

Dangerous
VENGEANCE

CORRUPT BLOODLINES

LYDIA HALL

DANGEROUS VENGEANCE

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BLURB

My need for revenge led me to the most dangerous member of the Bratva.

Ruthless and heartless, Matvey “Matty” Gusev, doesn’t deserve my body.

Let alone my soul.

And yet, as his captive, I crave the moments I spend alone with him.

Finding my uncle’s murderer was the only reason I became a journalist.

And investigating Matty was my only mission.

Now, I know his secrets.

But I also know he’s *not* a monster.

Matty would never hurt me.

Letting go of my desperation for revenge is tough as I’m faced with an impossible choice.

Put Matty behind bars or let him walk free and right into my arms...

NATALIE

The more information I dig up on this family the more I'm convinced someone needs to take them down. Sure, it started as a grudge. My uncle was murdered, and I am searching for his killer after police brushed it aside and said all their leads were cold. If they won't help me, I'll do it myself. But this? It has got to be one of the biggest cover ups in history. I shake my head, reading the words on the screen.

And the best part about this story is not only are my coworkers not going to scoop me on this—because they aren't even seeing what I see—but it's going to make my career rise so fast everyone will take notice. Imagine, a newspaper reporter exposing Bratva, the dirty police, finding her uncle's killer and all while still interning at the Herald. Yeah, I think that's going to feel amazing. I look out the window overlooking the city. It's not a great view, too many high-rise buildings stretching skyward to see much. It's the sort of view that makes you want to go higher, which is where I'm going. Up.

When Uncle Hal went down, it was like losing a father. Every Christmas, every birthday, every soccer game, Hal was there for me, right alongside my parents. My dad was really close with him, and it left a massive hole in our lives. When I noticed details in the case files weren't lining up, I questioned police detectives until I got stonewalled. I've spent my entire career—albeit a short one—with one pursuit, to uncover corruption. I had my eyes on this family long before Hal was gunned down in cold blood, and I blame myself partly for his death. Maybe I turned over the wrong rock and the roach that crawled out was the one who took him from me.

A glance at the clock tells me it's time for my review. I've been with the Herald for six months as of last Friday. Sheffield—my boss and a family friend—gave me the leg up after the Tribune shat on my chances of ever scoring a spot on their roster. They said I was nosy, not investigative. Hal spoke to Sheffield on my behalf and now with six months under my belt, he will assess my capabilities and determine if I go permanent here or if I'm destined to move to small town America in order to have a shot at being a reporter.

I stand slowly, straightening my pencil skirt. The sheer silk top I wear hugs my curves, straining at the buttons as I take a deep breath to prepare myself. A few nearby coworkers watch me as I walk through the newsroom toward Sheffield's door. They know it's review time too; I heard them talking this morning near the breakroom where they sit and drink coffee every morning, hashing out stories and sharing trade secrets. I've never been accepted into their club, maybe because I'm just the intern.

I catch eyes staring and keep my gaze fixed on the windowpane with black lettering etched into it. Sheffield is a private guy. He keeps to himself and keeps his door shut at all times. I knock on it and hear him call me in.

“Yes?”

My hand nervously turns the knob and pushes the door open, and he looks up at me. “We have a meeting now?” I stand in the doorway awaiting his invitation and his eyes flick to the clock on the wall.

“Yes, Natalie, come in.” He pushes some papers to the side and uses his mouse to pull something up on his computer screen.

I nervously walk to the chair opposite his desk, my heels clicking on the floor. I know I've done a kick-ass job at this place for the past six months but without Hal around to go to bat for me, I'm in with the big-league players now. Parts of me think maybe I haven't done well enough, that Sheffield will pass on me after all, which is why I've kept this little gem of a story about the Gusev's to myself. If he tries to give me the ax, I can let him in on it, and that could save my job. If not, I can take the story elsewhere with my intel, because there is no way they are getting the same inside source that I have.

“So, Natalie, I've looked over your employee files thoroughly.” He drums his

fingers on his desk as he leans back and continues. “It appears you’ve been assigned pretty trivial stories by your editor.”

“You think so too?” I try to hide my sarcasm, but the leach editor hasn’t given me anything good. She’s intimidated by my experience or something. I worked at the Herald long enough to score a few decent stories that dwarf anything her department has worked on.

“Yes, well...” He sighs and his eyebrows rise. “Given your history, well...” He pauses and I feel the ax ready to drop. So, this is it? He’s just cutting me loose after losing Hal not so long ago? I can’t go to the Times; that’s the only place left, and they’ll never take me until I have years of experience elsewhere. I hold my breath as he continues. “Given your history with the Herald and the stories you produced there, along with your behavior and professional work ethic here, I think we will give you a shot.”

My emotions yoyo, rebounding upward and a smile blossoms. “Really?” I want to jump up and clap my hands, make a big fuss because I’m so happy, but I sit still. Controlling my excitement is challenging but I have to remain professional. I can do a happy dance when I’m off duty.

“Yes, really. And I think we need to put you with a different editor too. One who sees your talent and knows your value.” He leans forward and uses the wheel on his mouse to scroll. “Says you worked in crime news at the Herald. Is that where you’d like to be? Or maybe we should start you in—”

“Crime is perfect,” I blurt out. “In fact, I have a story I’d love to work on first.” Here is where I wow him. If he is happy to hire me, then he will be thrilled to learn I’ve already got a huge story that will draw lots of attention to the paper.

“Is that so?” He leans back in his chair again and cocks his head. “We don’t usually let someone so green choose their own story... but go on. Tell me what it is.”

I beam a smile at him and begin. “Well as you know I’ve worked in crime for the past few years. I’ve reported on a lot of things, seen a lot of the corruption of organized crime and how cases go cold for various reasons. I have a source willing to speak out against the Bratva family. The Gusev’s are into some pretty shady stuff and I have hard evidence that could bring them down. I

plan to connect with my source soon and get more that can back it up. If you allow me, I believe this story will make waves, get attention, you know?”

“Hmm...” He bounces backward on his chair, mimicking a rocking motion, and his head bobs. “This source of yours, can they be trusted?”

“I believe so, sir. The person has given me a lot already but won’t hand over the big stuff until we meet face to face.” I personally checked the information against casefiles from the police, and most of it is a match. Maybe not enough to bring them down if there are dirty cops involved, which I suspect there are. And I don’t even tell him why I’m really searching this family out—my suspicions about their involvement with Hal’s murder.

Sheffield uses the tip of his tongue to polish his canine tooth and furrows his brow. “It’s got to be air tight. I mean, you can’t leave one single T uncrossed or one I undotted. These people you’re snooping around are dangerous.”

I sit a little taller in the seat and nod, sobering myself. I know what he’s talking about. I’ve had a few run-ins over the years, and once I narrowly escaped a drive-by. It wasn’t intended for me, but no doubt they’d have been happy to get me off their backs. So, yes, I’m well aware of the dangers.

“Yes, sir. I understand.” I scoot forward on my chair, anticipating his answer. It really is highly unusual for a new hire to score an assignment like this, but he can’t do this without me. I’m the one with all the notes, research—going back years—and the source. It makes sense to let me run with it because this source isn’t going to trust anyone but me.

“Alright then... Prove yourself.” He nods and looks down his nose at me. “Just remember you’re a news reporter, not a cop. We don’t provide protection.”

I stand and nod firmly, hiding my grin. “Yes, sir. I won’t let you down.”

Sheffield nods at the door and I turn and jaunt out, shutting it behind me. This is going to be perfect. I planned a call with my source for this afternoon, and I am hoping to push them to meet with me soon. The sooner I can get any hard evidence they may have the better. What I have is good, but I know dirty cops or prosecutors could poke holes in it. Which is why I need this to work out right.

Eyes follow me back to my desk and I duck into my cubicle where I sit and immediately pull out my phone. With the approval to move forward on the case, there is no time like the present to push the source. I dial the number I have. It goes to a burner phone, no doubt, but it's how I contact them. The phone rings through, and I hold it to my ear waiting for the answer.

A fleeting thought passes through my mind, that perhaps this source is just using me as a means to draw them out or something. Like they have a personal vendetta against the family and in time, when the Gusev's are made a public spectacle the real fireworks will begin, but I can't miss this opportunity-not for my career and not for my uncle.

"Hello, Natalie." The voice that answers is deep and robotic, made by a person talking through a device to disguise who they are. It's the only voice I've heard, so I can't even say if this person is male or female. Just dangerous.

"Hello...." I swallow hard and continue. "I was hoping we could meet. I have the story mostly ready to go, but I still need that evidence you spoke of—something hard to bring them down." I talk cryptically, not wanting anyone around me to overhear what I'm saying. They don't need to know I'm working on the story of the century.

"I'm not sure you understand how dangerous a meet would be."

"Oh, I know, and believe me; I'm terrified. But I need that information. So, how is this afternoon?" I clench my jaw while I wait for the response. Even if they only agree to a drop and not an in-face meet, I still have to have it. A few seconds tick by with just silence on the line and then they speak.

"Corner of Tenth and Broadway. Twenty minutes. Come alone. There will be a blue sedan parked and waiting. Climb in."

That really sounds sketchy and very unsafe, but if I want this story, I have to take risks. I've been speaking to this person for months now and they've never threatened me. They've only ever been helpful in my research into the Bratva.

"I'll be there."

As soon as I say the words the line clicks and goes silent. The call ends and I

lay my phone on my desk. Dad has a bead on my phone at all times because of GPS—we use an app to keep tabs on each other—so if I have my phone on me, even if I don't use it, I'll be safe. They'll never know I'm being tracked, and if something goes sideways, and I disappear, Dad can just ping my phone. It's going to be okay.

I glance at the clock and see that I barely have time to make it to the destination in twenty minutes, which is a bit concerning. The source knows where I work and what I do, which means they're probably watching me at times. That means they know what I look like, but I still have nothing on them except a mechanical voice.

Standing, I pick up my cell and grab my jacket and satchel. As I head toward the door, one of the reporters at their desk perks up. "Where you going?"

"Meeting a source." I swing my jacket over my shoulder and hold it there with a few fingers as I continue walking. "Don't worry. Sheffield knows."

That guy is a bit nosy, so I don't mind blowing him off. I take the elevator down to the ground level and stroll out toward the street. I have to hail a cab, which sometimes takes a few minutes. This time, I see a few coming toward me, so I walk right up to the curb and raise my hand, cell phone tightly gripped in my fist, and suddenly I feel someone grab me from behind. Something gets wrapped around my head or shoved over it—I can't tell.

"What the! Stop! Help!" I scream and writhe, kicking and swinging my arms.

"Get her cell," a voice says, and someone pries my cell phone from my hand.

"No, you can't take that." As I say the words, I hear something drop to the ground and I yank my arms away as I hear someone stomp.

"Get the car."

"What! No, give me back my phone. You can't do this. Help!" I make such a fuss that I hear a few cops nearby shout at whoever it is that has grabbed me. They take my bag. I feel my hands being tied up, maybe with a zip tie, and then I hear the report of a gun. Someone is shooting? "Oh fuck, help!" Tears come to my eyes as I am shoved into a car.

"Get out of here," a voice screams as inertia forces me into the seat of the car.

The tires squeal and more gunfire sounds.

“Help,” I plead, writhing on the seat.

“Shut her up!” It’s a man, and he’s angry. I feel a knee in my hip, then hear more gunshots.

“Oh god... oh god.” I sob and curl into myself. Is this my source? Did they know I would be coming out and they just snatched me? What is happening?

“I say we just kill her.”

“No, we can’t. She has files... We have to keep her around until we get them.”

The two men go on as if I’m not tied up in their car, and I realize with a gut-sick feeling that this is not the source. This is the Bratva. They’ve learned I’m on to them and they’re not happy.

Oh god, what did I get myself into?

MATTY

Hot water pours over my body, washing the sweat away. The round of eighteen holes with an old friend was unremarkable, but with the lifestyle I live, unremarkable is actually quite remarkable. I crave the slower pace of a normal life. A life where shootings and drug deals aren't the norm. But being born to the leader of the Bratva brought with it certain expectations and responsibilities, as well as a duty to honor and stay loyal to my family no matter the circumstance.

I finish my shower, rinsing the suds from my body, and wrapping a towel around my waist. Then I head for the lockers where my fresh change of clothing is. If everything has gone according to plan, Leo and Rome—my brothers—should be here to pick me up with a very important package—Natalie Yates. We've had our eye on her for some time now. She's a nosy reporter, snooping around the family business and asking too many questions. We need to shut her down before she shares what she knows with anyone of significance, especially the general public.

I dress quickly, heading to the front of the country club where I expect my brothers. As I walk, I button the cuffs of my shirt and ensure my gig line is straight. Ms. Yates has no clue what sort of hornets' nest she has stirred up by sniffing around where she isn't supposed to be. When Jimmy Slater—local hitman—did that, Sven almost killed him on the spot. Lucky for Jimmy, Dominic had a plan we didn't know about. But no one in the family is paying Natalie to hunt for a mole. And none of us want her around.

The sun is hot, and I begin to sweat the minute I walk out the door. Rome

pulls the car up and I climb in. I immediately hear the sounds of a woman struggling from the back seat. They must have bound and gagged her. I glance over my shoulder and see her there, sack over her head and hands tied behind her back. She isn't a physical threat to us; we outnumber her and overpower her three to one. But if she sees our faces and lives to talk about it, we will go down for the crimes of a dozen generations of Bratva men sworn to the fold.

"Did anyone see?" I ask them, turning back to the front as Rome pulls away. The windows are tinted. No one can see in and Leo, seated next to our pretty little package, can't see out.

"We had a security guard fire on us. We fired back. Nothing is traceable, plates were discarded." Rome talks in monotone as he drives. I know he's not keen on taking people hostage. He's an assassin. He removes obstacles, but Ms. Yates has information we need. If we just kill her, folks will look into why she is gone. She's smart. She has probably made backups of backups, mailed them to friends and family. The only way to do this is with stealth, not brute force.

"And is he alive?" It's not like Rome to leave a victim, only a body.

"He's dead, Matty. Okay?" Leo is on edge too. They must have been arguing or something just before I got in.

I hold my tongue for a few minutes. We all realize the delicacy of this situation. If we are wrong, and this woman isn't the one digging up dirt on us, anything we say around her is just evidence to bury us. We can still put her back and cover our tracks and she lives. If we are right, though, and she does have dirt on us, then we just have a few more steps to remove the thorn from our side and be on with our lives.

"Ms. Yates, I do hope these gentlemen have treated you with respect thus far." I don't really care what they've done to her. I'm just not fueling the fire of her fear and hatred. Frightened people take drastic measures.

She makes a few unintelligible sounds and I tell she is gagged. It's better that way. I don't have to listen to her whining and begging for her life. They always beg for their lives, especially women. Every time someone thinks they are going to bring us down; we find out and stop them. There is too much at

stake, too much riding on our family business staying private.

“You know where we’re taking her?” I ask Rome, whose eyes flick my direction, and he nods. We’re headed to my home, the only place deemed safe enough to host our guest, even for a short time. It was my place or Rome’s but he’s too busy hunting an enemy to keep a proper watch on her. My other brothers have wives—nosy ones who may not approve of holding Natalie hostage until we know the truth of everything she’s learned.

We ride in silence the rest of the way and when we pull up to the house and Rome puts the car in park, Natalie whimpers, squirming around the back seat. Leo and I climb out, and he pulls her kicking and grunting from the back seat. She’s missing a shoe, and her shirt is untucked, but she’s in one piece. He forces her to stand, and she shakes her head, presumably to toss the bag she’s wearing.

“It will go better for you if you just comply with what we’re doing, Natalie,” I say, leaning in close to her ear. She smells nice, like lavender and honey, and as I lean over her shoulder, I see the deep V of her cleavage housed within pink lace. It’s arousing.

“Mmm...” I can tell she’s trying to protest, and as we start walking, she limps then kicks her second shoe off. She fights us a little, trying to turn back toward the car, so I wrap an arm around her waist, smack her on the ass, and toss her over my shoulder, holding her down with a firm grip around her knees.

“Dumb bitch,” Leo chuckles. “Why do they always fight us?”

“The will to live...” I nod at the car. “Make sure he reports back. Don’t want the boss wondering if the job is done.” I speak cryptically, but she’s smart. She probably already figured it out the instant Leo let my name slip.

I carry her into the house and lock the door behind us. She’s lighter than I thought, though I won’t carry her around all day. No sense in an extra workout. I carry her right to my den with its dark mahogany paneling and leather furniture. Her pastels don’t fit amongst the charm of male décor. Everything about her is out of place here. I toss her onto the couch, and she bounces, yelping. Then I shut the door and turn the lights off.

I wait for a second, allowing my eyes to adjust to the near blackness. I need a conversation with her before I reveal my identity. If she already knows who I am then her life is as much as over. I move toward her, listening to the sound of her struggling against her restraints. The only light peeks in from behind the blackout curtains. I pull the bag off her head and untie her gag, and she coughs.

“What do you want with me?” she snarls, lurching off the couch. It does her no good. Her hands are still bound and it’s so dark in here if I stick to the shadows, she’ll never see the first hint of my face.

“I could ask you the same question, Natalie. What do you want with the Bratva?” I walk toward the liquor cabinet. At midday it’s a bit early to drink but I have a feeling it will be a long day. I can’t leave this place without word from Dominic that it’s okay. I’m her round the clock babysitter unless I put one of my men on her. First, I have to determine how wily she is, if she will attempt to escape from this fortress I’ve built. We’re far enough out of the city she won’t easily disappear. With gated homes in every direction for miles, she’d sooner be picked up by someone’s security as a prowler and my men would just go claim her. Still, I can’t be too careful.

I pour a glass of Scotch and set the decanter on the counter as I turn to watch her struggling to stand. She knocks her head on the coffee table and whimpers, but she manages to get to her feet. “Where am I? Take me back. I have an important meeting.” Her voice shakes. I like that too. She’s afraid, and she well should be. No one hunts up information on the Bratva and lives to talk about it.

“You are in a safe place, and your meeting was canceled. Did you think we’d let you meet with your source again? Or didn’t you realize we have a phone tap on your personal number?” I sip my whiskey as her whimpers grow quiet. “Our reach is far, Natalie. You’re a smart woman. Think about it.”

She remains quiet. I assume she’s putting the pieces together. I sip my drink and move toward her, staying along the wall. My toe taps the corner of the table sitting there and she jerks, turning toward me. I know she can’t see me, so I keep moving. “Where do you think you are, Natalie?”

“I am in the home of someone in the Bratva. If the man in the car wasn’t

bluffing, then your name is Matty.” She clears her throat, showing she is trying to regain her composure. She was definitely listening to the conversation, collecting every shred of information to tell the police just as I suspected, which means she’ll never leave this place alive. “If my research is correct, you must be Matvey Dimitri Gusev.” The Russian accent she puts on just to say my name is impeccable. I am impressed.

“Well done, Ms. Yates.” It’s obvious she has Russian in her veins too. The bit of research we’ve done into her revealed as much, but the accent tells me more. That she was raised in a home where it was spoken, or at least with someone who spoke it.

“*Ty umresh' zdes'. Ty znayesh'?*” My veiled warning of her impending death makes her stiffen.

“*Net, yesli ya ub'yu tebya pervym....* Not if I kill you first. You know, the research I’ve done is thorough. I have hard evidence against your family.” She slips back into her American accent and continues to turn as I progress toward the light switch. She knows who I am. There’s no sense in playing this game in the dark. “Everyone knows I’m writing this story. They will come looking for me. You won’t get away with this.”

“Ah,” I hum, flipping the light switch, “but you’re wrong. We have millions of dollars backing us, supporters, loyal men and women who will never turn on us. Why do you think police have never caught up with our crimes?”

As the lights flicker, illuminating the room, she blinks and squints at me. I stand proudly sipping my drink watching her squirm again. This time, I take a closer inventory of her. After her tumble from the couch, her blouse hangs lower in front. More of the pink lace is on display for me and I like what I see. Her creamy skin screams to be touched. I take a few steps toward her.

“Look around here.” I gesture with my hand at the grandness of my den. Tall ceilings boast artwork and gold leaf woodwork; a large chandelier dangles overhead, decked out with crystals. I’ve imported only the best and finest sculptures, rugs, paintings, and furniture. This is the lap of luxury. I’ve spared no expense. “If I will go to all this length just to make my home beautiful, what do you think I will do to someone who threatens to take it from me?”

She swallows and turns her face away from me as I stand directly in front of

her. Her chest rises and falls rapidly. Despite her strong outward appearance, inside she is panicking. I finish my drink and set it down on the table next to her. She takes a long deep breath and eyes me in her periphery. Her jaw is clenched shut; her muscles taut.

When I straighten and move in closer, she bristles again. I wrap my arms around her feeling down her arms to the ropes she's bound with and pull her against my body.

This woman is fantastic, curves like a Maserati, complexion of a goddess. I might just have a taste of her if time allows.

"Get off me," she growls, and I use my tongue to trace a line up her neck to her ear.

I whisper, "Oh, I'll get off. Don't you worry about that." She probably thinks I will rape her, that I'm some disgusting monster. I would never. Not after what my mother went through. But I will give her exactly what she wants, and right now she wants to be free of these restraints, but if she doesn't stop pulling away from me, she's going to get a hard smack.

Natalie backs up a step, using her shoulder to push my chest away. I hold her more tightly and work on the ropes to untie her. "Look at my face, Natalie," I hiss. This close, there is no way she will ever forget the details of who I am. I want her to have a very good look. "Look at me!"

Slowly, her eyes turn to take me in, drinking in every inch of my face. "Have a good look. Because once you memorize every line and every wrinkle, it will be the thing you hate most about what you know. People who learn who I really am don't live long enough to tell anyone who I am."

Even after her wrists are free, I pin her against my body. My dick throbs. It's been a while since I fucked, and this close proximity to someone so stunning is arousing. She licks her bottom lip, and her eyes search my face. "I don't think you'll kill me," she whispers, but I hear the quiver in her tone. She does think I will kill her, but she is hoping the hard cock against her thigh may be her salvation.

"Then you haven't done enough research." I pull away, shoving her hard onto the couch. She bounces and the force is enough to push air out of her lungs in

a squeak. “Maybe we have the wrong reporter. Who’d be scared of you?” I walk past her, picking up my glass to refill it. The instant I’m one step away, she leaps off the couch, racing to the door. She doesn’t know how that angers me.

I turn and set the glass back down and in three long strides in there, grabbing her around the waist. She claws at my arm and beats on my hand, and I turn her in my grasp and smack her hard across the face. “Stop fighting me. You don’t want me to get angry.”

Natalie drapes herself over my arm, heaving, and I pick her up over my shoulder again and carry her upstairs. The entire time she is pounding my back, kicking her legs. “You can’t do this! Let me go!” she protests, making it difficult to keep her on my shoulder.

“I can. And I am doing this.” In the room prepared for her, I toss her on the bed, and she scrambles to the headboard as I walk toward the door. “Be quiet or I’ll come back with the gag.”

As I lock her in, I think about how just a little more time with her in my den may have brought down her defenses enough for me to read her. I’ll have to be more patient, though my cock has zero patience. I want her bad. Believe me, if I see the first hint of desire in her eyes, I’m taking full advantage of that.

NATALIE

I have lain in this bed for nearly two hours now watching out the window. The view is beautiful, though I don't see a house in sight. I wonder where we are, how far out from the city we are. It can't be too far; I wasn't in the car for more than an hour and we made a stop to pick Matty up on the way. I don't even know what time it is. There is no clock in this room, and they smashed my phone. I'm cold too; they have the air conditioning set too low, and this comforter feels more like a sheet than a blanket.

My first move as soon as I realized he locked me in here was to go to the window to escape, but there isn't a chance of that. With the damn fifteen-foot ceilings that makes the windowsill of this second story nearly twenty foot high or more. I'd break a leg jumping, and there is no trellis to climb down, no emergency ladder in case of fire. Not to mention the rose bushes beneath the window. Who would want to jump into that thorny mess?

If I thought I could get to freedom I may take the risk, but I've never been one for adventure seeking and I have weak ankles. So, I'm trapped. Stuck here like a prisoner waiting for execution. If what I know about the family is correct, I'm not leaving either. Matvey's warning, given in my grandfather's native tongue of Russian, wasn't just a threat. It's a promise. They don't mess around with shit like this. And I've seen his face too—another reason to be afraid.

I push myself up from the bed and try to shank off some of the anxiety and heaviness. I've been cowering, in shock over being snatched off the street. I should be forward thinking, snooping for any information I can in this room,

looking for a weak spot and planning an escape. Death is certain if I stay, but with a little thought and patience, I know I can find the hole in Matty's defense.

My limbs are heavy, drained of energy by the emotion of the past few hours. I have to force myself off the bed, telling myself positive things to keep motivated and hopeful. It isn't easy, not with the weight of grief over Hal and my knowledge of the atmosphere I've been subjected to. But I manage to open a few drawers with shaking hands. There is nothing here but empty drawers. The old Civil War era bedroom set is void of any clues. The old wood is worn too, faded and in need of refinishing.

The carpet, however, is expensive. I stoop to touch its soft texture—Persian if I had to guess. Any man who spends this amount on furnishings—updated or not—is not afraid of anyone entering his home to take it. Which means he's probably not afraid of my threats to expose his family. That's why I'm here, locked up like an animal. They were afraid, and now they aren't. With me off the streets, the threat is gone.

Fuck's sake, why didn't I give myself insurance? I should have given Sheffield a copy of all of my files. As it is, if they get my laptop, I lose my research and they'll never be exposed for their crimes. I pace the floor now, walking past the ornate fireplace surround. Intricate decorations have been carved into it, a retelling of the days of creation starting near the bottom left and arcing up beneath the mantle to end on the bottom right. He had to have paid a pretty penny for that. It's a work of art, not a simple home furnishing.

"Get it together, Nat," I tell myself, moving to the bathroom. I haven't relieved my bladder since this morning. I'm bursting at the seams. The idea occurs to me that I will need to eat and drink—screw that. They'll probably try to poison me. That means less mess to clean up when I finally die. I wonder how long they will keep me alive, how hard they'll press to get my information.

I walk into the bathroom, not bothering to shut the door and yank my skirt down so I can pee. Even the bathroom is luxurious. It has been updated, marble counters and bath surround, claw foot tub and glass shower. The entire wall is mirrored, making it a bit creepy to watch myself sit on the toilet and do my business, but I can see how practical it would be if I had this in my

apartment as I got ready for work each day. I try not to watch my reflection in the mirror, but I notice how tired I look, how disheveled my hair is.

“He’s getting to you. You can’t let him win. Stay strong, Natalie.” I give myself a pep talk as I wipe and pull my skirt back up. I flush then fix my shirt and turn to the sink to wash my hands just as I hear the key turn in the lock. He’s back. The hair on my arm stands on end.

I don’t know how to respond to this man. Matvey Gusev is dangerous, angry and determined. I’ve seen the things he’s done in his business practices. He’s ruthless and cutthroat, and my god is he attractive too. I thought that the first time I saw a picture of him. All of the Gusev men are, but Matty stands out. His chiseled jaw has a dimple in it, dark, stormy eyes see right through me. If he wasn’t holding me hostage, I’d be aroused by him, or maybe I’m still aroused by him. I don’t even know. I’m too scared for my life to let that side of me think right now.

“I’ve brought dinner.” His voice is stern still, commanding. Any other man with that tone of voice would have me eating out of his hand. I like the bad boys, the ones who take what they want and never say they’re sorry. I always have, so my attraction to my captor is no shock to me. Still, I’ve only allowed my fantasy to entertain me in books and movies, nothing more. My body is a temple to be safely guarded until the right man comes along.

“I’m not hungry.” I rinse my hands and dry them, but before I take a single step out of the bathroom, he’s there, staring at me. His eyes hungrily rake over my body, as if memorizing me.

“You’ll eat because I said so.” Matty blocks my path to the bed which is the only place in this tiny space I’m allowed to feel safe. As if I could feel safe here.

“Move,” I tell him, standing my ground. He’s changed clothes, now wearing a plain white tee and black jeans. His stockinged toes point at me squarely, his shoulders back so the shirt stretches over his muscled chest. He catches me checking him out and takes a step toward me. “Move,” I repeat, this time my resolve waning a little. This whole thing is a façade. I’m trembling inside, but I won’t let him see me weak or scared. I have to come across as confident and aloof or he will eat me alive. That’s how these guys work. I know too

much about what he's done to believe otherwise.

"Is that really what you want?" His question strikes me as odd. Of course, that's what I want. He's in my way and I want to lie down. But I also want to go home and pretend this never happened. Part of me also wants to call off the story altogether and play it safe by joining the sports section of the paper and never thinking of organized crime again.

"Yes," I say resolutely, but he takes a step closer to me again. I can feel his hot breath across my chest. It makes goosebumps rise on my arms and the back of my neck. What is he doing?

"I moved."

Matty takes a single finger and brushes a few stray dark hairs out of my eyes. I smell his shampoo on his hands still, or lotion. Whatever it is, it is manly, musky and earthy. It smells good. My eyes lock on his; he's trying to seduce me? If I scream and push him away, will he force me? Or will that only make him get off more? I turn my face away, refusing to look him in the eye as his finger trails down the side of my face to my neck. He draws a line over my collar bone to my chest and down between my tits, then pushes my shirt to the side.

"Your tits are gorgeous."

He's turning me on, but how? I'm his prisoner, not his partner. "What are you doing?" I keep my face turned away as his finger brushes over the inside curve of my left breast. It sends shivers across my skin.

"I'm only giving you what you want."

"Is this what I want?" I have to force my voice not to crack. I've never had a man come onto me so strongly, with such an assertion that I want him. My pulse gets thready, and I feel lightheaded.

"Yes, Natalie. I see it in your eyes, the way your body responds. You think I'm attractive, don't you?" He pushes a finger into my waistband and pulls me out of the bathroom. "You want me to do bad things to you."

"I want to go home." I grab his wrist to extract it from my clothing but inside I am feeling worked up. Instead of freeing myself from his grasp, I fail. He

pulls downward in one hard yank and my skirt tears at the waist. I gasp and try to pull away. “Stop...” But he pulls again, splitting the skirt so far down one seam it begins to slide over my hips.

“Stop? Or more?”

Matty pushes the skirt down until it’s puddled around my bare feet. I stand there in shock, hands trembling at my sides. He’s hunting me now, stalking me backward toward the bed. His eyes devour my gaze and I bite my lip. If he fucked me, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, but I shouldn’t. I can’t. He’s a murderer and a thief, someone who can’t be trusted.

“Stay away from me...” I say the words, but my body is responding to the way he moves stealthily toward me.

Matty uses one hand to reach over his back and pull his shirt off in a swift movement that has me feeling aroused. His chest is covered with tattoos, upper arms too. It’s damn sexy, and I can’t keep my eyes off of him. I’m supposed to hate him, to be afraid of him and run away, so why am I so turned on by this?

“There it is... The way you look at me like I’m about to fulfill your deepest fantasy... Do you have a fantasy, Natalie? One you want to tell me?”

“Fuck you,” I mumble, feeling my stomach swirl. I do, but I’ll never tell him. It’d be like giving him the keys to the kingdom and his kingdom needs to fall. I back up until my calves press against the bed and I’m stuck. I glance at the door—shut and probably locked. The food he left on the dresser smells heavenly, but there is no opting for dinner now, not with my skirt on the floor and my panties about as wet as can be.

“See, I think you’re holding out on me. I think you want to beg me to fuck you. Or maybe you want me to just take it.”

My body tingles at the thought of him taking what he wants. What would he make me feel? I’ve lost all desire to run away now—or most of it. I still want to escape and get back to my work, expose these bastards and take them down, get justice for my uncle. But why can’t I enjoy it a little first?

“Ah, that’s it... Right there—” he points at my face “—I see it.”

He sees nothing. I try to keep my face steady. Fuck yes, I want him, but I won't let him see what he's doing to me. He takes another step closer, and I spit on his chest. "Stay back." He looks down at his chest, wipes up the spit and smirks at me.

"Feisty... I like it." With the same hand he wiped away my assault, he reaches out and grabs my pussy, hooking his fingers into me and pulling me. I'm forced to take a step closer to him as his hand investigates my moisture. "Yes... and the puddle too. You want me to fuck you, Natalie?"

I whimper as he pushes my panties aside and slides a finger into me. "Stop," I protest weakly. My hands, splayed on his chest, try to hold him at bay but I'm helpless. He rubs my clit through my panties then grasps the waistband and jerks them downward, tearing them too. What the fuck will I wear now?

"Please..." I whimper, both a request to continue and to not hurt me.

"Oh, you're going to enjoy this..." Matty shoves me hard onto the bed and a split second of some beast of an expression graces his face. His eyes practically glow with lust. I feel fear flush through me, and I turn to my stomach, attempting to crawl across the bed to get away, but he grabs my hair and pulls my head back. "Not so fast."

"Please... I..." My words come out half-choked.

"You what? Want me to go easy? Want me to take my time and romance you? Your eyes are begging for me, Natalie. A woman who doesn't do what she's told needs to be taught a lesson. You will eat your dinner as soon as I'm done teaching you that lesson."

"No," I gurgle, my neck craned so far backward I can't breathe. I protest again. If he's teaching me a lesson, it's that I am so easily dominated by someone so sexually attractive that I'd give up my virginity to him without truly fighting. Why? Because I like being dominated. And I like it because the powerlessness of it gives me a rush, like I walked to the edge and looked over and thought about jumping. "NO..."

I hear his belt buckle jingle, then the woosh of the leather as it slides out of the belt loops. It jingles more before I feel a hot smack across my ass and the crack of the leather on my skin.

“Ah!” I wince, clawing at the crumpled comforter. It hurts and stings. I try to tuck my chin down, but he holds my head back. “Stop...” I protest, unsure if I like this. I want him to fuck me, not beat me.

“Oh, but how would I teach you a lesson then?” The leather cracks on my skin again, this time the other side. I yelp and whimper and clench my pussy. It’s more arousing than I thought. I hiss and gasp as he smacks me again, this time with his hand.

“Fuck...” I grunt, unconsciously rocking my hips. My pussy aches to be filled up.

“That’s a good girl....” His compliment irritates me. I want him to fuck me and get it over with so I can die. The shame of this moment threatens to destroy my arousal. I try to crawl away again, but he pulls my hair hard and forces me back. This time, his hard cock is there pressing against my entrance.

“Shit...” I moan as he slides his head up and down my crack, smearing my juices around. “I... I’m...” If I tell him I’m a virgin, will it even matter? That I know nothing about this? That he’s going to split me from hole to hole? That I’ve never even done this?

“You have such a pretty little pussy... and your asshole just begs me to fuck it. Maybe next time,” he says as he lines up to my hole. I grit my teeth expecting the penetration, but he teases me. “You’re tight. I can already tell.”

“Shit... just do it!” I moan, the only hint of consent I’ll give him. “Get it over with...” I add, to hopefully make him think I’m scared and disgusted by him, but I’m anything but. I want him so fucking bad right now and I’m ashamed that I do.

Matty pushes his cock into my hole, and I feel it stretch and burn so bad I know I’ve torn open. He holds my hair tight in one hand, smacking my ass with the other as he fucks me hard.

“Ahhh...” I groan, fighting against his hold on my hair. It’s excruciating, exhilarating, and exquisite all at once. The way he fills me is divine, touching every place inside me that begs to be sated. “Oh, mmmm, fuck.”

“I told you, you wanted this.” His gruff thrusts are anything but gentle or

loving. He slams into me so hard I lose my balance but his grip on my hair holds me upright. I touch my clit, imagining what this must look like—captor fucking captive. The thought arouses me more and I feel my body build toward orgasm.

“Shit... oh shit,” I pant, furiously massaging my clit. It hurts, and I whimper, but it feels so good. I’ve never had a man make me come like this, only once—and that was oral in the back of his car. But shit does this feel amazing.

One more hard smack to my ass and I’m undone. His hand leaves my skin only to return as he pushes a digit into my ass. My hips buckle; I nearly collapse. My body spasms and jerks, clenching around his cock. “Ahhh,” I cry out, unable to control the sounds my vocal cords make in response to the waves of pleasure washing through me.

He’s silent for a moment, then I hear a growl rumble up out of his chest, his hand claws at my sides after releasing my hair. His fingernails sink into me, and I shudder. “God, you feel good.” His voice is gruff, and he slams into me a few more times before I feel heat seep into me. I assume it’s his load spewing out of his cock. I’ve never experienced this. My body continues to jolt and twitch even as he pulls his finger from my ass. My stomach spasms and my body jerks and I collapse to the bed as he pulls out, his sex draining from my hole.

I’m spent, heaving hard breaths and letting my body melt into the mattress. It was incredible. I don’t want to open my eyes and remember that I’m his prisoner, not his lover. For this split second I want to enjoy the sensations. I listen to him zip his jeans up and take a few deep breaths. When I look up at him, he’s putting his t-shirt on, covering the artwork that decorates his chest.

“You didn’t tell me you were a virgin.” He eyes me and I feel shame swell. I look at the sheet, stained with my blood. It’s a telltale sign I can’t hide.

“Fuck you.”

His smirk is infuriating. That he would get pleasure out of that pisses me off. “Now eat... and when you’re done, you’re going to tell me what you know about my family.”

“And if I don’t?” I’ll never give up what I actually know. If he thinks I will,

he's wrong. I may be an easy fuck because he's so damn sexy and assertive, but I'm not a pushover.

“Then I'll have to teach you a lesson again; only next time I won't be so nice.” Matty walks to the door and opens it then walks out. It was unlocked the whole time? I hear him turn the key in the lock and look across the room to where the food sits—a bowl and some silverware on a tray next to a glass of something.

Fuck that sex was amazing and I want it again already. But I won't sleep with the devil then tell him my secrets. He'll have to do better than that if he thinks he's getting to me. I'm not selling my soul.

MATTY

Even as the key clicks in the lock I am reeling. Natalie—a virgin? I stand there pondering it for a moment. She’s twenty-five-years-old and only now having sex for the first time? Women like that are a myth, aren’t they? Ones who still wait until marriage to engage in sex. And God was she so fucking tight I thought I wouldn’t fit. I felt the exact moment her skin tore giving me entrance. It was intense, like my first kill, staring that man in the eyes as the blood drained out of his body. Her blood stained my dick. Not nearly the same, but better in every way.

I walk down the stairs and head toward my den. So much about her remains a mystery. Other than her sizzling good looks and her profession, I know nothing about her. I sit down at my computer and power it on. A little research into her past won’t hurt at all, and if anything surfaces about her that helps us out, all the better. We just need her research notes from her computer, which isn’t connected to a network, or we’d just hack it.

Dominic doesn’t want her dead until we have all her files in our hands. What he doesn’t realize, however, is that we need to know everything she knows, and everyone she’s told. If she really did make copies and send them to other people, like her boss, then all of those people need to be tracked down too.

I let my fingers do the walking, pulling up her social media profiles and sifting through them. Her privacy settings are set very strict, so I can’t see much. I do enjoy the photos of her at Ocean City with someone who appears to be a friend or family member. The images were shared last year in the summer; Natalie looks fantastic in a bikini, but that only makes me want to

see her fully nude.

After nearly an hour of surfing the internet to see who and what she's connected to, my phone rings. I see Dominic's face light up the screen and I pick it up and answer it.

"How is our guest?" he asks, his voice stern as always.

"She's obeying for now." I don't need to tell him what methods I employ to keep her obedient. I assume as long as she finds me irresistible, she'll do whatever I want. Natalie is unique; a woman who never had sex but whose fantasy involves being forced to have sex and dominated by me? But she is so smart. It's an odd combination that arouses me greatly.

"And do you have the information? Have you squeezed her?" He's pushy and I understand why. If she is supposed to check in with anyone following her meeting with her source—who we're still trying to track down—and she doesn't call, they'll come looking. Or they'll call the police. Neither of those options is good for us.

"Tonight. I'll make sure I have it tonight." I sit back in my chair and stare at Natalie's profile picture on her Facebook account. I don't like admitting how sexually aroused I am by her considering she has to go. She's a threat to our family. I also will never tell my brothers how she responds to me—like she's waited her whole life to be dominated by someone and I'm the one she chose to submit to. They'll only tell me it's a manipulation tactic, that she's using her feminine wiles to control me and make me think I'm two steps ahead of her when in reality she's outsmarting me. I know it's not the case. But they won't think that.

"Tonight then..." He pauses for a moment, then continues. "We have to make sure she hasn't told anyone about this—her editor or boss."

"The editor is a chump. I've already looked him up. He's only given her breadcrumb stories. She'd never confide in him about this level of a story." I haven't looked into Sheffield though, her boss. From the way I understand the inner workings of this paper, he is the one who hands out assignments too, so that means if she is on this story for real, he's the one who knows about it. "I'll handle the boss."

“Good, good...” Dominic sighs and clears his throat. “Tonight then. We can’t have this leaked.”

“Got it.”

“Don’t let me down, Matty.”

“I won’t.” He doesn’t even say goodbye; he just hangs up. It’s a clearcut job. I have my work cut out for me too: find the boss and make sure he knows nothing, then get rid of him.

The next few searches produce instant results. Carl Sheffield lives in Scarsdale and commutes to work daily. That’s only another twenty minutes north of where I am now. He’s probably sitting around his family home sipping wine and chatting with his beautiful wife and kids. He has no clue that allowing Natalie to proceed with her ridiculous story means he’s going to pay with his life. I almost feel sorry for him, but in this line of work, rules are rules. When you learn about Bratva inside information, you either join us or you die.

In this case, we have no use for a mid-level manager at a newspaper.

I stand and push my call button. Flynn, one of my soldiers, is on standby tonight. I like to have at least a few guys ready to aid me at all times and tonight is no exception. I walk to my closet and pull out a dark hoodie and slide it on. People expect me to wear suits and slacks, but when I am on the hunt, dressing down is more appropriate. Besides, if I get blood on my good clothes, it’s hard to get out.

“You called?” Flynn says from the doorway. He sounds winded, as if he ran to get here. I like that energy.

I turn and nod at him. “Yes, I need you to keep an eye on our guest. She’s in the room at the end of the hall next to mine. She should be finished eating soon. Keep her company gently until I return. Don’t lay a hand on her unless she tries to escape, but do not hurt her or kill her. Understood?”

“Yes, sir. Anything else I can help with?”

I reach into my pocket and produce the key to Natalie’s room, placing it on his open palm as I pass by him. “Yes, have Peter bring the car around.”

I walk into the foyer and head for the front door. I pass the hall closet where my shoes are stored and sit on a bench to don a pair of sneakers. They're old, used in more than one event like this, and I know the treads are so worn they won't be recognizable. It's the only reason I keep them around.

In less than five minutes my car is parked out front, and I am climbing in. Sheffield won't suspect me coming, which makes this all the more sweet to think about. It's not like this is the first time we've had a run-in with the man or the paper either. A few reporters last year tried to do an exposé on us, and we had to quiet them. Except, back then they really knew nothing, so it was easy to shuttle them off to a different city with promises of fame and fortune. They never knew the offers came from us either. But Sheffield knew, and we threatened him to keep him silent. So far, it has worked, so I wonder why he'd turn on us now. Does he have a death wish?

I meticulously plan what I'll say as I drive. And for twenty minutes all I can think about is protecting my family. And Natalie—the curve of her ass beneath my hand as I smacked it hard. Next time she'll be more pliable, less rigid. And all because now I know she wants it, and now I know what she likes. It's no wonder she's never given herself over to a man before. She's an erotic little vixen who wants to be tied up and spanked. Just the thought of that makes my dick twitch.

I pull up in front of the Sheffield house and shut my car off. Lucky for me the front door is unlocked. It's such a safe neighborhood here, despite the fact that it's not a gated community. I bet they don't see any crime, that people mind their own business and folks feel safe in their own homes. Until some creep like me wearing a dark jacket with the hood up walks right into their home on family movie night and pulls a gun.

“Hello, Carl.” I chamber a round and stroll right into the room. Carl and his wife jolt off the couch, gathering their two children to their arms. “I suggest you send your wife to the basement.”

Carl glances at the end table where his cell phone lays. I look at it and pick it up, turning it over in my hand. The thing is as good as a brick now. I drop it and smash it under my foot then flick the tip of my gun and nod.

“Basement...” I repeat and Carl looks terrified.

“Who are you? What is this?” He herds them like little lost sheep toward a door beneath the stair leading up to the second floor. When he opens, I see the steps descending to the basement.

“I’m just here to talk, Carl.” I shake the gun again and a very frightened Mrs. Sheffield nudges her children down the stairs, following them with a look of terror on her face. Sheffield shuts the door behind them, and I say, “Lock it.”

“There’s no lock.” He backs away, hands raised, so I walk a few paces into the dining area and grab a chair from beneath the table. The white wood is immaculate, as if no fingerprint has ever smudged the surface. I thrust it at him, and he uses it to pry the door shut.

“In there,” I tell him, gesturing back toward the family room where the movie still plays. It’s dark in here, lights low to enjoy the show, and I’m certain the wife and kids haven’t seen my face, but Sheffield will, because I can’t have him threatening my family anymore. He has to know that he’s crossed a line. “Sit.”

Sheffield plops obediently onto the couch and stares up at me in horror. “Why are you doing this?”

I fold my hood back carefully and reveal my face to him. His eyes widen in revelation, and I watch his Adam’s apple bob. He’s terrified. “What do you want?”

“You see, Carl, I thought we had an understanding a few years back. We sent those good boys off to LA to do their investigative reporting and we made a deal with you. You keep your reporters out of our business, and you’ll be fine. Except, you have Natalie Yates sniffing around our family.”

“I can explain, okay—”

“Oh, I’d love it if you would.” I wait a second, but he remains quiet. “See, the way I see it, you were supposed to make sure no one pursued a story like this again. But not only has she been snooping into our family for years, but you are letting her run with the story now? In case you didn’t realize it, we put a wiretap on her phone. She never did get to meet that source.” I reach into my pocket and pull out the silencer for my Glock, screwing it into the barrel.

“What source? I knew nothing about a source.” Sheffield pisses his pants. I

chuckle. They always piss their pants.

“Hmm, well maybe you don’t know as much as I thought you knew.” It doesn’t change what I have to do tonight though.

“Please, let me explain. She hasn’t shared anything except that she wants to run a story on you. I know nothing—”

“Stop talking, Carl.” I raise my gun and point it at him, using the tip of the barrel to force his chin upward. “It doesn’t matter if you know about her story or if you have her files. You authorized her to run with it, which means in a matter of days, some of your editors will know. That is enough of a threat to break our agreement. You understand, this is just business. Right?”

“No, please. I—”

“I’m sorry, Carl.”

“I’ll give you the password,” he blurts out and for a moment I think of offering mercy.

“What password?” I watch him as he fumbles for words. Sweat beads on his forehead as he pulls a pen out of his pocket and uses a piece of mail lying on the end table to scribble something.

“It’s my log-in to the system. It works on my computer too. You’ll see she shared nothing with me or anyone else at the paper. At least not over our private system.” He holds the torn envelope out to me with a trembling hand. I snatch it and shove it in my pocket. I hear the wife in the basement consoling the kids who are crying.

“Such a shame your kids won’t have a father anymore.” I point the weapon at his head and shake mine.

“Please, you don’t understand. My kids need me.”

“Hmm, I’m sorry to hear that. I guess you should have thought of that before you double crossed us.”

Without any remorse or hesitation, I pull the trigger and blood peppers the wall behind him. Carl’s lifeless body reels sideways and his head smacks the ground with a sickening, hollow thud. I stand over him for a second,

watching the blood pool around his rotund body and then I let myself out. The music of the closing scene of whatever animated film they were watching seems eerily out of place as it resounds out the door following me to my car.

Not only is the boss no longer a threat, but I have a way to access his files and confirm he was telling the truth. A man that close to death always tells the truth. It's often his only leverage against dying. Dominic will like this.

NATALIE

I ate the food last night. It was good. Then I sat around waiting for Matty to come back like he said he would and grill me about my knowledge of his family. Instead, some unnaturally blond-haired man came to take my tray. He was silent and stoic, not at all like Matty. It's just as well. I have no intention of giving up information to him. He'll have to kill me first. When he does and my body turns up, Sheffield will turn my computer over to the authorities who will sift through it for the evidence they need to put this family away.

Until then, I just have to wait it out. I'm not afraid to die, though I would rather not do so. The thought has occurred to me too that I may yet escape. The calmer I keep myself the better I can think. If I learned one thing from Uncle Hal's death it's that these people have no remorse, no heart. They take what they want and kill whoever gets in their way. As long as I look like I'm not in their way, that I'm not a threat, I prolong my life.

Is that why I fucked him then? Or am I really just that turned on by how aggressive he is?

I push myself out of the warmth of the bed and hobble to the bathroom. I didn't realize how much that sex affected me. My lower back and pelvis are tender from how hard he fucked me; it feels like my insides are bruised. And when I sit on the toilet to relieve my bladder, it causes searing pain in my pussy. I Kegel so hard I think I'll burst a blood vessel in my eyeball straining, but I manage to stop the flow of urine.

It stings and aches. My pussy is torn from how rough and large he was. I dab toilet paper on it to dry it, then spread myself and examine the tear. It's probably not abnormal for a woman to tear like this her first time but fuck if it doesn't hurt like hell. And God, I have to pee. I whimper as I use a finger to cover the tear and let the piss drain from my body. It brings tears to my eyes, and it doesn't get any better the longer I urinate.

When it's over, I go straight to the shower and turn the water on, stepping in to clean myself. I'm not stupid enough to use soap on my vagina. No one is. The pain is bad enough with just clean water. Matvey Gusev may also be the world record holder for largest dick, or maybe that's just my perception since I was a virgin, and he was so fucking demanding.

I wash myself from head to toe, my body slowly adjusting to the aches and pains. When I lather my crack and my finger brushes over my ass, I remember his finger there. Wow! That was too amazing. Why did he get in my head like that? How could he make me so horny? I shake my head and rinse my body, realizing I have nothing clean to wear. After he ripped my skirt and panties off, then left me in a heap of pleasure, I got rid of the shirt and bra too. No sense wearing a top with no bottoms at all. So, I guess my wardrobe now consists of bedsheets and towels.

I turn the water off and dry off, returning to the bedroom with dripping hair, and I hear a click at the door. Someone is there unlocking. My stomach rumbles. I hope they've brought food; I'm starving. I stand hesitantly by the foot of the bed, the towel wrapped around my torso and tucked into itself. Matty will think I've done this just for his viewing pleasure, but it's not like my skirt is going back on me any time soon. I don't have a sewing kit and I'm not a seamstress.

The door pushes open and Matty walks in carrying a tray of food again. Toast and what looks like coffee. It makes my mouth water. I show my weakness by licking my lips, but I can't help it. Everyone has to eat, right?

"Good morning," he says as he sets the tray down. He turns and nods at the door and whoever is there shuts it behind him. I don't hear it lock, but I also don't hear that person walk away, which means I'm being guarded. That explains why he never locked it last night either.

I say nothing, watching him set the tray on the corner of the dresser. It's a very kind thing for him to feed me when I know he will just kill me the way someone in his family gunned my uncle down. Hal was just getting a few sundries for my parents, and he never came back. I'll never forget the shock of having him torn from my life like that. I have to remind myself of that as Matty turns and runs a hand through his dark waves, because seeing the way his eyes drink me in makes me remember something else. Something I need to push from my thoughts before I have a mess between my legs again.

"Looks like someone slept well."

"What do you want?" I swallow hard, clinging to the foot railing on the bed with one hand. Only now do I see that it isn't just a tray of food that's been brought in. On the armchair next to the door there is a long stick and a rope. What on earth he thinks he will do with those, I'll never know, but it frightens me a bit.

"I thought we could chat over breakfast." He gestures at the toast and coffee. I like mine with cream and sugar, though I see none of that. It's black and it's probably bitter, like my soul. I want nothing to do with it.

"I have nothing to say to you." I stiffen, reaffirming my inner resolve to hold my tongue. I can't give him the satisfaction. Hal needs to be avenged, and his family needs to be held accountable.

"I think you must misunderstand what I'm saying, Natalie." Matty advances on me, hands calmly at his sides. He touches the strands of dark hair dripping down my chest and curls them around my ear. "You don't get a choice. You are going to tell me everything you have on us, or you are going to be taught your second lesson."

"I have nothing to say to you," I repeat, knowing he fully intends to back up what he's saying with action. Especially when he draws a line down my chest to the towel and pulls it loose, letting it fall to the ground. I shiver, the cold air making my nipples hard.

"Ah, so you want to learn the hard way that I will not be ignored?"

I shrug one shoulder. His "lessons" aren't the problem; it's my fear of dying. He can fuck me all day long and I'll never talk. He knows nothing about me.

If he holds a gun to my head, I'm squealing like a pig, but this? This only encourages me to rebel against him because his cock inside my pussy is electric. I want to feel the girth stretch me while his eyes drink me in.

"Do your worst." The comment rolls off the tip of my tongue as my vagina begins to ache. There is no way in hell this is going to feel good, not as torn as I am, but I'd rather do this than to give up what I know and take a bullet. The longer they need me alive, the better. It means more time for someone to report me missing and the authorities to come looking.

"So you want me to teach you? You want to learn from me?" Matty turns away from me, surprising me. I thought he'd just force me onto the bed, pin me down and fuck me again. But he walks to the chair where the rope and stick are and picks up the rope. Tie me up? Is that what he'll do? I've never been tied up.

"What are you doing with that?" My chest tightens as he turns back toward me. He is going to tie me up. Why do I find that arousing and exhilarating? And why does it make me want him even more? Is this what Stockholm syndrome is? Shit, I might come just standing here with the way he's looking at me.

"I'm going to show you why it's important to comply with my wishes."

As he stalks toward me, I back up. I'm not sure I'm going to like this. Sex is just two people on a bed naked, not this weird shit. He's into some bondage or something and I'm just not. I back into the bathroom and try to shut it, whimpering as he advances, but he puts a booted foot in the doorway preventing it from latching. He's nearly double my size in strength and weight, and it takes nothing for him to push the door open and grab my wrist.

"Please, Matty, don't," I whine. "I'll fuck you. I'll do anything you want. Just not this." I don't even know what "this" is, but I can tell from the bulge in his pants it's something sexual. So maybe I do want it, but how would I know if he doesn't just tell me what he's doing?

"The pupil doesn't get to decide what lesson they learn. The teacher does." With one hand he pulls me back into the bedroom, with the other he dips a few fingers into my valley, raking across my sore spot before bringing his fingers to his lips and sucking them. "And you, my dear student, are very

ready for this lesson.”

I hate it that my body wants this. I hate it that he arouses me like this. I hate it that I could bend over and let him have his way with me because everything inside of me screams at me that he’s the enemy. That I should run away and call the police.

He swiftly wraps the rope around my wrists, binding me and smirking the whole time. I yelp as it pinches my skin and tightens down so I can’t even move my arms. Then he lifts it and swings it over the bathroom door, lashing it around the doorknob before shutting it. There is no way for me to get loose. My body dangles there, ass facing him, toes barely touching the Berber carpet. My shoulders scream under my own weight but I’m exposed vulnerable and helpless. A perfect victim for his dominant hands.

“Stop, please...” My wrists strain against the rope and my shoulders bend at an awkward angle. It’s terrifying and arousing all at the same time. I want to know what he’ll do next, but I’m scared to find out.

“Be patient, and I’ll show you everything you need to know to please me.” His hands smooth down my sides, cupping my hips. He breathes on the back of my shoulder and bites down hard. I swear he draws blood. I must look like large game, hung and ready to be skinned. His fingernails claw across my body, then rest on my ass spreading my cheeks.

“What?” I gasp as his tongue plunges between my legs. I whimper and moan, feeling his stubble scrape at my inner thighs. He eats me so good, drinking in my moisture. His tongue soothes the ache of my torn skin and I know my body will come so soon if he doesn’t stop, but he does. He pulls away and leaves me dangling there whining.

“Please... Matty... Just let me down.” I want to follow that with “and make me come,” but I don’t say it.

“No.” He grips my ass hard and lifts my hips up a little higher. It hurts and my toes dangle in the air.

I can't believe what is happening. I'm naked and bound in his house. He's going to rape me or kill me—I'm not sure which. All I can do is wait and hope I can convince him to let me go. I try to protest him. “You can’t just

keep me here. People are going to look for me.”

“I can do whatever I want.” He tugs my hair, pulling my neck to the side. I yelp, squeezing my eyes closed and waiting for him to bite me. He doesn’t. Instead, his lips are on my flesh, kissing and sucking. He’s marking me as his, and I feel my body respond. I’m scared, but I want him to touch me more.

I hear his belt buckle, then rustling. He's undressing, and it makes my pussy ache. The way he tied me up as if he'd done this a million times, it terrifies me, and excites me all at once. But that stick. What is he going to do with that? I try to watch him, but as my body turns, he grabs me and forces my face back against the door.

"Hold still," he barks.

I hate this. I hate that he's doing this to me. He's dangerous and crazy. I don't know what he's going to do, but I'm not going to pretend that I'm enjoying it. I'm not going to be his plaything, his toy. Or maybe I am. Why do I want this so much?

"Please." I plead with him, trying to keep my voice steady. "Please, just let me go."

He reaches around my head and runs his fingers through my hair. I feel a tear slip down my cheek. It burns as it drips onto my neck. He brings his hand to my mouth and presses my lips against his palm. "Suck my finger," he commands me.

"No." I shake my head and try to look away.

"Suck my finger." He pulls my head back by my hair. I whimper and open my mouth. My lips close around his finger and I suck, tasting the salty sweat on his skin. When I lick him, I feel his cock twitch against my hip. With my hands tied above my head, hanging from this damn door, there is precious little I can do but submit to him.

I suck him hard, raking my teeth across his knuckle and feel the sudden sting of something on my ass. I screech and he shoves his finger into my mouth deeper, almost into my throat, and growls, "Suck it."

I whimper and suck harder, this time hearing the whirr of the stick as it whips through the air before striking me again. "Fuck." I whine around his finger. It's just a stick, but God I've never felt anything like that before. I'm burning. I know he's going to fuck me now. I know he's going to shove that huge cock into me and tear me apart. I'm terrified and I want it.

The stick whirrs through the air and strikes me again and I wail again, this time at full volume as he extracts his finger from my mouth. "Shit!"

"You like that, Natalie? Like being my little bitch? Are you learning your lesson now? Or do you want me to make you my toy, really give it to you?" Matty's hot breath on the side of my neck sends shivers down my spine. I'm in pain, my ass stinging and burning, but my pussy aches so damn much.

I say nothing, and his hand clamps down on my hair, pulling my head back. "Say it, Natalie. Tell me you have learned your lesson."

I eye him in my periphery and feel his hand squeeze my tit so hard it hurts, then his hand slides down my stomach to my pussy. He forces his fingers into me then brings them up to my lips and lets me taste myself. I resist, trying to turn my head, but he shoves two fingers into my mouth and orders me, "Suck them."

Glaring at him, I let him insert his fingers into my mouth and I suck the salty-sweet moisture from them as he whips me again and again, each time drawing a yelp of pain from my lips. "Did you learn yet? Do you want more?"

Fuck do I want more, but I won't tell him. I want his cock in me now. "Fuck you," I spit, biting his finger, and this time his hand comes down hard on the back of my thighs, taking my knees right from under me. I hang there, moaning and catching my breath as he presses his body against mine, pinning me to the door.

"You asked for this. You are the reason men like me exist. You are the reason I have to hurt you, because you need it." Matty's hand is suddenly on my throat, pushing me into the door, his mouth tearing at the skin on my neck. I cry out in pain and pleasure as he grabs my hips and thrusts his cock between my ass cheeks. "You're going to learn to obey me or you're going to end up in a wooden box. You know that?"

I know. I'm going to a wooden box either way. I press my forehead against the door and groan as he slides into me, fucking me from behind. His teeth sink into my skin, and I feel them break the surface. I let out a whimper as he fills me and fucks me.

"Say it," he growls in my ear. "Say you understand."

"I understand," I pant, and then moan over and over. I'm breathless, hanging from my bonds whimpering in desire.

"Good girl," he growls. His teeth are still in my skin, but the pain is quickly being replaced by pleasure. He fucks me deeply, each thrust of his cock sending shuddering waves up my spine. He bites me again, lower this time, and I moan louder, my pussy clenching around him. He reaches around and his fingers find my clit, and he begins to rub it rapidly.

I feel my orgasm begin to build. I can feel the pressure in my belly rising, thickening, and I feel like I'm going to burst. Matty fucks me harder, his fingers flying over my clit, and I feel myself falling over the edge. I'm crying out, my pussy on fire, my body aching and exhausted. I'm coming, and I can barely keep my toes on the ground.

Matty bites my neck one more time, and then I feel his cock swell and pulse as he comes inside me. He pulls out and my knees buckle. I hang there again, spent and winded. I'm gasping for breath, my pussy throbbing, my body covered in sweat. I'm exhausted. Without notice he reaches up and cuts the rope and I drop to the floor. My wrists are still bound, but my shoulders feel instant relief, and the afterglow surges through me so I don't even notice the tear on my pussy anymore.

He walks over to his pants and puts them on like nothing even happened and all I can do is curl into a ball and watch him as he dresses. My body is damp with sweat, my hair still wet and cold from the shower. The way he makes me feel is sinful and I hate it and love it at the same time.

"We killed your boss, so you can't think he's going to rescue you now. Do you even want to be rescued?" As he asks, he buttons the cuffs of his shirt sleeves.

"You killed Sheffield?" I ask, not sitting up. I have no doubt in my mind that

he did. It's shocking though to hear he's dead.

"Yeah, and when we're done with you, we'll kill you too. So it's probably a good thing you like being my sex toy so much. It keeps you alive longer." He winks at me but doesn't even crack a smile. His scowl is forever etched on his face.

"I'm not your fucking toy, and I'm not telling you anything." I force myself to sit up and feel searing pain shoot down my arms. My shoulders feel out of place from hanging like that. My pussy aches too, while still tingling from sex. How on earth can it feel so amazing and raw at the same time?

"I'm so sorry you feel that way." He tucks his shirt in and buttons his pants and I glare at him.

"I hate you." I do hate him, right? So why do I like sex with him? And why did being whipped like that make me come so hard?

Matty kneels in front of me and pushes some hair out of my face before untying me. "I'm sure you do. Now, we are going to get into that newspaper and get your laptop, and you're going to enter the password for us like a good girl, or I will have to teach you another lesson." He cups my cheek gently as if I'm his pride and joy and I grit my teeth and look away. Sex is supposed to be between two people who love each other, not this carnal display of lust. I feel ashamed of myself. I've gone against everything my parents taught me and I loved it.

"I'll be back, Natalie, and maybe next time you'll have an audience for the show you put on. Have you ever been fucked in the ass? Because I have a feeling that might be lesson three."

Matty stands and walks away, and I shudder at the thought of his massive dick inside my ass. If he thinks stealing my laptop is going to be easy, he's wrong. That building is so layered in security there is no way he's getting in. And he won't get my password either. He would literally have to slit my throat and promise to save me if I gave it to him. Given what he's been doing to me and what he did to Sheffield, he deserves to go down.

"Because of my uncle..." I look down, ashamed for even answering the question he asked yesterday.

“What?” He stops by the door and looks over his shoulder.

“I started hunting your family because my uncle was murdered by someone in the Bratva.” I sucked in a deep breath and continued. “Just so you know it wasn’t Sheffield’s doing, and he was entirely innocent. You didn’t have to kill him.”

Matty looks at me with a cynical smirk and shakes his head, then walks out and locks the door behind himself. I hope he drowns in guilt. With my luck, he’ll come back eager for more because murdering innocent people energizes him.

God, what have I gotten myself into?

MATTY

I lock the door behind me, leaving Natalie to think about what I said. If she knows we've taken Sheffield out, perhaps she'll be a bit more cooperative. All I need from her is the laptop and proof that the only place her research exists is on that hard drive. I've already sent the information Sheffield gave me off to our tech guy, Lenny. He's working on searching the entire network and Sheffield's computer by hacking it. That will eliminate a lot of doubt.

Still, as I walk down the hallway away from Natalie's door, I can't help but wonder why she told me the reason she's looking into us. Her uncle was murdered, and she thinks it was someone in our family. It gives me a bit of sympathy toward her. I'm not a monster, after all. My own mother was assaulted when I was just a child, and following that, her mental health deteriorated so badly to the point she took her own life.

I descend the stairs, heading to retrieve my laptop and I think about Mom. I wasn't even a teen then, just in grade school. I don't remember much of the details, just the stark feeling of emptiness and loneliness when I missed her after the funeral. All of us suffered back then, but Dominic blamed himself, that he wasn't able to stop her killer. All I know is it put a soft spot in my armor, a weakness that should my father find out existed would be vigorously removed from me. He has his ways—brainwashing, beating, the like.

I'm not a weak man, but I do find myself relating to Natalie. If she is truly out for revenge, I can see how that would motivate her to do stupid things, like snooping around the Bratva and getting herself killed. And it makes

sense that they never found her uncle's killer if it really was mob-involved. We have too many men on the police force to deny a cover up.

I pick up my laptop and carry it out to the living room and sit. I'm not sure where to start my search for information, because I don't know her uncle's name, but I look up the name Yates in correlation to recent murders. I have to scroll back a little bit, but I find what I'm looking for. Hal Yates was shot in a drive-by shooting five and a half months ago. I click on the story link and read the article posted by the Times. It's the same shooting that brought down a few of our men too, Italian's after us for revenge after Leo killed one of their underbosses.

"Shit..." I breathe out. Natalie is after a killer for sure. Whoever pulled that trigger was Italian, not Bratva, but I'll never convince her, not with the way she's been digging into our family business. I've seen some of her stories already from her previous gigs at other papers. She's out for blood for sure.

I shut my laptop, now in the know, and set it on the coffee table. There is nothing in that article to indicate the shooting was Bratva-related or the Italians, which means she knows faces of men in our organization. And that means she knows enough to be dangerous at the very least. After losing so many good men to the mole last spring when Dominic and Sven sniffed him out, we can't afford to lose even a single man to this news article nonsense. And I don't think it's something Detective Akers or Sergeant Monroe can cover up on their own. Not with dirty cops working against us for the Italians too.

Wouldn't that be lovely? If the Italians worked with Natalie thus far to get her intel?

I think about that for a moment. Natalie said she had a source she was supposed to meet with the day we snatched her off the street. I know our men are loyal now—we already cleaned the cupboards when we rooted out the mole. So, who would inform on us? It only makes sense that it's someone who knows of our dealings because they are our enemy, which means our problem may be bigger than just Natalie.

I lean my head back and sigh. Dominic has put a lot of thought into this, but maybe not enough. I'm glad he'll be here soon with Sven to discuss our next

steps. If Natalie has partnered with the Italians in any way—knowingly or unknowingly—then we have to assume that once the head is cut off the snake, another will rise. It's possible that even our mole—Nicolas Popov—was working with Italian's too, that Natalie is the second head on the serpent.

The doorbell rings and I rise to answer it. Flynn is busy now, seated outside Natalie's door to watch her. I have my other men running errands, so this private family chat will stay very private. I open the door and step aside for my brothers to enter. Dominic leads Sven, both of them dressed in dark clothing with stern expressions.

“Where is she?” Dom asks, stalking toward my den.

Sven's boots squeak on the marble floors as they walk. I lock up and follow them. My socks dry up a hint of water on the floor from the soles of their boots. It's raining outside, matching the somber mood of this meeting.

“She's locked in a room upstairs. Flynn is watching her.” They have a seat on the leather sofa while I walk to the liquor cabinet and grab my best Scotch and three glasses. I make my way back with the refreshment and pour each of us a glass before sitting. “She's not being the most cooperative, but she's learning her lessons.”

The men eye me and nod. They understand just what lesson she needs to learn, and they ask no questions about it. I don't mention how incredible her pussy feels wrapped around my cock—it's none of their business. And it's also none of their business that she seems to like it. They know I'd never force her. After what happened to my family, we all know better than that. But we're good at using women's own desires against them. In time, she'll be eating out of my hand.

“And the boss?” Dom picks up his glass of Scotch and the couch squeaks as he leans back to sip it. Sven joins us in having a drink.

“He's dead; wife locked in the basement with the kids. He handed over credentials and Lenny is sifting through the network. We just need to get in and take Yates's laptop now.” I watch Dominic drink his whiskey and stew. He's got a lot on his shoulders trying to keep all our ducks in a row. The past few months have been overwhelming for all of us. So many things have changed.

Dad got sicker and handed over the reins officially. He's on hospice now. Nick pulled that shit at the docks and the entire family ended up in a shootout with Nick dead by his own hand. Leo sent everyone on a wild goose chase for that woman he claims to love, and since this reporter has been snooping around, we haven't had a chance to take a breath. Now, Rome is hunting an assassin who we believe has orders to take Dominic out, maybe all of us.

"We need these fires put out, boys. We can't keep chasing ghosts like this." Dom pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes his head.

"Rome will handle L'ombra, Dom, and I'll make sure Matty finishes this. It will blow over soon enough." Sven is the voice of moderation, keeping things at an even keel for the moment, but with what I've been thinking, I know Dom won't be happy.

"Listen guys, it's not that simple." I lean forward and sigh hard, setting my glass on the table. With my elbows planted on my knees I tell them my thoughts. "You know we rooted out Nick. He was trying to turn half the family against us. Now why would he do that? What would make him turn against us after being loyal for so long?"

Sure, Nick and Leo were best friends and maybe there was some sort of tiff between them, but Nick had been a good soldier for so long. Good soldiers who are treated well don't turn on their leaders.

"What's your point?" Dom asks, watching me over the rim of his glass.

"My point is, Natalie has a source. That source is a secret to everyone but her. She doesn't even know who it is, at least that's what I gather from the recordings of her phone calls. I think the source is an Italian, and I think the Italians were working to manipulate Nick too." I pick up my glass again and gulp it as I lean back.

"You think the Italian's are behind all of this?" Sven shakes his head. "Why?"

"Why not? They're our sworn enemies. Why not strike right when our leadership is changing? When the men are vulnerable? And with everything that's happened so coincidentally, it's the only thing that makes sense." I rub my tongue across my teeth and nod. "It's the Italians."

“So how do we stop them?” Dominic looks to me as if he’s waiting for me to supply the route forward. That’s his job. The only thing I can do is retrieve the laptop and try to confirm if in fact the information is coming from our enemies. That might take a bit more convincing for Natalie to give up anything, but I will manage. She likes my dick a little too much to stay quiet. Maybe if I withhold pleasure from her, it will be a more useful tool in breaking her.

Only time will tell.

NATALIE

It's been five days. I lie in bed staring at the ceiling bored out of my mind. Some woman named Ella brings me food three times a day, and I see the man they call Flynn standing outside my door each time it's unlocked and open, but Matvey is not around. I can't believe I miss him. Maybe it's because in my brain logic says if he's returning it means I'm useful, and as long as I'm useful I'll remain alive.

Or maybe it's because I get aroused just thinking of him. How my mind can go from infuriated with the man to so sexually turned on by him is a mystery, but it happens, and I can't stop it. I pull the covers tighter over my body and think of the reason I'm here. My laptop contains hundreds of files, images and links to casefiles, police rosters and bank account numbers. It's solid enough proof that if I found a straight cop to turn it in to, this family would go down for everything they've done.

And Hal... I miss him. It's been nearly six months since he died and not a day goes by that I don't wonder why he was taken. In fact, I feel deeply saddened at the thought of my parents grieving my death so soon after my uncle died. Maybe I shouldn't have pursued this so far, like Sheffield said. They're dangerous. I just know the court of public opinion is much greater than the justice system. If the police look the other way, then my story would just bring to light facts they can't ignore. There would be public outrage. They'd be forced to investigate.

And maybe they'd find the real killer and my family would have some sense of peace knowing we got justice for Uncle Hal. I don't even care about my

career anymore. It's not about that. Years ago, it was. When I just graduated from college and got my first real story assigned. I started going after the big fish no one else would fry because they were afraid. It was exhilarating. I'd chase down leads and skirt dangerous rendezvous. So exciting, in fact, that later I'd go home and watch porn and get off.

And that's why Matty gets to me. Fuck, why do I call him that? He's Matvey; he's not my friend or my sexual partner. He's a dangerous criminal who just happens to have me captive here and whose body is chiseled like a fucking Greek god. I don't want to die, but if he's going to kill me anyway, at least I can enjoy some incredible sex before I go. Right? He thinks he's teaching me a lesson. The only thing he's teaching me is that he has a weakness for me.

If he really wanted to hurt me, he'd just kill me. Or worse, kill my family in front of me. I have too many nasty rape fantasies to be taught a lesson by his aggressive sex play. I eat this shit up.

The door opens and Flynn walks in carrying a light purple swath of material which he tosses at me. "Get dressed. He wants you for dinner."

I sit up and scowl at him. "No."

"I didn't ask." His glare follows me as I reach for the material which turns out to be a dress. It appears to be my size. It's about time he gave me something to wear. I've been using a bath towel as a garment since the first night when he tore my clothes off of me. What I wouldn't do for a clean pair of panties.

Huffing out a sigh, I take the dress and slide it on over my head. As I stand it drops around my body and I smooth the sheer material. It's light and flowy, much like the style I'd wear if I were attending a wedding or baby shower. I walk to the mirror and see that it fits quite well sleeveless, with a classic V neckline. The bit of elastic in the center of my back makes it hug my curves, revealing a bit more cleavage than I'd normally show, but at least I'm covered.

"I'm hardly dressed for dinner. I need shoes, panties... Something to do my hair." I watch Flynn's reflection in the mirror, and he scowls at me.

"Let's go."

For a second, I stay put, staring at him. I'm not even given the basic necessities of life, like a fucking toothbrush, but Matvey sends me a dress and demands my company for dinner? Fuck him. And fuck this place. I turn to protest and Flynn walks to the door.

"Are you coming, or do I have to carry you?"

"I'm coming," I snap, following him.

The marble floors are cold against my feet. I whip my hair up into a topknot as we head down the stairs. My pussy is still raw, but it doesn't sting when I piss anymore. Still, when I walk it reminds me of how tender it was, and I think of Matvey's promise to claim my asshole too. I shudder thinking how much it might hurt but the thought arouses me a little.

Flynn leads me to a massive dining room where a table large enough for eight people stretches beneath a large chandelier similar to the one in the entryway of the home. Claw feet hold the solid oak up and Matvey sits at the head of the table smirking at me.

"I see the dress fits you nicely." He watches as I approach and Flynn leaves. I glance at him, sort of nervous to be left alone here. I've had plenty of time to think of how I will respond to him, but all that practice is gone, flown out the window when I see how devastatingly attractive he is in a black suit with silver cufflinks. "Sit."

I tiptoe to the chair at his right hand where a place is set for me. There is no food here, only the table setting, but I sit and watch him cautiously as he folds his hands over his plate and stares at me.

"It's only a matter of time now, Natalie. We will break into the paper and get your laptop." His tongue rubs the tip of his canine tooth. "Do you want to tell me what you know about your source? Help my investigation go a bit more smoothly. Tell me who it is and maybe we'll let you off easy."

"How's that? You'll put the bullet in my head instead of my chest? Make it instant?" I straighten my back and square my shoulders. I know my end is death. His only aim is self-preservation.

"Ah, you're a smart girl, aren't you?" He chuckles and sits back. "You know, my theory is that one of our enemies put you up to this." The silence as he

studies me is torturous, but I won't say a word.

No one put me up to this but me. I wanted my career to blossom. It's why I chased them down. Otherwise, I'd have been quite happy to ignore the entire underworld and just live my life. If it doesn't affect me, why should I care? I might have even gone after other big stories, had it not been for Hal's death. That put me over the edge. I stopped focusing on all organized crime and started focusing directly on the Bratva. My gut told me they were to blame after their men were there when my uncle died.

"We're not interested in cutting snake heads off. We want the thing gutted. If you have information that would help us take them down, we may look the other way." He glowers at me, fingertips pressed together so his hands tent in front of himself.

I do have information that he can use to bring his enemies down—all of them. Armenians, Italians, they're all corrupt and I have dirt on them all, but that's not going to bring Uncle Hal back, and it won't get him justice. I can't for a single second entertain the idea that my life is worth more than his. That I should give up my research and leave the mystery of Hal's death unsolved. No, Hal deserves better than that.

"Fuck you." I cross my arms over my chest and look away. "I thought I was having dinner."

"Oh, you must have misunderstood." Matvey leans forward with an evil grin and stands. "I want you for dinner."

My skin bristles, goosebumps rising on my arms. He slips his suit coat off and unbuttons the sleeves of his shirt and rolls them up. He means I'm his dinner, which is definitely a miscommunication. My stomach rumbles when I realize I'm not getting food right now and my throat constricts when he reaches for his belt.

"It's time for lesson three, Natalie. See, when I need information from you and you refuse to give it, there are consequences. Now, you can tell me what you know about your source, or I can provide the consequence for your refusal to cooperate."

I shift uncomfortably in the chair. I could give him what he wants, but what

sort of a person would that make me? Abdicating my responsibility to get justice for Hal? Besides, when he acts like this it pushes every button I have. My body has been on fire for a few days now, waiting for his next visit. I dream of him and wake up with my fingers buried in my pussy.

“I have nothing to say to you.” I lick my lips, wondering what sort of lesson he’ll teach me this time, and it makes me clench my muscles. My ass isn’t ready for that size of a cock.

“Ah, well that’s okay. Your mouth will be quite busy.”

“What?”

He unzips his fly and reaches into it, pulling a half-stiff dick out. As he steps toward me, he strokes himself. “You heard what I said.” His hand glides along his length teasing me and making my body respond. His eyes stalk me, drinking me in. I wonder if purple is his favorite color or if he just likes the way the thin fabric shows how hard my nipples are right now.

“I won’t.” I stand up, ready for whatever he throws at me. I don’t want to suck him; I want him inside of me. So, I defy him, crossing my arms over my chest. I know how to work him up and make him angry. If he could only see the way my pussy drips right now, he’d stick it in me for sure.

“Oh, but I think you will.”

What an ass. He strokes himself harder, neck craning back a little and I shake my head at him and turn to go. “Take me back to my room,” I growl as I start toward the door, but I feel something very hard smack across the back of my knees. It drops me right there. I fall forward on my hands and whimper. “What the fuck?”

The object cracks against my ass this time, stinging and burning, and then he pulls my hair, forcing me back up to my knees. His cock is rock-hard and in my face as he pulls my hair backward until I’m staring up at him from below.

“You are a naughty girl, Natalie,” he says, clicking his tongue. “Now, open your mouth.”

I don’t even get a choice. His dick thrusts into my mouth without my consent but fuck if I don’t like it. My ass stings still from the cane in his left hand as

his right hand pushes and pulls my head. He slowly thrusts into my mouth so deep his dick stretches my throat out. I gag when he buries himself to the hilt, his balls rubbing my chin, but relief comes when he backs out.

“Oh fuck, that’s good,” he growls then brings the cane down again on my ass and thighs. I can do nothing but brace myself on his legs and let him fuck my mouth as I whimper and whine. He’s working me up so much I know the instant he touches my pussy I’ll squirt on him, maybe lose control of my bladder too.

“Suck, Natalie. Suck it...” He thrusts faster now, and I let my lungs do the work, keeping pressure on his cock as it glides in and out of my mouth. Each trigger to my gag reflex makes him shudder and grunt and before I know it his salty wads of cum are spewing into my mouth. I swallow hard, hating the taste but unable to spit it out with him filling me.

Now I’m so worked up I don’t even know how he’ll finish me unless he is superman and can stay hard. Fuck, I need release. I suck him a few more times, then he pulls out and steps back, tucking his cock into his pants and zipping up.

“Get up,” he orders, so I stand on shaking legs. The cane in his hand is thick and long, bigger than the stick he used earlier this week. It felt different too, a deeper sensation than just the stinging skin. I liked it more. “Take it off,” he says, gesturing with a finger and as badly as I need him in me, I obey instantly. The dress comes off with a few tugs and I drop it to the floor.

“Shit...” I breathe, feeling the cool air waft across my moisture. I want to touch myself, but he moves toward me, so I hold my breath and brace myself for his touch.

Matty stands inches away from me. I can feel his hot breath on my face, down across my tits. His lips are full and firm, ready to kiss me. I watch them as my chest heaves. I smell myself, arousal permeating this whole room. He brings the cane up between my legs until it rides firmly against my clit, and he slides it up and down.

“The thing about lessons, Natalie, is that you have to learn something from them.”

“Yes, sir...” I grind on the cane, needing release so fucking bad, when he smirks at me.

“Flynn!”

I startle, jumping back. “What?” I won’t fuck Flynn. What is he doing?

Matty stares at me for a moment as Flynn walks in. His eyes stay fixed on mine as I stand naked in front of him and aching for his dick. “Take Natalie to her room. Dinner is over.”

“What? No!” I try to protest but Flynn hoists me onto his shoulder kicking and screaming and carries me to my room where he drops me on my bed with a lot of cussing and locks me in. I run to the door and slam my fists into it repeatedly. “You can’t do that!”

But it doesn’t matter how long I stand there banging and screaming, Matvey had his fill and he’s done with me. He’s not coming to fuck me. His lesson is learned, and I hate it. He got in my head and now I’m the one paying. I don’t know whether to give him information now or hold back. Either way the only thing I want is him inside of me in the roughest way possible.

I climb into bed feeling the ache in my body and touch myself, rubbing and smearing my cum around until I’m a quivering ball of sexual frustration. If he could see me rub off like this, he’d know he won.

Hopefully there aren’t any hidden cameras in here because the way I feel, I’ll need to do this at least three times to get relief.

MATTY

I sit at my desk with my laptop open, sifting through page after page of drivel on the internet. Natalie's past is in plain sight, not even hidden at all. We take great lengths to cover things, bury them and keep our names clean, but to an innocent like Natalie, everything is public domain. Her life is an open book. I found her birth certificate and hospital records with only a few searches. She hasn't even locked down her identity or tried to protect herself from fraud.

I found a few articles too, about her Uncle Hal and his murder. Reports were mixed and bystanders didn't all see the same thing, but I can see how she would assume it was Bratva related. The more I research it the more I'm realizing this entire thing is fucked up. The Italians not only did the drive-by where our men were shot and her uncle was killed, but now they're trying to pin it on us, as if we were taking out our own men.

It infuriates me, and it will piss Dominic off too. It's not bad enough that they want to take us out physically but soiling our reputation by pinning things they did on us is next-level evil. I take a deep breath and blow it out through my nose. Natalie is even a victim.

I found a hospital record for Haven—a behavioral and mental health hospital. Their records aren't hard to crack. It's a major HIPAA violation to not have patient accounts secured properly. If they knew my mild hacking skills got in, I'd be thrown in prison, but more importantly the hospital would be slapped with fines and lawsuits.

I'm not interested in proving their vulnerability. I just want Natalie's records. So I dig a little deeper, trying to remember everything Lenny taught me back in the day about getting past firewalls. It takes me several tries, but I manage to crack it and once I'm in, it's like taking candy from a baby.

Natalie's charts fall into my lap, every recording of every session with her therapist, the dates she stayed there, the meds they gave her. There are even detailed notes of what the therapist thought about her, which is where I start. He calls her traumatized, diagnoses her with PTSD. She watched her uncle be gunned down and was given strong beta blockers to help her cope with the anxiety. After months of treatment, she was diagnosed with severe depression and generalized anxiety disorder, and most of these notes indicate a very strong memory loss. She can't remember things the way they were.

The pieces start to come together for me. If she doesn't remember everything, it means she's been using her research to replace gaps in her memory. It also means things are tied a little too closely together. She was there at the scene after months or years of investigating organized crime and the families behind it. If she got too close, maybe that hit wasn't just about getting revenge after my brother killed an Italian. Maybe they saw the two pretty birds in the bush and the stone flew.

The Italians were targeting her and just found a convenient way to make it look casual instead of like a hit. Only, what they don't realize is that I've figured it out. My family only knew of their need for revenge, but now we know more. Their real target that day was Natalie and that infuriates me. Sure, she stuck her nose where it shouldn't belong, but her uncle was an innocent bystander and dragging innocent men into our game isn't a gentlemanly thing to do.

I shut the laptop and think about how all this has affected her. She respected her uncle so much because he was integral to raising her. From everything I can tell, he lived with them for much of her childhood and his intimate care shaped everything from her desire to pursue journalism to her choice to remain chaste until she married. The man has a rosary around his neck in every picture I found of him. It was definitely his religious influence that impressed upon her the need to keep herself.

"Hmm..." I rise and head for the kitchen. Natalie is probably hungry by now.

Maybe she will be a little more open to speaking with me about her research if I offer her a white flag of surrender in the form of food. I don't think we're on opposite sides of the fence anymore, and I'll have to show her that. My family does sell guns to illegals and militia groups aimed at protecting freedoms. Sure, Sven has had his dealings with other families too, trying to balance the powers that be to keep crime down on the streets. But we aren't just murderers and thieves. We may use uncouth methods, and sometimes we break the law to do the right thing, but every one of us knows that we do what we do for our family. There is no greater virtue than loyalty.

I prepare a plate of cheese and crackers and a glass of tea, and head up to Natalie's room. She has so much anger in her over what happened because it didn't just happen to her uncle, and she can't connect the pieces. She needs to be convinced that chasing down my family isn't a good choice. I can help her get the revenge she seeks, but she has to partner with me. I know what it's like to feel the need for revenge. I know the pain of losing someone so close to me, and after learning what I now know about Natalie, I feel somewhat guilty for allowing this all to happen to her on my watch.

She is, after all, just like me. I pursue justice and knowledge the same way she does. She just uses words to expose the truth, and I use my fists, or a knife, or a gun. Whatever happens to be at my side. The guilty fall and those who understand what is good and right in this world rise, all by my doing. By my family's doing. I want to help her see that, and I want to help her feel relief from the pain of grieving.

I knock on the door and wait for her to say something, but there is rustling and no talking. So, I put the key in the lock and turn it. She's been alone quite some time now and hopefully my presence will be welcome company and she will feel more cooperative. I enjoy teaching her lessons, but I'd rather just have the answers I need.

As I push the door open a burst of fresh air hits me and I smell the faint hint of rain. The room is dark, and I hear water pattering, which means the window is open. "Natalie?" I ask, walking in. I set the tray down on the table near the door and flip the light on to see her halfway out the window. A sheet, torn in strips and tied to the foot of the bed, dangles out the window and her disheveled hair frames her honey complexion.

“What the fuck!” I race over to the window as she yelps and tries to squirm out, gripping the sheet. “You bitch,” I snarl, grabbing her by the arm. She lets her weight drop and her legs dangle, but she doesn’t count on me being strong enough to heft her back in. I pull hard, hauling her across the windowsill until she drops to a heap on the floor.

“Ow, fuck... Ouch!” Natalie holds her stomach and winces. I see blood pepper the thin white material of the t-shirt I gave her. She’s not even dressed to go in the rain. She only has that shirt and a pair of gym shorts. Her clothing, torn in our first encounter, was tossed days ago, and the dress I let her borrow is no good for climbing out a window.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I pull on the sheet hard, tearing it. It falls freely out the window, which I shut and lock. “You’re going to kill yourself.” And get me killed too. Dominic will be furious if he learns how close she came to escaping. I knew she was bold; I just didn’t realize she was so fucking stupid.

“Fuck you!” she snaps, pushing herself off the ground. She stands, and I see her shorts and the back of her t-shirt are soggy, drenched in the rain now streaking down the windowpane.

“You realize that’s almost a thirty-foot drop? You’d have broken a limb.” I look at the mess she’s made of the room too, pillows strewn about, the comforter torn. She climbs onto the bed and crawls to the headboard but I’m furious. I grab her foot and pull her back down the bed and lean over her, glaring. “Say something!”

“I did. I said fuck you.” She spits in my face and pushes my chest and I swing my left hand hard across my body, backhanding her. She winces and covers her cheek.

“You’re going nowhere until you tell me what you know. How deep did you dig? What sort of damage control my family needs to get in place. You really want to die, don’t you? You don’t even see that I’m trying to find a way to do this without you getting yourself killed.” The words come out as I think them, a horrible trait of mine. It’s true. I don’t want her killed any more than I want anyone else killed. It may be a necessary evil but if I can stop it I will.

My chest tightens as she heaves herself into my arm and rolls away, racing

toward the door where I chase her and pin her against the wood. Fucking her has done something to me, made me weak or something. All I can think about is this insane obsession she has with justice or revenge. All I want to do is figure out why she does what she does, why she is hunting us. Make her see that we're not worth hunting, that I can make her goal of revenge successful.

"Stop fighting me and fucking listen." I grip her arms at the wrist and pin them over her head and she brings her knee up hard into my groin. I drop to my knees and take her with me, refusing to let go of her even as my stomach feels like someone shoved a knife through my prostate and up inside of me. I suck air like it's going to disappear, and she kicks my side.

"Let me go. You don't even fucking understand what it's like. Do you!" She kicks harder, but I tighten my muscles and take it. I train for this every week—the pot shots taken during a fist fight. My abs are strong enough to take a few good punches, but my groin is on fire.

"Stop it," I shout, pulling her wrists so hard she sprawls on the floor face down. I let go of her wrists and put my knee in her back, holding her there while I catch my breath. It's painful and she still tries to wrestle away from me, but I hold her down long enough to fight through the intense feeling that I may vomit. I grab her by the hair and slowly stand, dragging her with me, then push her back onto the bed and stand next to it heaving. She's given me a run for my money, but I bested her.

"You don't get it." She's sobbing now, curled in a ball and covering her face. "You don't fucking get it!"

"I get it. You want revenge so badly you don't care who you take down. It doesn't even have to be true."

She swings her foot out at me and I dodge it, then climb on top of her and pin her arms over her head, straddling her waist so she can't move. She screams and writhes beneath me and I'm forced to smack her face again to get her to calm down. Fuck, Natalie, why are you acting like this?

"He's there! Every time I close my eyes. He's there. And I have to find him and make him pay." Her eyes are alight with fire. "In my nightmares. In my dreams. When I'm awake. Fuck's sake. Just let me go."

“I get it!” I scream, leaning down in her face with such a loud volume it startles her to silence. “I get it,” I say calmly. “I know the feeling of wanting revenge. I know the thirst for blood. I know the pain of having someone you love, someone you looked up to and depended upon, being torn from your life.” My chest is heaving as I stare into her eyes and see recognition dawning.

“You what?”

“My mother was violently raped, Natalie. She took her own life because of the trauma, after months of watching her lie in bed unmoving, crying. In pain.” I squeeze her arms tighter as the memory of watching her casket descend into the earth comes to mind. “I know. I get it. You just can’t be fucking stupid about it, and you have to work with me or you’re going to be right alongside him in the cemetery.”

She narrows her eyes at me and blinks slowly. She has to listen to me because if she doesn’t Dominic is going to have her killed, and maybe at one point I would have done it, but now I know I want her in my house. I want her as my own. Natalie and I are kindred spirits. And she’s mine now.

“You what?” she asks, but I don’t even answer her. I just stare at her, scowling, demanding with my gaze that she obey me now. And she does something shocking.

She kisses me.

NATALIE

I know exactly why I kissed him. Because we are the same. Matty understands the pain of losing someone, the trauma involved in the hunt for justice. My heart wrenches in my chest, and I kiss him again and again, and he doesn't stop me, though my arms remain pinned over my head. The weight of his hips pressing mine into the bed is intoxicating, making my urge to be dominated flare up.

"We're not that different, Natalie," he growls as his teeth bite down hard on my lip and I whimper. I know we're not. I've known it since before I even met him, before I even started researching his family in particular. I've seen the stories, the things people in his line of business do, found myself being drawn to them out of curiosity and intrigue.

It all started because I wanted to know more. Hal tried to guide me to the light, help me use my skills as a researcher and investigative reporter to uncover truth, bring justice. But something turned sour in me when he was stolen from me. All my rage and anger over losing him made me forget my initial interest in people like Matty, my curiosity to see how they function, why they are the way they are. And all I wanted was revenge.

"God... I hate you," I snarl, biting him back as he squeezes my wrists harder. But I don't hate him. I hate the person who killed Hal. I hate life because evil things happen. And I hate myself for wanting him so badly, but I don't hate him. I want him.

"You don't even know what you want. Do you? You like when I force you to

do this. You like being here in this place. You waited until I walked in the door to try to sneak out because you knew you'd incite my reaction." Matty loosens his grip on my wrists, and I smack him hard. How dare he say those things. He doesn't know me.

But deep down I know he's right. I *am* addicted to the way he dominates me, to the way he makes me feel completely powerless. And I do want him, more than anything. It's like he's the missing piece of me that I've been searching for all my life.

"You're right," I whisper, my voice barely audible. "I don't hate you. I hate myself for wanting you." I go to smack him again, and he catches my wrist and stops me. He stares down at me, still straddling my hips as he slowly unties his tie with one hand. I shudder to think what he's going to do with it. His eyes stay fixed on my face, and I scowl at him.

"You want me to be cruel to you? To hurt you on the outside just so your insides stop feeling the pain they're in?" His voice is calm and even, and I scream-growl, bucking my hips and trying to force him off of me but he's too heavy. And he's too close to the truth. I feel tears burning my eyes.

"Fuck you!" I shout and growl again, but he only smiles a sad sadistic grin.

Matty wraps his tie around one wrist, then the other, then climbs off me and drags me up toward the slatted headboard and lashes my arms there tightly. "I'm going to take you now; make you feel the pain you're trying to hide. And then I'm going to make you wish you'd never met me." I don't really hear him, or care what he says. I'm still trying to process what I'm feeling, what I really want.

His teeth find my neck, and he bites down and sucks hard, leaving a mark that will surely bruise and be visible to the entire world. I don't care. I want him to mark me. To put his stamp on me so everyone knows I'm his. I want to feel his teeth and his nails and his cock inside me. To feel the pain. To feel alive.

Matty tears the thin t-shirt down the front and exposes my breasts, then yanks the shorts off me as I flail and kick. "You don't know what I want. You don't fucking know me." But he does. He probably knows me better than anyone I've ever met because trauma knows trauma.

"Oh, I know you." He unbuckles his belt, and I hear the hiss of leather sliding through the loops of his slacks. "And I know this is all an act. You pretend to hate it, to want nothing to do with me, but you're begging me to fuck you." He swings the belt hard, and I wince at the cold bite of the leather on my thighs, and I cry out and buck, but Matty doesn't stop. He uses the belt on me, and I arch my back and moan. I try to push him away, continuing the ruse that I'm actually fighting him, and his belt slaps my pussy, sending a shockwave of arousal through me.

"Oh fuck," I grunt and curl my legs up as he drops the belt on the bare mattress. He undresses slowly, watching me lay there. My chest is heaving from exertion, and my pussy aches to have him inside of me, to feel his thickness stretch and tear me. I want him to dominate me, and the only way to make that happen is to keep fighting. But he likes it. I can see it in his eyes. He enjoys it.

When he stands naked, hard cock standing proud, he reaches into his pocket of his slacks and produces a pocketknife. My skin bristles at the sight of him folding it open. "What are you doing with that?" I ask, licking my lips.

"I'm going to teach you a lesson." He grins. "And then you're going to be my little slave." He flips the knife and catches it by the handle. It's longer than my hand. I can't speak.

"You're going to tell me everything you know." He kneels on the edge of the bed and flips the knife again. "Everything you know about the crime syndicates that run the city. Every name you've heard, every man you've seen. And if you try to lie to me, or give me anything less than the truth, I'm going to cut you."

My pussy is on fire, a burning ache screaming to be soothed by his skin. "Fuck you," I hiss, watching him crawl across me. His dick drips with precum. He's so turned on by this too. Shit what did I do to deserve this? I'm so fucking horny.

"So, tell me, Nat. What do you know?" He presses the tip of the knife to my throat gently. It's not breaking the skin, but the pinch of pain is enough to drive me wild.

"I'm not saying anything." I grit my teeth against the sensation of the tip of

the blade as he draws a line down my chest. It's just enough pressure to leave a light scratch and send shivers of pleasure through me, but not enough to actually cut me.

"You refuse to tell me what I want to know when I hold a knife against your skin?" The fire in his eyes makes me shudder. Fuck do I want him to make me scream.

"Go to hell...." I squirm again as he rakes the blade over my stomach and my thigh. The scratching is painful, but he isn't going to cut me. He'll get no pleasure out of seeing me bleed. He wants me to scream his name. That's what this game is, and God do I enjoy playing it.

With a snarl of anger, he grabs my leg and shoves it up. I yelp as he rakes the knife over my pussy, the jagged-edged blade scraping over my clit and sending a spark of pain through me.

"You're lucky that I don't cut you." He says it with a snarl. "If you want me to stop, you'll have to say it. Come on, you're a tough girl, Nat. Say it."

"No." I breathe. "I'm not going to beg you."

"If you want me to stop, you'll have to beg me."

"I'm not going to beg." I look into his eyes, and I know he's going to make me scream. He drops the knife on the bed. I'm shocked by his strength as he turns me over with one swift movement. "Ah..." I yelp as I bounce on the bed, then instantly wince and scream as the belt comes down across my ass.

"Say it, Nat. Tell me you want me." Again, and again the belt cracks on my skin, the sting of pain mingling with pleasure. I can't take it. I need him in me. The fight is leaving now as he demands to be placated. "Say it, dammit."

"I want you!" I yell. "I want you."

"Tell me what you want from me." His voice is dark. He's so sexy. I don't want him to stop. I want more. "Tell me."

"I want you to fuck me." I tremble, aching to be filled by him. The pain is almost too much, but the pleasure is overwhelming. He could do anything to me and I'd let him.

"Beg me to fuck you." His voice is dark and angry. The belt keeps zinging my skin; it's probably bright red.

"Fuck me." I'm so turned on. "I'll do anything you want. Just fuck me."

"Fuck me. Say it again." He spansks me again, and I yelp. "Tell me what you want."

"I want your cock in my pussy." I'm so turned on. I don't know how much longer I can keep it up. The belt keeps coming down on me, and then I'm turned over again. "Please. Please."

"Please what?" His face comes close to mine, and I kiss him. It's not gentle. It's not nice. It's rough and I want it. I want him to be rough with me. I don't want to be a princess. I want him to give me everything I need.

"Fuck me." I kiss him again, and he finally pulls away, his eyes burning with anger.

Matty pushes his cock into me so hard and fast I scream. He doesn't do it gently. He does it in a way that shows me how much he wants me, how much he wants to own every inch of my body. His mouth is rough on my neck, and he spansks me as he takes me.

"You're mine." He says it over and over as he spits into my mouth.

"I'm yours." I bite his lip, and he spansks my thigh harder. I'm so wet.

"Tell me you're mine." He doesn't stop thrusting into me.

"I'm yours." I'm lost, and I want him to have me. Every part of me. "I'm yours."

"Tell me you want me to fuck you harder." His hand grips my neck and it's almost too much. I try to speak but all I can do is gasp. My pussy clenches around him. I feel my lungs about to burst. The first wave of orgasm crashes and I shut my eyes and let it take me. Wave after wave crashes over me and I'm lost in it. The spanking stops, and I feel Matty's hot cum inside me. His eyes are closed, but his mouth is open in a silent scream. I feel him shudder, and he lets my neck go as he comes.

"I'm yours."

"I know." He kisses me again, and I feel his seed inside me. I want him to fill me up. I want him to own every part of me. He kisses me again, and I kiss him back, his thick moisture between our bodies.

My body feels like jelly, warm and jiggly. I lie there with my eyes shut as he pulls out. The bed shakes and I feel him remove the tie from around my wrists. As I let my eyes flutter open, I see him putting on his boxers. He moves silently to the tray of food he carried in and he sets it on the mattress then lays down next to me. I'm not interested in the snack, but I am interested in the reason he is in my bed.

I prop myself on an elbow and take one of the crackers and nibble it, watching him. He lays with his hands behind his head resting on a pillow, staring at the ceiling. I can't help but wonder what's going through his head. And as I scoot closer to him, he doesn't get up and leave. The only blanket left is a thick woolen one, too tough to tear apart with my hands, but uncomfortably scratchy on bare skin. Still, it's all I have left in here. I put the tray of food on the nightstand and scoot closer to him, pulling the blanket over us.

"You were right..." I admit, curling up and laying my head on his chest.

"About?"

I hate that he's right. He's right about why I only climbed out the window right when he walked in. I had been standing there for an hour torturing myself. I could be free right now, but I don't want to be. I want him. I like what he makes me feel. And he's right about us being the same, about why I was investigating him, about my need to be dominated in order to make the war raging inside my head and heart be silenced by physical pain.

"Everything..."

I breathe deeply, tracing the line of his tattoos with the tip of my finger as I think about his story of his mother and the trauma he suffered. Is it true? Or did he make that up to try to level with me somehow? I want to ask, but I don't. I like thinking we have that connection, because what we actually have seems disingenuous—a predator-prey connection too frail to mean anything more than nasty hot sex. I'm not a whore.

“And your information? Are you going to give it up now?”

“Does it matter? You’ve made me a prisoner.” He can have the research for all I care because he fucking stole my heart right through my pussy. I’d even go along with helping him get it, but it won’t do him any good. All that will happen is they’ll see how much I really know—names, faces, bank account numbers, including dirty cops. It will scare them. I will scare them.

They’ll kill me for sure.

“I guess it doesn’t. We’ll have it soon enough.”

I can’t believe he’s letting me lie on his chest. Is he intending to sleep in this bed with me? And why didn’t he lock the door?

“Then what?” I feel a shiver of fear run up my spine. I know how these things work; I’ve read enough case files to know.

“That depends on Dominic, but I like the arrangement we’ve worked out. As long as you’re learning your lesson.”

The room falls silent, and I lie here with my eyes wide open. I feel alive and then I feel trapped. I feel like Matty is the only thing that makes sense, the way he makes me breathe again without a dull ache in my chest. And then I feel like I need to run, to hide. But I lie here draped over his sweaty form and I can’t move. I’m anchored. I just don’t know what to.

MATTY

We sit two blocks away in my black sedan watching the newspaper building. Tonight—nearly seven days after bringing Natalie to my house—we will infiltrate the building and obtain her laptop. Lenny has gone through everything in the network and mainframe and found nothing linking us to any known stories. No emails were sent on Natalie’s work email through their system, nor were there any emails sent from Sheffield’s email either.

“They tightened security since Sheffield’s wife got out of the basement and found her dead husband.” Dominic’s voice is dry; he’s not thrilled with the lengths to which we’ve had to go to make sure information about our family business doesn’t get leaked. If investigators find out we’re running a weapon smuggling operation out of our fishery at the docks we’re all going down. As it is we’ve had to really cut back and lay low after a shootout involving a mole we sniffed out.

“Yeah, our boys can handle it.” I say the words as I grip the butt of my gun, still holstered at my side. I may not even have to use it, and God willing I won’t. This shouldn’t be difficult.

It’s only natural that such a huge event—a mass shooting in a warehouse—would draw attention. I even understand how Natalie put the pieces together and connected us to the shooting. We do own the business and the building, and our name is synonymous with organized crime in this city. But with the dirty cops we have on payroll, we were assured it was covered up as nothing more than a disgruntled employee who came to work with a gun and those on

the premises who protected themselves and others.

“Look there,” Dominic says, pointing. A light goes on in the window on the second floor. None of us know the exact location of Natalie’s desk in the building, but with intel that suggests the news floor is on level two, we wait and watch.

I raise my binoculars to my eyes and peer through them. It’s dark out, which means anyone who is watching this building will see the light has gone on. They’ll also see the men walking around in there, two of them dressed in dark clothing and carrying weapons. They’d have done better if they wore night vision glasses and kept the lights off, but hindsight is twenty-twenty.

“They’re going to raise suspicions,” I mutter, watching them look through one cubicle at a time. They walk into an office, and I see sparks fly through the frosted glass—probably Sheffield—probably destroying his computer. It’s one of those nights so dark the sky swallows up light. Every flash emitted from that entire floor illuminates the block, flickering off store fronts and lamp posts.

“Those dumb fucks.” Dominic runs a hand through his hair. “Look, there.” He points at our watch man, standing near the corner of the building in the dark. He’s hidden but keeping an eye on things—there for backup in case something goes awry. “He’s not even able to see the entire perimeter.”

“We’re dealing with greenhorns, Dom. That shootout took several of our best men.” It’s as frustrating to me as it is him, all my other brothers too I’d assume. Right now, Sven and Rome are watching this too, from their spots on adjacent rooftops with their rifles on aim. I can see the red dot of a scope through my binoculars. At least one of them is watching. And each of us has a walkie talkie, ready to communicate if necessary.

I glance at my phone. I have a timer set. They have to be in and out in under three minutes and we’re staring at two minutes and fifty seconds they’ve been at it already. It doesn’t look good for us at all. I raise my walkie to my mouth and press the transmitter. “Guys, you need to get out now. If you don’t have the computer, make it look like a B&E, over.” The radio clicks and I hear static.

“We can’t find it, over.” The transmission isn’t clear. I can’t make out who

said it, and when Dominic glares at the building, I know I'm in for a rough night. Nothing has gone right for our family for weeks. We need this to be a non-event. It feels like the fates have aligned to take us down.

He shifts in his seat and leans forward, gripping his gun in hand. "If they don't get out in time, we'll have to fight our way out. The cops have already been alerted. Their silent alarm gives us only three minutes and thirty seconds from trigger to police on scene."

"That's only—" I glance at my timer "—twenty-three seconds left."

My self-preservation instinct kicks in and I start the car. We're close enough to be in the net they cast around the perimeter but far enough away to see it being set up. If I leave now, we'll be safe, but our men will be trapped and Dominic isn't big on leaving men behind. I feel the tension rising, my body growing taut in preparation to fight. "What's wrong with them?"

The light on the second floor goes out ten seconds past their expiration date and we sit on pins and needles waiting. "Be ready with cover fire, Sven and Rome, over." Dominic's order into his walkie talkie is acknowledged by both of them and in the distance, I hear sirens.

"Shit..." I brace myself, setting my walkie down in favor of drawing my gun. I chamber a round and take the safety off. "This is going down, Dom."

"Just don't shoot any friendlies."

I have no intention of shooting at our inside guys, the dirty cops we pay to make sure our business is protected, but in the heat of a shootout, friendly fire can happen. If they're smart, they'll stay out of the way and let us do what needs done. At this point it's a rescue mission. Getting our guys out without them getting caught is our number one priority. If the break-in at the paper gets tied back to us, authorities will be alerted to something going on, which will only put them on our scent for Sheffield's murder.

"Be ready to go..." Dominic opens the door and steps out, taking shelter behind a dumpster after leaving his door open and the one to the back seat. He intends to lay cover fire for our inside guys, and I have to keep the car ready to run.

Adrenaline courses through my veins as the red and blue flashes of police

lights come into focus. The car whips to a stop followed by a second one, right in front of the paper. The police leave their cars with guns pointed at the doors just as our guys run out the front. Bullets fly in a frenzied crossfire, shattering glass and clinking off of metal.

I point my gun through my open window and join the cacophony. I don't recognize these uniforms and my gun is untraceable, so I don't care who gets hit. I don't aim for kill shots, but I can't say the same about our men. We have the cops outnumbered for now, seven to four, but they'll have back up soon.

"To the car!" I hear Dominic shout as he opens fire again, putting more bullets in the air so the cops duck behind their vehicles. The two men once inside the building race toward my car and our watch man at the corner of the building fires off a few more rounds to cover them too. I keep my pistol trained on the open door of the cop car as one of them rises up and fires her weapon.

The bullet ricochets off the dumpster where Dominic is hiding, and I open fire. I put three rounds into her door which she uses as a shield, but this is getting intense. It's happening so fast I'm not sure who is firing at whom. Two men dart into my back seat and cower like babies. Their guns are probably empty anyway.

When Dominic goes to make a move to return to the car, the cops open fire again. I hear the wail of more sirens in the distance. More of them are coming. "We gotta get out of here," I hear over the radio. It's Sven's voice.

"Little help here?" Dominic's voice on the radio sounds a bit more alert than normal. He's feeling the pressure too. He is taking such heavy fire he can't move from behind the dumpster, and now the cops have started firing at my car too. I duck low, putting it in gear. I try to watch where I'm going as I creep forward. I can't see anything or help with the shooting with my car taking so many rounds. I hope they don't get my radiator or tires.

"We need cover!" The watchman's voice calls out over the radio, and he sounds frantic. I roll closer to Dominic's position and hear the report of Rome or Sven's sniper rifle. The cops are shouting orders and things are heating up. When I'm close enough to get a glimpse of my oldest brother I

put my foot on the break and stop the car. More bullets slice through the air, shattering my windshield and piercing my headrest. Thankfully, I'm folded in half, lying over the center console.

"Shit!" I hear screaming and the watchman falls. Dominic unleashes, using everything in his clip to cover himself as he drags the watchman toward the car. Rome and Sven continue to pummel the area in a rain of lead as the men in my backseat pull our wounded soldier into the car and Dominic slides into the passenger seat.

I don't even wait for them to shut the doors. I put the car in reverse and slam the gas pedal to the floor. Using the backup camera, I'm able to navigate us up the block to a stretch of the street where there are no parked cars. Bullets still fly, though our guns are spent, and as we pass a light post, Dominic's door catches on it and tears off. He grips the armrest as I whip the car around and slam it into drive. And as I push the gas pedal again, he buckles in.

"Shit, hold on," I grunt as I floor the accelerator. I sit straighter in the seat so I can see where we're going. Sirens blare from every angle. Headlights flash; red and blue flickers dance on the buildings and store fronts. The car hurtles down the street, weaving between vehicles and narrowly missing a pedestrian out late for a stroll with his dog.

"Fuck, he's really bleeding..."

I hear the groans of pain coming from the back seat along with the men back there tending to him but the only thing I can focus on is driving. I point my weapon over my shoulder out the window and fire a few times. I'm the only one with any rounds left and Sven and Rome can't cover us anymore.

"Someone tell them to get out of there or they're sitting ducks," I snap, darting through an intersection with a red light. A car flies through the crossroad just after I pass, narrowly missing me but slamming into a cruiser. That's one down and several more to go.

"Sven, Rome, get out. Get to my house now." Dominic sounds winded, probably from fighting for his life and the life of his men. He leans over the seat as I turn another corner trying to lose the bastards. As I do I fire another round and hear it ping on the car. "Drive faster, Matty."

“I’m going as fast as I can.” This old sedan isn’t made like the Chargers used by the police. I am flying at more than double the speed limit, putting all of our lives at risk, and I’m putting a distance between us and our pursuers, but it’s only a matter of seconds before they bring in a helicopter to pin us down.

“Shit!” Dominic ducks as a bullet smashes my rear window. “Matvey, Dan is bleeding out.”

“Fuck,” I hiss, turning down another side street. I turn my lights off, hoping to gain a little ground and go incognito and it works. The cruisers fly past the intersection and none too soon. I stealthily make my way across town, avoiding any place I know there is a traffic camera, and it takes us another ten minutes to get to my house where I park my car safely in the garage.

We drag Dan into my foyer where he lays on the herringbone hardwood bleeding. Dominic has already called the vet to stitch him up, but it doesn’t look good. I pace over him, watching as the pool of blood grows by the second. Dominic stands with hands on hips scowling and our two soldiers take turns adding pressure to the chest wound and giving rescue breaths. Dan is dead before the vet even gets here.

“This is ludicrous!” Dominic’s shout rattles the walls. “That should have been an easy in and out job. He screams at the soldiers who failed as he stares at Dan, the man who bravely put his life in front of Dominic’s to shield him from that bullet. “The plan changes!”

“What?” I shake my head and stand between Dominic and the dead man, his two comrades hovering over his lifeless form. “We have to get the laptop.”

“No, you have to find out who else knows. Then you have to kill the girl. We’ll set charges to the paper and burn the building down.” His eyes flicker with hatred. “Our name is on the line here.”

“Dom, if she lies? What if other people know? You really want that traced back to us?” I take a step boldly toward him. I’m not killing Natalie. She’s too valuable right now.

“Fine,” he snarls, his voice gravelly and filled with rage. “Then you make sure she doesn’t lie. Find out if anyone else knows about this and we’ll take care of them too. Then, she dies.”

I stare after him as he walks away. I have zero intentions of killing Natalie and every intention of defying my brother's orders. She may know things, but now that she's mine, she'll never have a chance to tell a soul. I'll see to that.

NATALIE

It's been days since Matty came in here. He had this jerk of a soldier install bars on my window. I really am a prisoner now, though he did bring me clean sheets and a comforter, a few changes of clothes too. And Flynn, the heavily tattooed man with a gauge in his left ear who watches over me, brings me three meals a day. I have zero entertainment though, so I spend most of my waking hours seated by the window staring out at the birds that land in the nest made in the corner of the house where the decorative architecture creates a nook for them.

“Where is he?” I ask quietly, staring out the window. Flynn doesn't talk much. He scrolls his phone and glances at me every so often, but he never lets me out of his sight, except when I use the toilet. I always shut the door and after ten seconds he's always there knocking. It's not like I can escape the bathroom. There is no window, no heating vent.

Flynn looks up at me and ignores me, then goes back to his scrolling. He has to be as bored as I am. All we do all day is the same thing. Scroll, stare, breathe. I feel like my fate has been decided for me. I'm destined to watch birds' nest and migrate the rest of my life, however long that is.

“I said, where is he? When is he coming back?”

Something inside of me longs for Matty. Not only is there an anxious uncertainty swirling in my gut but there is a craving there. The fear of the unknown hangs like a shadow over me but the need to be in the presence of his strength makes me ache, as if him being here made it better somehow. At

least I'd be able to see his facial features, read his expression. Not seeing him, not knowing what's happening, it's torture.

Flynn again looks at me, but instead of answering me, he stands and pockets his phone before leaving. It's infuriating that he never speaks to me. I wonder if he's deaf or if he was given orders not to talk. He's good at watching me though, until this time. As the footsteps retreat up the hallway, I don't hear the click of the lock. He's left the door open.

I lick my lips and glance at the door, then the window. I'm not locked in. This idiot forgot to secure the door and I am free to go. I only have a t-shirt and shorts on, no shoes or jacket, and it's fall—chilly outside. But cold outside is better than a prisoner awaiting an unknown fate.

I pop out of the chair and hurry to the door, tiptoeing. As I suspected, the doorknob turns easily and clicks open. It creaks as I pull it open and peek out into the hallway. There is no sign of Flynn anywhere, not even the squeak of his boots on the marble, so I walk into the hallway. I'm already cold, shivering and hugging my arms over my chest as I head for the stairs. I do so cautiously. For all I know this is a setup and he's waiting around the corner to snatch me and beat me for trying to leave.

The stairs leave me in a very vulnerable position. They wrap along the wall and descend toward the foyer. When I'm halfway down I see the front door in sight. I'm not stupid. I know if they catch me, I'm dead. If I get out and I tell a soul what I know—that they're running an illegal arm smuggling business that gets their allies weapons—I'll be hunted and killed. But I need to get out of here. Matty and his amazing dominance that hypnotizes me or not, I need justice for Hal and a safe place to live the rest of my life. I can't do that here.

As soon as my toes hit the ground floor I run. My feet slap the cold marble and I head for the front door. My heart races. I am only steps away from being outside, and then I have to decide which way to go and how to get away. My hand fumbles with the old door handle, forcing the metal lever down as I pull, but it's jammed. I can't tell if it's stuck or locked, and I am now frantic to get out of here. Flynn could come back any second.

I yank on it, whimpering and jiggling it and at the same time I hear a key jingle. My blood runs cold, my face blanches. I turn slowly to see Flynn

standing there with a tray of food and a key in his hand. He scowls at me, nodding, but still saying nothing. When I freak out, darting past him, he drops the tray of sandwiches and soup and in a single movement his arm wrapped around me. I dangle from his side as he moves toward the stairs.

“Fucking let me go!” I scream, kicking and pounding my fist into his thigh. “Let me go!”

Flynn continues his silent treatment as he ascends the stairs and I sob. I was so close to being free and getting away from here. “I hate you!” I kick harder, jerking my body around and hoping he will drop me, but his steadfast grip tightens and I can hardly breathe.

By the time we’re back in my room I’m breathless and sore. Flynn drops me on the floor and nudges me with the toe of his boot. I roll away, scared he will kick me, and scurry to the bed where I curl into a ball and pull the covers up.

“Stay,” he orders, and I tremble to think what he’ll do if I don’t stay. He’s large, his biceps as big as my thighs. There is no doubt in my mind that he could crush me. I watch as he leaves again, and this time the lock clicks.

My resolve is gone, drained out through days of staring at the walls and thoughts of never leaving this place. Hopelessness has replaced it and now reigns chief in my thoughts. I’m never going to avenge Hal. I’m never going to see my parents again or fall in love and get married. I’ll never be a mother, pursue my career the way I hoped to. My life is over, and no one even knows it yet, except me.

I want to go to the door and pound on it, scream and beg for them to let me out, but it won’t work. Matty isn’t here. Flynn is a robot. He’s taken orders and is following them to a T. I’m not sure anyone else is even in this house. I’m alone and no one can hear if I cry for help. So I let depression come, weighing me into the mattress as I drift off to sleep.

A sudden noise rouses me—doors slamming and screaming. I hear a few voices, all of them raise to the top of their lungs. I climb out of bed shivering and press my ear to the wood of the door. Flynn isn’t here; he never came back, and I never ate dinner. My fault I suppose for trying to escape and him spilling the tray on the ground during my capture.

Matty's voice is crystal clear, and someone is very angry about my source.

"Yeah, well Jeff is dead now too. First Dan and now Jeff, and after losing so many men already, this means war." Whoever it is seems to command the conversation. "Whoever the source is, they're cutting us deep. She has to know."

I swallow hard. I don't know anything. It's the truth. I never even heard their real voice. I got encrypted emails and texts from a burner phone. Every time we spoke it was with some sort of voice modulation software. I don't even know if they're male or female, but by now even my source has had to figure out I've been taken.

"You can't prove it was her source." Matty is enraged. His shouting vibrates in my chest. I want to run to him and tell him the truth, that my source is completely anonymous.

"You can't prove it isn't. And you can't prove she doesn't know who it is either." A third male voice, this one deeper, makes my hair stand on end. "Let me at her. I'll get her to talk."

"Put your gun away!" Matty intervenes. I wish I could see his face, know what expression is on it. "I will get to the bottom of things, but it won't be by torturing her and killing her."

I back away from the door as fear curdles my blood. I knew they were looking for my research which is safely stored inside the highly secured building the newspaper calls home. And I know they want me dead, but hearing this firsthand makes it real all over again. Matty said he's content to keep the arrangement the way it is. I assume that means me being his fuck toy and sleeping in my bed every now and then. Honestly that sounds better than death, though I'd rather really live.

This, however, sounds like he won't get a choice. They'll force him to kill me, or they'll do it themselves. Given our interactions, I don't think he'll do it, but I know they will. Just the anger in those voices tells me this family isn't playing around. I'm a threat to them because I know too much, and no matter how many times I swear I'll keep their secret, it will never be enough.

"Shit..." I whisper before pressing my ear to the door again.

“If she’s told other people and we kill her, they’ll come forward. How many times do I have to say that?” Matty is defending me? Why? He really does want to keep me? He doesn’t even know me.

“And how many times have I told you to get the information we need? Do it tonight or find another way to get her laptop. For all we know they suspect her as being taken and have already gotten into her laptop. Any day now someone will report her missing.” The first angry man seems to temper his voice, and then I hear doors slam.

I scurry to bed, on the verge of sobbing. What horrible tortures am I in for tonight? Matty is definitely in this house now. I heard his voice. I know he’s here. And when he’s here he comes to me. Albeit the anger-induced sex is hot and I love every second of it, but sometimes he frightens me. Like now, as I listen to his boots stomping up the stairs as I cower beneath the flimsy blanket like it’s going to shield me from his anger.

I want him angry, need him angry. Because I need him to rouse the monster inside of me that thrusts me into battle and makes me feel alive. Because I need him to dominate me to the point I’m breaking and vulnerable with him. Because I want him.

But needing those things doesn’t stop the fear—which prickles my skin as I hear his keys jingling outside my door. I brace myself, clamping my eyes shut and clutching the bunched-up blanket to my chest. I could love it or I could hate it, but either way he’s coming in and I don’t know what to expect.

Oh god... why do I want this?

MATTY

Me killing Sheffield is probably the one thing that has saved Natalie thus far and she doesn't even realize it. Her boss can't report her missing if he isn't alive. No one has reported her missing because her parents are too busy grieving Hal to call and check on her, but it's only a matter of days now until they do. Then I'll have no way to convince Dominic to keep her alive. She'll be a liability. She is now, just not to the same extent as if they know she's missing.

I jam my key into the lock, furious with the situation. We lost yet another man due to her source's leak. It isn't her fault that her source is fed up and now turning to other members of the press, so if I can convince Dominic that it's the source we need to take out, not Natalie, maybe he will let me keep her. Until then, she needs to start working with me. I don't care what she knows. She'll keep quiet as long as I make her. But I need her source.

"Get up," I snap, slamming the door shut. I put the key in my pocket and pace, pinching the bridge of my nose. Her light is on, but she lays under the blanket with it pulled all the way up over her head. She's curled in a ball, probably heard the screaming downstairs. "I said get up!" I shout, pulling the corner of the blanket and uncovering her.

Natalie quivers, looking at me with fear in her eyes as she chews a fingernail. She doesn't move, doesn't blink. Like a deer in headlights, she remains stock-still.

"Are you deaf? I said get up." I barge over to the bed and grab her wrist,

yanking her out of bed. Her body hits the ground with a thump, and she scrambles to her feet trembling. A whimper escapes her lips, and she tugs on the hem of her t-shirt. She looks into my eyes and swallows hard. I swear I see tears forming. She has nothing to fear from me if she tells me what I need to know.

“Tell me who your source is.” I stalk toward her, and she backs away. We’ve done this enough times, I know that look. She’s terrified and aroused all at once. If she’s a good girl and gives me an honest answer, I’ll beat her little pussy until it squirts.

“I... I don’t know,” she mumbles, backing against the wall. It’s either the chill of the crisp fall night without a heater on, or she’s aroused. Her nipples press against the underside of the t-shirt making an appearance. I like that—that I have this power over her. That she can’t control her own body when I’m around.

I grab her neck hard, pinning her against the wall and her hands instantly grip my wrist. “I said, tell me who your source is. I need a name, a number, anything.” She claws at my hands, eyes wide. When I did this during sex last week, she loved it. This time I’m not joking around. I need an answer.

“I... don’t... know...” she chokes out. Her frantic expression infuriates me. I loosen my grip and she gasps for breath. “What are you going to do? Rape me?” Her words slice through my heart. I know what she’s doing, and it just might work. I will not harm her like that, not after what happened to my mother. But I will dominate her, teach her a lesson. I stare into her eyes and pull my hand away.

“If you don’t tell me the name of your source, I will have to kill you, or Dominic will.” I clench my hand into a fist, and she glares at me. Her nostrils flare in a defiant way, as if she’s telling me she will not submit to my orders. No one rebels against me.

“They took my phone and smashed it. That was the only way I had to contact the source other than a single email they sent.” She hugs her arms over her chest. It’s a move of self-preservation, or it would be if it didn’t make her tits bulge up ever so slightly. I notice it, and she notices me looking.

“Hmmm...” My dick twitches. I lick my teeth and then stare her in the eye.

This tense standoff is interesting. It's like she is waiting for me to either hurt her or fuck her, and I hadn't come in here with the intention to do either, but seeing the way her chest heaves, the lust haze over her eyes. Maybe I will take advantage of that.

"So, if you want it you're out of luck."

I grab her by the back of the head, hair gripped tightly in my fist. "Oh, I'm not out of luck. You're going to give it to me..." I shove her onto the bed, and she lands with a bounce and another whimper.

"The information?" she asks, crawling away, but I grab her ankle and pull her back as I open the fly of my pants. Just thinking about fucking her has me rock hard.

"No, your pussy," I growl, freeing my dick.

Natalie whimpers but I see the half smirk on her face as I climb on top of her, pinning her into the mattress face down. She squeals and pushes as if she's trying to get away as I rip her t-shirt off and toss it. She has a scar on her back I never noticed, and she isn't fighting me as strongly as the last few times. Maybe I'm finally breaking her.

"Get off me!" she yells, twisting until she manages to turn over. I peel my shirt over my head and throw it too, my dick standing upright through the fly of my jeans.

"Hmm, that's not what you want, Natalie. I know you. You want me to fuck you so hard right now, don't you? You'll be begging for my cock any second."

"Go to hell," she snarls, and her glare excites me.

"I'm already there, baby."

I grab her by the hair and yank her head back as I jerk my pants down, exposing my dick. Natalie looks at it, her eyes wide. I love the look of surprise on her face, but I don't want to give her a chance to change her mind. I shove my cock in her mouth so fast that she chokes.

"You're not going to win this," she says, pulling away. She resists me but I

know she wants it.

I hold her head firmly and shove myself back into her. I fuck her mouth, forcing her lips up and down on my dick. Her tits are bouncing, and I can't help but grope one while I work her mouth.

"Shut up," I growl. "You're not going to win this game. You've given up. You want it. You want me to fuck you." Her eyes are watering, and she looks like she's about to cry. I'm enjoying myself. Every time her throat tightens around me in a gag, it sends waves of arousal through my body.

"Mmm," she grunts, and she gasps as I thrust my cock deeper, holding her head still and pulling her hair. Her eyes flutter closed, and she swallows. The muscles in her throat grip me, milking me.

"That's right," I say, pulling her hair again. "You're going to take it all, aren't you?" Her eyes are watering, and I fuck her mouth faster. She chokes again, but I don't let up. "You want it all, don't you?" My dick slides into her throat over and over, and each time she gags it squeezes me, sending my pulse racing.

Natalie pulls away and I let her, shoving my dick at her face. She's gasping for air, but she nods. "Mmm," she groans and covers her mouth. She's breathing hard as I tug her shorts off, then my slacks. As I move to climb on the bed again, she turns over in an attempt to get away again.

"No, you don't," I hiss, pinning her down. If she won't play nice, she will get the monster. Her creamy skin is too white, too pure. It needs a nice pink tint to it. I reel back and smack her.

"Shit," she moans. She's not even protesting this at all. It's too easy. She needs to fight me. So, I smack her ass hard again, and she yelps. "Now you're talking," I say, and I smack her again. Her ass is bright red and she's writhing under me, her pussy dripping wet. I lower my face to her hot, wet lips and I lick her all over. I taste her sweet juices and I shove my tongue inside. She gasps and her hips buck, pushing her pussy into my face.

"Oh my god," she moans. "I hate you."

"You love it," I say, and I shove my tongue even further, pushing her legs apart to get to it. I shove my tongue into her hole and fuck her with it as hard

as I can. She's crying out, her fists beating against the bed. I pull away and grab her hair, jerking her head up. She gasps. "Now you're going to get it."

"No please," she begs. "I'll be good."

"I don't want you to be good," I growl. Her eyes widen as I grab my shaft and guide it towards her pussy. "I want you to be bad for me." I want her to resist, make this more fun.

She moans as I push into her, grabbing her tits from beneath and squeezing them. She's wet and warm and her tight pussy grips my cock. I pull back, then shove it back into her and she cries out. I know I'm being rough, but I don't care. I want her to feel it. I want her to know that this is what happens when you don't give me what I want. I want her to know what it feels like to be controlled. I want her to know I own her.

"I'm going to make you scream," I say, and I start fucking her harder. She moans and bucks her hips, meeting me thrust for thrust. I pull my hand back and smack her ass again, and she cries out. "That's it," I say. "Scream for me."

Natalie's eyes are wide and she's biting her lip. I reach down and grab her hair, yanking her head back. "I'm going to make you beg for my cock," she says. "I'm going to make you take it. And you're going to love every goddamn second."

"Fuck you," she says, but she's saying it in a way that makes me want to fuck her even harder. I have her pinned down and she's not fighting me. She's moaning and begging for more. I feel like I could fuck her all night.

"You make me so fucking hard," I growl. "I could fuck you all night."

"Mmm," she moans, her eyes fluttering. "I want it." The pain and arousal in her tone do things to me. It's impossible for me to stop now even if I wanted to. She has me climbing the walls.

"I know you do," I growl, but I won't give her what she wants so easily. I pull out and wait, pressing my cock against her hole. "So, beg..." I slide the head of my cock up and down her crack, moistening her tight, hot entrance. I can feel the ring of muscles resisting me already.

"Please," she moans, bucking her hips. "Please, please, oh god please."

"Please what?" I ask, pressing the tip of my cock against her hot entrance. I want it so badly. I need to claim it, to make it mine.

"Please fuck me," she groans. "Oh god, please fuck me." She backs against me and I lose all control.

"Beg," I growl, and I push my cock inside her. She gasps as I shove it into her. I can feel her resisting even as she yelps too. I pull back and shove it into her again, groaning as I feel her tight ass gripping my cock. I pull back and thrust again, this time grabbing her by the hips. Her ass is so tight there's no way she's done this before, but she takes it easily. Fuck if that doesn't make it hotter.

She cries out again and I fuck her harder, my cock slamming against her. My hand smacks against her ass and she cries out, the sound echoing through the room. I smack her again, and then again, and I fuck her as hard as I can. I can feel her clenching around me, the tight muscles milking me.

"Harder," she moans. "Please, please fuck me harder."

"You want it harder?" I say, pulling back. "You got it."

She's bracing herself against the headboard and saying, "fuck me, fuck me," over and over and I know it won't be long before I feel her come. Her face is flushed and she's sweating, and I can tell she's close. I grab her shoulders and pull her back onto me harder so I can go deeper in her ass, and she is groaning so loud I know she'll snap any second.

"Come for me," I growl, and I feel her clench around me.

"I'm coming," she moans, and her face is twisted, and I know she's coming. Her knees give out and I pull her down onto me, thrusting as hard as I can into her ass. Tiny pulses of contractions grip me then loosen rhythmically.

"Holy shit," she gasps. "Holy shit, holy shit."

I bite her neck, hard, and the sensation sends her into a frenzy. She rises up against me and I can feel her come around my cock, her ass squeezing tight and her moans echoing through the room. I keep fucking her, unrelenting,

until my balls draw up. I groan, and I can feel my orgasm rushing over me. I come inside her, emptying myself into her ass.

I pull out and stand, a string of my cum stretching from the head of my cock until it snaps and dribbles over her ass cheek. She lays there somewhat incoherent until I smack her ass again. She jolts and curls to her side. I can't help but crave the feeling of her body against my skin still. So, I climb over her, curling around her. She turns and faces me as I straddle her hips and feel her tits press against my chest.

“I'll get you a way out.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, her voice only a whisper.

I think about it for a second. I need to know her information, who her source is, who else might know the truth about our smuggling business. “Get me that laptop, help me find out who the source is, and you can walk away from this.” I mean it too. I can tell my brother she's dead, I hid her away. He never has to know.

“I...”

“I need you to walk me into that building and get the laptop, give me the passcode. If the information you say is true is in your email, I'll have the source by the balls.” And I'll also know who else she's shared any information with. Lenny can go through her laptop and find that out.

“Okay,” she mumbles, and I believe her.

I lie down next to her and force her against my body. I'm playing with fire. My father, now on his deathbed, once told me that if I played with the devil, I'd lose my soul. But I gave my soul up the first time I fucked this woman. There are two things in this life that have ever mattered to me—family and loyalty. And I'm going to test her loyalty to me tonight.

“I have to tell Dominic the new plan. You'll walk me right into the office and get the laptop, and we'll return it here with the intent to find the source. Then I let you go.”

Natalie doesn't look at me or blink; she hardly breathes. If she can pass my test, she won't be an enemy. She'll be family.

“Sleep well...” I tell her, climbing out of bed. I dress quickly; she watches. And when I leave, I shut the door, but I don’t lock it. I have cameras in every hallway of this house. I saw the footage of her trying to leave. Flynn was a fool to forget to lock it, but I do it on purpose. I have three men ready to take shifts and watch the cameras. If she tries to leave, we’ll catch her. If not, I will know she wants to be here.

First, I have to tell Dominic my new plan, with one slight change. He will think Natalie will be dead in the end, but I can’t have that, so I will have to make it seem real. Only until I can find a way to prove to him that she is not an enemy. Until then, she will remain here with me, and I will protect her.

If I get that laptop.

If not, I’ll have no choice but to let my brothers have their way.

I pray it doesn’t come to that.

NATALIE

Matty has a soft side and he's showing it. After the comment I made I deserve to be punished, but he didn't... He couldn't. Why? He restrained himself that time. Was it because I wasn't fighting him so much? Was it because he's grown some maleficent erotic attachment to me? Whatever it is, I'm not sure I want it to end. I enjoy the back and forth, though tonight I was a bit scared of him when he first came in.

He's different though. I never thought men in his line of business had feelings or a sentimental side. Not until I met him. And maybe he is just an anomaly, an outlier amongst the others, but I know he's not supposed to be this way. He shows me mercy when his siblings demand swift justice. I threatened their name, their business, their reputation, but he uses himself as a barrier between me and them.

Why?

I climb out of bed and tiptoe to the door. When I turn the knob, I know he hasn't locked it. It wasn't just my imagination. He really left me in an unlocked room, despite the bars on the window, despite me having already attempted escape twice. I don't know why he did, but the thought of escape doesn't even cross my mind.

I find myself grinning, biting a single fingernail, as if there is much left to chew there. He's beginning to trust me, and I'm beginning to find that I have feelings for him. Real feelings. Which is why I didn't fight him tonight. He was upset, and it wasn't a macho display to make me cower and pretend to be

submissive to him. There was a truth in his eyes tonight, anger and pain about something so real it shook him. Matty was afraid of his brother.

I dress in the t-shirt and shorts, wondering if he is just testing me. Does he want me to try to escape again? Fight him the way I have every time we've had sex before, just so he can get off again? But why? Why not just tell me what he wants and trust that I'll be his little slut anytime? What changed? And why now?

Hugging my arms over my stomach, I let myself out of the room. I've seen this all before a few times now. It's not new, but this time I take a moment to soak it in. Every door is ornately carved, every archway the same. The marble tiles are cold on my toes, and I slowly descend the stairs. I see the front door, but that's not where I'm headed. I want to find him. Just being near him feels like the right thing.

The lights are low, only a few of them shining into the foyer. I see a door ajar, as if he's left it open just to invite me in. I walk that direction. The pentagram pattern in the tile under the behemoth chandelier catches my eye. I never noticed it the other few times I was in this room. It's laid out with gold flecked marble, framed in with thin black marble tiles. It's interesting. I wonder if it came with the house or if he had it put in that way.

I move on toward the room with the light and see that it's empty, but something in the room calls to me, coaxing me to come inside. So, I push the door open and make my way in. It looks like an office, large but comfortable. A tall cabinet sits on one wall, a bookshelf on another. There's a desk along the far end, a pair of sofas facing each other with a table between them closest to me. It looks inviting. The warm hues of browns and golds speak to me.

Sconces on the wall emit a soft light, while another chandelier overhead remains dark. It has the feel of an old diner near closing time. The only thing missing is the music playing. I pad into the room deeper, and I notice the expensive rug beneath the table and sofas. Matty has spared no expense for this room. It must be his favorite place in the house; I could see how it would be mine.

I let my hand pass over the back of the leather couch as I walk. It smells

musky in here, like cigars and whiskey. And it's warm too. It might be the only room in the house that has heat on already. I like that; it makes it feel much more homey to me. And when I notice a family portrait on the wall I stop and take it in.

There are five boys there, close in age, and a man and woman. I easily recognize Matty. In this photo he has to be around ten. He hasn't changed a bit since then, except to grow manlier. And his father—wow, does he look exactly like the man, though I can see the resemblance in his mother's face too, and pain. It fills her eyes, hauntingly. Her gaze is hollow, void of the life that most family pictures emit. I wonder if Matty's story was true, that she was ravaged and in so much emotional torment that she took her own life. This image of her certainly depicts one of pain.

I pull my eyes away from the portrait and look at the shelves of books. Several large albums there draw my attention. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then those albums may give me stories of times past that would fill in the gaps for me, tell me about the Matty of yesterday, the one who existed before pain came, before he grew into this business and the life of organized crime. The one I want to search out, to be near to.

I take an album and curl up on one of the sofas. Flipping through it I am surprised that I feel deeply connected to him. Each picture in this book has at least one familiar face, matching the portrait on the wall. I don't know who is who, but I know their names because of my research. I begin to wonder which brother is Dominic, the eldest and the one who will take over the family when Alexsi, their father, dies. I know he's on hospice because my source told me it won't be long now and that the time to strike is when they're weakened by his departure.

I don't think I want that anymore, to strike that is. Matty doesn't seem hell bent on my destruction. He seems to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing. Why I researched his family and why I need to get justice for Hal—or vengeance, either one is fine with me. He seems to understand that I need to find Hal's killer.

I turn another page and see a newspaper clipping. It's an article about the woman whose face is in the image on the wall. I begin reading, wondering what it's about. In this photo she looks happy, but the article is anything but.

It details the circumstances of her suicide and Matty wasn't kidding. The article tells all, about her rape and the suicide note she left, but it stops short of sharing the actual content of the letter. He must have been devastated. I feel tears welling up on his behalf, aching for this to have never happened to him or his mother.

I close the book and sigh, not able to look at another picture. My heart can't take it right now. It hits too close to home. It wasn't that long ago that Hal was taken, and I am feeling more connected to this family than I care to admit. I never did find hard evidence that it was Matty's family that killed Hal, though I still strongly suspect it. Part of me wonders if it was one of his brothers. I shudder to think that it was him, that I've fucked the man who murdered my uncle in cold blood. I have to force that thought away before it takes root because I'm falling for him.

Leaning my head back on the couch I close my eyes. If he wanted to kill me he would have. And maybe in the beginning he kept me alive because he thought I would be useful, or because he feared I may have built a safety net around myself that might crash in on him if I vanished. But now? Weeks later? He had no reason to be kind to me, to offer me a way out if I helped him get the research. He had no reason to trust that I wouldn't have made copies or sent them to myself or someone else. Saved them on hard drives hidden in other places. He had no reason to believe I wouldn't return to my job and rebuild a case against him.

"What are you doing in here?"

Matty's voice startles me, and I jump. I straighten and look at him with wide eyes. He's standing in the doorway holding a plate of food. Sex makes me hungry sometimes too, but I don't say that. I can't speak, not even to mutter out an excuse. I sit with my legs curled and the album on my lap, staring at him frightfully as he barges in and sets the plate down.

"This is my private office," he snaps as he stomps over to me. I don't have time to react. I didn't think he would be angry. I thought this was an invitation.

"I wasn't trying to escape," I whimper as he grabs me by the hair and pulls me off the sofa. The album crashes to the floor and I stumble forward as he

drags me toward the door.

“What the fuck were you doing? Snooping in here? Trying to get more information about my family?” He’s angry and I guess I understand why. I didn’t know he would think I was trying to dig up dirt.

“No, Matty, please. Let me explain. Ouch!” I wince as he shoves me hard into the foyer and my knees smack the marble. “Oh fuck...”

“Get up!” His booming voice startles me yet again. I stand as quickly as I can but he’s there on top of me too soon. I lose my balance and start to fall, and he grabs me by the waist and tosses me over his shoulder.

“Matty, please. I thought you left the door open so I could come down and sit with you. I didn’t know—”

“Shut up!” he hisses and smacks my ass, but it’s not a playful slap like the ones earlier. And his tone isn’t seductive and hungry. He’s hurt. It’s like he really was testing me, and he’s discovered that I’m not acting the way he thought I would. I cling to his body as he bounds up the stairs. It shakes me so hard it hurts my neck. I whimper but he doesn’t seem to hear, or if he does, he doesn’t care.

He storms into my room and drops me on my bed, and I whip my hair out of my face. “Stop it! Just stop!” I scream and he stands over me with his chest heaving. “I came down there to sit with you. I could have left. I could have walked right out that front door, but I didn’t. I didn’t run off. I told you I’d help you get the fucking laptop, and I will. I fuck will!” Maybe screaming at him is a mistake, but I don’t care.

“You had no right to go in there.” His eyes flash with rage, storms so dark it threatens to downpour, and all I can do is feel sorry for him. “That is my private space. No one goes in there.”

I knew it. I knew it was like some inner sanctum. That space felt too sacred to me. He’s right; I shouldn’t have gone in there. I don’t know why I didn’t leave the instant I felt that urge in my gut. All I can do is watch him seethe with anger.

“I...” I have no words, no excuses, only an ache in my heart to undo what I’ve done that has upset him and help him relax. I reach for him, and he

smacks my hands away.

“You’ve crossed a line.” He glares at me and shakes his head, then storms out and locks the door.

I jump off the bed and race to the door, jiggling the knob. “Please, no, Matty. Please...” I wail and sob, smacking the door. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Please come back.” It was good. He and I have a connection. It’s not supposed to be this way. He can’t be angry and storm out and lock me up now. I didn’t mean to upset him. I wasn’t looking for more dirt. I felt like we were really connecting.

“Matty,” I cry, slapping the door, but he doesn’t return. There isn’t a sound in the house. The wind howls past the windows louder than the sobs from my throat and I slide down the door and curl into a ball leaning on it. “I didn’t mean to.”

My heart aches. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he isn’t feeling connected to me. Maybe seeing his family album was crossing a line. Oh god, this hurts and I don’t even know why. I never meant to hurt him, and now all I can do is wait and see what happens, if he is still on my side when he returns to me.

Oh god, what did I do?

MATTY

I sit across Dominic's dining table from Nanette, his wife. She's not all that different from Natalie. They're both smart and beautiful, and Nan came about in Dom's life in a similar manner too. Though, Natalie started out on the wrong side of things. I still wonder if she's teetering the fence after that performance two nights ago. When I locked that door, I stood there listening to her cries, pleading for me to come back, telling me she didn't mean to upset me. That's a valuable trait she has, but she'll have to prove to me she's worth trusting. I'm teetering on that fence.

"Pass the salt, please," Dominic says, pointing his fork at me.

There hidden behind the bowl of green beans prepared by Dominic's maid is the salt. I grab it and hand it to him and he douses his pork roast. I'm here to talk business, but we will finish eating first. He doesn't like his wife present for business talks. He likes to keep his personal life separate from what we do. So, despite having a very solid plan in place, I hold my tongue.

"This roast is fantastic. Mika really outdid herself." Nanette puts the last forkful of meat into her mouth and chews slowly, savoring the flavors. I, too, am enjoying the food. It seems like it's been forever since I ate a real meal. It's been one thing after another with family business and for several weeks I spent a lot of my time seated by my father's bedside.

"I agree." Wiping my mouth with my napkin, I drop my fork on my empty plate. "Thank you for inviting me to dinner."

"Of course," she says, smiling. "I'll leave you two to your business. She

stands and picks up her plate, reaching for mine. I lift it and hand it to her, then plop my napkin on top of it.

“Thank you,” I say, and she nods politely before kissing Dominic on the forehead.

“I’ll wait for you to come to bed.” Nanette disappears into the kitchen, and Dominic and I are finally alone. I sip my brandy and watch him finish eating. I won’t start the discussion until his meal is complete; it’s the polite thing. I would appreciate a man who gave me that same respect. Dominic and I aren’t too different either. Same taste in women, same love for family, same thirst for truth and vengeance. He spent years hunting my mother’s rapist to enact justice and when he got it, he became a different person—more focused.

Still, right down to the familiar decorations around his house, furnishings, paintings, rugs, we are cut from the same cloth. Even the chandelier that hangs overhead is similar to the one hanging above my dining table. And within our veins runs the blood of the Gusev name, which is why we will both stop at nothing to protect our family and our business.

“So, you’ve broken her?” he asks as he wipes his mouth. His plate isn’t clean, but he pushes it away and lays the napkin over it.

“I have.” I am confident that she is broken in a way; I’m just not certain I’m the one who did it. But my plan will work.

“And the source?” Dominic leans forward pressing his fingertips together, elbows planted on the tablecloth.

“We will have the email address and a way to track where it came from as soon as we get that laptop.”

“Hmm, and what is the new plan for that?” He eyes me and tilts his chin down. Our previous plan failed massively, and I won’t let that happen again. We can’t lose any more men.

“I’m going to walk right into the newspaper and pick it up during broad daylight, and Natalie will be my escort.” I sit back with confidence and drum my fingers on the table. “She’ll use her ID and fingerprint for the biometrics, and she’ll escort me in as her ‘source.’ Once inside, we’ll have everything we need, and Natalie won’t be a problem anymore.”

Dominic's face contorts and he scoffs. "If she knows what we believe she does, she will always be a problem, a ghost that haunts us. She has to be—"

"I'll handle it," I say firmly, cutting him off. If he gives the direct order there is no way I can disobey. "She won't be a problem."

"Good..." He stands and adjusts his tie. "Do it soon. I heard from Sergeant Monroe that they're looking for her now. People have been asking. There isn't an official missing persons case yet, but if we don't get that laptop soon, there will be. It's probably good that she'll show her face in the office. It'll get some heat off our backs for now. Just make sure your face is covered or their security cameras will pick you up."

"Already on it. Lenny will divert the feed while I'm in the building." I stand too and stretch out my hand to shake his. Dominic reaches back in a tight grip and the agreement is made. I will follow my plan and we'll remove the threat. Then I'll deal with Natalie, and it will be over. She just has to trust me and keep her mouth shut.

"Report to me when it's done." Dominic walks away and I rub my hand across my beard. Now to go home and run through the plan with Natalie again. She has to know how vital it is that she does exactly what I say. Otherwise, her life is on the line.

I head home to find Flynn guarding her door as I requested, but now I have another request. Natalie and I have to have a talk, so I tell him to bring her to me in my study—the place she is never allowed to be. Her response after I caught her in here the other day makes me think she is willing to do as I order her, maybe more. She didn't shy away from curling up on my chest last week either.

I unlock my study and flip the lights on, then find two tumblers and pour a bit of gin in each of them. It isn't long before I hear her whimpering and whining. She's protesting something and I'm sure it's Flynn's handling of her. When I sit on the sofa and set the glasses on the coffee table, Flynn walks in with Natalie. He has her by both arms, forcing her forward. She stiffens when she sees me and goes silent.

"Welcome, Natalie," I say, gesturing to the couch opposite the one I'm sitting on. "Have a seat. Flynn, leave us alone." I flick my wrist and he's gone, out

the door, shutting it behind himself.

Natalie grabs an elbow and stands there looking sheepish. The same t-shirt and shorts she's been wearing for days hang from her thin frame. She looks tired, drawn face and disheveled hair. She's lost weight since coming here too, not a lot, but it's noticeable in her face.

"I... Can I go back to my room?"

"Sit," I say firmly, and she tenses. Her stiff walk as she approaches the sofa humors me. She hasn't even seen my dark angry side yet. That smack to her ass was only the beginning for her if she doesn't submit to me, though I know she will. She won't let it come to the point where I'm really angry with her. I can see it in her eyes. She wants to obey me.

She sits right on the edge of the cushion and puts her hands on her knees. She's timid and her hands shake a little. My reaction to her snooping put the fear of God into her. She knows I'm not a man to mess with now. That's a good thing. Now, we can get down to business.

"Drink," I order her and nod at her glass as I pick up my own. I down the contents in one gulp and it burns on the way down.

"What is it?" she asks, picking the glass up gently with two fingers.

"Gin."

I watch her as she, too, downs the entire contents in one swallow. She coughs and splutters a bit, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand before setting the glass back down. "It's awful."

"It's a five-hundred-dollar bottle." It's strong too, eighty proof and ready to peel the paint off walls. I already feel it hitting me after the brandy at Dominic's.

"What do you want?" Natalie scoots back on the couch a little, but she still looks uncomfortable.

"Tomorrow is the day you take me to the paper. I need to know who else has copies of your work, and I need the truth. If you're a good girl and tell me what I need to know, you'll go to bed happy." I lick my lower lip just

thinking of how badly I want to do very nasty things to her body.

She stares at me calmly and shrugs. “I gave a copy to a few friends. They have instructions to mail it to every major newspaper in New York if I disappear.” She says the words so firmly and convincingly I almost believe her. It is the wise thing to do when investigating someone as dangerous as me—as my family. But there is a hint of something in her eyes that makes me wonder if she’s telling the truth.

“What friends?”

“As if I’d tell you. You’ll just kill them.” Her chest puffs up and again I’m almost convinced. Her posture straightens and she keeps her eyes locked on me even as I stand and walk around the table toward her. When I move to her periphery, rounding the sofa she sits on, she looks straight ahead where I was just sitting.

“We’re not telling lies to each other, Natalie. If this is going to work, you’re going to have to be honest.” I stand behind her and pull her hair back over her shoulder, exposing her neck. Then I lean down and breathe across her creamy skin as I look into the collar of her shirt. “Because I wouldn’t want this pretty neck of yours to be tarnished by my brother’s blade.”

Leaning over the couch farther, I kiss her neck softly, then nip at it. She gasps and twitches but remains sitting with perfect posture, facing the other wall. I slowly move my mouth closer to her ear and whisper, “And besides, how can I have my way with you if you’re a corpse? Lies have a way of ruining things. And what we have deserves to stay alive, doesn’t it, Natalie?”

She shivers and I watch the goosebumps rise on her arms, causing her hair to stand on end. But she says nothing. She’s stonewalling me, which could mean she is very confident that her story will be told, or it could mean she’s bluffing and that she is fantastic at it. I wrap my hand around her neck, lightly touching her skin as I do. Her body tenses again as I slide my hand upward to her throat and force her chin upward.

She looks at me out of the corner of her eye and grits her teeth. “Are you lying to me? Did you really make copies of the files and send them to your friend for insurance?”

Natalie blinks a few times and tries to turn away, but I grip her neck so tight she gags and then coughs. She looks me directly in the eye and I loosen my grip. When I do, she says, “Yes, I did.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

“No,” she chokes out and I let go of her. Her hand flies to her neck and she rubs it, her chest heaving. I round the end of the couch again, but this time I head for the liquor cabinet. I want another drink, and I want her loser. She’s going to remember everything, but she is too rigid right now to be any real fun.

I grab the bottle of gin and when I turn to head back, I see her like a flash dart to the door. I chuckle and shake my head. She is out the door and running and I can’t wait to hunt her down. The house is dark. The doors are all locked, so she can’t get out even if she wants to. She’s afraid now, which means it’s a good possibility that she was lying to me and she has every reason to be afraid. I take a swig of the gin and set the bottle down as I head into the hallway.

“Natalie,” I call out as I walk down the hallway. I hear a whimper in the darkness and choose not to turn on the lights. It’s more fun this way, searching for her like she’s my prey and I’m the wolf stalking her in the night. “Come back, little minx. Your wolf is going to hunt you down and have his way with you.”

I move deeper into the recess of the home. I keep the doors locked, so there aren’t many places for her to hide. Even if she got into a room and locked the door after her, I have a master key. “I will find you and when I do you will learn another lesson.” A sound to my left pricks my ears, so I turn that way. She’s in the kitchen. “You like being hunted, Natalie? Like playing hard to get?”

There is no response, but I hear a thump and I push the door to the kitchen open. It’s dark here too, but my eyes are adjusting now. With the glimmer coming in the window from the moonlight overhead, I see a vague silhouette moving slowly. She thinks she’s invisible or something. “Now, now, Natalie, you’re starting to anger me.” I unbuckle my belt and slide it from the loops in stealthy silence. “And you don’t want me actually angry, do you? Or did you

like when I spanked you for breaking into my space?"

Her heavy breathing is a turn on. She may not be able to see me because I'm in the shadows, but she stands against the back door. Her form is clearly visible.

"Shame, really, that I have to do this to you yet again. I thought you learned your lessons." I move in for the kill, only a few steps left. I'm stunned to see something shiny in her hand. My mind races. What the fuck? She has a knife? What the fuck is she going to do with that? I'm shocked for a second, but I keep going.

I lunge at her and knock her hand and the knife away. It clatters across the floor, and she gasps. I have my belt in my hand, and I raise my arm, ready to bring it down on her. I don't want to hurt her, but I will if I have to.

"No!" She cries out, her hands covering her face as she slides along the wall, trying to get away from me. "No, I'm sorry." She doesn't know what else to say. She was just trying to protect herself. It's all she knows.

With both hands I bring the belt up and wrap it around her neck, pinning her to the wall. I'd be furious if I wasn't so turned on by the way she ran from me. My dick is hard now, ready to plow into her and make her scream my name. I press my hips against hers, pushing her into the wall. I hear her sharp intake of breath. She's turned on too. Her eyes are wide, scared, but her body is reacting to mine. She wants what I'm about to give her, but she's not sure if she should admit it.

"Why'd you run?" My whisper is almost a growl. "You like what I do to you."

"Fuck you," she tries to growl, but it's choked out by the belt.

"Oh, you will..." I grip the ends of the belt in one hand, keeping it firmly wrapped around her neck and pull her forcibly away from the wall. She grabs my wrist and gasps, grunting as I bend her over the stainless-steel prep table. "You know you like it."

"Fuck you!" She snarls, and I tighten the belt around her neck, squeezing her voice into almost silence. I press my hips against her ass, holding her up with one arm as I use the other to rip her pants down her legs. Her ass is pink and

luscious in the dim moonlight. I look forward to when I'll see it red from my palm. She kicks and struggles against me, and I can feel her heat against my leg. I resist the urge to just push my aching dick into her. I know she wants me to.

"Not yet, Natalie," I whisper.

"Please," she whispers back.

"You don't get to say please," I grin. "You don't get to beg yet."

"Ugh," she growls.

"I'm going to teach you; you're going to learn."

"Fuck you," she tries again.

"You are," I press my hand against her ass, feeling the heat of her skin. I take the belt and slide it along her ass, between her legs, teasing her. "I'm going to make you scream my name. I'm going to make you beg for my cock."

"Fuck you," she struggles, trying to get away.

"I'm going to spank you until you can't sit down."

"No," she pleads.

"Yes," I answer back, slapping her ass hard. She lets out a yelp and I can feel her body tense up. I'm going to enjoy this.

NATALIE

Matty's hand is hot; it stings as he brings it down on my ass. I grip the edge of the metal table and whimper. I didn't run because I wanted him to chase me. I ran because I was afraid, he'd see through my lie. I don't have extra copies of the files because I was stupid and didn't think ahead. But fuck, I do enjoy this, when he's pretending to be angry, pretending to punish me. Maybe the first time it was punishment, but now he's as hungry for my pussy as I am for his cock.

His hand comes down again on my ass, and though he isn't holding me down, I don't move. I want him—want this. Matty doesn't move away, instead he rubs my ass, spreading the heat through my skin. I close my eyes and enjoy this moment, this feeling.

"Good girl," he whispers. One more time, he spanks me. It stings, and I'm grateful for it. I'm grateful for the sting, for the pain, for his cock rubbing on the back of my thigh, for his hand on my skin. They make me feel something again and I want to feel it more. Every day.

"You're so fucking wet," he says.

I know it, I think. He rubs my pussy and smears my moisture around. I want his fingers inside me. I want his cock inside me. I want him to fuck me and to come so hard I can't breathe.

"Please," I say.

I hear him unzip his pants and I know he's going to fuck me. He doesn't

hesitate, doesn't tease me or rub my clit. His cock slides inside me, hard and fast and I gasp. He groans and I push back to meet him. I like that he's rough with me, that he's not pretending this is anything but lust. He pulls me back against him, and I want to feel him deeper. I push my ass back, push my hips against his.

"You like that, you like being fucked from behind, don't you?" he whispers. He moves his hand around to my clit, and I moan. I don't know what he wants me to say, so I don't say anything at all. I like this, I like him.

"Tell me, tell me what you want."

"I want you," I say. "I want you to fuck me."

His hand comes down on my ass again as he thrusts deep inside me. He doesn't stop, doesn't let me catch my breath. He just keeps pounding into me.

"You're going to come for me, aren't you?" he asks.

I nod, because I can't speak. I just want him to make me come. I want to feel good, and I want to remember this, the feel of him inside me, the heat, the pleasure.

His hand lands on my skin again, and I cry out. It hurts and it stings, but I don't want him to stop. It's too much and it's not enough. He pulls out of me, and I feel empty. I can't talk so I moan softly, urging him to put his cock back inside me, but he walks away. I lie across the table listening to him move about. Light pours from the fridge when he opens it, and he pulls out a beer. Now? Why?

"Mmm," I groan, touching my own clit lightly. He has to come back, has to fuck me. So, imagine my shock when he returns with an ice cold beer bottle in hand. I straighten and he is there, running the bottle across my thigh.

"Bend over," he says gruffly. I stand facing him.

"What? Why?" I try to protest but he shoves the bottle between my legs. It startles me and I jerk. It's cold.

"You're going to take your punishment now."

"Don't you want to fuck me?" I ask, but I don't mean it like a question,

because the answer is obvious.

"Yes," he says. "But not like this."

The bottle slides over my pussy and between my lips. I open up for him, and he pushes it inside. The cold makes me gasp and he curls a thumb against my clit. It's cold and I wriggle and moan. I love it. It's thick and I'm so wet it slides in and out of me easily.

"Do you like it when I fuck you with my cock?" I nod, because I do. "I want you to fuck yourself with the bottle, and I want you to come."

"What? No—"

My protest is met with a smack. He backhands me and my neck whips to the side, then he guides my hand to the bottle. "Now," he says, forcing me to grab the bottle. I grasp it firmly and he bends, hooking his hands behind my knees. He lifts and I'm tipped backwards, sprawled out on that damn cold metal table. The bottle feels incredible though, so I can't complain.

"Fuck yourself," he says. I spread my legs wider, holding onto the bottle. "I am." I push the bottle in and out of me. It makes the most obscene sounds as it rubs against my pussy. He pushes my thighs apart and leans forward. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think?" He spits into his hand, and I feel his fingers on my pussy, touching my clit. I fuck myself harder, moaning as he begins to massage me. He strokes his dick too and all I can do is writhe under his touch.

I'm so close. He leans down and kisses me, his tongue pushing into my mouth. I kiss him back, hard, pulling his hair. He reaches up with one hand and twists my nipple. I cry out into his mouth, and he kisses me harder. His fingers are rough and fast on my clit, and I can feel myself clenching around the bottle. Oh God, I'm going to come.

My body jerks, twitches, and tenses as orgasm crashes into me. It's never been more incredible, until he smacks his hand hard across my ass. The jolt of pain mixes with the waves of pleasure and I beg him, "Again... do it again." And he does. He spanks me again and my orgasm intensifies. I'm arching my back and gripping that bottle so tight my knuckles hurt. I come all

over his fingers, groaning his name and pushing my head back against the table.

Matty pulls his fingers out of my pussy, then lifts me up until I'm sitting on the edge of the table. He kisses me again, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. I wrap my arms around him, and he guides his cock into me. I'm still coming, and he feels huge, like a fucking baseball bat. I moan into his mouth as he starts to fuck me.

"Fuck me, Matty," I tell him. "Fuck me hard."

"Shut up," he says, but he fucks me harder, slamming into me. His skin slaps against mine, and he grabs my breasts. I'm still coming, waves of pleasure crashing over me. He kisses me hard, and I feel his fingers digging into my hips with each thrust.

"I want you to come," I say. "Come all over me."

He pulls out of me, and I don't know what I've done wrong. But then he grabs my shoulders and turns me around, pushing me down so I'm bent in half. He slams back into me, and I moan. It's so good. I can feel him touching my cervix and I push back against him, holding onto the table for support. He's fucking me so hard I'm worried the table will tip over. I push my ass up higher and growls in response.

"Shit, oh shit," I grunt, feeling another orgasm building. His dick hits all the right spots, and when I hear the jingle of his belt buckle, it sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine. "Oh shit, oh shit," I pant, grabbing the table as it shakes.

Matty reaches around and grabs my tit. He pinches my nipple and I shriek. It hurts, but it's the good kind of pain. I'm so close to coming. He whips my ass—hard—and I let out a cry, pushing back against him. "Oh God! Oh God, I'm going to fucking come!" I shout.

"Good," he says, thrusting harder.

I feel him swell inside me. I can barely breathe. He fucks me like a jackhammer, and I come again. It's like nothing I've ever felt before. He whips my ass again and I lose control of my body. I'm coming and crying and groaning all at once, and I feel myself explode, juices dripping from my

body. The sensations are so intense I lose control of my bladder and all I can do is lie here as it happens.

I clench and grit my teeth, but it doesn't help. Piss streams down the insides of my thighs and I whimper as he growls. Then I feel his hot release fill me. It drains down my thighs too and I am spent. He pulls out and I turn over, falling to the floor. I'm shaking as he grabs my hand and helps me up. I'm covered in his come and my fluids, and I can't even bring myself to care. He kisses me gently and I bask in his affection.

"Don't ever lie to me," he says, and I nod. I'm so tired. I can't even think.

"I won't," I promise.

Matty hands me my shorts and a towel, produced from somewhere in this fucking pitch-black kitchen. I dry myself as much as I can and then put the shorts on. By the time I do, he's already gotten his dick put away and zipped his pants. He grabs me by the elbow and leads me roughly through the kitchen into the hallway. It's still so dark in here I can't tell where we are, but we aren't going to my room. It's upstairs, and I've never been down this hallway.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask. My arm hurts where he's gripping me but I don't complain to him.

"You're sleeping with me."

The way he says it is gruff, demanding, but again, I don't protest. He guides me forcefully down a hallway and into another dark room then flips on the light. This room has the same warm feeling as his study. I like it. Burgundy and cream bedding matches the crushed velvet curtains. A tall four-post bed nestles up against heavy mahogany wainscoting. I stand and take it all in as he leaves my side, heading to the nightstand where a bottle of liquor sits.

"Why do you want me in here?" I ask, watching him slurp straight from the bottle. He's never done this before. I thought he was angry with me for going into his private room.

"Don't ask questions, just take your clothes off. You're going to shower and be my fuck toy tonight."

I shudder at his words. This man is so goddamn self-righteous and arrogant to think I will just be his fuck toy, but he's exactly right. I will. Because he makes me feel incredible. So incredible that I don't want to leave. I want to stay here, to study him and get to know him. I slide my shorts down and they fall to the ground, then I peel my shirt over my head.

"Are you going to kill me?" It may seem like a stupid question, but I've heard his family telling him what they intend for me. I need to know he will protect me from them, because no matter how much I want to be here, to love him, I can't. Not if his brothers want me dead.

"I told you I like our arrangement." Matty sits on the side of the bed and removes his shoes with one hand while he slugs the drink with the other. "Shower is there." He gestures with the bottle toward a door, and I glance at it.

That's when I see the whip on the back of his bathroom door. Long black handle, long threads of leather. It makes me tense with arousal even after two incredible orgasms. He's really into this kinky shit and I love it. It makes my heart wrench in my chest. I look away from it and back to him. I'm fucking falling for this sick bastard, and I can't fight it. I want to fall for him. I want to love him. I want to be his fuck toy and his slut, and anything else he wants. But he's the embodiment of darkness. Why am I so drawn to him? Is it only because we share some trauma in our past? Is that it? What's wrong with me?

"I said you're going to shower," he snaps, and I move toward the door, closer to the whip he will surely beat me with. "And don't take forever. I'm ready to go again."

Does he really think bossing me around is the way to my heart? He must. And maybe it is. Romantic shit just isn't my thing. Flowers, chocolates, poems—for soft women who need coddled. I lightly touch the whip as I open the door. This is for me. This is the way to my heart; to tenderize my body with his hands is the only way he will connect to me, the only way he will make me feel for him. And he does it so well.

I glance over my shoulder as I pull the door open. His eyes are devouring me. "I hear spanking feels even better when you're wet," I tell him as I walk into the bathroom and see him stand before I turn away. I don't know who is in

charge here, because he certainly seems to follow my orders the way he expects me to follow his.

God why am I falling for him like this.

And how do I get out of this situation without getting killed?

And what about Hal's killer?

MATTY

Natalie looks elegant. The pinstripe suit I bought for her to wear fits her perfectly. I picked her sizes correctly with a little help from Dominic's wife and some guesswork. And dark navy is a terrific color for her, accents her creamy complexion well this time of year. She sits on the edge of the bed putting on the black flats I got to match the suit. It looks like something she'd wear any other day of the week to work. This day—Wednesday afternoon—she's not going into the office to work, at least not for them. Today she's working for me.

“You'll want this,” I tell her, reaching into my pocket. I pull out a barrette, small and dark blue with a hinged alligator clasp. She looks up at me as I gently draw her hair to one side and clip the barrette in place. It holds her hair nicely out of her eyes and serves a dual purpose. The barrette is my insurance that she can't run. It has a tracking device in it, and I won't even tell her it's there.

“Thank you, but that's a very expensive looking clip.” She tries to pluck it from her hair. She's not wrong. It's made of solid sapphire and sterling silver. But it's essential to our cause and she can't be trusted to leave the house without it.

I gently place my hand over hers as she reaches to remove the barrette and cover her fingers. “It looks ravishing. Leave it.”

Her tongue flicks over her bottom lip. She knows when I give an order it is to be obeyed. I've taught her that through our various interactions. She knows

when she obeys it's good, and when she doesn't it's bad. This time, she nods and lowers her hand and I cup her chin and force her to crane her neck upward so I can inspect her.

Her makeup is done well, tasteful—like any other day at work. She has a few stray hairs, again, nothing out of the normal. And she looks like she's tired, as if she has jet lag or hasn't slept well. That will go right along with the story we've concocted as to where she's been and why she hasn't checked in.

“Remember what you're going to say?” I ask, searching her eyes. She tries to nod but my firm grip on her chin prevents it.

“I'm going to tell them I was with a source outside of the country. That Sheffield knew about it.”

“Good girl.” I let her go and take a step back. We are ready. I managed to get her bag out of Rome's car, so we have her swipe badge, and now all we need to do is head to the newspaper building and waltz right in.

I walk to the mirror to examine my own reflection. Sven's wife helped me this morning with a disguise—a giant scar on my cheek done in Halloween makeup. I wear a dark suit as always, but glasses and a white-tipped cane will add to the mystery. I will walk in dressed as a blind man who has suffered some ill fate and even if the cameras see my face, they will not be able to detect my face with software.

“We're ready,” I say, and Natalie is at my side. She hooks her hand around my arm, bag slung across her shoulder, and I watch her shoulders rise and fall. She looks resolute, determined. I'm not sure if she is determined to help me, or to escape, but my eyes will be on her the entire time.

Rome drives us across town. It's a silent ride; she seems afraid. I don't say much either. I don't have much to say to her. When this is finished, I know we will have everything we need to keep her from proving our family is dirty—for now. If she wants to pursue that in the future she very much can, but she'll have to start from scratch. I'm not sure I really believe her story about having made copies of the files with orders to turn it in if she goes missing. She's been absent for almost three full weeks. If a friend was going to turn that over, it would have happened.

The car pulls up near the side of the building. There are no spots out front for a convenient getaway if something happens. There isn't anything we can do about that short of having Rome circle the building. If he does that and we need a fast break but he's around the block we're screwed, so he stays put fifty paces from the door.

"You ready?" I ask her and she bites her lip and nods. I slide out first, holding the door open for her. I glance around; her source may be watching now. It's been so long without contact; she may be a target. That's why I have my single-shot, 3D printed gun on me. I can't take a real weapon through security, so it's my only option.

I hold my elbow out and Natalie grips it as she walks beside me. We approach the door casually. I can tell she's nervous. She's stiff. I, however, am completely relaxed. This is far from the most dangerous or risky thing I've ever done. I'm not on anyone's watch list; there are no warrants out for my arrest, and if they search me, they'll never find the weapon wedged into my boot.

The door slides open, and we step in. Natalie is like a breath of fresh air. Her bright, warm smile seems to change the room. The security guard looks up in surprise and stands to greet her as we approach the turnstiles and metal detectors. Natalie searches her bag and produces the badge and I square my shoulders, bracing for any confrontation that may happen.

"Hey, Mike, how's it going?" She hands him the badge and waits for him to scan it. "I have a friend today. He's an important source for a story I'm writing. I need to interview him in our secure room." Her toe taps nervously. I see it's her tell, but I don't know how well this Mike guy knows her.

"Hmm... Ms. Yates, you haven't been in for a while." He eyes her cautiously. "You heard about Sheffield?" Mike—a six-foot-three Black man with stern features and graying hair, hands the badge back to her.

"I did..." Her voice grows somber. "It's just awful. I was in St. Petersburg and heard about it. His poor wife and kids." Her voice cracks. It's real emotion. She really cared for the man, and Mike must have also. I see his eyes glistening. I feel nothing. Sheffield was a cog in a much larger machine that needed to be removed before the entire thing broke down. If it was his

first offense, I'd have let him off the hook. But he had it coming.

"Guess the bigwigs are getting a new guy in. For now, Lucy is in charge." He pulls out a clipboard and a pen and thrusts it out toward her. "Sign him in."

Natalie glances at me and looks nervous for a second. Her brow furrows and she bites her lower lip. If Mike sees her squeamish, she will blow our cover. "I'm not sure how to spell your name. Do you mind?" she asks, pushing the clipboard at me.

"Of course," I say with my best Russian accent. I've heard it so many times it comes naturally, though I was raised here with a strong American accent. I don't know much Russian either, just enough to get by.

I scrawl a fake Russian name on the paper and sign my name and hand it back to Natalie who fills in a few other parts of the sheet and scrawls her name. She hands the clipboard back to Mike and he gestures. One by one we go through the turnstiles and then the metal detector. The detector chimes when she walks through, and she lightly touches her barrette.

"Sorry, Mike... I forgot. I picked this up in Russia." She grimaces.

"It's alright. Go on." Mike gestures and she moves through.

So far our plan is going off without a hitch. When we catch a ride in the elevator, Natalie squirms, tugging at the hem of the suit coat. She shoves her badge back into the bag and rolls her head around a few times.

I stare at the number panel until the "three" button is illuminated. It makes sense why our guys never found the laptop. It wasn't the second floor at all. She leads me out into some chaos and shouting. The sound of printers swishing sheets of paper through the ink jets greets us. People look up and offer surprised expressions as I follow her across the room.

Natalie leads me straight to a small cubicle near the far wall. Her desk overlooks a boring view of buildings and flag poles. A thin layer of dust coats everything, including her laptop which is shut but plugged in. She busies herself stuffing it and the cable into her bag while I watch the reaction of her coworkers. A few talks in hushed whispers but one approaches. A blonde woman with a pointy nose and just as pointy heels.

“Yates, where the hell have you been?” Her voice is shrill, and I get the feeling that she’s a superior.

Natalie bristles and scowls, not yet having turned to see the woman. She glares at me and her nostrils flare as she turns around to face the coworker. “I’ve been in St. Petersburg out of contact. My phone got lost in transport.”

The blonde woman is out for blood. She looks like the type of woman who has a stick up her ass about everything. Her suit is so tight the buttons bulge along the front, and I swear her eyes are black as sin. “You’re supposed to check in. We give you this position and you don’t even follow rules.”

“How was I supposed to check in, Lucy? I was overseas with no phone. I’m here now. I’m just getting my laptop and I’m going to interview my source.” Natalie hangs her bag on her shoulder again and holds her ground. “Besides, you didn’t give me this position. Sheffield did, rest his soul.”

The blonde takes a huge breath and glares at me, looking me over from head to toe. “What story are you working on? You haven’t even officially been assigned anything.”

“I’m writing an exposé. Sheffield approved it verbally. He was killed the night I left. I can’t say any more until I have interviewed my source.” As she finishes, she nods at me and I nod at the blonde and smile.

To her credit, she covers very well. I thought she had no poker face at all, but this little vixen knows her stuff. Maybe it’s me she has no ability to hide from. Maybe I just see through her charade and tempt her into the open so well she doesn’t want to hide, but this bitch—Lucy? —seems to get her juices flowing in a very negative way. I like this side of Natalie. It reminds me of the way she fights me when we fuck. And that makes my dick twitch.

“Fine. You have seventy-two hours to produce something worth printing. If not, you’re fired. I already have approval from the top.” Blondie crosses her arms over her chest and smirks. “Good luck.”

I’d like to smack the smirk right off her face, but it’s not my place. Natalie huffs, tightens her grip on the bag and walks away. I nod at Lucy and offer a firm smile, then follow Natalie, tapping my cane as I go. I hear the click of her shoes and follow that, pretending to be blind. If anyone is really

watching, they may detect that I'm not, so I make an obvious mistake, turning when she hasn't.

"Fuck's sake," she whines, and I hear her approaching. "This way," she says, hooking her arm around mine.

She leads me to the elevator again and I notice her body is even more tense. She's doing such an amazing job; I may just fuck her in the car on the way home. I never thought she'd play the part so well. And we're almost finished.

"Want me to carry it?" I ask, but she shakes her head. I stand just ahead of her in the elevator watching the numbers again. She sighs and covers her face. I barely see it out of the corner of my eye, but I notice. She's feeling the stress of it. I pat the front of her thigh. "It's almost over, Natalie."

When the bell dings, she hooks her hand around my arm again and we walk out of the carriage and across the foyer toward security. All we have to do is get to the car and send the laptop to Lenny and this nightmare is over. Natalie and I will have conversations about her so-called friends and the backup plan, which I am convinced more than ever is just a lie. But my gut won't suffice. Dominic will want proof, and between Lenny's tech skills and Natalie fessing up to the lie—which I will make her—I'll get that proof.

"All done, Mike," Natalie calls. She walks through the metal detector and the turn style quickly, stutter stepping as she waves at the older man. I follow, but the strangest thing happens as I step through the detector. It chimes, just like it did for her on the way up.

Natalie turns for a moment and looks terrified as Mike stands and moves toward me. She shakes her head. "I swear I won't tell anyone, Matty. I need to find Hal's killer. I swear. Your secret is safe..." Natalie sets the bag down on the white marble floor.

Then she runs.

I drop the cane and dart after her, trying to leap over the turn style but the guard is there grabbing me around the waist. I jerk and wrestle him as he pins me against the turn style and searches me. His hands frisk me so quickly I don't know what's happening except that Natalie darts out the front of the paper as he produces her barrette from my pocket.

“Goddammit!” I shout, reaching for my weapon. I yank the plastic gun from my boot and aim it at the guard, shooting him in the leg with my single bullet. Then I leap over the turnstile and race through the door, grabbing the bag with the laptop in it on the way.

But she’s gone.

But at least I have my evidence.

“God fucking dammit!” I scream again, pointing the useless weapon at the ground.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. I angrily run toward Rome’s car as the security guard finally shoots off a few rounds. If she thinks she’s getting away with this she’s wrong.

NATALIE

I run—as fast and as far as I can before I’m breathing so hard, I have to stop. My pocket is full of cash from the petty cash fund Sheffield allotted me during my probation period. I shoved it there when Matty wasn’t looking at me, right before Lucy put her nose right where it doesn’t belong. It’s not much, a couple hundred bucks, and in New York it won’t even get me a night in a hotel. But it will help with a few things hopefully. I can’t go back to my apartment; that’s the first place they’ll look. They may be there waiting for me now. And I can’t go back to the newspaper either.

Leaning against the brick exterior of this pharmacy, I realize I’m in this alone now. There is no Sheffield to back me up, no source to glean information from. It doesn’t matter. As I stand there catching my breath, watching cars pass on the street, I know I’ll never write that story. Whether Matty’s family catches up to me and kills me, or I skip town and hide the rest of my life so they don’t, his secret really is safe with me. I don’t have a death wish, I just want justice for Hal, and I won’t stop trying.

My feet hurt, but I start walking north. Running in heels is difficult, so I’m surprised he didn’t even try to chase me. Or maybe he didn’t see what way I went. Regardless, I’m free for now and I have to make every second count. Based on my information and the images I’ve seen I know one of the men who snatched me off the street was there at the scene. I never got a good look at their faces at all, but I remember a voice. My memory is so foggy from the event that I have to rely on pictures to paste it all together. The doctors said it would be that way, that the beta blockers could mess with my memories.

I walk for twenty minutes at least before I get an idea. There is a library near me, on Fifth Avenue. I can go and access public records, old issues of magazines and newspapers. If I can do a little digging on my own, maybe I can find out who is really to blame. If Matty was the one who made the hit, he'd have told me. He wasn't shy about telling me he killed Sheffield. And if his family was to blame, I think I'd have seen it in his eyes. Still, I can't be sure, and finding Hal's killer is the only thing driving me now.

The streets of New York are never an overly friendly place to be, but today I feel all the more vulnerable. I have only a pocket full of cash—no handbag with pepper spray, no phone to call a cab. As I walk past the homeless folks begging for cash, I can't help but wonder where I'll sleep tonight, if I'll be safe. I glance over my shoulder and shudder at the idea of sleeping on the street like that. I've seen rats as large as small dogs out here after dark. It's no joke.

The thought of sleeping on a sidewalk or bench makes me long for the confines of Matty's house, even if he smacks me and locks me up. It was a shelter over my head, and now I have nothing. I know they're looking too, which only frightens me more. With no way to protect myself and nowhere to go, I'm a sitting duck. I have no clue how far their reach is, and I'm right in the center of Bratva territory here.

By the time I get to the library I have blisters forming on the backs of my ankles where the heels I'm wearing dig in a little. I'm sweaty from walking so quickly, and my mouth is dry. I should have stopped and gotten some water, but now I have no time. If I don't find Hal's killer before the Gusev family catches up to me, I never will. They'll kill me or keep me locked up forever. And maybe I should have gone to the police, but with the way they cover things up and the number of dirty cops working for them, that will do no good. I can't even call my family, or I risk dragging them into this.

This place is huge. It feels more like a castle or a massive courthouse. Tall ivory pillars hold up the ceiling. Sweeping grand staircases of marble and granite rise to the second story. A welcome desk is nestled near the archways I enter through, but no one is there. Red velvet ropes on golden pedestals separate the line area from the main entrance. I feel awed by how elegant this place is for a library. It's like I've stepped into history.

I see a sign indicating the research and computer room is located in the basement, so I make my way to the stairs and head down. My eyes take everything in at every angle as much as I can. I can't afford to be caught off guard and wind up with a bag over my head in the back seat of a car again. My hand shakes as it glides along the handrail until I'm in the basement and the computers come into view.

No one seems to take notice of me as I walk lightly across the red carpet. There are a few computers open, though one of them is isolated near a small window that allows light from the street above to filter down. I choose that one, hoping for some privacy. If nothing else, I can search public records to get phone numbers of people who can actually help me. I don't have my phone, and no one memorizes numbers these days. If I even want to call Lucy, or anyone at the paper for that matter, I have to look the number up and use a pay phone or buy a burner.

The computer is frustrating, forcing me to create an account with the library and sign up for a card to be mailed to my apartment in a few days. At least they give me seven-day access on a temporary basis today. Once I'm logged in, however, I freeze up. I don't even know where to begin. My research was so extensive, going back years. I don't need to bring everyone down, just the one responsible. So where do I start?

I navigate to the archives where they store digital copies of all magazines and newspapers. I know this one well, because I have to use it on almost a daily basis. It's different than the one at the Herald—this one has every issue of every paper in the city. The Herald's archive like this only stores its own issues. I used an archive like this at a different library, but it wasn't so extensive either. Maybe here I will have more luck than in my previous research.

I type in the day of the shooting and the computer pulls up thousands of articles, by hundreds of reporters. There are literally more than a thousand pages of search results with ten articles per page. This could take forever, and I don't have that sort of time. I click on the filters tab and select a few. I don't need anything in sports or religion. National news and international affairs can go too. The more ways I can filter this out the better. I find a few more relevant ones to remove and then I refresh the page.

It leaves me with around three hundred articles, which I can skim the names of to narrow it down further. What I'm looking for will be very obvious. The Herald's story on the shooting didn't give me enough information. The Tribune and the Times both covered it, but they were just copies from Reuters who got their information from the Herald. I need a fresh perspective, someone who had boots on the ground, not an after the fact interview with a dirty cop.

I sit in that chair for at least two hours reading through headlines and articles that look promising. Finally, on the twenty-second page of search results I find a small press that covered the shooting. It's a vanity press, and oftentimes they can't be trusted, but it's worth having a look through it. I open the article and read their version of the events. It sounds strangely similar to the story my parents told me about what happened. Again, my memories are foggy thanks to the drugs I took in therapy, but it seems pretty accurate.

The images this reporter captured are graphic too—the type you don't show children. There's a lot of blood. At least three people died in this shooting. The man I see standing over one of the bodies resembles Matty, and I'm pretty sure he may have been one of the men who snatched me. I've seen this photo before, or one like it. It's immediately following the aftermath of the shooting. I study the image, trying to conjure a memory that will help me put the pieces together. Thankfully there are no pictures of Hal here or I'd probably lose it.

Suddenly all the threads start to come together in my mind. If a man who resembles Matvey Gusev is standing over a dead man, no gun in hand, why did the police indicate that the Bratva were the ones doing the shooting? Detectives pinned the whole thing on the Gusev name as if they had been the gunmen all along, but why would they shoot at their own people? And how was I so blind to not see this before?

Before I leave this place, I need numbers. I take a notepad and a pencil and go to the public records search. I find Matty's number and a few others—the paper, Lucy, and a police detective I think I can trust. His name is Akers. I scrawl the numbers and shove it in my pocket then my heart nearly stops.

I hear a man's gravelly voice speaking across the room and the hair on my

arms rises. I straighten in my seat and look over my computer, then over my shoulder. He's dressed in all black, jeans and a jacket, with a turtleneck beneath. I see a tattoo peeking out of the neckline of the jacket and I start to panic. I can't see his face. I don't know if he is someone Matty sent to find me, or if I'm just being paranoid. I have a good reason to be so skittish though. I just ran from the largest crime syndicate in the city, and they will be looking for me.

Slowly pushing my chair back, I rise and walk the opposite direction from where the man stands talking to a librarian. My heels sink into the short, tufted carpet and I try to take large steps to move more quickly without looking like I'm running. I don't want to live like this—always looking over my shoulder in fear, running from place to place because I feel like someone is watching me. I need to get out of this city as soon as I can, but how can I do that if Hal hasn't been given his justice?

I make my way upstairs, heels clicking on the marble. I glance over my shoulder at least a thousand times, but as I approach the top of the stairs, I run into someone, causing them to stumble. It's a man dressed nicely in slacks and a sweater. My hands are shaking, my pulse racing, and he must notice I'm terrified because he looks at me with concern and reaches out his hand as he asks, "Are you okay?"

I step around him and shake my head. I can't even find words right now. I can't involve anyone, not even a complete stranger. The men coming after me are so dangerous they will kill anyone who gets in their way. Innocent people like my uncle have died because I involved them. This man probably has a partner and children or even grandchildren.

"I'm fine," I choke out, but I'm not fine. I'm anything but fine. I need Matty to know his secret is safe and that I'm not going to tell anyone. I need him to not send men after me.

"But, Miss, I—"

I walk away before the man can say anything else, rushing across the grand foyer of the library to the front door. The large archways glow with golden light now. It's getting late in the afternoon and the streets are filled with people now returning home from work for the day. I try to blend in, keeping

with the hustle, but I walk a bit slower than most. My feet hurt and I swear the blisters have popped. And when I glance over my shoulder, I see the man again—the one from the library basement with the black jacket, turtleneck, and tattoo.

He's following me?

“Oh shit,” I breathe and turn back around so I don’t run into someone else. Adrenaline rushes through my body yet again today. My hands are sweaty, my mouth dry. I walk faster, pushing through the pain, and trying to force my brain to slow down and think rationally. He could just be walking the same way as me. So, I need to test that theory, but to move away from the crowd would be stupid.

I begin to weave my way toward the far-left side of the sidewalk, closest to the buildings. If he’s following me, he will move into a store when I do. So, I want to find the busiest store there is. I pass several good options because for right now my body is in such a state of flight mode, I can’t trust myself to do anything but keep walking. Every time I glance over my shoulder the man is there.

Finally, when I see a pharmacy with its bright red lights flashing on the sign, I duck in, hugging my arms to my chest. I’m freezing now, a sure sign I’m having an anxiety attack. I’m sweating and shaking, probably look like I have a fever. I move down the first row and turn to stare out the windows. It seems like fifteen minutes goes by before the man enters my field of view. In reality it’s only a few seconds; I’m just so on edge time seems to stand still.

I hold my breath, fearing the man will enter the store, but he passes by as if he is completely unaware that I’m even in this world he lives in. Still, I stand frozen to the floor of that pharmacy shaking. I can’t do this. I’m not cut out for this type of intensity. Sheffield was right to warn me. They killed him in cold blood without thinking twice. What will they do to me?

“You okay, Miss?”

The voice startles me, and I jerk and turn around to see a young boy, maybe sixteen years old. He is wearing a vest with the pharmacy logo on it, carrying a price gun. I take a deep breath and nod, trying not to let show how afraid I just was.

“Uh, do you sell prepaid phones here?” I need someone to make calls, maybe do a bit more research.

“Yes, we do. This way.” He nods and I follow him to the register, still acutely aware that I am a sitting duck.

Just because that man wasn't following me, doesn't mean the next person I fear isn't. I need Matty's word that he isn't sending me after me. I need to know he won't hunt me down. I gave him the files—the only files. I have no copies, no friends to send them to if I did. I told him that so he would think I was prepared. I hadn't begun to prepare. Sheffield only gave me the okay like thirty minutes before I was snatched off the side of the street. But I'd made my name for snooping around over the past few years when I had no fear of the larger world of crime. Now, my fear was healthy and alive.

“Here you are,” the teen says, gesturing.

I look at all the different models and just grab one. “I just need this and whatever minutes it comes with. Can you activate it?” Handing him the phone in its plastic wrapping, I reach into my pocket and pull out the wad of cash.

He leads me to the register, scans my phone and I pay, then he activates it for me and I am back on the street, hiding in a nook near the front door where I'm out of the breeze. It's starting to get chilly now and I don't have a good jacket. Only this suit. I pull out the scrap of paper with the phone numbers on it and dial Matty's, holding the phone to my ear.

The voicemail picks up, so I leave a message. “Matt... It's Natalie. I'm so sorry. I left the laptop for you. Please, leave me alone now. Please keep your brothers away from me. I won't tell a soul; I swear. I just need to find Hal's killer.”

When I hang up my gut tightens into a knot. I don't think he's going to listen. But I had to try.

MATTY

Rome is gone when I get there, maybe moved on due to the gunshots fired. I run right past where he was parked and duck into an alley. I have no weapon to defend myself and it's not like I can bring fists to a gunfight. I already hear sirens blaring in the distance. These guys don't mess around at all. I catch my breath and peek into Natalie's bag. The laptop is there and the charger, but I still need her. I can't get into this laptop without her passcode.

As the sirens approach, I rise from my crouching position and walk down the alley away from the newspaper. I keep my guard up, knowing at any second someone could spot me and know I was the one involved in the shooting. I need a car to get back across town. I call Rome, wondering where he's at, and he picks up.

"Sorry, man. A meter maid chased me away and by the time I got around the block I heard the shots. You were gone. It's not safe for me to drive back in there. The meter maid knows the car and plate number. They'll associate it with the shooting for sure."

"Yeah, I get it..." I am frustrated but Roman is exactly right and he's doing the right thing. It's every man for himself at this point. We've had our soldiers get caught up in shit like this and go down, but us five brothers always keep our noses clean because we know how to get out of shit. "I'll be at Dominic's in fifteen minutes," I tell him, eyeing a car. A young man probably in his early twenties is walking toward an old Ford Focus.

“See you then,” Rome says and hangs up.

I walk right up to the man and point the gun at him. It won't do anything except act as a blunt object to knock him one, but it appears menacing at least. This guy doesn't know I printed it on my 3D printer at home.

“Give me your keys,” I order, and he holds his hands up, keys dangling from his middle finger.

“Woah, man. Go easy. No need to shoot me.”

“I said, give me the keys.” I'm still in disguise, awful makeup and sunglasses, but it makes me a bit nervous knowing this guy is looking right at me.

He starts to back away and I lunge at him, tackling him to the ground. We wrestle a bit, me overpowering him easily, and I grab his keys from his hand, nearly breaking his finger as he whimpers. “Fuck's sake, buddy. This is the second time my car has been stolen.”

“Guess you're lucky then that it isn't three times.”

He tries to sweep his legs beneath mine and knock me off my balance, but I give him a hard kick to the gut, and he curls into a ball. I don't like hurting innocent people, but I need this car and he resisted me.

I carry the bag to the car, making sure to take the plastic gun with me. My fingerprints are all over it, and now it's a countdown before they put a BOLO out on his car, which they will definitely connect with the shooting. I drive as fast as I can across town, parking a few blocks away from Dominic's place. I use the hem of my shirt to wipe the steering wheel and shifter down; then I get out and jog the rest of the way.

Rome is already here, arrived moments before me. He's talking to one of his men on the front step and I barge up with the bang hanging from my shoulder. They look up at me and I can tell they already know I failed. Dominic has got to be pissed.

“Someone needs to go to the corner down there off Hawthorne Street and move the red Ford Focus. I left the keys there. But if someone connects the meter maid's account of forcing Rome to leave with the fact that a car was stolen, and both of them are found in the same vicinity of Dominic's house,

we'll be in trouble." I don't even bother slowing down as I speak. I walk right past them and stomp up the stairs and into Dominic's house.

Light music filters out of his office door which stands ajar. I smell the faint hint of smoke too, as if he's smoking a pipe or cigar. Dom isn't one to smoke very often, but when he does it's either in celebration or because he's upset. In this case, I know it's the latter. I've failed and he knows it. Not only is Natalie on the lam, but we have no way to get into her laptop to know if she's sent her files to anyone else and the disturbance at the paper will definitely be tied back to Sheffield's murder, so if our guys at the station can't bury the evidence, we're all going down.

"Come in, Matvey," Dom says from the recess of his office.

Normally I'm not intimidated by him at all, but when I fail like this, I'd rather hug a porcupine. I move forward slowly, already trying to prepare my thoughts about the situation and how I will get Natalie back so we can get into her laptop. Her words echo in my mind, "I won't tell anyone." That's what she said. But it doesn't matter if she doesn't tell anyone now. The boys won't care if she has promised me such a thing. They will be out for blood now. She should have just trusted me.

"It's here," I say, dropping the laptop on the couch.

"And the reporter?" he asks, taking a long drag on his cigar. He sits behind his desk, leaning back with his feet propped on the desk in front of him. It's dark in here like usual. His bad-guy ambience doesn't affect me, but the light layer of perspiration along with the blackness of his stare do. I hold my silence for a moment while I think, but I can't lie to him.

"On the run." I say it as plainly as I can. There is no point trying to explain or rationalize. He is going to order me to hunt her down and kill her, and this is her fault. I thought we had a bond; thought she was going to trust me and obviously I was wrong.

"Hmm... Interesting." He sits up, putting his feet beneath his desk and rolls his cigar around his ashtray, removing the thick buildup of ash from the end. "You'd have thought a seasoned professional such as yourself would have had a backup plan, someone to keep an eye on her when she ran from you." Dominic's gaze darkens even more. He narrows his eyes at me and stares,

waiting for me to respond. I have no response. He's right. I should have had Flynn parked a block away, Peter or Lenny in the other direction. I put too much faith in her, left too much up to chance.

Because I remain silent, he continues his lecture. "And now, we have the laptop, but I'm going to guess it's encrypted or at the very least locked with a password we do not know. Because of that, we are no closer to ensuring our secrets are safe. We may have these files, but any other versions sent from that computer cannot be tracked down. That means we need the reporter back."

"Understood."

"And once the laptop is secured and unlocked, you are to shoot her dead, on the spot. Do you understand me?"

I take a deep, slow breath while staring him in the eye. He has no idea what Natalie has gone through because of the mess of our lives. Yes, she investigated us and put herself and her uncle in harm's way, but she was innocent of anything at all, and her uncle died. She watched him die. She suffered a very traumatic thing, and all she wants is justice. And I want is her. How can I accept his order? How can I stand here and acknowledge that she is a problem that needs to be taken out when she and I are the same?

"Do you understand me?" he asks again, this time in a booming voice that makes my chest tighten. I do understand but I disagree, and this may be the one time I ever defy my family.

I watched Leo go against everything this family stands for while fighting for the woman he loves. I'm not about to let them kill Natalie either. She's not a cop; I can't turn her. She may only ever cause more problems, investigate things that damage our business and our name. But the instant I put my cock into her sweet little pussy she became mine. And now it's the only pussy I ever want to fuck again. Dominic is never taking that from me.

"Do you—"

"Understood!" I shout; then my jaw clenches. My blood boils as I glare at him. "I fucking understand."

He straightens in his seat and puts his cigar down as he looks up at me. "This

is a direct order from your leader, Matvey. If you defy me, you know what that means.”

“And if I defy you, you understand why.” I turn leaving the laptop sit on the chair across from his desk, and I walk out.

“You will not defy a direct order!” he shouts, and his words trail behind me as I storm out the front of the house and start down the sidewalk. I need to clear my head. I need to get away from this and think, breathe, calm myself.

I know what it means to defy the head of the Bratva. When it was my father, I knew there was a bit of safety involved. He’d scourge me and force me to do things that were detestable before killing me, give me a chance to repent. But Dominic is out for blood now. He has something to prove as our new leader, and Dad isn’t even in his grave yet. I could go to Dad, beg mercy for Natalie, but he’s on hospice. There is no telling how long he even has. That’s not a good idea.

My phone buzzes and I pull it from my pocket. Somehow in the action of what went down I missed a few calls. This one is from a number I don’t recognize. They left me a voicemail, so I open my phone and listen to it as I walk. “Matt... It’s Natalie. I’m so sorry. I left the laptop for you. Please, leave me alone now. Please keep your brothers away from me. I won’t tell a soul; I swear. I just need to find Hal’s killer.”

Shit, she’s out there alone and looking for trouble. I know it was the Italians who got her uncle, and if she goes after them alone, not only will my family be hunting her, but they will think she’s working with them. After my brother killed their underboss, they’ve been out to get us. They’ll stop at nothing to take us down for good. Now, Natalie is going to dig up information about Hal and find out it was them. They won’t have any mercy on her. She’ll be dead on the spot.

I can’t leave her alone to fight them. I type up a message and send it to her, and she responds immediately.

Matty 5:47 PM: Natalie where are you? I’ll come get you.

Natalie 5:47 PM: No. I can’t come back. Your brothers will kill me. You have the laptop. That’s all you need.

Matty 5:48 PM: They want you dead, and I'm the only one on your side at this point. If you keep digging, you're going to be wearing cement boots.

A few minutes goes by, and I walk on pins and needles. This is a strange number, probably a burner cell. If I go to our police, contact or even Lenny to have this number traced Dominic will hear about it and Roman will be there before I get to her. He already knows I'm going to defy him. He may have given orders to the entire family to shoot her dead-on sight and not help me.

Matty 5:56 PM: Natalie, I'm your only option.

Natalie 5:57 PM: I can't come back, Matty. I'm scared. I just want Hal's killer to go down, and I intend to prove it. Please, just promise me you'll get your brothers to lay off. I know it wasn't you or them.

I am seething with rage now. No one tells me no. No one defies me or runs away from me. Doesn't she see I'm trying to help her? Can't she realize that if she's out there on her own, they will find her? And they will kill her.

Matty 6:00 PM: Let me come get you. I'll bring you in safely.

Natalie 6:01 PM: So, you can get my password and kill me? No thanks.

I try calling. It rings and rings and she never picks up. So, I try again, and again. I know she's there. I know she sees my calls. I know she's upset and scared, and fuck what I wouldn't do to see the little minx's face right now, stubborn and fighting me. I'd teach her a lesson she'd never forget. But she won't pick up, and I'm at a loss right now.

Matty 6:07 PM: Pick up the fucking phone.

Matty 6:08 PM: I'm not letting them kill you, okay? I want you in my bed.

There's more I'd say but this isn't the time. For all I know they're tracking my messages and calls and already know where she is because they ran a trace on the number, I'm in communication with. She has to know how stupid she's being.

I send a smattering of message, at least fifteen, but she stops replying, and when I try to call the number, it goes straight to voicemail. She's either removed the battery, turned the phone off, or they got her and destroyed it. I

scream and kick a stone from the sidewalk. I have to get to her before Dominic or the Italians. Chances are they aren't looking yet, but it's only a matter of time. We've almost definitively proved that her source was L'ombra, thanks to Rome's investigation.

I'm coming for you, Natalie, if it's the very last thing I do. Because when I see something I want, I take it. And no one stops me. I don't care if my brothers want you dead.

NATALIE

I lean against the building staring down at Matty's messages until I can't stomach it anymore. I can't go back. He doesn't understand that I need justice for Hal. The only thing he is thinking about is how good I fuck him. Not only is that not enough for a real relationship with him, but his family will kill me. I know now that investigating the Bratva or the Italian Mob, or the Armenians or any other organized crime family in this city is the worst idea possible. Sheffield was right to warn me, and I hate myself that he paid with his life, that I had to learn the hard way.

I turn the phone off and shove it in my pocket. It's cold, I'm shivering. I walk aimlessly for a while, checking over my shoulder every few seconds to make sure I'm not being followed. I don't have enough money to get a room anywhere, but I do have enough to pay for a subway ticket. A ride to anywhere is only a few bucks, so I purchase my pass and head below ground.

It's warmer down here, heat from the massive engines that power the trains keeping it a sweltering temperature even as fall grips the city. I'm relieved for a short time that I'm not shivering so violently, but the atmosphere is cold in a different way. Too many people get mugged and killed in subway stations. I've read horror stories of women being raped and men being gutted all for a watch worth nothing. Still, it's better than sleeping on a sidewalk where the rats will chase me.

I duck into a car, and I don't even care that I don't know where it's headed. These trains run on a massive loop that runs twenty-four hours a day. And the car I've chosen is pretty empty. A few passengers sit spread out from each

other, occupied with their phones or a book. One woman stands, holding the pole and staring into space. I take a spot near the front of the carriage and sit down. I feel so alone here, like I could drift on this train for days and no one would come looking.

I wonder if Lucy and the gang from work would have come looking if Matty had kept me longer? I wonder if my parents are worried yet, if anyone has called them to say I'm missing. It's been weeks. I'd call them myself, except what would I say? I can't come home to you because if I do, a madman and his family may kill you all... That's not a very comforting thought for them. It may be better off if I never speak to them again. At least they'd be safe—heartbroken, but not dead.

The words scrolling across the LED sign hanging from the ceiling of the car tell me there are delays on the line. It doesn't matter. I'm not even going anywhere. I just need a warm safe spot to sleep. The chances of a criminal targeting me on this particular train, at this exact moment, out of all the trains that are currently running in the city, and how many cars are in each train—it's probably up there with winning the lottery, and I've never done that.

I lean against the wall and let my head rest back against the window and shut my eyes. It's still early, just after seven, but I'm exhausted. I've been exhausted for months. Chasing leads to track down Hal's killer has been emotionally draining. When I laid across Matty's chest is when I felt the most comfortable, the most relaxed. But that moment wasn't real. He isn't my soul mate. I can't return to him.

Men like Matty are trained soldiers who follow orders. By now his brother has already told him to off me. I know it. I can feel it in my gut. He is only being nice to me to hunt me down. There is no way he intends to keep me safe. My only way out of this is to expose the killer and leave town. I have no other choice. No matter how magical the moments between Matty and me were, they weren't real. They were an illusion painted out of hormones and desperation.

I feel tears welling up and I don't even stop them. I wanted Matty to be real, for him to actually feel something strong enough to love me, to protect me. But he can't. He has to be loyal to his family. I know that. And I won't try to stop him, but I do have to stay alive, even if only long enough to give my

parents some closure over Hal.

Sleep pulls me into its depths, and I drown. Nightmares plague me, forcing me to jolt awake every twenty minutes or so. It's tormenting to relive that day over and over, and the only thing I remember when I wake up each time is the blood. There was blood everywhere. I can't unsee it, can't do anything about it except move forward toward answers.

Until a dream of Matty brings comfort. He's there, hands all over my body, words growling into my ear that I'm his. That he owns me. I yield to him too, desperate to belong somewhere now that the place I felt most at home has been torn away. Hal was like home, like my father, and he's gone. But Matty is here, ready to be my fortress... If I only believed that were true.

I wake to the gentle nudge of a hand on my knee. My neck hurts craned back all night long. The lights are the same as they were when I nodded off. I have no way of knowing what time it is even, until I look at the LED sign that announces the seven a.m. train is running nine minutes behind. I blink hard and look around, rubbing the back of my neck and see a very dirty woman seated across from me. She has to have been the one who woke me. Her skin is so filthy I can't tell what race she is other than the shape of her eyes—not of Asian descent at least.

“Hey, you can't be sleeping on here. They'll come and kick you off.” She says it like she has experience in it.

“Where are we?” I mumble, rubbing my eyes.

“Yeah, honey, they'll come around and arrest you, you go doin that.” Her clothes reek of urine and her hands shake. “Just think you oughta take care uh yourself, you know?”

“Thank you,” I mumble, trying to get my eyes to focus so I can read the sign.

“We're near Ninety Sixth. I reckon I gotta go get some breakfast. You have any spare change? Pretty lady like you all dressed up, you gotta have a few dollars.”

I rub my arm uncomfortably. If I show my hand and the few hundred dollars I have in my pocket, she'll definitely want more than a few dollars and who knows if she'll rob me. I can't let that happen. I need to figure out what I'm

doing now.

“Sorry, no...” I stand and walk toward the back of the train. We have to be close to a station. I feel bad because she woke me up out of the goodness of her heart to warn me, and I was totally rude to her, but I have to think of myself now. I need to go back to the scene of the crime and stand there. Maybe it will jog my memory. I will remember something.

The train stops and I get off, heading directly up the stairs to the city street. There are so many people I can't see anything. It's chaos. I've never had to walk someplace this early. I usually go to work around nine, but there are more people now than there ever are around nine. I tuck my arms in and put my head down and walk. My feet still hurt, blisters still stinging, but I feel more energetic after almost twelve hours of broken sleep.

My stomach grumbles too. I'm starving. I need to get a sandwich or a cup of coffee, or both. I weave through the crowd and manage to get closer to the store entrances. I see a coffee shop sign ahead and decide I will stop in, but first I pass a gun store. It's early, they only just opened, but something inside of me compels me to go. If I'm out here on the run, the only thing more valuable than money is protection. I know I can't call the cops and ask them to protect me because I don't know which of them are dirty.

So, I make an abrupt about face and nearly run into the man behind me. He snarls something nasty at me as I sidestep and push my way through the crowd to walk into the gun store. A bell overhead jingles as I approach the counter. I've never owned a weapon, don't know the first thing about it. But an older man with kind eyes approaches me and smiles. I must look frightful. I haven't had a proper meal; my hair is messed up. I have dirt down the front of my skirt from God only knows what, and I probably have bags under my eyes.

“What can I do for you?”

“Do you have any guns that are less than two hundred dollars?” I rest my hands on the counter which is a display case and stare down at the guns and trigger locks housed within it. Having a gun is a no-brainer now. I have to be able to defend myself.

“Sure thing, Miss. We have a few here on trade in that we could sell for

around that. Do you have your driver's license? We have to do a criminal background check, and you have to wait three days for the results."

My heart sinks as I look up into his eyes. "Three days? But there are people hunting me now." I've already said too much, and I know it. I back away from the counter and the man offers a sympathetic look.

"I could call the police for you."

"No!" I shout, suddenly knowing this was a bad idea. "Please, don't. That's not a good idea."

I rush out of that shop and back into the crowd quickly. I assimilate, taking on the appearance of just another person on the way to work. When I glance over my shoulder the older man is there watching the crowd. I feel so vulnerable out here and I know I can't do this on my own, but Matty's offer to come in safely isn't the answer. I can't trust him. Still, every time I turn around and look, I feel like I see someone watching me.

After five blocks of walking and my feet aching again, I duck into a coffee shop. I wait and see a strange man stop outside the door. He hesitates, looks at me then backs away. I'm glad I came in here. I'm afraid maybe he's with Matty's family hunting me, or maybe he's some other sort of scum bag and I'm just lucky to find this place.

I approach the counter and a middle-aged woman walks up to me. "What do you want?" she asks. It's not a rude question; she's just taking my order, but she says it so rudely I'm a little offended.

"Uh, just a black coffee. And is there a different exit? I think that guy is following me." I gesture over my shoulder as I reach into my pocket to pull out a few dollars to pay.

"Listen, honey, we aren't the cops. We just serve coffee." Spoken in true New York fashion of narcissism and selfishness. I roll my eyes as I pay and wait for her to pour my coffee.

I find a seat by the window and sip the hot cup of coffee, watching the man. He loiters around, like he's waiting for me to come out but I'm stubborn. I stay there until every last drop of my coffee is gone and the cup is dry. I have no way out of here and now after this entire thing, I know he was following

me. My heart is racing. I just want him to leave so I can get away from here. If he was from Matty's family, he'd have come in and gotten me by now, which means he's just a lowlife or something.

I sit there long enough that he must get bored or something. He walks right into the coffee shop and eyes me. He doesn't even order anything. He walks right up to my table and sits down, and I tense, holding my breath. He smells like alcohol and body odor. His smile is fraught with tobacco stains and cavities, and I move to stand, but he grabs my wrist.

"I overheard you are looking for a gun..."

His words make my hair stand on end. Goosebumps rise across my skin. "Uh... no that's okay."

"I'll give you one..." He licks his teeth and grins at me a stupid, ugly, crooked grin. "Just come back in the bathroom. Suck my dick... I have a gun you can have."

I'm so disgusted by his offer I feel bile rise in the back of my throat. "Let me go," I say, pulling my hand away, but his grip tightens.

"Come on, baby. You need a gun. It's free. Just come with me." He stands and pulls me to my feet, and I yank my arm away and back up a few steps.

"Leave me alone," I snap, and I back toward the door. He moves forward slowly, eyeing me.

"I'm just tryin' to help you out."

I turn and run as fast as I can. My heels go flying too; I'm not even sure where to find them if I try. I run across an intersection with a no walking sign, darting between people as I do. When I glance behind myself, I see him chasing me. When Matty offered to bring me in safely and protect me, I hardly think this was the sort of thing he was thinking he'd have to protect me from, but now I want him here. I want to call him and make him save me, but that will mean going back to that prison of a home and risking my life in a different way.

So, I just run....

MATTY

I sit across the desk from Detective Akers, a new name on our roster. His daughter got tangled up with our family in a nasty way and thanks to that, he's now on our payroll. I'm certain he doesn't like it, and I'm certain Dominic has already ordered him to not help me, which is why my loaded gun is pointed at his chest. He watches me reluctantly as he runs the trace on the number with which Natalie has been communicating with me. If I knew how to do it myself, I would have, but this is easier. The only drawback is that Dominic will find out and if this jerk tells him where Natalie is, I'll only have moments to arrive first to get her.

"It shows she's here," he says, turning his computer screen to face me, "down by the Night Hotel on Broadway. Man, your brother is going to kill you." He leaves the screen as it is, and I memorize the location. Dominic won't lay a finger on me, because I won't give him a chance.

"You let me worry about my brother, and you worry about you. He'll murder you if you tell him you helped me." I lean back and holster my gun. I think the man has the point that he's already in too deep. "Just remember to deny everything. The less you tell him the better. Because I'm his blood, and you're just a reluctant prisoner to his plans." I stand and button my jacket over my holstered weapon.

"Matvey, you can't just leave me like this. If he finds out I helped you he really will kill me. You have to back me up; I did this for you." His voice cracks as he speaks. There's nothing worse than a weak man, but we don't get to choose who we put on payroll sometimes. This man was a necessary

evil, so now he's going to pay off his debt to my family by helping me. And if he takes the fall for my insubordination, so be it.

“Keep your nose clean, Akers.”

With a new bead on Natalie's location, I head out. When I decided to seek help in the form of a trace on her line, I knew Akers was the only one to call. Our other cop buddy, Sergeant Monroe, is too close to the family. He's been around too long. Dominic and him are almost friends now, and I've seen him turn one too many of our men in for stupid shit—petty shit.

Traffic is heavy this morning, foot traffic even more so. I scan the crowds for her but don't see the familiar navy pinstripe skirt anywhere. Natalie may as well be a needle in a haystack. I can't run a continuous trace, so I only have the one ping to go on. It leads me to a coffee shop. There is no parking, so I just stop in the street with my flashers on as I enter the tiny little storefront with four booths and one table.

The middle-aged woman behind the counter scowls at me as I approach. It feels like a typical New York greeting. No one in this city is ever happy unless they know you personally and even then, not this early in the morning. Akers certainly wasn't, but then I woke him up at six a.m. to get to work for me.

“What do you want?” she snarls, and I'm not impressed. Natalie is not here and that means she left only moments ago.

“I'm looking for a woman, dark brown hair, brown eyes. She's wearing a navy-blue pinstripe suit. Have you seen her?” I don't have any pictures of Natalie to show her, otherwise I would.

I don't think that would matter anyway. This woman isn't very helpful. She says, “What does this look like, the fucking Fifth Precinct? Go file a missing persons report already. What is it with people and problems this morning?” She doesn't even take my order; she just turns and uses a towel to polish her espresso machine.

I have a mind to tell her off, but that won't help me find Natalie. I start toward the door when my phone begins to ring. I pull it from my pocket and see it's the same number she has been texting me from and I answer

immediately.

“Natalie?”

“Matty, help me, please,” she cries, and I can tell she’s out of breath. “He’s chasing me.”

“Where are you?”

I hear a commotion, some shouting and a few whimpers. Her panting makes it difficult to hear what else is happening. She’s been running a while; I can tell by how winded she is. “Corner... of.... Seventy-third and Broadway...” she manages before the line goes dead.

“Shit,” I hiss, racing back to my car. It’s only ten blocks from here. She’s in trouble and I don’t know what sort of trouble it is, but she would never call me willingly. She knows she needs help, which leads me to believe one thing. She’s gotten herself tangled up with my enemies.

I put the car in gear and pull a U-turn, whipping back into traffic as quickly as I can. The southbound lane is moving so slowly, I’ll never find her, so I turn up the northbound lane, going the wrong direction and accelerate. Cars swerve and maneuver out of my way, honking horns and screeching tires. I lay on my horn too, pushing the car as fast as I can safely go. I nearly hit a pedestrian and have to swerve again, causing another car to crash into a city bus. Horns go off everywhere, but I have to get to her.

My eyes are peeled, scanning the crowd moving both directions on the sidewalk. As I approach the corner where she said she was, I see nothing, but I keep going, searching, and there I spot her. Her dark brown hair flows behind her as she runs. I see the man approaching her too, though he isn’t what I expected. I see an opening in the crowd and turn my wheel just in time to clip his right hip. He spins around and slams into a light post and falls to the ground as I stop and throw the car in park.

“Natalie!” I scream as I jump out of the car. My heart is pounding. I have her. She’s here. “Natalie!” I shout again and she turns, and as she does, she begins to slow down.

“Oh god, Matty,” she says sobbing. She covers her mouth and nearly falls over trying to catch her breath. As she starts toward me, I walk her direction.

I'm not sure what the man wanted with her, but I will find out as soon as she is safely in my car.

I wrap my arms around her and hold her to my chest as she heaves, sucking in air. I've never felt more protective over anyone my whole life, not even my family. Natalie is different and I can't even say why. I just know she's mine and no one is allowed to touch her but me.

"Let's get out of here..." With an arm around her waist, I guide her toward my car. The door is open, the engine still running. It's time to get her off the streets and back to the safety of my house before someone nastier than the street thug comes after her.

"He was... My god..." she sobs, still trying to catch her breath.

"Look, you're safe for now. We have to get you to my house."

"Looks like someone is causing a bit of trouble, Tony." The voice that cuts me off chills me to the bone. The thick Italian accent sets the tone for the conversation. I know we're well within Italian territory and I'm not here to cause trouble. I just want to get Natalie home. I reach for my weapon, but it's not there—perhaps it fell off when I was weaving gin, and out of traffic.

"Yeah, Gio, I think we ought to teach this guy we don't want trouble on our streets." The second voice comes from a man in a dark suit wearing a black hat and sunglasses. I recognize him because of multiple run-ins with this family. With the tensions already thick between us, I know we're not safe.

"Get in the car, Natalie," I tell her, pushing her that direction, but the men have no interest in letting us go safely.

"Ah, that ain't going to happen..." The first man holds a pistol in hand. He is looking to prove a point. It's clear he recognizes me. Maybe he will send a message, or maybe he will just kill me.

"I'm not looking for trouble. That thug was chasing her; I just came to get her out of here. If you want to clean your streets, talk to him." I gesture at the man now writhing in pain. He likely has a broken hip and maybe a few ribs from that slam into the light post, but he'll live.

"You need to get out of here before something bad happens to you," the

second man says to Natalie. He pushes her sweat-dampened hair off her shoulder and runs a finger along her cheek and I've had enough.

"Run," I order and take a swing at the man. She darts toward the car and jumps in the driver's seat.

That's when I hear the gunshot. I don't even feel the bullet slice through me at first. I just feel warm, like a heatwave flash through my body and makes me sweat instantly. I feel dizzy, and then the pain kicks in as I drop to my knees. I can't breathe. It feels like I got kicked in the chest by a horse, and it's hot. It burns so bad like acid or lava rushing through my chest.

I suck in a heavy breath and reach for the car, but someone kicks me hard in the stomach and I heave forward. "Tell your Russian buddies we're coming for them. L'ombra is hunting tonight. There is going to be a feast when you fall. And your family will pay for killing our boss."

I suck in another breath and feel blood trickle from my mouth. I'm dizzy, my vision blurred. I try to speak but nothing comes out. The men chuckle and start to walk away, and bystanders who haven't run away shrieking by now circle around me. There is a rush of conversation, hushed whispers and people asking if I'm okay. I half expect Natalie to drive off, but she gets out of the car and rushes around to the passenger side and opens the door.

"Get back! Back!" she screams, pushing people out of the way. "Matty..." She drops to her knees by me. "Matty, I need to get you to the hospital. Fuck... Oh my god. Someone help me. I have to get him to the hospital. He's going to die."

I feel weak, like all my strength has drained from my body and I'm going to pass out. Natalie tries lifting me and I can't stand. Then she disappears. I am so close to collapsing now, my vision fading. It's black then clear, then bright lights appear. When she comes back, she's angry. I hear her shouting at people.

"I said, fucking help. You, right now. Get him in the car; I can't wait twenty-five minutes for an ambulance."

I have just enough strength to reach for my phone in my pocket. The smooth, hard surface gripped in my hand is my only hope. If I can call Dominic, I can

get the vet on standby, and he will save me. If I can get there in time.

Hands lift me and I pry my eyes open. Natalie stands with my gun in her hands pointed at the men who heft me into my car. I'm bleeding badly, my shirt already red and soaked. Each breath comes with gurgling sounds now as blood fills my lungs. They lay the seat down and shut the door and Natalie jumps in, peeling out. I fumble with my phone, calling Dominic.

My hand weakly holds the phone to my ear as she guns it, darting down an alley, and Dominic pics up.

"Matvey, you better not—"

"Call Brewster..." I choke out, then end up coughing so hard blood spatters over everything in my line of sight, including Natalie.

"Shit, Matty... oh my god," she cries, but she keeps driving.

"How bad?" Dominic doesn't even need to ask what I mean. We call the vet when we need emergency care that can't go on the radar. I can't go to a hospital; I just hit a man in a hit and run. I need my car scrubbed and my chest sewn up.

"Bad..." I grunt and I cough again. I can't manage another word. In fact, I'm so weak I drop the phone. It tumbles between the seat and the center console, and I can't fish it out. I'm bleeding so badly; I may pass out any second.

"Matty, fuck..."

"Dom's house..." I grunt out, and she squeals as she runs a red light and accelerates.

"No, you have to go to a fucking hospital. You're dying. Fuck."

"Dom's house, Natalie." I can barely move. My vision is blurring again. I shut my eyes as the car bounces over things and I don't know if she will even listen to me. But I blurt out his address as clearly as I can.

Dominic is the one who can save me now. I just pray that he sees that Natalie is trying to save my life and respects that she isn't trying to turn us in. If she takes me to a hospital, however, I will know she can never be trusted. I listen to her hysterics as my chest grows heavier. I hear the rasping of my own

breaths and know I'm close to dying. The pain in my chest is so acute I feel like every muscle in my body is on fire.

And then the darkness swallows me.

But at least she's safe.

NATALIE

I can't even believe this is happening. Matty is bleeding out right next to me all because I asked him to come save me from an unarmed man. I panicked. Why did I call him? And now I'm going to lose him. I was reluctant to go with him to his home because I feared his family, but that doesn't mean I want him dead. In fact, being away from him, on the run, and now seeing him lying there dying makes me wish I'd never have run. That I'd have just stayed with him.

"Matty... I need a hospital..." I am sobbing so hard I can barely see. I swipe at my eyes and turn down Columbia Street. I know exactly where Dominic lives. I didn't need Matty to ramble off his address. I've done my homework on these bastards, and fuck if I don't want to just take Matty to a hospital, but he's right. His family probably has means to deal with this and if he goes to the hospital, they'll get him for the hit and run. If that man dies, Matty goes to prison.

So, I head toward Dominic's house, praying they can handle this. By the way it sounded judging on the phone call Matty just made before he passed out, they will be expecting us—me. I'm terrified. They will kill me, or maybe they won't kill me since I saved his life. If I save his life. He's bleeding so badly right now. I don't know if I can even make this car go fast enough, not to mention the traffic. I am taking side streets and allies, but even then, there are people in the way.

"Shit, hold on," I gasp as I swerve around a garbage truck. Its flashing lights alert me to its presence and nearly side swipe it as I dart around the back end.

The driver's side mirror on Matty's car smashes into the bumper and I keep going, tearing the thing from the side of his car. Things are replaceable though, and lives aren't, so I don't even bother stopping.

We're only a few blocks from Dominic's house when Matty starts to cough and grunt. Blood splatters everywhere, soaking my sleeve, dousing the shifter and radio. He jerks and doubles over as I reel around a corner and pull into the community. Dominic's gate is open, and I am so blinded by tears I scrape the side of the car along it as I pull into his driveway, squealing to a halt near the front door.

Before I can even put the car in park there are three large men running up to the car. Two of them go to the passenger side and yank the door open and the third opens the driver's side door. He reaches across me and puts the car in park and then yanks me out by my bicep. I screech and wail, fighting him with my fists, but I am for all intents and purposes defenseless. This guy is three times my size.

"Let me go, you sick bastard."

He grabs me by the hair and drags me around the front of the car and I see Matty being extracted from his seat. He coughs hard and more blood oozes from his mouth. "Matty, oh my God, please. Someone help him. Please." I sob and reach for him but the behemoth holding me back is relentless.

"Get him on the gurney," a stout, balding man orders. He wears a white lab coat and has a black medical bag. He seems confident and I am a mess. I drop to my knees and sob harder.

"Oh god, please... Please, God let him live." I wipe my face and reach for Matty again and someone smacks my hands down. I yelp and hug my hands to my chest, but my heart is exploding with fear. I can't lose him.

"Take her around back," a man orders and I look up to see Dominic Gusev jogging down the stairs. He wears all black, and his eyes have the look of death in them. He's ordered them to kill me more than once before and I fear my end is now.

"No..." Matty's voice comes out in a hoarse squeak. "Do not touch... a hair... on her head..." He's struggling to speak, and every word pushes more

blood out of his mouth and nose.

“You heard me!” Dominic screams and the man holding me pulls me by the hair until I’m forced to stand.

“Fuck, ouch! Please, I need to be with him. Ow!” I push the man’s chest and he doesn’t budge.

“Dom, no.” Another man steps in. I recognize him as one of the brothers, but I don’t know which one. “If he doesn’t make it, that’s his last request, man. We have to honor that.” He places a firm hand on Dominic’s chest as Matty is wheeled away by the men who dragged him out of the car and the man in the white lab coat. Blood pools on the ground next to the car and drips from the gurney as it is hefted up the stairs into the front of Dominic’s home.

Dominic glares at me and I watch his nostrils flare. Something tells me if it was up to him alone, I’d be dead in his driveway now. But it’s not and I see that because of the man restraining him. They have a tense standoff without any words, then Dominic shakes his head and looks at me. “Lock her in the blue room,” he says, and then he turns and follows Matty into the house.

The man who defended me gives me a look of hatred and then turns and goes too. He probably would have killed me too if not for Matty’s request, which I hope is enough for them to never kill me. I weep as I am led into the home, following the blood trail, and then I’m shoved into a room down a narrow hallway. They push me so hard I stumble several feet before stumbling and falling to my knees.

“Ow,” I yelp, and I wince with pain as I sit there crying. Matty is dying, and it’s all my fault. I led him right to his death. My god, I’m as bad as this entire organization. It happened to my uncle, and now it’s happening to him. The only difference is that this time I saw the man responsible, and I know it was an Italian to blame.

I don’t even waste time getting into the bed to cry. I curl up on the light blue carpet and lean against the floral bedspread that drapes over the side of the bed. It’s really true what they say. You don’t know what you have until it’s gone, and Matty is that thing. I can’t lose him. He understands me and he, for whatever ridiculous reason, cares enough about me to stand up to his family and to take a bullet for me.

I cry, for Matty, for my heart, for Hal, and for the overwhelming need to be with the man I love, whom I am not afraid to admit to loving. I cry until my stomach cramps and my eyes run out of tears and then I feel drained. I lie on the carpet staring at the dark wainscoting, wishing I'd have just stayed with Matty, that I wouldn't have run away to find Hal's killer on my own. We'd both be safe in his home right now if I had.

The doorknob clicks and opens slowly. I have no concept of time. No way of knowing how long I've been lying on the carpet sobbing. I feel angry and hungry and tired. The sun streaming in the window tells me it's still daytime, maybe late afternoon, but again, I can't possibly determine that from where I lie.

"Natalie?" a woman's voice calls, and I sit up. She steps into the room with a glass of water and a smile. She's pretty, dressed in white flats, a pair of light-yellow slacks and a white silk shirt. She must have not gotten the memo that white after Labor Day is a fashion faux pas, but given who she's involved with, I don't think she'd care anyway. "There you are...."

I wipe my face, certain that I look hideous and curl my knees to my chest. Hugging my legs, I watch her walk in and set the glass of water on the bedside table. The woman isn't shy, sitting right next to me on the floor. Her clothes are expensive, maybe even couture. She shouldn't be sitting on the floor.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Nanette. You can call me Nan. I'm married to Dominic." Her soft smile is kind, like her eyes. She is clearly not blood related to these animals.

"Where's Matty? Is he okay?" I sniffle and use the back of my sleeve to rub my eyes.

"Matty is going to make it." She reaches out and takes my hand. "I saw how upset you were. I asked Dominic if I could come in and see you. You seem to really care about him." Her thumb brushes over the back of my hand gently and I feel like pulling away. I don't want this kindness. I want Matty.

"Can I see him? I mean, how is he doing?" I pull my hand away, not rudely,

but physical touch isn't my thing. This whole thing isn't my thing. I don't want to be locked up in someone's room and get served meals. I want Matty back, and I want to be with him. Even if he is some monster.

"Dominic has given me permission to let you come visit him for a few minutes. Matty woke up during the procedure to remove the bullet and asked for you. The vet had to put him out again and finish up, but he is doing okay now." Nanette speaks slowly, as if I'm mentally challenged or something. Maybe she doesn't know who I am, so I give her the benefit of the doubt.

"Let's go then..." I stand and she follows me, but she takes my hand again. "What's wrong?"

"He lost a lot of blood, okay? So, he's been sedated. He may or may not be conscious, but he did ask for you, so you're being permitted to run." Her lip quivers and she furrows her brow. "Natalie, I was just like you. Kept against my will and scared to death. I promise you; Dominic is a rational man and he will only do what has to be done to protect his family." I see deep concern in her eyes.

I don't want to die. I don't want to turn his family in. I want to know the man I have fallen helplessly in love with is going to be okay. I nod and let her hold my hand. She offers me the water and I drink it all, thankfully. Then I give her the empty glass and she leads me out into the hallway.

The house is massive, much larger than Matty's house. As we pass through the entry I look up and see two stories above us and a large rotunda painted in the fashion of an old cathedral. She takes me across the round foyer and into a dark hallway. The room smells like bleach and the floors look clean, as if they were just mopped to remove the traces of Matty's blood.

Intricate artwork hangs on the walls. Wood panels grace every surface of the hallway. The ceiling is low, like it was made as slave quarters a hundred fifty years ago, but I say nothing. The slap of my bare feet on the floor is the only sound. I just want to be with him, to sit next to him and know he's okay. My heart won't be alright until I know he will be.

Nanette opens a door and steps aside. Light floods into the hallway and I round the corner and step into the room. A machine beeps, keeping time with Matty's heartbeat. If it weren't a home, I would think this was a hospital

room. Overhead lights flood down on his frail form, pale and covered in tubes and tape. He's clean, no trace of blood, and he lays with a bare chest, white gauze peppered dots of blood from the wound still seeping.

I walk over to him and notice the same stout man in the corner of the room. He sits with a book in hand reading. He pays no attention to me as I sit on the edge of Matty's bed and take his cold hand. Up close, I can see there are bits of blood still crusted in his fingernails and knuckles, evidence of how close he came to dying. It makes me tear up again and I kiss his hand and hold it pressed to my lips.

"You need to wake up, Matty. You need to come back to me. I need you." I kiss his hand again and again, willing him to open his eyes, but they remain firmly shut. It's only because of his wish that I'm here, but that seems so ironic, because it's only because of my call that he's here. "I need you, Matvey, please. Wake up."

He has to help me get revenge for Hal, but more than that, he has to be here to love me, because what do I do now that I've tasted love if he can't be here?

When he moves his fingers on his own, I stop and watch them. He wiggles them again and my eyes dart to his face. He blinks a few times but doesn't move anything else. Then his eyes lock on my face. "Oh my god, Matty," I gasp and lavish his hand in kisses. But I'm not satisfied to kiss his hand. I lean over him, kissing his forehead and cheeks. I never see it coming when someone grabs me from behind and pulls me away. The man in the corner—whom I can only assume is the vet—rises and waddles to the bedside as I am dragged from the room, reaching for Matty.

"Holy shit, let me fucking go!" I slap at the hands that grasp me, the same massive man who yanked me out of the car. "Let me see him!" I scream, but there is no use fighting him. I know he is only doing what he's been told by Dominic.

There is no sign of Nanette either, and I'm ushered back to the room where they dumped me before. The man locks me in, and I slap the door in a frenzy, crying and begging to be with Matty.

At least I know he's alive....

MATTY

That smell, it's so familiar. And I swear I hear the voice of an angel pleading with me to come back. I stir, feeling a weight on my chest so heavy I can barely breath. When I do it hurts, searing hot pain that tears through my chest and shoots down my legs. I wiggle my fingers, but my eyes won't open; they're heavy like my chest is. But I can't stop the feeling that she's here, that Natalie is here in this room with me. That makes me fight to pry my eyelids upward.

I swallow and turn my head toward the sound of a woman crying. It's dark; then it's light—then I blink a few times. And the hand that is holding mine leaves. Drowsiness keeps me fading in and out, but I still fight, because I'm a fighter. It's what I do. I focus on breathing, taking deep slow breaths as my eyes open and shut. The scent of flowers and candy leaves, replaced with a musty scent of tobacco smoke.

“Hmm, you're finally waking up.” It's Dominic. He's here and I am alive. Flashes of what happened come back to me—being shot, Natalie driving. But my memory is foggy. Who shot me and why?

I lick my lips, opening and shutting my mouth a few times. My head hurts and I'm thirsty. I lift my arm, but a hand grabs it and puts it back on the bed. I grunt in disapproval and force my eyes open again. Brewster is here, hovering. His pudgy face is framed by his stethoscope as he presses it to my chest. It's cool, refreshing against my hot skin.

“Strong heartbeat, Dom. He's going to be fine I think as long as infection

doesn't set in." Brewster's voice is comforting. He never lies. I remember calling him or telling Dom to call him. It's all a blur.

"Thanks, doc." Dominic's voice is so loud. It's surreal.

I turn to look at him, able to keep my eyes open a bit better now. Sven stands beside him with arms crossed over his barrel chest. I must have come close to dying for them both to be here. I bet the others are out there somewhere too—Roman and Leonid. We're never closer as a family than when one of us is suffering, and I'm glad my brothers are here for me. Which only makes me think of Natalie, and how much I want her here with me too. But before I can ask about her, Dominic starts in.

"You gave us a scare Matvey. Even Dad is worried about you. Taking on two Italian street thugs by yourself without your weapon on you." He clasps one hand around the other wrist and watches me. He has blood on his suit, Sven too. They must have helped drag me in here.

"What happened?" I squeak out. My throat hurts, maybe from a breathing tube or something. I vaguely remember waking up to intense pain in my chest and seeing Brewster leaning over me. Probably woke up during surgery. "Was I shot?"

"Yeah, you took a round at point-blank range. Narrowly missed your aorta but got your lung." Sven shakes his head. "You're a fucking idiot."

His way of comforting me and trying to make light of my near-death experience, I'm sure. Sven has a big heart but just like the rest of us, he has no ability to show or expression any emotion other than anger. His fear of losing a brother will only be played out in an increased intensity toward anyone who rebels or threatens the family for weeks to come.

"You swept in to help that bitch reporter and two Italians ganged up on you. You realize what a risk you took?" Dominic sighs. I can tell he's upset with me, but he knows when I'm on my deathbed trying to fight for my life is not the time to lecture me. "They got away for now, but Roman will get them. But you... You defied my orders, went behind my back to involve Akers, and went in to rescue her alone like a fucking fool."

I remember now, chasing Natalie down the street and ramming into that idiot

who was chasing her. She was so relieved to see me, and I was so relieved to see her too. I wince as I try to sit up but Brewster is there pushing my good shoulder back into the mattress. “Stay put,” he orders and then his hand slides down to my wrist. He looks up at the monitors and watches them as he presses two fingers to my wrist. I turn back to Dominic. If I’m going to be locked in this bed, they are still going to listen to me.

“I need to see her.”

“She’s fine.” Sven eyes me, stern features glowering down at me. “We locked her in a room. We haven’t done anything but talk to her.”

So, they did listen to my request to not harm her. That tells me I was closer to death than they care to admit. A man’s last wishes must always be respected, and they feared I would die, so they honored my final words. I swallow hard again. My mouth is dry and so is my throat. What I wouldn’t give for a glass of water.

“If they got her...” I croak but I can’t finish my sentence. A coughing fit takes me over and I heave in the bed. Brewster pins me down, pressing on both shoulders and I cough up blood that spatters on his face. His expression is serious, and he glances at Dominic.

“He needs to rest. He can’t get worked up.” Brewster releases me as the coughing fit passes, then takes out a handkerchief and wipes his face of my blood.

Dominic sternly says, “If they had gotten her and any secrets about us she may know, we’d be done. I know that. But that isn’t the reason you ran in there like a buffoon.”

He’s right. I ran in there to save her because she is more than just a potential threat to our family name. She’s more than a risk or a mole. Natalie is mine, and I will fiercely defend that with everything in me. In fact, if I had to do it over again knowing the outcome, I would still do it.

“I want to see her.” I clench my hands into fists and tighten my jaw. This hurts like fuck, but if I have to get out of bed and find her, I will. I need to know she’s okay, that they really kept their word and haven’t harmed her.

“That isn’t going to happen, Matty. You will rest and get your strength back,

because if you don't you won't make it. You almost died."

This time when I try to sit up, it's Sven who holds me down. I feel the stab of pain in my chest where the bullet struck me and a tightening in my gut. There is no point fighting him. On my best day it would be challenging to overpower him, but right now I can't even think of resisting him.

"Rest, little brother. Your wishes are being respected until we can have a proper conversation with you." Dominic moves between me and Sven and Sven backs away. I relax into the firm mattress and look up at him. I know he is a man of his word, and I will trust him to keep that word. I have no other choice.

So, help me God, if I wake up and find she's not okay, or they have touched a single hair on her head, I will kill them all. I shut my eyes and breathe as deeply as I can without excruciating pain, then let my body release any tension I have. I lie here for a moment thinking sleep will claim me, but it doesn't. It's just peaceful to have my eyes shut.

That's when I hear them speaking. Brewster chimes in first and I don't like what he says. "Maybe I should sedate him. The more he moves and talks, the harder it will be for his lungs. If he gets a coughing fit like that again, he could rupture the sutures and bleed out internally."

"Prepare the sedative," Dominic says, and internally I groan. My body is too weak to be alert and react. All I can do is just lay here and take whatever they give me. I am not weak though; my soul and passion are flaming infernos ready to take down anyone in my way.

"Is he really going to make it?" Sven asks. He's still so near to me. I can hear the concern in his voice now. Like he really is worried about me. Maybe I'm not out of the woods yet.

"If he can stay calm and let the wound heal how it is. I may need to suction off fluid from his lung, and I have to keep him on the antibiotic, so he doesn't get an infection." I feel Brewster's hands working at my chest, maybe check the bandage. Every sensation is amplified, like needles on my skin and jackhammers in my ears.

The room is silent for a while except for the sound of the machines to which

I'm hooked. They beep and drone on, clicking and hissing, and I think I'm alone. I'm tempted to let my consciousness drift and fall asleep, but Dominic clears his throat and I'm instantly alert again.

"She's dangerous, Sven. Lenny hacked the computer. While we don't see any outgoing emails, there is no way to know how many times that information was copied or downloaded to independent flash drives or hard drives. She may know as much as one of us, and that's hitting a little too close to home." Dominic sounds certain that Natalie is the problem, but if I had the chance to explain it to him, he'd know she wasn't.

Sven hums a solid note then I hear him snort out a sigh. "You know the code, Dom. We can't go back on it. Not even a little. Matvey is not out of the woods. If he dies, and Leo or Rome know we've hurt Natalie, they'll never trust the family name again. Their loyalty will go out the window."

"So, we just keep her locked up in my house the rest of her life because Matty got himself killed?" Dominic sounds angry, his pitch higher and volume louder. I lay as still as I can, so I don't alert them to the fact that I'm eavesdropping. Sven is right. If they go back on my final wishes and I really do die, the family falls apart. They'll turn against each other one at a time. None of them will trust each other because the code is broken.

"Listen to yourself, Dominic. As the leader of this family, when you break the code of honor, the family falls. You may as well hand the laptop over to the police and the Italians." Sven has my back and even though he may not agree with my assessment of Natalie or my desire to keep her alive, he will follow my instructions.

Darkness starts to creep in, fatigue tugging my consciousness into the throes of its depths. I feel the weight getting heavier now as I begin to drift into sleep. Dominic and Sven continue talking but their words grow fainter, as if they're moving away from me. But it's me who is moving away, traveling faster than I care to toward the blackness of sleep.

I'm on the street running, chasing a black figure who eludes me. He's carrying a weapon, a large one. I know it's loaded, and I'm acutely aware that he's used it. I look down at my chest as I run and see the blood. It's spewing from my chest as I take each step, but I feel no pain. Instead, I

pursue faster, pushing my body to the brink.

The man turns down a dark alley and my father is there watching. He stands with hands folded in front of himself and a stoic expression. His features are older, faded, his eyes forlorn. He watches as I advance on the man and point my weapon.

But when the man turns, it isn't a man anymore. It's Natalie, she's here in my dream tormenting me, testing me, teasing me. She points at me then turns her hand upward, beckoning me toward her with a single finger, curling and pulling me in. Her lips mouth something I can't discern, and her shirt is open, revealing her tits. She's seducing me, wooing my attention away from the danger around me.

Then a noise behind me startles me. I turn around to see a bullet racing toward my chest and Natalie is there, stepping in front of it. She takes it. Her eyes go wide. She's stunned and hurt. And I catch her as she falls, and I'm holding her as she bleeds all over me.

She's dying and I can't stop it.

And when I look up, I see Dominic with a gun pointed right at her.

I awaken to the whir and click of the machines and I'm alone. The room is cool and dark. The stench of alcohol and bleach permeate everything. I blink my eyes several times trying to adjust to the darkness. I'm still in the bed, but I have no idea how long I've been here or what time of day it is. Hell, I don't even know which day of the week it is.

I try to scratch my nose, but my hand is restrained. I focus hard on my wrist, trying to narrow my eyes to slits to see what's binding my hand. It's a leather cuff. I'm chained to the railing. And when I try to sit up, I notice my chest is restrained too. I sigh and let my head loll to the side. Maybe they've restrained me because I'm a danger to myself, trying to pull tubes out or get up in my sleep. Or maybe they don't want me to get up and see that they've harmed her.

Given the conversation I overheard as I was drifting into unconsciousness, I believe Sven will keep Dominic at bay, but I can't be certain. I'm helpless now, strapped to this gurney and chained up like a prisoner. Shouting for help

will be futile too. If it's anything like last time I woke up I won't even be able to speak, let alone shout. I can't even take a breath deep enough to do so.

So, I lie here staring at the ceiling waiting for my body to heal so I can fix this. She has to know this wasn't my fault. She saved me after all; how could she blame me too?

NANETTE

I sit in the bay window, cushioned with pillows covered in pink flowers, staring out the window. It overlooks a beautiful garden that sweeps down a hill toward a pergola draped in wisteria and a fountain. The fountain is off, probably winterized as the harsher temps of fall have settled in. But it's still picturesque. I could sit here all day watching the birds' flit about. They're migrating now, moving south, so there are so many species we don't see around this area of New York most times.

And though most of the plants have lost their flower heads, the foliage is still beautiful. Reds and yellows pepper the hillside and every now and then I see a rabbit hop from beneath the outstretched branch of a tree or bush. I am so immersed in observing nature that I hardly hear the door click open. For seven days I've been locked in this room with no human contact except Nanette who brought me fresh towels, a change of clothes, and a meal three times a day. She never says anything; she just lays her parcels on the nightstand and leaves.

I never say anything either. I sit here and stare, thinking about Matty. By now he's either dead or healing well. I'm convinced, however, that if he were dead, they'd have taken me into that garden and ended me by now. Which is why I still have hope that I'll see him again, hear his voice. So, I don't even turn to see who it is. It's nearing lunch; it's probably Nanette bringing a tray of food I will refuse anyway. I haven't eaten much either, barely drank the water they've provided. I'm too depressed. I haven't even bothered to take my burner phone out of my pocket. It's dead by now anyway. The only thing I want is Matty.

“Natalie,” a gruff male voice says, and I turn to see Matty’s oldest sibling, Dominic, standing at the foot of the bed. He is dressed casually for a change, white polo and dark navy jeans. His hair is loose, falling in his eyes, his feet shod in sneakers. It’s a good look for him, though I doubt he regularly indulges.

I turn back to the window and stare. There is a cardinal in the bird feeder, pecking away at the seed. Its mate is somewhere close. They mate for life and rarely separate. Even when they migrate, cardinals are sworn to the one they mate with. You’ll rarely see them apart for very long. Even nature has a way of showing us how it’s supposed to be.

“I’ve come to talk with you.”

I hear movement. I assume he is sitting down or something. I don’t care. It doesn’t matter if I ask about Matty or not, they give me no information. In fact, nothing matters anymore without him. I am numb, a hollow shell of the woman I’m supposed to be. I feel nothing but emptiness and sadness. I’m tired. I wish I could drown my sorrows in that sweet Scotch Matty made me drink that night.

“We got into your laptop, Natalie. I know the things you have stored on there. I know you know everything.” He’s calm. Why is he so calm? Why isn’t he hitting me or slitting my throat or something?

“So?” I continue watching out the window despite my curiosity as to why he’s here. If he knows what I know, he has enough information to kill me and never look back.

“So, I want to hear it from your own mouth. Tell me everything.”

I look at him. He’s seated calmly on the foot of the bed with hands folded in his lap. His rugged charm won’t make me swoon. My heart is spoken for. But I can see the family resemblance and it makes me ache for Matty to be in my arms, for me to be draped over his chest in a post-sex high that melds us together forever.

“What?” I turn my body, placing my feet on the ground. He’s serious?

“I want you to tell me everything you know and leave nothing out. Start at the beginning.” He purses his lips and tilts his head. He is serious.

I don't even know where to begin. My story begins as a kid from a big family who felt neglected. My uncle took me in as his own when he moved in with us. My parents were there, sure, but they had too much on their hands, which is why they welcomed Hal's help. He loved us like his own.

"Well, I grew up in the city surrounded by crime and danger. My parents and uncle did their best to shelter and protect us. But with crime dramas on TV and smutty romance novels I read later in high school and into college, I became fascinated with the world of organized crime." I turn again, staring out the window as I speak. "I went to college for journalism, but the real reason I started investigating your family and the others in this city was because I was curious, drawn to it. Like I was made for it but wasn't born to it.

"It aroused me, excited me too. I was taken by stories of passion and romance, villains and heroes, and I found it somehow strangely satisfying to learn real details about things. I kept a few files as you can see on the laptop." I gesture but I don't know what I'm gesturing at. I don't even know if he's looking at me. I'm staring at a finch in the tree just outside the window. "Those were just for me to enjoy—until I got a job at the Tribune and a coworker saw my file. She said I had something there and that I should pursue a story. So, I did, but when I asked the boss about it, he said I was nosy, not investigative. He thought my work was childish."

"Because you were interested personally but never dug deep into the gritty stuff?" Dominic asks and I look at him. If he's trying to psychoanalyze me, it won't do any good. Even the best shrinks my parents could afford couldn't do that when I spiraled.

"Because I had no proof, just notes."

"So, you got proof?" he asks and tips his chin up.

"So, I dug deeper, exposing things from every family.... Until Hal was shot." My shoulders tense and I tear my eyes off of him, afraid that if I keep looking at his face I'll cry. "Hal was like a father to me. My digging turned over a rock, out from which a cockroach crawled and killed him." I have no doubt in my mind that the investigation I did triggered that shooting. I just don't know who did it.

“And after that?”

I pause my story for a few long minutes. After that I imploded. I was institutionalized for a while and spent hours every week in therapy. I dug and researched and dug some more. I scavenged evidence and information, fighting tooth and nail to swim upstream in a corrupt system that continuously pushed me down. Cops are dirty, men are dirty, I am dirty. And I was on the brink of discovery when I was nabbed off the street. How do I say that? How do I tell him the truth?

“After that,” I say after at least ten minutes of silence, “my focus was singular. Catch Hal’s murderer. I followed the evidence that your dirty cops buried. I traced it back to the shooting and who was there.” I turn to glare at him. “I seek revenge for my uncle’s murder, nothing more. I could never hurt Matty. That’s why I brought him here. It’s why I saved his life instead of letting him bleed out on the street. I love him.”

Dominic stares at me with a placid expression. There is no hatred there, no guile. He has no emotion toward me whatsoever, or perhaps he just has a really good poker face. Either way, I don’t want to look at him anymore. I peer out across the sweeping hillside garden in search of the cardinals who were keeping me company. They are gone, replaced with an eerie emptiness, as if Dominic’s presence in this room commands them to take flight, so that I can pay attention to him.

“And what do you know about the docks?” His voice is tinged with anger now. This is where rubber meets the road, where I prove myself to him.

“Sergeant Monroe of the first precinct covered it up. You had a problem with a man named Nick, who, having been a loyal member of your family for years, decided with the help of the Italians to turn on you and form anarchy.” I rise, taking to my feet to pace. If he’s going to kill me, he’s going to have a fight on his hands. “He was right under your nose, and you couldn’t see him. You hired James Slater, known hitman, to sniff him out. Jimmy gave you the intel you needed, and you brought Nick to justice the way your family handles things. There was a massive shootout between the loyal members of your family and the ones Nick turned.”

I cross my arms over my chest and stare at him. He remains seated, calmly

watching me. His expression hasn't changed a bit. "And the evidence?" He tips his chin up again and I continue pacing.

"Copied on hard drives all over this city just waiting for my word to be released to the press. If I don't check in by the first of November, they go live." I am seriously bluffing here, and I don't care. If it gives me ten seconds longer to live, I'll do it. Maybe that's ten seconds longer Matty has to wake up and come get me.

"I don't believe you for a second, but you do seem to know more than we'd like." Dominic stands and hooks his thumbs in his pockets as he does. "We will kill you, you know that? No one knows this much about our family and lives to talk about it. And it's all throughout your laptop."

I shrug nonchalantly. I'm shaking internally but I won't give him the satisfaction. "Kill me then. I did the right thing by saving his life because I love him. If that's not worth anything to you, then I want nothing to do with this family."

"You're only alive because he asked us not to touch you."

I turn my back on him, mostly so that the tears forming in my eyes—tears of terror—don't slip out and give away my true feelings. I hear the door click shut and I let out the emotion. I breathe and the tears come streaming down my cheeks. If Matty requested that on his deathbed, and he really meant it, then he must have truly meant it. He must truly care for me.

I stand by the dresser nursing my aching heart until the door opens again. I expect it to be Dominic, maybe returned to kill me now, but it's Nanette. I swipe at my eyes and sniffle, and she says, "Would you like to go to him? He's asking for you."

Nanette is like an angel in this place. She is fresh and warm, and I feel safer just for her being here.

"Yes, please."

I follow her down the narrow hallway, across the wide foyer, and into the dark hallway. Matty's room is here, just a few steps away. I am so eager to see him, I almost take off running and surpass my leader, but given the conversation I just had with the leader of this family, I know it's not wise. So

like a good girl I stay a few paces behind her and wait until she opens the door.

He's there, alone. His eyes are open, but he looks in pain still. It's been a week since he was shot, and I don't know how long it takes to heal from a gunshot wound, but this one was pretty serious. He almost died and the bandages on his chest show that. I rush to his side, grasping his hand and kissing it eagerly.

"I'll leave you two alone," Nanette says. I can hear her smile as she speaks. Maybe she's rooting for us, like a rugged, disparate romance where you can't wait to see the love interests get together.

"Hey..." Matty croons, his voice is gravelly, as if he's not used it for a while.

"Oh my god, I thought you were dead. They haven't told me anything. I've been alone for a week." I lay across the side of his bed, sinking into a chair left next to it. His hand lays on the back of my head and I press my forehead to his other hand.

"Hey, shhh... it's okay." I've never seen Matty be this way. He's tough and angry and commanding. He's not gentle and nurturing. Perhaps his near-death experience has softened him somehow. "Look, you're mine now. Okay? I've staked my claim. My brothers know you belong to me. They will never lay a hand on you."

I raise my head and look him in the eye. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, they know you know everything. Dominic told me my father put the judgment in his hands. He wants to kill you, but I told him he has to go through me first." Matty pinches my chin weakly. "I'm not letting him touch you."

My chest heaves with emotion. "Oh, Matty..." I let tears stream down my face freely. I don't care that he sees me. I don't care that it makes me weak. I don't care that this whole family is fucked up and they need to pay for so many horrible things they've done. "I love you. I need you."

"I'm not going anywhere, okay?" He takes a deep breath and sighs. "Doesn't hurt so bad to breathe anymore."

I reach up and touch the bandage on his chest. His hand covers mine and he looks me in the eye. “It’s almost the same spot where Hal was shot.”

He nods. Our eyes meet again, and I feel a connection. “Dominic is going to look into Hal’s murder, baby. He’s going to help you.” He brushes his thumb over the back of my hand. “I need your word you are on our side. You won’t tell a soul what you know.”

My gut ties itself in a knot. Hal taught me a sense of honor and justice. It’s why I want to avenge him, because if anyone in this world was pure and noble, it was him. But he also taught me a sense of loyalty. That I need to be honest and have integrity, be trustworthy to those who care for me. Looking the other way when it comes to Matty is simple—I love him. Looking the other way when it comes to his family, not so much. But if he is here to protect me, and it’s what I have to do to survive. I have no choice.

“Of course, Matvey. I will respect your wishes and say nothing. My heart is yours.”

I kiss the back of his hand again and gaze into his eyes. My heart really is his, and I pray to whatever god is listening that it will be safe that way.

MATTY

Natalie clings to me like a lost fawn, alone amongst the wolves. I've no doubt in my mind that's the way she feels. She's been a prisoner in my brother's house all this time with no hope of me returning to her. My request alone has kept her alive, and now that I'm regaining strength, I fully intend to back that up.

I caress the back of her head as she cries into my hand. It has been a very rough road, and for us it's over. At least for now. Rome may have his hands full on the next leg of the journey—hunting down the murderer we know has been hired to kill all of us, starting with him. But right now, what matters most to me is making sure Natalie is alive and safe, and she gets justice for her uncle the way she wants so desperately.

“Hey,” I call softly, stirring her with a nudge to the head. She looks up and wipes her face but doesn't let go of my hand. “Come here...”

She glances at the bed awkwardly, then my face. “I'm here. What do you mean?”

I pat my thigh and nod, and she blushes a deep red. Her lips warm, darkening to the color of strawberries ripe in summer. It's been a while, and though I can't do to her what my body wishes it could, I need release. “Here,” I say, patting my leg again, inches from my dick which is now beginning to swell.

Natalie glances at the door and then my face. “Someone could walk in. You're hurt. This isn't smart. They'll just lock me up again.” I can see the fear written on her face and I'm not fucking around with that. If I had my full

strength, she'd be taking the whip right now, pinned over the edge of this mattress with my cock in her ass whining about how fucking huge I am.

“Take your fucking clothes off and get on this bed now, woman.” The tone I use is not playful, neither is it inviting, but I know her. I know what she craves, what she loves. I know how to push her buttons and make her want me, how to care for her in the way her body needs.

Natalie stands and nods. Her shoulders are tense, her eyes fixed on me. Beneath this thin blanket I wear nothing, but the blouse and pants she wears cover far too much skin. Nanette must have shared some clothing with her, because I've never seen this outfit. It's nice, but it has to go, and she must agree. She peels her clothes off one item at a time. The shirt first, then the pants. Red silky bra, then satin panties. She stands in front of me timidly, one hand hooked around the opposite elbow.

“Fuck you're so beautiful,” I tell her, patting my thigh. “Get up here.”

I carefully push the blanket down over my growing cock and expose myself. She grins when she sees it and uses the chair as a step stool to climb up onto the bed. It shakes as she adjusts herself, straddling my knees first and gripping my hard dick. She strokes me and watches my face. Her long dark hair hangs over one shoulder, veiling her expression from anyone who may walk into the room, and then she lowers her mouth and takes me in.

“Oh god,” I groan as she sucks me, squeezing my shaft and lowering her mouth around my dick over and over. She grunts and it sends vibrations into my balls and groin; it's incredible. I've needed this for days, ever since first waking up and being told I couldn't see her yet. They only just removed the restraints today.

“Mmm,” she moans and pulls away. “I've missed you.” She smirks. “And your whip.”

“Fuck you have no idea how badly I want to tie you up and eat your pussy.” I push her head back down and her lips wrap around my girth again and again. She groans and sucks, then lets me push her mouth so far down I feel her throat constrict around my head and she gags. So I do it again; I love the feeling of her gagging on my cock, gripping me like that. It's tight and hot and I want to feel it over and over.

When I feel like my climax is close, I grab a fistful of her hair and pull her away. She yelps and complies, rising up. Her mouth is wet with her own saliva, and I can smell how wet her pussy is. I want to eat her, but in this condition it's probably not wise. So, I do the next best thing.

"Touch yourself..." I keep her hair firmly gripped in my hand, tilting her head to the side so I can see past her tits to where her fingers slide across her pussy. "Do it!" I jerk and she gasps.

"Mmm, Matty... I want you in me."

"Finger yourself now." I watch her fingers massage her clit in a circle and then she dips them into herself. They vanish as she thrusts, and I grit my teeth. "Shit... you're hot."

"You like this?" she asks, now thrusting her hips a little. "Me fingerfucking myself?"

"God, I want to eat that pussy so hard." I stroke myself with my free hand and know if I don't take a break, I'm going to spray my load all over her tits and face. "Put your fingers in my mouth now."

Natalie smirks and pulls her fingers out of her pussy, reaching toward my mouth. Her moisture is heavenly to my tongue. I suck her fingers clean and want more, so much more. "Again," I order, and she obeys, dipping her fingers in her pussy then bringing them to my lips. I never let go of her hair the whole time and she seems to like it. "Again," I say, and again she obeys. I can't get enough of her.

"Shit, I want you in me," she says, and I pull her hair until she is crawling across me, shaking the bed. The mattress whines and the frame squeaks and I know if anyone is in the hallway, they'll hear it. Fuck, they may have cameras pointed at me right now. I don't care. I need to fuck her so badly.

Natalie hovers over my dick, letting the very tip of my head press against her opening. She wriggles and slowly descends around me. It's tighter than I remember, though it's been a week or so. She groans and arches her head back, hair dangling down her back now. Her hips rock as she takes me, inching her way up my cock and stretching as she goes. "Fuck you're so fucking huge," she growls and grips my hips, nails sinking into my skin, as I

try to push in faster. Her eyes shoot open, and she sways her hips again, rocking more.

“Take it baby, take it all...” I grab her by the waist and pull down hard as I thrust up, and my cock catches on her lips but then releases, slamming into her hard. Natalie gasps again and groans.

“Holy shit, oh fuck...” She moans and hums and begins riding me. Her pussy grips me and squeezes me like a vice. She rocks her hips back and forth, up and down, and I’m barely holding it together.

Natalie moans, her voice high and sweet, and arches her back, pushing her hips forward and grinding herself against me, her pussy rubbing against my cock. She flips her hair out of the way and bites her lip and then whimpers again and bears down on me. I move my hands to her ass and thrust up, meeting her downward thrust, and we both moan and the room fills with the sound. Her pussy is dripping and gripping me, and her juices are flowing down my cock.

"Holy shit... fuck!" I thrust into her again, my cock throbbing, the head pushing against her inner walls. She grunts and throws her head back, eyes closed, mouth open, and lets out a long moan.

Then the door opens, and she turns her head. Her movements pause for a second and out of the corner of my eye I see Brewster walk in. Natalie seems shy for a second, but I reach up and grip her chin. “Fuck me right now,” I order and never slow my thrusts for a second.

"Oh my god," she whispers, and I feel her pussy clench me as she bites her lip. She turns back to me and resumes her riding, pushing her hips up and down, rocking them back and forth, her juices pouring down my cock. Her face is red and flushed and she spreads her legs wider, rocking harder, our bodies connecting. I slam into her again and again and her pussy grips me tighter and tighter.

"Sir..." Brewster approaches the bed. "Sir, this isn't smart... You'll tear your stitches."

Natalie tries to turn to see him, but I continue fucking her relentlessly. I pinch her chin and force her to look into my eyes. "Fuck me, Natalie."

"Sir..." Fuck the man is a fucking moron.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" I bark, glaring at him.

"Oh god, oh god... I'm gonna cum, oh my god, oh fuck!" She throws her head back and groans and I move my hands to her waist, thrusting into her as hard as I can. Her pussy begins to clench, and I feel her juices pouring down my cock.

"Sir..."

"Get out!" I shout and at the same time, I raise my hand and smack the side of her ass hard. "Shit... Fuck me, baby..."

Her eyes are closed, her body convulsing around my pulsing dick as Brewster backs out of the room. Pervert doesn't even look away from her bouncing tits, and being watched seems to be something she likes.

"You like that, Nat? Like being watched like that?"

"Oh god, oh yes..." Her eyes flutter open and she reaches back and grips the sheets and I thrust into her, my cock throbbing and my balls feeling like they're about to explode.

"You like seeing me fucking your pussy?" She nods and then moans and shudders as another orgasm washes over her. I slam into her again and again, my balls slapping against her and I feel myself starting to lose control. "Want me to invite him back? Let him watch me use you like my fucking sex toy?"

"Oh fuck, Matty," she whines.

"Tell me you want it."

"I want you to fuck me, Matty, oh god, fuck me..."

"Who are you?"

"I'm yours..."

"No one else's?"

"No one else's..." She's panting now, her eyes glazed over. I've never seen a woman cum so many times before.

"Who do you belong to?"

"I belong to you..."

"Fuck, Natalie..." I grip her waist and keep pounding away.

"Oh, I'm coming... oh fuck... yes, now." Natalie is loud, loud enough for the entire house to hear just how badly she wants me and exactly who she is to me. I bet Brewster is in the hallway beating off to just the sound of her voice.

"Oh, god... oh fuck..."

"Cum, baby..." I thrust into her again and again as she gushes around my cock, and I feel my own orgasm boiling up. I want to pull out, I want to shoot my load all over her pussy, but I can't stop fucking her. I want to fill her with my cum, I want her to know that this is my pussy, my body, my wife and I want everyone in this house to know who she belongs to.

She is panting and moaning and we're both covered in sweat. I thrust into her a few more times, feeling the head of my cock beginning to twitch, the cum rising up through my shaft.

"I'm gonna fill you up, baby... Gonna fill that tight pussy with my cum..."

"Yes... Please... Fill my pussy..." I grip her hips with both hands, and I thrust one more time and feel the cum rush up and fill her, gushing out around my dick and flooding her. It drains out as I slow my thrusts. Her body calms, glistening with sweat.

I pull out and stare down at her pussy. I'm leaking cum and her juices are all over my cock and balls and my stomach. She crawls up beside me and lays down carefully, resting a hand on my stomach. Three days ago, I'd have been in excruciating pain. Today, this is just what the doctor ordered.

"I mean it, Matvey..." I love when she says my name like that. "I love you, and I will not tell a soul what I know."

"I believe you." I wrap an arm around her and pull her in. I have zero doubt in my mind that she will do as she says now. She saw the folly of her ways, running from me when I am the only person in the world who can hold back the fires of hell. "But if you ever run from me again, it will be my bullet that ends you."

She doesn't bristle at my words or even tense up. She is full herself now, at ease in my embrace and I enjoy that. "If I ever run from you again, it will be when that whip is in your hand and my pussy is dripping with your cum." She kisses my chest and then lightly touches my bandage. "Did it hurt?"

"Yes." There is no point in denying it. Though, I don't know what hurt more, her running from me or that bullet. "Very much." I sigh and grab her wrist, keeping her hand from my skin. "But I'd do it again and again if it meant that you were here in my arms with me."

She is silent as I lay her hand on my stomach. We lay there for a few minutes like that. Brewster returns and she doesn't even blink. Her grip on me is firm, her body glued to mine. Brewster covers us with a blanket and checks my vitals. Natalie remains in her position nestled in my side. This is the way it should be, the two of us like this. Nothing in the world will ever stop this union again.

When he leaves, I feel fatigued. I shut my eyes, and she holds me while I fall asleep, and even deep in my slumber, when she tries to move, I am there, pinning her to my body. She is mine and no one is taking her from me, not even her.

NATALIE

I squirm and gasp as the whip comes down on me over and over again. Matty has been back at full strength for a month now and it's the best it's ever been. My arms, stretched across the table and handcuffed to the legs, ache with strain. The rubber ball in my mouth, held there with a leather strap wrapped around my head, gives me something to bite down on with each blow. My pussy drips for him.

"Mmm," I growl, not able to actually speak. He smacks my pussy and I wince and crave more.

"You like that, Nat? Want me to smack your pussy again? You bad little vixen..." He's so fucking hot. Ass-naked and hard as a rock, he pulls me harder toward the edge of the table until his body rests between my thighs. He grinds his dick against my entrance and then buries himself into me. Each thrust is magic, hitting my back wall in time with the slaps of his hand on my outer thigh.

I've already come twice, but I feel the third one building deep in my groin. I've never experienced such euphoria. I strain against the cuffs wishing I could claw his hips and pull him deeper, but all that manages to do is move me farther away from him and he has to pull me back. He fucks me so hard the table scoots across the marble floors, grinding and squeaking.

"Ggg, mmmm," I groan, clenching around his girth. This is so fucking hot, and the fact that he has the video camera set up to record this so we can watch it play back later is even hotter.

His body slams into mine and I accept every inch of him. My body tenses, milking him and I shudder with a third release as he brings me to completion yet again. I'm spasming and jerking as he fills me, his hot load spewing into my body. I love it, the feeling of him filling me and draining out. I could do this every day for the rest of my life, and maybe I will. He told me last night that I was marrying him and I didn't protest.

"Well..." Another male voice in the room startles me, but it isn't altogether intrusive. Remembering how that vet walked in on me and Matty when he was on his sickbed arouses me. Matty finishes his thrusts and pulls out, and I feel his cum dribble out of me. I'm spread eagle on the dining room table and there is nothing I can do but lie here and turn my head to see who walked in.

"Hmm," Matty grunts, using my blouse to wipe himself clean. He steps aside and I can see it's Dominic. I look him in the eye for a second and he drinks me in, every fucking inch of me—bared tits, dripping pussy—and fuck if it doesn't make me wish Matty was still in me fucking me. My body still twitches with the vestiges of the third orgasm, and I smirk at him as best as I can with the gag in my mouth.

Matty yanks his slacks on and tucks his still-hard cock into them. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" he asks his brother causally, as if they are used to walking in on each other's sexual exploits. He doesn't even bother covering me or anything, so Dominic continues to stare. He has a wife of his own, so I'm not sure what's so fascinating about his brother's cum draining from my body.

"Came for her..." he says and nods at me.

"Why yes I did," Matty snickers and fastens his belt. He glances at Dom and says, "Ah, I see what you did there."

Dominic stares at me with hungry eyes for a moment, then the hunger turns to indifference. He watches as Matty undoes the hand cuffs and I sit up on the table, legs dangling, as I remove the gag from around my head. I open and close my mouth a few times working my stiff jaw, and I'm not even uncomfortable being completely naked right now. I find it arousing that Dominic is intrigued by our sex or my body, or both. I swear he has a hard-on.

“What do you need?” I ask him, rubbing my cheek. My mouth was open for so long it aches now to be closed.

Dominic bends and picks up Matty’s boxers and t-shirt and tosses them at me. “Get dressed,” he says before turning and walking away.

I meet Matty’s gaze as he leaves, following his brother, and quickly put the shirt on. I find my panties and put them on too, but my jeans are torn. Matty got a little too rough this time. His boxers are too large, they’ll just slide off, so wearing his shirt and my panties, I trail down the hallway in the direction they walked. I find them in the living room seated on the couch and I tiptoe in.

“Sit,” Dominic orders. I’m not used to taking orders from anyone, and I’m not about to start now, but when Matty nods at the armchair, I sit.

“So, what’s this about, Dom?” Matty asks before I can. I get the feeling things are still tense between them on account of me. That Matty is still shielding me from things I don’t even see. It’s been a month now; shouldn’t they be over that? I’ve proven I’m not a snitch.

Dominic leans forward and tents his fingers in front of himself, pressing his fingertips together. “I thought I would stop by and let Natalie know we’ve gotten to the bottom of her uncle’s murder.”

I straighten in my seat. I’ve waited a long time for this moment, though I thought perhaps I would be the one out on the street searching for his killer. Matty relaxes back on the couch and grips his chin in thought. Neither one of us expected this to happen so soon, and I hope Dominic really does have the answer. I say nothing, though. I know better than to interrupt when something so important is being said.

“Natalie, the man you feared was at fault, one of our soldiers named Peter, was only in the vicinity because of personal reasons. Him and a buddy were getting lunch at the diner where the shooting happened.” He looks at me with a serious expression. “We believe the hit was taken because of a previous event instigated by our brother, Leonid. He inadvertently killed an Italian underboss, and ever since, they have been out to get us.”

“But... Why Hal? Why did that happen?” It can’t be so simple as a wrong-

place wrong-time scenario. That's too convenient, even for these guys. "I don't understand."

"Our belief is that they knew you were investigating them too. You were at the scene at the same time they tracked one of our men there." He eyes me with a deathly intensity. "Your investigation is what drew them to the moment, but it was too tempting to them when they saw our presence was there too. They saw two birds in one bush and opened fire."

"But..."

Matty leans forward too, shaking his head. His caution to me is heeded. I don't want to do anything to upset Dominic more than my past actions may already have.

"Dom, are you certain?"

"Yes, and we know who the shooter was—sort of." Dominic turns to face his brother.

"Sort of?" I ask, drawing a glare from Matty. I just can't sit here silently as he reveals such devastating information so slowly. I've needed this closure for months now. The killer is known, and I have to hear their name.

"We only know this person as L'ombra. Male or female is yet to be determined." Dominic talks but he faces his brother. "Roman is now on the hunt. He was already ordered to take this man out, but we also fear this person may be the source Natalie was working with. If so, they know a lot more about this family than even she did. We will stop at nothing to take them down."

Matty nods curtly at his brother and reaches a hand out to me. I stand and hurry to his side, and he pulls me onto his lap and holds me to his chest. "And Natalie..." His words are a question, but they trail off. I know he wants nothing but to protect me. This place is the safest I've ever been, even if Dominic is here with murderous intent.

"Is safe for now." He eyes me. "And for as long as she keeps her mouth shut. We will need confirmation when we open a line of communication with L'ombra that they are her source. We will only get that if Natalie helps us."

“Of course... I want Hal’s killer brought to justice.” I cling to the arms wrapped around me as Dominic stands and tucks his tie beneath his jacket and buttons it.

“I’ll be in touch,” he says as he walks toward the door.

My heart pounds hard against my ribcage and I feel a compulsive urge to speak to him still. “Dominic.” He turns to look at me and I stand. Hesitantly, I walk toward him, and he doesn’t move. “Thank you...” I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders and squeeze him. There is no flinching or disgust, but neither is there any return of affection. These guys are really something. I pull away and continue. “For finding Hal’s killer and helping me. I’m sure that’s not why you did it, but I appreciate your help. And I appreciate that you are taking a chance on me. I won’t let you down.”

He nods and turns, then walks out the front door in silence. I stand there watching the door long after he’s gone. Matty joins me, wrapping his arms around me from behind. He kisses the top of my shoulder through the t-shirt and then bites down on my flesh. “Mmmm... Now, where were we?” he asks, and I can’t think of anything other than wrapping my arms around him now. I turn in his embrace and do just that, claiming his lips into a deep kiss.

Never in a million years did I think I’d honestly fall in love with someone like Matty, deep in the world of organized crime. I fantasized about meeting someone like him, maybe fucking him, but never thought them capable of a real relationship. Me and Matty, we have our differences. He’s hard to read, never says he loves me, and demands sex daily to keep his temper in check. A temper I am very fond of, by the way.

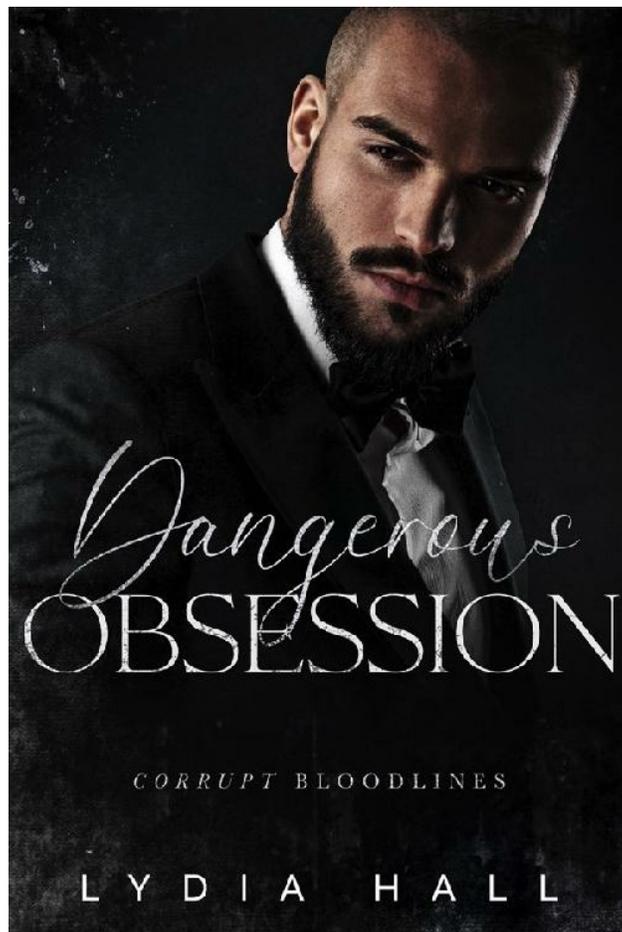
“I love you...” I whisper, deepening the kiss, and he accepts it.

I don’t know if he will ever say he loves me, or if his possessiveness is all I will ever have to bank on him wanting me. But I know I love him, and I will never change my mind. Matty taught me how to connect with someone, and though it’s erotic and kinky, and I have to endure his righteous anger at times, I will never be the same because of him. I’m free now, free to love and hurt and cry and celebrate.

And I’m free now to let Hal go.

Matty sweeps me off my feet, carrying me up the steps to our bedroom where we can be alone. I know what's coming, and I am ready. I only hope he brings on the pain.

EXCERPT: DANGEROUS OBSESSION



H *e broke my heart and sent me away... So why is he following me around town?*

Handsome, muscular and dangerous - Leo Gusev was the love of my life,

until he shattered my heart into a million pieces. I never recovered from the blow. But clearly, neither did Leo.

When I'm attacked in a dark alley late at night, Leo is there to save me with his bullets. But his heroic act might cost us both our lives...

Years ago, Leo made sure no man could get his hands on me. He stopped at nothing - scaring off dates, paying people to disappear, and ultimately, disappoint me. He says he did it all to protect me... But I'm not sure I believe him.

I know his family's dark past better than anyone...

And I know what his father is capable of.

Everything changes when I find out I'm expecting... and my baby will *not* be a child of the bratva.

Even if it means losing Leo... His dark lifestyle might break me, but I won't let it break my child.

DANGEROUS OBSESSION is the third book of The Corrupt Bloodlines series of interconnected standalones.

This is a sensually dark romance novel that can be binged alone or with the rest of the series!

Leo

She's there, in the brightly lit window of the gallery where her art hangs on exhibit, stroking a brush of bright blue paint onto a canvas. As always, her hair is tied up beneath a rag on her head, hiding the chestnut waves I once ran my fingers through. I can't touch her, only watch. The distance has been painful but I know my father keeps his promises and his threat to kill her and her father—a detective with the NYPD—wasn't an empty one. So I watch from a distance daily, and when I can't be here, Tucker or Clem does it for me.

The paintings are exquisite. Willow's talent seems limitless. When she graduated from Julliard I was never more proud. I was there, watching her,

noticing the somber expression on her face, the pain in those hazel eyes. It should have been a joyous day for her, but joy left her face when she became Reba Sanders. She lost everything dearest to her because she dared to fall in love with me.

“All available units, we have a code 11-59 in progress on Fifth Avenue west of Broadway. Male subject, six-foot-four with a baseball bat. Potential female injured and two children on the scene....” The police radio scanner crackles as the dispatcher awaits response and I turn it down. My focus is on Willow. The scanner is just a tool I use to know where the cops are at all times so I can avoid trouble. I’m not doing any jobs for the family right now, so I can just relax and watch her work.

A few men enter the gallery and move away from the windows that line the front of the building. Willow glances at them and smiles, waving a hand before returning to her concentration. I see it there still—the pain—but it’s faded a bit now. It’s been twelve years. She’s moved on. Not a hint of interaction with her father even though they live in the same city, walk the same streets. I’ve made sure of it, sending a bit of help at times when needed.

I raise my binoculars up and focus them on her face. Fine age lines have started to gather near the corners of her eyes, a hint of aging appearing finally. She’s stunning even in her thirties. I was her age when it happened, when my father forced her out of my life—or well, when I forced her out of my life because my father gave me an order with a threat behind it. I still hold bitterness about that event, but for her sake, I sent her away. To safety.

I start to lower my binoculars when I notice one of the men who entered the gallery moves toward her. She sets her brush down and turns to face him, wiping a bit of paint off her fingers onto her smock. She talks to him, smiling warmly. My chest tightens. She’s mine. I don’t share. Not even a little. In fact, every man who has come her way for the past twelve years has been paid off or sent away by my hand. Her unplucked beauty will only be harvested by me, when I find a way to convince my father she’s not what he thinks.

The man leans an elbow on the tall table next to her. Her palette jostles, and a brush topples to the ground. She leans down to pick it up at the same time the man does and they bump heads. Both of them straighten as they begin

laughing and hold their heads. Willow's laughter is magical; what I wouldn't give to hear that right now. The fact that this man gets to enjoy that melodic sound while I sit forty yards away in my car on a dark street stirs my anger. Both for the man and for my father.

She nods her head at him and slips off her stool, calling something to someone across the gallery. I can't see the person to whom she is speaking but I gather that she is telling them she's leaving. With a gift like hers she does nothing herself. The gallery has people for her assistance. I've never seen her clean a paintbrush or put paints away once, not in all the time I've been observing her. She reaches down and grabs her bohemian-style handbag and slings the strap over her shoulder, still talking and smiling with the man.

I tense, lowering the binoculars. The man's back is to me; I can't see his face even if I tried. I don't like where this is going either. Willow has dated exactly fourteen men—once each. They don't come back for a second date. I make sure of that. And that means I have to find out who this bastard is so I can make sure he doesn't come back either. But I can't do that if they walk off into the night.

When they exit the front of the gallery and stroll off down the dark sidewalk, I know I have to follow. If I follow with my car, they will see the headlights and be suspicious, so I climb out of my car silently, touching the piece on my hip to make sure it's still there. My phone lays on the seat of my car, but I don't need it. What I need is to follow her, make sure she's not doing anything stupid like inviting him up to her apartment only a few blocks from here. He'd regret that greatly, I'm afraid.

Keeping a safe distance, I trail them. I can barely hear her laughing at his stupid jokes. His voice is gruff. There is a hint of an accent, but I can't place it. He sounds older too, like me. Willow always goes for older men. The oldest being a man my father's age who took her to a show on Broadway and then to dinner at some fancy restaurant. I persuaded him to leave her alone, though it took a bit of force. Like, Tucker and Matty following him around for several days with not-so-friendly reminders that Willow is mine.

They turn a corner and I see the coffee shop more than a block away. The man points at it, which only makes me more upset. She agreed to coffee with him? She doesn't even know him. Doesn't she know this is New York City?

Sleazeballs of all kinds live here. I pick up the pace, coming closer to them as they continue down the street. It's darker here, where large scaffoldings tower over the sidewalk casting dark shadows the streetlights can't touch. I get a sense this creep isn't all he's cracked up to be, but I won't ruin her evening if all she wants is coffee.

When his arm reaches behind her, and his hand finds the small of her back, I rest my hand on my weapon. If he so much as breathes on her, he's mine. My fingers itch to draw the gun, but I stay calm, keeping pace behind them about fifteen yards now. I stick to the shadows and hug the brick building. He glances behind himself, but I'm nearly invisible in my all-black attire shrouded in the darkness. I see the glint in his eye, but before I can react, he swings her off the sidewalk and into the alley.

"What? No!" Willow's yelps send a shot of adrenaline up my spine. I draw my weapon and hurry to the alley. "Let me go!" she shouts, and I turn off the safety.

"Hold still, bitch," the man says gruffly, and when I peek around the corner, he has his hands on her, inside her smock.

"Get off me! Help!" Willow pummels him with her fists and he drags her father into the blackness of the alley. I round the corner and advance on them slowly. I don't want to startle him, because if he has a gun on him, he could hurt her before I get a shot off.

"I said, hold still!" The man smacks her, and as she is recoiling and covering her face, he reaches for her slacks and starts to pull them down.

"Motherfucker," I growl under my breath and I can't control myself any longer. Willow's creamy legs are exposed to the night air and I take off, sprinting toward the man. He never sees me coming. I plow into him with my shoulder, launching him into the dumpster a few yards away. He slams into it with a sickening thud, and I don't even stop to see if she's alright. I hear her crying, but all I'm thinking about is finishing this sick pervert off.

"You're going to regret that," he snarls as he stands up but I'm there already, kicking him in the groin hard. I hear the breath forced up out of his lungs as he doubles over and I chamber a round and aim at his chest.

“You sick fuck. You should know better than to put your hands on a woman.” My finger trembles over the trigger and he stands. I see the shimmer of metal reflecting the tiniest bit of light, and without thinking, I fire. The gun booms as it discharges, echoing down the alley, and the man drops to the ground. I still don’t get a good look at his face, but now he’s not my concern.

“What the hell!” Willow’s cries force me to turn to her. With shaking hands, she pulls her slacks up. Her bag is on the ground by her feet. I move toward her and pick it up and hand it to her.

“We have to go, Willow.” I grab her by the elbow and walk her deeper into the alley, past the dumpster. The man utters gurgling breaths as blood pours out of his body. I can’t even see where I shot him.

“Who the hell are you? You just killed that man!” She doesn’t fight me. She falls into line beside me with stutter-steps. “You know my name?”

I don’t answer, I keep moving. I need to get her to my car and out of here. If that guy doesn’t die, she’s going to be a primary witness. If that happens, she’ll be reunited with her father and that will mean my father’s orders to keep her away from her father will be impossible to uphold.

“Stop, you’re hurting me,” she whines and plants her feet. I turn to face her again and see headlights at the end of the alley. A car pulls in, and I press her against the wall, holding a hand over her mouth. She whimpers and squirms, but here we are safe for now. As long as they don’t drive deeper into the alley, they won’t see us.

“Shut the fuck up.” I stare at the car, which stops. Its headlights shine down onto the pavement where the man lays bleeding out. Two men get out of the car, the same two men I saw enter the gallery with Willow’s attacker a bit ago. From this angle, I can see clearly that the man on the ground covered in blood is none other than Romeo Leoni—underboss for the Italian mob. “Fuck’s sake,” I hiss, suddenly realizing the error of my ways.

“Mmm, mmmm.” Willow tries to knee me in the groin, so I turn my hip against her body and pin her there while I put my lips right beside her ear.

“If you don’t fucking stop, you’re going to get us killed. That man who tried

to hurt you is mafia.”

Her chest heaves beneath my frame, but she stops fighting me. I lower my hand from her mouth but I don't let her go. Her breath smells sweet, like she's had a glass of wine, though I don't recall having seen her drink this evening. She shifts, pushing at me, but I remain there pinning her to the wall. That car is going to move, and when they do, they're going to have to go somewhere. We need to get out of her.

“Who are you?”

“You have to come with me, or they'll kill you.” I keep my voice low and my gun ready.

“Leonid?” she asks, shock seeping into her tone. “Holy hell...” There is no hiding the surprised, not from me or the men down the alley.

I hear shouts erupting and know we're made. I hook an arm around her waist and we bolt, racing down the rest of the alley. “Goddammit, woman.” She has no clue what she just did by alerting them to our presence. Life could have gone on for her like it was, for me too. She paints, I watch. But now they will hunt us both until they find us, and then they will try to kill us.

“God, Leo, let me go.” Now her fists strike me, pounding my chest as I hold her to my side and move as quickly as I can away from the danger. I hear feet slapping on the pavement first, then a gun goes off. The bullet ricochets and I know I have no choice but to fight. “Oh my god,” Willow squeals, no longer fighting me.

“I told you, they'll kill you. Move faster,” I order, now letting her go. We can get to my car more quickly if she just runs. I fire over my shoulder and grab her hand. She cries out and covers her ear with the other hand. “Move, woman.” We run and turn back toward the street the gallery is on, enjoying a few seconds of respite from the bullets as the assailants can't find us.

“Who the fuck are you now?” she calls out, barely keeping up.

“Just hurry up, for fuck's sake.” Another round goes off over my head and I turn and fire again. My car is within sight; just a block away now. But the men are gaining on us. By the time we reach the car and climb in, they are only a half a block away. I fire my gun out the open window and they duck

behind another car to take cover while I fire up my engine.

“Leo, they’re going to kill us!” Willow is hysterical now, clawing at the handle on the door. I reach over and push her head to her knees where she will be safe. The car has bullet proof glass but if these guys have armor piercing rounds she’s a goner.

“Stay down.” I pull out and floor it, firing off a few more rounds, but as I pass the two men cowering behind the front of a van, I meet their gaze. In the light streaming out of the gallery window onto the sidewalk, I know they get a good look—good enough to ID me. I’m fucked now.

I race off into the night, fleeing the scene, but these damn Italians know exactly who I am—or they will when they do even the slightest bit of research. I’m sure they’ve memorized my license plate by now, and if the man in the alley doesn’t die instantly, he will alert them to the fact that he followed the woman from the gallery. She’ll be simple to ID.

“Fuck’s sake, Willow, didn’t anyone ever tell you not to talk to strangers!”

She remains doubled over, crying, and all I can think is that hell just rained down in my life in a way I never expected, bringing heaven directly to my arms again. But fuck if I won’t have an impossible time trying to keep her safe now. She should have just refused that man the coffee.

[Read the full story HERE!](#)

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