



**DANCING**

FOR THE

**DEVIL**

**FAYE PIERCE**

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# DANCING FOR THE DEVIL

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*In the arms of the Devil, I found my salvation.*

**FAYE PIERCE**



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## THANK YOU

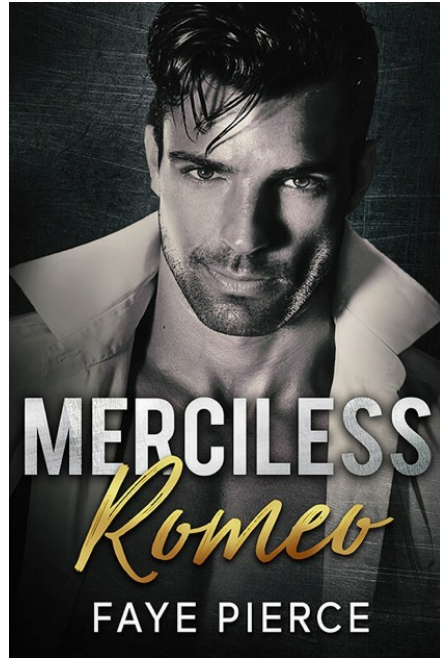
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I want to personally thank you for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me. It's a blessing to have the opportunity to share with you my passion for writing through my stories.

If you're a **true fan** of the **Dark Mafia Romance** genre, then you're going to love this story...

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

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**I would do anything to save my sister. Even work for the Devil himself.**

Six months have passed since my sister Celia inexplicably **vanished**. The police gave up looking for her **today**. But I won't allow Celia's memory to fade into **oblivion**. I know I can find her if I ask the right questions to the right people.

Which is why I asked Alexei for a job, as a dancer at his strip club, the very establishment where Celia once **worked**.



Alexei's gaze alone has the power to kindle **infernus** beneath my skin.

Does he make all dancers **audition** for the job by stripping just for him?

None of this matters. The fear of admitting my **attraction** to him **dominates** my thoughts.

What would my sister think of me **now**?

Infiltrating Alexei's inner circle is the only way to the truth I seek. Within his **enigmatic presence**, lies the key to my **redemption**. But I can't afford to get involved with him, or I might **lose my sister forever**.

*In the arms of the Devil, I found my **salvation**.*



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## PLAYLIST

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*If you need music for everything, like I do... Here's a playlist to listen to while reading my book.*

Muse - Uprising  
James Vincent McMorrow - Higher Love  
The Black Keys - Lonely Boy  
The Killers - Runaways  
Massive Attack - Teardrop  
Franz Ferdinand - Take Me Out  
AWOLNATION - Sail  
Placebo - Loud Like Love  
Thirty Seconds To Mars - Kings And Queens  
AWOLNATION - Guilty Filthy Soul  
Garbage - Blood for Poppies  
The Verve - Bitter Sweet Symphony

You can find the [complete playlist on Spotify](#)

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## NORA

“*T*he Celia Young disappearance has now been declared a cold case. I’m sorry.”

I stared at detective Reed, my hands clutching the chair so hard it hurt. I’d been expecting him to ask us to identify my sister’s body, or at least for him to say that he had a lead. Having him say instead that they had given up looking was... a mind fuck, to say the least.

All we had was a pile of questions and no shovel to sort them with.

The not knowing was the worst.

“I beg your pardon?” my grandma said. I looked in her direction, seeing how she was clutching her purse, and I knew she was just as close as I was to flying off the handle.

The detective sighed. “Whatever happened to her, the trail has gone cold. I’m sorry.”

“You’re... sorry?”

The detective was looking at me with fake regret in his eyes. He was putting on a show, which was even worse than the fact that they had given up. It had only been six months since my sister's disappearance. What did they mean, *the trail had gone cold?*

He shook his head. "The department has limited resources and—"

"Fuck your limited resources! This is my sister you're—"

My grandmother clutched my hand, her nails digging into my flesh. "Leave it, *Princesa*. They are doing their best." She turned to the detective. "Isn't that right, Mr. Reed?"

He nodded, still avoiding our eyes. "Of course, we are. We understand that this is your family, but as I said, limited resources. We are doing everything we can."

"I don't think you are," I blurted, my hand on my hip. I might have been petite, but I wasn't going to let this man get away with this. There was something more at play here. Something he wasn't telling us, and I was going to find out what.

"That British girl, the one who disappeared years ago... What was her name, Lita?" I turned to my grandmother.

"I think it was Madeleine. Madeleine McCann."

There was no ‘I think’ about it. My grandmother and her friends happened to follow that case obsessively. Conspiracy theories abound.

“Yeah, Madeleine. Fifteen years later, they’re still looking for her, and you give up after six months? How is that fair?”

Detective Reed rolled his eyes. “I can’t speak to what the British police do, ma’am. Here in New York—”

“Don’t speak to me like I don’t understand,” I snapped sticking my finger in his face. The urge to slap him was almost overwhelming.

A flicker of annoyance flashed across his face, but he suppressed it. “Ma’am, I am going to have to ask you to leave. This conversation is no longer produc—”

“No!” I said desperately, “Wait. I’m sorry.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “I want us to resolve this amicably. So, let’s begin again, okay? Celia was working at Club Pandemonium. Did you speak with all the workers there?”

Detective Reed gave an exaggerated sigh. “Yes, we did.”

“And what about the owner? Her boyfriend was a bouncer for the club. Did you talk to him?”

“Miss Young, you know very well that we have spoken to all those people.”

“What about her neighbors? Did you get to all of them? Someone must have seen something.”

“That neighborhood is not well known for cooperating with the police.”

“I wonder why that is.”

“*Nora*,” my grandmother whispered admonishingly.

I met her eyes, taking a deep breath. She was right. Snarking at the cops wouldn't get us anywhere. “I'm sorry. Just... I don't think you've run down every lead. There are still avenues to pursue.”

“Is that so?” the detective's mouth twisted in derision. “You know better than us?”

“I know that my sister didn't just disappear into thin air. She's twenty-two years old, and a whole hell of a lot of things could have happened to her. We just want to know what.” I fixed him with the most pleading puppy dog eyes I could manage. “Please, Detective Reed.”

He blinked at me and then shook his head. “I'm sorry, Miss Young. We've done everything we can.”

Simply put, I did not believe that he was telling the truth. There was something shifty about him. I couldn't quite put my finger on what... but yeah, for sure. He was hiding something. I tried to think of a way to get it out of him.

“What did Igor say? Her boyfriend? Have you informed him that you're stopping the investigation?”

“According to him, they broke up before she disappeared.”

“And you don't find that convenient?”

Detective Reed shrugged. “She's not exactly a housewife. We've had lots of women like your sister follow the same patterns of behavior—”

I almost leapt over the table to strangle him, but my Lita held me back. “*Like my sister? You mean strippers? Are you calling my sister a whore?*” I yelled.

“No. Of course not. But you must have known what sort of lifestyle she lived.”

I growled and he sighed, shaking his head.

“Look, all I'm saying is that there is nothing unusual about what happened



before she took off. Nothing that would indicate your sister didn't just skip town on her own. She's an adult and she can do as she pleases. As someone who has seen this play out over and over, I would really suggest you focus on other things. Your sister will more likely than not show up when she feels like it."

I just stared at him, my heart pounding. Thank God my grandmother was there. Celia wouldn't just *disappear*. Sure, we weren't as close as we once were, but we were the only family each other had. She wouldn't just leave without a word.

Something had happened to her.

Something bad.

And if this stupid detective thought I was going to just roll over and let it go, he had another thing coming.

I whirled towards the door, pulling my grandmother along with me. "Alright then, thanks," I said brusquely as I banged the door to his office open and stormed out. We were halfway down the hall when I heard my name called, much to my surprise. I turned to see Detective Reed following us.

"What now?" I snapped.

He came to a stop in front of me. "Please...let this go. For your own sake. This is doing nothing but causing you, and your grandmother, a tremendous

amount of grief.” He turned to nod at her. “Don’t you see that?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, suspicious at his insistence. I didn’t say a word, hoping he’d fill the silence and incriminate himself.

“Again, we’ve done all we can. We have no power over what comes next. Do you understand me?”

I stared mutinously at him.

“Nora?” He raised an eyebrow at me.

“When did we get on a first-name basis?”

He sighed. “Fine. Miss Young, last warning. Drop this. It isn’t going to go anywhere.”

“Thank you very much for your input, detective. Your warning has been noted.” I turned and resumed walking, my grandma by my side, watching me with her cloudy eyes. She didn’t say a word and neither did I, but I guess she knew as well as I did that I wasn’t going to drop it.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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## NORA

It was dark and freezing. I could feel every muscle in my body shivering—shaking with both cold and fear.

“Nora?”

Her voice was so tiny in the dark as her small hands grabbed at me.

“Shh,” I whispered, more afraid than I could ever remember being. Then it hit me.

Celia, clinging to me. We were in a dark, enclosed space, claustrophobia closing in on me like an evil cloud...

This is a dream.

I tried to wake up, but all I could hear was Celia crying softly, almost soundlessly; her small body shaking at my side. We were used to that—not making a sound. Papa didn’t like it when we cried. Even when he beat us. We couldn’t stop the tears rolling from our eyes, but we could stop the sounds in our throats. Celia, in particular, learned to be very quiet.

I wanted to get away from the dream, from the shouting I could hear outside the dark space we were in, from the cold... I wanted to be back in my own bed, warm and safe and grown, but I couldn't make myself wake up.

With a cry, I was suddenly sitting ramrod straight up in bed, my eyes wide open. I blinked a few times and wiped my wet cheeks. My shoulders dropped as I sighed, remembering.

Real life wasn't much better than my nightmares. Not with Celia missing.

*Where are you, Celly? God, I will find you.*

I blushed even as I thought it, knowing how much I'd let her down. Getting up, I stomped to the bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror. I couldn't stand the girl staring back at me. That girl had sunk into complacency, being content with one phone call a week, letting her sister get further and further away from the little family she had... I shook my head, looking away, unable to face myself.

My sister was in trouble, and I hadn't known until it was way too late to help her.

*I'll go to the ends of the earth if I have to. But I will bring you home.*

I grabbed my toothbrush, aggressively brushed my teeth, then washed my face. I didn't have to be on duty until an hour later, and the bike ride to the hospital took twenty minutes, so I had some time. I got in the shower,

standing under the spray and letting the hot water dissipate the grogginess I was feeling.

A horrible night's rest, no doubt brought on by too much whisky, meant I was in bad shape. I closed my eyes, trying to think about any clue I might have missed. Celia had failed to mention Igor in our weekly talks—frankly, she rarely mentioned *anyone* in her life—so maybe Detective Reed was right, and they weren't important to each other. I wasn't going to assume anything, though.

Maybe the police hadn't known the right questions to ask, or maybe Igor wasn't interested in talking to Five-O. He might tell me something he wouldn't tell them. It was a start at least. Then I could approach the other strippers at the club. All I had to do was get close enough for them to start talking.

I stepped out of the shower. The difference between the warm steam and the cold air made me shiver. I took my brush, standing naked before the mirror, and combed my dark hair while giving myself a once-over.

The best way to get to speak with Igor and the girls was to get a job at Pandemonium.

My eyes raked over my body. I had an okay cleavage. My waist was fairly small, and I had ample hips—thank you, Spanish heritage. I could dance well enough and had made my way through nursing school on the pole when money was tight. I wasn't a professional by any means, but I knew enough to fake it.

My muscles were kept tight and toned by the hours of walking in the wards that my nursing career demanded. Plus cycling everywhere of course. I wasn't a health nut or anything. Riding a bike was just that much cheaper than driving.

My goal had been to get the three of us out of the hood one day, save some money to pay for Celia to go to designer school like she'd wanted... Basically, save my family.

Things were going well. Until they weren't.

The ER was bedlam. I was so happy I'd had time for breakfast—coffee and avocado toast from Starbucks—before I had to deal with some guy's gunshot wound to the chest, followed by a kid with a bean stuck up his nose. The kid was fine; his mother, on the other hand, had needed a sedative.

“Do you want to wait thirty minutes for the doctor, or would you like me to extract it?” I asked her. It was a fairly simple procedure, and I had the forceps to do it. The bean thankfully wasn't very far in.

“You do it! Please, just do it!” she almost screamed, and I could see how freaked out she was.

“Alright. But I need you to calm down, alright? Have a seat. Everything is going to be fine.”

She nodded frantically and sat down—curled up on herself, swaying back

and forth, self-soothing. I felt sorry for her, but I knew the best way to help both of them was to get the bean out of the kid's nose.

I turned to him and smiled. "So, Julius, I'm gonna get that bean out of your nose, alright? It won't take long, and I don't think it'll hurt. Will you be a brave boy for me?"

He nodded slowly, his brown bangs bouncing on his forehead. He reminded me so much of Celia at that age. So cute and responsive, and very quiet.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and picked up the forceps. I talked to him as I burrowed in his nose, clamping onto the bean and pulling it out carefully. He didn't so much as flinch.

"What a brave boy you are!" I hummed. "There, all done."

I sprayed some antibacterial mist up his nose just in case, cleaned up the snot, and handed him good as new to his mother. She burst into tears, clutching him close. Julius was unmoved by her hysterics, and I had a feeling she freaked out often enough that it wasn't new to him. I waved awkwardly and left her to it.

My next patient was more... complicated.

Claudette Stevens, twenty-three years old. Her dark brown hair did nothing to hide the bruises on her neck, and her downcast eyes were tired. I could hardly bear to look at her, but I had to smile and be professional. All my patients



were bringing Celia to mind that day.

I felt as if someone was trying to send me a message.

Claudette was five foot six and a hundred-and-ten pounds—way too thin. Her elbows stuck out like tiny spears, sharp enough to pierce her concave stomach. Her collarbone was stark, and her cheeks were slightly hollowed. But she stood straight and unbowed, looking at me with defiant eyes.

Just like Celia.

“So, what brings you to the ER today?”

Claudette looked away. “I fainted and my stomach aches.”

I cocked an eyebrow in disbelief, staring at that bruise around her neck. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I expelled a breath and turned away, shaking my head as I picked up the blood pressure cuff. She pulled back her sleeve so I could get an accurate reading. More bruises. To nobody’s surprise, her blood pressure was on the higher side of normal.

There were so many times I stood to the side while my mother told a nurse or a doctor about her own “accidents”: running into a door or falling down the stairs. I glanced towards the curtains separating the cubicle from the rest of the corridor and saw a man peering in. His eyes were steady on Claudette.

“You know, the hospital has certain resources that can help you in case you’re in... a tricky spot,” I whispered.

She shook her head, still not looking at me. “Thanks, but I’m not in any sort of spot.”

“Do you have kids?”

Her eyes slid along the floor and then flicked towards the curtain. She shook her head. I didn’t know if I believed her, but there was nothing in her file to indicate she was lying.

“Well... if you change your mind, you know where to start,” I whispered.

She nodded, not lifting her head at all. With an inward sigh, I walked out of the room with her file, eyeballing the man lurking in the corridor.

“Excuse me, sir. You can’t be back here unless you’re a patient.”

“It’s fine,” he said, not deigning to look at me. “I’m waiting for someone.”

I hesitated, wondering if I should insist. He was a big guy, at least six foot three, with wide shoulders. His hair was cut close to his skull as if he was in the military. He wore cargo shorts and a striped blue and white shirt. I could describe him to the cops if needed.

I walked away, perfunctorily knocking on the GP's door before entering the room and placing the file on the desk. "Hey, doc. You need to watch out for this one. Might be some domestic abuse going on."

The doctor sighed, shaking her head. "I'm guessing she's not admitting it?"

"Nah. Walked into a door."

We exchanged commiserating glances before I shook my head and left. One thing I knew for sure: nobody could help Claudette until she was ready to help herself. Being that broken, that damaged, was something I could definitely relate to, so it filled me with guilt to just have to walk away... again.

I checked my watch and saw that it was almost noon. Late enough for me to take my lunch break. I was already sick of this shift, so I alerted the front desk and took off for the taco truck across the street.

Buying two tacos and two coffees, I headed down to the morgue where my friend Jodie worked as a pathologist. I found her in her office, transcribing her notes, and held up the brown paper bag.

She immediately stopped typing and grinned at me. “My Lord and savior.” She held her hands out wide, and I stepped into them and let her hug me before she snatched the bag of food. She opened it and peered inside.

“Mmm, tacos. It’s like you read my mind.”

“Yes, I’m psychic.” I collapsed into an empty chair with a sigh.

She stared at me, her bright blue eyes taking me in. “Rough morning?”

“Ugh.” I covered my face with my hands.

“Is it the clinic or your sis?”

“Both. Got a domestic violence case just now. Chick is denying it and not even trying to do a good job of it.”

“Maybe she needs a knight in shining armor.” Jodie shrugged, taking a bite of her taco.

I snorted. “Yeah, well, best of luck getting through her meathead boyfriend.”

“Is she like... hot?”

I opened my eyes to glare at her. “Did you not hear the part where I said she’s in an abusive relationship?”

Jodie shrugged. “You know I’m a sucker for a damsel in distress.”

“You’re a sucker for any damsel.”

“Hey!”

I grinned at her, feeling a lot better. “What? You know I call them as I see them.”

She shrugged. “Fair.” She handed me a taco, “Now eat and tell me what else is bothering you. You look rough, and I know it’s not just because of this.”

“Jeez, thanks. Always good to know that I look as bad as I feel.”

“You know what I mean.”

I sighed. “Yeah. I do.” I bit into the taco.

“So, what’s up, doc? Is it your sis?”

I sighed, leaning on my hands before telling her about our visit to the detective. She was outraged on my behalf and totally agreed with me that the detective was hiding something.

“Dick. Do you think he’s on someone’s payroll?”

I stared at her. I hadn’t even thought of that. I just thought he was being a lazy son of a bitch. “You think so?”

“Hey, Jeffrey Epstein had some cops in his pockets.”

My eyes widened further. “She’s too old to be caught up in something like that.”

“Would you prefer to think that she’s dead?”

I didn’t want to think about that.

“Well... anyway, I’ll find out soon enough,” I said.

“What do you mean by that?”

I gave Jodie a side-eye. She was my best friend, and she had my back, but I didn’t feel comfortable bringing anyone else into my plan. If I told her what I

intended on doing, she might have insisted on helping me... or changing my mind. If I knew one thing for sure, it was that my plan was dangerous and possibly stupid. I wasn't going to drag anyone else into it.

“Let's talk about something else. I need a distraction from the bad dreams and the worse thoughts. What are *you* up to?”

“Nothing fun. Madly swiping left on Tinder, trying to find my soulmate.” She shrugged but her blue eyes twinkled.

I had to laugh. “Maybe lower your expectations a bit?”

“Okay, fine. I just want a hot girl with a sharp mind and one hell of an ass.”

“Ah, much more attainable.” I grinned as I took another bite of my taco. I sat back and we ate in silence. I felt the peace of the morgue wash over me, the deep quiet, the sense of profundity brought about by the fact that we were surrounded by the end of life. It was impossible to think petty thoughts while I was down here.

Jodie finished her taco and wiped her hands on her tissue. She straightened up, grabbing her latte and sipping at it with a frown on her face. She flicked back her dark hair and focused on me.

“So... to return to your Detective Reed. What are you gonna do? Report him to his superiors?”

I gave her a look. “Does that ever work?”

She shrugged. “No idea.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

She lowered her head. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’ll figure it out.”

Jodie shook her head at me. “What are you planning, my dear scheming friend?”

My mouth twisted as I took a sip of my coffee. “Something stupid, obviously.”



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## CHAPTER THREE

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## ALEXEI

I threw my head back, almost hitting the wall behind me, and I bit my bottom lip to suppress any sound. Jules' mouth was a godsend, sucking the soul out of my dick like it was her job. She was nothing if not a pro—a valuable resource to have when I was feeling stressed.

My hips jerked as I grunted, coming down her throat.

She pulled away with a soft moan, giving me a lustful look from beneath her lashes. She was kneeling on the floor of my office between my legs, my desk at her back. It was a great look for her, but I *knew* she was about to start some shit. Asking for a performance review or when we could see each other again.

I had a feeling she was starting to get the wrong idea about us.

The door opened, and Kirill, one of my Brigadiers, came in. “Papa, we have a problem in the club.”

All my brigadiers called me *Papa* or *Pakhan* to show their respect. After all, I was the boss. But Kirill and I had grown up together in this business, so it felt weird when he called me that. When we were alone, he stuck with Alexei, but as soon as anyone else was around, he shifted into formality.

I liked that about him. When people saw someone as close to me as Kirill giving me my due respect, it didn't even occur to them not to do the same.

“What problem?” I pushed Jules off me, buttoning up my fly as I got to my feet.

“Fight broke out on the floor. One of the girls is involved. You want me to take care of it?”

I was tempted for a moment. Blowing my load always left me with a pleasant high for a few minutes. It would have been nice to bask in it.

But then conflict spurred a different but equally attractive kind of adrenaline, and I could walk and chew gum. I shook my head. “Let's go.”

The Pandemonium was a private club. It had nothing to do with the mob business. It belonged wholly to me, all above board and legal. Almost. Aside from it being an excellent place to launder money, the club was also great for hearing things. My clientele was a mixed pot: other gangs looking to party on neutral ground; rich kids wanting to flirt with danger; Wall Street types wanting to relax somewhere they didn't have to put up a front; politicians too, mostly those looking to make deals with criminals.

As a result, I expected a certain level of professionalism from my workers. This wasn't some hole-in-the-wall place. It was a classy joint. I expected my employees to behave accordingly.

Pandemonium had three levels, the first being a dance floor, with a DJ booth and a bar, strobe lights, house music, the works. I had a few girls working the floor, supplying the Wall Street types with every drug they could dream of.

The second floor was the strip club—we had theme nights. Monique, my entertainment manager, set them up. There were cowboy nights on Mondays, where anyone who could stay on the mechanical bull for two minutes got a free, private, lap dance.

We had a live band that played all the country songs.

Tuesdays was BBW night where our plus sized strippers did their thing. It's been surprising to see what a draw they were. Wednesdays was drag queens. Thursdays, college nights. And Fridays, was free for all.

The third floor was more exclusive—I call it VIP. Admission was by appointment only. Patrons could order dinner, have their secret meetings, drink the night away, order up strippers, dancers, or drugs, a stenographer, videographer, fax machine... Whatever they wanted, the butler would supply. It was swept for bugs twice a night and no phones were allowed.

I took the elevator down to the second floor, Kirill by my side. It was still early on a Monday night, so thankfully it wasn't packed yet. There were two men in the open space surrounding the stage, beating the shit out of each other. I sighed, squared my knuckles, and dove in. Taking each man by the scruff of their shirts like dogs, I shook them apart.

“Alright, fuckers. Either of you wanna tell me what's going on?” I demanded.

One of the men growled, trying to break free of my hold and come at me. I didn't spend six days a week with a trainer bench pressing three hundred pounds so that some punk in my club could attack me.

I let go of the first guy and punched the second one in the face. Then, quick as a flash, I resumed my hold on the first guy and brought him right up to my face, his feet almost hanging off the ground.

I was never one to display my physical power for fun. But now and then, just to remind the *hoi polloi* who the hell I was, I did let myself go.

I shook him a bit as he looked at me with wide, scared eyes. "You think this is some piss-soaked back-alley fight club, huh? Nah—here, you drink under me."

The guy started stammering a reply. He looked to his right where one of my dancers was standing, her arms crossed, shoulders hunched over and looking stressed.

I curled my lip in disgust. "You're fighting over a *girl*?"

He blubbered a little more, nothing intelligible, before I threw him on top of the other guy. I looked up at my security that was standing around, ready for anything. "Throw these shitbags out, would you?"

I stepped over the two sprawled bodies before my men picked them up and

heaved them off, stalking the girl. I could see her beginning to hyperventilate, her face pale, hands trembling. I came to a stop, looming over her. “Care to explain yourself?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I told him not to come. But my boyfriend gets so jealous and \_\_\_”

I snorted, lifting a hand up. “Save it. I don’t have time for this.” I raised my voice so the other dancers could hear me. “When you come here to work, you leave your domestic bullshit at the door. I don’t wanna waste my time breaking up fights. You think this is Coyote Ugly? My patrons come here to have a good time, not to be subjected to your baby daddy bullshit. Last warning.” I snapped my fingers before pointing at the stripper in front of me who was trying to sneak away. “Not you. You’re fired.”

She actually whimpered before going down on her knees. “Please, sir! It’ll never happen again. I’ll tell Rob to stay away, I promi—”

“If I had a dime for every time I heard ‘it’ll never happen again’, I’d be rich enough to retire. Go on. Get out. Tell Rob thanks from me.”

She began to cry.

Honestly... I could only roll my eyes. “Come on, stop with that. I’m not gonna hire you back. Collect your things and go.” I pointed sternly towards the door.

“Sir, please.” She came closer, looking me in the eye and trying to bat her eyelashes. “I’ll do *anything*,” she whispered.

“Yeah? Then leave.”

It annoyed me when girls thought that their pussies could get them out of anything. I turned my back on her as one of my security men took her by the arm, trusting that she got the message.

But something made me look up towards the bar. There was a woman there, staring at me, her dark eyes laser-focused and bright with interest. I found myself changing direction as if a literal magnet was pulling me towards her. She wasn’t the prettiest girl I’d ever seen, but something about the way she stood, the look in her eyes, set her apart from all the other girls in this place.

“Hey,” I said confidently, leaning on the bar next to her. “Sorry you had to see that.” I waved vaguely towards the middle of the now cleared room.

She shrugged. “Don’t apologize. Seeing you pick up that guy so effortlessly was something else.”

Her eyes twinkled with... something. Not really mirth, lust, or interest. More like an amalgam of all those plus some other, undefined emotion. It had me intrigued.

Who *was* this girl?

I held out my hand. “Alexei Levin, at your service. You have a name?”

She looked at my hand for a moment, as if making up her mind about something. Then she slid her much smaller hand into mine, looking me in the eye. “Nora Walsh—at yours.”

I shook her hand slowly, drowning in her dark eyes. Unlike most people who met me, she didn’t seem the least bit afraid. Maybe, she didn’t let her fear stop her from holding my gaze. I could see the wariness in her eyes, how watchful she was of me, which let me know she knew who I was.

“So, Nora, come here often? Haven’t seen you before.”

Her eyes slid to the place where the dancer had been standing. She looked back at me with a quirked eyebrow. “Yeah, well,” she threw me a one-shouldered shrug, “this isn’t my usual beat.”

“Oh yeah? And what is?” I clicked my fingers at the bartender, indicating that they should replenish Nora’s drink. They did so and brought me my usual—a white Russian. Puns be damned.

“I thought I was out of the business.” Her mouth twisted, “Been out of town, doing the domestic thing. But that didn’t work out.”

My mouth turned down. I gave her a disappointed look. “Damn, don’t tell me. Crazy ex?”



She laughed and then leaned in, beckoning me to do the same. I gave her my ear, eager to hear what she had to say. “The gag is, *I’m* the crazy ex,” she whispered, her warm breath ghosting against my skin.

I actually laughed out loud. I was not expecting that. I leaned back, seeing that she was smiling up at me. And she had dimples... kissable dimples.

*This might be a problem.*

“Do tell,” I said.

She inclined her head, mouth turning down. “He made me quit my job all of a sudden... which means no references, right? Took me to this town in the middle of nowhere and substituted my birth control with sugar pills. Blew through my savings while he was ‘looking for a job’, all the while selling me this line about happily ever after. My sister just died, so I wanted to believe him so bad.” Her voice broke and she swallowed hard but didn’t burst into tears or anything. I reached out and squeezed her hand. It would work in my favor to console her.

She gave me a quick, humorless smile. “Finally woke up. Skipped out of town with the one thing he loved. A Harley-Davidson. Mint condition. Sold it when I got back into the city, but I kinda need to get some work... fast.” She looked at me and smirked. “You know what I mean?”

I couldn’t help raking over her body from head to toe. She wore a white chiffon blouse which was practically transparent in the neon lights. I could see the twin peaks of her breasts pushing into a black lacy bra. There was

nothing extraordinary about them and yet my palm itched to curve beneath the swell of them and squeeze. My mouth watered at the thought of suckling her nipple through her shirt, wetting the material so it clung to her skin and rendered her practically naked.

I could feel my body react to my fantasies. I wasn't used to feeling so out of control.

*What hoodoo even is this?*

“You want to work for me?” My voice was fairly level, which was gratifying.

“I wanna work in your club, if you'll have me.”

The way she said it... I was ready to plow her right there.

I cleared my throat. “Let's talk in my office.”

She nodded, following me as I made my way to the elevator, parting the crowds like Moses did the Red Sea.

*I know this is stupid. I know it.*

I hardly knew anything about this girl—she was an unknown quantity. For all

I knew, she could have been a Fed. Yet there I was, letting my dick lead me into trouble for the first time in my life. She stood in front of me in the lift, turning her back on me. I could smell her. She smelled of mint and strawberry. It was a pleasant scent. Not intoxicating. And yet I wanted to lean forward and bury my face in her neck.

There was another smell. One I knew well. One that fascinated me more than the rest.

It was the smell of fear.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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## ALEXEI

*J* unlocked my office door with my thumbprint before standing back and gesturing for her to enter before me. She took a deep breath, stepping into the room and stopping in the middle. She had on a black pencil skirt that gently outlined her curves. Her ass was rounded enough that I wondered if she'd had some work done. I walked up to her where she stood trembling slightly. She stared at my desk.

Stopping just behind her, I bent down and breathed against her neck. She jumped and my hand came down on her shoulder. I spoke softly into her ear, "Are you a work of art or nature, Nora?"

She whipped around, looking at me with wide eyes. I figured if she'd really worked at a strip club before, she'd be used to the question. She made a sound somewhere between a giggle and a whimper, and I could see her pulse beating rapidly in her throat.

"It's all me," she replied, but she sounded strangled.

I huffed in amusement, taking one step back. Just enough to give her the illusion of space. "Gotta be sure. You know how our business works. Or don't you?"

Her pulse beat blue and fast against her collarbone. I wasn't sure if it was

because she was scared. “I mostly did burlesque. Stage work. Not much groping.” Her voice was breathy. I hoped it was because of me.

Otherwise, it was because she was lying.

I reached out, trailing my hand down her cheek, her neck, before pressing against that rapidly throbbing vein. I leaned in, rasping, “You should know, this crowd isn’t so well-behaved. You sure you can handle it?”

To my surprise, she did a little slithery move with her hips, rubbing against me. “I can handle it.” Her voice was steadier.

I let her go, stepping back. “Dance for me, Nora.”

She turned around, looking me in the eye. “Okay. Don’t suppose I can put on some music?”

I crossed my arms and smiled. “Sorry. No DJ in here.”

She reached into her back pocket and extracted her phone, waving it triumphantly at me. “Who needs a DJ when you have Spotify?”

I gestured magnanimously. “By all means.”

I moved back to stand against the wall, ceding my carpeted office floor to her. She fiddled with her phone for a bit before the opening strains of *I Put a Spell on You* filled the room. I smiled. *Predictable*. Though I guessed familiar was good.

In a blink, she was standing differently—her shoulders back, her posture stiff. She suddenly seemed taller. Her hair was shimmering all the way down her back when before it'd been in a neat bun atop her head. Her face was different too, her lips hypnotic, her eyes darker and even more alluring. She was a magnet, and I couldn't tear my eyes away.

She began to move, shimmying, bouncing, shaking her shoulders, her eyes never leaving mine. It was mesmerizing. She opened her shirt, and her creamy skin contrasted sharply with the black lace of her bra. As she moved, her blouse would open wider, creating a now-you-see-them-now-you-don't scenario as they winked in and out of view.

It was driving my body mad.

I knew that aside from my own adolescent reaction to her, Nora would be a draw for the club. I had to have her. I stepped over to her, snagging her around the waist. She looped her leg around mine and arched backward, her blouse pulling open as she flung out her arm in a classic dip pose, dark locks brushing the carpet.

I pulled her back up, my eyes on her lips. I leaned in, intent on kissing her stupid, but she put her palm between her lips and mine.

“Uh uh...” She stepped out of my arms and buttoned her blouse. “That’s not why I’m here. Tell me. Do I have the job?”

I bit my lip. “You know you do.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me, smiling slightly. “Do I?”

“Definitely.”

She took a deep breath. “Thanks. I appreciate that. When do I start?”

My lips twisted in sardonic amusement. “Well, I just lost a dancer tonight... so as soon as possible.”

“Right.” She smiled at me. “Thank you, Mr. Levin.”

“Call me Alexei.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I reached out, pulling her to me. “I think you earned it.”

“I think... you’re glad I did.”



I laughed. “Yeah, that too. So, what you gonna do about it?”

She reached up and put a finger to my mouth, tracing my lips. She parted her own, looking me in the eye. “I think... I’m gonna do... absolutely nothing.”

I gawped at her, unable to believe my ears. “What?”

She took me by the arms and pushed them away from her body. “You’re my boss now. I don’t want this to get messy. Like you told the girl on the floor. No drama, right?”

I rolled my eyes. Obviously, that did not apply to me.

I opened my mouth to protest, but she got there before me. “Hey, so do you have an HR department? Or how does this work?”

We stared at each other, in a fucking Mexican standoff. I could not believe the daring of this girl. “Leave your details with Kirill. If your background checks out, you start tomorrow.”

She nodded, opening her mouth as if about to say something, but the door opened, and Jules stepped into the room. She stopped short as she saw Nora, whose shirt was still half undone, and my dick still tenting my jeans.

“Uh...” Jules said, eyes narrowed. Then she cocked her hip and gave me a sexy smile. “I came to pick up where we left off.”

I could *feel* the side-eye Nora was giving me. She cleared her throat. “I’ll just uh... get out of your way,” Nora said.

“Don’t forget to give Kirill your details.”

“Yeah. Of course,” she threw over her shoulder without looking back. She couldn’t have left faster if she tried.

I sighed in resignation.

Jules came up to me, with a smile on her face. “Want me to take care of that?” She wiggled her eyebrows. I grabbed her by the hair and pulled her down onto her knees, burying her head in my crotch. As she got to work, I closed my eyes and imagined Nora’s lips around me.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## NORA

I ran out of the club, hurrying to the alleyway on one side so I could squat down and get my breath back. My heart was beating too fast, my knees were weak, and my mind was in turmoil. I hadn't really planned any of this—I was here for *recon*. I'd wanted to check the place out, find an opening to squirm through.

I hadn't expected it to fall in my lap like that.

Alexei Levin was something else. First of all, nobody's hair was naturally that shade of blonde, right? It was almost white. But he had no dark roots.

And I hadn't expected him to be so... fuck.

I covered my face with my shaking hands, reliving every aspect of our meeting.

He handled those two fighting men like they were puppets, flinging them about effortlessly. Then he'd seemed to sniff me out. Of all the people in the club, he'd made a beeline for *me*, stalking me like a white wolf, making me feel like he'd swallow me whole.

I didn't even remember half the things I said to him. I didn't know where my

sex-kitten act had come from. That girl was certainly nothing like me. I could see how much he wanted to fuck me, and that wasn't a surprise. He was still just a man, after all, and I was yet to meet a straight man who wasn't at least marginally interested in fucking.

The thought of it didn't usually get me wet though.

“Get it together, Young. He might be involved in whatever happened to Celia.”

I remembered the girl he'd fired in front of the entire club and resolved to follow up with her and see if she disappeared in time, too. If the club was a front for some kind of mob business, maybe no one was allowed to leave and live.

*Gotta find out about that.*

Even as my mind was going a mile a minute, my body was shaking. If that girl hadn't come in when she had, I don't know if I wouldn't have consented to Alexei laying me out on his table and driving me through it. I was so tempted. He kept looking at me with so much heat, his hazel eyes darkened with desire. I couldn't help but react to it.

The arrival of *whoever* she was reminded me that it was all an act. Alexei didn't care about me. He just wanted a warm body. Bet he fucked that girl as soon as I left.

I felt an unfamiliar feeling in my chest at the thought, which was worrying. I couldn't afford getting too involved with anyone at Pandemonium, especially the owner of the joint. He was my number one suspect.

Slowly, I got up and fished out my phone, calling an Uber. No matter what happened next, I was in. All I had to do now was find a way to snoop around for answers and uncover what really went on in that place... and if it had anything to do with what happened to my sister.

Nothing else mattered.

The Uber arrived and I went home, hoping my grandmother would be asleep. I really didn't feel like answering any questions about where I'd been. Not when all I could do was lie. Not when I still had to squeeze my knees together because my desire hadn't gone away.

Not when my sister's possible abductor was all I could think about, and all I wanted to do was spread my legs for him. It was embarrassing. Shameful.

I unlocked the door and immediately took my shoes off, holding them in my hand as I crept down the hall to my room.

“Nora?”

I closed my eyes, cursing internally. Dropping the shoes in the corridor, I walked into the living room where Lita was sitting by the fake fireplace, knitting.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“Ou—” My voice came out a bit raspy and I cleared my throat. “Out.”

She didn’t look up from her clicking needles. “Out where?”

I took a deep breath. “Uh, Jodie and I went out for a drink. Nothing special.”

“Uh huh...” She lifted her eyes, giving me a skeptical glance. “Did you have a good time?”

I swallowed and nodded my head.

She nodded in return. “Well, in case you’re still interested, I got a burial plot for your sister.”

I tensed. “I don’t want to talk about that, Lita. We don’t know that she’s dead.”

“Not yet. But sooner or later—”

“We don’t know that.” I couldn’t talk about my sister being dead. I just

*couldn't.*

She sighed. “Go to bed, my dear.”

I turned away from her. “Goodnight, Lita.”

“Goodnight,” she said. I walked away slowly, the heels of my shoes clutched in my fingers. “You’ll have to face it some time,” she added softly.

I heard her say the words anyway but chose to ignore them. *Maybe* I’d be forced to face it, or maybe I’d find Celia. I didn’t know what had happened to her, but at the moment, I chose to have hope.

Opening the door to my room, I dropped my shoes and then flopped down on the bed, blinking up at the ceiling. A feeling of *déjà vu* overtook me from that morning. I’d been exactly here, at a loss, not knowing what the next step should be.

With a sigh, I sat up and removed my bra and top. I undressed myself and jumped into the shower—couldn't help but noticing how sensitive my skin felt as I rubbed it with the washcloth. My nipples, which were still peaked, and almost painful to touch. My pussy was still dripping for him.

I put my right leg up on the bench, my hand burrowing between my legs, seeking my swollen clit.



*I'm just trying to relieve the pressure.*

I closed my eyes, rubbing myself. I imagined his slender but built body, his broad, elegant shoulders, his long fingers, and his hazel eyes fixed on me. I could imagine him watching me touch myself, how his eyes might darken, his hands clench to stop themselves from touching me. I gave a shuddering gasp as my hips jerked imagining what he would feel like inside of me.

I trembled, thinking of his cock burrowing into me, splitting me like a peach and just... *taking* me. No regard for my sanity or autonomy. Just taking over, possessing me, filling me up, grunting, grasping, growling with effort as he worked deep inside me—bending me over and holding onto my arms for leverage, just taking his pleasure from me, regardless of how I felt about it.

I threw my head back and moaned as my body shook, hips jerking, flesh contracting and relaxing around my finger, grasping in desperate search of him. It was a most unsatisfying orgasm, but it was the best I could do at such short notice.

I rinsed off, crawled into bed, and closed my eyes.

I didn't want to think anymore.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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## ALEXEI

The club is a tomb by three in the morning. All the money's been counted, and the patrons have all gone home. That's when the real business begins.

Three SUVs drew up silently by the back door, and I hopped in the middle one, Kirill by my side. We drove off silently into the night, on the way to a meetup.

After what I thought was an unnecessary back and forth, we'd finally come to an agreement with the Serbians to supply us with cocaine—the pure stuff—probably sourced from the CIA for all we knew. I had a bad feeling about this meetup, but with our previous contact in jail, we needed to find a new source quickly until he resolved his supply chain issues.

Kirill was watching me, a smirk on his face. I was in no mood to entertain his jokes that night.

“What's up, boss? The new hire is hot.”

I turned to give him the full benefit of my glare. “All the girls are hot. What of it?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Nothing. Just... you were in your office a long time. Were you sampling the merchandise by chance?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“Hey, I mean you’re the one who said no fraternizing with the help.”

“I’m aware.”

“So? What’s up with that?”

“What? Was I just supposed to hire her without finding out if she could dance or not?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I thought that was Monique’s job.”

“Yeah, and *your* job is to make sure she’s not a Fed, so why don’t you focus on that?”

“Eh, already did. She’s pretty straightforward. Trailer trash. Barely got her GED. Used to dance for a small club that’s closed. Went out of town for a while. Is back now. Nothing to worry about.”

“Great. You can call her in the morning and tell her she’s in.”

Kirill's smirk widened. "You sure you don't wanna do it yourself?"

I gave him a look. "Is there something you're getting at, *Brigadier*?"

He shrunk a bit at my tone. "Nah... of course not."

"Good. Now shut up and let me think."

He lifted his hands in surrender and stopped talking, for which I was grateful. I went over everything I knew about Anto Radić. He was a player that had emerged on the scene in the last few years. No one knew where he had come from. All of a sudden, he was selling high-quality snow, taking territory from the Colombians. He claimed his supply was Afghan and nobody had been able to prove otherwise. With no references, he had to find other ways to get customers, and I for one was very suspicious of Vladimir's sudden arrest. I'd known him a long time, and the man was careful.

We drove into Manhattan, and The City That Never Sleeps was empty of traffic. We were headed for a small, obscure club on a nondescript side street. Logistically, it wasn't an advantageous spot for anyone. The entrance was narrow and there was no nearby parking. That meant if we had to make a quick getaway, we were screwed.

As a compromise, the drivers would circle the building and be ready to go as soon as Kirill called for them. Three of my men entered the building before me, followed by Kirill and me, and then three of his lieutenants.

Anto was waiting for us in a basement. I clocked two men on the floor above, guns pointed downward. In the room were three more men in addition to Anto, their guns out.

He was sitting on a couch in front of a coffee table. On the table were three open black bags, and from what I could tell, they were packed full of the good stuff. I paused just inside the door, and my men spread out to the right and left of me.

“Anto Radić. We meet at last.”

He got to his feet, grinning, his long, greasy hair falling in his face. He was extremely tall and thin, with a full goatee and glittering, empty dark eyes. Seemed to me, he frequently sampled his own product.

“Alexei Levin. It is an honor.” He bowed.

Personally, I thought *that* was a bit over the top, but whatever. I took another step forward. “What you got for me?”

He shrugged, indicating the bags. “Everything you need.”

“Great.” I nodded to Kirill who stepped forward to test the merchandise.

Anto held up a hand to stop him.

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Money first,” Anto said.

My eyebrow went higher. “You’ll get it. After my associate has tested your product.”

Anto blinked at me. “Money first,” he repeated.

I snorted, shaking my head. “Are you saying you don’t think I’m good for it?”

“I’m saying you don’t touch the product unless we have our money.”

“Well then, we don’t touch your product.” I turned, headed for the door but froze when I heard a gun cock. I turned to look at Anto. “Really? Are you sure you want to go down like that?”

He gave me a lopsided smile. “I’m the one with the gun, *boss*.” His eyes slid to Kirill who was standing to my left. His hands were down by his sides. I guess from Anto’s point of view, we were unarmed and unprepared.

I sighed, looking defeated. “What do you—” I drew the gun from my holster and shot the two snipers above us, while Kirill shot the gun out of Anto's hands. Before I could unholster my other gun, my men shot the other three. A shot was fired, and I felt a punch in my arm, causing me to jerk backwards. I knew what that meant.

I'd been hit.

The shooter had emerged from somewhere behind Anto's sofa. Unfortunately, Kirill shot him before I could lift my arm. That's when all hell broke loose. We dove for cover as six more men appeared with automatic weapons. Propping my injured arm against the table, I aimed for their heads, taking two out while my men took care of the other four.

It wasn't a clean massacre, and I wasn't the only one who got hurt. Carlson, one of my foot soldiers, was shot in the neck. I could see him bleeding out. Reaching for my phone, I called the driver.

“John Connor,” I said and hung up, then rolled across the room, scooping up Carlson with me. It was our code, alerting the driver that we were coming in hot and probably hurt.

Kirill followed, covering my six, while the rest made sure the exit was clear. The SUV was waiting outside, all four doors open. One advantage to us of the narrow alleyway was the lack of places to post gunmen. I threw Carlson inside and dove in after him. Jedi, our resident medic, was waiting for us.

He pulled Carlson into the back seat and began working on him.



Kirill turned to me. “What about you? You need help? Is any of that blood yours?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine,” I growled. “It’s just a graze.”

I knew if I said I’d been shot too, then Jedi would attend to me first. Carlson was clearly in critical condition. He needed it more.

We drove to my compound in Brighton Beach where Carlson was taken to the medical wing. The other two cars parked on either side of mine and the men alighted... carrying the three bags of cocaine from Anto.

I smiled. “Well, well, well, what do we have here?”

“I figured we paid for it, might as well take it,” Kirill said with a proud smirk.

I grinned. “Did we pay for it though?”

His expression went cold as his gaze landed on my arm. “They shot you. Hell yeah, we paid for it.”

I looked away, disconcerted by his fervor. Clearing my throat, I instructed the men to take the product to storage right away. “Then take the day off. It’s been a long night.”

“Yes, Papa,” they said before taking off.

I sighed, looking back at Kirill. “Check on Carlson. Make sure he lives.”

Kirill nodded and took off after the medic and his patient. I stood by the door, looking up at the three-story mansion. True, it was my home base, but it didn't feel like home anymore. Not without my mother and sister. It was just a big empty house that echoed with memories that haunted me.

I strolled over to the garage and retrieved my sister's BMW convertible. Now that she was off learning to be a computer engineer in Russia, I was left to drive it now and then to make sure it stayed in peak condition. She hadn't been to visit in a while, and I missed her. She was one of the only two people I genuinely liked.

I drove to the club, my arm throbbing rhythmically. It was a clean shot with an entry and exit wound and at least the blood had clotted enough that the wounds were sealed.

It hurt like a motherfucker though.

Parking the beamer in the underground garage, I went up to my office and grabbed a bottle of whisky. I was tempted to pour it over my wound like I was in an Old Western, but it hurt to lift my arm. So, I just flopped on the sofa and drank from the bottle instead.

I had a lot to think about.

Had tonight been an ambush? They seemed extremely well prepared for a shootout rather than an exchange. I knew I had enemies out there. Any of them could have paid Anto to pretend to sell me drugs in order to kill me.

That would have had to be an elaborate plot, though.

So many moving parts to put together. Take advantage of Vladimir's arrest or have him arrested. Anto would be the only other big supplier in town, but there was no guarantee that I would go to him.

Perhaps they'd have eliminated anyone else I tried to deal with?

I was beginning to feel like a paranoid bastard. Who were 'they' and why would they want me dead? I had nothing concrete, only theories and suspicions. The knot in my gut was telling me to pay attention though, and I *never* ignored it.

Something was rotten in the water.

I gulped my whisky, looking up to make sure the door was locked. Nobody knew I was here. I could probably catch some shut-eye.

I closed my eyes with a sigh and willed myself to sleep.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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## NORA

I startled awake with the echo of screaming in my mind, but I could not remember what my dream had been about. I couldn't get out of bed fast enough, because I didn't want to hang about dwelling on it. I went to stand in front of the mirror, and I stared into my dark brown eyes, trying to see into my soul.

*What do you think you're doing, Nora?*

I really had no idea, no plan. Just the drive to find my sister. And if something awful had happened to her... to get justice.

*Gotta get in that office.*

I figured if there was any information on where to start looking for Celia, it was in Levin's office. I stayed up late, googling 'Alexei Levin'. There wasn't much about him online, not a Facebook page or Twitter feed. The Pandemonium had a social media presence, but it was all just marketing. I looked through the stripper photos, trying to find Celia, but they were cleverly taken so that none of the girls' features were apparent. The focus was on the assets on display.

Boobs and behinds galore.

The comments under the photos were pretty tame, all things considered. Nothing too unsettling. I wondered if they moderated them.

I googled ‘drug lords’ just to see what would come up. To my surprise, Alexei’s name didn’t, even though Celia had told me in one of our conversations that the club was run by the Russian Mafia. It was the cause of our last blow-up. I went off on her, asking her if she was crazy to work in such an environment. I bitterly regret it. I should have listened more, yelled less.

I got back to my search, trying to push away the memories. The Bratva did come up on my search, as did their operations in New York. But not Alexei.

“So, I guess this means he’s never been arrested or charged with anything...”

I dug deeper and found an obscure article on a gossip blog. His mother allegedly killed his father and then disappeared. Rumor had it, she was somewhere in Russia. That was all I could find. Nothing else.

“He has to be scrubbing his presence from the Internet. Is anyone this invisible?” I exclaimed in frustration. With a sigh, I gave up on that avenue of information and went to bed. If I couldn’t find the information online, then I had to do it old school.

I had the morning off from the hospital, and I figured it was the best time to snoop. Hopefully, the club would be empty, or at least *emptier*, than in the evening. I could maybe sneak in and sneak out and nobody would be any the wiser.

It was a cold day out, so I had the perfect excuse for my black trench coat and beanie. I pulled it low over my forehead and walked with my head down.

As luck would have it, I approached the front door and it opened, three girls trickling out as they giggled and gossiped amongst themselves. I slipped past them and into the club, skulking into the shadows as I made my way to the lifts.

Unfortunately, I had to cross the open space between the wall and the lifts, and one of the guards saw me. “Hey, you!” he called, “Where are you going?”

I extracted my keys from my pocket. “Just gotta collect something from my locker. I work here,” I said.

He stared at me for a bit before ushering me on. With a sigh of relief, I stepped into the lift and pressed the button for the second floor in case he was still watching. I took the stairs to the third floor, peering down the corridor to see if anyone was there. It was reassuringly empty, quiet, and I crept up to Alexei’s office and tried the knob.

Locked.

“Shit.” I leaned down to peer at the locking mechanism, to see if I might be able to pick it. The lock was opened biometrically which meant I would need Alexei’s fingerprint.

“Fuck!” I hissed, clenching my fists to stop from banging on the door. I looked down the corridor, keeping an eye out for anyone coming, while I tried to think of a way to get into the room. I cursed myself for not being prepared for this. Last night, while we were drinking together, I could have swiped a sample of his fingerprint from his tumbler. But I didn’t think.

“Goddamnit.”

“What’s with all the swearing?” I jumped at least a foot in the air as the door opened and Alexei peered out. Then my heart was racing, and my hands were shaking, and I just knew I was dead meat.

I tried to school my features into the picture of innocence, but his eyes were already narrowed suspiciously. “Nora. This is a surprise.”

I lifted my hand to run my fingers through my hair, forgetting I had a beanie on. It fell to the floor as I opened my mouth. “Yeah I—”

I stopped speaking, looking speechlessly down at my headgear, teetering between fear and embarrassment.

Alexei laughed at me. “Nervous?” he asked.

I cleared my throat, bending quickly to pick up my beanie. “Uh, yeah, I guess.”



“What are you doing here?”

I blinked a few times, trying to come up with a reason. I was stupid as fuck to have thought I could get away with this. “I, uh ...” I swallowed. “I lost something in your office, and I was hoping to retrieve it without anyone being any the wiser.”

He quirked an eyebrow at me. “Oh? What exactly did you lose?” He leaned into the doorframe, waiting for my response as my brain manically scrambled to find an answer.

“A p-pendant. M-my sister gave it to me. One of the last things she gave me, actually. I would hate to lose it. It must have unclasped when I was dancing for you.”

He frowned. “I haven’t seen any pendants.”

“Would you mind if I just... looked?” I *had* to sell it now.

He stepped aside and gestured extravagantly around the room, before wincing and clutching at his arm. I frowned, walking past him. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Find your pendant and go.” He shut the door, shuffled over to the long, cushioned bench next to the wall, and flopped down on it.

I paused, staring at him, noting the blood on his shirt sleeve. “Seriously, what happened to you? Another fight?”

He chuckled bitterly even while shaking his head. “No. I’m fine.”

I hesitated. I could shuffle around on my hands and knees, pretending to look for a nonexistent pendant, or I could use this chance to get closer to Alexei.

“Where’s your first aid kit?”

He looked at me, irritated. “What?”

“Your first aid kit. Surely you have one?”

I walked behind his desk and pulled open a drawer, peering into it.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Looking for your first—”

He sighed with irritation, rolling his eyes. “My first aid kit, got it. It’s in the bathroom.” He gestured with his chin to his left.

I saw the slightly open door and headed for it.

He had a really pretty bathroom, all dark green, gold-lined tile, and gold faucets decking the shower, toilet, and sink. There was a mirror cabinet on top of the sink. I opened it and found the kit. There wasn't much else in there except some floss, a toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant. It was a bit disappointing to be honest. I expected to find at least one gun with a fancy handle nestled between the dental floss and the soap.

Taking the first aid kit, I hurried back, not wanting him to think I was snooping. There was a small pair of scissors in the kit that I used to cut off his sleeve.

“You know this shirt is Tom Ford, right?”

“Sorry,” I said unrepentantly. “The blood won't ever have come out anyway.”

I examined his wound. It was definitely a gunshot. I could see the gunpowder residue and the burns it had left behind. I frowned, envisioning how he might have gotten it. My stomach inexplicably tied in knots.

Pursing my lips, I refrained from asking what had happened. Instead I focused on cleaning the wound with water before spraying methylated spirit on the site. He needed stitches to stop the bleeding, so I sewed him up without further ado, not failing to note his toned biceps while I did it. I did manage to refrain from squeezing them experimentally, just to see if they were as hard as they looked. I tried to touch him the least amount possible,

but when my fingers skimmed and pressed in on his skin... I craved more.

“You’re really good at that,” he said, startling me out of my reverie. He’d been totally silent despite the lack of anesthesia during the stitching, but he was still watching me closely, his eyes driving into me. I had a feeling he was used to such injuries.

“Yeah well...” I shrugged, inventing on the fly, “Growing up in my house, we didn’t get to go to the hospital much.” I met his gaze. “CPS might have ignored how many times we fell out of trees and broke our limbs.”

He grunted in acknowledgement.

“Learned how to set breaks and stitch wounds by the time I was thirteen.”

“A useful skill to have.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He was silent as I disinfected the site and applied a bandage.

“Is that how your sister died?”

My heart stopped, and my hands trembled. *How did he know about Celia?*

Then I remembered, just in time, that I'd mentioned her last night.

“Nah. Er, we'd both left home by then. I actually don't know what happened to her exactly.”

I got to my feet and patted his shoulder absently. “All done.”

“Thank you. That actually feels much better.”

“I'm glad.”

He turned, looking up at her. “Seems you could be more useful than just swinging on a pole.”

I smiled nervously, my heart rate ratcheting upwards. “I aim to please.”

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## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

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## ALEXEI

I wasn't convinced Nora was telling me the truth about why she was trying to break into my office. I don't remember seeing a pendant around her neck when she danced for me, though I admit I *was* distracted. But whatever she was after, I wouldn't find out by pushing her away.

Her story about being abused as a child hit me a little hard. My dad was an abusive asshole too. I knew too well the ups and downs of that life, even though we didn't have to learn to stitch up our own wounds. Not when we had a resident medic whose lips were sealed.

I found myself feeling a little sorry for her, especially since I could see how much her sister meant to her. Hell, I had a sister too.

And I knew how that went.

"Well, you can look for your pendant now."

She blinked at me, as if she had no idea what I was talking about for a minute before nodding. "Thanks."

She went down on her hands and knees, her behind in the air, peering under my table. My hand, of its own volition, reached out and cupped her ass. She

jerked in startlement, turning her head to glare at me.

I grinned. “You weren’t lying. It’s good.”

She continued to glare at me. “Yeah, well, if you want to touch it, you’d better put some money in my G-string.”

I burst out laughing. I loved her fearlessness. Most people spoke to me with more deference. “Are you wearing a G-string beneath your trench coat? Did you come here to seduce me?”

“Unfortunately for you, no. If I was gonna seduce you, you’d know.”

“Oh, do tell.” I leaned forward eagerly.

She resumed her search. “Well for one thing, I wouldn’t be dressed in sweatpants.”

I laughed even louder. Fuck. I could not remember the last time I’d laughed like this. She got to her feet. “It’s not there,” she sighed. “Is there any other nook it might have fallen into? Has someone been in to clean up?”

“No one would take anything out of this room without my permission.”



She nodded, biting her lip, looking as if she was really thinking hard. “I was so sure it was here.”

Her trench coat was cinched tight around her waist, outlining her figure lovingly. My palms itched to curve around her waist and pull her to me, to peel off her coat and see if she was really wearing sweatpants. Maybe it was a thong.

I reached out for her again, my hand curving against her hip. Her eyes followed the movement and made no effort to stop me. Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Fuck,” I hissed.

She laughed, taking a step back, her mouth turning down. “You’re a popular guy so early in the morning.”

“A popular guy who’s continuously cock-blocked.”

She leaned down, her face close to mine, warm breath fanning my skin. “Don’t make assumptions, sir,” she whispered before straightening up and heading for the door. She opened it to reveal Kirill, lifting his hand up to knock again.

His eyebrows rose in surprise as he saw her. She nodded to him, slid past and disappeared. I couldn’t help feeling disappointed.

Kirill smirked at me. “New hire’s hot.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and didn’t reply. The thought of Kirill ogling her made me want to punch him in the face. “What do you want?”

Kirill dropped the smirk. “Just wanting to see how you were doing. You didn’t come to the med wing last night.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah.”

He peered at my shoulder. Since Nora cut away my sleeve, the bandage she’d wrapped around it was obvious. “That doesn’t look fine.”

“Speaking of, I need a new shirt. Could you get me one?”

“Yeah. We have a few changes of clothes in the locker room.”

I gave him a hard look to shut down his questioning one. “Get me a shirt.”

Kirill nodded and left. It gave me some time to get my head straight. When I was close to Nora, it was like I was always thinking with my dick.

*I really need to hit that so that I can get her out of my head.*

Whatever she said, I knew she wanted it as much as I did.

Kirill was back in no time, and I went into the bathroom to change. I ran some water over my face before going to see what was on Kirill's mind. I found him sitting against the desk, his legs crossed, looking agitated.

“What’s up, Brigadier?”

“You tell me. What’s up with you having that girl in here with your shirt off and you injured? You don’t even know if she’s safe.”

“You said you had finished with the background check.”

Kirill shrugged. “Yeah well, maybe there is more.”

I huffed, in amusement. “Not likely.”

“I mean, yeah there are no red flags, but there’s not much I can verify. I haven’t found anyone who knew her before. She has no social media

presence. You gotta be careful, Alexei.”

“Do I look like a damned rookie to you?”

Kirill dropped his eyes. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“What *are* you saying? And since when do you regulate who gets my dick wet?”

“I’m just saying, I don’t trust her.”

“Your opinion is noted. Now, what happened last night? What the fuck was that?”

Kirill sighed, looking down and shaking his head. “That Anto is a junkie. Unpredictable. Who knows what he was thinking?”

“This wasn’t his first deal. I didn’t hear that he usually comes out shooting.”

“Yeah well,” Kirill grinned looking up, “people fear you. He was probably just nervous.”

“And what the hell was that about *show me the money*? We’ve never tried to stiff anyone. Why would he say that?”

Kirill shook his head and shrugged.

I glared at him. “I’m not liking your lack of answers, Brigadier. Find out what’s going on.”

He nodded. “Yes, boss. I will.” I waited for him to leave but he hesitated, straightening up and then leaning back on the table. “Boss?” he said, and I could tell from his tone that whatever he was about to say next was going to annoy me.

“Yeah?”

“So not to be an annoying bitch or anything, but did you get a chance to rethink that thing you wouldn’t discuss before?”

I frowned. “I don’t remember saying I was going to think about it. I remember that my answer was a definitive *no*.”

He sighed. “Every other gang is in that business, and the profits are insane. There’s no reason why—”

“I said no, Kirill,” I snapped irritably. I didn’t know why he was pushing it so much.

“I talked to the guys. They’re pretty puzzled too as to why we’re missing out on these payouts.”

“Oh, you’ve been talking to the guys. Are you conspiring behind my back now? Planning a little mutiny?” I took a step towards him, looming over him a bit, my eyes narrowed. I couldn’t trust anybody. Not after last night.

“Of course not. Shit. I just meant I heard them talking, and I thought you should know.”

“Well, don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“Boss—”

“I *said*, I’ll take care of it.” My jaw ticked.

He finally backed down, raising his hand in surrender. “Alright.”

I watched him for a beat, noting his heightened color. He was heated about this topic, it was clear. “You have a horse in this race, Kirill?”

“I just don’t want people to think you’re anything but the savvy leader you are. People talk, you know? Start calling you soft or some shit.”

I laughed. “Let them try to say it to my face.”

“That’s not the point.”

“No, I get you. You want me to be the biggest, baddest wolf in the shed. What you don’t seem to get is that I already am.” I snapped, clenching my jaw.

“It doesn’t matter if you are... if nobody sees it.”

I nodded sagely, not letting his doubt get to me. He didn’t deserve my anger. “I get it, Kirill. You’re worried. There’s no need to be. I got this.”

“Fine. We still need a new connect.”

“I know.”

“Want me to put some feelers out?”

“Nah, but I got some ideas.”

“Oh yeah? Who?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I have nothing concrete. I will let you know when you need to.”

He subsided finally, knowing he’d overstepped. I took a deep breath. “Given this whole thing though, I need you to organize an escort.”

“Okay. Who for?”

“Katya. She’s arriving in three days. I need her picked up and transported safely home.”

“I’ll see to it myself, boss.”

I nodded and gave him a half smile. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

My sister was coming to visit, and that was a source of both joy and trepidation for me. I didn’t want her to get caught up in all this bullshit. But having someone who I *knew* loved me unconditionally around was a rare treat. I was looking forward to it.

“Well, go on then. Get out of here,” I told him.

I had a lot of shit to think about and resolve, and I would feel better if I did it all myself.



But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was under siege.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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## NORA

I could hear Alexei's deputy talking about me as I left his office. Frankly, I didn't like the way the deputy looked at me like I was a piece of meat. It was by no means foreign to me, but I hated it all the same. To be honest, I was kind of dreading getting up on the pole. I thought I'd left that life behind me. Scrambling for money. Taking whatever I could get. But here I was, right back where I started, except now I was short one sister.

It was disappointing that I hadn't really learned anything from my sojourn to his office. The whole thing had been a waste of time. I almost blew my cover for nothing.

*I need to be more careful.*

I tried to think about what my next move would be. As I walked across the floor, I could see some of the girls warming up. Maybe if I spoke to them, I could learn something. I really hoped I would soon be one of them, so they would talk to me. I exited the club, collected my bike, and began to ride towards the hospital. I hoped to have enough time to eat lunch with Jodie before my shift started.

I was just pulling up at the hospital when my phone began to ring. I dug it out of my purse and saw that the number was unfamiliar.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Nora. Good news.”

My heart jumped. “Alexei.”

“Call me Boss.”

I was speechless for a moment, my mouth hanging open. “You mean I’m cleared to work?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” I closed my eyes, heaving a sigh of relief. “That’s great.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Um, now what?”

“Now you come by tonight and Monique will get you situated.”

“T-thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. You did this for yourself. You’re very talented. I feel confident that you’ll impress my audience.”

“No pressure,” I huffed nervously.

“*Right*, Nora. I’ll see you at eight?”

“Y-yes.”

He laughed. “Good. Maybe we can pick up where we left off.”

“Maybe. I think I might be busy working, though.”

“Don’t worry. I know your boss.” His voice dropped a little lower as he said that, and I had to fight an internal swoon.

“Oh, good for you.”

I needed to nip this flirtation in the bud, but I wasn’t sure how.

“Goodbye, Nora.”

“Bye.” I hung up fast, my heart racing.

I decided to forgo lunch with Jodie. She’d take one look at my face and make me spill everything. I wasn’t sure I was ready to do that. Especially since my knees were weak from just talking to him on the phone. That deep, honey baritone was like an eargasm, driving me a little crazy every time he spoke to me. And when he pitched his voice low and intimate like that... I hardly knew what to do with myself.

Instead, I went and changed into my uniform and went out to the ward. I had a Snickers bar in my locker and an energy drink. That would have to do for lunch. I didn’t think I could digest anything more substantial. My stomach was all twisted into knots. I was alternately terrified and turned on by the thought of seeing Alexei this evening. At the thought of getting on stage. Maybe he’d watch me perform. Maybe he’d touch himself while he was watching me perform—

I ran into a trolley and that brought me back to the present with a bang. “Sorry! Oh god, sorry,” I murmured to no one as I slipped past the trolley and went to see my first patient.

“Iris Martel?”

A petite, red-headed woman covered in freckles lifted her hand shyly.

“That’s me.”

I smiled. “Come with me.”

Iris had a boil that needed lancing, and a persistent headache she could not get rid of. I settled her in one of the examination rooms, ready for the doctor. I figured he’d need my help, so I waited for him to show up. I could see that it was Dr. Hutton on duty, which was exactly what I needed—a reminder why I should not mess with men.

He swept into the room, a huge grin on his face. “Hello, Iris. I hear you might need some help. Nurse Nora taking good care of you?”

Iris nodded shyly, though Dr. Hutton did not so much as look at me. With an inner sigh, I readied his surgical tray. We lanced the boil and then he nodded and left. “I leave you in good hands, Iris. Your script has been sent to the pharmacy.”

Iris blushed bright red. “Thank you, doctor.”

I cleaned her up, showed her where she could get her prescription and then left her to get dressed. As I was leaving her cubicle, someone pulled me aside and I squeaked with surprise.

“Shh! Everyone will hear you,” Dr. Hutton said, a satisfied smile creeping onto his face.

I rolled my eyes. “Cole, what the fuck are you doing?”

“I wanted to talk to you.” He trailed a finger down my arm, and I stepped out of his reach. “You’re looking good today. You smell good, too.”

I snorted derisively. “Really, Cole? We’re at work.”

“That didn’t stop you before.”

“Yeah well, I’m older now. I make better decisions. Let go of my arm.”

“Come out with me this evening. Let’s have drinks.”

“I’m busy.”

“Whatever it is, cancel it.”

I gave him a look. “You overestimate your importance in my life, Cole.”

“Come on, Nora... let’s give us a real chance.”

“I can’t, Cole. Don’t ask me that.”

He sighed impatiently. “Don’t tell me you’re still grieving. It’s been months.”



“Let go of me.” I pulled my arm roughly out of his hands. I looked him in the eye. “Do you remember the first time we tried this dating thing? It didn’t work out too well then, did it?”

He had the grace to look abashed.

Cole and I dated for three months. Rather, he wooed me. Took me to Lizzo concerts and date nights at jazz clubs. We played mini golf and went bowling. It was all going swimmingly, and then I invited him over to my place. We kissed, he put his hand between my legs and rubbed my clit. I put my hand on him... and he was limp.

I went down on my knees and sucked him off as if my life depended on it. Still nothing. He pushed me away roughly, making me fall on my elbow—that hurt like a motherfucker—and stormed out. He then proceeded to ignore me for months.

The whole thing played havoc with my self-esteem. Jodie and I grew closer during that time, because I’d take any opportunity to steal down to the morgue and hide. She talked me off the ledge, convinced me that it wasn’t me, it was him. I wasn’t about to put myself through that again.

Not long after that whole thing, Celia disappeared, so I really didn’t have time to see to a man’s ego. Especially when he just came up to me one day, acting as if nothing had happened. That behavior was too erratic for me.

“I have to go. Patients to see and all that.”

“Hey.” He gripped my hand as I turned away. “You’ll think about tonight?”

The man was *persistent*.

I shook my head. “No, Cole. The answer is *no*.”

I snatched my hand out of his and went to attend to my next patient. I just hoped Cole wouldn’t make the rest of my shift unbearable. I hated to think that I might arrive at my first day at Pandemonium all frazzled and exhausted from fielding pot shots and subs.

Thankfully, I was mostly occupied with triage, and I didn’t have to interact too much with Cole. Once I had my break, I snuck down to the morgue for five minutes of peace. I forgot that I was hiding things from Jodie.

“Hey, girl! Long time no lunch.”

I blushed. “Oh uh... sorry. I was late today. Couldn’t spare the time.”

She gave me a concerned look. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“You look kinda...”

“Long day.”

“How goes the search for Celia? Any leads?”

I shook my head.

“Come on Nora, I know you’re up to something. What is it?”

I shook my head again. “Nothing.”

She squared me with a look and all I could do was sigh and admit, “Nothing I can tell you about yet.”

Jodie pulled me right into her lap. “How about this.” She put her arms around me, holding on tight. “I won’t let go until you *tell me* what you’re up to.”

I laughed helplessly. “Really, Jodie?”

“Yes. I know that look. You’re doing something incredibly stupid or extremely dangerous and I want to know what it is.”

I expelled a loud breath, dropping my shoulders in defeat. “Fine. You want to know?”

“Yes.”

“I got a job at the club where Celia worked. I’m gonna look for clues.”

“You got a job? Doing what? Waitressing?”

I shook my head. “Dancing.”

“You mean *stripping*.”

“Yeah.” I held my breath, waiting to hear her judgement.

“And will you be able to pull it off? You’re not exactly an exhibitionist.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to.”

She drew away trying to take a better look at me. “You sound determined.”

“I am.”

“Well... what can I do to help?”

I kissed her cheek. “You’re doing it. It means a lot that you’re not discouraging me.”

Jodie sighed. “You’re stubborn. I don’t think I could change your mind anyway. When do you start?”

“Tonight.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you ready?”

I shrugged. “No idea. Guess I’ll have to get on the pole and see.”

“Do you have a costume?”

I covered my eyes with my hands. “Oh, god. No, I do not.”

“Hey, *relax!* The club probably provides something.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. If I was a stripper, wouldn’t I know if they provided something or not?”

“Wanna google it?”

“Yeah, let’s.”

We spent some time googling strippers, strip clubs, reading yelp reviews, just to try to get an idea of what I was walking into. Burlesque was a different animal to stripping. It was more of a performance. I couldn’t believe that I didn’t know these things. My sister had worked at that club for two years.

“We’ll just have to wait and see.” Jodie patted my back. “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. You have makeup?”

I gave her a despairing look. “I am already fucking this up,” I said miserably.

“Hey, hey, stop. I got some Fenty body lava on me, some foundation, some lip paint. You’ll be all right.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Jodie.”

“I’m your friend, and I’m here for you. Now, do you need help with the makeup?”

“No. I think I can manage to rub some body goop all over me.” I yawned, stretching, and blinking the sleep from my eyes. “The problem is, I’m already tired. I was working with Cole today.”

“Ugh.”

“Exactly. And it was as nightmarish as you would expect.”

“I don’t get that guy. Does he want you or not? Can he not get it up, or is he just not that into you? Did you ever talk about it?”

I gave her a look. “He acts like the whole thing never happened. Makes me feel crazy.”

“You should leave early. You know, get your head together.”

“Yeah... though I’m not sure how much good that will do,” I said wistfully.

“Why?”

I jerked, remembering that I hadn’t told Jodie about Alexei and the weird

sexual energy that insisted on sizzling between us. I'm sure if I told her she'd lose her shit.

“Oh nothing. Just nervous about tonight.”

She rubbed my back soothingly. “You'll be okay. You got this. You're gonna kill it, and then you'll find out exactly what happened to Celia.”

“I really hope so.”

“I *know* you will.”

I got off her lap and went to sit in the chair opposite. “Enough about me. Tell me what you're up to tonight.”

“Got a date.”

“Really? Where'd you meet this one?”

“Tinder.”

I laughed. “Of course, you did. Is she hot?”



“She’s smart and warm and funny...” Jodie grinned. “And yeah, she’s smoking hot.”

“Shallow ass.”

“Hey! I started with *she’s smart!*”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s the first thing you noticed about her.”

“It was. Her caption was hilarious.”

“Anyway, I hope you have a good time and that this one sticks.”

Jodie held up her hand. “Fingers crossed.”

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## ALEXEI

I was happy that I had decided to go in a different direction than my father when it came to running my business. Instead of antagonizing everyone else, I preferred to cooperate. Of course, the ultimate aim was to take over the whole of New York but... my peers didn't need to know that. So, I had contacts for the Bloods as well as the Latin Kings on speed dial. They were the biggest gangs operating in the area with established lines of supply.

Still, it was high time I became my own fucking connect.

My first call was to Jimmy Two Fingers, who was the King of Queens.

“Alexei. Heard about the incident two nights ago. Good to know you're not a doornail.”

I laughed, though I was far from amused. “Yeah well... you'd have to wake up a lot earlier than that to finish me. You and I know that's not how things are done. Heard anything about it?”

“Nothing I can tell you on an open line.”

“Yeah. I'm holding court tonight, why not come through?”

“Hey, you don’t have to ask me twice.”

“Heads up, I’m gonna be inviting The Prophet too.”

“Eh, no problem. But none of those Los Niños guys?”

I laughed this time with derision. “Too small time for me, my friend.”

“Yeah. A nuisance.”

“That’s why I keep telling you guys…”

“Yeah, yeah. See you tonight.”

A couple more phone calls, and I was feeling a little more settled in my skin. Once I knew why the deal had gone south, I could deal with it. I didn’t want to let this fester.

Picking up my drink, I got to my feet and headed to the floor. The early evening crowd was usually depressing. I walked the floor, nodding to the girls on the poles, seeing the stage being prepped for the show at 8:30. Kirill appeared on my left, walking with me like an assistant.

I noted that the wall hangings were looking a little threadbare.

“When’s the last time we decorated this place?”

Kirill gave me a look. “When we opened.”

“Hm, might be time to renovate.”

“We’d have to close the club.”

“No, we wouldn’t. We can do it a floor at a time. Find someone.”

“Yes, boss.”

“I’ll be using my booth tonight. Make sure it’s ready.”

“Will do.”

I nodded. “Good. I’m going up to see Jake.”

Kirill bowed his head, moving aside to let me pass. I went to the lift and up to the attic floor where the administration wing was housed. Accounting, HR—all the men and women in suits labored from up there. Jake and I were

scheduled to go over the accounts. Just because we were laundering money didn't mean I didn't want to make a profit.

Time flew as we looked over the gain and loss columns, and in the blink of an eye, it was eleven p.m. and time for the show to start. I could admit to being a little excited to see what Nora would look like in her outfit, dancing up on stage. I told myself it was because of the draw she'd inevitably be... but I knew better. I wanted to see her for *me*.

Maybe later, we could go back to my office and consummate this bitch. Then she could stop taking up so much real estate in my mind.

I emerged from the elevator and immediately spotted The Prophet and his entourage. Kirill had them well in hand, but I pasted a smile on my face and went to greet my guests. The Prophet ran the Mad Hoodlum Crips over on eastern Park Slope. He was a bit of a connoisseur when it came to men's suits, and he liked his men to dress just so. He was pretty old-school, a believer in honor amongst thieves. On most Wednesdays, we played chess together in the park and talked business. The park was too open for this, though. I needed a place where *I* controlled the environment.

He frequented my establishment quite a bit, but this was the first time I'd invited him to come, so it was understandable if he was confused.

"We need to talk," I told him under cover of the music. "About the attack on me the other night."

He frowned. "I thought it was just a drug deal gone wrong."

“The drug deal was rigged I think, and the gunmen were too prepared to shoot.”

The Prophet frowned. “What are you thinking? Someone want your territory?”

“I’m not sure yet. Was hoping you’d heard something.”

He pursed his lips, thinking hard as he watched Margot—a tall, blonde, buxom pole dancer—spin round and round seemingly effortlessly doing Ankle hangs, ballerina spins and Allegra, her long legs in eight-inch heels making her seem as if she was as tall as the eight-foot pole.

“Streets aren’t saying much about it. Just that you wiped them out.” The Prophet kept his voice low.

I inclined my head in acknowledgement, taking a sip of my drink. “Yeah. That part is true.”

“So now what? You short a connect?” He took a hit of his toke, blowing smoke into the air.

I sighed but didn’t answer him. It was none of his business. We were friends, but that didn’t mean he needed to know all my problems. He gave me a shrewd look. “There’s a new player in town. Name of Tommy. I hear he came out of Chicago. Gets his supply from the Colombians.”

“What does he want in New York?” I asked.

The Prophet shrugged. “Heard Chicago got too hot for him.”

“Hm,” I said noncommittally. “Might look him up.”

“If you do, tell him I sent you.” He winked at me.

I leaned towards him, looking him in the eye. “Why? You getting a cut of any new business he does?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

I smiled. Yeah, The Prophet wasn't about to tell me all his business either. Just then, I noted Kirill approaching with Jimmy Two Fingers and his lieutenant. The lieutenant seemed much more interested in Margot's show than he was in taking in his surroundings.

“Streets are also sayin' that Two Fingers wants to get in bed with the Dominicans. You down for that?” The Prophet murmured.

I gave him a look and shrugged, one shouldered. “No skin off my nose so long as they stick to their territories.”



The Prophet made a non-committal sound. We might've been cordial, but that didn't mean suspicions did not remain. Two Fingers took a seat and nodded to us both. "Yo, guys. You met Mr. Michael Bruce yet?" he asked.

I leaned forward. "The new Chief of Police?"

Two Fingers grinned. "That's him. Yo, Michael! Say hi to the boys who're gonna be paying your salary."

That was another reason for our alliance. The cops needed to have... liaison with the gangs, and we needed to exert some control over them. The fact that we presented a united front helped us gain their respect. Like a union.

I held out my hand. "Mr. Bruce. Pleased to meet you. I was planning to pay you a courtesy visit soon. Thanks for saving me a trip."

He shook my hand, his face a bit flushed. "Yeah, no need to come to my office."

"Oh, of course not. I meant at your suite at the Hyatt... I thought to send you a gift. What flesh are you in the market for?"

He blanched, looking out of his depth. The old Chief of Police had just retired and had fortunately picked a replacement who was amenable to continue his arrangement with us. I had a feeling, however, that Michael

wasn't as accustomed to the level of debauchery that his predecessor had been.

"I-I'm married."

"Great. Your wife can come too. We don't judge," I said. The discomfort on his face brought a smile to mine.

The Prophet nudged me as he leaned forward towards the Chief of Police as well. "He's teasing. Pay him no mind. Hi, Mr. Bruce. I'm Mohamed. Everyone just calls me The Prophet."

"I see. Pleased to meet you."

Kirill bent down to the chief. "What will you have to drink, Mr. Bruce?"

Two Fingers and I exchanged glances. He cocked an eyebrow before turning to the cop. "Hey, so my friend here had to clear out some garbage two nights ago in Manhattan. You heard of that?"

Michael swallowed. "Er, yeah. Gangland shooting. Drugs were involved. No pedestrians injured but several neighbors did call the cops. We had to file a report."

"And? What have the cops concluded happened?"

Michael shrugged. “Like I said, gang violence. Obviously, drugs were involved. They turned on one another and killed each other off.”

“Tragic,” I said drily.

“Yeah. I mean, all the people are dead, so case closed.”

“Very efficient police work.” I grinned, nodding to Kirill. He disappeared for a while and reappeared with a small pouch, which he put in Michael’s hands. “For your trouble.”

The cop nodded and smiled, his eyes lighting up.

*Ah, there’s the greed I’ve been looking for.*

“Thank you,” he said all good and proper.

I nodded, leaning back, and exchanging a loaded glance with The Prophet. The new Chief of Police would not be a problem. Margot left the stage, and the lights went down.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Monique’s smoky sultry voice cooed from the speakers. “We have a new dancer tonight, one who is going to blow... your minds. Put your hands together for the sultry temptress, Ariel!”

I cocked a brow. That was a new name. The spotlight came on, highlighting a figure on stage, standing legs akimbo. It was Nora. She wore black leather chaps and boots, the twin curves of her ass on display in a black thong. She wore a cropped, black leather cowboy waistcoat with long fringes hanging down to just above her ass, showing glimpses of her naked back. On her head was a cowboy hat, her brunette hair tied in a low, tight bun.

The music began, Dolly Parton begging Jolene not to take her man.

*Interesting song choice.*

I leaned in, and in my periphery, I could see The Prophet do the same. Nora swung her hips slowly from side to side before going faster and faster. Pretty soon she was snapping her hip, her butt cheeks shaking rhythmically.

There were people hooting and hollering all around the room. I didn't like it. I mean, the part of me that was all business *loved* it, but the leering made the rest of me want to take out my gun and shoot every single person in the room. It was disconcerting to realize that I'd grown possessive of a piece of ass I hadn't even had.

How pathetic was that?

Nora was good. She executed a graceful spin around the pole, showing us the front of her thong that had a silver star right in the middle. She spun her cowboy hat around, in sync with her hips, before giving a graceful kick and going down in a split, a smile splitting her face, white, shiny teeth on display.

She wore blood red lipstick and her skin glowed gold.

Her cupid's bow lips were calling to me. Calling to my cock. As she showed the room just how *flexible* she could be the urge to claim her—to shove my dick down her throat and fuck her mouth so hard I was painted red by the time I was through—was difficult to ignore.

She slid to her feet, did some complicated footwork that caused her tits to jiggle and jerk about. The room was cheering, and I was ready to kill them all. Even Kirill, who should fucking know better, was whistling and catcalling.

She instituted a complicated twirl that ended with her previously knotted hair swinging free in an arc like magic, her waistcoat off and the only thing covering her breasts being the fall of her mane. I shot to my feet but then remembered myself and sat back down.

*Fuck.*

I wasn't exactly in the mood for sharing, and Nora Walsh was not made to be shared. The Prophet leaned in towards me. "Boy, give me a price. How much to spend the night with this one?"

I clenched my jaw, my nails digging into my palm as I told myself that I couldn't exactly punch him in the face. It was a perfectly legitimate request, though we don't obligate our dancers to do that if they themselves are not so inclined.

“Now, Mo... you know we don’t do that shit around here. This is a clean place.”

The Prophet gave the Chief of Police a glance. “Okay, if that’s how you wanna play it. You don’t mind if I ask her out though, do you?”

Try as I might, I could not bring myself to shake my head. “I don’t know. Let’s give her a minute. It’s her first day.”

He sighed. “Fine. But I’m calling dibs.”

*No. You’re not.*

I just smiled coldly. I wasn’t ready to declare my own interest publicly, but I was pretty sure that if anyone tried to touch her, I might be breaking fingers. I decided that it would be best if I left now.

I leaned in to speak to all three of them. “Hey, I gotta go deal with some shit. Enjoy the show.”

They nodded in acknowledgement, and I stood up quickly, walking away. On stage, I could see that Nora was just wrapping up her set. She had more than exceeded expectations and I was afraid that just didn’t apply to her dancing alone.

“Fuck,” I murmured to myself as I opened my office door and shut it firmly

behind me.

I had made up my mind. This thing with Nora was getting resolved tonight.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## NORA

I stared at myself in the mirror, feeling like a deer caught in headlights. My makeup had held up well, my lips still shiny bright red, the body lava making my skin glow faintly gold. My eyes were open too wide, caught between extreme shock and exhilaration. I knew my set had been well received, and the resulting adulation had filled me with a sense of power I'd never really felt before.

They loved me.

I'd been so nervous and worried, so sure I was about to be exposed as the biggest fraud that ever lived. I just thanked God that the costume Monique gave me to wear was comfortable. And then I stepped on stage and my inner exhibitionist took over.

To hear that crowd cheer for me, throw money at me, appreciate me... it was mind-blowing. I was still very much on a high, floating on a feeling of disbelief, and yeah, maybe even joy. I looked around me, picking up the bottle of water by my makeup bag and drank deeply, trying to come back down to earth.

The Pandemonium changing rooms were quite luxurious, all things considered. There was even a shower and a steam room, as well as individual dressers. They were unisex, but everyone was respectful. Monique ran a tight ship. I liked her. I wish more clubs had a Monique to oversee the dancers.

Still, I had questions.

Like how exactly did Celia slip through the cracks.

“Hey. You’re Nora, right?” A tall girl with an afro and the most gorgeous lips I’d ever seen took a seat beside me.

“Yeah, I’m Nora. How did you know?”

“Monique. She said there was a new girl that I should watch out for.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Why?”

Suddenly, someone bumped into my chair from behind, an elbow in my neck making me jerk forward and almost hit my head on the table. “Oh, sorry! Didn’t see you.”

I turned to see the girl from Alexei’s office looking down at me with malice in her eyes. I glared and didn’t say a thing.

“Maybe try not to disappear into the furniture so much,” she said before sauntering off. I continued to glare at her.

The girl beside me laughed. “You can’t let Jules get to you. She revels in it. Thinks she’s the teacher’s pet or something just because she’s sucking the boss’ dick.” She said that last part louder than necessary and Jules held up a middle finger.

My eyes shifted to— “Hey what’s your name?” I asked.

“Oh.” She grinned. “How remiss of me. I’m Marci. Veteran dancer.”

“Hey, Marci. Pleased to meet you.” I reached out my hand for her to shake. She looked exceedingly amused but shook it, nonetheless.

“Likewise. So, what’s Jules’ problem with you?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Well, I guess she interrupted my audition and made... assumptions.”

Marci’s eyes widened. “Audition?”

“Yeah, you know. For the boss. He asked me to dance for him.”

“Did he now?” Marci grinned wide. “I bet Jules was *pissed*.” She folded her elbow on the desk, leaned her head in her palm, crossed her legs and stared at me as if waiting for a bedtime story.

“I mean... I was just leaving. I pretty much made myself scarce since he was wanting to... you know, touch me.”

Marci laughed. “Oh, so you’ve caught his eye. I don’t know whether to give you condolences or congratulations.”

I leaned towards her since she’d given me an opening, “What do you mean by that?”

She gave me a shrug, her ebony skin shining flawlessly in the bright light. “I don’t mean anything by it. I mean, it’s not like he fucks his way through all the girls. But now and then, he picks one, and they always hope that they’ll be the one he’ll choose to have on his arm and not just on their knees in his office.” Marci cocked her eyebrow at me to make sure I understood.

I did.

They were sucking his cock under his desk like amateur porn hour.

“Anyway,” she continued, “they never last.”

“What a sad ending to the fairy tale.” I rolled my eyes.

Marci laughed. “That’s the spirit. And now that I think about it, Jules was watching your set, and so was the boss. Maybe she caught him looking a little too hard.” She winked, giving me a salacious grin.

“So, you’re saying I might be next?”

“I mean... it’s not like he’ll force you.”

“Has anyone ever said no to him?”

“Hm, not that I know of. He has that Tom Hardy thing going for him. You know, the stoic, silent type, except he looks like he could kill you in a minute.”

“*Except* the boss’ hair is platinum white and he’s like... six-foot-five.” I shrugged. “I don’t know. He looks more like Michele Morrone to me anyway. Not Hardy.”

Marci laughed. “Morrone is hot yeah, but that’s not really it. He doesn’t have that cold, intense, animal sex energy that Hardy has.”

I had to concede that it was true, as well as begrudgingly acknowledging that, yeah, maybe it *was* a perfect description of Alexei.

*Cold, intense, animal sex energy.*

It would explain why I’d been daydreaming about having him in my bed

since we met. Why my pussy insisted on getting wet at the very thought of him. It wasn't my fault. It was all him.

"When I first came in, he fired someone on the floor. Her boyfriend was fighting with another guy over her."

"Oh, yeah. Poor Ruby. She has a kid you know. Just trying to feed her. But the boyfriend was just so jealous. Of course, he's also a drunk and jobless." Marci rolled her eyes.

"Aren't they always?"

"You can set your tips by it."

I snorted. "So, if he doesn't like relationships on the floor then...?"

"Why does he do it? Hypocrisy." Marci shook her head huffing in amusement. "Of course, he doesn't really fire you for having a relationship. Only if it spills into the club." Her face became bleak, and she sighed. "There was a girl here, six months ago." She sighed again, shaking her head.

My heart began racing as I realized who she might be talking about, and I couldn't help clutching Marci's wrist. "What happened to her?"

Marci gave me a sharp look. "Nothing. She was just fired."

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and then opened them again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’d... uh, I just heard that one of the girls from here disappeared. Was it her?”

Marci pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I don’t know about disappeared. But she was definitely fired.”

“What happened?” I tried to sound casually curious about it.

“Alright so Celia—that was her name—she was like... mad talented, right? She’d get on the pole and the other dancers would stop to watch her. So Igor, who was like one of the guards or whatever, he started chasing her, you know buying her flowers, chocolates, just showering her with attention.” Marci waved her hands about in illustration, her long manicured nails clicking like crab fingers.

I nodded keeping my eyes on hers. “Mmh?”

“Yeah, so at first she was all like, ‘I’m not interested’.” Marci rolled her eyes again. “But she starts watching out for him, starts blushing when he’s around. I mean you could just see that she was falling for him.”

I leaned on the table, my arms crossed on the linoleum. Behind us, the room was buzzing with conversation, people calling out to each other. I didn’t worry that anyone was eavesdropping. “When was that?”

Marci's brow furrowed as she thought. "Oh, like about a year ago. Soon she was letting him buy her drinks after the show, giggling with him at the bar and letting him buy all her lap dances."

I nodded impatiently, willing her to get to the good part.

"Next thing we know, she's moving in with him." Marci gave me a look that said more clearly than words what she thought about that.

"Was Igor like," I lowered my voice, "a criminal type or...?"

Marci shrugged. "All I know is, he worked security for the club."

"Okay, and then what happened?" I turned on my stool, crossing my legs as I faced her.

"What always happens. Things started to sour. Pretty soon, they were snapping at each other in public. There was one incident where Igor was openly flirting with someone else, and Celia poured a drink in his lap." She leaned towards the mirror, refreshing her lipstick.

I drew a shaky breath meant to steady me. "Then what?"

"Well, I tried to talk to her, y'know. Get her off the ledge. But the damned fool had gone and fallen in love with him. She would watch him go to the guard room with some girl who didn't want to pay the cover charge —you



know, *to pay him in kind*—and she'd stumble and get her routine all wrong. It was painful to watch.”

*God, why didn't she come to me?*

I swallowed the lump in my throat and willed myself not to cry.

“Anyway, push comes to shove right, and they're screaming at each other like a couple of banshees right there in front of God and everybody. I think there were some big shots in the club too that day. The boss was incandescent with rage. Fired them both on the spot.”

“Shit.” I turned back to the mirror to finish removing the mascara from my eyes mostly to hide the emotion I was feeling from Marci.

“Yeah. So, after a few days I call to check on her, just to see if she's okay, because I know she was living with Igor. She doesn't pick up. So, I go over to her old place. Her neighbor told me she hadn't seen Celia in a minute. So, I didn't know what else to do but keep calling. She probably left town, doesn't want any reminders. But it'd be nice if she answered one of my texts, just so I know she's okay.”

A tear escaped my eye, and I wiped it away quickly. “Yeah. That'd be nice.”

Marci gave me a concerned look. “Hey, are you okay? It's not always that bad around here. We're mostly a good crowd, look out for each other and all. You don't need to worry.”

Marci's kindness was making me feel even more emotional. I wished I could tell her the truth. I shook my head. "Sorry, I guess... I guess I'm just really up and down. This was my first performance in a while, and I recently broke up with a boyfriend so..."

"Aww, girl..." she squeezed my shoulder. "Fuck him, right? You're gonna be all right."

I huffed quietly. "I hope so."

"You *will*." She looked me in the eye and waited until I nodded in agreement. I reached out and enveloped her in a hug, as a silent thanks for the friend she tried to be to Celia.

Of course, her story had left me with more questions than answers.

I pulled back and wiped my eyes. We both laughed a bit as I took a deep breath and put the emotion behind me. "Uh so, what about Igor? Have you seen him since?"

Marci snorted. "Bastard got rehired about two months later. He still works the floor."

"*What?*" I stared at her, aghast.

“Yeah.” She said sardonically, “Welcome to the patriarchy.”

Now I was mad.

What the fuck kind of boy’s club was this, and what exactly had they done with my sister? The urge to march to Alexei’s office, take him by his collar, and demand answers was strong. If I thought there was a snowball’s chance of getting an answer I would have done it. Maybe I needed to kidnap him, tie him up on a bed and just torture him until he gave me answers. Hell, it worked for Misery Chastain, right?

My mind couldn’t help but get sidetracked about what else I could do to him if he was tied up on a bed, but I violently pushed those thoughts away.

“Can I ask you something, Marci?”

“Yeah of course.” Her bright brown eyes rested on me with interest.

“Well, do things like this happen often? Like girls... disappearing?” I could hardly look her in the eye as I asked.

She frowned. “What? You mean like, are they being kidnapped or something?” She lowered her voice significantly.

I shrugged, my lips twisting as I nodded.

She gave me a concerned look. “No. That’s not what this is!” She laughed, patting my thigh. “God, I’ve really managed to scare you, haven’t I? I mean, Ruby was only the second girl to get fired this year. It’s not that serious. Mr. Levin just doesn’t like drama.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay.” I tried to smile. “I guess my imagination goes haywire sometimes.”

“Do you like him?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Who?”

“The boss. Is that why you’re so worried?”

“No!”

She gave me the side-eye.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Maybe?”

“Well... I’m not gonna tell you what to do or not to do, but just use your head is all I ask. And don’t move out of your own place!”

I laughed in resignation. “Yeah. Clearly.”

Jules passed my chair again, banging into it once more. This bullying was going to get old really fast. I turned to glare at her. “Would you quit it?”

She cocked her hip at me. “Excuse you?”

“Stop hitting my chair,” I growled.

“Well, excuse me, princess. I didn’t realize I was disturbing you.” She scoffed, waving her hand. “You think you’re such a big deal after *one* performance?”

I rolled my eyes, turning away from her and really regretting saying anything. She was clearly looking for an opening. Just then, Monique came into the room, clapping her hands to get out attention.

“Okay girls and *gurrls*, tonight was another great night. Good job. I’m in my office for the next half hour, if anyone has any issues they need to discuss.” She turned and left. Jules immediately followed her, much to my relief.

I picked up my purse, collecting the money I’d made on the floor, and stuffed it inside. Marci was doing the same by my side. I decided to shower when I got home so I could slide straight into bed after. I was wearing my sweats and my bike was outside. I wondered if I should ask Monique to keep my money for me. I didn’t want to get robbed on the way home.

“Hey Marci, do you guys usually just walk out of here with all this money?”

“Yeah.” Marci gave her a look. “Wait, how are you getting home?”

“Bike.”

“Bike like...”

“Bicycle.”

Marci threw back her head and laughed. “No, girl. Park your bike in the locker room and take an Uber. Collect your bike in the morning. Don’t ask for trouble.”

I nodded. “You’re probably right.” I sighed feeling dissatisfied with my progress. I felt strongly that I should go and look for Igor, maybe corner him and find out what he knew. I gave Marci a sidelong glance. I didn’t see how I could ask her what Igor looked like without arousing her suspicion. So instead, I got up and left the changing rooms. In my sweats, I *hoped* I was unrecognizable from ‘Ariel’. I went up to the bar where the bartenders were all busy. I sat down waiting until someone noticed me.

One of the girls smiled, coming up to me. “What can I ‘getcha, *Ariel*?”

So much for not being recognized.

“Um, I was looking for a guy named Igor? He’s supposed to work security.”

“Oh, Igor’s not in today. Sorry. Anything I can do for you?” She gave me a flirty smile.

I swallowed. “Nah. I’m fine. Thanks. Maybe just a glass of water?”

She poured me a glass and I drank it thoughtfully. Fine, Igor wasn’t here... but Alexei was.

If I had to seduce him to get my answers then, so be it.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## ALEXEI

I took a hit from my cigar and sat back in my chair, looking up at the ceiling, thinking a little too hard. Yeah, this Tommy guy was in business with The Prophet, but I'd made some phone calls and his stuff was good. Furthermore, everyone I spoke to said he was a stand-up guy and looking to become *the* go-to guy for all the city's cocaine needs.

I sighed, wondering if I might offer him a partnership instead of buying from him. I had been thinking about becoming my own connect, and I had quite a bit to offer. Transportation on my many long-haul trucks, or the ships that plied between Russia and the East Coast.

Taking a deep breath, I lifted my phone to call him. There was a knock at the door. I frowned. "Who is it?"

To my annoyance, the person did not announce themselves, merely pushed open the door and poked her head in. "Hey," Jules said with a saucy smile. "I'm done for the night. Do you need me for anything?" She batted her lashes at me.

I couldn't help comparing her unfavorably with Nora. Don't get me wrong—the red hair sweeping halfway down her back, the double D's, the grey eyes made for a pretty picture. Very pretty. But those eyes were vacuous, avaricious, and grasping. The blow jobs weren't exactly mind-blowing, and the pushiness was beginning to get on my nerves.

“If I needed you, I’d have sent for you.”

Instead of taking the hint and going away, she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. “I can help you relax a bit. You look tense.”

My eyebrows crunched in annoyance as she approached my desk. Of course, I look tense. I’m a mob boss. It’s in the job description. “Hey, listen... get out before I throw you out,” I said coldly.

She got on her knees. “Baby, come on. Lemme help you out.” She reached for my belt and began to undo it. I felt strongly that Nora would never do shit like this.

“Quite acting desperate. You’re boring me.”

She got my fly open and practically swallowed me.

I watched as she sucked with everything she had and tried to look up at me beneath long lashes. I was almost amused. I wasn’t one to refuse this, and I couldn’t help but harden in her mouth. But I just couldn’t get into it.

I closed my eyes, and thought of *her* immediately; her saucy looks, her graceful body, the way she was both interested and not...in my mind’s eye, Jules’ hands were immediately replaced by Nora’s elegant ones. She pumped me as her small mouth did its best to take me in as deep as possible, those dark eyes growing inky with desire.

“Yeah, just like that,” I groaned.

“Told you I knew what was good for you. Fuck my mouth. Please.”

Jules’ grating voice brought me crashing back down to earth. She was trying too hard to make it porn sexy—she tried too hard in general. I grasped her hair and pulled her off my dick.

“What...?”

“Shut up,” I growled. “I said get out.”

She stared at me in disbelief, then looked down at my erect dick.

“You’re not serious.”

I leaned forward, narrowing my eyes as I looked directly into hers. “It seems we have a misunderstanding here. You seem to think you’re qualified to tell me what I’m thinking.”

Her face changed from sweet to thunderous in an instant. “It’s that stupid new girl, isn’t it? You’re thirsting over her like she’s *someone*.”

“You really have the wrong idea about our relationship if you think you can talk to me like that.” I shot to my feet and pulled her head back by the hair—far enough for it to hurt. “So, here’s the thing, get out of my office or else you’re not only fired, but I’ll make sure you never work in this town again.”

She blinked a few times, fear entering her eyes. “A-alright.” She swallowed hard. The cords of her neck stretched almost to breaking point. The temptation to keep going and just... snap her neck was strong. I flung her away from me in disgust.

“Take your shit and go.”

But no, the girl was even dumber than she looked and just had to try and get in the last word. “You’ll regret this. She’s no good for you, that girl. She asks too many questions. She’s been asking the other girls all sorts of things. You can’t trust her.”

I rolled my eyes. “This is getting embarrassing. Just go already, Jules. Or do you not need a job?”

She backed up slowly towards the door, but still kept talking. “I’m the only one you can trust, baby. I got your best interests at heart. I love you!”

I threw back my head and laughed. “You’re funny, Jules. It’s a shame that’s all you are.”

The anger came back to her face, and she flushed bright red. “You’re such a

bastard. I hate you!”

“That’s more like it. Now out.”

Jules began to cry. “Please, Alexei. We have such a good thing going.”

“*Had*. Past tense. Goodbye.” I hadn’t really planned on breaking up with her permanently. After all, she had been an obedient little bitch, but I’m not one for theatrics. “Now, are you going to be good and go about your business or do you need me to fire you?”

She gasped, turning towards the door with a huff and yanking it open so hard it banged against the opposite wall. The door didn’t do anything to her. She slammed it behind her, and I winced. That was unnecessary.

Bet *Nora* wouldn’t have done that shit.

I was back to thinking about her, wondering what it was about her that had me in a chokehold.

*It’s not just one thing, I thought. It’s the whole package.*

She was bright. She was witty. She looked at me as if she was fascinated not just with the package but by the man underneath. She made me want her. And I was gonna have her.

I was gonna have her tonight.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## NORA

A large shape came to stand beside me at the bar. I turned, already sighing with tiredness to tell them I was off duty when my eyes landed on the guy from Alexei's office. He was watching me and smiling.

"That was a cool performance," he said in a slightly Russian accent.

"Thanks."

"I'm Kirill by the way."

"Nora."

"Yeah, I know. Boss' new toy."

I both blushed and frowned, flustered and confused by his words. *Toy?*

"I beg your pardon?"

He laughed. "Come on, I saw you guys in his office. Y'all were getting hot



and heavy, weren't you?"

I gave him a challenging stare. "Why don't you ask your boss?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "No wonder he likes you. You got some moxie in you."

I quirked an eyebrow, taking a sip of my water. "Thank you?"

"Anyways, I'm here to tell you that the boss wants to see you in VIP."

My heart immediately began to race. "Why?"

He gave me a side-eye. "Why do you *think*?"

He was beginning to annoy me. "Look, despite what you might think, our relationship isn't like that."

He made a skeptical sound, eyebrows raised, a slightly amused lilt to his mouth. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

“Well, he still wants to see you.”

“Fine.” I let go of my glass and made to walk away. He grabbed my hand.

“You should know... the girl before you, she was discarded like yesterday’s news. No notice, no nothin’. You know why?”

He was holding my arm so tight it hurt. I looked up, met his eyes. “No. But I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

He smiled cynically. “Cause she fell for him. So, watch yourself.”

*Yeah, no chance of that. That guy might have had my sister killed.*

“Thanks for the warning but like I said...” I shrugged. “We don’t have that kind of relationship.”

He snorted derisively before letting go of my arm. I walked away as quickly as possible while trying to not make it seem like I was running away. There was just something about that guy that made me itch. The guy guarding the VIP section blocked my way at first.

“I’ve been summoned by the boss,” I said.

He peered into my face, seemed to recognize me, nodded, and stood back, unhooking the velvet rope. I stepped into VIP.

It was another world.

Everything was steeped in luxury. Thick, luscious, soft carpeting lined every inch of the room. There were soft black, brown, and white leather sofas dotting the space in private clusters. I mean, there weren't curtains or anything, but the way the furniture was arranged, it was possible to get a lap dance without necessarily having the whole room witness it. I wondered how they kept the white clean.

Alexei was seated in an alcove, concealed from view by a strategically placed plant. He lifted his hand and waved at me, and I made my way across the room feeling my cheeks flush, taking care not to meet anyone's eyes. I came to a stop beside the plant and stared at him.

He smiled at me, beckoning me towards him.

I drew a breath and stepped closer, coming to a stop beside him.

“Sit down.”

I sank down into the downy softness of the leather sofa and found myself inadvertently relaxing with the relief of having my body cradled so lovingly.

He smiled. “Can I get you a drink?”

“I’m good.” I needed to keep my head straight.

Despite my outward ease, a tension wound my insides as I waited to hear why I was here.

“Suit yourself.” He snapped his fingers and a waiter appeared, pouring a blue drink from a Cîroc bottle into a glass filled with ice cubes. He mixed it with a colorless liquid from another bottle and then stuck a lemon into the glass.

“Enjoy your drink, Mr. Levin.”

“Thank you, Magnus.”

The waiter smiled and nodded before taking off. Alexei took a sip of his drink. “So, about your performance.”

I nodded. “Yeah?” my heart began to race.

“Very good. Ten out of ten. You had all the men wanting you, ready to risk it all for a night with you. Well done.” His eyes flicked over my body—his eyes dark, unreadable.

I swallowed down my relief at his words. “Thanks.”

“However...”

*Oh, here it comes.*

He took another sip of his drink. “I didn’t like it.”

*Shit.*

“You’re a very talented dancer, Nora, but I don’t want anyone to see you naked but me.”

I blinked at him, confusion drawing my eyebrows together. “Um...”

He laughed, soft and cynical. “Believe me, I do not like that I feel this way, but it is what it is. So...” He turned in his seat so he was facing me, his leg bent on the sofa between us. “I don’t want you to dance anymore. At least...” He grimaced. “Well, you can dance, but you can’t strip.”

“Is that allowed?” I asked stupidly.

His lips tipped up into a smirk. “Boss says yes.”

I blushed, feeling a little stupid. “I... don’t know what you want from me.”

He took a deep breath, “I want...” He trailed off, and I felt that pause in my core. Then he shook his head and wrapped his hand around my neck. “How about I show you?”

He pulled me forward and kissed me.

At first, I was stiff with shock, and then I began to thaw out, only to realize that I was surrounded by him. His woody aromatic scent was familiar, expensive. I took a deep breath, savoring the strong notes of lemon, mint, pink pepper, and grapefruit.

He was delicious, and I wanted to devour him. *Bleu de Chanel*. I’d smelled it before—my boss was a fan. It was as if someone took all my favorite baked goods, infused them with male musk. I was intoxicated and my insides were soft, mushy, and needy with the need for more. Then it hit me that he was *kissing* me. His lips were surprisingly soft as they moved on mine, and I parted my lips a bit to give him access to my mouth. He didn’t hesitate to dive in, and I ended up clinging to his shirt while he plundered my mouth.

He pushed me back, breathing hard. His hand around my neck kept me steady.

His eyes burned into mine as he whispered, “It’s going to be you and me, baby. You don’t get naked in front of anyone else. You can continue to dance with your clothes on if you want to.”

“Okay,” I croaked, I could hardly think.

“Good. Now, get on your knees.” He pointed at his lap with his chin. I looked down and saw how aroused he was. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry. His hand was still on my neck, and he squeezed a little.

“Come on...” he said, his voice strained.

I looked into his face, seeing the barely leashed passion there and knew that this wasn't just a power trip to emphasize to me who was boss. The connection I felt between us was real and went both ways. He wanted this—badly.

I ran my hands up and down his thighs and smiled. “Okay.”

I dropped down on my knees and crawled between his legs. His pants were tight, his erection obvious. I reached out, unzipping his fly as I held my breath, my cheeks flushed with passion and embarrassment. I was praying that no one was watching us, or worse, recording us. My fingers trembled slightly as I pushed his pants out of the way, reaching into his boxers and setting his dick free.

I swallowed, staring at his length and girth, hoping he didn't expect me to get it all in my mouth.

I bent forward, his hard dick in my hands, and licked at his tip. A little teasing never hurt anyone, but I could hardly control myself. By the way he

jerked and tried to stifle a moan, I knew I had him. I suckled the head of his dick gently, using my tongue to dig beneath it and circle the head. He groaned, leaning back, jerking his hips, trying to get deeper. I put my hands on his thighs to control his thrusts before I parted my lips wider and let him hit the back of my throat.

I choked a bit, my eyes tearing up and saliva dripping from my mouth. Even so, his thrusts, getting a little jerky and uncontrolled as his passion grew, filled me with a sense of unexpected power.

He threw back his head and moaned, his hands threading my hair and pulling slightly.

“God, yes... just like that. Your mouth was made for me.” He moaned and I didn’t know whether to feel complimented or insulted. I tilted my head up, letting him fuck my mouth with abandon, as he grunted and groaned.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “God, yes.”

I massaged the base of his dick, too big to fit in my mouth, as I spat on it and sucked and licked, giving him the deluxe treatment. He jerked, letting out a long groan as he came down my throat. I sat back and wiped my lips watching him trying to get his breath back under control.

I smiled tentatively, not sure if I should stand up and walk away or what.

He reached out, his hand fisting in my hair. “You were made for this.” He



panted as he wiped the corner of my eyes where my tears had gathered.

“Thanks?” I gave a small grin in spite of myself, preening a bit for a job well done.

He leaned back, taking a deep breath, clearly still recovering. I stared at him wiping his cum from my lips.

*Now what?* I wondered.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## ALEXEI

The compound was a fairly large place, with plenty of room. Most of my men stay there; it's convenient. Dorm living was never my style though, however well-appointed the rooms. I like my space. That's why I have an apartment downtown.

No one knows about it aside from my immediate family and Kirill. But my immediate family—my sister and my mother—are currently in Russia.

The five-bedroom, four-bath apartment is registered to one Anton Bartlett the third, trust fund baby from Connecticut. I had no known or alleged affiliation with Anton, and so it would be difficult to trace the apartment back to me. I wanted a place where I could pretend that I was just *Joe Schmo* from Wall Street. With all the money I had and the strange hours I kept, it wouldn't be farfetched.

I had chosen every piece of furniture that went into the apartment. As my sanctuary, I wanted it to be just so. It was open plan with a large kitchen come lounge area. The cream-colored walls stretched up to a very high ceiling. All of the upper part of the wall was made of one-way, bullet-proof glass. That meant my apartment had excellent lighting whatever time of day it was.

I had three bedrooms downstairs, one of which I used as an office, the other as a gym, and the third as a game room. I had an elaborate setup where I played GTA. It was fun to play with wannabe gangsters, crashing virtual cars

and shooting virtual enemies. I found it kind of relaxing.

Upstairs was my master ensuite bedroom, and my weapons room.

The thing I loved about my apartment were the escape hatches. There were three different ways to get out, aside from the front door. All three ways were known only to me. My apartment sat at the penthouse of a ten-floor apartment block. Two of the floors below me were empty and booby-trapped. I had an elevator that ran from the basement to my floor and only I had the key. All these measures made me feel relatively safe.

I still slept with a gun under my pillow, though. Safety on.

I startled awake the morning after Nora gave me a blow job and didn't know what had awoken me. My gun was in my hand without me thinking about it, and I sat still, listening to the noises of the city going about its early morning commute, trying to hear if something was amiss.

Finally, I relaxed, returning my gun to its spot before padding over to my dresser. I examined myself critically in the mirror, ignoring my erection for now.

“What's wrong with you?” I asked my reflection.

He did not seem to have any insight to share, so I stripped off the vest and boxers I slept in and stepped into the shower. I closed my eyes, remembering my dream and realizing just what it was that woke me up.

My hand was on my dick almost without thought as I stroked it gently, moaning softly as I remembered the feel of Nora's mouth on it. "Fuuuckk," I whispered, thrusting my hips into thin air, imagining it magically transformed into the recesses of Nora's hot mouth.

She had been an artist at work. After she was done, I felt so out of it that I almost fell asleep right there on the couch. I had to send her away that moment. I couldn't afford for her to know exactly how much of an effect she had on me. I could see she was hurt by my abrupt dismissal, and that was a relief. I couldn't have her knowing just what kind of chokehold she had me in.

But I couldn't wait to see her again.

"Fuck my life," I groaned as my cum spilled down the drain.

I stepped out of the shower after rinsing myself off and brushed my teeth at the sink, barely able to meet my own eye. Yeah, I usually jerk off in the shower, but my accompanying fantasies were never personal.

*This is new*, I thought ruefully, and not in a good way.

If I was going to start fantasizing about random girls in my club, what was next? It was a slippery slope, that was for sure.

I left the bathroom in my white, monogrammed, terry cloth robe and headed to the kitchen to get myself some coffee while my body dried off from the shower. My slippers slapped against the wooden floor as I descended the stairs, just reveling in being inside my own space.

I came to an abrupt stop at the bottom as I saw someone lying on the sofa. I was already reaching for the gun I kept taped under the stairs when I realized who it was.

She sat up and gave me a smile. “Hello, brother. Long time no see.”

“Katya.”

I let out the breath I was holding and grinned wide as I held out my arms to her. She came flying into them without hesitation, and we held each other close. My sister and I have almost a decade between us, but that didn’t stop us from being thick as thieves—both when we were young and even in the present. We were really all each other had when push came to shove.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “You were supposed to come in tomorrow.”

“Yes well... I thought I’d surprise you.”

“And I am surprised.” I grinned, pulling her close again and kissing her forehead. “Surprised and glad.”

“Good. Because for a moment, I thought you were going to shoot me.”

“I was.” I turned her with me as we walked towards the kitchen. “But now I’m going to make you breakfast.”

“Oh, thank God. I am *starving*.”

I turned to her with a frown. “What time did you get in? And *how* did you get in without waking me up?”

“I arrived at 4:30 a.m. I tried to call you, but it didn’t go through. I figured you were off doing top secret things, or maybe fucking, so I decided to just take a taxi.”

I shuddered. “What? At 4:30 a.m. That’s living dangerously.”

“Oh, I wish he’d tried something. I haven’t had the chance to use my knife in a while.”

I smiled, always proud of her. “And how’d you get in the house?”

“Secret entrance three is DNA coded remember? We share DNA.”

“Shit. How did you know about that?”

“I had a lot of time to myself the last time I was here.” She sat down on the kitchen island while I got ingredients together.

“Eggs and bacon sound good?”

“No sausage?”

I smiled. “Of course, sausage. And coffee. Goes without saying.”

“Put in an avocado or something and boil the egg so I can say I stuck to my keto diet.”

“Your wish is my command,” I said as I put the eggs to boil and then set out to bake the bacon and sausage in the mini oven.

I went one better than avocado and made her an entire salad. I presented the concoction to her in a bowl with a flourish along with a cup of coffee.

“Eat up, *sestrichka*.”

She clapped excitedly. “Oh, you are the best big brother in the world.”



“I know it,” I said smugly.

She tucked into her meal while I sipped my coffee and forked a sausage into my mouth.

“So?” she asked. “How’s Jules? Y’all still hot and heavy?”

“Ugh. Hot and heavy? Who says that?”

“Not you apparently.”

“No. I do not. And I am not. Hot and heavy that is. Jules is yesterday’s news.”

“What? How’d she take that?”

“About how you’d expect.”

“Watch out for her. She could be trouble.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“So... Tell me about your love life. Do you even have one ?” she asked me

coyly.

“None of your business,” I said in the same tone, “So nose out.”

“I just ask because I truly expected to find Jules lording it over here as queen of the castle.”

“Come on, Katya. You know I don’t bring my work home.”

She laughed at me. “I really hope you didn’t call her ‘your work’ in her presence.”

“I barely called her *Jules*.”

Katya’s laugh grew even louder. “Oh God, you are so evil.”

“Of course.” I grinned, happy to make my sister laugh. She was one of the very few people I could totally relax around, and I relished it. I stopped grinning, giving her a serious look. “I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you too, Alexei.”

We gave each other affectionate glances.

“You know who else has missed you? Mom.”

I turned away, not wanting to talk about her.

“Lex... come on, look at me,” she cajoled. “She talks about you all the time, wonders when you’ll visit... I keep covering for you but I’m running out of excuses.”

“How can she want to see me? After what I did to her?”

“What did you do? You didn’t do anything. She made that choice.”

“Don’t act like she wasn’t forced into it. Someone had to take the fall, and she wouldn’t let it be me.” I still couldn’t meet Katya’s eyes.

“That’s because we needed you here. The Family needed you.”

“I needed her too.”

“Yeah, and that’s why you did what you did. Nobody blames you.”

*Yippee ki-yay.* Nobody blames me for killing my father and letting my mother take the fall.

I pursed my lips and sipped my coffee, unable to find words for my own self-loathing.

“I could’ve planned it better,” I said, my voice low. I still had trouble getting words out when it came to this. “I could’ve made it look like an accident instead of losing my temper like a lil’ bitch and smashing his head with a brick.”

“You can’t blame yourself. He provoked you.”

I remained quiet and Katya sighed, looking at me with something like pity in her eyes. I turned away from her, not wanting to see it. “In any case,” she said, “she sent you some gifts.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yes.” Katya held out a card to me. I frowned in confusion as I took it. “*Zlata Bogdanov*. She has an operation out of Kyiv. Runs drugs from Afghanistan. She’s waiting for your call.”

I felt tears prick my eyes.

My mother had found me a new connect.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## NORA

*I*'ll admit, I didn't really think this plan through. Working till late at Pandemonium and then having an early morning shift at the hospital meant that sleeping was going to be an alien concept for a while. I got home, dragging my feet, feeling used and demoralized to find my grandmother waiting up for me.

*Great.*

My lipstick was smudged. I was afraid I still had glitter on my body. I just wanted to shower and maybe take a nap. Lita had other ideas.

"Where have you been?" she asked in that quiet yet disappointed voice that never failed to make me feel about two feet tall.

"I..." I cleared my throat. "I went out with my friends."

She gave me a huge side-eye. "In your sweatpants?"

I shrugged. "Why not?"

She just looked at me and sighed. I hated lying to her, but the truth was not an option.

“Lita, I’m tired and I gotta work in a few hours. Can we talk tomorrow?”

“When exactly would we talk? You are never home.”

I saw red at this bit of exaggeration. “*Never*, Grandma? Really?”

She had the decency to feign embarrassment. “Never anymore. I feel like I haven’t seen you for days. Not since that policeman told us—” She cut herself off, bottom lip trembling.

“Lita...” I said her name with resigned tiredness. I didn’t have any fight in me tonight. I just wanted to sleep and forget. “I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

I turned to leave.

“Like mother like daughter I suppose,” she said.

I froze, frowning in confusion. My mother already had me and Celia by the time she was my age. I was working two jobs and didn’t have time to date. How were we the same? I pushed away the image of Alexei that came to mind away. I didn’t want to think about him.

I turned to my grandma. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean you’re erratic. You’re moody and secretive, and you’re making the wrong decisions!”

“Oh? *I’m* making the wrong decisions? About what exactly, Grandma? You don’t know my life.”

“Don’t I? You are ruining yourself like Celia did.”

That was too much for me and I growled, “I’m sorry. Here I thought I was a grown woman. I didn’t realize there was only one approved way to live in this house. Maybe I should move out.”

“Maybe you should, if you’re going down that road. I’ve already lost a daughter *and* a granddaughter. I won’t stand by and lose you too.”

I could only stare at her. I could see her pain but was angry because she’d already given up on Celia. “This is my life. I will do what I like with it.”

I stormed out of the room and slammed my bedroom door a little too hard. I regretted it immediately. I didn’t like fighting with my grandma. I didn’t like fighting, period. Crossing over to the bathroom, I stripped off my clothes and got in the tiny shower. I let the water pound on me while I cried for many reasons.



For the story I'd heard about Celia's time at Pandemonium. For Alexei dismissing me so callously after I blew him. For the fight with my Lita. It all came pouring out in tears, and snot, and stinging eyes.

Afterwards at least, I felt a little better as I lay curled on my bed. I set the alarm for five a.m. before settling in to sleep. My mind would not quiet down, however. It kept replaying the blowjob, Alexei's cock in my mouth, how it felt, iron hard, and silky smooth, the steady insistent thrusts that choked me.

I'm not normally into breath play, but just thinking about it had me dripping wet. He was so big and hard, and he clearly wanted me so much—before he discarded me like a used tissue.

My hand crept down to my crotch, cupping it gently. I gave a shuddering sigh as I pressed in with my finger, my entrance already open and ready, waiting for a fat cock to fill it. Just one, though. I spread my legs wide, turning to lie flat on my back and rubbed insistently at my clit, hoping to relieve the pressure.

With a sound of surrender, I stretched my hand out, reaching for my bedside drawer, and extracted my vibrator. Setting it on high, I pushed it into me, closing my eyes and imagining that it was him. I could almost feel his warm breath fanning my face as his dick split me, while his thumb rubbed at my clit with steady pressure. It was all I could do not to cry out, begging him for more, for deeper.

“Fuck me, please,” I whispered. My face contorted with the agony of pleasure as my sex toy acted as a poor substitute for the real thing.

It got me there, though. I could feel my orgasm explode through me like a fireball, picturing Alexei pouring his seed indiscriminately into me, causing my flesh to contract and relax around the vibrator, pumping it for every last drop it did not contain.

I lay back on the bed with a sigh of repletion, pulling out the vibrator and dropping it on the bed next to me. I panted a bit as I came down from the high, feeling even more miserable than before. I stared up at the roof, calling myself every name I could think of.

What kind of sick person got off to the man that might have killed their sister, or at least done something terrible to her? Me, that's who. I was the sicko who did this. I curled myself up into a small ball, tears rolling from my eyes.

*What am I doing?*

I didn't really have a clue.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## ALEXEI

The club was throbbing for how loud the House music was, reverberating through the building. Some early birds were on the dance floor already, dancing quite drunkenly, even though it was barely eight p.m. I could see some of my girls out there as well, doing their thing. I nodded to myself with satisfaction.

It'd been a busy day. Jimmy Two Fingers got shot, and there was talk of a coup in his crew. It made everybody nervous, including me. In this business, you gotta have eyes in the back of your head if you wanna survive.

So, I was glad to be in my club, surrounded only by people I knew well, whose loyalty was clear to me. I could see Kirill at the bar, conferring with the bartender as he pointed a few extremely drunk people out in the crowd. Probably warning him that it was time to start watering down their drinks. We didn't believe in kicking people out. Especially those who were ready to leave a month's salary on our table. But we did slow them down involuntarily if they wanted to drink themselves into a coma.

He was gesticulating quite a lot and I looked in the direction he was pointing, wanting to assess the level of drunkenness for myself. I was surprised to see my sister threading her way through the crowds, wearing a very short, green sequined dress, and followed by two other girls.

She saw me and waved.

I frowned, wondering what she was doing here. In truth, I would have preferred if no one knew of her presence in New York, especially now, with all the uncertainty over Jimmy. But here she was, dressed like a beacon of light, her long platinum hair—twin of my own—hanging like a curtain down to the small of her back.

Everybody in the club would notice her.

She must have noticed the frown on my face because she changed direction and walked towards me as I stood on the third step between floors. She came right up to me, the blue light making every part of her look as if it was glowing, but especially her eyes. She smiled up at me.

“What’s up?”

“You tell me,” I said, looking around the room with a furrowed brow. “What are you doing here?”

She shrugged. “Brought my friends for a fun night out. Why? Am I *persona non grata* or something?”

“It’s just not a good time, and there are plenty of other clubs.”

“Yeah well, I thought I’d bring you some business. Sue me.” She sounded annoyed.

I looked down at her and smiled. “Kat... hey, come on. You know I wasn’t trying to give you the bum-rush. I just think your friends would have more fun at the Shade Room. Have you been yet? I think Taylor Swift is playing there tonight,” I lied sarcastically. “You should go.”

She threw back her head and laughed. “You’re so funny sometimes, Alexei.” Rolling her eyes, she turned away from me and began to walk away.

“Hey! Where are you going?” I called.

“To VIP.” She threw back, “The show’s about to start, isn’t it?”

“Hey, wait.” I took the two steps down to her, turning her around. “Katya.”

“Alexei,” she said in the same admonishing tone I used on her.

I sighed, shaking my head. Just then, I spotted a familiar face in my peripheral vision and turned just in time to see Nora making her way past us. She bumped into Katya, mumbled something that might have been an apology, flicked me a very quick glance and hurried off. I remembered that she hadn’t told me if she would continue dancing or not.

In fact, there were a lot of things we were yet to discuss.

“Who’s that?” My sister’s question felt odd.

I turned to find Katya staring curiously after Nora.

“A new dancer. Why?”

“I don’t know... she looks kinda familiar.”

I frowned. “She’s new. How can she be familiar to you?”

Katya’s frown deepened. “I don’t know. She just is.”

“Hands off though, you hear? She bats for my team.”

She turned to me and smiled. “Is that Jules’ replacement?” She peered at Nora, checking her out. “I’d say it’s a definite upgrade.”

“Shut up and stop staring at her ass.”

“Why? It’s a nice ass.”

“It’s also off-limits.”

“Psh, I heard you the first time. No need to be so territorial.”

“Well great. Now go and...” I shooed her off, hoping she’d leave.

“Yeah, okay. I’m just gonna say hello to the other girls. Everyone’s still here, right?”

“Everyone being?”

“Oh, you know, Marci, Celia, and them.”

“Marci’s still here, but not Celia.”

Her face staggered for a moment almost too quick to catch. “What do you mean, not Celia? Wasn’t she your best dancer?”

“Yeah well... she brought her boyfriend troubles to my club, so I had to let her go.”

“What boyfriend troubles.”

“Igor Nikolaev.”



She frowned. “Didn’t he work here also?”

“Yeah.”

“So, you fired them both.”

“Yeah, of course. I mean well...” I inclined my head. “Igor is back.”

She got right in my face. “Why is Igor back and not Celia?”

“He apologized and broke up with her. She hasn’t come back since.”

Katya frowned. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“Yeah, well...” I shrugged, tired of talking about these people. It’s not like they mattered. They were just dancers. You couldn’t walk two feet in this city without tripping over a stripper.

“Katya! You stood me up!” Kirill suddenly appeared, enveloping Katya in his arms and lifting her off her feet. She squealed like a teenager, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Put me down right now, you oaf,” she ordered him, but her laughter kind of dampened the effect. “And I didn’t stand you up. I came in a day early. You

should have had your phone on. I might have called you!”

“My phone is never off,” Kirill protested.

She shrugged. “Then I don’t know what to tell you. The call didn’t go through.”

“Yeah, well now that you’re here, you have to let me buy you a drink.”

“I would, but my brother here is hustling me out of the club.” Her eyes brightened with malice as a thought occurred. “Do you know who his new girl is?”

“What? You mean Nora?”

“Her name is Nora? Sounds like an Eighties housewife.”

“Well, her stage name is *Ariel* if that helps,” Kirill said with a wide grin.

They both snorted.

“Nah, now the Eighties housewife is wearing a flowered crown and is barefoot.” Katya smirked.

They both collapsed with laughter. I rolled my eyes.

“Are you done?” I asked.

“No. But we’ll take pity on you. Only because the show’s about to start and I have to get back to my friends.”

I heaved a frustrated sigh but didn’t say anything else. Katya would do as she pleased regardless, so I would be wasting my breath. Knowing he was on thin ice, Kirill went off with her so I couldn’t chastise him about telling her my business. I looked towards the other end of the bar, where Nora had stopped to get a drink. She’d already disappeared, probably into the changing rooms.

With a sigh, I climbed the stairs towards VIP. If she was going to perform, I was going to watch. She better have listened to me and not attempt to get naked on stage.

*Otherwise I just might have to teach her who’s boss.*

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## NORA

I was a walking zombie. I think I'd had one hour of sleep in the last twenty-four hours. I only survived at work because of coffee and red bull, and now I had to perform. The only thing that was keeping me awake, I think, was the fact that my jobs required me to be on my feet most of the time. A great side effect of lack of sleep was that I hadn't had the wherewithal to obsess about Alexei and *what it all meant*. My brain was lackluster at best—brain cells only firing enough for me to perform tasks by rote.

I just wanted to dance, finish as fast as possible, and go home. Any sleuthing I needed to do would have to wait until I'd had a good night's sleep.

“Well, hello there, mermaid. What's up with you?” Marci took the seat to my right, peering at me as I applied extra-strength concealer.

I smiled miserably. “I'm just great. How are you?”

She put her hand on her palm and studied me closely. “Late night? Or should I say, long day? Did you not get any sleep?” she asked sympathetically.

I shook my head.

“Second job?”

I nodded.

She sighed. “Just your luck. We have a frat house celebrating some Ka Beta Kappa nonsense here tonight. You’re gonna need your wits about you. Those white boys don’t play about copping a feel.”

I put my concealer brush down and turned to her in alarm. “What do you mean?”

She waved her hand airily. “Oh, you know—squeezing your ass when they give you a lap dance, or your tits... The bouncers do their best, but those boys are fast.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

We exchanged commiserating glances. Then my slow brain remembered that Alexei had all but forbidden me to do more than dance in my bra. I was guessing he would not be a fan of lap dances or anyone groping me. So, *I* was safe. I still felt awful for Marci and the others, though.

She patted my arm. “Don’t worry about it, love. We look after our own here. Make sure they don’t get too handsy.”

I felt a bit guilty then, because I wasn't going to have to subject myself to that. I was tempted to tell her about it for a moment, but I wasn't sure if I was allowed. Who knew how these arrangements worked? I leaned forward, though, to confide, "Um, about Mr. Levin and the girls... When he chooses one, do they usually stop working the floor?"

Marci's eyes widened. "Oh, my God, it's true. Cinnamon told me, but that girl gossips about everyone so I wasn't sure if I should believe it."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Believe what?"

"That you and the boss... you were in VIP yesterday and you gave him head?"

My cheeks instantly heated and Marci's eyes widened.

"So, it's true?" she asked again.

I couldn't meet her eyes but nodded anyway.

She grabbed my hand. "Please, tell me he didn't force you."

I was moved by her concern but hastened to correct the misconception. "I

mean... no. I might not have wanted to give him a blow job in public but..." My voice and my eyes lowered in shame. "I did *want* to give him a blowjob."

Marci moved closer, looking concerned. "Are you okay?" she asked, her brow furrowing with concern.

I sighed, "I don't know." I shrugged, pursing my lips ruefully. "It's confusing."

"What is?"

"This," I waved my hands helplessly, "thing between us. Like, when we're together, the air practically crackles, you know?" I flicked her a kind of embarrassed glance.

"But...?"

"But..." I shook my head. "He's dangerous? He's my boss? I don't want to be just another notch in his belt? Take your pick."

Marci nodded her understanding. "So? What are you gonna do?"

"Fuck if I know. Play it by the ear?"



“I guess that’s all you *can* do. In any case, it’s nothing to lose sleep over. Put on your lipstick, fix a smile on your face, go out there and slay.”

I smiled. “Yes, madam.”

I squeezed her hand, grateful for her friendship. I hated that I was lying to her, but she couldn’t know the truth without compromising my operation. I did hope that once all this was over, we could remain friends. I wanted that, a surprising amount. It was rare for me to feel like I had made a real friend, and Marci gave me that feeling.

I put on my Stunna red lip paint, lined my eyes with kohl, and got to my feet. Kissing Marci on the cheek, I made my way out to the stage. Monique was just announcing the act before me. The statuesque drag queen, Cinnamon. I could already hear the frat boys cheering, calling out lewd things, and basically bringing down the tone of the club. I rolled my eyes, knowing no one would throw *them* out for being unruly.

*Money talks.*

Cinnamon was not just a dancer. She was a singer, too. She could dance, strip, and sing Sam Smith without putting a single eyelash out of place.

“*How will I know if he really loves me?*” she crooned, and I swayed, loving the slow piano rendition of it as she slid to the ground in a split and then threw her bodice into the air, where it landed at the edge of the stage. One of the frat boys grabbed for it, but a bouncer got there first, smoothly slipping between him and the stage and pushing the bodice further away, much to his

loud disappointment.

She finished to raucous applause, and then Monique was getting on stage, a smile on her face as she announced the next act. I couldn't believe I was supposed to follow that. I was dressed like a flamenco dancer, all in red and gold, hoping everyone would be distracted by the glitz and glitter of my outfit and not notice how sluggish I was.

The first person I saw as I waltzed onto the stage was Alexei. He was sitting across the room on a raised dais, hands spread out on the back of the black leather seat, staring at me. By his side was a chick with the exact same platinum blonde hair that he had. I think she was the one I bumped into earlier.

I squirmed a bit inside, feeling as if I was being watched by a couple of Targaryens, complete with dragons, as two burly men stood behind them, alert and aware of everything happening around them. There were some other people sitting at their table, but those two stood out as if they were paintings come to life.

I took a deep breath and tried to ignore them as I began to dance. The frat boys were still crowded near the stage and just as loud as they were before. It was easy to ignore them because their presence wasn't as compelling.

Suddenly I heard my name called. My *real* name. I almost stumbled, I was so startled. I knew it wasn't Alexei who shouted my name because his lips hadn't moved except to murmur to his companion now and then.

“Nora!” the person said again, and wolf whistled. They were throwing me off. My heart was racing. The way that they called my name... it was as if they knew me. I couldn’t afford to have my cover blown. Hands trembling slightly, I tried to finish my set without completely fumbling it.

*In addition to being tired as hell, now I have to contend with this?*

Sometimes I thought my grandmother’s God didn’t like me at all.

Finally, somehow, my set was done to a lot of cheers and a few jeers as I did not take it all off. Really, they were just pieces of string. There was nothing to complain about.

I quickly stepped off stage, meaning to go and change before anyone could stop me but the frat boys were blocking my way. Then I heard the voice again, calling my real name. “Nora! Hey, wait up.”

It was a bit embarrassing to think that someone from my real life was here, watching me. I almost didn’t want to know who it was. They grabbed onto my hand as I tried to hurry away, and they held onto it, *fast*. With a sigh, I turned around to see who had caught me, and my mouth dried up.

“Cole. What are you doing here?” I hissed.

He grinned drunkenly at me, leering a lot. “The question is, what are *you* doing here? Is the hospital not paying you enough? Are student loans kicking your ass? You should have asked for my help, baby. I’d have been glad to

open my wallet.” His hands began to wander, fingers trailing along my left side. I sidled out of range.

“Stop. You need to go. This isn’t the place for you.”

“I need to go? Why? If you can be here, so can I. Speaking of, what the hell are you doing here? I always figured you for the uptight type. It’s always the quiet ones you gotta watch out for, huh?” He grinned salaciously at me, waggling his brows. He lowered his voice and leaned in, breathing alcohol in my face. “So, I take it you’re down to fuck, right?”

I was shaking my head even before he was done. “No, I’m not. Fuck off, Cole, and leave me alone.”

He grabbed me instead, pulling me closer. “Seems the grieving period is over and done with, right? We can get to the good part.” He opened his mouth, tongue out, looking like he was about to lick my face.

I couldn’t help scrunching up my face and trying to duck away, though his hand was round my waist, and he had me pinned. Suddenly, his hold disappeared, and he went flying. I blinked in shock as I turned to see Alexei standing between us, his hand in a fist, hazel eyes blazing.

Cole was sprawled on the floor at his feet, clutching his cheek. “Ow, what the hell did you do that for, man?” he whined.

Alexei just growled and I almost laughed. He quirked an eyebrow at me.

“You know this guy?” he asked.

I froze, fingers turning to ice. I needed to tread really carefully. “Um, no,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You sure?”

I looked down at Cole who was trying to get up and denied him again. “Never seen him before.”

“But he was calling you by your... government name.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you. He’s just some creeper.”

Cole was still groaning on the floor. I just wanted to get away from him before he said anything else. So, when Alexei grabbed my hand and marched me off, I went, quite willingly.

“Where are we going?” I still had to ask.

He didn’t answer, but it was fairly obvious we were headed for the changing room. I remembered that Alexei didn’t like it when there was a ruckus caused by the girls in the club. That was funny considering *he* was the one who was involved in this one. I wondered what—

We entered the changing room, and he stopped just inside the door. There were a couple of girls doing their makeup on their vanities, but most of them were working the floors. He pointed imperiously to the door. “Out!” he yelled.

The two girls scrambled past us, and he slammed the door behind them. I didn’t know if I was about to get a beating, a lecture, a shot in the head or what. My whole body was shaking.

The silence in the changing room was loud as I looked up at Alexei and waited for the axe to fall. He rounded on me pretty fast, his face flushed, eyes glittering with anger. “Tell me the truth. How do you know that guy?”

I took a deep shaky breath, deciding to keep as close to the truth as possible. “Okay, fine. We went on one date. It didn’t work out. I ghosted him.”

His eyes narrowed. “Did you fuck on this date?”

“You know that’s none of your business, right?”

“*Tell me,*” he growled.

“Okay! Damn. We did not fuck.”

“Did you try to fuck him?”

I sighed, knowing that no answer would satisfy him. If I told him that Cole couldn't get it up, he'd just think that I ghosted him because I *wanted* to fuck, and he couldn't. Since he was already going ballistic on me, I didn't want to think what that revelation might do to his mood. So, I just clenched my jaw and stared mutinously at him.

He grabbed me by my jaw and pulled me to him, looking into my eyes, his own lit with so many emotions I could hardly keep up.

“Don't think you can lie to me, Nora. I *will* find you out.”

It sounded like both a promise and a threat. I couldn't help shivering in reaction, and he took my bottom lip in his mouth, nipping at it angrily before working it with his teeth. He crushed my mouth against his, plunging his tongue into mine and dominating my spirit.

I didn't *hate* it.

*God save me.*

I felt the tangy taste of copper in my mouth and realized he'd bitten me. I lunged upwards, fighting for control of the kiss, my tongue giving as good as it was getting. The kiss changed from domineering to sparring, each of us fighting for survival as our mouths pressed tight together, tongues pushing and pulling at each other, tasting. I was getting lost in it, my breasts pressed flat on his chest, nails digging into his arms, holding fast to him.

We pulled away from each other with a gasp, my mouth open as I stared up at him.

“What about you, then?” I blurted, “Who’s the ice queen you were whispering with?”

His lip curled. “You mean my sister?”

I gaped at him. “Your... *sister*?”

I had so many questions, but before I could ask them, he was plundering my mouth again. The kiss was unrestrained, but just as I was really sinking into sensation, he pulled back again, his eyebrow cocked.

“Why? Were you jealous?” he asked.

I blinked at him; my mind slow on the uptake. “Uh... no,” I said, though yeah, at the time, I’d had some thoughts on who the fuck the bitch was and why she was leaning into his side like she belonged there. It was... annoying.

“Liar,” he murmured before sucking at my bottom lip. “I don’t like liars, Nora.”

He nipped at my lip and then suckled it, soothing away the pain. His hands trailed down, landing on my ass and squeezing hard, pulling me flush against him so I could feel his erection.



I moaned in satisfaction, grinding my hips into him. “Yes,” I whispered, feeling punch-drunk.

“God, I’ve been thinking about you all day. Wanted so much to do this,” he whispered.

Before I knew it, he was dropping to his knees in front of me. I froze in shock, never having expected to see him like that. Even on his knees, he was tall enough to reach my waist. He lifted my right leg and placed it on his shoulder as he pushed his head against my pussy, his tongue flicking out to lick at me. My little G-string was no match for his ministrations as he skillfully moved it out of the way without using his hands.

I threw back my head and moaned loudly, my legs shaking. I reached behind me for a surface to lean on, but the door was too far. He seemed to sense my predicament because he was back on his feet in a moment.

“Come on,” he said roughly, manhandling me to the nearest flat surface... which happened to be the make-up counter. He bent me over the surface, grunting with desire as a zzzzziping sound alerted me to his actions. I couldn’t see much since my forehead was pressing flat against the table.

Then I felt his flesh—silky, slippery, and hard, rubbing against my clit. I moaned, widening my legs a bit to give him more room. The depth with which I needed him to claim me scared me. I wanted him inside me so badly. I had no other thoughts. Not birth control, not condoms, nothing.

He groaned as he leaned in, breaching me slowly and then thrusting hard so he drove himself home in one fell swoop. I cried out, unable to help myself, my body shaking for an entirely different reason now. My entire skin felt sensitive, like it could not bear to be touched.

“Lift your knee baby,” he murmured.

I arched my back, putting one knee on the make-up counter so that he could nestle in closer, possess me completely.

“Good girl,” he murmured approvingly, and I preened, surprised at my newfound praise kink.

The intensity was terrifying and impossible to deny. His hands were hot on my hips, holding me steady as he drilled into me, hard, rough, unrelenting.

It was too much.

It was nowhere *near* enough.

I was crying with need, my hands white from digging into the counter, anchoring myself so he could plunder me as deep and hard as he pleased. And he did please. His cock opened me up, so thick and long, stretching me out so full I couldn't think.

“Fuck me...” I murmured, just saying whatever nonsense occurred to me at

that point. I couldn't *think*. I could only feel, only want. "Please, please, please, don't stop. Oh, my God." I arched my back, throwing my head back.

He loomed over me, hands digging into my thighs as he groaned, hips jerking as he fucked into me. He threaded his fingers through my hair, kissing the back of my neck.

"That's right. Beg me. Beg me to fuck you right." He pulled my hair as the tempo of his thrusts increased.

My mouth was open in a soundless scream. My fingers scrabbled at the surface of the table, seeking some sort of purchase. He reached out with his left hand, threading our fingers together. I was surprised at the gesture.

His right hand snaked between my legs, his long middle finger rubbing my clit as he fucked into me with ruthless, focused efficiency. Our flesh slapped together, both of us dripping with precum, fluids mixing and adding to the friction, ratcheting up the tension, escalating the sensation into something almost unbearable.

I needed to come, and I never wanted it to stop. I backed my ass up into him, as he thrust into me, needing more, wondering if it would ever be enough.

"Oh yeah, baby. God you're so tight... so hot, *fuck!*" His voice was hoarse with effort, more of a groan than actual words. Still it was enough to get me going even higher, wanting him even more.

God, if Marci could see me now... if Celia could see me...

Even the thought of my sister wasn't enough to cure me of the need to have him, to possess him as he was possessing me. My body undulated, encouraging his thrusts, willing him deeper. I loved the feel of his balls nestling against my entrance as he drilled me. Suddenly, I understood why they called it 'screwing'.

He leaned forward, resting his weight on my back as his hands cupped my breasts and squeezed. Then using them as a handle, he increased his pace, fucking me harder, his breath ghosting on my skin as he groaned in my ear.

"Uh!" I cried. "Please." I whisper-shouted. I shut my eyes tight, every nerve in me straining. It was just so good. I needed him to let go. I wanted him to. I wanted to feel his come filling me up. My body was ready.

Keening, I arched my back as my insides clenched around him, cinching him tightly before letting him go, inner muscles contracting and relaxing, trying to milk him dry.

He groaned, low and deep, before his hips jerked. And he was coming into me as my body ebbed and flowed around him. I didn't know how much more my body could *take*.

He put his finger on my clit, giving it one last rub as his hips snapped, and he gave one last spurt in me. I hunched in on myself, body shuddering before I let it all go. I could feel liquid run down my leg, no clue whether it was his or mine. My leg dropped to the ground, too weak and boneless to stay up on the

counter. I collapsed, my head lying amongst the lipsticks and eyeliners, as I breathed slow and deep, just... replete.

He pulled out of me, stepping back and, suddenly, I felt cold. I wanted him back against me. I wanted to fall asleep with him inside of me.

It was a crazy thought and I staggered to my feet, turning to face him, a loopy smile on my face.

“Hey,” I said.

He grinned, quirking his eyebrow. “Hey, you okay?”

“Uh huh,” I said like a drunk valley girl.

There was a tentative knock at the door. “Mr. Levin?” Monique’s voice called through the door. “My girls need to use the room.”

That girl had some guts, I had to admit. I needed to ask her to teach me her ways.

“Just a minute,” Alexei said. He pulled me away from the counter and pushed me towards the showers. “Go clean yourself up,” he whispered as he zipped his fly.

I went off, almost staggering with exhaustion and sexual satiation, mind empty of thoughts.

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## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

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## ALEXEI

I neatened myself up in my office, and I made good use of it after I had ascertained that Nora's stalker was no longer in the club. The temptation to question him was strong, but he was obviously a civilian, and I didn't get mixed up with those. I did have the bartender bring me his credit card information. Just in case I needed to find out more about him.

I still had some work to do, even though the sex had made me lethargic. Great sex usually did, and that was... phenomenal. Almost scary, really. I hadn't expected her to be so pliant in my arms. So malleable. So suggestible. The crazy feeling of power that gave me was almost worse than how I felt holding a gun to a man's head.

The head rush was intoxicating. Dangerously addictive.

If I knew what was good for me, I'd fire her after tonight. Fortunately for her, my dick wasn't quite done with her yet.

"She can stay for a bit," I murmured to myself as I answered emails on ETAs for my shipments. Mama's contact worked fast. I had a feeling we were going to have a beautiful friendship.

Once I was done with those, I decided that, for once, I was going to head home before sunrise. I was still a little lethargic from the intensity of my



orgasm and the feel-good endorphins were making me feel like I'd taken a toke of the good stuff.

I sauntered out to the bar, glad to see it was still jumping even though it was closing at three in the morning. My eyes automatically swept the room, noting that my sister and her friends seemed to have left, and all that was left of VIP were a few stragglers. I saw a solitary figure, sitting slumped over on one of the sofas and tensed, wondering if she'd been roofied or maybe she'd OD'd.

With a sigh, I approached the figure. "Please, don't be dead. Please, don't be dead," I murmured to myself. My club just didn't need that sort of publicity. I stopped short just before I reached her, seeing who it was. I rushed in, leaning over her. "Nora?"

She didn't stir, her chest rising and falling rhythmically, face at peace. She was fast asleep. I sniggered, realizing proudly that I had worn her out. I watched her for a while, wondering if I should wake her or just leave her to rest. I looked about, knowing that I couldn't just leave her there.

I looked around for her belongings and saw that her purse was wedged between her and the arm of the sofa she was sitting on. I frowned in concern, wondering why she'd ended up here.

"Why didn't you go home?"

With an internal shrug, I picked up her purse and slung it around my shoulders before picking her up. She didn't so much as stir. The girl could

have been kidnapped and she wouldn't have been any the wiser. I wondered again if she'd been roofied. There was a bottle of water on the table beside her and a glass, but it hardly seemed as if she'd drunk any of it.

With a last shake of my head, I carried her to my waiting car. Depositing her carefully in the back seat, I slid in next to her. I could see my driver, Sevastian, peering curiously back at us. He'd been with the family since the days my father was in charge. His loyalty was unquestioned.

“Where to, Papa?” he asked respectfully.

I bit my bottom lip, surveying Nora thoughtfully. I didn't know where she lived. I couldn't just leave her on the street. I couldn't take her to the compound. There were too many things she might see there. I had to take her home.

With a resigned shake of my head, I met Sevastian's eye in the mirror. “Take us home.”

He nodded, unquestioning as always and drove. My bodyguard, Roma, turned around to give me a look but he also refrained from commenting. He and Sevastian knew the building I lived in, but they'd never been to my apartment.

They knew I didn't take anyone there.

It gratified me that they didn't say a word about it, however. Maybe I really

was as fearsome as I thought I was. Sevastian drove straight into the underground garage and stopped by the elevator. Roma did a sweep and pressed the button to summon the lift, before coming to open my door for me.

“Would you like me to carry her for you, Papa?” he asked.

“No.” I shook my head and smiled. “Thank you.”

I hoisted her into my arms and manhandled her into the elevator, nodding at the two men who waited for the elevator to close before taking off. Then it was just the two of us.

Nora slept on, unaware and uncaring of her change of location. It was concerning. I entered my apartment and laid her down on my sofa before making sure we were locked up tight. Then I carried her upstairs to my room and laid her on the bed. She was already dressed in sweats, so I just took her shoes off and tucked her into my bed. I stepped back, staring down at her, looking so cozy and comfortable in my space.

It was disturbing how good she looked there.

I stepped back, divesting myself of my clothes and flicking them into the laundry chute before stepping under my shower. I just stood there, letting the water wash over me and tried to think about everything.

There was a feeling of change in the air. I could feel my nerve endings tingle. It wasn't just the Anto situation; even my personal life was slowly coming

apart from the tightly controlled machine it usually was.

Thanks to the woman currently sleeping in my bed.

*Sleeping in my bed.*

I'd never brought a woman back here. Hell, the last woman I'd spent the night with was my high school math tutor. My parents were out of town, and I invited her over to 'study'. She spent the night with me, and in the morning, my father walked in on us. I never saw her again.

I stepped out of the shower, dried myself off thoroughly, and then walked naked over to my bed. I stared down at her for another moment before slipping into the bed beside her. Switching off the light, I left the bedside lamp on so I could read a little. But what I ended up doing was staring. Her brunette hair lay like a thick brown cascade contrasting sharply with the white pillow, her breathing deep and even. She slept on her stomach, kind of hunched in on herself like she was protecting herself from blows, even in her sleep.

*Kindred spirits.*

I didn't know where the thought had come from, but it seemed just about right. With a sigh, I put aside the book I wasn't reading, switched off my lamp and settled in behind her to sleep.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## NORA

When I opened my eyes, I was simultaneously bewildered and completely comfortable. Nothing around me looked familiar and I had no idea where I was, but I wasn't afraid. I sat up, looking down at myself and relieved to find I was still wearing sweats.

“Good morning.”

I jumped, looking around to see Alexei in bed with me, his long platinum hair lying like a bed head halo around his head, his hazel eyes dancing with amusement, naked arms inked with all sorts of symbols. I was staring. I knew it but couldn't stop myself. Somewhere I'd blinked and missed something. How did we go from him pushing me towards the shower in his club, to us, here, together, in bed.

I looked around. “Where am I?”

He laughed. “Guess.”

I blinked at him, noting how comfortable he was in this vast bed, my eyes sweeping the plainly adorned room all creams and browns, neutral palettes, all very understated... except for the vast mural of a jungle waterfall on one wall.

“Is this your place?”

“What do *you* think?”

“I think you suck at answering questions. What are you hiding?” The words just spilled out of me without my permission.

Okay, so maybe I *was* a little bit irritated with him.

He laughed. “I’m not hiding a thing. But some things are obvious, no?”

I looked around the room again, noting the buttery softness and coziness of the comforter I was under; the no doubt thousand thread count sheet beneath; the pillows, all done in brilliant white, not a stain to be seen anywhere. The four-poster mahogany bed provided a suitable dark contrast to the bedding, all monogrammed with his initials in gold.

No wonder he said it should have been obvious this was his home.

“But why am I here?”

He grinned. “Did you want me to leave you in the club, drooling over my expensive leather furniture?”

I stared at him in wide-eyed shock. “What?”

“You fell asleep in the club.” He grinned, “I didn’t know I wore you out that much. You should have asked me to call you an Uber to take you home.”

My lashes fluttered in embarrassment as I remembered. I *had* been feeling groggy and lethargic as I left the changing room, and so I stopped at the VIP bar to get some water to drink. I must have fallen asleep while I was waiting for it—hence the drooling comment, I presumed.

“That would have required me knowing that I was gonna fall asleep on the chair.”

He frowned. “Are you alright? This can’t be just about the sex last night.”

I froze, trying not to show my fear. “I…” I cleared my throat, “Just a long day, a longer night, and then what we did to top it off.” I huffed a quiet, nervous laugh.

He was still frowning at me, but he also smiled absentmindedly. Something began to vibrate close by.

He pointed to the bedside table. “Oh, your phone has been going off. Someone named Lita keeps texting you.”

I frowned. “You were reading my texts?”



“Who’s Lita?” he asked.

I glared at him. “Just because I slept with you once doesn’t give you the right to read my texts.”

“I didn’t read them. I could just see the name. Who is she, and why is she blowing you up?”

I reached for my phone, unlocked it, thanking heaven for phone security. I was quite sure if he could unlock my phone, Alexei would have read all my texts. I was getting a very possessive vibe from him—which was confusing because it contrasted sharply with everything I’d been told about him.

I read the texts, my heart sinking. My grandma was frantic. I saw she’d called me no less than three times during the night.

*Where are you?*

*Are you alright?*

*Will you make it in time for the funeral?*

“Shit,” I murmured as I read.

“What is it?” Alexei’s deep baritone startled me, and I moved my phone away as he leaned over to read my texts.

“Nothing. Just... my landlord asking for rent.”

“You hard up? I can pay the rent for you if you want.”

“Nope! Thanks.” I squirmed away from him as I typed a quick reply.

*Hi Lita. Long night in the ER. Of course, I'll make it for the funeral. Sorry for worrying you.*

“It’s no trouble.”

“No. Really. Thank you, but no.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

I began to scramble out of bed, intent on getting home.

He grabbed my wrist, stopping me. “Where are you going?”

“I uh... have errands to run. Thanks for the er, rescue and all. But I gotta go.”

“What? It’s barely six a.m. You must still be tired. Let’s sleep some more.”

“No, seriously, I have to go.”

He pulled me in by my wrist, so I was lying on top of him facing each other. “Come on what’s the hurry?” He put his hand inside my sweatshirt, rubbing circles into my stomach. “Stay a while.”

I sucked in my stomach in reaction, my pulse already racing. He smiled, smugly, no doubt feeling it from where he was holding onto my wrist. I snorted in derision.

“No,” I said, even though I made no move to move out of his grip.

He leaned in, planting a soft kiss on my neck. I couldn’t help gasping in reaction. His warm breath ghosted against my ear, and he bit down gently. I shivered, my entire body temperature rising a few degrees, my skin tingling in reaction. “Fuck,” I whispered, my eyes closing of their own volition.

He licked my neck and then up my ear lobe before thrusting his tongue in my ear. My moan was embarrassingly loud as I leaned further into him, my pussy beginning to drip, my legs moving to straddle him without my permission.

He took my sweatshirt and the vest I was wearing underneath in his hands

and pulled them both up and over my head in one smooth motion. My breasts bounced a little from having been set free so abruptly. They brushed his naked chest and we both made a pained sound. My nipples peaked, as they flattened against his broad hard torso. The hairs on it had the same platinum blonde as his head but smoother and downier, so soft to touch.

*So, it's not dyed.*

He also had a myriad of scars, everywhere. I ran my fingers along his treasure trail, feeling a raised scar that must have been a knife wound as well as spotting at least two healed bullet wounds; one along his left shoulder and the other on his lower left side just where his kidney would be.

It was concerning.

I didn't ask about it since I was supposed to be an exotic dancer, not a nurse who might know about these things. I leaned down and kissed the scar on his shoulder. "What happened here?" I whispered, as I turned and kissed him below the jaw.

"Nothing for you to worry about," he murmured, his hand snaking under the waist of my sweatpants to rub against the entrance to my vagina. He groaned, lifting me up effortlessly so he could push my pants off. I helped him as much as I could, feeling the urgency build up in me.

Urgency for his touch, for him to fill me up again.

He pushed away the comforter, and I realized he was already completely naked.

I straddled him again, looking down at his scar infested, tattooed torso and wondering where to start. I traced the tattoo of a rose that was shaped around his left nipple. Bending over him, I swallowed his nipple and suckled gently, reveling in his resultant groans and how his hips jerked upwards as if he could not quite help himself. I circled the other nipple with my finger, feeling gratified as it hardened under my ministrations. It seemed his body was just as susceptible as mine to whatever this was between us.

He put his big hands around my waist, lifted me, flipped us over and had me under him in one smooth movement.

“Show off,” I murmured, though I was breathless and impressed by it and him.

He laughed, leaning down to cover my lips with his. I was expecting him to plunder my mouth, but he just kept his lips lightly atop mine, barely touching. It drove me crazy, made my lips tingle and my breath come fast. His hands drew patterns in my flesh, trailing up from the side of my breast down to my hip and back up again. His body was a welcome weight above mine and I could feel his hardness against my thigh.

I whimpered with need, too far gone for shame, and grabbed his head, pushing his face down into mine and mashing our lips together. I flicked my tongue out, running it along his lips, begging for entry, wanting us to fuse together into a single entity. Maybe that way, I'd finally be free of this hunger.

He parted his lips, clamping them over my tongue and sucking it into his mouth. I moaned happily, arching up into him as he cupped my breasts and squeezed. I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him with all the strength I had, closer, I needed him closer. His fingers trailed up my thighs and I jerked my hips, feeling his hard cock brushing against the soft, wet surface of my entrance.

I wanted him inside of me, but he made no effort to make that happen. I shook with frustration, my arms unraveling from around his neck to snake between us. If he wouldn't fuck me, I was going to fuck myself.

He caught my hand in his, "Patience, little dove," he whispered in my ear. "I'm not done with you yet."

Going up on his knees, he bent his head and laved at my left nipple with his tongue. His dick hung down between his legs, long and hard, a tempting treat just out of reach. I whimpered and squirmed, so turned on I couldn't *think*. I just wanted him so badly.

"*Please*," I begged in a strained voice, canting my hips upwards in case he didn't get the message.

"Shh, soon," he whispered back, kissing his way down the middle of my torso from my throat, between my breasts down to my belly button. He thrust his tongue into it, wiggling it about and making me squirm and giggle.

He lifted his head, grinning up at me before dropping it to continue licking down to my pussy. I drew a deep breath and held it as his tongue found my

clit. Mr. Levin was quite proficient at using his tongue because he had me dying in moments, crying, pleading, and screaming for him to just please *fuck me*.

He completely ignored me, taking his time to flick and lick my rapidly swelling clit until the feeling was too much for me. I jerked my hips up, shaking and shuddering as I covered his face with my nectar.

I'd have been embarrassed if I had the energy for that. But no, I was weightless. He sat up and licked the shine from his face. I would have been worried about his reaction, but he was clearly pleased.

He took both my hands in one of his, pinning them on the headboard as he loomed over me. "Put your legs around my waist," he ordered, and I tried to move my lethargic body to obey. I was throbbing in anticipation as he guided his dick into me.

I let out a long, drawn-out, relieved groan as he finally, *finally*, breached me, breaking me apart and stretching me until his balls were snugly seated against my entrance. I was crying with joy and frustration as he stilled, not moving for a while.

"Please," I repeated over and over. "I need you to move. Please, I'm *begging*," I moaned as I tried to cant my hips. He held them down ruthlessly, just watching me writhe underneath him. I could see how it cost him. The veins in his temple were standing out, his face was flushed, his fingers digging into my hips so hard they were going to leave bruises.

I loved it all. It was exactly what I didn't know I needed.

“Alexei,” I whispered. “*Please.*”

“Fine,” he said suddenly and began rutting into me with ruthless, focused efficiency. It was as if he wanted to be so far inside of me I could taste him in my mouth. I shouted words of encouragement, egging him on, wanting exactly that, too.

He was moaning loudly and groaning in my ear. He let go of my hands to gather my legs together, pushing my knees right into my face so he could rut into me with increasingly erratic movements, his face and neck flushed with effort.

I was crying as he hit all my nerve endings with every thrust, causing them to jolt and send shocks of electricity to every cell in my body. I wanted this to go on forever, but I could feel myself racing towards an explosive finish. It didn't even *occur* to me to be concerned about his pleasure. I was too busy drowning in my own.

I did want to kiss him, but my own legs were in the way. I widened my legs and bended them, taking hold of them with my own hands. “Kiss me,” I whispered.

He swooped down and took my mouth in his. The change in angle was enough to send me careening over a cliff. All at once, I was complete. The winds of pleasure buffeted me this way and that, until I didn't know which way was up.



I could feel my insides clench around him as he filled me up. I whimpered, body shaking with the intensity of it. He bit my lip, sucked my tongue, and then placed his teeth on my neck, biting down hard as his hips shuddered and jerked and he made a long keening sound of effort, emptying himself inside of me.

We both collapsed in a boneless heap, my eyes closed, panting hard. If I had it in me to freak out, I would have, because I *knew* this was no simple hook-up. This wasn't friends with benefits. This was the kind of shit that could destroy you forever. I was catching feelings at a rate I could not control, and it scared the bejesus out of me.

He slowly withdrew from inside of me, rolling over to land in the space beside me, his eyes closed. I felt replete, revived, and complete. Horrified, terrified, and out of my depth too. In an effort to run away from my feelings, I sat up.

“Where's your shower?”

He pointed to a door on the far side of the room. I stumbled out of bed, weaving in punch-drunk wooziness towards it while he laughed smugly. I gave him the middle finger before slipping into the bathroom and closing the door behind me.

Of course, it was everything I ever wanted in a bathroom. The first thing I noticed was the flowerpots sitting on either side of a plexiglass wall between the shower and the toilet. I sat down on the toilet with a sigh, just looking around and wondering.

My pussy was still throbbing, and I could feel come seeping out of me. Everything was very... immediate. My legs were shaky, and my heart had not stopped pounding.

“What am I doing?” My voice was low with despair.

My sister’s face came to mind, not the distant woman she’d been lately, but the smiling naïve child who’d held my hand and trusted me to protect her. That girl was relying on me to find out what happened to her and here I was...

I shook my head, not even knowing how to define what I was doing. For all I knew, he was responsible for my sister’s disappearance. I could not afford to forget that, regardless of what I was feeling.

I stood up and stepped into the shower, turning the water up as hot as it could go. I stood miserably under the spray, letting tears of confusion and despair fall from my eyes.

I used Alexei’s expensive looking shampoo, meaning to wash all the glitter and guilt from my hair, and perhaps, to clear my mind at the same time. I scrubbed my body as if preparing for surgery. I still did not feel clean.

Wrapping myself up tight in Alexei’s monogrammed robe, I wandered back into the bedroom. The bed was unoccupied, and nobody seemed to be around. The promising aroma of coffee was wafting about the room, so I figured I’d see if I could grab a cup before I left.

I still had a funeral to attend.

I peered out of the room, following the smell of coffee, and I saw a flight of stairs. I headed towards them, passing a closed door on my way. I descended the wooden staircase, seeing a lounge area at the bottom of the stairs and realizing it was an open plan apartment.

*Good. Easier to find things... and people.*

I peered right then left as I reached the bottom of the stairs and saw a pair of legs sitting on a stool. I headed in that direction. But the legs belonged to a woman.

It was the blonde from last night. The one Alexei said was his sister.

I stopped short, a few inches from her and smiled tentatively.

She turned and smiled at me. "Nora! Hi."

I was startled that she knew my name. "Er... hi?"

Her smile widened. "I heard that guy calling your name last night. I'm not some stalker, don't worry."

I smiled tentatively back. “I didn’t think that.”

“Didn’t you?” Her lips twisted sardonically. “In any case, I enjoyed your set. It was... illuminating.”

I quirked an eyebrow in spite of myself. “In what way?”

She beckoned for me to come closer with her finger. I stepped up to her, awkwardly giving her my ear.

“I know what you’re up to,” she whispered.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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## ALEXEI

“Oh great, you’ve met,” I said as I stepped out from my office where I’d gone to check my messages.

Nora and Katya were leaning towards each other on the kitchen island. Nora was dressed in my robe, and I felt my dick twitch with pleasure at the thought of her in my clothes.

I told it to shut the hell up and stand down as I walked towards them. I saw that Nora was looking a little peaked, and I narrowed my eyes at my sister.

“Katya, I trust you’ve been behaving?”

She widened her eyes at me with fake innocence. “Of course.”

I flicked a glance at Nora, cocking an eyebrow at her to ask if she was okay. She gave me a small smile and blushed, looking away.

“Aww, that’s so cute,” Katya said.

Of course, she’d seen that.

I returned my glare to her. “Did you need something Kat? I wasn’t expecting you this morning.”

“Well, I thought we could have breakfast,” she said, getting to her feet. “But I can see that I’m intruding so I’ll take off. Nora? A pleasure to meet you.” Katya leaned in and kissed her cheek. This seemed to bother Nora even more judging by how much paler she became.

She nodded awkwardly and stretched her lips in a rictus of a smile.

“You too,” she rasped.

I stared at her in concern, but she avoided my gaze too.

I really didn’t get what was happening.

Katya took off, and then there were two. Circling the island, I went to the kitchen counter where breakfast was gently steaming in the chafing dish, most likely delivered from the club by Sevastian and picked up from the lobby by Katya as she came up.

I filled two plates high with scrambled eggs, fried tomatoes, baked sausage and bacon and refried beans with a side of guac. Putting a plate down in front of Nora, I expected to hear a protest on the magnitude of food or maybe for her just to pick at it, but she picked up her fork and dug in without a word.

With an inner shrug, I poured her some coffee and brought it to her before making my own plate. We ate in silence for a while.

“You know, my sister’s perfectly harmless. No need to be afraid of her.”

She looked up at me, her eyes assessing. “I’m not.”

*Lie.*

I put down my fork and snagged her wrist. She looked back at me as I asked, “What’s up?”

She heaved a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. I know I’m being weird. It’s just...”

“A lot?” I could sympathize. This thing between us was no joke.

“Yeah.” She laughed shakily. “Everything is just...”

I grinned. “A lot.”

“Yeah.”



We stared at each other before bursting into laughter. It cut the tension as effectively as a scythe and we were able to talk normally after that. Like two human beings who liked each other.

In its own way, this was a first for me. I did not talk to virtual strangers like this.

“Hey, so come on, tell me about that scar on your shoulder. How’d you get it?” she asked.

I remembered how she’d kissed it so gently, reverently, as if it might still hurt.

I shrugged self-deprecatingly. “Why bring the mood down with sob stories? We’re having such a good time.”

“Come on... Okay fine, if not that one, then tell me about another scar you have.”

I smiled sardonically. “You noticed how many there are, huh?”

She shrugged. “Hard not to. The one on your belly... feels like a knife wound,” she said watching me cautiously.

I sighed. “Yeah... I could cover it up with tattoos, but I can’t do anything about the raised surface.”

“Why do you cover them up? Are you ashamed?”

“Nah.” I lifted my shirt so she could see the tattoo that lined the jagged line of that knife wound. It was a leaf design, and the line of the scar was the center of the leaf. She reached out and traced it slowly, tenderly, and I had to work to keep calm at the resulting sparks.

Her hand moved to the rounded bullet wound on my side, surrounded by a broken window, the jagged edges emanating from that rounded center and splintering outward in a circle. It was a work of art, and I was proud of it.

She grinned. “You are fond of inking yourself huh?” Her fingers moved, tracing the skull just below my heart, death’s scythe cutting through it neatly. “Do they all mean something?”

“Every tattoo does. It’s a story in the canvas of my skin.”

Her eyebrow rose and she gave me a look. “What a poetic way to put it.”

“What? Night club owners can’t be Byron too?”

She laughed. “Not in my experience.”

“I live to exceed your expectations.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes still traveling over my chest, not missing a single tattoo. “I see that.” Her eyes lingered on my body before she flicked them back to mine. “So, tell me one.”

It was my turn to quirk an eyebrow. “One what?”

“Story.” She ran her hand over an x-shaped scar in the middle of my chest, around which a crucifixion scene was drawn.

I sighed. “You just *had* to pick that one.”

She met my eyes. “Why? What happened?”

“Nothing really. Just my dad, drunk and mad with a knife in his hand, and my sister breaking his favorite brandy glass. He lashed out. I got between them.”

She just nodded, displaying a surprising lack of perturbation. My eyebrow rose higher. “That doesn’t shock you?”

She shrugged, and I remembered what she’d said about her own life.

“Where is he now? Your dad?” she asked softly.

“Dead.”

She nodded, accepting it.

“Where’s yours?” I asked in turn.

She took a deep breath, “Do you know... I have no idea.”

“Mmh. Probably best.”

She huffed a laugh. “You’re probably right.”

I took a deep breath and shook it off. “So, I showed you mine. Show me yours.”

She met my eyes, her eyebrows raised. “Huh?”

“Tell *me* a story of woe from your life.”

She laughed. “Haven’t I told you enough embarrassing stories?”

“What? You mean like your boyfriend from out of town?”

“Yeah.”

“And the one stalking you at my club?”

She blushed, blowing out a loud breath, and gave me a look.

“All those are about what other people did to you. Tell me about *you*, Nora Walsh.”

She jumped a bit, as if she was startled at me saying her full name. Or maybe no one had ever asked her for her life story. She shrugged awkwardly. “Not much to tell. I pretty much brought myself and my sister up. Parents were either drinking or fighting. Sometimes both.”

“But you got out.”

She sighed, looking tired. “Did I though?”

I leaned in and took her hands in mine, “You’re here, aren’t you?”

Her eyes were unbearably sad as she nodded.

She pulled her hands away from mine. “I gotta go,” she said, not even looking at me, and hurried back upstairs to change into her own clothes.

I took her mostly empty plate and emptied it in the trash before placing our dirty dishes in the sink and rinsing them. I could not figure her out. She was literally a mystery. I knew I had to crack her wide open if only for my own sanity.

She was back downstairs before I could figure out how, dressed in her sweats, her bag slung over her shoulder.

She gave me a tentative smile. “Um, thanks for breakfast and all,” she said awkwardly.

I laughed at her, coming right up to her so we were flush against each other. I looked down at her, feeling such uncharacteristic affection for her that I wondered why it didn’t perturb me.

I took her chin in my hand and meshed my lips to hers, tasting the tang of coffee and breakfast on her tongue and attempting to swipe it all away. Her arms clung to my shoulders until I thrust her away. I saw that her pupils were dilated.

*Good.*

I smiled. “My driver’s waiting downstairs to take you wherever you need to go.”

Her eyelids fluttered and she nodded, headed for the door without another word.

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*M*y dear reader,

I apologize for the interruption...

But you just stumbled upon a SECRET GIFT!

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This means MORE GIFTS! Because you'll be getting books of mine and other authors of the genre one week ahead of release and for FREE.

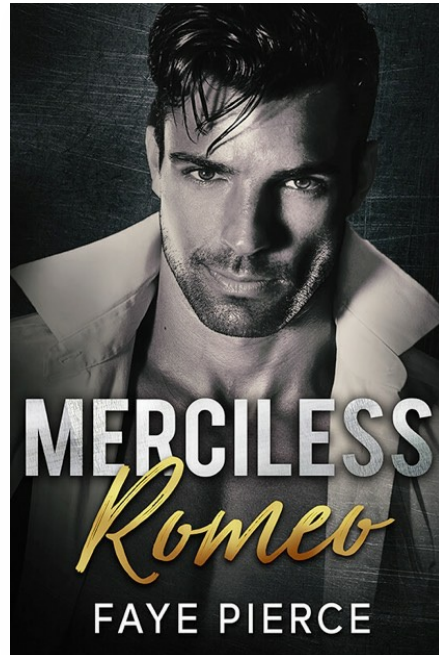
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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

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## NORA

“Drop me off here,” I told Alexei’s driver, and he looked at me through the rearview mirror in surprise. We were still three blocks away from my neighborhood, but I didn’t want him coming any closer. He maneuvered the large SUV to the curb, and I got out. I smiled tentatively, thanking him, and then waited until he’d driven away before I began walking the rest of the way.

I had to hurry, because even though I had some time, I was cutting it close.

Celia’s ceremony was supposed to start at ten a.m., and it was 9:15 already. The only upside for my being so late was that my grandma couldn’t interrogate me as to where I’d been. She was too busy hurrying me along.

She’d gone as far as laying out a dress for me to wear.

“No time for a shower now. Get dressed,” she ordered.

“Yes, Lita,” I replied meekly, hurrying to my room, and feeling very glad I’d taken the time to shower at Alexei’s. I changed my clothes in record time, pulled my hair back into a knot, applied the lightest foundation and some nude lipstick.

“That’ll do.”

I stepped out of my room and my grandma examined me critically. “Where are your pearl earrings? You should wear them.”

I nodded, going back to retrieve them before joining her at the door.

“I’ve already called a cab. It’s three minutes away,” she said.

I nodded and stood quietly, bag in hand. I didn’t really agree with this ceremony. It felt like giving up to me. But if it was what Lita needed, then I would support her.

We arrived at the cemetery with two minutes to spare. Jodie was standing by the headstone, looking solemn in a charcoal grey skirt suit. She reached out and hugged me tightly, then my grandmother. There were no other mourners except for the three of us and the priest.

The priest bent his head. “Let us pray,” he announced and launched into a slightly long-winded prayer about forgiving sins and accepting souls into heaven. I wasn’t really listening. My Lita tried her best, but I just could not take comfort in religion the way that she did.

All I could think was that, while we stood here mourning a headstone and an empty grave, Celia might be out there somewhere praying for someone to rescue her.

And I was failing.

I shifted from foot to foot, feeling restless. Jodie's hand crept into mine and she squeezed hard. I was grateful to her for turning up. Especially since I'd been MIA this last week.

Finally, the service, such as it was, came to an end. I turned away, unable to stand it for much longer. To my surprise, I caught sight of Detective Reed, standing by his car, his hands in his pockets, looking back at me.

I turned to Jodie. "Hey, could you call an Uber and make sure my Lita gets home? I gotta go talk to that cop." I indicated the detective with a jerk of my chin, not wanting my grandma to see. If the detective had bad news, I wanted to know about it first.

"Sure, babe. Go on, I'll take care of her." Jodie squeezed my hand before taking my grandma's arm with one hand, while calling for an Uber with the other. They headed down towards the gates, and I headed for the detective.

I came to a stop a few yards away from him and just stared.

"Detective," I said, trying to sound brave. I didn't like that he was here—it did not feel right.

"Miss Young." He nodded to me, straightening up from his lean. "How are you?"

“I’m worried. What are you doing here? Did you find something?” I couldn’t help how my voice trembled.

He shook his head, looking away, and then extracted an envelope from his pocket. “No. I didn’t. I had asked you to leave this alone, but I know you didn’t. I know you’ve been hanging around at Pandemonium. I can’t tell you how much of a mistake that is. I’m hoping this will convince you.” He held the envelope out to me.

I stared at it warily, wondering if I should take it. Every instinct in me was screaming *no*.

“What is it?”

He pushed it at me. “Take it. Read it when you’re alone.”

I reached out for the envelope. “Why are you giving me this?”

He sighed. “I couldn’t do anything for your sister. But maybe I can save *you*.”

“I don’t need to be saved, sir. I want my sister back.”

He turned, opening the door to his car. “Yeah well, you’re not gonna get her.”

He slid into the driver's seat and started the engine as I stared at him in disbelief.

Engine roaring, he turned to look at me. "Leave it alone, Nora."

He took off with a roar, accelerating down the cemetery lane before disappearing into traffic. I watched until his car completely disappeared before heading to a nearby bench and flopping down on it.

I stared down at the envelope, wondering if I should open it... if I should read it. Whatever was in there, I knew it was nothing good.

I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath. "I have to know," I whispered to myself before opening it and peering inside. I reached in and extracted the contents.

It was a file.

With a noisy sigh, I opened it. Alexei's picture stared at me from the front page with his stats printed neatly beside it.

**Alexei Levin.**

**Born January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1991**

*That would make him thirty-one. Huh. He's younger than I realized.*

**Father: deceased.**

**Mother: Detained in Russia.**

I remembered that I had read that in a blog. She was arrested for killing her husband, it said. The document went on to document all of Alexei Levin's suspected crimes. Top of the list was murder. He was thought to be culpable at the very least in his father's death as well as a suspect in various other deaths. He was a drug dealer and thought to be the head of the New York branch of the Bratva Organized crime family.

That was just the first page.

Aside from drug running and murder, the file said he also participated in smuggling, extortion, art theft, forgery, kidnapping and possibly human trafficking. Seeing it there all laid out in black and white was daunting.

What did I think I could do against such a man?

*What am I doing here?*

I laid the file aside, closing my eyes in despair. Apparently, Alexei grew up



in this life. He took over his current position from his father. Regardless of how well he played my body like a violin, he was an extremely dangerous man.

And he'd probably killed Celia.

I scrunched my eyes shut, a single tear managing to escape nevertheless. I wasn't sure what I was crying for. The loss of Celia... or the shame I felt? Shame at the slight heartbreak that crept into my chest at the crumbling potential of Alexei and I? That I wasn't sure made me feel like the worst sister on earth? Imagine if Alexei had my sister killed, and here I was contemplating letting it all go... because I'd spread my legs for him.

And now, I wasn't sure if I wanted to know.

The guilt was crippling. The pain was blinding.

I staggered over to the site of Celia's headstone and collapsed on her grave, digging my fingers into the dirt.

"Hey, Cece. Can you hear me?" I let the tears roll freely down my face. "I'm not giving up on you. I could never do that. I won't. I love you. Okay, Cece? I'm gonna find you," I whispered before laying my forehead in the dirt and watering her grave with my tears.

The regret was the worst. The missed opportunities. When grandma took us in, I was so glad to be away from dad and his mood swings and violence that

I just... let go. I let go of everything, including Celia. I went to school, I came home, did my homework, and just let myself exist. I didn't see how she was struggling—because I didn't want to. I wanted everything to be okay. I wanted us both to just be okay for once.

Grandma spent a lot of time praying for us, but we were both impatient with it. Where was that God when we'd needed him? When we'd been locked in a closet, claustrophobic and afraid, praying for help? He wasn't there.

Celia began to make her own friends, to pull away and I just... didn't want to stop her. And now here I was, paying for it. If only I had a do over, I'd make sure she was okay. I'd insist we go to therapy. I'd make her stay in school.

God... regret might have been an exercise in futility, but there was no denying that 'if only' were two of the saddest words ever spoken.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

---

## NORA

Having resolved to do this thing and get to the bottom of Celia's disappearance, I came in on Sunday afternoon, hoping to find the place relatively empty. Only Monique knew I wasn't on the roster. Her assistant, Anjelika, was in charge of introductions. I could see her doing a sound check and ducked low so I could slip past and down the corridor to the office block.

I was ready to pick the lock, but someone had left it ajar. This time, I didn't just barge in. First, I checked to see if anyone was in there. I listened intently, but the silence was absolute. Well... relatively. With the faint thrum of music from the DJ's station and various people talking, there was a lot of background noise. But none from the office.

I stepped in and closed the door behind me with a sigh of relief before turning to the desk. Creeping over, I opened it, rifling through the papers in it. They mostly seemed to be miscellaneous bills. Nothing that could tell me what happened to a random dancer six months ago.

"What are you up to?"

I started and turned around to see Katya posing by the door, hand on her hip, leg slightly cocked. Her long, platinum hair was hanging down in a curtain to her waist. She was dressed simply in jeans and a white statement tee. Her six-inch black Louboutin's made her legs look even longer. She looked like a supermodel.

I stopped breathing, my brain scrambling for an excuse. “I uh... I was waiting for your brother.”

She laughed at me. “You’re not very good at this are you?”

I frowned, genuinely confused by both her attitude and her words. “I don’t —”

“Celia talked about you, you know.” She took a step towards me.

I was frozen in shock. “What?”

“She always had nice things to say, don’t worry. One thing that stood out to me is how protective you were of her. She was always like, *if she knew what was happening with me she’d freak out*. And here you are.”

“I...” All my words disappeared. I wanted to grab her and shake her, make her tell me everything she knew about Celia and what happened to her. But she was Alexei’s sister. Hell, she was probably here to out me. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“Nora, Nora, Nora.” She shook her head and tutted at me, taking a step closer. “You’re a horrible liar. I don’t know how you got my brother to swallow anything you said.” She looked me up and down in a speculative manner. I squirmed on the spot, feeling uncomfortable.

I sighed in defeat. “What do you want?”

She ran a hand down my arm, and she dropped her playful demeanor. “I want to help you,” she said. “I loved her too, you know. I mean... we might not have been serious, or exclusive, but she meant something to me, and I want to know what happened to her as much as you do. Well... maybe not *quite* as much as you do, but you understand.”

She moved away from me, going to sit on Alexei’s desk and crossing her long legs. She stared expectantly at me, but I was still at a loss for words. “You... knew Celia?” I said quietly.

She nodded. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“And you were like... together?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. Not really. We fucked around, we talked, she was a friend as well as a lover.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t even know she...”

“Well... she wanted your approval. Maybe she thought you wouldn’t—”

“I would never have—” I spat fiercely before she stopped me with a raised hand.

“Hey, I know. I was just speculating. We lie the hardest to the ones whose opinion matters to us.”

“Does your brother know?”

She shrugged. “Not really. He doesn’t ask. I don’t tell.”

“I wish she’d told me,” I said miserably.

“What difference would it have made?” She looked genuinely curious.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It might have brought us closer together.”

“And she may not have disappeared?”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Oh, if only it were that easy to save our loved ones from themselves.”

I frowned at her. “What are you saying?”

Katya sighed, shrugging with studied nonchalance. “People are who they are. You can’t really save anyone Nora...” She gave me a sharp look with those piercing eyes. “Except yourself. You should get out before someone finds out what you’re up to.”

“And by someone, you mean your brother?”

“Yes.”

I looked away. I couldn’t trust this woman whether she claimed to have been Celia’s friend or not. This whole thing could be a trick. Katya hopped off the table and came up to me, standing flush against me and cupping my face in her hands. Her blue eyes peered into mine, and I felt like a fly, caught in a spider’s web.

“You’re not built for this life, Nora. Cece knew it, I can see it. I think even my brother can see that. You’re out of your depth. And if my brother finds out you’re lying to him...” She shook her head.

“Do you know what he does?” I asked, mostly out of curiosity.

“Of course. Do *you*?”

I just blinked at her. “Not really. Not the details. But I know what he is.”



“So, you know why you should quit while you’re ahead.”

“She’s my sister.”

Katya let go of my jaw with a sigh. She paced around the desk. “What if I offered to find out what I could? Would you get out?”

“I don’t even know you!” This woman was crazy if she thought I’d just leave all the sleuthing in her hands and skip off into the sunset. For all I knew, she was complicit.

Katya looked at me with narrowed eyes, her arms folded. “So, tell me, genius—what do you plan to do once you find out what happened to your sister, huh? You think you can take it to the cops? Do you see them doing anything to find her?”

My lips twisted. Considering that detective Reed had effectively told me to back off or else... I had to concede that she had a point.

“Tell me, Nora. What’s your plan?”

Well, she didn’t have to be so mean about it. I shrugged, avoiding her eye. I had no plan and had no idea what I was doing. I was flailing about like a landed fish. I admit it. There was no need for her to rub it in.

She resumed her pacing only to come to a stop in front of me. “I know what

to do,” she said with supreme confidence.

I looked up and met her eye. “Tell me.”

She gave me a sidelong smile. “So, you’re in?”

I bit my lip, thinking hard. I was really up shit creek without a paddle... and she was offering me a canoe. “Yeah, I’m in.”

“Good. Now, forget Alexei, he’s not who we want. It’s Igor that we have to get to. Make him talk.”

“And how do we do that?”

“Well...” She inclined her head at me. “For one thing, I’m gonna need some chloroform. You wouldn’t happen to have access to that? Say, in your other job as a nurse?”

My jaw dropped. “How did...?”

She snorted derisively. “I told you. Cece talked about you. She was really proud of you, making something of yourself.”

The lump was back in my throat. I *had* to find my sister. “Well, the use of

chloroform has been discontinued in hospitals since the civil war. But we could make it ourselves. The recipe is on the internet.”

“Perfect. Then I’ll take care of it.” She beamed.

Just then the door opened, and Alexei came in. He stopped short, surprised to see us there.

“Katya. Nora. What are you doing in here?”

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

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## ALEXEI

*K*atya and Nora in the same room, looking thick as thieves. I didn't know what to feel.

“What’s going on?” I asked the room in general. Nora avoided my eye, but Katya came right up to me and kissed my cheek.

“Just shooting the breeze, big brother, as we waited for you.”

“Oh really? And why were you waiting for me?” I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Well, you know that practically abandoned warehouse you keep near the docks? It’d be perfect for a rave since you don’t want me in your club. Can my friends and I use it?” She batted her lashes prettily at me and I snorted. My sister was always so full of shit.

Still, what harm could it do?

I shrugged. “Knock yourself out. You need some people to clean it up for you?”

“Nah. I’ll take care of it. I’m not *completely* useless, you know?”

“No one said you were.”

“Mmm.” She let go of me and sauntered to the door. “Well anyway, I will leave you two lovebirds alone. So long, and thanks for the warehouse.” She wiggled her fingers at me before leaving.

I shook my head bemused before turning to Nora. “And what about you? What do you need from me?”

She shrugged. “Nothing. I...” She looked down and blushed. “I just thought...”

I was moving towards her before she could finish her thought, and snaking my hands around her waist, pulling her to me. “What did you think?” I murmured, soft and low in her ear.

She shivered. “I uh...” Her eyelids fluttered, and she seemed to lose her train of thought.

I grinned at her, quite triumphantly. “If you’re gonna make a habit of sneaking into my office, I just might have to punish you for it.”

Her eyes widened and she stared at me, something like fear in her eyes. “What?”

I quirked a brow. “I never found that pendant you were looking for when you came into my office that first time.”

She seemed frozen, like a deer in headlights. “Uh, no. I did ask you to give it to me if you ever find it.”

I nodded. “You did.”

“Yeah so... did you find it?”

“Nope.”

“Oh. Well that’s too bad.”

I gave her a side-eye, but she just looked at me like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. I shelved it, fully intending to revisit later and find out what that was about, but at the moment, it was a matter of urgency to have the taste of her in my mouth.

Matching action to thought, I seized her mouth with my own, trying not to think too hard about the raging thirst I felt for her and how every encounter seemed to stoke, rather than quench, my desire.

My hands ran down her silky, coverall-clad body. The need to have her naked was overwhelming, and I stepped back, undoing the snaps that closed at her front and pushing the coverall off her shoulders. She took her shoes off as I pushed her coverall down, and she stepped out of it without hesitation.

Inside that, she wore a vest and panties in matching black. I cupped her breasts, leaning in to tease out her nipple with my tongue. She was already moaning, already arching her back, thrusting her chest into my face. Very demanding, this one.

I liked it.

I liked it a *lot*.

Lifting her by her pert little ass, I deposited her on the table that was thankfully free of debris. She wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. Digging into her vest so I could touch her warm skin, I meshed my lips to hers, kissing her with all the passion that kept welling up as if from a bottomless pit of desire.

She moaned into my mouth, arching her back and digging her nails into my shoulders. I reached between us, unzipping my jeans and letting my erection graze against her thigh. I dug my hands beneath her ass, squeezing hard as I kissed her and tilted her backwards. I took her legs and put them on my shoulders, before pushing aside her panties and pushing into her in one long thrust.

We groaned simultaneously... as if it had been years since we had sex and



not one day. I set a punishing pace, meaning to possess her fully. Even as she moaned against my mouth, I could sense her holding back from me. I wanted all of her, every last bit, but if it scared her half as much as it scared me, I couldn't blame her for trying to protect herself.

There were dark circles under her eyes. I hadn't failed to notice them even in the midst of my lust. She was going through something, and I wanted to know what. I wanted to split her open, mind, body *and* soul and know her in every sense of the word.

For now, I would settle for possessing every inch of her body. I increased my pace, thrusting into her like a drill, my hips snapping hard and fast. I couldn't help the growling sounds I was making, but they were drowned beneath her whimpering cries. Or maybe her whimpers were inspiring my growls. It was difficult to say when I couldn't really think straight.

I lost my rhythm the closer I came to orgasm. I didn't want to come just yet and slowed down, changing my strokes to long and slow. Her whimpers changed to pained groans, and she threw her hands behind her, grabbing hold of the table and arching her back as she pleaded with me to *please for the love of God fuck her harder*.

I grinned, enjoying her pained pleasure even as I tried to keep my edge. She was dripping, enveloping me in hot wetness, and it was all I could do to hold on and not give in to the urge to empty myself into her.

I threw my head back. "Oh, God," I groaned as I slightly increased my pace, unable to help myself.

“Alexei,” she whispered, low and desperate.

It was all I needed before I was pouring into her. Her pussy clenched around me, contracting and relaxing as she made desperate noises deep in her throat.

Simultaneous orgasms.

My hand closed around her throat, and I squeezed as my hips juddered. She choked and squeaked, making no move to stop me as we shook and shuddered to completion... together.

I let go of her throat and she gasped, panting. That was gonna leave a bruise. She already had a hickey from where I bit her yesterday.

I slid out of her slowly as she gasped and then helped her up to a sitting position. Her vest was askew, as were her panties. She straightened herself up, still sitting on my desk as I stared at her. I realized she hadn't yet told me why she'd come to the club.

I ran my hand down her legs, tracing their shape with my eyes. “You alright?” I asked.

She looked at me in surprise. “Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?”

I shrugged. “You look tired.”

She smirked at me, “Well, you kind of fucked the energy out of me.”

That was true, but it wasn't the truth. She was still hiding things from me.

“Oh yeah? What were you up to yesterday by the way? Did you manage to pay your rent?”

“What? Er, yeah, I mean I got her to give me some more time.”

I watched her intently, trying to see beyond her words to what she was hiding.

*Maybe she's just embarrassed and worried about having money problems.*

It could be as simple as that. I decided to do my own sleuthing... later. For now, I would enjoy her company. I bent down and picked up her coverall, handing it to her with a smile.

“Thanks,” she said, blushing prettily.

“You're welcome.”

I sat down in my chair as she got dressed, watching her speculatively. “You

didn't tell me why you came by," I said leaning back in my chair and swinging a bit from side to side.

"Didn't I?" Her voice was higher than normal.

"No, you didn't."

"Oh. Well... I was chilling at home and then I started to think about you and about this thing between us. Then I thought that maybe I was exaggerating it in my head, making it out to be... something it wasn't." She glanced at me from beneath her lashes as she snapped her coveralls closed. "Then I decided to come here and prove it to myself."

I grinned. No wonder she couldn't look me in the eye. "So? What's the verdict? *Were* you making it something it wasn't?"

She sat up with a sigh and considered me seriously. "I am afraid not."

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

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## NORA

“So grandma, I’m not going to be around much this week, okay? Crazy double shifts what with all these new infections and such.” I avoided my grandmother’s eye as I filled my cup with coffee, ready to leave for the day. I had a bag, packed with clothes, because directly after my shift at the hospital I was heading over to Pandemonium. Alexei had texted me telling me to be ready to spend the night with him. I didn’t expect to see my grandmother until maybe the next day.

She crossed her arm, blocking my path. I looked up to see her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You only call me Grandma when you’re lying to me. Now, what are you up to?”

I looked at her, mouth open in surprise. “Um... what?”

“Don’t play coy with me, *Princesa*. Tell me the truth.”

I blew out a breath, looking away to give myself time to come up with something.

*If you’re gonna lie, keep it as close to the truth as possible.*

I couldn’t remember where I’d heard that, but it made sense. “Okay Lita, see

the thing is, I'm still... searching for Celia. I haven't given up, and I have a lead which I'm going to follow up after work, so I won't be back tonight. But this week is also gonna be crazy because I *do* have double shifts."

She gasped. "Is it dangerous what you're doing?"

I shrugged noncommittally. "I don't know. Probably. Maybe. I'll be careful." I looked intently into her warm brown eyes. "You understand that I *have* to know, right?"

She sighed in resignation, giving me a kiss on the cheek. "I do, *Princesa*. You and Cece were always..." She crossed her index and middle fingers together, holding them up to me. "You were more of a mother to her than my poor Carmen."

I blinked at her, unable to find words. "Yeah well..." I cleared my throat, dashing away tears. "She was my Cece, too." My voice broke on her name. "And I can't just let her be gone without trying to find answers."

My grandmother nodded sadly. "*Sí, mamita*. I know."

I kissed her cheek, hitched my backpack higher on my shoulder, picked up my coffee cup and left.

Work was a blur. I avoided Jodie because I didn't want to tell her about the club or Alexei, and I knew she would ask. Between her and Dr. Cole, I felt like I was playing an elaborate game of hide and seek while trying to do my

job at the same time. I was surprised he hadn't said anything to my supervisor about me working at a strip club.

Or maybe he had, and she decided to keep it to herself. Add that to the myriad of things I had to worry about.

By the time my shift was done, I was pretty fed up with myself and everybody. I stopped off at an Ethiopian restaurant on my way to the club to have myself a wholesome meal. I sat by myself, legs crossed and tried to empty my mind of all thought as I ate. I couldn't afford to make mistakes. Katya was out there, supposedly doing her part.

All I could do was sit on my hands and wait for her to get back to me. Meanwhile, I had to be alert and avoid whatever unthinking traps might come my way. Just the other day, I'd been caught wrong-footed with Alexei talking about the non-existent pendant I'd supposedly lost in his office.

I didn't know if he was starting to question my motives. I took a deep breath, vowing to myself that I'd be more careful. I used the staff entrance at the back of the club. It was nestled in a well-lit alleyway and guarded by a burly guy named Jesus. He gave me a friendly nod as he opened the door for me.

I sneaked into the blue-lit hallway that led to the kitchens, hearing the clang of pots and pans and the cook's irritated voice. The club didn't exactly run a five-star restaurant, but they made some pretty tasty cheeseburgers and their fries were like crack. The strippers got courtesy platters in the changing rooms, and I'd had a chance to taste it all.



I walked past the kitchen and took the stairs to the second floor where the changing rooms were. I put my bag in my locker and then went to lay down on the sofa for a power nap. It was still early evening and most of the performers had not arrived yet. I resolutely closed my eyes and slept.

Later, I could see Alexei watching me as I performed my piece. His hazel eyes pierced the dark in the room like lasers as he stared at me up on stage. I hardly registered anyone else—he was all there was. He was sitting alone tonight; no Katya or other people with him. I could feel myself getting soft and wet just imagining what we might do later. Vaguely, in the back of my mind, I realized the crowd was cheering, but I had eyes for only one person.

As soon as I got off stage, I walked right up to him.

“Did you enjoy the show?” I asked coyly.

He smiled. “Go and get changed. We’re getting out of here.”

I couldn’t obey fast enough, even though it made me everything I’d hoped not to become: sex-obsessed, clingy, and needy—following Alexei around like a lap dog. I could hear the other girls whisper it. Hell, I whispered it to myself.

*You’re here to find out what happened to Celia.*

Repeating it to myself time and again wasn’t having the effect I hoped it would. My body had betrayed me as I let Alexei take me by the hand and

lead me to his car. Even as he walked beside me, the sane, sensible part of me wanted to turn on my heels and run—just get as far away from him as I could—before he managed to break my body *and* heart.

There was only one way this thing between us could end. Badly.

I knew it, but it didn't stop me from smiling up at him and letting him tuck his hand between my thighs as we drove to his apartment. The flimsy material of my jeans was not enough to block out the warm weight of his fingers on my thigh, the way his touch made my skin light up and tingle like it had been zapped by electricity.

His effect on me was worrying on so many levels even as it intoxicated me. I knew I'd never felt like this before, and I was terrified of my own feelings. We arrived at his place way too soon, and then we were ascending the lift and stepping into his vast studio apartment.

Alexei was carrying a bag which he set down on the kitchen island. "Why don't you go freshen up? I just gotta sort some things out here."

I nodded, climbing the stairs to his bedroom slowly, even as I questioned this unabashed domesticity we were playing at. Marci hadn't said anything about Alexei bringing his conquests home. I supposed I could ask Jules, but I didn't think she'd be inclined to tell me.

Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

Even though I was ashamed about it, I really wanted to know what all this meant. No, the truth was that I wanted it to mean I was special. That he didn't bring all his conquests home.

That I was the first.

*Might as well wish we were in a fairy tale.*

Focus, Young!

I gave myself a tiny slap as I waited for the water in the shower to heat up enough. I stepped into it, letting the water drown me in its hot, high-pressure spray. I washed the smell of the club off me, using Alexei's shampoo and body wash liberally. I stepped out of the shower and wrapped myself in his terrycloth robe, closing my eyes and breathing in the smell of his cologne—Bleu de Chanel, I remember—just feeling my insides melt with anticipation.

I heard him clear his throat and my eyes flew open. He was sitting on the bed, his head in his hand, and smirking. "What's up?" he asked.

I blushed with embarrassment. "N-nothing. Just really enjoyed the shower."

"Uh huh..." He got to his feet and began to unbutton his shirt. "Well... I suppose it's my turn then."

I was so fixated on watching his fingers I almost missed what he said.

“Uh... hm,” I mumbled, my eyes unable to leave his gorgeous, toned chest as more and more of it came into view. I didn’t like to think of myself as shallow, but I was totally objectifying him. All I could think was *Hot! Hot! Hot!*

My fingers tingled, wanting to touch him, and my mouth even watered like the most fucked up Pavlovian response. He walked past my frozen in place body and stepped stark naked into the shower. It was some time before I could make myself move the few steps that would take me to the bed.

Once there, I debated whether to lie down naked, or sit and wait in my robe. Before I could decide, the shower turned off and Alexei appeared at the door, dripping gently onto the carpet, wearing nothing to obscure the wonderful view of his glorious wet body.

He grinned at me, as he began walking towards me. I took a step back, feeling like a mouse being stalked by a cat. I may have whimpered just the tiniest bit. My legs hit the back of the bed and I sort of fell into a sitting position, clutching my robe like a distressed damsel clinging to her virginity.

Alexei’s grin widened as he loomed over me, his legs straddling me... which put his dick right in front of my face. He was already aroused, his cock making demands of me. I looked up at him from beneath my lashes.

“You want me to...?” I said tentatively.

He shrugged. “Only if you want to.”

I decided to stop being such a pussy and pushed the robe off my shoulders before reaching for him. My tiny hand was hardly adequate to the task of wrapping around his girth, and I leaned forward, tongue out, and licked him.

He groaned as if he was in pain, and I looked up at him again and grinned a bit.

“You like that?”

His hand closed around my neck. “Less talking, more sucking.”

He growled, squeezing a bit. I leaned into his touch, opening my mouth wide and choking him down. Unfortunately for both of us, my gag reflex was in proper working order, so there was only so much of him I could take. By the way his hand tightened on my throat and his other hand pulled at my hair while he groaned, I deduced that he liked it regardless.

I sucked as much of him down as I could, saliva dripping from the side of my mouth as he fucked into it. He looked down, his eyes, darkened with lust, gazing into mine. I worked harder, suckling him, licking at the slit at the tip as my other hand played with his balls. There was a curious sense of power in seeing his body react to me. He jerked when I tickled his balls, moaning encouragingly, as his hand tightened on my throat. I had a feeling he wanted to feel his own dick widening my passageways as he thrust it in as deep as it would go. I'd never had a thing for breath play before, but there was something to the lightheadedness I was feeling that made me reckless.

I squirmed, feeling my pussy aching, and I moaned as my lips worked him. As I pumped him with one hand, I cupped my breast with the other, pinching at the nipple to harden it even further. His hand left my hair, grabbing at my other tit and squeezing as he let out a long, drawn-out groan and came into my mouth.

He let go of my throat at the same time, and I gasped as air filled my lungs. My whole body was tingling with adrenaline, my insides open and hungry and *ready*. He pushed me back on the bed and lifted my legs up, folding them so that my knees were level with my shoulders. He wrapped my arms around my legs before bending down and flicking out his tongue.

He teased my clit, making me scream and cry, begging uncontrollably.

“Please, fuck me, Alexei. Please, I’m begging. Oh, God, I need...” I was babbling things I wasn’t even paying attention to. I just wanted him so badly.

“Fine. You want me?” he murmured, breath ghosting against my ear. “Then you’d better be ready to take all of me.” He thrust into me in one long fell swoop, and I cried out in shock and pleasure as his balls slapped against me.

He began pumping in and out, whispering all sorts of things. “Oh yeah, you feel so good. Fuck, yeah take all of me. You’re a slut for my dick, aren’t you?” He bit at my neck, rutting into me uncontrollably. It was driving me mad.

“God yes, give it to me.” I was crying with need. As deep as he went, it

wasn't enough.

I wanted more.

I spread my legs wider, letting him pump into me, his fists pressing down against my clit, enhancing the pleasure of it. My whole body began to contract, lifting off the bed of its own volition as my vision whited out. I shook and shuddered into completion as he emptied himself inside of me. I was incoherent with desire, my body a marionette, buffeted by whatever he wanted to do to it. He jerked his hips, groaning out loud as he came, and I clung onto him for dear life.

At the last minute, he reached down and smashed his lips into mine. We collapsed slowly onto the bed, and for a time, I knew nothing else.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

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## NORA

There is such a thing as having too many balls in the air— pun not intended. Working full shifts at the hospital, then doing my performance at the club while trying to question everyone I could without arousing suspicion... and then going home to get fucked by Alexei was *exhausting*. I felt like I barely slept. I was always late, and I had the nasty feeling I was half-assing everything.

I was avoiding my grandmother's calls because I hadn't been home in four days. Something was going to have to give. I sneaked out of Alexei's bed, creeping over to the bathroom for a quick shower before making my way out of the house. Thankfully, leaving was easy since it didn't require his fingerprint or code that only he knew. I could just open the door and let myself out. Heaven help me if I left something inside the house. I'd have to call him to let me back in.

I took the stairs like a zombie, trying to use the exercise to wake up. I only made it about two floors before giving up and taking the lift the rest of the way. When I stepped outside the glass doors of the building, I blinked as the early morning sun was a little bright for my eyes. Three mornings I'd snuck out of Alexei's bed to avoid questions about where I was going. I didn't know how much longer I could do this.

I'd left my bike at the club on the first night and never really retrieved it, so I called a driver to take me to work.

I walked into the hospital with my head down. Every day I expected to be summoned. Cole Hutton was not a man to *forget* he had dirt on me. If he was keeping my secret, there was a reason for it.

*He probably likes knowing that I'm in a constant state of dread.*

I nodded and smiled at the receptionist and headed to the locker room to change.

“Miss Young?”

I froze, turning to see my supervisor bearing down on me, looking grim.

*Here we go.*

My heart sank.

“Miss Young, what time is it?” Mrs. Smith asked me.

I frowned at her, not understanding, and then glanced at my watch. “It’s... 9:10 a.m.,” I said slowly, a flush staining my cheeks.

“And what time does your shift start?”

“Nine, ma’am.” I looked down, trying to seem appropriately contrite.

“This is the third day you’ve been late, Young.” She stared at me despairingly. “I can’t tolerate that in my staff. That’s not how we work here, and you know it. When your sister disappeared I cut you some slack. I can’t imagine what you went through, Nora, but you must find it in yourself to get it together, okay?”

I nodded slowly, feeling embarrassed to be reprimanded in front of the receptionist and anyone who cared to listen in. I quickly walked away, changing as fast as I could and getting to work. Mrs. Smith was right. I *had* been dropping the ball. I just didn’t know how to pick it up again.

I had enough self-awareness to admit that I was overwhelmed.

I tried to make up for it by bringing my A-game to the job. Smiling at every patient, taking barely any coffee breaks, and definitely not answering any calls I got. My phone was continuously vibrating in my pocket though, so I fished it out between patients to check who was blowing me up.

Of course, it was Alexei—which really made no sense since he’d seen me just that morning and would see me again in the evening. Whatever it was could surely wait. I put my phone on *Do Not Disturb* and continued with my day. I caught a glimpse of Jodie in the distance in conversation with a doctor and I ducked out of sight like a coward.

The truth was that I was ashamed of what I was doing. This had not been the plan at all. I was just supposed to snoop around, ask some questions, and

maybe find answers to what happened to my sister.

Now I was lying to everybody I loved and sleeping with the man who possibly harmed her. Mrs. Smith walked by the triage room, looking in on me with a jaundiced eye. She stopped, staring at me. “Where’s your badge?” she asked.

I tensed, looking down at my uniform.

*Shit.*

I had no idea where I left it. I cleared my throat. “Um, I must have forgotten to wear it. I’ll go get it right after this next patient.”

She nodded. “See that you do,” she said before sauntering off.

No doubt she’d be back to make sure I did.

I sighed, knowing that I had to do something. I got up and walked slowly to the locker room as I thought frantically about where my badge could be. In truth, with everywhere I’d been in the last few days, I could only hope and pray I hadn’t dropped it in the club or—God forbid—Alexei’s apartment.

Then I remembered that I had left my spare badge downstairs. In the morgue. With Jodie.

“Fuck!” I whispered in despair.

With my shoulders slumping, I changed direction.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

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## ALEXEI

I woke up, once again, to an empty bed.

The sheets were cold beside me meaning she'd been gone a while. I got up and padded over to my laptop and brought up the security cameras, rewinding to see when she'd left.

"7:45 again? Where do you go so early?"

I could see she was doing her best to be quiet and not wake me up.

"Why though?" I asked no one, biting my lip as I watched her leave on the screen.

Nora was behaving weirdly. She'd left every morning without a word about where she was going. When I asked her about it, she evaded me, giving me vague answers about errands.

I wasn't so pussy-whipped as to accept her answers without question. True, I liked having her around, and the sex was out of this world. But I didn't know enough about her to trust her implicitly.

Yesterday, I lojacked her phone after she'd fallen asleep.

I had my breakfast in a leisurely manner, going through my day. I had collections at three a.m., but aside from that, I was free. It would have been nice to spend that time with Nora, just getting to know her.

I tried calling her, and she didn't pick up. I tried again, and again, just in case she was away from her phone or somewhere loud. She still ignored me. She was leaving me no choice.

She forced me to track her like a goddamned stalker. It was upsetting, I won't lie. Chasing after a girl was not on my bingo card for this or any year. Frankly, it made me feel a bit sordid, pathetic. The only thing that consoled me was that my suspicions were purely professional. Whatever games she was playing, I needed to get to the bottom of it lest they come back to bite me in the ass.

I activated the GPS and located her. To my surprise, she was at St. Mark's hospital in downtown New York.

Lucky for me, it was a hospital where I sat on the board.

"What the fuck is she doing there?" I frowned.

She'd been fine when she left in the morning—at least, she had looked healthy on the screen. What could have happened to her between now and then?



Maybe she went in for chemo. That would explain why she's not answering the phone and why she leaves at the same time every day.

My heart sank. I didn't want that to be the answer. Getting in the shower, I cleaned myself as fast as possible before dressing up and leaving the house. I checked the GPS and saw she was still in the hospital. Taking the fastest route, I made my way there.

"Excuse me?" I leaned in to catch the receptionist's eye.

She looked up with bright eyes. "Yes, sir? Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for someone. Nora Walsh? She might be a patient here."

Her brow furrowed. "Nora Walsh? Let me check." She began to hit some keys on her computer, peering shortsighted at the screen. Finally she looked up, shaking her head. "I don't have a Nora Walsh in the system."

It was my turn to frown. I nodded, thanking her, and then moved away so I could check on the GPS. It said that Nora was still in the hospital somewhere albeit not stationary.

"Janice darling, how are you?"

The voice sounded familiar, and I glanced towards the reception to see who it was. To my surprise, I saw that it was Nora's stalker from the club, and he was dressed in a doctor's coat. I stared in disbelief. He was busy flirting with the receptionist and didn't notice me.

I followed him as he walked away, and happily, he turned down an empty corridor. I hurried up and caught up to him, closing my fingers around his throat and pulling him back so he almost fell on his back. I steadied him as I choked him, spinning him around to face me.

“Hello again.”

He stared at me, eyes boggling. He opened his mouth and tried to shout. I squeezed his throat harder.

“I'm going to ask you one question, and you're going to answer. If you do not answer, I will press down against your hyoid. You're a doctor, right? You know what that'll do to you.”

He nodded slowly.

“Good. So, the girl you were stalking in the club, where is she?”

He swallowed audibly. “Who, Nora?”

“Yeah, Nora. Where is she?”

“What do you want with her?”

I tightened my hold on his neck, impressed that he had the bravery to ask. He seemed like a spineless douche bag. He choked.

“I... don’t... know.” He gasped. “She’s been avoiding me.”

“Is that so? I wonder why. Where can I find her?”

He coughed and I loosened my hold... slightly. “She sometimes eats lunch in the morgue. You could try there.”

I let him go abruptly, and he almost fell on his ass. He caught himself in time, so he only stumbled about. I walked away from him, quite confident that he wouldn’t try to report me.

“The morgue, huh? You eat lunch there every day? What the fuck are you up to, Nora?”

I was even more determined to get to the bottom of all this.

I headed for the lift and pressed the button for the basement. I crossed my arms, and expelled a frustrated breath, trying to contain my annoyance.

Stepping out of the lift, I stormed down the hall to the morgue.

“Mrs. Smith looks like she wants to strangle me. Thanks for keeping this for me.”

I froze, hearing Nora’s voice.

“Hey, it’s no problem. At least it’s given me a chance to see you.” I recognized the pathologist’s voice—Jodie Hunt—and stepped into the room. I knew she batted for the other team, and her voice sounded *way* too pleased to see Nora.

I narrowed my eyes at them. Nora was standing with her hands in her pockets next to Jodie’s chair. She was wearing a nurse’s uniform. *What the fuck?* Jodie was sitting in her chair, turned to the side, facing her. They were so close together that all Jodie had to do to lick Nora’s pussy was lift her dress.

They both turned as I entered. Nora’s jaw dropped, her face paling. Jodie had a twin look of shock on her face.

“Well, well, well...” I said, crossing my arms. “What do we have here?”

“Alexei—”

“Mr. Levin—”

They spoke at the same time then looked at each other with comical—to me—shock.

“You know him?” they echoed.

I was too busy boiling with rage to entertain their charade.

“Nora?” I growled. “Would you care to explain what you’re doing here?” I looked her up and down. “And in that uniform?”

She cleared her throat, immediately starting to look shifty.

Jodie got to her feet. “Mr. Levin—”

I stalked forward, grabbed Nora’s hand, and pulled her out of there. “I’ll deal with you later,” I threw over my shoulder at Jodie as we left.

Nora stumbled after me, confusion warring with fear on her face. I cursed myself inwardly for being blinded by my lust. I’d had questions right from the jump and I let them slide because she looked at me with dewy eyes.

I stopped just outside the door of the hospital and spun around to face her. Crossing my arms, my brow furrowed. “You want to explain yourself?” I asked.

“*You* want to explain yourself? What the hell was that?” she threw back at me, much to my shock. People didn’t usually speak to me with that much challenge in their voice.

I cocked my head to the side, eyes narrowed to convey my utter disbelief at her audacity. “Excuse me?”

She waved her hands, flailing, “You! Walking into my place of work and manhandling me in front of my colleagues. What the fuck, Alexei?”

I stared at her incredulously before throwing my head back and bursting into laughter. “Your place of work? Excuse me if I thought you worked at my club. *As a dancer.*” Good luck to her if she hadn’t wanted people to know. Judging by how red her face was getting, she didn’t.

She huffed with annoyance. I was surprised she hadn’t breathed fire. I had to bite the inside of my mouth to hide my amusement.

She breathed in a few times, obviously trying to calm down. Her face was still flushed with annoyance. “Look. I understand you feeling... disgruntled... that I didn’t tell you about my job here. But just because we’ve been fucking for a week doesn’t make it any of your business.”

“Lying to me is my business. Especially when you came to me with that sob story about your supposed ex—”

“It wasn’t...” She stopped, biting her lip. “In any case, what are you doing here and how did you find me?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’d like to know.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Fine. How about we behave like adults here and not a couple of teenagers trying to one-up each other? I didn’t tell you about this job because... well, I don’t get paid enough, and I needed supplemental income, but I didn’t want anyone to know about it. There. Happy?”

“You were ashamed of being a stripper? Trust me—there are worst ways to earn your keep. Besides, I offered to help you with your rent, and you said no.”

“I still have my pride.”

I snorted derisively. “Pride won’t keep you warm at night.”

“Keeps me plenty warm, thanks.” She crossed her arms, looking me in the face.

I rolled my eyes. “So mature. Look, why don’t you cut the crap and just move in with me?”

Even as the words were leaving my mouth, I couldn’t believe I was saying

them. I didn't take them back though because this woman was driving me round the bend.

She gaped at me, just as shocked as I was with what I was proposing. "Have you lost your mind or have I?" she asked as if she genuinely wanted to know.

"Must be you. My mind is like a steel trap." I was just saying anything at this point. "So what do you say? Let's cut the shit. You move in with me, no more rent. No more food bills. Problem solved."

"Yeah, until you get tired of me and kick me to the curb. Do you think I'm stupid?"

I gave her a side-eye. "You really want me to answer that?"

She gave me that challenging look again. "Actually yeah, I do."

I looked away, shaking my head. "You know I could have you fired from the hospital right? I'm on the board."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "On what grounds?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I could find something." I smirked at her.



She paled, but still she was looking at me with utter defiance. “Yeah, well, if you do that, you can kiss whatever this is goodbye.”

I stared at her, impressed despite myself at how well she was standing up for herself. She was kind of a badass. But I wasn't about to let her win.

I grabbed her by the jaw and hauled her face right into mine, looking deep into her dark brown eyes. I smiled.

“Very well played, *dorogoy*,” I hissed. “I am very impressed by your determination. However, I regret that I cannot allow you to sneak in and out of my bed like a criminal. You're moving in with me. I don't care if we have to sign a contract. It's happening because I say it is.”

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

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## NORA

The irony of Alexei Levin calling me a criminal was not lost on me. If he wasn't currently almost strangling me I might have laughed in his face. Instead I kind of choked, as my mind went to the night he choked me while fucking me. Wires were getting crossed here. I was supposed to be mad at him, not turned on.

To be frank, most of the anger I was exhibiting was just fear. He had completely blindsided me by appearing in Jodie's office like an avenging angel. And don't think I'd forgotten about Jodie recognizing him and calling him 'Mr. Levin' like she was his butler or something. I'd have to follow that up later... once I was done with my misdirection.

In all my wildest dreams, I would not have expected Alexei to ask me to move in. I knew for a fact this was not his usual move. I was in virgin territory, and I honestly had *no idea* what to do.

"Alexei...?" I choked, staring up at him pleadingly.

He let me go and I kind of stumbled. He wrapped his massive hand around my arm, steadying me.

"I'm not one of your henchmen, you know. You can't intimidate me into moving in with you," I rasped, breathing a bit hard.

He laughed. “Henchmen? You think this is The Departed or some shit?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Isn’t it?” My tone might have been a bit sassy, but what the hell, he deserved it. We were standing in the middle of the cobbled path between the hospital entrance and the road that led to the exit—people having to go around us as they entered. I was pretty sure the guard was keeping an eye on us to see if he’d have to intervene. It wasn’t the best place to have an argument.

“No, it’s not. The Departed is a movie,” he smirked.

I was just about fed up. “How’d you even find me? You never said.” I glared at him.

His smirk widened. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” he said again.

I frowned, thinking about it. Had I mentioned the hospital somehow? I didn’t think so. Just then my phone dinged, and I looked down at it. There was a message blinking, and when I swiped down to see who it might be, I noticed that my location was on. I looked from the phone to him.

“Are you tracking my phone?” I asked accusingly.

He just shrugged.

“*Seriously?*” I screeched.

A wave of fear went through me.

If he was tracking my phone and I went home... he'd know about my grandmother. I couldn't risk that. Without thinking about it, I threw my phone towards the road. It bounced off a car's window and got run over by an ambulance. We both watched it happen with wide eyes.

Alexei turned back to face me. “Really?” he asked, eyebrow cocked.

I inclined my head as if to say, well, what do *you* think?

“You are such a stubborn cuss,” he said.

“And *you're* an invasive asshole.” I folded my arms like an eighth grader.

He laughed, shaking his head. “This is exactly the kind of bullshit I warned you about.”

“Well, then you don't have to deal with it. Just leave me alone.”

I started walking back into the hospital without another word, but of course he couldn't just let me go. He grabbed my wrist and held on tight enough I

was pretty sure it'd bruise.

“Is there someone else? Is that it?” he demanded.

*Yes. There is. There's Celia.*

I was glad I wasn't looking at him and had time to get my face in order. I turned, to look him in the eye. “Are you one of those little boys whose moms didn't ever refuse them anything and now you think you're entitled to everything?” My heart was thudding dully. My hands were cold with fear. But I still said it.

His eyes narrowed with rage, and he let go my wrist pretty abruptly. “Go then. Keep your secrets. But just know that I'm onto you.”

He took a step back before he turned and walked away. I watched him go, my heart thudding painfully and wondered if I had just made everything a thousand times worse.

With a sigh, knowing that Mrs. Smith was probably looking for me, I turned and walked back into the hospital. Life went on.

I got home after working my shift at the club, gearing up to face my grandma and explain all the ignored texts, the absence... I had no clue what I was going to say, but I guessed I'd have to find something. The Uber came to a stop outside my house, and I saw a shape sitting on the stoop. My heart leapt as I caught sight of platinum blonde hair. I don't know if it was in fear or joy,

but then I realized that the figure that was getting to their feet was a little smaller than Alexei.

I came to a stop a few feet from her. “Katya. Dare I ask how you found my home?”

Katya just smiled.

I sighed, resigning myself to not knowing. “What’s up?”

“I’ve been texting you all day. Why are you ignoring me?”

“Umm, oh. Well...” I laughed nervously. “I kind of got rid of my phone. Your brother was using it to track me.”

She just cocked an eyebrow looking both unsurprised and unbothered. Why should she be bothered? She wasn’t the one in danger if Alexei ever found out what we were doing.

“Well, if you’d answered your phone or got yourself a new one, you’d know that I got him. I got Igor.”

“What do you mean you *got* him?”

“I mean he’s currently tied up somewhere off the grid, waiting for us to interrogate him.”

“What?” I squealed then instantly regretted it. The lights were still on in my house which meant, my grandma was still up. Her hearing wasn’t as good as it used to be, but it wasn’t bad. She was only sixty-seven—not exactly ancient.

I froze, waiting to see if she’d come to investigate. Katya grabbed my arm. “Come on, we have to go.”

I stumbled after her, scrambling to catch up as I hitched my bag higher on my shoulder. I was really fucking exhausted and just wanted to get to bed, but this was important.

She led me to a black motorcycle. Not the sort of thing I would have pictured her owning. Much less *riding*. I didn’t want to get on it. “Are you kidding me?” I wailed.

She handed me the spare helmet. “We don’t have time for your drama. Save that for my brother. Do you want to learn what happened to Celia or not?”

I took the helmet, put it on, and got on the bike behind her.

We drove for a long time, the wind numbing my face as we flew across town. I refrained from questioning my driver since I wanted her full focus on the road, but I was a little afraid of how far we were going. For all I knew, Katya



was taking me somewhere to kill me and dump my body.

*Nobody would ever know.*

My confidence wasn't boosted when we drew up in front of an abandoned warehouse near the water. The presence of a big burly guy standing next to a black SUV wasn't helping my confidence.

"Don't mind him. He's just my bodyguard," Katya threw over her shoulder as she made her way to the abandoned warehouse.

I followed her reluctantly, looking around nervously, alert for the slightest rustle in the dark that might indicate an unseen entity. I didn't care if it was just a cat. I needed advance warning of its presence. We stepped into the poorly lit warehouse, and I realized there was a man tied to a post in the middle of the room. He was blindfolded.

"Is that Igor?" I whispered.

"Shh, he'll hear you," she hissed in my ear.

I quirked an eyebrow, pulling her closer to the door. "How are we going to question him if he's not supposed to hear us?"

She glared at me. "Do you *want* him to know who you are?"

I pondered the question wanting to give the right answer. Igor had never met me so I didn't see how questioning him would give me away. But I was willing to concede that Katya probably knew more about all this than I did.

I leaned closer to talk right in her ear. "So, how are we going to get the info out of him?"

She looked out the doors, to her bodyguard. "Suge will ask him."

"You think he won't recognize Suge's voice?"

She laughed. "No. I hired him myself two days ago. He used to be a neighbor of ours when I was growing up. Has some special forces experience, but he's an independent contractor now. He doesn't roll with the usual crew."

"Oh." I nodded. It looked like Katya had it covered. I decided to let her take lead. She beckoned to the bodyguard, and he ambled over, his face inquiring.

"Go inside there and find out what he did with Celia Young. Use whatever means necessary."

Suge nodded. "Yes, *Gospozha*." He executed a kind of bow before stepping into the warehouse. We followed him, standing a few feet beyond the doorway as Suge got to work.

He started by cutting Igor's shirt from his body with a knife, leaving him exposed to the waist. I could see that Igor was shaking, even as he called out insults and tried to intimidate Suge.

"I'll cut your head from your body, you fucking cunt. Don't think for one minute you're going to get away with this. *I will hunt you down!*"

Suge never said a word. Just let him rage and shout. I didn't know what he was waiting for. Then he suddenly picked up a whip from a table with several tools and lashed Igor across the chest with it. It left a large bloody welt that was obvious from afar. I wondered how much it had hurt. Igor cried out when the whip hit him again and doubled down on his insults.

Still, Suge didn't say a word.

He seemed to wait until Igor was mid-rant before hitting him with another lash of his whip. He was pretty precise because it was almost the exact same spot as the first lash. Igor screamed.

"What the fuck do you want?" he asked.

"What happened to Celia Young?" Suge asked in a monotone.

Igor kept quiet, panting hard as he looked in the direction of the voice. "Who are you?"

Suge lifted his whip, and it was silent enough to hear the whoosh as it flew through the air to land on Igor's skin with crack. I jerked a bit, startled. The gash on Igor's chest widened.

"Fuck!" he bellowed.

"What did you do with Celia Young?" Suge asked again, no emotion apparent in his voice.

"Who's that? Who's Celia Young? I don't know her."

"You were fucking her for months before she disappeared. Where is she?" Suge asked.

Igor sneered. "I fuck lots of whores. You're gonna have to be more specific."

I growled, deep in my throat. Katya closed a hand tight on my wrist to make sure I didn't fly at Igor and scratch his throat out.

The prisoner inclined his head, listening. "Who else is here?" he asked.

Suge cracked his whip, this time, making a crisscross welt on Igor's chest. "Celia Young. Where is she?"

“She’s dead,” Igor spat angrily.

My heart stopped.

“Where’s her body?” Suge asked at once in the same monotone.

He twisted his lips cruelly. “I ate it.”

Suge put the whip down and picked up a knife. He walked up to Igor, tracing a pattern over his stomach. “So she’s in your belly?” he asked impassively. “Shall I cut you open and see?”

Igor screamed. “No! Wait. Fuck!” He struggled against his restraints, trying to loosen them. “I don’t know anything. Please. I don’t know.”

Suge slipped the knife between the eleventh and twelfth ribs. Igor screamed but this guy knew what he was doing. He’d essentially avoided all vital organs. “Feel like telling the truth yet?” he asked.

“Fuck! She left town and told me not to look for her. That’s the truth, I swear!” Igor was screaming.

Katya and I looked at each other despairingly. It seemed this guy was not gonna crack so easy. She lifted her hand, beckoning the bodyguard over. “Is he gonna bleed to death if we leave him overnight?” she asked.

He pursed his lips. “Unless I accidentally nicked a vein, I’d say no.”

“Watch him, then. If he passes out, do what you can for the wound.”

“He won’t pass out. The wound was already clotting, it was a narrow incision. He should be fine,” Suge explained.

I stared at him. “Are you a doctor?”

He smiled enigmatically. “I’ll see you home and then come back here,” he said to Katya.

“No need. I can take care of myself. Watch him.”

We all three walked out of the warehouse, each lost in our own thoughts. Igor was going to be a harder nut to crack than I’d realized. Katya didn’t seem discouraged though. Just the opposite—as if she was relishing the chance to break him. I didn’t feel sorry for him. He knew what happened to Celia—his lies at least proved that.

Now all we had to do was get him to tell us what.

The sound of an approaching vehicle had us all freezing.

“You expecting someone else?” I asked Katya.

“Nope.”

“Should we like... hide?”

She exchanged glances with her bodyguard, frowning. “You got rid of his cell phone, didn’t you?”

“Yeah of course I did,” Suge said.

“Where’d you put it?” Katya demanded.

“Threw it off the pier.”

Katya growled impatiently. “You know better than that! This’ll show as his last known location.”

Suge sighed, reaching into his jacket, and extracting a gun. “I’ll take care of it, ma’am.”

“No!” Katya pushed him aside. “Hide the car. Whoever’s coming is a clue. Let’s see what happens.”

Suge nodded, taking off at once. He didn't start the car, but just set it to drive, and then pushed it between two other buildings. Katya lay her motorbike on the ground and covered it with a tarp. It disappeared in the dark. She and I retreated to the back of the warehouse where there was a second entrance, and we hunkered down, waiting.

The car came to a stop by the harbor and someone—a large man by the looks of it—stepped out. He went and stood at the pier, looking out into the water before turning back to examine the warehouse. He stepped down from the pier and walked into the warehouse where he caught sight of Igor.

In the dim light, I still clearly recognized him. It was Kirill, Alexei's right-hand man. My heart sank and the last vestiges of hope that Alexei wasn't involved disappeared in a mist of despair.

Kirill hurried towards Igor, tearing the blindfold from his eyes. "What the hell, Igor? What's going on?"

"I don't know. Someone took me and blindfolded me. Brought me here. Started asking me questions. They can't have gone far," he began to look around frantically.

Kirill drew his gun.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know. They were asking about Celia, Kirill. Asking what happened



to her.”

Kirill frowned. “And you didn’t see any of them?”

Igor shook his head. “But they were professionals. They tortured me. Cut me...” He looked down at his stomach.” Kirill examined his wounds and then looked around the warehouse again.

“What’d you tell them, Igor?” he asked menacingly.

“Untie me first,” Igor said, pulling at the steel handcuffs that bound him.

Kirill circled around Igor, examining the handcuffs critically. “Wow, they weren’t fucking around. These are police issue handcuffs. Gonna have to blow them off.”

“Shit. Don’t shoot me!” Igor sounded scared.

“You doubting my skills?” Kirill grinned.

“No. Of course not, boss. Just...”

“Don’t shoot your hands?” Kirill finished for him.

“Right.”

“First tell me about these people. If I shoot, how many might come running?”

“I don’t know. I was hit from behind, I blacked out. When I came to, I was tied up and blindfolded.”

“And was it a man or woman who questioned you?”

“Definitely a guy. Skilled too. He knew how to inflict pain.”

I felt a moment’s vindictive pleasure to know it’d hurt when Suge whipped him.

“And what exactly did you tell them?”

“Nothing, I swear. I just repeated the same story we been saying. That she left town.”

“And they believed you?”

“I-I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Well... they left me alone after. Went off somewhere.”

“But they left you tied up.”

“Yeah.”

They both seemed to be contemplating this mystery.

“Probably wasn’t expecting me to be found,” Igor said.

“Yeah.” Kirill’s voice was low and thoughtful. He circled him again and shot off his handcuffs. Igor screeched in surprise then brought his hands up to his face, both circled by steel bangles, the hinges to the handcuffs handing off them, cut precisely in two.

“Shit. Warn a guy,” he complained.

Kirill just laughed. “Come on, let’s get out of here before your guys come back. I really don’t want to out myself if they don’t know who I am.”

“Who do you think they are? Cops? Or maybe the Mexicans?”

“No use speculating. As long as you didn’t say anything...” Their voices disappeared as they entered Kirill’s car and took off.

Katya and I looked at each other, faces solemn.

“Now what?” I asked, my tone definitely challenging.

She heaved a huge sigh and shook her head. “Now, I take you home.”

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

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## ALEXEI

The mystery that was Nora Walsh was slowly driving me mad. I didn't understand why I was spending so much time thinking about one woman. I had a whole club of them at my disposal. Just one shouldn't be able to get under my skin like this.

I paced up and down my office, going over the events of the day before.

“She’s a nurse?” I said it to myself in various tones, but it didn’t sound any more believable. “And if she’s a nurse, why didn’t the receptionist recognize her name? And what the fuck has she to do with Jodie *fucking* Hunt?”

I decided that was the first place I should start. Picking up my cell phone, I called her.

“Mr. Levin!” Her voice was high and breathy, and I knew she was scared out of her mind.

“Jodie... how are you doing?”

“I-I... I’m fine.”

“Good. Now tell me everything you know about Nora Walsh,” I said with fake pleasantry.

“W-what?”

“You heard me,” I said coldly.

“Er, Nora Walsh? She’s just, uh-”

“*Do not* lie to me,” I growled warningly.

“No. Of course I wouldn’t. I was just saying that she’s a nurse, here at the hospital.”

“For how long?”

“What?”

“How long has she worked there?” I enunciated slowly and clearly, giving her no leeway to misunderstand me.

“Um, months I think. I’m not really sure.”

“So how do you know her?”

“We... we became friendly some time back, and we eat lunch together.”

“Did you know she was working for me?”

“Of course not. She didn't tell me.”

That was the first thing she'd said that I knew was a hundred percent true.

“So why is she so hard up for money?”

“She is? I had no idea. I mean, the salaries here are shit, as I'm sure you know, and what with the cost of—”

“Yeah, yeah, alright.” I wasn't in the mood to listen to a backhanded pitch for salary increases. Besides, it wasn't in my purview to decide that. It was Jodie's need for extra money that led her to working for me. I wasn't exactly incentivized to lobby for an increase.

“And that's all you know about her?” I pressed.

“I know she's a good and loyal friend and very honest, sir. Whatever you think she's doing, I can assure you, you're wrong.”



“Hmph. I pay you for your services as a pathologist not an advisor, so kindly keep your opinions for someone who asked for them.” I hung up on that note, tapping the phone against my chin thoughtfully.

All I had really gleaned from that conversation was that Nora inspired loyalty in her friends. It was great for her, I guess, but not so much for me. I threw my phone on the desk and resumed my pacing, deep in thought.

Monique had told me that Nora came to work as usual last night so she hadn't quit. I wasn't sure if this was good or bad. The jury was definitely still out. I wasn't used to tolerating shit from the women I fucked, and I had no clue how to handle this.

There was a knock at my door and Kirill came in, holding a tablet. His face was as solemn as I'd ever seen it. “We need to talk.”

I took a deep breath, bracing myself. “What is it?”

He held out the tablet to me. “It's about your little honey bun. She's not who she says she is.”

*I know.*

I took the tablet and stared at it. “What's this?”

I watched as Nora walked down a corridor. I recognized it as the corridor to my office. She looked from left to right as if making sure she was alone.

*Too bad she didn't look up.*

I was almost disappointed at her carelessness. She took something out of her pocket and then reached for the door. I could see her surprise when she pushed the door and it opened. She didn't waste any time slipping into my office though.

The camera changed to the one inside my office. I watched as she rifled through my desk with frantic energy. Whatever she was looking for, it wasn't there. Her disappointment was palatable. The video cut off abruptly.

I looked up at Kirill, eyebrow raised. "Where's the rest of it?"

"Oh uh... well your sister came in the room, and she pretended to be standing around. There's nothing of interest there. But the point is, you see now that she's up to no good right? Probably a Fed."

"A Fed? You got that from her rifling through my desk?"

"Well it ain't the local cops. Don't you have the Chief of Police in your pocket?"

"Who said she has to be law enforcement?"

“Papa, what else could she be? She came in here, asking the girls questions, rifling through your desk... the whole thing is suspicious. I heard she even asked Marci how to get in your bed. She planned all this. You see that, right?”

“Planned all of what, exactly?”

“Who knows? The night she arrived, our meet went bust, remember? What if it was a set up?”

“You don’t think that’s reaching?”

“You’re the one who says there’s no such thing as coincidence.” He stepped closer, his eyes intent on me. He was shifting from foot to foot, so eager to convince me. But something inside of me remained unconvinced. It wasn’t even my libido. Yeah, for sure, she was hiding something from me, and I was gonna find out what it was. But I didn’t think it was that she was a cop.

If she were one, she was the most inept one I’d ever dealt with. And I’d dealt with a few. For one thing, why would she be working at a hospital as a day job? And for another thing, if she was a cop, wouldn’t she have jumped at the chance to move in with me instead of throwing her phone in oncoming traffic like a brat?

Things were just not adding up.

“Look Papa, I know she got under your skin. Let me take care of this for you.”

I glared at him, and he took a step back. “Thanks for the offer, Kirill. But I’ll deal with this myself.”

He nodded, bowing his head. “Yes, Papa.”

I asked that I be notified as soon as anyone saw Nora enter the club. Not even thirty minutes later, I got a call from security saying she was in the building.

“Bring her to me,” I said.

I sat down behind my desk and waited, tapping out a tune on the mahogany. I couldn’t think of anything I wanted to do less than interrogate this woman. But Kirill was right about one thing: Nora was hiding something, and it was high time I found out what.

One of the guards brought her to me, her face already flushed with anger. She barely waited for the guy to leave before she turned on me. “Don’t worry, I just came to collect my stuff.” Her viciousness was unwarranted. *I* was the one who had the right to be mad. Not her.

“Did you? I don’t remember firing you.”

“I quit.”

“Really? You quit? How convenient. Could it have something to do with you being caught with your hand in the cookie jar?”

Her jaw dropped. “Excuse *you*?” She stared at me in disbelief.

I stood, leaning forward with my hands on the desk. “I know.” I said, looking her in the eye.

Her lips twisted derisively, arms folded, head tilted. “What is it that you know, Alexei?”

I straightened up, mirroring her pose. “Why are you here, Nora? What are you looking for?”

“What do you mean by that? Why am I here? I came to get my bag and my bike.”

I clenched my jaw rapidly losing my patience. “Don’t play coy with me. *Who sent you?*”

All the attitude disappeared from her stance, and she paled. She looked trapped, lost. My heart sank. I’d been hoping she was innocent of Kirill’s accusations. I took a deep shaky breath. “Why? Why would you even try to come for me? There’s only one way this ends.”

If she was pale before, now she was white as a sheet.

“How does it end?” she rasped. “*Tell me.*” She was curiously intent.

I rounded the desk, walking over to her and pulling up her shirt. I stared at her chest as she stumbled backwards, struggling to pull her shirt back down. “What the fuck?” she gasped.

“Just checking if you’re wired. Relax.”

“*Relax?*” she practically screeched, “Have you lost your mind?”

“Have you? Who do you work for?”

She gaped at me then threw her head back and screamed with laughter. “Who am I working for? That’s rich.”

I was fed up and losing patience. My hand reached up of its own volition and closed around her throat. “Quit dicking around and give me a straight answer.”

“Oh, you want a straight answer?” she rasped through the grip I had on her throat. “I’ve been asking for a straight answer for *months*—all the while just hoping that it wasn’t you, that you weren’t involved. Guess I’m the chump.”

“Oh yeah? You were hoping this was some kind of fairy tale, and I was some misunderstood murderer with a heart of gold?” I laughed, hauling her closer by her neck. “Well, news flash, baby. I own all this shit. Nothing happens around here without my say so.”

Her already flushed face grew redder and suddenly contorted with rage. Her hand came up and scratched my face. “You sick bastard! What did you do with her?”

I dropped her, reaching for my injured eye, stumbling backward. “Fuck! What the *hell*, Nora?”

I couldn't believe she'd done such a vicious thing. The kitten had claws after all. She'd scratched deep enough to draw blood.

My eyes were closed as I dabbed at my wound, and I heard running footsteps and the door open. By the time I'd gotten my vision back, I realized she'd run off. I stood in the middle of the room, panting with rage as I held my arm up to cover the wounds on my eye.

*This isn't over.*

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**

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## NORA

I grabbed my shit as fast as possible and lit out of there. I didn't know how Alexei had found out who I was or what I was doing, but I had my suspicions.

Blood was thicker than water, after all.

I still had a shift at the hospital, and I could not afford to miss it. Alexei knew where I worked now, and apparently, he was also on the board. I figured it was just a matter of time before they fired me, but I wasn't going to give them an excuse.

My shift was beginning at noon, and I had thirty minutes to get there. I decided to take a bus, hustling my bike into it with great difficulty. Happily, my stop was just outside the hospital, and I made it with ten minutes to spare. I was able to park my bike, get to the locker room and change in time.

I kept my head down, avoiding both Mrs. Smith and Dr. Hutton. Happily, I had rotated out of the ER and was now in the orthopedic ward. I made my rounds, pinning a smile on my face for the patients and going out of my way to be pleasant, engaging, and helpful.

In truth, my heart was erratic the whole time. I could feel the pulse in my neck beating against my flesh like a caged bird, and my hands trembled.

Still, as long as my patients didn't notice, I needed to be okay.

Half an hour into my shift, my stomach rumbled, reminding me I hadn't eaten a damned thing all day. I didn't think I could keep anything down. But I needed something to keep up my energy. Heading to the vending machine, I dug into my pockets for change. I was inattentive to where I was going, I slammed into someone's chest and stumbled backward.

"Oh! Oops, sorry!" I babbled before looking up to see Jodie, reaching out to steady me. I immediately snatched my hand out of her grasp, glaring at her.

She looked at my expression and frowned. "Nora? What's wrong?"

"*What's wrong?* Are you serious?" I felt rage just bubbling under my skin, looking for an outlet.

"Yes, I'm serious. Did I do something? What—"

"So you're just gonna pretend the other day didn't happen? You're gonna pretend you don't know 'Mr. Levin'?"

She sighed, looking away and shaking her head. "I didn't know it was him. Why would you do this, Nora? This guy is dangerous."

“Yeah, no shit.” My voice was dripping with sarcasm.

Jodie sighed. “Look, I don’t know what you think I do for this guy but—”

“What *do* you do for that guy?” I got right in her face, crossing my arms. I really wanted to know.

Jodie lowered her eyes, shaking her head slowly. “I store bodies for him. Fudge some cause of death reports. That’s it.”

I frowned. “That’s *it*? Really? You help a mobster hide his *murders*, Jodie.”

“I know. I know. You can judge me all you like but I needed the money and then...” She shrugged. “I can’t just resign.”

Jodie’s mother had suffered a brain tumor and they were having issues with insurance. I’d assumed Jodie worked something out... but maybe she hadn’t. I drew a breath, reaching out to rub her shoulder.

“Look, you can hate me all you want but you should really get away from that guy.”

I laughed, my tired gaze dropping to the floor. Then a thought occurred to me, and I grabbed her by the lapel of her coat. “Was Celia one of the deaths you fudged?” I demanded.

Her eyes widened. “What? No! God, Nora what the hell do you think I am? I would never!”

I stared at her, looking for the truth in her eyes. Finally, I let her lapel go. “I’m sorry. It’s just...” I shook my head. “Everything’s falling apart.”

It was her turn to rub my arm comfortingly. “Oh Nora...” she looked so sad for me. “I should tell you that he called me, asking about you. I didn’t know what to say exactly so I just kept it as vague as I could. You told him your name was Nora Walsh?”

I nodded.

“What’d he want with you? Why’d he come looking for you? Is he on to you?”

I bit my lip, not wanting to tell her that I’d been fucking him. Nobody needed to tell me how stupid that was. I knew well enough. “I think he might be, but I didn’t give him much of a chance to—”

“Miss Young.”

I turned to see Mrs. Smith glaring at me. Again. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I hate to cut short your, no doubt, *important* chat, but there are patients waiting.”

I blanched, glancing back once at Jodie before hurrying off with a quick apology. Even as I hurried off, I wondered if I should just give up now. If Alexei didn't get me fired, Mrs. Smith surely would.

I hurried off to see my patients, dealing first with a young lady whose period was late and swore she was a virgin. After booking her an appointment with a gyno, I moved on to attend to the next patient.

The door to the examination room was closed, which was unusual. Perhaps the patient had to strip. I opened the door and entered the room, a smile ready on my face.

“Good after—” I stopped short, staring in stupefaction at the barrel of a gun, aimed right at my face. Words dried up in my throat as I raised my eyes to look at the gunman.

He smiled at me. “Good afternoon, nurse Nora.” He laughed, “Sounds like the beginning of a porno, huh?” Getting to his feet, he walked towards me, the gun steady in his hands. “But believe me, there's no happy ending for you. You're coming with me.”

The urge to scream was strong. The urge to beg, even stronger. “D-did Alexei send you?”

“No questions,” Kirill sneered. “Now we’re going to walk quietly out of here. You try to scream, raise any alarm and I won’t shoot you. I’ll shoot whoever is closest. I don’t care if they’re a tiny *widdle* patient waiting for treatment. You understand me?”

I swallowed hard and nodded.

“Good girl. Now walk.”

I turned and headed out the door. He was right behind me, his gun concealed in his coat. I walked past patients and colleagues, smiling sickly at them as I tried to pretend everything was fine.

“Miss Young!” I closed my eyes in despair, hesitating to stop since Kirill had his gun against my back.

“Miss Young!” Mrs. Smith called again, *insistently*.

I stopped, glancing helplessly at the gangster as I turned. “Yes, Mrs. Smith?”

“Where are you going?” She was frowning in annoyance. I had a feeling she couldn’t wait to write that warning letter. I tried my best to smile and look normal, sweat beading my brow. I glanced at Kirill for some help, but he only widened his eyes threateningly.

“I... am helping this patient with something since their arm is broken,” I said

breathlessly. Luckily Kirill's hand was beneath his coat, the one holding a gun to the bottom of my spine, so it was believable.

"Oh." Mrs. Smith's face cleared, and she gave us both a fake smile. "Carry on then."

My shoulders dropped in disappointment. The one time I could have used her busybody nature, she withdrew at once. I glanced backwards and saw that Kirill was giving her a creepy smile, and I realized that maybe, Mrs. Smith was intimidated by him too.

We walked out to his car, and he removed the gun from my back to open the door. Without thinking about it too much, I leapt away, and tried to run, just heading into oncoming traffic. I didn't make it very far.

Someone yanked me backwards before a blunt pain consumed me.

Everything went black.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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## ALEXEI

The scratches Nora left me weren't going to scar, but I still had to disinfect them. I might have taken more time seeing to them than was strictly necessary since I *really* didn't want to deal with the prospect of killing her.

Something felt off. My instincts were never wrong.

For one thing, Nora did not react like someone in law enforcement would. In all the time we were together, she never tried to learn anything about the business from me or snoop about in my home. She had too much going on in her life anyway.

Nothing made sense, and I didn't like things that didn't make sense.

Still... I had to find her and take care of this.

I opened the drawer in my dresser, where I had an extra phone I'd been planning on giving her as a peace offering. I still couldn't believe she'd thrown hers away like that... after complaining about her bills, too.

She was just so... contrary.

I needed to find her. Kirill had a point in that she was hiding something for sure, but he was wrong about *what*. I knew it in my bones.

I grabbed my phone and called Jodie Hunt.

“Mr. Levin,” she said with nervous breathlessness.

“Miss Hunt. I have a question.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Where’s Nora?”

“Um, I think—”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I wasn’t going to, sir. I spoke to her some time ago. She’s on duty.”

“Is she really a nurse?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So you’re saying she’s on duty right now?”

“Like I said, we talked earlier, and she was here. What do you want with her?”

“Bold of you to question me. Tell you what—I’m going to hang up, and you’re going to look for Nora and confirm that you have eyes on her. You understand me?”

“Why? What do you want with her?”

“None of your business.”

“I won’t let you kill her.”

“You won’t *let* me?” I laughed. “Need I remind you who’s paying your mother’s medical bills?”

There was a loud silence on the phone. “Just... tell me you won’t kill her.”

“I won’t kill her.”

I had no idea if that was true or not.

“Alright. I’ll call you back.” She hung up and I threw my phone back on the bed with a sigh.

I settled on the bed, my head in my hands. “Fuck,” I whispered, shaking my head. The Bratva had a code. If Nora was *any* kind of spy, she’d have to be eliminated. The only way to save her was to prove that she wasn’t a mole. So far, it wasn’t looking good. She was acting erratic, and that was never a good thing.

It took half an hour for Jodie to call me back.

“Sir, I’ve looked everywhere. I checked the board. Her name’s up for this shift, but she’s nowhere to be found. Her supervisor is pissed. She caught us talking earlier and sent Nora off to work. But she’s not in any of the examination rooms, and the last anyone saw of her, she was walking out of the entrance with a patient.”

“What patient?”

“Large guy. Blue eyes. Black hair.”

My heart sank, and I hung up on her and called Kirill.

“Where are you?” I demanded.

“I’m uh... I’m at the docks.”

“What you doing there?”

“Got an errand.”

“An errand? What *kind* of errand?”

Kirill was silent. I waited for some word from him, something, *anything* to let me know it wasn’t too late. I’d deal with his disobedience later. For now, I just needed to know he hadn’t already done something stupid.

Something irreversible.

“Kirill,” I said again, my voice low and threatening.

“Look, boss, you didn’t seem like you wanted to do this, so I decided—”

“*You* decided?” I snapped. “It’s not your job to decide things.”

“I know. Hey, I’m sorry, Papa. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I just meant that I saw how hard it hit you when I told you and I thought I’d take the burden away. Take care of this myself.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Ki,” I said sarcastically, “but I don’t need your help to do what needs to be done. Now tell me where you are and don’t touch a single hair on her head until I get there.”

“No can do, sir. She’s a snitch and we have to take care of it. If you can’t, then I’m gonna.”

“*Ki—*”

He hung up on me. I stared at the phone in shock, unable to believe that had actually happened. I hit redial, just in case it’d been some kind of mistake, but the call went straight to voicemail. He’d not only hung up on me, but he’d switched his phone off. I fisted my hands, closing my eyes in frustration.

I couldn’t let Kirill kill Nora. I had to find them.

The doorbell rang and I hurried to open it, wondering if somehow Nora had escaped—

It was Katya at the door. She didn’t miss how my face fell when I saw her.

“What is it?” she asked as she stepped into my apartment and closed the door.

I took a deep breath. “Kirill’s got Nora. I think he’s going to kill her.”

She gaped at me. “*Kill her? Why?*”

“Because she might be a snitch. Kirill had footage of her sneaking into my office.”

“And on the back of that alone you order a hit?” She stared at me in disbelief.

“Of course not. Kirill took it upon himself to fucking kidnap her. Now I don’t know where he took her.” I couldn’t help how my voice broke on the last words.

Katya came up to me, squeezing my shoulder. “Nora’s no snitch. You guys got it all wrong.”

I quirked an eyebrow in surprise. “What do you mean by that?”

She sighed. “Nora is just looking for what happened to her sister. Her last name isn’t Walsh, it’s Young... as in Celia?”

My hands went cold. “What? She’s Celia’s sister? She told me her sister *died.*”

“Well, yeah according to the police she’s declared dead, but Nora wasn’t satisfied with that. She’s been trying to find out what happened.”

“Why didn’t she just ask me?”

Katya gave him a look.

“Well, okay fine, maybe I wouldn’t have entertained her questions, but really there’s nothing to hide. Celia was fired months ago. The end.”

“Not the end.” Katya shook her head. “She disappeared shortly after that.”

“What?”

“Yep. Just dropped off the face of the earth.”

“Well... that’s nothing to do with us.”

Katya made a dissenting sound.

I stared at her. “What? Tell me.” I was rapidly losing patience with all these secrets.

“Well, we *kinda* kidnapped Igor the other day. Kirill came to his rescue. From their conversation, it’s clear they did something to her.”



“Did something like what?”

“They didn’t say.”

I had a sudden flashback of Kirill coming to my office, talking enthusiastically about the money to be made in sex trafficking. How we were already one step there with the strip club... How we could use it as a lure...

Look, I’ve never been a good guy. I’ve killed people, stolen from them, and sold them drugs. But I’ve never been about luring young girls to my club to be sold as sex slaves. We’re criminals, not aristocrats.

I had shut him down at the time and thought it was more or less the end of it. But now I was wondering if he went ahead with his plans anyway.

Suddenly something Katya said hit me. “Wait. You *kidnapped Igor*? What the fuck Katya?”

“We wanted answers.”

“Have you any idea how dangerous these men are?”

“Don’t worry. They didn’t see me.”

“They saw enough to know Nora was involved.”

“Nah. I think Kirill just put two and two together because Nora’s been asking questions from the moment she stepped in this club. Maybe we shouldn’t have been so specific.” She looked regretful.

“You’re sure about that, Katya? Kirill’s been with me since day one. He’s my most loyal soldier.”

Katya heaved a sigh. “I know that Alexei. I know,” she said softly, “but why else would he have come to rescue Igor? How did he know about Celia? Has he ever tried to explain to you what he and Igor might have been up to?”

I closed my eyes and sighed, accepting her words at face value. Kirill was running some sort of business on the side that involved disappearing Celia Young. Now he had Nora, and he was going to kill her if we didn’t find him soon.

It was time to take the gloves off.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE**

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## NORA

*M*y head was pounding, and my body was shaking. My awareness didn't so much return as much as I had a growing awareness of myself and my surroundings. Like the sun slowly rising in the morning, spreading its light until all the shadows were gone, I slowly came to.

I tried to reach for my face and rub my eyes, and that's how I realized I was handcuffed to a chair. My feet were also tied, but I was surprisingly neither blindfolded nor gagged. Thank heaven, because I suddenly felt quite nauseous. I suspected I might have a concussion.

I let my eyes scan the room slowly—what I could see of it. It was a warehouse very similar to the one we'd kept Igor in, except this one clearly wasn't abandoned.

“Good. You're awake.” A water bottle appeared in my line of sight. “Drink up.”

I looked up to see Kirill looking down at me, a grin on his face.

“You've been a pain in my ass, you know that? First, you push aside Jules, who was very good about passing on information about what went on between her and Alexei—she made a great spy, you know. And now it turns out you want to stir up a hornet's nest that's *none of your fucking business.*”

He sneered at me.

“Where’s Celia? What did you do with my sister?” I thought I might as well ask since the jig was clearly up.

He looked away, pursing his lips. “All in good time. Right now you’re going to answer some questions for me and then we’ll get this show on the road, alright?”

“You mean, you’ll kill me.”

He shrugged. “Personally, I prefer *get rid of*. It’s ambiguous. Doesn’t really tell you much. Or,” he leaned in close, “make you sound like the trash you are.”

“Okay, so you’re gonna get rid of me after I answer your questions.”

He pulled back a bit and looked me straight in my eye. “Killing you would be such a waste. I know far better ways to get rid of you, *shlyukha*,” he whispered and smiled at me. My heartbeat sped up in fear.

“Did Alexei send you? Did he ask you to do this?” I don’t know why, but apparently I still had hope that Alexei wasn’t involved.

Kirill laughed. “Aw, do you have feelings for him? Tsk tsk, big mistake. The boss doesn’t do feelings.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“And *I* told *you*, I’m asking the questions here. God, Marci said you were a busybody, but she didn’t know the half of it.”

“No, she didn’t say that.”

“How do you know?”

I shrugged. “I just do.”

He huffed. “All the girls at the club are mine. All of them.”

“Funny. I thought they were independent contractors working for *Alexei’s* club.”

He reached out and slapped me lightly. “You really have a sassy mouth. Don’t worry, that’ll be beaten out of you.”

“Beaten out of me?”

He just smiled and straightened up, nodding to someone I couldn’t see. A

henchman came forward and untied me from the post. They pulled me to my feet and started leading me towards the door. I was terrified that they were leading me outside to shoot me.

“Hey!” I tried to twist around, to look at Kirill, “Hey, wait! Wait! If you’re gonna kill me, at least tell me what happened to Celia,” I shouted.

He laughed. “Don’t worry, you’ll know soon enough.”

“What does that mean? Is she dead?”

He did not answer me and neither did his henchman. He led me to the docks where a boat was bobbing up and down gently. He jumped onto it and pulled me with him before pushing me to sit on the bench and handcuffing my hands together beneath it.

I was torn between fear and relief. Fear, because I didn’t know where they intended to take me; and relief, because they hadn’t killed me yet.

I knew they still might. They were probably taking me out to the ocean so they could shoot me and drop me in the water. No one would ever find me.

Kirill stepped in the boat and sat on the bench opposite me.

“Did you do this to Celia, too?” I asked.

He laughed. “You just don’t stop, do you?” He came over to my bench and sat down on it, running a hand down my chest, and squeezing my breast. “It’s a pity. You’re much prettier than her. Might have liked to have some time with you, but...” He shrugged. “I’m sure Alexei’s actively looking for you by now, so...”

“Alexei’s looking for me?” My heart leapt. “So he’s not part of this?”

Kirill threw back his head and laughed. “Tell me, did he make your insides quiver? Were your moans of ecstasy real? No faking when he filled you with his cock?” He came closer with every word, his breath fanning my face.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I curled my lips as I stared at him.

He straightened up, running a hand up my back. “I would actually.” His eyes darkened. “The way he pushed Jules aside for you... I’m betting your pussy is worth its weight in gold, huh?”

I didn’t say a word as he squeezed my ass, pushing his finger between my legs.

“Wanna show me just how good you are?”

I stiffened. “Are you that jealous of Alexei to want his seconds?” I jeered at him.



He slapped my lower back before taking his hand away. “Don’t worry, there’ll be plenty of people who’ll want seconds, and thirds, and more. I’ll get the satisfaction of knowing I’m responsible for all those men running a train on you. How about that?”

I tasted bile. “I hope Alexei kills you slowly.”

He grinned. “Alexei trusts me. He weighs my words with the seriousness they deserve.”

“So did he weigh your words about Celia?”

“Celia was an opportunity. I took it.” He shrugged, considering me with shrewd eyes. “How’d you find out, anyway? Where did you get the guys you used to jump Igor? How much do they know? I looked you up. You’re just a nurse. Not connected. Nothing. So how’d you get to Igor?”

I blinked blankly at him not giving him a single thing. I knew his type well. They were always allergic to silence and would hasten to fill it with words. It didn’t take long for him to prove me right.

“Cat got your tongue?” he asked, with a smirk.

I gave him back the same energy.

“So, what? You don’t want to tell me?” He reached into his pocket, fishing out his phone. Whatever he read on there seemed to please him immensely but then he dropped it into the ocean. He looked up at me and smiled.

“Were you hoping he would be tracking us? Good luck with that.”

“You’re the one who seems obsessed with him. What is it, you wanted to fuck him, but he didn’t spare you the time of day?” I asked him with as much malice as I could muster.

“Ha! As if. Jules though... she would have liked to twist your head off. You came between her and a good thing.”

I shrugged. “If it helps, I didn’t mean to.”

“Oh you didn’t mean to? What did you mean to do, exactly?”

I shut my mouth pointedly without breaking eye contact.

“Oh, come on, don’t shut up now. We were just getting to the good part. How big is he? Does he fill you up? Did he know how to fuck you good?”

“Are you in love with him?”

“Your fixation with calling me gay will get you nowhere. I don’t care how my dick gets wet.”

“As long as it does, huh?”

He smiled. “Exactly. Wanna taste?” He thrust his hips at me.

I made a moue of distaste. “No, thanks.”

“Aw, getting all precious about your goods now. You seemed to give them away for free to Alexei.” He ran a hand down my face before grabbing my jaw.

“Well, you’re not him.”

His face darkened as he dropped his hand. “No, I’m not. I’m better.”

“What makes you think so?”

He shrugged. “I see the big picture. He doesn’t.”

“Big picture like what? Kidnapping his dancers?”

“The sex trade’s big business. Everyone else is doing it.”

“But not Alexei.” I couldn’t help the relief I felt.

He looked away.

The full import of his words penetrated my slow mind. “Where are you taking me?”

He gave me a sidelong smile. “I’m the nice man who’s gonna reunite you with your sister. Isn’t that what you want?”

My heart leapt, and I tried to get to my feet. Of course, I was encumbered by my handcuffs. “You’re taking me to Celia?” My voice was barely louder than a breath. He heard the hope that flooded it and grew too happy at the chance to crush it. But this was finally *something*.

“Don’t look too happy about it,” he huffed in amusement. “You might not like the state she’s in.”

The urge to kill him was unbearable, and I pulled at my cuffs to no avail. He cackled some more. “Oh yeah, careful what you wish for there, babe. You just might get it.”

“I’m going to kill you,” I promised.

Just then, a second boat drew up beside us and three men came aboard ours. They began speaking in Russian, occasionally glancing at me and I knew whatever was going on here, it was nothing good. The bobbing up and down, did not seem to have any impact on the men's balance as they stood in the boat. That told me they were accustomed to this. They'd been doing it a while and, soon, I'd be at their mercy.

I have a very sturdy stomach, but I had to swallow down bile as nausea assaulted me.

I watched them closely, noting the long scar on one guy's cheek that went from the edge of his left eye right down to his jaw. It looked like it'd been made by a knife. He was doing most of the talking, addressing Kirill in rapid fire Russian. Kirill seemed to be agreeing with everything they said.

The wind whistling in my ear prevented me from hearing a damn thing. Not that there was anything I could do about it. My difficult childhood did not make for much practice swimming and the precariousness of my being on a flimsy boat surrounded by miles of water was its own kind of despair.

A few seagulls called to each other over my head. The salty sea air assailing my nostrils together with the splash of passing humpback whales combined to make everything seem deceptively peaceful around us. Only my tightly bound hands and the presence of grim looking men before me gave any indication that it was anything but.

Scar face reached into his pocket and extracted a thick envelope which he passed to Kirill. He pocketed it and nodded towards me. The other guy came up to me and unlocked my cuffs before rough hands pulled me to my feet.

Kirill grinned at me and twiddled his fingers with a wave as the guy manhandled me to the new boat.

It looked like I'd been sold.

I should have paid more attention to those special features on CNN about human trafficking.

Because I wasn't sure how I was going to get out of this one.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO**

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## ALEXEI

Igor was stupid enough to report for duty. Sucked to be him. I asked him to report to my office, escorted by security in case he decided to run. As he stood before me, I could see from the smug look in his eye that he had no clue we were on to him and Kirill.

“Igor, how nice of you to join us.”

Katya stood behind me, her arms crossed.

“Uh, sure, boss.” He shifted from foot to foot.

“Sit.”

He looked from me to the chair to the door. It seemed he was starting to get that things weren't exactly copacetic. Slowly, with a sigh of resignation, he sat down.

“Good boy.” I leaned forward, looking him in the eye. “Now, tell me where Kirill's taken Nora.”



His eyes flickered and then he frowned. “Nora? Who’s that?” he said unconvincingly.

I drew back my fist and hit him in the face. “Did that jog your memory?” I asked. “Where’s Nora?”

“I-I-I don’t know who that is, sir!”

I flicked open my Swiss army knife and held it to the still healing gash on his face. Katya had told me all about how he got it. I gave him a smile. “Would you like to change your answer or shall I open this up some more?”

“Sir, please. I don’t know anything. I don’t know.”

“That’s strange, because she’s been working this club as a dancer for a few weeks. Her introduction was quite memorable. Everyone was talking about it. But now, you have no knowledge of her? Strange.”

Igor blanched. “Oh, *that* Nora. I was thinking of her as Ariel. She’s good. Did she run off?”

“No. Your accomplice Kirill took her.”

Igor’s face underwent a number of changes. He didn’t seem to be sure which emotion he wanted to express. “M-my accomplice? No, sir. He’s the boss. I just do as he says.”

“So did he tell you not to tell me where Nora is?”

“No.”

“So. Speak.”

“I-I don’t know. He didn’t take... I mean he didn’t tell me anything.”

“I find that hard to believe.” I bent down to eyeball him.

“W-why?” He was sweating like a pig.

“Because my sister kidnapped you the other day and you were rescued by him. She and Nora overheard you talking. Kirill asked you if you’d said anything about Nora’s sister, Celia. Then you said you hadn’t said a word about where he’d taken her. Which is it? Are you and Kirill running some sort of human trafficking racket behind my back?”

Igor’s eyes were bulging out of his head. “Sir, I swear—”

Suddenly Katya came out of nowhere and buried her knife in his thigh. He screamed so loudly, justifying the entire expense of making my office soundproof in one long cry of agony.

I stepped back and let Katya do her thing. “Where does Kirill work from, Igor?” she asked in a low, menacing tone.

Igor just breathed hard, panting in pain. She twisted the knife, making him scream again. “I don’t know,” he wailed.

She huffed in annoyance, and I knew she was losing patience. She turned to me. “Alexei darling, would you please open his mouth for me?”

I stepped forward. “No problem,” I said politely grabbing his top and bottom lip and pulling them wide open. I closed my Swiss army knife and pushed it into his mouth, using it to prop his mouth open. He couldn’t say a thing, but his eyes were eloquent.

“Right.” She came forward, holding a pair of pliers and began to pull out his canine tooth. She was ruthless and strong, but it took some time to pry the tooth out. He was panting and crying, trying to shake his head even as I held it steady. Finally, she pulled out the tooth, roots and all and dropped it to the floor. “Where does Kirill operate from?” she asked him.

He just stared, tears rolling down his face.

“Fine.” She looked at me, her eyes cold and determined. She looked so much like our father in that moment. “Hold him steady.”

I held his face while she extracted another tooth. This time his lower front tooth. He tried to scream which just sounded like gargling with his mouth propped open the way it was. I laughed as she pried and pulled at his tooth until it came out. He was shaking by this time, eyes red from crying, hair damp with sweat, his mouth dripping blood. He was a mess.

Katya watched him grimly. “Ready to talk yet?”

He just stared at her and panted before spitting blood at her feet and splattering her jeans. She moved out of the way, a look of revulsion on her face.

“Next tooth,” she said grimly, aiming for one of his molars.

Even with his mouth propped open with a knife, he managed to scream, tearing at his top lip as he forced his lips to come together. The knife slid out of his mouth, and I had to force his mouth back open as she pulled his tooth. It proved too stubborn for a pair of pliers which kept slipping away from her with all the blood, and she had to go back in with an elevator to loosen the tooth. Next, she grabbed a bottle of whisky and flooded his mouth with it. He keened in pain, his whole body contracting. The smell of ammonia filled the room as he peed himself.

Still, he wouldn't talk.

She pulled out his molar and he fainted. Without hesitation, she slapped him around until he was revived.

I won't lie, I was quite impressed by her.

"Where is Kirill right now?" she hissed, grabbing him by the lapel and getting right in his face.

"I don't... know," he gurgled.

She sighed in disappointment, sitting back to stare at him her brow furrowed thoughtfully. She looked up at me. "If the teeth won't do it, the eyes will."

"Mmh." I nodded in agreement.

Igor made a sound like he was choking. The urge to burst into laughter was strong, but I resisted. Instead I turned to him, eyes narrowed meanly. "You want to save yourself an eye and tell us where Kirill is and what he's doing with Nora?"

Igor spat, spattering Katya's white Givenchy jeans and the floor with his blood and spit again. She made a sound of disgust, moving away from him. "Come on, these are my favorite jeans!"

I grabbed his head and began to sink my thumb into his eye. He began screaming uncontrollably as I dug my hand further and further into the hard mass. It'd been a while since I'd done this, but the skill came back to me like riding a bike.

“Stop! *Stop!*” he began to scream.

“Why should I?” I asked, pressing harder. I could feel his eyeball begin to dislodge. It was disgusting, but I pressed down harder.

“I’ll tell you. Please! Stop!” My hand hovered over his eye, threatening him.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to?” I asked.

“No, no, no! Please. I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything.”

“So talk.”

He talked.

He told us about the Russian contacts that had gotten in touch with Kirill, wanting to use their organization to transport girls from Eastern Europe. Kirill tried to talk to me, but I shut him down, so he decided, in his infinite wisdom, to set up his own side hustle. He gave Igor work as a guard sometimes, and when he and Celia had a falling out and Celia threatened him with exposure, Igor decided to sell her too.

“Where does he keep them?”

“At the docks. He has a container where the girls are kept before redistribution.”

“Where exactly?”

“Near the south end, where it’s isolated. Just past where the ships dock and private individuals park their boats.”

“Container number?”

“Thirty forty-five.”

“Is that all you can tell us?”

Igor panted. “He... he has a boat he uses to go and meet the shipments. It’s docked just in front of the container. The name of the boat is The Westchester.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Igor. You’ve been most helpful.”

“You’ll let me go, then?”

Katya and I exchanged glances. I smiled. Katya stepped forward. “I’m sorry, Igor, but no,” she jammed her knife into his other eye and his scream cut off

just when it was getting loud. His head snapped backward, and he was still.

I looked at Katya and smiled. “That was badass, Katya. Kudos.”

Katya smiled. “Yes well, congratulations later. Let’s go and get your girlfriend.”

We stepped past Igor and out of the office, locking the door behind us. I texted my head of security to come to the entrance with five men.

My SUV had a trunkful of weapons, so we were pretty much set in that regard.

Vladislav drove up to me, peering at me from the driver’s window of his SUV. He had two men with him. Another car drew up behind him with two more men. “Where to, boss?” he asked.

“Follow me.” I got in the driver’s seat and Katya joined me. We drove off in a procession, my men following closely behind me.

“We’re going to kill him, aren’t we?” Katya asked.

“Just as soon as he tells us where he stashed Nora.”



Katya nodded. “Good.” She sighed. “You think we can get Celia back?”

I shrugged. “God knows. I know these guys. They’re not exactly known for being gentle with the merchandise.”

Katya shivered. “I’m proud of you for not getting mixed up in this.”

“Yeah well...” I shrugged and pressed my foot down on the accelerator.

Nora was waiting. I could only hope that Kirill hadn’t killed her yet. Now that I thought about it, I knew exactly which docks Igor was talking about. I’d been there once, when Kirill was MIA, and I had tracked his phone. I had wondered what the hell he’d been doing there, but I never followed it up.

We drew up outside the container to see the boat Igor had told us about, docked. I alighted the vehicle, waiting on my men to do the same.

“What now, boss?” Vladislav asked.

“Find Kirill. He’s either on that boat or in container three zero four five.”

Vladislav directed three of his men to check the boat while he and the other went to the container. Katya and I waited by the car, guns at the ready. If he tried to run, we’d intercept him.

We heard some shouting and scuffling. Vladislav emerged from the container, dragging a frantically struggling Kirill along with him. He brought him right to me, throwing him on the ground at my feet.

“Boss! What’s—”

I kicked him in the balls. “Where is she?”

He panted hard, not saying anything.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Kirill. Your choice. The longer we take to find her though, the longer your torture will last.”

“It’s too late. I already sold her.”

I reached down and circled his throat with my hand, squeezing hard. “Where is she?”

He choked, face flushing as he ran out of air. “North... Brother Island,” he rasped.

I let him go, looking to Vladislav. “Tie him up real secure. I’ll be back to deal with him.”

“Should I call more men, sir?”

I thought about it. “Yeah. Okay, you deal with Kirill and get reinforcements. Me and the rest of the men will go on ahead.”

Vladislav nodded. “Yes, sir.”

I turned to Katya. “You coming?”

She stared out over the water. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

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## NORA

*I* was *freaking out*. Even if I wasn't surrounded by three men, there was nowhere to run unless I wanted to drown. I could swim but not that well, and I could not see land anywhere close by. I thought about asking them where they were taking me, but they looked even more evil than Kirill, and I didn't want to get hurt if I could help it.

*They're taking me to Celia*, I reminded myself. At least, I hoped they were. Once I had my sister back, I'd figure out a way to escape. Who knew? Maybe Alexei would notice I was gone and try to find me. He must have known these people and how they worked.

I folded in on myself, trying to make myself as small a target as possible. After an interminable amount of time, the boat docked on an island. It looked as if it'd been abandoned after the end of the world. Everything was overgrown and derelict.

I was hauled to my feet and dragged off the boat, stumbling and tripping my way down a path. It led down to a decrepit looking building. An old sign near the entrance read *North Brother Island Mental Hospital*. That did not inspire confidence in my chances for survival. As soon as we stepped into the lobby, there was a smell. It was difficult to pin down exactly, but it was how you'd imagined despair and decay would smell.

I gasped, coughing, and felt immediately nauseous and like I needed to spit. The men dragged me deeper into the hospital. There was no light aside from

what came through the windows. Scary didn't begin to describe it. I'd been there barely ten minutes, and I wanted to go stark screaming mad. I could imagine that someone would do just about anything to get out of here.

We passed rooms with closed doors. I could hear quiet haunting whimpers. I was almost gibbering with fear, one sudden move in the shadows away from crying and pleading with my captors to get me out of here.

One of the men opened a door and shoved me into a room before slamming it shut behind me. I immediately turned and threw myself at it, banging on it as I shouted for them to let me out. I don't know why I did it. I knew it was useless even before I started. But I was just so terrified.

I was afraid to turn around and face the room. For one thing, I could hear breathing, loud and labored, and I knew I wasn't alone. I was almost afraid to see what—or who—was in the room with me.

I turned around slowly, bracing myself. There was one hospital bed near the window, with no mattress. My eyes swept the room and found the source of labored breathing that filled the room in increments, lying on a mattress on the floor. An IV line was through her arm, and I approached her slowly.

“Hello?”

She said nothing, didn't even turn her head. For all I knew, she hadn't heard me. She was a long, thin shape lying beneath a thin sheet—probably freezing. It wasn't exactly warm. From the rattling I could hear even from where I was, it sounded like she might have pneumonia.

I wanted to approach her, but my limbs felt frozen, heavy, and reluctant to take another step. Maybe I didn't want to know... but I had to. Whoever she was, she needed help, and me standing there gawking was doing neither of us any good.

Still, it felt like someone else was moving me from the outside, as I put one foot in front of the other and approached her. Everything was fuzzy as if I was seeing through opaque glass. Slowly, I went down on my knees and peered at her, pulling her dark hair away from her face.

I almost screamed when I realized who I was looking at.

“Celia...?”

She looked battered and bruised, and so painfully thin I wanted to cry. She didn't acknowledge that she'd heard me in any way. I leaned down over her, our faces close to each other.

“Celia?” I whispered again.

She made a slight whimpering sound. I moved the blanket aside to peer at her body. Aside from her dangerous thinness, she had a lot of bruises in various stages of healing, as well as a collection of needle tracks on her arm. “What did they do to you?”

I covered her back up, not wanting her to feel any colder than she already

was. Her body was shivering. I lay down beside her to give her my warmth, pulling her close. “It’s going to be alright. I’m going to get you out of here,” I whimpered.

“N-nora?”

I lifted my head so fast I almost gave myself whiplash. “Celia?” I loomed over her, looking down into her face. “It’s me. It’s Nora. I’ve come to get you.”

Her lips were chapped and dry even as she tried to smile. I looked around the room frantically, hoping to find a source of water somewhere. There was no tap in the room, no water bottle, nothing.

I licked my finger and brushed the resulting wetness against her mouth. “Shh... it’s going to be fine. Are you thirsty? What’s in your IV?” I peered closely at the bag of clear liquid reading the label. “Dextrose 5% in water.”

I sighed. That should have helped with the dehydration, at least. But she needed to be in the hospital. Not lying on the floor in an abandoned mental institution.

“Nora.” She could scarcely make any sound. Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Yes, baby. I’m right here. I’m right here, Ce. I love you. I’m going to get you out.”



She coughed weakly and smiled. I searched for her hand, taking her pulse. It was slow and weak. Her skin was so cold. I shuffled closer, trying to give her some of my body heat as I looked around the room.

Maybe we could escape through the window and make our way back to the boat. The blinds were broken. I sat up, wanting to see if I could get the window open, but Celia mewled weakly and I lay back down, gathering her close to me.

“Shh, I’ll get you out of here. Don’t you worry.” I began humming soothingly.

She turned her head slowly, resting it on my shoulder. Her breathing was still worryingly erratic.

“You... found... me,” she rasped.

“Yes I did. Yes I did,” I assured her.

She smiled, her lips cracking and bleeding. I tightened my grip on her. “Always were... so protective,” she said affectionately.

“That’s right. I *am* protective. And I *will* get you out of here.”

She took a deep breath, her chest expanding, and then she relaxed. It was a few minutes before I realized that she hadn’t taken another breath.

“Celia?” I peered down at her, shaking her a little.

There was no response. Her eyes were open, but far off and unseeing. I screamed her name in shock and despair.

“Celia!” I began to shake her, uncaring of her IV, of how brittle she was.  
“Celia, wake up! *Please!* Oh God, Celia!”

My voice just kept getting louder and louder and I screamed and screamed, but I knew she couldn't hear me anymore.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR**

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## ALEXEI

North Brother Island was bleak. The sky seemed darker as we approached the dock. There was a boat already berthed there, and I figured those were the traffickers. Between the six of us, we were weighed down with guns and grenades. I lifted my gun and jumped off the boat, keeping an eye out for anyone coming at us.

It didn't take long for the vermin to emerge. Three men approached us from the door of the hospital, already shooting. We wasted no time in dispatching them. Just as I was running towards the entrance to the hospital, a scream—desperate and blood-curdling—filled the air. It was distracting. I wanted to run towards it, but I had to keep a look out for hostiles.

“That was Nora,” I whispered to Katya.

“Are you sure?”

“It's her.”

“Cover me. I'll get her.”

“No! Go back to the boat and wait for us there.”

“What? Why?”

“We’ll need you. Can’t risk both of us. Go on.”

Katya sighed but she listened to me and returned to the boat. I followed the sound of the scream down a darkened corridor as my men cut a swathe through the hostiles who were stationed at the hospital. The screaming was ceaseless.

I came to a door and shot off the lock, bursting into the room, my gun at the ready. I wasn’t prepared for the scene that greeted me. Nora was on the floor, hunched over another figure, swaying back and forth, and screaming Celia’s name.

I closed the door behind me and dropped to my knees on her other side. The scene kept going in and out. One minute, it was Celia and Nora in front of me, the next it was my mother, her arms around my father, screaming at me, “What did you do, Alex? *What did you do?*”

My father’s head was in her lap, bashed open and bleeding, blue eyes staring at nothing. Then it was Celia’s body, eyes open and staring as Nora screamed her name. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, not even knowing *who* I was talking to.

Finally she looked up and saw me. “Alexei!” she cried. “Help her. Help her!” Her face was streaming with tears, eyes full of despair. I had no idea what to do.

I reached out for her, taking her by the arm. “Let her go,” I said gently. “We’ll... we’ll take her to the hospital, but first you’ve gotta let her go.”

She was shaking her head. “No, no, no, I can’t leave her. She’ll be cold.”

“No, she won’t. I promise you. She’ll be fine. Everything will be fine,” I assured her, her face still fading in and out, interchangeable with my mother’s.

*“What did you do, Alexei? What will we do? They’ll kill you if they know. There will be a price on your head. How could you do this?”*

“It’ll be okay. I promise you. We’ll find a way.”

She wailed, throwing her head back, begging for her to be okay. I reached out and took her hands, prying them off Celia’s body. “It’ll be alright. You’ll see,” I said softly. I picked up Celia’s body and got to my feet. “Come with me.”

I turned and began to walk out of the room. Naturally, Nora followed. My head was spinning. I was having a hard time staying in the present. I hadn’t ever thought that my father’s death had such an impact on me, but things I had buried long ago sprung up, demanding my attention.

I couldn’t look down at Celia’s body. All I could think of was my mother, frantically rubbing the blood from my hands, and then picking up the rock and smearing her own palms with my father’s blood, and brains, telling me to

get out, to just *go*.

I pushed the image away as I headed for the boat.

Nora was still chanting Celia's name as if she believed that if she just kept calling her, she would return to her. Katya came running to help get Nora onboard just as Vladislav rode up with reinforcements.

I pointed to the hospital. "Clear this place out and look after the victims," I called to him.

He saluted me and I nodded to Katya to take off.

Her face paled as she stared at Celia, lying dead in my arms. I remembered that she'd told me they used to be lovers. I shook my head at her, letting my eyes speak my sorrow as we returned to the mainland, Nora still clinging to her sister's body and whimpering.

I didn't know what to do for her.

Katya and I exchanged helpless glances. I could see in her eyes that our father had also come to her mind. I killed Valya Levin in a fit of rage because I was tired of him abusing our mother. Katya had not been present for it, but she came in to find my mother keening over his body. She knew about the cover up. He was her father too, but somehow, she forgave me.

I realized that all this was bringing his death to the forefront of both our minds. We'd been so focused on carrying on, with putting up a strong united front, and dealing with my mother being exiled off to Russia for killing him, that we never really dealt with the loss at all.

He was an abusive asshole, but he was also the man who brought us pizza every time he had a late meeting. He was *otets*.

I could see the tears on Katya's face as she drove us to the docks. Transferring Nora and her sister's body to the car was a feat, as Nora kept trying to shake her, trying to wake her up. I called Jodie Hunt from the car, and she was waiting for us at side entrance of the hospital, a gurney at the ready. She produced a body bag for Celia's body, and Katya had to hold Nora back while Jodie and I stuffed her in it. At some point, Nora collapsed. Katya, almost stumbling, held her up.

"She blacked out," she whispered to me.

I turned to Jodie. "You got this? I think I gotta get Nora home."

She nodded. "Are you sure she shouldn't be admitted as well? She could be hurt?"

"You think so?"

Jodie shrugged. "I don't know."



“I’ll take her to my clinic and have our medic look at her.”

“Yeah, okay. Would you mind letting me know how she’s doing?”

“Of course. You know what to do with the body?”

“Yes. I suppose you don’t need her in the system.”

“Not the way she was brought in. If you could fudge the details, that’d be great.”

Jodie bit her lip. “If Nora doesn’t mind, I can say she ODeD.”

“Yeah, that’d probably fit. I’ll talk to her.”

Jodie nodded, casting a worried glance at Nora before wheeling Celia away. With a sigh, I got in the driver’s seat and drove to the compound. Nora lay with her head in Katya’s lap. We exchanged glances in the mirror.

“Now what?” she asked me.

I sighed. “We have lots to do.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” She looked down, stroking Nora’s hair. “Poor girl. She’s been through a lot.”

I looked back out front. “Yeah. We all have.”

Doctor Ross treated Nora for shock. “She’s a bit out of it now, but you can take her home,” he said.

“I can’t take her home. I don’t even know where she lives.” I laughed softly, shaking my head.

“I do.” Katya stepped forward. “But she lives with her grandmother. She’s probably not in the right state to see her right now. Maybe we can take her to your place, and she can spend the night.”

“Her grandmother, huh?” I shook my head. Nora’s life was so different than what I had envisaged it to be. Would she even want to know me now that she had her answers? I had no idea. But I knew what I wanted. So until she told me to leave her alone, I was going to be there for her.

Katya went back to her hotel, and I took Nora home. She was all but catatonic. I couldn’t even blame her.

Once there, I stripped her of her clothes and then got naked before manhandling her into the shower. I let the hot water pour down on her, as she stood, unmoving, unmoved by our proximity or nakedness. Taking the shampoo, I washed her hair carefully before scrubbing her skin of dirt, blood,

and whatever other bodily fluids she'd encountered.

She let me touch her in the most intimate places with no reaction, and I was seriously beginning to wonder if I shouldn't check her in to a psychiatric facility. I gently bundled her out of the shower and enfolded her in a robe before leading her to the bed. Taking one of the sedatives Doctor Ross had prescribed, I made her take it with some water.

"Come on," I told her, "time for bed." I tucked her into the blankets and then stood looking down at her, wondering if I would lose her forever now that her sister had been found.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE**

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## NORA

I startled awake sometime in the middle of the night, hoping it had all been a bad dream. For maybe half a second, suspended in time, I almost believed it. Then my heart sank back to my feet where it had been living since the life went out of Celia's eyes. I realized that I'd never really doubted I'd find her somewhere, alive and well.

In my mind, Celia had been built to survive anything.

*Oh, how wrong I was.*

I couldn't help being filled with anguish at the thought of her trapped for months... *months*. And there I had been, just wringing my hands the whole time. I should have pressed Detective Reed harder than I did—not accept his bullshit excuses.

I felt as though regret might kill me. It was a weight, pressing down on my chest, suffocating me. I gave a shuddering gasp as the tears I didn't know were pressing behind my eyelids began to fall.

There was a movement in the bed beside me, and I realized I wasn't alone. A strong arm slipped around my waist and my muscles jumped before the scent of Bleu de Chanel wafted towards me. I knew who it was.

“Alexei?” I called. I had figured he’d cut his losses and ran as soon as possible now that I’d been exposed.

He pulled me in so that I was lying against his chest.

“Are you alright?” he asked me softly.

His tone was surprising to me. I expected some anger at least, due to my deceit.

“How did you find me?”

He sighed. “Torture and tech.”

I turned, squinting at his form in the darkness. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean we threatened to scoop Igor’s eyes out if he didn’t tell us where Kirill took you.”

My heart sank. “So you know about him?”

“About... who?”

“Kirill. And what he’s been doing—apparently behind your back.”

“I do.” His voice became really cold. “And he’ll pay for that. And for hurting you, too.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry.”

There was a rustling of the sheets as he turned his head. “For what?” he sounded curious.

“For all this. Kirill. The whole thing. You found out he was betraying you because of me.”

He huffed in quiet laughter. “I should be thanking *you* for that. You shouldn’t be apologizing.”

I sighed, feeling the tears soak into the pillow beside my face. “I just...” I shook my head, “I guess I’m tired. This has been...”

He didn’t want to hear any of this. I didn’t know why I was telling him.

“What?” he asked.

I stared, startled. “Uh... well...” I sat up, blinking into the darkness. “I’ve

been in a state of turmoil ever since my sister disappeared. Flailing about, just running around in circles. And now..." I choked, shaking my head. "Now she's dead."

My voice broke on the last word as I clutched my throat in anguish, hunched over in grief.

Alexei sat up as well. "What can I do?"

I drew up my knees, burying my face in them. I could not stop crying, no matter how hard I tried. "I'm sorry, I don't want to be like this, but I can't seem to stop."

"Oh, baby..." He breathed affectionately, rubbing my back. It made me cry even more. "Your sister just died. Of course you want to cry."

I tilted my body towards him, allowing myself to fall into his arms, and I buried my head in his shoulder. I breathed him in, taking comfort in his scent and his strong arms, so tight around me.

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

His chest and shoulders shook as he laughed. "What would you like me to do instead?" he asked as he petted my hair.

I pulled back, so I could look at his face. "I expected you to be angry with



me.”

“For lying?” he asked sharply.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Well, I *could* be mad, I suppose. I could make a fuss. But what good would that do? You had your reasons and I’m a pragmatic man. If someone took my sister, I’d do a hell of a lot more than pretend to be someone I’m not to get her back.”

His tone was even, but I could hear the slight tremor when he said ‘pretend’.

I reached out blindly, searching for a lamp to switch on. My fingers found the switch and turned it on. The light was soft and warm like being bathed in candlelight, just enough for me to see his face and for him to see my eyes.

“Not everything was a lie,” I said, making sure to meet his gaze.

“No?”

I shook my head. “No. Everything that happened between us was real for me. I need you to know that.”

His lips twisted and he lowered his gaze, probably to hide the expression in his eyes from me. “Except for the fact that you’re a nurse and not a stripper.”

“True...” I peered at him. “Does it matter to you?”

“Yeah, it does actually.”

My heart sunk.

He lifted his eyes and looked at me a twisted smile on his face. “In the sense that, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m a little hurt that you didn’t trust me, and that you thought I might be involved in your sister’s abduction.”

“I just...”

“No, no, don’t explain. I understand completely. Just... there’s no logic to feelings.”

“Well, if we’re confessing things, I gotta say I’m surprised you’re still here. I mean... I know the sex was great, but Marci was so clear that you don’t do drama *or* emotions. And I am definitely bringing both.” I didn’t know why I was pointing this out to him if he hadn’t yet realized himself.

He huffed a laugh, sounding tired and defeated. “Yeah well... that’s true for most of the women I’ve been with. But we weren’t *just* fucking. Hell, you think I ask just anyone to live with me?”

My heartbeat began to speed up. “I wondered, but I didn’t want to assume.”

“Well, I’m giving you permission. Assume away.”

“So... you’re saying you like me?”

“Yes.”

I cuddled deeper into him. “Well, for the record, I like you too.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

We sat in silence as he just held me for a while. For a few minutes, the horror of Celia’s death and the train wreck that was my life didn’t exist. I sighed, knowing that we couldn’t live here forever. In this torturous peace.

“What are we going to do?”

I didn’t really expect an answer, but he gave one anyway.

“We can’t bring your sister back, but we can avenge her.”

“How?”

“However you want. I have Kirill tied up, awaiting judgement. You can do whatever you like with him.”

I sat up, looking him in the eye. “You mean that?”

“Yes.”

“He’s your second in command.”

“He *was*.” His eyes were dark.

I nodded. “I want him dead.”

“You can do the honors if you like, or I’ll kill him for you. Fast or slow. Whatever you want.”

“Slow.” The viciousness with which I said it took me aback. I’d hated violence since I had to live with it as a child.

But I didn’t take it back.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX**

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## ALEXEI

I called Nora's supervisor and informed her that she wouldn't be coming in for a few days. Mrs. Smith was suitably impressed to be speaking to one of the hospital trustees and assured me that there would be no problem. It was one less thing Nora had to worry about, even if it hadn't occurred to her yet.

At the moment, she was picking at her breakfast. I'd made us both a fruit platter because it was easy to eat, and she had no appetite. The way she was half-heartedly moving the pieces of watermelon around the plate told me that even this was a challenge. I put a full glass of mango juice at her side with a smile as I called Katya, wanting to check in on her too.

She'd decided to go back to the hotel for the night, wanting to 'give us space'. She assured me that her bodyguard would be staying the night and she'd be safe. Seeing as I wasn't sure who else from my organization was involved with Kirill, I had to agree that it was a good idea for her to have her own independent security.

"Hey," she answered, her voice a scratchy, sleepy rasp.

"Sleep well?"

"Was sleeping quite well till you decided to wake me up," she complained.

I grinned. "Sorry to wake you. We're gonna go to the warehouse to question Kirill. Want to come with?"

"We? As in you and Nora?"

"Yes."

There was a small silence on the line. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No. But she needs closure, and I can give it to her."

Katya sighed. "I suppose. Yes, I'll meet you there. In an hour?"

"Yes."

"See you then." She hung up without further ado, and I put my phone away, going to pour myself some coffee.

Nora looked up from her plate, her expression still bleak. "Katya's coming?"

I nodded. "Yeah." I tilted my head to the side. "The thought of you and her teaming up is..." I shook my head, taking a sip of coffee.

I was glad to see it coaxed a smile out of her. “Daunting?”

“That’s one word for it.” I sipped my coffee with a smile. “You gonna eat that fruit or...?”

She looked down and took another bite of her watermelon before lifting her head to favor me with a tentative glance. “I didn’t thank you. For rescuing me.”

I snorted. “Yeah well... you don’t have to.”

“I do. God knows what those men were planning to do with me. And they would have probably thrown Celia’s body in the ocean. You saved us both.”

I looked away because the gratitude in her eyes was embarrassing. “You’re welcome,” I said quietly, before taking a sip of my coffee.

My SUV and Katya’s arrived at the warehouse at the same time. We drew up beside each other, and she lowered her blacked-out window to peer at me. I did the same and we grinned at each other.

“Mornin’, y’all,” she said in an exaggerated southern accent. “Ready for some mayhem and violence?”



“Always,” I replied.

I glanced at Nora, I couldn't help frowning with worry. Things could get bloody fast.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked her quietly.

“A hundred percent.” She reached for the handle of the door and opened it, stepping out determinedly. She was dressed in a pair of my sweats. She'd had to fold both the bottoms of the pants and the sweatshirt. But she didn't seem to care. It wasn't giving me confidence in her ability to handle all this. I knew she needed it, so I didn't say anything more.

We all made our way to the warehouse where Vladislav was waiting with two other men.

He nodded. “Morning, boss.”

“Vlad. How goes it?”

“Kirill was talking a lot. Had to gag him. He kept trying to bribe the men.”

My mouth twisted cynically. “No takers?”

Vlad gave me a strange look. “We are loyal to the family.”

I nodded. “Good. Let us proceed.”

We entered the warehouse in silence. I was slightly in front with my sister and Nora flanking me. Vladislav took up the rear. Kirill was locked up in the back room. He had peed himself, so that was a great start. I saw Nora wrinkle her nose, but she gave no further reaction. I folded my arms and smiled at him.

“Well, Ki, you know what happens now, don’t you?”

“Look, Alex —” he began to say.

I lifted up a finger. “Come now. That’s Mr. Levin to you.” I almost smirked.

He got to his feet slowly. “Mr. Levin. I get that I did the wrong thing. But—”

“No, no.” I flicked my finger at him. “There are no buts.”

He blinked at me uncertainly, and I knew I had him wrong-footed, which was exactly where I wanted him.

“I... did the wrong thing. I admit it. I thought it might make us money. Every

gang is in the business, and we were being left behind.”

“So you thought you’d start your own side hustle?”

He stared at me, and I could see the wheels turning in his head.

“Uh, no. I thought I’d get the brasses tacked and then bring you in.”

“That’s interesting. And who helped you with this?”

His mouth opened and closed. He shrugged meekly and looked down. Katya and I exchanged glances. It looked like the torture portion of the interview was about to begin.

“Right.” I nodded to Vladislav. “Take him.”

Vlad came forward and grabbed Kirill, covering his head with a black cloth as another of his men tied his hands behind his back. He pushed him out of the room, not bothering to be gentle, and we followed. The warehouse might make for a great storage space but for the kind of screaming we were planning on making Kirill do, it’d be better if we headed out to sea.

Vlad got him on the boat and took him to the berth and hog tied him to the bunk. I helped my sister and Nora aboard before heading to the engine room to drive the boat out. Vlad remained on guard downstairs while Nora and Katya took their seats on the fly bridge, where white leather cushioned

benches and a table were located.

I drove us out to the middle in the ocean, focusing on centering myself so that I could conduct the interrogation with clarity of mind. There is an art to making people talk—especially people like Kirill who are well-versed in withstanding torture. I had to know who else had helped him before I allowed Nora to kill him. The future of the Bratva in New York depended on it.

It also occurred to me that I was in the market for a new second. I couldn't help feeling like a failure. My second had betrayed me. There was no greater sin. Why had he had the nerve to do it?

What was I doing wrong?

I needed to step up on every aspect of my leadership to stop this shit from happening again. For this to have happened right under my nose was a stain on my record, and I needed to clean it up.

Once we were in open water, with not a vessel to be seen for miles, I stopped and dropped anchor. "Here we go." I walked over to the girls. "Are you ready?" I asked.

Katya held up the tool kit that had been sitting on the table. "Born ready."

I had to smile. "Let's go then."

Kirill was stripped naked and tied to a chair in the bathroom. I smiled at Vlad and nodded. “Good thinking. It will make it easier to clean up the blood.”

Kirill blanched. I frowned. He really should have been better at hiding his emotions by now. I stayed back, and my sister stepped forward.

“*Privet*, Kirill. How are you today?” she asked.

He just looked up at her, fear in his eyes, already panting hard. She reached out and put a clamp on his left nipple. “I asked you a question.”

“I’m fine!” he shouted, panicked. “Please!” He looked at me with pleading eyes. “There’s no need for this. She was just some stupid street rat. I promise there wasn’t anyone else. Just her. It was just that one time.”

To my surprise, Nora stepped forward and slapped him. Spit flew from his mouth, mixed with blood, and it splattered over the mirror. “*Don’t* call my sister a street rat.”

He sneered at Nora. “Who the fuck you think you are?” he asked.

She slapped his other cheek. “I’m the one who’s going to kill you,” she hissed viciously.

This Nora was new. I didn’t know if she terrified or turned me on, but I wanted to see more.

“Why did you take her? Why Celia? What did she ever do to you?” she asked him.

Katya took a step back to give Nora room to loom over Kirill.

“She was just a nobody that no one would miss. There was nothing special about her,” Kirill said, still sneering at my girl. Even tied naked to a chair, he still didn’t grasp who the most dangerous person in the room was.

Nora punched his nose. I heard a crack. She’d broken it without flinching. I was suitably impressed.

“You’re wrong. She wasn’t a nobody. She was my little sister. And you will pay for what you did to her,” she said, really getting in his face.

“Yeah? Well, whatever you do to me, you’re not getting her back. You can’t turn back time. You can’t stop all those thousands of men from using her body like—”

She punched him again, screaming with rage. He only laughed.

“You punch like a girl,” he said and spat a glob of blood at her feet.

Nora snatched the clamp from Katya's hand and pinched Kirill's other nipple viciously with it. She narrowed her eyes at him. "You know what? I think we'll start with fifty k volts. How about that?"

Katya turned to the mobile ECT device we were using and turned it to fifty thousand volts. Kirill blubbered.

"No, please, wait! Stop! Boss, listen, I haven't done anything. I wasn't doing this to go against you. I did this for you. I swear—"

Katya turned on the voltage and Kirill screamed. I stood by the door with my hands folded. Katya and Nora had him well in hand. I looked at him blankly as the voltage was cut off, and he slumped as much as he could while tied up, panting audibly.

"Please," he murmured, a line of drool falling from his lips into his lap.

"Who else were you working with?" I asked softly. "Tell me, and all this stops."

"No one. Just Igor. I swear."

"I don't believe you." I nodded to Katya, and she switched on the voltage again. Kirill screamed.

"Next time, how about I pour some cold water all over him?" Nora asked.

For the first time, fear flashed in Kirill's eyes. He finally understood why he was fucked. "Please. I'm sorry, alright? I'll tell you everything."

"So, talk," I said sharply.

"Anto Radić came to me with a plan. He wanted to connect me with some guys who were looking for girls. They were willing to pay top dollar. I came to you and made a proposal, but you turned me down."

"Why didn't you tell me Radić was involved?"

"Because I—" he cut himself off, shaking his head. "I wasn't sure what you would say since you were so adamant before..."

"And you wanted to keep your options open."

Kirill didn't say a word.

"Go on."

He took a deep breath, looking resigned. "Igor... Before he came to the club, he used to work for the Italians as a carrier. Their cargo was mostly drugs, but the smuggling routes were the same for drugs, guns, and girls. The girls



came from Eastern Europe, the drugs from Afghanistan, and the guns from Ireland, but the same ports meant transporters converged. He told me stories.”

“And you listened, all wide-eyed,” I said.

“Yeah... I mean the amounts of money he was talking about were crazy. And this wasn't even the Epstein type networks. This was just whorehouses and such.”

Nora spoke through clenched teeth. “Epstein sold underage girls.”

“Yeah I mean... that's why they were expensive.” He looked at Nora as if he thought she was dumb as rocks. She was huffing quite hard. Her patience was thinning by the second. It was best to move Kirill along quickly.

“Get on with it,” I said impatiently.

“He introduced me to some people. Buyers... y'know? They gave me their specifications, and I realized that a lot of the strippers fit the bill. But I couldn't just make them disappear. They were making good money at the club, so I visited other, seedier ones. Strippers are pretty world wise though. Most of them weren't interested.”

I was getting impatient, and he was just wasting time. “What a sad, *sad* tale. Get on with it.”

“I did find one or two girls, but I hadn’t yet gotten a good supply. The men kept demanding more and more, so I had to snatch a few off the streets, cruise the homeless shelters... Celia saw me and Igor one day, stuffing some girls in a van. She made the mistake of confronting Igor about it. She obviously had to go.”

I was not at all surprised when Nora leapt for him and began strangling him. I let it go on for some time before speaking up. “Just one question and then you can do whatever you like with him, Nora,” I said softly.

With a growl of effort, she pulled away from him, glaring all the while.

“Who else were you working with?”

Kirill shook his head. “No one. Please, I swear. I couldn’t trust anyone.”

I nodded. “Alright then. Nora, he’s all yours.”

She didn’t waste a moment closing her tiny hands around his throat and squeezing. I thought she might lose her nerve as his eyes began to bug out and his lips went blue, but she kept at it, her face a rictus of effort. Kirill was struggling, begging breathlessly as he tried to get free of his bonds. His eyes were filled with the realization that he’d severely underestimated this woman. I smiled, enjoying his discomfort.

His struggles got weaker and weaker until he went limp. Nora slowly removed her fingers from his neck, taking a careful step back from his body.

I stepped forward and shot him in the head.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN**

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## NORA

*I* felt sick.

I'd just strangled a man.

With my bare hands.

I stared at them, feeling the bile burn the back of my throat. I looked up to see Alexei looking at me, his eyes filled with pride.

"I shot him," he said. "My bullet is probably what killed him."

I felt gratitude to him for trying to protect me from this. But I was a nurse, and I knew what it looked like when someone stopped breathing. I didn't stop squeezing until he stopped, until I no longer felt his pulse.

Still, I appreciated the effort. Reaching out with one hand, I drew him to me and hugged him close. "Thank you," I whispered.

He wrapped his arms around me, holding me tight.

“Aww, you’re adorable,” Katya teased, but her smile was forced.

I smiled back at her before drawing her in and hugging her tight as well. After a moment, Alexei turned to his henchman. “Vlad, help me tie him up and weigh him down.”

The two of them dragged him out of the berth and up the stairs, weighting his body down with stones before throwing him overboard. Just like that, Kirill was gone. I knew I should’ve felt something—outrage, shock, or repugnance—but all I felt was relief.

Just this one time, someone who’d done something awful to us had paid for it.

My parents disappeared, they walked away and never looked back. I tried to repair the damage, but obviously, I had failed.

Putting my hands around his neck and choking the life out of him made me feel as if I took some of my power back. It wasn’t about revenge. Nothing was going to bring Celia back... Nothing would make any of her pain obsolete. But at least the man who’d done it to her was no longer breathing.

It was just about justice.

I never in a hundred years would have thought I was capable of murder, but here we were. Katya poured me a stiff drink as we sat down at the dinette. “How are you feeling? Was that your first kill?”

I took a large swig of whisky. “Uh, yeah. I’m usually about saving lives.”

She sighed. “Are you gonna be alright?”

I shook my head, sipping some more whisky. “I don’t know. I keep waiting for the guilt.”

“You grew up Catholic, didn’t you?”

I grinned. “How’d you guess?”

“I am familiar with Catholic guilt. I dated a convent girl, once.”

I nodded looking down at my drink.

She considered me closely. “You’re a lot tougher than you look.”

I huffed a laugh. “Thank you?” I didn’t know where to look.

She nodded. “You’ll be alright. And for what it’s worth, you have my blessing.”

I cocked a puzzled eyebrow at her. “Blessing?”

“For you and my brother.”

“Oh.” I looked down to hide my blushing face. “Thanks, I guess.”

“He does want you. You know that, right?”

I cleared my throat. “Uh, yeah.”

“Well, he does. And I know this isn’t the right time but... when you’re ready.”

I glanced overboard, thinking of the body we’d just gotten rid of, and then I looked at Alexei, his fair hair blowing in the wind, his face a closed book. If there was ever a time I needed someone, it was now.

I got up and went up to him, standing next to him as he steered the boat.

“You alright?” he asked, without looking at me.

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m fine. Just...” I shook my head. “Long day.”



He huffed in agreement. “When we get home, maybe you could eat something and try to rest.”

I folded my arms. “Still have to make funeral arrangements... real ones this time. And tell my grandmother that I found Celia and wasn’t able to save her.”

He looked at me, his eyes sympathetic. “You saved her. Maybe not her life, but you saved *her*.”

The lump was back in my throat. I was terrified that I might burst into tears again and embarrass myself in front of Katya and Vlad. I turned away, letting the wind blow my tears away. I walked over to the gunwale and looked down into the churning sea, sniffing as quietly as I could.

“You’re not alone,” he said, stepping up behind me.

I looked towards the helm to see that Katya had taken over the wheel. “I know I’m not.”

He put his arm around me. “I’ll help you with all of it. All you need to do is mourn in peace. Don’t worry about work, I already told your supervisor that you’re on leave.”

I turned to him in surprise, my heart jumping as I remembered Mrs. Smith for the first time in days. My work at the hospital seemed like a whole other lifetime ago. “Thank you.”

“No problem. I figured you probably didn’t want to think about such things at the moment.”

“You were right about that.”

He nodded. “And obviously, you don’t have to show up for your shift at the club.”

I nodded, my mind slowing with exhaustion.

“I expect you want to hand in your resignation for that one.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me I have to give you notice.”

He moved his head from side to side. “Eh. Who needs all that paperwork?”

I leaned my head against his shoulder and breathed him in.

“Thanks,” I said softly.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT**

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## ALEXEI

We docked at the otherwise deserted harbor to find Katya's new bodyguard waiting.

I squinted at him in some surprise. "Wait, isn't that Suge?"

She grinned at me in delight. "You remembered!"

"Of course I did. He used to kick my ass in basketball. Didn't he join the secret service or some shit?"

"The Navy Seals actually. He's in private security now."

I lowered my voice. "Does he know about the business?"

"He knows. Always did. But not the details."

"If he's any kind of good at his job he probably knows more details than he's saying."

“True. But he asks me no questions and does as he’s told so...”

“And you’re sure he isn’t a cop?”

“As sure as one can be in these cases. He came highly recommended. I didn’t just hire him because we played together as kids.”

“But that was a factor.”

“Yeah.”

“You trust him?”

“About as far as I trust anyone.”

Nora came up to us. “What are you guys whispering about?”

“Nothing. Just sizing up the help.” I smiled at her before helping her off the boat. I turned to help Katya as well, but she slapped my hand away and got down by herself. We made our way to separate cars, and as I was walking to my SUV, my phone pinged.

Fishing it out of my pocket, I saw I had a message from Katya.

## **We need to talk.**

I looked towards her as she was getting in her car. She gave me a loaded look and I nodded. She got in the car and drove off. I texted back.

## **Pandemonium.**

Vlad got in the driver's seat as I opened the back door for Nora. Instead of sitting in front, I went around and got in the back with her.

“Where to, boss?” Vlad asked.

I looked to Nora. “I have to take care of some things at the club. Do you want Vlad to take you ho—”

“No.” She moved closer, huddling into me. “I want to stay with you.”

“Alright then. Vlad, to the club.” I looked to Nora, kissing her hair, and smoothing it back. “I promise it won't be long.”

She nodded against my shoulder and closed her eyes. I was worried about her. It wasn't like her to be so clingy. Just the opposite.

We arrived at Pandemonium fifteen minutes later, and Vlad dropped us at the

side VIP entrance before going to park the car. I led Nora up the stairs and straight to VIP. I took her towards a back room using the special passkey which I handed to her. In there was a fully stocked bar, a buffet, a bunch of comfortable leather sofas, a TV, DJ system and to the side of that, a fully equipped bedroom.

It was a perfect space for business *or* pleasure.

“So, this passkey has today’s codes for this room. As long as it’s in use, no one else can come in. See this screen here?” I pointed to a small device above the doorknob. “It’ll show you who’s at the door. You let them in at your discretion. Feel free to use anything in the room. I won’t be long.”

She nodded. “I think I’ll just lie down. Maybe watch some TV.”

I leaned in and pressed my lips hard to hers. “You do that,” I said softly.

I had her open the door for me and close it behind me. Having her in a room where no one could get in was the safest I could make her until I had ascertained that there was no danger to her here. There was a camera feed in my office so I could keep an eye on her.

Katya was waiting for me outside my office. “What? You didn’t try to break in? I’m disappointed.” I opened the door, and she followed me in.

She rolled her eyes. “We have important things to discuss.”

I picked up my iPad and switched on the feed for the back room before leaning on the deck, folding my arms, and looking expectantly at her. “Alright. What’s so urgent?”

She sighed. “I know you don’t want to think about this but... Nora.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What about her?”

“She’s not family.”

I groaned. “Not you, Katya. Don’t come at me with that exclusionary nonsense.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying!” She grabbed my arm in protest.

“Then what *are* you saying?”

“Look, I know you’re falling for this girl, but you hardly know her. Hell, before this week you didn’t even know her real name. And now we’ve killed a man in front of her. This could be a problem.”

“And you don’t think I can handle it?”

She gritted her teeth in annoyance. “I’m *asking* you how you plan to handle



it.”

I expelled a breath, looking away. “It’s taken care of, Katya.”

“*How?* Damn it Alexei, you think I like asking these questions. But you can be damn sure other people will ask, even if not to your face.” She sighed. “I like Nora a lot. I want to see you happy. But to do that, you need to have an answer. She was present while we killed a man. What’s to stop her from having a crisis of conscience and going to the cops? Or what if you break up and she decides to be malicious?”

I glared at her. “She didn’t just *watch* us kill a man, Kat. She participated. She strangled him. She can’t implicate us without implicating herself.”

She stared at me with wide eyes, realization gradually dawning. “That’s why you let her do it. Encouraged her even.”

I just looked at her.

“Whew!” She shook her head in wonder. “Well, well. Mr. Diabolical strikes again.”

I huffed. “Just call me El Diablo.”

She shook her head. “Nobody calls you that.”

“The Mexicans do.”

She snorted, turning away, still shaking her head. I smiled. “In any case, I am no fool. I know what this means. I don’t plan on bringing her to any meetings or telling her anything she doesn’t need to know. But she is in my life, and I intend to keep her there.”

Katya nodded. “I understand.” She turned, smiling at me. “I even approve, like I said. She’s a strong one. She’ll make a good mate for you.”

“Oh, if I have *your* approval I must be on the right track.”

She punched my hand. “Anyway. If you want to go take care of her, I got you. I’ll deal with what needs dealing with here.”

I looked at her, *really* looked. When she’d left for Russia, she’d still been a child with some growing up left to do. This young woman in front of me though... she was someone I could trust. “Thank you. If you have questions my phone is on. Call me.”

“I will.”

I nodded. Then picked up my iPad and left my office to her. Both of us had spent a lot of time with my father, following him around as he worked. She knew as well as I did what needed to be done.

I went to find Nora, who was curled up on the sofa, fast asleep. Regretfully, I woke her up. “Hey, sorry to wake you, but we gotta go. Do you want to come back to mine?”

She shook her head blearily. “I gotta go home and tell my Lita what happened.”

I nodded holding out my hand to her. “I’ll take you.”

She placed her hand gratefully in mine and smiled. “Thank you.”

We drove to Brooklyn where she lived in a small stucco house with her grandmother. In my mind, I already had them moved out of there and into my place. Nora sat in the car staring ahead, as if frozen. I gave her the time she needed to gather the courage to go forward.

Before she could quite get there, the door opened, and a tall thin woman with salt and pepper hair emerged, dressed in blue jeans and a white sweater. Her arms were crossed as she peered nearsightedly at the car.

Immediately, Nora opened the door and got out.

“Lita,” she said tearfully, her voice breaking, and the woman immediately held her arms out to her. Nora ran to her, burying her head in her grandmother’s chest. I stayed where I was, wanting to give them their moment.

Eventually Nora disengaged and turned, gesturing for me to come over. I exited the vehicle, smoothing down my shirt and cursing the fact that I hadn't bothered to change. I had to hope there was no blood on my shoes.

I walked towards them, a smile on my face trying to look... regular. The perks of my job are that I never have to do the whole meeting the family schtick. So this was foreign territory to me.

“Lita, this is Alexei. He helped me so much in my search for Celia.”

Lita looked up at me and held out her hand to be shaken. She had paper-thin skin and bones, so I was careful to hold it very delicately as I shook it. She had no such qualms and squeezed my hand with a firm grip.

“Pleased to meet you. I take it that you have news.” Her eyes said she already knew what the news was especially since Celia was not with us.

“I found her Lita. I found Celia.”

She grasped her granddaughter's hands with both of hers, looking intently into her eyes.

“And?”

Nora kind of shrunk, pursing her lips, swallowing, and shaking her head. I decided to save her the anguish of breaking the news. “We did find her alive, but she did not make it. I’m sorry, Mrs. Young.”

“It’s actually Mrs. Gonzalez,” she said absently, looking in the distance. “I knew it. Last night, I woke up, her name on my lips. I felt her presence, my lips tingled as if she’d just placed a kiss on them. Then she was gone.”

I had no idea what to say to that.

“Oh, Lita.” Nora grabbed her and hugged her tightly. I stood awkwardly to the side. I had experienced a lot of death in my life and attended many funerals, but I had somehow managed to avoid consoling any bereaved. I had no idea what to do.

Nora finally released her grandmother who grabbed her arm. “Let’s go inside,” Mrs. Gonzalez said, pulling Nora along. Nora turned to look at me with pleading eyes as I hesitated between going to the car or following them in. Clearly, she didn’t want me to go.

I followed them inside.

Ms. Gonzalez wanted to make us some tea, but Nora tried to persuade her to sit down. I figured that even I could whip up a cup of tea without bungling it too bad. “I can make it, if you like.”

They both turned to look at me in surprise.

“The tea,” I clarified, just in case of any confusion.

“Nonsense. You are a guest in my house. *Princesa*, sit with your friend. I shall be but a moment.”

She took advantage of Nora’s distraction to slip out of her arms and make her way to the kitchen. I looked around the room, admiring the comfort it exuded. A person could sit in this room for hours, with a warm blanket on a rainy day and a mug of hot tea, and never want to move.

“Well, welcome to my humble abode. Won’t you sit?” she indicated the sofa. I sank into it, and it was just about as soft as I’d imagined.

I looked towards the mantelpiece where pictures of two girls at various ages dominated the space. Sometimes joined by their grandmother, sometimes not. There were no pictures of Nora’s parents.

“It’s a nice place,” I said as Nora came to sit next to me, folding her legs under her and leaning back with a sigh.

She ran a hand through her dark hair. “Yes, I suppose it is. Grandma made sure to make it nice for us. She wanted us to feel safe and at home when we came to live with her.”

“Well, she did a good job.”

“She did.” She turned to face me and smiled. “Thank you for being here.”

“You’re welcome.” I reached out and squeezed her hand.

Her grandmother came back, carrying a tray, and I leapt up to take it from her. I put it down on the table and she served us black tea and chocolate chip cookies.

She sat down in the armchair facing us and put her hands on the arm as if she was a monarch, judging us. “Now, tell me what happened.”

I gave her a severely edited version of everything, just letting her know we found out that Celia had been kidnapped by traffickers, traced them using my contacts and found her in a bad way together with other victims.

“Did she... say anything?” she asked.

Nora sniffed, a tear falling down her face. “She said... ‘always the protector’, and then she smiled.” Nora shook her head, her shoulders shaking with the force of her tears. “I-I didn’t pro-protect her when it mattered the m-most,” she sobbed.

Her grandmother leaned forward, grabbing her arm, and squeezing tight as she looked intently into Nora’s eyes. “You *did*,” she said fiercely. “You never gave up, even when I did. And you brought her home.”

That only made Nora cry harder. Her grandmother released her arm and made a gesture towards me. I took that as my cue to gather Nora in my arms and hold her as she cried. Lita and I exchanged loaded glances. We understood each other perfectly. There was only one person who needed to be protected in this room now, and she was sitting between us.

Eventually Nora's sobs petered off, though she hiccupped now and then. She sat up straight, apologizing for her outburst. Both of us hastened to assure her that there was nothing to apologize for.

"You did what you had to do," Lita said, and I had a feeling she wasn't just talking about Nora's tears. "Now you should go and rest."

Nora nodded, and then to my surprise, she turned to me. "Will you come with me?"

I flicked a glance at Lita, but her face was impassive. I nodded. "Of course."

We both stood up, and Nora went to kiss her grandmother's cheek. "Good night, Lita."

"Night, *Princesa*. Sleep well. It'll all be better in the morning."



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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE**

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## NORA

I didn't know if I would be able to sleep but I was bone-tired, nevertheless. So I didn't think too much about it when Alexei tucked me into bed like I was a child. I grabbed onto him as he straightened up, loath to have him far away from me.

"Stay," I whispered.

He looked towards the door and then back at me. "But what about your grandmother?"

I shrugged, wordless.

He stared at me for a bit longer before putting his knee on the bed with a sigh. "Fine. But let me take a shower first. I feel filthy."

I let go of his shirt. "Okay." I pointed behind him. "There's a small shower there." I shrugged one shouldered. "Hope you can fit. You are... so tall."

He smiled and took his leg off the bed. "I'll manage."

He reached for his shirt and pulled it off. I held my breath as his chest came into view. He was a magnificent specimen of a man. I watched as he walked naked to the shower, his ass jiggling a bit, and I licked my lips. I didn't even know I had it in me to feel passion so strong, but he pulled it out of me.

I listened as the shower started up, taking solace from the peaceful sound. At some point, my eyes must have drifted closed because I startled awake at a sound. I opened my eyes to see him drop his phone on my bedside table.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you,” he said.

I shook my head. “No, it's fine.” I sat up, “I need to take a shower too.”

I pulled off the clothes that I was wearing, and it occurred to me that he didn't have any of his own. I looked up at him, draped in my towel. I'd be happy for him to just walk around in that, but my grandmother was around.

“Shit, I don't have anything that would fit you,” I said.

He grinned. “It's fine. I have my gym bag in the car. It has a change of clothes and everything.”

“Oh. Do you need me to go and get it for you?”

“No. That's not necessary. I'll dry off and go get it myself.”

I looked down at his old clothes. They were wrinkled but fairly clean. Still, I grimaced. “Sorry about having to wear those again to go out.”

He smiled, picking up his sweatpants that *I’d* been wearing. “I think I’ll wear this instead.”

“Lemme pop it in the washer for you.” I grabbed my robe, pulling it over my underwear and tying it securely.

“You don’t have to.”

“I insist.” I grabbed the clothes before he could say another word and hurried out of the room. Things felt so weird between us. And yet entirely... comfortable. I hadn’t really ever expected to see him in this space. It was a strange thing.

The two people I lov—

The thought stopped me cold.

I loved him. How could I *love* him? I barely knew the man.

*Maybe it’s Stockholm syndrome.*

But how could it be? It's not like he'd held me prisoner. I shook my head, baffled, as I entered the laundry room. My body was tired, but I was too wired to rest. I needed to do some sort of routine activity to calm me down. Laundry was good enough. I took the rest of the clothes from the basket, along with Alexei's tracksuit and put them all to wash.

I heard a scrape and a step and then my grandmother was in the doorway, peering in at me. "What are you doing?"

I sighed. "Washing. Alexei doesn't have a change of clothes." I looked up at her cautiously. "He's staying the night. You don't mind, do you?"

She inclined her head, looking at me with soft eyes. "Of course not, dear. It's clear that you need him."

I blinked in surprise. "It is?"

"Yes." Her voice gentle.

"I... think I'm in love with him."

She came into the room and squeezed my shoulder. "Of course, you are." She smiled. "You never do anything halfway."

I sighed. "I'm not sure what I'm doing."

“You’ll be alright. Don’t worry.”

“Shouldn’t I worry? Alexei... he’s...” I clamped my mouth shut, looking down and shaking my head.

“Whatever he is or isn’t, I know that he cares for you.”

I looked up, staring intently at her. “How can you be sure?”

She smiled. “I can see it in his eyes.”

The washer’s cycle came to an end. I transferred the clothes to the drier before turning back to my grandmother. “Lita, I am so sorry I couldn’t save her.”

“We both loved her dearly, but we are not God, and we cannot save everyone.”

I leaned into her chest. “Lita,” I whispered in despair.

She petted my hair. “It’ll be alright. There, there.”

Her comfort made me feel better. I pulled back from her and went to collect

the clothes from the dryer. "I have to get back."

She kissed my forehead. "Sleep well."

"You too, Lita."

I walked back to the bedroom to find Alexei lounging on my bed covered only by his towel. His skin was so smooth and flawless, not tanned, but glowing ivory. I blinked at the length of him, legs hanging off my six-foot bed, ankles crossed. He was reading the book that had been on my bedside table. It was a steamy romance, and I blushed, feeling caught out. He looked up and smiled. "That was quick."

"Yeah, I mean, it was only a few clothes." I put his sweat suit down on the end of the bed, avoiding his eyes and crossed over to the bathroom. "I won't be long."

I closed the door behind me with a sigh and proceeded to take a shower.

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## CHAPTER FORTY

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## ALEXEI

I could see that Nora was restless in spite of the bags under her eyes. I thought about maybe seducing her and tiring her out that way, but I didn't want her to think I was only interested in sex. She lay next to me, staring up at the ceiling.

“Hey, do you want a massage?”

Her eyes moved from the ceiling to me, and she smiled. “That’s kind of you, but you don’t have to.”

I put aside the book I wasn’t really reading. “I don’t have to, but I want to. Come on, turn around.”

She stared at me and sighed, before slowly turning. She was dressed in a lovely confection of silk and lace. A spaghetti shirt and a pair of shorts. I pulled aside the bedclothes, taking a moment to admire her hour glass figure before I put a hand on her lower back. “Do you have any oil? Maybe lavender or sandalwood? Baby oil?”

She giggled. “Yeah actually, I do have some baby oil. Check in the cabinet in the bathroom.” I stood up and went to find it. I had decided to sleep in my boxers and that’s all I was wearing. I knew this could be a very bad idea, but I was willing to risk it. I grabbed the baby oil and went back to Nora.

She was lying on her stomach, and I straddled her, pouring some oil onto my hand and then slowly rubbing at her shoulders as I massaged gently. She began to make some moaning noises, and it was getting harder to control my own reactions. I kneaded her back industriously, ignoring my erection in the service of relaxing her.

I knew she could feel it too though. But she ignored it as much as I did.

I moved down, rubbing the small of her back before taking the twin peaks of her ass in my hands and kneading gently, lovingly, with maximum attention to detail. She sighed softly, shifting around. It looked like I wasn't the only one who was aroused.

I ran my hands down her legs, tracing random patterns in her tanned skin. I rubbed and palpated, shaking her legs. I ran my fingers along her inner thigh, and she widened her legs to give me more access.

Finding her clit, I rubbed it gently, enjoying the way she squirmed and moaned, and wriggled against the bed. My erection was almost painful, but I ignored it. I pushed my hand inside of her, fucking her with my finger.

I bent my thumb, pressing it hard against her clit and she arched up, backing her ass up. She was groaning aloud, but her moans were muffled, gyrating her hips, and pushing back against my fingers. She was dripping wet, and I wanted to shove my cock in her so badly.

But this wasn't about me.

The noises became more desperate, and then she shook and shuddered, her juices flowing all over my hand as she came. She collapsed on the bed and closed her eyes. Before I knew it, she was asleep. I smiled, covering her with the blanket and went to wash my hands.

I couldn't sleep when I returned. My erection had gone down, but I was still wired. I grabbed the sweats Nora had placed at the end of the bed and put them on. I left the room, barefoot, and wandered back to the living room. I thought I might just sit, maybe watch some TV on low volume and keep an ear out in case Nora woke up.

I found that Nora's grandmother was still sitting there, knitting. I paused awkwardly by the door, and she looked up and smiled.

"Come in," she said.

I stepped into the room and took a seat opposite her.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asked.

I shook my head.

She put her knitting aside and considered me, her brown eyes opaque, unreadable. "There's more to you than meets the eye, isn't there?"

My eyes widened and I shrugged. “I don’t know. Is there?”

“You know I come from Mexico. I’ve seen a lot of cartels. I’ve seen a lot of men who are killers. Your eyes tell me that you know something about that.”

I blinked in surprise, not knowing how to answer that.

“You don’t have to confirm or deny,” she smiled. “Just tell me my granddaughter is safe.”

I bit my lip. “She’s about as safe as any of us are.”

She nodded. “That’s all I can ask.”

I studied her, trying to read her. She had a bruise on her hand. A familiar thing. I’d seen it’s like before. “Are you sick?” I asked.

She quirked an eyebrow in surprise. “What do you mean by that?”

“Your hand...” I pointed at the bluish looking bruise.

She looked at it in some surprise, as if she’d never seen it before and then huffed in annoyance. “It’s strange. You’ve just met me, and you noticed something about me that Nora hasn’t.”

“I expect she’s had a lot on her mind.”

She nodded. “That’s true.” She sighed. “It’s why I really insisted on closure for her. I wanted her to get over her sister’s death...”

“So she could deal with yours?” I asked in disbelief.

She remained quiet for a moment, before she took a labored breath and said, “I just wanted to die knowing she was alright.”

“Is there nothing that can be done?”

She shrugged. “Nothing that is accessible to me.”

I nodded slowly. “I know we just met but... what if I paid for it?”

Her eyes widened a bit and then narrowed. “Why? So you can bind Nora to yourself even more?”

I smiled, leaning back in my chair, and crossing my legs. “I can assure you, there is not a thing I could do to bind Nora to me any more than she wants to be. Your granddaughter is strong.”

She frowned. “Is that supposed to reassure me?”

“Probably not. But it should tell you that my motives are fairly pure. Nora needs you. I don’t think she could stand to lose another person from her life right now. So if you won’t take the offer for me, take it for her.”

“Why would you do this?”

“Because I know what it is to watch while someone you love is lost to you forever. And because I can.”

She nodded slowly, looking down, her hands fidgeting in her lap. “It’s cancer. Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. They can treat it, but the insurance says it’s pre-existing. They won’t pay.”

“That’s some shitty insurance.”

She huffed, nodding. “I don’t disagree.”

“Well, the good news is I happen to be a trustee at a hospital that has an excellent oncology department. I’ll call the head in the morning.”

“You’re very kind.”

“I’m pragmatic and self-interested. You were right about that. Don’t change your mind now.”

She laughed softly. “I haven’t. I still say you have the eyes of a killer. But your heart harbors kindness. It might be selective, but you have not yet managed to beat it all out of you.”

I just gawked at her, at a loss for words. I got to my feet. “I think I’ll try sleeping now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Alexei.”

“Goodnight, Ms. Gonzalez.”

“Call me Carmen.”

“Goodnight... Carmen.”

I walked back to the bedroom and sat on the bed. With a sigh, I took off my sweatpants and crawled into bed. Nora was snoring softly, sprawled like a ragdoll all over the bed. I pulled her into me, arranging her so she was the little spoon and closed my eyes.

My mind was racing from my conversation with Carmen. For one thing, she definitely knew or suspected I was Bratva, and she was sick.

I didn't think Nora was in any shape to hear any more bad news. Maybe I could persuade Carmen to keep her treatment between us for now. I had a feeling it wouldn't be a hard sell. It was strange to have connected with her so fast. I didn't normally do that—especially not with nice old church ladies.

My phone beeped, and I turned over to pick it up. There was a text message from Katya, and I clicked it open right away.

**Everything dealt with for today. I'm off to bed. Will conduct inspections in the morning. Don't worry about a thing.**

I read it twice, a smile on my face. I really appreciated how much she'd stepped up for me. But once I was done with the hospital, I'd have to see my men. They must be very confused, and confusion is not good for business.

I clicked on reply.

**Thanks. But I'll see you tomorrow.**

I put down my phone and wrapped myself around Nora.

Closing my eyes determinedly, I drifted off to sleep.



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## **CHAPTER FORTY-ONE**

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## NORA

I struggled awake like a drowning person striving towards the surface, trying to escape from the nightmare that had me in its grip. It tried to grab my leg and pull me back down into the dark depths, but I struggled, kicked and finally got away, coming away with a gasp as if I'd truly been deprived of air.

I sat up, looking around my room for reassurance that I was safe and none of it was real. Then I realized that, *yes*, some of it *was* real, and my stomach dropped. I turned, looking at Alexei, sprawled on his back, his hands under the pillow. I draped myself over him, desperately licking along his neck, trying to distract myself.

He made an inarticulate sound and stirred, stiffening slightly as he felt me atop him before relaxing. "You should be careful, ambushing a man like me like that," he murmured. "Might take it the wrong way and pop your head off."

I huffed in laughter, my breath ghosting on his back and making him break out in gooseflesh. I traced his flesh with my hands, and he shrugged me off with a murmur of, "Tickles."

I licked his back. "Oh, you think that tickles? Just you wait." I dropped my hands and began to tickle his sides. He squirmed and struggled under me. "Resistance is futile," I said in my Mega Mind voice.

Before I knew it, he had me flipped over and was lying on top of me. “Oh yeah? You’re sure?” Then he began to tickle me mercilessly. I squirmed and kicked, struggling uselessly against his superior strength as he held both my hands in one of his.

My thigh brushed against his crotch, and I felt his arousal and stilled, panting up at him with wide eyes. I could see him clearly because of the street light even if everything was greyed out. He reached over and turned the light on. I blinked at the sudden brightness.

“Sorry. I just wanted to see you clearly,” he murmured softly.

“It’s fine. I want to see you too.”

He smiled and so did I. His eyes trailed down my body, pupils dilating with desire. My breasts began rising and falling as I panted, my flimsy pajama top not really providing a barrier to access. His hand landed on my breast and squeezed. I whimpered biting my bottom lip as my nipple hardened.

He watched me, his eyes intent.

“You sure you want this?” he whispered, still kneading my breast.

I remembered his massage the night before, how it made me feel both horny and lethargic, sleepy and needy. I had felt so grateful for his care, for the fact that he asked nothing of me but just to lie there and take it. But now I needed

him to fuck the hell out of me—literally. I needed to be an active participant.

I reached up and pulled him down to me, seizing his mouth. Just snapping and biting, sucking his tongue and digging my nails into his back. I needed him to understand without me having to explain.

He got with the program real fast.

He reached into my pajama top, squeezing and kneading my breasts as he pushed his body against mine, his erection a rod of steel against my thigh. I spread my legs wide and wrapped them around his waist, urging him on. One of his hands left my breast and burrowed into my shorts, searching for my clit. I canted my hips upwards in needy assistance, urging him to press harder as he found it and rubbed at it experimentally. I was already dripping wet, and he groaned into my neck, his hips jerking.

"I don't know if I've ever wanted anyone as much as I want you," he whispered.

That made me dig my nails even harder into his flesh. "Then show me."

He reached for his boxers, pulling them off with one hand and kicking them away before shoving the parting of my shorts out of the way and pushing into me. We moaned simultaneously, pausing to savor the sheer joy of being joined together like this.

He began to thrust slow and deep, groaning along with every thrust like he

lived for this. I was right there with him. His cock seemed to hit every single nerve ending inside me, setting them aflame with a fire that spread out from there to every cell in my body.

I undulated my body, urging him deeper still. I wanted him so deep that I knew he would never leave me. He took both my hands in one of his, shackling them above my head as he drove into me with reckless abandon. I couldn't have asked for more.

He pulled out of me, lifted me up and flipped me over. I didn't know I had a kink for being manhandled until right then. Lifting my ass in the air, he pulled down my shorts and then slid into me, smooth and long until his balls were cradling my entrance.

I gasped, anchoring myself so my head didn't go smashing into the headboard from his hard thrusts, his hands steadying my hips as he did so. I whimpered, my pussy dripping, our flesh pounding together as he showed me just what it meant to be loved thoroughly and completely.

He pushed me down to the side, getting behind me and thrusting into me from behind, my leg in the air. The change in angle was just what I needed to rev me up and have me tensing as the pressure inside me grew unbearable. My clit swelled, and my hunger grew as I reached for something that remained just shy of attainable.

"Please," I gasped, panting hard as his hands used my breasts as anchors, squeezing and kneading as he fucked into me. "Yes, yes *please* don't stop!"

His pace grew both faster and more erratic, his gasping breaths ghosting the skin behind my ear and adding to the sensory overload I was experiencing. I wanted to scream but our walls were not that thick. I put my hand over my mouth to keep the scream inside.

"Oh God, yes!" he moaned, deep baritone, almost vibrating. His words made me shiver in reaction. I pushed back against him, and he reached around, rubbing my clit as he fucked into me. I froze for a moment before my entire body shook and shuddered, the bubble of pressure bursting with sudden intensity and laying me out under a tsunami of ecstasy.

I let it wash me away without resistance, losing touch with reality for a while. When I came back to myself, I was lying on my side, Alexei behind me, both of us panting loudly. He was still nestled inside of me, and I could feel the wetness of his cum, inside me and out, slick on my thighs where our bodies were joined.

He moved back, disengaging from me, and then turned me around and held me close. We breathed in silence, just enjoying the afterglow.

"Was that good for you?" he asked.

I burst into surprised laughter. "Er, I guess?"

He peered incredulously down at me. "You *guess*?"

I grinned up at him, and he saw that I was teasing and scoffed. "A man exerts

himself to bring you maximum pleasure and all he gets on his review is two stars," he mumbled grumpily.

"Aw, poor baby. Tell me what I can do to make it all better," I lilted with faux sympathy.

He crossed his arms playfully. "No."

"How about a kiss?" I matched words to action and kissed his forehead—a little more tenderly than I had intended.

He softened against my lips, holding the back of my head.

I put my arms around his chest and rested my head comfortably on his shoulder with a sigh of contentment. "This is the life."

"What? Squeezing together on your tiny bed trying not to have loud sex so your grandmother doesn't hear us?"

I snorted. "Yeah that."

"Wow, talk about having really low standards."

"This is the high school dream! What are you talking about?"

"Newsflash darling, you're not in high school."

"What? No!" I feigned shock as I lifted my head and gawped at him.

He snorted derisively. "Please, keep your day job. You're not going to be winning any acting Oscars any time soon."

" I fooled you for a month," I said, arrogance flooding my tone.

"Not really. I didn't know you, so I wouldn't know the real versus fake you. So, you just presented a persona to me, and I accepted it."

"Okay... good point." I grew serious, looking him in the eye. "And do you forgive me for my deception?"

"Do you forgive *me* for failing to protect your sister?"

And just like that our blissful moment darkened. "How did you do that?"

"If she hadn't been working at my club, she never would have been put in the posi—"



“But that’s not your fault.” I reached for his hand, squeezing it tightly as I shook my head. “It’s not.”

He nodded. “Well in that case, I have nothing to forgive you for either.”

I smiled, drawing in a contented breath. “You know, this is... unexpected.”

“What is?”

“Lying here with you like this... There was a time I thought you’d kill me if you knew what I was doing.”

“Yeah, well.” He stroked the back of my head. “Life is full of surprises.”

“Yeah... it is.”

He contemplated me thoughtfully, studying me in a way that made me blush. “You know, I think I could love you.”

I blinked up at him and stayed quiet for a moment. A little stunned at his admission.

“I know,” I said, finally.

“Do you?”

“Yeah. Very much so.”

“Huh...” He gathered me close, rubbing my back gently. “Come on, we should try and get some more sleep. There’s a lot to do in the morning.”

I snuggled into him. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

I snorted. “Sure. Let’s go with that.” I let my eyes drift close.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-TWO**

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## ALEXEI

I woke up before Nora in the morning and crept out of bed, being sure to leave her wrapped up and warm in a cocoon of blankets. She made a protesting noise, and I froze, but she did not wake.

As quietly as I could, I took a shower and then got dressed in the sweatpants she'd laundered for me. I tiptoed out of the room, wanting to see her grandmother before she woke up. As expected, Carmen was sitting at the dining table, drinking tea. I joined her, pulling out a chair to sit at the table.

“Good morning,” I said as I sat down.

She looked up and nodded. “Morning. How did she sleep?”

I shrugged. “Fitfully. I think she might rest a bit this morning, which would give us some time to make arrangements for you.”

She peered at me from atop her spectacles. “Are you sure about this?”

I had a feeling she wasn't just asking about the appointments. “Yeah, I am.”

I fished out my phone and made some calls. The head of the cancer department at St. Mark's was a good friend of mine. His brother had been caught up with drug dealers, owing them more than he could repay, and I bailed him out.

Dr. Drake owed me.

He was happy to repay the favor by canceling his early morning golf game to see Carmen.

"What will I tell Nora?" She wrung her hands with worry.

"I'll leave a note for her that I've taken you to the hospital to see the body."

"Right. I suppose that'll work. Let's go right away before I lose my nerve."

I wrote the note and left it on the bedside table. Carmen and I took off in my car to the hospital. The sun was just rising in the horizon, so traffic was fairly light. We arrived by seven a.m. Dr. Drake was waiting for us in his office and ushered us in at once.

"I can wait in the—" I began to say but Carmen grabbed my hand.

"No! Stay. Please. I don't want to be alone."

I sat down next to her in the doctor's chair. Dr. Drake flicked me a curious glance. Obviously, Carmen was not one of my usual companions so I knew he must be wondering how we knew each other.

Still, he was a professional and turned to her at once, giving her his full attention. He took notes as she spoke, telling him how she had been feeling extra tired and attributed it to grief. But then she had a fall, and the bruise just would not heal, so she went to have it looked at. Long story short, they did tests and found the lymphoma, but insurance declined to pay for treatment.

Dr. Drake nodded. No doubt he'd heard these stories before.

I leaned forward. "I will be covering all her bills. Just invoice me."

The oncologist nodded and proceeded to examine Carmen. By the time we were through with examinations, tests and had been scheduled for the next phase, an hour had passed. I checked my phone for messages.

**Omw to you. Meet at the morgue?**

My heart skipped a beat as I checked the time stamp. I heaved a sigh of relief as I saw she'd left no more than ten minutes ago. I turned to Carmen. "We should head to the morgue now. Nora's coming."

I texted Nora back that yeah, she should meet us at the morgue, and we went down in search of Jodie Hunt. Her eyes widened as she saw me, and she rose to her feet.

“Mr. Levin, the body you—” Her eyes fell on Carmen who was behind me, and she fell silent. “Lita... what?” She looked from Nora’s grandmother to me in some puzzlement.

“She would like to see her granddaughter’s body, if you will be so kind.”

“Oh! Well I haven’t dressed her yet. Are you sure...?”

I looked to Carmen. “Do you want to wait?”

She was breathing very hard and looking a little pale. I took her arm and led her to her seat. “Why don’t we wait here for Nora while Ms. Hunt goes to do her thing?”

“Alright,” she said weakly, and I sighed, giving Jodie a significant glance.

She hurried off at once and I went to the coffee station I could see and fixed Carmen a cup of tea. We sat in silence. She sipped her drink while I tapped my finger on the table.

“You’re going to have to tell her sooner or later,” I said.

“I know. Once Dr. Drake gives me a prognosis, I will.”

“That might not be a for a week yet.”

“Just a week. Long enough for us to bury Celia properly.”

That shut me up. Just in time too, because the door burst open, and Nora came hurrying in.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“Jodie is preparing the body,” I said.

She nodded, taking a seat as well. “Well I guess we wait then.”

“Yes, we do.” I studied her critically. Her dark hair was wet with sweat and her face was flushed. She was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt which looked as if she’d flung them on in a hurry.

“Are *you* alright?” I asked.

She blinked in my direction, smoothing her hair back as her cheeks pinkened. “Yes, I’m fine. I just didn’t want to be alone.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I thought we’d be back before you woke up.”



“It’s fine. Not your fault. I’m just being stupid anyway.”

I reached out and took hold of her hand, cradling it in mine. “You’re allowed to need me.”

She nodded, her lips pursed, as her eyes reddened. “Thanks,” she rasped and looked away. She held my hand, and I squeezed it gently, trying to be reassuring. I was surprised that Carmen remained silent. I thought she’d chime in with a word of reassurance.

Jodie entered the room. “You can see her now. Follow me.”

We all three stood up, and Carmen raised her hand. “I would like some time alone with my granddaughter, please.”

I pulled Nora back down onto the chair, sitting with her. “We’ll wait here,” I said.

Nora sighed, shaking her head as she watched her grandmother’s retreating back. “God, she looks so frail. I feel so helpless right now.”

“Don’t. You’re doing everything you can and I’m here to pick up the slack.”

“You have an organization to run and here I am clinging to you like some

kid. It's embarrassing."

"It's natural is what it is. Stop beating yourself up, please."

She huffed. "If you insist."

"I do."

I rubbed soothing circles into her back, and she leaned into my touch. It felt good to take care of someone for once. I felt as if I spent so much time destroying lives and not enough building them.

I didn't know how or what I was going to do, but it occurred to me that I was lacking balance. I wanted more love, more family.

I nodded to myself. Yeah the business was great, and I was a hundred percent committed to it, but there was more to life than work. I killed my father to set us all free so, I was going to use my freedom to live.

The first thing I needed to do, that we *both* needed to do, was get some therapy.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-THREE**

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## NORA

*F*ive months later

“Some days it still doesn’t feel real. I wake up thinking it was all just a really bad dream, but then I remember that it wasn’t.” I choked, wiping away a tear.

Five months after Celia’s death, it still hit me sometimes like a sledgehammer.

My therapist leaned forward. “And what do you do then?”

“Like you taught me. I take a moment to center myself. I do the breathing exercises. Sometimes, if it’s too bad, I smoke a blunt.” I smiled crookedly at her. Since she’s the one who gave me the prescription, she couldn’t exactly condemn my escapism.

She nodded. “And then what?”

“Well, it’s still hard, but I get out of bed, and I get moving. Since Alexei won’t let me ride the bike to work anymore, I ride it around the neighborhood. There are perks to living in a gated community with its bike lanes and picturesque scenery.”

Dr. Kelly tilted her head to the side like a curious bird. “You say that with such sarcasm.”

“I’m still not used to it. The transition from living in a run-down Brooklyn neighborhood to the ‘burbs. It’ll take a minute.”

“Do you hate it?”

“No. Don’t get me wrong. When I say ‘get used to’ I guess I mean, do I deserve it? After everything, is it that easy? Get the right guy and the Cinderella fairytale comes to life?” I shook my head, “It’s unreal.”

“What would make it real for you?”

“I don’t know. I mean... my grandmother is alive because of this man, you know? I can’t exactly wish we’d never met.”

“But you associate him with a time of your life where there was great strife.”

“Yeah.” I bit my lip, thinking about it. “I guess.”

“And you’re waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

I gave her a tired smile. “Hypervigilance. I know.”

“You know it’s perfectly natural, right? You’re expecting so much of yourself, but you don’t acknowledge what you’ve gained.”

I laughed cynically. “What gains? A better wardrobe?”

She sighed in that long, suffering way she had that made me feel like an unruly teenager. “No, not your wardrobe. When you came to me, you could barely speak your sister’s name. You were sure your grandmother would die just about any day, and you clung to Alexei like a life raft. Now look at you, talking about your living situation with levity.”

“We live in a bungalow on three acres of land. My grandmother has her own,” I raised my hands to make air quotes, “‘cottage in the compound,’ which is actually a two bedroom, two bath house. She has her own butler, maid, *and* driver. Also a live-in nurse as she recuperates. If I ever broke up with Alexei, she would kill me.”

“*Do* you want to break up with him?”

“No, of course not. I love him.”

“Well then?”

I sighed.

It was difficult to really lay out the issues, seeing as I couldn't talk about the drug dealing, the gun running, or the murder and mayhem. That hadn't stopped. We lived in a compound because we had to move out of the apartment after a shootout. The Serbians came looking for revenge for Anto Radić in spite of the fact that *he* orchestrated the shootout that killed him.

So we moved into the compound, and not only did my grandmother have a cottage but her 'butler' was a bodyguard, and the houses were surrounded by homes owned by Alexei's lieutenants. It wasn't possible for outsiders to drive down the street uninvited. It was a fortress.

A fortress where Bratva families might ride their bikes safely in the street. Now these families looked to me as some sort of matriarch, and I didn't know if I was equal to the task.

I wanted to be, though.

"I guess sometimes I just feel intimidated by it all. This is my first real relationship, I think. My parents were such poor role models. I don't know if I know how to do this."

"Well, you're here, in therapy, working on all of this. It's a step in the right direction."

"Yeah, I guess it is." I smiled at her because it was the thing to do.

She leaned back. “Tell me about work.”

“What about it?”

“How is it going? Are you getting along with your supervisor?”

“Well, yes. At least she’s got nothing to complain about. I arrive on time. I do my work to the best of my ability.”

“Has she forgiven you for dating a trustee yet?”

I snorted. “I doubt she’ll ever forgive me for that. I guess she thinks I played her in some way. I don’t know.”

“But how is the work environment? Prospects for promotion? What are you looking for there?”

“I just want to be the best nurse I can be. I’m looking to transfer to oncology anyway, so I’ll be out from under her soon. I think we’ll both be happier.”

“Okay. Why oncology?”

I just looked at her and smiled. “Kinda obvious, isn’t it?”



“You want to feel you have some control over your grandmother’s care?”

“Partly. But also just sitting with her there and realizing how much of an impact the nurses have on the patients’ lives gives me a new motivation, and I just want to do my part.”

“That’s very noble of you.”

I shrugged uncomfortably. “Not really. After Celia’s death and the ‘survivor’s guilt’, I just feel like I need to justify my existence.”

Dr. Kelly raised her eyebrows. “It’s very insightful of you to recognize the source of your motivation.”

“Well, I’m not *always* an idiot.”

She smiled just as the little timer dinged, and I could’ve sworn she looked relieved. “Well, Nora. I guess I will see you next time.”

I nodded, getting to my feet. “Yes, see you then.”

I walked out, closing the door behind me as I headed to the elevator. I dug out my phone and shot Alexei a text.

**I'm done with mine. How was yours?**

I was down in the lobby when he replied.

**It went great!!!**

I snorted, having learned to read his sarcasm by now.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR**

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## ALEXEI

“*I* don’t understand where people get the time,” I complained grumpily.

Dr. Kaur grinned at me. “Time for what?”

“Work, date, eat. I feel like I’m constantly running behind on something.”

“And you think you’re alone in that?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Dr. Kaur was in his late forties, liked to dress like a hippie, had a British accent, five tattoos on his right arm, and a doctorate in human psychology. I found him on the internet. “I don’t care about other people’s lives, only my own.”

“Yes you’ve made that very clear. Mr. Levin, let’s cut to the chase. Where exactly are you feeling as if your needs are not being met?”

I cocked an eyebrow at him. “I just said. My work life balance is off.”

“Alright.” He leaned forward, steepling ringed fingers. “Let’s break that

down. How's the love life?"

"Fantastic."

"Now that you've gotten the sarcasm out of the way, how's your love life?"

I sighed, leaning back against the sofa, and thought about it. "The sex is out of this world... when we have time for it. I like her, she's my friend. We don't have enough time to just... be, you know?"

"Because of work?"

"Yeah."

"Have you thought about delegating?"

I snorted. I had help—Katya was shaping up to be a great underboss. But when you're the head of The Bratva, there were only so many things you could get other people to do for you. People are very distrustful out there, so you have to pull your weight.

"I do delegate, but some things only I can do."

"How does your girlfriend feel about all this?"

I shrugged. “She’s cool. Her job is also demanding, and her grandmother occupies her time as well. She understands.”

“So she’s not pressuring you to spend more time with her?”

“No, she isn’t. *I* want to.”

“Well perhaps you can find ways to combine work and play.”

I quirked an eyebrow. Dr. Kaur might be on to something with that. I nodded. “I’ll think on it.”

He nodded and smiled. I knew just from the sharkish nature of it that he was about to ask me a question I didn’t want to answer.

“Let’s double back a bit to your father. You lost him suddenly and were thrust into a leadership role in your family, isn’t that right?”

I didn’t lose him. I killed him.

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“And you never really had a chance to grieve for him.”

“He was a bad man.”

“He was your father.”

I sighed in frustration. “Why is so much importance imbued into that word? Why can’t we just let it be what it is. Not all fathers are deserving of the name.”

“That might be true,” he nodded, “yet deserving or not, we imbue them with a mystical kind of power, do we not? Forever craving their approval?”

I looked away. “Not forever.”

At the end there, when he was lashing out at any—imagined—offence and just breaking things and people, I was too mad at him to want anything from him but for him to go away. When he pushed my mother down the stairs, it was the last straw. I wondered if that was safe enough to tell the good doctor.

“My father was cruel and abusive. I hated him.”

He nodded. “And so you were happy to step in his shoes?”

I drew in a breath. “No. I was terrified. But there was nobody else.”

“Your sister and your mother needed you.”

“Yes.”

“Who did *you* need?”

I looked at him in surprise and almost laughed. “What?”

“Who did *you* need, Alexei?”

I looked away. Who had I needed? I needed my mother. But she took the fall for me. She took the punishment so that I could keep the family together. There was no room for what I *needed*. For what *anyone* needed.

I sighed and didn’t say a word.

“This is your assignment for the weekend, Alexei. Find out what—or who—you need and how you are going to go about getting that for yourself.”

“All that in one weekend?” I asked in mock-disbelief.



Dr. Kaur laughed. “Yes, darling. One weekend.”

I gave a very forced sigh, crossing my arms. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Well, for one thing, it would take a lot of reflection, self-examination, and willingness to face some painful truths. Are you ready?”

I shrugged. “Eh, piece of cake.”

Dr. Kaur grinned. “Good. I’ll see you next week.”

I got to my feet with a sigh. “Yeah, okay. If you say so.”

I walked out and joined Vlad where he was waiting in the corridor. He led the way to the elevator and pressed the button, one hand on his gun. Vlad did not approve of my therapy sessions. He was nervous about me going to the same place every week despite the fact that I varied the days.

Too many unknowns.

His nerves comforted me. It told me he had a 360-degree awareness of his environment. We went downstairs and my phone buzzed. I dug it out to see Nora’s name. She was through with her session as well. I knew she’d meet us in the parking lot. She preferred not to have a bodyguard following her around, but she was fine with a tracker in the chain around her neck that she

never took off. I could trace her right on my phone, so I knew she was already in the lobby of the next building.

Still, she tried to sneak up on me, coming up behind me and jumping on my back. “How many times have I told you you’re playing with fire sneaking up on me like that? The day I break your neck you’ll have no one but yourself to blame.”

She giggled. “Sure, big guy. I’m so scared.”

I huffed, walking over to the passenger door, and letting her get down as I opened the back door for her. Vlad got in the driver’s seat, and I got in the back with her.

“Good session?” I asked.

“Great.” She gave me the two thumbs up. We both laughed.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE**

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## NORA

*M*y grandmother's cancer was under control, but she still had chemo every week. Surprisingly enough, she hadn't lost her hair, but she had the most debilitating nausea and sometimes she was just too tired to be awake yet in too much pain to sleep. I would sit with her in the rocking chair by her bed, while she lay down with her eyes closed, reading a book out loud because it distracted her from the pain. It was a scary time, but Dr. Drake was very encouraging, letting me know she was doing very well, and the chemo was making a difference.

I sat with her as she prayed, too much of a nonbeliever to join her but respectful enough to bow my head. I would have liked to know where God was when Celia died, but no one could tell me. They just said, 'have faith' as if it was that easy.

Alexei dropped me off at home and then went to handle a situation that had arisen involving a rival gang attacking one of their people. He said you had to nip that sort of thing in the bud otherwise it could escalate.

I sat with my Lita until she truly fell asleep and then crossed over to the house, skirting the swimming pool and entering through the glass doors that opened out to them. The dogs came running to me, hoping for treats but I knew they'd already been fed.

I rubbed their heads and sent them off. They were meant to be guarding the premises not fraternizing with the residents. Still, they rubbed themselves

against my legs, and my spirit was too weak to send them on their way. I went to the kitchen and got them some dog treats. “Don’t tell Alexei, alright?”

They barked their thank yous and took off happily. I climbed the stairs slowly to our room, resigned to another night going to bed alone, but to my surprise, the light was on. I paused, cautious, before easing the door open as silently as possible. Alexei was sitting in bed, in nothing but his boxers. He looked up and smiled at me, putting his iPad aside.

“Hey, how’s Carmen?”

“Asleep. I didn’t hear the car.”

“Hm.” He shrugged holding out his arms.

I walked up to him and sat on the edge of the bed. “Actually, I feel filthy. I was gonna get a hot soak in the tub and listen to some music.”

He laughed. “Sounds fun. Do you want some company?”

I smiled. “Always.”

He pushed his legs off the bed. “I’ll get the wine and candles, you get the bath salts, and music set up.”

“A man after my own heart,” I called after him.

He waved a hand in the air without turning around. “Yeah, yeah.”

I stood up smiling and crossed over to the bathroom. There was a sunken bath in the middle of the floor, octagonal in shape and big enough that Alexei could stretch out his legs. In my opinion, it was criminally underutilized.

I switched on the water, making sure that it was just hot enough not to peel off the skin. If Alexei wanted to join me, he’d have to tolerate my water temperatures. I poured in some lavender bath salts as liberally as possible before crossing over to my phone. It was sitting on the stool in the corner next to the potted plant. I chose my playlist.

Alexei walked in, carrying a tray of wine, cheese, wine glasses and candles. He set the tray down on the flat edge of the bath. Next, he set the candles in their holders before lighting them, bathing the room in a cozy glow. I shed my clothes fast and threw them in the laundry basket and then looked to him expectantly. He pulled off his boxers before reaching down to pour the wine.

I stepped in the tub with a sigh, sinking into the hot water and letting it envelope me in a warm hug. Alexei handed me a glass of wine before stepping into the tub himself. He sat down before gesturing for me to settle in front of him. I moved between his legs, laying my head on his chest with a sigh of contentment. “Mmh, I’ve missed you,” I said softly.

“I’m right here.”

“I know. I just mean...” I didn’t really have the words.

“I know. And I’ve missed you too. Things have been crazy the last five months. Lots of upheaval. But it’ll calm down and we’ll have more time for each other.” He ran a hand up and down my arm.

“How was your thing tonight? Did you handle it okay?”

“Yeah. Turned out it was some personal beef over a girl,” he said derisively. “I gave them the sharp side of my tongue for wasting my time. One more incident and we’re dropping them. We want to work with professionals.”

I huffed in amusement. “Professional drug dealers.”

“Exactly.” He took a sip of his wine and placed his head back on the edge of the bath. “People who can handle their own shit, you know?”

I nodded. “I know.”

We sat in silence, just listening to the crooning voice from the speakers and drinking wine. I closed my eyes, just savoring his presence. There was no need to talk. No need to do a single thing. Just being with each other was everything.

Outside in the compound, a dog barked. Further away, I could hear the dull beat of loud music over our own, creating its own rhythm with the crickets and cicadas.

The house settled around us, the wooden floors creaking as if ghosts were walking along the corridors. The size of the place had really taken some getting used to. Five bedrooms and three bathrooms, a large kitchen and living room, game room, and in the basement, a home theater.

I finished my wine and held my glass out for Alexei to refill. He did, picking up a slice of cheese and placing it in my mouth. “Mmh,” I said, chewing and swallowing and sipping my wine. He moved his leg, draping it over both of mine so that I was tangled with his body. I squirmed a bit, putting down my wine and turning to face him with a smile.

“Would you wash my hair?” I asked.

“Of course. But wouldn’t you prefer to do that in the shower?”

“Hm, don’t want to leave this warm cocoon.”

I submerged myself in the water, effectively wetting my hair. I felt his hands in it, his fingers threading through it and setting jolts of feeling from my scalp all the way down to my toes.

He massaged my scalp, and I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling. I leaned against him, feeling his erection against my back. We both ignored it for



now, just savoring the water, the atmosphere, and the music.

He sighed. “I gotta get out to get the shampoo.”

“Okay...” I murmured without moving.

He snorted, pushing me away so he could stand up and get out of the water. He crossed to the shelf inside the shower stall and collected shampoo, conditioner, and brush.

He returned with his arms full, placing the items on the edge of the bathtub before getting back in. He gathered me back into his arms before pouring some shampoo liberally on his palm. He rubbed it on my head, and massaged it in. I closed my eyes and let my shoulders relax. Alexei was humming under his breath.

He scratched my scalp and I shivered. “You’re spoiling me. I’ll never want to go back to my stylist.”

He snorted. “What stylist?”

“I have a stylist!” I squeaked in protest.

“Uh huh, sure.” He huffed a laugh.

I pouted, folding my arms over my breasts. “Are you saying I that I have no game?”

“I’m saying that your style is very *whatever is closest.*”

I screamed, “How dare you?”

He laughed. “I love your style though—it suits you.”

I pretended to ponder his words. “Hm, alright, I’ll take it.”

He kissed my cheek. “Thank you, darling.”

I turned my head so that I could press my lips against his. We kissed softly, lips moving against each other, his hands casually around my waist. He pulled back.

“I need to condition your hair.”

With a smile, I turned back to face away from him and let him rinse off the last of the soap and put in conditioner and then piled my hair on top of my head. I straddled him, putting my hands on his shoulders, and smiling at him.

“Mhm, my hair feels good.”

He smiled back and kissed my cheek. “Come on, let’s go and rinse off in the shower,” he said, lifting me off his lap.

We let out the bath water before walking into the shower and rinsing off the conditioner, bath salts and everything else. Alexei took some shower gel and put it on a loofah before proceeding to trace circles around my breasts in ever decreasing rings until he was just tweaking my nipples. I arched my back a bit, so my bosom was right in his face. His erection brushed against my thighs but we both let that be for now.

He turned me around, wrapping his arms around my waist, and pulling me against him. The water poured down on us, and he rubbed the loofah against my stomach and then lower and lower, until he was rubbing my pussy. I spread my legs a bit to give him room to work but he went back to washing my back, leaving me empty and wanting.

He was very dedicated to getting every inch of my back clean before rubbing the loofah on my buttocks. I bent forward a bit, shaking my ass a bit. His finger entered my crack for a brief moment, but he avoided touching me intimately.

He bent down so he could wash my legs, paying special attention to the inside of my thighs. I bit my lip so I wouldn’t moan in need, my hips were jerking of their own accord... and not all my wetness was attributable to the shower.

He stood up, massaging my neck with his soapy hands before cupping my breasts and rubbing the underside back and forth. He stepped back adding

more shower gel to the loofah to wash himself. I grabbed the cloth from him. I wasn't about to miss the opportunity to drive him as crazy as he drove me.

I circled his rock hardness, really making sure to clean the head of his dick before rubbing up and down his length. He threw back his head and groaned, jerking his hips at me. I pressed myself flat against him.

“Want you so bad,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he nodded, eager. “Me too. I don't know if I want to fuck you now, though. The anticipation is killing me, but it's so delicious.”

I huffed in amusement. “Yeah, you're almost afraid the culmination won't live up to it.”

He kissed my neck. “Even if it does... every time.” He kissed me long and deep. “In fact, it exceeds all expectations.”

“You say the sweetest things.” I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing along his collarbone, biting his neck before latching onto his lips and kissing the taste of wine from his mouth. We kissed lazily as the water beat down on us, neither of us in a hurry to do more... yet.

I broke off the kiss and eased him around. “Haven't washed your delicious back or your ass. Must have you prepared, mustn't I?”

“Prepared for what?” He peered back at me with mock-fear in his eyes.

“Hell if I know. You tell me.” I squeezed his ass cheeks, leaning against him to rest my cheek against his shoulder blade and whisper, “But I trust you. Whatever you throw at me.”

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# EPILOGUE

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## ALEXEI

This was the life. Standing in the shower getting teased by my girlfriend about being a bottom. It was exactly what I needed after the day I had.

Dr. Kaur's words hadn't stopped ringing in my mind.

*What do I need?*

Having Nora rub my back slowly with the loofah, taking every opportunity to feel me up like a horny teenager, rubbing carefully at my balls with unprecedented dedication just washed away the stress of the day.

Talking down two young men from shooting each other over a girl had done nothing to cool my temper, even if Katya was inclined to laugh. The lady in question was a street walker in Dumbo, and she didn't even want either of those boys. As a thanks to me for deescalating that nonsense, she told me something that had been bothering me for a while.

She had a lot of clients who ran with the Serbians apparently, and she told me that the busted meetup that had turned into a bloodbath was actually planned as a takeover. The Serbs were supposed to kill me, and then Kirill would have taken over. The news had me hoping that Kirill's corpse was rotting really slowly at the bottom of the sea, and that his skull was being used by

crabs to lay eggs in.

Of course, I offered her a job at my club, if she was so inclined. It never hurts to have an extra pair of eyes around.

In any case, I was able to get home earlier than usual.

I turned around in the shower and took Nora by the shoulders, looking into her eyes. I smiled. "It's nice being here with you. I want to do more of this."

She smiled, wrapping her arms around my back. "Me too."

I looked into her eyes, searching them for I knew not what, before I leaned down and kissed her. My wet hair fell forward, slapping against my cheek and making me jerk in an effort to flip it off. Our lips parted and we looked at each other before bursting into laughter.

"This isn't going the way I envisioned," I said.

"What? It's not the perfect movie sequence you had in your head?"

I shook my head solemnly. "No, it is not."

She grinned. "Well, I love it. It's perfect because it's us."



Something in me tightened and quickened, and I grabbed her ass, lifting her up and slamming her against the shower wall. I latched onto her lips, kissing her frantically as she wrapped her legs around my waist, her hands holding onto my shoulders for dear life.

The kiss quickly went from frantic to desperate and she fumbled between us, searching for my dick. “Put it in me,” she mumbled against my mouth, and I pushed upward and forward to find her entrance. It took two swipes past it before I was able to sink slowly into her.

She moaned long and hard as I drove myself home. We both panted with the feeling, the effort and just this sense of completion. I began fucking into her, holding her legs open with my arms, and watching myself disappear into her body over and over again.

“Nora,” I groaned, withdrawing from her and letting her down. I whirled her around and bent her over. “Let me in deeper, baby. Please. I need you.”

She widened her legs, backing her ass up against me and I slid into her again. We undulated together under the spray of the shower. Nora was loud when there was no one around to hear. Though with the open window, all bets were off.

She screamed and moaned my name, urging me on with the filthiest words that she never uttered anywhere except when we had sex.

“Oh God, yes! Fuck me harder, please! Yes, right there. God yes, right there!

*Fuck, I love it so much. Love you so much.*” She began to whimper and moan with how much she liked it, almost crying with pleasure. “Yes baby, yes, don’t stop.”

Every word was a gift, pushing me to higher heights of depravity and passion. I reached around, rubbing her clit hard as her legs shook with the double stimulation. I pulled out of her, and she screamed in frustration.

“Why the fuck did you do that?”

I switched off the shower. “I don’t wanna finish here. Come with me.”

I pulled her to the bed. I took her legs and put them on my shoulders before holding the base of my shaft and guiding myself back into her.

“Yeah, just like that...”

I folded her legs, fucking her as deep as it was possible to go.

She screamed and shouted, hands clutching the bedclothes desperately.

“Alexei!” she yelled, bending her back awkwardly as she tried to lift her head before throwing it back and panting like a dog.

“Yeah, take it. Take it like the good girl you are. You love when I dick you down like this, don’t you?”

She nodded frantically, and I leaned forward, resting my weight on her thighs and put my hand around her throat. I leaned to the side, so I could whisper in her ear, “I can’t hear you.”

“Yes!” she yelled. “Yes. I love it.”

I widened my knees, the better to balance as I sunk as deep into her as our bodies would let us. My hand tightened on her neck even as my strokes grew faster and harder, more erratic. She choked, face flushing a bright red as her hands scrabbled along the duvet.

She didn’t stop me though.

Her eyes met mine, wide and wet and frantic with desire. I was about to lose it and I didn’t want to do that before I made her come. I bent down and nipped at her ear before blowing into it. She squirmed under me, bucking, jerking like crazy. I fucked her harder, our flesh heating with the friction.

My hand squeezed tighter at her neck and just as her eyes began to roll back and flutter closed, I let go. She gasped, wheezing a bit, and jerked before her body began shuddering and shaking. I felt the wetness coat my dick as she came. Her flesh clamped onto mine, kneading hard and begging for my seed.

I spilled into her, letting her milk me of every drop, my legs shaking, and my

eyes closed in rictus of effort. I collapsed on the bed beside her, panting hard and feeling boneless and replete.

*What I need.*

Slowly, our heaving breaths quieted down, and we turned simultaneously to face each other and then both laughed.

“We’re a hopeless pair,” I said grinning.

She giggled. “Everyone’s good at something.”

“And our superpower is being hopeless?”

“Exactly.”

I lay on my back. “I’ll take it.”

She turned on her side so that she was facing me, and she laid her head on my shoulder. “Was that good for you?” she whispered.

I put an arm around her shoulders, caressing her flesh and drawing patterns on her skin. “More than anything. You’re... always what I need.”

“Good.” She ran a hand over my stomach. “Have I told you that I love you, yet?”

I grinned. “Only during sex.”

She pouted at me. “Well, that’s better than you. You’ve never said it at all.”

I looked at her in some surprise. “Haven’t I? That’s an oversight. I guess I figured you knew.”

“I hoped.”

“Well, stop hoping and start knowing.”

She smiled, settling even more comfortably on my shoulder. “Dr. Kelly was telling me about the progress I’ve made in the last six months. It sounded so unreal coming out of her mouth but when I think about it, I realize that it’s true. I *have* made progress, and a lot of that is down to having you in my life. So, thank you.”

I turned to stare at her incredulously. “Me? What have *I* done? I’m barely here, I’m always working... worst boyfriend ever.”

She giggled. “Yeah. Well, what you see as your worst performance, for me is the best I ever had.”

“That’s just sad.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is.”

I looked into her eyes. “I’ll try to do better in the future.”

“I’ll try to expect more from you.” She grinned cheekily.

“You should. By now you should be demanding I make you mine for good.”

She laughed. “Really?”

“Yeah. Anyone else would.”

She frowned. “Is this your roundabout way of asking me to marry you?”

“Would you say yes if I did?”

“Ask and I’ll think about it,” she said.

I huffed in frustration. “So stubborn. You’re so stubborn.”

She wiggled her eyebrows playfully and giggled before she settled onto my shoulder again.

We lay in silence for a while.

“Well?” she said. “Aren’t you gonna ask?”

“Not now. You’re already totally expecting me to.”

She smirked. “And we can’t have that?”

“No, we cannot.”

“Well, alright then. I’m gonna crash. You’ve wore me out, Levin.”

“I aim to please.”

“Goodnight.” She kissed my cheek.

“Goodnight baby.”

## NORA

I woke up to find that Alexei wasn't in bed. My heart sank with disappointment. I'd been hoping that seeing as it was a Saturday, we might be able to lounge about. But it seemed he'd already left.

My body throbbed as I squirmed on the bed, awakening me to a most pleasant ache in my most intimate of places. Last night's shenanigans were brought to mind, and I froze.

*Did he really ask me to marry him?*

I must have dreamed that. I crawled out of bed slowly and slipped on my robe and slippers before making my way downstairs to find some breakfast.

There were delicious smells emanating from the kitchen and I quickened my step. I turned the corner to see Alexei sitting on the kitchen island, reading an honest to god newspaper. I came up to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Good morning. Fancy meeting you here."

He turned and kissed me on the lips. "Yeah, fancy that. It's not like I live here or anything."

I pointed to the newspaper. "What are you reading?"



“Oh, nothing much. Just some gossip. You know, a famous couple got engaged, that kinda thing.”

I sat down and poured myself a cup of tea. “Oh yeah? Which celebrity?”

He handed me the paper. “Read for yourself.”

I took the paper and peered at it curiously. It wasn't any publication I'd ever seen. “The Wuthering Heights Times? What a strange name for a paper. Where's the article?”

He pointed to the middle of the page. “Right there.”

I read the text and then froze.

*Nora Carmelita Young, will you marry me?*

I stared at the words, blinking rapidly as if they might disappear if I closed my eyes for too long. I looked at Alexei in shock. He bent down and pretended to pick something up from the floor and then held out his hand like he was handing it to me. “Here's your jaw. You dropped it on the floor, and you might need it for eating breakfast.”

I snorted, hitting his hand and then my eyes went back to the text. “Are you serious?”

“Would I have the cook make all your favorite dishes and then have my assistant print me an entire newspaper because I was joking?”

“Well...” I shrugged. “You *are* surprisingly goofy at times.”

He stood up from his chair and got down on one knee, a ring box open in his palm, displaying a very clear diamond in a platinum ring.

“I repeat, Nora Carmelita Young, will you marry—”

“Yes!” I exclaimed and then blushed in embarrassment. I *could* have waited for him to finish the sentence. He got up and extracted the ring from the box, slipping it onto my finger.

“That’s good because the ring is non-refundable.”

I just shook my head lost for words, for once. He took me by the shoulders. “Shall we seal this with a kiss?”

I nodded dumbly.

He swooped down, taking my bottom lip gently between his teeth and pulling it before licking along it and then pressing his lips to mine. As our lips moved against each other, the tips of our tongues touched. I grabbed his shirt and

pushed us closer together by standing on tiptoe. He put his arms around my shoulders, pulling me into him and opening his mouth to allow our tongues to play together—dance together in *joy*.

I pulled back, looking into his hazel eyes in disbelief and shook my head. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Did what exactly?”

“All of it. Proposed. The newspaper...” I brought my hand close to my face the better to stare at it. “The ring... everything.”

“Well, I told you I’d come at you when you were least expecting.”

I grinned. “My very own ninja.”

“You better believe it, baby.”

He swooped down and kissed me again. My mind was still whirling.

My Lita was going to freak!

I pulled back from him, looking intently into his eyes. “Tell me again.”

“Tell you what?” he grinned.

“You know what. Tell me so I know it’s real.”

He sighed, closing his eyes, and then opening them again. Suddenly he didn’t need to say a word because everything he felt was reflected right there.

“Nora? Ever since you exploded into my life, I’ve felt a pull towards you that I’ve experienced with no one else. You don’t complete me. You make me want to complete myself so that I can be a better partner for you. I want us to have a happily ever after, because I love you.”

I smiled, wide and happy. “I love you.”

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## EXTENDED EPILOGUE

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*E*ager to learn what the future holds for **Nora and Alexei**?

Then you may enjoy this **extended epilogue**.

Simply [tap here](#) and you can read it for **FREE**, or use this **link**:

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## AFTERWORD

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Thank you for reading my novel, **Dancing for the Devil**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE?](#)

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

Please use the link below:

<https://www.fayepierce.com/diy4>

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## DO YOU WANT MORE ROMANCE?

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Turn on the next page to read the first chapters of my latest best-selling novel: **Unholy Obsession**

As the daughter of a prominent mafia family, I never expected to be the one kidnapped. But when Marco took me, I realized how little I knew about my family's dangerous world. Despite us playing a deadly game of cat and mouse, I couldn't resist the allure of this complex man, even as I plotted my escape from his clutches. But, while his touch revealed secrets and fueled my desire to escape, I was falling for him...

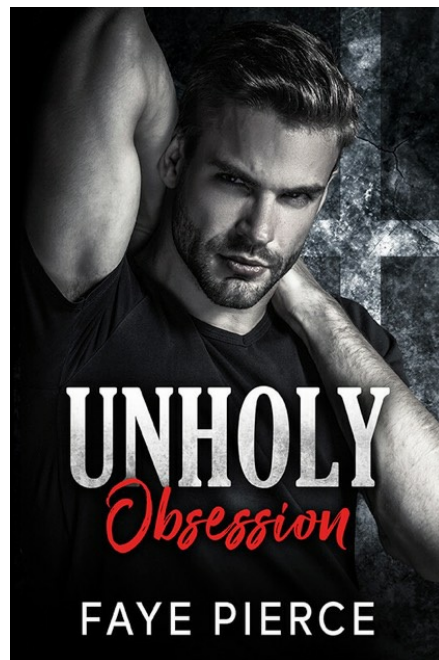




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# UNHOLY OBSESSION

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*L*ori

I'm sitting in the middle of Central Park and all I can focus on is how the sun hits the trees just right. Tall skyscrapers line the backdrop, although I cannot see the details. In fact, I can't see any details—of anything. I'm lucky that I can even see at all. Light, blurred objects, color, movement, sometimes even a hairstyle on someone's head. That's about all my vision can handle thanks to Stargardt's disease.

I developed it when I was twelve years old, and remember the moment to this day. I was sitting at my family's dinner table, a long handmade oak piece adorned with crystal plateware, when the crystal suddenly blurred and stopped glistening. My brothers' faces faded into shadows, and the pangs of fear in the pit of my stomach caused me to spill my gazpacho all over my white sundress.

I slip my bag off my shoulder and set it down on the bench behind me, my head tilting up towards the sun. It is moments like this when I wish I had normal vision. I wish I could count the clouds in the sky, memorize every little detail of the buildings in the skyline. I wish I could look at the couples I

hear laughing around me. Perhaps then, I wouldn't feel this intense loneliness, perhaps then, all the years of being hidden away would've been worth it, because I could revel in a moment like this with eyes wide open.

Since birth, my life has been threatened and I have been in danger, however the day that I lost my vision, was the day that the Saracino's would have a secret child. See, my father is a very important man. Graziano Saracino is perhaps one of the most feared and richest men in New York City, perhaps in the nation, the leader, and head boss of the Saracino Mafia. So ever since I lost my vision, I have been tucked away, hidden from the danger that is my family's reality. My father bought me an apartment on the other side of Manhattan, my brothers and him taking turns watching me. Thus, I have been living a relatively normal life, despite the blindness and all.

I pull my camera from my bag and remove my sunglasses. When being in the sun or harsh light, I must wear sunglasses, sometimes even a hat.

I fiddle with the lens and line up the perfect shot, capturing the perfect view of Central Park in the middle of the day, telling a sweet story of this amazing city.

I know what you're thinking, a blind girl that takes pictures? And yes, that does sound bizarre, but I don't just take pictures, I throw myself into them. I've made them a career. I've turned my shadowed haze into colorful storylines and now, I get to tell those stories for a living. Iris Media is one of the top marketing firms in the city and thankfully after I graduated college, they took one look at my portfolio and hired me on the spot, without being aware of my disease.

Now I really know what you're thinking, why does the daughter of one of the

richest and most powerful men in the city even have a job? Well, my answer is simple—I want to.

I don't want to live in my family's dangerous world. Although I love them more than words, and sometimes even more than photography, I refuse to let money be an additional reason for my lifelong isolation. It's dirty money, blood money, money that has kept me away from the brutality of the Saracino world, money that has allowed me to build a safe space for myself. A space where I can live a quiet life, taking pictures and hosting dinner parties with my friends, maybe even allow me to have a partner and someday, a family. A normal, happy and safe family.

As soon as I take the picture, a series of loud noises fill the air. I jump and clutch my camera, knowing all too well that the sounds were gunshots. Since my hearing is heightened due to relying on it for so long, I can almost tell where they are coming from, and that immediately triggers my flight response. They were close by and so is my father's office. Something in my gut tells me it's not good, that it's either him or one of my four brothers, so I pack my camera, slide on my sunglasses and make a beeline for the subway. Thankfully, I've memorized all the times of transit since this city doesn't cater too well for blind people. I know that the next link to my apartment is in five minutes, so I need to book it.

I run through Central Park, rushing onto the sidewalk and waiting for the crosswalk guard to signal that it's okay to pass. When I get to the subway stairs, I run until my lungs are squeezing inside of my chest, my thighs practically chaffing from brushing together beneath my skirt. When I count my steps and stop at my designated spot in the terminal, I wait and listen for the train. It comes, like clockwork and I step inside as soon as the door opens, sliding in my headphones as I tell my phone to call my oldest brother, Carmelo. He answers on the first ring, like always.

“Where are you right now?” I gasp, my voice thick with anxiety.

“Woah, kid, calm down. Are you okay?” he asks, the calm and deep baritone of his voice soothing some of my worry.

“Are... are *you* okay? I was just working in Central Park and heard gunshots. Where’s papa?” I ask, grabbing a pole and hanging tight as the subway takes off.

“Relax, Lori. Dad’s fine. Not every gunshot is due to or intended for the family. You forget this city is filled with thugs and psychopaths,” he chuckles, but I don’t laugh. My hand is sweaty as it grips the pole.

“You forget that the family is *also* composed of thugs and psychopaths.” I hiss, not in the mood for his humor today.

He sighs. “This is true. Look, Dad and I are fine—”

“What about Armone, Amelio and Claudio?”

“They’re here with me. Seriously, little one, you need to relax. You’re gonna turn gray at the ripe age of twenty-two.” He says and I sigh, thanking God or whoever resides in the sky for keeping my brothers and father safe just one more day.

“Look, we were planning on coming over to the apartment for dinner tonight.

Dad is going to Jersey for some... business and the boys and I are craving your Cavatelli.”

If there’s one thing that’s true about living in a house full of boys, it’s that they eat. A lot.

I had to learn how to cook at a young age because of this. My mom died when I was a toddler so if the nanny was off duty, somebody had to learn their way around the kitchen and that was me. Which is fine, I love to cook. With my loss of vision, I had to learn how to chop safely, but it's still therapeutic for me and one of the few things I'm good at.

“Fine. I’ll see you at the apartment at seven. Love you.” I disconnect the call and play some music, tilting my head back and closing my eyes as the subway continues, mindless chatter all around me.



When I get home, I busy myself with cooking and pour a few glasses of Chianti to calm my nerves. The apartment is quiet and lonely, so I draw the curtains and play my favorite classical playlist.

The space is huge, over five thousand square feet complete with granite countertops and vaulted ceilings. It's a true gem in Upper Manhattan, and I'm sure it cost my father a pretty penny, but thankfully he paid for it outright so that I would never have to struggle even if I wanted to. To be honest, I don't make that much at the marketing firm, but I do well for myself and am able to survive while still enjoying some fancy wine and organic food. Once my insurance kicks in, I'm going to talk to my father about switching doctors and paying my medical bills on my own as well, which I'm sure he will object to. Quite frankly, I'm tired of the frequent appointments. Of the pointless

surgeries. If this disease is as hopeless as my childhood doctor says it is, then I want to make it easier on myself.

I straighten my throw pillows on the leather couches and reach for the fireplace remote, turning it on and sipping from my glass while gazing out the large, floor-to-ceiling windows. I've made this place as colorful as possible to help me move around, but the view is my favorite, albeit blurry.

The doorbell rings and I hear the door open immediately after, all four of my brothers' laughter filling the apartment. I smile. It's been a long time since all of them came here. Usually, people visit me in shifts now that I'm an adult, except for holidays. In all honesty, the men in my life are much busier doing crime than they are spending quality time with family. It's something that I've had to accept at a young age.

“Lorena Rose!” My second eldest brother, Armone, shouts from the foyer, causing me to roll my eyes in response.

Nobody calls me by my full name but him and he only does it to agitate me.

I stand up and walk into the kitchen, pausing to kiss each of their cheeks. The eldest, Carmelo, is tall like my father. Like the other three, he was blessed with thick, dark and unruly hair and dark eyes to match. They're pretty much carbon copies of my father, but they all have something unique about them. Carmelo is tall and wise, Armone has a very buoyant sense of humor, whereas the third eldest, Amelio, has the biggest temper, and the youngest brother, Claudio, is charming beyond belief. However, each and every one of them are players. The number of random women I have seen wrapped around their arms have surpassed the hundred mark and for a while, it grossed me out. Now however, it fills me with envy.

Because, while my brothers are attractive playboys, I am the odd, lonely, disabled girl. The girl with the red brown hair and the overly bright hazel eyes. The skinny, petite waif with poor eyesight. It's safe to say that the only men I've ever known are my family members.

“Smells delicious, little one,” Claudio says, patting my shoulder as he pours a glass of wine, my eyes drifting to the long outline of his dark hair.

They all call me little one. It doesn't piss me off, but rather fills me with warmth. It makes me feel special. Because even in my lonely world—to them, I am special.

“Thank you. I have most of the table set up, but can you pull the pot from the oven and set it on the table? There's some Pinot Grigio on the table already,” I say, Claudio following my instructions immediately.

He's the easiest to get along with, always sweet and polite. I feel safe with all my brothers, but he's always had a way of calming me the best.

“Boys, come on,” I holler, grabbing my glass and walking into the dining room.

We take our spots at the table and say our prayers, wishing for health and safety as always. I hold my brothers' hands a bit tighter than usual, the nerves from earlier still not completely dissipated.



As we eat, the boys chatter about their newest romances, and the loneliness stretches inside of my heart. After minutes have passed and they realize I haven't said much, Amelio sits back and speaks to me directly.

“Car told us that you heard some shots and became frantic. Wanna talk about it?” he asks, his silhouette sipping wine as I sigh and swallow my food.

“Not really,” I say, but I should’ve known they wouldn’t listen anyway.

“Tough shit. What’s the matter?” he says, calling my bluff as I play with the food on my plate.

“I just... I haven’t seen papa lately and I guess I’m just anxious,” I say, the room silent as I speak.

“Maybe I just miss home.” I regret the words instantly.

“You know why you can’t go back there, Lori. It’s not safe for you.” Carmelo scolds, sounding just like my father.

“I know. I didn’t say I wanted to go back. Just that I miss it.” I whisper, swirling the wine in my glass as I bite my lip.

“I guess I’m just lonely. I hear you talk about these women, these companions, and I can’t help but wish for something like that for myself. To have someone to come home to—share my life with.” Armone’s hand rests

over mine when I fall silent.

“You’re only twenty-two, little one. You have all the time in the world. Trust that you will find someone someday. You’re beautiful, intelligent, and have many talents. Any man would be lucky to call you his,” he says earnestly, my heart sinking at his words.

“I have two talents and a disability. I think I may be off the market for good.” I wallow in my own self-pity now.

“You are special and a prize, Lori. Don’t tell yourself otherwise,” Armone says, patting me comfortingly as I smile at him.

“Enough of this loneliness talk, where’s the cake?” Amelio asks, everyone erupting with laughter as we finish our meal.

“How are you ever going to have a wife if that’s how you speak to a woman?” I tease, reaching to pour myself a glass, but retreating when Carmelo brushes me off and does it for me.

He hates when I try to be self-sufficient in his presence.

“Who said I speak to every woman like that?” Ameilo teases. “And who said I want a wife anyway?” I roll my eyes at him, getting up as Claudio clears the plates from the table.

Carmelo takes the tiramisu from my hands before cutting into it as I walk it into the dining room.

I stare at all four of them, the outline of their laughing figures filling what little vision I have.

“What?” Armone asks.

“Promise me that you’re being safe. I don’t know what I would do without any of you.” I whisper, the men falling silent and all but confirming that something did happen today.

“What happened?” I ask, gazing at them as they sigh.

“There was a robbery. One of the De Vico boys. Our guards caught him a block away from the office with some of our contraband,” Claudio says, the other three hissing and chastising him.

“She’s going to worry, idiot—”

“I’m fine! Jesus, I’m not an invalid. Just because I’m hidden away doesn’t mean I need to be kept out of the loop. The De Vico’s? Again?” I ask, frowning as they confirm.

The De Vico family has been an enemy of my family since the dawn of time. The Saracino’s have fought hard to maintain control over the city, but these

people are relentless. Heinous, relentless, and fucking brutal.

“Do I need to worry?” I ask, Carmelo getting up to grab the knife from my hand before he cuts into the dessert.

“Never, little one. We’re finally gaining the upper hand in our war. Now is the greatest time to relax and live your life with ease,” he says, kissing my forehead before he hands a slice of cake to all of us.

Regardless of his words, I can still feel the worry seep into my blood and blossom through my veins.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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*L*ori

My alarm is blaring, and I have a headache from Hell. My brothers stayed late last night and although I missed and enjoyed their company, I am now regretting my decision as I walk to the shower just before six in the morning.

I shower quickly and dress in my favorite red skirt and white silk blouse, sliding into a pair of nude flats before I blow dry my hair, spray my favorite perfume, and walk out the door. The trip to work is never long. Thankfully, Iris Media is only a few blocks away from the apartment and I usually make it there before any of the editors do, allowing me to develop my photos and have them on their desks by the time they walk in the office. I have a nice little setup here, my own small office and developer room right next to the editing team and John, the CEO.

I've always been worried working for men that I don't know, but thankfully, John Iris is one of the nicest men I've ever met. He and his team have always been understanding of my condition, and he always makes an effort to compliment my work and provide guidance rather than criticism. I enjoy bringing him new photos — his words are always refreshing.

Like today, when I slapped a stack of photos labeled "Central Park Series" on his desk. I can hear his awe and see his head nod in approval, his hand reaching out to pat mine.

“Kid, I don’t know how you do it, but you amaze me every damn time,” he beams, pride filling my heart as a smile stretches my lips.

“Thank you, I can hang around today and work on the next series if you want \_\_\_”

“Nonsense.” He waves me off, calling in one of his editors to take my stack of photos.

“You’ve been working yourself to the ground and are way ahead of schedule. The next issue deadline isn’t for another two months. Why don’t you take the afternoon off and relax for once?” He laughs and I sigh, unsure of what to do with my day.

If I’m not working or taking photos, I pretty much have no other purpose, but I decide not to argue against him. I want to always be in his good graces.

I shake his hand and grab my bag from my office, putting on my headphones and starting to walk home. Maybe I'll try a new recipe today. I have a series of audio cookbooks that I’ve yet to dive into.

Right before I tell my phone to open the file, Claudio calls me. I make sure every person in my life has their own specific ringtone so I can identify the caller. Because Claudio is the one who calls me the most, I always hear Elvis' "Can't Help Falling in Love."

"Hey, Claud. What's up?" I ask, turning the corner towards my apartment.

"She left me." His slurred voice says through the phone and my heart breaks for him instantly.

Claudio has been with the same woman, Maddalena, since high school. He just bought her an engagement ring, and I can tell by his broken and mumbled voice that this must have happened earlier, which means he's been drinking all morning.

Fuck.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm so sorry, I know you must be hurting, but we'll figure this out, okay? It might help for you to talk about it. I'm off for the rest of the day and I'm about to come home, why don't you come to the apartment, and we can relax together?" I try not to cry for him as he agrees with garbled words.

My sweet, older brother may work for one of the most dangerous businesses in New York City, but he has a heart of gold and, now, that heart is completely shattered. I'm instantly worried for him.

This week has already been a shit show and it's only Tuesday.



*Marco*

I'm staring at the ten-year-old death certificate of my father when Sergio, my assistant, calls me.

"I found one of the brothers. I was able to tap into his call. He's absolutely plastered and on his way to the girl's house. Tracking his location now," he says, and I immediately sit up in my leather chair, my glass of whiskey shaking on my oak desk.

Ah, the secret daughter of Graziano Saracino. Has the mystery finally been revealed?

"I want the address as soon as you get it and a van sent over to the office in five minutes." I order, tossing back the rest of my glass as I straighten my Armani suit jacket.

"Copy," Sergio says, ending the call as I stare at the certificate once more.

Ten years ago, to this day, Leone De Vico, my father and the head boss of the De Vico mafia, was brutally murdered by our sworn enemy, Graziano Saracino. I was only twenty-seven at the time, just an underboss when the century long business was thrown into my hands. Since then, I've been on a wild man hunt with a vengeance that has made me a ruthless bastard. I will



not rest until I see every single Saracino dead. Even the secret daughter.

But, if you want a successful operation, you must think critically, methodically. And that's what I've been doing for the past decade: carefully plotting and planning, biding my time and waiting for the moment when I can strike from the shadows with an army greater than ever before. And here's the moment showing itself, on the ten-year anniversary of my father's death.

Vengeance.

I could strike the head first, killing Graziano and taking out the heart of the family so everything else can fail instantly, but I want them to suffer. I want them to feel the pain that I have felt for years. And what better way to do that than to start with the two youngest first?

I'm not surprised to hear about the boy. After all my digging throughout the years, I've known that Claudio was the weakest, too soft for our world. What surprised me is Sergio's detection of the daughter. Graziano has hidden her well, for ten years he's kept her locked away, untraceable. Until today. Until God came out from the sky and granted me a key to my own gates of heaven.

I do not know what the girl looks like, I don't even know her name, but I do know that she is young, and she is weak, otherwise her father wouldn't have hidden her so well. She may be the weakest spot of this family. She may be the perfect opportunity for my plans. Meaning, I might not want to kill her right away. Maybe I'll kill the boy and make her watch as he bleeds out on the floors of her hidden palace. Maybe I'll put her in the van right next to his lifeless body and then throw her in the cages until I bait the rest with her fragile, pathetic existence.

I pour myself another glass and wait for Sergio to send me the address. When he does, I see that the boy has already made it to the spot.

*Perfect.*

I throw back the contents of my glass and grab my gun, tuck it into my custom trousers and call for my backup. Once we're in the van, I give them the location and light a cigarette, watching the city pass me by from the tinted windows.

The drive is long, on the other side of town. You'd think her father would move her to a different state if he really cared, but the man loves control. And since his beloved wife died many years ago, I'm sure he didn't want the last female of the family too far. Even if it meant still risking her life.

When we pull up to the apartment, I smirk. The girl lives in an expensive skyscraper, all the way at the top like a princess locked away in a tower. I grab my binoculars and peer around, stopping when I spot an open set of windows, the boy pacing past them and allowing me to identify him immediately.

*Stupid girl, why leave your windows open for the monsters of the city to peer through?*

I remain posted, searching for any new sightings of the mystery girl for what feels like an eternity. Until she comes into view, two glasses of water in her small hands. I take one look at her and frown, bewildered that the petite thing is somehow related to the dark Saracino men.

There, right in the open view, stands a small woman with light brown hair, shimmers of red highlights all throughout the long wavy tresses. Her skin is pale, unlike her brothers. And although I don't have a clear look at her face, I can tell that she is stunning. Small, soft features and decent sized breasts that peek out from the slope of her silk blouse. Her long, shapely legs on full display underneath her short, red skirt.

She's stunning, I'll give her that. But she's also damned, now more than ever.

"What do we do, boss?" One of my men say, bloodthirsty and anxious.

I wave him with a flick of my hand, eyes still glued on the woman in the window.

"We wait," I say, watching for nearly an hour in the idling van until they disappear from the view.

Minutes go by when suddenly, the large double doors of the apartment building open and out comes the boy and his sister. We all draw our guns, but when I spot the walking stick outstretched in front of her, her eyes covered with a pair of expensive looking sunglasses, I freeze.

*She's blind.*

The realization comes quick and hits me like a freight train, everything clicking into place.

Yes, Graziano *has* hidden her. And she's not just weak, she's fucking *impaired*.

*So much for making her watch her brother bleed out.*

They hug and right when they let go and the boy turns to walk away, one of my guards cocks their gun and looks over at me.

“Now, boss? He's getting away—”

“No,” I say darkly, tucking my gun back into my pants as the boy leaves and the blind girl turns to walk back into the apartment building.

“Marco, what the fuck! You had your chance for the first time in ten years and you fucking—”

I rear back and elbow my driver right in the face, the crunching sound of his nose echoing throughout the van. I then grab a tissue from the glove compartment and toss it to him.

“That'll be the first and last time you address me in that manner,” I growl, turning to look at him.

“Critically. Methodically. *Successfully*,” I bark at him, the same words I repeat to my men every day.

“I have other plans. I want the girl. And I want her alive,” I grunt, looking back at the apartment before I rest my hand on the door handle.

“And I’m going to get her myself. Get the rope ready. I’ll be back in ten minutes,” I say, stepping out of the vehicle as I strip my jacket and roll up my sleeves, tossing the coat into the passenger seat.

“This is personal,” I state, before I slam the door and walk inside the massive apartment building, ready to meet the hidden princess and steal her away from her little palace.



*Lori*

After walking Claudio out, I walk back inside my building and ride the elevator all the way up to the top floor. I set down my walking stick and toss my sunglasses on the foyer table. I haven’t really needed my stick in a while, but I’ve been anxious this week and don’t want to risk tripping or falling.

I walk into the kitchen and grab myself a glass of water. It took me over an hour to calm Claudio down, his drunken tears still echoing in my mind, my heart breaking for him. If this is what love is like, maybe I don’t want it after all. However, I can’t imagine living a life of complete solitude. And the reason she left him was because of the business, the very same reason why I have chosen to not be a part of it. So maybe... love won’t be painful for me since I’ve chosen to stay away.

My thoughts break when a knock sounds on the door. I smile, wondering what Claudio forgot this time. He may have sobered up slightly, but even so, the man forgets everything. He'd lose his head if it wasn't attached to his body.

I open the door, freezing when I see the outline of a man that is not my brother, a man that I have never met before.

I look him up and down, trying to make out what little details of his features that I can. From what I can tell, his hair is styled on the top of his head, his face shadowed with a thick, black beard. His body is massive, like incredibly massive. His shoulders stretch the entire width of my door frame, bombarding me with his aggressive size. He smells unlike anything I've smelt before. Something foreign and rich, like he had been standing in the woods and soaked up all the sun. And handsome, definitely handsome.

"Can-can I help you with something?" I ask, my voice dry and cracked, coming out as a broken whisper as I stand there, mesmerized.

He chuckles. The sound is devoid of humor, and when I hear it, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and my entire spine stiffens. This man should not be here. This man is not good.

"Yes, princess. You can help me with something, indeed," he grumbles, lunging forward as a scream tears from my throat.

Before I can move, his hand is clamped over my mouth while the other wraps around my throat, cutting off my air supply as I flail helplessly in his arms.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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*M*arco

She's flailing under my grasp like a fish and I can't help but revel in the luscious sway of her breasts as she does. Although the woman is both impaired and the daughter of my sworn enemy, I'd be a fool to say that she wasn't attractive.

I gorge myself on the sight of her chest as her lungs expand with rapid breaths, the outline of her nipples pressing and poking through the silk fabric of her white blouse. Her waist is narrow and trim, falling into the womanly curves of her hips that disappear under the short, red skirt that she's wearing. When my gaze falls to her pale, shapely thighs, my chest vibrates with a growl, causing her large, hazel eyes to widen in response but, oddly enough, not in fear.

I slam the door behind me with my foot, removing my hand from her slender throat to lock it before I push her against the wall in the foyer. When her back meets the wall, I bring my nose to her throat, inhaling the jasmine scent of her perfume before I remove my hand and let it travel down the length of her torso. When my thick fingers nudge her skirt up, her nostrils flare from above

my hand that's still plastered over her mouth, her breathing now unsteady. I smile like the bastard that I am before I let my fingers wander beneath the red fabric, pressing against the cotton of her panties, right where her clit is.

A whimper slips past her plump lips, vibrating against the skin of my palm as I groan, my fingers circling the wet fabric of her underwear. When I look into those wide hazel eyes, I see fear mixed with desire.

*She's aroused by this—by me. Perhaps I'm not the only sick person in the room.*

I bring my mouth to the shell of her ear, her neck craning upward as the hair of my beard scratches against her delicate flesh. I remove my hand from her panties, reluctantly, before I grab my gun from my trousers and place the barrel of it against her ribs, her eyes widening even more.

“You're going to be a good girl for me, okay? I'm going to move my hand and you're not going to scream; you're going to listen. If you try to resist in any way, this bullet is going straight through your heart. Got it, princess?” I snap, tilting my head back to gaze at her as shaky breaths leave her small body.

She gazes at me for a moment, her eyes wide and searching, as if she's trying to grab onto every detail of me. Which makes me wonder if her vision is completely gone.

Slowly, but surely, she nods.



I let my hand slip down her throat, wrapping it around her while my gun remains pressed against her rib cage. Her submission pleases me, her stiff muscles relaxing slightly as I gaze into her strange eyes.

“Tell me your name,” I order, my eyes traveling to her swollen lips, as if they were stung by a bee and painted with a raw cherry.

Her eyes narrow suddenly, her perfect breasts rising as she puffs out her chest defensively.

"You have a gun to my ribs and you don't even know my name?" Her raspy voice hisses, jolting my cock awake.

“Judging by the scent of your cologne and expensive suit, I know you’re not some random off the street. You know my family and you found me, so tell me, how is it that all your digging has still left you clueless? Are you an idiot or just bad at your job?” She growls and even though her lashing should have me throwing her against the ground, I find that I can’t stop the sudden smirk from lifting the corners of my lips.

She’s smart *and* sassy. I’m going to have fun with this one.

I tighten the hand that’s still wrapped around her throat, squeezing it just enough to allow oxygen, but still terrify her. Her eyes widen again, the pale skin of her sweet face reddening.

“Your name,” I demand, tilting my head at her.

Her lips part, and a whimper slips past before she mutters her response.

“Lori,” she says weakly. I can’t help the snort that slips out of my nose.

“You come from a strong lineage of bloodsucking Italians and they named you *Lori*?” I chuckle, shaking my head as my grip eases up on her throat.

Her family really is pathetic.

She stares at me for a while, her head tilted as her eyes travel from my face to my hair, narrowing as if she’s trying to see clearer.

“Lorena. They named me Lorena,” she says after a while, her eyes finally traveling to the ceiling as she breathes steadily.

“Lorena Rose Saracino,” she says, her coarse voice causing my cock to strain against the zipper of my pants.

Her eyes slide from the ceiling to mine, a blush coloring her freckled cheeks.

“I don’t know why I even told you that. I hate my name.” She admits quietly, embarrassed.

A part of me wants to tell her not to feel this way, that her name is just as beautiful as her body, but that very small part of me is overshadowed by the beast inside of me. The beast who wants to rip the head of her father off his shoulders before I kill every last one of her family members.

My nostrils flare and I move my hand away from her throat, tossing her hair behind her shoulders before yanking her head back and forcing her to look at me as I speak.

“I have a team of men waiting in my van in the front of your building. You are going to walk by my side, nicely and quietly. If you try to run or scream, all I have to do is send a simple message to my men, and all of your brothers, as well as your father, will have a bullet each planted in their heads in five minutes. Am I clear?” I growl, and in an instant her breathing becomes erratic.

A single tear falls from her eyes, and before I can stop myself, I lick it up with my tongue, her teeth biting down on her bottom lip in response. I stare at her, my gaze fixed on her mouth. When she releases her lip, she nods slowly, fear visible in her eyes.

“Good girl. Let’s go,” I say, tucking my gun into my pants as I unlock the door and push her out into the hallway, my hand wrapping around her waist and pulling her flush against me as we make our way down to the lobby.



*Lori*

He walks me out of my apartment building and shoves me into a dark van. Two large men grab me and position me in between them, binding my hands around my back with a rope. I want to cry, maybe even vomit, but I just squeeze my eyes shut as the vehicle moves for what feels like a millennium.

After a while, the van stops and everybody clears out, except for me and the man that stole me. I open my eyes and look at him still sitting in the passenger seat, his head craned in my direction.

“Time to go, princess,” his dark, thickly accented voice says.

He’s Italian, that much I know for sure. Which makes me wonder if he’s part of another mafia, or one of my fathers’ fired men. At this point, God only knows.

He steps out of the van and grabs me from the back seat, throws me over his shoulder as if I weigh nothing, and my breath stops in my chest as he walks me into a large house. There’s an army of men behind us, the outline of assault rifles strapped to their chests. When they start to disappear from my hazy view, the man carrying me slams a large, wooden door closed with his foot before walking me up a massive staircase. Albeit blurry, I can tell the tile that’s clicking beneath his expensive shoes is nice.

When we reach the top of the staircase, he walks down a long hallway, the walls blank and empty, the ceiling high. He opens a door and walks us inside, slamming it shut before he throws me on a large, silk covered bed.

I don't have much time to observe my surroundings, but from what I can tell,

this room is massive and practically empty, but still fine in its own right. I'm turning my head away from the bright light shining through the open windows when he grabs my hands and unbinds them. Before I can even take my next breath, he's yanking me up the bed and pulling my arms over my head, tying my hands to the headboard with that same rope.

I'm now bound, helpless, and terrified as he leans back and stares at me, a roar slipping past his lips. A growl that should have me shaking in fear, but instead causes a sudden fluttering in my belly.

"Who are you?" I gasp, my neck craned so that I can look at the outline of his face.

I can see his mouth move, twitching almost. As if it's trying to fight a smile.

"Curious about me, Lori?" He rasps, his feet clicking against the floor as he adjusts his massive body to sit next to me on the bed.

"My name is Marco De Vico, head boss of the De Vico family. Does that ring any bells for you?" he asks.

When I shake my head, a harsh sound slips from his throat. It is angry and scary, much like the rest of him.

"Let me refresh your memory, princess. On this day, ten years ago, your father decided to take the life of my own. Leone De Vico was the fourth boss of this family, and we have allowed your family rule this city for years. Until

that fateful day. Until your father shot my father between the eyes, leaving him to bleed out on the floor of my office. That was the day I took over as head of this family. That was the day I started starving for vengeance,” he says coldly, no ounce of emotion in his words at all.

“You are here because your family deserves to pay, to suffer,” he hisses the last word, the sound slipping through my bloodstream and chilling me from head to toe.

When I speak, my voice shakes.

“If you want them to pay, why am I still alive?” I whisper, his body shifting on the bed at my words.

He towers over me, grabbing my face roughly with his large hands, his eyes glued to mine. From this closeness, I can tell his eyes are brown, maybe even black. Regardless, they are dark and filled with a coldness that leaves me trembling in his grasp.

“Because, *Lori*, the greatest part of suffering is having that slim bit of hope to hang onto. Hope for better, hope for the pain to end,” he snaps, looming over me like a cold shadow.

“I want them to have hope. I want them to think that they will find you—alive. I want them to think that they can still save you—the precious little secret that they’ve tried to keep hidden.” He pauses, his hands pressing tighter against my face, smushing my cheeks together.

“And when they do, when they finally find you, I want all that hope to be sucked out from under them when they cling onto your lifeless, bloody body. Because as soon as they come to find you, I *will* kill you,” he says, his voice empty like a hollow shell.

It is in this moment that I know I should cry. I should scream and weep and fight back, but I don't. Because a part of me knows that's what Marco wants. He wants a fight, and I will not be the one to give it to him. He may have taken me from my perfect, quiet life, but I will not give him the pleasure of witnessing my fear.

When I don't respond, he moves one hand away from my face, bringing it down the length of my torso before it slips underneath my blouse; the rough skin of his palm scratching my belly before it rises to cup my breast. His thumb circles around my nipple and it rises to attention, poking through the lace of my bra as a low roar escapes his lips.

“For a woman that should be terrified, you are very responsive. Especially when I just vowed to kill you,” he chuckles darkly, my breath hitching in my throat as that fluttering in the pit of my stomach quickens, mimicking the flapping of a butterfly's wings.

This man is a monster and even though I am terrified, I can't help my body's response—its draw to him. No one has ever touched me in anger, or desire for that matter. No one has ever wanted to explore me, so even if I'm meant to die, perhaps I'll experience some pleasure before the pain.

His thumb circles my nipple faster, applying the slightest amount of pressure as my body trembles in response, though I'm not sure if it's fear or desire. When he bends down and sucks my breast through the fabric of my clothing,

my womb quakes, the feeling of an impending climax threatening me as my head spins.

When he senses this, my confused pleasure, he rears back, ripping his hand and mouth from me as he stands up next to the bed.

“If you listen to me, this will run smoothly. Though I will say this, if you fight me in any way, if you so much as think of disobeying me, this new situation of yours will only worsen,” he says, fixing the lapels of his jacket before he strides out of the bedroom, slamming the door behind him and leaving me in an overwhelming silence.

It is then that I give into my fear and cry.



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## CHAPTER FOUR

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*L*ori

It's been four days since he locked me in this room. Since then, all I've done is sit in my loneliness, crying on and off—always ensuring to hide my tears when Marco comes. He visits once a day, bringing me water and bland soup before he unties me and pushes me down on the toilet to pee. Each time, he doesn't look away, and after the second day, I stopped asking. He doesn't give a damn about me, and I'm starting to believe that this man is devoid of humanity. He removed my underwear the first time he took me to the bathroom and hasn't put it back on since. And the only time he touches me is when he fiddles with the rope around my wrists.

Today is day four and I'm almost certain that I'm going insane. My neck hurts from turning away from the windows, the bright light burning my eyes. I've had to keep them closed, especially since I asked him to draw the blinds yesterday and all I got was a dark chuckle and a shake of his head.

I'm awakening from a troubled sleep when the door opens and Marco steps in, my eyes still closed due to the light. I know it's him because of his smell—his rich, expensive scent that has my hormones spiking even though I want

to kill him. Plus, no one else has come in this room besides him.

He walks to the bed and pauses. I can feel his gaze burning into my skin as I squeeze my eyes even tighter, not opening them for him in the slightest. Apparently, this amuses him because he laughs when he starts untying me.

“Not happy to see me today, princess?” he asks, but I don’t respond.

I’ve been wavering between a myriad of emotions and today, I feel angry and defiant.

He yanks me from the bed, slamming me against his chest as his rough fingers grasp my chin and force my head up to look at him, my eyes opening only to narrow.

“Be a good girl and answer,” he growls.

“I’m never happy to see you,” I hiss, venom dripping in my words as he tilts his head back and laughs, the sound empty and cold like the rest of him.

“At least she’s honest,” he says, walking me to the massive bathroom.

It is just as plain as the bedroom, but the tile surrounds the floors and walls is an expensive ivory, that much I can tell. It has a double sink with a gold trimmed mirror, a massive shower with glass doors and a tub on the opposite end, which is of course, ivory.

He sets me down on the porcelain toilet, only a small bit of urine leaving my body since I am running on only a small bit of water. When I wipe and then wash my hands, I turn and wait for him to grab me, but this time, he doesn't.

He stands there for a moment, staring at me as my brows knit together in confusion.

“What are you—“

“Strip.” He barks, the order simple and loud as I stare at him.

I don't move, I don't speak, I just stand there and look at him in disbelief. His impatience grows and when he marches towards me, he grabs a handful of my dirty hair and yanks my head back, his lips near mine as he hisses the word again.

“I said *strip*.”

He releases me and I feel the flush of uncertainty heat my skin. I obey his command with trembling hands. I remove my shirt and then my bra, my hands covering my breasts. When I drop my skirt, he yanks my arm away from my chest, exposing me as my nipples tighten from the cold air that's now hitting them.

“Do not hide yourself from me,” he snaps darkly, his gaze raking over my

naked body.

I can't see the details of his expression, but I can feel his desire flood the room. It is thick and suffocating, choking me as I stand there in my most vulnerable form. He gazes at me for a while, his eyes traveling the entire length of my body as we both fall silent except for my heavy breathing.

When he undoes his belt and drops his pants to the floor, my jaw drops slightly. My eyes widen as they go to his sex, the hard outline of it resting against his muscular thigh. This is my first time ever seeing a penis and even though I can't see it well, I can tell that it is huge like the rest of him. Although I hate this man with every fiber of my being, I can't deny the fact that he is devastatingly beautiful. I can't also deny the fact that my body is drawn to him. Perhaps I am just as fucked up as the men that are in this business. Maybe I was born with the same sickness that my father and brothers have.

"On your knees," he commands, towering over me as I gaze up into the coldness of his eyes, my body trembling from both his words and anticipation.

He clicks his tongue at me, my teeth marring my lip as I slowly sink to my knees on the tiled floor. My eyes are now level with his cock, which is growing harder the longer I stare at it. His hand reaches for my jaw, roughly cupping it as he pulls me forward, my mouth only a breath away from his sex.

"Open," he order and I do, his thumb tracing my lips before he moves his hand to the back of my head, pushing me closer so that the head of his cock presses against the opening of my mouth.

“Suck,” he demands, staring down at me as my eyes flicker up to his, embarrassment flooding me before fear even has the chance.

“I... I don't know how. I've never-I've never done this,” I say quietly, and as the words leave my lips, he smiles and pushes his cock inside, my eyes widening and tearing up as the head presses against the back of my throat, choking me.

“Like this,” he moans, grabbing a fistful of my hair and maneuvering my head so that he slides in and out of my mouth.

“Hollow your cheeks,” he says and I obey, for a reason that is unbeknownst to me.

Maybe it's not because I'm afraid. Not because I fear he will kill me, but because, for some sick, twisted reason... I want to learn. I'm curious to see if this man can express emotions other than cold anger. And I want to be the one who coaxes them from him.

I let my tongue swirl around the velvet skin of his cock, the thickness of it invading every bit of my mouth. Every time he pulls back, I circle the head and every time he pushes in, I suck it like its candy. The taste is unlike anything I've experienced. It is heady and earthy, natural, intoxicating in its own way and, for some reason, I grow greedy for more.

“Look at me, Lori,” he orders and I flick my gaze up to his as I suck him

tighter, my tongue snaking around his length as his face grows harsh and his movements become aggressive.

Before I can move, his hips begin to jerk, and his sex slowly begins to swell inside my mouth. When my gaze moves from his cock to his eyes, he moans, making me wish I could see the details of his expression. The thought is fleeting, but it is there.

“Swallow it,” he demands, his fingertips nearly bruising the skin of my jaw. “All of it.”

And before I can even question him, I swallow. My mouth fills with a thick, odd tasting liquid and I know right then that this is his orgasm.

I’m a virgin, but I know what a climax is. I’ve been giving them to myself for years, however this is an entirely new ballpark. A male orgasm is something I’ve never witnessed. It’s not like I can watch porn, for Christ’s sake.

His cum fills my mouth, and, almost instinctively, I spit it out, but I obey his command. I swallow every drop he feeds me, which is more than I believe should be normal. His orgasm lasts forever and stretches for miles, and all I can do is sit there and take it, which, while depressing, excites that small sick part of me.

But the excitement doesn’t last long. He pulls away as soon as he’s done, tucking his cock back into his pants before the sound of his zipper closing fills the room. He then grabs me by the tops of my arms, lifting me and planting me in front of the massive, glass shower.

“Wash yourself,” he snaps and, immediately, I feel dehumanized, even more than when I was roped to the bed.

I feel used and dirty, exposed and foreign. Most importantly, I feel stupid. I feel so ridiculous because like the sick person that I am, my stomach is housing a swarm of butterflies, a wetness is pooling in between my legs, and my clit swollen and completely separated from my mind as it pulses with need. For some reason, that makes me cry, but I don't let him see my tears. I just turn my head towards the shower, slide the door open and step in. He closes the door behind me, sitting on the toilet as I look over my shoulder for the faucet, turning and adjusting it to the proper temperature before I melt beneath the jets that spray from nearly every angle.

I can feel his gaze on me as I tilt my head back and let the water wash the last four days from my skin. A moan escapes my lips, and he shifts, leaning closer as my gaze moves from him to the shelf built into the tile near my head. I feel around for a bottle of soap, and when I hold it for a few moments, he mutters something over the water.

“Shampoo,” he says coldly, but I don't thank him or acknowledge him.

In fact, I'm so pissed that I just squirt a massive amount into my palm and work it into my hair and all over my body. I don't want to rely on him or expose any more vulnerable parts of myself; I don't want to ask about conditioner or body wash; I just want to be away from him.

I lather the soap all over, and the scent of vanilla envelops me as his gaze burns into my skin the entire time. I turn to wash my face, swishing water

around in my mouth before spitting it out on the floor, a ghost of a chuckle leaving his lips, fueling my rage. When I turn off the faucet and wring the water out of my hair, I step out and wait with my head turned to the side.

He hands me a towel, and I dry myself while bending down to pick up my dirty clothes from the floor before slipping them back on. He doesn't say anything the entire time, just stares at me until I'm finished. Then, he grabs my wrists and drags me to the bedroom. I already know he's going to bind me to the headboard again, so I beat him to it and lay on the bed when we get there, hands above my head, eyes closed.

“Good girl,” he mumbles as he ties me again.

When he's done, he just lingers there, quiet and observing. When he turns to exit the room, I wait for the sound of the door clicking shut to release the remaining tears that have pooled behind my eyes. Of course, it's normal to cry because I've been kidnapped, bound, and used, but this is not why my tears fall.

I'm crying because I'm angry at myself, and him. I'm angry that he won't touch me, that he gets to come and I'm not. I'm mad that I want him to make me come, but more importantly, I'm frustrated that he's not here, that he'll only say a few words to me. I hate the fact that the only communication we have is through his orders and my compliance.

I allow myself to cry for a few moments, sitting in my grief while stretching my legs and taking deep breaths. I open my eyes and turn my head to the door, away from the bright light of the windows. I stand there for what seems like hours, my limbs aching and trembling.



The clock ticks forever, the only sound echoing in the large, modern and empty room before another sound is heard; a knock.

Marco never knocks. He always enters around the start of the afternoon, when the sun shines the brightest through the window.

My body immediately stiffens, on high alert as I wait for the person on the other side to show their face. It could be anyone. A guard ready to kill me, or even rape me. God knows these men are just as sick as Marco and maybe after what I just did for him, he's decided to spread the word. With that thought, my heart nearly stops in my chest, ice spreading throughout my veins as bile rises in my throat.

The door opens, and I try to scan for as many details as they can. A voice fills the room before I can see the person. A soft, elderly, womanly voice.

“Hello, Lori. My name is Mariella. I'm Marco's mother,” she says, her accent thick but her tone soft—the sound of it making tears fill my eyes again as she slowly enters the room and shuts the door behind her.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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*L*ori

Mariella walks into the room quietly, soft footsteps echoing against the hardwood floor. From her outline, I can see she's a small woman, soft and crouched. When she slowly sits on the edge of the bed, I can't help the involuntary stiffening of my muscles. The only interaction I've had in my captivity is with Marco and judging by the cold, violent nature of her son, it's not crazy of me to think that she could be the same way, no matter how tender her voice sounds.

"I'd be a fool to ask you how you are," she says and even though I want to quip back with a smart remark, I refrain and stay quiet, trying to feel her out.

She turns towards me on the bed, placing a gentle hand on my calf, letting out a strange sound as she looks at me, almost a sound of disgust.

"I know that you understand the brutality of the world that we are a part of and what it's like to be a relative of a mafia family, but I can't help but be

angry by what my son has done to you,” she says evident sadness in her tone as my ears perk up at her words.

“Are you... here to let me go?” I ask, feeling foolish as soon as the words leave my lips.

She sighs, shaking her head as she pats my leg and sets her hand back in her lap.

“Sadly, no. I had to beg my son to let me see you,” she says, fidgeting with her small hands as defeat fills my stomach once more.

“He’s waiting for the next stage of his plan. I told him there would be no harm in keeping you company. As for the rope, trust me when I say that I’ve tried my best to get you unbound. It kills me to see such a pretty girl like this,” she says with sincerity.

“Trust me, I feel anything but pretty right now,” I say, hating this outfit more than anything since it’s basically been plastered to my body for four days.

She looks at me for a long moment, assessing my form. I wish I could see the details of her face—I wish I could see if her eyes reflect the same sincerity that her voice holds. From what I can see of her hair, I can tell that it is dark and scattered with gray streaks, the contrast of colors sticking out prominently. Her face shape is like Marco’s, her lips just as full and her nose just as straight. I can see where he gets his incredibly good looks from.

“I will ask him for a few fresh sets of clothes for you. If he’s going to lock you away, then you should at least not smell like a rotting carcass while he has you alive,” she says, her joke not landing as I stare at her with a straight face.

“Sorry,” she says, embarrassed. “Just trying to make this horrible situation light somehow.”

I swallow the bundle of nerves that is clogging my throat, feeling comfortable enough to question her further.

“Mariella, is he really going to kill me?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“To be honest, child, I don’t know,” she says, leaning back on her hands as she rests on the bed and continues to speak.

“Since my husband died... Marco has been very angry, haunted almost. As if the demons of that awful night have stayed by his side. I will tell you though that he doesn’t keep his captives alive for long. They last a day, at most. And I’ve never seen a woman other than the cook and myself in this mansion. So, thus far, you are an enigma to us all,” she says, tilting her head to look at me.

“You said he’s been angry... was he not like this before his father died?” I ask, curious to know if the cold man has a heart, if he ever did to begin with.

I see her lips quirk up to a smile, as if she’s lost in a warm memory.

“Marco was a sweet boy, my only child. He’s been loyal to me his entire life, even more loyal to his father when he was alive. He became Leone’s second man at the young age of sixteen, eager to carry on the legacy of his father. Though, we didn’t expect him to become head of this family at the young age of twenty-seven. We didn’t expect him to be thrown into this unforgiving business without any kind of help,” she whispers, crossing her legs and scooting back on the bed as she continues to shed light on the monster that snatched me away from my life and my family.

“I remember the day he turned sixteen. He picked me a bunch of roses from our garden and his hands were all bloody from the thorns when he gave them to me, a smile on his perfect face. He told me then that he was going to make this family proud, that he was going to do right by me and his father.” Her tone darkens at the last of her words, the air changing in the room, becoming denser almost.

“And then I remember the day his father died. I remember looking at his bloody hands then, as he held my husband’s lifeless body. I remember his cries filling the halls, his constant prayers for his father to come back. That day I lost more than just my husband; I lost the sweetness of my son too,” she says, sniffing back tears as my own set of sadness gathers behind my eyes.

I don’t want to think of Marco as a boy picking flowers for his mom. I don’t want to picture him crying and holding his father’s dead body. I don’t want to see him as anything other than the monster that he is, but right now, I can’t help but feel my heart break for him and his mother. For the loss and the anguish that they’ve had to endure.

“I didn’t know. I had no idea my father did this. To be quite honest, Mariella,

I didn't want to. I've stayed out of my family's business my entire life because this is what it brings. It causes death and horror and heartbreak, and I didn't want any of that to touch me," I say, swallowing my tears as I bow my head to my chest, my neck screaming from the tenseness of it.

"But I can see now that was mere wishful thinking. I'm sorry that you lost your husband, that you lost the purity of your son. I'm so sorry for it all," I say, her hand reaching back to touch my leg once more as my head lifts towards her direction.

"There is no need for you to apologize, dear. You are not at fault for any of this. It just pains me that no matter how many times I say that to Marco, his vengeance will not let him understand," she says, the reality of her words stabbing into my chest like a sharp knife.

"Why are you still here in this house? Witnessing the constant brutality of this life? Why have you chosen to stick by it still? It must haunt you just as much as it haunts him," I whisper, staring at her hazy form on the bed.

"My son is all I have left, demons be damned. He's my child and without him, I have no protection. I have nothing. I'd rather coexist with this anguish than with fear and loneliness," she says honestly and right then, I know that I can trust her because I understand her.

"I know what it's like to be lonely," I admit. "I've been lonely my whole life."

"And what of your life?" she asks. "What has your life been like, being

hidden away with a vision impairment? That must have been difficult enough. Without a mother no less,” she asks, her voice laced with empathy.

“It’s been hard, but it’s beautiful. I love my life. I love what it’s filled with. I’ve made sure to find joy at every turn, to experience as much as I can,” I say, sadness overwhelming me as I think back to the life that was ripped from me.

“But that’s all in the past now. This is my life from now on, my future,” I say, tears falling from my eyes as my throat burns.

“Mariella... how much time do I have left? Before he... takes my breath too?” I breathe, my voice just as shattered as my heart.

I can’t see her face, but dear God, do I feel her sorrow.

“I don’t know, Lori. I wish I did. I wish I had an answer, or some hope to give you, but it seems all that I can offer you now is company,” she admits, her words settling inside of me, breaking me to my core.

I sniff back my tears, shifting my body on the bed to try and gain whatever comfort that I can find.

“Would it make you feel better if you could talk about something that you love?” she asks, not letting the room fall silent.

I smile at her, nodding as she scoots closer to me.

“Then tell me, Lori, what is it that you love?”

“Pictures,” I say instantly, my fingers practically itching to feel my camera beneath them.

She chuckles in surprise, amazed by my admission like most people have been my entire life. It’s not every day that you hear about a blind photographer.

“Do you like looking at them?” she asks, propping her chin on her small hands as she stares at me in wonder.

“I like taking them,” I say, a smile on my face now.

“Really?” She smiles wide, a small giggle leaving her lips, the sound warming me all over.

“Yes. I’ve had a camera on me since I was a little girl. I found that if I couldn’t see the world in front of me clearly, then I would at least show the world the beauty that I’m missing, the beauty that I’ve been dying to see,” I say, wishing that I could be in Central Park right now with the sun warming my skin and sounds of laughter all around me.

“What do you like to photograph?” she asks, genuinely curious.



“Anything, but nature mostly. Being outside brings me peace,” I speak.

“I know what you mean. I’ve spent most of my life growing flowers, walking barefoot through gardens,” she says fondly and it doesn’t take me long to imagine a young Mariella walking through miles of roses, a smile on her pure face.

I ask her about her favorite flower, about how long she’s been gardening, what life was like when she was a child. I ask her anything and everything to pass the time, to ease the loneliness that has stretched across my heart. She tells me everything, of her love for plants and cooking, her love for her fallen husband, how grief has overtaken her in the years since his passing. And then she starts talking about her love for her son. She tells me stories from when he was a child, how he grew into a hardworking man that only wanted to provide for his family. She tells me that when he turned sixteen, he declared that he wanted to be a husband one day and have six children. When she says this, I scoff. When she talks about Marco, I hate how my heart softens for him. I hate that I start to picture him as a man instead of a monster. I hate it almost as much as I hate him.

When she brings me food and water, she feeds me like I am a child. When Marco does this, I feel angry, spiteful, but with Mariella, I feel cared for in a way. She is gentle and soft, talking to me the entire time. Which is why, when she leaves, I start to cry once more. I cry into my chest, chin dropped with snot falling from my nostrils. I feel disgusting and ridiculous, but most of all I feel lonely. I do this for quite some time. Until the birds stop singing outside and the sky grows darker with impending nightfall.

Dusk comes quick and soon the room fills with darkness, bringing me anxiety

instead of peace. My mind races with thoughts of Marco, with the memory of what happened this morning, tainted with the newfound knowledge of his humanity. I feel my body pining for him, for him to come back into this room and talk to me like his mother did. To want him to know me and to allow me to know him. Most importantly, I want him to touch me again. I want him to explore my body, to touch every inch of my skin with his rough, strong hands.

And as I sit there wanting him, I begin to despise myself—hating that I pine for a man who has treated me like a creature of lesser importance.

“What is it about you, Marco De Vico?” I whisper into the quiet room, darkness spreading all around me as my question goes unanswered.

I hear a soft creak coming from the doorway. When I turn my head, I see nothing. Mostly because there are so many shadows interfering with my poor vision. I sigh and turn my head back up to the ceiling, my arms sore to the point where my joints are no longer screaming, but rather whimpering and whining like a wounded dog.

When I close my eyes and force myself to sleep, I hear something else. It's the sound of a door shutting.

My door.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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*M*arco

I close her bedroom door, my blood boiling inside of my veins. When I saw her laying there, breasts pressed against her silk top and hair fallen around her in a mass of waves, I had to stop myself from entering and forcing my cock into her mouth again. As soon as I heard her murmur my name into the room, something inside of me snapped. Something old and dead, something I buried deep within me a long time ago. Something a whole lot like boyish curiosity.

You can see my dilemma here. Not only am I one of the most powerful men in Manhattan, but I'm also the most ruthless. And ruthless, powerful men do not become curious over a woman that they are holding hostage. A woman that is the daughter of his father's killer no less.

I fix the lapels of my suit jacket and march down the staircase to my office in the right wing of the mansion. It used to be my father's, but as soon as he died, I completely gutted the old room and knocked down a couple walls to make it one massive office coupled with a boardroom and bathroom, since I am in here majority of the time. I've made sure to remove everything that

reminded me of him, except for his gun collection. I wanted the space to be simple and strong, not adorned with family photos and reminders of the life that I once had.

Right now, in said office, sits a man that owes me a large sum of money. He's a gun dealer from New Jersey and one that I've been doing business with for a couple of years now. During our time together, he's mostly been on time with his payment. See, I smuggle over his new merchandise from a source down in Columbia and it costs me a pretty penny. A pretty penny that I double for him and, thus far, he's been on time with what he owes. Until this morning.

I walk into the large boardroom and my men already have him tied up, his face all bloody and bruised from their interrogations earlier. He's been avoiding my calls about his new shipment, and after the fourth unanswered one, I dispatched my men to his small store, which is primarily in business because of me.

"Mr. Mueller, it's great to finally see you," I say, sitting across from him at my large conference table, his mouth sealed by a thick slab of duct tape.

He mumbles something incorrigible, and it causes me to laugh. If I wasn't so amped up from the last few days of having Lori in my house, maybe I'd go easy on him, but as it seems, my restraint is limited and my frustration is at an all-time high. It would appear so that lately all I want to do is wreak havoc on anyone that dares to fucking cross me.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mueller, but I can't hear you. Not that I want to anyway," I say, folding my hands on the table after I pull my gun from my pants and set it on the worn oak. When he sees it, his eyes widen in fear.

“You see, Mr. Mueller, now is not the time for me to hear you. It’s for you to hear me. And perhaps what I’m going to say will make perfect sense so that I will only need to say it once. I’m not in the mood to reiterate today.” I snap, standing and grabbing my gun as I walk towards him, his old eyes fixed on me as he watches me approach.

I motion with my hand to one of my men to move the gun dealer's chair back so that I have a clear shot. When he does, I cock my gun and aim it squarely at Mueller's crotch, causing him to whimper like a helpless animal.

"We agreed that when I call to notify you that your shipment is ready, you have approximately one hour to respond, make your way to the premises, and provide payment." He starts shaking his head, snot dripping from his nose as I narrow my eyes and move the gun to his head.

"I called you four times and received no response. You can see why I’m a little on edge, right? You can see why I’m not happy. Mr. Mueller, I don't do business with flakes. I made that abundantly clear when we made the deal.” I lean in close to his ear, ensuring that he hears my next words clearly and without misunderstanding.

"I said I would kill a man if he did not pay me for my services. You remember that, don’t you?" I ask, tilting my head at him as tears fall from his eyes and his head shakes violently.

What a pussy.

“I'm going to have Diego remove the tape and when he does, the only words that I want coming out of your mouth are the ones describing where the fuck my money is,” I snap, slamming my gun against the side of his head before I straighten myself and stand, his howl muffled against the tape.

I look to Diego and nod, his hand ripping the tape away from Mueller's face immediately after I issue my silent command.

Mueller gasps and begins talking frantically.

“I swear, I swear Marco I had the money, I did! It's just that one of the Saracino boys already had a shipment that I needed so I paid them for it right away. I just needed some time to sell a little more before I could pay you, but I swear. I had it! I was going to—”

“Enough!” I shout, my voice echoing off the walls, his mouth shutting instantly.

Fucking Saracino's. I should've guessed.

It seems that no matter how much business I create in this goddamn city, they're always right there, ready to take it for themselves.

“You tainted our business for a Saracino?” I growl, my gun raising to his crotch again as he starts to blabber like a child.

“It really is a shame, Mueller. I thought we worked well together,” I say, clicking my tongue as annoyance floods me.

I really wasn't in the mood to get my suit dirty today. It's a brand-new piece from Armani and it's going to take a while to get the blood out. What the fuck is wrong with people today? Why must they test my patience for all that it's worth?

I pull the trigger, shooting him in the dick as blood splatters and his yelps fill the boardroom.

“Diego,” I say, his eyes meeting mine instantly.

“I need you to call that dealer from Rhode Island at once and have a contract on my desk within the hour. It seems both the Saracino's, and I have lost a big merchant this week,” I grunt, looking at Mueller before I aim my gun at his throat and fire one last shot, his bloody gurgles disgusting me as soon as I hear them.

I turn, grab a tissue from my desk and wipe my gun before I walk out of the room, turning my head to order one last command at my men.

“Clean up the mess. I want his body at the bottom of the Hudson before dawn.

I leave the office and march through the halls of my mansion, my blood burning like the fires of hell.

I'm so fucking done with this family taking everything of mine. I'm tired of them walking around this city as if they own it, as if they can stake claim even though my family has been here for generations. I want them to hurt, to bleed and mourn and suffer as I have for the last ten years. As I continue to suffer to this fucking day, because of them. And although I want to run over to their territory and shoot each one of them individually and watch them bleed out on the cement, I have something readily available. I have a Saracino of my own to break.

I march up to Lori's bedroom, kicking the door open and snarling when her surprised gasp fills the room. As soon as I slam the door shut, I discard my jacket, roll up my sleeves and march to the bed that she lies on, her hazel eyes wide with both confusion and fear.

Good. It seems the little princess is finally afraid of the beast that lurks in her new castle.

"Marco, what is—" she gasps, eyes searching mine before I silence her with a rough hand over her mouth.

"Not a fucking word. You don't deserve to speak," I hiss down at her, those hazel eyes of hers oozing fear as my cock hardens like granite.

I grab onto her thigh with my other hand, prying her legs apart and yanking her closer to me as I kneel on the bed. She wails beneath my hand, but the sound is muffled.



“Don’t cry, Lorena. It only makes me harder,” I tease, tears springing to her eyes.

She stills instantly, eyes glued to mine as my hand leaves her thigh to travel up her shirt, dipping beneath it in search of her perfect nipples. This woman may be the spawn of Satan himself, but I’d be a fool to say that she wasn’t beautiful. That every inch of her body wasn’t complete fucking perfection.

My fingers find her nipple and pinches it tightly before I grab onto her breast, her shocked gasp hitting the palm of my hand and causing my cock to practically burst from my zipper.

“You’re my toy now, Lori. My little toy that I get to play with whenever I’m bored. Or angry. Or quite frankly, just in the mood to fuck with,” I grunt, her eyes narrowing on me in anger.

Anger I would almost believe if her body didn’t give her away.

Her small, shapely hips rise from the bed, her eyes rolling behind her head as my thumb circles her nipple and my fingers bite into the flesh of her tit, eliciting a raspy moan off her throat.

Jesus Christ, even when I hate her, I want her. And how fucked up is that?

I remove my hand from her breast, and a sound of protest escapes her lips. When I slide my fingers to her pussy and find her drenched, I’m not surprised. In fact, I’m angry. I’m angry because her desire elates me, and

that... that is by far the worst thing that has happened to me today.

I pull my fingers away from her wetness and remove my hand from her mouth, forcing the fingers that were playing at her pussy into it.

“Suck,” I demand. “Taste yourself,” I say harshly, her hot little tongue swirling my fingers on command, my cock screaming with need.

“How does it feel, princess? To taste what your body made for me? For the monster,” I growl, shoving my fingers deeper until they touch her throat.

She gags instantly, eyes tearing up again—only this time... not out of fear.

I yank my fingers from her mouth, placing my palm back over it so that she doesn't have the chance to speak. I'm so over listening to what bullshit people have to say to me today. I just want to be mindless, to lose myself and forget everything.

With my free hand, I unzip my pants, and free my cock before pulling her shirt up to reveal her stunning tits. They're more than a palmful, possibly the largest part of her small body other than her fucking mouth, which had me coming down her throat earlier this morning. For an inexperienced woman, she is incredibly responsive and receptive.

I bend over her, avoiding eye contact as I descend on her breasts, sucking and biting at her nipples while I jerk my cock furiously, her soft moans tickling the palm of my hand. They piss me off—her moans. Because I don't want

this to be for her, I don't want this rough, selfish pleasure to be for anyone but myself. Once again, a Saracino is taking what's fucking *mine*.

I bite down hard on her nipple, enough to draw a bit of blood as she screams against my hand, the sound causing my balls to draw up, ready for release. I jerk my cock a few more times before I aim it at her exposed chest, coming on her shaking tits as she looks up at me with confused, hazy eyes. My cum decorates her ivory chest, reddened from the roughness of my teeth and fingers. It glazes her strawberry nipples and paints her skin as I grunt and growl above her like an animal.

When I'm done, I pull her shirt down, not even bothering to clean my seed from her as I tuck my cock into my pants and zip them up. I get off the bed without looking at her and fix my hair before strolling to the door. Of course, I should've known she wouldn't keep quiet because her small voice calls after me, but I don't answer. I don't turn or look in her direction or give her any time to say anything further.

Instead, I yank the door open and slam it shut behind me. Silencing her before she has another chance to slither inside of my head like the snake that she is.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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*L*ori

When the sun comes up, I'm awake in bed. Marco hasn't been in my room in three days, since wreaking havoc on my body. Havoc that for some sick and bizarre reason, my body enjoyed.

Since he hasn't come, Mariella has been the one to bring me food and let me shower. On the second day that she came to see me, she brought me a change of clothes. A tank top that is two sizes too large and a pair of sleep shorts that I had to tie incredibly tight around my waist, but you won't find me complaining. I was sitting in those soiled clothes for nearly a week and not to mention, Marco's cum for nearly an entire day. I've felt defiled, disgusting and most importantly, fucking confused.

Today, when his mother comes to visit, she is more quiet than usual. She won't look at my eyes and while the last two days she's untied me and let me feed myself, today she keeps me bound and feeds me with a spoon. When I refuse to eat more of the bland soup, she gets up and prepares to leave.

“Mariella? What is wrong? Has something happened?” I ask, eyeing her as she sighs and turns to finally look at me, the air filled with tense sadness.

“Marco found out that I gave you new clothes and let you shower. He’s pretty angry with me right now, won’t even look at me,” she says sadly, my heart sinking into my stomach for her as my blood boils for him.

“What, he just expected me to stay in soiled clothes for a week and rot in my own filth?” I hiss, knowing full well that he’s not pissed because she gave me a shower, he’s pissed that she did it before he could. Before he could take my body once more and do whatever the fuck he wants with it.

*You’re my toy now, Lori. My little toy that I get to play with whenever I’m bored.*

His words echo in my head, my anger for him spiking as high as a fever at this point. I want to scream and shout, mostly because he makes me feel this way, but also because I let my body respond to him. I let my body feel desire for him—pleasure when he finally touches it or looks at it. I think that’s what makes me the angriest, the want that I have for this monster that obviously doesn’t contain a single ounce of humanity like I was beginning to think.

But this is not Mariella’s problem. Even though her son is a ruthless bastard, this is not her fault. All she has been trying to do is help me—make me feel comfortable in this fucked up situation, and now he’s punishing her for it. The anger I feel in result of that does not need to be aimed at her, it needs to be thrown at him.

“I’m sorry, Mariella,” I whisper, turning my head away as I stare out of the window that isn’t nearly as bright today due to the rainstorm outside.

“I didn’t mean to cause anything between you and your son. I appreciate all that you’ve done for me. I hope you know that,” I say, her hand going to my calf as I speak.

“I’m sorry that this is happening to you, Lori. You are undeserving of it and I wish I could make Marco see that. I really do,” she says sadly before her hand leaves my skin and her footsteps echo across the large room, the door shutting softly behind her as she leaves me alone, only the sounds of rain now filling the room.

I lay like this for hours, listening to the rain and breathing softly as my mind races. I can’t really feel my arms at this point, my fingers now beginning to lose sensation in them as well since I have been bound for seven days. Bound to a bed and stuck with only silence and thoughts that turn inside of my brain like a rusty wheel, each day I think of the same things. I think of my family, of my life before this—think about how worried they must be right now. I also think about my friends and my job, wondering if there will ever be a day that I’ll hold the camera again. When I’m not thinking of my family or my former life—I’m thinking of him; the monster.

I think of the pain that he’s inflicted on me; the torture he’s forced me to endure. I also think of the pleasure that I feel whenever he is near, the want that fills me whenever he’s not. It’s the most frustrating and mind-numbing thing, constantly pining for a monster, for a man that wants absolutely nothing more than just see me dead. For a man that sees me as a toy he can play with until he’s ready to kill it and find a new one.

When I think about that, I wonder if he's done this to other women. Mariella said that I was the first woman to be brought to the mansion, but that's because he's allowed her to see me. God only knows what he's done without her knowledge. And when thoughts of him with another woman fills my head, my whole body erupts with a jealousy the likes of which I've never known before. A jealousy that slowly morphs into self-loathing because what kind of sick woman am I? Getting jealous over her captor's sex life?

I'm already a mile deep into my insane thoughts when the door opens again, my stomach dropping instantly because I smell *him*. I smell him before I see him and it has my whole body going ramrod straight as he approaches the bed.

I feel his gaze track up and down my body, my skin burning in response as I remain mute. He doesn't touch me, doesn't speak or issue any commands. He just stands there and stares at me, raining his silent fury down onto my skin. I can feel it, but I refuse to look at him. I refuse to give him anymore of my submission or my acknowledgement.

As the clock ticks and silence continues to fill the air, he grows frustrated. He goes to grab my thigh and instead of fighting him or shying away from his touch, I let him touch me. I continued to ignore him, with my head turned towards the window. I know that this man gets off when I put up a fight, so I refuse to do that today. I refuse to let him feel anything other than frustration, like he's done to me.

"Look at me, Lori," he commands, but I don't respond.

This has him growling like an animal, grabbing a fistful of my hair and forcing my face towards him as he bends over and rests his nose against

mine, when I finally look at him, I am shocked.

The shadows and blurry details of his face are not the same today. His beard is thicker, wilder, but that is not what has my eyes filling with wonder. It is the thick, large and black framed glasses that he adorns over his eyes.

Marco De Vico, head boss of one of the most dangerous mafias in New York City, wears glasses. This knowledge should make me giggle, but like always for some stupid reason, it pulls me to him even more. It makes him feel human, ordinary. And the longer I look at him, the more I feel unexplainable things for him. Things like curiosity, like the need to kiss him. Suddenly, I am dying to know what his lips would feel like on mine. If he kisses like he touches, all rough and consuming. If his beard will hurt my skin when it scratches against me, if I will like it when it does.

When the urge becomes too much to bear, I decide against all my reasoning and remaining sanity to tilt my head up, pressing my lips to his suddenly as a shocked grunt leaves his throat.

He remains still at first, his hand still wrapped tight in my hair as my eyes close and my body melts against him, desperate for him to move. When he finally does, I swear I could almost cry with elation.

His hands go to both sides of my face, smashing me against him as he claims my mouth in a heated kiss. Turns out I was right, he kisses exactly like he touches. He demands and bites and invades and I take all of it with excitement. Excitement not only because I finally know what it's like to kiss Marco De Vico, but because this is the first kiss I've ever had.



And although I should hate that he is my first, I can't help but be enthralled. I can't help but crave more of it, more of him.

He kisses me like he's planning on devouring me, like he wants to swallow me whole. He bruises my lips and sucks on my tongue, tasting every inch of my mouth and claiming it as his own—and I let him. I let him do whatever he wants because finally, fucking finally, he's kissing me.

I moan against his mouth, my hips rising and falling against the bed as a fierce rush of desire overcomes my body. I wrap my legs around his waist, a growl ripping from his throat and falling into my mouth as his cock presses against my clothed entrance, wetness seeping through. This seems to excite him too because one of his hands leaves my face to go to my thigh, his fingers biting into my flesh. I know I'm going to be bruised in the morning, but I couldn't care less. Right now, all I care about is this kiss. All I want is for him to explore me with his mouth and his hands, to make me mindless with pleasure.

He bites down on my bottom lip, a moan falling from me as he thrusts his hips into me, my soft cry filling the air in response. Never in my life have I felt like this before, this wanton, this needy. He brings this out of me like he brings out my anger and, for once, I accept it. I accept this need with open arms and dive down into the abyss that he offers me. One of his hands moves from my face to my hair, grabbing a fistful of strands as his other moves from my thigh to my breast, pinching my nipple through the cotton tank top as I cry out in need, my hips circling against him.

When he sucks my tongue into his mouth and growls like a beast, the room starts to spin. I begin to pant like an animal in heat, desperate for him to tear my clothes from my body and give me what I really want; him. All of him.

Just as that want overflows me, he stops.

He pulls back abruptly, as if I've burned him. I open my eyes, the room hazier than normal as I try to search his face. His chest moves violently, his breathing ragged and unhinged just as I am.

"Why?" He growls, staring down at me, my hair still wrapped in his fist while his other hand goes to my throat, circling it as I gasp.

"Why?" He repeats, shaking me as his confusing rage falls over my trembling body, my hips still circling him involuntarily.

"Answer me, goddamnit!" He bellows, a whimper leaving my lips as I close my eyes in defeat.

I should've known that the passion wasn't going to last long, that the blissful bubble I had put us in was going to burst at some point. I just didn't want it to happen so soon.

"Because I..." I pause, his face looming over me.

"Because *why*, Lori?" He hisses, a snake ready to strike.

"Because I wanted to, okay?" I cry, turning my head away from him as my admission leaves me.

“Because maybe for once, I wanted to feel something other than your wrath.” I whisper, the room falling silent at the sound of my words.

He’s quiet for a while, his hand leaving my throat as his breathing slows from above me. His hand loosens in my hair, but it doesn’t leave for a while. It stays there, immobile like my body as we remain in this awkward position on the bed, my heart no longer hammering inside of my chest.

He moves his hand from my hair to my chin, turning my face and forcing me to look at him. When I do, I notice that his glasses are slightly askew and for some reason, this makes him feel human. This makes him feel like less of a monster.

“You cannot bait me, Lorena,” he snaps, tilting his head at me as he speaks.

“You cannot kiss me and expect me to release you because you offered yourself to me. That will do nothing but get you hurt, princess,” he says, his words meant to be laced with venom, but instead, they just confuse me.

“I wasn’t trying to bait you...” I say, closing my eyes.

“Open your eyes when you speak to me,” he commands and I do, I lift my lids and gaze up at his blurry, beautiful face.

“What were you trying to do then?” he asks, his voice still rough.

I can't help but wonder if he's ever sounded like a person rather than a commanding boss.

"I was trying to... to..." I stammer like an idiot, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"Tell me now or I'll make these ropes so tight, all your blood flow will be—"

"I just wanted to taste you! Okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?" I shout into his face, angry that he has me admitting my stupid, unfathomable emotions.

"I wanted to know what you tasted like and I'm sorry if you thought that was my way of bating you, but it wasn't. It was just me, being a complete idiot," I say, averting my gaze as I sigh, my skin heating all over as he soaks in my words.

He's silent for a while, his gaze still burning holes into my face as I look away. When I turn to speak to him again, he silences me by placing his hand over my mouth.

*Here we go again...*

"If you behave like you're supposed to and stop trying anything funny, then I will give you the pleasure that you're seeking," he bends to lick a trail up my throat, my skin igniting instantly.

“That means no trickery, no random kissing when I’m trying to control you. And no coercing my mother. That will only get you killed sooner,” he snaps, my blood boiling in my skin as my words of rebuttal rush to my lips.

He presses his hand down harder when he feels my mouth open in denial, his forehead pressing against mine.

“I mean it, Lori. Be a good girl and you’ll get what you want,” he says, shoving away from me after he says the words.

When he leaves the room, he doesn’t just leave me in my usual silent loneliness, he leaves me in complete confusion.

Because what exactly do I want?

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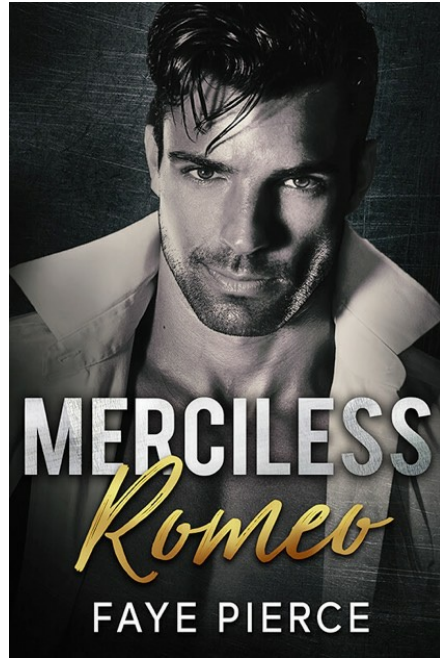
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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As a teenager, Faye used to read at night with a flashlight underneath her bed covers. She fantasized of bad boys who stopped at nothing to capture the hearts and bodies of their women, and of equally strong heroines. Make no mistake, there are no damsels in distress in her world.

Her addiction is the "enemies to lovers" trope, and maybe that's why when she first met her husband, their chemistry was just as sizzling as their disapproval of each other. But as in her novels, passion won, and now they live through their happily ever after.

By day, she is taking care of her household. By night, her shadow self emerges to satisfy her undisclosed desires. Literary and not.



### *Note from Faye*

I'm always happy to communicate with my readers. So if you want to stay up to date with my newest releases and win little treats, please [subscribe to my newsletter](#), and you will always be the first to know about my newest Dark Mafia Romance novel.

Thank you.

Your friend,

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