threw him off me and jumped to my feet, searching for Tatiana.

She was further down the alley, the last two remaining MC members boxing her in. Her dress was torn, a trail of blood dripping down the side of her face. I saw red. A deep, dark rage took over me and I charged ahead, running for them.

How. Dare. They.

How dare they attack *my* Tatiana. My beautiful, radiant Tatiana. How dare they corner her. Hurt her. Make her bleed. For that, I'd make them fucking suffer.

One of the men turned around and saw me coming. He met me head on, throwing a punch. I ducked underneath it, twisting the blade in my hand into a reverse grip and slicing the inside of his bicep as I popped up behind him. He yelled out a curse and swung his arm back in a spinning back fist. I reared back, avoiding the blow and threw my knife, hitting him right between the eyes.

I didn't stop moving to watch him fall. I spun, preparing to help Tatiana, but of course my woman didn't need any help. She was ramming a knife repeatedly into the last MC man's stomach with a smile on her face. A truly evil, sadistic smile that made her look even more beautiful. Something I honestly didn't think was possible.

She was still stabbing.

Six. Seven. Eight.

Blood pooled in a circle all around her, staining her skin.

Nine. Ten. Eleven.

She started laughing maniacally.

Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen.

As much as I *loved* watching her completely eviscerate someone—and I did, so much so that my cock was hardening every second that went by—I knew I had to stop her. Someone definitely would have heard those gunshots, those screams of pain. We had to get out of there before the police showed up.

I approached her and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Tati—”

She spun so fast I didn’t even see it coming and shoved me up against the wall, knife to my throat. She panted heavily, eyes burning like wildfire. Then she dropped the knife, grabbed my face with both hands and yanked me down into a searing hot kiss. I moaned, my arms banding around her and pulling her closer. Her tongue dove into my mouth, sliding against mine and making me shiver.

“Do you think we have time to go another round?” she asked in between kisses.

I wished to God we did. The fight seemed to have gotten her adrenaline soaring, like it did to me. But the sirens blaring in the distance told me we absolutely did not have the time.

As hard as it was for me to do, I ripped my lips from hers, clasped her hand and ran.



I trailed my finger down Tatiana's arm slowly as I watched her sleep, completely mesmerised. Every detail, no matter how small, drew me in. Her long lashes. That cute button nose. How soft and smooth her skin was.

After we'd fled the alley, we came back to her apartment and fucked again. And again, and again.

It was as if, because we started again, we couldn't stop. Like we were making up for lost time.

We barely made it through the front door before we were ripping each other's clothes off. We fucked right there on the floor, then we jumped into the shower to wash all the blood off, and ended up fucking again, before finally moving to the bedroom and doing it one more time.

Tatiana had passed out shortly after, completely exhausted. Not that I could blame her. I was too, but I was too terrified to sleep. Too terrified that when I woke up, it would have all been a dream. The whole night. It was a dream I wasn't prepared to let go of, so I stayed up all night, just watching her sleep.

We were both naked, tangled up in her blanket, her head resting on my chest. Light peeked behind her black curtains, and I knew without glancing at the clock on her bedside table that it was now morning.

I didn't feel a single shred of regret for staying awake all night. How could I when the reward was watching the most radiant woman in the world sleep right next to me? I'd do it every single night, if it was physically possible.

Tatiana snorted, a very un-lady-like snore ripping from her before she rolled over, giving me her back. I laughed softly, picking up a lock of her silky, golden hair and rubbing it between my fingers.

And the woman was adamant she didn't snore.

My phone vibrated on the bedside table next to me. I quickly scooped it up before the noise could wake her. Although, when I thought about it, I didn't think anything could be heard over that snoring. It was like someone had thrown rocks into a blender and turned it on full speed.

I looked at the screen.

Mikhail.

I tsked, a sliver of irritation slicing through me. The last thing I wanted to do was get up. This was the most content I'd felt in years. I honestly contemplated ignoring it so I could stay in this perfect moment a little while longer, but I knew I couldn't.

There could be only one reason why he was calling me.

"Podozh," Hang on, I whispered in Russian when I answered the phone.

I leant forward, placing a soft kiss on Tatiana's shoulder before quietly slipping out of the bed. I found my pants and put them on and then left the room, shutting the door behind me.

“Alright, what’s going on?” I asked, moving further into the apartment.

“I have your in,” Mikhail said, getting right to the point. Which I appreciated, because I wanted to get back in bed before Tatiana woke up.

“Give me the details.”

“Talon owns several big, private security companies. When I called them and inquired about hiring someone for the first week of May, they told me straight away that they had no one available.”

“You think he’s using the people in his security companies to man his island?”

“Yes. I went back and dug a little deeper into their employment history. Every year, in the last week of April and the first week of May, none of their employees were available for hire. I even checked his other

businesses, his maid services, his restaurants. All shut down for those two weeks. Even the calendars holding their schedules for the coming years have those dates blacked out.”

He was pulling his employees out of their normal jobs to work on the island. That meant he used the same people each time. Posing as a worker wouldn’t work, in that case.

“You said you had my in? How?”

“There’s a waitlist of people in case of emergencies. Say someone’s broken their leg and can’t work, or someone has died between this game and the last one. Well, they have a waitlist of people to call and replace them, if need be.”

“Ah,” I said, catching on. I idly walked around the apartment as I spoke. “You want to take one of the employees out of the equation and replace them with me.”

“Already done. Frederick Anderson met his untimely demise in a tragic hit-and-run incident late last night.”

I smirked.

“But not before I hacked into their server and slipped your alias into the number one spot in their security waitlist. You should be getting a call any day now to bring you in.”

“Wouldn’t people be suspicious, though? Like, the head of security? Considering they’ve never met me before.”

“No. Hiring people would be something done specifically by Talon. He’s too much of a control freak to let it be any other way. Your name being on the roster will be enough for people to think you’ve been vetted and chosen by the big boss.”

When I walked into the bedroom I used to occupy, I frowned. The bed and all of the furniture had been pushed to one side of the room. On the other side was all of Tatiana's design equipment. Her sketchpad, pencils, scissors, fabrics, sewing tape. It was all spread out chaotically with no organisation.

My frown deepened the longer I looked around the room. I've seen Tatiana's design space back home. It looked *nothing* like this. Tatiana was meticulously organised when it came to that kind of thing. Everything had a specific spot, and absolutely could not be put anywhere else.

I was beyond surprised to see it like this. Why was she—

“Nikolai? Are you still there?”

I cleared my throat, shaking my head. “Here. Sorry. Just zoned out for a second.”

“No problem. That was all I had to tell you anyway. Once you get the call, let me know and we'll plan the next step.”

“Will do. Thanks Mikhail,” I said, hanging up.

I crossed my arms over my chest, staring at the room in front of me, distaste building up inside of me. I didn't like this. Tatiana deserved a better space to work in.

I fired off a few texts to my people and turned around, intending to go back to bed. But of course, my plans never worked out the way I wanted them to.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



TATIANA ANDREEVA

MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN the moment Nikolai left the bed. I lay perfectly still, listening to him shuffle around the room as he put his pants on and left.

He was seriously trying to do the “hit it and quit it” on *me*? Oh, I was going to cut his balls off! Actually, first, I’d suck on them, because he made this deeply masculine groan whenever I did that, and it was the hottest sound I’d ever heard in my life. *Then I’d cut his balls off.*

And make him eat them.

I was busy planning his death as I shoved my underwear up my legs and my arms through my tank top when I heard his voice, muffled by the door. He was talking to someone.

Ohhh, he left to answer his phone.

I laughed at myself and shook my head. Sometimes, I really did overreact.

Wait a second...who was he talking to at—my eyes sliced to the alarm clock and narrowed suspiciously—4:30 in the morning?

I slinked forward on the tips of my toes and opened the door, peeking my head out. Nikolai was slowly walking up and down the apartment as he spoke to whoever was on the other end of the phone. It was hard for me to follow the conversation since I could only hear his responses, but it was clear he was talking Bratva business.

That ball of anxiety that had started to form in my stomach disappeared. I didn't know why I automatically went to a negative place when it came to Nikolai. He'd made it clear time and time again that there was never another woman in his life. Infidelity wasn't his vice.

But I was as jealous and possessive as he was. So, sometimes, my mind went a little crazy with scenarios, no matter how ridiculous they might seem.

When he finished the call, I debated running back to the bed and pretending to be asleep. I wasn't ready for what happened between us last night to end. We hadn't spoken about it, about what it meant. I think he was avoiding the conversation because he didn't want to hear what he knew I would say. That it was just sex. That we weren't back together. So he didn't bring it up, and neither did I. We just kept fucking, and fucking and fucking, refusing to talk about it and ruin the moment.

Nikolai turned and the decision to return to bed was taken away from me the moment our gazes collided. My eyes ran down that flawless form, marvelling over every curve and defined line. *His body...fuck me.* That solid eight-pack. The muscles. He was goddamn fucking perfect. Every single inch of him.

We stared at each other, the silence building between us, showcasing the elephant in the room. The subject we were both trying not to acknowledge.

“Did I wake you?” he asked, tucking his phone away into his grey sweats.

“It’s fine. Who were you talking to?”

“Mikhail. There’s been a development in finding my father.”

“Really? That’s great news. What kind of development?”

Nikolai moved into the kitchen and started opening cupboards in search of food. He told me all about the information they’d uncovered. The email of his father fighting. The games he was suddenly being forced to participate in. His plan to infiltrate this mysterious island under the cover of an alias.

The more he spoke, the more anxious I became. The whole thing sounded incredibly dangerous. It wasn’t that I didn’t have faith in him, or believe in him. I did. But he was going deep into the belly of the beast with no backup. If something went wrong, he had no one to help him.

He slammed the refrigerator shut and turned to face me, hands on his hips. His left pec flexed and I bit my lip. “Tatiana, where is all your food?”

“It’s in there,” I said, taking a seat on the stool in front of the kitchen island.

He exhaled in exasperation and pulled a few items out, holding them up. “Half a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter and some ramen noodles *is not* food.”

“Semantics,” I shrugged. I didn’t want to tell him that I could barely afford food. He’d take it upon himself to rectify the situation. The man had bought me dozens of Louboutin pairs of shoes on the remote chance it would make me happy. If he knew I was struggling to buy food, he’d end up buying me a damn grocery store or something.

“It’s great news about your father,” I said, changing the subject. Then I realised what I said and cringed. “Not the news itself. That isn’t great. I meant the fact that there *is* news. I know Illayana was freaking out because there was no news of your father anywhere. She thought he was dead. But now you know he’s alive, and that’s—”

Nikolai chuckled softly at my rambling, a playful smirk dancing on his lips as he looked at his phone.

“—great,” I finished on an exhale.

“It is.” That smirk was still on his face. “The information about the games was surprising.” His fingers tapped quickly on the screen for a few more minutes before he tucked it back away. “Out of all the possible scenarios I envisioned, that definitely wasn’t one of them.”

“Same. I’ve never even heard of something like it before. I mean, Mikhail has the fight pits. But that’s not to the death. And every fighter in there is there by choice.”

“Me either. But I guess rich people need something exciting to get their blood pumping. When you have the ability to buy anything you want, you get bored pretty quickly.”

“You’re rich,” I pointed out. Did that mean he was bored?

“I have you and I kill people for a living. That’s enough to keep me entertained for a lifetime. And more.”

When I opened my mouth to respond, he gave me a pointed stare that made me snap it closed. He knew what I was going to say and he didn’t want to hear it.

“When will you leave?” I asked, changing the subject again. It was quickly becoming a specialty of mine.

“According to Mikhail, the games are always held in the first week of May.” He started taking out cooking items and laying them out on the bench. Plates, pans, cutting boards, knives. For what, I had no idea. It’s not like he could cook anything with what was in my pantry. “Depending on how early they want their workers there to set up, it could be any time between now and a few weeks.”

A tight pressure squeezed my chest and I rubbed my sternum. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it one fucking bit. The odds of something going wrong were too high. All it would take was for someone to recognise him, or someone to dig more into his alias, and he was done for.

Fuck, he and his family where googleable. Did no one fucking think about that? Who came up with this stupid plan? It wasn’t going to work. This plan was going to fail. He was going to get caught. They were going to catch him and kill him—

“You’re spiralling.”

“Of course I’m fucking spiralling,” I hissed, glaring at him. “Nikolai, you and your family are too recognisable for this plan to work. Have you forgotten there are pictures of you guys all over the internet? ‘The rich Russian family who owns Las Vegas’? There was a damn news article done on you guys three fucking days ago. I read it. How-I don’t-this isn’t-”

He spun me around and wedged himself between my legs, grabbing my face with both hands and forcing me to look at him. “Tati, *breathe*. Relax and breathe.”

My body tingled at his touch but I ignored it. “I’m breathing, you idiot,” I said, slapping his hands away. He chuckled deeply, not the least bit deterred. He stayed exactly where he was, unbearably close, and clutched the island bench behind me on either side of my body. Caging me in and

giving me absolutely nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. He was so close, I could feel his breath fan out over my face. Smell that intoxicating scent that was all man. All Nikolai.

“YA tsenyu, chto ty bespokoish’sya za menya, lyubimaya. No tebe ne sleduyet etogo delat’.” I appreciate that you’re worried for me, love. But you shouldn’t be, he whispered softly.

I swallowed thickly, staring at his lips. I couldn’t take my eyes off them. “*YA ne dolzhen?*” *I shouldn’t?*

“*Nyet.*” *No.* He tilted his head to the side, watching me with every shred of his focus. “Because there’s nothing in this world that could keep me from you. There’s no obstacle I wouldn’t climb. No task I wouldn’t complete. No person I wouldn’t kill to get back to you. You, my beautiful Tatiana, are the centre of my universe.” He placed the softest kiss on my lips. “*Moye vse.*” *My everything.*

Well...shit. My heart fucking swooned. This man had rendered me completely and utterly speechless (a feat not easily accomplished). It wasn’t just his words. It was also the sincerity in which he spoke them. There was no doubt in my mind that he meant every single word, and a little bit more of my heart healed, another crack from our past just fading away.

There was a knock at the door and I breathed out a small sigh of relief. I had no idea what to say back to that. I mean, what did you say to someone who just poured out their entire fucking soul to you?

Nothing I could think of seemed good enough, so I used the person knocking on my front door as the perfect excuse to deflect.

“I should probably get that,” I breathed out, licking my lips. Was it hot in there? It felt hot in there.

He grinned and I swear my heart fucking stopped. “Yes. You should.” But he didn’t move. He just continued to give me that wide, cheshire grin, all sexy and shit.

I was going to kill him if he didn’t stop looking at me like that. It made it impossible for me to think. When the knocking persisted, I placed my hands on his chest and pushed him back. He let me, the grin still plastered firmly on his face.

When I opened the front door, there were four men standing there, all with several big bags in their hands.

“Nikolai Volkov?” the guy in the middle asked.

“Uh, he’s in there,” I pointed over my shoulder.

The guy nodded. “This way fellas.” He walked straight past me and into the apartment, the other men following suit.

“Hey!” I was about to go all Xena on their asses, but Nikolai spoke, his words making me pause.

“Good. You’re here.”

I frowned. *What the fuck is going on?*

All of the bags were sitting on the bench when I rounded the corner and stepped into the kitchen. Ten in total.

“You got here quick,” Nikolai commented as he plucked several hundred dollar bills from his wallet.

“With what you paid, it was pretty much guaranteed.”

Nikolai grunted, “For your efficiency.” He handed the men three bills each.

They fell over themselves in gratitude. “Thank you, Mr Volkov! Thank you! If you ever need anything else, we’re your guys!”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.”

After the men left, he began unpacking the bags.

“Really, Nikolai?” I placed my hands on my hips. “You bought groceries?”

“Don’t act all surprised. We both know you’re not.”

“When did you even—” then I remembered he’d been playing around on his phone shortly after discovering I had shit all in my fridge. “Oh, you’re sneaky.”

I was going to tell him off for it, but honestly, what would be the point? Nikolai was the type who, if we were both dying of thirst in the desert, he’d force the last of the water down my throat instead of sharing it. Anything I said would go in one ear and out the other.

“You need to stop doing shit for me,” I said anyway, moving to help put the food away.

“I’d rather die,” he said with complete seriousness.

I rolled my eyes. “Kind of dramatic, but okay.”

Once we were finished, he used the cooking equipment he’d taken out earlier to begin making breakfast. Which was fine with me, because I couldn’t cook to save my life.

“Cheese and tomato omelette still your favourite?” he asked, cracking some eggs.

“Mm-hmm,” I answered idly, focusing on my sketchpad. I’d gone and grabbed it when he started cooking. I was determined to finish the design I’d thought of as quickly as I could so it could be made in time.

“What are you working on so hard over there?” He poured the eggs into a sizzling hot frying pan.

“I’m designing you a suit.”

“A suit?” he frowned. “Why?”

“For our wedding.”

“What?!” he dropped the bowl in his hands in shock. When I started laughing, he narrowed his eyes. “You’re cruel.”

“I am.” I gave him a big smile. “But that’s why you love me.”

He shook his head and chuckled, bending down to pick up the bowl. “It is. One of them, anyway.”

I winked. “All kidding aside, I’m designing you something I hope will help keep you safe on this suicide mission of yours.”

“I’m intrigued.” He diced up some onions, chives and tomatoes, throwing them into the pan.

“I don’t know if it’s possible yet, but I want to try and make you an outfit completely made out of Kevlar. That way, if something goes wrong, it might buy you enough time to make a run for it and hold out until I can come and save your ass.”

When he didn’t say anything, I glanced up from my sketchpad, pencil frozen in the air. He looked at me with a mixture of surprise and affection, eyes slightly wide. “As much as I appreciate the gesture, Tati, I don’t think I’ll be able to wear it. I’ll most likely be given a uniform of some sort.”

“Then you can wear it *under* your uniform. I don’t care if it’s a thousand degrees and you’re sweating your balls off. If I can somehow make this work, you’re wearing it. End of discussion.” I highly doubted it would be as effective as a proper Kevlar Bulletproof Vest, but even if it could offer a little resistance, it might mean the difference between life and death. I stared him dead in the eyes. “Promise me.”

He tsked, serving up the food. “Fine, I promise. Here, eat.”

“I’m almost done—”

“No. Now.” He snatched my sketchpad away and set the plate down right in front of me. “Lord knows when you last ate a proper meal.”

“Last night, actually.” Although, I didn’t get to eat the whole thing. He’d gone and pissed me off before I could do that.

He narrowed his eyes, not as pleased with that statement as I would have assumed. He placed a glass of orange juice and a glass of water down next before taking a seat on the empty stool, facing me.

“You’re not going to eat?” I took a bite and had to hold back a moan. So much cheesy goodness.

“I’ll eat after.” He grabbed my stool and yanked me closer in between his legs, his huge, muscular thighs caging me in.

I shrugged and continued eating, not stopping until I finished the whole plate. I pushed it away once I was done. “There. Happy? Can I finish my sketch now?”

“Not yet.” He pushed the glass of orange juice towards me. I rolled my eyes but took a sip, placing it back down. He pushed the glass of water towards me next and I shook my head.

“How much water have you had in the last few days?”

“Tons. At least four bottles,” I said, lying through my teeth. He just stared at me, not believing a single word. “Okay, fine, three bottles.” His fingers tapped on the bench, waiting. “Two,” I amended. He still didn’t move, eyes locked with mine. “Fine! None, okay?”

He nodded, as if he knew that had been the answer all along. He pushed the water towards me again, a silent command to drink it. With a growl, I picked up the glass and swallowed the whole thing in one go before slamming it back down. The smile he gave me afterwards sent my pulse racing.

“Now can I finish my sketch?”

“No.” A gasp flew out of my mouth when he picked me up and plopped my ass down on the island bench, spreading my legs wide. “Now it’s my turn to eat.”



I walked into my apartment a few days later, utterly exhausted. Working a proper job *sucked*. I’d managed to pick up a few extra shifts, which I was thankful for. It meant I could actually pay for a manicure this week. One I was in *desperate* need of. I swear, a little bit of my soul died any time I caught a glimpse of my nails. It was the longest I’d ever gone without getting some self care done, and I didn’t fucking like it. It made me irritable.

After our *very memorable* morning the other day, the one where Nikolai ate my pussy until I came three fucking times, he left and went back to New York. There was a lot he had to prepare for. As much as I wanted him to stay, he had to go. I missed him immensely.

It was funny, I’d been putting so much distance between us for so long that I was almost able to forget how much I missed him. How much I enjoyed just being around him. But after those last few weeks of being constantly surrounded by him, his touches and those heated glances that

spoke of a million things, it made it impossible to forget. It physically *hurt* to be away from him. I felt like a drug addict, desperate for their next hit. We'd been texting and video calling, but it wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

I kicked off my shoes and stretched out my toes on the soft carpet. I was so fucking glad the night was over. *I'll make myself some dinner, take a shower and then curl up in bed with a good book.* Yes. Sounded like a plan.

It wasn't only work that had me so tired. I'd been staying up until 1 a.m. every night, trying to get the Kevlar outfit I had in mind for Nikolai finished so he could take it with him on his mission to rescue his father. I'd finally managed to get it done, but it hadn't been easy. Trying to sew Kevlar was a fucking bitch. But all that mattered was that it was finished, and if it could offer Nikolai even the tiniest bit of protection, then I was happy. It was already on the way to him, express courier.

I took a step towards the kitchen and froze. The light in the spare bedroom was on. I was entirely sure it wasn't on when I left this morning. A frown on my face, I moved towards the room and opened the door wider.

My jaw dropped. *What in the everloving hell?* The entire room had been completely re-done. Gone was the bed, the side tables, the dresser...all replaced with a design studio any fashion major would *kill* to fucking have. It was even better than the space I had at home.

A sturdy work table was pushed up against the wall with downlights pointed right at it for optimum lighting. Those weren't there before. I would have noticed. There was a state-of-the-art sewing machine—a MT-KCO1-ZPL SEG Multi Function Silicone Edge Sewing Machine, to be precise—that ran for a whopping \$10,000, easy.

Everything was set up with meticulous detail. There was an array of different fabrics hanging on the wall, just ripe for the picking. Two dress mannequins stood either side of the work table. The scissors, pencils, pens and measuring tapes were aligned neatly. It was...my dream design studio space.

I honestly didn't know how long I stood there, marvelling over what was right in front of me.

After I picked my jaw up off the floor, I whipped out my phone and called the only person in the world who could be responsible for this. He answered on the first ring.

“Good afternoon, love.”

My mouth broke out into a smile. Ever since we'd been back in constant communication, Nikolai had made an active effort not to only answer all of my calls, but answer them immediately. He did the same with my texts, responding straight away. There was even one time when he was sparring with Lukyan that he'd chosen to completely drop his guard and answer my call, resulting in a solid punch to the jaw. I knew that because I'd heard the grunt of pain fly out of his mouth the moment after he accepted.

I was aware of the fact that he was overcompensating. He was trying to prove that no matter the case, he would always be there when I needed him. The emotions it stirred up within me sent me into a tailspin.

“What did you do, Nikolai?”

“You're going to have to be more specific.”

My eyes narrowed suspiciously. “How many things could I be referring to? What else have you done?”

“Until I have more information, I plead the fifth.” There was a grunt and a Russian curse, but it wasn't from him. He was probably sparring again.

“The design space, Nikolai.”

“Ah.” So much humor in that one syllable word. “Do you like it?”

“You know I love it.” I walked around the room, lovingly running my fingers over everything. “But I told you to stop doing things for me.”

“And I told you I’d rather die.” Another grunt. Another curse. “How it was before wasn’t good for your creative mind, Tati, and you know it. How are you meant to become the next Vera Wang, or Donatella Versace, or Christian Dior if you don’t have the space to do your best work?”

I bit my lip. He’d done some research. That was the only way he knew who those people were. Nikolai didn’t give a shit about fashion or what he wore. If it fit, he wore it.

“As much as I love what you’ve done—and I do—this isn’t my apartment, Nikolai. I’m renting it from Arturo and your sister. Who, by the way, still isn’t talking to me. You can’t just—”

“I can,” he cut in. “I already called Arturo and told him what I was going to do. I had all the furniture moved into storage and it will all be returned once you leave.”

The wording was hard not to notice. “I told him,” not “I asked him.” If Arturo had said no, I doubt Nikolai would have listened.

I exhaled and collapsed into the comfortable armchair in the corner of the room. Next to it sat a mini fridge. Which, when I opened it, was filled with all of my favourite drinks and snacks. The man really had thought of *everything*.

“Honestly, I don’t even know what to say. What you’ve done here, for me, it’s nothing short of amazing. Thank you. It really means a lot.”

“Making you happy makes me happy.”

“Ya byla by schastliva, yesli by ty perestal delat’ chto-to dlya menya.” I’d be happy if you stopped doing things for me.

“Vidimo, togda oba budut neschastny.” I guess we’re both going to be unhappy then. He responded just as quickly. I laughed softly. It was worth a shot.

My phone beeped. I looked at the screen and saw Arturo was trying to call me. Strange.

“I have to go. Thank you again so much for the room. It’s beautiful.”

“Ostavaytes’ v bexopasnosti, do vstrechi.” Be safe. Talk soon.

“Ty tozhe.” You too.

I hung up and accepted Arturo’s incoming call. “Hey. What’s going on?”

“We’re moving on Franco in an hour. You in or out?”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine



TATIANA ANDREEVA

O*H, MAN. NIKOLAI IS absolutely going to murder me.*
I was crouched down on one knee behind the small table in the kitchen of Arturo's new fake distribution house.

The plan was simple. Let Franco and his men infiltrate. Take them by surprise. Kill his men. Take Franco alive. Haul ass.

Simple, right?

Wrong!

There was nothing simple about it because, for some reason, the plan had been pushed forward and Nikolai wasn't there. He wasn't there, and I was, and he was going to fucking kill me.

Yes, okay, I knew I didn't have to be there. But I wanted to see it through, and I knew if I told him, he'd rant and rave and demand I not go. I, of course, wouldn't listen, and Nikolai would spend the night going out of his mind with worry because it was physically impossible to get from Vegas to

New York in one hour. So, I opted not to tell him about what was going on until after the fact. He had a lot of shit to deal with already. Why add more unnecessary stress and worry on his shoulders when it was completely avoidable? Nothing was going to go wrong. I was going to be fine and leave this place without a single scratch on me. Why?

Because they'd stuck me in the back far away from any of the action. It's not like I could say anything. It wasn't my OP to run, so if Arturo wanted me covering the backdoor to make sure no one snuck up on them from behind, then that's what I'd do. And I'd do the best damn job possible.

I adjusted my position slightly, keeping the barrel of my gun pointed right at the door that led out into the backyard. Arturo had done a great job in making this place look operational. He'd even gone as far as to fill it with all the equipment he would use at a proper drug distribution house, so as not to arouse suspicion when The Outfit broke in. There were even mannequins dressed in gear, spread throughout the house to really sell the ruse. Thorough bastard.

I was dressed in my best boss-bitch outfit, the material all black, tight and non-restricting, allowing for plenty of manoeuvrability. Arturo had offered me weapons but I politely declined. I much preferred to work with my own. There was a handgun and a knife strapped to each thigh, another knife at my ankle, one more behind my back, and a fully loaded, semi automatic Scorpion EVO 3 machine gun strapped over my shoulder. I was so ready to fuck a bitch up.

“Incoming. ETA two minutes.” A voice crackled in my ear from the earpiece. It was one of Arturo’s men who were monitoring the streets, keeping watch for Franco’s arrival.

Excitement surged in my veins. I checked over my weapon one more time, ensuring everything was in working order before focusing back on the door again.

“I thought your guard dog would be here,” Vincenzo commented at my side. There was a small part of me that thought Arturo had stuck him back here to protect me, but I wasn’t entirely sure.

My eyes flicked to him and back to the door. “There wasn’t enough time, otherwise he would be where you are.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. I didn’t know you guys were dating.”

“Why would you? Our business is our business.” I watched him discreetly out of the corner of my eye. There was something...different about him. Gone was the sarcastic playboy who flirted with anything that had a heartbeat. In his place was this stone cold, focused predator. It was a complete personality switch.

“Target confirmed. Heading up the driveway,” the voice crackled in my ear again.

Here we go. Here we go.

The next few minutes went by unbearably slowly. Vincenzo and I waited in silence. My palms started to sweat. I flexed my fingers around the handle of my gun and took a deep breath. The anticipation was fucking killing me.

The sound of gunfire made me tense. It was coming from the front of the house. Vincenzo and I shared a look. We both wanted to go and see what was going on, if they needed help. But we couldn’t abandon our post. It opened us up to being attacked from behind.

There was movement in the window, several dark, shadowy figures walking past and heading right for the door.

“1 o’clock,” I said, alerting Vincenzo in case he didn’t see them.

“Got it.” He looked through the scope of his gun, taking aim.

“It’s an ambush! GO!” someone roared from the front of the house.

I watched the door, the window, the door, the window, my gaze ping-ponging back and forth between the two. Something silver glinted through the window and my instincts screamed to run. I had no idea why, but my instincts had never steered me wrong before, so I was definitely going to listen to them.

Without wasting another second, I turned and tackled Vincenzo out of the room and into the adjoining one at the same time as something came hurtling through the window.

There was a *flash* and a loud *bang* that sent my ears ringing. My vision blurred, making it impossible to see.

Fuckers had used a flash bang grenade.

Disorientation washed over me. I’d been hit with one of those bastards during my training with the Bratva. It had been ten times worse than this. It had left me so scrambled, I couldn’t even form a coherent thought. Jumping into the next room must have lessened its effects, but they were still prominent enough to impair my senses. My ears were still ringing. My vision was still blurred. If I didn’t move *immediately*, whoever threw that flashbang would be right on top of me.

Move. Your. Ass!

I ran a finger down the strap over my shoulder until I felt my gun. With a hiss, I got to my feet and took aim. A blurry figure appeared in front of me. I fired and it disappeared out of my field of vision.

With every passing second, my sight improved. I used the wall as cover and breathed a sigh of relief when I could finally see more than just

blurriness. Bullets smashed into the wall I was hiding behind. I dropped into a crouch a moment before the bullets ripped through the plaster.

One more second and my brains would have been splattered all over the floor.

I locked eyes with Vincenzo. He was crouched down, using the same wall as I was for cover, except he was on the other side of the entrance.

Using military hand signals, I told him to charge forward at the same time I did, having our paths cross in an X formation so we could cover both sides of the kitchen.

He nodded.

“Go, go, go,” I mouthed.

We sprung into action, crossing over each other as we ran back into the kitchen. I didn’t hesitate to fire, releasing a stream of bullets. My vision was still slightly impaired, but I saw them dive for cover. Three of them, maybe four. I wasn’t sure. That stupid flashbang really fucked with my senses.

I ran out of bullets quickly and unclipped the strap from around my shoulder, dropping the weapon. Two men charged at me. My daggers were in my hands before I could even think, and we fought. *Hard*.

Lucky for me, they were more the “Swing my arms around and hope I hit something” type than the “skilled fighter” type. I ducked and sliced. Blocked and stabbed. Twisted and kicked. A boot to the thigh made me stumble and then I was flat on my back, tackled to the ground. I kept a tight hold on my knives on the way down so I wouldn’t lose them, because if I did, I knew I was done for.

Hands wrapped around my throat, squeezing. I didn’t panic. Panic would get me nowhere. My fingers curled tighter around the hilt of my weapon

and I rammed it into his eye. He screamed and I pushed him off, scrambling to my feet.

A foot came flying towards my face. I dodged left, wrapped my arm around his leg and charged forward, knocking him off balance. My blade was in his throat before he knew what happened. I smiled, twisting it left and right, dragging out the kill, trying to make his last few moments on this earth as painful as possible.

Vincenzo's cry of pain snapped my head up. He was flat on his back, one knife in his shoulder and another one getting dangerously close to his eye, the man sitting on his chest pushing it closer and closer. Three bodies lay dead around him.

"Hey!" The man turned to look at me. I threw my knife and his head snapped back, the blade lodging deep into his forehead.

"Stop him! Don't let Franco get away!" someone yelled. A second later, Franco bolted into the kitchen and ran towards the backdoor, trying to escape.

I jumped up, preparing to chase after him but my gaze locked on Vincenzo. He saw my hesitation. I didn't want to leave him on his own when he was vulnerable.

"Go, go!" he insisted, grimacing as he moved to sit up.

I ran, whipping out one of my handguns. I stepped out into the cold air, my head darting left, then right. There. He just turned the corner and disappeared from sight. Cursing, I leapt over the bannister, landed in a crouch and sprinted after him. Determination made me kick into another gear, running faster. I wanted to catch him. I wanted to take him down for Illayana. For all the suffering and inconvenience that bastard had caused my best friend.

I skidded around the corner, too fast to stop my body's momentum, and ran right into the taser in Franco's hand. I cried out as a strong electrical current rocked through me, pain assaulting all my senses. My muscles locked and I fell forward into Franco's arms, completely stunned. Another round of pain hit me as he tased me again. I screamed. Darkness crept into my vision, taking over my sight inch by inch until I saw nothing but black.

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Chapter Thirty



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“HOW’S PACKING GOING?”

I looked over my shoulder, seeing Illayana standing in my doorway, arms crossed over her chest. Considering she hadn’t said a word to me since I got home a few days ago, I was surprised she was here, talking to me.

Yesterday, I received the call we’d all been waiting for. A woman named Andrea told me a position had just become available in the private security firm I’d applied for, if I was still interested in taking it. She’d spoken in code, another precaution set forth by Talon, no doubt, in case anyone was monitoring their phone calls. I had to pick my words carefully because, as someone on this waitlist, I should know what her words meant, even if they didn’t make sense to me.

Everything seemed to go okay, because she gave me the flight information that would send me on my journey. In two days, I would be off to that

island and the mission would be underway.

A mixture of emotions warred within me. Excitement. Anticipation. Eagerness. Dread. Not for me, but for Tatiana.

I feared going away, becoming unavailable to her and anything she might need could set me back in the progress I'd made. What if something happened while I was away? What if she needed me? There was no coming back from where I was going. Not unless we completed our mission and saved my father, something that was going to be extremely hard to achieve. There were a lot of obstacles to overcome, a lot of things that could go wrong. It made me hesitant to go, despite knowing what fate my father would most likely suffer if we didn't rescue him.

"You're talking to me now, are you?" I turned back around and continued the mundane task of packing my clothes into my suitcase.

Illayana huffed and stepped into the room. She sat at the edge of my bed, staring me down. "I don't want you to go without settling things between us."

"Didn't we already do that? Yes, I distinctly remember. That bruise on your face, it's from me kicking your ass in the ring."

She picked up a pair of black pants and threw them at me. I caught them and put them in my suitcase. "If something happens, if you don't come back, I don't want our last words to be ones of anger. I want to resolve this."

Very mature words from someone who had acted like a complete fucking child less than a week ago. But she was trying, so I wouldn't say that.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say, Illayana. Or more, what you want to hear. I'm not going to apologise—"

“And I don’t want you too,” she cut in. “I just want to hear your side of what happened. I’ve heard Tatiana’s. Now I want to hear yours.”

Was that something I could give? The memory of that day was something I tried actively not to think about, not to relive. The past was the past. It couldn’t be changed. Reliving it only caused pain, so I’d promised myself I wouldn’t think about it if I could help it.

But as I looked at my baby sister and those big, pleading blue eyes, I knew I couldn’t say no.

Two years ago

“So, as you can see Mr Cliveson, I have more than enough inventory to meet your needs.”

It took a conscious amount of effort not to roll my eyes. Sitting across from my father and I was Delano Campos, the fucker who had been selling guns in our territory. We had suspected it was him, but he’d just confirmed it, and in doing so, signed his death warrant. He didn’t realise he was sitting at a table with the Pahkan of the Bratva. He thought we were just a couple of drug runners looking for weapons to protect ourselves and our product. Not his competition.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and glanced at the screen, my jaw locking up tight.

Tatiana.

I ignored the call.

*I wasn’t ready to talk to her yet. Not after everything. I didn’t want to hear her tell me what an idiot I was being, how I was overreacting. She just kept trying to invalidate my feelings. I heard that fucker Kurt, with my own ears, explain in great detail about their ‘time’ together. Heard him describe the tattoo on her ass that she had gotten with **me**. The timeline matched. I didn’t*

need to know anything else. The baby wasn't mine, just like with Galina. I wasn't going to go and get my hopes up again just to have them and my heart crushed into oblivion. I wasn't.

Still, there was this tiny voice in my head that kept saying, "What if?" What if she was telling the truth? What if it was all just a big misunderstanding and the baby was mine? What if she didn't betray me? That voice was slowly getting louder and louder, more prominent. More demanding.

I wanted to believe it, to listen to it. What I felt for Tatiana was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. A blazing love as powerful as a supernova. All-consuming. She was everything to me. It was why the idea of her betrayal hurt so much.

My phone vibrated, Tatiana trying to call me again. I ignored it. Again.

I told myself I was ignoring her calls because I was dealing with Bratva business, but deep down, I knew the real reason. It was because I just didn't want to deal with any of it right now. I needed more time. Needed to figure out exactly what I was going to do about our situation. Whether to believe her and run back to her, or let her go.

After the third call, I switched my phone off and focused back on the meeting.

*Delano was running his mouth, trying to make himself seem all Alpha dog, like he was the big man and we were nothing. It was getting harder and harder to sit at this table with him and not put a bullet in his brain. But, Father wanted to wait. We had confirmation it was him selling guns in our territory, but Father wanted to know **where** he was getting them from.*

You had to take out the supplier, as well as the seller to truly stop it. Otherwise, another person could easily replace Delano and we'd be right

back where we started.

After what felt like hours, we were finally done, and said our goodbyes with arrangements to meet in a few days, us with the cash and him with the inventory. That was where we'd attack.

Father and I exchanged a few words before he got in his car and left. I climbed into the driver's seat of my own vehicle and took a deep breath, my hands curling around the steering wheel.

I feared what I would find when I turned my phone back on. Most likely Tatiana, cursing me out for ignoring her. Something I probably deserved. I'd been ignoring her attempts to talk for months now.

I don't know how long I sat there, my car running idly as I worked up the courage to deal with my problems. I couldn't ignore them any more. Ignore her. We needed to talk and resolve things, no matter how much I dreaded the conversation.

I turned my phone back on. An influx of text messages overtook my device, as well as several voicemails.

Panic set in when I read them. Oh, dear God. What was going on? I opened up one of the voicemails and placed the phone to my ear.

At first, I couldn't hear much. I thought perhaps it was a pocket dial, but then I heard it. Heard Tatiana, crying, sobbing, calling out for me. Begging for me. My heart literally broke, pain burning my insides.

I'd never heard her like that before. Never heard her voice filled with so much pain. So much desperation. So much agony. Something must be wrong. Something must have gone horribly, horribly wrong. Tatiana was the strongest woman I'd ever known. For her to beg for me...

There were other voices. A man telling her to push. A woman asked if there was someone else she could call for her. All while in the background

Tatiana cried...for me. She said my name over and over again, each time like a knife through the heart.

She was in labour? Fuck. She was in labour, and she called me and...I ignored it. What had I done?

I started the car and sped down the road, my tires screeching. One of the text messages said she was at Saint Royal Hospital. It was only a few hours away.

As I drove, I tried calling back. Relief filled me when she answered.

“Tatiana? Tatiana, are you there? I’m on my way. I’m coming.”

“H-hello. This is Maureen.”

I swerved erratically through traffic, trying as hard as I could to get there fast without killing myself. “Where is Tatiana?”

“She’s...here.” When she said nothing else, I exploded.

“Put her on the phone!”

The woman yelped in surprise at my outburst but I didn’t care. “Darling, here. He answered. He’s on the phone.” Was she talking to Tatiana? Why wasn’t she responding?

I swallowed the lump in my throat and tried to soften my voice. “Tati?”

Still nothing.

“What’s going on?” I demanded. “Why isn’t she talking?”

“I-I’m incredibly sorry, sir—”

“Sorry? Sorry for what? She’s okay, isn’t she?” Please, God, tell me she’s okay. If she wasn’t...if something happened to her...if she died...

I shook my head. If she died, I’d follow her.

“Tatiana is okay,” Maureen said, and I released a huge sigh of relief.

“And the baby?” When there was no answer, I asked again, more firmly.

“And. The. Baby?”

*“You should get here as quickly as you can.” Then she hung up.
No. No, no, no. I threw the phone and punched the steering wheel,
slamming my foot down on the accelerator.*

*My mind was going crazy, coming up with different scenarios, each one
worse than the one before it. She was only eight months pregnant. It was too
early for her to be in labour.*

*Guilt overwhelmed me. Why? Why did I ignore her calls? Why did I turn
off my phone?*

*When I got to the hospital, I drove right up to the front doors and jumped
out of the car, leaving the driver's side door wide open and the engine still
running. I bolted inside, looking around frantically for some sort of nurses
station or reception desk.*

*A woman standing in front of a set of double doors saw me and her eyes
widened. “Are you Nikolai?”*

“Yes.” I rushed over. “Where is she? Where is Tatiana?”

*“This way.” She pushed a button on the wall and the doors swung open. I
followed her, right on her heels, so close I was practically her goddamn
shadow.*

Why is she walking so damn slow? Hurry up!

*Worry clutched at my chest, a building pressure making it hard for me to
breathe, to calm down. God, why didn’t I just answer her fucking calls?*

*Eventually, she stopped in front of a closed door and turned to look at me,
her eyes filled with sadness. “I feel I should probably prepare you—”*

I don’t have time for this.

*“Move.” I pushed her out of the way and opened the door, walking in.
Tatiana was sitting up in the bed, slowly rocking back and forth as she
stared at the small little bundle in her arms. She was alone. There was no*

else in the room, except for them. A blanket covered her lower half and she was still wearing her street clothes, not a hospital gown. Whatever happened must have happened quickly. Her hair stuck to her forehead, drenched in sweat.

The relief I felt at seeing her alive and well was short-lived.

She didn't acknowledge me, didn't lift her head to look at me. She just kept staring down at the baby in her arms, like they were the only two people in the world.

I moved closer, approaching her like a skittish animal. "Tati?"

Nothing.

"Tatiana?"

She didn't move, didn't speak. She just rocked back and forth, back and forth. I stopped at her side and looked down at the baby.

*He looked exactly like...me. God, he looked **exactly** like me. The dark hair. The nose. The lips. There was no denying it, no second guessing it. There was no doubt in my mind that he was my son.*

"He's beautiful," I whispered, rubbing his head affectionately.

*Love burst in my chest, so strong that it rocked me. How could I love someone I only just met **so** much? How was it possible he consumed so much of my heart already? One look...that was all it took. One look to know that I'd die for this little boy. I'd give my life a thousand times over—*

"Why isn't he moving? Is he sleeping?"

Tatiana still didn't speak. I hunched forward, trying to catch her eyes, and what I saw made me stiffen. They were empty. No light or life. Just...emptiness. Pure emptiness.

I reached forward and cradled her jaw softly, turning her face towards me. "Tati." Her eyes connected with mine and it was like getting stabbed in

the heart. Those gorgeous hazel eyes I loved so much were dull and lifeless. She looked...broken. It was like her body was there but her mind was gone. I could feel her, see her sitting there right in front of me, and yet, she wasn't there at all.

My eyes moved to the baby in her arms and the pieces clicked together. "No." I shook my head, refusing to believe what I knew was already true. "No." My legs gave out and I crashed to my knees, a pain unlike anything I'd ever experienced before splitting my heart wide open.

How? How did-what? I couldn't think. Couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. My son. Oh, God, my son. The pain...the agony...the guilt. It twisted inside me, clawing at my chest.

*My eyes rose to Tatiana. My beautiful, strong Tatiana, who still hadn't moved, still hadn't talked. I knew in that moment that I had to be strong for her. I couldn't crumble. I wasn't there for her when she needed me—something I would never forgive myself for—but I could be there for her now. I could be her rock and hold her up. **She needed me.** It would be my time to crumble later.*

That time came the following night when I got home from the hospital. I'd driven home on autopilot. To be honest, I couldn't even remember the drive. I could barely remember what happened after discovering our son had died.

I think I blocked the whole thing out because it was just too painful. All I remember was trying to be there for Tatiana. Holding her. Holding our son until the nurses had to take him away.

I remember they had to literally pry him from my arms because I didn't want to let him go. I remember Tatiana screaming for them not to take him. To take her instead. I remember her crying on my shoulder, clutching at me, begging me to make the pain stop.

Then, her sadness switched to an anger so swift, I hadn't been prepared when she attacked me. She punched me, kicked me, screamed at me. And I took every blow... because I deserved it. One second she was begging me to hold her, and the next she was begging me to go, telling me she never wanted to see me again.

I didn't want to leave her. I didn't. But I couldn't take the way she was looking at me. The contempt in her eyes, the hurt and the betrayal. I couldn't take it. It ripped out what was left of my already-shattered heart.

When her father arrived at the hospital, I did what she asked and left.

“Nik?” There was a knock on the driver's side window. “Nik, what are you doing just sitting in the car?”

Is that Aleksandr? I didn't know. It sounded like him.

I was drowning in a sea of black, thick darkness. It surrounded me and smothered me. It wanted to drag me under and crush me. I wanted to let it.

“Nikolai?” The door opened. Hands grasped my face. “Hey. What's going on?”

I could hear his words, hear the worry in his voice, and yet I couldn't respond. I was sinking further and further into the abyss, that ache in my chest consuming me to the point that I couldn't see anything but my son's face.

My beautiful son.

What if I didn't ignore Tatiana's call? What if I had been there? Would it have made a difference? Would my son be alive right now, in my arms, if I hadn't been the world's biggest asshole? If I had been there for Tatiana those last few months? Not caused her all that unnecessary stress?

Would he?

Would he?

The pit in my stomach grew bigger. The crushing, inescapable weight of shame and guilt all but consuming me. Devouring me. Stealing my breath. My words. My ability to move or think. I was dragged out of the car. Somehow, my legs worked. I don't know how. I couldn't feel anything. I was...numb.

"Nikolai. You're scaring me. Hey. Hey!" Was he shaking me? My body was moving back and forth like I was being shaken. "Nik? Nik?!" A hand slapped my cheek and the blow was like ice water to the face, waking me up.

My eyes snapped to Aleksandr, who was holding my head in both hands, staring at me with fear lying deep in those blue orbs. Everything came crashing into me at once. The pain. The loss. The grief. What I'd done.

The guilt. Oh God, the guilt.

It was too much. It was all too much.

I wailed, a loud, piercing cry that rang out into the night, echoing into the trees. My legs gave out, like they couldn't hold me up anymore, and I went crashing to the ground.

"Whoa-Nik." Aleksandr tried to catch me, his arms wrapping around my body, but it was too late. We fell to our knees together.

I screamed again and again. Over and over. My hands scratched at my chest, trying to relieve the pressure I could feel smothering me.

Make it stop. Make it stop. Please. Make it stop.

Aleksandr was trying to talk to me but I just kept screaming. Crying. I hunched inwards, wrapping myself up into a ball, and sobbed.

"Ahhhhh!!!!" I wailed. My voice went hoarse but I didn't stop. I didn't stop screaming.

Tears fell, only to be replaced with more. My whole body shook as I cried and Aleksandr held me, begging me to tell him what was wrong, but I couldn't. I could do nothing but scream as the agony ripped me apart from the inside out. I could do nothing but cry for my son.

“Oh, Nik.” The feel of Illayana’s arms wrapping around me pulled me from the past. “I don’t know what to say.”

I took a deep breath, trying to reign in my emotions. The pain was still there, even to this day. It never went away. I learned to live it, but it was always a constant ache in my chest. Always.

I patted her on the back and cleared my throat. “Are we done talking about this now?” I hoped we were. There was only so much I could take. I loved my son, but thinking of him brought me so much pain I just wanted to let the darkness swallow me up and never let me go.

She sniffled and leant back, wiping tears from her eyes. “Yes. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you to relive that.”

“You’re forgiven...*if* you sort things out with Tatiana.”

She nodded. “I will.”

“Good.” I got to my feet and offered her a hand. “Now, I’m hungry. Should we go and see what’s in the fridge?”

“Yes. Please.”

We chatted a little bit as we made our way down the stairs. When we stepped into the foyer, there was a knock on the front door.

“I’ll get it,” she said, stepping towards it. “You go see if there’s any chocolate cake left.”

I snorted. “I doubt it. Lukyan would have eaten it all.”

“He better fucking not have!”

Shaking my head, I turned and headed for the kitchen.

“Arturo! You’re here!” I heard Illayana greet as I fished through the fridge. I was right. Lukyan had eaten it all, the jerk. There was a bag of M&Ms though. I shrugged.

Close enough.

I ripped open the bag with my teeth and started eating them as I made my way back to the foyer. Arturo was standing in the doorway, his brother at his side with an arm in a sling. Bruises marred their faces. They looked like they’d both been in a massive fight.

Arturo’s gaze snapped to me and the look in his eyes made me stiffen. Illayana turned and tears were streaming down her face. Something bad had happened.

I dropped the bag of M&Ms. “Where’s Tatiana?” I asked, voice cold.

Arturo stepped into the house. He licked his lips, trying to pick his words carefully. “Our trap for Franco had to be moved forward—”

“Did I ask about Franco or did I ask about Tatiana?”

Arturo’s jaw clenched.

“Where is she, Arturo? *Where is Tatiana?*”

He stood a little taller and cleared his throat. “Franco has her.”

I stared at him, his words swirling around in my head. A dark anger settled over me and I roared, lunging for him.

Chapter Thirty-One



TATIANA ANDREEVA

PAIN WAS SOMETHING I was familiar with. I've dealt with a lot of it in my life, both physical and emotional. But getting Tased? That had to be one of the worst. That shit *hurt*.

I coughed and groaned, licking my dry lips. My eyes slowly opened and dread instantly filled me when I realised I was strapped down onto a table. Thick, leather bands were cuffed around my ankles and wrists, making it impossible to move an inch.

Oh, this is not good. Not good.

I looked around the room, trying to get a sense of where I was. The last thing I remembered was chasing after Franco...and running right into the taser in his hands.

Fuck, how could I be so fucking stupid?!

One of the first things they taught in the Bratva training was to always be aware of your surroundings, and to always check before running around a

damn corner. *Especially* if you were chasing someone.

I was in a dark room. It smelled foul, unclean. Kind of like a cross between a moldy bathroom and a portapotty. There were another two tables beside me, both with the same restraints as the ones that currently held me captive. Dry blood coated both of them and I tried not to think about the fact that the same was probably underneath me. A variety of torture implements sat on a tray in front of me, rusty and crusted with blood. There was a single light bulb dangling from the ceiling, casting shadows throughout the space. Shadows that put me in instant distress.

I didn't like the dark.

A huge metal door was directly across from me. It looked like it would take a damn battering ram to break the thing down.

I'm so fucked. The only upside was that I was still wearing all of my clothes.

I pulled at my restraints, hoping they would somehow magically pop open and I could make my escape. They of course didn't, but I kept trying nonetheless. Pain flared in the back of my neck and it made me hiss. *Did I get some sort of injury during the fight and the adrenaline had kept me from feeling it?*

Why did Franco kidnap *me*? It made no sense. I wasn't anyone of value. I held no ranking in the Bratva. There was nothing I could offer him. I wasn't privy to any information. The only person who gave a shit about me was—

Nikolai. *Shit.* I had to get out of there. I *had* to. More for him than me. The moment he found out what happened, he'd lose his fucking mind. I could picture it as clearly as the night sky. Nikolai freaked out when I got a damn papercut. Hearing that I'd been kidnapped by the Don of the Chicago Outfit was liable to give him a heart attack.

The heavy, metal door groaned as it swung open, snaring my attention. Franco strolled in with two men at his back. He had shoulder-length light brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He was an average looking man. A little short and a little pudgy, but average. He looked nothing like Nero. I never would have guessed the two were siblings, to be honest.

“Good. You’re awake.” He moved further into the room. “You’ve been out for a while. I was worried you wouldn’t wake up.”

I wasn’t naïve enough to think he actually cared about me, or cared if I died. I was some sort of bargaining chip to him. That was the only reason he was concerned.

“You’ve made a really big mistake, taking me.”

Out of the two men who’d come inside with him, one of them sent my danger radar blaring. His eyes ran the length of my body in disgusting appraisal, flaring with heat. He adjusted himself behind Franco’s back, his tongue practically lolling out of his mouth like a hungry dog.

A woman instinctively knew when she was in the presence of someone who posed a threat to her. It’s this feeling we get. A cold, dreading feeling that makes our whole body shiver.

That’s the feeling I got when I looked at that man. Like he was the type you didn’t want to be left alone with.

Franco stopped in front of me and studied me. “I don’t believe I have. You see, I’ve been watching you.”

“Because that doesn’t sound creepy at all,” I muttered under my breath. I had to pick my words carefully. I was at a serious disadvantage there. Franco could literally do anything to me and I wouldn’t have the power to stop him.

The vulnerability I felt made my heart pound in my chest with panic, but I tried to ignore it.

“Well, not you specifically. You just happened to be around. I’ve been watching the Volkovs.” He leant forward. I tensed but he did nothing threatening. He just pushed a button on the side of the table. All of a sudden, I was moving. I went from lying down, staring at the ceiling, to being completely upright.

Gravity tried to pull me down and the restraints dug painfully into my skin. I didn’t know if this new position was better or worse. My gaze flicked around the room, searching for something—anything—that could help me get out of that mess. “Still pissed about what happened to your brother?”

The man scoffed. “Please. You guys did me a favour. Nero wasn’t fit to lead. Never was. It was always meant to be *me*.”

That surprised me. I thought the reason he’d been causing so many problems for Arturo and the Cosa Nostra was because he was trying to avenge his brother.

“I see your confusion, allow me to explain.” Oh, he was one of *those*. The type who liked to explain his master plan in some long, grand speech. *Kill me now.* “Nero was the oldest, so tradition dictated the role of Don fall to him, even if he wasn’t suited for it.”

“You guys are annoyingly set in your traditions.”

He smiled. “We are. And I agree, it is incredibly annoying. Anyway, despite the fact that my older brother was absolutely clueless, had zero business sense and threw tantrums like a toddler, our father still passed the role of Don to him. But that was in title only. I’ve been the one doing everything, ensuring our empire didn’t crumble. It was just behind the

scenes.” He ran his fingers over the instruments on the tray. “Loyalty is something that is absolutely crucial to The Outfit. Something that holds the foundation of our organisation together. If I made a move against Nero, no one would support me. Not the advisors, not the capos, not the soldiers. No one. So, when he was killed, I celebrated.”

The man who sent chills down my spine hadn’t taken his eyes off me, and it made me nervous. I could see him in the corner of my eye, watching me with a leery gaze. His hair was a dirty blonde colour that looked like it hadn’t been washed in months. In fact, *he* looked like he hadn’t been washed in months. His skin was dirty. His teeth were yellow. I wanted to throw up just looking at him.

“Although Nero’s death was extremely beneficial for me, I couldn’t let the transgression slide. Honor and the survival of The Outfit demanded I punish those responsible. Otherwise, what’s to stop others from trying to do the same thing?”

He had a fair point. The Bratva would never allow someone who’d killed one of their own to live.

“So you’ve been trying to humiliate Arturo by destroying his business?”

He raised his brows slightly in surprise. “Yes. Humiliation is far more entertaining than outright destruction, wouldn’t you say?”

“Where do the Volkovs come into this then? They weren’t responsible for Nero’s death. It was Arturo who killed him.”

“With their aid.” He pointed, head tilting to the side. “Without their interference, I highly doubt La Cosa Nostra would have been able to pull it off. Not only that, but they took our leverage.”

Leverage? Was he talking about Drea?

“It was *your* idea to kidnap the Cartel Queen?”

He winked. “As if my useless brother would ever think of something so cunning. So grand. I dropped enough hints for him to think *he* was the one who came up with the idea, but it was really me. Turns out, one of the cartel members wanted the little bitch gone, so he sent feelers out to see who would be interested in taking her life. He didn’t plan on us keeping her alive. With her dead, the leadership of the cartel fell to some guy he was seeing, which is why I think he wanted to get rid of her. But I figured, why waste the opportunity to have the Los Zetas under our thumb? With the added numbers, we were ready to annihilate La Cosa Nostra forever. I was the puppet master pulling all of the strings.” The smugness on his face was unbelievable.

“Was it also your idea to kidnap the daughter of the *Pakhan*?”

That smugness vanished in an instant.

I’ll take that as a no.

“Do I seem like a stupid man to you, Tatiana?” If I was being honest, no. He seemed very smart and very capable. Two qualities that absolutely worked against me in that moment “Nero assumed that because the leverage plan had worked on the Los Zetas, it would also work on the Bratva. By the time I learned of his plan, it was too late to stop it. It was already set in motion. There was nothing I could do.” He picked up a knife from the tray, studying it admiringly. “I knew what would happen. Word of the Bratva’s ruthlessness has spread far and wide in our little circle. Especially Dimitri Volkov. The rumours of him being The Bratva Butcher were enough for me to proceed with caution. So, when Nero took her to his little house in the middle of nowhere, I made sure I wasn’t there, sat back and hoped he was killed in the crossfire.”

“So what’s your plan now? You’ve got what you wanted. You’re Don. You’ve humiliated Arturo. What the hell do you want with me?”

He tapped the tip of the knife against my nose. “You will be my salvation.”

I frowned. That didn’t sound like me.

“Like I said, I’ve been watching the Volkovs. Closely. I see how the second oldest looks at you. How he treats you. He loves you.”

I didn’t bother denying it. If what he said was true and he’d been watching the Volkovs, he would have seen everything. Nikolai wasn’t exactly discrete about his feelings for me.

“If he wants you back alive, he will get the Bratva to back off. My confrontation isn’t with them. It’s with Arturo and the Cosa Nostra. I don’t want any more problems with them. What my brother did—his transgressions—died with him. I want a clean slate. I’ll even agree not to harm the daughter, Arturo’s wife. You know, as a show of good faith.”

I tried to hold back my laugh. I really, really did. A man like Franco wouldn’t like someone laughing in his face. But I honestly couldn’t help it. “You signed your death warrant the minute you took me. Nikolai will kill you. He’ll find me, come here and kill you all.”

“Will he now?” His smirk put me on edge. “I’m curious, how do you think he’ll find you without that little tracker in the back of your neck?”

I stiffened. That was the pain I’d felt earlier. He’d cut the tracker out of me. How the fuck did he even know about it? There was no way Nikolai was going to find me without that tracker. *Oh, I was super fucked.*

“Yes, I know all about that,” he continued. “I think it’s pretty much common knowledge now that you Bratva folk have a thing or two for

trackers. I mean, where do you think I got the idea to track Arturo's cars from?"

"He'll never make a deal with you. Nikolai will kill you for laying a hand on me."

"Don't worry. I don't plan on hurting you."

Whether he hurt me or not was irrelevant. Nikolai would slaughter him on principle alone. For taking me. That, I was sure of.

He placed the knife back on the tray and straightened the lapels of his jacket. "I'll wait a few days, let the worry build to the point that he'd do anything to get you back. Then, I'll let him negotiate for your release. Until then, I hope you're comfortable. For the foreseeable future, this is your new home."



The groan of the metal door slowly swinging open woke me from a very uncomfortable sleep. After Franco left, I had expended all of my energy trying to get free. It was completely useless. I was never getting out of there. He'd done a very good job in ensuring my capture. My head hung forward, a painful ache shooting up the side of my neck when I tried to lift it.

Time was distorted in that room, and I had no idea how much of it had passed. All I knew was that my entire body hurt from being suspended like that. The restraints dug into my skin so painfully, I could feel the bruises. Any time I so much as twitched, pain shot through me, enough so to make me suck air in between my teeth.

My eyes drifted up to the men who'd walked into the room. I blinked, trying to clear the haziness of my vision and see through the darkness.

"I don't know about this, Dario," a male voice whispered. "You heard what Franco said. She's not to be harmed."

"Relax, Fabroni. We're not going to hurt her. We're just going to have a little fun with her. What Franco doesn't know, won't hurt him." Footsteps echoed around me, getting closer and closer. A face stepped into the light and my whole body ran cold.

It was the man I'd seen with Franco—the one who had been staring at me like he was mentally undressing me with his eyes. Dread filled me. There was no good reason why he was in there—especially without Franco. I tried to keep a hold on the panic that coursed through my veins but it was almost impossible when that thick, metal door slammed shut, locking me in the room with them.

Two men appeared behind him, one on his left and one on his right. The one on the left looked like he didn't want to be there. His eyes kept darting to the door and back, unease literally wafting off him. He was young, with short, red hair, pale skin and deep brown eyes. The other man was older, and seemed perfectly fine with what was about to happen. And I knew what that was.

"You don't want to do this." My voice was strong despite the fear running through me. The thing that scared me the most was that there wasn't a damn

thing I could do to fight back. If I wasn't restrained, at least I could make it hard for them. Fight them. Hurt them. But all I could was lie there, completely helpless.

"Oh, I think we do." Dario licked his lips. "It doesn't have to hurt, you know. If you don't fight, you could even enjoy yourself." He ran his finger down the side of my face. His touch repulsed me. "Such soft, pretty skin."

I turned my head and latched my teeth down on his finger, biting hard. Blood filled my mouth and he screamed out a curse. He tried to pull it away but I just bit down harder, trying to fucking bite it off.

The older man came rushing over and placed a blade right at my throat. "Let him go," he hissed.

I bit down harder. *Is that bone I feel against my teeth?*

I'd rather they fucking killed me than do what they were about to do. Dario screamed out again, took the knife from the other man and hit me with the bottom of the hilt right in the face.

I cried out, and his finger slipped from my mouth.

"You fucking bitch!" He struck me again, his fist connecting with the side of my jaw. Pain rocked me and I groaned, my body sagging.

Dario started pulling down my pants.

"I-I don't think we should do this," Fabroni whispered, shaking his head and stepping back.

Dario turned and pointed the knife at him. "Don't be such a fucking pussy! You want to die a virgin? Huh? Look at this." He cupped my pussy and I thrashed angrily, ignoring the bite of pain from the restraints. "It's right here, Fab. Right fucking here. You can take it, and finally see what it feels like to come in something nice and warm and tight." He turned back to

me. “You’re tight, aren’t you?” Then he shrugged. “You don’t have to answer that. I’ll find out in a second.”

“You’re all going to fucking die!” I roared as he cut my underwear off my body. My bottom half was now completely bare.

Dario laughed, beginning to undo his belt. “What can *you* do, huh? You’re all tied up. You can’t even stop us, let alone kill us.” He stepped forward, his body pressing against mine. His lips were at my ear and he whispered, “From the moment I saw you all tied up on this table, I knew I’d have you. You’re just too pretty, I can’t help it. Especially when you’re all tied down like this, just begging to be taken.” His tongue ran over my skin as his hands gripped my thighs, pushing them further apart, no matter how much I tried to fight it. “You’ll like it. Trust me. They all do.”

Prepare yourself, Tatiana. I refused to cry. I wouldn’t give him the fucking satisfaction. And fighting seemed to do nothing but turn him on more, so I stayed perfectly still.

Prepare yourself.

I turned my head away and closed my eyes. *Think of something else. Anything else. Don’t—*

Boom!

My eyes snapped open. Was that...an explosion?

Gunfire and screaming came next. Dario growled in frustration and turned to look at Fabroni. “Go see what’s going on.”

The young man nodded and bolted out of the door, shutting it behind him.

“Maybe we should stop,” the older man said, looking a little uneasy.

“Fuck that,” Dario spat. “I’m getting what I came for. It’s probably nothing. Just the soldiers fucking around or some shit.” I felt something hard wedge itself between my legs. I screamed out in anger and disgust.

Repulsion was a thick, heavy pressure, swimming inside of my stomach. I was going to throw up. I was sure of it.

Dario laughed. “I won’t be long. Then you can have a turn—”

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Dario spun to look at the door. “What now?! Can’t a man fuck in peace?!” he growled.

The door swung open with brutal force, slamming into the wall. In the doorway, stood Nikolai.

He found me.

He was covered head to toe in blood, so much so that it literally looked like he’d bathed in the stuff. It dripped down his face. It drenched his hair and clung to his clothes. The rage burning in his eyes made my breath hitch. I’d never seen him so angry. His chest rose and fell with deep, hard breaths, his teeth bared and face contorted with so much fury, I thought he’d burn the whole room down with just that look alone.

He took in what was going on—me tied to the table with my bottom half completely bare, Dario pressed up against me with his pants down—and then he roared, his whole body shaking as he let loose this beastly, ear splitting scream. He lunged. The older man ran to meet him head on and Dario cursed, quickly tucking his dick back into his pants.

The older man swiped his knife and Nikolai dodged, spinning out of its path. He swung his leg in a roundhouse kick to the back of the man’s legs. He crashed to his knees. Nikolai rammed one knife deep into his back and then reached around to slam the other knife into his chest. He ripped them out just as fast and kicked him away, turning to face Dario.

Dario had picked up one of the weapons from the tray and held it up, crouched and ready to attack. Nikolai was far too angry to play any sort of game with him. He charged forward and picked him up in a running tackle, slamming him into the wall.

Dario groaned, his weapon clattering to the ground. Nikolai threw him over his shoulder, raised his knife into the air—

“Stop!” I screamed as loudly as I could.

Nikolai froze, the blade hovering right above Dario’s eye. His gaze snapped to me. I was surprised he was even able to comprehend anything, given how much anger was blazing in his blue eyes.

“The kill is mine.” I pulled on the restraints. “Please, get me down.” Despite how thankful I was at him for showing up before anything more happened, despite how much relief was flowing through me, I couldn’t stand another moment being tied up like that. I needed to get down. I needed to cover myself.

Distress flashed across Nikolai’s face. He pulled Dario’s arm out straight, flattened his hand on the ground, palm up and drove his knife deep through it, pinning him to the floor. Dario screamed. Nikolai did the same thing to his other hand, effectively keeping him trapped right where he was.

“Lukyan!” he called out.

His brother came running into the room, a machine gun in his hands. Nikolai pointed to Dario on the floor and Lukyan nodded, running over. He kept his gun aimed at him as Nikolai sprinted over to me.

“Tati,” he breathed, eyes running up and down my body. His jaw clenched as he pulled my pants back up and then his hands were gripping the sides of my face, holding me tenderly. He lay his forehead against mine and let loose a deep, relieved sigh.

I closed my eyes and leant into him, breathing him in. He was there. He came. Somehow, against all odds, he'd found me.

My Knight.

He kissed me softly on the cheek, reverently, with all the love and care in the world before he quickly cut the restraints away. I fell forward and he caught me, his strong arms wrapping around my waist. My limbs felt weak, my wrists and ankles aching with pain. He supported my weight as he dragged me away from the table and down to the ground.

"I'm okay. I'm alright," I reassured him, but he continued to sweep his hands over my body, needing to see for himself that I was unharmed.

"I was so worried. So scared. Fuck, Tatiana." He held me tight, burying my face into his shoulder, squeezing me so hard, I struggled to breathe. "*Ty v poryadke. Ty v poryadke.*" *You're okay. You're okay*, he whispered into my hair. He wasn't saying that to me. No. He was saying that to himself, like he was trying to reassure himself that I was alive. I hugged him back, the comfort and support he was providing instantly putting me at ease.

For one horrible second, I thought I was done for. I thought Dario was going to rape me, and there was nothing I could do to stop him. I'd never felt so powerless. So helpless. I didn't fucking like it.

My eyes snapped to him, pinned to the ground with knives in his hands, still crying out in pain.

Vengeance surged in my veins, this overwhelming desire to make that despicable human being bleed and suffer all but consuming me. I wanted *him* to see what it felt like to be fucking powerless, to have someone do something to you that you had no way of stopping. I wanted *him* to feel helpless, like I had.

"Do we have time?" I asked, never taking my eyes off Dario.

Nikolai watched me closely. Because he knew me so well, because he was my Nikolai, he knew without hearing the words what it was that I wanted. What I needed.

He looked over his shoulder at his brother. “Lukyan. Time?”

Lukyan glanced at his watch. “Two minutes.”

Nikolai nodded. He helped me get to my feet and then walked me over to Dario, despite my protests that I could do it myself. His hands never left my body, like he was afraid that if he stopped touching me, I would disappear.

“Hold him still,” I commanded.

Lukyan threw his machine gun behind his back, the strap it was connected to stopping it from falling to the ground, and gripped his ankles, holding him down. Dario fought, screaming and thrashing, cursing and spitting, but every time he moved, the knives in his palms would cut more into his skin, making him cry out in pain.

I dropped to my knees at his side. “Help me with his pants.” Nikolai didn’t hesitate, yanking his pants down.

“What are you doing?! Stop! Stop it!” His voice was filled with panic, and it made me smile.

Good. Let him fucking panic.

“Don’t! DON’T!”

Nikolai didn’t listen, pulling his underwear down next. The material pooled around his ankles and Lukyan adjusted his grip, making sure to keep his legs still.

I held out my hand and Nikolai slapped the hilt of a blade into my palm.

Dario’s eyes widened. “Wait, just wait. Please, don’t do this,” he begged, crying.

A sadistic smirk curled on my lips. I gripped his jaw roughly, holding the knife up for him to see. “How many times were those words uttered to you right before you raped someone? Hmm?” I carved into his cheek and he screamed, blood trailing down his face. I forced him to look at me, staring him dead in the eyes. “*This* is for all of those women who didn’t have a knight of their own to come and save them.”

I clutched his flaccid dick in my hands and cut it off right at the base. Dario screeched so loudly, it hurt my ears, his whole body thrashing and convulsing. I pried his mouth open and shoved it inside. Nikolai darted to the tray in the middle of the room and grabbed a roll of duct tape. I kept my hand over Dario’s mouth, making sure he couldn’t spit his dick back out as Nikolai wrapped the tape around his head and over his lips.

Dario cried, whimpering and moaning. He was losing a lot of blood. I didn’t think he would last much longer.

I kicked him in the side and spat at him. “*Svoloch.*” *Motherfucker.*

I looked up at Nikolai, my heart so full of love and gratitude. He stretched his palm out in offering and I took it, placing my hand in his.

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Chapter Thirty-Two



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

I STARED AT TATIANA'S sleeping form, unable to calm myself down even though she was lying there, right in front of me.

If I'd been any later...

I shook my head, trying not to think about it, but the image of what I'd barged into was seared into my brain. I feared it would be there forever. That I would never be able to forget it.

After Arturo told me what happened, I almost killed him. The only reason he was still breathing was because Aleksandr had latched onto my arm at the last second, stopping the blade in my hands from piercing Arturo's chest. It had taken my two brothers *and* Adrian to pull me off him. I didn't have the time to waste trying to kill him again, but I planned to challenge him to the ring. I didn't need a weapon to kill. I could do it with my bare hands. And I would. Illayana would just have to deal with it.

Arturo was aware of the dangers of his little trap. He should have taken the proper precautions and paired Tatiana up with someone who would watch her back. He should have had someone outside, ready to catch any stragglers who ran from the house so Tatiana wouldn't have to. So she didn't go running after Franco. He shouldn't have gone forward with his plan without *me* there. No one could protect Tatiana better than I could. He should have given me the fucking time to get there before moving forward.

End. Of. Discussion.

When we discovered that her phone had been dumped and the tracker in the back of her neck had been destroyed, everyone thought the worst. That we would never find her in time.

But I never took chances when it came to Tatiana's life. She had another tracker on her. One she had no idea about. One I'd put into her necklace over three years ago. A necklace she never took off.

We tracked the signal to a double-story house in the suburbs. Aleksandr, Drea, Ivan, Illayana and Arturo, along with a mixture of Cosa Nostra and Bratva soldiers infiltrated the premises and dealt with any resistance while Lukyan and I hunted for Tatiana. The tracker in her necklace was state of the art, and could pinpoint her location precisely, right down to what room she was in, so it made it easy for us to find her.

The image of her tied to that table, *that man* pressing himself against her, flashed through my mind again and I ground my teeth together, trying to reign in my temper. I thought I had been mad before. I thought I knew what *real* anger was. But it wasn't until that moment, right there, that I truly felt that emotion. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. A dark, red haze had settled over me and I wanted nothing more than to fucking eviscerate him. To cut off all his limbs one by one until he was begging for

me to kill him. But I wouldn't. I'd do everything in my power to keep him alive for as long as possible so he could suffer for days. Months. Years. So I could torture him every single day for daring to touch *my* Tatiana.

Tatiana groaned in her sleep, rolling over onto her side and facing me. I leant forward in my chair and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, just watching her. The fire from the fireplace cast her in this beautiful orange/yellow light, her beauty absolutely bewitching me. The flames crackled, the sound oddly comforting.

After we'd gotten her out of there, I'd taken her straight home. To my house. Ivan tried to fight me on it, but he must have realised how close I was to snapping, because he let the matter slide. Tatiana had a shower and fell straight asleep in my bed, despite me trying to get her to eat something.

That was roughly seven hours ago, and I hadn't moved from my spot next to the bed since. I refused to. It wasn't just that I wanted to be there for her when she woke up...I found that I was incapable of leaving her side.

My phone beeped. I reached into my pocket and pulled it out. It was a text message from Andrea, confirming the flight details for tomorrow. Unease flickered through me. Up until Tatiana's kidnapping, I had been more than prepared for the mission. I'd gone over the plan a thousand times with my siblings. Packed my bags. Mentally and physically prepared myself.

But now...

Now things were different.

I couldn't possibly leave. Just the *idea* of not being in the same room as Tatiana sent me into full-blown panic mode. How could I possibly complete the mission if my mind was there? If I was constantly worried about Tatiana? I couldn't.

"Why do you look so grumpy?"

My gaze rose and collided with that set of beautiful hazel eyes that sent my heart racing. All I could do was stare, so incredibly thankful she was there, alive and well.

Tatiana moved to sit up and I jumped up to help her. “Cut that out,” she chastised, slapping my hands away. “I’m not an invalid. I can sit up on a bed on my own.”

“Have pity on me and let me help you. Please.”

Her face softened. “I could use some water?”

I nodded. I got to my feet and went to the pitcher of water on my dressing table, pouring a glass. I returned and offered it to her. She took it, drinking the whole thing in one go.

“Thank you,” she said, placing the glass down on the bedside table.

“Alright, out with it.”

I frowned. “Out with what?”

“You’re mad at me, aren’t you? That’s why you look so grumpy. You’re mad I joined in on the trap set for Franco—”

“No, Tatiana. I’m not.”

It was her turn to frown. “You’re...not?”

I shook my head. “I know exactly what kind of person you are. You don’t like to leave things unfinished. Of course I knew you’d want to see this thing through. I’m mad that Arturo didn’t give me the time to be there. I’m also mad you didn’t tell me what was going on. I didn’t even know the trap was taking place until Arturo showed up here, telling me you’d been taken.”

She winced, avoiding my eyes. “Yeah, I didn’t think you’d like that one. But I was trying to save you from any unnecessary worry.”

I gave her a deadpanned look. “And how did that work out for you?”

She bit her lip. “Alright, you win. I apologise. I should have told you. Had the situation been reversed, I would have wanted you to tell me.”

“You don’t need to apologise to me, Tati.” I sat on the bed and placed my hand over hers. She flinched slightly, so slightly I doubt I would have noticed it if I wasn’t staring right at her. Guilt gripped my heart and I went to take my hand back, but she quickly latched onto it, refusing to let go. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she answered immediately, giving me that classic Tatiana smile. It didn’t seem forced or fake. And I would know. “Really, I am. You got there just in time before anything could happen—”

“Tatiana,” I said softly but firmly. I held her hand with both of mine, trying to support her, to comfort her. “You don’t need to do that with me. Don’t downplay it and make out like nothing happened. *Something did happen.* He assaulted you, regardless of whether or not he raped you. He touched you when he shouldn’t have, and I’m so sorry I couldn’t get there sooner to stop it.”

She looked down at our hands. “His touch, it was...repulsive,” she shivered. “I wish I could kill him again. I wish we’d had more time to *really* make him suffer.”

“Me too.” I raised her hand to my lips, kissing her skin softly. “But at least we know he *did* suffer.”

“How did you find me, by the way? Franco said he destroyed the tracker in the back of my neck.”

My gaze darted to the necklace around her neck and back up.

She gasped. “You didn’t,” she said, touching the little golden heart.

“I did. And I’m not sorry.”

"Well, neither am I now," she scoffed. "First my phone, now my necklace...how many others are there?"

I smirked, mischief dancing in my eyes. "I don't think you want to know the answer to that question."

She laughed softly. It felt so good to hear her laugh. "You're right. I probably don't." She leant back against the headboard and exhaled heavily. Her head rolled on her shoulders, her eyes locking on my suitcases in the corner. She was silent for a moment. "When do you leave?"

"I'm not." I got to my feet, desperate to change the subject before she could ask any other questions. "Are you hungry? I'll send for some food." I turned and took a step towards the door.

"Stoooop," she sang, her voice ringing out with authority. I froze on the spot. "Turn." I groaned in frustration and spun on the balls of my feet to face her. "Talk," she demanded.

I sighed. "Tatiana—"

"Do you want me to cry? Because I'll cry right here, right now if you don't sit the fuck back down. I will."

Humor trickled through me when she pouted, jutting out her lower lip.

I sat back down, exhaling a tired breath. Where was I even going to start? How could I possibly tell her I didn't want to go because I couldn't leave her? Not now. Not after what I walked into. How—

"You're hesitant to leave because of what happened, aren't you?"

I should have known she'd be able to see right through me. "Yes."

"Nikolai." Her voice held a wealth of compassion. Next thing I knew, she was in my lap, straddling me. Her hands dove into my hair and she forced me to look her right in the eyes. "I say this with all the love in the world, but you're a fucking idiot."

I tried not to move. I really, really did. She'd just gone through something incredibly traumatic. The last thing she needed was me feeling her up. But she was sitting right on my cock, and that thing always had a mind of its own—especially when it came to Tatiana. It would stand to attention the moment she walked into the damn room.

"You *have* to go. Your father's life depends on it. You can't stay here for me."

"But—"

She placed a finger over my lips, stopping me from saying another word.
"Did it sound like I was finished?"

I shook my head.

"That's right. I'll let you know when it's your turn to talk. Right now, you're going to shut the fuck up and listen to me." She adjusted herself, inadvertently grinding her pussy down on my cock, and I choked. She smirked playfully. "I appreciate more than I can ever put into words that you want to stay here for me. Truly. But you *need* to go, Nikolai. If you're worried something will happen to me, don't. I promise I won't put myself into any dangerous situations. I promise I'll sit in my apartment and do nothing but wait for you. I love you, Nikolai, and if knowing I'm safe will help you do what you need to do, then I promise that I won't get so much as a damn papercut."

I stiffened, my body going completely still. I moved her hand away from my lips. "You love me?"

She smiled and it lit up the whole room. "I've always loved you. There was never any doubt about that. My problem lay in whether or not I could trust you again. You hurt me, Nikolai. So much I didn't think my heart and soul would ever heal from it. But in these last few months, you've shown

me not only with your words, but also your actions that you'll always be there for me. Come hell or high water. You've proven time and time again that you love me. That you'd do anything for me. I know in my heart that you'd never hurt me again, like you did before."

I gripped the sides of her face with both hands, overwhelmed with her words. "Can I kiss you?"

She answered me by leaning forward and placing her mouth on mine in the most heart stopping kiss I'd ever experienced. My entire world righted itself as I kissed her back, this sense of complete euphoria washing through me. It felt right. Complete. Like everything had fallen into place. Like I was whole again.

The kiss deepened, moving from this sweet, perfect moment to absolute fire. Her hips swivelled, pleasure shooting up my spine and making me groan. I latched onto her hips, halting her movements. "Tati, we don't have to—"

"Why?" She ground down harder, a whimper falling from her lips. "I want you."

"But you just—"

"I just nothing." She kissed across my jaw and down my neck, my skin buzzing. "I don't want you to go without erasing his touch. Please, Nikolai." She sucked on my neck, hands gliding down my body to grab a handful of my cock, and I came undone.

My lips slammed against hers and I jumped to my feet, wrapping her legs around my waist. I took her down to the bed, kissing her harder, faster. Eager to have her naked body below me.

She clutched onto me like she never wanted to let me go, completely wrapping herself around me like a spider monkey. Her touch did things to

me. It turned me into a damn fumbling mess. I struggled with the buttons of her shirt and frustration got the better of me. I ripped it off.

Tatiana gasped, her breasts spilling out. I stared down at them in awe, completely mesmerised. I cupped them both and squeezed, enjoying the way she arched her back, pushing them further into my palms.

“Yes, Nikolai. Yes.”

I leant forward and latched onto her tight nipple, sucking it into my mouth. I rolled my tongue over it and she moaned. She made the sweetest fucking sounds. It made me so fucking hot.

Not wanting the other one to feel left out, I kissed across her chest, my tongue licking at her skin, and sealed my lips around her other nipple. My hands drifted down and I pulled her shorts off without taking my mouth away from her. She squirmed beneath me, holding my head to her breast and begging me to suck harder.

I let her nipple go with a *pop*. “You have no idea what you do to me, Tati,” I groaned, kissing and nibbling my way down her body.

She propped herself up on her elbows and spread her legs wide, allowing me to settle myself between them. Her face was flushed, eyes burning with heat and chest heaving, her breasts moving up and down, up and down.

She was so goddamn gorgeous. Like a beautiful, golden-haired goddess.

I smirked and ran my tongue from her entrance all the way up to her clit in one long, languid stroke. She moaned. “You’re going to watch me, aren’t you?” I licked her again. Slowly, leisurely, basking in her taste. “Watch me lick this beautiful pussy until you come all over my face?”

Her head rolled back on her shoulders. “God, yes,” she panted. “You know I love to watch you go down on me.”

“I know.” She would watch me any chance she got. “Watch and enjoy, love. I know I will.” My hands slapped to her thighs and I shoved them further apart as I buried my face in between her legs. She cried out in pleasure and I soaked it in, revelling in it, the sound making my cock twitch.

“The best goddamn thing I’ve ever tasted,” I moaned against her. She was so soft, so sweet.

I shoved my hand down into my pants and gripped my cock, unable to hold off any longer. I stroked myself with the same rhythm as my tongue, my pleasure building and building. Everything about her sent me spiralling towards release and I had to work hard not to spill in my pants. I kissed her pussy like I was kissing her mouth, moving my lips and tongue against her softly. Slowly, sensually. Exactly the way she liked it. I barely came up for air, much preferring her feel and taste than breathing. Who wanted to waste the time on trivial things like breathing when you had the most intoxicating taste right before you?

Not me. That was for damn sure. I wanted her to fucking smother me with it. And I was going to get what I fucking wanted.

Tatiana shrieked in surprise when I grasped her hips tightly and spun us so she was sitting on my face. I didn’t have to tell my girl to ride my face. She knew, because she was goddamn fucking perfect. She moved back and forth on me, her hands cupping her breasts and head thrown back in pleasure.

She was such a fucking sight.

I groaned as she drove down harder on me, her pleasure giving *me* pleasure. My cock was so hard, it fucking hurt. I grabbed a handful of her ass in both hands and squeezed, urging her on.

“Damn it, Nikolai. I’m going to come already,” she whimpered, her hips moving faster and faster. Her little clit pulsed against my tongue and I knew she was telling the truth.

“Not yet,” I begged, pleaded. “I’m not done.” Truthfully, I would never be done. Her taste was downright euphoric. I wanted to bottle it up and make it into a fucking drink, so I could taste her whenever I wanted to.

“Too bad, I can’t hold back—*oh, fuck.*” Her whole body shook and then she was coming, a rush of wetness flooding into my mouth.

I’d died and gone to heaven. I drank it all down, sucking hard, searching for more. *Desperate* for more. Tatiana slumped forward, breathing heavily. Her breasts dangled above me and I gripped one roughly, pulling her down so I could suck it into my mouth. My hands were all over her. My mouth was all over her. I would never get enough. *Never.*

Tatiana moved back, pulling her breast from my mouth. I whined and tried to get it back, but she shoved me back down with a hand to the chest.

“You still got those handcuffs?” she panted, rubbing her pussy up and down my shaft, the friction unbearable.

“Side draw,” I choked out.

She leant over and pulled out two pairs of cuffs and a condom from my bedside table, a smirk dancing on her lips.

“Are those for you or me?” I asked, anticipation curling down my spine. We’d used cuffs before. Sometimes it would be me cuffed up, sometimes it would be her.

She twirled one of them around her finger, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “You.”

I offered up my wrists eagerly. She slapped one around my left wrist and then cuffed it to my bedhead. Her breasts dangled right in my face and I

nipped at her skin. She did the same thing with my other wrist until I was completely at her mercy.

She sat back, admiring her work before she slinked down, pulling my pants from my body as she went.

Fuck, this was going to be absolute torture. I was sure of it.

Tatiana leant forward and kissed me softly, running her tongue over my bottom lip before she slowly started moving down, trailing her tongue down my chin, down my throat, across my chest and through my abs in one long, tortuous lick.

I groaned in both pleasure and pain, straining against the cuffs, trying to get closer to her. “Tatiana,” I whined.

“What’s the matter, Nicky?” She gripped the base of my cock and I choked, the cuffs rattling and groaning against the wood. “We both know you like being tortured like this.”

She was right. I did. It was like a wonderful form of torture that turned me on so much, I could barely keep still.

I watched, completely riveted as she leant down, her golden hair spreading out over my thighs as she sucked one of my balls into her mouth.

“Fuckkkk.”

She ran her tongue up my shaft and then took me into her mouth, the head of my cock sliding down her throat. She swallowed, her throat constricting around me and I groaned deeply. The cuffs dug into my skin, blurring that delicate line between pleasure and pain. I was sure I’d have red marks around my wrists by the time this was over, and I didn’t care.

Her hands slammed down on my chest, nails digging into my skin. I hissed. She clawed down my stomach as she moved faster and faster,

literally gulping me down. My back arched, the pleasure gloriously excruciating. If she didn't stop soon, I was going to blow in her mouth.

I tried thinking of something else—anything else—to distract myself. But watching her swallow my cock with earnest was almost too fucking much.

"Tati—you've got to stop. I'm going to come," I panted, the feeling of my balls drawing up telling me of my impending orgasm.

I released a shuddering breath when my cock fell from her mouth.

"You're not coming until you're inside of me." She shoved the condom between my teeth. "Rip it open."

God, I *loved it* when she told me what to do. I'd long discovered I was a switch in bed. So was Tatiana. It was actually a kink we'd discovered together. She was the one taking control now, and I was all fucking for it.

I gripped the condom with my teeth and tore it open.

She smiled, taking it out of the packet. She tapped my cheek twice. "Such a good boy you are, Nikolai."

She rolled it down my cock and then impaled herself onto me deeply, her head falling back on a moan.

Pleasure encompassed me. It swallowed me whole. There was nothing better than the feel of her tight little pussy wrapped around me. My hands clenched and unclenched, this overwhelming need to touch her, *feel her*, making me yank roughly on the cuffs.

The bed rocked as Tatiana moved, the sexy swirl of her hips setting my whole body on fire. Her pussy squeezed me, pleasure bursting through my soul.

"You're fucking beautiful. Absolutely beautiful," I whispered in reverence, totally bewitched by her and her movements.

She gave me this mischievous, sexy smile, clutching her breasts with both hands as she continued to ride me. Her eyes roved over me, from my chest, to my face, to my hands cuffed to the bed. Heat flared in her eyes and she moved faster. She liked seeing me like this.

We moaned together, me thrusting up and her bearing down. I begged her to undo the cuffs so I could touch her. It was agonising seeing her tits bounce right in front of me and not be able to put them in my mouth.

“I’ll let you go, if you say your safe word.” She rocked back and forth, swivelling her hips. My back arched. “Are you going to say it, *Nicky*?”

My safe word was Nicky, and she knew I’d never fucking say it. I growled and yanked on the cuffs as Tatiana bounced and bounced, white-hot pleasure burning through my veins.

The wood groaned and Tatiana’s eyes widened, her breath hitching. She moved faster, panting, moaning, her pussy squeezing the fucking life out of me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I grunted. I yanked on the cuffs hard and the wood snapped, freeing one of my arms. My hand shot out and grabbed her by the hair roughly, pulling her down to smash her mouth onto mine. My left arm was still cuffed to the bed, completely stretched out as I strained forward, trying to be as close to Tatiana as possible. “Fucking come for me,” I whispered over her lips.

I thrust up at the same time she slammed down and she cried out, her pussy clamping and spasming around me.

I came. *Hard*. Mind-numbing pleasure swept through me and I groaned deep in my throat, kissing her harder, my eyes rolling into the back of my head. My whole body shuddered, my hips pistonning upwards over and over again as I emptied myself inside her.

Tatiana slumped against me, breathing heavily. She curled herself around me and I tried my best to hug her back with one arm, my heart still pounding in my chest. My left wrist burned. I could feel blood trailing down my forearm, but I didn't care.

This wasn't the first time she'd made me bleed during sex, and I really hoped it wouldn't be the last.

Tatiana stayed lying across me, her breasts pressed right up against my chest, and I lost track of time, just enjoying being close to her. Being with her.

“Promise me you'll come back, Nikolai.”

I looked down, staring at the top of her head. She was hiding herself in the crook of my neck, her whole body shaking like she was crying. I used my free hand, handcuffs still dangling from my wrist, to pull her face up. Those beautiful hazel eyes were tinged red, glassy with tears. I stroked my thumb across her cheek, my heart so filled with love, I thought it might explode.

“I promise.”

Chapter Thirty-Three



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

I STARED OUT AT the view from the balcony of my assigned bedroom, a little in awe. The island really was beautiful. Clear, crystal blue waters. White, sandy beaches. Stunning, well-maintained forestry with towering palm trees and huge meadows surrounded by tall grass and wildflowers.

It was entirely self-sufficient. I'd been given a brief tour when I first arrived late the night before. It was as if an entire city had been packed up and dropped right there. There was a mall that was filled with every kind of store you could think of: clothing stores, grocery stores, book stores. Even a hair salon and a bowling alley. There were even a bunch of bars and clubs.

There were several large, resort-style hotels, built with an almost gothic/castle-like feel. Three made specifically for guests, one for the workers and one for Talon, each one capable of accommodating a few hundred people, at least. Elegant five-star restaurants. Five-feet deep Gunite

swimming pools with all the latest amenities. Casinos. State-of-the-art movie theatres. The place literally had it all.

And then there was the Arena.

Built to be every bit as grand and opulent as I'm sure the Colosseum was back in its day, it was what caught my attention the most. It was easily 1000 by 1000 feet wide with enough space to seat at least 100,000 people.

I highly doubted there were that many people attending the games, but one thing I'd already deduced about Talon was that the man did absolutely *nothing* in halves.

He was the epitome of "Go big or go home." Of "If you've got the cash, why the fuck not??

Talon's net worth was in the billions, so he clearly had it, and I didn't think that included the money he made from the games he held annually.

Made entirely of stone and concrete, the structure stood over seven stories high and had a large oval in the centre. There were sections that were split off into different terrains. One filled with sand, another with grass. Weapons lined the metal cage surrounding it: swords, machetes, axes, long-staffs, nunchucks, spears and even scythes. It had everything except for projectile weaponry.

The arena-style seating cascading upwards ensured everyone would be able to see what was going on.

It was the perfect fighting arena.

Figures that my father would piss off one of the richest and most powerful men in the world. Only someone with high volumes of money and incredible resources could put something this extravagant together.

I turned and made my way back into my one-bedroom hotel room. I hated to admit it, but the whole place was actually pretty impressive. Not only the

island itself, but everything I'd seen and experienced since stepping off that plane. They were well-organised, thorough and extremely vigilant. All of the security precautions Mikhail had mentioned were completely true.

After I'd landed in Naples, I was taken to a secure room where I was searched meticulously, as were my belongings. They'd even made me stand in a huge body X-Ray to make sure I wasn't carrying anything internally. I was then blindfolded before being put in a car and driven to a dock to board a boat. I was searched again there. Each time I was transported to a new location, I was searched, all the while remaining blindfolded the whole time.

Like I said, extremely thorough. It was a good thing I didn't try and sneak any trackers or weapons with me, because they definitely would have found them.

Once I arrived on the island, I was given an orientation, where it was explained in great detail what my role was. Myself, along with six other men who had travelled with me on the boat were to join the other low-ranking soldiers to help maintain order within the island and make sure none of the guests stepped out of line.

Nothing was mentioned about what exactly would be happening on the island, nothing of the games or the illegal activities, so I had to assume it was something that was already covered in the original interview process that was set up by the security firm I had "come from". Something I should already know. Our only job was to run regular patrols, monitor the area and keep the guests from doing anything Talon deemed unsuitable (which was basically vandalising his property).

Being part of the security team, I was allowed access to certain areas other workers were not, which worked well in my favour. I had a keycard

that gave me entry into restricted areas of the resort, as well the Arena itself, which was where I suspected the prisoners were being kept—and where I needed to get into.

I picked up my watch on the bedside table and slapped it across my wrist. I couldn't stop the smirk from curling on my lips as I buckled the clasp. The sex with Tatiana a few nights prior had left both of my wrists bruised and bloody, just as I'd anticipated. Not that I minded.

Saying goodbye had been harder than I thought it would be. Not just to Tatiana, but my siblings as well. There was a very real chance I wouldn't make it back from this alive. One wrong move, one wrong word and my cover was blown, most likely resulting in a bullet to the head. It was something that was always at the forefront of my mind, even as I left my room and walked the gilded halls of the workers' accommodation, heading towards the security tower that was situated smack in the middle of this building and the guest accommodation.

Several other employees were leaving their rooms at the same time, dressed in different uniforms to signify where they worked on the island. My uniform was a black, long-sleeved sweater and black pants. It wasn't too tight, so I was able to wear the outfit Tatiana had made me. The one she insisted I wear.

Even though I was most likely going to pass out from a heatstroke because it was a 1000 fucking degrees and I was wearing two outfits, I'd made her a promise, and I was damn sure going to keep it.

People greeted me as I made my way down the stairs and out into that cool, refreshing air. I tried to smile politely, nodding my head, but it was a movement I wasn't accustomed to. It felt incredibly foreign to me.

Lukyan was good at it. He was generally a happy guy. Always smiling, always cracking jokes. Aleksandr was the king of adapting. He was able to change himself into whatever he needed to be to get the job done.

Me?

I just wasn't built like that. I didn't talk unless I had something to say. I didn't smile unless I wanted to (usually only in Tatiana's presence).

I walked the marked cobblestone path from the workers' accommodation to the security tower, trying to commit everything I saw to memory. Despite having a pretty good memory, I feared it would take me a few tries to properly memorise the correct paths to take. The place was kind of like a maze. So many twists and turns, footpaths leading into different directions. It would be confusing for our people to infiltrate unless I could give them a clear-cut path of where to go.

The security tower came into view. It was a long, tall building with hundreds of clear windows and sharp, angular architecture. Guards patrolled the ground floor to its entrance. More could be seen in the distance on the balconies that wrapped around it, focused, vigilant expressions on their faces and machine guns in their hands. They not only looked out over the island but also out into the deep, blue sea, looking for any boats that might try to arrive undetected.

It was going to be harder than I thought.

When I arrived at the front door, one of the guards stopped me, hand up in the air. "Badge," he demanded.

I held up the badge I'd been given when I first arrived. It had my name (fake name, anyway), my picture and my level of clearance.

"I was told to report here in the morning to begin work."

The guard nodded. He scanned the barcode under my photo, checked something on the computer and gestured me inside with a flick of his head. I thanked him and walked in.

Another thing I'd quickly noticed about the place was that there were different types of guards/soldiers. There were the ones like me, whose main job was to patrol. We were given a baton and some mace to use in case any of the guests stepped out of line. Then there were the other ones. The ones who had the guns and were dressed in tactical gear, like they were about to run off on some secret, undercover mission. I suspected they were Talon's personal security team and the ones he trusted the most, hence the weapons.

The bottom floor was buzzing with activity, people coming to and from quickly with a sense of urgency. Today was the first day of arrivals, guests already starting to make their way to the island, and it was clear people where freaking the fuck out about it. I tried not to look out of place, like I had no idea what exactly was meant to happen as I made my way over to the elevator.

A few of the men I'd met the night before were standing at the elevator, waiting for it to arrive. Luke was an average man with close-cropped hair and a slim build. From what little I knew of him, he was shy, nervous and skittish. Ryan was next to him. He was a little more sure of himself. Confident, strong. His honey-blonde hair was short and styled neatly. He kept one hand on the baton at his waist, like he wanted to be prepared in case anything happened. The last man was John. He was someone to be weary of. It was in the eyes. Dark brown—almost black—and filled with malice.

Luke looked up at me when I stopped at the elevator. "You're Damien, right? I'm Luke. We met last night."

“Yes. Hello.” I offered my hand and he shook it, a little timid. He was in the wrong place. There was no way he’d be able to handle the brutality of what was to come.

I nodded my head in greeting to the other men. Ryan returned the gesture but John just stared at me with those dead, soulless eyes. I looked away. Not because I was afraid of the man, but because I didn’t need to cause any trouble. I needed to stay as inconspicuous as possible. But he was on my list.

The elevator arrived with a *ding*. We all climbed in and it took us to the tenth floor. We made our way across the floor to the conference room we were taken to last night for orientation. My gaze wandered around the space covertly. It had been night time when we first walked through there, so all of the other rooms had been pitched into darkness, making it impossible to see anything.

Now they were teaming with light and completely overflowing with people. Up ahead on my left, through the floor-to-ceiling glass window, I spotted a whiteboard that took up an entire wall. Photographs of people were pinned on it like mug shots. Twenty-four in total. I slowed my steps so I had more time to look at it.

They were arranged in some sort of order, similar to a bracket challenge people used during March Madness. Two photographs were placed side by side with a line, running to another two photographs that were sitting directly underneath them. Then there was an empty slot in the space beside them. It was the fight order for the games. Who would be versing who. The empty slot was for the winner, which meant the losing team would be eliminated, most likely meaning they’d been killed.

I dropped to one knee, undoing my shoelaces quickly and then started doing them back up again slowly as I continued to study the board as discreetly as possible.

One side was marked “Morning” and the other “Evening”. They were holding two fights on the same day. I ran my eyes over the photographs swiftly, searching...searching...*there*.

I was staring at a picture of my father. It took everything within me not to physically react. He looked just as menacing in that picture as he did in real life. The hateful glare, the firm line of his lips, his clenched jaw. Oh, he looked positively *evil*. Angry and evil. Next to his picture was one of a woman.

It was clear in the way it was arranged that the fights were two versus two. And that woman was his partner.

“Damien? Are you coming?” Luke called out from the open door of one of the conference rooms.

Shit.

I wanted to study the board more but if I took any longer, it would start to get suspicious. I over exaggerated the final loop of tying my shoelaces and jumped to my feet, running to catch up to them.

“Sorry.”

Luke just smiled. Ryan shrugged. But John...he narrowed his eyes with scepticism.

Double shit.

“Come on in, gentleman. Quickly. We have a lot to get through and not a lot of time to do it in,” Andrea said, sitting at the head of the table. She had a laptop open in front of her, her fingers typing furiously as we all took a seat. She was dressed in business attire, a dark, freshly pressed pantsuit with

her blonde hair done up tightly in one of those buns you just knew was incredibly uncomfortable.

“As you know, you’ve been brought here to help with crowd control. This is the biggest Til Death Games we’ve ever hosted before and we’ve had an influx of guests added to the invite list, due to who we have fighting this year.” She didn’t look up from her laptop once, her brows snapped together in a frown, filled with concentration. “The first round begins tomorrow morning, so we’ve got all the guests arriving today. Be courteous. Be polite. Do whatever they ask you to do as long as it doesn’t go against the set of rules I gave you last night. I need one of you monitoring the Arena at all times as I don’t have any other men to spare right now. Every year, some idiot tries to sneak in and get a look at the fighters before the games begin. They think it might give them an edge, betting wise. *No one* is permitted access to the fighters.”

I raised my hand, offering myself for the position. Not too fast that it seemed like I was super eager, but fast enough to beat out the other three men. It wasn’t lost on me that she was referring to them as “fighters”, not “prisoners”. Compartmentalising at its finest. She probably didn’t even think about them as human beings, just merchandise to make herself some money.

Andrea nodded. “Thank you, Damien. You can report there now.”

I nodded in thanks and left the room, a fresh round of excitement sizzling in my veins.

I was one step closer to my goal. I just needed to figure out how the fuck I was going to get into that Arena without blowing my cover.

Chapter Thirty-Four



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

ANDREA HADN'T BEEN KIDDING. All day, I had guests try to sneak in and get a look at the prisoners. They wore the same thing: fancy suits that cost anywhere from \$20,000 and up. They all had that rich, entitled arrogance. The one that said, "How dare you try to tell me what to do." Some of them even tried to bribe me into letting them pass.

I did my job, keeping them away from the Arena and directing them back towards the main area. I walked the entire perimeter at least a hundred times, just walking in a circle over and over again, studying the structure and telling people to fuck off (but in a nice way).

I recognised some of the guests. A few corrupt politicians. Some governors. They were people I'd seen on the TV, people in charge of not only our country but dozens of others as well. It made me laugh. If the general public knew what these guys were up to in their spare time, all hell would break loose.

The Arena was located a short distance from any of the main buildings. It sat nestled in the wilderness, completely surrounded by nature. Only one footpath led back to civilization.

Despite being far from everything, it was teeming with people setting up for the first event scheduled tomorrow morning, coming in and out of different entrances and carrying loads of equipment.

I debated briefly trying to sneak in with some of those workers, but that would only get me so far. I needed some sort of excuse to go down into the dungeon where the prisoners were being held.

My salvation came in the form of a tiny, young woman pushing a huge cart up the footpath. On it were plates of food and bottles of water. She was wearing the teal blue uniform of the kitchen staff with a white apron tied around her waist. She had dark hair tied up in a ponytail, pale skin and a face full of freckles. She struggled with that cart, the wheels getting caught on the cobblestone pathway, making the whole thing rattle.

I approached her quickly, hoping my instincts were right. “Hello. Do you need some help?” For the first time in my life, luck seemed to be on my side. At that precise moment, a bottle of water tipped over the edge of the cart and plummeted towards the ground. I caught it, spun it in my hand and offered it to her in one smooth move.

She gasped in surprise and then laughed. “Oh! Thank you!” She was young and extremely timid. She gave me a shy smile before taking the water and putting it back in its spot. “I-I’ve told them so many times how hard it is dragging this thing all the way up here from the kitchens. I manage to drop something every time.”

I offered what I hoped was a friendly smile. “If you need some help taking it the rest of the way, I’d be happy to offer a hand.”

“Wha-really?”

“Of course.” I smiled again and it felt incredibly forced. She didn’t seem to notice though, too flustered with the attention. “Is this food for the prisoners?”

Her nose scrunched up. “I don’t like that word. We call them fighters.”

First slip up, Nikolai.

“Oh, yes, my apologies. It’s been a terribly long day. All I can say is I’m glad the sun is finally setting,” I laughed. “Here, let me help you with that.”

She protested slightly when I took her place at the back of the cart and began to push, but then she saw how easy it was for me and shrugged, walking beside me.

“I’m Daniella.”

“Damien.”

“It’s lovely to meet you, Damien. Is this your first time here? I’ve never seen you before.”

“Yes. First time.” The cart shook, the items wobbling slightly, but nothing fell out. “How about you?”

“Oh, no,” she laughed. “This is my third year.”

“Really? So you enjoy it?”

“The money, yes. It helps pay for my mother’s medical bills. She’s sick, and the only way we could afford the treatment was if I took this job. But everything else? Not really.” Was that how Talon got his workers? Targeting the desperate, people who had no other choice? It would guarantee their silence. Especially if it was people like Daniella, who had a loved one at stake.

She flashed her badge to the person standing guard in front of one of the entrances into the Arena. “Hey Jerry,” she greeted.

“Hey, Daniella.” He scanned the barcode under her picture. “Who’s this?”

“This is Damien. He’s helping me with the cart.”

Jerry laughed softly as he scanned my badge. “Still dropping things?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “At least this time it wasn’t one of the plates of food.”

She turned to look at me. “Last time, I actually dropped a plate and the food went all over the ground. I had to go all the way back to the kitchen to grab another one. It was the worst.”

I honestly couldn’t fucking care less, but I smiled and laughed along with them.

“It was just a water bottle this time,” she told Jerry.

“Oh. Well, that’s good then,” he chuckled. “Okay, you’re all set. You know the way. See you in a little bit.”

“Yep.”

Daniella took point through the entrance and into the dark, gloomy halls ahead. There was next to no natural light, so the only illumination along the path were the torches and sconces on the walls.

Daniella knew exactly where she was going, zero hesitation in her steps as she led the way through the endless corridors and all the twists and turns. I felt like I was walking through old, ancient catacombs. A labyrinth of stone walls, concrete floors and arched tunnels filled with a dangerous, ominous air. At each archway stood two guards, armed with machine guns. Professionals. It was clear in the way they stood and in that laser-type focus on their eyes. They were Talon’s A-team. His best to protect the merchandise.

I trailed behind Daniella as slowly as I could without arousing suspicion. The longer I had to study the layout of this place, the more chance I gave my family of being able to rescue Father.

A left, two rights, another left, across a small bridge, one more right. The wheels of the cart squealed as we moved, a truly unpleasant sound that grated on my nerves. Daniella made small talk that I barely listened to, telling me about her life, her mother, her cat. I replied with the proper responses, acting interested in what she had to say, but I was quickly losing my patience.

So when Daniella finally stopped in front of this huge, imposing metal door, I breathed a silent sigh of relief. She looked up at the camera, held her badge up and gave a little wave. There was a loud *clunk*, a groan and then the door opened, another one of the A-team soldiers stepping out.

Shit. If we couldn't go any further and they just took the cart to the prisoners themselves, this had all been a huge fucking waste of time.

“Daniella. Managed to finally wrangle in some help this time, hey?” he joked, scanning her badge. She seemed quite friendly with all of the guards, like they all knew each other well.

“Hi, Patrick. Yeah, this is Damien.”

“Hello,” I greeted, offering my badge for him to scan. He barely paid me any notice. His attention was entirely on Daniella. Someone had a crush.

“I guess it’s good he’s here. I won’t be able to help you this time. I know how much you hate going into that room. And you know I don’t mind doing it for you, but I have to report to the security tower for an emergency meeting.”

“Oh.” She wrung her hands together in front of her. “Th-that’s okay. I understand. Thank you.”

Patrick stepped back and opened the door wider to allow us to walk through. Any hope of breaking my father out of here plummeted in an instant. The walls on both sides of the room were lined with computer

screens, each one displaying different camera angles of the prisoners, locked in their cells. Sitting in front of them were more A-Team guards, watching the monitors and cataloguing everything that was going on. Two, four, six, eight, ten...there were twelve of them, and all they were doing was watching the prisoners. These guys weren't fucking around. There was no laughter, no joking around. It was just complete concentration. Complete focus.

There was a small, clear path that ran right down the centre of the room towards an elevator at the back. Patrick led us down and I wheeled the cart, keeping my gaze forward. Even though I was dying to get a look at their systems, I knew it would be far too suspicious.

Patrick placed his thumb on an imprint scanner on the wall and the elevator *dinged*, the doors opening. "One of the guards down there will let you back up. Sorry again that I can't help you this time, Daniella." He placed his hand between the doors to keep them from shutting as we loaded the cart into the elevator.

I might as well have been invisible to the man, considering how much attention he was paying me. Not that I was complaining about it.

"It's okay! Don't worry about it!"

"I'll be here tomorrow morning, though, to help you with breakfast. Remember, it's been pushed up an hour to accommodate the time of the fight."

"I remember," she smiled. "Thanks, Patrick. See you tomorrow."

"See you." Patrick stayed exactly where he was, his eyes plastered to Daniella right up until the moment the doors shut.

"You know he likes you," I said as the elevator descended. There was only one button inside to press, which meant it only went to one place.

“What?!” Her face turned bright red. “No, he doesn’t. He’s just being friendly, that’s all.”

“Trust me, Daniella. The man likes you. You should ask him out.” Did I sound sincere enough? Fuck, I hoped so. I didn’t give a shit about any of it, but I couldn’t show that. I had to show interest, like I *cared*. Ugh, revolting.

I needed Daniella distracted, preoccupied. Not paying attention to me and thinking about something else. Patrick provided that perfect distraction.

“Really?” Her voice pitched higher with excitement. “You really think he likes me?”

“It’s obvious.” The doors opened and we wheeled the cart out. Two more A-Team soldiers stood right at the elevator. They nodded in greeting but made no move to do anything else. Another huge, metal door was at the other end of the room, being guarded by another two of them.

Jesus, Talon really spared no fucking expense. Any type of infiltration of this place would be next to impossible.

When we neared the door, one of the soldiers placed his finger on the scanner and then pushed it open when it unlocked. Daniella took the lead again, walking down the circular ramp.

I swear to God, if there was another set of guards and another locked door, I was going to lose it. Three was e-fucking-nough.

Once we reached the bottom of the ramp, Daniella stopped. Surprise-fucking-surprise. Another locked metal door. Another two A-Team soldiers.

This Talon dude was *really* starting to piss me off.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I was getting really good at this whole acting thing.

She bit her lip nervously, staring ahead at the door with a nauseated look on her face. “I don’t like going in there,” she whispered softly, her gaze

dropping to the floor. “Usually, Patrick will do it for me. The fighters, they make me nervous. They say things. Horrible things.”

Probably because they're experiencing horrible things. Fighting for your life isn't exactly a walk in the park.

I tried to rein in the giddiness that burst through my body at her words. Luck really was on my side that day. “I can do it for you.”

“Oh, no, I couldn't ask that of you—”

“You're not. I'm offering.” I laid a hand on her shoulder. An innocent gesture, but it still felt so wrong to touch another woman, even with no sexual underlines.

Relief filled her face. “Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. I've debated asking for a different task, but I'm afraid if I do they'll fire me, and I really need this job. I can't afford to lose it.”

“Don't sweat it. You wait here. I'll take the food in.”

She nodded. “They each get one plate and one bottle of water. There will be a gap at the bottom of the cell for you to push it through. Just be careful.”

“Alright.” I pushed the cart forward before she could say another word, not giving her a chance to change her mind. It was my opportunity to get in that room and come face to face with my father. I wasn't going to let it slip by me. Not when I was so fucking close.

One of the A-Team soldiers opened the door for me and I disappeared inside, the *clank* of it shutting behind me ringing out through the room. I took everything in with quick, assessing eyes. Six cells on one side of the room, another six on the other, each housing two prisoners. twenty-four people in total. The air reeked of oppression, cruelty, desperation.

It was one of the nicest dungeons I'd ever come across. Better than ours, that was for sure. There was ample light and each cell had two beds and a toilet. It reminded me of an actual prison cell, possessing the bare necessities a human needed to survive. Despite being held captive, it looked like they weren't being entirely mistreated. Emphasis on "entirely". It would have been no sweat off Talon's back to have them housed in much poorer conditions than this, and yet it seemed he'd spared no expense to make sure they were being held captive in relatively bland accommodations.

I moved forward slowly, running my gaze quickly through each cell, searching.

Where is he? Where is he-there. I spotted him in the cell at the very end.

Father.

He was doing pull ups, his body heaving up and down, up and down, sweat gleaming along his bare skin. He wore no shirt. Just a pair of loose pants. There was a collar around his neck—around *all* of their necks—that put me instantly on alert. I wasn't sure what they were for, but I knew it couldn't be for anything good.

I slowly wheeled the cart to the closest cell. Most of the prisoners moved to the front of their cells, clearly knowing what was coming and eager to get their hands on the food.

As I neared the first cell, Father's gaze drifted to me and our eyes collided. He froze, his body suspended in mid air as recognition took over. Then he continued on with his exercise, giving nothing but that brief moment of hesitancy as an indication that he recognised me.

It required a conscious effort for me not to look his way again as I stopped in front of the first cell. The man inside approached the bars, watching me

with these angry, repulsive eyes that spoke volumes of what he thought of me and this place.

He was a big man with pasty skin, a crooked nose and a buzz cut that made me think perhaps he was a Marine, or had been previously. There was also a woman there. Actually, as I subtly glanced at all of the cells, I noticed they *all* had one man and one woman. A way of keeping the fights fair, I suspected. Any team with two males would have a slight advantage over those that didn't.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” the man spat, looking down at me with derision. “We’re people. *Human beings*. You can’t treat us this way.”

I said nothing, picking up two of the paper plates full of food and slowly pushing them through the gap that Daniella mentioned. The woman grabbed the water bottles I rolled through next.

“Please,” she begged, eyes glistening with tears. “This isn’t right and you know it. Please, let us go.”

Ah. So he was the bad cop and she was the good cop. Or, more accurately, the sad cop. He was meant to get me ashamed of my actions and she was meant to appeal to my humane side. Make me feel sorry for her, guilty. To make me want to help her.

A clever tactic that I’m sure they tried on everyone who went down there. Admirable, very admirable. I had to give them points for trying. But there was only one person I was interested in saving.

I moved from cell to cell, handing out the allocated food and water. I took my time at each one, dragging it out for as long as I could so that when I got to my father’s cell, it wouldn’t seem suspicious when I took a little longer. I knew each of these cells had a camera in it, and the prisoners were being

watched vigorously. That meant *I* was too. I had to be careful not to blow my cover.

Each person tried their luck at getting me to let them go.

“Please, they’re going to kill us!”

“Have a heart.”

“You soulless bastard!”

I didn’t respond to a single one, which seemed to upset them more. It solidified the whole “heartless” thing they all kept yelling at me.

One thing I noticed as I went to each cell was that they were all in incredible shape. The men had no shirts on, so it was easy to see they worked out in some way or another. The same went for the women. They all wore identical sport bras and shorts. A few of them even had a better set of abs than I did. Whether they could fight or not was a whole other story, though.

Father was still doing his pull ups when I finally approached his cell. The woman was sitting on the bed, throwing balls of rolled up toilet paper at him. He just ignored it, heaving his body up and down, up and down. The slight tick in his jaw told me it pissed him off though.

She looked roughly the same age, with wild red hair, bright green eyes and, despite the angry scowl she was aiming my father’s way, a soft, delicate face.

How long had they been locked up in there together? Long enough to drive each other crazy, that was for sure.

Father dropped from the bar and landed flat on his feet. He was panting heavily, sweat dripping down his body. He rolled his neck along his shoulders and then walked towards the bars with complete casualness, not in any hurry. Like he had all the time in the world.

Now that he was closer, I could see the scars on his skin. Knife cuts. Purple/yellow bruises. Cigarette burns. He'd been tortured. Whether it was at the hand of my uncle or Talon, I had no idea.

Seeing him like that was harder than I thought it would be, but I tried to lock those feelings away. They wouldn't help me, only hinder me.

"What are you doing here, boy?" he spoke out of the side of his mouth, his words barely above a whisper. He was angry. That was the only time he pulled that stupid "boy" crap, like I was still some shithead teenager.

I grabbed one of the plates and crouched. Father followed, slinking down.

"We have a plan to get you out," I said softly, pushing it through the gap slowly.

"We?" He took it, placing it off to the side. "You rope your siblings into this?"

"It was a joint effort, actually." I passed the next plate through. "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."

I internally cursed. This Talon dude was really, *really* pissing me the fuck off.

That meant we'd have to get the collar off him before trying to go anywhere, and the anti-tampering device would make that next to impossible. One step forward, ten steps back.

"Go home, Nikolai," Father whispered, catching the last water bottle I rolled through. "There's no way out of this. Get out while you can. That's an order."

I stood to my full height and he did too. I fiddled with the front of the cart as a cover to continue the conversation, even going so far as to add a frown.

When I spoke next, I barely moved my mouth, but he heard every word. “Sorry, Father. You’re not *Pakhan*. You don’t give the orders anymore. Aleksandr does.”

His eyes narrowed into slits. Before he could respond, the woman came bounding over, picking up one of the plates.

“Who’s this?” she asked covertly behind a piece of steak. At least she was smart enough not to outright blow our cover.

“Mind your own business, devil woman,” Father hissed with venom.

She smiled and it seemed completely innocent, until she stomped down hard on the back of his leg. Father stumbled forward, smashing his forehead right into the metal bars with a painful grunt.

“Asshole,” she hissed back, her smile still firmly in place. She walked back to the bed and started eating her food, not paying any more attention to us.

Father grumbled in annoyance, wiping away the blood that had started to drip down the side of his face. When he made no move to retaliate, I gave him an odd look.

“What?” he snapped under his breath.

If I had more time, I definitely would have questioned him, because the Dimitri Volkov *I* knew would have never let a transgression like that slide. Maybe he didn’t want to risk injuring her, since she was his fighting partner. Any weakness she had, he had too.

Still, the interaction was...strange.

“I’ll see you soon, Father,” I whispered before walking away.

Chapter Thirty-Five



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

THE CROWD WAS WILD. Electric. They screamed and cheered, eager for the next fight to begin.

It was the night after I'd seen my father in his cell deep beneath the Arena. The second fight of the Games was set to commence in ten minutes, the first having been concluded this morning.

According to the schedule I glimpsed, there were two fights set for each day. A morning match and an evening match. That meant that—every day—four people left the Arena alive, and four people left dead.

The first match up had been an ex-army ranger and an MMA fighter versus a boxer and a martial artist. Their images, along with their stats—name, age, height, weight, strengths, weaknesses and list of skills—all appeared on a massive jumbotron that hung suspended in the air above the oval, right over their heads.

At first, both teams had refused to fight, even going as far as to beg and plead with the crowd to help them. When that didn't work, they turned to anger, yelling and screaming what heartless bastards we all were.

Once the crowd started to boo, that was when Talon stepped in.

He had appeared on the jumbotron in a \$50,000 tux with a martini glass in his hand and a bright, beaming smile on his face. It was the kind of smile that made it glaringly obvious he had veneers. I think he *would* have been a handsome man, if he hadn't been jamming botox into his face. He had that look, that "I've had hundreds of plastic surgery operations so I don't look as old as I am" look.

Talon had given the fighters a choice. They could either fight or die, right where they stood. That kicked things right into gear. There was nothing more motivating than the threat of impending death to really get things moving.

The fight had been brutal. They were fighting on the sand terrain and, despite being united at the beginning, things quickly turned into a massive free-for-all. Both teams dove for the weapons that were laid out, trying to get the upper hand. Knives cut. Axes swung. Bats smashed. It was the epitome of blood and violence.

In the end, only one team remained victorious, moving onto the next round. The ex-army ranger, Samuel Marlon and the MMA fighter, Jessica Clifford. Once it was over, Jessica had curled up into a ball and wailed, covered in blood. Samuel seemed to handle it a bit better. I suspected it might not have been the first time the man had taken a life.

The fight had been broadcast to the other prisoners in their cells via a bunch of cameras spread out throughout the oval. That same footage was

also displayed on the jumbotron so everyone in the Arena could see what was going on, no matter where they sat.

It was an arena style seating. The wealthiest had box seats at the very top, and the least wealthy had to stand at the bottom. I'd tried to get a glimpse of the people up there but they were too far away.

As one of the lower-level soldiers in Talon's employ, I was stuck on the ground floor, doing crowd control along with Ryan, Luke, John and a bunch of others.

The bright side was that I did have a front row seat to the fights.

“Are we ready for Round Two of the Til Death Games?!” A voice blared out through the speakers.

The crowd *roared*. Everybody jumped to their feet, screaming and clapping as the Arena darkened and the jumbotron displayed the first set of fighters.

“We have a special treat for you tonight, ladies and gentleman! A truly special, special treat. Let's meet our first team!” A spotlight shone into the oval, revealing a tall, athletic woman and a strong, muscular man. They both held a hand up to shield their eyes from the glaring light of the spotlight, walking further into the oval with dazed expressions. “Lily Nicole is a Master Sergeant in the Marines with over thirty-three confirmed kills.” The camera zoomed in on Lily, following her every move as the announcer continued to introduce her. A photo of her appeared next to the live feed with her stats. “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 cheered again. The camera panned to the man next.

“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!”

The announcer continued to talk Lily and Roger up, getting the crowd more and more excited with each passing second. They seemed like worthy opponents. Their only weakness would be Lily’s morality. She was a Marine. She’d have a clear cut line between right and wrong. She could struggle with killing someone for blood sport.

I didn’t think Roger would have that same problem though. He might be a bit dazed by the whole situation, but he was a stone-cold killer, most likely thanks to his occupation.

The Arena darkened again. “Alright! Time to meet their opponents!” the announcer yelled out. “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!”

The spotlight shone on the next two people, and my whole body ran cold.
No.

Dimitri Volkov stood in the oval, his expression dark and murderous. Like the fighters before him, his collar was gone, and he just stood there bare-chested, staring out into the crowd with cold, dead eyes. That look on his face...that wasn’t my father out there. No. My father was somewhere else, locked away in his mind. The person out there was the Bratva Butcher.

The woman came into view, walking up to his side. They stood together, a united front. Contradicting, considering how I’d seen them in the cell the night before. They must have put their differences aside for the fight.

“The Bratva Butcher and The Crimson Death!” the announcer roared.

The crowd went wild, the screaming and cheering so loud, I had to cover my ears.

She was the Crimson Death? She was rumoured to be one of the deadliest assassins on the planet. I was beyond shocked. I'd grown up hearing stories about her. Her identity had always been a secret, but the few glimpses of blazing red hair had been what had given her the moniker of the Crimson Death, because that was all her marks saw of her before they met their end. Her skills were renowned. Fast. Efficient. Resourceful. Intelligent. Incredible hand-to-hand combat. Expert marksmanship.

No wonder the crowd was going so fucking crazy. Individually, my father and this woman were legends. But together? Together, they were a powerhouse couple.

Father was a pro at hiding his emotions. However, the moment the announcer revealed the woman's identity, even he couldn't hide the flicker of surprise that went through his eyes. He looked down at her and she smiled up at him brightly, full of cheekiness. Like they weren't about to fight for their lives or anything.

The crowd was still going berserk, cheering and chanting for the Deadly Duo. The announcer couldn't even finish introducing them because they were screaming so loud, impatient for the fight to begin.

"Alright! I see everyone is eager to get the night going! So, why don't we get to it?! Ladies and gentleman, Round Two of the Til Death Games!"

Tense, nervous energy filled me when the oval flooded with light and the cameras panned in on the fighters. I had complete faith in my father and his skills, but there was something truly sickening about watching someone you love in a dangerous situation, regardless of how good they were, and not being able to do a damn thing to stop it. Anything could happen. And I would just have to stand there and watch it.

Music came on in the background, something dark and bassy to fit with the event of the night. Father and Autumn (that was the name next to her image on the jumbotron) spread out, sizing up their targets. She took Lily and he took Roger, clearly having come up with some sort of attack plan prior to the fight. They stayed close enough so that they'd be able to reach each other if need be, but far enough away to be able to fight unhindered.

I continued my lap around the Arena ground floor, making out like I was doing my job, monitoring the crowd, when really my entire focus was down there in the oval.

They were in the grass terrain and small obstacles had been placed throughout it: rocks, boulders, logs. There was even a small stream running from one side to the other, separating the two teams.

There were only two weapons that I could see accessible—an axe and a machete—which would mean it would be a fight to get to them first. They seemed to be placed at an equal distance from each team, so it would all come down to who was faster.

There was no countdown. No ticking clock for when the fight was to begin. Both teams just stared at each other from across the field.

Then everything snapped into action.

They ran for each other, leaping over whatever obstacle was in their way as they sprinted towards the weapons. Father was quick, despite his big size. So was Roger. They reached the axe at the same time and both chose to leave it and engage in hand-to-hand combat rather than risk bending down to pick it up.

Father front-kicked and Roger leapt to the left, dodging it. Father swung a reverse elbow and then pivoted quickly to jab at Roger's abdomen. He groaned at the blow but recovered fast, lashing out with his own strike.

They exchanged blows, neither one holding anything back as they punched and kicked, using all of their quickness and strength to try to catch the other off guard.

Autumn and Lily were in the same situation, both fighting each other ruthlessly to try and get the upper hand. Lily slipped and Autumn rolled along the grass, picking up the machete. She swung for Lily's head. Lily dove out of the way and scrambled, looking for something to use to defend herself. Someone threw a shield down into the oval and Lily picked it up, using it to block the blow Autumn delivered right at the last second, the sound of metal on metal ringing through the air.

My gaze moved back to Father and Roger. They were circling each other, fists up and bodies crouched, coiled to strike. The crowd screamed for more bloodshed. More violence. They wouldn't be happy until they'd torn each other limb from limb.

Roger kicked some pebbles near the stream into my father's face. He hissed, scratching at his face and Roger charged, tackling him to the ground. The crowd groaned in unison. Roger started pounding and Father did his best to block but the MC president had the upper hand. He held the advantage.

Get up. Get up.

Father deflected his blows and then reared forward, wrapping his arms around Roger's head in a headlock and pulling him down. He tried to get free, but Father held tight, his legs curling around his waist and strengthening the hold. Roger's arm shot out to the side, his hand searching for something to use as a weapon. His fingers curled around a rock and then he struck Father across the face with it.

The blow was hard enough to disorient him and Father's hold loosened. Roger burst free and raised his arm, rock in his hand, preparing to strike him again. Out of nowhere came Autumn. She rammed into Roger from the side, tackling him off Father.

The crowd *roared*.

They rolled along the ground, fighting for the dominant position, and when they finally stopped rolling, she was on the bottom, her arms around his neck and legs locked around him in a perfect, textbook rear naked choke.

Roger struggled. Lily shuffled over, trying to get to him to help him, but her leg was dragging behind her. Had Autumn broken it?

Father jumped to his feet and kicked her in the chest when she tried to pass him. Lily went flying back, landing in a heap with a pain-filled cry that could be heard over the roaring crowd. Father didn't hesitate to pick up the axe and, thanks to the hold Autumn had on Roger, lodged it deep into his exposed chest with a powerful swing.

Roger screamed in agony, his whole body bucking. Autumn let go and shuffled out from underneath him as Father prepared to strike again. The axe cut into his arm next, the force behind it so strong that Father severed the limb entirely. Blood sprayed, drenching him from head to toe, but that didn't stop him from swinging again. And again, and again. He hacked into Roger until he was in tiny little pieces, not stopping even when the man was long dead.

Autumn made her way over to Lily, who was still clutching her chest, groaning in pain, her whole body curled up into a ball. Both women were covered in dirt, water and blood. The tell-tale signs of a brutal and vicious fight. I'm pretty sure I could see locks of Autumn's blazing red hair out

there in the grass. Hair-pulling hadn't even been off limits. Women fought dirty.

Autumn picked up the machete casually, kicked Lily onto her back and then swung the weapon without a shred of hesitation, the sharp edge of the blade lodging deep into Lily's forehead. Her face froze in a mixture of horror and pain and then her entire body slumped, her life vanishing into the night.

There was a brief moment of silence and then the crowd broke out into an enormous cheer, screaming and chanting 'Deadly Duo! Deadly Duo!' They stomped their feet. Banged whatever they had along the metal railings. They tried to make as much noise as was possible to convey how much they fucking loved what they had just witnessed.

Father joined Autumn at her side, blood literally dripping down his face and his body covered in gore. The axe was still in his hand.

"Your winner's of Round Two of the Til Death Games! The Bratva Butcher and The Crimson Death!" the announcer roared.

The camera panned in closely on them. They did nothing but stare ahead with emotionless expressions. There was no celebration. No waving to the screaming audience who had come here to watch them. Nothing.

Then the oval darkened and I exhaled in relief, knowing my father had survived his first fight in the games.



I used the cover of night to sneak out of my room and towards the security tower. It was 2 a.m. and, although the majority of people were in bed asleep, there were still a few people up. Mainly security doing patrols.

After the second round of the games had finished, the crowd had quickly dissipated, though the night had been far from over. A lot of the guests went to the bars and casinos on the island, drinking and partying the night away.

I couldn't wait one more moment to get what I needed. Not after what I witnessed. Although Father had won, I didn't want him to be in that situation again. I had to get him out before his next fight, and the only way I was going to do that was if I broke into that security tower, found the coordinates for this island and sent them to my brother.

Easier said than done.

I had clearance to enter the building, yes, but to get to the top floor where the command centre was? That, I didn't have. But I had a plan.

Each worker had a badge with their image and a barcode on it to scan. I managed to lift one from one of the A-team soldiers after the fight and, after a little tweaking, altered it to make it seem like *my* badge instead, replacing the photo with one of me. The problem lay with the barcode. I wasn't sure what information came up when they scanned it, but I knew whatever it

was, it wouldn't match with the badge. Not unless I could access a computer and change the records.

That wasn't possible either, since all of the computers were in top level security places. So, the only thing I could think of to do was fuck with the barcode so it wouldn't scan, and hope that whoever was on duty at the door would be too tired to give a fuck. All I needed to do was get up there.

I approached the security tower with slow, measured steps, like I was in no hurry at all, when really it was the opposite. I was running *out* of time and felt the need to rush. But I knew I had to keep my cool and act completely nonchalant, or I'd risk being discovered.

The man on guard was someone I hadn't met before. Despite the time, he was still extremely vigilant, his gaze scanning his surroundings on the constant lookout for danger. There was also a slight droopiness to his eyes, like he was having trouble keeping them open.

"Hello, I—"

"Badge," the man grunted, clearly not in the mood for pleasantries. Which was usually fine with me, but his annoyed mood didn't really work well in my favour. He was just as likely to say "fuck off" as he was not to give a crap and let me in.

I held up the badge I'd altered and he tried to scan it. When nothing happened, he released a frustrated breath and continued trying, moving the scanner this way and that way, trying to get it to read the barcode.

It wouldn't work. I'd made sure of that.

"For fuck's sake," he groaned.

"Technology, hey," I shrugged, trying to crack a joke. Lighten the mood. The man just grunted again, and didn't stop trying to scan the barcode.

“Look, I only have to run in there quickly and grab something I left behind. Maybe you could—”

“No one goes in without their badge being scanned.”

Fucking hell.

“Totally get it. You’ve got a job to do. I understand that. How about—”

“Look, man. You’re not getting in unless this thing scans. End of—” he frowned, his hand going up to the side of his face to touch the earpiece in his ear. He tsked, looking down at the badge again before handing it back to me. “I have to go handle something. You go in and come right back out, you hear me? No fucking around.”

“Got it.” I couldn’t believe my luck. The man turned on his heel and left, disappearing around the corner of the building.

I kept my pace brisk but not rushed as I walked across the main floor towards the elevator. There were a few people around, but not nearly as many as that first day. I rode the lift up to the top floor, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I watched the numbers move up and up with each floor we ascended. Only a few more and I was one step closer to my goal. One step closer to saving my father. There was still so much that needed to be done, but if I could just get those coordinates, everything would be alright.

I was already past the deadline my siblings and I had agreed to. We had hoped to get my father out of here before the games even began, before he even had to fight. But it had taken me longer than I’d anticipated to not only gather the information I needed, but also get into the building.

I feared that, because they hadn’t heard from me, my siblings may have taken matters into their own hands. It could jeopardize our original plan. I

had to hope that, despite not being the most patient people, they'd waited like we planned.

The elevator dinged, announcing my arrival on the top floor. I took a deep breath in and let it out to steady myself.

You're almost there, Nikolai. Almost there.

The doors whooshed open and I took a step forward, preparing to step out. Shock froze me on the spot.

Dominik stood in front of me, pointing a gun at my chest. "Hello, nephew," he said, a victorious smile on his face. Something sharp pierced my neck and I grunted. My hand drifted upwards, fingers curling around what felt like a dart. I pulled it out and looked down at it.

What?

My whole world tilted, blurriness snaking into my vision. There was another bite of pain, then another. I slumped against the elevator wall, trying to figure out what was going on, trying to get my bearings, but my body started to go numb. Dizziness gripped me. I swayed on my feet, fumbling for my gun, but it was too late. Whatever was in that dart took me over. I fell forward, succumbing to the darkness.

Chapter Thirty-Six



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“I APPRECIATE WHAT YOU’RE trying to do, Illayana, but it’s not going to work.”

“Oh, come on, you love Modern Family.”

She was right. I did. But not even one of my favourite television shows was going to help calm me down.

Nikolai was overdue. We should have heard something by that point, and the fact that we hadn’t meant something had gone wrong.

God, why had I convinced him to go on that stupid fucking mission? I should have let him stay home out of guilt and worry. At least he’d be alive. At least he’d be safe. He was likely being tortured, cut into tiny little pieces, and there was nothing I could do to save him. Pain lanced my heart and I rubbed my chest. I couldn’t take it. Couldn’t take not knowing. Couldn’t take living in a world where there was no Nikolai. I continued to pace back and forth in Illayana’s bedroom, unable to keep still.

“You’re going to wear a hole in my floor,” Illayana commented, her gaze fixed on the TV in front of her. She sat snuggled in her bed, a bowl of popcorn in her lap.

“How can you be so calm?” Nikolai was her brother. She should have been just as worried as me! Yet, she was sitting there acting like nothing was wrong.

“I’m taking the very wise advice someone gave me when I was spiralling out of control. ‘Don’t let your fear and worry consume you. Be strong for him.’ That’s what I’m doing. I’m being strong for Nik *and* for my father. Trusting them. Having faith in them.”

“Who said that? Sounds fucking stupid,” I said, continuing to pace.

She gave me a deadpanned look. “*You* said that, you idiot.”

“I did?” I went back in my mind, vaguely remembering saying something like that to her when she was freaking out about her father. I really should have taken my own advice, but I couldn’t. I was filled with all this unbearable, restless energy, with no way to get rid of it.

Usually, when I was feeling like this, I would go for a run. But I promised Nikolai I wouldn’t do anything that put me in danger. Not that *I* counted running as a dangerous activity. But I knew *he* did.

Please, God, let him be okay.

After all our struggles, all our heartbreak, we were finally back together. We might not have had the “official” talk yet, but for all intents and purposes, we were together. He was mine and I was his. I didn’t think it was possible, but I’d finally put the past behind me. I’d finally found a way to not only move on, but forgive him for what happened. Especially after Illayana told me about what he said right before he left. *His* events of that night.

I'd never given him the opportunity to talk about it before. In the beginning, I was hurting too much to ever hear his side. And then, as more time went on, I just didn't want to think about it all. So...I never asked.

Guilt had hit me hard when she told me about how he collapsed into Aleksandr's arms, screaming and sobbing for the pain to stop. It hit me harder when I realised that he had *never* been able to talk about it with anyone. That for the last two years, he'd been keeping all his emotions from that night bottled up because I had made him promise not to tell a single soul.

I at least had my father to help support me during those first few months. Those months where I wanted to end my life just to be with my son. Nikolai had no one. He had to deal with it all on his own. I had let my grief swallow me whole, ignoring the fact that he had been grieving too.

In truth, I didn't deserve him. Not really. Even after I cut him out and kept him at a distance, made him deal with that pain all alone, with no one to confide in, he still put me first...in everything. In every way. The man had proved time and time again that he loved me. Would do anything for me. Protect me at all costs.

The knight I had been dreaming of since I was a little girl really had been right in front of me all along. I had just been too blinded by pain and resentment to see that.

But I saw it now.

"Alright, you're driving me fucking crazy. Will you cut it out?!" Illayana snapped, throwing popcorn at me.

"I can't help it," I almost whined, burying my face in my palms.

"Jesus, I've never seen you like this. You really *do* love him, don't you?"

I peeked through my fingers to look at her. Sympathy shone in her eyes. It felt a little weird talking about it with her, considering how long I'd been hiding that secret from her. But I was so glad everything was out in the open. Turns out, getting kidnapped by Franco had been the best thing that could have happened for our friendship.

Who would have thought? Not me. That's for damn sure.

Illayana had felt so guilty about what she'd said to me. About how she reacted when she first found out. The idea of me dying and never being able to resolve things between us was the kick in the pants she needed to let it all go and move on. We'd talked for hours and everything went back to normal. It was like the whole thing never happened, like she'd known all along.

"I do. Fuck, I do, Illayana. Something is wrong. I can feel it in my bones. We should have heard from him by now."

She nodded, not denying it. "That doesn't mean something is wrong, though. Maybe it just isn't safe to reach out to us yet. Maybe he hasn't gathered the information he needs. There could be a thousand reasons why he hasn't reached out."

"Yeah. And one of those reasons could be that he's been discovered."

She exhaled heavily. "I'm not going to dispute that. You're right. It could be. I'm just hoping that it's not."

I grunted and resumed pacing. There was a knock at Illayana's door.

"Come in!" she yelled out.

Drea stepped into the room, a five-foot nothing scruff of a woman. I'd barely said two words to her but she was family now. She was covered head-to-toe in tatts and piercings and had a real "rocker chick" kinda vibe going on, with the ripped black jeans and band t-shirt. I'd never pictured

Aleksandr with someone like her. She was the polar opposite of the man: fun, energetic. Like a big ball of crazy energy that couldn't be tamed.

"Drea, hey. What's going on?" Illayana paused the TV and turned to face her.

"Hey. Have you seen your brother?"

"Which one? If Lukyan, no. He went out last night and hasn't come home yet. If Aleksandr, I saw him early this morning when he was out training the soldiers. But I haven't seen him since then."

Drea bit her lip. "Me either. He ducked out a little while ago and I haven't heard from him since."

"I'm sure it's nothing." Illayana picked up her phone. "I'll try calling him."

"I tried. His phone's off."

Sure enough, when Illayana dialled Aleksandr's number, it went straight to voicemail.

"That's weird," Illayana frowned. "His phone is never off."

"Maybe he's in a meeting?" I suggested. "Where was he going when he left here?"

"He *did* say he was going to meet up with a client. I don't know, I just—"

I gasped, my eyes widening on her. "You have 'the feeling,' don't you?"

Illayana groaned. "Oh, don't you start."

"What's 'the feeling'?" Drea asked, looking between the two of us.

"Like something bad has happened." I rubbed my sternum. "It's right here. And it feels like you can't breathe."

"Yes, actually." Her brows creased. "I can't explain it. It's like a sense of...of—"

"Foreboding," I finished.

She nodded, worry all over her face. “Yeah.”

I pointed at Illayana. “See. *I told you* something is wrong.”

Illayana rolled her eyes. She flicked off the blankets and jumped off the bed, her bare feet slapping against the hardwood. “Maybe his phone just died?”

“Maybe,” Drea grumbled, but I could tell she didn’t really believe it.

“You want to pace with me?” I asked, my head tilting to the side. “It helps me feel a little better.”

Illayana cut in before she could respond. “No! No more pacing.” She swiped her hand through the air. “You guys *really will* wear a hole in my floor. Why don’t we go for a run or something?”

“Can’t,” I said, pacing again despite her words. “I told Nikolai I wouldn’t do anything to put myself in danger.” I held a hand up to stop her from saying what I knew she would. “Yes. I know it’s not *actually* dangerous. But we both know how your brother feels when I go for a run, and I promised him.”

A cheeky smirk graced her lips. “I thought that was just if you ran *alone*?!”

I froze. Technically, she wasn’t wrong. Nikolai would always flip out because I ran by myself. But if I went with someone, that wouldn’t be breaking my promise, would it?

I ran over and grasped Illayana by the face, squishing her cheeks. “This is why you’re my best friend!”

Illayana struggled. “Would you get off?!”

I laughed and planted a big, wet, sloppy kiss on her cheek. She shoved me away with a growl.

“How about you, Drea? Want to go for a run?” I asked as Illayana went to her closet to put on a pair of running shoes.

She shook her head. “I’m good. I want to stay here and wait for Aleksandr. He may come back while you’re gone.”

“Good call.” I looked to Illayana. “You wanna go now?”

“Yeah. I need to get out of this house.”

“I feel that.” I hadn’t left since Nikolai went on the mission. I called Belinda and told her I was having family problems and wouldn’t be able to make any of my shifts for the next week. She was surprisingly very understanding about it. She told me to take as much time as I needed, which I greatly appreciated.

Drea pointed over her shoulder at the door. “Do you want me to tell your bodyguards?” she asked Illayana.

“Fuck no,” my friend breathed out, a mask of horror overtaking her face. “I need to get away from them. They’re driving me crazy, following me *everywhere*. I swear, they’re getting worse and worse.”

I laughed. “I would have thought that, after all this time, you’d be used to them.”

“Would you get used to never being able to piss in peace?” she snapped, annoyed. “It’s like, since your kidnapping, Arturo has gotten more paranoid that something is going to happen. That he’s told them to be extra vigilant. This room here is the only place I get to be alone without one of them breathing down my damn neck.”

“Touchy, touchy,” I joked, giving her a bright, beaming smile.

She snapped her fingers together in a “shut your mouth” kind of gesture. She looked at Drea. “Who’s out there?”

“The twins,” Drea responded. “They’re just sitting out there playing ‘Go Fish.’”

“Go Fish?” I laughed. “What are they, twelve?”

Drea tittered. “How do you plan to get around them? They’re right at the door.”

Illayana glanced at the window, mischievousness glinting in her eyes.

“You can’t be serious,” Drea gasped. “If you fall—”

“I won’t fall,” Illayana said with complete conviction. She tied her hair up into a high ponytail. “I’ve climbed out that window a thousand times. I just need *you* to tell them I’m going to sleep and I don’t want to be disturbed.”

Drea shook her head in amusement. “Alright. But if something happens, I’m saying I tried to stop you, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“That is entirely believable,” I nodded.

Illayana walked over to the window and opened it wide. “We’ll be back soon.”

I gave a salute in farewell and then followed Illayana out. There was a drainpipe right next to her window that we used to climb down, one we’d used in the past to do this exact same thing when we were younger, when her father wouldn’t let us out.

There were a few guards circling the property, but they just shook their heads at us when they spotted us, not interfering. Illayana waited for me when she got to the bottom, narrowing her eyes in warning at the guards, a silent message to keep their mouths shut about what they saw. I suspected they would. My best friend could be kind of scary when she wanted to be.

I dropped down next to her and blew my hair out of my face. “This is kind of fun,” I whispered, smirking at her. Why I was whispering, I had no idea. It just seemed fitting for the moment.

Illayana smiled. “Right? It’s like that time we snuck out to go see that concert in the city.”

I barked out a laugh. “Oh my god, yes. Do you remember how pissed our fathers were when they found out?”

She snorted. “Like I could forget.” She waggled her fingers. “Father ended up breaking two of my fingers in the ring as punishment.”

I sucked air in between my teeth. “Right. Forgot about that. Damn, your father can be such a hardass sometimes.”

“Only when you disobey one of his orders,” she shrugged. “Okay, the coast looks clear. Let’s go.”

We sprinted across the front yard towards the main gate, constantly looking over our shoulders like we expected to see Illayana’s guards chasing after us at any moment. We couldn’t hold back the giggles as we ran. It was like we were kids again. The nostalgia it brought forth was unbelievable, and it honestly helped in distracting me, from getting sucked into all of the negative thoughts my mind insisted on throwing in my face.

The guards at the maingate gave us odd looks as we bolted towards them, almost tripping over each other.

“Open it, open it,” Illayana ordered, bouncing on her feet, excitement literally rolling off her.

We didn’t even wait for it to fully open. The second it started to move, we squeezed through the small gap and burst out the other side.

“Which way?!” I yelled, my head snapping left to right.

“I don’t know!” she laughed. “This way!” She went right and I followed after her, both of us howling with laughter. We raced down the road like we were getting chased by a madman with a chainsaw, and only started to slow down when the house was far off in the distance.

“Okay, okay, I think we’re safe,” Illayana panted, switching to a light walk.

I did the same. “I wish I could be there to see their faces when they find out you’re gone.”

“Me too.” She put her hands on her hips and steadied her breathing as she walked. “I do feel a little bad though. They’re gonna freak out.”

“Eh. They’ll get over it. Should we just jog to my house and back? Maybe we’ll get back before they even notice.”

She nodded. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

“You set the pace. I’ll follow.”

“Alright.”

We jogged at a light, easy pace. It was late in the afternoon, so it wasn’t too hot (which was good, because Illayana got kind of crabby in the heat). My mind would go to wander, but it was easy to snap it back to the moment by counting my breaths and focusing on my steps.

It was exactly what I needed. I’d been so distracted with everything in my life that I hadn’t gone for a proper run in almost a month. I forgot how much it soothed me. The only downside was that I didn’t have my music, but that was okay.

We made it to my house in record time, went in to grab a drink of water and then left again, all in a rush. Now that the adrenaline of running away had worn off, I think Illayana was determined to get back before her guards noticed she was missing. Although she was desperate for some time away from them, I knew she’d feel guilty if Arturo found out and punished them because she decided to ditch them. She still felt bad about what he did to them when Rayna kidnapped her.

Stupid bitch. I was glad she was dead. The only negative was that I didn’t get to see it.

I was so zoned out and in my own little world, I didn't notice the van until it was too late. It swerved right in front of us at breakneck speed, almost smashing right into us.

"Watch out!" I yelled. We dove separate ways, only just managing to avoid it. I rolled along the road, pain flaring all over me as my skin scraped across the asphalt.

I winced, placing my hands on the ground and trying to push myself up.

What the hell?

"Get the fuck off me!" Illayana roared.

My gaze snapped to her in panic. Four masked men were shoving her into the van.

"Hey!" I ignored the pain and got to my feet, rushing over. The door slammed shut right when I reached it and my hands smacked against it. "Hey! Let her go!" I went for the handle, frantically trying to open it, but it was locked. I smashed my fists against the door. "Let her go!"

The van started to move and I ran with it, pounding on it viciously. "Illayana! Illayana!" It picked up more speed and I tried to keep up, running fiercely beside it for as long as I could, but it quickly sped off down the road with a screech.

I reluctantly came to a stop, unable to go any further. I stared after the van, breathless. "Illayana," I panted heavily, watching the van disappear out of my line of sight.

What the fuck just happened?

Chapter Thirty-Seven



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“NIKOLAI. NIKOLAI, WAKE UP.”

I groaned, rolling over to my side. My head pounded, a constant *thump, thump, thump* behind my eyes that made me completely disoriented.

What-how—

“Nikolai.”

I struggled to open my eyes, the grogginess in my mind making it impossible for me to get my bearings. The last thing I remembered was being in the elevator, heading up to the top floor. The doors opened and—

My eyes snapped open. *Dominik.*

Oh, no.

I blinked rapidly and my surroundings gradually came into view. The first thing I saw were the metal bars.

No. No, no, no.

I fought against the haze that kept trying to pull me back under and groaned as I slowly sat up, my limbs feeling like jello.

Yep. I was down in the dungeon below the Arena. I released a defeated sigh. *Fuck. This isn't good.* I looked around, seeing my father in the cell to my left and, to my right—

“Aleksandr?”

My big brother was leaning against the concrete wall at the back of his cell, his head tilted up towards the ceiling and arms crossed over his chest. When he heard me say his name, his head rolled my way and he gave me a sad smile.

“I’m here too.” In the cell next to Aleksandr’s, Lukyan waved a hand.

“Me too.” Illayana poked her head around Lukyan’s body from the cell next to his, which had been blocking her from view.

They are all here?

“No,” I groaned, burying my head in my hands. “You idiots tried to rescue us when you didn’t hear from me?” It would have been a complete suicide mission. They didn’t have any of the information necessary to pull something like that off. No wonder they got caught too. They should have waited—

“No,” Aleksandr grunted and I frowned.

“You didn’t?” I looked around the room. “Then what the fuck are you all doing here?”

“I got jumped,” Aleksandr answered, his voice laced with anger.

Lukyan raised a hand. “Same.”

“Ditto,” Illayana cut in.

“Wait, you all got kidnapped? At the *same time*? ”

“No,” Illayana said, shaking her head. “Lukyan was first. Aleksandr second. Then me. I think that’s the timeline we worked out, hey?”

“Sounds right,” Lukyan nodded. “I was balls deep in this cute little blonde when a bunch of guys in masks came busting in and shot me with a dart.” He gave me a deadpanned look. “A fucking *dart*.”

“I was getting in my car after visiting a client when this van pulled up beside me.” Aleksandr gripped the bars with his hands, the metal groaning as he squeezed hard. “Fucker’s darted me too. I managed to kill a few of them before I passed out, though.”

“You did?” Lukyan frowned in confusion. “I didn’t.” I swear to God, he fucking pouted. “Whatever was in those things knocked me flat on my ass. I didn’t even have time to pull my damn pants up.”

“I got jumped while I was out for a jog.” Illayana’s face was a mask of furious anger. “They almost hit me with the van and I had to dive out of the way. Then four guys just picked me up and shoved me inside it.”

I stiffened at her words, my gaze snapping to her. “You were with Tatiana.” I didn’t phrase it like a question, because it wasn’t one. My sister didn’t jog. She kept in shape, yes. But jogging wasn’t her outlet. It was Tatiana’s.

Illayana avoided my eyes and I knew I was right. I jumped to my feet, frantically trying to look into the other cells.

Please, God. No. Don’t do this to me. It was hard enough trying to deal with the fact that my entire fucking family was there. If Tatiana was too—

“She’s not here,” Illayana said, but her words didn’t put me at ease. “They only wanted me.”

“You don’t know that.” All the other cells I could see were empty. The only people in this room were us. Talon must have moved all the other

prisoners out when he'd taken us down there.

"I do. She was banging on the van trying to get me out when we took off. They left her there. Trust me, it was only me they wanted."

"Trust you?" I hissed, moving to the right to grab the set of bars between Aleksandr and I, glaring at her. "You think I don't know that it was *your* idea to go for a jog? She wouldn't have done it unless *you* convinced her to do it. She promised me—"

"Are you seriously coming at me right now?" Illayana screeched incredulously. "Look around, you idiot. She isn't here. She's fine. Get off my fucking back."

I growled, shaking the bars. "You're so lucky you're over there, otherwise I'd fucking throttle you."

"Okay, everyone, let's all just calm down—"

"Shut up, Lukyan!" Illayana and I yelled.

Lukyan gasped, then scowled angrily. "No! You guys shut up! I'm sick of all of you always telling me to shut up."

Illayana kicked the bars that separated her and Lukyan. "It's because no one wants to hear what you have to say!"

Lukyan lunged, his hands reaching for her neck through the bars. Illayana managed to jump back just in time. "Come over here and say that to my face!"

"What if Tatiana is lying on the side of the road, injured? How could you be so fucking stupid—"

"Don't call me, stupid!" Illayana snapped.

"Why not?" Lukyan cut in. "You are."

We all started screaming at each other. Me at Illayana. Illayana at Lukyan. Lukyan at Illayana *and* me. All three of us yelled over one another, not

letting anyone get a word in. We switched between English and Russian as the fight started to mutate, issues from the past rushing to the surface that had absolutely nothing to do with what we were arguing about, but just added fuel to the fire.

“I know it was you who ate that last brownie!” Lukyan screamed at Illayana.

“You know what? I did! And it was fucking delicious!” Illayana screamed back. Her gaze snapped to me. “And *you!* Are there any other friends of mine who you’d like to fuck?!”

I threw my hands up in the air. “What friends?! You only have one, because people can’t stand you,” I hissed.

Illayana gasped in outrage. “You—” She looked at 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,” I said, shaking my head. “Fight your own battles.”

“You wait until I get out of here,” she 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 Illayana. “Ha, ha, he kicked your ass.”

“I’m gonna kick *your* ass!”

“TIKHIY!” QUIET! my father roared.

All of us snapped our mouths shut at his command, that one word so powerful that we could do nothing but listen. I turned around to face him. It was the first time I heard him say anything since I woke up. To be honest,

I'd completely forgotten that he was in the room. My fear and anger over Tatiana had consumed me so entirely, I lashed out without thinking.

The silence that followed after so much yelling and screaming was totally jarring.

Autumn coughed awkwardly, the sound ringing out through the room.
“Well—”

Father spun on her and pointed a finger. “Not one word out of you.”

She threw her hands up in the air. “Aye-aye, Mr Grouchy.”

Lukyan snickered, his hand flying to his mouth to try and cover the laugh.

Just like that, the tension in the air disappeared and everything went back to normal. Illayana and I looked at each other.

“Sorry,” we both grumbled at the same time.

“Ahem,” Lukyan pointed at his chest. “Where’s *my* sorry?”

Illayana and I rolled our eyes but both offered him an apology as well.

“Alright,” Father began, crossing his arms over his chest. “Now, we need to come up with a plan—”

The huge metal door at the end of the room swung open and we all snapped to attention as Dominik walked in. Whatever differences we had a moment ago were gone. We presented a united front, each of us moving to the front of the bars and glaring at the man responsible for putting us in there. I gripped the bars so tight that my knuckles turned white, imagining they were his fucking neck.

He looked exactly like Father, but he didn’t at the same time. They were identical twins, so they had the same facial features. But where Father looked strong, tough and in shape, Dominik looked weak, slightly pudgy and pasty. He didn’t have the same terrifying aura that my father exuded, the instant respect people felt a man like Dimitri deserved.

I think that had always been one of the contributing factors to the hatred Dominik felt towards my father. He hated that he could never measure up to him.

“My family.” Dominik smiled, his arms spread wide as if he was preparing to embrace us in a hug. “It is 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, arching an eyebrow.

Dominik waved that off. “Oh, that little thing? That was just a little fun.”

Illayana smiled, a truly dark and evil kind of smile that made Dominik stiffen despite being separated by thick, metal bars. “So was disembowelling your daughter.”

His eyes narrowed but then he just shrugged. That was one of the big differences between my father and Dominik. Father loved all of his children with every cell in his body. He’d die to protect us. Dominik, however, couldn’t care less. He used Rayna as his pawn to accomplish whatever plan he had and then just tossed her aside when she was no longer of any use to him.

“If she wasn’t such a fucking disappointment, I might actually care,” Dominik chuckled. He let loose a self-satisfied sigh, walking up and down our row of cells with admiring eyes, like he was so happy to be seeing what he was seeing. He stopped in front of Aleksandr’s cell and tilted his head. “You remember our last conversation, don’t you? I bet you’re wishing right now that you took my offer.”

Aleksandr leant forward menacingly. Dominik slanted back on autopilot, an unconscious movement he couldn’t stop that showed he was afraid of my

brother. Aleksandr said nothing, letting his murderous gaze do all the talking.

Dominik swallowed nervously and licked his lips. He moved away from his cell and stopped in front of mine. If it wasn't for the situation we were in, I would have enjoyed watching that.

"Hi, nephew. Sorry about the dart."

"No, you're not," I scoffed.

"I really am." He almost sounded...sincere. "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."

I frowned. "You saw me?"

"I've been waiting to witness Dimitri's downfall since I was ten years old. 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."

They'd known I was here since the first round? Why didn't they capture me straight away then? They still let me roam around there until—

"You waited until I watched Father fight before capturing me."

Dominik shrugged lazily, his lips curled up into a smirk. "Talon and I thought it might be fun for you to watch your father in the games." He moved to Father's cell next and the two men stared at each other, years of hatred and anger brewing between them.

"How does it feel, Dimitri? To finally be beaten by me."

Father 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 just

shows how weak you really are. No wonder Father never gave you a position worth any substance.”

Dominik’s jaw clenched. “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 rightfully been all along.”

Talon walked in, six A-team guards at his back. He was wearing another expensive tux, his red bowtie slightly askew. A minor detail to notice but it was irritating the fuck out of me.

Dominik smiled and gave us all a pretentious wave. “I look forward to seeing you all very soon. For the last time.” He nodded to Talon and then walked out without looking back.

Talon came to a stop in the centre of the room, his gaze moving from Illayana all the way around to my father. “Hello, Volkovs.” He smiled, and it held nothing but arrogance and triumph.

None of us responded.

“Not a very chatty bunch, I see. Understandable, given your circumstances.” He walked down the line of cells, starting at Illayana’s and going all the way around to my father’s, looking intently at each of us as he strolled past. He stopped when he reached my father’s cell and rocked back on the balls of his feet, hands behind his back. “Ah, Dimitri,” he exhaled. “Dimitri, Dimitri, Dimitri. You know I didn’t want it to come to this. Truly, I didn’t.”

“Really?” Father drawled, sounding bored.

The irritation flickering through Talon’s eyes said that he didn’t like that. “I would have been happy with just you, but then you had to go and send

your little herd after me.” He waved through the air at my siblings and I. “Now you all get to be a part of my games.”

“You’re even more deluded than I thought if you think for one second that I’m fighting my children.”

“Oh, come on, give me a little credit,” Talon smirked. “Even *I* know what a pointless task that would be. After all, the love you have for your family is famous, *Butcher*.” The jealousy and hatred in that one word spoke *volumes*.

“You don’t like the fact that the crowd cheered louder for my father than they did you, do you?” I asked, the pieces suddenly clicking together. I noticed it the night Father fought, but thought perhaps it was just because the crowd was eager to get the fight going. But that wasn’t it.

Before the first round of the games had begun, Talon appeared on the jumbotron to introduce himself and the games he’d created. He’d received a mild applause. Nothing more than one might receive after delivering a boring speech that put half the room to sleep.

But when my father was announced? The whole arena shook with the roar of the crowd. Some of that could also be attributed to his partner, The Crimson Death, but I highly doubted such a detail would matter to Talon.

“That’s what all this is about, isn’t it?” I cocked my head. “You’re jealous of my father. And what better way to bring him down than to make him fight in your little games.”

Talon kept his composure quite well but the slight tick in his jaw told me my words had bothered him. “It’s ridiculous, you know? *I’m* the one that created *all* of this.” He spread his arms out wide. “*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 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?”

My father smirked. “Sounds like you’re projecting what happened all of those years ago into the present. So your father told you he wished *I* was his son. So what?”

That was news to me. Mikhail hadn’t mentioned that either. But then again, perhaps he didn’t know.

Talon’s face reddened with anger. “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.” An evil, diabolical smile graced 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. “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 of 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.”

Autumn said nothing at first, her eyes moving over us one by one until they finally landed on my father. He didn’t speak, but they shared some sort of moment the rest of us were not privy to. Something that was only happening between the two of them.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m going to have to pass.” Autumn leaned against the side of the cell, arms crossed over her chest. “I’ve seen what Samuel can do, and no offence, but I think I have better odds with this lot,” she finished, hiking her thumb at us.

Talon smiled evilly. “It’s your funeral.” He walked back down the line of cells and stopped in front Aleksandr, admiring him. “You killed three of my men, even *after* they darted you.”

Aleksandr just grunted.

“I assume I couldn’t convince you to fight for me in a different competition? Could make you a lot of money.”

“I have a lot of money.”

“*More* money.”

“Not interested.”

Talon hummed. “Disappointing.” He strolled past Lukyan, who was death staring him, his eyes following the man as he continued on and stopped in front of Illayana’s cell. “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 looked to one of the guards. “Open the cell.”

Panic curled down my spine. My father, Aleksandr, Lukyan and I all slinked forward, watching in dread as Illayana’s cell was opened and four of the guards strolled in, surrounding her. Two of them grabbed her by the arms while the other two slapped a pair of thick, metal handcuffs around her wrists. Then they escorted her out to stand next to Talon.

Illayana didn’t say a word. Didn’t fight. She just stared Talon down with an angry glare that would put my father to shame.

Father growled, and his cage rattled. “You touch her, Talon, and I swear to God, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Talon smirked, moving behind her. He pressed up against her, burying his face into her hair and smelling her. Illayana took a deep breath and stayed completely still, head up, face strong, like what he was

doing wasn't affecting her. But I knew it had to. She was putting on a strong front for our father, for us.

"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."

My brain exploded with fury and I rammed into the bars with my body at the same time Father and Aleksandr did. The cells *shook*. We all kept ramming while Lukyan opted to kick furiously instead, each of us screaming and cursing at Talon to let her go, not to touch her.

But the man just smiled, seeming happy with the reaction his words and actions brought forth. "That's it," he encouraged, egging us on. "Let that anger build! It will make for a more entertaining fight." He gripped Illayana's chin and ran his tongue up her cheek. She shivered in repulsion and it made Father roar in fury, his body slamming into the bars over and over again.

My shoulder hurt. I could already feel the bruises forming on my skin but I didn't stop trying to break down the cell. Neither did Aleksandr or Lukyan. We kicked, rammed and pounded our fists. All while Talon laughed.

"Ostanavlivat'sya. " Stop, Illayana whispered.

I didn't want to. I knew it was physically impossible to break down the bars but I didn't want to stop trying. How could I? She was my baby sister. It was a big brother's job to protect their baby sister. I couldn't stop.

"Ostanavlivat'sya. " Stop, Illayana said again, pleading, begging.

The look on her face and the suffering layered in that one word was what did it for me. Watching us hurt ourselves trying to get to her was hurting *her*.

One by one, we all stopped. First Lukyan. Then me. Then Aleksandr. Father was the only one who didn't. His fists bled. His body was covered in bright red marks that would turn into painful bruises. Indents from the bars showed on his shoulders. And still he kept trying, refusing to give up.

"Otets. Ostanavlivat'sya. Pozhaluysta." Father. Stop. Please. Illayana whispered sadly.

Father tried a few more times before finally doing as she asked, releasing a defeated sigh. Illayana looked at him and gave him a small smile.

"Vse normal'no." It's okay, she said, voice strong. "I'll be okay."

"Aww," Talon cooed condescendingly. "How sweet." His following chuckle made me clench my fists, my teeth grinding. "You all should try and get some rest. Trust me when I say that you will need it."

Agony assaulted me as he led Illayana out of the room, the door slamming shut behind them.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



TATIANA ANDREEVA

“HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?” Mikhail asked, the question directed at no one in particular. We were all gathered in Aleksandr’s office; me, Drea, Arturo, Vincenczo, my dad, Illayana’s guards, some of the higher ranking Bratva soldiers, the *Sovietnik*, Vladimir and, of course, Mikhail.

After Illayana had been kidnapped, I sprinted back to their house to report it. I’d given a description of the van but there had been no license plate, so the chances of finding it were slim to none. That’s when we discovered that not only had *she* been taken, but so had Aleksandr and Lukyan. It was a completely unprecedented situation. Never in the history of the Bratva had not only the *Pakhan*, but all of his children as well, been kidnapped. If word got out, it could mean the end for the Bratva.

As Aleksandr’s wife, Drea was technically now in charge, but they’d only been married a short time. A few of the Bratva soldiers had already begun to

show indifference to her. It didn't bode well for her, or for us. We needed the loyalty of all the soldiers if we were going to pull off any kind of rescue.

How? Well, I still hadn't figured that out yet.

Arturo paced back in forth in the office and everyone stayed the fuck out of his way. The anger rolling off that man was enough to make even me steer clear of him. "Who the fuck cares how it happened?" he barked at Mikhail, never stopping his pacing. "The point is that it has, and we need to make a plan."

Mikhail sat forward and interlocked his fingers, staring Arturo down. "I care," he said sternly. "If there's a rat, someone reporting the movements of this organisation to Talon, then we need to know and find them before we come up with any sort of attack plan. Otherwise we'll just be walking right into a trap."

"You're sure it's Talon that has them?" I asked, frowning in thought. Of course, it made the most sense. It was the most logical conclusion. But we had to be *sure*.

"As sure as I can be."

Drea was seated behind the desk in Aleksandr's chair. She looked even smaller in it, the gargantuan size of the thing almost swallowing her whole. But she didn't let that affect her. She sat tall and proud, like she had every damn right to be there, in that position. "First things first, we figure out *how* they were all kidnapped."

"It was clearly a coordinated strike." Vladimir crossed his arms over his chest, standing tall at Drea's side. He'd shown nothing but respect to her and made it clear he was loyal to her and would follow her orders, something that couldn't be said for some of the other soldiers in the room. Once Aleksandr found out, he'd have them killed. For sure.

“They were each targeted when they were at their most vulnerable. When they were away from the house,” Vladimir finished.

“How could Talon possibly know that though?” my dad asked.

The answer came to me in a lightbulb moment.

I touched the back of my neck. “Their trackers,” I whispered, running a finger along the small scar. I looked at Mikhail. “Is that possible?”

He pursed his lips in thought. “It could be. Especially if they knew what frequency the trackers use. It’s safe to assume that Talon and Dominik are in league with each other. Dominik knows about the trackers. He cut it out of Dimitri before kidnapping him. All he’d need is the serial number from it and then he could use that to hack into the system and track the others. The ones in Aleksandr, Lukyan and Illayana.”

“So Talon used their trackers against them and waited for the opportune moment to kidnap them?” Drea frowned. “Why? What does he want with them? Isn’t his beef with Dimitri? It makes no sense to take them. He has what he wants: Dimitri in chains.”

“Could be any number of reasons,” Mikhail answered. “Maybe to use them to torture Dimitri. It’s well known how much he loves his children. Maybe Nikolai was discovered and Talon decided to capture the others to ensure they don’t interfere in his plans.”

“Or?” Arturo pressed, stopping his pacing to stare Mikhail down. He clearly sensed what I did—that there might be another reason Talon kidnapped them. A reason Mikhail was hesitant to voice.

“Or...he wants to use them in his games. Think about it. Having the heart of the Bratva in such a thing? It would be the game of the century.”

Anxiety, worry, fear...they all gripped me at once and I clutched my chest, struggling to breathe. I *knew* something was wrong. I’d felt it in my

bones, in my soul. And I ignored it.

Arturo cursed in Italian and went back to pacing, his footsteps thumping around the room. His brother tried to offer him support, but he didn't want to hear a word of it, slapping his hands away when he tried to comfort him.

Drea exhaled, rubbing her temples, her shoulders tense with stress. "I'm leaning towards that."

A chorus of agreements rang throughout the air, everyone nodding along.

"Alright." She pushed through the apprehension I could see in her eyes, sitting up straighter and projecting an air of strength and confidence. "So, we need to come up with a plan to—"

"I'm sorry, but why are we listening to you?" It was one of the high-ranking Bratva soldiers. Peter? Paul? No, Perry? Fuck, why was I always so crap with names? "You're not the *Pakhan*. You're just married to him. Just because he's gone doesn't mean we have to take orders from you—"

Drea whipped out a gun and shot him in the head with zero hesitation. His body thumped to the ground, blood and brain matter spraying across the wall. Smoke billowed from the barrel of the gun, curling into the air. Nobody moved a muscle, the room going deathly silent. She placed her elbow on the table and leant forward, letting the gun lull in her hand as she lazily pointed it around the room.

"Was there anyone else?" She moved her eyes from person to person, daring them to step forward. Daring them to question her right to be sitting in that chair, to be giving orders.

"No."

"No."

"Nyet."

"No."

She nodded, satisfied. "Good." She placed the gun down but kept it in arms reach. "Now, we need to come up with a plan."

"Any plan we come up with is pointless unless we find the location of that island," Mikhail said, his voice layered in frustration. "That was the whole reason we sent Nikolai undercover."

"And there's no other way we can find out where it is?" Vincenzo asked.

People started chucking out ideas, all of which were crushed by Mikhail. The tension in the room built higher and higher with every suggestion he knocked back, and I felt the hope inside me diminish by the second. I didn't like feeling so helpless, like there was nothing I could do. The people I loved were in mortal danger and all I could do was stand there and listen despairingly as every idea was squandered. Deemed too risky or with no chance of success.

This couldn't be how it ended. There had to be *something* we could do. Talon couldn't win. He couldn't be allowed to just come into our lives and take those we loved with no consequences.

"Are you okay?" My gaze cut to my dad who had moved to my side. He watched me with concerned eyes as everyone continued to argue amongst themselves about what to do.

"No, I'm not," I answered honestly. How could I possibly be okay? The man I loved was going to die...if he wasn't dead already, that is. Pain squeezed my heart, constricting it to the point that I felt like I was going to collapse from the agony of it. I couldn't live in a world without him.

My dad laid a hand on my shoulder. "It will be okay. We'll find him."

"I thought you'd be glad Nikolai was gone." It was a mean thing to say. I knew that. But I had a tendency to lash out when I felt cornered, useless.

“How could I be, knowing how much pain it would cause you?” He gave me a small, sad smile. “I don’t like the man, sure. I’ve made that more than clear. But I know how much it hurts to lose the one you love. It’s something I would never wish on my worst enemy, let alone my daughter.”

“You’re talking about Mum.”

“Yes,” he whispered sadly. “You really should give her another chance, Tatiana. She—”

I held up a hand. “This is so not the time.”

“Okay. Fair enough. But we *do* need to talk about it eventually.”

“No. We really don’t.” That was a conversation I wasn’t even remotely interested in having. Not now, not ever.

The debate flying around the room about what to do next reached a crescendo, everybody yelling and screaming over the top of one another, trying to get their point across. The frustration within me reached boiling point. We were getting nowhere, and the more time we wasted arguing amongst ourselves, the more likely Nikolai and the others would be dead by the time we found them. Drea seemed to be feeling the same frustration I was, because she slammed her hand down on the table, demanding silence. It worked.

The room went so quiet, the only thing that you could hear was people breathing. For such a little woman, she sure held a lot of power over these men. Or maybe none of them wanted to join Percy on the floor.

“Alright. Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to worry about finding the island later. Right now, I want to get our soldiers ready so that as soon as we *do* have the location, we’re ready to go.” She looked at Arturo. “How many can you bring to the table?”

“Forty. Some of them are still in the early stages of training, though.”

Drea nodded. “My brother can bring seventeen. What are our numbers?” she asked Vladimir.

“Our force was recently replenished after the attack. Currently, we have sixty-five. Half of that are the new soldiers sent over from Russia. They’re still in the middle of their evaluation, so I’m unsure of their skill set, but they should all be proficient in basic hand-to-hand combat and weapons training. We could possibly get more if we reached out to Sergei—”

“No,” Drea and I said at the same time. We shared a look with one another. She knew as well as I did that they didn’t have a great relationship with their grandfather, that they wouldn’t want him involved. We had to do this without him.

“We’re not going to Sergei,” Drea said sternly, her voice laced with authority.

Vladimir bowed his head in acknowledgement of her command.

“Where do we sit with weapons?”

“We have enough to supply our own soldiers, but not the others,” Vladimir answered.

Arturo finally sat down but his leg bounced repeatedly, like he still couldn’t keep still. A nervous habit, no doubt. “We still have the shipment of guns supplied to us by Dimitri. It’s not enough to arm everyone, but we can make do.”

“I can cover the rest,” Mikhail added. “Just get me the final numbers and I’ll pull it from my personal inventory.”

Vincenzo pulled his phone out. “On it.”

Drea took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s start getting the soldiers all here. I don’t want to waste any time. I want to leave the moment we have a

location.” She raised a hand to silence Mikhail, who had been about to say something. “Yes, I know we haven’t figured that out yet, but we will.”

The man looked doubtful but kept his mouth shut.

To be honest, so was I. Surely if there was some other way to find the island, they would have thought of it the first time around instead of putting Nikolai undercover.

“Mine are already on the way,” Arturo said. “They’ll be arriving within the hour.”

Drea checked her phone for the time. “Good. The cartel will be here roughly at the same time. Now—”

The laptop on the desk dinged with an incoming notification. Drea ignored it, but when she tried to continue on, it dinged again.

And again, and again.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” she screeched, picking it up and preparing to throw it across the room.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I rushed forward and quickly took the laptop from her hands before she could let it go.

Nikolai had a thing about smashing electronics. He was still holding a grudge against Aleksandr for some fancy computer the brute had broken years ago.

Drea growled, releasing it with a huff. “I’m good. I’m good.” She ran her hands down her hair and flicked them down her chest, taking a deep, calming breath.

The laptop was still dinging. Someone was clearly desperate to get a hold of Aleksandr or something. The notifications were going off the charts. Drea’s eyes sliced to it and I swear it looked like she was going to take me out to get to it.

I started opening the laptop. “Okay, I’m just going to shut it off—what the hell is this?”

The entire screen was black, and smack dab in the centre of it was a set of numbers in big, white block font.

“What? What’s going on?” Arturo asked.

I showed Drea first and then turned the laptop around to face the room.

Mikhail frowned and got to his feet, coming closer. “They’re... coordinates. Latitude and longitude.”

Vincenzo’s eyes widened as something flashed across the screen. “Whoa.”

I curved my body over the top of the device so I could see. Text was literally being written across the screen beneath the numbers right before my eyes, like someone was typing it in real time, but no one was.

At least, no one there.

“You’re running out of time.

Save my Lukyan.”

“Save my Lukyan?” Vincenzo read out loud, brows snapped together. “Save my—” he gasped in realisation and pointed vigorously at the screen.

“That’s Lukyan’s stalker!”

“She hacked into Aleksandr’s laptop to give us these coordinates to save him?” Christian asked, speaking for the first time.

When Arturo cut him an angry scowl, I understood why he hadn’t said a word before, why none of the four guards responsible for Illayana’s safety had said a word. The poor guys were in trouble for losing Illayana...again.

My dad moved to the window and looked outside cautiously. “That means she’s watching us. Right now. How else would she know we’re around Aleksandr’s laptop to see that message?”

Made sense. From what Nikolai told me of the woman, she was incredibly smart and resourceful. She was also completely infatuated—*obsessed*—with Lukyan.

Mikhail took the laptop from me, looking it over. “How did she find the location of the island?”

“Who cares?” Arturo jumped to his feet, eagerness in his eyes. “We have what we need. Let’s go.”

Vladimir cleared his throat. “We don’t even know if we can trust this information. For all we know, Talon could have sent that.”

“It’s highly doubtful.” Mikhail typed on the laptop, but nothing happened. The device was being controlled by someone else. “Talon has what he wants. There’s no logical reason why he’d risk sending an army to his doorstep.”

“So we’re in agreement?” Drea looked around the room. “We’ll treat the information as accurate and prepare to strike?”

“Uh, just hang on a second,” I said, raising a finger in the air. “We might have the location of the island now, but how the hell are we going to get to it? Talon surely has some sort of precaution in place for that. Lookouts or

something. People watching for intruders. There's no way we'll get within ten miles of that island without being spotted."

"Oh, that's easy." Mikhail slammed the laptop shut, clearly giving up on trying to hack the hacker. "I have a submarine."

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Chapter Thirty-Nine



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

THE CHAINS AROUND MY wrists and ankles rattled, echoing through the underground caverns of the Arena as I shuffled along.

We moved in a single file, Father and Autumn at my back, Aleksandr and Lukyan at my front. Our cuffs were all locked together. Connected to make it harder to run if we tried to escape. Pointless considering we would never try to escape without Illayana.

Ten A-Team soldiers escorted us, five leading the charge and five covering the rear. Every single one of them was armed with a high-powered machine gun, their focus unwavering. They hadn't told us where they were taking us, but then again, they didn't really have to. I could hear the roar of the crowd from all the way down there.

The next round of Talon's games was about to begin...and we were the main attraction.

Lukyan glanced over his shoulder. “You gotta admit, impending death aside and all, this place is pretty fucking cool.”

I glared, opening my mouth.

“I know, I know. ‘Shut up, Lukyan’,” he said, rolling his eyes before turning back around.

Aleksandr grunted in agreement at his words.

To be fair, I did agree with Lukyan. If you took out who made the Arena and what was about to happen, the place was pretty awesome. But, like always, Lukyan’s timing was off. There was a time and place for it, and that wasn’t while we were getting marched to our death.

I had no idea how much time had passed since our capture. There was no way to differentiate night and day down there. But based on the amount of meals we’d received, I’d say it had been roughly two days. During that time, I’d done nothing but work out, pray Illayana was okay and think about Tatiana.

The chances of us getting out of there alive were basically non-existent. Even *if* someone was going to try and rescue us, they had no idea where we were. I’d come to terms with it and accepted that I was going to die very, very soon. The only thing I cared about was how it was going to affect Tatiana.

My beautiful, golden-haired goddess. I’d promised her I would come back to her. That’s what hurt the most. In my final moments, I would let her down...again.

No one else had come to visit us since Talon and Dominik. Our food was even delivered by one of the A-team soldiers, like Talon didn’t trust anyone else to come near us (probably smart, given how I managed to get in there).

Lukyan had been surprisingly...tolerable during our time locked in the cells. He'd barely said two words, in fact. I think, like the rest of us, he was too worried about Illayana to really focus on anything else.

We were led down gloomy corridors and up spiral staircases (presumably because we all couldn't fit in the elevators at once), until we finally stopped in front of a heavy cage door. Through the metal bars, I could see a huge sand field encircled by flaming tiki torches. Racks of weapons were off the side, along with shields of all different shapes and sizes.

It was giving a very "roman gladiator" kind of vibe, which made the TVs mounted high on the walls seem completely out of place.

"This is where we come to train every day before the games begin," Father said from over my shoulder.

"Talon let you train?" Lukyan stared ahead at the field with an almost dream-like expression on his face.

"Of course he did. Above all else, Talon wants to put on a good show. He can't do that if the fighters are malnourished and out of practice. It's one of the reasons why he feeds us so well. It wouldn't look good if the fighters pass out from dehydration and starvation two minutes into the fight." He pointed at what looked like a huge concrete door that took up half the wall. "That's the entrance into the main fighting area, where everyone watches. We train here before the fights start to warm up, and then we're ushered through the door out into the public."

"He wasn't worried you guys might use those weapons over there to try to escape?" I asked.

The chains rattled as he lifted his arm to tap the collar around his neck. "These prevented that. The collars aren't removed until we're about to step into the arena."

One of the guards turned the crank and the cage door began to rise with a groan. One by one, they unlocked our cuffs, pushing us into the sand field.

First Lukyan, who hadn't been prepared for it and he stumbled forward, landing roughly on his hands and knees with a grunt.

Next Aleksandr. The same guard who shoved Lukyan undid his cuffs. The moment my brother was free, he grabbed the guard by his tactical vest, yanked him forward and smashed his forehead right into his nose, breaking it. The guard cried out in pain. Aleksandr shoved him away and then went right to Lukyan, helping him up.

The other guards had their guns up and aimed at us instantly, expecting us all to start fighting and trying to escape, but that wasn't what that was about. Aleksandr wasn't trying to escape. He just wanted to punish the guard for hurting Lukyan. His overprotectiveness covered all those he loved. Plus, we would never try to escape without Illayana.

When the other guards realised we weren't trying to make a run for it, they finished unlocking us, opting not to shove us inside like the first guard had done, allowing us to walk in at our own pace.

The cage door slammed down with an ominous *bang*. The guards dispersed, leaving us alone.

"I don't see Illayana," Lukyan said, looking around the room.

Neither did I. If she wasn't there, then where the fuck was she? My mind went to dark, evil places. Places where unthinkable things happened. I tried to block it out.

Talon wouldn't do that. He wanted Father to suffer by watching us die. That included Illayana. Still, she'd been gone for nearly two whole days. What had Talon done to her in that time?

“She’ll be here.” Aleksandr’s voice sounded more confident than I’m sure he felt.

“Yes. She will,” Father agreed.

The woman, Autumn, stood at my father’s side, stance strong. I wasn’t sure if she could be trusted yet. Yes, she had agreed to fight *with* us instead of against us. But still, we didn’t know her. There was every chance she could turn around and stab us in the back.

“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,” Father commanded.

We all bowed our heads. “Yes, Father.”

He grabbed my arm, stopping me from walking away like Aleksandr and Lukyan. I frowned, looking down at his hand in confusion.

“Give me a moment alone with my son,” he told Autumn.

She saluted him. “As his Royal Grouchiness commands.” Then she bowed eloquently before walking away.

Father shook his head, mild amusement on his lips before it vanished. He levelled his gaze on me, seriousness burning in his eyes. “Are you sure you’re okay with what we all discussed last night?”

Ah. We’d all had a family talk about what we were going to do when the games started. We weren’t exactly sure what Talon had planned, but there were really only two options.

He could either pit us against others. Our family versus the other fighters.

Or...he could pit us against *each other*. A fight to the death between us, where only one came out victorious.

Of course, we all hoped that wouldn’t be the option, but there was every likelihood that it could be.

If it was...well, we needed to be prepared. So, last night, we'd come up with a plan.

"I'm sure." I gave him a small smile. "I'm not capable of killing any of you."

"Nor am I." He squeezed my shoulder. "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—"

He held his palm up, silencing me. "If I thought for even a moment it would make any difference, I would beg Talon to let you all go."

I internally scoffed. There was nothing anyone could say or do that would make Talon let us go. He was determined to make my father suffer, and we provided him the perfect way to do that.

"But we both know that's pointless. I wish this was never a position you had to be in—"

"*Father*," I pressed, voice stern. He stopped his rambling and looked me in the eyes. That emotionless mask he always kept on his face was gone. He was showing me everything. For the first time in my life, he was sharing his emotions with me. Sadness. Hopelessness. Desperation. Love. It was all right there. He was holding nothing back, letting me see it all.

"We all agreed. If only one of us can get out of this place alive, it's Illayana." It had been a unanimous decision.

If, worst case scenario, Talon decided to pit us against each other for the games—something every single one of us was incapable of doing—we decided to sacrifice ourselves, so Illayana would be the last one standing.

Father didn't want any of us to die. In fact, when Aleksandr first suggested the idea, he flat out refused. He tried coming up with other solutions, other ideas, but they all fell short.

"We'll try and escape."

"We'll demand a different game."

"We'll refuse to fight."

He knew as well as I did that, if we refused to fight, Talon would just kill us all. At least that way, Illayana might live. She might survive. So the plan was simple. Father would hold Illayana back while The Crimson Death took our lives quickly and painlessly—something the woman claimed she could do easily—and then Father would kill *her* before finally killing himself, leaving Illayana to be the last one standing. That last bit of the plan had been organised when Autumn was asleep. We needed her to do the killing because none of us were capable of hurting each other like that. But once she served her purpose, Father would end her so that Illayana could live.

It was a horrible plan, one we prayed we wouldn't have to implement. But Aleksandr, Lukyan, my father and I weren't physically or mentally capable of killing each other. If Talon chose to have us fight each other, we would have no other choice but to go through with it.

Father leant forward and rested his forehead against mine. He closed his eyes, taking a big, deep breath in before he whispered three words I'd never heard him say to me before.

"YA tebya lyublyu." I love you.

And then he was gone, leaving me to stare dumbfounded after him with my mouth hanging wide open.

Oh, he must be really, really worried we aren't going to make it through this alive.

He went to Aleksandr next, pulling him aside to have the same conversation he'd just had with me. My suspicions were confirmed when a

look of pure and utter shock flashed across my brother's face, no doubt from Father's declaration of love.

It wasn't like we didn't know he loved us. Of course we did. He showed us that in the way he fiercely protected us, in the way he cared for us. He'd just never said the actual words before.

When he got to Lukyan...well...it's Lukyan. The idiot acted exactly how I predicted he would.

"Oh my god! I love you, too!" he screamed, throwing his arms around Father in a huge bear hug.

Father grunted, stumbling back from the force of it but didn't push him away, patting his back lightly with a small smile on his lips.

"Ladies and gentleman, are we ready for the next round of the Til Death Games?!"

We all looked up at the set of TVs hanging on the wall, seeing a man dressed in a tuxedo and holding a microphone, displaying on each screen. Tension descended over us as the man announced the events of the night, saying that there was something special planned for everyone. That it would be a night no one would ever forget. That something that had never happened before in the history of the games was about to take place.

I found his voice irritating. If I somehow made it out of this, I was going to take his voice box so he could never talk again. I'm sure I'd be doing everyone a fucking favour. Maybe—

"Father!"

At that voice, we all spun, seeing Illayana running towards us from another entrance. Behind her marched a line of A-Team soldiers, all armed.

"Illayana!" Father caught her when she jumped into his arms.

Relief literally took my breath away. My body slumped slightly, my hand grasping at my chest.

She is okay. She is okay.

We crowded her, asking her a million questions.

“Are you alright?”

“What happened?”

“Did he touch you? I’ll fucking kill him.”

Illayana laughed softly at our fretting. *That is a good sign, right?*

She didn’t look any worse for wear. She was still in the same clothes she was wearing before she was taken from the cells. There was no blood and no bruises. If someone tried to take her against her will, she would have fought back. Hard.

“I’m fine,” she said, stepping back out of Father’s arms. “Talon didn’t touch me. 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 man 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.”

We released a collective sigh, all beyond pleased to hear she hadn’t been hurt.

Before we could say anything else, one of the soldiers barked out a command. “You two, against the wall.” —he pointed to Autumn and Father — “You four, over near the door.”

None of us moved.

“Now!” he demanded, waving his gun around.

Aleksandr, Lukyan, Illayana and I all looked to our Father and waited. When he gave the slightest nod of his head, we moved to where the guard indicated.

Father and Autumn went to the wall and placed their palms against it, spreading their legs as if they were about to be searched. They clearly knew what was to come next, having obviously been through the process before.

A guard approached them each from behind and used a key to unlock their collars. Father stretched out his neck when the device was finally removed, Autumn doing the same. The guards kept their guns trained on all of us as they herded Father and Autumn over to the rest of us.

Apprehension bubbled up inside me. The roar of the crowd was so loud that the walls shook as the announcer continued his speech, riling them up more and more with every word he said. I shifted from one foot to the other, adrenaline surging in my veins. My siblings did the same, determination and anger burning on their faces.

I despised every bit of it. I hated that there was nothing we could do. The hopelessness. The helplessness. Either we fought or we died. There was no in between.

“Introducing the next competitors of the Til Death Games, The Crimson Death and the most notorious family in the Bratva, The Volkovs!”

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Chapter Forty



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

I STEPPED OUT ONTO the field, hand up to shield my eyes from the blinding light bearing down on me. The crowd erupted, screaming, chanting, stomping their feet and clapping their hands.

“Volkov!”

“Volkov!”

“Volkov!”

The atmosphere was electric. The excitement was contagious. Having been on the other side, exactly where they were, it made being all the way down there slightly disorienting.

You could barely see a thing up there in the stands. The spotlights placed around the Arena made it almost impossible. The only thing I could make out was the outlines of the box seats all the way at the top, but they were way too far away to see who was inside them.

Lukyan and Illayana turned slowly in a circle, mouths open slightly as they took in the Arena. The field had been condensed into one terrain instead of being broken off into several.

Sand. They'd chosen sand. I wasn't happy about that. Sand was harder to fight on.

Talon appeared on the jumbotron dangling above our heads. He had a smile on his face but his eyes burned with anger. I suspected it was from how loud the crowd was cheering for us, chanting our name.

Well, if it isn't the consequences of your own actions.

“Wow! Aren’t we excited?!” He had no microphone, but his voice rang out into the air.

The crowd cheered again, louder this time.

“I present to you, the Volkovs, the most lethal and dangerous family in all of the mafia.” He emphasised the ‘I’ in that statement, trying to make it clear that *he* was the one responsible for capturing us. A feat not easily accomplished. “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!”

Roaring cheers erupted from all around us. Talon was really laying it on thick.

Lukyan raised his hand and waved to the crowd, like he was some kind of music superstar and everyone had come here to watch him sing, not be bludgeoned to death. Aleksandr slapped him upside the head, and Lukyan winced, rubbing the back of his skull.

“Now, I’m sure you’re all *dying* to know what we have planned for the family tonight,” Talon smiled evilly. “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.”

The relief I felt at finding out we weren’t fighting each other was short lived as the Arena flooded with soldiers, coming in from all different directions to surround us.

Five soldiers. Ten soldiers. Fifteen soldiers. The number just kept climbing.

“Back to back!” Father ordered. We quickly formed a small circle, standing shoulder to shoulder with our fronts facing outward. Father grasped Autumn by the arm and moved her into position beside him when the woman didn’t move.

Twenty. Twenty-five. Thirty.

“Aleksandr, with your sister.” My brother stepped back into the circle and moved to the other side to stand next to Illayana. We all shuffled along so he could fit, keeping the formation tight.

Thirty-five. Forty. Forty-five.

The soldiers just kept on coming, no end in sight. It was a mixture of the A-Team soldiers and the normal guards. Some were dressed in tactical gear. Some had knives. Others had bats. Batons. I think I glimpsed a mace?

My gaze collided with Luke’s. His eyes shone with regret. He didn’t want to be there, that much was obvious. Ryan was at his side, and so was John, whose expression was filled with glee. He smiled at me, flashing his teeth

in a feral smile. He pointed at me, then at himself, a silent promise that he was coming for me.

That was fine with me. I had been waiting to kill him since the moment I met him.

“Have I delivered, or have I delivered?!” Talon roared, his arms spread out wide.

The crowd cheered, stomping their feet and clapping their hands.

“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, landing on Dominik.

His eyes widened in shock as he was surrounded by soldiers. “What? What’s going on here?!” They grasped him tightly and, at Talon’s command, escorted him out of the box seat. A few moments later, he was thrown into the sand field with us.

“Father,” I growled, my eyes locked on the backstabbing man that was my uncle as he picked himself up, dusting sand off his clothes. His head darted left to right in distress, looking for a way out.

“Leave him. He’s *mine*,” Father vowed, darkness and vengeance dripping from his tone.

“Of course, we want to keep it fair, so weapons will be in play,” Talon continued as if nothing had happened. He’d just betrayed the very man responsible for bringing my father—and, by extension, us—to him. The look on Dominik’s face was fucking priceless. “But they’ll have to get to them first.”

The ground shook, and walls of weapons rose from the sand at the edges of the Arena. Knives, swords, spears, shields, axes, katanas. All right there.

His army of soldiers stood between us and the weapons, which meant we'd have to go through them to get to them.

Talon didn't give a shit about fair. If he did, it wouldn't be fifty versus six. There was no way we were going to win, because he didn't *want* us to win. He wanted to humiliate us. To watch us get overrun and slaughtered.

Well, we weren't going to make it easy for them, that was for damn sure.

The men surrounded us from all sides, forming a big, loose circle. They moved closer and closer as one, slinking forward like a snake. I could see Dominik on the outskirts, running for the wall of weapons.

Talon was still talking but I'd stopped listening. I think all of us did, focusing instead on the army of men that was getting closer and closer.

Father shifted at my side, his eyes never leaving the threat in front of him. "Fight hard. Watch each other's backs. And remember, I love you all."

Illayana gasped, her gaze whipping to him in shock. She hadn't been there when Father pulled each of us aside one by one to say a final goodbye, so it was the first time hearing those words from him. And it had shocked her, like it did all of us.

Aleksandr gripped the top of her head with his whole hand and turned it, forcing her to look forward again. "*Sosredotoch'tes'!*" *Focus!* he snapped.

Deep, bassy music began to play. Lukyan jumped up and down on the spot, shaking out his hands. Father cracked his neck and put his fists up. Autumn stretched her arms above her head, twisting her body at the waist left and right.

"If we don't make it out of this, Your Royal Grouchiness, it has *not* been nice working with you," she said to Father, taking a fighting stance.

Father grunted. "Same to you, devil woman."

Aleksandr whispered to Illayana to stay close to him and she nodded. For once, she wasn't pulling the whole "I can take care of myself" card, because this was a situation where we all needed to help each other. They each took up position, bodies tight and ready for action.

I took a deep breath, my gaze shifting from one person to the next, assessing. I thought of Tatiana. Of her bewitching hazel eyes and silky golden hair. Of her beautiful smile and her soft, smooth skin. Her face materialised in front of my eyes and I couldn't help but smile.

Tatiana, I love you.

"Let the games begin!" Talon roared.

Aleksandr rushed forward and front kicked the first soldier within his reach, sending him flying back. A knife came sailing towards him. He blocked, punched the man in the face, took the blade from his hand and tossed it over his shoulder to Illayana. She caught it, flipped it into a better hold and sliced right across a man's throat.

I ducked and weaved, trying my best to avoid the swing of an axe and fists hurtling towards my face. I twisted out of the axe's path, grabbed a man by the back of the head and smashed his face into my knee as I drove it upwards. Lukyan's hollering war cry rang in my ears as he ran past me and literally jumped into a man's arms, knocking him down.

Swiping up the axe, I gripped it with both hands, lifted it over my head and sent it hurtling at the soldier running towards Lukyan. His whole body went airborne from the force of the axe impaling deep into his chest and he let loose a blood-curdling scream. A scream that made me smile like a feral wolf.

I dodged and punched, kicked and blocked. My body worked on complete autopilot. Muscle memory. Attack, defend. Attack, defend. *Don't stop to*

think. Just move, move, move.

The adrenaline helped numb the pain of the strikes I couldn't avoid. Arms and legs swung in every direction. Blades curved through the air. Bones snapped. Noses broke. Necks twisted at ungodly angles. It was complete and utter mayhem. A total free-for-all. You defended yourself and struck back, or you died. There was no sitting this one out.

Lukyan dove forward, rolling along the sand and swiped up a machete. He turned, swinging it in a powerful arc that had the sharp edge lodging deep into the side of a soldier's neck. Blood sprayed. He ripped it out and struck again. Hacking and hacking and hacking, drenching himself in blood.

A kick to the stomach had me grunting in pain. I managed to grab his foot at the last second, mildly lessening the blow, but it still fucking hurt. I twisted sharply, hearing a resounding *crack*, and then smashed the side of my fist down onto his shin, snapping the bone. He screamed and went down like a house of cards.

I reared back, narrowly avoiding another strike, ducked under another one from a different soldier and threw out a wicked fast combo: uppercut to the chin, left hook to the face, knee strike to the gut, front kick to the chest, roundhouse kick to the jaw, alternating each blow between the two men. They both crumbled under the onslaught.

A big, heavy body rammed into me, lifting me up in a running tackle. My back slammed into the sand. Pain shot up my spine. The flash of silver caught my eye and I just barely managed to throw my hands up in time to stop the blade from piercing my chest.

It was John. He smirked, slapped his free hand down onto the one curled around the hilt of the knife and pushed forward, throwing his body weight behind it.

I growled, struggling to hold it back. My arms shook, my teeth clenched in exertion.

He laughed, the blade inching closer and closer. “I knew there was something off about you. I just *knew* it.”

What does he want, a fucking medal or something?

I darted my head left to right, looking for something—*anything*—to help me get out of the situation. I saw Aleksandr fighting off four men, trying to keep them back from Illayana, who was on the ground nursing what looked like a pretty bad blow to the head. There was blood trailing down the side of her face.

Father and Autumn were trying to get over to them, but for every soldier they killed, another two took their place.

Lukyan was in the same position I was, except instead of trying to stop a knife, he was trying to pry the hands around his throat away. His feet dug into the ground as he bucked his body, gasping, desperate for air.

I took it all in in only a few seconds and a dark cloud of anger took over me, burrowing deep into my soul, into every cell of my being. I couldn’t let him die. I couldn’t. I had to do something.

Not my baby brother.

I snarled, grabbed a fistful of sand and threw it into John’s face. He cursed, the shock providing the perfect distraction for me to knock the knife out of his hands. I heaved with every bit of strength I possessed and we rolled, growling and snarling as we wrestled for the dominant position.

Rage pulsed in my veins and I reared forward and tore out a chunk of his cheek with my teeth. He screamed, the pain overwhelming him enough to allow me to wind up on top. Blood stained his skin. He clutched the side of

his face, crying. I spat his flesh into his face, gripped his head and snapped his neck in one quick move.

Scrambling to my feet, I rushed towards Lukyan, trying to dodge the attacks of other soldiers as I ran. Duck, punch. Deflect, kick. Block, elbow strike.

I'm not going to make it in time. I'm not going to make it in time. I'm not

Bang!

I froze, everybody in the Arena doing the exact same thing, exchanging looks of confusion.

Was that...a gunshot?

The man on top of Lukyan slid to the side and then collapsed to the ground, sand wafting up into the air around him. Right in the centre of his forehead was a huge bullet hole. It didn't look like it was made from a standard weapon, like a handgun or even a machine gun. The entry wound was far too big. 50 calibre, easy. And the sound of the gunshot hadn't been close. Most likely a sniper.

Lukyan jumped to his feet, hand to his throat, his skin red and marred with bruising. He looked down at the lifeless body at his feet in shock.

Movement behind him caught my attention. "Lukyan! Behind you!"

My brother spun and—

Bang!

The soldier that had been running towards him dropped dead, an identical bullet hole smack dab in the middle of his forehead like the other. All of sudden, soldiers started dropping like flies...but *only* the ones around Lukyan. Only the ones who came near *him*. Any time someone even made an attempt to go near him, they were shot dead. None of the soldiers

fighting me or my siblings were shot. It was only Lukyan. Whoever the sniper was, they were protecting him, and him alone. He just stood still, watching in shock as soldiers fell to the ground all around him.

I caught a fist flying towards my face. I twisted sharply and front kicked him in the chest before lashing out with another strike to a soldier coming at me from the side. I didn't care who the sniper was. I didn't care that they were only protecting Lukyan. The only thing that mattered was that they were keeping him safe, shielding him from danger.

"Go to Illayana!" I screamed, ducking under a roundhouse kick.

Lukyan nodded and sprinted to our sister. The sniper followed him, taking out any soldiers in his vicinity, providing a clear path for him to run in any direction he pleased.

Block, block, kick, punch. My body ached, my energy dissipating fast. I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep it up. My reflexes were getting slower. More strikes were making contact with my body, sending pain shooting all over me. I didn't know how many soldiers I'd killed, but it didn't seem to make any difference. I was being overrun. Two soldiers. Three. Four. Five. They swarmed me, each one trying to get a piece of me, hitting, punching, kicking.

I blocked and lashed out, trying to get them off me, but more just took their place. I couldn't—

BOOM!

A huge, concussive force sent me hurtling into the air. I curved my body into a tight ball to try to protect myself and then slammed painfully into the ground.

Chapter Forty-One



TATIANA ANDREEVA

I STEPPED THROUGH THE rubble and into the well-lit arena, keeping my grip tight on the machine gun that was strapped across my body. My ears filled with the sounds of screaming, crying, people fighting. Smoke curled into the air, hindering my ability to see properly, and small blazes of fire burned bright around me, courtesy of the explosive we'd just let off. A blaring alarm rang out into the night.

I fired my gun, the recoil hammering into my shoulder. *Thump, thump, thump.* I didn't differentiate my targets. I didn't hold back, didn't hesitate. Anybody who wasn't a Volkov or part of our raiding party was free fucking game. Including the people buried beneath mountains of stone, crying out for help. The people who'd been sitting in the stands, cheering for the death of my Nikolai when we'd blown up the side of the Arena.

It had been a mission and a half to get there in time, and even then, we almost didn't make it. Luckily for us, the majority of Talon's army had been

called to the Arena, so not only were we able to sneak onto the island relatively undetected, but with all the noise and bluster of what was going on, it was like a shining beacon in the night sky, telling us exactly where we needed to go.

We all split off into our pre-arranged groups. Drea and her brother with the Bratva and the cartel soldiers, and Arturo, Vincenzo and I with the La Cosa Nostra ones.

Each of us had a job to do. Drea and Juan were responsible for finding Aleksandr and Lukyan. Arturo was on Illayana. I was on Nikolai. Mikhail was on Dimitri. There was no set plan exactly. Just get in, find them and get out.

I couldn't stop to think about what condition Nikolai might be in. Every time I did, it would almost cripple me. I had to believe he was okay. Anything else was unacceptable. If he was hurt...if he was *dead*, I'd kill them all. Every. Last. One of them.

I stuck by Arturo's side as we forced our way through the hole we'd blown into the side of the building, being careful where I placed my booted feet so I didn't roll an ankle. The bulletproof vest strapped to my chest offered little comfort against the danger we were walking into. I had as many weapons as I could carry secured to my body without them becoming a hindrance. Hip, waist, ankle, thigh. A mixture of daggers and guns.

Dead bodies littered the ground. Far too many to count, most of them in pieces. Blood seeped deep into the sand. The air reeked of burnt corpses and rotting flesh. Of death and destruction.

Arturo and I spotted Illayana at the same time, crouched over the body of one of Talon's soldiers, repeatedly smashing a rock into his face. My best friend had undoubtedly seen better days. She was covered head to toe in dirt

and blood. Some of it others'. Some of it definitely hers. Her clothes were torn, her hair a frizzled mess.

Aleksandr was fighting around her, snapping necks and breaking bones, but I couldn't see any of the other Volkovs. I couldn't see Nikolai.

The panic inside me grew. *Where is he?*

The sight of Illayana made Arturo growl and he took off, charging towards her. He blew away anyone who came into his path, offering no mercy, no hesitation. Vincenzo and I struggled to keep up with him. He dropped to one knee at her side, his machine gun up and firing a stream of bullets as his soldiers surrounded us in a protective circle, keeping Talon's men from getting any closer.

Illayana looked up, surprise flashing in her eyes. "Arturo," she breathed. Her gaze darted to me and did a double take. "Tatiana, what are you—how did you find us?"

"Later," Arturo snapped. He quickly unsnapped the bulletproof vest from around his body and then shoved it over her head, forcing it on her. Illayana didn't fight. Whether that was because she didn't want to waste the time or she just didn't have any energy left, I wasn't sure. She looked like she'd been to hell and back.

Aleksandr's chest heaved up and down as he took a second to catch his breath, the surprise in his eyes mirroring Illayana's. He was covered in blood, cuts and bruises dotting his skin. Exhaustion lined his face but he didn't let it affect him, keeping his stance powerful and body ready for action.

I reached back and pulled a gun out from behind my back, offering it to him. He nodded in thanks, took the weapon, checked it over and then held it up, keeping watch over the area.

“Can you walk?” Arturo asked, helping Illayana stand.

“I’m fine.” Though she stumbled when she finally got to her feet. His arms instantly wrapped around her waist, holding her up.

“Illayana, where’s Nikolai?”

“Nik?” she looked around, still slightly dazed. There was blood running down the side of her face from a nasty cut. She pointed across the Arena, all the way to the other side. “The last time I saw him he was over there somewhere.”

I cursed. Between our position and there, it was like a goddamn battlefield. Bodies everywhere. Some alive and fighting for their lives, others lying motionless on the ground.

“Give me a gun,” Illayana demanded, pushing out of Arturo’s arms to stand without his help.

Arturo shook his head. “No, you’re hurt. I’m getting you out of here.”

“I’m not leaving without my family!” she hissed. “Now give me a fucking weapon.”

Arturo growled before handing her his machine gun. She checked it over quickly, like Aleksandr had done, before holding it up.

“Is that Drea?” Aleksandr stared out across the field, eyes narrowed in concentration.

“Yes. Her and her brother—” and he was gone, pushing his way out of the protective circle of Arturo’s men and running after her, not even letting me finish the sentence. *Whatever.*

“I need to find my father.” Illayana looked around frantically, searching. It was hard to see anything in the place with the smoke and all the people moving around, some fighting, some running away.

I didn't give a shit about Dimitri, as bad as that sounded. There was only one person I wanted to find. "You find your father. I'll find Nikolai."

"We shouldn't separate," Arturo chimed in. "It's too dangerous."

"Tell someone who cares. I'm going." I stepped away and he yelled out.

"Wait! Vin, go with her." His younger brother nodded and moved up to my side, gun ready. There was none of that playful banter he was very well known for. Just pure focus and determination.

Illayana's arms wrapped around me in a tight hug. "Be safe."

I quickly returned the hug. "You too."

Arturo's men dissipated, following him and Illayana as they went a different way. I ran in the direction Illayana had indicated, Vincenzo jogging at my side. A man came at me from my right. I fired, never slowing down. Another from the left. Vincenzo took him out. A knife came soaring towards me. I ducked, plucked a dagger from my thigh, threw it and kept running. Four soldiers stepped into our path, far too close for me to try and get a shot off, and attacked. Two on Vincenzo and two on me.

Duck, swerve, twist; I avoided their strikes, my movements quick and fluid. I pulled out another dagger and slashed upwards in a powerful arc. One of the men screamed, stumbling back. I blocked a strike from the other soldier and stabbed him twice in quick succession, one blow to the rib, another blow to the side of the neck. He crumbled.

I kept running.

Nikolai, where are you?

Vincenzo caught up quickly, coming back to jog at my side. After all of it was over, I'd probably feel bad for not sticking with him, but in the moment I didn't care. I needed to find Nikolai. He was there, somewhere in the chaos—

“Watch out!” Vincenzo dived, tackling me out of the path of an axe flying through the air. I grunted on impact. Soldiers swarmed us, yanking Vincenzo to his feet and punching him.

A boot came flying towards my face and I only just managed to roll out of the way before he literally stomped me to death. He was on me quickly, pinning me to the ground with his hands wrapped around my throat.

I gasped, struggling to breathe as I thrashed wildly. *You stupid piece of—*

I frantically ran a hand down my body until my fingers curled around the handle of a gun.

Bang!

He slumped against me and I shoved him off, straddling him. I stuffed the gun I’d just used to shoot him in the stomach into his mouth. His eyes widened. *Good. He is still alive.* I emptied the clip. Blood splashed me in the face, along with what I think was part of his tongue (I wasn’t sure).

I wiped my face with the back of my hand and ran to help Vincenzo. The dude did just save my life. I couldn’t just go running off again.

Having no qualms about shooting someone in the back, I fired my gun at the man crouched over Vincenzo and shot the other two standing over him. Not wanting to waste any more time, I rushed over and pulled Vincenzo to his feet.

“You good?”

He groaned, holding his side, but nodded. “Good. Go.”

We took off again, a little slower this time thanks to the injuries we’d sustained along the way, but still, fast enough.

“Where is he?!” I almost sobbed when we still hadn’t found him. The panic inside me increased every second we went without finding him,

almost suffocating me. I started to lose hope, my will to live going right along with it.

“Is that him there?” Vincenzo pointed to the right and I almost broke my neck snapping my head in that direction.

Relief nearly had me dropping to my knees, my legs buckling.

There he was.

My Nikolai.

I always loved watching him fight. There was something truly hypnotic about the way he moved. The way he swung his arms. The long stretch of his legs as he delivered powerful kicks. The brutality with which he took his enemies lives. It was like nothing could stop him, like he was death reincarnated.

Given the amount of bodies lying on the ground all around him, the analogy fit quite well, and I’d pat myself on the back for that later.

He was a small distance away, surrounded on all sides by soldiers with a wall at his back. I took off at full speed, focusing on nothing but him. Getting to him. I ducked and swerved around other people, ignoring everything and everyone else. I let loose a stream of bullets in his direction, being careful not to hit him, then I unstrapped the machine gun from my shoulder and dropped it so I could run faster, the weight of it doing nothing but holding me back.

He was up against the wall, a knife inching closer and closer to his throat as he struggled to hold it back. One last burst of speed brought me right to him and I rammed into the soldier in a brutal tackle, sending us flying into the air and landing in a heap on the ground.

The soldier was taken completely by surprise, allowing me to get the upper hand quickly. We rolled in the sand and I pushed for the dominant

position, ending up on top. I plucked a dagger from my waist and thrust it up under his chin, the blade slipping through his skin like butter. His lips opened on a silent scream and I glimpsed the knife inside his mouth. I ripped it out and plunged it deep into his eye before rolling off him and jumping to my feet.

Strong arms locked around my neck and lifted me off the ground, squeezing tight.

Fuck!

I kicked out, thrashing wildly, but whoever had me wasn't letting go. They squeezed harder and I gasped, scratching frantically at the arm crushing my throat, running out of air quickly.

The body behind me suddenly stiffened, going completely still.

"Let her go." That voice...I'd recognise that voice anywhere. It was laced with darkness, rage, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was Nikolai.

"Drop the knife or I'll snap her neck," my attacker warned.

"Motherfucker, you think I'm playing?" I was jostled forward slightly when Nikolai grabbed a fistful of my attacker's hair. "I will fuck you bloody with this knife if you don't let her go. *Right. Fucking. Now!*"

That threat scared my attacker enough for him to drop me instantly, his hands flying up in surrender. I landed roughly on my hands and knees, breathing hard. I looked over my shoulder just in time to see Nikolai sink the knife deep into the man's neck, right down to the hilt. He literally threw him to the side and then his arms were around me, holding me tight.

"Love, what are you doing here?" he breathed into my hair, his whole body shaking.

I hugged him back, squeezing so tightly that it made him groan in pain. “What a stupid fucking question to ask.” I half-laughed, half-cried. All the fear and anxiety I’d been holding in since the moment I found out he was taken came bursting out of me and I sobbed, clutching him to me like he was going to disappear again.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he chastised, kissing the side of my neck, my jaw, my cheek.

“Thank you, Tatiana, for coming to save me’ is what I believe you meant.”

He chuckled softly, grabbing the sides of my face with both hands. He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and just stared at me, those mesmerising blue eyes holding all of my attention. He kissed me softly, full of love and tenderness that made my whole body melt into him.

“Excuse me?!” Both of us snapped our gazes to Vincenzo, who just yanked out his blade from a soldier’s stomach and then kicked him away. “Kiss later, fight now!” He ducked under one strike, slashed upwards, ducked under another and spun, delivering a powerful roundhouse kick into a soldier’s jaw.

Right.

Nikolai and I jumped up, leaping back into the fight.

“Have you seen my family?” he asked, defending and attacking, defending and attacking.

“Illayana and Aleksandr, yes. Duck.” He dropped and I swung a kick over his head, smashing my foot into the side of a man’s face. “Lukyan and your father, no.” We kept close together, inching our way back across the field towards the hole we’d blown into the Arena. It’s not like it was easy to miss.

Mikhail's voice blared through my earpiece. "Dimitri secured."

Arturo's voice came next. "Illayana secured."

"Aleksandr and Lukyan secured," Drea said last.

Vincenzo touched his earpiece. "Nikolai secured. Making our way out now."

"Rendezvous at the submarine," Arturo ordered. A chorus of "Yes" followed.

I looked at Nikolai. "Your family is safe."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, they—" my eyes widened as I glimpsed a figure appear behind Nikolai, a gun pointed right at his back. I didn't stop to think, didn't hesitate. I pushed him out of the way and—

Bang!

White-hot pain exploded across my chest. My body was propelled backwards by the force of the gunshot and I landed hard on the ground, screaming out in agony.

The pain. Fuck, the pain!

I'd never been shot before and, if that is how it felt, I never wanted to be again. Jesus.

Nikolai's face appeared above me, eyes glistening with tears. "Fuck, Tati. You're okay. Why the fuck did you do that?! You're okay. It's alright." He frantically pried open my bulletproof vest and literally sagged on top of me. "You're okay. The bullet didn't penetrate the vest. You're okay. Oh fuck, you're okay."

"That's good." Whoa, was it just me or did that come out kind of sluggish?

His head snapped up and he looked at me with concern as he cradled my face. “Hey, what—” his eyes widened with fear when he looked at his hand. It was covered in blood. He lifted my head slowly and I winced. He pulled out a rock from behind me.

Did I land on that?

“Fuck.” He threw it to the side. “Get me some fucking help!” he roared to Vincenzo.

“I’m feeling a little...woozy.” Darkness crept into the corners of my vision. My head lolled to the side and Nikolai gripped my face tight.

“No. Hey! No. Stay awake, you hear me? You’ll be fine. Just stay awake.” Dizziness washed over me. My eyes suddenly felt heavy, so fucking heavy. There was a dull pain throbbing from my skull. Something wet slicked down the back of my neck.

“Tati! Hey!”

The darkness around the edges of my vision increased, spreading out, swallowing more of my sight.

Oh, boy. This can’t be good.

Nikolai started screaming, but I couldn’t hear him. Why couldn’t I hear him? I felt so weak, I couldn’t even lift my arms. I wanted to touch his face. He had such a handsome face. Beautiful. Utterly beautiful.

Nauseousness rolled through me, mixing with the dizziness. The last thing I saw was Nikolai crying before the darkness took over completely.

Chapter Forty-Two



TATIANA ANDREEVA

I GROANED, MY HEAD *pounding* like a jackhammer in my ears.
Where the fuck am I? What is going on?

My mouth felt dry, a heavy grogginess working its way through every single one of my limbs, making it almost impossible for me to move. The last thing I remembered was fighting in the Arena. The flash of a gun. The pain of getting struck in the chest. Falling. A complete wave of disorientation. Nikolai.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and struggled to push past the haze that controlled my mind. There was some sort of repetitive beeping noise swimming around in my head. It reminded me of what you'd hear in a hospital, like a heart monitor. Was that where I was?

It made sense, given the last few bits of fragmented memories I could make out.

The heaviness over my eyes slowly started to fade, and I used all of my strength to open them.

I was right. I was in a hospital. The room brought back painful memories of the last time I'd been in a room like that, but I shut them out. I locked them back away in that little corner of my mind where I refused to go.

Nikolai was slumped forward at my side, his head resting on his forearm, hand clasped over mine. He was sleeping. Lines of exhaustion marred his face. His hair was a dishevelled mess, his clothes all rumpled and dirty. They looked like the same ones he'd been wearing in the Arena. Had he not rested the entire time I'd been out?

Bloody hell, probably not. This man, I swear.

I licked my dry lips, shifting my body slightly. I didn't want to wake him, especially considering how tired he looked. My whole body ached. Pain throbbed from everywhere. My chest. My legs. Even my goddamn toes. Everything *hurt*.

Now that adrenaline wasn't flooding through my veins, masking the pain, I could feel everything. And it fucking sucked.

I was covered in wires. Some of them stuck to my chest, some of them to my forehead. They ran from me to the monitors surrounding the bed, keeping track of my vitals.

The floor-to-ceiling glass door in front of me slid open, a short, plump woman in a nurses outfit stepping into the room. She gave me a warm smile.

“Oh, you’re finally awake—”

“Shhh,” I whispered, placing a finger to my lips. Her eyes flicked to Nikolai sleeping beside me and she raised the clipboard in her hands to cover her mouth.

“Sorry,” she mouthed when she took it away. She stepped further into the room, coming to stand next to me by the bed. “I was beginning to wonder if he ever slept. He’s been awake since the moment he brought you in,” she whispered softly.

“Just out of curiosity, when was that?” My voice was hoarse, my throat all scratchy. It made me cough.

She handed me a small styrofoam cup filled with water. The name on her badge read “Marie”. I thanked her and drained the whole cup in one gulp. The refreshing liquid slithered down my throat and I moaned.

“You’ve been here just over a day.” Marie checked the monitor, writing down a few readings onto her clipboard. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” I answered honestly.

“I don’t blame you, given the condition you came in. Severe concussion, cracked rib, a few cuts, intensive bruising, multiple finger sprains. The list goes on and on. That must have been one hell of a car accident your boyfriend here pulled you out of.”

“It was,” I agreed, lying easily. I wasn’t surprised to hear that he’d come up with some sort of cover to explain my injuries. It’s not like he could have walked into the emergency room and said “Oh, she was hurt trying to rescue me from a gladiator-style, fight to the death tournament. You know, same old, same old.”

“Was anyone else brought in with me?” I asked, removing the tubes from my nose. I was dying to know how the others were. If anyone else had been hurt. What happened after I passed out.

“Just you. You’ve been in and out of consciousness for the last twenty-four hours. We’ll keep you here for another day or so, just to monitor your concussion, and then you’ll be free to go. Don’t worry, we’ve noted your

pre-existing condition in your file, so if you need to come back for any reason, the proper precautions can be taken.”

“Pre-existing condition?” I groaned, trying to sit up without jostling Nikolai.

“The pregnancy,” she smiled.

My brows snapped into a frown. “I think you’ve got the wrong file there. I’m not pregnant.”

Her frown matched mine. “Uhh.” She flipped through her clipboard, riffling through the papers. “This is awkward.”

“What is?”

“You were in quite a bit of pain when you arrived. We always run a blood test before administering morphine, and the results revealed you most certainly *are* pregnant. Very early stages, only about two weeks or so. But definitely pregnant.”

I stared at her, her words taking a little longer to process than they usually would.

Pregnant...pregnant...pregnant.

My mind just kept repeating the word over and over again, like it was waiting for me to catch on and understand the significance of what she’d just said.

Oh, god...what? How? Nikolai and I used protection every time we had sex. How strong were his goddamn swimmers?

“I’m sorry if this isn’t good news,” she said softly, offering me a sympathetic pat on the hand.

“It’s not that. It’s...well...” It wasn’t *not* good news, right?

Of course I always wanted to try and have another child. But that was *years* from then, when I’d had the chance to properly heal from the trauma

of Nikolas' death.

It was too soon. I couldn't go through what I went through last time. There's no way I'd survive losing another child.

My eyes flicked down to Nikolai, still fast asleep. "Does he know?"

"The boyfriend? No." she shook her head. "Doctor/patient confidentiality."

I nodded, slightly relieved. I needed time to process that information before even trying to tell Nikolai.



"Tatiana, please let me take the blindfold off. You're making me nervous."

I glanced over at Nikolai in the passenger seat of the car, a flicker of amusement running through me at the sudden paleness of his complexion.

A week had passed since the hospital. Since I found out I was pregnant. And I still don't think I've come to terms with it. Not really.

On one hand, I was excited. Happy. Elated. The idea of a little baby, the chance to do it all over again—the right way, with the right outcome—was an opportunity I didn't think I'd get for a very long time...if ever.

On the other hand, I was absolutely stone-cold terrified. Terrified that what happened last time would happen again. It was a crippling kind of

fear. The kind that literally took my breath away. I think I had at least ten panic attacks in the last seventy-two hours alone.

And poor Nikolai. He had no idea what was going on. Why, all of a sudden, I was gasping for air. Shaking. Feeling like I was going to pass out. But he would soon.

It was the day I was going to tell him. There was just something I had to do first.

“What’s the matter, Nicky? Don’t you trust me?” My hands glided across the steering wheel as I took a turn, a chuckle bubbling up in my throat when Nikolai released a high-pitched sound that I could have sworn was a squeal of fear.

“Behind the wheel while I’m blindfolded and can’t see what’s going on? No. No, I don’t.”

I rolled my eyes. “Relax. I’m not going to kill us.”

“Tell that to the cyclist you hit.”

“He was fine! He got right back up. I’m an excellent driver.”

“I’d believe that if you weren’t—” his words cut off as I swerved abruptly to avoid a car on the road, and he grunted when his head thumped against the window, “—driving like a goddamn manic,” he hissed. “That’s it. I’m taking this off—”

“No, don’t!” I slapped a hand over his eyes to keep him from removing the blindfold.

“Two hands on the wheel, Tati!” he screamed in distress.

“Alright, alright. Just don’t take it off.”

“I won’t, just tell me you have two hands on the wheel. Please.”

“I do. Jeez, you really don’t like it when I drive, do you?”

He chose not to answer. “This is ridiculous,” he breathed out, but he didn’t try to take off the blindfold again. “Why do I need to wear this?”

Because I knew once he saw where I was taking him, he’d want to turn right back around.

“Because I don’t want you to recognise where we’re going and ruin the surprise. Just sit back and relax. We’re almost there.”

“That’s impossible with you driving,” he mumbled. “By the time we get there, I’ll have aged thirty fucking years.”

“Oooo, silver fox Nikolai? That’s a version of you I can definitely get behind.”

He chuckled that deep, bassy laugh that always sent goosebumps crawling over my skin.

Sweat slicked my palms, nervousness flooding my veins. While I was confident Nikolai wouldn’t abandon me again, I couldn’t say for sure how he was going to react to the news when I told him. The first time he’d found out I was pregnant, he’d been ecstatic. But like for me, this news came with scars.

Would he truly be happy about it?

I honestly wasn’t sure.

We made small talk as I continued driving, being mindful not to do anything crazy or erratic that might send him into cardiac arrest.

Things had been hectic for the Bratva since the whole Til Death Games fiasco. Although all of the Volkovs had come out relatively unscathed, there was still a lot of unfinished business. Talon had made a run for it the moment we’d infiltrated the Arena. He was still in the wind. Dimitri was hell-bent on finding him though, devoting all of his time and resources to trying to locate him.

Illayana had finally gone back home with Arturo. I honestly didn't think that man was ever going to let her out of his sight again. I felt a little bad for her. He was plastered to her side like a goddamn shadow. And her guards? Well, before they'd left, Arturo had burrowed the ring and absolutely demolished them. Poor guys.

I turned right and drove down a dirt driveway, passing slowly through the gates. My heart sped up at the sign, a wave of sadness washing over me. I pulled the car over and turned off the engine.

"You can take the blindfold off now."

"Thank God." He removed it and his whole body went rigid beside me as he took in our surroundings. "Tatiana, what are we doing here?"

The smile I gave him was one filled with sadness, pain and despair. "Come on." I opened the door and stepped out of the car. The cool breeze blew my hair off my shoulders and rustled leaves across the ground. It swirled all around me, bringing with it the scents of freshly dug soil, damp moss and rain.

I made sure to grab my handbag before shutting the door and walking around the side of the car to come face to face with Nikolai.

"I don't want to be here, Tati," he whispered, so softly that I barely heard him. Tension rolled off him, his mesmerizing blue eyes filled with anxiety. With loss. With grief.

My heart broke and I felt bad for putting him in such distress, but it was something I felt we both needed to move forward. To take the next step. To finally put the past behind us.

"I know, my love." I held out my hand in offering and waited. If he really didn't want to do it, I wouldn't force him. It had to be a choice he made without any prompting from me.

He exhaled heavily, his breath coming out shaky, and placed his hand in mine. I squeezed it tightly in support and then led him down the stone pathway onto the grass. I didn't need to see where I was going. If I wanted to, I could close my eyes and still get to where I needed to go without a single misstep, because I'd been coming here once a week for the last two years.

I stopped walking and dropped to my knees, running a finger lovingly down the headstone. "Hi baby, Mama's here."

Nikolai stood like a statue behind me, his face passive, hands clasped together in front of him. He avoided looking at the grave, his eyes roaming over everything except what was right in front of him. Like he couldn't bear to look at it, couldn't bring himself to acknowledge what we were doing in this place.

I pulled out the little bouquet of flowers from my purse and placed them on his tiny grave, tears blurring my vision. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it last week. Mama was dealing with some things. But I brought your dad to come and visit you."

Glancing over my shoulder, I urged Nikolai to come closer with a small wave of my hand.

He hesitated, face contorted with a mixture of pain and anguish. "Why are you doing this to me?" he whispered sadly. "Are you trying to hurt me?"

Sympathy washed over me. "No, Nikolai. Of course not." I hooked my fingers around his and pulled him down. He reluctantly slunk down beside me, watching our son's grave with trepidation, the pain in his eyes as clear as day.

"Do you know I come here almost every week?"

He didn't respond, but I had a feeling he did.

“At first, I avoided it.” I looked at the headstone, the words “NIKOLAS IVAN VOLKOV” like a dagger to the chest. “After we buried him, I couldn’t bring myself to come here. To allow myself to think of him gone. But then I realised this was the only place I could go to be with him. To be close to him. To talk to him. So I started coming once a week. I’d just sit here for hours, telling him how much I missed him, the giant hole his absence left in my heart.”

Tears welled in his eyes. He didn’t respond, staring numbly at the headstone.

“I wanted to apologise to you.”

His head snapped to me, eyes full of confusion. “What the fuck do you have to apologise to *me* for?” The ludicrousness layered in his voice made me chuckle softly, like he couldn’t fathom the idea of *me* apologising to *him* for something.

“After Nikolas died, I was so...angry.” I readjusted my position, sitting down to cross my legs. “Angry at what happened. Angry at life. Angry at... you.”

Anguish flashed across his face. “I’m so sorry—”

“No, stop.” I gripped his face with both hands and forced him to look at me. “You’ve said sorry a million times now, over and over again. Now it’s *my* turn to say sorry to you.” I smoothed out the frown in his brows my words had caused with my thumb, admiring all the small little details of his face. The slight crook of his nose. That strong jaw. Eyes that sparkled like the ocean. “I was so blinded by my anger and grief, I never realised what I was doing to you was the exact same thing I was punishing *you* for doing to *me*. I abandoned you. I left you to grieve his death all on your own. I never gave you the chance to mourn properly because I made you promise not to

say a word to anyone. Then I just disappeared. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you, Nikolai, but I'm here now. I'm here now if you want to say goodbye to our son."

He closed his eyes, tears rolling down his cheeks and then he leant forward, burying his head into my chest. His whole body shook as he sobbed quietly, and I soothingly rubbed a hand up and down his back.

I wasn't sure how I knew. Call it intuition, or maybe it was just the fact that I knew him better than anyone else in the world, but I *knew* he hadn't really allowed himself to grieve Nikolas. That instead, all that time, he'd just kept those emotions buried deep in his mind and pretended they weren't there.

That was partly my fault. I understood that and I felt horrible for it. My insistence on ignoring what happened and refusing to acknowledge it had made him feel like he couldn't mourn, because there was no one else he could talk about it with except me.

The guilt of that decision would stay with me for a long time.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when Nikolai finally leant back, his eyes bloodshot. I placed a soft kiss on each eye, first the right, then the left, before finally giving him a kiss on the lips, one filled with all the love and care I felt for him.

He kissed me back, wrapping me up in his big, strong arms and holding me tight. "I love you. I love you so much."

I smiled, caressing the side of his face. "I love you, too." Now was as good a time as any. "I have something to tell you."

"What?"

I pulled out of his embrace and picked up my purse. He watched me, slightly confused, as I fished around inside it until I found what I was

looking for. I offered it to him. He stiffened, his gaze whipping from me, to the sonogram, back to me. Back and forth, back and forth.

I waited patiently, letting him process the information however he needed. He was completely shell shocked. Like I had been. No surprise there, really.

“How-how-what—”

“You apparently have some very strong fucking swimmers. See this, here”—I pointed to the little thing that looked like a peanut—“This is baby number one. And this”—I pointed to the second little peanut—“is baby number two.”

He reared back as if I’d slapped him. In a way, I guess I had. It was just with startling information instead of my hand.

It had been quite a shock to me too, when I found out they were twins. I’d only really just come to terms with being pregnant when the doctor had dropped that little tidbit. After I left the hospital, I decided to book an appointment with my OB and see for myself if I actually was with child. They’d run a prenatal ultrasound and boom, there they were: two little blobs on the monitor.

“T-twins?” he stuttered. He hesitantly reached for the sonogram, like he was afraid it might disappear or something. He looked at it, running a finger lovingly over the surface. “Twins,” he repeated again, this time stronger, more certain. With confidence.

The shock morphed into happiness. His lips slowly curled into a big, beaming smile and he launched himself at me, encircling me in the tightest hug. “I promise things will be different this time, Tati. I promise I won’t let you down.” He placed a hand on my stomach. “I won’t let *any* of you down.”

His eyes, so filled with love and tenderness, stared deeply into mine, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt he meant every single word.

He kissed me, softly at first, but like it always did with us, it ignited into something more.

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Chapter Forty-Three



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

“DIVE FASTER, NIKOLAI,” TATIANA panted, kissing down the side of my neck.

I tried to keep my eyes from rolling in the back of my head, the feel of her lips on my skin making me groan.

The woman was going to be the absolute death of me. I dropped down a gear, shifting into third and stomped on the accelerator, zooming forward.

When I woke up this morning, the last thing I expected was for Tatiana to take me to our son’s grave. We hadn’t been there together since we laid him to rest. *I hadn’t been there since we laid him to rest.*

I knew Tatiana went there constantly, but I could never work up the courage to.

Deep down, there was a part of me that felt like I didn’t deserve to go and see him. That I had no right, that it would be an insult to his memory. I

hadn't been there for him when he came into the world. What right did I have to disturb his afterlife just to make myself feel better?

Apart from that first night when I got home, when Aleksandr had pulled me from my car, I'd never let those feelings out, never allowed them to take me over. I just kept them locked away, pretending they weren't there. If I didn't think about it—about *him*—then it couldn't hurt, right?

Tatiana's words had done the one thing I'd been trying to avoid for the last two years.

"I brought your dad to come and visit you."

"I'm here now, if you want to say goodbye to our son."

I crumbled. All those thoughts and feelings I'd been trying desperately to ignore came rushing to the surface, and I had no choice but to feel them. It hurt. God, it hurt, so much that I didn't think I'd survive it. I guess, when you finally let yourself feel emotions you'd been suppressing for years, they came back with force. With a vengeance.

I couldn't say how long I ended up crying for. How long Tatiana sat there, comforting me. By the time I was done, though, I felt...lighter. Like a tiny bit of my soul had finally healed. I wasn't the least bit embarrassed about crying in my woman's arms. There was nothing more debilitating, more soul crushing than the loss of a child. I just finally let myself feel that loss in its entirety, with no restrictions. No restraints. No part of me holding back.

Then, for the second time in one day, she'd surprised the ever-loving fuck out of me by telling me she was pregnant. *With twins.* Holy fuck, had my world been completely and utterly rocked.

Once the shock had worn off, I realised Tatiana had been staring at me with this scared look in her eyes, almost like she was afraid of what I was

going to say. Like she feared I'd react badly. As if that was possible.

The world had given me a second chance, the opportunity to learn from my past mistakes. To finally do things the right way. It was a blessing, a miracle, a gift.

Of course, I knew Tatiana would be freaking out about it. It explained so much of her behaviour in the days before. She must have found out at the hospital and had been coming to terms with it on her own first before telling me.

Things had gotten *very* heated after that. I couldn't help it. I was so happy, so excited. Completely over the fucking moon that I just had to kiss her and, like always when we kissed, it went from zero to a hundred in the blink of an eye.

She begged me to take her home and fuck her and of course I happily obliged.

So, there I was, trying to get us home as quickly as I could without killing us while Tatiana drove me absolutely fucking crazy in the passenger seat. Kissing me, touching me, whispering filthy fucking things in my ear that made my cock so hard, it hurt.

"I can't wait any longer," she whined, and before I could ask her what she meant, her hand was up her dress, a deep moan falling from her lips.

That fucking sound. Hottest thing I'd ever heard.

"You dirty little girl. Can't even wait until we get home, huh? You're just going to fuck yourself right here in my car?"

She mumbled an agreement of some kind, her head thrown back in pleasure.

"Let me have a fucking taste," I demanded harshly, my gaze darting between her and the road.

She pulled her hand out from under her dress, fingers glistening with her arousal, and offered them to me. I made sure to keep my eyes on the road as I curled my tongue around her fingers and sucked them into my mouth. Her delectable taste flooded my mouth. I was powerless against that taste and I couldn't stop myself from palming my cock over the top of my pants, desperately trying to get some sort of relief from the building pressure.

Tatiana, the little minx, smirked at me. She lifted her dress all the way up so I could see her fingers disappear inside her pussy again.

I thumped a fist against the steering wheel in frustration. Fuck, I wished that was *my* fingers going in there. My tongue. My cock. "You're going to pay for teasing me like this, love," I warned.

The iron fence surrounding my house came into view. *Finally.*

"That's okay. I like your punishments. They always make me feel so. Fucking. Good," she breathed out, grabbing a handful of her breast. She ground against her hand, her hips moving in slow, deep circles.

The sight she made...Jesus Christ. I was going to come in my goddamn pants just watching her. I turned the wheel, drifting into my driveway wicked fast and coming to a stop right at the main gate. Dirt and gravel kicked up into the air and one of the guards jumped back in fright.

"Open the fucking gate!" I roared out the window.

Tatiana giggled at my impatience. She always did love to fucking tease me.

The moment the gate was open wide enough to fit through, I shot down the driveway, speeding towards the house like if I didn't get there *now*, I was going to fucking die.

Lukyan emerged from the front door when I pulled up, half-dressed and carrying a machine gun. I didn't even turn off the car. I just threw it in park

and flung the door open, racing to the passenger side.

“The guards said you were in a hurry. What’s going on? Who’s chasing you—” Lukyan’s words died off when I hauled a laughing Tatiana out of the car and over my shoulder. His mouth dropped open as I jogged up the porch, taking the steps two at a time and walking straight past him. “No one’s chasing you, are they? You’re just rushing home so you guys can fuck! You gave me a bloody heart attack!”

I said nothing, too focused on getting Tatiana somewhere private so I could finally feel that tight little pussy wrapped around my cock. My thoughts had reverted back to caveman-style thinking. Want my woman. Fuck my woman. Want. Fuck. Want. Fuck. Want. Fuck.

Aleksandr and Drea came bursting into the foyer at the same time I did, Aleksandr with a machine gun in his hands and Drea with two blades. I went right for the stairs, ignoring them completely.

“Oh, don’t worry. Everything’s fine.” I heard Lukyan say, coming in behind me. “Those heathens aren’t in any danger. Nikolai came bursting through the main gate because he’s horny and wants to bang.”

“Aw! I love that!” Drea gushed, then I heard the distinct sound of a harsh slap. “Why don’t you do anything like that for me?”

“Woman, you *did not* just slap me.” There was a girlish squeal and I glanced over my shoulder to see Aleksandr march out of the room with Drea over his shoulder.

“Sexual deviants! The lot of you!” my youngest brother yelled.

“Sorry, Lukyan!” Tatiana giggled.

I slapped her ass, making her yelp. “Don’t you apologise. You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

“Is this what it’s going to be like all the time, now that you guys are out of the closet?!”

I didn’t bother responding to Lukyan, rushing up the stairs. When I got to the second floor, Tatiana demanded I put her down. The moment I did, she began running her hands along the walls, searching for something.

“What are you doing?”

“I know it’s here somewhere.” Her fingers clicked on the small button underneath one of the light sconces, and part of the wall shifted, revealing one of the many hidden passageways in the house. She turned to look at me, eyes full of mischief. “What do you say, Nicky? For old time’s sake?”

Excitement sizzled in my bones. I ran my tongue over my bottom lip and stepped forward, forcing her back into the passage.

“You remember this one, don’t you Nicky?” she breathed heavily, her chest rising and falling deeply, drawing my attention to those glorious, perky fucking tits.

“Like I could forget.” That spot right there, that exact one was the spot where I finally gave in and got my first taste of her. Where my obsession with her started.

It was my favourite place in the house.

“Are you going to keep me quiet, like last time?”

I chuckled deeply. With a flick of a switch, the wall slid back into place, encasing us almost entirely in darkness. Faint strips of light from the other side made their way into the small space, illuminating just enough for us to see each other, but not much else. I used my body to press her into the wall, the hitch of her breath making my lips curl into a feral smile.

“I don’t see why I need to,” I whispered, running my nose up the side of her neck. Her head lolled to the side, giving me more access. “Everybody

knows about us now. We've got nothing to hide. So make as much noise as you want. Fucking scream if you want. No one is coming to save you."

My fingers drifted up her legs, hooked around her underwear and tugged them down. The feel of her skin, that hot fucking sound she made when I delved my fingers inside her, made pleasure zing down my spine. Her pussy gripped me in a tight vice and the thought of having that heat wrapped around my cock sent me into a fucking frenzy.

I slammed my lips onto hers, forcing my tongue deep into her mouth as I picked her up, pinning her legs wide open.

"Nikolai," she moaned, kissing me harder, her nails digging into my scalp.

She began to grind herself against my stomach, chasing for a relief.

I whipped off my shirt. "That's it, love. Use me to get yourself off. Go on. You know I love it when you use me."

She whimpered. She moved faster, her pussy rubbing in circles over my abs, slick and hot.

"God, I love your body. You're so hard. *Everywhere*," she groaned out in pleasure.

Her hands were all over me. Grabbing, squeezing, clutching, like she couldn't stop touching me. Like she couldn't get enough of me.

I loved that I drove her so wild, so crazy. Because that's exactly what she did to me.

"Suck on my tits," she demanded breathlessly, grinding and grinding and grinding.

I used a hand to her throat to pin her against the wall. "Ask nicely," I whispered over her lips. "Or better yet, why don't you beg me?"

The truth was, she didn't need to beg me. I'd give my life to suck on those glorious tits of hers, but I liked the game. So did she.

“Please,” she begged, licking at my lips.

“I think you can do better than that, love. *Beg me.*”

She whined, this truly impatient sound that made me think she couldn’t wait any second longer to have my mouth on her.

“Please, Nikolai. Please suck on my tits.”

I chuckled. “Such a needy little girl you are.” I yanked down the front of her dress roughly and her tits spilled out. Full, plump and perfect, little pink nipples.

Fucking delicious.

Tatiana gasped when I sealed my lips around her, sucking her tit deep into my mouth. Her hand moved to cradle the back of my head, keeping me right where she wanted me as she continued to grind, her movements turning feverish. Chaotic. She was close.

The sound of footsteps echoed around us. Someone was coming up the stairs.

Her tit fell out of my mouth with a wet *plop*. “Here’s your chance, love. Let them hear you.”

“*Oh, fuck.*” She came undone. Her whole body shook, a pleasure-filled scream erupting from her throat. Her pussy grew slick against my abs, drenching my skin.

I was going to make her lick it all off—on her knees.

Thump, thump, thump.

Tatiana stiffened, her eyes widening at the banging coming from the other side of the wall right behind her.

“Are you guys fucking *in* the walls?!” Lukyan yelled out incredulously, his voice slightly muffled.

Tatiana giggled, burying her face into my chest.

“You are!” Lukyan squawked in disbelief. “Oh my god! Why didn’t I think of doing that?”

“Go away, Lukyan.” I placed Tatiana on her feet, then moved my mouth to ear. “On your knees, love.”

She smirked mischievously, slinking down. She braced her hands on my thighs for support and looked up at me, waiting for her next command. She looked so sweet, so innocent. What made this even hotter was the fact that I knew she was anything but.

To the world, she was a perfect, little angel, but to me, she was a sly fucking demon who would do anything I told her to.

“Look at all this mess you made, Tati,” I whispered, pointing to the wetness coating my abs. “Lick it off.”

That mischievous smirk stayed plastered to her lips. “Ask nicely.”

A dark chuckle bubbled up in my throat. I grabbed a fistful of her ponytail, wrapping it around my hand, and tugged her head back roughly. “I’m in charge this time. So. Lick. It. Off.”

Her tongue ran over her bottom lip teasingly before she leant forward and ran the flat of her tongue up through my abs in one long, slow, languid lick.

I shuddered, my head rolling back with a groan.

“What’s going on?” Lukyan banged on the wall again. “I can’t hear anything.” *Bang, bang, bang.* “Are you guys done now?”

“Fuck off, Lukyan, or you and I will be in the ring.”

I heard the sound of running footsteps not even a second later.

Tatiana continued to lick, kissing and biting at my skin. She gripped my waist tightly, nails digging into my flesh, that small bite of pain sending me over the edge.

“Enough teasing,” I barked out roughly, picking her up.

She squealed in excitement. “Someone’s eager,” she laughed, wrapping her arms around my neck as she spread her legs wide around my body.

“Of course I am. You want to know why?” I quickly pulled my cock out and lined it up with her entrance. “Because I’m going to fuck you raw. You got a problem with that?”

She shook her head, eagerness in her eyes. “It’s not like I can get *more* pregnant.”

I laughed softly. “Hold on, love. This is gonna be a wild ride.”

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Chapter Forty-Four



NIKOLAI VOLKOV

I STEPPED INTO MY father's office a few days later, trepidation curling down my spine. He'd called an impromptu family meeting. Very unlike him. He was a meticulous planner and scheduled any kind of meeting in advance. Whenever he'd call us all together to his office out of the blue like this, it usually meant something was going on.

Aleksandr and Lukyan were already seated when I arrived, Aleksandr spread out on the three-seater couch (his usual spot) and Lukyan in one of the two armchairs in front of Father's desk.

"Father not here yet?" I asked, taking a seat in the chair beside Lukyan.

"No," Aleksandr grunted.

Lukyan looked at me. "Tatiana make it to New York okay?"

"Safe and sound." It killed me not being able to go with her yet. I had every intention of going. There was no way I could handle being apart from her, even if she *wasn't* pregnant. The fact that she was just intensified all of

those protective, possessive feelings I already had towards her. Times a billion.

I just had to talk to my father first and let him know I was leaving. He hadn't been in the best of moods since returning. You'd think he'd be happy, having been rescued and freed from Talon's stupid gladiator games. But he'd been the exact opposite: moody, withdrawn, downright fucking sullen.

Part of it, I suspected, was because he'd been searching for Talon and hadn't had any luck in finding him. The man was hell-bent on revenge, and I honestly didn't think he was going to rest until he got it.

The other part, I'm sure (though, he'd deny it), had something to do with the red-haired woman. Autumn. His mood had turned even more sour after her departure, to the point that the soldiers and the staff were afraid to talk in his presence, in case he snapped and bit their heads off (something he'd been doing a lot of lately). If someone even breathed around him, he threw a fucking tantrum. Father was already short-tempered, but this? This was something entirely different.

"Do you know what this is about?" I pulled my phone out, double-checking it was on loud just in case Tatiana called me. If she needed me, I didn't want to miss the call.

"Not a single clue," Lukyan responded. "You, Zander?"

"No idea."

That didn't bode well.

Father stomped into the room a few minutes later, that dark, angry cloud that had been following him around for the last few days hanging over his head.

He looked around the room. "Where's your wife?"

Considering only one of us was married (for now), it was easy to guess he was talking to Aleksandr.

My brother frowned, getting to his feet. “She’s upstairs.”

“Get her here,” he snapped. “What part of ‘family meeting’ did you not understand? She’s family, isn’t she?”

Aleksandr hid his surprise well. Just a slight crinkle at the edge of his eyes showed that he was startled by Father’s order, but he did as he commanded, leaving and reappearing a moment later with Drea in tow. His little cartel wife looked a little nervous as she stepped into the room. Surprising, considering how sure of herself she was, the confidence she’d always displayed. Was she nervous...scared of my father? A lot of people were, so it wouldn’t be entirely surprising, I guess.

She cleared her throat awkwardly and came to stand in front of my father. “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 shook her head. “Sorry, uhm, Aleksandr said you wanted to see me? Maybe? Or was he wrong? I can go.”

Her rambling put the first bit of amusement on my father’s face I’d seen in days. There it was—that tiny, little twinkle in his eyes that showed he found the whole thing utterly humorous.

“I remember you,” was all he replied with.

“Okay. Cool. Well, I remember you. Obviously.” Aleksandr frowned down at her as she continued to ramble. “I mean, who wouldn’t remember you, you know, ‘cause of the whole ‘kkkkkkkkkk’.” 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—” Aleksandr slapped a hand over her mouth to get her to finally stop talking. Lukyan snickered.

“Right.” My father cleared his throat with an awkward cough and moved to his chair behind his desk. But he didn’t sit down. He just held it open, staring pointedly at Aleksandr. Lukyan and I shared a look with one another, our faces mirrored in shock.

“Father?” Aleksandr questioned, confusion in his eyes.

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. *That* was what was confusing him.

It was *Father’s* chair. It’s where *he* sat. Where the *Pakhan* sat. Offering the seat to him held a significant meaning, one we all understood.

When Father was kidnapped, the role of *Pakhan* had gone to Aleksandr by default. Now that he was back, though, his previous position was now his once again, and Aleksandr returned to being his second-in-command. Everything had gone back to normal, the status quo restored. At least, so we thought. Until now, because it wasn’t just his seat that Father was offering. It was his position.

Before, Aleksandr had no choice but to fill the role. With Father gone, someone had to step up. We all assumed that when he returned, he would take back the role permanently, but what he was doing now suggested otherwise.

Father said nothing, staring Aleksandr down. Waiting. We all waited to see what he would do. He was still young in terms of leading the Bratva. At fifty-four, he still had a good ten or so years before he even needed to think about stepping down.

So why was he offering it to Aleksandr now? Over a decade early? Determination and pride shone in my brother's eyes. With his shoulders back, head held high, posture perfect, he marched over and took the seat that was offered, conditions and all.

The *shutter* of a photo being snapped rang out into the air. We all looked at Lukyan, his phone in his hand. He bared his teeth in an innocent smile.

“What? We have to document this. It’s a special moment.”

I rolled my eyes.

Father moved to the corner of the room, grabbed another chair and wheeled it over, placing it right beside Aleksandr's. He looked pointedly at Drea, waiting again.

Drea glanced behind her. “Is he looking at me?” she whispered.

“Duh,” Lukyan whispered back, and Aleksandr cut him a scathing glare that had him snapping his spine straight.

Despite the initial nervousness she'd had upon first entering the room, Aleksandr's little cartel wife walked over with perfect confidence and took her rightful place beside the new *Pakhan*.

Father nodded, satisfied. He sauntered over and stood in front of Lukyan. He arched an eyebrow.

“I’ll just go sit over there,” Lukyan said, getting up and moving to the couch.

“Father—”

He raised a hand, silencing Aleksandr from saying another word as he sat down gallantly. “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*.” He stressed the last word, pride ringing in his voice.

Aleksandr swallowed thickly.

“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”—his gaze shifted 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 me, back to father. He seemed to struggle to know what to say back. I couldn’t blame him.

To say that I was completely and utterly shocked would be the understatement of the fucking century. Based on the looks on Aleksandr and Drea’s faces, they clearly thought the same thing.

“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.”

“Oooo,” Lukyan perked up. “Does that mean *he* gets to boss *you* around for once?”

A very interesting question.

Aleksandr arched an eyebrow, waiting for Father to respond.

He gave the tiniest hint of a smirk. “I’m nothing if not respectful of the proper chain of command,” was all he said on that matter. “The meeting is yours, son.”

Aleksandr sat up a little straighter, determination stiffening his spine, and cleared his throat. “First order of business, the Cosa Nostra. I’ve

coordinated with Arturo and a strike is underway against all of Franco's establishments to try and draw him out of hiding."

"Interesting," Father commented. He'd been brought up to speed on everything that had happened since his disappearance. There was a lot to go over.

"With our combined forces, it will be easy to beat the men he's left behind," Aleksandr continued. "The only problem will be who gets to kill him once he's found."

"I will," I growled. "After what he did to Tatiana, that kill is *mine*."

"Ordinarily, I'd agree with you." Sympathy flashed in his eyes. "But after all the trouble he's caused Arturo, he's also entitled to a piece."

"You think I give a fuck about what that fucker is entitled to?" I was still pissed off about the role he played in Tatiana's capture.

"He *did* help rescue us," Lukyan pointed out.

"So?" The fact that he was part of the rescue party didn't mean shit to me. I still wanted to see his head on a spike.

"So let the man have the kill. Tatiana is fine—"

"She was almost *raped*," I snarled. "By one of *his* men. If anyone is going to kill Franco, it's going to be *me*."

"I'm just saying—"

"Enough," Aleksandr barked out. "Until he's found, this conversation is pointless, so we'll deal with it when the time comes. Onto the next issue. The final two MCs responsible for the attack on our home have been dealt with."

"Have they?" Father drawled. "That's disappointing. I would have liked to get in on that."

“There could be minor repercussions from other charters, like Nikolai and Tatiana faced in New York from the Brotherhood. If there are, I’ll be sure to save you a few, Father.”

He nodded his head. “Much appreciated.”

“How were they handled?” I asked.

Drea chose to answer that one. “A few of the boys and I paid them a little visit. Don’t worry, I kept up with the theme of the whole ‘V’ on the forehead thing. Nice touch, by the way,” she winked.

“Thanks.”

Lukyan cleared his throat. “So, with the MCs gone and Dominik dead, that means the threat is over, right?”

I glanced at my father beside me. He hadn’t spoken about what happened exactly, but we all knew one thing. Their feud had finally come to end, with Father victorious.

Whether he planned to explain the specific details later on, I wasn’t sure, but for right now, the topic was off limits.

“The threat is far from over,” Father said ominously. “Talon is still out there.”

“But his island isn’t. Not anymore.” I could still picture it. The flames, the screams, the smoke. Everything burning in the distance as we moved further and further away from the island, rowing to Mikhail’s submarine. Apparently, Drea had ordered complete and total destruction. Turns out, Aleksandr’s little cartel wife was just as protective and vindictive as the rest of us. She wanted the whole place to *burn* to ash.

So, a few of the soldiers had been ordered to plant explosives on all of the buildings while they made the rescue, rigged to explode within thirty minutes.

She didn't care about casualties because, in her opinion, none of them were innocent. I was inclined to agree. They all knew who their boss was. They all knew what took place on that island.

Whether they were a cook, a janitor or a soldier, they all contributed to the functionality of the island. They helped it thrive. When you worked for a man like Talon, no matter the job, your life was at risk. Either by his hand, or his enemies'.

"He'll just build another one," Father grunted. "He's got unlimited resources. There will be another one up and running in a week."

"But who would even attend?" Lukyan questioned. "Word has already spread about what happened. It's all over the news...the missing politicians, the burning island in the middle of nowhere. Even *if* he built another one, no one would trust that he could keep them safe. He's lost his entire client base. He'll have to start over from scratch."

"He is not going to like that," Drea frowned.

"Good," Father blew out with an angry breath.

"He could be looking for retaliation," Aleksandr pointed out. "Revenge for what we've done to him and his business."

A dark, feral smile curled on my father's lips. "I'm counting on it."

"We should double the patrols around the house, in case he plans to attack," Drea suggested.

Aleksandr nodded. "Good idea."

"I'll make it happen," Lukyan said, rising to his feet.

"Before you leave, there's something else we need to discuss." Aleksandr held his gaze and Lukyan thumped back down into his seat.

"What did I do now?" he sighed.

"*You haven't done anything—*"

“For once,” I couldn’t help but add in.

Lukyan cut me an annoyed glare.

“It’s about your stalker,” Aleksandr finished.

Lukyan shrugged uncaringly. “What about her?”

“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?”

His eyes widened. “She was?” he breathed out in shock. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I didn’t order anyone up there.” A troubling look crossed Drea’s face. “Neither did Arturo, Mikhail or my brother.”

“Okay? I don’t get what the big deal is. If what you’re saying is true, it means she saved me, saved *us*.”

“The big deal is, the woman is highly-trained, highly skilled, has managed to sneak in and out of our property completely undetected, *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.”

Lukyan said nothing, his brows lowered in a deep frown.

“We need to find her and deal with her.” The underlying meaning in Aleksandr’s words were 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 until finally, Lukyan agreed. “Got it.”

“Good.” Aleksandr addressed a few more issues; where we sat with inventory, our new clients in New York, the progress of the new soldiers sent over from Russia. Lukyan and I sat and listened, chiming in whenever we had anything to add. Father said nothing. He just sat back and watched

Aleksandr completely in his element. If there was ever any doubt about Aleksandr being able to handle this job, it was all squashed at that moment.

After he was finished, Father 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, his face full of cheekiness.

Father’s head snapped to him so fast, I worried he’d break his neck, that dark, angry cloud hanging over him that had slowly started to diminish flaring straight back to life.

Aleksandr and I both groaned. *You goddamn fucking idiot.*

We *all* knew not to mention her to him. Anytime anybody did, his mood got even worse. Darker, more enraged.

Lukyan winced under Father’s terrifying glare, hunching his shoulder in to try and make himself smaller.

Now’s as good a time as any to share your news. It might distract Father long enough to save Lukyan’s life.

“Since we’re sharing news,” I coughed. “I have something to tell you all. I’m leaving.”

That did it.

Father’s gaze whipped to me and they all spoke overtop of one another.

Father: “What are you talking about?”

Aleksandr: “Where are you going?”

Lukyan: “Can I have your room?”

We all looked to him, giving him a deadpan stare.

“What?” he shrugged. “It’s not like it’s a surprise. Of course he’s leaving. As if he could live somewhere different than Tatiana.”

There he went again, being a complete idiot one minute and incredibly insightful the next.

Aleksandr leant forward, bracing his elbows on the desk. He frowned in concentration. “Tatiana can’t move here?”

“We spoke about it and she offered, but her classes have just started. Moving back means she has to pull out. I don’t want her to do that. This is something she’s been dreaming about for years. I don’t want to be the reason she can’t do it.”

Aleksandr’s jaw clenched. “I need you here, Nikolai.”

I smiled sadly. “Respectfully, Zander, there’s nothing you can say that will keep me here. She’s pregnant.”

“What?!” Lukyan shouted. “Already?! Damn, how strong are your swimmers?”

A mixture of emotions swirled in my brother’s eyes: shock, bewilderment, happiness, defeat. He knew there was nothing on God’s green Earth that could keep me away from Tatiana then.

Of course I felt bad. We used to talk about this moment all the time when we were kids. The moment when Father would finally step down, and we would be in charge. Just eight and ten-year-old boys giggling under the blankets late at night about all the changes we were going to make.

Switching all of the passwords to “fart knuckles”. Making all of the soldiers wear capes. No more vegetables in the house. Idiotic changes, of course. But to two little kids, they were perfect.

“Oh my god! Congratulations!” Drea squealed, jumping up and down in her chair. “A baby! How exciting!”

“Two, actually.”

“Twins?” Aleksandr’s eyes widened at the revelation.

I nodded.

He got to his feet and marched over to me. I thought he was going to hit me or something, but he hauled me up and hugged me so tightly, I choked. “Congratulations, little brother.”

It took a second for me to react, stunned that my usually un-affectionate big brother was embracing me. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him back.

“Congratulations, son.” Father patted me on the shoulder.

“I wanna get in on this.” Not even a second later, Lukyan joined in, his arms encircling the three of us. “This is so nice,” he breathed dreamily.

Aleksandr grunted. “Get off me.”

“Andddd look at that, you ruined it, ya big grump.”

Laughing softly, I returned to my seat, the others following suit. “Just because I’m leaving doesn’t mean I won’t still work. 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. “So when do you leave?”

“Now.”

Chapter Forty-Five



TATIANA ANDREEVA

SIX MONTHS LATER

“Stay still or I’m going to end up poking you.”

“I’m trying,” Drea squealed, fidgeting on the spot. “I’m just so excited! I’ve never been in a fashion show before.”

At her side stood her husband, a perpetually sour look on his face as he was getting fitted with his very own Tatiana Andreeva original three-piece suit. He so very clearly didn’t want to be there. And yeah, I felt a little bad for it, but my assessment was worth sixty percent of my final grade and I needed his help. I needed *all* of their help.

Not only did I have to create an entire collection, but I also had to put together my very own fashion show and display all of my designs using real life models. Not exactly an easy thing to accomplish when you were over six months pregnant with twins who insisted on using your bladder as a freaking chew toy.

My only saving grace during this whole craziness was Nikolai. Not only had he been there every step of the way, supporting me, helping me cut and sew each piece, but he'd also managed to wrangle his siblings into walking the runway for me.

The last six months had been a whirlwind. He'd moved to New York so that he could be with me—something I'm sure irritated Aleksandr to no end—but it wasn't permanent. In fact, we were getting ready to move back within the next few weeks. I'd managed to secure a spot at another college, where I planned to finish my studies after I gave birth to the babies. It was important to both of us that the babies be born at home. In Vegas. Plus, there was no way I could have them so far away from my dad. He was so excited to be a grandpa. He'd already changed my old room into a nursery for the babies.

“Tatiana!” a deep, angry voice called out that I would recognise anywhere.

Dressed in his own suit to model for the show, Nikolai came storming over, his face a mask of displeasure and concern.

Uh-oh.

His touch was light, soft. Surprising, considering the tension rolling off him as he gently took me by the arms and helped me off my knees. “I told you if there were any alterations you wanted done to call me. I’ll do them.”

I smiled, love exploding in my chest. Honestly, how did I get so fucking lucky? “Hi, my love.”

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t you ‘my love’ me. You promised you would take it easy.”

“And I am. I just had to adjust the hem—”

“Okay, well I’ll do it. Please, just sit down.” I didn’t argue as he steered me toward one of the many comfortable arm chairs he’d had placed all around the backstage for me. “How high do you want it taken up?”

“Just a few inches, please. I forgot how short she was.”

“Hey! I heard that!” Drea chastised, her gaze locked firmly on the mirror in front of her as she twirled in her all black, gothic-style dress. I’d tailored each outfit to match the Volkovs’ personalities. I didn’t want them to be uncomfortable in the clothes. I wanted them to *like* what they were wearing, to enjoy them.

Drea was easy. She had a very punk-rock, heavy metal kind of style, so anything black was a given. She baulked a little at wearing a dress, but once she’d put it on, she changed her mind.

I watched in amazement as the love of my life—a man who, six months ago, couldn’t even thread a needle—effortlessly folded and sewed the hem of Drea’s dress up for me. I so did not deserve that man.

“Tatiana, Tatiana, look at me. Watch me.” Lukyan strutted past me, going right for the mirror, swinging his ass extravagantly with a blue-steel look on his face. He stopped, popped his hip out, pursed his lips even more as he posed left to right before spinning around and strutting right back to me, ending on another pose. He pumped his eyebrows up and down. “Whaddaya think? Pretty good, right? I’ve been practicing.”

“Oh, I can tell,” I chuckled, rubbing my belly. There were two big kicks in response that put a big, beaming smile on my face.

Though this pregnancy had been a tough one with the pain, swollen ankles and heartburn, I couldn’t be happier. I’d spent the first few months in constant terror, scared that I would lose them, like I lost Nikolas. The stress and worry hadn’t been good for the babies, but I couldn’t help it. The

thoughts occupying my mind were dark, dangerous ones that completely paralysed me, originating from past trauma.

Then Nikolai, the Godsend that he is, gave me the ability to check on the twins whenever I wanted to without having to go to the hospital. He purchased a \$300,000 ultrasound machine—the best one available on the market—and hired someone to teach us how to use it. Every night before we went to bed, we checked in on them, read them a story and said goodnight. We told them how loved they both were already, and that we couldn't wait to meet them.

There was a lot of noise. A lot of activity. A lot of people ran back and forth as the other students tried to get their models dressed in their designs. A lot of mayhem, nervousness and chaos. I loved every second of it.

Three girls crowded around Aleksandr, fawning over him like out of control fans. They pretended to admire his suit as an excuse to touch him, giving him flirtatious smiles and lingering touches. He instantly backed away towards Drea, who pushed him behind her and hissed at the girls like a feral cat. They scurried away pretty fucking quickly, making me laugh.

Illayana came out from the changing room, her red gown flaring out around her. She looked flawless, exactly how I envisioned. I knew red would be absolutely perfect for her. It was her colour, like a red, avenging angel.

I shook my hands in the air. “Lukyan, help me up.” He came right over and clasped my hands in his, pulling me to my feet. I waddled over to Illayana.

“What’s the verdict, T?” she asked, arms out at her side, doing a little twirl.

I check her over, examining every stitch, every seam. It fit her like a glove, the measurements exact. “You look amazing,” I smiled.

“Easy to do when the merchandise is this. Freaking. Awesome.” She ran her hands lovingly down the bodice. “I better get to keep the dress afterwards.”

“Of course,” I winked. “What good is modelling in a mock fashion show if you don’t get to keep the clothes once it’s all done?” I studied her closely. “You seem particularly chipper this evening. What’s going on?”

She flashed me a smile. “I got my revenge.”

“Oh really?” I laughed. “The wicked witch of La Cosa Nostra finally meet her end, did she?”

“Yes.” Her smirk was positively devilish. “Took a little longer than I originally planned, I’ll admit, but Gabriella is gone.”

“What happened?”

“She gained sixty pounds, lost all of her hair and went a little crazy because I kept drugging her food with Benzodiazepines. Now she’s locked up in an insane asylum.”

I raised my brows, impressed. “Wow. How did you manage that?”

“It was easy,” she shrugged. “I had the cook, Giuseppe, make sure all of her meals were filled with all the good, fatty shit that makes you gain weight like crazy. Which he was happy to do, because Gabriella is a bitch. I switched out her shampoo for hair removal. The poison ivy trick you did was a nice touch, by the way,” she winked. “And after she started talking to herself and doing crazy shit, I suggested she be locked away for ‘safety’. Arturo was more than happy to oblige. He’d been trying to find her a husband, but after she stripped off all her clothes at an important meeting

and started screaming that the lampposts were trying to kill her, no one wanted to go near her.”

“You are diabolical,” I laughed. “Killing her was just too soft for you, huh?”

“Way too soft. Killing her meant her suffering was over quickly. This way, she gets to spend the rest of her life locked up in a place where the loonies go,” she giggled. “You know what? I might pay her visit every now and then. You know, just for fun.”

I shook my head. My best friend, ladies and gentleman, was fucking crazy.

She placed her hands on my stomach, warmth and love shining in her eyes. “How are my niece and nephew doing?”

“Absolutely perfect,” I grinned from ear to ear. We found out a few months ago that we were having a girl and a boy.

“Good. In case you’re stumped for names, Illayana is a *fantastic* one.”

“I’ll remember that,” I chuckled.

She glanced behind me. “Uh-oh, looks like Aleksandr is trying to get out of doing this again.”

I turned around to see Nikolai and Aleksandr arguing amongst themselves quietly. “I should go over there.”

“Good luck.”

I waddled towards them, just catching the end of what Nikolai was saying. “—doing this. I don’t care if you don’t want to. Tati needs this. Man up.”

Aleksandr growled. If he was the stomping his foot kind of man, I had a feeling he’d be doing it right then and there.

Maybe it was the guilt. Maybe it was hormones. Maybe it was just because I didn't want to put a strain on their relationship. I'm not sure, but I wanted him to know how much I appreciated his involvement, how much both Nikolai and I appreciated *him*.

"Have you told him yet, my love?"

Nikolai looked at me with confused eyes.

"Told me what?" Aleksandr grunted. "That there's something else you're going to make me do against my will?"

I slowly ran a hand across my stomach, staring intently at Nikolai. His gaze flicked down and back up again, realisation flashing across his face.

"Now?" he questioned.

"Why not?" I shrugged.

"What are you two talking about? If you're going to ask me to model underwear for you, the answer is hell-fucking-no."

The idea was an intriguing one. I had a feeling that, if I did, all the women in the crowd would faint.

Nikolai all of a sudden looked a little nervous, like he was afraid how Aleksandr would react. I touched his face gently, giving him an encouraging smile.

He cleared his throat. "Your nephew, we finally decided on a name for him." He glanced away, avoiding Aleksandr's eyes. "Aleksei. After you."

Nikolai still wasn't looking at his brother, so he didn't see the myriad of emotions that took over his face. Warmth. Tenderness. Love. Honor.

"Me?" Aleksandr's voice croaked slightly.

Oh, shit. Not now.

I started crying. Panic took over Nikolai's face and he moved towards me instantly, but I waved him away. "No, no, I'm okay. It's the hormones. Just

pretend I'm not here."

"Tati—"

"It's such a special moment," I sniffled. "Don't let me ruin it. Look at your brother. He's so"—hiccup—"so"—hiccup—"happy," I sobbed hysterically.

This happened a lot. More than I cared to admit. If I saw something sad or sweet, I just burst into tears.

Strong arms wrapped around me and, for a second I thought it was Nikolai, but I quickly realised the body shape was off. It was Aleksandr. *He* was hugging me. Something he'd never done in the twenty or so years that I'd known him.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for this privilege."

I cried harder.

"Okay, stop. You're making her more upset." Nikolai barged in between us and Aleksandr embraced him in a hug as well from behind.

The subject change had done exactly what I intended. It had distracted Aleksandr from his displeasure about being in the fashion show. We'd planned to tell him soon anyway. Why not then?

"Tatiana?" I turned to look at one of my professors, wiping the tears from my face. He was a short, thin bald man with a moustache and a Texas accent. "You're next."

I nodded.

Okay, here we go.

NIKOLAI VOLKOV

I'm so nervous.

I took a deep breath, trying to get a hold on my frazzled nerves. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. Feel it hammering in my chest. My lips

were dry, my palms soaked with sweat.

Why am I so nervous? I shouldn't be. I had everything planned, right down to the most microscopic detail. I had six contingency plans in place in case something went wrong. I was the most prepared any person in my position could be, and yet, I was still a complete and total nervous wreck.

I ran my hands down the beautiful, pristine suit Tatiana made and straightened my tie, watching the seconds tick by on the clock mounted on the living room wall of our apartment.

Any second now. You can do this, Nikolai. You can do this,

The fashion show tonight for Tatiana's final grade had gone off without a hitch. I feared Aleksandr would pull out at the last second and ruin the entire thing, but Tatiana's idea to reveal the name we'd chosen for our son had given him the push he needed to go through with it without anymore fuss.

To be honest, I expected some sort of push-back from him on the subject anyway, so I wasn't all that surprised when he came to me before the show and told me he wasn't going to walk. The whole thing was completely out of his comfort zone. When you think of the words, 'fashion show' or 'cat walk', my grumpy older brother wasn't exactly the first thing that came to mind.

Or the second.

Or the tenth.

It had been a mission and a half getting him to even *agree* to it, let alone show up and put on the suit.

"No. Fucking. Way."

*"I'm sorry, I must have given you the impression you had a choice in this. Let me rephrase. You **will** march your ass down that runway and help Tatiana ace her class, or I'm going to pound your face into the fucking ground. We clear?"*

He arched a brow. "Sounding mighty confident there, little brother. That's not something you've managed to accomplish yet."

"Never had the proper motivation before. Now, I do." I glared down at him, something that was easy to do for the first time in my life since he was sitting behind his desk. "I'm serious, Aleksandr. I have an incredibly stressed out, pregnant woman at home and I swear to God if you cause her more stress, I'll make you regret it."

He scoffed. "You don't scare me, Nikolai."

I folded my arms across my chest and smirked. "I might not, but what about your wife?"

He stiffened, narrowing his eyes.

*There was a running joke in the family now that if you wanted to get Aleksandr to do something, all you had to do was threaten to go to his wife. She had quite the temper, and was straddling that 'batshit crazy' line. That wasn't the only reason though. Yeah, part of it I think was because Aleksandr was a little scared about what that woman would do if she was angry, but the main part, the **biggest** part, was that he'd do whatever he could to make her happy.*

Like I would for Tatiana.

*Aleksandr groaned, running a hand down his face. "What part of me screams 'fashion runway show'? Honestly? Can you picture **me** walking on some platform modelling some ridiculous outfit with a bunch of people staring at me?"*

Yes, I could. And the image was fucking laughable. But I couldn't tell him that, so I just said, "please, Aleksandr. I need your help. Do this for me."

He groaned again and thumped his head face down onto his desk. "Fine," he grumbled.

A crackle burst through my ear from my ear piece.

"Sunflower and Mad Hatter have entered the building. I repeat, Sunflower and Mad Hatter have entered the building." Lukyan's voice blared into my head.

I exhaled heavily and straightened my spine, standing taller. *Here we go.*

"What the fuck is Sunflower and Mad Hatter?" Aleksandr grunted to Lukyan through the ear piece.

"Tatiana and Illayana's codenames. Did you not read the mission brief I gave you?"

"Why can't we just say their names?"

"Because we're on a mission, you nitwit. Mission's require codenames. I'm 'Pretty Wizard' because I'm the pretty one. You're 'Angry Demon' because you're, you know, angry. Illayana's 'Mad Hatter' because she's fucking mad, and Nikolai is-

"Will you guys shut up?" I hissed in frustration. "I'm trying to prepare myself." I enlisted my siblings help for this but now I was seriously regretting it.

"Sorry," my brother's parroted at the same time, then they promptly shut their mouths.

This was one of the biggest moments of our lives. It *had* to go perfectly. Tatiana deserved for it to go perfectly.

I tapped my ear piece. "Bring them out."

A second later one of the bedroom doors opened, the photographer and videographer I hired stepping into the room. I googled 'must have's' for a proposal and the top answers on nearly every list was someone to document the moment. Another thing that was mentioned quite a lot was to pay for them to get their nails done. So I paid a beauty salon to stay open after hours and give her whatever services she wanted.

I'd gotten Illayana to take her under the pretence that it was *her* idea, to celebrate a successful fashion show. My younger sister was more than happy to play along. When I told her I was planning to propose to Tatiana, she practically *begged* me to be a part of it.

While she was off distracting Tatiana, Aleksandr, Lukyan and Drea were helping me set up.

"Sunflower and Mad Hatter are approaching the door. I repeat, Sunflower and Mad Hatter are approaching the door." Lukyan relayed.

I took one more glance around the room, making sure everything was in place, everything was in order. The nerves hadn't settled. In fact, they'd gotten worse. Something I didn't even think was possible.

I heard the jingle of keys and the creak of the door opening-

"Sunflower is opening the door. I repeat, Sunflower is-" I ripped out the earpiece and threw it across the room with a frustrated hiss.

An audible gasp hit the air. Tatiana had seen the path of candles I laid out to lead her into the lounge room.

No going back now. Not that I ever would. Tatiana and I belonged together.

She would know what was about to happen. I hadn't really been subtle with the set up. She would see all the flowers, hear the music playing

lightly in the background matched with the romantic-mood lighting and put two and two together,

The path of lavender scented candles I'd placed at the front of the door would lead her straight to me. Whether she chose to take that path would determine what was about to happen. We'd come a long way in the last six months. I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, but did she feel the same way? Especially after everything we'd been through.

The *click-clack* of high heels echoed from down the hall, and I released a huge sigh of relief.

She's coming.

I licked my dry lips, blew out a sharp breath and let determination fill my bones. Tatiana stepped around the corner. Her hand flew to her mouth as she took in the room before her glassy eyes landed on me.

My heart stuttered to a stop.

She's absolutely breath-taking.

"Nikolai," she whispered, emotion dripping from that one word.

I smiled, full and bright, and fell to my knees. One knee wasn't enough. Not for my Queen. "Tatiana—"

She burst into tears.

Emotion welled in my chest. Tears began to form behind my eyes, but I pushed them back, exhaling a shuddering breath. "Tatiana, I've agonised for months, trying to find the right words to convey how much you mean to me, the words you deserve, but I always came up short. The truth of it is, nothing ever seemed good enough. There was no combination of words I could come up with that would accurately explain your worth to me, how much I love you, how much I value you, but I'm going to try anyway." Another breath. "I've lived in a world with you, and I've lived in a world

without you, and though our time apart was one of the worst moments of my life, it showed me something incredibly vital. That I never want to do it again. Tatiana, I love you so much, more than anything else in this world, and there isn't a single thing I wouldn't do for you. I would lie for you. Kill for you. *Die* for you. I would do anything you asked of me because your happiness is my happiness. I want to spend the rest of my life showering you with the love and devotion you deserve. I want to grow old with you, and I pray that when our time comes that I go first, so I never have to experience a world without you again."

With shaky hands, I pulled out the ring box and opened it. Tatiana gasped, her eyes widening.

"Tatiana Vera Andreeva, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

My heart hammered so hard in my chest I struggled to breathe.

Oh god, what if she says no? What if she doesn't want to marry me? What if—

"Yes," Tatiana cried, smiling. "Yes, yes, yes."

A little note from me to you

THANK YOU SO MUCH for taking the time to read Bratva Knight! I hope you enjoyed reading about Nik and Tati as much as I enjoyed writing them!

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 and the overall storyline and plot 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 character's perspective.

The next book will be centred around Dimitri and Autumn. It will pick up right at the moment Dimitri was kidnapped by his brother, so you will see everything that happened to him while he was gone. You will also see the games from his POV, what happened between him and Dominik in the Arena, and what happened in the six-month time jump at the end of Nik and Tati's story.

Again, I would just like to say a massive thank you to all of my readers. Without you, this story would not have come to light, especially this quickly.

If you have the time and enjoyed the story, please don't hesitate to leave a review!

T J x

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