

MARISSA HONEYCUTT



A DARK EROTIC SERIES

EMERGED

the life of anna

PART FIVE

The Life of Anna, Part 5: Emerged

By Marissa Honeycutt

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*****WARNING*****

This book is for grownups. This book is not for people who are easily offended, get nightmares easily, or have difficulty reading books about tough subjects. I do not glorify bad things, but bad things do happen to my poor characters. This is not your typical love story. My heroine does not fall in love and live happily ever after... at least not like the typical heroine. There is a happily ever after, but it is a long, painful journey to that end.

This is not a stand-alone novel. The series must be read in order.

Anna's story is told in five, novel-length books. There is a subculture within our own world that you've only heard whispers of. The conspiracy theorists wish they knew Anna's story. What the conspiracy theorists think they know is only disinformation, put out there to keep them from the real story.

This book will likely offend you. This book might make you cry; it might make you throw up. It is a dark book. As my friend, Heidi, said, "It's dark. It gets darker. It gets even darker, and then it gets even darker. And then, just when you think it can't get any darker, it does."

But, don't worry. I take you to the deep end gradually. ;)

There are many sexual situations in this series of books. People die. People get hurt. Things aren't always truly the way they appear. The antagonist isn't just a bad guy; he's EVIL. My heroine's worldview is skewed; things that may appall you are perfectly normal to her.

Any violence in this book is non-gratuitous and crucial to the plot and character development.

Do not read this if you are under the age of consent in your country. Do not get angry if the subject or actual book upsets you. If you're reading this,

you've been warned.

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Chapter One

Aaron paced around Penn Station, stopping to stare at the arrivals screen every few minutes. The train that Anna and Justin were on was supposed to have arrived over two hours ago. Yes, this particular train had a reputation for being late, but every minute that ticked by made Aaron's anxiety grow. The lack of communication was killing him.

He hadn't seen or spoken to Anna in nine months. Their goodbye had been passionate and he couldn't stop himself from wondering if things could maybe get going between the two of them again. She was a free woman now. No obligations to the Brotherhood, other than staying out of Devin's sight. What would she do?

The overhead speaker blared and he was pretty sure he heard the train number he was waiting for. God, he hoped so! He didn't know if he could stand waiting any longer.

He turned and headed back to the arrivals area and, sure enough, he saw a notification of the Number 48 train. As he sighed in relief, he anxiously scanned the crowd for the beautiful face of the woman he still loved after all these years.

Justin's tall, thin frame was easy to spot and Aaron looked around for Anna, but didn't see her. A panic arose in his heart as he and Justin made eye contact. Justin grinned and then bent over to the small person wearing a hat next to him. The hat lifted and Anna's green eyes appeared, her gaze moving quickly around the room. She looked for a second and then Aaron's heart took a nosedive as she found him. A big smile appeared on her face and she said something to Justin who nodded.

The next thing Aaron knew, Anna was in his arms, hugging him tighter than he'd ever been hugged before. It felt like heaven.

"Aaron!" she cried against his chest.

Justin approached, watching Anna closely with a troubled look on his face; the other dancer had grown feelings for her. It wasn't really surprising, though. Aaron suspected that anyone who spent time with Anna developed feelings for her. It couldn't be helped.

Justin and Aaron shook hands and Aaron reluctantly detangled himself from Anna's embrace.

"What's with the hat?" Aaron asked, tapping the brim and grinning down at Anna.

Justin looked around. "She's all over the news as a missing person."

Aaron frowned. "She is? I haven't seen anything." Fuck, that wasn't good. But he watched the news and he hadn't seen anything. "Where did you find that out?"

"In Chicago," Anna said, looking up at him with anxious eyes.

Aaron's heart raced as he gazed into her eyes. Oh, he just wanted to lean down and kiss her, but she looked away before he could decide if he would or not.

"C'mon, let's get going," Aaron said with a heavy sigh as he took Anna's backpack from her. He would take them to the Ritz tonight where Wilhelm was staying. Tomorrow they would start dealing with her new life.

They went outside and he flagged down a taxi.

Anna stared out the window of the taxi, amazed by all the tall buildings. They went on and on and on. "Where are we going?" she asked. Aaron had

told the cab driver, but she had been overwhelmed with her surroundings and hadn't been listening.

"The Ritz. Wilhelm is there."

Anna inhaled sharply and then sighed with a smile. *Wilhelm*. "Is Kurt with him?"

Aaron shook his head. "He couldn't risk bringing Kurt."

"Why?"

Aaron glanced at the cabbie. "Traveling difficulties."

"Oh."

She sat between Aaron and Justin. Both men wanted her attention and she wanted to give attention to them both. Justin had risked his life by bringing her out here and they'd connected on the train. Aaron...Aaron was Aaron. Her best friend and first love. She intertwined her fingers with both of them and smiled at each of them.

They arrived at the hotel, went up to the Royal Suite and knocked on the door. A few moments later Wilhelm opened the door and smiled at her with tender blue eyes.

"*Mein Liebling*," he said in a soft tone and opened his arms.

She rushed into his arms and sighed as he held her tight.

Wilhelm stepped back without letting go of Anna. "Come in, please."

Justin and Aaron stepped inside and Aaron closed the door behind him.

Justin let out a whistle as he looked around. "Fuck," he murmured under his breath.

Anna buried her head in Wilhelm's chest. "You're here," she mumbled.

"Of course, *Liebling*," he murmured, stroking her hair. "I wanted to be here when you arrived."

Anna looked up and saw his eyes were wet. She reached up and stroked his cheek. "Why are you upset, Wilhelm?"

He shook his head sadly. "I should have done this years ago. I should have kept you in *Deutschland* and never returned you to him."

"Wilhelm, you know you couldn't have done this alone," Aaron said softly. "How many Elders did it take to get her out?"

Wilhelm chuckled. "Several." He smiled and looked at Justin. "Thank you, Justin, for bringing her."

"You're welcome, sir," Justin said.

Wilhelm led them into the living room and sat down with Anna on the couch. She curled up next to him and rested her head on his chest. Aaron and Justin took seats on opposite sides of the couch.

"Are you hungry?" Wilhelm asked, looking at Justin and Anna.

Anna nodded and glanced at Justin, who nodded as well. "There wasn't dinner on the train," she said. "It was supposed to arrive earlier. Even when the train is late, they close the dining car mid-afternoon for the end of the line."

Wilhelm reached beside him on the table and handed Anna a binder with a picture of the hotel on the front. "Let me know what you want and we will order it."

After the orders were placed, Justin told Wilhelm and Aaron about the trip.

"There weren't any issues, except Anna showing up on the news as a missing person in Chicago." He shrugged. "I don't get it."

"Tom is most likely preventing the story from airing here," Wilhelm said. "Anna's face plastered all over the city's TVs would not be good."

"He can do that?" Justin asked surprised.

Wilhelm nodded and smiled almost sheepishly. "Part of being an Elder and running a city." He kissed the top of Anna's head. "Would any of you like something to drink?" He motioned to a wet bar in the corner. "Feel free

to help yourselves. I would get it for you, but....” He smiled down at Anna. “I do not think she will let me up.”

Anna shook her head. She tightened her arms around his waist and snuggled closer. “*Nein*,” she whispered.

Wilhelm’s eyes dilated slightly. “I like it when you speak German. It is very sexy.”

“That’s about all I remember.”

He looked down at her intently and stroked her cheek with his thumb. “I have missed you so much, *Liebling*,” he whispered. He slid his hand around the back of her head and captured her lips with his as Aaron and Justin made their way to the wet bar.

After a relaxing dinner, Anna followed Wilhelm into the master bedroom after saying goodnight to Justin, who was staying in the second bedroom of the suite.

“Why isn’t Kurt here?” Anna asked, hurt that he wasn’t.

“An Immortal transported me here. They can only do that with Elders.” Wilhelm glanced down at her. “He is very sad that he could not be here, but sends his love.” He took her into his arms. “Did you learn what your new name is?”

Anna couldn’t stop the grin from appearing on her face as she nodded. “Justin said you picked it out.”

“*Ja*,” he smiled. “Kurt picked the last name. I picked the first name.”

“Katrina Engel,” she said softly and gazed up at him. “It makes me feel like I belong to you,” she said softly.

He brushed her hair back from her face. “You do belong to me,” he said softly and brushed his lips against her. “Always.” He slowly pulled her shirt off and stroked her bare back. “I have missed you,” he murmured.

Chapter Two

As Justin, Anna and Wilhelm were finishing breakfast the next morning, someone knocked on the door. Wilhelm looked at his watch before standing and going to answer it.

Tom and Tommy walked into the room with another man that Anna recognized as Wayne Sawyer.

“Dad?” Justin exclaimed, standing as the men appeared.

Tommy smiled brightly at Anna and she stood quickly and went to him. He sighed contentedly as he pulled Anna close. “For the first time I don’t have to worry about you getting hurt,” he murmured against her hair.

She looked up at him and smiled. “Thank you,” she said softly.

He brushed her cheek and leaned down to kiss her. “I can’t believe you live here now,” he said softly.

“Tommy,” Tom said in a warning tone. “She’s a free woman now. And you have a wife.”

Tommy grimaced and released her. “You’re right, Dad,” he said, though the longing remained in his eyes.

Anna looked at the ground, ashamed at her excitement of seeing Tommy. Tom clearly didn’t approve of Tommy approaching her. What did that mean?

Tom came up and hugged her in a fatherly manner and then kissed her on the top of the head. “You don’t have any more ‘obligations’, Anna. Er, Katrina.” He grinned down at her. “Katrina is a free woman who can do as she pleases, as long as she stays in Manhattan.” He released her and went to shake hands with Wilhelm.

Wayne, whom she had met several times, came to her and kissed her cheek. "Hello, Anna," he said with an affectionate smile. He then went over to Justin and embraced his son. "I'm really proud of you, Justin."

Justin's eyes widened for a moment before he smiled at his dad. "Thanks, Dad." He beamed and glanced at Anna, who smiled encouragingly at him. She knew their relationship had been difficult. Maybe this would be a new beginning for them.

They settled down in the comfortable seating area in the living room. Anna curled up on the couch next to Wilhelm.

"So, Anna," Tom said with a sigh. "You're here. I'm so relieved. It's been a stressful few days. We just got back into town yesterday afternoon. Devin's...not taking your disappearance well."

She chewed her lip. "Ian?" she asked softly.

Tom's face fell. "He took a cyanide pill after he told Devin that he'd helped you escape. Devin...." He paused and glanced at Wilhelm. "Devin was ready to kill him, but Ian knew that a quick death was preferable to the torture that Devin would have put him through. He also didn't want to risk revealing any information about your whereabouts, even though he didn't *officially* know anything."

Tears ran down Anna's cheeks. At least he hadn't suffered.

"Anna's face was all over Chicago's news," Justin said. "Why isn't it here?"

"I control the news here. Devin won't know." He looked at Anna. "Anna, like I said, as long as you stay in Manhattan, you are safe. Just don't go around telling people who you are. Katrina is from California and was just accepted into the New York City Ballet Company. You have no obligations to anyone here like you did when you were Anna. You have a

chance to make your own life and do as you please. Just, please, be careful. New York can be a dangerous place.”

Anna nodded.

“I have put a type of shield over the city, with the help of several other Elders so that Devin can’t find you here. He won’t know the shield is in place unless he were to try and come here, but there’s no real reason for him to come, so it won’t be an issue.” Tom smiled. “Technically he’s still your Master and we won’t be able to do anything about that until next year. We just need to keep you safe until then. But Katrina is not a slave, not a Mistress, not anything except a normal, beautiful young woman.”

Anna liked the sound of that.

“You can call any of us, though it would probably be safer if you had Aaron call,” Tom said. “But in an emergency, don’t hesitate to call me. If you see something that doesn’t look right, like someone you know from San Francisco, call me immediately. Devin is the only one blocked from seeing you, but I can put up temporary protections if needed.”

“So, I don’t have to go to your Manor?” Anna asked softly.

Tom shook his head. “It wouldn’t be a good idea if you did.”

“Aaron has a second bedroom in his apartment that is set up for you, unless you want your own place,” Wilhelm said. “Though I would prefer it if you stayed with him so you are not alone. If something were to happen to you, he has the authority to take care of things.” Wilhelm looked at Justin. “You are also now a member of the ballet company. I know Aaron has a place for you to stay as well. If there is anything you need, please let me know. I would like to help you in any way I can as a thank you for bringing Anna out here.”

Justin blinked. “Thank you. That’s really nice of you.”

Tom smiled. "I'm sure you'll do fine here, Anna. Just be careful and remember to say no if you don't want someone's advances." He stood with Tommy and Wayne. "I'll let Wilhelm help you settle in. Vincent would like you both to stop by the studio today so you can get a feel for it. Performances begin at the end of the month and he would really like you to be able to perform in the spring program."

Anna gave him a hesitant smile and Justin grinned.

"Cool," Justin said, bringing his hands together with enthusiastic force.

Justin went with his father so they could spend time together, and he and Anna agreed to meet at the studio at two.

Wilhelm took Anna to the apartment she'd be sharing with Aaron. It was only two blocks from the theater on the fortieth floor of a tall blue-glass building.

"There is a second master bedroom in here, which is one of the reasons Aaron liked it," Wilhelm said, leading her to the back of the apartment. "I wanted to buy you a place, but Aaron pointed out it would draw a lot of attention to you if you showed up in the Company living in a multi-million dollar penthouse." He smiled. "You will be garnering enough attention once you begin dancing, you do not need more due to where you live."

Her room was beautifully decorated in purples and creams and she had her own private bathroom. One wall had floor to ceiling windows, and she had a beautiful view of the city and the Hudson River.

Wilhelm stood behind her and put his arms around her waist. So, since I cannot spoil you with a condo, I will spoil you other ways."

He kissed her neck and she turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. His hands moved to cup her breasts and kneaded them gently.

Anna pressed her lips against his and moaned softly as he moved his hands down to cup her ass. It felt so good to be in his arms again. Last night, she'd been reminded what an incredible lover he was.

"Anna...", he whispered, and picked her up and carried her to her bed.

"So, what is your relation to Katrina?" Anna asked as she and Wilhelm lay naked together in her new bed. She ran her fingers through his white chest hair and across his chest.

"I have been trying to figure that out. I will not be able to come out very often and see you, but I do not want to hide it when I do." He twirled her hair around his finger. "I think a guardian of some sort. Or, perhaps we should just make it simple, and I can be who I am, the father of your deceased husband."

"I don't think people would approve of us sleeping together." She had learned enough when she'd been allowed "out into the world" that most people would find the sexual activities of those in the Brotherhood odd at best, and revolting at worst.

Wilhelm tweaked her nipple. "Definitely not. But I was not planning on revealing our sexual relationship to anyone." He grinned. "I do know how to play the part of a gentleman in public."

Anna smiled. "I know. You are the perfect gentleman."

"As I was brought up to be and brought my sons up the same way." He paused for a moment and continued to play with her hair. "Anna, if you.... I am sorry for what I did to you...with getting you pregnant. I should have asked, but I thought—"

She gave him a warm smile. "Wilhelm, I would have loved to have carried your child. I still would."

He splayed his hands over her stomach. “We will wait until you are ready to stop dancing for a while. I want you to get used to being free before I put any burdens on you. And, if that does happen, I would really prefer you to be in Germany with me. But that cannot happen until your bond with Devin is broken.”

“When I’m twenty-six?”

Wilhelm nodded. “Besides, you may decide you want Kurt for a husband after all.”

Anna softened at the mention of Kurt’s name. “It would be right for us to marry, wouldn’t it?”

He sighed. “*Ja*, Anna. It would. Kurt still loves you, even though you tried to help him get over you. You are an Elder-Mistress. It is good to marry an Elder-Son. But I do not want you to think about that right now. I want you to enjoy your freedom. Kurt can court you as any other man.” He chuckled. “And probably will. You will have to learn how to say no, Anna. Many men will want to date you. A benefit of being a half-Immortal. You will attract attention from men. It cannot be helped. But Aaron will help you if you ask.”

They dressed a while later and Wilhelm took her shopping for electronics, toiletries, clothing, and of course, dancewear. The highlight of the shopping trip was finding a dress for the City Ballet’s Spring Gala. She picked out a strapless lavender, silk taffeta gown with a sweetheart neckline and full skirt. The fitted bodice was decorated with crystals.

Shortly before two o’clock, Anna waited for Justin outside the studio. Wilhelm had dropped her off so she could establish herself on her own, and they planned to meet for dinner later. Justin came sauntering around the corner a few minutes later.

“Aren’t you nervous?” Anna asked.

Justin shrugged. "A little. Just trying to act brave." He laughed.

Anna giggled as he opened the door.

Justin led her through a small lobby where dancers were standing around chatting. The dancers glanced at them as they walked by, but didn't say anything.

Down a white hallway and around a corner, Anna could hear piano music and a man speaking loudly. "...Two...three...four...and up....yes, good...turn, turn, turn...."

Anna's stomach was in knots when they finally walked through the door and stopped just inside the room. The music finished and a dozen heads turned and looked at them. Anna flushed and looked at the ground.

"Justin, Katrina, I'm so glad you came." The man Anna vaguely remembered as Vincent Marsellis approached them with a big smile on his face.

Movement caught Anna's eye in the corner and she saw Aaron with his hand on another man's arm, holding him in place and whispering to him. The man looked directly at her and she found herself lost in a pair of whiskey-brown eyes. *Nate*? He was older now, but still had the same warm eyes. Anna didn't have a chance to reflect on much more because Vincent blocked her view of him.

Vincent shook hands with Justin and gave him a knowing smile. He kissed Anna's cheek and gave her a fatherly smile. "I'm so glad you are both here." He turned around and spoke loudly to the dancers in the room. "I'm sure some of you remember Justin Sawyer, who has returned to dance with us." Vincent put his arm around Anna. "And this is Katrina Engel," he introduced with a smile. "I've been trying to get her out here for years," he added in a slightly softer voice.

Anna looked at him wide-eyed and then blushed, which made his smile grow even wider.

“I wanted them to come and see a rehearsal before they begin dancing tomorrow. Yes,” he said over mumbles around the room. “They will be dancing with us in the spring program and I expect you all to help them as much as you can.”

“Are they principals?” a Spanish-looking woman asked.

“Yes,” Vincent affirmed. “From San Francisco.”

Anna glanced at Aaron, who nodded in assurance. She didn’t know if she was supposed to be from San Francisco or not. Tom had only said California.

She could feel Nate’s gaze on her, and tried to avoid looking in his direction, but she succumbed to temptation and found her eyes locked onto his. She hadn’t seen him since the evening of their student performance, so many years ago.

Justin pulled at her arm and led her to the side of the room where they sat along the wall and watched rehearsal progress. The dancers were mesmerizing. Some had better technique than others, though the ones with lesser technique danced with a heart that she could almost feel.

Nate had gotten even better since she’d last seen him. His jumps were magnificent and she loved watching him soar across the room. He and Aaron danced a bit together and they were both amazing.

When Nate wasn’t dancing, he was watching Anna. She tried not to look at him, but would inevitably look up and find herself lost in his brown eyes.

Watching him dance with one of the women brought so many memories floating to the forefront of her mind. Oh, he was still so handsome! She wondered what he had been doing all these years, aside from dancing. Had

he thought of her at all? Was he dating anyone? She didn't see a wedding ring on his hand, so she assumed he wasn't married.

When rehearsal was over, she stood nervously next to Justin as Vincent gave the dancers last minute instructions. Vincent dismissed the dancers and several of them hurried over to her and Justin. They seemed happy to see Justin; two girls in particular were not subtle when flirting with him. He grinned sheepishly at Anna, who smiled back.

"Justin, I arranged for you to stay with Dave and Kris for now," Aaron said. "They have a three-bedroom and just lost a roommate."

Dave and Kris seemed to know Justin and there was much hugging and backslapping.

Anna stepped away slightly and backed into something solid. A man. She swallowed nervously, turned around and found herself looking up into Nate's eyes again.

"I can't believe you're here," he said softly. His hand twitched at his side, as if he wanted to reach out to her. "How did you get here?"

"I ran away with some help," she said with a shy smile.

"Aaron?"

She nodded. "And Justin and a bunch of others."

He stared at her for a long minute. "It's been so long," he whispered, his eyes filling with longing. He had lifted his hand slightly when someone called out to him.

"Nate, man. C'mon, I'm starving."

Anna turned to see one of the dancers with his arms crossed and making a face at him.

"That's Lance, my roommate," Nate explained. "Okay, man. Just hang on a sec."

Lance walked over to them. “Katrina, right?” he asked with a seductive grin.

Anna briefly wondered who Katrina was, before she remembered *she* was Katrina. She nodded and gave a hesitant smile.

Lance glanced at Nate with a grin. “You know her or just making fast moves?”

“Yeah, I’m so like that,” Nate said, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, I know her. I’m from San Francisco too, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot.” Lance grinned and looked at Anna. “Wanna join us for dinner?”

“Thanks,” Anna said softly, “But I have plans already.”

“You do?” Nate asked, surprised.

Anna looked over at him. “Yeah. With Wilhelm.”

“That’s...Alex’s dad, right?” he asked, squinting thoughtfully.

Anna bit her lip and nodded, wondering what he knew about her relationship with Wilhelm.

“Nate, can I talk to you for a sec?” Aaron said, walking over to them.

Nate nodded and followed Aaron to the other side of the room.

“So, how do you know Nate?” Lance asked, his dark brown eyes slightly mischievous.

“Oh,” Anna glanced at Nate, who was listening intently to Aaron. “Um...we danced together before he came here.”

“Is that all?”

Anna looked back at Lance and flushed.

“I thought not. I could see how he watched you during class.” Lance tilted his head. “Did you come hoping to get back together with him?”

“I... No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, I’d forgotten he was here.” But how could she have forgotten Nate? It all happened so fast she wasn’t

sure what she was hoping for.

“He’s got a girlfriend. Not sure how serious they are, but thought you might want to know.”

Part of Anna was relieved, part was sad. At least she didn’t have to worry about hurting Nate since he was already involved with another woman. “That’s good,” she said after a moment with a smile. “He’s a great guy.”

Lance grinned. “If you’re too broken-hearted over him, I’d be happy to cheer you up.”

Anna looked at him for a moment and then laughed. The mock seductive look on his face was priceless. She liked Lance.

Aaron and Nate walked back over to where she was standing.

“We doing dinner?” Aaron asked Anna who nodded.

“You know her, too?” Lance asked, bewildered.

“He’s from the same place, dumb ass.” Nate laughed.

“I’ve known An...Katrina for a really long time,” Aaron smiled affectionately at her. “Too long, I think.”

They chatted for a few more minutes and then Lance dragged Nate away. Nate smiled at her before he walked out the door of the studio and Anna sighed.

“He’s got a girlfriend,” Aaron said. “Just so you know.”

Anna nodded. “I know. Lance told me.”

“He would.” Aaron chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Hey, Justin,” Aaron said, turning to the small group of dancers nearby. “You comin’ to dinner?”

“Do I need to?” Justin asked.

Aaron shrugged. “I didn’t know what you had planned.”

“I think I’ll go see my new place.” He grinned at his new roommates and the girls standing next to him. “And catch up with some old friends.”

“You coming, Aaron?” a woman asked. Kim, Anna thought her name was.

Aaron shook his head. “Gotta get Katrina settled in.”

Kim and the other women raised their eyebrows. “She’s living with you?”

“She’s a really old friend. Have to watch out for her and keep her safe.”

Aaron took her arm and led her out of the room. “Did you get a phone?” he asked as they walked outside into the cool evening air.

“Top of the line, as I understand it.” She shook her head. “Wilhelm always insists on the best for me.”

“Why shouldn’t he? You deserve it.” Aaron’s eyes were filled with longing as he looked down at her.

Anna blushed and didn’t respond. She was too overwhelmed with everything going on at the moment to know whether she wanted to start things again with Aaron. They walked across the street and down a block to their building.

The doorman greeted Aaron by name and Aaron introduced Anna. “James, this is Katrina, my new roommate. Katrina, this is James.”

“Hi.” Anna smiled and gave a little wave.

“Hi, Katrina.” James smiled back.

“So, what’s up for dinner?” Aaron asked as they got on the elevator.

“I don’t know. I told Wilhelm I’d call when we were home.” She smiled. *Home*. She liked the sound of that.

“I’m gonna shower,” Aaron said as they walked into their apartment. “Why don’t you call Wilhelm and find out what’s up.”

“Okay.”

Anna went into her room and called Wilhelm.

“Hello, Anna, er, Katrina.” Wilhelm laughed. “Perhaps I should just call you *Liebling*.”

Anna giggled. “I like it when you do.”

“As do I. How was your afternoon?”

“Good.” Anna sighed. “Their dancing is so different than Isaak’s. I mean, not foreign, but...I don’t know. Different.”

“Do you like it?”

Anna shook her head. “I don’t know. I’d heard that Balanchine was different but...it will take some getting used to.”

“I am sure you will do wonderfully, Anna. You are one of the finest dancers I have ever seen.”

“Thanks, Wilhelm,” she said softly, appreciating his encouragement.

“So are you hungry?”

“Yes. Justin went to spend time with old friends, but Aaron is showering right now.”

“Alright. Well, how about I pick the two of you up in about twenty minutes?”

After a very nice dinner, Wilhelm walked Anna and Aaron back up to their apartment.

“Anna, I must return to Frankfurt.” Wilhelm stood in the middle of the living room and Anna turned to him in surprise. “If Devin knew I was here he would become suspicious, and Tom is shielding me. I would rather him put his energy into protecting you than me.”

“Oh,” she said, sitting down on the couch. “When?”

“Tonight. Gavin is waiting for me in my hotel room.”

“Oh,” she repeated, looking down at the ground.

Wilhelm sat next to her, wrapping his arms around her. “I am sorry, *Liebling*. But we will speak often.”

“You can’t come back?” she asked, hoping it wasn’t true.

Wilhelm frowned. “Eventually, *ja*. But I do not know when for now.” He stroked her cheek. “You do not need me hanging around here, Anna. You need to find your new life.”

Anna tried to blink away tears as her heart burned in pain. “I like you being here,” she said softly. “I hate the idea of you absent from my life.”

He smiled gently. “Anna, I will always be a part of your life. But you need to stay safe and my being here may draw Devin’s attention. Once he is weaker it will be easier. But he is too strong now. The longer you are away from him, the better.”

Anna nodded in understanding, though she didn’t like it. “I’ll miss you.”

“And I, you, *Liebling*. Tom is available if you need anything. And Aaron.” He leaned down and kissed her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Wilhelm didn’t linger, but gave her another kiss and left the apartment. His quick exit made it easier to maintain her external calm, but it still hurt.

She went into her room and lay down on her bed and cried. Aaron came in a few minutes later, lay down behind her and held her until she fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter Three

Anna nervously followed Aaron into the large dance studio where classes would be held every day except Sundays. Justin was surrounded by several people and laughing. Anna envied the ease with which he had already gotten settled in. She, on the other hand, hovered behind Aaron, trying to hide.

Aaron put his arm around Anna and chuckled. "C'mon, Kat. You can stand by me."

"Cat?" Anna asked.

"Nickname?" Aaron said with a grin.

"Oh." She smiled. She hadn't had a nickname like that before. Shortening Anna wasn't really necessary.

Aaron took his place in the back center of the room and Anna stood next to him, uncertain of what to do. It was such a large room and full of so many dancers. The New York City Ballet was much larger than the one back home.

Several dancers said hi to Aaron and looked curiously at Anna, but didn't speak to her.

"Don't worry, Kat. They looked at me the same way when I came. They'll respect you once you start dancing."

"It's so different," she whispered. Anna fiddled with her wedding ring. The women looked so sophisticated, even though they wore simple workout wear or dance attire. There was just something about them that screamed elegance. They were all tall and thin, making Anna feel very fat.

She sat down on the ground and slowly began softening her pointe shoes. They were new and she had forgotten to do it last night. Everyone else's were well worn. She sighed silently and hoped Aaron was right.

Vincent came in a while later and caught Anna's eye. He smiled warmly at her and then spoke quietly to the pianist. While Aaron talked to the other dancers around them, Anna stayed on the floor and stretched quietly. She felt someone watching her and looked up to see Nate had arrived and was looking at her, eyes full of emotion.

He has a girlfriend, she reminded herself as she smiled timidly at him. He smiled back and made his way over to her.

"Hi," he said quietly, sitting down next to her. "I never thought I'd get to do this again."

"Do what?"

"Sit next to you in a studio." He glanced at her and she bit her lip nervously. "Hell, just to be near you."

"Nate...", she said softly but his roommate Lance walked over and plopped down next to them.

"Hey, Katrina," he said with that mischievous smile of his. His mannerisms made her think of Kurt.

"Hi, Lance," she said softly and bent forward into a stretch to hide her nervousness.

"How was your dinner last night?" Nate asked.

"Nice." She held back a sigh. Wilhelm was gone now. She missed him already and not knowing when she would see him again made her sad.

Vincent clapped his hands and the room fell silent as the dancers took their places.

"Just a reminder, you need to be at the airport Sunday morning by seven to catch the plane. Please don't be late." The room erupted in laughter as

Vincent arched a brow at a male dancer across the room.

“I know! I know!” the dancer said with a grin. “I’ll have three alarms to make sure I’m there.”

Vincent smiled and then looked around. “I’m sure many of you have noticed the new faces this morning. Some of you met them yesterday, but I’ll introduce them to the rest of you. Justin Sawyer has returned to us after spending some time in San Francisco, and along with him came a new principal, Katrina Engel.”

Anna smiled shyly and then looked back at the ground, very aware of everyone staring at her.

“They will be dancing this upcoming program with us, so please help them out when they need it.” Vincent looked at the pianist. “Let’s begin.”

The music began and Vincent hurried over to her. “The warm up is similar to what you are used to, Katrina, but I’ll guide you through it once.”

Anna began the series of *plies* and *relevés* as Vincent stayed close to make adjustments and call steps.

She was frustrated and discouraged by the end of the first warm up. Vincent kept correcting her arm position and Anna hated that he had to do that.

The warm ups progressed, increasing in speed. Even though the steps were similar, it felt so foreign to move her body the way Vincent directed. Vincent was patient with her and didn’t, in any way, make her feel inferior; to the contrary, he was very encouraging. But things she was used to doing slowly this company did twice as fast. In fact, *everything* seemed twice as fast as she was used to. Anna was nearly in tears by the end of the *barre* work.

Aaron touched her arm as she hung her head, sweating profusely and trying very hard to hide her tears. “It’s all right, Kat. You’ll get used to it. I

promise.”

She saw several smirks as she took her place for center work and kept her face lowered. She couldn't even close her eyes and just dance because it was so...different. The only thing that made her feel better was the cross-room jumps. She easily out-jumped all the women in the room and allowed herself a tiny smile after she even out-jumped one of the men. She heard murmurs from the back wall where the other dancers watched. After that, her confidence grew...a little. Her balance was exquisite and her pirouettes perfect. Many of the smirks were replaced with looks of respect by the end of class. She still felt out of place, but felt a glimmer of hope that she would eventually fit in.

She went to lunch with Aaron, Nate, Lance, Justin and several other dancers. The girls that came with them stared as Anna sat down with a tray full of food. Anna noticed they had small salads and vegetable soup, whereas Anna had gotten a Caesar salad wrap and French fries.

“Should I not be eating this?” she whispered to Aaron.

Aaron laughed. “Nah. You always eat like that, don't you?”

“Well, yeah....”

She ate self-consciously at first and then stopped altogether when she overheard one of the girls comment on Anna's hips and what she was eating.

“Why aren't you eating?” Aaron asked.

“I'm fat,” Anna said softly, tears burning her eyes.

“Who said that?”

“Come on, Aaron. You know I don't look anything like the other female dancers.”

“You never have, Kat. They're just jealous because you actually look like a female.” He grinned. “You look the same as you did when we danced

together and...did other things.”

Anna blushed and looked back down at her plate.

Rehearsals that afternoon were exhausting. The City ballet didn’t just do one ballet. They did snippets of several different modern ballets of Balanchine's, most of which Anna hadn’t even heard of. Vincent paired her with several different men to see how the chemistry worked. Some she felt more comfortable with than others. When she danced with Aaron, though, it felt like coming home.

“You two have danced together before, correct?” Vincent asked.

Aaron nodded. “Not as much as I’d have liked, but yes.”

“You work well together. Probably because you trained at the same school.” Vincent looked at them again and then walked away to work with another couple.

Anna didn’t know if it was good or bad, but Aaron assured her that it was okay.

“Where are you going on Sunday?” she asked.

“The Netherlands. The whole company is going, including you and Justin. We go on tour every few months.”

Anna shook her head. “I can’t go. I can’t leave Manhattan.”

Aaron chewed his lip. “I forgot about that.” He glanced at Vincent. “I’ll let him know after we’re done.”

Vincent wasn’t happy about Anna not being able to travel, but he understood. “We’ll be gone all week. I can talk to the school if you want to dance there.”

Anna shook her head. “It’s okay, Vincent. I can practice on my own. I don’t want to be a bother.”

Vincent glanced at Aaron. "How long will the restriction be in place?"

Aaron shrugged. "I don't know."

Vincent pressed his lips together and nodded curtly. "All right." He turned and walked away and Anna looked at Aaron.

"He's upset." Anna sighed.

"You've only been here a couple of days and you're gonna miss a tour. It's okay. He knows why and would rather you be here and not tour, than not be here at all."

At the end of rehearsal, Vincent called Anna aside. He stood with one of the male dancers she hadn't been introduced to yet. The tall dancer's black hair was cut very short and his mahogany skin looked so smooth Anna wanted to run her hand over his clean-shaven cheeks. A dimple appeared when he smiled at her and his eyes were a surprisingly light brown that reminded her of a topaz.

"Katrina, this is Hugo Sintzenich. Hugo, this is Katrina Engel."

Anna shook hands with Hugo and said hello.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Katrina," Hugo said with a slight accent. His name sounded German. "I've enjoyed watching you today."

"Hugo was not going on tour with us because of a family issue, and he has agreed to work with you while we're gone," Vincent explained.

"Oh!" Anna exclaimed. "Thank you, Vincent. I'm sorry to be a bother."

Vincent smiled. "You're not a bother. I understand why things are the way they are. I had forgotten Hugo wasn't going until halfway through rehearsal. It works out well since he also choreographed one of the ballets we're performing for the upcoming program."

Anna looked back at Hugo, who smiled modestly. "I'm honored you're willing to work with me," she said softly.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he smiled, his white teeth standing out in contrast to his beautiful dark skin.

Most of the men she had contact with were “white guys,” with the exception of the president. Anna thought Hugo was very handsome.

“We can work out a schedule tomorrow if you’d like,” Hugo said as Vincent walked away. “Unless you’d like to tonight, over dinner,” he added with a boyish grin.

“Oh...I...um....” She glanced over at Aaron, who was talking with Justin and another girl. She looked back at Hugo, who smiled at her hesitation. Was he asking her out on a date or was he just being friendly? She reminded herself that she was a free woman now and could do as she pleased.

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, Katrina.” Hugo chuckled. “It’s just eating. You do eat, right?”

Anna smiled and nodded. “More than I should apparently,” she added softly.

Hugo arched one eyebrow. “Why do you say that?” He looked her up and down and smiled, but not in a way that made her uncomfortable.

Anna blushed, which seemed to amuse Hugo. “Dinner would be nice,” she said decisively. She could try this freedom out. She didn’t have to ask Aaron if she could go out with someone...did she?

“Great.” He smiled broadly. “I...” He trailed off as Aaron approached. “Hey, Aaron.”

“Hey, Hugo.” Aaron touched Anna’s arm. “You ready?”

Anna glanced at Hugo, who looked between the two of them with thoughtful eyes. “Aaron’s my roommate,” she explained.

A hint of relief showed in Hugo’s face as he nodded. “What time is good for you?”

“Um...” She glanced at her watch. “An hour?”

“Sounds good. I’ll pick you up.”

“Okay, I live at—”

Hugo shook his head. “I know where Aaron lives. I’ll see you in an hour,” he said with a smile and walked away.

“You’re going out with him?” Aaron asked incredulously as Anna went to pick up her bag.

“Is that okay?” she asked nervously. “Vincent is having him work with me next week while you all are gone. Hugo said we could work out the schedule over dinner. Is he an okay guy?”

“Hugo? Yeah, he’s a great guy.” Aaron grimaced. “I guess I need to be quicker about asking you out and not assume you’re going to be home.”

“Oh, Aaron, did you want to do something tonight? I’m sorry.” She felt bad for not checking with him first.

“I was thinking about doing something, but I didn’t ask and you have no reason to feel bad. How about tomorrow night though?” They made their way out the back door of the theater and headed towards their apartment building.

“Sounds wonderful,” Anna said, grinning.

Anna stood in front of the mirror an hour later, smoothing her new blue dress over her hips. A knock sounded at the door and Anna went to answer it, but Aaron got there first. But it wasn’t Hugo; it was Nate.

“Wow, Anna. You look great.” Nate walked over and kissed her on the cheek, lingering next to her a second longer than necessary but long enough to heat her blood.

She looked up at him, wide eyed and startled. “Thanks,” she said softly.

“Here,” Aaron said, handing Nate a beer. “Anna’s got a date already.”

Nate raised his eyebrows. “Really? Who?”

“Hugo,” she answered.

Nate smiled. “Good guy. I approve.”

There was another knock at the door and Anna went to answer it. Hugo stood in the doorway wearing a black button-down dress shirt and khaki dress pants. He smiled broadly when he saw her.

“Hi, Hugo,” she said, stepping aside to allow him room to enter.

“Hello, Katrina,” he said with an appreciative grin. “You look fabulous.”

“Thanks.” She smiled shyly.

Hugo greeted Aaron and Nate. The three men chatted for a few minutes and then Hugo looked at Anna. “You ready?”

Anna nodded with a shy smile. She went quickly to her room to retrieve her purse and then returned to the living room.

Hugo opened the door and the two said goodbye to Aaron and Nate. “Do you like Italian?” Hugo asked as they made their way to the elevator.

“Yes,” Anna answered with butterflies in her stomach. How long had it been since she’d been on a date? A real date? It had to have been Ben, but this time she didn’t have to worry about what Devin thought about it.

Hugo and Anna settled into a cozy table for two in a small Italian restaurant across town. Or at least that’s where Anna thought they were. This city was so different from her own.

“So how come you’re not going on tour?” Hugo asked after they had ordered their dinners.

“I....” Anna hesitated. “I can’t travel right now.”

“Oh? Why not?”

Anna’s eyes widened. How did she answer that? “I...just can’t.”

“Are you sick?”

Anna shook her head.

“Are you a criminal?” He grinned.

Anna smiled and shook her head.

“Are you....” He thought for a moment. “A secret spy undercover as a dancer who has duties here in New York?”

Anna laughed. “No.”

“Are you going to tell me or should I give up now?”

Anna laughed. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.” She gave him a sly look.

Hugo leaned his head back and laughed. “All right, all right. I give up.”

“So, why aren’t you going?”

“My mother broke her leg a few weeks ago and I need to keep an eye on her.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! How did she break it?”

Hugo chuckled. “Skiing.” He rolled his eyes. “I warned her that a seventy year old woman shouldn’t be going skiing, but she didn’t listen. She’s a bit stubborn.”

Anna laughed again. “Are you disappointed you can’t go?”

“I love traveling, but it’ll give some of the younger principals a chance to dance in roles not normally available.” He shrugged. “Do you like to travel?”

Anna paused. “I suppose it depends on the activities involved and who I’m with.”

“Interesting answer. You’ve traveled with unpleasant people?”

Anna shrugged. “You could say that.”

“Where have you gone?”

Anna thought aloud. “Frankfurt...St. Petersburg...Washington, DC....” Alex had never gotten to take her on a honeymoon that he’d wanted to. Her hand went unconsciously to her wedding band.

“Katrina?”

Anna shook her head. “I’m sorry. I...got lost in a thought.”

He grinned. “It’s all right. You’re German, correct?”

“Why would you...oh, um...yeah.” Her name.

“Were you born here or in *Deutschland*?”

“In California. Your name sounds German as well.”

“I was born outside of Dusseldorf, but came here as a teenager.”

“To dance?”

Hugo nodded and then smiled. “Your name suits you. *Engel*.” He nodded. “Unusual last name, though.”

“Is it?” Was it obvious it was made up?

Hugo smiled. “Like I said, it suits you.”

Their food arrived and the conversation turned to more basic topics, such as movies and books; Hugo didn’t believe her when she said that she couldn’t remember the last movie she’d seen. They talked about their favorite ballets: Hugo’s was Swan Lake; Anna’s was Giselle.

Dessert was served before they started discussing a schedule for the following week. After a few minutes, they just decided to meet at the studio mid-morning each day and go from there.

They took a cab back to Anna’s apartment and Hugo walked her up to her apartment. She fidgeted with her keys as she looked up at him. “Did you want to come in?”

He grinned. “Not tonight, Katrina.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

Anna felt her cheeks warm at the simple kiss. "I had a really nice time," she said sincerely. "Thank you."

"Me too. I'm looking forward to working with you. I'll see you tomorrow."

Hugo waited until Anna had unlocked her door and opened it before turning back to the elevators. She waved and then went inside.

Aaron was sitting on the couch. "So, how was it?" he asked.

"Nice," she smiled. "He seems like a great guy."

Aaron grinned. "Yeah, he is. There's talk of him taking Vincent's place when he retires."

"Really? Wow."

"He's an incredibly talented choreographer. It's good you can work with him while we're gone."

Anna fidgeted. "Is he safe?"

Aaron gave her an affectionate smile. "Yeah, hon. He's safe."

Anna sighed in relief.

"Hon, I think you know if someone's safe or not. You just need to be brave enough to say no if they're not safe."

It was true; she knew men. "Thanks, Aaron. I'm gonna go to bed."

"G'night Anna."

Anna smiled at his use of her real name. "Good night, Aaron."

The next few days flew by. Friday was another exhausting, frustrating day of dancing. Anna hoped that Hugo would be able to help her next week. The style was so different and it frustrated her to no end.

Friday night, Aaron took her out to dinner and they had a wonderful time. It was so nice being with him again. They cuddled up on the couch

when they got home and watched a movie.

Saturday night Anna lay in her bed fidgeting. She'd spent the day with Aaron as he packed. They didn't have class and it was wonderful to spend time with him, especially since he was going to be gone for an entire week.

She tossed and turned but couldn't find a comfortable position. It had been several days since she'd had sex and she was feeling it. She needed to be touched; more than just a hug. She sighed and got up out of bed.

She crept into Aaron's bedroom. He was illuminated by the outside lights, his sheets tangled around his hips. One arm was slung over his head and the other rested on his stomach. His chest moved slowly up and down as he snored softly.

She smiled, remembering how he slept like this when they'd been together. Her heart squeezed at the memory. How she had missed him!

Anna pulled her pajamas off and crawled onto the bed at his feet. She slowly made her way up until she could kiss his chest. He groaned softly as she kissed her way up to his neck and straddled his hips. The hand that had been on his stomach moved to her hip and caressed her lightly.

She kissed his mouth and his eyes snapped open. "Anna," he whispered hoarsely. "What are you doing?"

She leaned to the side and nipped at his earlobe. "I can't sleep," she whispered.

His arm above his head moved to pet her hair gently as he gazed into her eyes. "You need touch?" he asked gently.

Anna nodded and he rolled her to her back and moved the sheets so his body was against hers. His cock was hard against her hip as he leaned down to kiss her, gentle at first, but with an increasing hunger as the minutes passed. His hands roamed her body and they both felt their desperation for each other. She stroked his cock and he circled her clit with his finger.

“Please, Aaron,” she rasped, wiggling beneath him. She opened her legs and he groaned in appreciation.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he said and thrust inside her with one movement.

Anna arched her back and cried out softly as he filled her. He kissed her as he began moving. She wrapped her legs around his waist and met his thrusts, both of them quickly climbing the road to ecstasy and reaching the peak together. Aaron cried out Anna’s name and clung to her as he pumped her full of himself.

He kissed her again as their heart rates slowed and he rolled to his side. She rested her head on his chest and wrapped her arm around his waist as he kissed the top of her head. “I’m so glad you’re finally here,” he whispered.

Chapter Four

“What will I do while you’re gone?” Anna asked as she sat on Aaron’s bed early the next morning. He was cramming a few last minute things in his suitcase.

“Haven’t you ever masturbated before?”

Anna’s eyes widened. “You mean touch myself?”

Aaron chuckled. “Yeah. Most people do it.”

Anna shook her head. “I would be punished if I did that.”

Aaron made a face. “Hon, Devin’s not here. There’s no one to punish you.” He grinned. “You should try it. You might like it.”

Anna frowned at the thought. “I don’t know if I could.”

“When I get back I’m gonna buy you a vibrator.” He paused. “Or maybe not. If you use that you won’t need me.”

“I’d much rather have flesh and blood inside me than plastic.”

He grinned. “Good.” He leaned down and kissed her deeply. “I’m gonna miss you.”

“Me too,” she murmured against his lips, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He pulled away and zipped up his suitcase. “We’ll be back Sunday afternoon. Call Tom if you need anything.”

Anna nodded and reached for her pajamas so she could walk him to the apartment door. “You...will return, right?” she asked in a shaky voice.

Aaron looked at her with sad eyes. “It’s just a ballet tour. Nothing dangerous.”

She took a deep breath. “Yeah.” Everything would be fine.

“Would you feel better if I called you every few days?”

Anna’s heart lightened and she nodded. “Yeah, that might help.”

“Okay. I’ll do that. I’ll call you when we land too.”

“Thank you for understanding, Aaron.”

“I remember Alex. I know what you went through. I never want you to feel that way again.”

They hugged one last time, Aaron repeated his admonitions about being safe and not going out alone after dark and then he left. Anna went to his bed and fell back asleep, hugging his pillow.

Later that morning, Anna woke up feeling refreshed and decided to go exploring. She had heard of the big New York City library and decided she would go find it.

According to the map on her phone, it was a thirty-five minute walk. Forty-five if she went through Central Park. She had all day to herself and decided to take the scenic route.

She was glad she did. Central Park was amazing with the first hints of spring breaking through the winter barrenness. It smelled so good and was filled with interesting people. Maybe she would find a good book to read and return and spend some time reading here. The air was cool but not cold.

Anna walked slowly down Fifth Avenue admiring the stores and restaurants. She imagined she looked pretty silly, mouth open in awe of the “big city” but she was having an incredible time and didn’t care.

A mile down the road she finally reached the library. What a magnificent building! White marble with regal columns and lions and stairs. She stood outside for a good ten minutes just taking it all in before walking slowly up the steps and into the historic building. She’d arrived just in time

for the library to open and was thrilled to find out that there was a tour available in an hour. She bought a ticket and kept herself busy by wandering around the first floor. She hadn't been in a library in years and was excited to learn about "her new library." She even got a library card after silently thanking Tom for the New York driver's license.

At dinnertime, Anna settled onto the couch with a sandwich she'd bought at a deli on the way home. She was laughing at the sitcom she'd flipped on when there was a knock at the door. She jumped at the sound and cautiously walked to the door and opened it.

"Tommy?" she asked with astonishment.

Tommy grinned sheepishly. "Hey Anna. I just...wanted to see how you were settling in."

"Oh, well, come on in." She stepped aside and Tommy walked in and looked around.

"Nice place," he commented.

"Thanks. I live with Aaron."

"Yeah." Tommy nodded. "Is he here?"

She shook her head. "No, he's flying to the Netherlands. He'll be back next week."

"Oh."

Anna looked at his handsome face and smiled tenderly. "How are things with you?"

"Good." He blew out a breath and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Found out that Kim's pregnant."

Anna blinked and tried to ignore the stabbing pain in her heart. "Oh, that's...that's great, Tommy." She smiled weakly. "Are you happy?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. I mean, it's good. It's time to start the family. I just...." He sighed. "It's just weird, knowing I'm gonna be a dad."

"I bet you'll be a great dad," she whispered, struggling to keep her emotions in check.

Tommy stepped closer to her and she could smell his cologne, bringing so many memories to the forefront of her mind. He ran his knuckles gently across her cheek. "I miss you," he whispered. "It kills me, knowing you're in the city and...not with me." He sighed. "I wish I'd waited for you." His blue eyes filled with emotion as he stared intently into her eyes.

Anna's lips parted and she trembled at his words. "Me too," she whispered.

He slowly slid his hands around the back of her head and bent his head down to hers. His lips brushed hers lightly, waiting for permission to kiss her. Anna hesitated. She wanted him to, oh so much, but....

"We shouldn't," she said in a hoarse voice as she leaned forward slightly.

His lips enveloped her bottom one gently. "I know." His tongue traced her bottom lip as his thumb caressed the sensitive spot behind her ear.

"Tommy....," she whispered, pleading for him to continue; pleading for him to stop. She didn't know what she wanted.

"Anna...." He stepped even closer and captured her lips with his, holding her head gently with both hands. Her hands slid up his hard chest and over his shoulders. His tongue slipped between her parted lips and past her teeth, stroking, caressing, dancing and taking her breath away. His arms wrapped tightly around her, holding her close.

She clung to him as if he were a life vest in the middle of the ocean. His kisses became more insistent, his embrace, tighter. He slid his hands down her back and pressed his fingers into her ass, her hips against his.

“Tommy,” she moaned softly as she felt him hard against her.

“Where’s your room?” he asked against her lips, his voice husky.

She pointed down the hall and he picked her up and carried her around the corner and to her room, placing her gently on her bed. He stretched out next to her and pulled her close to kiss her again. His kiss was deep, passionate, loving. He caressed her back, her ass, her hips and finally moved his hand up to cup her breast gently. She broke the kiss to gasp as he thumbed her nipple over her cotton camisole. The heat from his hand scorched her skin.

He kissed her neck when she leaned her head back, sucking on the skin above her collarbone. She moaned softly as he kissed her nipple over the soft material and sucked on it through the fabric. It puckered under his skilled mouth and she arched her back to press her breast deeper into his mouth.

She cried out softly as he pulled the camisole away, exposing the sensitive skin and softly bit her now engorged peak. Her hands got lost in his hair as he swirled his tongue around and around, the nipple ring being jostled with the movements.

She caressed his cock over his jeans and he moved his hips in rhythm against her hand.

“Touch me,” he rasped.

Anna quickly unfastened his jeans and wrapped her hand around his cock. She caressed his piercings and smiled at the throbbing hardness. They quickly disposed of their clothing and Anna knelt next to his hips and took him into her mouth, moaning at his taste.

“Oh, God, Anna!” He pulled at her hips and adjusted her legs so that she was straddling his head.

He held her hips and buried his tongue into her swollen pussy. She gasped against his cock as he sucked her clit hard, kneading her ass and brushing his fingers against her asshole.

He knew her body well. Knew how to make her moan and scream in passion. And he did both. She tried to concentrate on his delicious cock, but his tongue lapped at her clit as he sucked on it. She felt herself tingling and then she leaned her head back as her orgasm rushed through her body.

“Tommy!” she cried, trying to pull away, but he held her firm until he sucked every ounce of pleasure out of her.

Tommy pushed her to her side and moved quickly above her, her head at the foot of the bed. In one swift move he was inside her and kissing her. His tongue mimicked the movements of his cock, thrusting slowly in and out. Anna moaned loudly and met his rhythm enthusiastically. His movements were deep and deliberate, making her moan with each deep thrust. Her fingernails dug into his back as she felt another orgasm building.

“God, Anna!” he shouted and cursed as his cock throbbed deep inside her. She followed quickly and her muscles clenched around him.

He held her tightly and kissed her as he softened inside her. He nuzzled her neck and then rolled to his side, stroking her arm as he gazed lovingly into her eyes. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

Anna grinned and turned to face him. “I think you’ve learned some new moves.”

He chuckled. “Maybe.” He kissed her again, sliding his hands down her back and hips. “Perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

She ran her hand slowly over his chest and abs, loving every inch of him. She’d missed him so much.

Music sounded loudly, making them both jump.

“Fuck,” Tommy said, sitting up and reaching for his jeans. He pressed the screen and stood, running his hand through his hair. “Hey, baby,” he said in a gentle tone that wrenched Anna’s heart. “Yeah, just getting some air...yeah...I can do that...okay...yeah, be home soon...love you, too.”

Anna sat up and stared at her blanket. His wife. She swallowed back tears and blinked rapidly.

Tommy shrugged his clothes on. “I’m sorry, Anna. I have to get home.”

Anna nodded, but didn’t trust her voice to say anything. He paused after he’d dressed, standing next to the bed.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. He leaned down to kiss her head and then left the room. She heard the apartment door open and close a moment later and she kept staring at the blanket, trying to understand how she felt. To put words to the pain in her heart.

Used. She felt used. She was a cheap prostitute for him to use and then go home to his wife.

No, Tommy truly cared for her. He helped her escape.

But he had a wife and a child on the way. A family to go home to. Anna was a distraction from his responsibilities.

She rubbed her face. Confusion filled her heart. She’d never felt like this before. Intellectually, she knew she’d been *used* for years; since Devin first touched her after her parent’s funeral. Maybe even before then. Why did it bother her now?

She was an Elder-Mistress. Her body was to be used as the Elders pleased. She was trained to please their every desire.

Then why did she feel so empty? Was it the illusion of freedom? Was her freedom just an illusion? Or was it real? Did pretending something was true make it true? Was she a prostitute? After all, wasn’t that what they all really were? Slaves. Sex slaves. Unpaid prostitutes.

What was she? Was she a Mistress or a free woman? As an Elder-Mistress, what just happened shouldn't bother her. As a free woman, what just happened broke her heart. Katrina was the free woman. Anna was the slave. Was she Anna? Or was she Katrina?

Who did she want to be? Did it matter what she wanted? The reality was that she was Anna. Katrina was an illusion to keep Devin from finding her.

Part of her wanted to embrace Katrina. To find out what it was really like to be "free." But could she? Could she dare try to be something she'd never been before? And what did that mean anyway? Saying no to men? She didn't know if she could do that.

What did it mean to be free?

The answer eluded her and made her head hurt. She was too tired to think about it right now. She went into her bathroom to take a shower and then watched TV until she couldn't keep her eyes open and fell asleep on the couch.

Devin stared out the window of his downtown office. Where the hell was Anna? How was she eluding his search? Someone, somewhere, had to know where she was. Someone had to be helping her. There's no way she could have done this on her own.

Who was helping her? Surely Wilhelm had something to do with this, but his activities showed nothing suspicious.

Damn Ian for his betrayal.

If Anna was hiding, he had to get her to reveal herself. But how? What could compel to her to come out of hiding?

Chapter Five

Anna leaned her head on the *barre* and gulped for air. She'd never been so tired from practicing before. Then again, she'd never had so much one-on-one attention before.

It was Monday afternoon, and she and Hugo had been dancing since ten-thirty that morning with a brief break for lunch. She didn't know how much more she could take.

"C'mon, Kittykat. One more time and then we'll call it a day."

She smiled at the nickname he'd come up with for her. If nothing else, her new name certainly allowed for interesting variations. A new experience indeed.

Hugo handed her a towel to wipe her face. "You're doing fantastic, Katrina. Don't give up."

Anna gave him a doubtful look as she patted her face. "I don't understand how you move so fast. I don't think my body was made for that."

He gave her that brilliant grin of his. "You'd be surprised. You'll get it. We have all week." His eyes glinted with humor.

"A week, huh?" She couldn't help but grin back. His smiles were contagious. "All right." She groaned as she straightened.

"After we're done, I'll buy you dinner. How does that sound?"

Anna gave him a shy smile. "Okay."

He chuckled and walked to the front of the room and nodded to the pianist. The music began and Anna danced. She hoped it would soon become as exhilarating as it seemed it should be.

By Saturday afternoon, Anna was feeling more confident in her dancing. Something had clicked that morning and she finally “got it.” Hugo cheered as she finished the dance.

“That was...amazing, Katrina. Truly amazing.” He came to stand in front of her with a huge smile on his dark face. “Good job,” he said in a softer tone. “I knew you could do it, Kitty cat.” His eyes glowed as he looked at her.

Anna gazed up into his topaz eyes and her heart fluttered. They had spent hours and hours and hours together this week, and she had grown quite fond of him. She smiled shyly and turned to get her water bottle but he grabbed her hand.

“Dance with me,” he said, his voice low. He looked at Suzie, the pianist. “Giselle, second act.”

Anna shook her head. “No, I can't....” She had spent all week trying to immerse herself into Katrina and that dance was too much a part of Anna. She was afraid of slipping back.

The music started and she stood with her eyes closed. It swirled around her like a silk ribbon and she was powerless to resist. Her body moved of its own accord, her eyes still closed, remembering. She danced for Alex. She mourned for him through her dance, as if dancing could somehow heal the wound his death had left. She and Hugo danced as one and he lifted her effortlessly and supported her with his strong hands.

When the music ended, she opened her eyes and realized she had danced the entire thing with her eyes closed. Tears burned her eyes and she turned away so Hugo wouldn't see.

“Who was he?” he asked softly, holding her hand to keep her from walking away.

She turned back to him, surprised. "Who was who?"

"The one you danced for. I could...feel your emotions. You were mourning." He shook his head. "I've never seen anyone dance like you do, Katrina."

He watched her expectantly as she wiped her eyes. "My husband," she said softly. "Alex. He died four years ago...almost *exactly* four years ago." It was the beginning of April. Almost to the day when Wilhelm came to tell her that Alex was gone.

"You must have married very young."

"I was twenty." She looked down at her ring and shook her head. "We weren't even married three months when he died. I keep asking myself why I still wear my wedding ring." She felt kind of silly still wearing the ring, but she couldn't bring herself to take it off, even though Devin wasn't around to make her wear it. "He meant the world to me," she said softly. Alex had saved her.

"I'm so sorry."

"Thanks." She sighed. "You must think I'm silly, hanging on to him for so long."

"Sometimes people leave such a deep imprint on our hearts that they never go away." Hugo gave her a sad smile and the pain showing in his eyes made her wonder if there was someone who had made him feel the same way.

Maybe that's what it was. Alex had touched her in such a way that her heart was permanently altered. Did moving on...*really* moving on...betray his love? Betray her love for him? It had been four years. Perhaps it was time to really let him go. Letting him go didn't mean she didn't love him anymore. It didn't mean that he hadn't touched her; Alex had touched her unlike anyone else had. And that was okay.

She smiled up at Hugo, her chest lightened by the thought. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“What you just said. It...made sense suddenly.”

Alex would want her to be happy. He’d told her that many times. And now that she was free from Devin...maybe she really could leave her past behind her and start over.

Anna lay in bed later that night, pensive and rubbing the indentation on her right ring finger. When she’d returned home from rehearsal that afternoon she’d decided it really was time to move on, and she removed her wedding ring for the first time ever. She had kissed it and put it in her new memory box, next to Alex’s wedding ring. It was a bittersweet moment.

Hugo had taken her out to dinner and a movie and she’d had a wonderful time. He was sweet and funny and a “normal” man.

When he’d walked her to her apartment door that night, she didn’t invite him in. She reminded herself she was under no obligation to sleep with him. They’d only known each other for a week and normal, free people didn’t sleep with each other so quickly.

But he had kissed her.

Anna touched her mouth, remembering the feeling of his soft lips on hers. He’d tasted of the popcorn they’d gotten at the movie. The kiss was gentle, tentative even, and made her head spin a little. He hadn’t pressed himself against her or done anything other than hold her hands. Strange, foreign, but exhilarating.

She smiled and drifted off to sleep.

It was the room again. Anna hadn't seen it in months. But it was different; it was empty. The bed was stripped down to the mattress. The bookshelves were cleared off. Alex was gone.

Anna's eyes snapped open in the dark room. Alex was gone? How could someone be gone from a dream? But there was no doubt about it. No one lived in that room anymore.

Maybe that was a sign that she'd made the right decision; that she'd finally let him go. She didn't need him in her dreams any longer.

The thought was bittersweet.

Alex would always be in her heart, but she could move on now. Her mind had released him.

Anna went for a walk late Sunday morning and, after she'd eaten, found herself at the library. There was something about the big white marble building that soothed her whirring mind. She had finished the book she'd borrowed the previous week and wandered around the third floor until she found a section on ballet. She settled down on the floor between the bookshelves and pulled one of the picture books into her lap.

"You can check those books out, you know."

Anna looked up to see an older, wiry man with thin gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses looking down at her.

"Or we have more comfortable chairs over there." He motioned behind him.

Anna smiled shyly. "I know...I just...it's quiet here."

The man chuckled. "Yes, it can get a little noisy on the weekends. People don't seem to understand what quiet means anymore."

Anna smiled. "I can imagine."

“You were just here last week, weren’t you?”

Anna’s eyes widened and she flushed. “Yeah. I liked it so much I came back. It’s a beautiful building.”

The man leaned his shoulder against the end of the bookcase. “It is. I couldn’t imagine working anywhere else.”

“You work here? What a wonderful job to have!”

He tilted his head and studied her then nodded with a smile. “I’m Max. Max Richardson. I’m the head librarian here.”

Anna stood and shook his hand. “A...Katrina. I just moved here from California.”

“California, eh? That’s quite a change. What brought you here?”

“Oh, uh...dancing.” She shrugged sheepishly.

“Ballet?” he asked with a grin.

Anna looked down at the book she was holding. “Yeah. I just joined the City Ballet.”

“Wow. That’s quite impressive.”

Anna didn’t feel that Max was trying to flirt or come on to her at all. He was just a nice, older gentleman who was very friendly. “Thank you.”

“I take my granddaughters to the Nutcracker every year. They love it.”

“I understand the Nutcracker is very different here than what I’m used to.” She laughed. “Well, everything is very different here.”

Max laughed with her. “Yes, the East and West coasts do tend to be quite different. We’re a bit more...uptight.”

Anna decided she liked Max. He was funny and didn’t seem uptight in the least.

Max studied her for a long moment. “Why is a pretty thing like you hanging out in a library on a weekend?”

Anna blushed again. "I like reading. I haven't been to a library in years and...", she sighed. "There's nothing like it."

The man chuckled again. "You're an unusual young woman."

"I've been told that."

He smiled. "Have you been on the tour?"

"Oh, yes. It was wonderful." Anna sighed. "I was going to go again but I got here too late."

Max chuckled "I'll let you get back to your reading. I was just curious about you. Most young people don't come in two weeks in a row." He gave her a last smile and then walked away.

Anna smiled and then sat down again where she had earlier and finished looking through the book, happy at finding a new friend.

Aaron was there when she got back to her apartment. She laughed and ran to him, hugging him tightly. "I missed you," she said, gazing up at him. "How was your trip?"

He smiled, but not as enthusiastically as she'd expected. "Good. Interesting. Dancing went well." He glanced at the kitchen table. "Who got you the flowers?"

Anna followed his gaze and smiled, remembering Hugo standing at the apartment door with the huge bouquet of different types of beautiful flowers. "Hugo. He brought them last night before he took me out to dinner."

"Oh." Aaron frowned and stepped away from her. "Are you guys dating?"

She blinked in confusion at his sudden coldness. "I...I don't know. We went out a few times after practice. Why are you upset?"

Aaron turned and walked to the window, hands in his hair on top of his head. After a pause, he lowered his hands and turned around to face her, his eyes pained. “God, Anna, you get here, I have to leave for a week—*one week!*—and when I get home you already have a boyfriend.”

“I don't think he's—”

“I have waited and waited for another chance with you.” He stormed across the room and grabbed her upper arms. “I was your first boyfriend and we never got a chance to try again like we said we would. You kept pushing me away. I thought....” He paused and swallowed. “I thought with you moving out here, we could give ‘us’ a chance. But no!” he spat. “You have to go out and—” He turned away again. “God, don't I ever get a second chance?” His voice softened.

Anna stared at his back, speechless. “Aaron, I didn't know you wanted —”

“You didn't know?” he exclaimed spinning around. “Anna, you can read men like a billboard, and you think you can claim you don't know I'm still in love with you?”

Anna's chest tightened. “You're my best friend—”

“I don't want to be your best friend, Anna,” he snapped. “That's a death sentence to a guy.”

Anna blinked, now hurt by his words and his tone. He was so angry. At her. He'd never been angry with her before.

“*I* am the one Alex asked to watch over you. *I* am the one Wilhelm asked to watch over you. God!” He whirled back around and looked out the window. “Can't you just be single for a while before you go off fucking some new guy?”

Anna winced as if he had struck her. “I haven't fucked Hugo,” Anna retorted after a pause. “He kissed me. That's it.”

Aaron snorted and turned back around to look at her, derision in his face. “Anna, you can’t go a week without fucking someone. You don’t need to lie about it.”

Anna pressed her hand hard to her heart as the air rushed out her lungs. She gulped for oxygen. “Why would I lie about something like that?” she asked softly. After Tommy had left her, her desire for sex had faded. He had used her and then left. She didn’t want to feel that way again. She had successfully deflected the physical need with her own hand several times, but hadn’t really been tempted to go out and find someone.

He looked down. “You took your wedding ring off?” he asked softly, blinking in surprise.

She glanced down at her right hand. “It was time.” She looked back up at Aaron. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Aaron. I’m sorry I did. But you *are* my best friend, Aaron. You’re one of a handful of people here who know what I really am. Please don’t be angry with me. I need you.”

Aaron sighed and shook his head. “I’m not angry. I’m jealous.”

“Jealous?”

He nodded. “I was thinking about you all week and was looking forward to coming home and...being with you and then I saw the flowers and I thought I’d missed my chance. Again.” His jaw clenched. “I wanted the chance to ask you out again. To see if there is still anything between us.”

Anna reached up and cupped Aaron’s cheek. “I love being with you. I love spending time with you. I love that I live with you.” She smiled. “I do love you, Aaron. With all of my heart. I can’t imagine being here without you. You broke my heart when you left me before.” She looked up into his denim-blue eyes. “I want to find out, too. But I also want to...figure out who I am. To find out what it means to make my own choices. To not be defined

as ‘Devin’s Mistress’ or ‘sex slave’ or even ‘Alex’s wife.’” She swallowed. “I’ve never just been me.”

“You’ve never had a chance to be you,” Aaron affirmed softly with a tender smile. “I understand. I’m sorry for getting upset. It was very wrong of me.”

“You’ve put up with a lot from me, Aaron. From the very beginning. And I am so thankful for you. You’ve always loved me for who I really am.” She sighed. “But just to be honest with you, I think Wilhelm will expect me to marry Kurt when I’m freed from Devin.”

Aaron winced. “Oh.” He was quiet for a few minutes and then started to smile. “Then you’re like the run-away princess that is grabbing for her last few minutes of freedom before she’s forced into a loveless marriage.”

Anna grinned. “Marriage to Kurt wouldn’t be a loveless marriage.”

He shrugged with humor in his eyes. “I know. But the story doesn’t work that way. What’s the point of running away from a love-filled marriage?”

“Because even though the princess knows that her future husband will make her happy, she still was imprisoned by an evil sorceress...er, sorcerer.” She giggled. “And she wants to see the world before she assumes her new duties.”

Aaron laughed. “I suppose that’s a legitimate story plot.”

They grinned at each other.

“Of course, the princess has to have her trusty best friend to watch out for her during her explorations,” Anna added. “And that may come with some side benefits, if the best friend is interested.” She grinned mischievously.

Aaron grinned. “What kind of benefits?”

Anna took a step forward and ran her hands up his chest and around his neck. She went on tiptoe and kissed his ear. "Fantastic sex."

Aaron pulled her closer. "You really went all week without sex?"

Anna nodded. "My fingers are a very poor substitute, but yeah. That and...." She told Aaron what had happened with Tommy and how she had felt afterwards.

"Oh, hon. I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me when I called?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't want to bother you while you were out of town. I...it's still my duty to please the Elders, isn't it?" Doubt reared its ugly head.

Aaron frowned. "Katrina isn't an Elder-Mistress."

"But Anna is."

"Then don't be Anna."

She smiled wryly. "You make it sound so easy, but I was doing pretty well before...." She trailed off with a sigh. She didn't want Aaron to feel bad.

"Until I started yelling at you?" He shook his head. "It was so wrong of me to do that, Anna. I'm so sorry. If I do that again, slap me."

Anna shook her head with a smile. "I don't know if I could do that."

A grin spread over his face. "If I were your Master, I would command you to."

She grinned. "Katrina doesn't have a Master," she said mischievously.

"That's true." He grinned. "So me and Katrina will be friends with benefits?" He brushed his lips against hers.

"What does that mean?" she asked softly, heart racing at his touch.

"It means...." He ran his hands down her back. "We go into my room and fuck because it feels good, but no one else knows because I don't want

Katrina to get a reputation, but I also know that Anna really needs to be touched on a regular basis.”

“That’s quite a definition.” She trailed her fingers down his chest, circling a finger around one of his nipples, making him moan softly.

“It seemed appropriate. I really want you to be respected, hon. You don't need gossip spreading about you. Not here.”

“Thanks, Aaron.” She kissed him again. “I think I could do that. Can you?”

“Mmm,” he murmured against her lips. “Yeah.” He kissed her again and then took her hand and led her to his bedroom.

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Chapter Six

Anna walked confidently into the studio Tuesday morning. The company had Monday off to recover from traveling and she and Aaron had spent much of it in bed. She was eager to show Vincent what she'd learned.

"Katrina," Vincent called as she walked through the door.

Anna didn't respond and Aaron nudged her and motioned to Vincent. "He's calling you, *Kat*," Aaron grinned.

"Oh!" Anna exclaimed. "I forget...things." She grinned at Aaron and then walked across the room.

Vincent and Hugo were both watching her as she came nearer and she bit her lip nervously.

"Good morning," she said quietly.

"Good morning," they both responded.

Vincent studied her for a moment then nodded. "You look good, Katrina." He smiled. "Hugo says you did magnificently this last week and is very impressed with your dancing."

Anna glanced over at Hugo. "Thank you."

Hugo shrugged with an affectionate smile. "You did it."

Anna's cheeks turned slightly pink as she looked back at Vincent who gave her an amused smile. "He said you were working on *Firebird* a little bit?"

Anna nodded.

"Good. I want you to concentrate on *Firebird* and *Arches*."

Anna widened her eyes and looked between the two men. Those were two very difficult pieces. *Arches* was Hugo's new ballet and the world

premier was the night of the Gala. “Vincent, I...you think I can do it?”

“Hugo thinks so. I know you’re capable. Besides,” he smiled. “Arches is more his decision and I can’t override the choreographer.”

“I want you for the premier, Katrina,” Hugo said. “Dancing with me.”

Anna smiled up at him. “Really?”

“You’re perfect for the role, Kittycat.”

Anna’s cheeks warmed, which seemed to amuse Vincent.

“I also want you for Titania for *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but concentrate on the others first,” Vincent said. “*Midsummer* isn’t until the end of the season.”

“Okay,” she said slowly in a shaky voice. She was overwhelmed by the confidence they had in her.

“That’s all,” Vincent said with a smile. “You can go warm up.”

“Okay.” She felt a little dazed as she made her way to the *barre* next to Aaron.

“What’d he want?” Aaron asked as she sat next to him.

“Letting me know the ballets I’m supposed to be working on.”

“What are they?”

“*Firebird* and Arches. Then Titania in *Midsummer*.”

Aaron arched his eyebrow. “Wow. You must have really impressed Hugo.”

Anna pouted at him. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“Oh, hell, Kat. You know I think you’re the best I’ve ever seen. No, I’m just...I’m glad they see it, too.” He smiled at her affectionately. “I hope I get to do *Firebird* with you.”

“Me, too.”

Hugo had taught her all the warm ups and other common steps used in class so when the music began, Anna felt much more confident than she

had the first two days of class. She finally felt the exhilaration that she thought she should feel. Vincent nodded to her several times, which Anna took to mean she was doing well.

“I think the others are impressed by your improvement,” Hugo whispered in her ear as they moved to the center of the room for floor work.

Anna looked up at him, surprised. “Really?”

He smiled and nodded but didn’t say anything else. Anna did notice that most of the other dancers actually smiled at her now.

After lunch, Anna read over the list of rehearsals for the many ballets they would perform over the course of six weeks. Anna was dancing *Firebird* with Dave, *Arches* with Hugo and *Midsummer Night’s Dream* with Aaron. It seemed that each dancer had their own parts and the ballets were scattered across the season. It was so different from what she was used to, but it also meant she wasn’t dancing every night for six weeks. Several nights a week, but not all. It would be interesting to see how it all panned out.

Firebird was primarily the first two weeks. *Arches* was second, third and fourth weeks with the premier the first week. *Midsummer* was every night of the sixth week plus matinees. She had little to do the fifth week but would more than make up for it the following week.

The next afternoon, Anna had her first official rehearsal for *Arches* with Hugo. He had already taught her quite a bit of the piece. They worked on the *pas de deux* for most of the afternoon. She adored dancing with him.

He held her in the final pose longer than Anna expected and she caught his eye in the mirror, smiling. "Is it really held for this long?"

He chuckled. "No. It was just nice." He set her back up in arabesque and turned her to face him. "Have dinner with me tonight," he said softly, holding her around her waist.

Her heart fluttered as she nodded. "Okay."

His eyes sparkled as he grinned. "Pick you up at eight?" Anna nodded again, making Hugo laugh. "Did I make you speechless?"

"It's not that hard to do," she admitted softly.

"I'm learning this. You don't talk nearly as much as most women." He chuckled. "Maybe that's why I like you."

Anna's cheeks turned pink as she gave him a last shy look and went to get her things together. "Eight?" She paused by the door and turned back to look at him.

He gave her a bright smile. "Eight."

"I had a really nice time tonight," Anna said softly as she and Hugo stood by her apartment door. She smiled. "I guess I always have a nice time with you."

He grinned and leaned against the door post, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all." She chewed her lip as she saw him watching her. "What?"

His eyes turned soft as he gazed at her. "I was thinking about how much I enjoyed kissing you the other night."

Anna's body tingled and her heartbeat quickened. "I liked it too."

"Aaron said you just got out of a bad relationship. I don't want to scare you away by moving things along too fast."

Anna's eyebrows furrowed. "He did?"

Hugo's eyes narrowed. "Is it not true?"

Anna hesitated. "It's really complicated, but yeah, I suppose that's the easiest way to explain it," she said slowly. How else could she explain Devin?

He rubbed the back of his neck. "It wasn't with Aaron, was it?"

"What? Oh, no. No, of course not. He's...a really good friend." She looked up. "Are you upset?"

"No. You're just reluctant to talk about your past and it makes it hard to get to know you."

She looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry. It's not easy to talk about."

"Was he abusive?"

"Aaron?" she exclaimed, looking up.

Hugo smiled. "No. I know him better than that." He shook his head. "I meant your past relationship."

"Oh. I..." She sighed sadly. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Hugo's eyes became sad and he pushed himself away from the door post. He stepped close and cradled her cheek. "I wish you would trust me, but I understand. If you ever want to talk, I'm a good listener."

"Thanks," she said softly, putting her hand on his.

He took a small step closer and Anna's breath hitched in her throat. "Is it okay if I kiss you again?" he asked quietly.

Her whole body tingled as she nodded. He smiled tenderly as he bent down and gently caressed her lips with his. His hand moved from her cheek to the back of her head where it tangled in her hair. She stepped forward and put her hands on his upper arms for support. He slanted his mouth against hers with slightly more pressure, teasing her lips with his tongue and put his other hand on her lower back. Anna held back a soft moan as his

tongue explored her mouth, drawing her own tongue to him and caressing it, sending delicious shivers through her body.

Their bodies touched as he held her close and she could feel his heat radiating into her. He had held her to himself many times today and Anna realized the intimacy he created with her while they danced. But this was more intimate than dancing together. She slid her hands up his arms, over his shoulders and around his neck as he deepened his kiss.

Her phone rang in her purse and they ended the kiss reluctantly. Anna gave him an apologetic look as she went to ignore the call. "It's Aaron," she said, frowning. Aaron knew she was out with Hugo. Why would he call her? She silenced the call and looked up at Hugo. "He wouldn't call unless it were important."

"Is he home?" he asked.

"I don't know." She pushed the screen on her phone. "Aaron? What's wrong?"

"Where are you?" Aaron asked. He sounded upset.

"Outside the door of the apartment."

He didn't say anything but a moment later the door opened and he looked between her and Hugo. "Something...happened."

Anna didn't like the look on his face. "What happened?"

Aaron looked hesitantly at Hugo and back at her. "Tom's here." He looked back at Hugo. "I'm sorry, Hugo. But I really need to talk to Kat alone."

Hugo looked a little bewildered as he nodded.

Anna bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Hugo."

Hugo recovered enough to offer a weak smile. "It's okay." He leaned forward and kissed Anna on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow." He and Aaron shook hands and then Hugo turned and walked to the elevator.

Aaron grabbed her hand and pulled her into the apartment, closing the door behind her. Tom was sitting on the couch with a very unhappy look on his face. He looked up as Anna walked into the room.

“Did you tell her?” he asked.

Aaron shook his head and then turned to Anna. “Hon...it’s Jenna. She’s....” He swallowed and looked up at the ceiling. “Devin took her a few days ago and said if you didn’t come home that he’d kill her.”

Anna’s heart fell into her stomach. “A few days ago? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you would have gone home or gotten in touch with him,” Tom said, standing and walking over to her. “We can’t let Devin have you back.”

“Is she okay?” she asked, afraid she already knew the answer.

Tom shook his head. “No. He killed her.”

Anna struggled for breath as she stared at him. “You let him kill her?” She glowered at Aaron. “I could have stopped him and you didn’t tell me!”

“If I’d have told you, you would have made contact with him,” Aaron said quickly, coming close and putting his hand on her shoulders. “Anna, he would have found you.”

“So what!” she yelled, backing away and slapping his hands away. “She would still be alive. You should have let me make the choice. It’s my life!” she shouted.

“No, Anna, it’s not just about protecting you,” Tom said calmly. “It’s much bigger than you. He’s using you to take over the country. He’s eroding our democracy. He’s got control of the president, for God’s sake. Even you should realize that’s not good.”

Anna turned to walk away but Tom grabbed her by her shoulders. “He wants control of the country, Anna. If you return to him, there is nothing we can do to stop him. He will continue to grow more and more powerful and

then he will control everything. Freedom, what you're just beginning to taste, will be gone. Do you want everyone in this country to be Devin's slave?"

Anna paused, chest heaving. "That's what he wants?"

"Yes, Anna."

No. Being Devin's slave...she wouldn't wish that on anyone. She took in a shaky breath and turned back around to look up at him. "Why didn't you stop him earlier?" she asked softly.

"We didn't realize what he was doing. I never took his claims that seriously. We thought...we just thought he knew better. He's a smart guy and our politicians are pretty dumb. But when he came back from Vitaly's funeral, his plans escalated and we saw he was trying to become Immortal. Yes, we should have done something earlier. We know that now...should have listened to the Germans."

"Can you still stop him?"

"If you stay out of his reach, yes."

"Okay." She walked slowly to her room and closed the door.

Poor Jenna...*poor Matt*! Matt had lost two loved ones by Devin's hand now.

Anna closed her eyes and wept.

Anna stared out the window as she lay in her bed in the dark room. She was angry. Angry at Devin. Angry at Tom and Aaron for letting this happen. No, it wasn't really their fault, but...why did so many people have to die because of her?

She sat up, grief consuming her. She was half-tempted to call Hugo and ask him to come back, but she didn't think that would be appropriate.

Instead, she got out of bed and headed into Aaron's room. The lights were out; it was after midnight. But his head turned when she walked in.

"Hey," she said softly, walking across the room and stopping by his bed.

He looked up at her and sighed. "I can't believe she's gone." He pulled aside the blankets and she cuddled in next to him.

"I can't believe it either," she said, tears running down her cheeks.

"I called Justin. We're going to fly out tomorrow for the funeral."

Anna nodded. "I can't go, can I?"

"No."

Anna took in a shaky breath. She hoped that Devin killed Jenna quickly, like he had with Ben. She was afraid to ask. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know.

Chapter Seven

Hugo rushed over to Anna when she walked into the studio the next morning. She was calm and trying not to think about things too deeply. It had been a quiet morning in the apartment. Aaron stayed home to pack and she fought the anger at not being able to go with him.

“Is everything okay?” Hugo asked as she dropped her bag on the ground.

Anna looked up into his concerned eyes. “My best friend was killed.”

His eyes widened. “Oh my God, Katrina. I’m so sorry.” He looked around. “Why are you here? You should go home and...I don’t know...pack to go back to the funeral?”

Anna shook her head. “I can’t go.”

Hugo stared at her and then he exhaled. “Does it have something to do with that relationship you don’t want to talk about?”

Anna nodded. She squeezed her eyes shut and grasped the *barre* tightly, trying to maintain control of her emotions. Her heart hurt and she didn’t know what to do.

“C’mon,” Hugo said, putting his arm around her and leading her out of the studio. He paused by the door to tell Vincent what happened, and then led Anna into his office. He sat her down on a leather couch along the side wall and put his arms around her.

His caring warmed her heart and she leaned her head against his chest as he stroked her arm. “You could have called me last night,” he said softly, leaning his cheek against her head. “I would have come back over.”

“I didn’t want to bother you. You looked kinda upset when Aaron said he needed to talk to me.”

“He had interrupted a really nice kiss. I was a little irritated with him.”

Anna couldn’t help but let out a soft laugh. “It was a nice kiss,” she agreed.

“I feel bad now, though. Did he know her?”

Anna nodded. “She was like a sister to him.” She leaned her head against his chest. “Have you ever lost anyone?” she asked softly.

“Yes. My father died when I was fifteen. That’s when my mother and I moved here.”

“How did you...get over it?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know if I ever ‘got over it.’ I still miss him. I loved my father dearly. He was a good man.”

“How did he die?”

“Cancer. Mercifully, it went quickly, but it still was very difficult, watching him die.”

“You got to say goodbye, though, right?”

“Yes. My mother and I were there when he died.”

“I’ve never gotten to say goodbye to anyone,” Anna said softly.

“You say that as if you have lost many people, Katrina.”

She had lost quite a few people in her life. Her parents, Ben, Alex and his men, hers and Wilhelm’s baby, and now Jenna. “A few.”

“Are your parents alive?”

“No. They died when I was twelve.” Devin killed them. She had almost forgotten that he had admitted to it.

“How did they die?”

“A car accident.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine the grief you must have felt to lose both of them at once.”

“I don’t really remember it.” Devin and Jack had started touching her afterwards, dulling the pain. Had she actually *ever* mourned for anyone? Mourned like normal people? Probably not. She wasn’t exactly normal. She used sex to distract herself from the pain. She looked up at Hugo with wet eyes. “How do you mourn?”

He stroked her hair and gave her a sad smile. “It’s different for everyone, Anna. How did you deal with your husband dying?”

She flushed. “I was doped up for two years.”

“Oh.” He gave her a gentle smile. “I wouldn’t recommend that.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Good,” he smiled. “I’d hate to see you on drugs. You wouldn’t be able to dance and I wouldn’t have you for my premier.”

She gave him a half smile. “I wouldn’t want to let you down.”

“I can’t imagine you doing such a thing.”

They sat quietly together for several long minutes. His presence was comforting and she slowly relaxed into his arms.

“Do you want to go home?” he asked softly. “Vincent would understand.”

Anna shook her head. “Dancing...dancing helps. Helps me feel better.”

He nodded. “I could see that about you.” He stood and helped her to her feet and then hugged her tight. “I’m here for you if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Hugo,” she said softly.

They went back to the studio. Class had just started a few minutes prior and Anna slipped her shoes on and joined in. Hugo spoke with Vincent for a few minutes then slipped onto the *barre* behind her. She knew that people

had watched her and Hugo walk back in together and hoped they didn't think badly of him.

Aaron was gone when she got home that evening. He and Justin had flown out earlier that afternoon. She was sad that they couldn't tell Jenna's dad that she was sorry for what happened. Neither of them could let on that they knew where she was. Anna understood but the knowledge didn't make it any easier.

Hugo promised to keep her company while Aaron was out of town. He took Anna out to dinner Friday night and then they went back to Anna's apartment and watched TV. He'd suggested going out to the club with the other dancers, or even a movie, but she wasn't in the mood to be around a bunch of people.

Anna liked being in Hugo's embrace on the couch and snuggled closer to rest her arm on his solid stomach and her head on his chest. He played with her hair, brushing her neck every once in a while. She wasn't sure he was doing it on purpose, but found herself lifting her chin so he had better access to her neck.

She heard his heartbeat increase in tempo as he glided his fingers down her neck from behind her ear to her collarbone and back up. Anna fisted his t-shirt and swallowed nervously as he repeated the motion. She wanted him. Wanted him to touch her, more than just on her neck, but would he think poorly of her if they did have sex? She was pretty sure he thought of her as a sweet, innocent girl by the things he said, and how he treated her. But that's how she was supposed to appear; she even felt that way sometimes.

He had no idea she could give him the best blowjob of his life and she wanted to badly. She wanted to taste him, to have him in her mouth first and

then in her body.

But she liked that he thought of her as innocent. She supposed she could justify it by thinking about the fact that 'Katrina' hadn't slept with many people.

His fingers caressed just above her collarbone at her neck and she sighed and lifted her chin even more.

"Katrina," he whispered. She slowly opened her eyes and saw him gazing down intently at her. He wanted her. She could feel it.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, sliding her hand up his chest and around his neck. His hand came up to cup her neck and he deepened the kiss, delving his tongue into her mouth urgently. He turned his body towards her and deepened his kiss while caressing the side of her neck.

When he pulled away a few minutes later, they were both breathing heavily. Anna watched him nervously with wide eyes as he stroked her cheek, wondering what he was thinking. She was hesitant to read him. Katrina didn't read men like Anna did.

"I should go," he said in a husky voice.

No! Her lower jaw trembled. "Did I do something to upset you?"

He frowned. "Why would you think that?"

"You don't want to stay."

Hugo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Kittycat, there is nothing more I would like to do than stay, but...." He cleared his throat and looked at her sheepishly. "I don't want to do something you'll regret."

"Regret?"

He studied her. "Katrina, I am very, very attracted to you, in case you didn't know." He grinned. "But pushing too fast...." He sighed. "I like you. A lot. But, I don't want you to resent me for...moving too fast."

“Why would I resent you? I’m attracted to you, too.” She leaned forward to kiss him again, but he moved back. Tears burned at her eyes and she looked down at her hands.

He lifted her chin. “I like you, Kittycat,” he said softly and then shook his head gently. “I’m going to be a gentleman and leave before things go too far.” He kissed her chastely on the lips and then stood. She could see his erection straining against his jeans and she licked her lips.

“Hugo,” she said softly, feeling herself going into seduction mode. She looked up at him for a moment and then turned away. No, she didn’t want to seduce him. She just wanted him to stay.

He kissed her on the top of the head. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She stared at her hands and heard the apartment door open and close, and then burst into tears. Part of her understood why he left, but the other, larger, part of her felt rejected and lonely.

She looked at her watch. It was eleven-thirty. She wanted to call Wilhelm. It was, what...nine hours difference between them? It was early but not too early...

She got her phone out of her purse and made the call.

“Anna?” his voice was very gravelly. “What is wrong?”

“Wilhelm,” she said softly. “I’m sorry to wake you so early, but I...just wanted to hear your voice.”

“*Liebling*, I do not mind you calling, but I am much better at conversations that do not occur in the middle of the night.”

“Middle of the night? Isn’t it six there?”

Wilhelm paused and then laughed. “Anna, you are in New York, not San Francisco. It is three in the morning.”

“Oh, God! Oh, Wilhelm, I’m so sorry! I forgot.” This night was not improving. “I’ll call you later then. I’m sorry.”

“*Nein*, Anna. It was important enough for you to call. Hang on a moment and I will go in the sitting room.” She heard him speaking in German, assumingly to Ilsa. “All right, *Liebling*,” he said a few minutes later. “What happened?”

The tears began to flow and Anna told him what had happened between Hugo and herself. When she was finished, he was quiet for a while. She knew he was thinking and respected his silence.

“It sounds like he is an honorable man, Anna. He left because he respects you and cares for you. Do you remember how long it took for Alex to make love to you?”

“Yes,” she sniffed. Months! And why did he have to bring up Alex?

“Do not be angry with him for waiting, Anna. Most men do not take the time to rein in their desires without thinking about how it will affect the woman he is with.”

“But what do I do now?”

“Is Aaron there?”

“No. He went to California for Jenna’s funeral.... Did you hear about that?”

“I did. I meant to call but...things have been very busy here the last week. I’m so sorry, *Liebling*. I should have remembered.”

Wilhelm knew and he hadn’t called her? That hurt worse than Hugo’s rejection. “It’s okay.” She said softly. “I’ll let you get back to sleep. Thank you for listening to me. Good night.” She pressed ‘end’ on the phone before he could say anything else. She went into her room, put her pajamas on and lay down in bed. Well, her hurt had dissipated her need for sex. At least she’d be able to sleep now.

Wilhelm stared at his phone in disbelief. Anna had hung up on him. Not that he blamed her. He should have called her and he was properly rebuked. Things had just gotten...crazy here all of a sudden. She would forgive him once she found out what happened. He hoped.

“I’m sorry I left like that last night, Katrina.” Hugo sat down on the floor next to Anna the next morning and spoke softly. “I didn’t want to hurt you, but I probably did anyway, didn’t I?”

Anna looked up from her stretch and gave him an understanding smile. “It’s okay. I understand. I...appreciate what you were trying to do.”

Hugo let out a deep breath. “I was afraid you’d be angry with me.”

She shook her head. “I’m not.” She smiled. “But I’m not as delicate as you may think I am.” She grinned mischievously, with a hint of seduction, at him.

His eyes widened for a split second and then he shook his head and laughed. “Not nice to look at a man like that before dance class.”

Anna giggled. “Sorry.”

He smiled, his dimples deepening. “I am determined to remain a gentleman,” he said quietly. “If that’s okay with you, I’d like to take you out again tonight.”

Anna nodded. “I’d like that.”

Aaron returned Sunday night and Anna greeted him at the door with a passionate kiss.

“Are you okay, Anna?” he asked taking a step back, surprise evident on his face.

“Please don’t reject me, Aaron. I...I just need you to fuck me.”

Aaron grinned. “That’s what every man wants to hear when they walk in the door.” He kissed her back and they undressed as they kissed their way to his bedroom. They fell naked into his bed and Anna rolled on top of him, straddled his hips and impaled herself on him.

“Argh!” she cried, not having expected it to hurt.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Anna winced and nodded. “It’s been a few days.” She hung her head and tried to relax around him.

“We didn’t have to go so fast, hon,” Aaron said, pulling her hand and bringing his lips to hers. “I’m not in a hurry.” He held her as he rolled her to her back, still inside her, and kissed her neck.

Anna closed her eyes and relaxed as he kissed her. When the pain subsided, she moved her hips, wanting him to move.

“Better?” he asked, moving slowly inside her. She gasped and nodded. “Good.” He grinned. “You feel so amazing.”

“How was the funeral?” Anna asked later as she ran her fingers over Aaron’s chest while they cuddled together.

“Sad.” He sighed. “Matt wasn’t taking it very well. He looked like he wanted to jump into the casket with her.”

Anna stopped moving her hand. “I feel awful for him...and guilty. First Ben’s death and now Jenna’s. Does he hate me?”

“No. He knows where the blame lies: with Devin. He did ask about you, though.”

Anna looked up at him, expectantly.

“I told him it was better if he didn’t know. He accepted that.”

“Did you see Devin?”

“Yes. He was there but, surprisingly, he kept to the background. He watched me a lot so I was careful about what I said and warned Justin to do the same.”

“What about Jenna’s family?”

Aaron shook his head. “Luke’s not well at all. He’s so angry and I don’t blame him. I saw him and Devin arguing. I assume it was about Jenna.”

Anna was quiet. So many people dead because of her. She hoped Tom knew how to stop Devin and would do it soon.

“Have you found her yet?” Devin growled as Jack walked into his study at his house. Anna hadn’t taken the bait with taking and killing Jenna. He didn’t know what else to do. He supposed he could keep killing off her friends, but that would get messy. He wasn’t that desperate. Yet.

“No. She’s...disappeared into thin air.” Jack frowned. “There’s no trace of her anywhere.”

“That’s not possible!” Devin shouted. “She’s a fucking Immortal. She can’t just disappear.”

Devin stood and walked to the window. Fucking Ian. Devin would have gotten the information out of him if he hadn’t killed himself.

“They’ve run the security footage on all the airports in the area, Devin. She didn’t show up in any of them. Could she have teleported somewhere?”

Devin shook his head. “No. Not without an Immortal. Half-Immortals don’t have that power.” He’d scoured his books, trying to find any sliver of information as to how she disappeared.

“What about the missing dancer. Justin? He didn’t have anything to do with it?”

Jack shook his head. "Isaak caught him smoking pot and fired him. He's back home in New York."

"Is he dancing?"

"I don't know. There's no indication that he is."

Devin growled and looked out his window to the street below. His powers were safe for now, but soon they would start failing without Anna to renew him.

"He's from New York?" Devin asked thoughtfully.

"Who?"

"Justin."

"Yes. Danced for the New York City Ballet until he came out here a few years ago. After Anna stopped dancing."

"What about her other friend...Aaron? The one who was friends with Alex."

"I believe that's his name. Yes, he's in New York."

Something told him there was some connection, but he didn't know what it was. She'd been invited to go to New York before. Maybe she ran away to there? But how the hell did she get there, *if* she was there? And why couldn't he sense her?

Devin rubbed his eyes. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"Did you check Germany? With Wilhelm?"

"Yes. There's no trace of her there either."

"Someone, somewhere has to know something," he said more to himself. "She wouldn't stop dancing. She has to be somewhere where there's a dance company." He turned around and looked at Jack. "You've checked security footage around New York?"

Jack nodded.

The logical place for her to go would be there, but Tom had said repeatedly that she wasn't there. None of the Elders were sensing her in their areas and while there were a few that he didn't completely trust, there was no reason Anna would go to LA or Houston. New York was the best option, but how the hell was he supposed to find her there? Someone had to be protecting her from him.

He looked at Jack. "Go to New York. Stake out the ballet companies. I want firsthand knowledge whether she's there or not."

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Chapter Eight

The days flew by and before she knew it, opening night had arrived. Anna didn't dance until the next night, so she was able to sit in some empty seats in the house and watch the performance. Both Hugo and Aaron were dancing and she was eager to watch them.

Just being in the audience was thrilling. She felt so elegant and was reminded of when she went to the ballet with Kurt in San Francisco. Alex and Wilhelm had been there, too, and she got lost in the memories, not noticing when someone sat down next to her.

"Hello, Anna," the man said softly.

Anna opened her eyes in surprise. There were only a few people here that knew her real name. Anna's heart pounded as she stared at the man next to her. "Jack?"

Her guardian gave her a wicked grin. "Surprised to see me?"

Anna didn't know what to say. Devin couldn't be far behind. Oh God, what was she going to do? "How did you find me?"

"Logical deduction. New York City Ballet. Not that hard to figure out where you would go."

Anna started trembling. "Where's Devin?"

Jack smiled. "At home. Waiting for my call to tell him I found you." He put his hand on her leg and slid up her skirt. "He's been awfully selfish with you, though. I thought I might have some fun with you before I called. For old time's sake."

Anna pushed his hand away. "Don't touch me," she snapped. She tried to stand but he held her wrist tightly and twisted, making her whimper.

“Oh, no you don’t. I’ve been here for weeks trying to find you. You’re not getting out of my sight so you can disappear again.” He stood and pulled her to her feet. “But I can have more fun with you in my hotel room rather than sitting and watching a ballet with you, so let’s go.” He twisted her wrist and she began making her way to the aisle. She looked around, desperate for a familiar face, but there was no one she recognized.

Jack pushed her up the aisle and into the promenade. Tons of people milled about, but she still didn’t see anyone she knew. He led her outside and down the stairs to a taxi.

“Mandarin,” he told the driver.

It was only a few blocks away and they arrived at the hotel within minutes. Jack paid the fare without letting go, then pushed her out of the taxi, into the hotel and up to his room.

Anna stood in the middle of the hotel room, watching Jack as he removed his tie and jacket. She wracked her brain, trying to figure out a way out of here. She glanced at the door, wondering if she’d make it before he could catch her, and Jack laughed.

“I’m not that stupid, Anna.” He strode across the room and pulled her further away from the door and pushed her to the bed. “Undress, unless you want me to rip that dress off of you.”

She blinked back tears as she stepped out of her shoes. With shaky hands, she unzipped her dress and removed it, laying it across the back of a chair. She looked back at Jack who raised his eyebrows at her. “All of it, Anna.”

She removed her panties and bra and lay them on her dress.

He walked over to her and ran his hands down her breasts and she shuddered. “You don’t like my touch anymore, Baby? I’m hurt.” He squeezed her nipples and she whimpered.

“Please let me go, Jack,” she whispered. She didn’t want to go back to Devin or her old life. She wanted to stay here. The last few weeks had solidified that. She and Hugo had grown very close and he had invited her over to his place after the show tonight.

She closed her eyes and tears burned behind the lids. She would never get to make love to him.

Jack pushed her onto the bed and held her hands above her head. She felt something around her wrists and she realized he had tied her to the bed. The ties were unyielding as she pulled against them.

A glimmer of hope poked a hole in the darkness of her heart. Devin didn’t know she was here. Maybe she could still get away before Jack told him.

Jack laughed and kneaded her breast. “Sweetheart, I know how to tie you. Though I’m kinda turned on that you’re trying to get away.” He arched his brow. “I have more where those came from if I need to tie your legs.” He grinned. “Maybe I should anyway.” He trailed his hand up her thigh. “Spread you open nice and wide.” He brushed over her pussy and she squeezed her legs together and kicked at him.

He laughed and stood to finish undressing. “Oh, Anna. I always wondered what it would be like if you had more spirit in you.” He stroked his hard cock. “I guess I get to find out.”

He knelt on the bed and she kicked at him, but he grabbed her ankles and laughed again, spreading them apart. “Who’ve you been fucking since you got here Anna?” He bent down and kissed her pussy while he held her legs apart.

The feel of his mouth on her both sickened and aroused her, and she squirmed to try and get him off, but he just laughed. He pushed her knees into her chest and held her tight as he licked at her clit.

She bucked her hips, but her body was betraying her and she moaned softly. He locked his lips around her clit and sucked. Her legs relaxed and she closed her eyes as he lapped at her. She squirmed again, but this time to open her legs wider. He released her legs and they fell open on the bed. She arched her back as she felt the orgasm building. He slid his fingers inside her and she moaned loudly as her orgasm overtook her.

“Good girl,” he murmured as she came back down to earth.

Her body lay limp and she closed her eyes as shame filled her. She’d given in so easily. She deserved to go back to Devin.

Jack moved her legs and quickly tied them to the upper corners of the bed, spreading her legs into a V above her head.

“You’re so easy, Anna. Of course, we made you that way.” He kissed her swollen pussy again and then positioned his cock at her slit and pressed inside. Her eyes snapped open as he entered her body and she cried out in pain.

“How long’s it been since you’ve been fucked, Anna?” he asked, not stopping to allow her body to adjust to him. She whimpered and cried out as he rammed himself against her hips.

She pulled furiously against the ties, trying to get free. No! She wanted to go home to Aaron and Hugo, not be here with Jack. She didn’t want to go back to Devin.

Jack laughed and Anna looked up at him, suddenly angry.

Very angry.

“Get off me!” she screamed.

Anna pulled at the bindings that held her in place with all her strength and then screeched in fury when she couldn’t get free. Jack froze and looked down at her. She’d never seen fear in his eyes before.

“You will not take me back to Devin!” she growled and a white-hot rage consumed her.

A knock sounded on Aaron’s dressing room door.

“Come in,” he called.

Hugo opened the door and poked his head inside. “Have you heard from Katrina?”

Surprised, Aaron shook his head. “I thought you guys were going out tonight.”

Hugo nodded. “We are. She said she’d come backstage at intermission and she didn’t, and I haven’t seen her since the show ended.”

Aaron knew how much Anna had been looking forward to going out with Hugo tonight. She’d been anticipating staying the night with him for the first time since they’d started dating. It pained Aaron to, once again, see Anna happy with someone besides himself, but Hugo was good for her. He treated her like the princess she was without the baggage of her past.

Aaron glanced at his watch as nerves filled his stomach. The show had ended twenty minutes ago. Something was wrong. “Where was she supposed to meet you?”

“Back here. In my dressing room.”

Aaron rubbed his neck, not knowing what he should do. He couldn’t risk Hugo finding out about Anna’s past. “Did you call her?”

Hugo made a face. “Of course. Several times, but it goes to voice mail.”

Aaron picked up his phone and dialed. It rang several times and then went to voice mail.

Stefanie walked past his door. She wasn’t dancing tonight, but she was here. Maybe she’d been in the audience. “Stef!” he called, pushing past

Hugo. “Did you happen to see Katrina out in the audience tonight?”

Stefanie frowned. Aaron knew she wasn’t very fond of Anna, but when she glanced at Hugo with a hesitant expression, it made his heart rate triple. “Stef, please. Did you see her?”

She rolled her eyes and nodded. “I saw her get up and walk away with some older guy who was holding her hand.”

Alarm filled Aaron’s veins with ice. “What did he look like?” Maybe it was Wilhelm?

“A little taller than Katrina, with dark brown hair and a goatee.”

Aaron rubbed his face. “He wasn’t very tall?” Devin was definitely tall.

Stef shook her head. “I mean, he wasn’t short, but it wasn’t like ‘wow, that guy is tall’.”

Aaron felt the blood rush from his face as a suspicion came to him.

“Aaron, what’s wrong?” Hugo said softly. “Do you know who she left with?”

“Fuck!” *Jack*. Aaron spun around and went back into his room, calling Tom with one hand and pulling his shoes on with the other.

“Hey, Aaron—” Tom began.

“Anna’s gone. I think she may have been taken by Jack.”

“Jack? How is that possible? I didn’t know he was here.”

“Can you track her phone?”

“Um, yeah. Give me a few minutes and I’ll call you back.”

Aaron went back out to the hallway. “When did she leave?” he asked Stef.

“Before the performance started.”

“Security cameras!” he exclaimed and then ran down the hallway with Hugo behind him.

Anna heard a faint buzzing sound and she jumped. Her body ached and her head throbbed. She opened her eyes and sat up. Where was she? It looked...like a hotel room? But it was a mess, like there had been a fight. She looked down to see herself covered in bruises and cuts and blood.

Her heart beat rapidly in her chest as she looked around. *Jack*. She had come here with Jack. But where was he? He wouldn't have left her alone.

She heard the buzzing sound again and realized it was her phone. She stood on shaky legs to retrieve her purse from across the room and pulled out her phone.

She looked at the screen. "Aaron?" she asked weakly, sitting down on the bed.

"Anna! Where are you?" he sounded out of breath.

"I-I don't know." She started crying. She was so afraid.

"Hon. Take a deep breath and look around. Is Jack there?"

"I don't know," she whispered. She looked around. "It's a hotel." She looked behind her. The headboard was broken in pieces and the bed was a mess. Glasses were broken on the floor and it looked like there was even a crack in the window. She walked to the table that had been overturned. "Mandarin?" she read, looking at the cover of a binder that had fallen on the floor.

She heard him repeat it to someone. "What room, hon? Look on the back of the door."

She walked across the room and saw a diagram of the hotel floor. "Thirty-oh-six" she read and turned to go back and she saw feet in the bathroom. She stepped inside and saw Jack lying on the floor in a pool of blood. "Oh, God, Aaron! I think Jack's dead."

“I think Jack’s dead,” came the words over Aaron’s phone. He had been running down the sidewalk and he stopped mid-step. Hugo ran into him from behind.

“Dead?” Aaron repeated.

“There’s blood...oh, God, Aaron. What happened?” The panic in Anna’s voice frightened him more than anything else.

“Anna, are you okay?” He started jogging again

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“Okay. Just...wait, Anna. We’re almost there.”

“Okay.” Her voice was so tiny he could barely hear her.

Hugo caught up to him. “Who’s Anna? I thought we were trying to find Katrina?”

Aaron realized his mistake and looked up apologetically. “I’m sorry, man. I’ll try and explain later. Yes, we’re going to Katrina. She’s at the Mandarin.” He swerved around a group of people.

“Is she okay?”

Aaron shook his head. “I don’t know. Will you call her? I need to call someone.” He put the phone back up to his mouth when Hugo nodded. “Anna, Hugo’s gonna call you and stay on the line with you until we get there.”

“Okay.”

Aaron nodded to Hugo, who called Anna. Aaron hung up and called Tom to let him know he’d gotten a hold of her and her room number.

Anna’s phone beeped. It was Hugo.

“Hugo?” she said in a tiny voice.

“Katrina? Oh, hon, are you okay?”

“I don't know.” She stared at Jack’s body, unable to move. Blood seeped from a gash in his head, and scratches and bruises covered his body. His head rested in an unnatural position. “I don't know what happened,” she whispered.

Hugo didn’t say anything, but by his breathing it sounded like he was walking very fast.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. Tonight was supposed to be their night together. She should have fought Jack harder. Then she would be in Hugo’s arms right now instead of naked and bloody in a hotel room with her guardian. She fell to her knees and started sobbing. “I’m so sorry, Hugo,” she sobbed.

“Katrina, why are you sorry? What happened?”

Anna felt too ashamed to tell him that she’d had sex with her guardian. Hugo would never see her the same way and their relationship would be over.

“Katrina?”

Anna didn’t answer and hung up the phone. Her nerves tingled as she got up and looked for her clothing. They’d fallen to the floor and her dress was wrinkled, but she put it on anyway.

Her body ached. What had happened to Jack? How did he end up dead? She only remembered him fucking her and getting angry.

She was zipping up her dress when someone pounded on the door. “Anna!”

Anna walked slowly to the door and opened it. Immediately, she was in Hugo’s arms. “God, Katrina. Are you okay?” She could sense him looking around. “What happened?” He held her at arm’s length and looked her up and down. “What happened?” he repeated in a softer tone.

Anna didn't answer. Instead she looked at Aaron. "He found me," she whimpered.

Aaron nodded. "Tom's on his way. Where is he?"

Anna tilted her head to the bathroom. Both men looked and jumped. Aaron stepped into the bathroom and looked down at Jack. "Pretty sure he's dead. But I'm not touching him."

"Did someone come in with you two?" Aaron asked.

"I don't know. I don't remember anyone. He...." Anna tried to pull away from Hugo but he held her tight. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "You should just let me go now, Hugo."

Hugo shook his head. "Who is he?"

"My guardian."

"Your guardian?" he exclaimed.

"He's been abusing her since she was twelve, Hugo," Aaron said. "She didn't come here voluntarily."

"Oh, Katrina," Hugo said softly, pulling her back into his arms. He kissed the top of her head and petted her hair.

There were voices in the hall and Tom and Tommy appeared in the doorway seconds later. "Holy shit," Tommy exclaimed. "What happened?"

Tom walked over to Jack's body and put his hand on his neck. "He's dead." He looked up at Anna leaning against Hugo with her head on his chest. "Does Devin know?"

Anna shook her head. "Jack said he...he wanted to have fun with me before he called him."

Tom exhaled and stood up. "I've never been so thankful for his perversion." Tom looked at Hugo. "Who are you?"

"Hugo. Katrina's...boyfriend."

Anna looked up at him with wide eyes. "Really?"

He stroked her cheek. "After what I had planned for tonight, I certainly hope so."

"He's a dancer and choreographer with the City Ballet," Aaron added.

"Oh! Hugo Sintzenich! I know you, though we've never officially met. I'm Tom Pendleton." Tom extended his hand.

Hugo's eyebrow raised as he shook Tom's hand. "You're Tom Pendleton? You know him?" He looked at Aaron, clearly surprised.

Aaron shrugged. "It's a really long story."

"One that doesn't need to be told right now," Tom said. "I got another room to take her to." He pulled a card out of his pocket. "Next door." He handed the card to Hugo. "Can you stay with her while I look around?"

"Of course," Hugo said, taking the card from Tom. He kept his arm around Anna and led her next door. He sat her on the bed and held her close. "Did he rape you, Katrina?"

Anna didn't know how to answer that. "I suppose some would qualify it as that."

Hugo stiffened. "Did you want to come here with him?"

"No. I never wanted to see him again. I wanted to see you dance." Anna clasped her hands in her lap. "You don't have to stay with me if you don't want to."

"Why wouldn't I want to, Kittykat?" He lifted her chin to look her in the eye. "I was so worried about you. I still am. Please trust me."

Anna bit her lip. "I don't know what I can tell you. I'll have to ask Tom."

"Is your guardian the relationship that you didn't want to talk about before?"

"He's part of it."

"Katrina's not your real name, is it?"

Anna shook her head slowly. "They changed it so I couldn't be found."

"It's Anna, right?"

She smiled. She liked the sound of her real name on his lips. "Yes."

"It suits you. Though I think your other name does too. Whoever picked it out did a good job."

The door opened and the others came in. Tommy sat down next to Anna. "Are you okay?" he asked, taking her hand.

She hadn't seen or heard from him since the night he'd left her after having sex with her. She pulled her hand away and watched as first hurt, then sorrow filled his eyes.

Tom leaned on the dresser across from where she was sitting on the bed, arms loosely crossed over his chest. "Tell me what happened," he said in a gentle voice.

She glanced at Hugo and then back at Tom and told him what happened, up to the point where she got angry and didn't remember anymore. "The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground and my phone was buzzing at me." Tears spilled down her cheeks and Hugo handed her a tissue. He hadn't moved the whole time she spoke, even when she talked about having sex with Jack.

"Anna, do you remember getting angry any other time and not remembering what happened after?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"Was it after Devin...er, you lost the baby? A few months ago?"

She looked up at Tom, thankful he didn't say what had really happened, and nodded. "Do you know what happened then?"

He gave her a wry smile. "You were defending yourself. Anna, sweetie, I think *you* killed Jack."

“What?” she exclaimed, looking around wildly. “I couldn’t have done that. He’s so much stronger than me.”

“There is a part of you that is very strong and is starting to emerge when you need to defend yourself. It took Ian and two other men to subdue you when it happened before.”

Anna remembered Ian talking about it and the bruise on his cheek. She was saddened at his memory. Another death because of her. She stared at her hands. “What should I do now?”

“Go home, take a bath and get a good night’s sleep. I’ll take care of things here and come up with a story for Devin. I can honestly say he got attacked in his hotel room.”

“You’re not going to call the police?” Hugo asked incredulously.

Tom gave him a sympathetic look. “This is beyond the police, Hugo. Involving them would only endanger Anna...er, Katrina.”

“I know her real name.”

“What else do you know?” Tom asked, his face inscrutable.

“I know that she was raped by her guardian tonight and you don’t seem to care much about how she’s going to deal with it.”

Tom inhaled deeply and looked at the wall behind them. “I do care that Jack came and got her. Unfortunately what he did to her was rather...well, I’ve seen her go through much worse.” He looked back at Hugo. “I know you’re concerned about her and that’s good. She needs that. I am too. There’s just more going on here than I can explain right now and frankly, it would be dangerous for me to tell you anymore.” He straightened. “What I can tell you is, by being here in New York, she is safer than she’s been in her entire life, and there are many people working to make that safety a permanent reality for her.”

Hugo looked at him for a long moment and then nodded. "Please tell me if there is anything I can do."

Tom smiled at Anna and then looked at Hugo. "You're doing it. Please continue to call her Katrina. If her name gets out, I don't know how long I'll be able to protect her." He crouched down and looked Anna in the eye. "You can tell him what you're comfortable with about your personal experiences, but keep names out of it, all right?"

Anna nodded. "He knows a little about Alex."

Tom looked surprised and pleased, then took her hand. "You took your wedding ring off," he commented softly, and looked approvingly at Hugo. "You're obviously doing many things right, Hugo." He kissed Anna on the cheek and stood. "Take her home, get her cleaned up and put her to bed. Are you healing again?" he asked Anna.

"I don't know. I haven't been injured in a while."

"That's good." He chuckled. "A good problem to have. Don't worry about this, Anna. Devin won't find out you're here."

"Thank you, Tom," she said quietly and stood. Hugo finished zipping her dress and put his arm gently around her. She looked down. "My shoes are in the other room."

"I'll get them," Aaron said, walking quickly out of the room and returning a few minutes later.

Hugo cleared his throat. "Do I, uh, need to be concerned about...defending myself?"

Amusement filled Tom's eyes. "Are you planning on raping her or dragging her back to people who want to hurt her?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Then you have nothing to worry about. She's not the Hulk where she'll turn into a monster if she gets angry. She's just finally learned to defend

herself against people who want to hurt her.”

“Are there a lot of people who want to hurt her?” Hugo asked.

Tom frowned. “Unfortunately, yes. But there are many who want to help her too.” He smiled encouragingly. “Take her home. She’ll be all right.”

Anna put her shoes on and glanced at Tom. “Thank you, Tom.”

Tom nodded. “Anytime, Anna. It’s the least I can do.”

Hugo and Aaron flanked Anna as they walked down the hallway and in the elevator down to the lobby. The doorman hailed a cab and they went back to Anna and Aaron’s apartment. Hugo kept his arm around her the whole time.

“What can I do to help, Katrina?” Hugo asked as they walked inside.

She looked at him, searching his eyes. “Do you still want to be with me?”

He cradled her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere, Kittykat,” he said softly.

“You could get killed,” she squeaked, grief hitting her like a ton of bricks.

Hugo caught her before she could fall to the floor and led her to the couch. He held her in his lap with his long arms wrapped around her body.

Aaron gave Anna a sad look and then came to kneel next to her on the floor. “Anna...Kat,” he said softly, glancing at Hugo. “Kat, nothing’s gonna happen to Hugo. We’re not in San Francisco anymore, remember? You’re safe. He’s safe.”

“But Jack—”

“...got lucky and now he’s gone. Hon, it’s okay to be happy for once. Don’t let your fears ruin it.”

She blinked back tears as she gazed at Aaron. "I'm sorry," she whispered, trying to apologize. She knew he was wishing that he was the one making her happy.

He brushed her hair out of her face. "I'm just the doomed best friend, destined to forever be shoved aside for your boyfriends." He chuckled. "Maybe I should just become gay, or rather, lean further in that direction."

Anna gasped. "Aaron!"

"What? I've gone out with guys before. And no other girls ever interested me." He shrugged and then laughed. "Then I can see you naked and Hugo won't get pissed."

Hugo narrowed his eyes, partially mocking. "I haven't even seen her naked."

Anna blushed as Aaron laughed. "You really should change that."

Hugo shook his head. "I don't want to know why you would say that." He laughed. "I was going to try tonight, you know."

Anna buried her head in Hugo's chest, blushing furiously. "I'm sorry, Hugo."

"Nothing to apologize for, Kittykat." He kissed her head. "Do you want to go take a shower and clean up? We can watch a movie or something afterwards."

Anna nodded. She felt gross and knew she was sticky from blood and other things. She stood and went to her room.

Chapter Nine

“She’s worth it, you know,” Aaron said after Anna disappeared around the corner.

Hugo nodded. “I know. I just had no idea...she was always reluctant to talk about her past. I guess I understand why now.” He grimaced. “That was really her guardian?”

Aaron nodded. “He started sexually abusing her after her parents were killed.”

“God,” Hugo mumbled, shaking his head. “And he came after her for that?”

Aaron shook his head. “It’s much bigger than just his abuse, Hugo. There’s...someone out there who wants to control her and he wants her back. That’s why she’s here. To keep her from him.”

“Why?”

Aaron hesitated. “Because she’s very special. It’s the easiest way to explain it.”

“Anyone can see that she’s special just by looking at her.”

Aaron smiled. Hugo was a good guy. He’d watched him as Anna told Tom what happened, looking for any sign of disgust, but all he saw was sadness for Anna. Aaron couldn’t help but approve of the guy as being worthy of Anna. “She is.” He cleared his throat. “The thing is, with what happened tonight...she really will be okay.”

“I think that’s one of the most disturbing things I’ve heard in a long time. I can’t imagine what she’s gone through to make tonight look like nothing to be concerned about.”

Aaron shook his head. "You don't want to imagine it, Hugo. Trust me."

"You know?"

"I know almost everything about her. I've known her since she was eleven. I danced Giselle with her when she was that age. I was there when she found out Alex was dead. I was there..." He stopped. "I've seen her go through hell so many times I don't even want to count them."

"Why didn't you help her?" It was an accusation and rightly so, for someone who didn't know Devin.

He leaned back on the couch. "Because the person who is behind all this is very powerful, and getting killed would have hurt her worse than trying and failing to get her out of a situation that she couldn't get out of. I would have been dead and she would still be where she was. As it is, I am alive and I've been able to help get her out of that situation by playing an extremely high-stakes game of cat and mouse. I hope you can understand that someday, Hugo."

Hugo stared at him for a long moment and then nodded. "I know you, Aaron. I know you're a good guy and I will trust what you say, even though I don't understand it."

Aaron smiled grimly. "Thank you, Hugo." His phone rang and was surprised to see it was Wilhelm. "Hi, Wilhelm."

"Hello, Aaron. Tom told me what happened. Is Anna all right?"

"As all right as can be expected. Did you try to call her?"

"Ja, it went to voicemail and I thought she might be still ignoring my calls."

"Why would she do that?"

"I believe she is angry with me. I have tried to call her a few times and she has not answered."

"Why would she be angry with you? She loves you."

“I did not call her when I heard about Jenna, and I hurt her feelings.”

“You didn’t call?”

“Things have been...very crazy here. I forgot to call. I feel terrible, but, as I said, I have not been able to get in touch with her.”

“That’s really unlike you, Wilhelm,” he accused.

Wilhelm sighed. “Please do not start, Aaron. You will understand in a few months, but I cannot go into it right now.”

Aaron heard the rebuke in his voice. “I’m sorry, Wilhelm. I was out of line.”

“Is Anna there?”

“She’s in the shower.”

“Please have her call me when she gets out. I want to hear her tell me she is all right. Tell her it is a command if necessary.”

“Isn’t it late there?”

“*Nein*, it is very early. I do not care. I want to hear from her.”

Aaron winced at Wilhelm’s irritated tone. “I will have her call you, Wilhelm, as soon as I see her.”

“*Danke*.”

They said goodbye and ended the call. Aaron stared at the floor. What on earth would make Wilhelm forget to call Anna?

“Who was that?” Hugo asked.

“Her....” It wasn’t his place to explain she was a slave. “Her father-in-law. Alex’s father.”

“Wilhelm...sounds German.”

Aaron smiled. “He is. He’s the Duke of Hesse.”

Hugo’s jaw dropped and then shook his head. “No, the German state outlawed titles years ago.”

“Except for a few families.”

Hugo looked like he was going to protest and then stopped. "That's true." He leaned back in his seat. "God, I've learned more about Katrina tonight than I have in the entire month I've known her. Which son was Alex?"

"The oldest."

"Did he have brothers?"

"One brother, two sisters."

Hugo looked at the ceiling with sad eyes. "I'm not going to get to stay with her for long, am I?" He turned his eyes to Aaron. "Unless the brother is married already?" he asked hopefully.

"He was. He divorced a few years ago."

"Divorced? I didn't think that was allowed in those families."

"Gretchen was a bitch, to say the least."

"An unmarried brother," Hugo said softly and shook his head. "She'll be expected to marry him. Unless the father has decided against it because she's American?"

Aaron felt terrible as he shook his head. "No, Wilhelm is quite fond of Anna. He's the one who came up with her new name."

"Does she know what's expected of her?"

"She's guessed."

Hugo sighed and rubbed his face. "What do I do with that?" he asked softly.

Anna stepped out of the shower feeling much better. She was glad to find out that most of the blood was not hers, though she had quite a few bruises. Part of her wished she knew what had happened. How had she

managed to kill her guardian? How could she possibly be that strong? Maybe it was better if she didn't know and didn't remember.

She put on a comfortable pair of sweats and a cotton camisole and went back out to the living room. She could hear the deep voices of Hugo and Aaron as she approached but they stopped talking once she entered the room.

Hugo saw her and stood. "How are you feeling?" he asked softly.

She shrugged. "Okay." She stood in the hallway, not knowing what to do. Did he still want her? He hadn't left, but....

"Anna, Wilhelm called," Aaron said. "He wants you to call him."

Anna grimaced. "I don't want to talk to him. Besides, it's the middle of the night there."

Aaron gave her a look. "He wants you to call him."

"I don't want to talk to him," she retorted.

Aaron sighed and shook his head. "It's not a request."

Wilhelm had commanded her? "Fine," she snapped and reached for her phone. She pressed his picture on the screen and waited for him to answer. She hoped maybe he'd gone to bed and wouldn't....

"Hello, Anna."

"Hello, Wilhelm," she said coldly. "Aaron said you wanted me to call you."

There was a pause. "I wanted to make sure you are all right," he said softly.

"I'm fine."

"You do not sound fine. You sound angry."

Anna turned and walked to her room and sat on her bed with her head in her hands. "I'm fine. Aaron and Hugo are taking care of me."

"Hugo?"

“My boyfriend. The one I called you about several weeks ago.”

“Ah. I remember. You have gotten serious with him, then?”

“I guess so. Is that okay? Do I need your permission to date someone?”

She was snapping, but really didn’t care at the moment.

He was quiet for a few minutes. “Anna, I am sorry I did not call you when Jenna died. It was unthinking of me.”

“Are you going to come see me dance tomorrow?”

“I cannot do that. Showing up in New York, especially now, would arouse Devin’s suspicions.”

Anna clenched her jaw and blinked back angry tears. She wanted to yell at him, to tell him how much he was hurting her by not being here for her. Any other time he would have been here in a heartbeat. Now that she was safe in New York, he seemed to think she didn’t need him anymore. Well, maybe she didn’t need him anymore. “Is there anything else you need, Wilhelm?” she asked coldly.

“*Nein, Liebling,*” he said, not responding to her coldness. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay and that you know that I love you.”

“I’m okay.”

“I love you, Anna.”

She didn’t respond and he was quiet.

“I will let you get on with your evening, Anna,” he said after a long pause. His voice was strained.

“Good night,” she said, and ended the call.

Anna threw her phone down on her bed and sat down hard on the floor, drawing her knees to her chest. She felt abandoned by Wilhelm. He had his

own family and he was probably realizing that he needed to attend to them first. She was just a side distraction. A plaything.

She stared at the floor in front of her until there was a soft knock on her door. She looked up to see Hugo standing in her doorway, looking concerned. "Is everything okay?"

Anna shrugged. "As okay as it ever is."

He walked over and sat behind her, hugging her to him. She sighed and relaxed into his embrace. "I'm glad you're here. Thank you."

He kissed her cheek. "As long as you need me, I will be here for you," he whispered and kissed her cheek. They sat together in silence for several minutes. "Do you want me to leave so you can go to sleep?"

Anna thought for a moment. "I don't want you to leave," she whispered. "But I understand if you need to." She didn't want him to be uncomfortable.

Hugo hesitated. "I don't want to leave you like this, Kitty cat," he said softly. "I'll stay if you want me to."

Anna nodded. "I want you to."

"All right. Let me tell Aaron," he said standing and helping her up. "And I'll be right back."

Anna sat on her bed. This wasn't exactly how she'd envisioned the night going, but she was glad he was willing to stay. He'd been adamant about not staying with her for weeks. Was it because he knew what she was now? No, he didn't know what she was. He just knew that she'd been abused by her guardian. He wanted to take care of her and she was grateful for it.

He returned several minutes later, closing the door softly behind him and held up a pair of sweats. "Aaron lent me something to sleep in. Jeans aren't very comfortable."

"Oh! I hadn't even thought about that." She smiled shyly. "What do you normally sleep in?"

He grinned. "My underwear or sweats." He wagged his eyebrows and she giggled. "What do you normally sleep in?"

She looked down. "Something like this, I guess. Or naked."

His grin widened. "I can't say I'm not looking forward to the second."

Anna blushed.

"I'll go change, if that's okay?"

She nodded. She changed into shorts while he was in the bathroom. She realized she hadn't even seen him with his shirt off. That was so weird to her. She was used to seeing guys naked first and then getting to know them.

The door opened and she turned, nervous for some reason. Well, there was reason to be nervous, she supposed. They were spending the night together, although she had a feeling there would be no sex involved, which was fine with her. She was still sore from Jack and really wanted to be able to enjoy their first time together.

He smiled and walked to her bed, pulled down the covers and looked at her. "You sleeping over there?"

Anna shook her head and walked across the room and stood by the bed, looking at him. Hugo. Her boyfriend. She smiled at the thought.

"What's that smile for?" he asked sitting down and patting the bed next to him.

"I was thinking about you being my boyfriend."

"I'm glad that made you smile."

"Me too." She was stretching out her legs under the covers when she remembered the light. "Oh, the light!" She moved to stand and he put his hand on hers.

"I'll get it," he said.

He turned the light off and then made his way back to the bed slowly. "It's dark in here," he commented with a chuckle.

Anna giggled. "It happens at night."

"Mmm." She felt the bed dip beside her and him moving around, getting comfortable. He reached for her. "Come here," he said softly.

She moved under the blankets and stretched out on her side next to him, head resting on his chest as he lay on his back. He played with her hair. "I'm glad you're okay, Katrina. I was so worried about you. Especially when Aaron freaked out."

"I'm sorry I worried you."

"What matters is that you're safe, Kittykat. I can't ask for anything more than that." He tucked her in closer to his side and she rested her hand on his bare stomach. When she moved her hands she could feel the ridges between his abdominal muscles. There was no chest hair to tickle her nose and he smelled good. A spicy vanilla scent of some sort. She closed her eyes and was sound asleep within minutes.

"You're kidding, right?" Devin asked, pushing away from his desk in shock.

"I wish I was, Dev." Tom's voice was tense. Devin could tell he was shaken even through the phone lines. "It was...really a disturbing sight. His skull was caved in, his neck was broken, and his dick.... I can't imagine what happened. He must have put up a fight, though. His room was all torn up and...God, did he have mob connections or something?"

"With him, you never know." Jack didn't think things through sometimes. Devin stood and paced over to the window, gazing out at the downtown skyline.

"Why didn't you tell me he was here? I could've offered him a place to stay or something. Kept whoever wanted him dead off of him."

Devin sighed. “I wanted him to see if Anna was there, and keep out of sight until he confirmed either way.”

“I really don’t think she’s here, Dev. I’ve looked. I don’t sense her here.”

“I can’t figure out where she went, though. I should be able to sense something from her. The bond is still active.”

“I’ll keep looking, Devin.”

“Thanks, Tom. Let me know if you find out anything else about Jack’s death.”

“I will.”

Devin tossed his phone on his desk. Jack was a smart man, but sometimes his passions got ahead of his brain. He couldn’t imagine what trouble he could have gotten into to deserve such a horrible death.

Shit. Now who would train his red girls?

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Chapter Ten

Safe. Warm. Strong arms around her. Happy.

Anna stretched her arms and legs and Hugo jumped slightly behind her. She turned over to face him and gave him an adoring look. “Did I startle you?” she asked softly.

“No...well, maybe.” He grinned. “I’m not used to sharing a bed with someone.” His voice was gravelly and lower than usual.

She ran her hand over his rough cheek. “I’m glad you stayed with me.”

“I have to say, I slept very well.”

“Me, too.”

“How are you feeling?”

Anna thought for a minute. She wiggled a little bit. “Better.” She still felt a little achy, but knew she’d be better after moving around a bit.

He moved closer and kissed her softly. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

She felt his erection brush her thigh and bit her lip, looking up into his eyes.

“Sorry. I’m a guy.” He shrugged sheepishly. “It happens.”

Anna smiled. “I know.” She stopped herself from offering to help. It just didn’t seem appropriate to say that to him.

He kissed her cheek and then stood. “Bathroom,” he said, turning away from the bed. She watched his back muscles ripple as he stretched while walking across the room.

She stood and walked to the floor-to-ceiling window that looked out across the city and the river. It was nice being here. Even with what

happened last night, she still felt safe. She felt more and more like “Katrina” every day. And tonight, she would debut as Katrina the dancer.

Butterflies invaded her stomach as she thought about tonight’s performance: *The Firebird*. She still had a hard time believing Vincent gave her that part. It was so...demanding, but in a good way. He trusted her, she supposed. She loved the part. It was fun, but it was still nerve wracking. Her comfort was that she knew once she was on stage, she would lose herself and become the character. Hugo was dancing tonight, too, and she was thankful he would be backstage with her.

She felt his warmth before he put his arms around her. “This is an incredible view,” he murmured, kissing her cheek.

“It is,” she agreed. “I like seeing it in the mornings. It reminds me....” She paused. “That I’m not in California. That I’m safe.”

He gave her a little squeeze. “I’m very glad for both of those things.”

She smiled and they stood together, watching the boats in the river.

“Do you want to come to my place tonight?” he asked softly after a while.

Tingles shot through her body at his question. “Yes,” she whispered. “If you want me to.”

“I do.”

She felt her nipples harden at the thought of him touching her, kissing her everywhere, and making love to her. She closed her eyes and her breaths came in little bursts.

His hands lifted to her upper arms and he kissed her shoulder. “I should get home so I can get ready for the day.”

“But...,” she began, turning around.

“Katrina, I can feel your desire. It matches mine. But I don’t want to just throw you down on your bed and fuck you.” He brushed her hair away from

her face. "If I stay, I will. I want to make love to you slowly tonight and then fall asleep holding you close to me."

Anna nodded, understanding. She gave him a tentative smile. "You're such a different type of man," she whispered, moving to her toes and kissing him gently on the lips.

He smiled boyishly. "I try."

"You succeed."

He went into the bathroom to change back into what he wore last night and then Anna walked him to the door. "I'll see you in a little while," he said after kissing her goodbye.

After Hugo left, Anna went into the kitchen and ate breakfast. Aaron came out a few minutes later and poured a bowl of cereal.

"So, did you?" he asked with a grin.

"Did I what?"

"Did you guys fuck?"

"Aaron!" she exclaimed, hitting his arm, and then rolled her eyes. "You would know the answer to that. I'm not exactly quiet."

"I didn't hear any screaming, so I'm guessing the answer is no."

"Correct. We're...I'm going over to his place tonight." She smiled. "Providing I'm not kidnapped again."

Aaron shook his head and rolled his eyes. "You shouldn't even joke about that. You nearly gave me a heart attack last night."

"Sorry."

Aaron chuckled. "I know you didn't do it on purpose and I'm glad you were able to defend yourself, however freaky it may be."

"I'm just glad that Devin won't find out I'm here."

“So who was the hot guy you ran off with last night?”

Anna looked up in surprise as Stefanie walked up to her. “Hot guy?”

“Yeah, I told Aaron about it and he freaked out.”

Anna swallowed. “That was my guardian.”

Stefanie looked at her doubtfully. “You let your guardian feel you up?”

Anna blinked. “What?”

“I was sitting above you, Katrina. I saw his hand go up your skirt. Does Hugo know?”

Anna looked down at the ground and then she stood and looked Stefanie in the eye. “Yes, Hugo is aware that my guardian has sexually abused me since I was twelve,” she said coldly.

Stefanie’s dark brown eyes widened and her dark skin went ashen. “Oh. Oh, God, Katrina. I had no idea. Omigod! I’m so sorry.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “How did you...He took you...?”

Anna set her jaw and nodded.

“Aaron found you okay? Did your guardian...?”

“Yes, but I’m okay.” She found herself softening under Stefanie’s remorse. Stefanie had treated Anna with contempt since she’d arrived. At least the other dancer was showing that she was human and Anna gave her a small smile. “He won’t bother me anymore.”

Stefanie let out a long breath and looked at her nervously. “I thought the worst of you, Katrina. I’m so sorry. Had I not...God, it might not have happened.”

“I’m okay, Stefanie. Really.”

Hugo walked up with a troubled expression on his face. He knew she and Stefanie didn’t get along. “Everything okay?”

Anna nodded and gave Stefanie a kind smile. “Yeah.”

Stefanie glanced up at Hugo and then walked away with her head hanging in contrition.

“What happened?” Hugo asked.

Anna told him what had happened.

Hugo sighed. “I hope she didn’t go blathering her mouth about it.”

Anna had butterflies in her stomach all morning and afternoon. The dress rehearsal went very well.

Hugo beamed at her when they were done. “You’ll be the talk of the ballet world after tonight,” he murmured in her ear while Anna waited for Vincent to adjust some scenery.

Anna blushed and looked down.

He jumped back and laughed. “Your feathers tickle.”

Anna giggled. Her elaborate red-feathered headdress was always getting in the way. Dave said he got a mouthful of feathers every time they danced together. Hugo wrinkled his nose and Anna laughed. “Sorry.”

He rolled his eyes. “Poor Dave,” he laughed.

Dave was standing a few feet away. “What?”

“I just got a face full of feathers. I know why you make the face now.”

Dave laughed and shrugged. “I’ll try not to tonight.”

When Vincent was satisfied that they were ready for tonight, he dismissed them so he could rehearse the other ballets for tonight. Anna headed back to her apartment after carefully hanging her costume in her dressing room.

After showering, she lay down in her bed and stared out the window across the room. She could see the tops of several buildings from her bed

and was fascinated at the number of tall buildings in the city. Her eyes slowly closed and she fell asleep.

“Anna.”

Anna’s eyes opened at the sound of the long-dead voice. Alex stood next to the window and she sat up straight in her bed. “Alex!”

She shook her head. No. He was gone. He had left her dreams. She looked at him watching her. Tall and handsome as ever. Her heart pounded in her chest. “You left. You were gone.”

He nodded. “I had to. But I’m here again.”

She shook her head. “I’ve given you up. I’ve moved on.”

The sadness in his eyes made her want to cry. “Don’t give up on me, Anna. Please. We’ll be together soon.”

“How can we be together? You’re dead.” She shook her head again. “No, Alex. It’s time to stop dreaming of you. I have a wonderful man in my life. He’s alive and he cares for me.”

“Do you love him? Does he love you like I love you?” Anna could hear the angst in his voice.

“I...I don’t know if I love him. I might. It’s all so...different now. I’m different.” She looked up at him. “I killed Jack,” she whispered.

Alex walked over and knelt next to her. “Does he love you as I love you?”

Tears filled her eyes. “He’s alive,” she whispered.

“What if I were still alive, Anna? What if I walked back into your life tomorrow? Would you take me back?”

“But you’re not,” she whimpered.

“But if I was?”

Her mind filled with memories of Alex. He truly knew her. He knew every single thing about her and had loved her regardless. Would Hugo still want to be with her if he knew what she really was? Hugo cared for Katrina. Could he care for someone like Anna?

Hugo was the most honorable man she had ever met, next to Alex. Before they took the next step in their relationship, he deserved to know the truth.

“Anna?”

She closed her eyes at Alex’s deep, melodious voice. The voice she had wanted to hear again for so long. She opened her eyes again and looked into the eyes of the man she had loved for so long. “I don’t know,” she answered honestly.

Alex searched her eyes. “I will always love you, Schatzi.” He reached out to touch her cheek, and disappeared.

Anna stared at the ceiling. Why did she see Alex again? Was her mind telling her that she needed to be honest before she went any further with Hugo? Was she afraid to go deeper with Hugo? She adored him and the last thing in the world she wanted to do was hurt him. He meant so much to her.

But last night was a reality check. Even though she was “Katrina” now, wasn’t she really just pretending? Hugo thought of her as someone who was abused, and while it was true, there was so much more than abuse. Once she was freed from Devin, would she cease to be an Elder-Mistress? Would she just become Wilhelm’s Mistress? Or would she be free to live her life as she wanted to? There was only one person that could answer those questions.

She picked up her phone from the nightstand and dialed Wilhelm.

“Hello, Anna,” Wilhelm said in an even tone. He didn’t seem surprised to hear from her.

“Hello, Wilhelm.”

“What can I help you with?”

She hesitated. Did she really want to know the answer to the questions? She sighed. For Hugo’s sake, yes. “Once I’m free from Devin...will I be free?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...like, will I be free to live my life as I want to, or...will I still be an Elder-Mistress?”

“Ah.” There was a pause, and then a sigh. “You will still be an Elder-Mistress. Your father gave you to us, to protect you, *ja*, but that gift cannot be undone. You will still belong to me.”

Anna swallowed several times. “So...I’ll never be free?” she whispered.

“*Nein*, Anna. I am sorry.”

“Oh.”

“My son is not a cruel Master, *Liebling*,” he added softly. “I think you will be happy when all is said and done.”

Anna tried to smile through her tears. “Yes...I know.” Kurt was a good man. He loved her. She loved him. “I’m sorry for how I spoke to you, Wilhelm.”

“Thank you for saying that, Anna. I know I hurt you terribly by not being there for you. I am truly sorry for that.”

“I wish you were going to be here tonight.”

“I wish I could as well. I had been planning on coming and surprising you, but with what happened with Jack...it is too risky.”

“I understand.” And she did. She knew that he would be here if he could. “Well, I need to get back to the theater. Thank you for answering my

questions.”

“Anytime, *Liebling*,” he said tenderly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She ended the call and put the phone down on her bed. Now she just had to figure out how to tell Hugo.

Anna ate dinner and then went back to the theater. She wasn't sure where Aaron was, but he wasn't dancing tonight, so he'd maybe gone out. Hugo wasn't in his dressing room so she went to hers and began breaking in her pointe shoes. He came by later and they chatted for a while.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

“Yeah. I mean, a little. I'm feeling nervous now, but I know once I'm on stage I'll be fine.” She grinned. “It's weird, but it works for me.”

Hugo laughed. “I understand. It doesn't happen to me all the time, but I've had that before.”

“Do you get nervous?”

“Yeah. Sometimes. I'm a little nervous about next Thursday.”

“It's a fantastic ballet, Hugo. I'm honored you're having me dance with you.”

“You help make it great, Kittycat. It wouldn't be the same without you.”

Anna blushed. She had decided she would talk to him after the performance tonight and was thankful he was being sweet and kind as usual, but not as touchy-feely as she had expected, considering they were planning on having sex tonight. But she didn't know if that would still happen. She looked up at him and gave him an adoring smile. She truly cared for him and wished things were different. The story of her life. But at least this time she didn't have to worry about him getting killed.

He left a bit later to get ready for the show. *Firebird* wasn't until after intermission, so she had a while to wait, although she wanted to watch him dance from the wings. After her hair and complicated makeup were done, she stretched for a bit until she heard the music beginning. She wandered out to the wings and saw Hugo doing some last minutes stretches. He grinned when he saw her.

"Hi, Kitty cat," he said walking over to her.

"I wanted to see you dance since I missed it last night." She chewed the inside of her lip. "Is that okay?"

"Of course. I'm glad to have you in the wings for me."

She grinned and then he winked at her. "See you soon."

Anna watched, enthralled, at the dancing. She loved watching it as much as she loved doing it, and before she realized it, Hugo was taking his bows with the other dancers and Anna was clapping hard for him.

"You were wonderful," she beamed as he walked to her.

"Thanks," he grinned. He kissed her cheek lightly, to keep her makeup intact.

The other ballets flew by as well, then came intermission and then it was time for Anna to step on stage for the first time as a City Ballet dancer. And oh, it was exhilarating! She felt herself transformed into the *Firebird*, flying across the stage, flitting around as the exotic bird, and saving the Prince.

When she 'flitted' off stage for the last time, Hugo crushed her in an embrace. "You were amazing!" he whispered in her ear.

She looked up at him. "Really?"

"Yes, Kitty cat," he said, stroking her upper arm. He looked up as the applause began and smiled. "I bet that's for you."

Anna shook her head, and held his hand until it was time for her to take her bow.

Dave came and grinned at Hugo. “Can I take her?” he laughed.

“Of course,” he laughed.

Anna was nervous for the two seconds it took her to get from Hugo’s embrace to the side of the stage, but when she and Dave walked on stage the applause became louder, and even included some shouts. She blushed and made a low, humble curtsy. She glanced back at Hugo in the wings, who had been joined by Vincent and they both beamed at her. The audience stood and Anna grinned at Dave.

Several minutes later, when the applause had finally died down, the curtain closed for the last time and Vincent rushed over to her. “Fantastic job, Katrina,” he said, hugging her.

There were hugs and kisses and congratulations all around and then Anna was finally able to head back to her dressing room to change and wash her face.

She tried not to think about what she had to say to Hugo. Now that the performance was over, her nerves were kicking in, though.

Hugo knocked a few minutes later. “You ready?”

Anna smiled. “Yeah.” She picked up her bag and took his outstretched hand.

They were quiet as they walked the block to Hugo’s condo. She’d been here just a few times. Just a little one bedroom with a balcony and a beautiful view of Lincoln Center.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked as he locked the door behind them.

Anna shook her head and looked around. She had so been looking forward to tonight. Even now her body reacted to the idea of being with Hugo. But her heart ached and for once, she would listen to her head and heart instead of her body.

He walked by her and took her hand, leading her to the couch. *Always the gentleman*, Anna thought to herself. Of course he wouldn't take her straight to the bedroom. He would make sure she was okay with everything before taking the next step. Especially after last night.

"You've been quiet tonight," he said, still holding her hand. "Is everything okay?"

She looked at him as she tried to decide how to begin. Oh, how she wished things were different! "Before we...progress with...stuff, there's some things I need to tell you," she said softly.

He squeezed her hand and gave her a gentle smile. "Okay. I'm listening."

She looked down at their hands, fingers intertwined. Dark, light, dark, light, dark, light. How could she have let it go this far? She should have stopped it from the beginning so that he wouldn't get hurt.

"Katrina?" he said softly.

She glanced up at him and swallowed. "I...I'm not who you think I am. Or rather *what* you think I am."

His brow twitched, but his gentle expression remained unchanged.

"I don't know how to say it...." She paused, looking at their hands again and then looking up. "There is a man who decided he wanted me when I was born. I'm...different than most girls and I have something he wants. He was the one who arranged my parent's death and for my guardian to raise me as he did. When I was twenty, he took me from my guardian and made

me his....” She hesitated. “...his slave.” She paused and looked away. “His sex slave,” she added softly.

Hugo’s mouth opened in surprise, but he didn’t say anything. He simply nodded and gave her an encouraging smile.

“Alex...he...saved me from being totally taken by him and as a result, I became both of theirs. Alex did it to keep the other man from gaining complete control over me. He married me so that he would have an advantage over the other man. The upper hand, if you will.” She smiled softly. “Alex loved me and I loved him. So much.” She shrugged slightly. “Alex would have married me if he hadn’t loved me, but his....” She swallowed. “He knew everything about me, and still loved me. He could have had any woman in the world, and he chose me....” She trailed off.

Hugo squeezed her hand gently, encouraging her to go on.

“When we married...well, De...I mean, the first man had taken me by force...by unscrupulous means. When Alex married me, I was given to him as...it should be done. It’s rather complicated.” She gave Hugo an apologetic look.

“It’s all right, Katrina. You don’t have to tell me more than you want to.”

“Thanks,” she whispered. Why did he have to be such a good guy? “So, I was given to Alex in marriage by his father who is the one who actually legitimately ‘owns’ me, I suppose is the easiest way to explain it. When Alex died, I returned to Wilhelm’s care.” She stopped, not knowing what to say next. After a long pause, she continued. “By me being here, it...weakens the other man and eventually I will be freed from his ‘ownership’. But not Wilhelm’s. I will belong to him for the rest of my life.”

“And you’re expected to marry Alex’s brother.”

Anna’s head snapped up. “How did you know?” she asked, astonished.

“I know a little bit about how the higher German families operate, and Aaron told me a little bit about you last night.”

“I called Wilhelm to ask him if I would ever be free and he said I wouldn’t.” She blinked. “Wilhelm is a good man, as is Kurt. I’m not being forced into a horrible marriage. Kurt had actually asked me to marry him before but...we couldn’t.” She looked at Hugo with sorrow. “I’m sorry things...got so far. I suspected that I would have to marry Kurt, but...I like you. A lot. I suppose because I didn’t know for certain, I didn’t think about it much. But now that I know for certain...” She shook her head. “I never wanted to hurt you, Hugo. You are one of the best men I have ever known. But I had to tell you before we...slept together.” She blinked back tears. “I’m so sorry.”

Hugo was quiet for several minutes, making Anna nervous, but he deserved her quiet respect.

“If I were a callous man and didn’t care about the future, I would say ‘fuck it’ and take you into my bedroom right now. I would stay with you as long as I could have you and then let you go when it was time.” He paused. “But I’m not a callous man. When we began getting serious, I started imagining a future for us.”

Tears burned at Anna’s eyes. She had thought of a future with him as well.

“I know that, if I did hold on to you, it would kill me when I had to give you up. I don’t know if I *could* let go of you.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks as she looked down at her lap. Her chest was tight and she could hardly breathe. She tried to pull her hand away, but he held her tight.

“Katrina,” he said, lifting her chin with his hand. “I don’t regret a moment of the time I spent with you. I will always cherish it. And I will

cherish our time together in the future as well.” He smiled. “I’m not going to stop dancing with you. And I certainly can’t stop caring about you.”

She let out a choked laugh through her tears. “I don’t want to stop dancing with you either.”

“Don’t feel guilty, Kittykat. I understand why you kept things from me. And you didn’t lead me on when you found out what would happen in the future. I would have been far more hurt if you had told me next week. Or even tomorrow.”

Anna nodded, though she couldn’t erase the guilt from her heart.

“But I do think we should end things now, before either of us gets more hurt than we already are. At least romance-wise. Then we can remain friends and have a good friendship instead of parting as hurt lovers later.”

She nodded again. He was right. But it still hurt.

“Katrina?”

She looked up.

“I was going to talk to you about what Aaron had told me last night. Either way, we would have resolved it tonight. It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry,” she said and then the tears fell freely. Hugo pulled her close and let her cry on his shirt.

Hugo walked her home a while later. They were quiet, but Anna was feeling better. Hugo had taken it well. He said he’d been thinking about it all day and had already gotten his head and heart around not being with her.

When they got to her apartment door, he kissed her on the cheek. “We have rehearsals for *Arches* tomorrow, don’t forget.”

Anna managed a smile and nodded. “I can’t wait.”

He waited for her to unlock the door and then said goodbye and walked to the elevators.

Anna went inside and saw the living room light was on. Was Aaron home?

She walked around the corner and froze in surprise to see Aaron on the couch kissing another guy. She stared for a moment, fascinated, and then cleared her throat.

“An—Katrina. What are you doing home?” he asked, looking as surprised as she was. Anna didn’t recognize the other guy. He was good looking in a feminine way, with thick auburn hair and blue eyes. “I thought you were staying with Hugo.”

She blinked rapidly and shook her head. Aaron was at her side in a flash. “What happened?” he asked putting his arm around her and leading her to the couch.

“We broke up,” she said softly. “We...had to. I told him....” She looked at the other guy and back at Aaron. “I told him what I was and what was expected of me in the future. We decided it was best to end things now. Well, Hugo decided and I agreed.”

“Oh, Kat, I’m so sorry.” He hugged her tightly.

“I know it’s for the best, but it still hurts.”

Aaron nodded. “I know.”

She glanced at the other guy again. “I think I’ll just go to bed. Give you some privacy.”

“You don’t have to. Cam’ll understand.”

“Oh, yes, it’s totally fine,” Cam said gently. “You shouldn’t be alone after a break up.”

Anna shook her head. “I just want to go to sleep.” As if to justify her claim, she yawned. “I danced hard tonight.”

“How did it go?”

Anna flushed in pleasure. “Good.”

“Standing O?”

She nodded. “Two curtain calls.”

He grinned. “That’s my girl!”

“Thanks. I’ll see you in the morning.” She hugged him and then went to her room.

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Chapter Eleven

After a few days, seeing Hugo didn't hurt as bad. She began to be able to enjoy his company as a friend. The other dancers seemed to be surprised that they'd broken up, even though they hadn't been overt in their dating. It was just known that they were together. Questions were asked, but Hugo just said they'd had their reasons and to let it go. When a rumor began that Anna had cheated on him, he got angry and squashed it immediately.

Anna danced both Friday and Saturday nights and received standing ovations both times. Wednesday she danced again and Thursday was the Spring Gala and the premier of Hugo's Ballet.

She fidgeted backstage, waiting for the music to begin.

Hugo came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Katrina. It's all right."

His touch was calming and she took some deep breaths. Sometimes when he touched her, sparks flew through her veins, making her wonder what it would be like to be with him, but it was getting easier to be around him without feeling that way all the time.

Although opening night had been last week, the Gala was the really important event of the season. The audience was filled with celebrities galore, as well as the who's-who of New York society. After the performances, there was a dinner where the dancers would intermingle with the guests. She knew she was sitting at Tom's table, which made her feel much better about going, but she was still nervous.

The music began and Anna took another deep breath as the curtain opened and the blinding stage lights came on. She closed her eyes and

allowed herself to become one with the music and the dance.

The ballet was met with resounding applause. Hugo grinned at her as he led her out for their bows. Her heart soared at the appreciative audience. She was so happy for Hugo she could hardly stand it.

The good thing about being the first ballet of the evening was that there was plenty of time to get ready for the dinner. She dressed in the lavender gown that Wilhelm had bought her, wishing he was here. She comforted herself by remembering that there had been people to see her dance tonight. Tom and his wife were there and cared about her. Tommy, too, although she doubted his wife cared very much. She knew Hugo cared and Aaron too. She didn't feel lonely like she had when she'd danced Giselle.

The hallway got noisy and she supposed that the dancing was completed for the evening. Those in the audience who were staying for the dinner would be heading out to the promenade and the dancers were supposed to be there as quickly as possible.

There was a knock at the door. Anna opened it to find Aaron standing there with a goofy smile on his face.

"Wanna head out together?" he asked.

Anna nodded. She and Hugo had talked about going together, but their emotions were still raw and they decided they still needed healing separation.

She and Aaron made their way through the theater and Anna gasped when she walked inside the dim lobby. The ceiling, four stories above, was draped with beautiful sheer fabrics and flowers. Dozens of round tables had

tall vase-like centerpieces with cascades of colorful flowers hanging down from them. Anna could smell the flowers as she walked through the room. Hundreds of people meandered around the room, talking and laughing. The men's black tuxedos were a sharp contrast to the elegant, colorful gowns of the women.

"Oh, Aaron. It's so beautiful." She looked around. "How are we supposed to know where to sit?"

"Over here." Aaron led her to a table where one of the dancers was sitting. "Hey Mindy. Where are we sitting?"

She smiled. "Let's see." She looked at a clipboard in front of her. "Aaron, you're at thirty-three. Katrina, you're at...." She looked up at Katrina. "Wow. Table one. You're with the Mayor. And that hot blond guy everyone's been gossiping about."

Anna glanced at Aaron. "Tommy?"

He shrugged. "Guess you'll find out."

Mindy pointed to the direction of their tables and they walked away.

"I'll find you for a dance later," Aaron said and went to go find his table.

The occasional woman's laughter was heard above the din, making Anna feel awkward. Socially awkward wasn't an apt description of her any longer; she was much more comfortable in social situations now than she'd ever been, but she was also used to having 'duties' in these types of situations. Was that why Tom wanted her sitting with him? So that she could help influence the attending men as she had for Devin? She glanced at the men as she wandered through the large round tables. Would she be expected to fuck any of them?

Anna looked around and spotted a number one on a table near the dance floor. It made sense that Tom was at table one with the mayor. After all, he

ran the city. It had to be Tommy who was the ‘hot blond guy’ being gossiped about. Tommy was very good looking and charming. But she imagined he usually attend these types of events with his father. Was he always gossiped about? How did New York gossip work? Anna didn’t usually pay much attention. Either she was too out of it or it was just uninteresting. Who really cared who was fucking who or how someone’s hair was a disaster?

She met Tom’s eye and he smiled and stood as she approached. “Katrina, the star of the night,” he said with a big grin and kissed her cheek.

“Tom....” Anna blushed, shaking her head.

“Katrina, you remember my wife, Kelsey?”

“Hello, Katrina,” Kelsey said with a kind smile. Her brown hair was pulled up in an elegant twist and she wore a strapless, blue chiffon gown. “I’m so glad to see you again.”

“Hello, Mrs. Pendleton,” Anna said softly with a timid smile. “Thank you. It’s good to see you again, too.” Kelsey had always been kind to her after she understood why Anna had been with Devin.

“And of course, Tommy and his wife Kim.”

Tommy gave her a sad smile. Anna nodded stiffly and glanced at Kim. She was watching Anna with a sad, although somewhat suspicious, look. Kim’s face was fuller than it had been when Anna had met her. Anna supposed it was the pregnancy. Her straight and amazingly shiny dark hair and bangs glimmered in the lighting from above.

Tom introduced the other couples at the table: Mayor Timothy Craig and his wife, McKenna, and Scott and Jennifer Moody, important people of some sort in the city. Vincent and his partner, Walter, would be joining them shortly.

Anna became alert as she saw someone familiar making his way through the crowd towards their table. Tall and blond, she couldn't quite see his face until he was closer, and when she was finally able to see it, she inhaled sharply.

"Kurt?" she whispered.

Kurt smiled at her as he strode across the dance floor and stopped in front of her. "Hello, *Engel*," he said softly.

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Chapter Twelve

“What are you doing here?” she asked, bewildered.

“I came to see you dance. And to see firsthand how you were doing.”

“But...I thought you couldn’t come.”

“*Vati* cannot. I can. At least more easily than he can.”

She stared up into Kurt’s blue-gray eyes. Well, he would definitely be the one that was being gossiped about. He was as handsome as ever, and more relaxed than she’d seen in a while.

He grinned. “Shall we sit?” he asked, pulling out her designated chair beside Tom.

“I...um, yeah,” she stuttered and sat down. Kurt sat in the chair next to her. She looked at Tom. “Did you know he was coming?”

Tom smiled and nodded.

“How are you fortunate enough to know our new favorite dancer, Kurt?” the mayor asked.

Kurt put his arm around Anna’s chair and smiled in his relaxed way. “She was married to my brother before he...died.”

Anna didn’t know how she felt about Kurt putting his claim on her so quickly. She supposed he had a right to, but...well, she didn’t want Hugo to find out this way. She’d rather tell Hugo than him find out by seeing her across the floor.

She looked around to see if she could find him, and spotted him across the room with Vincent and some other men.

Anna stood suddenly. “Excuse me,” she said and made her way to the other side of the room as quickly as she could, considering the crowd. She

could feel Kurt's eyes on her back as she walked away.

Hugo saw her walking towards him and said something to Vincent and then walked towards her. "Katrina? What's wrong?"

"Kurt's here."

He stared at her. "Here? Why?"

"He came to surprise me, I guess. I just...I didn't want you to think I called him to come or anything. I..." She swallowed and looked up at Hugo's kind eyes. She wanted his arms around her again. She knew why they broke up and, now especially, it was obvious it was the right decision, but that didn't mean she cared for him any less.

The look in his eyes told her he felt the same way. If they had been alone, he might have even kissed her. "I know you wouldn't have done that, Kittykat," he said softly, reaching for her hand. "Where is...oh."

"What?" She was focused on his hand holding hers.

"Is that him?"

Anna whirled around and saw Kurt weaving his way through the crowd with a determined look on his face. "Yes."

Hugo chuckled. "He looks like a Duke's son." He took hold of Anna's wrist and pulled his hand away from hers. "I won't keep you from him, Katrina. This is why we broke up."

She looked back at him. "But Hugo..."

"Katrina." Kurt's voice was low and almost...warning-like? That was so unlike him

"You must be Kurt," Hugo said with a smile and extended his hand. "I'm Hugo Sintzenich."

Kurt eyed him suspiciously, but shook his head in surprise. "Sintzenich? You are German?"

Hugo said something in German to which Kurt responded in kind with a laugh, lightening the mood. Kurt slipped his arm around Anna's waist and the two men chatted in German for a few minutes. Anna looked between the two men, bewildered. What were they saying?

"Holy shit. Kurt?" Aaron appeared next to Anna.

"Aaron. It is good to see you." Kurt smiled broadly in greeting. "You were great tonight. As usual."

Aaron grinned. "Thanks. What are you doing here?"

"Came to surprise An—Katrina."

Several of the dancers walked by their little group, and Anna saw them looking at her and Kurt as they passed. She wondered what they were thinking and tried to step away from Kurt, but he kept a firm grip on her waist.

"I think you succeeded," Aaron commented dryly, glancing at Anna.

Anna didn't know how she felt about the whole thing. She still had feelings for Hugo, and Kurt lived thousands of miles away.

Kurt was...different. Possessive, even. He had been before, but not like this. He was usually more...gentle with her. What had gotten into him?

Kurt kept his hand on her back as he led her back to the table a little bit later. "I did not realize Hugo was German."

"Does it matter?" she asked, the coolness in her voice coming through a little more strongly than she'd intended. "Am I allowed only to date Germans?"

"I would rather you fuck a German over anyone else."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Anna could feel her anger rising. "You live thousands of miles away and I just found out from your father that no matter what happens, I'll still end up with you owning me." She knew deep

inside that she didn't dislike the idea of being with Kurt, but she was angry at his attitude.

"I just think that if you are going to have a boyfriend here, I am glad he is German."

Anna glared at him. "So you don't mind me fucking around as long as he's German?"

Kurt shrugged. "I know you have needs and I am not here enough to fulfill them properly. I am not saying he *has* to be German, I am just saying I am glad he *is* German."

Anna shook her head in bewilderment. "So you and I are 'together' now?"

"I suppose you could see it that way."

"Were you planning on telling me this? I was under the impression that I was free to do as I liked."

"You are...when I am not around."

Anna stopped and stared at Kurt. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She squinted in disbelief and shook her head. "You're as bad as Devin," she whispered and turned to walk away, but he grabbed her arm.

He forced a smile onto his face, though his eyes were chilled. "I am going to pretend I did not hear that," he said looking around and then locking onto her eyes. "I am *not* Devin and you know it."

She opened her mouth to retort, but the MC began speaking and Kurt pushed her gently to her seat. She sat down and crossed her arms over her chest. Kurt gave her a look and she sighed and dropped her hands into her lap.

During the dinner, she remained silent except when asked a direct question. Kurt was very affectionate, at least physically, ignoring her

coldness and keeping his arm around her between courses or leaning in to whisper something in her ear, which she ignored in turn.

The dancing began after the final course and Kurt led her out to the floor as it filled up with couples. He held her close, intertwining his fingers with hers and holding them to his chest.

“Why are you being so hostile?” he asked softly.

“Why are you being an ass?” she retorted.

“I am not trying to be an ass, Anna. I am trying to...get control of the situation. To establish your boundaries.”

“Don’t you think you’re making me look like a bitch? Lavishing my affections on the handsome foreigner while ignoring my boyfriend?”

He looked down at her, startled. “I...had not thought of it that way. But you should not have a boyfriend anyway,” he added quickly.

Anna huffed. “When did all these rules come into play and why wasn’t I told about them? If I had known....” She sighed. “God, Kurt, if I’d known I never would have gotten involved with Hugo. I could have saved us both a tremendous amount of hurt.”

“Us?”

“Hugo and I.” She sighed. “We broke up last week because of what I learned talking to your father. Don’t worry. I won’t get into any more relationships. I don’t want to hurt someone else.”

“I thought you were just fucking him.”

“We haven’t been together like that, Kurt. We were going to and then Jack showed up and....” She swallowed. “Because of everything, we decided it would be better if we ended things sooner rather than later.”

“You have not fucked him?” he said softly. “Really?”

“He was determined to be a gentleman and not push things too far. He didn’t know what I was until I told him last week.”

They danced in silence for a while then Kurt broke the silence. “When was the last time you had sex?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. Couple weeks I guess.”

Kurt’s eyes widened in surprise. “I did not think you could go that long.”

Anna frowned. “Thanks,” she said bitterly. Kurt was just really trying to endear himself to her, wasn’t he?

“No, I meant....” He sighed. “I think it is good....” He trailed off as the music ended.

“Can I go?”

Kurt nodded and she left him standing in the middle of the dance floor. She needed some fresh air and headed outside.

“Katrina!”

Anna turned to see Stefanie walking quickly to her. “Are you okay? Is he another bad guy from your past?”

Ever since Stefanie had learned about Jack, she’d become Anna’s protector. If Anna was unhappy, Stef was the first one by her side to make sure she was okay. Anna was grateful to have a friend. A female friend.

“No, he’s actually a good guy from my past. He’s just acting like an ass tonight.”

“I’m glad. Because he’s yummy and I’d hate to have to take him out behind the theater and kick his ass.”

Anna smiled.

“Is he why you and Hugo broke up?”

Anna shook her head. “Well, indirectly yes.” She sighed. Her heart ached for Hugo. “I was married to Kurt’s brother a long time ago. He died and now I’m expected to marry Kurt.”

Stef grinned. “That doesn’t seem like such a bad thing...to be stuck with someone like him. But...I mean, why are you expected to marry your husband’s brother? That seems so...old fashioned.”

“They’re a very old German family and that’s the way things work. Even Hugo, once he found out, knew eventually I’d have to go to Kurt. That’s why we broke up. Because we care about each other too much to have to end things later under duress.” Anna sat down next to the fountain and rested her chin on her hands. “But Kurt’s being a jerk tonight and I don’t understand why. He’s usually so sweet and laid back.”

“He’s hot!”

“You should have seen his brother,” Anna said fondly. “He was the most handsome man I’d ever seen.”

“Damn, girl. Any other brothers?”

Anna shook her head. “No, but several cousins, though I can’t remember who’s married and who’s not. It’s been years since I’ve seen them. They all look alike. It’s bewildering.”

“You better invite me to the wedding,” Stef laughed.

“Of course, though German weddings are very different than American ones.” Anna told her about getting married at the JP’s office and the lack of a big church wedding.

“That is fucked up,” she said. “How can an American girl not have a big white wedding?”

“Did I mention he’s a Duke?” Anna grinned.

Stef hit her in the arm. “Shut up!” she laughed. “Damn girl. Stop complaining and get back in there and jump his bones.”

Anna sighed and leaned back, looking up at the starless night sky. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him.” She had a feeling she needed to get

back inside and she reluctantly stood with Stefanie and headed back across the cement courtyard to the theater.

Kurt was near the door, talking with Aaron and a few other dancers. The girls were flirting with him shamelessly and he laughed with them, almost flirting back, but not quite.

Anna sighed. This is what it would be like, being married to an Elder-Son. They were free to do as they pleased while their wives stood by and made sure everything stayed perfect at home for them. Anna just happened to have other duties to perform in addition to the wifely ones.

Stef smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry he's being a jerk. Maybe you should make him jealous." She grinned. "You look fantastic tonight. You could have any guy here."

Anna knew that was true. Even if the man wasn't interested at first, she could seduce him. But did she want to? Was she angry enough to play that game with Kurt? What would he do if he were jealous? She'd didn't recall seeing him angry before. Had his temper grown to be like his father's?

Kurt turned towards her and she quickly turned away so he wouldn't see her watching him. Over Stefanie's shoulder she saw Hugo dancing with a woman wearing a slim red dress and laughing with him. Her heart twisted in her chest and she turned further away.

"There you are, Katrina." Tommy appeared in front of her. "Dance with me?"

She looked at him with a blank expression for a moment before nodding with a small smile. Stefanie winked at her. If nothing else, it might make Kurt jealous. It was petty, she knew, but she didn't care.

"Where's Kim?" Anna asked as Tommy held her close on the dance floor.

"With my mom, I think, getting some fresh air."

“Oh.”

“Anna, I’m sorry for what I did to you...a few weeks ago. I hated leaving you the way I did, but I couldn’t ignore the call.”

Anna shrugged. “I know. It’s just part of being a Mistress, I guess.” She glanced at Kurt across the room. “I guess I’ll understand that more, eventually.”

Tommy turned his head and followed her gaze. “I thought you liked him.”

Anna stared at the buttons on Tommy’s tuxedo shirt. “I did. But he’s...different now.” She glanced up. “He’s actually being an ass tonight.”

Tommy frowned. “I can’t imagine him doing that. He was enthralled with you when you were dancing.” He shrugged. “I guess we all were. You’re rather captivating when you dance.”

She half smiled at the compliment and then looked up at him. “If you want to stop by sometime again, you can.”

He arched his brow. “Are you sure?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “The freedom I thought I had isn’t real, so I might as well get used to having my duties again. At least I don’t have to worry about abusers coming to see me.”

Tommy gave her a sad look. “I’m sorry, Anna. I thought...I thought you were supposed to be free to do as you pleased, but Dad’s been talking with Wilhelm a lot lately. Something’s changed.”

“I wish I knew what it was. Then I might understand my freedoms being taken away.” She sighed. “I don’t like fighting with Kurt. I don’t like thinking of him as a jerk.” She watched Kurt continue to laugh and joke around with the women around him. What had caused this change in him?

When the song was over, they saw that Kim had returned to the table and Tommy went to be with her. Anna wandered around the outskirts of the

party, wondering when she could go home. Being tied to Kurt made her feel lonely. Her new “free” life was now over and it was simply a waiting game until they would marry and she would move to Germany.

“Where have you been?” Kurt asked as she finally approached him a long while later. The circle widened for her and he put his arm on her waist, taking possession of her again.

She’d made a long, slow circuit around the promenade. “Wandering.”

The conversations continued around her and she stared off into space. There were worse things than being possessed by Kurt. Devin, for example. Kurt didn’t hurt her like Devin did. She should simply be grateful for that. But she wished she’d been told instead of just being expected to know what was going on. She’d had a month to be herself and now it was over. She would just have to accept that and hope to figure out whatever was going on with Kurt.

When the party finally began to break up, well after midnight, she went to the table to get her purse.

“Where is your apartment?” Kurt asked, as he stood behind her, rubbing her upper arms in an affectionate manner.

“It’s just a couple of blocks away.” She turned. “Where are you staying?”

“The Plaza.”

“Oh.” Did he expect her to go with him? It would surprise her if he didn’t.

“Do you need anything from backstage?”

Anna shook her head. She could get it tomorrow. She just wanted to go home and sleep.

Kurt took her hand and led her out to the valet where many guests were waiting for vehicles. “Do you want to have dinner tomorrow night?”

Anna frowned in confusion. "You're asking me out for tomorrow night?"

He shrugged. "I did not know if you had plans or not." His expression made her suspect it didn't matter if she had plans or not.

"Are you asking me out or telling me we're going out?"

"Which would you prefer?"

"Does it matter?"

"I am trying to be nice, Katrina."

Anna huffed. "What time do you want me ready?"

"When are you done with rehearsals?"

"Six at the latest."

"I'll pick you up at seven-thirty then."

"Fine."

A limousine pulled up and Kurt led her to it and they got in. "What is your address?"

"You're not taking me back to your hotel?"

Kurt clenched his jaw. "Do you want to come?"

"No."

He closed his eyes for a long moment. "Then what is your address?"

Anna told him and he repeated it to the driver.

A few minutes later they pulled up to the front of her building. He went with her up to her apartment, but they didn't speak until they were outside her door.

"Here." He handed her a small box. "So people know the status of our relationship."

Inside was a beautiful diamond ring. Anna looked up at the strained look on Kurt's face. "So, we're engaged?"

Kurt nodded.

“When are we going to get married?”

“We cannot marry until after you are freed from Devin. It will be a long engagement.” The manner in which he spoke about it seemed so businesslike. “I will keep my...private time private. No one will think me a playboy here.”

Anna gasped and tears sprang to her eyes. Her jaw trembled as she stared, bewildered, at Kurt. His jaw was clenched and his eyes were hard.

“I do not care what you do, just keep it private,” he added softly.

“Don’t you think people will think it strange if I don’t stay with you?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Do you want to come and watch?”

Anna felt the knife in her heart and she turned to unlock her door before he could see her cry. “I’ll be ready at seven-thirty.”

She slipped inside the dark apartment and leaned against the door, sliding down to the ground. Her body shook with grief. It *would* be a loveless marriage. He was marrying her out of duty and nothing more. As angry as she was, it stemmed more from hurt than actual dislike. This was not the Kurt she knew and fell in love with.

Maybe if she hadn’t been so cold she’d be in his bed instead of on a cold wooden floor. She curled onto her side and sobbed.

Chapter Thirteen

Somehow, she had made her way to her bed the night before, because she woke up in it. The horrible memories from the previous night flooded back into her memory and she sat on her bed staring at the floor. She hadn't even changed into her pajamas and her dress was a wrinkled mess.

She went to take a shower and stood under the hot water for an eternity, hoping it would erase the pain. She turned it hotter and hotter until she was dizzy from the heat and knew she needed to get out.

She dressed in her practice clothes, put her hair up and put the ring on. It was a very impressive diamond, a few carats at least, and sparkled in the sunlight that streamed through her windows. The main round diamond was flanked by two smaller round diamonds and even more round diamonds were channel-set around the band. It was heavy. If he had given it to her out of love, she would have adored it. But it was given to her out of obligation and it seemed a gaudy, taunting reminder of her lost freedoms.

But she needed to pretend to be happy and in love. Easier said than done. She decided a quiet contentment would be as much as she could manage and went out to have breakfast. Aaron came out as she was finishing.

"Holy fuck!" he exclaimed staring at her hand. "Kurt?" he questioned.

Anna nodded and put her bowl in the dishwasher.

Aaron came and took her hand. "That is mighty impressive."

"Yeah," she mumbled and went to sit on the couch.

"What's wrong?" he looked around. "And what are you doing here? I thought you'd be with Kurt."

“I think he had other plans.”

“Other plans...?” Aaron shook his head. “He went and fucked someone else?”

Anna shrugged. “I think so. I mean, he implied it. He said I could watch if I wanted to.”

“What the hell is wrong with him?”

She shrugged again. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll play the part and he’ll leave...soon, hopefully.”

Aaron frowned but didn’t say anything else.

Her ring did not go unnoticed at the studio and there were many admirers surrounding her, both for the ring and for Kurt. She smiled as best she could and answered the questions, but was thankful when class began. Hugo had smiled kindly at her but hadn’t said anything, and he stood on the other side of the studio.

Anna was miserable, but didn’t dare show it. She looked around during warm-up, seeing the girls who had been around Kurt last night and wondered which of them he’d slept with. He did have a thing for ballerinas. Then she realized she didn’t really want to know and set to work losing herself in her dancing.

Her rehearsal went a little long and she was late getting home, but managed to be ready when Kurt knocked on the door. She barely looked at him when she opened the door and went to get her purse.

Kurt took her to a nice restaurant in Times Square. She didn’t speak unless he asked her a question, but tried not to radiate dislike to him. She was just quiet.

A thought occurred to her as dinner was brought out. She waited for the server to leave and then looked at Kurt. "Are you not sleeping with me because of the whole Elder-Son's-wife-has-to-be-a-virgin thing?"

He looked at her for a long moment and then nodded. "We're not supposed to sleep together until we're married."

"You really expect me to wait over a year to have sex again?"

Kurt sighed and took a sip of his wine. "I don't really care what you do. Just keep it private."

Anna looked down at her hands, ashamed. For a moment she had thought maybe he'd been keeping her at a distance because he didn't want to be tempted to be with her. But it was obvious he just didn't want her. The knife in her heart twisted again and she didn't speak for the remainder of the dinner.

"When are you leaving?" she asked as they rode back to her apartment after the long, uncomfortable dinner.

Kurt stared out the window. "Tonight. I was going to stay and watch you dance again, but..." He shrugged. "I don't think it's necessary."

"Oh."

The remaining few minutes in the car were even more uncomfortable than dinner.

"Can you please let me know when you're coming back into town so I can be prepared?" she asked as she stood outside the limo. She had asked him not to walk her up to her door because she just wanted to get away from him.

Kurt nodded. He looked at her with a pained expression for a moment and then turned impassive. "I don't know when it will be, but yes, I will call you."

Anna nodded and then slowly walked away with her head down.

She heard footsteps and then Kurt's arms were around her and he spun her around. He looked at her for a minute and then pressed his lips to hers in a hungry, passionate kiss.

She pushed against his chest, trying to escape but he was too strong. He held her against his chest and she could feel his heart pounding against her hands. One hand held her around her waist and the other tangled in her hair, trying to deepen the kiss, but she kept struggling, tears in her eyes now. She didn't understand what was going on and she was scared and confused at his changed attitude.

He loosened his hold slightly and held her head to look him in the eye. "I'm so sorry, *Engel*," he whispered. He kissed her one last time and then released her.

With a trembling hand she touched her swollen lips and stared at him. "I don't understand," she whimpered.

He opened his mouth but closed it before he said anything. He gave her a sad look and then turned and walked back to the limo. He got in and the door was closed. She stared as the limo drove away moments later.

What had just happened? The way he'd looked at her...it was the old Kurt. The one she fell in love with. But why was he so cold and why was he leaving her again? Why did he apologize?

She turned and ran into the building.

When Aaron came home later she was still crying in bed. He lay down next to her and pulled her close.

"What happened?" he asked softly, stroking her hair.

Anna told him the events of the night.

"That doesn't even make any sense," Aaron commented.

“I don’t know what’s going on. I’m so confused. It was the old him who kissed me, but then he just left.”

“I’m sorry, hon. I wish I could help, but I’m as confused as you are.”

There was a knock on the door and Anna looked at Aaron. “Expecting someone?”

He nodded. “Cameron.”

“Oh.”

“Let me go let him in,” he said sitting up. “Be right back.”

She heard muffled voices and a few minutes later Aaron returned. “You want to come watch a movie with us?”

Anna shook her head. “No. I’m okay. I didn’t sleep well last night. I think I’ll just go to bed.”

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “Come get me if you need anything.”

Anna didn’t hear from Kurt until a few weeks later when he called her to wish her a happy birthday. It was a short call.

Aaron threw her a party the night of her birthday and most of the dancers attended. Those that were performing that night came after they were done.

Anna had a good time, despite the strained phone call from Kurt.

Most of the time, Anna was too busy or tired to think about sex, but it had been weeks now and she was starting to feel it. Everyone in the company knew her to be engaged and for her to even flirt more than just innocently would not be a good idea. She briefly entertained the idea of approaching Hugo, but they had finally come to a point where their emotions were under control and they were able to be themselves again

around each other. She didn't want to ruin that. She valued Hugo too much. And with Aaron in a pretty serious relationship with Cameron, she couldn't even approach him. God, she needed to get laid!

She stood at the edge of the terrace looking out at the lights of the city, wracking her brain for a solution.

"How's the birthday girl?" Hugo came to stand next to her at the railing. She inhaled deeply. "I'm okay. One of my better birthdays."

"What do you usually do for your birthday?"

"Not much." She thought for a minute. "I had a birthday dinner for my twenty-third birthday. Last year my fake-boyfriend threw me a surprise party." She shrugged. "That's about it."

"Fake boyfriend?"

"Someone I pretended to date because...someone else thought I needed some sort of stable relationship, even if it was fake."

"The same someone who wants to control you?"

Anna nodded, smiling about Peter. "It wasn't so bad. He was a really nice guy after a while. Once he got to know me, I suppose."

Hugo nodded. "Did Kurt call?"

"Briefly." She looked up at the sky. "I still don't understand what happened to him. He used to be so caring and nice."

Hugo put his hand on hers. "I'm so sorry, Katrina. I wish...I wish there was something I could do."

"Me too," she said softly. She looked up into his kind eyes. One of the best things about dancing with him was the ability to show how she cared about him in an acceptable manner. Most of the time she was "over" him, but there were sometimes that her heart ached for him. Especially when she was feeling lonely. Like now.

He gazed into her eyes, his eyes darkening as their bodies moved closer together. “Katrina...,” he whispered.

Anna blinked and looked away. It wasn’t fair to him to encourage him. “I’m sorry, Hugo.”

“I miss you, Kitty cat.”

Anna fought against everything inside her to not look at him. She wanted to throw her arms around him and kiss him until she couldn’t breathe anymore. But she couldn’t. “I need something to drink,” she said softly, pulling her hand away and going back inside the apartment.

The first week in June marked the last week of spring performances. *Midsummer Night’s Dream* came together and ended out the season nicely. She had received a standing ovation at every performance of the season and had become a favorite with the press.

The company had a couple of days off dancing, but started again on Wednesday so that they could get ready for their July tour to upstate New York. Anna still couldn’t travel with the Company. Vincent had spoken to Tom in hopes that something could change, but Tom apologetically told him that there was nothing he could do. On the bright side, this would give Anna an opportunity to learn a bunch of the repertoire without the pressure of an upcoming performance.

Near the end of June, Anna got sick. She woke up not feeling very well, but didn’t think much of it. She hadn’t been feeling especially good the last few weeks, but it was mostly just tired. That morning she felt like she had the flu, or was pregnant, but she knew she wasn’t pregnant. The only sex she’d had was with a vibrator she’d purchased a while back.

But she didn't "get sick," so she shook it off and headed off to class. She was shaky and pale when class started, but she kept telling herself she didn't get sick and tried to ignore it. But by the time they'd begun their center work, Vincent and Aaron were keeping a very close eye on her and Aaron caught her when she collapsed.

"Why didn't you stop, hon?" Aaron asked as she lay on Hugo's office couch with her head in his lap. He wiped her face with a cool cloth.

"I don't get sick," she protested.

"Well, I think this proves you wrong."

She shook her head. "I'm not supposed to get sick," she said weakly.

"Maybe your humanity finally caught up with you."

She gave a weak laugh. "Maybe."

After she'd rested a bit, Aaron took her home and settled her in bed with the remote and a cooler full of drinks.

She remained in bed for the next week without getting any better or any worse. Aaron called Tom because he didn't know if he could take her to the doctor. Tom came over that afternoon.

"No. It wouldn't be a good idea to take her to the doctor. A doctor would do tests and find out she's not fully human.

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know."

She had a low-grade fever and was very pale. She trembled and sweated as if she had the flu. Tom promised to stay with her while Aaron was out of town. The day he left she fell asleep and didn't wake.

She dreamed strange dreams. Of beaches and men in white tunics. Of Devin and Alex. Of California and Germany. She floated on a cloud over the earth as it spun.

Days passed, unmarked by Anna, and then one day she woke up.

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Chapter Fourteen

Anna sat up in her bed and looked around. What time was it? She remembered being sick, but now she felt better. All better. She smiled and stretched and then got out of bed and went to get something to eat in the kitchen. Aaron had gone to Saratoga Springs. She remembered that.

“Anna?”

Anna spun around and was shocked to see Tom standing in her kitchen wearing pajama pants and nothing else. He rubbed the back his neck and his lean muscles contracted in his chest. He looked as surprised as she felt.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I’ve been here for a week watching over you. You’ve been sleeping.”

“A week?” Anna leaned on the counter. “Wow. I think I’m better. I mean, I remember how I felt and I feel much better now. Normal. Actually better than I have in a while.”

Tom chuckled. “Maybe your body figured out how to fight whatever bug you had caught.”

“I didn’t think I could get sick, though. How did it happen?”

Tom shook his head. “I don’t know. You do tend to be more human than Immortal. Maybe that’s what it is.”

“So I’ve been sick for a week?”

“Three weeks, actually.”

“Oh.” She looked at the counter. “Was Vincent terribly angry?”

“Vincent? No, he was very concerned. As were all your friends. Aaron left reluctantly and only after I promised I’d stay with you. Once you fell asleep, you stayed pretty steady.”

Anna scratched at some dried jelly on the counter. “Did Kurt call at all?”

“I spoke with Wilhelm several times, but no, Kurt didn’t specifically call.”

The knife in her heart she had begun calling “Kurt” twisted again. Though she hadn’t felt it since she’d been sick, it was obviously still there. “I think I’ll shower and go out for a while,” she said softly.

“Anna, are you sure? You’ve been sick for quite a while.”

“I want to go outside. I want to walk.” She glanced up. “I bet you’ve missed quite a bit of work because of me. And your family.”

“I could work from here. Kelsey understands why I’m with you.”

Anna nodded. “I appreciate you watching over me. It couldn’t have been very interesting.”

He shrugged. “It’s all right, Anna. I kept busy.” He chuckled. “I think I actually might have gotten more done while I was here than at the office. Less distractions.”

Anna laughed.

“Well, if you’re going out, I think I might head into the office for a while.” He stepped closer to Anna. “If you start feeling sick again, call me and I will come get you,” he said firmly. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Tom,” she said softly, astonished at the concern in his eyes.

“Where are you thinking about going?”

Anna thought for a minute and then smiled. “The library.”

Tom stared for a moment and then threw his head back and laughed. “You are a strange girl, Anna.”

Anna flushed.

“Do you want to call Wilhelm or do you want me to?”

“You can,” she said softly. Since Kurt had visited, she had felt disconnected from the family. She didn’t want to open herself up to more hurt than she already felt. She’d asked Wilhelm about Kurt’s attitude and he had brushed her off.

“All right. You should call Aaron and let him know you’re awake.”

“I will.”

After a nice long shower, Anna dressed and headed downstairs. Tom had gone to the office and said he’d call her later. She called Aaron and left a message. He was probably in class or rehearsals.

She slowly made her way down the street, not wanting to push herself too hard, although she felt better than she had in a long while. Even before she got sick.

After stopping to get something to eat at a bakery on the corner, she headed towards the park. She loved walking through the park to the library, even though it added ten minutes to her walk. It was worth it. Especially on a weekday when it wouldn’t be too crowded.

She heard a whisper of a sound and froze, croissant halfway to her mouth. She could have sworn she’d heard Alex’s voice. She turned around slowly, half expecting to see his ghost behind her. There was no one there. She looked around for a minute and then shook her head, chiding herself for the ridiculous thought.

She relaxed as she got to the park, inhaling the *somewhat* fresh air and smiling at the *somewhat* peaceful oasis in the middle of the bustling city. Every time she walked into the park it amazed her. Maybe she would stop on the way home and read here for a while. It was quiet and a perfect place to get lost in a book.

Fifth Avenue was just a few minutes away when she caught sight of the Plaza. The place where Kurt had stayed and fucked another woman after he gave her the engagement ring. After she had crossed the street she stared up at the beautiful building, plagued by unanswered questions about Kurt's behavior. She hated her ring. It reminded her of him every time she looked at it. She twisted it on her finger, contemplating "losing" it, but just sighed and continued on, knowing she could never lose something on purpose.

By the time she made it to Rockefeller Center, she had recovered from her sad memories and went to get a soda at one of the restaurants. She usually stopped in on her way to the library and the bartender knew her by name.

"Haven't seen you in a while, Katrina," Levi said with a smile, pouring her drink without having to ask what she wanted. "Where ya been?"

"Sick."

He handed her the Styrofoam cup with a smile. "I'm sorry to hear that. Feeling better?"

Anna nodded. "Much better. Thanks." She gave him a big smile and put a five dollar bill on the bar. "I'll be around more," she promised as she turned to walk away.

"Your fiancé come visit you yet?" Levi asked.

Anna's face fell. "No."

Levi gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry. He's really stupid, in my humble opinion. Shouldn't let a pretty woman wander around the city alone. It's...uncivilized."

Anna laughed. He had asked her out a few times before Kurt had come to town. She paused and looked at him. His dark brown hair was wavy but pulled back into a ponytail, contrasting nicely with his electric blue eyes.

He'd always been nice to her. Kurt said he hadn't cared what she did as long as she kept it private. Maybe she should test that theory.

She stepped back to the bar and wrote her number on a napkin and slid it across the slick wood at him with a shy smile. He raised his eyebrows when he saw what was on the napkin.

"Really?" he asked.

Anna blushed and shrugged her shoulders. "If you want." She glanced up at him and then quickly left the restaurant, not quite believing what she'd done.

She looked up and met the eyes of a man with chocolate-brown puppy dog eyes and looked away immediately as her heart pounded. He reminded her of Seth, and she walked towards him slowly. He had turned around and was casually looking up at the building with his hands in his pockets. His brown hair was long and he had a neatly trimmed beard. She paused behind him, debating if she should speak.

But Seth was a military guy through and through. He'd never let his hair grow long or have a beard. "Stupid," she said to herself. "He's dead. They're all dead." She mentally kicked her own ass and walked away before she embarrassed herself anymore today.

She wandered further down Fifth Avenue until she reached the lion-flanked steps that led to the entrance of her favorite building in the City. After stopping at the information desk to have them tell Max, the librarian, that she was here, she headed upstairs trying to decide what she was in the mood for. She headed to the dance section and settled on the floor with her favorite ballet book. Max had told her a hundred times she should just check the book out and read it at home in comfort, but there was something comfortable about sitting on the floor of the library reading a book. Max teased her about it, but he respected it.

She heard footsteps and looked up to see Max's smiling face. "How's my favorite reading ballerina today?"

She smiled back. "Much better and glad to be here."

"You haven't been around, or have I just missed you?"

She shook her head. "I was sick for a few weeks, but I'm better now." She motioned to the book in her lap. "And back with my favorite book."

Max chuckled. "I'm glad you came. We have an exhibition that I wanted to make sure you saw."

Anna's eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. "What of?"

"Old photographs of dancers from Cambodia. The exhibit closed this weekend, but the photos are still here if you're interested."

"Oh yes!" Anna leapt up and put the book carefully back in its place and followed Max to the back rooms where the photographs were.

Later that afternoon, Anna bought lunch at a deli and found a comfortable patch of grass to sit on and eat and read the book she'd borrowed from the library. She'd looked at the German language books, wondering if she should begin to learn to speak German, but her heart just wasn't in it. She passed by the selection of German poetry, and was tempted when she saw a copy of a book that Alex had read to her when he was still alive, but she couldn't bring herself to take it. Even though she'd thought she was over him, this whole mess with Kurt had her resolve and confidence dangling by a string and she was missing him again. She almost wished she'd dream of him again, just to see his face and kind eyes. At least when she moved to Germany, she'd have pictures of him again. And if Kurt remained as cold as he had been when he visited, she would keep a picture of Alex by her bed so she'd remember the one man who truly loved her.

She wiped away the tears that threatened to fall and unwrapped her lunch and immersed herself in the trashy romance novel she'd picked out. Max would have been shocked by her selection of book, but she was feeling sorry for herself and didn't care.

Tom called her as she was walking home.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Physically fine. Emotionally lonely," she admitted.

"Do you want some company tonight?"

"Oh, Tom, you're so sweet. But you've been away from Kelsey for a week. I'm okay. Go home to your family."

"I promised Aaron I'd make sure you were a hundred percent better before I went home."

"Then you'd be with me for a very long time. Really. I'm okay. I have a couple of books to read and I'll order takeout."

"That makes me feel even worse," he chuckled.

"Go home, Tom. I'm fine. Really."

He sighed. "All right, but call me if you need *anything*."

"I will. Thanks. Tell Kelsey I said thanks for lending you to me."

They hung up a few minutes later and Anna took the elevator up to her floor.

Aaron called her and they spoke for a few minutes before he had to go onstage. "I'll call you in a few days to check on you."

It was Monday. The rest of the week she spent doing, well, not much. It was nice for a change. She went to the studio to practice every day and then was a couch potato the rest of the day. When the company got back, it

would be full force practice for the fall season. She figured she should rest while she could.

Aaron called on Friday morning and heard the loneliness in her voice.

“I’m going to call Cam and have him take you out tonight.”

“Aaron, really. I’m fine.”

“It’s Friday night in New York City. You haven’t experienced the nightlife yet and you should...if you’re feeling okay. Cam knows all the good places.”

“Aaron...”

“If you’re better, then I’m not going to listen to arguments. You need to get out.”

“I did get out. I went to the library.”

Aaron huffed. “That doesn’t count and you know it. Are you still feeling good?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then I’m calling Cam. Find something hot to wear. You need to get laid.”

“Aaron! I’m engaged!”

“To a nice-guy-turned-jerk who fucked another woman the night he threw your engagement ring at you.”

“We’re only getting married because we have to.”

“Then live a little before you do. God, Anna, if he was the same Kurt I knew, I wouldn’t be encouraging this, but you’ve been miserable since he gave you that ring and that asshole deserves to be showed up.” He laughed. “I might even have Cam take a picture so I can send it to him.”

“Oh, Aaron don’t. I’ll get in trouble.”

He grunted. “Fine. So, go pick something out to wear, get showered and all that good stuff you girls do and have fun tonight.”

“I don’t know if I have anything that would qualify as hot. I’m a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl now.”

He laughed. “Oh, Cam will love to take you shopping. Okay. I’m going to call him. He’ll be there soon.”

“Aaron....”

“Love you. Have fun tonight.”

He hung up before she could protest again and then she smiled. Okay, maybe going out sounded like fun.

Ten minutes later Cam was knocking on the door. He lived in their building, which is how he and Aaron met. It was weird to think about Aaron in a relationship with a guy, but he was happy and that’s what mattered.

“Oh, honey, I’m so glad you’re all better!” Cameron exclaimed as Anna opened the door. “You look fabulous!” His flamboyance was an endearing quality. “Okay. Get your purse. We’re going shopping!”

Chapter Fifteen

“I can’t wear this, Cameron! I’m half naked!” Anna stared at herself in the mirror. The white micro-mini skirt was so micro it barely covered her ass. Her pink lace top was held together between her breasts with a single tie. She could see her nipples through the sheer lace. Granted when she was acting as Elder-Mistress, she wore a sheer white dress that showed everything, but that was different

Cameron laughed. “You’ll have more clothes on than most of the women there. Haven’t you ever been to a club?”

“I...well, a few times back home.”

“And what did you wear?”

“I dunno. A skirt and sweater or something.”

“God, girl, how did you get laid?”

“I had a boyfriend.”

Cameron rolled his eyes. “You have the body most women would die for and men will want to touch. You should show it off.”

“But...I’m not good with men. I mean,” she added seeing Cameron’s doubtful face. “...I don’t know how to say no to them.”

“Just say ‘no’ and back away. The place we’re going to has good security and if they see you in trouble, they’ll rescue you.”

She pleaded with Cameron with her eyes. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can. Stop worrying so much and relax. Or I’ll get you so drunk you won’t remember the evening and wake up with a hunk in your bed.”

Anna rolled her eyes. One thing nice about being who she was, she didn't have to worry about getting "knocked up" or getting any sort of STD. The Elders had immunizations for all those things. Too bad they didn't share them with the rest of the world.

"Omigod, did you hear about the condo that was just sold down the street?" Cameron asked as they walked into Anna's apartment.

Anna didn't pay much attention to the gossip of the city. The women of the company talked endlessly about the celebrities and rich men from the gala, but Anna was never really interested in gossip. She supposed she just didn't know enough about the normal world to understand it. "No."

"Well, it was *the* most expensive condo in the city and he, yes it's a *he*, paid cash for it. Was okay'd by the building's approval board and everything, even though he's a foreigner." Cameron wiggled his eyebrows. "He's supposed to be incredibly hot. Don't you read the paper?"

"Cameron, I've been sick for three weeks."

"He just moved in Sunday. It was the front page of the gossip rags." He put his hand up in the air, emphasizing each word. "Handsome, rich, unmarried European buys billion dollar condo!" Then he giggled.

Anna rolled her eyes. "New fodder for the other dancers."

"Maybe he'll be out tonight. Maybe he'll see you and sweep you off your feet."

"If he's European, my father-in-law will probably know him and if word gets back to him, I will be in so much trouble. Cam, please remember that I'm supposed to keep my private stuff private."

"What happens in a New York club, stays in a New York club." He grinned.

Several hours later, Anna had passed Cameron's dress screening and they were in a taxi on their way to the club. Cameron apparently knew the bouncers and when they exited the taxi they bypassed the line and went right in.

"I'll make sure you get a good guy, Katrina," Cameron shouted over the music as he took her hand. They sat down at a table near the dance floor. "What do you want to drink?"

"I don't know," she shouted with a grin. "Surprise me."

Cameron winked and sauntered away towards the bar.

She looked around nervously. It was a classy place, decorated in dark woods with lighter accents. The music was loud and people ground themselves against each other on the dance floor, but it wasn't like the clubs she'd been to in California. The men were dressed nicely, although the women wore clothing that made Anna feel overdressed, even with her breasts practically exposed.

A man approached her and asked her to dance. She hadn't had a drink and wasn't ready to move yet. She shook her head and offered him an apologetic smile. He asked a second time, but she shook her head again and he walked away.

Cameron returned a few minutes later with shots and martinis. He handed her one of the shot glasses. "For bravery," he shouted

Anna laughed. They clinked their glasses and she poured the alcohol down her throat. "Oh, God that burns!" she said, wiping her mouth and coughing, but within a few minutes she could feel herself relaxing. She sipped her martini as she watched people dance.

"Oh! I almost forgot to tell you!" Cameron said excitedly. "He's here!"

"Who's here?"

“The mystery man. The one who bought the condo!”

Anna found herself looking around for a handsome European. “Where?”

Cameron motioned over to a curtained archway. “There. He’s watching!” His eyes sparkled as he said it, making Anna laugh.

“Can he not dance?” she asked, gazing at the sheer red fabric that only allowed a slight glimpse of several silhouettes.

Cameron shrugged. “Maybe he’s just getting the lay of the town.”

Another man approached her a while later. He looked Italian, with thick black wavy hair and dark eyes. Anna glanced at Cameron who grinned and nodded and Anna took the Italian’s hand, letting him escort her the few steps it took to get to the dance floor.

He pulled her close, putting his hands on her lower back and swayed with the music. “I’m Rob,” he shouted close to her ear. She felt his warm breath on her ear and she shivered. She hadn’t been held this close to a man in a really long time. Ballet rehearsals didn’t count.

“Katrina,” she shouted back.

He gave her a boyish smile. “Very glad to meet you.”

“Likewise.” She grinned back.

The floor was crowded and even if she’d wanted to, there was no room to back away. He pushed his thigh between her legs and she gasped softly. God, she hadn’t been touched in ages and was feeling it. She looked at him, trying to decide if he would be worth fucking and gave him a seductive smile as she put her arms around his neck. Yes, he would do nicely. But when his hand slipped down and his fingers started caressing the skin at the top of her thighs, she pulled away.

She shook her head. “No. I’m sorry. I can’t.” She turned to walk away and the man tried to pull her back. She felt her heart pound with anger as

she turned and gave him a warning look and he released her, wide-eyed, and hurried away.

She sank back into her seat next to Cameron.

“What happened?” he asked, holding out her martini to her.

She took it and took a big gulp, then coughed as it burned her throat. “I just...can’t, I don’t know. It felt wrong.”

“That’s okay, darling. There are plenty of fish in the sea.”

Anna danced with several other men, all of whom seemed nice enough and definitely handsome enough to pique her interest, but the moment they started making moves on her, she escaped. Maybe she was nervous about being caught. Maybe she just felt guilty. Whatever the reason, she was beginning to accept that she wouldn’t be getting any tonight.

Cameron, on the other hand, was having a fabulous time, flirting and talking with old friends. There was an eclectic mix of people in this place, which made it very interesting for people-watching, though if Anna sat for too long, Cameron went and found someone for her to dance with.

She had just sat down after turning another guy down when a man in a suit walked along the side of the room in her direction. He looked like he had just stepped out of *GQ*. His perfectly cut and styled light brown hair perfectly matched the obviously expensive suit that perfectly fit his broad shoulders. Anna stared at him as he confidently approached their table and stopped in front of Anna. Even Cameron stopped and stared.

“Hello, my name is Simon,” he said with a slight accent that she couldn’t quite pinpoint. “May I sit?” he asked politely. He didn’t appear to be coming on to her. In fact, he looked like he was coming to discuss business with her.

Anna nodded and scooted over to give him room to sit down, curious about his presence. She smiled and extended her hand. “I’m—”

“Katrina. Yes, I know.” He shook her hand and then released it. All business. *Okay...*

Anna blinked nervously. “H-how can I help you...Simon, is it?”

“Yes.” He smiled, showing perfectly even white teeth. He glanced around and then returned his gaze to Anna. He didn’t look down her shirt or at her legs, which Anna thought very odd for someone in a club. “I will get straight to the point, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay....” Strange way to approach a woman.

“To put it succinctly, my employer is new in town and when you walked into the building, you caught his attention....” A smile reached his eyes as he paused. “...to say the least. Your friend here mentioned that you were, how shall we put it delicately, looking for companionship for the evening?”

“Cameron!” she exclaimed, hitting his arm.

“Ouch!” He winced and pouted jokingly. “I was just trying to help.”

“Is it true?”

Anna bit her lip. After dancing with all those men, her libido was very active. She was almost to the point she would fuck the next guy who walked up to her, if only to get some semblance of release. “Y-yes, I suppose it’s true.” She winced, anticipating his reaction, but he merely nodded as if checking something off his mental list.

“My employer is also desiring companionship tonight, although because of circumstances beyond his control, his need for anonymity overrides his ability to approach you himself.”

Anna frowned. Anonymity? “He wants me to have sex with him without knowing who he is?” She felt like she should be indignant, but she couldn’t muster the energy. “How is that possible?”

“You would be blindfolded and he would remain silent.” Simon looked straight into her eyes. “I assure you, complete discretion is assured. Your

reputation would be unharmed, unlike if you were to openly leave with a man you met here.”

“Why do you think I would worry about my reputation?”

Simon looked down at her hand. “That is a very beautiful ring. Not something purchased at the local jewelry store.”

She bit her lip again. An anonymous encounter. She felt her body responding at the thought. “How do I know I’d be safe?”

The man smiled as if she asked the right question. “Although his name remains hidden, he is quickly becoming well known in the city. He is the ‘mystery European’ that the gossip papers have been writing about.”

“Ooh, Katrina!” Cameron exclaimed. “You should go! And that whole privacy thing will be taken care of too.”

“Privacy thing?” Simon asked.

“My fiancé told me he didn’t care what I did, as long as I kept it private.” She looked at her hands and blinked rapidly. Crying would make her look foolish and ruin her makeup. Besides, she had come to the conclusion that Kurt didn’t deserve her tears.

But that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt to think about.

Simon smiled. “Then perhaps this is the perfect situation for both you and my employer. If you two...get along well, then there may be more opportunities in the future. Physical needs can be demanding, yes?”

Anna laughed, almost in relief. “You have no idea.”

“Then you are willing to meet with him?”

She glanced at Cameron who was nodding emphatically.

“Okay,” she said timidly.

“Good.” Cameron smiled broadly as Simon continued. “There will be a limousine outside waiting for you in fifteen minutes. It will take you to the hotel and I will be waiting for you in the lobby. I will give you further

instructions at that time.” He stood and took her hand. “I will see you soon.” He kissed the back of her hand and strolled away in that confident manner of his.

Anna glanced back at Cameron, eyes wide. “What did I just get myself into?”

Cameron giggled. “Hopefully a night of great sex.”

The next fifteen minutes were filled with such conflicting thoughts, Anna had half talked herself out of going by the end of the wait. If Cameron hadn’t been there, she would have chickened out. But the man promised discretion. That’s what she needed to protect herself. If something happened to her...well, she’d been through worse things. If she wound up dead.... Well, again, she’d been through worse things. If it was terrible sex...she had her vibrator at home. She wouldn’t be any worse off than now. And she could smile at the fact that the “mystery European” had chosen her, without her even trying to seduce him.

When it was time to go, Cameron practically shoved her out the door with a huge grin on his face. “Aaron will be so pleased!” he said, clapping his hands. “Enjoy yourself, darling.”

She gave him the dirtiest look she could muster before walking out the door. As she stood at the top of the stairs, a man in a black suit and tie approached her. “Miss Katrina?” he asked politely.

Anna nodded.

The man smiled and motioned to a limousine behind him. “If you are ready....”

She nodded again and slipped into the back of the long vehicle, nerves churning at a million miles an hour. The limo started a few minutes later

and Anna pushed the button to lower the partition between sections of the car. “Where are you taking me?” she asked, trying to sound braver than she felt.

“*The Library Hotel*, Miss.”

“There’s a Library Hotel?” she exclaimed. “Really?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Is it...part of the library?”

“No, Miss. It’s a block away from the library. The theme of the hotel is the library. The floors and rooms are decorated based on the Dewey Decimal System.”

“Wow.” She thought for a moment. “Do you know why he picked this particular place?”

“No, Miss.”

Anna stared out the window. A psychopath wouldn’t choose a library-themed hotel, would he? He had to be cultured to even consider a place like that...right? Anna couldn’t imagine a more romantic rendezvous, even if he hadn’t planned it that way. She resolved to just enjoy herself. The old Kurt might have done something like this, but not anymore. She still hadn’t heard from him and that stung.

A while later, the limo pulled up in front of a tall narrow building at the corner of 41st street and Madison. The entrance was a gothic marble archway with library-type windows around it that glowed yellow from interior lights. When she stepped inside, she felt like she had, indeed, walked into a library. The walls were paneled in dark wood and shelves of books surrounded her.

A few people gave her strange looks as she walked in and she crossed her arms over her chest and blushed, remembering what she was wearing.

She looked like a prostitute. And she would have to go home like this tomorrow.

Oh, this was not a good idea. She turned to leave when Simon appeared at her arm. "Miss Katrina. I'm so glad you came. Right this way."

Anna flushed again but allowed Simon to guide her to the bank of elevators. She couldn't help but stare at the room. "It's beautiful." She glanced sideways at him. "How did...*he*...choose this place?"

Simon grinned. "He had a feeling you might like something...unusual." He pushed the call button for the elevator.

"Does he have a name?" she asked as they stepped into the wood-paneled elevator.

"All people have names," Simon answered with a smile. "You may call him Mr. J." He pushed the button for the eighth floor.

"Mr. J?"

"Anonymity, Katrina."

"Oh. Right." Mr. J? What did the J stand for? Jones? Johnson? Jerk? Anna smiled to herself at the last one. Unlikely, though one could never tell. "Have you worked for him long?"

"I have known him for more than half my life."

"Is he a good man?"

Simon smiled. "One of the best I have ever known."

Tears burned unexpectedly. Alex had been referred to as that many times. Oh, she missed him.

The elevator doors slid open silently and she followed Simon down the hall. "Eighth floor...eight hundred," Anna murmured to herself. "Literature."

"Smart girl." He stopped at the end of the hallway.

“Mystery.” Anna read the plaque next to the door and then grinned. “I love it.”

“He will be pleased to know you approve.” Simon produced a black silk scrap of fabric from his pocket. “You will wear this the entire time you are with him. If you take it off, I will be forced to contact your fiancé and tell him of your escapades.”

Anna gasped.

“I have no wish to do this, Katrina. But you must realize how serious he is about staying hidden.”

“Okay,” she said nervously. Maybe this was a bad idea. “You know who my fiancé is?”

“You are fairly well known in this town. It’s not hard to find out information.”

“Oh.” She stared at the ground.

“Katrina,” he said in a gentle voice. “I will not call him. I only said that so you understand. My employer desires to stay as hidden as you desire to keep this from your fiancé.”

“Okay.” She swallowed nervously.

“He will not speak to you. You will not touch him unless he initiates it. You may speak to him, but his silence limits the questions he can answer. ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ questions work.” Simon grinned. “If the answer is no, he will tap you on the nose. No, nose? Get it?”

Anna giggled and nodded. At least he seemed to have a sense of humor.

“If he strokes your cheek, it means ‘yes.’”

“Okay.”

“He will not hurt you. If you don’t like something he’s doing, tell him and he will stop. He wants this to be a mutually enjoyable experience.”

“Okay.”

“When you two are...done, he will leave and you may stay the rest of the night in the room and leave whenever you are ready in the morning. There is a change of clothing in the bathroom for you and a car will be available to take you home. Just speak to the front desk.”

“How will I know when we’re done?” She blushed at Simon’s arched brow. “I mean...sometimes men like to do things multiple times.”

Simon chuckled. “He will hand you something before he leaves. After he hands you the item and you hear the door close, you may remove your blindfold and do whatever you wish for the remainder of the night. However,” He turned serious again. “If you attempt to follow him, I will again be forced to contact your fiancé.”

Anna nodded in understanding.

“I will be in touch with you within a few days to see how you enjoyed yourself. Like I said at the club, if the two of you enjoy each other’s company, we can arrange more evenings like this one.”

Anna took in a shaky breath. “Okay.”

Simon held up the blindfold. “Are you ready?”

Anna nodded and bit her lip. What was she doing?

Simon walked around behind her and tied the soft fabric across her eyes. “Can you see anything?”

“No,” she answered barely above a whisper.

She heard Simon knock on the door and her heart pounded as the door opened. Mr. J. didn’t move for a moment and she began to tremble as she felt his eyes take her in. A large warm hand enveloped hers and she was led into the room, the door closing behind her with a soft click.

Chapter Sixteen

Mr. J. took her by her two hands and led her across the room slowly. Not being able to see made her rely on her other senses. She smelled something sweet, roses perhaps? Yes, definitely roses. And something else...vanilla. She could hear Mr. J's breathing, steady and above her head as if he were quite tall. Her heart quickened and she gave a small smile. She did have a thing for tall men.

He stopped and put his hands on her upper arms and squeezed gently as if to say 'stay.' She felt the heat of his body come close and then felt the gentle scratch of a beard as he kissed her cheek. Shivers ran down her arms at that simple touch and she swallowed hard.

The mattress made a noise as if he sat down on it and then he took her hands again, pulling her closer to him with several small steps on her part. He took hold of her ankle and she shifted her weight so he could slide the strappy sandal off, and then did the same with her other foot.

"Thank you," she said softly. She felt much steadier on bare feet while blindfolded. Did she just *hear* him smile?

His fingers touched her jaw line and trailed gently down her neck and along the deep neckline of her shirt. Goosebumps emerged in the wake of his touch. She heard the sound of fabric sliding against itself and realized he was untying her shirt.

She let out a very shaky breath as he parted her shirt and let it fall off her shoulders. She heard the rustle of fabric as it settled onto the floor. When he didn't move, she trembled. Did he know what her piercings meant? She stepped back unconsciously but he grasped her hand and held

her in place, then traced the underside of her breasts with a finger. Her nipples tightened into hard pebbles at his touch and she sucked in short, stabbing breaths. He pulled her skirt and thong down and she stood in front of him, naked. She wasn't normally ashamed of how she looked, but she couldn't see his face to see if he was pleased or not, and it made her nervous.

When he finally cupped her left breast in his large hand, she moaned softly and parted her lips, gasping for breath. It had been far too long since she'd been touched. How had she survived?

He plucked gently at her nipple and tugged at her ring, still holding her other hand. The heat that had already been forming between her legs roared into a blazing inferno and she squeezed her legs together.

He squeezed her breast gently and pulled her even closer with the ring. She could feel his hard thighs on either side of her own legs, covered in soft material. Finely woven wool perhaps.

"Oh, God!" she cried as he took her nipple into his mouth. She instinctively reached out for his shoulders but he caught her hands before she could and held them at the small of her back.

"I'm sorry," she said breathlessly. "I didn't mean...Oh!" He sucked at her breast with increasing pressure and she felt like she could have come right then and there. His hands caressed her back slowly as his tongue swirled around her nipple.

He released her breast, the air cold after his hot mouth, and kissed his way to her other breast, lapping at it with his tongue a little before taking it into his mouth like the other.

"Oh, God!" she moaned, tilting her head back. If his hands hadn't been there, she would have fallen backwards. As it was, she was having a difficult time making her knees stay straight. His hands separated and ran

around to the side of her ribs. His thumbs caressed the side of her breasts and her knees buckled. He caught her and released her breast.

“I’m sorry. It’s been a while....” She swallowed nervously. He caressed her cheek gently. “Is that okay?” she whispered. He paused and then stroked her cheek again. She blushed and smiled shyly.

He moved his hand and his thumb brushed her bottom lip. She fisted her hands at her sides, itching to touch him, but knowing she couldn’t. He took her hands in his and intertwined his fingers with hers. Her heart pounded at the intimate gesture and when his lips brushed hers, she whimpered slightly at the quiet intensity of the moment. She tilted her head slightly, letting him know she wanted to kiss him. He hesitated for a moment and then nibbled on her lower lip, making her lips part. He pressed his lips to hers and his tongue darted between her teeth.

He tasted of sweet red wine and man. His scent was very masculine, in an outdoorsy way. A hint of lemon and cinnamon, and cypress. His facial hair tickled her lips as she groaned against his mouth and leaned in against him. Her nipples came in contact with a hard chest. He didn’t pull away and she increased the pressure, her breasts now firmly against his bare chest.

She heard a growl in his chest and he snaked his arms around her and pulled her to the bed, rolling on top of her. His kisses became intensely passionate and she gasped for breath as he released her mouth and kissed down her neck and between her breasts. He lavished attention on one breast with his mouth as his hand kneaded her other breast. He rolled her nipple between his fingers and pulled slightly, eliciting another deep moan from her.

She could feel his erection at her thigh. It was very, very hard beneath the soft wool of his pants. Unthinking, she reached for him and he caught her hands and held them above her head. He pushed them gently and then

released them. She took that to mean to keep them up there. His hands trailed down her sides and his mouth kissed down between her breasts and to her belly where he swirled his tongue around her belly ring.

He kissed across her stomach and down to her hips, and then trailed his tongue along her hipbone. She squirmed and he held her hips gently and traced her other hipbone with his tongue.

Her pussy was on fire. She wanted him inside her so badly.

She wanted his mouth between her legs, but when he kissed the top of her mound gently, she jerked and cried out “No!” Horrible memories of what Devin had done to her every night flooded in and she twisted to get away.

Mr. J. released her, though whether it was from shock or concern, she wasn’t sure. She rolled to her side and curled up in a ball.

She felt him looking at her and could almost feel his concern. She felt bad. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “Just...give me a minute.”

After a moment, Mr. J. lay down behind her and tucked her in close. She could feel his heart pounding against her back. He stroked her arm gently and she slowly relaxed. She swallowed nervously and turned over, even though she couldn't see him. “I’m sorry. I just....”

He pressed his finger to her lips and then caressed her cheek. She smiled at his kindness. She leaned forward and searched for his mouth using his breathing as a guide. She pressed her lips gently to his. “I’m okay now. Just...don’t kiss me there. Please.”

He didn’t move and she began to worry that she’d offended him, but she felt his gentle fingers on her cheek and his lips pressed gently against hers. All at once, the fire returned as he slid his hand down her back and to her ass. They moved to the side of her hip and stopped.

“It’s okay if you use your hand,” she said in a strained whisper. That she could handle. She just didn’t want to remember the pain of what Devin had done with his mouth.

He pressed at her hip and she rolled to her back. He tickled her belly gently and stroked her inner thighs, running them lightly and slowly up and down. Every time he approached her pussy, she held her breath but he didn’t touch her. After several minutes of teasing on his part and wiggling on hers, his fingers lightly brushed the outer lips of her sex.

She moaned as his fingers traced the swollen lobes. They went lower and gently probed the wet inner petals. She spread her legs apart, wanting more. He sat up and then tugged at the rings.

Anna wondered what he thought of all her piercings. “I...like rings,” she said lamely. He tapped her nose and she jumped. “I don’t like rings?” He tapped her nose again. Did she dare ask? “Do you know what they are?” she whispered.

He didn’t move for a long minute. She could feel his hesitation and then a gentle caress on her cheek. She inhaled sharply and blew it out. “Did you know before you...asked for me?”

Another hesitation and then a gentle tap on the nose. “I won’t tell if you don’t.” She smiled nervously.

He caressed her cheek and then leaned in to kiss her on the mouth again while he slid his fingers slowly inside her. She broke the kiss as she gasped at his large fingers entering the tight space. “Oh!”

He took her hands and held them above her head as if he knew she was about to reach for him, which she was. She wanted to touch him as he touched her. He slowly pressed his fingers in and out of her as he kissed her deeply. When her body had adjusted to that, he slipped in another one. She arched her back in pleasure, breaking the kiss once more. She gasped for

breath and he kissed her neck. Her eyes rolled back into her head as she moved her hips in sync with his hand.

“That feels so good,” she breathed.

He kissed her cheek and then his fingers were gone. She whimpered as he moved off the bed, but when she heard the zipper, she smiled. “Oh.”

Fabric rustled to the ground and she clenched her muscles in expectation. Her hands were still above her head and she clenched them together.

She heard a sound that sounded like something tearing and then smelled latex. “A condom?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

The bed moved as he reached to stroke her cheek.

She started to protest that he didn’t need to use one, but he knew what she was and was still using one so she supposed he had his reasons. Maybe the girls in Europe weren’t...fixed the way Devin took care of his girls. Maybe he thought that she—

The thoughts disappeared as he moved back onto the bed between her legs. She could hear him breathing heavily as he leaned forward and pressed his cock against her very wet opening. It felt weird. She’d never had sex with a condom before and wondered why anyone would want to. But when he began to press himself inside her, once again all thoughts disappeared from her mind.

“Oh God!” she exclaimed as his girth became apparent. She clutched at the pillow above her and almost tried to scoot away. But he leaned forward and kissed her, moving slowly inside and letting her body adjust to him. Kaveh had been bigger than this when he raped her, but he didn’t care about hurting her. Mr. J. was very kind and considerate, not pushing himself faster than she could adjust.

As Mr. J.'s considerable girth filled her she felt an orgasm building as he scraped against the ceiling of her tight channel. She gasped for breath and dug her fingernails into her palms.

“Oh, God! I’m going to come!”

He briefly stroked her cheek and the explosion erupted in her body. She screamed out in ecstasy and wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him deeper. The slight pain of his size accentuated the pleasure and she reached another level of pleasure. He held her hands with his as he moved, making the orgasm last for what felt like an eternity. It wasn’t more than a minute before Anna heard him grunt and let out a deep groan as he stiffened against her and came. He squeezed her hands so tightly she felt like he would rip them off. They rode the rocket of pleasure together, bodies moving as one as each gained intense pleasure from the other’s movements.

When Mr. J. finally collapsed on the bed next to her, Anna’s heart was pounding so hard she thought it would break a rib. “I haven’t had an orgasm like that in a really long time.”

Mr. J. let out a breathy chuckle and squeezed her hand.

She grinned up at the ceiling she couldn’t see. “I’d do that again,” she offered, cautiously.

He moved and kissed her deeply, stroking her cheek the whole time.

“I’ll take that as an agreement?” she grinned.

Another gentle caress on the cheek. He kissed her again and then moved off the bed. She heard the rustle of fabric again and guessed that he was dressing. She lay quietly, listening to his quiet movements until she could feel him looking at her again. She blushed and smiled in the direction of his sounds, wishing she could see him.

He pressed something thin and cool in her hands. The leaving token. “Will I ever get to see you?”

There was a hesitation and then he kissed her on the mouth gently. He pulled away and she heard him walk across the room and then the door opened and closed. He hadn't answered her question.

She cautiously pulled the blindfold off and blinked in the dim lighting of the room. There were candles lit throughout the room and rose petals on the bed that she hadn't felt, but had certainly smelled. She looked at her hand to see what he had given her.

A single pink rose.

She stared at it for a moment and dropped it, shaking her head. No. Pink roses were Alex's to give.

But Alex is dead. It wasn't Mr. J.'s fault that pink roses reminded her of her dead husband. She put it on the pillow and went to blow out the candles and turn out the light.

She could pretend it was Alex. If she never got to see him, it would be easy to do. It would give her a face to imagine. But was that wise?

She sighed and crawled under the covers, staring at the rose for a long minute before taking it and bringing it to her nose. She rolled to her back. It smelled so good. Maybe she could just allow this mystery man to give her new memories. He seemed to want to see her again. It would be a year before she married Kurt. One last romantic fling with a mysterious stranger. In the Mystery room of the Library hotel.

How fitting.

Chapter Seventeen

Anna's phone rang, dragging her out of a wonderful dream about mystery men with hard chests and enormous cocks.

She looked around for her purse and found it on the nightstand next to her. She smiled at Mr. J.'s thoughtfulness and dug out her phone. It was Cameron.

"Hi, Cameron," she said, her face splitting into a goofy grin.

"You sound happy," Cameron said. "I was worried when I didn't hear from you last night."

Anna looked at the clock. Almost eleven. She rarely slept this late. "Sorry, Cam. I...forgot."

"That good, eh?" He laughed.

"Oh, God yes!" she groaned.

"Are you home? I want to hear all the juicy details."

"No, I'm at...." She grinned again. "The Library Hotel. In the mystery room."

"How romantic!" Cameron squealed.

Anna laughed. "I'll get moving and call you when I get home."

"Do you need me to bring you clothes so you don't have to take the walk of shame?"

"No, I was told there were clean clothes for me here somewhere."

"Wow. He thought of everything, didn't he? Wait, don't tell me anymore. Get home fast!"

Anna laughed as she went into the bathroom to shower. A pair of denim shorts and a pink tank top hung on the back of the door along with a pair of

panties and a bra. On the floor sat a shoe box with white sandals inside. All the right size. Mr. J. was good. She wondered if he did this often, and then pushed the thought aside. It would ruin the fantasy if she thought about it that way.

After a luxurious shower, she braided her hair and dressed in the clothes. How did he know her style? Last night's attire wasn't exactly her norm. Come to think of it, she had this exact tank at home....

Had he seen her before last night? She'd worn that tank on Monday when she'd walked to the library. Cameron said he'd moved in Sunday and she'd walked right by the condo. Had he seen her? Did he go to the club looking for her? The thought thrilled her.

And he knew what she was, or at least partially. She almost looked like a common girl, with both nipples pierced. Was he a Brother? Was he a politician that was manipulated by the Brotherhood? Was he just as much a victim of them as she was? The thought saddened her. She knew what it was like to be manipulated by them.

She sighed. She wouldn't come up with any answers until she knew him better. *If* she got to know him better. Part of the thrill was not knowing who he was. She grinned as she gathered her things. Maybe she'd check out a mystery novel at the library tomorrow.

"Okay, spill the beans, missy!" Cameron demanded.

They sat at an organic restaurant a few blocks from their apartment building and Anna said she wouldn't tell him until they'd ordered. The tortured look on Cameron's face when she told him that was priceless.

They'd walked past the condo where Mr. J. lived and she'd looked up, wondering which floor was his. It wasn't a very tall building; eleven or

twelve stories at the most. Too bad her apartment faced the opposite direction so she couldn't spy on him.

Anna giggled and began telling him all that had transpired. She left out the part about the rings. Cameron had promised he wouldn't tell anyone and she trusted him. Of course, she would tell Aaron when he got home tomorrow though.

They had their entrees and were halfway through them before he'd asked his last question.

He stared at her in awe. "That is so awesome. I'm so happy for you."

Anna rolled her eyes. "It's not like anything is going to come from it."

"Fantastic sex is nothing to sneeze at, girlfriend," he said, jabbing a piece of lettuce at her. "Maybe it'll wake Kurt up if he knows you have a...what's a male mistress called?"

She laughed and shrugged. "A lover?" Mr. J. was European. Maybe he was even German. That would please Kurt. "Maybe Kurt will let me keep him." After all, even Kurt's mother had a lover.

They both giggled at the thought.

Later that afternoon, Anna had finished her trashy romance novels and decided to go to the library today rather than tomorrow. Aaron would be home tomorrow and she wanted to spend time with him. Besides, she wanted to read something new. She put her books in her backpack and headed out.

As she passed Mr. J.'s building, she looked up, again wondering who he was. She shrugged her shoulders and crossed the street to the park. She glanced back again and looked up at the top of the building. She could see the tops of trees. Was it a terrace of some sort?

A shiver ran through her body as she felt someone watching her. Someone from up there. Was it Mr. J.? She squinted and could just make out the outline of two people standing between two trees. The sky was overcast, making a gray background and she could just see them moving. Was it him?

She waved and then blushed, feeling foolish. But her heart skipped a beat when she could have sworn he waved back. Anna covered her mouth in shock, and turned and walked away quickly.

She berated herself all the way through the park. What if it wasn't Mr. J.? What if she'd just waved to a complete stranger and looked foolish? What if she'd just waved to a statue?

Anna stopped at Rockefeller Center as usual and went to buy a soda from Levi. He gave her a big grin. "Hey Katrina. I was gonna call you when I got off. Wanted to know if you wanted to go out tonight."

Anna blushed. "Really?"

"Yeah. I meant to call you Thursday, but I got called into work and had a double shift yesterday too." He shook his head. "If you have plans already, I understand."

"No. I was just heading to the library."

"Today's Saturday."

Anna gave him a mischievous grin. "I'm daring to do something different."

"Different is good." Levi laughed. "Anyway, a buddy of mine is doing a show at a comedy club and got me tickets. I wanted to ask if you were interested in coming with me."

"That sounds like fun. What time?"

"It starts at ten-thirty. I get off at seven and we could have dinner first."

"Sounds like fun."

“Cool.” He grinned. “I’ll pick you up at....” He looked at his watch. “How about eight?”

Anna nodded. She took a napkin and wrote down her address and apartment number. He raised his eyebrow when he saw the address. “Nice place.”

“It’s near the studio.”

Levi leaned his hip against the bar. “Ya know, I’ve actually never found out what you do.”

“I never told you?” She was surprised. She certainly didn’t hide it.

He shook his head. “Studio would imply some sort of artist....” He stroked his chin mockingly and laughed. “Singer?”

Anna laughed and shook her head.

“Painter?”

She shook her head again, giggling.

He peered at her over the bar. “Dancer,” he said firmly.

She nodded. “Ah, but what kind?”

He grinned. “Exotic?” he said hopefully.

Anna laughed again. “Sorry, no.”

“Darn,” he said laughing. “Okay. What kind of dancer are you?”

“Ballet.”

His eyes widened. “Wait. Is your last name Engel?”

“You didn’t know?”

He rolled his eyes. “This is the longest conversation we’ve had.”

“True. Yes, that’s my last name.”

“I read about you in the paper. You’re really good.”

Anna blushed. “Thanks.”

“Well, see, now I have to take you out. I have a thing for dancers.” He grinned.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to disappoint you. Eight?”

He nodded.

“What does one wear to a comedy club?”

“Whatever you want.” He gave her a mischievous look. “Less is always better.”

Anna laughed. “I’ll see you tonight.” She picked up her soda and walked towards the exit.

“Looking forward to it,” he called.

She glanced back with a saucy smile and then walked out into the sunshine.

She turned to head to the library and stopped. Did she really want to go to the library right now? She had a date tonight. “I’ll go shopping instead,” she told herself.

She wandered down Fifth Avenue, looking in windows and sipping her soda. She spotted a flowered sundress in one of the windows and wondered if that would be appropriate for a comedy club. It was cute but not very sophisticated. She walked past another shop and saw something that might work. A black satin strapless top and a short pink skirt. It wasn’t a micro-mini like she’d worn the night before, but it was short. She matched some pink-heeled sandals with it and headed home.

Levi arrived a little before eight wearing nicely fitted jeans and a red button-down shirt. Anna had known he was good looking but hadn’t seen him in anything other than the light blue t-shirt he wore tending bar. *Yummy!*

They had dinner in the West Village and then headed to the club nearby. As they waited in line, Levi stood behind her and put his arms around her

waist. When he kissed her neck gently, electricity shot through her veins and down to her pussy.

“Is that okay?” he whispered in her ear and nipped the lobe gently. “How long has it been since he visited you?”

“Months,” she said, tilting her head slightly. He brushed her hair away from her neck and she shivered.

“Stupid man,” he said quietly, nuzzling behind her ear. “You smell delicious.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, pressing back against him. Her hardened nipples strained against her strapless bra.

He chuckled. “I like the view.”

Anna looked up to see him looking down her top and giggled. “Glad you like it.”

“I’m glad that you’re glad.” He sucked gently on her neck and she let out a shaky breath.

The line began to move suddenly and he released her, but held her hand as they showed their IDs and walked inside.

After many drinks and a whole lot of laughing, they emerged two hours later, Anna clinging to Levi’s arm.

He pulled her to him and pressed his lips to hers. “Come back to my place with me,” he murmured.

Anna gave him a lazy smile and nodded. He flagged down a taxi and kissed her one last time before helping her in.

She giggled and stumbled slightly as he led her into his apartment that he shared with two other guys; one of them was the comedian they’d seen

tonight. They were alone and Levi pulled her to himself and kissed her deeply.

“God, you are so beautiful, Katrina. I’ve wanted to do this since the first day I saw you.”

Anna was pretty sure she was tipsy, if not drunk, and was feeling very good. “Then you should do it.”

He grinned and kissed her again as he walked her backwards into his bedroom.

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Chapter Eighteen

The pounding in her head wouldn't stop. Anna groaned and opened her eyes. Levi opened his eyes a second after hers.

"I've got a hellava hangover," he mumbled, but smiled at her.

There was that pounding again. Anna looked up and realized it wasn't her head, even though there was definite pounding going on in there too.

Levi frowned. "Fucking roommate." He kissed her. "Probably forgot his key. I'll be right back."

He stood and pulled on his jeans and walked out holding his head.

Anna laughed and rolled to her back and then winced. Oh, she didn't remember ever feeling like this before. She rubbed her face and then heard loud voices from the living room. What had happened?

"Where is she?" came a familiar voice.

Anna's heart dropped. Kurt.

"You're the fiancé?"

"You know about me?"

"Why do you think I took her out, you fucker?"

Anna didn't hear Kurt's response as she quickly reached for her clothes. But it was too late and Kurt slammed open the door and took in the sight of her naked, in another man's bed, and probably with just-fucked hair. His eyes narrowed and he threw something at her.

"Get dressed."

Anna looked down and saw it was a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. She narrowed her eyes at him. "How dare you barge in here on me like this!"

Kurt's eyes flashed. "How dare I?" he growled. "What the fuck were you doing going out with him anyway?" Between his anger and his accent it was difficult to understand what he was saying, but Anna got the picture. He was angry. It was quite frightening.

Levi appeared behind Kurt. "I'm not going to let you take her and hurt her," he said calmly.

"I will not hurt her," Kurt mumbled, glaring at Anna. "Get dressed," he ordered.

Anna pulled on the clothes before standing nervously by the bed. She glanced at Levi and gave him an apologetic smile. "He won't hurt me." She hoped.

There was a pair of flat sandals in the bundle Kurt had thrown and she slipped those on before trying to comb out her hair with her hands.

"You are fine." He growled and pulled at her hand.

"Let me get my things," she said pulling her hand away. She picked up her rumpled clothes and purse and stalked out of the room. "I'm sorry, Levi," she whispered as she walked past him, giving him a sad smile.

"If you ever touch her again, hell will rain down on you," Kurt threatened, jabbing his finger at Levi's chest.

Kurt was slightly taller than Levi, and much broader, but Levi refused to shrink beneath his glare. "If I find out you hurt her, I will rain hell down on you," he retorted.

Kurt looked taken aback, blinked, and then turned with a growl and pulled Anna out of the apartment.

It was a silent ride through the city to Anna's apartment. When they finally walked into her place, she walked away from him, went to her room and got into the shower without a word.

She was so angry. He hadn't shown up for two and a half months, even when she was sick, and then showed up the one night she went out and did something "wrong?" Was he having someone follow her? The thought riled her to the core. How dare he!

When she was dressed, she stalked out to the living room where he was pacing. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked, turning to face her.

"Me? What the hell is wrong with you?" she shouted. "You don't even bother to call me when I'm sick, but decide that today is a great day to come visit me? Or did you know I went out last night?"

"Of course I knew you went out last night. Why else would I be here?"

"I don't know, maybe because you actually cared about me? That you had recovered from whatever bug had gotten up your ass that turned you into a fucking bastard?"

Kurt's eyes widened at her words. He was clearly shocked at her attitude. Gone was sweet, docile Anna. Present was Katrina, strong woman of New York. She smiled a little at the image of her standing in the middle of Times Square with her hands on her hips with a red cape streaming out behind her.

"I told you to be discreet."

"Oh, like you were discreet, meeting up with Jasmine after you threw my engagement ring at me?" Through Stef, Anna had learned that it was her fellow principal dancer, Jasmine, that had met Kurt at his hotel after the Gala. "You fucking asshole," she shouted as the anger welled up inside her.

"How did you know?" he asked, having the decency to look a little ashamed.

"It's a fucking dance company, Kurt. I think everyone knows. No wonder I was getting sympathetic looks a week later."

"There are different standards for men—"

“Oh don’t give me that bullshit, Kurt. I’ve probably fucked three times as many people as you have. I’m not sweet and innocent and you know it. Why are you making me pretend to be? Why the hell did you give me a ring this far from when we could actually get married? You could have at least let me have some fun before crushing the life out of me again.”

“I am trying to keep you safe.”

“From what? Having a good time?”

“No. From getting hurt.”

“Ha!” She snorted. “You failed.” She shook her head in disbelief. “You have hurt me far more than any other man ever has,” she said quietly, glaring at him. “I never had expectations for men to treat me other than as a plaything. But you spent years pretending to be nice, and I had expectations from you. God, I was so stupid.” She walked to the window. “You’re all the same,” she said bitterly. “Even Alex abandoned me.”

“How dare you speak about Alex that way! What happened was not his fault.”

“I told him I had a bad feeling about it. That he shouldn’t go.” She clenched her jaw. “But he went anyway.” A sob escaped from her throat. “He broke his promise to me. He didn’t come home.”

Kurt stepped behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. “Anna...look, I am sorry about coming here like this,” he said gently. “I know I have been an asshole. But I can explain—”

She turned and pushed him away, shooting daggers with her eyes. “I will play your game, Kurt,” she said evenly. “I will be your perfect fiancé. The one that all the Elder-Sons need. I will keep you well pleased in bed and make you feel things you’ve never imagined.” Her eyes turned ice cold. “But I will never love you.”

Anna was surprised at the pained look in his eyes when she looked up into them. “Anna....”

She stepped away. “Don’t. If you want sex, just tell me. I will make all your fantasies come true,” she added in a seductive voice. “Are there any other indiscretions that you are aware of that I need to be more careful about?”

“M-more indiscretions?”

She nodded sweetly. “Do you know about the other men I’ve fucked since you’ve been gone?” Not that there was anyone except Mr. J., but he didn’t need to know that.

“How many are there?”

“You said you didn’t care.”

“Maybe I do care.” He stepped closer with a heated look, reached his hand around her waist and pulled her close. “I care, Anna,” he whispered before crushing her lips to his. She resisted for a moment before remembering that it was her duty to please him and pushed him to the couch. He sat down heavily and she knelt between his legs.

She smiled up at him as she unfastened his jeans. “Just like when we met, huh?” she said bitterly and pulled his cock out to take it into her mouth. She sucked and licked it, running her tongue along the bottom and then swirling it around the head. He groaned and laced his hands through her hair, mumbling in German.

She put forth her best effort and his balls were quickly tightening against his body and he groaned loudly as he came in her mouth. She swallowed everything he gave her and he lay his head back on the couch as she put him back in his pants.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, my lord?” she asked quietly.

He raised his head and looked at her as if he couldn't believe what she'd just done. He cursed in German and stood quickly. He took two steps away and then turned back around. "Do not make me have to come back and pull you out of another man's bed, Anna. Use more discretion next time." He huffed as he turned around and walked out the door.

She stared at the door and then curled up in a ball on the floor and burst into tears.

After she'd calmed down, Anna decided to return her library books and get some new ones to get her mind off of what had happened> She took the shorter route down Columbus Avenue, avoiding Rockefeller Center entirely. When she finally reached the library, she sat down in the atrium, feeling numb. She wanted to forget everything that had happened and bury herself in a book. She buried her face in her hands. How had things turned so bad so fast?

She caught a glimpse of pink on the floor by the staircase as she approached. She walked slowly over and confirmed what she thought it was: a single pink rose. Much like the one Mr. J. had left her. She looked around, wondering who had dropped the rose, but there was no one around. Most people took the elevator, but Anna preferred the carved marble staircase. She looked at it as she walked by, but didn't touch it. The owner would return for it, but she caught its scent as she stepped by.

The rose triggered the memory of the wonderful night she'd had with Mr. J. She wondered what he was doing. What had brought him to New York? Why did he want to remain anonymous? His kindness stood out in her mind after Kurt's...tantrum.

She smelled the second rose before she saw it at the landing between floors. It didn't look as if it had been dropped: it was propped up against the wall. Anna frowned at it and looked around. She saw another one at the top of the next set of stairs.

What was this? She went to where the third rose stood propped up against the marble wall. Curiosity got the better of her when she saw another rose at the end of a table and instead of going on up to the third floor, she walked to the end of the table. She looked around, half expecting to see another rose and saw it down the way at the end of a bookshelf. Was this some sort of romantic trail left for someone to follow? And if so, what was she doing following it?

The roses are the same as the one given by Mr. J.

But it was just a coincidence, right?

Of course it was. But she walked to the next rose. When she looked at the plaque identifying the genre for that bookcase, she nearly choked. *Mysteries.*

She spotted another rose about halfway down the aisle and she walked slowly to it. It was lying on top of a book that had a note card sticking out of the top. She looked around cautiously before pulling out the book. She would replace the rose and hopefully no one would know she'd been there.

Her heart pounded when she looked at the book. It was about a ballet instructor who solves murders. Her hands shook as she pulled out the card. It was written in beautiful calligraphy on very expensive card stock.

Friday night was magical. – Mr. J.

Anna nearly dropped the book and the rose. The trail was for her! A smile crept across her face and she put the rose to her nose and inhaled deeply. After her terrible morning, she needed this. A romantic gesture from a strange man. Her...lover, maybe? She could trust him to be discreet since

he wanted to keep things quiet. Kurt hadn't heard about it, so obviously Simon hadn't called him. And whoever was following her for Kurt hadn't figured out what she was doing.

Maybe a little bit of romance and mystery would help her cope with the horrible person that Kurt had become. Take her mind off of him. It was already lifting her spirits.

She hugged the book to her chest with a grin on her face and picked up the other roses that were in the room. She brought the flowers to her nose, inhaling their scent as she wandered around, picking out other interesting-looking mysteries. She finished picking out her selections and went back out to the staircase and picked up the rose at the top of the stairs and saw another rose at the bottom of the next staircase. She giggled and quickly picked it up, following a new trail of roses up to the fourth floor.

She grinned when she saw the next rose, and followed the trail to the biography section. The rose led to a book about Anna Pavlova, which made her smile. There was no card in this one, but it didn't matter. She knew the trail was for her and he was talking to her through the books. Her heart swelled to be understood like this. And by a stranger no less.

A third trail of roses led to a book of the history of New York City with lots of beautiful pictures. She looked around but didn't see any more roses. And was rather relieved. She wasn't sure how she was going to get these home as it was. Her hands were full of roses and books. She might have to take a taxi. *This is not a bad problem to have.*

She practically skipped down stairs to the checkout counter and beamed as she scanned her books with the self-checkout machine. She was humming happily to herself as she tried to decide what to do to get home when she looked up and saw Simon smiling at her.

"Simon!" she exclaimed in surprise.

“I see you found the books Mr. J. wanted you to find.”

“Oh, Simon! It was....” She sighed, happiness filling her heart. “It was just what I needed today. Please tell Mr. J. I said thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Bad day?” he asked, taking the books from her.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Mr. J. will be very pleased to know he made you smile.”

“This was...wonderful.”

“Can I offer you a ride home?”

Anna was about to accept when she remembered Kurt’s anger from the morning. “I...I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Katrina, I’m just going to take you home.”

Anna shook her head. “My fiancé wouldn’t like it.” She took her books back from Simon. “I’ll just take a taxi.”

Simon frowned but didn’t protest. He started walking with her to the doors when she stopped and looked at him. “Please just let me go by myself,” she pleaded. “I don’t want to anger him further.”

“He was angry with you? For what?”

“Very angry. I’ve never seen him like that.” She blinked away tears. “I was...indiscreet last night and he flew all the way from Germany last night to yell at me and make sure I don’t do it again.” She didn’t want to admit to Simon that she’d slept with someone else and that Kurt had practically dragged her out of Levi’s bed.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I assure you I didn’t call him.”

Anna gave him a timid smile. “I know. I’ve learned my lesson. Freedom gone,” she sighed.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to see Mr. J. again, but I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.”

Anna swallowed. "I want to. Terribly. But I'm afraid of getting caught."

"Did your fiancé know about Friday night?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Do you trust me to keep things as discreet as they were before?"

Anna looked up at him. "Yes," she whispered.

Simon smiled. "Good. I will be in touch and let you know where and when." He gave a little bow and walked away.

Anna watched him for a moment and then turned to go outside and catch a taxi home.

Aaron was home when she got there. "Where'd ya get the roses? They're pretty."

"Oh...somewhere." She said vaguely and went to her room to put her books down. Did she want to risk telling Aaron? Would he tell Kurt?

After finding a vase in the kitchen, she filled it with water and arranged the roses and put them on her dresser in her room.

"What's wrong, Anna?" Aaron said sitting down on her bed. She hadn't realized he'd followed her.

She told Aaron about going out with Levi and Kurt showing up the next morning.

"He flew all the way from Germany to pull you out of some guy's bed?"

Anna nodded.

"I never thought he was that much of a control freak."

"I didn't know a lot of things about him."

"It's so unlike him." Aaron shook his head. "What the hell happened to him? Have you tried talking to Wilhelm?"

“He doesn’t care. He’s...busy.” She laced her fingers together. “Sometimes I wish I’d just stayed with Devin. At least I knew to expect cruelty.”

“Oh, Anna. Don’t say that.”

“Well, there is one bright thing that happened while you were gone.” She told him about the mystery man and the trip to the library that afternoon.

“Wow,” he said when she finished her story. “Do you know who he is?”

Anna shook her head. “Simon told me to call him Mr. J.”

“It’s kinda romantic,” he grinned.

Anna nodded and smiled shyly. “It’s nice.”

Monday morning, the female dancers, and some of the guys, were all abuzz with the gossip of the Mystery Man who moved in while they were out of town. Anna listened with amazement at the amount of information they had gathered in the short day they had been home.

“He went out to a club, but stayed unseen.”

“I wonder if he’s terribly ugly. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t want to be seen.”

“I heard he’s Russian.”

“No, I heard he’s British.”

“Russia isn’t part of Europe, silly.”

“A friend of mine saw him at the club. Well his silhouette. He’s really tall.”

Anna smiled, listening to them. She knew a little bit more, but not much. She knew he tasted of wine when he kissed her. That his touch was gentle. That his cock was huge! Anna grinned to herself.

“I overheard Vincent talking about him in the office.” Anna looked up to see Jasmine wide-eyed with excitement as she spoke. Anna immensely disliked the woman, but was still curious enough to listen to her. “He’s apparently given the Ballet a *huge* donation. So much so that he can pretty much come and watch us whenever he wants to.” She sighed. “I’d love to dance for him.”

Anna growled at the thought of Jasmine taking another one of her men...not that Mr. J. was *hers*, per se. She got up and walked out of the room to calm down, and then laughed at herself, dispelling her anger. She was beginning to get a temper like Alex had.

Rehearsals were intense that week and Anna left the studio each night feeling as if the day would never end. She loved what she was doing, but there was so much to do it was hard to get her head wrapped around it. They were not only rehearsing for fall, but she was also trying to learn some Nutcracker pieces as well. Learning so many different dances was difficult, but Vincent wanted her to learn everything she could so he could use her wherever he wanted.

She loved crawling in bed after showering and reading until she fell asleep. By Thursday night, she was on her last book and was about ready for a new round.

That evening, as she was getting ready to curl up with a good book in bed, a knock sounded at the apartment door. Aaron called that he would get it but called her name a minute later. She trudged out on tired feet, but was energized when she saw the pink rose with a note card tied to it in the hand of the doorman.

“A gentleman asked me to deliver this to you, Miss Engel.”

“Thanks, Sam.” She grinned and took it.

Aaron closed the door. “What does it say?”

Anna unfolded the note card to find the same calligraphy from the note in her mystery book. “Dinner at eight-thirty with trusted friends. Drinks and dancing after. Romance at one.”

Her pussy clenched at the last sentence and she blew out a long breath.

“Wow. At least he’s a nice control freak.”

Anna laughed. “What does he mean by trusted friends?”

As if in answer to that question, her phone rang. “Hello?”

“Hello, Katrina. It’s Simon.”

Anna grinned. “Hi, Simon.” She glanced at Aaron who grinned back at her. “How did you get my number?”

“I have my ways. Sometimes it’s better not to ask.”

She giggled. “Okay.”

“I wanted to call and give you my number. Mr. J. wants you to enjoy yourself with your friends on Saturday. I just need to know how many to make the reservations for.”

“Oh, um...”

“You can think about it and give me a call tomorrow. Or text if you’re more comfortable. I’ve called from my mobile so you have my number, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Do the plans sound pleasing to you? You can bring as many friends as you’d like.”

“Absolutely. He’s very kind.”

“An astute observation. Have a good evening Katrina. I will anticipate your numbers tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Simon.”

Anna told Aaron what Simon had said. "Please, can I come?"

She laughed. "Of course. And Cameron. And Stef. I need to think about the rest. Do you think Hugo would want to come?"

"I don't see why not."

She called Simon the next day to let him know that there would be eight friends. "Is that too many?"

"Absolutely not, Katrina. You could invite more if you wanted."

"No, these people are good."

"Excellent. The limo will pick you all up at your place at eight. Does that work for you?"

"Yes. Thanks."

She'd told her friends that Kurt had arranged all this. How else would she explain it? And the look on Jasmine's face was priceless when she overheard. Anna briefly wondered if she had Kurt's number and would call him, but the wonder hurt too much and she pushed it aside. She didn't really want to know.

She suppressed an urge to text Kurt and tell him that she hated him. Maybe if she got drunk enough on Saturday...but she didn't want to get drunk. Not with meeting Mr. J. afterwards. She wanted to feel everything with him. Mr. J. was becoming a life vest in the sea of hurt. Anna knew it was dangerous, but she didn't want to give it up. Not yet.

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Chapter Nineteen

“Damn, Katrina,” Hugo whispered in Anna’s ear Saturday night. “That’s not fair.”

“What?”

“What you’re wearing.” He slid his arms around her waist and kissed her cheek. “Not nice to tease the ex-boyfriend.”

Anna giggled and pushed him playfully away. The feelings that came up when he touched her were still strong sometimes. She’d had to give Hugo up for Kurt. The thought made her so angry.

“I thought that was what ex’s were supposed to do to each other,” she teased, both of them knowing full well that they’d been forced apart by outside influences and would be back together in a flash if those influences were gone.

Hugo was the first to arrive for their night on the town. Well, except Cameron, but he didn’t count. He was always at their apartment.

“You should have seen her last week!” Cameron teased. “Even *I* was tempted.”

“Hey!” Aaron exclaimed, hitting Cameron’s arm playfully. Then he grinned. “Eh, well. Yeah. I could imagine.”

“What were you wearing?” Hugo asked with a smile.

Cameron rattled off the designers and the fabrics, but Hugo raised his eyebrows at the words “sheer” and “micro-mini.”

“Damn summer tour,” he muttered, and then laughed. “Maybe it was good that I wasn’t here.” He shrugged. “Or maybe we’ll have to go to a less classy place next time so I can see it.”

Anna rolled her eyes playfully. “Don’t you know it’s unbecoming to wear the same club-wear twice?”

Hugo’s eyes glinted. “Then maybe we should have a private club here.” His voice turned husky and made Anna shiver.

“You shouldn’t tempt me like that, Hugo,” she whispered, eyes wide.

They stared at each other for a long time, the electricity between them undeniable, until Hugo shook his head and looked away. “I’m sorry, Katrina. I shouldn’t have said that.” He cleared his throat. “You do look really nice though.”

Anna looked down at the spaghetti-strapped black dress she’d bought the other day. Its low V-neck was covered in sheer lace, so it wasn’t incredibly modest but not outright whoreish either. The back had the same sheer lace to the waist and the skirt hit her slightly above mid-thigh. Her favorite thing about the dress was that it was made from incredibly soft silk and it tickled her skin every time she moved.

Hugo’s words and gaze had made her nipples harden against the soft material and she was glad the dress was black so they were mostly hidden.

Stef, Jamie, Rachel, and Tanner arrived a few minutes later and the apartment became noisy with the girls’ chattering. Cameron joined in, but Hugo, Aaron and Tanner stood on the other side of the room shaking their heads and laughing at the girls’ excitement.

A few minutes later, the doorman called to inform them that their transportation had arrived and they all crowded into the elevator.

They ooh-ed and ah-ed about the elegant limo that waited for them and scrambled in, excited to begin the evening. Dinner took place at an exclusive French restaurant with melt-in-your-mouth everything in a private dining area.

They were taken to the same club that Anna and Cameron had gone to the previous week. As they walked inside, Anna wondered if Mr. J. would be there like before. She glanced slyly over at the private area he'd been in before and her heart leapt when the curtains were closed, allowing only a glimmer of a silhouette behind. Was he here?

Cameron nudged her and motioned to the side of the curtained opening where Simon stood hands clasped together in front of his hips. He was watching her and smiled when she saw him. He bowed his head slightly and then disappeared into the curtains.

"He's here," she squeaked to Cameron, butterflies floating in her stomach.

Anna didn't know if she should behave herself or give him something to watch, but realized when they sat down at their table that he would have a perfect view of her and her friends as they enjoyed themselves.

Drinks were ordered and delivered. Anna glanced in the direction of the curtained room and smiled before she took a sip of her martini. She could almost feel his eyes on her and it gave her shivers that ended right in her clit.

Hugo pulled her onto the dance floor a while later and slid his hands down her hips. "This is the one place I'm *expected* to molest you," he grinned as he ran his thumbs over her hipbones.

Anna smiled and put her arms around his neck as he swayed with her to the music. "Then maybe we should come here more often," she teased.

"Tempting," he grinned, showing off his even white teeth. He pulled her close and his hands went lower on her ass and her heart pounded.

Was it wrong that she wanted his hands on her? It wasn't like Mr. J. was expecting anything other than sex. Maybe he was the watching type. Why

else would he send her to a dance club where he watched her dance with men the previous week?

She pressed her hips to Hugo's and she faintly heard him groan as she leaned backwards, leaning her head back so she could smile at Mr. J. Hugo's fingers trailed down her neck as she was leaning back and ran against the edge of her dress. She brought herself upright when he skimmed the very edge of her areola and looked at him with wide eyes.

"Did you mean to do that?" she asked breathlessly as the blood drained back into place from her head.

He grinned. "Did you like it?" His hands went back to her ass, moving her hips with his.

"Yes," she admitted, making him grin.

She pressed her chest to his and he looked down her dress. "You're not wearing a bra." His hand skimmed up her side and brushed the side of her breast.

Anna gasped softly and closed her eyes. "I can't with this dress." Was dancing like this considered indiscreet? She pulled back, suddenly uncertain. She had two men tonight to take into consideration, and Hugo wasn't one of them. She gave him a timid smile. "I need to use the ladies room."

Hugo looked crushed as she pulled away and walked towards the other side of the room.

Damn Kurt! She swallowed nervously and dodged dancing couples as she made her way to the bathroom. The line extended out the door and into the hallway, so she continued down the dimly lit hallway until she reached an open door that led outside to a gated patio. A few club-goers had a similar idea. She walked to the end and gripped the metal railing, looking up at the starless sky.

“Do you know the man you were dancing with?” Simon had walked up silently and stood next to her.

“Yes.”

“You looked like you were having a good time. Why did you walk away?”

Anna didn’t answer immediately. “I had a feeling I was being indiscreet,” she finally said, fingers tingling with discomfort. “If Kurt saw me dancing like that with my ex-boyfriend, he would probably fly out here again to yell at me, and then lock me in my apartment.”

“Your fiancé is that temperamental?”

“He used to be one of the kindest men I knew, but since I moved here....” She shook her head. “He’s become volatile. And cruel. Well, no, not cruel, but mean.”

“Then why are you marrying him?”

“Because I have to.”

“In this day and age? That seems unlikely.”

Anna glanced at Simon. “I’m in a...position that comes with duties. I must perform those duties.”

Simon chuckled. “Are you a runaway princess?”

Anna smiled at the reference that she and Aaron had made months ago. But now she really was trying to enjoy herself before she got into a loveless marriage. “Something like that.” If it weren’t for the whole Devin-wanting-to-control-the-world thing, she’d fly back to him tomorrow. At least with him, her life would fly by without a care. She wouldn’t be aware of anything. It sounded blissful.

“Mr. J. was enjoying watching you dance. Envious, perhaps, of the other man’s hands, but comforted in the fact that his will be there soon enough.”

“I don’t understand why he stays hidden. With the amount of gossip going around, at least in the Company, he could have any woman he desired.”

“He has the woman he desires.” Simon gave her a pointed look. “At least in a way.”

She laughed. “Has he seen the other dancers?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Enjoy yourself. I will...keep your fiancé’s hawks away if that will comfort you.”

“You know who’s watching me?”

Simon nodded. “Consider your dancing...foreplay.” He smiled and walked away.

Anna followed him a few minutes later and went to find Hugo. He was dancing with another woman and she mouthed, “I’m sorry.” He grinned at her and nodded and she went back to her seat and took a big gulp of her martini.

“Did you hear?” Stef squealed. “He’s here!”

“Who?” Anna asked, putting her drink down.

“*Him*. Euroman.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The rich European who donated all that money to the Company.”

“Oh!” She tried to look surprised. “How do you know?”

“I overheard someone talking about it in the bathroom. He’s over there.” She motioned to the curtained doorway.

Anna laughed when she noticed a crowd of women dancing in front of Mr. J.’s private room. A moment of doubt plagued her as she watched the beautiful, sophisticated women dancing for him.

“C’mon. Let’s go dance.” Stef said, pulling her up. “Rachel and Jamie are there already.” She grinned. “We have an advantage over the other women there.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re ballet dancers. He obviously likes ballerinas.”

“Or the guys.” Anna laughed. “Maybe he’s gay.”

Stef stopped and frowned. “Bi?” She looked around. “Just in case....” She grinned and grabbed Aaron’s hand. “Come dance with us for Euroman.”

Aaron rolled his eyes but followed along.

Anna felt very silly, dancing with all the other women trying to get the man’s attention. But she wasn’t trying to get his attention...really...well, maybe she had doubts that he was truly watching her.

Dark hands slid around her waist and she turned to see Hugo grinning at her. “You owe me the rest of a dance.” His hands slipped down to her ass and cupped it as he pressed her hips to his. She clung to his upper arms, becoming dizzy as the alcohol caught up with her.

She gazed up into his eyes and he smiled at her. He grazed her neck and she leaned back, letting his hands trail down her chest as before. His palm subtly grazed her nipple and her breath caught in her throat. When she straightened, he held her close, one arm around her upper back, the other hand at the side of her breast.

“Come home with me tonight,” he whispered, leaning in to her neck and nuzzling her ear.

“Hugo....” She whimpered as his thumb brushed her nipple, sending jolts to her pussy. “I can’t. We can’t.”

“You don’t sound very convinced.”

“Kurt found out I did something last weekend....” She told him the basic story and he looked at her, horrified. “I don’t want to get into trouble again.”

“God, he’s an ass,” he commented.

Anna shrugged. “I don’t want to think about him anymore. But that’s why....” She looked up at him. “And I don’t think I could stay with you without falling for you again.”

He gave a little smile and nod. “I understand.”

She nodded.

“Maybe some other night,” he said in a low voice and turned her around, guiding her into Aaron’s arms.

She looked back in surprise and he grinned at her and winked.

“Hey sexy,” Aaron said. “Trying to steal me away from Cameron?”

Anna laughed, looking to see Cameron dancing between Jamie and Rachel. “He looks to be having fun.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Yeah.”

The next few hours were spent drinking and dancing and Anna had a great time. She didn’t have to worry about Kurt, and Mr. J. was enjoying himself. At least she assumed so. With all the beautiful women in front of him, how could he not? As it approached midnight, she began to wonder how she was going to get away from her friends without them being suspicious. Only Aaron and Cameron knew what was happening next.

She knew she could just slip out the door without being noticed, but how would she explain her absence in the limo home? Not that it looked like everyone would be going home with her.... Stef was practically fucking the guy she was with on the dance floor.

She went to get a drink and sat down for a few minutes. Cameron came and sat down next to her. “When are you supposed to leave?”

“I don’t know exactly. Simon hasn’t said anything.” She looked at him with doubt. “How do I explain why I’m not in the limo on the way home?”

“Get sick?”

Anna laughed. “That might work, though I hate lying.”

“Don’t lie. I’ll do it for you. Let me know when you get the go-ahead, slip out and when we get ready to leave, I’ll tell ‘em you weren’t feeling good and took a cab home.”

“I can’t ask you to lie for me, Cameron.”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering.”

Anna’s phone vibrated in her purse and she pulled it out. “The limo’s outside,” she told Cameron nervously.

He looked around. “Go. Everyone’s busy. I’ll take care of it.”

Anna gave him a goofy grin. “Thanks.” She kissed his cheek and walked around the perimeter of the room and out the door.

Chapter Twenty

Anna walked into the Hotel Elysee feeling more comfortable than she had the week before. For one, she was dressed. Also, she kind of knew what she was getting into.

Simon met her in the lobby. "Have you enjoyed yourself so far tonight?"

Anna smiled. "Yes." And then blushed, thinking about what was coming.

He chuckled and walked towards the elevators.

"Is he sure he wouldn't rather have one of the other women he was watching tonight?" she asked, following him. "I mean, there were many vying for his attention."

"He was only watching one woman tonight," Simon said with a serious face, and then chuckled again. "In fact, he was getting quite irritated when he couldn't see you."

"Oh." They stepped into the elevator. Simon pushed a button and the doors silently closed.

"Same rules as last week. Do you remember?"

"Don't take the blindfold off. Don't touch him." She bit her lip, remembering how she'd tried to touch him a few times. She wasn't trying to be rebellious and hoped he knew that. "Yes, stroked cheek. No, tap on the nose." She giggled. "If he kisses me, he wants me to shut up."

Simon laughed. "I'm sure there are other reasons he kisses you."

She looked at him in the reflection of the brass doors. "Do you know what I am?" she asked quietly.

His eyebrows twitched slightly. "I know you are a beautiful woman that is in an unfortunate relationship." He turned his head to look at her. "Anything else is irrelevant."

Anna blinked several times. "But is...is it why he wants me back again tonight?"

"No. As I said, anything else is irrelevant."

Anna shook her head. "I don't understand. How could that not be a factor?"

"Mr. J. is an unusual man."

"Does he know my fiancé?"

"I won't answer that Katrina."

Anna sighed. "Does he know who I belong to?"

"Yes."

The elevator stopped and they exited. He turned to look at her. "I assure you he will not do anything to jeopardize your safety. He...likes this arrangement and doesn't want it to end just yet."

They walked down the hallway together. "Is he handsome?"

Simon smiled. "Does it matter?"

"No, I suppose not. The girls in the company have been speculating about him."

"Oh? What do they say?"

"That he made a sizable donation to the City Ballet."

"Yes."

"That he's either British or Russian."

He laughed.

"Is he?"

Simon shook his head. "You ask many questions."

"I'm curious."

“I’m not going to answer that either.” He stopped at a door. “And we’re here.”

Anna looked at the non-descript wooden door with a mixture of nervousness and excitement.

Simon pulled out the blindfold. “If you would like, the car can take you to the library tomorrow so you don’t have to walk.”

“I like walking. Wait...will there be more roses?”

Simon smiled but didn’t say anything. He motioned for her to turn around and then tied the blindfold around her head, covering her eyes. “Can you see?”

“No.”

“Clothes for tomorrow are in the bathroom. Call for breakfast when you are up. Or lunch.” He knocked on the door and a moment later, the door opened.

The large hand enveloped hers again and gently tugged, pulling her into the room. It was a longer walk around several corners before he stopped her.

Anna’s heart beat fast in anticipation. Thoughts flitted here and there about the evening, last week, wondering what would happen tonight.

He pulled her forward a few more steps and she heard a noise and assumed he had sat down on the bed in front of her as he had last week.

When he didn’t touch her she swallowed nervously. “Thank you for tonight,” she said softly. “It was a lot of fun. The food was delicious and...” She blushed. “I kinda liked dancing, knowing you were watching.”

He stroked her cheek and she took it to mean he liked it too.

“Did Simon tell you how much I enjoyed the rose trails at the library?”

Another touch on her cheek. “I’d had a really bad morning and it cheered me up. Thank you.” She smiled. “And I really enjoyed the books as

well.”

He took her hands in his and held them at the small of her back and kissed her gently, slowly, as if wanting to explore every recess of her lips and mouth. Her head spun and it had nothing to do with the martinis at the bar. His lips alone were enough to make her dizzy.

Slowly one hand went up her back and then pulled at her zipper, loosening the dress until it fell from her shoulders and was trapped at her elbows. His fingers trailed down her neck to her exposed breasts, taking one in his hand and squeezing gently. Anna moaned against his mouth.

He released her hands and her dress fell to the floor as she straightened her arms. He helped her step out of it and then removed her shoes and thong. Then he stood and picked her up as if she weighed nothing and placed her gently on the bed. He didn't hold her long enough to feel anything except smooth skin.

The mattress sank beneath the additional weight next to her, and something cool touched her nose. She inhaled and smelled roses and smiled. He dragged the rose across her cheeks and nose and lips. He trailed it down her neck and between her breasts, and then sideways over one nipple and then the next. The rose was cool but it left trails of fire behind. Anna wiggled and giggled as he moved it gently across her skin. He moved it down her belly and thighs and then back up and brushed her aching mound, making her gasp for breath. He went slowly up her arms and over each finger, down to her feet. He made her giggle as he trailed it on the bottom of her feet. She thought she might have even heard him chuckle softly, which made her tingle all over, even more than from his activities with the rose.

He stood and walked away, returning a minute later and lying down beside her. It was a good thing the mattresses were high quality or she

would have been rolling over to meet him. Not that that would have been a bad thing....

Something cool and hard touched her bottom lip. Instinctively she opened her mouth slightly and he pushed the object into her mouth. Her tongue darted out and tasted...chocolate? She licked at it and smiled. It was really good chocolate. She took a few more licks and then he pressed it against her bottom teeth. She took it to mean he wanted her to bite and slowly brought her teeth together, in case she was wrong.

She bit through the crisp chocolate and into a cool, soft center. It was sweet and juicy. He pulled it away and let her chew and swallow. "Chocolate covered strawberries?"

He stroked her cheek and she grinned. "Yummy."

He gave a breathy chuckle and pulled her to a sitting position. The strawberry was put to her mouth again and he made her take a big bite, making her giggle when it dripped down her chin and to her breasts. He kissed where the juice was on her chin and licked the remaining juice off her breasts.

"Oh!" Anna sighed.

He put a new one to her lips and she opened her mouth. He pushed it in and she bit, juices dribbling to her breasts again. "You're doing this on purpose," she said with a soft giggle. He gave a soft chuckle again and stroked her cheek.

Something cold touched her nipple and she jumped. He spun it around her nipple and then took her nipple into his mouth.

"Was that a strawberry?" she whispered with a moan as he sucked at her nipple.

Cheek stroke.

Slowly he fed her several more strawberries, each one juicy enough to require his tongue to clean up the juices. After the strawberries stopped coming, he got up from the bed and Anna listened as fabric rustled and foil ripped.

“You don’t have to use one of those, you know,” she said softly, referring to the condom.

He tapped her nose and lay down on the bed, taking her hands in his and putting them above her head.

She was wet and ready for him when he slowly slid inside her. It stung a little, as it had the week before, but turned quickly to pleasure as he gently moved inside her.

“Oh, God!” she cried, pressing her head back against the pillow and feeling the stirrings of an orgasm deep inside.

His hard chest pressed against hers as he kissed her and increased his movements. She rocked her hips against his and panted as the fire built inside, exploding moments later. She screamed against his mouth until he pulled his mouth away to breathe heavily as he came silently, squeezing her wrists. His hips jerked against hers as she returned to earth, squeezing against his girth inside her. God he felt incredible!

He kissed her and then fell heavily onto the bed next to her, breathing hard.

She wondered again why he kept himself hidden but couldn’t think of a way to ask it in such a way he could answer with a yes or no.

“You like the ballet?”

She felt him move a little closer and he stroked her cheek.

“Will you come to a performance this season?”

Cheek stroke.

Anna hesitated. “So you’ll be in public then?”

Cheek stroke.

“Will I get to see you?”

Cheek stroke.

“Will all this end? I mean, our meetings and stuff, once you...present yourself to the public.”

Pause. Cheek stroke.

“Oh.” She gave him a smile, hiding the disappointment. “Then I’ll just have to make sure I enjoy it while I have you to myself.” She paused. “Do you want to see me again?”

He cupped the back of her head and kissed her deeply. If she’d been standing, he would have had to catch her. When he pulled away, he stroked her cheek one last time and then got up from the bed. Fabric rustled and the mattress moved. He kissed her gently on the lips and placed what she assumed was the stem of a rose in her hand.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Moments later, the door opened and closed. She sat up and took off the blindfold. In her hand was a pink rose. On the nightstand was a single red rose that looked a little crushed, next to a plate of strawberry stems.

Anna yawned and looked at the clock. She’d arrived almost two hours ago. She turned out the lights and went to sleep with a smile on her face.

Anna woke late the next morning. She smiled, remembering the previous night, though the knowledge that all this would end soon saddened her. But at least she knew it *would* end and could prepare for it.

She showered, dressed and ate lunch before allowing the car to take her to the library, her mind full the entire time with thoughts of Mr. J.

She saw Max at the information desk and went to say hi.

“Did you enjoy the roses last week?” he asked with a grin.

“You knew?” she exclaimed.

“Of course. I wouldn’t let just anyone throw flowers around my library.”

Anna laughed. “Well, good thing because it would be difficult to walk around here if there were roses all over the place.”

“Yes, but it would smell good.”

Anna nodded in agreement.

“Have you found today's roses yet?”

She shook her head.

He grinned and winked at her. “Then go. Enjoy yourself.”

The roses were placed in much the same manner as they were the previous week, but this time leading to The Phantom of the Opera, a biography of Marius Petipa, and a book on the Paris Opera Ballet. Anna noticed a French theme and she practically hit herself when she remembered the French restaurant and hotel. Her heart warmed when she realized how much thought he had put into her evening and felt the delight building up in her as she wondered what he would do next time.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tom called her on Tuesday to let her know that the Summer Gathering was in a week and a half. The same weekend that the Company was going out of town.

“You need to stay in the apartment while Devin is so close, Anna. Do you understand? You can’t go out, not even on your terrace.”

“But I have....” She sighed. “I have something I do on the weekends.”

“I’m sorry, Anna. I won’t let you put yourself in danger. If I have to have someone stay with you to make sure you don’t leave, I will.”

“All right, fine. I’ll stay inside.” No matter how badly she wanted to see Mr. J., she didn’t want Devin to find her.

“He’ll be arriving in DC next Thursday and leaving the following Thursday. He might even be coming here to the city. You must stay inside until I call you and tell you he’s gone.”

“I’ll miss rehearsals.”

“I will talk to Vincent, Anna. My power to protect you is growing weak. I need you to please do as I ask.” The urgency in his voice made her realize how serious he was.

“I will stay inside until you say it’s all right to leave. I promise, Tom.”

“Thank you, Anna.”

“Is he...getting weaker?”

“Yes. And he’s not happy about it. I have a feeling this will not be a pleasant weekend.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’d rather this be an unpleasant weekend for me than for you.” He sighed. “Thank you for understanding, Anna. You doing this will take a load off of my mind.”

Saturday night, she, Aaron and Cameron went out for Moroccan food, a theater showing of the movie “Casablanca,” and then Anna was taken to the Hotel Casablanca, all courtesy of her mystery man. Anna was sure to tell Mr. J. how much she enjoyed the themes he picked out, and he seemed to appreciate her thanks. After a wonderful evening of lovemaking and a peaceful night’s sleep, she visited the library and followed Mr. J.’s roses to a travel book on Morocco and two other biography-type books about the country. Anna couldn’t wait to get home and read them.

She had told Simon when he called to make the arrangements for the weekend that she wasn’t allowed to leave the apartment the following weekend. Simon said Mr. J. would be disappointed, but would understand. But when Anna looked at the calendar for the following weekend, she realized it was Alex’s birthday. If she didn’t go to see Mr. J., it would be two weekends of not being with him. Would he lose interest if she didn’t go? Would he think she had lost interest? But she didn’t think she could bring herself to go have sex with someone on Alex’s birthday. She’d rather stay home alone and think about him.

Sunday afternoon she gathered up the courage to call Simon.

“Hello, Katrina. How are you?”

“Bored,” she laughed. “Being stuck in here kinda sucks.”

Simon laughed. “Is that why you called me?”

“No, although it is nice to talk to somebody. I...needed to tell you that I’m not available to go out next Saturday.”

“Oh?” He sounded wary. “May I ask why?”

Anna hesitated. She had made up her mind, but now was having doubts. “I was married when I was twenty and my husband died just a few months into our marriage.” She paused. “Saturday would have been his thirty-third birthday and...I don't think I'd be good company that night. I'm sorry,” she added quickly.

“I see.” There was a long pause and Anna started feeling a little queasy. “Have you eaten dinner?”

“What?”

“I asked if you had eaten dinner.”

“No.” What a strange question.

“Good. Don't. I'll talk to you soon.” He ended the call and Anna frowned. What was that about?

She found out half an hour later when there was a knock on the door. The doorman stood there with two paper bags that smelled amazing and a bunch of pink roses. A grin spread across her face as she took the roses and the bags. “Thank you.”

She put the bags on the kitchen table and pulled out an Italian dinner, complete with breadsticks and salad. In the second bag was a box of chocolate covered strawberries with a note that read, “Think of me when you eat these.” Like she could think of anything else when she was eating chocolate covered strawberries. There were also two DVDs: *Pride and Prejudice* and *An Affair to Remember*. Anna's heart beat when she saw the second movie. Was he trying to tell her something? Was he engaged as well? Is that why he had to keep things hidden?

No, she told herself. It was just a classic romantic movie. They'd only been together for physical enjoyment, right? Although he treated her romantically, he barely knew her. Some guys were just romantic-types.

“Don’t over-think it, Anna,” she told herself and went to put *Pride and Prejudice* in the DVD player while she ate.

Aaron and the rest of the company returned home on Monday afternoon.

“Where’d all this come from?” he asked, pointing to the empty containers from the previous night.

“Mr. J. sent them over.”

He grinned at her. “I think someone likes you.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “We’ve spent three nights together. And he’s never spoken to me.”

“Maybe not with words, but he certainly has with his actions.”

“I’ve been told he is a very good man.” She shrugged. “Maybe he treats all his lovers like this.”

“He has multiple lovers?”

She shrugged again. “I wouldn’t be surprised. He’s very...virile.” She blushed.

“Is that code for ‘has a big schlong’?”

Anna laughed. “Maybe. But I can’t imagine him being happy with sex just once a week.”

“I dunno, Anna. You *are* that good.”

“But he doesn’t let me do anything. He does it all. I’m not allowed to touch him.” She realized what he had said. “Thanks.”

“Well, then. I’d just go with it. Does it matter if he fucks other women?” Aaron threw away the empty containers and rooted through the fridge.

The thought of him being with someone else made her cringe, but it wasn’t like she had a right to demand anything else. “It shouldn’t.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It shouldn’t. You’re gonna marry Bastard-Kurt eventually. I say just enjoy your time with Mr. J. so you have happy memories of your time in New York.” He raised his eyebrows. “*Those* Kurt can’t take away from you.”

“I wish he wasn’t such an ass. Kurt, I mean.”

“Yeah, I figured. Is he coming out for the Gala?”

Anna shrugged. “I haven’t talked to him since he yelled at me.”

“Maybe you can talk to him...see what the hell is wrong with him. I just can’t believe the nice, laid-back Kurt is acting like he is.”

“Maybe you could talk to him. You know, before he goes off and fucks Jasmine again.”

Aaron growled. “I can’t believe he did that to you. Fucking asshole. She’s so fucking arrogant about it now, too. Whenever you’re not around...” He rolled his eyes. “I want to hit her sometimes.”

“Did he go see her when he came to yell at me?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Dunno. I can’t believe he’d rather have her over you. I mean, even if he is not liking you for some reason, you’re still really, really good at sex.”

“We can’t have sex until we’re married. It’s not allowed.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Anna shrugged. “It’s the way it is.”

“Well then, doubly enjoy your time with Euroman. Kurt deserves it.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aaron was pulling his slippers on when Hugo sat down next to him. “How’s Katrina holding up?”

Aaron smiled at the talented dancer/choreographer. He had it bad for Anna, poor guy. Aaron knew how that felt, which is why he had given up trying to find another woman like her. Or even halfway like her. Hugo even knew her secret and still cared deeply for her.

Hugo and Anna danced very well together, so Aaron wasn’t surprised when Hugo chose her for his partner in his new ballet. Again. Jasmine had been his primary partner before Anna showed up and she was pissed, which probably contributed to Jasmine’s dislike of Anna, and her justification for the way she tormented her. Aaron was glad Anna got to show that...woman...up somewhere, though he wasn’t certain that Anna knew Jasmine had been Hugo’s partner. Wasn’t sure if telling her would be helpful or hurtful.

“She’s doing okay. She feels awful about missing rehearsals.”

“I’d rather her be safe, though. Maybe I could stop by tonight and we could dance a little in the living room there. She might not feel so left out if we did.”

Aaron nodded. “If you want, I’m sure she’d be thrilled. There’s not a ton of room, but we could move the furniture.”

“Sounds great. I’ll call her at lunch.”

Vincent clapped his hands and warm-ups began. Aaron closed his eyes, enjoying the movement of his body and his mind drifting to thoughts of Cameron.

Unexpectedly he began to feel like he was suffocating. He opened his eyes and held his chest. The other dancers didn't seem to notice. Was he having a heart attack? The room felt dim, even though sunlight streamed in from the windows as it always did. His stomach churned and he turned to stare at the doorway of the studio.

"What's wrong?" Hugo whispered.

Aaron just stared. Something was coming.

Five seconds later the door slammed open. Tom walked in, eyes searching the room until he locked on Aaron's. He shook his head slightly and then the darkness appeared in the room.

"Devin," Aaron whispered.

The music stopped abruptly and the dancers all turned and looked. Devin stood in the doorway, an invisible cloud of darkness around him. He was beyond angry. He stood with arms crossed over his blue dress shirt as he searched the room. Nate and Justin knew who he was. Vincent, too. But everyone else was clueless that the most powerful man in the country had just walked into their studio. Some of the women even gave him flirtatious smiles.

Idiots.

"Can I help you, Mr. Pendleton?" Vincent asked politely, walking over to the men. "You're Devin Andersen, correct?"

Devin looked at him with cold eyes. "I am. You wanted to take Anna away from me." He spoke softly, but his tone was ice-cold.

"I wanted to have one of the best dancers I'd ever seen in my company. It had nothing to do with you."

"Anything she does is my business." He turned and looked around the room again and then pulled something out of his pocket. "I'm looking for

someone,” he said loudly, his voice silky. He held up a picture of Anna. “Have you seen this woman?”

The dancers looked at each other. Everyone in the room would have recognized her, but the power that Devin radiated made them hesitant to answer.

Hugo strode over and took the picture from him. “She’s pretty,” he commented lightly.

“Yes, she is. Have you seen her?”

Hugo handed the picture back to him. “No. I haven’t.”

The room was silent. Hugo was well respected and for him to declare he hadn’t seen Anna made the others reluctant to say otherwise.

But then Aaron saw Jasmine looking at Hugo with narrowed eyes, and he felt sick as she opened her mouth. “I’ve seen her.”

An evil smile crept across Devin’s face. Hugo and Aaron both cursed as they watched Devin walk slowly over to Jasmine with hungry eyes. “Where?” he asked softly.

She looked around nervously, meeting Aaron’s eyes. Aaron shook his head slightly.

“I mean...I think I did,” she stammered.

Devin stroked her cheek seductively. “Anna always has women as enemies,” he said softly. “She tends to steal men away from their women. She likes the power she has over them.” He gazed into her eyes and trailed his fingers down her neck. “Did she steal one from you?”

Jasmine blinked, clearly frightened, but as she gazed into Devin’s eyes, she began to relax. She smiled and nodded her head. “But I got even—”

“All right, Devin,” Aaron said loudly before Jasmine could say anything else. “Yes, she was here.”

Devin wheeled around. “Was?”

He nodded. "We went on tour last week. She didn't come along because she told me she was leaving. She didn't want anyone else to know, but she got accepted to the Paris Opera Ballet." That would be believable to everyone here. She was that good.

Devin's eyes flashed, but didn't make any other movements. His hand was still on Jasmine's neck. "And you didn't think it strange that she was here without me?"

Aaron shrugged, trying to remain casual. "I didn't think she'd run away. She's not stupid."

Devin shook his head. "No, I can still feel her. She's still here. Where did she stay?"

Aaron glanced at Tom, who nodded. "With me."

"You are a very, very stupid man, Aaron," he said in a low voice, releasing Jasmine and walking over to him. "You would dare hide Anna from me?"

"How was I supposed to know she ran away? She just...showed up."

Devin looked around the room again. His eyes stopped on Nate and then on Justin. "I thought you had been fired in San Francisco," he said suspiciously.

Justin frowned. "It was a bogus charge. I left of my own free will. Isaak just didn't want to admit he was wrong."

"Something is off." Devin turned back to Aaron. "Take me to your apartment. Now!"

Fuck. "I need to change shoes."

Devin frowned at him and then nodded and walked back to the doorway. Aaron sat down and pulled his slippers off. "Hugo," he whispered.

"Yeah."

“I’m leaving my bag here. Get my phone. Call Wilhelm. Tell him what happened. As soon as I’m gone, do it. I don’t know how to keep him from finding her.”

“Do you want me to call her and tell her to get out?”

“Call Wilhelm first. He’ll tell you what to do.” Aaron stood and slipped his flip-flops on, giving Hugo a desperate look. “Hurry.”

Hugo nodded slightly and Aaron turned and walked away. How would they keep Devin from getting her? He glared at Jasmine as he walked by. He would personally strangle her if Anna was hurt. She had the decency to look ashamed.

Anna huddled on the couch, hugging a pillow to her chest. Her mind felt hazy, unfocused, as if it were being scrambled from outside forces. Her body trembled uncontrollably. She couldn’t put a coherent thought to even try and figure out what was going on.

Her phone vibrated next to her and she stared at it. What did she do with that? *Press the green button.*

“Anna? Anna?”

She heard Wilhelm’s voice faintly. “Wilhelm?”

“Pick up the phone, Anna. Put it to your ear.”

Anna did as she was told. “Wilhelm?”

“Where are you?” His voice was clearer now.

“At my apartment,” she said in a shaky voice.

“Go into your room and shut the door. Lay down on your bed and stay there until I call you back.”

He ended the call and Anna stared at the floor.

Room. Anna stood on trembling legs and slowly made her way to her room. She closed the door and then stumbled to her bed. She curled up in a ball and trembled, staring at the door.

Aaron walked in front of Devin and Tom.

“I can’t believe you didn’t know she was here, Tom,” Devin growled.

“I’m not as powerful as you, Devin. I don’t know everything that goes on in my city.”

“You should have known.” He growled again. “But I can still feel her. She hasn’t left yet.”

Aaron prayed that Hugo had gotten a hold of Wilhelm and that somehow Anna wouldn’t be there when they got home. Stalling was the only thing he could think of to do.

“Ow! Fuck!” he exclaimed hopping on one foot like he’d stepped on something. He stopped and brought his foot up to his knee, taking his shoe off.

“What the hell?” Devin snapped. “Why’d you stop?”

“I stepped on something.” Aaron peered at the bottom of his foot as if he were searching for something.

“You’ll live. Get moving.”

“Hey, these feet are how I make a living. Just give me a sec.” He ran his hand over his foot, stalling for as long as he could and then put his shoe back on. Even a few seconds could make a difference.

“How far away is it?” Devin asked.

Aaron straightened and pointed. They could see his building from here.

“Then let’s go.” Devin said, striding off ahead of him.

Anna was terrified. She could feel Devin's presence now. After being away from it so long, the return of darkness and fear was heavy on her heart. She resisted the urge to run, and hugged her pillow to her chest, shaking so badly her teeth chattered.

Then, suddenly, she felt a warm glow flowing over her. It surrounded her like sunlight on a warm spring day, seeping in through the pores in her skin, relaxing and soothing her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

The apartment door opened and Anna stared at the door. Male voices were in the hall and one of them was...Devin! He was here! He was going to take her!

The warmth intensified, making her relax against her will. Her eyes were wide as Devin's voice got closer.

"What's this?" she heard him ask, and the door opened. She saw his angry face as he looked around. "Closet," he mumbled and closed the door again.

Anna's heart stopped. He hadn't seen her? He hadn't seen her!

Aaron's heart pounded as he opened the door to his apartment. Devin stepped inside and looked around. He went into the living room. The pink roses were still on the table where Anna had put them. When Devin asked about them, Aaron shrugged and said, "Cameron. My boyfriend."

Devin stared at him for a long moment. "You're gay?" He looked him up and down like he was evaluating him.

"Gotta problem with it?" he asked, more defensively than he felt.

Devin smiled, almost warmly, and shook his head. "Not at all. I appreciate men who appreciate other men." He swept his eyes over Aaron

again and then turned to search the rest of the apartment.

Aaron blinked in shock. Was Devin gay too? Or was it just the whole ‘Brother Love’ part of the Brotherhood? He shuddered at the thought of Devin fucking him and followed Devin and Tom out of the living room.

Devin searched Aaron’s room and then the guest room. Anna’s room was last. He opened the door, took a sweeping glance, and muttered “Closet” to himself.

Aaron’s mouth dropped open in shock at Devin’s words, but he quickly recovered. There was no reason to be shocked at anything in his apartment. But when Devin opened the door, Aaron could see Anna’s brightly lit bedroom. Why did Devin see a closet?

Devin closed his eyes and then opened them, looking at Aaron. “When did she leave?”

“I-I don't know. She wouldn’t tell me.”

Devin nodded and frowned. “She’s gone now. Fuck. She must have been at the airport when we were.”

Tom’s face was impassive and nodded. “Can we go now? I’m dying to see Kelsey and the kids.”

Devin rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you hopeless romantic.” He turned his cold eyes on Aaron. “I should kill you for what you did.” The words were spoken in an almost offhand manner that made them even more terrifying, and then Devin strode away and he and Tom left the apartment.

Aaron leaned against the wall and slid down to the ground. His legs had turned to jelly and wouldn’t hold him anymore. What the hell had just happened?

He heard a phone ring in Anna’s room and then heard her voice. A moment later, she ran out of the room and into his arms.

“Aaron!” she exclaimed and lunged into his lap. He held her tightly. She was shaking like he was. “What happened?”

“I have no idea. He thought your room was a closet...I don't know but I'm so glad.”

They sat for a long while like that and Aaron told her what had happened at the studio. “I think I still may strangle Jasmine. Fucking bitch.”

Anna didn't argue.

After a while, he pushed her away. “I should get back to the studio and let everyone know you're okay.” He stood and helped her to her feet. “Hugo wanted to stop by tonight and practice a little here. Would you be up for that?”

Anna's face softened and she nodded. “Yeah. That'd be nice.”

“Call me if you need anything. Even if it's in the middle of rehearsal. Vincent will understand.”

She nodded and smiled. “Thanks, Aaron.”

“I didn't do anything, but I'm glad you're okay.”

Aaron walked back to the studio as quickly as he could. He knew Hugo would be extremely worried and meant to give him an assuring smile when he walked into the room, but when he saw Jasmine, his temper exploded and he stomped over to her.

“You fucking bitch!” he shouted over the music, which promptly stopped. “You almost got her taken by him!” He pulled back to hit her but someone pulled him away before he could swing his arm. Yeah, a guy hitting her probably wouldn't be a good idea, a small rational part of his mind told him. He struggled against whoever was holding him but searched out Stef, who was standing next to her. “You remember about her guardian? That's nothing compared to what that man did to her. A walk in the park.”

Stef's eyes widened and then narrowed on Jasmine. The resounding crack as her hand hit Jasmine's cheek was one of the most satisfying sounds he'd ever heard. Aaron knew he could count on Stef to get indignant for him.

Jasmine struck back and a catfight ensued, which Aaron watched gleefully. Stef outweighed Jasmine by twenty pounds and she got in some good throws before Vincent, seemingly reluctant, stepped in. "Enough!" he shouted.

Everyone stopped. Vincent didn't yell often, if ever.

The two women looked at him, as did everyone else in the room.

"Jasmine, did you hear Hugo tell that man that he hadn't seen Katrina?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Did you know it was a picture of Katrina?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Don't you think there might have been a reason why Hugo lied about seeing her?" Vincent's stare became very harsh. "Katrina came here to be protected. From him. That man...." Vincent shook his head and dragged his hand through his hair. "Your jealousy of her has gone far enough. It's bad enough you've stolen the attention of her fiancé from her."

Jasmine's olive complexion paled into an ugly ash color. "You knew?"

"Yes." He looked around the room. "Anything you hear or see today will absolutely not be repeated at anytime, anywhere. If I find out anyone has spoken about these things, they will be fired immediately and not given a good reference for their next job."

"What the hell, Vincent?" Jasmine whined. "What's so special about her?"

Vincent breathed in deeply. "Do you know what torture is, Jasmine? I mean real torture. The type that takes you to the brink of death and you pray

that death will finally take you?”

Jasmine wisely didn't say anything, but shook her head.

“That is what that man has done to Katrina. Many, many times. If you had taken even a sliver of what she's gone through, you wouldn't be here today.” He glared at Jasmine. “I think you need to go home for the day or I *will* fire you.”

Jasmine picked up her bag and quickly ran out of the room.

Vincent rubbed his face. “Let's continue this after lunch, shall we?” He turned and walked out of the room.

Aaron was bombarded with questions, but he didn't answer most of them. But he was pleased to see that everyone was on Anna's side instead of Jasmine's. He would be surprised if Jasmine was still here at the end of the week.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Anna fidgeted as she waited for Hugo to arrive. She'd been nervous all day, unable to stay still for long. After Devin was gone, the glow diminished, then disappeared and the nervousness returned, though she wasn't terrified anymore. Tom had even texted her, telling her that Devin had decided to go home early and she could return to rehearsals tomorrow.

She was thankful for that. Being stuck in the apartment for so long was driving her crazy. She was afraid her vibrator would give out and then where would she find release?

Hugo arrived ten minutes later and she told him she'd be back tomorrow. "We don't have to practice if you don't want to," she said.

"What else did you have in mind?" he asked with a boyish, yet seductive, grin.

Anna blushed. "Oh, I meant...I just thought...."

He stepped forward and in a flash his lips were pressed to hers in a hungry kiss. She stood in shock for a second and then wrapped her arms around his neck. His tongue delved into her mouth, stroking hers, making her moan softly.

He held her tightly, chest pressed against chest. Her mind swirled with sensation and thought. It warred against itself about whether or not she should be kissing Hugo like this. *Oh, but it felt so good.* Desire had been building for months. The affair with Mr. J. would be over soon. Then she would only have Kurt. Why shouldn't she have Hugo too? They both knew it couldn't last, but maybe it was possible to just enjoy one another while they could. Find comfort in one another's arms.

But then what? For Hugo? He could be out trying to find someone he could really be with, instead of holding onto something that could never be.

She pulled away slightly, and looked up at him and shook her head. “Hugo, we can’t.”

“Can’t what?” he said, nuzzling her neck. “I want you, Katrina. So badly.”

“I want you too, Hugo, but....” She pulled away. “I can’t do this to you. You should be out finding someone special. Someone you can settle down with. Not wasting time with me.”

“Time with you is never wasted, Kittycat,” he said softly.

She gave him a pleading look. “I won’t be able to keep myself from falling for you again if we...make love. And then I’ll have to leave. You know that. I won’t be here forever.”

“Katrina, I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself. Going into this, I would know that it was only short term. But it would be a wonderful short term.”

“But what if you met the love of your life in the middle of it and didn’t pursue her because of me?” She took his hand. “You are a wonderful man, Hugo. One of the best I’ve ever known, and I’ve known many men.” She smiled. “But my life is already laid out for me, and I don’t want to start this if I have to leave you soon.”

“Do you know when you’re leaving?”

Anna shook her head. “Things will be...settled after my next birthday. Kurt will likely take me home then.”

He stepped away and sat heavily on the couch. “We could just be fuck buddies.”

“I couldn’t do that with you, Hugo. I care about you too much. I’d end up falling in love with you and my heart would break even more when I had

to leave.”

He sighed and rubbed the top of his head. “Yeah. I know. You’d take a piece of my heart with you back to Germany.”

“I’m sorry, Hugo.” She sat down next to him and took his hand. “But I love dancing with you.”

He smiled warmly. “I love dancing with you too. Nothing will change that.”

“Good.”

Hugo left a little while later. Since she would be at the studio in the morning, they didn’t really need to practice tonight. She curled up in bed with one of Mr. J.’s books and tried to get her mind off everything.

When Anna went to the studio the next day, the other dancers were very kind to her. Aaron had told her what they had found out about her, and their kindness melted away the awkwardness she felt walking into the room.

On Thursday, they were to practice in the theater and Stef ran up to her as she walked into the wings. “Omigod, did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“Do you know why we’re in here this afternoon?”

Anna shrugged. “Staging purposes?”

Stef shook her head excitedly. “*He’s* here. He wanted to watch us.”

“He? He who?”

Stef rolled her eyes. “You are so dense sometimes. Euroman!”

Anna’s heart dropped to her stomach. Mr. J. was *here*? “Where?” she asked, trying to act calm.

“First Ring. I already looked. It’s pitch black out there. Can’t see anything. But isn’t it exciting?”

Anna shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. "I guess."

Stef rolled her eyes again. "Well, the rest of us are excited. We're going back to the club on Saturday. Wanna come?"

Anna shook her head. "I'm staying home that night. Personal reasons."

"Is it because of Hugo?"

"What? No. It's...Saturday would have been Alex's birthday. I just don't feel right going out."

Stef looked like she wanted to say something but changed her mind. "Okay. Then next week?"

"Maybe."

The female dancers were preening themselves before walking out on stage. If Anna hadn't been so nervous, she might have laughed. But this would be the first time Mr. J. would see her dance and it filled her stomach with nerves; nerves that were more aggressive than butterflies. Frogs maybe.

She chided herself for being nervous. Why did she care what he thought? He was a lover, that's all. It was purely a physical relationship. Maybe he was having one last fling before he got married too. She vehemently denied that she had any feelings for the man she'd never seen.

Anna successfully forgot about the stranger watching rehearsal...for a few minutes...every so often. With amusement, Vincent declared it one of their best rehearsals.

Saturday evening finally came and she was relieved to be able to stop hearing about Mr. J., but had to admit it was pretty lonely in the apartment by herself. Aaron had gone out and she was alone, as she'd wanted to be.

She went to her room, pulled out her memories box and took out Alex's ring.

“Oh, Alex. I thought I had given you up, but you still hold onto my heart, even after all these years. I don't think I'll ever really get over you. Especially when I have to go back to your home and live there. Sleep in your room. Eat at your family's table. Sit in the library we sat in together. You will haunt me forever.”

She had been over him, until that last dream when he pleaded with her. It made her doubt all her resolve and now she was an emotional mess again.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Devin put his phone down on his desk and stared out the window in shock. He'd just finished a phone call from a distraught Connor Diaz, the Elder from Philadelphia. His son had been shot earlier in the day. In the head. It looked like an assassination, but who would call out a hit on an Elder-Son?

There was no reason to call hits on Sons. They wielded no power, had no authority. They simply were next in line. But Chris was harmless. Yes, he was a jerk sometimes, but no more than Tyler or any of the other Sons.

Why the hell would someone kill Chris?

This had not been Devin's best week. The Summer Gathering had not gone as well as it should have. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, but he was definitely losing his power. Anna had been gone five months now and he was feeling it. The president, idiot that he was, was not listening as well as he should be.

He would kill whoever had helped Anna escape with his bare hands. They'd apparently managed to smuggle her out of the country as well, though he'd spoken to the French Elders and there was no sign of her in Paris either. Where the hell had she gone?

She had been in New York. Fucking Aaron. He's who should have been killed, not Chris. Devin's fingers itched to call an assassin, but Brotherhood assassins weren't to be used for 'common' people. And killing someone who belonged to Wilhelm probably wouldn't be the smartest thing to do right now.

The Philadelphia kill made no sense. No sense at all.

Monday evening, Anna received a phone call from Tom.

“Anna, I need you to stay in your apartment starting on Wednesday,” Tom said.

“What? No...I can’t.” Anna had been looking forward to going out and seeing Mr. J., even though she hadn’t heard from Simon yet.

“Anna, Devin is going to be here on Wednesday. You need to stay in the place where I can protect you.”

“Why is he coming here?” Anna was confused and then scared. Why would Devin be coming to New York again? He’d just been here last month. Had he found her?

“There is a funeral on Friday in Philadelphia. He’s stopping here on the way. Chris Diaz, Connor’s son, was killed on Monday.”

“Connor...? The Philadelphia Elder?”

“Yes.”

“He was killed? What happened?” Anna had no fond feelings for Chris. He was a cruel man, like his father.

“He was killed by a Brotherhood Assassin.”

“Omigosh!” Who would want Chris dead? “Is it...like Alex’s funeral?”

“Yes. Wilhelm said he and Kurt will try and stop by and see you.”

Anna’s jaw clenched, anger mixing with her fear of Devin finding her. She didn’t want to see Kurt and Wilhelm, but knew she couldn’t avoid them. She sighed. “Will you call Vincent about rehearsals?”

“Of course.”

Tuesday morning, when she got to the studio, she gave Hugo an apologetic look. “Did Vincent tell you?” she asked.

Hugo frowned. "Yeah." He sighed. "I suppose it's better than you being found, but it sure does make it difficult."

"I'm so sorry, Hugo. Could we...maybe practice in my apartment?"

He got a mischievous look in his eyes. "Just practice?"

Anna bit her lip. "Hugo...."

Hugo smiled. "I was kidding, Anna. When do you have to be holed up?"

"Starting tomorrow."

"Okay. How about Thursday and Friday?"

Anna nodded. "Okay."

Wednesday and Thursday dragged on and on. Simon called her on Wednesday and told her that Mr. J. was unavailable this weekend, but assured her that he had plans for her for the next weekend. Part of her was relieved. At least she didn't have to say she couldn't go, but she couldn't help but wonder if Mr. J. was losing interest in her.

Hugo came over on Thursday afternoon. They moved the furniture to the side of the room and went through the parts of his ballet that they could manage in the small space.

"Too bad we can't go onto the terrace," Anna said, catching her breath. "There's more room out there." Tom had put the same restrictions on her as before.

"We'll just do what we can," Hugo said, taking a drink of water. He walked over to the stereo. "Ready to try again?"

Anna nodded. She moved into position and they began the dance again. She loved dancing with him. She loved also that he asked for suggestions when something wasn't working quite right, and even used some of them. They worked together to make the dance as beautiful as it could be.

“Do you think this pose?” Hugo asked, holding her wrists as she extended them behind her back. “Or this?” He turned her around and put his hands on her waist, holding her close.

Anna’s heart pounded as she stared into his kind eyes, rapidly darkening with passion. He brought his hand to her cheek and leaned in his head towards her. “Hugo....” she whispered, lifting her face to his. She shouldn’t kiss him. She shouldn’t....

His lips brushed against hers for a moment before he captured her lips with his own. Anna ran her hands up his damp t-shirt and over his shoulders. His tongue probed her mouth and she moaned softly. She was feeling lonely and his attention was very welcome. She didn’t know if she could resist him tonight. She didn’t know if she wanted to resist him tonight.

Aaron was looking forward to getting home and calling Cameron. He never expected to be in a relationship with a guy, but it had happened and he liked it. He liked Cameron. A lot. Sometimes he missed the softness of a woman, but Cameron was so loving and accepting...he really couldn’t complain.

He walked out into the lobby and stopped short. “Wilhelm?” he exclaimed. “Kurt?”

The distinguished Germans turned and smiled kindly at him. “Hello, Aaron,” Wilhelm said. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” He went and shook hands in greetings with both men. Why were they here? He thought they were supposed to be in Philadelphia.

“We thought we would catch you after rehearsal and walk over to your apartment with you. Anna....” He sighed. “Anna is ignoring our calls

again.”

Aaron pressed his lips together. He knew exactly why she was doing that. Kurt was an ass and Wilhelm wasn't acting very sympathetic towards her. But, Aaron knew better than to rebuke his Elder. “All right.” They walked outside and headed to his apartment. “I thought you guys were going to Philly.”

“We do not have to be there until tomorrow and thought we would stop by and visit,” Wilhelm said. “I have not seen Anna since she got here.”

Aaron didn't need to be reminded of that fact, but grunted in reply.

“How is she doing?” Kurt asked.

“Okay. I think she gets lonely when she has to stay in the apartment all day. But Hugo went over this afternoon, so at least she has some company.”

“Hugo?” Kurt asked. “I thought they broke up.”

Aaron frowned. He knew how hard that had been on Anna. “Yeah, but they still dance together. Hugo's having her dance in his new ballet.”

“Oh.”

They arrived at the apartment a few minutes later. Aaron unlocked the door and was surprised to not hear music playing. He looked in the living room and didn't see Anna. Where was she?

Wilhelm and Kurt looked around the room. “Where is she?” Wilhelm asked.

Aaron shrugged. “Probably in her room. Must have finished early. I'll go get her.” And warn her that they were here. Aaron invited Wilhelm and Kurt to sit down and went to go get Anna.

He lifted his hand to knock on her door and heard something...unexpected. A moan. A moan from a man...and then Anna moaned, too. Who was she with? And how did he keep the Germans from finding out?

He winced as he knocked loudly. He hated interrupting something like that, but he really didn't have a choice. Anna didn't answer and he knocked again, cursing to himself.

"What do you want?" Anna called, her voice impatient and annoyed.

"Anna...I...." Aaron cursed again. "Can I open the door?"

"No!" she yelled and then giggled.

Aaron took a deep breath and opened the door and then gasped. Hugo was in bed with Anna, naked and on top of her. Anna's pale legs and arms wrapped around his dark body tightly. He closed the door quickly and Anna looked over Hugo's shoulder at him.

"Aaron!" she shrieked.

Hugo jumped and reached for the blanket, but not before Aaron found out that what they said about black men was true. Wow. Suddenly he wished Hugo was gay.

"What the fuck are you doing, Aaron?" Hugo exclaimed, covering both himself and Anna with the blanket.

"Wilhelm and Kurt are here," Aaron said, closing his eyes.

Anna gasped at Aaron's words. She had thoroughly been enjoying Hugo's attentions when Aaron barged in. She was furious, until Aaron told her that her father-in-law and fiancé were here.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed and looked at Hugo with frightened eyes.

Hugo grimaced. "The Germans, right?"

Anna nodded and looked over at Aaron. "Why are they here?"

"Because you've been ignoring their calls."

Anna rubbed her face. "Oh, this is not what I need right now." What would they say when they found out that she had been in bed with Hugo?

She was afraid and then her fear turned into anger. They had no right to be upset. She was being discreet. If they had a problem with her being with Hugo, then...well, that was their problem. She looked at Aaron. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

Aaron gave her a sad look and then nodded and left.

She looked at Hugo. Ending up in bed with him had not been planned. At all. But, oh, was he an amazing lover!

"You okay?" he asked, running his fingers down her neck.

Anna grimaced. "Yeah. Irritated."

Hugo leaned down and sucked on her neck. "We can finish later."

She slid her hand around the back of his head. "I want to finish now."

Hugo kissed down to her breast and licked her nipple. "Mmm." He sucked the taut peak, making Anna moan again. "Do you think it wise to leave them waiting?" he murmured.

"I want you back inside me," she whispered, reaching down for his very impressive cock that was slick from being inside her just moments ago. "I didn't invite them over," she said, pulling him until he moved back over her. "They can wait."

Hugo grinned and kissed her as he pressed himself back inside her. "God, I've wanted you for so long, Kittycat," he moaned.

Anna wrapped her arms around him, loving the feel of him inside her. "Me too."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Wilhelm sighed and looked out the window. Would Anna avoid coming out here? He knew she was upset with him. He hadn't been as attentive as he should have been, but he had his reasons.

"Hello, Wilhelm. Hello, Kurt."

Wilhelm spun around to see his precious Anna and was shocked to see her wearing a robe and a frown on her face. What was more surprising was to see a man standing behind her with his hand on her shoulder. He assumed this was Hugo.

Kurt stood, looking upset. Wilhelm stared in disbelief. It was quite obvious what they had been doing. His jaw clenched, and he took a deep breath to calm his anger. How could she stand there so defiantly with Kurt in the same room? Had she grown that cold? He knew Kurt had told her that they couldn't be together until they were married and that Kurt hadn't exactly been nice to her the last few times he'd seen her. But to continue seeing her ex-boyfriend? That didn't seem like her at all.

"Hello, Anna," Wilhelm said in a strained voice.

"I thought you were going to Philadelphia," she said softly.

"We do not have to be there until tomorrow morning. You have been asking when I was going to come visit you...." He shrugged. "This was a good opportunity."

Anna grimaced and looked at Kurt. "I thought you were going to call me when you were coming out."

Her attitude worried Wilhelm. And irritated him. He took another deep breath and walked over to where she was standing. "Hello," he said to the

man. "I am Wilhelm Kunze Herzogin von Hesse."

The man smiled and extended his hand. "I'm Hugo Sintzenich. It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Wilhelm thought he detected a hint of a German accent. "You are German?" he asked.

Hugo nodded and glanced at Kurt. "Yes," he responded in German. "I grew up in Dusseldorf."

Wilhelm chuckled. Anna certainly liked her Germans.

Anna frowned as Wilhelm and Hugo spoke in German above her. She hated not knowing what they were saying. She was also irritated that Wilhelm was here. She huffed and turned to leave the room. "Let me know when you want to talk to me," she snapped and began walking away.

"Anna." Wilhelm's voice was low and full of warning. *Crap*. But she wouldn't back down. She and Hugo were finally together the way they wanted to be. She wasn't going to let anything change that. She turned back around and her eyes widened slightly at the sternness in Wilhelm's eyes.

"Would you mind excusing us, Hugo?" Wilhelm said politely. "I need to speak with Anna for a bit."

Hugo glanced at Anna and then back at Wilhelm. "Of course." He turned to Anna. "I will see you tomorrow afternoon?" he said, affection in his eyes.

Anna smiled softly at him. Oh, how her heart swelled at his affection. "I'll walk you to the door." She stopped at the door, just out of view of Wilhelm and Kurt. She reached up and caressed his cheek. "I really enjoyed this afternoon."

He pulled her close. "I did too." He bent down and kissed her deeply. "Call me if you want me to come back over tonight," he said softly.

A thrill ran through her body at the idea of him staying the night with her. Of being with him again. "I might do that," she said with a smile.

He grinned and kissed her again. "I will await your call," he murmured, and then left.

Anna returned to the living room and raised her eyebrows at Wilhelm. "What did you want to talk about?"

Wilhelm frowned. "I thought you two broke up."

Anna shrugged. "We did."

"And yet you are sleeping with him still?" Kurt asked, his voice accusing.

She glanced at Kurt and rolled her eyes. "Still? It was our first time together, Wilhelm."

Wilhelm's frown deepened, as if he didn't believe her. "So you admit to cheating on Kurt?"

Anna's mouth dropped open in shock and then her eyes narrowed. "Cheating? Really?" She glared at Kurt. "What would you call fucking Jasmine?"

Wilhelm's brow raised and he looked at Kurt. "What is she talking about?"

Kurt's eyes narrowed. "I have not been with her since the first time I came out."

"Yeah, you just did it the same night you threw my engagement ring at me. Why the hell do you care what I do? You told me if I was discreet, you didn't care what I did."

"So, you hook up with your ex?" Kurt snapped. "How can I trust that it is not just physical?"

“Why does it matter what I feel about him?”

Kurt sighed and got a pained look on his face. “Look, Anna. I know I have not handled things well, but—”

“*Handled things well?* You flew all the way here from Germany to yell at me!”

“I found you in another man’s bed!”

“You said I could do what I wanted to!”

“You were not being discreet!”

Anna growled. “I was this time. It’s not my fault you came uninvited.”

“Enough!” Wilhelm’s deep voice filled the room as he stared, unbelieving, at Anna. “What has gotten into you, Anna?”

“Me?” she exclaimed. “Kurt’s the one who’s turned into an asshole.”

“I told y—” Kurt began.

“He is your fiancé, Anna,” Wilhelm said. “He deserves your respect.”

“I didn’t ask for him to be my fiancé. In fact....” She glared at Kurt. “...he didn’t even ask me. He just told me and threw the ring at me.”

Wilhelm frowned at Kurt.

“I did not throw it,” he muttered.

“Regardless of how it happened, Anna, you are still engaged to him and you need to act accordingly.”

“I don’t want to be engaged to him!” She threw her hands up in disgust. “I was told that I was free! You told me, and Tom told me, that I was free. Then Kurt shows up and tells me I have to marry him? Not ask. Tell.”

“Anna, things have changed,” Wilhelm said softly. “I need you to trust me.”

“Why?” she huffed. “So you can ignore me again?”

“Anna, that is enough.” Wilhelm gave her a warning look. “You have no idea what is going on, and I need you to trust me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “No.”

Wilhelm’s jaw clenched and he took a very deep breath. She knew she’d made him mad. Good. Then he’d know how she felt.

She put every ounce of her anger and frustration into the look she gave him, then turned on her heel and stalked toward her bedroom.

“Anna, come back!” Wilhelm commanded in a loud voice.

Anna froze. She had to obey. She didn’t want to obey. She trembled as she fought within herself. “No!” she yelled, and took another step away and then screeched and fell to her knees as her head exploded in blinding pain.

Aaron ran out into the living room to see Anna curled up in a ball, holding her head. He’d heard the shouting and had been rather impressed at Anna holding her own, but the scream had concerned him.

“What the hell did you do?” he asked, running to Anna to comfort her.

“Aaron, stay away from her,” Wilhelm ordered sharply. “She has been disobedient.”

Aaron gave Wilhelm an exasperated look. “You can’t be serious.”

“Aaron, back off,” he growled, and picked up Anna and carried her to the couch.

Her face was screwed up like she was in a tremendous amount of pain and tears ran down her cheeks. Aaron looked at Kurt, who watched her with pained eyes.

Wilhelm stroked her hair back from her face. “Anna, will you stop rebelling?”

She didn’t answer right away. She started to shake her head and she shrieked again and grabbed her head.

“What the fuck is going on?” Aaron growled. “What are you doing to her?”

“He is not doing anything, Aaron,” Kurt said softly. “She is doing it to herself.”

Aaron could hardly bear to watch her and turned around. “What is she doing?”

“She ignored a command from her Master,” Kurt said. “The pain will not stop until she stops rebelling.” He gave Aaron a small smile. “I never knew she could be so stubborn.”

Aaron frowned. “I did.” Anna shrieked again and Aaron winced. “I suppose I never imagined her acting out to your father, though.”

Kurt sighed and pressed his lips together. “Aaron, please believe me. I never wanted to hurt her.”

“Then why did you?”

“I did not mean to...I just....” He shook his head. “I cannot explain it right now.” He gave Aaron a pleading look. “Please encourage her to trust us. I promise everything will make sense soon.” He turned back to look at Anna with such longing on his face, Aaron hurt for him.

“All right,” Aaron said after a few minutes. “But can you stop being such a jerk?”

Kurt nodded. “I never wanted to be a jerk.”

Wilhelm stroked Anna’s hair back from her face as she slowly calmed down. He was truly amazed at the amount of stubbornness in this little girl. Well, she wasn’t a girl anymore. She was twenty-five. Oh, how time flies.

“Are you going to punish me?” she asked in a raspy voice, eyes full of fear.

“Do I need to?” he asked gently.

She swallowed nervously. “You are my Master,” she said softly.

He pulled her up into his lap and cradled her head against his chest. “I think you have learned your lesson.” He kissed her forehead and held her until she was completely calm, and then set her on the couch next to him.

Kurt and Aaron had disappeared a while ago, and he was alone with Anna in the apartment.

“Do you love him?” he asked quietly.

“Hugo?”

Wilhelm nodded.

She didn’t answer right away, instead twisting her hands in the tie of her robe. “I don’t know. I might. I care for him immensely.”

Wilhelm was fairly certain that Hugo cared for her just as much.

“We broke up because of what you told me about marrying Kurt. That was the only reason.”

“Ah.” He hoped she would forgive him for what he was about to say. “Anna, I must forbid you from having sex with him anymore. It is not a good idea for you to become attached to him, or anyone for that matter.”

She stared at her hands. “Yes, Wilhelm,” she said after a moment.

He saw something hit the side of her hand resting in her lap and realized it was a tear.

“May I go?” she asked quietly without a hint of rebellion.

He knew he had wounded her by his command, but he knew it was the right thing and hoped she would understand someday.

“*Ja, Liebling,*” Wilhelm said in a gentle voice. “You may go.”

Anna was trying to contain her tears. She had learned her lesson. A painful lesson about rebellion. She would never do that again.

“Would you like us to stop by on our way home on Monday?”

“Whatever you would like, Wilhelm.” She turned and gave him a respectful nod, and then walked quickly to her room and fell onto her bed. Her pillow still smelled like Hugo and she cried herself to sleep.

“I’m so sorry about Chris, Connor.”

Devin and Tyler sat in Connor Diaz’s large living room in the suburbs of Philadelphia. His wife and four younger children were somber, sitting together on the couch. The second youngest son, Chad, was in his mid-twenties. How would he be as an Elder?

“Thank you, Devin,” Connor said, more sober than Devin had ever seen him. He sat in an easy chair, staring out the window.

Devin didn’t want to imagine what it would be like to lose his son. He suppressed a smile, remembering what Wilhelm went through.

Devin and Tyler had stopped by and offered to accompany them to the funeral. Tonight would be the Gathering for Chris and to make Chad the Elder-Son. Once more he was reminded that Anna had run away and there would be a struggle to maintain his leadership. No one had said it outright, but there was the question of how he could remain Chairman without an Elder-Mistress. He assured the other Elders that he would find Anna. And soon. And oh, how he would punish her!

Twenty minutes later, it was time to leave. His limo waited outside and the group made their way outside. He walked next to Connor, asking him a question about Chad, and suddenly there was a loud *bang*. A moment later, Connor fell to the ground.

Devin stared in astonished horror at the hole in the center of Connor's forehead. Screams from his family echoed in the area as he dropped to the ground and pulled Tyler down with him.

"What happened?" Tyler asked in a shaky voice.

Devin couldn't pull his eyes away from his friend's clearly dead body. First Chris and now Connor? What the hell was going on?

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Anna woke feeling incredibly lonely. She stared at the window for a long time. There was no reason to get out of bed. She couldn't go to rehearsal, or anywhere for that matter. She would be here until next week.

Should she even let Hugo come over tonight? Would that be disobeying Wilhelm? Should she just avoid Hugo? Maybe she should just avoid everyone. Go back to being on her own, like when she was in San Francisco. She never wanted to feel that searing pain in her head again.

She'd never disobeyed Devin like she'd tried to disobey Wilhelm last night. Now she knew what would happen if she did. The pain didn't subside until she had decided to stop disobeying. Her mind would punish her if she tried to be blatantly rebellious.

Great. She didn't need Devin to keep herself in line. Her mind did it for her.

Anna reached for the remote and turned on the TV. She wanted something to distract her. Anything.

She stared at the TV at the special news report about a shooting in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Wilhelm and the other Elders would be there today! Had one of them been shot?

She sat up and stared at the TV until the name was announced: Connor Diaz.

Connor? Connor had been shot? The reporter said that he had been on his way to his son's funeral when he'd been shot in the head. She didn't like Connor by any stretch of the imagination, but she wouldn't wish the loss of a father and son in one family on anyone. His poor wife.

Anna stayed in bed until after lunchtime. She wasn't hungry, she wasn't motivated to do much of anything. It was a surprise when there was a knock on the door. She went to answer it, and found Hugo standing there with a tender smile on his face.

"Hey, Kitty cat," he said, leaning towards her to kiss her. "I missed you last night."

Anna stepped away and shook her head. "I can't." She blinked back tears and hated the ache in her heart. She could see the hurt in Hugo's eyes as he straightened. The tears won the battle, running down her face and she turned away. She walked into the living room and sat down on the couch.

"Katrina? What's wrong?" Hugo followed her and sat down next to her. "Do you regret what we did?"

"No," she said, burying her face in her hands. "No, not at all. I... Wilhelm has forbidden me from being with you again."

"Forbidden you? What does that mean?" He put his hand on her leg and she scooted away.

Anna sniffed, feeling miserable. "He knows what we did and he told me I couldn't have sex with you anymore."

"Who the hell does he think he is?" Hugo exclaimed. "It's none of his business what we do!"

Anna shook her head. "It is," she said sadly. "Everything I do is his business. He's my Master, remember?"

Hugo growled. "You don't have to tell him. He doesn't have to know."

"Hugo, I can't. I can't disobey him. I feel...physical pain if I do."

He looked at her and she wasn't sure if he believed her or not. "Are you just saying that because you don't want to be with me?"

Anna's heart ached even more. "Hugo, if I could run away with you this moment, I would. I would go anywhere with you, to escape my life and

spend the rest of it with you.” She swallowed. “But I can’t.”

“Why not?” He cradled her cheek in his hand and stared deeply into his eyes. “Run away with me. We’ll go somewhere where no one will find us.”

Anna let out a sob. “I want to, Hugo. I want to so badly, but I can’t. My...my life is not my own.” That was the ultimate truth. She was not her own person. “I’m a slave. I can’t do what I want. I can only do what my Masters want me to do.”

“Slavery is illegal, Katrina.”

She shook her head. “Not in my world,” she said sadly.

Hugo rubbed the top of his head and leaned back into the couch. “I don’t know whether or not to believe you,” he said softly.

“Why would I lie?” she whispered, hurt. Damn Wilhelm and Kurt! Why did they have to come last night? “If you don’t believe me, ask Aaron,” she said softly.

Hugo didn’t say anything for a few minutes and then shook his head. “Regardless, we should rehearse.” He stood. “Do you need to change?”

Anna looked down at her pajamas and nodded sadly. She understood why he didn’t believe her. He didn’t know anything about the Brotherhood. He was lucky.

Rehearsal was productive, but sad. They only spoke of dancing, both ignoring the hurt in their hearts. When they were finished, Hugo gave her a sad look and left without saying much. Anna went back into her room and cried.

Aaron found her in the same position she’d been in when Hugo left. He lay down behind her and held her. She slowly told him what had happened with Wilhelm and Hugo.

“That is really fucked up, Anna,” Aaron said.

“Story of my life.”

Aaron sighed and kissed the back of her head. "Too bad you can't go out tonight."

"If I was allowed to go out tonight, none of this would have happened."

"True."

Anna turned over and looked at Aaron. "I hate this. I had gotten to the point where I wasn't resenting what Alex had done in saving me when I came here. Aside from the Devin power thing, I'm beginning to resent it again." She sighed. "I wish it was all over now. Just...ya know, move on with my life. No more possibilities, just...life."

"I'd miss you, though." He smoothed her hair back from her face. "I like having you here with me."

"I like being here with you too." She sighed. "I don't know how Wilhelm expects me to go without sex until I marry Kurt."

"Does he know about Mr. J?"

Anna shrugged. "I certainly didn't tell him. But, I don't know if Mr. J. is still interested in me. It will be three weeks tomorrow that I haven't seen...er, felt him."

Aaron chuckled. "If he's found someone better in the sack than you, I want to meet her."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Wednesday, Anna was allowed to go out again. She hadn't seen Hugo since Friday and he avoided looking at her when she arrived at the studio that morning. She blinked back tears as she went to her place at the barre. Hugo had moved across the room. She felt miserable the entire class.

"Okay, girl," Stefanie said at lunch, trying to cheer her up. "We need to go out this Saturday. You've been cooped up for too long."

Anna hesitated. "I don't know if I'm up for going out." Would Wilhelm disapprove if she did that? She hated the uncertainty, not knowing what she was supposed to do. It would be easier if Wilhelm were here. Then he could tell her exactly what she was to do. Or maybe she should just go live in Tom's Manor. She'd know what to do there.

"I will drag your ass out if you don't come voluntarily. Being alone isn't good, Katrina. You need to get out and have some fun. You look so depressed."

Anna wished she could tell her friend more about her life, but didn't know if she was allowed. Tom had given her permission to tell Hugo. Was she allowed to tell her new best friend? How was she supposed to have a friend if she couldn't tell her anything about her own life?

She hadn't even told Stef about what happened with Hugo. As wonderful as it had been, making love to him, the knowledge that it wouldn't happen ever again made the memory painful. She was afraid she'd finally fell in love with Hugo, and now could do nothing about it.

She hadn't heard from Simon yet. Maybe it was a good thing. Was she up for a "date" with Mr. J.? Maybe Mr. J. really had lost interest. Wilhelm

had forbidden her from being with Hugo. He had also said she shouldn't get attached to anyone else. Had that been a command? It didn't feel like one. Besides, she wasn't getting attached; she was just enjoying sex with him. That didn't involve emotions. Much.

Oh, she hated all the confusion! Resentment towards Wilhelm and Kurt was growing steadily.

"Euroman wasn't at the club last week," Stef continued. "I wonder if he found another place to go."

"He wasn't?" Anna asked, surprised. "Was he the week before?"

Stef nodded. "Yeah. Boy, were the women showing off for him. I saw a few of them flash their breasts at him."

Anna denied the stab in her heart. No wonder Simon hadn't called.

"So, you wanna see if he's there Saturday?" Stef asked.

Anna shrugged. "Aren't there other clubs to go to?" She didn't want to see other women vying for his attention. But she agreed with Stef that she needed to get out.

In the end, Anna and Stef and some other dancers ended up at the same club as always on Saturday night. Stef had invited Hugo, but he said he was busy. Anna wondered if he was busy or just avoiding social situations with her. She didn't blame him. It was more painful being separated from him this time than it had been the first time.

Simon had called Wednesday evening to make arrangements for Saturday, but Anna told him that she'd already made plans. When he asked about the following week, she told him that she didn't know. He didn't seem happy about her answer, but she didn't know what else to say. She hesitated to do anything.

Anna found herself dressing carefully for the evening out, but she wasn't exactly sure why. The denim mini skirt and white baby-tee were very sexy. Was she trying to make Mr. J. jealous? Or just trying to make sure she had a good time at the club? She tried not to think about what Kurt or Wilhelm would do if he found out what she was doing. They'd probably be furious. But then again, they hadn't forbidden her from going out and having fun.

For some reason, she smiled at the idea of making Kurt and Wilhelm mad. She knew she'd been forbidden from being with Hugo. Rebellion bubbled inside her. Fuck Wilhelm. Fuck Kurt. If these were her last few months of freedom, then she was going to enjoy them.

They walked into the club and Anna's eyes unconsciously went immediately to where the red semi-sheer curtain hung, shielding Mr. J. from prying eyes. Did he even notice her?

What did it matter? She could have any man here if she wanted, and she was determined to have a good time. The music was loud and the dance floor crowded. A large crowd of women had gathered in front of the red curtain.

She joined Stef and the other girls on the floor, but stayed as far away from the curtain as she could. She drank and laughed and flirted, attracting attention from many of the men and feeling almost high on the endorphins.

Aaron found her later as she was resting at their table. While the flirting had been fun for a while, it wasn't really doing anything for her tonight. She was beginning to wish she'd stayed home.

"Come dance with me," he shouted over the music, pulling her to the dance floor. He pulled her close and they began to move with the music. "Why aren't you doing the Mr. J. thing?"

“I think he has other interests besides me,” she answered with a frown. She glanced over to the crowd of women. Two blondes were kissing and groping each other right in front. He was surely enjoying the show.

“He asked you out.”

“After not seeing me for three weeks.”

“You were busy too.”

“He went out when I stayed home for Alex’s birthday and apparently had quite a show.”

“He still asked you out.”

Anna frowned. “No, Simon asks me out. What if he’s pushing Mr. J. into doing it?”

“Kat, seriously. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?”

She was about to retort with a smart comment when she realized he was right. “I was really stupid, saying no tonight, wasn’t I?”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “You said it.”

Anna sighed. “I probably blew it.” She glanced over to the curtain, wishing she could see inside. Mr. J. had been nothing but kind to her and she was taking her anger at Wilhelm and Kurt out on him. “I’m an idiot.” In hopes that he was somehow watching her, she gave him an apologetic look and mouthed “I’m sorry,” and then turned back to Aaron. “I don’t think I’m much in the mood to be here.”

“Kat.” Aaron motioned with his head to the curtained room. “I think he’s been watching you.”

Anna turned and saw Simon standing next to the room in his customary stance. He tilted his head slightly to the back of the club where they’d talked outside several times. She nodded slightly. “I think Simon wants to talk.”

Aaron pushed her away. "Then go. At least you'll be getting laid tonight."

She rolled her eyes and walked away.

"My employer was quite disappointed that you turned him down for tonight," Simon said, walking up to her as silent as usual. Anna glanced up at him and saw a glint of amusement in his eye.

Anna leaned against the railing in front of her, hands clasped tightly on the metal bar. "I've had a bad week and...I thought he had lost interest," she said softly.

"Quite the contrary. He regrets that he was unable to see you last week. He had business to attend to." The glint of amusement showed in his eyes again as he stared out to the brick building across the alley.

"My friend said that the women were making quite the impression on him the week before."

Simon chuckled. "Yes, well, his companions enjoyed the show. My employer was not impressed. Let's just put it that way."

"He has friends with him?"

"Yes."

Something about that made her smile. He wasn't sitting behind the curtain all alone. "Why doesn't he come out in public? Why all the secrecy?" She turned to Simon. "Do his friends go out?" She tilted her head. "Are they men or women?"

"You are a very curious woman, Miss Katrina." He looked at her. "Does it matter if he is with other women?"

Anna felt her cheeks warm. "I don't know. I guess not."

"You are engaged to another man."

She turned back to the railing and looked at her hands. "Is he married?"
"Yes."

"Oh." An unexpected pang touched her heart. Why did it matter if he were married or not? It wasn't as if this were going anywhere. "Is she a bitch?"

Simon laughed. "Again, does it matter?"

Anna shrugged. "I was just wondering. I've learned that many men don't like their wives and seek out companionship elsewhere to keep up appearances."

"I can only say that it is complicated."

"Will I ever get to see him?"

"I expect so."

Anna rolled her eyes at his ambiguous answer. "Should I stop asking questions?"

"I find them amusing, but I will not reveal more than I am permitted."

They didn't speak for a few minutes. The music from inside seemed to rattle the bricks behind them.

"Are you willing to meet with him tonight?"

"He wants to?"

The amusement appeared in his eyes again. "He was quite pleased when you showed up tonight and hoped you might have changed your mind." He smiled. "It's the only reason he came out tonight."

"Really?"

"There are many women in New York, Miss Katrina, but you are the only one who has his attention."

Anna thought back to the day after her first encounter with Mr. J. "Did he see me when I was walking to the library the day after we...met?"

"You turned and waved to him," Simon answered with a smile.

Anna smiled. "I was hoping I wasn't waving to a statue." She froze. "Wait, did he see me the week before too?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because the clothes that were in the room...it was the same outfit I wore that day." Simon didn't answer right away and Anna wondered if she'd asked something wrong. "Was that an impertinent question?"

"You're a smart girl, Katrina. Yes, he saw you. It's how he knew you liked the library." He turned and cocked his head. "I think that's enough questions for the night, aside from: Will you meet with him tonight?"

Anna smiled shyly and nodded. "Yes. I'd like that."

The next week went so fast, Anna could hardly believe it. There were only two weeks until opening night, and Anna was feeling a little worried since she'd missed a week of rehearsals. She fell into bed each night exhausted and didn't even have enough time to read the books on New York that Mr. J. had picked out for her at the library.

Simon called Monday to make arrangements for the following Saturday. She liked that he called early in the week. It made her feel like Mr. J. really wanted her.

Mr. J. came to two rehearsals that week, sitting in the auditorium in pitch blackness. The girls all primped before going out on stage and Anna did a little, too. Stef grinned at her when she saw Anna primping.

Anna spent an amazing Saturday night with Mr. J. in the Winston Churchill Suite at the Waldorf Astoria. He seemed tense for some unknown reason, but since all she could do was ask yes/no questions, it was hard to make sure he was all right.

Monday as she was walking to lunch with Aaron and Stefanie, Wilhelm called and Anna reluctantly answered. "Hello, Wilhelm," she said in an even tone. She was still angry at him but was trying very hard to be polite.

"Hello, *Liebling*. How are you doing?"

"Okay. Busy." She hoped he would take the hint and keep the call short.

"I can imagine. Did Kurt tell you he is coming out for the Gala?"

Anna kept herself from sighing. "I haven't spoken to him since you two were here."

"Ah. Well, he will be there."

"Okay." She really didn't care, except that she'd have to spend time with him and she wasn't looking forward to that. "Is that all?"

"*Nein*. There—" Wilhelm paused. "There was another shooting this morning."

Anna stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Another one? Who?"

"Joel."

"Marcus' son? From Chicago?"

"*Ja*."

Anna couldn't say she was sad about the news. She had no fond feelings for either man. "Was it...the same as last time?"

"We believe so."

"Oh, Wilhelm. Why...why is this happening?"

"Perhaps someone is taking advantage of Devin's weakening."

"Will he come here? Devin, I mean."

"I do not believe so. If he does, Tom will get in touch with you. Chicago is far enough away for you to be safe."

"Thank you for letting me know, Wilhelm."

Aaron looked at her curiously as she put her phone in her pocket. “What happened?”

“Do you know who Marcus is?” she asked, glancing at Stef and hoping Aaron would understand her vagueness.

“Chicago?”

Anna nodded. “His son was killed this morning.”

“Holy shit.” He grinned. “Maybe they’ll take out Devin and you’ll be free.”

“That’d be nice.”

Devin stared in disbelief at Tom. “You’re kidding, right?”

Tom shook his head. “I was just a few feet behind him when it happened.”

Another Elder killed. This time, Marcus. In the same manner as Chris and Connor.

“What the fuck is going on?” Devin muttered to himself. “Who is calling hits out on American Elders?”

Devin didn’t want to think about the possibility that he might be on the list too. But no one would dare try and kill him. Would they? It hadn’t worked the last time. Would he be so lucky if it happened again?

He’d borrowed Irina, the Russian Elder Mistress, at Connor’s funeral and was able to gain some of his powers back, but didn’t know if he’d be able to do so again. It wasn’t the same as having it from Anna, but it was enough to help him. He’d had a firm discussion with the President earlier in the month.

But even the “recharging” didn’t ease his mind. He was still mortal.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Anna sat, ill at ease, in the Russian Tea Room with Aaron, Cameron, and Stefanie on Saturday night. The elegant décor and atmosphere did nothing to ease the ache in her heart. She was feeling the loss of Alex keenly at the moment and wasn't sure why.

Perhaps it was because of the shooting of Marcus. What if there was some rogue Brotherhood Assassin out there, killing off Elders. Would Wilhelm be next? What about Kurt? What would she do if she lost them? Oh, she was furious at them, but that didn't mean she wanted them dead.

"You okay?" Aaron asked.

Anna shrugged. "Missing Alex."

Aaron gave her a sympathetic look. "Yeah, the Russian Tea Room might not have been the best choice for him to pick, but it's not like he would have any idea what it would mean to you."

"I guess I can just focus on Peter."

"True. At least you have a fond memory of him."

"But then it just makes me feel even lonelier." She shook her head. "I don't know if I'll be very good company for him tonight."

"Anna, you go to him for sex. There's no relationship, remember?"

It was hard to remember when he seemed to put so much effort into her nights with him. "His wife must be truly awful for her not to realize what a great guy he is."

"Maybe. Maybe he doesn't try with her."

"Or maybe he has tried, and she brushed him off."

"What woman would brush off romance from her husband?"

“I might with Kurt,” she said sadly. “I don’t know if I could ever fully trust him after all this.”

Aaron squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry. It really sucks that he’s turned into such a jerk.”

Anna shook her head. “The same thing happened to Tyler when he became a Son. He was a pretty nice guy and then all of a sudden he turned into a mini-Devin.”

“I can’t imagine Wilhelm allowing Kurt to treat you that way.”

“But you saw how distant he was when he visited.”

He nodded his head. “You want me to kick Kurt’s ass on Thursday?”

Anna laughed. “Maybe.”

Anna had fun at the club, dancing with Aaron and some of the other dancers, but she felt a constant ache in her heart for Alex. Why of all nights couldn’t she get her mind off of him? She was in for a wonderful evening of sex with Mr. J. Why was she thinking of her dead husband?

“You’re rather subdued tonight, Miss Katrina,” Simon said as they rode the elevator up to the eleventh floor of the Library Hotel.

“I’m sorry, Simon. I just...have a lot on my mind.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“Not unless you know how to bring the dead back to life.” She gave him a sad smile and then shook her head. “I’ll be okay. Mr. J. is good at getting my mind off of things.”

Simon studied her for a long moment and then nodded. “I hope so. I believe he has a lot on his mind as well. Perhaps you can distract each other.”

“Simon, if he’s not up for tonight....”

He shook his head. “He’s very much looking forward to it. He just had some business to attend to yesterday and is having a hard time letting it go.”

She smiled. “Well then, maybe we really can help each other.” They walked down the hall to the room at the end. “The Love Room?” she asked doubtfully.

Simon shrugged and held up the blindfold. “Ready?”

Once again, her vision was removed and she was led into the hotel room. The room smelled delicious, as it usually did, but there was something off, though she couldn’t quite pinpoint it. Maybe it was just the stress from both of them.

She inhaled as she walked, smelling vanilla and roses, and smiled. “It smells good in here.”

He gave a breathy chuckle and squeezed her hand. The bed squeaked slightly as he sat and he intertwined his fingers with hers. She could hear him breathing deeply and could feel him watching her.

She could sense his tension as she stood in front of him, and was tempted to try and read him. Would that be a violation of their privacy agreement? But if she did, it wasn’t like she could do anything about what she got from him. He was quick to keep her from touching him.

“Simon said you had some stressful business to deal with this week,” she said softly. His tension increased and she bit her lip.

He didn’t move. Had she upset him with her comment?

Finally, he released one hand and ran his fingers across her bare stomach beneath the black halter-top she wore. He put his hand on her hip, pulling her closer, and then began to kiss across her stomach with soft, caressing touches of his mouth.

“Oh!” she exclaimed softly as he swirled his tongue in her belly button. His fingers flexed the flesh of her hips, making her wince slightly. He

nipped at her hip and then kissed up between her breasts and captured her mouth in a passionate kiss. A desperate kiss.

Something was off, Anna was certain now. She knew it was him, but something was different. His tongue thrust forcefully into her mouth, stoking her own passion and she moaned softly. He pulled her closer, her body pressed against his chest. Her hands moved unconsciously to his shoulders and she was shocked when he didn't pull them away. What was going on?

She kissed him back with as much passion as he kissed her with. She grasped the soft material of his shirt over his shoulders and felt hard muscle beneath. Why was he letting her touch him? Why did she care?

Her hands moved up his neck and into his hair, but it was caught in something. He had a ponytail? It wasn't very long, but long enough. He growled and pulled her to him, twisting his body so that she was on her back on the bed and he was on top of her.

The fire in her body grew hotter and she pulled at the elastic band, freeing his hair and tangling her hands in it. His own hand tangled into her hair as the other held her around her upper body.

His kiss never faltered in intensity and he continued invading her mouth with his tongue. He pressed his hips against hers and moved his hand down to her neck, stroking her cheek just in front of her ear.

He broke away from her mouth, leaving her lips throbbing as he kissed his way down to her neck. He nipped gently and she gasped. His hand moved down to her breast and pulled at her shirt until it tore open and he could cup it with his hot, bare hand.

She moved one hand around to his face, feeling the scratchy hair of his beard. He was letting her touch him; she was going to take advantage of it. He sucked hard on her nipple and she arched her back and cried out,

tangling her hands in his hair once more to pull him harder against her breast.

Her hand moved down to his shoulder and, feeling a collar, surmised he was wearing a dress shirt and moved to unbutton it. He pulled her shirt off and she heard a soft noise as the shirt hit the ground.

She unbuttoned as many buttons as she could reach as he kissed her breasts and then tried to sit up so she could undo the rest.

He put his hand on her shoulder to hold her down. “*Nein*,” he murmured in a low voice and she froze as a chill ran through her body. He froze as well.

He spoke. In German. In a voice that haunted her dreams.

No! This was some sort of cruel trick her mind was playing on her. Lots of men have low voices. And speak German.

Grief overwhelmed her and she tried to push him away. He didn’t move and she kicked at him. “Let me go!” She pushed harder and he moved. She rolled to the side of the bed and fell to the floor on her hands and knees, head hanging down and breathing heavily.

After a moment, she shook her head. “I have to go,” she whispered and pulled the blindfold off, looking around on the floor for her shirt. It had dropped over here and she spotted it in front of her.

She didn’t dare look at the bed. “I won’t look at you,” she said in a broken voice. “But I need to leave.”

He didn’t speak as she pulled her shirt on as best she could and held it together as she stood, facing away from the bed. “Thank you. For everything. But I think we should end things now.” She would never be able to be with him again without thinking of Alex and she couldn’t deal with that.

She put her hand to the side of her face so she wouldn't see him as she made her way to the door. Her hand was on the knob when he spoke again, his voice full of pain.

“Anna. Don't leave.”

It wasn't surprising he knew her real name. He knew who and what she was. But, she wanted to open the door and run out of the room screaming. This was worse than her dreams of him. Of Alex. Now there was a man alive who sounded like him. And felt like him....

But she couldn't move. Why wouldn't her body listen to her mind?

“*Schatzi*,” he whispered. She heard the bed move and felt him coming closer.

“No,” she whispered. “No, you're dead.”

He was standing right behind her, his body heat dissolving the chill in her body. He put his hands on her upper arms and turned her around. “*Nein*, Anna. I am alive.”

Alex stared down into the face of his beloved wife. Her green eyes filled with tears and she began to shake. “Alex?” she whispered, disbelief written all over her face.

His heart swelled at the sound of her voice saying his name. For the first time in so many years, she recognized that he was still alive. “Yes, *Schatzi*. It's me.”

She blinked several times and shook her head. “How...how are you here?”

He cradled her soft cheek with his hand and smiled. “It's a very long story, and I will tell you everything, but for now, know that we escaped several months after Vlad became Elder, and arrived in New York in July.”

“July?” she asked in a broken voice. Her lower lip trembled. “You’ve been here since July?”

“Yes, when you got sick, I had to—”

A crack sounded in the room and it took Alex several seconds before he realized that she had slapped him in the face. It took him another few seconds to register the look of anger on her face. The sting of the hit was padded by his beard, but it still hurt. “You’ve been here for two months and didn’t tell me?” Her eyes widened and then narrowed with her jaw trembling at the same time. “Why am I just finding this out now?”

“Anna, there were things I had to do before I could let you know I was here...and alive. I had to—”

“Were you just using me?” she asked in a squeaky voice, motioning around the room. “Why did you lie to me? Why all the secrecy? Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you come see me in person?” Her voice got louder with each question until she was yelling at him. “What the hell is going on, Alex?”

He could hardly believe this was really Anna standing in front of him. The fire in her eyes bewildered him, and he didn’t know how to answer her questions. This was certainly not how he had envisioned their reunion. He’d imagined it thousands of times, but it never had involved her being angry with him. Or hitting him.

She had hit him! And yelled at him! He felt his own anger rising beneath the surface. “You never believed me when I told you I was alive, Anna. If you’d believed me, we wouldn’t be going through all this shit.”

“You were dead, Alex. Devin told me. Your father told me. Everyone told me you were dead! I spent two years doped up out of my head rather than grieve for you. How the hell was I supposed to believe my fucked up dreams?”

“I tried to tell you,” Alex snapped. “I tried to tell you and you refused to accept my word. Didn’t you notice I aged? That I changed? Why wouldn’t you believe me?”

“So I was supposed to believe a dream over what people in the real world were telling me? Even your father accepted my dreams were just dreams.”

Alex stared at her, his chest heaving. He shouldn’t be angry with her. It wouldn’t do any good, and harm their future relationship. But this was a different Anna than he knew before. Who was this angry woman standing in front of him? Angry tears streamed down her face as she glared at him while clutching her shirt between her breasts; a reminder of how the evening had started.

He took a deep breath to calm himself. “Anna, *Schatzi*. Please. Let’s not start things like this.” He took a step towards her and she stepped back and shook her head.

“You lied to me.” Her voice was softer, but filled with anguish. “You lied!” She turned on her heel and stalked to the bathroom, slamming the door closed behind her.

He stared at the door, completely baffled at her behavior and at a loss for what to do. He’d never seen her angry before.

She emerged a few minutes later, changed into the clothes he’d brought her for the morning. She walked over to where he’d put her purse on the dresser and headed to the door.

“Where are you going?” he asked, his voice sharper than he intended.

“Home.” She opened the door and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Alex stared at the door and rubbed his chest, his heart broken. This was not how it was supposed to go. He took a deep breath and then reached for

his phone to call his father.

“Vati, we have a problem.”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Anna ran out of the hotel, tears streaming down her face. She was given strange looks by multiple people as she ran down the sidewalk, but she hardly noticed. Her mind was going a million miles a minute and she didn't know what to do. She ran blindly, not paying attention to where she was going, only wanting to run away from the pain in her heart.

She wanted to scream! She wanted to cry! She wanted to run back to the hotel and fling herself into Alex's arms. She wanted to run away and never see him again, even though she hadn't seen him in years.

He was alive! Alex was alive! And been here two months without bothering to see her. He hid behind red curtains and blindfolds, keeping her from knowing he was there. Why? Was he ashamed of her? Where had he been?

Fear gripped her heart and she stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk. Had he found someone while he was gone? No, was that *where* he had gone? Had he fallen in love with someone and faked his death so that he could be with her? His father never would have allowed Alex to divorce Anna.

Wait, did Wilhelm know Alex was alive? Had he known the whole time?

No, she knew Wilhelm thought Alex was dead. She had felt his grief and healed him of it. Had Alex deceived his family?

Then why come back? Why find her and become "Mr. J?" No, it didn't make any sense. Why would he run off with another woman and then come back to her? No, that wasn't it. She started walking again.

What had he first said? That he'd escaped? From where? *After Vlad became Elder*. Vlad? Had he escaped from Vlad? Had he been in Russia the whole time?

Her dreams...she'd dreamed of him...but Alex had said they were real. He'd gotten angry at her because she didn't believe him in her dreams. He'd always been in the same room. No, he hadn't run away to be with another woman. He'd been imprisoned by...Vlad? Vitaly?

Peter! Peter had to have known Alex was alive! And he hadn't told her?

Anna stopped cold in the middle of the sidewalk again. Peter, the man she'd lived with for a year. The man who loved her...he knew her husband was alive, and he'd never told her.

How many people knew Alex was alive and didn't tell her? How many people had lied, letting her continue in her grief?

"Hey, sweetheart. What's a pretty thing like you doing out alone this time of night?"

Anna looked around and saw a man walking up behind her with a creepy smile on his face. The street was small and surprisingly devoid of people. She backed away, looking around and trying to figure out where she was. None of the buildings looked familiar.

She walked away from him quickly, breaking into a run when she heard him following her. It was the middle of the night. Where were the bars that stayed open all night? Wasn't anyone out this late?

Arms wrapped around her waist and she shrieked, kicking and screaming, then suddenly she was on the ground and the sound of flesh hitting flesh was behind her. She turned and saw the man who had been following her up against the wall and another man with long dark hair and a beard punching him in the face.

Anna didn't stop to find out what would happen. She ran down the sidewalk as fast as she could and waved down a taxi at the corner. She gave the driver her address and slumped into the seat, wrapping her arms around herself and trying to stop trembling.

By the time she unlocked her apartment door, Anna was an emotional mess. Anger, fear, hurt, confusion, all filled her, leaving her emotionally raw. She closed the door behind her, and fell to the ground and sobbed.

"Anna?" Aaron walked out of his room, bare-chested and running his hand through his hair. "What are you doing home? I thought you were going to see Mr. J."

She stared at Aaron. What would he say about the news that Alex wasn't dead?

Concern immediately filled his eyes. "Anna, what's wrong? Did he hurt you?"

She laughed bitterly. "You could say that," she said, anger rising inside her again. She stood and lifted her chin, wiping the tears away. "I found out who Mr. J. is."

Aaron's brow raised and she heard quick footsteps behind Aaron. Cameron appeared beside Aaron. "You saw him?" he asked excitedly.

Anna looked back at Aaron, her jaw trembling. "It's Alex."

Aaron stared at Anna's tear streaked face. "Mr. J. is Alex?" He shook his head. He couldn't have heard her correctly. Alex was dead. "What do you mean?"

"Who's Alex?" Cameron asked.

"Alex, Aaron," Anna said with a strained voice. "Alex is alive and hiding behind the persona of Mr. J."

Aaron shook his head. "No...he's...dead...."

Her face screwed up, but he wasn't sure if it was in anger or grief. "He's been in the city since July," she spat. "And he's been pretending to be someone else."

Aaron didn't know what to say. Alex was alive? How was that possible? A million thoughts crammed into his head. He, too, didn't know if he should be angry, happy or what. How did you deal with finding out someone you thought was dead for four and a half years was alive?

He felt a gentle hand on his and he looked down to see Cameron holding his hand. "Aaron? What's going on?" he asked in a gentle voice, his blue eyes full of concern.

"Alex," Aaron choked out over the lump in his throat. "Anna's husband. The one we thought was dead. He's apparently not."

Cameron's eyes widened. "Omigosh!" He slapped his hand over his mouth.

Aaron had told Cameron about his physical relationship with Alex before Anna came into the picture, and that they had been best friends. Cameron at least kind of understood why Aaron was upset.

Anna's phone rang in her pocket and she looked at it. Her eyes narrowed and she hit the ignore button and put it down on the ground. "Wilhelm," she said, looking up at him. "He probably knew too. He had to have known."

Suddenly, Aaron felt the anger that he saw in Anna's face. He had trusted Wilhelm. Why hadn't Wilhelm told him? Why all the secrecy? "I need some air," he growled and went into his room to get dressed. He slipped his flip-flops on and stormed out of the apartment.

Back at his condo, Alex ran his hands through his hair as he slumped down on the white couch in his dark living room. Oh, what a mess. This is not how it was supposed to go. Not at all. Anna was supposed to be happy to see him, not hit him in the face.

Anna had been so angry that she had hit him! He'd never seen her like that...never imagined she could be that way. He would strangle Devin for what he'd done to her...once she was freed from him.

But once she was freed from Devin, she would be freed from Alex as well. Would she stay with him? He hadn't doubted before, but did now. Vati had told him she'd changed, but Alex hadn't realized how true it was.

He heard the door to the condo open and close and looked up to see Seth walk into the room.

"Did she get home okay?" Alex asked in English. He'd insisted on speaking English since he arrived in New York. He was rusty and he wanted to be sure that Anna could understand him when they were reunited.

"I think so," Seth answered and held up his hands, palms out, at the dirty look Alex gave him. "Some guy attacked her on the sidewalk and I took care of him. She ran away and got into a taxi."

How would he find out if she made it home? It wasn't as if he could just call Aaron and ask. Aaron would freak out.

"So what happened?" Seth asked, turning on the light.

Alex sighed. He'd just told Seth to follow Anna and make sure she made it home. He didn't have a chance to tell him what happened. "I blew it." He leaned his head on the back of the couch and looked up at the high ceiling. "I was...passionate, I suppose, and I was letting her touch me. It felt so good to have her touching me." He looked at his friend, who gave him a sympathetic look. "I was being stupid, but I couldn't stop her. Couldn't bring myself to pull her hands off me. But then I spoke and she froze. I

don't think she knew it was me, but she knew something was off. She tried to leave, but...." He shook his head. "I couldn't let her leave like that." He closed his eyes. "She knows it's me."

"Oh, fuck, Alex." Seth sat down hard on the couch across from him.

"She hit me. She was so angry, she hit me and then she left. That's why I told you to follow her." He looked back at Seth. "Did the guy hurt her?"

Seth shook his head. "He grabbed her and I got hold of him before he could do anything." His brow raised. "Anna hit you?"

Alex nodded and rubbed his cheek where she'd hit him. "She's strong."

Seth chuckled. "She'd have to be to survive everything she's gone through."

"She hates me," Alex said, scratching at his beard. "She yelled at me."

"Alex, think about it. She's in shock. She doesn't hate you. She couldn't. She just...needs some time—"

"You didn't see the look in her eyes, Seth." Alex felt the tears burning his eyes. "She accused me of lying to her." He grimaced. "She's not wrong."

"You have your reasons for doing so, Alex. They're good reasons. She never would have let you out of her sight to do what you need to do before you can face Devin."

"Now I wonder if she'll let me *into* her sight."

"She will. I'm sure of it. She just needs some time to process it."

Alex's phone rang. "Hello, Vati."

"She's not answering her phone," Wilhelm said and then sighed. "She's so stubborn now."

"So I've seen."

"I can't get there until Monday. Marcus' funeral isn't until later today. But I don't know if it will do any good. She's angry at me, too."

“She wouldn’t have been angry at you if you two had been more careful with her,” Alex snapped. “Kurt’s been treating her like shit, too. How is she supposed to trust either of you?”

“I know, Alex,” Wilhelm snapped back. “I was going to try and make amends on Tuesday.”

“It’s a little late for that.”

Wilhelm sighed. “Perhaps she would respond better to your mother.”

The Penthouse phone buzzed and Seth went to answer it. Who would be coming here in the middle of the night? Maybe Anna changed her mind! Everyone knew where he lived.

“Someone’s here, Vati,” he said, standing and looking at Seth, whose face wasn’t very encouraging. He looked expectantly at Seth who turned and grimaced.

“It’s Aaron,” Seth said.

“Aaron?” Alex exclaimed. “Vati, Aaron’s here. Maybe he’ll be able to talk some sense into Anna.”

“Call me in the morning and let me know.”

Alex tossed the phone on the wooden coffee table in front of him and looked at Seth. “Is he coming up?”

Seth nodded. “Ken said he didn’t look very happy and was hesitant to let him up, but I said it was all right.”

Alex nodded and sighed. Another friend angry that he was alive. No, that wasn’t fair. It was unlikely that Aaron was upset that Alex was alive. He was probably upset for the same reason Anna was. Oh, what a mess. But at least he could assume that Anna got home all right.

“When’s your dad coming in?” Seth asked.

“Monday. Funeral’s tomorrow, er today.”

“It’s too bad they can’t let on that they know what’s going to happen already. What a waste of time, having to hang around Chicago until the real funeral.”

“Devin can’t know I’ve escaped yet. I wish I could go punch him in the face.” He shook his head. “Poor Anna. It’s not going to be as easy as I thought it would be, getting back into her life.” The thought of not having Anna in his life made his heart feel like it had been stabbed with a dull knife.

A knock a few minutes later announced Aaron’s arrival. Alex’s stomach churned as he waited to face his best friend after so many years.

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Chapter Thirty

Aaron's fists clenched as he waited for the door to open. He had no idea what he would say to Alex. Right now, he just kinda wanted to hit him like Anna had. How could Alex have not told them that he was here? That he was alive? Why had he hid himself?

The door opened and Aaron stared at the broad man with long dark hair and a beard. "Seth?"

Seth smiled nervously. "Hey, Aaron."

"You're alive too?" What the hell had happened?

"And Greg and Tony. And Erich." His face darkened. "We didn't all make it."

Aaron's anger abated at Seth's words. He didn't know the other guys as well, but he knew them. "Jason, Michael and Jesse?" Sebastian was Immortal. Was he allowed to come back?

Seth nodded, grief in his eyes. "C'mon in." He stepped aside and Aaron walked inside.

The entry foyer was round, with dark wood floors and white paneled walls and ceiling. He followed Seth around a corner and into a large living room with a very high ceiling and two long couches. At the end of one couch stood Alex.

Aaron stared at his dead friend for a long moment. He was older, with messy, long blond hair that brushed his shoulders and neatly trimmed beard, but it was him. There was no doubt about it. He was just as tall as he had been when he'd left, though not quite as broad. The cobalt-blue eyes that watched him nervously were the same.

A myriad of emotions flitted through Aaron's mind. He wanted to hug Alex and punch him at the same time. Having been in a relationship with a guy for several months, he couldn't help but see him through the eyes of a man who liked men. Damn, he was still fucking hot.

"Hello, Aaron," Alex said in a quiet voice. His accent was very strong, and different from before.

"Alex." Aaron blinked, still having a hard time believing Alex was standing in front of him. "I don't know whether to punch you or hug you," he admitted.

"Please don't hit me. Anna already did."

Aaron nodded. "I know. She told me."

Alex grimaced. "I'm sorry." His eyes filled with pain and his shoulders slumped. He shook his head sadly. "This was not how it was supposed to go."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Aaron asked in a hoarse voice. "Why didn't you come see us as soon as you got here?"

"Because...." Alex ran his hands through his hair. "Because I have to do some things before I can confront Devin, and I didn't want you and Anna to think I was leaving you again."

"What do you have to do?"

Alex hesitated and then inhaled slowly. "You know what I do...what I did for the Brotherhood."

Aaron nodded.

"I assume you've heard about Connor and Marcus?"

He nodded again and then inhaled sharply. "That was you?"

Alex nodded. "Once Devin's supporters are gone, I can confront him, in front of the world Elders, and he will face judgment. I was going to come to you and Anna in just a few weeks. After I took out Oscar."

It amazed Aaron how casually Alex could talk about killing a man, but then he remembered what these men did to Anna and clenched his jaw. "Can I help?"

Alex laughed. "If there was something you could do...." He stopped, growing serious, and his brow twitched. "Help me with Anna," he pleaded.

"She's changed."

"I know," Alex whispered. "I've missed so much...." He took a step forward and stopped. "Please forgive me, Aaron. I had my reasons for staying hidden. I have to leave in a few weeks and take out Oscar. Anna won't like that...if she forgives me."

Aaron sighed. "She will. I'm sure of it. She still cries herself to sleep sometimes." He pressed his lips together. "What the hell is wrong with your brother?" If she wasn't so angry at Kurt and Wilhelm, she probably would have taken Alex's appearance better. Although Wilhelm's command to stay out of Hugo's bed made more sense now.

"He doesn't want to give her up," Alex said simply. "I showed up and suddenly the woman he was in love with belonged to his brother again."

"He's been an ass."

"I know. He knows. He regrets it. He hates that he's taken his anger out on her." Alex chuckled. "Believe me, we've had words. And fists."

"You two fought?"

Seth laughed from behind him. "Kurt's picked up some impressive moves. He beat Alex the first couple of fights."

"I wouldn't say beat..., " Alex said with a frown.

Seth walked into Aaron's sight and leaned against the wall. "I would." His eyes glinted with amusement.

Aaron looked between the two men. His friends. His friends that were dead and now were alive. "Fuck this," he mumbled and walked over to

Alex and hugged him.

Alex hugged him back, patting his back. A guy hug. Aaron knew how much Alex had loved Anna before, and was certain he still did, but it didn't prevent a twinge of disappointment as Alex hugged him as a guy friend.

Alex sighed in relief as Aaron hugged him. His friend wasn't furious at him. One down, one to go. At least here in New York.

Aaron pulled away and went to hug Seth and then leaned back against the couch, looking between the two of them. "I can't believe you're really here." He looked around. "Nice place."

Alex smiled. "Thanks. I hope Anna likes it."

Now that Aaron had seemed to accept his presence, Alex felt like he could relax. At least a little. Like Anna, Aaron had changed in the years he'd been gone. Still tall and lithe, Alex had enjoyed watching him dance when he'd hidden in the darkness to watch the rehearsals. Especially when he and Anna had danced together. His best friend and his wife in the same spot on the stage was wonderful.

And, oh, watching Anna dance! So graceful. It was beauty in motion. She also danced well, exceedingly well, with...what was his name, Hugo? Her ex-boyfriend. He grimaced at the thought of her sleeping with another man, though she'd told Kurt they hadn't slept together. Had they?

Alex couldn't blame Anna for wanting a boyfriend, but he was still possessive of her, even if she didn't know it. That was the reason for having Sebastian help him appear to her in a dream after Jack had been killed. He didn't like that she'd gotten over him. That she'd taken her wedding ring off.

He'd seen the indentation on her finger the first night they were together with him disguised as Mr. J. and oh, how it had hurt. Intellectually, he knew it was good that she'd moved on...except that he was still alive and still in love with her. His wife.

"Alex?" Aaron's voice cut through his reverie.

He shook his head to clear it. "Sorry."

"I can imagine there's a lot on your mind."

"You could say that." He ran his hands through his hair. "I guess I can cut my hair now," he said with a wry smile. "And my beard. I kept it to keep from being recognized."

Aaron laughed. "Like you could disguise yourself."

Alex shrugged. "As much as I could."

Seth laughed. "I don't know. I kinda like not having to shave every morning."

Aaron glanced at Seth and shook his head. "I'm not used to either of you guys being that hairy." His eyes widened slightly and his cheeks turned a little pink and he rubbed his neck.

Alex glanced at Seth, wondering why Aaron was embarrassed. Seth gave him a look, and through some sort of unspoken language they'd had forever, Alex understood. At least, he thought he did.

Did Aaron have feelings for him as more than a friend? Alex knew he had a boyfriend. That was such a strange thought. He and Aaron had shared women in San Francisco. Many times. But they'd also fucked. Many times. Once he'd started dating Kirsty, they shared her a few times, but were never together alone. Then Anna entered the picture and Aaron backed off sexually, though they'd spoken lightly about sharing her sometime. He wondered what had finally pushed Aaron over to the other side. He had no

problem with his best friend being gay. He just hoped Aaron's feelings wouldn't get in the way of their friendship.

"So, I understand you're dating someone?" Alex had learned that the man he'd first seen Anna with at the bar was Aaron's boyfriend. A good guy and very flamboyant. Alex had never imagined Aaron as a dominant partner with another man, but seeing them interact with one another, it was obvious he was. Oh, how time changed things.

"Yeah," Aaron said slowly. "Cameron." He looked at Alex nervously. "Does that bother you?"

Alex cocked his brow. "Why would it bother me?"

"Well, I wasn't...", Aaron shrugged. "...gay when you left."

Alex laughed. "You were bi."

"There's a difference. I never went trolling for other guys."

"Aaron, it doesn't matter how I feel about it. If you're happy, that's what I care about. And if Cameron makes you happy, then I'm happy for you."

Aaron nodded, staring at the floor and then looked back up at Alex. "I've never met another woman like Anna," he said softly, his eyes pained.

He was still in love with her. After all these years, he still loved her. Alex nodded. "She's special."

"I kept hoping...", Aaron said, shaking his head. "I guess I know why things never worked out between us."

"But you've been there for her. She's had you to depend on while I was gone."

"I didn't keep her very safe."

"You did what you could. You got her out here and away from Devin." He stepped forward and put his hand on Aaron's shoulder. "Thank you, Aaron. Anna is here and safe, because of you."

"I hardly did anything."

“You told Peter the truth. If you hadn’t...” Alex shuddered. “I don’t want to imagine what would have happened.”

Anna hardly slept, tossing and turning. One minute she wanted to run and find Alex and fling herself into his arms. The next minute she wanted to find him and hit him again. Her heart ached for him and she hated him at the same time.

The questions that raced through her head when she left the hotel continued. He lied! He hid himself from her! Was he trying to get his jollies off by taking advantage of her need for sex? How many other women did he sleep with while he was here? Why didn’t he call her as soon as he’d escaped? How could he claim to love her if he kept himself away from her?

At long last, the sun came up and she stared at the light growing brighter on the ceiling above her bed. She hadn’t heard Aaron come home last night. Where had he gone?

She got up and went to his bedroom. Cameron was there, asleep, but no Aaron, so she went to find her phone and called him.

It took a few rings before he answered in a very groggy voice. “Hello?”

“Aaron, are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh...yeah...fine....”

“Where are you?”

“Um...Alex’s place.”

“You’re with Alex?” What was he doing there?

There was a pause. “Yeah, I came here last night and we started talking until I couldn’t keep my eyes open. I slept on the couch.” Another pause. “Anna, he has a really good reason for not coming to us when—”

Anna felt her temper flare. Aaron had already talked to Alex. Alex had talked to Aaron, but not her? “I don’t care, Aaron.” She ended the call and tossed the phone on her bed. At least, she told herself she didn’t care.

But she did. She wanted to know why he hid himself.

Anna was laying on the couch staring blankly at the TV in the living room when Aaron walked in around lunch time. Cameron had gone home earlier. She half expected Alex to be behind him and wasn’t sure if she was glad or disappointed that Aaron walked in alone.

“You okay?” Aaron asked, sitting down next to her on the couch.

Anna shrugged. She wasn’t sure how she was feeling, aside from resentment that Alex had spent time with Aaron instead of her. Granted, she had run away from Alex, but that didn’t stop her feelings.

“I have his number, if you want to call him. Or you can go see him. He said you could come by any time.”

Anna snorted. “I’m supposed to chase after him? He’s the one who disappeared for years.”

“Anna, he’s trying to respect your feelings. If he thought you would accept him, he would have chased you home, but he doesn’t want you to resent him. If he forces himself on you, your relationship won’t work.”

“What relationship?” she asked bitterly. “We barely knew each other when we got married, and it only lasted for three months.” She paused. “Not even three months. “

“That wasn’t your fault or his. And you know you two are supposed to be together. You’re soul mates. Literally.”

Anna looked at Aaron. “What if I don’t want to be with him?” she asked. “What if I’d rather be with Hugo?”

Aaron's eyes widened. "Hugo? I mean, yeah, he's a good guy. A really good guy, but...." He grimaced. "Anna, Devin would kill him without a thought. Alex is the only one who can protect you. Tom's protections are growing weak. He's not sure he'd be able to keep him from sensing you if Devin came again."

"So I'm stuck with Alex, then?"

"Anna, you don't mean that—"

"I don't?" Her temper flared again. "I was brought here and told I was free. Free to be my own person, and then within a few months, I'm told that I'm not really...that I have to marry Kurt, whether I want to or not. I have to break up with a really good guy, a guy that I—" She stopped herself before she said that she loved him and sighed. "I wish I'd known all this when I arrived. Then I could have been prepared."

"The only ones who knew that Alex was alive when you got here were Vlad and Peter. Wilhelm didn't know until Alex showed up at their house one morning." Aaron sighed. "That's when Kurt came and you two got engaged. They were trying to keep you from getting involved with anyone, until Alex was able to come see you."

"So, Peter really did know that Alex was alive?"

Aaron nodded. "I had no idea when we started talking. But he did some investigating, as did Vlad, and they realized that what Devin had told them was a lie, and began working to undo what Vitaly had done. Anna." Aaron looked at her with serious eyes. "They killed Vitaly so they could get Alex free."

"Vitaly had Alex?" Her musings were confirmed.

"Yes. Vitaly captured Alex and his men because Devin asked him to."

Anna stared at Aaron, not knowing what to say, her lungs squeezing in her chest. It was Devin? Devin did this? Her lower lip began to tremble and

the rest of her body followed.

Devin. Devin had taken Alex away from her. Why did that surprise her? After all Devin had done to her, why would he have hesitated to get rid of Alex the only way possible?

“Why didn’t he escape? He’s...he can do anything.”

“Three men died trying to find a way out of that castle. Jesse, Michael and Jason all died the first year they were captured. Vitaly had them watched like a hawk. Jason was shot just because the word ‘escape’ was spoken.”

Tears came to Anna’s eyes. Those poor men. “What about Seth? And Tony and Greg?”

“They’re here with Alex. Seth followed you home last night, or partially home. He’s the one who stopped the guy who attacked you.”

Seth protected her? Alex sent him to make sure she got home okay? Even after she yelled and hit Alex, he still made sure she made it home okay? “But how did they escape?”

“After Vitaly died, and you’d escaped from Devin, Vlad had to go out of town, and he took most of his guards with him. He hinted to Alex how to escape.”

“Oh.”

“Peter worked very hard on trying to get you away from Devin. He was going to take you to visit Vitaly last September, to try and convince his grandfather that Devin was wrong, but he died first. Vlad had been slowly poisoning Vitaly so no one would suspect his death was intentional. Especially Devin.”

“Did you know all this?”

“No. But it’s because of Peter that you’re here. He saw firsthand what Devin was doing and what his goals were. He worked with me, and Travis

and Justin. We got you here eventually, but had no idea Alex was alive. We didn't know how you'd be able to be away from Devin without getting sick, but Peter assured us that he'd take care of it. I guess Alex knew he'd have to come and establish his 'home' sooner or later so that you'd be okay. It just happened faster than they'd expected."

"Why didn't they tell me?"

"Because Devin would have found out that they weren't loyal to him anymore, and killed them. Then you would never have been able to escape."

Anna's thoughts went back to the Thanksgiving she'd spent with Peter's family. "That must have been why Nina got so upset at Thanksgiving. She must have known about Alex."

"Nina?"

"Vlad's wife. She got really upset when she found out that I'd been married to a German named Alex...and then Vlad wouldn't let her be around me the rest of the time I was there." It made sense now. But it still didn't explain why Alex had hidden from her.

"Anna, Alex still loves you. Desperately loves you. He...knew what Kurt was doing, and heard what Cameron said about you needing to get laid. He was trying to help you by posing as Mr. J."

"Why didn't he just tell me? Why didn't he just come to me? Why did he lie?"

Aaron sighed. "You know those Elders who've been killed recently?"

"Marcus and Connor? Yeah."

"That was Alex's doing."

Anna's mouth dropped open in shock. She knew what Alex had done...in theory, but never fully comprehended it...until now. "He killed them?" she whispered.

“Yeah. And their sons. Partially to get revenge on what they did to you, but mostly to kick Devin’s legs out from under him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Alex is taking out Devin’s supporters, one by one. It will screw with Devin’s head, and make him more vulnerable. Then Alex can confront Devin.”

“He’s not going to kill Tom, is he?”

“No. Alex knows Tom isn’t loyal to Devin anymore. But he has to pretend to be.”

“What does that have to do with him not seeing me?”

“Anna, if he revealed himself to you, and then told you he had to go out on a job, would you have let him go? Would you have forgiven him leaving you?”

Anna stared at the ground. “No,” she said softly. She would have been furious at him for even thinking of leaving her.

“He wanted to get things taken care of so that he wouldn’t have to leave you again. As it is, he has to go out next month.”

Terror rose up in her heart as she thought about Alex going out on a job. “No!” she whispered, eyes wide with fright. “No, he can’t!”

Aaron put his hand on hers. “See why he stayed hidden?”

“He can’t, Aaron. He can’t. I can’t go through that again.” She jumped up and ran to her room, burying her face in her pillow. No. If she stayed away from him, if she protected her heart against him, then it wouldn’t hurt. She wouldn’t care if he came back after this job.

Chapter Thirty-One

Alex sat on his rooftop terrace looking out to the treetops of Central Park. He'd been sitting there for hours as the sun passed overhead and slowly began the decent into evening. Aaron called a few hours ago, letting Alex know that he had shared Alex's story with Anna and explained why Alex had stayed hidden. Alex had hoped it would have gone better.

He hoped that she would have called or, even better, come to see him. Maybe he should go see her, but he didn't want to press her. He wanted to give her time to accept the fact that he was alive.

There was a flash of light next to him. "Hello, Sebastian" he said without turning his head. Ever since his friend had given Alex some of the Immortal essence, he'd been able to sense his, or any other Immortal's presence. He could also sense Anna, when she was close enough. Her apartment was too far away for him to feel her now. But if she walked by his building, as she had on the day he arrived in the city, he knew it.

The tall Immortal settled himself on the wooden chair across from Alex. "Have you talked to her?"

"You know?" Alex hadn't spoken to Sebastian since he'd returned from the job in Chicago.

"I do. She's quite upset. I can feel it."

Alex ran his hand through his freshly cut hair. It was a strange feeling after years of long hair, but he thought it might help Anna accept him if he looked more like himself. His face felt extra sensitive after shaving off his beard as well. "She hit me."

Sebastian's eyebrows rose high on his face and amusement lit his eyes. "Really?"

"I've never seen her so angry." Alex grimaced. "I guess I've never seen her do a lot of things." He looked at Sebastian. "She's so...hard, so stubborn. Not at all like the sweet girl that I married."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Alex stared at the ground. "I don't know. I'm glad she's become her own person. But it's sad to see her sweetness diminished."

"She's still sweet, Alex. But she's hurt and confused. Did your father tell you she blatantly disobeyed him?"

"She did what!"

"He gave her an order and she willfully did the opposite and found out what happens when a slave disobeys her Master."

"Don't call her that," Alex growled.

"I didn't mean it disrespectfully, Alex."

Alex huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "What happened?"

"Extreme pain in her head."

"No, I mean, why did she do it?"

"Wilhelm didn't tell you?"

Alex shook his head.

"He and Kurt went to visit her on the way to Connor's funeral, or Chris' at that point. She didn't come out right away to see them, and when she finally did, it was obvious that she'd been in bed with her ex-boyfriend."

Alex's heart squeezed. He thought they hadn't slept together.

"She was very...stubborn. She and Kurt fought. Loudly. She was ready to storm out of the room and your father told her to stop and she didn't."

Alex sighed. Could anything go right? No wonder she was ignoring his father and brother.

“He forbade her from being with Hugo again. She cares for Hugo a great deal, and he for her. Wilhelm was trying to keep them apart so she would accept you when you went to her. She was very compliant when he left.”

“And somewhere between then and now, she’s become angry again,” Alex muttered. He wanted to have words with his father. He and Kurt were supposed to take care of Anna, not drive her to anger. Maybe if Kurt had been kinder to Anna, this Hugo thing wouldn’t have happened.

“You’re right,” Sebastian said, reading his mind, and Alex looked up in confusion. “If Kurt had handled things better, she would have accepted your presence easier.”

“I should pummel him again.”

“It won’t do any good. What’s done is done. You must decide what to do from here.”

Alex stood and went to the side of the terrace to look down the street at Anna’s apartment building. “She has feelings for Hugo?”

“Yes.”

He closed his eyes. He knew she’d had relationships with men since he’d been gone. Peter and Kurt included. Could she ever love him again? Would she want to be let go once she was freed from him? Or would she just stay with him because she had to?

“I wish I could torture Devin to death.”

Sebastian chuckled. “Perhaps once the bond is broken.”

“Will it really dissolve on its own?”

“I believe so. If the final ritual is not performed, the bonds will not be strengthened and she should be freed from both of you.”

“But not our marriage?”

“Marriage bonds you for life, Alex. Nothing can destroy that.”

“What if she doesn’t want me?”

“You will have to work hard to make her want you again. You two can’t be separated. Kurt could divorce Gretchen because he wasn’t an Elder-Son. You and Anna were married and bonded by the Elders. Only death destroys that bond.” He gave him a sad smile. “It’s why she could never get over you. If you had really died, she would have been able to.”

There was comfort in Sebastian’s words. It gave him hope. “But I don’t want her resenting me.”

“Maybe you should set her free and trust that she’ll come back to you.”

“I can’t, can I?”

“Technically no, but you can give her freedom to choose you. Have your father lift his restrictions, or override them yourself.”

“I can do that?”

“You shouldn’t, but yes, you can. With her.”

Alex nodded. “‘If you love something, set it free...’.”

Anna’s phone rang that evening and she ignored it. It was Wilhelm. Again. She didn’t want to talk to him. What else would he forbid her from doing?

Her phone rang again, this time it was Aaron. “Hey, Aaron.” He was out with Cameron.

“Anna, Wilhelm’s trying to get ahold of you.”

“I don’t want to talk to him.”

“He says he needs to talk to you.”

“Is he ordering me?” she asked bitterly.

“No. He said he wouldn’t command you, but asked you to please call him.”

He wouldn't command her? "Really?"

"Yes. Please call him, Anna. He sounds concerned."

Anna sighed. "All right." Perversely, she was more inclined to call him knowing he hadn't commanded it.

She stared at her phone for a long minute before tapping on Wilhelm's picture on the screen.

"Hello, *Liebling*," Wilhelm answered in a gentle voice. "Thank you for calling me."

He didn't sound angry. Was it a trick? "Hi, Wilhelm," she said timidly.

There was a pause before he spoke. "Anna, I know I have been...distant and hard on you these last few months. I am very sorry for that. Now that you know that Alex is back, I do not have to hide anything from you anymore. The last few months have been very, very busy and I am so sorry I pushed you aside."

Anna didn't respond. She didn't know what Alex's return had to do with his pushing her aside. He had hidden Alex's return from her too, and it hurt.

"Anna, I am lifting any commands I have given you since you arrived."

She blinked in shock. "What?"

"When you arrived, you were told you were free, and then I began to remove your freedoms without telling you why. That was unfair of me. Obviously, you are no longer engaged to Kurt, but I..." He hesitated. "I remove the ban on you being with Hugo as well."

Anna was stunned. Alex had returned...her husband had returned, and Wilhelm was telling her it was okay for her to be with Hugo?

"Alex will respect your wishes about whether or not people learn that he is your husband. He will not demand you return to him."

Anna didn't know what to say.

“Anna, I only ask that you at least give him a chance to win you back. That is not a command.”

“He’s leaving again,” she whispered.

“For jobs given to him by myself, Tom and Vlad. There is no trap, they are simple jobs and, if you want, he can remain in contact with you while he is gone. Aside from a few of us, no one knows he is alive.”

“Anyone who sees him will know he’s related to Kurt.”

“If you want him to remain hidden, he will. Though it will be difficult for him to take you out if he does.”

“Take me out?”

“How else do you court a woman?”

“Oh.”

“Is it all right if he asks you out on a date?”

“I...” Alex wanted to ask her out? He wouldn’t demand her return? He would even hide that they were married if she wanted him to. She could go out with Hugo, too. “Y-yes, I suppose so.”

“Gut.”

“What if I decide I don’t want to be with him?”

Wilhelm didn’t answer right away and Anna grew nervous in the silence. “Then I will permit a divorce,” he said softly.

Anna inhaled deeply. He really meant what he was saying. She really was free. Free to choose whether or not she wanted to be with Alex. Tears came to her eyes at the thought of not being with him, but she didn’t want to think about that now. “Thank you, Wilhelm,” she whispered. *Freedom.*

“I love you, *Liebling*. I want you to be happy.”

Anna’s jaw trembled. “I love you, too, Wilhelm.”

Anna stared at the engagement ring she held in her hand. The one that Kurt had given her. She no longer had to wear it. She was no longer

engaged. Yes, she was married, but only technically. If she didn't want to stay with Alex, she didn't have to. The thought was both heart-freeing and sad.

Now what did she do?

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Alex smoothed his blue dress shirt and khaki dress slacks nervously as he walked into the theater Monday morning. Today he was going to watch the City Ballet's rehearsals again, but not in the dark balcony. No, today he was sitting in the orchestra section with Vincent. He would be seen.

He heard Seth chuckle behind him. "Nervous?" his friend murmured.

"Do you blame me?" Alex asked. "You would be too...." He had told Aaron he was coming, but he still hadn't talked to Anna. Wilhelm had called him and told him that Anna had taken his call and that she'd seemed to have softened.

Alex sensed Anna as he walked down the aisle, but didn't see her at first. His eyes searched the dancers on the stage and he finally spotted her talking to the tall, dark-skinned man he knew was Hugo. She gave Hugo an adoring smile and Alex felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. Maybe watching rehearsal today wasn't such a good idea. But he was here, and he couldn't leave. In fact, he planned on being there a lot. She would get used to him being alive one way or another, though he would maintain his distance.

As Alex, Seth, Greg and Tony made their way down the aisle towards the stage, he knew when he became visible to those on stage as whispers erupted from all corners. He could see the women looking at him and giggling, and he sighed. He had to maintain his distance from women, or Anna would never trust him. But at the same time, he wasn't supposed to know Anna. What had he gotten himself into?

Vincent noticed the whispers and grinned as he turned to greet Alex. “I should have realized the whispers could only be about you.” Vincent didn’t know exactly who he was, except that he had some sort of familial relationship with Kurt. Alex had kept the information from him to protect him. Vincent didn’t know that Alex knew Anna.

Alex chuckled. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. They dance exceptionally well when you are here. Do you mind if I introduce you? If I don’t, they won’t pay attention to anything this morning.”

Alex nodded, glancing quickly at where Anna was standing, still talking to Hugo. She apparently hadn’t noticed the whispers. Hugo reached out to caress her cheek and Alex growled.

“Alex...,” Seth murmured.

Alex took a deep breath. “I know,” he muttered.

Vincent led them up onto the stage, clapping his hands to get the dancers’ attention. Anna turned to look at Vincent and her eyes widened as she made eye contact with Alex. His heart pounded as he gazed into her beautiful green eyes for just a moment before dragging them away. Was this really such a good idea? Could he keep himself from walking over to her and kissing her until she couldn’t stand straight?

Anna debated all night whether or not she should tell Hugo what was going on. She’d almost called him after she finished her call with Wilhelm, but didn’t. The knowledge that she was allowed to be with him thrilled her, but should she really just go jump back into bed with him, not knowing how she felt about Alex?

She woke Monday morning, determined to speak to Hugo. She walked out on stage and found him at the side of the stage, talking with Vincent. She could go to him. She could go to him and kiss him and go out with him and anything else she wanted. Her heart both swelled and ached as she looked at him from the shadows of the wings. Maybe she could finally admit that she loved him. Maybe.

Did she love Alex? Alex was just such a part of her...could she *not* love him? But did she *have* to love him? Did she *want* to love him? She honestly didn't know.

Taking a deep breath, Anna walked out on stage as casually as she could. She and Hugo had barely spoken since the night they'd made love, and only when they had to. It hurt to gaze into his loving eyes.

Hugo glanced up as she walked towards him and raised his brows. Her feelings must have been showing on her face. She gave him a small smile and dropped her bag on the ground.

"Katrina?" Hugo's large body blocked out the stage lights behind him. "Are you okay?"

"Why do you ask?" she asked softly.

"You look...troubled. Did something happen over the weekend?"

She gazed up into his topaz eyes, trying to contain her emotions. "I...." She was so torn, so conflicted.

"Kittycat...", he murmured. "What's wrong?"

"Wilhelm lifted his ban on us being together," she blurted out quickly.

Hugo blinked several times, looking at her as if he wasn't quite sure he'd heard correctly.

She held up her empty left hand. "I'm not engaged anymore," she added softly. *Just married*. But only if she wanted to be, she reminded herself.

His eyes widened. "You mean...we can...."

She gave him a shy smile and nodded, pushing thoughts of Alex out of her mind. She didn't want to be thinking about Alex right now. Who knew the next time she would even see him?

"Why are you not engaged anymore?" he asked softly.

"Wilhelm decided not to force me into something I didn't want to do." That was true.

"I'm glad he changed his mind."

Anna heard people beginning to whisper around them, and hoped she and Hugo weren't being too obvious. She continued to gaze up at Hugo. Oh, how wonderful to be able to look at him without feeling like she was disobeying Wilhelm.

He reached out and caressed her cheek. "Have dinner with me tonight," he said in a quiet voice.

She leaned into his caress and nodded. "Okay."

His gaze intensified and she thought he might lean down and kiss her, but Vincent clapped his hands and the moment was broken. She glanced over to see Vincent walking onto the stage with several men behind him. Tall men. Men that....

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed softly, eyes widening as she stared into Alex's cobalt-blue eyes.

He'd shaved off his beard and cut his hair, making him look like the handsome man she'd fallen in love with so many years ago. He was not as broad as he'd been, but was obviously still very muscular, as she'd felt on Saturday night. She'd barely looked at him on Saturday, but now she could see that he'd grown older, as she certainly had as well. Her heart pounded as she stared at him, barely believing that he was really here.

He stopped and gazed at her for a moment and then turned away from her and said something to Vincent next to him. She stared at him as he

followed Vincent to the center of the stage.

Anna looked around and saw the female dancers gazing at him, star struck. Is this why he'd come? So he could get the attention of the women since she was avoiding him?

Aaron walked on stage at that moment and stopped short when he saw Alex. Alex saw him and shook his head slightly, making Anna wonder what that was all about.

"Everyone!" Vincent called.

The whispers stopped, and everyone was free to gape at her husband as if he were a piece of meat. A very handsome piece of meat. Anna was having a hard time keeping her heartbeat at a normal level.

Alex smiled and she, along with every other woman on stage, melted. Hugo stiffened beside her and Anna closed her eyes. This was not good. Not good at all.

"Everyone," Vincent repeated. "I'd like to introduce you to Alex Kunze. A new and," Vincent smiled at Alex. "...very generous donor. I believe you all gave him the name Euroman?"

The stage instantly became filled with a hundred people whispering and giggling to each other. Alex looked amused, and smiled politely, but didn't seem to give flirtatious smiles to any of the women. He simply nodded his head in greeting.

Stef walked over to Anna and grabbed her hand. "Omigosh! He is so hot!" She giggled and then glanced at Anna. "Doesn't he look like Kurt a little?"

Anna shrugged and glanced up to see Hugo pressing his lips together.

"So, he will be watching rehearsal today and spending time around the theater. Please be polite," Vincent continued in a slow voice. "And let's begin our warm-up."

Hugo turned on his heel and walked off the stage. Anna followed him.

“Hugo? Hugo, what’s wrong?”

He stopped in the wings and turned around, hurt in his eyes. “I never thought you so shallow, Katrina,” he said in a harsh whisper.

“What?” What was he talking about?

“I saw how you reacted to...him...when he walked up. I thought you were different than the other women.”

It took Anna a moment to understand why he was so upset. She’d tried to mask her reaction to Alex’s appearance, but had apparently failed to do so. And now she’d hurt Hugo. Before she realized it, Hugo had spun around and walked away. “Hugo!” she called, running after him into the dressing room area. “Hugo, wait. Please?”

He stopped, hands on his hips, but didn’t turn around. “That hurt, Katrina.”

Anna put her hand on his arm and walked around in front of him. “Hugo, please...I can explain....” But did she want to? No, but Hugo deserved the truth. “Hugo...I—” She took a deep breath. “That is Alex. *My* Alex. The Alex whom I was told was killed.”

Hugo frowned and stared at her. “You expect me to believe that’s your dead husband out there? Then why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

“I just found out on Saturday. Wilhelm called yesterday, telling me that I was free to do as I wanted.” She told him about “Mr. J.” and how she discovered it was really Alex, and her conversations with Aaron and Wilhelm. By the time she was done, she was in tears. “I don’t know what to do, Hugo. I love you. I want to be with you. But...Alex.... I don’t know what to do about him.” She looked up into his eyes. “Please believe me.”

He was still frowning, but let out a sigh. “I don’t think anyone could make up a story like that.” He closed his eyes and then pulled her to him,

stroking her hair. "I don't want to keep you from him, Kittykat."

"I don't know what I want, Hugo. I'm so confused."

"I don't feel right, going out with another man's wife."

"But I don't have to be...that, if I don't want to be." She looked up at him with sad eyes and caressed his cheek.

"You said you loved me?" he asked in a soft voice.

Anna inhaled sharply. Had she really said it out loud? "I do," she whispered.

He gazed down at her for a long moment before bending his head and gently kissing her. "I love you, too."

Vincent introduced Alex to several of the principal dancers and then went to sit in the audience. He and Aaron weren't going to hide that they knew each other, but were trying to keep it low key. The less the other dancers knew about how much he knew Anna, the better she would take his presence...he hoped.

Shortly after Vincent had introduced Alex to the Company, Anna had disappeared. Was she upset that he'd come? Well...that was just too bad. He'd made the donation so he could have access to the company and was going to take advantage of the situation. Especially sitting with her at the Gala on Thursday night. Big donation equaled a seat at the first table with Tom and the Mayor.

The women had treated him as they normally treated him, and he tried to keep his annoyance hidden. He used to savor the attention; he no longer did. He just wanted one woman...the one woman he couldn't see right now. Hugo was gone too. *Fuck*. He didn't like the idea of her wandering off with her ex, but...what could he do? Commanding her to be with him would be

counterproductive. He'd just have to convince her that she wanted to be with him. Somehow.

The two missing dancers showed up on stage a few minutes later. Alex growled when he saw Anna's lips were slightly swollen. What the hell was she doing, kissing that man when she was supposed to be warming up?

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Alex found himself mesmerized by Anna's movements. Being this close to her, he could watch her individual muscles flex and relax as she moved her body. Her skin was so smooth and he wanted to rush up on stage and grab her, but he kept in control of himself...mostly. He didn't like the way she gazed into Hugo's eyes as they danced, but had to admit that they danced exceedingly well together.

Finally at lunch break, he stood. He wondered if it would be imprudent to go out to lunch with some of the dancers. Should a donor do that? He'd heard someone say once that if it weren't for the dancers who slept with rich men, there would be no money for the productions.

Aaron walked up to him a few minutes later and grinned at him. "You wanna come to lunch with us?"

"Is that okay?"

"You're my friend. We did it when we were in San Francisco."

"But this isn't San Francisco."

"True. Do you know how difficult it is to understand you?" Aaron laughed.

Alex rolled his eyes. "I've hardly spoken English the last four and a half years. I'm working on it."

"So you gonna come? Anna always comes with us."

"Oh." Alex thought for a moment. "All right then."

“Hey, Katrina. You coming?” Aaron called to Anna from the edge of the stage as she was untying her shoes.

Anna glanced at Hugo. “You want to come to lunch?” she asked with a shy smile.

He smiled back and her heart fluttered. “Love to.” He held out his hand and helped her to her feet, not taking his eyes off hers.

“Katrina?” Aaron asked in an irritated voice.

“Yeah, we’re coming,” she called, frowning at Aaron’s tone. She dropped her shoes in her bag and slipped on her sandals. “Ready?”

Hugo nodded and they walked to the edge of the stage where Aaron was waiting for them, talking with...Alex? She stopped short, Hugo running into her, as she stared at Alex.

He gave her a brilliant smile. “Hello, Katrina.”

Anna pressed her lips together and Hugo stiffened slightly, then moved around her and jumped down to the audience level. He extended his hand in greeting to Alex. “Hello, I’m Hugo Sintzenich. You’re Alex, correct?”

Alex gave him a stiff smile and took his hand. “Yes, Alex Kunze.” He glanced up at Anna, who was still on the stage. “I’ve enjoyed watching you work these last few weeks. You are truly a gifted choreographer.”

“*Danke.*” Hugo said something in German that she couldn’t understand.

Alex looked surprised and glanced at Anna again. “You speak German?”

Hugo smiled. “Didn’t your father or brother tell you?”

Alex began to shake his head and then stared. “You know who I am?”

“Katrina told me.”

“Ah.” Alex looked between Anna and Hugo, confusion in his eyes. “I see.”

“Kat, where’re we going...?” Stef walked up and trailed off as she seemed to sense the tension in the group of people. She glanced around at the tense faces. “We doing lunch?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “C’mon.” He dragged Alex by the elbow and Hugo followed after them, speaking in German with a serious look on his face while Alex listened intently.

Anna crossed her arms and huffed. Was Hugo trying to make friends with Alex?

“Kat, what’s wrong? Do you know Euroman?”

Anna sighed and glanced at her friend. “Yes. He’s my husband.”

“What!” Stef exclaimed loudly and then clapped her hands over her mouth. “What? Why didn’t you tell me?” She stared. “When did you get married?”

“I...no, my husband that I thought was dead. I...I didn’t know until Saturday night....” She began to tell Stef about her trysts with Mr. J. when Aaron turned around and looked at her.

“You coming?” he asked.

Anna saw the pleading look in Alex’s eyes and bit her lip and nodded. She and Stef both jumped down off the stage and hurried after the men.

They stayed well behind them and Anna finished telling her story to Stef. “I didn’t think anyone could be hotter than Kurt, but man....” Anna saw Stef drag her eyes all over Alex’s backside. “Damn, girl.”

Anna frowned. She didn’t like her friend ogling Alex. But she had a point. ‘Course, all three men ahead of them were worth looking at, not to mention the three men, Seth, Tony and Greg, walking behind the whole group. She suddenly realized she hadn’t greeted them, nor thanked Seth for saving her on Saturday night. She stopped and turned around, giving them timid smiles. “Hi,” she said softly, looking between the three of them. They,

too, had aged in the last four and a half years. Tony and Greg both had a bit of grey at the temples, but were as handsome as they'd been when they'd left her that morning all those years ago....

"Hey, Anna," Seth said, walking up and giving her a bear hug. Tony and Greg did the same thing and Anna found herself blinking back tears. Her past was surrounding her. These guys watched out for her and Alex. They suffered years of imprisonment because of her.

Suddenly, Anna wasn't hungry. She glanced at Stef. "I'm gonna go back to the theater. I'm not hungry." She squeezed her way between Tony and Seth and ran back to the theater. She needed to be alone.

Alex found himself reluctantly liking Hugo. He was a good, honorable man and cared about Anna deeply. He half suspected he was in love with her. It would have been so much easier to hate the man he was competing with for Anna's heart, but he couldn't.

"I want Katrina to be happy," Hugo said in German as they walked out of the theater. "I don't know everything that she's gone through, but I know enough to want her to be happy, even if it's not with me."

Alex glanced at Aaron. "We can speak in English. I've known Aaron longer than I've known Anna, er Katrina."

Hugo gave Aaron an apologetic look and Aaron grinned. "It's all good," Aaron said.

Hugo looked back at Alex. "I don't want to stand in your way. You are her husband and...." He grinned. "...from a very powerful family that I don't want to mess with."

Alex chuckled. "I appreciate your understanding, Hugo. I..." Alex glanced back at Anna, who was speaking softly and intently with her friend.

“I want her to be happy, too. I don’t want to force her into anything and resent me.” He sighed. “But I love her. I’ve spent the last four and a half years longing for her. I will do whatever I can to win her back.”

Hugo nodded, understanding in his eyes. “As much as it kills me to say this, I will back off and let you and her get to know each other again.” He was quiet for a moment and then chuckled. “I hope you’ll let me continue to dance with her, though. It would be difficult to find a new partner two days before the performance.”

“That’s not my decision. That’s hers.” Alex twisted his wedding band on his hand. Anna had chosen well in Hugo. “If she decides against me, I’m glad to know that you are sincere in how you feel about her.”

“I had asked her out to dinner for tonight before we knew you were coming. I’ll talk to her....” Hugo looked behind them. “Where’d she go?”

Alex whipped around and saw Stefanie jogging towards them. “Where’s Katrina?” he asked, a little harsher than he meant.

Stefanie’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry,” he said, with a soft smile. “I worry about her.”

“She said she wasn’t hungry and went back to the theater,” she answered, narrowing her eyes.

“Stef is Katrina’s defender,” Aaron said, walking over and putting his arm around her. “Stef, Alex is as protective of Katrina as you are. Maybe more.”

Alex smiled, glad to learn that Anna had surrounded herself with good people who cared deeply about her. Maybe if he could win them over, Anna would be more receptive to his advances.

“Katrina,” Hugo sighed as they talked after rehearsal. “I don’t want to get in the way of you and Alex. I think you need to give him a chance...give yourself a chance to get to know him again.”

Anna stared in disbelief at Hugo. He’d just told her he didn’t think they should go out to dinner tonight and now he was telling her that she should give Alex a chance?

Anna had been looking forward to having dinner with Hugo. After all, she was free to do as she liked now. And, when she didn’t remember Alex was there, or look at him, she really wanted to spend time with Hugo. The problem was that Alex seemed to always be somewhere she could see him and it tortured her heart.

She saw the other female dancers come up with excuses to go over to him and flirt, but he never flirted back. He was polite and friendly, but nothing beyond that. There was an element of relief in seeing that.

Alex stood at the edge of the stage, talking with Aaron and Vincent. Seth, Tony and Greg were all surrounded by female dancers and appearing to enjoy it very much. She could imagine they hadn’t gotten out much since they’d arrived.

“Katrina?” Hugo touched her shoulder. “Are you upset?”

Anna turned her gaze back onto Hugo’s kind, handsome face. “Hugo...I...I want to go out with you.”

“And I, you, Kittykat.” He stepped closer. “But you need to figure things out with Alex first. If you decide you don’t want to be with him, I will welcome you back with open arms. But you need to give yourself a chance to find out.” He inhaled deeply. “He loves you, Katrina. It’s written all over his face when he watches you dance. And he is your husband, like it or not. He should have the first chance with you.”

Anna grimaced at the reminder that Alex was still her husband, though she wasn't exactly sure why. She nodded slowly. Hugo was right. If nothing else, it wasn't fair to Hugo to be uncertain of how she felt about Alex.

Hugo leaned down and kissed her cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow." He straightened and walked away.

Anna stared at the pointe shoe in her hand. She felt lonely again, but at the same time, felt like she wanted to be alone. She dropped the shoe in her bag, picked it up and walked into the wings to head home.

Footsteps sounded behind her and she turned to see Alex jogging in her direction. "An—er, Katrina." He gave her a sheepish smile. "I don't know if I should call you Anna or Katrina."

Anna stared at him for a moment. "Whichever you'd like to call me, I guess."

"You've always been *mein Schatzi*," he said in a low voice, filled with emotion.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Alex...." She shook her head. Why were her emotions so raw?

"Please, just give me a chance," he whispered, stepping close. "I know that I wounded you terribly by hiding from you." He cradled her cheek. "But I couldn't bear to tell you I had to leave again. I didn't want to put you through that again. I knew it would be incredibly difficult for you if I did." He stepped closer and she tipped her head up to gaze into his eyes, brimming with tears. "I was going to tell you as soon as I came back from this next job. Vati is fairly certain that...I will be able to retire once the others find out what happened."

Anna closed her eyes. She could hardly stand to look at his eyes, they were so filled with emotion. "I'm afraid, Alex. I've been hurt so badly...."

“I know, *Schatzi*,” he murmured. She could feel his breath on her face and knew his face was just inches from hers. His arm slipped around her waist and he pulled her close. “I will do everything in my power to make sure you’re not hurt again.”

Fear bubbled up inside her and she pushed him away. “No...no, Alex. I can’t.” She clutched her chest and ran away from him as fast as she could.

Alex stared through his tears as his beloved wife ran away from him. He took a deep breath, chest expanding as he sucked air into his lungs. Maybe the cool air would soothe the burning pain in his heart.

He’d pushed her. Pushed her too fast. He hadn’t meant to, but he did. The fear he’d sensed from her as she ran away was heartbreaking. Once again, she was afraid of him.

“She’s not afraid of you, Alex.”

Alex looked up to see Sebastian walking towards him from the backstage area. “What are you doing here?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“Wanted to see how you two interacted today.”

“Hardly at all,” Alex muttered, running his hand through his hair. “I tried to kiss her and pushed her too fast. I felt her fear.”

“Fear of being hurt, Alex, not of you. Her heart is battered. The very fact that she’s not a cold-hearted bitch is attributable only to her heritage.”

“Why are the other ones like her so...cold then?”

“They’re not cold, they’re just above emotions.” Sebastian stopped in front of him. “She was born of love between her parents. She was raised, at least her first few years, in a home of love. Even Jack and Devin loved on her when she was younger. That is why she’s able to feel things other

women like her could only dream of. That's what makes her so powerful. That's what makes her so vulnerable."

Alex felt his rage oozing through his veins like molten lava. A slow-burning hatred and abhorrence to the abomination that was Devin Andersen. No pain, no punishment would ever make up for what that man did to Anna. But he would pay. Alex would personally oversee it. Death was too kind for someone like him.

"Alex, calm down," Sebastian said softly, putting his hand on Alex's shoulder. "You will have your opportunity to deal with Devin."

Alex's eyes were hard as steel. "And I will savor every moment."

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Chapter Thirty-Four

“Hey, Anna you want to come out to dinner with us?” Aaron asked, standing in her bedroom doorway.

Anna sighed, assuming the “us” included Alex. She didn’t want to see Alex. He made her feel things she was afraid to feel. Every relationship she’d ever been in ended in heartbreak. Why would she want to go through that again? Yes, she’d been about ready to try and start things with Hugo, but...Hugo was different. He had nothing to do with the Brotherhood and Devin didn’t know he existed.

She sat on her bed and frowned at Aaron. “Not really.”

“He’ll leave you alone, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

Anna’s stomach growled and she clutched her stomach with her arms.

“We’re going to Rinaldi’s,” he said in a sing-song voice.

Anna huffed. Leave it to Aaron to pick her favorite restaurant.

“You have to come, there’s too many guys, and I can’t handle them on my own.”

At that, Anna laughed and rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. But only for you. And because of where we’re going.”

Anna dressed quickly in a dark green sheath dress. After she fixed her hair and makeup, she went out to the living room and was relieved to find that only Cameron was there, standing in the kitchen with Aaron.

Cameron’s blue eyes were sparkling as he walked over to her. “I can’t believe I get to meet Mr. J. tonight!” he shrieked, and Anna couldn’t keep herself from giggling at his enthusiasm.

Aaron rolled his eyes. “If you start flirting, I’ll be jealous,” he muttered.

Cameron grinned and kissed Aaron full on the mouth. “Only as I would flirt with any celebrity.”

“Not encouraging.” He kissed Cameron back as though trying to brand him, and Anna watched their easy relationship with frank envy.

They took a taxi to the small Italian restaurant across town. When they walked in they were led to a large table in the back where Stef, Jamie, and several other dancers including Hugo, were sitting with Alex and his men.

Anna was not happy to see Jasmine there, sitting next to and blatantly flirting with Alex. Jasmine had been behaving herself lately and had even apologized to Anna for the Devin incident. Anna had a feeling it had more to do with fear of losing her position with the company than any remorse on her part, but the other dancers had slowly been allowing her back into the social circle.

Anna sat between Stef and Aaron after greeting everyone. Alex gave her an affectionate smile that made her heart flutter, but she quickly looked away.

Aaron introduced Cameron to Alex, and Cameron greeted him wide-eyed and breathless, to which Aaron looked a little grumpy. Alex greeted Cameron with an amused but genuine smile. It would be a strange event, meeting your best friend’s boyfriend.

“I can’t believe Jasmine!” Stef whispered behind the menu.

Anna looked over at Alex who was smiling politely and nodding, but there was no hint of flirting in his face. “She doesn’t know who he is.”

“She flirts with anything with a cock. Aaron, did you warn Alex about her?”

Aaron shook his head. “No, but Alex is a smart guy.”

“Does he know what she did with Kurt?” Stef asked Anna.

Anna shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve barely spoken to him.”

“Why?” Stef looked shocked.

“It’s...uncomfortable.”

“It’s uncomfortable looking into those gorgeous eyes and beautiful face?” Stef asked with a grin.

Anna smiled, knowing Stef didn’t mean anything by her comment. “Well, kinda. I’m not used to him being alive. It’s something I never dared to hope would happen and I’m not sure what to do with it.”

“Take him home and jump his bones. That’s what I’d do.”

“It’s complicated,” she said softly. Alex was not only her husband, he was also her Master. He could make her do anything he wanted.

Anna watched him throughout dinner as he interacted with her friends. He was polite and friendly with the women, but didn’t flirt back when they flirted. To the guys, he was more relaxed, telling jokes and laughing a great deal. She found herself gazing at him as he did laugh, noticing the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, wondering when they’d appeared. His lips were as perfect as ever, and she remembered the feel of them against her own mouth and body. His hands were large and powerful as he waved them in the air while he talked, and she remembered how those hands had made her feel.

Even after being imprisoned for all that time, he was still an easy-going, charming man who knew how to interact with people in such an admirably easy way, it awed her. He listened to each person carefully, asking questions and clearly making them feel as if he sincerely cared about what they were saying.

Alex would glance at Anna frequently, giving her gentle smiles and making her heart jump in her chest. He asked her questions along with the other dancers, but didn’t single her out. Anna wasn’t sure how she felt

about that. She had a feeling he was trying to be unobtrusive, but part of her was indignant that he treated her like all the other dancers.

“That’s a pretty ring,” Jasmine said as the dinner plates were being cleared. She grabbed his right hand and stroked his ring finger. Anna narrowed her eyes.

“*Danke*. It’s my...wedding ring.”

“Wedding ring?” Jasmine exclaimed and then gave a strained smile. “Your wife is a lucky woman. Where is she?”

“We are....” Alex glanced at Anna. “We have been separated for a long time and are trying to see where our relationship is at the moment,” he said softly, taking his hand away from Jasmine and twisting the ring on his finger. “I am hoping we can work things out.”

“Why did she leave you?”

“*Nein*, it is I who left her.” He blinked several times. “I...made a mistake in leaving. I should not have left and have regretted it every day since.”

Anna stared at him, heart aching. He thought he made a mistake in leaving?

“She doesn’t want you back? Is she crazy?”

He looked at his ring. “She’s been through a lot and is a different person than she was when we were together.” He paused. “She may have decided she’s better off without me.” The pain in his eyes stabbed directly into Anna’s heart.

“Do you still love her?” Stef asked.

Anna elbowed her in ribs.

“*Ja*, I do,” he said, voice cracking. “More than anything in the world.”

The table grew quiet. Anna stared at her hands as she twisted them in her lap. If Aaron or even Stef had brought the original subject up, she

would have thought it planned. But Jasmine wouldn't do something like that. She was probably just wanting to know how available he was.

Anna closed her eyes and concentrated. It had been a very long time since she'd read a man. She hadn't needed to when she was under Devin's control and before that, she'd lost her ability when he'd drained her every night. But her long separation from Devin had allowed her powers to return to almost normal levels again, and it didn't take but a few seconds before she could feel Alex.

The force of emotion that erupted into her heart and mind from Alex shook her to the core. She exhaled sharply, feeling as if her heart would explode. How could he possibly still feel like that about her, after all these years? She felt his fierce determination to avenge her; he was taking out Devin's supporters, not only to hurt Devin, but to take revenge on what they had done to her. His remorse about having to leave in a few weeks was keen, but knowing he was doing it for her made him determined to do it.

She stopped reading him and looked up to see him watching her. Did he know what she had just done? Her eyes were wide as she tried to understand what she was feeling about him. She was scared, but knew how he truly felt about her. It overwhelmed her. How could he still love her like that?

She shook her head, not able to look away from him. She wanted to run: run away and run into his arms at the same time. She twisted her fingers together, not knowing what to do. If he came to her, she didn't think she would resist....

Alex watched the conflicting emotions flit across Anna's face. He saw her reading him and felt overjoyed that she was opening herself up to him.

Now she would know his feelings, that his desires were for her, and her only. He wanted to run over, pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless, but held himself back.

He'd been very careful how he interacted with her throughout the dinner. The last thing she needed was him trying to force himself on her like he had that afternoon. No, he would continue to give her space.

The waiter approached, asking if anyone wanted dessert and the tension around the table was somewhat broken.

"If you want some company while you're waiting for your wife to come around...", Jasmine said in a quiet voice that no one but him could hear.

Alex looked at her, not quite sure he'd heard her correctly. She gave him a seductive smile and he bit back a retort. She slid her hand onto his thigh under the table and he frowned and removed her hand. The touch of a woman was something he'd severely missed the last few years, but he had no intention of jeopardizing his relationship with Anna for a fling. Especially with one of her fellow dancers.

Jasmine was a pretty woman, with smooth olive skin and long dark hair. Her dark eyes would be more alluring if they didn't hold a hint of desperate seduction. They were in sharp contrast to Anna's warm, sincerely bright eyes.

"Thank you, Jasmine, but I am content to wait."

She tilted her head and looked at him closely. "Do you know Katrina's fiancé, Kurt?"

Alex cocked his brow. Did she? And if she did, Kurt had a lot of explaining to do. "Why do you ask?"

She smiled. "You kinda look like him."

"Is that a good thing?" He wasn't sure if it was wise to admit Kurt was his brother.

“It’s certainly not a bad thing.”

“Do you know him?”

Jasmine glanced towards where Anna was sitting talking to Stefanie and nodded. “Katrina doesn’t treat him very well, so he visits me when he comes out.”

Alex clenched his jaw and took a breath to control his temper. Oh, he and Kurt would have words tomorrow.

“Why do you say she doesn’t treat him well?”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. “She’s not even wearing her engagement ring today. Maybe she thinks you’re better than Kurt. You might want to be careful around her. She, like, lures men in and then ignores them. Kurt doesn’t even bother to come visit her anymore.”

Kurt didn’t visit her because every time he did, she ended up getting hurt and Alex had told him to stop. Alex thought it was better if she thought he was ignoring her than being mean.

“She’s cheating on him, too,” Jasmine said in a conspiratorial whisper. “I’ve heard her talking about Kurt setting up elaborate evenings out, but when I called Kurt, he said he didn’t know anything about them. I don’t know who’s doing it, but it’s not Kurt.”

“How do you know it’s not Kurt who’s treating Katrina poorly?”

Jasmine huffed. “I know Kurt loves her, but she’s hurt him really bad.”

Alex’s eyes narrowed. “And you open your bed for him, when he’s in love with a fellow dancer? Don’t you think it would maybe be nicer to him if you encouraged him to work on the relationship, rather than cheating?”

“He said he has to marry her. He *has* to. I just...comfort him.”

“So if you’re interested in Kurt, then why are you coming on to me?”

She smiled and shrugged. “He’s not here very often.”

Alex was disgusted, but was determined to remain polite. He had a feeling that Jasmine wasn't a friend of Anna's, but they still danced together. "Thank you for your offer, Jasmine, but I'm content to wait and work things out with my wife."

Jasmine put her hand on his again. "Well, if you change your mind...." She gave him a flirtatious smile. "Let me know."

Alex heard a whimper and then a crash and turned to see Anna walking away from the table.

"Fuck!" Alex muttered, pushing his chair back and going after her.

Aaron had watched the interaction between Alex and Jasmine with narrowed eyes. Did Alex know what Kurt had done with that woman? Anna wasn't paying any attention and didn't see Jasmine's arm move in such a way that Aaron was pretty sure she was stroking Alex's leg. Alex removed it quickly and shook his head and Aaron was glad, otherwise he would have gone over and punched Alex in the face.

But when he kept talking to her, it began to bug him. Alex was a smart guy, but Jasmine was manipulative, and he'd been out of the game for a long time. Anna noticed them talking after a while and when Jasmine grabbed Alex's hand, she gave a soft, strangled cry and pushed away from the table so hard her chair fell backwards.

Aaron had watched the whole interaction, and Alex had not flirted, but Anna didn't know that. All she saw was Jasmine touching him. Jasmine was a sore spot in her new life, and seeing her touch Alex was not a good thing.

Alex cursed and went after her, leaving a bewildered Jasmine staring after him.

She caught Aaron's eye and raised her brows. "She's manipulated him already?"

"You're such a fucking bitch, Jasmine," he growled, and turned to see Alex catching up with Anna halfway to the front door and grabbing her around the waist from behind. He pulled her hard against him and spoke into her ear.

Anna shook her head and Aaron could see tears streaming down her face. She struggled to get away, though, Aaron was pleased to see, not as hard as she could.

"I thought he was going to give her space," Cameron said, watching the couple.

"He won't let her go, thinking that he's interested in Jasmine. She doesn't need to be worrying about that."

The incident had gained the attention of the others at the table. Those that knew their relationship had slight smiles on their faces. Those that didn't were as bewildered as Jasmine.

"Anna, what I said at the table is true. I love you. More than anything else in the world. I have no desire for anyone except you."

Alex's hot breath tickled Anna's ear as she tried half-heartedly to get away from him. Being held against him felt good...so good...and so right.

"You were holding her hand," she whimpered.

"She was trying to convince me to sleep with her. I said no, several times." He loosened his grip slightly and he turned her around to face him. "Kurt hurt you with her, didn't he?"

Anna gazed up into his concerned eyes and nodded slowly.

Alex frowned. "I didn't know until she started talking, otherwise I would have avoided her. And I will be having words with my brother about it tomorrow."

"Kurt's coming tomorrow?" she asked between sniffs.

He nodded. "And Vati. They're traveling back from Chicago."

"Oh." She stared at Alex's broad chest beneath his blue dress shirt. It was a similar blue to the one he wore the night after the bonding ceremony. The one that made his eyes almost glow.

"Anna, *Schatzi*," he said quietly, cupping her chin and lifting her face to his. "I will back off if you want me to, but..." He smiled softly. "I don't think you want me to."

She blinked away the tears, his face coming into focus, and gazed into the eyes of her husband. Her husband whom she thought was long dead. Who was alive. And just as kind and wonderful as he'd been when she'd known him before. "I don't know you anymore," she whispered.

"I'm not saying I'm going to take you home and force our relationship to work. Just...give me a chance. Spend time with me. Let me share what happened and you tell me about what you've been doing. I know you are a different girl than the one I married, Anna. I'm very proud of the woman you've become." He gave her a heart-melting smile. "I saw you say no to men at the bar. Several times. You've become the strong woman I always knew you were, and am proud to know you are my wife. But we can take things as slowly as you need to."

He cradled her face and wiped away her tears with his thumbs. "I love you, Anna. With everything that I am, I love you. I will make sure Devin pays for everything he did to you. And it will happen very soon."

She knew he was being truthful, but part of her was still frightened.

“I know you’re scared, *Schatzi*. I promised myself I would give you space, not pressure you, not...” He ran his thumb over her lower lip. “...not kiss you.” His voice was hoarse. “Tell me not to, and I will stop.” She searched his eyes as he began to lower his face to hers. “Tell me to stop, Anna,” he whispered when their lips were a scant centimeter apart.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. She didn’t want him to stop.

Aaron grinned as several dancers gasped when Anna and Alex began kissing. He glanced at Jasmine, who would have been shooting daggers at Anna if looks could kill.

“That fucking liar,” Jasmine snarled.

“Who?” Aaron asked, amused at her anger.

“Alex. He said he was going to wait for his wife, and then he goes running after that cunt?”

“I would watch what you call Katrina, Jasmine,” Hugo said in a dry voice. “*She* is Alex’s wife.”

Jasmine’s eyes widened as she stared at Hugo. “You knew? You were dating another man’s wife?”

“I didn’t know until this morning that he was still alive. She didn’t know until Saturday.”

“And, yes, Jasmine,” Aaron said. “That is Kurt’s older brother. If you know what’s good for you, you will stay away from Kurt. You don’t want Alex angry at you. Trust me.”

Jasmine’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe I should just call Devin,” she said with a wicked grin.

Immediately, Seth, Tony and Greg stood and all walked over to her, menacing looks on their faces.

Seth very casually lowered himself until he was inches from her face. “I’m not one to hurt women, but if you even so much as look up Devin’s number, I will slit your throat.”

Aaron had never seen those three men so aggressive. Seth, a normally very easygoing guy, was truly terrifying, and his voice held no hint of bluff.

Jasmine frowned. “What the hell is so special about her?”

Alex returned at that moment, arm around Anna’s shoulders, and gave his men questioning looks. “What’s going on?”

Alex was concerned about the threatening looks on his men’s faces as they stood around Jasmine.

“She threatened to contact Devin,” Greg answered in German.

Alex took a deep breath, knowing he needed to keep in control of his emotions.

“Seth told her he’d slit her throat,” Tony said with a grin.

Alex smiled at Seth, appreciating his protectiveness. He turned his gaze to Jasmine and she shrank under his glare. *Good*. “I don’t take threats against my wife lightly,” he said to her in a low voice, pulling Anna closer to him. He hated catty women. It was sad, really. Jasmine was a very talented dancer and a pretty woman. What on earth was his brother thinking?

He kissed Anna’s head. “Anna, stay here with Aaron for me, all right? I’ll see you in the morning.”

She looked up at him. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to deal with Jasmine.” Her eyes widened and he felt her fear again. “Anna, she’s threatened you. I won’t allow her to do that.”

“What did she do?”

“She threatened to call Devin.”

Anna gasped and looked at Jasmine, eyes filling with tears. “Why would you do that?” she asked, truly bewildered. Her tone made Alex even more adamant about making sure Jasmine didn’t talk to Devin.

Alex tried to guide Anna back to her seat, but she turned and glared at him. “You can’t seriously think I’m okay with you going anywhere alone with her.”

“I’m not going alone. My men will come.”

Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms. Alex’s brows raised at this new, defiant Anna. It was kinda sexy and he grinned, which made her frown. He stopped smiling, though his heart still pounded with desire for her. That lower lip sticking out like that....

He shook his head slightly and gave her a firm look. “Anna, I don’t want you to see what happens.”

Her brows arched. “What are you going to do? Sleep with her?”

“What? No, of course not.” He glanced over and saw Aaron watching him, an amused look on his face.

“I warned you she was stubborn,” he said with a laugh.

“Anna, please trust me....” He trailed off when her brows raised even higher. Okay, that probably wasn’t the best choice of words, but she didn’t need to see him reprogramming Jasmine’s mind. At least, that was his plan, if Sebastian would help. Since he wasn’t an Elder yet, he couldn’t do a lot of things without Sebastian’s help. If Sebastian refused, he would just wait until Vati arrived tomorrow. Vati would take care of it.

He looked around, realizing that they were being watched. After having just kissed Anna, it probably wasn't a good idea to go off with Jasmine, even if he had absolutely no intention of doing anything except removing a threat. He ran his hands through his hair and looked down at Anna, who was looking at him with a defiant expectation in her eyes. He liked this new Anna, but was careful to keep his face impassive. "All right. Fine. Do you want dessert first?"

Anna stared up at Alex in surprise. He'd given in to her? Well, good. He should have. There was no way in hell she was letting Jasmine near him alone.

"Anna, do you want dessert?"

She had been looking forward to dessert, but had lost her appetite when she'd seen Jasmine touching Alex. "Yes...I guess so."

Alex grinned at her and then looked to his men and said something in German. Seth leaned down to say something quietly to Jasmine and her eyes widened and he helped her to her feet. When they had gone, Alex took Anna to Jasmine's place and sat down.

"What was that about?" Lara asked.

Alex's face turned firm. "She threatened Anna, er Katrina. I won't stand for that."

Lara's eyes widened and then she smiled. "I figured her apology was full of shit." She shook her head and looked between Anna and Alex. "So, you two are really married?"

Anna glanced up at Alex, who was looking at her carefully. "Is it okay if they know?"

“It’s a little late for that,” she said with a smile, her heart swelling with affection for him. “It’s not...dangerous, is it?”

Alex shook his head. “Sebastian’s reinforced Tom’s protections, and I can protect you.” His eyes grew firm. “I will protect you,” he added in a soft voice and then looked at Lara. “*Ja*, this is my wife.” He put his arm back around Anna’s shoulders. “I went on a business trip and there was an accident. She was told I was dead.”

“But you’ve been here for a few months, though,” Lara asked. “Haven’t you?”

Alex nodded. “And I had my reasons for doing what I did, which I am not at liberty to discuss. But I have spoken to Anna about them.” He gave Anna a tender smile. “We will work through those issues.”

“So, should we start calling you Anna, now?” Lara asked with a smile.

Anna shook her head. “At least, I don’t think so.”

Alex shook his head. “Please continue to call her Katrina. I will try and remember too,” he added with a smile.

Dessert arrived and the conversation moved to other subjects. Anna glanced at Hugo, who gave her a sad smile. Her heart ached for him, but she couldn’t deny the fact that she felt like she was where she was supposed to be. With Alex.

To everyone’s surprise, Alex insisted on paying the massive dinner bill. “I am so happy that Anna has good friends around her,” he said. “It is the least I can do.”

“You gonna throw some parties?” Aaron asked, leaning back in his chair and grinning.

Alex grinned. “Maybe, but not like our old ones.” He looked at Anna. “Perhaps a wedding reception? We never got to have ours.”

Anna sighed. "That's true." They'd begun planning it before Alex left, but it never happened.

"*Kommen Sie*," Alex said softly, helping Anna to her feet. "Let me show you the home I purchased for us." He caressed her cheek. "I don't expect you to stay with me, but I would love for you to see it."

Anna's heart fluttered at his touch. And his understanding. "I'd like that."

They said their good-byes and headed towards the exit. Alex had promised Aaron he'd not have her out too late, to which Aaron told him that maybe he should.

Anna curled up next to Alex in the back of the town car, resting her head on his chest and sighing. She traced his fingers on his right hand, running her finger over his wedding ring. "You still wear it," she commented, feeling guilty that she'd taken hers off.

"Hugo is a good man, Anna. I understand why you removed yours. But," he took a deep breath. "I hope you will be willing to put it back on someday in the near future." He cupped her chin and brought her face up. "But only when you are ready. I don't want you to feel obligated."

"Your father told me that if I...didn't want to be with you, that he would permit a divorce."

"Ja, I know. I asked him to."

Anna gasped. "You did?"

"*Schatzi*, love forced is not love at all. I spoke to him and told him that you needed to know that you were totally free to choose me. To choose us. You needed to know you could walk away. Then, and only then, would I know that you truly wanted to be with me."

“But you are still my Master,” Anna said softly.

“*Ja*, Anna. I am. But, unless your life is in danger, I will not command you to do anything. I give you my word.”

Silence filled the car for a few minutes as Anna continued to trace his ring. “Did you...I mean, is there a way for me to be free?”

She heard his heartbeat increase and he took a deep breath. “I believe so,” he said softly. “It’s never been done before, but Sebastian believes it will work.”

“What is it?” She tensed, afraid of what it involved.

“To simply not perform the final ritual. I could perform it, but then you would be permanently bonded as a slave to me. You would be my mindless slave instead of Devin’s. I don’t want that. I want you free.”

“But your father said I would always belong to him.”

Alex sighed. “It’s true, to an extent. Your father gave you to him. But that is a different gift. Devin forced you to be his slave, and I did as well. To prevent him from totally controlling you. Those bonds, we believe, will dissolve once your birthday passes and no final ritual is performed. You were given to Vati as an Elder-Mistress, not as a slave.”

“Can that be undone?”

Alex hesitated. “*Nein*, but Vati and I spoke extensively, and agreed that if you do not want to continue to be an Elder-Mistress, we would not use you as such. Technically, you still would be, but just...unused in that manner.”

“So you just hide me away until after my birthday?”

“*Nein*. I must confront Devin. I must...demonstrate before the Elders that I am more powerful than he so that my decisions are not contested.”

“You’re really going to confront him?”

“I must.”

“He’s so powerful, though.”

“Not as he was when you were with him. And I have the element of surprise in my favor. He believes I am still in St. Petersburg. Neither Vlad nor Peter will tell him different.”

“So...when do you have to confront him?”

“It can be done any time before your birthday, but we have chosen a time.” His voice lowered and he became very somber.

“When?” she whispered.

“At Tyler’s funeral.”

“Tyler?” Anna exclaimed. “But Tyler’s not....” She trailed off. “You’re going to kill him?”

“He is my last target.”

“Oh.” Anna shuddered. “When?”

“The first week in November.”

“And sometime between now and then, you’re going to...take care of Oscar?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“Ja.”

“Oh.” Anna’s mind felt a little numb. To hear him speak of killing people was so...he was so dangerous. It was a little frightening.

“Anna, I know what Oscar did to you. The night Devin killed you.”

She inhaled a shaky breath, horrible memories flooding her mind.

“I know what the Sons did to you, that’s why they’re included on my list.”

Anna blinked back tears, emotions threatening to overwhelm her. Alex was the only person who could truly protect her. Could truly avenge her. Could truly confront Devin and win.

“Devin will suffer, *Schatzi*, for what he did to you. I promise you. If Jack were alive, he would be right there next to him.” Alex gave a small

smile. "But you already avenged yourself on him." He cradled her cheek and kissed her gently. "You are a strong woman Anna. A woman worthy of an Elder."

"I've never felt strong before," she whispered, gazing into his eyes.

"That's because Devin never wanted you to. He beat you down so that you would not know the strength inside you. I admire your strength." He grinned. "I liked that you stood up to me tonight."

Anna's eyes widened. "You did?"

He nodded. "It was very sexy."

Anna let out a giggle and Alex's grin broadened. "My favorite sound." He brought his face close to hers. "I love you, *Schatzi*. I loved you when you were young and scared. I love you still, now that you are older and strong. You are the most beautiful woman in the world. Both inside and out."

His lips caressed hers lightly and Anna slid her hand up his hard chest and around his neck. He traced the outline of her lips with his tongue before slipping between her parted teeth. She let out a soft moan and his kiss deepened. He held her tightly against him and she could feel his desire; it matched her own. When he pulled away, as the car stopped in front of his building, her lips were swollen.

She traced his cheekbones and ran her fingertips over his smooth cheeks with a smile. "I like that you shaved."

"I thought you might," he kissed her gently and then stepped out through the open door, extending his hand to assist her. "*Kom mit mir, mein Liebe.*"

They rode in the elevator up to the top floor. Anna looked at him for a moment in the reflection of the elevator doors and then reached up, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Kiss me again," she whispered.

He grinned and did so. She barely heard the elevator ding and didn't register it had stopped until he picked her up and carried her to a door set in an angled wall. "Is it all right if I carry you in?" he murmured against her lips.

She wrapped her arms tighter around his neck and nodded. She didn't want to be put down, she didn't want to leave his arms. She wanted...she wanted him to make love to her. She looked up into his face as he opened the door and walked into a circular entry hall.

He smiled and moved to put her onto her feet but she shook her head. He raised his brows, questions in his eyes.

She cradled his cheek and leaned up to kiss him. "Make love to me," she whispered.

He stared at her for a moment, studying her eyes, and then nodded. She saw in his eyes that he understood. She needed to be with him. Needed to reestablish their bond. She was his wife, and there was no one in the world who could take his place. She may have loved other men while he was gone, but he had her heart and always would.

Their lovemaking was long and sweet and earth shattering. Alex gazed into her eyes as he joined his body with hers. The sensation of him inside her, filling her, without the barrier of the condom he'd used as Mr. J. brought tears to her eyes.

"You are mine," he whispered. "I have taken your body as you have given it to me." He wiped away the tears that slid down her cheeks and smiled gently. "We are husband and wife. Nothing can separate us."

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he began to move. His piercings rubbed her in just the right way and she moaned loudly. He kissed

her deeply and then murmured in German. Her head spun as a powerful orgasm began deep inside her.

Her eyes closed as she felt herself melding with him, as they had on their wedding day. Their souls touched once more, renewing the bond between them, stronger now because Anna was a stronger woman than before. She felt his strength wrap around her like a shield and it was a welcome sensation.

They were one once again.

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Chapter Thirty Five

Alex gazed tenderly at his beloved wife, his treasure, sleeping peacefully in his bed. He ran his hand down her exposed arm, marveling at how soft her skin was. He caressed her flushed cheek and smoothed her hair back from her face.

Making love to her had not been expected, but had been oh-so welcome. He felt whole again. For the first time in a long time, he felt like himself. His whole self. They completed each other. It was as simple as that.

She'd fallen asleep over a half hour ago and all he could do was lay there and watch her sleep, his heart full of love and gratefulness that they were together again. He knew she'd felt the bond restored as he had. He smiled, anticipating seeing her wedding ring back in its proper place soon.

A soft knock sounded on the door. "Come," he called softly, hoping he wouldn't wake Anna.

The door opened and Tony peeked his head in. He saw Anna lying there and grinned. Not in lust, but in happiness that she was back where she belonged.

"Are you going to deal with Jasmine?" Tony asked in a quiet voice.

Fuck. He'd forgotten about that woman. He grinned at the idea that she'd heard Anna scream out in passion as she came, and then shivered in blissful memory of the sensation of being inside her body. Oh, he would do that every day for the rest of his life and still not get enough.

"Yes. Is Sebastian here?"

Tony nodded. "He seems pleased."

"He better be." Alex grinned and sat up. "I'll be out in a moment."

Tony nodded and closed the door behind him softly. Alex stood and walked to his closet to get dressed in something other than the wrinkled dress clothes that had been tossed aside earlier. He glanced back at Anna's small form in his large bed and sighed in contentment.

Only a few more weeks and she would be safe from Devin forever.

Alex walked into the family room and saw Jasmine sitting on the couch, staring blankly at the TV that his men were watching and laughing at. She looked up as he walked into the room and started to give him a flirtatious smile, but he frowned and she bit her lip instead.

Sebastian, standing in the back of the room, gave him an amused smile when he walked in. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Alex couldn't suppress his grin and nodded. Having Anna back in his life made him feel like he could take on the world. "Is that a bad thing?"

Sebastian chuckled. "Not at all. She seemed to enjoy herself."

"These walls aren't as soundproof as my last house, eh?" Alex chuckled.

"No. And she's quite an enthusiastic lover."

Alex frowned at his friend. "You didn't...while I was gone, did you?"

"Alex, I wasn't here, remember? If I could have been here, you would have been freed long before you were."

"I hate those rules."

Sebastian shrugged. "I didn't make them."

"You slept with his wife?" Jasmine asked, turning around on the couch.

Alex smiled. "Yes. In fact," he motioned around the room. "All of my men have. Granted, it was before we were married." He smiled, knowing Jasmine wouldn't remember any of it in the morning.

“She really is a slut,” Jasmine spat.

“And what makes you any better?” Alex retorted.

She opened her mouth and then closed it, clearly uncertain on how to respond. “I’m not a cock tease.”

Alex stared at the woman in disbelief. “You do realize you’re speaking of my wife, right?”

Jasmine shrugged and stood, a seductive glint in her eye. “C’mon, Alex. She can’t be that good.”

Alex stared at her for a moment and then looked around the room. The other men were suppressing laughs and the amusement struck him and he laughed. “She could make your legs turn weak, and she doesn’t even like being with women all that much.”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. “I doubt it.”

In a shallow moment, Alex wished Anna was awake so he could prove her wrong. “You can’t have been that good, otherwise my brother would have mentioned you.”

“*She* couldn’t be that good, or else Kurt wouldn’t have come to me.”

“If my brother had slept with her, I would have kicked his ass.” His eyes narrowed. “If I’d known he was so desperate that he slept with you, I would have allowed him to be with Anna.”

“You would have let your brother sleep with your wife?” Jasmine’s eyes were wide.

“I know my brother cares deeply for her, despite his behavior these last few months. He’d asked her to marry him before, but—”

“Alex, why are you justifying yourself to her?” Sebastian asked quietly in German. “You don’t need to prove anything to her.”

Alex sighed and ran his hands through his hair. Sebastian was right. He was acting shallow and foolish. “How should we do this?” he asked in

English, wanting to frighten Jasmine before making her forget everything.

Sebastian shrugged and walked towards Jasmine, studying her. “How far do you want to go?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked in a nervous voice.

“You are a threat to the woman I love,” Alex said in a menacing voice. “I will not allow any harm to come to Anna.”

Jasmine’s face turned pale. “I wouldn’t really do anything to her,” she squeaked.

“I won’t take your word for it,” Alex growled, making Jasmine jump.

“Please don’t kill me,” she whispered.

Alex gave a wicked smile. “You haven’t done anything to deserve that. Yet.” He felt his anger bubbling to the surface. “And you won’t be allowed to get to that point.”

He glanced at Sebastian. They were going to erase all memories of Devin and hopefully, make her into a more pleasant person to be around. He was glad Sebastian was here. The last thing he wanted to do was fry her mind.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Warmth surrounded Anna like sunlight on a warm day. She stretched and then smiled at the sound of a deep chuckle next to her. Alex! He was alive! She was with him, snuggled up close in bed.

She slowly opened her eyes, wanting to cherish every second of waking up next to her beloved husband for the first time in years. The smile on his face and the love in his eyes made her heart pound.

“*Guten Morgen*,” he said softly, leaning down to kiss her gently on the lips. His arm was bent at the elbow, head resting on his hand and his hand rested heavily on her ribs. A good heavy.

“Good morning,” she responded. The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled at her and she noticed a round scar on his right side, just under his clavicle near his shoulder. Her hand ran up his chest to trace the light spot with her finger. “What happened?”

He looked down and frowned for a moment. “I pissed someone off and they shot me.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “Oh, Alex.” She leaned up and kissed the spot. “Did it hurt?”

Alex chuckled. “Hurt like hell, but no permanent damage.”

Anna’s body tingled as she ran her tongue over the slightly raised skin and pressed her body to his, sliding her hand around his back.

“Mmm,” he rumbled and rolled to his back, bringing her with him.

His cock teased her pussy and she squirmed and tried to lower herself on his body to take him inside her. Grasping her hips, he obliged, pushing her down; her wet, swollen folds separated and allowed him in.

They both sighed as he filled her completely and lay there for a few minutes, feeling each other in the most intimate fashion. Anna's head lay on his chest and she heard his heart pounding. She shifted her hips slightly and the pounding got louder and quicker.

She grinned and lifted her head to look at him with mischief in her eyes.

"You did that on purpose," he accused with a smile. She shrugged innocently and his smile turned into a grin. He mumbled something in German and grasped her hips, holding her still as he slammed up into her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in surprised passion and sat up slightly, hands on his smooth, hard chest. She tried to move with him, but his strong hands held her firm as he repeatedly pounded his full length inside her. His abdominals contracted with every thrust and the muscles in his upper body flexed as he held her immobile. Her head fell backwards and she moaned loudly as he took her with loving force. "Oh, God, Alex!" she screamed as she came with such force it nearly blinded her. The colors exploded inside her like fireworks, consuming her every thought and nerve. His hands tightened on her waist, his fingers digging into the soft flesh as he exploded inside her, shouting, "*Oh, mein Anna!*"

She slumped forward onto his chest, her muscles unable to hold her body upright. Alex stroked her back slowly and she listened as his heartbeat slowed. "I think that's my favorite sound," she murmured, tracing a finger around his nipple in front of her face.

"What is?"

"Your heartbeat. The most wonderful sound in the world."

"*Schatzi...*," he murmured, squeezing his arms around her.

"Can we stay here forever?"

His chest rumbled as he chuckled. "I would love to, but you have class this morning and, as much money as I donated to the Company, I don't

think Vincent would appreciate me keeping his favorite dancer in bed all day.”

“You really donated a lot?”

He chuckled again. “I wanted to make sure I could have as much access to see you as I could. Vincent offered to rename the theater after me, but that’s not why I did it.”

“Does he know who you are? I mean, that you’re my husband?”

“He knows that I know you and Aaron, but not much more than that. I believe he will learn the truth this morning.” He tugged gently on her hair and she lifted her head to look at him. “Is that all right?”

Anna knew he was asking if she needed more time to decide if she wanted to be with him. But she didn’t. She knew that she was where she belonged. Her heart twinged with sadness when she thought of Hugo, but she couldn’t change the truth. She belonged with Alex.

She nodded. “You don’t need to hide who you are. I am your wife. You are my husband.” She gave him a tender smile. “I think I’d like to put my wedding rings back on.”

His eyes lit up and he grinned. “Oh, *Schatzi*. You have made me the happiest of men.” He kissed her full on the mouth and then rolled her to her side. “Does that mean you’re willing to live with me?”

“A wife should live with her husband, shouldn’t she?”

“*Ja*. Most definitely.”

“I don’t have a housekeeper,” Alex said apologetically, handing her a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. “Tony’s the shortest one among us.”

Anna barely heard him, her eyes being transfixed on his chest. He was wearing only a snug-fitting pair of dark blue jeans and he looked

unbelievably sexy, she could hardly think of anything else. “Huh?”

He chuckled and walked over to her, bending down and kissing her on her mouth. “I like how you look at me.”

She shrugged sheepishly. “You are very nice to look at.” She glanced up into his face. “What did you say?”

He laughed. “I said, I don’t have a housekeeper. At least, not a live-in one. Frau Gersten would have had your dress cleaned already.” He handed her the clothes again and this time she took them. “I know they’re big, but I don’t have anything smaller. I didn’t expect you to stay the night so soon.”

Anna bit her lip. “Should I not have?”

Alex knelt down in front of her and cradled her cheek. “I am very happy that you did. Very happy. I am even happier that you’ve decided to stay with me.”

“Me too.”

Alex’s phone rang on the nightstand and he reached for it. “Vati,” he said, looking at it. “Get dressed and I’ll take you home so you can get to class.” He answered the phone in German and stood and walked to the window.

After she pulled on the much-too-big clothes, Anna went to the spacious bathroom and found a comb to work through her hair and then washed her face as well as she could. Alex had good skincare items, but they were not designed to remove makeup.

Alex came in a few minutes later and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Tomorrow you will have your own stuff here.” He kissed her cheek and turned her around. “Vati and Kurt arrived a little while ago. They left Chicago as soon as the funeral Gathering was finished. They’re going to rest and then perhaps we can meet them for lunch?”

Anna bit her lip. She still felt the sting of hurt when she thought of Wilhelm and Kurt. "If you'd like," she said softly.

Alex cocked his head. "Anna, if you don't want to, say so."

She swallowed nervously and stared at his chest. "They...I know they didn't do it on purpose, but they hurt me. The last time I saw your dad...." She sighed. "I know I should see them, but I don't really want to."

Alex tilted her head up and gave her a gentle smile. "Thank you for being honest with me."

"You can go, though."

He made a face. "I'd rather have lunch with you than them."

Anna giggled, making him grin.

"How about I go to lunch with you, and then while you are rehearsing this afternoon, I will go see them?"

Anna nodded. "I shouldn't have rehearsal too late, though. I'm not in Swan Lake." Swan Lake was all this week, except Thursday night, which was the gala and Hugo's ballet. "Hugo's ballet will probably be right after lunch."

He nodded. "I was thinking that I would call Simon and have him arrange some movers to bring your belongings over here, hopefully this evening. But if that's not possible, then tomorrow."

"Okay." She grinned. She liked that idea. "Who is Simon? I mean. I know who he is, but what is his relation to you?"

Alex chuckled. "Simon is the youngest son of Edwin Reisig, Elder of Bavaria. He's lived here for several years, working for Deutsche Bank, and when I was planning on moving out here, Edwin suggested that I get in touch with him. He agreed to be my face-man."

"I've met Edwin," Anna said softly. "He's very nice."

He nodded. "My father and he are good friends. It was Edwin who asked around, seeing who would support Vati in trying to reclaim you at Vitaly's funeral."

Anna smiled softly. "Then I must thank him doubly the next time I see him." Alex frowned, making Anna giggle. "I just meant to give him a sincere thank you, not a mind-blowing blowjob." She giggled again. "Will you be this possessive forever?"

"Ja."

She grinned. "I don't mind at all."

Alex felt very different walking into the theater today as opposed to the day before. Today he was holding Anna's hand: her right hand with her wedding ring back in its proper place. She had even given him his ring back that she'd been given when she was told he was dead.

Vitaly had yanked it off his finger, telling him that he would send it to Anna so she'd know he was dead. The tears in her eyes when she'd put it back on his finger showed him how difficult that had been for her. Its heavy weight was comforting and he would never, ever take it off again.

Anna was shaking slightly as they walked through the backstage area and he squeezed her hand gently. She was nervous about what her friends would think about her and Alex being together. Especially since she hadn't told anyone that her engagement with Kurt had been called off. It was never supposed to be a real engagement, only for her to have some security while Alex was taking care of things. It hadn't worked out the way it was supposed to.

They walked into the wings and Anna stopped, looking out onto the stage from the shadows at her friends. Aaron hadn't been home this

morning when they'd gone to her apartment.

"Ready?" he asked gently, squeezing her hand again.

She took a deep breath and nodded. "At least, I think so."

He kissed her soundly and then walked out to the audience area with Seth while she made her way to the stage. The bright smile on her face made his heart melt, knowing he had at least something to do with that. She certainly had something to do with the smile on his own face.

Greg and Tony had the day off. He decided he didn't need to walk around with three armed men. If there was trouble, they were only a few blocks away. Few people knew he was alive, no one would come looking for him.

Vincent saw him and walked over to greet him. "You look happy this morning," he commented with a smile.

Alex couldn't keep the grin from spreading across his face and he shrugged sheepishly. "I am."

Vincent's brow raised high. "Would it be impertinent to ask why?"

Alex chuckled and nodded in Anna's direction. "Look at her hands."

"Katrina?" Vincent gave him a strange look and then squinted.

It was difficult not to notice the sparkles on her left hand. She wore several karats of high quality diamonds on that left ring finger.

"That's not her engagement ring, is it?"

"It is. It's her real engagement ring. And wedding ring."

Vincent squinted again. "She is wearing the other ring she wore when she arrived...." He glanced at Alex. "She got married?"

"She's been married. She is my wife and has been for almost five years."

Vincent stared at him. "Wait, I thought...you were supposed to be dead."

“Yes. I was, but I’m not. She was told I was dead, as was everyone else. Aaron, too.” Alex smiled as he glanced at his friend stretching on stage. “You’ve met Devin Andersen?”

Vincent’s face turned dark. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“He had me taken so that he could have Anna to himself. The reason she came here was so that we could be reunited and I could...take care of Devin.” It was nowhere close to the whole story, but Vincent needed to stay ignorant of the details.

Vincent studied Anna for a long minute. “She seems...lighter than I’ve ever seen her.” He smiled affectionately at her. “She’s practically glowing.”

“Anna in love is the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen,” Alex said softly, gazing at his beloved.

“I can’t disagree with that.” He turned his smile to Alex. “You can keep her safe?”

Alex nodded solemnly. “When Devin came here a few weeks ago, I kept him from finding her.”

“Good.”

They chatted for a few more minutes and then Vincent went onstage to speak to his assistant. Alex settled into the seat next to Seth. He gazed at Anna as she moved into position and began the warm-ups. God, he loved that woman! “How am I going to leave her to go out on another job, Seth?”

Aaron could tell, just by looking at her, that Anna and Alex had gotten back together. She radiated happiness, which made her even more unbelievably beautiful. He would see the straight guys watching her from time to time, she was so fucking sexy, but today, they almost couldn’t take their eyes off her.

‘Course, the sparkling left hand also made it painfully obvious that she and Alex were together again.

Hugo walked up to him with a resigned look on his face. “If I were a selfish man, I would be angry,” he said in a quiet voice, looking at her with longing in his eyes.

Aaron’s heart went out to him. He knew exactly how Hugo felt. “It’s not easy getting over her.”

“Did you get over her?”

He shook his head. “I still love her.” He gave Hugo a lopsided grin. “I gave up trying to find someone like her.”

“Are you saying I should give up and try playing for the other team?”

Aaron laughed. “Have you ever had any inclination towards that?”

Hugo shook his head and grinned. “Never been attracted to men.”

“There’s some nice girls out there,” Aaron said encouragingly. “There’s not another Katrina, but...there couldn’t be.”

Hugo stiffened and Aaron followed his gaze to where Jasmine had just come out on stage. A few people that had been out with them gave her dirty looks, but she didn’t seem to notice. She had a slight smile on her face and she looked...happy?

Aaron instantly searched out Alex and stormed over to him. “Did you fucking sleep with Jasmine?”

Alex’s eyes widened. “Why the hell would you ask me a question like that? Of course not.”

Aaron motioned up to the stage where Jasmine was sitting quietly and changing shoes. “Why is she...happy?”

“Did you know that her father was an alcoholic?” Alex asked calmly.

“What? I...no.” What the fuck did that have to do with anything?

“He was very neglectful and emotionally abusive.”

Aaron gave Alex a look. "What the hell does that have to do with anything? And how do you know?"

"Sebastian and I were going to erase her memories of Devin to eliminate the threat for Anna, but when we began to do so, we saw the hurt that caused her to act the way she does." Alex smiled. "Sebastian healed her."

Aaron stared at Alex for a long moment and then turned to look at Jasmine, who was talking to Anna with a kind expression on her face. She was definitely different today. "He can do that?"

"Immortals can do all sorts of things."

Anna hugged Jasmine and gave her a friendly smile and Jasmine looked...sincerely happy. He'd never seen that woman look that way.

"Give her a chance, Aaron. If you do, the others will. She acted out from her past hurts."

Aaron made a face. "Fine."

Anna looked around with a hint of nostalgia at her empty room. She would miss living with Aaron, but Alex being alive changed so many things. All for the good.

The movers had come as soon as she arrived back at the apartment after rehearsal. They'd helped her pack and were delivering her items as she stood there. Alex was out in the other room talking to Aaron, giving her a few minutes to herself.

Her friends in the company had been very supportive of her relationship with Alex, especially when they found out that Alex was the person who could keep Devin away from her. Everyone knew who Devin was and more than one said that they never wanted him to visit again.

Jasmine had been a big surprise this morning. Anna could see that something was different about her. She seemed more peaceful. When she came to apologize to Anna for her behavior, she seemed genuinely sincere. Not like before. Anna would still be a little wary around her, though.

Tonight she had to face Wilhelm and Kurt. She wasn't looking forward to that. For one, she and Alex hadn't had much time alone. She still hadn't heard how he had escaped or what he'd gone through while he was captured. She didn't know what would happen between now and Tyler's funeral.

"Anna?" Alex walked into the room and gave her a bright smile. "Ready?" He glanced over to the window with a slight smile on his face.

Anna followed his gaze and realized he was looking at the spot where he'd appeared to her in her dream. Or rather... "That wasn't a dream, was it?" she asked. "When I dreamed of you."

Alex looked a little ashamed. "No. Sebastian helped me. I...I couldn't let you get too involved with Hugo. I knew I was returning soon, and—"

"You came to keep me from getting too close to Hugo?" Anna gave him a bewildered look. "That's why you came? You were jealous?"

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Alex saw that Anna was upset about why he'd come to her, but he couldn't have not come. He thought back to that afternoon...

"She has a what?" Alex exclaimed loudly. Vati had just told him about Anna killing her guardian, which to be honest, was a little frightening. Then Vati told him that she now had a boyfriend. That was more disturbing than the thought of Anna committing murder. At least Jack deserved it.

Vati gave him a sympathetic look. "I know, Alex. Tom says he's a good guy—"

"That's my wife!" Alex shouted. He studied his father for a moment. Something about his expression made him wonder what else happened. "What aren't you telling me?"

Wilhelm sighed. "Tom said that she's taken off her wedding ring."

Alex stared at his father as his heart broke. She'd moved on. She'd given up on him. He looked down at his right hand and twisted the ring that he'd worn for so long. He shook his head and left his father's study without saying another word.

He found himself in the rose garden a few minutes later. He sat down hard on the cement bench and stared at the ground, twisting his ring on his finger.

Was he being selfish? Should he just let her go? If she found a man who would take care of her—

"No!" he exclaimed. He wouldn't give up on her without a fight. He'd come too many miles to give up so easily. What would happen if Devin

found her? This other man wouldn't be able to protect her. He would likely get killed. Then she would be even worse off.

No, he had to convince her to return to him. He had to! But how?

He heard a movement behind him and turned to find Sebastian walking towards him.

"I heard what happened," Sebastian said as he stopped in front of him. "She's strong, Alex. She'll be okay."

"She has a boyfriend," he growled.

"Ah. They've become serious."

Alex shook his head. "I should have gone back already."

"You can't Alex. You're not ready. Soon. You have to be patient."

"What if he falls in love with her? What if she falls in love with him?" He looked up at his friend. "I need to talk to her, but she doesn't dream of me anymore...."

Sebastian looked troubled. "I know."

"You know she shouldn't be with him?"

The Immortal nodded. "He won't be able to protect her."

"Then what can I do? Can I make her dream of me? Can you make her dream of me?" The look on Sebastian's face made his heart pound. "It's possible?"

Sebastian pressed his lips together. "I'm not supposed to do that sort of thing."

"But you can?"

"I could with an Elder. It's possible. I can't teleport you. You don't have any Immortal in you."

Alex cocked his brow. "What?"

"When Elders become Elders, they...we imbue them with a bit of ourselves. That's why you become an Elder the way you do." He paused

and looked thoughtful. "It would give you the ability to protect her," he said softly. "I need to speak to your father."

Sebastian disappeared suddenly and Alex sighed. How could he get through to Anna?

Wilhelm sat back in his study and listened to Sebastian explain his thoughts on giving Alex a share of Immortal essence.

"I won't do it unless you are all right with it, Wilhelm. I know my brothers won't approve, but I'm most concerned, at this point, of offending you. Your son would have some Elder abilities."

"Is there anything dangerous about it?"

Sebastian shook his head. "Not unless you are concerned about him challenging your leadership."

Wilhelm chuckled. "No. I know my son respects me."

"I agree. I trust him completely." Sebastian chewed his lip for a moment. "I think it would also be helpful when he confronts Devin."

Wilhelm tilted his head. "Would he be more of Devin's match?"

"I believe so. Nothing like this has ever happened before, but it seems logical. Unless Devin's other Elders band together with him against Alex."

"Then maybe we need to remove those other Elders."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. "That would not be a decision I am allowed to be involved with. That is a human decision." He smiled. "I'm sure a certain assassin wouldn't mind getting some revenge on men who have hurt his wife, though." He stood and nodded respectfully before disappearing.

Wilhelm contemplated Sebastian's words. Elders coming together can be very powerful, as evidenced by the multiple Elders ability to get Anna away

from Devin. If the Elders that were loyal to Devin gathered around him, he would be difficult to defeat. If Devin was the only one left—

He needed to discuss this with Alex. After Alex somehow convinced Anna to break up with her boyfriend.

Alex waited in his bedroom for Sebastian to return. Alex was going to become like an Elder. The thought thrilled and frightened him at the same time. Would it hurt? It never looked comfortable when he saw it at the Gatherings. How would it feel? He'd never asked a new Elder. It had never occurred to him.

Sebastian appeared a few minutes later with...Irina? The Russian Elder-Mistress?

"What is she doing here?" Alex asked, irritated. There would be only one reason an Elder-Mistress would be here. He had no desire to fuck her. Irina was beautiful and sensual, but cold. Like all the Elder-Mistresses. He wanted his sweet, warm Anna.

"Alex, I can't give you my essence straight. You wouldn't be able to handle it. Irina will be able to...make it palatable." Sebastian gave him a sympathetic smile. "I know she's not Anna, but she is a Mistress we can trust."

An hour later, Alex felt...different. And guilty. Sebastian had fucked Irina and then Alex had 'partaken' of both of their essences from Irina's body. Then he'd fucked her senseless. He wasn't thinking straight. He just had to do it for some reason. Lust had consumed him.

Sebastian had taken Irina back to Russia and Alex sat on his bed, staring at his wedding ring. Is this what it would be like when he became Elder? Becoming so consumed with lust that he would fuck anyone? Is that what the Immortal essence did? He couldn't do that to Anna. It would kill her. Why, oh why did he have to be his father's son?

But he was. And she was an Elder-Mistress. They would always have to share one another with others. Maybe he could fake his own death after he took care of Devin. Then he and Anna could—

“Ready?”

Alex jumped at the sound of Sebastian's voice. He turned and looked mournfully at his friend. “I can't believe I did that.”

“Did what?”

“Fucked Irina.”

Sebastian studied Alex for a few minutes. “Alex, the first time is...difficult.” He chuckled. “We're sexual beings. It can be a bit intense the first time. Your body doesn't quite know what to do with it. But it will get more comfortable.” He took a step towards Alex. “Once you and Anna are reunited, you'll need to do that with her.”

Alex gave him a horrified look. “I can't use her like that.”

“With the right relationship, it's not using. She will want to give of herself.”

Sebastian's words triggered a memory from long ago. Before they had married, they had made love and Anna had tried. She'd tried to give him of herself. He didn't know how he knew, or even if she knew at that point, but he had told her not to. That he didn't need it. How had he known?

“She loves you, Alex. She will want to give it to you.”

“Will you fuck her first?”

“It would be a good idea if I did every once in a while. Maintaining it is much easier than re-doing it. And it will give you the strength and power to fight Devin.”

That perked Alex’s ears. “Really?”

Sebastian nodded. “That is what he was taking from Anna that made him so powerful. You will still be limited until you become Elder, but you will be...more than yourself.”

Alex thought for a moment and then nodded. “Okay. But I won’t force her.”

“It’s much more potent if she does it voluntarily. The two of you together...” Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “She is a very powerful half-Immortal, though she doesn’t know it. You will be able to do great things.”

“I don’t want to do great things. I just want to be with her.”

Sebastian smiled. “That’s okay. For now. You’ll change your mind eventually.”

Alex sighed. “So, how does this work?” he asked, changing the subject. He was close to seeing Anna again and he was becoming anxious.

Sebastian chuckled and came to stand behind him. “She won’t see me. You can move as you normally would.” He put his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “Close your eyes.”

Alex did so, and felt dizzy and squeezed at the same time. He sensed the difference of his environment and slowly opened his eyes. He was in a sunlit bedroom. The scene outside the windows was one of a city. New York. He could see the Hudson River from where he stood.

He turned and saw Anna lying on her bed, sweetly sleeping. The indentation on her right ring finger made his heart ache and he swallowed over the lump forming in his throat. She looked different. She looked peaceful. He hadn’t seen her sleep in years. When they were together, he

had loved waking up before her and watching her sleep. She'd been pregnant then. Oh, how his heart ached for the memories.

He could stay here forever and watch her sleep. He longed just to watch her, to see how she'd changed. She was changed so much from the twenty-year-old girl he'd married. His hands clenched into fists. Devin would pay for what he'd done. As soon as he was able to, he would destroy that man, that animal. It was an insult to humanity to call him a man.

But for now, he needed to concentrate on the task at hand. "Anna," he said softly. He reminded himself that he needed to speak English and hoped she could understand him.

Her eyes snapped opened and she stared at the ceiling for a moment before turning her head in his direction. Oh, his sweet Schatzi! She sat up and stared at him.

"Alex!" she exclaimed and then shook her head. "No. You left...you were gone."

He nodded. "I had to. But I'm here again."

She shook her head. "I've given you up. I've moved on."

His eyes unconsciously turned to her empty ring finger and sorrow filled his heart. "Don't give up on me, Anna. Please. We'll be together soon."

"How can we be together? You're dead." She shook her head again. "No, Alex. It's time to stop dreaming of you. I have a wonderful man in my life. He's alive and he cares for me."

Her words were like a dull knife in his heart. "Do you love him?" he asked softly, his voice cracking slightly. "Does he love you like I love you?"

"I...I don't know if I love him. I might. It's all so...different now. I'm different." She looked up at him. "I killed my guardian," she whispered.

Alex walked over before he realized what he was doing. How he wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be all right. Instead, he knelt next

to her bed. *"Does he love you as I love you?"*

Tears filled her eyes. "He's alive," she whispered.

"What if I were still alive, Anna? What if I walked back into your life tomorrow? Would you take me back?" His questions were desperate.

"But you're not," she whimpered.

"But if I was?"

She didn't answer right away. She stared out the window, her lower lip trembling. He could almost sense the turmoil in her heart and it pained him to no end.

"Anna?"

She closed her eyes for a long moment and then opened again. His heart leapt at the love in her eyes. "I don't know," she answered honestly.

Alex searched her eyes. She hadn't rejected him outright. Her hesitation troubled him, but what else could he do? Forced love was no love at all. Winning her back would be more difficult than he'd imagined. "I will always love you, Schatzi." He reached out to touch her cheek and she disappeared from his sight.

Alex realized he was back in his room and he fell to his knees in grief. Would he be able to gain her love back? Gain her trust back? Was she really reluctant to love him, or was she afraid to? After all, he'd been gone for so long.

"Alex?" Sebastian brought him back to reality.

"She doesn't know if she'd take me back," he said in a cracked voice.

"She's afraid."

Alex nodded. "What do I need to do to get ready?"

“Alex?”

Alex blinked, realized he'd become lost in his thoughts. He looked at Anna and saw her, frowning at him with her arms across her chest. “Anna, if I hadn't come, and you and Hugo had become even more involved...what would have happened when I returned? What if I had given up on you? Devin would have found you when he visited and you would be back with him now, instead of here.” He inhaled slowly. “Yes, perhaps my motives weren't totally pure. Yes, I was jealous. But—”

“You manipulated me,” she said in a low voice.

“I kept you from getting hurt.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What would have really happened if I decided I didn't want to be with you?”

Alex hesitated. She would be angry at the truth. “Anna, please—” He stepped forward and she stepped back.

“What would have happened?”

“You wouldn't have chosen him,” he said softly after a long pause. He wouldn't lie to her.

“What do you mean?” Her eyes narrowed further.

“You may have tried for a while to be with him, but ultimately, you would have been with me. We're bonded, Anna. Sebastian said that's why you could never get over me, even though you desperately wanted to. If I had truly been dead, the ties would have been severed and you would have been free. But because I was alive, the bonds remained active and eventually you would have returned to me.”

She stared at him, anger and hurt in her eyes. “You mean I never really had a choice?”

Alex grimaced. "I did whatever I could to let you have that choice, *Schatzi*. But...no, you didn't."

She stared at him a moment longer and then left the room without another word. He heard the apartment door open and close and his shoulders slumped.

"Seth!"

Seth's curious face appeared in the doorway.

"Follow her. Make sure she's okay, but don't be seen. I want her safe, but she needs some space."

Seth nodded and disappeared.

Alex sat heavily on the bed, head in his hands. Would it have been better had he lied to her? No. She needed the truth. It was the only way she would be able to trust him. He would tell her the truth, no matter how much it hurt.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Anna slowly walked to the park and sat down under a tree. It was getting late and the sun was going down, so she only went a little way in. She knew better than to wander around the park at night. It wasn't as peaceful as she'd like, but it was about as peaceful as it got in the middle of the city. She sat quietly, watching the people hurry by as she tried to sort her mind out.

She leaned her head back against the uneven bark and sighed. She never really had a choice to make? She would have ended up back with Alex regardless? She didn't know how she felt about that.

Part of her—no, all of her knew that she belonged with Alex. But once again she was reminded that she wasn't really free. She had Masters. She was a slave. She had a cruel Master and a kind Master. At least she was with the kind Master now.

Was it really so bad to be stuck with Alex? He loved her, he was good to her, and he was the sexiest man she'd ever seen. As a slave, she couldn't ask for more.

That was it, wasn't it? She didn't like being a slave. That was the bottom line. That was the crux of it. She wanted to be free, even if she was married to Alex. Being married didn't take away freedom; being tied to he and Devin as their slave was what took away her freedom.

Alex was working to free that part of her. That's why he did what he did. If it weren't for him, she would have had no happiness in her life. She would have belonged to Devin and he would have consumed her.

She shouldn't be resentful towards Alex. It wasn't Alex's fault things were the way they were. It wasn't really anyone's fault, save Devin. And Alex promised he would take care of Devin. He was the only one that could.

Anna looked up past the trees in the park. She could see Alex's building from here and saw the lights on inside his condo. Had he gone home?

She needed to apologize.

Anna stared at the building from across the street. The building was intimidating, even though it wasn't very tall. The elaborately carved entrance was guarded by four two-story banded columns. And a doorman.

Could she get in? Was this her home now? Would Alex let her in? There was only one way to find out.

The light changed and she crossed the street, and then paused at the bottom of the marble steps that led to the large wrought iron and glass door. A man in a black suit and hat stood there and watching her curiously.

"Can I help you?" he asked politely.

"I—" Anna paused.

"Sam, this is Anna, Mr. Kunze's wife." A familiar voice said from behind and she turned to see Seth walking up behind her.

"Seth? What are you doing here?"

"Making sure you're safe."

"Were you with me the whole time?"

Seth nodded. "Only to keep you safe, Anna," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Alex knew you needed space, and respected that. But after what happened when you ran away from the hotel..."

Anna nodded and gave him a grateful smile. “He will do whatever he can to keep me safe, won’t he?”

Seth’s eyes softened. “Yes. As will the rest of us.”

Anna wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest. “Is Alex mad?”

Seth chuckled and hugged her back. “Not at all.”

She closed her eyes and savored Seth’s embrace. She’d grown close to him, Tony and Greg when they’d lived together in San Francisco. She hadn’t known the rest of Alex’s men as well, but was grieved to hear that they hadn’t made it back. “I’m glad you made it back, Seth,” she said softly.

Seth squeezed her gently. “Me too.” He pulled away. “C’mon. It’s getting a little chilly, and Alex is worried about you.”

The doorman nodded politely as they went through the doors and into the marbled lobby with the stained-glass arched ceiling.

“It’s so pretty!” Anna exclaimed as they walked, her voice echoing slightly on the hard walls.

“You didn’t see it last night?” Seth asked with a laugh.

She felt her cheeks warm. “I wasn’t paying any attention.”

Anna walked nervously into the living room where Alex was visiting with his father and brother. It was really a beautiful apartment, with carved columns and paneled walls. Huge windows overlooked Central Park that would be nice to look out in the morning.

Alex stood when he saw her and gave her an apologetic smile as he walked over to her. “Anna, I’m so—”

Anna shook her head. “I’m sorry I left. I was angry, but I know—I understand why things are the way they are. Considering the circumstances,

I couldn't ask for, or expect, things to be more than they are. I belong with you. I know this, and I don't want to be anywhere else."

Alex's eyes brimmed with tears. "I know the truth was difficult, but I didn't want to lie."

"I know." Anna smiled and then reached up on tiptoe to kiss him. He still had to bend over for her lips to reach his, but she didn't think he minded.

A throat cleared behind Alex and he pulled away slowly. "I think someone wants to say hello," he said softly.

"Your dad?"

Alex nodded and straightened. He took her hand and led her the rest of the way into the room. Wilhelm and Kurt sat on either end of a long couch and they stood when they saw her.

Anna twisted her rings as she looked between the two men who had both hurt her and loved her for so long. They were caring for her long before she'd married Alex. Oh, how long ago all that was. How different she was. How different they were.

Kurt's hair had grown out longer, like he'd worn it when she'd met him. His goatee was scruffier than it had been, though fashionably so. He still had some of the seriousness he'd gained over the last few years, but seemed to be relaxing a bit. His eyes were apologetic.

Wilhelm was as debonair and noble as ever, though he had aged as well. The aura of sadness that she'd grown accustomed to seeing him with was gone. She supposed with Alex alive "again," that burden had disappeared.

"Hello," she said softly, clinging to Alex's hand and hiding behind him slightly.

Wilhelm's face broke into an affectionate smile. "Hello, *Liebling*," he said in a gentle voice.

He opened his arms and Anna looked up at Alex. Alex nodded and Anna nervously walked over to him. Once she was in his arms, though, she relaxed, inhaling his scent and warmth. He stroked her hair gently and kissed the top of her head.

He released her after a few minutes, turning her towards Kurt.

Kurt, who had loved her and hurt her so much. She gazed up into his sad eyes. “Why?” she whispered. It was all she could bring herself to say without erupting in tears.

He closed his eyes, as if in pain, and took a deep breath. When he opened them, they were even more pain filled. “I can never apologize enough for hurting you the way I did, Anna. I—” He swallowed and glanced at Alex. “I was angry that I was losing you and I took it out on you. I am so sorry.” His brow twitched and his jaw clenched. He was trying to stay in control of his emotions. “I am so sorry,” he repeated in a whisper.

Tears filled Anna’s eyes and she went to him, wrapping her arms around him tightly. He held her so tightly she couldn’t move, even if she wanted to.

Alex’s jaw clenched as he watched his wife and brother embrace. He’d known Kurt cared for her, but didn’t realize how much until now. And watching Anna cling to him didn’t make him feel any better.

His head told him that he shouldn’t be surprised. She’d spent more time with Kurt than she had with himself.

Alex’s heart was being torn apart. Anna had loved Kurt. Did she still? If it weren’t for Devin’s interference, they would be married and Alex would be out of the picture. It was the *only* thing Alex would ever thank Devin for.

Alex stood there for a few minutes and then walked into the library and poured himself a drink. Maybe he shouldn’t have had Kurt come. Maybe he

should have told Vati and Kurt to just go home after the funeral was over.

He walked to the window that overlooked Central Park and stared out at the orange lights that dotted the huge rectangle. Was it possible that he was actually jealous of his little brother? He'd never felt that before. Kurt was always popular with the women, but given the choice, the woman would choose Alex over Kurt. More than once, he'd taken advantage of that fact.

Kurt's anger made more sense now. A lot more sense. Alex would probably feel the same way if he were in his brother's shoes. Hell, Kurt had even divorced Gretchen so that he could marry Anna. Not that the divorce was necessarily a bad thing. It got rid of a blight in the family.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Vati striding into the room.

"He loves her, doesn't he?" Alex said in German.

"Yes, son. He does."

Alex sighed and looked back out the window. "I realize there is one thing I can thank Devin for."

"Oh?"

"For interfering and not letting the two of them get married."

Wilhelm chuckled softly. "Yes, I suppose you could."

"If they had gotten married...I would have lost her, right?"

His father sighed. "Yes. Although I could have forced a divorce. Or just declared the marriage annulled. I'm glad it didn't come to that."

"Me, too."

Anna gave Kurt a sad smile as they sat on the couch. "I'm sorry you're hurting Kurt. It's the last thing in the world I want for you."

Kurt grimaced. "I love my brother, but sometimes I wish he had not returned."

She understood. Although she belonged with Alex, she couldn't help but miss Kurt. Kurt, Hugo, Peter...all men that she had spent time with...that she had fallen in love with while Alex was gone. Was it wrong for her heart to ache for them?

Suddenly, Kurt smiled and got a glint in his eye. "You know, Alex and I used to share women...."

Anna giggled. "I don't think he'd be keen on sharing me anymore, though we did talk about it before he...disappeared." She took his hand. "You'll make a wonderful husband for a good German wife."

He grimaced. "I think I have slept with all the women in Frankfurt."

Anna laughed. "So you can't marry them?"

"None were interesting enough to call again." He gave her a half-smile. "Guess I will have to look around here."

Anna rolled her eyes, but was glad to see the old Kurt emerging.

Kurt leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "If Alex ever hurts you, let me know. I can almost keep up with him in a fight now."

Anna laughed and then looked up to see Alex frowning at them. She sobered immediately. Kurt saw her looking and turned around.

"Do not worry, big brother. I will not try and steal her away."

"*Gut.*" Alex sat down heavily on the couch with a drink in his hand. He gave her a pointed look and she went to sit next to him.

He pulled her close and she felt a tremor of fear. Was he jealous? Would he lash out at her?

Later, as Anna was changing for bed, Alex came into the walk-in closet with an apologetic look on his face. She clutched her top to her chest, covering her breasts, more out of habit than anything else.

“I’m sorry I was acting jealous,” he said softly. “I scared you, didn’t I?”

She nodded.

“I don’t recall ever being jealous of my brother before. I’ve always had confidence, never doubting my place in the world. After being gone for so long....” He shook his head. “I’m having trouble figuring out where I fit. Everyone moved on, which they should have. But, it leaves me a little lost.”

Anna’s heart ached, listening to his humble confession. Confidence had always been part of him, and to hear him struggling was heart-wrenching. She let her top fall to the ground and stepped closer, taking his hand. “I know exactly where you fit,” she said softly and walked out of the closet and to their bed, pulling him gently behind her.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Alex smiled politely at the blonde and redhead walking past him, Greg, Tony and Seth. Their eyes traveled over each man, giving them knowing looks and then walked slowly away, swinging their hips seductively.

Tonight was the Fall Gala for the City Ballet, and everyone who was anyone was in attendance. He was doing a lot of polite smiling. He'd forgotten how vulture-like women could be in social situations.

It was finally intermission and Alex was eager for it to be over so he could see Anna dance. Hugo's new ballet was the second half of the program.

"You know, you can pick up women," Alex said to his men with a chuckle. "As long as one of you is available, I don't care."

Greg rolled his eyes. "I've been out of the game for so long, I'm not even sure where to begin."

Alex laughed, though Greg's comment made him a little sad. It was his fault his men had been locked up. "I think smiling and saying hello is all you need to do." He grinned. "Or do we need to go out to a bar?"

Seth grinned back. "Might be nice to go out, not hiding behind a curtain."

"Or Anna and I could stay in this weekend and give you a few days off to carouse and conquer."

"Might be easier to pick up women without you around," Tony said with a laugh.

The idea of staying in all weekend with Anna was very appealing. Last night he'd been reminded of how magnificent her mouth was and he felt his

cock twitch just thinking about it. *Down boy.* She certainly helped his confidence, letting him know exactly where he fit in her life: in her heart and in between those amazingly sexy legs of hers.

Simon approached with a lovely blonde on his arm; his wife, Emma. “Suffering through the attention, Alex?” he asked in German. They were sitting with Alex and his men in the theater, but had arrived just before the performance began and hadn’t had a chance to speak.

Alex rolled his eyes. “You could have kept it quiet about who I was.”

“It’s easier to just put it out there. In the end, you will garner less attention. I did say that you were married.”

“I don’t think that part has gotten spread around as much as it should,” Alex grumbled, politely smiling at another woman trying to get his attention.

“There was a time when Alex reveled in this attention,” Seth remarked with a laugh.

“That was a long time ago. A very long time ago.”

Simon smiled at Alex. “Things are going well, I presume?”

Alex gave Simon a goofy grin, making him laugh. “Yes. I can’t wait to see her dance tonight.”

Simon grinned. “I think I like this connection to you. I’ve never been able to attend the Gala before.”

“It’s the least I could do in repayment for all you’ve put up with these last few months.”

Emma laughed. “He’s enjoyed it more than he will admit. I think he may have developed a crush on your pretty wife.”

“She’s a sweet girl,” Simon said with a shrug. “But not tempting enough to lure me away from you.” He kissed Emma on the cheek and she beamed.

The lights flickered and Alex’s heart pounded. “It’s time.”

They made their way to their seats in the first balcony, known as the first ring. Alex had hidden up here when he first came to watch Anna dance. Alex settled in as best he could. There were disadvantages to being six and a half feet tall and broad shouldered, especially when the men next to him were the same. Maybe not as tall, but he and Seth were about the same width now, and Tony was about where Alex was before they'd gotten captured.

Anna didn't seem to mind though. He loved catching her watching him as he did something without his shirt on. He'd barely worn his shirt at home the last few days, just so he could know she was watching him. Then again, he found himself surreptitiously watching her in the shower, finding some excuse to be in the bathroom. It had been so long since he'd seen a live, naked woman, he couldn't help himself.

He hadn't been with a woman since the second year of his imprisonment, save as Mr. J. with Anna, and while that had been nice, it had been less than satisfactory. Lovemaking without Anna's arms around him had been difficult, but satisfied his itch temporarily. He did everything he could to make sure Anna enjoyed it too, but always had to be sure to hold her hands down. She wasn't trying to be rebellious, but whenever he didn't hold them, they inevitably strayed to his body. It was sheer hell pulling her hands away from him, but he'd kept telling himself that it wouldn't always be that way.

At first, when he was captured, he'd shunned Vitaly's offers of *Dirne*. But despair hit him hard after the first year. There was no escape. He'd lost three men trying to do so. The guards watched them like hawks over mice, and had even shot him in the shoulder for looking suspicious. After finding out Anna had been drugged up for two years, it made more sense that no

one had noticed her hurting from his injury. He'd never seen that guard again after it happened, and wondered if the guard had gotten into trouble.

Anna didn't come, and after a year, he was desperate for anything to feel better. But sex hadn't worked. Nothing worked, although when one of Vlad's daughters had snuck up, he took her with pleasure, thinking Vlad wouldn't be happy with it. When Vlad found out, several months later, he'd been furious. Alex had savored the look of horror on Vlad's face when Yelena told her father that she was pregnant with Alex's child.

The memory hit Alex in the stomach and he nearly doubled over. He ran his hand through his hair and shuddered. He had forgotten about that. Yelena lost the baby before it could be born, and Alex had wondered if it had happened naturally or not.

Vlad had tried to blame Alex, but what could Alex have done to prevent it? Besides the obvious one of not fucking her? It wasn't as if he had access to condoms in his prison. He'd told Vlad that he couldn't tell the difference between his daughter and a *Dirne*, and Vlad hadn't taken that very well, but Alex enjoyed the fury on the other man's face. It matched his own.

After Vitaly died, Alex had asked Vlad what had happened and Vlad confessed that he had "arranged" for Yelena to lose the baby; she didn't know that the miscarriage had been induced. It was for the best all around that the baby hadn't been born. Especially in light of Alex's escape. He didn't need reminders of his captivity, nor did Anna. Yelena had married last year and was happy. She was a sweet girl, but Alex had no feelings for her. He had used her to get revenge with his captors.

After the incident with Vlad's daughter, there were no more *Dirne* for quite a while. Punishment, he supposed, but it wasn't much of one. Yelena being pregnant just reminded him of Anna. That she had been glowing with pregnancy when he'd left. Despair and depression had crept in again and he

did very little except sit in his chair and stare at the spot where Anna had stood, willing her to come back, but she didn't.

"You okay?" Seth asked quietly as the lights began to fade.

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his face. He had told Vati about the baby and they decided that Anna didn't need to know about it. At least not right now. There was too much for her to absorb at the moment. Maybe he would tell her about it later. He wasn't trying to hide it. He was just trying to be sensitive to Anna's level of acceptance.

Alex needed to get control of his emotions before he saw Anna at the Gala dinner. She was beginning to be able to sense his emotions, and the last thing she needed was to find out about Yelena.

The music began and Alex became lost in the ballet. Watching Anna was beauty in motion. Something had been elevated in the last few days. Her dancing became even more beautiful, if that were possible. She was captivating.

The story was a simple boy meets girl story, set to music by a Russian composer Alex had not heard of, but it was entrancing. Anna and Hugo had a true synergy when they danced together, making Alex wonder briefly if Hugo had some Immortal in him. When she danced with Peter it had felt similar.

He tried to deny the jealousy that began to stab at his heart. The look on her face as they danced together was beautiful, and heart breaking. She loved Hugo, and he looked at her the same way. He held her like the precious gem she was, gazing adoringly into her eyes.

Alex shifted uncomfortably in his seat. *Had* he made a mistake coming back? Trying to renew their relationship? Was it fair to Anna? After all, she'd moved on. Hugo was the only man she'd taken her ring off for.

But Hugo couldn't protect her the way Alex could. No, Anna was where she needed to be. With Alex.

But was he being cruel, taking her away from her lover?

Alex didn't like these doubts. He wasn't used to doubting his place, doubting his decisions. Since he'd escaped, he found himself doubting almost everything he did. It was very uncomfortable. He didn't like it one little bit.

Anna hummed as she put on her long, black lace dress. The corset top had thin lace straps at the edge of her shoulders and the skirt was fitted, though not obscenely so. She checked herself in the mirror, wanting to look perfect for Alex.

Alex. Her heart swelled with love for him. She loved dancing with Hugo, but the whole time, she was thinking about how Alex was in the audience, watching her dance. She danced for him and him only. The more she thought about him, the more she felt like she was floating in mid-air.

There was a knock at her door and she went to answer it, knowing it was either Hugo or Aaron. She smiled when she saw both, looking very handsome in their tuxedos.

Aaron smiled and then groaned, glancing at Hugo. "You don't get used to it."

"Get used to what?" Anna asked.

"You. Not being mine. Not being Hugo's."

Anna's face fell. "I'm sorry," she said, not knowing what to do. She didn't want to upset her friends.

Aaron chuckled and hugged her. "I was teasing...somewhat. Don't feel bad."

She glanced at Hugo, who gave her an affectionate smile. “I would love to still be with you, Kitty cat,” he said in a soft voice, hugging her. “But seeing you the last few days makes me realize how much you belong with Alex. You glow.” He kissed her cheek and released her.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” Aaron said with a laugh.

Anna’s mood lifted at their laughter. They were happy for her, not angry.

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Chapter Forty

The three dancers arrived in the promenade a few minutes later. Hugo and Aaron went to find out where they were sitting. Anna already knew where to go: Table One, with Alex.

The huge room was decorated in the colors of fall: green, gold, yellow and red. At the center of each table sat a tall golden urn with strands of autumn leaves hanging over the edge. The tablecloths were white, but the underskirts were different fall colors at each table. It felt as if she had walked into the middle of Central Park, except that people were dressed in formalwear instead of jeans and jackets.

Anna nodded greetings to people she recognized as she made her way to table one. Tom, Tommy and their wives were there, as were Vincent and his partner, Walter, the mayor and his wife, and another couple she didn't know. She didn't see Alex and she frowned. There were two empty seats, so she knew she was heading to the right table, but she didn't see her tall, handsome husband anywhere.

Tom spotted her as she approached and stood to greet her. "Katrina," he said kissing her cheek. "You were even more wonderful than in the spring, if that's possible."

She greeted the others around the table and then looked around. "Where's Alex?" she asked Tom.

Tom looked around. "He mentioned something about getting some air."

"Oh." Anna sat down next to Tom, disappointed. No, hurt was more like it. Why would he not be here when she arrived?

"Hello, Miss Katrina."

Anna looked up to see Simon standing next to her. She smiled and stood. “Hi, Simon. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Simon grinned. “Alex helped.”

Anna’s smile wasn’t as bright as it would have been, had Alex been next to her.

“Katrina, I’d like to introduce you to my wife, Emma. Emma, this is Katrina.”

The beautiful blond woman standing next to Simon extended her hand. “Hello, Katrina,” she said with a slight accent. German probably. “It is wonderful to meet you at last. I’ve heard much about you.”

Anna greeted her, wondering what she’d heard about her. “It’s nice to meet you, too. It never occurred to me that Simon was married.”

Emma gave a playful look to Simon and laughed. “Pretending to be single again?”

“It never was an issue. I was merely conducting business on behalf of my employer.” Simon gave Anna a friendly smile and looked around. “Speaking of...where is he?”

Anna bit her lip. “I don’t know. Tom said he went out for air.”

Simon frowned and looked behind him. She saw Tony and Greg sitting there. “Where’d Alex go?” Simon asked.

Tony shrugged. “Outside somewhere. Seth is with him.”

Simon looked thoughtful for a moment. “Excuse me for a few minutes.” He kissed Emma’s cheek and walked away.

Anna gave the others at the table a sad smile and then sat down in her chair again next to Tom. She fidgeted with the lace on her dress, not knowing what to do. Had she done something to upset Alex? But she hadn’t seen him since the early afternoon and he’d seemed fine then. Even when she was dancing, she hoped that he would sense her love for him. He

seemed to always know how she was feeling and she wondered if his “imbuement” of the Immortals had something to do with that.

Where was he?

“Alex, is there a reason you’re out here instead of inside with your wife?”

Simon had found Alex and Seth around the side of the theater. Alex had been there since the end of the performance. He didn’t want to see the way Anna looked at Hugo up close. It was bad enough watching it on stage.

Seth told him he was being ridiculous, but it didn’t help. Alex felt like he didn’t belong anywhere and for the first time in his life, he was avoiding a social situation because he was afraid. Knowing that he was afraid made him feel even more insecure and more determined to avoid the situation. It was a vicious cycle.

“She doesn’t want to see me,” he said softly in German. “I should have stayed away from her.”

Simon looked at him like he’d grown a second head. “What are you talking about?”

“Anna. She...God, I should have just left her alone to her new life. I could have confronted Devin on my own and she would have been free to live her life, believing I was dead.”

“Alex she loves you,” Seth said. “I don’t know where you got this ridiculous idea that she’d rather be with Hugo than you.”

“She took her ring off when they were dating.”

“She put it back on.”

“She knows she has to be with me. That she didn’t really have a choice after all.”

“She chose you before she knew that.” Seth frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “Although if you keep acting like a pussy, she might change her mind.”

Alex closed his eyes at his friend’s words. “Maybe I should let her.” He turned and walked away, heading away from the theater.

“Where are you going?” Seth and Simon caught up with him.

“Home.” He looked at Seth. “Make sure she gets home okay.”

“You will hurt her if you leave,” Simon called after him. “She was very disappointed when you weren’t in there when she arrived.”

“She’ll be more disappointed if I went back in,” Alex muttered, skipping down the shallow steps that led to the street. His condo was only a few blocks away. Just a few blocks until he could be alone in his misery.

Anna knew something was wrong when Seth walked in with Simon, but not Alex. Dinner was being served, but she pushed away from her chair and hurried over to the two men. “Where’s Alex?”

They looked at each other. “He...,” Seth began, then sighed. “He went home.”

Anna couldn’t believe what Seth just said. “He went home?” she whispered, not believing what she heard.

Seth nodded sadly. “I’m sorry, Anna.”

Anna blinked back tears, unsure of what to do. She looked out through the glass doors, hoping to see Alex walking towards the building, but he wasn’t there. “Why?”

Seth grimaced. “He’s having trouble adjusting to being here.”

Was he really saying that Alex was having doubts about being with her? She didn’t understand what was going on. She’d so been looking forward to

dancing with him tonight. To see the proud expression on his face when she walked in.

But he left and went home? Who was this man? Did he not want her anymore? Was that it? He'd spent time with her and realized that she wasn't what he wanted? The thought was a knife through her heart. Did he not love her anymore?

She went back to her seat and sat down hard, staring at the elegant china place setting in front of her.

"Where's Alex?" Tom asked as an entree was placed in front of Anna.

She looked at the delicious smelling salmon and vegetables. "Seth said he went home." She blinked away tears again. "He's having problems adjusting to being here."

"Alex?" Tom asked, disbelief in his voice.

Anna nodded, unable to speak, for fear of bursting out into sobs.

"He looked a little uneasy when we came in, but," Tom shook his head. "I don't understand why he would leave. I saw him before the performance began and he was looking forward to tonight."

Tom's words didn't help. What had happened between then and now? A knot formed in Anna's stomach. Had he met someone during the performance and he was going to meet her?

Doubts from all directions began to assault Anna and she was beginning to feel ill. But she couldn't leave, even if it was to chase after Alex. She represented the Company to these people who spent thousands of dollars to be seen and meet the dancers tonight. She'd left a social occasion early once and had been punished for it by Wilhelm. Anna doubted Tom would punish her, but she didn't want to take the chance.

She took a deep breath and began to slowly eat, trying to ignore the pain in her heart.

Anna ate and socialized and danced throughout the evening, all with a dull ache in her heart. She quickly got tired of answering the “Where’s Alex?” question. She even tried to call Alex a few times, but he didn’t answer, making her feel even worse.

She and Alex had never fought like this before. Were they fighting? That’s what made it worse. She had no idea what was going on. She didn’t know what had upset Alex. She tried getting angry at him, but couldn’t. All she could do was push away horrible images of him leaving her to be with another woman, or him leaving her period.

By two o’clock Anna was exhausted and her head was hurting. She just wanted to crawl into bed and curl up next to Alex. Would he even be there when she got home? Should she go home? Was that still her home? She’d only lived there a few days. Should she go back to the apartment?

She looked around for Seth and found him flirting with one of the corps dancers. He saw her looking at him and said something to the girl, then walked over to Anna.

“You okay?”

“I think I’m going to go home.” She gave him a questioning look. “Or should I go back to my apartment?”

Seth shook his head. “No, hang on a minute and I’ll take you home.”

Anna shook her head. “You seemed to be having a good thing going with Crystal. It’s only a few blocks.”

Seth frowned. “It’s the middle of the night and I told Alex I’d get you home safe.”

“Then just walk me to the building and come back. There’s no reason you can’t have some...company, like Tony and Greg.”

Seth thought for a moment and then nodded. “Alex is probably asleep and will wake up in the morning regretting leaving you here.”

Seth walked her the two blocks to their building and made sure she got in okay, then headed back to the party.

Anna greeted the doorman and then went to the elevators. She fidgeted in the elevator and then hesitated at the door to the condo. After taking a deep breath, she opened the door and walked inside.

The lights were off except in the library, at the far side of the living room. She kept her shoes on, wanting to alert Alex to her presence with her steps on the hardwood floor. She didn’t want to startle him. Was he in there?

She peeked inside and saw him slouching on the brown leather couch, wearing black sweatpants and holding a drink in his hand. He stared blankly at the lit fireplace, unmoving except for the slow rise and fall of his bare chest.

“Alex?” She was careful to keep her voice soft.

“I didn’t think you’d come home,” he said in a low voice.

Anna inhaled sharply. “Did you not want me to come home?” Tears burned her eyes again.

“I didn’t think you’d want to.” The hopelessness in his voice made Anna want to cry.

She walked over quickly and sat next to him, taking his hand. “Why would you think that, Alex? Why did you leave?” Her voice squeaked on her last word.

Alex gripped the glass in his hand tighter. “I thought you’d prefer it if I wasn’t there.”

Anna stared at him. “Why on earth would you think that, Alex? I was crushed when you left.”

Alex finally looked at her with bloodshot, sad eyes. “I saw you, when you were dancing with Hugo...you love him.”

Anna was taken aback. She’d barely been thinking about Hugo while she danced. No, she hadn’t completely gotten over Hugo yet, but she was certain of her love for Alex. “Alex...I know I’m still working out my feelings with Hugo, but I love you. *This* is where I want to be. With you.” She held his big hand with her two much smaller hands as her eyes filled with tears. “Is that why you left? Because you thought I’d rather be with Hugo?”

Alex nodded slowly and the tears spilled over onto Anna’s cheeks. “Why, Alex? Why would you think that?”

She saw the tears in his own eyes and he blinked rapidly. “I saw how you looked at him...how he looked at you. You...I could feel your emotions.”

Anna’s heart broke. Never in her wildest dreams would she ever imagine Alex being so insecure. The tears in his eyes made her own flow harder. *Devin* had done this to him. *Devin* had made the most confident man she’d ever met insecure.

Suddenly, Anna was hit full force with what Devin had done to them both and she felt her rage rising to the surface. She knew what Devin had done to her, but she hadn’t realized the full extent of what Devin had done to Alex. Until now.

Alex wasn’t exactly drunk, but not exactly sober either. He’d been sitting here for hours, imagining Anna dancing and having a good time at the Gala, all while being thankful that he’d left. Images of her in Hugo’s

arms broke his heart. But if she'd rather be with Hugo, Alex didn't want to stop her.

He was very surprised, then, when he heard the door open and her light footsteps in the hall. His heart had pounded, fearing what he would see in her face: Disdain? Disgust? Hatred? He didn't even want to look at her.

She hadn't responded to his accusation that she'd rather be with Hugo and he felt even more defeated.

Her hands suddenly clenched into fists and she began to shake. He looked up and saw a frightening sight; not disgust, but anger. No, not anger. Rage. Pure, unadulterated rage in her eyes.

"Anna?" he whispered. He exhaled sharply when her pupils began to disappear. "Anna!" he exclaimed, dropping his glass on the floor and grabbing hold of her shoulders.

"Devin..." she growled. "Devin...destroyed you..." She let out an inhuman scream and Alex leapt back.

She was going into a rage, like she had the night she'd killed Jack. Yet he was pretty sure she wasn't angry at him.

Fuck. What had the tomes said about this? He...he needed to get control of her. Theoretically, it would be easier if he caught her before it completely took hold.

He sat back down and took her head in his hands, turning her face toward his. "Anna. Anna, look at me."

She shook and jerked, trying to get free.

"Anna, *Schatzi*, look at me. Devin will pay. Devin will pay, I promise. Don't lose control, my love. Please."

She grabbed hold of his wrists, growling and digging her fingernails into the tender flesh. He winced, but thought he'd seen a glimmer of humanity in her eyes.

“Anna, look at me.” He hesitated. He had to command her. It was the only way. “Anna! Look at me.” He spoke in a firm, commanding tone, praying it would get her attention.

It did! Her eyes locked onto his. “Anna, Devin will pay for what he did. Please, please come back to me.”

She growled, but her pupils were starting to show again. He held her head firmly, keeping his eyes locked on hers and watched as she slowly, oh-so-slowly began to relax.

Her jaw trembled and she let out a sob and collapsed into his arms, tears drenching his chest and heart-wrenching wails breaking his heart. He leaned back in his seat and pulled her into his lap, holding her as tight as he could without hurting her.

She cried and cried and Alex held her. His chest was as wet as if she were showering him with her hot tears, but he didn’t care. He stroked her silky hair and whispered to her in German as the sobs wracked her body.

Grief overwhelmed Anna, making her wail unlike she had in a very long time. She thought she had passed out for a few minutes, because she remembered getting angry and then the next thing she knew, she was in Alex’s lap, crying. She tried to stop, not wanting to impose on Alex while he was upset, but she couldn’t.

Devin! Devin had destroyed her handsome, confident husband. The anger wasn’t there anymore, just grief. Intense grief.

An eternity later, when her tears ran dry, she looked up at Alex. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I made you feel like that, Alex.”

He wiped away her black-mascaraed tears with his thumbs. “I’m sorry I got jealous.”

“I was dancing for you,” she whispered. “I was barely thinking about Hugo as I danced. It was all for you....”

Alex’s eyes widened and she saw tears forming again. “Oh, Anna. Oh, *mein Schatzi*.” He grimaced. “I am a fool.”

“Devin...he hurt you so badly.” She cradled his smooth cheek. “Alex....” She leaned forward and kissed him, dragging her hands through his hair and thrusting her tongue into his mouth.

He groaned loudly and kissed her back with a passion. His hand tangled in her hair and met her tongue’s thrusts.

“Make love to me, Alex,” she murmured against his mouth. She felt him grin against her mouth and suddenly she was in the air.

Alex stumbled slightly and she opened her eyes to see him giving her a sheepish smile. “I’ve had a bit to drink.”

Anna giggled and wiggled out of his arms and onto the floor. “Are you up for lovemaking?” she teased.

He grinned. “Always.”

Feeling playful suddenly, she gave Alex a mischievous smile before running out of the room. She heard Alex laugh and his heavy footsteps followed behind her. She figured this would be the only time she might be able to outrun him.

He laughed and said something in German as he chased her down the hall and she screamed in delight and ran to their bedroom. His legs being so long, he easily caught up with her and grabbed her around the waist as she reached the door. She screeched and laughed, trying to get away, loving the light in his eyes. He tossed her onto the bed and jumped on after her, making the bed squeak.

“Little minx,” he murmured as he crawled over her and kissed her.

“I love you,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Alex's gaze softened. "I love you, too."

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Chapter Forty-One

Alex lay on his back with Anna lying on top of him, her green eyes full of love as she gazed at him. He'd been so unbelievably stupid the night before, it was a wonder Anna had forgiven him. But he was very thankful. So thankful.

She ran her fingers across his chest, giving him goose bumps and he shivered. The delight in her eyes made him want her to do it again. He couldn't imagine a better morning than this: waking up, making love, and then gazing at his beautiful wife for as long as he wanted. Technically, she should be in class right now, but he was glad she'd stayed home. She wasn't dancing until Tuesday so missing today wasn't too big of a deal.

It was late morning and neither of them were inclined to get out of bed. He reached out to twirl a lock of sable-silk hair around his finger.

"I missed you," he whispered, trying to maintain control of his emotions. "I didn't mind being imprisoned so much, but it was torture being away from you."

Regret filled her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Alex. I should have listened to you. I should have—"

He pressed his finger gently to her lips. "Anna, I understand why you were troubled. Yes, things might have been different, but what matters is we're here. Now. I don't hold it against you. None of my men do." He felt a flash of pain as he remembered his fallen men.

She stroked his cheek, sorrow in her eyes. "How is Erich doing?" she asked after a moment.

“Adjusting. He’s looking forward to coming out in November to confront that son-of-a-bitch.”

“November?”

Alex closed his eyes. “First Monday in November. The day I will kill Devin’s son. Friday will be the funeral. He’ll be expecting a bullet to the head. It won’t come. Saturday at the Funeral Gathering, I will confront him.” He opened his eyes to see Anna staring at him, eyes wide. He grimaced. “I don’t mean to upset you, *Schatzi*.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s....” She bit her lip. “Can I come?”

Alex didn’t want Anna anywhere near Devin. He wanted her here, safe and far away from that monster. He must have frowned because she narrowed her eyes. “I’m not letting you go anywhere without me.”

He carefully kept his face impassive as his heart swelled with affection for his stubborn wife. He must have not kept his face as impassive as he thought, though, because her eyes narrowed even more.

“I mean it, Alex. The last time you went out of town, you disappeared for almost five years. If you disappear, I’m disappearing with you.”

“Anna, you can’t come with me. I’ll be on a job.”

“Then tell the Elders that your wife won’t let you go.”

“Anna!”

Her brow raised. “I know who the Elders are who are sending you.”

“I have to go to Boston in three weeks.”

“Boston?”

“Oscar.”

Anna looked thoughtful for a few minutes. “That’s my last week of performances.”

Alex nodded. “I was going to come to you that Saturday after your last performance.” He grinned. “Bring you a bunch of pink roses.”

She grinned. "You still could."

"I might."

She gave him an affectionate smile and pushed forward to kiss him, her soft lips caressing his. Her leg brushed his cock and he felt it come to life. She smiled, letting him know she knew it too.

"I want to come with you," she murmured against his lips. She nipped his bottom lip and he inhaled sharply, wrapping his arms around her and rolling her to her back.

"Come with me where?" He was feeling very relaxed.

"To San Francisco."

He chuckled and kissed her again. "You should stay here, where it's safe." Why was he feeling dizzy?

"You want to leave me?" she pouted.

"Of course not, *Schatzi*. I—" Alex stiffened and pulled away from her. Suddenly, he realized what she was doing. "You're manipulating me."

Her eyes widened and she shook her head, but he put his hands on both cheeks. "Anna, don't you dare try and manipulate me." He gave her a stern look and she blinked rapidly a moment before bursting into tears.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered. She gazed up at him, all hints of seduction gone. "I'm sorry, Alex, but I can't stand the thought of you leaving me." The tears slid down the sides of her face and onto his hands. "Please," she whispered. "Please don't leave me. I'll be a nervous wreck the entire time."

"You can call me while I'm gone."

"But what if you don't pick up? What if something happens to you?" Her green eyes were filled with grief. "Please, Alex. Please don't leave me here."

Alex rolled to his back and ran his hands through his hair. The thought of leaving her didn't sit well with him either. He knew she'd be a mess with

him gone. But what could he do?

“Anna, even if I take you to San Francisco, I still have to go to Boston.” He sighed. “I don’t want you seeing what I do.”

“It’s okay if I know, but not okay if I see?” She sat up on her elbow and frowned. “Alex, Devin killed Ben in front of me. Tyler is as cruel as Devin. Oscar nearly killed me. Rylan raped me so many times I can hardly count. Seeing you ‘work’ can’t be any worse than that.”

He grimaced at the truth of her words, but he couldn’t take her with him. “Anna, you have to dance while I’m in Boston. I can’t take you away from that.”

“Change the date.”

“What?” he exclaimed. “Anna, we’ve worked out the details. I can’t just call my father and tell him I’m pushing off the job. You don’t do that to Elders.”

“Fine.” She rolled over and stood up. “I’ll call him.”

She started to walk away and Alex jumped up and lunged after her. “Anna, you can’t do that.”

She spun around. “Why not? Why are they making you leave me? Don’t they know what that will do to me?”

“I’m doing this for you, *Schatzi*,” Alex said in a raspy voice. “I know your country will be better off without these men, but the only thought that will be going through my head as I pull the trigger is how much they hurt you.”

She began to shake and Alex briefly became concerned that she was going to rage again. He hadn’t told her about the previous night yet. He studied her eyes, but there was no anger. Only what could be described as insane grief.

She dropped to her knees and hugged his legs. “Please, Alex. I can’t lose you again. I can’t. I won’t survive.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me, *Schatzi*.” He bent down to pull her arms from around his legs before crouching down next to her and hugging her tightly.

“That’s what you said the last time,” she sobbed into his shoulder.

He stared out the window behind her as he stroked her hair. “I will talk to Vati. If he believes it is a possibility, I will approach Tom and Vlad.” He pulled her away slightly and gazed lovingly into her eyes. “But we must obey our Elders, Anna. I cannot go against their wishes.”

Anna nodded and sniffed. “Okay.” She gave him a brave smile through her tears.

Alex hoped Vati had a solution for this. He had no idea what to do.

Chapter Forty-Two

“What was it like?”

Alex looked up from his lunch. “What was what like?”

“Being in Russia.” Anna’s fork was halfway to her mouth, holding a cluster of romaine lettuce and Parmesan cheese. They sat together upstairs, in the windowed conservatory that overlooked his terrace and Central Park.

Alex thought for a moment and then gave a half-smile. “Boring.”

Anna giggled. “Boring?”

He shrugged. “There wasn’t much to do. After we realized there was no chance of escape, we just...accepted it...”

I sat in my room next to the window, reading, most days. There wasn’t much else to do. Three and a half years passed sitting by that window. The world went on, but still I sat there. For a prison, it wasn’t so bad. We had good meals every day down in the well-appointed dining room, unless there were guests. We were given time outside and time in the library when requested. Vitaly even had a gym downstairs for us to use.

You had appeared in this room when I first was captured but you were faint, and I hadn’t been certain you were real. You didn’t speak very coherently, and when you disappeared, I wondered if it had been a dream. Then there was nothing for two years.

Those were my dark days. My men tried to cheer me, but it didn’t work. Despair and depression crept in and I did very little except sit in my chair and stare at the spot where you had stood, willing you to come back, but

you didn't. Vitaly wouldn't tell me anything that was going on, though sometimes he hinted that you were dead, or married to someone else and happy. Anything to torment me. That fucking bastard. And to think he had been a family friend.

Vlad was just as bad when he visited, though he seemed more reasonable on some levels. Vitaly seemed as bad as Devin. Vlad at least tried to understand and was sympathetic...a little.

It was one of my darker days when I sensed you again. I was staring out the window at nothing when I heard a wisp of a sound. I was afraid to look; I had looked so many times before. But when you said my name...my heart leapt and I turned to see you, my beautiful sweet wife, older, thinner, sick-looking even. But you were there. It took everything inside me to not run over there. I knew you would disappear at my touch, so I just looked, gazing into your beautiful green eyes, willing you to feel my love and longing.

"Are you really there?" I asked in a raspy voice, but you frowned, and I realized I'd spoken in German. Same mistake I'd made so many years ago. I smiled at my foolishness and tried again in English.

Your eyes widened and you took a step back and shook your head. "You're dead. This isn't real. No!" you shouted, and disappeared.

I slumped in my chair and stared at the spot. You had come, but you didn't want to be there. Did you no longer love me? I looked at the ceiling and let my tears flow freely. My beloved Schatzi. Did you hate me? Why had you come? Was it something Devin had cooked up to torment me?

I still had no answers to my questions when Seth came into my room later to get me for dinner.

"She came," I said in a broken voice. "She came and she hated me."

Seth walked into the room and knelt down next to my chair. "Alex, she would never hate you. What happened?"

I told Seth what had happened.

“You’ve been gone for two years and you haven’t seen her since you first got here. She was probably scared and hurting. I know Anna. She would never hate you. Never.”

I gave my friend an uncertain smile and swallowed. “You think so?”

Seth grinned. “Either that or your appearance scared the shit out of her. Have you looked at yourself lately?”

I shook my head. “Do I look that bad?”

“Well, you look better than a bum on the street. But only just.”

I chuckled. “Maybe I should trim my beard.”

“Maybe. Or at least brush it so you make sure there aren’t any rats living in it.”

Seth had been right; I looked like shit. From then on, I kept my hair combed and beard trimmed in hopes that you would come. It was several months later when you did. I had almost not bothered that day, but was glad I did.

The hurt in your eyes was evident when I turned to see you. God, it broke my heart. You accused me of abandoning you. You were hurt and angry. I thought trying to assure you that I was real would help, but I was wrong. It only made you more upset. Without thinking, I reached out to you and you were gone. I fell to my knees and wept.

When you came again, you seemed reluctant to be there, but calmer. God, you were so beautiful. You looked healthier than before, which made me feel better. You refused to accept that I was real, and I didn’t push it. I was thrilled to see you still wore your wedding ring, as I did. You might not

know that I was still your husband, but I certainly knew you were still my wife, and knowing you still wore my ring...it made me want to fly.

It killed me that I couldn't comfort you when you started crying about the baby. I had been adamant about finding out about the baby and had been stunned when Vlad told me what Devin had done. But that had been years ago, and you were still grieving? It didn't make any sense. Not that what happened wasn't traumatic, but I was confused until I found out, much later, that you had been on drugs for two years, until Devin had demanded you get sober. I swore that when I got out of there I would make Devin pay for what he had done to you.

But you had reached for me before you left. The briefest touch and you were gone, but it warmed my heart. Maybe you would forgive me after all.

The next time you came, I accepted that I needed to let you think it was just a dream. You were calmer and didn't get upset if I let you think you were dreaming. You stayed much longer and I was able to find out a lot about what Devin had been doing. He was taking your powers from you for his own, and it frustrated me to no end that I couldn't do anything about it. I made you leave when the contact became too burdensome and you began to hurt. I liked that you didn't want to leave. You told me you loved me, and I lived on those words for a long time.

Shortly after that, Vlad began visiting me more often. He seemed to genuinely want to know about my relationship with you, and about Devin. Vlad, in turn, gave me news about you. That you still loved me and—

“Do you see her?” Vlad asked one morning after a lengthy question and answer time.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What do you mean?”

“She says she dreams of you but they're not real, like they used to be.” Vlad's eyes softened. “Are they real?”

I studied him for a few minutes. “Yes,” I said finally. “Yes, she comes here. I let her think they’re dreams because she gets upset when I try to tell her I’m real.”

Vlad nodded and left a few minutes later.

The next time Vlad came, Peter was with him. I was appalled at first at what Devin had done, making you “date” someone, but as Peter spoke, I realized that Peter cared for you deeply. Peter spent a few hours with me, telling me about what you had been doing and reassured me several times that you still missed me and that if I ever got free, you would willingly return to me.

“Ever got free?” I snorted when he said that. “Not as long as your grandfather is alive.”

Peter looked at me impassively and then stood to leave. “He is an old man, Alex. Old men die.”

“Peter really said that?” Anna asked. She vaguely remembered Aaron saying something about Vitaly being killed.

Alex nodded. “Honestly, I think his death was...artificially induced.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “Peter killed him?”

“I think it was more Vlad. Peter was with you, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Vitaly slowly started getting sick, and towards the end, I didn’t even see him. Vlad seemed...unsurprised and rather unemotional when he came to tell me....”

Time passed, Vitaly was still alive and even Vlad didn't come visit anymore. You came every once in a while and, as long as I didn't try to convince you I was real, you were fine.

I'd seen you just a few days before and you looked so dejected. You said you were lonely. Promises of dead men, you said. Those words tore into my heart. I longed to prove that I would come, but how could I? It was too painful to hope.

I realized that I had been staring out the window. Not that it mattered. I had the rest of my life to finish the book in my lap. I could stare at the Russian blue sky all I wanted, and still have time to finish my book.

I sighed and stood, placing the book on the table next to me. Maybe I'd ask for some time outside. It would get cold soon; too cold to go out. I ran my hands through my hair and interlaced my fingers on top of my head as I looked out the window to the small world I had inhabited for so long.

A sharp rap sounded on the door and then it opened. I turned to see Vlad standing in the doorway with a very somber expression on his face.

"My father is dead," he announced without emotion.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Vlad," I said sincerely, for Vlad's sake. It would be tough to lose a father, even one as harsh as Vitaly.

"Yes, well...." Vlad looked at me uncomfortably. "Anna will be here in a few days and I must take you all down to the cellar until she's gone."

The cellar was a freezing cement room that we were taken to whenever there were guests in the house. It was also where I and my men spent our first few weeks in St. Petersburg.

"Anna's coming here?" I asked, with more emotion than I'd expected to show.

"I don't think she'll come here to the house, but she will be in town. If she senses you here...Devin will not like it."

Devin won't like it? I studied Vlad carefully. "What about you?"

"I don't want her to be hurt," Vlad said slowly.

I snorted. "If you don't want her hurt, let me and my men go."

"When the funeral is over, I will reconsider many things my father did."

He gave me a pointed look. "But until then, the protections on the house must be strengthened. There cannot be a hint of anyone knowing you are here, or Devin would be very upset."

I nodded slowly, trying to decipher what Vlad was saying. Was he saying that he would let us go? Would Vlad not be upset if anyone knew we were here?

"Once the funeral is over...things may change. Tomorrow I will take you to the cellar." He turned to leave but paused. "I almost forgot to give this to you." He handed me a portable DVD player. "Peter sent this to me. I thought you might like to see."

When Vlad left, I powered the device on and my heart pounded as I heard the first strains of the music of Giselle. My Anna! It was your performance of Giselle with Peter. I watched the entire thing without moving, and then began it again before I realized the others might want to see it. I hurried out into the hallway and called for them.

Though the stairway was blocked off, we had the tower floor to ourselves. Seth, Tony, Greg and Erich came out of their rooms. You would have laughed at all the beards and long hair. A pain hit my heart, knowing I had lost three men trying to find a means of escape the first year we were there. There was no way out. The deaths of Jesse, Michael and Jason had proven that. Sebastian hadn't died, of course, but had been banished to wherever he came from.

I put the DVD player on the ground and began it again. No one spoke as the ballet progressed, but we all watched. When it was over, Seth started it

over and we all sat and watched it together again. And again.

I looked around at my men. My family. I would have likely killed myself if it hadn't been for them all this time. They were subdued, but not unhappy. There just wasn't much to talk about after all this time; nothing really happened. We had exhausted all possible escape routes and lost three good men trying. Life was monotonous.

Vlad chuckled a few hours later when he came up and saw us all sitting on the floor in the hallway. "I didn't know you were all so fond of ballet."

If it had been Vitaly, I would have had a smart remark ready for him, but Vlad had been kind enough to give us this, so I held my tongue. Besides, his comment seemed genuine.

"I can ask for more if you'd like," Vlad offered.

I nodded. "Please," I said, my voice raspy.

Vlad gave me a sympathetic look. "She's a wonderful dancer and a wonderful young woman."

The men all nodded. Not once had they complained or suggested that you were the reason they were there. Seth, Greg and Tony still adored you. Erich didn't know you as well, but knew me enough to know you were something special. I was so grateful for them all.

It pained me to know Vlad had contact with you when I couldn't, but...there was something different about Vlad now that Vitaly was gone. More than just him becoming an Elder. It gave me a glimmer of hope for the first time in a very, very long time.

Chapter Forty-Three

Anna stood and walked around to the other side of the table and embraced Alex. Knowing her refusal to believe him had hurt him made her feel so guilty. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you, Alex,” she whispered, settling on his lap and leaning her head against his shoulder. “I was so consumed with grief—”

“Anna, I’ve told you. It’s all right. I understand. If you had believed me, and Devin had found out...who knows what would have happened? I might still be in that cellar.”

His words brought to mind a memory unbidden. “The cellar....” She sat up. “You got sick. You got sick and... Devin sent me to heal you....”

Alex nodded.

“But...why did I get sick too?”

“I was down there because Devin wanted me down there. I got sick because of being down there. So you did too....”

The cellar was freezing as usual. There were blankets and cots, but they did little to abate the cold. I hated being down here in the windowless box. Not to mention I was starting to feel like crap.

As time went on, I started sweating and shivering at the same time. Seth put me down on the bed and did what he could for me, but all I could do was shiver. Tony pounded on the metal door but no one came. God, would I die down there?

No relief came and the room seemed to grow even colder. Even the other men huddled in their beds against the cold. They had done all they could for me. I put my head under my blanket and wondered about death.

I felt you before I could see you. A warmth spread throughout the room before you even came to me. My thoughts were scattered, though I was surprised you were there. Vlad had said this room was sealed against your presence.

You pulled the blanket away from my face and I opened my eyes. My teeth chattered as I mumbled something about your presence and I tried to smile at you but all I could do was groan in pain. I felt your cool hand on my forehead and stared at you in wonder as you sighed in relief and then stretched out in the bed with me. I wanted to reach out to you, to wrap my arms around you and keep you there forever, but I couldn't move. Instead, you wrapped your arms around me and I felt the fever leaving me. My body relaxed and I moved closer to you, but opened my eyes in alarm when your body became hot with the fever I'd just had.

"No, Anna. No, you can't get sick." I put my hand on your head and willed you to give me my sickness back. You cried out and I saw the pain in your eyes before you faded away.

"Anna!" I screamed sitting up. "Anna!"

But you were gone.

I looked around but knew you were gone. I caught Erich's eye. "Did you see her?" I asked wildly.

Erich nodded. "Felt her first. The room is warmer."

The other men had sat up.

"You okay?" Greg asked.

"She took my fever," I rasped, staring at the ground. "She healed me." I squeezed my eyes shut and fell back into my cot. I could almost feel you still

next to me. Your warm body against mine. It was torture.

I didn't know how long we were down in the box but when Vlad finally appeared, I charged at him. "Is she all right?"

Vlad looked at me, surprised. "Yes, Alex. She's fine. She's much better than she was. Your father challenged Devin, and she is with him and your brother now."

I slumped against the wall in relief. I could feel my men relax as well. But I stiffened again as Vlad's words sank in. "You think she is better because she is with my family?" I knew that my family had been forbidden to have contact with you and I was thrilled that the ban had been revoked.

Vlad didn't answer right away. He looked away, emotions flitting across his face. "If I were to answer that in the positive, my family would be in danger." He looked back at me. "The look of joy on her face when she was allowed to return to your father...was very pleasing."

I read between the lines. Vlad didn't approve of how Devin treated you, and maybe even what Devin was doing, period.

"You can return to your rooms," Vlad said, stepping aside. As I stepped by him, after the others had left, Vlad spoke again. "You should spend some time in the library soon."

I arched an eyebrow at the new Russian Elder, but nodded my head. "Perhaps I should go now?"

Vlad nodded and walked away.

I made my way to the large library on the second floor of the huge mansion. Vlad was definitely different from Vitaly and I wondered about the changes he had mentioned a few days ago.

One change I did notice as I made my way through the house was the lack of security. Vitaly had kept armed guards throughout the house; I

couldn't go more than a few steps without seeing a guard watching me with a gun ready to shoot me if I or any of the others acted suspiciously.

Now, I couldn't see any in sight, which made me more nervous. Was Vlad tricking me? I stopped in the hallway and listened. I didn't hear or sense anyone around me. It was odd. I looked around and didn't see any new cameras, either. What was going on?

I arrived in the library and looked around to search for what Vlad obviously wanted me to find. Nothing caught my eye as I stood at the double-door entrance of the two-story library. I wandered slowly around the perimeter, looking for any differences. I knew this room almost as well as my own family's library. My Russian had certainly improved since I'd been here; almost all of the books were in Russian.

Your presence still haunted me as I walked around the room. I missed you now more than ever. I was glad that you were able to see my family again, but a part of me couldn't help but wonder if something might develop between you and my brother. My heart squeezed at the thought, though Kurt was the logical person to take my place in your life.

I stopped by a floor-to-ceiling window and leaned my head against the cool glass. What if you fell in love with Kurt and married him? Yes, I wanted you happy, but I wanted you happy with me, not my brother. Vlad, by his actions and words, had lit a glimmer of hope in my heart that we might actually get out of here someday. I felt the desire to fight growing inside me again. Something I hadn't felt in a long time.

I looked around the room with new eyes. What was different? What was it that Vlad wanted me to find? A bookshelf in the corner caught my eye. Something was odd.

I crossed the room in a few short strides and saw that the edges of some books were closer to the edge of the shelf than the surrounding books. I bent

down and looked but there wasn't anything behind them. So what was here?

The dust cover on a large book was slightly bent and ill fitting. I pulled the book out, opened the front cover and was astonished when I saw the elaborate script of an ancient Elder book.

There were three volumes of the Books of the Elders that had been banned centuries ago. I had found the first two when I had searched before we were married. This was the missing third volume! This was the volume that should tell me how to free you from Devin's grip!

I ran my hands through my hair as my pulse pounded in my head. I was certain that this book had not been here before. Had Vlad put it here? He had to have done so, otherwise why would he have told me to go to the library?

Changes.... You.... Devin.... Freedom?

I closed the book and made sure the dustcover was in place, then turned and carried it out of the room. Vlad came around the corner and I stopped dead in my tracks, blood chilling in fear of what Vlad would say.

"Did you find anything interesting?" Vlad asked conversationally.

"I...uh, yes, I did," I answered hesitantly.

Although Vlad didn't smile, I saw his gaze soften. "Good. I hope you find it...educational." He nodded his head and continued past me down the hallway.

I stood in the middle of the hallway for a split second more and then hurried to the staircase and up to my room. It would take me a while to decipher the book, but it would be easier since I was familiar with the language already. If Vlad had left this book for me to find, would he also provide a means of escape?

One thing at a time, I told myself. I needed to learn what I needed to know before I thought about anything else.

I immersed myself in learning what I needed to know. Seth and the others would drag me out of my room every day to make sure I got exercise.

“Anna won’t like it if you’re skinny,” Seth teased.

I rolled my eyes, though my vanity winced. I had lost a lot of muscle tone over the years. What was the point of working out if I was never going to leave? But finding the book had renewed my desire for life. There was a chance that I would see you again! My heart pounded every time I thought about it.

The mood had lightened significantly since Vitaly had died. We found ourselves joking around and talking about what it would be like to be free again; something we hadn’t dared to even dream about for a very, very long time.

Winter came and went and I studied diligently. Vlad told me that you were living with Devin after you went home and, from what Vlad had heard, you weren’t doing well. When Vlad would bring your performances for us to watch, I could see you weren’t yourself, though it was subtle. My heart ached for you, and my determination to get free increased.

At the beginning of March, Vlad came to my room early one morning.

“Anna is gone.”

I was still in bed and I sat up straight. “What? What do you mean gone?”

Vlad’s face was inscrutable, as it was most of the time when he came to speak to me. “She ran away from Devin.”

My jaw dropped and I stared at Vlad. I could hardly comprehend his words. “Ran away?” I repeated. “How? Is she safe? Where is she?”

Questions shot through my head like a bullet ricocheting off steel plates.

“She had help. Yes she is safe.” Vlad’s eyes softened. “She’s with friends.”

“Do you know where?”

Vlad didn’t answer, but strode to the window and looked out. “Our Gathering is next week in Moscow.” He turned to look at me. “I, of course, must attend and will have to take much of my household with me.”

My heart pounded in my chest. Was this our opportunity to escape? Was it a trick? “Oh?” was all I could come up with.

Vlad nodded. He looked like he wanted to say something, but hesitated. “Have you explored much of the house?”

I shook my head. “Your father kept us on a tight leash.”

“I hope you have noticed I am more...relaxed than he was.”

“I have,” I admitted. “I was used to guns pointed at me wherever I went. It’s...nice.”

Vlad allowed a smile to breach his face. “I can imagine.” He turned back to the window. “My father liked to keep things he thought could be useful. He kept them in a locked storage room under the house.” He paused. “It has a door to a tunnel that leads outside the property.”

My heart pounded even harder. Escape? “Th-that’s interesting,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. Was our gear in there?

“Of course, the room is guarded, but only by one man.” He turned around. “Midnight snacks are tasty, aren’t they?”

I blinked, hardly daring to believe what I was hearing. Vlad was telling me how to escape? “It can be dangerous, wandering a house at night.”

Vlad nodded. “It can be. If you’re not careful. But rewarding as well.” His eyes were pleading. “Sometimes someone else’s safety is worth the risk. Elder protections can only last so long against stronger men.”

I swallowed. I needed to find out where you were.

“We leave on Monday. I know I can trust you to...do the right thing.” He put his hands in his pockets and then drew them out again, and something hit the ground with a soft thud. “You’re a good man, Alex. I’m sorry I distrusted you.”

I nodded, still disbelieving my ears.

Vlad strode out of the room and closed the door behind him.

I sat for a moment, looking at the closed door and reflecting on what I had heard, and then walked over to the cloth bundle that Vlad had dropped. Inside were several keys. Praying this wasn’t a trap, I went to tell my men what I had learned and to make plans for Monday.

“Vlad really did that?” Anna asked, eyes wide. She’d put her fork down and listened intently as Alex told her his story. Vlad really had risked everything to let Alex escape. “Devin doesn’t know?” she whispered.

Alex shook his head. “No, Vlad and Peter only have to hide it for a few more weeks, and with all the funerals, Devin’s a little...well, he’s started to get a little paranoid.” Harsh amusement lit his eyes. “I can’t wait to see him going to Tyler’s funeral.”

Anna bit her lip. She understood Alex’s feelings; hers weren’t much different. But the years of imprisonment had hardened him. She could see it in his eyes. Or maybe this was what he went through when preparing for a job. Then again, this job was personal.

She reached across the table and put her hand on his. He looked down, his eyes softening as he looked at her hand. “Alex, I will respect what the Elders decide about me going along,” she said softly. “But please consider the fact that it’s my fight too. I want to see you stand up to Devin. I want to

see the look on his face when he realizes he's lost." She paused. "I'm the one who had to live with him, who dealt with him every day."

Alex pressed his lips together and nodded. "I understand, *Schatzi*. I will speak to my father tonight."

Anna smiled. "Thank you."

They ate in silence for a few minutes and Anna's curiosity got the better of her. "How did you escape?"

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Chapter Forty-Four

Alex took a breath, thankful for Anna's desire to hear his story. They'd missed so much of each other's lives. It was a way he felt that he could share of himself.

Monday morning, I watched from my window as Vlad, Peter and an enormous entourage climbed into several SUVs and drove down the road and through the gate that guarded the property. If I counted correctly, there were only a handful of guards left in the house. I inhaled deeply and went to discuss last minute plans with the others.

At midnight, dressed in the darkest clothing we had, I unlocked the door to the stairs and the five of us crept silently downstairs. We carried a few possessions in pillowcases, including the Book of the Elder that I had "found." Though we were out of practice, we moved as silently as ever, prepared to attack whomever we came across. I was operating without a full team, but it would have to do.

At the bottom of the stairs we paused outside the door to the house. I listened at the crack and heard movement. I motioned to my men that there was someone out there and they moved into position. I pressed myself against the wall to the side of the door and turned the handle and let the door swing open. The guard grunted and poked his head through the doorway and I grabbed his head and twisted his neck, breaking it with a satisfying twist of my hands. Tony and I dragged the guard into the corner of the stairwell and searched his body, coming up with a pistol and several

magazines. There was also a wallet and a throwing knife, which I tossed to Erich, who grinned. I stuck the pistol in the back of my waistband and we slowly crept along the side of the dimly lit hallway, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. There were no other guards until we reached the corner that led down to the kitchen.

The man was too far away to sneak up on, so Tony charged the guard and broke his neck, and we dragged the body to a side closet, stripping him of his wallet and weapons.

We crept down the stone staircase silently, unsure if there was another guard in place. The kitchen was dark except for the moonlight streaming through the windows. I listened for a long while and when I was satisfied there was no one in there, we made our way through the narrow doorway and began searching. The only thing I knew was that the storage room was in there. We gathered as much food as we could, dropping bread and fruit into the extra pillowcases. I chuckled as I remembered doing something similar with Kurt when we were children.

A low whistle from Greg told me the door had been found. It was in the back of the pantry. I produced the key and unlocked the door. It wasn't quiet, but not loud enough to overly concern us. Once the door was closed, Tony found a light switch and the room lit brightly. We had to wait for our eyes to adjust before looking around in amazement. All our gear was in here, plus some.

We took a quick inventory and shrugged into our darker "sneaking" clothes before divvying up the extra gear from our deceased friends. Once we were somewhere relatively safe, we could check our weapons, but the important thing was to get out of there. Quickly. I located the door across the room and opened it. It smelled of wet dirt and something else unpleasant, but I trusted that it went where Vlad said it did. Once our

flashlights were on, Greg turned out the light and we filed into the tunnel, closing the door behind us.

It was long and straight, with damp stone walls and floor and a wooden ceiling. Our boots made little sound as we quickly jogged through the narrow passageway. After about fifteen minutes we came to a rusted metal doorway. I studied the door. There was no visible keyhole or latch. I poked around a little and found a hidden latch near the bottom and pushed the door open. Fresh, cold air rushed into my face and I took in deep gulps.

“Freedom,” I whispered in a husky voice. I looked back and grinned at my friends. They returned the grin and filed out into the dark forest, closing the door quietly behind us. As much as I wanted to savor our newly found freedom, we had to keep moving.

We were south of the mansion and I knew there was a town a few miles away that had a local train into the main city. We had to get into St. Petersburg to catch the train to Warsaw, and then to Frankfurt. Train was the easiest way to travel. Our ultimate destination was my father’s house. Vati would be able to help me figure out what to do next. Maybe he even knew where you were.

The five of us took off in a southeasterly direction, not talking but concentrating our energy on getting where we needed to go. A few miles into our journey we were huffing more than we ever had in the past; confinement had taken its toll.

By the time we made it into the town, we were exhausted. The plan was to “borrow” a car and take it to the closest train station. Seth and Tony would go find a suitable vehicle while I waited on the edge of town with Greg and Erich. Two men walking around weren’t as noticeable as five.

We didn’t speak much, but ate a snack as we waited for Seth and Tony to return. If there was one thing they knew how to do, it was get places without

being noticed. That was never the issue with getting away from Vitaly. The issue had been guards that watched our every move, prepared to shoot to kill if we even looked like we were trying to escape. I closed my eyes at the memory of my friends' deaths.

After what seemed like an eternity, a dark sedan pulled up next to us and I heard the signal whistle. We shoved our things into the trunk and squeezed into the small car.

"Think you could have picked a smaller car, Tony?" I asked in English. "I feel like a sardine."

"Beggars can't be choosers," Tony responded. Seth laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You better practice your English. Anna won't be able to understand you."

I growled. "She hasn't had problems before."

Seth rolled his eyes. "Maybe the dreams interpret better. I'm having a hard time understanding your English, and I've been with you for the past several years."

"Is it really that bad?" I asked Greg.

"You have an interesting mix of a Russian and German accent." Greg shrugged. "She'll figure it out, I'm sure."

"Or you won't need to speak at all," Erich laughed. "Just kiss her."

I groaned softly and remembered kissing your soft lips. Somehow, we had been able to touch the last few times you'd come. Feeling you against me had been heavenly. Feeling your lips against mine...I sighed thinking about it. I would never let you out of my sight again once I found you. Never.

The drive was a short one, and Tony parked the car in the back of the parking lot. We pooled our cash and Greg went to buy the tickets. We

always kept plenty of local currency with us when we went on missions, as well as pre-paid debit cards with extra. But I wanted to be out of the country before we used those. Cash was always better.

Greg returned a few minutes later. “The trains don’t start for a few more hours. It might be better to just drive into the city. The train to Warsaw doesn’t leave until almost midnight.”

I ran my hand through my hair. I’d wanted to get out of the city as soon as possible. “Does anything else leave earlier?”

“There’s a train to Helsinki, but we’d be trapped there. I think it’d be better to find a place to stay for the day and wait for the Warsaw train. Unless you want to go through Moscow.”

I shook my head emphatically. “That would be walking into the lion’s den. All right. Let’s go find a place to stay, get rid of the car and get the tickets to Warsaw.”

We found a hotel near the station and stayed there until it was time to go. Tony went out and purchased us new clothes so we didn’t look like criminals or, well, assassins. The hotel clerk had looked at us nervously as she checked us in.

Nine nerve-wracking hours later, we were finally aboard the train to Warsaw.

I shared a sleeper berth with my cousin, who was snoring next to me. I was exhausted, but couldn’t sleep. I missed you with everything that I had and was impatient to get to you. Would you want me back? When you thought I was a dream, you certainly wanted me, but what about the reality? Would you still think I’d abandoned you? What was the best way to approach you? Just show up wherever you were staying and say hello? Could you handle such a thing? Or should I ease you into it, giving you hints that I was there and then revealing myself?

No answer came to me and I drifted off to sleep still wondering.

The train arrived mid-afternoon in Warsaw with several hours until the next train left. I relaxed a bit, knowing we were more than halfway there. Erich and I would have to keep a low profile once we were in Frankfurt. It wouldn't be good if we were recognized. Our beards and hair helped, but the Kunze family members were all well known, and our height alone could give us away.

Arriving in Frankfurt early in the morning was only beneficial if it was the weekend. It wasn't. The train station was busy on that Thursday morning, though not overcrowded. Erich and I both wore hats and kept our heads down. For once, I wished I weren't so tall.

Fortunately, Uncle Friedrich and Aunt Klara lived only about a half mile from the train station and we headed out as soon as we found our bearings. My stomach churned as we walked through the familiar streets. I was so thankful to be home, but now the real challenge began. Staying out of Devin's sight and finding you.

I glanced over at Erich. "You all right?" I asked.

Seth, Tony and Greg walked behind us.

Erich let out a big breath. "How can I be so nervous about seeing my family?"

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who feels that way."

Erich looked at me, surprised. "I didn't think you got nervous about anything."

"Maybe not before, but now, yes."

Erich's childhood home came into view and our steps slowed.

"What's the best way to approach?" Seth asked. "Knock on the door or walk right inside?"

"Do you have your keys?" I asked with a grin.

Erich thought for a moment and then dropped his bag on the ground. “I just might.” After a few minutes of rummaging, Erich made a triumphant sound. “I hope they didn’t change the locks.”

Traffic was increasing and we carefully made our way down the street. Most likely, both my aunt and uncle were awake, but Uncle Friedrich would still be home.

We walked around the back of the house and Erich unlocked the door. I could hear voices in the direction of the kitchen. Familiar voices of loved ones. Tony closed the door behind us and I motioned for the three non-Kunzes to wait there while Erich and I announced our presence. I nodded to Erich and we crept to the kitchen. Dishes clinked and Uncle Friedrich spoke about a legal case he was researching.

We walked slowly into the spacious kitchen. “Hello, Mutti. Hello, Vati.” Erich spoke loud enough to be heard, but not loud enough to startle them. Too much.

Klara screamed and dropped her coffee mug. It crashed to the floor and porcelain and coffee scattered across the floor. Friedrich stood, pushing his chair back and took a defensive stance. His gaze went back and forth between us. “Erich?” he whispered in wonder. “Alex?”

Klara put her hands to her mouth and then rushed to Erich, embracing him and crying. She reached for me as well. Friedrich was quickly behind her and we were hugged and kissed and stared at in wonder.

“We were told you were dead,” Friedrich said in a hoarse voice.

“That’s what you were supposed to believe,” Erich said. “I’m sorry you suffered.” He kissed his mother’s head.

“The others are here,” I said softly. “May I call for them?”

“Oh!” Klara said. “Of course.”

I quickly went to gather the others and returned to the kitchen. My uncle and aunt knew them too and hugged them with just as much enthusiasm.

“Have you spoken to Wilhelm?” Friedrich asked.

I shook my head. “We only just got in. Your house was closest to the station.”

“I should call him,” Friedrich said, reaching for his phone.

“No, Uncle. I need to see him in person. Soon.”

“Of course.” He looked around at the group of men. “If you don’t mind being uncomfortable, we might be able to squeeze into the SUV.”

“We surprised Vati and Mutti and the others,” Alex said with a soft smile. “To say the least.”

Anna was staring at him with a mix of awe and sadness. It must have been a shock, hearing him speak so casually about killing a man. Another reminder of how little time they had together before he was captured.

“Why...,” she said in a soft voice. “Why didn’t you come right away?”

“I wanted to, Schatzi....”

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Chapter Forty-Five

“Vati, I need to see her. I’ve waited years to see her.” I ran my hands through my long hair as I stared out the window of Vati’s study at the first Frankfurt sunset I’d seen in many years. I had spent the whole day with my family, sharing and learning what had happened since I’d been gone. The families of Seth, Tony and Greg would arrive tomorrow. They were being brought here so they could be reunited, but also so Devin wouldn’t know. My whole family knew I was still alive by now. I would get in touch with the families of Jesse, Jason and Michael soon as well. My whole family save you, my beloved wife. “My heart can’t stand it much longer.”

Vati stood behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. “I know, Son. But the situation needs to be handled very carefully. Devin is still very strong. If you go announcing you’re alive, he will find you and likely find Anna. You’re not ready to confront him yet.”

I frowned and wanted to lash out at my father, but I knew Vati was right. You had only just escaped. Devin was still very strong and would remain so for several months.

“I miss her,” I whispered after a long silence. “My heart aches for her....” I turned suddenly. “I could touch her. The last few times...I could touch her. I could kiss her.”

Vati’s eyes widened in surprise. “You could?”

I nodded. “Ever since I got sick....” I paused. “Did Devin know she dreamt of me?”

Wilhelm shook his head. “No, I told her not to tell him. When were you sick?”

“During Vitaly’s funeral.”

Wilhelm pressed his lips together. “Anna was sick too. She must have been....” He paused and then chuckled. “When you’re bonded, you’re really bonded, aren’t you?”

I cocked my brow, not understanding why my father was amused.

“Because Devin arranged for your disappearance and insisted on you being put in the cellar, Anna got sick with you.”

“Devin must have done something so she could touch me without disappearing. He likely wouldn’t have thought to remove the ability because he didn’t know she visited me.”

Wilhelm nodded and we were quiet for a long time.

“What have you learned from the third book?” Wilhelm asked, breaking the silence.

I sighed. “Not as much as I hoped to. As I understand it, the final bonding ritual is very similar to the first one, with some subtle differences. The most important element seems to be the strength of the bond that has formed between master and slave since the first ritual.” I gave my father a sad look. “Vati, I don’t want to take Anna like that. I don’t want her to be a mindless slave. I want her to be free.”

“The whole point of that ritual is to get the mindless slave,” Wilhelm said thoughtfully.

“I want my wife, not a slave.”

“What would happen if it wasn’t performed?”

The room was silent while we both contemplated Vati’s words. “Is it possible?” I whispered.

“You would know better than I, Alex.”

I turned back to the window. What would happen if the final ritual simply wasn’t performed? Would your bond to Devin simply dissolve?

Would your bond to me dissolve? Would something even worse happen? Would you be free? "I need to study more." I turned to leave, but my father stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

"Alex, you can't bury yourself in the library again." Vati gave me a sad smile. "We've missed you too."

I nodded. "You're right." I had missed my family terribly. "Please help me find a balance. I've been isolated for a long time."

Vati chuckled. "Your mother will drag you out if you try."

I studied as much as I could without neglecting time with my family. I read and read, but found nothing about breaking the bond or what would happen if the ritual wasn't performed. The only thing it said, and what I knew already, was that the final ritual solidified the bond. Logic told me that the bonds would dissolve, but I was hesitant to take the risk. I didn't want anything to happen to you.

I was lying on my bed in my old room. According to the clock, it was almost midnight. Kurt had moved into Greta's old room a few days ago. Sophie and Derek both had rooms on this floor and he didn't want to move them back into the wing he'd lived in with Gretchen.

I had stayed in one of the guest rooms until Kurt was ready. I didn't want to push my brother. Kurt was having a difficult time adjusting to my return. I had a feeling it had more to do with you than just my presence. Kurt had said that he was glad he didn't have to worry about becoming an Elder, but I had seen regret in my brother's eyes.

Vati had said Kurt had been doing very well trying to step into my shoes. I'd never seen Vati so proud of Kurt, and I hoped Vati would continue to

support Kurt in the way he had obviously supported him while I had been gone.

Kurt had certainly changed. I never would have imagined my younger, carefree brother ever feeling so responsible for so many things. But he did. And he had taken his adopted role as eldest son very seriously. I didn't imagine for a minute it had been easy; I knew it wasn't. But it wasn't in Kurt's nature to be so serious. I hoped Kurt would learn to be himself again.

We hadn't talked much since I had returned, aside from light family conversation. But every time your name was mentioned, Kurt got quiet and his jaw clenched. Kurt had fallen for you hard. Harder than the first time. Vati had said he'd asked you to marry him twice, but both times Devin had prevented it. I was torn to hear this. What would I have done had I returned home to find you married to Kurt?

The stabbing pain in my heart brought to mind what Vati had told me a few days ago. You were dating someone. I rubbed my chest at the pain. That is why I had wanted to go to New York immediately. What if you fell in love with this guy? Where would that leave me? It didn't help that Tom said that this Hugo person was a good guy. You are my wife!

I growled and imagined punching the guy in his face if he touched you.

Laughter from behind me made me jump. I was out of bed and in a defensive stance before I realized what I was doing.

"Sebastian!" I exclaimed. I hadn't seen my Immortal friend since we'd been taken by Vitaly's men. He looked exactly as he had the last day I'd seen him. We embraced. "What took you so long to come?"

Sebastian gave me an apologetic look. "I had to get out without Kaveh knowing."

I had forgotten about that Immortal's involvement. "Does he know you're gone?"

Sebastian shook his head. "I finally convinced the leaders that what Kaveh was doing was wrong. Since the humans have finally realized what Devin is doing, Kaveh and the others needed to be dealt with. They're protecting me and staying out of it until you deal with Devin. But I promise you, Kaveh will be dealt with."

I nodded. "Good." I felt a grim twist to my mouth that couldn't really be called a grin. "I can't shoot him, can I?"

Sebastian chuckled. "Well, you can, but it won't do any good. Don't worry, Alex. He, and the others, will pay for what they've done."

I set my jaw and nodded again. "Good." I ran my hand through my hair. It was still long. For some reason, I was reluctant to cut it and shave my beard off. I supposed it made me feel less vulnerable. I wasn't immediately recognizable, even though I had no intention of leaving the estate until I was ready to go to New York. How long would it be?

"Not long, Alex," Sebastian said sympathetically. "You have to be patient."

"I hate it when you do that," I grumbled, not altogether seriously. Sometimes it was nice not to have to talk.

Sebastian laughed and then sat down on a chair near the fireplace. "How are things going? Why do you want to punch someone in the face?"

I stood and walked to the chair opposite Sebastian. "Anna's dating someone."

"Ah."

"He's supposedly a good guy."

"You're rather amusing when you're jealous."

I growled. "How can I not be? That man is fucking my wife."

“Alex, she thinks herself a widow. She’s finally accepted it and moved on.” Sebastian's smile was gentle. “You have to woo her back.”

I slumped in my chair. “Is it possible? Will she be able to love me again?”

“I firmly believe so. But you’ll have to be careful with her. She’s likely changed quite a bit from the girl you married.”

“I hope it’s in a good way.”

Sebastian shrugged. “Gavin told me she’s been through a lot. She has more emotional scars than before. Your death being the biggest.”

“How do I approach her?”

“Slowly and carefully. Talk to Tom and Tommy. See what you can glean from them. Did you know she’s living with Aaron?”

I nodded, my heart squeezing again. I missed Aaron, too. I felt guilty that I hadn’t thought of Aaron’s reaction to my return. And all my other friends. They’d suffered too. Oh, what a mess Devin had made. He would certainly pay.

With Sebastian back, planning became more rounded. Sebastian had a different perspective, and while he couldn’t tell me exactly what to do, he did give guidance and kept us going in the direction we needed to go.

I wanted to get information from Tom as well, but couldn’t call directly. We didn’t want Tom to know I was back for as long as possible because of how close he was to Devin. Tom was no longer loyal to Devin, but he kept up appearances to be able to feed information to Vlad. Vlad was the only one who knew everything that was going on. The central contact. It was safer that way. Although, now Vati and I knew most of what was going on as well. But keeping Tom in the dark kept him safe.

Tom spoke to Wilhelm occasionally, but too much communication would be noticed by Devin. Their relationship had to retain the appearance of how it had always been. More often, their sons were the ones who maintained the communications. It was less obvious that way.

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Chapter Forty-Six

Anna tried very hard to be understanding and supportive of the decisions that had been made, but it seemed that everyone got to know Alex was alive six months before she had. It wasn't fair.

She leaned back in her chair and twisted her fingers around each other.

"Anna?"

She looked up to see Alex studying her.

"Are you all right?"

Anna grimaced. "I just don't understand why you couldn't come see me. Or have me go see you."

"It was too risky, *Schatzi*. If Devin had found out...I couldn't protect you."

"But you came to New York earlier than expected."

"You were sick. I had to. It was difficult getting in under Devin's radar."

"But you bought this place," she said, looking around.

Alex shook his head. "Simon actually purchased it. I paid for it, but Simon did the purchase." He sighed. "And I was stuck in here for a few months." A smile crossed his face. "I remember the first time I saw you here...."

I was waiting to hear that you were better, pacing the floor and driving Seth crazy. I was trying to figure out how to occupy myself the next few months, besides studying everything I could so I'd be able to protect you when the time came.

“You’re going to wear out the floor before Anna even gets to see it,” Seth said, rolling his eyes.

“Once I know she’s better, I’ll be able to calm down.”

Seth snickered. He knew better than that. I wouldn’t calm down until you were in my arms again.

I glared at him and Seth threw up his hands and went outside to the terrace.

My temper was short those days, though I didn’t lose control like I used to. I was just irritable. The guys were sympathetic, but even they had their limits.

I stared at the wall and then jumped. I sensed...something....

“Alex!” Seth called urgently from the terrace. “Come here. I think I see Anna.” Seth had the binoculars up to his eyes and was looking down at the street.

“What?” Was I feeling your presence?

“I swear that’s Anna. Every man she passes by does a double-take.”

My heart swelled as I took the binoculars and focused in on where Seth was pointing. You were walking across the street from my building and I could see you walking towards my corner. Your brown hair hung down your back in a long braid and glimmered in the morning sunlight. I remembered the silky feel of those sable strands in my fingers. You wore a pink tank top and denim shorts. Your legs were just as sexy as they had been when we’d been together. The muscles in your legs flexed as you walked away from me. Your shorts weren’t overly short, but most of your thighs were visible, and your ass....

I groaned as my cock twitched. I remembered the feel of your soft skin against mine, the way your nipples puckered at my seductive smile when you entered the room. The taste of you.... “Schatzi,” I whispered.

My heart skipped when you stopped and turned around, looking almost as if you had heard me. I willed you to look up, but you just shook your head and continued walking slowly down the street.

“Go!” I said suddenly and without thinking about it. I looked at Seth. “Go, follow her. See where she’s going.”

“I—” Seth grunted. “All right. Why?”

“Because I want to know what she’s been doing. The things she likes to do. She’s been sick, she goes for a walk. Where does she go?” I glared at my friend. “You still know how to be stealthy, don’t you?”

Seth frowned and headed quickly to the stairs that led back into the condo. “I’ll call you when I’m downstairs,” he called. “Keep an eye on her until I catch up.”

“With pleasure,” I murmured, turning back to the beautiful love of my life. I grinned at myself, watching a girl in secret like a horny teenage boy with his first crush.

Seth would forgive me. He cared about you, too. At least he would get to follow you. I couldn’t risk going out yet. My height was too noticeable. Even though Seth was tall, he was still good at blending into crowds.

You walked across the street and disappeared into the park. My phone rang moments later. “Where is she?” Seth asked.

“Still on the same street, I think.”

Seth was quiet, though I could hear him breathing. “Okay. I see her. What do you want me to do?”

“Just follow her at a distance. I just....” I sighed and swallowed over the lump in my throat. “I just want to know her again.”

Seth was quiet for a moment. “I know, Alex. I’m sorry I got irritated. I will let you know everything she does. Do you want pictures?”

I grinned. “Yeah.”

Anna burst out laughing. "You can't be serious. You were really thinking that?"

Alex grinned, glad she seemed less upset than she had a few minutes ago. "Even from twelve stories up, you are an incredibly sexy woman."

Her cheeks turned slightly pink. "Simon said that you'd seen me that day. I...." She chewed her lip for a moment. "I thought I heard your voice."

Alex's heart leapt in his chest. "You did?"

She smiled shyly and nodded. "If I had only listened to myself...we could have been saved so much grief."

"Anna, what happened is in the past. We can't change it. We can only change the future." He reached across and took her hand. "I know you were upset because I was in Frankfurt and didn't come to you right away. But you don't have to share me with my family. I had several months with them, and they don't resent me being here with you. You and I can just be together, without me having to be concerned about hurting my mother's feelings."

She chewed her lip for a few minutes and then nodded. "I suppose I can look at it that way." She moved to sit on his lap and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "I don't have to share you," she murmured against his neck.

Goose bumps spread from the touch of her lips. "I don't want to share you. At least not for a while."

"I don't want to be shared. I only want you."

Alex wished he could keep her to himself, but knew the likelihood was slim. Monogamy was not easy to maintain as an Elder, and impossible as an Elder-Mistress. But he would keep her to himself as long as possible.

Heavy footsteps sounded and Seth poked his head around the corner.
“Ah, you’re here.”

Alex cocked his brow. “We are.”

“You weren’t downstairs.” Seth shrugged. “Just wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

“I was telling Anna about what we’ve been through.”

Anna giggled. “He was just telling me about when he had you follow me.”

Seth grinned. “A very pleasant assignment....”

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Chapter Forty-Seven

“I was glad I hadn't shaved my beard,” Seth began. “My tailing skills were rusty, and the last thing I needed was for you to know we were here. Not yet anyway. Not until that rat-bastard Devin was weak enough to be pushed off a cliff. At least that’s what I hope is going to happen.”

Seth chuckled. “No, to be honest, I remember thinking I wanted to slice that man apart piece by piece, starting with that fucking cock of his. Slice it into deli meat. Maybe a meat grinder...yeah, that *might* make up for the hell he’s put everyone through....“

I remember smiling at the image of Devin howling in pain as I shoved his cock through a meat grinder, and then realized I was getting too close to you. The park wasn’t very crowded and I needed to be sure to keep my distance.

You meandered down the walkway slowly, as if you weren’t in a hurry to get anywhere. I couldn’t help but notice your shapely legs and tiny waist. Your figure had filled out slightly and you looked more like my idea of a real woman than ever before. It was wrong to think about it, but I wished you would turn sideways so I could get a look at your luscious breasts under that tank top. Alex is a damn lucky man.

You stopped and inhaled deeply, looking up at the trees and smiling. You gave a little skip and took off through the park, walking slowly and looking around, skipping every once in a while.

I chuckled, then. Despite all the shit you've been through, you could still skip through a park like an eight-year-old.

I'd expected you to just wander around the park, but you eventually turned and walked out of the park. You stopped at the corner next to the Plaza and stared up at it with a sad look on your face, twisting a ring on your finger as you looked up, and then hung your head and continued on. The change in your demeanor was heartbreaking. I realized it was your engagement ring you were playing with. Kurt really fucked with your head, didn't he? I could sympathize with Kurt's feelings, but still....

You walked down Fifth Avenue and I wondered if you were going shopping. I grinned at the businessmen who smiled at you and looked you up and down. You ignored most of them, but when you did see one, you gave them a shy smile and walked away quickly.

Still shy after all these years. It's an endearing quality. Most women with your looks would be sauntering down Fifth Avenue, swaying their hips and making eye contact with every custom-made suit they passed. But not our Anna.

After a few blocks, you seemed to have recuperated from whatever had bothered you in front of the Plaza, but you still didn't saunter. You headed into Rockefeller center where I almost lost you in the crowd. I expected to be here a while, but you just went into a restaurant and emerged a few minutes later with pink cheeks and a Styrofoam cup. I was wondering what caused the pink cheeks when I realized you were heading right towards me.

Shit! I turned around quickly to admire the building behind me. I felt you stop behind me, hesitating, and I prayed you wouldn't talk to me.

"Stupid," I heard you say to yourself, just loud enough for me to hear. "He's dead. They're all dead." You walked away and I let out the breath I'd been holding.

I knew you were thinking about Alex. Maybe you even thought you recognized me, but your logical mind kept you from going there. I waited a

few minutes and then jogged to catch up.

You kept walking and walking. You looked in windows as you moved, but never stopped or went into a shop.

“Where on earth is she going?” I muttered under my breath. You hadn’t been what I consider a normal woman when I’d known you before, and I was pleased to see you hadn’t changed. When you finally headed towards the entrance of a particular building, I laughed out loud. I should have known!

I reached for my phone. I had to call Alex.

“Is she okay?” Alex answered, obviously worried, since his accent was so thick you could cut it with a knife. He’d insisted on speaking English ever since we got here, you know, so you would be able to understand him when the time came. Speaking Russian for several years hasn’t helped him speak English intelligibly. Not that he ever could, mind you.

I laughed. “She’s fine. I’m pleased to let you know she has finally reached her destination.”

“It’s been an hour. She’s been walking the whole time? Where did she go?” The barrage of questions made me smile.

“The library. The big one on Fifth.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “The library?” He sounded astounded.

“Yup.” I followed her up the stairs casually, ignoring the flirtatious smiles of the college girls coming down the steps. Another time maybe....

You stopped at the information desk briefly and then headed to the stairs.

“Seth?” Alex broke my concentration.

“Sorry. I’ll follow a while longer and let you know what she’s doing.” I ended the call and put the phone in my pocket.

I finally found you on the third floor, sitting between bookshelves, absorbed in a book. I positioned myself in between some shelves where I could see you but you couldn't see me. An older gentleman went directly to the row you were sitting in and spoke to you.

Your eyes sparkled as you laughed at something he said, and you chatted for a few minutes. The man leaned against the bookshelf as you talked like old friends. I was contemplating moving closer so I could hear what you were saying, half wondering if you were having some sort of secret rendezvous with him.

Suddenly you gave him a big smile and hopped to your feet and followed him to a back room, eyes sparkling as he talked to you. I couldn't help feeling suspicious. What was he going to do with you in there? And how did he have access to a locked door?

I spotted a librarian putting books away and approached casually. "Excuse me," I said with the kind of charming smile that worked with women. This time was no exception. Several minutes later, I knew the man's name was Max and that he was the head librarian. The woman didn't know you, but knew that the closed exhibits could be accessed through that doorway.

Well, at least the guy wasn't a sleezeball who wanted to hurt you. At least it didn't seem like it. The woman had spoken of Max as if she held him in the utmost respect. Of course, many "respectable" men take advantage of younger women. Just look at the Elders. Sorry Alex, but it's true.

I tried to decide what to do. Part of me thought I should find a way through that door to make sure you were okay, but my gut told me that Max was a good guy and there was nothing to worry about.

The question became, then, where would you emerge? The building is huge and who knew if you would even come back up to this floor. The only

sure thing was that you had to leave through the main door, so I headed downstairs to stake out the door.

About an hour and a half later, I saw Max come through a side door and walk towards the information desk. Maybe I could learn something from him. I meandered towards the information desk and gave him a friendly smile.

“Hello,” Max said with an equally friendly smile. “How may I help you?”

How best to approach this? “I noticed you speaking with a woman upstairs a while ago....” I hesitated. “You seem to know her quite well.”

“Yes,” Max said cautiously. “You might say that.”

“What can you tell me about her?”

Max’s brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed. He was protective of you. Good. “Why do you ask?”

I grinned. “She’s a beautiful woman.” I gave a little shrug. “I’d like to know more about her.”

The older man studied me for a while. “She’s engaged.”

“I see.” I paused. “Whoever he is must be a very lucky man.”

Max frowned. “I don’t know if he realizes how lucky he is.”

“Why do you say that?”

He sighed. “It’s not my place to spread rumors, but he doesn’t seem to appreciate her the way she should be appreciated. Let’s just put it that way.”

“She’s a special girl?”

Max nodded with a fond smile. “Not too many young women spend their days off in the library. But she comes every week, either on Sundays or Mondays. Well, up until a few weeks ago. I thought maybe she’d gone off

and gotten married, but she came back.” He smiled. “She’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen, and a spectacular dancer.”

“Dancer?” Of course, I knew this already.

“She’s a ballerina with the City Ballet. Made quite a stir in the Arts world during the Spring Season. But the company’s on tour now. Not sure why she’s not with them, unless it was her illness that kept her here.”

We’d only arrived in the city yesterday and hadn’t had time to learn much about what you had been up to, so I was quick to ask more questions.

“What kinds of books does she look at?”

Max smiled. “All sorts, though she stays away from the popular modern fiction. She always looks at the ballet books. Sometimes she’ll go to the classics. Sometimes she’ll stay in non-fiction. I saw her in the German language section a little bit ago.”

“German language?” That was promising.

“Apparently her fiancé is German.”

“Ah.” Back to Kurt. “And she doesn’t seem happy to be engaged?”

“No, not really. When she told me she was engaged I pointed her in the direction of the wedding books and she just shrugged and asked about something else. That’s not normal.”

“Well, Germans don’t get very romantic about their weddings.”

“That’s a shame. She’d make a beautiful bride.”

I nodded thoughtfully. You were radiant the day you married Alex.

Max eyed me carefully. “She’s got a very pretty rock on her finger. He must be pretty wealthy. Although she doesn’t seem the type to marry for money. Maybe someone could steal her heart away from him.” He gave me a pointed look.

“Maybe.” I shook my head. “Please don’t tell her I was asking about her.”

“Why not?”

“Because....” I hesitated. “It’s my employer who is interested in her and he’s...shy.”

“Employer, eh? You seem pretty interested yourself.”

Max was a smart man. “Who could resist someone like her?” I smiled.

“Thank you for your time.” I turned to leave.

“Is your employer a good man?” Max asked.

I turned around with a serious face. “The best man I’ve ever met.”

The older man smiled. “If there’s anything I can do...I’d love to see her happy.”

“Thanks, Max.”

“So that’s why Max was okay with the roses in the library,” Anna said thoughtfully. She gave Seth an affectionate smile. “I should have said something to you.”

Seth shook his head. “It was better if you didn’t know, Anna.”

Anna sighed. “I guess so.”

Seth laughed suddenly. “Did you tell her about the first time we saw her at the club?”

Alex’s face turned red and he shook his head.

Anna giggled. “Tell me?” she pleaded, intrigued by the embarrassed look on her husband’s face.

Alex sighed. “All right.”

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Chapter Forty-Eight

I had been in my condo for a week. I'd been cooped up on my family estate for the prior four months. Before that, I'd been imprisoned for four years. I needed to get out. Get out and be around people. Being in the city, watching the hustle and bustle made me restless, not to mention having to wait a few more weeks for the start of my mission to destroy Devin.

I'd been officially "called out" but this was a mission I was looking forward to fulfilling. As a Brotherhood assassin, I couldn't just go out and start shooting people. I'd be killed. Me and my team. But, if given an assignment by Vlad, Tom and my father to take out some Elders and Sons, then I was simply acting as a proper Assassin. It didn't matter that I had helped in the planning of the assignment. It didn't matter that I was itching to see these men through the scope of my rifle. All that mattered was that I'd been given an assignment and I would gladly fulfill it.

My assignment: Take out the Elders and their Sons from Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago. One city at a time, each month. Take the Son on Monday and the Elder the following Friday. By the time I got to the third Elder, Devin would be freaking out and wondering who was next. No, I couldn't kill Devin, but I could kill his son. And then, at Tyler's funeral, I would show myself and he would be condemned by the world Elders who would, of course, be there. Then I would gladly take him off to live the rest of his life in the same prison where I'd spent the last several years. Russians know how to run prisons, even private ones.

The idea of simply killing Devin wasn't satisfying. No, I want Devin to feel the pain and humiliation of defeat. That would be far more satisfying

than simply a bullet to the head. If I hadn't been able to get out of Vitaly and Vlad's prison on my own, there was no way Devin would be able to.

Three weeks. Three weeks until the Summer Gathering and then I'd be able to begin my mission. Once Devin was safely in prison, I would go find you and we'd live happily ever after. I had argued to take them all out at once at the Gathering. But doing it slowly would break Devin. His perfect plans would be falling apart around him and he wouldn't be able to stop it. It might even drive him insane. I liked that idea.

But I was restless. Very restless. I paced up and down on my rooftop terrace. I felt like a caged lion. I needed to do something. Something other than cleaning my rifle and working out.

Tony came up and sat in one of the chairs. "I need a drink and a fuck." Tony grinned. "And by fuck, I mean a woman."

I chuckled. "I can appreciate that." I only wanted you, but I could understand the needs of my men. We'd been very busy the last few months and had been restricted on going out in public. We hadn't been out to a bar or club since before we were captured.

I thought for a minute. "Call Simon. Maybe he can offer a suggestion."

"You're willing to go out?" Tony asked with a brow raised.

I shrugged. "I need to get out of here. I'm going stir crazy. Maybe there's a place we can go and remain unseen?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Doubt it." But he stood and made the call anyway.

My new personal assistant, Simon, was the one person in New York who knew who I was and why I was here. Simon was my "face" whenever I needed to transact business. He was the youngest son of Vati's friend, Edwin, who was another German Elder. Devin wouldn't know him. He

spoke excellent English and was completely trustworthy. And he'd lived in New York for several years.

Simon knew the perfect place. This particular club was classy and very discreet. There were several private seating areas off the main floor where we could see without being seen. Seth, Tony and Greg could hopefully find some girl to fuck anonymously and get some relief.

I thought it was a good course of action, but as Seth, Greg and Tony and I walked in through the back door and took our seats in the room to watch the activities of the night, I groaned. Before Irina, it had been a really long time since I'd been with a woman, and the mostly naked women gyrating on the dance floor were not helpful. But I didn't desire anyone but you, and had no intention of sleeping with anyone else. Especially after seeing you earlier in the week.

Of course, I wouldn't expect the same level of control from the others, though I did tell them to keep it anonymous. They also couldn't go out on the dance floor in case someone recognized them. It was a small chance, but I couldn't risk it. I was thankful for the loyalty of my men.

"Holy shit," Tony said, choking on his beer.

I was talking to Simon and had just taken a swig of my beer when I looked in the direction Tony was staring. The mouthful of beer I'd just taken sprayed across the table.

It was you. Half-naked and extremely sexy. Hell, sexy was an understatement. My pants became very uncomfortable very quickly.

You were wearing a scrap of white over your ass and a sheer pink top that I could almost see your delicious nipples through. I became indignant as I thought of the other men in the room seeing my wife's breasts like that, and nearly stormed across the room to shield you from the stares that followed your every move.

In fact, when I looked down, both Tony and Seth's hands were on my arms holding me back.

"What the fuck is she doing, dressed like that?" I growled, shifting in my seat.

"That's Anna?" Simon said, letting out a wolf whistle, and I turned to glare at him. "Sorry."

My only comfort was that you seemed oblivious to most of the stares, and even shy when you caught a man's eye. "Who is she with?" I muttered. The man you stood next to took your hand and led you across the room to a table. I was thankful I could still see you.

The man you were with winked at you and sashayed across the room, making me relax slightly. He was obviously gay, but could he protect you from these...savages who were ogling you like you were a piece of meat? They'd be drooling if they knew how good you tasted....

"Fuck," I muttered and ran my hands through my hair. Why did Simon have to pick the one club you were at? If I stayed, I would likely wind up killing someone for touching you. If I left, my mind would be filled with all sorts of horrible scenarios, most of which ended up with some guy's cock in your pussy. I growled again.

"Alex, relax," Simon said, resting a firm hand on my shoulder. "This is a very safe, discreet club. Nothing will happen to her."

"Except she looks like she wants something to happen. Why the fuck is she dressed like that?"

"She's dressed like all the other women in the club," Seth pointed out. "She has more clothes on than at least half of them."

"That's not much comfort."

The other men chuckled, making me growl again.

A man approached you and spoke to you. I was pleased when your cheeks turned pink and you shook your head. He said something else, to which he was given a head shake; he walked away dejected, and I grinned. "She's learned to say no."

The gay man returned with several drinks in hand. Two shots and two martinis. You clinked your shot glasses together and drank. You giggled and wiped your perfect pink mouth.

"I need an ice bath," Greg mumbled.

The man spoke excitedly and you looked around. When he pointed in my direction, you turned around and my heart skipped a beat.

"She knows you're here," Seth commented.

"She probably found out that the rich mystery guy is here," I grumbled.

"Oh, Alex, you know she's not the money chasing type," Tony pointed out. "God, she's got your family's fortune. What does she need to chase rich guys for?"

I shrugged. Tony had a point. You weren't the type, as Seth had found out this afternoon. That pleased me immensely.

We watched you like starving men watch a chef preparing a juicy steak.

"I can see about arranging some companionship for you if you'd like," Simon offered.

I shrugged again. Simon knew I wasn't in the market for a cheap fuck. Oh, how I just wanted to walk over there, pick you up and bring you back here. I would fuck you hard until you screamed so loud the entire club heard you over the music. A grin spread across my face at the thought.

"Shall I see if there's any gossip about her?" Simon suggested after a few minutes.

"Yes," I said quickly.

As Simon walked away, another man approached the table and this time you nodded and went onto the dance floor with him. He pulled you to his body and put his hands right on your ass. A moment later, you gave him a seductive smile and put your arms around his neck.

I growled. "How can she do that!" I exclaimed, gripping my beer bottle tightly.

"Alex, you've been gone for years," Seth reminded me gently.

"But she's engaged to my brother."

"Who is treating her like shit."

I didn't like the reminder of what Kurt had done to you. But still...had you turned into the type to go out and cheat? Was it cheating if the engagement wasn't real? From what I understood, Kurt had made it clear that you could do whatever you wanted when he wasn't in town. Did you go out every weekend and find a different guy to fuck?

I could feel my anger rising, and when the man you were dancing with leaned down to kiss you, I squeezed my beer bottle so tightly it broke.

"Whoa!" Seth said, grabbing my arm. "I'm thinking this wasn't a good idea."

"We didn't know she'd be here," I snapped, and stood with my fists clenched. It would have been fine had you.... God, the man's hands were on your ass and crawling up your skirt.

I had taken two steps forward when Greg and Tony grabbed me at the same time you pulled away from Groping Man. You shook your head and stepped further away. The man grabbed your hand, but you pulled away and went back to your seat.

"Good girl," I breathed, and collapsed back on the couch.

"Apparently...." Simon trailed off as he looked at the glass on the table. "What happened?"

“Someone groped Anna’s ass,” Tony said with a chuckle.

Simon let out a small smile, but didn’t allow more expression than that. “Well, I hope this doesn’t cause more beer to be wasted, but I got the information as requested.”

I turned quickly. “What’s going on?”

He shook his head. “According to the bartender who is a friend of Cameron, the guy she’s with, she’s engaged to a fuckhead and is in desperate need of a cock between her legs.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or curse. To hear my brother referred to as a “fuckhead” was extremely amusing. That you were desperate for a fuck angered me. Kurt should have been visiting you. You have needs. You have the strongest sex drive I’ve ever seen in a woman.

A plan formed in my head. “What’s the closest hotel?”

“What are you thinking Alex?” Greg asked in a wary tone.

“She wants sex.” I shrugged. “I’d rather her be with me than some asshole she picks up here.”

“You can’t!” Greg protested. “You can’t reveal yourself this soon.”

“She doesn’t have to know it’s me. She can be blindfolded. Isn’t that the big thing in romance novels now? The mystery and all that shit?”

“You’re a big guy, Alex. How are you going to keep her from knowing?”

“It’s been years. She’s absolutely convinced that I’m dead.”

“What about your piercings?”

“I won’t let her touch me.”

“She’ll know your voice.”

“I won’t speak.”

Seth raised his eyebrow. “You won’t speak? How will you get her into bed if you don’t speak?”

I glanced at Simon. “Simon can make the arrangements with her. Kurt told her things had to remain private. I can offer her privacy. Something likely these men can’t. It will be noticed if she goes off with one of them.” I glanced at Greg. “Go find a hotel with a suite and have it made up nicely. Good smells since she’ll be blindfolded.” I looked at Tony. “Go find a good blindfold.” I looked at Seth. “Stay with me to make sure I don’t kill any of the guys who approach her.”

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Chapter Forty-Nine

Anna did not have the amused expression Alex had imagined she'd have when he finished his story. He would have thought her to be giggling at his silly jealousy, not staring at her hands in her lap.

He glanced at Seth who shrugged. Seth was as confused as he was.

"Anna?" Alex's voice was soft.

"You slept with Irina?" she whispered.

"I—" *Fuck*. He hadn't realized he'd mentioned her name. Until now. "It happened when I came to you. I had to take in the Immortal essence, but I couldn't take it straight and—"

"I'm very familiar with the process, Alex," she said bitterly and stood.

"I didn't ask for Sebastian to bring her," he said softly.

"You fucked her so you could come and manipulate me into breaking up with my boyfriend." It wasn't a question and Alex realized how bad it sounded.

"It wasn't like that. I— I didn't know what was going on when I'd finished—"

She shook her head and put her hand up, palm out. "I know exactly what happened. You don't need to tell me." Her jaw was clenched and she took a deep breath. "I need some air." She turned and glared at him. "Don't send Seth to follow me. It's the middle of the day."

Anna turned on her heel and left the room, her light footsteps disappearing down the staircase.

Alex looked at Seth. "Is it wrong that I don't understand why that upset her so much? She would have to know I'd slept with the other Elder-

Mistresses before.”

Seth frowned. “I dunno. How she put it sounded really bad.” He sighed. “I understand why you did it, but...yeah, I don’t know why either.”

Alex ran his hands through his hair. “I can’t do anything right with her.”

“Did you tell her about Yelena?”

Alex shook his head. “She won’t take that well either.”

“Who’s Yelena?” Anna’s soft voice came from the stairway.

Alex glared at Seth and then turned to look at Anna. “I thought you were getting air,” he said, a little too defensively.

“I realized I was being oversensitive and came back to apologize.” She stepped towards him. “Who’s Yelena?” she repeated.

Alex sighed. “Peter’s cousin. Vlad’s middle daughter.”

Her face stilled, and he was a little in awe that he couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “What should I know about her?”

Alex cursed to himself again. “She came to visit me when I was imprisoned. She...posed as a *Dirne*, but I knew who she was. She...became pregnant.”

Anna’s face paled, but her expression didn’t change.

“She lost the baby. She got married last year. I only used her to get even with Vlad. I didn’t have any feelings for her at any time.” Anna nodded, face unchanged, and Alex started feeling defensive. “You were pregnant while I was gone, too, you know.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “You think I wanted Devin to do that to me?”

“I meant with Vati’s child.”

Her mouth opened in shock. “I didn’t ask him to get me pregnant,” she said after she recovered from his low blow.

“But you went along with it.” Why was he picking a fight with her?

“I didn’t know what was going on.” Her eyes widened. “I didn’t know what was going on!” Her voice rose higher until it squeaked on the last word. “I didn’t know!” Anna fled the room. He could hear her crying in the stairwell as she went back down to the lower floors.

Guilt immediately flooded his heart and he looked at Seth, full of shame.

“It’s gonna take a while for you guys to get used to each other again.” Seth gave him a sympathetic smile. “You want me to follow her?”

Alex shook his head. “It’s daytime. I will respect her wishes.”

Anna ran to the bedroom to dress quickly and then left the condo and wandered around the park for a good hour before sitting down under a tree and staring at the ground.

Alex’s words had opened a wound that hadn’t healed. Her insecurities from not being a proper Elder-Mistress. She hadn’t known what was going on the day that she became pregnant with Wilhelm’s baby. Either at the funeral or after Wilhelm had disciplined her. Alex sleeping with Irina shouldn’t bother her, but her name reminded Anna of that horrible day. A reminder that she didn’t fit in. Anywhere, really.

Alex had slept with Irina so that he could tell her to break up with Hugo. That made her mad.

She pulled her phone out and called Hugo. She didn’t know if he’d still be in rehearsals, but figured she’d try anyway. He picked up after the third ring.

“Katrina? Is everything okay?”

She tried to talk, but suddenly burst into tears.

“Katrina? Are you okay? Is Alex okay?”

Her voice squeaked. "Are you home?"

"Heading there now. Why?"

"Can I come over?"

He hesitated. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

Anna sniffed. "Please? I...I can't go home. I just need to talk to someone."

Hugo sighed. "All right. Where are you?"

"In the park."

"Do you want me to come find you?"

"No." Her crying began to subside. "No, I'm okay. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Anna sat on Hugo's comfortable, black leather couch, remembering the last time she was here. The subject on her mind was much the same as it was presently.

Hugo handed her a glass of water and then sat down next to her. "What's going on?" he asked in a gentle voice.

Anna held the cool glass in both hands and studied it. "Alex and I spent the morning talking," she said in a soft voice and smiled slightly. "He told me about what went on while he...was gone...and stuff." Her jaw began to tremble. "He told me that he slept with...." She stopped. How much did Hugo know about her life? About what she was? His expression was one of surprise. "He...." She stopped again and leaned forward on her legs.

"Katrina, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

How could she explain without confusing him? "The day you and I broke up...I...had a dream about Alex. He pleaded with me to not give up on

him returning, which is why I called Wilhelm and found out the truth of my future. Or, at least kind of the truth.”

Hugo’s brow raised. “Okay...?”

Anna chewed her lip for a moment. “It...it wasn’t a dream. He...really came to talk to me, though I didn’t know it was real at the time.”

Hugo’s expression hadn’t changed. He looked confused, but supportive.

“In order to...do that, he had to...do something. That *something* involved him having sex with...someone I don’t really...get along with.”

“He used sex to visit you?”

Anna sighed. “It’s hard to explain without going into a lot more details, but in a roundabout way, yes. He did it to manipulate me into breaking up with someone I really didn’t want to break up with.” She took a sip of water and stared back at the table in front of her.

“Ah.” Hugo rubbed his head. “That seems...not nice.”

Anna smiled at his diplomacy. “Then I found out that he got someone pregnant when he was there, and threw in my face that his dad got me pregnant.”

“His...dad...?”

Anna exhaled sharply. She realized how that sounded. To someone outside the Brotherhood, that would sound really bad. Her shoulders slumped and she closed her eyes. “In the world that I live in, he has a right to do that...,” she said lamely.

“You’ve slept with your husband’s...dad and brother...?”

Her face burned. She shouldn’t have gone to Hugo. She should have gone to Aaron instead. He at least understood the strangeness that was the Brotherhood. “I haven’t slept with Kurt in a while....”

“But you were engaged.”

“He wouldn’t sleep with me.”

“Oh.”

The room was quiet and Anna felt awkward. “I’m sorry, Hugo. I shouldn’t have come to you about this....” She stood, but he grabbed her hand.

“Why *did* you come to me?” he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Anna turned to look at him, her heart aching. She never had a chance with him. Their relationship was doomed from the beginning. “We never had a chance...,” she whispered, eyes full of grief. “I’m so sorry, Hugo. If I’d known—”

“I don’t regret a moment of time I spent with you, Kittykat.”

Tears burned her eyes at his use of his pet name for her. “If Alex hadn’t come....”

They gazed into each other’s eyes. Damn Alex! Damn him for coming back. Why couldn’t he have stayed where he was? Why did he have to come back and ruin things? She’d had a life. She’d been happy. And he had to come back and ruin it all.

Anna slowly sat back down. “I miss you,” she whispered.

Hugo reached out and caressed her cheek. “I miss you, too.”

She leaned forward, brushing her lips against his. He jumped slightly at her touch, but didn’t back away. “I didn’t want to break up with you,” she whispered, running her hand over his shoulder and around his neck. “I didn’t want to leave you.”

Suddenly, Hugo’s arms wrapped around her and held her tightly against him. He cupped the back of her head and crushed his lips against hers. She opened her mouth, letting him thrust his tongue in and out slowly, sensually. She moaned softly and clung tighter to his shoulders.

He pulled her onto his lap, her legs straddling his, and she pressed her hips against him. His cock was straining against his sweatpants and he

groaned when she pressed against him. She smiled against his lips.

His hands slid under her t-shirt as he kissed her and she shuddered as he caressed her back. She slid her hands down his torso and brushed his cock, making him jump.

“Katrina...,” he murmured.

She sat up and pulled her shirt off. His eyes widened as he gazed at her bra-covered breasts. She took his hand and placed it on her right breast and he inhaled slowly. He squeezed gently and she closed her eyes and sighed. “Yes...,” she sighed as desire coursed through her body.

Hugo leaned forward, pulling her bra down, and took her nipple into his mouth. Anna moaned softly and held his head to her. His tongue swirled around and around her nipple and her arms moved to his shoulders and pulled at his shirt.

Thoughts of Alex came unbidden to her mind and she pushed them aside. She didn’t care that he wouldn’t like what she was doing. He could kiss her a—

A shooting pain shot through her head and she grabbed hold of it and screamed.

“Katrina!” Hugo exclaimed. “Katrina, what’s wrong?”

Chapter Fifty

Alex paced on the rooftop terrace. He went back and forth between anger and hurt at Anna's departure. How dare she get upset about something he did when he never thought he'd see her again! He hadn't done it *against* Anna. He did it *to* Vlad.

And how many men had she fucked while he was gone? How many men had she fallen in love with? How could she get upset for him keeping her from being with Hugo? Alex was returning. He couldn't let her be with someone who wouldn't be able to protect her. She was his wife, dammit! *His* wife! *His* slave! She belonged to him.

"Alex?"

Alex spun around to see Greg standing near the door, holding his phone out. "You need to take this."

"Was?" he snapped into the phone.

"Alex? It's Hugo."

Alex barely contained a growl. This was not a person who should be calling him right now. Hugo was at the top of his shit list. "What do you want?"

There was a slight hesitation. "It's Anna. She's—"

"Anna's with you?" Alex growled.

"I...yes. She's in pain. She holding her head and crying."

Her head? "What was she doing when it started hurting?" Hugo didn't answer right away and Alex's stomach began to twist into knots. "What the hell were you doing with my wife?"

"We...shit, Alex. I'm sorry. I didn't mean for anything to happen."

Alex felt his temper snap. “Tell her to stop fucking rebelling and get her ass home as soon as she can fucking walk. And you better stay the fuck away from her from now on or I will have you fired.” He ended the call and threw his phone down in the middle of the terrace.

“Argh!” he yelled at the sky. What the hell had she been doing? No, he knew what she’d been doing. She was being intentionally rebellious, which is why her head was hurting. Fucking stupid woman. Why was she acting this way?

He stalked downstairs to the library for a drink. What the hell was he going to do now?

An hour later, Anna walked through the door of the condo looking very pale and weak. Alex stood in the doorway of the library and glared at her. “Go take a fucking shower and rinse that motherfucker off of you.”

“Yes, Alex,” she said meekly, and hurried to their bedroom.

He walked into the bedroom a few minutes later and was pleased to hear the water running in the bathroom. She wasn’t rebelling anymore. Good.

When she came out of the bathroom in her pink cotton robe a while later, he was sitting on the foot of the bed, waiting for her. She froze in the doorway when she saw him, fear evident in her eyes. He flinched, seeing the fear. He didn’t want her afraid of him...did he? But he didn’t want to feel the hurt right now. He wanted to be angry, not hurt.

They stared at each other for a moment before Anna slowly approached him and knelt at his feet, head down. “I’m sorry...,” she said softly, trailing off as if she didn’t know what to call him.

The angry part of him liked the idea of her calling him Master, but that would wound her. His rational side didn’t want to wound her. His irrational

side wanted to wound her as she'd wounded him.

She'd gone to her ex-boyfriend and started having sex. The only reason she stopped was because of the pain of rebellion.

"How could you do that to me, Anna?" he asked in a soft voice.

She looked up at him, hurt and anger in her eyes. "I didn't ask you to come back."

Alex felt as if she'd slapped him across the face. He stared at her, hardly believing what he'd heard. "Do you wish I hadn't?"

She sighed and looked down at her hands. "It doesn't matter what I wish," she said in a broken voice. "You are here. I belong to you."

Alex lifted his chin and clenched his jaw. "Yes, you do." He reached down and tipped her face up to his. "You never had a problem with it before."

Her eyes narrowed. "You weren't around long enough for me to have a problem with it."

Alex barely kept himself from wincing.

"Perhaps you should perform the final ritual. Then I would be like the other Elder-Mistresses. Cold and beautiful."

"I like your warmth," he said before he could stop himself.

Anna didn't respond, but looked back at the floor.

He felt his anger rising to the surface again. "I will allow you to continue dancing with Hugo for this season, but once Devin is dealt with, we will be returning to San Francisco. I expect you to keep your interactions with him strictly professional."

"Yes, Alex."

He wasn't commanding her, he rationalized to himself. He was just laying out his expectations.

“When I am out of town, I expect you to go to class and then return here. No going out to clubs or spending time with other men. I obviously can’t trust you.” He wondered briefly if she would be glad if he disappeared again.

“Yes, Alex.” Her voice was getting softer with each response.

“If you need to go somewhere, I expect you to ask me first. If you disobey me, I will put a tracker on you.”

“I won’t disobey you,” she whispered.

He continued to look down at her and she looked up after a moment. “Do you want me to sleep in a different room?” Her eyes were remorseful.

“Why would I want that?”

“That’s what...I mean, in case you want to bring another woman home.”

Was she going to say that’s what Devin would have her do? He closed his eyes. He was angry, yes, but he wouldn’t do that to her. “No woman could satisfy me like you do.” It was true.

She made no response to that.

The next two days were filled with tension. Alex hardly spoke to Anna and she didn’t dare approach him. She went to class and rehearsals each day and kept to herself for the most part. If she wasn’t dancing, she was at home. Alex and his men spent most of the time in the study, planning their trip to Boston, and their interactions were kept minimal.

Anna didn’t say much to him and she understood why he was angry. He had a right to be. She’d hurt Alex terribly by what she’d done with Hugo. Alex didn’t come to rehearsals anymore. They had sex every night, but he kept it impersonal. He wouldn’t even kiss her.

Tuesday night was her first regular performance. She went home after rehearsal that afternoon to rest. As she was getting ready to leave, she knocked on the study door.

“Herein.”

She opened the door and saw the men standing around a large table with maps and computers covering it. Alex didn’t look up as she stood there.

“A-are you coming tonight?” she asked softly. Before their fight, he said he would attend as many performances as he could, tonight being one of them.

He looked up and stared at her with hard eyes. “I told you I would be there,” he snapped.

Her mouth moved to speak, but no sound came out. He cocked his eyebrow at her, impatiently waiting for her to speak. “Okay,” she finally squeaked out and left the room quickly, blinking away the burning tears. Would he ever forgive her?

She arrived at the theater and went straight to her dressing room. Slowly, she began to get ready and jumped when there was a knock at the door a while later. She stood and opened the door, half-afraid it was Alex.

It was Hugo. “Are you okay, Katrina?”

She smiled. “Of course. Why?”

“You don’t seem okay.” He frowned. “Is Alex hurting you?”

She shook her head. He wasn’t being abusive. Just...ignoring her.

“You don’t need to lie for him.”

“I’m fine, Hugo. Please....” She looked down the hallway. “I can’t be seen talking to you.”

Hugo frowned. “He’s no better than Kurt.”

“I hurt him, Hugo. What else is he supposed to do?”

“He made us break up. Him and his stupid family.” His gaze softened. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have let you go.”

She gave him a longing look. The more Alex ignored her, the more her heart ached for Hugo. “It doesn’t do any good to wish things were different,” she said bitterly.

The ballet Anna was dancing in was the first one of the evening and she went straight home after she was done. She took a shower and curled up in bed to read until she fell asleep or Alex came home, whichever came first.

She finished her book around ten-thirty and Alex still wasn’t home, so she wandered into the library to find another one to read. Ignoring the pain in her heart was getting easier. Sometimes.

Nothing looked good in the library and she went back to the bedroom to look around for her Kindle. There was always something interesting to download.

The door opened and she heard male voices as she was settling back into bed. And then she heard female voices and her heart dropped into her stomach. Multiple female voices.

Should she go out there? Should she hide so whomever Alex brought home wouldn’t know she was here? Did he want her to know that he’d brought someone home?

She bit her lip and then decided to go out, using the premise that she wanted some water. Her cup was by the bed and she grabbed it before walking out into the hallway and to the living room. Her stomach churned as the voices got louder.

When she walked around the corner, she saw three nicely dressed women, along with the four men sitting in the room. Alex was sitting on one end of the couch with Greg and another woman. The woman reached for Alex, but he shook his head and brushed her hand away.

Alex looked up at that moment and their eyes met. Emotions flittered across his face as he looked at her. Anna held her cup up with an apologetic look and hurried to the kitchen.

One of the women giggled as Tony kissed her neck. The one sitting between Alex and Greg saw her and raised her eyebrows. "Who's that?"

Everyone turned around to look at her. She felt awkward, standing in her pajama pants and chemise, obviously ready for bed, while the women were dressed elegantly and hanging on the men.

"That's Anna," Alex said, staring at her. "She...lives here."

The third woman laughed. "Live in maid?"

"Something like that," Alex said in an even tone.

Anna bit her lip to keep from crying out and walked into the kitchen, quickly filling her cup and almost running back to the hallway and out of sight. It was obvious that Alex didn't want the women to know he was married to her. Should she sleep elsewhere tonight? Probably.

She made a fast decision and went upstairs to the conservatory. There was a couch up there and, if the door was closed, it was fairly quiet. She wrapped the blanket around herself on the couch and cried herself to sleep.

Alex awoke to an empty bed. He'd gone out with the other men after the performance and they'd found some women at the bar they went to. Alex didn't flirt; he had no desire to, but the idea of making Anna jealous appealed to him.

He had no intention of sleeping with any of them. They were there for the other guys. But he couldn't resist the jab about Anna's purpose in the household. He saw the pain in her eyes and felt satisfied that she was hurting as much as he was.

But when he came to bed and Anna wasn't there, he realized he might have gone too far. He found her upstairs in the conservatory, her face still wet from her tears. She'd slept up there to give him the opportunity to be with someone else.

His whole body tingled with guilt. How many times had Devin done that to her? The very fact that she offered to sleep somewhere else after they first began fighting made him realize she'd probably experienced that with Devin more than a few times. Was he no better than Devin?

Alex just wanted her to feel his jealousy. For her to know how much she'd hurt him by running to Hugo after they'd fought. He was angry and hurt and wanted to punish her so she'd never do it again. But had he gone too far? Had his anger done irreparable harm?

She'd been incredibly submissive these last few days, coming home immediately after rehearsals and reading quietly in the library, or napping in their bed. When she was asleep, he would stand in the doorway and watch her. Even though he was angry, he still woke up early and watched her sleep until her alarm went off.

Maybe he should just get her free of Devin and then let her be with Hugo. She wouldn't be in danger any more. She could have her new life; the new life she'd begun here.

He was still contemplating his thoughts when there was a soft knock at the door.

"Come."

The door opened a tiny bit and he saw Anna's eyes, red from crying. "I need to get ready for class," she whispered. "May I come in?"

Alex nodded and she opened the door further. Her eyes widened when she looked at the bed. She glanced at him and then back at the empty spot next to him, biting her lip and then glanced at the bathroom door. "Is she in there?" she asked softly.

"Is who in there?" Alex asked.

"The...woman you slept with last night."

"I didn't sleep with anyone last night."

Her mouth formed an "O" and she blinked rapidly as she turned and hurried into the bathroom. She emerged a while later and approached him slowly. "W-would you like me to give you a blowjob?"

Alex studied her for a long moment. She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. Would rejecting her make her feel worse? Would accepting make her feel used? If he accepted, at least she wouldn't think that he was off with another woman.

"Do you have enough time?" he asked.

She glanced at the clock beside him and nodded.

He nodded stiffly and she nervously walked around the other side of the bed. She gave him a mournful look before pulling at the blanket.

The rest of the week passed much as the start of the week had. Anna knew Alex was still upset with her, and she tried to keep him as happy as she could. He still spent much of his time in the study and Anna felt very lonely.

Stef was not happy about how Alex was treating Anna, but Anna knew Alex wasn't wrong in his treatment of her. She had done wrong and was

lucky he wasn't abusing her like Devin would do.

When she arrived home on Friday after rehearsals, Sebastian was there with Alex. She greeted them respectfully and hurried to her bedroom. She went back out into the living room after showering and saw Sebastian there, alone. He studied her quietly.

"I-is there something I can do for you, Sebastian?" she asked quietly.

"Alex needs you."

"I won't run away from him."

"I didn't think you would." He motioned for Anna to sit on the couch and she did. "He's miserable, you know."

Anna raised her brows. "Why?"

"He misses you."

Anna grimaced. "Right."

Sebastian's cool blue eyes bored into hers. "Would you rather be with Hugo than Alex?"

Anna blinked, surprised at his direct question. "I-I don't know." She sighed. "If life is going to be like this...." She motioned around the room. "Yes. I would." She twisted her hands together. "But I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"You have a choice in whether or not you want to be happy."

"Will he ever forgive me for what I did?"

"It's not so much what you did, but why you did it that upsets him. He thinks you'd rather be with Hugo than him."

Anna thought for a few minutes. "I want things to be good between Alex and I. I belong with him."

Sebastian looked at her for a long moment and then nodded. "He needs you."

"You said that already. I will do what I can to help him."

“I suppose I should really say he needs you and I together. He needs our essence if he’s going to defeat Devin.”

Anna paled and stared at her hands. She never wanted to do that again. “Why doesn’t he ask Irina?” she asked, cringing at the thought of him being with Irina again.

“You are his wife. It is your duty.”

Anna stood and walked to the window and looked, unable to hold back the horrible memories of Devin and Kaveh that flooded her mind. Tears trickled out of her eyes as she thought about what Sebastian was asking of her.

For her to be raped and sucked dry each night. To become a means to an end, a tool in Alex’s pocket. Would he hang her from the ceiling like Devin did? Would his eyes have golden flecks in them? Would he begin to treat her like Devin treated her? Would he torture her while she was half-conscious, unable to even scream?

Would Sebastian chase her around the condo? Make her run until she couldn’t run anymore? Tear her apart while he raped her?

She exhaled slowly. Sebastian was right. It was her duty. Maybe Alex would forgive her if she did this.

“When do you want to do it?” she asked quietly, before she lost her nerve.

Chapter Fifty-One

Alex was leaning over the table, studying a map of Boston when Sebastian walked in. He stayed in the study most of the time because it was too painful to be around Anna. She was quiet and respectful, as if resigned to the fact that she was stuck with him. His anger had worn off, replaced with sadness and longing for their relationship to be restored.

“She’s willing to help you,” the Immortal said.

“I don’t want to force her,” Alex sighed.

“I listened to her thoughts as she contemplated what I asked. She’s terrified of doing it, because of Devin, but hopes that maybe you’ll forgive her if she does.”

“I have forgiven her,” Alex said in a broken voice. “I want things to be better between us.”

“Have you told her that? She thinks you’re still angry.”

“She doesn’t seem to be interested in talking with me.”

“She’s afraid, Alex. Devin tortured her for the slightest infraction. I don’t even know if she realizes how afraid she is.”

Alex straightened and stared at his friend. “She’s equating me with Devin?”

“She doesn’t know what to think. He’s the only Master she had for several years. There is no other frame of reference.”

“My father wasn’t cruel.”

“Being with your father a few days here and there can’t undo what Devin did to her.” Sebastian leaned against the back of the couch. “Did you even ask her why she went to Hugo?”

“I—” Alex paused. “No.”

“I think what we did with Irina and her terror of what I’ve asked her are related. Devin—” Sebastian shook his head. “Do you know *how* Devin did it?”

Alex shook his head. Did he want to know?

“Kaveh brutally raped her every afternoon and then Devin hung her from the ceiling and consumed her until she couldn’t move. Sometimes he tortured her while she was hanging there, coherent but unable to move. Then she was half-way revived so Devin could rape her.”

Alex closed his eyes, sick to his stomach at the abuse Anna endured. Every new thing he learned about Devin made him more determined to make him pay. His poor brave, sweet wife. “She thinks if she lets me do that to her, that I’ll forgive her?” he whispered.

“You can show her it can be different. That it can be enjoyable.”

“You’ve been itching to fuck her again.”

Sebastian shrugged. “I won’t deny the appeal this has, but I wouldn’t make up the need just to do it. I won’t rape her, either.”

“She might prefer you to me after you’re done.”

“Only if you continue to be a fuckhead.”

The irony of Alex being called the same name that his brother had been called was not lost on him. He wasn’t acting much better than Kurt had. Had he been wrong in being angry?

“You had a right to be angry, Alex. She was wrong in what she did. But just because she’s stood up to you a few times, doesn’t mean she’ll confront you when she knows you’re angry. She’s not that confident. Not yet.”

Alex walked into the library and found Anna reading. She was curled up in the big brown leather chair near the window where she usually spent her afternoons at home, if she wasn't napping.

He stood in the doorway watching her for a few minutes. She was absorbed in a book. He was pleased to see her still using the Kindle he'd bought for her. It wasn't the one he'd given to her in San Francisco. That one had been left behind when she'd escaped.

"Anna?" he said softly, not wanting to frighten her. At least not more than he would just being there.

She looked up at him, eyes wide with fright, and put the e-reader on the table next to her as she stood up. "Yes, Alex?"

"Sit," he said gently, walking to the chair next to hers. She followed him with her eyes and didn't sit down until he had done so. "Anna, why did you run to Hugo after...last week?"

She stared at her hands for a long time before answering. "I was angry...I was hurt." She twisted her fingers together. "I wanted to talk to someone. I don't know. I was sitting in the park and just...called him."

"You were in the park?"

Anna nodded. "I wandered around the park for a long time, thinking about stuff, and then I just called. I was angry at you for interfering in my life."

Alex kept his face impassive. He didn't want her to stop talking because she thought he was mad at her. He had thought she'd gone straight to Hugo, but apparently she hadn't. That made him feel a little better. "What upset you before you left?"

She glanced up at him and shook her head. "It shouldn't have upset me."

"But it did. What was it?"

“Irina.... I met Irina at Vitaly’s funeral. It was obvious that I was very different from the other Elder-Mistresses. Painfully obvious. Irina had made a comment about sleeping with you once before, and then *she* was *chosen* for the ritual. She thought me silly for loving you. The other Mistresses were perfect. I...I had no idea what was going on that day.” Tears formed in her eyes. “I was so confused, so lost. Devin got so angry at me for embarrassing him, but he hadn’t told me what would happen. Your dad had to punish me for doing something stupid...I didn’t know what he was doing when he got me pregnant. That whole day was horrible.” She sniffed. “When I found out that you’d slept with her again...it reminded me of how much I don’t fit in anywhere. Not with my own kind.... Even Hugo was appalled at some of the stuff I told him....” A tear slid down her cheek. “I don’t fit anywhere. I’m not a normal girl. I’m not a normal Elder-Mistress. They were all disgusted with me.”

Alex took her hand and pulled her into his lap. He held her against his chest and she cried as he rocked her gently. After a few minutes, she put her arms around his neck and hugged him like he was a lifeline in the middle of a raging river.

“I’m sorry, Alex. I’m so sorry. Please don’t get rid of me. You’re the only one who really understands me.”

“Shhh. Shhh, *Schatzi*. I would never get rid of you.” He stroked her hair and held her tightly against him. “I love you. I love you so much.”

Anna clung to Alex, fearful that he’d decide that she wasn’t worth the trouble.

“I love you, *Schatzi*,” he repeated.

She leaned back slightly and looked at him through tear-filled eyes. "I'm sorry I ran to Hugo. I...I was jealous of Irina. She's...a perfect Elder-Mistress. I'm not."

"*Schatzi*," Alex said gently, smoothing her hair. "The Elder-Mistresses are beautiful, *ja*, but I would much rather be with you than any of them. They are cold, you are warm and loving and beautiful." He brushed his lips against hers. "I'm sorry I hurt you. We hurt each other, and I regret that deeply."

Anna nodded. "I don't want to be with Hugo, Alex. I mean, it's not that I don't care for him. I do, a lot. But you...with you is where I belong."

He smiled down at her and kissed her again. "*Ja*. You belong with me." He stood and carried her into their bedroom.

"I missed kissing you," Anna said as she rested her head on Alex's bare chest, tracing the ridge of his pectoral muscles.

"I was trying to keep sex impersonal, I didn't want to let myself go."

Anna winced. Peter had done the same thing before he got to know her.

"But I didn't want you to think I was sleeping with someone else."

"What about those women the other night?"

"The other guys picked them up. Even though I was angry at you, I had no desire for any woman except you." He turned on his side and grinned at her. "You are very, very good at sex."

Anna smiled. "I guess I don't have to worry about you leaving me because I don't satisfy you in bed."

He chuckled. "Definitely not." He leaned down and nibbled along the outside of her breast.

"Alex?" she asked after a few minutes.

“*Ja, Schatzi?*”

“Sebastian said that you...needed us to help you defeat Devin.”

“*Ja*, it’s true.”

She closed her eyes and took a breath. “I will do it whenever you want to.”

Alex cupped her cheek. “Anna, the way Devin did it to you...that is a cruel way to do it. I will try my best not to hurt you. And Sebastian will certainly not rape you.”

She searched his eyes. “It’s okay if you have to.”

He shook his head. “*Nein*, Anna. If I had to hurt you, I wouldn’t do it.” He kissed her gently and then smiled. “I hope you don’t decide that you like Sebastian better than me.”

“Why would I...oh!” She would have to have sex with Sebastian so Alex could have them both. “Is there any other way to do it?”

Alex grimaced. “Yes, but I don’t need that much power. And I would risk taking control of you.” He traced her jaw with his finger. “What Devin did to you in the plane.”

“Oh.” Anna sighed in relief. Alex wouldn’t have golden flecks in his eyes.

“Besides, I don’t think my father would approve of me having that much Immortal in me without being an Elder first.”

“Haven’t you had sex with Sebastian before, though?”

Alex nodded. “*Ja*, but it’s different when it’s just...sex. He wasn’t trying to ‘imbue’ me, it was just for enjoyment.”

“Oh.” She vaguely remembered Kaveh and Devin having sex just for enjoyment. “Will it bother you? I mean, me having sex with Sebastian?”

Alex was quiet for a moment. “In a perfect world, I wouldn’t have to share you with anyone, *Schatzi*. But unfortunately, we don’t live in a perfect

world. After I deal with Devin, though, I will have more control over who I share you with. And it certainly won't be with Devin's friends."

The idea of Devin not being in her life, of not being afraid anymore was wonderful. But was it really possible that she would be free of the two men who hurt her? Jack was already dead. Devin would be soon. What would her life be like when that was done? "Are we really going back to San Francisco when all this is done?"

Alex sighed. "I don't know. I know I said that, but I was angry and wanted you away from Hugo. Honestly, *Schatzi*, I don't know how long Vati will let me stay out of *Deutschland*. Having been in Russia for so long...I have a lot of time to make up for."

"Would I have to stop dancing?"

Alex turned onto his side and cradled her cheek in his hand. "Not until you're ready to stop." He smiled affectionately and moved his hand down to her stomach. "Although, I would love to start our family soon." His eyes turned sad. "I'm thirty-three and have no legitimate children. That is very unusual in my family."

Sadness for Alex squeezed her heart. She hadn't thought about that fact. He was eight years older than she was. Of course he needed to start his family. *Their* family. If he hadn't been captured, perhaps they would have had a child already. A *son*.

She put her hand on his. "If you want to return to Germany after Devin is taken care of, I will go willingly."

His eyes brightened. "You would do that for me?"

Anna nodded. "I would miss dancing, but there are other things more important than that." She didn't mind the idea of living with Wilhelm and Ilsa. It would be nice to have family around her.

“Anna, we don’t necessarily have to live in Frankfurt. At least for a while. Stuttgart has a very good ballet company and it’s a little over 200 kilometers away from Frankfurt.”

Anna looked at him blankly. “Kilometers?”

Alex smiled and then narrowed his eyes with a thoughtful expression. “About...125 miles. That would be close enough to keep Vati happy.”

Anna nodded. “That wouldn’t be too bad.” She inhaled sharply. “What about Aaron?”

Alex’s eyes became sad again. “I’ve hardly seen him since you and I got back together,” he said softly. “I don’t know...”

“He’s not dancing tonight, why don’t the two of you go out?”

Alex looked away. “He’s probably with Cameron.”

Anna giggled. “I’m sure Cameron wouldn’t mind seeing you.” She studied him. “Are you okay with Aaron having a boyfriend?”

He shrugged. “I guess it’s kind of weird. I was the first guy he was ever with.”

“I didn’t know that.” That would explain the longing looks Aaron gave him when Aaron thought no one was looking. But Anna saw them.

“Does that upset you?” Alex asked softly.

“That you were the first guy Aaron was with? Why would that bother me?”

“I think he still has feelings for me. When he came here that first night...he acted kind of strange.”

Anna swallowed. “Did you two...?”

Alex quickly shook his head. “I haven’t been with him since...well, since before I met you. Met you in real life, that is.”

“Oh.”

“Maybe he’d want to move with us, if you’d be okay with that. After all, he is part of the German Brotherhood.”

“As a friend or as a lover?”

Alex’s eyes widened. “As a friend. Anna, you are my lover.”

“What about at a Gathering? Would you be with him there?”

Alex blinked and then frowned. “I don’t know. It’s been so long since I’ve been to a Gathering.” He sighed. “Maybe. But the world of the Brotherhood is different than the normal world.”

“I know. I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad. I guess I was just wondering.” The idea of the two of them being together didn’t bother Anna overly much. She’d rather him be with another guy than one of the Elder-Mistresses.

“We have a while before we have to decide anything like that, *Schatzi*.” He gave her an affectionate look. “If you want, I will speak to him. I’m certain the Stuttgart Ballet would welcome both of you.”

Anna nodded and cuddled up next to him. They lay quietly together, Alex slowly stroking Anna’s back and arms.

“Anna, would you be willing to be with Sebastian today?” Alex asked in a soft voice.

“I.... If you want me to.”

“He says that it wouldn’t be wise to wait much longer. What Essence I have is fading and it’s easier to do a ‘refill’ than to start over.” He shuddered slightly. “The first time wasn’t very pleasant.”

“Really?” Anna smiled slightly. “Why?”

“Well, first of all, I wasn’t with you. And secondly, it made me feel...weird. I felt out of control.” He gave her a sad look. “I didn’t plan on fucking Irina. I didn’t want to. But I just...had to.”

Anna pressed her lips together and nodded. "As I understand it, it can be rather strong." She looked up at the ceiling.

"When I become Elder, you will be the one up there with me."

"Will someone tell me what to do next time?"

Alex nodded soberly. "*Ja*, Anna. I will make sure you know what is happening."

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Chapter Fifty-Two

“If I hurt you, I will heal you,” Sebastian said walking towards Anna later that evening. “I’ll try not to, but I’m not often with an Elder-Mistress.” He grinned sheepishly. “I’m a little excited.”

Anna smiled nervously and nodded. She didn’t want to be hurt. She glanced at Alex, who sat on the bed watching. He gave her an encouraging smile. This was it. She would be giving of herself to Alex. Willingly, save her fear of being hurt. She had no idea if it really could be a pleasurable process, and Sebastian’s words weren’t exactly encouraging.

Sebastian sat on his heels on the floor on the soft rug and pulled Anna down between his legs. He pulled her close to him between his thighs, her back to his front. His hands ran up and down her thighs and she heard him murmuring in another language. She closed her eyes, melting back against him as he brought his hand slowly up to her breasts. He pinched her nipples and she gasped at the pleasurable pain his fingers produced. He held her nipples, the pain as sharp as a knife, and kissed her neck before biting the junction of neck and shoulder hard. He released her nipples and they throbbed as his teeth dug into her neck. He released her and soothed the bite with his tongue. Goose bumps appeared all over her body as he ran his hands up her arms, to her shoulders, and once again grasped her nipples in the knife grasp.

She moaned softly as he pulled and twisted. The pain was doing something to her head and she felt dizzy.

“Good girl,” he murmured. “Let yourself feel.”

It was all she could do: feel his breath, hot on her neck; his fingers running up and down her arms and legs; his cock pressed into her back.

She shivered and moaned as he explored her pussy with long fingers. He spread her open, pinched her clit, pulled the inner folds of skin and then finally pressed inside her.

“So wet and swollen, Anna,” he whispered. “Beautiful.”

She was dazed. She couldn't open her eyes if she wanted to. Her body was under his control. He circled her clit with wet fingers once...twice...three times, and a sharp orgasm hit her like a wall and her body shook as she screamed in pleasure. He held her back against his body and played with her clit again, making her come over and over again. Tears streamed down her face at the intensity of the sensations.

“This was just our warm-up, love,” he whispered, then lay her down on her belly.

He kissed her back and shoulders and made his way down to her waist and ass. His tongue swirled around her ass and she moaned as he pressed his fingers inside her pussy and tongue-fucked her ass. He rubbed the roof of her pussy and made her come again with a shudder. The orgasms were melding into one continuous pleasure wave of sensation.

His hot body stretched out over her and they intertwined fingers. He bit her neck again and she felt him take control of her; take her body for his own. Their minds melded as she anticipated their bodies joining.

Bright colors blocked her vision as he brought her to her hands and knees and began to enter her. She stretched around him, amazed at his girth and she whimpered as her body struggled to accommodate him. He leaned over her, kissing her back and shoulders as he filled her.

“Feel, Anna. Feel the pain and the pleasure. Together, they make ecstasy.”

She stiffened and cried out in pain as he reached her cervix. She tried to pull away, but he held her firm. He massaged her breasts and kissed her back as he pressed forward. More pain, cramping as he went deep into her body.

Fear gripped her. He was hurting her, just like Kaveh did. She struggled to get away again as her tears fell to the ground beneath her face. The pain intensified as she felt him swelling inside her and she screeched as she felt her entrance tear.

“Yes, Anna. I know it hurts. But I will heal you. Trust me, Anna. You were made to take me as I am.”

She stiffened and screamed again as she felt him go deeper and widen more. Her arms were trembling and she could hardly hold herself up. Sebastian put one hand on the ground and supported her with his other arm. Her body was on fire. Her stomach cramped. She whimpered and cried, trying to get away, but he held her tight.

He pulled out slightly. “Feel the pleasure in the pain, Daughter,” he said and slammed back into her body. Her eyes rolled back into her head at the instant orgasm that came from his violent thrust. He did it again and again and again. Her body was pure sensation. Pure pleasure. Pure orgasm. She flew in the light of pleasure; waves rolling over her that took her higher and higher. There was no pain, there was no body. There was only orgasm.

Alex watched Anna’s face contort in pain, tears streaming down her face. She scratched against Sebastian’s grip and Alex stood to pull her away from the Immortal. Sebastian was hurting her. He had promised he wouldn’t, and he was.

He walked around the bed towards them. Sebastian held up his hand and Alex was pushed by an invisible force back onto the bed and held there.

“Let her go, Sebastian!” he bellowed. “You’re hurting her, let her go!” Irina hadn’t reacted like this, she’d been writhing in ecstasy the entire time.

Anna screeched and Alex’s eyes watered. He struggled against the invisible force holding him on the bed. What the hell was Sebastian doing to her? Why was he hurting her?

“Anna!” he shouted. “Sebastian, let her go!”

Sebastian pulled back slightly and Alex relaxed, thinking he would let her go, but then he slammed back into her and Anna stiffened and screamed again. But this scream was different. Her mouth was wide open and her eyes tightly closed as if...she was climaxing? Her face flushed and her neck muscles strained as Sebastian pounded into her over and over again.

Sebastian growled and let out a primal yell as he thrust deeply into Anna’s body. Was Anna breathing? Her back was arched as if Sebastian was pulling her up by her hair, but Sebastian’s fingers were pressing hard into her hips. Their bodies seemed frozen in a permanent orgasmic state and Alex could only stare. It had not been like this when Sebastian had taken Irina. Sebastian hadn’t seemed to have lost control with the Russian Elder-Mistress like he had lost it with Anna.

After what seemed like hours, Anna slumped forward, her chest on the ground. Alex lunged forward, surprised that he could and gathered her into his arms. She was limp and barely breathing. Sebastian sat back on his heels, hands resting on his thighs and chest heaving. His cock was still large and semi-hard, but dripping with Anna’s juices and...was that blood?

“What the hell did you do to her?” Alex growled, punching at Sebastian’s chest with one hand while he cradled Anna with the other arm.

Sebastian grabbed his fist before it made contact and looked at him with glowing blue eyes. “Don’t,” he said in a low voice, filled with warning. His skin was glowing slightly and he looked very...Immortal.

Alex pulled his hand away, never having seen his friend like this. Sebastian leaned forward, resting his forehead on the floor in front of him. His ribcage expanded and contracted as he gasped for breath, another thing Alex had never seen in his friend. What had happened?

He looked down at his beautiful wife with regret. She was so pale, the dark hair sticking to her face a sharp contrast. Her chest and face were covered with a sheen of sweat. He smoothed back her wet hair and rocked her gently. “Anna?” he whispered to the limp body. He put his fingers to her neck and was relieved to feel a pulse. “Anna....”

“She’ll be okay, Alex,” Sebastian said in a hoarse voice after a few minutes. “I’ve never....” The Immortal shook his head. “I didn’t realize how powerful she was before.... No wonder Devin was able to do what he did.”

Alex glared at Sebastian and noticed, although he was glowing, his face was slightly pale. “What do you mean? Why did you hurt her?”

Sebastian sat down on his hip and reached out for Anna. Alex pulled her away. “Let me heal her. I tore into her pretty hard.”

Alex growled. “I know.” But he allowed Sebastian to touch her.

Sebastian placed his hand on her lower stomach and closed his eyes. Anna groaned slightly, but didn’t awaken. “I took her,” he said softly. “I took her as I took Irina, but her power overwhelmed me. I couldn’t....” He gave Alex a sorrowful look. “I couldn’t control myself. She came inside me and consumed me. I had to get control or I would have killed her. That’s why I hurt her, Alex. Her pain pulled her away from me enough for me to get control. I’m sorry. I had no intention of doing that, but if I hadn’t, I would have killed her.” He stroked her thigh slowly. “I still lost it at the

end. Her orgasms are very strong. I could feel her coming, but she didn't feel the pain at that point. She was in...what some humans call sub-space. Beyond knowledge of anything except feeling."

Alex looked down at Anna again. Part of him was proud that her power overwhelmed Sebastian. Another part of him was frightened. "Why is she so powerful?"

"She's in touch with her humanity. That's the simplest way to explain it. Her ability to love combined with the powers of the half-Immortal. It can be powerful and it can be dangerous. I've not known a half-Immortal to rage in centuries. Not since we changed how the humans interacted with them."

"You know she killed her guardian?"

Sebastian nodded. "That was one of the things I brought up to my brothers. The very fact that she was pushed that far was a stunning piece of evidence."

"She almost raged the night of the Gala."

"She did? Why?" Sebastian's head tilted. "And how are you still alive?"

Alex shrugged slightly, trying not to jostle Anna too much. "I saw what was happening and got control of the situation. I think she was angry at Devin, though, not me."

"It doesn't matter who she's angry with, she'll kill anyone around." Sebastian studied him carefully. "You are very powerful, Alex, to be able to control that." He smiled. "You would have to be to battle Devin. What we are doing will strengthen your natural...strength."

"I didn't tell her about her rage. I didn't know if—Sebastian?"

Sebastian didn't appear to be paying attention, instead he was staring at Anna.

"Sebastian?"

“You can control her. That—” He paused. “That would be good for the others to see when you confront Devin. The very fact that you can control her supports your claim to her as more legitimate.”

“You want me to take her and induce a rage at a funeral gathering?” He couldn’t be serious.

“I think simply seeing Devin will be sufficient for her to do it herself.”

“She’s not been given permission to go. I was going to speak to Vati about it, but we ended up fighting....” Alex trailed off. Why bother asking if she wouldn’t want to go?

“I think she should be there. She has a right to see the end.”

“That’s dangerous. She could kill everyone. Devin could get ahold of her.”

“That would certainly induce a rage. And if she does rage, you’d best make sure your relationship with her is solid. And that you...partake...of us regularly.”

Alex shook his head. “I can’t make her go through this again.”

“It won’t be like this next time. I wasn’t prepared. I know now what to expect. I can keep control of the situation.” Sebastian grinned. “She had a fantastic orgasm, and if you make the next part pleasant, she will be more willing.”

“How do I do that?”

“You don’t know how to pleasure your wife with your mouth?”

“I— of course I do, but is there more?”

“Stop when you see her fading. It will show her you care about her. She’ll want you to take it all, but you don’t have to. Show her you’re different from Devin. Once you’re done, I’ll revive her and then you can make love to her.” He grinned. “Or we both can.”

Alex frowned.

“You might be surprised what you’re in the mood for.”

“If you and I start having sex on a regular basis, my men might get jealous. We were each other’s only lovers for the last few years.”

Sebastian smiled and stood. “Get her onto the bed. She should awaken soon.”

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Chapter Fifty-Three

Anna moaned softly as she felt a mouth at her breast. Her body felt extra sensitive; she wanted more, more touch, more sexual touch. The tongue lapped at the nipple and she shuddered and opened her eyes.

Alex's face was there next to hers, and she smiled. "Alex...", she said in a soft voice.

He turned to look at her and kissed her gently. "*Mein Liebe*," he murmured, and rolled to stretch out on top of her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled herself up towards him so she could get him inside her, but he shook his head. "Not yet, *Schatzi*." He kissed her again. "Will you give yourself to me?" His eyes were full of love and it brought tears to her eyes.

He was asking for permission to consume her. Devin had never done that. She began to tremble, remembering what that had been like. She remembered freaking out when he tried that as Mr. J. But she wanted to give of herself to him, and she nodded and clenched her fists.

He took both fists in his hands and kissed them. "I know you're scared, *Schatzi*. Tell me at any time, and I will stop. All right?"

Anna nodded and he kissed down between her breasts and down her belly. When he reached the junction of her legs, he paused and Anna froze. "Stop me at any time, Anna."

He bent his head and gently kissed her pussy lips. "Oh!" she exclaimed softly as desire coursed through her body at that simple touch. He dotted tiny kisses all over before gently dragging his tongue between her nether lips.

Anna moaned softly and spread her legs wider. He kissed and licked in such a gentle manner, she couldn't even compare this experience to the one with Devin. "Oh, Alex...", she whispered, squirming beneath his gentle touch. He gently spread her open and buried his tongue deep inside. He let out a groan and his movements became more insistent. She wanted to give him more...more of herself.

She closed her eyes and felt herself relaxing into his kisses. As she did, she became slightly dizzy as she released herself to Alex. He groaned louder and sucked on her clit until she screamed out in ecstasy. He eagerly lapped up her juices and then repeated the processes until she was floating in a sea of pleasure.

After a while, Anna felt herself fading. She was too weak to move, but she didn't care. She was helping Alex. Making him strong. She wanted to smile at him and struggled to get her eyes open. They met his and his blue eyes were instantly filled with concern.

He pulled away and scooted up next to her and stroked her cheek. She hardly felt it.

"Did I take too much, *Schatzi*?"

She shook her head slightly and gave him a weak smile. "Can...take...more...."

"*Nein*. I've had enough. We have plenty of time."

There was a flash of light and Sebastian appeared. "How is she?"

Anna turned her head slightly and gave him a weak smile.

"Different than previous experiences, huh?" Sebastian smiled.

Anna nodded slightly.

He undressed and lay down next to her, bringing his cock near her mouth. She hesitated until Alex kissed her cheek. "It's all right, *Schatzi*," he said in a soft voice. He rolled her to her side and helped her get Sebastian's

semi-hard cock into her mouth. She immediately began sucking and tasted the golden nectar a moment later.

As feeling returned to her body, she felt Alex pressed against her back, kissing her neck and caressing her breasts. She groaned as she felt Alex's hard cock against her ass. She pressed back against his hips, wanting to feel him inside her.

"Are you sure, *Schatzi*?"

Anna nodded and closed her eyes when he brought her leg up and positioned his hard cock at her pussy. She jumped slightly when she felt a mouth on her pussy as Alex pushed slowly inside.

"Does that hurt, Anna?" Sebastian asked from the general direction of her hips.

"Uh-uh," she mumbled over his cock.

"Is that a no?" he asked with a chuckle.

Anna nodded and moaned as she felt the hot mouth on her again.

Alex wrapped his arms around her and slowly pumped in and out of her. "I love you, Anna," he whispered.

Anna mumbled that she loved him too against Sebastian's cock, but doubted Alex understood. Sebastian's cock hardened to arousal and Anna sucked fervently. This was much more pleasant than when she'd been between Devin and Kaveh. She wasn't worried about either of them hurting her, even though she had a vague memory of pain from being with Sebastian. The orgasm had more than made up for it.

Anna grabbed at Sebastian's hips and pulled herself to him, needing more of him to consume. He pumped his hips in rhythm with her mouth and let out a groan. Anna looked up to see Alex's hand fondling Sebastian's balls and wondered if Sebastian was doing the same to Alex.

Within a few minutes, they had all reached their climax and Anna was feeling herself again. Alex nibbled on her neck. "I have the best wife," he murmured, cupping her breast gently.

"I couldn't disagree with that," Sebastian said, sitting up and flipping around so that his head was the same direction as Alex and Anna's. "Was that all right, Anna?"

She grinned and nodded. "That was nothing like...what I experienced before."

"*Gut*," Alex said from behind her, pulling her tight against him. "That was unlike my previous experience as well."

"Really?" Anna turned to face him, surprised. She hoped it wasn't better with Irina.

He tapped her nose and gave her an affectionate smile. "This was much, much better." He chuckled at Sebastian. "I think even he would agree."

"I would."

"You're sure you're not just saying that?" she asked Alex, feeling a little insecure. She didn't want him lying to make her feel better.

"Anna, I love you. You love me. That makes everything better. I was in control this time, too, which was better. I don't feel as...weird. Or guilty."

"Guilty?"

"I felt awful after I...you know. But this was very nice." He grinned. "You are tastier."

Anna giggled and kissed Alex on the mouth.

"I would concur with that conclusion as well," Sebastian said, sliding his hand around her waist and kissing the back of her neck.

Anna looked up at Alex, concerned he would be upset about what Sebastian was doing, but he just kissed her deeply, thrusting his tongue in

and out of her mouth as both men caressed her breasts and hips. She felt herself getting aroused again.

“Did I mention that the process can heighten your sexual desires?” Sebastian asked as he rolled her nipple between his fingers. Anna gasped softly against Alex’s mouth. “Both of yours. Well, all three of us, really.”

She wasn’t totally surprised when she felt Sebastian hard again, pressing against her ass. But she was a little surprised when Alex followed suit.

“Ready for a bit more fun?” Alex murmured against her lips.

Anna nodded and moaned as Sebastian pressed his long fingers into her ass. This would be an interesting night.

Alex hugged Anna to him as he awoke before the sunrise. Last night had been different than anything they’d experienced together before, but he thought that Anna had enjoyed herself. Alex certainly had. The Immortal essence certainly had a strong effect on his libido. He hadn’t been that horny since they’d gotten married. He liked being able to make love to Anna over and over again last night, but his cock was a little sore this morning. Sebastian had kept both of them busy and Anna had watched with wide, fascinated eyes as the Immortal fucked him in front of her.

Alex had watched her nipples harden and her cheeks flush, which just turned him on more. She’d looked up at Sebastian and they seemed to communicate without words. Sebastian pulled Alex up onto his knees and Anna had given him an incredible blowjob while playing with both of their ball-sacs. His cock twitched just remembering that experience.

The question was, though, how would she feel this morning? Sebastian hadn’t left until after three this morning, and she’d passed out before he’d disappeared completely. She had a beautiful smile on her face, though.

Alex watched the sky turn from black to gray to blue while he held Anna close to him. He knew Anna needed to go to class this morning; she was performing tonight. The tickets had sold out for the performance and Alex wondered if he could watch from the wings. He didn't want to leave her side.

But he'd have to eventually. There was still more planning to be done for the Boston job. Maybe he could come back during the week so Anna wouldn't worry so much. They had to move positions anyway. Even if he only came home for one night, it would probably help Anna considerably.

With the last two jobs, he hadn't needed the use of a red girl. He was more aggressive with Anna when he'd returned from Chicago, which is why she'd found out who he was, but it had turned out for the best. After the first job, they'd kept their stress relief within the team. They had to.

But Alex was concerned about hurting Anna. He didn't want to lose control and hurt her, even though she said she could take it. Or at least, she had in the past. He ran his hand through his hair. They needed to talk about it before he left.

He dozed for a while, inhaling Anna's sweet, musky scent, until the alarm went off and she groaned. "Don' wanna," she mumbled, and his heart swelled with affection for her.

"I'm sorry for keeping you up so late, *Schatzi*," he said softly. "You can sleep tonight."

Her eyes snapped open. "Don't we have to do it again tonight?"

Alex frowned and shook his head. "Sebastian said only about once a week."

"Really?"

He cocked his brow. "How often did Devin do it?"

"Every night."

Alex stared at her. No wonder she'd lost her powers, or at least, that's what his father had said. When Vati had first seen her at Vitaly's funeral, she'd been a shadow of herself. To be drained completely every night...how had she survived? *Damn Devin!*

She kissed his cheek and then crawled out of bed and walked to the bathroom. His cock twitched again as he watched her ass sway gently as she made her way across the room. How on earth could he possibly be able to still get hard? Damn, even his ass hurt.

He stroked himself a few times and winced. He didn't remember ever being so sore from a night of passion. Maybe he needed to practice more.

Anna giggled from across the room and he looked up to see her standing in the doorway, still naked.

"What are you giggling about?" he asked.

"The expression on your face. You went from looking like you were in pain to a very seductive smile."

"I am sore from last night," he admitted with a sheepish smile.

"Your ass?" Her grin was adorable.

"No, well, yes, partially. But I think my cock is out of practice."

Her grin widened and she walked back to the bed, her eyes dark with lust. "Maybe I should kiss it and make it better?" She knelt on the bed and pulled the covers back.

"Oh, Anna...," he murmured as she lowered her head to his throbbing cock and took it into her mouth. "I love you...."

Anna smiled as she did her warm-up at the barre. Last night had been...unexpected. Amazing and unexpected. She had no idea that Alex consuming her could be so erotic. She almost didn't want to wait a week.

But then again, if they did that every night, she wouldn't be able to dance. She was having a hard time garnering her energy today.

And Sebastian! She'd only been with him the one time, the night before her wedding, but being with him and Alex together was unbelievable. Unexpectedly, she'd been incredibly turned on by watching the two men together. It made her wonder what it would be like to watch him and Aaron together.

"Anna?" Vincent's voice dragged her out of her daydream and she blushed, realizing she'd stopped dancing.

"Sorry, Vincent." She turned to face the direction the other dancers were facing and began the steps again.

Vincent walked over to her and chuckled. "I'm glad you and Alex are getting along again."

Anna smiled shyly. "Is it that obvious?"

He gave her an affectionate smile and nodded before walking away.

Chapter Fifty-Four

The days passed too quickly and before she knew it, Alex was packing to leave for Boston. It was Sunday morning and Anna sat on their bed, watching him pack his things and trying not to cry.

“I will come home on Wednesday to see you,” Alex repeated for the hundredth time with an understanding smile on his face. “I will come home to you, Anna.”

Anna swallowed back her tears. She didn’t have bad feelings about this one, like she had before he disappeared, but it didn’t make it any easier. “I know,” she finally whispered.

“You can call me at any time. I will turn my phone off only when I must.” He smiled. “You wouldn’t want my phone to vibrate when I’m taking my shot, would you?”

Anna let out a mix of a laugh and a cry as she shook her head.

“Sebastian will keep an eye on you. If there is an emergency, close your eyes and think of him. He will feel you.”

Sebastian was going with Alex, but he could stay connected to Anna while he was gone. Boston wasn’t that far away. Too far for Alex to feel her, but not too far for Sebastian.

“Remember, I don’t mind if you go out with your friends,” Alex said, coming to sit next to her. He put his arm around her and kissed her temple. “I trust you, Anna. Please don’t betray my trust.”

Anna nodded and sniffed. She had no desire to do so.

“I don’t know when Devin will arrive in the area. When he’s here, please stay in the condo, just to be safe. On this floor.”

“What if he’s here Thursday night?”

“Tom will do what he can to shield you from Devin. Sebastian flashing into town would be noticed by Devin. Keep your phone with you, Tom will call if there’s a problem.”

Anna nodded, trembling. Alex held her tightly.

“It will be all right, Anna. I won’t let anything happen to you. We’ll be back Friday afternoon.”

It was only a few days at a time that he’d be gone. She could handle that. Aaron would keep an eye on her while Alex was gone. She could be brave for Alex. He would come home to her.

Alex stared out the window of the business jet that was taking him and his team to Boston. The jet was registered under Simon’s name, but like the condo, was actually Alex’s. After everything was finished, then he could put his name on his property again. That would be nice.

Anna had tried to be so brave when he left. She’d been trying very hard not to cry, and succeeded for the most part. Though as soon as the door closed, he heard her start to sob. He and his men had looked at each other with sad eyes before turning and walking to the elevator, but they were doing this for her.

He didn’t have the sick feeling in his stomach that he’d had when he’d left her the first time. He was confident he would see her on Wednesday.

Erich was not along for this trip, but he would be out for the one on Tyler. It was too risky for his cousin to fly into the country every month. But for the last one, it was worth it. He would deny no one who wanted to come see the “final showdown” as he thought of it in his head.

As Alex understood it, Rylan, his target for tomorrow morning, was the cruelest of the Sons, save Tyler. He was looking forward to seeing his dark-haired head in the crosshairs of his rifle.

Three more dead bodies until he could confront Devin.

Rylan is dead.

Devin dropped his phone after he'd read the text. He didn't drop it on purpose. He dropped it because he'd begun shaking.

Another killing? What the hell was going on? Why were they being picked off? Who the hell was targeting the American leadership?

If Anna were here, he could figure out what was going on. But she'd been gone for so long, he had little of his former powers he'd gained from her. He still had his natural talents, but the enhancements were nearly gone. He was no longer a Chairman. When he found Anna, he would punish her severely. He had no doubt he would find her. He had to.

There was one thing that the text had brought. Relief that it wasn't Tyler. His son was still alive. He didn't know what he would do if Tyler died. But no one would dare kill Tyler...would they?

Anna was distracted. It was after lunch on Wednesday and she hadn't heard from Alex. She'd been afraid to call for fear of him not answering.

The performance last night hadn't been her best, but it certainly hadn't been bad. Hugo could tell she'd been distracted, but had been understanding. He didn't know why Alex was out of town, but knew Anna was nervous.

She tried to lose herself in the rehearsal and finally managed to succeed. When she opened her eyes at the end of the dance she gasped. Alex stood at the side of the stage with a big smile on his face. She ran to him and hugged him tightly, relief sweeping over her.

“You’re here,” she said, her face buried in his chest.

“*Ja, Schatzi.* I am here.”

Anna sighed in relief to have Alex’s arms around her. “I saw the news,” she said softly. “You really did it in one shot?”

“It’s how I’m trained. You often don’t get a second chance. The hardest part is finding the place to shoot from.”

Anna’s heart was much lighter as she finished rehearsal, and it showed in her dancing.

Hugo shook his head in disbelief as they walked to the edge of the stage when they were finished. “I don’t think I could ever begrudge you being with Alex. Your whole countenance changes when things are good between you two.”

Anna touched his hand. “You made me happy too, Hugo.” She didn’t want him to think otherwise.

He gave her a sad smile. “And you made me happy, too. But it’s obvious where you belong.”

Alex walked up from the audience seats to where they were sitting on the edge of the stage, his eyes slightly suspicious.

Hugo nodded in greeting. “I was just telling Katrina that it was very obvious that you two belong together.”

Alex studied him for a moment before nodding. “I’m glad she has supportive friends around her,” he said sincerely.

Hugo chuckled. “I wouldn’t want you as an enemy.”

Alex laughed. "I'm sorry for getting angry at you on the phone. I was...." He shrugged. "It's difficult, adjusting to so many changes." He put his hand on Anna's leg. "But we're getting there."

Anna beamed and nodded. "Yes, we are."

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Chapter Fifty-Five

Aaron was pleased to see Anna handling Alex's second departure better than the first one. Monday and Tuesday he'd hardly seen her smile at all. Today she smiled a few times.

After lunch, they ran through Hugo's ballet. Aaron was in it as well. He especially liked the part where both he and Hugo got to dance with her.

It was in the middle of this dance when Aaron began to feel a little dizzy. He thought he was getting sick, until he saw Anna stumble and grab her head.

"Katrina?" Hugo said, putting his arm around her.

Anna looked up, fear filling her eyes as she stared at Aaron. Her jaw trembled as the fear turned into terror. "Devin...", she whispered.

He stared for a split second before shaking his head to clear it. "Hugo, find someone to rehearse with so it doesn't look like we're missing." He ran to grab his and Anna's bags.

"Wha—why? What's going on?"

Aaron turned to look at Hugo. "Devin's coming." He saw Hugo's face turn ashen as Aaron grabbed Anna. "I'm taking her to her place. I'll call you later."

He dragged a stumbling Anna off stage and a second later heard Hugo calling names. Aaron knew he could trust Hugo to do what needed to be done.

Aaron felt his phone vibrate and glanced at it as he pulled a stumbling Anna through the maze of the backstage. He didn't recognize the number, but answered it anyway. "Hello?"

“Aaron, oh, thank God. It’s Kelsey, Tom’s wife. I’ve been trying to call you for a half hour.”

Aaron froze. “Kelsey?” He’d met Tom’s wife a handful of times.

“Tom and Devin are on their way to the theater. Tom told me to call you since he couldn’t.”

“I’m dragging Anna out as we speak. We felt him.”

“Oh, thank God. Take her to her condo and into Seth’s bedroom. That’s all I know.”

“Thanks, Kelsey. I will.” He shoved his phone back into his bag and looked at Anna. Her face was pale and she could barely walk. How was he going to get her home?

“I know she’s fucking here, Tom. What the hell is going on with you?” Devin stood in Tom’s kitchen and yelled at his friend. “Why can’t you feel her?”

Tom frowned. “Watch your tone, Devin. My kids are home.”

Devin had flown into New York to spend the day with Tom before flying into Boston in the morning. He hadn’t told Tom he was coming. He might be paranoid, but he was beginning to not trust anyone. Even his oldest friend. Someone was calling hits on his loyal supporters. He wouldn’t rule anyone out. Who would be next? He had a horrible feeling he knew what was going to happen in the morning and didn’t want to be anywhere near Boston until it was done.

As soon as he landed, he felt her. *Anna*. His elusive prey. She was here.

“I think you’re being paranoid, Devin,” Tom said with a sigh.

“Am I?” Devin glared. “I don’t think so. Let’s go visit the ballet company again. I would bet anything she’s there.”

Tom rolled his eyes. "Fine. Let me tell Kelsey I'm leaving."

Tom double-parked his Lexus behind the theater and Devin had his door open before he'd turned the ignition off. Devin could feel Anna as easily as he could feel the cool breeze on his face. They strode in the back entrance, the security guard balking until he saw Tom's nod.

He heard the music coming from the stage as they approached, and didn't bother to wait for the dancers to stop before striding onto the stage. That black man was in the middle of the stage, dancing with the woman he'd manipulated the last time he'd been here.

The music stopped suddenly and everyone turned to look at him and Tom. Anna was here, somewhere. He looked around as the ballet master approached.

"Hello, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "May I help you?"

Devin glared at him. "Where is she?"

"Where is who?" The older man glanced at Tom.

"Anna," Devin answered, walking up to the woman standing in the middle of the stage. He gave her a small smile and she smiled nervously back. "Where is she? Where is the woman who stole the man from you?"

"I...I don't know what you're talking about." She was clearly terrified of him, which pleased him to no end.

"Anna." He turned to the black man and narrowed his eyes. "You lied the last time I was here. You're lucky to be alive."

The man narrowed his eyes at Devin. "She's not here."

Devin clenched his hands and looked around, noticing Aaron wasn't around. "Where's Aaron?"

“He went home sick,” Vincent answered, walking over with a firm look on his face. “If you don’t mind, we are in the middle of rehearsals. Whoever you are looking for is obviously not here.”

Devin grabbed him around his neck and stared into his eyes. His powers weren’t as strong, but if he concentrated, he could glean a little bit of information from his mind. He saw Anna dancing and....Devin growled. “You fucking bastard. You will pay for hiding her.” He shoved the man away and stalked back towards Tom. “She was here. She left with that fucking Aaron.”

Without a backward glance, Devin strode off the stage. He needed Kaveh.

Anna huddled in the corner of Seth’s room with Aaron’s arms around her. She was terrified. She could feel Devin searching for her, and Alex wasn’t here to protect her.

“Shh, Anna. It’s okay.” Aaron held her tightly and stroked her hair. “It will be okay.”

There was a flash and Sebastian appeared, immediately kneeling in front of them. He lifted Anna’s chin and studied her eyes. “It will be okay, Anna,” he said in a soothing voice and then stood and closed his eyes.

She felt the warmth surround her and she was able to relax. She leaned her head on Aaron’s chest, knowing she was safe. She felt Aaron relax, too.

Sebastian stood like a sentinel in the middle of the room, not moving, but glowing. He would keep Devin from finding her and then Alex would be home tomorrow night and everything would be okay.

Suddenly, Sebastian’s eyes shot open and there was another flash of light. Anna screamed as Kaveh appeared. He was broader than Sebastian,

and clearly angry. He snarled to Sebastian in a language she didn't understand. Sebastian replied in the same language.

Aaron pulled her to his other side as a flaming sword appeared in Kaveh's hand.

Kaveh swung at Sebastian, who jumped out of the way and a similar sword appeared in his hand as well. Sebastian swung at Kaveh and Kaveh blocked it. The two Immortals moved so quickly it became a blur of light and fire as they fought furiously. The wall blasted open and they moved out into the hallway.

Devin stood outside the building where Kaveh had said Anna was hiding. It was a luxurious private building with a doorman. He couldn't feel Anna, but trusted that Kaveh wouldn't steer him wrong. Kaveh had missed Anna as much as he had.

Suddenly he could feel Anna fully and looked back at Tom with a malicious grin. "She's here. Get me in."

"Devin, this is a private building with three dozen apartments. How the —"

Devin grabbed his collar. "If you don't get me into this building, I will have to question your loyalty."

Tom pressed his lips together and pulled away from Devin. "My loyalty? After all we've gone through?"

Devin was losing his patience. "Then get me inside."

Anna winced at the sounds coming from the hallway. Something shattered and she jumped. A sound like a wall being blasted open made her

jump and then it was quiet. After a moment, there was still no sound and she looked at Aaron. His eyes were wide as he looked at her.

They crept to the door and peeked out. The hallway was a mess and the Immortals were gone.

“Where’d they go?” Aaron whispered. “And will they be back?”

Anna shivered. “I don’t know.”

A chill ran through Anna and she stared at the mess. “Devin...,” she whispered and looked at Aaron. “He’s here.”

They stared at each other, unmoving, until Aaron suddenly grabbed her hand and began pulling on her rings.

“What are you doing?”

“If he sees you wearing your wedding rings, he’ll know Alex is alive. He can’t find out yet. Alex needs the element of surprise.”

With tears in her eyes, she pulled her rings off and handed them to Aaron. He was right. If she was going back to Devin, he couldn’t find out that Alex was alive.

“C’mon. The less he sees of the apartment, the better.” Aaron dragged her out to the living room.

Anna was shaking so badly she couldn’t move herself. The darkness that surrounded her was suffocating. She didn’t want to go back to Devin. She wanted to stay with Alex. They had a plan. This wasn’t part of the plan.

“I’m scared,” she whispered as she sat, curled up next to Aaron on the couch.

“Alex will get you back, Anna. Stay strong.” He turned her to face him and she saw tears in his eyes. “You are so strong, Anna. Don’t forget that. Don’t let him tell you differently.”

Tears streamed down her face. “Tell Alex I love him.”

Aaron nodded.

They heard a knock on the door, but neither got up to answer it.

The knock became a pound and then it sounded like someone was kicking the door. Anna jumped with each sound. Finally, there was a crash, and Anna whimpered. Aaron grabbed her face and kissed her passionately.

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Chapter Fifty-Six

Devin kicked in the door after several attempts and stalked into the luxurious apartment. He walked into what had to be the living room and saw Anna on the couch. Kissing...Aaron? He thought Aaron was gay.

“Anna.”

The couple froze and he saw Anna shaking. Good. She should be terrified. He would torture her for leaving him.

She turned and looked at him, terror filling her eyes, and Devin smiled. “Stupid girl, Anna. Stupid, stupid, stupid.” He walked towards her slowly, glaring at her and making her shrink away. He grabbed her by her hair and she shrieked as he pulled her over the back of the couch and onto the floor.

Aaron reached for her, but Devin pushed him away. “You will pay for hiding her, you fucking twat.”

“No, Devin, please.” Anna whimpered. “He wasn’t hiding me. Th-this is my place. I didn’t like Paris so I came back. Aaron didn’t know anything about me running away.”

Devin twisted his hand in her hair and she shrieked again. “Please don’t hurt him,” she begged.

She didn’t want him hurt? Oh, he would hurt him. He released her hair and reached for Aaron.

“Aaron.”

Aaron groaned and rolled to his side, coughing. He saw splatters of blood on the floor and realized he was coughing up blood. *Fuck*. Devin had

started punching him as soon as Anna hit the floor. The last thing he remembered was hearing Tom tell Devin that he would deal with him and to get Anna out of there.

He opened his eyes and saw Tom crouching down next to him.

“Anna?” Aaron whispered.

Tom pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Devin took her. But he won’t kill her. He would have killed you.”

“You let him take her?”

“I didn’t have a choice, Aaron. Devin’s defeat depends on him not knowing about me or Alex.”

“He’ll hurt her.”

Tom sighed. “I know, and that thought kills me. But he won’t do anything until the funerals are over. He wouldn’t want her to look bad in front of the other Elders. He’ll wait until he’s home.”

“You can’t let him take her home!”

“I won’t be able to speak to Wilhelm or Vlad until after the funerals are over. I don’t know if they’ll find out about Anna before then.”

“I’ll call Alex and tell him.”

“No, Aaron. You can’t. We have to stick with the plan. Alex has to kill Oscar in the morning. If you call and tell him...he’ll lose it. I can’t let that happen.”

“Fuck the plan, Tom. You can’t let him have Anna for that long. He’ll get his powers back.”

Tom shook his head. “We’ll modify the timeline, but we have to get rid of Tyler, or Tyler becomes Elder when Devin is removed. Tyler’s no better than Devin.”

“So call Alex and tell him to take out Tyler.”

“The jobs were given to Alex by myself, Vlad and Wilhelm. One of us alone can’t modify it and as I said, I won’t be able to speak to them until after Devin’s gone. Devin will be on the lookout for anything suspicious.” He helped Aaron to his feet. “Let me get you to a hospital. I told Devin I would deal with you. I’ll check you in under a different name. Once you’re released, you need to stay out of sight. You need to pretend you’re dead until Devin’s back in San Francisco.”

Alex opened the door to the seedy motel room he and his team were staying in. They could pay cash here, no questions asked, and wandering in and out at odd times of the day and night wasn’t questioned either.

He smiled to himself. Oscar was dead. One more person to attend to in just a few more weeks and then Anna would be safe. He sighed in relief as he put his bag down and walked farther into the room.

“Where’s Sebastian?” he asked, looking around. Sebastian was supposed to stay here with Greg. Seth and Tony had returned from their secondary lookout points. Greg was here, but no Sebastian.

Greg gave him a look that brought chills to his body. “He left suddenly yesterday afternoon. Just disappeared.”

Alex dug in his bag for his phone and impatiently waited as it powered on. Damn smartphones took forever to start up. There were no new messages so he called Anna. She would be in rehearsal and likely wouldn’t pick up.

“Pack up, we’re leaving ASAP,” he said to his men as Anna’s phone rang. It went to voicemail. “Anna, *Schatzi*. Please call me as soon as you get this. I will be home in less than two hours. Please. Call me.” He couldn’t hide the panic in his voice.

They were packed and on their way to the airport within twenty minutes. Alex called every person he could think of. Unfortunately, they were all in rehearsals. *Simon!*

He punched his phone a little harder than he should have, but sighed in relief when Simon answered. “Simon! Have you...have you heard anything about Anna?”

“No.... Should I have?”

“Sebastian left suddenly yesterday and hasn’t returned. Everyone is in rehearsals and no one is picking up. I don’t know if Anna is all right.”

“Do you want me to go over to the theater?”

Alex thought for a moment. He wanted to see for himself that Anna was all right. “Do you have time?”

“I can make time.”

“Call your father first. See if he has heard anything. He’s in the country, right?”

“Yes. He arrived yesterday.”

“Call and let me know what you find out.”

“Will do.”

Alex laid his phone on his knee and closed his eyes. Anna had to be all right. She just had to be.

Anna stared at Devin from across the room as he talked and joked with Tom, Tommy and Tyler. Somehow knowing that Tom and Tommy were on her side was comforting, even though they couldn’t even give a hint that they were. Devin and Tyler both had been merciless to her last night. If Devin had brought his syringe, he would have used it on her, but thankfully he hadn’t.

As it was, she had bruises on her torso and hips, but nothing that would be seen at the funeral or Gathering on Sunday. She would not be participating as an Elder-Mistress at the Gathering, which was fine with her. She had no desire to spend time with those women. Especially Irina.

She had flown with the three men to Boston this morning. Devin had looked a little shaken when the news was sent out that Oscar had been killed. Anna carefully kept her expression guarded. Devin couldn't suspect she knew anything about what was going on.

So far, she'd managed to keep her spirits up. She constantly twisted the wedding ring on her right hand, thankful for once that Devin made her wear it all these years. Now it didn't cause pain, but assured her that Alex wasn't far away and that he would rescue her. He was probably still in town and would be busting through the door any minute.

He had to be. She didn't know how long she would survive with Devin once he got her back in San Francisco.

Alex ran through the back door of the theater, not acknowledging the guard, but walking as quickly as he could to the stage. Simon had called him back a little while ago, telling him that his father hadn't heard anything. The drive from the airport had been torture and he'd gone straight to the theater.

He burst onto the stage and looked around, desperately searching the faces for his beloved wife. She wasn't there. The music had stopped and everyone turned and looked at him. The sadness in their eyes did nothing for the knot in his stomach.

His eyes met Hugo's. "Anna?" he whispered, walking towards the dancer.

Hugo swallowed and his eyes filled with grief. “She’s...Aaron said that that man, Devin, was here.”

Alex’s jaw trembled and the rest of him followed. He stared into the brown eyes of the man who loved Anna almost as much as he did. “This isn’t some sick idea of a joke?” he whispered in German. He couldn’t think straight.

Hugo’s brow twitched as he shook his head.

Alex looked around. “Where’s Aaron?”

“I heard he was in the hospital. He got beat up pretty bad.”

Alex’s grief doubled. “Where?”

Hugo gave him the name of the hospital and Alex thanked him and shakily turned and walked off the stage.

Alex couldn’t call any of the Elders to find out what was going on. Not with the possibility that Devin could be near anyone he would call. He had to wait to be called. In the meantime, he went to the hospital and visited Aaron.

Cameron was sitting next to Aaron’s bed, holding his hand when Alex walked in. Cameron’s face was full of worry.

“Alex!” he exclaimed. “Oh, thank God!” The smaller man rushed over and hugged him around the waist.

Alex looked down at him for a moment before hugging him back. It was obvious how much Cameron cared for Aaron. He couldn’t begrudge the guy some affection.

“What happened?” Alex asked, walking over to Aaron. His face was covered in bruises and he had a tube coming out of his mouth. He looked to be sleeping.

“I don’t know exactly. He was conscious when he arrived, but has been sleeping since. He’s got some pretty bad internal injuries.” Cameron sat back down and took Aaron’s hand. “Tom Pendleton brought him in.”

Alex sensed his men entering the room and they stopped and stared at Aaron. Cameron looked up with wide eyes. Alex realized they probably looked rather intimidating. They hadn’t stopped to shower and were in their black outfits still. Shit. He hoped he hadn’t tipped anyone off at the theater as to what he had been doing.

“You have my number?” he asked Cameron.

Cameron shook his head. Alex grabbed a piece of paper from the table next to Aaron and scribbled his number on it. “Call me the moment he’s awake. I have to go find out what’s going on.”

Cameron nodded, tears in his eyes.

Alex and his men cursed as they saw the mess in the condo.

“What would do this?” Seth asked, crouching down and looking at the damaged wall of his room. “It’s not an explosion.”

Alex looked around. Seth was right. There were no signs of fire or anything that would normally accompany a scene like this.

Alex blew out a breath when he saw dance bags in the far corner. He walked over and realized with sadness that they were Aaron and Anna’s bags. Why had they come into this room? Anna’s phone showed his missed calls, as did Aaron’s. He looked through their call history and saw an unknown number from Thursday afternoon on Aaron’s phone. He tossed it to Greg. “See if you can find out who called Aaron.”

Greg nodded and walked away. Alex looked around and saw a slash in the wall and on the bed. “Fire?” he muttered to himself.

If Anna had been here and Sebastian had disappeared, the logical conclusion was that Sebastian had come here to protect her. But why would Sebastian have left? He wouldn't have left Anna unprotected unless there had been another threat besides Devin. Who could that have been?

He would have to wait until Aaron woke up.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

Anna watched nervously as Devin greeted the American Elders and their sons that evening. With three Elders recently assassinated, there were three new men she hadn't met. Chad Diaz was Connor's second oldest son. Jonathan Reece was Marcus' second oldest son, though he had an older sister between him and Joel. Anna could tell who Noah, Oscar's younger son, was the moment he walked in: his eyes were wide with nervousness and filled with grief.

Brandon was the first newly arrived Elder to spot Anna sitting in the corner. He was clearly surprised and stumbled slightly, causing his son, Ethan, to run into him. Ethan had apparently just received his piercings at the last Gathering.

Brandon recovered quickly and smiled smugly at Devin. "You found her?" Brandon had helped in her escape.

Devin motioned for Anna to come to him and she quickly crossed the room and stood next to Devin with her head down. "Yes, she hid in Paris for a while and then returned to New York." Devin stroked her hair and then pulled it, bringing her head up. "A pleasant treat for the evening, I think?"

Brandon stroked her cheek. "I would have to agree."

Anna gave him a small smile.

Devin had the American leaders in his room for dinner, and so he could get to know Noah. Anna wondered if the new Elders were as cruel as their fathers and brothers.

Alex walked into Aaron's hospital room for the second time that day. Cameron had finally called him after dinner and Alex and his men had rushed over to see him.

Aaron gave him a weak smile as he walked in and Alex's heart squeezed to see the pain in his friend's eyes. He was relieved to see the tube had been removed from his mouth. "Aaron," he said in a soft voice. Cameron moved so that Alex could sit down. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, been better," came Aaron's raspy voice. "You?"

Alex pressed his lips together. "I'm so sorry, Aaron," he said after the lump in his throat subsided a bit. "Who did this?"

"Devin. Had no idea that guy was so strong."

Alex's jaw clenched and he heard the guys behind him mumbling. "Why?"

"He thinks I had something to do with Anna's disappearance. Wasn't wrong. Tom saved my life, but Devin got away with Anna. There wasn't anything else to do."

"Had you seen Sebastian?"

Aaron nodded. "Kelsey called me and told me to take Anna to the condo. Sebastian showed up a few minutes later. Then some big guy appeared and Anna seemed to know who he was. She screamed when he showed up. He and Sebastian started fighting with these fire swords that appeared in their hands." He glanced behind Alex. "They blasted out your wall, Seth."

The destroyed wall made more sense now. But who was the other Immortal? If Anna knew him.... Kaveh maybe? It was the only thing that made sense.

"There was a bunch of crashing and stuff in the hallway and then nothing. They'd disappeared."

So why hadn't Sebastian returned? He really could use Seb's help right now. Alex took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. What a mess. He couldn't have not gone to Boston though. There wasn't another choice. But was there something that he could have done to prevent all this? Oh, his poor Anna. He wished he could call Vati and make sure she was all right. But had he even seen her?

Aaron told him about Devin's appearance and how Devin laid into him. "She told me to tell you she loved you before he came."

Alex blinked back the tears that burned his eyes. He felt so helpless. There was nothing he could do right now. He couldn't go back up to Boston until he knew what was going on, and he needed to talk to his father to find that out. Or Tom, or Vlad. Someone! Why hadn't someone called him?

Alex squeezed Aaron's hand gently. "Thank you for doing what you could."

"I hardly did anything. Oh, her wedding rings are under the couch in the living room. I thought if Devin saw them, he might suspect you're around."

"Good thinking, Aaron." Grief filled him as he looked into his best friend's bruised face. He was hurt because of him. "I will make him pay for this, Aaron. I promise."

Aaron was starting to fade. "I know. Hope I get to watch."

"If it is humanly possible, I will make sure you're there." He watched as Aaron closed his eyes to sleep, and sighed in sorrow.

Wilhelm was sitting in his hotel room with Kurt, eating dinner when they heard a knock on the door. He was surprised to see Edwin standing there. "You have a moment?" he asked.

Wilhelm nodded and stepped back, allowing the Bavarian Elder to enter. Once the door was closed, Edwin made a motion with his hands, making Wilhelm assume he was putting a shield over the room. That brought his blood pressure a bit higher than it had been.

“I received a call from Simon a few minutes ago. Have you heard from Alex?”

Wilhelm shook his head.

“Anna’s been taken. By Devin.”

Kurt gasped from across the room and Wilhelm grabbed hold of the wall. “Oh, God. Is she all right?”

“There’s no way to know until tomorrow. We can’t go barging into Devin’s room. How would we explain that we knew?”

Wilhelm stumbled over to the couch and sat down heavily. Kurt’s face was pale and Wilhelm was certain his was the same.

Edwin sat down across from him. “Is there anyone you can call to find out?”

Wilhelm shook his head. “If I call Tom, Devin would know.”

Edwin looked thoughtful. “What about the Elder with the son that helped? Brandon?”

“I can’t call him.”

“No, but you could call his son.”

Wilhelm gave Edwin a grateful smile. He was thankful to have a level-headed friend at this moment. He certainly wasn’t thinking straight. “I should find out if Anna’s all right before I call Alex. Does he know?”

Edwin nodded. “He called Simon this morning. I had my phone off all day without realizing it and missed his calls. My wife was not happy with me either.”

Wilhelm gave him a small smile as he searched his phone for Travis' number.

"Hello? Wilhelm?" Travis' voice was filled with concern.

"Travis, Devin found Anna. Can you call your father and find out if he knows anything about it?"

"Oh, no. How did...never mind. I'll call you back as soon as I talk to him."

Wilhelm leaned back and closed his eyes. This meant that Anna was very close to him; in the very same hotel. But he couldn't go to see her. He doubted that Devin would let her out of his sight over the weekend. If he could get her away from him...but, no. It would do more harm than good. They had to protect the knowledge that Alex had escaped at all costs.

Devin wouldn't kill Anna...though that was a small comfort, knowing how Devin was. The thought that Devin would likely torture her brought tears to his eyes. Could he have prevented this? He should have gone into New York while Alex was gone. He could have put some protections over her. Or taken her out of the city, or....

"What will you do?" Edwin asked. He knew of their plans, but didn't participate in the actual planning.

Wilhelm shook his head. "I don't know. We can't do anything until the funeral is over. Devin would notice if we were talking. He likely blames me for her disappearance. I hope we can accelerate the plans, though. Instead of waiting the month. Alex will be unable to wait that long, but he will wait for instructions."

Edwin nodded. "You have a good son." He glanced at Kurt, who had walked outside to the balcony. "You have two good sons."

"Thank you. I am very proud of them both." How long would it take for Travis to get in touch with his father? The wait would surely kill him.

“Don’t leave marks on her,” Devin called as the new, younger Elders took Anna to the side of the room. “She needs to look healthy Sunday.”

Anna screeched as Noah plowed into her ass and took hold of her hair. Serves her right. She would likely look back on tonight with fondness once he got her home to San Francisco. It was good to see the new Elders took after their fathers.

Another scream from Anna brought a smile to Devin’s face as he chatted with his friends. Though the thought came unbidden as to whose funeral would be next. He shook his head to push the thought away. He didn’t need to be thinking about that. He needed to keep his head clear and get Anna back under control. Then he could work on getting everything else under control.

The most concerning thing was that Kaveh was nowhere to be found. The other American Immortal that he had semi-regular contact with, Val, was not as loyal to Devin as he would like. He wasn’t as interested in Anna as Kaveh was, which made it difficult to manipulate him, as much as a human could manipulate an Immortal. Kaveh had been with Devin from the beginning, and had influenced Val and the other Immortals into helping him. With Kaveh gone...would Val step in and rape Anna so that Devin could have their essence?

Brandon’s phone rang, bringing Devin out of his thoughts. The LA Elder smiled. “Travis.” He stood and walked out to the balcony.

Devin rolled his eyes. He didn’t understand why an Elder would be so interested in a bastard son. But Brandon was soft. He hoped Ethan wasn’t, though it didn’t look hopeful. Tommy and Ethan were sitting on the other side of the room from where Anna was being hurt. Tommy winced every

time Anna screamed. He'd always had a soft spot for Anna. Probably always would. *Weakling.*

Alex paced the length of his terrace. It was the longest straight path in his condo, and there was no damage to make him wince every time he looked at it. *Poor Anna, poor Aaron. Poor Anna, poor Aaron.* His heart ached like it was torn in half for his beloved wife and best friend. He felt impotent in the face of this waiting, but any other course would mean disaster.

If he went after Devin now, he risked the ultimate punishment for going after an Elder without permission. His claims, his confrontation with Devin would be invalidated because of his rogue status. The world Elders would question everything he'd done if he went out on his own. To save Anna in the long run, he had to stay away from her now.

It was killing him.

His phone rang and Alex ran across the terrace to answer his father's ringtone.

"Vati! Anna's been taken!"

"I know, Alex. I know."

Alex fell to his knees and began to weep. "I've failed her, Vati. I let her get taken." The grief was so excruciating, he wanted to stab his own heart to dull the pain.

"Alex, it's not your fault. You were doing what you needed to get done. Devin shouldn't have been able to sense her as strongly as he did." He paused. "I spoke with Travis a few minutes ago."

"Travis?" Why would...? "His father?"

"Yes. Brandon was in Devin's suite with her. She's...doing all right."

“What does that mean?”

“She’s strong, Alex. You know this.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“Devin’s not going to damage her too severely for the time being, but we both know it's only a matter of time.”

Alex's fingers tore at his chest, wishing he could rip his heart out. “Can’t you do something, Vati? Can’t you take her away from him?”

“I can try, Alex, but I am unlikely to succeed. She ran away from Devin. Devin has the right to punish her.”

Alex threw his head back and screamed in helpless rage, the sound echoing off the neighboring buildings. Dogs barked in response. The echoes had scarcely died away before he spoke again.

“You can’t...you can’t let him do that, Vati.”

“I will try and prevent him from taking her, but I will be contested. Like it or not, she is a slave. Devin’s slave. As much as the others find it distasteful, they won’t contest his right to punish her.”

“Then let me confront him now. Let me come up and—”

“You must get rid of Tyler first. Otherwise Anna’s ownership passes to him and you will be no better off than you are now.”

“Then give me the order,” he growled.

“You know I can’t, Alex. I can't change the plans without the consensus of Vlad and Tom. We will talk as soon as we are able, but I cannot give you the order without their consent.”

“He attacked Aaron, Vati,” Alex said in a low voice. “Aaron’s in the hospital with massive injuries because Devin attacked him.”

Wilhelm was quiet. “I *can* do something about that. It’s not much, but it is something. He attacked someone who belongs to me.”

“Anna belongs to you.”

“It’s different, and you know it.” He paused. “Kaveh has disappeared, at least that’s what Devin believes.”

“Kaveh disappeared?” Maybe that’s where Sebastian went. Without Kaveh, Devin likely couldn’t get his powers back. “Would Sebastian be able to take Kaveh out of the picture and keep him in the...Immortal place?”

“It’s possible. Why?”

“Sebastian was here, battling with someone whom I suspect was Kaveh. According to Aaron, they just disappeared.”

“If that’s what happened, I will be eternally thankful to Sebastian.”

“It’s the only explanation as to where he is.” Alex told Wilhelm everything he had learned from Aaron.

“If that’s true, Sebastian will return with Kaveh when you confront Devin.” Wilhelm sighed. “Son, rest. Make tentative plans for an earlier attack on Tyler. Keep calm. Anna will survive. She’s a strong woman. You will have your revenge.”

Anna could hardly move when she awoke. After the young Elders and Tyler had their way with her, Devin made her please the other Elders, and then he had taken her to bed and consumed her until she couldn’t move. It terrified Anna to think of Devin becoming powerful again.

Should she have run, tried to escape? Maybe if she hadn’t gone to the condo, maybe she wouldn’t be here. It was Kelsey who had told them to go. Was Tom really as loyal as he claimed? Maybe it was a trick to get her back to Devin.

She heard voices outside the door and then the door opened.

“See, there she is.” It was Devin, but she couldn’t see who he was talking to.

“I’m impressed, Devin,” said a male voice with a thick accent. Russian, maybe? Vlad? “I’m glad you were able to find her.”

“When she’s able to move, you’re more than welcome to her.”

“Bah, she’s not my type. I prefer my Irina. Peter may be interested. He did have a soft spot for her.”

“Do you trust him?”

“He is my heir. Of course I do.”

“He fell in love with her.”

“What did you expect? You made them live together. He realizes how foolish he was...that he was under her spell. But he did say she was a good fuck. I will let him know.”

Tears burned Anna’s eyes. Peter thought that of her?

Devin came into her view. “How are you feeling, Baby?” he asked with a sickening smirk on his face. He caressed her face. “I can’t wait to get you home in a few days. We are going to have lots of fun.” He grinned back toward the door, and he and Vlad both laughed.

With effort, Anna turned onto her side, away from Devin. He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back onto her back. “Don’t you dare turn away from me, bitch.” He slapped her face, but all she could do was look up at him. “We need to find you some clothes this afternoon. Rest well. The next few days will be busy.”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

By dinnertime, Anna was able to get up and move normally, except for being tired and sore. Devin had the concierge bring clothes up to her since she hadn't been able to get up and go shopping.

Vlad and Peter came to eat dinner with Devin and Tyler. She carefully kept her head down, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Peter greeted her warmly, to which Vlad snapped at him in Russian and he stepped away with an apologetic look on his face. Why was Vlad being so mean? Had he changed his mind about helping her? If he had, she would be stuck with Devin forever.

Devin made Anna give Peter a blowjob after dinner, since Vlad didn't particularly care for her. She knelt between Peter's feet and, with shaking hands, released his cock from his pants.

"Suck it, Anna," Peter growled, bringing tears to her eyes. She sat up on her knees and took him into her mouth, sucking on the cock she'd been so fond of not so long ago. He put his hand on her head as if to control her movements, but he really just followed her movements. She was confused.

When Vlad and Devin were deep in conversation about the American Elders, and Tyler had left the room, Peter leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Anna, everything will be all right. Forgive us for our actions. We must keep Devin from suspecting us."

Anna nodded as best she could with his cock in her mouth, but her enthusiasm for the blowjob increased after that.

Wilhelm and Kurt arrived at the cathedral Sunday morning and immediately began to search surreptitiously for Devin, and more importantly, for Anna. What he had learned from Brandon had relieved some of his fears. At least temporarily. But he would feel better when he saw her. He made brief eye contact with Vlad and gave a subtle nod of greeting, wishing he could go speak to him openly and discuss their next move.

He saw the other Elder-Mistresses, cool and aloof, talking and smiling with each other and the men around them. Suddenly, they all turned, almost as one, and looked towards the street. A limo stopped, the back door opened and Devin stepped out, an arrogant look on his face. Behind him was a very pale Anna, dressed in a simple black skirt suit. She had a bruise on her cheek, but looked otherwise unharmed.

Wilhelm noticed the various expressions on the other Elder-Mistresses' faces. Most looked at her with disdain. A few had subtle, though genuine smiles on their faces, almost as if they admired her. Irina looked at her curiously, but otherwise remained impassive.

Devin's eyes met Wilhelm's and he barely contained himself as the other man smirked at him. He put his arm around Anna and walked her toward the entrance of the cathedral.

"A word, Devin?" Wilhelm said in a calm voice as Devin walked by.

"You won't be getting Anna anytime soon, Wilhelm, so don't even ask." Devin gave him a cool look.

Wilhelm saw Anna studying the ground intently. He winced at the bruise on her cheek. It was much worse up close. "You can't treat her like that, Devin."

"Why not? She's a runaway slave. She's lucky she can walk."

"She's an Elder-Mistress," Wilhelm growled.

“Who ran away from her Master.” Devin smiled. “You have no right to contest her punishment and you know it.”

Anna shuddered next to Devin, which broke Wilhelm’s heart. “Perhaps not, but I can contest how you treated one of my own.”

Devin raised his brow. “Oh?”

“You attacked Aaron and put him in the hospital.”

“He’s lucky to be alive,” Devin snapped.

“It’s not your right to attack my Brother. He belongs to me. My country.”

Edwin walked up at that moment, as well as Oswin and Jürgen, two other German Elders.

Devin’s eyes widened. “All right. All right. I apologize. But he was harboring my slave.”

“As I understand it, she was in her own home when you found her. How could he be harboring her in her own home?”

“Fine. What do you want?”

“Stay away from him from now on.” Wilhelm smiled. “And I would like a few minutes alone with Anna.” He had figured out a way he could give Anna an element of protection. It wouldn’t keep her from getting hurt, but it would keep Devin from torturing information out of her. At least to an extent.

“Absolutely not,” Devin snapped. “I will not allow you to take her out of my sight. For all I know, you helped her run away.”

He forced a lightness he was far from feeling into his tone. “How could I do that from Germany, Devin? Really!”

The other Elders chuckled, and Devin frowned. “Fine. As long as she stays where I can see her.”

“Fair enough.” He extended his hand. “*Liebling?*”

Anna looked up with hope in her eyes, and he gave her a kind smile. She glanced at Devin, who nodded begrudgingly, and walked away with him as Wilhelm hugged her to him. She began to sob and Wilhelm felt his heart squeeze in his chest.

“I’m so sorry this has happened, *Liebling*,” he said softly. “I will speak to the others as soon as I am able and we will get you away from him as soon as we can.”

She looked up at him with mournful eyes. “Will it have to wait until next month?”

Wilhelm shook his head. “I don’t think so, but I cannot make that decision on my own. Don’t give up hope. He will come for you.” Wilhelm leaned down and kissed her head. “Anna, for your protection, I am going to bury many of your memories since you went to New York, especially of Alex, all right? Devin cannot know he is in the country.” He cupped her chin and made her look up. “Do you trust me, *Liebling*?”

“Of course, Wilhelm,” she said softly. “Will they return?”

“Yes, Anna. I will release them when it is safe. I will also hide the memories of your escape so you can’t tell him who helped you.”

Anna nodded and gave him a brave smile. “Peter told me that everything would be all right last night.”

“Thank you,” he whispered. Another memory to block. He leaned down, as if to kiss her head again and began to murmur the ancient words that would protect her mind from Devin’s probing. He gave her new, temporary memories that would conceal the truth of what happened in New York with his son and her escape. They only had to last a week or so.

He hoped.

Anna felt as if she were trying to hold on to smoke. Her mind was desperately clinging to something that was rapidly disappearing. A faint memory of...something. Something good...she thought. It was gone now. She sighed, having felt that she lost something of importance, though she had no idea what.

She looked around. She was in a courtyard of a cathedral. Elders surrounding her... a funeral. Oscar and Rylan's funeral. But why was she here?

She looked up at the person who was holding her. "Wilhelm? Why am I...?" As she continued to look around her, she spotted Devin. *Devin*. He had found her. In New York. Oh, God, he found her!

Suddenly she remembered everything that had happened the last two days and her knees buckled. Wilhelm held her close. "It will be all right, *Liebling*," he whispered.

She shook her head. "He found me...he's going to punish me." Terror filled her heart. There was no hope. No hope for escape. He'd found her in New York and he would take her back to San Francisco. He would never let her out of his sight again.

Devin glared at her from across the courtyard. "He's angry," she whispered, and looked up at Wilhelm.

"Anna, it will be all right," Wilhelm said, cupping her cheek. "I promise."

"Wilhelm, can't you keep him from taking me?" she whimpered, seeing Devin walking towards them.

"Anna, you ran away from him. There is little I can do."

Anna stepped away, her face contorting as she tried to control her emotions. Her immense hurt and disappointment. "I thought you cared about me, Wilhelm," she whispered, incredulous that he would do nothing

to help her. She hadn't seen him in what seemed like forever, and he wouldn't help her? She didn't even remember the last time she'd seen him. Why were her memories so fuzzy?

"I do, *Liebling*. So much. Please trust me. Everything will be all right."

Tears filled her eyes as Devin approached and dread filled her heart. "Please Wilhelm...", she whispered. "Please don't let him take me."

Wilhelm's eyes filled with grief.

"Come, Anna," Devin said sharply.

Anna's jaw trembled as she stared at Wilhelm. Why wouldn't he do anything? Had Devin done something to him?

Devin grabbed her elbow and Wilhelm grabbed her hand.

"Devin, please...", Wilhelm said softly. "Please, let me spend some time with her. I haven't seen her in—"

Devin laughed and pulled her away, but Wilhelm held onto her hand. "What, days? Surely you helped her run away from me. She couldn't have done it on her own."

Anna was being pulled between the two men and the crowd was beginning to take note of them.

"She belongs to me just as much as you," Wilhelm snapped.

"I'm not saying I won't share her, but she must be punished for what she did," Devin snapped back.

"Gentlemen!" Neither man released Anna as the respected British Elder, Shaw Wilson, walked into the circle. "Why are two grown men fighting over a woman?"

"She ran away from me. I have a right to punish her," Devin snarled.

"She knows she did wrong, let her be," Wilhelm countered.

"Release her, both of you," Shaw commanded.

“You have no jurisdiction here, Wilson.” Devin growled, but he released Anna’s elbow and Wilhelm let her go as well.

“You are attracting the attention of outsiders, and even you should know how dangerous that is, Devin.”

“He’s trying to take my slave away from me,” Devin said in a soft, snarling voice.

“He’s going to torture her,” Wilhelm protested in an equally soft, intense voice.

Anna saw Creda, the British Mistress, standing next to Shaw and studying her. Anna gave her a pleading look. She was desperate enough to reach out to a fellow Elder-Mistress for aid in getting away from Devin, even though she knew Creda didn’t care for her.

“It’s disrespectful to call her a slave, Devin,” Shaw reprimanded.

“Whether you like it or not, it’s the truth and you know it.”

Shaw turned his gaze on Anna. “Who brought you here today, Anna?”

“D-Devin. Devin brought me.”

Shaw studied her intently. “You ran away from your Master?”

Anna’s eyes widened in fear. She had run away. She knew she had, but the memories were so fuzzy, she really only remembered arriving in New York. She finally nodded timidly.

“What is it that you want?” Shaw asked, looking back at Devin and Wilhelm.

“I want my sl— I want Anna back,” Devin snapped. “She ran away in March and I just found her a few days ago.”

“I would like time with Anna as well,” Wilhelm countered. “And I would like assurance that Anna will not be tortured within an inch of her life.”

Shaw looked around and sighed. “This needs to be discussed somewhere more private. Anna, stay with Devin, since he brought you. Those of us with Mistresses will discuss the situation after the funeral and make a decision.” He gave Devin a firm look. “Do not begin your discipline until then.”

Devin did everything he could to remain calm. How dare that British son-of-a-bitch interfere and tell him what to do! And in his own country, no less. But Devin knew he didn’t yet have the power to do anything different. Damn Anna for running away!

“I won't take the pleasure of...discipline until I return home.” He pulled Anna away from Wilhelm, almost satisfied by the old man's look of despair.

“You have embarrassed me, bitch,” Devin whispered as he pulled Anna through the crowd and toward the cathedral. “You will pay for that.” He grinned as she shuddered next to him. He had discovered some interesting new uses of the pain juice while she was gone and was looking forward to trying them on her.

For now, he just had to get her home and to do that without much fuss, he had to behave himself. He took a deep breath. He could stay in control for a few more hours. As soon as the funeral Gathering was over, he would be in his jet and heading back to San Francisco. Once he got Anna back to the Manor, he could lose control to his heart’s delight.

Wilhelm watched as Devin dragged Anna away, and then looked back at Shaw as the crowd dispersed. “You realize that if you let her go home with him, he will torture her.”

“As distasteful as it is, Wilhelm, she is his slave,” Shaw said sadly. “Yes, she is your Mistress as well as his, but his claim of ownership is stronger. No one likes it, but it is what it is. If we decide that he may take her home, we will put limits on what he may do to her, but—”

“You think he will listen?” Wilhelm spat, disgusted at the man’s naiveté. “He performed the *forbidden* ritual to make her that way, and you think he will listen if you say ‘do not hurt her too much’?” He shook his head. “Give her to me, I will make sure she is safe,” he said, desperation evident in his voice. “You have no idea the things he will do to her.”

Shaw lifted his chin. “We will discuss it later, Wilhelm, and let you know our decision. He would be foolish to ignore our decision. His powers have faded and he knows it.”

“So you’ll give her back to him so he can get them back?”

“His Immortal pawn, Kaveh, has been banished. It won’t happen.”

Wilhelm sucked in a breath. “He has?” Was it really possible?

Shaw nodded.

Despite knowing that Anna would likely be staying with Devin, Wilhelm sighed in relief. At least there was one less thing they needed to worry about.

Alex was in Aaron’s hospital room Sunday evening when his phone rang. “Vati? Is Anna all right?”

Alex looked at Aaron, who sat up at his words.

“She is...for now. I heard from Shaw Wilson that Kaveh has been banished.”

Alex sighed in relief. That was good news. “What about Anna?” His father hesitated, which made Alex tense again. “Vati?”

“The Elders who are Masters of the Mistresses met this afternoon to discuss the situation. Devin and I acted inappropriately at the funeral, and called attention to the situation.”

An unexpected smile appeared on Alex’s lips at the idea of Vati acting “inappropriately.” He couldn’t imagine what had happened.

“I pleaded with them to let me take Anna because of what Devin would do to her, but they ignored me. She will return to San Francisco with him tomorrow with the instructions that he is not to discipline her more than is appropriate.”

Alex’s blood boiled. “They really expect Devin to listen to them?”

“I protested with the same sentiment, Alex. I am to return and take her home with me in three weeks. As I told you, Alex, the Elders, as much as they detest the idea, acknowledge that she is his slave, and that he has a right to deal with her.”

Alex slumped into the chair by the window. His poor Anna. He felt his heart break at the thought of the torture that Devin would surely put her through.

“The good thing is that Devin will be returning directly to San Francisco, not stopping in New York. Tomorrow Vlad, Tom and I will be able to discuss changing your assignment.”

Alex let out a slow breath. That was good news, he supposed.

“How quickly can you be ready to go?” Wilhelm asked.

Alex had hardly been able to sleep or think or do anything except despair about Anna. “A few days. I’ve had problems concentrating.”

“I understand, son. Speak with your men and prepare. I will call you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Vati.”

Alex put his phone back in his pocket and repeated to Aaron what he had learned from his father.

“You should go, Alex,” Aaron said with a nod.

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Aaron waved his hand. “My parents are bringing me dinner. I’ll be fine. You need to go figure out how to kill Tyler.”

Anna stared out the jet window as San Francisco came into view, the familiar Bay Bridge stretched over the sparkling waters of the bay. How had she ended up back here? Why had she run away? It was all so pointless.

Three weeks. She told herself she only had to last three weeks, and then Wilhelm would come get her. Could she last that long?

She closed her eyes, remembering what felt like her sentencing.

The Elder-Mistresses looked at her with disdain as they sat at the feet of their Masters. Anna sat between Wilhelm and Devin. She tried to lean towards Wilhelm, but Devin pulled her back to the center by her hair.

“You ran away from your Master, Mistress,” Shaw said from the middle of the row. “As an Elder-Mistress and as a slave, you should have known better. Why did you do it?”

Anna had stared at him for a long moment, unable to come up with an answer, besides the obvious one of Devin’s abuse. But surely they already knew about that. If they didn’t and she brought it up, Devin would be angry. “I-I don’t know,” she whispered after a moment of silence, and hung her head.

She could feel the condemnation emanating from around the room. If word got out that slaves could run away without consequences there would

be chaos. She would surely be made an example of what happened to disobedient slaves.

“As repulsive as we find your methods, Devin, we cannot deny your right to discipline your slave,” Shaw said. “But we would remind you that she is an Elder-Mistress and should be treated accordingly.”

Tears burned Anna’s eyes at the Elder’s words.

“You may have her for three weeks, and then she will be turned over to Wilhelm. You have abused her for long enough. He will keep her for as long as he can without harm coming to her, and then he will return her for another three weeks.”

“You can’t take her away from me, she is mine,” Devin protested. “Even the Immortals acknowledge that. The simple fact that she must be returned to me proves that point.”

“You abuse her, Devin,” Wilhelm snapped. “She is a person, not a punching bag. No wonder she ran away from you.”

“Wilhelm, that’s enough,” Shaw said. “She did wrong, she will pay the price and then you will have her back.” He turned to Devin. “If you demonstrate respect befitting an Elder-Mistress, we will reconsider our decision. The Immortals are already unhappy with us. We will not risk losing our Mistresses because you cannot control yourself, Devin.”

And so she was in Devin’s jet, clinging to the armrests as the jet dropped to the runway. The Manor wasn’t far from the airport, which meant there was little time before the pain began.

“Anna, did you know that the nerve-juice can be injected directly into the clit?” Tyler asked with a nasty grin. “I understand it’s incredibly painful. More so than injecting it into your neck.”

Anna’s face paled and she looked at Devin, who nodded.

“We’ve been experimenting with the expectation of your eventual return. Wilhelm will get you back in three weeks, but you probably won’t know it until a few days later. I intend for you to be in excruciating pain the entire three weeks.”

“I can’t find him!” Alex told his father, anguish squeezing his heart. “He’s never out where I can get a shot at him.”

He had been in San Francisco for a week and had not been able to get a clear shot of Tyler. He couldn’t even find him for the first few days. Seth had finally figured out that he’d been in the Manor the entire time. When he finally emerged, he stayed in his car until he was sheltered by the garage of his apartment building. The curtains were kept drawn over the windows in his apartment. At work, he’d moved into an office whose window had no vantage point that Alex could reach.

“I’m half tempted to get a handgun and approach him on foot.”

“Alex, you can’t do that.”

Alex sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “I know, Vati.”

“Devin must be trying to keep Tyler out of the assassin’s scope.”

“Devin’s not stupid. I’m sure he’s figured out the pattern.”

“Don’t snap at me, Alex. I know you’re upset. If nothing else, when I go get Anna, we can relax a bit.”

“I can’t let her endure three weeks of torture, Vati! Every day is killing me. Seth says she isn’t even in her room. He’s keeping her in the dungeon.” Alex was dangerously close to whining, but he was getting desperate. What made the whole thing worse was that Anna had no reason to hope for things to get better until his father picked her up. Vati had wiped her memories of Alex. She still believed him dead.

“Tyler’s an arrogant man. He will expose himself soon. Don’t get upset, or you’ll miss your chance.”

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

“Mr. Andersen?”

Devin pressed the intercom button on his office phone. “Yes, Maddy?”

“The Chief of Police is here to see you.”

Devin’s heart skipped a beat at his secretary’s words. *It’s nothing*, he told himself.

It was his first day back in the office in two weeks. It had gotten to the point that Anna wasn’t any fun to torture anymore. She no longer responded to anything he did. He supposed a day away wouldn’t hurt. Besides, he had work to catch up on. He would let her sleep today and then return tonight when she had healed sufficiently to know what was going on around her again.

Every joint in her body had been dislocated. Her pussy was so swollen from electricity and beatings he couldn’t get his cock inside her anymore. Same with her ass. Her breasts were black with bruises, as well as most of the rest of her body. Devin took as much of her essence as he could and still keep her conscious, which severely limited her healing abilities. Wilhelm would have a helluva time getting her back in shape.

When he left her last night, she was manacled in the dungeon, lying in a pool of her own blood. The manacles were in case she started to rage, but Devin doubted she had the energy to do so.

Devin took a deep breath. “Send him in.”

Devin stared at the door, praying that his old friend was just here for advice or a casual conversation. He’d been keeping Tyler sheltered in case he was the next target. He could not let anything happen to his son.

The look on the police chief's face sent chills through Devin's body as he realized his greatest fear had just come to pass. He gripped the edge of his desk and began to shake, and his voice cracked when he tried to speak. "Tyler?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Andersen...." The police chief continued speaking, but Devin's ears were ringing so loudly he couldn't hear anything the man said.

Flashes of Tyler growing up flitted across his mind. The toddler literally trying to walk in his father's shoes. Winning football games, prom king with the best-looking girl in school. Graduating college with his degree. Demonstrating that his father's strength had passed to him, accepting the mantle of Elder Son and all the responsibilities that entailed.

Devin recalled the first day Tyler came to work in the office next to his. His son. His pride and the beneficiary of *everything* he'd worked for. His only son—his one weakness—was gone.

His legacy, ended.

He looked up at the Chief. "How?" Maybe it had just been a car accident. After all, today was Thursday. The other Sons had been shot on Mondays....

"I told you, sir. Two shots. One to the groin and the other straight through his head."

"Two shots?" Devin asked, shaken out of his dreamlike state. "Two?" The others had only been single shots, straight through the head. "His dick?" What the hell was that about?

"Yes sir, a pretty...impressive shot, if you think about it."

That made it sound personal. The assassin wouldn't do that on his own; the Elder who was doing this was making it personal. *Wilhelm*. But why would Wilhelm take out the other Elders? No, that didn't make sense. Who the hell was behind all this?

“Sir? I need you to come down to the morgue to identify the body.”

Devin stared at his desk, his teeth clenched together to stop them from chattering.

He was next. Mortality was staring him in the face. He thought he had done enough to prevent this—he'd been so careful, made Tyler be so careful—but it hadn't made a damn bit of difference.

For the first time, he had to acknowledge that he was afraid.

Alex watched through binoculars from the rooftop across the street with satisfaction as Devin was told about Tyler's death. The gray face, the shaking and sweating; yes, he enjoyed seeing Devin in anguish. The only thing that would be more satisfying was the look on Devin's face when Alex walked into Devin's Manor next week, showing himself alive to the world Elders and putting the blame at Devin's feet.

Devin's world was crumbling at his feet, and Alex savored every moment.

Anna heard the door open and forced her swollen eyes open. She was lying on the floor in the cold dungeon. Everything in her body hurt and she couldn't move, even if she wanted to.

Devin walked over and stared down at her. She tried to brace herself for a blow, but he didn't move.

He was pale. No, his face was gray, his eyes wide with...terror? Anna had never seen him afraid, much less terrified, but she couldn't ask him what was wrong. Her jaw wouldn't move.

“Tyler is dead,” he whispered and fell to his knees in front of her.

Anna looked up at him, unblinking. How should she react to the news that Tyler was gone? She certainly wasn't sad. He had proven himself an adept torturer these last two weeks.

But the other Elders died a few days after their Sons did. Did that mean Devin would be dead soon? Hope lit in her heart and Devin narrowed his eyes.

"You're hoping I'm next, aren't you?" he growled.

Yes! Yes, I hope you're next! She screamed in her head, almost wishing he could hear.

"I won't let that happen," he said in a low voice, as though her unspoken defiance gave him the strength he'd been looking for. "I will not let my family line die. My family brought the Brotherhood to this country and I will not let the line die with me. You will give me a son."

Anna's eyes widened. The thought of having Devin's son revolted her.

"I will regain my powers and you will help me." He stood and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Devin watched with satisfaction as Val healed Anna's body and then raped her. Val wasn't as powerful as Kaveh, but with Kaveh missing, Val had gladly accepted the opportunity to rape Anna for Devin. Anna screamed as Val plundered her pussy, drilling deep so he could plant his essence in her for Devin to partake of.

He could almost taste the sweet nectar. Tomorrow morning was his son's funeral. He had to gain some sort of control to be able to dodge the bullet, both literally and figuratively.

Tyler. He regretted his son's death. Devin could imagine all sorts of reasons why someone would want to kill him, but why his son? What had

Tyler done? What had any of the Sons done to warrant an assassination?

He could feel himself giving in to despair and shook himself. He couldn't lose it. He had to maintain control or he would be shot tomorrow. Get through the funeral. Get through the Gathering, and then impregnate Anna before she left to go with Wilhelm.

Wouldn't that just kill Wilhelm? He laughed, imagining the look on Wilhelm's face when he found out. And the German, being the honorable man, wouldn't do anything about it.

Devin took Anna home with him that night. Val raped her once more, giving Devin a second dose of essence. Val was confident that Devin would know when the bullet was coming with the double dose. Anna wasn't feeling well, but then again, she wasn't supposed to be feeling well. She was supposed to be hurting from punishments.

Most of her bruises were gone, though she had received some new ones earlier in the day. Devin was trying to control his feelings about the loss of his son. It wasn't working very well and Anna bore the brunt of it. Devin really didn't care if the other Elders didn't like the bruises on her face. They knew she was being punished. She could walk and talk now. It was better than she looked a few days ago.

Wilhelm sucked in a deep breath when he saw Anna at Devin's side. Beside him, Kurt cursed, and Wilhelm grabbed his arm to keep his son from going to her. He understood Kurt's desire, however. Anna looked terrible.

She was very pale and her dark hair was dull and pulled back into a low ponytail. She wore the same black suit as she'd worn at Oscar's funeral, but

it seemed almost big on her. Had she eaten at all since she'd been here? Even more disturbing were the bruises on her cheeks. Devin was not hiding what he'd been doing to her. She walked with her head down, limping slightly.

When he looked at Devin, his heart dropped into his stomach. Devin had obviously been partaking of Anna; he was radiating power again, though not as much as he had before. Wilhelm was pleased, however, to see his eyes darting around, as if expecting to feel a bullet at any moment. He saw several Elders looking very alert as well. Only a handful of people in this area knew that there was no bullet forthcoming.

Devin greeted people somberly and elbowed Anna when she didn't do likewise. Her green eyes were dull and lifeless and it hurt to look at them.

Wilhelm could only imagine what was going through Alex's mind as he watched from his perch across the street. He could almost feel his son's anger. Or maybe it was just his own anger Wilhelm was feeling. This evening could not come soon enough.

Shaw Wilson was watching Devin and Anna with wide eyes. Wilhelm walked over to him. "Do you regret your decision now, Shaw?" he asked quietly. "He probably cleaned her up to make her presentable."

Shaw looked at him, horror evident in his face. "How can he treat her like that?"

"I told you he would ignore you."

Anna looked up at that moment and met Wilhelm's eyes. They were begging for help and Wilhelm found himself walking to her, even though he knew he could do nothing.

Devin glared at him as he approached. "Come to try and steal her away?"

Wilhelm shook his head in bewilderment. “How can you do this to her, Devin? Have you no heart?”

Devin pressed his lips together but said nothing.

Wilhelm reached out for Anna, but she stepped away and looked at Devin fearfully.

Devin smiled grimly. “I still have her for a few more days, Wilhelm. You will not touch her until then.” He grabbed Anna’s arm, making her wince, and dragged her away. She didn’t look back.

Devin sat on his chair in the Great Hall with Anna trembling and naked at his feet. He had listened to his friends speak fondly of Tyler, had spoken himself, briefly. He had allowed tears to gather in his eyes to show his attachment to his son, but they had threatened to choke him, and he stopped short. He could not show that kind of weakness in front of these men.

Now, watching as Tyler’s white robe was brought to the brazier near the edge of the platform, he held himself utterly still. Burning Tyler’s robe made his death seem all the more real. Devin’s eyes darted around the room—anything to hold back the reality of the moment.

A movement at the back of the room caught his attention and he saw Wilhelm, Vlad and Tom standing shoulder to shoulder, their faces impassive. Tommy stood nearby, next to Peter and Kurt.

What was going on? Why were *those* Elders standing together? They had nothing in common with each other.

He was momentarily distracted as Tyler’s robe was placed on the brazier, the smoke as the flames caught briefly blocking his view of the men. Grief threatened to overwhelm him again, but he would not cry. He

would not show weakness. He kept his face stoic and stared at the flames that represented the death of his son.

When the flames died down, he stood to speak once more, but the doors in the back of the room were thrown wide, sending them crashing against the walls, and Devin froze. He stared as a giant of a man in a hooded white robe walked slowly down the center aisle, followed by four equally immense men in black robes. He only knew one person who would be that tall and broad, but he was supposed to be thousands of miles away in Russia. He glanced over at Vlad and Wilhelm, standing with expectant looks on their faces. In a moment of clarity he understood everything, and he looked around for an easy exit.

Alex looked at his men before taking a deep breath. This was it. The moment he'd been waiting for. This was the moment Devin's world would come crashing down around him.

"Ready?"

"You sure I can't use a meat grinder on his cock?" Seth asked with a devilish grin.

Alex chuckled. "As tempting as it is, it would be a bit messy."

The others laughed softly, defusing the tension.

He took another deep breath, pulled the hood over his head to hide his face, and pushed the doors open with a dramatic flair. Might as well make sure everyone saw his entrance.

He stepped through the doors and walked slowly towards the platform where Devin stood, frozen with his hands lifted halfway over his head. Anna huddled next to Devin's chair, bruises looking much worse than they had this morning. She didn't look up as he approached. Alex stopped a few

feet from the edge of the platform and looked up. He could tell when Devin could see part of his face because he went grayer than he already was.

He lowered his hands slowly and lifted his chin. “What do you want?” His low voice failed to convey the bluster he'd surely been trying for, and he visibly swallowed, looking behind Alex at the black-robed men.

Alex flashed a wicked grin before lowering his hood. “I want you.” He pointed to the floor at his feet. “On your knees.”

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Chapter Sixty

Anna heard the murmurs spread across the room but didn't dare look up. Devin had warned her that the slightest hint of disobedience and he would make sure she wouldn't be able to move for the next week.

But a warmth began to spread into her body as the murmuring got louder. She heard Devin say something, though she couldn't understand his words. Then a voice spoke. The voice from her dreams. Was she sleeping?

It couldn't be, could it? She was afraid to look up. It was probably just Wilhelm. Thoughts of Alex had plagued her since she'd woken this morning and it had to be just her imagination.

But then she heard a name being spoken around the room. *Alex*.

"Did you like the way your son died, Devin? I did it especially for you."

Anna gasped and looked up. "Alex!" she cried and scrambled to her feet, ready to run to him.

"Stop!" Devin commanded and she froze, nearly falling over.

"You *dare* forbid *my wife* from coming to me?" Alex asked, his tone scathing. A few voices in the room called out in anger.

"You are supposed to be dead," Devin spat.

"You would like that, wouldn't you? It would have been a lot easier if I was dead, but you couldn't kill me without destroying Anna, so you just had me ambushed and taken out of the equation."

The murmurs around the room rose to an alarming volume and Anna saw Wilhelm, Vlad, Peter, Kurt, Tom and Tommy walking towards the front of the room.

"That is absurd! You can't prove that. How could I do such a thing?"

“You had my father help you,” Vlad said, his voice carrying throughout the room. “Even I was enlisted to help, manipulated into thinking Alex was a threat.”

“You betray me?” Devin snarled.

“I consider it correcting a grievous wrong, Devin,” Vlad answered.

“Tom?” Devin said, clearly shaken at the thought that his friend would take sides against him.

“You’re destroying our country, Devin. I can’t allow that to happen.”

“Tell Anna, Devin,” Alex said in a low growl. “Tell everyone how you had me captured and held in St. Petersburg, while you used my wife to further your plans.”

Alex continued speaking, but Anna could only stare at him, heart reaching for him. Alex glanced at her and gave her such a loving look she started to cry.

As the words sank in, she slowly turned to look at Devin.

Devin had taken her beloved Alex from her, and tortured her and used her and—

Anna’s jaw clenched and her vision was blinded by a white light of rage. She balled her hands into fists and screamed in primal fury.

Alex flinched at the scream that came out of Anna’s mouth. The entire room froze and every eye turned to her. She was trembling as she had the night she’d almost raged in front of him. Her pupils were disappearing and her eyes began to glow as she turned towards Devin.

Devin turned to look at her and his eyes widened in terror. “Fuck,” he whispered and began to back away from her. She walked forward as he

walked backwards and he shrieked as he tripped over his robe and fell on his ass.

Alex bit back a smile at Devin's girlish scream. He knew he couldn't let Anna kill him, but he was truly enjoying Devin's terror.

"Help me," Devin whispered, looking at Alex with wide eyes. "Please. She'll kill me."

"I will show you as much mercy as you've shown her."

Alex actually saw tears in Devin's eyes as Anna stalked over and stood above him. And then he shook his head.

"Anna, stop!" Devin commanded, but she ignored him and a wicked smile formed on her face. She knelt down next to him and looked to be about to stroke his hair back, but instead she rested her hand on his forehead and closed her eyes.

Devin began to scream. His arms and legs shook like gelatin.

"Noooooooo!" he screeched and arched his back as if in terrible pain. Anna removed her hand and stared unblinking at him, a faint smile on her face. Devin continued to shriek and thrash about.

"You must stop her, Alex."

Alex turned around to see Sebastian standing behind him. "She will kill him, and you can't allow that to happen. Killing him will break her."

Alex frowned, but he knew Sebastian was right.

After Devin let out a particularly blood-curdling scream, Alex straightened and walked over to Anna.

"Anna," he said in a firm tone.

She ignored him.

"Anna, release him."

She ignored him and he took a deep breath.

“An-na!” he shouted, his voice echoing off the walls and ceiling of the room.

She looked up at him and narrowed her creepy emerald eyes.

“Release him.”

Her eyes narrowed further.

“Now!” he barked.

She growled, but Devin stopped thrashing and was still except for his heaving chest.

“Thank you,” he said softly, with a smile.

He stepped up onto the platform and she narrowed her eyes further and growled again. “Anna. Sit.”

He pointed to the floor with a firm look in his eye and stared her down. She shook her head, trying to break eye contact, but couldn’t. “Sit,” he commanded again, intensifying his stare. She fell to one knee, looking up at him, eyes narrowed.

He continued staring at her, but neither backed down nor blinked. Suddenly she lunged at him and he caught her wrists, holding them firmly. Damn, she was strong. He held her wrists, arm muscles straining to keep her hands and fingernails at a distance. She bared her teeth at him and growled.

His eyes narrowed and looked at her disapprovingly. “You are being disobedient,” he said slowly and firmly. “This behavior is unacceptable. You do not attack your Master. Now, sit.” He kept his voice even and firm, not breaking eye contact. She growled again and narrowed her eyes, and he realized he needed to change tactics. Bullying her is what caused her to rage in the first place. What she needed now was love.

“Anna, love,” he said, turning her swiftly so she was enveloped in his arms, his hands still locked around her wrists. She strained against him, but

could not break free. “*Schatzi*,” he whispered into her ear. “Come back to me, my treasure. Remember what you are to me. Remember how much I love you.”

He felt her body change, her breathing beginning to even out. He was risking it all, he knew, when he released her hands, turning her so she could see the love in his eyes. Alex opened his heart to her, willing her to feel his love.

To his relief and surprise, she stepped back, then sat down on her heels, hands on her thighs, head down in a submissive pose.

Alex stood above Anna until her body began to relax, then he knelt down and lifted her head to see her eyes. They were still angry, but her pupils were beginning to show again. He sat down on the floor next to her and pulled her into his lap. He rocked her gently and stroked her hair as he spoke softly to her in German. She had always seemed to respond to his native language before, and this time was no different. Her body sagged in his arms a few minutes later and was totally relaxed shortly thereafter. He looked down and saw that she was asleep.

Alex looked around and spotted his brother nearby. “Kurt, would you please hold her?”

Kurt nodded and rushed over. “She’s not going to attack me, is she?”

Alex smiled. “No. She’ll likely stay asleep until morning.”

Kurt took her into his arms and carried her to the far side of the platform, cradling her close and kissing her temple. Alex watched his little brother love on her for a moment and then turned to Devin.

“I didn’t do that for you,” he said, pulling the man roughly to his feet

Devin looked at him with glazed eyes and Alex looked back at Anna. What had she done to him?

“Give him to me,” Sebastian said. “You do what you need to do.”

Alex released him into the Immortal's arms and went to stand in front of the staring men and the few Elder-Mistresses in the room. "I am Alexander Kunze Herzog von Hesse, son of Wilhelm Kunze Herzog von Hesse, Elder of Hesse and Thuringia. The beautiful woman my brother is holding is my precious wife, Anna Kunze Herzogin von Hesse, daughter of Trevor and Anya Perkins. I am also a Brotherhood assassin. My team is known as the Black Eagles."

Another murmur swept the room. Not many assassins identified themselves publicly and as far as he knew, he was the only Elder-Son that was also an assassin.

Wilhelm watched proudly as his son addressed the crowd with dignity and confidence. By giving his team's name he was making himself vulnerable, but also letting every person in this room know that they were looking at the best Brotherhood Assassin of the present age. There wasn't any other way to explain everything.

"My wife's father is an Immortal, but she was not born to be an Elder-Mistress. She was born of love between her parents, and Trevor had no intention of her knowing anything except what would be considered a normal, loving home."

Devin, apparently revived by Sebastian, struggled to stand, but Sebastian held him down on the floor.

"When Anna was born, Devin used an ancient method to claim her for his own with the help of Anna's guardian, Jack Koslov, who was killed earlier this year." Alex looked at Devin. "By Anna when she was provoked into one of her rages by his attempt to rape her."

Devin's eyes widened, and then he looked at Tom, who raised a condescending eyebrow at his former friend. Wilhelm knew Tom had told Devin that Jack died at the hands of the mafia.

"Trevor became suspicious of Devin, but before he could do anything, Devin caused a car accident, killing Anya and sending Trevor away. Anna came into the custody of her guardian, who molested her until her sixteenth birthday."

Murmurs were beginning to sound around the room, and none of them sounded in favor of Devin.

"Trevor, in a desperate act, contacted my father and asked him to help. My father told me about it, but in my foolishness, I acted against my father's wishes and missed the opportunity to save Anna." Wilhelm saw Alex's cheeks redden slightly before he turned to look lovingly at Anna, sleeping in Kurt's arms. Someone had gotten her a blanket and she was snuggled against Kurt's chest.

Alex's voice cracked slightly as he continued. "Devin took Anna as his own on her sixteenth birthday, and she was then raised by her guardian in an unbelievably abusive home. Jack was a special trainer of Devin's, who trained his Red Girls. He trained Anna in a similar, though far more brutal, manner than our Red Girls are trained. When she was twenty she was turned over to Devin."

Alex looked at Wilhelm with a smile. "My father, ever wise, knew about this and when my first wife died, directed me to San Francisco. When Anna's birthday approached, my father visited me and through various circumstances, we were able to intervene in Devin's performance of the bonding ritual, which bound her to Devin *and* myself. I intended to intercede to save a half-Immortal from a cruel fate. I didn't expect to fall in love with her."

The men in the room laughed softly. Devin's face was red with impotent fury.

"Determined to make up for my past mistakes, I set out to find a way to free her from Devin's hand. After an intense amount of research, I discovered that the bond between husband and wife was so strong, it would likely balance out the power difference between myself, as a Son, and Devin, as an Elder."

Alex twisted his wedding ring on his right hand. "Anna and I were married at the end of that year in Germany and we returned to San Francisco. As much as I wanted to, I never kept Devin from having Anna, as long as he treated her with respect. My plan was to find a way to free her from both of us."

He was quiet for a few moments, swallowing several times. "Four and a half years ago, I was called out on a job by Vitaly Asimov. I had been married only a few months to my beloved bride." He motioned in Anna's direction. "I knew that if I didn't go, I would certainly be killed for refusing to do my duty as a Brotherhood Assassin. So I went, against both of our instincts."

"We planned everything down to the last detail and arrived in St. Petersburg as expected, but when we went to the target's town, we were ambushed. Kept alive, but captured and taken to Vitaly's home. Vlad was there at that time and can attest to the truth of my words." Alex glanced at Vlad, who nodded.

"For four years, we were imprisoned there, by Devin's orders. He couldn't kill me because of the bond I share with Anna, so he just removed me from the equation, telling everyone, including my beloved bride, that my team and I had been killed."

Held in Sebastian's tight grip, Devin felt everything crashing down around him as Alex spoke. The world's Elders looked disapprovingly at him as Alex told them how Devin had used Anna and consumed her powers in order to become more powerful. He told them how he had abused Anna and finally taken control of her.

He learned the truth of her escape. How he had been betrayed by Tom and Vlad. How Tom had kept him from finding her while she was in New York.

What could he do now? His son was dead, apparently by Alex's hand. The room was against him. The most he could hope for was to retain his Elder status under the watchful eye of the rest of the Elders. They wouldn't strip him of his position...would they?

At long last, Alex stopped speaking.

The room filled with the low rumble of men speaking amongst themselves. After a few minutes, Shaw stood and approached Alex. He studied him for a moment and then looked at Devin.

"These are serious charges, Devin. Do you deny the truth of them?"

Devin rallied himself and shook off Sebastian's hands, knowing that he could only do so because the Immortal allowed it. "This is my home country. I did little that the other American Elders disapproved of. If they had such a serious problem with what I was doing, they should have said something."

"And risk being killed?" Brandon stood. "By the time we knew what was really going on, you were too powerful."

Devin scoffed.

"You used Anna to manipulate the dissenters, Devin," Tom said.

"You manipulated your own Elders?" Shaw asked.

Devin lifted his chin. "I did what needed to be done. I wasn't afraid to do so." He glared at Shaw. "This is America. We do as we please."

"That's true," Shaw said slowly. "Fine. The American Elders will decide what happens to you."

Suddenly Devin realized why Alex had been given the job of killing the other Elders.

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Chapter Sixty-One

Alex stared impassively at Devin as the bastard tried to defend himself. He tried not to show the fact that he was enjoying the panic that was beginning to show in the man's eyes.

The American Elders moved to the side of the platform to discuss the matter. Surely the older Elders would be able to convince the younger ones of the best course of action. If not, then they didn't deserve to be Elders.

He saw Kurt stroking Anna's face as he held her, and walked over to sit down next to him. "How is she?" he asked softly.

"Sleeping soundly," Kurt answered, gazing down at her and petting her hair.

He felt a swell of emotion towards his brother "Thank you for taking care of her, my brother."

Kurt looked up at him, surprised. "I hurt her terribly."

"And she's forgiven you. But when you could, you took very good care of her. Aaron told me how you took care of her when she was catatonic after my disappearance."

The two brothers had barely spoken of Anna since Alex had returned. It was a touchy subject for Kurt, and Alex respected his feelings. But he wanted to let his brother know how he felt.

Kurt pressed his lips together. "I divorced Gretchen so I could marry her."

"I know. It's no great loss to be rid of Gretchen." Emotion flashed through Kurt's eyes, which surprised Alex. "You still care for her?"

Kurt shrugged. "I loved her when we married. It's...lonely being a single father."

"Do you love her still? Or are you just lonely?"

Kurt looked up at Alex with a pained look. "I wouldn't mind trying to work things out with her, but I don't know if I could ever trust her."

Alex nodded. "If Anna wants to, we will stay in New York through Nutcracker before returning to Germany. Perhaps you could stay with us. She has several nice friends."

Kurt shrugged. "Maybe."

Alex smiled. "Even Jasmine has changed. She's actually a pretty nice girl."

Kurt raised his brow. "What happened?"

"Sebastian healed some past hurts."

Kurt looked thoughtful for a moment. "I always thought Anna's friend Stefanie was pretty."

Alex laughed. "She is. You just have to treat Anna well. She's very protective of her."

"I know. She yelled at me the last time she saw me."

Alex laughed even harder. He could see Stefanie doing so.

"What are you two laughing about?"

Alex looked up to see his father approaching with amusement in his eyes. "Trying to hook up Kurt with one of Anna's friends."

Wilhelm grinned and shook his head. "My sons...." He squatted down and stroked Anna's head. "Do you think she should be woken?"

"Is it all right to do so?"

"I don't see why not. She should see what happens. I will release her memories." Wilhelm put his hand on her head and closed his eyes.

Anna's eyes slowly opened and she looked around at the three German faces around her. She blinked, trying to orient herself, and studied each anxious face. Her eyes focused on Alex and she smiled. "Alex...."

His grin made her heart skip a beat and he pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. "*Oh, mein Schatzi...*," he murmured against her lips. "Oh, these last few weeks have been pure torture without you."

Her mind was slowly sorting out the events of the last weeks. "I was...." She sat up and looked around. Devin was sitting on the floor with Sebastian standing over him, looking defeated. "He...he found me.... I...." She looked up at Alex. "Why didn't I remember you while I was here?"

"Vati blocked your memories so that you wouldn't tell Devin about me."

"Forgive me, *Liebling*, but I had no other choice," Wilhelm said, taking her hand.

Anna nodded and rested her head on Alex's chest and closed her eyes. *Safe.*

When she opened her eyes, Kurt was watching her with sad eyes, and she sat up and reached for him. He looked at Alex in surprise and Alex loosened his arms around her. She moved to her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I will always love you, Kurt," she whispered, hugging him tight. Kurt squeezed her hard. "I owe you my life," she said softly, remembering the night they'd met in this very room. Everything changed that night.

He held her for a few minutes and then released her, gently pushing her back into Alex's arms. "That is where you belong, though you will always hold a piece of my heart." He kissed her head and then stood and walked over to where Peter and Tommy were standing.

Anna snuggled into Alex's chest, burying her face in his soft white robe. He wrapped the blanket around her and held her tightly, rocking her slightly. Wilhelm kissed her head and patted Alex on the shoulder, and then went to stand with Vlad. Tom was with the American Elders, still deep in discussion.

"How are you feeling, *Schatzi*?" Alex asked softly.

"Wonderful...", she murmured. It was heavenly, being in Alex's arms again.

He chuckled. "I meant your injuries."

"Oh." She giggled softly and he squeezed her. "I feel okay. Tired."

"Are you hurting?"

"Mmm. A little. Not bad though."

"When we are done, would you like to spend a few days here before we go back to New York? We can see our old house."

Anna smiled. "Yes, I'd like that."

Twenty minutes later, Anna was nearly asleep again, but sat up straight when the American Elders appeared to have finished discussing the "Devin Problem." Tom went to the middle of the platform and held his hands up, but before he could speak, there was a flash of light and several Immortals appeared, including Kaveh and Val.

Anna let out a whimper and Alex hugged her to his chest. "They won't hurt you, Anna," he murmured against her hair. "But look."

Anna frowned at Alex, but looked where he was looking, at the group of Immortals. She gasped. "Daddy?" She scrambled out of Alex's arms and ran to her father's arms.

Trevor held her close. "Oh, Anna. My Anna."

Tears streamed down her face. "You're here? Can you stay?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I can only stay as long as the others are here."

She looked up into his crystal-blue eyes and gave him a smile.

He tucked some hair behind her ear. "You look so much like your mother," he whispered.

"So I've been told," Anna said with a grin.

He grinned and then looked up as Alex approached. They shook hands in greeting.

"I'm sorry I failed you and Anna...that night, Trevor." He gave Anna a mournful look. "I won't fail her again."

Trevor smiled. "Just love her. That's all I can ask."

"I do. So much." Alex squeezed her hand.

The biggest Immortal that Anna had ever seen stepped to the center of the platform. He was taller and broader than Kaveh and Alex both, with black hair and crystal blue eyes. He wore a white tunic edged in gold and diamonds and looked old and young at the same time. Two Immortals, slightly smaller, though still giant, stood on either side, dressed similarly, though in black.

"I am Kronos, father of the Immortals," the big one said, in a powerful voice that reverberated in Anna's chest. "We have heard of the deeds of our fellow Immortals. We do not judge the deeds of humans, unless it interferes in our affairs. But we do judge our fellow Immortals, and have pronounced judgment on Kaveh, Val, Chiron and Skaron. Both for the abuse of our daughter, and for enabling a human to perform forbidden rituals and act against the sacred agreement between humans and Immortals."

He looked around the room, seeming to gaze at every man in the room at once. "We are displeased with how you humans allowed this to happen. Our daughters are gifts to you, to aid you in your endeavors, and you stood

by and allowed this human,” he pointed to Devin, “To abuse her in the worst form.” His eyes glowed with anger. “Nothing like this has been seen in centuries, and it is despicable. Those who have the forbidden books are warned at this time to destroy them, or we will remove our daughters from your world and leave you to your own self destruction.” Kronos looked at Anna. “Come, Daughter.”

Anna walked to the huge Immortal on trembling legs and fell to her knees at his feet.

Alex watched as Anna knelt at the feet of Kronos. What would he do to her? Would he take her away from him? Because he failed to protect her? *Oh, please don't take my love from me.*

Kronos' blue eyes met Alex's and Alex barely kept himself from looking away. The gaze was so intense it made him step back. He sighed in relief when the Immortal's gaze turned to Devin. Devin trembled as Kronos stared at him.

Kronos turned back to Alex. “You would free our Daughter if you had the opportunity?”

“Y-yes. I would.”

“Even if it meant she might leave you? I can undo the marriage bond as well.”

Alex swallowed over a lump that had formed in his throat. His eyes burned with tears and it felt like a dull knife had been stabbed into his chest. The thought of losing Anna again was too much to bear. He looked at Anna, who watched him with her big green eyes.

What if she chose Kurt? Or Hugo? If she were free, she might decide that she didn't belong at his side anymore. It was tempting, oh so tempting

to say no. To keep her where she was: with him. But did he want to force her to be with him if she wanted to be with someone else?

No. He wanted her to choose him, not force her. He loved her too much to force her to stay with him. *If you love something, let it go....* Only this time she would really be free. There was no safety net, knowing she'd ultimately choose him. He could lose her forever.

Alex took a deep breath and set his jaw to look at Kronos, even as tears filled his eyes and his heart ached. "Yes. I would choose for her to be free, even if it meant I would lose her."

Kronos nodded, his face inscrutable, and went to stand in front of Anna. He knelt down and spoke softly to her. Alex couldn't hear what he said, and it took every ounce of willpower to stay where he was.

Devin was having a hard time concentrating on anything for long. Horrifying images kept coming to mind and he shuddered at each. Anna had torn open his mind and shown him everything he had done to her from her perspective. If Alex hadn't stopped her, Devin would surely be dead. He felt every lash he ever dealt, every emotional scar, every heartbreak. His human brain could barely comprehend it all.

It had taken everything he had left to come to his own defense before the world Elders, and he had very little energy to try to rally one more time.

Now, he watched as the Immortal Father spoke to Anna. Alex had told him he wanted her free. Didn't Devin get to answer the question?

"No, Devin. You do not." Sebastian stood over him as a stern guard. "You do not deserve to have her. You have proven yourself...unworthy."

Devin narrowed his eyes, but then sighed. Anger would get him nowhere. He suddenly felt very tired. He put his head in his hands and

waited.

Wilhelm saw the grief in Alex's eyes as he watched Kronos speak to Anna. Alex loved her so much, but Wilhelm was proud that Alex was willing to let her go. It spoke loudly of the man he had become and he was so proud, even as he grieved the loss of Anna himself. She would no longer belong to Wilhelm, either, once the bonds were broken. But if it meant her being free of Devin, then it was worth it. Even with the pain in his own heart.

Kronos stood and helped Anna to her feet, and then nodded to Tom. Kronos led Anna to the side of the stage and looked expectantly at Tom.

Tom gave the Immortal a nervous look, and then glanced sorrowfully at Devin. "Devin, you are one of my oldest friends, but we cannot let you continue down this path. Your selfishness has wreaked havoc on our country and has spilled over to affect the entire world. We, the American Elders, do deem you unworthy of the position of Elder. Come and kneel as we strip you of the symbols of your position."

There were numerous murmurs as Sebastian helped Devin to his feet. Devin jerked as though trying to flee, but Sebastian's hands on his shoulders prevented it. He shook so badly he could hardly walk to the center of the platform. "Don't do this, Tom. Please. I've learned my lesson. I won't—"

"No, Devin. It's too late."

The American Elders surrounded him as Tom removed his robe, leaving him naked in front of the entire room. Javier removed Devin's Elder ring from his finger, and Brandon produced a tool that looked like wire clippers, but thicker, and handed it to Tom.

Wilhelm winced as he realized what was going to happen. Devin's cock piercings would be removed. Knowing how well-seated his own were, he couldn't imagine it would be painless. Tom turned to Alex and held out the tool. "Would you like to do the honors?"

Alex raised a brow and looked at Wilhelm. It would be a true insult to allow a foreigner to remove his piercings, and even more so, a foreign Elder-Son. It couldn't get much lower than this for Devin.

Wilhelm nodded and Alex accepted the tool from Tom.

Alex was surprised when Tom turned to him, but gladly accepted the task. Watching Devin up close as he was de-pierced would be a very pleasant assignment.

He took the tool from Tom's hand and went to crouch in front of Devin. Devin's eyes grew wide as the Elders grabbed his arms and head to hold him still while Alex worked.

"I should just cut it off," Alex growled softly as he grabbed the soon-to-be-former Elder's cock. "But that would be too easy a punishment. You should endure some semblance of the pain you put my wife through."

He actually heard Devin whimper as Alex put the tool to the first piercing at the top of his cock. Amusement lit his eyes. "Shall I show you mercy?" He squeezed and heard the snap as the metal broke and he pulled the piercing out and dropped it on the floor. He didn't cut him. He had no intention of doing so, but didn't want Devin to know that.

Devin was shaking. "P-p-please," he begged in a hoarse voice. "Don't hurt me."

Alex grinned wickedly as he placed the tool at the next piercing. "How many times did my Anna say that to you?" *Snap*. Devin jumped at the

sound. *Snap. Snap.* One by one, the piercings were pulled and dropped to the ground.

When the normal piercings were all gone, Alex studied the spikes. “How do we get this one out?”

Devin’s face turned gray again and the only reason he remained upright was because of the grip the other men had on him. Alex had a feeling there was no way to remove this one without pain. He glanced at Tom for direction.

“They all need to be removed,” Tom said softly with a nod.

“Oh, God!” Devin whimpered. “Please...just cut the spikes off. Don’t pull it. Please.”

Alex hesitated, not because of Devin’s begging, but because he wondered if an honorable man would do such a thing. He would essentially be ripping Devin’s cock apart. There was a definite appeal to the thought, but he had made it through the ordeal without lowering himself to Devin’s level. Would this do what he’d been trying to avoid?

He looked at his father, who was watching carefully, and he nodded. Alex looked at Kronos who also nodded. Lastly, he looked at Anna.

Anna stared, frozen, as she watched Alex carefully remove Devin’s piercings while Devin begged and whimpered. Alex could have just ripped them out, but he was showing Devin mercy, something Devin didn’t understand. She didn’t know how she felt about Devin avoiding pain.

As awful as Devin had been to her, she still felt sad as he was humiliated in front of the room. He had been so proud, so confident, and he was reduced to a whimpering mess. But he had done the same to Alex.

The memories of Alex's jealousy and insecurity returned. Her heart ached for Alex. She loved him, so much. Kronos had offered to free her of not only her slavery and her obligations of being an Elder-Mistress, but also of her marriage. She and Alex had married so he could protect her from Devin. When that was no longer needed, would Alex still want her as his wife? Would he still love her?

Alex mumbled something about Devin's last piercing, the spikes that had caused her so much pain. She saw him hesitate and look at Wilhelm and Kronos for guidance. Alex was a good man. A very good man, who wasn't driven by revenge, even though he had every right to tear Devin apart.

When Alex looked at her, her heart pounded at the love she saw and felt. She opened her heart to him and felt every ounce of his love for her. She knew right then and there that she could not let Kronos break their marriage bond. They belonged together. He was a part of her and she was a part of him. To separate them.... Was Kronos powerful enough to separate two rivers that joined together into one? Which drop of water belonged to which river? It was impossible to know. It was the same thing with their souls, their spirits. To remove Alex from her would be to remove herself.

Anna smiled at Alex, hoping he could feel her own love for him. His eyes softened and he gave her a gentle smile, and she knew he knew. She sighed in happiness.

Alex looked back at his task and as he reached for the band of metal just below the crown of Devin's cock, Anna briefly wondered if she would feel the pain. In slow motion, Alex's hand moved upwards and there was a terrible ripping sound and then Devin let out a horrifying scream.

Anna winced and closed her eyes, leaning back against Kronos. He squeezed her shoulder gently. She didn't feel any of Devin's pain and was

relieved. When she opened her eyes, Devin was huddled on the ground, tears streaming down his face, his body shaking with silent sobs.

He was alone in his suffering. Like she had always been.

There was a sick gratification in hearing Devin's scream as Alex ripped the horrible piece of metal from Devin's cock. It was surely only a fraction of the pain Devin had inflicted upon Anna over and over again, but Alex was satisfied that he had finally been able to hurt Devin physically.

With a grim smile on his face, Alex stood over the huddling, trembling, crying man who had caused Anna to do the same thing countless times. Devin would likely never be able to have sex again, which Alex thought was fitting. The man would be lucky to be able to pee.

The room was silent, save Devin's whimpering. All the men watched in horrified fascination as Devin was de-Eldered. A warning to any man who would consider doing something similar in the future.

When Devin had quieted, Kronos went to kneel behind him and put his hand on his head. "I remove the Immortal essence from your body. When it is gone, you will no longer be an Elder."

Devin stiffened and hissed as, Alex assumed, Kronos drained him of every drop of Immortal essence. When Kronos stood, Devin lay still, staring off into space and making Alex wonder if it had killed him. He blinked once and Alex knew he was alive.

Kronos turned to Anna and motioned for her to come to him. Anna did and the Immortal put his hands on her head. "I free you from your bonds of slavery," he said quietly.

Alex grunted as he felt a sharp tingle in his head. Devin jerked on the floor. Alex looked at Anna and his heart swelled at the beautiful smile on

her face.

“I free you from your obligations as an Elder-Mistress,” Kronos said.

Alex’s stomach began to churn as he realized what was coming next. Kronos would sever their marriage bond. He closed his eyes against hot tears and clenched his fist. When the bond was severed, would it shred his heart to pieces? It certainly seemed that it should.

“The woman standing in front of you is a free woman,” Kronos said loudly.

Alex opened his eyes and saw Kronos standing behind a smiling, peaceful Anna. The Anna Alex knew from their wedding day. Oh, he didn’t need to think about that day. It hurt too much.

“She is no longer an Elder-Mistress. She is no longer a slave.”

When would Kronos deal the final blow? Waiting was going to drive him insane.

“Do you acknowledge this?” Kronos asked the men in the room.

Affirmations in every language were heard throughout the room and Anna grinned up at Kronos. The Immortal gave Anna an affectionate smile and then guided her over to Alex.

Alex blinked rapidly and set his jaw against the coming severing.

“Behold your free wife, Alex. Take good care of her.”

Alex’s jaw dropped open as he stared up at Kronos. “What?”

Kronos grinned. “You are a worthy man, Alex. I saw your thoughts when I asked if you would free her. Only a man who is willing to let her go free is worthy of this precious creature in front of me.” He gave a deep chuckle, then added in a soft, affectionate tone, “Besides, she wouldn’t let me sever the bond.”

Alex looked down at Anna, who was looking up at him with an adoring smile. “Is that okay?” she whispered.

A huge grin split Alex's face and he grabbed her around her waist and he held her so tight, he was afraid he might break her ribs, but she was holding him almost as tightly.

"Oh, my Anna. My precious Anna." He murmured into her hair as tears streamed down his face. He tipped her chin up and kissed her. "*Ich liebe dich, mein Frau, mein Liebe, mein Leben.* I love you, my wife, my love, my life."

"I love you, too," Anna said, gazing lovingly up into his eyes. "My husband, my love, my life."

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Epilogue

In the darkness, an ear-piercing scream echoed through the small room and into the hallway, down the stairs and into the main house. The screams occurred regularly, but no one desired to have them muffled. At least not for now. There was a level of satisfaction that came along with the terror-filled sound.

Devin sat straight up in bed, drenched in sweat, eyes darting around the dark room, looking for the source of his pain. His shirt was as wet as if he'd been out in a rainstorm; the blankets as well. The room reeked of sweat and fear. No matter that the window was kept open at all times, nothing would rid the room of the smell.

He was alone. Alone with the nightmares that had haunted him for months. Ever since the night he'd lost Anna and his life as an Elder.

How long had he been here? Days? Weeks? Months? Years? Did it matter? He would be here until he died, haunted by Anna's memories.

He did everything he could to keep from sleeping, to keep the nightmares away. The nightmares that Anna had placed in his mind. But no matter how hard he tried, eventually sleep overpowered his will and he slept, and dreamed.

And screamed.

"...Happy birthday dear Anna...happy birthday to you."

Anna grinned as her friends and family finished singing to her. She was twenty-six today and it was by far her best birthday ever. Her heart swelled

with happiness as she hugged Alex and then blew out the candles.

The celebration took place in the dining room of the Kunze *Landgut*, which had been outrageously decorated for Anna's birthday. Alex had insisted on going all out for her birthday since he'd missed so many. He'd told her he had presents for every year he'd missed and indeed, when they walked into the elegant room, a huge stack of presents stood in the corner.

Not only were Alex's family there to celebrate, Aaron, Seth, Tony, Greg and Stefanie were there too. Then again, Stef was at the house a lot. She and Kurt had become engaged a few weeks prior. Kurt had stayed with Anna and Alex in New York during *Nutcracker* and, to Anna's delight, he and Stef had hit it off. When Alex and Anna moved to Germany after the first of the year, Stef and Aaron had come with them and the three of them had been dancing with the Stuttgart Ballet since.

Aaron had completely recovered from Devin's attack and was dancing as wonderfully as ever. He and Anna had danced Sugar Plum in their last American *Nutcracker* performance. Aaron had told Alex that they weren't moving to Germany and leaving him behind. Anna was happy Aaron had come, even though it had taken him a while to get over Cameron. He and Cameron had decided that, as much as they liked each other, they didn't see a future together. Aaron had seemed to hit it off with a few of the women in Stuttgart and Anna liked teasing him about it.

Devin had been taken to St. Petersburg with Vlad and imprisoned in the same room Alex had lived in while there. He would spend the rest of his life in that small room. There was no chance of escape.

Applause erupted around the table and Anna giggled.

"What did you wish for?" Stef asked with a laugh.

Anna grinned. "I didn't. I have everything I could ever wish for." She hugged Alex again.

Alex kissed her cheek. "I am happy to hear that."

They ate cake and laughed and talked and Anna thought it the most wonderful day. When it was time for presents, Anna stared at the pile in bewilderment. "It will take me days to get through all these," she said with a grin.

"I'm okay with that," Alex grinned.

Aaron handed her a card. "This is from Hugo and Jasmine."

Hugo and Jasmine had started dating shortly after Nutcracker rehearsals began. With Jasmine healed, it turned out she was a really sweet girl and Hugo had fallen for her. They were a very cute couple and Anna was so happy for both of them. Anna opened the envelope and pulled out a cream-colored card. She laughed. "Looks like we'll have a few weddings to go to this summer," she said to Alex, handing him the card.

Alex grinned. "Good for them."

Anna began working her way through the presents, piling books and jewelry and clothing and fur coats next to her and laughing the whole time.

"I have many years of presents to make up for," Alex said with a grin and a shrug.

After all the presents had been opened, she grinned and looked at Wilhelm, who smiled at her with a sparkle in his eye.

"Alex," she said, turning to him and giving him a long kiss. "This is by far the best birthday I can remember. You are the best friend and husband I could imagine." She kissed his cheek. "Now, I have a birthday present for you."

Alex frowned in confusion as Anna handed him an envelope. "My birthday isn't for several months."

Anna shrugged. "I couldn't wait. It's kind of time sensitive."

Alex chuckled and opened the envelope. He pulled out a card and laughed at the silly picture of a baby on the front. He opened the card and a slip of paper fell out. He picked it up and froze when he looked at it.

Anna swallowed nervously and glanced at Wilhelm, who smiled encouragingly. She looked back at Alex staring at the black and white photo. He looked up at her with wide eyes, brimming with tears. “Really?” he whispered.

Anna nodded and bit her lip. Alex lunged at her, hugged her tightly and kissed her passionately. She faintly heard the other’s asking what was going on. Only Wilhelm and Ilsa knew what the photograph was of.

When Alex finally pulled away, his eyes were so filled with emotion, it brought tears to Anna’s eyes. “Is that a good present?” she asked in a soft voice.

“The best I could imagine.” He grinned and picked up the photo and showed it to the others in the room. It was a mess of white and black lines with a little circle on the one side. “We’re having a baby,” he announced proudly.

Shrieks from the women and shouts from the men echoed in the room as Alex and Anna were hugged and congratulated. Anna was back in Alex’s arms the moment they were done and he hugged her again.

“How did you get pregnant without me knowing?” Alex murmured in her ear.

“I asked your dad how to do it. I wanted to surprise you.”

Alex grinned at his father. “*Danke, Vati.*”

Wilhelm walked over and patted his son on his shoulder. “I’m sure you will be as proud of your son as I am of you.”

“A son?” Alex asked, wide eyed.

“I’m fairly certain,” Wilhelm said with a grin. “It usually is.”

Alex beamed as he looked at Anna. “You have made me the happiest man, *Schatzi*.”

“How could I do any differently, Alex?” Anna whispered with tears in her eyes. “You are my husband. My love. My life.”

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Thanks for reading my book. If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave a review at your favorite retailer?

Thanks!

Marissa Honeycutt

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About Marissa Honeycutt

Marissa's story of Anna began with a dream about being kidnapped with Adam Savage from the *Mythbusters* (Yes, really). Over the next year and a half, it morphed into the story you just read. She has several other stories in progress, one of which is based on her kidnapped dream.

When she's not writing or editing, Marissa is taking care of two young boys, training to be an astronaut, running her household, wrestling with gorillas, playing around on Facebook, promoting whirled peas, and busting her tush for her accounting degree. She enjoys chocolate, air conditioning in the desert's summer heat, really good strawberry margaritas, sleeping, and shopping.

Stalk Marissa:

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Reader's discussion & support group for Part 1:
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Reader's discussion & support group for Part 2:
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Reader's discussion & support group for Part 4:
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Reader's discussion & support group for Part 5:
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Deleted scenes on Marissa's blog:
<http://marissahoneycutt.wordpress.com/>

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